

*ONLY ONE STARSHIP LEFT
WITH A UNIVERSE - AND MORE - GOING DOWN IN FLAMES!*

STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

BEFORE THE STORM

THE MAIDEN VOYAGE OF THE USS ARTEMIS



STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

USS ARTEMIS: BEFORE THE STORM

SEASON 1 EPISODE 1

DRAMATIS PERSONAE (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Spawner as Captain Kevin Froud

Kheren as Lieutenant Commander Kheren

Drakxii as Lieutenant Commander Michael O'Conner

Elliago as Chief Medical Officer Elliago Nasaro-Myth

Baromosa as Lieutenant Anthony T. Jackson

Mishy as Lieutenant Kelsey Alther

Devem as Lieutenant DevEm

Sorripto as Lieutenant Marksus Sangliar

MRall as Lieutenant M'Roll Micheals

Special Appearance by:

Spawner as Vice Admiral Spawner

N'eligahn as Commander Allendros

Caltern as Captain Speaker-of-Names and Fleet Captain Kotari

Forum roleplaying session

from June 28th 2010 to January 25th 2011

Novelization by Kheren

Cover art by Alexander Calderwood

PROLOGUE: NEW BEGINNINGS

" Enter."

The voice was strong, but slow and heavy. The hiss of the door right after it felt like the annoyed breath proper to such deliberate manner of speech.

But the authority behind this voice was unmistakable. And so, the tall silhouette beyond the door frame stepped into the ready room and stood at formal attention:

" Lieutenant Commander Kheren, reporting for duty, Captain. "

The black and red uniform was filled by a tall, powerfully built body topped by a dark-blue face with two silver eyes darting straight ahead. Two scars crossed the high forehead, a pair of knobby antennae protruding from each side of a thick platinum mane. This was obviously an Andorian... but this Andorian however was noticeably darker and stockier than what was usual for his familiar but still strange race.

All of that was taken in by one long, high-leveled glance from the Human behind the oak desk.

The man's back was to the door, hands crossed behind him, so that he was looking at the reflection in the high, narrow window he was facing. Small but wide shouldered in his own black and red uniform, blond, short-cropped hair slightly graying at the base crowning a head lifted as if he was much taller, he kept his mustached, green-eyed face away from the other as he asked in a very measured tone:

" For how long ? "

" Sir?" wondered the low, soft but strong voice of the Andorian behind him.

" How long have you been... awarded... your rank ? "

" The promotion was officialized just after the Borg Invasion, Sir, stardate... "

" How long have you served in Starfleet? " interrupted the deliberate voice of the Captain.

" Class of 08, Sir. "

" And how long before you will become too good for *this* ship? "

This question left the Andorian speechless.

With exaggerated slowness, the Captain turned to face him. His hooked nose pointed almost disdainfully at a PADD on his desk, his eyes halfway closed. His voice kept it's syrupy rythm, but the edges were now sharper:

" I know all about you, Mister Kheren... you and your *kind* . "

Kheren's eyes were thinning. But he said nothing. His antennae slowly flattened on top of his earless skull as they looked and listened more acutely to the man making his point:

" Yes, I know you, Mister. I've seen enough hotshot officers like you... courting higher ranks, pushing for high profile assignments, taking every risk and opportunity to advance their personal glory... ship, crew and Service be damned. "

" Sir, if I may... "

" You may *not*, Mister Kheren." cut haughtily the blond-haired man. Then, nosing distantly the PADD again, he explained:

" I read your file: graduated with highest honors from Starfleet Academy; assigned to Starbase 10 and promoted to Ensign after directly helping retake it from the Romulans; recommended by Fleet Captain Krauwn as Chief of security and tactical aboard the USS Lotus, the flagship of Lotus Fleet no less; faster than it takes to read the report of the Savoy incident where you were injured on duty, Admiral Redding himself promoted you to Lieutenant; and now, not even completing your ship's assignment in tracking a rogue Romulan fleet, you get to act as exec of the flagship during the Borg invasion... after which none other than Fleet Captain Kotari promotes you to Lieutenant Commander... and formally to First officer... of *this* ship... *my* ship. "

While talking, the man had scooped up the PADD and made some theatrical pretense at looking at it; then, in a flourish gesture, dropped it on his desk like one would a useless, worthless thing.

" Dedicated Starfleet officers toil and devote themselves for years of service every step of the way to earn their pips... but some lucky opportunist, like you Mister Kheren, get's promoted over them in a meteoric rise to command. Then, younger generations of Kirk-wannabes like you think that this is the way of things. It is *not*, Mister Kheren. Not in *my* Starfleet... not on *my* ship. "

The steely gaze of the commanding officer flashed towards one wall of his ready room. A series of portraits, some ancient paintings, others old photographs and a few more recent holos, aligned a gallery of stern faces atop uniforms of various Earth historical periods.

As he noted the glance of the Andorian following his own, the Captain said:

" I come from a distinguished military family, Mister Kheren. There was a Captain Froud with Admiral Nelson at Trafalgar; there was another at la Marne during the First World War; his son was at D-Day during the Second and his grandson fought Colonel Green in the Third; another Froud fought during the Earth-Romulan war, then gave his life against the Klingons to save the newly founded Federation; My grandfather died serving aboard the USS Potemkin during the catastrophic M5 computer-controlled starship testing. When the USS Melbourne was destroyed by the first Borg Cube to threaten Earth, she was under the command of my own father, when William T. Riker shied to serve aboard her... Generations of the finest Navy, Space and Starfleet officers came before me, Mister Kheren, before I earned this... command. "

The man closed his eyes and took a deep breath, as if swallowing something sour. After a moment of silence, he lifted his chin higher and then said:

" To earn the privilege and responsibility of Command, I made it from the Dominion war to the border skirmishes with Klingons and Romulans, since the end of the Accords and the Hobus catastrophe: years of dedicated, faithful service, like all my kin before me... And in return, as a new command after a retirement so well deserved, they give me... *this*... "

His short-fingered hand went over the room around them to end in a sweeping gesture over the PADD on his large heavy desk, all the while explaining:

" *The USS Artemis*... "*Stalwart Guardian of the Federation*" they call her... An old, rebuilt, obsolete museum piece outclassed by all the designs commissioned a century after her... "

Kheren forced himself to silence. The urge to defend the honor of his new ship was so hard to contain that he had to close his eyes a moment and grip his hands together behind his back in a painful grip. Even his otherwise expressionless face showed his contained anger. But the other, unaware or uncaring of his feelings, was adding:

"And look at her crew: most of them Ensigns or less... some with files reading like a Starfleet Security warrant, others like a psychology study...most no longer than my ID card... And now... you. "

Captain Froud was now looking straight up at him, his hands returning to the small of his back as he added with his still infuriatingly slow voice:

" I will be straight with you, Mister Kheren: You're not who I wanted to be as my Number One. I have no taste for heroes and career-minded opportunists. But, disregarding my command privilege in this matter, Starfleet appointed you, over my formal objections. You are too bold, too unorthodox, not experienced nor tempered enough. Frankly, I don't know how you lasted even this long... and in all truth, I expect you to be booted out in less than a year. "

Kheren lowered his head, making his senior officer raise his own as in silent triumph. He obviously mistook the gesture for submission, when, for an Andorian, it was exactly the opposite: as for a duel, he was in fact darting ears, nose, bioelectric receptors and all four eyes from his face and antennae pointedly at the one challenging him. He was facing his challenger squarely.

Froud apparently didn't know... or didn't mind. He took again the PADD and tossed it at the other. Then, he turned his back to him again and walked to the window to look outside, at the lights of the starbase where the ship was preparing for departure in the following days.

" Prove me wrong, Mister Kheren... if you can. This, is the crew manifest. You will review it, conduct the meetings and confirm to me who is fit to serve... at least aboard this ship. Let's see if you can at least make proper personnel selection and pretend to be a First Officer. Dismissed. "

With slow, deliberate steps, the newly appointed First Officer walked to the desk and put the PADD back on its glossy, dark wooden surface.

Lifting an eyebrow and a corner of his mouth, Captain Froud turned his head sideways to say in a definitely mocking tone:

" Well, well, Mister Kheren... Am I to assume insubordination... or resignation? "

To this, his head slightly bowed to him, the Andorian retorted in a deep, calm tone:

" Neither, Sir. I already studied the crew manifest, met all the enlisted personnel and completed the inquiries regarding all officers. With your permission, Sir, I will now start interviewing the command staff. You shall have my full report on your desk by tomorrow 800 hours...Captain. "

Standing straight at attention, Kheren walked back, turned on his heels and left the briefing room.

For a while, Captain Froud just kept looking at the closed door.

* * *

With a whoosh the doors opened and the tall Starfleet officer stepped in and gave the Andorian sitting at the table a salute. Michael O'Conner's Irish descent was clearly on display, his red hair and two days old stubble proving his stark contrast to his pale skin and dress whites.

The main conference room of the USS Artemis had a large old style triangular table in the middle with PADDs on it. Right in front of it was a tall, muscular Andorian with a strikingly dark blue face, long platinum mane and bright silvery eyes. He was slightly smaller than the entering Human, which made him look all the more massive for one of his usually willowy race.

As soon as the Human had let the door slide close behind him, the Andorian straightened up and welcomed him with his head lifted up in the typical Andorian posture of respect:

" Welcome aboard Lieutenant O'Conner. I'm Lieutenant Commander Kheren, First officer of the Artemis. Please be seated. "

Gesturing to a chair besides him, the First Officer went to sit opposing him on the other side of the table.

"Thank you, Sir" O'Conner replied with a nod and sat down.

Kheren took one of the PADDs near his thick right arm in one heavily callused hand and read aloud:

" O'Conner, Michael David... graduated from Starfleet Academy on stardate 75336.3... assigned as engineering officer on the USS Thunderchild for two years as Ensign and transferred to Starbase 10. I see you were there too when the Romulans attacked last year... "

"Yes I was assigned as the station's chief docking officer. It was a far more interesting assignment than I was expecting." O'Conner replied.

Especially then... The Lieutenant commander did not elaborate about the coincidental dramatic event that could have made them meet much sooner at the time; but it made him ponder for a brief moment and it showed in the brief silence that stretched between them before he resumed:

" After eight years of steadily well done duty, achieving full Lieutenant rank, you were assigned as Chief Engineer of the most advanced starship in the fleet, the USS Spectre, where you also had to act as First officer during the Tempest Incident... and then again during the recent Borg Invasion, from which you were decorated by the Starfleet corps of Engineers. And now, you are to be assigned to the newest vessel of Lotus Fleet as Chief of Operations and Second officer. "

The Andorian put back the PADD on the table and crossed his fingers on the dark polished surface, leaning forward with antennae and eyes straight at O'Conner:

" Anything else to add or correct to this resume, Lieutenant? "

O'Conner paused and went over the information in his head. Then he replied. "Well I hope that this crew won't be as umm..." He paused again as he searched for the word; "spirited as the last crew. Oh I also have hand to hand combat training and I try my hand at defensive system engineering."

The Andorian lifted his head and almost smiled, quite a feat considering his typically few facial muscles:

" Each crewmember is required to be tested for hand to hand efficiency every six months aboard the ship, Lieutenant. If your expertise is adequate, I would ask you if you would be willing to assist our chief of security and myself in that regard. Or maybe we could spar sometimes together? Humans have such a rich martial variety... "

O'Conner smiled at the Andorian and waited a moment to reply. But, then Kheren stopped abruptly, as if checking himself from his growing enthusiasm to get back to the business at hand. He lowered his head again to say:

" You have a well rounded record, Lieutenant; years of duty and service correctly rendered, culminating in a remarkable performance during two successive critical missions where your steadiness and professionalism helped both to discipline an unruly crew and back up your acting Captain's authority... Exactly what the Captain of this ship respects most. "

For a moment, Kheren said nothing, just looking straight at the Human officer.

O'Conner nodded. "Thank you, Sir. I have tried to hold to Starfleet's principles and make my parents proud of the officer they raised."

Then Kheren added;

" As for the crew... You will find that, under Captain Froud, this will be a tight ship... and I'm not so... tolerant myself. Especially that we may have to deal with some... "spirited" officers, as you say... like one you already know: Kelsey Alther. "

O'Conner paused at the mention of Alther.

"I wouldn't want to speak ill of a fellow officer... but she seems a bit immature for her age. Given the right commanding officer, I believe she could make a fine officer one day, sir."

"Starfleet seems to agree with you, retorted Kheren with definite wonder in his voice, glancing at one of the PADDs near him; but... one day might just be what Mister Alther has left... especially on *this* ship."

Even upside down, the PADD was clearly visible to O'Conner: it came from Starfleet Command's JAG office.

As silence started to get thicker between them, the Andorian finally said:

"I'll be completely straight, open and honest with you, Lieutenant: Captain Froud wanted *you* as his First Officer... not me. "

O'Conner raised an eyebrow to this. Then moments later a small smile crept across his face which he quickly got rid of. After another moment of silence, he replied.

"Why is that, Sir? From what I have heard, you have a fine career in Starfleet."

"A very good question... since even over the prerogatives of a Captain to choose his own crew, especially his Number One, Starfleet really shoved me down his throat. "

"That is a bit odd..." O'Conner added in almost a mumble.

The dark-skinned Andorian half-smiled a moment before resuming:

"Your career is that of a well-rounded, experienced Starfleet officer who proved himself in the Service. That is the only kind of officer he *truly* respects. Mine is a rather... meteoric one: the kind he *despises* the most. Captain Froud considers me... unfit for the responsibilities I have been entrusted with. I'm not speculating here, Lieutenant: he said so to me in no uncertain terms. "

Again, Kheren didn't move nor speak for a time, letting his words sink in the mind of Michael O'Conner.

The Lieutenant leaned back in to his chair as his mind fumbled over the words for a response.

"Well... hopefully you will be given the chance to show the Captain your capability as a Starfleet officer and your ability to lead men."

"Men, that might be easy... Kalthurians, that might be something else. " answered the First officer almost to himself.

Was that a joke? he suddenly wondered. But instead of wondering outloud, he looked up sharply and said:

"I'm a duellist; I'm not one to fear a challenge, be it from a demanding Captain in my face or a performing junior officer at my heels. And I have no qualm with you or with you being onboard. I too respect you, as a tried and true Starfleet Officer, invaluable in the proper maintenance of a ship and the success of it's mission. If I fail in my duties, as Captain Froud is betting on, I know as well as him that you will be there for this ship. *That* is all that matters to me. "

Then, leaning back in his chair to cross his muscular arms across his wide chest, Kheren asked:

"Now, the one remaining question is: How do *you* feel about it, Lieutenant O'Conner? "

"To be honest, Sir, I don't know how to feel about it, yet. I have never been one to quickly judge a situation or person." O'Conner replied.

Then, after a short pause, he added:

"To use an old human phrase: don't judge a book by it's cover."

Once again, the Andorian just looked at him in silence. Then, he nodded and lifted his head in his typical attitude of respect as he stood up:

" Wise words... not surprising coming from you. Very well, Lieutenant: unless there is anything else you want to discuss, you can go review crew manifest and request everything for the Ops department before we undock in seventy-two hours. You will also of course have to provide for the needs the other departments will have. I trust we will have everything ready before Tuesday? "

It was a very old and very well known Starfleet joke. As usual, Kheren didn't get it, even knowing the Historical incident that sprung it... but he hoped O'Conner would.

The last thing he wanted was to be caught between a despizing Captain and a resentful Second Officer.

The Lieutenant gave the joke a quiet chuckle before standing and giving the ranking officer a salute.

"Aye, Sir. I will make sure the OPs department is shipshape before the ceremony." He said before making his way out of the door. Outside the door he picked up his bag and made his way to his quarters.

Ah yes... the ceremony now recalled the Andorian from the man's words.

He didn't seem all that pleased thinking about it.

* * *

The door opened to show a Deltan wearing a blue uniform. His purple eyes ran around the room to end on the officer waiting for him. A wide smile appeared on the Deltan's face. Elliago approached the three-sided table and saluted:

"Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth reporting for duty, Lieutenant Commander Kheren." the doctor said, with smile in the voice.

The Deltan recognized immediately the tall, muscular Andorian in front of the triangular table from his strikingly dark blue face, long platinum mane and bright silvery eyes.

And he could see in those eyes that the Andorian also recognized him as well. Hand he said so in a warm, deep voice to welcome him:

" Welcome aboard, Doctor. I am really glad to meet you formally at last. Please be seated. "

" Nice to meet you too, Lieutenant Commander." answered the Medical officer as he took a seat at the table.

Going around the table to sit on the other side, the First Officer let his elbows rest on the dark polished surface between them to lean forward and add:

" You might not remember me, Doctor, but I am one of the numerous lives you saved when the Romulans assaulted Starbase 10. "

" Oh, dear Lieutenant Commander, I always remember my patients. I actually recall your sorry look on the biobed as I did my job over you. Frankly, being fresh for duty suits you better than lying half-dead on a biobed," Elliago answered, a smile in the voice.

Being shot by Romulan disruptors at close range doesn't suit anyone well... Kheren perceived that the Doctor was using humor just like Humans did.

And as usual, he didn't quite get it.

Nevertheless, he managed a long practiced half-smile on his rigid face and answered:

" I was but barely out of the Academy back then... only responsible for my duties, so it was easy to risk myself against the enemy, easy just following orders... But now that I am to be responsible of all the lives onboard this ship in the eyes of the Captain, I'm just glad that we will have you on board, Doctor. "

The First Officer of the Artemis glanced at one PADD near his thickly muscled arm:

" Graduation from Starfleet Medical as a xenobiology expert on stardate 85428.3... serving a term on Starbase 10 before being assigned as Chief medical Officer of the USS Sapentia, Gemini Fleet, then transferred to Lotus Fleet as Chief Medical Officer of the USS Spectre on it's maiden voyage... decorated by Starfleet medical... and now, assigned as Chief Medical Officer to the newly commissioned USS Artemis. "

The Andorian looked straight at the Deltan for a moment before finally adding:

" I have to tell you, Doctor: I'm the one who sent you the application to serve aboard this ship. "

" I was glad to receive this application form. I was hoping to get another deep space assignment. It is pleasant to work while traveling compared to a station."

Kheren nodded in understanding then confided again:

" When I heard that the post was open, I went through the Starbase files to track you down and made sure you were aware of the opportunity to serve aboard this vessel. I dared to hope that you might find an Ambassador class starship more to your liking than an obvious warship like the Akira class Spectre. "

" How kind of you. I sure am a doctor, not a soldier. I do understand the necessity of warships, but I am not so inclined toward that part of the Federation's obligation."

Kheren nodded again. Then, he looked straight at the medical officer, his antennae sharply pointed forward to bring his full sight on him:

" I must admit that it is also out of selfishness that I did this: truth is, there is no other physician I'd rather serve with than the one who saved my life. You are certainly aware of how important this is to us, Andorians... and you are already aware of my... personal medical file. "

That you are a laboratory-born mutant fusing both male Andorian genders into one ? Yes I know... mused the Deltan. And I know what it means for your dying but sometimes overly traditionalist species...

" I sure am, Lieutenant Commander, I sure am," just said the doctor with another wide smile. Deep down, he was flattered, even though he knew a little about Andorians, it was still much appreciated to see this kind of commitment toward him. To learn that the First Officer of his new ship had sought him personally felt really warm to the Deltan's heart. If another Deltan had been in the room, the pheromone language distinct to this species would have told him how much pride Elliago felt.

The exceedingly acute olfactory receptors in his knobby cranial appendages made the Andorian sharply receptive to the Deltan pheromones; so sharply in fact that his own head jerked upright as if he was himself feeling the pride the other was conveying. Even with his lifetime of severe self-control, it took him a moment to regain hold of his own emotions.

Then, he lowered his head again:

" But there is more to it and I'll tell you straight: of all the officers assigned to the Artemis, you are one of a very small handful that could earn the Captain's approval right from the start. Since he is at present challenging my own competence with the ship's complement evaluation, I tried to get at least one ace in my hand. "

" Glad to be that important in your mind, Commander."

Kheren sat back and crossed his powerful arms over his wide chest, head still bowed towards Elliago to point all four oculars at him:

" Captain Froud is a very proud man, Doctor, with a proud heritage. He feels this assignment, this old, venerable, legendary starship, is beneath him; and that the crew he's getting with her, especially the department heads, is even worse... especially me. "

The Deltan kept his thought to himself. His training in the savoir-faire of the Federation prevented any negative comment about an officer. In his personal opinion, no assignment could be beneath someone. If a challenge looked slightly easy, it was the challenger's job to spice it up enough to feel really challenged.

" With you at least, he's getting a young but proven officer with a fine family tradition of healers and Starfleet officers... not a hotshot, unorthodox Kirk-wannabe career opportunist... like me... "

The derision in those last words was clearly perceptible... and it was clearly not just his.

" I would be glad to have an unorthodox Kirk-wannabe in my crew. After all, Captain Kirk is a major figure in Starfleet History. Furthermore, to my knowledge, Captain Picard started his career in a similar way, before his heart injury. But, sorry sir, that is none of my business to discuss."

A hint of purple showed on the Andorian's cheeks and his voice became softer for a while;

" I'm quite far from being worthy to be named in the same breath as them... especially to Captain Froud... unless it would be to agree with him about the errors of their ways to better condemn mine. Because he is right you know: you don't throw the book away before reading the last page."

Then, he lowered his head and darted his antennae right over his unblinking pupils:

" I would suggest, Doctor, to avoid the subject with him: the Captain can do the math; such open support would serve his low opinion of me, maybe put some doubt about your posting here... even raise the question of me maneuvering behind his back to further myself... when the only thing I care about is having the best chief medical officer for this ship."

" Of course sir, I had no intention of doing so. I was just speaking my mind out loud, sorry for that statement, I was not asked to speak my mind." The Deltan felt slightly ashamed. For an obscure reason, Elliago felt very familiar with the Andorian. *I never thought that fixing someone would drive me so close to him*, the doctor thought.

Kheren waved his hand in unconcerned dismissal:

" Think nothing of it Doctor. In fact, as our CMO, I expect you to speak up your mind. I just wanted to make you aware of certain... realities, so as to not get yourself burned needlessly. "

but then, his tone became again more serious:

" We do have a green crew, Doctor, including me... and besides me, other very peculiar individuals, as you will find on the medical files. Your presence here will be invaluable. Although the Emergency Medical Hologram can roam this entire ship with the holo-emitters installed from bow to stern, we would all rather put our health in your capable hands. So, I hope that you will accept this assignment... and for a long time. "

For a second, Elliago felt weird. Then he realised that he had mentioned how glad he was with the offer, but he never did officially agree on it or not.

" It will be an honour for me, Lieutenant-Commander Kheren, to serve on the Artemis. And I hope this assignment will be the longest possible," said Elliago, a wide smile back on his lips.

" Thank you Doctor Nasaro-Myth. Please review your department roster and facilities. Inform our Ops Chief of anything else you might further require. We depart in less than seventy-two hours. "

" Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir," answered the Deltan. He stood up, saluted, and went out of the briefing room towards his personal quarters.

* * *

Opposing the entering gold and black-clad officer in the conference room stood the Andorian he had heard was serving aboard as First officer, his dark blue face making his silvery eyes shine brighter than the lights of the starbase visible through the windows behind him. From their respective sides of the triangular table, they were facing each other eye to eye, surprisingly similar in size; but the definite thinness of the Human made the Andorian look all the more massive, especially considering him from the point of view of his own usually much slender race.

After a moment, his soft but deep voice broke the silence between them:

" Please be seated, Lieutenant. "

Doing so himself, Lieutenant Commander Kheren crossed his fingers in front of him on the polished top of the table.

" Tell me, Lieutenant Jackson: why did you accept this assignment? "

The question was blunt and straight to the point without any pretense at social niceties, typically Andorian.

The Lieutenant had quickly taken the seat as instructed, and, though try as he might to look comfortable, his eyes seemed to glance around the corners of the room. He had then looked at the windows past his new First Officer before the question posed to him helped to refocus his attention.

"To be honest, there wasn't much more to learn locked away in that outpost. Spending days running through transporter circuits, figuring out some new way to stress systems to the breaking point and have it all fixed before the next inspection..."

Lieutenant Jackson sighed and suddenly showed emotion with a cool smirk.

"I accepted for my own sanity, Commander. I may have something to prove, but it wasn't going to get done at home. I belong in deep space."

Lieutenant Commander Kheren just nodded, glanced at one PADD near his thickly muscled arm and coldly recited:

" Jackson, Anthony Thomas, Graduated with Highest Honors from Starfleet Academy in Engineering, starship operations specialist and expert programmer, stardate 85063.1... Promoted to Ensign after serving with distinction on Jupiter Station for eight months assuming transporter duties... And upon reaching the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade while compiling an excellent service record at Starbase 10, transferred to USS Artemis as Chief Engineer. "

For a moment, the Andorian just looked with head bowed at the square-faced, short-haired engineer, as if humbled. Then he asked:

" This is a good career start... but a rather fast promotion.Chief Engineer of a starship... this means very important responsibilities entrusted to so someone so young. Do you think you are up to it, Mister Jackson? "

At this question, the the human's eyes met his Commander's look directly. There wasn't any hesitation as he started to nod slowly.

"Yes, I am prepared to go all the way, Sir. To tell the truth, I'm surprised someone older wasn't chosen. But I believe I have the maturity for the job, though... Sir?" Lieutenant Jackson asked, pausing for a moment. "If you put my to the test, I won't fail you, Sir. You'll see from my file I'll find the solution, even if its unorthodox."

The Andorian was looking at him with a face that could have been carved out from ice. But, to the perceptive Human, there was the shadow of a smile that would have stretched this face wide if it could have but been able to do it. And there was some warmth in his metallic eyes and his soft voice:

" Be aware that our Captain is not... fond of unorthodox options... But that will be my job to sell it to him for you. "

Jackson almost heard "with pleasure" in the following sudden silence of his superior officer. But after a moment, Kheren was instead saying;

" The Chief Engineer of a Starship is the most important person on board, after the Captain and on par with the Chief Medical Officer. We are all relying on each and everyone of us on a starship to be sure, but all our lives will depend on those three officers more than anyone else. This requires not only expertise, but experience. You may have the first, but you obviously lack the second, Lieutenant. And, believe me when I say that this is of *very* serious concern to our Captain. "

The First Officer paused, still keeping eyes and antennae pointed at the young Engineer before continuing:

" I'll be honest with you, Lieutenant: I know what you are going through; I went down the same road when I was myself promoted to Ensign and sent to serve as Chief of Tactical and Security aboard the Lotus, the flagship, no less. At the time I was fortunate that First Officer Felez, who became Captain during my assignment there, took me under his wing: he gave me all possible opportunities to learn and to prove myself worthy of it... even as I had a lot to learn... and to prove. Now that I find myself in his shoes, I understand the risk he took then, the effort he made... "

He made a pause as if to take the time to push back a flood of memories before adding:

" But, like him, I am willing to take the same risk with you... because what I see in your eyes is what I felt in my heart, back then. "

Making a longer pause, the Andorian sat back in his chair and crossed his big arms over his wide chest, still looking intently at the junior officer. Finally he said:

" I fear however that Captain Froud is not so... patient. The Artemis is a ship with a noble and long established reputation of excellence... and so is her commanding officer. He told me in no uncertain terms that he does not like... fast-moving officers like me... or you, Lieutenant Jackson. "

Once again he leaned forward to add:

" I doubt my personal feelings will weight much when I recommend you to take your assigned duties aboard. So, I ask you: is there anything you could tell me that could help me make him see what I see in you? "

"Sir, I think it's important for anyone over my head to trust me. I'm going to need to be able to trust you and the Captain as well if I'm going to do my job well Commander."

The Lieutenant seemed to be very honest, starting to return to his calm and observing state as he sat back in his chair. Lifting his chin he thought for a moment before answering with:

"I keep things organized, and I never risk the mission for my own ideas on how to do things. I might come up with my own innovations, but I think it'll be clear when you see me working that I don't compromise. I hope the Captain is pleased with that, sir."

" I'll tell you one thing : I believe the Captain will be pleased with your assignment just because I will officially agree with it; so if ever you foul up, it will also prove my incompetence and he will be justified to boot us both out of the ship in one single stroke. I imagine that *this* sole possibility will please him immensely. "

There was no clue on the frozen face of the Andorian to tell if he was joking or not. He just stood up again to signal the end of the meeting:

" But I believe you will work at least as hard as me to prove him wrong, Lieutenant Jackson. Anything else? "

Shaking his head, Lieutenant Jackson stood up and straightened out his uniform as he did so with a small smile on his face, the look of a pleasing meeting.

" Very well." concluded the First officer of the Artemis, standing up also. " You can review the technical crew manifest and make any request regarding your department needs within the next seventy hours to Second Officer O'Conner before we leave spacedock."

"Sir, I won't fail you. If that is all, I will be off to take another glance over my first week's preparations. Mentally preparing myself mostly."

Kheren nodded:

" Dismissed, Lieutenant. And welcome aboard. "

" Good evening Sir."

The walk back to his own quarters made Lieutenant Jackson's own spine twitch. Now he was alone with his thoughts about his new Andorian superior, a new universe of components under his watch, and a crew that would depend on him as an integral part of their future.

* * *

Kelsey Alther stood outside the conference room and checked its uniform before taking a deep breath.

Finally get to meet Kheren thought the white-haired, blue-skinned female-looking androgynous Kalthurian walking past the sliding door. There has been only a glimpse of him during the award and promotion ceremony following the final, costly victory over the Borg, when he had been promoted and awarded the Command Decoration of Starfleet for assuming command of the flagship when her captain was injured; Kelsey also remembered the astounding tactics and maneuvers of the Lotus during the battle to defend Starbase 10, to defend the entire Federation. And if only half of the crazy things heard about the reclusive, stern Andorian were true...

In the conference room he was already seated behind one side of the triangular table, a piece of furniture the long-lived kalthurian had not seen since at least over a century now. His dark blue face made his long platinum mane and silver eyes brighter than the starbase lights in the narrow windows behind him.

He gave no invitation for Kelsey to sit, just glanced at a PADD near his thickly muscled arm:

" Kelsey Alther: Graduated from Starfleet Academy in Security-Tactical, starship combat specialist, stardate 84791.5. Promoted Ensign and Chief of Security-Tactical on the USS Spectre. Promoted Lieutenant and requested transfer to the USS Artemis... after *one* mission? "

Kelsey nodded, looking at Kheren:

"Bad experiences with the Borg on that ship, particularly after that last fight we had alongside the rest of Lotus Fleet."

The Lieutenant took a deep breath:

"It made me a bit unstable when fighting the Borg, to be honest, so I have a lot of things going on as of now." Is that all?" the Kalthurian finished.

For a moment, there was only silence between them; the antennae on top of the seated officer's head curved sharply forward as he lowered his gaze at the androgyn before asking in turn:

" Do you truly believe that you *deserve* this assignment, Lieutenant? "

The question was blunt and straight to the point without any pretense at social niceties. But Kelsey Alther didn't need any mental ability to feel that this was more than Andorian flat pragmatism.

"Do I deserve this assignment?" the androgyn stated: "I believe I do, I have experience in Starfleet for many years, I've served on this type of starship before and I have been told by others I do my job well."

Alther resisted the urge to smile; *I already respect this Andorian more than a Captain.*

The First Officer of the Artemis sent a PADD sliding across the table to stop near the standing officer. He didn't wait for the other to read the lighted screen:

" On Starbase 10, stardate 86051.8, you assaulted security Lieutenant Senneth, fracturing his jaw, then within the hour assaulted Justin Saunders, civilian bartender at same starbase. In front of other officers, you talked back to starbase Captain Speaker-of-Names as he was disciplining you and you were summarily expelled from the establishment. Your behavior allegedly made a junior officer, one Ensign Cyrus McCann, also talk and act inappropriately. "

The voice was still soft, but the eyes were hard and cold as metal:

" Tell me, Lieutenant: why would I recommend to Captain Froud a Security Officer that *makes* trouble instead of preventing it? "

Kelsey took another deep breath.

"I will admit what I did in all those cases was wrong and I accept that. I will admit, that I may have had a bad influence on Cyrus"

Pausing a moment, the androgyn then added:

"If you wish to prevent me from serving on the Artemis for a few bad judgement calls, so be it; however, I do want you to know that I have grown and no longer am I as rash as I once was. I talked to some people who opened my eyes."

Alther stared at Kheren's eyes:

"I am no longer that person,"

The Andorian looked without speaking for a good moment straight in the pale blue eyes. His rigid face gave away nothing... but his own eyes were gleaming with some unscrutable emotion. It almost crept into his voice:

" This is not *my* ship, Lieutenant; *my* wishes are irrelevant... but *my* report following *this* conversation, *that*, is another story. "

He then took a second PADD and also pushed it to slide in front of the standing Kalthurian:

" On stardate 86005.2, you endangered your entire ship beaming back while infected with Borg nanoprobes, disobeyed a direct order from your Captain and of your own initiative fired upon and destroyed the USS Tempest with all hands on board. On stardate 86309.5, ship logs here again report minor insubordination during the initial phase of the Borg crisis."

His voice was measured and calm as ever, but now with a slight edge in it's low tone:

" Tell me, Lieutenant: why would I recommend to Captain Froud a tactical officer that *disregards* rules and orders instead of following them ? "

"I was under orders at the time to bring back some crewmembers on the Tempest, as my race is immune to assimilation in such a way that I do not 'connect' to the Collective. I thought it was safe to transport back aboard the Spectre."

The androgyn paused before continuing: "The Tempest was infested with Borg and taking it back to Starbase 10 would have been irresponsible for us to do and I will stand by that opinion on that matter."

" But it was not irresponsible to bring on board your infected body, knowing that, even if you are allegedly immune, the rest of your crew mates are not. "

The irony in the tone of coice was unmistakable.

Kelsey took another breath "I only disobeyed those rules and orders because I believed it was the right thing to do for the safety of others. "

" You don't throw the book away before reading the last page. Our duty, *your* duty, Lieutenant, is *not* to make decisions and discuss orders, but to offer options to whoever *is* in command and obey *his* decisions. We *serve* in Starfleet. Or do you think yourself so much better than everyone else, *Lieutenant?*"

"I understand your point sir, no I don't think I'm better than everyone else here. I think we are all as good as each other, while we all may excel in some different area we are not better than someone else who isn't as good at what that person excels at."

" I am not sure I understand yours, however. " said Kheren cocking his head sideways a moment. " To the point: do you believe you acted as a Starfleet officer should? "

Kelsey blinked and stayed silent a moment, the question had caught the Kalthurian off guard.

"I believe that I have acted sometimes not as a Starfleet Officer should have, but at other times I have done conflicting things... and sometimes I do act like one"

Kelsey paused.

"To clarify: those incidents in the bar on Starbase 10 for instance were not what a Starfleet officer is like; other times such as the destruction of the Tempest I disobeyed orders which is not like a Starfleet officer... But I was helping others which is what a Starfleet officer does. And finally, I do act as much as possible like one, which is following orders and doing my duty."

"Do you need me to rephrase that for you?" the Lieutenant finally asked.

" I suggest that you keep your impertinence in check, Lieutenant. I may be quite used to Tellarites... but I will remind you that I am *not* the final authority on this ship... nor at Starfleet Command. "

Kelsey bowed its head :

"Sorry I meant, if you wanted me to rephrase because that didn't come out very fluently."

" Rest assured, Lieutenant, I can read what your body is saying that your words do not. Part of my former training... Unfortunately, there are not many Andorian duellists at the Judge Advocate General's Office."

Kheren held yet another PADD. This one he lifted in his callused hand as he said:

" These are formal charges brought against you : conduct unbecoming of a Starfleet officer; inciting insubordination; insubordination; assault on a civilian; assault and harm on a superior officer; negligence; violation of security protocols; assuming duties while emotionally compromised; disobeying a direct order from one's ship's commanding officer; opening fire without authorization; destruction of Starfleet property; causing the death of an entire ship's complement..."

The Andorian could not read any further. So he sighed and concluded:

" All of this officially puts into question the validity of your entire Starfleet record. "

Before Kelsey could take a breath again, he explained:

" They are reviewing it for evidence of forgery... which will take time, since yours seems to literally span Federation History. A complete genetic and psychological profile is also demanded prior to your court martial. Some believe you might be an Undine in disguise: How can anyone be in Starfleet for so long as you and be such a... how did Humans of old put it? Be such a... loose cannon ?"

He didn't give the Kalthurian time to answer:

" I am not the one you have to answer to on this, Lieutenant. But I *am* the only one standing between you and *this*. "

The PADD listing the charges bounced in Kheren's hand as he locked eyes with the Kalthurian:

" Unbelievable as it is, you will still serve instead of being confined until the inquiry. But, only on *this* ship: *Captain Froud's* ship... and this, only *if* he agrees. If so, your conduct aboard will weigh heavily in the Inquiry. Be warned: you answer to Captain Froud, and to him through me... and Captain Froud does *not* tolerate insubordination, not even *once*. And neither do I. Do you understand what I'm saying, Lieutenant? "

Kelsey stood shocked, blinking a few times before taking a deep breath:

"Very well" Kelsey said "I can see how some of those apply... but not all of them" then shut both eyes for a moment.

" That will be for the Board of Inquiry to decide, Lieutenant... after this mission. " retorted Kheren dryly.

"Thank you for the chance, Sir" the androgyn finally said. "I will keep in check my insubordination because I respect you"

Alther bowed towards Kheren.

"Is there anything else I should know?"

The Andorian seemed to relax for the first time... but only by a fraction:

" Indeed there is..."

He juggled a moment with the JAG PADD then said:

"Starfleet may authorize your request of transfer, but it is up to the Captain to accept it. And he made it clear that his decision will rely on *my* recommendation. The Captain runs this ship... and *my* job is to see that it runs smoothly. So, if you... erre again... he will hold *me* responsible."

Now something unexpected happened: a smile started to creep on his thin lips:

" You may think the Borg were your curse, Lieutenant... but truth is, they were your salvation. "

He expected confusion from the androgyn, so he immediately explained:

" My investigations on Starbase 10 lead me to the briefing logs before the Borg attack. When fearful, morally weak officers made proposals against the laws and ethics of Starfleet and the Federation, talking of cloaking devices and subspace weapons, citing pragmatism and survival as the excuse for any kind of action... you stood up against them, regardless of rank or consequences to your career. "

If possible, Kheren then became even more serious as he added:

" There is a saying among us duellists of Andoria: a cheated victory is the worst defeat. If we sacrifice the values we fight for to win the fight, it proves these values worthless and the fight meaningless. I deeply believe so... and I think you do too, Lieutenant. "

His silver pupils locked on those of Kelsey:

" That alone is enough for me to believe in you. Am I wrong to believe in you, Mister Alther? "

Kelsey allowed a smile to show for a fraction before curbing it

"Yes I do believe in that, it's something that I firmly hold true to."

Kelsey took a deep breath to finish saying :

" Thank you. "

The First Officer simply nodded:

" I do think you deserve a chance; you deserve to prove your worth aboard *this* ship. And I *will* say so to the Captain. Such an officer as you, I most want, I *only* want to serve with; but I am talking about a *Starfleet officer*, Mister Alther. "

The Andorian sat straight and lifted his head up in typical Andorian posture of respect, still holding the PADD of charges in one hand:

" Now, your fate is in my hands; but afterwards, your fate *and mine* will be in *yours*. "

Obviously, this was meant as a most stern warning... and a dismissal.

" Oh, and Lieutenant: Next time you feel violent... don't risk your career. Invite me in the gym. "

His arm swelled almost right through the seams of his uniform. With a crunch and a shower of sparks, the twisted PADD clattered from Kheren's fighter-callused hand down on the polished top of the table.

" Welcome aboard. " he said.

"Thank you again" she said with a smile "I'll take you up on that gym session too sometime; I never got around to sparring with my Andorian friend on the Spectre."

Walking out the door, Kelsey turned around before leaving said:

"I'll make sure your trust isn't misplaced. "

* * *

Over the past century, DevEm had developed quite a dislike for Starfleet lines and waiting. He knew the reasoning and understood it, but never the less, still abhorred them. He had been on Starbase 10 for more than four weeks and wanted to be back into space.

Being stationary made him miserable.

Interviews make me MORE miserable, Dev thought.

But, he understood the purpose behind them too. CoriEm, in her day, was the standard model for making a new officer sweat under pressure. She was Em's second host and a Starfleet officer for more than 30 years. It still pained Dev to remember the cancer that took her away, so long ago.

Anyway, DevEm thought, *different time, different life*.

The door to the conference room slid open with the usual and familiar sound that he was so accustomed to. He got up and headed for the room.

The conference room was looking even larger with only two people in it and the large triangular table in the middle of the room with half a dozen PADDs on it. Immediately noticeable was one of them utterly crushed as if it had been squashed in a high pressure chamber; but there were gouges around it that looked astonishingly like finger marks. Even a strong Vulcan would have had a hard time crushing the instrument that way with his bare hands.

The destroyed object just laid there as a discarded thought... or as a warning.

Opposing the Trill officer on the other side of the table was the powerfully built First Officer Devem had been summoned to meet, his back turned to him, his dark-blue, heavily callused hands crossed behind him. As the scientist stepped into the room and the door fully closed behind him, Lieutenant Commander Kheren turned around to greet him:

" Welcome aboard, Lieutenant Devem. Please be seated. "

The Andorian's dark blue face made his silvery eyes shine brighter than the lights of the starbase visible through the high narrow windows behind him as he seated himself opposing his visitor.

For a short moment, he just looked at the well-built man, his antennae sharply inclined towards him, giving his posture a somewhat deceptively humble one. As a well-rounded scientist, Devem was certainly not fooled by appearances; he most probably knew that was how earless, four-eyed Andorians concentrated on someone in front of them.

Finally, the soft but deep voice of the First Officer broke the silence between them:

" Tell me, Lieutenant : why did you apply for this assignment? "

The question was blunt and straight to the point, in pure Andorian pragmatism. The tone was almost mechanical, as if he had been asking this question too many times already. But, judging by the way his four oculars pointed straight at the Trill, he was obviously still very interested by the answer.

"Sir. I always have had an affection for the Ambassador class and when I saw the Artemis...well, I haven't seen a ship like her in years, Sir. I was assigned to an Ambassador class back in 2330, Sir, and I must say I have very fond memories of that time. I wish to secure a role in your Science Department. I believe I can use my experience to enhance an already great staff...Sir."

" Your previous experience with this type of vessel will certainly be an asset, Lieutenant. Even as modernized as she is, with new power, combat and sensor systems, reinforced hull, state of the art research facilities and improved command functions, the Artemis is still but an Ambassador class starship. All more modern designs will outdo her... But the crew, now that is entirely something else. "

Lieutenant Commander Kheren glanced at one PADD near his thickly muscled arm:

" Since graduating from Starfleet Academy in 81373.4, you served on the USS Osprey, Akira Class, as a Tactical and Science Officer. Quite an unusual combination there, Lieutenant... until stardate 86069.3. Assigned to Starbase 10 until stardate 86309.4 up to the Borg crisis; afterwards, promotion to Lieutenant Junior Grade for distinguished service and now immediately assigned as Chief Science officer aboard the latest starship of Lotus Fleet. Anything else to add, Mister DevEm?

"I believe my, our service records speak for themselves, Sir. I have also sat in your chair and I know how hard it is to be Number One. That said, I will do my utmost to bring all that I have as experience to the table." DevEm smiled and then said, "When do I meet my staff?"

The Andorian would have smiled if his too few facial muscles would have allowed him to. *Dedicated and to the point. I like that* he thought. But he simply answered:

" As soon as this meeting is over, you are expected to meet them and prepare your department as you see fit... pending Captain's approval of course. "

Kheren offered him a PADD where the Science department facilities and personnel were listed for its chief's benefit and approval. Then he asked:

" Anything else I should be aware of that would justify me recommending you to Captain Froud? "

DevEm thought to himself, then spoke to the First Officer:

"I have nothing else to add, Sir, other than the vantage I can offer with the plurality of a joined Trill mind. Being a joined Trill, you know my consciousness carries the memories, emotions, and skills of each of its previous hosts, each of us acting in concert. Lor was a distinguished Federation Ambassador, both Cori and Ka were Starfleet officers, and Ray was a medical research doctor. I believe those assets will greatly serve to enhanced the operation of the Artemis."

" I can believe so, Lieutenant... although I can only imagine, not pretend that I truly understand, what this ability of your people really means. "

The Andorian paused, his antennae slightly wiggling this way and that until he finally said:

" One more thing: you are undoubtedly aware that there are but a handful of Trills aboard, all of them already joined... and most of the crew will be Human... with some even more... let's say, young... races added to the mix. I hope you will be tolerant of us all... but most importantly: have you made any preparation in case of any serious medical emergencies ? "

"I will meet with our Chief Medical Officer and prepare a standing procedure for all joined Trills onboard. I will coordinate this with the Symbiosis Commission on Trill." DevEm said. As an after thought, Dev smiled and said, "I have a few connections there and I am due for a final check up over there before we depart."

" Glad to hear it. Doctor Nasaro-Myth is an exobiologist specialist, so he should do well by you. I ask you this because I want to make sure that this ship will run smoothly. *That* is my job. So I want to know who I can rely upon, how and for how long. You are one of the oldest crewmembers aboard and Captain Froud will certainly appreciate, even rely, on your maturity, especially with all those... untried... officers... including me."

The first officer pointed to the PADD he had given to DevEm:

" You will find that, despite her age, the Artemis has been fully refitted and is exceptionally well equipped for scientific research and exploration. Her already extensive research facilities have been filled with the latest equipment available, and her sensors are state of the art. We vastly outperform even Galaxy class starships and can challenge any recent design... especially with people like you onboard. "

Then, his heavily callused hands went in front of him, his long fingers crossed together on the table between them:

" You are to serve as our Chief science officer. Captain Froud will have no problem understanding that, beyond your current rank, you bring with you a level of experience like what he most look after in his senior officers. You of all people should have a long and fruitful assignment under his command. "

There was something else behind the apparent praise. But whatever it was, the Andorian was not telling. Instead he just added matter-of-factly: " Anything else, Lieutenant DevEm?"

Bringing himself to Attention, DevEm said, "No sir. I beleive that is it."

Kheren once more simply nodded, saying in his low, soft voice:

" Please review personnel and ressources of your department. You have sixty-eight hours to request anything specific to our Operations officer, Lieutenant commander O'Conner, before we depart for our first deep space exploration assignement. Well, I hope this didn't went as dreary as you feared, Lieutenant? "

Before the other could express any surprise, the First officer almost smiled, explaining;

" No, Lieutenant, I am not telepathic; apart from our half-legendary Aenar people, psionics are very rare among my people. But I can read body langage easily. Sorry about that... an old duelling habit of mine... "

The Andorian then stood up very straight, his head typically lifted up to show respect as he concluded:

" Again, welcome aboard."

DevEm hoped his "body language" as the Commander had put it didn't betray his overall excitement about getting into space again. He longed for experiences that would, one day, add to the Em symbiont. Life's main purpose is the set of unique opportunities that the galaxy has to offer.

LorEm told someone, one time...or was it RayEm ? Anyways, DevEm thought, This tour is going to be a good one, I think.

Looking forward to getting started, DevEm took the PADD in hand and asked the Commander, "Dismissed, Sir?"

" See you on the bridge, Lieutenant... Oh, I mean, at this, what did they call it again? Ah yes, the "Launching Ceremony"... "

He was obviously bewildered by the idea.

O'Conner walked into The Bow with a multitude of PADDs in hand. He paused and looked around the large room for the first time. He was impressed, though he hoped it will be big enough. Then, upon seeing a few of the officers he had called for a meeting, he headed over to their large table.

"Hello Sir." Lieutenant Junior Grade Linda Lamartine said as she stood and saluted O'Conner who dropped the PADDs on the table, some of the sliding off of it. The other officers followed Linda's lead, standing and saluting in respect.

"At ease." O'Conner said as bend down to collect the PADDs that have fell.

"Now... " He said down at the end of the table and then passed out a pair PADDs to each of the four officers, leaving two left. "In front of you are the menu and a rough plan for each of the three parties for the upcoming ceremony. We won't be able to hold all five hundred and fifty of us in here so the enlisted crew will be having parties in the galley on deck 4 and the crew lounge on deck 15. The menu will be an asso..."

As he continued Master Chief Petty Officer Bakalu rushed to the meeting. Hebert passed him the last two PADDs.

"Thank you for join us Mister Bakalu. As I was saying, the menu will be an assortment of Human and non-Human dishes served at serving stations.

Lieutenant Lamartine, you will help set up the galley party with Mister Hebert; Lieutenant Morrison, you will help Mister Bakalu with the party in the crew lounge. You two will need to set up a feed to The Bow in case the Captain gives a speech. Lastly I expect you both to come back to the the Bow for the officer party. These plans are just rough guide lines if you have any questions about the party or run into any problems contact Lieutenant Cheonghi or myself."

O'Conner paused for any questions but his officers remained quiet as they looked over the PADDs in their hands.

"Well then you four are dismissed."

The Human officers nodded and quietly made there way out.

"Lieutenant Cheonghi, we will need to remove most of these tables and chairs and..."

O'Conner and the six-limbed Edoan officer went about determining the details of the party in The Bow.

* * *

Before going to his quarter, Elliago wanted to get a glimpse of Sickbay. When he entered the medical department of the ship, he was pleased to meet a few Deltans working as nurses and doctors. Deltans being an extremely socialised race, the presence of other Deltan on a ship was of the utmost importance. Thus, Dr. Nasaro-Myth was happy to notice that some of them were working with him.

With the pheromonal communication, he thought, having them around in sickbay will fasten the pace.

Once his quick look around done, the Deltan went straight to Deltan quarters.

Contrarily to most quarters, Deltan quarters were not seperated rooms. Deltans are use to live in huge communities, thus, there are no real "walls" within the Deltan quarters; curtains do just fine. Elliago got to his section of the quarters and placed his personal belongings. Owning only the basics, it took him a little less than an hour before it was done. And this being over, the doctor was able to attend to his CMO's tasks.

He took his PADD and went through the medical personal list, trying to memorise names and faces. A lot of competent people. A few Deltans, several Humans, three Vulcans, two Joined Trills and a Saurian.

Nice staff, he thought, the remaining part will be easier from my office.

He continued in his head, as he was standing and walking towards the door. He took the turbolift and went straight to Sickbay.

As always, Sickbay felt like a little hive. There was always something to do and everyone was quite busy, but not busy enough to ignore the incoming officer.

"Good morning, Doctor." said the prettiest Deltan nurse working at the moment. "How may I help you?" she said, releasing some pheromones to communicate her excitement to meet a new Deltan crew member.

Elliago responded with an equally excited response with pheromones. She was really beautiful and he was happy to meet with her.

"I am Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth, the new Chief Medical Officer of the ship" he answered. The nurse's smile widened.

"I am nurse Siella Keilan-Dyram," she answered, "and your office is over there" she said, pointing behind her. With a nod of the head, he thanked her and went straight to his office.

He sat behind his desk and opened the medical database of the ship.

"Computer, load every medical file of every crewmember, in rank's order" the Deltan asked the computer, "it's time for the big review" Elliago thought out loud. He sat comfortably, leaned back in his chair, and started reading the files, to make sure he had at least caught a glimpse of everyone's file.

He did however glance over quickly over that of the First Officer.

Oh how I know that one well...

* * *

Kelsey Alther sighed, dumping personal stuff into the new room.

"This is gonna take a while to make my own" mumbled the Kalthurian, pulling out odds and ends from the bag, placing most of it on the bed.

Kelsey looked around the room and placed the traditional weapon of choice of a Kalthurian warrior, the Deki'kah, retracted, on the drawers next to the bed and walked out the door to the nearby turbolift.

"Deck 9" Alther ordered as the turbolift's doors closed.

Kelsey waited for what only seemed like a few seconds as the doors opened and strode towards the security office. Walking in, the Lieutenant laughed: a pile of PADDs were laid out on the desk. It reminded Alther of the Spectre when first transferring from the Tempest.

Kelsey sat down at the chair and began breezing through the PADDs.

"Report, report, report" muttered the androgyn going through them all. Kelsey finished by reviewing the officers of the tactical and security team, Alther's heart shuddered remembering some comrades' deaths and a few friends like Arizhel and Devna's transfers.

The new chief of security of the Artemis felt no need to call them in to interview them; they all seemed capable enough.

They already had their positions Most likely given to them by Froud or Kheren thought the Lieutenant going through the list, noting the four- shift changes compared to other ships.

After what seemed hours, Lieutenant Alther had finished and felt like needing some relaxing. The androgyn checked the location of the holodecks on the Artemis.

Kelsey walked out of the office and to the turbolift.

"Deck 6"

As the turbolift arrived to the ordered deck, Kelsey walked straight to holodeck 1, downloaded and keyed in a personal combat program.

The Lieutenant entered an ancient Kalthurian arena and asked the computer to run the program, Kelsey smiled as the first opponent appeared.

"Time to work off some stress" Alther said outloud and began the combat program which was designed to get progressively tougher.

Kelsey was beginning to get tired by the fifth opponent, not having fought hand to hand in a while; and the Vulcans and Klingons really started tiring the androgyn out. So Alther told the computer:

"After this opponent end the program"

And so saying, the 6th and last opponent appeared.

It was an Andorian.

Kelsey audibly swore, Andorians were a pain. Almost as strong as a Vulcan, born fighters and with hypersenses and semi-chitinous skin, they were tough opponents.

Kelsey charged the Andorian hoping to catch him off guard.

It didn't quite work.

The living Kalthurian and the programmed Andorian fought for what seemed like hours, matching each others moves until Kelsey managed to distract him long enough as it typically tired quickly, to kick him downward to land a solid straight on top of the antennae. The Andorian collapsed to the ground in intense pain and the program ended.

Kelsey walked briskly back to officer's quarters for a sonic shower before actually having to do some work.

* * *

"I realize that, but can you just fulfill my request Computer?"

"Theoretically the redesign would not increase the probability of a warp core breach, but radiation levels would increase more than 20% above the maximum lethal limit."

The computer's reply to his query made Lieutenant Jackson scratch his chin in thought before he sighed and paced back towards the schematic displayed on the wall. It didn't take long for him to sigh and realize his time was up.

"Save program, Jackson 65. Add note: Increase radiation shielding solution. Computer, end program."

As the virtual lab space began to disappear, the black panels of the holodeck began to outline the actual room dimensions. Turning about, the soon to be Chief Engineer decided it was time to take his place and transport over to the Artemis. He needed to get settled in before the launch, but he couldn't help but spend one last stab at his old project. Every engineer of ambition has thought about what his own contribution would be to the field, and what more perfect opportunity to be recognized than by a Starfleet Captain? One that he needed to earn the approval of anyway.

Walking to meet his fate, he approached the transporter room. It only took another breath before the Lieutenant raised his head to look at the transporter chief with cool brown eyes. As soon as he would walk into Main Engineering, he knew his mind would explode with every detail he wanted to absorb about this ship. Lieutenant Jackson wanted to inspect every station, take a walk down every deck, and there was so little time to do it all.

"Are my bags ready, Chief?" he asked of the transporter technician.

"Already on board the USS Steamrunner for your leave on Earth, Sir. Enjoy the few days of leave you will have." answered the blonde woman.

"Um, yeah... Thanks. It will be only *one* day; we launch in three, so barely time to go reassure my family in person that I had not been assimilated. Lucky Starfleet understands what the war imposed on them and showed so much leeway... But I was talking about my *other* bags... those for storage on the Artemis."

"Already sent over too, Lieutenant: cargo bay 3. And if you don't mind me asking: what is in those bags? Couldn't find specific description on the manifest since they were labelled personal effects."

"A pet project of mine: portable security restraints. You know, like the command chair's safety belts on a Sovereign class... but usable anywhere for rough emergencies. Haven't tested them yet..."

"Well, hope you don't have to, Sir, if you get my meaning... At least not on your maiden voyage."

"A quick ride around the block with a bunch of media folks, bottles of *Château Picard* and a few hors-d'oeuvre platters... What could possibly go wrong?"

"With the *Artemis*, Sir? The starship twice believed to be destroyed and twice brought back from the grave? My, you never know..." smirked the blonde.

"With my luck, I will probably miss the party anyway."

Jackson exchanged a short laugh with her and stepped onto the transporter platform.

"Energize."

* * *

"Lieutenant, I don't care if you don't have the specs, I do. I have them because I invented it. Look, there must be something here that you can use... something you have a request for that I have here... an active EM scanner, Gamma Ray Imager, Graviton Detector... Think Lieutenant, there *must* be something." DevEm said into the comm.

The human Lieutenant talking to Dev responded quickly,

"Did you say an EM scanner? I might have a use for the wide-angle active one, not the narrow one... One sec... let me look."

Lieutenant Boyles' image disappeared from the view screen in Lt. DevEm's office. The Trill looked around at the empty room.

In no time I will have this place looking like home...I hope.

"Lieutenant Em?"

"I'm here Boyles, give me some good news..."

"Well, your in luck: the USS Podesti is in dock and, believe it or not, they have twenty-five of those SAT thingies you're looking for. The USS Harrisburg is inbound and has another twenty-five. The best part about this is both are in need of an active EM scanner. If you got two of them, you can have your SAT thingies in less than six hours."

"Boyles... you're a life saver. Secure the packs from the Podesti and hail me when the Harrisburg arrives. I'll have your scanners on the starbase in cargo bay 7 within the hour."

Great news, Dev said to himself inwardly; *the SAT packs will be a great addition to the Science Department when on Away Missions. And I won't have used any replicator energy to manufacture them.*

One thing Lor taught him was : *You should always be over ready for whatever job needs to be done.*

Smart words from a wise man.

Dev turned back to the PADD on his desk and thought:

Now that that's done, let's get on with meeting the heads of my department...

Hours passed and the managers of the various specific sciences departments aboard the Artemis, Physical Sciences, Xenology, Linguistics, History, Mathematics, Social Sciences, Stellar Cartography, Arts, Conservatory, and Logic at the forefront, paraded in Dev's office and presented their different takes on how each one was competent and knew their jobs. After Dev met with each member, they did indeed seem competent, if not excellent for their postings. Particularly the Assistant Chief Science Officers, Lieutenant Irkos, a petite dark-skinned Human female and Lieutenant Valence.

DevEm felt that, with a little work, this Department would be ready for anything that the unknown might throw at it.

It was a good feeling.

* * *

They were calling it, *The Bow*: it was the foremost section of the primary hull of the USS Artemis, a vast social room on deck 8 with huge windows looking directly outside, offering a breathtaking vista of the outside world; at this moment, the interior of Starbase 10 where the ship was preparing for it's new life.

Artemis' bow... Artemis, ancient Human Goddess of the Hunt... just like our own Larashkail mused the Andorian standing alone in the darkened room, his powerful silhouette defined by the lights of the starbase. Standing so, he looked like a black hole with a human-shaped event horizon against a field of stars.

The trend was rapidly catching the rest of the ship: he had heard engineers refer to the two warp nacelles as *Charybdis* and *Scylla*, the mythological twin monsters flanking a straight of the Mediterranean sea on Earth and main engineering , the hottest and noisest part of the ship, as *Hades*, the Greek Hell; the various shuttles distributed in her three shuttlebays were already christened *Arrow* 1 to 12 and painted silver like those attributed to the goddess; the crew messhall was dubbed accordingly, the Quiver. Located neat shuttlebay 1 on the back side of the saucer section; and he had heard more than one crewmember already naming *Olympus* the whole of desck 1 and the detachable bridge module of the starship...

Thinking of the crew brought Lieutenant Commander Kheren back to his last meetings. The bridge officer were quite a peculiar lot. He partly understood now why Captain Froud was so apprehensive.

Second officer Michael O'Conner was certainly the prime example of a proper Starfleet Officer, especially as the Captain saw it; but he had admitted to his uneasiness with "spirited individuals" as he put it... something this ship was certainly not lacking of... beginning with Kheren himself.

There was also Doctor Nasaro-Myth; a competent medical officer to be sure, even with a quirky habit of disregarding modern technology in favor of primitive hand techniques... and constantly trying to affect others around him with his pheromones: a controlling personality that might particularly irke the Captain and a few others...

Then there was the chief Engineer. Lieutenant Jackson was certainly enthusiastic and talented, but that was a dangerous combination without experience. Something Kheren was personally well aware of; under his red and black uniform, there was a large burnt scar crossing his wide chest he had purposely left there to remind himself of it, the remembrance of a precipitous rush from a turbolift without first identifying himself to the Starfleet guard watching it against alien intruders coming....

Science officer DevEm was exactly the opposite: a seasoned, well-experienced individual tempered by many lifetimes of service. But Kheren had sensed arrogance in the man: his impatience with the meeting, his pride in his people and his "connections", his usurpation of authority trying to end the meeting himself... That might all just be an after effect of a symbiot in a young new host... Still, the First Officer wondered how the Captain would respond to it.

And finally, Kelsey Alther; Kheren was still bewildered that the androgyn hadn't been summarily dismissed, booted out of Starfleet and sent into a Penitentiary Colony. The charges against the androgyn read like a list of all the offenses in the book; assault on a superior officer alone was a major court martial offense. Yet, Alther had only been denied the higher promotion and decorations its courage during the war had called for. There must be more to the fiesty Kalthurian than this neurotic behavior reports gave. He *did* see something in the Lieutenant...

But... had Alther acted on an Andorian ship as it did on the Spectre, the Lieutenant would have been summarily executed on the spot by its Captain.

Fortunately, for Alther at least, this was not a ship of the Imperial Guard: this was a Starfleet vessel. And this meant she was a ship of hope.

Kheren surely hoped it would all work out. That the Captain would allow him time to make it work. They were all extraordinary individuals; they just needed a firm hand for a while.

The Andorian, however, feared that, on this ship, it would be more like a fist.

He took a deep breath and slowly sighed in the darkness, looking at the star-like lights outside. As much as it will be his job to make this team achieve it's full potential, it will be his job to loosen up this fist... even if it meant that this hand would slap him in the face.

The crew evaluation report was now in Captain Froud's hands... just like their entire careers, and their lives. The Artemis was about to launch again into her new life, ready to bring them all face to face with the wonders and perils of this universe.

And now, Lieutenant Commander Kheren, First Officer of the USS Artemis, was contemplating this very first, most fearful peril:

The upcoming launch ceremony.

CHAPTER ONE: THE STALWART GUARDIAN

The imposing stateroom of Starbase 10 had an immense Federation banner on one side and on the other one of Starfleet; the fleet logo of Lotus Fleet sprawled across the vast floor and rows of seats aligned themselves in soft curves under wide balconies. Hundreds of persons sat behind the bridge officers in the front row and media reporters on one side with recorders of all kinds, all facing the vast viewport showing the immense starship gleaming under bright lights.

The USS Artemis.

Just in front of her titanic silhouette was the stage where four high ranking officers stood:

One was an imposing eight foot tall felinoid of the Kzinti warrior race: Captain-Speaker-of-Names, Commander of Starbase 10.

The next one was a deceptively diminutive Boslic man of visible experience with his slightly greying hair and short cropped beard: Fleet Captain Kotari, Commander in chief of the Hromi sector where the starbase served as the headquarters for Lotus Fleet, the elite division of Starfleet Command.

The third one was a ship captain: medium height, fit despite his visible years of experience with short cropped hair and a neatly trimmed mustache; Captain Kevin Froud, Commander of the USS Artemis.

The last one was Human too, Tall, athletically built and younger than his rank would have made anyone believe: Vice-Admiral Spawner, Chief of Operations for Lotus Fleet.

And in the silence that his authority imposed, he stepped to the podium:

"Today is a day of days; we are here to celebrate the refit and launch of the newly recommissioned Ambassador class vessel, USS. Artemis.

With the addition of the Artemis to the fleet, it will allow us to provide longer range support, as well as engage in longer term exploration missions. With her expanded facilities for cargo and personnel, it will also allow us to engage in more humanitarian based missions, should that be required. Do not be mistaken; while this ship is one primarily designed for exploration and cargo/relief efforts, she has been retrofitted with the latest available technology, allowing her to benefit from the advances made since the Ambassador class was originally commissioned. She has the teeth necessary to deal with the current types of threats that the fleet has/ to and will face; so, overall, this ship will, I am sure, will become one of the premier multi-role ships within Lotus Fleet.

Now, I would like to briefly turn the podium over to the captain of this fine vessel; a man whom has come out of retirement to aid the fleet, and provide his extensive experience and expertise to benefit the fleet and the officers serving. That man, is Captain Kevin Froud. "

Applause allowed the Vice-Admiral to back off from the podium to let the other man step upfront and face the crowd with a high lifted chin and peircing stare:

"Thank you Admiral Spawner; I am honored to be taking on such a role on such a ship.

For those of you who may not know me; I have served aboard several vessels, all of which have now either been destroyed or decommissioned, starting as a Midshipman, and earning my way through the ranks. My first official posting was as a junior tactical officer, then I became chief tactical officer and head of security. Later, I moved on to become a ship's Second Officer, then First Officer. Ultimately, I earned my first command after many years of blood, sweat, and tears, so to speak... All in all, I have enjoyed roaming the stars for many a year.

While I was enjoying my retirement on Risa, I got a subspace communique from Admiral Spawner, saying that the fleet was bringing another ship online, and he needed an experienced captain for her. I was reluctant at first to accept, but I came to the realization that it would be a chance to do that of wich I have demonstrated such an unswerving ability in doing; Captaining a starship.

This, coupled with the fact that one of my previous commands was an Ambassador class vessel, made it seemed like I could be of great assistance to the ship and the fleet.

The USS. Artemis represents a new era for this fleet; one of long range sustained exploration, and the ability to conduct extended reasearch in deepspace; as well, the Artemis will be able to provide a platform for planetary aid and relief type missions. With all her upgrades, should she be forced to engage in battle, she would be able to hold her own quite well; retrofitting also upgraded every single one of her systems beyond the original design. I can liken her to what ancient Earthers would call a "street racing car"; one that looks like a standard design vehicle on the outside, but has vastly upgraded performance parts at the very "heart" of it compared to the original design.

The USS. Artemis takes a standard workhorse multi-mission cruiser of the past, and brings her into the current day.

I am proud to have the honor of being her captain, and I appear to have a fine crew at my disposal.

That being said, I would like to turn the podium back over to Admiral Spawner. "

Again, a thunder of applause saluted the officer and his words. It allowed the Vice Admiral to return to the pulprit to conclude with his calm, authoritarian voice:

"Thank you Captain Froud; I am sure that, with your years of experience, you and your crew will bring great honor to your ship and this fleet.

Without further delay; I should like to declare the USS. Artemis officially commissioned and active as a ship of the line in Lotus Fleet".

As the Federation anthem started playing, a flood of colored lights started playing across the smooth hull of the immese ship outside, and people stood up to applaud with enthusiasm at this new symbol of hope for the future.

Her dedication plaque was rhen showed on the giant viewing screen under the Starfllet banner and the motto that had first, and now still, graced her destiny:

The Sun Never Saw Her Like Outside Of Olympus.

* * *

There was a lull between the launching ceremony, the media frenzy and the festivities regarding his new command. Captain Froud walked the halls of Starbase 10 to clear his head while the fleet techs completed a last minute baryon sweep to ensure that there were no residual contaminants aboard, before she launched.

Those silent, solitary walks were a habit of his since his first command. They helped him clear his head but also to think ahead.

And he did have a lot on his mind, beyond the usual burden of command...

I've always hated the pomp and circumstance of these ceremonies; so pretentious, so unnecessary.

This Artemis is a fine ship after all, with a fine crew, all things considered; after having reviewed the reports prepared my Mister Kheren, I must say that I do have indeed some fine, hardworking officers aboard. Many of my officer corps have worked their way up, put in their time, paid their dues.

My one concern is the relatively "green" XO they have chosen for MY ship; usually, a captain is chosen for a ship, and he in turn gets to select his first officer. This posting was seemingly backwards, the fleet admiralty assigned an XO, then sought a captain; VERY backwards.

I would also like to know why they feel that Mister Kheren is the right one for the job. I can think of at least three officers more deserving than he...

And how dare they usurp the captain's right to choose his Exec!

Be that as it may, I will have to deal with the decision of the admirals and work with Mister Kheren. I must say that it will be difficult to have faith and trust in the abilities and decision making of someone whom has not "paid his dues", as he had an all-too-rapid rise to his current station. I will just have to put him "through his paces", make him prove his worth.

The baryon sweep of the starship was done... But Captain Kevin Froud's own cleaning up was still yet to be done.

* * *

The music, the speeches and the applause finally died down.

But it was far from over.

Standing apart from the crowd of officers, civilians, mediapersons and crewmembers of Starbase 10, the Artemis and all the ships still docked at the headquarters of Lotus Fleet, the newly appointed First Officer of the USS Artemis just tried to make himself invisible by turning his own quadriscopic vision away from them all and contemplate the elegant form of this new ship he was to serve on.

She was well over five hundred meters long, more than three hundred meters in span and over a hundred meters tall... nearly four million tons: by far the largest starship in all of Lotus Fleet.

Her smooth, curved lines were of another era, retaining those classic lines that bore the best of Starfleet for centuries: a wide, smooth saucer atop a slender neck protruding from an elongated, slightly flattened hull of the venerable earlier Excelsior type that supported two perpendicularly angled pylons with the short, wide, flattened nacelles of the famous following Galaxy class design.

The classic metallic-blue silhouette of the Artemis spoke of an era of beauty long gone, erased by dull notions of efficiency and military pragmatism. Kheren found it hard to even imagine a more heart-lifting image.

Admiral Spawner's speech had befitted her: full of promises of wonder and discovery, of humanitarian action and noble service. The Artemis was now able to stand her own against any opponent, but she was not a mere warship: she was even more a ship of discovery, a ship of support... a ship of Hope: A true Starship.

And she was her charge now.

More than five hundred souls will be living onboard, devoting their time, their efforts, maybe even their lives to what this grand old lady would bring them to. And it would be his responsibility to see to them, to make them all be the heart, the blood that will give her life and purpose under the will of her master and commander.

No wonder Captain Froud came back of retirement to accept her command. If he had served aboard such a vessel before, Kheren too would not have missed a chance to get back to one of them once more.

Thinking of his commanding officer made the Andorian frown at his own image reflected in the transparent aluminum viewing port he was gazing through.

Captain Froud was a man of discipline and protocol, a man of honor and very status-conscious. Only the most perceptive observer could have noticed, despite all the proper behavior, how cold and distant he was with his First Officer. And it was of course most evident for him.

The Captain profoundly resented being imposed an executive officer he deemed unqualified for such responsibilities. It was not personal; and certainly not a racial issue: the way he exposed his own career in his speech clearly showed where he stood: for him, service and duty, dedication and experience were what defined a man in Starfleet. That was in fact the sole reason he was chosen as master of this vessel... and why he accepted.

And Kheren... he was one of those lucky enough to have survived a horrible war, and in the euphoria of the aftermath, the Federation and Starfleet did their best to heal the terrible wounds suffered with titles and medals and honors and celebrations of new ships, restored stations, of life itself.

Too many new officers now, barely older than their freshly replicated uniforms, arbored more pips on their collars than years of actual experience.

Just like him.

With a deep breath, Lieutenant Commander Kheren, First officer of the USS Artemis, squared his shoulders and lifted chin and antennae high:

So... time to prove what I am made of. he vowed.

* * *

As Admiral Spawner and Captain Froud made grand speeches and Kheren isolated himself from people to think long and hard about the ship and crew, Second officer and Chief of Operations Michael O'Conner did his best to secretly glance down at a PADD he hid beneath the table. He double and triple-checked the party plans.

While someone does the speeches, someone else does the dishes...

Quietly he mumbled:

"I hope we have enough Chocolate."

While he worried, he continued to send orders to the few chefs still working behind the scenes to get the desserts finished.

Shortly after sending the last order, he lifted his head and looked over at the crowd, as a smile crossed his lips. Then, as he finally tried to relax for the first time during his short stay on the Artemis, he saw his third in command motioning to him.

With a small sigh, he quietly returned to his PADD to see what went wrong now.

* * *

Lieutenant Kelsey Alther, former Chief of tactical and Security of the USS Spectre and now assigned to the newest starship of Lotus Fleet, was zoned out during the entire series of speeches.

They never interested the centuries-old Kalthurian... so attended but never actually payed attention.

The androgyn looked around, staring at everyone partially. Kelsey noticed Lieutenant commander and second officer Michael O'Conner, their Human chief of operations, and Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth, the Deltan Chief medical officer and ship Counsellor, recognizing them both without effort since, they too, were tranfered from the Spectre.

Lieutenant Alther let out an audible sigh. The blue-skinned female looking officer missed seeing N'Eligahn among the crew of a ship. He had stayed on the Akira xlass light cruiser. The spine-headed, orange-skinned recently promoted Lieutenant-Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo was the First officer there now.

Kelsey missed the mental connection with the Rethian pilot.

It brought a smile to the androgyn's lips:

First non-Kalthurian to get imprinted Kelsey thought, still staring off into the distance, ignoring people in the great room.

* * *

First officer Kheren was on the bridge of the USS Artemis, alone.

For long minutes, he had just stood there, admiring the circular command center that would become his workplace.

Even extensively modified and upgraded as it was, the bridge kept the simple, elegant design of the original Ambassador class: The workstations behind him might be state of the art, one century beyond the original ones, like all the stations, but they still allowed the same ease of operations as the original, recessing seats included.

Lieutenant Jackson and lieutenant DevEm will certainly appreciate that, as they both will spend most if not all their workhours at those bridge stations, coordinating all scientific and technical activities throughout the ship from there, right behind the Captain.

Beyond the safety ramp, the captain's chair was now flanked on each side by two new command chairs: on the right of the commanding officer's seat was his own First officer chair, equiped we a simplified control station where every other station of the ship could be controled or supplemented... and speakers for him to hear clearly the officers behind him.

On the left was the new, experimental Medical Officer chair: from there, the Chief Medical officer could supervise not only sickbay activities, but the welfare of all the crew aboard, casualties or evacuation protocols and act as ship's counselor and handle communications, incuding away teams needs.

How Doctor Nasaro-Myth would perform with it would determine if this new command post would be later implemented on all ships of Lotus Fleet... maybe even to the rest of Starfleet.

Lower and in front of the command well stood the joint navigation and tactical console. Like the legendary Constitution class of old, close coordination between maneuvering and tactical operations would make the Artemis even more effective in combat than anyone would expect from such an old design.

This will certainly bring back a lot of memories to Lieutenant Alther, as the long-lived Kalthurian will sit on the right chair from the Captain's point of view.

Between them and the large viewing screen stood the multipurpose station, where Chief of Operations O'Conner would monitor and coordinate all shipboard activities, or in a pinch support or even take over any other ship station if needed. This central station would again allow the Artemis to perform in a smooth, seamless manner even in the most dire or complex of situations.

Kheren had completed himself a diagnostic on all stations of the bridge. The Captain's ready room and the conference room on his left, the last one at the end of a short corridor with the second turbolift access leading directly there, were in full readiness.

The Andorian took a deep breath, then stepped down to his own chair. He keyed a command and pushed a button there that patched him up not only throughout the ship but throughout the entire starbase, from the docks to the mess hall, within holodecks and shuttles as well.

He had even requested personal channels for every crewmember of the ship, so that his words would reach them even if they were in quarters without a combadge.

He straightened up, looked at the bronze dedication plaque near the turbolift door on the right and said in a firm, clear voice:

" All bridge officers of the USS Artemis, this is the First Officer speaking: report to your department at once. Be ready for the Captain's inspection 1900 hours, sharp. Lieutenant Alther: meet me in shuttlebay 1 at 1800 hours. First officer out. "

Shipboard chronometer indicated 1600 hours: three hours before the announced inspection.

And it was scheduled for 2000 hours.

Kheren would make sure they were ready for it even if it happened sooner.

As he expected it would.

* * *

With the Baryon sweep complete, Captain Froud prepared for his inspection tour of the ship. There was much trepidation in his mind, as he has come out of retirement for this, and he has a relatively "green" crew... by his standards, anyway.

However, if nothing else this ship has one of the finest, most experienced Captains available he told himself; that's why Admiral Spawner requested ME specifically.

Froud went over some last minute PADDs while on his way to the shuttle bay, his shuttle to the Artemis leaving soon.

He made a supplemental into his log:

" I hope Mister Kheren and the rest of the crew are ready for my inspection. I am eager to see all the last minute upgrades and improvements that they and the drydock techs have made. As I understand it, they have made some internal design improvements by necessity as part of the refit; hope they haven't messed up *my* bridge or *my* chair *too* badly".

He closed the log, imagining what was now going on aboard the USS Artemis: Kheren and the rest of the crew finished putting the "spit and polish" and last minute touches on, prior to their new Captain's arrival on board. They certainly worked quickly, yet seemingly calmly; eagerly anticipating Captain Froud's arrival and hoping they and the ship would meet his *strict* standards.

* * *

"Put those two over there!" Michael O'Conner ordered with a shout as he and the other officers and crewmen guided antigrav lifts in and out of the cargo bay.

They were working hard to get the last of the supply containers on to the ship, before the launch party.

"I hope we can get all these supplies on board before tonight." O'Conner said to Lieutenant Cheonghi his six-limbed Edoan assistant.

"We will, Sir." He replied quickly in his high voice. " We already have the containers with both Mister DeVem's SAT sensors systems and Mister Jackson experimental safety harnesses neatly stashed already. "

"We better; the captain seems to be a.." O'Conner was interrupted mid sentence by Kheren's call.

Michael paused, pondering where his department was. This ship was much larger and much more complex than an Akira class he was so used to. It almost felt like a miniature starbase.

"Lieutenant Cheonghi, go give Transporter rooms, Docking stations, Shuttle bays and the systems officers a quick inspect. I will finish up here then head over to the Bow to check on the food."

Quickly he replied, "Yes sir" and then headed out the door with his weird three-legged gait as the Chief of Ops supervised the intake of the supplies delivery that were delayed by the Borg attack.

Lieutenant Commander Michael O'Conner, Chief of operations and Second in Command was the first to respond to his order to report.

As *expected* chuckled the Andorian inwardly. O'Conner was the most seasoned officer on board. Lieutenant Kelsey Alther might have centuries more of experience, but her uncontrolled and emotive nature had made her until now act more like a raw cadet of the Klingon Defense Force than a real Starfleet officer. And Lieutenant DevEm was obviously all about science; maybe as long-lived as the Kalthurian throughout all his past lives, but not necessarily all of it within Starfleet.

O'Conner was also obviously the most dedicated. Since his assignment to the Artemis, the man had never stopped supervising all the day to day work in preparing the ship for her relaunch:from ship supplies to the upcoming social event in The Bow. Like Kheren, he even slept in his quarters on the ship instead of the nicer starbase accomodations and privileges offered to the survivors of the Borg War.

He would indeed have made a perfect First Officer to Captain Froud could only admit Kheren in view of the excellence of his tireless work. *Maybe that's exactly what he's working for here...* the Andorian started to speculate.

He chuckled softly as the lift went from vertical descent to lateral movement towards the aft end of the ship and shuttlebay 2. Kheren was doing his best to be up to what was expected of the executive officer of the latest starship of Lotus Fleet. If O'Conner proved himself the better man, than the captain just had to make his choice.

When you accept a challenge, you must accept the possibility of losing. It is the best incentive to strive for success.

But Kheren was not overtly concerned with all that. In the end, the only thing important, was to get whatever - or whoever - was best for the Artemis.

As the turbolift finally stopped, he activated his combadge:

" Mister O'Conner: report to the bridge please and make final check on all ship's operations readiness and confirm it to me before 1800 hours. We will join you there with the Captain and all other bridge officers at the end of the inspection. Kheren out. "

And now, if I read my Kalthurian right, Mister Alther will be the next one to report ready.

The turbolift door opened directly in view of the access to the ship's main shuttlebay, at the rearest part of the secondary hull. There was a second one aft of the saucer section and even a third one underneath the main one. But shuttlebay 2 was the largest and, where it was located, the best place to start a thorough inspection of the Ambassador class vessel.

This is where he would first meet the chief of Security and start a dry run of the inspection together.

The Kalthurian had a lot going on this maiden voyage. Kheren hoped that the androgyn was aware that it had to do the upmost to make sure the first voyage of the new USS Artemis would not be the last voyage of Lieutenant Kelsey Alther.

Lieutenant Alther rubbed both eyes pacing shuttlebay 2; the androgyn had been there since over an hour already looking at the safeties of the landing deck.

"I knew I should have stuck to the Spectre" Kelsey muttered, hating these ceremonies.

The call of the First officer came.

Alther grinned: "Already there" the androgyn muttered again continuing to pace the shuttlebay, stopping away from the turbolifts when the doors woosh open.

Kelsey turned and walked straight to the turbolift doors, hearing the telltale opening noise and greeted Kheren.

"Greetings Sir, I'm assuming you wish to go over it all from the beginning?"

Already here? I knew I saw the right thing in those eyes when we first met thought the Andorian when he saw the androgyn already in the vast hangar deck coming from between the various parked shuttlecrafts. *But this civilian carelessness has to go before captain Froud get's here...*

"Already there... Sir." he corrected sternly, visibly expecting in his severe expression that the junior officer would do the same.

"Already there... Sir."

Kelsey curtly nodded at Kheren, listening to the rest of his words, still a little preoccupied but managing keeping attention focused on the task at hand.

He stayed frozen and glaring down at the Kalthurian until it was done. Then he relaxed his attitude; just a bit to show acceptance of it but not tolerance of any other lack of discipline.

If you think I'm harsh, wait 'till you meet the captain... chuckled inwardly the First officer. But his face remained inscrutable as he instead complimented:

"Mister Alther. I'm pleased to see that you have taken your responsibilities at heart. Knowing our Captain, this seriousness at work will play most favorably for you."

Kheren looked over the vast room for a moment then he added:

"Yes Lieutenant, I already figured out life on the Spectre was much more relaxed and cozy than it will be on this ship."

The surprise of having been heard muttering was plain to see on the tactical officer's face.

The First Officer simply lowered and cocked his head to Alther and wiggled his antennae, with a "don't you know?" expression in his silvery eyes. Andorians had hearing equal to Terran dogs.

Kelsey was a little surprised when Kheren mentioned some of it's mutterings, but when he wiggled his antennae, the Kalthurian realised that those were what had allowed him to hear them.

Then he straightened up to say:

" But this is the Artemis: the highest standards of Starfleet are more than expected here; they are *demande*d. If you think you can't live up to it, there is still time to disembark and request a transfer back to an easier ship before we launch... if Starfleet Command allows it. "

The message was clear: shape up or ship out.

Kelsey smiled as Kheren said that :

"Sir, I can live up to it; just general nervousness from not having done one of these ceremonies in a while."

The Kalthurian did its best to not take what he said as a personal challenge to keep oneself going; Kelsey didn't need more pressure.

But they both knew it was just a catch up phrase. For Kelsey Alther, the choices were even narrower than that...

Lieutenant Kelsey Alther wasn't leaving the Artemis anytime soon if having any a say about it.

" I understand your nervousness, Lieutenant. I am not much into those... social events myself... even when I try. But at least this part is almost over and we will get to real work soon enough. "

The way the Kalthurian took in stride the strictness of his attitude and immediately adjusted was most encouraging. *there is hope for you yet* he thought with satisfaction.

After all, his job too depended on it.

Completing his multisensory scan of shuttlebay 2, Lieutenant Commander Kheren turned and invited Kelsey Alther to accompany him:

" Come Lieutenant. We will dry run this inspection tour before Captain Froud comes with a white handkerchief in hand. We have a five hundred meters walk and back to discuss anything you like between you and me before we welcome him here."

Nodding at Kheren as they began the dry run of the inspection, Kelsey could only think of one question for the Andorian:

"What's Captain Froud like? You know him better than me since you're First Officer; anything I extremely need to be particular on?"

As they started walking out of the shuttlebay, Kheren nodded to Alther;

" To be honest, Lieutenant, I do not really know him anymore than you do actually. But I understand him. In one word: rulebook. "

He could see the androgyn understood what he meant but he wanted to spell it out:

" He's a proud and accomplished career officer from a long line of military officers going back to almost a millenia of Earth History. That means: he believes in the book, learned it, used it and expect everyone to do exactly the same. So, with that kind of superior officer, it is easiest: follow protocol, obey orders, work hard and stick to the rules and you will do quite fine with him. "

And won't it be fun now... he thought... but kept to himself.

Kelsey resisted the urge to make a shake of the head.

Another by the book captain. the androgyn thought, walking with Kheren while recalling previous assignments... like one under a certain ship commander called Captain Edward "stiff neck" Jellicoe....

"So, basically I just have to be a talking rulebook with legs?" Kelsey smiled:"Nice change of pace."

Alther hadn't had to restrain himself in a long time; most people just went with it. But now? It felt like a challenge.

The Kalthurian was thrilled, to say the least.

" Be glad, Lieutenant: those are the officers that most often get back home." commented the Andorian.

Kelsey shrugged a little:

"I'm quite happy not going home but I do know that I will help them get home if they want that."

The energy in the voice and the walk, the light in the eyes, the body language of the deceptively feminine-looking androgyn was that of a fighter before a duel.

Most gratifying.

But now, they were entering the captain's first stop on his tour: Engineering.

" Let's see if Lieutenant Jackson is as ready as you are, Mister Alther... Or at least worthy of his responsibilities as much as he pretends to be. "

Kelsey had to restrain a smile; seems like the tactical officer wasn't the only one who had some form of scrutiny upon one's work, even if it wasn't as much as Lieutenant Kelsey Alther did have.

The engineering section of the Artemis was a crescent-shaped observation area where thirty engineers and forty technicians routinely could monitor various systems of the ship on floor-mounted situational displays similar to the Master Systems Display on the Bridge. All those consoles mounted on every system across the room were presently manned by one or more members of the technical personnel, busy running final diagnostics and pre-launch operations.

A second tier ringed the second level of Main Engineering. A small single-person elevator, as well as a ladder on the opposite end, provided access. From there, many technicians worked in and out of the Jefferies Tubes in various places as on the first level of Main Engineering. The semi-circular room was cleverly designed to be small but exceedingly functional, saving space and promoting the highest level of efficiency, especially under alert conditions.

Farther in from the observation area was the warp core and main control systems. The entire section was towered in the very center by the Matter-Antimatter Assembly, ten decks high, where primary power for the ship was generated in the reaction chamber, pulsing red and loud like a colossal heart. Near it was the front port to the dilithium matrix and a side port for access to warp plasma conduits.

Alther and Kheren looked silently for a moment at the busied activity ongoing in the engineering section. Then the Andorian called out:

" Lieutenant Jackson! "

" Not here! Shoo! People working here! "

The Andorian's face remained frozen hearing the gruff, rough voice below from his left. But his antennae curved towards one another, in obvious amusement.

More than a few engineers and technicians had turned around at the sound of his powerful voice, rarely heard at such intensity. One of those junior engineers hurriedly went off to the port side where the Chief Engineer's Office was located. From a large observing window, both Kelsey Alther and Kheren could see that it was well equipped with a diagnostics table, assembly and repair equipment, a small replicator and a personal console with built-in private viewscreen.

The young woman whispered earnestly and grumbles could be heard from inside the office. A shuffling sound preceded the exiting of a dark-skinned, portly Tellarite barreling his way towards the two blue-skinned visitors. He stopped right in front of Kheren and lifted his thickly bearded chin and flat wide stunt of a nose as if he would try to match the taller Andorian's height:

" Lieutenant Marksus Sangliar, Assistant Chief Engineer. If you care to remember... Sir. This is Beta shift... Sir. Chief Jackson and Alpha shift were here before 1600 hours... I guess... As you should well know... Sir. "

" Ah, that's why it is so messy now down here. " retorted Kheren looking around as if already dismissing him.

Lieutenant Sangliar shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, almost stamping in contained anger:

" This is not the lofty, relaxed Olympus... Sir. " explained the Tellarite, referring to the main bridge by its newly adopted nickname. " Here people are hard at work all the time... while our lordly bridge officers stroll around the ship... Sir. We will be ready for launch. "

Kheren looked down at him sternly:

" The captain will be here well before that, engineer... with a white handkerchief. "

" We will be ready, Sir! " repeated Sangliar forcefully.

" You'd better be... The captain is not as forgiving as I am. "

For a moment, silence was only troubled by the throbbing sound of the powerful warp core; so near them they could feel it's pulse through the deck plates and the very hot air around them. The Andorian was sweating profusely but kept a stoic acceptance of his obvious discomfort.

He looked at the security teams of both Starbase 10 and the Artemis, doing a final sweep of the ship for any unnoticed Cardassian booby trap that could have been missed by the refit teams of Utopia Plenitia and the station itself. Then he commented dryly:

" I expected the Chief Engineer to be here in this final, crucial stage. Well, seeing you here, I suppose this antiquated propulsion doesn't require much security...or competence...to run properly. "

He was looking around and then sharply down at the fuming Assistant Chief Engineer.

" Our warp propulsion system is checked on a regular basis and access is restricted... Sir! " protested Sangliar forcefully. Then, on a calmer tone, he explained: This is the newest Consolidated Fusion's version 8 Standard Matter-Antimatter Reaction Drive; it allows our normal cruising speed to be at Warp 7 and not warp 6 like most other ships. Our maximum speed is rated at Warp 9.2, but with some more tweeks, we are confident the Artemis will soon even reach and maintain Warp 9.6 for a full twelve hours. "

" You should read Starfleet Regulations more carefully, Lieutenant. " scolded Kheren. " Regulation 12856 forbids any starship to exceed Warp 5 without direct authorization from Command or under defined emergencies. "

" Reading *all* of it is most important indeed... Lieutenant Commander Sir... This Drive System no longer has to obey the maximum cruising speed limit, thanks to this new General Electric Type 8 Warp Drive, nullfying the risk of subspace deterioration. Starfleet Command Directive 12856.A therefore recognize that the Artemis can exceed at will all warp speed limitations... and she *will*... Sir. "

The Tellarite crossed his short thick arms on his barrel chest, smirking. For his part, the Andorian looked away as if it didn't matter much. His tone of voice said the same:

" Speed is not everything, Engineer; especially considering that this ship is certainly not the fastest around. In fact, it is the slowest in the Fleet... except for, maybe, Tellarite tugs? "

For a moment, the Assistant Chief Engineer's eyes bulged and his teeth gnashed between his trembling lips. But the, slowly, a wide smile stretched his thick beard:

" Indeed, speed is not everything... but we have the original second generation "Red" Scarbak V "Peacemakers" Ambassador Class mass drivers. They were developed specifically for the Class... and never surpassed since. The impulse engine on the upper neck. deck 14, can propel us at a maximum of .25c, a quarter of the speed of light, due to time dilation problems. Quarter impulse is rated at .0625c, half impulse being .125c... as you should know... Sir. "

His tone became more serious, obviously prideful:

We also still have the original second generation 5 magnetohydrodynamic gas-fusion thrusters, developed specifically for the Ambassador Class starship, Lieutenant Commander Sir. Each thruster quad can produce four million Newtons of exhaust. Coupled with the Impulse engines of this ship, the Artemis can almost dance with a Defiant class ship a third of its size: The Artemis is rated at least 250% over a Galaxy class' maneuverability. "

The Tellarite was now fully showing his broad teeth, his beard high up as if to dare anyone to challenge his ship.

" And I suppose you never thought that, if those system fail, we are dead in the water ? " criticized the Andorian.

" You did read some technical manuals... Sir?" almost choked out the proud Tellarite, making it sound as much as an insult as an inquiry. " Accumulators and rechargeable batteries are distributed throughout all key systems of the ship. They can be coupled, rerouted, bypassed or isolated from any engineering control station under the overall control of the bridge engineering station, the auxillary control room on deck 5, or the main control station here, in that order. "

" Batteries... " Kheren made it sound like he was talking about the trash compactors and recyclers of deck 25.

" Never leave home without them... Sir. " now answered Chief Sangliar almost as if lecturing a small child. "These are constantly kept fully charged by residue energy from both impulse and warp engines or by the reactors when both systems are otherwise inoperative or fully sollicitated. "

" And... after *you* have checked them... do they actually work? "

" Batteries will become automatically active if all other systems are inoperative... Sir" explained the Chief with the same half-insulting tone. " Life support systems and ship's automated disaster beacon are prioritized by an integrated hard-wired program that cannot be bypassed when no other system can provide for environmental controls. Only residual energy can then be allocated from the batteries to other systems... if any. And the automatic disaster beacon will start broadcasting if only the batteries are left as a power source, unless deactivated by the proper command codes."

The First Officer nodded, his frozen features revealing nothing. but his voice was hard at work to hide his satisfaction:

" A ship is much more than just its parts, Engineer. I hope your crews are up to all this hardware you are so boastful about... Well, I guess that means at least that, in spite of your presence, the hardware is reliable. "

" Well, since *you* approved all of our postings, that means that this is *your* problem... Sir. " smirked Sangliar. Then, more seriously he added:" Since all systems and decks are accessible through a web of Jeffries tubes between the hulls and deck levels, all engineers and technicians are required to know the layout of those workspaces as well as those of the decks proper. Regular training is required to ensure that all engineering personnel can quickly and easily reach any part of the ship even when powered transportations are inoperative. "

He looked up at Kheren to finish with a tone defying any doubt:

" The Artemis is ready, Sir... and so are we. "

I truly hope so... tought the First Officer, because not seeing the Chief Engineer himself at work at this final, important stage, and just before the captain's tour of inspection, is not reassuring.

" Thank you Mister Sangliar. Carry on... if you can. " he simply said.

The Tellarite nodded, obviously pleased. Being allowed to show his strength of character through arguying and small insults but still within the limits of Starfleet protocol was immensely gratifying for one of his species. He would be even more efficient and happy to do his work because of it.

But First Officer Kheren was not so happy.

I know the call is for a few hours still... But I thought that, with his enthusiasm during our meeting, Lieutenant Jackson would have been more dedicated to this ship and to his job than that...

Maybe I was wrong.

First Officer Kheren and Chief of Security and Tactical Kelsey Alther exited the well-manned Engineering section on deck 21 to take the nearest turbolift. For a moment, the Andorian paused after the doors wooshed shut, closing his eyes and taking a few breaths before resuming his walk.

" Sorry about that, Lieutenant... but it was rather hot in there. "

Kelsey shrugged as Kheren commented on the heat

"I don't mind your pace" she said as they continued their tour. As they got onto the turbolift, the First Officer ordered outloud to the computer:

" Deck 14."

As the elevator hummed to send them upward, Kheren looked straight ahead as he said, almost as if talking to himself:

" The Science department would logically be next; and the captain will certainly want to see the new stellar cartography room more than just the labs or the sensors, as state of the art as they may be... "

After a short silence, he looked at the Kalthurian androgyn to add:

" Since Chief of Science DevEm is still on medical leave on the Trill homeworld, I guess you might be the one to answer the captain's questions, Lieutenant. You did serve as a science officer before, if I recall your record accurately, didn't you?. "

"Well yes I have served as a science officer on ships before, but I'm not quite sure on the scientific abilities of this ship. I would have to go over it to in-grain it in my mind." Kelsey said, putting a finger to a lip in thought.

" This dry run tour will be most useful for you too then." commented Kheren with antennae facing one another and a glint of amusement in his silver eyes. " As far as scientific missions go, you will find out that the Artemis is undoubtedly the premier ship of Lotus Fleet. "

The door of the turbolift wooshed open, and they walked a short distance in the almost deserted corridor in front of them, passing the door of Chief Science Officer DevEm's office before reaching a door marked:

STELLAR CARTOGRAPHY.

On the original Ambassador class, a small stellar cartography bay was located there on deck 14, with direct EPS power feed from engineering. All information was directed to the bridge and could be displayed on any console or the main viewscreen.

On the Artemis however, refit teams not only upgraded all Science Labs to current Starfleet Standard. but also repurposed two labs, one as a research simulation holodeck, the other as a limited-holography Astrometrics lab with full holographic display; it was of the same design as the one found on the late Enterprise-D and updated to the one that was used on Starbase 10 during the Borg War.

When both officers stepped in, they found themselves walking on a narrow ledge right into outer space; a bewildering feeling when one was not prepared for the quality display of this room. It felt like walking right to the stars.

There were four persons in the room, working around the display console at the end of the walkway seemingly suspended in the starfield: All wore the two pips, one hollowed, of Lieutenant Junior Grade rank on their blue uniforms.

They turned as one when Alther and Kheren came up to meet them. A petite, dark-skinned Human female first welcomed them:

" Lieutenant Commander, welcome to stellar cartography. As you can see, everything is in order, Sir. "

" Lieutenant Irkos, this is Lieutenant Kelsey Alther, our Chief of Security and Tactical. Lieutenant Alther, this is the Assistant Chief Science Officer, Lieutenant Valencia Irkos. "

The woman greeted the Kalthurian androgyn with a handshake, looking at Alther with blinking eyes.

" You are the famous Kalthurian officer from the Spectre, right? Sorry if I stared Lieutenant but, standing right besides the Lieutenant Commander, I thought for a moment you were Andorian too... until I saw that the antennae were missing and realized you were female looking but much smaller than him. "

Kheren now introduced the three other scientists:

" This is Lieutenant T'Val, Head of Astrometrics and Astrophysics. " The tall, slim Vulcan woman bowed her black haired head slightly but did not offer her hand; Vulcans, being overtly sensitive to the minds of others, didn't like to be touched, especially by emotional beings.

" How are the sensors on this ship, Lieutenant? "

" All in perfect working order, Sir. " began the Vulcan with her soft, deep throated voice. " Our long range and navigation sensors are located behind the main deflector dish, to avoid sensor ghosts and other detrimental effects consistent with main deflector dish millicochrane static field output. The lateral sensor pallets are located around the rim of the entire hull; they provide a full coverage in all standard scientific fields, but especially in astronomical phenomena, planetary and remote life-form analysis, active energy, passive neutrino, mass displacement and thermal variances scanning, quasi-stellar material detection... We even have a parametric subspace field stress sensor that can be used to search for cloaked ships."

She looked more directly at the Kalthurian to add:

" In that regard, Lieutenant Alther, we also have an independent subspace graviton field-current scanner that can also track ships at high warp by locking onto the eddy currents from a ship's warp field... and then follow the currents with the multi-model image mapping. "

Lieutenant T'Val then returned her black, shiny eyes to the First Officer to conclude:

" Each of our twenty sensor pallets can be interchanged and recalibrated with any other pallet on the ship, Sir, including the twenty independent tactical sensors, since those are approximately 50.39% efficient against jamming, and operates modestly in particle flux nebulae up to 50% accuracy... compared to the main sensors, Sir."

Kheren patiently let the astrophysicist expose her brief but typically Vulcan thorough lecture before nodding in appreciation and turning to the visibly older, paler and less pointy-eared man besides her:

" Lieutenant Seton, Head of Subspace and Quantum Mechanics. "

Lieutenant Seton didn't offer his hand either and instead also bowed his dark-brown head. Even a half-Vulcan like him had the same sensibilities and aversions full blooded Vulcans had.

" Are all the new labs also ready, Lieutenant? " Kheren asked him.

" Indeed they are, Sir. The five biochemistry labs on deck 7, adjacent to Sickbay, can also be reconfigured for Medical research. On deck 8, we have two bio-chem-physics labs, two exobiology labs, and one eugenics lab. The final five on deck 16 are multi-functional labs that can be equipped for various experiments."

Eugenics and exobiology... I must remind myself to avoid deck 8 half-joked Kheren in his mind.

Lieutenant Seton kept his arms crossed behind his lower back at attention, but had he been anything but of Vulcan descent, his posture and the gleam in his brown eyes would have looked prideful as he finished:

" The refit teams have also upgraded the bridge science station. In conjunction with other science upgrades, the Artemis is rated at 120% scientific capability when compared to Galaxy-class refits as of now. "

Nodding again his thanks, the Artemis First Officer for his part didn't hide his pride in his new ship from his own posture as he turned to the last of the four blue-clad scientists:

" And this is Mister James Karmichael Korbo, Head of Physics and Mathematics. "

The small, lanky, blond-haired and green-eyed man shot his hand at Kelsey Alther with a huge smile on his almost gaunt face:

" A pleasure to meet you, Chief. "

" Mister Korbo is reknowned for his uncanny mathematical ability, said to even challenge our most advanced computers." commented Kheren. " And speaking of computers..." "

As he left his voice trail off, the man quickly took over:

" All nominal, Sir. The primary core occupies decks 6, 7 and 8, dead center of the main saucer section. The secondary, emergency core is much smaller than the first and is located adjacent to Environmental Control on Decks 17 and 18. They both are smaller versions of the Galaxy Class Isolinear Processing Cores and powered by a smaller, regulated EPS conduit directly from the warp core. Cooling of the isolinear loop is accomplished by a regenerative liquid nitrogen loop that is vented directly to space. The isolinear processing and storage devices, being faster than light, are even faster than me, Sir! "

" Impressive. " simply commented Kheren. " How about long term, complex research and exploration, Mister Korbo? "

" Beyond relying on over a hundred science specialists on board, requirements on the computer core rarely exceed 75% of total core processing and storage capacity. The rest of the core can thus be utilized for various scientific, tactical, or intelligence gathering missions... or to backup data in the event of a damaged core."

" How about the interface? " Asked the First Officer.

" We have been refitted with the latest design in Library Computer Access and Retrieval Systems, with verbal and graphically enhanced display input and output. The graphical interface adapts to the task performed, allowing for maximum ease-of-use. This version 6.0 accounts for increases in processor speed and power, and also for limitations discovered in the field in earlier versions, especially in regards to security. "

He was now turning his enthusiasm towards the androgyn Chief of Security:

" Access to all Starfleet data is of course highly regulated. A standard set of access levels have been programmed into the computer cores in order to stop any undesired access to confidential data. Security levels are also variable, and task-specific, just like certain areas of the ship are restricted to unauthorized personnel, regardless of security level. The main computer grants access based on a battery of checks to the individual user, including physiological measurements, face, retina and voice recognition in conjunction with a vocal code as an added level of security. "

" Thank you, Mister Korbo." said Kheren. "Are we well stocked in probes, Lieutenant Irkos?"

" Affirmative, Sir. " answered the woman. " All ten different classes of probes, which vary in sensor types, power, and performance ratings. They all can be reprogrammed for electronic counter measures and, with a warhead attached, each can become a mine or a torpedo. " she added looking a moment at Kelsey Alther.

She then turned her green-eyed gaze back to the First Officer:

" The standard equipment of all probes are instruments to detect and analyze all normal and subspace bands, organic and inorganic chemical compounds, atmospheric constituents, and mechanical force properties. All types are capable of surviving a powered atmospheric entry, but only types III, V and X are especially designed for aerial maneuvering and soft landing. "

She used the nearest console to punch in and show what she was explaining:

" Many can be real-time controlled and piloted from the ship to investigate an environment hostile or otherwise inaccessible for an away-team... and probe VI to X are warp capable."

" Well, I think this ship is ready to go where no one has gone before. " quoted the Andorian from the most renowned ship dedication plaque in Starfleet History.; that of the USS Enterprise. " Carry on... The Captain should be here in two hours... if not sooner. "

He winked at them, a gesture he had caught from his former Commander Mark Robertson, his former First Officer on the flagship USS Lotus.

" Alright. Mister Alther, let's go see if *your* department on deck 9 is as ship-shape as this. "

Kheren and Kelsey exited the turbolift to inspect the tactical and security department prior to the captain's tour.

This multi-room department was in a Restricted area on deck 9. Within it were the entrances to the brig, the torpedo and probe magazine, the weapon control room and the armory, as well as Lieutenant Alther's office.

The office had yet to be decorated to the lieutenant's preference. For the moment, it had only the work area, a personal viewscreen, a computer display and a replicator.

From there they had access to the brig located on deck 17, a restricted access area whose only entrance was from here, through a reinforced hatch and ladder just like a jeffreys tube. Each of the eight double occupancy cells contained beds, a retractable table and chairs, a water dispenser, and a toilet.

" Well Mister Graalthrii, I see all prisoners have escaped while you were here. " said the Andorian first officer to the Tellarite checking the security systems of the Brig.

" Would you care to take a room and try... Sir? " retorted the short, thick-set bearded security officer with his gruff voice filled with defiance... and a hint of... hope. " The cells are secured with a level 10 forcefield emitter built into each doorway and transporter dampeners imbedded into the walls made of the very bulkheads, with ship armor plating reinforcement. Same with the smaller set of four secondary holding cells on deck 5. And we can rig up cargo bay 2 the same way too."

" So, even that thick head of yours couldn't go through? " asked Kheren in an overtly serious tone.

" I'm not sure about yours, tho... Sir." countered Ensign Graalthrii with a show of teeth.

The First officer conceded the point to the stout security officer with a half-smile of his own and went with Alther to check on the rest of the department.

They climbed back up to deck 9 and then proceeded to check the weapons control room and the torpedo and probe Magazine: another restricted area for storing unarmed photon torpedoes, quantum torpedoes and science probes, it also stored the components for manufacturing new torpedoes. This room was also accessible by the loading mechanism for the torpedo launchers, but the fire control room itself was almost as secured as the brig.

" Ensign Tyvya, status of the tactical systems? " ordered Kheren when they arrived there.

The Andorian shen on duty there towered over both of them from well over two meters. She answered in a surprisingly soft voice:

" All ship weapons primed and ready, Sir. We have three dorsal arrays on the saucer section, one for the forward, starboard and port sides. These arrays are duplicated on the ventral side of the primary saucer. Two smaller arrays cover the aft side firing arcs, mounted on the nacelle pylons. Two small arrays cover the aft firing arc from the aft, dorsal portion of the saucer section."

" New ones if I recall correctly." commented the the First officer. The giantess nodded:

" They are all brand new Type X systems firing a pulsed beam of phaser energy, discharging the phasers at speeds of 0.986c. The phaser array automatically rotates phaser frequency and lock with our sensors onto the frequency and phase of a threat vehicle's shields for shield penetration. "

" That's what they have on current warships. " noted the First Officer.

" Affirmative, Sir. Each phaser array takes its energy directly from the impulse drive and auxiliary fusion generators and each can discharge approximately 5.1 megawatts at up to 300,000 kilometers. However, several emitters, at least two, fire at once in the array during standard firing procedures, resulting in a higher discharge. "

" Good, Ensign. What about torpedoes? "

" We have two fixed-focus torpedo launchers just above the main deflector dish in the neck of the vessel. A nother pair of launchers are set to fire dead aft and located on the rear of the engineering hull just below the aft shuttlebay. All are the second generation of automated, high-speed burst-5 launcher type: each can fire up to five warheads in any desired pattern... and they have covering retractable cowls to protect them and lower the ship's threat signature. This is an *ambassador* class starship after all..."

" Are we fully stocked? " then inquired the first officer.

" Yes Sir: we have one hundred twenty-five Quantum torpedoes and one hundred twenty-five type 6 Mark XXV photon torpedoes, and thirty-five configured as probes. They're all capable of pattern firing as well as independent launch and targeting once launched from the ship, with detonation on contact... unless otherwise directed by the Chief Tactical Officer. They go up to three and a half million kilometers at near warp 10. "

" Are our defensive systems also upgraded? "

" Basically, we have a symmetrical subspace graviton field fairly similar to those of most other starships, Sir." now explained Tyvya. " However, besides incorporating the now mandatory automatic mutation shift in frequency, our shields alter their graviton polarity to better deal with more powerful weapons, such as the neutron-carbide beams of Tamarian vessels. "

" Have the specs of the Lotus I provided taken into account?" inquired the First Officer.

" Yes Sir. During combat, each shield sends data on what type of weapon is being used on it, its frequency and phase. Once this is analyzed by the tactical officer, the shield can be configured to have the same frequency as the incoming weapon but different mutation. This tactic dramatically increases shield efficiency."

Kheren simply nodded in approval. He was familiar with this innovation brought about by the Intrepid class like the Lotus he had served on.

" There are twelve shield grids, each one generating 145.9 Megawatts, resulting in a total shield strength of 1750 Megawatts taken directly from the warp engines and impulse fusion generators. They can also be augmented by power from the impulse power plants. The shields can protect against 12% of the total EM spectrum. This improvement was made possible by the multi-phase graviton polarity flux technology incorporated into them, now standard issue on Federation starships. When raised, shields stay extremely close to the hull to conserve energy, about ten meters away. "

" So, we have adequate defense from enemy threat forces, hazardous radiation and micro-meteoroid particles." commented Kheren.

" We can even ram threat vehicles, Sir. " added the giant Andorian woman with a feral look in her icy blue eyes.

" Very good, Ensign. Carry on. "

The First Officer and Chief of Tactical and Security then went to inspect the rest of Lieutenant Alther's department. But Kheren was not worried: all of the Kalthurian's main assistants like Graalthrii and Tyvya had come with him from the Lotus. They were battle-hardened and especially trained by him personally.

And they were all accepting him easily enough as First Officer... even Andorians like Tyvya.

At least they are at their posts, like the Lieutenant here mused the Andorian with a sour taste building in his mouth. *The Captain is about to come aboard and the Chief Engineer is not here, the Chief Science officer is not here... and the Chief Medical Officer hasn't even acknowledged reporting. Looks like Mister O'Conner will have his promotion faster than expected...*

But then, the stopping of the turbolift brought him out of his growing gloom.

The ship's Armory was located in a restricted area on deck 5 and under constant guard, even now before the ship was even launched.

" No attempt at mutiny yet, Ensign Julian? " asked Kheren coming to the guard booth.

" I'd like anyone to try, Sir." greeted Carmilla Julian, a blonde Human woman at the guardpost. She was of medium height but frighteningly muscular and with a jaw that looked capable of biting through a Klingon bat'leth. " The room is sealed with a level 10 forcefield and can only be accessed by personnel with Alpha 3 security clearance. Speaking of wich, may I see both your identifications? "

After they went through the mandatory retina and bioscans, declining name and rank to the computer for voice recognition, both visiting officer entered the armory itself. Inside was a work area for maintenance and repair of phasers as well as multiple sealed weapon lockers. one red-skinned Edoan female was finishing stocking the room with hand weapons, her three arms simultabneously taking, checking and securing one after the other in an almost machine like continuous work.

" Are we fully stocked, Ensign Tosan? " asked Kheren, taking one phaser rifle to examin it briefly.

" We carry enough type-I and type-II phasers to arm the entire crew, Sir. " confirmed the six-limbed Edoan with her high-pitched voice. "Type-III phaser rifle and the new compression phaser rifles are available as well, but only in enough numbers to arm a third of the crew. Heavy ordinance like photon grenades, photon mortars and mines are also available in limited numbers. And also the six-hundred duranium combat knives you requested. "

" Good, thank you Ensign. Mister Alther, you will make sure every crewmember coming to his scheduled security training will also be trained in knife combat. I want everyone prepared even for Klingons, Jem'Hadars and Hirogens and any other such bloodthirsty boarders. If nothing else, they can also use it to pry open panels during emergencies. "

As they left the armory, going through the same security check as for entering, Kheren turned his silvery gaze to the androgyn accompanying him:

" Lieutenant, make sure that all personnel are also tested every six months in marksmanship and hand to hand combat. "

Before the new Chief of Security could aknowledge, he cocked his head to add:

" Mind you, *not* with *entertaining* holodeck fight program like yours and mine, but with the computer *combat* program: the one wich adapts to every individual and learn from one's own style of fighting until you get defeated. And see to it that all personnel maintain a minimum marksmanship level of 15 with type I and II. Of course I expect your security personnel to have at least level 18 with all types of phaser weapons. Familiarity with non-Starfleet standard weapons is recommended. "

As they entered the turbolift, he explained:

" This is not a warship, but we are also not the latest starship design around. I know I am demanding, but I want this crew to surpass the best Starfleet standards in every department. That is how this ressusitated ship will do her part. "

That is... if they report for duty tought Kheren, his mind still lingering to the previous departments attended only by subordinates... and Captain Froud coming...

As the door slided shut, he simply ordered the computer:

" Deck 7: sickbay. "

Is there a doctor in the house? he wondered.

The First officer and the Tactical Chief entered the one large sickbay facility located on deck 7. They were immediately assaulted by an almost overwhelming sense of mixed excitement and seriousness, especially the Andorian: powerful pheromones were cumulating within their olfactory senses.

And Andorians, being as sensitive as Terran dogs, Kheren felt almost dizzy a moment, so much that his antennae reflexively half-retracted from the smell inside his skull in this most unique peculiar way of his.

the feeling-inducing body scents were propagated by the surprisingly high number of Deltans working within the small hospital, chief among them the ship's surgeon and head medical officer, Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth himself.

" Welcome to sickbay, gentlemen!" greeted the Deltan with a smile as shiny as his shaven bald head and gleaming purple eyes.

He was barely taller and heavier than Kelsey but he showed a poise that made him look more mature than even the centuries-old Kalthurian androgyn.

" I must say, I usually do not see people come in on their own feet quite often here. Hope this is a good sign for the future. "

" Glad to see you here, Doctor Nasaro-Myth. *And you have no idea how glad... relieved, I am* he thought. " In turn I must say that, usually, I do not see many officers wishing to be that much out of a job either. " openly retorted Kheren in an equally good-natured manner.

" In this universe, what is logical is not always true, and what is true is not always logical. " half-joked the doctor.

" I gather from that remark that you are primed and ready for the unexpected. " then said the Andorian, not joking at all.

" As much as anyone can be, my dear Exec: this sickbay has undergone a full renovation, as a hull breach and EPS explosions had destroyed the previous one. We have four brand new biobeds, with an additional one set aside in an isolation ward. Holoemitters have been installed, allowing for the operation of the ship's brand new EMH mark II not only here but throughout the entire ship except the Jeffreys tubes... something I would like to discuss with you and the Chief Engineer at your earliest convenience, by the way. "

Kheren nodded, while giving a full look around the entire medical area. It certainly was the largest he had seen yet outside of the ones on Starbase 10...

Or on Andoria he was reminded a moment.

But, following his gaze and that of the Kalthurian security officer, the Deltan doctor brought him back to the present with his soft, calming voice:

" As you can see, we are equipped with an intensive-care ward, a laboratory, a nursery, four surgical suites, a null-grav therapy ward, a morgue, a biohazard isolation unit, and a dental care office... oh, and I have my own consultation office too of course. "

He gestured to another adjoining door:

Conveniently, since I will cumulate both responsibilities onboard, the Ship's Counselor's office is just outside, with standard furnishings I will later personalize, a personal viewscreen, computer display, and replicator. Besides it is the individual therapy room furnished with chairs and couch for one on one sessions, as well as a large group therapy room with several couches and chairs."

" You think those will be needed anytime soon, Doctor? " It was now the Andorian's turn to make a half-joke.

" You tell me..." responded Elliago in kind. Then, more seriously, he added:

" Although everyone has already been checked out by Starbase 10's Chief Medical Officer, I have reviewed every crewmember's medical file and noted with my staff every detail concerning any specific crewmember. "

So everyone in sickbay know about me... realized Kheren. He was used to having only the CMO aware of his... condition. But he realized that it was of course simply more efficient and practical to have the ship's staff informed... especially when someone like the Captain and Executive officer were concerned. Still, he felt somewhat... exposed.

This is not Andoria, this is Starfleet. he then strongly chastised himself.

" Have you seen the brand new Doctor's Command Chair on the bridge, Doctor? " he then asked to get back on track.

" Exactly to the right of the Captain's chair. " answered Nasaro-Myth with a smile. " I am aware that this station is in the testing phase, but I must say it's about time! Not only is its console like that of the Tactical station, and that it can be reconfigured to other advisory stations, such as Diplomatic Advisory or Councillor, but it will allow me to be at the center of command to inform and implement all procedures faster and wider. "

" Most doctors might find it annoying to be outside of sickbay. " observed the Andorian.

" Most doctors don't have such an excellent team as I have. " explained the Deltan. " In that regard, I would request to have all the Deltans on board assigned to my shift, so that we can maximize our natural benefits for the entire crew, especially here in sickbay. "

" Consider it done, Doctor. I should have thought of this myself. Deltans are even more deeply communal than us, clan-minded Andorians. I hope you will forgive me for this oversight. "

" Think nothing of it, my dear Lieutenant Commander. Few ships have Deltans on board, and this one has by far the largest contingent of my people on one single vessel in this fleet. Everyone has to adjust. If you personally can manage with the heat aboard, we can certainly follow your example and tolerate a little isolation during ship operations. "

" Speaking of which, Doctor: are you ready for any and all emergencies? "

Doctor Nasaro-Myth crossed his hands behind him and in a formal tone answered:

" Pursuant to Starfleet General Policy and Starfleet Medical Emergency Operations, at least forty percent of the crew of this ship are cross-trained to serve as Emergency Medical Technicians, triage specialists, medics, and other emergency medical functions as much as in engineering or tactical departments... and please don't call me a Witch-Doctor. "

The joke made them all laugh, even the Andorian; something Elliago was obviously aiming at for a while. *Laughter is the best medicine... not just for Humans* was his thought then, especially as he felt the tension in the First officer. But he was professionally serious when he continued:

" In emergency conditions, the recreation deck and lounge on deck 15 along with the Bow on deck 8 and the VIP/guest quarters on deck 2 can serve as emergency intensive care wards, with an estimated online timeframe of thirty minutes with maximum engineering support. Each of our three shuttlebays has five mobile hospitals that can be deployed either on the flight deck, or transported to Cargobay 2 or 3 for emergency overflow triage centers. Cargobay 3 also provides for the emergency atmosphere recalibration to type H,K, or L environments, intended for non-humanoid casualties. All facilities are equipped with full Bio-hazard suites, to minimize and prevent crew exposure to potentially deadly diseases, especially those that could potentially bypass transporter filters. "

" And to mental illnesses as well? " inquired Kheren. He still had in mind the telepathic takeover attempt that almost allowed the Borg to take control of the entire fleet through their own telepaths.

" If a crewmember suffers a psychotic episode, and has to be isolated from the crew, the ill crewman is kept in sickbay, in the isolation unit, or in the intensive care units depending on availability."

Once more, the Andorian First Officer nodded:

" Well, doctor, don't take me wrong but, I hope you will get bored on this ship. "

" Bored? Never. This is a starship: there are always new things to discover, to study, to understand, to wonder about... No need to have suffering people to have a reason to be here. Do engineers only want to repair things? "

The smile and gleam in the Deltan's eyes could have jump-started the entire vessel.

" *Touché* Doctor. And I believe Captain Froud would be the first to tell you that, if exploration and discovery is what you crave for, you certainly got on the right ship... and this ship's got the right Chief Medical Officer."

Thanking Elliago with a bow of his head, Kheren turned to Kelsey Alther:

" So, Lieutenant: one quick, last stop to see Mister O'Conner in the Bow and if all is in readiness for this *bon voyage* party of ours... The captain might choose to surprise us and come sooner than announced. "

At least someone was serious about his duties before the Captain showed up. he sighed inwardly with relief.

In the Bow, Lieutenant O'Conner looked over the new message he just got on his PADD.

"Well we are finally done. He said as the report told him that all of the cargo had been stored and All of the food prep work had been done... nearly two hours early as ordered.

Leaning back in his chair he mumbled:

"I hate these ceremonies..."

He smiled just a bit as he looked around the Bow and saw all the decorated tables set out buffet style. The only thing missing was the food, which sat in the kitchen waiting to finish cooking and be served for the upcoming ceremonies. No replicated stuff; only fresh, real, best food for honoring the Grand Lady's return.

Then he turned back to the small table, where one of his steward officer sat and returned to the standard idle chit chat. O'Conner was still trying to get a feel for his officers and, with nearly two hours to go, he figured this was as good of a time as any.

The Bow on deck 8, occupied a large portion of the foremost part of the saucer section. It's numerous wide windows showed a panoramic view of whatever was directly in front of the starship: at present, the distinctive forms of the USS Alsea, the USS Spectre and the USS McKenzie, the heroic fighting vessels of Lotus Fleet.

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

The curved form of the vast room, located at the forefront of a ship named after the ancient Greek goddess of the hunt, was all that was needed to have it christened as it was... certainly vastly more appropriate than the bland copying of the Ten Forward name made famous by the USS Enterprise that many other ships tended to do... especially that, on an Ambassador class, the area was not even on deck 10 to begin with! And calling it " 8 Forward" would have been as ridiculous as it would have been meaningless.

And that was not the only difference: on the Artemis, although some from the crew's family members did work here, the area was not held by any civilian but by Starfleet junior officers under the authority of the Chief of Ops and the Quartermaster. it was used as a disciplinary area for education or for minor offenses onboard; serving others was a good way to reinforce respect, humility and sense of duty for undisciplined crewmen, beginning Starfleet personnel and cadets on their final year cruise. It also helped keep minimal order in what was a basically casual section of the ship: one where some might forget they are serving on a starship, not on a tourist starliner.

It was therefore more formal than the Quiver, the common social hall on the port section of deck 15 where ranks were not enforced and recreational games were freely available.

For that same reason, true intoxicating beverages were not accessible there, and here only if authorized by the Captain, First Officer, Chief of Ops or Quartermaster for official celebrations, diplomatic occasions and such appropriate events, as the upcoming launch party; the rest of the time, it was as restricted as the armory itself.

With the quality of all synthehol products, there was no justification for any crewmember of the Artemis to risk deficiency or dishonor by courting the debilitating effects of true intoxication.

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

And, at the center of the bar, stood a full-sized bronze statue of Artemis herself, the exact replica of the 18th century bronze masterpiece *Diane Chasseresse* of Jean-Francois Houdon. The original was still at the Louvres Museum of Paris, right across the street from the Federation Presidency Palace. Even nature's fragrance and feeling could be experienced here, with environmental controls including olfactory emitters providing various wildlife aromas and an artificial breeze giving the hint of the outdoors. Soothing natural sounds, from the haunting ice winds of Andoria to the scorching dry ones of Vulcan, the powerful breathing of the immense oceans of Earth to the cristalline singing of the waterfalls of Betazed, everything was both to relax and distance everyone from the cold emptiness of space... and yet, provide a simple social gathering atmosphere to every being onboard.

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

For now, everything was prepared for the crew's celebration of their maiden voyage. Young crewmen and some junior officers were still busy making the final touches to the place, but everything was obviously ready when Kheren and Alther came in.

O'Conner quickly stood up as he heard the pair enter the Bow.

"Hello, Sir."

With a quick salute, he greeted the tall Andorian officer.

" Mister O'Conner: well done. If this is but an example of your competence in organizing things on board, the Artemis is then in the best of hands. "

Despite his frozen features, the warmth and respect in the Andorian's eyes and voice were unmistakable as he went to the Chief of Operations.

Even more, he was obviously relieved to see him there.

"Thank you, Sir. I wasn't quite sure how to decorate a umm..." He paused as he looked around the lush green room, trying to figure out how to describe it in one word. "An indoor countryside. So just when with standard white table cloths and flowers" He said with a small shrug of his shoulders.

" Understood Mister O'Conner. It *is* a rather... original setting to begin with. Ambassador class indeed... " acknowledged Kheren to the Chief of Ops.

"The chef will begin to finish the food about a half an hour before we are suppose to start." He added quickly.

" Real handmade food... most thoughtful of you, Mister O'Conner. I'll make sure Captain Froud will take good note of that initiative of yours. "

Looking over the entire celebration area. He nodded with satisfaction:

" I guess we're ready for the Captain then. We'll meet you with the rest of the senior staff on the bridge with the captain at the end of his tour, Lieutenant Commander. Mister Alther and I will go back to the main shuttlebay and welcome Captain Froud. It might not be the official hour, but I have a hunch he and the media crew might already be on their way... "

" Aye, Sir. "

So saying, the Andorian signaled Lieutenant Alther to follow him and they both exited the Bow for the nearest turbolift.

They quickly rode sownward, sideways, downward then sideways again, almost travelling the entire half kilometer of the ship back to their starting point: the main shuttlebay.

Both walked briskly back along the last corridor stretch to join the honor guard already preparing for the commanding officer's arrival with the media ships in tow.

The Artemis had by design three landing bays: one in the aft part of the saucer section, with a pair of Type 10 advanced shuttles and three Type 6 Personnel shuttles reserved for ranking officers, a small one in the aft underbelly of the secondary hull where workbees and four shuttlepods were docked and a main large one identical to what was on any other starship, aft of the same secondary hull, at the dorsal bow of the ship.

On this class however, the Flight bay module had been initially replaced the shuttlebay module that were found in previous Classes of sarships. This Flight bay contained the latest in Starfleet shuttle and runabout designs. It was controlled by a space/air-traffic control room, known as "Flight Ops", located against the forward wall of the Flight bay, next to the exit for the turbolift.

The Flight bay contained in neat row six Type 15 Shuttles, four Type 6 Shuttles and three Type 7 Shuttles.

There would still be room for the media ship USS Devilfish, a runabout class vessel, and the accompanying shuttle bringing in the rest of the media crews form all over the Federation.

The USS Artemis was the newest, latest ship of Lotus Fleet, the elite of Starfleet that stood at the forefront to protect it from it's most lethal enemy... and prevailed, even making victory possible. Her launch happening so soon was seen as a symbol of the Federation's victory and resilience, strength and purpose, vision and hopes.

All eyes were on them. The Artemis already carried a body of legends, an aura about it that would only be paled by that of the flagship of Lotus Fleet, the Lotus, or by the Defiant, the Voyager or the Enterprise. And the appointment of Captain Kevin Froud, Starfleet veteran and among the most reknowned ship commanders, was only enhancing the importance of the moment, of the ship.

No time to be found wanting...

" Mister Alther: please review the Honor Guard and make it ready. I want the Captain to be proud of this ship even if he is looking at her right now with a hand-held telescope. "

* * *

On the vast deck of the USS Artemis main shuttlebay, all was in readiness to welcome her master and commander.

The parked shuttles were aligned in a chevron formation behind a double row of security guards standing at ease, their standard gold and black uniforms giving a regal coloring to the blue-white decor. Through a pre-programmed computer sequence, the inner forcefields would allow the Captain's shuttle to come in by pushing itself in front of it's sleek bow while another one would close in behind it as soon as it was inside the ship, before the huge sliding doors would finish sealing them all off from outside space. Thus, no one would be in any danger of exposure to vaccuum and all would be there to greet Captain Froud like on old navy ships of Earth.

Even an orchestral recording of the federation anthem and a traditional bosun's whistle was prepared to officially welcome the commanding officer of the USS Artemis when he would step out of the shuttlecraft.

Kheren was particularly proud of having tought of that little detail himself. He hoped Captain Froud would be pleased with this gesture of respect to historical formality. After all, the Captain was the proud descendant of centuries of military tradition; this warranted much respect.

" Sir, Starbase 10 is hailing us. "

Hearing the flight control officer's announcement from the ship's intercom, the First Officer answered through his combadge:

" Patch them down here, Ensign. "

" USS Artemis, this is Starbase 10 Flight Control; Captain Froud's shuttle on final approach to main shuttlebay. "

" This is the Artemis. " answered the Andorian. " Thank you Starbase 10. Landing procedures acknowledged."

The entire vessel seemed to hold its breath for a moment, as the huge hangar doors slid open like a metallic curtain and the golden shimmering of the forcefields flashed a moment between the people inside and the star-like view of the starbase's inside lights.

The Captain was coming aboard.

* * *

As his shuttle was on final approach to the aftmost and widest shuttlebay of the Artemis, the media runabout in tow, Captain Froud could not help but think if his crew was ready for what may come. Froud knew himself to be a very demanding, exacting, ship's master; and the crew was fairly green, by his standards anyway.

" Shuttle SB 1, you are clear for docking in the main shuttlebay". Went the flight controller from aboard the Artemis.

Captain Froud was not alone in the shuttle, as Vice Admiral Spawner has also come along for the first inspection. Spawner turned to Froud and said:

"Kevin, are you sure you are ready for this?....Sure your new crew is ready for this?"

"Oh I am more than ready for this, Admiral. As for my new crew, we shall soon see if they are as good as their service records hint at. They *will* be put through their paces, as you know from previous experience. You do remember your days as my XO, don't you?"

Spawner chuckled:

"Yes *Skipper*, I sure do; that's why I asked. How could I forget my days aboard the USS. Longbow?"

"You sure have come a *long way*, Number One....I mean, Admiral".

The shuttle landed on the deck of the shuttlebay, and all on board heard the engines and systems power down.

"Alright, Captain. " said the Admiral. " She's your ship; I am merely here to see her for myself, a silent observer if you will".

"Understood, Sir. I just wish that the Media weren't following. I hate overblown attention like this".

The shuttle doors opened; Froud stepped out, followed by Vice Admiral Spawner. He could see his First Officer, and all the rest of the senior staff assembled. waiting to greet him.

The bosun's whistle sounded, and Kheren called out:

"Captain on deck!"

Everyone stood stiffly at attention.

"At ease" came the quick reply from Captain Froud. "Mister Kheren; I see you anticipated my early arrival, very good. Your stock just went up a couple of points, as I do enjoy a First Officer that can anticipate me on occasion. "

"Aye, Sir; Thank you, Sir". Replied Kheren, secretly smiling to himself slightly. The Andorian had read all the Starfleet documentation about the new Captain; he felt he was ready for what may come from this fine officer, and this kind of thing was exactly par-for-the-course with Captain Froud.

The news media was already busy recording the captain's entire embarkment and subsequent exchanges with his First Officer.

"We have a large ship to see, Mister Kheren", remarked Captain Froud; Seeing as you and the officers put in so much extra time, effort, and "spit and polish" in this ship....You will be giving a guided tour for myself, the Admiral, and the tag-along media."

"Aye, Sir." simply acknowledged the Andorian. "Admiral Spawner: this is a pleasure and an honor having you on board. The Artemis is getting a top-brass send off. It says a lot about this ship and her captain."

"I assume you were prepared for this, correct?" remarked Admiral Spawner to Kheren. "I hope you brought out the "white glove" already in your pre-inspection; as Captain Froud will be donning his shortly".

Spawner chuckles slightly.

"I licked every bulkhead myself, Admiral Sir. " answered the Andorian with a very serious face.

But then, Kheren always looked dead serious.

For once, he hoped his rigid face would serve to acknowledge and share with the Admiral this Human humor he was trying so hard to master. After all, it did work for a certain historical master comedian of ancient Earth named Buster Keaton...

"Captain, Admiral, may I present to you Lieutenant Kelsey Alther, the Chief Tactical and Security officer of the Artemis. " said the First Officer, gesturing at the willowy blue-skinned, white-haired androgyn at the head of the security Honor detachment. "Mister Alther, lead the Honor guard please. " he then ordered.

Four security officers took position around the entire procession: the Vulcan Ensign S'Ken and the blond stoic Human Ensign De Paul at the head, while the rear was taken by the Andorian giantess Tyvya and the stout Tellarite Ensign Graalthrii. Kheren believed his selection, led by the only Kalthurian in Starfleet, would particularly please the media people, here to see the revived hopes and dreams of the United Federation of Planets soar again with the resurrected USS Artemis.

This was also an antiquated Human tradition, dating back to the time when Earthers were still a warlike, divided people and capital ships were confined to military duty. Today, only the still battle-minded Andorians maintained this kind of protocol within the Federation, so Kheren felt very at ease with it; he just hoped Captain Froud would appreciate this further acknowledging of military tradition.

At least, it would enhance ship and crew's tidyness... and prevent the excited media people from wandering around and poke at things.

"Mister Kheren, please proceed; as she is still *your* ship to show, since I have not input my command codes into the ship's main computer yet and taken command" said Froud. "Depending how the inspection goes, I may *not* enter my command codes"; joked Captain Froud showing his seldom used, slight sense of humor....the kind where you can almost never tell if he really is joking or not.

It was of course entirely lost on the Andorian. Taking the comment of his commanding officer very seriously, he stood very straight and answered;

"Captain, this ship is yours, since the moment you accepted her command, whatever the computer may acknowledge or not. And it will be so until the moment you may decide to leave her. This is what this tour will demonstrate, Sir. "

"Where shall we begin?"

Lieutenant Commander Kheren started them on the Captain's word along the vast landing deck where they were all assembled:

" Well, Captain, Admiral, we will work our way from stern to bow, through main engineering, then the science department, security, sickbay and finally the bridge, meeting all your department heads along the way to answer your questions. Afterwards, we will all proceed to the Bow where a reception is prepared to celebrate your coming aboard. So, let's first look at this shuttlebay, the largest of the three this Ambassador class design is equipped with. "

With an inviting gesture of his massive arm, the First Officer of the USS Artemis led his commanding officer and guests throughout the largest starship of Lotus Fleet.

Kelsey Alther stood and followed everything to the letter blankly, still in shock from her first meeting with the new Captain.

What a pompous ass, the androgyn thought, continuing along assigned duties with all the present people. The Chief of Security noticed how he probed every area he could find for small particles of dust, even the small crevices which to Alther made no sense to even check.

Does dust really bother him that much? Kelsey continued to think, noticing more of his behaviours; something about him made the Kalthurian think that Starfleet was some form of religion to him... which was strange to one from an agnostic race. Wasn't it just an organisation?

Alther's head shook from side to side while walking and observing the moustached captain. More observations kept popping up observing him, such as how Froud avoided called Kheren anything other than "Mister." The Kalthurian had already noted the surprisingly stark coolness of many Andorians towards the First Officer, which was something considering the usual dourness of the entire species...

But Froud was Human.

"Seems a tad condescending" the blue-skinned officer muttered... and startled as a thought struck suddenly like a lightning bolt.

The court martial!

Kelsey had nearly forgotten about it: The court martial of formerly Ensign Kelsey Alther of the USS Spectre... the chief of security who disobeyed orders and fired upon another Starfleet vessel, destroying her and all hands aboard...

The court martial that was supposed to happen.

The freshly minted Lieutenant looked at the floor and tried to keep the anger controlled as thoughts rushed through its head.

Absurd, Stupid, Ridiculous... such words raced through the Kalthurian's mind as both fists clenched for a moment before unclenching. Kelsey took a deep breath, looked up with a passion and fire in its eyes and took a glance at Kheren... and remembered the promise.

I won't fail you the androgyn thought, looking at the First Officer.

The highly sensitive hearing of the Andorian had caught the mutterings of the Kalthurian in front of him. Kheren had been of a mind to whisper a terse reply to bring the junior officer to order when all four oculars caught then the expression on the blue-skinned face and in the eyes.

It was a look of resolute conviction, of steadfast determination, of trust and confidence.

And it was aimed directly at him.

The First Officer held Lieutenant Alther's stare with both pairs of eyes and antennae for a moment, then just nodded slightly.

A First officer's job is to see that the ship runs smoothly for the Captain Kheren reminded himself. As long as Lieutenant Kelsey Alther would follow orders by relying on him, even if disapproving of the captain, things would be fine for ship and crew... whatever her mutterings.

Truth is, I agree with Alther admitted the Andorian to himself.

He would even have smiled, had he had enough facial muscles to let the repressed irony surface. But his cold, merciless mind would not let his burning, passionate heart speak out.

No matter; it is not important that we like one another, as long as we respect one another and put the ship first and foremost in mind.

He wondered suddenly if he had not heard that from his former commanding officer, Captain Felez Comorna'tu. That is something *he* would have said for sure. The Efrogian master of the USS Lotus certainly lived up to it when he had found himself with an overachieving, too serious-minded and reckless Andorian, and a mere Ensign at that, as a Chief of Security and Tactical aboard the very flagship of the Fleet.

Was that just barely over two years ago? Kheren wondered in amazement.

And now, his attention was back to his present commanding officer.

Kheren could not help but notice that Captain Froud was very knowledgeable, not only about starships, not surprising for an experienced ship commander, but especially with the Ambassador class.

Right from the start, he commented on the third shuttlebay which was typical of the early design of the class, making the Artemis a shuttle platform rivalled only by the much more recent Akira class. And the variety of shuttlecrafts, pods and workbees could only be surpassed by an actual starbase.

When they moved on to Engineering, with the media cohort in tow, they were welcomed by the Assistant Chief Engineer Sangliar - as much as a Tellarite could be welcoming - but the Captain was again displaying his experience by taking the Tellarite's characteristic attitude in stride, briefly exchanging banter and mild insults with this natural ease Humans were so well able to.

Froud commented then on the replaced impulse drive, which belonged to the Zhukov later Ambassador variant, giving the Artemis astonishing sublight maneuverability for a ship of her size... and consequently a surplus of impulse power in standard maneuvering.

The Captain even knew that there were spaces behind some consoles where his hand sought dust he didn't find... thanks to Lieutenant Sangliar's thorough takeover of the department in the chief engineer's absence.

"And where is the ship's Chief Engineer?" asked the representative of the Federation Hailing Frequencies Multimedia Service, a petite Bolian woman with her bald head as blue as that of an Andorian..

Froud looked at Kheren; Kheren looked at Sangliar...

Then, everyone looked at the wall intercom as it beeped.

Kheren had wanted to share his own thoughts with Kelsey Alther, during the tour or else after, during the reception... to give the junior officer something to hang on the two precipices of a court martial and a difficult captain Kelsey was finding itself caught in between...

"Engineering: Lieutenant Commander Kheren please respond. "

The urgency in the tone of voice was unmistakable. Kheren lifted his hand to his commbadge then froze as his eyes met those of Captain Froud.

"Sir?" he asked, his hands going behind his back.

Froud looked at him for a moment as the urgent call was repeated. Then he activated his own personal communicator with a slow, deliberate tap on his chest and answered outloud:

"Captain Froud here: go ahead. "

His eyes never left those of the Andorian as everyone heard:

" Captain Sir...Lieutenant Cheonghi here, Sir. We have an emergency call from Starbase 10. "

" Patch it through, Lieutenant. "

Another voice, female, replaced the high-pitched, raspy tones of the officer at the other end of the call:

" Artemis, this is Starbase 10: we just received a distress call from the USS Jeanne Mance, a relief ship that was coming in with wounded and supplies. There was an accident. She needs immediate assistance. "

Froud stood up with his own hands clasped behind his back, head lifted up and voice very calm:

" Starbase 10: we are still in dock preparing for launch. Have you scrolled through all available ships to assess best availability?

" Affirmative, Sir. The Artemis is the only ship in dock currently operational. "

" Did you contact the nearest patrol ships first?"

" Affirmative, Captain. The Artemis is the only one in the entire sector able to launch a rescue operation. "

" Starbase 10, went again Froud, unimpressed by the mounting urgency in the officer's voice, Have you confirmed all proper clearances for our launch and orders for operation? "

At the other end, the soft feminine voice was replaced by a deep, growling voice like a barely contained roar:

" Captain-Kevin-Froud, this is Starbase-Commander-Speaker-of-Names: by orders of Starfleet and Lotus Fleet Command, you are to launch immediately to rescue the Jeann Mance. Starbase 10 out. "

Kelsey stifled a laugh and a smile as Froud was told of by Speaker-of-Names as the communication ended with such sudden abruptness that it was as if somebody had punched right through the speakers. For a moment, there was utter silence on the entire engineering deck; only the pulsing heartbeat of the warp core seemed still alive. Kelsey stared at Froud to see what would happen as a result of being ordered to do something against regulations.

Froud himself seemed for a moment like a warp core building up to a breach; but he half-closed his eyes and bit his lower lip under his trembling mustache before finally ordering in a strained voice:

" Mister Kheren: please note in the ship's log that proper procedures were not followed or confirmed for this mission. "

It took a moment for the Andorian to answer his superior officer.

" ... Aye, Sir."

" Proceed, Mister Kheren. "

This time, the reaction of the First officer was instantaneous, like something too long held back:

" Yellow Alert! All hands to stations! prepare for emergency departure! "

The captain looked at him for another moment as the alert klaxon reverberated throughout the entire vessel. Then he simply turned around, saluted Admiral Spawner briskly and went out through the swishing doors as everybody else scrambled hurriedly around them.

" Lieutenant Alther, then ordered Kheren, his eyes still on the back of his departing commanding officer, clear all civilians off the ship. Escort them and Admiral Spawner to their ship then report to the bridge on the double. "

" What? "

"No way! "

" Just a minute you... "

The Andorian didn't hear the sudden exclamation behind him from all the media people that the honor guard were starting to round up.

He was however barely starting to walk out when one of them, the petite Bolian woman in a silvery suit, planted herself right in front of him, a burly man right behind her with a mounted multimedia device around his head, lighting lamp straight at Kheren's face, blinding him a moment as his antennae retracted partly inside his skull:

" Listen, Mister Kheren: we are authorized by Starfleet *and* the Federation Council to cover the *entire* launch *and* first flight of the USS Artemis: you can't order us out like this! "

Kheren looked down at her, as much as to meet her eyes as to avoid the glare of the recording system of her assistant:

" That's Lieutenant Commander Kheren to you, Miss...? "

" Nonh, Vela Nonh, Federation Media Network. And here is our official confirmation of rights to cover this entire mission. "

She was thrusting a padd right in front of his face and the Federation Council seal prominently displayed with the long scrolling text over it.

" Fine, sighed Kheren moving by her and leaving the padd in the hands of Kelsey Alther: you deal this with our Chief of Security. "

Kelsey nodded stepping over to Vela Nonh and glancing over the padd, scrolling through it :

"Miss Nonh, everything seems to be in order; however I'm going to have to ask you to stay in the Bow as the bridge is off-limits but to Starfleet Ensigns and above only."

Kelsey saw the reporters started arguing and held one hand up:

"If you prefer, I can just throw you off the ship." as Kelsey said... and the reporters went quiet.

"Good" Kelsey continued; "Now please follow the honor guard to the Bow."

The Kalthurian rounded up any civilians who weren't reporters and walked over to Admiral Spawner to say: "Sir, please come with me" while guiding everyone to the shuttlebay where lay the Devilfish, the media ship..

Without another word or glance, the Andorian First officer had abruptly moved away and out of the Engineering room after his Captain. But then, a warm hand on his shoulder stopped him gently. He turned his silvery eyes to meet the soft brown ones of Admiral Spawner:

" Rock, Paper and Scissors, Commander. " said the Admiral with a knowing smile. " A good Exec knows how to play the game with his Captain. "

It took a moment for the Andorian to grasp what the Human was referring too. but he finally understood as Spawner went on:

" He may not be a nice man, you know... but he's a good officer. "

" He's the Captain. " Simply retorted Kheren, as if it was all that was needed; and to him it was. He took his leave from the Admiral with a nod of respect the other returned with a smile and a wink.

Froud was already in the nearest turbolift, obviously waiting for him with a frown on his uplifted face. His voice was cold as ice, but he waited for the doors to close and for the lift to whisk them up and away towards the bridge before commenting:

" I expect more alacrity from my officers, Mister Kheren. "

" Yes, Sir. " Simply said Kheren with a neutral tone, looking straight ahead and standing at formal attention besides Froud.

Especially from my Exec. See to it that you come awake on duty, next time. "

" Yes, Sir. " the Andorian answered with the same very controlled tone.

The lift stopped its horizontal move and started ascending from the secondary hull towards the primary one. The captain was also looking straight ahead as he spoke:

" How long before we are ready to depart? "

" We are ready now, Sir. However, we will do so without some key personnel. "

" This is not what I call acceptable performance in your handling of the crew, Mister Kheren. "

The Andorian didn't move a muscle; but his antennae were flattening on his thick white mane as he spoke:

" Sorry, Captain: Doctor Nasaro-Myth was waiting for us in sickbay and Chief of Ops Lieutenant Commander O'Conner was doing the same in the Bow... But I was just informed that Chief Engineer Jackson's shuttle from Earth was due only tomorrow for the planned launch... and we just received report from the Trill Homeworld that Chief Science Officer DevEm has been hospitalized for some emergency treatment regarding his symbiont. "

" Sorry won't help the Jeann Mance, Mister Kheren. "

The hiss of the opening door covered the one that filtered through Kheren's tightened lips. He let his commanding officer step out first, out of proper protocol as much as to hide the fire in his own eyes, then followed him to the command well of the bridge. He deliberately left his four oculars up and straight towards the main viewer, avoiding any glare at the Captain.

Froud stood before his command chair, looking over the entire bridge and the officers already activating to full status all consoles around him. directly behind the command chairs, Assistant Chief Sangliar manned the Engineering station; assistant science officer lieutenant Valencia Irkos stood besides him at the science monitor; at the navigation console, right in front of the Captain, Lieutenant Roberta Marcus already prepped the ship for departure, asking and receiving confirmations from the starbase flight operations officer.

" I see Lieutenant Commander O'Conner is still not at his post either... nor... "

From the door on their left came out at a run the Chief of Security and tactical. Barely pausing, Captain Froud continued:

" Lieutenant Alther...Kind of you to join us for work. I trust you enforced rules and kept the civilians off the bridge? "

" All civilians are secured and comfortable in the Bow, Captain. " came from the other side the voice of Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth, a blue medical smock over his dress uniform. His smile and presence slowly lowered the tension that was building up on the bridge as he went to sit in the chair on the left of the Captain.

Kelsey nodded as Elliago said where the civilians where. She was tempted to be sarcastic but this captain wasn't a person who would take it well, so she kept her mouth shut and manned her station.

For his part, the smiling Deltan doctor activated the console on the armchair of his own command station, glanced at it and reported:

" 97% of ship's personnel reported at stations, Sir. We are fully stocked and ready for emergency medical operations. "

" Not a moment too soon, Doctor. " commented Froud dryly.

The smile on the Deltan's face froze. He swallowed back the retort coming up to his pressed lips and busied himself coordinating all upcoming operations of a space rescue, his fingers on his central control padd. Froud hadn't even gratified him with a glance.

Once again going over the entire command center of the ship with his uplifted gaze, Froud finally sat down on the center seat. Activating his own armchair controls, he kept his head high as he said:

" Computer: this is Captain Kevin Froud: By order of Starfleet Command, I take command of this vessel. Note stardate in ship logs and activate command codes Alpha Prime One One A... "

His order was acknowledged by a sudden mounting hiss and a terrible groan that shook the entire bridge with an intense light and roaring heat wave... as if suddenly, a dragon was belching its deadly breath at them.

As Captain Froud input his command codes and before he could utter anything else, a sudden flash of light and burst of heat detonated behind the command well.

It made Kheren turn halfway around to hear the screeching of metal as if the ship itself was screaming in agony... and see an entire supporting pylon of the bridge topple at the base towards the center of the bridge!

The massive incurved beam struck Engineer Sangliar on one broad shoulder as, coming out of the turbolift to reach the engineering control station, he tried to step aside the falling debris while plasma burns flamed across the left side of his body; plasteel flakes rained on them all from the ceiling, causing Kheren's antennae to reflexively retract into his skull, making him effectively deaf, anosmic and color blind.

That is when a brutal hand pushed him face forward into the nearest console... right into Kelsey Alther already halfway up from the tactical seat.

Kelsey had no clue what just happened as a large form landed on her and tried to cover her. It worked somewhat but the impact of the landings cracked something in her chest.

The Andorian fell right across the smaller Kalthurian and instinctively covered the other while attempting to roll with the blow; they both smashed into the tactical console and fell entangled together with the toppling lieutenant's chair as the floor shook from a short, heavy impact and a rain of smaller plastic chips fell down on them.

Then, all was deathly still.

Kelsey grimaced as pain shot through her body as she lay there with the Andorian and next thing she knew she was being moved quickly, and in the wrong way.

With one heave of his left arm, Kheren shoved Alther's whole body up and away from his sprawled form, over and beyond the circling railing of the bridge. Kelsey moaned loudly as she was rolled, after a few seconds she managed to stand, grasping the right hand side of her chest. Where her ribs should be. Kelsey saw the devastation of the bridge and the toppled pylon. Kelsey laughed quietly to herself as she felt dizzy.

Kheren let out a cry of pain as his right arm tried to do the same with the much lighter chair. His right sleeve was gone to mere shreds, and the dark blue skin of his muscular arm showed large abrasions and deep burns. As he staggered to get upright, his usually deep blue skintone turned suddenly greyish, as sweat ran down across his entire face and body, both suddenly shaking as if under intense cold.

He was about to go into shock.

Kheren didn't feel his injuries to be that severe; but Andorian physiology was much more prone to shock than that of a Human, and he was even more sensitive to heat and burns than the average Andorian. The blast had reached his right side as he turned towards it, striking his entire right arm and part of his right ribs with debris, shockwave, electrical sparks and gouts of plasma.

Dazed, Doctor Nasaro-Myth shook his bald head from the plastic dust that covered most of his sprawled form. A violent push had sent him cleanly out of his chair and face first into the side rail circling the command well. It took a moment for his blurred vision to focus again. Instinctively, he gazed at every place where a moan or groan of pain was heard...

And when he turned his head back towards the command chairs, he gasped.

The First Officer of the Artemis gripped the handrail so strongly that it groaned under the pressure and twisted to cut into his callused palm. The pain and trickling blood brought him back out of the dizzying cold blackness that was about to engulf him. Barely standing on wobbling legs, he looked around through his blurry, colorless eyes: he saw helmsman Roberta Marcus rolling on her back on the floor while holding her own right arm at an odd angle, her debris powdered face contorted in pain; Doctor Nasaro-Myth was shaking his head and also picking himself up, mouth agape, opposing him across the large fallen pylon.

And he too felt his jaw drop.

It was resting square across the crushed remnants of the Captain's chair.

"Just what I need" the tactical chief muttered, stumbling over to where Elliago and Kheren were meeting each side of the crumbled bulkhead part.

"Well this is going to be a fun trip." Alther said sarcastically... and collapsed on the floor.

" Medical team to the bridge! " spoke Elliago through his combadge, himself struggling to stay upright, his other hand to his bruised head.

With a growl of rage, Kheren stumbled also right to the massive pylon. Ignoring the excruciating pain of his burned and lacerated arm, he hugged the enormous fallen beam.

" Damage control..." then began the doctor, but then, he stopped, eyes bulging.

With one loud hissing of breath and slow heave of his powerful legs and massive back, Kheren lifted the entire mass off the damaged floor.

It would have taken at least over half a dozen men just to budge the huge beam; but with another, louder hiss, the muscular Andorian took the entire bulkhead part from the floor, held it across his huffing torso for a full second and, with one last effort, threw it away over the bent railway where it crashed with the sound of a falling building.

But Kheren wasn't even looking at it; all his four oculars were lowered to what remained of Captain Kevin Froud.

The massive pylon had fell squarely on him while his arms were still extended after pushing both the CMO and the XO out of harm's way. He was lying sideways, arms spread out... but the crushing weight of the bulkhead had flattened his body so severely, it looked as if he was lying on his back. Only the still forward angle of his twisted, squashed legs under him showed how horribly mangled his entire body was.

And he was still alive.

Ragged, whizzing breathing came out of his bloodied lips and through his bent, crushed torso as well. The red color of his shirt hid the growing wetness that was spreading all across it. His eyes were fluttering as they tried to focus on the kneeling Andorian and crouching Deltan now by his side. So where his lips.

The Deltan doctor immediately spewed out calming pheromones and put his hands on the grotesquely mangled body, trying his natural healing touch to lessen the pain.

It was not working.

But the eyes fluttered fully open. In a raspy, horribly bubbling voice, Captain Froud stammered:

" Shhh... she's... yours... Number One... "

" Bridge to transporter room 1: *emergency!* CMO and Captain to sickbay, *NOW!* "

Kheren had tapped his combadge so hard it fell from his uniform half crushed between his hard palm and wide chest. But the device was sturdy enough to still transmit his plea. His blinking eyes, wide with fear and anger, buried themselves into those of Elliago:

" Save him Doc! *Save him!* "

The last words dissipated with the sparkling sound of the disassembled molecules of both doctor and patient before him.

* * *

Kheren stood up right before where the Captain's chair had been. He had not budged from there since the dying Captain had been transported away with the ship's head surgeon, refusing to move himself while ship and crew were still recovering from the shock.

Accident? Sabotage? they were all silently wondering the same as he was. He could see his own troubled gaze reflected in their eyes.

Captain Froud had entrusted the ship to him with his last words. He could not, would not let personal pain stray him from his sacred duty to what might just be his own captain's last order... a hero's last wish.

No Andorian could.

No Starfleet officer would.

The medical team had quickly come to the bridge to tend to the wounded; helmsman Marcus was relieved from duty with a dislocated shoulder, a broken arm, fractured ribs and a severe concussion; Engineer Sangliar was also lying in sickbay with 3rd degree plasma burns, a broken collarbone, a dislocated shoulder and numerous contusions and abrasions, but only doing so with typical Tellarite stubbornness and loud arguing; Security chief Alther had suffered superficial contusions and a cracked rib with a light concussion from colliding with Kheren, the console and the floor... twice. A small cordrazine shot with a quick treatment using dermal regenerator and osteoregenerator brought the androgyn up and running again, albeit visibly a bit distraught by the whole experience.

Hang in there, Lieutenant, thought Kheren looking at the Kalthurian, *we need you more than ever.*

As for the first officer himself, his right arm was now in a sling and covered with regenerative salve.

And there was no news yet about the captain's condition.

The damage control team had also worked quickly: all the debris had been whisked away with the transporter, and support braces had been beamed back from the industrial replicator to the bridge and quickly put in place of the missing pylon, while the damaged plasma conduits were simply removed and the power rerouted.

It would take much longer however to replace the command chair.

In mere minutes, almost all traces of injury and destruction had disappeared... except in their hearts and minds.

Almost...

And out there, there was still a ship in danger, desperately waiting for them.

On his tousled white-haired head, Kheren's antennae were still flattened forward in anger. But his voice was very deliberately strained with self-control as he tapped, this time gently and with his left palm, the new combadge he had been issued:

" Lieutenant Sheeneea, report to the bridge helm station. "

As a female voice acknowledged the order, the Andorian bent sideways to open the ship's comm channel:

" Starbase 10: this is the Artemis. First officer Kheren reporting. There has been an accident on the bridge. Captain Froud is critically injured and left me in temporary command. We are about to answer a distress call as the only ship available. We request that you urgently assign to us a Chief Engineer, a Chief Science officer and a Commanding Officer for the mission. "

A deep, growling voice answered after a moment:

" Artemis, this is Captain Speaker-of-Names, Starbase-Commander. Request acknowledged: we have recorded the explosion onboard your ship. Replacement officers on their way. As for a commanding officer, that will be you, Lieutenant-Commander-Kheren. "

For a moment, the Andorian just stood there, blinking, mouth slightly agape, antennae suddenly wobbling in confusion.

" With all due respect, Sir, he began to protest, this is a new ship, a new crew, on an critical emergency mission. An experienced commander... "

" ... is nowhere available in time. " cut in the powerful voice of the Starbase Commander. " You are First-Officer, you are there, you have your captain's order and my authorization as senior-officer. Good luck, Acting-Captain-Kheren. Starbase 10 out. "

Like a loud voice shushing any further protest to silence, the lift door opened to bring an Andorian shen to the navigation console, miraculously missed by the falling pylon.

This is deja vu somberly thought Kheren, recalling his very first day on the bridge of the Lotus. Then, acting Captain Felez was conducting a wargame simulation, made him his exec for the simulation and ended up "dead" to go answerinf a call from Starfleet in his ready room, leaving the freshly-minted Andorian Ensign in command to finish up the exercise.

And it hadn't gone all that well.

But this is not a simulation this time. This time, it's for real. Lives are at stakes. Real lives may have been lost...

Squaring his broad shoulders to dissipate the slight trembling of his heart from pulsing through his voice, Kheren calmly ordered through his combadge:

" Lieutenant Cheonghi, report to the bridge's ops station. "

At that moment, the ship's intercom whistled:

" Sickbay to bridge. "

Kheren took a full unbreathed three seconds before answering:

" Go ahead Doc. "

Another three seconds of silence stretched before the smooth voice of the Deltan came back:

" Bridge... Lieutenant Commander... Captain Froud... is dead. "

The sorrow in the voice rode on the long silence that gripped the entire command center and seemed to stretch over the entire ship like a falling shadow.

Even the Andorian felt the coldness.

He sacrificed himself to save us... he recalled in his mind. he was still feeling in the middle of his broad back the heat of the Human's palm brutally pushing him out of harm's way. *And he didn't even like me...*

Kheren felt humbled by the last act of his late captain: the act of a true Starfleet officer, one Kevin Froud had been up to his very last breath.

But there was no time for mourning; other lives were now in dire peril... and it was up to him now.

Finally finding back his voice, the Andorian stretched up, hands clasped at the small of his back and said in a cold, even tone:

" Thank you Doctor. You will perform the required autopsy for the Board of Inquiry after our mission is completed. Report back to the bridge to supervise the rescue operations. Bridge out."

Kheren let again the silence permeate the ship for a moment before going to the Doctor's command chair, opening a shipwide channel and patching it through the entire Starbase. Again, he waited a few seconds, took back his formal stance, and then spoke in a voice firmer and calmer than he felt:

" All hands, this is Lieutenant Commander Kheren: an accident occurred on the bridge, claiming the life of Captain Kevin Froud, ship's commander. Captain Froud gave his life while performing his duty, sacrificing his own life to save those of Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth, Lieutenant Kelsey Alther, Lieutenant Roberta Marcus and mine. He shall be remembered as the finest example of what is a Starfleet officer, an example we shall now follow in our own assigned rescue mission."

He made a pause to let the words find the hearts of everyone, then finished:

" All assigned officers, report to your station at once. By order of Starfleet and Lotus Fleet Command, I am now assuming command of this vessel."

CHAPTER 2 : TO BOLDLY GO

O'Conner mumbled angrily to himself as he stood in an empty turbolift. He never did like the press to begin with, but he had spend the last ten minutes trying to calm down nearly two dozen angry press members. Now, if he had known about the captain's condition or what had happened on the bridge, he wouldn't have been so worked up about such trivial details.

As the turbolift stopped and it's doors opened with a swoosh, he mumbled. "I hate the press." Just as Lieutenant Commander Kheren began his speech to the crew.

After Kheren's speech, O'Conner lightly frowned to himself about his behavior and then quietly took up the operation position. He quickly got an overview of the status of the ship.

"All departments reporting ready, Captain Kheren."

Captain Kheren...

It sounded so odd in the Andorian' antennae. Last time he had heard it was over twenty Earth years ago, when he was assigned to command the Andorian flagship Kumari at the end of his two decades of service in the Imperial Guard, the local defense fleet of his homeworld.

But that was almost in another life... and nobody had needed to die for it.

Kheren hadn't moved from the spot in front of where had been the captain's chair. He had gruffly dismissed the damage repair crew from the bridge, not allowing them to replace the command seat.

That was Captain *Froud's* chair... He was just assuming the interim out of expediency during an emergency.

So... he would stand... until it would be over.

He could *stand-in* for the Captain. That was his job in the first place. But replace him? As in: make *his* the command chair? Being a Starfleet captain was something else entirely than commanding a border patrol warship.

And the Artemis was not just a mere warship or even a spaceship: it was a *starship*.

And , for *now*, and obviously *only* for now, she was *his* sole responsibility: her and her entire crew.

He noticed immediately the confusion in the Ops officer of the Artemis, looking at the stations; the man was obviously still unfamiliar with the Ambassador class bridge and hadn't taken the time to study it properly.

Captain Froud may have been right after all thought the Andorian bitterly.

But he did not voice his doubts; he could not... not anymore. And he could not say anything that would embarrass a ranking officer in front of subordinates, especially when an emergency was upon them. Instead, he simply ordered:

" Lieutenant Commander O'Conner: since you are the highest ranking and most experienced officer on board, you are now acting First Officer."

As if on cue, the turbolift door wooshed open to let in the Edoan Assistant Chief of operations, Lieutenant Cheonghi, shamle forward with his ungainly three-legged gait towards the foremost station.

With a slight nod towards the chair at his right, the Andorian added:

" Take your station, Number One. Get ready to take us out. "

O'Conner glanced back at Kheren and raised his eyebrow as he shoosed the repair team away.

I wonder if he plans on standing there the whole mission, he thought.

"Aye Sir." he nevertheless responded. At the new commanding officer's orders, he nodded and moved to Kheren's old chair. With a few quick taps on the arm control console, he scanned ship reports and said a moment later:

"All sections reporting ready. Only missing our replacement officers, Sir."

Kheren's callused left hand was tightly bunched in a closed fist behind him to keep him from punching the communication panel and scream for the immediate presence of those missing crewmembers.

Standing with one arm in a sling and the other behind his back, straight as the ship's nacelle pylons, the Andorian just nodded, staring straight in front of him as if he could already see the disabled, endangered ship out there, beyond the far walls of the starbase they were still docked in.

He could see besides him the Doctor's chair padd scrolling confirmations of emergency space rescue protocols and resources readiness. In front of him, Ensign Sheeneea's pale blue hands were finishing inputing the coordinates of the Jeanne Mance's signal into the nav computer.

" Course plotted and laid in, Sir. " the Andorian woman reported.

" Docking clamps released, all moorings cleared and priority flight autorization recorded. We are free to navigate. " added the Ops Officer Cheonghi.

Then, still looking ahead, Kheren said between tight lips:

" The very moment those officers are beamed aboard, launch us one-quarter impulse power out of dock; then, maximum warp as soon as we clear spacedoors... even if we have to leave a few of their molecules behind. "

* * *

Elliago Nasaro-Myth, Starfleet doctor and former Chief Medical Officer on two starships before the Artemis, was walking head down towards the turbolift nearest to sickbay. When the door closed, leaving him alone in the upward-shooting cabin, he allowed himself to slump a moment against the wall.

He had lost a Captain while on duty... for the second time.

As soon as he had materialized in sickbay with the horribly mangled body of Captain Froud, he had ordered a stasis field activated around the operating table, even as the monitor had immediately flatlined on all readouts.

Recollection of the genetically degenerating Captain of the USS Spectre, dying on the ship's maiden voyage, had disturbed his mind for a moment. But the horrible sight before him brought him back to the present emergency.

Four minutes... He had had four minutes, much less in fact, before the brain activity in a Human would completely cease and make death irreversible. The life support unit had slid smoothly and quickly over the crushed body of Kevin Froud; but there has been practically no organ recognizable to the medical computer that could have been stimulated; there had been no physical space in the squashed body to provide holographic substitutes; it had took a full minute to connect artificial supports directly to the brain and provide mechanical body functions to sustain it long enough...

But the brain had been as damaged as the rest of the man's anatomy. Parts of it were simply destroyed, others so displaced and deformed by the impact of the falling bulkhead support that it took another full minute to both him and the medical probe just to find what remained of the correct parts to connect to.

Most of them had not even responded to artificial stimuli. For a couple of minutes, Elliago still had tried everything his knowledge and experience could provide; he had even ordered all Deltans of his medical team to apply with him their soothing touch and stimulating pheromones; he had even requested a Betazoid nurse to directly reach into the Captain's mind and revive any sparkle of thought she would find in there. He had gone as far as asking one Vulcan orderly to attempt a mind meld...

Captain Kevin Froud had saved the lives of his bridge officers at the cost of his own; he had even directly saved the Doctor's own life pushing him out of the way to take the whole weight of the falling pylon on himself; and there were hundreds of lives depending on him, out there, on another ship...

But Captain Kevin Froud could not help anyone now, or ever... not even himself.

" Computer... Doctor Nasaro-Myth had finally said: record time of death under my personal identification code: Nasaro-Myth Elliago, Chief medical officer, USS Artemis, Delta Four Blue Cadeuceus. "

Then, he had signaled for the remains to be put in a stasis container for later autopsy and, with a heavy breath, informed the bridge.

As the door to the command center sighed open with the sound of his own sadness, Elliago straightened up slowly and walked with heavy steps to the medical command chair besides which stood the new commanding officer of the Artemis. As he sat down, he could clearly see all the tension raging through the body of the Acting Captain.

The Deltan Doctor immediately released soothing pheromones he knew the oversensitive smell of the Andorian would pick up strongly; and his osmotic circulatory system would diffuse the effects much more deeply and rapidly than for others.

And soon enough, Kheren visibly relaxed under the body odors of the Doctor... but some tension still remained, so deeply concentrated on his life-saving duties the Andorian was; the tunneling effect of his physiology on his mind in times of stress was dampening the effects.

But at least, he would go at them in a calmer mood. It would not be a good thing to have an enraged Andorian in command.

* * *

" Incoming personal transmission from Starfleet Command, Lotus Fleet Division, Starbase 10. " droned the voice of the computer.

The image of the Starfleet Logo, then that of Lotus Fleet, faded to show the face of a stern female human obviously seated in front of the screen of her personal computer; her hands were crossed over one another on her immaculate desk. Her long, jet-black hair was pulled into a tight pony tail that ran down her neck.

"Ensign M'Rall Micheals, thank you for your interest in serving with Lotus Fleet," she said. "I'm Commander Allendros, special assistant to Fleet Captain Kotari.

She stared straight at the large blue eyes of the other on her own screen::

"As you are aware, the recent incursion into Federation space by the Borg has left many commands working to build themselves back up to full strength. Lotus Fleet is no different."

She glanced down at her datapad before crossing her hands sternly across her desk.

"There's been an emergency aboard the USS Artemis," she said. "Therefore, you will be assigned to the Artemis as her Chief Science Officer. You are to report to Captain Kheren as soon as possible. You are also hereby promoted to Lieutenant Junior Grade. I'm sorry we can't be more ceremonial about the promotion, but it is urgent that the Artemis begin her mission immediately. "

"Good luck Lieutenant... Allendros out."

" End of transmission." finally stated the soft voice of the computer.

" Computer, patch me through starbase communication center: request direct line with USS Artemis. "

Moments after settling back into his chair on the bridge of the Artemis, a small flashing light appeared on the Deltan Doctor's console.

"Incoming transmission from Lotus Fleet Command," he said, his voice still low and soft.

"On screen," Kheren said in his normal low, steady voice.

A young, stern human woman appeared on screen. She looked around the bridge for a moment before focusing her steely gray eyes on the Ansorian.

"I wish we were meeting under better circumstances," she said. "I'm Commander Allendros, special assistant to Fleet Captain Kotari. Allow me to offer my condolences to you and your crew for the loss of Captain Froud. I know from past experiences that he could be a very coarse person sometimes, but his heart was always in the right place and he loved the Federation."

She shifted awkwardly in her seat for a moment.

"As for yourself and your ship, *Captain* Kheren; she's yours now; remember the Captain but keep in mind that his would have been a different ship then what yours will be. All command wants is to know that you and your crew did your best."

She had placed a heavy emphasis on the word 'Captain' and had thus made a point to omit any reference to 'acting'.

She looked down at her datapad.

"We are immediately transferring aboard an officer recently assigned to us here, Lieutenant Junior Grade M'Rall Micheals," she said. "Her record, while short, shows that she's more then capable of supporting your crew in this time of need."

She glanced down at the PADD again and shook her head.

"Unfortunately, we cannot spare an engineer for you at this time, Lieutenant Junior Grade Marksus Sangliar will have to do until your return."

She placed the PADD back onto the table and looked directly at Kheren.

"I know you don't have much to work with, Captain and this is more then we'd usually ask of a brand new crew in your position, But if anyone can bring honor to that ship, it's you and your crew. Fair winds and following seas, Captain. Allendros out."

Captain... How can they make me Captain? Don't they realize I was but a moment ago just a Lieutenant Commander... Barely out of the Academy since...

Kheren's thoughts were a jumble in his head, making his antennae wobble in all directions. He looked a good moment at the screen now back to the image of the Starbase's docking interior. Then, he slowly turned around and looked at the empty space where the captain's chair was still missing.

Don't they know that Captain Froud's death was my responsibility? I was his First officer... I was responsible for him... and now...

"Sir: your new rank and assignment are now confirmed by Starfleet Command, Lotus Fleet Division. You may input your command codes at any time later. But the ship is yours, Captain."

The soothing voice of the Deltan Doctor besides him brought him out of his darkening mood. It left his mind but it still hardened the corners of his jaw.

He kept silent and pensive again for a moment before finally nodding:

"Looks like your assignment as First Officer is now also confirmed, Mister O'Conner." he simply said without looking at the Human sitting opposite the Chief Medical Officer.

O'Conner nodded lightly to the captain as he was declared First Officer. His eyes seemed to be locked on the little screen on his chair. He was waiting for the signal that, their new science officer was on board.

"Our Science officer is on board, Captain."

Taking a deep breath, the Andorian straightened himself and tapped his combadge:

"Sickbay, this is... the Captain: Mister Sangliar, are you awake?"

Something like a rumble was heard; it was finally recognizable as a grunt when a coarse voice answered:

"Aye... Captain?"

The title sounded halfway between an insult and a disbelieving compliment.

"Mister Sangliar, you are now Chief Engineer of this ship. Get up here and don't make me regret it."

"I already do... Captain Sir." but there was no mistaking the undertones of pride in those gruff words.

"And bring me a chair while you're at it." closed Kheren still unsmiling; but his antennae were finally curving inward as he turned to face the screen once more.

His silver eyes bore into the distant image of the closed spacedoors of the starbase and his cranial appendages were slowly lowering forward with his slowly renewed anger born out of mounting impatience.

Now... this Lieutenant M'Rall Micheals better beam in right now...

After the peculiar exchange between the Captain and the Acting Chief Engineer, a quick smile flashed across O'Conner's face as he pressed a button on the screen:

"Our new Chief of Science is aboard, Captain."

"Lieutenant Sheeneea: take us out." He ordered as the large spacedock doors began to open in front of them, clearing the way to their future ahead of them.

"Yes, Sir" The Andorian officer replied quickly. Under her quick fingers, the ship was truly a spaceship once again, its impulse engines and thrusters roared to life. The ship headed towards the opening the spacedoor, seemingly eager to explore the galaxy once more.

* * *

M'Rall had finally finished appearing on the transporter dais as her hearing picked up

" ... completed, Sir. She's aboard"

M'Rall's hearing then caught something; perhaps it was the com system.

"Send her to the bridge immediately" replied a voice.

To M'Rall's hearing, it sounded angry; something was certainly up. Whatever it was, she was unsure.

The scent in the room was giving off something; the air was recycled, but there was still something in the air all the same. Shaking the moment off, she padded down off the dais.

Unlike most Caitians, M'Rall wore boots; she looked to all intents and purposes fully Caitian. However she was also a hybrid, that being Half Caitian and Half human. She had been brought up as most other Caitians but had also included the heritage from Earth into her schooling.

"Welcome aboard Lieutenant. Please report to the captain immediately. He's on Olympus... I mean, the bridge."

As the Chief science officer padded away, she raised an eyebrow; such comments had not gone down well at the Academy. Moving towards the turbolift, the Caitian put out her right arm and pressed the system to call the turbolift.

The turbolift door opened with a long hiss that seemed to be much louder for some reason. As she stepped into turbolift car she looked around.

"Bridge"

She had already noticed the alert bars were flashing yellow: yellow alert was normally designated a ship-wide state of increased preparedness for possible crisis situations. And it was unheard of while a ship was docked in a starbase.

She sighed softly.

"Not the best way to start a tour of duty."

As the turbolift opened on the Bridge, she was not ready to see the scene of destruction that had swept the command center of the vessel. The final effects of a site to site beam out had left a tang of ozone in the air.

"Chief Science Officer M'Rall Micheals, reporting for duty, Sir"

At that moment, outside, The blue concavity of the USS Artemis main deflector dish flared up as the immense spacedoors of Starbase 10 finished sliding open. Almost at the same instant, the oblong warp nacelles of the starship also lighted up, as if the vessel was some great beast awakening.

Then, faster than allowed by regulations or even common sense, the massive ship slid forward and out from the bowels of the titanic space station at six percent the speed of light, crossing beyond the miles-long radius of the entire starbase in barely a couple of seconds.

And as soon as her graceful frame flew outside in open space, the nacelles flared up even brighter and the USS Artemis seemed for a moment to stretch itself towards a distant flare, before disappearing in a blinding flash of light.

" Warp 9.2, Sir. " then confirmed the Andorian woman from navigation. " ETA with point of origin of distress call: 5.3 hours. "

" Thank you Ensign Sheeneea." acknowledged the new captain of the Artemis. Then he shifted his gaze clockwise around the bridge, first towards Doctor Nasaro-Myth sitting again in his Medical and Counselling Command Chair, where communications were centralized:

" Can we hail them, Doctor? "

" No, Sir." answered the Deltan after a few tries. " All we get is their disaster beacon. "

" Send a message that we are coming, Doc. Maybe *they* can still hear us. "

He then stared at the Edoan at the forefront :

" Lieutenant Cheonghi, rationalize all ship systems to the best of your abilities to provide more power to propulsion. Evacuate, shut down and depressurize non-essential decks if you have to. "

" Aye, Sir. " Answered the six-limbed ops officer, already activating several system checks at once on his multipurpose console.

Then, Kheren looked at the Chief of Security:

" Lieutenant Alther: you will start immediately an investigation as to the cause of the... accident... that happened on the bridge. Lieutenant M'Rall Micheals may assist you with the help of the science department if you require it. You have four hours to complete it and bring your findings to me in the ready room. It will be the most important part of my report for the board of inquiry when we get back to Starbase 10.. "

Kelsey nodded as Kheren told it to do a report :

"I'll get on it right now" the androgyn said as it cracked its neck.

Looking one more time at the rest of the bridge crew after the acknowledgement of the Kalthurian androgyn, the Andorian simply finished saying:

" Lieutenant Micheals, come with me. The bridge is yours, Number One. "

All the time she had been on the bridge, he hadn't even acknowledged the Caitan's presence... until now. And now, he sternly invited her as he walked to the left set of sliding doors leading to the captain's workroom.

Kheren was not even aware if she was following or not; not just because his perceptions from behind were so limited; he was already thinking about the report he had to write for the official Starfleet investigation into the death of his own commanding officer...

While he had been on duty.

"Lovely start to a mission" muttered Kelsey Alther to itself, sitting down and starting examining the bridge by going over the damaged section, waiting for M'rall Micheals to finish her meeting with Kheren.

The turbolift doors to the bridge opened with a whoosh and all that was seen inside was a big chair and what looked like a bag of metal on top of it. Slowly, behind the chair, the small yet rough hands of the Artemis' new Chief Engineer came into view. Smaller than the average Human, the Tellarite was obviously having a tough time moving the surprisingly massive chair by himself, but aggravated that everyone seemed too busy to notice his struggles and too prideful to openly ask for help.

No no don't mind me I got this all by myself lazy sons of...

Lieutenant Junior Grade Sangliar was beyond frustrated.

"I have your chair, Sir..." he started in a gruff voice and cutting off his own words when he looked up only to realize that the new Captain was not even on the bridge.

Figures; not even a day on the job and he is already missing. Glad to see Andorians haven't changed much.

What could almost be described as a chuckle comes out of the grizzled Tellarite. Looking directly at Lieutenant Commander O'Conner, Sangliar spoke again:

"I have the Captain's chair as requested; don't suppose you kids mind if I actually install the damn thing?"

The tall ginger-haired human smiled as the bearded Tellarite made his way on to the bridge.

"What took you so long? Not smart enough to get some crewmen to help you I see..."

Sangliar cut him short, grumbling:

"Great, I will only be a few minutes" and before even waiting for a response, the Artemis' new Chief Engineer dragged the chair and brackets to the space where the old chair used to be.

Damn this might be harder than I thought.

Pulling off his tool belt and flipping down a welder's mask, Sangliar took out a small plasma torch adjusted the bright blue flame coming from and got to work in a hail of sparks.

Cutting away pieces of scrap and welding in the new mounted bracket within a matter of minutes, the hole where the old chair used to be looked brand new. Picking up the new chair, the Tellarite struggled, adjusted his shirt around his belly, and struggled again, this time lifting the chair and placing it firmly into the bracket that he just installed.

As the acting Chief Engineer installed the chair, O'Conner looked over the bridge.

Not the best design... but it should work... he thought before spotting the orange-skinned Lieutenant Cheonghi nearly hiding behind his chair, clearly not enjoying being in the front of everyone. O'Conner just smiled lightly and shook his head and his eyes moved to Lieutenant Junior Grade Sheeneea. The tallish, almost teal-colored Andorian Shen worked quietly and silently on the flight ops console, keeping an eye on the engines readouts.

Then he glanced over to Lieutenant Alther. He sighed lightly and thought to himself about how he would need to keep her in check. He still didn't know if that blue-skinned Lieutenant was crazy, had a troubled past, or was just reckless.

As he pondered that, the Tellarite engineer finished his repairs.

Look at that old man, good as new. Not exactly the first thing I wanted to do as a new interim Chief Engineer, but good work is good work.

Trying not to be noticed, Lieutenant Sangliar looked around the room to see if anyone had looked at the new chair. After getting no responses, he kneeled to his tool bag and packed up his things. Now standing his full four feet tall, he walked to Lieutenant Commander O'Conner and nodded.

"New First Officer eh?... well good luck with that."

Walking to the turbolift door, the engineer looked back at O'Conner and winked. Not a normal wink, but the kind of wink only a grizzled old man could give. It was the wink that said: I don't yet like you kid, but I've got your back.

Sangliar knew his message was received and with what almost looked like a smile he entered the turbolift and left the bridge.

"Took you long enough." O'Conner told the Tellarite as he entered the Turbolift.

Kelsey Alther sat at the tactical station, finishing up the investigation report while waiting for M'Rall to check something... when came a light sigh from someone.

Kelsey's curiosity was piqued and turned its head slightly, looking to the side at O'Conner. The androgyn quickly turned its head back to the console as a smile creeped up along its mouth. The tactical officer wasn't sure if it was the fact that O'Conner was sighing or that the captain, who had been an absolute ass, had been crushed... but the androgyn felt at peace, much less stressed than ever since coming aboard.

Seems I get to play some more "Confuse the O'Conner" the Kalthurian thought.

His personality grinded against Alther's, but the androgyn dealt with it better than it would normally have, like the time they both were on the Spectre.

Instead of resorting to anything physical, Kelsey would confuse him with personality quirks.

Guess that's what happens when you stuff around when the Borg attacks Kelsey Alther's eyes widened for a second, realizing what it had thought.

"So that's why I dislike him so much" Kelsey muttered, recounting the events of the Borg invasion.

A soft whine suddenly was heard all across the ship; one all experienced crewmen recognized instantly when aboard a warp-moving vessel:

"Commander O'Conner," voiced Ensign Sheeneea from helm without turning her eyes and antennae towards the command section: "we are accelerating... warp 9.3... 4... 5... leveling at warp 9.6, Sir."

"Engine output now at 102%, Sir." added Cheonghi from Ops, keeping his own bald, orange-skinned head lowered to his own multiconsole. "But we can maintain that speed for about nine hours at most."

As if to emphasise the point, a small tremor shook the entire starship as it leveled to its new speed.

From the spare wall console, now acting as the Engineering station, the blonde Chief Technician Lieutenant Junior Grade Patricia Blakely turned her pale-skinned head forward and explained:

"Sir, Chief Jackson has been working with Warp Specialist Cherenko, Propulsion Engineer Baoule and Intermix Expert Lorio well before launch to improve ship's performance. Obviously Chief Sangliar completed the work to comply with Captain Kheren's wishes."

"This will shave off half an hour from our rendez-vous estimate, Commander." confirmed the tall Andorian Shen at helm with obvious satisfaction despite her frozen blue features

Back down in engineering, tapping away at the main system console, Lieutenant Junior Grade Sangliar watched as the meter on the screen increased: 101.1, 101.2, 101.3... Finally stopping at 102.1

"Only one hundred and two percent, dammit we can do better than that. Cherenko, I want you to continue routing the power through the secondary converters. Lorio, I want you to use the auxiliary intermix converters looped together to stabilize the flow."

Looking up again, Sangliar watched the power indicator with anticipation. Waiting, waiting.... 102.11

"Well that was anticlimactic. Last time I trust this rusted piece of..."

Being cut off by a beeping sound, Sangliar saw an overtemp alarm on the console. Pointing at the two crewmen working the console behind him, Sangliar yelled.

"Report!"

"Sir, the plasma is overheating and we are getting an overtemp alarm on the coolant for the intermatrix converters."

Rubbing his gruff Tellarite beard. Sangliar clenched his fist and shook it at seemingly nothing. Crewman Baoule spoke while switching the alarm to quiet the annoying beep.

"Sir, if we can't drop the temperature of the overheating coolant, it will fry two isolinear matrix all together."

"Thank you Mister Baoule, maybe next time your report will include something I don't know"

Well this is awkward. Sangliar thought.

Having to make the situation less awkward after realizing that his pointing directly straight meant that he was pointing at the crotch of the much taller Crewman Baoule, the gruff Tellarite looked up, realigned his pointing finger, and continued to speak.

"Reroute auxiliary power from the forward stabilizers to the secondary stabilizers. That should drop the temperature."

Watching as the temperature alarms silenced, Sangliar was surprised to see the flow alarms turn to amber.

But that means...

"Mister Baoule, I want to try something different. Different is ok with you, right?"

"Yes Sir." answered the tall, black-skinned bald man.

"Notice that, when the coolant overheated, the flow increased. If we can use the stabilizers to regulate the coolant temperature instead of just lowering it, we can increase it during the forward flow and decrease it during the return. This should... oh come on, even you morons should get where I am going with this."

Watching the screen, Sangliar hoped his trick would work as a jolt shook the ship slightly.

"Here we go. Come on you old rusted bucket of..."

The jolt subsided and the condition meter on the screen ticked green. 102.11, 102.5, 102.8, 103.4, 104.1, 104.6...

Tapping his combadge after the indicator finally stabilized after a time, Lieutenant Junior Grade Sangliar spoke with a fully-toothed grin through his thick dark beard:

"Bridge, this is engineering. We have engine output at one hundred and seven percent, she is holding, but I am afraid this old man can't give you much more than that. We are going to start work on the tractor beams now, but the extra engine capacity should give us a bit more pull. Any other miracles you need for now?"

"Confirmed, Sir." answered Lieutenant Sheeneea at the helm, her antennae curving in obvious satisfaction. "We remain stable at warp 9.6 but three hours have been added to our effective duration at this velocity."

"Improved output will allow supplementary tractor power from modified phasers without any strain on the other systems, Commander." then added Cheonghi, turning his orange hard-skinned head back at his ship operations displays. "All EPS conduits diagnostics show green despite the power overflow."

"I hope so... They are *all* brand new." recalled the Andorian pilot dryly.

The first officer tapped his comm. "Well if your up to bending the rules of physics some more, we could use better long range sensors. At this speed we will be on top of them before we can see anything."

O'Conner leaned back against his chair as he looked around the room before Lieutenant junior grade Sangliar voice came over head.

"I'll be in Engineering to consolidate our riggings. And I'll send damage control teams to perform level 2 diagnostics on all EPS conduits and brace them against any further possible overload. Sangliar out."

As the Artemis flew to the rescue of the USS Jeanne Mance, Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth used his experimental Medical Command Chair to the fullest, preparing everything for the upcoming emergency.

Communications were centralized on his station instead of the usual tactical one, thus freeing the tactical officer to concentrate fully on actual security and combat duties. This was an option former First Officer Kheren insisted upon but never had time to report to the late Captain Froud. "No time in a crisis to play dispatcher as the ship is locked in combat" he had told him from his own past experience as Chief of security aboard the USS Lotus.

Elliago readily agreed: the ship's Counsellor was best suited to both negotiate with enemies and listen to allies, inform Starfleet and calm the crew through both internal and external channels... and report everything relevant to the Captain.

Quite practical and efficient estimated the Deltan Doctor, as he doubled himself as Chief Counsellor.

And even more so now that he had this Medical Command Chair on the bridge, the first one in Starfleet. Instead of running around in sickbay, sharing his anxiety with the medical team while waiting for the expected calamity to be dumped on them, he was now ahead of things: he could receive all relevant information immediately with the Science department, be part of Command's decisions and instantly coordinate with Security, Ops and Engineering in all emergency efforts. Now, he was able to react and adapt as fast as the bridge itself and ensure the proper flow of information both throughout the ship and with the outside universe.

And the flow of emotions too he smiled inwardly. As a Deltan, his pheromones would, even at the heart of a crisis, help keep the bridge officers steadier than any other crew in Starfleet. *Not a bad thing, especially with an Andorian captain... especially THIS Andorian captain.*

Elliago was quite familiar with the "tunneling effect" of Andorian physiology and the high-swinging emotional state of Andorian psychology. But he was also familiar with *this* Andorian captain's peculiar physiology and psychology. The Doctor was glad he could keep an eye directly on him, with the pressure of commanding an untested ship and crew suddenly and so soon thrust upon him, piling up over the recent death of his captain before his very eyes, his own injuries and the current crisis.

Kheren was like an ancient atomic reactor: a nuclear explosion only contained by the concrete walls of unforgiving self-discipline and the heavy water of his own iron will... The Deltan's very presence would hopefully provide the lead bars to further control it...

Hopefully.

But he was not sitting on the bridge just to babysit the commanding officer and the bridge crew; there was a whole ship to attend to. And from here, he could relieve the captain from the pressure of managing emergency protocol details:

" Sickbay, he called through the ship's internal channel, ready all one hundred Stasis units stored for heavy casualty scenarios, and prepare available spare parts to built others in case the situation is catastrophic aboard the Jeanne Mance. Configure some lifepods as isolation units if current facilities aren't enough. "

" Understood, Doctor. " answered a female voice as soft and poised as his own; it was the mesmerizing voice of Surgeon Sheelya Osaro-Lyth, another Deltan and his own "Number One" in the medical department. "The recreation deck and lounge on deck 15 and the VIP-guest quarters on deck 2 will be able to serve as emergency intensive care wards, within 30 minutes with maximum engineering support. Medical teams are moving at all transporter rooms and shuttle bays. "

From the tactical station, Kelsey Alther let a smile creep upon both lips.

"Guess it's going to be a strange form of recreation for some if they convert the recreation deck and lounge."

The Kalthurian understood why they were doing it, but the name made Alther smile a bit.

But the Deltan doctor was continuing:

" The shuttlebays have each five mobile hospitals deployable either on the flight deck, or transported to cargobay 2 and 3 for emergency overflow triage centers. " reminded Nasaro-Myth then. " One should be enough: prepare Cargo Bay 3, as it also provides for the emergency atmosphere recalibration to type H,K, or L environments for non-humanoid casualties, including biohazard suites like all medical facilities. "

" Acknowledged, Doctor. Emergency isolation forcefields and all holo-emitters for the Emergency Medical Holographic System are being checked and put on alert readiness in all key areas."

" Very good. Doctor Sirris, are we ready also to treat shock and trauma from any of the survivors? "

He was answered by another female voice, this one he recognized as that of his Betazoid Chief psychiatrist, Lieutenant Junior Grade Marleeneea Sirris:

" Both isolation unit and intensive care units are also ready in case a crewmember suffers a psychotic episode. The brig is also prepared for the gravest cases if there is no other room available and if they represent a threat to ship and crew."

" Well done, people. Complete preparedness and stand ready. " concluded Elliago, closing the channel.

Without a pause but with a confident smile, he then addressed the new First officer sitting besides him:

" Lieutenant Commander O'Conner; regarding Starfleet Policy about Medical Emergency Operations: I know you are aware that at least forty percent of the crew are to be cross-trained as emergency medical technicians: triage specialists, medics, and other emergency medical functions with non-medical emergency operations in engineering or tactical departments..."

He punched in some references on his armchair padd for the other to see:

" Regulations dictate they should be trained and tested every twelve months, every six months for assigned medical personnel... But, even if your predecessor, now our captain, told me to standardize both testings to six, I did not yet test any of them. "

" We did leave rather in a hurry... " interjected helm officer Sheeneea as if talking to herself, her antennae and eyes straight at the viewing screen.

Michael O'Conner looked over to Elliago as he gave orders, raising an eyebrow.

"That's a bit excessive, Doctor but..."

O'Conner paused a moment and tapped a few times on his console. With a small smile, O'Conner tapped his combadge.

"Lieutenant Commander O'Conner to Ensign Jameson"

"Aye, Sir." Came back a Scottish accent.

"Help the medical teams clear room in cargo bays 1 and 3."

"Oi, will do boss."

The new First Officer turned back Elliago.

"You can use Cargo bays 1 and 3 for overflow. The medical supplies are in cargo bay 1. I would rather not have the wounded in mess areas if this is a medical emergency."

From the forward console, Ops officer Cheonghi turned partly around to say:

" May I remind the First Officer that the use of the VIP quarters and recreation areas for medical emergency is standard procedure for this class of vessel? Those facilities are certainly not as essential as cargo areas when salvaging a damaged ship and her crew, Sir. "

As his two lateral hands were still working on dispatching resources in pre-programmed simulated operations expected to occur during a space rescue, the Edoan's third hand punched up on the main viewer the schematics of the distressed vessel he had been studying. He turned his bald orange head back to the viewing screen to add:

" As you can see, Sir, the Jeanne Mance's crew complement is of 320 officers and crew and we do not know yet how many refugees they have on board. It's an old transport-tug Mark VIIC, much like the old style Miranda class, with a possible train of 200 meters long pods attached under it; her cargo of medical supplies and ship spare parts is vital to Starbase 10. We might need all of our available space to bring it back if it is still salvageable and the ship is not. "

O'Conner turned to his ops officer:

"I know that, Lieutenant. May I remind you that our guest and VIP quarters are only meant to hold an additional 100 people even at triple occupancy we would not have them room for the whole crew and officers, and any refugees they have. "

Michael took time to speak calmly and not too harshly to the Ops officer: Edoans were a shy race, and addressing them too brusquely, even trained Starfleet officers like him, would add undue stress in an already way too much stressful a day. He was even feeling the pressure himself. For a ship to run smoothly, most of all the crew must do too...

And that was *his* job now.

" Also, he then went on in a calm, composed voice, we have not heard anything from the Jeanne Mance, so I am going to assume the worse, which is that there is some type of medical emergency and the crew has been incapacitated and need to be Quarantined. Which can be easily done in the cargo bays, Not to mention if this is true, the doctor and his medics would like to have room to work, which the cargo bay has room for. Once we have the crew sorted out, we can find room for the cargo when we come to it."

" Understood, Sir. Channeling resources and personnel now. " answered Cheonghi, all his hands flying over his console. Then his shrill voice could be heard all over the ship:

" Attention all hands:third shift personnel not affected to specific duties will report to Doctor Osar-Lyth for medical support duties. Second shift unassigned personnel on standby for either medical support or damage control assistance. Cargobay 2:clear out for salvage and retrieval. "

Nodding in agreement with the First officer's assessment, Doctor Nasaro-Myth opened the intercom:

" Sickbay, Nasaro-Myth here: prepare cargo bay 1 and 3 for medical emergency."

Spinning on his tripod base to make his chair swivel completely around, the Edoan asked then:

" Commander O'Conner: with your permission, I will see with engineering if we can amplify tractor beam output. maybe we could tractor in the cargo ship's pods ourselves if they are undamaged and the Jeanne Mance is no longer able to. "

Then, he suddenly jerked his head sideways to look at the tactical chief between them:

" Lieutenant Alther: maybe we could also reconfigure a few phaser arrays to send gravimetric emissions; won't be as powerful as standard tractor beams emitters, certainly not as much as the cargo ship's tugpad, but a few of them could help stabilize and ease the load on our systems."

Kelsey sat in thought for a moment.

"We can do that, but I'd rather hold off on it in case we need those phasers; however it is up to Kheren to decide whether or not to do that." Kelsey Alther said. "Hopefully there will be no need for phasers and we can convert them. "

" *Lieutenant* Alther: of course I didn't mean *all* of them. " half explained, half apologized Cheonghi. " Maybe just the two small ones on the nacelle pylons. Those would be quite enough for the task and provide us with a full coverage of tractoring power with the main and secondary tractor emitters underneath the secondary hull. But you're right, *Lieutenant* Alther: although we can prepare the work immediately if the First officer agrees, indeed it's up to *Captain* Kheren to decide... or presently, up to *Commander* O'Conner to bring it up to his attention. "

"I would have to agree with Lieutenant Alther. Until we know more about the situation, I would rather not reduce our defenses." then commented O'Conner.

Keeping his eyes glued to the viewscreen, the Chief of Ops spoke:

" Begging the First officer's pardon, Sir, but isn't that for the captain to decide? "

The air seemed suddenly colder on the bridge. But, before the silence could become any heavier, Science Assistant Valencia Irkos offered to the man in the central chair:

" Commander, I can reassure you immediately about sensor capacity: the entire sensor dome of the Artemis has been replaced by the same state of the art technology you now find on a brand new Nova class science vessel. As you certainly know, Sir, current sensor signals travel at warp 9.9997; this means that, even at our currently boosted up warp 9.6 speed, we will take slightly over four and a half *hours* to reach what our sensors will report a light year away in four and a half *seconds*."

" I should be able to steer and do evasive in between, Sir. " then commented Sheeneea in a very serious tone. Then again, only Andorians could know when an Andorian was joking or not.

"I know our sensor capacity, Lieutenant. As you know our interim chief engineer is a Tellarite. I can assure you if he wasn't going to work on the sensors, he would be working on something else. So, while four hours to prepare should be more than enough time, if our bearded engineer can bend the law of physics a bit for us and get us more information sooner, I would not be one to complain."

O'Conner, with a small smile, looked over to the blue pair of women and the orange officer seated before him:

"Lastly, I wasn't doubting your *abilities* Lieutenant; nor was I doubting the chief tactical officer to blow stuff up. Just testing the abilities of our interim chief engineer and our engineering crew, as well as doing my duty to keep the captain as well informed as possible.

Kelsey smiled a little out of the corner of one eye.

Blow stuff up? The androgyn did have a habit of making explosions happen; but it was funny that a higher ranking officer would make a remark about that.

Must be from our previous mission Kelsey thought. The thought was interrupted by O'Conner finishing:

Now did you have any other remarks for your XO?"

"No, Sir." answered all voices as one.

The black-skinned Human woman, Valencia Irkos, turned back with a sheepish smile to her scanners, determined to perform up to the obvious high standard of the new First Officer... if his handling of Lieutenant Sangliar was any indication.

At the helm, the Andorian Shen Sheeneea focused herself more intensely on her piloting. She was weary of Human smiles when it came from a superior officer intent on demanding nothing less but the best of even new officers like the junior Chief Engineer. But the challenge was... stimulating.

And, in front of her station, the Edoan Chief of Ops Cheonghi also turned back to his own console, going from bright orange to pale red, his own answering smile full of embarrassment. When he was First officer himself, barely hours ago, newly promoted Captain Kheren had been quite demanding; this new First Officer certainly did it more smoothly... but no less strongly.

Cheonghi applied himself diligently to his work. From Kheren to O'Conner, command on this ship was certainly not to be found lacking... department chiefs, especially new ones like him, had better shape up as fast...

Especially now... with lives in the balance.

"Think you could make yourself ready and activate tactical systems in the same time, Lieutenant?" Sheeneea then threw from the side of her mouth at Kelsey Alther sitting right besides her.

Again, there was no way to tell if she was bantering... or criticizing.

Kelsey simply activated the weapon systems.

"Tactical systems are ready"

Kelsey had long since given up trying to understand Andorians beyond some standard things; bantering, criticizing, joking and all of that had been too much to understand. The androgyn just went with the flow, letting things roll off one's back when it came to Andorians.

Sheeneea sent a sidelong glance towards the tactical side of their common console. She could sense the passion of the tactical Chief in every heartbeat but noticed the deadpan response to her jibe.

Very Andorian...

With this and the blue skin and white hair, the androgyn would indeed have passed for one... except for the absence of antennae.

Sheeneea self-consciously kept her eyes away from her neighbor. With the peculiar look of the Kalthurian race, the lack of antennae was all the more disturbing, almost indecent to the Andorian helm officer.

In fact, Kelsey Alther had been noticed by every Andorian on board.

Even knowing the Lieutenant to be an alien, so obvious with ears each side of the head, they all shuddered each time they looked at Kelsey; they always saw in the Kalthurian the image of a pitifully handicapped Andorian, one that had been blinded, deafened, muted, castrated and disfigured all at once.

Only Andorians could see it that way. And Lieutenant Alther was visibly not suffering any handicap. but with their innate passionate nature prone to tragedy, the natives of Andoria could not help themselves feeling that way.

After all, they were of a dying, doomed race... even so close to Kheren Kalel Th'Ch'Leryll Keth Reiji.

Sheeneea sighed, nodded to the Chief of Tactical's response and keyed in the nav computer all the evasive maneuvers best suited against ships decloaking to attack. Out there, they would be near the borders of both Klingon and Romulan Empires. And, despite all their pride and boasting, both fought the exact same way: hiding before pouncing from behind then running to hide again...

Like all cowards thought Sheeneea in a very typical reaction.

Very Andorian.

Edoans themselves also had no facial muscles whatsoever except around the mouth; and the six-limbed Lieutenant was definitely not smiling. Neither was his tone of voice.

The way he emphasized the proper ranks of everyone with his tone, especially of their superior officers, made Doctor Nasaro-Myth frown deeply however. He was now considering removing himself from the bridge. He too had noticed the lack of proper basic Starfleet etiquette from the part of the Chief of Security.

In fact, that's how it had started on the Spectre.

The Chief medical officer of the Artemis acknowledged with a nod, a smile and a shrug but still looking at O'Conner said:

"With seventy dedicated medical officers on board, I do not think additional personnel should be required. But, nevertheless, we should still prepare for the worse." As Elliago told O'Connor about the cross training, Kelsey spoke up:

"I studied Medical during one of my many times at the Academy, I am quite happy to volunteer" the chief of Security said, looking at Elliago with the same smile from before.

"Thank you Lieutenant, but you'll be much more helpful taking care of any violent outburst from traumatized people during the emergency..."

Doctor Nasaro-Myth smiled warmly at the Kalthurian; but blinking at the blue-skinned officer, he abruptly cut off his pheromonal glands, hoping breathlessly the remaining emanations would not reach Kelsey Alther.

Like the last time.

Elliago already knew well Lieutenant Alther. He had been a direct witness to the aberrant behavior of the Androgyn during the near fatal away team mission they shared onboard the assimilated USS Tempest.

At the time, there was no logical explanation as to why centuries-long, numerous times-serving officer Alther had acted with such blatantly irreverent, overtly emotional, wildly erratic, even mutinous and almost murderous attitude. Starfleet Officer Kelsey Alther had first joined Starfleet in the 22nd Century, serving longer and wider than any one individual in all of Starfleet History, with a rather unremarkable but virtually spotless record in every successive commission undertaken. That, until Elliago and Kelsey both met during the ill-fated maiden voyage of the USS Spectre and the failed rescue of the Akira class sister ship USS Tempest within an asteroid field.

While on Starbase 10 awaiting a new deep space assignment, Nasaro-Myth had been called upon by Starfleet Command to provide medical data about that mission; and Kelsey Alther was one of the prime topics of the inquiry. Fortunately, with centuries of Academy, Starbases and ships routine medical examination reports on the only Kalthurian in Starfleet, Elliago's xenobiology expertise and deep knowledge in Deltan physiology was able to find the best plausible answer to her behavior:

Pheromones.

Asexual despite their definite feminine appearance, Kalthurians had particularly stunted olfactory senses, even more so than Humans; after all, of what use are odors when you do not hunt to find food or a mate? Kalthurians themselves didn't realize it: the naturally blind never wonders about colors... But that didn't mean their metabolism couldn't be affected by it; after all, Humans do not see either infrared or ultraviolet light, but both certainly affect them.

And evidently, so were Kalthurians similarly affected by odors, thus even more so by the powerful Deltan pheromones.

Sexually-minded Humans could be irrevocably scarred emotionally if exposed too much to a Deltan's sexually enticing emanations; the effects on a race of androgyns therefore would be nothing less than devastating... if Alther's behavior was any indication.

And it so happened that research into Kelsey Alther's previous service records showed that the only Kalthurian to ever serve in Starfleet never did so with a Deltan... Until Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth came along on the same away team.

Suddenly, the Medical Command Chair, and a full Deltan medical shift, didn't seem all that much practical to Elliago.

He certainly didn't want the Spectre's former Chief of Security, and now new Chief of Security of the Artemis, to lose control again. Especially now, during a crisis and with a novice captain... an *Andorian* Captain.

* * *

All the while, the Caitan Lieutenant had disappeared following the new commanding officer behind the left door, the one leading through a short corridor to the conference room near the second deck one turbolift and the captain's ready room just on the left side of the access door to the bridge.

The newly appointed captain of the USS Artemis went straight to the desk at the other end of the room. Passing before the row of portraits depicting the prestigious lineage of Froud servicemen, Kheren felt unsure of himself for a moment.

I should not be here... I should not be doing this...

He stopped in front of the desk, head lowered, his valid hand barely resting its fingertips on the polished, dark, translucent surface.

Real glass... So is life...

Then he looked at the empty chair on the other side of the desk.

But... I am the one here now... I am the one that has to do this. How did the ancient samurai warriors of Earth put it? Ah yes: Giri and Ninjo... The eternal inner conflict between duty and desire... The source of all their tragedies... But, am I in conflict... or am I just... afraid?

The Andorian went around and sat in the chair to look back with all four oculars at the Felinoid woman standing behind him.

Taller but much more slender than himself, the lustrous orange fur and luxurious mane, the immense, bright blue eyes, the high swiveling ears, the peculiar digitigrade posture and elegant tail... he could also notice the strength and suppleness of the wiry frame and the way all senses reacted to the faintest stimulus.

Fangs, retractable claws,,, Her people are born warriors... and obviously well educated, if she embraced the Sciences instead of Security he instantly estimated. His own violent, passionate people were not so easily able to break their instinctive mold...

He was still looking straight at her as his left hand called to the desk computer her Starfleet file. He glanced at it and spoke:

" M'Rall Lucy Shimboline Micheals, Lieutenant Junior Grade; Date of birth stardate 53798.9 on Cait, T'vena Province." *Almost twice the standard graduation age* he noticed. " Father James Micheals, Designer, Utopia Planitia Ship Yards, Mars; *Human? She must have been born from an earlier mating of her mother then... there is nothing Human about her... apart from her wearing boots....* All the Caitans he had met, up to Ensign M'rriish of Artemis security, walked barefooted.

But the commanding officer of the Artemis just kept these thoughts to himself and finished:

" Mother M'Ael Micheals, Constuction worker, Cait Starship Drive Yards, Cait. Five siblings: two older: Aran Micheals, M'elena Micheals, two younger: Kara Micheals, Ajan Micheals, one deceased: M'Sel Micheals. " Kheren watched closely her reaction as he finished with her family loss. To his own people, Family was sacred above everything else. How she reacted would say a lot about her people and herself, a lot about her as a starship crewmember and a ranking officer.

M'Rall stood still as Kheren read out her history. She swallowed softly, hoping that he would not notice. The air still seemed odd, probably from the burnt insulation and other materials she had spotted traces of on the bridge near the turbolift door. But it might have come from her own memories...

M'Sel's death had hit the family hard as it had been so unexpected. For Caitians, family and tradition were everything. It had helped to keep their world from tipping over from the enviromental disaster that they had created. The Caitians knew that they had been very close to the brink. Most Caitian technology had been either changed or reinvented to do no damage to the now fragile ecosystem of the homeworld. Cait, or Fressa as it's true name was, had come back quickly, certainly with the terraforming systems the Federation had shared with the feline-like inhabitants. Each embraced the ideals that they shared without many problems.

M'Rall knew little of the Andorian race; she watched with interest. She moved slightly as her tail touched the deck a little.

And now the freshly-minted captain went on:

"Holder of the Ancestral honorary titles of Princess of the blood, Empress of the lands of K'sharn, Brigadier of the Caitian Space Fleet, Knight Commander of the City of K'Shaen." Kheren could appreciate the values of tradition in a people, even when things like those titles might just only be for social show with no real advantages behind them. They certainly meant nothing in Starfleet. Yet again, how Lieutenant M'rall would react to them being stated should reveal a lot about her.

M'Rall shifted slightly as Kheren read her file. It seemed a while ago, someone different. Perhaps the space of ten years had been a long one but there had been things she needed to do. Commitments had been sorted and things had settled down, plus, well, there was that incident with the bombing on Cait. She shivered ever so slightly as she remembered it.

"A question, Lieutenant: you are a full standard decade older than the usual Academy graduate. I suppose this means you have personal skills, education and experiences prior to your involvement in Starfleet; but your record speaks nothing of it... "

"I know, Sir, answered the felinoid with her characteristically purring voice; the first five years were spent in the Caitian starfleet. I rose to the rank of Brigadier. The other five were spent in various places. Four years were spread out in various construction yards. The last year had been mostly quite researching and such... that's when I lost my arm, it's a cybernetic. I lost it from the top of the shoulder in a bomb attack that was targeted at the Klingon ambassador. He wasn't killed though. As for me, five months in regen and physiotherapy."

Kheren's antennae were slowly wobbling; the only outward sign of what he thought and felt.

The artificial limb surprised him, considering standard regenerative medicine could easily give her back her natural arm even had it happened a hundred years before this old Ambassador class starship had been on the drawing board. Technological replacements were unheard of in the Federation because of it, being deemed crude and inefficient... And the Borg didn't help popularizing such a "retrotech" medical approach... And who would not want his or her real arm back?

He didn't pry about it nor why she chose not to go through the entire treatment: that was between her and the Doctor only.

However, he made a mental note to ask later what it meant to be a Brigadier in the Caitian home fleet: like him, she had experience beyond her Starfleet career that could become handy.

At least Starfleet think so he thought, looking at the barely promoted Lieutenant... and at the captain's ready room that was now his.

He quickly glossed over quickly and silently her psychological profile; Kheren always preferred his own judgment during actual duty over those of clinical experts with generic questionnaires and standardized tests. "*Blood shows its true color on fresh snow*" he once had himself taught his duelling students.

But then he spoke again:

" Graduated from Starfleet Academy in Sciences, stardate 86666.8, specialization in cybernetics... *now that might start to explain something*... he thought, but then went on: promoted to Ensign upon graduation. Field promotion to Lieutenant Junior Grade on stardate 86920.1 upon being assigned as Chief Science Officer of the USS Artemis... Previous assignments: none. "

Now, why does all this sound so familiar? inwardly chuckled Kheren mirthlessly.

Captain Froud would have been beside himself if the Lieutenant would have showed herself before him.

But then, he was not captain Froud. So, the Andorian addressed the felinoid woman bluntly:

" Lieutenant, I know how you feel right now: not only am I myself torpedoed to my present duties like you are, but I too was rushed through ranks and responsibilities at warp speed... something many officers have a hard time coping with. Hope *you* can cope with it, because it will not be easy, believe me. "

For a moment, he looked sideways as if talking to himself while he added:

" However, considering the current crew of the Artemis... *including* her new commanding officer... you might fit right in. "

Kheren then leaned forward on his unscathed elbow to say:

" Anyway, we both may be aboard on this assignment only for this emergency... but lives depend on us as we speak and on what this ship will do now. I hope we, and the crew of the Jeanne Mance, can depend on you. "

The Andorian leaned back in the chair, lifting his head respectfully at her; but his eyes were cold, hard slivers of metal:

" Any concerns or questions, Lieutenant? "

" None Sir; if I may be excused, I'll like to take up my station, if I may. "

Funny how these new junior officers think they can decide the end of a meeting with a superior officer nowadays he chuckled inwardly, remembering previous interviews with some other crewmembers, notably Lieutenant DevEm, the originally assigned Chief of Science this Caitan woman was now replacing for this mission.

Maybe it's a Science thing? maybe they think they know so much more and understand things so much better than the rest of us...

But prolonging the interview just to ascertain his authority would be petty and pointless. He had learned everything he wanted to know at this point.

Not to mention that there was an emergency going on...

So, Captain Kheren simply nodded:

" You are now Acting Chief Science Officer of the Artemis. You are expected to have answers when we will have questions, Chief of Science Lieutenant M'Rall Micheals."

The dark-skinned Andorian stood up:

" You have at best five hours to familiarize yourself with our science personnel and facilities. Make the most of it, Lieutenant. Chief of Security Alther may also ask for your assistance in investigating Captain Froud's death... And, once we reach the Jeanne Mance, you may further have to assist our Acting chief Engineer in finding the causes of both accidents. You have your work cut out for you, Lieutenant... Lots of it. "

Suddenly, as if he woke from a daydream, the Andorian lifted his head and looked at her with his silvery eyes wide open. A curious half-smile showed on his thin lips as he said with a warm tone:

" Welcome aboard. "

* * *

Captain's log, stardate 86920.5

From here to Eternity... These are the new voyages of the starship Artemis. In a universe full of wonders and perils, the Stalwarth Guardian of the Federation, once more, reaches out to the edge of the universe... and beyond.

Having cleared spacedock merely over 4 hours ago, the newly refitted and crewed USS Artemis is answering a distress call from the USS Jeanne Mance, a relief ship bound for Starbase 10 with supplies and refugees following the last Borg War of a solar week ago. They experienced severe damage and injuries from an as yet undetermined cause.

The Artemis is on yellow alert and all damage control and medical teams ready. Despite recent events and my own emergency posting in command of this vessel, we are still the only ship ready and able to effectue the rescue... and to find out and possibly face whatever wrecked the Jeanne Mance.

Personal log, stardate: 86920.6

Tragic circumstances has entrusted the captaincy of the USS Artemis into my hands. But I have a

hard time accepting it. As First officer, was I responsible for Captain Kevin Froud's death as he was just about to take command? As her Captain, will I fail to face the burden of that command? And if so, be it one or the other, or both, will I see this first mission of the resuscitated Artemis as my last one as a Starfleet officer?

This resurrected ship was meant to launch as a symbol of the Federation's triumph and resiliency, as a symbol of faith and hope... But now, this symbol is tainted with blood. And there is a rescue to perform... with an incomplete, untested crew that will have to be tempered in fire. There will be a Board of Inquiry following all this... and it will be all blood and fire .

And I, as captain of the Artemis, will stand before the storm.

Kheren took the new uniform out of the replicator's slot, delicately removing his injured right arm from its sling to slowly put it on. It looked exactly like his previous one... except for two more solid pips on the collar. But despite their small size, they weighted at least as much as the whole starship on his soul.

And to his eyes, their golden luster was tainted with the red of Human blood.

For a moment, the new captain of the Artemis looked in the narrow, star-streaked window at his reflection without really seeing it. His inner eye was still too much blurred with the last, horrible vision of he who wore it before him, he who saved the life of someone he despized at the cost of his own.

Kheren still felt the warmth of Captain Froud's palm on his back, and of his last words in his heart.

Yet, his heart still felt cold as ice.

Could I ever be that much of a Starfleet officer when my own time will come? he wondered, looking at himself in the new uniform.

It has been four hours now since he had talked with Lieutenant M'Rall, the last living soul he had addressed. In the semi-darkness of the empty ready room, it had taken him a long time before he dared remove the gallery of Froud family portraits off the wall, with a reverence that made the large office feel like a mausoleum... and he like a tomb robber.

He didn't like that feeling.

It had taken almost as long for him to finally sit in the chair behind the wide desk, and again as long to eventually activate the computer terminal and properly confirm command, access files and orders, finishing with the first entry log of the newly recommissioned starship, He did all this with a solemnity that made the place feel like a throne room... and he like an usurper.

He didn't like that feeling either.

But, because his own command codes had triggered the deadly trap that killed him, Froud's command status had never been officially acknowledged by the ship's computer. It was actually still under those of the refit coordinator, the former First officer, now her captain. Sealing them now as his own command codes felt horribly ominous to the Andorian, as if he was but a figure in some ancient prophecy.

He didn't like *that* feeling at all.

Yet, he had to do it all. Now, like it or not, for better or worse, he was the captain.

And so, he finally got down to it all... but on his own terms now. His own command codes were recorded, but in his native Graalen; let's see any future saboteur try to decode, let alone implement anything without the ultrasonic syllables of the Andorian language!

Then for the next couple of hours, Kheren had accessed new files, orders and regulations now declassified according to his new rank. Some of the things he found there were pretty much expected... but a few were downright astounding, if not simply frightening! In particular, the Omega Directive: it was a General Order, and yet, the entire data and protocol were classified to captain rank and above only... Order, data and

protocol regarding a monstrosly devastating molecule, made by Federation researchers centuries ago... and maybe others... like the Borg once... Or rather, was it, like some speculated, the very thing that turned an entire sentient species into ravenous, wandering, rampaging cyborgs?

Such terrible power...

It seemed the burden of command went widely beyond the confines of one's starship. Not anything to make him feel any better at the moment...

But now, there were duties to perform; new duties: his duties. The crew were already hard at work with the rescue operation underway. Time for him to do his own part.

So, as his first duty to ship and Starfleet, he started by reviewing Lieutenant Alther's investigation report on Captain Kevin Froud's death.

Because the ship presumed destroyed decades ago had been found and returned by the Cardassians themselves from an abandoned asteroid base, it had been expected to be full of booby traps left by the former enemies of the Federation. And indeed many were found, even if most were now obsolete and offline. But, despite diligent search by Starfleet Intelligence and Starbase 10 security, then by the ship's own complement under Alther's personal direction, one last half a century old Cardassian booby trap was never found on board the salvaged USS Artemis; the last remnant of a bygone war finally claimed its last victim when Captain Kevin Froud activated his command codes.

Forensics research confirmed that the trap was a hidden set of subroutines tied up to the activation of such command codes from the Captain's chair.

It had been programmed to overflow bridge plasma conduits at key points of the structure, causing a power build up that would eventually rupture the conduits and collapse all the bridge's support beams onto themselves, instantly crushing the entire command center and officers during flight and flooding the area with burning plasma.

The resulting destruction would cripple the ship, kill key officers and allow either easy boarding and take over... or have the loss dismissed as an accident, possibly crippling part of the fleet with a recall of the era's main starship class to investigate a potential design or construction fault.

The trap however, was now over half a century old.... and the extensive refit of the ship had altered both the mechanisms and the subroutines of the trap so that the overflow became concentrated in only one plasma connexion... causing instant overload and collapse of only one hull support... right across the command well.

The quarter-ton pylon caused impact injuries to junior Chief engineering officer Lieutenant Sangliar and Chief helmsman Lieutenant Roberta Marcus, while causing fatal crushing injuries to Captain Kevin Froud. First officer Kheren and Chief Medical Officer Elliago Nasaro-Myth escaped a similar fate for two reasons: the addition of their respective command chair to the original bridge layout shielded them from the plasma, but even more through the last heroic act of their commanding officer as he pushed them both out of the way.

Stumbling Lieutenant Commander Kheren's own body covered Tactical and Security chief Lieutenant Kelsey Alther from serious injury while helm officer Markus was not and thus more seriously injured.

Detailed structural study, computer records, schematics of the trap including hidden subroutines and activation sequence and all testimonies were filed with this report from both science and engineering. Judging by this alone, M'Rall and Sangliar had proven excellent replacements for the missing key officers in each department.

Not *everything* had gone bad for this ship after all...

Will I prove to be such a good replacement myself? wondered the Andorian briefly.

Kheren then glanced at the autopsy report of Doctor Nasaro-Myth, confirming the accidental death by catastrophic crushing trauma of Captain Kevin Froud and the inability of modern medical science to either keep him alive, revive him or heal the damage. He didn't need to read all the clinical details of the gruesome death he himself had been a prime witness to. A death he had failed to prevent... He added his own report as First officer to the events, filed it all and the entire event under his own responsibility and transmitted it

himself directly to Starbase 10 for Lotus Fleet Admiralty and Starfleet Command.

Now the Board of Inquiry would have everything to properly evaluate the tragedy. *And more than enough rope to hang me* he thought bitterly with a sigh. *But not the crew, that's what's most important. This ship will go on to fulfill her renewed promises, whoever will be in command now and thereafter.*

Kheren sat silent in the semi-darkness after that, just looking at the streaking stars through the transparency, like so many threads of his life now unraveling... There was no beep at the door nor from his combadge all the long hours he had been alone in this room, the captain's room... his room. Obviously, the ship was ready to face her first challenge and her new First Officer Michael O'Conner had things well in hand.

A good man. O'Conner... He will make a fine captain one day... even if it would be this ship...

His antennae reacted to the suddenly flashing color on his desk padd and his facial eyes focused on the time readout under the blinking warning light.

Kheren stood up, loosened his four-pipped collar and straightened his new uniform. Then he took a deep breath with his massive chest, squaring his wide shoulders and lifting his white-haired, dark-blue skinned head. Calmly, he stepped through the sliding door and took the short corridor away from the second turbolift to the access leading to the bridge. Unconsciously, he still held the shiny blue slingcloth in his left hand as he walked out.

And with all the appearances of a confident commander, Kheren stepped onto the peculiar bridge of the ship... *his* ship.

" Captain on the bridge! "

The solemn announcement by Ensign Sheeneea, nearest to the door that had wooshed open to let him enter, made the Andorian freeze in his tracks... then palm his face.

Don't remind me...

He resumed his walk and tried hard to filter out of his voice the annoyance he felt:

" People, let us avoid pompous protocols until at least my Admiralty, shall we? "

But don't hold your breath, he thought with as much amusement as seriousness... until he recalled how long, or rather how short, it really had took for him from the Academy classroom to the command chair.

From the poopdeck to the gallows shall come even faster tho! he suddenly sobbered up inwardly as he stood at the heart of the bridge, all four oculars straight at the large viewing screen. He instinctively tried to glimpse the distressed ship they were rushing to.

He had selfishly stared at his own fate long enough.

CHAPTER 3 : IT WAS A DARK, STORMY NIGHT

" Captain: we have reached the coordinates of the Jeanne Mance's disaster beacon signal. "

" Bring us out of warp, Ensign Sheeneea. Full impulse. Lieutenant Alther, maintain condition yellow. All stations, full scan, standard search pattern. "

The stars shifted from streaks of lights to luminous points dotting the blackness of space. And the words had barely left Kheren's lips that another, shriller voice rose:

" There she is, Sir! "

On the main viewer, closest to the speaking Lieutenant Cheonghi, there was a distant flash of light, as if one of the distant stars was blinking.

" Magnification. " simply ordered Kheren.

The blinking light blurred and became a precise image filling most of the screen: that of the flattened silhouette of a Starfleet cargo ship lying at an odd angle, plasma leak clouds covering it partly, some flaring fires pulsing here and there on its darkened, pock-marked hull. One of the nacelles was gone, a trail of fiery debris arcing behind the starship now hanging there askew like a beached whale.

" Captain, reported Doctor Nasaro-Myth from the specialized read-outs of his CMO chair, attempting to filter out a subspace signal and a scanner reading... But there is a lot of subspace interference from background radiation. One moment Sir... Captain: I read... lifesigns... sixty-seven in the main hull, most of them faint...and eight more in the first pod. "

Elliago couldn't talk anymore. As a physician, he had already seen his share of death; that of captain Froud was merely hours ago. But in his short Starfleet career, it was the first time he saw it on such a scale. Even during the Borg attack, he had been assigned to one of the secondary sickbays of Starbase 10 and he had seen little action; the battling ships had been taking care of their own and the evacuated station, empty but for its operating personnel, had been left almost unscathed during the whole flash war.

But now, on the main screen, death and destruction were looking back at him with a scarred face as large as a starship.

For a moment, everyone on the bridge also looked silently with him at the wreck of the cargo ship. Kheren, with unconscious steps, came down between the tactical and helm officers to stop right before their jointed console.

Seventy-five... out of two hundred and twenty... and... how many refugees? It took a moment for the new commander of the Artemis to shake off the ominous feeling that gripped his throat, before he could finally ask:

" Were they attacked? "

Kelsey didn't waste time watching the crippled cargo ship.

"Seventy-nine percent of the hull is covered in plasma fire and fifty-seven percent of the hull has impact damage" the Chief read out of the tactical scans. "Captain, I don't think so. The damage is inconsistent with any weaponry I've ever seen and there isn't even a residual weapons signature, which would be still evident if there had been an enemy ship firing."

Kelsey took a breath and finished:

"The warp trail doesn't lead to either Romulan or Klingon space and I can only find the cargo ship's warp trail within a cubic parsec... and there are no other ships in this area. "

Listening to the Kalthurian's estimate, Kheren could only agree silently. His own tactical expertise had already ruled out instinctively the possibility by just looking at the wreck: the damage was too haphazard, too generalized, not concentrated on specific emplacements like engines or combat systems as any deliberate attack would have been.

And sentient hostiles would not have left her adrift in space like that: Klingons would have sent them off to Sto-Vo-Kor, Romulans or Gorns would have towed her away as a prize and pirates or mercenaries like Nausicaans would have picked her up clean of her cargo pods... or even enslave the survivors like Orions are well known to do... Or taken, like Kzintis in the old days... as food.

And if this has been a lure to trap a bigger prize - like the Artemis - the trap would have sprung by now.

But there was one other possibility: a diversion... forcing away from Starbase 10 the only operational starship in the sector to better assault the still war-torn station...

" Doctor, then ordered Kheren, eyes and antennae still fixed at the viewing screen: contact Starbase 10. Inform them we have located the Jeanne Mance and are proceeding with the rescue operation. "

Turning his head partway but still keeping his four oculars at the screen, he then said:

" Engineering, boost subspace signal as much as you can in case of any interference. What is the status of the cargo ship ? "

The doors to the bridge opened with a whoosh as Lieutenant Junior Grade Sangliar entered wearing an equipment belt and carrying a small bag. Hurrying to his console, he relieved Patricia Blakely sitting in his chair

"Sorry I am late, but Engineering and all..."

Suddenly staring up at the view screen, the dark-skinned, dark-haired Tellarite scratched his gruff beard and chuckled dryly.

"Oh is that all? And here I thought this was going to be hard."

Looking over the readouts, he read his console now with an almost sorrowful tone

"Sir the readouts are coming in now. Sensors show that fifty-three percent of the decks are depressurized, the inertial dampeners and gravity plates are offline and structural integrity compromised over half the hull and pods."

Continuing his scan, the gruff Tellarite stroked his beard slightly and continued.

"I am getting no readings from either the warp core or their impulse engines, their recharge reactors are destroyed and the only power I am reading is from the batteries. There are plasma conduits ruptured all

across the ship's structure... which are interfering with scans. I am going to have to boost the sensors."

Scratching at his brow, the acting chief engineer of the Artemis pressed buttons on his console as fast as his tiny hands would let him.

"That should do it. I had to tap power, so don't expect to use the replicators for a few hours I hope everyone had a big lunch"

Continuing the scan, the boosted sensors read through the mass plasma leaks on the ship

"The internal hull seems to be in reasonable shape. There is only minimal damage to many of the internal bulkheads. Based on what little power she has left, I could have life support stabilized in sixty five minutes if you let me run the damage control team. Stable is all you are going to get, Sir. I can get life support stable but it cannot be fully restored, only maintained at minimal levels on the undamaged decks. We can also seal the fissures in the hull in about seventy to eighty minutes, but repressurizing the hull would take several hours. As for the damaged inertial dampeners and artificial gravity, I would say that can be restored at minimal levels in thirty minutes or so, but full restoration will take a complete replacement of the systems at a Starbase."

He took a moment to stare once more at the derelict ship before concluding:

"Sorry to say it, Sir, but, even with a good Damage Control Team and a genius like me, that's the best you're going to get. I am a good engineer not a miracle worker."

" You finally got yourself to the bridge, Chief: that is enough of a miracle in itself. " commented the Andorian captain, not looking at him, but his stony face, even without any movement of his thin lips, gave the definite impression of a smirk.

Sangliar stood, raising his diminutive height from the chair only a few inches as he stood::

"Great I will get right on it. When all that is done I would say give me another hour to charge her batteries from our own power systems. That will give her thrusters and not much else. She won't win a race, but she will get where she is going: that is, inside spacedock once we tow her there."

If she doesn't fall apart and the lousy piece of rubble making me look bad...

"All attitudes aside tho, Sir, that ship is salvageable, but not out here. To get her back to any shape other than junk, we absolutely need to get her to a Starbase."

And so, the engineering report confirmed Kheren's instinct and Alther's tactical assessment.

But still...

There are more things in Heaven and on Earth, Horatio, than you can ever imagine in thy philosophy wrote, centuries ago, the Human sage Shakespeare. The sentence popped up in his mind looking at the wreck.

His thoughts were interrupted when the Andorian helm officer Sheeneea shifted slightly on her swiveling chair to tell her commanding officer:

" Sir, we are approximately one parsec from the Neutral Zone and three parsecs from the borders of the Klingon Empire, well within Federation Space. Even at the maximum speed this class of cargo ship is capable of, it is highly unlikely they could have made such a huge navigational error and violate any of those borders... then drift back that far in after a battle... especially with that much damage. "

" Could they have drifted so far of an encountered anomaly without us being close enough to detect it? " wondered aloud Chief of Ops Cheonghi, also turning in his chair on his tripod lower body to face the rest of the bridge.

" Sensors? " then inquired the captain.

Science Lieutenant Valencia Irksos sighed loudly.

"Sorry Sir. Our long range sensors can't cut through the radiation coming from the Jeanne Mance. And short range sensors couldn't find any anomalies."

Irksos seemed almost ashamed as she told the captain they couldn't find anything.

Minutes earlier, the black woman and the other science officers on the bridge had been working hard to try every what way they could to cut threw the interference, but they couldn't find anything strange out there.

Ensign Dawson has continued to work as the beefed up sensors came on line.
"Wait... I am detecting a wake of residual chroniton and nucleonic emissions."

Irksos quickly turned back, looking a bit shocked. "Chronitons?"

Dawson nodded and quickly work to find the source. "Aye ma'am they seem to dissipate about a light year away."

Kheren looked back with wide eyes at the science station beyond where the handrail had made a crescent behind the command chairs... before it was crushed by fate. He was obviously surprised at not hearing the purring voice of the new Chief Science Officer, M'rall Micheals, when he asked for a sensor report; at least as much as hearing about emissions usually associated with time anomalies.

But before he could inquire about either the Caitan woman or the readouts, Doctor Nasaro-Myth called out besides him:

" They're hailing us, Sir. Lasercomm... the lessons of the Borg War are sticking it seems..."

The former acting First officer of the USS Lotus remembered well how Borg jamming had been circumvented with old style line-of-sight laser signals during Lotus Fleet's heroic stand against their last, final incursion.

The Captain made a single hand gesture towards Elliago and the Deltan punched his console.

The image on the screen shifted to a grainy, pixel-disrupted image of a burning bridge and the sooth-darkened face of a woman in a torn, red uniform. The image faded in and out, but the sound was slightly better despite the deforming echoes and hiss of an obviously makeshift transmitter:

" This... kzzt... Captain Indira Shanankahar of the... kzzt... kzzt... nne Mance. We... kzzt... eived your message, Arte... kzzt... kzzt... Please... kzzt... We have over a hundred dead... kzzt... and refugees... kzzt... aboard. Life support failing, power offline. Kzzt... kzzt... multiple breaches...kzzt... We need immediate assist... kzzt... kzzt... "

" This is... Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis. Hang on Jeanne Mance, help is on the way. " answered the Andorian.

" All transporters ready for emergency evacuation, Sir. " reported Cheonghi. " All shuttles ready to assist, damage control and medical teams standing by. Tractor beams ready to secure and tow the ship itself. "

" What about the cargo pods?"

" We need to either beam their content to cargo bay 2 or modify a few phaser arrays into graviton emitters to tow them along safely with the wrecked ship, Captain. " explained the Edoan. " The first one is a mobile emergency hospital, Sir. "

Kheren nodded and turned towards Michael O'Conner:

" Take charge of the operation, Number One. "

"Aye Sir." O'Conner smiled, quite happy to be able to do something after hours of waiting. He stood up from his chair and looked around the bridge, then paused a moment.

"Sir, I don't think we should engage the tractor beam till the plasma leaks or the structure are contained as they might cause the ship to tear in two or have it drop out of tractor when we are at warp."

So, *my first away team as XO*, he thought before barking orders.

"Doctor, send an officer to transporter room 1 to help Ensign S'Prek deliver your patients in dire need where

you need them, till the interference is contained. I suggest we limit the transporter to emergency only. Also I will need your medical expertise and soothing nature over there. "

" Right behind you Exec. " answered the Deltan. Just as he rose, he opened a channel to sickbay to order:

" Doctor Shledax to cargo bay 1 for triage; Doctor Sirris to cargo bay 3 for supplementing sickbay and Doctor T'Lynn; Doctor Nedaro-Lenn, standby for supplemental evac procedures in shuttlebay 2; all medical assistants to transporter rooms 1 to 6. Emergency transporters 1 to 3, standby. Emergency Medical teams, prepare to board the distressed ship for search and rescue protocols. All medical personnel, be ready for immediate treatment of all types of plasma burns, radiation poisoning, hypothermia, oxygen deprivation and kinetic trauma, protocols A. Doctor Lumquist, report to bridge station. "

With a last quizzical look at Captain Kheren, Elliago went to the open turbolift with a quick step and a professional smile, but not forgetting his portable medkit encased with a phaser within the side of his command chair.

" Mr. Sangliar, if your done making us eat rations, I could use your help on the initial away team." was then ordering Michael O'Conner.

" Lieutenant Alther, hopefully we won't need your skills with a weapon, but better safe than sorry."

Kelsey nodded and followed the First Officer to the turbolift.

The Chief of Security highly doubted to be of that much use, but O'Conner ordered and there was no reason to think even remotely protesting, not from one under JAG scrutiny for sure... And so, the androgyn went without question.

It's good to get off that bridge anyway, Alther thought, looking at the remaining damage markings.

O'Conner had spoken quickly before heading to the turbo-lift to wait for the other officers, as seemingly hundreds of worse case outcomes went through his mind.

The new captain now had a moment to finally notice the brand new chair just installed between the Doctor's seat and that of his First Officer. It was bigger and squarer than the original, even equiped with added speakers to compensate for his unidirectional hearing and a swivel mount allowing him to turn around and face any point of the bridge. It looked nothing less than one of those old 23rd century starship command chairs like they had on the old Constitution class.

With a perplexed frown, the Andorian looked at it, swung it this way and that with his left hand, then dusted it with the sling cloth he had kept all this time in his hand and, finally, sat in it. Trying again its rotating function this way and that, he looked with an appreciative nod at both the perfect view it gave him to any angle of the bridge and at the decidedly modern padd attachments on the new command chair's broad arms.

" Mister Sangliar... finally said Kheren, using the full swiveling option to turn and face the Tellarite just as he stood in the turbolift with the rest of the away team, it pains me to admit it... but I like it. Thank you. "

Looking up at the Andorian Sangliar showed no emotion.

"Oh great, let us install another one based on what everyone wants. Young people are never..."

Just as he turned away with a tough, cold shoulder, the dark Tellarite let a faint smirk cross his face... it was a smile, but you would never hear him admit it.

The new commanding officer of the Artemis was now eager to see how his Executive Officer would handle things. If O'Conner was to be his right hand, he had to know how he did things, especially in a crisis; one like this rescue operation in space.

Despite being pretty new to the job, Kheren was not at all feeling like other green captains clinging to earlier smaller responsibilities, eager to micromanage missions themselves; especially not when there might be something else behind the whole crisis. There was still a lot left unexplained, therefore still potentially dangerous for the rescuing ship too. And so, he found quite relevant to keep himself on top of the overall situation and leave his executive officer with some of the specifics. That is what "exec" meant after all...

And besides, it would say a lot about the man he would have to rely on while he was in command... w

While he was still in command.

And, indeed, and if he read his Doctor right, it already did.

But a starship captain didn't just have one's First officer to worry about:

" Lieutenant Irksos, have our new Science Chief report here and on the double. "

For someone eager to end a meeting to assume her station, she certainly is not so eager to actually work... The Andorian frowned, but without voicing his annoyance. He just sighed and instead added:

" In the meantime, get more data on these emissions... and keep trying to scan the immediate area."

" Aye, captain. "

As a grey-haired, stern-looking Human physician exited the turbolift to reach the CMO chair, he then ordered:

" Doctor Lumquist, keep contact with the away team. I don't want to lose precious seconds trying to find out what's going on if they get into trouble. I want a transporter lock on the damage control party, the medical crew and the away team while they are over there. No telling if or when this wreck might suddenly fall apart under them."

" Establishing lock and monitoring, Sir." confirmed Doctor Lumquist from the CMO chair.

The captain then turned his quadriscopic gaze towards the double station in front of him, following a towering golden silhouette, one that came in with the Human physician, but to take the seat exited by the Kalthurian Security Chief:

" Ensign Tyvya: keep watch with your tactical sensors and maintain yellow alert. Try to assist main sensors... but keep in mind any potential threat from those emissions, what could cause them... or who."

" Aye, Sir. " answered the giant Andorian woman as her fingers started to implement diagnostics and configurations for the shields, the deflectors and the internal forcefields.

" Mister Cheonghi, finally commanded Kheren: implement phaser remodulation protocols needed to secure towing; but stand by on activation until Mister O'Conner confirms it safe; no shark fins knifing the murky waters, but still, we're... standing poultry out here. "

" Sitting ducks, Sir. " gently corrected Ensign Tyvya.

The Edoan nodded as much as to answer his captain as to hide his amused smile and allocated resources and personnel for system conversion, ready to be implemented at the flick of a switch when, and if, confirmation came back from the First Officer.

The turbolift door wooshed open again seconds after the one carrying off the away team closed. Out of the cabin came with the distinctive supple gait of her species the Caitan new chief of science of the Artemis.

"Lieutenant Micheals: you honor us by your presence. Would you mind manning the Science station please?"

" ... Yes, Sir." purred the orange-furred Caitan.

Kheren's voice was light and composed. He spoke not looking at the female felinoid as she went to the wall console behind him. He spoke as if in casual banter. But in fact, it was to better hide his displeasure.

Since day one, the Artemis had a hard time with senior officers: the chief engineer came and went, still unaccounted for when the ship launched; the former chief of science never showed up, trapped by medical complications on his own world; the chief of Ops now has to assume executive duties; even the chief medical officer, also covering for a missing Ship Counsellor, almost didn't make it in time for departure.

And then, the chief of navigation was severely injured...

And the Captain was killed.

Now, they barely got a new head for the science department and she had to be called up directly for duty during a yellow alert and a rescue operation.

The hastily appointed captain of the newest ship of Lotus Fleet was not pleased with his unexpected current command, to say the least.

But then again, as executive officer originally assigned to this ship, *he* had been the one to approve them for his late captain. Thus, the fault was entirely his.

You do with what you have, not with what you wish. The thought erupted into his mind like a calming mantra.

Where had he heard that?

N'Eligahn Etarudbo... remembered Kheren with a calming sigh: at the award ceremony, when all the newly appointed First Officers of the fleet were introduced to one another briefly during promotion. He recalled also having met the Rethian once in a corridor of Starbase 10 when they were both junior officers. Now, newly promoted Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn Etarudbo had been reassigned as exec to the USS Spectre, the ship he had served on since graduating from the Academy.

Enjoy your dedicated crew my friend silently wished the Andorian, thinking of the Spectre's command personnel: the two most honored heroes of the Borg War served onboard the Akira class vessel: Captain Daniel Summers and Doctor Braedon Jori both spearheaded the telepathic takeover operation that made the Borg vulnerable to Starfleet's last stand against their final invasion. And there was Chief Engineer Joey Day Sisko, who's technical expertise had made that takeover possible; and of course the thrice decorated tactician Etarudbo himself.

For a moment, it made Kheren wonder why his current Chief of Security, Kelsey Alther, had wished to part from such a fine ship and such illustrious company. In fact, the Kalthurian had seemed rather close to the Rethian himself during the ceremony.

And Michael O'Conner, for that matter. He had been chief engineer *and* acting First officer on the Spectre, and for some time. But instead of taking up this lofty status officially as he was entitled to, he had applied for the Artemis... and accepted a much lower commissioning. The fact that he ended up exec once onboard was purely circumstantial.

There might be more to the Spectre than could see his antennae.

The other clan's snow always seems whiter they said on Andoria.

The new commanding officer of the Artemis sighed again, thinking of his current predicament... which brought his mind back to his current chief of science behind him.

" Lieutenant Micheals: scan the surrounding area and conduct a thorough astrometric study while the rescue operation is proceeding. I want to know the cause of those abnormal emissions flooding the wreck. "

" Aye, Sir. "

As the Chief of science started calibrating sensors to different search parameters, a voice rose from Kheren's left while he swung his command chair back towards the main viewer:

" Captain, voiced Doctor Lumquist from the CMO chair, the media people are complaining and sending a formal protest about security confining them, err... rudely... in the main mess hall. "

Both cranial appendages of the Captain waved this way and that in short, momentary confusion, then curled inwardly in typical amusement.

Sounds like there is a Caitan at one end and a Tellarite at the other chuckled Kheren to himself, knowing quite well how Security Ensigns Mrrriish and Graalthrii would enforce Starfleet regulations on a mostly Human crowd. Growls on one side and verbal barbs at the other would certainly feel... rude to them.

" And they are demanding access to the command center and to accompany the rescue team aboard the Jeanne Mance. "

" Denied." flatly answered Kheren, his antennae shaking in irritation. Then, taking a deep breath, he added:

" Bridge is off limits to non-authorized personnel or anyone below Starfleet Ensign rank, and there is too much risk involved to allow civilians to go over there. They are in no position to make demands: remind them that Starfleet authority prevails during emergencies involving its own facilities and personnel."

Then, he sighed and said with obvious annoyance:

" Tell them that they can see all the external operations even better than us from the Bow's viewports... And that we will patch them up with our communications with the away team. Signal Doctor Nasaro-Myth to have a portable audiovisual emitter with him... and patch bridge comm to them too. "

That should keep them out of our hair for a while hoped inwardly the Andorian.

He had completely forgotten about the media crew onboard as the rescue and salvage operation went underway. This lapse made his eyes narrow and his antennae flatten on his thick white mane in momentary anger.

The most important duty of a Starfleet officer is to guard the safety of Federation citizens he chastized himself silently. *And that of a Captain is to the safety of his crew.*

He kept these thoughts foremost in his mind as he waited to see the Artemis' shuttle, Arrow 5, on the viewscreen, flying towards the frightening wreck of the disabled cargo ship.

* * *

Once Chief Sangliar made his way in to the turbolift, O'Conner ordered:

"Deck 12."

As the turbolift swooshed down, he addressed both Alther, Doctor Nasaro-Myth and the Tellarite:

"Our job will be to take an initial survey of the ship and to make contact with whoever is left of the command crew to find out what happened."

Hearing the First Officer's command to the turbolift, Elliago cocked an eyebrow and a half-smile at the bearded Human:

" Since you called for the engineering deck, I assume you want to use the Arrows while the other teams beam over. "

Before Michael O'Conner could answer, the Deltan Doctor nodded appreciatively:

" Using the shuttles along with the transporters will speed up the evacuation and salvage operations and provide a solid back up in case of transporter failure. There is indeed some curious subspace interference around here... Well played, Mister O'Conner. Between you and our impetuous captain up there, the Artemis should be ready to face even the fiery wrath of Hades. "

Hades? I do hope we don't have to go there..." O'conner replied with a smile.

Now Doctor Nasaro-Myth gave Michael a full smile... and a very Human wink.

"Well I would like to limit the use of the transporters as the plasma leaks seem to be affecting our sensors. Transporting with out a clear sensor reading is not something I would want to or ask someone else to do.

O'Conner quickly stepped out in to the hallway after the door opened. He answered questions as they came but seemed in a hurry to get to shuttle bay. He knew that time was important and wanted to get to the Jeanne Mance as quick as he could.

As they entered the shuttlebay, they saw a set of shuttles warmed up and ready to go. In front of one them, a young brown haired woman stood in front of it with a big smile.

"Hello Sir! Ready to depart?" She asked cheerfully as she held out a set of tools for the First Officer.

"Yes we are, Maxona." He took the tools like the old friends they were and attached them to his thigh as he entered the shuttle with it's pilot. Michael might be exec now, but he still was, in his heart, an engineer.

"Are the other shuttles ready?"

"Aye, Sir. Lieutenant Yamato is just waiting for orders to launch."

"Very good." He turned to the other officers, with a smile of excitement. "Ready?"

Looking through his bag of tools, Sangliar inventoried what he had been preparing for the task ahead.

"That seems to be everything now. If anything else comes up, I will have to use what I find over there"

Looking around, the Chief Engineer noticed Lieutenant Commander Michael O'Conner looking around nervously and appearing anxious. As the oldest person on the shuttle, Sangliar figured he should motivate the team; but being nice was not exactly his thing.

"Do not worry, Sir, this is a repair mission, so I will take good care of you. You don't have anything to worry about. If you have questions or need anything, just ask."

Before O'Conner could open his mouth, the Tellarite cut him off.

"Unless, of course, you get in my way; then, I will beat you with a plasma torch."

Winking at the Lieutenant Commander, Sangliar laughed to himself. He was impressed with his new XO, but respect is something that will not come easy for old, grizzled Tellarites.

The hatch closed with a slight swoosh. Then as the giant shuttlebay doors opened, they revealed the burning, leaking wreckage of the Jeanne Mance. Lastly, the engines roared to life lifting the shuttle off of the floor and out to the cargo ship and Michael O'Conner first away mission as Executive Officer.

Under Kelsey Alther's deft piloting, the type 8 shuttle rose and flew smoothly from the massive lower hull of the ambassador class starship to move in a graceful arc behind the heavily damaged saucer section of the derelict cargo ship. The single shuttlebay was apparently intact and transponder signal opened the door smoothly to allow them in.

As the soft clunk of landing reverberated all along the shuttle's cabin, Elliago activated the comlink to report:

" Artemis, this is Arrow 5. Away team to proceed to the bridge and then on the upper decks of the Jeanne Mance. "

" Acknowledged Doctor Nasaro-Myth. " answered the slightly garbled voice of Doctor Lumquist. " Please keep a standard tricorder open and linked to us to transmit and record operations over there. "

" Acknowledged. " But It took a moment for the Deltan to understand the unusual request.

Ah... the newspeople. Our joyful Captain must have allowed this to better contain them. I wonder how he will manage when the civilian families of the crew will be on board.

The image of the dour, stern Andorian surrounded by dancing, laughing children brought a smile to the face of Elliago as he took a spare tricorder from the shuttle's supply locker and calibrated its audio-visual feed for short range and continuous transmission.

Despite her age, the Artemis was the only ship of Lotus Fleet designed to perform even for years without any contact with the rest of the Federation. While the others were either warships, like the Prometheus class Alsea and Defiant class McKenzie, or short range explorers like the Intrepid class Lotus, or even a bit of both like the Akira class Spectre, the Ambassador class was a deep space explorer, able to fulfill all the mandates of Starfleet by itself when deprived of all support, even for a long time.

This therefore meant General Order 27: *No member of Starfleet shall be required by the assignment of standard duties and responsibilities to undergo extended separation from one's family, if family members can be reasonably provided for aboard ship or as a part of an existing Starfleet installation.*

As with all ships-of-the-line following the Excelsior class like its immediate successor, the much larger Ambassador class, the Artemis was the one Lotus Fleet ship currently able, and required, to obey this particular directive. Only the suddenness of their departure and the proximity of the rescue operation had prevented any civilians to board her for the moment.

Luckily for our so gracious host of a captain chuckled the Deltan for himself.

That same abruptness of departure had however trapped the civilian media crews aboard. *To their utter dismay and under protest, I am sure...* thought Elliago rolling his eyes.

Keeping the active tricorder to his belt, he took his portable emergency medkit and went after the others as they already stood on the shuttlebay deck of the cargo ship. They were getting their bearings with Chief Engineer Sangliar's own tricorder while Security Chief Kelsey Alther evaluated potential risks in moving to the bridge of the damaged ship, one deck above.

Now, they were all waiting for First Officer Michael O'Conner to lead them.

Coming out of the shuttlecraft, the away team could instantly see the extent of the damage to the cargo ship: there were burnt scars all across the bulkheads delining where the plasma conduits had been, consoles still sparking and burning under fire suppressant fumes, a smog of ozone-smelling smoke blocking vision despite the noising recycling vents trying to filter it all out... The vast hangar deck looked nothing less than a warzone.

After exiting the shuttle, Sangliar was immediately lost in the fog and smoke that filled the room. He heard the mumbles and talks of those around him, but could see nothing. Frustration began to set in as the Artemis' Acting Chief Engineer realized that he was too short to see over the haze. What would be waist height on those around him had the Tellarite completely encompassed.

Those first slow steps inside the derelict ship were like those in an antique horror movie: the floor was damp with smelly fluids, fuming with thick, green, heavy fog and littered with fallen debris... and bodies.

Doctor Nasaro-Myth immediately went to the nearest forms lying on the ground, his medical tricorder's probe in one hand sweeping the immediate area with a wide scanning beam while his other hand probed the prone body.

Elliago was aware many Starfleet officers were bewildered by his propensity to use his hands even more often than his instruments; but most Starfleet officers were not Deltan: Humans, Andorians, even Vulcans, and especially Tellarites, could not perceive vital signs, sensations and even emotions from others with the clarity and richness of perception his people's touch had nurtured and perfected for thousands of years on Delta IV.

Pleasure and pain were both part of the same equation, in both mind and body. And so were life and death.

Before the Betazoids joined the Federation, Deltans had been the ones to pioneer the Counsellor position in Starfleet well over a century before. It had been a direct offshoot of Medical were they excelled with their traditionally elaborate knowledge of anatomy and physiology, soothing pheromones, deep sensibilities, enhanced sense of touch and strong empathy. And so, even after the telepaths of Betazed rose to prominence in this new profession, Deltans still were often best in cumulating Counselling and Medical duties aboard starships.

Like Elliago Nasaro-Myth, Chief Medical Officer and Ship's Counsellor of the USS Artemis.

And, like all Deltans, he could sense and ease at the same time with a simple touch... something even the best instrument could never do... at least not as well.

Hands sees deeper than eyes was a popular saying among Deltans. But Elliago had no time to share his own people's wisdom at the moment: and instruments were nevertheless useful too: the readings of his tricorder along with the rescue team preliminary reports flashed before his eyes before he said:

" Commander: medical teams report sweeping the lower decks and rescuing the first survivors; victims of plasma burns and concussions as expected."

As he rose from the first body, his bald head still lowered in silent regret for a unique life lost to the universe, the doctor then added:

" Lieutenant Alther, we will need your security expertise to chart a safe route through this hazardous area between here and the bridge: there are at least half a dozen toxic fumes in the atmosphere, bulkhead sections still susceptible to fall and certainly some burning plasma that could still erupt and engulf us along the way... "

He finished his recommendation looking at the Tellarite Acting Chief Engineer while his hands now went to his medkit on his hip and pulled out a hypospray.

"Is anyone..."

Just as Sangliar eyes attempted to adjust to the smoke and he began to call out, a hand reached through the thickness in front of him and injected him with something.

As he injected each one of his team mates and finally himself with it, the Chief Medical officer of the Artemis gazed back at O'Conner:

" The largest concentration of vital signs are on deck 1: the bridge. This Tri-Ox compound will get us there through the noxious fumes at least. The rest is up to you both, chiefs. "

Pulling out his own technical tricorder, Sangliar scanned the area in front of him in an attempt to figure a course. Detecting damage to the surrounding bulkheads, he followed the reading of a power signature through the smoke. Coming upon a damaged, yet still slightly powered console, the engineer scratched at his beard and thought:

"If I can route enough power through this thing, I can maybe get a better view of the internal damage."

"Hey over here"

Waving his hand above the smoke, Chief Sangliar attempted to gain the attention of the other away team members.

"I am going to try to repair this thing. I can makeshift something with what I have and then maybe tap into the internal engineer diagnostics. From that, I can better figure a repair route."

Scratching at his beard again, the Tellarite began to dig through the massive repair satchel he brought for parts. Removing a small power matrix from inside of it, Sangliar wired it through the console and, with a faint blue glow the small screen came to life.

"Ha! that did it..."

Sangliar's enthusiasm and smirk turned off as soon as the numbers on the screen began to display. Every line of data was more bad news and showed damage on a scale even an endless pessimist like him shuddered at.

O'Conner looked around the heavily damaged room with a frown as he tried to get a sense where to go. He flinched a bit at the the smell of smoke as he moved around the room, pushing rubble aside as he walked.

"Chief Petty Officer Maxona and Petty Officer Shokar, clean this deck best you can and signal Lieutenant Yamato that this shuttlebay is ready and to send the other shuttles asap."

The two crewmen that had joined them on the trip nodded.

"Aye Sir."

"Thank you, Doctor, please take care of the wounded here. Lieutenant Alther check behind the main door for fire or flumes. I will check the Jeffries Tube."

The First Officer grunted as he shoved a piece of bent metal out the way.

"You guys go on ahead and tend to the survivors... this is going to take a while" called out the Tellarite engineer from somewhere under the low, thick smoke.

"Don't take too long, Sangliar. This ship isn't exactly stable." Michael said as he scanned behind the wall, inspecting the condition of the Jeffries tube.

"A little warped... plasma leak on deck 2, but the door is holding... Looks like a clear shot."

With another grunt, he pulled off the access panel and knelt down peering through the hatch, smiling.

"So far so good..." He mumbled to himself as stood back up. "Seem clear over here. Stats?"

The foggy surroundings were reminding Kelsey Alther of the old Klingon ships once boarded during the first time the Federation had responded in kind to the border attacks of the Empire on their first meeting, centuries ago: dry, greyish and sticky.

And smelly too.

Kalthurians may have had exceedingly stunted olfactory organs, but even Kelsey winced at the stench of burnt flesh and burned insulators. Scrunching its face, the androgyn also pulled out a tricorder to sweep the area before each step towards the main access to the Jeanne Mance's shuttlebay.

It didn't take long for the experienced Alther to respond to the First officer's inquiry:

" Sir, there is plasma fire on the other side of the door. If we open it, the backdraft will fry us were we stand. "

Raising the instrument, the Artemis' Chief of Security scanned the other points of entry to the vast room and reported as soon the readings came:

" The other accesses from the other decks are either crushed by smashed hull plates or obstructed by twisted bulkheads. And the still live but damaged plasma conduits here and there could rupture at any time. Your jeffries tube route is indeed the safest one, Sir: after all, they were designed and reinforced for emergency repairs. "

Coming alongside Michael O'Conner, Kelsey peered in turn inside the narrow conduit. Checking the tube's number, the Kalthurian punched it into the tricorder and got back its location on the ship's schematics downloaded before leaving the Artemis. Then, adding the damage data just scanned, the display traced out on the schematics the safest route to the bridge.

Showing the result to the First Officer, Lieutenant Alther said:

" Following security protocols, I will take the lead, Sir. I will reinput scanning data as we go along at a twenty meters interval so that we will be able to alter our route with any change of situation, if this wreck decides to resume shaking itself apart. Recommend that Mister Sangliar also monitor our transporter link with the Artemis... in case we have to be plucked out in a hurry. "

Before the Human could respond, Kelsey Alther went to a side panel and pushed it open, revealing a row of bulky white suits inside with large transparent helmets.

" To be on the safe side, we should also put on these space suits; they will nullify plasma burns and radiation, provide each of us with basic hazard scanning and alarms; and they come of course with their own

life support unit."

A smirk then crept on the deceptively feminine blue face of the Kalthurian androgyn:

" Of course, it will make our tube crawl rather crampy. "

As the away team got organized, Doctor Nasaro-Myth went to each and every body lying in the shuttlebay, tagging them for transport. His systematical search found two officers uncounscious but still alive: one was a Human technician that managed to escape serious harm in the flight control booth; the other was a Saurian crewman lying under a crushed shuttle, severely wounded but still breathing, despite being engulfed in the noxious, deadly fumes permeating the lower part of the room.

The wonders of Saurian physiology inwardly smiled the Deltan. The reptilian species was famous for its unparalleled resiliency against all forms of toxic substances.

And xenology specialist Elliago Nasaro-Myth knew something else too about Saurians, besides their most famous Brandy: he immediately sedated the scale-skinned crewman with a hypospray applied at his pelvian section; he didn't want the secondary brain to take over control and send the Saurian into a violent animalistic rampage out of pain before the primal brain was healed and conscious again.

At the same moment, Lieutenant Alther scouted ahead into the Jeffries tube, tricorder leading the way. When the Deltan doctor finished clearing out the bay of bodies and the pair of survivors, the Kalthurian came back to report:

" Clear and safe all the way to the bridge, Sir. But don't touch the bulkheads until we're out of the tube: they are still hot enough to cause second degree burns on exposed flesh. And there are a dozen life forms in the bridge proper, all Humans."

Kelsey moved back into the conduit, assuming point again for their group as they were ready to move out to the command center of the cargo ship.

Elliago shot a glance over his shoulder as he got behind First officer Michael O'Conner:

" You coming, chief? " he asked the Tellarite Engineer.

Earing the call, the gruff Tellarite looked up and returned to work typing the console as fast as his stubby fingers could.

"One moment...."

Connecting a concoction of tools form his bag to his portable power station, Sangliar typed and continued to work.

"Wait for it... there!"

Just as Sangliar finished typing at the console, the lights in the bay and the acess tube leading out turned on slowly, showing even more starkly the damage to the walls and surrounding area.

"There. That should help, and now we can at least half see where we are going."

Packing up his things, the Acting Chief Engineer of the Artemis placed his tools into his bag, went to the open locker to find a suit to his size and found none... and hurried to catch up with the rest of the away team standing at the entrance to the jeffries tube.

"We have to see what we are doing don't we? I mean, I would hate for any of you all to step on me... maybe in the next area we go to, someone else can do some work."

Cutting off anyone wanting to speak, he pulled out his tricorder and began to scan.

"Well lets go, we don't have all day do we?"

The away crew climbed slowly up the two decks. Even wearing the hazard suit, sweat dripped down O'Conner's brow as the plasma leaks had warmed the jefferies tube to scalding temperatures. The climb was nevertheless quite easier than expected.

Well, other than for the loudly complaining Tellarite Engineer. He grumbled about this and that as he struggled to climb up the ladder.

Upon reaching the bridge, the blue-skinned Chief of Security pushed at the hatch. At first, it didn't move; then, one forceful shove the door tried to hold back screeching and it was finally forced open.

As the away team came out of the hatch, they were greeted with an almost horrific site. The team looked around for the command crew under the only light of the viewscreen; it flickered, showing glimpses of space, as exposed parts of the eps grid sparked, giving them brief views of a bridge laced with exploded consoles, burned bodies and metal debris.

Michael O'Conner tapped his combadge.

"Lieutenant Commander O'Conner to Ensign S'Prek: Please lock on to our combadges and transport over a medical team and a repair crew."

"Aye, sir."

As O'Conner began to search for the ship's command officers, the teams appeared in a flash of transporter light. At once the first officer of the Artemis motioned to them:

"Repair crew, remove that bulkhead."

A soft groan came out from under it. The removed debris revealed underneath a slim woman, golden-skinned, dark haired and eyed: the captain of the stricken ship. She still layed under another part of the fallen bulkhead that was crushing her right side.

"Sangliar, try to get the lights on."

Nodding and mumbling under his breath, the Tellarite grumbled:

"What a *brilliant* idea; why didn't I think of that..."

"Say again, Sangliar?"

"I will get right on it, Sir"

Ripping a panel off the wall, Chief Sangliar cut his middle finger, causing a dull pain. The ache was almost unnoticed by the engineer who was already in considerable pain from the very long climb up a ladder. Climbing of course was not his strong suit.

"Damn, that hurts"

Grabbing at a cluster of fiberoptics, he pulled the tangled mess from the bulkhead and threw it on the deck in front of him. Pulling the connector off the cluster of luminous wires, he tapped them into his local generator and began a power overload test.

"This should only take a moment..."

Sangliar's words were cut off by a pop and fizzle as the small generator in front of him exploded and sparked.

"Correction Sir: more like two or three moments."

Think, you dolt he told himself silently.

Just then, the Acting Chief Engineer of the Artemis remembered a Cardassian that he had worked with, back at the Starbase, who fixed a replicator issue he was working on by routing it through a desk lamp and a plasma torch.

"Of course... I will have to Sorripto this thing together"

Looking around after dumping his tool bag on the deck, the Tellarite officer removed a plasma torch, two scanners, and a small flashlight and linked them into a power loop to create a closed power circuit. Connecting the power loop to the panel in front of him, he worked to create the feedback needed to power the secondary circuits for the bridge lighting. Pulling on the fiberoptic strands, Sangliar connected them to his concoction and activated it...

Nothing.

"Damn: the connection is off. I need to cut the strands and try again"

Removing a cutting tool from his bag, he sliced the wires open, causing a large blue arc that burned at his beard. Patting at the small fire on his face, the Tellarite realized that his beard was gone, singed away, and with a loud saddened howl, he bellowed into the air.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO..."

Punching the panel in front of him, the spark flickered and the panel illuminated itself, followed seconds later by the lights on the bridge.

It worked! Sangliar thought to himself as he rubbed his face where his glorious beard used to be *But at what cost?*

The cry of pain from the acting Chief Engineer summoned Doctor Nasaro-Myth at his side.

The xenologist saw two things: first, that there was no physical injury, although he could perceive some dull ache in the engineer's body. Second, there was however a deep emotional injury that felt almost as keen as a third degree burn in Sangliar's psyche.

The Deltan already knew what he was feeling empathically, just looking at Sangliar's black face: Tellarite males took great pride in their facial pilosity; it was as much an expression of identity as one of status and achievement in life. "Smooth face" was the worst insult in their culture, driving them to a rage even Andorians and Klingons stepped back from. Being beardless, even for a time, was thus terribly humiliating, to say the least.

Fortunately, Chief Sangliar's beard had been remarkably full and dense from decades of growth and care, as much as antique cleaning steel wool back on Earth had been. A good part of it had been singed; but there was still enough of it left to cover the sad face of the Tellarite and groom it into a short-trimmed beard, in the style made popular some years back by the captain of the USS Titan, William T. Riker, when he served as exec aboard the USS Enterprise of former Captain Jean-Luc Picard.

The Deltan doctor told so to Sangliar, adding with a sympathetic smile:

"If you wish, I can use a follicle stimulator when we'll get back on the Artemis. You should have it in full glorious bloom again in a couple of days."

Looking up at the Doctor and rubbing the smooth and singed patches that used to be his beard, Sangliar did all he could to stop from tearing it up. Trying to toughen up his appearance, Sangliar stood up and spoke:

"A fake beard? The only thing more offensive to a Tellarite than no beard is a fake one."

The Deltan doctor looked genuinely shocked:

"Fake? *Fake?*"

Like someone struck with total disbelief, or plain outrage, the Chief Medical officer of the Artemis looked around as if dreading being overheard; yet he was talking loudly enough for everyone to hear:

"You call *me* a *fake*?"

His gaze went straight at the eyes of the smaller Tellarite:

Mister Sangliar! Do I look like a cheap cosmetic-selling Ferengi? "

And so saying, he was tapping his shiny bald head.

" Pay attention, Engineer: I said: *folicle stimulator*. It *stimulates* the growth of *your* body hair by increasing biomolecular response to nutrients and external stimulation and regenerates the entire follicle. I can turn you into a giant walking, complaining *tribble* in three days flat with it. But you still have too much of it in your ears already! I'm a *doctor*, *Mister Sangliar!* I *heal* people. I don't sell disguises!"

With an exaggerated pouting, Elliago stood up and turned away, saying over his shoulder:

" If you prefer, I can send you a *shaving* kit. Nothing *fake* about it, I assure you: real Earth 19th century-like cream and blade. "

Seeing the concern in the Doctor's face, Sangliar continued to speak as he placed a breathing mask and cover over his face.

"A nice gesture, but there is not time for this. Let us continue our mission"

"Uhh... Sir..."

Kelsey Alther was staring at the main viewer when she addressed the First officer with obvious trepidation. The Kalthurian had been searching for survivors when something flickered on the screen.

Michael O'Conner looked up and noticed Alther's stare.

"Hmm?"

Then he saw too the large flash on the screen, and mumbled to himself:

"It was going too well... wasn't it? "

* * *

" All aboard the *Jeanne Mance* but the command crew on their bridge safely aboard , Sir. " then announced Doctor Nasaro-Myth over the comm. " They are being treated as we speak. We are also... taking care of the bodies... Sir."

The last part brought a somber silence all across the bridge of the *USS Artemis*. All Starfleet officers were sworn and ready to give their lives as part of their duty. But that didn't make it any easier for the survivors. After the last war, they still all felt that very keenly.

" 68% of its cargo has been recovered intact, Captain. " added Cheonghi in a monotone to break the ominous feeling that was making his frail shoulders droop." Recovered medical supplies and ship spare parts now secured in cargo bay 2. It's full to the rim, Sir."

Kheren's four eyes now went back to the engineer station behind him as he turned his new chair around:

" Lieutenant Blakely: damage report. "

The blonde woman turned halfway while stepping back from her station, keeping her left hand on the controls as she answered:

" According to the damage control teams, the warp core is drained and dilithium crystals burned out. As far as can be seen, there was a huge plasma overload and the feedback made the security lock outs shut down the entire assembly, but not fast enough to prevent extensive damage. There was also a massive outburst of

nucleonic radiation causing complete dillithium crystal degradation. recrystallisation would prove ineffective; they would have to be replaced."

The large screen of the replacement engineering station showed diagrams and cut outs of a Ptolemy class cargo ship to illustrate what the engineer was reporting:

" Impulse engine drained and depolarized. It's like all the electromagnetic charge was spent in one huge burst... beyond the actual capability of the system to do so. Reactors are melted down to a scrap heap. Again, its like a huge, sudden overload occured and backfired into the system; excessive subatomic particle levels still detectable. "

" Is there anything still working or salvageable aboard this wreck? " wondered outloud Lieutenant Cheonghi, raising both soulders as his central third arm ajusted controls.

" Batteries are operational " said Lieutenant Blakely as if both continuing her report and answering the Edoan ops officer: their heavily shielded protective casing is severely damaged however and barely survived a sudden drain out. Thrusters are also still operational but at low power levels. Their reactants are partially depolarized as if bombarded by an intense subatomic emission. "

" Can we tow her back to Starbase 10? " asked Kheren looking back at the crippled ship on the main viewer with a frown.

" I beleive so, Sir. The superstructure is twisted out of shape but still sturdy. Damaged decks will be repressurized once hull breaches there will be sealed... Although there are stellar debris imbedded in the bulkheads at almost every breach point. They show the same levels of chroniton and nucleonic radiation as the outer hull itself. minimal power and Inertial dampeners have been reactivated, thanks to Chief Sangliar's personal touch I gather. They were turned off by a powerful gravimetric drain that also neutralized all the gravity deckplates. Life support is also fully operational again on all undamaged decks. "

" Medical teams are all back on board, Captain. " now reported in turn Lieutenant Cheonghi. " A damage control team is staying on the Jeanne Mance to continue emergency repairs, maimtain minimal servicing and also to make sure nobody has been left behind. The away team has reached the bridge as we speak. "

" One emergency medical team will stand by in transporter room 2." then announced doctor Lumquist sitting at the captain's left.

Kheren nodded:

" Good job people. We'll tow the ship back with us. At best it will be salvageable... or at worst, cannibalized for parts too. They need all they can get back at Starbase 10. Mister Cheonghi : all tractor beams and modified phasers on standby. Doctor: open a channel to the away team. "

A few touches with his fingers and Lumquist nodded to his commanding officer who then spoke:

" Number One, we're ready to get underway as soon as you are. Lieutenant Alther, have Captain Shanankahar brought to the ready room if Doctor Nasaro-Myth agrees she is in good enough shape for a report. "

After the officers on the rescued vessel aknowledged his orders, the Andorian brought his gaze down to his female compatriot at the helm before him:

" Lieutenant Sheeneea, bring us about and plot a course back to Starbase 10, cruising speed. "

" Aye, Captain." answered the Andorian pilot, her fingers already inputing commands on the navigation board. "Course back to Starbase 10 plotted and laid in. ETA at warp 6: twenty-two point four hours. "

Kheren turned towards the science station:

" Lieutenant Micheals: anything you can tell us about what hit the cargo ship? "

The Caitan turned from her station to look over and beyond the Captain's head, right at the viewing screen:

" I would assume... *that*. "

On the viewing screen of the starship appeared an immense field of swirling orange and gold fire, slowly revolving around a blindingly white center. It flickered in and out like a candle flame in a wind. Tendrils of fiery, crackling energy extended in several directions and angles like fire coursing on tree branches in a tangled forests.

The raging fire seemed to cover the entire field of stars. It was both beautiful and terrifying to behold.

And it was moving, pulsing... expanding before their very eyes... and right across their path.

"What the blazes *is*... that?" fluted Chief of Ops Cheonghi in his clear, raspy voice, blinking his big eyes at the main viewer right in front of him.

"Don't tell me it just popped out there." asked the Andorian with a side glance at the Caitan.

"As a matter of fact... it did, Sir." retorted M'Fall Micheals in an almost apologetic tone.

Then, she straightened herself to properly explain:

"Long range sensor scan didn't pick it up because it's radiofrequency is exactly like that of the universe's background radiation. We were investigating the sudden surge in background noise when it... just popped out there. Short range sensors detected the phenomenon only presently: it moves much faster than the speed of light, well over warp 5... and it seems to fluctuate in and out of our space-time continuum."

"Do we have the Jeanne Mance with us?" now asked the captain.

"Main tractor beams and support ones ready, Captain." answered Lieutenant Cheonghi in a slightly trembling voice.

"Activate. Ensign Sheeneea: plot a wide parabolic course around it and maintain distance. Analysis, Lieutenant Micheals." ordered Kheren.

His four eyes stared at the bewildering dance of fire making the vastness of space look as if some wild forest fire was spreading accross it from a swirling tornado right out of hell.

And it was more than just blinding; Kheren's antennae were itching, and he even lost color and sound a moment, when the strange phenomenon crackled strongly with flaming tendrils. He felt suddenly vaguely dizzy as he swung hard his chair back to face the screen fully.

In front of him, he could see both Tyvya and Sheeneea gripped the edge of their common board with one hand, their antennae trembling.

As if underwater, he was barely hearing the voice of the Caitan science officer despite the speakers of his seat:

"Approximately one light year in diameter; rate of expansion : zero point sero one percent of a light year per solar day in exponential progression; speed :warp 9.9997. "

As fast as a subspace signal, no less noted Kheren as he strained to hear Lieutenant Micheals continue:

"Strong presence of chronitons and nucleonics coming from the center of the phenomenon, but I read neither mass nor polarity...Yet, it behaves in most respects like plasma, wich is a state between energy and matter... and therefore should have both. Time dilatation and excessive energy outpour are definitely distorting sensors. Corona is plasmic, similar to supernova ejections but extending in an erratic pattern. There are however some gravimetric readings at the fringe. "

She stopped a moment, rechecking readings and blinking her large slitted eyes furiously. Finally, she looked again at her commanding officer and said:

"Captain... It's effects are distributed along multiple subspace frequencies, sometimes only one, sometimes a few or all at once, sometimes dropping out into normal space. "

Kheren frowned. Leaning forward in his chair, his small chin rested in his left hand while his elbow rested on his knee as he tilted his head to keep with a conscious effort the focus of all four oculars at the image:

" Doctor: open a channel to Starbase 10. "

" Sorry Captain. " apologized Doctor Lumquist after a moment. " The phenomenon is causing subspace interference on all frequencies. We can only barely reach the Jeanne Mance as it is. "

" Sir, came back Micheals, database records a plasma storm in this sector, reported by the relief convoy that reached SB10 months ago during Operation Reconstruction Blue; and then again by the USS Steamrunner just before the Borg attacked, last week. "

" No one investigated *this*? " wondered the Andorian in obvious surprise.

" At the time, it seemed nothing more in size and nature than a standard plasma storm emanating from a now dead star system, Sir. So, no detailed scan were made: only standard automated astrometrics scans... and they are nowhere near anything of this nature or magnitude. "

As information flew across the bridge, the raging, blinding phenomenon was almost filling the entire screen. Now, they could discern amidst the fiery mass some darker objects floating around like debris caught in the ferocious winds of a cyclone.

And the phenomena was obviously moving and expanding right across their path.

" We are having difficulties maintaining contact with the cargo ship, Sir." now stated the doctor seated at Kheren's left, frowning and running fingers all across his armchair console. " Mister O'Conner is hailing us."

" Number One... " acknowledged Kheren, fighting off a sudden, strange feeling of dizziness.

"Sir the viewscreen here is showing a large storm heading our way. Orders?"

As if to answer, a red light flashed on the board of the Edoan Ops officer.

" Automated defense field just snapped on! "

And then, a long vibration shook the entire ship.

" Captain: inertial dampeners strained to 120% " said Engineer Blakely in obvious concern.

" Magnitude 1 shockwave, Sir! No damage but shield penetration is fifty-three percent. " stated Tactical Officer Tyvya, her voice very calm... a sure sign of an Andorian reacting to stress.

An Edoan's voice, however, in the same state, became loud and shrill in sudden alarm:

" Sir! *The ship!*"

The screen was for a moment filled with the image of the USS Jeanne Mance suddenly loose and tumbling like a falling rock towards the raging swirls of fire, debris peppering space around it amidst crackles of orange lightning.

" Beam them all back, *now!* " yelled Kheren to Cheonghi.

" Transporter lock difficult, Sir! Subspace interference... "

" Divert all power: Boost the signal!" ordered the Andorian, stepping down to the long navigation and tactical console and leaning on it with his left hand, his neck taut and stretched towards the image of the drifting ship caught in the first flaming swirls of the fiery vortex.

Then, they all saw the wreckage of the cargo ship engulfed in crackling tongues of golden flame, each tearing it apart piece by piece like savage claws, debris raining on its exposed hull like a meteor swarm until all of it sank into the blinding crackling of one energy flare.

" Got them, Sir! " shouted Cheonghi, raising all three arms in the air.

Kheren straightened up with a sigh of relief. But his breath was cut short by the disembodied feminine voice of the ship's computer:

" Warning: shockwave magnitude 3 incoming. Contact in one minute."

" Sir, then said M'Rall, this is but the forefront effect of the anomaly through normal space as it expands through several subspace frequencies: theta radiation; shields will only work partially at best... if at all. "

" Even our state of the art hull plating will not withstand direct contact for long, Captain. " added Blakely nervously. " And the shockwave will strain inertial dampeners near design limitations. "

" Captain! now reported Tyvya: there are debris caught into the... storm, They are propelled at such speed and force, navigational deflectors alone will not stop them all. "

" Collapsed planetary matter, Sir. " confirmed the Caitan at the science console. " The gravimetric void of the anomaly forced planetary bodies to self-compress under their own mass to near neutronium state. Weapons will not destroy them nor our hull resist kinetic damage if collision occurs. "

" Red Alert! shouted Kheren. " All hands, brace for impact!"

Then, the entire ship shook again, this time much harder and longer.

" Minimal damage to outer hull, deck 8 ! " reported Tyvya.

The civilians! immediately thought the Andorian captain with alarm.

" We're going to get caught right into it Captain! " voiced Lieutenant Sheeneea, her fingers running all across her navigation board: " Helm is sluggish... propulsion fluctuating... "

" Full astern! Emergency warp! " ordered Kheren, himself reflexively stepping back to half sit, half fall in his chair.

" *Belay that order!* " roared the Caitan science officer, suddenly turning almost into a crouch. " It's moving through subspace! Our warp trail will pull at it like a magnet! "

" Full Impulse! instantly corrected the captain... Back off! *Back off!* "

The ship vibrated as much from her strained engines as from the fringe of the flaming inferno trying to engulf them. Then, it settled itself like a panting beast under the lash. And for a moment, everyone on board the Artemis felt the same.

The ominous silence was then broken again by the same maddeningly calm voice as before:

" Warning; Shockwave magnitude 9 incoming : contact in three minutes."

The ship whinned like a straining beast as the engines roared to maximum output, sending vibrations coursing through the deckplates. On the screen, the fiery space maelstrom was widening like a flaming maw opening to engulf them, with fiery lightning bolts extending each sides of it like energy-crackling claws closing in on them from each side.

" No use Sir! We can only maintain thrust against the pull. " said Sheeneea blinking wildly, her antennae fluttering like reeds in the breeze.

" Not for long! Impulse buckling, Sir! " now reported Cheonghi in a high-pitched voice. " It's... depolarizing! And... Sir! Antimatter and matter reserve are being drained! EPS flow levels becoming critical! "

" Warp core offline! " shouted Kheren, blinking as his vision dizzily shifted from color to black and white and back to distorted colors again to the rhythm of the pulsing buzz in his head.

" Shutting down the core, Sir! " confirmed Lieutenant Blakely. " Reducing EPS flow to minimal output; venting excess plasma through nacelles and diverting residual power to batteries. "

In the sudden silence that followed like a sigh of relief, Lieutenant Cheonghi turned on his chair and said in a strained voice:

" Alther and Sangliar are back with all the teams and the last of the refugees, Sir. But... O'Conner... the Doctor... they... "

Kheren cut him off tapping his combadge:

" Away team: to the bridge on the double! "

The captain didn't give time for the Ops officer to speak up again:

" All ship's personnel in shuttlebay 2, sickbay, cargo bay 1 and 3 and mess hall, this is the captain: evacuate. You have 15 seconds. Computer: command override Kheren Sigma Zero Sigma : seal off those five sections, fifteen seconds silent count down, mark. "

Now his silvery eyes and dark blue antennae all gazed at the Edoan at ops:

" Mister Cheonghi: lock on to all lifeforms in those areas: in ten seconds, beam them to the media ship. Then call up its transponder code and take command of her nav controls. Prepare for launch. "

" Take command... "

" Contact in two minutes. " droned the impassive voice of the computer.

" *Do it!* While we still have time... "

As eternity stretched between two heartbeats for everyone on the bridge, silence engulfed them all in their own thoughts until Doctor Lumquist said:

" Done, Sir. All civilians and refugees aboard the media ship. They are packed full in here... and what you hear are screams of outrage..."

" Better that than screams of agony." retorted Kheren acidly. " Ops, fire up impulse and standby warp engines of the courier ship, maximum output... but keep docking clamps and magnetic locks on until my mark "

The vessel itself shook, as in protest with the sudden strain on its aft section while it was barely reajusting itself from the last shockwave. But Kheren didn't give the Artemis any more time to get her breath back than for her crew:

" Lieutenant Blakely: depressurize shuttlebay 2, open bay doors but keep emergency forcefield up until my mark. "

" Sir... if we can't pull away with all of *this* ship's power... how will *they* escape? " almost whined Cheonghi as if only to himself, but loud enough for everyone to hear.

" Pre-warp emergency evacuation protocols. " cryptically answered the Andorian." Viewer aft. " he then asked.

" Contact in one minute. " then announced the computer.

" Mark! "

A sudden jolt was felt as something like a cough reverberated from aft to bow all across the entire starship's structure.

Switching to aft view, the main viewer showed the rear end of the Ambassador class starship, and a small, elongated shape shooting out like a torpedo with a cloud of ejected, heated atmosphere exploding out behind it. Sudden decompression had been added to a brutal impulse burst, both together providing enough momentum for the small warp-capable courier ship to escape the anomaly at high velocity and without pulling it behind with warp power.

Kheren sighed with obvious relief, almost smiling despite the natural rigidity of his face.

Almost...

The quickly receding view of its abrupt departure was made even more spectacular as the reaction effect of the sudden blowout from the hangar deck had pushed the Artemis away as well in the opposite direction...

Right into the incoming shockwave... and towards the heart of the storm

On the viewer, the small spacecraft was already just a tiny speck against the cleared starlit blackness of space; its preheated warp nacelles flared up and it went flashing away.

" Civilian ship escape confirmed! But... decompression pushed us in, Sir! " explained Sheeneea, half crouched over her piloting controls, shaking her head as if to fight dizziness.

A new, more brutal vibration, made them all totter. The lights of the raging storm danced around them on the very walls of the bridge as their own internal lighting went out for a moment.

" Contact. " then said the computer. " Hull temperature rising near safety levels. "

" Plasma conduits still overheating all over the ship! " warned Lieutenant Blakely.

" Power is overloading faster than I can rerout it! " said in turn Cheonghi in a shrill voice.

" Venting all plasma to compensate... but if that thing gets any stronger, it will not be enough to prevent the conduits from overloading still. " countered the engineering Lieutenant.

They were all interrupted by violent jolts making them stumble and grab chairs and consoles, as if the entire vessel was slapped this way and that by some angry titan. Around the Artemis, huge chunks of debris were flying around, caught also in the swirling energy vortex and pelting the flickering shields, some even going through and smashing the deflector field and the hull with the force of a rain of stones. And the raging energies savagely swirling around the starship splashed massive tongues of fire over and through the flimsy flickering bubble of her energy shields.

" Warning; hull temperature exceeding safety levels. Hull breaches..."

" Hull breach reports on decks 13, 11 and 9!" confirmed over the maddeningly calm computer voice the Edoan Ops officer. " We have radiation exposure!"

" Debris impact, Sir! " told Ensign Tyvya in a loud voice, a sheen of perspiration all over her blue-skinned face, her antennae drooping.

" Point defense fire! " ordered the captain in an even louder voice, as if he couldn't hear himself talk. His hands were gripping his seat so hard they creaked.

Point blank range phaser fire was barely able to deflect a few of the bigger ones with their thin golden-green fingers of light; the subspace fluctuations of the anomaly allowed too much debris to still bypass shields and deflectors and rain on the exposed armor plating, chipping it away like dry plaster the plasma fire roasted almost instantly. The entire vessel swirled on one side then another like a boat in a raging sea tempest.

" I'm losing helm control, Sir! " suddenly shouted Sheeneea, sweating and swaying as if sick " Gravimetric forces from several changing vectors! "

" It's those high density neutronium masses caught in here. " growled the Caitan Science Officer. In this absolute null-grav zone, their mass and ours are attracting... each... other..."

Then she stopped speaking. Her ears were twitching and flattening, reacting to some alarming sound. Slowly, she dropped on all fours, putting hands on the deckplates, then the bulkhead. When she rose up, grabbing her console against a new brutal shake of the entire vessel, she looked straight at her commanding officer but still took a moment to find back her voice:

" Captain! whispered breathlessly M'Rall Micheals, her orange-golden fur bristling and her large blue eyes wide: our structural integrity... is failing. "

And now, most of them could hear a soft, distant groaning that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once, like the creaking of those ancient wooden sailing ships of centuries ago.

" She's right, Sir! " then confirmed engineer Blakely from her instruments readouts and lights flashing wildly all across her board: " I read hull stresses all over the superstructure... at the sub-atomic level! "

Then the Artemis shook again and groaned like a dying beast. M'Rall's own growling voice seemed to be the very voice of the agonizing starship:

" If we stay in here, even avoiding collisions and being burned, we... we will either smash ourselves against the debris... or be crushed under our own mass! "

The only answer came from the straining groans of tortured the ship... and, tolling like the Bells of Hell, the voice of the computer:

" Warning: external temperature exceeding design limits. Warning: structural integrity compromised. Warning: internal power flow over safety requirements. Warning: fatal radiation exposure in five minutes. Warning: hull breaches on decks... "

The USS Artemis, tossed around like a flag in the wind, was now nothing but part of the debris field of the fiery cosmic storm.

As damage reports flowed to all stations from all parts of the ship, Kheren, half-blinded, half-deafened, dizzy, sweating and shaking, felt like a sea snail caught in a reef under a tsunami.

A sea snail...

Suddenly he stood. Still swaying on his feet despite the calm lull between impacts, he bellowed:

" Tactical: full spread of photon torpedoes, manual firing, point blank range, directly aft; minimal dispersal pattern... *on my mark!*"

" Captain!" said Tyvya turning around from her tactical console with the same sweating, shaking, disoriented look as her commanding officer: " Photon torpedo detonation will ignite the plasma... And swell it back right at us like a solar flare! "

" Hopefully. " barked back the Andorian, eyes on the fiery hell raging around them." Engineering! All remaining power to thrusters, phasers and tractor beams."

" Launchers crews... ready, Sir. " announced the Andorian woman at tactical, swaying on her chair as if drunk.

And the Artemis swerved and trembled, as if drunk and sick herself.

" Ready, Captain. " came the answer back from the engineering station.

" Ops! switch *all* phaser arrays to modified graviton emissions. All phasers and tractor beams, widest dispersal pattern: grab every large debris nearby and pull them close to the hull, now! "

" Close to the... "

" *Now!* "

A few taps on his board from his trembling three hands and the Edoan swallowed hard as immense chunks of planetoids, suddenly bathed in greenish, fluttering lights, obscured the screen as they were now all closing in on the buffeted starship.

" Helm: thrusters only; forward full, on my mark."

" Sir? " startled Sheeneea, "That's right into the heart of that... "

" *Mark!* " cut the Andorian.

" Torpedo room: fire! " roared Tyvya, sending the order down deck 22 to the aft launchers weapon control room through both comm and board.

On the screen and the tactical monitor, everything was darkening as a mass of planetary debris converged on the defenseless starship, like a fist closing around the hull to crush it from all sides. The green lights of the tractor beams and the golden-greenish ones of the altered phasers trembled feebly as in utter terror before the orange and white fury of the engulfing storm.

The aft view then showed ten blobs of blueish light eject from the underside of the ship. Right between the closing walls of the tractored debris covering the entire vessel like an egg shell.

A violent detonation filled the screen like a blinding nova; and not even a breath later, a huge explosion rocked them all.

There was a brutal sense of forward momentum that the inertial dampeners barely managed to contain; and a wave of heat that the environmental controls struggled to push back. Another console exploded; Sheeneea and Tyvya sweated profusely while Kheren, gripping hard the armrests of his chair, fainted from that heat wave, falling forward between them; they gripped tight their console but still banged their swaying heads on the panel in front of them.

Bodies were tossed around, sparks flying from under one console. Then another...

Right in the face of Lieutenant M'Rall Micheals.

Between alternating bouts of static, the large screen showed the dark covering around the vessel disintegrating under their sudden burst of momentum and the aftermath of the explosion amplified by the flaming inferno swirling across the entire raging cosmic storm all around them.

Everything went blindingly white...

And then... completely dark... and silent.

* * *

In a hellish tidal wave of flames, the graceful silhouette of the Ambassador class starship rolled over like a beached whale, masses of dark, rocky matter closing in to crush it like rocks of a reef, amidst the last flashes of greenish energy bleeding from all parts of the hull like blood from wounds.

And, in a last, blinding explosion of light and fire, the USS Artemis disappeared, leaving only a raging inferno of swirling debris and crackling bolts of fiery lightning tearing the field of stars.

Then, all went black.

In the deep, heavy silence, a soft voice rose, slow and solemn:

" These are the last images of the USS Artemis... as viewed from the Devilfish, the brave crew of the last Ambassador class starship managed to send out to safety... at the cost of their own lives."

A petite Bolian now appeared over the blackness. Her bald, ridged head was lowered, her eyes downcast, her blue complexion even paler than usual. Swallowing with difficulty, she looked up again at the holocam in front of her; but her gaze was looking much, much farther away. And her voice was also distant, strained:

" We all know Starfleet officers are trained and sworn to give their lives for all the citizens of the Federation... many, the good ones, would also sacrifice themselves for any sentient being, regardless of affiliation or origin. And a few, the best of them, would even risk all to extend a helping hand to an endangered enemy, in the name of Life, Peace and Hope. We all know this. And we all know the crew of the USS Artemis will be hailed and remembered as honorable officers who gave their lives in the line of duty... "

She stopped, closing her eyes as if the last images of the viewer threatened to engulf her once more. Taking a deep breath, she continued:

" All twelve survivors of the Borg War, all sixty-three surviving crewmembers of the USS Jeanne-Mance and all fifteen members of Federation media were saved by those selfless officers, not even hesitating in doing so when they knew it meant death to them. They were more than Starfleet officers; more than worthy officers of the elite Lotus Fleet division: they were heroes. No... more than heroes: they were the crew of the USS Artemis... Stalwart Guardians of the Federation... worthy of the very legend of their famous starship... to the end. "

The Bolian newswoman straightened herself and lifted her small chin up, a new brightness coloring her azure cheeks. Now, her clear grey eyes were focused and unflinching:

" My name is Vela Nonh, first anchorwoman of Federation media: I was there."

Behind her, a visual of the USS Artemis in flight filled the background.

" Never will I ever forget those whom I owe my life, and the life of my colleagues, and the lives of all of those who were, with us, about to die a horrible, burning and crushing death. Always will I remember each and everyone of them. Please, to all who can receive this transmission, do not forget them. Please remember : "

The Federation anthem started to play softly. The image of Vela Nohn dissolved. Over the holoprojection of the majestic Ambassador class silhouette, faces slowly faded in, then out, as her voice bravely held back tears and solemnly recited:

" Captain Kheren Kalel Th'Ch'Leryll Keth Reiji... "

" Lieutenant-Commander Michael David O'Conner... "

" Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth... "

" Lieutenant Marksus Sangliar... "

" Lieutenant Kelsey Alther... "

" Lieutenant M'Rall Lucy Shimboline Micheals... "

" Lieutenant... "

CHAPTER 4 : FROM HELL'S HEART

As the Jeanne Mance tumbled in to the storm once more, Michael O'Conner's hail was only replied with static.

"Well thats just great...." the Artemis First Officer mumbled as he stared in to the blinking viewscreen and held on to the console in front of him for dear life.

"O'Conner to all hands! Brace for Impact! This is going to be a rough ride!" He yelled out as he prayed that what was left of the inertial dampeners strained enough to keep anyone on their feet as the unprotected hull dove in to the raging storm.

The ship rocked violently, tossing officers and crewmen around the dark, damaged hallways of the stricken ship. As bolts of plasma and large pieces of debris slammed against the hull, eps conduits exploding throughout the ship raining sparks and shrapnel down. Each blast threatened to break the ship once and for all as the it got engulfed by the yellow hue of the storm.

After seemingly an eternity of violent shaking and explosions, just as the remaining crew thought that this was the end, it just stopped.

O'Conner looked around in amazement at the barely working screen. The ship was drifting in the middle of the storm in a calm area of space. He tapped the console but either it wasn't working or there was no sensors left on the ship.

"Uuh... Report, team"

But as the team struggled to find a console that was working, there was one last violent jolt that tossed him over the console.

He awoke dizzied and, as he rubbed the sharp pain coming from his shoulder, he looked around the bridge wondering how long he had been out.

The bridge was in far worst shape than when they first got there, if that even was possible. Other than one science station, all of the consoles had blown, most of the inner bulkheads have been destroyed and other than the sparks raining down from an EPS conduit, the bridge was pure blackness.

"Report" He ordered as he looked around once more, finally noticing the Deltan doctor hovering over him.

" Lie still, Commander. You had a concussion and a dislocated shoulder... but this at least will dull the pain as good as my pheromones are doing now. "

A hypospray hissed near Michael's neck and for a moment, a pounding pain tried to surface from the back of his skull, then subsided into a dull sensation. The stars in front of his eyes dissipated, and all he saw was a black rectangle curving on a burnt-streaked wall. The only stars he could still see were a few sparks from dying consoles.

Crouching besides the First officer, Elliago smiled to him; but it was obviously strained as he searched for words before finally saying:

" Well, I have some good news and some bad news. " said the Deltan. " The good news is: we are alive... for now. "

The doctor then looked around and sighed:

The bad news is: we're both of us the only ones left aboard a dying wreck. "

O'Conner rolled his neck a bit.

"The only ones left? What happened to the rest? Did the Artemis get them out in time?"

He spoke quickly as he sat up, ignoring the doctor's advice, like most Starfleet officers would do.

"We need to get to a shuttle." He said as he tried to stand up.

The Deltan sighed at the Human propension to disregard pain. They were worse than Klingons; at least, Klingons had the excuse of not actually *feeling* the pain of their wounds... Humans were just... stubborn. Even more than Tellarites... and they could be as argumentative too.

Especially with their doctor.

So he didn't force the First Officer to lie back down; but he sent soothing pheromones to both add to the painkiller,,, and keep the man calm.

" The... storm, or whatever it was... it was interfering with communications and transporter signals. I imagine they had to narrow and amplify the bandwidth of the locking signal or something... When you were knocked over, I rushed to help you,,, and I guess we were both out of the beam's pick up zone when they transported everyone else... I think. "

" With a smile he added:

" I am not an Engineer... "

When he saw the First Officer walk to the bridge's door, he stopped him with a warning before he would do like him and smash his nose on the closed, jammed panel:

" Only life support has power, Commander. I doubt there is much left of this derelict to even activate a combadge... or for much longer. I think only part of the upper saucer section of this ship is still in one piece... whatever is left of it."

Elliago had no clue how they could get out of this mess. But he knew Humans: they were at their best when things were at their worst. A bit of defeatism from him would sparkle defiance and stimulate resourcefulness in a man like Michael O'Conner.

If they had any chance at all to survive, it would come from him. Because the last thing he had seen of the Artemis on the failing viewing screen was crackling bolts of fire rushing towards her.

O'Conner pulled out his tricorder and scanned the room. A small frown crossed his lips as he noticed the large piece of wreckage that had landed in front of the jefferies tube hatch. After putting his tricorder away, he headed for the turboshaft and began to force it open.

"Well, we better hope that the Artemis is in better shape then us... because." He replied as the door slowly surrendered and opened for the pair. "We might just need some saving."

Elliago was at a loss for a moment. last thing he had seen of the Artemis was the starship submerged with flames and debris.

It might have just been because of their own perspective as they plunged themselves into the raging space storm...

So, he said nothing. He needed the Human in a positive and hopeful state of mind. O'Conner was an engineer; as long as he had hope, he would go out of his way to find a mean to squeeze more minutes of life from the wreckage.

Elliago for his part needed *that* hope.

The First officer pulled out his hand lamp and used it to survey the dark hole, before them. He sighed quietly as the light wasn't nearly strong enough to reach the bottom.

"Seems clear..."

O'Conner had a bad feeling about this... but he wasn't about to just wait around; so, he began the descent into the darkness of the shaft, hoping the lack of light at the bottom was a good sign.

Elliago followed the First Officer down, feeling the cold and the lack of air already.

Especially with the tri-ox compound the doctor had injected themselves with earlier, the tougher Human would take a while to register the effects of space slowly and inexorably closing onto the last reserves of the derelict, now with a barely functional life support. But even he was panting and rubbing his hands together after climbing down the cold rungs of the access ladder in rarefied air.

The pair of Starfleet officers slowly climbed there way down on to the third deck and looked around with hand lamps. Around them laid dark, creepy smoke that filled the hallway. These had once been the heart of the ship, but now they were just littered with the metal remains of the bulkheads.

Undeterred, they pushed their way past the debris and onward to the shuttlebay.

The Deltan scanned around with his own tricorder, looking for any other sign of life beside their own. If they were to get out of here, it would not be good to leave any unseen, unfortunate soul behind.

But he found none when they reached the blocked door to the shuttlebay. The walls and the door itself were blackened and still hot from a recent plasma fire, forcing back the encroaching coldness for a moment.

" Look at these burnt marks everywhere. " pointed Elliago. " Kelsey was right: there was a hell of a fire raging here not so long ago. Opening this door would have fried us to a nice crisp."

O'Conner frowned as he read his tricorder. He had just scanned behind the large metal door.

"Well there are three shuttles in there... but only one of them is undamaged... I think."

He tapped the tricorder.

"Also there is no air in the bay, hmm... Maybe I could activate the shuttle's transporter."

The Deltan doctor looked around the shoulder of the taller man to peek at the readings:

" Try Arrow 6' transponder code; if it is our shuttle, we will be able to activate all its systems remotely. "

And, luckily, it was.

He worked quickly with his tricorder. Then, after a few bad codes and error signal sounds, they were engulfed in light; and then, the dark corridor was replaced with a small cramped shuttle interior.

"Well, at least we won't run out of air." O'Conner said with a half-smile as he moved to one the pilot seats and sat down with a small sigh of relief.

Doctor Nasaro-Myth moved to the co-pilot seat, activating sensors and scanners, both internal and external.

" Diagnostics completed. " he said after a moment. " All systems nominal. But I fear we will have to blast our way through this bay door. In the state this wreck of a ship is, I am not sure it will stay in one piece around us when we do. I hope your that good a flyer, Michael. "

First name basis was usually reserved for medical consultations... But when two lives were so closely dependent to one another in a crisis, it was appropriate too in Elliago's Counselling experience.

And Michael O'Conner didn't seem to mind at the moment.

As he glanced around the ruined shuttlebay, he saw the other shuttles, or at least what remained of them. One had been crushed by a bulkhead and the other had been stabbed by a support beam. After a few taps on the screen, he spoke:

"Well at least the door is cle..." He stopped mid sentence and used the console and the shuttle limited sensors to scan the area around. "But no storm or Artemis, within sensor range. Where are we?" He asked himself as he tried to make sense of the sensor data.

The Deltan also looked at the readouts, frowning:

" Overflow of chroniton and nucleonic radiation but near complete void of electromagnetic and graviton emissions... Amplified universal background radiation but no stellar signals whatsoever... and all scans are reflected back beyond a hundredth of a light year... except for some erratic plasmic and subspace energies... "

His voice trailed off as he too tried to make sense of the data. With an apologetic shrug, he smiled thinly at the First officer of the Artemis:

" I'm no physicist, I told you... but this doesn't look anything like normal space to me. "

Suddenly, a light flashed on the sensor board and new readings flooded the small screen.

" Large metalloid composite object just emerging one thousand kilometers starboard. " read out loud Elliago, frowning. " There is a trail of plasmic nucleonic charges coming out with it... and scattered semi-ferrous, very dense debris... faint antimatter emissions... "

He suddenly looked directly at O'Conner:

" The Artemis! "

"The Artemis?" O'Conner smiled lightly as he thought their luck might just be picking up.

"Arrow 6 to USS Artemis, Come in. It's Lieutenant Commander O'Conner and the Doctor."

But the hail was only answered by static.

"Of course it can't ever be easy." He mumbled to himself as he looked back over the sensor data.

"Seems she was hit hard, the warp core is offline and she is running on batteries. It would probably take them a couple of hours to get her back running."

" I wonder how bad. " answered Elliago, peering the sensor readouts. " I fear they might have severe casualties out there. It was a miracle for us to even go through that... thing... and survive... Never thought I would see lightning strike twice on the same spot. "

he turned a quizzical eye towards his companion to finish:

" I would guess it's at least partly due to that bewildering captain of ours. "

Michael raised an eyebrow at that but didn't comment, as he didn't know the captain well enough yet.

The banter however barely hid the Deltan's concern. He could not wait to be over there, helping how many injured shipmates deal with pain and fear, confusion and suffering.

O'Conner sighed lightly and leaned back against his chair, as though back over the mission. The only thing that came to his mind to describe it was: 'what a mess'.

After a few minutes, the engineer side of Michael O'Conner was tired of just waiting around.

"You know... Bet I could transport us to her." He said with a small smile. "It's a little out of range but I doubt we would be getting this shuttle back anyways."

He quickly went to work on the console, programing into it a power surge to increase the transporter's range for two quick trips, for the doctor to sickbay and for him to the bridge... before the circuits fired for good.

"Ready doctor?" He asked as he stood up and moved to the small transporter pads in the back of the shuttle.

Nasaro-Myth suddenly stood straight, looked at him and pointed an accusing finger straight at his face:

" Now just you wait a minute, you... Are you telling me you plan to attempt out of range transport under a power surge? Using me as the test subject? "

He sat back and crossed his arms over his chest, lowering his bald head with a frown to say with a very serious tone:

" In the immortal words of Doctor Leonard H. Mc Coy: now you'd spread my atoms all over the galaxy, boy? "

O'Conner smiled at the doctor and shrugged lightly.

"Well either that or try to blast our way out... which I don't think would end well. Less you think that the Artemis can last a few hours with out it's Chief Medical Officer.'Sides, I have done it a couple times before. It's about as safe as deatomizing and reatomizing kilometers away can be. It's just a one way trip, if I do it right it should fry most of the shuttle's systems."

Elliago raised eyes to the heavens:

" Just a one way trip, he says. "

His eyes fell back down to the First officer:

" If you are trying to be reassuring, stick to command and forget counselling, Mister O'Conner. "

He sighed, uncrossed his arms and shrugged:

" Well; death under falling debris, death by asphyxiation, death by hypothermia, death by decompression, death by disintegration... At least with the latter, I will know who to blame and who to haunt in the afterlife. "

With a strained smile, the Deltan rose from the co-pilot seat and went to stand on the shuttle's small transporter pad, hands behind his back in the attitude of the Starfleet officer at readiness.

he was far from feeling as confident as he postured. But the First Officer had touched the right nerve in him; risking his life in his capable hands was nothing compared to the needs of the crew in the endangered ship. Over five hundred lives were at stake, not just his own.

And saving lives was what he took an oath to do, both as a physician and as a Starfleet officer.

Deltans never broke oaths.

O'Conner grinned lightly at the doctor's response.

"Here we go" He said as Elliago moved in to position. Then after a couple of taps on the console at the back of the shuttle, they were caught up in the bright light of the transporter beam.

* * *

There was only silence and darkness... Then, the void was filled with stars...

and excruciating pain.

Kheren opened his eyes but there was no color. He couldn't hear or smell anything either and his head swam as if he was on a rough sea.

Injury... His antennae were retracted; a sure sign he had been hurt, since his mutation allowed this peculiar reflex no other Andorian could reproduce. It always happened when he had been taken out too swiftly to see it coming.

The last thing he remembered was the unendurable heat washing over him as he was fixing through a blur the unstable image of planetary debris closing in to crush the ship...

To cover it he suddenly realized, now remembering his desperate string of orders intent on pushing the ship through the wave of fire as swiftly and safely as possible before it consumed them.

And now, he could see and recognize the distinctive, old style bulkheads of the Artemis overhead.

Hey! it worked! he started to laugh... and was rewarded with a sharp pain in his elbow that turned his laugh into a groan.

Through his tear-filled facial eyes, he saw Doctor Lumquist come to his side. At first he heard nothing as the man started talking; but his body language was more than explicit to a master duellist. It plainly spoke of his concerns for his health and warnings about his arm.

As he relaxed, his cranial appendages finally came out of his skull, bringing back smell, sound and color. His head started to settle right up too, despite the pain shooting up from his right arm.

" You shouldn't try to get up now, Captain. " warned the physician. " Andorian bones may be mostly cartilage and about three times as strong as Human bones but, when they do break, they break pretty messily. Your last fall compounded the hairline fracture you had at launch when the bridge was... "

The heat... recalled Kheren before everything went swirling around, then completely dark. Undoubtedly, Doctor Lumquist in the CMO chair had been right on hand to prevent him from going from bad to worse; Andorians were also much more prone to go into shock than Humans, even from relatively minor injuries...

As he clenched his teeth against the throbbing pain, the Andorian captain looked around. Sickbay was packed full of injured personnel despite its vast size. And on the nearest beds, he recognised the unconscious forms of Chief Engineer Sangliar, Science officer Micheals and Security chief Alther.

" Where are O'Conner and Nasaro-Myth? "

It took a moment for Lumquist to finally answer:

" They... they never came back. "

It was now Kheren's turn to stay silent for a while. Finally, he clenched his jaw and swung sideways to sit on the edge of the biobed. The monitor over it started screaming almost as loud as his own skull. But he ignored both, and the alarmed doctor:

" Casualty report, Doctor. "

" Captain! You shouldn't... "

His silvery gaze now went straight at the squinting stare of the physician; his voice was as firm as his frozen expression:

" Am I medically relieved of duty, Doctor? "

" Err, No, but... "

" Report. "

Lumquist sighed and gave in:

" We have one hundred and thirty-six wounded, mostly second degree plasma burns, minor fractures and a few severe concussions; we have also seven crewmembers missing besides the Doctor and the First officer... and... sixty-one deaths... mostly in engineering. "

The captain closed his eyes as his antennae drooped down.

Well done, Captain Sir! You almost cleanly decimated your first command! he mocked himself without humor. But his expression of self-despising was clearly evident even on his rigid features, so Doctor Lumquist quickly added:

" We were lucky, Captain; without your last minute maneuver, we would *all* be dead by now. The Artemis would have been utterly destroyed... just like the Jeanne Mance. "

Just you wait... I can certainly do worse still... Kheren almost retorted spitefully. But he kept his doubts and self recrimination in check. There were still living people here; *he* was still alive. It was his responsibility now to do everything to bring them safely home.

" Anything about ship status? "

" As far as I know, we are adrift on low power levels, clear out of the anomaly it seems. All essential systems are functional at minimal levels and we are experiencing no further damage or perturbation. I don't have much more details I'm afraid... We've been rather busy over here. Fortunately, with all the medical and damage control set up already deployed, we managed much better than we should have. "

Dropping down to his feet, swaying a little, he let Lumquist reattach the sling he had worn earlier when they went out into space from Starbase 10.

" I've mended your arm but even with sedatives, your Andorian physiology will still register much pain if you move to sharply or try to use it. I could give you cordrazine... "

" No more drugs, Doctor. I need all my wits about me. And the Artemis needs a captain. Pain will be a good reminder of what this ship went through... and a proper motivation to take care of her. I will bare the ship's pain. "

Taking slow, measured steps to keep his head straight, the Andorian walked out with one last look at the disabled senior officers, thinking of the missing ones... and used his left arm to awkwardly tap his combadge as he exited sickbay:

" This is the captain. All personnel, report ship's full status diagnostics to your current department heads. Engineering's priority will be to restore power. Security will assist medical in taking care of all injured people and clear damaged areas. Science, prepare a full study of the anomaly and of our current position. Senior officers will come to the briefing room in two hours with a complete report. All hands look alive! "

He was gone for a moment already when Sangliar sat up on the medical table down in sickbay and, through the haze that was his returning vision, looked at the pandemonium about him. His memory was fuzzy from the incident and, shaking his head, he cleared the cobwebs; he remembered the fire and...

His beard!

Feeling his face, Sangliar felt smooth skin with no show of hair whatsoever.

Looking around, the Tellarite grabbed the nearest medical crewman he could reach and screamed:

"What happened to my face? what did you do to my beard?"

"Sir. We had to treat your plasma burns. I shaved off..."

The conversation was cut short when Sangliar punched the crewman in the face, knocking him to the ground unconscious. Looking up at the crowd that was now motionless and staring at him, the chief engineer kept screaming.

"Did anyone else touch my face? Anyone else touch my beard? We are in this kind of crisis and you want to send me to a barber?"

"Sir, we..."

Sangliar put up his hand and calmly shook the anger out of his system. He suddenly realized he was back on board the Artemis. More calm suddenly, he continued to speak.

"How many did we lose? How many from engineering?"

"Sir, we lost sixty-one, and I am sorry sir, but forty-nine of them were technicians."

The Tellarite felt his heart sink in his chest as he thought of the lives and the friends lost. He prided himself on knowing everyone in Engineering very personally, and he now had to deal with the personal loss.

Jumping off the table, Sangliar landed on the medical crewman who was still on the floor at his feet.

"Oh sorry, I forgot you were still there. "

Adjusting his medical robe, Sangliar ran to the console on the wall and tapped into the ship's inner communication system:

"This is Chief Engineer Sangliar. Any able-bodied engineer who can still walk, meet me in main engineering in five minutes. Our main priority is going to be ship's main power. Sangliar out"

Turning off the panel, he then turned towards the doctors.

"Well I am leaving, and I hope for your safety that none of you try and stop me."

Running out of sickbay, he headed towards main engineering for the massive task at hand. Sangliar was in such a hurry he failed to notice his hands shaking, or the blood under his robe.

" Sickbay to Captain. "

I barely reached the turbolift and they want me back already? sighed Kheren, tapping his communicator left-handed in response to the disembodied voice of Doctor Lumquist.

" Go ahead, doctor. "

" Captain: reporting Mister Sangliar back on duty. " The tone was curiously strained, almost grumpy... but that may have been only because the call had him think of Tellarites.

" Well, that was quick. " commented the Andorian. " They are a sturdy people to be sure. "

" You don't say, Sir. " back the sarcastic retort. " So much in fact that he left without a uniform... or before we could start the follicle stimulator treatment to grow his beard back. "

No beard? That should put a Tellarite in a dreadful mood... realized the Andorian. but instead of voicing his thought he said:

" That is dedication for you, Doctor. Thank you for the call. "

The doors to Engineering whooshed open and Sangliar entered in a frenzy like a dog on a sent.

"Sir you are bleeding..."

Before he could finish, the engineer raised his hand as if to throw another punch, only to cut himself off.

"Anyone see any blood?"

"What blood, Sir?"

Sangliar lowered his hand and nodded as a crewman threw him a small uniform. Removing his medical robes in front of what was left of his Engineering staff many of the crew turned away. Apparently seeing a half naked and bloody bandaged Tellarite is not something most humans enjoy.

"Report..."

Just then, Kheren's deep voice came over the intercom:

" Mister Sangliar, this is the Captain. When you will be through showing off in your undies, restore as much power as you can, get full ship diagnostics from your teams, then have them effect repairs when you will report to the briefing room in two hours... and in uniform. "

A small laugh spread through the crowd that had gathered as Sangliar touched his combadge.

"Captain, this is Lieutenant Sangliar. One step ahead of you on the uniform and already in Engineering with what is left of my team assembled."

" That is a pleasant surprise, Mister Sangliar. Now please make sure those technicians who survived this freak storm now do survive *you*. Kheren out."

The Andorian cut off communication and ordered outloud:

" Olympus. "

Obediently, the turbolift shot upward towards deck 1.

As expected... Sangliar encoded the nicknames of our ship's main sections already the Andorian mused, slightly amused. If anyone can keep her alive now, it's him.

That last thought sobered him sharply. They had lost so much already... so many...

A dozen levels below him, looking at the small gathering of Engineers, Sangliar adjusted his uniform, picked up a PADD off the table in front of him, and bellowed.

"You heard the Captain: let's go. I want level 3 diagnostics on all systems on my desk ten minutes ago. I need three core specialists to come with me so we can restore power... NOW!"

In a dash of yellow uniforms scattering, the Engineering party swarmed all over like a beehive that had just been attacked.

At that moment, others in sickbay also regained their wits about them after the incredible ordeal they went through.

Kelsey groaned on the bed; eyes opened slowly, head ringing as the Kalthurian sat up.

Doctors appeared at the androgyn's side but Alther waved them off, getting off the bed and stretching. Kelsey tapped on the combadge:

"Kelsey Alther reporting for duty Captain. I'm heading to the bridge to check the tactical systems" said the Chief of Security, speaking while walking out the med bay and heading for the bridge.

" Acknowledged. " was the curt answer from the commanding officer of the Artemis.

Kelsey arrived on the bridge and took over from the delta shift Human officer who was currently stationed there and began checking tactical systems.

The Kalthurian began muttering expletives as readouts about the issues with the ship's tactical systems scrolled on the monitoring screen:

"Shields offline, armor compromised, phasers offline, auto-targeting offline, have to fire torpedoes manually..."

The list went on.

Kelsey almost missed a strange reading while checking the sensors; but curiously got the better of the Kalthurian's annoyance while checking out the signal. Kelsey tried different types of filters to try and get some sense of the reading before the chroniton filter allowed finally to see what it was:

Another starship.

The warp signature took a moment to be cleaned out, but once recorded, it was unmistakable:

a Klingon Vor'cha battleship..

Kelsey sighed.

This was not what they needed right now.

The tactical chief of the Artemis began a scan of the warship, gathering as much information on it as possible despite its cloaked status and the condition their sensors were in. It took a while and a lot of inference, but a satisfactory evaluation finally emerged:

Of course, it too had gone through the storm to end up where they were... whatever it was. Like them, it was bathed in chronitons and nucleonics, the very reason why they noticed them despite their activated camouflage. The sturdy basic design of the battleship had allowed it to survive in a better condition than the Artemis, but it was still in a sorry state. Their main torpedo launcher was even blocked by some form of dense debris... and all their weapons systems were offline.

Alther let out a sigh of relief at the fact they wouldn't have to fight the Klingons... at least not yet. But then, the tactical officer noticed that their cloak was locked down, draining out what little was left of the life energy the ship extremely quickly. Most likely, because they had first to disable their leeching cloaking device, it meant that the minimum time for repairing their ship would extend if they simply wanted to survive first.

Kelsey urgently called Kheren. The Kalthurian needed to see him. Now.

Kheren came out of the ready room as soon as his tactical officer called. His antennae were still faintly buzzing after the storm encounter, but he could nevertheless clearly hear the urgency in the voice of the Kalthurian.

As he went through the corridor and then the door leading to the bridge, he saw the androgyn at the tactical station. Alther was looking alternatively at the strangely blackened viewing screen and its faintly stormy distant horizon and the furiously blinking lights and screens of the console where a ship's outline flashed intermittently.

Body language told him his tactical chief was still a bit reeling from coming out of sickbay too soon. *Commendable*]he thought. The Andorian could certainly understand dedication beyond mere physical inconvenience, not to mention that it played well in the investigated lieutenant's favor.

And besides, the captain was certainly not leading by example as far as medical advice was concerned...

So he stepped down to the large console to meet Alther and simply asked:

" What is it, Lieutenant? "

Kelsey turned to Kheren as he came up at tactical:

"There's a Klingon Vor'Cha class battlecruiser out there; it's in a similar shape as we are, but slightly better off due to the sturdier design of Klingon warships."

" A Klingon ship? " wondered the Andorian, obviously taken aback. " Here? Any specifics on their status? Have they locked weapons? "

To answer succinctly, Alther continued:

"Any power they can restore will take at least eight hours of work and they don't pose an immediate threat as their cloak is locked down; meaning it's draining power at an alarming rate."

Kelsey looked at her commanding officer:

"What do you think, Sir?"

The captain of the Artemis seemed not to hear for a moment, then finally said in a pensive tone:

" We know cloaked ships are encroaching the tri-border sector. That is why Starbase 10 was erected near here to begin with. This one must have been caught like we were by the unpredictable trajectory of this... storm. "

He looked down at the tactical readouts and frowned, the only facial expression his too few facial muscles could easily convey:

" There is an awful lot of chroniton emissions over them; no wonder their cloak didn't mask them completely."

He suddenly turned towards the science station and the relief officer manning it:

" Ensign, record and analyse tactical data with astrometrics and particle scanners and send the result to Lieutenant Mic... Lieutenant Irksos." he corrected, remembering the Caitan chief of science was still out of commission in sickbay.

Kelsey looked at Kheren with concern:

"While they may not be able to fight us, they are losing power quite rapidly. "

Kheren looked back at the Kalthurian. He would have smiled if he had been able too.

Good for you Kelsey. Concern for sentient life, and that of a declared enemy no less... Starfleet Command will be shocked at your sudden enlightenment... but then again, that is how it is supposed to happen, isn't it?

" Ship to ship, Lieutenant."

Waiting for the androgyn to confirm a channel open, the Andorian stood straight, one hand behind his back in formal stance despite his slinged arm and said in a firm voice:

" Klingon vessel: this is Captain Kheren of the USS Artemis. "

There was no response.

" Klingon vessel: we know you are there. We also know that you are experiencing a critical power drain of your systems. We offer assistance. We can beam you technical and medical crews and supplies. "

He was about to repeat his message when the viewer shifted to a static filled image that finally settled with difficulty into the image of a typical gloomy, hazy Klingon ship's bridge... and the dark, lumpy and bloody face of a bearded Klingon male:

" Federation ship! Any one attempting to board the *To'Kath* will be executed! "

Then, the transmission was cut off abruptly.

" You're welcome. " told Kheren to the now blackened, empty screen.

Mere moments later, Doctor Nasaro-Myth materialized in the very middle of sickbay, to the shock of the wounded and nurses around.

" Please state the nature of the medical emergency. "

He couldn't restrain himself from seizing the moment of his sudden appearance in the medical center in such a peculiar fashion. It would defuse tension in the overcrowded room he had expected to land in; and it calmed his frayed nerves too.

Humor IS the best medecine he told himself.

" Doctor! Where... How... ? "

" That leaves what, when and who; and I want answers to all of those, people. Report on current crew status and medical deployment. "

At the same time, O'Conner also materialized on the darkened, powered down bridge.

"Hey, it worked." the First Officer mumbled to himself as he looked around.

Then, he stepped to the side to get his balance back as a short dizziness spell hit him and then he rubbed the back of his head. The bump there from the trip still obviously affected him.

The shimmer of a transporter beam surprised Kheren; normally his electromagnetic sensitive antennae would have picked up the lock of the beam this near him, even before the first telltale lights of teleportation would flicker in the air. But now, he was no more sensitive to it than any non-gheloid.

Not to mention impaired hearing, anosmia, colorblindness and dizziness endlessly succeeding one another in a most nauseating way.

Michael O'Conner finally noticed the stares from the bridge crew.

" Uuhh..." He smiled lightly and then saluted the captain. "Permission to come aboard?"

" You look rather small and pale for a Klingon. " greeted the Andorian, replacing the sidearm in its compartment and standing up to nod at his First officer. I dare to hope our good Doctor came back with you?

Before the man could answer or say "Klingon?", the tactical board lit up before Lieutenant Alther.

Sensors still working noticed a small explosion. What was left of the transport ship floating in the distance detonated in the last throes of its depleted systems.

" Our Imperial friends out there will not like this." grumbled the Andorian with a frown.

Noticing the confused look on Michael O'Conner's soot-covered face, he said:

" You guess we are going to be quite busy for the next hours, Number One. If medical clears you, I am sorry to say that rest will have to wait: coordinates all repairs and personnel reshuffling to make us operational again ASAP. And have both engineering and science report on... whatever that doorway to hell we went through. Then come to the briefing room in... he looked at the nav chronometer, ninety minutes. "

He leveled his silvery eyes at the tactical chief :

" Lieutenant Alther: well done. Keep an eye on our jolly neighbors out there. "

As he turned to walk back himself to his command office, Kheren glanced sideways at his First Officer:

" Welcome back. "

"Aye, Sir" O'Conner gave him a salute as he walked back to his office.

"Klingons? Wonder if they went through as well..." He said to no one, as he headed to the science station.

"Report, Lieutenant." O'Conner ordered to the young human officer.

She jumped lightly, then turned to the soot-covered human standing over her.

"Uhh.. " She paused at the sight, then cleared her throat. "Well long range sensors are still out sir, but with probes we were able to get some short range sensors working. 'We are trying to use astrometric charts to figure where we are. But...."

"But what?"

"Uhh... well, none of it seems to match any known star clusters."

"That's just great... what about the storm?"

"Well, it's still here, Sir, curiously reduced in size but it's still expanding, albeit much more slowly and evenly than before."

"Okay; first thing we need to do is to come up with ideas on how to tackle that storm."

Leaving the science officer to her work, Michael turned back towards the long double station in front of the command seats.

"Hmmm... Lieutenant Alther, does the Klingon ship still have weapons online? "

Kelsey's head shook at O'Conner.

"They are in just as bad a shape as we are, if not worse" said the Kalthurian, handing over a PADD with downloaded tactical information. " Here is everything I know about the current situation on it, specs of the ship, it's current status... "

The blue-skinned Lieutenant continued to list things on the PADD before finally stopping.

At the same moment, PADDs in engineering were also going from hands to hands.

Sangliar looked over the data interface on the main engineering console on the wall and thumbed through the stack of PADDs in front of him.

"Well... good to see the ship can keep in one piece despite having everything so broken" Sangliar thought.

Entering the last of the diagnostic information into the computer, Sangliar sat up, took a sip from a flask on his desk, and rubbed his eyes. The numerous red blocks and alarms on the panel in front of him showed the massive amount of damage and Engineering work that would be needed. Power was the priority however, and the Chief Engineer of the Artemis would have to work on that first.

"Alright listen up. The internal power matrix is fried, the phase coils are burnt out, the isolinear network is on back up, and two of the warp core stabilizers are showing signs of minor fractures. Other than that, the power should be back on in no time."

Rubbing the smoothness on his face, Sangliar shook his head, visualizing the massive task at hand.

"First things first. On the PADDs in front of you all is a list of all the supplies we have. Everything else we need we are going to have to borrow from elsewhere. Take it from everything but replicators and life support systems."

Standing from his desk, Sangliar tossed the PADDs to the Engineering team at the brief and continued to give instructions.

"First, we are going to take the phase coils from transporter room 2 and use them as a primary back up. The isolinear network can be repaired, but it will have to be repaired chip by chip."

Pointing at three human Engineering crewmen, Sangliar continued.

"I want you three to take sealant and anything you can use for isolation and get to work on those fractures on the warp core stabilizers. Once that is done, we are going to run the filter checks and the dilithium matrix power conversion subroutines."

Adjusting his uniform as if to show his short stature, Sangliar almost laughed as he finished:

"As for me, as the smallest one here, I am going to crawl under the deck plates. The damage to the internal power matrix has caused charring on the backplane assemblies and circuit matrix. The cards themselves will have to be replaced, along with a manual power reroute of all secondary over compensators. If anyone needs me... I will be in the floor. "

A laugh came from the small group.

"Well? what are you waiting for? Let's move out!"

In a frenzy, the Engineering crew scattered, grabbing tools, PADDs, and various gear as they ran to the parts of Engineering and out the door to other parts of the ship.

Sangliar touched his combadge.

"Captain, this is Lieutenant Sangliar: I am commencing repairs on ships power and hope to have an update within the hour. She is bad tho, Captain... I may be able to only return fifty percent on the short term."

In his office, Kheren raised a snowy eyebrow listening to the Tellarite's preliminary report.

Bad indeed... for you to be so concise and even forgetting to throw in any respectful insult...

" Understood. Do your best, Chief... as little as we both know it will be. "

Showing proper respect to his senior officer, Tellarite style, would go a long way to stimulate his proficiency, as outstanding as it was in truth already. A starship didn't run on brain and warp power only: it ran even more with the power of the heart. That's what made crews like those of legendary starships like Enterprise and Voyager... and this USS Artemis, once. The Andorian now understood this at least.

" Report ship status and summary of the storm's technical issues at the briefing. I will need to know all that this ship can and cannot do against this phenomenon. Kheren out. "

The engineering staff had it's hands full with damage control and restoring the Artemis to operational status. In sickbay and cargo bay 1, the medical teams were fast at work saving lives and bringing the crew back on its feet. All the while, the tactical and security department prepared for all scenarios involving the Klingon threat, from boarding assault to starship combat.

Activity was no less frantic in the science department. The state of the art astrometrics lab was the hub of all the excitement. With chief of science M'Rall Micheals out of commission with a severe concussion, Lieutenant Junior grade Valencia Irksos was assuming overall authority and coordination.

Fortunately for the USS Artemis, her field of expertise was astrophysics and spatio-temporal mechanics. It would have taken months, if not years for a general science team to just figure out where they were or how they actually got there. Even superior intellects like Vulcans would have needed days, if not weeks to logically explore all valid hypotheses and determine the most probable one...

But Valencia Irksos was Human. As with many Humans faced with a life or death situation, her mind did leaps of logic, random associations fueled by intense emotions that sparked that most surprising aptitude of all:

Intuition.

From what she had experienced on the bridge and her own personal knowledge, she focused the physicists, the astronomers and all the other researchers along a particular direction of thinking and analysing.

It had taken them all but less than two hours.

When came the time to report to the captain in the briefing room with the other bridge officers, she had, if not a fully detailed one, at least a clear answer about what happened, where they were... and maybe if, and how, they could get back home.

She exited the turbolift that led directly to the bridge, took the latest sensor readings to input the data on her PADD into the ship's computer for integration and final analysis, checked the results and downloaded it back to her PADD.

Valencia nodded and smiled a reassurance she did not feel to Vulcan Lieutenant Junior Grade T'Pol filling in for her on the bridge and went to the other door, through the short corridor beyond and up to the second lefthand door to enter the briefing room.

The Captain was already there, waiting.

CHAPTER 5 ; FIREWALL

In the USS Artemis sickbay, Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth leaned back in his chair, enjoying finally a quiet moment in his office.

They had been incredibly lucky.

There had been a lot of people suffering plasma burns, concussions and a few sprained or broken body parts; but nothing that couldn't be routinely handled, even if it was here on an inordinately large scale. Having being on full medical disaster alert when the rescue call for the Jeanne Mance occurred, everything had already been in place on this big starship to immediately contain health hazards and medical and psychological emergencies when disaster then struck the Artemis herself.

Being barely out of the last Borg war, medical crew efficiency and preparedness had also been exceptionally able to deal with what amounted to a bonafide shipwide catastrophe in Starfleet medical regulations book. There were more than a few commendations now registered for many of his staff.

And most of all, having only sixty-one dead crewmembers over the five hundred and fifty on board, and no civilian casualty to report, all this after going through Hell's Gate - literally - was nothing short of a miracle.

Elliago wasn't sure how this miracle had been accomplished. There were rumors all over sickbay and the ship that there has been some kind of armoring made; others about an artificial solar flare pushing them out of danger...

It was both confusing and exhilarating. The USS Artemis had been declared destroyed more times maybe than any other Starfleet ship... And yet again, it had escaped certain destruction.

The Phoenix would have been a better name for her. concluded the Deltan with a smile. *Maybe, if we get out of this mess, the captain will have earned the priviledge of asking for a recommissioning under the name... Like Captain Sisko got for the Sao Paulo back in the Dominion war...*

His musings were interrupted by the computer:

" Briefing session scheduled in 10 minutes, on Olympus. "

Now who's the comedian who programmed this thing to say this? frowned the Doctor, before smirking. *Oh yeah... that was me.*

With a grin, Elliago got up, glanced one last time at his report to further memorize it and went out of his office with a leisury stride.

" Doctor Lumquist: call me if there are any near death experiences in here. Otherwise, I don't make house calls. "

Not acknowledging the headshake of his assistant or the muffled laughs of a few nurses, he exited sickbay and went straight to the secondary turbolift.

" Hum... Olympus? " he ordered outloud. And as he half-expected, the cabin shot up softly to deposit him right before the briefing room door.

Entering, he saw the Assistant Chief of Science Valencia Irksos reviewing the content of her PADD before the holographic projector of the conference table, and Captain Kheren standing one hand at his back and the other flexed in front of his belly because of the arm sling he wore, looking pensively at the eerie blackness beyond the transparency.

" Funny... Even being a Frenchman, I never pictured Napoleon Bonaparte to be *that* blue. " he said jokingly as he took a seat besides Irksos and waited for O'Conner, Sangliar and Alther to join them.

The Chief medical officer and the acting Chief of Science were chatting softly from their neighboring seats, both sipping Tarkalian Tea they had offered to the captain also, but he had silently declined.

He was even more allergic to caffeine, even in such a minute dose, than other Andorian were.

And exciting his nerves at this moment was not a good idea to start with. He was growing restless as time passed by in this... whatever it was that they were now in.

With a curt gesture, he activated his combadge.

In the engineering section, Sangliar at that moment still worked frantically to remove and replace every chip from his bag. Working in the dark and by feel was hard, especially for someone with rough hands.

The Tellarite Engineer pulled a chip from his pouch, felt it to ensure it was the one he wanted, and then replaced it inside the isolinear chip slot. Yelling through the floor, he pounded on the panel above him.

"Try it now! "

Before Sangliar could finish his sentence, arcs and sparks began to form on the slip slot in front of him, illuminating the small cramped space he was in with a faint blue glow.

"Cut the power. Turn it off! Turn it off!"

The sparks ceased; he reached into the panel in front of him and removed a burnt and charred isolinear chip. Reaching into the bag, he grabbed the last chip he had and placed it into the system.

"*Last one... this' better work.*" Sangliar thought apprehensively.

"Ok, try it again."

A brief pop of blue spark exploded from the panel before it started to emit low humming noise. The Artemis' acting Chief of Engineering closed the panel, activated the control pad to his left and watched as the lights in the small space he was in glowed with life.

The muffled sound of cheering could be heard through the floor above Sangliar's head. Crawling out of the space backwards, he poked his head out in time to see the warp core roar back to life.

"Report."

"Sir, systems are showing a power increase of forty seven percent."

Climbing out of the hole, the Tellarite walked over to a the control panel at the base of the warp core and started to hit button as fast as gruff stubby fingers could. He watched and almost smiled as the indicator warnings faded from the system and the power reading rose.

Turning to address the gathered Engineers, Sangliar spoke.

"Alright, listen up. The power matrix is stable and the phase inducers are online. What I am going to need you to do is continue repairs on the actual power network so we can distribute power. I want anyone not currently tasked with structural repairs to realign the isolinear matrix for a power conversion. We are at about fifty percent maximum power right now and we have to stabilize the system first; then, we can boost the remaining power. A level 3..."

Sangliar was cut off by his commbadge being activated:

" Mister O'Conner; Mister Sangliar; Mister Alther: report to the briefing room. "

Sangliar picked up a PADD and began to enter information then touched his combadge and responded.

"Aye Sir, on my way. Maximum power is at fifty percent and rising. Give me a moment to finish assigning the remaining repairs to power and I am on my way."

Throwing the PADD at the crewman to his left Sangliar continued.

"The instructions and assignments are in there. I want work to begin immediately and an update in thirty minutes. I could do what.s on that PADD in less then two hours so, you all have one."

Sangliar turned walked to the door of Engineering and, as the large blast doors opened, stepped out on his way to the briefing room.

O'Conner looked up from his mess of padds as he walked swiftly down the corridor from the bridge to the briefing room:

"Already here, Sir. Just putting the finishing touches on the new shifts."

Kelsey walked in as the combadge beeped, bringing up a smile:

"Brillant timing" said the Androgyn, sitting down at the briefing table and looking around, taking in the surroundings.

" That is *your* opinion, Lieutenant. " retorted the captain without even turning from the window.

The Kalthurian noticed Kheren injured and thought then:

The day had been long... if there was even something called a day in where they were... and the tactical chief just wanted to rest. But the threat of the Klingons allowed for no rest.

When Sangliar and O'Conner entered and seated themselves, Kheren went back to the old style triangular table that occupied the center of the room and sat beside his First officer.

It seems like the original layout of this Ambassador class vessel had kept a few 23rd century leftovers like this table; technical and security officers were thus seated on one side, science and medical on another and command ones at the third, making clear and easy ordering an open discussion,,, and lessening the hierarchy dampening effect on the flow of ideas and speech a modern elongated table inevitably caused.

Here, everyone was equally near the captain's ear and the ship commander could closely address any of his senior officers on who's expertise and experiences all his decisions relied on.

Wonder why Froud kept it. thought the Andorian for a moment. *I would have guessed it was not his style of management... Or maybe... he never saw it in the first place.*

He lifted his head and forgot about it; there was a crisis more important at the moment than furniture choices. Anyway, he liked it.

" People, we have been lucky so far. " he said. " Despite sabotage and loss of life, we rescued a distressed ship and saved civilians from a hazardous area. Despite being in a dangerous situation with failing ressources, we avoided complete death and destruction and found ourselves... here. All of you and your own teams showed dedication, courage and ressourcefulness in both those instances. But now, we have to show even more if we are to get safely back home. And that will be our top priority."

He let a moment pass to allow everyone to get ready before he spoke again:

" Let us find answers by asking questions. First: what was that, where are we and how did we get here? "

All eyes immediately went to Lieutenant Valencia Irksos. She activated the holodisplay at the center of the table, a definitely state-of-the-art data device replacing the antiquated three-screened triangular monitor that

used to be on such old-style conference tables.

Between them all, a revolving ring of ever shifting, crackling fire with a hollow center appeared. Everyone that had been on the bridge immediately recognized it. Data poured around it as the petite dark-skinned woman started to explain:

"Astrophysicists call it: the "Azimuth Horizon" anomaly... don't ask me why: You'd feel like a first year cadet again at your first stellar cartography course. I know how much most of you must have enjoyed it. "

She didn't wait for any reaction and just went on:

"Sensors first picked up a zone of energy and matter in a state of flux: something like a powerful plasma storm but expanding in an unusual spiderweb pattern and extraordinarily fast... just shy of the Hobus Supernova that destroyed Romulus and Remus and shattered the Romulan Empire. "

The view went into closer detail as she continued:

"Data analysis: one light year in diameter and expanding; mass reads zero, not even residual gravitons, except for debris at the periphery... and we all know about those. Rate of expansion is a tenth of a percent of a light year per solar day, but grows exponentially. Speed is constant at warp 9.99997, a speed only a massless thing like a subspace signal can achieve. Power output equivalent to a force 10 shockwave. "

"Alright, I am no physicist, started Doctor Nasaro-Myth, frowning, but if that thing is so big, so powerful and so fast, how come we have such a hard time detecting it? "

Lieutenant Irksos almost sighed in frustration as she answered:

"Long range sensor scan didn't pick it up because it fluctuates in and out of our space-time continuum and across subspace in an erratic manner, and it's radiofrequency is exactly like that of the universe's background radiation. Short range sensors actually detect it only when it flickers into normal space. "

With a finger, she made the scrolling data more prominent:

"It exists within multiple subspace frequencies, sometimes only one, a few or all at once, sometimes dropping out into normal space; that is why it goes faster than light and is barely detectable until very close. Time dilatation effect and excessive energy outpour distort sensor readings. And, no electrons nor gravitons are registering from it. "

The Deltan's head cocked to one side:

"Meaning? "

"The phenomena has no polarity and no mass. Yet, it behaves in most aspects like plasma, which is a state between energy and matter... and thus should have both. "

She altered the display and went back to show the visual of the anomaly:

"The corona is definitely plasmic, like supernova ejections, but caught in a vortex like a typical ion storm... without any polarity to explain such movement. As I said, electromagnetic and gravimetric readings are only present at the fringe; no polarity nor mass readout at all at the central point. "

She activated a zooming function and a portion of the fringe was enhanced; a view of dark objects caught in a swirl of fire they already knew quite too well.

"Those polarized masses are fragments of planetary bodies... and here and there even residue of artificial origin. These are the source of gravimetrics within the anomaly and they have compressed themselves to a neutronic state. This means that entire planets, maybe even stars, have been caught and destroyed by the anomaly already."

Captain Kheren immediately opened wide his silvery eyes as his antennae jerked up:

"Computer: Are there any inhabited systems in this anomaly's projected trajectory? "

The view switched to one of a star sector where the flaming ring was linked to a numbered star the view zoomed to, until it focused on a single typically blue and white M class world. At the same time, the soft, calm voice of the computer droned:

" Planet Neural; sentient population of one point six-eight million class 1 Humanoids; social level 0 prehistorical, cultural level 1 pre-antiquity, technological level 4 pre-industrial... "

" Computer, interrupted the Andorian: ETA of analysed anomaly with planet. "

" Current estimates, standard time: sixty-six days. "

Silence gripped the room as they watched the fragile orb, looking so much like the homeworld of many around the table.

The Andorian for his part leaned forward, antennae and eyes lowering to the image as if looking at a dangerous opponent. His voice was low and measured:

" Is this... anomaly... natural... or artificial? "

Everyone understood the question: a natural phenomenon would condemn the inhabitants of Neural, a pre-warp culture, under the strict non-interference policy of the Prime Directive.

But if it was not...

The acting chief of science looked at him as she explained;

" Sir, we theorize that the anomaly is a discharge from the collision of time and anti-time, thus the high level of chronitons, rupturing matter and anti-matter; and thus too, the high level of free nucleons and the absence of any matter to produce electromagnetic and gravimetric properties. The closest analogy to it are some recent theories about the Big Bang that created the universe. However, the subspace displacement is beyond any natural cause known to science. "

" Clarify. " ordered Kheren rather bluntly.

" Possibility of natural origin is low, Sir: no natural, non-sentient phenomenon can travel faster than light, especially if it has any mass at all. But tachyons, muons and other such massless particles never behave in such a way or on such a massive scale. Also, no energy release feeds on itself. There is no mass at the core, and not enough floating matter in the corona to create and keep a phenomena of this magnitude active, let alone expanding. Finally, there is no substance known, not even antimatter, that can account for what is observed here. "

The commanding officer of the Artemis didn't say a word at this. Asserting his responsibilities earlier, he had come across something that *could* account for this...

The Omega Molecule.

He shivered at the very name.

But he could not discuss it... not even with his First Officer.

His voice was deadly serious when he said instead:

" Subspace weaponry is known to cause destruction like this, throughout subspace itself, feeding on it; we know now that the Hobus supernova that destroyed the Romulan Empire was due to failed experiments in this banned technology. "

" Yes, Sir, started to agree Valencia Irksos before adding: but there was no report to Starfleet of any such research since then... And readings so far are not consistent with subspace weaponry results; the scale of it is even beyond the Hobus catastrophe's worst projections. "

" What I don't understand is how this thing can move around like that and threaten the entire sector! " exclaimed Elliago.

And to this the science officer answered:

" It is expanding along subspace fractures. "

In the deep silence that followed, she highlighted a web of crisscrossing silvery lines across the visualized sector of space. It was plainly evident that the ring of fire's crackling tendrils were nothing else than its energies coursing along those lines like a forest fire on tree branches.

The voice of Captain Kheren filled the room like a judgment from the Heavens themselves:

" We are responsible. "

After a short pause O'Conner spoke up, to break the silence, and firmly stated to the crew and the captain:

"And we will fix this. First, we need ideas; did your teams come up with any ideas on how to stop this, Lieutenant Irksos?"

The Science Lieutenant looked at the First officer, shaking her head:

" We have several theories, Sir, all incomplete at this time. The only fact we can ascertain for now is that, whatever means might be found, no one ship has more than a fraction of the power necessary to attempt countering a phenomenon like this. Stopping a supernova would look easier at this point... and the anomaly is still expanding, growing... because, as the captain pointed out, we made it possible for it to do so. "

" What do you mean, we? " exclaimed Elliago, looking around. " We did not start that brushfire! "

" Maybe not, Doctor, said Kheren, but we made it the menace that it is now. "

Leaning forward with his good left arm on the table, he ordered:

" Computer: expanding view from anomaly's point of origin, following projected path over a standard year, one standard day per second. "

The tridimensional display at the center of the triangular table expanded to follow the rapid growth of the fire ring at its very heart. It was both beautiful and mesmerizing at the same time, looking like a snowflake of incandescent flame expanding in all directions in a haphazard manner.

To the native of an ice world like the Andorian Captain, it was more like as if looking in slow motion at the ice of a frozen lake cracking under his weight.

And it was just as ominous and horrifying.

On the display, it took it barely over a minute to extend fiery fingers to the nearest star, where the fragile blue-white orb of the planet Neural was still displayed, like the first victim to be burned at the stake.

Another minute later, the monstrous fiery storm had expanded all across the entire sector.

Another minute after that, its flames had reached the heart of the Federation..

Barely more than five minutes later, the first tendril of fire had started expanding beyond the farthest end of the galaxy.

Now, captain Kheren spoke:

" Granted, there are some naturally occurring subspace fractures. But notice how the storm's path moves almost like a malignant thing towards every populated center... along the travelling routes of starships. Most of the subspace fractures in our part of the galaxy are the result of centuries of warp travel. Only in the last few decades did the Federation start using modified warp engines undamaging to subspace. No assurances do we have that other warp cultures did the same."

he pointed at the heart of the phenomenon and his dark blue finger circled it:

" This sector alone we are in is at the convergence of Federation, Klingon and Romulan borders... and who knows how many others pass through here, like Orions slavers and Ferengi smugglers. Bottom line is: whoever or whatever started this is irrelevant as far as our responsibility is; we still made the path for it to move and expand... and threaten lives... if not our entire universe. "

He looked at all his officers in turn to make sure they understood the magnitude of the threat... and their duty regarding it. Then he said:

" Our first duty is to warn Starfleet before it is too late. One ship can certainly not stop a disaster of this magnitude alone. But we must report it... before it becomes too late to attempt anything. "

He lifted his left arm towards the big transparencies looking outside:

" So the next question is: where are we... and how do we get back ? "

Again, Valencia Irksos took control of the holographic projection. A flashing dot appeared right in the empty middle of the fiery ring. The image zoomed in rapidly towards that point of light, until even the storm went out of the edges of the display. Moving further in, the visual went into a void, then something like a bubble of mirroring water and finally settled on a starfield where a tiny model of the USS Artemis floated peacefully.

" Computer: location of the USS Artemis. " she then asked out loud.

" Unknown. " answered the disembodied voice.

" Explain. " the acting Chief of Science ordered.

" Unable to identify detectable star configurations. "

The dark-skinned woman looked at the other officers and finally into the silvery eyes of her blue-skinned commanding officer:

" As you all well know, we may have explored but barely 15 % of our galaxy... but we have charted over 75% of it over the last five hundred years of Earth history alone. Vulcans and other older spacefaring cultures even more. The fact that the astrometric system can't even locate one familiar point of reference to fix our position can mean only one thing... "

Doctor Nasaro-Myth finished for her:

" I know, like Humans used to say: we're not in Kansas anymore. "

That lifted more than a few eyebrows... and not all in amusement.

" Colorfully put, Doctor, acknowledged Lieutenant Irksos, but essentially correct. We are not in our own galaxy anymore. And as far as we can tell from astrometric preliminary results... not even in our own universe."

" Don't tell me we breached into that Mirror Universe we heard so much about... " began the Deltan in growing alarm. But the scientist shook her head:

" No Doctor; the Mirror Universe has the exact same configuration as our own. It is a parallel reality. This, her hand went to the windows, this is completely different... and much smaller. "

" What? " exclaimed the Doctor for the benefit of everyone.

" Our long range scans show a... an edge to this... place. It is moving away as the expanding movement of its stars show on spectral scanners, just like in our own... but our farthest scans are not lost in the distance as in ours, but reflected back... Something which can only be explained by some kind of barrier... made out of nothingness. Not a void, but utter non-existence. "

It took sometime for more than a few to grasp the meaning of such a discovery. Finally the captain asked;

This faint glow we see outside? "

" Negative, Sir. This glow is the edge of the storm we went through. It is smaller here, obviously because there are only naturally made subspace fractures for it to expand through... But it *is* here too, in this... pocket universe. "

Again, they all took a moment of silence to reflect upon their discovery. And again, the Captain spoke first:

" As fascinating as this discovery might be, our priorities remain unchanged: we must first get out of here and make it as fast as possible back to starbase 10 in order to warn Starfleet Command. "

He waited for the obviously disappointed science officer to nod in acknowledgement before continuing:

" Now the next question is: how will we do this? "

He turned towards the left and the gold-uniformed officers sitting there:

" Chief Sangliar: what is the Artemis' status and what are we risking by taking her back into that... storm? "

Looking up from the PADD he was working on, Sangliar scratched the chin where his beard used to be, concentrated slightly to decide how to word his many thoughts, and spoke up.:

"Sir, the odds of us getting through are low at best. It works like this, and I am only going to explain this once so pay attention. "

When he was sure his veiled jab had the desired effect, he went on:

" Ok... first traveling long distances is going to be tough because of the atomic and subatomic forces creating a matter to antimatter reaction, which would also increase exponentially the closer the ship gets to it; that would create a cascading effect building up on the ship's hull, creating enough structural damage to result in a warp core breach. The only way thing I can think of if to avoid a complete collapse of the core is to completely shut it down with a level 10 force field around it."

Stopping to breathe, the Tellarite paused and then continued:

"The problem with that theory is that even with the depleted power reserves, you will still have a full system power shutdown. "

He punched up a tridimensional ship schematics for everyone to follow on the table's holodisplay as he went into more details:

" As for navigation, now that is going to be the tricky part. Impulse power would decrease the closer we got to the energy signatures from the anomaly because of the lack of electromagnetism within the anomaly itself. Our backup batteries, being heavily shielded and unconnected until actual use, will be unaffected; however, we could only recharge them out of the anomaly's range. I would say beyond three hundred thousand kilometers at least. "

The display automatically highlighted the relevant systems on the holographic image as he went:

" Our biggest challenge is going to be main thrusters. Thrusters are not powerful enough to oppose the gravimetric forces created by the debris swirling at the nebula's center. However, they would be much more effective within because of the total lack of gravitons in there to oppose their own thrust. Thrusters in there could only be powered by batteries, and if we have the batteries powering any main systems they will drain before we can ever exit the anomaly."

Entering some info on his PADD. Chief Sangliar then explained:

"The risks to the ship's hull are what have the most worried tho, Sir. The hull itself will be exposed to temperatures and irradiation all over the spectrum; I mean there are parts of the anomaly that kick out the radiation of a small star. The direct stress and impact on exposed hull plates will damage the external hull plates and could lead to a small fracture, or even a full hull breach. With the radiation we are talking about, Sir, there is no way for any damage control team to do external repairs on the ship. And on top of that, we also have direct impact to worry about once at the fringe, Sir."

Watching the series of puzzled looks around the table, the Chief Engineer brought up a small graphic of the debris in the anomaly and the ship.

"You see, every object has mass and mass attracts through gravity. In microgravity free environment like this one, our ship risks attracting any object less dense and lighter than us. That means our own gravitational field will lead us to get knocked around by objects attracted to us. With limited power to the main deflector array, I guarantee you we will feel some of them."

" You *do* work on this ship, Lieutenant Sorripto. This is a pleasant surprise. "

Kheren knew such mildly insulting insinuation would be worth more than any thank you to the Tellarite. And he needed him primed and focused on his work; he knew how deeply unsettling his beard loss was to one of his kind, even as temporary as it was until regenerative treatment was to be applied. And thinking about this kept the Andorian's mind to his most pressing concern: the welfare of the crew:

" Doctor: report on crew status and effects on another passage through the anomaly. "

" All the effects of a standard plasma discharge were reported and treated. answered the Deltan, not bothering to show dry, bland statistical charts on the tridimensional viewer: severe burns and radiation poisoning from limited or distant exposure, outright disintegration from direct close contact. An equal number were also suffering from concussions, fractures and other impact trauma following our bumpy joyride. You have seen the casualty list already... We have lost eleven percent of our crew, twenty-nine percent more are incapacitated and an added twenty-eight percent victims but recovering and able to return to duty."

Elliago looked at each officer in turn as he finished:

" Translated from Doctorish to Federation Standard, Captain Sir: we've been lucky. "

" I think we are all aware of that, Doctor." retorted the captain, sitting back so that his injured arm would not painfully rest on the table. " What can we expect when we will go through it again? "

The Chief medical Officer almost made a face, but like everyone else, he knew it was not a matter of choice. So, he refrained from any comment about wisdom to answer:

" Essentially the same; but, this time, we can lessen it and especially avoid any more loss of life with proper precautions. However, the peculiarities of the storm causes several debilitating effects on the crew under prolonged exposure, even within a starship's shielded environment. "

As he spoke, Doctor Nasaro-Myth looked directly at each person in the room concerned by his next words:

" Humans and many humanoid species are showing signs of chronic fatigue and stress from the lack of electromagnetic contact. Bone and muscle tissue degradation is also starting to appear from the absence of gravimetric forces, although controllable to a degree as long as artificial gravity holds. All in all, it is much like what early space explorers had to cope with centuries ago when they attempted the first orbital flights. "

" Recommendations? " asked the commanding officer of the Artemis.

" A highly concentrated diet of calcium and protein supplemented by injections will be prescribed... along with regular social events to relax without needing technology to avoid depleting renergy reserves. "

" Poker night all nights of the week. " commented Valencia Irksos with a half-smile.

" Better stage concerts and poetry recitals my dear. " retorted Elliago with a crooked smile of his own. "More serious is the debilitating effect on vision. Light being electromagnetic in nature, everyone will experience short sightedness and diminishing field of vision. The effects are cumulative, therefore long exposure to the phenomena will eventually cause blindness...until the patient is brought back into a healthier environment. "

" Most of our crew is Human. " the acting Chief of Science remarked. " But what about the others? "

" Other species among the crew will suffer the same effects, but some with additional inconveniences depending on their specific physiologies."

He looked at Kelsey Alther then:

" All empathic and telepathic races are definitely handicapped by the lack of electromagnetic forces on which psionic powers depend on: Betazoids and other fully telepathic races are now no more than touch telepaths at best... and touch telepaths like Vulcans or species-limited ones like Kalthurians or empathic ones like us Deltans are now deprived of their natural mental abilities as long as the ship is within three-hundred thousand kilometers of the anomaly. Stimulants could revive a certain level of aptitude as well as fight off the general effects I told you about, but only temporarily... before the side effects of stimulant overdose start showing."

He now looked back at his commanding officer:

" Caitans, Klingons, Andorians and all other species with highly developed endocrinal and hormonal systems are prone to elevated stress reactions, violent mood swings and even arousal states. Regular dosage of tranquilizers and counterbalancing hormonal injections will be prescribed to those affected... Which means in their case that stimulants to fight off general effects will not be. "

A moment, he shifted his gaze to the acting Chief of Engineering:

" Tellarites are unaffected: their argumentative nature is cultural, not physiological. They now just have many more partners to engage in their racial sport... at their own risk. They must be strongly counselled into restraining themselves in their behavior for the time being. The anomaly is not a good place to taunt hunting Caitans, brawling Klingons or duelling Andorians. "

The Deltan doctor then went back to the captain:

" Speaking of Andorians, the lack of electromagnetic forces is particularly debilitating to them: in short, their antennae are not working. They become perfectly colorblind, anosmic, and lose their famous depth of perception and ability to sense bioauras. But the worse is that their sense of balance is in there, like their own auditory system. Consequently, they will also suffer from increasing deafness and a definite loss of balance."

He took a moment to let his words sink in before finishing with a very serious expression on his face:

" Clumsy, hard of hearing, short-sighted and short-tempered Andorians should be given a wide berth while in the anomaly. They should be temporarily transferred from regular duties to isolated ones like conduit maintenance or nightshift guard duties...if at all possible. "

Kheren nodded, took a moment to breathe and then said:

Number One: I want you to stand ready to take command if I become incapacitated to the point that the safety of the ship and the crew might be compromised. Do not wait for my order. Do it each time you see that I falter at a crucial moment, be it just answering a warning from an officer. "

His four oculars then pointed straight at Nasaro-Myth:

" How long will these disabilities last, Doctor ? "

" Based on what we experienced... Within minutes of being out of the anomaly and farther than at least three-hundred thousand kilometers, all debilitating effects should stop and reverse. But that is based on *one* observed exposure. The effects of multiple exposures are yet to be studied... In any case however, Tellarites will still remain argumentative. "

The attempt to lighten the mood was welcomed. The Andorian captain let some time pass to let anyone take a breath before asking the doctor:

" Recommendation about safety measures? "

" If the transitory effect of the actual passage might disrupt the inertial dampeners, physical restraints, like large straps solidly affixed must be provided to all ship personnel before attempting it. Else, broken bodies imbedded in all bulkheads of the ship are to be expected. "

" Thank you Doctor. We'll follow your recommendation and avoid redecorating the Artemis Nausicaan style"

Kheren then shifted his gaze to the left of Lieutenant Sangliar and the white-haired, blue-skinned female-looking androgyn sitting there:

" Speaking of pleasant people: report on our Klingon companions of misfortune, Lieutenant Alther? And what do you recommend as security measures for our next... joyride, as the doctor puts it? "

" About the Klingons, Sir... "

Yes Lieutenant Irksos? "

The woman punched up a few buttons and the display showed a representation of a distinctively vulture-shaped starship emerging from what appeared to be an anomaly. The swirling vortex it was coming out from was not resembling the Azimuth Horizon phenomena they were dealing with, except for the swirling look and the immense size of it. yet, even this phenomenon was dwarfed by the monstrous subspace storm they had just gone through.

But now, the acting chief of science was speaking:

" These are images taken by the Deep Space 9 station orbiting planet Bajor, exactly forty years ago. What you see here is the Klingon Vor'Cha class battlecruiser IKS Toh' Kath, under the command of Captain Tel'Peh. It entered the Gamma Quadrant on a scouting mission but later returned through the wormhole and exploded afterwards. It was discovered through the report of the only survivor, it's First Officer and battlemaster, that the crew had fallen under the influence of sentient energy spheres from Saltah'na V and, in the end, in typical Klingon fashion, they destroyed their own ship."

At that very moment, the vessel in the display indeed exploded in a warp core breach that sent a blinding flash of light, ending the recording.

The acting Chief of Science fingered some controls again. Now, it showed the ominous fire ring of the storm and a highlighted trail of residue leading to a diffuse cloud of dust and plasma drifting at the end of it.

" Computer: focus on image section 3457, augment and enhance with tachyon and chroniton filtering. "

The amorphous cloud suddenly highlighted as the ghostly but distinctive shape of a starship, expelling the detected plasma through numerous breaches in its hull: the trapezoidal stern with lowered nacelles, the extended neck ending in a pincer like head left no doubt about what kind of vessel it was: a klingon warship.

" These are your "companions of misfortune," captain. Because of their numerous plasma leaks, their cloaking device is failing and so, we have tapped into their transponder signal. It reads: IKS... Toh'Kath. "

Once more, silence fell into the room. Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth finally found his voice back first:

" Are you saying these Klingons travelled through time? "

" Yes Doctor. And because the Azimuth Horizon is the result of a collision between time and anti-time, the initial release of chronitons must have reached them somehow when they were through the Bajoran wormhole. The wormhole is a still misunderstood anomaly itself, but one that we know is unconnected to the normal linear flow of time. We can postulate that it caused them to end up here, in our time, their future. "

" This will have changed the timeline then, no? " now wondered Captain Kheren.

" We can't know for sure yet, Sir. " answered Valencia Irksos. " If that is so, our own passage through the storm would have isolated us from the altered timeline. Linear timeline is meaningless here under those conditions. So, until we return, we can't be certain. It is also possible that, if and when we do, we will find ourselves in our unaltered timeline, as the presence of these Klingons here and back then in 2369 might be simultaneous, therefore leaving things unchanged... "

" Alright, please let's postpone the temporal mechanics lecture until my headache is gone." now grunted Doctor Nasaro-Myth, holding his bald head in pretended pain.

" Good timing Doctor. Let us keep this for a later time. " agreed the captain, his face straight.

The Deltan sighed:

" I hate it when an Andorian tries to be funny. "

" Let's get serious then, " quickly retorted Captain Kheren, his expression unchanging. " Now, I want options for us to get out of here, and this time without losing anyone. "

As nothing was forthcoming, captain Kheren stood up and walked back to the large transparency. he just stood there, waiting, thinking...

For a good moment, he dwelled from the outward silence into his own inner one, looking at the new universe they had just discovered... and thinking of the one they had to get back too.

With a broken ship, cracked like an egg and oozing plasma through the fissures...

Suddenly, his head jerked up and his antennae went rigid. he turned on his heels, went back to the table and ordered out loud:

" Computer: display again the web of subspace fractures recorded between here and our own universe. "

The holodisplay switched to a white, translucent image like a snowflake of wildly intertwined, crisscrossing lines.

" Computer: add Azimuth Horizon phenomena; display in real time current state and projected path of expansion. "

A golden orangy glow now spread inside and around the complex web of lines, slowly highlighting them as it moved outward in an apparently random fashion.

" Computer: enhance closest subspace fracture and isolate visually. "

Now, the image zoomed in at a dizzying speed until a crooked transparent tubular representation of the subspace fracture was alone displayed. It looked strangely like a glass-made Jeffries tube to the engineering-minded officers; especially when, suddenly, it was filled with orange and gold fire like a conduit getting filled with plasma.

Kheren's fist struck the table, startling everyone:

" There is our way out! "

They were all staring blankly at him. The Andorian stayed up on his feet, looking at the acting chief of science:

" Lieutenant: what do we know of subspace fractures? "

" Well, Sir... they are a phenomenon which can be created either by a natural erosion of space-time, as a byproduct of a polaric ion explosion, or polluting damage of warp bubbles from a warp engine like those used before the phenomenon was first discovered. Subspace mechanics make them the basis for transwarp conduits like those of the Borg... while temporal mechanics also postulates that, as they dissipate through the space-time continuum from both ends, they could possibly allow travel through time... "

" Our Klingon friends are certainly proof of *that* theory. " commented the Deltan doctor.

" So... what are they? In layman terms, Lieutenant. " the commanding officer of the Artemis asked, glancing at the Deltan Doctor sitting besides her.

" In the most simplistic terms, Captain: each is a void between normal space and subspace where time and space are diffused into infinity. A crack in space-time if you will. "

" And why subspace weapons are so dangerous and unpredictable. " added Lieutenant Alther then. " Their detonation spreads without limit through space and time. Take the Hobus supernova: normally, a supernova is limited to the speed of light and dissipates as its stellar matter disperse in all directions, well before it

usually reaches even its nearest neighbor. But, because it went into subspace and fractured it, it moved to warp speed into infinity. "

" Until it was stopped, Lieutenant. " reminded Kheren. " And so can be subspace weapons, with a large enough antimater detonation, like that of a warp core. "

" Yes, Sir. " confirmed Valencia Irksos. " A sufficient disruption in normal space can create a "hole to stop the crack" if you will; like stopping the tear in a sheet of paper with a hole large enough in the middle. "
The Andorian looked back at the chief of tactical:

" Could it be done with torpedoes? "

" Since we do not carry transphasic torpedoes, it would require no less than a full spread from either front or aft pair of our five-tubes launchers. " the Kalthurian chief of tactical answered. " And only with quantum warheads each into a different frequency, since we would have to detonate in both space *and* subspace. "

" How many do we have on board? " now asked Kheren of the androgyn.

" We still have our full complement of two-hundred and fifty, Sir. But given enough time, we can fabricate twenty-five more with what we have on board. "

" Now just wait a minute here, Captain Sir. " said the Chief Medical Officer with a frown. " Are you implying that we would attempt to *shut off* this thing? I may be a physician, not a physicist, but I still can count: If I follow Lieutenant Alther correctly, we would have at most thirty shots available before we deplete our entire payload; but there are hundreds, thousands, maybe *hundreds of thousand* of those fractures already! "

" Shut them all off? Of course not, Doctor. " retorted Captain Kheren, letting the Deltan breathe easier.

Then he looked around:

" We will use only one of them... to fly out of here. "

If his fist striking the table had startled them, his words almost knocked them out cold.

Listening to the bickering going on about the table, Sangliar continued to enter calculations into his PADD. he continued to work as the debate around him unfolded, and like a shy child sat lower and said nothing.

The Tellarite did not react immediately when the Captain pounded his fist on the table, but instead looked up slowly and spoke.

"Sir with all due respect, that may not work that way."

Captain Kheren turned his head blinking at the beardless Tellarite barely looking over the table.

" Such a subspace burst would cause a series of microfissures along the hull as the ship phased in and out of subspace. What we would need to do is shield the ship from both space and subspace at the same time. Sadly even armor or our current shield configuration won't do that."

Realizing that, not only did he have everyone's attention, but no one seemed to understand what he was saying. Sangliar started to speak slower and attempted to explain himself.

"Fine... since none of you tallers are with me here, listen, I will explain. Theoretically speaking, subspace reacts the same way to fire and energy on the subspace level the same way regular space would. If we were to create a detonation and attempt to use a subspace fissure to escape, for that moment of escape we would be in subspace and regular space simultaneously. That pull of sorts would create a series of microfissures throughout the hull and allow use to be bombarded with subspace radiation."

Continuing Sangliar started to become animated speaking with his hands.

"See, it is like this: a subspace fissure creates a fissure in the space time continuum. Just knowing that, we do not want to blindly enter one without first shielding the ship from the possible reactions of space time. Picture skipping a rock on a pond. Only a smooth, or in our case well shielded, rock will skip properly. If you take a rock that is not protected, it will skip wildly or worse, sink."

Transferring the data from his PADD to the viewscreen Sangliar continued.

"What we need to do is create a form of shield from the pull of the multiphase imbalances of subspace. If I may suggest, we can create a deflector pulse through the warp nacelles creating a static warp shell. A static warp shell has technically worked before, and with what limited power I can give you, we can do it again... sort of."

Again, Elliago was the first to regain his wits:

" Your joking. "

The frozen expression of the Andorian's face and the intense light in his silver-hued eyes told plainly that he was not. But he was also looking at the Chief Engineer and nodding. And so was the Deltan; he was not nodding as he added:

" And its the "sort of" from your part that has me almost as worried, Chief. "

Sangliar shook his head wondering why he was the only one who caught the reference to famous Star Fleet History.

"Look, when I say " sort of " I literally mean "sort of." You see, when Ambassador Picard was still Captain of the Enterprise, they had a run in with the entity known as Q. Q sent the Captain into an alternate reality where the Enterprise encountered an anomaly that ran through both space and subspace, but also infused antimatter and antitime. In order to survive entrance into this anomaly, three different Enterprises created a static warp shell and survived for a short time. Now, that was an alternate reality that was reset by the Q and mentioned only in the Captain's official log, and all three Enterprises were destroyed, but they stayed in the anomaly and were not trying to leave it."

Valencia Irksos shook her head:

" Sorry Chief, but you are an engineer... No offense, but astrophysics happen to be *my* specialty. "

She punched a few controls and another blue-grey star-like anomaly appeared in lieu of the gold-orange fiery one they were concerned about. it looked almost peaceful and soft compared to the raging inferno they were dealing with.

" The case you refer to is now standard course material in temporal mechanics at the Academy: it deals with this: an anti-time anomaly is not at all related to subspace fractures or subspace mechanics... wich are very well known and have quite different principles. Granted, a static warp shell will preserve the hull from damage coming from the temporal distorsion of the fractures; I'll spare you the equations about it. But... "

She brought back the display to the current flaming phenomena to add:

" *Our* phenomena follows the mechanics of a plasma storm throughout subspace domains when coming in *contact* with subspace fractures. The time and space diffusing effect of the fracture pulls at it like a magnet... and so will a static warp shell *if* it comes in direct contact with it. So, unless you fly with pinpoint precision, what would save you would kill you at the slightest grazing of the fracture's boundary bathed by that storm. "

Showing through the display a simulation of travel through the tunnel-like fractures, she concluded:

" With or without a static warp shell, flying in there will be extremely risky... but less so than straight through the anomaly itself in our present state. "

Captain Kheren listened to the science debate; and it only reinforced his conviction about what they had to do.

For his part, Sangliar sat by as the debate unfolded before him.

"*Lousy tallers. I swear for founding members of the Federation, Andorians and Humans have learned nothing from us.*" Sangliar thought in frustration.

" With all due respect, Sir, then said Lieutenant Irksos to the Captain, subspace fractures are as unpredictable in size and orientation as ice cracks on a frozen lake. And this starship is rather large. Considering that our sensors are limited to unreliable short range effectiveness in the vicinity of the anomaly, and no active shields or even a deflector field operational, we would risk fatal collision with the... "walls" of the passageway, literally at every turn... "

She then turned to the Tellarite;

" I am not sure why you speak of any fracture-creating detonation while we already have thousands available to freely enter. "

She pointed to the display where the computer was clearly showing both filled and unfilled fractures amidst the anomaly and then continued:

" But you are right of course that a static warp shell would protect us... in theory. Have you considered that, here, not only are our antimatter reserves not even near full capacity, but that any contact with the storm's effect will drain them further and again overload what little we have left of the plasma grid?"

And now she turned back to the Andorian to finish:

" Even more than what I said before, Sir, we then would have to avoid at all cost even the slightest contact with the subspace fracture's boundaries all the way through... or that intended protective bubble would turn into the very instrument of our destruction."

" Not to mention being swallowed at any moment by an unrushing plasma fire that would decide to enter and flood the crack. " added Doctor Nasaro-Myth, pointing at the tridimensional display between them, showing exactly what he was colorfully describing.

" In one case or the other, expert precision flying is evidently our only hope to escape from here, " admitted the captain, With or without Mister Sangliar's static warp shell. Unless anyone has a better idea? "

" No... I am not the engineer or the physicist here... not even a pilot. But I am not a suicidal fool either. "

The Andorian stood ramrod straight, looking down at the Deltan:

" Doctor Nasaro-Myth: are you now stating this as official diagnosis on my behalf ? "

In the shocked silence, he looked at each one in turn, further saying:

" If Mister O'Conner and any one of you senior officers here support this diagnosis also... under General Orders 28 and 39, you can here and now relieve me of my command. "

The sudden silence was now colder than outer space.

Touchy here... the Deltan thought worriedly, looking at the Andorian captain. *Forgot he could still be feeling some after-effects from the storm*

Pointedly answering the commanding officer of the Artemis, Elliago said in a calming tone:

" Depends on what I will hear next. And so far, it is not encouraging." he said, now looking at the First Officer after hearing his proposal.

O'Conner looked around the room a moment before replying.

"Well... As for better ideas, if the goal is to warn Starfleet and to call for support, we could send one of our type-10 shuttles. They are in far better shape than the Artemis. Also as they are much smaller than the Artemis, it would be easy to maintain a static warp shell and would be far easier to do pinpoint flying in."

He could see the captain was nodding to his words and went on:

" Once the two-man crew cross to the other side, they could quickly contact Starfleet and then, we could begin to test if it's possible to send a message from one side of the storm to the other. Not to mention to give our fine engineering crew and their chief a chance to better repair the Artemis."

Looking at the display before them, he added:

" Also our science teams could further study the storm to see if we can stop it from expanding more or even close it." .

The Andorian nodded curtly and turned towards his First Officer:

" Good thinking Number One. Your idea is usable but for one little detail: there will be no rescue. "

He looked again at everyone before continuing:

" No ship at Starbase 10 can possibly be ready for launch for at least over a full month, possibly two. Finding another ship from Starfleet to divert to our rescue in our far away sector would barely take less time. And, by the time any rescue could find a way to help us and effectively come, too many people in sickbay will have died... and that, if what is left of our EPS grid holds that long. We can't repair it out of drydock, and we won't survive long if we have to survive on batteries alone. "

His thumb went towards the windows:

" And there are our Klingon friends out there. They know we are here; you may be sure that they are hard at work restoring their weapons systems... and we can't risk engaging them and possibly alter History. "

He looked pointedly at each one as he concluded:

" We all have to get out of here by ourselves... and soon. "

But he gave a stare at O'Conner as if to say " but..." and then he looked again at Valencia Irksos:

" Could a probe sent ahead of us provide early warning for course corrections ? "

" Ah... yes, Captain. " admitted the dark-skinned woman. " But a probe, despite the benefits of its smaller size, would not be able to navigate a fracture as well as a manned ship and would sooner or later crash itself. Despite our large complement of probes, we risk running out of them before being out of the danger zone. "

" How about a shuttle, like Mister O'Conner suggested? "

Everyone looked at one another in disbelief before the science officer answered:

" Well... it would work... But since the shuttle would be on thrusters only and subject to the ebb and flows of space and subspace deforming the fracture, it would require a pilot with actual atmospheric flight experience and excellent flying instincts to "ride the winds" to speak figuratively. "

" And who would be willing to try such a stunt? " wondered Elliago outloud, still looking at the captain but frowning at O'Conner as well.

" Mister O'Conner is right on one point:a nine meters-long type 10 shuttle has a much better chance to negotiate the flight than a five-hundred meters-long starship. And I have such flight experience..." began Kheren, but the Chief medical officer cut him off:

" Forget it... Captain Sir. And not only because of your duties here onboard or any whatever regulation: you are Andorian; as soon as we get inside that thing, you will be drowned in sensory deprivation, too much to even look out by a porthole, let alone sail through rough seas. "

The Deltan had purposely switched analogies from flight to seafaring; he knew that Andorians were instinctively afraid of deep waters. They even saw their own Hell as a bottomless sea... Thus, his point would get home all the more deeply, even for the bold and self-blaming, responsibility-minded captain of the Artemis.

And it did. For a moment, Kheren looked like a man torn between his wish and his obligations. Then he sighed and slowly turned towards Michael O'Conner:

" If I recall, Number One, you served on Akira class starships for practically all your career... and a good length of time on a starbase. You should be more experienced in shuttle flying than anyone on board. Do you think you could do this? "

Clearing his throat to speak, Sangliar cut off the young First Officer before he could answer:

"With all due respect, Captain, any shuttle piloted in front of the ship would need on the fly modifications to its shields, thrusters, warp matrix, and the static warp shell it would have to generate... Not to mention power reroutes in case of any microfractures that would form. The shuttle would have to transmit those back to the ship on the fly as well. The only person here experienced enough, qualified enough, and frankly old enough to do that, Sir, is me. I volunteer. Not to mention that I would not want our First Officer to singe his hair. And I could survive radiation and heat easier than he could. If you want to send someone Sir, I suggest... me."

The Andorian looked a moment at the Tellarite, then back at his First officer;

" What do you say to that, Commander? "

"Honestly, I don't know if the static warp shell would be able or even be needed to protect a type-10 shuttle, but the Artemis will need some sort of protection. Based on the last trip, I doubt the Artemis could travel through the storm and then be able to make it back to the station without some sort of protection."

" Not *through* the storm , Commander; through one the *fractures* the storm itself uses. " corrected Irksos. " Only the Lotus or the McKenzie could tackle the storm itself with their regenerative armor... and that without warp power. Any other ship, damaged or not, simply can't do it. "

" Unless going in with a blanket of stone... sorry: neutronium... over one's head." smirked Elliago.

" Wich we don't have available anymore. " finished the acting chief of science. but now, the First officer was speaking again:

" If we do decide on a static warp shell, either Sangliar or I could maintain it... But one of us should stay on the Artemis to maintain *her* warp shell. The shuttle would also need somebody to pilot it; the ideal pilot would need the knack for atmospheric flight. I know a couple of flight ops officers that could do it, but they are pretty green."

O'Conner replied calmly as he tried to think of other measure to quickly protect the Artemis.

" Well, guess that settles it then. " said Kheren.

The captain of the Artemis looked at each one of his officers in turn before ordering:

" We are moving out."

He sat down, leaned forward on his uninjured elbow resting on the table to detail their escape from the fiery jaws of Hell:

We will take no more than five hours to prepare... being ready at best three hours before the Klingons should possibly complete their own repairs... just in case they are, as I expect, as efficient as us. "

The Andorian turned his four eyes towards the science officer:

" Lieutenant Irksos: tell astrometrics to gather data from this... pocket universe, for as long as they can. But as for the rest of your department: have sensors on Arrow 1 and the ship to optimum level and prepare relay probes: one will be sent up front, to follow the shuttle and supplement transmission if there are any problems; another behind, slaved to the Artemis, as an early warning system for any incoming plasma wave. "

" Aye, Sir. "

" Lieutenant Alther: take charge of simulation exercises with the torpedo room staff, using our sensor data and computer projections, to stop or divert incoming plasma waves. And have all supplemental ones be fabricated and ready also to be fired manually. "

He then looked at his First Officer besides him:

" Number One, since you will be also doubling up as Chief Engineer, I want three things from you: "

And so saying he lifted one finger:

" First, prepare Mister Sangliar's static warp shell for both Arrow 1 and the Artemis, with autotransfer of all warp power from propulsion to the emitters when we move out with a last warpspeed burst: that should give us some good starting momentum and enough power left to sustain the shell and drift out of the anomaly's radius. Keep all remaining battery power for manoeuvring thrusters and navigational sensors. "

A second finger went up:

" Second, reinforce inertial dampeners and provide security restraint to all stations. "

Finally, he lifted his thumb and jerked it towards the window:

" And third, a tractor beam on the Klingons when we will move out."

He looked pointedly from O'Conner to Alther and then at Irksos:

" I certainly will not leave them here to cause problems later... or in our past... or whatever. "

Valencia Irksos then nodded, her dark brown eyes suddenly alight with understanding:

" Of course; bringing them back near the time diffusing effect of a subspace fracture's ending should excite the chronitons flooding them... and realign them with their own timeframe! "

She looked up at the Andorian:

" I was not aware that you were so well-versed in temporal mechanics, Sir. "

" / for one did not sleep through the Academy. " answered the captain with a wink." At least I learned enough to be able to read. " he added, pointing at the holodisplay.

They could all see then that the solution had indeed already been made evident by computer correlation.

" You found the answer yourself, Lieutenant; I just said it outloud. That is what captains do. "

And he winked again. No small feat for an Andorian when considering they had so few facial muscles. Leaving her with the well earned praise, he now addressed the man besides him:

" Mister Sangliar: take this time to prepare for the flight on holodeck 1 with data for our course and projections provided. You will lead our escape by transmitting trajectory changes and data signals from your shuttle to our navigation. And, if I recall, we have but one Tellarite flight officer aboard: Petty Officer First Class Shokar; take him to training with you as your back up. Since your species is least affected, he will be able to take over if you become incapacitated. And *no* arguing during flight, understood? Time later for sport "

Kheren now turned to Elliago:

" Doctor: it would be wise for you to accompany them. "

" I'm not a pilot... "

" No, you're a Doctor. And you will be there to help our intrepid ace here stay up and able to guide us through. Have your department prepare ship and crew for a safe travel and immediately report to Mister Sangliar in simulation to prepare with him for the flight. "

" Oh, Joy... " But the Deltan nodded nevertheless. And there was a gleam now in his purple eyes he couldn't hide.

The captain then straightened up and looked again at all of them.

" Alright people; in five hours, we will prove that we are indeed Starfleet officers all... and take our fate into our own hands.

He stood up:

"Let's get to work. "

CHAPTER SIX : LIKE A BAT OUT OF HELL

Captain's log, Stardate: 86922.1

During the rescue operation of the USS Jeanne Mance we were urgently assigned to, the Artemis was caught into an unknown space-time anomaly responsible for the cargo ship's predicament. The Artemis managed to send all refugees and civilians out to safety and survive going through the anomaly, only to emerge heavily damaged into what appears to be another universe.

We have gathered all the basic data we could from that anomaly and that pocket universe while we prepared to return back to our own. We will now attempt to navigate through one of the very subspace fractures the anomaly uses to expand and travel... and threaten our entire galaxy.

It seems unbelievable that we have gone through all this in barely over thirteen hours. But our faith now is focused solely on our belief that we will all get home and warn the rest of the Federation about the terrible menace looming over the horizon.

Would this log only survive us, along with all the accumulated data we hereby enclose, I wish to state for the record that the crew of the USS Artemis risked and gave lives in the line of duty, and this with upmost distinction. I request that all receive from Starfleet Command and Lotus Fleet Admiralty, special commendation... whether we make it or not.

On the bridge of the Artemis, Captain Kheren watched the calm, focused activity around him with both trepidation and wonderment.

The crew had been intensely preparing for their attempt to escape their fiery prison but, contrary to them, all heavily busy with their work, his was done since the conclusion of the briefing session, five hours ago: he had taken decisions, given orders... and since then, he could only wait.

That was the hardest part. Not just relying on others; that was part of starship life, wherever you were a crewman or in command: but to be unable to do anything while his decisions were followed and, because of what he had decided, would bring success... or failure... and death.

" All stations and personnel report ready, Captain. " said Doctor Lumquist at his left hand, again filling up for the Chief Medical Officer. On his right, Michael O'Conner was supervising everything with crisp efficiency, his Human will and sturdiness the best insurance against any sudden weakness of the Andorian captain. Chief Engineer Sangliar was down in shuttlebay 1, ready to launch with Doctor Nasaro-Myth and Petty Officer Shokar on board the most advanced shuttle available, fully prepared for their ordeal.

Behind him, Lieutenant Patricia Blakely manned the converted Engineering station and Lieutenant Valencia Irksos was back at the science console. Being Humans and now full of stimulants, they would endure the voyage through the anomaly and stay alert.

So would Ensign S'Kyn at navigation, who's Vulcan physiology and discipline would cope with the effects. His computer-like mental aptitudes, his physical precision and his extrasensory sensitivity would respond instantly to any sudden course correction Lieutenant Sangliar would send from Arrow 1 flying ahead of them.

Also in front of the captain, the Kalthurian decisiveness of Lieutenant Kelsey Alther was ready to protect the ship from any plasma wave, with the help of a launcher crew now well practiced in efficient manual firing.

And, at the forwardmost multitask station, Lieutenant Cheonghi would coordinate or take over any and all ship functions with the natural ease only a three-armed humanoid could make possible in their dire predicament.

They would never be more ready.

Kheren felt a moment of pride swell his chest. Whatever would happen, they would all have done their best. His thought went back a moment to Captain Kevin Froud, the man who was supposed to be sitting in this chair, right now; the man who came back from a comfortable and well earned retirement to command a starship once more... and died doing it.

Now Kheren truly understood why; even more: he felt it.

Being captain to such a crew was indeed worth dying for... and even more, worth living for.

He signaled for internal communication then spoke in a calm, clear voice;

" All hands, this is the captain: we will now move out and attempt to get home and tell everyone about what we have learned here. The Federation is counting on us... and I know I can count on each one of you. Wether we succeed or not, you have all proven yourself more than worthy of the uniform you wear. Good luck to us all. Stand ready. "

He swiveled his chair towards the women behind him:

" Are we ready? "

" Ready for warpburst, autotransfer to static warp shell synchronised. All battery power to thrusters and sensors. " confirmed Blakely. " Tractor beam ready. "

" Short range sensors at maximum, probes reconfigured and ready to launch through forward tubes. " followed Irksos with her own clear voice.

Kheren swiveled back towards the main viewer, where the blackness was split by a far away glow.

Without being asked to, Ensign S'Kyn reported:

" Navigation on manual, thrusters fully responsive, Sir. "

" Aft launchers ready, Captain" then added the Kalthurian chief of security. " Full torpedo payload at your disposal."

" You will fire at will, Lieutenant. " said the captain.

" Link with Arrow 1 strong and clear, Captain. " assured Doctor Lumquist.

" Mister Cheonghi? "

" Inertial dampeners at maximum, all personnel secured, all back ups at the ready, Captain. " answered the Edoan.

And indeed, all active personnel throughout the ship were strapped down to their chairs with self-powered graviton safety belts crisscrossing their chest.

Captain Kheren nodded then asked for a direct channel to the shuttlebay and the shuttlecraft waiting there, at full readiness:

" You lead this one, Chief. "

As soon as the sleek type 10 shuttle would leave the bay, it would angle itself towards the most auspicious subspace fracture and move out with a warp burst that would immediately shift to a static warp shell from its warp core to protect it from the drain and overload effects of the storm; just like the starship that would follow right behind it.

Through its own torpedo launcher, Arrow 1 would then launch a relay probe in her wake to ensure contact between them and the Artemis... who will also leave a probe on its tail as a watchdog for any incoming plasma flow inside the subspace fissure that would be their only passage back to their own universe.

Captain Kheren sat back in his massive command chair, took a deep breath, then finally said:

" Standby for departure... Red alert. "

Red lights flashed, klaxons blared; from bow to stern, hundreds of people sat in chairs and strapped themselves with autoextending restraints crossing their hips and torso. They were just like the old safety belts first tested on the new command chair of USS Enterprise after her repairs following the Shinzon Incident, except that these were portable units you plastered to the center of gravity of your body so that it extended straps and a graviton field all over you.

Lieutenant Anthony Jackson, he who would have been the Chief Engineer, had stored a few models of these clever units of his own design on board, prior to his leave of absence that left him back on Earth, while the ship was launch prematurely to save the Jeanne Mance. They were intended for testing in his spare time before submitting the design to Starfleet.

With all the units replicated now, the concept would certainly get an extensive field test.

On the viewer, the sleek bullet-shaped class 10 shuttle emerged from the shuttle bay aft of the saucer section and arced towards the luminous horizon.

" Mister Alther: do you have a lock on the Klingon ship? "

" Aye, Captain: hard to miss bathed in plasma and chronitons like they are. "

" On my mark: activate tractor beam. Ensign S'Kyn, warp burst, full speed ahead..."

On the large screen, the shuttle Arrow 1 stretched and vanished in a distant flash of light.

" Mark! "

It took 3 seconds for the warp core to flare up, the warp bubble to form and the starship to engage fully; it took a hundredth thousandth of that time for the tractor beam to grab the Vor'Cha class battleship and drag it inside the forming subspace field.

On the screen, the fareway flutter of light suddenly became a glaring inferno of gold and orange fire, then, just as suddenly, a flashy white semi-translucent, iridescent tubular field they literally dived into. It was like being in a glass tunnel in the middle of a raging oil blaze.

" We are inside the targeted subspace fracture, Sir. " Confirmed Irksos from sensor readings.

" Speed decreasing from plus C as calculated, thrusters at full. " added S'Kyn tonelessly.

" We are hailed by the Klingons, Sir. They sound angry. " reported Lumquist.

" Angry Klingons? Surprising. " retorted Kheren dryly as he signalled to open the channel.

And sure enough, a dark, heavy-browed face, framed by a huge mop of coarse black hair and snarling through jagged teeth filled the screen:

" Fed rat! What treachery is this? I will destroy your ship if you do not release us this instant! "

Kheren glanced back at his acting Science Chief nodding and then back at the fuming face on the viewer:

" Have... a... good time. " he waved back, then signalled Kelsey Alther in front of him.

The view on the screen switched to that of the Klingon warship suddenly released by the greenish ray of light holding it behind the Artemis. As soon as it was floating free, a strange glow enveloped it; its shape stretched as if it was about to enter warp speed and suddenly, it disappeared as if it had been only a dream image.

" Chroniton residue confirms realignment Sir: they are back to where they came from. " reported Valencia Irksos. " The temporal effect of the fracture caught them as soon as we released them from our static warp shell vicinity. "

" Captain, then said the Vulcan navigator; mass release from detaching the Klingons added to our momentum. Our speed is higher than anticipated. "

" Let us count our blessings. " the captain commented. " Report on Arrow 1 ? "

" Nine hundred thousand kilometers ahead, steady on course; relay probe steady at six hundred thousand kilometers, following trajectory. " reported Patricia Blakely.

" Signal strong and clear, Sir. " confirmed S'Kyn. " Course adjustments proceeding. "

" Lieutenant Alther; launch watchdog probe; standby on aft tubes. "

" Aye, Captain. "

On the bridge's main viewer, a single probe flashed out of one of the front tubes and flew behind the hurtling vessel. A change to aft view showed it taking position exactly behind and following.

" Watchdog probe steady and on course at nine hundred thousand kilometers. " announced Irksos.

For a good moment, they all breathed easier as they smoothly flew on the trail of the small shuttlecraft.

Then, a long vibration travelled from bow to stern.

Kheren suddenly rolled his eyes and gripped his armrest with his one good hand. A sweet, fruity scent washed over the bridge as he started perspiring profusely and his antennae wobbled and retracted in a haphazard manner. He looked as if he was about to collapse into shock.

And at the same instant, alert sirens blurted all over the ship.

" We grazed the boundary of the fracture! " shouted Irksos. The fracture is contracting under the pressure of the surrounding anomaly! "

" Static warp shell fluctuating! Four point seven percent power drop! " said Blakely loudly. " It deviates us towards the boundary... then flickers off when we touch it, letting storm effects flood the ship! Microfractures are forming all over the hull and radiations are detected on several decks! "

" Of course! A warp shell is graviton based!" suddenly understood the science woman. " It is not us deviating: remember, there is no mass in the anomaly or within subspace except us... We are pulling it towards us!

Another shock went through the entire vessel... and the Andorian also shuddered as if under a sudden, strong fever.

" Captain! Plasma wave incoming! "

The warning of the Kalthurian tactical chief came just as the viewer image showed the iridescent energy passage behind them suddenly flooding with golden fire raging right after them.

The Artemis, trapped within the twisted passage contracting like a swallowing snake, trembled like a deer fleeing a forest fire.

And so did her Captain, swaying on the very edge of consciousness.

Sitting at the shuttle controls Sangliar navigated the shuttle a head slowly into the anomaly before him.

"*Lets hope this works*" the engineer thought.

" I hope this will work, Chief." echoed outloud Doctor Nasaro-Myth. Sitting at the co-pilot station, he was looking like a man about to be sent to Rurha Penthe.

Before he seated himself in the seat, he injected cordrazine into his own bloodstream with a hypospray from the portable medkit on his knees, prepared for the bold trip they were about to undertake within a terrifying space anomaly.

" Nothing for us, Doc? " growled Shokar, the other Tellarite and third member of the shuttle crew. " Guess the sharing and compassionate virtues of Deltans are but the myth I always thought they were. "

Elliago waved his hypospray in front of his smile:

" If you'd care to be jumping around on your head like a mugato in heat, I will be happy to ablige; you already got the fur right. Not that hitting your head the entire trip will cause any damage to *you*."

The Brown-furred Tellarite grinned at the jest and finished the in-flight diagnostics, chuckling.

Feeling the shuttle shake as it entered the anomaly, Sangliar began his calculations to activate the static warp shell. Entering commands at the helm and control console, he could hear the buzz of the warp nacelles as they generated the static warp shell, and watched in relief as the shaking of the shuttle slowed and stopped.

" Chief: you sure you know how to drive this thing? " wondered the Deltan, looking out the shuttle windows with apprehension at the nearby flaming sky.

" Would you care to try, Doc? " asked Shokar. " I hope not... for our sake. "

Sangliar ignored them both.

"Computer status."

"Thrusters on standby, warp field is stable."

Nodding to himself, the Tellarite continued to navigate slowly, activating the thrusters and increasing the distance between the shuttle and the Artemis.

"Computer, updates every thirty seconds on distance between us and the Artemis"

"Distance four hundred thousand kilometers, increasing one thousand kilometers a second." The computer's voice was cold and uncaring. unaware of the importance of the mission at hand.

Listening for more updates, Sangliar checked on the signal probe between them and the massive starship following; who's very safety depended on him now..

"Distance six hundred thousand kilometers." droned the feminine voice of the onboard computer.

Suddenly, the shuttle began to shake and the operations panel showed a sharp drop in the stable power of the static warp shell.

Elliago then remembered the portable restraint they had been given when boarding the shuttle and, with a flat palm, hit the central button, letting the extending bands encircle him in a X pattern and activate a graviton field to keep him as firmly rooted to his seat as the seat itself was to the deck.

" Chief, I will get down at the next shuttle port, please. "

"Damn it, think old man!" Sangliar yelled to himself

"Distance, seven hundred thousand kilometers"

"Computer, shut up! I am thinking!" Sangliar yelled to the shuttle.

"Of course, it is so obvious. A static warp shell creates reverse gravitons allowing for the warp pull even in a zero mass environment. I am not nearing the anomaly: I am pulling it towards me. Space is actually the thing in constant motion right now."

Rerouting emergency power through a second coupling, the Artemis' chief engineer stabilized the static warp shell field and steadied back on course towards the rift.

"I just hope those guys can figure it out."

" Well, they *should*; the only two Tellarites that could have caused them problems are *here*. " mumbled the Deltan Doctor.

Sangliar took a deep breath as his shuttle approached the end of the fissure and was nearly thrown from his seat by the violent jolt, as the static warp shell breached the fissure's entrance. Shaking violently, Sangliar navigated the shuttle slowly into the fissure's opening, activating comms for one last message:

"Artemis, this is Lieutenant Sangliar. I am leaving the rift, all is stable. Hope to see you on the other..."

Sangliar's communication was cut short when a shock wave struck the shuttle without warning, blowing sparks from the communications panel.

Stretching his arm fully, Nasaro-Myth punched with a sidefist the activator of the engineer lurching his way in the pilot seat. The portable safety net righted him promptly back into position.

" Engineer, maintenance thyself. " simply paraphrased the Doctor.

Looking back, he saw that the other Tellarite had also neglected to activate his new safety feature... and was knocked out cold in his seat after bumping his forehead to his console.

" Great, now we have just *you* left to kill us. " growled Elliago as he rose to go take care of the unconscious crewman. He moved like a man in outerspace wearing magnetic boots because of the safety field effect, making his walk to the back of the shuttle feel like hours.

Navigating the shuttle, the Tellarite successfully dodged two large fiery plasma bursts. Attempting to contact the Artemis to warn them of the resulting shock waves from exiting the fissure, he pounded his fist on the console when the cold reality set in that the Artemis would be on her own against the incoming flood of fire.

"Dammit! come on Humans, don't screw this up!"

" If we don't survive this, I'll make sure our charming Andorian Captain hears that insult! " absurdly shouted the Deltan doctor from the back of the craft.

As the shuttle shook and alarms blared, Sangliar worked feverishly to maintain power to thrusters and the static warp shell. Entering commands and controls as fast as his stubby rough Tellarite hands could, he gritted his teeth as the shuttle shook and rocked as it pushed its way forward.

"Come on baby; hold together..."

" I have bandages in my medkit... " offered Elliago.

The shaking came to a sudden stop as the flashing light of the fissure faded as instantaneously as it had started. Looking around in disbelief, Sangliar's eyes adjusted to the darkness in front of the shuttle as his eyes came into focus. Then, he pumped his fist and cheered out loud as stars began to appear, then constellations, then clusters, then a red nebula.

Sangliar knew that he was not only looking into space, but at the Milky Way galaxy and friendly space.

The Deltan too was cheering:

" Alright! Driver! Left star to the right! And straight on 'till morning! "

Coming back to the front seat, he looked out with a big smile... Then, slowly, the smile faded as he searched the star-studded blackness, then the scanning readouts.

" Chief... where is the Artemis? You... you don't think that she... "

* * *

As the ship rocked, O'conner griped his chair firmly and looked the console at his side. Data streamed across the screen... none of it was good.

Then, at seeing Kheren nearly pass out, all Michael could think was :

Were doomed.

Then, something popped in to his head.

"Lt. Irksos! Can we use the deflector to discharge an antigraviton pulse along hull?"

"I.. Believe so Sir! That should blast back the storm and the ruptures, but it would only last a minute or two, Sir."

She rushed in to action, wildly typing away on her console.

"We will have to wait for the perfect moment then!"

"Sir! Warp Shell at thirty percent!" Blakely yelled out as the storm on the screen got larger and larger.

"Arrow 1 reports it's clear." S'Kyn told almost calmly.

We are almost there... O'Conner thought.

Blakely Yelled out in panic:

" Fifteen percent! "

"Now Irksos!" O'Conner ordered as the full fury of the storm engulfed them.

* * *

Having waited for over a week for the Artemis, Sangliar postulated that time in regular space and time in the anomaly moved forward at different paces. Having run out of patience now, he used a Tellarite hibernation technique and put himself into a deep sleep, hoping that he would not have to wait too much longer.

Days later, Sangliar was jostled awake by a sensor alarm.

"Computer: report."

"Sensors indicate subspace activity approximately seven hundred thousand kilometers, bearing 237."

" Doctor reports: it's been boring and stressful as a Vulcan bachelor party! "

From the back of the shuttle, Doctor Nasaro-Myth came back with a frown and a yawn to sit in the copilot seat. He didn't look or sounded very happy:

" All fine with you Tellarites and your hibernating metabolism. Do you know how utterly lonely a *Deltan* feels after nine days of solitary meditation with only two catatonic bodies lying around? "

He was obviously not in a good mood, and crewman Shokar, now also fully awake, was not helping:

" Come now, Doc; I thought you would appreciate the peace and quiet of your own insipid company. "

" *Peace and quiet?* Did you ever spent *nine* days confined in a small shuttle with two heavily *snoring* Tellarites? "

Both of them laughing didn't help with his mood either.

In fact, his hands were trembling.

Sangliar activated the controls and watched as a small rift appeared in front of the shuttle, turned so as to face the distant fires of the anomaly.

"Come on baby, you can do it!" Sangliar yelled.

On the Artemis, Irksos pressed a button before her as if hearing the very encouragement of the Tellarite engineer on the shuttle and, then, a bright flash nearly blinded the bridge crew as the storm was violently thrown back.

The violent shove and their remaining speed had thrown them free of the storm and they were greeted once against by a view of stars on the monitor; but, this time, it was the Milky Way.

Unfortunately, it wasn't a free ride...

Watching the rift grow larger, the engineer smiled slightly as a saucer section emerged followed by the rest of the Ambassador class starship.

She is in bad shape, but she is here and that is what matters" Sangliar sighed inwardly and smiled.

Activating the now functional communications panel Sangliar hailed the Artemis. Sangliar laughed to himself as rubbed his chin...

His beard!

He couldn't believe it; in nine days, it had grown back to a full nine *years* of luxurious growth! it went down all the way to his chest, spreading out as wide as his clavicles!

The Deltan doctor just smiled and showed him a flat, serrated instrument he switched on and off, showing alternatively a green and red energy glow coming out of it.

" How do you think Deltans keep their skull bald as per regulation? Cream and rasorblade? Always come to your Doctor if you have follicle problems. "

The shocked look on the face of the Tellarite made him forget his days of terrifying solitude a moment.

But just a moment.

Deltans were a highly gregarious species; even quarters on starships were made for them so that they could constantly be with one another in large groups. Isolation was a terrible ordeal to them. It had taken Elliago all his Starfleet discipline and personal faith in seeing the Artemis again to hang on...

But barely.

Almost didn't make it this time...

On the bridge of the Artemis, O'Conner rubbed his head and looked around with the very same thought before saying.

"Report!"

Looking up from his monitor, Doctor Lumquist was the first to answer:

"Casualty reports on decks 12 to 15 and 21; no fatalities but a few wounded. Sickbay is taking care of them now."

He let the ship channels open so that everyone on the bridge could hear the cheers going throughout the ship as people learned that they had made it. He was no psychologist but he knew enough about the effect it would have on the morale of the officers.

His attention now focused on Captain Kheren who was still reeling from exposure to the storm's effect on his physiology; especially *his* peculiar physiology. The other Andorians on board had but felt discomfort; nothing as severe as Kheren had apparently endured.

But the commanding officer of the Artemis was regaining his wits rapidly, now that they were safely a few hundred thousands of kilometers out of range of the devilish storm.

"Warp core recharging, Sir." now reported Patricia Blakely with a smile. "Minimal damage to our structural integrity on the previously damaged sections only. Internal forcefields are holding and damage control crews already on the job."

"Lucky for us the torpedo deterring effect worked." commented Valencia Irksos, also smiling with obvious relief. "The salvo opened a large enough disruption to open a side fracture and deviate the incoming plasma wave before it submerged us. It confirms that transphasic torpedoes will protect a ship from a plasma flood while traveling a fracture. The second wave that came at us from the other end of the fracture was successfully deviated around the static warp shell by the antigraviton burst because, for a moment, it disrupted the shell's frequency and effectively gave it multiphasic shielding properties... just long enough to plow through."

"Sir, Cheonghi called out from the multitask station at the front; we have Arrow 1 stationary at 035, distance six hundred and thirty-three thousand kilometers."

"They're hailing us, Sir." announced Lumquist, opening a channel:

"Artemis this is Arrow 1; glad to see you... But seriously, what took you guys so long?"

"They were dreading the day they would see you again." said Elliago with a smirk.

"Time displacement effect of the subspace fracture aperture because of the antigraviton pulse, Sir." explained Irksos from her end on the Artemis bridge.

"Crappy guide on the ice trail." croaked Captain Kheren in response, sitting straighter in his command chair, smiling and nodding at his First officer. "Glad to see we didn't lose our shuttle and our good doctor. Prepare to come aboard. Number One, take charge and send us on our way back home while I try to recover from the sad news of the chief's heroic return. I'll be in my ready room, reporting... and vomiting."

Helped by Lumquist, Kheren stood up and walked towards the left side door. He paused there a moment and turned to say:

" Well done Number One; well done all. Any captain will be most proud to have you as a crew."

The words hang in the silence like the silence after a storm as he disappeared behind the sighing door.

Only the Vulcan navigator, with perfect control of his emotions, managed to first recover his voice:

" Impulse power restored, Mister O'Conner. " now said Ensign S'Kyn. " But we can only engage warp at factor 2 until full repairs to the EPS grid is done at Starbase 10. Course plotted and laid in; ETA to station: thirty-six point five two five days. "

Nine days? Nine days!? Was all O'Conner could think of for the first few minutes.

Then Kheren ordered, him to take control of the ship.

"Aye sir."

O'Conner stood up from his chair and looked around the bridge before barking out some orders.

"Cheonghi, guide Arrow 1 to dock. Oh, and make sure they go through decon; I don't want to know what a Tellarite smells like after nine days without a shower. Then contact starbase 10 and inform them of our situation and of the storm."

" Aye, Sir. " answered the six-limbed ops officer, his three hands already flying across the multitask board..

" Lieutenant Irksos, launch a number of probes to study the storm and add a warning beacon, then send whatever data we have about the storm to starbase 10."

" Probes launched, Sir; telemetry nominal. Warning beacon in place and active. All ships within the entire sector will be warned well in advance. "

" Once we have finished launching probes and Arrow 1 is on board, engage return course. Ensign S'Kyn."

" Shuttle secured in shuttlebay 1, Sir. Engaging course back to Starbase 10, warp 2. "

With a smile, he sat down on the captain's chair.

"Oh, and tell Arrow 1 about the captain's illness and that I expect Sangliar to have this ship at warp 6 long before we get to starbase 10."

That spread much needed mirth and relief accross the bridge. The only way the engineer could accomplish such a miracle would be to replace in flight the entire damaged EPS grid; a grueling one month job while in spacedock...

But everyone knew the stubbron Tellarite would sweat his ass off trying anyway.

As the shuttle doors opened, Sangliar was the first to exit and step foot inside the shuttle bay. His look of relief turned quickly to surprise and dismay as he was greeted by three crewmen in contamination suits with full decontamination gear.

"Great. Probably some joke about a smelly Tellarite. Not Humans, Andorians, or Vulcans... I swear you would think Tellarites would have rubbed off on them a little bit."

Sangliar laughed to himself.

Sighing as the young crewman approached, the Acting Chief Engineer extended his arms outward and stepped slowly towards the young man in front of him with a decontamination sonic pulser. The crewman blasted Sangliar with the pulser, which was just a glorified portable sonic shower, while another scanned him with a tricorder.

Just as the Tellarite began to lower his arms, the young crewman in front of him reached towards him and grabbed his beard.

"No don't..." The crewman with the tricorder yelled, but was cut off as Sangliar quickly made a fist and punched the crewman touching his beard through his decontamination face shield.

The engineer laughed and wiggled his fingers.

"Muscle spasms from the cramped quarters in there. I guess I better go see the Doc."

The doctor stood right behind him, shaking his head, clearly disoriented. Sangliar helped the young crewman back to his feet and dusted off his contamination suit. Looking to the other crewman with the tricorder, he asked:

"Status report."

"Well, Sir... basic repairs are underway under the guidance of Commander O'Conner. The First Officer assumed control after the captain became ill upon news of your return."

Sangliar laughed out loud as the crewman obviously did not get the joke.

"I'll bet he did; clearly the crew is glad to see me. What else, any word on what they need me to do?"

"Yes sir. Mister O'Conner said that he expected you to have this ship at warp 6 long before we get to starbase 10."

Sangliar's laugh slowed and then silenced.

"There is no way he just said warp 6, is there?"

"That is an odd request. Anyone who has been near a ship for more than a few minutes knows that I cannot replace an entire matrix underway! Too bad I will have to make due, and try and replace as much of it as I can anyway... Tell the all mighty back up on Olympus that I am on my way down to Hades... to Engineering... and will not rest until we can move faster than a crawl."

Hurrying towards the exit, Sangliar rushed out of the shuttle bay. As the doors closed, the Deltan doctor walked over to the punched crewman and gave him a brief look over.

He didn't touch him however... In fact, he was keeping his trembling hands away from any contact with anyone, as if he was afraid to touch somebody.

"You will be fine son, you are lucky he is worn out from being hungry or I doubt you would be conscious right now. Just for future reference: do not ever touch a Tellarite's beard."

His voice was reassuring... but there was a slight trembling edge too hit, like when someone is exhausted.

"Aye sir, that is good advice isn't it." The crewman wiped some blood from the side of his mouth.

Doctor Elliago touched his combadge, took a few deep breaths, and then spoke:

"Bridge this is the doctor. Docking procedures completed and decontamination tests accomplished. Mister Sangliar received your instructions and is on his way to Engineering. Correct me if I am wrong, but there is no way he can do that until drydock, so I take it that was just a way to get him out of our hair until we get home?"

He tried to smile at the joke made at the Tellarite's expense... but found out he could not.

In fact, he felt like crying.

" Bridge, Lieutenant Cheonghi here. Those were Mister O'Conner's orders. "

" What? Of all the inconsiderate, unthinking... "

Elliago suddenly calmed down, as fast as the outburst of anger had flared. Now calmer, he sighed and said:

" Let me talk to him. "

" He's not available at the moment, Doctor. Do you want me to get the captain? "

" No no, nevermind. " said Elliago with annoyance, his hand tapping hard his combadge closed.

And his hand was noticeably trembling.

" Doctor? Is there something wrong? " wondered one of the crewmen, the one with the tricorder.. He was already darting it towards the Deltan who suddenly jerked upright and briskly walked away.

CHAPTER SEVEN : LAST EMBERS

On the large screen adorning the wall of his ready room, Captain Kheren looked at the Starfleet logo announcing the channel between him and Lotus Fleet Command about to open.

It was a secured, encrypted channel at the captain's request; the very nature of what he was reporting about could start a quadrant-wide panic if it was to be disclosed too soon, before a viable solution to the problem was at least conceived.

Because the danger was very real.

He straightened up as the screen switched to a view of a typical Starfleet high-ranking officer's office, complete with Federation flag hanging on a pole and a holopicture of the Federation territory on the wall behind. On the foreground was seated behind a desk full of PADDs a stern looking Boslic man, with greyed temples on his regulation short cut hair and a neatly trimmed beard.

" Fleet Captain Kotari. Good to see you again, Sir. "

" And you, Kheren my friend. " answered the Fleet Captain, allowing himself a small, friendly smile at the corner of his lips. " Quite the baptism of fire you literally got for your very first command now, wasn't it? "

" That is the the politically correct way to put it, yes Sir. " agreed the blank-faced Andorian. But his antennae did curve inwardly a bit in slight amusement.

As was his style, Kotari immediately cut short the pleasantries and went straight to the matter:

" I read the reports your staff sent along the way." Kotari began while glancing at the PADDs before him. "But since you are still weeks away from Starbase 10, I wanted to get a direct summary from you... and some questions answered. "

" Of course, Sir. "

" First of: how are you? "

The question visibly took the Andorian by surprise. And so, the Fleet Captain added:

" Ship medical report said you were seriously injured and twice incapacitated; a broken arm, a heat stroke, bouts of acute sensory deprivation... "

" Arm is healing fine, Sir. The rest was the result of close exposure to the anomaly. I was just more... allergic to it than even the other Andorians on board. But all negative effects dissipated within minutes of clearing distance of the phenomenon. "

" Doctor Nasaro-Myth is not very precise as to why you were so much adversely affected. "

" Bad genes I guess. "

Kotari felt how uncomfortable this was getting and decided not to press the issue, as long as his newest commanding officer was fine now.

For the moment at least.

" Alright. Now, what about your crew? "

Kheren almost winced at the question. He sighed and finally answered in a saddening voice:

" Sixty-one dead, two-hundred ninety-two injured. Most are recovered now, thanks to the efficiency of Doctor Nasaro-Myth's team. "

" And... what about him? I have here his request for an extended leave of absence... "

" Doctor Nasaro-Myth is Deltan, Sir. He spent nine days in complete isolation aboard a shuttle in deep space, alone with two hibernating Tellarites. To his kind, this is enough to drive most of them completely insane. They are a very gregarious people, so much Starfleet ships even make large communal group quarters on their crewquarters decks so that they can all live and work together all the time. This ordeal had a deep... disturbing effect on him. He has been relieved of duty since his return on board and wishes to go back to Delta IV... at least for some time. "

The Boslic nodded.

" Let's talk about your First officer now. "

" Sir, Mister O'Conner has shown himself more than a capable executive officer; he successfully lead the rescue operation of the Jeanne Mance at great personal risk, did the duties of his new charge without prior preparation in an exemplary manner and acted promptly during my incapacitation to save the ship from destruction. As I told in my report, Sir, I formally request that he receives a promotion to full Commander rank, official confirmation of his position as First officer of the Artemis if he wishes so, and awarded with the Starfleet Command Decoration for assuming command successfully in a difficult situation. "

Again, Fleet Captain Kotari nodded.

" So noted, Captain. It seems also that, in addition to a CMO, you will be lacking a Chief Science Officer and a Chief Engineer. "

" Lieutenant Junior grade Marksus Sangliar was instrumental in the ship's survival, Sir. His implementation of a static warp shell has opened the door to some effective ways to face the anomaly... and he has first hand technical experience with it. He's been granted a promotion to full Lieutenant at my request and in return, they offered him to lead the technical research team when we get back to Starbase 10. "

" I know. " smiled Kotari. But his smile faded quickly as he added: " I also know from the Doctor's report that Lieutenant junior grade M'Rall Micheals has been critically injured. "

" Yes, Sir. She's in a stasis pod until we can transfer her back to Starbase medical for more extensive treatment. Tough break on her very first space assignment. "

" Part of the job description. " simply said Kotari. But his eyes had the same sadness as those of the Andorian captain. Things might be accepted as they were... it didn't mean they liked it.

The expression on the Boslic's face then became, if possible, even more serious:

" On the subject of your officers... There is still the case of your Chief of Security. Frankly, when the Board of Inquiry was called, I was astounded at the list of crimes and the seriousness of them this Kelsey Alther had committed in so short a time. Even in the Klingon Defense Force, this poor excuse for an officer would have been killed on the spot. To think that this... Kalthurian, is *three centuries old* and served so many times in Starfleet... and yet, acts like a three years old with no clue about rank, discipline or responsibility!"

" I know, Sir. And the Lieutenant *does also*, Sir. But now, *we know why*: Doctor Nasaro-Myth has offered extensive data to demonstrate that *he* himself was the cause of her sudden bouts of aberrant behavior. "

" Yes... the " unpredictable sex pheromone-induced hormonal imbalance in an anosmiac androgyn species" report. " quoted the Fleet captain, holding another PADD a moment.

" Lieutenant Alther's performance and attitude have been exemplary during our entire mission, Sir. " reminded Kheren. " Even when in dire peril, there were no outbursts of violence or act of insubordination whatsoever... And no Deltan was near or emanated pheromones in the presence of Alther... on the doctor's express orders when he theorized the problem. "

Kotari kept silent for a moment, looked back at the PADD, then another. Finally he folded his hands in front of him and looked back at the Andorian captain:

" As member of the Board of Inquiry, I will recommend to the Judge Advocate General that a full dismissal of charges be granted on medical evidence of unintentional misconduct. "

" Thank you, Sir. "

" However, I will also recommend that any promotion be reported until the Lieutenant had effectively proven full recovery by the end of the Lieutenant's *next* assignment. Since this one was one of disciplinary review for the Board of Inquiry under the late Captain Froud, Lieutenant Alther will be recalled to Starbase 10 for debriefing and transferred to another command for said recovery assessment. "

" Yes, Sir. Simply said Kheren. But in his mind he added;

Good luck Kelsey...

" We will discuss your crew replacements later once you are back at Starbase 10." now said Kotari. " Current ship status? "

" Limping back to starbase with ship efficiency at forty-seven percent. We are steady at warp 2, ETA thirty-three days. Hull damage repaired, EPS conduit bypass starting to allow main ship functions operational. Holodecks are offline but we do finally have the sonic showers back on. Three weeks of dock repair needed to replace the entire EPS grid and phaser arrays, all burned out by plasma overload. And a new paint job while we're at it. Charcoal is not a proper color for a Starfleet ship."

Kheren was freely using quips gathered during his inspection tour of the ship, hoping the Human style humor would work to alleviate the meeting.

He didn't get it at all... but it seemed to work as the Boslic did smile.

" We'll have nice new clothes and a make-up kit for the fine old lady when she gets back. " answered Kotari.

Then his face darkened again: " More important now is debriefing you about the phenomenon you encountered. Let's discuss this... Azimuth Horizon. "

And let's hope we'll be able to do more than just discuss it thought Kheren, his own dark-blue face becoming even somber.

"The reports sent by your scientific staff is truly astonishing. Let's review it together, shall we? "

" The urgency of the situation calls for it for sure. " agreed Kheren. " Computer: display records on Azimuth Horizon phenomenon."

On the viewing screen behind him appeared the immense field of swirling gold fire, slowly revolving around a blindingly white center, flickering in and out like a candle flame in the wind and sending out tendrils of fiery, crackling energy. It was the first view Kheren had of it and it brought back painful memories only the voice of the Fleet Captain over the comm pulled him out of:

" So... here is the beast. "

" Now it's over one light year in diameter, Sir, started the Andorian, expanding at point one percent of that size every solar day and moving up to warp 9.99997. It does so however by following subspace fractures, thus in a very erratic manner and across several subspace frequencies at once, dropping occasionally into normal space. "

" So... that is why it goes faster than light and is barely detectable intermittently until very close. " understood the Boslic man " Reports also say there are chronitons and nucleonics coming from the center? "

" Yes, Sir: and it registers on the same frequency in normal space as background radiation. Time dilatation and excessive energy outpour from those concentrated emissions are also distorting sensors. However, we went close enough to confirm no electrons nor gravitons; no polarity and no mass. Yet, it behaves like plasma, a state between energy and matter that should have both. "

" Close enough is a funny way for you to put it, Captain. " smiled Kotari briefly. But his eyes and especially his voice stayed dead serious: " From your own readouts, the corona is definitely plasmic, similar to supernova ejections but caught in a vortex like a typical ion storm. "

" We have a fully burned-out EPS grid to confirm that, Sir. " acknowledged Kheren. " and so do those neutronic masses self-caught at the periphery. "

" Ah yes... Using those objects to cover your ship with a shell to survive going through the storm riding a torpedo-provoked plasma wave was an act of great inspiration, Kheren. "

" it was more an act of great desperation, Sir. " countered the Andorian.

" Be it as it may, Starfleet Corps of Engineers are already studying designs of starship "shells" based on your... inspiration... or desperation if you prefer. "

" Providing regenerative armor or multiphasic shielding to current ships might be easier and faster. " suggested the captain of the Artemis.

" Agreed; and you may request any of those upgrades for your ship if you like; I don't know if it will be approved but you certainly earned it. Anyway, you know engineers: they just love to make new things. "

" Sir, now volunteered the starship commander, my science team is convinced that this anomaly is a discharge from the collision of time and anti-time rupturing matter and anti-matter, following the theories about the Big Bang that created the universe... and within it, we did find a passageway to another universe... a much smaller one. "

" The level 10 Theta radiation wavefront preceding it supports that theory, Captain. " Nodded Kotari. " Is it possible this phenomenon is the remnant of what created that pocket universe? "

" According to my science officer, a distinct possibility. "

" What about the possibility of artificial origin? Of hostile intent? "

" Despite the similarities with the Hobus supernova and subspace weaponry, my tactical officer found no evidence of artificial source or intent. The only possibility left was the one he couldn't have known about... the Omega Molecule, Sir. "

Kheren himself was only recently aware of General Order 0: the only one directive, known only to captains and higher ranking officials on pain of instantaneous lifetime imprisonment, that superseded even the Prime Directive in finding and destroying the most devastating substance in the universe... A substance that had possibly existed at the birth of the universe... and in laboratories. One single molecule could devastate space and subspace up to twenty light years... just like this anomaly.

Kotari took a good moment to think. Finally he said;

" We will investigate this possibility with the appropriate authorities, Captain. In the meantime, we will officially limit any further discussion to the more acceptable possibility of a natural phenomenon gone awry. "

" Understood, Sir. "

The Boslic officer breathe a moment then asked:

" Estimates on risk to star travel, captain. "

" Extensive, Sir. Core breach mounting the deeper you get into it, unless you shut down your warp engines and raise a level 10 forcefield around the core quickly enough. Impulse power shuts down and can't be activated. Properly shielded batteries are left alone to provide all power until your at least over three-hundred thousand kilometers out of it. Thrusters are not powerful enough to oppose the gravimetric forces cumulated by the debris at the corona, but they are much more effective within because of the total lack of gravitons in there to oppose their own thrust. "

" And the bigger it gets, the longer and harder it will be to go through it. " understood Kotari. " Hull damage? "

" The hull itself will be exposed to temperatures and irradiation ranging from full phaser fire to that at the core of a star in a wildly fluctuating manner. The direct stress and impact on exposed hull plates to the corona debris will cause anything from microfractures to clean hull breaches. And the very ship's mass attracts small ones while the ship itself is attracted to bigger ones in this gravimetric-free environment. "

" Based on your experience, Captain, what would you recommend? "

Kheren took a time to collect ideas and data before replying:

" Avoidance for one. If not possible, a warp burst at the edge and then course through on momentum, shutting down the warp core and piloting with thrusters. Emergence will leave the ship without warp power for thirty minutes of course, and without warp, shields and phasers until start up is again possible. "

" And severely damaged, understood the Fleet captain looking at the data on a PADD, unless equipped with regenerative ablative armor... with added batteries to power it... all of it reduced to zero by the time they come out of it. Standard plating will simply not prevent destruction. "

The Boslic thought for a moment then asked:

" Systems overview. "

- " Shuttles have the same fate as starships, down to their own scale... but livepods will not survive direct exposure. Phasers will dissipate exponentially within three-hundred thousand kilometers. All torpedoes will create a plasmic reaction that will come back right at the source. Transporters and forcefields will only function within the ship's hull. Inertial dampeners will be severely strained. Sensors will be offline. Tractor beams however, just like thrusters, will be exponentially amplified in power and range due to their high level of graviton and electromagnetic emissions in an environment lacking any to compete against. "

"You sure proved it with your turtle tactic, Captain Kheren. "smiled again the Boslic. " What about Shielding?"

" A Vessel with multiphasic shielding can safely go through, Sir. But only with extra battery power. Those like the Artemis and larger already have the necessary power reserves; smaller ones however must add them before encountering the anomaly. Standard shields will be only partially effective at best and but for a short time... Multiphasic shielding however might be manually attempted in extreme emergencies... We've tried in simulations, and it takes a first grade science officer with hyperdeveloped senses and reflexes, experience and state of the art equipment to even hope to do it. "

" Seems we will have to promote Caitans and Andorians to science positions then. " half-joked Kotari. But Kheren was quick to damper his hopes with cold facts:

" You might want to reconsider, Sir. Plasma burns and radiation poisoning from direct exposure is not the only risk to a crew. Even within a starship's shielded environment, exposure causes chronic fatigue and stress, bone and muscle tissue degradation, short sightedness and diminishing field of vision leading to blindness. All empathic and telepathic races are definitely handicapped with full telepaths reduced to touch telepaths at best... and touch or species-specific telepaths deprived of it. All species with highly developed endocrinal and hormonal systems are prone to elevated stress reactions, violent mood swings and even arousal states.

" The anomaly is not a good place for unsensitive Efrogians, shut off Betazoids or tired Tellarites to taunt hunting Caitans, brawling Klingons or duelling Andorians." understood Kotari.

" The very words of our Chief Medical Officer, Sir. Speaking of Andorians, I speak from experience in urging special caution:in there, our antennae are not working. Clumsy, hard of hearing, short-sighted and short-tempered Andorians should be transferred to isolated or nightshift duties while encountering the anomaly. "

" Quite a problem when said Andorian is the Captain. " smirked the Boslic officer. " You more than proven your worth and valor here, Kheren. "

" At least in judgment... when I assigned O'Conner as my Number One " said the Andorian.

Fortunately, the effects are not permanent. "

" Within minutes of being out of the anomaly, beyond three-hundred thousand kilometers at least, all debilitating effects are reversed."

" As you yourself proved. You also demonstrated quite an ingenious way to navigate the anomaly with any conventional ship... even a heavily damaged one like yours were. "

" Well Sir... Following subspace fractures while the anomaly is not coursing through one is like running a maze with corridors that could be flooded suddenly. It requires expert piloting, and scanning proficiency of the highest level with state of the art equipment. "

" You used a guiding shuttle and relay probes to maintain contact and warn you in advance of incoming plasma floods. " read Kotari from the last PADD on his left.

" Affirmative, Sir. Lieutenant Sangliar came up with a static warp shell on both shuttle and ship to protect us from temporal distortions... although when it touches the boudary of the fracture, it makes contact with the storm and bring it in. And its gravitons attract the boundaries of the fracture to the ship. Thus it is a mixed blessing. Fortunately, Mister O'Conner came up with an antigraviton discharge from the deflector to repulse the plasma just long enough to get through the only wave our torpedo salvos didn't stop. "

" Lucky for you the Ambassador class can fire ten torpedoes at a time; just enough to cover each subspace frequency and create that subspace hole to cut off the fracture... else you would have needed a warpcore each time. "

" One transphasic torpedo would do the trick, Sir. " then suggested the Andorian captain.

The Boslic man sat back in his chair, crossing his hands on his flat belly.

" So noted, Captain. Anything else? "

Kheren took a moment to collect his ideas and phrase them as unequivocally as possible. Then he said with his deep, soft voice:

" Sir... It is my opinion that we are, at least partly, responsible for this catastrophe. "

Fleet Captain Kotari darted his clear eyes into the silvery orbs of the Andorian:

" Explain. "

" Sir, subspace fractures sometimes occur naturally, but the centuries of extensive warp travel has created and expanded them dangerously until Starfleet modified its warp engines a few decades ago. This means that this anomaly will naturally travels towards the most densed inhabited parts of the quadrant, in all direction. You received the projections from our study; were it not from us, this anomaly would have been able to expand so much and threaten all life in the galaxy. The comparatively stable and reduced size of the anomaly within the pocket universe supports this. "

Kotari said nothing. And Kheren added;

" Sir, the planet Neural is already first in the path of destruction. Its pre-warp culture can't save itself... and our travels there since the 23rd century furrowed a direct line for the anomaly to threaten them. The Prime Directive itself states that we *must* intervene to correct what we did to affect this people's normal destiny. "

The Boslic officer kept silent a moment longer but finally nodded:

" Your judgment is sound, Captain. I will see to it. The USS Lotus will be assigned to solve this problem."

Kheren's voice opened but Kotari cut him off:

" No captain, the Artemis and yourself have done enough already. Take time to breathe, to repair your ship or even upgrade it, reassemble a complete crew... and take some time for yourself too. I will see to our responsibilities to the people of Neural... and to your reports, recommendations, promotions and awards and... all the paperwork. "

The Andorian then straightened up:

" About that, Sir... I believe my failure here will require a new commanding officer for... "

Again, Kotari cut him off, this time with a smile:

" *Captain Kheren*; send to me a report of the mission detailing how any captain under the same conditions and without prior knowledge could have done better than you did... and I'll consider it... Then, I will dress you down for wasting my time when we have a cosmic-scaled catastrophe on our hands. "

Kheren didn't know what to say, and so the Boslic finished:

" See you at Starbase 10, *Captain Kheren*. Oh and, good work, *Captain*. Kotari out. "

Alone in the ready room, the captain's ready room... *his* ready room... the Andorian looked at his own reflection in the transparency where stars were streaking towards him at warp speed. For a long moment, he just looked at the image of himself looking at the stars coming at him.

It looked real nice.

* * *

Weeks later, the USS Artemis reached Starbase 10 and docked like a tired horse covered with sweat and bruises but puffing contentedly in the welcoming familiar berth within the titanic station frame.

As soon as docking was completed and orders for repair and refit given, Captain Kheren went straight to transporter room 1. He was met there by newly promoted Lieutenant Sangliar who seemed to have been tinkering with the transporter console for hours.

The moment the captain entered the room, he cut off the feed on a noisy monitor he had been watching with the transporter chief and immediately turned towards the taller Andorian.

" Beaming down, *Sir*? " said the Tellarite with a strangely wide smile.

The Andorian simply nodded and went up on the transporter platform. The Chief Engineer dismissed with curt, impatient gestures the transporter chief and took place behind the console. Because of its height, only his fully bearded, smiling face and sparkling eyes could be seen from behind it.

Kheren looked at him quizzically.

" Something the matter, Chief? "

" Oh not at all, not at all, *Sir!* " he emphatically answered, still smiling. " By the way, Sir, thank you for your recommendation. I like the Artemis but research and development is my true love. "

" You deserved some honor and recognition, Lieutenant. "

" So do *you*, Sir! "

If possible, his smile seemed to completely fill up his long dark beard.

" Ready? " he asked jovially.

" Energize. "

The last thing the Andorian saw was his widely smiling bearded face... before a horde of faces, lights and receptors flooded his entire field of vision with clicking noises and a deafening roar of voices:

" Captain Kheren! Captain Kheren! Here please Captain! Tell us about the storm! A question for you, Sir... Turn over here please? Did you really built a genuine Dyson sphere to navigate it? Look over here Captain... Sir, can you tell about flying through subspace fractures? Miss Vohn here, remember me, Captain? can I ask you...A word please Sir! Is it true that you died on the bridge and were brought back to life? Please Sir? Captain! "

The entire transporter room was full of media people from so many corners of the Federation, all rushing him, talking and poking, that Kheren was totally bedazzled and overwhelmed, his antennae suddenly retracting and leaving him deaf and colorblind on top of it all.

But in his mind, he could clearly see a stout, fat body rolling on the floor and hear a Tellarite roaring in mirth.

THE END