

**A First Contact that might be the Last!**

***STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET***

# **PORT IN THE STORM**

***The Second Voyage of the USS Artemis***



# STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

## USS ARTEMIS: PORT IN THE STORM

### SEASON 1 EPISODE 2

#### DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Kheren as Captain Kheren

Drakxii as Commander Michael O'Conner

N'Eligahn as Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo

Mishy as Lieutenant Kelsey Alther

BawdyScoundrel as Doctor Josiah Sage

Jeff T. as Lieutenant Syntron

#### Special Appearance by:

Evshell as Commander Allen Samji

Forum roleplaying session

from February 2nd 2011 to May 15th 2011

Novelization by Kheren

Story concept by Caltern

Editing by Jeff T.

Cover by Kheren

## PROLOGUE

In the infinite field of stars, lightning struck.

Across the light-studded blackness, a crackling tendril of light suddenly flashed out of nowhere; tearing the silent darkness of space with a brief flash of intense light.

The lightning bolt left an after image that was then as suddenly followed on its crooked path by raging fire. Like flames of a forest fire running on a lone denuded branch, the tongue of orange-golden fire followed the exact erratic trace left by the lightning bolt and the entire starry sky went ablaze.

Behind it, a titanic deflagration suddenly flared out like the detonation of a supernova that whisked out the dim lights of the stars everywhere, as if the entire universe suddenly burst into flames. A huge ring of fire filled the void, with a blindingly white center and tiny dark specks swirling with its flames around it.

At first, it appeared as a perfect sphere of raging fire. But then, slowly, it started to visibly deform on one side; slowly, the fiery flares took a definite orientation as the dark specs at the corona moved sharply towards a certain part of the cosmos.

Then the fire died out and flickered, flared again then dissolved into the nothingness it had come from. In a moment, there was no trace of the inferno that had filled space a moment before.

No trace... but for one, frantic flare, running along the path the bolt of lightning had left across the field of stars for hundreds of millions of kilometers... until it suddenly struck... something.

The flames splashed against an invisible barrier, spreading brutally like molten lava against an unseen volcanic rock, tracing partly the shape of a dome that in turn lighted like some rock shattered by an explosion.

Fire and lightning flashed in an almost perfect sphere around nothingness before dissipating in the cold void. But, for a moment, it left sparks outlining this part of space like a perfectly transparent luminescent bowl floating in darkness, before the darkness and stillness of outer space reigned once more.

*"Nuq ghaHta' vetlh?"* wondered out loud a strong voice from the forward seat, a thickly-gloved hand pointing at the small ovoid viewing screen that showed the entire fiery display of the heavens.

*"LaH ghobe' ja' wIj joH'a"* apologized another harsh voice, after looking at a red-lighted sturdy console with large triangular controls blinking.

"*Chaw' maH jaH legh. GhuH vaD may'!*" ordered the voice from the massive, high-backed swiveling seat on the low podium. A Siren blared and lighting became crisp and darker all around the command center.

From within the cover of a dense asteroid field, several dark, raptor-looking starships, bristling with weapons and armor plates, swooped towards the sector of space where the flash fire had briefly outlined a ghost, themselves turning into evanescent specters as they activated their cloaking device.

A short time later, they passed by several automated sensor buoys marked with the blue and white symbol of the United Federation of Planets.

## **CHAPTER ONE: FIRE ON THE HORIZON**

**Captain's Log, Stardate: 87052.7**

**After weeks of repairs, the Artemis is assigned to deep space study of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly it discovered.**

**Latest long range observations from automated sensor stations have reported a recent significant change in the anomaly, hinting at other unexplained phenomenon that must also be investigated to assess nature and possibility of further threat to Federation space.**

**Lotus Fleet Command is now diverting us at this new possible threat, towards the Klingon border: we are to investigate if this is a side effect of the anomaly, another unrecorded phenomenon... or a possible incursion into Federation space by a large force of cloaked ships; large enough to be the forefront of a full scale invasion.**

**Because of this significant probability, the 1st Fleet is being dispatched in haste towards the Hromi sector. But they are a long way off; again, Lotus Fleet has been called to action until Starfleet can fully face the situation.**

**And, again, with all of the few able ships in the entire sector already engaged in crucial missions dealing with the incoming Azimuth Horizon catastrophe, the Artemis alone can answer the call.**

**Personal Log, Stardate: 87052.73**

**The unrest between the Federation and the Klingon Empire makes the prospect of a full scale war too probable to ignore. If the Klingons have also detected the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, they most certainly decided that it was proof that the Federation is breaking the Treaty and experimenting with subspace weapons. The ill-advised association with the So'na of a few decades ago may have been a brief affair, but long enough to justify the Klingons' usual faulty reasoning.**

**The prospect of facing another general conflict, barely months after the devastating final war with the Borg, is truly dreadful. And if it starts here, again, I doubt that Lotus Fleet will be as successful this time to end it.**

**With my first official command, I have been ordered to bring my ship directly in the line of fire, literally as figuratively. I just hope our studies will defuse the invasion hypothesis and provide true understanding of the Azimuth Horizon... before it sets the quadrant aflame... again literally as figuratively.**

**For the moment, my only consolation is that, when Starfleet awarded me the Science decoration, the Federation Science Council in turn did not follow scientific tradition and rename the cryptically-named Azimuth Horizon the... Kheren Anomaly.**

Coming onto the bridge, the solidly built Andorian wearing the four pips of captaincy on his red and black uniform went directly to the oddly retro-designed 23rd century style command chair at the center of the command well. As he sat, the fingers of his callused hand opened a ship wide channel:

"All hands, this is the Captain."

He paused a moment, not only to let everyone come to attention but to adjust himself in hearing his own voice state his newly acquired command; he was still a bit dazzled by how swiftly he earned it, in the aftermath of the tragic death of her former captain and a recent war that depleted Starfleet of so many officers.

But he was Andorian: facing challenges head-on was in his nature. And so, he went on with firmness in his deep, soft but powerful voice:

"A subspace distortion, consistent with the use of cloaking devices on an unprecedented scale, has been detected between the Azimuth Horizon's path of expansion and the Klingon border. Starfleet fears this might be the prelude to another large scale invasion. We are to either confirm this... or find out what else is out there."

He paused again to let people understand the implications of his words before continuing:

"Lieutenant Irksos will further explain the details of the situation."

With a slight turn on his big swiveling chair and a nod of his white-haired head, antennas waving, he let the petite, dark-skinned Human woman take over with her own, sharp and clear voice:

"Please look at your nearest monitor..."

As on the main viewer of the bridge, a graphical representation of a lower quarter of the Milky Way galaxy appeared on the screen of every station throughout the vessel and zoomed to one side of it towards the galactic center, showing as little flashing dots a string of starbases and surveillance outposts on both sides of a band of space five parsecs in depth and seven hundred and fifty parsecs in length... One blinking light was identified as SB10 at the very rim ward edge of it, near another border perpendicular to it, of similar length but only a parsec in thickness and also delineated on both sides by outposts and monitoring stations. Behind this last line, space was tinted grey and labeled "Romulan Star Empire." Upward, the other zone beyond the one in blue between them labeled "UFP" was a red-colored one marked "Klingon Empire."

The image concentrated on the border of this last area closest to the grey area, where the SB10 flashing dot was centered, as Lieutenant Valencia Irksos explained:

"This is the Organian Peace Treaty zone; what many incorrectly refers to as the "Klingon neutral zone. " For the purpose of our mission, it is important to understand the distinction. The border between us and the Empire never was a neutral zone, as with the Romulan one, where any incursion is considered an act of war. It is more akin to the old Cardassian Demilitarized Zone: a mutual sector of space free to all for peaceful colonization and exploration, but where any kind of violence was strictly forbidden... and factually impossible. However, almost nothing has been heard of the all powerful Organian energy beings that enforced that peace since stardate 3199.5, back in the 23rd century."

Indeed, many in the latest generation of Starfleet officers had but barely heard of the Organians and the pivotal role they played to stop literally dead in its tracks the second Federation-Klingon war before it even began. Starfleet was not very fond of being reminded that, once, it considered appropriate to spread war, death and destruction on a crusade pretending to serve the cause of peace. And so, Lieutenant Irksos continued to explain:

"The peace and friendship between both Klingons and us that they had predicted, and which was a reality throughout the last century, further diluted even the validity of the Treaty zone. But, in all instances, navigation through the border was only influenced by political winds."

The image zoomed even further in, dividing the huge view of space into standard twenty light years sectors and closing in on one identified as " Hromi sector " where the SB10 dot of light flashed alone. A fiery ring appeared in the lower corner, like a flame starting to burn the corner of an antique vellum map. Between the fire ring and the red border, a small blob like the fuzzy distortion of an ancient glass lense also appeared.

"The border's Argus class monitoring stations detected this subspace distortion. It is about five billion kilometers across in a relatively stationary position, midway between the border of the Klingon Empire and the current position of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. It emits residual radiation consistent to high levels of power output, either from a very large cloaked installation, a major fleet assembling under cloak... or both."

As she finished, there was a moment of deep silence throughout the ship.

It was barely a few months ago that the Borg launched their thousand cubes in a last attempt to utterly annihilate the Federation. The war was won but by the skin of the teeth; and, all the while, both the shattered Romulan Empire and the growling Klingon Empire offered but a deaf ear to the call to arms of the Federation against the ultimate ravagers of the galaxy.

Then, as the Federation was about to be brought down to its knees, the Romulans had attempted a stealthy attack on the Klingons to create major unrest for their own benefit...

Not many knew about this classified incident that involved the USS Lotus; but Captain Kheren, former tactical chief of the flagship, knew this first hand: he had been there.

And now, it might very well be the Klingons' turn...

The Andorian in the command seat spoke again:

"Our orders are clear: identify and monitor, gather as much information as possible on nature and possible intentions behind this presence, until 1st Fleet arrives. If a conflict is inevitable, the Artemis will join 1st Fleet in containing enemy forces until further reinforcements are sent. This is a Code 2 operation with General Orders 8 and 33 in effect."

All of these amounted to one thing in the mind of each and every crewmember: prepare for war.

"However, then declared Kheren slowly, we are under strict orders not to do anything that would precipitate such a conflict. In this regard, both this ship, and this crew, are considered expendable."

He marked a moment of silence to let the words sink in before finishing:

"Prepare for departure in six hours. Captain out." After the announcement, Kheren went back to his ready room, confirming orders and preparing for departure; which mainly meant that he was letting his people do their own jobs.

But he quickly reviewed onboard crew and replacements embarking. They had lost sixty-one crewmembers during their encounter with the terrifying Azimuth Horizon anomaly, and about a dozen people left the ship upon their miraculous return.

Among them, there was the Chief Medical Officer, Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth. He requested an indefinite leave of absence to return to his home world of Delta IV, after a grueling ordeal of solitude, trapped for nine days alone in a drifting shuttlecraft with two hibernating Tellarites. Isolation was deeply traumatic to Deltans, and Elliago never fully recovered from the experience.

Hopefully, his return among his people would help mend the inner wounds he tried to hide the whole month of their limping return with a damaged starship. But for the Artemis, it meant the loss of its twice decorated ship's top surgeon.

There was also the Chief Science officer, Lieutenant Junior Grade M'Rall Michaels; the Caitan hybrid had been severely injured during the brutal trek through the raging anomaly and she went into a coma that lasted even as they returned over a month later. And so, she had to be left in the care of Starbase 10 Medical for extensive treatment.

Then there was the Chief Tactical and Security officer, Lieutenant Kelsey Alther. The only Kalthurian ever to serve in Starfleet had been aboard under a JAG investigation for many major infractions against regulation; and so, the androgyn had been put in care of the experienced and strictly authoritarian Captain Froud for evaluation before a Board of Inquiry could be convened... simply because Starfleet lacked too many officers to deplete all ships in the short term, even of unbecoming ones, and to compose a proper Board in the first place.

But that was before Froud died from sabotage and Kheren had to take command, under whom Alther showed such poise, discipline and exemplary action in a crisis that not only was the Lieutenant cleared of all charges, but even decorated for meritorious conduct. Doctor Nasaro-Myth's medical proof of the Kalthurian having been affected by Deltan pheromones when committing all infractions certainly helped as much.

And so, Kelsey Alther was now free to pursue a career wherever deSired, no longer confined to the Artemis.

And finally, there was the Chief Engineer; rushing to answer a distress call, the Artemis had been forced to leave without a chance to wait for him to come back from leave on Earth. And now, the acting chief of engineering, Lieutenant Marksus Sangliar, had been offered the envious position of head of research and development of technologies to combat the Azimuth Horizon catastrophe he witnessed firsthand and helped to successfully escape from.

The Tellarite readily accepted, leaving the Artemis with yet another head of department missing.

Kheren had requested replacements; but with the depletion of experienced officers since the Borg war, he knew already that he would have yet to leave dock without a Chief Medical Officer and a Chief of Science.

He just hoped they would get a Chief of Security and a Chief engineer before they left in six hours.

The Andorian captain sighed heavily.

I think I need to take it easy and relax a bit.

He thought then of his personal holodeck combat program.

Yes... that will do nicely.

\* \* \*

N'Eligahn swung his Mek'leth as his opponent brought its own down at his head. He rolled to the inner ring of the battle arena and came back up in a combat pose.

"You're getting good with that thing," he said as he caught his breath.

"I have a good target," Relys said as she moved in for another attack.

N'Eligahn deflected her blow and went for his own, but she deftly moved to the side.

"Can't believe you'd think it was a good idea to actually arm me."

"I call it a temporary lapse in judgment," N'Eligahn said as he brought the Mek'leth at her again but she deflected it and thrust with her own weapon. He just narrowly avoided having his stomach sliced.

"Watch it with that thing!"

"Sorry... Too sharp?"

She swiped at him again.

"So why Klingon weapons? I thought you hated them."

"I do," N'Eligahn said. "But just because I do doesn't mean I can't know their culture."

He parried one of her attacks.

"Have I mentioned I'm also a bit of a fan of Klingon opera?"

"Oh good, so you're dumb AND deaf," Relys said as she brought the blade down on N'Eligahn's head.

But he blocked it and locked their blades, their eyes a few inches from their respective blades.

"If you don't mind my asking, what exactly do you hate about me?" the Rethian asked.

"Besides your stubbornness, overall attitude and the fact that you seem to get me in trouble whenever I'm around you? Or do you want me to be more specific?"

She stepped sideways and unlocked their blades, readying once more in a fighting stance when the ship's whistle blew and the Commanding Officer's voice filled the room.

When the entire announcement and debriefing was over, Relys turned her Mek'leth around and passed it to him.

"Same time tomorrow, Sir? I look forward to taking you down again."

"Same,"

He followed her out of the Holosuite and his eyes continued to follow her for another moment before he stopped in front of the monitor outside, typing in his clearance code. He watched the entire briefing.

As it came to mention the Klingons he felt his stomach twist.

N'Eligahn keyed into the comms near the monitor.

"N'Eligahn to Blakely."

From the comm, he heard a bit of a grumble before a response.

"Sir?" said a blurry feminine voice.

"Get up and ready. And get Alpha Shift together. We need to make sure we're fully ready to move with the Artemis in six hours. N'Eligahn out."

\* \* \*

O'Conner stared off in to space as he sat in the "Bow". It had been a very long couple of weeks. O'Conner had volunteered to help the repair crews get back in shape. It was a huge change from the PADD writing and management he had been doing the past few weeks, and he had loved it.

But now, he was back as the First Officer of the Artemis.

He smiled as he thought of this, though he also hoped that this mission would be less painful then the last... But he doubted that it would be, hearing the captain's speech.

They were being sent back to the storm... alone.

Well, at least this time they had a better idea what to expect of the "Kheren Anomaly".

Deep down this made him chuckle. Everyone wants something to be named after them so that they are remembered, but something that could eat a system or that just might start an intra-galactic war was not something you wanted your name attached too.

Certainly not a captain who took over a month just to accept his name said in the same breath as his rank.

O'Conner finally turned back to his tea, picked it up and headed to another table full of crewmembers. With all of his work already out of the way and six hours to kill, he set out to get to know the crew better.

After all, that was part of *his* job.

\* \* \*

Kelsey stood looking out a viewport in The Quiver as the room swirled with action. Kelsey had stood looking out the viewport long enough to forget time itself.

The blue-skinned, white-haired, female-looking androgyn had long since finished its book and came down to The Quiver to see if anything else could distract it, when came a sudden urge.

Kelsey tapped its communicator:

"Captain Kheren, this is Lieutenant Kelsey Alther; would you care to meet me in The Quiver? I want to discuss something with you in a more relaxed setting" she asked politely.

The call signal came over the intercom just as the Jem'Hadar appeared out of nowhere and swung his halberd-like weapon at Kheren's head, directly from behind.

Like all Andorians, Kheren could neither smell nor hear anything directly behind him, as both senses were encased in his rigid antennas pointing forward; even his electromagnetic field perception that would have spotted the shrouded Jem'Hadar was useless from that angle.

The Jem'Hadar knew it... and so did Kheren.

That is why he had removed his boots.

Sensing the thumping run of the attack from his bare soles on the deck plates, he dropped sideways in a roll, the blade whistling at an angle that would have cleaved him from neck to hip. As he rolled under it, the grey-scaled assailant shifted his weight to follow in a fast sideway step the evading Andorian, halberd trailing behind at the ready for a backhand blow.

Too fast; it impaled itself on the heel Kheren extended from the ground to his pelvis as the Andorian abruptly stopped his roll with his hands, extending one powerful leg to the side.

The blow would have shattered human bones, so strong he was; but a Jem'Hadar was made of sturdier stuff. Something Kheren knew well. That's why he aimed his kick at his center of gravity and motion, blocking his hips and thus his blow and breaking his center of gravity in midstride. The surprised Jem'Hadar went down brutally face first on the floor, his arms extended on a side under his chest.

At the exact moment the scaly face hit the floor, Kheren spun on his back a full turn and struck with his back elbow directly down on the lower cervical under the thick armored skull. The power and precision of the strike from his callused joint added impact to the upward rebound of the falling body.

An audible crack was heard just as he rolled on top of the now inert body, struck the cubital nerve on the extended forearm with his own to release the weapon from the opponent's hand, grabbed it... and thrust it up and behind him.

It skewered the bowels of the second Jem'Hadar as it lifted his own blade to decapitate him, also from behind.

Only then the he heard the call signal of the Kalthurian from the Quiver.

*Kelsey? he suddenly wondered, panting heavily. Now cleared of all the regulation violation charges from previous assignments, I thought the good Lieutenant was already gone. Wonder what's this about?*

"Computer... end program." he panted still.

The familiar lines of the holodeck replaced the starship corridor he had been simulating his fight in. Bare-chested, wearing only the white fighting pants of a duelist, he went to the arch access and punched the shipcom control:

"Kheren... here. I'll be there... shortly, Lieutenant."

Taking a large towel to sponge the sweat from his muscled, scarred torso, he left Holodeck one still recovering his breath and went to the nearest turbolift. He didn't bother going by his quarters to get back in uniform. Kelsey Alther wanted a relaxed, casual meeting; and so, casual and relaxed it was going to be. The Quiver was the special area of the ship where socializing was done outside of rank and protocol. About time he showed he followed his own rules by finally going there himself.

He didn't have to wonder for long. The lift doors whooshed open and he stepped in the short corridor leading to the secondary social area of his ship. It had been named the Quiver as it was on the side and back of the saucer section of a ship named after the Human Greek Goddess of the Hunt.

"Quiver." he ordered the lift once inside the cabin, nodding to an exiting couple of crewmembers who smiled a bit sheepishly seeing the captain so uncharacteristically... casual. Kheren nodded again to a few officers and crewmembers noticing him entering the place and he went straight to the bar:

"Cardassian fish juice at room temperature, please. And a glass of whatever Lieutenant Alther usually orders."

He had developed a fondness for the thick, grey brew Cardassians enjoyed as their morning drink; although he avoided talking it hot like they did, since his much lower body temperature would not like it much.

Then, the towel hanging around his neck to fall besides the large phaser burn scar crossing his heavily muscled chest, he went to meet the blue-skinned, white-haired female looking androgyn who requested a talk. Offering the Kalthurian' drink to his chief of security, he said:

"Mister Alther, nice of you to drop by to say goodbye. Now that you are once again an unblemished Starfleet officer, I guess you will have excellent career opportunities for sure. Congratulations."

Kelsey snapped out of a trance as Kheren spoke. Turning to meet the casually dressed captain, Kelsey took the drink with a smile and thanked him.

"I don't think I'm quite unblemished somehow" the Kalthurian said, taking a sip from the drink Kheren had brought, ignoring his uncharacteristic casual outfit.

"I actually wanted to request to stay onboard the Artemis" Kelsey admitted with seriousness while motioning to the nearby table and taking a seat. "I'm not quite sure why; maybe it's because I feel more at home here than at any other ship I have served on in a long time"

Kelsey paused before adding:

"Maybe it's the crew, maybe it's the ship, hell maybe it's even you. But I do know that I do like the Artemis and want to stay onboard," Kelsey said with a sigh.

The androgyn knew it was a long shot but maybe it would pay off.

For long seconds, the captain just looked at her with these cold, silvery eyes of his, the antennas each side of the top of his thickly white-haired skull wiggling slightly. His decades of body language study left no doubt as to the sincerity of the androgyn before him... but also of some confusion lingering.

"You honor us all with your praise. Thank you."

He took a sip from his glass before continuing:

"I must say I am quite surprised by your request. I know you found well deserved respect and acceptance onboard this ship; and that alone would be good enough to justify your wish to stay on board."

He put his drink on the table and crossed his muscular arms over his wide chest:

"But, let us be blunt here: I am aware of your rather... warlike nature; not so hard, being myself from a most passionate, violent race... and of your personal preferences for, let us say, excitement. I understand and respect that. But I wonder if you realize that the Artemis is the farthest thing from a fighting ship you will find in the fleet."

His left hand flew around to encompass everything around them both in a gesture he wanted casual but in which the pride could still be felt as much as in his deep, low voice:

"This is a refitted and upgraded Ambassador Class starship almost eight decades old now. We are outgunned by any Akira class like the Spectre, outmaneuvered by a Defiant class like the McKenzie, outraced by all more modern ships, even older ones like the Intrepid class USS Lotus, and certainly out powered by a Prometheus class new design like the Alsea... which currently is under repair and in desperate need for a good crew."

He looked at the Kalthurian again while letting enough time for his words to be reflected upon. Then he asked:

"The Artemis is a ship of life and peace, of exploration and colonization. Wouldn't you think better for your career and your, let us say, dispositions, to apply for an advanced warship like the Alsea? As chief of tactical there, you would be even in command of one of her three assault modules during combat; something I myself would have been thrilled about when I was still a security officer..."

His voice trailed off as he recalled that it was not that long ago that he had been himself an eager, inexperienced Starfleet tactical officer... before a series of rushing tragic circumstances propelled him up to the command chair.

At least Kelsey had a chance to breathe before moving on.

The androgyn smiled at Kheren's suggestions but shrugged it off.

"I know the Artemis isn't state of the art; I know it isn't as good as other ships and I know I won't command any mini battleships, but maybe that's my reason; to further my horizons, extend my reach and quite possibly try to grow out of the way I am."

Kelsey gazed out the nearby window.

"I know I'll always have a preference for combat but maybe, just maybe, I can grow as a person and try to control that more and I feel a ship that is more peaceful and science-based will allow that more so than any other ship we have in Lotus Fleet," Kelsey said, still staring out at the window.

The Andorian captain looked intently at the Kalthurian Lieutenant all the while, sensing the truth in those words... and their wisdom.

That is why *he* himself had joined Starfleet in the first place.

That... and the urge to escape the fate his people had condemned him to because of what he was.

*Messiah... Abomination... proof and promise... mutated monster...*

"Tell me then: how will you cope with an intransigent commanding officer who will be unforgiving towards any lack of discipline or obedience, enforce rules and regulations without compromise and, worst of all, force you to follow to the letter Starfleet Rules of Engagement when all the rest of Starfleet doesn't seem to care anymore?"

He paused a moment and cocked his head to the right, saying;

"You do know about those now, don't you? After all, you were in Starfleet back when Garth of Isar himself wrote them... over two centuries ago."

Kelsey grinned at Kheren's mention of him being a tough commanding officer "That's the worse you can do? I'll be fine then" the androgyn let go of the grin and paused; "Without any interference Deltan style, I should have no issue obeying your orders. My mind may not agree, but you are party to more information than I and have more responsibilities."

"You got that right, Mister. And I was only listing my good qualities," the Andorian said with a straight face.

But his metallic eyes were sparkling.

Kelsey looked at its drink then finished it in one big swallow.

"Yes, I remember the Starfleet Rules of Engagement... from when they had been first written by Garth of Izar, revised by Christopher Pike and later annotated by James T. Kirk himself. Hard to remember many people following them though" she said with just a hint of sadness in her eyes as she looked at Kheren.

"Tell me about it" acknowledged the commanding officer of the Artemis. He drank from his own glass and then said very seriously:

"Rest assured they will be the guiding principles of *this* old ship and *this* new captain."

He took another sip and then cocked his head again towards the Kalthurian:

"Well... if you feel you can... I will advise command of your "new old" posting then."

Kelsey smiled once again at Kheren:

"Thank you, Kheren." said the Kalthurian as the smile still wouldn't leave the blue-skinned face. "With you as my CO, I can just tell I'll be fine here" Alther finished, putting a hand out for a handshake.

Hopefully Kheren would understand the gesture, the Lieutenant wasn't sure.

He looked at the extended hand quizzically for a second or two and then took it.

"A human gesture. I should expect it from someone like you who was exposed for so long to them... fascinating creatures, aren't they? "

He shook the hand, taking care to simply follow Kelsey Alther's own movement and pressure. The first time he had tried it, he had broken all the bones in the man's hand and dislocated his elbow.

He still disliked the gesture. Andorians did not like to be touched; but if Kelsey Alther could learn to be a better officer, he could at least try to learn to be a better person.

"Welcome back aboard, Chief." He said with laughter in his voice.

They relaxed together for a while before Kheren finally excused himself when his drink was finished, and went back to his quarters to shower and change back into uniform.

He then went to his ready room, checking on ship's preparation progress with the junior crew on the bridge and then realized:

*Hmmm... about time I formally welcome this new Chief Engineer we got.*

He went to his desk and activated his terminal, calling up ship personnel files. *And not the least of them to be sure... Four times decorated by Starfleet Command...and what's this? USS Spectre... again?*

Kheren was looking at the Starfleet file of his newly arrived captain of engineering and frowned, his thoughts a bit distraught:

*This is the fourth senior officer to transfer from there to here. And no less than the second First officer to step down to a lesser position by doing so. Is there a problem on Captain Summers' ship?*

He leaned back in his chair, frowning even more.

*Or is the problem here?*

\* \* \*

"All right, rescan sections 6 through 8, it's the only area we haven't triple checked," N'Eligahn said to Ensign Doloth.

N'Eligahn pulled a headpiece out of his pants pocket and placed it on his head. He looked through the scanner over his eye and directed it at the warp core. He pulled out his tricorder and scanned the core.

"There are still two more stress fractures there. Seal them then scan it again."

"Bridge to N'Eligahn."

"N'Eligahn here, go ahead."

"The Captain wishes to speak with you."

"All right, on my way,"

He handed a PADD to Lieutenant Blakely. "Check over the main systems again. At least a level 2 diagnostic."

The turbolift whisked him quickly from the lower aft of the five hundred meters long starship to the topmost deck of the forward saucer section.

As he crossed it to the opposing door, he looked around the bridge of the Artemis. It was about the same size as the Spectre's, only slightly more retro in design.

The arrangement however was rather peculiar; there was one very complex station at the front, nearest to the viewing screen showing the interior of Starbase 10; a fused console where both navigation and tactical were seated side by side like in older ships. Even the captain's chair was a precise replica of one from the old Constitution class ships of James Kirk era: a big square seat with control panels on both thick armrests, able to fully swivel to face any part of the bridge.

The two command chairs flanking it however were decidedly 25th century style; especially the left one: it was the famous experimental Chief Medical officer Command Chair tested successfully on this ship and now being retrofitted on all Lotus Fleet vessels.

Conspicuously absent was the safety rail that should have been behind the command well. Recent repairs were evident as eyes went to the rear wall where the Engineering station and the science station flanked a reserve station that could be reconfigured to any specific use.

N'Eligahn buzzed the door once to the Captain's Ready Room, waiting for permission to enter. "Ah, Sir?" said a petite dark-skinned woman presently calibrating that very station. "This is the door to the hallway. The captain's ready room is the first door on your left."

When the door swooshed open, N'Elighan could indeed see a short corridor ending with an access to a briefing room and another turbolift at the end and, indeed, another door at his left, from which came a deep-resounding voice.

"Enter."

The room beyond was truly spartan, lacking any decoration or even anything showing that it was in use, as if it had been but only recently and sparingly occupied. There was but the usual blue and white standard Starfleet furniture, including two comfortable chairs each side of a translucent black desk with a single computer terminal on it. There was not even the popular fish tank in there to break the strictly utilitarian, cold feel of the room.

When he was allowed in, he entered the room and stood in front of the desk, his eyes staring straight ahead and over the head of the rather large Andorian Captain.

By human standards, he was merely athletic and tall; but by the usual willowness of his deceptively slender race, he was massive. His red and black uniform did not much to conceal the rippling muscles that were playing at the slightest movement he made.

He rose up, darting flexible antennas and a pair of silvery eyes at the newcomer.

"Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo reporting as ordered, Sir," the entering officer said, while standing at attention. "Thank you for accepting me aboard your ship, Sir," he said.

"Yes, our new Chief Engineer. Please sit down," he said. "Do you prefer to be called Commander N'Eligahn or Commander Etarudbo? I am sorry to say, I am not yet familiar with the traditions of your species."

"N'Eligahn, Sir," he said. "The clan name is only really used for achievements granted to the entire clan as a whole."

"Mister N'Eligahn it is then," nodded the dark skinned Andorian. He sat behind the desk, tapped a few commands and glanced at the terminal facing him. It was not hard to guess he was looking at the new Chief Engineer's Starfleet record. His words swept away any doubt.

"I must say, Lieutenant Commander, that I was puzzled by your transfer request."

N'Eligahn smiled slightly as he placed his arms behind his back at ease.

"I think I would be, too, were I in your position, Sir," he said.

Kheren motioned to the chair before his desk.

"As I said, please sit down, Mister N'Eligahn. Unless of course there is a medical or cultural reason for you to strain yourself like that."

The Andorian was still struggling with Human humor that most humanoids appreciated. He hoped the Rethians were among those... because he himself still didn't get it. But he still tried.

"Would you care to elaborate?" he now asked of his visitor.

"Not at all, Sir," he said as he sat in the chair directly in front of the desk. "To put it as frankly and succinctly as I can, Sir, I don't think I was ready for that position. I understood the need at the time for positions to be filled as best they could, but now that we're being more re-enforced again I felt it was the time to return to a position where I could learn more about leadership before being thrust into the near-center chair again."

He shifted slightly in his chair for a moment, while keeping his eyes focused on those of his new captain.

"I for one can certainly understand your point of view, Lieutenant Commander," Kheren said. "I'm glad that, in your case, you had a choice."

The Andorian stood up and walked to the nearest transparency to gaze at the busy starbase outside for a few seconds, before he continued.

"It is rather unusual for the executive officer of one of the most advanced ships in the fleet to ask for a lesser assignment. This is the second time the USS Spectre sends me her first officer to fill up a simple ship department."

He returned the intent stare of the Rethian with his own silver orbs. His face was straight but his antennae were slowly curving inwardly.

"Do you believe Command sent you here to nursemaid me too?" he asked.

N'Eligahn's eyebrows rose in genuine confusion.

"Nursemaid you, Sir?" he asked. "Sir, I requested to come aboard this ship."

He frowned. "And I refuse the insinuation that I'd be a puppet of some higher power to spy on someone who's proven their worth already to the fleet, Sir."

Now the antennas were almost touching as Kheren returned behind the desk to face the Rethian.

"Well said, Mister N'Eligahn. And I apologize if you felt insulted by my remark. But you have to kick the embers a bit to see if there is still some fire left."

He sat down and glanced again at the terminal.

"Starfleet Corps of Engineers class of 08, expert in propulsion systems, high ratings in piloting and navigation. I assume you see the Artemis as an interesting challenge for your abilities?"

"Yes Sir," he said. "I have to admit, the Ambassador-class wasn't extremely high on my list of most deSired vessels upon entering the academy."

He smiled a bit at the captain.

"However, the ship herself has impressed me, partly in her overall mission performance and partly in understanding better what went into modernizing her propulsion systems."

"Spoken like a true engineer, Lieutenant Commander," said the Captain.

For a moment he just seemed to look around, as if trying to see the ship from the inside out as he spoke.

"You will find that this ship has been so extensively upgraded that the only thing she's got left from her original frame is but the frame only. And even that has been covered with modern armor plating. You should have a field day just exploring everything that was done to her and you just might come up with a few more of your own, if I know anything of engineers."

He crossed his fingers on the desk in front of him.

"Yet, she is an old Lady still: outrun, outgunned, out powered, and outperformed by any one of the other ships in the fleet."

Then, his metallic eyes went back straight into the golden ones of N'Eligahn.

"But her pride and her heart are second to none. Do you believe you can bring more to that pride and that heart from your own, Mister N'Eligahn?"

N'Eligahn leaned back in the chair for a moment, going over his thoughts.

"It is my personal belief that every ship has a sort of spirit about it, Sir," he said, trying not to sound as crazy as he sounded to himself. "Every person who walks the halls and decks of the ship leave behind a part of themselves, adding to the feel of the ship. It's how you know when stepping onto one ship that it's not something you'd want to fly out of spacedock, let alone stay aboard one, and a ship you innately know will carry you as best she can through the darkest hours."

He paused for a moment and took a deep breath, aware he was in extreme danger of just talking uncontrollably.

"I've been involved with ships of varying size my entire life, Sir," he said. "I think I would be doing both you and the Artemis herself a disservice if I didn't treat her with the respect and service that she deserves."

The commanding officer of the Artemis didn't move and just stared at the Rethian with his antennas pointedly looking at him. His face was a frozen mask but eyes and voice were warm.

"Glad you see it that way, because as Chief Engineer of this ship and third in rank, you will also act as her second officer. The leadership experience you think you still need will certainly be made available to you. But it all means nothing if you don't deeply care about this ship and this crew."

He let a short moment of silence pass to let his words sink in before straightening up.

"Anything you want to ask or add, Lieutenant Commander?" Kheren asked.

"No Sir," N'Eligahn said. "With your permission I'd like to head back down to Engineering and finish our pre-launch diagnostics."

Kheren stood up and nodded to the spine-headed, orange-skinned man.

"Very well then, welcome aboard, Chief."

\* \* \*

"All hands, prepare for departure. "

All across the half-kilometer of the Ambassador class starship, over five hundred sentient beings from almost all corners of the United Federation of Planets walked, slithered or jumped to their stations or retired to their quarters for some deserved rest, as the USS Artemis prepared to leave spacedock to face the perils and the promises of the cosmos.

On the bridge, all senior officers were present and accounted for, except for the missing Chief of Science and Chief Medical Officer. The science station was now to be manned once again by acting chief of Science Lieutenant Valencia Irksos while the Chief medical Command chair was occupied by the acting Chief Medical Officer lent by Starbase 10 for this specific mission. He was Tellarite... and specialized in treating combat trauma, including from non-energy weapon like the bath'leth-wielding Klingons are fond of using, while Irksos, despite her low rank, was by force of experience the most knowledgeable expert on the Azimuth Horizon anomaly.

Besides her, Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo, the new Chief Engineer, had done a tremendously efficient job in prepping the ship for her launch, making her completely fit and ready to face the most grueling situation. In barely six hours, he already demonstrated what a difference an experienced engineer could make for a starship.

Captain Kheren was thinking how lucky he was to have him join his crew.

The same thing he thought about Lieutenant Kelsey Alther sitting in front of him at the tactical position besides the navigator. Whatever mistakes the Kalturian had made in the past, one thing was certain: no one would be better in handling a violent situation with courage and decisiveness.

Same for Commander Michael O'Conner sitting in the Executive Officer chair at his right. The Human engineer had proven himself for years in command duties and stressful situations, the last one being nothing less than saving the Artemis from destruction going through the anomaly they were now ready to tackle once again.

These three were highly decorated officers of Lotus fleet, the premiere elite division of Starfleet Command. Kheren felt humbled having them as part of his crew.

The rest of the bridge officers were also something to be proud of: Ensign Relys Allana was at the multifunctional ops station at the very front of the command room, right before the main viewer, overseeing all general operations aboard the Artemis. The way the light-brown haired, green eyed Bajoran woman so easily handled the complex station almost gave the impression that she had three hands, like the Edoan Cheonghi the captain was used to see there. And at the helm the black-haired, blue-eyed Trill Ensign Jerred Narod showed an almost magical touch with the flight controls of the Artemis. He maintained the huge starship stationary inside spacedock as if it was resting flat on a floor.

Those last two were also from the Spectre, like O'Conner, N'Eligahn and Alther. And Kheren would have smiled if his face had allowed him to.

*Captain Summers must really hate me by now... The Spectre must feel like a cadet ship...*

His inner smile widened when he glanced to his left, at the Tellarite sitting in the CMO Command chair and barking in the intraship channel:

"Aaww, poor chap feeling space sick? Doctor Lumquist, clunk him on the head with... Oh, feel better now? Clear the biobed and send him back to work before I go down there and apply Klingon treatment number 6!"

"Well Doctor Sangliar... said Captain Kheren with a glance in his direction, "I think I understand why your brother took on that research post at Starbase Engineering."

The dark-skinned Tellarite looked up at him with the same smug expression as the former Acting Chief Engineer of the Artemis used to have when feeling banterous:

"Don't you feel lucky now... Sir?"

"Rather wary... Doc."

They both laughed, a laugh full of promises of verbal dueling they would both enjoy later.

For now, it was time to get to work.

"Number One... time to move out, and please... no fancy flying like the McKenzie did the last time. I know we can do as well as her four hundred thousand tons did, but I don't think repeating it with a four million ton starship will go as well with Command."

"Aye Captain."

O'Conner smiled to Kheren. He was quite happy to get under the way again, though this time he hoped that they would last more than two days before being nearly destroyed.

"You heard the captain. Take her out Ensign Narod."

O'Conner look toward the main view as the Starbase doors opened and Ensign Narod engaged thrusters to move towards the doors.

"Once clear plot a course for the Kheren Anomaly" O'Conner paused for a moment before adding: "Oh and try not to scratch the paint."

"Aye Sir," Narod said from the helm. "Taking her out with minimum paint damage."

The deck of the ship thrummed to life and the Artemis moved forward, up to the door of the Starbase.

Kheren turned his face halfway to his First officer with eyes narrowed:

"The *Kheren* anomaly, Mister O'Conner? Tell me: are you talking about that weird fire out there... or about me?"

"Want me to answer that, Sir?" Offered Doctor Sangliar.

"Please don't," face palmed the Andorian.

"Did they not name it after you, Sir? I had heard that the Science Council was debating what to name it" asked O'Conner.

Kelsey piped up from the tactical console:

"While the Kheren Anomaly sounds fun, I vote we keep the name Azimuth Horizon" Kelsey said, trying to keep her smile contained.

"Thank you Lieutenant. This is much appreciated" said Kheren with obvious relief in his voice.

"I will make sure your recommendation reaches the naming Council along with mine."

He then turned back to his First officer:

"You are quite right, Number One. But in *this* instance, I do believe tradition is not so good after all. I'd rather be remembered for my modest contribution to Starfleet than after something that might destroy billions of lives."

Looking back at the screen and the field of stars now opening before them, beyond the immense space doors of Starbase 10, the Andorian sighed:

"And so wished Alfred Nobel when he came up with dynamite... and Carol Marcus with the Genesis device."

"I rather like it." then said Doctor Sangliar, typing on his transmitter a proposal message for the Starbase research department, the government of Tellar, the Federation Science Council, Starfleet Medical...

Kheren sighed again.

N'Eligahn remained silent during the exchange, instead keeping his eyes focused on the engineering console. He was still worried about the overall integrity of the ship, but so far he'd seen that he had good people working for him and they'd done the best they could under these circumstances.

He glanced over at Kelsey Alther. When he saw that the androgyn was aboard, he was happy but sad at the same time. Unfortunately, Kelsey had somewhat become the officer you sort of avoided; although past actions aboard this ship had done some to alleviate that stigma.

N'Eligahn's only concern was whether or not on this mission he'd be thrust head first into some unknown situation somewhere, with little to no support whatsoever. So far he was two for two in this, and desperately wanted to break that record.

"We have cleared spacedoors, engaging full impulse."

The two large, flat nacelles each side of the aft cylinder-shaped lower hull had barely cleared the huge spacedoors that Ensign Narod switched from mere thrusters to the powerful Sternack V impulse engines and swiftly moved away from Starbase 10, the rounded saucer section leading the way in a wide, graceful arc.

The sublight propulsion of the Ambassador class was second to none, even after all the improvements Starfleet engineers came up with over half a century since the initial launch of the class. It made the Artemis more agile and nimble than any ship of comparable mass and could rival smaller vessels with surprising ease... especially under the hands of a skillful pilot.

And it appeared immediately that the young Trill Ensign was such a pilot. Under his touch, the Artemis flew with the grace and liveliness of a living thing.

"We are clear and free to navigate," finished Narod; his hands poised to implement both trajectory and warp propulsion.

"Heading 110 mark 5, Mister Narod." ordered Kheren.

"110 mark 5, aye Sir."

"Warp factor 6."

"Standard cruising speed, aye Captain. ETA with anomaly in 22 hours 25 minutes."

On the screen, the stars coalesced and then flashed in a blinding explosion before settling to the familiar streaking light show of warp travel. The piloting was done with the smoothness expected on board the largest vessels like the Sovereign class capital ships. Not even a vibration was felt to betray the fantastic change of velocity the ship went through.

"Nicely done, Ensign. This will ease up on the engines and allow Mister N'Eligahn's department to finish his meticulous diagnostics and repairs."

He nodded to the Rethian Chief Engineer before turning to include both Michael O'Conner and Kelsey Alther in his silvery gaze:

"Number One, I want you to use the rest of the Alpha shift to conduct battle simulations against Klingons with Mister Alther. Then have all following shifts do the same while alpha shift will rest to get back when we will reach our destination. Include the possibility of 1st fleet being there... and not being there... in all your simulations. "

"Aye, Sir." O'Conner replied to Kheren.

He then turned to Ensign Narod.

"Ensign Narod please join us."

O'Conner headed to the turbolift. Once Narod and Kelsey joined him he ordered. "Deck 6."

"We only have a little time so I would like you two focus on ship battles in holodeck one. Don't waste too much time on Artemis versus a Klingon battle group. Meanwhile, I will have Ensign Tyvya lead the alpha security teams through boarding training in holodeck 2."

As he finished, the doors opened and he headed quickly out to holodeck 2, summoning Ensign Tyvya as he did.

"Wasn't that a bit contradictory? Didn't the captain order us to do battle sims with and without the backup of a fleet along with ground battles?" Kelsey enquired.

O'Connor walked away without answering however, so Kelsey sighed and shrugged.

The Tactical Chief wasn't going to spend all that time firing phasers at a ship while Narod piloted.

Alther headed to the holodeck and began a ground mission first. At first it was a brutal boarding of the Artemis by the Klingons, followed by a boarding action and then realised almost forgetting to do ship to ship battles.

Kelsey organised two battles, one with just the Artemis against a Klingon ship and the last one with fleet backup in a fleet engagement. After finishing that, the Kalthurian headed back to the bridge to fill out the rest of the shift.

On the bridge, Lieutenant Alther arrived just in time to see Kheren addressing the black woman at the science station:

"Lieutenant, calibrate all sensors and ready all departments for extensive astrometric research. This time, I don't want that anomaly to jump us like the last time."

"Aye, Sir." she answered. "Already on it."

"Good. Mister... Lieutenant Relys, what about the metaphasic shielding we requested a month ago?"

"Still on the docks... unpacked... Sir." uttered the Bajoran woman with a definite uneasiness she was obviously not used to.

Relys was fresh from a ship where tempers usually flared without warning and chaos a common occurrence lately... And, as she turned around from her foremost station before the main viewer to look back at the rest of the entire bridge crew, she recognized too many faces to feel reassured when having to act as the bearer of bad news.

And the captain was Andorian, of all things: a species most renowned for their violent passions...

Thus, she was genuinely surprised when, instead of the terse rebuke and stern reprimand she expected, she heard... a sigh... and a deep but soft voice:

"Of course... We left before Tuesday."

\* \* \*

Relys nodded to her relief as the junior officer took her seat at the Operations console during the shift change. As she passed the tactical area, she turned and walked over to Kelsey Alther.

"Lieutenant, I wondered if I might be able to discuss the tactical duty rosters with you," she asked.

Kelsey was tapping furiously on the tactical console, organizing Klingon battle drills when the shift ended and Relys approached to ask her question.

The Kalthurian tapped final instructions before standing up and nodding:

"Sure thing; what do you want to discuss? Specifically..." Kelsey said, motioning to the turbolift and walking at the same time.

"I'll be down in a few moments, Sir," Narod said to Kelsey as she left the bridge. "Just have to secure a few things and pass down information."

Relys waited for Kelsey to respond before joining her in the turbolift.

"I just wanted to let you know that you accidentally double-assigned Ensigns Kaylyn and Tilok," Relys now explained. "They're on the roster for both Beta and Gamma shifts."

She paused for a moment.

"There's also something else I wanted to ask you on a somewhat personal nature. You might know N'Eligahn better than anyone in the fleet. I just wanted to know: what's with him?"

Kelsey looked down, head shaking, with a smile at Relys:

"I knew him somewhat on the Spectre but he has changed since I last saw him" the androgyn said before looking back up at Relys.

"What do you mean whats with him?" Kelsey enquired. "Seems like a broad statement"

"Uhm...what I meant was...well, just forget I asked," Relys said quickly as the turbolift doors opened and she moved into the hallway.

Kelsey shot a confusing glance at Relys as she started to head into the corridor.

"Well thanks for clarifying?" Kelsey half joked as she scratched her head and headed to her quarters to meditate for a while.

She had started doing self meditation lately to see if it would help calm her down and so far it was sort of working.

Hours later, the bruised and exhausted security teams dragged themselves out of the holodeck and to their beds.

They had fought well and O'Conner was impressed; but four hours of fighting even holographic Klingons is going to take a toll on anyone.

O'Conner grinned a bit to himself, then he called down the Beta shift security team and set the holodeck to an automatic program to help train the rest of the security teams on how to fight klingons.

Then he headed to engineering to check on how the repairs were coming.

\* \* \*

"Now!"

The silently worded order of the giantess sent the entire four-man team after her in a fanned out triangular formation behind and each side of her through the somber, cramped corridor, phasers blasting. The Four Klingons were shot down as they were drawing their weapons.

Then, another quartet of Imperial warriors appeared behind them from the other end of the low-ceiling passage, weapons raised.

The towering Andorian leading the boarding party could not have heard them; but like all Andorians, Ensign Tyvya had learned and trained how to compensate for her natural weaknesses. Here, the squad formation was especially designed in that regard.

The pair of exceedingly sound-sensitive Ferengi officers closing the group suddenly rolled on the ground and spun to face in the other direction on one knee, hand phaser raised, even before the Klingons showed up. Their movement entering her field of vision send her in the same maneuver as the other pair, Humans, did the same.

When the armored warriors appeared, they faced an inverted chevron of five kneeling Starfleet officers firing together.

They all went down in a heap. For a moment, they hampered four more of their comrades following them.

With her free hand, Tyvya lifted a palm and spread her fingers flat before her. At once, offering cover fire to one another, they all retreated and disappeared into a side corridor.

The howling Klingons rushed after them, a disruptor in one hand and a D'ktagh in the other. They ran into the side passage after the fleeing Feds, shouts of taunt and victory on their lips... before falling from phaser blasts from each side, inches from their faces as they passed the open doors of the rooms the Artemis officers had taken refuge in.

"Computer, freeze program."

Obedying the clear but hard-edged voice of Tyvya, everything took a glassy, petrified quality around the Starfleet officers as they stepped into the corridor among the fallen holographic enemies.

"Well done people. Time for a break before we do this for real." she complimented in a curiously neutral tone.

"Ensign Tyvya, a question if I may," then asked one of the Human officers looking up at the much taller Shen.

"Yes, Mister Gunderian ?"

"Why are we limiting ourselves with hand phasers? Phaser rifles have better aim and longer charges."

"Name me one prime warrior race in the Alpha quadrant, Mister Gunderian," she retorted.

"Why... the Klingons of course," he answered, looking around as if it was self evident.

"How are they armed here?" Tyvya asked then. They all looked at them. They still clutched hand disruptors and their signature three-pronged daggers. "You see any rifle... or any bath'leth?"

As they realized that not a single one did, her free hand then went around:

"This isn't the insides of a sprawling Federation starship: this is the interior of a Klingon Bird of Prey, the workhorse of their space fleet. And the corridors of larger vessels like the B'Rel and the Vor'cha are barely wider. Look at those low-beamed, cramped passages and the angled support pylons. Everything is designed to prevent boarding enemies from using large-sized weapons... like Bath'leths... and cumbersome rifles."

They all nodded, remembering well now the wisdom of small hand weapons in close quarter. A hand phaser could be used even in close combat while wrestling with an enemy; not so well a three-foot long rifle. And since a hand phaser at maximum setting could vaporize a meter cube of ship hull, it was more than enough to face even armored ones like Klingons. The very last maneuver they had pulled, trapping the pursuing warriors of the Empire in a crossfire from the small recess of locker rooms, would not have been even possible with rifles.

"A photon grenade is more powerful than a knife; but which one would you prefer to have fighting in a turbolift?"

Again they nodded, as they understood also now why Captain Kheren had issued duranium combat knives and training in them, which was not standard regulation in Starfleet.

Then, the sound of the holodeck doors was heard from behind them. Assistant Chief of Security Tyvya straightened to her full seven feet of height to order:

"Beta shift over. Gamma and Delta shifts are next. Take a good rest; we're all gonna need it. Next time, their won't be safety protocols hardwired to give us any second chance; next time, it will be for real. Dismissed."

\* \* \*

As the USS Artemis flew towards its destination at the relativistic equivalent of three hundred and ninety two times the speed of light, Captain Kheren finished alpha shift by completing all the inevitable paperload coming with his command duties then took a light meal of heavily salted raw meat with extra spicy vegetable juice before conducting his own personal fleet simulations involving the Artemis and the rest of the First Fleet task Force to rendez-vous with them.

It was a bit disappointing as the Artemis could only play a support role in the company of no less than five Sovereign class battleships. But sometimes, it was not heavy artillery but a lone foot soldier that nailed the Red Baron...

Afterwards, he took a full four hours of sleep to be in top condition for the upcoming mission and, before reporting himself to the bridge at the appointed time, he decided to do a tour of the ship and meet some of the officers and crewmen he was serving with.

Something of an old Earth Navy tradition on the eve of battle he had been told.

*If it comes to that* he thought.

But the more he looked at the mission data, the more his hopes plummeted.

Fortunately, because of the short range, short term and immediacy of the mission, no civilians but a handful were on board, contrary to what would have been the case for a deep space long term assignment the Ambassador Class starship was intended for.

*Lotus Fleet might have been wiser to concentrate on relaunching the Alesia instead of this Grand Old Lady* mused Kheren. *It seems there are only but immediate close by emergencies to deal with nowadays, most of them against this or that enemy, the Borg, the Romulans, and now the Klingons... A state of the art Prometheus class triple-warship would have been much more helpful here for sure.*

His walk brought him towards deck 8 and the Owl's Crest, the observation lounge at the rear of the saucer section, where the wide panoramic transparencies and the living vegetation of the arboritum would quiet his growing trepidation.

*Does anyone remember when we were explorers?*

At the same moment, others were also pondering things to come, each in their own way.

Chief Engineer N'Eligahn Etarudbo made his way down to deck 15 and walked into The Quiver. A PADD was in his hands and constantly scrolling information as he read while walking towards a more quiet table in the corner. A steward walked over and he just ordered his usual hot cocoa and resumed reading the information.

"Mind if I sit?" said a familiar voice.

N'Eligahn met the eyes of Master Chief Brandon Mills, another friend from the Spectre.

"Not at all, Chief," N'Eligahn said, gesturing towards the chair opposite him.

"What're you reading?" he asked.

"About three different reports on the current structural integrity of the entire engineering decks," N'Eligahn said. He placed the PADD down and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "We're holding it all together with sticks and tape...just more technologically advanced ones. That anomaly really hit this ship hard."

"From what I've seen, you've been relentlessly grinding yourself into the deck plates," Mills said.

"I have to keep my mind busy otherwise it kind of drifts..." N'Eligahn said.

"Towards what?"

"I'd rather not talk about it," N'Eligahn said. The steward came with his drink and left with a small nod. "How have things been going in logistics and operations?"

"Insane," Mills said. "A bunch of kids thrown on a ship who's got a structure not designed to hold the tech crammed into her. The officers *obviously* knowing more than me certainly doesn't help matters."

They sat in silence for a few minutes while N'Eligahn sipped his drink and glanced at the PADD.

"I've got a proposal for you," Mills said.

"I wasn't aware I was looking for one," N'Eligahn said, not lifting his eyes from the PADD.

"You are," Mills said. "You're going to have a work-related breakdown if you keep this up."

"I'll go to medical..."

"Oh yeah, drugs, that's the solution," Mills retorted with obvious sarcasm.

"Fine," N'Eligahn said, placing the PADD down. "So what's the proposal?"

"Mollie gave birth to pups while the Spectre was out on our last mission," Mills said. "Three of them. We gave away two on the Starbase before we left here."

"Mollie... your pet?" N'Eligahn asked.

"Yes, one of the nicest most well-meaning dogs this side of Sector 001," Mills assured him.

"So your proposal to stop me from 'running myself into the deckplates' is a pet?"

"Are you kidding? Since I've been telling Theresa about you doing that she's been obsessing over the idea," Mills said. "She wanted me to at the bare minimum offer the last pup to you before we opened it up. Pets are a good stress reliever, you know."

"I have my doubts..."

"Oh come on, at least come back to my room with me and see the pup," Mills said. "She's got a sweet temperament." N'Eligahn sighed and drained the last of the cocoa.

"All right, but only because I know you won't let me alone until I do," the Rethian finally conceded.

He followed Mills back to the more upper levels and stopped outside of one of the family suites. Mills opened the door and a small blurred figure exploded outwards.

"Daddy!" a little girl screamed as she ran and hugged his leg.

"Hey, honey, where's your mom?" Mills asked as he bent down and picked her up.

"She's arranging flowers from the flower place," she piped. She looked at N'Eligahn. "Hi Nelly!"

"Hello there Carla, how are you?"

"Okay," she said. "Want to see my room?"

"He's here to look at the puppy," Mills said.

Carla's eyes widened.

"Oh! I'll go get him," the little girl exclaimed as she fought out of her father's grasp and ran into the room.

"Hey," called Mills' wife Theresa from further inside. "Did you finally round him up?"

"Yeah, he's gonna think about it, wanted to show him the puppy first," Mills answered.

"Hello, N'Eligahn," Theresa greeted. "How're you?"

"Somewhat tired, Ma'm, But thankfully I've got a good team, so not nearly as tired as I could be."

"Here he is!" Carla announced proudly as she brought over a squirming little ball of black fur. A larger version of it was running at her feet. "His name's Monty!"

"He's a Scottish terrier," Mills explained. "They're good in small places like this, but they can be rambunctious. They can also be extremely loyal to their owner...if they choose of course. I'll transmit some reading materials on care if you decide to give him a try."

Carla walked over to N'Eligahn and handed him the ball of fur.

"I'm still not sure..."

N'Eligahn picked up the puppy and looked at him for a moment. The puppy yelped once and reached for him. He brought the puppy closer and it climbed into his neck and fell asleep.

"I...guess I could see how it goes...maybe..."

N'Eligahn walked down the hallway as quickly as he could, a small bundle of fur in his hands, and fully aware of the odd looks he was getting.

He reached his room and entered, walking into his bedroom and placed the puppy on the bed.

"All right...so where did he put those books..." he said as he picked up his PADD and accessed the computer. A message from Mills flashed up for a moment.

"Just to let you know, Monty's already housetrained," Mills said. "He's a smart one. I took the liberty of having a piddle pad already put in your room, I hope you don't mind, Sir. I also included a basic care and training book too, enjoy!"

"Piddle pad?" N'Eligahn asked as he scrolled down the page to the caring of a pet. While he paced back and forth, the dog followed him with his eyes.

"What?" N'Eligahn asked. Monty just cocked his head at him. "What does that mean?" He flipped through the packets looking for any sort of answers. Monty barked at him. "What?" Monty barked again at him. "I can't understand you." Monty yipped. "Do you want food?" Monty cocked his head. "Okay..."

N'Eligahn walked over to the replicator, trying to remember what specific food combination Mills had told him to use.

"Canine food...uhm...13? And a bowl of water, room temperature."

A bowl of odd brown mush appeared in the replicator followed by another filled with water.. N'Eligahn sniffed the brown mush and cringed. "Ugh...smells like a rotting animal..."

He put the bowls on the floor next to the replicator. Monty leapt off of the bed and began to scarf down its contents. "I'm glad you're eating it and not me."

He stepped back and opened up the training book, reading through the introduction chapters.

"...to make training easier, it is important to establish dominance..." he read aloud. "...one common method is to mount the dog... Well that's a bit extreme, why would you kill and stuff him just to..." he scrolled further down the page. "OH! Jeez, no, absolutely not. You can stay dominant in that case," he said to Monty who was looking up at him, mush dripping from his muzzle.

N'Eligahn's comm badge chirped.

"Blakely to N'Eligahn."

"N'Eligahn here, go ahead."

"You might want to get down here Sir, looks like the XO is on his way for inspection."

"Thank you, I'm on my way," N'Eligahn said. He looked down at the little dog. "I'll be back don't...uhm...break anything," he added as he left the yipping dog behind.

O'Conner walked in to main engineering, or the "Forge", with a smile on his face.

He had just put alpha shift security through their paces and now it was time to see how the final repairs were coming.

As he entered the Forge, it was mostly dead. Only a few crew members and officers went from console to console, but he had expected this; most of the repairs the ship still needed were more hands on.

The crew watched their XO warily as he entered. He quietly made his way to one of the consoles and brought some reports on the ship's stats.

N'Eligahn made his way down to Engineering and nodded to Lieutenant Blakely as he did so. He walked over to the XO.

"Can I help you with anything, Sir?" he asked.

"Ah there you are." Michael O'Conner said with a smile as he turned around. "So, will she be ship -shape and battle-ready when we arrive?"

"Considering what she actually needs is about a year in drydock, a starbase engineering team that actually has a clue and probably less modern systems crammed into a design not intended for them, she'll be ready. This team knows what they're doing, I'll give them that. They did everything I asked them to and more. Just don't ask *me* to assure you she'd be fine against a fleet of Negh'var cruisers...I can't guarantee much there."

"Very good."

The First Officer smiled and looked around.

"Though, hopefully, we won't have to test if indeed she be ready. She is a beauty and I do hope her second mission won't be her last."

"Well, I can assure you we won't go down due to a failure on our part, Sir," N'Eligahn said. "We'll keep her together. You can count on that."

"Mhm..." O'Conner nodded to the Chief Engineer and began to head out of The Forge. "Do keep up the good work."

He wanted to believe that the ship would be ready, but he was right: the ship still needed quite a bit of time in the drydock to be fully repaired. Not to mention that, without that multiphasic shield system they left back at starbase 10, they stood little chance to be able to make through the storm again if they needed to.

\* \* \*

Inspired by the Owl of Wisdom, the companion of the Ancient Earth Greek Goddess Artemis, the Owl's Crest was the nickname given to the observation deck located on the most aft section of the saucer-shaped primary hull, on deck 8, diametrically opposing The Bow, the VIP lounge.

It housed the ship's arboritum, providing walking among real living plants from numerous worlds, subtly renewing with their own life cycle the oxygen what the air filtration system did as part of the life support technology of the ship.

The Owl' Crest also provided a vast panoramic view of the aft of the ship. The windows were huge and curved overhead, providing a splendid view of space outside, even wider than what could be seen from the Bow. This observation deck was used both for recreational purposes, as for amateur and official optical astronomical observations, as for direct line of sight examination of docking operations, the outer hull and the warp nacelles.

It was also the quietest part of the ship and provided a suitable atmosphere for meditation and therapeutic relaxation. Some also found it most favorable for some artistic endeavors like painting or more quiet socialization than the more crowded and animated mess halls or social areas like the Quiver or the Bow.

It was a favorite part of the ship for its Captain... especially now that they were heading towards untold wonders and perils. At this moment, he was alone before the transparency in the vast, quiet area, facing the stars streaking away faster than light, like shreds of his past flashing away as he sped towards his chosen destiny.

"So... this is the infamous Kheren Kalel Th' Ch'Leryll Keth Reiji."

He had come from behind, knowing well that the Andorian captain could not hear, see, smell or perceive him from that angle. But Kheren had spotted his shadow growing on the frame of the transparency he was facing; a natural thing for one who taught duellists back on Andoria.

Only when his full name was proclaimed did he turn slowly around to face the other.

"Call me Iddy."

The other's last sentence immediately changed a formal challenge into a ceremonial greeting. The man truly knew the rules; after all, he was Andorian too.

His light blue skin and frontal antennae immediately showed him to be of the Bishee subrace, the most numerous on the homeworld since Kheren's own Thalassian people had steadily started to decline after being the most populous until the end of the 23rd century. But the Bishee too were slowly but surely travelling the inexorable path to extinction the only Ghelnoids in the Alpha Quadrant were now condemned to.

*By their own will*, bitterly thought Kheren. But his attention was quickly drawn back to the particular individual standing relaxed before him and eyeing him up and down.

The newcomer looked at the red and black-garbed captain of the Artemis with well concealed amazement... if not a bit of apprehension; although tall, he was not as tall as he had heard... but he was so massive, it was almost frightening; he had heard that Kheren had been created in-vitro with both male genders of the Andorian race fused in his one body, but the actual physical result, the big bones, the rolling mass of muscles, the dark skin, the almost metallic eyes and the indecent retracting antennae, was still shocking to behold... even more frightening than his reputation as a master duellist. He looked at once more alien and more Andorian.

He himself was not as tall and nowhere as large as him, quite average for a Thaan; and, like all Andorians, his greater age was only visible through the glint in his wide grey eyes, the smirk of his full-lipped mouth and the dullness of his short white hair. His blue and silver attire, patterned with small crystalline motifs, showed him to be one of the very few civilians aboard.

And so, the commanding officer of the Artemis had no difficulty recognizing him:

"You're the bartender."

"Among other things." Iddy acknowledged with a smirk and a wink. "You're the captain."

"Among other things."

The smirk grew wider and the grey eyes sparkled as much as the voice; but the tone was deeply serious nevertheless:

"It's been decades since I set foot back on Andoria. After so many outposts, starbases, space stations and starships, it seems so... distant now... so... small."

"So... your blood is warmer now?"

The veiled personal insult shot back at the one Iddy had made towards their homeworld. The older Andorian straightened a bit as he retorted:

"Only enough to make the ice shine under the sun."

They looked at one another in silence. They had taken each other's measure and stated plainly to one another that they were Andorians... but Andorians of the United Federation of Planets looking towards a brighter future for all, not those of a single world closing its eyes to its own darker one.

"Anything I can help you with, Mister Iddy?" asked Kheren with a very small smirk of his own.

Iddy cocked his head a bit, his antennae slightly curving inward:

"Iddy will suffice. Not really, thank you. Since I found myself on your ship, I just wanted to see what you were exactly: the science-born messiah who will change the very nature of our people for ever... or the genetic abomination created to threaten the very nature of what we are. "

"And... what do you see?"

Iddy managed to work his inflexible face into a perfectly well made smile:

"A Starfleet officer."

Kheren did not try to smile; he was still trying hard to and didn't quite manage to do it yet. So instead, he lifted his head in typical Andorian gesture of respect, then nodded in silent thanks.

His eyes still glinting, the other snorted:

"Hmmm... and I thought this would have been such a better insult Lieutenant."

Nodding a salute and leaving a last smirk, he turned around to exit the Owl's Crest, hands in his pockets.

But before he was out, Kheren turned back towards the transparency and said to his parting shadow:

"And alcohol is still restricted on board."

The other stopped dead in his track, like a kid caught with his hand in his cookie jar.

Iddy didn't turn as he resumed his exit, pretending to say only to himself but loud enough to be heard:

"Truly a Starfleet officer."

It really sounded like an insult to the Lieutenant

But it made Kheren almost able to smile.

\* \* \*

"Yarp! Yarp! Yarp!"

"Errnnfff..." N'Eligahn mumbled.

"Yarp! Yarp! Yarp!" barked the little black Scottish terrier.

"Waking me up like that is not the best way to get on my good side."

"Yarp! Yarp!" Monty barked again followed by a low whine.

"Fine, fine," N'Eligahn grumbled. "Was planning to get up anyway..."

The dog huffed at him before trotting over to the replicator and scratching at it.

"Don't do that... Last thing I'd want to explain is why I'm fixing my own replicator."

He turned and got off his bed, walking over to the replicator.

"Uhm...dog food 14..." he read outloud. The bowl materialized and the Rethian was immediately blown away by the stench.

"Oh by all that is holy...that's disgusting."

But Monty barked and wagged his tail eagerly.

"When we have more time, we're going to work on a diet that won't make me ill. Aren't you supposed to help me alleviate stress?"

He put the bowl down and got into his work out clothes. Monty glanced up at him and he swore he could smell the foul foodstuffs from across the room.

"I'll be back to clean up, don't spread that stuff around if you can help it," N'Eligahn admonished.

Monty yipped and dove his head back into the mush.

The new Chief Engineer of the USS Artemis arrived outside Holosuite 2 to find it already occupied with a program running. Upon closer inspection, he saw the only occupant of the program was Lieutenant Relys. N'Eligahn decided, against his better judgment, to enter.

Inside, he saw green, rolling hills and standing atop the nearest was Relys in her work out clothes, an odd, slightly curved sword in her hands. Standing opposite her was a human male wearing rather odd armor.

The two were locked in some sort of ritualistic single combat. He watched as both of them moved fluidly and smoothly in the fight until Relys managed to sidestep her opponent and slashed him across the stomach. He collapsed to the ground and disappeared. Relys turned to him and sheathed her sword.

"About time you showed up," she uttered as a welcome.

"I wasn't aware this was becoming a regular thing," N'Eligahn observed matter-of-factly.

"I don't know, I enjoy the idea of kicking your butt every morning."

"And I take it that's the purpose of this setup?"

"Yes, you had the edge with Klingon weapons yesterday, so now we're going to go with a nice concept that's foreign to you," Relys announced with a wry smile.

"Oh really?"

She walked over and drew her sword, giving it to him to see.

"This is an Uchigatana," she said. "A shorter Earth Japanese sword used by many warriors between the 14th and 16th centuries. What you saw there was a combination of battojutsu and kenjutsu, forms of Japanese swordsmanship."  
She handed him a similar weapon.

"Care to try it out?"

\* \* \*

"Bridge to Captain Kheren."

"Kheren here."

"Sir... we are approaching the coordinates. ETA ten minutes."

"Thank you Mister Narod. " he answered and tapped again his communicator to open the shipwide frequency: "Attention, this is the captain: all senior officers to the bridge."

N'Eligahn was just returning to his quarters after forty minutes of holodeck, scratched, beaten and with more than a few nicks and cuts. Relys hadn't been kind in her instruction and he intended to repay her "kindness" tenfold.

Monty had finished his meal and was sniffing around the room. He looked up at N'Eligahn and cocked his head.

"Yes, I have to go again," he said as he put on his uniform, the more proper one than his usual work suit, since he'd be spending more time on the bridge today than normal. "I'll read more up on you and when I get back we'll...uhm...play? Or something?"

Monty barked and trotted over to the corner. N'Eligahn walked over to the door.

"Same request as before, keep destruction to a minimum."

At the same moment, the captain left the Owl's Crest and the view of what lay behind with long strides towards the nearest turbolift... and towards what lay beyond.

"Olympus" Kheren ordered to the cabin which shot him backwards toward the bow of the ship, then upward midway into the saucer section until the doors wooshed open on the uppermost deck, to a corridor with two doors on the right and one at the end. He walked with growing trepidation in his heart. This short corridor gave access to both his ready room and the briefing room, separated from the command center itself by a third door at the other end from the lift tube. Alone in this silent, bare passage with many doors, he felt like someone walking a passage of choosing destinies.

*May this time see me worthy of the command and crew I was entrusted with... and this time, without paying for it with blood.*

He wondered how other ship commanders could forget all the lives lost under their command; how they could face their duty knowing more would be lost... all because of the path they would choose, the door they would open.

*Can I truly be the captain of this ship?*

He shook his head as he reached the other end of the corridor and quickly ducked sideways to his right into his ready room. He hastily pulled off his uniform top as he went to the replicator:

"Computer: standard ship captain upper uniform to my specifications."

The red shirt and the black and grey vest appeared as he finished removing his four golden pips from the collar of his old red and black shirt. He quickly pulled the new one over his heavily muscled frame, adjusting it in front of the window transparency and putting back on the insignias of his rank on the right side of his collar.

All the crew was already wearing the now standard uniform since they had left Starbase 10; but it had taken him this long to finally work himself ready to finally wear it.

To his four Andorian eyes, the new uniform officialized by Starfleet and now Lotus Fleet Command was bland and dull, as uninspiring and generic as you could get a uniform to be.

If anything, it was much too militaristic for his taste. But a ship commander could not expect his crew to obey him if he himself casually disregarded regulations. And so, he said goodbye to his old red and black garment, last remnant of a bygone era where Starfleet remembered that it was out there to explore the Heavens, not set them ablaze.

*Comes with the Defiant, Akira and all other Prometheus class kind of mentality I gather... At least the dress uniform ARE definitely classy and stylish, he thought to console himself, thinking of the black pants, white shirt and white short tuxedo that was now his official attire in Starfleet for ceremonial and social occasions. Now those were truly inspiring.*

*At least, I suppose that I look like a starship captain now.*

And now, wearing, but not without a last sigh, the proper uniform of the Fleet, Kheren swiftly exited his ready room and stepped through the hallway's door giving him access to the bridge.

*Once more unto the breach* he silently quoted to himself from he didn't know who or what.

\* \* \*

"Begin." O'Conner said as he looked down the sights of his experimental phaser carbine.

Several targets appeared in the darkness before him, which he quickly dispatched with short red bolts of light... until the gun began to smoke.

"End." He said with a sigh as he moved away from the firing range of his holosuite program and into the design area. He put the carbine down on the table and looked over it.

He had been working on this design for months, but he still hasn't been able to get it just the way he wanted. It finally had the precision and power he wanted, but now, it was overheating.

As he began to disassemble the carbine, Kheren's call came overhead.

"Computer, Save and End Program." In a moment, the clean work area was gone and replaced with a black grid.

O'Conner quietly walked out; his mind lost in thoughts about the mission and his rifle as he headed to the bridge.

At that moment, Kelsey Alther was sitting on the bed in its quarters, meditating on past events as the combadge rang out from the nearby desk and the call to duty from the captain sounded.

Kelsey had swapped into more casual wear temporarily for meditation, finding the Starfleet uniform too restrictive. However, when Kheren's order for the senior officers to the bridge came over, the androgyn got up and changed into uniform.

Kelsey stretched for a moment before heading out the doors and into the nearby turbolift.

"Bridge."

The turbolift shot up towards the top of the primary hull. While others may use the nicknames, the Kalthurian refused to do so and simply used the old fashioned terms for things normally used... unless not remembering the deck and had to use the nickname.

"Oh well" the tactical Chief muttered as the turbolift doors opened to the bridge.

Lieutenant Alther walked over to the tactical seat and relieved the Delta shift officer manning the console.

N'Eligahn entered the bridge right behind her and nodded at Kelsey before he took his place at the main engineering console.

"Blakely, this is N'Eligahn," he said in the ship's comm. "Get Alpha to their stations early today. Keep Gamma on until normal shift change. While they're both together, run diagnostics on all systems and be sure we're running at as best a capacity as we can. N'Eligahn out."

Once on the bridge himself a moment later, Commander O'Conner quietly made his way to his chair and checked the status of ship on his console.

Stepping last into the command center of the Artemis, Kheren was doubly satisfied that, instead of hearing from any new officer the useless and pompous "Captain on the bridge" greeting he had expressedly forbidden, he was welcomed instead by an immediate status report:

"Arriving at designated coordinates, Captain." announced Ensign Narod from the helm.

The Andorian commanding officer of the Artemis stood behind his command chair, laying his hands on the backtop of it and inclining his wide torso forward, as if to brace himself while looking straight ahead.

"On screen."

On the main viewer, the star-streaked view of warp space coalesced at the center into the swirling, raging fire of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly.

It was the same intense white sphere of light ringed by gold and orange flames they had been first to encounter a month ago; a swirling plasma storm extending erratically in all directions like a crackling ball of static electricity carrying tongues of flame across the stars.

And yet... it was not the same.

The new crewmembers of the Artemis would probably not have noticed it; but the veterans of the first encounter immediately noticed the definite change in its fiery corona; instead of the crown of fire they were familiar with, it looked now like long flaming hair blown sideways by a strong wind.

The view of the immense space storm was already too familiar to Kheren. But the slanted, cocked shape now taken by it's fiery corona was certainly strange, even as far as this barely explained phenomenon was concerned.

"What is that thing up to now?" mumbled Kheren, still standing behind his chair and looking at the screen with all four oculars.

"Too soon yet to tell, Sir." admitted Irksos beside him.

On the screen, the image of the warped, crackling, swirling ring of orange-gold fire around a blindingly white sphere was as mesmerizing as it was ominous, especially to this crew, as many of them had already felt its deadly, raging embrace. To the others, the single feeling of awe and dread coming from those who had survived this weird cosmic storm was enough to have them caught too in its powerful fascination spell.

Silence was so intense on the bridge that a few could even believe they heard those titanic flames roar menacingly at them... until a deep, low and soft voice finally broke the spell:

"Let's get ready to work, people." ordered Kheren as he walked down the command well to sit in the big central chair.

The Chief of Science kept facing her wall console as she reported:

"All astrometric sensors locked on the anomaly. Data input into tactical sensors as warning system on any change of the phenomenon that could go off in our direction. The parametric subspace field stress sensor will also serve as an early warning system of any incoming subspace fracture... as well as of any cloaked ship. Astrometric lab ready for deep scans and analysis."

"Parabolic course around the anomaly at the closest safe distance established; ready to go to impulse." announced the pilot. Nine hundred thousand kilometers standard orbit plotted and laid in, Sir."

Eyes on the main viewer, leaning in his large command chair by resting both elbows on knees and joining his callused hands between them, the Andorian nodded.

"Take us out of warp."

Suddenly, the ship lurched noticeably as a sound like a titanic snare drum echoing in slow motion through a vast cavern was heard all across the ship.

Kheren, jerking upright in his seat, was first to react:

"Report."

Ensign Narod looked at his navigational monitor:

"Sir, we have entered a large and intense gravitational field."

"Source."

"Undetermined, Sir." now answered Lieutenant Irksos, "but it is located in the same area of space the anomaly is apparently drawn to. Readings on the anomaly's deformation at the periphery, where the neutronic masses are concentrated, is consistent with stellar material being affected by a large gravitational source nearby; like the black hole dragging to it the solar corona at the Cigny X-1 star system, first observed from Earth in the later part of the 20th century."

"Captain, now added Ensign Narod, our starmaps show no planetary system, astronomical bodies or phenomenon in this specific sector of space."

"Something or someone is trying to tell us something?" commented Doctor Sangliar as he stepped out of the turbolift just in time to hear the conversation and look at the deformed shape of the cosmic ring of fire.

"Mister Narod: plot a course towards the most likely location of that gravitational effect. Full impulse."

"Aye Captain."

"Stay sharp everyone." then said Kheren, as much to himself as anyone else.

N'Eligahn had only read a few preliminary reports about the anomaly, but seeing it for himself was a whole other matter.

When the ship had lurched as it entered the gravitational field, he had tapped in for reports from his console.

Everything was still well in the green. He let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

"On second thought, Blakely, keep Gamma on standby," he transmitted down to Main Engineering.

After an hour of routinely-looking travel at a quarter of the speed of light, which was anything but routine for the crew of the Artemis at the moment, so close to no less than two unexplained phenomenons, a faint bleep was heard from the navigation board.

"Entering search sector, Captain."

"All stop, Mister Narod."

"Reading all stop, Sir."

For a long moment, they all looked at the field of star on the viewing screen.

"Well... nothing. Let's go home." proposed Doctor Sangliar half-seriously.

"Still... it is there, Sir." countered Valencia Irksos eyeing her instruments. "Gravimetric sensors register a massive gravitational field centered ten billion kilometers straight ahead. Mass readings are comparable to that of the entire Sol system."

"The entire... You're joking," flatly stated Sangliar.

"Readings confirmed," answered Ensign Narod, hand pointing at the navigational control, then at the active thrusters firing constantly. "Forward momentum is registering despite being at all stop. Something is pulling at us and it has to be massive, at least on a stellar scale, to affect us that much."

"Then... what is it? *Where* is it?" retorted the Tellarite doctor with a grunt. "Even I, I'm nowhere *that* big and everybody can see *me!*"

"A black hole?" guessed Kheren, all four oculars trying to pierce the star-studded blackness.

"Negative, Sir" Irksos said. "Despite its power, the gravitational effect is nowhere strong enough at this distance from the focal point; no X rays emissions or other common radiation readings consistent with the presence of a singularity either. And this close, such a singularity would blot out a portion of the starfield."

"There!" exclaimed the Ops officer at the foremost station, right before the viewing screen.

They all blinked several times; but all they saw was a motionless field of stars. The Science officer however tapped a few controls; and, after a moment, everybody this time saw it.

It looked like a brief flash of light, like a star silhouetting a planet's curvature when coming behind it, tracing a thin, ghostly crescent of white light on the right side of the screen. It was so brief; anyone blinking would have missed it.

But then, it flashed again.

"Lieutenant Relys spotted it while the sensors were cycling through the scanning spectrum, Sir," now explained the acting Chief of Science.

"I have locked sensors on that specific bandwidth so that we can at least get a glimpse of it when it sends residual emissions."

"Emissions of what?" asked Sangliar before anyone else did.

"Tetryon plasma."

"Possible source?" asked the captain, looking intently at the screen, antennae waving.

"Tetryon plasma does not exist in nature, Sir. It can only be of artificial origin."

"Specify; what do we know could produce such emissions?"

"Among the very few devices that could emit tetryon plasma, there are propulsion systems, some weapons systems, a few sensor and communication systems and..."

"... And?" asked the Tellarite doctor impatiently of the small woman at the science station.

"And a cloaking device."

The words hanged in the silence like a bell toll.

"Yellow alert." ordered Kheren.

*A massive cloaking device? N'Eligahn thought. The power output needed to cloak an entire area of space that provided its own gravity would be enormous.*

He ran a several calculations, based on the assumed area of the gravity and overlapped it with a perceived range a cloaking device would have to be in order to cover that large of an area.

"Sir, to power a cloaking field that large you'd have to have a power source the size of a star," N'Eligahn reported, "Or more likely, a star itself."

He tapped into his console.

"If you have an interest at all on what's inside, I might suggest a concentrated antiproton beam fired at several locations ahead of us from the main deflector," he added. "It was used by the Cardassians to locate the USS Defiant when she was kidnapped by the Maquis. Might give us enough time to at least scan what's underneath it."

Kheren listened to the estimate of his Chief Engineer and nodded. But then, he swiveled his chair around and glanced back at him:

"Would an entire fleet spreading out, maybe also with a starbase, be able to link their cloaks and form a masking net this large, Mister N'Eligahn?"

"In my honest guess, Sir, no," N'Eligahn admitted. "What we seem to be looking at is someone hiding an entire star system hidden by a single cloaking field. A field that even seems to attempt to hide a gravitational field."

He thought for a moment.

"Just to hide the sun of the Sol system so it was as hidden as what's ahead of us you'd need a power output greater than what we'd have with our entire fleet of starships," he added.

Kheren nodded again, agreeing with the Rethian.

"If the Klingons had such level of cloaking technology, we would surely have heard about it. Nevertheless... whatever is doing it, an invasion force could *still* hide in there..."

"And even would it be the case, added Valencia Irsos, it would not explain a gravitational field of this magnitude."

His antennae perked up and his silver eyes went to the petite black woman besides N'Eligahn:

"Lieutenant; do we have enough probes to ring the entire zone with our deflector dish and create an antiproton grid like Mister N'Eligahn suggests?"

The acting Chief of Science quickly looked at her own computer terminal before replying:

"We would need to launch three dozen probes at equal distances, each covering a conical field of ten degrees with their antiproton emitters to encompass such a huge area of space. It can be done, Sir, but it will require more than half of all the units we have on board..."

Then she looked at the Chief Engineer beside her to say:

"It would require much less of our actual probes however if you could use the twenty-five reserve torpedo casings to make specific antiproton emitting probes out of them, Sir." The captain's gaze shifted back to the spiny-headed, orange-skinned engineer:

"How long would it take you to do it, Chief?"

N'Eligahn thought about it for a moment, doing the calculations in his head.

"Give me about two and half hours, Sir, and you'll have them."

He nodded to Ensign Pacioretti who was currently on stand by on the bridge. The Ensign nodded back and walked over to the main engineering console as N'Eligahn approached the turbolift and tapped his combadge.

"N'Eligahn to Blakely, have Gamma on standby, they're about to have a busy shift," he said.

"You have three, Mister N'Elighan. Lieutenant Irksos, provide engineering with all the specifications needed for the needed frequencies and deployment and keep monitoring the Azimuth Horizon."

"Aye, Sir."

Kheren spun back towards the screen and his eyes went from right to left as he ordered:

"Mister Alther, you will monitor our... ghost out there. Mister Narod, maintain present position but have us ready to move out at the first sign of trouble."

He turned his head to his left at the Tellarite sitting in the CMO Command Chair to add:

"Doctor, monitor all frequencies. If there is someone out there and they try to contact us... or anyone else, I want to hear about it."

"Curiosity killed the cat... Isn't what Humans say?" smirked Doctor Sangliar as he tapped his console to open channels.

"And ignorance decimated their entire Aztec civilization." retorted the Andorian as he turned his lifted gaze to the multistation at the front of the bridge. "Lieutenant Relys, stand down from Yellow Alert but have all systems checked for instant readiness."

"... Aye, Sir," acknowledged the Bajoran woman with a small but perceptible hesitation as she glanced at the screen.

The Andorian captain stood up and looked at his First Officer:

"Number One, prepare personnel for anti-boarding teams, but also for an exploration team and a diplomatic delegation. Whatever we end up finding out there, or happen when we will drop that cloak, we may have to shift priorities once we learn exactly what we are dealing with... or who."

He walked towards the lefthand door finishing:

"I'll be in my ready room, doing some research of my own. You have the conn."

O'Conner for a few moments got lost in his own thoughts about how to deal with such a large cloaking field. He was only brought out as he heard his name.

"Aye, Sir. I will make sure the teams are ready."

O'Conner then paused and turned back to the viewscreen, and before Kheren could make it in to his ready room he asked the first question that popped in his mind.

"Sir, why don't we just try to hail them?"

Kheren stopped in front of the door, paused, then turned around to face his First officer:

"Quite right, Number One. Standard rules of engagement when faced with a possible unknown presence. Yet..."

He paused for a moment before explaining:

"If there is someone cloaked out there as we fear, it is obviously because they do not want to be found. We have been here at long range sensor and scanning in that direction long enough for them to notice us and to initiate contact themselves."

He looked down at the Tellarite Doctor managing communications at the CMO Command chair but Sangliar just shook his head.

"Lets not pressure them for the moment, whoever they may be. We will give them a few hours to do so... or make a move... while we attempt neither to leave or do anything else than ostensibly watch. If nothing happens by the time Mister N'Eligahn finishes with our anticloaking grid, then we'll get more pro-active as you suggest."

He lifted his eyes to the screen before finishing:

"Anyway, we have an astronomical study to perform. Let us just go slow for a change. Keep getting as much data as possible on both anomalies until we are fully ready to deal with our... ghost. One way or another."

\* \* \*

Syntron, walked toward his cramped but sufficient quarters after having just completed a double-shift updating new interfaces in the primary computer core on the USS Excalibur stationed at Starbase 24.

As he reached the doors they quietly swooshed open.

"Meditation 2", he announced as he walked in and immediately headed toward a Vulcan Lyre hanging on the wall behind his computer terminal.

The lights dimmed, the temperature began to slowly rise, and a small water fountain began to flow in response to his command. He reached up and carefully removed the instrument from its almost invisible clasp. He walked with the lyre to a corner alcove of his room and sat down on a slightly cushioned stool. He carefully placed the instrument on his lap and began to meticulously pluck and strum the strings.

As the melody emerged from the instrument, he could sense calmness begin to replace the multitude of thoughts running through that keen Vulcan mind of his. He knew that this was not really logical, yet he had found that when he was contemplating too many thoughts and unresolved issues, that this was an effective way to evoke a kind of serenity into his consciousness; and to an even deeper level into his sub-conscious mind.

Although Syntron was a recent graduate from Starfleet Academy, his ardent skills had been in demand even before he received his diploma. When he wasn't overseeing the installation and problem-solving aspects of new equipment on revamped starships stationed within Earth Space dock and then Starbase 24, he was assisting Captains and Admirals of different ranks and assignments in an array of science-related endeavors and dilemmas; at times simultaneously. He was also filling in as a temporary crew member on test flights to analyze the condition of science equipment and systems, then helping to calibrate the instruments to maximum precision and accuracy. On many occasions while temporarily serving on a vessel he was also called down by a chief engineer to assist in the recalibrating of a variety of engineering equipment.

He didn't mind facing all of these challenges. In fact, these occurrences were some of the most pragmatic on-the-job training experiences that he had yet encountered.

As he moved to a bridge in the melody he was playing, he was disturbed by the sound of the tones emanating from the intercom in his quarters followed by the voice of a communications officer.

"Lieutenant Syntron?" she inquired with a sound of urgency in her voice. "Are you there?" she continued, still sounding impatient.

"This is Syntron," he responded after placing the lyre on the chair and pressing the communication button.

"We have a message coming in from Starfleet Command. Please stand by".

The screen of his personal terminal lighted up with the logo of Starfleet. Then, it was replaced by that of a stylized white flower blooming and the name " Lotus Fleet Division" under it. Superimposed over this symbol appeared the face of a Boslic man, with short brown hair graying at the temples and a neatly trimmed beard in the style made popular a while back by the renowned William T. Riker of the USS Titan. The pips of a Fleet captain could be seen on the red collar of his uniform.

"Lieutenant Syntron, I am Fleet Captain Kotari, Starfleet Lotus Fleet Command, in charge of the Hromi sector. "

The tone was warm but dry, one of command and yet of pragmatic understanding. But there was also a faint emotional edge the sensitive ears of a Vulcan could perceive, even without understanding what it was exactly.

"Your application to the Lotus Fleet starship USS Artemis has been approved. It is the logical choice of starship, and I'm sure the ship will benefit from your scientific expertise. You will receive transfer instructions shortly. Congratulations and safe journeys. Kotari out."

Before the Vulcan could even breathe, the image of another officer appeared before the Starfleet banner; that of a Human woman with a stern dark-haired ponytail, an even sterner grey gaze and as much steel in her clear voice:

"Lieutenant junior grade Syntron; Commander Allendros, special assistant to Fleet Captain Kotari. You will report immediately to Captain DeSalle on the USS Excalibur. Your ship is part of the task force that is being sent to rendezvous with the USS Artemis of Captain Kheren following a possible major incursion of Klingon forces in the Hromi sector. Once there, you will transfer on board the Artemis as Chief of Science."

Her steely eyes stayed on him, unblinking as she continued:

"This is the same sector as where the newly discovered Azimuth Horizon anomaly has been reported. And to complicate matters further, the last report of the Artemis sent to study it reveals that they discovered in the vicinity of the anomaly nothing less than a Dyson sphere."

She sat back, making a pause before adding:

"The Artemis is an old but newly refitted ship, with a green crew and a novice captain. You certainly saw the newsfeed about their alleged destruction and miraculous return when they found the anomaly. And now, they stumbled again upon another cosmic-scaled mystery... and again we have lost all contact with her... with Klingons rattling their swords on our doorstep, right where they were..."

She sighed heavily then finished:

"When you will get there, you are expected to be thoroughly familiarized with large-scale cloaking principles and technology, including data recorded by the USS Enterprise-D which first encountered such a thing... and with the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, including all the logs and specs of the Artemis and all relevant data about plasma storms and subspace fractures. Report to the Excalibur at once, Lieutenant. And safe winds. Allendros out."

The woman disappeared, leaving only the logo of the United Federation of Planets on the small screen.

For a few moments Syntron just stared at the UFP symbol on the screen. It all just happened so fast. He was replaying the key information that he just witnessed in his mind.

*"application to the Lotus Fleet starship USS Artemis has been approved"*

*"report immediately to Captain DeSalle on the USS Excalibur"  
"rendezvous with the USS Artemis of Captain Kheren"*

*"possible major incursion of Klingon forces in the Hromi sector."*

*"cloaking principles and technology... Azimuth Horizon anomaly....ship specs... relevant data... plasma storms... sunspace fractures..."*

It was all swirling around Syntron's brain simultaneously like a compilation of feedback loops.

To break the spell, he decided to focus on the immediate tasks at hand. He would address the other issues once he was somewhat settled in on the Excalibur and enroute to the Artemis.

"Computer", Syntron stated.

"Working", the synthetic female voice replied.

"Compile a current list, description, and location involving the duty schedule for Lieutenant Syntron Nacluv over the next six weeks associated with ships and personnel at Starbase 24", he declared.

"Matrix completed," the voice of the computer responded almost immediately.

"Next" he continued, "cross-reference qualified science personnel available to immediately replace Lieutenant Syntron Nacluv in this duty schedule, and indicate specific tasks that have no personnel available."

"Complete" the synthetic female voice responded.

"Now, send this information along with my transfer orders to the USS Artemis via the USS Excalibur to all personnel involved in this schedule change and to the Admiral's Department of Personnel and Assignment Scheduling/Placement office," he added.

"Matrix and transfer orders sent to all specified personnel" the synthetic voice confirmed.

Syntron was about to close the connection with the computer, when he thought:

"Computer, when is the USS Excalibur scheduled to leave orbit?" he inquired.

"In 3 hours 42 minutes and 15.6 seconds" the synthetic female voice announced.

"Intriguing" Syntron thought to himself.

He had just left this ship only a brief while ago and there were no indications or information that this ship would be leaving the starbase less than four hours later.

With so little time until the Excalibur's departure, Syntron began packing his belongings. He began with his Vulcan Lyre a followed by his Terran Violin. Step-by-step he methodically compiled his remaining collection of essentials and personal belongings.

Afterward, he showered and dressed in his Starfleet attire in front of the relatively small mirror above the sink. He was combing his gleaming black hair into shape when he again heard the familiar tones emanating from the intercom.

"Lieutenant Syntron?" the voice inquired.

"Syntron here" he responded as he turned and walked toward the device.

"We have a message coming from the Excalibur. Please hold" the communications officer required.

Within moments, as he finished arranging his luggage, another voice came over the intercom.

"Lieutenant Syntron, this is Ensign Rodriguez aboard the Excalibur" the youthful male voice began nervously.

"Captain DeSalle wanted me to inform you that you need to be aboard this vessel immediately! She is scheduled for departure in 27 minutes... and Captain DeSalle emphatically declared that this departure time is not negotiable... for any reason!"

He concluded with concern very obviously laced within his voice.

"I'm on my way now" was all Syntron replied.

He grabbed his belongings, and before he walked out, he took one last gaze around the small cabin that had been his temporary home since graduation.

"*Well... this is when everything really begins*" he thought to himself as he walked out of this little room on Starbase 24 and toward his destination as the new Chief of Science aboard the USS Artemis.

It wasn't long before he was transported aboard the Excalibur.

One of the five Sovereign class battleships composing Task Force Alpha of the First Fleet, this vessel had a tradition as long and almost as prestigious as that of their command ship, the Enterprise. The Excalibur, along with the Hood, the Potemkin and the Lexington, had made the premier task force of Starfleet throughout the last two centuries since the days of the legendary Constitution class starships.

Back in those days, those same four starships had been the ones to battle the USS Enterprise of the legendary James Kirk during the ill-fated testing of the M5 unit; the experiment of a completely computer-controlled vessel had turned into tragedy when the Excalibur had been nearly destroyed, hundreds of people killed. Since then, the starship Excalibur had carried the remembrance of this heroic sacrifice in the renewed pride of its successive designs and commanders.

Her current captain, Pierre DeSalle, was no exception, if the sound of his strong, clear voice over the comm was any indication:

"Send him to my ready room, Mister Rodriguez. "

It didn't take much for the Vulcan to understand that the transporter Chief had already announced his arrival just as he was being transported.

"You can use the conduit interface on the wall to be guided to the captain's ready room on deck 1, Sir. " said the small, bronze-skinned man." I will have someone bring your luggage to your quarters on deck 2, senior officers' quarters. The captain is waiting, Sir. "

Syntron just nodded in affirmation to the young Ensign Rodriguez. Apparently the Ensign was unaware that Syntron had left this ship merely hours ago and that he was already familiar with the location of the ready room on the Excalibur; having recently upgraded the Captain's computer terminal and other technological features in the ready room that Captain DeSalle specifically requested.

He exited out of the transporter room and walked down one of the many recently refurbished corridors of the Excalibur. He headed toward the turbo shaft. The crews of different departments were moving frenetically throughout every region of the ship and in all directions, like bees through a hive, trying to tie up all of the loose ends before the Excalibur's departure from the Starbase.

As he entered the turbolift, he turned and announced:

"Deck 1".

The doors closed together with a sound like a contained gust of wind and the cabin began to move immediately. With a whirling sound, it also changed direction and he could feel it ascending upward toward the bridge.

In just a matter of moments the turbolift came to a halt and its doors whooshed open.

Syntron just stood and looked out into the view of the bridge as a multitude of crew members were all buzzing about the various terminals and consoles, each focused on the priority of their task at hand. However, the pace and intensity of their movements were vastly greater than they were only four hours ago.

Something had obviously and drastically changed since that time.

He deduced that this was all connected to his commission to the Artemis and the sudden departure time of the Excalibur. However, he only knew of these effects, but not of the cause of these events that were suddenly set in motion. Perhaps he would learn of the origin of these proceedings from Captain DeSalle, along with other implications that may be involved.

He stepped out of the turbo lift and onto the bridge, and then proceeded to weave his way around all of the crewmembers in motion around him. He headed toward the ready room. He signaled his arrival and the doors immediately slid apart.

The captain looked up from his terminal:

"Welcome back Lieutenant Junior Grade Syntron".

He rose from the chair and walked toward Syntron and instructed him to sit down, then sat down himself at his chair across from the tall Vulcan. He looked firmly at him, took a deep breath, and with a look of concern began to speak directly to the young lieutenant.

"Well, Mister Syntron, I hope you do not expect to be a simple passenger on this ship."

Syntron, with an eyebrow slightly raised, was not expecting the conversation to begin in this manner. He pondered for a moment what exactly the Captain was implying.

"I am here Captain DeSalle to perform in whatever capacity you deem necessary to fulfill the requirements of this mission or your ship. I offer my services as a science officer or in any auxiliary position or task which necessitates my aptitude or attention." He replied, looking directly into the Captain's intense and focused eyes, in a matter-of-fact like tone; as if the message were being vocalized from the speakers of a computer terminal.

The man for a moment stared at him, unblinking. He was tall and lean, with angular features almost as stern as those of a Vulcan under his short-cropped auburn hair. But his green eyes burned with a very human pride and satisfaction in his command position. His great, great, great grandfather had been a navigator aboard the USS Enterprise of the legendary Captain Kirk, and he bore the tradition with definite pleasure.

But he was not smiling when he said:

"I have been informed of your assignment to the Artemis. I know of her, the famous "stalwart guardian of the Federation"... But I think that, this time, she will not return from the dead as she is so well known for. Luck can only hold for so long..."

*Why then, Syntron pondered, would Starfleet go through these steps to send him to rendezvous with a ship that is not expected to be there upon our arrival?*

But before his thoughts could even begin to produce an answer, the Captain continued: "I suggest that you do not get your hopes too high, Mister Syntron: last report from border sensor buoys shows a massive cloaking field that could very well mean a Klingon invasion fleet is on the way... and the Artemis is right in its path. We are ordered to rendezvous with her with the rest of Task Force Alpha... but it will take us over a full solar day just to get there. I'm afraid the old lady will find no safe port to weather the coming storm."

He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms.

"You have no assigned duty here on board, Lieutenant. Therefore, I expect you to work on the data we received from Lotus Fleet about the whole situation and be ready to provide it to our chief of science, Lieutenant-Commander Nakamura, so that we are ready when we get there. I don't want that watchamacallit anomaly reported out there to hinder us if and when we tackle the Klingons."

He paused a moment before finishing:

"Questions?"

Syntron stood there silently for a moment. He had many questions relating to this situation: his new commission, the events unfolding out there in the Hromi sector, the present condition of the Excalibur, the current status of the Artemis, details regarding the anomaly... and the thoughts just continued to escalate.

However, Syntron merely faced the Captain for another moment and processed his circumstance.

"None at this time Captain DeSalle" Syntron replied with a stoic expression.

The captain unfolded his arms and just looked at the tall young Vulcan standing before him.

"Cool as a cucumber" the Captain thought. "Would probably be a helluva poker player" He then gave a similar tone in this reply:

"Dismissed".

Syntron then turned and walked out of the ready room and back into the controlled chaos of the bridge. He entered the turbo shaft from the bridge of the Excalibur and, turning around, faced the doors and ordered:

"Deck 2".

The doors closed together and the turbo lift began to move downward.

He began to think about what the Captain had just reminded him: the futility of the Artemis probable circumstances, the apparent invasion of Klingon forces in the Hromi sector, and his responsibility to follow up on the information and data provided, and then to be prepared to present his findings to the chief of science of the Excalibur.

He realized that at this moment that his only course of action was to get settled into his new temporary quarters and begin his research.

The turbo lift came to a halt in just a few seconds. Its doors whooshed opened and Syntron stepped out onto deck 2 and headed toward his quarters. This corridor was deserted compared to the others he'd be traversing; most likely because everyone else was on duty within some other section of the ship.

As the doors to his room opened, he was initially surprised to see that these quarters were much more spacious than where he resided on Starbase 24. Then he recalled that Ensign Rodriguez stated that his bags would be sent to senior officers' quarters on deck 2. Rank apparently does have its privileges.

As he stepped inside these new quarters he saw that his luggage was neatly arranged next to his bed, and that a new officer's uniform was hanging in an open closet. He would save donning this new uniform until he was ready to step onto the Artemis and officially take his place as its new Chief of Science. He also noticed that his two instruments were sitting side-by-side in their cases next to the other luggage. It was reassuring to note that neither had been lost in the transition. It was now time to get to work.

After spending a moderate amount of time setting up his quarters, Syntron logged onto the computer terminal set up on the desk in his room and began his examination of available information on the upcoming mission.

As he worked researching information about the Klingon forces and the Hromi sector, he was again interrupted by the tones of the intercom.

"Lieutenant Syntron", began the message from the bridge communication officer, "you have an officer's meeting that is about to commence in the Captain's ready room within five minutes. The captain wants to ensure that you will be prepared and on time", he spoke with a hint of an ominous warning to the newly arrived science officer.

"Acknowledged" replied Syntron.

He quickly gathered and compiled his research findings and presentation notes into his science log. Afterward, he briskly headed out his cabin and toward the turbolift.

He made his way toward the ready room with only seconds to spare before the meeting began.

Captain DeSalle was already reviewing background information when Syntron entered the room and he gave the Vulcan a look that told him to swiftly sit down and listen up, which Syntron promptly did.

"...Task Force Alpha... as you know is led by the USS Enterprise under the command of Captain Data, the USS Lexington is under the command of Captain Heather Anderson, the USS Hood is under the command of Captain Dina Voykunski, the USS Potemkin is under the command of Captain T'kai, and of course... the USS Excalibur", the Captain enunciated with distinction the name of the last ship. "You better know who is commanding this ship" he stated with an "or else" tone of serious mischievousness.

After glancing slowly around the room, making intense eye contact with each officer he continued.

"Our main mission is to rendezvous with the USS Artemis in Hromi sector, near Klingon border, to investigate possible incursion of Klingon ships under cloak. By direct orders from Starfleet, we are to carefully assess the situation and if required, personally escort Klingons back to their territory or call for reinforcement from the rest of our Fleet in the nearby sectors".

Captain DeSalle looked at them all very sternly then added with emphasis "We'll engage them only if absolutely essential and unavoidable. Diplomatic inquiries are already underway about a possible border dispute that may have led to this possible transgression".

"By now" Captain DeSalle continued, "Captain Data has already ordered immediate departure in star formation at emergency warp for ten hours, cruising speed for six hours for diagnostic and maintenance of engines then again ten hours at emergency warp to reach the rendezvous point as fast as possible. All vessels will remain on yellow alert at all times until ordered otherwise. No one is to engage without his direct order".

"Any questions before I continue with the latest update?" DeSalle inquired as he glanced around the table at all of the officers surrounding him.

At that moment, a signal came through the ship's intercom system:

"Captain DeSalle: message from Task Force 1 commander Captain Data for you, Sir."

"In here Lieutenant. "

The holodisplay at the long banana-shaped table's center activated to show the head and torso on a dark haired, yellow-eyes, pale man in a red command uniform, his features as soft as his voice:

"This is captain Data of the Enterprise. To all ships of task Force1: prepare for immediate departure, T- minus five minutes... mark. Coordinates have been sent to your navigation computer. Keep an encoded channel open. Enterprise out."

DeSalle straightened up and immediately ordered:

"Let's move people!"

All the senior officers present immediately scrambled out of the conference room and got back to their stations on the bridge. But just before Syntron got out, the commanding officer of the Excalibur called to him:

"Lieutenant: you will have the next day to conduct a thorough research of this sector of space we are about to engage in. This... Azimuth Horison we got reports about will pose an unknown element in a possible battle situation... and I hate unknown elements in a battle situation. Make sure that we will get no surprise from that thing out there when and if the time comes to face the enemy. Dismissed."

And without further words or even a glance at the tall Vulcan, DeSalle left from the room to walk straight to his command chair and ordered an immediate departure.

## CHAPTER TWO: MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

**Captain's log, stardate: 87055.4**

**We have been motionless for two and a half hours, preparing for deeper investigation of the cloaked area of intense gravitation that is affecting the Azimuth Horizon anomaly.**

**Chief Engineer N'Eligahn is almost done with reconfiguring our twenty-five spare torpedo casings into antiproton emitting probes. Deploying them by groups of three slaved to a standard probe and adding the wider area of our own deflector dish as the main control system, acting Chief of Science Irksos is convinced we can collapse the immense cloaking field hiding the unknown source of gravitation we encountered... and see what's in there.**

**There has been no sign of any attempt to contact us from whatever is hiding inside that zone... if there is anyone in there. The presence of a large Klingon Fleet feared by Starfleet is now pretty slim; having being here for hours actively scanning the zone, Klingons would have been convinced that we were on them; they would not have hesitated or wasted anytime to send a squadron of cloaked ships to "silence us" if they had been hiding there.**

**So now the question is: who or what will we find in there?**

Kheren had been musing for a long time in the darkness of his ready room. He always preferred it that way when he wanted to do some heavy thinking. Looking at the silent, blinking stars helped focus his mind.

"Computer: open access to all Federation files regarding gravitational phenomena, including classified ones, authorization Kheren \*\*\* 8-4-2.\*\*\* crystal \*\*\* Blue."

The computer had no problem registering the ultrasonic syllables the Andorian had used from his native Graalen language for his own personal code.

"Authorization code confirmed. Access granted level 9. There are forty-hundred sixty five million... "

"Computer hold. Access current sensor readings regarding the present gravitational phenomenon studied and correlate. "

"There are three hundred and eighty-five..."

"Hold: add presence of a cloaking field to the correlation."

"There are no files conforming to the required search parameters."

Kheren sighed, rubbed his eyes and then said:

"Expand search parameters by ignoring the exact figures of measurements."

"There are seventy-six files conforming to the required search parameters." then droned the feminine voice of the ship's computer.

"Correlate with current data on Azimuth Horizon anomaly; Out of those files, how many report a phenomenon that would theoretically be capable of affecting the anomaly gravitationally?"

"There are no files conforming to the required search parameters."

The Andorian sighed more heavily. Then he said:

"Computer: expand search parameters by ignoring specific measurements for those seventy-six files."

"There is one file conforming to the required search parameters."

*Now we're starting to get somewhere,* thought the captain of the Artemis as he sat straighter in his chair to better face the terminal on his desk.

"Computer: open file."

"File open: Starfleet starship log, NCC-1701-D USS Enterprise, stardate 41869.1. Epsilon Minos system, Planet Aldea, hidden from view for millennia by an enormous planet-wide cloaking device that hid it from marauders and other galactic threats. In addition to the cloaking device, Aldea was defended by an immensely powerful shield..."

"Hold."

The commanding officer of the Artemis reflected for a moment on the image of an entire planet under cloak. Then he asked:

"Computer: ignore gravitational parameters and concentrate on those of cloaking technology. Correlate with currently studied area of space measurements."

"There are no files conforming..."

"Hold. Now go back, ignore cloaking parameters and concentrate on gravitational parameters from artificial sources. Correlate with with currently studied area of space measurements. "

"There is one file conforming to the required search parameters."

"Display file."

"File open: Starfleet starship log, NCC-1701-D USS Enterprise, stardate 46125.3..."

Half an hour later, Captain Kheren came back on the bridge, his eyes very far away as he looked at the apparently empty area of space on the main viewing screen.

As he sat in his command chair, he just kept silent for a moment before finally asking:

"Doctor Sangliar: any sign?"

"I can make you one with a finger if you want, but nothing from out there."

The captain didn't retort to the Tellarite's jibe; a sure sign that his mind was greatly preoccupied. After another moment, he tapped his combadge:

"Mister N'Eligahn: are we ready to deploy our net?"

As the call came down, the engineering teams were finishing up on their task:

"Yes Sir, we finished building them about forty minutes ago and have been running simulations and tests on the procedure," N'Eligahn said.

"Thank you, Chief."

"Blakely, how go the simulations?" then asked the Rethian as he passed two ensigns who were closing up their tool kit.

"All positive, Sir."

"All right guys, well done," N'Eligahn said over his combadge and aloud as he walked through cargo bay 2.

Cargo Bays 2 and 3 had served as their makeshift work shops because, for one, they were large and, two, because if anyone messed up, the doors could be opened and the resulting mess released into space. He tried to not think about the possibility of the second option.

He exited onto the bridge a few moments later and relieved the Ensign at the engineering station. He waited for all stations to report ready before turning to the captain.

"All probes are ready and loaded, Sir, crew are just awaiting your order," he said.

From his command seat, Kheren nodded then looked at Valencia Irksos:

"Telemetry parameters encoded and ready as soon as Engineering confirms the probes loaded for deployment, Sir." reported the petite black-skinned woman.

"Good. Mister Alther, get eady to launch from all tubes, widest dispersal pattern. Lieutenant Relys, you will deploy them following Lieutenant Irksos' precalculated pattern and standby before initiating the grid. Mister Narod, maintain present position."

All the officers acknowledged in turn.

Glancing at his First Officer, the Andorian captain then asked:

"Any last recommendation, Number One?"

O'Conner had spent the last half-hour or so sending orders to the different teams on board. A ship like the Artemis had scientific away teams and a diplomatic delegation, as it was part of their true role as a deep space explorer, which O'Conner hoped that one day they would be able to do.

And, as part of the security training, a number of anti-boarding teams had already been formed, armed and stationed.

Boarding was a tactic that Klingons enjoyed to use.

"The teams are ready Sir. Though I still recommended hail who ever might be out there before firing torpedo shaped objects." O'Conner replied warily as he gazed out at the seemingly deserted emptiness before them.

Kheren nodded, spun on his chair back to the screen, his head cocked to the left as he ordered:

"Doc, open all hailing frequencies."

"Sure thing, Sir." obeyed the Tellarite, not without commenting: "Let's shout to the Klingons: Hey, over here!"

"If there are Klingons around, Doc, they already heard you grumbling anyway."

"Rmhpf... Hailing frequencies open... Sir."

Kheren stood up, looking straight at the main viewer and the empty field of stars.

"This is Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis, representing the United Federation of Planets. We are on a peaceful mission of exploration."

For long seconds, only the soft purring of the bridge's instruments was heard.

The Andorian cocked an eyebrow at Sangliar who silently sneered. Then, his silver gaze shifted to the science station behind him.

"There are two possibilities," Lieutenant Irksos said: "They are unable to respond... They are unwilling to respond."

"Unwilling for sure if they are Klingons," commented the Chief Medical officer watching closely his communication panel.

"If there is someone out there," countered the Science officer.

When silence returned, Kheren straightened up again and spoke anew:

"This region of space is recognized as Federation territory. We have detected your cloaking field. Its presence is a potential risk to navigation and security. If you do not willingly reveal yourselves, we will be forced to do it for you. In the interest of Galactic Peace, please respond."

And again, silence was the only answer.

The Andorian sent an apologetic stare at his First officer and sat back down in his command chair.

"Deploy the grid."

N'Eligahn watched as the altered torpedoes were launched and deployed in front of the ship. They emitted an odd golden glow as they approached the presumed object ahead.

"Torpedo probes deploying in grid pattern Sierra-Delta," Relys said. The torpedoes slowed as they neared the presumed wall of the phenomenon, rotating into place.

The tops of the torpedoes slid off and revealed the inner working of the devices. They angled slightly and the bottom portion began to glow golden orange. Each torpedo shook for a moment before they deployed a golden beam that impacted with the object, a ripple formed around each beam's point of impact in a precise grid.

On the screen, twenty-five specially-made probes were joined by five class VIII medium range multimission-type ones. Like the newly made probes, they were built out of photon torpedo casings and capable like them of reaching warp 9. After testing their emitters upon launch and confirming target position, they each slaved five of the improvised ones to them, linked together and then went to warp.

In forty seconds, they had all reached their designated position: from each side of the starship itself, they all ringed an area of space five hundred million kilometers in diameter, each covering an overlapping conical scanning zone of fifteen degrees.

"All probes are in position, telemetry stable and strong, ready to activate antiproton beam, Sir" reported then Lieutenant Relys.

"Let's see it."

On the screen, a ring of tiny stars flared up before the special filters of the electronically converted imagery. Something like a sphere of troubled waters churned before the stars, fogged their lights and finally obliterated them completely.

Before their eyes, an object appeared, dark and immense.

"Analysis." ordered the Andorian ship commander, leaning forward in his seat, eyes and antennae darted at the image.

"Data stream coming in, Sir." answered the acting Chief of Science: "Volume three point zero-two times ten to the seventeenth cubic kilometers; diameter two-hundred million kilometers..."

"That is almost the size of the Earth's orbit around the Sun!" exclaimed Patricia Blakely.

"Mass... one metric ton."

Everyone looked at Irksos as if she was mad.

"How can a single metric ton of matter generate a gravitational field strong enough to shake a four million tons starship... ten billion kilometers away?" stammered Narod with wide eyes.

"It can't," admitted Valencia Irksos. "But our scans cannot penetrate deeper than a few kilometers into the object; there is a two point four kilometers-thick carbon-neutronium alloy envelope and that is what alone is registering but partly on our mass-density scans. The gravimetric sensors, however, confirm massive energies being dissipated through it in the form of a gravitational field, one equivalent to that of a class M-I red giant star."

"There is a *star* in there?" wondered out loud the Bajoran woman at the foremost multitask station. "But... but that would mean that... that this thing could be a..."

"A Dyson sphere." finished Kheren.

O'Conner stared out at the viewscreen and asked the question that first came to his mind:

"Wonder if it's powering the storm... Lieutenant Irksos: estimated age of the sphere?"

"Impossible to estimate age without actual physical samples to examine, Sir" answered Irksos.

"Even cosmogenic isotopes are not detected by our sensors from the structure, and those isotopes can last for millions of years..."

"I don't think the sphere would be powering it, Sir," N'Eligahn said in turn. "According to the little information we have about them, the energy released by the sun inside of it is completely absorbed by the interior side of the shell. It goes to reason that if this actually is a Dyson Sphere, then that energy is merely going to the cloaking device...which to maintain a cloaking device this size I'm sure takes more energy than we can truly fathom."

The acting Chief of Science activated a few controls and looked at readouts before adding:

"Chief N'Eligahn is quite right, Sir. There is no data suggesting any causal relation between this and the anomaly. This Dyson sphere, or rather Dyson *shell*, is indeed theoretically catching all the energy output of an enclosed star... which is way too much for any structure to contain, especially if you want it to be inhabitable. Venting the excess energy in producing a cloaking field of this magnitude is certainly one way... and so is the enormous gravitational field we encountered. Even then, there would still be enormous amounts of excess energy left. And..."

She paused a moment, looking again at some readout before adding:

"Sir, there is also a powerful deflector field around it. Obviously to protect the structure from astral bodies like comets, asteroids and even micrometeorites, since the enclosed star's heliosphere cannot do it anymore as in an open solar system... But..."

The woman rechecked her readouts then reported:

"It is fluctuating, Sir... and weakening at the poles... where I read a field of debris..."

Calibrating again her readings, she suddenly blinked, then turned to look straight at Kheren:

"Captain: the gravitational field of the Dyson shell is definitely altering the Azimuth Horizon's corona. But... Sir... there are subspace fractures between the anomaly and the structure. Residual chronitons and nucleonics strongly suggest that the shell was already hit once by the anomaly!"

The Andorian spun around in his chair to face her:

"Where is the anomaly now?"

"It whisked itself back into subspace, Sir. But the next time it will appear..."

As he looked back at the viewing screen, he finished for her:

"It might destroy it."

For a moment, he just stared at the immense object, blinking, antennae waving. After a moment of silence he asked:

"How long?"

"Impossible to tell, Sir. Could be days... or the next minute."

The silver eyes were staring hard at the screen.

"Could there be anyone living inside that shell?"

The petite black-skinned woman immediately explained:

"Sir, the interior surface is one point twenty-five times ten to the seventeenth squared kilometers; the equivalent of two hundred and forty-five million class M planets... Over twelve times the estimated total of all the M class worlds in our entire galaxy. At an average of fifteen inhabitants per square kilometer... enough to provide for three *quintillion* inhabitants!"

For another moment, the Andorian captain blinked and waved his cranial appendages.

"What do you think, Number One?"

"First, I would suggest contacting Starfleet and First Fleet. If there is people in there, Artemis couldn't even hold one percent of them."

"Sensible Commander... and quite according to procedures." agreed Kheren. "Dovtor, open a channel to Starbase 10 on an encoded channel."

A few seconds of tapping controls and the Tellarite at his left grumbled:

"Forget it: this gravimetric field is so intense, it disrupts all subspace channels. We can just have short range communications."

"Never can be easy." sighed Kheren. "Record our logs on a buoy and send it back to base for them to inform both Starfleet Command and First Fleet. We'll do this every shift."

"A few more orders programmed through the CMO command chair and Sangliar reported:

"Done. Starbase 10 will receive all reports, logs and data in a little less than six hours."

"Good." nodded Kheren as he looked once more at his First Officer to add: "If there are people in there, I guess an evacuation is simply not an option. We'll be not only short of space but short in time as well. This anomaly can strike at any moment."

He kept his eyes on the Human who then continued:

"Second: For an away team I would send Arrow 1, if the storm comes only they could survive the onslaught of the storm. If we take this to be a first contact mission I would suggest you captain lead the team, with Lieutenant N'Elighan, Lieutenant Alther and our friendly doctor."

O'Conner replied calmly as he took stock of the situation. He didn't like the idea of sending so many senior officers in the line of fire but if there was a new culture in that sphere, he figured the captain would want to meet them first.

"Thank you for respecting my privileges, Number One," retorted the Andorian with a glint in his eye, "but we need to know much more before sending people in a lone shuttle out there. Especially that we must keep in mind that we don't know, not only *if* there is someone *in* there, but also if there is someone else *out* there."

He then turned to the large double station right in front of them:

"Mister Alther: estimate of how a force of Klingon ships in the sector would approach us with our anticloaking grid active."

Kelsey turned to face Kheren:

"The Klingon ships could possibly mask their energy signature as they approach, which would be unaffected by our anti cloaking grid."

Thinking a bit, the Kalthurian continued:

"We would have to tune our short and long range scanners to pick up much lower energy signatures from the Klingon vessels if they are indeed here."

Kelsey paused for a moment, then added:

"There is also the possibility they have developed a similar technology to what the Spectre has, the DYCEP hull plating."

Looking back at the screen, the androgyn finished saying:

"There may also be some form of docking bays which the Klingon's may appear from the shell since we are unsure if they have already taken the Dyson Shell from its previous occupants."

Kheren took a moment to consider the words of his tactical officer.

"A lot of "ifs" and "maybes"... And all point out to the fact that we know not enough."

He looked at the image of the titanic construct before them and added:

"You bring out a scary possibility with your Dyson shell takeover by the Empire, Lieutenant. The danger to the Federation would make the last Borg war look like a Vulcan Tea Ceremony."

Keeping his silvery gaze forward, his antennae dropped aggressively forward as he finished:

"And our duty is as much to seek out new life and new civilizations as it is to ascertain any threat to the Federation."

The Andorian seated himself back in the command chair to order:

"Mister Alther: adjust your tactical sensors to your parameters and keep an eye out for any Klingon surprise. Keep shields and weapons down but be ready to go to Red Alert at a moment's notice."

Kelsey nodded and turned back around to the console and tuning tactical sensors into the ranges that a Klingon fleet could be using if they masked their energy signatures, getting ready for anything as they approached the Dyson shell.

"Let's hope the Artemis will handle this." she muttered to herself quietly.

"The warrior triumphs, Lieutenant, not the sword." muttered back the Captain, his sensitive auditory organs inside his antennae catching effortlessly the whisperings of the Kalthurian.

Kelsey smiled, head shaking at the same time. The androgyn kept forgetting that Kheren could hear pretty easily.

Even though being worried, Kelsey trusted Kheren to lead the Artemis and her crew through whatever was to come, including the massive Dyson Shell that was looming before them.

He didn't turn from his posture darting at the main viewer to order next:

"Mister N'Eligahn, we need full technical analysis of this construct. Lieutenant Irksos and the science department will assist you in scanning and deciphering data. Starting now."  
He then glanced at his First Officer seated on his right hand:

"Number One, plan best away teams for different possible scenarios: uninhabited exploration, First Contact and covert scouting operation."

"Aye, Sir" O'Conner replied quickly as turned to look at his console and began to sort through personal files. He then paused and added. "Just remember that we left before Tuesday."

Kheren sent him back a mocking stare with an obviously feigned expression of reproach. But for the first time, he *did* get the humor of the time honored Starfleet joke.

"Thank you, Commander O'Conner. Until now, I did not understand it."

He sincerely, seriously meant it. But the smiles around him showed it was received as returning banter.

*Will I ever truly get it?* He wondered silently once again.

Taking a deep breath, Kheren finally ordered:

"Mister Narod: assume axial orbit around the Dyson shell."

"Aye, Captain." acknowledged the Trill pilot. "approaching at full impulse, pole to pole orbit plotted, course laid in."

"Alright people... we're going in."

The Artemis moved in on the position of the colossal construct encircled by her own unmasking probes and it rapidly filled the entire viewing screen, even at full image reduction. Remote visuals from the lead probes were needed to keep an overall view of it, so immense the globe was.

When the starship settled into orbit along the imaginary north-south axis of the Dyson shell, it was four hundred thousand kilometers from it; roughly the distance between Earth and the moon. Yet they could all see stark details of it's titanic surface. It looked nothing less than a sheer wall of joined metal parts and plates, somewhat like a Borg cube but smoother and without the ugly green glow associated with the Collective's technology.

But even the Borg could not have begun to manufacture such a thing.

For a long moment, they all looked silently at the screen, until the Trill navigator announced:

"Axial orbit steady at four hundred thousand kilometers in a North-south trajectory. At present full impulse speed, it will take us two point eight hours to complete a first orbit."

"Thank you, Mister Narod." answered Kheren. "Any attempt to hail us, Doctor?"

"No... started to say the Tellarite in the CMO command chair but then looked from his armchair console to the main viewer to add: " But I feel like I'm being watched."

"Lieutenant Irksos?" inquired the Andorian without turning.

"No active scans detected from the construct, Sir. But passive scans would not be detectable."

"Well, if our own scans would have indisposed them, they would have reacted to our ring of probes and our own long range scans by now." observed Lieutenant Relys at the Ops station.

"And we did knock on the door." reminded Doctor Sangliar.

Captain Kheren didn't move or even blink but then ordered:

"Science, Engineering, Tactical: Full analysis."

Valencia Irksos was first to report:

"All preliminary scans confirmed, Sir. At present distance, we can penetrate further through the carbon-neutronium shell and detect the presence of a stellar body. Calculated from current excess energy output from the shell, we can deduce that this is most probably a main-sequence yellow dwarf star, much like Earth's own Sun."

"How could anyone bottle-in a whole star?" wondered Relys outloud. The artificial wormhole near her own home planet of Bajor was already beyond known science to make, deemed a miracle from supernatural beings; but this was beyond even that... beyond belief.

"The very size of the shell is too immense even to have been made out of the material available in any known solar system, including the metallic core of their gas giants and all the estimated debris, comets and meteorites that can pass through it." admitted the acting Chief of Science. "But, calculating the excess energy output used in the cloaking field, the gravitational field and the deflector screen, we can postulate that there is enough there to power replicator technology on a cosmic scale and fabricate enough from the basic material to complete it."

She looked at her instruments again as new data was coming in and analysed by the computer. Her eyes went wider and she turned to look at the captain.

"Sir; there is an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere clinging to the interior surface of the shell!"

"Impossible. "Flatly said Sangliar, crossing his thick arms across his wide torso. "Anyone with half a brain here knows the star's gravity would pull it off from the periphery and towards it."

"Don't belittle yourself like this, Doctor." half-mumbled Kheren without tearing his eyes from the screen. "Artificial gravity?"

"Undoubtably, Captain," answered Irksos still smiling at her commander's jest silencing the frowning Tellarite. "As to how..."

The Andorian glanced to his right.

"Mister N'Eligahn?"

N'Eligahn frowned and thought for a moment, going over everything he could remember from the Academy and working for his father.

"To be honest Sir, if they do have it, the best guess I can make is that it'd operate on basically the same principles as ours."

He turned to Blakely and brought up the scans that had been made.

"We picked up slight traces of Duranium plating throughout the shell, something commonly used in gravity plating. And then...wow..."

He clicked through the scans again.

"This is beyond any engineering I can fathom, Sir, but looking at these scans overlapped with what we suspect the skeleton of that thing looks like, there's about 4-5 enormous rings spinning between the inner and outer shells. To charge the gravity plating along the inner surface, they'd have to be spinning at..." he paused while he checked the numbers, "...no less than two-hundred and seventy kph."

He sighed and shook his head.

"I can't hazard a guess who built this, but they knew construction," he added. "There's absolutely no way any currently known factions could have done this, it doesn't match anything on record since records were kept...except...stardate 46125.3, the USS Enterprise-D encountered a similar structure and..."

He read through the file.

"Sir, I have to recommend that we don't go inside until we have more information. That last encounter with a Dyson sphere...didn't go so well."

Kelsey piped up from the tactical console after N'Eligahn gave his report:

"It has a deflector grid but is only powerful enough to stop meteors and other such space hazards"

The androgyn paused before continuing:

"It also appears that the deflector grid is weaker at the poles than it should be and there is some kind of debris, resulting from photon torpedo detonations or contact with the anomaly, I am not sure... There are only residual traces of plasma discharges and decayed photons. I can attempt a more detailed scan if you want. Sir."

Head shaking slightly after talking for the moment, the Kalthurian then added:

"It also looks like we won't be able to destroy this, Sir, if we need to; carbon-neutronium hull is so strong that to penetrate it we would need an extreme amount of power, something along the lines of millions of starships."

Tapping a few controls on the tactical sensor pallet control, Arther finished:

"I can't detect any weapon ports on the Dyson Shell and my shuttle bay theory was correct. However, there are no signs of them being used to ferry out anything or anyone as of now."

"So... this is no death star from the Empire."

Kheren felt very odd saying that.

"The question now, he quickly added, is: is this a *dead* star?"

"Unless somebody answers our hails, no way to tell from out here," admitted Lieutenant Irksos.

The Andorian then turned partway on his swiveling chair to address his Chief Engineer and Tactical officer at the same time, while including his First officer in between:

"I studied the Enterprise logs you refer to, Lieutenant Commander, and those of the two research vessels assigned to study the first Dyson shell discovered. The Enterprise had been caught by the docking beams of an entry port when they hailed one of the subspace transmitters near it."

"Maybe the same thing happened here when we sent our own hail, but we were too far even to register the activation of the door and the tractor beams..." ventured Doctor Sangliar from the other side of the command chair.

Kheren nodded without turning:

"A good guess, Doctor. It so happens that those same logs report that the USS Genolan managed to open a portal without being caught in the docking system by activating the opening from a safe distance."

The captain thought for a moment, then ordered to N'Eligahn:

"Continue scanning and analysing this structure with Lieutenant Irksos, chief. You are right: we do need as much information as possible before committing ourselves deeper."

The silver eyes and the antennae above then darted at the Kalthurian:

"Mister Alther: any access ports or docking bays of the same kind on that thing?"

Kelsey nodded "There are two hundred and fifty thousand docking bays all across the shell's surface and five hundred large access doors all over the shell... and they all have tractor beams along with communication relays per bay and access doors."

The Chief of Tactical paused before continuing:

"We could attempt to hail the communication relays directly and thus allow the relays to relay a communication to possibly whoever may be inside."

"Like they didn't hear us the first time with all those antennae bristling like spines all over." commented Doctor Sanglair before looking at both the Captain and the Chief Engineer, adding: "No offense."

Kheren just gave him an amused look but his voice was still serious:

"Let us complete a full orbit and a full scan of the external structure. Then we will look at our options."

Behind him, the Chief Engineer was already busy to do just that.

"N'Eligahn to Engineering," N'Eligahn said to his combadge. "Lieutenant M'Laress, please come to the bridge," then paused for a moment. "Please bring Crewman Yuri with you too, N'Eligahn out."

"Yuri, Sir?" Blakely asked.

"I read something in his profile I think will help us here," the Rethian explained.

"A Crewman on the bridge, though?" Blakely asked, her tone low.

"Captain said: analyze the structure; he can help us," N'Eligahn retorted.

He scanned the data for another moment.

The bridge doors opened. A black furred Caitian entered and walked over to the rear Engineering consoles. A younger human male entered cautiously behind her, his eyes looking around the bridge. N'Eligahn gestured him over.

"Crewman, if I'm not mistaken you wrote a dissertation on the theory of Dyson spheres and shells that was printed in several higher-tier engineering publications, am I correct?" he asked.

"Y-yes, Sir," Yuri said.

"I'd like you to work with Lieutenant Blakely and go over this information and based on your knowledge and the data we have; see if you can determine a possible origin of the shell,"

N'Eligahn turned and walked to the adjacent console and stood beside M'Laress, who had already taken the seat.

"Lieutenant, based on the information and scans, is there any way we can get information on the interior of the shell?" he asked.

"Possibly," M'Laress answered.

She brought up the most recent scans of the shell as they were fed to the console by the science team.

"Based upon the scans and the theories we've formed about the artificial gravity of the shell, it could be possible to determine the surface to water ratio based on the various concentrations of the Durranium plating."

"Give it a shot," N'Eligahn said.

As Yuri walked in, Kelsey noticed he was a crewmember but simply smiled and turned around.

However another bridge officer was not quite so lenient and walked over to Yuri.

"Excuse me crewman, but what are you doing on the bridge?" the Human questioned Yuri, glaring at him.

"Ah, sorry, Sir... the Chief Engineer, ah, ordered me here... Sir," stuttered crewman Yuri, glancing nervously at the command well.

Captain Kheren said nothing but watched the whole scene with a keen stare.

He had immediately noticed the Chief Engineer casually breaking a security regulation and for no reason; it was clear by his attitude that the crewman himself knew it full well. Even the Chief Engineer's assistant reminded regulations to her direct superior and, yet, he ignored them.

Then, the Andorian noted the chief of security turning away from the security breach without any concern... as if the Kalthurian didn't know, or didn't care, that the command center for the entire ship was not just another deck but one understandably with its own set of rules.

And now, as a consequence, an Ensign addressed the situation, thus leaving his post and interrupting his job to do so.

The captain of the Artemis decided to let a few moments pass to see now if the First officer would allow such chaos to build up and continue, or do his job and manage the officers and crew to proper order and efficiency.

Kheren was very much aware of something deeper in this superficially absurd situation: N'Eligahn, Alther and O'Conner were all three former bridge officers of the USS Spectre. Two of them even served as executive officers aboard the Akira class starship.

Either they were uncounsciously and inexplicably falling back to the wrong patterns that had made them leave her in the first place... or..

They had been deliberately sent aboard the Artemis to test her novice captain.

Just then, O'Conner turned around and looked at N'Elighan, with a seemingly disappointed look.

"Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn, don't you think a better place to study this sphere with your crewman would be in the astrometrics lab? You should know it's against regs to have crewmen up here."

"Well, Sir, I thought the Crewman was the closest thing we have to an expert on Dyson Spheres aboard this ship, but I apologize for the breach in protocol."

He walked over to the crewman and whispered something in his ear before leading him to the turbolift and waiting for the doors to close.

He flattened his spines against his head, working to show that he wasn't as perturbed about this as he was. He didn't like being up here. He much preferred being in his utilities on the deck plates doing actual work. Sitting here staring at monitors and watching the commanders 'Hmm' and 'Huh' was starting to irk him.

He walked past Blakely and just motioned for her to carry on before he took his place back beside M'Laress and just stared into space.

He'd never felt so stupid...or useless.

Kelsey grinded her teeth a little bit as N'Eigahn was told off; the Kalthurian could feel his pain through the mental link with him and it was hard to bite one's tongue and not react.

*Relax Kelsey, you can control yourself, just relax* the androgyn thought, taking even deeper breaths to try and calm down from overreacting and potentially losing it on the bridge, getting relieved of duty... or even worse, thrown into the brig.

Kelsey tried to send a reassuring vibe down the connection with N'Eligahn, hoping to make him feel better while working still.

Even with his very acute senses, the body language of the Chief Engineer was not so easy to decipher for the Andorian captain and former master duellist, as he knew not much of the Rethian people... nor of Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo's specific psychological profile.

But he was learning fast. The lowered cranial spines, the slumped shoulders, the half-closed eyes were contrasting deeply with the initial reaction of discovering this miracle of technology that was the Dyson shell; most engineers he knew of would be frantic being this close to such a technological marvel, even give half of their lives for a chance to study it in depth and explore its secrets.

But Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo just sat there and stared blankly at the bulkhead... just because he had been caught in a regulation breach and shown being still unfamiliar with his new ship's proceedings and resources.

The Andorian still said nothing; it was the job of the First officer to see not only to the welfare of the ship but to the welfare of the crew. Going over his head to find out what was so troubling to the Chief Engineer would be disrespecting his exec, showing lack of confidence in him.

The Artemis didn't need *two* fragile, depressed senior officers at the moment.

They had a few hours before they would have to decide what to do next. Hopefully, that would be enough to settle things down properly.

But Kheren felt apprehensive.

They were right now looking straight at the face of the unknown... and there might still be Klingons out there.

*If this is the kind of reaction I have to expect in a routine survey operation... what would happen in a real crisis?*

His own gaze now stared blankly at the screen and the impressive image of the Dyson shell they were orbiting and studying.

*If I can't instill both discipline and enthusiasm in a high-ranking, many times decorated officer like Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn... how can I pretend to be a ship's captain?*

Michael O'Conner frowned a bit at N'Elighan's disrespecting reply, but he didn't reply to it. He knew that the crew was still young and needed to learn and maintain discipline. But if he was going to allow a fellow officer to just singlehandedly violate regs in front of the whole bridge crew without at least explaining why to the captain or the XO, the discipline of the crew could quickly be lost.

But... he understood why N'Elighan had replied as he did. He would need to talk to him later... But for now, he would let the Chief Engineer and his officers work.

Before the door closed on the turbo lift behind crewman Yuri, O'Conner added.

"Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn, keep us apprised of any thing your man might find out there. Lieutenant Irksos, send a science officer to aid them in the study, might help them to have a different viewpoint on the subject."

"Aye, Commander," answered the petite black woman. "Astrometrics are all over the data our sensors are collecting right now. Mister Yuri won't feel alone down there. His specialized technical expertise will be added to their analysis and sent back up here in a continuous report to the Chief Engineer's station and mine as well as to the support station of Lieutenant M'Laress."

"Sirrr," M'Laress said. "Sirrr?"

"Yes? Sorry, Lieutenant," N'Eligahn said.

"Based on this analysis, we have a parrtrial map of what we think the interriorrr looks like."

"Bring it up."

A small orb appeared on the console's screen.

"With the varrying concentrations of Durrranium plating, we picked up a patterrrn," M'Laress explained. "Therrre's higherrr concentrations wherrre land-masses would be and lowerrr wherrre therrre's be surrrface liquid."

She pointed with a clawed hand towards the display. N'Eligahn read the information before Blakely motioned him over.

"We're just now starting to process the scans we're getting from the outer shell," the blonde woman confirmed in turn. "The outer shell is of extremely dense carbon and neutronium."

"So completely beyond any known species' ability to build," N'Eligahn understood. "Any clues as to its actual origins?"

"Not quite yet, Sir, but they're working on it. Comparing the design to the structures of known extinct races."

"Thanks."

The Rethian Chief Engineer relayed this information to the command staff then added the information from M'Laress' report:

"And it appears that the approximate surface to liquid ratio is about forty to sixty. We can't know what those surfaces or liquids are without direct scanning."

"Confirmed, Sir." now reported Valencia Irksos. "However, this first orbit confirms all current data identical to that from the first Dyson construct found by the Enterprise almost half a century ago. It is safe to assume that the artificial environment inside will be class M: oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, H<sub>2</sub>O surface liquid and common planetary soil material. But, as Mister N'Eligahn said, only direct scanning will confirm this and provide detailed information."

Captain Kheren nodded to his senior officers.

"Any clue as to who built it... or may live here? If any?"

"Negative, Sir. The first Dyson shell was devoid of inhabitants and later studies shed no light as to who had been there, who built it... or even if they were one and the same. In fact, such a thing could have sheltered a great many number of different people... or may just harbor here an even bigger and diverse society than all the known spacefaring cultures in the galaxy combined."

"So... go in and take a look see?" asked Doctor Sangliar?

Kheren almost had a smile on his frozen face:

"That is why we're out here in the first place, Doctor."

"Not a healthy proposition." grumbled the Tellarite.

"Life isn't healthy. " shot back the Andorian with his usual deadpan expression. Then he glanced at Michael O'Conner:

"Recommendations, Number One?"

O'Conner paused for a moment before replying.

"I would have to agree with the good doctor. We should take a look. As this is a first contact type mission, I believe this would be your mission, Captain."

He turned to Kheren with a smile.

"Less you want to wait around for Klingons that may or may not come by."

The Andorian winked as his Executive Officer.

"I'm about three hundred years too late for First Contact with the Klingons, Commander. As for this Hollow World... it might be as empty as the other one of it's kind we know of."

"It sure sounded empty," chimed in the Tellarite Doctor from his left.

"Now... do we risk the ship in... or do we mount an away mission with a shuttle as you suggested earlier?"

N'Eligahn took a deep breath. He knew exactly where this was probably going to head and he didn't like it one bit. Nevertheless, he spoke up anyway.

"I'd honestly have to recommend a shuttle. That way, if the interior of this Dyson sphere is the same as the previous one discovered the risk and casualties would be...smaller."

"With all due respect to the Chief Engineer, Sir, I disagree," then chimed in Lieutenant Irksos beside him with an apologetic glance at him. "No auxillary craft can be equiped well enough to convey a survey and research on such an immense structure. And probes can do so much. Even our entire ship's ressources for scanning and research, which are already the biggest any one ship could ever bring out here, are strained already."

"And with all due respect to the Chief Science Officer," N'Eligahn shot back. "I'd rather risk losing a shuttle to a rampaging star to make sure it's safe enough to bring the Artemis herself in rather than risk the entire ship in one gamble. You dip your toe in the water first to make sure it's not boiling before you jump in."

Then he added, looking at the captain:

"If it proves safe enough for the shuttle, then we can move the Artemis in. Until we can determine that safety, though, I think there would be too much to risk on a gamble."

"General Order 29: the primary responsibility of the commander of any Starfleet vessel or installation is the welfare and safety of his crew, including any civilian members. No action may be taken that creates an unwarranted threat to the safety of those individuals under the officer's charge, except in the line of duty and when otherwise unavoidable," then quoted Kheren in response to the words of the Rethian.

He swiveled his chair around to look at him before continuing:

"You will make a fine captain one day, Lieutenant Commander. Taking unnecessary risks would be unwarranted. But, the next step is obviously to find out: what *are* the risks?"

And so saying, he looked at Valencia Irksos. She didn't even glance at N'Eligahn this time.

"As far as we can tell from our astrometric surveys, Sir, there is no indication of the star instability Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn is speculating about," she answered, stepping back a bit to show her monitoring screen. "Not only is the power output of this construct considerably higher than the previous one discovered, but it is stable, despite the weakened deflector field... and already we see repairs on the damaged structure being done with what appears to be some as yet unidentified kind of nanotechnology applied on a huge scale."

She looked at both superior officers as she further explained:

"You said that you have studied the Enterprise file, Sir; then, you realize that Captain Picard's ship got imperiled only because it was forced into entering the shell, with its own systems impaired as a result. If we do so on our own power, there is no reason to fear we would be so incapacitated. Even if the star would be in an unstable condition, a fully operational Ambassador class starship is well equiped to handle anything short of an actual nova explosion."

Kheren pondered it all for a moment, antennae slowly wavering this way and that as he looked at both officers in turn. Then he lifted his head to them:

"I think we can both follow Mister N'Eligahn's wisdom and your sense of duty, Lieutenant."

Swiveling back towards the screen, he ordered:

"Mister Narod: take us out in front of one of those big access ports, distance:six hundred thousand kilometers."

"Aye, captain."

"Lieutenant Relys: slave navigation to sensors. If there is any artificial emission coming out of that construct *directly* at us, program the ship to jump full astern into emergency warp."

"Understood, Sir." answered the Bajoran woman at Ops.

"We have reached our designated position, Sir" then reported the Trill pilot.

"All stop. "

"Answering all stop, Sir."

N'Eligahn still blinked a few times more at the unexpected praise as the Captain ordered the ship into a stationary position to begin entry into the sphere.

The praise was paired with another feeling:

Relief.

Although he'd recommended the shuttle approach, the fact that O'Conner had recommended himself, the Captain and Kelsey to be on the away team poked at his mind. The last thing he wanted was to be thrust, again, into a completely unknown situation with absolutely no support or even contact with the ship.

He'd done it twice already and nearly died both times. He wasn't anxious to do so again. So he'd actually surprised himself when he went with, even adamantly defended his position of sending the shuttle in first.

N'Eligahn watched on the view screen as the ship maneuvered to a spot directly in front of an access port. He felt his two hearts start to race as the ship came to a stop.

Before their eyes, the main viewer showed the surface of the titanic construct like a sheer wall of metal. And, dead center, was a huge hexagonal plate segmented in two parts in a Y and inverted Y manner, the rim bristling with already identified subspace and cloaking transmitters, antennae, deflector and tractor emitters.

Without moving his silver eyes from the screen, Kheren then ordered:

"Doctor: hail them."

The Tellarite was about to retort something, but looking at the icy expression of the Andorian, he closed his mouth and activated the external comm channels.

On screen, the colossal door suddenly parted from the middle, opening like the cavernous mouth of some mythical beast and rays of blue light flashed out and crossed each other in an obvious search of a target.

But the Artemis was way too far out for them to even begin to make contact.

Through the gigantic opening, a distant yellow-white light poured out, blinding them for a second before the automatic filtering of the imagery system brought it down to the image of a not so distant star.

"Scanning, Lieutenant Irksos."

It took merely seconds for the woman to answer:

"Sensors confirm a main-sequence star, often imprecisely called a yellow dwarf, of spectral type G and luminosity class V, 1.1 solar masses, surface temperature of 6,000 K. It is in the process of converting hydrogen to helium in its core by means of nuclear fusion, just like Earth's Sun, Alpha Centauri A, Tau Ceti, and 51 Pegasi. Each second, it fuses approximately six hundred million tons of hydrogen to helium, converting about four million tons of matter to energy."

She turned to face the screen and add:

"This star is about six billion years old, barely passing half its lifespan before it exhaust fuel at the center, expands to many times its previous size and becomes a red giant, such as Aldebaran... then, eventually shed its outer layers of gas to form a planetary nebula, while the core will cool and contracts into a compact, dense white dwarf."

She then glanced with a warm smile at the Chief Engineer beside her to finish:

"It is quite stable, Sir... and will remain so for at least a few billion years."

"Now we know." simply commented the Captain, as he watched with everyone else the blue searching rays finally wink out, and the huge door starting to close.

The Andorian waited until the aperture closed completely, all the while looking and blinking once every second. Then, he glanced at the nav station:

"How long would it take us to get inside from here at maximum impulse?"

"Six point seven seconds, Sir."

"And the door closes in ten seconds after the lights go off. Maximum range of those tractoring beams?"

"Enterrrrrise and Surrvey Team data confirrrred:Thrrree-hundrrred thousand kilometerrrs, Sirrr. " reported M'Laress at the auxillary station.

Kheren stood up and went to stand between Narod and Alther, still looking intently at the closed access port on the screen before them.

"Anybody home, Doctor?"

"Nope," simply spat the Tellarite, arms crossed across his chest.

The captain thought for a few seconds more of silence, then half-turned towards the First officer:

"Shall we?"

N'Eligahn waited for O'Conner's answer. All the while, sitting sideways at his station, he felt his claws start to dig into his console, his eyes focused squarely on the image ahead of them while his mind raced through every contingency plan he could think of in case this didn't work.

O'Conner turned and smiled at the captain.

"I do believe the appropriate proverb in this instance would be: fortune favors the bold, Sir."

O'Conner turned to the view screen with a large smile, they were finally exploring the unknown and looking for new civilizations. This was the reason he had signed on to the Artemis.

Kheren opened his mouth to answer... but was interrupted by Lieutenant Relys from the forwardmost multitask ops station:

"Sir! Shields just snapped on!"

When he had been First Officer, the Andorian himself had installed this old Constitution class early warning system into the Artemis defense programming, just as he had done when serving as Chief of security of the USS Lotus. When the ship's computer identified through the tactical sensors any common threat, be they natural like a sudden solar flare or artificial in origin like a decloaking ship, the shields were automatically raised.

"Warning: level 1 theta radiation shockwave incoming," announced the calm soft voice of the computer. "Impact in one minute."

"All hands, red alert!" blared the captain returning to his seat. "PID now!"

And so saying, he palmed the side of his seat where, like all seats on the bridge, was stored a hand phaser as required on the Ambassador class original design specifications... and now, with it, the innovative Personal Inertial Dampeners.

All personnel on board the Artemis were instructed in its use and most had already used it once when they had escaped the grip of the Azimuth Horizon: based on the old medic-sensory bellybuckle of the pastel uniforms of 23rd century Constitution refit time, it adapted the safety belt system of the more recent Sovereign class command chair to offer a miniaturized individual inertial dampener, extending security straps across chest and hips of the wearer to secure him in his own gravity bubble against kinetic shock.

Kheren and the other bridge officers placed the device on their lower belly and pressed it to activate the portable power unit and literally root themselves in their chairs.

All but Doctor Sangliar.

The Tellarite's short arms tapped the side of his chair; his pudgy hand took the PID out... and his thick fingers dropped it to send it skittering on the deck.

Grumbling and cursing, he hopped down from his CMO command chair, bent to retrieve it...

And the shockwave struck the entire starship like a titanic handslap.

N'Eligahn didn't have time to grab his PDI, but he just dug his claws into the console's rim and held on for dear life as the ship was hit hard by the wave. The impact wrenched his shoulder but he managed to hold on and keep from becoming a projectile.

The impact shifted the vessel in a slow, slight roll, like a ponderous galleon caught by the tide; but inside, it made for a sudden lurch that sent the small Tellarite doctor flying face first into the bulkhead near the left hand door.

As he slumped slowly to the floor barely righting itself, his broken nose left a bloody smear on the grey wall.

"Bridge to sickbay! Medical emergency!" roared Kheren.

He stood as he did so, but the PID was making him move as if he was in outer space wearing magnetic boots. He was about to deactivate his PID when the computer announced again:

"Warning: level 3 theta radiation shockwave incoming. Impact in three minutes."

And right beside the Andorian, a human form shimmered into being.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency."

Kheren pointed swiftly to the inert form of Sangliar and the Emergency Medical Hologram immediately went speedily to him.

As the klaxons sounded on the bridge and the computer notified them of what was happening, time seemed to slow for Kelsey Arther, noticing the Tellarite been thrown across the bridge.

Kelsey deactivated the PID to leap out of the chair and dash towards the Tellarite's PID that had been thrown across the bridge. Once the Kalthurian had quickly picked it up, it dashed over to the inert Tellarite with the EMH.

"Need an extra set of hands, Doc?" the androgyn asked, placing the PID on the Tellarite and making sure being ready at a moment's notice to reactivate its own PID.

"Good thinking, Lieutenant. Now the patient is properly immobilized." complimented the EMH without looking at the Kalthurian. "I just scanned a cranial fracture and a starting oedema in the frontal lobe and severe trauma of the nasal cartilage. He's in serious condition."

"Captain! The shockwave shifted us closer to the Dyson shell," reported the Trill navigator.

"Now at five hundred thousand kilometers, drifting forward on shockwave momentum at five hundred kilometers per second and slowing."

"Lieutenant!" shouted Kheren, turning towards the science station.

"It's the anomaly, Sir! It's coming out from subspace right behind us!"

When the ship was still again Chief Engineer N'Eligahn turned to Blakely. She kept herself solid though he could see the fear in her eyes.

"Get down to main engineering, do a visual and systems check and make sure everyone's all right down there," he said.

She nodded and ran towards the turbolift, tossing the PDI device to him. He caught it with his wrenched arm and pain shot up his shoulder.

He regained the engineer alcove and his fingers flew across the keypad.

"Warning: level 3 theta radiation shockwave incoming. Impact in two minutes."

"I'm getting minimal damage reports from around the ship," the rethian engineer reported. "A few secondary systems are offline. I'm rerouting auxilliary power to maneuvering thrusters, emergency stabilizers and shields."

Down in sickbay on deck 7, Josiah Sage bounded his way over to his emergency medical response kit.

"Chief Gwanagae! Petty Officer Fujikawa! To me! Nurse Crosby! Prep the rest of Alpha shift to receive incoming patients! Doctor T'Lynn! Prep O.R. one for possible incoming!"

He made his way to a clear spot in sickbay where trays hadn't spilled their contents over from the shockwave.

Josiah addressed the two enlisted with him.

"The EMH should already be there assisting Doc Sangliar with whatever happened. Are you two ready?"

Both nodded at him.

"Good. Computer! Emergency medical transport directly to the bridge!"

The whine, and bright lights whisked Josiah and his response team away.

The response team materialized on the bridge to a scene of organized chaos. Josiah looked around for the EMH, and rushed over to it when he saw it. Then he saw who the hologram was treating.

"Oh, Hell."

Josiah nodded in agreement with the EMH's assessment. His own medical tricorder was over the Tellarite nose.

"I'm detecting a depressed skull fracture ranging from the frontal lobe to his sphenoidal sinuses. The oedema you mentioned is being caused by cerebrospinal fluid leaking out of his skull."

He looked at the scan more closely.

"Damn! It looks like there's cartilage embedded in his prefrontal cortex. We need to operate to save him or he's going to end up a vegetable!"

Josiah placed a cortical stimulator on the Tellarite's forehead, just above the fracture. He tapped his comm badge and repeated the diagnosis to Doctor T'Lynn in O.R. 1. He made sure the two members of his emergency team were situated.

He then looked to Kelsey, then the EMH.

"El-tee, thanks for your help, but we've got this from here. Computer, emergency medical transport, four to beam directly to O.R. 1, now!"

The familiar whine came, and the four were whisked to the O.R.

Kelsey blinked as the doctor transported away.

"El-tee? Did I miss something?" Kelsey enquired into thin air as the EMH spoke.

The EMH looked at the Kalthurian and said:

"Well, that was abrupt."

"Yes, because I'd rather have to watch a Tellarite die in front me so much slower" the androgyn said sarcastically. "Least he's getting treatment now."

The chief of security returned to manning the tactical console.

O'Conner braced himself in his chair still after the first wave hit.

"Captain! I would recommend entering the sphere if we can, Sir. Even with the repairs and N'Eligahn's fine officers, we have little hope to survive another trip into the storm! "

Kheren nodded to his First officer as he sat back in his chair and ordered:

"Helm! Turn us into the wave towards this access port!"

And as he spoke, his left hand stretched towards the armchair control of the CMO command chair to hit the switch opening all hailing frequencies at once.

On the main screen, much closer now, the huge portal opened again and tractor beams crisscrossed the image, like fingers trying to grab the drifting starship.

"Chief! Keep shields up and all available power to full impulse on my mark!" said the Andorian back at N'Eligahn.

Seconds stretched to infinity as the blue beams moved all across the opened portal.

"Come on! *Come on!* There's nobody here!" growled Kheren at the screen.

"Sir!" now shouted Science chief Irksos from her station: "There is a plasma flare following the shockwave close behind along a subspace fracture! It will hit us..."

"Now!" ordered Kheren, the flat of his right hand slapping the top of his armchair so hard, the impact startled everybody.

Then, the entire starship lurched forward, as if a wave suddenly lifted it to push it right towards the grappling beams... just as they winked out.

On screen, the immense jaws of the monstrous access port were closing already to crush them like an insect, with a tongue of flame running right behind with the irradiated shockwave.

Like a leaf in a tornado, the Artemis was thrown right into the titanic portal, the massive doors behind closing before the huge plasma flare touched them. The colossal panels turned red under the intense energy discharge but kept shut.

And in an instant, the worse of the shockwave was absorbed by the immense structure around them too, and the Artemis lost almost all momentum and quickly slowed down to a slow drift past the hexagonal rim of the gigantic entrance.

Everyone, still gripping their seats despite the portable inertial dampeners keeping them well in place, could see the incredible view the main screen now showed them.

They were inside the Dyson shell.

It was very quiet on the bridge of the Artemis. The furious last seconds, filled with tension from actual danger and remembrance of the near fatal first encounter with the fiery anomaly were now replaced by the deep calmness of a luminous, peaceful universe.

On the screen, a small, bright star lighted a horizon of very soft hues of blue, white and greens that seemed to literally envelop them. It was like seeing planet earth from the farthest orbit, stretched flat around them like an immense dome.

Kheren deactivated his PID and stood up.

"All stop."

"All stop, Sir." acknowledged helmsman Narod. "We are two hundred ninety thousand kilometers above the inner surface of the shell and one hundred and sixty-five million kilometers from the star's corona."

Looking around and seeing that everyone on the bridge was safe and sound, the captain then said:

"Computer: deactivate EMH."

As the photonic officer disappeared, the Andorian asked: "Casualty report."

Taking over for the vacant CMO command chair directly from her multitask station, Lieutenant Relys turned around to answer:

"Just frayed nerves, Sir. All decks report no casualties, thanks to those units."

Like the others, she had removed the Personal Inertial Dampener from her belly and stored it back in the side panel of her seat. Then she finished saying: "Seems only our Chief medical officer was injured."

Kheren nodded with an obvious sigh of relief and tapped his combadge:

"Bridge to sickbay: status on Doctor Sangliar please."

The team had materialized in sickbay, with the Tellarite on O.R. 1's table. Josiah had then looked at the alpha shift standing around, seemingly at a loss. He then had realized something.

They were stunned.

It was one thing to operate on a fellow crewmember, but this was one of their own.

Although that certainly wasn't the entire matter; there was more. Josiah had just reported when Artemis left Starbase 10, and really hadn't gotten a chance to get to know Doc Sangliar. But, he knew everyone looked up to the Tellarite. Seeing an individual with such a strong personality suddenly laid low on an operating table was overwhelming. Josiah's will had gone hard: Doc Sangliar was not going to die. Period.

"Doctor T'Lynn," Josiah had said, snapping the Vulcan out of her immobility. "I'll be taking point on this, but I will need you as my second. I don't think this will be much more difficult than a by-the-numbers, but I'm concerned about the materials I discovered in his prefrontal lobe. If it's bits of skull we may have some serious issues with recovery. Ensign Osaro, scrub in. Nurse Crosby, I'll need you to scrub in too. Master Chief Rondell, you're on anesthesia. Chief Seral, you're on vitals monitoring. Chief Gwanagae. Petty Officer Fujikawa. You were with me on scene, so I need you two to start the incident report."

Alpha shift had then stared at him for a moment.

*"Now, people! Do you want him to die?!"*

And the team had scrambled.

Sage now swallowed hard, exhaled slowly and thought:

*Okay, let's not screw this up.*

He tapped his comm, and started scrubbing in while addressing Artemis' captain.

"Skipper, Doctor Sage here. We're going to do everything we can for Doc Sangliar. I don't have time to go into details, Sir, but for right now, know he's in a bad way. But, know he will not die! Not on my table, Sir! Sage, out!"

He cut the comm, and finished scrubbing in. The surgical team was already assembled around the Tellarite on the table. They were looking at Josiah expectantly as he stepped to Sangliar's side.

He cleared his throat, hoping it didn't crack when he spoke;

"Nurse Crosby, exoscalpel."

He stopped talking then... but his words were still hanging around the bridge several decks above.

*Skipper?*

The word had lifted an amused eyebrow over the left eye of the Andorian. He remembered meeting briefly once the junior medical officer as he had reviewed all crew members before departure and the man had appeared pretty much the quintessential Academy graduate and early career officer: bright, competent, enthusiastic and full of drive and promises. He was very young for someone of his accomplishments, but, judging alone by his last message, growing fast into his responsibilities aboard the ship.

Fortunately... especially considering that he was now the highest ranking active medical officer on board...

Then, Kheren turned towards the engineering station to address Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn:

"Damage report."

"Looks like we just got our butts fried, Sir," he said. "The aft torpedo tube and shuttle bays one and two's doors have been fused shut by the heat of the Azimuth." He scanned the reports again. "Looks like our anti-matter reserves are down a bit and we need to re-polarize the impulse engines."

"Sir," Blakely said over comms.

"N'Eligahn here."

"We've got several plasma ruptures in areas throughout the aft portion of the ship," she said. "And I've got kinda bad news. The heat overloaded several of the phaser emitters along two of the aft phaser arrays."

"So we're down most of our aft fighting capabilities?" N'Eligahn asked.

"For about an hour or so while we replace it, Sir."

"Thank you," N'Eligahn said. He relayed this information to the command well.

"Start inside repairs, prioritizing power systems. " decided Kheren then. "But we'll make sure we are completely secured before risking anyone out in the workbees or shuttlepods we have left. "

Kelsey Alther gave a report before even being asked:

"Captain, scanners aren't picking up any weapons or defensive systems or structures so it seems we are safe from the shell... And I am not picking up any Klingon energy signatures or anything related to their cloaking devices."

"Our sensors are affected by the higher than normal ambient level of solar emissions and radiations from both the star and what is reflected by the inner structure, Captain." Valencia Irksos chimed in. "Long range communications and sensors are useless and short range sensors are at forty-seven percent efficiency."

"So... assuming they would have managed to come here, they could be on the other side of the star and we would not know it," concluded the Andorian captain out loud.

Then he asked:

"Do you have any reading on the anomaly outside, Lieutenant?"

"Negative, Sir. It must have jumped back into subspace. But computer projections are ninety-four percent positive that the next time it will find a subspace fracture to follow, it will engulf this entire construct. "

"Will it withstand contact with the anomaly? "

" Not a chance, Sir. The chronitons will disrupt its space-time stability, the nucleonics will disrupt its subatomic structure and the null-gravimetric nature of the anomaly will make the shell and the star inside collapse upon themselves from their own mass to a neutronium state. In a matter of minutes, this two hundred million kilometers enclosed system, and everything in it, will be reduced to a two kilometers dead ball of matter floating around with the rest of the debris in the anomaly's corona."

"Time estimate?"

"Impossible to accurately determine it, due to the erratic nature of the Anomaly. Best estimate is, at the latest, when it will grow large enough to fill the surrounding area of space: twenty-four hours at most, probably less."

Kheren became pensive hearing his science officer's dreadful words. But Lieutenant Alther was now further reporting:

"I am picking up several objects in geosynchronous orbit two thousand kilometers over the inner surface of the shell. I am also detecting a high level of subatomic particles going to and from the surface and between them."

Kelsey paused as her scanners continued to spit out information.

"Visual." ordered Kheren

The peaceful image of the distant star floating in a dream like emptiness of soft colors was replaced by a sharp view of the inner surface of the colossal construct they had entered. It looked nothing less than the surface of an M class planet stretched out in an immense concave infinity.

"Magnify."

The image shifted and much nearer now could be seen, floating at regular intervals, small metallic and flashing objects. They looked much like escape pods and were just hanging there over the inner equatorial part of the titanic spherical star system.

"Analysis, Mister N'Eligahn."

Waiting for the Chief Engineer to complete his work and report on it, Kheren was still standing behind both the navigator and the Chief of Security when Lieutenant Alther, eyes on the tactical sensor monitor, immediately reported anew:

"Captain; there are also massive objects orbiting the star at the center of the shell; they are square shaped, ten million kilometers on each side but barely a kilometer thick each and are separated one from the other by a gap of twenty million kilometers. I can't detect a visible mechanism but they orbit the star perfectly at 50 million kilometers from the corona, blocking the sun on any specific point of the inner surface of the shell for ten hours at every twenty hour interval."

"Lieutenant Irksos?"

After a moment adjusting controls on her wall console and reading preliminary reports from the astrometric labs, she answered without turning:

"Sensors are unable to analyse what they are exactly, Sir. But they are seemingly composed of solid carbon-neutronium alloy in a high orbit around the star, revolving around it, just like Lieutenant Alther is reporting. Mister Yuri down in astrometrics is suggesting that these would be nightshades, Captain."

"Nightshades?" wondered the commanding officer of the Artemis.

Irksos tapped her combadge:

"Mister Yuri, could you please detail your theory to the captain?"

Over the speakers came a male voice apparently trying to fight off both impressed hesitancy and overwhelming enthusiasm:

"Ah, yes... sure, Lieutenant. Captain... well it is like this: Having a star at the center of a hollow sphere, there is of course uninterrupted illumination on the entire inhabitable surface," explained the voice of engineering crewman second class Vladimir Yuri. "In simpler terms, Sir: perpetual daylight."

"I see now; no planetary revolution to change facing of the inhabitable surface," suddenly realized Kheren out loud.

"Ah yes, quite right, Sir. However, Dyson's theory of stellar engineering suggested that, in our present condition, if you put at a proper orbital distance objects large enough to block out the light of the star at regular intervals, you effectively simulate a night time period. The astrometric labs computer confirms that, here, those star-orbiting blinds are creating a twenty hours day cycle across the entire inner surface of the shell."

For a moment, the Andorian just marveled at the incredible engineering of it all.

Then he looked back at Valencia Irksos while saying:

"Thank you Mister Yuri. Keep up the good work down there. Lieutenant: scan the inner surface of the shell. Let's see if there is still any life form enjoying either the freshness of the night or the light of day."

"It will take about seven hours to complete the scan, Sir."

N'Eligahn reviewed the scans and sent the structural analysis to M'Laress. Between the two of them, they analyzed and managed to put together a decent 3-D image of the objects.

"Sir, they're about the size of a standard shuttlecraft," he said. "Manufactured from the same substance as the shell itself. They have life support but according to our scans no one's home." He looked over at M'Laress again. She nodded and sent him more of her analysis.

"There are sub-atomic particle emissions coming from them and heading to the surface of the shell," he added. "They seem to have some sort of intermittent power network running through the entire surface...and... are you sure about this?" he then asked.

M'Laress nodded.

"And according to our scans, it bears a resemblance to a Federation-style transporter network. But bigger."

"A transporter network?" wondered Kheren out loud. "Any transporter beam directed at us?"

"Negative, Sir." confirmed the Chief of Science. "But it does register all over the inner surface of the Dyson shell. "

"As far as I can tell, Captain, we aren't in any immediate danger from any defensive systems," then offered Kelsey.

"As we have just seen, danger can come to us in many forms, Lieutenant," retorted the captain. "Keep an eye for any space travelling object or energy on a deliberate trajectory, especially if coming at us. Do what you can to compensate for the star's interference, but if there are Klingons, or anyone else around here, I want to know it the moment they notice us... and preferably before they notice us."

"Too late for that, Sir." then said Lieutenant Relys.

Everyone looked at her when she turned again to the captain, this time to announce:

"We are being hailed."

"Well...at least they were polite enough not to open fire first," N'Eligahn said, his voice low.

"Not everyone is Klingon in this galaxy." agreed Kheren with the same low tone.

"Where are we being hailed from and did they identify themselves, Lieutenant?" O'Conner finally said after taking it all in.

He was just about going to ask to scan for life-signs... but seemed that those life-signs did beat him to it; and this gave him a little smile.

Relys took a moment to verify her data as she had taken over the comm function of the CMO command chair. Then she turned again with wide eyes towards the command well:

"Sir... we are being hailed from a specific point of the shell's inner surface... in Federation Standard... and... on all Starfleet channels."

There was amazed silence on the Artemis bridge for a long moment.

"Open a channel, Lieutenant. On screen." Finally ordered Kheren.

The exterior visual of the Dyson shell was then replaced by the image of what appeared to be the curving walls of an interior structure, with some lights flashing on some parts of the visible walls and a lot of ovoid, slightly concave furniture apparently made of some firm but foamy silvery substance.

Some of those were occupied and those that were often were also encircled by numerous humanoids... just like the one who's upper body filled the forefront of the image.

Its skin was blue-black, the elongated, thin head sporting enormous golden, blinking eyes and a pointed chin covered with what looked like feathers where hair and beard would be on a human. Those feathers were of a much lighter, bluish color and laced with what looked like fiber optic strands, tracing a complex highlighting pattern of changing colors into the thick, fine feathers. The creature indeed looked birdlike, with a very fine and delicate bone structure, the same feathery covering on its shoulders and forearms. The limbs were slender but the chest was very wide and protruding forward with a thick V-like bone structure on the front.

Standing with hands at his back, the Andorian said with his deep, soft voice:

"This is Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis, representing the United Federation of Planets. Our intentions are peaceful."

"We are the X'ell."

The voice of the birdlike humanoid was fluty and whispering at the same time, soft but with a musical quality to it that was immediately mesmerizing.

N'Eligahn watched the exchange between the two. Aside from the nearly disastrous first contact with the energy beings a month ago, the only other first contact he'd seen was while he was a crewman aboard the USS Shiva. That one had gone more by the book and was far smoother.

*Who knows, he thought, maybe this mission would mark a turnaround from the complete chaos of my previous assignment. Maybe this new race would acknowledge them and...*

But the self-named X'ell's next words were like a cold slap:

"Please leave."

The Rethian resisted the urge to put his face into his palm.

*Why was nothing ever simple anymore?*

The captain of the Artemis however was not put off by the polite but stern words of the X'ell.

"Are you the inhabitants of this construct?"

"We have been here before your kind even rose from your own birthsoil... We will be here when your kind will not even be memories."

"Nothing is less certain."

The words of the Andorian sounded as stern as those of the Avian humanoid; almost menacing. On the screen, the X'ell's feathers were ruffled, its large eyes blinking, its mouth slightly open as if in growing anger... or repressed fear.

Kheren cleared the air immediately:

"Our mission is one of exploration. We came here..."

"We know why you came, and what you pretend to do." cut in the alien. "Just as well as with your other tribes, the *Rihann'su*, the *Thlin'Gans*... We know about all of you, the savage, unclean child races of Outside. We will not be part of your tribal cycle of violence. You are unworthy of sentience. Please leave us be."

The captain lowered his head as if in submission; although anyone knowing Andorians knew it meant instead that he was bracing himself to face a challenge. And his next words, although measured and soft, were firm:

"Our own laws require that we comply with your demand. However... as a token of our respect and proof of our intentions, we give you this warning: use all means available to you to immediately evacuate this construct. It will be destroyed no later than your next dawn."

Again, silence was thick and heavy between them. The feathered head jerked this way and that, but the immense golden pupils never left the screen:

"You threaten us..."

"On the contrary: we are *warning* you," immediately interrupted Kheren. "If you have monitored outer space for so long, you can not but be aware of the anomaly that struck your construct, not even an hour ago. And at least once before that."

"We are aware. This world can not be harmed by a plasma storm, even if abnormally large like this new one."

"This is no ordinary plasma storm. With your permission, and as proof of our goodwill, we can offer you all the extensive data we have on this anomaly... data from the inside and out. You will see for yourself the danger you face."

There was again a moment of silence, during which the head of the X'ell jerked this way and that, as if he was listening to someone else outside of the viewer's field of recording.

Finally, the golden eyes went straight back at the viewer:

"You may proceed."

While Lieutenant Irksos continued scanning and Lieutenant Relys transmitted the research data on the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, all four eyes of the Andorian captain were detailing everything on the screen, trying to make sense of all he was seeing, trying to find a way to get on a better foot with this never-before-seen people.

It was clear in his mind that they were far more advanced technologically than most cultures the Federation had encountered; the possible benefits were self-evident... *if* the Federation was capable to safely assimilate this new knowledge.

The Prime Directive popped incessantly in Kheren's mind:

*General Order 1: As the right of each sentient species to live in accordance with its normal cultural evolution is considered sacred, no Starfleet personnel may interfere with the normal and healthy development of alien life and culture. Such interference includes introducing superior knowledge, strength, or technology to a world whose society is incapable of handling such advantages wisely. Starfleet personnel may not violate this Prime Directive, even to save their lives and/or their ship, unless they are acting to right an earlier violation or an accidental contamination of said culture. This directive takes precedence over any and all other considerations, and carries with it the highest moral obligation.*

The danger to an equally, or as in the case here, a more advanced culture might look minimal... But the Prime Directive was not just intended to protect other sentient beings after all: it was also intended to protect themselves.

The ancient Amerinds of Earth had been quite willing to get better food, clothing, tools and weapons from the more advanced Europeans... and in the process, lost practically everything that they were. The same thing had happened on the planet Neural when the Klingons provided the knowledge of firearms to the Villagers, forcing Starfleet to similarly provide the endangered Hillmen to correct the artificial imbalance threatening their very existence; both Villagers and Hillmen had willingly accepted this knowledge... and both forever lost their peaceful paradise.

Thinking of the planet Neural brought his mind back a moment to the former ship he had served on, the USS Lotus, now sent to save this very world from the Azimtuh Horizon too...

*General Order 30 : Starfleet Command recognizes the right of each ship commander to interpret the specifications of the Prime Directive as he sees fit, consistent with the conditions of other existing general orders in effect, and based upon circumstances that may arise in dealing with newly discovered sentient races.*

This is what had prompted Captain Kirk to intervene on Neural, a few centuries ago; it had ended up in near disaster. And now, everything hinged on Kheren's own judgment; his next words and actions could benefit the X'ell and the Federation... or doom them both.

As they waited on the inhabitants of the construct to review their data, the Andorian commander of the Artemis was reviewing in his minds his own options.

*General Order 11 ; Starfleet officers with the rank of captain or higher are granted full authority to negotiate conditions of agreement and treaties with legal representatives of non-Federation planets. In such circumstances, the acting officer carries De Facto powers of a Federation Special Ambassador. Any and all agreements arranged in this manner are subject to approval by the Chief of Starfleet Operations and the Secretary of Starfleet.*

With subspace communications nullified by the shell's immense gravitational field and not enough time to return and warn Starfleet Command before the anomaly struck again, it was clear that he had to exert his diplomatic powers to resolve the situation.

This might be his second First Contact experience, after encountering the Circoids while he had been Chief of Security and Tactical aboard the USS Lotus; but it was his first as a starship commander.

Now, all consequences rested on his next words and actions.

Then, the very words of the X'ell representative echoed in his memory... a reminder of other responsibilities:

*General Order 13: Except when orders state to the contrary, Starfleet personnel will respect the territorial integrity of independent planetary systems and governments, and will not violate territorial space belonging to such worlds.*

They had entered the Dyson shell only because of emergency conditions. And the inhabitants had been clear enough in their refusal of contact and request for them to depart.

But things were not so simple.

*The Klingons.*

The thought of them discovering too this awesome civilization so near their border never left his mind. Their cloaking technology alone could get a tremendous uplift from any learning torn out from the X'ell. That threat to Federation security and to the balance of power in the Quadrant was more than enough to force Kheren's hand. Even if the Artemis had to terminate contact right now with the X'ell and leave the Dyson shell, they could not risk this construct and its technology falling into the hands of the Empire.

Not to mention that conquering this Dyson shell would provide an never dreamed of foothold for the Klingons into Federation Space; a most formidable port to provoke the storm of an interstellar war on the entire quadrant.

And this brought new orders to mind:

*General Order 8 : Upon sighting a warship within Federation space and identifying it as belonging to a foreign power, the commander of the Starfleet vessel shall determine the reason(s) for that craft's presence in the vicinity. If there is conclusive evidence that the vessel has hostile intentions, the Federation vessel may take appropriate action to safeguard the lives and property of Federation members. In such cases, the commander may use his discretion in deciding whether to use force to disable the hostile vessel. However, care should be taken to avoid unnecessary loss of sentient life.*

Again, simple enough at first glance... But Klingons were not all blundering brutes. Like those who had soiled Neural forever, or what had happened on the dillithium-rich planet Capella IV in those same years, they could come as benefactors to the inhabitants of this hollow world and so threaten the safety of the entire Federation without even firing a shot.

And words alone could not so easily dislodge them...

But just gracefully bowing and leave the X'ell on their own with the Klingons was not an option:

*General order 33: If a commanding officer deems that an individual or group of individuals pose a direct threat to the safety of Starfleet personnel, Federation citizens, or those under current Federation protection, they may take any actions necessary to safeguard the lives of those threatened. In such cases, the commander may use their discretion in deciding whether to use force. However, care should be taken to avoid unnecessary loss of sentient life.*

This Dyson shell was clearly within the boundaries of the United Federation of Planets. The safety of Federation citizens was clearly linked to that of the X'ell. Allowing it to be used as a port for any possible invading fleet, Klingon or otherwise, could simply not be allowed.

As he waited for the X'ell, Captain Kheren realized that the constraints of the Prime Directive were far from being their only problem.

"Sirrr?" M'Laress said, calling him over to her console.

"Yes?" N'Eligahn said, walking over. He looked at the display and saw the display of her in-progress map of the sphere.

"Now that I've been betterrr able to complete the scans," she said. "I've noticed inconsistencies between the innerrr surrrface of the shell and the outerrr surrrface."

"How so?" N'Eligahn asked.

"Well, the places that should be thickerrr arrre not. Basically, it seems as if the storrrm is beginning to weaken the shell. I am picking up what might be considerred tectonic activity on a terrrestrrrial worrrld."

"You think the constant bombardment of the outer shell may be affecting the inside, somehow?"

"Possibly, I don't know to what extent orrr how much, but it might be a way to furrther cement ourrr insistence of prrroblems."

N'Eligahn relayed this information to the command well.

"Depending on their response, it might help our case," he added.

"Your hypothesis is quite plausible engineer," answered Lieutenant Irksos, sitting at the station besides them both.

Her fingers activated a monitor that showed a visual representation of a transversal cut of the Dyson shell and undulations travelling throughout its envelope on key points where images of off-screen discharges intermittently made direct contact with it.

"The plasma flames themselves and the neutronium debris they carry may not be powerful enough to affect the carbon-neutronium material, but sporadic nucleonic and chroniton discharges of the anomaly are damaging the shell as predicted. It is affected locally at the point of contact, causing fractures."

"Just like it did for the hull of the ship when we went through it back then," understood the Caitan sitting beside her.

"Exactly. But here, we are not speaking of microfractures; this thing is so immense that it's own mass is moving under null-gravity to fill up those much larger fissures, indeed just like tectonic plates moving on a planet's crust. It is shaking just like our ship did under it's own fragilized mass, but consequently on a much larger scale."

Valencia Irksos looked straight at N'Eligahn to resume with a somber tone:

"The clock is already ticking, Sir."

And on the viewing screen, her sense of alarm was plainly visible on the dark, feathered face of the X'ell:

"Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis: our preliminary review of your data tells us all the truth of your words."

The Andorian sighed, almost with relief but visibly with concern. His soft, low tone voiced this feeling:

"May we be of assistance?"

For another moment of silence, the X'ell looked sideways as if listening to persons unseen, outside the field of view of the viewer before answering:

"Only if you can somehow stop this anomaly or shield our world from it."

"We could evacuate..."

"No, Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis." interrupted the feathered alien before he could propose any further. "Would you be able to bring it all over here in time, you're entire Starfleet doesn't even have enough ships to evacuate forty-seven trillion individuals. And no X'ell will ever leave another X'ell behind to die just to save oneself or a few thousands of us. We are not as callous as you Outsiders all are."

It sounded more like a reprimand than an explanation. But Kheren seemingly was not unsettled by it:

"We may not be as callous as you may think. Whatever help we can provide, we are offering it to you."

For some time, the Andorian had noticed all the agitation behind the speaker. The ovoid, concave tables aligned along the wall extending far behind it were filled with either inert or visibly wounded X'ell, while others hovered over them with thin rods and thick rings that seemed to peel off or recompose the strange shimmering material covering their bodies like garments. Blue and green lights flashed on the wall directly behind each occupied furniture, more blues than greens when the body laid on it was unmoving.

This as much as anything else rang an alarm inside Kheren's head as, for him, blue-skinned and almost as dark as the X'ell themselves, the Andorian perceived blue as the color of blood.

A new option then came up to his mind:

*General Order 16: Starfleet personnel may extend technological, medical, or other scientific assistance to a member of a previously unrecognized sentient species only if such assistance in no way compromises the Prime Directive or the security of the Federation or Starfleet.*

It was all clear to the captain of the Artemis: doing nothing and leaving the X'ell to their fate would *be* a violation of the Prime Directive.

He never lost sight that *they* were responsible for the anomaly's propagation, through the subspace fractures their centuries of space travel had created, now right to the X'ell's doorstep.

And now, they needed help.

"If you have monitored us and scanned us, you are aware that we have the will, the moral obligation and maybe even the capability to offer you assistance. We are ready and willing to help you take care of your injured people while we work with you in finding a way to save your civilization."

There was definite hesitance, then another longer pause, the X'ell visibly in heated discussion with his unseen interlocutors.

Finally, sound returned and the fluty, windy voice of the X'ell speaker answered:

"Your offer of help is... appreciated, Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis. Unfortunately, we do not allow Outsiders to contaminate us with their physical presence."

It was the Andorian's turn to stand there in silence for a while, his silver eyes wandering with his mind, searching for a suitable solution to the dilemma... when they finally saw the bloody smear still left on the wall by the injured Chief Medical Officer, where Kelsey Alther had gone to his aid with the Emergency Medical Hologram...

Abuptly, his metallic gaze went right back to the main viewer, his antennae jerking up sharply:

"We *can* help you... *without* setting foot among you."

The X'ell on screen lowered his head sharply, his chin in his throat while his eyes bulged towards him; apparently their way of expressing surprise, or doubt... or both. So Kheren went on explaining:

"We have the technology to create photonic constructs able to perform even the most complex medical procedures. If you would allow us to use them on your soil, they could provide full medical help without you having us anywhere near you. Let us send you the data regarding this technology. You may then decide if this is appropriate. Please give us a chance to help you."

The feathered alien cocked its head on the left side for a moment, then, although in a surprisingly inverted way, finally nodded.

"Lieutenant Relys: bring up basic data only on holographic technology and transmit with the comm signal."

Basic data would precisely describe the technology without providing any necessary detail to effectively reproduce it. Kheren was weary about introducing unknown technology to a culture.

Even if circumstances allowed him to intervene, he still could not, and *would not* use this as a pretext to casually disregard the Prime Directive.

There was yet another moment of wait, but shorter this time, before the X'ell answered once more:

"You may proceed."

Then, the communication was cut off, leaving only the deceptively peaceful view of the hollow world around them.

The captain of the Artemis tapped his combadge:

"Bridge to sickbay: as soon as Doctor Sage has completed operating on Doctor Sangliar, send him to the bridge without delay."

"Acknowledged." answered a female voice over the intraship channel.

Then, he turned to his chief Engineer:

"Mister N'Elighan: I want Mister Yuri and all your best theoretical engineers to work with the entire Science department on a solution to save this Dyson shell or thirty trillion people from the anomaly. Also, and until Doctor Sage joins us here, please remove as many holoemitters as possible from inside the ship and adapt them for remote control. Take out and prepare as many as you can. If necessary, you may postpone all repairs to do so."

"Yes Sir," N'Eligahn said.

Kheren sat back in his chair, crossing his powerful arms over his thick chest, bracing himself for the worst, most difficult challenge facing him:

Waiting.

The Chief Engineer however was not intent on making him wait any longer than necessary. Immediately after acknowledging the orders, he turned to M'Laress:

"Coordinate with the primary science lab and work to find a way to protect the outer shell. Focus on strengthening the integrity."

"Aye, but I don't know if that'll accomplish anything," she said, frowning.

"Maybe not, but it's a good starting point," N'Eligahn retorted as he turned towards the turbolift.

"Deck 7," he ordered as the doors closed.

He tapped his combadge.

"Lieutenant Blakely, take teams 2 and 3 and scour the ship for holoemitters. In key areas, keep the minimum necessary for operation but remove them from non-essential areas. Have Ensign Furlan and Lieutenant Ferrier meet me in main medical."

The doors opened and he walked towards main medical.

"You sure, Sir? That'll keep all of the aft weapons offline for another two hours," she remarked.

"Yes, Captain said this is priority," the Rethian answered.

"What exactly are we doing with them?"

"We need an army of holographic doctors controlled by the CMO on the bridge and we need it in less than an hour."

"Well, he's not asking for much, is he?"

"Not at all, this is the fun part," N'Eligahn agreed. "Get Ensign Rhee down there to begin re-working the holoemitters for long-range and possible autonomous operation. Good luck, N'Eligahn out."

He entered main medical and glanced briefly at the closed-off side room where they were performing surgery on the CMO.

He grimaced a bit as the memory of the Doctor's fate hit him again. He walked over the medical's primary computer and knelt down beside it, the pain in his shoulder hitting him just as hard as the memory.

"All right, let's get this going," he muttered to himself.

Not far from him, Doctor Josiah Sage felt the sweat trickling down his brow.

"Nurse Crosby, daub please."

The Artemis' head nurse brought the gauze up to him, and wiped away the wet distraction.

"Thank you, Ell-Tee."

It had been a precarious surgery, rife with trouble. A century prior, the patient may not have made it through the procedure. Doc Sangliar was also lucky the medical emergency response team had gotten to him when they did. A few more moments without treatment would have been lethal. As it was, the surgery was not turning out as well as Josiah had hoped.

As he kept working, one of the human male petty officers stepped into the surgical suite, holding a breath mask over his mouth.

"Doc Sage?" the young man said to announce his presence.

Josiah, not looking up from what he was doing, couldn't tell it if it was Matteo or Tobrou. Despite the fact that they were from two different regions, Italy and Greece, the pitch of their voices was the same. That their accents were occasionally similar didn't help matters.

"Yes?"

The young human cleared his throat.

"The, um, captain asked to see you. Sir."

"Now?"

"Yes, Sir. He said without delay, when you were finished."

"I see," Josiah said as he made a few more circuits with the osteogenic stimulator in his hand over the unconscious Tellarite's exposed skull. "Thank yew."

The young man nodded, did an about face & left O.R.1.

Josiah turned off his tool. "Doctor T'Lynn, I'm done with the osteogenic stim'lator. Would yew please finish here with the dermal regen'rator. I'm gonna have to speak with the cap'n about Doc Sangliar anyway."

T'Lynn nodded at him. During the surgery, her respect for him had obviously raised a notch.

"I will take care of it from here. But you have to do your own paperwork."

Josiah gave her a wane grin.

"Why, Doctor, was that a joke?"

The Vulcan raised a brow at him and went to work.

Josiah left the O.R. and threw his gloves and surgical smock into a bio-waste receptacle. He grabbed the small glass tube with a few calcium-based fragments inside. He then left sickbay, and made his way to the turbolift.

Once inside, he said:

"Bridge."

A moment later he arrived on deck 1. As he stepped off the 'lift onto the Artemis' command deck, he saw the blood splotch on the bulkhead.

He winced. Not wanting to linger, he quickly spotted the Artemis' commanding officer in his chair. Josiah could read the body language easily enough: Captain Kheren was tense. Josiah suddenly didn't want to deliver the news he had to give.

He steeled himself, came down from the 'lift area and presented himself smartly.

"Skipper, Lieutenant Josiah Sage, reporting as d'rected."

Kheren's lifetime of experience with the body language of humanoids immediately told him the young doctor was apprehensive in his presence. It might have been just because of being on the bridge for the first time, or because of added responsibilities... or something worse.

"I didn't expect you so soon, Doctor. " admitted the Andorian. "Your alacrity is commendable. Would you please follow me to my ready room?"

And so saying, he stepped off his large old fashioned chair, adding over his right shoulder:

"Number One, you have the bridge."

"Aye, Sir" O'Conner replied to the captain as he entered his ready room.

He had been quietly taking it all in as he watched the battle of words between the captain and the X'ell. He didn't have as much hope as the captain did they would be able to help them... Still, he wanted them all to be ready.

With a heavily callused hand, he invited Doctor Sage to the other access door of the bridge, sliding open to show a short corridor with two doors on the left and one on the right. He guided him to the nearest left one and both entered the captain's office.

Again, his hand invited the medical officer to a chair in front of a large translucent desk behind which the captain sat. When they were both seated, he immediately asked:

"How is he, Doctor?"

Josiah tried to find a comfortable position in the chair. When he realized he wouldn't find one, he stopped squirming and looked at the Artemis' captain.

"Sir, I don't want to sound dramatic, but he's not good," the young doctor said. To emphasize his point, he set down on the captain's desk the tube he had taken with him from sickbay. Fragments within tinkled almost like broken glass.

"These are bits of Doc Sangliar's skull that had gotten wedged into his frontal lobe. The surgery was touch-and-go for a l'il bit, but he's now recoverin'."

Josiah smoothed his moustache and beard and said:

"However, there was additional trauma deeper within the brain not registered on initial medical scans. As a result, he's totally unresponsive to external stimuli. Right now, the only thing keepin' Doc Sangliar's brain alive and active is a neural stim'lator."

Sage smoothed his moustache and beard again.

"He's comatose Cap'n, and I'm not entirely sure when, or if, he's goin' to wake up."

For a moment, the Andorian just sat there, looking at the Human doctor, his antennas drooping to the side from his earless, white-haired skull. Then, his fingers crossed in front of him on the desk, he sighed:

"Thank you for what you have done for him, Doctor. Please make sure he gets back to Starbase 10 with us, alive. Have him put in a stasis container if necessary. We've had too much death on this ship already."

He then straightened up and sat back in his chair to dart his silvery eyes into those of Josiah.

"You are senior medical officer on board, Doctor Sage. You are therefore called upon to act now as our Chief Medical Officer."

He gave a few moments to let the other register the news before adding:

"I wish circumstances for such a promotion could have been better. But it seems that these days they rarely are. Believe me, I do understand how you must feel right now. Nevertheless, we do have a job to do out here."

Kheren brushed aside the memory of the similar circumstances, the death of his former captain, that had brought about his own rise to command, to get back to the immediate situation:

"You will find all current data of the present situation on your CMO command chair on the bridge, left side of mine. You are probably not familiar with this new feature: it was successfully experimented first on the Artemis barely over a month ago and is now just being installed on all Lotus Fleet ships for further testing. In short, this station will allow you to efficiently coordinate with all the rest of the department heads on the bridge, sickbay and all medical teams in and out of the ship... pretty much like the First officer does for the entire starship, albeit in a more specialized way. It can also be instantly reconfigured to other advisory stations, such as Diplomatic Advisory or Counselor, so that you will also take charge of all communications."

Kheren leaned forward again, his strong, callused hands once more crossed before him, elbows on the desk as he continued:

"To bring it up succinctly: there is an unknown species living inside this Dyson shell that is in dire need of medical help on what appears to be a vast scale. Both our own directives and their taboos are preventing us from direct contact with them, despite both also demanding that we help. The Science department also just informed me that their atmosphere is exceedingly rich in oxygen and laced with residual radiation that would be harmful in the long term for almost all non-natives. Your job will be to oversee that help."

The Andorian made a pause, then further explained:

"We are going to beam down as many EMH as our Chief Engineer will be able to provide us. You will have to direct and coordinate their research and medical actions on the surface; hence why you will now have to work mostly on the bridge from now on. That way, we can circumvent difficulties and efficiently help these people."

Making a final pause, Captain Kheren looked again straight at Doctor Sage with all four oculars to conclude:

"Questions?"

Josiah suddenly had the feeling of staring into the abyss. It was a vast, gaping maw from which something was staring back.

Josiah didn't blink.

He nodded and smoothed his moustache and beard.

"I'll be yer huckleberra. Les' git started. What do yew need from me first, skipper?"

The Andorian blinked at the unfamiliar terms the Human threw in from time to time, wondering briefly if he should activate the universal translator.

*This is going to become an interesting relationship.* He could not help but smile inwardly.

But his face remained typically Andorian-deadpan as he answered:

"Please familiarize yourself with the CMO command chair and get in touch with Chief Engineer N'Elighan to provide our photonic rescue for the X'ell. As soon as you both feel ready, both of you join us back on the bridge to give it the go. I don't have to remind you that time is of the essence, Doc."

He stood up, signifying the end of their discussion.

Josiah stood when the Artemis' captain did.

"I un'nerstand, Sir. I'll do my bes' t'not let yew down," Josiah said. "I'll go find the Cheng an' git right t'work. If yew'll 'scuse me then, skipper."

Kheren nodded at the Artemis' new Chief Medical Officer, and smiled inwardly again.

*Interesting, indeed.*

Sage stepped out of the ready room, and took a deep breath.

*Chief Medical Officer? Damn* he thought. *I'm innit now.*

At the same moment, there were also questions that were discussed on the bridge;

"Lieutenant Relys. ETA on the fleet?"

"Maybe three to four hours, Sir. " answered the Bajoran woman with an apologetic shrug towards the First officer. "Sorry Sir but I can only give you a rough estimate from our last signal before we entered the gravitational interference of the Dyson shell. And now that we are in here, there is no way to contact the outside beyond a few hundred million kilometers."

After getting the reply, the First Officer of the Artemis looked back.

"Lieutenant Iksos. If you have any free officers I would like them run a simulation on the sphere failing. We need to know what our chances would be."

"Understood, Sir. " acknowledged the petite dark-skinned woman.

Then she contacted the science department:

"Crewman Greco, Petty Officer Errdruu, Chief Petty Officer Kleeshyss, Master Chief Thomas, Ensign Thlax: report immediately to Lieutenant Seton in multipurpose lab 1, deck 16. Lieutenant Seton: work with your team on analyzing possible collapse of the Dyson shell and ship survivability conditions. Report hypothesis and possible options to bridge science station as soon as possible."

After that reply he tapped his comm.

"Commander O'Conner to Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn. I know the captain ordered you to remove the emitters from the wall, but you might want to look in to replicating standard holographic generators. It might be quicker."

Between tweaking console wires and re-arranging isolinear chips, N'Eligahn was absorbed in his work until the sudden beeping of his combadge startled him.

"Thank you Sir," he said, keeping his voice as even as possible. "I'll take it under advisement. N'Eligahn out."

He cut off the comms.

*Quicker, maybe, but they would have to connect each of those replicated emitters to the central computer core, whereas the ones they were removing were already tuned and programmed for that purpose.*

Ensign Rhee was already working to network the emitters that they had and if he could figure out how to quickly replicate new emitters and ensure they coordinated with the current network of emitters, then they would do so.

"Sir?" said a younger female voice.

N'Eligahn looked up at the two engineering officers he had requested.

"Good," N'Eligahn said. "Ensign Furlan, please work with the EMH to determine the precise files and programs he thinks he'd need to operate independently on the surface. We're not sure if we'll be able to keep a solid connection between their primary interface and the ship's computer while they're down there." Ensign Furlan nodded and entered medical proper.

"Activate EMH," she said.

The form of the doctor appeared and cocked his head at her.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency."

"And Lieutenant," N'Eligahn then added, this time to Lieutenant Ferrier, "I've already done most of the preliminary work here, tapping the main holographic control circuits to the primary medical computer. I'll contact you from main engineering so we can make sure both consoles are communicating to each other. In the mean time, run a Level 2 diagnostic to make sure this console is able to receive and relay instructions from the CMO commands on the bridge. Getting the relay right between engineering and medical won't mean a damn thing if no one can steer the little light beings."

"Excuse me, I resent that remark," the EMH said, momentarily ignoring the Ensign.

"I'll be in touch," N'Eligahn finished, nodding to both of them and exiting main medical.

He made his way to the primary aft turbolift.

"Deck 21."

"Doc Sage to Commander N'Elighan. I need to speak with yew concernin' the EMH project the skipper has yew on. What's yer location?"

N'Eligahn was crammed into a port-side Jefferies tube which contained the primary holographic control module. He reached for his toolkit when his combadge beeped again.

N'Eligahn stared for a moment.

*What the hell did the person just say?*

He caught a few other choice words, but the accent threw him off guard.

"N'Eligahn here," he said back. "I'm currently crammed into Port Jefferies Tube 4, if you care to join me... Else, just give me a few minutes and I'll get right back to you, N'Eligahn out."

He shook his head as he opened the kit and removed the charged interphase regulator.

"Any more interruptions and we might as well just dump some hyposprays on the bird-folk."

He tweaked the holographic circuits, re-routing their primary control to the main medical computer, rather than their usual route through the primary engineering console. If this worked, the medical console would then route the controls up to the bridge command. He tapped his combadge.

"N'Eligahn to Lieutenant Ferrier," he said. "How's the relay?"

"It's up and running and we're getting a ready signal from both the bridge command console and the holographic controls," the man reported. "As long as we can keep the relay up, the CMO should be able to maintain control of their actions from the bridge."

"Great," N'Eligahn said as he crawled out of the tube and back into main engineering. "How's Ensign Furlan?"

"She's nearly done compiling the information. She'll relay it all to Ensign Rhee."

"Very good, keep up the good work, N'Eligahn out," he finished as he emerged into the bright light of Main Engineering.

He walked over to Blakely. She was near a large work table upon which several dozen holoemitters sat. Several technicians led by Ensign Rhee were tuning them. Rhee himself was adjusting a control board.

"How is it?"

"Good," she answered. "If this crazy plan works, this board will operate like a large control module for all of these holoemitters. The technicians have already adjusted them to all be portables."

"The board will coordinate all these holoemitters from the ground and maintain the connection through the ship's usual communication channels," Ensign Rhee now explained. "As long as we can keep those up, the CMO will be able to relay commands and receive analysis from the EMHs."

"All right, and the CMO console on the bridge?" N'Eligahn asked.

"Ensign T'Nell and Crewman Quond were already on that," Blakely confirmed. "Everything seems to be communicating properly."

"All right, do we have enough to test it out?"

"There are about twelve emitters ready and connected with about fifteen still being worked on," Rhee again explained. "Each emitter and the relay attached to the emitter can support between one and six EMHs."

"All right, stand by," N'Eligahn ordered as he tapped his combadge. "N'Eligahn to Doctor Sage; get to your console, we're about to try a crash course in EMH control. Get ready."

Up on the bridge, Josiah Sage stepped over to the CMO command chair. It was a dizzying array of lights and buttons. "Now, what in the darkest depths of tarnation is all this?"

Josiah let out a breath and sat down in the chair. "Oookay, then," he said while looking at the armrests. Within a few moments, a readout started scrolling information. As he looked at the subroutines within the readout he realized something: he recognized them.

At that very moment, N'Eligahn tapped his communicator again.

"All right everyone, stand back and prepare for some major annoyance."

He nodded to Rhee who returned it and activated the twelve emitters that were ready. They hovered over the largest, most empty part of main engineering.

With another nod, from N'Eligahn, he switched them on. Sixty EMHs appeared. They varied in appearance between the Mark 1s and Mark 2s.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency," said all sixty voices simultaneously.

Every one of them looked like they were functioning with their normal parameters.

"Now those are a lot of EMH's," Doctor Sage mumbled to himself. He tapped his combadge.

"Doc Sage to Commander N'Elighan. I gotta heartbeats up here. I think yer little broomsticks are ready to carry the water to the bath."

Sage then isolated one of the numbers flashing across his console, and tapped a few buttons.

"Commander, tell me if yew see one of the Mark I's doin' sum'ent outta the ord'nary."

As N'Eligahn looked in the crowd, he noticed a hole being cleared in the center. The Rethian pushed his way through the crowd of photonic physicians and saw one of the Mark 1 models based on Doc Zimmerman himself, the EMH creator, doing a type of rhythmic movement.

First, the model put its right foot out, shook it, and then it brought the foot back in. Then, it repeated the same movement with its left foot: out, a shake, and then in again. It then did the same for its right hand and then left.

"Well," came Doc Sage's drawl over the comm, "is it doin' anything, or do I not un'nerstand what this is all about?"

N'Eligahn covered his face with his palm and shook his head.

"25th Century technology jury-rigged into an impossible relay system and the Doctor makes them dance," he muttered.

He tapped his combadge.

"Yes, Doctor, they're operating." Then all of the EMHs arranged themselves into two lines and began some sort of coordinated line dance.

N'Eligahn added another palm to his face.

"Doctor, you need a life of sorts," he said. "Looks like the relay's operational. I'll meet you on the bridge."

Now the EMHs were all singing some sort of obnoxious tune in the same awkward accent the Doctor used.

"Someone turn those things off, please!" N'Eligahn said.

In a moment all of the dancing and singing doctors disappeared.

"Well, if the Doctor is able to coordinate those arrogant photons into a coordinated line dance, making sure they perform surgery right shouldn't be a problem," Blakely said.

N'Eligahn glared at her for a moment.

"All right, finish programming the other holoemitters. About how long?"

"Fifteen minutes, give or take," Rhee said.

"Good, contact me on the bridge when they're done. Once that happens, prepare the entire load for transport to the surface."

N'Eligahn left main engineering and made his way towards the central turbolift.

"Deck eight," he said.

If this whole plan went right, then he could say that it would be the very first time in his Starfleet career that something he'd actually been involved in had gone right. But due to his impeccable track record, he didn't hold out much hope for that.

He emerged onto deck 8 and walked down the long hallway towards the central turbolift.

"Computer, bridge, now."

\* \* \*

After returning from the briefing in the ready room and being immersed with his research, Syntron hadn't even noticed that virtually an entire day had passed since he arrived back in his temporary quarters on board the Excalibur. Food, rest, and sleep were irrelevant and trivial conditions that he could ignore for days-on-end when engaged in scientific inquiry.

Soon after the Excalibur had gotten underway, Captain DeSalle had forwarded a message to Syntron from a probe that had been received from the Artemis with a complete report detailing their discovery of a Dyson shell. The transmission concluded with the possibility of the Artemis potentially entering the shell at some point. No signal or contacts of any type had occurred with the Artemis since then; even though that message was received more than twenty-four hours ago.

Syntron knew that a Dyson sphere was an enormous megastructure named in honor of physicist and mathematician Freeman Dyson and that the "sphere" consists of a system of orbiting solar power satellites and containment materials meant to completely encompass a star and capture most or all of a star's energy output.

Therefore, he decided to begin researching other related information: Dyson Rings, Dyson Swarms, Dyson Bubbles, Dyson nets, and of course Dyson shells in preparation for the report he was to present to the chief of science aboard the Excalibur, Lieutenant-Commander Nakamura; and then eventually to his new captain on the Artemis. He also realized that if the event of meeting up with his new ship does come into fruition, that this crew would more likely be sharing more first-hand information than he could possibly gather on his own. Nevertheless, the better informed and prepared he was, the more effective he would be able to start his commission as its new Chief of Science.

He began to summarize the information as he researched.

"A Dyson Ring is the simplest form of the Dyson Swarm to scale. Orbit is one Astronomical Unit in radius, collectors are one hundred and seven kilometers in diameter or about twenty-five times the Earth-Moon distance, spaced three degrees from center to center around the orbital circle,"

He entered the vocal report while he added graphics and simulations to his notes.

"A relatively simple arrangement of multiple Dyson Rings forms a more complex Dyson Swarm. Rings' orbital radii are spaced one point five times one hundred and seven kilometers with regards to one another, but average orbital radius is still one AU. Rings are rotated fifteen degrees relative to one another, around a common axis of rotation,"

Making a pause to review the data, he noted further:

"A Dyson Bubble is an arrangement of statites around a star, in a non-orbital pattern. As long as a statite has an unobstructed line-of-sight to its star, it can hover at any point in space near its star. This relatively simple arrangement," he noted "is only one of an infinite number of possible statite configurations, and is meant as a contrast for a Dyson Swarm only. Statites are the same size as the collectors and arranged at a uniform one AU distance from the star." He recorded everything he was saying as he produced a variety of holographic simulations to help him visualize the possible potential configurations of these phenomena.

"The Dyson shell" he then summarized "is a uniform solid shell of matter around a star. Such a structure would completely alter the emissions of the central star, and would intercept a hundred percent of the star's energy output. Such a structure would also provide an immense surface which may be used for habitation, if the surface could be made habitable".

*The utter immensity of such a structure alone would be enough to enthrall any sentient being, let alone a scientist or engineer* Syntron contemplated.

He went on and added additional information:

"A spherical shell in the Sol system with a radius of one astronomical unit, so that the interior surface would receive the same amount of sunlight as Earth does per solid angle, would have a surface area of at least two hundred and seventy-two quadrillion square kilometers, or about five hundred and fifty million times the surface area of the Earth. This would intercept the full energy of the Sun's output; other variant designs would intercept less, but the shell variant represents the maximum possible energy captured for the Sol system at its current point of the Sun's evolution. This is approximately thirty-three trillion times the power consumption of humanity in the twentieth century, which was twelve terawatts."

*Intriguing*, he thought.

Syntron then went on to summarize information concerning shell gravitational interactions, obtaining sufficient building material in the Solar system to construct a Dyson shell, potential biospheres within the shell, and how these spheres would be hidden in darkness with all of the star's radiant energy contained within the shell.

What they all basically have in common though he surmised, is that they would all absorb and reradiate energy from the star and that the wavelengths of radiation emitted by the collectors would be determined by the emission spectra of the substances making them up, and the temperature of the collectors.

Syntron then referred to Starfleet information available about these Dyson phenomena. He found the records about all the known discoveries and actual encounters with Freeman Dyson's theory: a first Dyson shell found by Starfleet's former flagship, the USS Enterprise-D, stardate 86125.3; a Dyson ring found by the USS Grimsby of Gemini Fleet division, stardate 86172.6; and finally, this latest Dyson shell found by Lotus Fleet division's newest commissioned starship, the USS Artemis, stardate 87055.4.

He referred to information from the USS Enterprise-D:

"Excerpt from Science log:...for the interior of a Dyson sphere to be habitable to most humanoid lifeforms, the radius of the sphere must be such that habitable temperatures, between five and thirty degrees Celsius, are maintained. The radius would therefore depend on the size and the energy output of the star around which the sphere would be constructed; if a Dyson sphere were to be constructed around the Earth's sun, the radius would have to be approximately one astronomical unit. At such a radius, the interior surface area would be about 550 million times the entire surface area of the planet Earth. Such a surface area could easily support the lives of many quadrillions of beings." This information correlated with what he already found and noted.

He went on to peruse Captain Jean Luc Picard's entry:

*"Unsurprisingly, due to the almost immeasurable amounts of effort, resources and time required to construct such a structure, this is the only Dyson sphere yet discovered. This particular sphere encased a G-type star and had a diameter of 200 million kilometers, giving it an internal surface area of approximately 250 million M-class planets. As no radiant sunlight or solar wind escaped from the sphere, starships were not able to detect it until they were almost on top of it. As a result, the USS Jenolan crashed onto it in 2294 after being pulled in by the sphere's immense gravity well while en route to the Norpin colony."*

The information then went on to note that in 2369, the USS Enterprise-D discovered the Jenolan and investigated the sphere. The sphere was deserted because the star around which it was constructed was highly unstable.

It was at this moment that he was notified to report to the bridge.

He acknowledged and headed out of his cabin and toward the turbolift.

Ascending toward deck 1, he realized that the Excalibur was now less than five hours from their rendezvous with the Artemis. He pondered what they would find upon their arrival.

As the turbolift stopped and the doors opened, he stepped onto the bridge of the Excalibur to catch his first glimpse of the still distant Azimuth Horizon anomaly and the Dyson shell, uncloaked by a ring of Starfleet probes, right across its path. He was stunned as he stared at the viewscreen and tried to process the complex unfamiliarity of these incredible forces that lay ahead of them.

He could now see a part of what they were about to encounter upon their arrival. The question now was how were they possibly going deal with these awe-inspiring and potentially lethal phenomena and survive to also contend with the intrusion of Klingons? At this moment Syntron perceived himself as infinitesimal and unprepared to embark on such a formidable task. Having not even officially begun his first commission, he was about to come face-to-face with his own much more complex and dangerous version of the Kobayashi Maru scenario.

At the science station, Chief Nakamura signaled the Vulcan to come and join him at his post. Captain DeSalle was discussing on screen with Captain Data about the tactical and diplomatic situation for the upcoming apprehended confrontation, leaving bridge officers to their duties.

"Research data on Dyson's theory?" asked the Japanese officer, pointing to the data chip Syntron was holding.

The Vulcan offered it and went to the science station to work with him on the data.

Understanding what they were about to face could make all the difference between helping the Artemis or failing to save her.

## CHAPTER THREE: SECRET WARS

**Captain's log, stardate: 87057.6**

**We have entered the Dyson shell, forced to use it as a safe port to escape the Azimuth Horizon. Once inside, we made first contact with the X'ell, an avian humanoid species declaring to be descendants from the original builders of this stellar construct.**

**They are a species as advanced technologically and socially as they are reclusive. They have been hiding out here for eons under an immense protective cloak and had observed all events occurring in the Alpha Quadrant, refusing even today contact with what they consider savage, primitive, uncivilized cultures.**

**Thinking back about recent historical events like the senseless Dominion War, I am forced to accept their severe judgment. For the last fifty years, even the Federation lost sight of its vaunted values too often and too easily. We may have more powerful ships now than we had when the USS Artemis was first launched all those decades ago... but we certainly now have weaker spirits.**

**And now, the X'ell are in dire need of help. Their population seems to be under a medical emergency their own advanced knowledge is apparently unprepared to deal with... and even their superior technology appears powerless to escape annihilation from the incoming destructive Azimuth Horizon phenomena.**

**We are underway to answer their call for help, using EMH emitters on board the ship to bring medical assistance with their full informed consent... and so, without violating their laws... or our own.**

**I just hope this will be enough... and that we will, together, find a way to face the incoming storm.**

Kheren closed the ship's log, stood up finishing his cold Cardassian fish juice and moved out of his office to turn into the short corridor towards the bridge door.

A few steps and he entered the ship's command center, looking at the astounding view of the hollow world vastly sprawling around the Artemis, sat in his large command chair, his silver gaze never leaving the wide screen.

After a moment, he ordered:

"Open a channel to the surface."

As soon as the bird-like face of the X'ell speaker appeared on the viewer, the Andorian announced:

"Our Emergency Medical Holograms are ready to be transported to the surface. We have twelve separate units of five independent photonic healers ready. Please provide coordinates where you feel our help would be most needed."

"You may link your signal to our own transporter web, Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis," answered the X'ell. "Our system will automatically do so and strengthen your control signal."

"Confirmed, Sir," reported Lieutenant Relys from the ops multiconsole. "We are now connected and their more advanced technology is of course perfectly adapted to the peculiar conditions here that are disturbing our own sensors and communications. Through it, we will be able to keep complete monitoring and control of all holoemitters even from the other side of the Dyson shell."

"Mister N'Elighan, you may energize at your discretion. Doctor Sage, you will supervise and record the entire operation."

After a moment, he lowered his eyes and antennas towards the long double station before him to add:

"Mister Narod, start a high orbit flight over the equatorial line of the inner shell, one-quarter impulse power.

"One quarter impulse power, aye aye, Sir."

"Lieutenant Irksos; continue detailed scans of the interior and relay them in real time to the tactical station as well."

"Patching main sensors with tactical sensors," confirmed the petite woman.

"Lieutenant Alther, continue tactical surveillance and establish a tactical grid from those scans, centered on the star. I want you to know this place like the back of your hand."

Kheren finally turned his head to look at his First officer:

"Number One, you keep coordinating all our other researches during this time. Since the X'ell don't seem to mind, let us do here what we are meant to do: exploration."

"Aye Sir," O'Conner replied as he stood up and moved to the science station.

The Captain of the Artemis then sat back in his chair, looking again at the screen and the awesome sight of the immense inner world all around them.

*That's why we are out here,* he thought with barely contained excitement.

"Lieutenant Irksos, let's get some detail scans of their transporter grid and agriculture methods. They seem to be far ahead of our standards in both; we might not have time to study them but this should give researchers more than enough to study" the Exec of the Artemis said as he looked over the shoulder of the petite dark-skinned woman.

"Understood, Sir."

After a short pause Irksos added: "Sir, they seem to power the whole shell purely with solar energy. We should get a scan of their solar power system too."

"Good idea; they might be more efficient solar systems than what we currently have."

O'Conner smiled and watched her work the console.

"There is definite urbanization as well, Sir" reported the science chief. "We detect several large agglomerations of roofless buildings apparently composed of some crystalline silicate that reacts to sunlight. There are also vast patches of the same material disseminated like sunlight collectors around those and the highest concentration of life forms are to be found in such cities."

From his own chair, Kheren looked on the screen at the visuals of those glittering spires of iridescent glass and colored stone with awe. They made him see them as the metal-in-ice underground cities of Andoria if those had been built on the surface to sparkle under the lights of the sun.

He chased the image from his mind. He was not remembering fondly the cold, harsh, unforgiving world of his birth. And so, he looked away from the screen.

He could see now on his left the monitor of Doctor Sage following the scans and actions the one hundred and thirty five Emergency Medical Holograms were now performing under his command. The new Chief Medical Officer had apparently things well in hand and collecting tons of data on the X'ell while already resolving the health crisis most efficiently than the natives apparently could.

"Report, Doctor."

Josiah looked up at the Artemis' captain.

"Damnest thing, skipper. The surface where the 'habitants live is mostly M-class. But EMH-66 is reportin' a signif'cant d'gree of radiation that the X'ell seem to thrive on. 66 also adds this is harmful in large doses to Starfleet species, with the exception of Saurians. 66 doesn't have anythin' as to the why."

As an afterthought, he said:

"Prolly a good thing we didn't go o'erthere to begin with."

Doc Sage went back to scanning the readouts.

"EMH-23 is makin' an addendum concernin' their physiology. The X'ell are genuinely avian. They're warm-blooded vertebrates. 23 postulates they're probably descended from the kind of flightless birds like those found on Earth in the period between the 'stinction of dinosaurs and the rise of mammals."

Josiah cleared his throat while smoothing his moustache and beard.

"They're diurnal, which seems to be in line with most avian species Starfleet's come 'cross. They're also mostly veg'tarian. They eat a v'riety of grains, beans, veg'tables and fruits. It seems meat is treated as a spice for their food. It's pr'pared and used almos' like a dried chipotle pepper. They don' seem too reliant on drinkin' water none too much, either. Tha's curious."

He made a soft sound of surprise.

"This is in'trestin'. EMH-75 says there're scans suggestin' the X'ell swallow small stones to aid their digestion."

After a few more readouts, he made another surprised noise and looked at Kheren.

"Skipper, their clothes aren't made of fabric. It's some kind of viscous liquid formed through the use of 'vanced mind-controlled forcefield technology. The liquid is chock full of nutrients, which is good for their skin and remarkably versatile. Apparently the X'ell can program the color of their clothes. 75 says they can manipulate the liquid to the point that they could easily blend into their surroundings becoming completely invisible to the naked eye."

Lieutenant Iksos chimed in:

"It sounds similar to the biomimetic gel first discovered in the Delta quadrant by USS Voyager."

Sage looked to Irkos and nodded.

"Yup, but one 'ssential diff'rence here is that this one lacks any capacity for sentience."

He returned his gaze to Kheren.

"Tha's all I've got for now, Sir. But, I admit another curiosity: despite some of these advanced technologies, they seem to be at a loss when it comes to med'cine. With your permission, skipper, I'm havin' the EMH's dig deeper into the why that is."

"Go ahead, Doc. I'm glad we are learning so much while being proven so useful to them. I hope we are doing enough. Your efforts might prove to be the very key we need to make successful contact with them. Good work."

The Andorian looked lost in his thoughts for a moment before returning his four oculars towards the Chief Medical Officer sitting at his left hand:

"Tell me, Doc: do we have any idea what it is they are so extensively suffering of? "

Josiah smoothed his moustache and beard.

"I'm not gettin' anything on that yet, skipper..."

When Doc Sage trailed off, the Artemis' captain could tell by the look on the physician's face new data was coming into the Chief Medical Officer's command chair.

"Sir," Josiah began, with an edge of disbelief in his voice, "it seems the birdmen have no weapons."

"Interesting... mumbled Kheren. " They obviously have evolved socially beyond using conflict to resolve issues. I am beginning to understand now why they consider us still a savage childish culture."

The chief medical officer looked up at Captain Kheren.

"They have nothin' in the way of weaponry, offensive or d'fensive. Not even bladed tools! EMH-36 is reportin' they use rings and small cylinders that smart-detect the material they're interactin' with! These tools sever, or, well that's int'restin', *bond* materials at the quantum level!"

Lieutenant Iksos asked then:

"Do they only cut organic material, or are they capable of anything outside of that?"

Josiah looked back to his readout.

"It's lookin' like just about anything. If we could get a chance to 'xamine it first-hand, maybe we c'n learn more. But, until the birdman invite us into the nest, so-to-speak, we're not gonna git to un'nerstand much more."

Doc Sage regarded Iksos and saw her nodding. The Prime Directive had to be upheld. Josiah went back to his chair's armrest.

"Uh-oh," he began. "Cap'n, there may be a problem."

"Just one, Doc?" retorted the Andorian deadpan.

He transferred some data from his chair to the commanding officer's so Captain Kheren could see it for himself.

"EMH-111 and EMH-112 are both on the edge of the area we r'sponded to in the Dyson shell.

They're reportin' patients presentin' with what appear to be lac'rations and burns. When the EMH's pressed for the source of the inj'ries, the r'luctant birdmen b'came even more tight-beaked."

A beep came through on Doc Sage's command chair. Josiah read the message, and smoothed his moustache and beard again before continuing:

"EMH-112 is sayin' majority of these patients are bein' brought in from the side of the sphere closes' to the Klingon border."

Another beep came in. Josiah took a sharp intake of breath.

"Oh, gods, EMH-111 and EMH-112 have also jus' confirmed the lac'rations are consistent with bat'leth and d'ktagh cuts. The burns are definitely from disrupt'r discharges, and in some cases, photon det'nations."

The chief medical officer looked up at Artemis' captain, eyes wide.

Looking at the medical report on the X'ell injuries, Kheren turned his silver eyes to the right and suddenly lowered his antennae towards his First officer.

"Three guesses who's been here..."

Kelsey's eyes shot open after Josiah reported the damage to the X'ell. He was voicing what the tactical console was now screaming :

"Captain, there is a series of intense photonic eruptions along the equatorial line"

The Tactical officer turned to face Kheren.

"It's a bombardment, Sir."

Kheren straightened up suddenly in his chair, glanced at O'Conner and ordered:

"Yellow Alert. Mister Narod: intercept course, full impulse."

Klaxons blared as the Artemis simply accelerated towards the disturbance, her shields shimmering around her as her phaser arrays charged and tube number 1 was readied with a torpedo, the crew all following other procedures during alert readiness called by the captain.

It took but a few seconds at this speed for the tactical board to flare up again.

"There are three ships, their formation consistent with a carpet bombing."

Kelsey said, turning back around to the tactical console.

"Visual," commanded the Andorian.

On the screen appeared the unmistakable silhouettes of three familiar vessels, dark green and shaped like long-necked, stunt-winged raptors, all looking identical but for the rear central one which was noticeably bigger and continually dropping luminous blobs of light down towards the immense surface.

"Klingon ships, Sir: two K'Vort class escorts and a single B'Rel class destroyer" the androgyn confirmed, brow furrowing.

*This isn't good* Kelsey thought while getting ready for combat.

"Red Alert!" shouted the Andorian from the center seat.

As the trio of warships loomed before the bow of their ship, the commander of the Artemis darted his gaze and his mind towards the incoming threat.

"Ship to ship, Doc." he demanded then.

The image of a long haired, thin bearded Klingon warlord filled the screen, his thickly rippled brow heavily lowered on his dark ebony gaze. His somber skin was darkened by the battle lust ripping out a snarl from his pointy-toothed mouth:

"Fedrats! You have no business here! Begone!"

"I am Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis: you know full well that your presence here with vessels of war is a violation of Federation territory. These people are under our protection. *You will leave... now!*"

"I am Commander Wharkh of the Hegh 'Iw, leader of second squadron! *You will die, now!*"  
And then, the signal was abruptly cut off.

"Now we Know, Number One," sighed the Andorian, leaning forward in his command seat.  
Alright, now shut that damn noise."

O'Conner walked back to his seat as the Klingon closed the channel. He then quietly watched; waiting a moment to add his input.

"Lieutenant Relys: Did they send any signal elsewhere?"

"Unlikely, Sir" assured the Bajoran ops officer. " We could barely maintain a comm signal with them ourselves even at so short a distance because of the star's heavy interference. "

"Jam them" ordered Kheren. "Make sure it stays that way."

He then turned his large chair halfway towards the engineering station: "Mister N'Eligahn: do everything you can to protect our rear."

N'Eligahn took his seat and scanned over the readouts.

"Aft weapons are still offline," he said. "I'd recommend keeping the bow pointed towards them unless we want them blowing about our already charred butt...Sir."

He glanced over the readouts.

"I've got full teams working on it, but they're estimating the aft torpedo launcher working in fifteen minutes, give or take. Phasers will take longer, the charging coils were fried."

He sent a quick message to Blakely via the console:

*Get them up.*

The commanding officer of the Artemis spun back forward again.

"Helm: bring us between them and the surface and try to keep our bow to them. Tactical: arm all remaining weapons and, as soon and as fast as you can, lock onto their weapons systems but do not, I repeat, do *not* fire unless I give you a *direct* order!"

*I will not fire the first shot of a new Klingon-Federation war! Vowed Kheren to himself. And I will certainly not fuel it if I can do anything about it! But I can not let them massacre these people...*

Kheren was thinking furiously, his innate physiological reaction to danger focusing all his senses and thoughts towards the incoming confrontation.

"Lieutenant Alther: keep a sharp look out for any emission towards us. If they are overconfident enough to attempt a weapon's lock, we will pin their location just then; Mister Narod, be ready for appropriate evasive maneuvers."

The dance of death was about to commence.

Josiah quickly activated his PID. No reason to end up like poor Doc Sangliar if things got a little rough.

He cast a quick glance at the still-fresh red splotch on the bulkhead. He couldn't help but wince a little. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the flashing light on his command chair. Another medical report, no doubt.

"Not the best of times, fellers," the Artemis' chief medical officer mumbled.

What he read only caused his stomach to flutter.

"Aw, hell..."

He swung his view point over to Captain Kheren.

"Skipper!" Doc Sage said, with urgency. "EMH-113 has jus' reported Klingon troops have transported to the surface b'hind the bombardment! They're attackin' the pop'lation in the city neares' to that partic'lar EMH!"

Kheren steeled himself.

"How many?"

Josiah, a little swept up in the moment, said:

"113 says its counted six squads of six armored warriors carryin' hand disrupt'rs and bat'leths! They're massacrin' any X'ell in sight after the bombardment has passed o'er. The Klingons are performin' an organized urban clean-up op'ration, movin' from street to street and in each buildin'!"

Josiah made a strangled noise of outcry.

"They're forcin' doors open with disrupt'rs. They're not usin' sidearms direc'ly against the natives, only their blades."

Doc Sage looked back to Kheren, his face flushed with anger.

"The Klingons aren't treatin' this like a military action. They're treatin' it like it's a damned hunt!"

Kheren read Josiah's body language, and knew the young doctor was riding the riptide of an emotional tidal wave.

"Doctor Sage." Kheren said, calmy. "I need all of my officers in a centered state of mind. If you're not capable of doing this, then get off my bridge."

Josiah's eyes suddenly widened, and he drew a sharp breath. The captain's words had found their mark. He nodded in acquiescence at the Artemis' commanding officer.

"Aye, skipper. My 'pologies, skipper." Josiah said, the color to his face returning to normal.

Kheren nodded.

"Good. Now, have the Klingons spotted our EMH's yet?"

The Chief Medical Officer looked back to his readouts, his hands still trembling from the adrenaline surge.

Josiah shook his head.

"The Klingons haven't spotted the EMH's yet, but they will."

Doc Sage looked back to Captain Kheren.

"The invaders will reach the medical centers in a matter of minutes."

"Might I make a suggestion?" N'Eligahn asked.

He turned and walked over to the railing overlooking the command well.

"If you'll allow it, I might be able to adjust the EMH's programming. We can merge their present EMH programming with that of the ECH programs. That way, it's possible they can..."

He paused for a moment.

"I guess fight the Klingons off. They can't kill a hologram as long as they don't target the emitters. At the very least they can defend the hospital. We might be able to bring up shields around the emitters to protect them, but it'll drain some of our energy and we'll have to maintain a direct line of sight with the area...which means our mobility options will be limited."

N'Eligahn shook his head.

"Either way it'll make the approaching ships more...difficult to deal with."

"I would have to agree with the Lieutenant Commander " Added Michael O'Conner." At the very least, it will delay the Klingons."

Captain Kheren turned to face both officers:

"There is only one problem with your idea, gentlemen: since the introduction of holographic officers on all decks of Lotus Fleet starships, all holoprograms are now hardwired with safety protocols that can't be bypassed without destroying the program itself. In short: holograms cannot cause any harm."

He didn't need any expertise in body language to see the surprise and frustration in both men.

"But... they are still holograms."

He turned to his left:

"Doctor Sage: please transfer all scanned physiological data on the X'ell to the engineering station."

And then he turned back towards N'Eligahn:

"Think you can make them look and act like our friendly natives, Chief?"

"The EMHs? Yes, but that won't solve the two issues of their inability to hurt anyone and the Klingons about to wipe out an entire hospital," he said, nearly spitting out the last phrase.

Then his face jerked up.

"Maybe they can't cause any harm, but maybe they can be manipulated in some way. There's plenty of ways to stop someone without hurting them. Since a hologram is essentially a collection of force fields and photons, we can adjust that and essentially form a wall with their bodies. Maybe increase the density so they can't be moved."

He paused for a moment.

"And we can make them a wall of immovable bird-folk," he added.

Kheren lifted his head in typical Andorian respect towards his Chief Engineer and simply pointed a finger to him clearly meaning "go!"

"Lieutenant Irksos, he then ordered turning towards the screen and the Klingon squadron, transfer all architectural scans to the Chief Engineer's station."

"Transferring data, Sir." confirmed the petite woman as her fingers flew over her console.

"N'Eligahn to Rhee," called the Rethian, tapping his combadge. "I need you to access the primary holographic controls. Increase the density of the holograms by approximately..." he looked over the screen, "...forty-five percent. If you can, increase their mass by about one third."

"Uhm...yes Sir," Rhee answered over the speakers. "But doing so will halve our current EMH numbers on the ground."

"Do it, N'Eligahn out."

He gestured at M'Laress.

"Head down to engineering, help Ensign Rhee,"

He tapped his badge again.

"Blakely, how goes the repairs?"

"We'll have torpedo capabilities in about seven minutes," she replied. "Team three had to go EVA to get the doors open."

"Do what you can, N'Eligahn out,"

He sat at the console and rapidly typed into it. He double checked the relay between his console and the ground hologram controls. He began to copy the X'ell appearance algorithms into the EMH's programming, though admittedly computer programming had never been his strong suit.

All this time and without diverting his gaze from the menacing ships, the commanding officer of the Artemis was further ordering:

"Doctor, continue monitoring ground activity. And Number One, since you yourself are an engineer, assist Mister N'Eligahn; there's no time to loose. "

He finished saying:

"Lieutenant Relys; whatever happen next, make sure we stay connected to the X'ell relay grid."

Then, his gaze shifted to his tactical chief, Lieutenant Kelsey Alther.

Kelsey continued to read out the tactical scanners and examined the soon to be battlefield.

"Great, those are really Klingons" the Kalthurian muttered before piping up: "Each only have eighteen out of thirty-six crewmembers Captain" Alther said before widening eyes suddenly. "They have seen us, Sir, scanning us."

Kelsey then exclaimed:

"They are locking weapons!"

"Evasive Mister Narod. " ordered again the Andorian from the center seat. "Lieutenant Alther, use their own scan to keep track of them and reinforce shields before they fire."

"They are cloaking... Sir, their course suggests that they are trying to do a pincer like maneuver. two of the escorts are peeling off and the third is going full reverse"

Kelsey was worried, the Artemis wasn't in the best condition to fight and now they had to contend with Klingons.

The Artemis shook from a hail of disruptor fire.

"Aft, port and starboard shields being hit Captain! Aft shield is down to ninety percent, port and starboard shields down to eighty-three percent!" now reported the chief of tactical.

"Phasers reduced sixty percent effectiveness. The ships attacking our port and starboard shields are cloaking but the aft ship is keeping full firing at us; it has a perfect firing position."

Kelsey Alther then directed a question to N'Eligahn.

"We really need something on the aft section Commander!" said the androgyn with a worried voice as the ship shook again. "Aft shield down to eighty-four percent!" the lieutenant at tactical finished, attempting to concentrate on the battle.

"Enough of this..." growled the Andorian captain. Helm, hard about. Lieutenant Alther, Fi..."

Suddenly and without any prior signal or warning, the now familiar face of the X'ell speaker filled the main viewer. If anything, the agitation behind him was even more frantic than ever. They could all see a few of the EMH directing a standard sheltering operation as the image rocked and some glittering dust fell from the ceiling.

"Speaker, said Kheren rising up from his chair, we can assist..."  
But the X'ell's windy, fluty voice interrupted the captain of the Artemis:

"All will cease hostilities. This barbaric violence is unacceptable. Please, all of you: leave us be."

At that moment, the Artemis shook slightly but noticeably with the unmistakable feel and sound of more disruptor impact on her shields.

The Hegh 'lw uncloaked right behind the Federation vessel and sent a volley from twin canons blazing from its wingtips before recloaking again. Now on port. then starboard aft, the pair of Birds of Prey did the same, one after the other.

On Alther's board, shields were weakening still. And so was the Andorian's patience:

"You have the Klingons' answer right there, Speaker." retorted Kheren with a strained tone. "They are intent on harming your people. Please allow us to defend..."

He was again cut off by weapons fire and the voice of the avian humanoid on screen:

"Commander Whark of the Hegh 'lw; Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis: you will honor our territorial integrity and will not violate territorial space belonging to us, especially without a direct order to do so from us."

These were almost the exact words of General Orders 13 and 14, Kheren couldn't help but notice. They had indeed watched them closely for a long time... and now effectively tying his hands. Disregarding those orders would only prove their severe judgment of them... make them no different from the invading Klingons themselves.

Another volley ignited urgency in the deceptively calm tone of the starship commander:

"Speaker: you certainly know the Klingons as well as us: so you must know that they are conquerors. If they can't enslave you all, they will kill you all..."

"We will not be soiled by your barbarism... or theirs. Using violence to preserve our way of life would make this way of life, what we are... worthless," firmly stated the X'ell representative in a tone that allowed no discussion.

"You would die... as a race..."

"To preserve what we are."

O'Conner couldn't help but roll his eyes at the response of the X'ell. He never quite understood why some races clung to tradition before common sense. To O'Conner, Humans had thrived on their ability to change; and his ability to adapt had served him well as an engineer.

But it was not his place to speak. If they wished to be trophies for Klingon mantles, it was not Starfleet's place to get in the way.

Feeling the ship shudder with the renewed attacks of the Klingon squadron, Kheren for his part could not help but admire such courage and integrity in the face of annihilation itself; something the Federation had cowardly forgotten too many times since the Dominion had struck, and with allowing an abomination like Section 31 to exist. Kheren could accept that the Federation still had a long way to go to live back up to its own lofty ideals... and that this might just be the time; but his inbred warrior instincts could not let him just leave a defenseless people to their suffering and grim fate when he could do something about it.

*If he could do something about it.*

But what could he *do* about it?

On the viewer, the evasive maneuvers of his ship, trying to shield the inhabited surface while still facing the Klingon squadron, brought back in full view the fiery glare of the star enclosed in the titanic hollowed world.

And a light flared in his mind.

He suddenly sat back, head high and antennae sharply pointing forward:

"Helm: full impulse, bearing 010 mark 0."

"Sir: That will bring us directly towards the star."

"And blind them." understood outloud the Bajoran woman at ops.

Kheren just emphasized his order with a pointing finger at the screen.

"Aye, captain: full impulse, 010 mark 0. ETA with star's corona: forty-four minutes."

A renewed series of impact rocked the ship.

The bloodthirsty Klingons were now competing with one another for the honor of destroying the much larger Federation starship fearfully running away without having fired a single shot at them... and for the moment, forgetting all about their bombardment and ground assault.

"The chase is on." said the Andorian.

Despite his frozen features, it looked as if he was smiling.

It would not have been a warm, friendly smile.

O'Conner was definitely not smiling in any manner as he was rocked back to reality by a Klingon weapon impact. He quickly looked around the bridge and barked out to N'Eligahn and Kelsey:

"Reinforce the rear shields! Status report!"

Kelsey Alther's eyes twitched after Michael O'Conner barked out to reinforce the shields.

*What the hell does he think I am doing?* thought the Tactical Chief, holding back an answer.

The Artemis rocked again.

N'Eligahn's claws flew across the console. His eyes moved from display box to display box, organizing the reports that came in and moving people around to where they were needed.

"We can't maintain forward shields against the steadily increasing radiation in addition to strengthening the aft shields, not when we're also powering and maintaining a connection with the holographic emitters so we can implement the changes ordered for them two minutes ago, we don't have the power," he said. "As for a status report, I have four people outside the hull forcing open the aft torpedo bay, two inside working it open from there; I have a total of thirty people working the Jefferies Tubes along the aft phaser banks to get those working; Seven are working the holographic connection to reprogram the EMHs so they can defend a hospital and a lot of bird people from being slaughtered by Klingons and at our current speed I've got about three minutes before we lose the connection with the ground."

Casting a glance towards the command well, he added:

"With respect, Sir, please let me do my job. Talking slows my keys per minute," and he returned his full attention to the display.

"Mister N'Eligahn... now said Captain Kheren to the Chief Engineer, get your people back in and suspend weapon repairs. Concentrate on defense and on not losing EMH contact."

Then, he turned around and looked straight at the Rethian:

"And, as soon as this little scrape will be over, please report to my ready room."

In the short moment of tense silence that followed, Lieutenant Relys reported:

"The X'ell powergrid is strengthening our signal all across the entire Dyson shell, Sir. No danger of losing it, especially with their emitters spread around the entire structure. And a pulse from the deflector grid channeled aft will provide the added reinforcement required by Commander O'Conner. As long as we aren't using weapons, we'll have lots of extra power too."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." said the Andorian, still looking at N'Eligahn.

Then he spun his chair back towards the main viewer and the star they were rushing to meet, disruptor bolts whizzing by the edge of the screen.

N'Eligahn shook his head and shot a glance at the command well before contacting Engineering.

"Blakely, pull everyone back to main engineering. We're keeping our ass raw."

"Sir...are you..."

"Do it," N'Eligahn said, his voice low.

He turned his attention back to the console, keeping his mood as passive as possible and focusing rotating the shields to keep them focused.

To him, this was stupid and moronic. The idiot birds would have been annihilated ages ago if they hadn't had this stupid shell protecting them and giving them everything they needed. There was a time to cling to your beliefs and there was a time when you had to fight for those beliefs. His thoughts were firm about this.

*When you stare into the very face of oblivion, there's two ways to do it: take the deathblow on your knees or face it and make them wish they'd never come after you.*

And right now, he believed both the Artemis and the birds were doing the former.

"Shields down by thirty-one percent!" Alther called out as the aft shields of the Artemis were taking a beating.

"Those working on the aft torpedo tubes on the outside are probably having a hard time, the energy bleeding through is missing them so far." the Kalthurian commented with a worried tone on her voice.

As the Artemis moved to the new heading, the Klingon ships completely decloaked and opened fire on the Artemis, aware that her aft section was not firing.

"Captain, the Klingon's are attempting to overtake us, they have lowered their weapon power but not by a huge amount" Kelsey called out again.

The androgyn felt almost useless in this situation, sitting at a console that allowed control over the ship's weapons but having to stay one's hand because of damage and the X'ells belief.

*Can't really fault them for that, though* mused the blue-skinned Lieutenant. *It's their choice, I'm just hoping it doesn't wind up with our deaths.*

The Artemis rocked again.

"Sir, they are attempting to slow us down by targeting our impulse engines!" Kelsey reported, putting down its left hand onto its lap. It was taking all the Kalthurian's willpower not to target the Klingons.

As the Artemis approached the sun, Kelsey Alther slowly put that hand back on the console as they approached, keeping in time with how close they got. The androgyn chief of Tactical was going to keep instincts under control as much as it could.

The starship fled face first into the enclosed star of the X'ell artificial star system when that blazing sun suddenly turned completely dark but for the burning edges of the screen.

"What the..." exclaimed helmsman Narod as the darkness for a moment engulfed even the entire bridge.

"One of the nightshades, Sir!" explained Lieutenant Irksos then. It's sliding across our path, distance: fifty-four million kilometers. "

"Mister Narod: adjust our trajectory to follow their own orbit once we reach it" then ordered Kheren.

"Heading 012 mark 1, ETA twelve minutes." responded the navigator.

Even such a small change of trajectory almost threw the charging Klingon ships off their tail, so fast and overconfident they were, going all out after a seemingly defenseless vessel. They veered off quickly however and resumed the pursuit, although they loosed time doing so, their firing aim completely thrown off for a moment.

"Lieutenant Relys: you will perform emergency jettisoning of all content of shuttlebay 3."

"Sir?"

"Now."

With wide eyes full of the interrogations other bridge officers darted to one another, the Bajoran woman complied.

"Shuttlebay 3... emptied, Sir. Closing bay doors and repressurizing. Arrow 14 and 15 and Arrowhead 2 to 4 away and drifting aft."

On the aft viewer appeared the much tiny shape of two shuttlepods and three workbees, rapidly tumbling away with different odds and bits of tools and parts between them and the pursuing Klingon ships.

A moment later, five explosions lighted the aft view.

"Now we know they really mean business." commented Lieutenant Relys dryly.

"That was your first clue?" retorted Jared Narod, swirving the ship away from another series of disruptor bolts. Then he glanced towards the center seat briefly to say:

"Sir, they will believe that we are desperate, throwing things in their way to divert their fire. Sir... sudden decompression and loss of mass accelerated us by zero point zero one percent."

Kheren didn't acknowledge the Trill's report, instead looking straight at the screen, his chin in his left hand and asking:

"Number One: assuming from their bombing operation that these three, self-labelled "second squadron," are part of a larger force hiding somewhere inside the shell, say from the Klingon side of the border... how long do you think would it take for their hiding main force to miss them?"

O'Conner turned to the captain.

"Depends, Sir. If they are just hiding I don't think it would take more than a couple a minutes; but if they are attacking the other side of the sphere, it might take them more than an hour to notice."

"Hmmm... I would have guessed much more than that." pondered Kheren outloud. "This shell is the size of your native planet's orbit, Number One; hundreds of millions of kilometers in circumference at the equator. It would take almost half a day at full impulse to go round it... four times more at a quarter impulse like they were doing to implement their bombardment."

There was a distinct tremor all around the bridge as a disruptor shot glancing on the shields kept them aware that they were now the Klingons' new target.

"Unless they are not alone, Sir." retorted Lieutenant Irksos then. "Assuming 'second squadron' means there is a 'first squadron' here too, and doing the same carpet bombing from the other side for maximum speed and efficiency, this cuts time in half; then half again if they indeed started from a portal nearest to the Klingon border, which is most logical."

A more violent shake from the impact of a more precise energy bolt on their defenses underlined their sense of urgency.

"Even less so, Captain. "now chimmed in the Trill pilot." We intercepted them when they were barely halfway through their part of the bombing... assuming another group also takes care of the other side of the shell. And if so, they would have met halfway around the entire construct."

As the viewer's image swerved a bit to let another series of discharges fizzle in the distance without touching them, the Andorian nodded to his officers.

"So... half and half again. That leaves us, what... three, four hours?"

A new impact first answered him.

"At best, Sir." now Lieutenant Relys retorted. "Klingons are not reknowned for their patience. As soon as they see their comrades are not showing as expected on short range sensors, they will start looking for the enemy responsible for their disappearance."

The next shot shaking the entire starship confirmed that they were that enemy.

"ETA with solar shades orbit: eight minutes," announced Narod from the helm; enabling another evasive maneuver to avoid the worse of the Klingon shots: those few that managed to get dangerously close.

On screen, a series of titanic black squares could now be glimpsed before the very glare of the star, fragmenting it in two with a wide broken band of darkness artound the exact middle.

And the starship Artemis was hurtling right towards them, three ravening Klingon warships hot on her trail.

Kelsey let out a small smile.

"Captain, the Klingon's engines are starting to overheat from keeping up with us. Looks like this chase won't last forever for them."

Checking again her tactical readouts, the Kalthurian continued to report:

"The solar emissions are clouding our long range scanners and short range scanners are not working so well. Neither is target lock. The Klingons are blindfiring more or less, wasting their power supplies."

Doc Sage had been quiet while the bridge was a flurry of activity. He couldn't help but think of how out of place a chief medical officer on the bridge was. True, he had been coordinating the EMH's before everything went to hell, but he felt his place was in medical.

He considered bringing this up to Captain Kheren when things quieted down. He looked over at the Artemis' commanding officer. The Andorian emanated a steeled will.

Josiah decided against mentioning it; probably would not be a winning battle. Besides, he'd been in contact with his medical staff via the command chair the whole time. All shifts were standing by, ready to take possible incoming. Josiah had even activated the triage stations throughout the ship, just in case.

Maybe the chair wouldn't be too bad. He just didn't want to get too soft because his posterior was incessantly parked in it.

"All right," N'Eligahn then declared. " While we're flying around here playing chicken with the Klingons, has everyone forgotten that they're presently slaughtering the good bird folk on the surface? Every minute, more of them are dying. We're currently accomplishing nothing by baiting them away. If anything it'll make their fellows more irate."

The captain didn't even turn his way to answer in a detached tone:

"Wrong, Mister N'Elighan: we have followed the wishes of those people, as our own orders forces us too. But still, we *are* helping them: we have ended the bombardment of their cities. And if you did your job right, your excellent idea also respects their non-violent ethics but still is now helping them stave off their aggressors. "

He then glanced to his left at the Chief medical officer still in contact with the EMH away teams. On cue, Josiah's chair gave a slight beep. Doc Sage looked down at the flashing indicator light. The readout surprised him.

"Skipper!" Josiah said with excitement in his voice, his previous trepidations now forgotten. "It would seem the X'ell are far from d'fenseless! One of our incognito EMH's just r'ported the birdmen are usin' a mult'tude of advanced stasis fields to trap individual Klingons getting' inside buildings! They're stringin' the bastards up, Sir!"

The readout continued, and Josiah only became more animated. "Thanks to our chief engineer, the forcefield is preventin' the Klingons from enterin' the refugee areas. Also, while the Klingons are tryin' to kill our disguised EMH's, the real X'ell are closin' on 'em, catchin' the invaders by s'prise!"

"Well done Mister N'Eligahn. " shot Kheren with a respectful glance to his chief engineer.

Josiah smiled to himself.

"The X'ell are 'parently pretty agile, too, 'cuz they're outright dodgin' attacks more often than not! The Klingons are gettin' frustrated tryin' to just hit 'em!"

As he read more, his voice, while excited, also projected loudly.

"It would seem 'spite the X'ell's disgust at our savag'ry, they're not too high brow to go hand to hand! The tools we were jawin' 'bout before; they're usin' them to parry and then to bond bat'leths or disrupt'rs to inanimate objects they touch: walls, poles, the ground. Hell, even to other Klingons! Once bonded or inside a stasis field, the Klingons are getting' transported out."

The Andorian's antennae jerked up:

"Transported? Where?"

The Chief Medical Officer overlooked the readout, and frowned.

"The EMH's don't know where to, though. But," he said as he looked at Captain Kheren, "while the Klingons have the 'vantage of weapons, trainin' and pure cussed'ry, the X'ell have numbers, terrain 'vantage and far superior technology. The X'ell's clothin' even seems capable of absorbin' one or two blasts from disrupt'rs without the shots getting' through. A lot of X'ell are getting' wounded and killed, but slowly and surely, the Klingons are being neutr'lized!"

Kheren looked at Lieutenant Irksos who checked her readouts before returning him his gaze:

"They are being transported back to their ships, Sir... And their own shipboard transporters are now being disabled by cascading feedback."

"Fighting... without fighting," murmured the captain of the Artemis. The respect and admiration in his voice were easily felt.

"But Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn is right Sir," commented Jared Narod, still evading salvos from the now fully staffed Birds of prey. "This will only make them even more angry."

The captain sighed, straightened as if he was about to stand, but then turned his chair halfway towards the engineering station:

"Mister N'Eligahn: now we will need the very best pilot aboard: take the helm please."

Without a pause, he spun back forward the nav and tactical console:

"Mister Narod: take the reserve station and monitor navigation sensors to assist Mister N'eligahn: make sure they stay optimal. Lieutenant Relys; you will allocate and maintain emergency power to maneuvering thrusters, communications and transporter room 1."

"Aye, Sir." both responded the junior officers, puzzlement etching their strained faces as they obeyed.

N'Eligahn stared at the captain for a moment before the realization of what he'd said sank in.

"Y-yes Sir," he said.

He tapped his combadge.

"Lieutenant M'Laress, I need you at the bridge console ASAP."

He then moved over to the flight control console and nodded to Narod before taking his now vacant station. He keyed in his command codes and the whole console lit up.

There was one thing for Narod: he kept his controls organized.

The first thing he did was reroute thrusters, both maneuvering and emergency, to his console, alongside impulse controls. Then he routed rear view with a sensor overlay to his visor's HUD.

*All right, Neli, you can do this,* he thought.

He closed his eyes for a moment and imagined the ship around him, getting a sense of space for the ship, trying to make it an extension of himself. He moved his hand over to the impulse controls and slightly increased the ship's speed.

A few disruptor shots hit the ship, but they didn't distract him.

"Lieutenant Irksos," now ordered the Andorian captain, "as soon as we come to a parallel course with the shades, scan for the nearest sunspot."

"Already charted those on the solar plane we are approaching Sir," answered the petite woman.

"At current speed, we will pass over them in eighteen minutes."

Kheren nodded in visible satisfaction and finally looked at Michael O'Conner:

"Number One: go down to deck 24 and cargo transporter room 4 to perform a site to site transport of Arrow 9 from shuttlebay 2 down to shuttlebay 3. I want you yourself to prep it for maximum shield power output. Minimal life support for one pilot, no weapons or cargo except a signal enhancer for comm and transporter. Take as many technicians as you need. Once finished, get back here fast. You have ten minutes."

"Aye, Sir." O'Conner smiled as he quickly made his way to the turbolift. He always enjoyed doing some real engineering work.

"Deck 24," he commanded to the lift after entering.

Then he tapped his combadge:

"Commander O'Conner to Lieutenant Blakely. I need two transporter techs, a comms tech and two power techs in shuttlebay 3, ASAP."

"Yes, Sir" She quickly replied before barking out orders to her officers.

"Oh, I also need a type VI probe."

After a confused pause she replied.

"Yes, Sir."

Kelsey was staring at her console as the bridge went silent after the turbolift doors shut behind the XO. The tactical officer was curious to why the captain had not asked for volunteers.

Kelsey looked at the captain with widening eyes, noticing his body language.

He was readying himself to leave his chair towards the left door; behind it was the short corridor leading to both ready room and conference room... and the secondary turbolift. The one that could bring the captain to deck 24 and the prepped shuttle in shuttlebay 3 while O'Conner would come back up the main shaft, only to find too late that the commanding officer was down there... and taking out the shuttlecraft to risk himself on the obvious suicide mission he had planned. He would sacrifice himself rather than ask for someone to do it...

*No... not happening* the androgyn thought, fully turning to face Kheren.

"Captain, I volunteer to pilot the shuttlecraft," said Alther, looking directly at the Andorian in the center seat.

Kheren was visibly taken aback by the sudden offer of the androgyn officer.

*Was I so obvious?* he wondered, antennae wiggling in confusion. This was a very well planned but very dangerous stunt... and he had no intention of asking for a volunteer...

Yet, there was Kelsey Alther, as if the Kalthurian had read his mind.

*Maybe they can.* he mused, looking at the disturbingly Andorian-like androgyn before replying:

"We are under attack, Lieutenant. This ship needs her tactical officer."

"Frankly Sir, I am not doing a damn thing besides reading out reports, something that anyone here could easily do in my stead. We are respecting the X'ell's thoughts on violence and thus there isn't much I can do at this moment."

Kelsey paused for a moment.

"Not to mention General Order 15, Sir" the tactical chief said, staring at the ship's commander without blinking. "It is a one-sided warzone out there; you going out there would be suicide and I think you know that, Sir."

*And the captain risking himself in such conditions would endanger ship and crew, a violation of General order 29... not to mention that attempted suicide is admissible as proof of command inability and immediate dismissal from duty.*

Kheren was no telepath, but he could read the thoughts behind the words of his security officer. And he could perceive something too in the eyes, the voice, the face, the posture: an urge, an eagerness, a determination, a purpose...

The Andorian sat back, slowly took a long breath and, with a heavy voice finally said:

"Go."

Kelsey nodded, got up and called Ensign Tyvya to the bridge, heading to the nearby turbolift. Before leaving, the Kalthurian turned to face the bridge.

"Let's hope that this all goes well, hey?" said Lieutenant Arther with a small laugh in the voice before entering the turbolift cabin.

"Shuttlebay 3" ordered Kelsey Alther as the doors shut.

*If it doesn't, you will just precede us by exactly fifty-one seconds.*" bitterly answered the Andorian in his own mind, watching the deceptively frail-looking Kalthurian disappear into the turbolift.

Doc Sage watched Kelsey Alther go with some trepidation, wishing he could have said some words of encouragement.

Taking a short breath in, Kheren tapped his combadge:

"Commander O'Conner, Kheren here: Lieutenant Alther is going to pilot the shuttle. As soon as ready, I want you back up to transporter room 1. You will have maybe a couple of minutes to boost transporter gain as much as possible from there too. Keep bridge channel open and a constant lock on Alther. I'm counting on you to be ready and beam back our tactical chief on a half-second's notice. Acknowledge."

The first answer he received was a sudden shake of the entire ship; one disruptor bolt had hit them squarely in the backside. Then another vibrated up to the very bridge itself. Two other pairs burned past their reinforced shielding, lighting on the screen the immense dark form of one of the stellar shades they were hurtling towards at full impulse, their enemies raging after them.

Down the lower decks of the starship, off to the side, an angry Tellarite Female engineer beat on a power relay with her hydrosponder as she cursed at it. This brought a smile to O'Conner's face as he went there to pull down a welding shield. He always liked working with Tellarites.

Before he could begin thought, he had been interrupted by the Captain's report.

"Lieutenant Alther?" O'Conner mumbled to himself before replying: "Aye, Sir. Just need a couple more minutes to finish attaching the back up shield generator."

O'Conner looked up and over the number of engineers in the room. Most had quickly finished their work and he was proud of them.

"Ensign Zhukov; head to Transporter room 1: ready it to work with the probe's comm relay."

"Da." The transport technician quickly replied before grabbing her tools and heading quickly out the door.

O'Conner turned back to his work and finished off the last weld to on the little structural support he could add with the limited allotted time he had. He then climbed down the side of the shuttle and began to inspect the other engineers' work.

"Good job. All ready, Garvo?"

"No, grumbled the Tellarite woman; these systems are not designed to handle that probe."

O'Conner smiled a bit.

"But it *will* work, yes?"

"We'll see, Sir." Said the grumpy engineer as she covered the power relay she was working on.

"How about the enhancer? That relay up and running?"

"Yes, Sir." Replied the two other humans with them as he gathered all the tools.

"Head back to engineering." O'Conner ordered as he moved to the transport controls. Then once the engineers moved off, he transported the modified vehicle to shuttlebay 3. Using the comm emitter of the cargo transporter console, he opened a channel:

"Commander O'Conner to Lieutenant Alther. Arrow 9 is ready for you; good luck."

O'Conner's voice then came over the communicator and Kelsey perked up in spite of the situation.

*That's one reason to survive I guess... get to make O'Conner's life more of a misery* the tactical chief of the Artemis thought with a smile, heading to shuttlebay 3 and Arrow 9.

Without waiting for any answer from the Lieutenant, the First Officer punched a new ship channel:

"Commander O'Conner to the Bridge: heading to transport room 1," he said as he left the room and headed to the turbolift for the ride up to deck 16.

"With one and a half minute to spare. Well done, Commander." answered Kheren.

He then opened another channel on his personal communicator:

"Lieutenant Alther: on my mark, you will have exactly five seconds to clear out of shuttlebay 3 and head at emergency impulse directly towards the coordinates I will be sending you. I expect you will be chased too, but keep all remaining power on shields and do not; I repeat, do *not* deviate off your heading, reduce speed or implement evasive maneuvers. Timing will be critical here. Acknowledge."

Kelsey looked up at the top of the turbolift.

*Oh joy, looks like I get to be blown to pieces instead of the captain. Well, at least he isn't doing it I guess,* the androgyn thought before tapping the communicator to answer him.

"Acknowledged: keep all power to the shields, do not change heading or speed. Anything else I may need to know about Sir?" inquired Alther as the turbolift doors opened on deck 24.

"You will have to navigate with instruments only, Lieutenant." answered Kheren over the comm. "Keep your reentry stores down. You launch in minus four minutes sixteen seconds."

The Artemis trembled again from a few grazing shots before he turned his silvery gaze towards the navigational and tactical console just as the towering silhouette of Ensign Tyvya slid into Kelsey Alther's seat. But he was not looking at her:

"Mister N'Elighan: adjust speed and heading to let the Klingons close in at one hundred thousand kilometers aft of us *exactly*." the Andorian ordered then. "And keep them there. Then, bring us as close as you can to the nearest shade along their own orbit, darkside."

The Rethian didn't acknowledge the order but complied with it. His eyes fixed on the viewscreen ahead.

As for the Andorian captain, his four eyes were now glued to the navigation chronometer.

He kept his eyes and antennae forward as he then ordered:

"Lieutenant Irksos: transmit data and coordinates of your last scan to the shuttle nav computer. Include a locked autonavigation program in case of pilot incapacitation."

She hesitated a moment before acknowledging with a nod and a gulp.

"Transmission complete... Sir."

Without even turning towards the CMO Command chair, the Andorian now told Doctor Sage:

"Doc, I would like a medical team ready in transporter room 1. Just in case we get back a badly burned, asphyxiated, irradiated and dehydrated Kalthurian."

Snapping back to the here and now, Josiah nodded. What more could he do? He was a physician, not a bridge officer, dammit! He felt like a first year intern all over again: out of place and five levels of awkward. He *belonged* in medical!

*So, what then? Hide in yer sickbay?* a little voice whispered in the back of his head. *What then, Joe? What will yew bein' a physician in sickbay do fer anyone?*

The voice sounded peskily like his younger sister, Abby.

*'Yew, hush up now, lil' sister.'* Josiah thought back. *'Yer jus' a figment of my 'magination. Yew don' git a say.'*

*'Now, Josiah Nathaniel Sage, yew know a sight better'n that!'* came the whip-crack reply. *'Yew know perf'ctly well I ain't yer 'magination! I'm yer gumption, which'n yew seem to have lost a'soon as that 'ntennaed feller put yew in charge! Now why don' yew drop a pair, an' tell the folks down in yer sickbay to get ready fer that purty Kelsey Alther in case anything happens to her? Don' think I didn't notice yew givin' her the twice over when yew were up here earlier!'*

Josiah suppressed a smile. Abby would notice him noticing a woman, even if woman would be a loose term for a Kalthurian. Still, Lieutenant Alther did have the most striking eyes. And *just why* did Josiah's subconscious sound like his younger sister anyway?

*"Cuz I'm the only voice of reason in yer otherwise tawdry life, Doctor Sage,"* came the sly reply like only Abigail could give.

This time, Josiah did smile. His sister always knew just when to give him the words he needed to get himself centered and back in the saddle.

He punched a few buttons on his command chair to tell folks down in *his* sickbay to standby in case Kelsey ended up on the wrong side of a disruptor.

At that very moment, the entire bridge was plunged into darkness. On the main viewer, the titanic shadow of a starshade blocked all view from the captive sun, leaving only console lights to see by, before interior lighting adjusted... and some streaking bolts of disruptor fire outlined their shields or splashed feebly against the carbon-neutronium mass they were now flying by.

Doc Sage looked up at the viewscreen, and mumbled to himself, "Now, ain't that a sight."

"You'll get a much closer look in a moment, Doc." commented the Andorian without moving his eyes from the nav chrono.

"Rear shields down at fifty-three percent." reported Tyvya, her own antennae lowered to her tactical readout. Minimal damage to shuttlebay door 2... still welded shut like shuttlebay 1... and aft torpedo tube. Aft weapons still offline."

"Sending new deflector pulse to strengthen shields," then announced Lieutenant Relys, her voice tense and her eyes riveted to the forward screen.

"Sir, with the shade fully blocking all emissions from the star, the Klingons will have full targeting lock operational..."

As if to fulfill Valencia Irksos' prediction, the Artemis buckled from a succession of direct impacts.

"We're loosing armor plating over decks 18 to 15, shields down to forty-seven percent," said the Andorian giantess at tactical, just before the ship started trembling again from another disruptor volley.

*All right, N'Eligahn thought, clenching his teeth in concentration. He focused his vision squarely on the looming solar shield. Let's give these ridge-headed bastards something else to shoot at.*

"M'Laress," he called over his shoulder barely turning his spined head, keeping his voice steady, "augment whatever we have to ventral shields."

Then he adjusted the thruster and rolled the ship around, bringing the relatively undamaged ventral shields to face the encroaching Klingons as he brought the ship itself up to the panel.

*Keep it together, he thought. No problem.*

He brought the now inverted ship as close to the surface of the panel as possible. The dorsal hull of the saucer was about 300 meters above it.

*I've got this...easy day...*

He watched the vector the Klingons attacked from and used the thrusters to shift the Artemis ever so slightly in an attempt to dodge the incoming attacks.

"Let me know...when we need...to move," he said through clenched teeth.

"Steady as she goes, Mister N'Eligahn." answered the captain, seated at the tip of his chair, elbows on knees, unmoving, unblinking. " And don't mind the paint. "

He was still only eyeing the shipboard chronometer, silently counting down four minutes, seemingly oblivious to the beating they were taking.

Kelsey arrived, hopped into the shuttle, began pre-flight procedures and laughed noticing the auto navigation program. The androgyn almost wished having a bottle of drink on hand to toast to the air what was looking to be one last voyage.

Lieutenant Alther simply raised an imaginary bottle instead.

"Heres to Kelsey Alther, probably the craziest Kalthurian there ever was."

There was only left to wait for Kheren to give the departure order.

The peculiar angle of the Artemis put the titanic dark surface of the stellar shade on top of the viewer and the distant inner surface of the Dyson shell below, giving the image a crushing, claustrophobic feel as the starship flew in between them, framed by the flashes of disruptor discharges on the edge of its energy shields.

Each time the vessel shook under the impacts, it felt as if both dark heaven and curved earth before their very eyes converged to crush them. But the piloting prowess of Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn kept the top of the Artemis so close to the titanic surface that the Klingon ships had to line side by side, forcing two of them to awkwardly angle their fire at this distance... and concentrating all their shots on the same reinforced shield grid, rapidly rejuvenated by the less sollicitated ones on top and front of the fleeing vessel.

But that race couldn't go on forever.

On the screen, the could see the edge of the vast dark surface approaching fast. And suddenly, the black heavens parted and the view was again flooded by the intense brightness of the star.

The Artemis was clearing the immense shade it was skimming at full impulse, again fully exposed to the pursuing Birds of prey.

Kheren spoke outloud through the open inner ship channel:

"Lieutenant Relys, viewer aft. Lieutenant Alther... get ready... on my mark..."

On the main viewer, the image shifted back to the looming mass of the neutronium square they were barely clearing, the distant flashes of the firing Klingon ships, lancing beams of destructive energy hurtling towards them...

"Mark!"

Then right in the middle of it, the sleek, compact form of a class VI shuttle swiftly emerged from under the aft end of the starship, spun to the side and suddenly plunged into the outpouring light of the unveiled star.

"Arrow 9 away, Sir." confirmed the Bajoran Ops officer.

And then, they all saw the lead Klingon ship, the Hegh 'Lw, break formation and veer away into the light after the fleeing shuttlecraft.

N'Eligahn felt the slight tremors cease as the ship cleared the solar panel and bright sunlight filled the bridge through the dome. He took the momentary reprieve to glance at the screen to see the shuttle take off towards that same sun.

*You'd better not die, Kelsey, he thought. I'd hate to have to explain it to Iddy...*

He glanced down at the readings and saw the increasing radiation and heat from the sun pouring down on the weakened dorsal shields. He checked the distance between the two stellar shades and estimated the time.

*Okay, balance shield exposure between two angry Klingon ships and an even angrier sun, easy enough, N'Eligahn thought as his full attention returned to the controls. Let's try this.*

He fully opened the port dorsal thrusters, both emergency and maneuvering while doing the same for the starboard ventral thrusters. The ship began to turn on it's axis, bringing the ventral hull and shields against the sun, giving the weakened ventral shields a slight reprieve from the punishment.

*C'mon you rock-headed dolts, let's see you dance too, he thought. As they came to another firing position against the weakened dorsal shields, he did the same thing as before, letting the ship make a full spin until its port side was facing the sun.*

He slid his fingers across the console and fully activated the ventral aft thrusters, fishtailing the ship and bringing the stronger ventral shield to bear the brunt of the Klingons' renewed volley.

Just before the ship would have started to turn, he increased the impulse and pushed down on the throttle, straightening the ship back out as he twisted it back upright.

He felt the ship groan slightly in protest.

"Don't you complain at me," N'Eligahn said outloud. "Do this and I'll run level one diagnostics on every system, promise you that."

The edge of the next solar shade loomed directly ahead as he put the ship into one more spin, to bring it's ventral hull to once more face the Klingons.

Whatever Kelsey and the Captain had planned, they needed to do it soon, they couldn't stay this lucky forever.

Alther noticed the bird of prey chasing after the already shaking shuttle.

"Just what I need" muttered the androgyn, avoiding the temptation to evade.

Kelsey made the engines hit emergency impulse and the little shuttlecraft jumped to three quarters the speed of light. The computer stated:

"Contact with the corona: four minutes sixteen seconds."

The Kalthurian sighed as the Klingon ship was managing to pound on the small type 6 shuttle even without a target lock and being blinded by the suns radiation.

"Least they can be good shots I guess" muttered Alther once more, hoping that the shuttle would hold out long enough.

"Warning: hull temperature approaching safety limits." droned the emotionless voice of the shipboard computer.

The type 6 shuttlecraft began to heat up inside and cause Kelsey to break out into a sweat. The intense heat from the sun was hitting the fore shields and causing the inside of the craft to heat up; and the disruptor fire from the bird of prey on the reinforced aft shield was not doing much to alleviate the issue.

"Warning: speed exceeding regulation safety limits: time dilatation effects in progress."

As Arrow 9 hurtled ever closer to the star, the chief tactical officer of the Artemis started to lose track of time after the first minute; it almost seemed like the Klingon ship was going faster and faster while the Artemis and its chaser pair zoomed further and further away. Kelsey swore outloud, unsure entirely what was happening. So the Kalthurian looked at ship time to keep some semblance of real elapsing time, if only to understand minutes.

"Warning: external temperature at recommended safety limits."

During the second minute, the shuttle's alarms blared anew:

"Warning; warp core breach in progress. Engine failure in two minutes."

The sheer speed and heat in the cockpit was causing a warp core breach. Lieutenant Alther swore once again; the androgyn had been hoping that it wouldn't have been an issue till much later. The shuttle was barely at the halfway mark and she still had 2 long minutes to go.

As the shuttle got closer and closer to the star, Kelsey started to hallucinate with images of respected and beloved people popping up behind.

"Well, just what I need" said the sweating, blinking, panting Kalthurian.

N'Eligahn, Iddy where there and, to the androgyn's surprise, so was Kheren... and...

*Mather?*

Kelsey tore both eyes away from the vision. The androgyn's progenitor had died a long time ago and Kelsey avoided thinking about it as much as possible, having been there on Mather's death bed. Kalthurians may be reproducing by parthogenesis, literally birthing by dividing themselves, the emotional bond with their one birthing parent was no less strong than from any of the more common bisexual species.

Especially for Kelsey Alther, after centuries away from the homeworld.

So far, far away... so long ago...

"Warning: external temperatures exceeding safety limits. Warning, warp core breach in progress. Engine failure in one minute."

As the third minute arrived, Kelsey knew it would be soon impossible to stay on the ship much longer and got up, dashing to the transporter pad to activate the transport enhancer.

"Let's hope I can get out of here" the androgyn prayed outloud while looking at the hallucinations as they started to act out of character.

"Great, that can't be good" muttered Alther as Iddy the Andorian bartender started to tap dance. Sweat dripped off her entire body.

Kelsey was almost at the point of begging to be beamed off; dying after watching a grumpy Andorian tap dance was not how anyone wanted to go.

"One minute before Arrow 9 reaches the corona." reported Ensign Tyvva from the tactical station of the Artemis bridge. Her own blue skin and white hair reminded everyone on the bridge who was now risking life and limb to save them all in that minuscule spacecraft, hurtling towards the enclosed star and away from them.

"External temperature way beyond safety limits... a warp core breach is in progress... and The Hegh 'Lw is overloading the shuttle's shields with continuous disruptor fire."

A sudden jolt reminded them all that they too had angry pursuers intent on destroying them as they flew around the star.

Kheren didn't acknowledge the report. His four oculars were transfixed the chronometer as he still sat on the edge of his seat, bent forward over his elbows digging into his knees. Each disruptor impact on the Artemis threatened to topple him out of his chair, but it was as if he didn't care.

"Our shields are down to thirty-one percent." now announced the Andorian giantess her fingers hovering over firing buttons, almost trembling with restraint. " Minor damage to deck 18 and 17 outer hull. No casualties... yet"

"Damage contrrrrol teams allrready on it, Sir." added the Caitan M'Laress from the auxilliary station.

The Artemis flew between the colossal neutronium panels, rolling to make Klingon fire spread over different shields, deflecting them like the USS Lotus had done a months ago against the monstrous firepower of a Borg Cube; an unorthodox maneuver Kheren himself had devised then, while he had been Acting First officer of the flagship; one that Lieutenant-Commander N'Elighan, a decorated tactician, had witnessed first hand from the USS Spectre.

He had obvioulsy learned and now brilliantly adapted the idea with his talent and training at piloting. The Rethian was saving precious seconds of life for the starship.

And there was now very few seconds left:

"Captain! The Hegh 'Lw is firing torpedoes at the shuttle! Thirty seconds before contact with the corona!" shouted Tyvya, her antennae rigid.

"Michael! Get Kelsey out of there! *Now!*" belowed Kheren in turn through the intraship channel, suddenly up on his feet, fists half-raised before him as if he could himself grab and drag the Kalthurian to safety.

"We lost communication signal, Sir!" now announced Relys, turning towards the captain with a face etched with fear. " Interference from the star! " Transporter signal is... "

"Aye, Sir."

O'Conner turn to the console before him as the signal began to brake up.

"Oh no you don't." O'Conner's hands sped across the transporter console, as he tried to pull all of the blue Lieutenant back to the Artemis.

"Sir, she is breaking up... but..."

"Zhukov! Reinforce her pattern!"

"*Da*" The quiet ensign replied now as she worked the other side of the console.

Just as the young Ensign replied, two torpedoes slammed into Arrow 9.

The first blew off one of the engines and sent it tumbling in to the sun.

The second one ripped out a large chunk of the shuttle, clearly killing anyone that might be left in the small craft as it continued it's dive into the sun.

Then, after what seemed to be hours to O'Conner, a shimmer of light appeared on the transporter pad and then, the grumpy sweaty blue officer.

As transports go, it had been a long one... but to anyone else, it was no more then fifteen seconds.

"We got her, Sir." O'Conner claimed with pride, before turning to Ensign Zhukov. "Well done Ensign."

He then turned to Kelsey Alther with a *you-owe-me* smile.

"Welcome back, Kelsey."

Kelsey slumped against the nearby transporter room wall and wiped the sweat off its brow before looking up and seeing O'Connor's face.

*Bloody hell* the androgyn thought.

Kelsey Alther knew that something had happened... and now owed him one. At least, the kalthurian was safe and sound back on the Artemis, for now at any rate.

Kelsey simply stayed on the wall behind, enjoying the refreshingly cool air of the starship.

Up on the bridge, Josiah tapped his combadge.

"Commander O'Conner, Doc Sage here. I've personnel standin' by to receive Lieutenant Alther in main medical. I don' know what kinda condition she's in, but I'd really like my staff to give her an all clear 'fore puttin' her back in the saddle. If yew need me for any reason, please give me a holler an' I'll come a'runnin'."

The chief medical officer then looked back down at his EMH-fed readouts. Looking at the pinwheeling stars was unsettling to his stomach.

But it was to be the least of his worries.

Hearing that Alther was back on board, Kheren himself started breathing again. But it was a short sigh of relief.

The matter-antimatter reaction of the shuttle's warp core had ended in a deflagration near a small grouping of sunspots; closed intense magnetic field lines, penetrating the photosphere to link the corona to the solar interior and with a strength normally large enough to contain the plasma, then suddenly broke apart.

The brutal release of magnetic energy stored in the corona caused a massive ejection like a large explosion in the star's atmosphere. It released about a sixth of that sun's total energy output each second, affecting photosphere, chromosphere, and corona, heating plasma to tens of millions of kelvins and accelerating electrons, protons, and heavier ions to a third of the speed of light. Radiation across the electromagnetic spectrum at all wavelengths, from radio waves to gamma rays came with it, as the disruption of the magnetic topology converted that magnetic energy into kinetic energy, thermal energy, and particle acceleration.

The planned destruction of Arrow 9 had unleashed a catastrophe of stellar proportion.

A solar flare.

The monstrous geyser of fire erupted deceptively slowly then swelled outward, immediately engulfing what was left of the doomed shuttlecraft and, a second later, the pursuing Hegh 'Lw.

"*Q'apla.*" mockingly growled Kheren, sitting back in his command chair.

And now it was rushing at frightening speed towards the other two Klingon ships... and barely a couple of hundred thousand of kilometers ahead, the starship Artemis.

Then, the maddeningly calm voice of the computer droned:

"Warning: magnitude 7 stellar mass incoming. Contact in forty-nine seconds. Warning: magnitude 5 shockwave incoming. Contact in twenty-one seconds."

Before the immense, fiery tongue of flame and much faster came the Moreton wave, the chromospheric signature of a large-scale solar coronal shock wave... a kind of solar *tsunami* generated by solar flares.

"PIDs, *everyone!*" ordered the Andorian, shipwide.

He went himself in two long strides to the chair of N'Eligahn with his own Personal Inertial Dampener and slapped it active on the much too busy helmsman. Then, he pulled out the one in the Rethian's chairside compartment and literally threw himself back into his own wide command seat, activating it on his own belly.

All the while, he looked around to make sure that, *this* time, *nobody* would fly face first into a bulkhead.

The ship started trembling like a leaf in the wind as the dark wall of the next solar panel loomed before them in a dizzying spin.

Just when Kheren yelled out to turn on their PIDs, Lieutenant Alther reached down but was too slow to activate the personal safety harness, having been put under so much stress in such a small amount of time. The blue-skinned, female-looking androgyn was brutally thrown against the wall behind and slumped to the ground.

Lucky for remaining officers in the transporter room, they were able to activate the PIDs in time. O'Conner watched Kelsey fly about and cringed at the painful landing of the Kalthurian.

"Oh god" Kelsey mumbled, sprawled on the floor, pain wracking every body part. "Somebody please tell me we have a doctor somewhere... I think I just broke all my ribs"

*Talk about a bad day* she thought to herself in between bouts of pain.

N'Eligahn looked at the rear viewer to see the disruption the exploding shuttle had caused and the wall of fiery doom that was now approaching them and the Klingons.

*All right, girl, let's move it,* he thought as he put the ship into one last half spin, pointing her still stronger ventral shields towards the sun as he punched the impulse engines to the max.

N'Eligahn wanted to thank the Captain, but focused on keeping the ship steadily flying towards the solar shade. He dumped any energy setting he could get his hands on into the ship's impulse engines.

*Come on, come on,* he thought.

He saw the flash of light and fire erupt behind them and between them and the Klingons. He accelerated the ship as fast as he could get her, feeling the ship shake in protest as it threatened to fly apart.

The ship passed over the solar shade just as the flare rose to its zenith and the shade did its job, blocking the encroaching fire from incinerating the little ship. He angled the bow of the ship slightly downwards as the shockwave from the flare approached.

On the viewer, the colossal black square became a trapdoor sliding right behind them over the rising fires of hell itself. The shockwave had sent one Bird of prey almost into the other before they were both incinerated like paper, while the Artemis, surfing on the shockwave itself, hid at the very last moment behind the protective mass of ten million kilometers of neutronium alloy that only a crushing black hole could damage.

"Ha ha!" N'Eligahn yelled as the shockwave of energy hit them and they rode it like a wave, further accelerating the ship.

The angle of the ship kept the wave from impacting and further damaging them, but lifted them up slightly while keeping the ship on a relatively even keel. He glanced back but couldn't see the Klingons behind them in the still burning flare.

Josiah, caught up in the adrenal rush himself, let slip his own cry of surprise while punching a fist into the air.

"Yeeeeee-HAAA! Better'n ridin' a mustang stung on the nose by a yellor jacket!"

"Yeah! Eat my fiery exhaust you ridge-headed pieces of s... " the Rethian at helm yelled, but stopped himself suddenly as the wave pushing them started to subside.

"Uhm...I mean...uhm...Sir, resuming course and heading, Sir," he said.

Doc Sage turned a slight shade of red.

"Yes, Sir. Followin' what the Commander said. Ahem."

He inhaled deeply, looked at the back of Nel's head with a slight smile and then turned back to his EMH readouts.

The words of the Rethian and of the doctor were half-drowned by the spontaneous cheer that erupted on the bridge, and then all over the ship.

"All stop, Mister N'Eligahn." said the captain with a bland face, once the flight smoothed out.

Deactivating his personal safety harness, he stood up and went right besides the Chief Engineer seated at the helm.

"Well done, Lieutenant Commander. Surfing the Moreton wave like that just ensured our survival as much as our success. Remind me to recommend you for a well deserved promotion."

N'Eligahn wasn't sure he'd heard the last words right, so he put them aside. He ensured the ship's parking brake was on before he stood and motioned for Narod to take the seat back. The Ensign gave him an appreciative nod before sitting back down.

Putting a friendly hand on the Rethian's shoulder and leaving him with a saluting nod, the Andorian looked around to add:

"Well done everyone. But our job is far from over. Now that our personal solar flare solved our conflict for us and hid every trace of what we did, we will hide here until ready to do our next step. Ensign Tyvya, how much time left before possible Klingon interference again?"

"Assuming there are more inside this place... and if they divided in half their large scale bombardment operation as we might expect, Sir: three hours at best. " replied the Andorian giantess at tactical.

"Chances of being spotted here, Lieutenant Irksos? "

"Unless they launch a probe directly towards the star in our vicinity... negligible, Sir."

"And the X'ell?"

"It will take a moment even for their advanced technology to compensate for the solar flare. However, we will be totally invisible to all if we hide on the other side of the solar shade. At this distance, our shields and hull can effortlessly withstand the star's emissions."

"Which at the moment do not affect our systems at all, shadowed by that same panel," then observed Ops Chief Allana Relys.

Kheren thought for a moment and then ordered to the helm station:

"Bring us behind the next shade to a synchronous orbit with it. Mister N'Eligahn, get back to engineering and proceed with as much repairs as you can during the next two hours."

The Rethian nudged Narod slightly.

"You heard the boss,"

As he turned towards the back of the bridge, he caught Relys' eyes for a moment and could have sworn he saw a smile before she returned her focus to her console.

He shook his head and walked over to M'Laress.

"Coordinate all current essential repairs up here," he said. "Have Lieutenant Blakely and every engineer not currently doing essential repairs to meet me in main engineering in five minutes."

He turned to the turbolift and entered it, heading for main engineering.

"All right people," N'Eligahn said once he stood in front of the warp core in main engineering.

He addressed nearly the full complement of the engineering staff: almost one hundred people were gathered here now, the rest on the lower decks shoring up the damage there. "We've got less than two hours to bring this girl up to speed," he announced then. "Ensign Yoshenko, take team Alpha and do an entire sweep of the ship for stress fractures and damage that Team Epsilon isn't currently addressing. Coordinate with Lieutenant M'Laress on the bridge."

He got a nod from the young Ensign.

"Lieutenant Ferrier, take Team Beta and get the aft weapons systems going and optimized, focus on the phasers. When those are done, assist Epsilon with the hull repairs," He turned to Blakely.

"Lieutenant Blakely and Gamma Team will focus on getting the aft torpedo bay working. After that, start running diagnoses on any ship systems that might have been damaged by the solar flare."

He looked at everyone gathered.

"I know it's been rough, people," he said, checking the chronometer. "I want everyone taking 20 minute shifts on and off. The last thing I need are burnt out engineers for whatever the Captain has planned next. I want everyone back on station and ready to go in one hour, fifty minutes."

He nodded to everyone.

"Take care and good luck."

All the engineers started to disperse as N'Eligahn walked over to the primary console in engineering, lowering the VISOR back over his left eye.

"And what are you going to do?" Blakely asked then.

"I promised an old lady I'd run some level 1 diagnostics," N'Eligahn answered with a smirk.

Once the Artemis found refuge behind the following massive star screen, the still standing captain stepped towards the turbolift, saying:

"I'll be in the conference room in half an hour. But now, I will go greet our hero of the day. Lieutenant Relys, you have the conn. You coming, Doc? "

Once in the turbolift, the Andorian turned to him to ask:

"Mind explaining to me that... riding a mustang... stung... thing? "

Before the surgeon could answer, a call came over the ship's comm:

"Oi, doc I got ya a little lady that be needing some fixing."

They were already exiting the lift on deck 10 and jogging towards the main transporter room.

The First Officer had spoken with a little smirk to himself, making Kelsey look up and glare at O'Conner.

*One of these days...* the androgyn thought before cringing and relaxing some neck muscles, *I need a vacation.*

The medical team assigned there by Doctor Sage were taking care of the girl-looking Lieutenant when both the captain and the Chief medical officer got to transporter room 1, barely a minute after the call from Commander O' Conner.

When Josiah entered, he saw a few members of Beta shift hovering around Kelsey where the androgyn laid on the deck plate. He didn't recognize most of them.

*I need to rectify that as soon as things settle down'* he thought. *Now, where's the primary r'sponder?*

He didn't take long to locate her. Doctor Sheerya Osaro-Lyth, the Deltan's ship surgeon, was talking to Kelsey Alther, making notations on a PADD as others in the emergency response team were scanning the Kalthurian with medical tricorders.

He made his way over with Captain Kheren. When Artemis' skipper knelt next to the injured Lieutenant, Doc Sage looked at the blue face, and felt a pang of...what? Sympathy? Empathy? It was something, and whatever it was went beyond professional medicine.

Josiah frowned, and did his best to push down whatever these uninvited feelings were. He turned to Ensign Osaro, who was already looking at him expectantly.

"Good lord, Doc, don't make me laugh right now, I prefer to keep my ribs where they are and not bouncing around in me," said Alther, this time with a full smile.

Josiah couldn't help but smile in response to Kelsey's. The previously pushed down rush fought back against his initial repression.

Taking care not to hinder the medics nor the doctor, Kheren bent his knees to get to the Kalthurian's level and share a knowing stare between them.

"You did great out there Lieutenant. Thanks to you, we now just might have a chance to save the X'ell and the Federation... even if they don't know it yet. "

Kelsey nodded at Kheren, then winked:

"Told you I would change," said the Kalthurian officer with a half smile before looking at the doctor and laughing.

Nodding to Kelsey Alther with respect, the captain of the Artemis then lifted his head to meet the eyes of Michael O'Conner:

"So did you, Commander. You thought well to install that probe aboard to help our own systems pinpoint the shuttle through all that solar interference. Now, we'll need more of that experience and ingenuity for our next action. Meet me in the conference room in half an hour."

"Aye. Sir" O'Conner replied to the captain and then quickly added. "I will take watch on Olympus less you have other orders, Sir."

"Just mind the store, Number One, and keep us inconspicuous where we are for the time being."

For a moment, the antennae on each side of the top of his head waved in obvious uncertainty, then suddenly perked up. And just as the First officer was about to exit he added:

"Come to think of it, Commander; don't we still have one of those probes for covert cultural surveillance of pre-warp cultures aboard? See with Lieutenant Irksos if those could be used to search discreetly for further Klingon presence. Maybe using the starblinds and this star's interference to hide its path might do the trick... Do your best, but don't tip our hand yet."

"Aye, Sir." O'Conner replied as he headed out of the transporter room and up to the bridge. As he walked he couldn't help but smile in pride.

Still crouching besides the injured tactical officer, he finally turned towards Doctor Sage:

"What is the Lieutenant's condition, Doc?"

"I'm just 'bout to find out, Sir, iffing' yew'd like to listen 'long with me."

Josiah turned back to the Deltan woman.

"Alright, what's El-Tee presentin' with?"

Ensign Sheelya nodded, and addressed the chief medical officer as well as the Andorian captain:

"Lieutenant Alther has suffered blunt force trauma to the chest. The thoracic injury is due to an impact with the bulkhead when the Artemis was hit by the solar flare's shockwave. Lieutenant Alther's injuries are as follows: clean breaks of the fifth, sixth, and seventh ribs on the left side, under the arm. Fortunately, the costal cartilage is holding the ribs closer in place to the heart. Also, the left arm is dislocated from its glenoid cavity. A complication to that is the tendons attaching the left scapula have been torn. There is also a clean break on the left clavicle."

Feeling it was a little pretentious considering how recent his promotion, but already on a roll, Josiah did exactly what his resident did to him when he was a first year intern. He crossed his arms, looked official and said;

"Very well. Treatment?"

Shherya nodded.

"Osteoregenerator will take care of most of the damage. The tendons will have to be operated on for full recovery."

Josiah nodded, and turned to Captain Kheren.

"There yew have it, skipper."

Doc Sage then looked into Kelsey's eyes. He pushed down the little rush he felt when he saw the sapphire blues.

"It looks like we're gonna have to git you on the table, El-Tee, iffing yew ever wanna play tennis a'gin."

He gave Kelsey a genuine smile, hoping he didn't sound as awkward as he thought he did.

The Andorian then stood up and looked at the ship's Chief Medical Officer:

"Doc, I will need my tactical officer in a couple of hours. And I believe it will be a bit rougher than a tennis play... whatever that is."

"How long will the surgery take?" Kelsey enquired to Josiah.

"While del'cate, it won' take much longer than twenn'y standard minutes," Doc Sage said. "The long part is the recov'ry. Smiles aside, yew really should 'void doin' anything strenuous. Tendons c'n git kinda funny when they heal."

The Andorian chimmed in then:

"If we can work with what I have in mind, it will certainly be much less strenuous than whatever is that tennis play you referred to. Although by no mean safe and easy. But we still have a job to do out here... and out there."

Thinking of the Klingons had brought back to his mind the image of the Bird of preys engulfed in the immense fire of the solar flare. Ant that vision of stellar flames brought back to his memory another, larger, more destructive fiery rage of the heavens...

Tha Azimuth Horizon.

The anomaly was still out there; it could strike full force at this titanic construct and burn it to ashes at any moment...

*One opponent at a time... one attack at a time...* he admonished himself silently, with the very words he had imparted to his duelling students, a lifetime ago.

While he had those thoughts, Doctor Sage motioned at the ERT to standby for transport & looked back into Kelsey's sapphires.

"We're gonna have to beam yew to the O.R. They should already be expectin' yew. I'll be beamin' with yew to oversee the pr'cedure m'self."

He looked at Captain Kheren.

"As long as yew've no objections to losin' me on the bridge, skipper."

The ship commander shook his head:

The EMH are capable of doing their job independently... including now protecting the X'ell from any further Klingon menace. And besides, their new look should make their job even easier now with our feathered recluses."

He turned to walk out but before leaving said:

"For the moment, I need more my tactical chief up there than you. And if you can bring Lieutenant Alther back in time for my tactical meeting with Commander O'Conner, in half an hour, you will more than deserve some rest. Carry on, Doc."

Josiah nodded. "The Lieutenant'll be as good as gold or better, skipper!"

Kelsey nodded at the doctor.

"Sounds good, but not doing strenuous activity is going to be hard..." the androgyn joked before looking at Kheren:

"Don't push him please; rather would keep my insides how they are, thanks."

Maybe it was the pain but Alther was getting less and less formal.

*Really need to curb that for a bit* the Kalthurian thought just before being transported to sickbay.

The chief medical officer turned back to the ERT.

"Ev'rybody ready?"

Everyone nodded.

Doc Sage looked down at Kelsey one more time, feeling the rush all over again.

"Hol' on, El-Tee. I'll git you fixed up right proper in no time. Computer, six to beam to O.R. Two."

"Let the operation begin!" Kelsey said before closing both eyes and getting ready to rest.

They de-materialized in one place, re-materialized in another, and Doc Sage went to work fixing Kelsey's scapula.

The whole time, he kept telling himself not to risk another Leeann'Eeta.

But, if Josiah could use a word to describe the surgery it would have been 'textbook.' All the right people, with all the right tools, in all the right places saw to Kelsey Alther's scapula being put back together. The entire procedure had taken five minutes less than Doc Sage had quoted Captain Kheren.

The osteoregenerator also performed as expected, thanks to the masterful hands of Doctor T'Lynn. The tactical chief was very lucky the rib cartilage held together, so only the bones needed to be repaired.

Doc Sage took off his surgical gloves, and tossed them into the bio-waste receptacle.

"G'job, ev'rybody," he said to the surgical team. "Please lemme know when her anesthesia wears off."

As Josiah walked out of O.R. two, he cast a sideways glance at the comatose form of Doc Sangliar. The vital monitoring panel over the Tellarite's bed told Josiah there hadn't been any improvement yet.

He sighed. If only they all went as well as Kelsey's. He frowned at the thought of the Kalthurian. What the hell was he feeling when he looked into Kelsey's eyes? Of all the times and places to develop an uninvited attraction! And to another member of the crew!

A crew he's charged with keeping well, not cultivate romantic feelings for!

*You're bein' a fool!* Josiah told himself.

*The only fool is the one that don' follow his heart, big brother,* came Abby's voice again.

Josiah shook the thoughts away, and walked up to Doc Sangliar's office. He looked inside and corrected himself: it was *his* office now.

He made his way in, and gingerly sat down in the chief medical officer's chair. Now, *this* felt like a chair for a CMO, not that stiff back, beeping, blinking torture device he had to sit in on the bridge.

He sighed again, and leaned forward. He set both elbows on the desk, and put his head into his hands.

"One helluva day," he said aloud to no one at all.

Captain Kheren himself had been to sickbay awhile ago, visiting the other crew members that suffered diverse minor injuries since their mission had begun, offering words of praise and support before heading up to deck 1 and the meeting awaiting him.

The ritual had been quite new and strange to him, but he had consciously imposed it on himself the moment he had become First Officer, then suddenly Commander of this ship. Within Lotus Fleet, the modernized Artemis was still an old, underpowered vessel compared to a modern battleship like the Prometheus class Alsea or an Akira class new cruiser like the USS Spectre. Even the less recent Defiant class destroyer USS McKenzie and Intrepid class short range explorer USS Lotus were still newer designs than this short-lived precursor to the Galaxy class, all the more so with the experimental technologies they sported.

But if there was one thing the Artemis was second to none, it was her crew. Kelsey Alther, Michael O'Conner, Josiah Sage and N'Eligahn Etarudbo just proved it today.

And Captain Kheren fully intended to honor this to the upmost.

All the while, his executive officer too, promoted in the wake of his own commander's meteoric rise to command, made sure he lived up to his new responsibilities. After entering the bridge, Michael O'Conner walked over to Ikrsos.

"Lieutenant, the captain wants us to use a type VII probe, to get battle damage and to try to locate the remaining Klingons."

Ikrsos nodded. "But, Sir; won't the X'ell detect it?"

"Maybe, but..." He turned to her console and brought up a diagram of the star and its shades. "If we have it orbit the sun at the same trajectory followed by the shades, the star emissions should help cover it."

"That could work, Sir, but the star's interference will block any communication back to us."

"True..." O'Conner pondered a moment. "If we have it warp around the star, it still should be able to get readings and get back in time for us to collect it before the meeting."

Iksos nodded. "That should work. Sir. We will just need to watch its angle and trajectory to check for any slingshot effects... even at the probe's speed of warp 1.5."

"Very good." O'Conner said with a smile as he walked to the captain's chair. "Ensign Tyvya, ready a type VII probe and fire on my mark."

"Probe ready, Commander." reported the Andorian giantess after a moment.

O'Conner sat down and got comfortable before saying:

"Mark."

On the screen before them, a blob of light shot out from below the screen then poofed away in a small flash of light.

A class VII probe was specifically designed for covert observation of pre-warp cultures; along with its multisensory package made for identifying and recording sentient activity on various levels, it was equipped with the best stealth technology available to the Federation.

It would not have escaped sophisticated sensors like those of Klingon warships, but the interference from the enclosed star would see to that. By flying at warp 1.5 behind the circling solar panels, it would alternatively hide behind each one and under the solar interference between them.

"The probe will complete a full revolution of the star in 28 minutes, Sir" informed Ensign Tyvya.

Alone in the conference room, Captain Kheren was again in what was becoming his customary waiting stance, hands behind his back, standing in front of a transparency looking with unfocused eyes and waving antennae at the universe outside.

From this side of the ship, it was a breathtaking view of the yellow-white star, barely fifty million kilometers away. The fiery orb was taking almost the entire heavens with its rounded horizon raging with plumes of fire and plasma.

The automatic filtering of the transparency could not completely diffuse the majestic glare. Even the shields failed to completely block out the intense heat so close to the enclosed star of the Dyson shell, and the Andorian was even sweating so close to the warmed hull. But the ship was in no danger even this close to the star; the titanic black neutronium panel it was hiding behind absorbed most of the stellar emissions.

But the gigantic power of the star could still be felt; a power that paled before that of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, somewhere outside, trapped in subspace until it would find an open fracture close enough and wide enough to pour down like molten lava on the massive artificial star system, engulf it and devour it.

If Kheren had for one instant forgotten the danger threatening this hollowed world, the simple vision of the star's own flaming face was enough to burn it back deep in his mind.

And even before they could tackle that terrible danger, there was the Klingon problem... and the X'ell problem.

It all amounted to this: how could they chase off the Klingons from the X'ell world, without giving them an excuse to start a war with the Federation, without violating X'ell Law of Life and all in time to find a way to save them from the cosmic catastrophe looming over their world?

As he waited out the last minutes before the tactical meeting with O'Conner and Alther, he felt like the only viable option left was to fly away... It took most of his self-control not to pace the room aimlessly like a headless bird...

*A headless bird...*

He suddenly tapped his combadge:

"Doctor Sage: would you join us in the conference room, please?"

Down in sickbay, the Artemis' CMO tapped his own combadge to respond:

"On my way, skipper."

There was a knock at the entryway to Doc Sang...to his, *his*, office. He looked up and saw Petty Officer Mindy Fujikawa.

She gave him a curious look.

"Doc Sage? You okay?"

"I'm good. What's up?"

"You asked to be told when Lieutenant Alther woke up."

Josiah darted a quick look at the chronometer.

"Now, that was in no time a'tall! Alright, 'les see how she's doin'."

He got up and walked to the recovery area where Kelsey had been taken after the procedure. Surprised once by how fast the Kalthurina had woken up from the anesthesia, he was again surprised the blue-skinned lieutenant was already sitting. He approached the biobed before Alther had a chance to hop down.

"El-Tee! Welcome back to the land of the livin'!" he said when he was next to Kelsey. "Lemme take a look at your shoulder real quick."

He walked around to his patient's back, and started a looking at the handiwork, as well as testing for any tenderness around the wound.

"Now, yew really are goin' to have to take the next few days easy. 'Spite the surgery bein' a complete success, yew could still complicate your recov'ry if you're not careful."

Completing his own examination he circled around, looked directly into Kelsey's eyes, his breath momentarily catching. He regained it, quickly enough to not seem like he was gasping for air, and said:

"Now, tell me, how d'yew feel?"

Head shaking, Kelsey answered after a moment:

"Little tired and slightly out of it but I feel fine."

Slowly trying to sit up to avoid complicating anything, the Kalthurian deliberately moved to get a feel for what limits there were and, so far, all seemed fine indeed."

"Thanks again, Doc," the androgyn said with a smile, standing up and patting him on the shoulder. "Am I good to go to the meeting with the Captain or do you need me to stay behind a bit longer?"

Josiah felt a slight jolt of giddiness at Kelsey's touch. He smiled at her and said:

"You're free to go, El-Tee. Jus' r'member yew can't go runnin' 'round for a bit."

He looked back to the Kalthurian, directly into the sapphire blues. He smoothed his moustache and beard saying:

"Well, it would seem I'm goin' up to the bridge, too. Share a turbolift, then?"

He then looked over at Doctor Osaro-Lyth.

"Would you please have Lieutenant Alther's post-surgery r'port filled out, and sent to my chair on the bridge, please?"

The Deltan female nodded.

"Yes, Doctor."

"Thank yew," he said as he started heading toward the door.

He turned back toward Kelsey.

"Yew comin', El-Tee? Not wise to keep the Captain waitin'," he admonished with a touch of mirth to his voice, and a quick, playful wink.

Following Josiah, Kelsey Alther's eyes rolled.

"Thanks for patching me up doc" she said with a smile, walking with him to the bridge.

"Anytime, El-Tee," Josiah said, as he walked into the turbolift. "Bridge."

When the familiar feel of the 'lift moving started, he added:

"I'm jus' happy yew weren't as bang'd up as Doc Sangliar. Hope he pulls through n' wakes up."

When the 'lift doors opened on the bridge, Josiah wasted no time reporting to the Artemis' captain in the conference room. When the doors whooshed open, he spotted the Andorian standing with hands folded behind his back, looking out the viewport.

Josiah cleared his throat.

"Skipper, Doc Sage, reportin' as d'rected. What c'n I do yew for?"

Kheren watched both the Chief medical officer and the tactical Chief enter the conference room through the barely discernible reflection of the transparency. For a moment, he had the odd impression of seeing a couple entering the room.

Lieutenant Alther's body language was its usual casual self, tinted with a slight tension that was formerly due to the precarious position of the officer on board; it was not so long ago that Alther was under the shadow of the Judge Advocate General Office for almost half the offenses in the book; only to finally have all charges cleared through attenuating circumstances. So now, that tension in eyes and limbs must be from the recent harrowing events and those yet to come. Left side and shoulders looked a little stiff too, no doubt from the healing injury.

Doctor Sage's attitude however was more intriguing. He looked much more than a solicitous healer hovering over a patient. There was a smoothness in his eyes and in his face when he repeatedly glanced towards the almost Andorian-looking Lieutenant, a softness in his voice and movements when he addressed Kelsey...

Kheren would have smiled if his rigid face had allowed him to. Of all people, the doctor should have been aware of the androgyn nature of the only Kalthurian in Starfleet, of their peculiar... biology...

But *that* was not *his* concern. His concern was to see that, whatever was in store for both of them, or for the entire crew, even for the X'ell people and the entire Federation, it would not end in blood and flame.

"Please be seated, Doctor" greeted the Andorian captain, turning around and doing so himself on one side of the old style triangular conference table.

Indicating with his right hand one side of the table, he looked to his left where Kelsey Alther was already moving to.

"Hope you feel as well as you look, Lieutenant. I'm sorry to say you might not have much time to recover before we get to face the Klingons again. "

Kelsey nodded at Kheren:

"I should be fine so long as you don't make me run up and down the walls and tapdance."

"Sorry Lieutenant, the Klingons are calling the dance, not I." almost smirked the captain.

They were each occupying one of the three sides of the table, smartly designed to have everyone near the ear of everyone else and promoting proper brainstorming with the lack of distant hierarchy the more modern elongated tables imposed.

As Josiah sat where Captain Kheren indicated, the young doctor had an overwhelming sense in his consciousness.

Today was a day to mark in the books for Doc Sage: first he was promoted to chief medical officer, now here he was in Artemis' sanctum sanctorum.

*How did this happen?*

Josiah never saw himself as more than "jus' a simple country boy hollerin' 'cross the pond." He never would have imagined, or really wanted, himself here.

He smoothed his moustache and beard. Besides those two, today was also the day he'd finally come face-to-face with Kelsey Alther. He'd read her medical file, along with the rest of the senior officers, when he'd come on board. Hell, Doc Sangliar had made it required reading when Josiah checked in!

But a face-to-face was a far cry from the two dimensional image of a person. Josiah cast another brief, furtive glance in Kelsey's direction, totally unaware of Captain Kheren reading the doctor's body language like an open book.

Josiah smoothed his moustache and beard again, a sure sign of the discomfort he was experiencing.

He looked out the viewport and had the urge for a shot or five of whiskey.

"Commander O'Conner will join us as soon as our spy probe will be back with the data we need," he added after a moment. His silver eyes were on them but his antennae pointed sharply towards the door.

At that very moment, the man the captain was referring to glanced around the bridge impatiently as he awaited for the probe's return.

"Relys: probe's ETA?"

"30 seconds, Sir."

O'Conner glanced down at the clock on the chair and sighed lightly. He was supposed to be in a meeting with the captain in less than two minutes... and he had nothing to bring.

"Probe is back, Sir."

"Good. Ikrsos, transport it where you need it and then send any data you can to the conference room."

"Yes, Sir."

As she typed in orders through her console, O'Conner added:

"And be quick about it. I don't want to keep the captain waiting."

The First Officer looked down at the clock once more and sighed anew before standing up and straightening his uniform. He looked around the room: Iksos would be busy so he turned to the next highest officer on the bridge. "Lieutenant Relys, you have the bridge. I have a meeting with the captain to get to."

Grudgingly, O'Conner got up, walked the short corridor down to the conference room and entered with a small fake smile before taking his seat.

Kheren watched his First Officer come in the conference room and sit beside him with a small unfelt smile. The Andorian failed to understand what was behind that curious attitude but didn't bother much with it; Human emotions were as complex as those of his own people... so, trying to guess anything about them was an exercise in futility at best. If and when whatever troubled O'Conner would matter, he would talk about it.

The captain's attention was now brought to the computer controls signalling data pouring in. With the commander coming in a moment before, it was obvious this was the anticipated data from their returning probe.

"Well gentlebeings; let us see the face of our enemy."

And so saying, Kheren activated the definitely state-of-the-art holographic display at the center of the decidedly old-fashioned table. Between all the officers present, data readable from any angle poured around a visual display that came out in a series of long sequences.

The first one showed a squadron of three B'rell class Birds of Prey in chevron formation engaged in carpet bombing of the concave inhabited surface of the Dyson shell. It was identical to the first group the Artemis had challenged, but the view angle and the transponder records showed them to be another group entirely, flying over the opposite side of the hollow world.

This part of the record ended with a strong transporter signal towards the ships and all three of them veering off back the way they came. Lifesign readouts indicated that they were overcrowded each with sixteen warriors instead of the standard dozen.

"Seems like the X'ell defended themselves successfully for the time being." commented the Andorian. "Which makes me believe the Klingons will regroup and take more drastic measures. They will certainly not abandon such a prize that easily... and they do love a challenge."

The probe's recording now displayed a new set of data. This time, there was a ground visual showing what appeared like two entire cities reduced to smoking rubble with large portions of agricultural zones scarred with craters and blackened gouges; all emanating the well known Klingon weapon signature. There was no X'ell lifesigns recorded in the entire region as large as a small Earth country.

Right in the center of one of those devastated cities, the recording showed a large, mostly intact building surrounded by three more Klingon scout ships that landed to encircle it with their backs turned to it; it looked at a glance just like the famous three-pointed Klingon crest. There were less than a dozen lifesigns there; but they were all Klingons.

The record also showed that one of the Dyson shell's portal was wide open. Astrometric data confirmed it to be the one closest to the direction of the Klingon border.

There was no sign of damage anywhere near it; which would have been surprising, considering the nearly indestructible carbon-neutronium alloy the thing was made of.

The recording ended with the returning bombing squadron, all three ships seen moving into high orbit circling the landing zone at one-tenth impulse power, shields down but weapons hot.

"The vultures' nest," simply said Captain Kheren.

He let a moment pass for everyone to ponder the data before angling to his left towards Lieutenant Alther:

"Tactical analysis. "

Kelsey Alther cleared its throat and began:

"The Klingons are fielding B'rel class ships which can pose in sufficient numbers a real threat to us. They are well known for their speed, size and maneuverability and can give us some real issues"

"Computer: schematics of the Klingon B'rel class scout ship. "

Kheren looked intently at the tridimensional cutout of the raptor like enemy ship he had called up while the tactical officer continued:

"Their standard weapon locker of a B'rel contain up to twelve disruptor pistols. Four disruptor rifles, a grenade launcher with forty-eight grenades. two rocket launchers, six agonizers, three hundred power packs for hand weapons and rifles and even an antimatter fusion warhead with a remote trigger for it."

Kelsey paused again from the list then added:

"Meaning that they have a very versatile and large amount of ground weapons suitable for occupying buildings or boarding starships" the Kalthurian said with a hint of worry in her voice.

"No matter how many weapons you have, you can use only one at a time... and not from a locker. " mumbled the Andorian absently, still intently looking at the image of the Klingon ship.

Lieutenant Alther, finished with information on the Klingon warships, started to talk about the ground situation:

"The Klingon ships on the ground are acting like artillery, one man stationed at the tactical console and providing cover from the aft turrets on the ships."

"Computer; detailed schematics of the ship's forward section." now ordered the commanding officer of the Artemis. And immediately, a detailed set of tridimensional floor plans hovered between all of them over the table.

Pointing to the display of the makeshift Klingon base, the androgyn explained further:

"There are a total of six Klingons in the building, three on the outside patrolling and another three inside, with one most likely being the commander of the group. There is also no X'ell lifesigns within one hundred thousand kilometers of the cities. and the area surrounding the cities is full of holes and is almost destroyed."

There was a hint of sadness in kelsey's voice. Nevertheless, the Kalthurian finished up with the ground situation and moved onto the space situation:

"The other bombing squadron is missing many members and those many members are most likely assaulting the ground like what happened on this side. They would most likely have meet up with the now destroyed bomber squadron within the next two hours" Kelsey said.

"No survivors... no hostages... no witnesses... " mumbled the Andorian.

His tone was suddenly ominous.

"Since they seem to have been prevented from completing their own half of the bombing circuit, then added the tactical officer, I expect they will send at least one ship to make that rendez-vous... and discover that their comrades are missing. At which point they will most likely warp back to their base to report the missing ships due to the long range communication interference. They will then use the doors from the shell. The X'ell are most likely keeping them open to entice the Klingons to leave, which of course we all know won't work... but it will allow the Klingons to go get reinforcements and supplies."

The silvery eyes in the dark blue face were focused as far way as the voice, addressing everyone and no one at the same time, sounded to the others' ears when he finished saying:

"Unless... they get convinced somehow that trying to conquer the X'ell is futile..."

Kelsey finished and took a deep breath.

*Talk about a long tactical analysis* the androgyn thought, trying to relax in the plush seat.

"Overall Sir, we have around three hours before the Klingons are onto something. "

Kheren was silent for a moment, again looking intently at the vulture-shaped image of the enemy's vessel, not even blinking.

He didn't move at all; even when he finally summarized:

"We have three hours; and First Fleet is still at least four hours away, assuming they received the order and launched from Starbase 24 at the same time we did back at Starbase 10. "

Taking a breath, he then summarized:

"We have to respect local authorities and still remove the Klingon threat, and this, without antagonizing the X'ell or the Klingons; if we are to prevent a general conflict and do this first contact at the same time. The Klingons have the advantage of ships and firepower, but we have the advantage in resources and personnel... and that our presence is still unknown to them."

Now, his silver eyes and antennae darted to each one of them in turn before he finished:

"Assuming of course that the Azimuth Horizon does not suddenly come and solve it all with one blast of cosmic inferno."

He crossed his fingers before him on the table and looked around again to ask:

"Options?"

O'Conner looked over the screen for a moment before standing up and speaking:

"We saw that the X'ell were able to transport Klingons back on to their ship. If they could do this, they should be able to transport things off of the Klingon ships. So, if we were to contact the X'ell and give this data and point out the weapon systems of the ships, they might be able to use their advance transporter technology to disarm the Klingon ships without fighting them."

"Not a bad idea Number One." agreed the captain." However, I can't help to wonder that, knowing their far more advanced technology and their detailed knowledge, why they didn't do it already. "

He paused for a moment, visibly pondering the problem.

"Either they won't... or they can't. As advanced as their transporter technology is, they might still be unable to teleport only part of a whole, just like we can't. Individual torpedoes, sure; maybe that is exactly what they did to cut short the second team's bombardment. But someone would have to detach the disruptor cannons from the ship's wings in order for them to transport the armament away."

Looking at his officers, Kheren then added:

"Even then, that will stop the immediate threat of those ships... but not of the Klingons themselves. So far, maybe these squadron commanders didn't have time to report... or are unwilling to do so, trying to keep all the glory and benefits between themselves. But this prize is too big and looks like too easy picking to abandon it after such a minor setback. If they find themselves simply disarmed, they will certainly built new weapons, or go get supplies... and reinforcements."

The Andorian's antennae were wagging slowly, this way and that, betraying the puzzlement his rigid face was masking. As no one immediately responded to his analysis, he went further, saying in measured tones:

"And... they could decide also to wage urban warfare: going for a systematic ground assault of key areas. Even barehanded, Klingons will not fear a peaceful, unarmed people just harmlessly hampering them. Klingons are born and bred warriors, natural predators immune to fear and relishing pain and violence. In time, even the X'ell's superior numbers won't matter. "

Josiah nodded in agreement with Commander O'Conner's suggestion.

"XO's sounds like a good idea. I have one to take it further so it may work with yours, captain," he said with a touch of trepidation.

Tactical decision making was not his forte, and right now he was keenly feeling it.

"If the X'ell beam the Klingons to the building El-Tee mentioned, they'd be in one localized location. This would put what you just said into effect, skipper: only one weapon at a time."

He smoothed his moustache and beard.

"It would make that there 'lil vulture's nest into a house arrest we can better monitor 'til the cavalry gets here. Bringing prisoners in their own HQ may demoralize the invaders enough to reconsider ever coming back again. The only issue I see would be convincing the birdmen to host their aggressors for the mean time. In any case, we should be prepared for casualties."

The commanding officer of the Artemis took time to evaluate the Doctor's input then retorted:

"In normal circumstances, an excellent idea, Doc. But again, we are facing two difficulties here: the X'ell's attitude and the Klingon's. "

Kheren sat back and then reminded them:

"The X'ell are loathing any direct contact with all of us "savage child cultures". They even accepted our assistance only because we could provide it with holograms. And the way they've been transporting out those they had already captured in their forcefields underline this taboo plainly. Telling them to keep prisoners until even more "savages" will come for them will not be acceptable to the X'ell, I fear."

Again he looked at the others with an unblinking stare.

"And if we get openly involved, the Klingons will have an excuse to declare open war upon the Federation, stating that we want to exploit the X'ell ourselves in order to conquer them... They could even rally other factions to their banner by shaking the spectre of a "Federation superweapon" threatening all..."

The Andorian sighted.

"We need for the X'ell to chase off the Klingons... but they won't. We want to chase off the Klingons for good... but we can't. So... how do we kill two birds with one stone?"

The antennae suddenly curved forward and the silvery eyes became like slits of metal as his voice took a determined tone:

"What we need to do is not only to have the Klingons neutralized and chased away, but to have them *convinced* that they and no one will never be able to conquer the X'ell."

For a moment, the captain didn't move or say anything. He noticed Lieutenant Alther punching up more data on transporter capabilities and torpedo statistics then erase it all without saying anything.

*Transporters...*

Kheren's antennae perked up suddenly and he tapped his combadge:

"Lieutenant Relys, Kheren here."

"Yes, captain." answered the clear voice of the Bajoran Chief of Ops.

"Status on our connection with the X'ell satellites?"

"Strong and steady, Sir. We are still receiving full communication from our EMH emitters on the ground, even from the other side of the star. The extensive ring of the native's orbital transporter and communication grid allows us clear reception through the local interference."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

Kheren brought up on the holodisplay at the table's center the schematics of the forward section of the Klingon Bird of Prey.

"Number One, Chief Alther, please study and memorize this thoroughly."

Then, the Andorian turned his head towards the Chief Medical Officer of the Artemis:

"Tell me, Doc: mobilizing your entire department for the job, how many individuals can you physically alter in two hours? "

Doc Sage cocked his head at the Artemis' captain.

"D'pends on what kinda alt'rations you're talkin', skipper. Iffin' it's not crazy intensive, I c'n have 'bout five-eighths of the crew phys'cally altered in two hours. Are we talkin' prom'nent cranial ridges, or feathers?"

"Feathers... highlighted with fiber optics."

Down in main engineering, N'Eligahn was half buried in an engineering console when he heard a soft cough. He backed out of it to see Blakely standing over him.

"You know it's ten minutes into what's supposed to be your break rotation," she reminded him.

"Yeah, didn't want to bother anyone. How are the aft weapons repairs?"

"The aft launcher is working, it just needs some calibrations. Stevenson's working on getting the aft phasers working."

She stood there in silence for a moment before N'Eligahn looked up.

"You're not going to stop staring at me until I sit somewhere for a minute, are you?"

"No Sir," Blakely admitted.

"Fine,"

N'Eligahn pulled his head out of the computer console and stood up, walking towards his office. Blakely followed him closely. He walked up to the replicator and turned to her.

"You want anything?"

"Black coffee is fine," she said.

N'Eligahn ordered her drink and a hot chocolate for himself. He handed the coffee to her and took a seat behind his desk.

"I wanted to apologize again for not being the best chief engineer I could be," N'Eligahn said.

"I'm too used to being a bit more free form and the Captain is very...by the book."

"Well, his by the book got us out of the Azimuth Horizon before it crushed us," Blakely retorted. "I think it's for the best."

"Oh I have no doubt about that... In fact, I respect him more than I thought I would. It's just...adjusting to his captaining style has been a slight...challenge."

He nursed his drink without taking a drink. Then the captain's call came:

" Engineering, this is the captain. Mister N'Eligahn please respond."

"Ah, speak of the blue devil," N'Eligahn said. He tapped his combadge. "N'Eligahn here, Sir."

"Chief, in two hours, we will need at least half a dozen transponder injectors... modified to look like the hand rods used by the X'ell. "

"This is top priority, Lieutenant-Commander. Bring them yourself to Mister O'Conner's team in transporter room 1 in two hours please."

O'Conner looked over to Kheren as he gave orders and sighed lightly.

He knew where the captain was going. He didn't like it but it was the captain's ship so he nodded to his commanding officer and went about studying the ships before him, focusing on the main control panels and armory locations.

"Go, Doc." nodded the Andorian before turning to his other two officers. Then, he pointed to the cutaway tridimensional display of the Klingon bird of prey bridge:

"Transfer this data to transporter room 1's targeting scanners and to holodeck 1 for as much dry run as you can find the time to, Number One. You will lead this operation."

Shifting his silvery eyes towards the Kalthurian chief of security, he then ordered;

"Lieutenant Alther, you will select four more of your officers to complete the away team. Choose those that have the best hand to hand expertise and can read Klingon... or have actual experience with Klingon bridge layouts... and that would be most easily disguised as our friendly natives."

Now looking at both of them he straightened himself in his seat to say:

"I will detail my plan to you both, then you will brief Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn for his part and then the rest of your team while I will do the same with Doctor Sage. We have the advantage of surprise, but once we tap into their resources, the X'ell might interfere. So, we will need speed, coordination and timing... and as little luck as possible. "

The plan was bold; but it relied on pure Sun Tzu philosophy: they knew their enemy... and their enemy didn't know them.

\* \* \*

*'Ghobe' SoH, Warran. "*

The other bridge officers laughed at the grumbling tactical officer denied relief from his station. he watched them all leave the oval bridge for the large mess hall, beyond the double blast door, with baleful eyes.

There were only six of them aboard, all the others transported back to the base on the surface of this weird hollow world and the mess was large enough to accomodate almost twice that number. Still, the ship's commander followed regulation and dutifully disciplined his crew by denying a meal to one officer chosen at random.

Him.

Random, yeah... he was sure it was because of his name: Warran, son of Mirdak. It sounded too much like "Warren" a weakling Human name. He had fought hard and bitterly all his life because of it; the fights had made him strong and merciless and he had understood why his father had bestowed it upon him. But at this moment, alone on the dimly lit, smoky bridge of a ship hovering over a world of spineless, unarmed but devious and dishonorable bird creatures, it only made him glum and despirited... and hungry.

Thinking of the aliens made him gnash his uneven, pointed teeth together and furrow even deeper the thick bony lines of his large brow; they had been easy enough to conquer at first, not having any kind of weapons whatsoever, not even rocks and sticks. And they were a race of weaklings and cowards, not even fighting to defend themselves. Even the Fedrats had more spine than those ugly birdmen.

But that was at first.

Warran snorted out of frustration, both from his punitive assignment as from the memories. After they had occupied those first two cities, cleaned up with disruptors, those ridiculous, feathery natives had started trouble: wands and rings that somehow made their weapons, their clothing, even their bodies stick to walls, floors, trees... even each other... Emprisonning forcefields dropping out of nowhere... even outside... then, they were beaming them away, back to their ships, even through shields...

The dishonorable bird creatures were chasing them away and still refusing to fight!

The warrior snarled silently at his own thoughts. The task force commander had ordered all available torpedoes distributed between two ships and implemented a full scale bombing operation of those flimsy glass cities, and all but a few warriors sent down to mop up the aliens. That would solve their infestation!

Or so they thought; until these detestable creatures somehow whisked their warriors back aboard and stole all their remaining ammunition with their damnable transporters! They had to turn back... and the other bombing squadron still had not returned.

They were probably finishing a successful run and would come back full of trophies and glory...

Warran checked the targeting scanner out of boredom.

They would have blasted those meddling satellites; but those annoying things were made of some alien metal impervious to their weaponry. It was all so frustrating... He slouched in his seat at the tactical console, looking distractedly at the scanning readouts... when he heard the hum of a transporter beam.

All around him.

He snapped at attention; but there was nobody... No wait; turning in his seat, he saw them, right before the access doors; a dark, gangly but fluffy silhouette crouched there... And another before the other door leading to the forward sensor room!

*ToQ loDpu'!* Bird men!

Four others then rose much nearer, from behind the consoles that hid their crouched arrival.

As the Klingon went for his blaster, the X'ell behind him seemingly stabbed him with his wand.

The Klingon turned around and spat out "qoH!" Just as the X'ell smiled at him and tapped his wrist twice and in a flash of light the Klingon was gone.

As two of the bird men used magnetic locks on the bridge's access door, the bird man that had transported the Klingon away turned to one of the bird men and ordered.

"Transport any remaining Klingon to the boom section. Kelesy detach the boom." From it's voice, it was clearly Commander O'Conner.

O'Conner then moved quickly to the captain's chair and started to hotwire the self-destruct.

The noise of munching, sloshing, gurgling and chewing around the curved table was as strong as those of grunted bits of conversation, covering even the low hum of the ship's impulse engines.

Then suddenly, two other warriors appeared from the corridor access to the rest of the ship, panting and growling like hunting wolves suddenly released from their cages.

One was still holding a hypospinner, the other was the officer of the watch Warran they had left on the bridge.

As soon as they appeared, all the others looked at them with wide eyes.

*"ToQ loDpu'! ChaH ghaj tlhappu' ra'ta'ghach mu'mey!"*

"*NUQ?*"

They couldn't believe it: the Birdmen had taken the bridge?!

They all rose from their seats, throwing them back against the wall violently in their haste to get around the table and to the access door to the ship's command center.

It was locked... from the inside.

*"SoH jaH Daq latlh lojmIt! SoH cha' qul Daq vam lojmIt 'ej poSmoH 'oH! leS tlhej jIH!"*

Hearing the orders from their senior officer, one warrior went to the floor hatch to get to the lower deck, one was ordered to the forward sensor room to try and access the command center of the vessel from the other side.

The other two, those who came back from the ship's long access corridor, had carried disruptor rifles and photon grenades back with them and proceeded to use them to blast the door open from the other end of the mess hall. The rest scrambled after their leader to the transporter pad nearby for site to site transport.

On the other side of the door, Kelsey had appeared to help to seal the door as O'Conner had jabbed the Klingon with the rod-looking transponder injector, tagging him for immediate transport. It really had looked as if the X'ell were indeed using their transporter technology to battle the invaders.

*This is going to be a painful day* the androgyn had thought nevertheless while finishing sealing the door and then looking over to O'Conner.

When ordered to detach the boom, Alther had nodded and walked over to the tactical station and successfully activated the release.

Before the crew on the other side of the condemned door could all do more than a few steps, there was a sudden echoing noise of something detonating and heavily clunking, as if massive doors were banged somewhere aft of the ship, at the other end of the long corridor.

Now finished, the tactical chief of the Artemis walked over to the disguised First Officer and knelt down next to him as he was finishing hotwiring the self destruct mechanism under the commanding chair.

"Boom section detached, Sir" reported Alther before standing back up.

"Very good. Get everyone in position, you can take the next one." He said not looking back.

He worked quickly but it was taking longer than he hoped so he wanted to start right away next time. The human seemed quite at ease under his disguise but the whole X'ell modification felt so strange to the androgyn; it had to change how it walked, curb its tongue and even deal with feathery parts.

*Oh well,* thought the Lieutenant while letting out a sigh; *let's just hope that I don't have to start fighting like this.*

Overhead, an alarm sounded and a Klingonee countdown began.

"*wa'maH!*" The computer yelled out.

"Got it!" O'Conner yelled out as the alarm sounded.

"*Hut!*"

The First officer of the Artemis quickly moved around the chair.

"*chorgh!*"

He quickly checked if everyone was in position.

"*Soch!*"

Then, Commander O'Conner signaled to the others and kneeled down, readying himself.

"*jav!*"

And then finally, tapped his wrist three times.

"*vagh!*"

The Klingons aboard the seperated forward hull were all still looking at each other in confusion when the sudden release of the forward half of the ship was followed by a brutal vibration that almost threw them all off their feet.

It seemingly had come from the end of the long corridor, now closed by an airlock hatch.

They all knew then what had happened.

The entire boom section of the Bird of Prey housing the bridge and forward torpedo room along with the habitable decks had been detached from the wing-shaped aft of the ship. All Klingon ships were equiped with this feature, allowing to escape an enemy at impulse with the forward command section while leaving the aft section to be used as a massive antimatter mine in their wake... or as in the old days to eliminate mutineers.

And now, someone on the bridge had released the attaching bolts... and activated the self-destruct control, exploding the aft section and leaving the powerless forward section with barely enough flight power to maintain orbit... or return home... in a few centuries.

Depleted of torpedoes and only left with one impulse engine, they didn't even had shields and disruptors available. They could not even communicate and send a signal for help or warn the grounded ships of the unexpected attack: the communication systems were on the locked bridge... and local interference were too powerful for the portable communicators they had.

They couldn't even land safely.

" *Mu'qaD Daq Hoch toQ loDpu'!* "

They could only curse all treacherous, honorless Birdmen.

\* \* \*

Artillery officer Kuroth, son of Tarhnek, was dutifully at his post, sitting in the firing chair.

It had been a long vigil and he was feeling tired and bored after sitting all those hours doing nothing. This sector of the alien world had been thoroughly cleansed of any alien presence, so now there was nothing at all left to kill, not even insects...

On the unexpectedly early return of one of the bombing squadrons had put everyone back on edge as soon as the three orbital vessels had reported the devious treachery of the natives and their transporting tricks; but now, after assessing the tactical situation, the wing ships had been dispatched with full crews to check on the other bombing group, each following the opposite curvature of the inner sphere at full impulse, all scanners searching both sky and ground. Since then, everything had returned to a dull, silent, tranquil haze.

Kuroth had tracked the remaining orbital ship for a while, just to adjust and calibrate targeting scanners and disruptor angle for optimum coverage of the sky above. He knew the three grounded B'rel were supposed to act as makeshift turrets for their fortified headquarters planetside, but since they had sterilized hundreds of kilometers around the two neighboring cities nearest to the immense access portal, there was no real danger to be expected from the ground. It was just standard occupation procedure.

But Kuroth knew that if danger was to come, it would be from above.

After all, they were in Federation Space. A patrolling Starfleet battlecruiser could drop by inadvertently anytime, as those persky Fedrats were so annoyingly prone to do... and come through the widely open portal inside this majestic solar system-sized construct.

Let the other two sentinels on the pair of other landed ships worry uselessly about any ground assault; he would watch the skies, and reap all the glory if and when an enemy vessel would...

The tactical scanner beeped.

Straightening suddenly in his hard-backed chair, Kuroth adjusted the signal and stared at the readout.

*An antimatter explosion... at high orbit.*

He widened the tactical scanning targeter, looking for the patrolling Bird of prey covering also their heads.

*Nothing.*

*No, there...*

His furrowed brow pressed down over his dark beady eyes.

*A cloud of residual radiation and debris... The ship... No, there it is... But... only the forward hull? What in the name of Kahless...*

He was concentrating and wondering so much about the tactical readout that he failed to immediately register the multiple transporter beams suddenly surrounding the entire bridge, before the doors, behind the consoles... even the one right behind his own. But his eyes caught a movement and suddenly focused on a beaked dark face framed by a feathery mane highlighted by a complex pattern of fiber optics.

There was a rod in its hand.

Kelsey Alther jabbed the rod into the Klingon but, before she could tap on her wrist twice, the Klingon roared and punched the disguised Kalthurian away.

Kelsey landed on a console right on the shoulder which had just been operated on and clenched both eyes shut from the bolt of pain.

A disruptor's muzzle was suddenly rising inches from Alther's grimacing face.

Quickly blocking out the pain with sheer force of will, the androgyn managed this time to swiftly tap on a wrist twice, whisking away the Klingon before more damage could happen.

After the room was sealed, Kelsey moaned in pain, standing up and grabbing the injured shoulder, or assed as a shoulder through the modification the kalthurian's body had been through.

*Knew this was a bad idea* thought Alther while going to the detach boom section control once again.

Seeing the wobbling tactical chief move into position near the separation controls despite the obvious injury, the squad Leader Tactical Officer, Ensign S'Ken, finished sealing the access door between the bridge and the rest of the ship with the portable magnetic lock he was carrying for that specific purpose and immediately went to the central chair where Commander O'Conner was again hot-wiring the self-destruct command panel.

"Sir, I will stay with Lieutenant Alther." offered the tall willowy Vulcan, his deep bass voice so incongruous behind his alien feathery disguise. "We will wait for your signal as planned before we launch this hull section and detonate the grounded aft hull at the exact same time as the other two."

With this first guard sent away, even if it was a good kilometer away, the clock was already ticking before their presence might be noticed.

And the critical part was: they *had* to be noticed...

This was indeed the crucial moment of the entire operation. And now, there was no margin for error.

O'Conner smiled at Kelsey.

"And here I thought you were itching to take down some Klingons."

"Normally yes, but when you have been thrown against the Artemis, you tend to not want to do that, more so against doctor's orders" said the Kalthurian before taking position.

As moved quickly to other side of the chair, he looked at one of the ensigns.

"Check for any other Klingons in this section."

He then turned his attention to the console and began to hotwire the ship to self-destruct. This time he knew what to do but this he was going to get a longer count down.

"Klingon piece of junk..." He mumbled to himself, as he worked.

"Got it!" He yelled out, before pausing. "Uhh... we might want to leave soon, everyone in position."

It seemed that he turned off the countdown feature, so he figured it best to leave quickly, as he didn't know how long they had. "Ready?"

"Ready, Sir." Most of the personal replied.

O'Conner then gave N'eligahn the go ahead through his own implanted transponder in his forearm for the next ship.

*Nice to know he cares about me too* Alther thought sarcastically as the transporter beam caught them again.

Ensigns Reed Culp and Paula Germaine, almost indistinguishable under their dark, feathery disguise, took their prepared position aboard the first grounded Bird of prey.

They looked at one another with worried eyes as the other four beamed away to the next ship. There, Ensign S'ken and Tylok Sayan, the Bajoran Ensign, would stand ready like them on the second B'Rel, once it was commandeered like the first one.

Then, that would leave only the wounded Kelsey Alther and Michael O'Conner to overpower the last sentinel, prepare the last Klingon ship and signal their final act of sabotage.

Before the Klingons had a chance to realize something was going on.

*Nuq?*

At the artillery station of the second guarding B'rel stationed besides the occupation headquarters building, Thleng, son of Workog, looked at the scanning console beeping an alarm. He had left active the ship's scanners with the tactical ones in case of some unforeseen menace that could creep on them. They had thoroughly secured this entire land area for a full day now, but there could have been some hidden survivors preparing a counter-coup; too many occupation forces had been thus surprised in the past on countless worlds to dismiss the idea.

And these... creatures; Thleng didn't believe in pacifism. It didn't made any sense; life is a constant struggle where only the strong could prevail: strong of body but also of mind. Predators with dull wits and dull senses could not find prey... or prevent the other from preying in turn upon it. It was as much a weakness as any failing of the limbs.

Thleng was neither weak nor dull. He immediately checked his targeting sensors to confirm and identify what had triggered the sensors, scanning both the ground and the sky.

Nothing.

He quickly boosted the gain out of his tactical scanners to punch further through theis system solar disturbance and once again covered the entire area in a two hundred kilometers radius across a complete hemispherical radius around his position.

There! An intense residual antimatter reading... in high orbit. Like what was left of a ship exploding... But there was no weapon signature.

And no patrolling ship... Wait: there, almost flying out of short scanning range...

He checked the ship's disruptor cannons and sent an immediate hail to check the status of the patrol vessel:

" *'Iw 'ethl, vam 'oH Hegh ghop... 'Iw 'ethl, jang!*"

The ship's scanners beeped again.

Thleng stood up from the artillery seat and in a few long swift steps went to the surveillance station and checked the readout.

A transporter beam signal... X'ell signature.

Then, what his eyes had read, his ears confirmed... from all around him.

His black-gloved hand went instantly to his sidearm.

O'Conner appeared right behind the Klingon, staff at the ready. He quickly jabbed him in the side with it, but before he could tap his wrist, the Klingon turned around and pointed the disruptor right at him. The disguised Human was barely able to bat it away in time with the rod, knocking the pistol down and letting the shot burn a hole in the ground. The Klingon roared angrily as he went for his dagger.

O'Conner took that moment to tap his wrist.

Before the Klingon was able to pull his *d'ktagh* free of its scabbard, point it and stab at his feathery target, the signal went to the hidden starship millions of kilometers away and back through the X'ell advanced transporter system its own transporter signal was hooked with.

Cursing loudly in Klingonee, he disappeared in a shimmer of light.

O'Conner breathed a sigh of relief and went off to hotwire the self-destruct mechanism. He smiled as he worked quickly; this time, he understood much better what he was doing and how to do it quickly.

"Ready here" He stated as he looked around before connecting the last wire.

It took no time now for the four of them to again seal the doors, place the release bolts of the boom section on emergency standby and time the self-destruct mechanism to the ship separation procedures.

The last two security officers took position like their comrades on the first ship, ready to receive the last signal from the First Officer.

They nodded and both Michael O'Conner and Kelsey Alther, unrecognizable as they were under the extensive X'ell disguise Doctor Dage had managed to provide them, were sent away by another transporter beam to the last ship and the last sentinel... now aware that something was amiss.

There were few Klingon women in the Klingon Defense Force, especially on warships; in the brutal, physical chain of command, they had to be either very crafty or exceptionally intimidating to have any chance of making any career as a crew member, or even more as an officer.

Shalla, daughter of Brankhnass, was both. She was not only near two meters tall and a match for any Bath'leth champion, but more versed in science and technology than the average warrior. She was utterly fearless and remarkable level-headed, even in the heat of battle... or during long dull moments like guard duty.

And now she was on to something... and dutifully reporting to Squadron Head Commander Murrak what her, always, meticulous surveillance had found:

"*Djah'Qui*, there is no doubt; readouts confirm the *'Iw 'etlh* has been destroyed. Only the Boom section is adrift with all the crew massed in the messhall. And there are several transport signatures from the..."

"*Kahless rol!* swore the wide-shouldered, balding, dark-skinned warrior on the monitor, his armor covered by a rust-colored sleeveless longcoat and a metalmesh baldric adorned with many medals, what did those *Pe'taQ* do?"

"Undetermined, *Djah'Qui*; there is no other ship in the vicinity and no weapon signature. But there is..."

"Code Amber!" roared the older Klingon over her voice. "Recall the *Hegh mup* and the *batlh HoH* immediately! And get me the *'Iw 'etlh* now!"

"Stellar interference are too strong to reach both searching ships, *Djah'Qui*, and I can not raise what's left of the *'Iw 'etlh*. Seems the crew is massed in the mess hall and the bridge is empty. Hand communicators are not powerful enough..."

"Bah! interrupted the Lord-Commander of the Klingon invasion force slamming a gauntelet in his own console, I bet these poor excuses for warriors got drunk and blasted their own ship!..

"Or those X'ell did it."

For a moment, the commander just blinked at her with his beady black eyes.

"*Nuq?* Don't tell me those spineless, feathery weaklings finally found themselves a back bone!"

The imposing Klingon woman wasn't blinking at all as she finally could report:

"I read multiple X'ell residual transporter signatures over there... and... on both the *Hov HoH* and the *Q'apla Jach* down here! And now... one... incoming..."

Despite the very narrow field of view of the ship board monitor, the supreme commander of the Klingon force clearly saw Shalla jerk up, take out her disruptor and aim it behind her.

And, offscreen, he could clearly hear the hum of alien transporters.

As Kelsey transported in, she saw the Klingon aiming in her direction and she dropped, the hastily aimed shot missing as the Kalthurian somehow landed on the proper side to avoid further injury.

The tactical chief of the Artemis rolled and carried the move into standing up and popped her head up behind a nearby console she had rolled behind.

Another disruptor blast headed her way as she ducked again.

Kelsey took a deep breath, shuffled over a bit and leapt over the console and dodged yet another disruptor blast before getting close enough to poke the Klingon with the device. The taller Klingon woman was stunned by the jab, not through any pain since there was none, but with the puzzling maneuver itself seemingly doing nothing. Kelsey took advantage and swept her legs to momentarily disarm her as she fell on her back, the next shot lost against the reinforced ceiling of the bridge.

Kelsey signaled to Michael O'Conner with a hurrying stare behind her X'ell mask as she jumped on the Klingon warrior.

But the tall Klingon woman was way too strong for the smallish disguised androgyn and, with a simple heave of her thickly muscled arms, bodily lifted what she thought a X'ell cleanly off her to throw Alther away and right back from where she came.

Kelsey sailed into the console leapt over a moment before and landed on the injured shoulder yet again. The androgyn's eyes shot open in pain, glaring while sitting there while the Klingon threw expletives. From her prone position, she groped to her side with her black gloved hand and her right arm rose to aim her disruptor pistol point blank at the black feathered form before her. Then, barely up and beginning to gloat in her harsh, guttural tongue, she suddenly shifted her gaze, then her aim to the side.

Right at O'Conner.

The disguised Kalthurian leapt again at the Klingon woman and bodyslammed her, throwing off once more the aim of the disruptor pistol.

O'Conner had appeared in the Klingon bridge crouched behind the captain's chair and quickly had moved to the hotwiring of the self-destruct control there. He knew that, while Klingons weren't great at science, they did have sensors and that they would notice their interference if given time. But, as he started to work, he heard the Birdman-disguised tactical chief and the Klingon guard fighting; he looked up just in time to see the Klingon towering over the sore Starfleet officer.

Luckily for Kelsey, the Klingon was a Klingon, so she cursed and taunted her prey... then, noticing him, the muzzle of her weapon leveled straight at him...

All of which gave Commander O'Conner just enough time to double tap his wrist and let N'Eligahn back in the main transporter room of the Artemis remove the ugly Klingon woman just before she pulled the trigger. Her barely starting shot fizzled out with her.

"Loud mouth Klingons... at least when Tellarites complain, they work at the same time."

So saying, a slight smile crossed his features as he turned back to the hotwiring of the self destruct.

Kelsey sighed, walking over to activate the boom section release and, once finished, leant on it.

"Sometimes, I regret staying with the Artemis." the Lieutenant joked with a laugh. "Don't think I've ever been this injured in the line of duty somehow."

O'Conner looked up as he finished and chuckled a bit at the androgyn's banter before tapping his wrist a final time with the end code.

Now, they were done, tensely waiting for the final beam out... before all hell broke loose.

On the bridge of the Artemis, tension was also running high.

Only the transport confirmations by Chief Engineer N'Eligahn told them what was going on, if the delicately timed operation was ongoing, if their people were on the job... and still alive.

From where the Federation vessel hid, sensors were unable to get any conclusive reading; they had registered an antimatter explosion, so powerful such a blast was... allegedly from one disabled Klingon ship in orbit... But then nothing; solar interference hid them effectively from any Klingon detection, or even the X'ell's for that matter, but it also left them just as blind.

Only their contact with the much more advanced and powerful native ring of satellites kept them connected through their transporter signal piggybacking and controlling the X'ell one. But that had been possible only because of the opportunity provided initially by the reclusive inhabitants of the Dyson shell, when the Artemis had offered their holographic medical help. It was most probable the X'ell were quite aware of what they were doing... and could decide to cut them off, stranding O'Conner, Alther and the rest of the disguised away team right in the heart of enemy territory.

It could happen at any moment... and they could do nothing about it.

For what seemed an eternity, they just waited... and prayed.

Then, in the heavy silence, the captain's console beeped so loud it sounded almost like the red alert horn to all the bridge officers.

It was transporter room 1.

Three beeps.

Kheren let loose a long sigh, his breath uncsciously held for too long now. Quickly he turned his head to his left;

"Send the message, Doc."

Prior to sending the away team, the captain had ordered a new covert probe to be sent to hide behind the closest X'ell orbital platform and wait for a specific line-of-sight laser beam to activate itself and transmit on the Klingon communication frequency; exactly what the X'ell must have done earlier, just as they had used Starfleet frequency to address them. It was a much lesser gamble than sending their commando team.

On the main screen, they now all could see the altered message of the X'ell play out, this time for the benefit of the Klingon headquarters: from a long empty room, the stern face of the X'ell speaker appeared to address them in perfect Klingonee:

"We are the X'ell. You are unworthy of sentience. We will not be soiled by your barbarism. You will honor our territorial integrity and will not violate territorial space belonging to us. You will leave. "

Just as the made up transmission ended, Kheren tapped his combadge:

"Now, Mister N'Eligahn. "

From their hidden position, they couldn't see what was happening and they all held their breath... until the intraship comm vibrated with the voice of the transporter chief assisting the Rethian Chief Engineer in transporter room 1:

"All back, Sir!"

A collective sigh of relief punctuated by hissing exclamation of satisfaction and triumph swept the entire bridge like a huge "yeeesss!" Even Kheren pumped his side with a fist held too tight for too long, and his antennae perked up like his snarl of victory.

Out of their sight, from the ruins of the devastated X'ell city, three boom sections of three grounded B'Rel class destroyers suddenly blasted off all at the same time, just as Kheren ordered transport, a well calculated minute after N'Eligahn had received the away team's last transponder signal.

Pilotless, crewless, they arced for a few kilometers before coming down and crashing in a huge ball of flame in the ravaged, burned, lifeless countryside.

From where they had all lifted off, all was deathly quiet... except for three small armor clad figures running desperately towards the building before being caught by reddish-hued transporter beams... barely seconds before the three aft sections of decapitated Klingon warships, left on the ground like headless bird corpses, suddenly exploded.

Three huge antimatter deflagrations obliterated everything left on the now totally deserted city for dozens of kilometers around, flattening the very ground over that entire immense area down to the indestructible carbon-neutronium basement.

Even through the star's local interference, such a massive tripled explosion registered clearly on their sensors.

It had been an especially tense few minutes for Artemis' chief medical officer. His command chair, while restricting in terms of practicing medicine, was gracious enough to provide him with real time updates of the team as they cleared out the opposing Klingon ships.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the teams beamed back aboard. He was even more relieved when he saw the readout letting him know Kelsey had beamed back aboard relatively unscathed.

*'I jus' know I'm gonna hav' to check her shoulder all ov'r a'gin! Why in the Sam Hill is someone recoverin' on an away team anyway?'* he thought sourly.

"Hey, it worked." simply commented the Andorian captain as if reading his mind.

Everyone on the bridge felt like laughing.

Until the main viewer was suddenly filled with the severe face of the X'ell speaker.

It was not from their faked transmission.

After being transported back to the Artemis, Kelsey Alther dashed to the bridge without another word but waving thanks at the Chief Engineer and the transporter chief.

As he reappeared at last in a familiar transporter room with the rest of the disguised six-man team, the First Officer of the Artemis smiled at N'Eligahn who had been handling all the transporter operation; literally having all their lives in his hands..

"Well done, Commander."

As Kelsey dashed off, O'Conner quietly walked down the pad and looked around.

"It's good to be back. Now, to get these feathers removed." He mumbled and headed off to sickbay, throwing a glance at the running silhouette of the Chief of tactical.

*Lets see the fruits of our labour* thought the Kalthurian heading to the turbolift.

"Bridge" Kelsey said as the turbolift shot up ten decks up straight to the command center of the starship. The disguised tactical officer rubbed the sore shoulder, the bird-like modifications making it hard for to judge where it exactly was on this gaunt, feathery body structure.

As the turbolift doors opened, the Lieutenant went to see if Josiah Sage was in his Medical command Chair.

Josiah's tensions partly evaporated as the Kalthurian appeared on the bridge. Then he saw Kelsey favoring the previously wounded shoulder. He could tell from the Lieutenant's body language that it had indeed been re-injured.

Josiah cursed under his breath.

When the X'ell speaker showed up on the main viewer, Josiah's discomfort multiplied.

*Oh crap...* thought Kelsey Alther with worry, looking at the stern face of the Avian humanoid..

They had been found out... and it wasn't going to end well for them.

For a good moment, the X'ell speaker just looked at them, evidently noticing the disguised Kelsey Alther appearing on the bridge. Finally, his fluty, windy voice filled the silence:

"Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis: you have used our technology to do violence on the *Thlin'gan* tribe. "

"Against their instruments of death and destruction, Speaker. " corrected the Andorian standing up with hands behind his back.

The bird-like alien cocked a head to a side and blinked his big golden eyes.

"So we have seen. All the *Thlin'gans* are now back on the two crafts they have left. "

"It is our hope, speaker, that what we have done will force them to flee, full of shame and empty of ammunition, back to their own world."

The X'ell looked again at them in silence, his head slightly lifted and cocked behind, a posture the Andorian captain now read as one of confusion or pondering. The speaker was looking again at the disguised Chief of security as he then said:

"Because of your deception, they will believe we did it. "

"Exactly. " admitted Kheren.

To the blinking avian creature, he then explained:

"Had we left them alone, more of your people would have suffered and died, until they would have received support and more of their kind to conquer your world and either enslave or eliminate your people... and then use its technology to bring more death to us, and then anyone else they would have seen fit to conquer. That is their way. "

"And so, you made it so they would keep their wrath solely on us."

"Hear me out, Speaker: had we shown ourselves and repulsed them as we did, your people would still have suffered and died. They would have fled only to get back with more of their kind, more engines of war, fearing we would do to them what they would do to us."

"And you would not?"

"We could have killed them all much more easily." bluntly retorted the Andorian captain. He knew the X'ell had followed each and every move they had made the moment they had tapped into their transporter grid. Possibly even before that. And so he further explained:

"*We could* have... but we did *not*. *You* never would... and they *know* it. And now, they believe *you* cannot ever be conquered: "*you*" now proved to them that you are too powerful, too advanced to be conquered... even by them... *and* us. Now, they have no other option but to flee, knowing *you* will shut them out for ever... them *and* us. They will bother you *and* us no more here."

The X'ell speaker was again visibly pondering Kheren's words. His head went to one side then the other as he fluted back:

"Still... the violence..."

"Speaker; allow me to tell you of a fable from Earth. Once there was a musician, who's talent and art were so great, even the fiercest creature stopped everything to listen to him, just sitting there in rapture, right to their very prey they all but forgot, so enthralled they all were."

The X'ell had cocked his feathery, illuminated head to the left side, listening attentively as the Federation captain continued:

"One day, as he was playing for all the beasts of the forest, came an old lion. The old lion looked at the entranced beasts, then at the master musician playing... and with one swift, brutal stroke, killed the musician and ate him. Then he just went back on his way."

The head of the X'ell jerked back sharply in shock. Kheren then added:

"As the old lion walked away, all the other animals, shocked and outraged, shouted at him: What did you do? Why did you kill this wonderful musician? He gave so much beauty to the world and to the soul, why did you give him death? He did nothing to you, why did you kill him? How could you? "

For a moment, the speaker of the X'ell obviously was asking the same. Which he finally voiced:

"Why? How could he? What did he answer?"

"Nothing. The old lion went his way, not even looking back at them. He was deaf."

For a moment, deep silence let the echoes of the tale reverberate in everyone's mind. And before they died in that of the X'ell, Kheren finished:

"Speaker: in this universe, there are unfortunately a few deaf lions; that is not reason enough to let yourself be eaten."

Silence once more stretched between them. Finally, it was the X'ell now who broke it: "You are still a savage, uncivilized race... but there seems to be hope for you."

Those words and the side nod of the X'ell were as much a thank you as Kheren would have hoped for.

"Our hope for now is that the Klingons will leave." he simply answered in acknowledgement to the hard-earned respect of the X'ell.

"Their vessels are heading for the outside." confirmed the Speaker. "And we are seeing other vessels approaching our domain. "

For a moment, everyone on board the Artemis went rigid, until the captain asked:

"More Klingons?"

The X'ell Speaker lowered his head in his typical gesture of denial.

"More of yours."

"First Fleet's task force! " voiced Ensign Tyvya from the tactical station.

"Helm! Full impulse towards the open spacedoor." ordered Kheren. Then, he faced again the screen: " Speaker: we will move out to tell our people to let the Klingons return home. We wish to prevent further conflict. "

"There is hope for you." simply answered the X'ell.

N'Eligahn watched the entire scene unfold from his bridge station. After departing the transporter room along with Kelsey Alther, he'd made sure through his combadge that ship's repairs were still well on their way before he got back and relieved M'Laress.

Dancing with the transporters had been easier than dancing with the Artemis; he had just needed to keep track of the departure point and make sure he didn't beam them into open space. With the high-speed and streamlined network of the advanced X'ell system, the entire operation had been a breeze from his point of view... but he had no doubt that it had been considerably more of a challenge from the perspective of the others.

For now he just sat at his large engineering alcove and waited for something with which to occupy his mind...specifically, keeping this entire structure from being crushed from the overpowered forces outside.

Out there in space, five powerful Sovereign class starships were dropping out of warp and closing in at a quarter of the speed of light, in a star-shaped formation, towards the gigantic construct outlined by a faint plasma like glow that was filling almost all the vastness of the starfield.

Slightly preceding the others, the command ship of the First Fleet task force showed on its sleek armored hull the most renowned starship name in History: USS Enterprise.

And in the command chair sat one of the most renowned Federation officers of all: Captain Data, the first and only artificial lifeform to ever serve in Starfleet and rise to command a starship.

The android looked unblinking at the astounding view the main viewer of his bridge showed to them. During the more than seventy years of service he had given, he had seen more cosmic phenomena and technological marvels than any living creature; he was himself one of those technological wonders, a unique man-made sentient artificial lifeform; and he had been there when the predecessor to this battleship, the Galaxy class USS Enterprise D, had found the very first Dyson construct ever discovered.

But even Data had never seen anything like the Azimuth Horizon anomaly.

"Intriguing," he mumbled from his seat, his yellow eyes detailing every subtle nuance of the fiery storm flickering in and out of reality like a flaming tornado behind dark, dense clouds.

"Captain; then reported the Vulcan woman at the science station, all USS Artemis data regarding the anomaly confirmed. The Dyson construct also correspond exactly to the parameters of the previous one in Starfleet records, except for the deflector shield and the cloaking field."

"Thank you Lieutenant Teevyn. Lieutenant Thaneb, any trace of the Artemis?"

"Negative, Sir," replied the Andorian from the tactical station. Long range sensors are disrupted by the heavy gravimetric interference of the construct and the universal background noise amplified by the anomaly when it shifts back into normal space."

"We also have some intermittent difficulty maintaining subspace contact with the rest of the task force, Sir," added the Betazoid man in the ship counsellor seat besides him.

"Any trace of Klingons in the vicinity?" asked the blonde woman in the executive officer's chair on the other side of the captain's.

"I read a heavy and recent warp trail from the general direction of the Klingon border leading to the construct, Commander Shelby." answered Lieutenant Thaneb. "It would seem a good number of Klingon warships came here in tight formation, less than two standard days ago."

"Lieutenant Stewart: bring us behind that trail towards the Dyson construct, full impulse. Counsellor Bronn, signal the task force."

"Aye Sir." both the man at helm and the counsellor answered.

The Enterprise arced to the side in a graceful but sharp curve, followed precisely by the other battleships, that brought the immense artificial sphere between the starships and the ghostly storm of the light year wide anomaly.

"Captain! I detect two Klingon warships, B'rel class, emerging from inside the construct!"

"Red Alert, Lieutenant Thaneb. " ordered Captain Data.

On the bridge of the Excalibur, the image on the screen was filled with the impressive view of the titanic artificial construct highlighted by the ghostly lights of the fiery anomaly coming and going from sight. After contemplating it for a good moment, the commanding officer swiveled his chair towards the science station.

"Mister Syntron; since you are to serve aboard the Artemis... *if* she's still out there... you must know something about this ... Kheren anomaly, don't you? "

It sounded as much like a dubious question as a mocking challenge. Syntron gave Nakamura a curious look. Apparently, for some reason, the Captain was attempting to taunt him with his reference to the "Kheren" anomaly.

Syntron without hesitation turned to the Captain and stated nonchalantly:

"If you are referring to the *Azimuth Horizon* anomaly, Captain, I could provide a synopsis for you based on the information gathered from the Artemis and her gallant crew during their first encounter with the anomaly. "

DeSalle turned his head halfway towards the tall Vulcan and raised an eyebrow:  
"Already full of the pride of a crewman, Mister Syntron? "

His remark was obviously aimed as a direct jibe at the typically emotionless Vulcan. It seemed that almost every sentence he sent Syntron's way was a test.

But before the junior Lieutenant could retort with the usual Vulcan denial about ego and pride, he turned back towards the main viewer and said:

"Let's hear now how good you are as a science officer in providing data to a commanding officer then. Humor me. "

Captain DeSalle was not looking at him, but he was not blinking either; a clear sign to Syntron's analytic mind that the man was attentively listening to him.

"According to records from the Artemis," Syntron continued "Their sensors first picked up a zone of energy and matter in what they described as being in "a state of flux", analogous to something like a powerful plasma. "

"That's what it looks like alright. " commented the man in the command chair, nosing the flickering ghost of a swirling maelstrom of fire on the large screen." But I've never heard of a plasma phenomenon this big outside of the Badlands. "

"Its dimensions, the Vulcan specified, were noted as one light year in diameter and expanding... yet containing no mass; not even residual gravitons. It was also somehow traveling near the speed of light when detected."

"I read the Starfleet report" confided DeSalle, again turning halfway towards the standing Vulcan. "The Artemis, and her green crew must have been napping to get caught by something this big and this slow... Although for their defense, an Ambassador class is an old, obsolete design..."

He was clearly jabbing at him again. Without skipping a beat Syntron replied:

"The records of the Artemis go on to note that their long range sensor scan didn't pick it up because apparently the anomaly fluctuates in and out of the space-time continuum and across subspace in an erratic manner, and it's radio frequency matches that of the universe's background radiation and therefore its existence is often camouflaged. Apparently, short range sensors detect it only when it flickers into normal space."

DeSalle was about to make some acid comment again, judging by his eyes and mouth, when the Excalibur's chief of science chimed in:

"Confirmed, Sir. We cannot lock on sensors on the anomaly. And the Artemis thorough report reveals it travels along subspace fractures; it could burst on us at any moment, faster than a transphasic torpedo the size of the ship itself..."

That brought the captain back fully towards the main viewer.

"Number One: implement all radiation and damage control protocols to full readiness. Mister Nakamura, concentrate on keeping an eye on this... thing and nothing else. We need to be alert people. We might not be as lucky as the Artemis was back then."

"There is no such thing as luck. "

DeSalle didn't turn or even give any sign he had heard Syntron. But after a few seconds, he bowed his head slightly:

"Spoken like a Vulcan... and a true science officer. "

Nakamura looked at Syntron with a smile and a "well played" nod and wink. All over the bridge, the short silence revealed how rare indeed it was to see the commanding officer of the USS Excalibur thus bested.

"Captain: signal from the flagship, Sir. "then reported the tactical officer. "Klingon force warp trail detected. Orders are to follow. "

DeSalle sighted between his clenched teeth.

"Acknowledge order. Helm; stay in formation. "

Then, after a moment, he said without even turning to address anyone:

"Next time people, I want to see things coming *before* the flagship does, even if she's flying ahead of us. I want *this* ship to be the one to dethrone the Enterprise from her lofty leading status... And we won't do this by *following* her."

"Aye, Sir." answered all the bridge officers. But Syntron's sensitive ears could perceive more tension than pride in their voices... and in the cold silence that followed.

And now, still eyes on the forward screen, Captain DeSalle was addressing him directly:

"Since you have no duty aboard this ship, Mister Syntron, you may leave the bridge."

It was as clearly a polite dismissal as could be expected from the stern commanding officer of the Excalibur. But a dismissal nonetheless. But before Syntron could make more than a step towards the turbolift door, the tactical officer again spoke, this time with more urgency in his tone:

"Captain: two Klingon B'Rels emerging from... inside the sphere! "

"Red Alert!" ordered DeSalle straightening up in his command chair.

"Enterprise confirms sighting and orders pursuit course, Sir." added the tactical officer.

"Now that's more like it, people! Engage! "

Merely scant seconds after, tactical again reported:

"Both Klingon warships turning away at full impulse towards Klingon border, warp engines warming up... now already past the sphere's horizon...They are overflowing with warriors, Sir."

"An invasion force alright." concluded DeSalle. "And they have seen us... but why don't they stand and fight? "

"Sir! There's another vessel coming out of the sphere! Much larger! ' "

DeSalle suddenly feared that they had fallen into a trap; two small vessels uncloaked, obviously to lure them while a larger force would immediately pounce on them from behind...

"A Klingon battlecruiser? " he tried to guess. But the tactical officer turned to face him with wide eyes:

"No Sir... It's the Artemis!"

Captain DeSalle, rendered momentarily speechless, turned to look at the tactical officer with a keen eye to see if this was merely a jest.

The look of the officer confirmed that it was not.

As he turned his gaze toward the viewscreen, he could now see before his eyes the Artemis arising from the ashes once again to the utter surprise of DeSalle and her crew.

"Well... I'll be damned." Captain DeSalle muttered to himself. "The luck of this greenhorn captain and her crew of tenderfoots is... astounding! "

"Remarkable!" stated Syntron with a tone of reverence, apparently the only one to hear the Captain, this time ignoring the reference once again made by DeSalle toward the resourcefulness of the Artemis' crew being summarily dismissed as merely a matter of "luck."

Captain DeSalle, reacting as if this simple statement of admiration were a personal insult to him and his ship, turned toward the Vulcan and stated with a low but menacing tone:

"Even a rookie officer should clearly understand and be able to comply with a simple directive such as being dismissed from the bridge of a ship."

Syntron simply nodded affirmatively toward the captain and headed toward to turbolift.

Before it opened, he heard the captain add, as he slowly swung his chair away from the turbolift and toward the viewscreen:

"Then again, perhaps a raw recruit may feel entitled to ignore the orders of a superior officer; especially a rookie that's been newly commissioned... and instead, focus only on their own tunnel-vision objectives."

At that moment, the turbolift doors swung open and Syntron stepped inside. He turned around and he faced toward the bridge again. He knew that the captain was again baiting him; daring him to respond.

He looked around at the bridge crew members who were pretending that they weren't listening to the banter again occurring between their strict Captain and himself, yet were totally enthralled.

Syntron then calmly said to no one in particular:

"Perhaps an officer who relies too much in his own intelligence and position may end up underestimating the abilities and ingenuity of his opponent... or his ally."

Before the Captain could respond, Syntron calmly ordered "Deck 2" and the turbolift doors brought a physical closure to their verbal skirmish.

If the man sitting in the captain's chair of the USS Excalibur thought he was through locking horns with officers of the Artemis, he had another thing coming.

Crossing his arms and his legs, he curtly ordered:  
"Get me the Artemis."

The image of the Dyson construct, filling most of the starfield even this far out, shifted to that of an old style starship bridge behind the very stern face of the Andorian captain of the USS Artemis, his silver eyes almost glowing like firing torpedo tubes in his indigo face.

"Captain... Kheren. DeSalle from Excalibur. Glad to see your old bucket of bolts didn't fall apart around you."

For a moment, the Artemis commander said nothing, his face a frozen mask; but his antennas lowered almost parallel with his metallic eyes. His deep resonant voice had a disturbing softness when he finally answered:

"Thank you for your... concern, Captain DeSalle. But rest assured, this ship flew long before yours did... and still will; long after it will be scrapped. "

The tone was all banter; DeSalle however took it more seriously as he shifted subjects:

"We have a Vulcan junior science officer here on board affected to your boatload of children. Mind you, I don't appreciate playing schoolbus here... "

"Starfleet knows the true worth of its officers, Captain, " retorted Kheren with a straight face.

It took a moment for the captain of the Excalibur to get his breath back. His tone was still short as he threw back:

"Well... Captain Kheren... If you'd care to lighten our load, you'd best find a way to get to us fast with this old lady of yours; we've got some Klingons to escort back home and I won't wait for you... even if you kids have to get out and push."

On the screen, the silvery eyes became slits of metal; but the oddest thing then happened: something almost like a smile appeared on the blue thin lips.

"Don't mind us, kids, Captain DeSalle."

"I certainly won't. DeSalle out. "

His own eyes burning, the commanding officer of the Excalibur signaled cutting off the channel, sat deeper in his command chair and barked:

"We wasted enough time here. Tactical: shields and weapons at full; Helm, pursuit course! Engage! "

His last two verbal bouts hadn't gone well. Now he needed some Klingon hides to simmer down.

As soon as the screen went off, Kheren sat very still in his command chair for a grand total of five seconds.

Then, he tapped his combadge.

O'Conner at that moment was walking down the hallways of the Artemis. His bird-like appearance was drawing more than a few looks from the crew members that hadn't been informed of the latest mission.

All the First Officer could think was: *at least they didn't dress me up as a Klingon...*

Then, just as sickbay's door came in sight, the captain chimed in.

"Number One, Kheren here: please assume control of transporter room 1. Stand by for coordinates from the Medical Command Chair. "

"Uhhh... Aye, Sir." O'Conner replied half-heartedly.

He paused, giving the sickbay door one last look before turning with a sigh, heading back to the transporter room he had just exited.

Without moving his gaze off the screen and the field of stars dotted with the impressive formation of First Fleet's Task Force Alpha, the Andorian captain nodded absently to the First officer's acknowledgement over the bridge's speakers and then ordered:

"Doctor Sage: find me a way to pinpoint that one Vulcan Science officer for transport... and quickly please."

"Ahoy, skipper." immediately answered the Chief Medical Officer of the Artemis. "Here I can hook up t' main sens'rs an' scan their crew's biosigns, no sweat."

Kheren still didn't move when he then commanded:

"Lieutenant Alther: we need to bypass the Excalibur's shields in the next sixty seconds."

And again, his four eyes never losing sight of the Federation starships out there starting to veer off to engage pursuit of the fleeing Klingon destroyers, he finally asked:

"Mister N'Eligahn: think you can fly inside and back out of that formation close enough to flake off their paint? "

The Rethian just grinned and took the seat of the Trill Ensign at navigation once again.

As the Ambassador class starship rushed suddenly forward, it overtook the speeding task force with a surprising burst of acceleration from its unique Sternback V impulse engine glowing red like a furnace behind and under the saucer section.

They were getting closer to their target... but not to their objective.

"Skipper, reported Josiah Sage, running fingers and eyes over his own command chair, eight Vulcans ovah ther'..."

The Andorian captain closed his eyes with a clear expression of "*would have been too easy*" on his face. But when he opened them again there was a new light in them and he realized aloud:

"We need only the one not assigned to the Excalibur."

"Thah one... not at any post durin' red alert!" understood then Doctor Sage.

He called up from engineering the schematics of the Sovereign class and overlapped the Vulcan biosign readings from the Excalibur. Then, with data from the tactical sensors, Josiah eliminated all the ones near active stations.

As he was doing so, Josiah realized this almost instantaneous search would have not been possible without this Medical Command Chair.

Any medical officer could act planetside; any doctor aboard could operate in sickbay; this ship even had Emergency Medical Holograms shipwide. But he, the Chief Medical Officer, was the only one who could make the decisions. Fast and efficient life saving decisions were now possible because the Chief Medical Officer was finally on the bridge, like all the other command officers, where those decisions were made. He was nothing less than the Captain of Medecine!

The potential of this bridge station now hit him like a bucket of icy water. Especially now that they were hurtling towards their target with only seconds to act.

"Down to ah pair, Skipper!" told Doctor Sage from his streamlined readings." One in a corridor on deck 9, thah other on deck 2: Officers' quarters."

"Have O'Conner transport them both." growled the Andorian as the much larger hull of the Sovereign class battleship filled the screen, so close it felt like they could all stretch a hand to touch it.

"No need, skipper." smiled Josiah, his peculiar accent definitely thickening with tension and excitement." Mah console can pinpoint an' reckon individual combadges of ev'ry crewmember assigned to their ship. Thah one on deck 2 has none..."

By the time O'Conner reached back the main transporter room, the transporter console was already flashing the schematics of a Sovereign class starship and strings of numbers scrolling rapidly. At a glance, he could tell they were not technical data but biometric signature codes. Quickly over half a dozen of those flashed green and soon were the only ones left, now showing fast-changing spatial coordinates.

"Ah the fleet arrived," O'Conner said with a small smile as he tried to make sense of the console in front of him.

It was quite obvious they were going to effect transport while at full impulse from another equally fast-moving target; no easy task, even for a skilled and experienced technician like Michael O'Conner.

"Number One! Be ready!" announced Kheren through his open combadge.

"Oi, Sir can we do anything the easy way?" O'Conner replied with a small smirk as both hands moved on the console, locking in on each signal and committing them to computer monitoring, one for each transporting pad of the teleportation system and the last two kept in transit inside the transporter buffer.

"This *is* the easy way." shot back the voice of the captain.

This was an old trick Michael had learned to do during his first rescue operation while fresh out of the Academy and serving on the USS Thunderchild. It was a bit risky, but then, you could that way beam out a much larger number of people in one pass than the normal capacity of one transporter platform.

He was about to suggest such a mass transport to the captain, sorting out the right officer later, when, at that very moment, of the eight fluctuating coordinates, only two were left... then, finally, just one: forward starboard saucer section, deck 2... officers quarters.

*Doctor Sage knows a few tricks too.* he grinned inwardly as he said:

"Locked on, Sir. "

But he couldn't effect transport; readouts showed the other ship's shields were up and would repulse the teleportation signal.

On the bridge, Captain Kheren was very well aware of that.

"Lieutenant Alther? "

"Activating ship transponder code to drop their shields... now. "

Silently, the androgyn tactical officer swore.

"Result Negative. they changed the combination recorded in Starfleet security records. "

"The Klingons are warping out, Sir." then reported Chief of Ops Relys, pointing at two flashes of light on the main viewer far ahead of the looming battlegroup of Starfleet vessels.

"Calling up shield frequency from records." then proposed Kelsey, blue fingers running all over the tactical console.

They all held their breath until, barely seconds later..

"Negative, Sir; they are rotating shield frequencies."

"Lieutenant, the clock is ticking."

The Kalthurian just nodded, teeth clenched as the large silhouette of the USS Excalibur loomed closer and closer to them. Kelsey let out a sigh.

*That's probably going to get me reprimanded* thought Kelsey, trying one last option.

At the helm, Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn was following a tight elliptical trajectory that suddenly sent the Artemis right in front of the close formation of Starfleet battleships readying itself to warp away in hot pursuit of the two Klingon destroyers, directly blocking the path of the USS Excalibur before it could follow the others.

"What is that devil Andorian doing?" exclaimed Captain DeSalle as his screen showed the Ambassador class chancing collision with them.

"Captain! " suddenly exclaimed the tactical officer: "The Artemis has locked phasers on us! "

"*What?* "

At that very moment, the forward phaser array of the circling starship flashed a long beam of green-golden hued light that struck their shields at point blank range.

"Report!" screamed DeSalle, gripping his armrests to brace himself for the impact.

But it never came.

Even his safety harness didn't activate.

"Sir? Their phaser is at... one thousandth power level!" again exclaimed the man at tactical with obvious disbelief and confusion." That would not even flake off the paint... "

On the Artemis, the First Officer however understood quite well what was going on, even if he didn't see what was happening outside; he was receiving a set of frequency readings from tactical.

Sensors hooked to the phaser beam were reading the target's shield frequency.

Not wanting to lose the signal, O'Conner locked that continuous sensor reading to the dematerialization beam and engaged the transporter.

As the Artemis swooped in and around the Excalibur, right amidst the entire task force formation, she veered off, fast orbiting in a dangerously tight ellipse the bigger Sovereign class she was firing on continuously and, as she rushed out and away from the battlegroup, pulled the Vulcan officer suddenly from his very room.

Kheren's ship was already out of range in the mere seconds it might have taken anyone on board the Excalibur to guess what could have happened; and then, they were all warping out after the fleeing invaders... the USS Excalibur last.

"Transport successful, Captain. " announced O'Conner with a grin behind his dark blue X'ell disguise.

His grin widened as he met the very puzzled expression of the tall Vulcan on the transporter pad, looking down over his Starfleet duffel bag at an unknown bird-like alien manning the console.

As Syntron looked down upon the unusual looking feathered bird-like individual that just appeared standing behind what was apparently the transporter controls of another ship, he couldn't help but wonder about the bizarre nature of this event.

Seconds ago, he was standing in his quarters of the Excalibur, and now he was in the transporter gazing at this curious sight.

*Intriguing*, he thought, as he looked down and also saw his belongings clustered around his feet. *I don't recall hearing of any life form like this in Starfleet before... what is the protocol here? Do I reach out and shake a wing or...*

At that moment, the creature moved from behind the transporter controls and sort of waddled toward him.

"Welcome aboard... Now, if you would excuse me, I need to go get pucked."

O'Conner rushed out the door and down the hallway. Clearly he hoped to be human before he was needed again. Looks had always been important to the Commander and he longed to be in his uniform and out of this "birdform."

Ten decks up on the bridge, his grin was also on everyone's face.

"Well done people." complimented Kheren with obvious satisfaction." Mister Narod, take back the helm and bring us full speed ahead back to the Dyson shell. "

"Never challenge an Andorian if you're not ready for him." whispered the Trill pilot with a smirk to the Rethian engineer he replaced at the navigation post.

"Especially teamed with Kalthurians, Rethians and Humans." added Kheren matter of factly.

Their celebration was short lived however.

"Captain!" Lieutenant Irksos called out from the science station: "the anomaly is back into normal space!"

If anyone had forgotten about the cosmic-scaled menace, the view on the main screen brought it back vividly to their eyes; space itself seemed to part open with the opening of the very doors of Hell.

Once the anomaly appeared, Kelsey Alther, who was wondering what would happen next, now wanted to plant its head straight into the console. *Even better! I really need to get a new job.*

Almost exactly where task Force Alpha had disappeared, a fiery maelstrom of raging plasma fire came out hurtling at them.

"The Klingons, Sir! Their warp trail ruptured subspace when they left! "

Not looking at the petite science woman, Kheren barked:

"Emergency impulse! Send a signal to the shell's spacedoor! Now! "

The view shifted forward and the immense Dyson shell swelled rapidly at them, like a safe port offering haven to a ship before an incoming sea storm.

And then, Lieutenant Relys lifted her head with an almost panicked glint in her eyes and an echo of disbelief in her voice:

"Sir. The door... it is still closed! It is not responding to our signal! They... the X'ell... *they are shutting us out!* "

## CHAPTER FOUR: RIDERS ON THE STORM

The starship Artemis was flying at more than half the speed of light away from the huge onrushing tongue of plasma flame spewed out from space, straight at the immense face of the stellar-sized Dyson shell of the X'ell.

On the main viewer, the vast, closed spacedoor at the equator of the titanic construct was coming at them like a wall of impenetrable metal.

"No use, Sir. The portal is not answering our hailing signal. "Lieutenant Relys reported as they all contemplated with wide eyes the colossal structure they were approaching at frightening speed, so large it looked as a flat, vertical wall expanding to the edge of the universe.

"Keep signalling." replied Kheren, all four eyes darting at the view of the incoming mass of carbon-neutronium.

"We will reach the shell in seventy-seven seconds." announced Ensign Jarod at helm, glancing nervously from the viewer to the captain's chair then back to the screen.

Now that the Federation ship had exited their artificial star system behind the last of the Klingons, the xenophobic X'ell had simply closed their access portal, shutting them all out.

The Andorian understood their reasoning: now that the "savage races" had left their closed world, they hid behind their impenetrable walls of nearly indestructible alloy and their titanic deflector field, giving the "savages" no choice but to go home and leave them be.

The Captain of the Artemis might have done just that,,, if it hadn't been for the Azimuth Horizon anomaly.

It would eventually find more than just one narrow, far away subspace fracture to seep back a single tendril into our universe like it did now; soon, it's fiery heart would come to the proper subspace frequency, pour out from every fracture in the sector and completely engulf the Dyson sphere through several layers of subspace at once and several quantum realms across the space-time spectrum... and consume everything, even a four hundred millions kilometers wide carbon-neutronium shell, its very star and its billions of inhabitants...

Just like this single jet of plasma was coming out to incinerate the starship Artemis.

"Bridge! This is engineering! " came the feminine voice of engineering assistant Blakely over the speakers. "The gravimetric field of the Dyson shell overloads the warp core's capacity to create a stable warp bubble... and the anomaly itself is weakening the polarity of our magnetic containment, draining antimatter out and multiplying the risks of a breach if we fire up the nacelles! "

They simply couldn't flee.

"Warning! collision course. Impact in sixty seconds."

The voice of the computer sounded like the toll of a bell announcing their last moments of life in this universe. They were fleeing towards the vast artificial construct that could shield them from the incoming cosmic blast, even as it would damage it; but all access portals were now closed shut before them.

They couldn't flee... and they couldn't hide.

"Warning! collision course. Impact in fifty seconds."

And even if they could flee, Kheren would not.

The commanding officer of the USS Artemis would not abandon the X'ell to their terrible fate... not when the Federation itself was responsible for it. His own morals would not let him either.

Nor the Prime Directive.

Centuries of irresponsible warp travel had made possible for the anomaly to threaten the very existence of the X'ell civilization. To correct that violation of the Federation's most sacred law and principle, even the crew of the Artemis were deemed expendable.

Kheren understood his responsibilities; even if he didn't like what they meant for his ship and crew. But even if he didn't like them also, he also understood the X'ell.

*Hopefully well enough...* he silently prayed.

"Warning! collision course. Impact in forty seconds. "

"Captain: plasma fire at one hundred million kilometers directly aft and closing fast." announced Irksos from behind him.

"We have a slight drop in power, then said the Bajoran Ops officer; depolarization of our impulse trail noticeable already. "

"Confirmed, Captain." then said the Trill helmsman, now his eyes mesmerized by the monstrous wall of metal looming closer and closer and closer. "Captain, we will not be able to veer off if we do not do it in the next..."

"Maintain course." ordered Kheren.

"Warning! collision course. Impact in thirty seconds."

Kheren sat in his chair, crossing his powerful arms over his massive chest. The silence was thickening with every passing second.

"Sir? "

"Maintain course."

The captain's voice was colder than even that of the computer.

They all looked towards the command chair. But they did not dare do so more than with a passing glance, as the hard face of death was looking back at them from the wide screen, behind a titan's flat, eyeless mask of metal.

"Warning! collision course. Impact in twenty seconds."

"Plasma fire now at seven hundred thousand kilometers."

It was clear now that, had they tried, they would have been able to escape the blazing destruction the heavens had spewed out after them before it would have swallowed them, had they taken any other direction.

But the only one left, the one they had taken, had only offered them another choice of death.

At the navigation station, Ensign Narod was now as silent as the rest of the bridge crew and, like all of them, eyeing only the massive wall of metal seemingly coming straight to crush them like a concrete wall would an egg. His slender hands were not trembling... but they kept hovering over the flight controls.

"Maintain course." ordered again the deep, sonorous voice of the Andorian captain.

"Plasma fire at four hundred thousand kilometers... closing..."

"Warning! collision course. Impact in ten seconds... nine... eight..."

All gripping their seats and clenching their jaws tight, they looked without blinking at the vast octagonal portal, closed like an eye shut so as not to see their brutal end.

"Seven... six..."

"Plasma at one hundred fifty thousand kilometers and closing..."

And incredibly, suddenly, the gargantuan panels parted open!

"Five... Four..."

"Hard to starboard on X axis!" shouted Kheren, almost crushing down his armrests as his body shifted as far as it could in the large command seat, even turning it sideways as if the gesture would shift the entire starship on a side.

"Three... Two..."

With the slowness of incoming fatality, the gigantic doors slid apart, reflecting on their pale surface the fiery rage of the skies that was hot on their tail.

"One..."

Slanting sharply on the side, the starship Artemis flew between the monstrous panels of the space portal with a scant dozen of meters to spare.

Like the proverbial bat out of hell, it went through the one kilometer airlock and shot inside the enclosed star system with a fiery display of plasma darkening and melting the immense doors in its wake... and then dying out on the half melted panels.

"We're through!" shouted Narod over the collective sigh that filled the entire bridge, from the command chair to every station around it.

The sense of relief was so intense, even the frozen face of captain Kheren was smiling.

They were all still recovering their breath when the main viewer once again shifted from the astonishing view of the enclosed solar system to that of the now familiar face of the X'ell Speaker.

Although there was little way of telling if this was the same person or somebody else entirely.

"Speaker; thank you for allowing us in. "

There was no sarcasm in Kheren's voice but the relief was still perceptible. The feathery face of the avian alien however showed nothing of what it felt as it said in its windy, fluty voice:

"You were about to kill yourself instead of running away to save your lives."

"No, Speaker: to save yours. "

The blue-black birdlike alien looked at him with his peculiar lowered withdrawal of its head, the now familiar X'ell way of expressing puzzlement. And so, the Andorian Captain, now up on his feet at respectful attention, explained:

"Running away for our lives may have saved us from this little tantrum of the Azimuth Horizon... but it would have left you alone to face the full wrath of the anomaly when it will find a path back to our space... and right on top of you. Our conscience and our own regard for sentient life will not allow us this cowardlice."

The X'ell was silent, obviously pondering what the Federation captain was saying. Straightening up, Kheren then added:

"Speaker; you have just seen the destructive power of the anomaly. Your huge space door is now but so much scrap metal. Although your replicator and nanotechnologies would certainly repair it in time, the fact is: there is no time left. Before you know it, you will not be simply grazed by a single plasma tendril but engulfed in the entire inferno."

The Andorian made a pause before continuing:

"You have seen the data. You certainly have some of your own now too. Tell me Speaker: will your structure be able to withstand a full light year expanse of what just burned down your door? "

The X'ell speaker still was silent, but now his expression showed he was listening to someone else offscreen. Finally he turned his large golden eyes fully towards the viewer and said:

"No, it will not. "

Kheren sighed.

"Then please, Speaker, allow my crew to try to work out a way to help you. We ask nothing in return. We firmly believe, as officers of Starfleet and citizens of the United Federation of Planets, that this is our solemn duty: to safeguard sentient life."

The X'ell, after a moment, nodded.

"Thank you Speaker. We shall do our best. "

The image shifted back to the interior view of the artificial construct.

Captain Kheren then ordered:

"All senior officers to the conference room in one hour with all relevant data to face the Azimuth Horizon. "

He stepped from the command well as he added:

"All stand down from general quarters. Mister Narod, hold position. Doctor Sage, please restore my First Officer and Chief of security to their former self. Mister N'Eligahn, continue supervising ship repairs... and you have the bridge until Commander O'Conner returns."

N'Eligahn nodded silently as the Captain stood to leave the bridge. He transferred all of the data he'd been accumulating from M'Laress and his engineers who since the first day had been compiling scenarios for saving the bird folk. They now had a solution to the problem.

From seeing the way the bird people had been reacting to their aid originally and their level of hostility even in the face of utter annihilation still baffled him.

As he leaned in the command chair, his eyes locked on the star directly ahead of the ship. He didn't know where the Federation was anymore. They fought in stupid pointless wars when they didn't have to, but when the time came to actually fight for the right causes they shied away and hid behind their directives.

He didn't condone reckless actions, but sometimes you had to fight, especially when it was the only thing you could do. He thought back to everything he'd read about the legendary James T. Kirk, how the great Captain would look for ways to avoid hostile actions, but when it came time to put phaser to hull he'd do it, as long as the cause was just.

N'Eligahn clenched his fists as he sat in the chair, his eyes occasionally glancing down at the display. They had the fate of billions resting on them and the Captain was having an idiotic meeting while members of the crew were dressed like birds.

He looked back up at the star. In it, he could see the distant flashes of a long destroyed station.

Then, he had been powerless to do anything except watch.

He started to dig his claws into the armrests of the large command seat.

*Never again.*

Ignoring the somber mood of his chief engineer, Kheren stepped down and went to the door leading to both his office and the meeting room. Suddenly he then added:

"Oh and send me that Vulcan science chief we just plucked off the Excalibur. We will most certainly need him now."

Kelsey Alther heard the Captain and quickly said "Aye Sir" before turning around, offering the tactical console to Ensign Tyvya standing guard at the door and heading to the med bay to get the X'ell costume off.

Once inside, the Kalthurian quickly muttered the deck the med bay was on.

"Deck 7. "

As the turbolift doors closed, Alther started playing around with the feathery costume.

"This is weird" Kelsey muttered before stopping the fiddling as the turbolift doors opened and stepping out to head for the med bay. Once the Androgyn entered, it looked around and spotted a medical crewman.

"Is there anyone available who can get this off me now please?" Kelsey said, gesturing to the body-covering feathers.

"Of course... err... Lieutenant." answered the woman, blinking a moment to recognize the Artemis chief of tactical. " Doctor T'Lynn?"

A tall, slender Vulcan woman came out of the medical office, walking with the calm, stately manner typical of her dignified, emotionless species. She looked immediately at Kelsey Alther with a blank expression on her feline face.

"Doctor T'Lynn, Lieutenant Alther is here for... pluckering."

Kelsey grinned. "Nice one nurse."

The Vulcan looked down at the red-headed woman with an almost contemptuous expression on her face; but her black eyes clearly showed how devoid of any emotional intent her gaze was; so did the coldness of her voice:

"Thank you, nurse Romita. I will take care of it... without your usual colloquialisms."

The woman was smirking, not at all intimidated by the stern Vulcan.

"It was just a joke, Doctor."

"A *very* small one, crewman."

Crewman Romita smiled still as she nodded to the disguised Lieutenant and moved off to help an orderly with storing medical equipment that had been made ready during the red alert. Doctor T'Lynn now was addressing the altered Kalthurian:

"Come with me please, Lieutenant. I shall help you remove the alterations. It will not take long; because of your natural skin coloration and slender built, you were the least altered of the away team."

As the Vulcan surgeon showed the androgyn to a biobed, they passed before the one where First officer Michael O'Conner was waiting for Doctor Sage himself to perform the same restoration. As much as Kelsey's had been quick and easy, it had been hardest on the away team leader because of his own much more imposing built and pale skin.

Fortunately, they hadn't needed to shave his short, close-trimmed beard; it had been neatly meshed and dyed with the rest of the cropped feathery facial covering.

Before being put under O'Conner looked over to Kelsey:

"I say next time we got to dress up as some Aliens, we make the captain do it."

There was a lot of poultry jokes flying around his biobed at the moment.

Kelsey heard the jokes and laughed:

"Oh dear, poultry jokes? Did everyone I know get high on something I missed out on while I was on a mission? Or is everyone just in a good mood from escaping from yet another near death experience onboard the Artemis?" the disguised Kalthurian enquired before leaping onto the biobed and laying down.

Nurse Romita was preparing O'Conner on the next bed and couldn't resist retorting:

"Well, you know, Lieutenant: birds of a feather... "

Doctor T'Lynn was the only one not smiling or giggling at the remark. But her tone had that very small trace of annoyance as she ordered:

"Nurse, I require epidermal biosolvent grade 6 please. "

As Alther's gaze was clearly wondering despite the large golden lenses giving her an already wide-eyed stare, the nurse passing on the bowl of medicinal cream added with a wink:

"Sauce for the goose."

"Humans..." simply commented Doctor T'Lynn to Kelsey with the faintest hint of resignation in her icy tone.

Josiah walked into Medical and could instantly sense the merriment. Not one to cut down on high morale considering the ship nearly ran headlong into the X'ell's Dyson shell, he made his way over to Commander O'Conner.

He smiled at the XO.

"Well, howdy, Commander. Yew ready to get outta that there yard bird suit?"

Josiah made quick work of O'Conner's disguise, whistling a jaunty tune while as he did.

"Okay, XO. You're all set," Doc Sage said when he finished. "Iffin' yew feel any itchin', an' I mean any, jus' let us know an' we'll give yew some antipruritics, alright?"

O'Conner slowly sat up in the bed and turned to the Chief Medical Officer, and stretched his neck to the side.

"Uhh... Thanks, Doc. Any problems?"

Before Josiah Sage could even answer he added.

"How long was I out?"

Then quickly added again:

"When will I be ready for duty?"

And then again:

"Where is my uniform?"

Doc Sage looked at the XO, gave a wry smile, and answered the man's questions in order,

"No problems on yew I can detec'. Not f'r very long. You're ready now. Your uniform is in the locker a meter to your righ'. "

And he pointed at the mentioned locker.

"Not that it's my place ta' tell yew your duty, but I believe the skipper is waitin' on a report from yew."

Doc Sage indicated the door out of Medical.

"I'll be catchin' up with yew momentar'ly, Sir."

O'Conner stood up and walked over to the locker. Then he slowly opened it with a smile. Inside hung his command uniform.

"It's good to have you back."

Quickly he got dressed and headed out before Doc's out. With a large smile on his face, he walked down the corridor towards the turbolift. He was quite happy to be human once more and in his uniform.

He stepped in and nodded to the crewman already in the cabin.

"Olympus"

Then with a whosh they were off.

"Sorry Brooks." O'Conner said with a smile, as the turbolift came to a stop.

The crewman raised an eyebrow in surprise that the XO knew her name, but didn't reply as O'Conner stepped on to the bridge and gave her back the turbolift.

"Commander N'Elighan, Report!" O'Conner ordered as he moved to lean against the railing behind the Chief Engineer.

"Everything's operating, the ship hasn't blown up in the last ten minutes and the sun is still in the same spot," N'Elighan said with a small smile as he stood up in the chair and acknowledged the XO. "Repairs are underway and progressing well. The Science Officer has begun his analysis of the anomaly and the sphere."

He nodded at him once again.

"I'll be returning to engineering to ensure everything continues to run smoothly, Sir," he added as he passed the XO and entered the turbolift when it arrived, stepping into it and waiting for the door to shut behind him, not waiting for an acknowledgment from the XO.

Relys watched N'Elighan leave the bridge in a hurry, clearly distracted. There was only one other time she'd seen him like this.

After KelseyAlther had destroyed the Tempest and the Captain was throwing her into the brig.

N'Elighan made his way down the hallway of deck 21, his hands shaking, his eyes fixed on the corridor ahead of him. He went over everything in his head time after time, what would need to be done, how it could be done and would it work.

They'd done the calculations. It would be possible and even likely. But they wouldn't accept it. It would possibly anger the bird folk and they couldn't let that happen.

He turned the corner into engineering and caught Blakely's eyes.

"Sir, everything's proceeding well," she said. "To be honest, we came off better riding this wave than the one that brought us here."

N'Elighan moved around to a side console and began to rapidly type into it.

"Everything okay, Sir?"

"Just running a quick diagnostic," he said. "Everything's fine."

He stopped and looked at her, a smile on his face.

"You and the other members of the team have been performing better than I could have ever expected."

He entered another series of rapid keystrokes before he nodded at her.

"I'll be back in a few."

He turned and left engineering, moving quickly down the hallway. He entered his quarters and Monty began to yip at him. N'Elighan paused for a moment and knelt beside the little dog.

"I don't know anymore..." he said. "Nothing's...like I thought it would be."

Monty cocked his head quizzically then ran over to the replicator, yipping some more.

"Dog food number five," N'Eligahn ordered the machine.

When the food appeared, he put it down for the little dog.

Then he turned and removed his combadge, placing it on his bed.

In sickbay, having completed the restoration of all the disguised way team members, Josiah turned on his heel, and walked away from the First Officer and into the Chief Medical Officer's office. *Josiah's* office. He sat down at his desk, and kicked his feet up onto it, and let out a sigh.

As great as it felt to even momentarily be directly with a patient, it still felt lackluster.

"Now this is a chair fit for a chief med'cal off'cer," he murmured to himself, thinking about the bridge command chair. But it would get some used to and some time to forget old obsolete ways of doing starship command medicine.

He noticed then his personal PADD blinking a new message notification.

"Now, how in the hell did I get a message?" he said aloud to himself.

He checked the time it was received.

"Well, how about that?" he said. "The split second the ship leaves the shell, and I getta letter from home right through the interference."

He played the transmission. Josiah's father appeared before him.

Jeremiah Sage looked exactly like Josiah, save for the hair color, and fullness of moustache: all silver compared to Josiah's brown. And the elder Sage's facial hair was a moustache alone, but much more full than his son's.

"Hello, boy," the message began, "how yew doin' out there on the final frontier? Heh-heh! I always found that there funny: we play here at home as the frontier, an' yer out there livin' it!"

Taking a moment to regain composure, the elder man continued:

"Anyways, I was hopin' to talk to yew direc'ly, but it's easy to assume yer out savin' lives in some such manner. Have yew done any surg'ries since reportin' to the Artemis? I bet yer helpin' all manners of folks in the sickbay yer at. I hope the chief med'cal off'cer onboard don't keep yew up too late at night! Heh-heh! "

Again a pause to catch his breath and then adding:

"Anyways, yer momma's doin' jus' fine, as are Jane and Charlotte. They all love the life we live back here at home. Abigail, though, seems to be takin' after yew! She's started talkin' all manners of joinin' Starfleet's Med'cal Corps jus' like her older brother! She's been talkin' to the recruitin' folks an' their fillin' her head about all the hands-on work the med'cal personnel in Starfleet get to do. 'Helpin' people in their time of need is what Starfleet doctors are all about,' she keeps sayin'. Damnedest thing, ain't it? Always knew she looked up to yew, Joe, just didn't figure her for the spacefarin' type!"

Jeremiah looked down for a moment as though wondering if he should say what he had to say. The older man's jaw set, and the determined look on his face was one Josiah knew well.

" Listen, boy, I know yew said yew were over that Orion hussy that broke yer heart in the Academy, but yer momma an' I know you better'n that. We know the only reason yew followed through on Starfleet was b'cause that girl said you'd ne'er make it when yew started strugglin' in yer second year. Yew think to yerself she left yew b'cause yew couldn't make it. An' when yew did graduate, yew came to find she'd already moved on. That's life, boy. It hurts, sure, but it's real."

The pause in the message allowed Josiah to stem images and feelings now flooding him, just enough to listen still:

"Now, my youngest daughter is talkin' about followin' yew into the great unknown. I gotta tell yew, something like that scares the hell outta me. Hell, yew bein' out there scares the hell outta me! I... "

Jeremiah stopped, realizing he'd started going deeper than he had intended.

"Listen, son. The Doc Holliday position opened up. Before you'd met the Orion girl an' gone off to the Academy, you'd always expressed the int'rest in that role. I can hold on'ta it for another month for yew, iff'n' yer still int'rested."

Jeremiah sighed, suddenly looking older.

"Yer mother an' sisters all send their love and support for you. I do too. Wholeheartedly, I love and support yew, no matter what. Write us back soon, son."

The transmission ended, and Josiah's face was a beet red. During the message he had put his feet down on the deck, and became shades more violet until he was as he was now. His jaw set, looking the spitting image of his father.

Doc Sage could feel the anger rise up, and a little snap went off.

He flung his PADD like a discus at the nearest bulkhead, the sound of it smashing almost pretty to Josiah's adrenaline-filled mind.

He stood up, paced for a few minutes, and stormed out the door of his office, past some of the stunned medical personnel, and out into the passageways of the Artemis.

Kelsey woke up just in time to see Josiah storm out. The Klathurian shook off any grogginess, found a fitting uniform in a nearby locker and put it on quickly.

"Thanks you guys, try to avoid those terrible poultry jokes" the restored chief of security said with a smile while leaning in to nurse Romita:

"Keep up the terrible jokes by the way." the androgyn whispered before chasing out after Josiah.

Kelsey looked quickly around and noticed the doctor and chased after him.

"Doc!" the feminine-looking lieutenant called out, running to catch up with him to put a hand on his shoulder: "You alright?" Kelsey asked with a tone of worry.

Josiah whirled around on the androgyn at the touch. His face was a livid whirlpool of rage. A snarl was etched where a light smile usually lay, making his face almost unrecognizable.

When he recognized Kelsey, his features instantly softened.

"El-tee, hey there," he said, with a touch of embarrassment and confusion on his face. His face then changed to one of concern.

"Yew should be restin'! Especially after that last away mission! *Damnation!* Yew were all tore up from that shockwave, an' then sent out to git blasted at b'fore yew had a chance to heal up! What're yew doin' chasin' me down when yew should be recoverin' in Med'cal?"

"I might have a bugged shoulder but I was needed; maybe it wasn't the most brilliant idea I have ever had, but what are you going to do about it now?" the Kalthurian said.

Kelsey's head shook.

"Rest may be needed, but I can rest later and when I see people storm out like you did, I tend to make sure if they are alright. Speaking of which, you never did answer my question." Alther said, crossing arms. " And don't tell me you are fine. I saw how you went out and I saw that snarl." the chief of security finished, with arms still crossed, looking at Josiah's eyes with worry.

Josiah stopped short. What could he tell her? There were so many things bubbling in his mind. Trying to separate the thoughts in his agitated emotional state seemed impossible to him.

However, if the thoughts could be sorted out, they would have come out verbally like this:

*Hey there, Kelsey. Oh, yew wanna know what's on my mind? Well, there's quite a bit, but if yew hav'a moment, and yew really wanna know that bad, then I c'n tell yew.*

*'Well, where to start? Okay, my father jus' tol' me what I'm already thinkin': this is all a bad idea. Oh, what's a bad a idea yew ask?*

*'Well, in a word: ev'rythin'.*

*'Me bein' in Starfleet f'r starters. What in the hell am I doin' out here? I'm no damned spaceman! I'm a terra firma lovin' country boy jus' wantin' to holla' 'cross the pond!*

*'My complete an' utter lack of direct contac' with patients I could be helpin', but instead I'm a glorified communications officer an' transporter chief. My place is in sickbay, not the damned bridge! I joined Starfleet to be a surgeon, dammit!*

*'No, wait. I didn't. I didn't join to be a surgeon.*

*'I joined Starfleet to impress Leeann'Eeta. Leeann'Eeta, the most beautiful Orion this side of the milky way. I became a doctor because she told me that's what she wanted. She said xenosurg'ry was the hottest thing this side of Sol! And then she left! She left f'r a damned parrises squares player! An' I promised myself, I PROMISED, I would not allow myself to ever fall like that for someone again!*

*'An', dear Kelsey, this is where you come in. I've only known you for less than a few standard hours, an' already, when I look into your sapphire eyes, I meLieutenant The sound of your voice makes my head turn in your direction ev'rytime! When yew were o'er on the Klingon ships, I was concerned f'r more than just a doctor to his patient!*

*'An' I can't even begin to describe how many ways me feelin' this is wrong! A doctor feelin' for his patient? A junior officer feelin' for a senior officer in his chain of command? And le's not even git started on the gender issues!*

*'What in the nine levels of tarnation am I thinkin'? Did my father's message really bring all of this to head? Or is it just the straw breakin' the cattle's back?*

If they could be sorted, Josiah's thoughts would have come pouring out exactly like that, telling Kelsey everything he wanted to say.

But Josiah didn't say anything like that at all.

He wouldn't. He couldn't.

Anger.

Pride.

Fear.

These were why he wouldn't. These were why he couldn't.

Instead, he said the first thing that came to mind:

"I jus' received a letter from my father back home. He's jus' expressin' his concern for his son, is all. My pa c'n really git under my skin when he wants to."

He smiled, hoping Kelsey would buy it.

*'Please buy it,'* Josiah pleaded silently.

Kelsey read his body language as he thought and finally spat something out.

*Yeah that isn't it* felt the Kalthurian; but, seeing his discomfort, Kelsey Alther backed off :

"I can see that" the androgyn said with a half smile.

*I hope he'll be fine* Kelsey quietly thought before turning the half smile into a full one, adding:

"I'm always here if you need to talk. We should probably head to that meeting now, it's getting pretty close right?" the security chief then enquired, changing topics.

Josiah breathed an internal sigh of relief. He then smiled back.

"Yeah. Sure. Le's head on o'er to the meetin'. Lead the way El-tee."

When Kelsey Alther started walking, he went too, all the while "feeding small talk to the elephant in the corner" as they used to say on Earth.

\* \* \*

Still a bit disoriented by the abrupt transport and the departure of the curious birdman after but a curt welcome, Syntron just stayed on the transporter pad, puzzled and uncertain.

Red alert had sounded; an odd whine rising in pitch repeatedly, not the monotone low ringing he was accustomed to.

The Vulcan immediately understood that he could only be on the Artemis; the old design of the transporter room alone, with its state of the art console, was an obvious clue: such blending of the old and new could only be found on the refitted Ambassador class starship, which schematics he had thoroughly studied upon learning of his new assignment.

Protocol required for an officer to direct him either to the captain, the First officer, his post or his quarters.

But there was no one in the transporter room now but him.

Then the door whooshed open and two technicians and a security officer rushed into the room.

"You! Who are you...? Sir?" growled the security Ensign, a thickly bearded Tellarite with bushy eyebrows frowning deeply at the Vulcan Lieutenant in a science uniform.

His phaser was still at his belt but his stubby hand was not far from it.

Syntron just glanced down at the security officer and technicians with a raised eyebrow and stated nonchalantly "Syntron, Chief of Science Officer of the USS Artemis".

They didn't seem to know what to do next as they just stood there like a couple of wax figure relics from an old museum trying to determine the authenticity of this stranger on the transporter pad.

"You must be the welcoming committee I presume?" Syntron added with a bit of a sarcastic inflection that he picked up from classmates at Starfleet Academy.

The Tellarite seemed to only grumble at this comment and kept his eyes squarely on the Vulcan, yet his pudgy hand seemed to move slightly away from the phaser on his belt.

"Identity confirmed, Mister Graalthrii. " said one of the technicians, a tall Human female, with a master Chief petty officer rank on her black and gold uniform. Looking down at a readout on the console.

"Syntron of Vulcan, Lieutenant Junior Grade, assigned to NCC 64121 USS Artemis as Chief of Science, stardate..."

"Alright, alright, alright." growled again security Ensign Graalthrii.

They were all three looking more and more nervous as seconds went by under the alert klaxon and the reddish lights flashing all around. From here, it was hard to guess what was going on; but despite their low ranks, they were all trained Starfleet officers and crewmen, well-prepared to face the direst crisis.

And to Syntron's acute perceptions, they all three looked like this was not by far the first crisis they had faced.

"Well don't just stand there! Get to your post... Sir!" barked Graalthrii to the Vulcan.

The portly security officer gestured to the other Human in the room, an Asian-looking athletic fellow of Petty officer rank, but the Vulcan lifted a hand to stop him and keep him at his post.

He needed no guide to exit transporter room 1 and find the nearest turbolift to get to the bridge, ten decks above. His long stride brought him quickly to the cabin and he ordered the lift to deck 1.

As the doors parted open before him, he was greeted by a scene he would have expected from a crew coming home after a long and difficult, death-defying patrol. Emotions ran high across the entire deck.

He glanced at the main viewer and saw for a moment the image of another bird-like humanoid, just like the one that had greeted him, disappear to show the unbelievable sight of a system-sized hollow sphere with an inner surface looking nothing less than that of an M class planet, enveloping a yellow star.

His contemplation was distracted then by a deep, soft voice to his left saying:

"Oh and send me that Vulcan science chief we just plucked off the Excalibur. We will most certainly need him now."

Syntron glanced at the origin of this soft yet commanding voice and saw the muscular Andorian almost at the other door giving access to the bridge opposing his. And, as if on cue, he responded as he stepped toward the captain:

"Science Officer Syntron reporting for duty Captain." he said as formally as could be expected under the current circumstances.

Kheren looked around, antennae perking up, now eyeing the tall Vulcan officer the turbolift had deposited on the bridge. Turning completely around and straightening himself to proper attention, he answered the formal greeting by saying:

"Lieutenant Syntron... Well, if your timing is always this impeccable, we just might succeed against all odds here. Would you please join me in my ready room?"

He stepped a bit and showed the door next to him, his callused hand inviting Syntron to step through with him.

Kheren guided the new officer of the Artemis to his office, and showed him one of the chairs before his translucent desk. As he did so, he went to the replicator near it on the wall:

"Captain's brew."

In the replicator slot appeared in a swirl of light a glass cup of thick, greyish liquid with the rim crusted with white crystals. Taking the drink out, the Andorian turned to Syntron and asked:

"Can I offer you something, Lieutenant? Excuse me if I indulge myself, but it has been quite a long day so far."

Syntron nodded respectfully and approached the chair that was presented to him.

Upon hearing this offer coming from the Andorian Captain, Syntron paused and looked at him, and after a moment of pondering stated informally:

"Vulcan Spiced Tea... hot."

When the cup materialized in the slot, the Andorian was careful to bring it to the Vulcan holding the saucer under it. Even then he could feel the uncomfortable heat from the beverage. When a Vulcan said "hot" it meant "boiling" to a Human... and "scalding" to one of his own kind.

Going around his desk, Kheren sat in the high backed chair and sipped once on his own drink; at room temperature, it was more than hot enough for him. He gave the Vulcan a few moments to settle in and enjoy a bit of his drink too, even if he knew the science officer would already be fully ready for anything he would throw at him.

The commanding officer of the Artemis activated his desk PADD and brought up the Starfleet record of his new bridge officer, from the data he himself had provided on an isolinear chip upon arrival in transporter room 1.

From the small screen he read aloud:

"Syntron, born on stardate 62840.9, son of Kalelothran, administrator of the Vulcan Security Directorate, and of T'Maire, Historian and Archivist in the Vulcan Ministry of Information.

Joined Starfleet Academy on stardate 79141.8, graduating on stardate 82556.3 as Ensign in the science department. Participated in a number of starship training missions: most simulated, but also on several ships as a temporarily replacement for crew members on short-term leave. Impeccable Starfleet record and admirable success leading to assignment with the rank of Lieutenant junior grade to the elite Lotus Fleet division of Starfleet, assignment on stardate 87053.6 to deep space exploration starship USS Artemis, as Chief Science Officer."

The Andorian blinked a few times and then turned his silvery gaze towards the Vulcan:

"Anything you wish to add to this summary, Lieutenant?"

"The summary is quite adequate Captain Kheren," Syntron began as he sipped on his simmering tea, "but I would like to add that I am genuinely honored to serve aboard this exploration vessel as your Chief of Science officer. "

He paused for an instant and then added:

"I was intrigued by the swift, yet I may presume unconventional approach taken to... transfer my commission to this ship."

The Andorian looked genuinely surprised by the Vulcan's feeling, and then smirked as much as his few facial muscles allowed him to:

"Well, you don't throw the book away until the last page... but we're slowly starting to become infamous for adding new chapters."

After a moment of silence between the two officers, Syntron stated:

"Having observed and interacted with Captain DeSalle on multiple occasions recently, I would estimate that his level of cooperation in expediting this transfer process would occur... at a very minimal degree."

"Captain DeSalle certainly earned well his command of one of the five leading ships of Starfleet," then retorted Kheren. "But on a ship as underpowered and venerable as the Artemis, the crew is everything. As a new captain, I am blessed with an extraordinary staff: Commander O'Conner is a Starfleet veteran and former chief engineer; Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn is an ace pilot, and experienced as much as a chief engineer himself as a chief of ops, the most decorated officer in all of Lotus Fleet; Lieutenant Alther has seen more crisis and brushes with death than anyone alive in Starfleet and always came out on top; and Doctor Sage is a topnotch Medical officer, despite his youth, who already helped us save an entire species. I believe, you, Lieutenant Syntron, might but enhance even further this... high degree of cooperative level."

The Andorian now glanced again at the readout and his antennas perked up:

"A musician... Vulcan Lyre and a Terran violin. I hope we will have an opportunity to sample your talent and mastery, Lieutenant."

"I have not been in a position to perform before an audience on many occasions Captain Kheren. " Syntron replied. "Although the opportunity to perform... perhaps with other crew members at some appropriate point in time, could potentially be an intriguing endeavor. "However," Syntron added, "I must acknowledge that my proficiency with the Terran Violin may not yet be to the standards fitting for a public performance."

Letting a moment of silence pass, Kheren finally looked at the Vulcan again with an unblinking stare:

"Lieutenant, I'll leave the pleasantries for later and get right to the point: I have to tell you that your arrival is most fortuitous. The Artemis has been refitted with the very best Starfleet has to offer in scientific study and research, bar none... and her science crew may be still green but nevertheless is the most experienced of all regarding what we are facing. But this crew still needs someone who can lead them and guide them efficiently."

He made a pause and sat deeper in his chair before continuing:

"Lieutenant Irksos has done a great job so far in substituting for no less than two science chiefs, but she has neither the will nor the way to do it on a permanent basis. How did she put it? Ah yes... She's a lab rat, not a top dog."

Obviously, the Andorian was a little puzzled by the Human imagery; but he brushed his confusion aside to add:

"She can provide all the data and first-hand experience this crew has on the phenomenon we are committed to face. But we need someone well prepared to lead the team. There are billions of sentient beings right here whose lives will depend on what this ship will do... or fail to do. And it will all rest on our sole understanding of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly... how we deal with it... and *if* we can deal with it to save this entire solar system."

He looked again straight at Syntron with his unflinching silver eyes:

"Are you up to it, Lieutenant? "

Syntron look at the intensity on the Andorian's face.

"As the Terrans might say, Captain... that is a tall order," Syntron began. "Nevertheless, I am fully prepared to take on all of the responsibilities that this position and this situation require. As a Vulcan, I am sure that you are aware , I require very little rest or nutrition for extended periods of time; especially in the type of circumstance we are currently facing. In these matters related to emergencies and stressful conditions, I do not have extraneous emotions inhibiting my progress. "

Then he added:

"As a scientist, I am well versed in a variety of subjects and procedures to expand our knowledge and aid in our decision making process. Through extensive research, statistical correlation, and pattern recognition using available tools, such as our nine classes of probes, I will lead our science teams to conduct appropriate experimental investigations as a means to gather, extrapolate, analyze and present information and options to you whenever we conduct a meeting to debrief; such as the consultation about to occur here momentarily."

Kheren sat forward, joining his hands in front of him on the clear surface of the desk, looking at them without really seeing anything. He seemed to think for a moment and then his four eyes looked up again at the Vulcan:

"We already have complete data from our first... encounter with the anomaly... inside and out. Irksos will make it fully available to you in astrometrics on deck 14. We will need a solution to stop, divert, reverse or do anything else you can come up with to save this civilization... and ourselves. And you have but one hour to understand it all and come up with it... or validate anything our other departments may come up with. Indeed... a tall order."

The Andorian straightened up, putting his hands flat on the desk to finish with a sigh:

"But, is it not why we are Starfleet officers? "

Syntron carefully placed his cup back on the plate, looked at the Andorian sitting across the table with the weight of an entire civilization resting squarely on his broad shoulders and simply said:

"Indeed it is, Captain. Therefore I should begin working toward a viable solution immediately."

The captain nodded.

"Last but not least, they say... Although fighting off an intruder without starting a war and violating the sovereign rights of another culture or our own ethics was no child's play; any idiot would just have ran away, not taking time to think things through... or worse: started shooting and crash it all down on our heads. Fortunately, the best officers Starfleet has to offer were here to do the right thing the right way. I am confident you will prove yourself worthy of them and of what we all stand for, Lieutenant. "

Kheren stood to face the much taller Vulcan, signifying the end of their meeting.

"In forty-five minutes, I want you with the rest on the senior staff in the conference room with either a solution to our... weather problem, or enough hard data to validate what the others might come up with."

He looked a moment longer at the new chief of science of his ship before finishing:  
"Welcome aboard the Artemis, Lieutenant Syntron. "

"Thank you Captain Kheren. " Syntron replied, as he nodded in respect to the Andorian standing resolutely before him.

"I shall go directly to Astrometrics to meet with Lieutenant Irkos and begin to devise a solution to cope with this anomaly; or as the Terrans might express it, figure out a way to "grab this tiger by the tail."

Syntron then turned away from the captain and headed out of the office.

On the way to the turbolift, he glanced to his left at the diminutive portion of the interior view of the shell that filled the viewscreen. Many lives were now relying on what practical resolution they would be able to formulate over the next 45 minutes.

He entered the lift as soon as the doors opened and stated firmly:

" Deck 14 "

As the turbo lift doors closed and it began its descent, Syntron closed his eyes to center and focus his thoughts. His lifetime of training and preparation were now facing an ultimate challenge, and there would likely be no time or opportunity for second chances. A resolution must somehow be discovered and ready for implementation within the hour.

The doors to the turbolift parted almost immediately after stopping, revealing the spartan hallway of Deck 14. Syntron exited the lift and headed straight toward astrometrics.

Upon his arrival, he was greeted by a flustered yet eager Lieutenant Irksos. Looking methodically at the taller Vulcan she stated emphatically:

"Lieutenant Syntron, Captain Kheren notified me of your arrival here, and you couldn't have come at a more critical moment. We're down to about 43 minutes to figure out a way to either contain this anomaly or devise some way to protect the X'ell. At this point I don't know how we would resolve this even if we had months to work out and test a solution... but 40 some minutes?" she concluded; obviously exasperated and overwhelmed.

"I understand the devastating nature of what we are facing Lieutenant and our very limited timeframe, so perhaps we should begin by briefly reviewing together all of the data and information that we know about this anomaly before worrying about determining an immediate solution." Syntron replied in a calm and reassuring manner.

The petite black woman went to the central set of consoles in the astrometric labs and recalled the data the Artemis had gathered from its initial encounter with the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, adding the recent data scanned; up to the moment they had been again chased off by an energy tendril back under the relative protection of the Dyson shell.

On the holographic display before them appeared a representation of the X'ell artificial world and, hovering over it like a fiery cloud, the immense anomaly dwarfing even the system-wide construct. On the screen behind, data poured down in complex formulaes they both already knew.

Irksos then noticed some new detail on the Dyson shell and turned around to face her new chief:

"Sir... the portal we went through is severely damaged and still open to space. Since we know how to detect it now, we could send a class IV probe out there to warn us when the anomaly would reappear. With its six detachable modules, it would allow enough coverage to have us ready in time."

"Excellent suggestion Lieutenant" Syntron began. "Assign the beta shift to work together to calibrate the probe and have it ready to launch expeditiously."

He thought for a moment and then added "Assemble key members of alpha shift to prepare for a series of computer simulations. I want this team ready to test our proposed solutions as we come up with them."

"Then consign gamma shift to thoroughly analyze the specific damage done to the portal of the shell we narrowly arrived through, and monitor the detailed process by which the shell is being restored. Perhaps there is something we can discover in their methodology that could be applicable in some aspect of our solution." Syntron concluded as he focused his attention on the information, images and graphics represented on the holographic display.

"The solution is here Lieutenant," Syntron spoke quietly, almost to himself as he gazed at the display, "We just have to uncover it."

"Probe is ready, Sir. " reported Valencia Irksos after a moment. "Since we launched initially to study in depth the anomaly, calibration has already been done hours before we arrived here. You may signal the bridge to launch it at your convenience."

Syntron nodded in affirmation. "One less step brings us that much closer to a solution Lieutenant."

He then reached up to activate a communication badge on the chest of his uniform, but there was no badge there to signal the bridge. He briskly walked over to the nearest intercom and signaled the bridge.

After the communication officer responded Syntron declared:

"This is science officer Syntron, notify the captain that we have a class IV probe ready to launch through the current opening in the shell."

He then added: "Also, have a communications badge sent to me in Astrometrics Deck 14. Syntron out"

It didn't take long for him to receive his combadge; and for his message to get through:

"Bridge to Captain Kheren. "

"Go ahead Lieutenant Relys. "

"Sir, then said the voice of the Bajoran woman over the intercom, science officer Syntron wants to inform you that a class IV probe is ready to be launched through the opened spacedoor. "

"Early warning system... understood the Andorian; very well; have Commander O'Conner supervise the launch when he'll get back. "

Cutting off the channel, the commanding officer of the Artemis stood up and went to the narrow transparency giving him a breathtaking view of the hollow world. For almost the entire time left before the meeting, he just stood there, antennae slowly wavering as he was deep in concentration about what they were facing.

Up until now, they had managed to make successful first contact with an advanced, enlightened species and repulse an intruding force without starting a general war. But now, what they had to face was even more challenging than those two accomplishments combined.

Nothing less than avert a cosmic-scale catastrophe.

For a moment, it unexplainably reminded him of a joke he had heard at the Academy, about two Ferengis retired on the beaches of Risa, and one asking the other: "What are you doing here? What about your business?"

"Oh it went down, said the other; a big fire you know. Insurance paid up and here I am. But what about *your* business? "

"Oh it went down, mine too. A big flood you know. Insurance paid up and here I am"

"Ah. " said the other.

But then, after a moment he asked in turn:

"Tell me one thing though: how do you start a flood?"

Even now, Kheren still didn't understand it; Human humor was so... alien. But there was one thing he understood even less:

*How do you stop... a flood of fire?*

While the captain was alone with his thoughts in his office, on the bridge, his orders were implemented without hesitation:

"Sir the class IV probe is ready." Lieutenant Relys reported.

In the captain's chair, Michael O'Conner paused a moment as he thought what that was for... then he smiled.

"Very good. Launch the warning probe. Make sure to contact the X'ell if we detect anything."

The Ops officer nodded and launched the probe. It went straight for the demolished spacedoor back where they had come, then split in six smaller sensor devices that spread out to scan the immediate area.

Then the Bajoran woman turned and stood up.

"Ensign Narod, please take the Operations console," she said.

The Trill nodded at her and walked over, another junior flight officer taking his now vacant seat.

Relys walked into the turbolift and waited for the doors to shut behind her.

"Deck 21."

As the turbolift isolated her from the bridge and the rest of the ship, the Bajoran leaned against the curved wall made an effort to calm herself.

It was not easy.

Relys knew well how irrationally impulsive and stubbornly reckless her Rethian friend was.

But she knew also how hard on discipline and duty an Andorian could be, for himself and all others, be they above, besides or below them.

And their captain was most *definitely* Andorian.

She also remembered that captain Kheren had ordered N'Eligahn to report to his ready room after dealing with their Klingon pursuers... because of his blatant disrespect of the First officer on the bridge... and N'el had yet to report to him. The captain was obviously giving rope to see if he would use it to guide himself back up the right track...or hang himself with it.

And now, N'Eligahn was down the same wrong pattern that had him once thrown into the brig of the Spectre; and the captain of the Artemis was clearly not as tolerant and forgiving with upstart, gung-ho officers like Captain Daniel Summers had been.

Even the volatile Kelsey Alther had obviously understood that...

*Oh, N'el...*

She was almost running when the cabin doors wooshed open with a sound like her own breath sighing and she went straight for main engineering.

But Relys didn't see the chief engineer anywhere. And she had clearly heard him tell the XO he was heading here.

"Lieutenant Blakely: where is Mister N'Eligahn?"

"He should be back shortly, Lieutenant. " answered the blonde technician.

"Did he say where he went?"

"Not that I recall... just went in then said he'd be back in a few. Something wrong, Lieutenant?"

Instead of answering, the ops officer tapped her combadge:

"Relys to Lieutenant-Commander N'Eligahn..."

"Chief N'Eligahn, please respond..."

"Computer: locate Lieutenant-Commander N'Eligahn."

"Lieutenant-Commander N'Eligahn is in his quarters."

That made the Bajoran blink a few seconds.

*Sudden illness? He would have left for sickbay... Dereliction of duty? No, not N'el... Insubordination, possibly... but he never hid to do that before...*

Almost too hard, she tapped another channel on her communicator:

"Relys to Narod."

"Narod here, Lieutenant."

"Don't move, don't say anything, just listen: reconfigure your secondary panel to science functions and do a shipwide scan: locate Rethian biosigns and send the coordinates to engineering auxilliary station number... 3. And quickly."

"Lieutenant? What..."

*"Just do it! Now!"*

"Got him, Lieutenant."

Barely a few minutes later, N'Eligahn finally packed the last of his tools into his bag and walked over to the door. As it hissed open, it revealed Relys standing there, her hand a millimeter from the call pad. Her eyes looked him up and down then quickly narrowed.

"Looks like I was right," she said.

"Move," N'Eligahn said.

"Not a chance," Relys said. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" She took a step forward, forcing him back into the room. The door hissed shut behind her.

"I'm doing what needs to be done, what no one else is doing," N'Eligahn said.

"Storming out like a spoiled brat?"

"You wouldn't understand," N'Eligahn said.

"Maybe not, but I can see," Relys said. "And what I'm seeing is someone shirking their responsibility and going off on a flight of heroic fancy." N'Eligahn said nothing and just glared at her as she blocked the door. "Did I strike a nerve?"

"I'm going to save people, actually make a difference," N'Eligahn said. "No one else seems to care and I'm tired of just watching as people make decisions that damn lives."

"And *you* know better?"

"Yes."

"And that knowledge tells you that whatever idea you have cooking in that spiky brain of yours will be better pulled off in a cranked-up shuttlecraft than this ship?"

"No, but I'd know it'd get done," N'Eligahn spat. "Now please. Move."

She crossed her arms.

"And be an accessory to a mutiny? No. Have you even listened to a word I've said?"

"Yes, and I...I just can't. I can't just stand by and watch something else be destroyed when I knew I could..."

Relys moved quickly to the side and clocked him square in the jaw with a solid right hook, knocking him backwards and spilling the contents of his case.

"You need to wake up," she said. "Stop diving so deeply into yourself that you forget about those around you. You had a few terrible incidents. We all have, welcome to life. You have two options *Commander*," she spat; You can either gather the contents of that bag back up and go on your little crusade of righteousness and make a single, solitary difference alone... Or you can pick yourself up off the floor, stop trying to be all brooding and complex, put those pips back on and show THEM what the right thing to do is. It's your call, *Sir*."

"Relys...I," N'Eligahn said.

*"All senior bridge officers report to the conference room,"* chirped the combadge from the bed.

"Just remember there's still people here that give a damn about you," she said as she turned and left him lying there.

\* \* \*

After the launch of the probe, O'Conner leaned back in his chair and pulled a PADD that he had brought with him. On it was a letter from an officer he knew from the Thunderchild, his first starship assignment. He didn't notice Relys leave her post as he quietly read the letter to himself with a smile.

Minutes later, Kheren's voice came overhead.

"All senior bridge officers report to the conference room."

O'Conner almost jumped in his chair as he dropped the padd.

"Lieutenant Rel..." O'Conner said as he turned to where Relys should have been.

O'Conner sighed and looked to Ensign Narod.

"Where is Relys?"

Seated at the Ops station, the Trill stood up ramrod straight to answer:

"Commander Sir, Lieutenant Relys is in Engineering, Sir. She ordered me to Ops here while she went down there for some checkings prior to our next task, Sir."

It was all true... although maybe not all of the truth, guessed Narod. But O'Conner then tapped his combadge.

"Commander O'Conner to Lieutenant Relys. Why are you not at your station?"

Ugly flashbacks of his previous tour of duty flashed in Ensign Narod's mind and almost made him wince. He felt like an old, cold shadow fall over the bridge, like a very bad feeling...

Like a... spectre.

The turbolift doors wooshed open and out of it came the voice of the Bajoran ops officer:

"Sorry, Sir. Chief N'Eligahn urgently needed a hand to adjust a few things straight, so I gave it to him."

Relys went straight to him with a calm, resolute expression on her closed face and stood at attention besides him.

"I heard the captain's call for the senior officers' meeting, Sir. Ready to take over. I will call the briefing room if the X'ell contact us again or at the first signal from the monitoring probe."

O'Conner quietly listened to Relys and then paused a few moments before replying.

"Very well, but do not leave your post again without an order or requesting to leave. This your only warning, Lieutenant."

O'Conner spoke firmly as he looked Relys in the eye before standing and moving towards the meeting.

"The bridge is yours, Lieutenant." He finally said before stepping in to the corridor leading to the conference room.

As Relys took the center seat, Narod sat back at her own station with a telltale look... one that did not escape his own replacement, Ensign Sheeneea, at helm.

"Good to remember that we follow *Starfleet* rules on *this* ship. " said the Andorian shen to no one in particular.

"Tell that to the dead Xell on the surface, Ensign," Relys said back, at her station.

Since the XO was so adamant about her remaining at her station, she intended to remain there.

*Insult me then give me the bridge, classy,* she thought.

"Indeed Lieutenant. Without them, we would *all* be dead... and they under Klingon occupation, all chances at a successful contact lost for good and the Federation on its way to a general war."

The Andorian pilot didn't look at Relys behind her. Her growing anger would much too easily flare up looking at her and hearing such typical Bajoran arrogance.

*No wonder the Spectre had known chaos with people like that onboard* she silently told herself. *If she really expect to stay on Captain Kheren's ship, she better learn fast to be an officer.*

The coldness on the entire bridge told how much her sentiment was shared by the other officers around them. Even Ensign Narod from his foremost station could feel how the former crewmembers of the USS Spectre were suddenly singled out because of their attitude.

Relys smirked a bit. Were they really so uptight and mindcontrolled that they could only swallow the things that the captain and Starfleet spit at them? Could any of them think for themselves, or was it just easier to follow in the wake of the great captain Kheren?

She said nothing else, knowing it wouldn't do any good for the sheep around her. She glanced over at Narod who frowned but gave her a slight nod.

It was becoming more and more apparent about this ship that they were far more interested in following the book of rules to the letter rather than doing what was right.

Maybe she'd given N'Eligahn the wrong advice after all.

As if on cue, the Engineering officer entered the bridge he glanced over at her and she gave him a small smile, but she could tell he felt the uneasiness in the room. Without a word, he went through the opposite door to get to the meeting called by the commanding officer of the Artemis.

Kheren as usual was already waiting in the conference room, in his now typical stargazing posture near one of the wide windows, all four eyes on the sprawling panorama of the immense artificial world surrounding them. But his thoughts were looking far beyond even the distant confines of the enclosed solar system.

*We are slowly gaining the respect and friendship of an advanced, more enlightened sentient species. We averted a quadrant-wide conflict with a bitter, former ally still prisoner of its own aggressive limitations and with minimal loss of life. We did all this without compromising what we all stand for... and because we all worked together...*

Those thoughts seemed comforting; yet, the Andorian sighed:

*We could have failed so easily at every turn... sneaking in to help the X'ell despite themselves and so despising their way of life... One premature phaser shot or one torpedo too many against the Klingons and acting like the savages we brand them to be... We have prevented a war and made this first contact, our very first, a success. Are we going to lose it all now because of a mindless freak anomaly of nature? Or... a bad decision?*

He closed his eyes a moment as if to better look at the turmoil in his soul.

*Am I going to destroy all that we have accomplished here with an ill-conceived plan, acting out of a rash decision based on my feelings instead of the facts? Am I going to follow my own rules and ignore what centuries of Starfleet experience is offering me through its own... Or will I have to because they might not be enough?*

He opened his eyes and turned around, as if his faraway gaze could embrace everything and all of the starship around him.

*It was so easy when I was but the Chief Tactical Officer of the Lotus back then; I was only responsible for my part, and even then, MY wrong decisions, my mistakes, were to be assumed by my captain... alone. But now, I AM the captain. I AM responsible. I, alone... before my conscience, before my crew, before Starfleet, before the Federation. How can I alone find the right decision to make?*

Kheren's metallic gaze suddenly rested on the triangular conference table and the empty seats surrounding it.

*I can not.*

The Andorian then took a deep breath and finally relaxed.

*No one can take upon himself the fate of an entire crew, even less of an entire world, alone. No one can pretend to act like a god and fall, bringing everything and everyone down with him. That's why First officer Michael O'Conner is here; and Doctor Josiah Sage; and Chief Engineer N'Eligahn Etarudbo; and Chief Tactician Kelsey Alther; and now Chief Scientist Syntron... THEY will be with me here, so that together, WE will find the correct answer; WE will make the right decision... WE will succeed. Together.*

But another thought then flashed right behind his unworded vote of confidence to his crew.

*I am the Captain: I bear alone the failure of making the wrong choice from what they offer; but we will ALL harvest the fruits of success... together... as long as we work together... not one alone.*

He straightened himself and now more than ever eagerly waited for his officers to join him.

The pride he felt to be with all those officers, so dedicated to bring in common all the best they were and had for the good of all, in fact deeply humbled him.

*That is why I am so blessed to be the captain of the USS Artemis: because of them. We are all together in this. THAT is what Starfleet is... THAT is what the United Federation of Planets is all about.*

As the bridge officers of the Artemis entered the conference room to sit around the large triangular table, Kheren now stood at his own customary place, still looking at a tridimensional display of the Dyson shell they were in and of the much larger Azimuth Horizon anomaly that could appear and jump on it at any moment.

The new Chief of Science, the Vulcan Syntron, had already updated their extensive data with studies he had done during his long day of travel from Starbase 24. He had been hard at work with his department, without rest, in the space imagery bays.

*Barely aboard and still on the job with his entire team... already a fine officer, but a lot rests on his shoulders now... Will it prove too much for him... like the others?*

The captain expected a lot too from his new Chief Engineer; the Rethian had in fact left for main engineering the moment the First officer had relieved him: no doubt to study in depth and prepare all the technical possibilities this ship would offer to implement whatever option they would find to save this huge world.

*If he could just tame his emotions and learn discipline... what a great officer he could be.*

Michael O'Conner's own engineering expertise and long term experience would be invaluable in bringing out a viable solution to their cosmic-scaled problem. The captain of the Artemis hoped he could rely on them both... but, most of all, on the First officer's actual ability to do his main job: properly handle the crew.

*I will have to talk to him about that... See if he is willing and able to do it... or if I will have to find a new XO.*

At that moment, the First officer of the Artemis sighed softly to himself as he entered and looked around the room, nodding to those that were there before sitting down to the right of Kheren's chair.

Kheren looked at him a moment but refrained for the moment to inquire about his uneasiness. He put his fears and doubts aside as he instead considered Kelsey Alther and Doctor Josiah Sage.

Both would not be as crucial for the next challenge facing the Artemis; not like they had been when there was a Klingon problem and a humanitarian crisis before that. But he had already started to value the point of view of both officers because of their unique individual perspectives on things.

*Kelsey is turning out to be a better officer than anyone ever could have imagined.*

The Andorian's thoughts went to the doctor then. He had perceived the uneasiness of the man working in the new Medical Command Chair besides him. The novice officer obviously was not comfortable with the new station like Doc Nasaro-Myth, the brilliant former CMO, had been...

*Have I promoted him too fast? Kheren of all people knew the feeling. My fault then.*

Thinking of the doctor's reluctance got him back to think about his Chief Engineer. He too was definitely ill at ease on the bridge and clearly uncomfortable working with others, especially superior officers...

*Is it just because he clings to the old ways of the grease monkeys of the past century.... or something much more serious? the captain wondered. He too came from the USS Spectre...*

Kheren suddenly realized something then... But for the moment, he brushed it aside. It was too disturbing to consider it for the moment when there was a catastrophe to prevent.

*If anyone should appreciate the frustration of being rocketed unwillingly to the burden of command, it should be me.* the Andorian chastised himself silently.

Now looking at the officers seating themselves with him, he nodded to himself.

*As soon as we return to Starbase 10, I'll offer them both the option to step down back to lesser work and responsibilities. The needs of the entire ship don't have to be their aches if they don't want it. With all they have done already here, they deserve at least that much respect from their commanding officer.*

But now was not the time for management: now was the time to find a way to save an entire civilization.

Arriving promptly at the officer's meeting in the conference room. Syntron immediately sat down. His advent to the Artemis had been accomplished with such remarkable swiftness while the entire crew of this ship was so intensely immersed in dealing with these ominous circumstances that he had not even had the opportunity to actually meet the other bridge officers.

There was not time for such formalities. Each officer was tasked with trying to develop ideas and have recommendations ready to present and share with the captain and the other bridge officers, in hope of ascertaining a resolution to the anomaly and its impact on the X'ell.

Once all of the remaining bridge officers had arrived, he could sense that Captain Kheren was prepared to get this meeting started. The clock was ticking, as the expression went, and they were indeed caught in a race against time.

Right besides the Vulcan, Doc Sage sat at the table with the other senior Artemis officers. As he settled into the chair he couldn't help but think to himself this material was more comfortable than his post on the bridge.

*I wond'r why that is,'he thought with a smile on his face. Yew'd think they'd wan' the senior officers to stay awake here jus' as much as the bridge!*

He let out a quick, involuntary laugh. When the other officers at the table looked at him, his grin only widened. Before they could make any remarks, he waved a hand of dismissal.

"Don' mind me, folks. Jus' rememberin' a limerick tha's applicable to the situation we're in," he said, still chuckling to himself. He clasped his hands in front of him in response to the stares.

"'Nother time, p'rhaps."

He cast a furtive glance in Kelsey's direction, almost as if to make sure she was still there.

Kelsey Alther sat in the meeting in a zoned out state, not completely aware of things. The androgyn barely registered most things unless its name would be called. Kelsey had so much stuff to think about, most of the outside world wasn't registering.

*"She does look nice,"* came Abigail's voice again. *"Yew really should ask her out."*

Josiah sighed inwardly. This was getting out of hand, especially when other crewmembers were astute enough to ask him 'what is wrong?' He had to nip this in the bud, and nip it now.

*"Abigail, he thought, yew know you're jus' a figment of my 'magination meant to bounce rational thought off of emotional thought, right? "*

*"Well, duh. You're a doctor. An' I'm yew. I know what yew know. Wha's your point? "*

*"Well, Abby, I ain't gonna go fer this one. I'm doin' what I should'a done with Leeann'Eeta: I'm lettin' go. Kelsey's a damn fine officer, an' I ain't gonna go tear-assin' 'round the ship, beatin' myself up over 'nother woman jus' 'cause I'm projectin' onto her what I los' at the 'cademy. It ain't healthy, an' it's coun'ner-productive."*

Josiah heard Abigail's laugh.

*"Good fer yew, big brother. Good fer yew!"*

Josiah felt his sister's presence fade in the back of his head. He smiled again, and gave Kelsey a wink.

He looked at the collection of people around the table, and realized there was one person missing: the chief engineer.

"Now, where is that toothpick-headed feller?" he mumbled quietly to himself.

The Rethian engineer entered as if in answer to his question. His arms contained several PADDs and holographic emitters as he entered the conference room and arranged them neatly in front of his chair next to the weird-speaking doctor.

"So how's your day going, Doc?" he whispered.

"I'm feelin' purdy good, actually. Bett'r than in a while. I was also jus' askin' about yew, believe it or not," Doc Sage whispered back. "When this is all ov'r with, yew an' I should get some drinks togeth'r. I hear tell yew're the feller with some stories."

After the brief exchange, Josiah sat back in his chair and settled himself up to listen intently to the briefing. He didn't want to miss any details, but, as he didn't have anything in his field of expertise to offer at the moment, he remained quiet.

Across the table, the distracted Alther noticed N'Eligahn come in and it snapped the tactical chief out of limbo, noticing that the meeting should begin soon

*Time for my uselessness to commence,* the Kalthurian thought quietly.

Kelsey looked at the display hovering over the triangular table and wanted to just get up and walk away. The kalthurian had reached the end of the rope with this anomaly.

*Why can't we just have a nice peaceful mission anymore?* thought Alther.

Still standing up before his own chair, Kheren was looking at his command crew assembling and slightly frowned at several details his sensitive receptors couldn't help but notice.

His First officer's expression was closed as he sighed looking around the room; he knew enough of the man now to know that as a sure sign something was upsetting him. Kelsey Alther had almost slid unnoticed into the room behind the doctor, not saying a word or doing anything to draw attention from the others, but eyeing the bearded human with a definite expression of concern. Something was bothering the Kalthurian too, but it seemed more personal than it was for Michael O'Conner.

The doctor himself had entered in some kind of highly emotional state; his skin was flushed, his body odor and temperature higher than normal, his heartbeat slightly elevated, his face drawn in hard lines... and speaking in whispers. Even not knowing him that much, the Andorian was familiar enough with Human body language to feel he too was deeply upset.

The newest officer of the Artemis, science Lieutenant Syntron, had come in and sat with the typical Vulcan controlled professionalism expected of someone like him. but Kheren immediately saw that he was at least as aware as his new captain of the emotional uneasiness in the room. His logic would certainly consider it a normal byproduct of the present situation when emotional beings were concerned.

But Kheren knew it was not.

O'Conner and Alther had been aboard the Artemis when they had faced the anomaly before. So had been almost the entire crew back then. There had been tension of course, as any life and death situation would inevitably cause... but not this chaotic brewing of mixed emotions seemingly unrelated to one another. And they even had a voluble, grumpy old Tellarite chief engineer on board at the time.

Something was happening aboard... something that was starting to force itself into a subtle pattern in his mind. And he didn't like what he was starting to see.

Not at all.

With auditory senses equal to a Terran dog, the Andorian heard Doctor Sage's derogatory whisper right besides him as clearly as if he had said it directly to him. He didn't like that either. But before he could chastize the Chief Medical officer about it, Chief Engineer N'Eligahn Etarudbo, arms full of padds and emitters, entered last and seated himself, acknowledging only the doctor's presence as he took the other seat on the same side as Sage and Syntron. The Rethian had visibly been hard at work this past hour. But that didn't ease Kheren's growing bad feeling. He noticed the engineer sitting besides the doctor instead of the Chief tactical officer as would have been expected, then whisper to Sage... he did a lot of whispering the Andorian recalled... apparently casual banter that needed not being whispered... But most of all, Kheren's four eyes noticed the elevated position of his head spines...

And the welt across his jaw.

The Andorian captain briefly glanced at his First Officer.

There was a storm coming... and not just outside the ship.

Kheren straightened up and put his hands behind his back. Dealing with the cosmic storm would come first. Then he would deal with the smaller one among his crew swiftly enough.

Indicating the tall Vulcan on his left, the captain broke the false silence and calmness fouling the ship's atmosphere:

"May I present to you first our newest crewmember: Lieutenant Junior Grade Syntron. Lieutenant Syntron, meet Commander Michael O'Conner, First Officer; Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo, our Chief Engineer; Doctor Josiah Sage, our Chief Medical Officer; and Lieutenant Kelsey Alther, our Chief of Tactical and Security."

Letting the Vulcan acknowledge each of the other officers, the captain then added:

"Mister Syntron is now our assigned Chief of Science. His arrival could not have come at a better time. Or should I say a worse time?"

Slightly nosing towards the double tridimensional display over the center of their three-sided table, the commanding officer of the Artemis didn't waste any more time:

"Gentlemen, here is the situation: thanks to your expertise and discipline, we managed to avoid plunging the Federation into a war while dislodging an invading force, at the same time helping a peaceful, advanced culture fend off this invader... All this you did without compromising our own ethics and openly respecting the territorial sovereignty, laws and ethics of this people, thus opening a door to future relations that would otherwise had been closed forever. Well done gentlemen. You have shown today what it truly means to be Starfleet officers. My report to Lotus Fleet Command will highlight *all* that each of you have done. "

Then, the Andorian leaned forward, putting both his strong callused hands flat on the table and darting all four eyes at each one of them in turn to say:

"But that was the easy part. "

Sure that he had all of their attention, he continued:

"Most of us are already intimately familiar with the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, what it is and what it can do. All of us are now quite well informed about the X'ell world; even Mister Syntron, who thoroughly studied our astrometrics data for the past day and our recent discoveries for the last hour. We have no time to ask Starfleet for assistance and no way of knowing even how much time we actually have. So let us cut straight to the heart of the matter:

He nosed again each display in turn as he asked:

"How do we save *this* from *that*? "

*You bloody well don't*, Kelsey Alther answered inwardly.

The Kalthurian knew this was probably being pessimistic, but being the Chief Tactical and Security Officer, all this anomaly stuff was beyond reach. Sure, basic science was taught at the academy, but this anomaly was a reminder of just how far behind Kelsey had fallen in scientific terms as of late.

*Shame there isn't a simple answer for this*, the androgyn with a small frown, showing frustration with this phenomena they had to face again.

As if reading her mind, the Rethian across the table then declared:

"The solution to the problem is actually more simple than one would expect."

N'Eligahn stood, carrying two PADDs over to the controls of the large display floating over the table. He brought up a new image of the shell as a whole, envelopped with two layers of colors.

"As we've seen, the shell itself is protected by a combination deflector and cloaking field that's projects from emitters all around the shell itself," he detailed, gesturing towards the holographic image. "This has successfully kept the X'ell hidden for centuries, which means it's powerful and, more importantly, reliable."

He shifted the main image of the hovering projection to a display of the Kheren Anomaly.

"We've also found that the primary defense against the effects from the anomaly are metaphasic shields, which were unfortunately not given to us through...hopefully, a misunderstanding..."

He kept his eyes to the hologram as he further explained:

"So, since the cloaking is now rendered somewhat ineffective by the presence of the anomaly, as evidenced by our Klingon friends, I propose that we seek out the hub for the overall control of the emitters, which I believe we've already located through our interface with their systems. There we can adjust the cloaking field and deflector field to power a massive metaphasic shield."

He straightened to look back at the others in turn.

"If we use the power already relayed from the current defensive systems to that, I believe it won't be an issue. With the shield up, it should protect the shell itself from the anomaly until such a time that the anomaly itself is no longer a threat; in which case, we can revert the systems to the current dual shield set up and let the X'ell return to their happy, Federation-less lives."

He stopped his gaze at his commanding officer to finish:

"All that and we likely won't have to put a boot down on their dirt."

Kheren thought about it for a brief moment then nodded.

"Looks pretty good to me, Mister N'Eligahn."

The Andorian had immediately felt in the words and voice of the Rethian his contempt for the builders of the sphere, but he didn't raise any issue over it. Warrior cultures invariably despised pacifist ones and, of all people, had the hardest time even understanding the very basis of the United Federation of Planets and the rules of Starfleet safeguarding this ideal. He fully understood this attitude, being himself from a proud, passionate, violent people with eons of bloodshed even between brothers and sisters, parents and children.

Kheren himself had started to see things clearly only after his own hands had been drenched in blood.

He just hoped that, in time, the chief engineer would also understand things better, without going through the pain and regret he himself had to live through... and not just for the sake of his career or of his posting aboard this ship...

Because, if anything, this precise, concise solution to a vast problem he gave just showed what a tremendous asset he could be.

Kheren now turned eyes and antennae towards the Vulcan seated at his left:

"What does our new chief of science think about this solution? "

As N'Eligahn spoke, Kelsey stayed quiet once again until he mentioned modifying the X'ell's technology.

"Is it even possible for us to get the X'ell to allow us to modify their technology or convince them to modify their own on our behalf? We aren't exactly considered the most enlightened people to them" the Kalthurian then said. "Would they think their technology could be retroengineered by us if this happened? Would they think it to be... defiled by us?"

The androgyn paused before adding;

"It's a good plan. I'm just worried about the X'ell's response and if we can get them to go for it. "I don't think they appreciate us right now for getting rid of the Klingons... and going behind their backs once again could make things worse. "

Alther looked down slightly to finish saying:

"Just putting it out there. "

*Way to put a damper on our plans to save a race, Kelsey,* winced the Lieutenant inwardly. The captain nodded again, this time to his Tactical Chief:

"Well put, Lieutenant. Your concern is legitimate. There is no question about us "going behind their backs" as you say. We're Starfleet: there is a reason after all why we are not using cloaking devices to deal cowardly or treacherously with other people. "

The Andorian paused a moment before continuing:

"Granted, we did hide ourselves to deal with the pursuing Klingon squadron in our own way... because of our duty; but even then, we removed the immediate threat without warring openly on the invaders and in this, we respected their law as well as our own. And it was more for the Klingons' benefit than theirs as I strongly suspected they would have been aware of what we were doing anyway. We finished chasing them off without further loss of life, and afterwards the X'ell openly approved of our actions... which we all knew they would have been monitoring the second we started using their own transporter grid." Straightening up, he added then for everyone:

"We could just warp out of here now and leave them to their grisly fate. In fact, they are surprised we did not. We are not going about this for ourselves, but for the X'ell... and they know it. So, they have accepted our help... for the second time. "

For a moment, he looked again at N'Eligahn.

"As we have seen, they have no qualm about us offering our technology to them and combine it with theirs when lives are at stake. That's why Mister N'Eligahn's solution is quite appropriate."

Kheren looked again at Kelsey, offering a very Human wink:

"But of course, we will tell them first. "

Syntron listened carefully as the discussion began while glancing one-by-one at the bridge officers sitting around the conference table. There was a palpable tension that seemed to linger beyond the anxiety of these dire circumstances; cloaked under an eroding visage of etiquette that seemed on the brink of collapsing at any given moment.

Clearly, the ongoing high level of stress on this crew was wearing down these officers' tenacity and fortitude, along with the protocol needed to collectively address and resolve this crisis.

But then, Captain Kheren snapped Syntron's attention right back to the matter at hand with his interrogative.

Syntron gathered his thoughts for a moment and then proceeded to explain:

"We are still gathering information on the anomaly's impact on the shell itself and analyzing the manner and methodology in which the shell has responded to affect repairs. There is a reasonable probability that the X'ell employ a distinctive procedure to maintain and secure the integrity of this shell that we could potentially expand on as a means to prolong its vitality; at least until we are able to nullify the immediate lethal effects from this anomaly."

Then he supplemented:

"Perhaps, this suggestion by Officer N'Eligahn to integrate the cloaking field and deflector field to power a massive metaphasic shield could indeed be a viable method to enhance the integrity of the shell while we continue to study it; and it may even allow everyone additional time, so critical at this point, to continue exploring our options in regards to the anomaly."

He pondered for a moment before continuing, as if he was continuing a process of recalibrating the information as it was being presented.

"This leads to the main focus of our science teams: the anomaly itself."

He drew in a breath and looked at the officers around him.

"Since this anomaly's main problem is hypothesized to be a result of subspace fractures due to extensive damage by centuries of warp travel, and since it phases in and out of our time-space continuum... perhaps we could come up with a plausible solution and methodology to repair or seal up these fractures; at least in the immediate areas in proximity to the Dyson Shell."

Looking straight at his commanding officer, the tall Vulcan stood at attention to report:

"We have been striving in our science teams to affect any method to accomplish this, even on a small scale, but have yet to determine one." he declared with an almost disappointing tone. "Therefore, if this is deemed a worthwhile endeavor by the captain and bridge officers present, then I would advocate that our teams coordinate our efforts together to help devise a means to this end; each from our own area of expertise: even if it purely theoretical and utterly unconventional, in addition to working on the metaphasic shield."

Syntron then concluded:

"We'll obviously need to implement any solution we develop while this anomaly is still out of phase with our time-space location; before it reemerges and perhaps resolves this crisis in its own devastating manner."

Again, the Andorian captain pondered on the new proposal for a moment then finally said:

"Sounds like a good plan B to Mister N'Eligahn's. Start working on it, Mister Syntron. If anything, it might provide us with a long term possibility to get rid of this thing when it will reach beyond this system and strike at the rest of this sector... and beyond."

They had all seen the projections: unchecked, the anomaly would reach the boundary of the galaxy in less than a year, swallowing everything in its path.

The head of the captain rose up sharply at that moment; looking at tactical Chief Alther, his mind, distracted by events on board, just now registered what the Vulcan had come up with.

*Closing subspace fractures...*

His mind went back in a flash to his youth; something deep inside his mind that usually only surfaced as a nightmare when he went to bed under stress.

*The frozen lake... the crackling ice rushing at where he had been left to die... the tall form running before the fissure, striking the ice to crack it further... running away with the crack roaring behind... the cold layer over the waters suddenly opening wide...*

Kheren wasn't sure why he felt his past now so vividly connected to the present. But he deeply felt that his new science officer had touched upon something of vital importance.

He just wasn't sure what... yet.

And then, abruptly, the Ferengi joke popped up again in his mind.

*How do you start a flood? How do you STOP a flood...*

But for now, the immediate concern was saving the X'ell civilization.

"Any security concerns you might have with us following immediately on our chief engineer's proposal, Lieutenant Alther? "

"Judging by our past experiences with this anomaly, Sir, we should most likely have Doctor Sage enable radiation protocols and have medic teams prepare for shock trauma and plasma burns."

Kelsey paused and looked at Syntron next.

"We should also have Lieutenant Syntron calibrate the sensors to detect subspace fractures for one of the worse case scenarios: we get trapped again," the Kalthurian proposed quietly before quickly shifting attention to N'Elighan. "We could also reinforce the inertial dampeners, emergency shutdown the warp core and rely on batteries for propulsion, inertial dampeners and shields. Also organise damage control teams to counter any hull breaches or plasma leaks."

The Chief of Security then looked at everyone:

"I can assign Security teams to the medical and engineering teams as needed and also, needless to say, we should all wear our PIDs... unless we want to end up like I did, which I can assure you, did not feel all that great."

With a half smile, Alther turned to the captain:

"That's all I can think of for now, Sir."

"Very well, Lieutenant. See to it. "

The silvery gaze then went to the bearded man seated between the Vulcan and the Rethian.

"Doctor, you will have to supervise all the medical teams aboard the ship, any emergencies in sickbay, monitor the entire crew's physical and mental state during our confrontation with the anomaly... also for the population on the surface... and possibly help me convince the X'ell if they balk at Mister N'Elighan's plan. Any recommendation from your part? "

Doc Sage nodded, and said in a jovial tone:

"I tol' yew once b'fore skipper: I'll be yer huckleberra. Don' yew worry none 'bout that. Now, as f'r me an' mine; I still have all shifts not on duty standin' by in case of, well, any some such that may spring up like a jack rabbit in springtime. On top of that, all EMH's on the surface are reportin' they too are still standin' by f'r f'rther instruction. As SA f'r yerselves, they are all still in their Sunday finest waitin' to be put back into their normal Type one an' Type two shapes. As a side note, more than one EMH has made commentary 'bout the feathers hamperin' their abilities to perform at peak 'fficiency."

Josiah then changed his tone to one of sincerity.

"It's hard tellin' what the X'ell may or may not go f'r. They seem straigh'forward in their adherence to their cult'ral status quo, but when it comes to their self-pres'rvation, they balk at doin' anything we may consider necessary to save lives. In med'cine, when the patient says, 'I refuse treatment' the physician is required, not only by law, but moral obligation as well, to back off."

The CMO ran his hand over his moustache and beard.

"I believe the Cheng's idea to be sound and in keeping with both the Federation's obligation to help as well as the X'ell's wishes for isolation. However, if the X'ell say no to what we're plannin', then who're we to force treatment on them? We may be the cause of what ails them, but if they don' want the help we have to respect their wishes. It pains me to lay it out like that Skipper, b'cause to me, it's jus' too much like admittin' defeat."

Kheren straightened and respectfully lifted his head before the Chief Medical Officer of the Artemis.

"It is never a defeat when you do the right thing. And the right thing is to be true to our own ethics and our own laws, which, you so aptly point out, Doc, are based *most of all* on the right of every sentient being to his own beliefs and self-determination. It would be indeed utter defeat if we were to impose ourselves and our own sensibilities on these people. More than that: it would be *wrong*."

After a short moment of silence, he then lowered his head and winked at the Human, saying:

"But that doesn't mean we can't at least *try* to convince them."

Sitting down in his own chair, the Andorian finally turned towards the man seated right besides him:

"Anything to add, Number One? You're an engineer yourself; you can certainly best of all among us evaluate our Chief Engineer's proposal."

O'Conner had quietly watched the meeting, his mind on other things.

When Kheren turned to him, he paused a moment before replying:

"It should work if the X'ell agree. If they don't, I would suggest we leave the shell. I am not sure the Artemis would be able to survive if the shell would collapse."

"Agreed. Plan a secure route for us if we have to leave... including options if we get caught into the anomaly again. I suggest you apply Mister N'Elighan's plan to the Artemis. Let us forget bureaucrats and implement our own metaphasic shielding." said the captain before turning to the rest of the officers assembled.

Kheren had no doubt the experienced Commander would prove up to the challenge, especially with all the preliminary work the Chief Engineer had already completed.

"Mister N'Elighahn, start preparations for implementing your plan as fast as possible. We have no clue how long we may have."

The captain was confident, judging by the number of padds and isolinear chips the Chief Engineer had brought, that he was more than ready to do so.

Kheren just hoped he, all of them, would indeed have enough time.

"Lieutenant Alther, full security protocol and assistance as you proposed."

The Andorian truly wished they would not have to face the terrifying phenomenon again; but if only one ship could face it, it was the Artemis and her crew. He knew Alther would make sure that they were ready for the worse.

"Mister Syntron, keep working on an alternate solution with your staff... And keep close watch with our warning probe group out there."

Whether or not the Vulcan and his team would soon find some other solution was not worrying the Andorian; his research would at least prove invaluable when Lotus Fleet would have to deal in a definitive manner with that cosmic catastrophe.

For the moment, helping the X'ell and safeguarding his ship and crew were the priority.

"Doctor Sage, get everything ready up here and reconfigure the planetside EMHs to their standard parameters to have them resume their work."

Once more, the captain of the Artemis was gratified to have his Chief Medical Officer besides him on the bridge, where information and decisions could instantly be shared, able to do more than any medic in sickbay and at the same time ready to help him with his own duty:

"On with it, people. I am going to talk with the X'ell right now."

As the officer's meeting was reaching its conclusion and the officers began to rise and gather their materials, Syntron continued to contemplate the subspace fracture predicament. He began to recall something that had been lurking persistently in his subconscious. Polaric ions... they were capable of generating power on a large scale, but among other devastating effects, they were also capable of generating subspace fractures.

*What if...*

"Captain" Syntron began as if an epiphany had reached out and struck him like a powerful tendril of the anomaly; since polaric ions are capable of generating waves of subspace fractures, perhaps we could inverse this process as a means to neutralize these fractures. "

He stated his theory as the ideas and words were forming and flowing almost simultaneously.

"We could recalibrate the deflector dish and use it as a means to generate an anti-polaric ion field around the ship, while also aiming concentrated beams of anti-polaric ions directly into the fractures as they appear." he then proposed. "Theoretically, this could have the effect of neutralizing these fractures... sort of stitching them up as we travel parallel along these subspace fractional lines... "

He paused and contemplated for a moment, then continued:

"Our one ship may not be able to neutralize enough of these fractures to contain the anomaly, but if this process works, then perhaps a coordinated strategic approach with the remaining fleet ships in the area could be devised to close in and trap this anomaly into a proverbial corner. "

The Andorian didn't have to think long to appreciate what his science officer was conveying... and what it meant:

"You may just have found the solution for this catastrophe... if it works." acknowledged Kheren.

Then he looked at the Vulcan directly:

"There is no better time than the present. Mister Syntron, start working on the proper deflector dish calibrations. As soon as Mister N'Eligahn and Mister O'Conner are ready, we will first protect the shell, then the ship, with the metaphasic shields... and then, we will move out. Lieutenant Alther will fire the anti-polaric ion beam at the fractures threatening it. We shall see soon enough if it does work."

Letting all his bridge officers leave the room before him, Kheren took a moment to look again at the holodisplay of the anomaly and the Dyson shell, seeing in his mind the immense construct replaced by the much smaller, much more fragile disc of Starbase 10... then by the grey and white orb of Andoria, his homeworld, circling the giant gas planet Andor...

With an abrupt flick of his finger, he flicked off the holoimage.

O'Conner walked quietly out of the room behind all the others to get back to the bridge. He glanced at Relys and frowned a bit as he noticed her position before moving to stand before his own chair.

Kheren's eyes were slivers of motlen silver as he headed last out of the room, walking briskly the short corridor that lead to the access door of the bridge. As Lieutenant Relys left the command well to get back at her own ops station. Ensign Narod leaving her the seat to get back at helm, the Andorian stood right before his large command chair, hands behind his back, head high and all four eyes straight at the main screen.

All this time, Syntron's mind was swiftly preparing all the necessary arrangements needed to implement his unsubstantiated theoretical solution to the nearby subspace fractures as he exited the turbolift onto deck 14 and quickly stepped into the Astrometrics lab.

"Lieutenant Irksos," he commanded as he continued walking purposefully, "have Lieutenant T'Val and her team analyze and utilize the information received from our recently launched class IV probe sent beyond the shell, and then immediately prepare a simulation in stellar cartography projecting the specific locations and paths of the nearest subspace fractures detected; starting from the perimeter of the shell and plotting a course moving outward from the shell to as far as we have detected them."

Without skipping a beat, he moved toward the Chief of Science office: now his, yet to be occupied domain, and continued:

"Once established and projected, this information needs to be immediately transmitted to the tactical officer on the bridge... Lieutenant Kelsey Alther, so that her team can begin to prepare our course... that is once the engineering teams have completed their work on the metaphasic shielding and the Artemis is ready to exit the shell."

Before she could respond to him or pose a question, he walked into the office and dropped off all of the extraneous materials he had brought back with him from the officer's meeting onto the large empty desk sitting there. He needed hands-free access to any of the consoles and instruments that he may be accessing while preparing to implement this experiment.

As Syntron hustled out of the office he continued:

"Next, I need you to work with Lieutenants Seton and Korbo to make temporary adjustments to the sensor arrays and the main deflector dish. We need to be able to generate an anti-polaric ion field around the ship, while also aiming concentrated beams of anti-polaric ions directly into these fractures as a means of sealing them."

Seeing that she nodded in understanding, he then detailed further on:

"We'll need to utilize the sensor arrays surrounding the dish to monitor the effectiveness of the anti-polaric ions on the subspace fractures with minimal interference, and then execute all adjustments necessary to the anti-polaric ionic beam accordingly... until we are able to effectively close them up."

He now stopped directly in front of the petite, dark-skinned woman and, as he looked down directly in her eyes, he emphasized:

"Additional science teams need to be working on computer simulations and assisting in the work of all primary teams. We need everyone involved and working in conjunction with one another. "

"Aye, Sir." Valencia Irksos acknowledged.

Syntron then quickly added:

"You will also need to coordinate these efforts with Chief Engineer Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn and his team, since many of these actions will indirectly and directly affect engineering; especially the temporary rerouting of the ship's energy."

Showing what he had come up with on the nearest console, he elaborated:

"His engineering staff will already be speedily focusing their attention in the preparing for the metaphasic shielding course of action, so the sooner they are aware of what the actions from our department may involve, the better coordinated our department efforts and timing will be."

Lieutenant Irksos looked up at Syntron and, with a tone of intensity and professionalism, replied:

"I'm on this, Sir."

As she turned away to get started, Syntron added:

"Lieutenant Irksos, please let Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn know that if the engineering team needs some additional hands to accommodate this additional task... that we will provide additional personal to compensate."

Irksos nodded in affirmation as Syntron turned to get started.

After a frantic but coordinated effort by all personnel in the science department, Syntron was conducting the process of refining the deflector calibrations with Lieutenants Seton and Korbo while Lieutenant Irksos confirmed the results of the simulations almost instantaneously with her team from the computer lab.

Despite various calculated adjustments and running a subsequent series of multiple trials, the science teams had yet to achieve the results needed to reach the high level of accuracy in their simulations deemed essential to thoroughly affect positive results to alleviate and then secure the subspace fractures.

The information gathered from the surveillance probe had already provided the precise locations and trajectory of the subspace fractures. This was all refined, mapped out and already sent from stellar cartography to the bridge. It would now be in the hands of the bridge officers to implement the actual process of navigating to the coordinates and then aiming and engaging the anti-polaric ion beams into the precise locations of the fractures: that is if they're able to complete the correct calibrations in time.

All this time, Doc Sage back on the bridge nodded approvingly at the readouts from his chair. He had a hundred percent muster of his EMH's on the surface returning to their baseline human form.

He pushed a button on the CMO bridge chair.

"Nurse Crosby, repor' please."

The woman's strong voice spoke back to him.

"Doctor Sage, all shifts are fully implemented. As per our conversation, the primary triage center on Deck 11 has been activated and staffed by Alpha shift. The secondary triage center in Cargo Bay 3 on Deck 16 has been activated also, and is staffed by Gamma shift. Beta shift is manning main medical. All three locations are standing by."

Doc Sage frowned.

"Nurse, why's Alpha mannin' prim'ry triage and not main med'cal? They've been there f'r this entire 'ncounter."

The head nurse's voice came back with a thread of confusion weaved into it.

"Doc, you said to me earlier to maintain the shift turnover. The time is currently 1636."

Josiah, looked down at the chronometer built in to his seat. Crosby was right. It was after the Alpha-Beta turnover time. He ran his hand over his moustache and beard.

"My 'pologies Nurse Crosby. I must have lost track of time. I'll do my best t'make sure it dudn't hap'n again. Thank yew. Carry on, then."

A thread of amusement replaced Nurse Crosby's previous confusion.

"Yes, Doctor. Understood. Crosby out."

Josiah smiled to himself and shook his head. He new he was still slightly preoccupied by the message from his father. Josiah then looked over to Captain Kheren.

With all the chief officers similarly already upon their world-saving duties, it was now time for the starship commander to also do his own.

"Open the channel to the X'ell, please."

The awesome vista of the incurved artificial world faded to that of the now familiar blue-black feathered face of the X'ell speaker, the fiberoptics highlighting the denser covering of it's round head paling before the large golden eyes blinking back at the captain of the Federation starship.

"Speaker; we may have a way to save your people."

"You may speak." answered the avian humanoid with his windy, fluty voice.

"Our Chief Engineer is able to reconfigure your deflector field into what we call a metaphasic shield; an energy barrier capable of withstanding the radiation, pressure, temperature and power of a star's corona. From what we know of the anomaly, these are of the same magnitude and therefore would protect your entire world from harm."

The bird-like humanoid cocked its head a moment, as if listening to someone else or thinking intently, or both at the same time. Kheren took this as an opportunity to explain further:

"Our standard shielding being multiphasic, we can therefore apply this principle to the metaphasic formula and sustain it on multiple subspace frequencies at once. This will ensure success of that defensive measure against the multiple frequencies of discharge that will engulf your sphere."

The X'ell retracted its head on its long neck for a second or two, then asked:

"How do you propose to implement your technology?"

"Speaker, we will not violate your laws against direct contact with outworlders, nor ask you to disregard your own beliefs. We can help you again without leaving our ship... if you are willing to help us too."

"Please explain." now demanded the one speaking for billions.

"One Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge, Chief Engineer of the starship USS Enterprise D, developed the Metaphasic shield program 1, an application of metaphasic technology for use on starships. It involves a steady increase of the subspace compression factor of the shields, which corresponds in the decrease of the field distortion, after which the metaphasic field is engaged. We would link our systems with yours, download an adapted version of the program and calibrate it to alter your deflector screen to metaphasic parameters. With your permission, of course."

Kheren was glad N'Eligahn had come fully prepared to the meeting with all the data properly researched to support his proposal. The details his engineering pads had given had allowed him to fully understand how the Rethian's plan could work for them... and the X'ell.

And it apparently helped persuade the X'ell too:

"Your respect of us and of your own principles and your ingenuity, once again shows true promise. We will maintain your access to our systems. You may proceed."

"Thank you, Speaker. Let us hope now that we will have enough time."

As the X'ell representative's face was once again replaced by the view of the hollowed world, the answer to that question came from Lieutenant Relys at Ops:

"Sir... we will not."

All four oculars of the Andorian darted to the forwardmost station and to the Bajoran woman now facing him to report:

"Surveillance probe is reporting a sudden increase in chronitons and nucleonics in several points of subspace fluctuations."

"It's about to emerge." understood Kheren immediately.

They were running out of time.

"Sir" yelled Lieutenant Irksos in an almost euphoric voice through her combadge; the last simulation of the deflector utilizing the most recent calibration of the anti-polaric ions worked almost perfectly!"

"Superb, Lieutenant." Syntron replied. "Let us swiftly reconfirm the results again and if the outcome is equally favorable, then set up the sensor arrays to..."

"Sir! " interrupted Lieutenant Irksos, this time with anxiety and urgency in her voice. "Our sensors from the probe are now indicating increased levels and fluctuations of chroniton and nucleonic emissions along the regions in proximity of the subspace fractures! "

"Belay that last order, " Syntron responded firmly. "Lock in those last calibrations of the deflector, and immediately prepare for full implementation! Our next test will be on the fractures themselves. "

Syntron then reached up and tapped his new combadge as he looked around the room at his team that had worked so diligently together and pondered reflectively.

*Would all of their tenacious efforts accomplish something positive in this maelstrom of circumstances?*

"Syntron to bridge" he called after taking in a deep breath.

"Kheren here, Mister Syntron. "

"Captain Kheren" Syntron began, "as you are probably aware... sensors from the surveillance probe are indicating a high probability of the anomaly emerging at any given moment. Our last simulation of the deflector calibration indicated a 94.58% chance of success engaging the anti-polaric ion beams into the exact locations of the fractures with the settings just established."

After a brief pause he added:

"We will not have time to test this simulation again, and therefore we are now locking in the settings and then preparing to immediately send the parameters up to the bridge. However Captain, he added with a bit of hesitation, "these results are merely based on the simulations conducted. We endeavored to account for numerous conditions, variations and fluctuations within these fractures... but we will not know categorically what the true results will be until the parameters are actually put into operation."

"As I said earlier, Mister Syntron: nothing like the present. We're just about to give you the testing you require... and hopefully, enough time for all of you to save the X'ell and protect the ship. Kheren out. "

The captain sat back in his chair, sharing a concerned look with Doctor Sage sitting besides him and then activated a few commands on his armchair padd:

"Computer: download deflector modification parameters from Lieutenant Syntron's station to the command readout."

As the computer complied, Kheren stood up again.

"Lieutenant Alther; man the multitask station please. Everyone else: clear the bridge."

Kelsey Alther had just finished sending out security teams.

*What great timing!* The androgyn thought dryly but instead said:"Yes, Sir," striding to the station and configuring it to the purpose they needed it for.

Kelsey almost muttered something but remembered Kheren's hearing and simply smiled, keeping the thoughts unspoken.

*Time to see how well this plan works* thought the tactical chief.

Josiah Sage cocked an eyebrow. Suddenly leaving just didn't seem right.

"Skipper," Josiah said, "permission to stay. Can't jus' up an' leave y'all when the goin' gits tough, now."

Kheren blinked several seconds at the Chief Medical Officer, until everyone else had disappeared in the turbolift, before he finally said:

"Alright, Doc, we can use someone better than me to calibrate and man the sensors for subspace readings. "

As the others left their stations, the Andorian turned towards the man standing on his right:

"Commander O'Conner: you will assume command of the Artemis from the auxilliary bridge. Make sure Mister N'Eligahn and Mister Syntron fully implement their plan. Saving the shell is top priority; so is the ship's safety. Only after that will you come for us and not a second sooner. Is that understood? "

O'Conner blinked a bit and raised an eyebrow.

*He isn't going... to... maybe he is as reckless as the former captain thought,* the man wondered silently before replying:

"Uhh... Aye, Sir!"

O'Conner turned and guided the bridge crew to the turbolift. The first one quickly filled up and left, before O'Conner entered the second one and turned to the captain, giving him a formal salute.

"Good Luck, Sir."

"To us all. " acknowledged the Andorian, returning his salute.

Minutes later O'Conner stepped off the turbolift and looked over the secondary bridge. It was much more function than style, the stations linearly laid out in standard gray with basic consoles, but they worked and that was important now.

He quickly moved to the captain's chair as the rest of the bridge crew moved to their positions: while Ensign Narod went at helm, Ensign Tyvya took over tactical while Doctor Lumquist came to sit in the chair on the left of the First Officer. The engineering station was occupied by Lieutenant Ben Ferrier, as Lieutenant Blakely was hard at work assisting Chief Engineer N'Eligahn with adapting Starfleet's shield technology to that of the X'ell. Since Lieutenant Irksos was in the same way assisting Chief of Science Syntron to reconfigure the immense deflector dish of the starship, Vulcan Lieutenant T'Val, head of astrometrics, would seat herself at the science station.

Lieutenant Cheonghi, the Edoan Assistant Chief of Operations, was on his way... because executive functions had to be assumed by the next senior officer present on the auxiliary bridge... Chief of Operations, Lieutenant Alana Relys.

Slowly, Commander O'Conner sat down as he looked over the crew before tapping his comm and carrying out Kheren's orders.

"Commander O'Conner to Lieutenant Cheonghi; I need you to set up a link between our computer systems and the X'ell's."

"Uhh... Aye, Sir." The Edoan timidly replied. And the First officer of the Artemis tapped another channel:

"Commander O'Conner to Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn: do what you can to create a shield for the Artemis."

"Getting right on that, Sir, " N'Eligahn's voice answered.

Moving to the nearest console in Engineering's upper level, his claws flew along the keyboard. He tied into the deflector shield controls and linked them with the structural integrity field.

"I'm giving you all she's got," N'Eligahn then announced. "I've boosted shield output by about forty-five percent."

He didn't say that this sort of thing might also cause the ship's EPS conduits to explode, but, just to be on the safe side, he sent an emergency team to each location so that, if they did have a blow out, they could respond quickly.

N'Eligahn slid down the ladder from the upper level of engineering back to the lower level. Everyone was moving quickly from station to station, ensuring all of the connections were operating at peak capacity.

Lieutenant M'Laress was working closely with Crewman Yuri to finish up the calculations for the shield operation. They were the ones that had originally come up with this plan in the first place and by extension were the ones with the best capability to implement the equation for the shield.

They were essentially taking a split system and merging it into a single system with a back door implemented to revert the change when it was no longer needed.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Blakely was working to make sure the science department had adequate power to the primary deflector array for whatever they had planned.

N'Eligahn never pretended to understand that aspect of the ship and never really planned to. Right now his two concerns were gravity and not causing the shell's exterior to either explode from a power overload or be so underpowered that the anomaly tore through it like paper.

"Sir," Blakely said, the broad-spectrum capacitor is threatening to overload."

N'Eligahn walked over and looked at the display.

"Realign the lithium coating with a field of sub-emissive photons," N'Eligahn directed as he moved over to M'Laress. "How's it going?"

"Most of the simulations were successful," M'Laress said. "Although one didn't pan out too well"

"Explain."

"Well, Sir, Yuri explained as demanded by his superior officer, in simulation twenty-three, the anomaly expanded so massively and quickly that it overwhelmed the shield, causing the shield's energy to reflect back into itself and implode the entire structure."

"Okay, so we know the worst-case scenario, " N'Eligahn acknowledged. "How many simulations have you run? "

"One-hundred thirty seven, " M'Laress answered.

"All right; begin implementation and stand by for my mark," the Chief Engineer ordered.

At the same moment, up in the auxilliary bridge, Michael O'Conner opened up yet another intraship link:

"Commander O'Conner to Lieutenant Syntron: what do you need to get this beam ready? "

"Syntron acknowledging. " the Vulcan science officer responded upon hearing the communication from the first officer.

"Commander O'Conner, we have the deflectors about to be configured here," he added as he was finishing the final modifications to the sensor arrays.

"However, you will need to coordinate your tactical and navigational officers to pinpoint the precise locations where the anomaly begins striking at the shell to effectively target the fractures with the anti-polaric ion beam. "

"Modifications in progress; science and engineering teams completing work on the main deflector systems. Targeting from main sensors will be done through the tactical controls." reported T'Val in turn.

"Commander, Lieutenant Syntron emphasized then; We must focus our energy and priority at fending off the emerging tendrils of fiery plasma to allow the engineering teams the time needed to get the interfaced metaphasic and multiphasic shields through the X'ell network operational and linked to all of emitters all around the shell. "

Syntron pondered for a second and then warned:

"If the plasma damages the emitters or the X'ell network before Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn is able to activate the modified shielding, then the Artemis, along with the entire X'ell civilization will be at the mercy of this Azimuth Horizon anomaly."

The very same concern had already been in the mind of the captain of the Artemis. Still standing up, he ordered:

"Computer: this is Captain Kheren, voice recognition, code Alpha --- Omicron Blue ---"

"Command codes recognized" confirmed the calm feminine voice of the computer, after registering even the ultrasonic Graalek words within the code.

"Computer: engage bridge module separation."

Suddenly came a long whisper from the turbolifts sealing themselves off, then an echoing, massive noise, like some huge doors opening all around and below their feet.

"Bridge module separation sequence complete." droned the disembodied voice.

"Lieutenant Alther: launch the Aegis."

At the very top of the vast saucer section of the starship, the uppermost deck slowly rose; in one, smooth vertical motion, the entire bridge lifted off under the power of its own impulse engines. Like all previous top of the line starships since the Constitution class, the Artemis could detach its entire saucer section and move it on impulse; but that was only for extreme emergencies, as the primary hull, once detached, could not reattach itself to the rest of the ship outside of dockyard facilities... and in such a catastrophic event, the ship would in fact simply be decommissioned.

But this was something else.

The bridge module was a unique feature of the Ambassador class, forerunner of the saucer separation of the Galaxy class and of the multivector assault mode of the Prometheus warship design. It made the bridge an auxilliary craft, capable of interplanetary travel, atmospheric flight and planetary landing, to help in complex missions parameters.

Like giving enough time for the starship to get ready to save itself... and an entire solar system.

From the forwardmost multitask console, Kelsey Alther was able to control the entire craft alone as easily as if it was a mere shuttlecraft. The Kalthurian brought the Aegis, as the bridge module was called, to full impulse as soon as it cleared the top of the saucer section and went straight for the vast opening and the stars beyond.

Leaving Doctor Sage to reconfigure his command chair for external sensor detection of subspace signals, Kheren went to a wall hatch and opened it to slide down into the bowels of the craft.

There he found the deflector relays. Bringing up on a small engineering screen of the assembly column the data provided by the science officer, the Andorian opened the covering of the deflector system and pulled out the isolinear control panel.

Despite being almost totally refitted, the Artemis was still relying on isolinear chips first implemented decades ago on this very ship class. They were slower processors than the more recent neurogel packs, but beside being much sturdier and reliable, they had a very definite quality: they were easy to manipulate quickly and efficiently without tools, even with only the basic engineering training given to any cadet in Starfleet.

Following the extremely clear and precise directions provided by Lieutenant Syntron, Kheren transferred quickly the required chips for the necessary adjustments, then slid back the assembly into nominal position.

With the same ease, he hauled himself back up on the bridge then went to the helm station.

"Alright I'll take the helm, Lieutenant. You will need all your concentration to manually target the subspace openings Doc will detect for us. The Aegis has no weapons systems, so there is no target lock available."

Kelsey swapped the console to the required station once again.

"Helm's yours, Captain." she said as she focused her concentration on what was needed to be done.

As Kheren talked about what were issues she simply smiled,

*Five strips of latinum that I can manage to not miss any of them!* Thought the Kalthurian.

While Kelsey Alther seemed unworried about this at all, deep down there was more worry than anything else. Here was Kelsey, on a support craft for all intents and purposes, attempting to seal subspace fractures while firing a beam from a small deflector dish with no target lock. It reminded the androgyn of the last shuttlecraft episode.

Kelsey's expression finally cracked.

*Bloody hell, I hope this works... really getting tired of this life and death thing that keeps following me around here* thought the Tactical Chief of the Artemis before recomposing and getting back the non-worried look.

The bridge module flew out of the kilometers wide opening and into outer space and the captain veered off towards the first sensor signal received by one of the six scanning nodules of the sensor grid.

"Doc, you should also connect yourself to the probe; it will expand our coverage and report back in real time to the Artemis. Transfer sensor signals to both Lieutenant Alther's board and mine."

From his command chair, Doc Sage punched in the necessary instructions for the relays.

"Awright, Skipper, probe's ours. Sensor signals are away to both y'all."

On the main viewer, space was starting to ripple in several places right before their path.

"Get ready Lieutenant! Our deflector dish is not as large as that of the Artemis; your shooting skills are our only hope to shut down as much of those openings as we can until the ship can get the shell and herself ready."

They didn't have to wait long: the stars were blotted out by a sudden flash and raging plasma fire poured out directly at them.

Kelsey Alther looked at the raging plasma fire and squinted at it.

*Time to dance...* the Tactical Chief thought and went into a deep trance, starting to aim and fire the ionic pulses at the first fractures that threatened the shell.

As Kheren piloted the detached top of the saucer section, it shot out at the fractures from its modified deflector dish, sealing them one by one as Kelsey carefully and quickly managed to aim and fire the pulse. It was working...

But, no matter how hard the Kalthurian tried, the anomaly slowly was gaining ground.

It reminded Alther of the last Borg invasion, where a fired a torpedo had missed only to struck the starbase they were defending. The blue-skinned androgyn grimaced.

*I am not going to miss today!* Kelsey swore silently, firing yet another ionic pulse and sealing off a new fracture as it glowed with incoming plasma inferno boiling in its bowels.

For more time than anyone else alive in Starfleet, the Kalthurian had been practicing aiming without a target lock, since the early days when there was no target locks... and it was helping immensely. Kelsey kept firing and aiming and, so far, hadn't missed... even if some of it was luck. like where a shot went wide but inadvertently connected with another fracture just on the verge of opening into normal space.

"Lucky " Alther muttered as another shot hit an unseen fracture by mere chance.

However, for however much the Aegis dodged and weaved firing ionic pulses, they were slowly losing the battle.

The anomaly was simply to large and chaotic for them and for one little eighty meters craft.

Kelsey Alther's concentration and strength was flagging; aiming without a target lock was hard, aiming without a target lock from a different angle then you were used to was even harder.

Kelsey steeled itself.

*Not going to fail the Artemis... Not going to fail the X'ell.*

"Captain, I'm not sure how much longer I can keep this up, how long before the plan is going to be put into action?" the blue-skinned lieutenant enquired.

"Your guess... is as good as mine... Lieutenant" retorted the Andorian through clenched teeth.

The resolve and composure of the tactical chief were remarkable; but the weariness and growing apprehension were no less evident to the captain of the Artemis, himself struggling as much to stir the small sublight craft through an ever growing maze of flashing fractures of space and fiery sprays of plasma fire.

Kelsey Alther might have had several lifetimes to hone shooting skills, but Kheren, even graduated top of his class in piloting, had never tried to fly a small, unarmed sublight craft at full impulse through suddenly sprouting plasma bursts while trapped between an emerging light-year wide space anomaly and the titanic mass of a carbon-neutronium wall hundreds of millions of kilometers tall.

With each second passing, their evading of fiery death and proper angling to target nascent sprays of cosmic fire were less and less due to skill and more and more due to mere chance.

They were all three of them already too conscious that, the longer they stayed out here, the more the Artemis chances to succeed grew... as much as theirs dwindled.

"Doc... watch out... for... the Artemis. She... will not... come out... too soon... for us."

Doc Sage nodded from his chair, sweat running down his back.

"I see 'em, skipper! They're doin' jus' fine, all things considered!"

The vessel shuddered, nearly pitching Josiah from his seat. He gripped the armrests tightly.

"Leas' wise, they're doin' might better'n us!"

The Andorian was panting. The hull's exposure to so much radiation so close was heating up the inside of the small spacecraft and Kheren was already sweating profusely, hair and antennae flat on his skull. Humans would find it hot, and other Andorians very uncomfortable; but he was fighting as much to stay conscious as he was to keep the Aegis from colliding with the crackling, flaming bolts of cosmic energy crisscrossing the main viewer at an increasing rate.

And worse; the peculiar effects of the Azimuth Horizon were again starting to make him feel dizzy: his antennae were retracting and extending erratically, shifting his sight from color to black and white and back, sounds and smell rushing and receding without warning, his sense of balance wobbling...

*Come on O'Conner... N'Eligahn... Syntron... don't let us down.*

\* \* \*

Syntron was monitoring the progress of both halves of the ship. The Aegis, out beyond the shell fending off the emerging plasma bursts thus far was performing at superlatively accurate levels.

But this noble effort was like trying to contain a raging fire with mere buckets of water, and this fiery monstrosity was not surrendering without a fight.

The Artemis must get this new shield configuration operational on the shell as quickly as possible and get out there and help seal these fractures before the Aegis is consumed by this relentless anomaly.

Sensors were already showing dangerously high concentrations of radiation and rising hull temperature on the Aegis to the point that the crew herself must be approaching critical levels; while their ability to stay focused and accurate in their ongoing attempts were inevitably going to continue to diminish.

Syntron knew that he couldn't just monitor from the Science lab what was occurring on each craft. He had to assist in whatever way was possible.

He rushed out into the corridor and headed toward the turbolift.

As the lift doors opened and he entered, he realized that he was caught in a dilemma as well.

Should he head to the auxiliary bridge to help Commander O'Conner deal with the plasma bursts or should he head down to engineering and assist Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn get the shield configurations and the links to the X'ell network operational?

There was no time for hesitation. Where would he assistance best be served?

After a brief moment of mental prioritization and a swift formulization of a plan, he headed up to the auxiliary bridge.

As the lift doors parted, Syntron could readily see the treacherous activity occurring outside of the ship on the main viewer.

He headed directly over to T'Val at the science station to confer for a moment about the sensors and then to disclose his plan with her.

He then began to monitor the affect the ion pulse was having on the localized plasma bursts from each of the vessels.

"Commander O'Conner" Syntron firmly stated, looking up from the monitoring station directly at the first officer.

"Might I suggest that we prepare to immediately launch a class IX long-range multi-mission probe at maximum warp in an attempt to contact the fleet and inform them of our current status?" he offered to the already stressed and preoccupied first officer.

Commander O'Conner gave a bewildering gaze to the Vulcan science officer, as if he just deliberately added more complexity to an already impracticable situation.

"We have now seen that we are able to affect closing these subspace fractures with the reconfigured deflector dish. However, we also must acknowledge that we cannot maintain this containment indefinitely by ourselves. The Aegis is out there on her own, barely surviving trying to hold this raging storm back for us as we strive to frenetically get these shields on the shell fully operational. Sir, we need as many ships from the fleet to rendezvous back here immediately to help coordinate an offensive attack on these plasma bursts" he insisted.

Just besides him, Lieutenant T'Val said with a discreet voice:

"The launch of the probe will ensure all the data collected here will reach Starfleet Command, Sir. But the very best estimates will place such transmission four hours from now... once the probe clears the area of the anomaly... and at least three hours for it's subspace signal to reach the nearest Starfleet contact, which is Starbase 10... with no ship available to help us."

Pointing at the sensor readouts, the Vulcan woman added:

"The closest starships known are those of the task force that brought us here; and from the Klingon border and back, they will not reach us in less than forty-eight hours even all the way at emergency warp... and again, only after receiving the probe's signal, several hours from now. Either we will have succeeded long before that... or this entire solar system and us will be dust for them to find. "

She finally turned her dark, almond-shaped eyes towards Syntron to finish with the typical obvious-stating Vulcan manner:

"It will benefit Starfleet in the long run, Sir. But as for us, we're on our own."

Syntron knew that receiving help from the fleet was a far reaching and unlikely long shot. Nevertheless, he had also surmised that at some point in time the remaining fleet may not have any choice but to become involved in this chaotic anomaly somewhere.

*We should at least prepare them with what we have learned already Syntron thought, in case we don't make it out of this sphere alive.*

"Thank you Lieutenant T'Val for enlightening me on the reality of our situation with the fleet," Syntron addressed formally and without emotion to the female scientist next to him. Then he went back to the man in the command chair:

"With your permission Commander, I will head down to engineering to prepare the probe and upload all relevant information and deflector configurations needed for them to prepare their deflector dishes and coordinate their strategy. Since these probes were generally prepared before launch, I should be able to have this probe uploaded, configured and equipped rather quickly. I will then notify you when it is ready to launch so that you may add any additional message you wish to convey to the fleet."

Without a pause he continued: "After this, with your permission again Commander, I will then immediately assist Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn in his efforts to get these shields fully operational with the X'ell network. I have had extensive training and experience working with various shield configurations and I'm certain that I can help expedite this process... and as you realize, our timing is vital."

Syntron looked at the contemplative first officer and awaited his response.

O'Conner turned his head to the two science officers. He nodded in agreement with the Lieutenant.

"T'Val is correct. We are on our own for now. We need either weather this storm or end it. If we are lucky your plan will work and we won't need the fleet. "

The Chief of Science then turned his attention back to the first officer:

"Commander O'Conner.. after hearing that latest update on the shields, I will resume my destination to engineering to see if I can coax the X'ell network to engage the metaphasic and multiphasic shielding in less time than anticipated, before I turn my full attention to the preparation of the probe."

Commander O'Conner just waved him on and gave him a look that told Syntron "*just go and do whatever will work!*"

He then turned back the viewscreen.

"Permission granted and hurry! The captain ordered us to wait till that shield was up."

Syntron headed back into the turbolift and ordered it to main engineering on deck 21.

Here he was... now heading down into Hades; literally and figuratively: both inside and outside of the ship. He was sure that one of the humans he knew at the academy would have come up with a funny comment or joke about this situation; but as a Vulcan, he could not even begin to speculate what that would be.

As Syntron left, O'Conner leaned back in his chair and gazed at the closed port waiting for the moment he could come help the rest of the crazy bridge crew.

Down in main Engineering, Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn however was too concerned to even sit down for a few seconds.

"N'Eligahn to bridge. "

He just received static.

"Okay... N'Eligahn to Commander O'Conner."

He waited for the acknowledgment.

"O'Conner... go. "

"We're about to link with the shell's primary control and activate the metaphasic shield system. Stand by."

"Sir, transmission systems is standing by," M'Laress announced to the Chief Engineer overseeing the entire operation from the main engineering control station.

" Transmit shield reversal code to the shell," N'Eligahn ordered as he tapped into the primary engineering control console near the warp core itself.

M'Laress nodded and moved to her console, transmitting the signal.

"Uhh Sir... Transmission completed. X'ell reporting that it will take them at least 15 minutes to get the shielding installed in the in endangered sections. " The orange-skinned ops officer quietly reported.

"Very good," O'Conner replied, emotionless.

The Chief Engineer watched with the same cold expression the power readouts they were getting from the shell as the power faded from the cloaking device and deflector shield systems. If anyone outside would have been looking at the location of the shell at that very moment, they would have seen the immense, massive object suddenly appear out of nowhere.

There was a brief moment where N'Eligahn's hearts were the only things he heard as he waited for what felt like an eternity for the shell's shield to come back online.

Then the power readouts began to level out and the readout for the shell's metaphasic shield system reached a green line. The Rethian let out a sigh of relief.

"N'Eligahn to O'Conner: Metaphasic shielding is operational and... "

He heard a sharp hissing crack from above him.

"Oh, shit..." he muttered.

"Sir, EPS conduits four and five are nearing overload point!" Blakely reported. The Rethian rolled eyes and said outloud:

"And Sir, whatever you needed this shield for, I'd recommend you do it fast. N'Eligahn out."

"Commander, we have metaphasic shielding." then confirmed Lieutenant Relys from her own command chair at the right of the man.

"Power fluctuation in the EPS grid, Sir!" warned Engineering Lieutenant Ferrier behind him.

"We have full cover... but I can't tell for how long... unless they manage to stabilize the shield grid with the complex computer calculations maintaining it. We don't have here the complete engineering control station of the main bridge; they can only make it good down there in main engineering."

"Ionic pulse, nominal and ready to fire through main deflector dish" then added T'Val from the science station. "However, if we loose main power, it will go offline."

"I'm working on it I'm working on it!" shrilled the Edoan, three hands running in a blur over management controls, shutting off non essential systems, rerouting secondary ones, even turning off unoccupied decks to allow enough time for the engineers to correct the problem.

"Target lock programmed for all subspace apertures on sensors" then announced the Andorian giantess at tactical. " Give the word, Sir and I will weld shut this thing. "

"Emergency impulse speed at your command, Sir," helmsman Narod finally said.

"Ensign Tyvva, I hope your aim is good we are going to need it in a moment. Ensign Narod, get us out of the system and bring us to the storm."

Finally, the Artemis came alive and started to move to port, the large doors now nearest to her slowly opening, showing to the bridge crew the fiery storm ahead.

Before the storm, a small ship darted about shooting beams of blue energy as it fought back against the raging cosmic forces. To O'Conner, it looked like someone trying to put out a forest fire with a squirt bottle... this would have been amusing if hadn't actually been so terrifying.

As the Artemis passed through the huge spacedoors and started closing in with the anomaly at three-quarter the speed of light, O'Conner tapped the comm on his chair.

"O'Conner to Lieutenant Syntron: any idea how long this storm will last, this time?"

"Commander O'Conner, message received. I'm just about to enter into main engineering. " Syntron responded.

Prior to entering the main part of deck 21, he stopped for a moment outside the doors to add:

"I will signal you back momentarily with a response... after I have an opportunity to check on the status down here. Syntron out. "

As he stepped into main engineering, he could see the flurry of coordinated activity transpiring; led by the chief engineer Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn. He walked toward the fully immersed Chief Engineer and waited for an opportune moment to introduce himself:

"Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn, I just wanted to inquire if there is something I could assist you or your team with to help expedite the shielding implementation or any related task affecting its performance. "

He then added:

"I recognize that you have a very dedicated team already working diligently here throughout engineering. Nevertheless, if there is any issue that I could help to resolve or any piece of equipment that I could assist in testing or installing... I am here at your service. "

In the pause that followed, Syntron qualified his offer with some fundamental background information:

"In addition to my science responsibilities at Earth Spacedock and Starbase 10, I also completed a variety of engineering tasks on different ships prior to my transfer here to the Artemis. "

Before the chief engineer could respond, Syntron finished by telling him:

"If there is nothing that I can do for you, Lieutenant Commander, then I will focus my effort on preparing the class IX long-range probe for launching. "

Syntron left the decision to the chief engineer.

After a brief but thorough conversation mapping out a sequential series of emergency procedures and specific plans for implementation, Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn and Syntron methodically jumped in and began resolving the succession of issues as they arose.

It was like a multiple tiered balancing act providing the essential power requirements to operate the shields while also trying to prevent the EPS conduits from overloading and bringing down the entire shield network.

The team yelled information back in forth through a flurry of systematic actions and trials as they continued to work toward reaching shield stability with the X'ell network.

One of many ironic absurdities in this process was striving to achieve all of this when the time for completing the implementation of the shields had already expired. The anomaly had already begun to lash out whips of malevolent plasma energy thrashing out from these problematic space fractures and into the outer layer of shell.

When they were finally able to get the complex shielding apparatus and its subsequent configurations to maintain a balanced nominal level, as indicated by to glowing green levels on the displays, they were more than ready to move on.

Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn then swiftly contacted the auxiliary bridge first officer and notified him that the shields were now in place and functioning within nominal levels and that the Artemis was now ready to go and assist it's smaller and extremely vulnerable counterpart: the Aegis.

The Rethian then hustled along with the Vulcan into another section of engineering to get the class IX long-range multi-mission probe sitting partially opened like a patient on an operating room, uploaded, configured, equipped, sealed up and ready to be launched in record time.

It was moments like these team efforts that turned the improbable circumstances of misfortune into the possibility for success; even if the likelihood for even a minimal level of triumph was remote.

These were also the types of events and training that were never really taught in Starfleet; not through neglect or oversight, but because these were the unpredictable circumstances that occur unexpectedly when as sentient life-forms you venture out into regions of space seeking other new civilizations.

Yet these were also the experiences from which the overall knowledge base expands, as these and other officers stand on the shoulders of the giants that came before them, face challenging circumstances, and from the repercussions of these encounters, add their piece and perspective to the ongoing legacy that is Starfleet.

That was why they had to ensure that this probe was properly prepared and launched successfully. It would contain information and data vital to Starfleet if the Artemis, the Aegis and the X'ell were unsuccessful in their collaborative efforts.

The starship Artemis flew boldly right from heaven to hell.

As she emerged from the immense hexagonal aperture in the titanic wall of the Dyson shell, the Federation vessel plunged towards a raging sea of plasma that was already lapping at the edge of the enclosed solar system.

O'Conner gripped his chair as he watched the screen.

"Artemis metaphasic shield activated. All lights are green. " confirmed Ensign Tyvya.

"Very good." replied the man in the command chair.

A translucent covering then appeared intermittently around the starship as it plunged directly between the discharges emerging more and more with each passing second.

"Targets locked on tactical sensors: ionic pulse at your command, Sir." Then announced the giantess as the vessel rushed at full impulse towards the nearest subspace fractures about to pour out deadly energies.

"Interception course to the nearest ones on sensors plotted and laid in, Commander." then reported Ensign Narod from helm, his own eyes riveted to the vision of the still invisible storm slowly coming into normal space like some great fiery beast emerging from the dark depths of the abyss, tentacles of fire already gropping for the defenseless construct.

"Well what are you waiting for? The captain out there needs our help: engage already!" ordered the First officer of the Artemis between clenched teeth.

Behind the Artemis, a few plasma discharges glanced at the enclosed solar system's outer shell, leaving deep flaming gouges on it's surface like claws raking flesh.

"Dyson shell's metaphasic shield still not operational, Sir! " almost shouted the towering Andorian, glancing continuously from her board to the screen and back.

"We can't worry about that; we can only do what we can to keep the storm away from the shell." O'Conner retorted, this time more calmly.

"Commander O'Conner! The Aegis!"

Closest to the main viewer, the three hands of the Edoan ops officer pointed all at once to the forward view of the merging anomaly.

The small form of the bridge module fired a last blue-white shot of ions before disappearing... and then, a moment later, a sprout of fire exploded right were they had been. O'Conner sighed quietly.

*If we would have only gotten the shield at spacedock...*

"Alright crew, he said outloud, we still have a job to do. If they are lucky, they are... somewhere else. If not... worrying about them now won't help them."

Michael O'Conner straightened his resolve like his stiffening body.

"Ensigns! Engage!"

The Artemis maneuvered in an arc around the immense circumference of the endangered Dyson shell; her large deflector dish glowing blue white with energies that suddenly sprouted in front of the vessel as it went straight for the nearest eruptions of plasma.

The beam struck where the fiery energies seemed to emerge from nothingness and literally plugged the leaks, leaving only gouts of flame to dissipate before they reached the darker surface of the unprotected X'ell world. One by one, the erupting fires were doused by the starship flying back and forth between the construct and the vastness of space where the anomaly was slowly but surely reforming.

For a while, it looked as if the lone vessel would hold the line against the raging forces of the cosmos; but then, as the number of flaming tentacles seemed to recede, the immense blazing heart of the phenomenon dropped into normal space, devouring the lights of all the nearby stars across an entire light year. Like the ravenous mouth of some monstrous, hellish beast emerging from the abyss, it swelled towards the Dyson shell, extending gropping fingers of plasma to seize and devour it...

And the minuscule starship standing alone between them.

There was a last, valiant blast out of the front of the vessel as it stood fast before the fire, extinguishing yet another flame; and then, it was submerged in a maelstrom of fire and debris and a blinding light, along with the colossal sphere behind it.

For a moment, there was only fire and light... and then everything darkened.  
Then, a voice:

"The new shields held! "

All was dark on the auxilliary bridge of the Artemis. Even the viewer had turned offline before the surge of plasma would overload the ship's power grid. But now, everything was coming back online.

"Commander... then said the raspy, shrill voice of Lieutenant Cheonghi, we're inside the anomaly... again."

"Tell me about it. " groaned Ensign Tyvya, her antennae wobbling erratically and her head swooning, already starting to feel a bit dizzy with her cranial receptors affected by the inexplicable lack of electromagnetism of the phenomena. But it was much less debilitating than the first time they had experienced plunging onto that inferno weeks before. And this time, there was no uncomfortable and threatening heat to be felt. Indeed, their altered shields were protecting them as she had exclaimed... but for how long?

"Negligible damage to external hull, Sir" announced Ferrier at the engineering post. "Plasma flow and antimatter rate steady, depolarization under control... as long as the shields will hold of course."

"No casualties. We were ready this time" commented Doctor Lumquist from the CMO chair.

"No heat or radiation exposure."

"Very good" O'Conner quietly replied as he looked at the viewscreen.

"Registering all stop, Sir" now said Helmsman Narod. " Navigation sensors inoperative. If we're to fly through this, we'll fly in blind."

"Sensors offline... We have lost all forms of contact with the X'ell world... and no trace of the Aegis, Sir" now reported T'Val with the typical Vulcan calmness.

"Of course they are" O'Conner said with a small smile.

"The X'ell might have managed to complete Mister N'Eligahn's modifications... but... the Aegis had no time to implement a metaphasic program" then said Lieutenant Relys with a somber look and a heavy tone.

"Commander O'Conner... between the plasma overload, the depolarization effect, the self-collapsing void of gravity in here and the swirling neutronium masses crushing everything all around... there is no way the bridge module could have survived in here... Sir."

The sinister silence that followed those words was making almost everyone forget to breathe... until the First Officer of the Artemis replied:

"You have too little faith in our captain and starfleet construction, Lieutenant."

All decks were reporting all systems nominal and much more fear than harm from their plunge into the fiery anomaly that was even now raging like Hell itself all around them. Seemingly extending to infinity with crackling energy bolts and swirling masses of dark, dense matter in a sea and sky of flame and burning gases: it was as if the entire universe was being consumed by all the raging forces of the cosmos.

The metaphasic shielding, conceived to penetrate a star's very corona, was protecting them not only from damage but from all the effects of the bewildering phenomena. Even barely a few minutes inside, Andorians like Ensign Tyvya were recovering from their initial dizziness, Betazoids and Vulcans felt their psionic talents reactivate... and Tellarites still argued with everyone else.

Calm and composure had returned on the auxiliary bridge of the Artemis. But there was still palpable tension as everyone wondered if their desperate fight to retard the expansion of the Azimuth Horizon with ionic pulses had given the X'ell enough time to also protect themselves and their entire civilization from annihilation.

And they were all thinking about the unknown fate of the bridge module and the three officers who had risked themselves to buy *them* enough time.

"Commander... I think I know where they could be!" suddenly exclaimed the Edoan Ops officer Cheonghi.

As everyone was looking intently and curiously at him, the six-limbed officer's dark orange skin became almost red, but he still explained in a rush of words:

"The only way they could have escaped destruction in here is like we did with the Artemis the first time we escaped from it: inside a subspace fracture!"

"A logical hypothesis" admitted science officer T'Val.

"They were flying right at subspace fractures when they were swallowed by the anomaly. However, they would have had to find an empty one... and then they would have been trapped when plasma from the anomaly would have rushed into it to flare up into normal space... as we have seen at the moment of their disappearance."

"Torpedoes" then added tactical officer Tyvya, turning towards the center seat.

"Sir, we used torpedoes last time and bore deviating passages within a fracture. They could have done the same and dig themselves a passage away from danger... or even just a hole to hide into."

"There is only one problem with that brilliant idea, Ensign, commented engineering officer Ferrier with a somber tone; the Aegis has no weapons systems... no torpedoes."

The brief light of hope was dying as all eyes now rested on the dark-haired, bearded man seating in the command chair.

"There is nothing we can do for the captain here, so we must focus on repairing the sensors and getting out of the anomaly." O'Conner said firmly to the crew. "We must save ourselves before we can save them."

They all bowed to the evidence and turned back to their controls.

"Ensign Narod; head back from where we came into the storm and try to get us back to our space."

The young flight officer nodded and they moved through the storm once more.

Plunged into a sea of fire, the starship Artemis shimmered inside the translucent bubble of its energy shield while the cosmos raged blindingly around her, the fury of the elements echoing the anguish in everyone's heart.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the storm abated and, like a candle flame blown out by the breath of some invisible god, simply disappeared.

For a moment of eternity, all was deeply quiet, the silence of the stars twinkling in the darkness filling every eye, every mind, every soul. On the main viewer, a few flashes of plasma fire dying in the cold vastness of space were the last remnants of what had been an infinite inferno barely seconds before.

Then, a single voice rose:

"Commander... the storm... it's... gone!"

"For now, Lieutenant Cheonghi. " now confirmed Vulcan science officer T'Val, eyes on her instruments." The anomaly has shifted out of normal space again.

"So soon?" exclaimed Ensign Tyvya, also looking intently at her tactical readouts.

"Sensors are back online, Commander. There is an unusual concentration of subspace fractures in the vicinity." now reported T'Val. "Much more than the usual high level we have recorded upon our arrival. Apparently, the anomaly found them and went through and into another subspace domain."

"More... The Klingons!" suddenly realized Lieutenant Relys. She turned towards Michael O'Conner's questioning look. "B'rel attack ships are an old design, Sir; I bet they were not modified to our modern standards, their warp engines still damaging subspace like our own ship designs of the same era did. Nine of them coming here in close formation must have gouged a significant part of space, even maybe enlarged and connected together some fractures already present here."

"They dug in a trench... and the anomaly fell into it," understood helmsman Narod then.

"It also means that it could reemerge here all the more quickly and frequently in this specific sector of space" then warned the Vulcan.

"Commander! " suddenly announced the Andorian giantess still looking at her tactical sensor readouts: "I have the Dyson shell on sensors! It is still here!"

Lieutenant Cheonghi shifted the main viewer's angle and, before their eyes, appeared the solar-sized spherical construct, shimmering under the translucent covering of a massive energy shield on which were dissipating the very last flames of the Azimuth Horizon.

"Metaphasic shield active around the entire construct, Sir. " confirmed Tyvya with her voice what their eyes were telling them." The X'ell world seems to have suffered only negligible damage since we exited it."

"Very good" O'Conner said as he tried to take it all in.

A collective sigh seemed to exhale from the entire ship herself as they contemplated the vast artificial world, now safe from harm. The mere sight of it, knowing it had stood unharmed before the worst of the cosmic storm, made them all feel proud... and relieved: it made them truly feel like Starfleet officers.

They had made a positive difference in this universe.

As the doors to the turbolift swished apart, Syntron stepped out onto the auxilliary bridge. The viewscreen was surprisingly vacant at the moment he glanced at it, stepping toward his post, especially considering the volatile events transpiring outside of the ship while they were concluding the recalibration of the probe.

*A momentary calm in the midst of the storm apparently, he contemplated, perhaps the most opportune time for the Artemis to launch the awaiting probe.*

Syntron turned and addressed the first officer:

"Commander O'Conner, this may be a favorable time to launch the probe... before the storm begins to reemerge."

O'Conner turned to Syntron and raised an eyebrow.

"You haven't launched it yet? Of course launch it as fast you can."

Before the science officer could confirm the launch, a commotion emanated from the tactical station.

"And... Sir?" now added the Assistant Chief Tactical Officer after a moment of hesitation:

"Sir! I have found the Aegis!"

Again, the Edoan Ops officer shifted the viewer's point of view and magnified the image. There, slowly drifting in space, was the oblong, disc-shaped silhouette of the Artemis' bridge.

By some miracle, it was still in one piece, floating slightly tilted on a side, the forward part blackened and only navigational lights blinking.

"Receiving the emergency beacon signal from the module Commander," now reported Doctor Lumquist from the CMO chair. "Sensors register heavy damage to their deflector dish, emergency power online, minimal life support... Sir... I can't read any lifesigns... sensors are now being disrupted..."

"There is a new increase in chronitons and nucleonics," interrupted T'Val.

"The storm! It's coming back! " voiced for all Ensign Narod, fingers already twitching over the helm controls.

Despite himself. Michael O'Conner huckled a bit at that.

"Oh Mr. Narod, I am sure it is. Move in to tractor beam range. Tyvya, use the ionic beam weapon to clear away for the Artemis and protect the Aegis. Lets go save them. Lieutenant, O'Conner then said curtly to Relys, engage the tractor beam when in range and then get us back to the shell."

Lieutenant Relys looked at Commander O'Conner's eyes, exchanged a curt nod with him and then ordered:

"Tactical: tractor beam on the Aegis and bring it under the cover of our metaphasic shield! Comm, send a signal to the nearest entrance to the Dyson shell! Helm, Emergency impulse!"

In a fast, swooping arc, the Artemis jumped to life and swung around, grabbing the small, inert bridge module in a greenish beam and pulled it close like a protecting hen with her only chick as she rushed at full speed directly towards the titanic, metallic sphere.

Behind the fleeing starship, space flared up once more and a sudden flood of fire spilled out from nothingness to set all the heavens ablaze. Long tongues of destructive flames stretched out after the fleeing vessel as if to grab her, the monstrous anomaly opening like a burning mouth of blinding incandescence to devour her and everything else in it's path.

But before she could even be touched by the plasma fire lapping ahead at the vast shield around the X'ell world, the Artemis went through the large opening before her.

Then, the massive entrance closed itself behind the fleeing vessel, cutting her off from the blazing inferno now pounding with fists of fire against the closed doors, impotently raging against the energy shell of the colossal construct.

"All stop. Computer: automated reconnection of the bridge module," breathed the Bajoran woman from the executive chair. Only then did she release the armchairs she had been gripping with whitened knuckles on both hands.

On the main viewer, they could all follow the Aegis suddenly flare up to life and start to move over the saucer section of the Artemis. Even five decks below, they could hear and feel the bridge module reconnect itself with the rest of the ship.

"Bridge module reintegration complete," announced the voice of the computer.

"Commander, then reported Ensign Ferrier looking at his engineering panel, bridge is fully operational. Minor damage, inertial dampeners at minimal level and deflector dish destroyed, relays burned out. What the blazes did they do with it? "

"And how did they survive inside the anomaly?" wondered aloud Lieutenant Cheonghi.

"If they survived..." gloomily added Ensign Tyvya.

"Medical team to Olympus!" was now ordering Doctor Lumquist.

Suddenly standing up to her full two and a half meters to turn towards the command chair, the Andorian tactical officer darted eyes and antennae hard at O'Conner, her voice etched with barely controlled anguish:

"Permission to escort the medical team and secure the main bridge, Sir."

O'Conner turned his chair to the tactical officer:

"Permission denied, Ensign Tyvya."

As she began to protest O'Conner turned to Relys.

"Lieutenant please inform Alpha and Beta shifts to get some rest and for Gamma shift to report to their stations."

He then turned back to Tyvya.

"If you wish see the captain during your rest, I suspect that you will need to talk to our surgeon, Doctor Sage."

It took a moment for the towering Andorian shen to regain composure before answering stiffly:

"Aye, Sir."

After her reply, the First officer turned to his chair's console and hit a few keys before tapping his combadge.

"Commander O'Conner to engineering; Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn: we have rejoined with the Aegis. I expect the bridge to be like new in 6 hours."

His voice sounded hard in the silent tranquility permeating the whole ship like after a great sigh. After the raging times they had all gone through, the calmness now reigning all around them felt strange, especially knowing that a monstrous storm was raging outside.

But now, they had found a safe port in the storm.

\* \* \*

Lieutenant Kelsey Alther lay on the floor of the Aegis, face down. The Kalthurian had been thrown once again by the storm and simply laid there.

Letting out a groan while rolling over, Kelsey felt a liquid on its face. The androgyn put a hand roughly on the spot and pulled it away to see blood.

"Not my week" Alther groaned, managing to sit up. "Doc, you there?" the Lieutenant asked with eyes shut, rubbing the back of its neck.

Josiah shoved a fallen panel off of himself. He felt like he'd been run through a blender. He was pretty sure he smelled fire.

He groaned as he sat up.

"I'm here, purdy," he mumbled. "Think I busted a few ribs back thar'."

He slowly stood, and checked himself. The rib were definitely cracked, but not in any danger of puncturing his internal organs. He breathed a painful sigh of relief.

He fished out his medkit and ambled over to Kelsey. He scanned her with his medical tricorder. He breathed another sigh of relief.

"Well, the good news is yew only have a mild concussion an' yew're a lil' busted open on your noggin'. The bad news is your superficial bleedin' is otherwise marrin' your lovely face," he said as he helped her sit up. "Yew're not in any danger as long as yew don' fall 'sleep. Stay keep them purdy blues of yours open, y'hear?"

Josiah then propped Kelsey up against a bulkhead.

"An' stay put while I look f'r the skipper."

The blue-skinned, feminine-looking officer's whole body ached, from head to toes. Not to mention bleeding on the head somewhere; that was never fun.

Kelsey nodded while being propped up against the wall.

*Great, a concussion* the Kalthurian sighed inwardly while staring around at the ruined Aegis.

Kelsey simply laid back down on the floor of the Aegis, waiting... and didn't notice that the captain was nowhere to be seen.

His body was lying down the trapdoor to the lower section underneath, inert before the deflector dish relays that had blown up right into his face when Kelsey had fired the last modified blast that had saved them all.

It would be soon obvious to anyone examining the burned out apparatus that this last blast from the deflector dish of the bridge module had not been an ionic pulse.

Doctor Sage looked around for Captain Kheren. When he spotted the open trapdoor, he looked down into it. All he saw was the exploded relays, and part of the captain's body under some debris.

To Josiah, it was like seeing Doc Sangliar all over again.

"Aw, hell," Josiah mumbled.

He then climbed down as best he could over to the prone figure, and started scanning with the medical tricorder.

"Oh, no..."

The commanding officer of the Artemis had a few severe burns on his hands and arms and a lump on the back of his silver-haired head, but no other apparent injury despite being unconscious and abnormally cold to the touch, even for one of his species. Amazingly, his antennae were nowhere to be seen... but the Doctor recalled his medical file and knew they had reflexively retracted into his skull, a peculiarity of his unique mutation.

From the preliminary examination he could make, Josiah Sage could not find anything else.

But, like all Andorians, Kheren was much more prone to shock than the average Human, even from superficial injuries...

Like now.

*Let's not do this again*, was silently vowing Kelsey Alther, head against the bulkhead, before getting up and walking over to the open trapdoor and lean in.

Down to the lower deck below Alther, Doc Sage looked at all of the data the medical tricorder was showing him.

"Not good. V'ry not good," he said.

He set the tricorder down, and started murmuring to himself:

"Neurogenic shock. Avoid usin' phenylephrine, don' wan' t'jack up his bradycardia. Now, le's see."

He adjusted his hypospray.

"Don' have any fluids I c'n give yew, so we're gonna have to settle on usin' a wond'rful dopamine-atropine cocktail."

He then felt the Aegis dock with the Artemis. He smiled.

"Need some help down there?" the androgyn enquired, wiping a small amount of blood from its face.

Josiah looked up at Kelsey.

"Naw, we're good. Jus' gotta wait f'r the cavalry."

With that, he set the hypospray against Captain Kheren's skin, knowing the reaction would most like revive the Andorian violently.

"Knock-knock, skipper."

Josiah pressed the injection button.

Kheren's eyes popped open.

With the osmotic circulatory system Andorians had, they were highly susceptible to toxins and drunkenness; but for the same reason, medicines worked almost like magic on them.

For a moment, he just stared at the ceiling, not even registering the bearded face of Doctor Sage until his antennae sprouted out of his platinum mane to bring back color, sound and smell and a sudden rush of bioelectrical aura that made him wince.

"Thank you very much, Doc. I knew I was right to accept your offer to come with us."

He propped himself up to a sitting posture, feeling a slight dizziness, a remnant of their last romp into the anomaly.

Then he saw the burned out deflector relays and cocked his head to a side then the other as memories came back to him.

"I see your aim was true, Lieutenant," he threw up at the face of Kelsey Alther looking down upon them from the open hatch. "Glad our fake torpedo worked."

Every tactical officer coming out of the Academy nowadays knew about this trick: simulating a torpedo blast through a resonance burst from the main deflector dish was known since the historical death of Captain James T. Kirk. What had been different now was that, to burrow an escape route into a subspace fracture, Kheren had to manually shift subspace frequencies of the blast while it was fired to simulate a transphasic effect.

And, as expected, it burned out the entire assembly right under his hands.

The bridge module reconnection was not only heard but felt in the lower section they were in. With the power coming back on with the coupling of the bridge to the rest of the ship, he understood immediately that not only they had survived, but so did the Artemis... and hopefully, the X'ell world.

Ignoring the discomfort of his recently burned arms and hands still itching from the doctor's treatment, the Andorian climbed back up to the bridge.

Giving a thankful squeeze to Kelsey Alther's misleadingly frail shoulder as the Kalthurian helped him up, Kheren went back to his command chair and activated the main viewing screen.

For a moment, he just looked at the wondrous vista of the astounding view of the interior of the Dyson shell, so beautiful and peaceful under the light of its enclosed star. Only then did his breath come out again.

Kheren then tapped his combadge:

"This is the captain: all senior officers, report to the bridge."

Then, standing at attention before the screen, he said:

"Doc, would you be so kind as to open a channel to the X'ell please?"

Josiah couldn't help but smile. He mumbled to himself:

"Man's hoverin' near death, an' he still's got the mission underway. Ain't that a daisy?"

He went to his chair, and punched the appropriate sequence.

"Channel's open, skipper. G'head an' send it."

"This is Captain Kheren of the Federation starship Artemis. We wish to thank you for harboring us against the anomaly and hope you suffered not yourselves."

There was a moment of silence the Andorian used to shake off the dizziness that was resurfacing as he stood rigidly before the viewer. Then, the now familiar face of the X'ell speaker appeared.

"Captain Kheren of the Federation starship Artemis; the X'ell thank you and your people for providing us with the means of doing so while respecting our territorial integrity. The X'ell thank you and your people for helping us in our time of suffering while respecting our laws. The X'ell thank you for removing the *Thlin'gans* from our world while curbing your barbarism and respecting our wishes as best as your limited ways allowed you to."

Kheren inwardly smirked at the convoluted way of the bird-like humanoid to admit having judged them too hastily.

Or had they?

The commanding officer of the Artemis was well aware that maybe even a few of his crew may had preferred a more "direct" and heavy-handed handling of the situation, thinking only of Federation interests and their own personal values and not of what the Federation was supposed to stand for... Maybe even Command would admonish him for not having taken matters in a more... "imperious" manner. After all, there were still disgusting aberrations like section 31 around and commanding officers who believed like so many dictators that the end justified the means...

But it didn't matter: the Klingons were dealt with and no war was coming because of it; the anomaly had been again faced and her weaknesses discovered without losing ship and crew; and an entire civilization was saved without disregarding it or the Federation's own ethics... and all Starfleet rules and orders obeyed while doing it.

Kheren took a deep breath that firmly steadied his resolve. He was the captain; and as long as he would be a Starfleet captain, this is how he would do things... or he would be a Starfleet captain no more.

*Well done people... You all made me proud today to be a Starfleet officer like you all... with you all,* he promised himself silently to tell each and every deserving member of the crew.

For the moment however, he had to address the X'ell.

Dampening a slight buzzing in his hearing with a shake of his antennae, the Andorian captain straightened himself further to declare:

"Speaker of the X'ell; if you would allow us some time to repair and catch our breath, we will then depart from your system and leave you be as you wish. However, we hope this first opportunity to help one another could be but the beginning of a peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship between your people and ours."

Taking a step forward, Kheren then explained:

"We are willing to offer you further medical help and knowledge; we will leave our EMH planetside for you to learn from them thousands of years of medical knowledge from a hundred worlds. Let this be our gift for you to show you our good will towards your people."

"And what will your animalistic greed ask in return?" bluntly retorted the X'ell.

"Only a chance to better know you as a people... and perhaps, hopefully, learn the wisdom of your ways to which, you know from our own values, we do aspire to."

The avian humanoid cocked its dark-blue feathered head to one side, then the other, large golden eyes blinking and beak-like mouth slightly open. Then its windy, fluty voice filled the bridge speakers again, but this time with a melodic quality to its voice that was almost soothing to hear:

"You are still a barbarous, savage child-like people... but you have kept true to your own word as best you could; you have followed your own, simplistic ethics despite obvious temptation to go the easy way; you have shown respect to our own way of life, our world and our people; you have acted with restraint and compassion, even towards your tribal enemies. There is indeed hope for your people."

The X'ell stopped for a moment, its head turning one way then the other, in this peculiar way that definitely suggested that it was listening to someone else unseen. Then he finished:

"You may stay until you are ready to depart. We will decide later if your actions will allow you to come and share breathing the wind with us. For now, we will accept your generosity and allow your people to come to our world and talk with us. May we at least grow together tomorrow as we helped each other today."

The X'ell speaker lowered its head to show the colored fiberoptics highlighting the dense feathers covering its head, then looked one last time with unblinking golden pupils at the screen before returning the image to that of the vast hollow world.

Kheren forcefully exhaled his breath as if he had been swimming underwater for some time. He looked at Kelsey Alther with an expression that had everything of a smile except the actual curling of the lips.

"Well, I think we did enough for today. Lieutenant, go with the Doc to get yourself patched up and take a good day off. Pretty darn good work by the way."

Kelsey Alther had tried to stay out of the viewscreen as much as possible, still feeling uneasy at having impersonating one of the birdfolk and being seen by the X'ell speaker while still in the feathered disguise. But when finally the conversation ended and the captain gave the order, the Kalthurian simply nodded.

Kheren finally let himself fall back heavily into his chair, sighed as if all the worries in the world finally left him and looked sideways at Josiah Sage.

"You too, Doc. "

"Aye Sir" Kelsey said with a smile before heading for the turbolift. "Coming Doc?"

"Yeah, El-Tee, le't git goin'," Doc Sage said, returning her smile.

Despite what he'd told himself earlier, he couldn't help but find her smiling face to be stunning. Pushing the thought away, he stepped onto the 'lift, he felt a sudden urge of spontaneity.

"El-Tee, I have this program on the holodeck tha's jus' like where I grew up. I go there to rope, shoot, and ride. Mos'ly ride. Horseback that is," he said. "I was wonderin' iffin' yew'd like to join me f'r a ride an' mebbe a picnic sometime?"

He paused, and characteristically ran his hand over his moustache and beard. He felt the tips of his shoulder-length hair, only then realizing his tie pulling the hair back had fallen out during the last encounter.

"Well, whatta'yew say?"

Kelsey pondered for a moment at Josiah's request.

"Sure, I need some kind of relaxation" the Kalthurian said with a smile and a quick nod. "Just tell me when" the lieutenant added as the turbolift arrived at main medical's deck.

When the doors wooshed open, First Officer Michael O'Conner couldn't help but smile at Kelsey Alther and Doctor Sage as they stood almost awkwardly right in front of him and did a step back as the door opened.

"Good job you two." O'Conner said as he stepped past them and took their place in the cabin.

O'Conner quietly rode the turbolift to the bridge. In his head, he was trying to think of a way to multiply the beam weapon they had. It was working, but even if the Artemis' temporary could hold back the storm, it might take them weeks to fully fix all the rips in space this anomaly could seep through.

He exited the lift and looked around the bruised command center. He then turned to the Captain.

"Commander O'Conner reporting for duty."

Kheren craned his neck towards the man as he approached the command well.

"You did great back there, Number One. You didn't even fog the windows. Well done. "

Then, the Andorian stood up, shaking so very slightly; but it was unmistakable in his otherwise rock steady usual manner to the alert eye of Michael O'Conner.

"If you feel up to it, would you mind overseeing things for a couple of hours? I don't know what the Doc pumped into me, but I need to lie down before it starts wearing off. I'll be in my quarters. If it's alright with you too, Doc."

"Of course Sir," O'Conner smiled at the tired captain. "I have given alpha and beta shifts time off to rest."

O'Conner leaned against the rail behind the captain's chair and gazed out the viewscreen.

Kheren nodded and left the command seat to his First Officer.

"Good thinking. Everyone deserves some rest. Rotate the shifts and let repairs and reports be done without hurry. We'll drop anchor here for a time before heading back to Starbase 10."

As the rest of the bridge officers poured out of the turbolift, he headed towards the other door and the other shaft at the end of the corridor of his ready room to get to his own quarters.

The crisis was over; they had succeeded in establishing a positive relationship with a previously unknown advanced civilization, removed the threat of war and found a safe haven from an monstrous anomaly they now had learned ways to face. They had done their duty to the best of their ability and made the Artemis worthy of serving Lotus Fleet and the United Federation of Planets.

A job well done... and the Andorian now felt the tension of the last day catch up to his freshly healing wounds.

He felt like sleeping a huge, lazy six hours; a fitting reward.

\* \* \*

A few hours after Kelsey had left sickbay, Josiah sat in his office. He was finishing a message meant for his father on Earth.

"...so Dad, I'm glad to hear Abby's gonna make whatever decision she makes, an' I support her. I know yew will too. Jus' like yew support me. I know yew don' always like the decisions I make, but yew know when I make'em, I make'em of my own volition. Tha's what bein' an adult is all about, right? Yew taught me that, Dad."

Josiah took a slow breath. "Be proud of me, an' know that I love you. Give my love to mama, an' the girls. I'll be home soon to visit, okay? Take care, papa."

Josiah thumbed off the recording. As soon as he did Doctor Frederic Lumquist poked his head into the CMO's office.

"Hey, Joe, come quick!"

"Freddie? What's goin' on?"

"You've got to see for yourself!" Lumquist exclaimed before moving out of sight.

Josiah stood, and put on the blue lab coat with the embroidery designating his position as Chief Medical Officer. He followed after Freddie, and saw a gathering around Doc Sangliar's recovery table.

When Josiah heard weeping, his heart fell. He pushed on through to look on at the form of the Tellarite, fully expecting to pay his final respects.

What he found were two beady eyes staring at him. A gruff greeting followed, "Why in the hell are you wearing my coat? I'm out for a few hours, and every gets delusions of grandeur! Where's Captain Kheren? I have few choice words for him about this outrage!"

Josiah's face spread into a wide smile. He tapped his combadge.

At that very moment, Kheren almost bolted out of his bed.

Because his antennae reflexively retracted into his skull while he was unconscious, cutting off all colors, smells and sounds, he had set his combadge to vibrate and wore it while he slept as a habit. The sensory deprivation allowed for very deep and recuperative sleep, but it made every wake up call rather brutal.

He took a moment to breathe deeply so as to regain control of his killing instincts filling the void between sleep and full consciousness. It was never a good idea to be near him when he suddenly awoke.

Then he activated his combadge:

"Kheren here. "

"Chief Medical Officer to Captain Kheren. Skipper, your presence is respectfully requested in main medical."

*What now?* he wondered silently.

Looking at the time piece, he saw that he had slept for almost four hours; a full night sleep for one of his kind. He felt refreshed despite the itching in his arms where he could still feel the effects of the dermal regenerator on his burns.

It would feel uncomfortable for a few days still, even with regular treatments. The burns had been very serious, especially for one as sensitive to heat as he was, even for a coldworlder like him.

But he guessed by his tone that Doctor Sage was not calling him for a treatment.

"On my way."

He stood up and went straight for the door, then stepped back quickly as soon as it opened to let it close immediately. Fortunately, no one was passing by his quarters at the moment. Seeing the commanding officer of the ship in the nude would have meant nothing on an Andorian ship; but on the Artemis, almost all the crew was made of other species, mostly Humans who had a strong opinion about what they called "decency."

Kheren got a fresh uniform from the replicator, and then exited his quarters at a brisk pace towards the nearest turbolift and sickbay.

A dozen possibilities were running into his mind as he entered the vast medical ward of the starship, but none was even close to what greeted him as soon as he came in:

"*You!* These beardless peons are telling me that, while I was napping, you named this... flat stomach paleskin THE Chief Medical Officer of this ship! Is it true? "

The Andorian crossed his powerful arms across his large chest and kept his head high while looking down at the much smaller, portly, thick-bearded Tellarite wagging a stubby finger at his face and retorted in his deep calm voice:

"Even for a temporary assigned officer like you, sleeping on the job is a serious offense, Doctor Sangliar. "

The rotund doctor put both meaty hands on his wide hips and lifted high his bearded chin to snarl:

"Are you telling me that you are putting off my assignment on this ship? "

"Nonononono, Doctor. As soon as we get to Starbase 10, I'm putting *you* off this ship."

There was a moment of silence that stretched uncomfortably across the entire room.

Then stretched across the bearded face a wide smile.

"Good. About time I get back to real work; real and *safe* work."

"Yes... you will sleep better that way."

There was another pause... and then, a raucous laugh from the Tellarite.

"Ah, my no-good engineer of a brother did warn me: the Humans and all the others on the base do not appreciate good sport like you do. They have no stomach for it. I will miss you, Captain."

"I won't."

This time, the laughter came on immediately and Kheren joined in.

Doc Sage and Doc Lumquist stood off to the side. Josiah's face a wry smile, while Lumquist was barely suppressing snickers.

As Doctor Sangliar bowed to him and went off to say his farewells to the rest of the medical team in his typical Tellarite raucous manner, the captain of the Artemis turned towards Josiah Sage:

"Anything else, Doc?"

Both medical officers wiped the smiles off of their faces when Captain Kheren turned their way. Lumquist nodded at the captain, and bowed out with a quick mumble at Josiah:

"See you there in thirty mikes."

Josiah nodded at Lumquist, and looked to his commanding officer. He smiled brightly.

"Nothin' else at all, skipper. If you'll 'scuse me though, I'm headin' to holodeck one in 'bout a half-hour. You're welcome to come if yew'd like."

With that, Doc Sage nodded at the commanding officer, and left out of medical with his PADD in hand. As he walked, he sent messages of invitation to the rest of the senior officers on board.

A half-hour later, Josiah sat on a log next to Lumquist. Overhead, the holodeck presented night time on Earth. The sky was perfectly clear with billions of stars twinkling in the darkness. The only local source of light was an open-hearthed fire surrounded by fist-sized rocks. The fire glowed a comfortable red-orange.

Josiah was tuning a steel-string guitar that was across his knees. He addressed the few others who had showed up.

"It's somethin' of a tr'dition after a successful cattle drive," Josiah explained, "ev'rybody gits t'gether an' holds what's known as a chuckwagon dinner. It's food, music, an' general good natured-ness. Now, makin' food on the holodeck on such short notice wasn't really feas'ble, but the second part of the dinner, music, was totally doable, an' as such, leads to good natured-ness, as it were. So, without further ado."

Doc Sage strummed his instrument, and Lumquist started to sing. The fire crackled, and spit, in tune. Somewhere in the distance, a coyote howled, underscoring the lyrics.

As Josiah played, he had a sense of calm he hadn't experienced since he became Chief Medical Officer. Despite his misgivings, he knew he'd become part of something bigger. And, to his slight surprise, he accepted his role in it.

He sighed to himself as he played for the other members of the crew sitting around the hearth under the starry sky.

\* \* \*

N'Eligahn leaned back in the chair and watched the pulsing warp core. He was somewhat blackened from smoke and electrical burns, but overall unscathed.

The electrical feedback hadn't been as bad as they thought, but they'd have to take a few of the less important systems offline to bring them back up to par. The larger repairs would be able to wait until they reached the Starbase.

"Sir?" Blakely said as she walked over and took the seat next to him.

"You hear it?" N'Eligahn asked. "That constant, healthy thrum of the warp core. You get used to it after awhile, but sometimes it doesn't hurt to stop and listen. That's the sound you want to hear, always. If it stutters for even a moment, something's wrong."

He looked over at her and smiled.

"It's like flying," he said. "You can have all the computers and instruments in the world, but it still doesn't replace the intuition and rapid response required to do it right."

He shook his head.

"I can't be up there looking at computer monitors all the time. It's my job to be down here, keeping aware of the full situation and leading people from the front."

He looked over at Blakely.

"I'm going to change the watch roster, Blakely, if you feel up to it."

"How do you mean?" Blakely asked.

"It's going to take some time to implement, but I'm going to establish a primary watch station on the bridge. I'll coordinate it with you later. But whether the Captain likes it or not, my place and role is down here in the fire, not up there staring at a computer screen. At least, not unless the situation requires direct control from the bridge."

Lt. Ferrier stepped into Engineering and looked both officers up and down, a small smile on his face.

"You both smell terrible...Sirs," he commented. "I've got the passdown and Gamma shift is already replacing Alpha and Beta shifts. Might be best if you two stand down as well."

"I agree," N'Eligahn retorted as he stood and shook his fellow engineer's hand before turning to Blakely. "You get some rest too, good job today."

"Thanks Sir, husband's probably freaking out," she agreed with the first smile she'd had all day.

"I'll see everyone at the 0700 morning meeting," N'Eligahn concluded as he walked out of engineering.

A short while later, he stepped out of the shower a half hour later, no longer smelling of smoke and burnt plastic. Monty, however, had seemed to be taken with the smell and was happily sniffing at his discarded uniform.

"Hey, you little fuzzball," N'Eligahn said as he scooped the dog up. "I hope today didn't mess with you too badly. It's not normally like that, honest."

The terrier yipped at him and squirmed out of his grasp, making a dash for the replicator.

"Okay, fine," N'Eligahn sighed. "You're going to get fat if you keep eating like this."

His combadge chirped once.

"Relys to N'Eligahn."

He walked over and picked up the badge.

"N'Eligahn here, go ahead."

"Could you come to Holodeck 2, please?"

"On my way. Be there in about 5 minutes."

As promised, N'Eligahn stepped onto the holodeck a few minutes later, to what looked like a moonlit prairie. If the stars hadn't been completely wrong, it would have been Rethia. Off in the distance he saw a fire and a bunch of people around it. Some odd, alien noise was coming from the group, but since N'Eligahn regularly listened to Klingon opera, he didn't have much room to complain.

He looked up at a small hill overlooking the campfire and saw a figure sitting there, her head cocked and listening to the alien music. He walked over and up the hill to find Relys sitting there.

"Sir," Relys said, without looking at him.

"I...think I owe you an apology..." N'Eligahn then admitted.  
"For?"

"Being an utter idiot."

"And?"

"Having to make you hit me to get me to understand."

"I guess that'll work," Relys shot back.

N'Eligahn eyed her for a moment.

"Did I just apologize to you for you hitting me?" he asked then.

"Something along those lines."

She turned and smiled at him, the moonlight fell across a side of her face, casting shadows on the other. The light itself reflected in both of her eyes. Then she turned back to look at the fire and the small circle of people.

"I think we've both been guilty of being idiots," she confessed as he stepped forward and sat beside her.

N'Eligahn's eyes moved from the fire, back to her face, studying the flickering orange glow that reflected there. He moved a bit closer.

"You are an immense pain in the butt," he said.

"Well, we all have to be good at something."

N'Eligahn reached over slowly and took her hand in his, moving closer to her as he did so. His eyes met hers and she moved this time, closer to him and resting her head on his shoulder as the music from the group below continued into the night.

\* \* \*

As Syntron found his way onto deck 2 after reporting to the bridge and completing assignments for the science shifts to accumulate more data on the Dyson shell, he headed toward what would be his new quarters.

The door swiftly pulled open from the center and recessed into the wall, then almost as quickly they pushed back together as he crossed past the threshold into his quarters.

This was his first glance at his quarters since he abruptly arrived on the Artemis. It was adequately spacious and had an alcove to set up his personal artifacts. Somehow his belongings had managed to make it into his quarters, including his violin and lyre.

He walked over to the instruments, picked them up and placed each of them onto a shelf. He then opened the case protecting the violin and plucked the strings as it rested within its case. They were badly out of tune. He gently picked up the instrument and began tuning each string one at a time.

After he finished tuning it, he picked up the bow and began to pull the hairs of the bow across the string. He then sparingly added rosin to the bow strings and tried it again. The note sang out and filled the cabin with a melodious sound. Apparently the acoustics were quite good in this room of this old ship.

He then began playing an old Earth classical piece from a composer name Antonio Vivaldi. It was a piece of music he was learning as he was finishing up at the academy. It was the first movement of The Four Seasons entitled "Spring".

Somehow the music seemed appropriate; after surviving the harshness and intensity of recent events and now emerging into perhaps a new beginning as a officer aboard a somewhat battle worn but worthy ship.

Syntron closed his eyes and relaxed as the melody of the song resonated from the body of this old Terran instrument.

As he played through a brief repertoire of classical pieces, the computer in Syntron's quarters signaled an incoming message from Doctor Sage.

As he viewed the message on screen, it indicated that there was a gathering of officers in Holodeck Two that would be commencing in thirty standard minutes.

*An unusual location to hold a briefing,* he thought to himself.

After about twenty-five minutes elapsed, he walked over and carefully rested the violin back into its case, slipped the bow in position, closed and latched the case.

He walked over and placed it back on the shelf, turned and headed out into the corridor toward the turbolift, and upon entering it directed it to the Holodeck.

Moments later as he stepped into the Holodeck, Syntron was a bit bewildered as he glanced around to see that he had erroneously reached a destination in some alien desert environment that appeared to be currently occurring at some point in the evening. Perhaps he had intruded upon a crew member's recreational program rather than the intended location for the meeting.

There was a single natural satellite reflecting subtle illumination throughout the virtual environment, along with what appeared in the distance to be a small fire radiating from the ground. Then he noticed that there were several silhouettes of life forms surrounding this fire along with some unusual sounds emanating from what now appeared to be a small collection of crew members.

The air was warm and dry, reminiscent to a small degree of his home planet.

After a moment, he recognized that he was hearing a different type of stringed terran instrument, but the sounds were nothing like he had heard before.

He walked toward the gathering and could hear singing accompanying the instrument, but this voice had a twangy sort of resonance; like the unusual timbre of Doctor Sage's method of speech.

Even though Syntron had only briefly met the ship's doctor, he was having a difficult time comprehending many of the things that the doctor said. He seemed to have an unusual method of speaking... like clipping the ends of words and using a collection of esoteric metaphors that Syntron knew was initially going to be challenging as he worked toward establishing a set of parameters to interpret his manner of communication.

Syntron stopped for a moment to ponder this event occurring before him. There was something vaguely familiar in this setting; somewhat related to stories that he had once read a long time ago when he was a child about Terrans in the period that they referred to as the Old West. He just wasn't able to recall the details of the stories.

However, more recently in Starfleet Academy, he had learned that such gatherings, especially after a difficult mission, were intended to build and strengthen working relationships through off duty personal interactions.

As illogical as these unusual events were, he eventually realized while attending the academy that he was in time able to gain a level of insight into other officers' modus operandi, and ultimately establish more efficient ways to communicate with them by involving himself in these events; despite their often overly emotional actions and reactions.

Paradoxically one of the more challenging yet valuable lessons unofficially learned as an undergraduate.

So with this awareness in mind, and as a new and relatively unknown officer aboard this ship, Syntron forged ahead toward the gathering of seemingly merry officers surrounding the fire blazing in the hub of this occasion; not fully knowing what to expect.

\* \* \*

On the third chime, he answered with a toneless voice:

"Come. "

Ensign Tyvya crossed the threshold of the ready room to find Captain Kheren seated at his desk, half buried under piles of pads he was intently sifting through with one hand while the other compiled data on his desk terminal, hard at work with what Humans colloquially called by the antiquated term of "paperwork"

*Typical* she sighed inwardly.

"Sir, the bridge officers are all gathering in Holodeck 2."

"Good initiative. The crew more than earned the rest."

"All the bridge officers... Captain."

"Have fun, Ensign."

She rolled her eyes skyward while her antennae flayed in growing annoyance.

"May I ask what you are doing, Sir?"

"Work."

"Work?"

Kheren finally stopped his fingers and lifted eyes and antennae to his subordinate. For a moment, he had to consciously keep his mouth from falling to the floor as he looked at her. She had removed her uniform in favor of a long, full body covering gown of shimmering, silky black fabric that clung to every shape and every movement of her gigantic body. It was not a sight he was accustomed to... or even expected.

But the garment was not just comfortable but practical; it would insulate her body temperature from the searing heat of the desert program the Doctor had prepared for his social event after the intense day they all had gone through. The pile of pads before him was proof enough.

But it was also exceedingly alluring.

"Ensign, contrary to popular belief, a captain's job is not just glamour and adventure. What you see here is three-quarters of it: mission reports, department reports, personnel reports, ship status reports, requisition forms, supply forms, tasks forms, survey forms, assignment requests, transfer requests, leave requests, personal requests, promotions, demotions, commendations, reprimands, complaints, orders... All of them to be read, evaluated, approved, denied, filled, signed, dispatched for each crewmember, each department... The bridge part everyone looks up to, that is the easy, fun part." It took him some effort but he managed to tear his eyes of the towering Andorian shen and lower them back to his terminal, finishing:

"So, if there is nothing else, Ensign..."

There was an angry edge to her voice when Tyvya broke the silence:

"Begging the captain's pardon, but where is your Yeoman?"

His silver eyes went back to her.

"My what?"

"Your duty officer in charge of taking care of all this... stuff," she explained with a patience she was losing fast.

"I can not discharge my responsibilities on a subordinate," he retorted flatly, returning to his terminal.

"If I may, Sir: your responsibility in this Sir, is to overview, decide and either approve or deny with signing a report of all those."

"That," she indicated with an almost disgusted gesture the pile of padds, "all of that is a yeoman's job... so that *you* can be informed and responsible but completely rested and alert to properly do a *captain's* job... like knowing better your bridge crew... *Captain, Sir.*"

Crossing her deceptively graceful arms under her generous bosom, she added then:

"And even an Andorian Captain also deserves and need his rest... and to be *himself* better known by his crew."

Kheren blinked for a moment at the tactical officer, this time not even seeing how her casual wear so alluringly enhanced her body despite covering it from neck to ankles in shimmering darkness. Her tactical skills were excellent even in seemingly casual conversation; but this time, he saw her coming:

"Ensign Tyvya: I thank you for your concern. But I must decline."

It took a moment for the blue-skinned woman to wait for her cranial appendages to rise again from her thick long white hair they had flattened on suddenly. Her voice was strained under the exaggerated formality of her speech when she slowly said:

"May I ask why?"

Turning fully towards her, he crossed his hands before him on the cluttered desk to explain:

"Because I am the Captain."

Seeing the way she looked at him, he further detailed:

"I am the one who must direct them to difficult tasks, reprimand and demote them, even order them to their death; and in all this, impose order and discipline so that we not only succeed in what we are bound to do, but plainly survive... And not for our own benefit, but for the benefit of billions who will not even know our names."

He was looking straight at her with all four oculars when he finished saying:

"How can I do that to a friend ?"

The giantess stood there silent for a while. Then with a heavy sigh she whispered:

"Lonely at the top, as Humans say?"

"Nothing to worry about. I was even more lonely at the bottom," he said flatly.

She nodded back to him and turned around to leave.

"I know," she whispered softly.

The door sighed for her behind her back.

\* \* \*

Kelsey Alther lay in casual attire on the dirt and not the logs nearby, close to the fire and sighed staring at the stars.

The Kalthurian knew they weren't true stars; but even that was not enough to stop memories of sitting on Kalthan in the woods staring at the sky wondering about going to them.

Kelsey let a smile out, sitting up a little bit as the doctor began playing an instrument. His easy smile grew even bigger and he finally seemed relaxed.

The androgyn turned its neck to see N'Eligahn and Relys holding hands and had to restrain a good natured laugh.

Kelsey remembered when those two simply did not get along; but now maybe it was stubbornness or something that brought them together. Kelsey smiled and yawned, looking around to notice that Kheren wasn't here.

*I wonder if he even knew* the female-looking androgyn thought, pulling a combadge from a pocket.

"Lieutenant Kelsey to Captain Kheren. Sir, there's a little gathering in Holodeck 2 you probably should attend; its quite a nice evening and its quite relaxing." the Kalthurian said, moving over to a nearby log and resting on it, awaiting a response before leaning over to the nearby Josiah.

"If he doesn't come down, think you can convince him or make him come down here? Somebody out there knows he needs it." Kelsey said with a smile.

Josiah smiled back at Kelsey as he played. He still found the Kalthurian's eyes striking, especially in the firelight.

As the androgyn spoke, a towering shadow fell over the gathering; the gigantic silhouette of Ensign Tyvya walked up to them from before the large moon in the simulated sky, with a slow, heavy walk that looked all the more stately because of the formfitting and shiny black dress she wore.

But her stare and her voice were heavier still; she had easily overheard Kelsey and looked at her, shaking slowly her head with antennae drooping on the side.

As if to emphasize her resigned expression, a distant, solitary howl was heard from somewhere far in the night... and Kelsey's call was answered by the soft, emotionless voice of the ship's computer:

"Captain Kheren is not available. Please leave a message."

The Chief medical officer of the Artemis nodded gently as he and Kelsey shared a look because of the automated reply. Josiah shrugged.

"It's like they say on Earth, El-Tee," he said quietly, as a coyote gently cried in the distance, "it's lon'ly at the top. Our skipper is no 'xception."

Even though he didn't know, Josiah's sentiment echoed Captain Kheren's just as surely as the coyote's howl echoed throughout the prairie.

Josiah played on.

**Captain's log, Stardate: 87063.1**

**After a day spent with repairs and rest and ensuring future relations with the X'ell, the Artemis has returned the following day to Starbase 10.**

**The data probe wisely prepared by Science Lieutenant Syntron preceded us by more than a day, providing Lotus Fleet with all the details of our encounter with the anomaly, including all accumulated astrometrics data and even the successful attempts made at countering it. This should provide Starfleet with a sound foundation to build an appropriate response to this incoming catastrophe.**

**Task Force Alpha reported having completed their... escort duty with the encroaching Klingons. Relations between the Empire and the Federation are still very strained, but at least a full scale war was averted... for now.**

**The Artemis came out of it quite well considering the circumstances. We will finally have time to get our promised enhanced shields and replace our lost Arrow 9 obsolete class 8 shuttle, hopefully with a brand new class 11, which has been replacing runabouts for some time now as the main auxiliary crafts of Starfleet. And since the bridge module has to be repaired, we will also ask to retrofit it with modern shuttlecraft technology, allowing for warp capability and small-sized weaponry. A few phaser arrays and micro torpedo launchers would have helped much in this last mission.**

**And who knows what we will be facing next.**

**Personal log, Stardate : 87063.2**

**I am an hour away from my report meeting with Commander Allen Samji, commander of Starbase 10. There is no hiding the pride I will feel in confirming how the Artemis and her crew outperformed themselves so admirably during such an unusual, complex and difficult situation.**

**Well... most of them.**

**There is nothing that pleases me more than requesting promotions and citations for such worthy officers as those that served here under my command, except contributing to further the values of the Federation and live up to the high standards of Starfleet. Without those, we would be no different than the Klingons we so openly look down upon; and yet, even they strictly follow their own harsh rules... and to the death. That is what Honor means: why, despite values we do not share, they are still worthy of respect... and how we in turn can earn any.**

**I just wish this sentiment was shared by all.**

Captain Kheren stepped into the office of Starbase Commander Samji as soon as the answer to his chime came through the closed door. He walked to the large desk behind which sat the bronze-skinned, dark-haired Human and stood at proper attention before him.

Commander Allen Samji might have been of lower rank than the Andorian, but, as a starbase commander, his responsibilities far exceeded those of even a starship captain. Kheren only had to make decisions for his own ship and crew; Samji had to do the same, not only for Starbase 10, but for all the ships of Lotus Fleet, with consequences covering the entire Hromi sector of Federation Space... if not more.

Rank was one thing; but it was the level of responsibility that truly defined it and gave it any value. That is what the Andorian respected; not the number of pips on a collar... and most of all, how the pip-wearer faced these responsibilities.

Despite being recently appointed to his position, Commander Samji had already earned much respect from the captain of the USS Artemis.

"Captain Kheren of the Artemis reporting for mission debriefing."

Samji stood and smiled, looking up at the large Andorian.

"Come in Captain, welcome back."

He extended his hand and received a handshake in response, less hesitant than he remembered previously. Samji supposed he was becoming more comfortable with human customs. He also motioned to the chair across the desk from him and said, "Sit down if you like," knowing that Captain Kheren would probably choose to stand.

Regardless, he himself sat down and began the debrief.

"I was really pleased to read about your encounter with and handling of the X'ell. Two successful first contact missions by Lotus Fleet ships in mere months!" Samji exclaimed, with pride that he had developed even after such a short time among the fine men and women of Lotus Fleet.

"Three in fact, Commander," corrected the Andorian, his eyes and voice filled with the same pride and satisfaction as that of Allen Samji. "It was not quite a year ago that Captain Felez of the USS Lotus resolved for the better a disastrous first encounter with the Circoids. But that was shortly before your time. Seems Lotus Fleet has been assigned to this sector of space for more and better reasons than just to watch over borders."

"Of course, apologies for the oversight," the starbase commander agreed. "And you managed to keep us out of a war with the Klingons when the situation was poised to go far worse. Excellent work. Fleet Captain Kotari wanted me to personally extend his congratulations and thanks to you and your crew. Additionally, he passed along some information about some promotions and awards for the Artemis crew that you may be anxious to hear about."

"Thank you, Commander Samji. Any commanding officer can not but succeed with such fine officers working with him. My crew proved itself up to the challenge and more than a few of them are worthy of special distinction," the captain of the Artemis said, seizing the moment.

With visible pride he reported:

"Commander O'Conner showed excellent leadership in several difficult situations during this one mission alone; Lieutenant Alther displayed remarkable valor, even while injured, and deserves a long overdue promotion. And let's not forget Doctor Sage, who's handling of the emergency situation with our EMHs was most meritorious, the key to our success in this first contact; nor ignore Lieutenant Syntron, who's studies were as meritorious, discovering possibly an effective way to combat the Azimuth Horizon catastrophe."

Commander Samji could not but notice that, in all the praise Captain Kheren gave to his people, there was one bridge senior officer he did not name.

And, from the mission report, he already knew why.

For the moment he put that situation aside.

"And for their actions, your officers will be honored. First of all, however, I have been asked to act on Captain Kotari's behalf and award you the Lotus Fleet Medal of Diplomacy for your handling of the First Contact situation and your non-violent solution to the issue of the Klingons."

"Thank you, Sir. Nothing is more gratifying than doing one's duty like this... like a Starfleet officer."

It was clear from his voice alone that these were more than just words of gratitude for the Andorian.

It was nothing less than an oath.

Commander Samji continued with the other officers' commendations.

"Commander O'Conner's actions in carrying out that same non-violent attack, among other such commendable actions has earned him the Prentares Ribbon of Commendation. Lieutenant Alther will be promoted to Lieutenant Commander as you recommended and, for valiant efforts at great risk to personal safety, will be rewarded the Starfleet Medal of Valor. For his ingenious EMH solution, Dr. Sage will receive the Starfleet Medical Decoration. Finally, for his discoveries involving the Azimuth Horizon, and a possible way to counter it, Lieutenant Junior Grade Syntron will receive the Starfleet Science Decoration."

He handed Kheren a PADD containing the awards and promotions.

"On that note, tell me more about this discovery involving a way to counter the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. I read the logs, but don't quite understand the details."

The blue-skinned starship commander blinked his silvery eyes, antennae wiggling slowly this way and that. In typical Andorian fashion, his mind was more preoccupied with problems of the present than those of the past or the future. But he could rapidly shift focus.

"We attacked the subspace fractures through which the anomaly travels instead of the anomaly itself; cutting off its route, if you will. Mister Syntron could explain to you the physics and subspace mechanics of it; but, to put it simply, a focused inverted ionic pulse from a ship's deflector dish closes a fracture and the anomaly cannot reintegrate normal space from there."

Kheren crossed his muscular arms on his wide chest to pause a moment. his next words were uttered with a heavy tone.

"It works fine... But, considering the number and dispersion of subspace fractures in this sector alone, most of them undetected yet... and the huge size of an anomaly growing still as it propagates through our space..."

His metallic gaze rose up to look directly in the man's eyes.

"Commander Samji, this is but a delaying solution at best. I seriously doubt even our entire Starfleet could muster enough ships to completely bottle up the Azimuth Horizon. And sealing it off only partially would make things even worse."

Samji nodded.

"Yes, I could see how that could get much worse, as the energy could be funneled in a certain direction. A more sinister man than I may see it as an opportunity, considering how close we are to both the Romulan and Klingon borders. This needs to remain classified at the highest levels. Even from certain 'elements' within the Federation."

He knew from the bitter expression on Captain Kheren's face that he didn't need to say that he was referring to Section 31. He was sure that he had the same sour reaction just thinking about them.

Samji listened to the rest of Kheren's assessment.

And the Andorian's words voiced the gloom in his eyes.

"We have an effective defense with metaphasic shielding and an effective counter with the ionic pulse... but not a full solution. We are still in grave danger."

"I agree. I think that the only way to stop this thing is at the source," Samji said. "Even if we discover a means to stop it, then the question becomes how to get close enough to deliver it. We have our Science department on Starbase 10 working on a solution and we'll continue to gather data and perform field experiments from our ships. It is really all we can do at the moment," Samji concluded, clearly finished with the subject for the time being.

"Now about Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn," Samji said with a sigh. "I had hoped that his apparent deSire to serve on the Artemis would serve to temper some of his tendencies. I guess either you follow orders or you don't."

Samji glanced down at N'Eligahn's file.

"But regardless of his discipline problems, the guy sure can deliver," he said with enthusiasm.

"You can't argue with results. His input into the Borg situation was invaluable and without him, the Spectre most likely would have been lost to us."

He set the PADD down and looked up at Kheren.

"I'd like to hear your thoughts on the matter and any ideas you may have to help him better adjust."

The Andorian's antennae were twitching, a sure sign of emotional tension even if his frozen face didn't convey much of anything. His voice also betrayed the struggle between his mind and his heart.

"Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn is the most decorated officer in Lotus Fleet and for a good reason. He is most competent at everything he does, be it piloting, ship operations, engineering or even executive duties. His quick and effective solution to save the X'ell Dyson shell alone says it all."

The "but" floated in the silence between them as distinct as if he had said it. And so, he broke the silence without any pretense at softening his words.

"However, as Captain, I can not overlook his failures. He displayed an attitude badly influencing several bridge officers to behave inappropriately. He disregarded security protocols to bring unauthorized personnel on the bridge without valid reason or clearance. And he showed open disrespect to the First officer. With all the respect due to an officer of his caliber, I asked him to report to my ready room to discuss this in private but, with all the commotion of the last days, he never showed up... And, I must admit that, for the same reason, I made my own mistake since I did not expect that I had to remind such a thing to a veteran Starfleet officer..."

Again, Kheren fell silent for a moment, as if he had to make an effort to swallow something sour. The tone of his voice still carried that sourness when he resumed voicing his thoughts.

"Bad influence on junior officers, disregard of security protocols, publicly disrespecting a senior officer..."

He shook his head, his antennae drooping.

"Reading the reports from the USS Spectre and all the chaos that happened there, I first thought Lieutenant Alther had been the main cause of it all. But since joining the Artemis, Kelsey Alther has been the perfect Starfleet officer. And it occurred to me later that I had practically the entire bridge crew of the Spectre on board: Commander O'Conner, Lieutenant Alther, Doctor Nasaro-Myth... and all went well. Then Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn came aboard. Suddenly, all was in good order on the Spectre... and chaos started on the Artemis."

The implications were clear, even if the way he shook his head, Kheren was having a hard time believing his own words; but his voice was hard and cold as ice.

"Frankly, Commander, I don't need a loose cannon on the Artemis. Despite the extensive refit, my ship is still basically outperformed by every vessel of the fleet. I have no choice then but to *demand* the highest standards from each and every crew member in efficiency *and* discipline. More than any other starship, a close community in the most hostile of environments, proper order means more than success on the Artemis; it means survival."

Kheren sighed.

"My first impulse would be to boot him out."

His eyes went back unblinking to the starbase Commander.

"But then, Kelsey Alther had come to us with even more serious charges and yet, proved to be worthy of respect and trust, because of that second chance on the Artemis. In all fairness, I can but only offer the same chance to Mister N'Eligahn... *if* he thinks he is willing and able to prove himself up to it."

Crossing again his arms on his chest, he sat back, eyes still on Samji.

"I will let Command decide if, despite of all this, he is still worthy of a promotion to Commander he would be entitled to as of now. But... with your permission, Commander, I for myself will offer him a choice: transfer to another ship better suited to his... tastes and aptitudes and find a Captain more worthy of his respect than I; or to clean his watch if he wishes to stay on the Artemis. In simpler terms, Commander, shape up or ship out, as you Humans say."

Samji had just sat and listened, nodding occasionally, overwhelmed by a display of attitude and disrespect from an officer that he thought to be one of the best in the fleet.

*Everyone must have a weakness*, he reflected. Commander N'Eligahn's was clear, but he wondered if he were to improve his discipline, would he get the same results.  
*Do the ends justify the means? Are attitude and discipline problems trumped by results?*

Little did he know, one of the famous captains from Starfleet's history that he looked up to, Benjamin Sisko might have thought so. His actions saved thousands if not millions of lives, just as N'Eligahn's may have. Even Jean Luc Picard, James T. Kirk, and Kathryn Janeway disobeyed direct orders from superiors and even potentially the Prime Directive itself when they decided that what they were doing was the right thing to do.

This case, however, seemed to be different. Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn demonstrated bad behavior for no particular reason, but he was willing to give a second chance as Captain Kheren had been so gracious to do. He was also sure Fleet Captain Kotari would back him up on it, considering the circumstances.

"Very well, I think that is the best way to handle it. If he chooses to do so, he can stay, but let him know that Captain Kotari will be watching this situation closely, and if need be will file formal charges which may lead to a court martial. I will also forward on to the Fleet Captain my recommendation for promotion to Commander for his great demonstration of skill and aptitude on both the Spectre and the Artemis, despite the attitude and discipline issues."

Samji sighed again.

"Sorry to end on a bad note, but unless you have anything else to add, I should get back to my duties. Thank you for this information, Captain."

The Andorian simply nodded, suppressing another sigh. Unknowingly, his own train of thoughts were following the same track as those of the starbase commander.

Many legendary officers in the past had shown such disobedience to do the right thing. Kheren was not one to place blind obedience over one's conscience... but he utterly despised anyone believing that the end justified the means. It was the sorry excuse for all dictators and atrocities across time and space, from Earth's Inquisition to Kodos the Executionner to Section 31. If you could not stand by your values when they were tested, they were worthless; you *made* them worthless, not having the strength to live by them when they were needed the most.

And here, it was not even so. There is simply no comparison with a chief engineer acting wrongly and a starship captain challenging even the Federation for an immoral act or for the sake of family and friends.

N'Eligahn Eтарudbo hadn't been right while acting wrongly; he had been wrong and acting wrongly.

But so had been Kelsey Alther at one time.

Kheren just hoped the Rethian would turn around as the Kalthurian did... for his own sake. Because he would not get a third chance.

When Allen Samji concluded with his own regrets, Kheren stood up.

"I'm sorry too, Commander. Especially that I have now one last thing to ask: a replacement shuttle for our lost Arrow 9; and I would dare request a class XI shuttle instead of an obsolete runabout or older shuttle class. Oh, and our bridge module would have been in much less danger if it had been equipped with modern shuttle technology; warp propulsion and micro armament to be precise."

Samji's mood brightened a little. He was happy to be the one to be able to fulfill such a request.

"Granted, Captain," he exclaimed. "The Artemis certainly deserves it. Fortunately for you, we're wanting for officers, not equipment. It just so happens that we have a few dozen Class XI shuttles sitting unused in Starbase 10's docking bay. I will see that you receive one. Improved weapons on the bridge module is easy. Installing a warp core however, is obviously going to take some time. If Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn stays on, I hope he is prepared to spend many hours not only installing it, but also designing the plans for the installation in the holodeck."

He shrugged.

"Like I said, we have the equipment, but it's really dependent on how many Engineers we can spare from the Starbase - which is most likely few - and how soon your next mission comes up. But there's no reason we can't try, right?"

Kheren nodded in visible appreciation.

"Thank you, Commander Samji. If there is only one thing to say for Mister N'Eligahn, it is that he is a really hard working and efficient engineer. Installing the new type of membrane warp coils and micro warp core of modern shuttles on the Aegis is certainly no major challenge for him. And he has the largest engineering starship crew available already on board to help him. I guess it will all depend about what he will think of the Artemis now."

"Very well, I'll see to it," Samji said as he stood, indicating that the meeting was over.

Saluting the starbase Commander, Captain Kheren left the office at a brisk pace, eager to get back to his ship.

There were several officers to reward... and one to try to save from himself.

## EPILOGUE

A somber, vulture-shaped silhouette passed by several automated sensor buoys marked with the blue and white symbol of the United Federation of Planets. Behind it, five points of rapidly moving lights showed the group of Starfleet battleships shadowing it.

Then, from within the cover of a dense asteroid field across their path, several dark, raptor-looking starships, bristling with weapons and armor plates, swooped towards that same sector of space, evanescent specters that became solid as they deactivated their cloaking device.

On board the foremost of the three cruisers, shaped much like the approaching scoutship but much, much larger, a Siren blared and lighting became crisp and darker all around the command center as a harsh, guttural voice from the massive, high-backed swivelling seat on the low podium barked a single word:

"*BhakH!*"

Fire and lightning flashed in an almost perfect sphere from the forward, red-hot aperture at the front of each three battleships, and all three energy projectiles hit the smaller incoming vessel in a brutal explosion of burning fumes and flashing debris.

For a moment, it left sparks and goutts of flames outlining this part of space like a perfectly transparent luminescent bird-like silhouette floating in the darkness, before the darkness and stillness of outer space reigned once more as even the remembrance of the small warship dissipated in the cold void.

Then, the silence that followed was broken by the hard-edged voice again:

"Federation vessels: these *PeTaQ* renegades who stole our ships and our honor when they violated orders from the High Council have met justice. You will share their fate if you do not leave. Now."

The five sleek fish-like shape of the large Starfleet vessels plowed on towards the three Klingon battlecruisers.

Then, in perfect symetry, they peeled each side in a graceful arc to regroup once more in their star-shaped formation, but now heading away from the buoy-garded zone.

Then, in a series of flashes, they went to warp.

For a long moment, the three large warships just stood there, unmoving, like birds of prey waiting for their prey to return.

But there was only the star-studded velvet of space, silent, peaceful.

Finally, the same rough voice commanded:

*"Su'wI! HaH!"*

Back within the cover of the asteroid field, the dark, raptor-looking starships, bristling with weapons and armor plates, swooped away, turning into evanescent specters as they activated their cloaking device. Only long after and in the distance, three flashes of subspace energies briefly faded out the flickering light of the stars to betray their departure.

Then, for minutes that stretched into eternity, there was only darkness and silence.

Until...

In the infinite field of stars, lightning struck.

Across the light-studded blackness, a crackling tendril of light suddenly flashed out of nowhere, tearing the silent darkness of space with a brief flash of intense light.

The lightning bolt left an after image that was then as suddenly followed on it's crooked path by raging fire.

Like flames of a forest fire running on a lone denuded branch, The tongue of orange-golden fire followed the exact erratic trace left by the lightning bolt and the entire stary sky went ablaze.

Behind it, a titanic deflagration suddenly flared out like the detonation of a supernova that whisked out the dim lights of the stars everywhere, as if the entire universe suddenly bursted into flames. A huge ring of fire filled the void, with a blindingly white center and tiny dark specks swirling with its flames around it.

At first, it appeared as a perfect sphere of raging fire. But then, slowly, it started to visibly deform on one side; slowly, the fiery flares took a definite orientation as the dark specs at the corona moved sharply towards a certain part of the cosmos.

Then the fire died out and flickered, flared again then dissolved into the nothingness it had come from. In a moment, there was no trace of the inferno that had filled space a moment before. No trace... but for lingering flames splashed against an invisible barrier, spreading like dissipating incandescent smoke and cinder against an unseen volcanic rock, tracing partly the shape of a distant curve... a dome... a sphere.

Then all was stillness, silence and blackness once more.

**THE END**

