

They were lost at the edge of infinity... but they were not alone.

STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

THE FORGOTTEN

The maiden voyage of the starship Horizon



STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

USS HORIZON: THE FORGOTTEN

SEASON 3 EPISODE 1

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Kheren as Captain Kheren
Redding as Commander Neal Stanley Redding
Jureth as Commander Oseno Jureth
Snowfire as Lieutenant-Commander Snowfire K'leysha
Evshell as Doctors Zero One One-One One Zero
and Lieutenant Commander Joey D. Sisko
Corcoran as Lieutenant J.G. Sarah Corcoran
Jeff T as Lieutenant J.G Elisha Leone

Special Appearance by:

Evshell as Fleet Captain Allen Samji and Rear Admiral Kotari
Jeff T as Captain Syntron
Redding as Commander Felez Conno'ratu
Kalten as Captain Kalten Siduri
Kheren as Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth

Forum roleplaying session
from April 4th 2013 to February 25th 2014

Novelization by Kheren

Story concept by Athos

Cover by Kheren

"We do not forgive... or forget!"

Gowron
Chancellor of the Klingon Empire
from 2367 to 2375

PROLOGUE

The very edge of space seemed to shimmer as if some galactic rainbow was curving itself around all the immensity of the Milky Way spiral.

So far out in the vastness of galactic space was that long iridescent strip of energy that you could barely see the few nearest stars at the rim of the galaxy. It was a vast void bordering the immense abyss between the galaxy and the rest of the universe that only this Great Galactic Barrier separated from the dim lights of the oldest, mostly dead stars at the edge of the unexplored section of the Alpha Quadrant.

Only one ship had ever made it this far, albeit no less than thrice: once after long months with a never disclosed travel technology; once again after an engineering sabotage caused an unprecedented acceleration beyond the ship's normal limits; and, once more, this time under highly advanced alien technology and control.

The Constitution class starship USS Enterprise, most famous starship in History, alone ever crossed all of those eight thousand light years to reach the Great Galactic Barrier.

Until now.

Suddenly, there was a ripple in the darkness, a brutal flash of light sending tendrils of whitish energies towards the very edge of space, even beyond the galactic arm. The spidery lights curved to form a funnel of swirling lights that opened up to spew out the sleek, scorch-marked silhouette of a space vessel.

As soon as the orca-looking starship exited the white-lighted, webby quantum tunnel, the powerful energy passage immediately collapsed in its wake, leaving only cold darkness to swallow it. No sooner was the vessel fully back into normal space that the entire underside of the flattened hull opened. Tons of deuterium and antimatter were ejected from vented tanks while two long columns of glowing metal and pulsing energies shot out from under and over its rear section.

Carried by its own faster than light momentum a moment still, the starship nevertheless was caught by the edge of the cataclysmic explosion that resulted in the sudden contact between free floating matter and antimatter outside of a magnetic containment field. The blasted pair of ejected warp cores floating in their midst added their own terrible power to the mix. Despite the thousands of kilometers already separating them, the titanic shockwave struck the helpless vessel like a tidal wave and threw it even farther, towards the shimmering border shearing the infinite darkness, where raging energies swirled angrily with iridescent colors and crackles of ferocious discharges.

Hurled further away from the dimmed lights of the last few, far away stars, to the very distant edge of the galaxy, without fuel, a warp core, auxilliary crafts, lifepods or even a way to find where it was, the crippled starship tumbled slowly like a dying whale on the dark waves of outer space.

Cold and darkness drowned the only mind left on board, the very soul of the derelict starship, its last long howl of impotent rage and despair unheard in the silent, lifeless void.

But it's arrival had not been left unseen.

" Confirmed;by power signature and hull construction materials, it is a Starfleet vessel. But the tactical data is... impressive, far beyond anything we have on record about any Starfleet design, even one this large. It seemsto be adrift... minimal reserve power output, minimal life support, no lifesigns... all lifepods jettisoned. So are the deuterium and antimatter tanks and power cores. The main cargo bay door seems to have been blown away. There is also minimal damage on one deck section, starboard side. "

" I do not recognize the configuration..." said another voice, as gravely and rough as the first but with much more authority in it. " Find us a docking port nearest it's command section. "

" Located... but there is a Starfleet shuttlecraft, class VIII, already docked at the bridge's access port. " now said the first rough voice. " Seems fully intact and operational... but there is no lifesigns aboard either. Transponder code reads; Shuttle Arrow VIII, USS Artemis NCC-64121. "

" Artemis... " said another voice, farther behind; " data files list it as an Ambassador class heavy cruiser destroyed during the Cardassian wars. But data recorded is inconsistent with data received; at the time of that ship's destruction, the class VIII shuttle was not yet deployed by Starfleet. "

There was hesitancy in that last voice. But there was none in the more authoritative one among them.

" Clear the way. We dock and claim this prize. "

There was no further word as a powerful white beam struck the docked shuttle and cut it off the docking port it was fixed on. As the small, boxy spacecraft tumbled away from the much more massive starship, a second pair of beams struck it squarely, reducing it to fiery dust.

There was no further word exchanged as they took the place of the destroyed shuttle at the docking port access to the top deck of the derelict. There was not a second wasted as their own airlock, barely cycled, opened to see half a dozen stocky silhouettes pour into the circular chamber beyond.

The bridge had the distinctive basic configuration of a typical Federation command deck, but with an advanced look that was unmistakable in the layout and consoles, most apparently on standby mode. before the darkened large viewing screen, there was a forward multitask station for helm and ship operations, at the foot of the dais where rested the command chair, deeply recessed at the back of the whole room to allow the captain full view of all the stations encircling the oval bridge.

And on that command chair, a body was resting.

It was a Human corpse, male. It wore a one piece coverall that looked more like a technician's apparel than any of the known Starfleet uniforms worn by ship commanders. Under the dim lighting, the body was dessicated, hair discolored to a white hue, eyes sunken and blackened, the skin greyed, mummified by long exposure to the cold vacuum of space... despite life support being active; indeed, a faint smell of rotting flesh was permeating the whole sinister-looking place.

There was some faint humidity coming from most surfaces and a few other bodies also merely starting to decompose at their stations under the reddish hue of the emergency lighting. All wore the same apparel as the one sprawled in the command chair, with a badge on their shoulder that read:

Starfleet Corps of Engineers, Utopia Planitia, Sol IV

"Boarding Team 4 reporting. "

The voice, crackling over their communicators, sounded hard-edged in this cold, dim, tomb-like silence.

" Report," was the terse answer of the one with the authoritative voice.

" We have secured Engineering. Both warp cores have been ejected with a Starfleet command code inputted fifteen minutes ago. "

" Check again, Team 4. There is no one aboard. No one alive that is. "

" Not so sure; we have glimpsed movements from some upper, darker sections. "

" Team 5 reporting; we have secured the battle bridge; consoles here have been activated and programmed ten minutes ago with several activation sequences of propulsion and evacuation protocols. And we heard noises from adjoining corridors... but no presence identified. "

" Team 2 reporting; computer core fully active. We found a Starfleet-issued phaser rifle lying on the floor, of a very advanced design, still fully charged... And that computer core... I have never seen anything even remotely like this..."

For a moment, there was silence over their comm channels.

Then another crackle.

" Team 3 reporting; we are on the astrometrics deck, all navigational systems have just been recently destroyed. We are in pursuit of...target lost. "

" Team 6 reporting; sounds confirmed in weapons control section. Spreading out to locate... "

There was a louder crackle on the channel...

And then...

Silence.

" Team 6! Confirm hostiles in your area! All teams, engage and confirm!" finally barked the lead voice.

But not even a burst of static came over the communicator. Instead, another, softer yet strong voice was heard.

"Tell me; why are you here? "

The low, strangely accented and ominous voice came not from the comm channel. It came from right beside them, on the dead bridge, from the tall, powerfully built form that rose slowly from the corpse lying in the captain's chair.

" And tell me... where can I find Lieutenant-Commander N'Eligahn... Commander O'Conner... and... Captain Kheren..."

CHAPTER ONE : NEW HORIZONS

Doctor Nathaniel Cross, Temporal Psychosis and Readjustment department. (TPR)

Location: Temporal Investigations Housing Complex

Stardate: Undisclosed at this time.

Subject: Rear Admiral, Neil Stanley Redding.

Status: Listed as temporally displaced until new definition can be applied, situation: unique.

Overview: Subject Redding was exposed to supercharged chroniton emissions and was rejuvenated to an earlier state of existence in both physical presence as well as mentality. It is to be noted that prior exposure to chronatonic energy was likely a catalyst for the event. Reference file number TIO56385/78/B

Transcript to follow:

A man dressed in black with white striping sits across a table from a large man in a gray jumpsuit. The room is bare with the exception of a one way mirror along one wall and a picture of a starship passing between a planet and its moon on the other. A door can be seen behind the man in black.

"Would you like anything to drink, Neil?" that man asked politely.

Neil looked away from the painting to him.

"Sure, why not? Some cold water would be great."

He didn't seem particularly uncomfortable despite the situation.

The man in black stood up hesitantly at first; it was obvious he had expected Redding to say no. Everyone did after all.

"Your remarkably calm, Neil, considering."

He touched the picture frame and it vanished, leaving a recess in the wall.

"Computer, water, chilled."

The glass quickly materialized with cold water in it. Redding looked at it with great interest.

"Well, that was handy. Can it make anything else?" he asked as he took the glass from the other man's hand.

"Oh yes, nearly anything you could think of. It's called a replicator, one of many inventions that you will discover when you leave this place." he answered as he sat back down.

Redding drank some of the water with the same apparent lack of concern, then looked up at the man.

"So, I do get to leave some day? always good to hear. So what are we here for, Mister..."

"Cross, Nathan Cross. Doctor Cross if you need a title."

He folded his black gloved hands up under his chin.

"OK, Doctor Cross, let me see if I can cut a few corners here. You're from Earth, south eastern united states.. Georgia boy? Witch means you're Federation.. or a spy. BUT... this place, that machine over there and a few other things I've seen since I got here... I'm starting to think It's not so much a question of *where* I am as much as *when* I am."

Cross's expression didn't change.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, first I'd like you to tell me, for the record, your name, rank and personal information including date of birth, last assignment, and the like."

Redding took another drink and sat back in his chair.

"I'll play along. I'm Neil... Stanley, named after my father... Redding. Born December 23, 2254 in Anderson, Montana. My last assignment was aboard the USS Ajax from 2284 to present..."

His voice then trailed off before he recomposed himself to continue with the same detached tone as he had begun with.

"I mean, 'till 2288... and then, I showed up... here."

Cross simply waited for him to continue. Redding sighed and went on.

"I maintained the position of Chief security officer for the last three weeks until... until..."

Vainly, he strained to remember.

"What is the last thing you remember, Neil? don't push to hard, just relax and let it come to you."

Cross had a very calming voice that was hard to ignore.

"I... I was on Terranic III, a mining moon in the Tostig system of the Celes sector. A local despot had tracked us, Sara and me, to the facility. The mining facility was ancient and dilapidated but it was as far as we could get in a damaged hauler Sara had managed to procure for us after pulling my butt of that damnable cross."

He glanced at Doctor Cross to see if the irony bothered him, but it didn't seem like it.

"I was on trial, so to speak, for smuggling and, by their laws, that meant public humiliation by nonlethal torture. I was allowed to choose wich kind."

He took a breath before continuing.

"Believe me, of all the choices getting bound to a cross in a public square was the best one. Anyway, my ship, the Ajax, was doing what they could to get me out, but Federation law prohibits interference with local laws and customs... so, I was stuck"

Then he smiled a little.

"Sara played my grieving woman and showed up to beg for my release or at least mercy for my bravery. It might have worked a little better If I hadn't broken my keeper's nose with a head butt just thirty minutes prior to her attempt."

He gave a little chuckle at the remembrance.

"But she did manage to slip a Viridian patch onto the heel of my boot, clever girl."

He got up and walked over to the replicator.

"Uh.. do I get another glass or will it fill this one up again?"

Cross smiled.

"Both; put your glass in there and it will be replaced with a full one."

Redding did as instructed and asked for more more cold water. Getting it, he took another sip of his drink then sat down.

"So anyway... as soon as the contraband was proven as planted and that I had been set up, the Ajax pulled me out of there instantly. This caused some turmoil but the captain decided enough was enough and that I had done my time. All this set the stage for the finale at the mining facility. Seems that their leader, Toh'ampa, was just trying to keep us occupied while he was setting up for the total destruction of a dissident colony moon in their orbit, using a type of energy cannon which I think he had managed to scrape together from some ruins we discovered beneath the facility. It had some sort of energy pattern we couldn't identify as well."

He took another sip of his drink to clear his throat before continuing.

"After evacuating the rest of my team, I had to set the cannon to overload and make a run for it, the next thing I know, I woke up here."

Cross smiled.

"You have a way of making the miraculous sound mundane, Neil. It was far more involved than that. But your recounting of the events, as you know them, is accurate."

Redding sat back.

"Glad you liked it, Doctor. So... now what?"

* * *

Captain Kheren rode the turbolift towards Ops with a sense of trepidation he could barely control. His antennae on the top side of his thick white-haired mane were swinging wildly, a sure sign of it despite his frozen indigo face and straight-staring silver pupils. He had been summoned to the office of Lotus Fleet's Exec, Fleet Captain Allen Samji, commander of the Hromi sector starbase.

The huge, kilometers wide space installation had been recently rechristened Starbase Lotus to honor it's decisive action in both the recent Borg War and the universe-threatening Azimuth Horizon crisis. This heralded a lot of changes to the elite division of Starfleet, especially with the Klingon border tension, Romulan uneasy demilitarized situation and Undine peace resulting in the latest event.

The ships of the fleet were first and most notably swept by those changes. The aging Intrepid refit flagship USS Lotus was to be decommissioned, the barely newer Akira class USS Spectre and Defiant class USS McKenzie were to be reassigned to border patrol; only the Prometheus class USS Alsea remained at base and only because it needed major repairs after Operation Horizon.

And of course the USS Artemis, the venerable eighty years old refitted Ambassador class explorer, the Stalwart Guardian of the Federation, had sacrificed herself to help Operation Horizon succeed.

The Artemis... his ship... his first command... now gone.

Almost four months had passed since that glorious but terrible loss. There has been a board of inquiry of course, but Starfleet had not only exonerated him of any blame, it had commended him for his actions as a starship commander and Starfleet officer.

Still, the Andorian felt... cold... empty... lost.

The Artemis had been his first command; tragically thrust at him following the death of her assigned commanding officer, but then becoming the central part of his life. After all those months, he had somehow come to terms with the loss, at least intellectually; after all, he had lost none of her crew during the dramatic last days of his ship. And gaining two wives in the process had lighten the burden somewhat. His decisions and actions were now heralded as textbook examples of command. But on an emotional level, he still felt odd, sad, angry even; it was like he was acclaimed for having sent his wife to die in a fire to douse it...

He shook the thought out of his mind when the turbolift doors opened on the vast control center of the starbase. He would have sacrificed his own life if duty had required it; he almost did... And as a commanding officer, he was expected to send people to their death if it meant saving others.

And that was exactly what he was expecting now. Rear Admiral Kotari had mentioned at the end of the inquiry that Captain Kheren was to be reassigned to another command. And right after that, Fleet captain Samji had taken him aside to tell him that this command would be rather... peculiar.

There was a highly experimental, highly classified vessel that would be in need of a very special commanding officer and crew. But it was not ready yet. In fact, it would not be ready for months... if ever. There has been some kind of unpredictable accident with it's stardrive, a tragic one it was rumored. So, the status of that command was now in question.

In the meantime, Samji had said then, it would be almost as tragic if they let one of their best captains twiddle his thumbs... or antennae... waiting for a ship that might never be launched.

As he came before the door of Samji's office, that was all Kheren knew.

He chimed his presence and readiness to report to duty.

The Hindu base commander opened the door and, with both hands clasped behind his back, gave the Captain a curt nod, as he was now familiar with the Andorian enough to be aware of his discomfort when it came to shaking hands. He merely gestured to Kheren to take a seat. He knew the Captain would rather stand but he did not feel like doing so for this meeting and did not want to deal with the difference in eye levels throughout the entire meeting.

"Good morning, Captain, " he said when both of them were seated. "I trust you are already mostly aware of what I want to discuss here today, so I will skip the pleasantries and introduction and just get right to the point. You are aware that we have a new ship, the USS Horizon, that needs a Captain. With Captain Gould, our former flagship commanding officer, moving on to bigger and better things, I can't think of anyone more suited or qualified to take on the responsibility of commanding the Horizon than you."

Kheren looked at Samji, blinking.

"The new flagship? That is... an unexpected honor and privilege, Sir, especially considering that there are still more experienced captains available, like Captain Crist and Captain Summers, to name but those already assigned to Lotus Fleet."

The Andorian seemed to look inward for a moment before continuing.

"Of course, I expected you to assign me to a new command... but... the flagship of Lotus Fleet? And quite a ship at that. This is... I must say, a bit overwhelming. Quite a challenge."

Fleet Captain Samji and Rear Admiral Kotari had of course discussed the decision at length and they had both considered the captains that Kheren had mentioned. They certainly had more experience, but Samji and Kotari felt that they were more comfortable with the status quo on the ships they were used to. Kheren provided a fresh perspective and a Captain who was willing to take risks and come up with and use creative solutions. Samji felt that solution he and his crew developed to get their impulse-only capable ship back into the Operation was ingenious and only possible with his leadership.

Of course, he would never degrade the other captains publicly, even in confidence to the captain before him.

"We had our reasons for choosing you, Captain," he simply said and left it at that, knowing that professionalism would dictate he not ask any more questions about it.

Samji's eyebrows rose then as he continued.

"And it is a challenge, indeed. As the biggest vessel we've ever had to deal with, both in pure size and amount of crew, your responsibility will be quite incredible. We are confident, however, that you will handle it quite well."

He motioned briefly to a PADD before him.

"As you are well aware, you will have the help of Lotus Fleet's best and brightest. Of course, you may select the officers you feel will best serve you in this, but we have two important officers already in mind."

Kheren's antennae perked up. Usually when Command decided upon certain officers to be assigned regardless of a captain's position and preferences, it meant two things: either they wanted something specific to be done and make sure it would be; or the captain needed someone to temper him or hold his hand... or all of those. It usually meant for an unpleasant working atmosphere, especially if the captain was headstrong or proud.

Fortunately, Kheren had a firm hold on both attitudes within himself. But that didn't mean that it would be either easy or pleasant. It all depended on whom Samji was a bout to speak about.

Samji glanced at the officer who appeared to be intently interested in who he would present, but said nothing. So he began by speaking about the first officer.

"Captain Kheren; are you aware of a Rear Admiral Neil Redding?"

For a moment, the Andorian stood very still. he did remember the name. And it was not a fond memory.

"I never served with him, Sir. In fact, since I joined Lotus Fleet, I never even met Admiral Redding directly except in passing at the end of the Borg Invasion."

He didn't want to say more. Speaking of a senior officer, especially one not present, was a touching matter at best... especially when you did not have the best of sentiments towards him. But to Kheren, just assigned a prestigious command, it meant more; the USS Horizon was so huge, it was defined as nothing less than a miniature mobile starbase, able to accomplish and sustain the deepest exploration missions for the longest period of time. It was looking like they felt a senior command officer was needed to look over the shoulder of their "chosen" captain ...

He let Samji lead the conversation about the Admiral where it would have to go.

Samji muttered a "hmm" sound, detecting that Kheren had more to say on the matter than he was letting on. Clearly he was aware of the officer, at the very least. Beyond that, Samji wasn't sure.

"Well, Captain, you may also be aware of an incident involving the Millenium project we previously spoke of. It is highly classified, but I am aware that some rumors have floated around regarding an officer who was lost during one of the experiments. This is in fact, true, and the details are being currently declassified as we speak."

The Millenium experiment...

Kheren knew of it only by it's name and the fact that it involved a new kind of starship that he would be expected to take command of... but that was under so much secrecy that he himself had been warned of immediate expulsion and imprisonment in a penal colony if he but even breathed the name to anyone else but Kotari, Samji and "select officers and personnel that will be made known to you when needed."

But this was a small universe. There has been rumors of Starfleet experiments and tests all over the quadrant... and at one time or another, rumors of failures, even accidents and disasters... like the one that had led to the Omega Directive. And being "one-in-the-know" even with as little as he actually knew, he had indeed learned that something had gone wrong with the latest work on the project. But what exactly, of course he knew not.

"I don't suppose you are at liberty to disclose those details as we speak. And I am guessing they involve Admiral Redding... But what has this all to do with the Horizon... or me?"

"It has to do directly with your new first officer, Captain," Samji said curtly, indicating he was getting to it. "I have been given permission to say some things about the project, as they will be revealed in time anyway."

Samji went on to explain the details of the trajedy that occurred.

"About a month ago, Rear Admiral Redding was tasked with overseeing the tests of an experimental drive that was the basis of this project."

He handed Kheren a PADD containing redacted details of the drive and the tests that occurred.

"With his engineering and... let us say peculiar background, it was thought that Rear Admiral Redding would be the best high ranking officer to oversee this task, and he was even working quite closely with the engineers on the project. During one of these tests there was an overload of the experimental drive that caused a supercharged chroniton emission to burst from the drive. Redding bravely saved the other engineers in the room by putting himself directly in front of the blast. However, this resulted in him being ripped out from our timeline, and for a while, it was thought that he was dead."

The details on the PADD were of course sketchy and disclosed nothing much of the nature and purpose of the actual thing except that it would propel the starship to where it needed to go for it's missions... A description that could apply to a selhat in a ball rolling under the hull... But there was one significant detail that made him almost jump in disbelief.

The power core was not based on matter-antimatter reaction but on a microsingularity.

Although this was the logical faster than light travel power source most likely to arise in any beginning spacefaring civilizations, the mastery of antimatter reaction and of warp travel occurring surprisingly early in most known cultures had eluded that expected technical step... except in the Romulan Star Empire, which lagged for centuries behind it's neighbors due to lack of essential resources like dilithium in their core worlds to come up with a working antimatter stardrive. And so, when they finally managed to, it was through applied mathematics and physics of a perfectly natural, inexhaustible power source.

Inversely, such a need never happened in the Federation. Why Starfleet was now considering this alternate power source eluded him. He was not much of an engineer after all. But there was one thing he knew that differentiated current Starfleet drives from this one: in a matter-antimatter core, trilitium was the waste byproduct. In a microsingularity power core, it was chronitons...

Particles of time.

If Admiral Redding had been irradiated by those, who could say what happened to him... except that he was probably dead...

Or not?

"Your words seem to suggest that he was not killed by the accident. "

Samji nodded.

"Quite right. I was informed merely days ago by Admiral Kotari that Mister Redding was actually restored to our timeline about a year and a half ago. Due to some kind of temporal effects that I don't really fully understand, he returned to a state in which he was physically and mentally equivalent to himself sometime in his mid thirties. This means that he essentially reverted backwards almost forty years, but returned quite close to the present."

Samji pointed at the PADD Kheren held in his callused hand.

"These details had to be kept strictly classified at the highest levels due to the Temporal Prime Directive so that the events would play out as they were meant to. Only Rear Admiral Kotari knew of his existence and that the accident would happen, thanks to Temporal Agents. Kotari went through the process of rehabilitating and educating this former version of Redding. He retained all his previous Starfleet knowledge and training that he did when he was in his thirties, so it was decided, based on various aptitude tests, that he was mentally prepared to be at the rank of Commander and would be able to assume a role as a First Officer.

"Of course, Rear Admiral Kotari wanted him to remain in Lotus Fleet to oversee his progress. Therefore, he is in fact on his way here as we speak."

Kheren paused a moment to digest all of it. Then his antennae curved slightly inward, the Andorian way of smiling.

"I would say this is quite extraordinary and baffling... were I not already too well familiar with the tricks of time. Five all-different time displacement experiences tend to somewhat make one rather... "philosophical" about it."

Speaking thus gave the Andorian time to compose himself. Not only was Redding involved in what has been promised as his next assignment, in a way that may just have compromised it... but he was coming here... and to serve as his right hand man aboard his new command, no less.

It was but a little bit awkward... and in a way disturbing... if not downright frustrating, annoying even. This was the man who had thought him an Undine infiltrator and had manipulated his early career to "expose" him...futilely of course... but, then again, it told much of the man's way of thinking and manipulative nature. And now, he was back as a younger man with allegedly no knowledge of it... after tampering again with his promised career.

Forget the past and you are doomed to repeat it, so goes the proverb. Even just meeting the man was not something Kheren was looking forward to.

"Am I to assume, Sir, that part of my responsibilities will be to... nurture him back to his former self?"

"That is up to you," Samji replied simply. "In fact, I don't like the idea of forcing an officer onto anyone, so technically it is up to you whether you even accept him onto your ship as your exec. However, I'm hoping that you will see it as an opportunity and, of course, after reading over his Starfleet profile, I will let you come to your own conclusion on that. If not, we have other options. There is another ship assigned to Lotus Fleet already on its way here, so it will not be a huge issue if you decide to go with another candidate."

It took much of Kheren's Vulcan training to not spontaneously dismiss the case in pure Andorian pragmatism and send the time-displaced officer on his merry way... away from his ship and him. He almost did... but then, he reflected on what it all really meant.

Starfleet was entrusting him with their latest ship design... and a valuable officer in dire need of reinstatement, one that had been a victim of his own devotion to duty as of time itself. There was a gesture of confidence here, of hope... and no doubt some scrutiny of how he would react emotionally as well as professionally.

Kheren had never been one to shy from either a challenge or his responsibilities, or turn his back on someone in need. After all, he had just married the two women that had saved his very life by bonding with him, he, the self-exiled duelling master, the... *abomination*...

"Sir, I will defer to Starfleet's judgment until I can make my own. Commander Redding should prove himself... again... a valuable officer. Well, he'd better..."

"Good," Samji said, "I am glad you are willing to work with him, as I believe he will be most likely to make the best progress under your guidance."

"It remains to be seen if he himself will agree with that assessment," half-joked the Andorian.

The Fleet captain just smiled. He then stood and moved over to a nearby shelf which on it was laid another PADD.

"Moving on, I'd like to now discuss another officer, who until a few days ago, I had been planning on presenting to you as a candidate for First Officer."

Don't tell me you are reinstating Commander N'Elighahn Etarudbo as well... and again under my command... "

This time, the newly appointed captain of the flagship was not joking at all. The first and last Rethian in Starfleet had been for a time his Chief Engineer aboard the *Artemis*, and both had parted ways with harsh words and no respect left for one another, as they had butted heads on irreconcilable differences about command, duty and responsibility.

But Allen Samji was shaking his head.

" Mister N'Eligahn is still under investigation about his involvement with the Horizon Children Cult which tried to overtake your ship and nearly contributed in destroying this universe through the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. Whatever the verdict, I doubt his desire or possibility of reinstatement into the ranks will come anytime soon... if ever. No, I'm speaking of somebody else you do however know just as well. "

The Andorian then thought about Michael O'Conner, his first exec on the Artemis, now chief engineer on the USS Spectre. Although their relation ended with no open conflict, albeit in cold professionalism, they also had parted because of the man's rejection of Kheren's command decisions, when he had ordered almost his entire crew off the ship for Operation Horizon. Events had proved the captain right... which would not help in closing the gap between them if they were to be reunited again under his leadership.

Kheren's apprehension was now laced with genuine curiosity. Samji took no time to tell him.

" Commander Oseno Jureth, you know well," he revealed as he handed Kheren the PADD with the officer's profile on it. "Given the way he was able to handle command of the Alsea during the Azimuth Horizon operation, I thought that he would be particularly suitable to the position I had in mind."

He motioned toward the PADD he handed to the Andorian officer.

"That also contains details about the USS Polaris. The Horizon, in many ways, is able to operate itself as sort of a mobile starbase. It is self-sufficient and can last on a mission for decades without a starbase to carry out repairs and resupply. It also operates in that way with its own Aquarius-class small escort starship that is able to dock in the aft section of the Horizon's stardrive."

Kheren nodded. The latest designs of Starfleet were now trying to gain benefit from earlier experiences with saucer separation and multivector assault mode without the technical complexities and vulnerabilities of such systems on starships. The latest capital ship designs like the Odyssey class came thus with an integrated escort starship within the aft section of the secondary hull, complete with it's own docking and maintenance sections. With it's immense size and long term mission profile, the new Lotus class therefore also had this feature.

"I'd like Commander Oseno to take command of that ship when it is necessary for the Polaris to depart and carry out a task separate from the Horizon. When docked with the Horizon, he would act as the Strategic Operations Chief. If again, you have no objections to the assignment, of course."

"I certainly have none; quite the opposite, " said Kheren with no small amount of enthusiasm and relief showing in his deep resonant voice. "From first hand experience, I can testify that Commander Oseno has proven himself to be an exemplary officer and an exceptionally apt commander, even this early in his career. The responsibilities you are giving him here are huge, but if he could handle a Prometheus class starship like he did against a Romulan task force and then an Undine battlecruiser, even ending that engagement sowing the seeds of lasting peace between us and them... I can not imagine a better officer at my side. And if Commander Redding has any... difficulties... in his... recovery, I am sure Commander Oseno will prove adequate to fill up the blanks."

That was also a way for Kheren to tell how he would have preferred Oseno Jureth at his right hand. But then, he remembered the late Captain Kevin Froud saying the very same thing about him and then Lieutenant-Commander Michael O'Conner on the eve of the launch of the Artemis. Froud resented being imposed the freshly-minted Andorian Lieutenant Commander as his exec over the more seasoned O'Conner he had expressly wanted. Now, it was Kheren's turn to play that role.

But, if Froud did find the in himself the professional maturity to accept him despite his misgivings, he could do no less for Redding; especially with someone like Oseno Jureth to back him up.

His antennae curved inward again.

"Although I must say, it would have liked to also get to command the Aquarius escort; they're said to be all the fighting dog that the Defiant was but without any of the glitches. Fleet captain, you're taking away all the fun..."

He became more serious then.

"A strategic officer and department... that usually means Starfleet Marines..."

Fleet Captain Samji grinned at his comment about the Aquarius escort, and then nodded.

"We felt that the sheer size of the Horizon meant that the Tactical and Security department would have their hands quite full and would benefit from the support of a Strategic Operations Department and M.A.C.O. Detachment, just like a starbase would. They will be primarily responsible for the type of operation that would involve hit and run, hostage rescue, and the capture of an enemy leader, so it will need to be staffed with very highly skilled and trained combat specialists."

Samji pointed at the latest PADD in the ship commander's hand.

"Jureth is certainly also the best officer we have to lead such a team, due to his training and experience in the field."

The Andorian nodded.

"I agree... although I am not sure that I feel comfortable with a purely military unit on board. But as long as they know who the captain is and who is in command, I guess I can live with it."

Samji reflected on the Captain's statement with interest. The marines were certainly focused more on military combat, but he didn't see why, as a strategic addition to the existing crew, that the M.A.C.O. detachment couldn't be a benefit. After considering it more he realized how it could cause trepidation in the Captain's mind, however. The intent of Starfleet was to explore... something they had lost in recent years... and a military force was counter to that directive. He wouldn't let it interfere, however, as he had the same goal in mind as Kheren. Samji wanted to bring their status back to those of explorers as much as the Andorian before him, so he offered him such an assurance.

"They will of course be fully under your command, Captain; you have my guarantee of that. As I said, they are only there for support in the most specialized of circumstances."

The Andorian nodded again, visibly satisfied.

"Let us hope that they find our missions as boring as possible. It is not so much them that I worry about than me. As an Andorian, it is easy for me to focus on resolving a situation in a most expedient way... maybe too expedient if I have them at my disposal. They are not the ones that will need a good compass but me. Your words just helped me in that regard, Sir. Thank you."

"I will expect a full crew roster to be completed within the next few weeks. We are working on repairs to the Horizon after the last battle with the Klingons at the end of Operation Horizon... and I will expect you will want to add your own personal touches and ideas. Also, " he added after a short pause, " your first mission will be a routine trial run to work out any of the kinks and test the transwarp system, to be sure it can hold up after multiple runs without repair. We're not sure exactly when launch will be, but it will be dependent on repair time, which could take a couple of months."

Kheren stood at the same instant as his commanding officer did and spoke, having seen the shift in bodyweight that told him Samji was about to rise and conclude the meeting.

"Aye, Sir. We will be ready."

"I have no doubt about that. I expect that you will be just as ready for the commissioning ceremony."

The antennae dropped on the Andorian's head.

Not another one!

And this time, he would be the one speaking before all his fellow officers... and senior officers... and crew... and the media... with both wives watching...

As he left Samji's office, Captain Kheren was considering how best he could, maybe, use the MACOs...

At that moment the door chimed drawing their attention to it.

"Ah.." Samji said, "That must be our 'young' Commander Redding now, enter."

The door slid open and a very large man entered the room and snapped to attention.

"Commander Neil Redding reporting in, Fleet Captain Sir."

He gave a quick nod of respect for Kheren's superior rank before continuing to address the starbase commander.

"I was instructed to report directly to you upon arrival, Sir, for reassignment to a duty post."

His short cropped, dark-haired hair stood just over one point nine meters in height, with extremely broad shoulders and weighed in at about a hundred kilograms, giving him the overall look of a football linebacker. This was almost a stark contrast to what Samji remembered when they had met before. At that time, he had graying hair and a gaunt, almost 'shrunken', look to him due to advanced age and moved at a more deliberate and careful pace. Now, he seemed imposing and a bit brash, as if just entering a room was to challenge anyone that was in it.

Kheren also was taken aback by the imposing figure of the man. And it took much to make an impression on the Andorian. This man looked born to command, reminiscent of those ancient mythological figures of heroes and great warriors of Earth or of his own homeworld. The stance was firm and proud, the stare straight and true, the voice strong and confident. It started to dawn on him why Starfleet Command thought so highly of this man, even without considering his accomplishments and their debt towards a man who had sacrificed himself for the sake of duty and fellow officers until the very end... now a new beginning.

Kheren knew from both instinct and experience how to assess a man. Despite his thoughts and apprehensions and misgivings about the officer who had manipulated a central part of his life without his consent or even good justification, he had to admit to himself that he was truly impressed by the officer now before him.

Impressed... but still apprehensive. This was a man who was a natural born leader, of strong will and character, therefore one not prone to obey others easily. And although Kheren was a patient commander, he was not a tolerant one.

He would *not* have another N'Eligahn Etarudbo on his ship. Never again.

Thus, he would have been very interested in listening to his appointed first officer right here and now... but this was Samji's office and his own meeting was over. Staying would have been an intrusion upon the commander's privilege to meet and discuss his status with the executive commanding officer of the fleet before coming... or not... to his expected commanding officer. Doing so with his captain was for after things would have been decided here.

And so, Kheren excused himself.

" Taking my leave of you now, Fleet Captain. Commander, a pleasure to meet you. And later, perhaps. "

Redding gave him a curious look; then a spark of recognition was in his eyes.

"Captain Kheren is it not? You're quite the celebrity around here, Sir. And may I say congratulation on your recent marriage."

He completed this with a traditional Andorian 'I wish you strong children' expression in passing, if not perfect Andorian.

" Thank you, Commander. And despite of course missing the ultrasonic syllables of certain words, you do speak Graalek exceptionally well for a Human. If this is but a small sample of your talents, you will be a major asset to this fleet. "

It was direct enough and noncommittal enough to acknowledge one another's respect and give them both room to become better acquainted without forcing issues. Kheren might have had reservations, but he never went without giving anyone a chance to prove him wrong, friend or foe.

And of all people, the man before him, at least, deserved that.

As Kheren left the room, Redding turned his full attention back to the Fleet Captain.

"I hope I didn't interrupt anything, Sir. I was told to you were expecting me." He said with a stern expression.

Fleet Captain Samji took a moment to assess the newly restored Redding with interest just as Captain Kheren did. Samji had met Admiral Redding once, when assigning him to the Alsea mission that had attempted to make contact with the Klingons and come to a peaceful resolution. Despite the fact that they had to engage in combat, he had done well in that mission due to his prior relationship with their Captain, Ja'rod.

Samji wondered what, if any, of that knowledge or associations with Klingons he had retained. It was not likely they would have to deal with Klingons for a long time, however, with their former chancellor and Captain Ja'rod now considered a disgrace and outcast for escaping combat instead of dying in honorable death... and the rest of the empire in chaos with houses fighting each other to seize control.

All he saw at the moment, however, was an energetic officer, who happened to only be a few years younger than Samji, who seemed, however, anxious to prove himself to Samji and to Lotus Fleet as a whole.

"Not at all, Commander," Samji responded pleasantly. "Come have a seat."

He in turn, took his seat and waited for Commander Redding to do the same.

"I'm not sure how much Rear Admiral Kotari told you, beyond that you were to be assigned to Lotus Fleet. He is interested to see how well you will adapt to command again, since it is clear you already possess the knowledge and experience of many years as a bridge officer."

Looking down to his PADD, Samji made a pause before continuing.

"Also, according to your aptitude tests, you can actively take over or assist in the roles of engineering, tactics, science, navigation, helm, and field medic."

He leveled his gaze to meet Redding's.

"You seem to possess all the qualities valued in a first officer, so my question to you is... are you interested in pursuing a career in Command?"

Redding paused to consider his answer.

"It's strange, Sir... I've had fifty years of experience reintegrated into my memories from a past life. I've been in command of a starship twice and was even promoted to rear admiral; at some point it seems I even went back to live with the Klingons for a few years before our house fell."

He took a breath.

"I won't lie to you, it's been an adjustment going from what I remember over one hundred and fifty years ago to what I know today. The ships are bigger and faster and have features I never even dreamed of, such as Multiphasic shielding and holodecks. And Starfleet is far more integrated than I'm used to. In my time, you had only a few member races represented on a starship; now, it's dozens."

Then his face took a stern look.

"But I don't see these things as problems, Fleet Captain, just challenges. And a good challenge is a working man's bread and butter, as my father used to say. Am I still interested in command, Sir? that will never change, no matter how long I live. Hell, yes Sir! First officer or admiral, I'm your man."

"Very good, I like your enthusiasm," Samji replied. "I like a good challenge too, and like to hear when those under my command are encouraged by one as well. It keeps you sharp on your toes, and, if you succeed, makes you all the more ready to meet it a second time."

He stood and looked out his office's window where he could see the docking ring and was in a position to see half of their new flagship, the Horizon. He motioned for Commander Redding to stand beside him.

"That challenge will be great. There is no ship more modern, and thus with more things to learn, than the USS Horizon. Captain Kheren has just been put in command of her, and we want you to be her First Officer. I won't ask you a lot of questions as if this is an interview. Kotari has already vetted you and Captain Kheren has already accepted you to the position. The Horizon is the largest ship ever constructed. She is majestic and beautiful, but also powerful and deadly. She possesses the weapons for war and the diplomatic resources to build peace. She is as fast as anything with her transwarp capability, but with the functionality of a mobile starbase, including her own attached escort vessel, the USS Polaris."

He turned and offered his hand to shake in a gesture indicating the meeting was coming to a close.

"This paradox of a ship, will be your life and your home, hopefully for years to come. Take good care of her, of her crew, and of her Captain, Mister Redding."

Redding took his hand readily enough but his face displayed genuine surprise.

"First officer of the Flagship, Sir? That's more than..."

He changed both his tone and his expression in mid-sentence, recomposing himself to a more professional mien.

"Yes, Sir, thank you, Sir. Just the fact that you and someone like Captain Kheren think I'm ready for such a responsibility is more than enough to inspire anyone to excel at their job."

He then came to attention than asked permission to be excused.

As he left the office, he stopped and turned to look out at the docking ring and stared at his new ship, the USS Horizon.

"It's a dam good start" he said to himself.

And with a smirk, he left to retrieve his gear.

* * *

As Syntron meandered his way through the labyrinthine decks and corridors of Starbase Lotus, he eventually found the location of his former Captain's quarters. As he stood before the closed doorway for a moment, he was cognizant that he did not know exactly what his rationale was for arriving here. It was almost like an involuntary reflex that carried him here after his meeting with Rear Admiral Kotari. Now that he arrived, it had dawned on him that he did not know exactly what he was going to say. Nevertheless, he activated the door chime to indicate his presence and awaited a response.

After a short moment, the door slid open to reveal the athletic shape of Captain Kheren. he was bare-chested but was in the process of putting on the top of his uniform. Like all Andorians, the former captain of the USS Artemis had no concept of nudity taboos like those of Humans, and so had to learn through his Academy years to account for the more prudish reactions of other species.

Syntron nevertheless had the time to see the large burn scar that crossed his chest; an obvious phaser burn already several years old. This had happened before the Vulcan came to know captain Kheren, so he had no clue as to how it had happened... or why the Andorian did not have it removed by simple dermal regeneration. But then again, Kheren also still wore scars on his forehead, much older than this usually hidden one; Syntron did not know of any Andorian cultural habit of keeping scars for any purpose... but then again, his former commanding officer was not your average Andorian to be sure.

His antennae on top of the side of his thick-haired white head conveyed the surprise and pleasure he felt that his rigid facial muscles could not convey. And so did his deep, resonant voice.

" Why, Mister Syntron! What brings you into this neighborhood? "

From the tone and words chosen within the Andorian's casual response, the Vulcan immediately realized that the captain was in all probability unaware of the proceedings that just unfolded in the Admiral's office nor their immediate ramifications in terms of their former partnership. As a Vulcan, Syntron was not coy or evasive, so he attempted proceed directly to his inquiry.

"Captain Kheren, I just concluded a meeting with Rear Admiral Kotari...."

Despite his stoic demeanor, the Vulcan found himself at a loss for what he was actually trying to say. Then he refocused his thoughts.

"Sir, are you aware that the Admiral just promoted me and placed me in command of a new starfleet vessel?"

Kheren invited him to enter his quarters without first answering the taller Vulcan. Once they were inside, he offered him a chair and a drink. There was a duffel bag on the couch where Syntron could glimpse the meager but valuable possessions of the Andorian; a pair of belium uushan-tor, the famous duelling Andorian icepick, these given only to established masters; a small coffer containing the numerous medals and commendations Kheren had earned during his career; and an even smaller one that used to contain four wedding rings, one of them now adorning his left hand, Human fashion. Normally, Andorians wore them on their antenna, but Kheren's peculiar mutation made his cranial appendages able to retract reflexively, and he certainly did not want to loose it when that would happen.

The largest object in it was a bronze plaque, the kind that was used to dedicate a starship. Syntron knew which one it was. He had been with his captain when he had removed it from the bridge of the Artemis, the only part of his ship that had survived Operation Horizon.

Once they were both seated with drinks in hand, Kheren finally answered his, now, former officer.

" Affirmative. I knew about your promotion some time ago, since I recommended it myself after your outstanding service aboard the Artemis; but your assignation was not yet known to me. Congratulations, Captain. Starfleet could not have found a more desserving officer to assume command of a vessel. "

The congratulations were genuine, Syntron could see it; but there was also a perceptible feeling of regret, even sadness, etching the voice of the Andorian.

Syntron slowly sipped the hot tea as he gazed around the sparse quarters and belongings of the captain. He mentally noted the few artifacts in the area that he recognized. He too had very few remaining items in his possession. He swiftly returned his attention and listened carefully to his former captain's response.

Knowing the sincerity of the Andorian's tribute, the Vulcan slightly bowed his head and responded "Thank you Captain."

Then he cautiously looked back toward his former commanding officer.

"Although I am somewhat... uncertain as to the wisdom of my commission as Captain to this new vessel. It is a rather ominous ship and an equally ominous task bestowed with it."

It was the type of admission that a Vulcan would only make to someone who had truly earned his trust, and his respect. This was someone that he had come throughout all of their their work together to admire too; as much as this was possible for any Vulcan. Yet it also seemed somewhat paradoxical that Starfleet deliberately chose to separate a team of officers that had somehow almost miraculously accomplished missions that were by all accounts impossible to complete.

But there was a bit more to this situation than this. It was something that currently perplexed the Vulcan. Perhaps it was something that he was subconsciously denying: He was going to miss working on the same ship with the Andorian Captain. There was no logic to this other than the Captain's remarkable aptitude for the position and his unwavering commitment to Starfleet and its principles. But this would seem to also be reflective of a more personal response too, which doesn't sit very well at all with a Vulcan outlook and disposition.

There was no mistaking the concern in Kheren's former first officer's voice. He could not say what, but something told him there was more here than mere professional concern over increasing responsibilities.

And Syntron was not known for using language aphazardly. His use of the term "ominious" was cause for concern for the Andorian himself. He knew the Vulcan would have never spoken thus with anyone else. It was an honor... but also a concern.

In his typical Andorian bluntness, Kheren asked:

"What ship have you been assigned to?"

After a very brief hesitation, Syntron responded.

"It is an Avenger-class Star Cruiser Captain, that I have been discussing and negotiating with the Admiral to have modified in design and purpose toward a more science-based configuration; before it progresses any further toward its completion."

Kheren took a sip of his Cardassian fish juice, so much his customary beverage that it had been dubbed the Captain's Brew, thinking a bit before speaking almost for himself:

"Avenger class... multipurpose heavy cruiser... among the very latest Starfleet designs..."

Then his four oculars went to the eyes of the Vulcan.

"what is so... ominous about it? "

"Well Captain... it holds a crew of a thousand... of which I am currently the only member to be officially assigned to this ship, at present an unfamiliarity with the specifics of its designs, a host of explicit modifications still to be negotiated and successfully implemented prior to launch, and no specific mission provided to contemplate."

" Count your blessings, my friend," Kheren said, unconsciously relaxing.

He knew exactly what Syntron was going through. But refusing himself the release of emotions, he was caught in a disturbing intellectual uneasiness that only one thing could alleviate: shared experience.

" When I was first assigned to the Artemis, it was not as her captain but as her first officer. I was barely over a year out of the Academy, freshly rocketed to Lieutenant Commander status simply on the benefit of having served adequately in many high profile missions aboard the USS Lotus and under the command of Captain Felez. And then, on departure, Captain Froud was killed before my very eyes... leaving me in command for an emergency rescue mission, on board an eighty years old refitted legend with seven hundred and fifty lives under me and three hundred more hanging in the balance... And as if this wasn't enough, we got swallowed all the way into the heart of the Azimuth Horizon. "

And then, with a definite sparkle in his eyes and voice, he finished:

" Welcome to the club, Captain. "

Syntron nodded in acknowledgement as gave a dubious "Thank you" to the Andorian Captain in response to the club in which he was just volunteered, and now welcomed. The Captain always had a unique way to reach the Vulcan that was atypical yet somehow effective.

"I suppose Captain," he stated as he slowly leaned back and began to relax a little, "that it was the unexpected suddenness of this all... and then the gradual realization that all of those yet to be assigned lives and others will be placed into my hands and become my responsibility. The success and failure of missions affected by the decisions that I make and the orders that I give... that I may very well be required to send crew members to be injured or killed."

He stated this as he gazed at the familiar bronze plaque and remembered that solemn last moment aboard the Artemis. It seemed to emphasize his point.

" It is heavy burden to bear, " admitted Kheren. " And one you can never ignore. But there is one thing to remember about Starfleet; you are NEVER alone. "

He stood up and walked to his bag, looking a moment at the plaque inside it. He took it out, looked at it then showed it to Syntron.

" Had I been alone, Had I insisted on bearing the burden alone, I would not be here holding this memento of my lost ship. I would have gone down with her... alone. When you are the captain, you alone must make the decision, yes; but that does not mean you alone may come to it... or implement it. You will have a crew, officers, chiefs that will bring you their knowledge, their experience, their personality, their arms, hands, eyes and ears... and yes, their feelings. Listen to them, ask for them, demand it of them. And so, when you will make your decision, you will never know beforehand if it was the good one or the right one. You may not even be sure afterwards; but, because of them, you will know that it was the best one."

It was as if the words of his former captain had penetrated deep within him and abated the gnawing sensation that had emerged during the earlier meeting with the Admiral. It wasn't that he was telling him something new or poetic, but rather, reminding Syntron of these important lessons that Kheren had demonstrated throughout their time serving together on the Artemis. These were the essential tools that he would take with him into his next commission with Starfleet. They would be the foundation from which he could begin to ready his ship and crew while he also prepared for the journey before him.

As he gazed at the plaque before him, he also placed the empty cup onto a nearby table and stated sincerely:

"Thank you Captain. You have given me much to think about and many lessons to reflect upon as I move forward in this position. I aspire to lead by the example that you have presented to me throughout our missions."

" As I have come to know you, you will far exceed any mere example I could provide. Well, I might have given you good examples of what not to do! "

He put down his drink and the ship's plaque to come before his former exec. He did not offer him his hand like most Humanoids did. He knew Vulcans did not like to be touched, no more than Andorians did, even if it was for totally different reasons. But that was just it; whatever the differences, they always shared something. That was the founding principle of the Federation; the working principle of Starfleet; the very thing that had made this Vulcan and this Andorian prevail against all odds and live to yet achieve more and better... like Syntron here, now rightfully earning his first command.

And so, he stood before him, at attention and spoke very formally.

"It was a pleasure and a privilege serving with you, Captain. And if I may give one last piece of advice; if one day your first officer insists on following you on a suicide mission... "

With a slightly raised eyebrow and the barest hint of a smirk, at least for a Vulcan, he then bowed his head slightly as he responded.

" You better comply. "

Syntron gave a nod of acknowledgement to Kheren.

"Thank you, Sir... and I will try to remember that advice."

Syntron then pointed at the brilliant rings surrounding the Andorians's middle finger.

"I believe congratulations are also in order for the recent marital vows you exchanged with Lieutenant Tyvya. You have literally been through life, work, and almost death together in ways that other couples could only imagine. I am certain that this will be a bond that will continue to endure."

Syntron never told Captain Kheren about his conversations with Tyvya prior to their final mission together. About her deep and conflicted passion she felt for her captain and the degree in which she strived to keep her emotions in check caused her boundless torment; especially in his presence. Nor would he ever.

"Thank you my friend... I guess," answered Kheren suddenly ill at ease. "Not only is it rather... peculiar to be part of such a... triad marriage with her and Lyrva instead of the usual quad, because of my... mutation... or even to be married to begin with, again considering my estranged status with my people because of that same mutation... But it is still disconcerting and bewildering to loose consciousness on the verge of death and suddenly regain your life bonded with two wives. Especially those two."

A short laugh escaped his thin lips.

" So, you really want to talk about ominous and challenges... try that! "

The Andorian captain certainly knew how to put circumstances in perspective, and in a divergent yet humorous way; a concept that was still a bit of a challenge itself for the Vulcan to grasp. Nevertheless, he got the gist of what his former captain was conveying.

"Well Captain, I believe that the path before me will turn out to be more than challenging enough. Adding interpersonal relationships with more than one female may prove beyond the threshold of my tolerance, let alone survivability."

" I am not so sure I will survive this either, " admitted the Andorian.

As the Vulcan turned toward the exit, he acknowledged him with a nod.

"Thank you again, Captain, for your hospitality and advice."

" It is I who thank you for accepting the challenge. Good luck, Captain Syntron. I know that you do not beleive in it; but that does not mean it can not help you nevertheless. It sure did good for me. "

Kheren escorted him to the door to watch him go where his own destiny would now lead him, and with him a new ship and a new crew, to where no one has gone before.

* * *

Sitting in his assigned quarters on Starbase 10, Jureth glanced again over the personnel files in front of him, and sighed audibly. Selecting departmental personnel was possibly one of the most difficult jobs an officer could have, but these selections were giving Jureth a headache. Security personnel were one thing, but staffing a department that doesn't exist on any other ship in the Fleet was another. The fair-haired Bajoran pushed the desk monitor away again and rubbed the ridges on the upper part of his nose and then his temples as his door chime rang.

"Come"

The door slid open to reveal another Bajoran that Jureth had never met before, the man was wearing a command red uniform tunic with lieutenant's pips.

"Can I help you...Lieutenant?"

"Commander Oseno Jureth?"

"Yes, and you are?"

"Lieutenant Variel, Starfleet Intelligence. I've been assigned to your staff."

Jureth was slightly taken aback.

"I wasn't informed of this... and I'm in the process of selecting my own staff."

"I apologize Sir, but my position is not negotiable, my orders."

Variel produced a PADD and offered it to Jureth, and he took it and examined it. After reading through the usual administrative items he came to a memo.

To: Chief of Strategic Operations, USS Horizon
From: Starfleet Intelligence
Re: Lieutenant Variel Palos

Lieutenant Variel Palos is hereby assigned to USS Horizon as Intelligence Specialist by order of Commanding Officer Starfleet Intelligence. Lieutenant Palos will serve until otherwise ordered by this office.. These orders are binding, and are effective upon receipt.

Signed

Patrick Weedon

Admiral
Starfleet Intelligence

Jureth looked up from the PADD. He did not like having his personnel dictated to him and the look on his face showed it. Variel remained expressionless as he evaluated his fellow Bajoran. He had read Oseno's record of course and he liked what he had seen, which was why Variel hadn't argued with the admiral when he'd given the assignment. Jureth looked the man up and down for a moment before responding with resignation.

"Very well, Lieutenant, orders are orders. We can't board the ship yet, so you'll have to procure quarters here."

"Already done, Sir."

Jureth nodded.

"Fine then, dismissed."

"There's one more thing, Sir."

Jureth's eyes narrowed slightly, he was beginning to get annoyed.

"What is it?"

"I need to vette you, Sir."

Now Jureth was irritated. Who did this Variel think he was anyway.

"Lieutenant, I was just involved in a classified Starfleet operation, and was temporarily promoted to Captain of one of the most powerful warships in the Fleet. My clearance is probably higher than yours."

Variel smiled smugly.

"Not likely, Sir; and once we are commissioned, we will have access to real time intelligence at some of the highest classifications. Part of my job will be to safeguard that information, Sir, and that includes confirming the qualifications of any personnel accessing that information. If you like Sir, I can call the Admiral."

Jureth glared at Variel.

"Fine, Lieutenant; let's get this over with."

It was nearly two hours later when Variel finally asked the last of his questions... and by that point, Jureth was exhausted.

"That should be all, Commander, thank you."

"Go home Lieutenant," Jureth sighed

"Aye Sir; see you aboard ship."

Variel left and as the door closed Jureth muttered several Bajoran curses under his breath.

After his encounter with his new intelligence specialist, Jureth sat back down at his desk and switched from personnel files to his personal log on the desk top monitor...

Personal Log Supplemental

It has been nearly three weeks since the end of Operation Horizon, and sitting around Starbase 10, now Starbase Lotus, is beginning to irritate me. I'd be happy inspecting my departmental spaces only if it meant that I could be back on a ship again... doing...something.

I've visited the Alsea several times since we docked, simply gazing at her through the observation windows around the docking area. I am definitely going to miss the old girl. I never thought I'd get attached to a starship like that. I certainly didn't feel that attachment to the Cortez, though I wasn't in command of that ship either. I suppose I now know how Kirk felt about the Enterprise which is an emotion that one can't get simply from reading his logs.

Perhaps I'll see her again one day, but now the Horizon is my new home and it will be interesting to be serving on what is essentially a flying starbase.

Speaking of my new command, I recently met my intelligence specialist. He is Bajoran, and it will be nice to work closely with one of my own, but he is also being forced on me by Starfleet Intelligence which I am less than happy about. However, I suspect that not even the Fleet Captain or Rear Admiral Kotari would be able to do anything about it. So, for now, I am forced to accept Intel's orders. The man is cocky to be sure, more so than most Starfleet officers, and he acts as if he knows something you don't. Working with him could be a challenge....

"Computer, end recording..."

The door chime rang again.

"What!?" Jureth practically shouted

"Is that any way to greet a friend?"

Jureth looked up to see his friend Catherine Steele standing in the door way. He sighed as she entered the room

"I'm sorry, I just got through with a marathon question and answer session with an intelligence officer."

Cat smiled "I'm so sorry. I hate intel people."

"Yes well, this one will be working for me."

"Oh, better you than me," she said patting him on the shoulder

"Speaking of which, have you thought about my invitation?"

Jureth had asked Cat to join him aboard the Horizon as his assistant department head. He enjoyed having his good friend by his side, and she had proven invaluable aboard the Alsea during Operation Horizon.

"That's why I came by, Oseno." she said her demeanor noticeably changing. "I've been offered the Chief of Security position aboard the USS Celestial."

"An Excalibur Class cruiser, that's great Cat." Jureth said with as much enthusiasm as he could muster which wasn't much.

He knew he should be happy for her, this was a great career opportunity for her, but he had really counted on having her by his side trying to run this new strategic operations department and there was something else too. He had come to care deeply for Cat, but while they had been on the Alsea he knew that he couldn't express it especially since he had been her commanding officer. Now there was nothing stopping him..except his own fear. Fear of ruining their friendship, fear she didn't feel the same way, fear she'd hip toss him for being so emotional...

"If it's so great then how come you don't sound happy?" she asked

"I'm sorry Cat; I know its a big opportunity for you, and you should take it. I was just hoping you'd stay, but that's just me being selfish."

She smiled softly.

"It's allowed. We make a good team, but it's not like I'll never see you again you know."

"I know. I just was looking forward to us being together on the Horizon."

"I know you were, and I would, but I can't turn this down, Oseno."

"It's okay Cat, you should take the position, I know it's what you wanted. When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow, the Celestial is making a supply stop on her way to her next assignment."

Jureth was surprised, he'd been hoping to at least take her to dinner first.

"That soon huh?"

"Yeah, I know its quick."

"Well, you better go get packed then."

"I know, I know. But I wanted to tell you in person, and...say goodbye."

Jureth walked with her toward the door, and suddenly he realized that this might be his only chance to tell Cat how he felt. Should he take the chance? What if she wasn't interested? "Ah the hell with it," he thought.

"Cat..."

"Yeah?"

"You're leaving tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah.."

"Good, then you won't be around to make me regret this..."

Jureth pulled Cat close, looked his stare in her eyes and then kissed her.

* * *

Jureth stood in front of one of the many observation ports on Starbase Lotus as he had done many times since the conclusion of Operation Horizon. This time was different however, for this time he was not gazing at the USS Alsea longing to be back on the bridge of the mighty warship. No, this time he was looking toward the future, and the future was the massive vessel undergoing repairs on the perimeter of the starbase, the USS Horizon. As he watched, work bees flitted back and forth between the ship and the starbase and engineers in environmental suits conducted extravehicular inspections of repairs. Jureth wasn't really looking at them though, he was thinking about his place on the Horizon and the job he was going to be entrusted with.

From his understanding, the strategic operations position would be quite valuable to Captain Kheren. News had travelled quickly that the Andorian had been given command of the Horizon. Not only that, but Fleet Captain Samji had informed him that he himself would also be given charge of Horizon's integrated escort, the USS Polaris. So, in a way he was being given another command, even if it was only situational. It was a great deal of responsibility, and part of the young Bajoran wished he would be standing at the tactical station instead. Yet, he didn't shy away from the assignment when it was offered to him. As he looked out of the port at the ship again his thoughts were interrupted by a gruff voice with an accent that Jureth couldn't place.

"Ah, excuse me, Commander?"

Jureth turned to see five people standing behind him, three men, and two women; all of whom were dressed in olive green camouflage battle fatigues with the distinctive uniform patch of a Starfleet MACO detachment. The voice had come from the head of the group, a tall human with short jet black hair, and a neatly trimmed moustache, who's rank insignia was two gold oak leaves on his collar. Jureth struggled for a moment to remember his Marine ranks, but finally came up with a response.

"Yes... Major... how can I help you?"

"Sir, are ye Commander Oseno?"

Jureth nodded.

"I am."

The man snapped to attention and saluted.

"Major Duncan MacGregor, Sir, Third MACO Division, First Battalion, Second Platoon, Fire Team Echo reporting for duty."

Oseno returned the salute, an uncommon gesture within Starfleet at best, and then frowned at the Major.

"I wasn't expecting you, Major. Are you sure you aren't looking for security?"

"No Sir," MacGregor said. "Our orders were to report to the Strategic Operations chief aboard USS Horizon, and since we can't board the bloody ship I used the computer to find ye."

"I see..."

Jureth really had no answer for him, he couldn't recall Fleet Captain Samji telling him about a MACO team, but then perhaps he'd still been a little attached to the Alsea at the time.

"So Commander, is the ship really as big as they say?"

Jureth gestured to the observation port "see for yourself" he replied with a small smile.

"Och! She's... *huge!*"

"Yes she is, Major, but I have to ask again; are you sure you aren't working for whomever the chief of security is"

"Commander," MacGregor said in a chiding tone, "Security officers are a blunt inst'rument. We," he continued gesturing "Are a laser scalpel. We're troubleshooters we handle the tough jobs."

He finished with a wink

"You know I *was* a security officer, Major."

MacGregor flushed slightly.

"I didn't mean nothin by it, Sir, I was too... once."

Jureth smiled.

"It's okay, Major... Well, if you've been assigned to me, I suppose I should get you quarters."

"Already done Sir," MacGregor said. "the station MACO commander is a friend o' mine."

"I see... Well, I don't have anything for you, Major, so you're free to relax until we can board the Horizon."

"It will be an honor to serve with you, Sir," said one of the other men, a dark skinned human male.

"Calm down, Reese," MacGregor said. "You'll give yourself a heart attack."

"Have to have a heart before you can have an attack," one of the female said softly.

"That'll be enough," MacGregor said sharply. "I'm sorry, Commander," he said to Oseno; "we're a wee bit testy. We've been cooped up on a transport for thirty-three days... they dinna even have a firin range, Sir!"

"I can't imagine," Jureth said with a chuckle. "I will see you later, Major."

"Aye," MacGregor answered. "I expect ye will."

The MACO troops walked away and Jureth turned back toward the observation port. He pulled out a PADD and began going over the specifications of the Aquarius Class USS Polaris, the Horizon's integrated escort ship. For all intents and purposes, the ship was nearly as powerful as the Alsea, at least until the Prometheus Class vessel engaged its multi-vector assault mode. The Aquarius had all the teeth of the Defiant Class, but none of its drawbacks. For Jureth this was a ship that he would be proud to command when the time came. He started to walk away from the observation port and a warm female voice behind him stopped him.

"Commander Oseno?"

Jureth turned to face the source of the voice and found himself looking into the emerald green eyes of a strikingly beautiful human woman wearing the uniform of a Starfleet science officer, bearing the rank pips of a Lieutenant Commander.

"Yes, I'm Commander Oseno."

She offered her hand.

"I am Lieutenant Commander Adira Yiral, Sir, your diplomatic specialist."

Jureth took her hand and shook it. She had a firm grip that he would not have expected until he realized he was judging her on appearance alone. From what he had read of her record, Yiral was El-Aurian, not human, and she was well respected in all of Starfleet's diplomatic circles, both for her friendly disposition and her shrewd negotiating skills.

"Yes, Commander Yiral, welcome to Starbase Lotus," Jureth said with a smile. "How was your trip from Bajor? Did my homeworld treat you well?"

"Very well," she replied with a warm smile. "Kai Kira is a very easy woman to deal with."

Jureth laughed outloud. He knew that Kira Nerys was anything but easy to deal with. In fact, the former Bajoran militia officer and second in command of Deep Space 9 had a reputation for being stubborn and tenacious.

"I don't think I've ever heard the Kai described in quite that manner, Commander."

Yiral's smile widened.

"So, you know her well."

"She sponsored my entrance into Starfleet Academy. She was still Colonel Kira then."

"Ah, so you have a personal connection to the Kai."

"She's been very good to my family," Jureth replied noncommittally.

"Well, then working with you should be equally as easy, Sir. They tell me you were a security officer, even a captain for a time."

"That's correct. I was in command of the Alsea."

"Prometheus Class," Yiral said recalling the specifications in her head. "A very powerful ship."

"She is, Commander, but our new home is equally as majestic."

"Indeed; when I was told I'd be serving aboard her, I was quite excited. I haven't been on a starship in years."

"Well get ready, Commander," Jureth replied with a smile. "you're about to be aboard the largest ship in the Fleet."

"I suspect it will be... interesting." she said with a knowing expression on her face. "When do we board?"

"I don't know. I haven't spoken with the Captain yet."

"Yes, Captain Kheren, the hero of Operation Horizon."

Jureth was surprised that a diplomatic specialist was so well informed, and he said as much.

"You're unusually well informed Commander Yiral."

She smiled again. "I have my ways," she said cryptically. "You don't do my job without knowing where to get information, Sir. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some preparations of my own to make before we board. And please, call me Adira."

Oseno nodded.

"Very well, Adira. Please take care of whatever you need."

She nodded and walked away. Jureth did as well in the other direction toward the nearest turbolift.

When the door opened, he came face to face with his new commanding officer.

" Commander Oseno. A privilege to meet you again... dwarfed only by that of being offered to serve with you soon. "

Hands behind his back, the athletic dark-skinned Andorian was looking at him with both his facial silvery eyes and the visual receptors in his antennae over his thick white mane darted straight at him. That is also where his auditory receptors were on his earless skull.

Jureth looked into the eyes of his new commanding officer and felt the slightest twinge of both regret and guilt. Here in front of him was a man that had done perhaps the hardest thing for a captain to do; sacrificing his ship... and Jureth still felt as if he could, *should* have done more to save the Artemis.

" Captain Kheren, the privilege is mine, Sir. I saw the inquiry recordings on the holonet, Sir; they couldn't have possibly come to any other conclusion and I'm glad to be serving under you. You know, it was your security procedures I adopted when I arrived on the Lotus, and then carried with me to the Alsea...they ought to be teaching them at the Academy, Sir."

" I'll keep that idea in mind if I ever end up on the wrong side of things and there is ever another such situation again," commented Kheren. If he was joking or serious, no one could ever tell with that inexpressive face of his. " In the meantime, rest assured those security procedures you speak of are to be part of the Horizon as well. "

The Andorian made room for the Bajoran to enter the lift.

" As a matter of fact, I am on my way to tour the ship. Care to join me, Commander? With her size, it should take us a few hours... more than enough time to discuss about your new and very special responsibilities on board, if you are so willing. "

"I'd be happy to, Sir. lead the way." Jureth replied.

He'd been itching to see the inside of the Horizon since he first accepted the position, and it would give him a chance to find out what the captain expected of him and his people as well.

As they rode the turbolift towards the starbase's main transporter level, Kheren asked:

" Tell me, Commander; how do you envision your role aboard the ship? "

Jureth took the question and thought about it for a moment before replying.

"Truth be told Sir, I struggled with it for a little bit. The way I understand it Strategic Operations is supposed to be a resource for yourself and the XO. Our job is to provide information, and take action if directed. I've selected specialists from all over Starfleet Sir, officers who are consistently considered among the best in their fields, and apparently the MACO detachment will be at my disposal as well if need be. I met their commander a short time ago though I don't specifically remember Fleet Captain Samji mentioning them, but I had a lot on my mind after the Alsea returned from the operation."

" They were somewhat of a mild surprise to me as well. But considering both the nature of this vessel, the mission profile it is expected to fulfill and recent events in this galaxy of ours... I guess Starfleet wants to stand on the side of caution. And regardless of what we might think of Starfleet Marines, we must keep in mind that they are *still* Starfleet; they *do* serve the same values as we do... only maybe a bit more... forcefully. "

The lift stopped and they exited to walk towards the main transporter room of the starbase. As they did so, the Andorian looked at his new officer with an inquisitive stare.

" You will be called as well to act as the commanding officer of our integrated escort vessel, the USS Polaris. Any particular thought about that? "

"I've no problem with the Marines, Sir..."

Jureth paused momentarily, thinking about he should refer to Catherine Steele... and the truth was, he didn't know.

He hadn't heard from her since she left aboard the USS Celestial so he used her official title.

" My former assistant security chief from the Alsea was a Marine at one point. In regard to the Polaris Sir, I'm almost looking forward to it. I was disappointed to have to give up the Alsea, though I knew she was Captain Rivers' ship. You yourself could probably see I was a little reluctant to take command at first, Sir. I always thought of myself as a career security officer. My vision of command was the head of security on a major starbase. Operation Horizon changed that, Sir. As I pointed out to Captain Syntron, it was Captain Kirk who said; 'Don't let them promote you. Don't let them transfer you. Don't let them do anything that takes you off the bridge of that ship because while you're there, you can make a difference.' And so to me, Sir, in a way, having the Polaris will almost be like having my own command."

" Thank you for your candor, Commander. I do understand your feeling in this, not so far from my own actually. As for the Polaris, she might be attached to my ship, but she is not a mere overblown shuttlecraft. She is a fully registered and commissioned starship, tasked with the same responsibilities and duties as were the USS McKenzie, to speak of another well known escort vessel. Even under my overall authority, you will effectively have your own command, as much as I have one myself in relation to Starbase Lotus. Once out there, you *will* be alone with your ship and your crew... and you will be called to make the decisions that will spell success or failure, life or death. I am confident that you will, once again, show yourself up to the challenge. Frankly, I can not think of anyone better to take on that responsibility. "

As they spoke, they reached the main transporter room of the base, in fact a series of transporter chambers arrayed in a semicircle within one vast control center. Kheren lead Oseno to the chief station.

" Now, let us check if our security level is also up to spar. "

He addressed the transporter chief, a female Bolian Lieutenant, with all the formality and crispness he was known for.

" Kheren, Captain, USS Horizon. Please transport us to the ship. "

" I am sorry, Sir. Security protocols on the flagship requires that any transport must be authorized and made by the ship's own transporter system only. I will contact them for you. "

The Bolian opened a channel.

" USS Horizon, this is Starbase Lotus. Request transport for one Kheren, Captain and one accompanying officer, Commander rank, Bajoran male. "

A curt, yet soft and clear female voice answered.

" Starbase, this is the Horizon. Please send us pattern signal and ID confirmation. "

The transporter chief invited Kheren and Oseno to step onto the transporter pad directly in front of her. Once there she activated the pre-transport sequence and both biometrics and combadge data were sent to the target ship.

" Starbase Lotus, we are ready to effect transport, then came back the feminine voice over the comm a scant seconds later.

" Energize, " ordered Kheren.

The familiar shimmering of light and cristalline sounds brought them both from the headquarters of Lotus Fleet to the main transporter room of the Lotus class vessel, a two-pad room of a yet unheard size for any vessel, the control console manned by an Ensign Human male and flanked by a towering giantess with blue skin and wobbling antennae over her long, dense and straight white hair. Her deep blue eyes fell on both arriving officers with the intensity of a starship weapon sensor lock.

" Welcome aboard, Captain. Commander Oseno, I am glad that we can finally meet. "

Jureth was pleased with the response from the Lotus transporter team and security forces, no one was going to beam unverified onto their ship if they could help it. His eyes turned to the gigantic Andorian woman and as she spoke, recognition entered his eyes.

"Lieutenant Commander Tyvya is it not? We met albeit briefly during Operation Horizon."

"Good answer. Indeed we did. Looking forward to work with you on a more regular basis. "

"You're not checking me out with a trick question, Lieutenant? asked Kheren with antennae curved inward in amusement.

Tyvya just pointed to the ring around her left antenna, identical to the one on Kheren's left hand. She didn't had to say anything else but for the Bajoran's benefit, she explained anyway.

"There is a telepathic bond between Andorian mates that transcends the mere physical and mental, space and consciousness. And ours was forged in a time of life and death and in a triad union unheard of in any species, even our own. Not even Undine alteration could ever duplicate this unique contact between us and Lieutenant Commander Lyrya. Had the Captain been anyone else but himself, I would have known instantly..."

She didn't finish but it was clear that what would have happened next would not have been pretty.

"Keep up the good work," said the commanding officer of the Horizon. " The Commander and I are going to inspect the Polaris. "

"Boys and toys, " she said in obvious jest. " Understood, Sir. "

With an inviting hand, Kheren guided Oseno outside of the overlarge transporter room towards the nearest turbolift where they rode down the huge ship until they reached the lowest decks of the stardrive section, aft. As the door parted, they came upon a docking area where they could see, resting like a sleeping stingray, the Aquarius class USS Polaris.

Jureth took in the sight of his new command, the Polaris rested peacefully until called upon to perform her prescribed duties. She was just as capable of exploring an unknown nebula as she was baring her teeth and defending a ship in distress or her mother ship the Horizon. Jureth approached the ship and put his hands on her hull plates:

"Aquarius Class," he commented "the latest in Starfleet escort technology. Newly revamped pulse phaser cannons, quantum torpedoes, and shields and armor that absorb more punishment than her Defiant Class predecessors. I expect we'll need to have security sweep her if they haven't done so already, Sir. I'm looking forward to seeing what she can do. Polaris is a Terran reference isn't it?"

" The Pole Star, the North Star... the brightest star of the Alpha Ursae Minoris constellation that, as viewed from Sol III, shines almost directly above the planet's north pole. Humans had used it as a guiding light since the dawn of their species. Even today, as a type II Cepheid-type variable star group, this trinary system is used as a galactic candle to estimate extragalactic distances as well as positionning with the galactic center, globular clusters and galaxies. "

Kheren's personal education in cosmology was showing. But he brought his speech back to the subject soon enough.

" This ship will be our guiding light over the Horizon as well. Beyond scouting missions, it speaks of her firepower; so easy to misuse but unfortunately necessary in regrettable events that might occur despite our best efforts... If and when this happens, her name will remind us not to forget our own guiding values even when things get at their worst; remind us that we strive to be ourselves the guiding light for a better life, a better future for us and everyone else. "

The Andorian looked at the Bajoran's reflection and his own in the access port's transparency. That single image of a blue-skinned, antenna sporting gheloid from a passionate violent race side by side with a pale-skinned, nose-ridged humanoid from a deeply spiritual people, both in a Human-designed uniform, summarized that hope as much as it factual possibility.

He opened the hatch with his command code and invited Oseno to step in first.

" After you, Acting Captain. This is your ship. Of course we have been thorough... but we will never be infallible. So, if you feel that more security is required to satisfy you, feel free to do so. Shall we go in? "

"Thank you Sir," Oseno replied stepping through the access port, and then through the inner door and into a dimly lit corridor. It appeared the ship was on minimal power, either her own or siphoning from the Horizon's power grid. Jureth decided to see if the ship's computer had been programmed correctly.

"Computer, recognize Oseno Jureth, Commander, authorization code Oseno Six One Bravo Juliet."

"Authorization recognized, Oseno Jureth, Commanding Officer USS Polaris."

Jureth nodded pleased and then continued "Computer, raise interior lighting to normal levels."

The computer beeped in compliance and almost immediately the lights in the corridor came up to normal visibility.

"Computer, status of USS Polaris." Jureth then demanded

"All ship systems in standby status, warp core offline, weapon systems offline, transporters offline, deflector systems offline, sensors offline."

"Computer state the source of shipboard power."

"Docking umbilicals connected in the forward and aft sections."

Jureth nodded again and turned to Kheren as the Andorian came aboard.

"According to the computer all ship's systems are in standby Sir. I wonder how long it takes to cold start her warp core...if we have to launch quickly have her cold all the time will cause a delay."

" I agree. Moreover, having her warp core active will provide the Horizon with an emergency warp power supply in case of dire emergencies as long as she will be berthed in here. "

The captain tapped his combadge.

" Kheren to engineering. "

" Baoule here, Captain. "

" Mister Baoule... since you are the highest ranking engineer on board, please report to the Polaris. We need to activate her warp core properly. "

" On my way, Captain. "

Jureth nodded in approval at the response.

"I'm sure Mister Baoule will get things squared away. I selected two engineering specialists for my staff, but I've met neither yet. I'd like to take a look at the bridge if you don't mind, Sir."

" I am curious myself. I have not been aboard yet. "

The ship had only five decks and was not even two hundred meters long. It did not took them long to reach the bow and the command center of the small escort vessel, which looked for all intent and purposes much like the bridge it,s famous predecessor, the Defiant class; compact, spartan and all about efficiency, with all stations arrayed along the walls all around the recessed command chair, standing alone before a strategic briefing area set up behind it and between both turbolift access and ready room door.

" Welcome to the Polaris, Commander," said Kheren upon letting him enter first his bridge.

"Thank you, Sir," Jureth replied as he gazed around the small bridge.

It was by far the smallest bridge he'd been on in his career. He glanced around the space, noting the positions for helm, tactical, science as well as engineering along with the auxiliary consoles that could be used by whichever officer needed them at the time. His gaze finally settled on the command chair. It was much like the Alsea's, with numerous controls on the arms. He contemplated for a moment going to try it out, but stopped himself.

No, not yet... he thought.

He wanted to wait until the first time they launched the Polaris. And he had another thought which he spoke aloud.

"Sir, do you know if the Horizon is carrying the personal inertial dampeners that were developed by the Artemis crew? If so, I'd like to requisition some for the crew of the Polaris. You and I are both aware of what happens when starships enter combat and get tossed around like an old Terran baseball."

"Affirmative, Commander. In fact, the PIDs are supposed to be standard issue in Lotus Fleet now. Each ship locker and seating has one ready to be strapped on at a moment's notice for every person on board. Your command chair and the infirmary's biobeds even have them integrated right into their frame."

Meanwhile, as soon as he received orders to that effect, Robert Baoule went to the small engine room of the Escort vessel. The warp core of the Polaris was on blue status, connected to the Horizon just like a standard ship would to a starbase. Having it come on line was a delicate yet routine operation he had done many times, and so he went on through the procedures and protocols fairly quickly.

" Horizon, this is the Polaris engine room, do you read? "

" Horizon main engineering, Blakely here, Sir," came the soft female voice of the flagship's second engineering assistant.

" We'll be bringing the Polaris warp core online, Patricia. Prepare to divert it's power output in a feedback loop through the main systems. This way it will supplement the main ship during docking as a warp power back-up source but will be instantly autonomous and self-contained once launch procedures are initiated. "

" Understood, Robert. EPS manifolds are being resequenced and secondary conduits connected. Ready when you are. "

The dark-skinned bald man nodded and activated the main engineering console before him.

" Initiating start up sequence. Time to full activation, thirty minutes. "

A low hum started to be heard from the lighted blue column, very faint at first but steadily growing in strength and speed.

" Intermix chamber open, reactants pouring in at a steady one for one ratio; core activation in progress. "

" Power output registering over here," then reported Patricia Blakely. "Three percent and climbing, steady growth at three point thirty-three percent, confirming estimated activation time as per specs. Transferring power output to secondary back-up power grid. Everyone should have his cup of coffee even in case of main power drain now. "

" Just don't tell Commander Oseno that his ship is used as a coffee pot," laughed Baoule. "Warp power coming online, fifteen minutes remaining. "

Soon enough and in the half-hour announced by the acting chief engineer, the power core of the USS Polaris came alive. A rhythmic pulse of blue light came from the glassy column at the center of the small room, beating strong like the powerful heart of the ship.

Robert tapped his combadge.

"Commander Oseno, this is Lieutenant Baoule in the Polaris engine room. Confirming ship's warp core online and on standby. Your ship will be ready to launch as fast as any of our torpedoes now, Sir. "

"Seems things are in good order now, Commander," Captain Kheren then said. "I will leave you to your ship then and go attend to mine. If anything, I will be in my ready room then in my quarters on board until the commissioning ceremony. See you there, Commander. "

Jureth nodded.

"Aye, Sir; I suspect I will be here for quite some time."

The captain went on his way and Jureth made his way to the escort's bridge.

* * *

Snowfire gave a gentle sigh of pure contentment as she finished her tour of what would be, in time, the Horizon's primary science bays. Everything on this ship was so big, such a marked change from her previous assignment on the Defiant class USS McKenzie, at the very other end of starship scale... yet also a reminder, in its own way, of her home. Which, truthfully, she was trying somewhat to ignore right now... primarily due to the last message that had come through from her 'contacts' in the IDF in regards to her promotion and new duty post.

As the first member of the so-called 'Starfleet Group' to attain a rank above that of Lieutenant, and to do so whilst assigned to arguably one of the most prestigious fleets in Starfleet... Goddess only knew what they would say when they found out about her new assignment.

Chief Science on the McKenzie hadn't been much to write home about, and wouldn't have been even if she had been willing to pass along the type of information that her 'contacts' expected her to. CSO of the Horizon, however, was quite a different story.

One of the most advanced vessel in all of Starfleet, as well as the largest ever built, the Lotus class vessel would undoubtedly be of great interest to her superiors. And therein lay the rub. Things were coming more and more to a head, with the *Velkyn MI'aen* having now, as of the last message passed through the *Zahur* service by her sisters, retrieved a full third of all Foreseers in the entirety of Council space to bring together the Flashes that had been steadily mounting. Everyone knew that the Flashes had something to do with the Federation. The main question, however, was which way it would direct. And, to a growing number, what a Vision for likeness to the Federation would bring about. As if it wasn't obvious. All across her people's home, there were questions taking shape. Alliances forming. Loyalties being decided in the event of a future that was as utterly exhilarating as it was terrifying.

But that, at least, was still for the future. Flashes took time to bring together. And it would be some time yet until the *MI'aen* and those aboard her could bring together the steadily building Vision.

And until that future came, she had a job to do.

"Well, this is certainly more than we had on the McKenzie, isn't it?"

The familiar voice sounded behind her, and she turned with an almost incredulous laugh.

"Nolanis." She said softly, her smile almost enough to split her dark face. "And Daniel and Keladry too. I see Command granted the promotions I recommended."

"And the transfer requests, Ma'am." Daniel replied, black eyes twinkling. "As of this morning, we were all transferred from our posts on the McKenzie to your command. I do hope you know what you're signing up for."

"I would hope so." Keladry remarked coolly. "It would be highly illogical to request the assignment of those that would not be of use to the Lieutenant Commander."

She held the poise for a few seconds, then cracked a smile too.

"It's good to be with you again, Snowfire. Hopefully we won't have to do anything as crazy as what we did back on the McKenzie during Operation Horizon until at least a few days have passed aboard our new home."

"I guarantee nothing," Snowfire replied in equal good humor. "There are a few tall stories circulating about her captain... So, where are Tanya and Jaylen? Did they get transferred too?"

Nolanis chuckled.

"They did indeed, Lieutenant-Commander. In fact, they heard about it first."

"And then stormed each of our quarters, bundled us into our uniforms, and told us to get aboard 'so that the Lieutenant Commander would know that she has some old friends in her department.' Oh, and that they would be dealing with our personnel effects." Daniel finished.

"That would be what I'd expect from them." Snowfire chuckled, cocked her head for a moment in thought, and then chuckled again. "Probably why they did it."

As she spoke, there was a faint hiss as the doors of the science lab slid open.

"Why who did what, *an'kin*?" A pitched contralto sounded from the door, pulling a gasp from Snowfire.

"Orin?"

"Ensign Orin Latonesh, reporting for duty." The red haired Bajoran woman in the doorway smiled. "Keren'sel, sh'aen'chara. My senior on Starbase 21 had some rather severe words for you regarding stealing his language specialist."

"Keren'sel, sh'aen'chara." Snowfire replied solemnly, her face smiling still. "Nothing a lady like yourself would be unable to repeat, I hope?"

"I'll send you a memo."

"Oh, that bad?"

Snowfire shook her head.

"Sorry. Lieutenants Nolanis May, Daniel Lorenz, Keladry Virto, meet Orin Latonesh, our Alpha Shift language specialist, and one of a grand total of fifteen non-Illythiiri within Starfleet to be passably fluent in our people's language."

She quirked a slender eyebrow at Orin's open-mouthed reaction to her subtle jab, and laughed; actually laughed.

"*Usstan nime, aen'chara*." She said placatingly, then held out her hand and gestured for Orin to join the cluster of Lieutenants around her. "Come on, they don't bite."

Laughter swirled again at a comment, and the doors to the bay slid shut with another faint hiss, cutting off the sounds of joyous greeting.

The joyful reunion was still in full swing when the door swished open to let in two dark-skinned Humans with the blue collar of the science section on their standard black and grey uniforms. One was male, tall and slim, with a sort crop of black curly hair and a concentrated look in his dark eyes and on his square, beardless face. The other was a woman as tall as he was, long black hair with dark brown highlights falling over her shoulders, soft oval face with high cheekbones, shiny black eyes and plump lips. When they saw the group around the Illithyri, then the pips on her own blue collar, they went straight for them.

" Welcome aboard the Horizon, " said the woman with a strong yet soft voice. " I'm Lieutenant Valencia Irksos, chief astrophysicist and first assistant chief of science. "

" Norbert Baoule, sensor specialist, second assistant chief of science, " then said the man. " Welcome aboard Lieutenant-Commander. Captain Kheren already told us of your assignment as our chief of science. "

" We're looking forward to working with you, M'am, " then said Valencia Irksos with a warm smile. " We have studied your report and research files about the Azimuth Horizon and how you came up with the final containment solution. Despite a few miscalculations, it was brilliant to say the least. "

Turning her attention away from her already known officers, Snowfire swept violet eyes over the two officers. Both Lieutenants felt the weight of years behind that piercing gaze, eyes older than the Federation assessing them and searching their manner for some hidden quality. Whatever it was, apparently she found it, or at least enough of what might become it, for she nodded graciously and extended her hand in greeting.

"Considering I worked out the entire plan in about three hours, miscalculations were pretty much a certainty when taking into account both the complexity of the calculations and the rather limited ability of the ships involved in that stage of the operation."

She finished rather bluntly, but her eyes were soft despite the possible hardness of her words, and she grinned wryly in faint memory.

"Oh, and not forgetting that the last time I actually attended a proper lecture on wormhole mechanics was a few years before the Federation and the Klingon Empire signed the, now defunct, Khitomer Accords."

Her eyes turned serious again, a warning in her eyes to the officers before her that her part in that final solution was classified for a very good reason. And that further talk on the matter, in such manner that it implied her having a leading role in both establishing the hypothesis and implementing it, would be more wise to be done elsewhere.

"No criticism intended, M'am, " Baoule then said with a genuinely warm smile. "We just wanted you to know here that we admire your work and that you can count on us to assist you thoroughly with it on board this ship. This is how it works under Captain Kheren's command; among other things, he cares not a wiff about status and expects his senior officers to tell him anything that can improve his effort in fulfilling his duty... and thus, he also expects all his department heads to follow this attitude. "

"*Ele l'aphyon lor, aen'chera?*" Orin asked, expression curious as she cocked her head at the new arrivals. "My apologies, where are my manners. Ensign Orin Latonesh, Language Specialist."

The other officers nodded in greeting, giving name, rank and position within the Horizon's newly formed Science Department.

"Glad to meet you, Ensign, " said Irksos. "With the mission profile given to this ship, your skill will certainly prove invaluable."

"We do have a Tellarite in security that is barely understandable in Standard... and who's universal translator somehow always seem to be malfunctioning..." jested Norbert Baoule.

"*Klezn dos ph'naut hass'len ulu zhaun. Klezn dos xun naut ssinssrin ulu zhaun.*" Snowfire replied softly, speaking into Orin's ear as the other officers introduced themselves. Then she stepped back, withdrawing a PADD from a trouser pocket, and started tapping away carefully, maintaining an easy watch on her mingling subordinates and on the door.

The gravitic compression field of this strength was used in conjunction with...

The Illythirii then instantly noticed the reaction of the two Humans. They had noticed her secretive exchange with the Ensign. The obvious intent of excluding them, and this in their very faces, was not well received. The look they exchanged between them was telling enough. These were people used to trust one another and their crewmates implicitly with their very lives and for a long time now. Moreover, their assigned department chief suddenly withdrawing to her own little affairs on her PADD while still among subordinates did not help matters.

This was definitely not the small chaotic crew of the McKenzie. It became obvious then that such an attitude would definitely hamper the good workings of the science department if Snowfire did not adjust quickly.

Quirking an eyebrow at the reaction, Snowfire laid the PADD down on the table behind her and observed for a short moment, then it clicked.

"My apologies, Valencia, Norbert. This is meant as more a social than formal occasion so that this team can get to know each other. If I appear distant, it's more out of a wish to not intrude. As to my words to Orin, you will have to forgive me. I haven't spoken my native tongue in months, but it's still rather easy to slip back into the habitual language of a lifetime when it's used in conversation."

She nodded at the specialist.

"If you would translate for those not gifted with your knowledge?"

Orin chuckled ruefully.

"Of course. I asked, 'Why the death look?' to which Snowfire responded with the all too enigmatic 'Things you are not meant to know. Things you do not want to know.'"

"Things we are not *meant* to know?" said Norbert Baoule exchanging wide eyes with Valencia Irksos. "Quite a... questionable statement for someone claiming to be a scientist."

It didn't need telepathic powers for anyone to see that the chief of science had suddenly lost a peg in their appreciation and respect from them.

The Bajoran for his part just shrugged.

"I apologize if it seemed out of order, but I know how much our superior misses the ability to speak her own language in general conversation. Considering she taught me the language, I couldn't exactly not be aware of that."

"Regardless, you have our apologies." Snowfire finished. "And I do look forward to working with you both. Your work aboard the Artemis was exemplary. It is just more common for... well... cultural I guess. The IDF... the Illythiiri Defense Force, did this sort of thing very differently, and it worked. But again, that was a totally different organization, despite the fact that the IDF had a lot more experience with crews this sort of size aboard actual vessels. As I said, this is far more new for you than it is for me. One of the things I found in previous assignment was that once you hit the rank that I currently hold, or thereabouts, even the best relations would usually become somewhat stiff except for small conversation. With my crew from the McKenzie, I was happily surprised to find that not the case. I was, I am afraid, unsure in regards to yourselves."

She dipped her head in further, albeit wordless, apology.

"For this, then, I am at your service."

The black-skinned Human woman nodded with a smile.

"Well, we all have to adjust to one another I guess. After all, to seek out new life and new civilizations has to **start somewhere, no? Why not here?**"

"Fact is," Norbert Baoule then added with a smile of his own, "speak a few lines more and the Universal Translator will resolve that problem for us and you will be free to talk freely all your heart's content in your own language if you feel like it... and we will still be able to follow your orders, M'am. "

"Although I would be more than willing, I can't." Snowfire shrugged helplessly. "And I have reasonable reason to believe that the translator wouldn't actually function. Restrictions as part of the Treaty of Khazet regarding Ilythiiri cultural courtesy. I'm more than willing to teach it, and there is no bar for me to do so, but one of the things that I honestly like about my people, is that we'll learn a language the hard way before we try to open contact. We've got the ability to create a program like your Universal Translator, and we have. But it only gets used in emergency situations. If we have to learn a language simply by listening to broadcast transmissions, then we do. With the Federation, it was honestly quite easy. You're a rather...loud....nation on the galactic level." She chuckled, then turned thoughtful.

"You underestimate the computing power of starships, M'am," Baoule said with a smile but still a very professional tone. "Our UT is now incorporating visual cues and symbolic decryption algorithms, even olfactory receptors, to decipher even the most complex languages, verbal and non verbal. The Ensign here can certainly concur that yours is obviously not different from the normal form of communication of most sentient species; it is indeed far, far more simpler than the gesturing code of the Tak Tak or the symbolic structure of Tamarian and contains no ultrasonic syllables like the Andorian Graalek... all of which the UT can fully process, given enough time. It can even catch and translate telepathic communications from noncorporeal beings since the Companion incident on board the USS Enterprise two hundred years ago. A few more sentences and your native tongue will become fully translated, have no fear. "

"Actually, thank you, that reminds me that I wanted to restart the cultural learning groups that I started running at the Academy. Not many citizens of the Federation know much about my people, and whilst the percentage in Starfleet is higher, it's not much higher. And it also allows me to learn a bit about the cultures that make up the Federation. Although primarily those who enlist within Starfleet. Would you be interested? And do you think that the Captain would be willing to authorize such a thing? I've only met him a few times, and you had the entirety of your time aboard the Artemis to get to know how he commands."

"That is a good proposal to present to him, " agreed Valencia Irksos. "Despite being Andorian and a master duellist, Captain Kheren does not consider himself a warrior but an explorer. The famous motto 'to seek out new life and new civilizations' is most important to him. To fire is always his last order and his first is always to open a channel."

"Hence why the UT is so efficient nowadays, and especially on board the Horizon," added her colleague. "As an Andorian, he has lived through terrible situations caused by simple misunderstandings or a single wrong word. He will have none of that under his command. "

"I have no doubt of the computing capacity of this ship, nor of the Universal Translator." Snowfire replied gently. "It is simply that I suspect, from my reading of the Treaty signed between the Federation and Council, that regardless of its obvious ability to translate my language, programmed restrictions will not allow it to."

"Well if that's the case, M'am, then those who negotiated this are utter idiots... and on both sides," commented Irksos dryly. "Or else, one or both are just dishonestly pretending at a relationship they do not want at all in the first place. It's like we would be saying "Yeah we want to talk to you but we don't want to understand you" and on your people's side they would be saying "yeah we want to meet you but we don't want you to know and respect us." Of all useless, illogical, inefficient, asinine action you could take to make sure all relations would quickly fail, this is the top. The Federation Council has completely forgotten what it stands for... and your people failed to understand it with such a recipe for failure... no offense M'am."

Snowfire's eyes flashed slightly, and she shook her head at the Human Lieutenant.

"Quite the opposite." She replied coolly. "I'm disappointed, Lieutenant. You exhibit a startling lack of care for the culture of another species, especially when it does not in any way interfere with communication. At the time of my transfer, every member of the IDF was fully fluent in Federation Standard for reasons of your rather extreme loudness in galactic terms. Standard tutoring packages for our language have been supplied... or should have been... by the IDF for use by those who would use them as dictated by your own government. The Universal Translator grants translation. It does not grant understanding to a sufficient level. And before either of you attempt to contradict that statement, tests were conducted. Using the computing capability of modern Starbases. The UT granted translation, but without the necessary attention to detail."

"Exactly my point, M'am. By imposing restrictions on communication, you ensure that ignorance. Worse, you invite questions about motives... and that is never a good foundation for good relationships, be it between two persons or two governments. "

"And if I might interject, as the expert in the field?" Orin spoke up, a quiet stress on the word 'expert'. "The Ilythiiri language lends a great deal of weight in the way that it is spoken to one's ability to speak it. The Universal Translator, whilst perfectly capable as a translator, doesn't catch that nuance. To put it quite simply, it *can't*. Not without being sentient; and that's a rabbit hole that I'm quite sure no one wants to try climbing down. And I think, that in respecting the views of another culture, the Federation Council remembered quite well what it stands for. In fact, the very reason that it was recommended for UT programming to be reconfigured such was to avoid the very incidents that you implied doing so would cause."

"Well, you *are* the expert," smiled Valencia. "But what you are saying is that this recommendation is moot because of the ban on letting the UT work with it, along with specialists like you and more sophisticated programming tested to finally achieve proper communication... and in fact contribute to a significant step forward in this field. As I said, illogical and inefficient... unless... there is something else hidden behind this situation. The Federation never tries to impose itself on another culture. It would have, it *should* have, let the Ilythirii go their merry way and let them be, instead of going half-cocked like this with all the dangers of misfire such a badly conceived rapport risk bringing. Fact is, that is exactly how conflict started with the Klingons, back then. Seems some asinine diplomat forgot the lessons of History."

Nodding at Valencia's reply to her questions, she smiled faintly.

"That was my impression of him also, but thank you for confirming it. I will bring up the proposal at the next reasonable opportunity I have, and I will hope to see you all there."

Her smile solidified, and then further conversation enveloped her. The officers off of the McKenzie moving forward to welcome the two new additions; as they would all; with welcoming joy, professional companionship and keen curiosity.

Snowfire cocked her head at the human, she sighed and snagged a PADD from the table behind her.

"Computer, download Ilythiiri cultural database articles 6094731 through 6094746, all Federation records involving diplomatic relations with the Ilythiiri Council within my clearance and a full copy of the Treaty of Kahzet to my PADD." She said crisply.

There was a brief tone followed by the cool, synthesised tones of the Horizon's voice interface.

"Transfer Complete."

Snowfire didn't even glance at the PADD's contents as she held it out to Lieutenant Irksos. She knew what was there.

"When you have the time, read through what's on here. I understand that my people haven't been as open as you might have liked. What's on there should explain at least some of it."

"Thank you M'am. I shall study this with great interest."

And then entered the latest addition to the science department.

Cera Ji'lan hated large areas, well perhaps hated was a strong word...she disliked being in large areas because that usually meant lots of people, and lots of people meant that more eyes could be staring at her. She could feel the eyes on her when she walked into most crowds. mostly they stared at her skin because that was the first thing people noticed about her. Cera looked human, but her skin betrayed her for what she was, a half breed; her father Orion and her mother Human. She had been stared at and talked about her entire life, and the cruelty of her Orion siblings had not been lost on her. However, despite all of those things, Cera had excelled when she had fortunately found herself on Earth, sold by her father to her mother and there allowed to get an education.

She graduated second in her high school class and was easily admitted to Starfleet Academy on her first try, becoming a brilliant young Starfleet science officer.

Now, as she made her way through the largest ship in the Fleet she wondered why she was here. Her orders had said she was specifically chosen by one of the senior officers to serve on the Horizon as some sort of scientific specialist, but she could not figure out why it was her. There were other, more experienced officers that could have been chosen surely and she could have stayed happily on Mars conducting research, and editing star charts. That, unfortunately, was not the case and now after reporting aboard she had decided to head where she felt most at home, a lab.

She had transported several research studies with her on various star systems and she wanted to upload them to one of the lab terminals so she could continue her private work. As she entered the lab area she was surprised to find several other science officers there, including one Vulcanoid woman with dark skin and snow white hair who was obviously of a species that Cera had never heard of. The officers appeared to be engaged in an animated discussion and Cera tried to hide her uneasiness at encountering others.

"Oh....um..." she stammered "I...I didn't know the lab was occupied, I'll..I'll come back later, sorry."

Turning away from Valencia following her taking the PADD, Snowfire smiled at the officer whilst her thoughts blurred slightly.

Science line, but not one I recognize; and I know I'd remember someone of Lieutenant rank. So...ah, of course! Polaris.

A few quick taps on her PADD found the relevant data.

"Lieutenant Cera Ji'lan, isn't it?" She asked, her voice calmly authoritative. "Strategic Ops science specialist and CSO for the Polaris. I've heard good things about you, Lieutenant."

The Ilythiiri extended her ebony-skinned hand in greeting.

"Snowfire K'Leysha, Chief of Science for the Horizon. I suspect we'll be working quite closely in the coming months."

She gestured at the labs with a vague, throw away gesture.

"Please, stay. Considering your record, I assume you brought homework from your last assignment. Don't let us stop you. I'm pretty sure at least a few of them are designated for use by yourself and any staff of your own if you need to do more in depth studies. And, well, the Horizon has arguably the best astrometrics lab of any vessel in Starfleet. I only have passing knowledge of the subject myself, but Daniel...well, Lieutenant Lorenz if you want to be formal... is my Astrometrics head."

"A pleasure, Lieutenant." The Betazoid nodded respectfully.

Cera recognized the Chief of Science's name as one she'd heard even while on Mars. The dark skinned woman was part of Starfleet's officer exchange program and from all accounts an accomplished science officer herself.

"Thank you, Ma'am," Cera said softly, shaking the Snowfire's hand. "I apologize if I seem...um...standoffish...I'm not normally...social. I do have some things I was working on the Mars observatory...mostly star maps. The Hobus Supernova changed a lot of things...we're still working on cataloging all the consequences even after all these years. I...I had heard you were part of the team that...fixed the Azimuth Horizon...That must have been...fascinating."

As she talked, Cera felt slightly more comfortable. Perhaps it was the lab setting or perhaps it was the fact that the woman in front of her stood out far more than her green tinted fair skin did.

"I'm sure there were a few points where it was fascinating... between the periods of crushing stress and sheer terror." Snowfire replied with a chuckle, the words clearly joking in nature. "When I work out where they were, I'll let you know."

The reaction of the half-Orion officer to her was quite interesting, but Snowfire understood very well how difference could be a bond.

"I'm afraid that, whilst I read about the Hobus Event, especially considering its similarity in some ways to the Azimuth Horizon phenomenon, I can only guess the effects it had beyond the destruction it inflicted upon such a wide sector of space. If you have time, I'd love to hear about it."

There was no trace of mockery or false intent in the Ilythiiri's tone. Unless she was a consummate actress, she truly wanted to hear about Cera's work.

Cera smiled slightly at the senior officer's joke, the half-orion wasn't without a sense of humor, she just didn't display it often, but when the discussion turned to her own work Cera shied away slightly.

"Humm... it's really not that interesting ma'am... the supernova aside from the widespread destruction of several planetary bodies... it... rearranged a lot of things, and left behind an active nebula. Starfleet is constantly studying it... even twenty-two years later... the data is mundane... and updating the star charts is probably the least exciting... but I was the junior assistant at the Mars observatory, and I promised them I'd finish what was left of my assignment."

Snowfire shrugged accommodatingly, her facial expression gentle.

"If you ever change your mind... or simply want someone to talk to about your work as you do it... then don't hesitate to let me know," She said.

For a moment, even the faint mask of formality worn was even now falling away for a moment. And then it was back, so quickly that it almost wasn't noticed.

"Now Daniel... if you would be so kind as to see Lieutenant J'Lani to the astrometrics lab? I suspect that it will be easiest for her to do her work there. Unless you would like to get to know your fellows?"

The question was informal, the intonation clear in the statement that a no would not be offensive in the least. Not everyone was used to social gatherings. Well...not yet at least.

Cera hesitated for a moment. She truly had no desire to socialize whatsoever, but she also didn't want one of the ship's senior officers to think poorly of her, but in the end it was her reclusiveness that won out.

"Thank you ma'am, the lab would be great."

Snowfire nodded to her with a parting smile, then to all the others in the room. Leaving her department to get to know one another without the burden of a senior officer present had been somewhat harder than she'd expected, but in a good way. The new members of the team seemed to be getting well; although she'd have to see how the other officers meshed as they arrived. She filed that away in the small corner of her mind dedicated to shipboard administration, attaching the possibility of a full social gathering for the officers of her department before the commissioning ceremony. Possibly a formal briefing followed by some sort of shirt-sleeve dinner. She'd work it out. And she could always rely on the officers she knew to help her get to know the others. Complicated sometimes, but it would work out. It always did.

Now, however, there was another duty that she had to obey. That of a subordinate officer to their captain. A quick query had confirmed his location, and now her long legs carried her almost silently across the vast bridge of the Horizon. A *lot* bigger than the McKenzie; the term 'glorified breadbox' quite an apt description of her former ship.

From here, less than a score of officers would dictate the lives and duties of over two thousand. And she would be one of those few. It was a lot of responsibility. Oh, sure, most IDF cruisers had crew populations of this size or even larger, but that was differences in design philosophy. And more to the point, didn't really matter right now.

Right now...right now, was something else. She was going to have to ask about those cultural sessions if she had the chance now. There seemed to be a lot of misunderstanding involving her people; not that she was terribly surprised. Disappointed, but not really surprised. And adding another few prayers to the Goddess that the Vision was for likeness.

She reached the other side of the bridge, and reached out to tap the stud on the wall that served as the trigger for the entrance request chime. Everyone else had reported, and it wouldn't do to let herself fall behind. Not when she respected this captain as much as she did. Ebony fingers touched the switch, and a brief pressure knocked it home for the second required to transmit the signal. She doubted she'd have to wait long.

"Enter. "

This was the deep resonant voice she was familiar with. The door slid open before her and she could see the former captain of the late, great starship Artemis looking at a framing plate where were displayed a good number of medals, some of them noticeably prestigious. He was looking at them with his head going from one shoulder to the other, as if unsure about what he was looking at.

"My wives' idea of instilling proper decorum in the office of the commanding officer," said Kheren with a decidedly dubious tone. " I prefer to have the respect come from actual dutywork... but I know that if I put them back in a drawer, they will as quickly get them back out here... and bolt them to the bulkhead... "

He finally turned to greet the dark-skinned Vulcanoid woman now entering his ready room.

"Lieutenant Commander K'leysha; welcome aboard the Horizon. And congratulations on your well deserved promotion. We are all in your debt after what you did during Operation Horizon. I am sure you will prove yourself invaluable to this ship and crew. "

"I will do all that I can, Captain." Snowfire replied firmly, then her lips quirked in a fleeting grin. "Just don't get us in any situations where we need to use neurogenic overrides until I've got at least ten more people trained in the technique."

Her tone was joking, but there was a subtle question within. Scream during Operation Horizon to retake control of the sabotaged USS McKenzie had been a desperation measure, but it had also worked. And even if the reasons for that medal were known, the technique almost certainly was not... beyond herself and those few others that she had trained in it. And blocking it would be... difficult if one didn't have specialist knowledge.

"No promises, Lieutenant Commander. I do not choose the problems we face; I deal with them. With your help and that of everyone on board. Guess this is what those baubbles mean..."

"And any who know you will understand the reasons for that framing, Captain. It is a statement of what you have done in Starfleet, what you have sacrificed and given in your time as an officer. It shows that you are not just the captain of this vessel, but that Starfleet could not have chosen a better one."

It wasn't flattery. The very idea of that was as repellent a concept to her as it was likely foreign to the Andorian who stood before her.

"Medals are more than pieces of metal. They are a sign of Starfleet's thanks, and of its trust. And to not show that?" She shook her head gently. "If you would forgive my speaking freely; your wives would not be the only ones wanting to bolt them to the bulkhead."

She hadn't raised her voice, but the presence of command that had brought her a captaincy of her own a long, long time ago had never been clearer; violet eyes flashing fire as she looked down to meet the reflective silver of her superior. Then she shook herself, posture shifting, and the intonation in her voice faded to return to that of a subordinate.

Kheren sighed in obvious surrender.

"Guess I must submit to will and reason then. I just hope they will not have people, or me, look backward when we should be looking forward. "

"That aside, Sir, I come bearing a request."

She centered herself mentally, running over the words in her mind, and then spoke carefully.

"In meeting one of my new subordinates, I found through conversation that there are a great many misunderstandings in regards to my people and how they have interacted with the Federation; and how they exist now. With your permission, I would like to try and remedy that. You may know that I headed small classes at Starfleet Academy in the two years before my transfer to Lotus Fleet. I would like to request permission to restart that cultural course here aboard the Horizon. The number of officers in Starfleet that have more than passing knowledge of my people is a fraction of the total. The number that actually have been taught about us is even less. I do not place blame here, and even if I intended to, it would not lie with Starfleet in the primary. The files that my people transferred to the Federation were not as well ordered as they could have been; and the fact that our databases use a very different hierarchy does not help. So if you would allow it, I would endeavor to fix that."

Kheren nodded.

"I am all for it, Lieutenant-Commander. Fact is, I will attend them myself. Understanding one another as individuals and as a people and sharing what we are is why we are out there in the first place. "

He looked at her in silence for a moment. Then his tone became a bit more formal.

"On that point, Lieutenant-Commander; I am known to be rather strict on adherence to regulation. I prefer a certain... *esprit de corps* under my command... and such a distinctive uniform as yours only serves to set you apart from all of us, to remind us that you are not one of us, only parading as one... "

He left the thought suspended in the air, attentive to what the Illythirii would say next.

Snowfire blinked, then it clicked. Bringing one black-skinned hand up, she tugged lightly on the white shoulders of her uniform.

"This?" She sighed. "I don't have a choice, Captain. However, I came prepared this time."

Drawing a small PADD from her pocket, she held it out. The device was already set to the right passage of the Treaty with her people. She had expected this. A slender finger tapped the particular sentence.

All members of the Ilythiiri Defence Force contingent transferred as cultural exchange must adhere to the jointly designed IDF/Starfleet hybrid uniform standard detailed in appendix 42A.

"I'm not a member of Starfleet," she said quietly. Was there regret in her voice? Shaking her head once she explained; "Not really. It might not seem like that sometimes, but it's the truth. And the IDF wanted to make very sure that we stayed like that. That there was some visual cue to show that we weren't Starfleet officers first. Hasn't been working so well with me... but I'm the exception to the rule. And I am also the only member of the exchange program to rise about the rank of Lieutenant; which attracted more... attention... than you would believe."

"I want to make things crystal clear," said the Andorian looking straight at her. "On this ship, I do not care from which culture or species you come from or adhere to; on this ship, I expect you to act as a Starfleet officer, first and foremost. I respect your heritage and beliefs, but if at any point the requirements to those interfere with your proper duty on board, I will demand that you ask for a transfer. Are we clear on that, Lieutenant-Commander?"

"Loud and clear, captain," she answered stiffly.

Again that small headshake, as if she wanted to say more but something was holding her back.

"I'm glad you'll be coming to the cultural courses, Captain. I'm planning on going over the Treaty first, so why don't you keep this copy?"

She released the PADD into the Andorian's hand, and her tone turned formal.

"Was there anything further, Captain?"

The Andorian listened to her explanation and simply nodded. It was hard to tell what he felt about it from the lack of expression in his dark blue face, but his eyes told plainly that he was not happy about it; but he would defer to higher authority in this matter... at least until he found a reason to bring up any objection. And it would not be to Snowfire.

He took the PADD and looked directly at his chief of science.

"Is your department ready to... go boldly where no one has gone before? "

"One or two of my sub-department heads are coming in a bit later than I'd prefer, but they were multiple quadrants away when I sent the transfer requests so we're lucky that they've managed to get here at all. But even with that, we'll be shaken down and ready well ahead of the commissioning service. I'm aiming for a twenty-eight hour grace period."

Here, at least, she had a lot more experience than most Starfleet officers. If there was one thing that the IDF had learned and then proceeded to hammer into every member who graduated from its Academies, it was the required practices to get a large number of personnel working together in as close an approximation to a well oiled machine as the timing allowed.

It was an oft repeated mental mantra for herself, even with the somewhat short notice that she'd had to work with. From the smallish McKenzie, yes, it was a *big* jump. But from the last ship she had served on before then, before the transfer, it was actually a step down. Illithirii ships were indeed bulky and monstrous in size compared to the sleek, efficient form of most spacefaring cultures.

"We'll be ready Captain, my word on it." She said firmly, then in the manner of reciting a motto: "Before you need you know us."

"This universe will certainly endeavor, as always, to put that assumption to the test. Excellent, Lieutenant-Commander. Unless there is anything else, you are dismissed. See you at the commissioning ceremony. "

The way he ended his sentence, Kheren gave the distinct impression that this upcoming social event was the very test he had been speaking of... at least for him.

* * *

As the shuttle approached the airlock the new Lieutenant readied her bags. As she had been appointed as the new chief tactical officer on board the USS Horizon a new Lotus class starship, she couldn't help but feel her pride surge.

Passing through the airlock into the arrival bay she approached the Deck officer;

" Excuse me chief"

"Yes lieutenant what can I help you with?"

"I was hoping you could direct me to the office of..."

She looks at her assignment padd.

"Captain Kheren!"

"Of course Ma'am; would you follow me?"

As the lieutenant followed the chief out and across a large atrium she couldn't help but notice the large amount of activity and personnel about.

The duty officer led the arriving young woman to the nearest computer panel on the wall.

" Computer; activate DOH. "

Instantly, the figure of a medium height blonde woman appeared before them.

" Please state the nature of the task required. "

The deck officer smiled at Sarah as she spoke.

" With your permission, Lieutenant, I will now resume my duties. There is still a lot of work to be done before this ship is ready for launch. This Duty Officer Hologram will bring you to any person or place aboard as soon as you ask her." Then turning to the hologram; "please guide the Lieutenant to the Captain. "

" My pleasure; if you will please follow me, Lieutenant, Captain Kheren is on the Aquadeck. "

As the deck officer returned to her duties, the holographic woman waited for the arriving officer to regain her composure and indicate that she would indeed follow and they both started to walk towards the nearest turbolift. The cabin whisked them swiftly towards the dictated destination and, once arrived at one of the lowest decks of the immense starship, the artificial yeoman guided the young lieutenant to a double door that slid open to reveal an awesome sight.

The entire deck was filled with water. As far as the eye could see, there was a vast liquid expanse that seemed nothing less than an actual sea, complete with tide and waves cresting plumes of white foam on a rocky shore dotted with small sandy beaches. The entire artificial lake was ringed by a catwalk above and a lower passageway below, where lighting playing on the walls hinted at the large transparencies that encircled the whole titanic basin.

The holographic yeoman allowed time for the newly arrived officer to assimilate the astonishing reality of an entire starship deck filled with water before leading her once more, this time down into the lower passageway. There indeed could be seen gigantic transparencies that allowed to look under the water, where a fantastic underwater vista offered itself to the eye.

Leaning on both elbows on a railing bordering the huge windows, a tall, athletic Andorian with singularly dark blue skin was alone, looking intently at the underwater depths, seemingly mesmerized by the play of light and waves over the sand, rock, vegetation and colored wildlife of this artificially constructed seabed. He wore the standard black, grey-shouldered uniform with the red collar of command adorned with four golden pips.

" Captain... "

The Andorian rose up to his full height and turned towards them a startling pair of silvery eyes and two antennae that seemed to have a life of their own on the top sides of his white thick-haired, earless head. Sarah noticed immediately the scars on the high forehead, her professional experience recognizing those left by bladed weapons.

" May I present Lieutenant Junior grade Sarah Corcoran, the ship's tactical and Security Chief. Lieutenant, this is your commanding officer, Captain Kheren. "

Kheren looked over the tall, young, athletic human woman before him, assessing with his duelling eye the way she moved with controlled precision and relaxed balance on well-toned limbs while her blue eyes darted like sensors on every surrounding detail and person present in the vicinity. Her auburn hair was straight and cut to her nape so as to free her field of vision without sacrificing to her femininity, a sure sign of a healthy sense of selfworth. As a former security officer himself, Kheren had experience in evaluating how good someone could be at such a stressful and demanding job; what he saw was already promising, if not already satisfying.

They were almost eye to eye as she was almost as tall as he was and so he looked intently into hers as he asked:

" Do you swim, Lieutenant? "

Retaining her composure and suppressing the urge to dive into the crystal clear waters, the lieutenant showed on her lips the faintest of smiles.

" Actually, Sir, I haven't had much chance to enjoy a good swim since being back home."

The captain looked into the depths of the half a kilometer expanse of artificial ocean with a strange far away look.

" I am terrified by the very idea of diving in there. You might not know this, Lieutenant, but this is exactly how Andorians picture Hell. Maybe I will ask you to teach me one day. At one point, every Starfleet officer has to look the Devil in the eye. "

There was some kind of a message in there, the young woman could feel it. But for now, she could not really fathom it.

As she surveyed the deck around here, she could see that it had been configured into a larger swimming area with what looked like dolphins and other aquatic creatures which she hope were all peaceful. The walls had been made to resemble a distant endless ocean and at the far wall was a crop of trees and a small beach;

Upon seeing this she spoke with a sly smile.

" What a lovely sight! Not many ships have there own beach side resorts."

" Not real ones to be sure, " agreed Kheren, still looking far away into the depths. " Only Galaxy class starships ever did; other ships of sufficient size made afterwards were all too much battle-oriented to bother with such... luxuries. "

Again, there was the distinct feeling that there was something more hidden in those few words. Sarah was already starting to get in synch with the cryptic speech pattern of her new commanding officer.

" Fact is, Lieutenant, " now said the Andorian, " this is not just a mere recreational area. Beside being a source of water, oxygen and hydrogen and helping with temperature and humidity levels, there is plankton in here to provide a natural source of breathable air, as in the early days of interstellar travel."

His callused hand swept around them in a small arc.

"Also, there are more than a few sentient species that are aquatic in nature; even Bolians are much in need of water as they descend from aquatic mammals. And where this ship might go, we might find a lot more of those other lifeforms. This area is therefore also a residential and diplomatic area, complete with lodging facilities, communication systems and water equipment to facilitate relations with those other forms of life. It can even be compartmentalized to create different liquid environments for the specific needs of such people. "

He then turned to face the tall woman squarely.

" That will be the purpose of this ship under my command, Lieutenant; to explore strange new worlds, seek out new life and new civilizations where no one has gone before. Do not get fooled by the size and power of this vessel or the fact that we carry an auxillary escort starship and a Maco detachment; this is not a ship of war. This is a ship of peace. What I expect from you as much as from myself is to enforce that peace and prevent war, or, if facing war, find the best, most peaceful way possible to end it. Feel you are up to it, Lieutenant? "

Nodding at the Captain, Sarah couldn't help thinking of her own home on Earth. Smirking matter of factly, she responded to the Captain's comments.

" Well, Sir, it is a really nice thought to provide these facilities for races we don't or may never encounter. Unfortunately, I would hate to think that this deck may present a significant threat to combat operations or during, God forbid, boarding actions. I'm not sure any of my security teams are fully conversed with standard underwater procedures."

" Neither will most boarders, Lieutenant, " retorted the Captain, " and unless they have gills and fins, they will certainly avoid this level... and if they do not, they will find themselves quite effectively confined by the same forcefields that allow to divide it into separate liquid environments. The same antiboarding forcefield grid is implemented on every deck of the ship, as you will find once you settle in. "

" So, may I ask, Captain; does the Chief of tactical and security have an office aboard the Horizon?"

Kheren tapped his combadge.

" Lieutenant Tyvya, please report to the aquadeck."

" On my way, Sir," immediately came the reply from a strong-sounding yet soft and clear feminine voice.

" Lieutenant Tyvya has been with me since I entered service in Starfleet, on the first flagship of Lotus Fleet, " then explained the commanding officer of the Horizon. " You are free of course to name anyone as your assistant, but I recommend her to you. You will be hard put to find a better one in all of Starfleet. "

Sarah Corcoran then heard the sound of a long stride behind her and turned around to have her gaze sweep upward, craning her neck to keep eye contact with the towering Andorian shen that joined them. She was almost two and a half meters tall, with a muscle tone that showed even through her gold-collared, black and grey uniform. She was not as dark of skin as the captain but her left antenna wore a ring identical to the one on his left hand.

" Please show our new Chief of Security and Tactical where her office is, Lieutenant... and answer any specific question she may have about her posting on board and our security protocols... including any question about me. "

" Aye, Sir... with pleasure, " answered the giantess, her antennae curving inward in the peculiar Andorian smile.

" Welcome aboard, Lieutenant Corcoran. " the captain said, ending their meeting.

" If you would come with me, Chief," Tyvya then said to the smaller woman. " Your office is on deck 16, near the brig. "

As the two Lieutenants made their way to deck 16, Lieutenant Corcoran couldn't help but be curious about the composition of the crew, noticing there were a lot of Andorians aboard.

"So, Lieutenant Tyvya, how long have you been aboard?"

"Not that long really. Well, this is a brand new ship after all... But I came across with the captain from his last command."

"Ah yes, I heard about your last ship during my last posting... It's a shame about the outcome of her last mission."

After the short conversation, the two officers approached a rather wide glass door flanked by two security officers of crewman first class rank.

"Well, Chief; welcome to the security complex. As you can see, it's a little unconventional compared to standard ships of Starfleet."

Sarah chuckled.

"Not as unconventional as having a deck of water."

As they entered the main section, Corcoran looked around the room and took in the thirty plus officers and crew station at the terminals and alcoves. To her right, she noticed a heavy reinforced entrance. Noticing the new security chief's gaze resting on the door Tyvya started to head over there.

"This is the main armory. It houses most of our equipment, but we do have multiple auxillairies scattered around the ship too, mostly near the remote stations."

"So, what do we keep in her exactly?"

"A lot of highly sensitive equipment; but, at the moment, it is mostly used as storage until the arms and supplies come aboard."

"Ah."

As the Lieutenant moved away, she headed to a rear door at the back of the main room.

"Ah... I presume this would be my private office..."

As she tapped the door open, she then noticed the multitude of boxes and storage cases.

"I see my personal effects are here already. So, any other rooms I should see, Lieutenant?"

At the comment, the giantess lead the way to what appeared to a be a briefing room of a scale usually only seen on a station like DS9. Immediately next to this entrance to this area was a glass door leading into what looked like the brig area.

"So Lieutenant; what are the other three doors for?"

"One of them leads to the security holodeck, which is placed mainly to be used for training and possible security replay and reconstructions. The other two are empty rooms that can be configured for multiple purposes."

"I have to say this is all rather impressive. But maybe we should have a few of the crew to unpack the boxes and start to get things in order ready for launch and any inspection. I'm not very comfortable knowing that our armory is full of tissues and cups."

As both of them smiled, Sarah with her lips and the Andorian giantess with her antennae, a rough looking officer with the rank of chief warrant officer approached them and handed Lieutenant Tyvya a small status report.

"Hmm... it would seem our brig might be seeing its first inhabitant... small fight between some cargo jocks and a flight officer."

"well dispatch a security team and get it sorted."

"aye, Chief."

Lieutenant Corcoran made her way to her office and took her seat to look at the commanding view of the security complex her office provided.

Ah this will do. I best think about finding my quarters aboard this thing.

She tapped up her computer terminal and brought up the deck listings.

* * *

Seeing the arrival of a high priority communication from Starfleet brought a chill of anticipation down the spine of Elisha Leone. It was a moment she had worked harder than most can even imagine to reach a point such as this, regardless of what the outcome would be. Yet despite the curiosity burning deep within her, she just stared at the Starfleet emblem on the viewscreen without activating the impending message.

She closed her eyes and reflected intensely on the moment's arrival.

Brought into existence and then abandoned far outside of Federation domain from a race of slave traders and other questionable practices, even as a mere youngster, Orion girl had been forced to battle her way just to survive. She had had no long-term shelter, no steady meals, and no one to care for her throughout her life.

But somehow, despite these adversities, she had discovered within her an indomitable strength of mind along with a sheer determination to overcome all of the relentlessly dangerous obstacles that had repeatedly befallen her. She had realized that she would find a way to prevail beyond this meager existence; no matter what the risks or audacity to accomplish this required, or die in her attempts. Later, as she had started to physically mature, Elisha had eventually begun to capitalize on the compelling gifts that she possessed to advance her long-term objectives.

After years of exertion, exasperation and countless attempts, she eventually had made her way into Federation space. She had then served as an engineer's apprentice on the Beta VI colony and then as a science lab technician on several sectors of the Martian colony.

After still more years of menial work, her exceptional aptitude, quick-minded diagnostic abilities and skills in both engineering and science had emerged and had caught the attention of visiting starship Captain Theron Burke. A reserved and dignified officer, he had witnessed firsthand her ability to thoroughly investigate several environmental and mechanical system malfunctions and then fix them in a manner more efficient and effective than their hired in-house engineers had been able to do. And so, months later, this captain, known for his keen eye for talent, arranged to have Elisha take a Starfleet Academy pre-entrance exam; despite the initial objections to allow this uneducated laborer from a known adversarial species even the opportunity to participate. She outscored all of the other examinees.

With Captain Burke's official sponsorship and special permission granted from several Academy professors, she was granted admittance to Starfleet Academy within one year... the very first of her kind to ever do so.

Since that time, she had graduated from the academy with top honors; not that this did not come without a new set of challenges and obstacles that she also had to overcome beyond the rigors of academic courses. The biggest lesson she had learned during her time at the Academy was the skill to tone down and control her naturally provocative manners and mesmerizing hormones combined with her exotic, seductive looks.

Having reached full maturity, she indeed possessed alluring features, including intense aqua-colored eyes, silky emerald-colored skin surrounded by a thick mane of long shiny black hair. Elisha Leone had slowly adapted the unwanted and unwarranted attention that she received virtually everywhere into an equivalent of a bargaining chip. She was after all, an extraordinarily attractive Orion female, even by her species high standards, and therefore most individuals that she encountered assumed her disposition to be very sensual and promiscuous.

While many considered her striking appearance an asset, she later realized it to equally be a liability. It distracted those around her from acknowledging her keen mind and diverse capabilities. Instead, this seemed to evoke the more basal instincts and tendencies in both males and females. Women were often threatened by her potent allure to the men around her, while males would often gawk and be overly attentive to her in all of the wrong situations.

She was caught in a dichotomy between the nature of her species and her professional aspirations. She worked consciously during her years attending the Academy at repressing her sensuality along with her powerful and enticing pheromones to the point of virtually denying their existence. It was an internal battle that raged within her constantly and she kept this in-check by the sheer determination of her will.

But this was mostly behind her now.

However, from the moment of her graduation, she had applied repeatedly to be commissioned to a starship. Yet until this moment, not a single opportunity had been extended to her.

Elisha then opened her eyes and after a few deep breaths activated the message.

**From: Starfleet Command, Lotus Fleet Division
To: Ensign Elisha Leone, Starfleet Academy**

Following your exceptional graduating marks, you are hereby promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade. You have been assigned to serve as the Chief Operations Officer aboard the Fleet's newest Flagship , the USS Horizon, effective immediately.

A shuttle is en route to transport you to the USS Pittsburg which will ferry you to Starbase Lotus in 26 hours from the mark on this transmission. You should arrive within the next sixty standard days to report to there to your commanding officer.

Congratulations Lieutenant

**Commander Karen Schmidt
Executive Officer
Command Division Hromi Sector
Lotus Fleet**

As fierce and brave as this Orion woman was, Elisha could not restrain the tears that began to flow down her soft green-hued cheek as she read the message.

The newly commissioned operations chief was transferred from the shuttle that picked her up on Earth to an awaiting starship two days later. It was an unceremonious event, other than a few awkward stares as she walked down the corridor of the starship to her awaiting guest quarters. But this was nothing new for Elisha Leone. Most Starfleet members she encountered were not accustomed to seeing an Orion female dressed in an officer's uniform of the Federation walking among them. But from her years in the Academy walking down its corridors dressed in a cadet's uniform many times, she had learned that this reaction was not malevolent in intent, but more one of curiosity. She had adapted to being observed as such a curiosity wherever she went and in response, carried herself with poise and grace.

She remained in her quarters on the starship during the majority of the journey across the quadrant, advancing her abilities in both reading and writing in the style and format of Federation protocols. She would have reports to complete and turn in after overseeing internal systems control, communications, and sensors. She would also be expected to coordinate the scheduling of resources along with hardware and system usage and allocation for the entire starship. She would not allow any technicalities or ambiguities to interfere with the efficiency of managing her responsibilities.

Once she felt confident in those responsibilities, she shifted her emphasis and began to research information available on the USS Horizon in order to familiarize herself with its overall design.

With that aspect of her knowledge reasonably addressed almost a week later, Elisha then focused her remaining time utilizing her PADD to study the details of Ops console on the Horizon's bridge. She would not step one foot on that bridge without first establishing a working familiarity with its layout and specific functionalities.

Before she realized it, the weeks had passed and she was notified that they would be docking at the Lotus Starbase in less than one hour. With only one bag in tow, packing only took a few minutes.

After going through all of the required security protocols, Elisha exited out of the airlock and entered into the corridors of the starbase. She stopped for a moment to engage her PADD and then downloaded a basic map of the accessible areas of the starbase. The details within the Starbase general information also contained the docking area location of the USS Horizon. Given the choice, she would rather walk than be transported there; especially since she was rather self-confined during her journey.

The Orion officer began to look around, got her bearings straight, and then set on her passage toward the docking area of the flagship.

The starbase was bustling with activity as she meandered her way through corridors and turbolifts. She learned that they had two new Federation starships present and each vessel was being prepared to launch within weeks of each other. This was rather evident as she witnessed scores of workers and crews hustling around in apparent fixation as their preparations were challenged by the steady countdown of looming deadlines.

Arriving to the access point of the Starship, she approached the security detail posted outside its entrance. She displayed her transfer orders as she announced to the main security officer:

" Lieutenant Junior Grade Elisha Leône reporting for duty as Chief Operations Officer aboard the USS Horizon."

The officer greeting her was a stout, heavily muscled Tellarite male with the customary bushy hair, eyebrows and beard and a stare that could melt down a bulkhead. His voice was as rough as a mountain avalanche.

" Really... either the captain is abusing his status... and risking life and limb with his wives... or this is the most outrageous security test I have ever heard of. "

He took her displayed data and checked it on his security tricorder. Then he checked her up with the hand scanner. Then again. He made a swift check with Starfleet data, starbase files and the ship's computer, asking for complete data correlation and confirmation from all three together. Then, he looked at his colleague, a tall, slim, stoic blonde Human male who had also contacted the vessel and spoke with her transporter chief who confirmed pre-transport biometrics scans, down to the subatomic level, verified with previous logged data.

All the time, both officers had a hand never far from their phaser at their belt. So did the two others on the other side of the transparent, forcefield reinforced airlock . They were also checking the same data and locking the ship's own scanner ready for her when she would set foot on the access port.

And the Orion woman could not help but to notice that all of them had a combat knife jutting out from inside a boot. Definitely not standard Starfleet issue... at least outside of the Starfleet Marines Corps... and obviously Captain Kheren's command.

" Well what do you know; you are clear and genuine, Lieutenant. Welcome aboard. "

This time, the Tellarite was smiling hugely through his dense, dark beard, looking up at her with eyes that were now kinder yet still sharp as the knife in his boot.

As she stepped before the reinforced door, the computer controlled lock accepted the readings from her as recorded in its memory banks and opened for her. By the time she had stepped to the ship's access and its own security check, another scan had been made between them as she left the station for the vessel. Once on the other side, The Betazoid male and the dark-furred, blue-eyed Caitian woman repeated the same security check as had been done by their colleagues on the base.

The whole process had taken barely over a minute. Yet, the thoroughness of it was like nothing one would have experienced outside a classified area or a Starfleet Intelligence installation.

" Welcome aboard, Lieutenant Leône, " said the Caitian with a soft, purring, strangely seductive voice as she signalled to a Vulcan male officer to take over for her. " I am Lieutenant Mriish. Please follow me. I will escort you to your assigned quarters. "

With merely a subtle nod, the newly arrived Orion officer shifted her attention from the greeting of the rather intense Tellarite as she gazed curiously at the Caitian officer now leading an escort to her quarters. Elisha had never met someone from this felinoid species before, yet she consciously strived not to stare at her. She knew all too well what that was like. She immediately followed in step behind her.

As Elisha swiftly caught up with her, she refocused her attention on the path in which Lieutenant Mriish led her. This was a massive vessel and she did not want to appear as someone who was relatively lost among the corridors and decks; even though, at the moment, she was.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Mriish," Lieutenant Leône responded, "for the welcome and escorting me to my quarters."

The Orion then inquired;

"How long have you been aboard the Horizon, Lieutenant?"

The felinoid woman glanced at the computer interface on the wall and touched the broad black glass-like band that seemed to go all the way throughout every corridor of the titanic vessel. It came to life with several readily available options as she answered the new chief of ops.

" According to onboard chronometer... forty-five minutes. "

She smiled a wide, sharp-toothed, feral grin that was more frightening than friendly-looking, obviously trying to mimic Human mannerism but evidently not physiologically well suited to succeed in all of them. But the purring in her soft, throaty voice was reassuring enough.

" Even those who built here could get lost in such a massive structure; even the jefferries tubes are big enough to walk upright inside of them! But if you ever got aboard an old Galaxy class, you recognize here the same type of wall-mounted computer interface. Just ask for a destination and follow the light sign until you get there. In your case, I just knew because I am assigned to the quarters next to yours. This ship is truly big by the way, so that, even as a junior officer, you get your own private quarters on board. "

Mriish unsealed the doors and gave her the access code to her quarters that only command, medical and security senior officers would share with her.

" Same way, if you want to report to the Exec or the captain, use the interface to find them. Even without their combadges, ship's internal sensors will locate their recorded biosigns and help you find them, or anyone else, anywhere on board. Anything else I can help you with, Lieutenant? "

Elisha nodded affirmatively.

"That is a helpful recommendation, Lieutenant Mrrish" Elisha responded with a smile as she walked over and engaged the interface.

"The current location of Captain Kheren?" the Orion inquired directly to the device.

Almost immediately, a synthetic response informed her.

"Captain Kheren is on the Aquadeck, deck 20."

Having limited experience with Andorians as well, other than an occasional glimpse during her Academy years, Lieutenant Leône turned back toward the dark-furred Caitian security officer and asked rather demurely.

"Is there anything in terms of... protocol that I should know when speaking to the Captain Lieutenant?"

"Oh it 's quite simple with Captain Kheren; behave like a Starfleet officerr and you will go OK by him everrytime. "

Lieutenant Leône stepped further inside her quarters as she swiftly dropped off the single bag she was carrying by her new bed and then gave an appreciative parting salutation to the Caitain as she left her quarters.

She followed the path back to the turbolift from which they arrived and directed it to deck 20.

Lost deep in her thoughts, the turbolift doors suddenly parted and Elisha gasped as she reached for the lift to have something graspable to hold on to. Before her was what appeared to be an entire deck that was filled with water. It was similar yet more spectacular to the oceans she saw images of in the Academy data base with its oscillating waves and breaking crests of sea foam as they broke out onto a variety of beaches filled with rocks and sand.

It was a wonderment for her to see and she was speechless as she cautiously stepped out onto the walkway. Her eyes moved from the distant trees to the unusual lifeforms moving beneath the waves. Then she noticed the Andorian... the captain and immediately regained her composure and stood at attention.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Elisha Leône reporting for duty as Chief Operations Officer, Sir."

Kheren looked over the newest addition to his crew with no small amount of amazement. She was one of those infamous Orion women, formerly called "Orion slave girls" with all that those words implied... but in truth, known to be the true power behind the Orion civilization, especially it's well known Orion Syndicate and their despicable practice of slavery; the main reason why Orion had never been and could not be part of the United Federation of Planets. For this woman to have not only joined Starfleet but manage to rise to the rank of Lieutenant... and that well enough to get assigned, not only to the elite Starfleet division of Lotus Fleet but even more to serve on Lotus Fleet's new flagship and as a department chief no less... This resonated deeply into the ostracized, self-exiled Andorian mutant's own soul.

Of all people, he truly understood what she must have gone through just to stand here in front of him and say those words today.

As a matter of fact, his ultrasensitive Andorian smell told him that her seducing pheromones were off. Just like her "vow of celibacy" similar to that of Deltans she had signed upon entering service told on her Starfleet record, it showed plainly what she was ready to do to be worthy of the uniform and pips she was wearing. Yes, of all people, Kheren knew what she had gone through... and what she would face next. No wonder she was standing thus in front of him.

"Welcome aboard, Lieutenant. I gather you took time to review you new assignment while coming all the way from sector 001..."

His words showed not only that he did his homework as a commanding officer, but that he expected his officers to do the same, even when not directly ordered to. Thus she would immediately begin to know what kind of captain he was...and show to him what kind of bridge officer she would be.

Diligently, Lieutenant Leône replied.

"Yes Sir Captain. During my journey to the starbase, I utilized my available time to study schematics of this entire vessel. I then designed an exemplar template for the scheduling of existing resources along with a concurrent template program which outlines and updates hardware and system usage and allocation throughout the entire starship. After which, I examined the layout and specifications of the operations console."

"Well done, Lieutenant. Please confirm your data with all department heads and submit your report to the attention of Commander Redding, our First officer. Any comment, problem or improvement you would like to discuss now? "

Reflecting on the question for a few seconds, the Lieutenant responded.

"Thank you, Sir. At this moment, there are no issues that I am aware of Captain. The truth is... I only arrived to the Horizon moments ago. It seemed appropriate for me to introduce myself to the commanding officer of this vessel."

She lowered her head slightly.

"I hope that this is the appropriate protocol."

"Always a good idea to get on the good side of your commanding officers," said the Andorian with a pleasant tone and a wink.

Elisha also hoped that she didn't somehow offend the captain by interrupting his time in this aqua-based environment. Then looking up again, she added:

"The only thought I would like to add is that I am much honored to be serving aboard this vessel under your command. Your reputation is well-known and well-respected throughout the Academy... and Starfleet. It is my oath that I will serve you in this position to the absolute best of my abilities, Sir."

Kheren grunted at this.

"Worst thing ever is to have to live up to some bloated reputation..." He sighed and, with a calmer tone, said to the green-skinned woman; " I'll do my best to prove myself up to your expectations as a commanding officer, as much as you will do yourself to serve this ship and this crew in your assigned duties."

He looked at her a moment before speaking again.

"Anything else, Lieutenant? "

Thinking of an old Earth expression she had learned about at the Academy, Elisha felt by seeing and hearing the reaction of the Captain on her last statement, that she had somehow put her foot in her mouth once again. Not wanting to make matters any worse, she decided that it would be in their mutual best to move on.

"No, Sir... not at the moment. I will proceed confirming my data and prepare to meet with my staff. Afterward, I will visit each of the department heads. But first, I will visit my station on the bridge... To see it...in person I believe the expression is. So thank you for your time Captain."

Leône turned, entered the turbolift, and then engaged the device to carry her up to the main bridge on deck 1. This would provide her the opportunity to not only see the actual Operation's station and consoles but to test them as well; a moment that she has waited for a long as she could remember.

Moments later, the turbo lift doors whooshed open and Elisha stood for a few seconds and just absorbed the splendor of the bridge and the high level of activity occurring throughout the area.

Then after a deep breath, she stepped out of the enclosure of the turbolift and walked toward the Ops station. Arriving to the vacant station, Lieutenant Leône sat down at her post for the first time and was prompted to enter her access codes. She didn't know them offhand. She pulled out her PADD and checked it to see if they were listed in her files but found nothing.

Elisha then scanned the bridge to find an officer of sufficient rank who would be able to provide her with the access codes that she would need to function in her capacity as COO.

"You are Lieutenant Elisha Leône, our new Chief of Operations, right?"

The question came from a graveling, shrill voice, that of an Edoan Lieutenant Junior Grade which was ambling towards her on his three legs, his three arms dangling around his cylindrical torso, with hands the same orange chitinous look as his bald head and almost dummy-like face. But the smile was wide and the black eyes sparkling.

"My name is Cheonghi. I am to serve as your first assistant, M'am. "

Elisha looked in fascination as the Edoan lieutenant approached her as he introduced himself. This was yet another new species for her to meet since arriving on the Horizon, and a tripedal one at that. She replied with a sincere smile emerging across her expression.

"You are correct; I am Elisha Leône. It is a pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant Cheonghi."

The Orion woman then realized that she was not certain of the appropriate greeting with someone hailing from Edo, so she offered a slight downward bow of her head as an indication of respect. Then looking up again she inquired rather discretely.

"Tell me Cheonghi, where am I to obtain my access codes for the Ops station?"

"Well, until you would show up and assume your assignation, I, as the highest ranking Ops officer on board, was holding them. "

The Edoan stepped up to the console and tapped a few controls.

"Computer; proceed with transfer of Ops command codes."

"Identify for voice print, retina and genetic scan."

"Computer, recognize Cheonghi, Lieutenant Thaankuun."

There was a red light shooting out from the console into the right eye of Cheonghi as his voice pattern was analyzed along with his genetic imprint from the finger traces he had left on the controls.

"Identity confirmed; ops command code transfer is now available."

The central arm of the Edoan invited Elisha to step up in turn to the console.

Of all the research she did learning about the Ops station prior to her arrival, Elisha didn't even think of confirming this step of her duty. She was a bit embarrassed by her oversight.

"Thank You," though was all that she said as she sat down in front of the console to proceed with the security protocols.

Looking at the console screen she stated clearly.

"Computer; continue with transfer of Ops command codes."

The computer immediately responded.

"Identify for voice print, retina and genetic scan."

"Leône, Lieutenant Elisha."

The computer followed the same procedure. A red light emanating from the console scanned across the right eye of Lieutenant Leône as her voice pattern and genetic imprint were simultaneously analyzed.

"Identity confirmed; ops command code transfer is now complete. Welcome aboard, Lieutenant Leône."

Elisha was somewhat surprised at first by the end greeting, but surmised that this was probably offered to each new officer when they first logged into their console.

She then turned to face her assistant again.

"How many crew members are accounted for in our department at this moment, Lieutenant Cheonghi?"

"Including the Flight department, all three hundred and twelve ops officers and crewmembers have reported in, M'am," said Cheonghi. "This ship has to be fully restored and ready to launch in barely a few weeks after taking on a Klingon battle group near the Azimuth Horizon... and Captain Kheren is a patient individual but not a tolerant one. If this ship fails to be ready to depart on time, he will still manage to do it by leaving all dead weight behind."

It was hard to tell the joke from the fact with the chitinous face of the Edoan. But one thing was clear; this was the flagship... and nothing short of excellence would be acceptable aboard her, from the lowest crewmember and up even to her captain himself.

A grin appeared on the face the young Orion woman as she listened carefully to the fair warning presented by her assistant Ops officer.

"That is a reasonable expectation for all officers and crew assigned to this starship, Lieutenant Cheonghi," replied Elisha Leône confidently. Thinking for a few seconds longer she added; "Since it would seem that we will not have time to spare in ensuring that everything is ready and in place by launch, perhaps we should meet after I get better acquainted with our Ops station here. We can create a list of known issues and sort them into priorities, and afterward, you could fill-me-in on what you know already about our staff."

The turbolift from the hangar deck seemed to move agonizingly slow to Jureth who, having finished both his conversation with the captain and the Chief Engineer, was on his way to the bridge to access one of the ship's auxiliary consoles from where the on-duty strategic operations officer could monitor the Polaris, as well as access any information regarding the current mission including intelligence, sensor data, and other important items. Oseno believed it a necessity that his people stay informed even if they weren't actively participating in the course the mission was taking. They had to be ready to provide Captain Kheren with real time mission options if need be.

The turbolift doors opened and Jureth stepped out onto the massive bridge of the Lotus Class vessel. The bridge was just as impressive as the rest of the ship. It followed the lines of the well known Galaxy Class bridge layout and was staffed minimally given the current in repair state of the Horizon. Jureth stood for a moment at the tactical station with just a hint of jealousy that someone else would man it and not himself. Then, before he turned to the auxiliary consoles, he noticed two officers standing near the operations station. One was Edoan, and the other, a female, clearly at least part Orion given the telltale green hued skin, and jet black hair. Jureth recognized the Orion as the ship's Operations Chief from the file he had studied and stepped around the tactical station and toward the pair who appeared to be conversing earnestly.

"Excuse me, I hope I'm not interrupting."

The Orion chief operations officer turned her attention from her Edoan assistant chief to the Bajoran officer now standing beside them. Noticing his rank, she stood up and formally introduced herself.

"Not at all, Commander. I am Lieutenant Elisha Leône, the new chief of operations here on the USS Horizon. We were just discussing a possible operations meeting... now that Lieutenant Cheonghi has helped me get situated here at my post."

"Welcome aboard, Lieutenant. I am Commander Oseno Jureth, Chief of Strategic Operations, Second Officer of the Horizon, and CO of the USS Polaris, our integrated escort. It's good to meet you. Cheonghi is a good officer, one of Captain Kheren's staff from the Artemis if I recall correctly. I'm sure he'll be invaluable to you."

"Always ready to lend a hand, Sir," Cheonghi replied, showing all three of them.

Elisha suppressed a laugh into a wide grin at the Edoan's play on words.

"Thank you... both of you... for making me feel welcome and offering me your assistance. I am very honored to be here and to be given the opportunity to serve with such magnificent officers on this remarkable starship."

It was difficult for the Orion to contain her gratitude at moments like this after having grown up in the harsh conditions she experienced throughout most of her life. From her perspective, Starfleet and her new post were equivalent to awakening in a splendid dream that followed a long and terrifying nightmare.

"Do we know when we are expected to launch?" she then inquired.

Jureth shook his head.

"When I spoke with the Captain, he didn't say... though I'm sure there will be the usual pomp and circumstance surrounding the launch of a vessel like the Horizon."

"He of all people would not be inclined to speak about it, " laughed Cheonghi. "The captain is a very... private person. You will see, when his two wives will be dragging him kicking and screaming like they did the last time at the award ceremony."

Elisha Leône could not restrain herself and allowed a laugh to slip out too; imagining that proud Andorian captain she just met being dragged along to a public ceremony by two unrelenting Andorian wives.

Quickly regaining her composure, she then replied.

"Perhaps that is just as well... with me only arriving here recently. This will allow me time to get settled into my position and meet more of the crew... including the remaining Operations department members."

The Orion female then turned her attention back to the Bajoran.

"Perhaps Commander, after I am more situated, you can give me a brief tour of the Polaris."

As these words were spoken Elisha consciously strived to contain her 'persuasive' abilities while also keeping her potent pheromones in check. She did not want to create any tension or send the wrong messages on her first day aboard the Horizon by her request.

Jureth laughed along with the other two crew members at Cheonghi's reference to the captain and after the brief moment of levity responded with his own comment.

"Ceremonies aren't exactly my specialty either, remind me to share with you some time how I made it to my Academy graduation ceremony. As for that tour, Lieutenant, I'd be happy to. You may end up serving aboard her at some point so you might as well get to know her. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to set up one of the auxiliary consoles to monitor the Polaris as well as a few other things."

As Jureth walked away from the pair he couldn't help but notice when responding to Leône's request for a tour he felt a little odd, it wasn't anything severe, but just a strange tugging in the back of his mind.

Orion pheromones, Oseno realized.

As a former security officer he was well versed in the threat a strong willed Orion female could pose to a ship's crew. The original Enterprise's encounters with the species were required study at the Academy, along with so many of their other adventures, though this was the first time that Jureth has encountered any. His instructors at the Academy had offered mental conditioning techniques to mitigate their influence, but perhaps Jureth thought as he sat down at the auxiliary console he would speak to his El-Aurian diplomatic specialist, or the ship's doctor for some further steps to take.

Working with that one should be interesting.

And then he had another thought. He spun around at the console and spoke back toward the front of the bridge.

"Lieutenant Cheonghi, could I have a word with you please, in the Captain's ready room if you don't mind."

"Of course, Sir," the Edoan acknowledged, ambling after him with that curious "man with crutches" gate a three-legged locomotion created.

Jureth joined the Edoan in the captain's ready room wanting to make this quick in case the captain should appear, and so as not to make Lieutenant Leône feel any more uncomfortable than she probably already was. That aside Jureth felt it his duty as second officer to determine if the young Orion was a potential security risk. As the doors closed Jureth turned to Cheonghi and with a serious tone questioned him

"Tell me Lieutenant, during your brief interaction with our Chief of Operations did you feel anything odd? Anything at all?"

"You mean like the legendary mesmerizing effect of Orion females on males of nearly every humanoid species?" Cheonghi said. "Well, Sir, I could not tell you. Edoan physiology is too different to react to their famous pheromones, and I did not smell anything particular coming out from her. "

The six-limbed officer thought for a moment before continuing.

"But Sir, you are aware that she signed the same Oath of Celibacy as Deltans do upon entering Starfleet? Would she take advantage of any sexually-vulnerable species, she would instantly be dishonorably discharged. I read her Starfleet file upon learning that she would come to take over my department; seems she is extremely committed personally to become the best possible Starfleet officer. I do not think she would risk anything to compromise that goal."

Jureth nodded.

"I've never served with an Orion or a Deltan. However, your assessment is more than enough to satisfy me, I was only attempting to ascertain if there was any possibility that she could be a security risk to the crew. I realize I am not the ship's security officer, but call it... instinct. Thank you Lieutenant, that will be all."

"Aye, Sir. And don't you worry, Sir; after what happened on the Artemis with the Horizon Children attempt at takeover, Captain Kheren expects, even demands, that we erre on the side of caution. Rest assured he will properly appreciate your concern, Commander."

And with those words, Cheonghi bowed his head and exited the ready room. Oseno followed him out and proceeded back to the auxiliary console behind the tactical station. He had some minor programming left to do so the console would display the data he desired.

After the two officers had excused themselves and walked away, Elisha Leône had focused her attention on the Ops console she now had access to. She had worked through all of the displays and tested each of the functions on the display panel on the console by the time they got back.

Now, after everything checked out, she initiated the Ops Duty Roster to get background information on several of her key Ops department members. She began to scan some of the digital folders.

Lieutenant JG Thankhuun Cheonghi; The assistant chief operations officer whom she had just met...

The rest of the names however were still unfamiliar.

Ensign Dorin Rixx; a thirty-one year old Bolian male assistant Ops officer... Lieutenant JG Robert Javorie Moore; a Human male assistant chief flight control officer... Ensign Aurora Jaxon; a twenty-seven year old female Trill Ops crewman... Ensign Dimitri Stukov; a thirty-seven year old Human male Quartermaster... Ensign Kitara Najuk; a twenty-six year old female Klingon Boatswain... Ensign S'Triton; a thirty-eight year old Vulcan male Transporter Specialist...

She then realized, looking ahead, that there simply were too many names to just glance at. So she went back to the first name and then spent additional time getting to know each name, face, background, and specialization of these officers to assist her when she would meet them. This was her department now and therefore her responsibility to know her team as quickly yet as thoroughly as possible. Then she would be ready to make her rounds and meet these team members in person and on duty.

Before she even realized it, Lieutenant Leône had completed her first Ops shift. She knew this now because the attractive twenty-seven year-old Trill had arrived to take her place. With her soft green eyes and shiny black hair she had gently touched Elisha on the shoulder when the Orion had not noticed her arrival.

"Your time is up, Lieutenant Leône. I am Ensign Aurora Jaxon. It is time for you to go and relax... and if you have not had your physical yet, you had better get down there before the Captain realizes this. He is not one to appreciate his bridge chiefs not setting the example for the rest of us."

She stated this with a smile and a wink.

Despite the gentle nature and tone of the message, Elisha took the advice seriously and dismissed herself from her post and headed directly down to sickbay on deck 12.

At that moment, having finished his work with what was now the Strategic Operations console on the bridge and locking it with his command code, Jureth returned to the Polaris and stood alone now on the bridge of his ship.

"My ship," he said aloud to the empty bridge.

The Polaris wasn't really his he supposed, but according to Captain Kheren she was, and he could tell from the Andorian's tone that he expected Jureth to act as if the ship was his, and he intended to start now.

"Computer, activate internal sensors, and begin security sweep. Identify any unauthorized substance, weapon or unauthorized persons aboard USS Polaris. Continue internal sensor sweeps every hour unless otherwise directed by command personnel. Report results via link with USS Horizon main computer."

"Internal sensor scans started," the ship's computer confirmed in the Starfleet standard pleasant female voice.

Jureth nodded in approval and went to his PADD and the checklist he had created for the items he wanted to be in place aboard the Polaris. He then sat down at the ship's tactical console and began inputting several commands matching the Polaris security procedures to those of her mother ship, the Horizon. It took him several minutes of modifying standard protocols and changing several access lists to preclude anyone but the necessary personnel from accessing certain areas of the ship. As he was finishing, he heard the turbolift doors open and saw a familiar face step out onto the bridge.

"Lieutenant T'Lana, it's good to see you again." he said with a smile.

"Greetings, Commander," the Vulcan woman replied. "I am reporting for duty, though I admit I expected Lieutenant Steele to be serving as your chief assistant."

"And she might have," Jureth admitted, "but she has accepted a chief of security position aboard the USS Celestial, an Excalibur class cruiser."

"I see, it is... unexpected that she would not be with you."

Jureth nodded.

"It is, but she had to do what was best for her career."

"And logic would dictate that the chief of security position would better serve her advancement."

"Yes,"

"Very well; is there anything that you require of me, Sir?"

"I have set up an auxiliary console on the bridge for our use. I'd like you to take a look at it and see if there is any other data you think we could use. Then I'd like you to see about a duty rotation for myself, you, and Lieutenant Commander Yiral. As we are the most senior strategic operations officers, I want one of us on the bridge at all times."

"Understood, Sir."

T'Lana noted that there was something different about the Bajoran as they spoke. At first, she struggled to ascertain what it was, but a closer study of his facial features made it clear.

"Commander, may I ask you a...personal question?"

"Fire away."

"I cannot help but notice that your scar is gone."

Jureth smiled. The observant Vulcan was correct. The scar that had been by his left eye, the direct result of a bar fight with a Cardassian, he had made remove by dermal regeneration after the conclusion of Operation Horizon. Previously, the deformity had served to remind him of the stupidity that his own arrogance and temper could produce, but command of the Alsea and all the other events that had happened during the operation had changed Jureth's outlook and he felt that he no longer need the physical reminder of his own actions.

"You're right, I had it removed after Operation Horizon. Starbase Lotus has a fine medical staff, and I decided that I no longer needed a physical reminder of my past actions."

"I see...though I am not quite sure I understand."

"Perhaps we can discuss it further another time."

"that would be...agreeable."

As they were finishing conversation, the turbolift opened again and revealed the combat fatigues of the Horizon's MACO commander Major MacGregor and the dark skinned Marine who had been part of the group Jureth had met aboard the starbase.

"Commander Oseno, ye wanted to see me, Sir?"

"That I did Major. Major Duncan MacGregor, Lieutenant T'lana, my second in command."

"A pleasure Lieutenant... and this is my second in command, Captain Kevin Reese." MacGregor said with a smile.

T'lana raised an eyebrow.

"I was not aware that we would have Marines aboard the Horizon."

Jureth nodded.

"They are here to support our operations, and augment the ship's security team if needed."

"Fascinating...if you will excuse me, Sir..."

"Go ahead T'lana, I'll see you later."

"Affirmative, Sir."

T'lana turned and exited via the turbolift, leaving Jureth alone with MacGregor.

"How do you like the ship, Major?"

"She's huge Sir! If it weren't for the computer, I'd never find my way around!"

Jureth chuckled a bit.

"She is indeed huge. Tell me, Major... "

"Call me Mac, Sir, everyone does."

"Alright Mac; tell me, what you and your men do aboard ship?"

"Mostly we shoot, Sir," MacGregor replied. "Lots of target practice... and physical training."

"I see. I'd like to add to that."

"What did ye have in mind?"

"I want you to secure this ship."

"This ship, Sir? Isn't she secure enough?"

"No," Jureth replied. "After the Horizon's Children infiltrated the Fleet so successfully, I'm not taking any chances. I want you and your men to secure this ship when she's docked. Two Marines on each shift, and no one gets aboard until their identity is verified by tricorder."

"Not to be arguin', Commander, but should ship's security be doing this?"

"No, they have enough to do. I want the people securing the Polaris to be directly under my command, and I know no one will be getting by you and your team."

"Fair enough, Sir," Mac said. "I'll work up a rotation. Turns out we're due to get a sixth man for the team so it'll be a perfect rotation."

Jureth nodded.

"Good; the only other direction I will give you is that you stagger your shifts so they are offset from the rest of the ship."

"So no one can hit us during a change out," Kevin Reese said speaking for the first time.

"Exactly Captain, that is how I ran my security department on the Alsea."

"It's a good plan, Sir."

"Aye," Mac said in agreement. "We'll get her locked down. I'll have Pierce and Kelly get their gear and get down here immediately."

Even as MacGregor made the statement, Reese was nodding.

"I'm on it, Sir." the younger man said and left the bridge quickly.

"Was that all, Sir?" Mac asked

"That's it. And, Major..."

"Mac," the Marine reminded gently.

"Mac," Jureth said with a nod, "I'd like to train with you and your men some time."

The Marine smiled. He had already developed a measure of respect for the Bajoran Commander simply from their first meeting, but this confirmed what MacGregor had already suspected; the Bajoran was anything but the typical Starfleet type.

"Any time, Sir; we'd be happy to have ye."

The Major departed the ship and Jureth turned back toward the console, noting that the computer was already reporting the first results from his security sweeps.

The inspection team entered the hangar, the chief security officer leading the way.

Sarah turned to her assistant.

"Chief, secure the control and command areas and deploy the inspection teams to verify that the hangar systems are all secured."

Aye, Sir.

Afer a quick few moments, a young crewman approached her and quickly blurted out in a brisk manner.

"Ma'am, their appears to be some armed guards next to the auxillairy craft. they're refusing to allow our inspection teams to secure the ship or the external command controls... something about us not being authorized."

At this, Sarah looked a little startled. Picking up her datapad, she scanned through the rosters of the ships departments and security arrangements, not seeing an order for any marines.

"Hmmmm, ok crewman lets go see what they are doing here."

With the crewman in tow, Sarah made her way out for the control room and down into the hangar, heading straight towards the two armed marines at the support escort's airlock.

As the cadre of Starfleet officers approached the two Marines, Master Sergeant Nicolas Pierce, a large intimidating human male and Gunnery Sergeant Autumn Kelly, a slim, but well toned human female, tensed and each rested their hands on their phaser carbines. The two MACO soldiers were well trained and both knew their orders from Major MacGregor via Commander Oseno. Pierce, being the senior officer, waited until the group was within earshot and stopped them.

"Halt! Stop and identify yourselves."

Taken a little aback by the tone in the Marines voices, Lieutenant Corcoran and the group halted a meter away from them.

" I would happen to be the chief security and tactical officer aboard the Horizon and this is a security inspection team. Why exactly have you prevented my officers and crewmen from securing and inspect this ship and the hangar?"

The security team arrays themselves around their chief with weapons still holstered as no one was willing to push the situation further. They could see the Marines had their hands on their rifles.

Chief warrant officer Williams motioned to Lieutenant Corcoran that the Marines were holding phaser carbines.

"Well, one question, Marines; why are you armed with phaser carbines while not making the chief of security aware they were taken out of an armoury? And more importantly, being armed on the flagship of the fleet when in spacedock, which may I add is in contravention of numerous protocols and rules?"

Looking rather displeased, Lieutenant Corcoran raised her voice.

"Get me your commanding officer here right now!"

Both Marines has snapped to attention, recognizing the presence of a senior officer, but neither relaxed their posture. Pierce had dealt with Starfleet officers his entire career, having gone from being an enlisted security team member to volunteering for the MACO training when Starfleet reinstated the program. Rather than reacting harshly to the woman's demands, Pierce knew that, while officers were demanding, especially security officers, they were also reasonable, and so he spoke calmly and evenly.

"I can answer your questions....Lieutenant," he said checking her rank. "But I need to verify that you are who you claim to be."

He motioned to the female Marine beside him. She produced a tricorder and swept it back and forth over the group.

"Confirmed, Master Sergeant," she said after a moment. "Lieutenant Junior Grade Corcoran, Chief of Security and tactical, USS Horizon."

Pierce nodded.

"I apologize, Ma'am; our orders come from Commander Oseno, and if you'll check you'll find our gear was registered with the Starbase and transferred with us under my care as our squad's weapon master. As for why we're here, I'm afraid you'd have to speak to the Commander. I can contact him if you like, but I can't allow you aboard without his authorization as we weren't notified you were coming... orders,"

Pierce repeated the fact that they had their own orders, hoping the young officer would appreciate that the two Marines were only doing as they were told, and trying to calm her ire at the same time.

"I understand that you have your orders, Master Sergeant, and I shall contact Commander Oseno shortly. At the moment though, there are bigger issues. For instance, your apparent lack of care in informing shipboard security you were bringing weapons onboard. Which, may I point out, must be registered and catalogued and secured in the ship's armories. In which case, these firearms were not, otherwise I would have seen the transfer request and logs relating to the events."

Lieutenant Corcoran took a breath and looked at her datapad. Then she called for a security team to join the inspection team in the hangar.

"Now, it is clear to me that you are dedicated to your duties and as such I will not place anymore undue stress upon you. But, I have to request you turn over your phaser carbines and any other weapons you currently have in your possession. For the time being, you will be issued with standard shipboard phasers from one of the security armouries on this deck. This is not a suggestion either; its an order."

The security team arrived in the hangar and arrayed themselves into the standard gamma pattern, involving the securing of both exits and the control room.

"These officers will take temporary possession of your weapons so they can be properly logged aboard in the main security complex. I do hope you won't have a problem with this, will you, Master Sergeant?"

Pierce was slightly startled by the security officer's reaction, now she was being unreasonable and he hadn't planned on that. This wasn't going to end well he knew, because Marines were trained to never surrender their weapons. His response was the only one he could make. He tapped his combadge.

"Master Sergeant Pierce to Commander Oseno."

Jureth was sitting in the ready room aboard the Polaris when the call from Pierce came in. The former security officer could immediately detect the stress in the Marine's voice.

"Oseno here, what's wrong Pierce?"

"Sir, you better get out here...we have a problem."

"Oh Hell," Jureth muttered under his breath. "I'm on my way Pierce, Oseno out."

Jureth practically leapt from the ready room door to the turbolift and rode it down to the where the Polaris's boarding hatch was. As he stepped through the hatch, he took in the scene arrayed before him. Master Sergeant Pierce, and Gunny Sergeant Kelly were standing on either side of the hatch and in front of them were what appeared to be a platoon of Starfleet security officers. It took Oseno all of two seconds to figure out what was going on.

"By the Prophets," he said aloud as he looked over the array of people.

He found the one that was wearing the most rank pips and approached her.

"Lieutenant, I am Commander Oseno Jureth, Chief of Strategic Operations, and Second Officer of the Horizon. The Marines are here on my orders...stand down immediately."

"Unfortunately, Sir, I can't have my team stand down unless the proper protocols are carried out." Lieutenant Corcoran stood defiantly before the commander. "Your marines have brought unregistered heavy weapons and sidearms on board the flagship without clearing them with shipboard security. As you may know that is a breach of quite a number of regulations."

Holding up a datapad, she looked straight at him without flinching.

"If, though, you would be willing to sign this datapad to confirm you take full responsibility if any accidents happen with those weapons, or one is used against any crewmen or visiting dignitaries... Also, that you will be willing to store them in a designated armoury to be guarded by a joint team of your marines and security,,, then, that would be satisfactory. But as for security on board this vessel, that is my department and I will not have any personnel that do not allow a simple inspection team to carry out their duties or that question the security chief. God forbid, if there was a problem and it caused any damage or issues with the Horizon, as we would all be for it when the captain would find out."

Lieutenant Corcoran stared at the commander, awaiting a response.

"Lieutenant," Oseno replied with a sigh, "I was the Chief of Security on two vessels including the former flagship of Lotus Fleet. You do not need to lecture me about protocol."

He extracted his personal PADD and entered several commands.

"I simply hadn't had a chance to transfer the proper paperwork to the Horizon's main computer. Negligent of me, perhaps, but a court martial offense...not quite. Now, if you'll check again, you'll see I just transferred the proper paperwork from my PADD to the main computer, which authorizes the transfer of the MACO equipment from Starbase Lotus and designating it for assignment to the Horizon and the Polaris. Second, as for accidents...Master Sergeant, your weapon."

"Aye Sir," Pierce said handing the carbine to Jureth who rather dramatically pointed it toward the one of the bulkheads and fired... but nothing happened.

"These weapons are equipped with the latest in Starfleet biometric weapon security protocols. They cannot be fired by anyone but the registered user."

He handed the weapon back to Pierce.

"I agree, the security aboard the Horizon is your territory and you are free to run it as you see fit... however, the Polaris is *my* ship, and I'm her commanding officer. I secured her as I deemed necessary, and the Marines did it. Their job, end of story. Were you aware that Lotus Fleet recently had several incidents of sabotage by cultists among Starfleet officers? I know full well; my security officers captured one aboard the Alsea during the Azimuth Horizon incident. Were you also aware that there well established records of Undine infiltrators wreaking havoc in the Alpha Quadrant? Those two things alone were enough for me to implement verification procedures before anyone was allowed aboard the Polaris. Can you imagine what would happen if this ship was stolen? Her warp core is in the process of being fully online!"

Jureth could feel his face flushing as he spoke.

was I this bad? he wondered.

He took a breath trying to compose himself especially in front of a junior officer.

"Now, then, if you wish to report my actions to the captain, you are free to do so, and I will not hold anything against you if you do. In fact, I commend you and your team for being thorough and for handling well what you saw as a potentially dangerous situation. I apologize for the confusion, Lieutenant... and I will take responsibility for it. At the same time, however, unless Captain Kheren orders me otherwise, the MACO team will continue to guard the Polaris as long as she is docked and as long as she is under my command."

Lieutenant Corcoran couldn't help but smile while checking the paperwork had been properly stored with the relevant details.

"Well Commander, the papers are now in order. As for the details of the past, I have read the reports and I am amazed at how your team aboard the Alsea handled themselves in the situation. Not many would have come out the otherside so valiantly. As for the Marines, for now, I will not push the issue further but to make you aware that once they leave this hangar and the Polaris, they are on my turf. The same goes for any other Polaris crew, so I must request the weapons are left behind as I'm sure they will not be needed onboard the Horizon. To make sure of that, the security office on this deck will run with a four-officer team with two officers to guard the entrances to the hanger at all times, just to be on the safe side."

Placing the updated schedule on the padd she held, the Lieutenant couldn't help but admire the Marines' dedication to their duties and the loyalty they showed to the commander.

"As everything stands, Sir, the inspection team will still need to carry out their duty before the ship's commissioning and departure, even if that means they have to be accompanied by a Marine guard or not. We wouldn't, as I said before, want any surprises when we are out in space."

Oseno smiled as the young security chief dictated her terms on the weapons the Marines had brought aboard with them, thinking that he might have done much the same thing.

"Understood, Lieutenant, and I think I can solve the weapons issue permanently. Master Sergeant..."

"Sir?"

"When you are relieved by the next team, you are to lock your weapons in the Polaris armory. You are free to store your armor, and other gear in your quarters, but the armory officer will check your weapons in and check them out on each shift. I will give you each your own access code to the boarding hatch, but there will always be an engineer aboard as well as some security"

"Yes, Sir,"

Jureth turned back to Corcoran.

"You are free to conduct your inspection, Lieutenant. The Marines will remain here, but please don't disturb the engineers any more than necessary. The startup of a warp core is a delicate operation. Also, I've instructed the Polaris computer to run internal security sensor sweeps continuously. I can have the results reported to your office or personal PADD if you like. They are already going to the bridge, and my own PADD as well. Marines, as you were, oh, and Lieutenant...good work."

Jureth stepped back through the boarding hatch. Now that the crisis was handled, he had work left to do.

* * *

The lift doors slid open revealing the rather expansive command center of the USS Horizon and Redding stopped short at the sight of it.

Slightly in shock he murmured "I'm not sure the Ajax's cargo bay was this big," but straightened his shirt and went into the room.

"Excuse me, Chief, have you seen Captain Kheren? I need to report in."

A human male with slightly alien features turned to face him.

"Commander is it? you must be our new first officer then? welcome aboard, Sir. Master Chief Petty Officer Hollett, chief of the vessel at your service, commander."

He gave a friendly kind of smile.

"Aye, Sir, he's in his ready room, right over there, Sir," the man answered and pointed starboard at a door.

Almost without thinking about it, Redding took his outstretched hand and shook it firmly.

"Good to meet you, Chief Hollett. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

Redding walked away towards the designated door. He checked his uniform again and signaled his request to enter.

I can't believe this, I'm actually a little nervous.

The door opened and Redding took three brisk steps in.

"Commander Neil S. Redding reporting for duty, Captain."

The Andorian captain was just taking out his brew from the replicator when the tall, powerfully built man entered. He looked up at Redding with pointing antenna, noticing the features of the older admiral in the young man's face. The power, the incisive mind, the energetic will were easily noticeable and true to the record of the original officer. But there was something new, fresh in there as well. It was hard for Kheren to see in this young officer the old one who had manipulated his career years ago and even cast doubt over his nature. And so, not one to accept preconceived ideas, even if they were his own, Kheren then left his cup on his translucent desk to go meet him.

"Commander Redding; welcome aboard the Horizon. Can I offer you something?"

"I think you already have sir, the best spot on the flagship" and gave a crooked smile. "But if that's Katheka you have there, I wouldn't mind a cup, Sir."

"Negative; it's Cardassian Fish Juice at room temperature. But one Katheka cup coming up," said Kheren, bringing the Andorian version of coffee, which contained of course none of the caffeine poisonous to his kind, to his Exec and inviting him to sit before his desk where he himself sat with his pungent beverage.

Neil still marveled at the wonder of a replicator, anything at the touch of a finger. How could people of this time be so casual about it? He of course remembered using them thousands of time thanks to the implanted memories, but they still felt new to him.

"Our first officer aboard the USS Ajax got me used to the stuff during a pilgrimage to the Wall of Heroes on Andoria."

He took a sip and frowned slightly.

"Hmm... well, it's not like 'home' is it? but it's still not bad," and took another swallow.

"I would not know, Commander; I never drank the stuff... and I left Andoria many years ago," confided the captain.

Then he looked outside through the large window adorning one wall of his office, where could be seen the sprawling immensity of the starbase outside of which their ship was anchored.

"What do you think of the Horizon, Number One? "

"I think, Sir, that my personal quarters are larger than the entire bridge of the Ajax, an excelsior class vessel I last served on... and it was the largest ship in the fleet at the time." He said with a little shake of the head, also looking outside. "Nothing comes even close, but then, I seem to recall mostly escorts under my command."

He turned back to face his captain.

"I think of the Horizon as the biggest, most ambitious responsibility in Lotus fleet and I can't tell you just how much I'm looking forward to meeting that responsibility, Captain."

There was a slight smile on his lips and a gleam in his eye as he thought about the task ahead.

"I can share your feeling," Kheren said after a sip of his thick, grey beverage. "My previous command was an Ambassador class and she was by far the largest vessel in our fleet; yet, this one dwarfs it so much that I wonder when will I find myself lost on some lower deck. "

His four oculars went straight to the eyes of the commander.

"But you are quite right. This assignment is a major challenge and responsibility on a scale unequaled so far. I am glad we will face this together. Regardless of what happened to you, what I know of your qualities as an officer and a human being are definitely what this vessel will require. "

The Andorian was silent for a moment, still studying his first officer with keen eyes before the tall man spoke again.

"May I ask, Captain, what do you think about me serving under your command?"

Kheren looked at him for a few seconds before answering.

"We never actually met face to face... but if you look into Starfleet records, notably those of the former flagship the USS Lotus... or maybe personal records of yours... you will find that you had quite a hand in my early career... that is, in your former life. To be blunt, quite a heavy hand at that; even filed suspicions of me being an Undine infiltrator during the Borg war.

The Andorian stood up and went to the large transparency to silently look outside for a moment. Without turning, he then spoke again with an almost absent tone, almost as if he was speaking to himself more than to the man seated behind him.

"I must admit, Commander, I had been resentful about it for a long time. Being judged on appearances alone and because of how different I am is what drove me away from Andoria. I am a mutant, Commander, born from illegal genetic experimentation as a solution to our coming extinction; not to the liking of our traditionally-minded people. To go through it again in Starfleet was making me fear that I would have no choice again to leave everything I held dear behind... that, in the end, there was no place for someone like me in this universe..."

He then turned to face Redding again.

"When I learned that you were going to be assigned under my command, I did have some apprehension at first, because of this past resentment. But although you are the same man that used me for his own purposes once, you are also a different man, a man that has been transformed through some unfathomable ordeal in a way no one can truly evaluate. If anyone in this universe should understand how deep this can go and not to judge someone by his past or nature, it is me. "

He walked to come before his first officer.

"As far as I am concerned, *Admiral* Neil Stanley Redding is another person. You are *Commander* Neil Stanley Redding, Executive officer of my ship and I welcome you as a young, dedicated Starfleet officer eager to prove himself worthy of the responsibility he has been offered. I will work with and judge the man at my side, not the man in my mind. I want you to know that."

An almost uncomfortable silence held the room for several seconds before Redding decided how best to respond to this information.

"Starfleet Intelligence would tend to agree with you, captain. Most of Admiral Redding's records have been sealed and I, as a commander, don't have the proper clearance to yet review them. I can't express just how... annoying, that is. Especially when I have this."

From a pocket, he took out a large isolinear chip of a peculiar design Kheren had never seen before. In fact, such hard portable data chip had gone out of fashion with the advent of neurogelpack technology, even if all ships and installations were still fully compatible with the previous isolinear tech. They were in fact physically more resilient as far as data storage was concerned. And this one looked like it could contain quite a lot of data.

Which Redding confirmed.

"This is the entire personal journal, career record and all files related to Admiral Redding's life and work. Almost a starbase computer databank in itself. It was given to me so that I may... retrieve myself... when time is right. This means for the moment that most of it is not accessible even to me at this time. It's even more frustrating than being truly amnesiac. Thus I know nothing about my... his... relationship, opinions and feelings towards you, Sir."

He returned the chip in his pocket then stood and placed his cup into the replicator slot to watch it vanish.

"But I think I know what the basis of his distrust was, Sir, " he offered as an explanation. " From what you say, there is only one reason you might have left Andoria; because you're different. You see, the Admiral's closest friend, the first officer of the Ajax? Well, I remember him dying... poorly, trying to avenge the death of his son... my Godson in fact, from a bullying Nausicaan."

Redding took a breath but there was no hint of anger or sorrow in his face.

"I later beat him in a match myself, the only death match I'd ever been in, even when I was among the Klingons."

Then he straightened up again.

"That Nausicaan was a mutate from his own kind and he destroyed the only man I ever called a friend. I don't regret his blood on my hands, not in the least."

His face twisted in disappointment.

"My only regret is that, although I can remember it, I just can't feel it. Admiral Redding was a different person. He did things because they made sense to him at the time they happened. But I wasn't really there, if you get my meaning. I know my best friend was killed by someone like you, but I didn't feel him die."

He held up his fist and clenched it.

"I remember ending the life of the one that killed him, but the rush of the kill, the satisfaction of hearing his last breath? Nothing."

Redding now looked straight at his commanding officer, all traces of emotion gone from his face.

"What ever bias or prejudice feelings he may have had for you Sir died with him. As far as I'm concerned, you're another example of the best Starfleet has to offer in ship captains."

He stood smartly near the door.

"Will there be anything else, Captain? "

"Negative, Number One. I am glad the ice is clear between us. Please attend to your duties. I will be waiting for your first report about ship and crew readiness for launch. Dismissed. "

* * *

Striding smartly down the main corridor, the Andorian Shen in the blue collared grey and black standard Starfleet uniform made her way straight to main sickbay, stopping only periodically to check her directions with the ships computer. She was light blue of skin with antennae on the top of her forehead, identifying her as one of the Bishee subpecies of her homeworld. Although one might not be able to tell from her outer expression, as Andorians had very few facial muscles to begin with, she was nearly overwhelmed by the sheer size of the vessel.

As she entered the area, she tuned to the first person she encountered, a young human male wearing the orange-gold collar of the technical field.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant; is the chief medical officer available? I need to report in."

Her tone was very professional. Then again, all Andorians were notorious for that, as they were quite deadpan and aloof as a rule when interacting with other species.

The young man hopped up, his features were very slick, perhaps even suave.

"Yes... and yes, but at the same time no, not really."

He smiled, evidently at his own perceived cleverness.

Her right eye narrowed just a little. She wasn't sure how to take his response. Was he trying to be cute or just annoying?

"What..." she started, but changed her mind. She wasn't going to play into his game. "So, wich way is the doctor then?" she said finally, looking around.

He pointed to the right.

"Head that way and keep to the right; you'll find them in their office... I think anyway."

He kind of shrugged.

The brashness of the man was almost overbearing. She noted that he had said 'them' but she wasn't going to ask what he meant by that and started to walk in the direction he had indicated.

"Thank you, Lieutenant..."

He finished the sentence for her.

"...Moore, Robert. Assistant chief flight control officer extraordinaire," he said with a flourish before asking in turn; "And you are?"

"Doctor Shree, councilor. And I have a feeling you and I will be talking more in the near future."

He took a step back as if he suddenly decided more space between them might be a good idea. The man almost backed into the wall as he did so.

"Oh... well, I'd best let you get back to it then."

Shree shook her head and went on her way through the unusually vast sickbay until she came to the main office and hit the chime.

"Come... in," came the reply from inside the room, with a halted manner.

Even through the door, the Andorian's keen senses were able to detect the exact orientation of each word and it seemed that they came from two sources, causing her antenna to wave slightly in both directions that the sounds originated from. This served to confuse her even more until the door swooshed open to reveal the sight of the office within.

The CMO's desk was wider than would usually be necessary for a single officer, and two chairs were positioned behind it. Seated on them were the two Bynar officers who had been assigned to fill one senior position. The almost identical female humanoids were seated close together and their overlarge, lavender heads were tilted slightly toward each other, the ridges and crevasses seeming to flow toward each other as if they were attracted by some magnetic force. The Bynar were very petite, with a physique matching that of a human girl between the ages of 8 and 12. Except for their fully formed figures and large craniums, Dr. Shree would have mistaken them to be children.

Because Bynar always lived and worked in pairs, Starfleet allowed them to share the single role of CMO.

Another female medical officer was also seated in the room to the side, making notes on a PADD. The Vulcan raised her view slightly to assess the newcomer and then returned her gaze to her work. Seated across from the Chief Medical Officers was an Aenar, who was in the middle of getting briefed by the Doctors.

Along with the Vulcan Assistant CMO, Dr. Lyrya, the Chief Counselor had previously been on the Artemis with their current Captain, Kheren, and also had a special relation to him as one of his wives. The experienced blind counselor sensed the presence of the Andorian, who stood patiently at attention behind her. As a sub-species of Andorian herself, with telepathic abilities, she was easily connected mentally to her and was able to sense her confusion and apprehension.

"Please have a seat, Lieutenant," she said softly. "We were just discussing the medical and psychological tests we need to perform before the Horizon can launch."

"Quite..." said 011 on Shree's left.

"... right," followed by 110 on her right.

Every sentence was shared between the two, who were also telepathically linked, but through certain computer components installed in all Bynars at birth.

"While Lotus Starbase's medical department... "

" ... has examined the entire crew already... "

" ... it is our duty... "

" ... to perform the function... "

" ... for the senior staff..."

" ... including ourselves..."

" ... who will be medically examined... "

" ... by Dr. T'Lynn," they said, one following the other, as they both gestured simultaneously to the silent Vulcan with both their right hands.

" Lieutenant Junior Grade Shree..."

" ... it will be your duty... "

" ... to perform a psychological examination... "

" ... of Doctor Lyrya."

"And additionally, of our Captain and of Assistant Chief of Tactical and Security, Lieutenant Junior Grade Tyvya," Lyrya added. "As they are my husband and wife, it would be a clear conflict of interest to try to provide an objective assessment of them."

The CMOs nodded in approval to Lyrya and at the same time, their heads shifted slightly to the left to stare at Shree, with the clear intent of expecting a response. It was oddly calculative, as if they possessed a mental list of all functions and responses that would be appropriate to be performed in a row and, like a computer, would wait until a new command was entered or a fault was logged.

Shree stood smartly before the Bynar doctor, determined not to look the least bit out of sorts. The fact was, she had never seen Bynars before and had very little idea how to properly converse with them... and what she didn't understand tended to make her nervous.

"Of course, doctor..." she cut it off because she was unsure how to address.. her? them? "I am fully qualified at counseling Andorian groupings and would be honored to accept this position."

All the while she never directly looked at or addressed Lyrya.

"It should be noted however that my primary reason for being posted aboard the Horizon was for my expertise in both Earth History and Temporal Studies, to better address the likely difficulties your new first officer, a Commander Redding, might encounter conforming to his new environment and century. I will of course be at your disposal for normal duty shifts as well doctor."

Then she turned to face the Aenar.

"I will let you know when I will be available as soon as I receive my duty assignment and we shall discuss any specifics at that time. Have you any questions for me at this time?"

"Thank you, Counselor, I have nothing further," Lyrya responded lightly.

The meeting thus ended, Assistant Chief Medical Officer T'Lynn sent a message to all the senior bridge officers and assistants to request their presence at the medical and psychological examinations to take place before launch.

As soon as the message to report for the mandatory physical and psychological examination went out, the intraship channel opened and a deep resonant voice was heard.

" Kheren here; on my way. "

Chief Counselor Lyrya looked at the two Bynars and then toward Counselor Shree with a wink.

" As I expected; our dear captain leads by example and is first among this entire crew of over two thousands to report for his examination. "

" Unusual for a command grade officer, " commented Doctor T'Lynn with her typical dry Vulcan tone. " Not the leading by example of course, but this eagerness to submit to medical protocols. Captains in particular are notoriously allergic to doctors. "

"Don't get fooled by this compliance, " the Aenar said to her. " Of all people, Captain Kheren is most uncomfortable with medical personnel and medical facilities; this comes from way back, from the peculiar circumstances of his birth... and from his very unique nature. But he is most of all a rational and pragmatic person; he knows that his very life might one day depend on correct knowledge and treatment of his peculiar condition. In fact, it did on several occasions already. And he knows that, by showing his own discipline, he can afterwards be as strict and severe to all his subordinates as he wants to with no chance for anyone to argue with him. "

"I see, " the Vulcan doctor said, nodding. "It's a command decision more than a personal one."

"Exactly. If you ask him, he will tell you that he's not an Andorian; he's a Starfleet officer. "

Several minutes went by and the doors to the vast sickbay of the Horizon swished open, letting in the athletic shape of her commanding officer enter and come straight towards the CMO's office.

"Doctors 011 and 110, welcome aboard. I did not have the chance to welcome you earlier, so I apologize for my rudeness. If there is anything you require to make your department fully ready, just present me with your requests while you proceed with my examination."

"What about me, Captain?" then asked Lyrya with a hint of amusement in her otherwise very formal tone of voice.

"Are they of a professional or of a personal nature?"

"Both."

"Proceed accordingly," was his simple response. But there was no denying the similar trace of amusement behind the cold answer.

The Aenar then rose from her seat, looking at her Andorian assistant.

"I leave him into your capable hands, Lieutenant. Good luck. But remember; all those abomination rumors about him you heard on the homeworld are true... except for him. "

And with those cryptic words, she left the room for her own office.

With slightly tilted heads and what seemed like intent fascination, the Bynar CMOs waited patiently for the discussion to come to an end and then replied immediately to the Captain's earlier salutation.

"Good morning..."

"...Captain... "

"Thank you for..."

"... your welcome," said Doctor 011, followed by her partner. "Your apology..."

"... was unnecessary. We have... "

"... settled in... "

"... quite satisfactorily."

They stood together and moved closer to the towering Andorian with a short, shuffling gait, until they were between the Captain and a nearby biobed. There were a few such beds set up in the Chief Medical Officer's office that was separated away from the massive regular sick bay room and additionally there were corridors around that room that were lined with private rooms for more intimate medical exams. There was no need for that however, for such a routine exam, so the glass between the office and main sickbay provided them the discretion necessary against the possibility of an officer overhearing some piece of sensitive medical data.

As they stood by Kheren, the doctors' line of sight barely reached the Captain's chest. Nevertheless, they both gestured commandingly to the left as they looked up at the dark blue face.

"If you would... "

"... please... "

"... sit down... "

"... Captain."

Kheren complied and sat on the appliance very straight, as if ready to jump off and run away at the first opportunity. But he stayed there calm and composed despite his posture.

"I suppose you read my medical file from Starfleet Medical, Doctors, and that you are aware of my... specifications..."

"Indeed... "

"... Captain," they said at once.

After a few high-pitched words that were intelligible to the Captain, they began listing said specifications, each taking an alternating phrase.

"As part of a genetic experiment..."

"... your gender is unique..."

"... for an Andorian."

"Being both Chan... "

"...and Thaan..."

"... your male attributes..."

"... are enhanced."

" Concentrated testosterone levels... "

"... extended fertility period..."

"... doubled chromosome count..."

"... increased muscle and bone mass... "

"... and density, strength and aggressivity,"

"... retractable antennae, "

"... darkened skin tone."

"We will take..."

"... all this... "

"... into account for..."

"... our examination, Captain."

As Doctors 011 and 110 began scanning him with the medical tricorder, they would occasionally communicate amongst themselves in their peculiar high speed data stream sounding so much like a flow of high-pitched signals. Eventually, they finished a preliminary scan.

"Captain, we understand..."

"... you recently... "

"... suffered again... "

"... from the effects of..."

"... the Azimuth Horizon... "

"...anomaly..."

"... a fourth time within,"

"... is that correct?"

"I did go through the Azimuth Horizon four times, yes, " confirmed Kheren. " But on the second and third times, I suffered no ill effects, thanks to the metaphasic shielding of the ship. On the fourth occasion, I suffered only when the shield failed some fifteen minutes before being rescued from the ship's destruction. But that last moment was a more direct exposure than the first one."

They spoke again briefly, in what was only a couple seconds to the Andorian but was in fact a full conversation discussing the scan results.

"Our mistake... "

"... Captain," they responded. "We are seeing... "

"... slight damage to your... "

"... occipital lobe... that was not present... "

"... in your last... "

"...examination. We can only assume... "

"... it was... "

"...due to the stress of... "

"... the Anomaly. From what we've studied... "

"... the effects are supposed to be... "

"... temporary... but this time, we're seeing... "

"... some lasting... "

"... indicators."

They shuffled a few feet to the left of the biobed to a hold containing various medical gadgets and apparatuses and pulled one from within.

"We would like you... "

"... to wear this... "

"... cerebral sensor... "

"... so that we can... "

"... monitor your eyes...

"... and antennae... "

"... for signs of... "

"... degradation."

110 reached up to attach it to his dark blue skin under the temporal lobe, where a Human would have a right ear. It was a small device that would be completely unnoticeable underneath his long, flowing white hair.

"I do hope you are not trying to assimilate me, Doctor,"the Andorian said. With his expressionless face, it was truly hard to tell if he was joking or genuinely concerned.

"There's no worry... "

"... of that..." the Bynars responded, either playing along with the joke or being serious. Their lack of expressions made it equally hard to tell, just as with the Captain.

" ... while like the Borg... "

"... we possess several neurological... "

"... and mechanical implants... "

"... to assist in computational... "

"... thought processes and improved... "

"... physical movement... "

"... we have no nanoprobes..."

"... to make assimilation... "

"... possible."

Being on the receiving end of his own deadpanness was a new experience for Kheren. He found it even more fun than he could have expected, the uncertainty making the effort of listening closely to someone else a challenging and almost exhilarating experience, especially for someone like him routinely able to read body language as easily as someone could read a book. And here again, the task was daunting with the smallish, almost unmoving Bynars.

"I will have to take your word on it, Doctors, " he conceded, "since we Andorians are probably the easiest species in the galaxy to assimilate."

The Chief medical Officer of the Horizon knew of course that he was referring to his species' osmotic circulatory system that made them extremely susceptible to the effects of medicines, alcohol and poisons... and therefore, to nanoprobes invading their bodies. They got drunk on a whiff and caffeine was almost poisonous to them because of it.

"But then again, I have every confidence in you, "he said, standing up. "Am I free to go now? "

"Everything else..."

"... looks good. You are as healthy... "

"... as in your last scan. Just remember..."

"... you have a psychological assessment... "

" ... to do with Doctor Shree... "

"... at some point," they reminded him, and then shuffled back to their desk to get ready for the next patient.

"Thank you, Doctors. I will go see her right now."

And so saying, Kheren went straight for the counselor's office.

"Doctor Shree, I am ready if you are. "

Not long after this, Commander Redding showed up as well, claiming that now was the only time he had free to under go this check.

"I still have twelve more departments to check over today, so if at all possible, I need to get this over with quickly. Besides, I underwent a battery of tests not two weeks ago at Starfleet Medical and they determined I was in excellent shape for a one hundred and eighty year old man."

At that, he kind of shrugged. Indeed, Redding did not mind taking physicals; it seemed yet another way for him to prove himself.

Doctor T'Lynn raised an eyebrow as she approached the First officer, tricorder in hand.

"The illogic of referring to past examinations, when regulations clearly states that all personnel must submit to a complete physical upon boarding a ship, never ceases to fascinate me," she said as she went through the motions of said proceedings.

She didn't seem to hurry, yet the proceedings went faster than even the impatient ship exec expected. She noticed his surprised expression when she announced that it was over.

"As a matter of a fact, Commander, we do take into account your latest previous examination. It is automatically compared to your transporter signal when you come aboard and then again both with this reading I did. Any discrepancy or anomaly whatsoever then calls for further detailed protocols. But when all checks out after the comparative analysis of all three different sources, you are logically considered fit for duty. As you are now."

As he moved from the biobed, the Vulcan woman added:

"But watch out from consuming too much caffeine. It could prove detrimental to your nervous system in the long run."

"I've no doubt that will be the death of me in the end."

He seemed slightly uncomfortable.

"I guess I'm used to exams being more medieval. I didn't even take off my shirt... but thank you, doctor. Let me know if you require anything else from me."

He gave a polite nod and headed out of the room.

Watching from an open office across the bay, Counselor Shree made a note of interaction between Redding and T'Lynn, a slight frown of thought showed as she reviewed the note.

Arriving onto deck 12 at that moment, Lieutenant Elisha Leône walked cautiously toward sickbay. There was just something unnerving about these environments that perhaps dated back to her awful childhood, but there were only shadowed glimpses and flashes of fragmented memories of those traumatic days.

Arriving to the entrance, she drew in a few deep breaths and then crossed the threshold into the medical facility as she calmly announced " Lieutenant Elisha Leône reporting in for my medical exam."

She stood there and did not utter another syllable, but the focus of her eyes darted all around the room like a pair of tactical scanners observing every nuance, life-form, and piece of equipment in the area; as she had learned to do since childhood when sensing danger or entering a new environment.

A young Human male whipped around the corner and stopped short as he saw her and then held up an obvious non-medical PADD.

"I'm Doctor Moore" he said professionally. "Ahh yes, Lieutenant Leone.. it says here we should start with an upper body exam, so if you'll kindly move into the exam room and remove your uniform I'll get right to it."

He gave a reassuringly 'fatherly' smile. There was no doubt he wasn't being serious.

Elisha cast a suspicious look at this Human making that rather provocative request. It was the type of innuendo that she had endured from males virtually wherever she went. She had hoped that this ship would be an exception.

Rather than make an issue out of this, she quipped back.

"Would you care to show me your medical credentials first, Doctor... and then explain to why it is that you are wearing an Ops uniform rather than a medical one?"

He looked down at his PADD and tapped on it.

"Well, you passed the I. Q. part of the test perfectly; nice response time by the way AND a 3.7 on the witty retort scale."

He shook his head as if impressed by the results.

"But I think you could do better. Feel free to sign up for my private classes and, don't worry, I just know I can help you with that nagging 'tell' you have there."

He glanced away at the sounds of incoming footsteps.

"But for now, I must away for I fear the approach of one so much in spirit as my mother that I could not dare to say a cross word of her."

Moore gave a little bow and he walked quickly out of the room.

An Andorian Zhen walked up at the end of his speech and watched him walk out. She didn't say a word about it.

"Hello Lieutenant, if you'll follow me, I'll take you to see doctors 011 and 110 for your check up, I am counselor Shree. Perhaps later we will have a talk as well."

She gave a welcoming smile as she gestured for Leone to follow her.

"Yes, Counselor," Elisha replied as she gave a brief glance back to the area of the departed human.

There always seemed to be males trying to charm her no matter where she went. Many were more debonaire than that human Ops crew member. She could have retaliated with a few enticing pheromones of her own to get that Ops fellow's head spinning and his hormones accelerating. But she had restrained the momentary impulse. Instead, she had dealt with the situation with her wit and the result had been satisfactory.

Elisha followed the Andorian as she pondered what the requirements of this medical exam would actually entail.

Shree noticed Leone looking where Moore had departed.

"I wouldn't concern myself with Mister Moore. It's a classic case of needing to be accepted."

They stopped at the office doorway.

"He approached me as well and I suspect a great deal of other women with the need to be charming, so I wouldn't take it as a personal opinion due to your heritage."

She was referring to Leone being an 'Orion slave girl' of course, the subject of many a young man's fancy.

With a slight smile, she responded to the Andorian woman.

"Duly noted Counselor."

Although in her mind, Elisha realized that she would be rather cautious in the presence of this individual; at least in the beginning. The level of attention or acceptance he sought might be a bit too personal for her comfort zone.

"Come... "

" ... in," came the high-pitched, monotoned response when she pressed the door chime.

As Elisha entered, she was greeted by the two Bynar medical officers standing side by side in front of their desk.

"Good afternoon..."

"... Lieutenant Leône."

They motioned to a nearby biobed,

"Please have a seat there..."

"... and we can get started."

Generally, they would let the tricorder speak for itself, but there was something about this green-skinned woman that seemed amiss and was actually affecting their own bodies' chemical balance. They expected it had something to do with her physiology. In their natural dialogue that neither Elisha nor the universal translator could comprehend, they discussed it.

*"Could it be the pheromones?"*110 said.

*"According to Starfleet records, she's been taught to lower them to a level found in most humans,"*replied 011.

*"It could be residual... something she's not aware of,"*110 argued.

"Perhaps. We should be able to detect it."

The conversation with complete data transfer about orion females in general and the Lieutenant's medical file in particular was done in merely a second. When Elisha was seated, they pulled out a medical tricorder and began scanning, but barely after they began, they spoke in the most comforting tone they could muster with their limited capabilities of their vocoder.

"How are... "

"...you feeling?"

The Orion woman looked curiously back and forth between the two Bynar physicians until she was questioned.

"I feel fine" was all that Elisha stated, although she was uncertain which one she actually replied to.

This was her first encounter with Bynars. They were rather interesting to the Orion, especially how they communicated with each other. Her experiences in Starfleet continued to be filled with such interesting curiosities. It made her truly appreciative to have this opportunity available to her.

"Are you..."

"... sure?" the doctors both asked in their usual way of 110 completing the sentence that 011 started. "You seem slightly... "

"... agitated about... "

"... something. And your... "

"... pheromone levels... "

"... are slightly higher than... "

"... your previous... "

"...recorded examination."

The Bynars' voices sounded slightly cold and detached, and their faces appeared interested, yet they were not showing any emotion. The computerized components built into their physiology made them seem very robotic to other humanoids. However, they were actually a very passionate race and wanted to make sure that their new colleague was feeling alright.

The Orion officer was rather stunned by the words of the Bynars. They somehow sensed the impact of her questionable encounter with the human actually had on her physiologically.

She was uncertain how to respond or proceed.

After a few moments of hesitation, she realized that she couldn't establish her first impression on these medical officers with subterfuge.

"I'm sorry. " she finally said. "It's just that, before your arrival... I mean, there was this individual... I'm not certain what his intentions were... It just flustered me..." and she could feel her composure begin to slip.

She turned away for a moment and began to center herself again.

The Bynars turned to look at each other as she did that and shared a look of concern.

"Hopefully your other... "

"... encounters with... "

"... the crew... "

"... will be less... "

"... irritating. If he... "

"... continues, we suggest you... "

"... speak to the... "

"... First Officer... "

"... about it."

"However, if you would like... "

"... assistance in controlling your... "

"... pheromone output... "

"... we could prescribe a mild... "

"... hormone inhibitor," they suggested.

She faced the pair of Bynars again as she spoke.

"I was trained by several Vulcans during my time at Starfleet Academy to control my pheromone output. It took years of meditation, discipline and practice for me to finally gain control of this. Since this is a natural biological function of my species, there are individuals of a variety of species that I have encountered that make certain assumptions about my physiology and sensuality. It has been a constant struggle for me since I was little."

Elisha had no desire to dredge up the ghosts of her past at this moment. She had worked tirelessly for the majority of her life just to escape and move beyond them.

"I believe I was just caught off guard here. I wasn't expecting... well... to encounter something like this on the ship. I will be more cautious and aware of my surroundings and interactions from this point forward."

She then thought for another moment as she could see that these Bynars were reaching out to help her.

"Perhaps a prescription of mild inhibitors could be something that I could keep in reserve... just in case an imbalance of some kind somehow begins to occur."

"Your attempt at... "

"... mental discipline is... "

"... admirable, Lieutenant... ""

"... and hopefully these will be... "

"... of assistance, if truly... "

"... necessary. But we will... "

"... leave you to decide... "

"... when a situation may... "

"... warrant it," they responded, and moved to the replicator to retrieve a few hyposprays with the inhibitor.

They then put their medical tricorder down on their desk.

"Your scans otherwise... "

"... match perfectly... "

"... your previous records. ""

" You are a specimen... "

"... of health, Lieutenant... "

"... so you are... "

"... free to go. Just remember... "

"... to also speak... with Doctor Lyrya... "

"... at some point."

"Thank you Doctors" she stated respectfully as she accepted the hypospray and tucked it away carefully in a small pouch in her uniform. She then slipped out of sickbay and headed back to the turbolift.

As the doors closed and the cabin began to ascend to her quarters, she closed her eyes for a moment. She had completed her first day of obligations and was ready for some time off before her next challenge; the commissioning ceremony.

* * *

Oseno Jureth had been avoiding this moment for as long as he possibly could. He had busied himself with preparations of the Polaris, and trying to hash out exactly what services his department could provide to Captain Kheren once the ship was underway. There was also the run-in he'd had with the ship's Chief of Security which really had been his fault for neglecting to do the paperwork he should have done in the first place. Now, there was no avoiding it however.

Oseno had grudgingly left the Polaris and made his way down to the Horizon's sickbay. The doctors on Starbase Lotus had given him explicit instructions to have his regeneration treatments checked as soon as he was able, and he had probably delayed it longer than he should have.

As he walked through the doors of sickbay he was amazed by what he saw. Jureth was used to the sickbays on smaller ships like that Alsea and his first assignment, the Cortez. This medical space was huge. Biobeds lined the wall, and nurses, orderlies and junior medical officers hurried to and fro, stocking supplies and checking off lists and conducting basic medical examination of crew personnel. As he stood there taking it all in, a young human female with shoulder length brown hair, wearing a blue medical coat over her uniform, stopped to speak to him.

"Can I help you, Commander?" she asked in a pleasant voice

Jureth was slightly startled as he had been focused on absorbing the sight of the mammoth sickbay.

"Oh, um...yes, Commander Oseno reporting for my physical."

"Oh, Commander Oseno, I am Lieutenant Julianne Lowe, I'm told you're my department head."

"Ah Lieutenant Lowe, good to finally meet you."

"Yes Sir, I understand I've been assigned as a medical expert of sorts?"

"Correct; you will provide your expertise as requested and serve as the CMO of our integrated escort, the Polaris."

"Ah... then I suppose I had better get her sickbay squared away instead of helping out here!" she said with a smile

"I'll let the Marines know you're coming," Jureth replied.

"Marines? Ookay... This is going to be a different command isn't it, Sir?"

"Yes Lieutenant, for all of us."

"Well, Doctor 011 and 110 is in her office. I'm sure you can report there for your exam."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Lowe... and I suspect I will see you later."

"Yes Sir, I'm sure you will."

The young doctor hurried off and Jureth strode over to the Chief Medical Officer's office where he found the ship's Bynar medical officer... officers? Jureth wasn't exactly sure how to address them as he'd never encountered the species before.

"Commander Oseno reporting for medical clearance," he announced.

"Good morning...

"...Commander," they responded together, in turn. "This should be... "

"... a fairly... "

"... straightforward...

"... and painless...

"... examination."

The Bynar officers rose from behind their desk. They had just been finishing their report on Captain Kheren, and the Bajoran's timing was quite fortunate.

Together, they shuffled closer to look at him and, with an intense yet pleasant gaze, were clearly reviewing the work done by the Starbase's medical staff to remove his former scar. Their gaze shifted between the Commander's face and a PADD that 110 was holding up several times. Then they turned to each other, and in a lightning fast, high pitched voice, they communicated something unintelligible between them before turning to face Commander Oseno again.

"The dermal reconstruction surgery... "

"... you received... "

"...is coming along... "

"... satisfactorily."

" If you would please... "

"... sit on the biobed..."

"... we will... "

"... examine it... "

"... more closely..."

"... with our... "

"... medical tricorder. "

"Of course," Jureth replied pleasantly.

As much as the Bynar pair was studying the Bajoran he was studying them as well. He had never seen two beings work so perfectly in synch. Even Klingon warriors who fought together for years were not as precise. It was an interesting sight to Jureth as he sat down on the biobed.

"I haven't had any residual pain, though not having the scar there has taken some getting used to."

The doctors nodded as 011 ran the scanning node of the medical tricorder that 110 was holding over the skin under Jureth's left eye.

"We can imagine... "

"... how you feel, Commander. "

"Shortly after we were found... "

"... by our Earth parents... "

"... we acted out one day... "

"... and were separated. "

"It almost killed us... "

"... without the other there."

" They did not know... "

"... we do not blame them. "

" Obviously this is not... "

"... near as drastic. "

" It is... "

"... a scar, not... "

"... a partner, but... "

"... it is a... "

"... similar feeling: "

"... to have something... "

" you're so used to... "

"... not be there anymore."

Jureth almost did not know what to say. The gravity of the Bynar's experience was nothing compared to his, he supposed.

"I didn't realize that being separated could harm you. I will have to keep that in mind. You are right though, it was something I had gotten used to. I could have had the regeneration done back when it happened, but I wanted a reminder. A reminder of foolish I had been to engage in a drunken brawl, especially with a Cardassian."

The doctors simply nodded, deciding against agreeing too wholeheartedly with the level of foolishness he previously demonstrated. The Bynar were used to always saying whatever was on their collective mind, so the idea of a "bedside manner" had always been a challenge they struggled to work on.

"We imagine scars..."

"... are a matter... "

"... of course in your... "

"... line of work," they responded. "It seems..."

"... you may be able to..."

"... avoid them... "

"... as you continue to..."

"... progress in the... "

"... command track."

They finished their scan.

"You are as... "

"... healthy as..."

"... can be. Come in... "

"... weekly for a month... "

"... so we can monitor... "

"... your eye... "

"... and inject this..."

"... antibiotic daily."

011 then handed him a hypospray with the required dosage of the medicine.

Jureth nodded acknowledging the instructions.

"Understood," and then he smiled; "I don't know about avoiding scars...I was planning on doing some training with our MACO team."

"Well hopefully... "

"... we don't see you... "

"... in here until... "

"... next week. Not that... "

"... we don't... "

"... enjoy your company," they said, trying to imitate some of the humanoid humor they encountered growing up on Earth.

"You are free... "

"...to go, Commander."

"Thank you, doctors," Jureth replied with a wry smile acknowledging the bynars attempt at humor. "I hope not as well."

After receiving the medical approval from the Horizon's bynar CMO, Jureth had returned to his work, switching from making sure the Polaris was ready to fly if need be to sifting through intelligence reports and preparing Captain Kheren's first strategic operations briefing. As the time passed, Oseno knew the appointed hour for the ship's commissioning ceremony was approaching, but he hardly gave it a second thought until he was back in his quarters on the Horizon his door chime rang.

"Come" he said not looking up from the terminal in front of him.

"Commander, I bear a message from Lieutenant Steele; she says, yes, you have to go."

Jureth looked up to see Lieutenant T'Lana standing in front of him in her dress uniform with her recently earned medals and ribbons neatly pinned on in their appropriate place.

"She said that, did she?"

"Yes, Sir; the message arrived via subspace on my terminal one standard hour ago."

Jureth smiled and shook his head. Even from wherever she was on the USS Celestial, Cat Steele was dragging him out of his quarters.

"Alright, I suppose I had better get dressed then,"

T'Lana nodded. "I will wait outside, Sir."

Jureth closed down his terminal and, as quickly as he could muster himself to do it, which was not all that fast, he pulled on his dress uniform, affixed all of his awards in their proper position and fastened his combage. He then exited his quarters into the passageway to find that T'Lana had been joined by the El-Aurian diplomat Adira Yiral who was dressed in a more civilian attire, choosing a long light blue dress made of a soft sparkling material that had straps extending over shoulders to run down the length of her back. The neckline was plunging, and Jureth's eyes drifted to it for only a second before making eye contact with the woman again.

"Commander Oseno," Yiral said by way of greeting; "nice to see you again."

"Commander Yiral; where did you come from, and where is your uniform?"

"Oh, I was leaving my quarters when I came across Lieutenant T'Lana here who informed me she was waiting for you... and about your...reluctance for ceremonies. As for my uniform...I am a diplomat, Commander; this is a diplomatic function of sorts so I can work the room much better in this."

"Is that allowed?" Jureth asked, not sure if regulations would have precluded such a thing.

"If I may, Sir," T'Lana said, "I believe regulations allow diplomatic personnel to dress...apart from normal crew during social functions."

"I see... Very well, let's head for the starbase. People will be gathering by now."

The trio made their way to the transporter room and beamed over to Starbase Lotus.

CHAPTER TWO: ALL I ASK IS A TALL SHIP

The great hall of the starbase was again in full regalia, banners proudly displaying the colors of the United Federation of Planets, of Starfleet and of Lotus Fleet. There was also on display the logo of the Lotus Starship Project, honoring both the researchers and technicians of Utopia Planitia, the premier starship development facility in the Alpha Quadrant and the elite division of Starfleet honored for its sacrifices and accomplishments with a starship class rechristened in its honor.

The four banners were framing the great transparencies that showed the immense vista of space around the base. But much closer, docked at the vast ring circling the main body of the starbase itself, was seen in all its glory the USS Horizon, first and only starship of the new Lotus class to be commissioned on this very day.

Starfleet officers, civilians, non-com personnel and media people, hundreds were filling up the huge area where a circular, slowly turning podium occupied center stage with the Federation symbol covering its flat, currently unoccupied surface. That was where the dignitaries for the official commissioning of the starship would stand and address not only those hundreds present, but people from over a hundred and fifty worlds across the Alpha Quadrant via UFP media; maybe even beyond via efficient intelligence and spying services.

There was also a series of seats reserved for the officers that would be presented along with the new starship; those that had the honor of first flying her during Operation Horizon and those who would have the singular honor of first serving aboard her. Many of those were already being filled up by white-coated officers in formal wear, among them Captain Thomas Eugene Paris formerly of USS Voyager fame and one of the brains behind the new "Great Experiment" and the one who would now assume command of the largest design yet commissioned by Starfleet, a singularly dark-hued athletic looking Andorian now well known on this starbase; Captain Kheren, formerly of the late, great Starship Artemis.

Both men sat together among the rest of their respective bridge crew spread out each side of them, all waiting for the official commissioning addresses to start.

"You're getting a damn fine ship, Captain, " Captain Paris said with a genuine smile and a friendly hand on the Andorian's shoulder. " And I don't say this because I had a hand in her design. The Horizon represents the crowning achievement of state of the art starship technology. Nothing comes even close to it in terms of raw power, sheer size, speed and range capability, total versatility and complete autonomy. It's like having both the USS Enterprise and the USS Defiant together with everything the USS Voyager ever had on top of it. "

"She is a beauty to be sure, " agreed Kheren with a nod. "But you know as well as I that what truly makes a ship is much more than bulkhead and circuitry. "

Tom Paris nodded in turn.

"Unfortunately, I can't leave you with my own crew... but from what I see, you have yourself everyone needed to make this ship the pride of the fleet. Bynars, Illythirii, Aenar, Andorian... even an Orion woman..."

" I am not sure we are thinking of the same type of crew quality, " Kheren said with antennae curving inward.

" Oh I'm pretty sure that we are... " insisted the legendary officer with his famous smile broadening even more.

The Andorian followed his eyes to see his two wives coming towards them.

" Is our dashing captain ready to mesmerize the crowd with words of courage and wisdom? " asked the towering Tyvya as she came up to the stand.

" As if I ever could, " growled Kheren, conscious of the amused stare of Paris on him.

" Why, " then added Lyrya with her blind stare disturbingly leveled straight at him, " I recall that the crew was definitely galvanized and moved each time you spoke before any of your numerous odds-defying orders. "

" That was different; I was merely giving proper data to have them know what we were going to do... and sharing my confidence in them and my hopes with them. "

" And there is a difference here? " countered Tyvya with curbing antennae. " Just think of this as another crisis to face... and that this crowd is your crew... which, as a matter of a fact, many of them are. "

" Many... but not all," retorted Kheren, eyeing the seats were sat Rear Admiral Kotari and Fleet Captain Allen Samji... and the host of media people crowding them at the moment. He knew his turn would come... and he dreaded it. Being the center of public attention had rarely been a good experience for him.

" Maybe you should consider hiring some help to deal with such... administrative duty and inconvenience, " suggested his Aenar wife.

" I am certainly open to the idea, " said Kheren absently.

" Good; Captain Kheren, may I present to you Ensign Meeramanee Blackbird, your new yeoman. Ensign Blackbird, your commanding officer. "

For the first time, the Andorian noticed the tall, copper-skinned, straight black-haired woman standing at attention slightly behind his two wives. Her looks, reminiscent of his chief flight officer Aguk Snow, proclaimed her of the Amerind subspecies of the Human race. She was of the same height as Lyrya, but her frame, although slender still, was definitely much more athletic and solid looking than the deceptively lithe and fragile-looking snow-skinned Aenar. And her eyes were flashing slivers of obsidian.

" It is an honor to meet and to serve with you, Captain Kheren, " said the Indian woman with a small smile. " I've heard truly tall tales about you, even back at the Academy. "

" Ensign Blackbird graduated top of her class in ship operations, specializing in starship administration, management and computer applications, " said Tyvya. "She is also cross-trained in medical and security, with the current record performance in the Academy's survival training course and excellent grades in both phaser firing and close combat basics. "

"And Andorian-spouse approved, no doubt," grumbled Kheren in Graalek, making both his wives 'antennae curve sharply inward in the typical Andorian smile.

" Better and better, my friend, " whispered Tom Paris but loud enough for most around them to hear.

" A secretary and a bodyguard... I should have known you two would come up with something like this, " Kheren growled but without much emotion in the words.

" Last time, I had to pull you out of the fire... literally, " retorted the towering giantess with a nod from Lyrya standing beside her.

" And you barely managed the paperwork while you commanded the Artemis, back then, " the Aenar added. "With a ship and crew three times her size, you will need the help so that you can better concentrate on what you have to do and that you do best; make the right decisions that will see us succeed... and this time without you taking all the brunt. We may not be able to save you again, next time... "

" Alright alright alright! I surrender... welcome aboard, Ensign. "

" Your first command decision as captain of the Horizon that may prove your best ever, " commented again Paris discreetly.

" Thank you, Sir, " Meeramanee Blackbird said with an amused smile that she could barely contain despite trying hard to stay professional and proper before her ship commander. " I already took the liberty of filing all the needed paperwork for the upcoming launch and ready it all for you to sign it. I also wrote an acceptance speech for you if you think you might need one in a hurry, Sir. "

" He is what you would call a male, Ensign; he will manage all by himself to talk loud when the time comes, " Lyrya said as she took the Indian woman by the arm and guided her back to their seats, Tyvya leaving over both their heads a telling look to her husband.

" And I thought *my* wife Be'lanna was a handful, " Captain Paris said with a sympathetic hand on Kheren's shoulder.

" Aye, lucky you; she's only *half* klingon, " the Andorian growled. " Guess that is the real reason they gave me this command. If I can survive my wives and stay sane, I certainly can face the worst this universe may throw at us. "

They both laughed.

Then they noticed Commander Oseno Jureth, Lieutenant T'Lana and Ambassador Yiral walking quickly through the entrance of the hall. As they entered, Jureth took in the scene. There were scores of guests from high ranking members of Starfleet and the Federation, officers of Lotus Fleet and others that had been invited. The banquet hall was elegantly adorned with decorations and, as they walked through the crowd, Jureth spotted a group of officers that included Captain Kheren. He headed that way, wanting to make sure his superior saw that he was present.

"Captain Kheren, quite the party they're throwing us."

"I should have consulted you before coming here, Commander, " Kheren said, not a hint of a joke in his tone of voice or the annoyed stare he flashed over the entire place. "Remind me to never face a social situation without getting your strategic assessment first."

"He means that you would help even the odds with his wives, " Tom Paris said to Jureth with a smile, not giving any explanation to his cryptic remark. Then, he extended his hand. "Tom Paris, *former* commanding officer of the Horizon... well, for a day. "

After introducing the two women, Jureth then addressed Tom Paris.

"Captain Paris Sir, I never got a chance to thank you. If not for your timely arrival, the Alsea might have been reduced to floating debris. As her captain at the time, I'm grateful."

"Welcome to *this* historical day, Commander Oseno. I heard rather good words about you. Captain Kheren is sure lucky to have you by his side... and evidently quite aware of it."

"I quite agree, Sir; they should work well together from what I have seen."

An Efrozian couple walked up on the small group behind those words thrown with a soft yet strong voice. It took a few seconds to place the man's face as that of Captain Felez Conno'ratu, former commander of the USS Lotus. He looked much older due to the the radiation damage he had endured on his last mission and a good deal frailer. But Kheren still recognized him.

"Commander Felez!" exclaimed the Andorian, reflexively lifting his chin in the typical Andorian gesture of respect. "This a great honor, Sir. I wasn't informed that you would here."

"Hello again, Kheren. I see you've done well for yourself, despite my initial concerns for your humility."

Kheren laughed at the remark.

"It got worse, Sir. Gentlemen, Ladies, may I present Commander Felez Connora'tu, formerly acting captain of the USS Lotus and who showed me the proper way to command."

Felez forced a pleasant smile through conscious movement of his facial muscles, as all Efrozians must to relay emotion to non empathic people. He sidestepped a little to present the woman with him.

"Allow me to present my better half, Natra, my betrothed."

Kheren remembered Felez spoke of her rarely, and that she had be captured by the Borg until their resent destruction. From last Kheren had heard, Redding had managed to reunite them, which led to Felez accepting the role of facility commander for the newly liberated drones. The arrival of Felez surprised Jureth. He had not expected to see the Efrosian whom was to have been his commanding officer at one time. He had never had a chance to serve under the man, but, seeing him and the way Kheren looked up to him, part of him wished he had.

"Commander Felez," Jureth said using the last rank that he remembered Felez having as he departed the Lotus; "Its good to see you again, and to meet you, Ma'am" Jureth said to Felez's escort, distinctly remembering hearing that she had been captured by the Borg and liberated when Lotus Fleet had destroyed the cybernetic species.

Jureth could not imagine having gone through such a trauma, and offered a small prayer to the Prophets for both of them.

Kheren also welcomed the orange-skinned, white-haired woman with a bow then addressed the couple with much respect and pleasure in his deep voice.

"This is as a much a surprise as a honor to have you here, today, at the launching of the new flagship with me as her new captain... It would almost make me believe in destiny."

"Destiny needed a week's leave of absence from my duties as well as three ship transfers, but I could not miss such a historic event as this." Natrasaid, nothing and displayed no emotion but simply nodded respectfully at any attention given her. Despite her lack of facial expression, there where other kinds of body language at work, as she tended to glance around the room at any one that walked near her and the way she gripped Felez's arm, like he might slip away if she lost her hold on him.

"I was dismayed to hear of the lost of your first command, the Artemis, but I had full faith that you did no more than you needed to do."

"She was the finest ship anyone could have served on," agreed the Andorian. "We can only hope that we will all end up serving as well as she did."

At that moment, commander Redding walked up holding a drink in his hand.

"What's all the commotion over here, captain?" Then he spotted the Efrozian. "Felez! my God man it's good to see an old friend again, and Natra! It's good to see you up and about." Natra seemed confused as to who he was until Felez cleared it up for her.

"This is Admiral Redding dear; do you remember Admiral Redding?"

His tone was very careful and patient. She walked up for a closer look and traced his face with a slightly shaky hand, then hugged him. Putting his drink down Redding returned her hug gently as possible, then looked at Felez.

"I really am happy to see you both," and slightly pushed her back and looked at her. "And you? you look wonderful!"

She forced a little smile of embarrassment and went back to Felez's arm. Felez was delighted. "That's the first facial expression she's attempted since she was recovered." And smiled boldly at her.

But Kheren noted something only a man might find from serving with an Efrozian; he hadn't shown any expression when meeting Redding again, his face had remained blank.

He's feeling something... realized the Andorian, looking attentively at his former commanding officer, knowing his empathic sensibilities. *I might learn more about this new Redding from his own reactions than his entire Starfleet record might state.*

Jureth watched as the officers who were obviously familiar with each other interacted. This was the first time he had met the Horizon's XO, and when he'd first seen the name on the roster he had thought that perhaps it was some relative of Admiral Redding. Hearing Felez introduce the younger man standing in front of him as Admiral Redding, however, confused the Bajoran and he made a mental note to either look up the man's service record or ask the captain about it at another time, or both. There was a certain familiarity about Redding's features that harkened to the much older man Jureth had accompanied to meet with Captain Jar'rod aboard the Klingon's flagship, but clearly this couldn't possibly be the same man... could it?

Kheren was no empath but he was a master at body language and became aware of his Strategic Chief Officer's confusion instantly.

"Commander Oseno, this is Commander Neil Stanley Redding, our executive officer for the flagship. Commander Redding, meet our Strategic Chief Officer and ship commander of the Polaris, our integrated escort vessel, Commander Oseno Jureth. "

As the two of them shook hands in the traditional Human greeting form most popular in Starfleet, the Andorian, having heard from the starbase's grapevine that the last visit of Admiral Redding had involved the Alsea when Jureth was serving aboard her, added his next sentence in a lowered tone.

"We might discuss the Commander's relation to Admiral Redding at a later time if both of you so wish. "

For both commanders, there was no mistaking the underlined "classified" meaning of what he was talking about. Kheren knew that Commander Felez as well would pick up both words and what lied between them... and maybe even a little bit more.

"Aye Sir," Jureth replied acknowledging the captain's statement; "but, Sir, if I didn't know better, I'd swear you were part Betazoid," the last statement indicating that Kheren seemed to have known exactly what the Bajoran was thinking.

"Body language is a duellist skill, Commander; I just happen to be good at it, " Kheren explained. "So let's kill this nascent rumor off right now before it further adds to the already bloated and distorted image too many have of me. "

The Andorian was at this moment particularly conscious of Redding's presence and how, in another life, he had misjudged Kheren so much as to consider him an Undine in disguise... and meddle in his career because of it. He definitely didn't want History to repeat itself and let any false idea make its way in the mind of the "new" Neil S. Redding.

Felez then gave a slight bow.

"My apologies to all; Natra is still in a confused state and I was afraid.. well, enough said on that."

"No need to apologize, Commander Felez, it's not a problem." Jureth said to the Efrosian, not wanting the commander or his wife to think they'd caused any undue stress.

"Absolutely," Redding said cheerfully. "We should have time after the ceremony to hash out the details."

And with that, he made to show the couple to their seats. Before leaving, he turned to Jureth.

"When we get a chance, I'd like to see that ship of yours, Commander."

"Anytime, Sir; just mind the Marines at the door."

The last part Jureth said with a slight smile, thinking of his run in with the chief of security earlier.

Redding gave a little wave as he walked off with the Efrosian couple.

"Mister Oseno, it's good to see you again."

The voice had come from behind Jureth, but he immediately recognized it and turned to see Kalten Siduri standing in full dress uniform.

"Captain!" Jureth exclaimed, truly surprised; "I wasn't aware you'd come back to the land of the living, let alone been released from medical!"

"Reports of my demise have been greatly exaggerated. As for releasing me...I made them, I wanted to thank you for your part in my safe return after my fall and to see this grand new flagship of ours."

"I think it might be more due to the Alsea's EMH and the starbase medical staff than any part I played, Sir."

"Nonsense man; from what I hear, you reacted immediately, and I'm grateful."

"You're welcome, Sir, but I only did my job."

"I hear you did more than that...something about taking over my ship..." Siduri replied with a mock stern look.

"That was Fleet Captain Samji's doing, Sir... seems Starfleet doesn't let mere Lieutenants attempt to negotiate with enemies."

"You did good work, Oseno," Siduri said seriously, "but nothing I wouldn't have expected after our initial work together."

Jureth thought back to the first real encounter he had with Captain Siduri, a security drill in which the captain had interfered, resulting in two injuries. He and the Bajoran had later gone toe to toe in the Alsea's main conference room with the Bajoran taking a tone that lieutenants weren't supposed to take with captains. Siduri had weathered the storm of his security chief's temper though and the two had agreed to try and work together.

"Thank you, Sir," Jureth replied sincerely. He was truly grateful to see the captain back up and about after feeling very responsible for allowing his former commanding officer to become seriously injured. He pushed that thought away though, realizing he was neglecting the other officers present.

"Captain Kheren, I apologize, Sir," Jureth said. "I presume you know Captain Siduri, formerly of the Alsea."

"Not as much as I would want to, " the Andorian said, inwardly thanking his wife Lyrya for coaching him in the niceties of social interaction he was so alien to. " I am glad you are up and about, Captain. Last time we saw you, we were quite worried after the injury you had suffered during your own Azimuth Horizon recon mission. Oh, and this is Captain Thomas Eugene Paris, the lead designer of the Horizon and from whom I am inheriting this prestigious command. "

The former hero of the Voyager saga shook hand with the athletic blonde, hazel-eyes officer.

"Just Tom will do fine, Captain Siduri. Captain Kheren makes my name sound like some grand title."

"Well between all of us and the rest, there are a lot of big names around here, " said Kalten Siduri with a short laugh. "Voyager legends, Borg War heroes, Azimuth Horizon veterans... And the best of it all, this all seems not like any dreary remembrance day but like the beginning of things even greater to come."

"We are far from having fully reached the entire final frontier yet, " Paris agreed.

"Or whatever lies beyond," added Kheren cryptically, flashing a brief look at Commander Redding.

"I remember at one time being quite concerned about how I would fit in with such a prestigious group of men and women," Jureth admitted. "Being assigned to the Lotus immediately after the Borg War was...intimidating. It seems like a long time ago now."

"I know *exactly* how you felt then... and how you feel now, " confessed Kheren in turn. "I myself got sent to the Lotus to be her chief of security and tactical when I was barely promoted Ensign and straight out of sickbay after the Romulan attack on this starbase. You do feel pretty small when you face such responsibilities, especially in such an elite division. But, as they say on Earth, calm seas do not make good sailors. And so, judging by you and the rough seas you went through, Commander, indeed you have come a long and hard way and proven yourself more than enough... like the rest of our gallant crew. It will be a privilege and a challenge for me to try and be your captain."

"Hopefully not too much of a challenge Sir," Oseno replied with a smile,, "though I'm pretty sure that Captain Gould almost beamed me onto a passing freighter after I ran a security drill without telling him first..."

"And I think you wanted to lock me in the brig after I interfered with your first one on the Alsea," Siduri said with a smile of his own. "I'll say this though; it will remind me to think twice before I... adjust my security chief's drills in the future."

"Indeed, an officer should always keep his captain in the know on his ship... but a captain must also have faith in his officers and not interfere or dictate every step they make from here to the loo," the Andorian agreed with both. "Regarding that, micromanagement is assuredly a good way to fail in Starfleet... and as for cowboy soloism, Lieutenant-Commander Sorripto himself recently taught us the necessity of the first."

Kheren was referring to the recent court martial of a veteran officer who, faced with blackmail from Section 31, disregarded both regulations and common sense as he decided to face the threat alone and, in the process, endangered the starship McKenzie and the whole of Operation Horizon, instead of trusting his commanding officer and fellow crewmates, Lotus Fleet Command and Starfleet. In the end, Section 31 was destroyed... but the benefit of his wild actions had threatened to destroy as well everything Starfleet stood for and relied upon. So he had been commended... and condemned at the same time.

In the end, the officer had taken full responsibility for his actions, which in itself was commendable. If he learned anything from it all, well, that however remained to be seen. But the rest of Starfleet certainly learned what Kheren himself had always believed in: you don't throw the book away until you get to the last page.... and that Starfleet officers needed to work *together* to *truly* succeed.

And this was something he was adamant about as far as his next command would be concerned.

"I heard about Sorripto..." Jureth said solemnly. "It is disturbing... but, at the same time, I wonder how many other men would have acted similarly. I don't think any of us truly know how we would respond without having been placed in the situation. I don't think many Bajorans fancied themselves soldiers until the Cardassians occupied our planet."

"Indeed. But here is the thing; the more we will risk officers acting like this, the more we risk unraveling at the seams. If we do not trust one another and do not openly work together to face the challenges before us, we will always fall into those traps and shifty, shadowy forces like Section 31 will always prevail, while everything we say we stand for will weaken us at best, or at worst makes us hypocrites, fools and buffoons. "

Thinking about what Oseno had just said, the Andorian looked straight at him with his four oculars.

"Bajorans prevailed under a harsh, powerful conqueror because they worked together, trusted one another. Maybe they had no choice, or maybe they understood something then... But we Starfleet officers would do well to follow the example set by your people. And on a starship, one lone wolf can misstep and cause the death of everyone on board. Space is the most hostile environment to life you can ever find; we all got there and prospered because of trust in ourselves *and* in each other. That is what we must never forget."

Kalten Siduri nodded agreeing with Kheren.

"I read the Sorripto file...the unclassified part anyway. Indeed, both what your people Oseno, and Sorripto went through shouldn't have to be experienced by anyone, but the difference is that the Bajorans adapted and overcame as a people when they had no other choice. Sorripto, instead of trusting Captain Crist or any of his fellow officers aboard the McKenzie, chose his own route, going against what most of the Federation and Starfleet stands for."

"True," Jureth said. "There are documented incidents about rogue officers throughout Starfleet history, and most of them ended badly. Even the vaunted James Kirk dismissed rules and regulations on more than one occasion...I read he even stole a starship, but I suppose his ends justified the means either at the time or after the fact or they would have thrown him in prison."

Jureth paused for a moment.

"I can assure you though, Captain," he said to Kheren, "you won't have to worry about me doing anything like that."

"I'm very glad to hear it, Commander; because if you ever did, then *you* would have to worry about what *I* would do," said the Andorian very seriously. "And if you recall, Kirk was *demoted* and *never* promoted again after his crime, even after saving the whole of planet Earth and after a most illustrious career. Fact is, today his career is used as a reference about what *not* to do in most instances! But to his defense, his times were a lot different than ours today... and like Sorripto, he assumed full responsibilities for his actions. Nevertheless, then and now, in Starfleet as in the mind of any moral individual, the ends *never* justify the means... Therefore, you must not only do the right thing but you must do it the right way and for the right reasons. And this is something I for one believe firmly in."

"Yes Sir," Jureth said in agreement only somewhat intimidated by the large Andorian "but frankly Sir, I think I'd be more afraid of Lieutenant Tyvya..."

The comment drew smirks from Siduri and Tom Paris and the former captain of the Alsea took that moment to take his leave

"Gentlemen, I must say it's been grand, but I should probably get back to medical before they come drag me away. Captain Paris, nice to have met you. Captain Kheren, Commander Oseno best of luck to you both. She's a fine ship, take care of her, and she'll return the favor."

"Thank you, Sir," Jureth replied.

"Take care, Captain, " Kheren offered as parting words.

They watched as the blonde man walked away towards the entrance where they could notice several officers of the USS Phoenix coming to the ceremony.

That reminded Kheren that their own ship was still lacking an assigned chief engineer. Unless Fleet Captain Samji assigned them an officer for the job, he knew he would have to resort to promote one of his junior officers to the position.

Robert Baoule was the obvious choice, being a propulsion expert and their main task being the thorough testing of the transwarp drive; but Patricia Blakely, his colleague and girlfriend, had proven herself quite as capable in general engineering management.

Shortage of qualified personnel among two thousand crewmembers on the largest starship ever built; Kheren slightly shook his head at the thought. but then, he had to get back to the here and now; others were coming to the ceremony and wanted to greet them and wish them luck.

Commander David Rogers, chief engineer of the soon-to-be commissioned Avenger class science cruiser USS Phoenix, entered the huge hall where the gathering for the commissioning ceremony was currently underway. Hundreds of Starfleet officers were in attendance already, similarly dressed as David currently was in formal dress uniform. Again, the half-Romulan, half-Human engineer tugged at the hem of his collar where his long dark hair brushed the hem and straightened the already straight uniform again on his lithe body. Although rarely worn, David's uniform was certainly constricting enough to remind him that it was through participation in events such as these that Starfleet showed it's pride to the Alpha and Beta quadrant's premier personages and attendant crews and populations through out. Every fleet officer and NCO present wore their medals and awards prominent on their uniforms; not out of any sense of pride or vanity, but to honor the events or personnel sacrificed in which ever circumstance that the displayed medals were presented for. David's own small display was similarly arranged and, although he rarely thought about them, he did know that the one that he could not wear on his chest on it served to remind him that everyone in this hall who diligently displayed their own medals were, like himself, aware of the commitment and dedication and sacrifice's these awards entailed.

Skirting the outer rim of the hall, Rogers stopped at the great window that showed, in her sleek lines and graceful stance the largest Starfleet vessel Rogers had ever seen. The USS Horizon reflected the lights around her in a subdued glow that only heightened her hidden menace, but glorified her pent up spirit.

To boldly go.

After a few minutes of study, David turned and made his way to the second row of seats near the podium, to the right of the assembled crew that would soon board the fleets newest flag ship. He recognized Captain Kheren immediately. The unique looks of the Andorian mutant was as unique and distinctive as a warp signature on sensors. Taking a seat near the center portion of the group of seats in the section, David sat and, with another tug to straighten his already straight formal jacket, awaited the pending arrival of the rest of the Phoenix crew that would honor this new ship and crew.

Not long after, the chief medical officer of the Phoenix entered. With his bald head and mature features, he looked amazingly like a younger version of Captain Jean-Luc Picard in his white and black dress uniform when seen from a distance. But his easy smile and complete ease in the setting of such a social event immediately corrected that impression, faster than any notice of his few medals and science-colored undershirt.

Elliago went to pay his respects and leave his best wishes with Captain Kheren in but a few words. Both officers had served so many times together since their Academy graduation that but few words were needed for them to understand each other; and between Andorian passion and Deltan sensibilities, understanding was more a matter of feeling than of rhetoric.

That left the Deltan free to go and meet the rest of the Horizon's crew, and especially the officers who were taking over from his former assignment.

"Doctors, it is a pleasure and a privilege to meet you, " he said to 110 and 011, the Bynar chief medical officers of the new flagship. " I am Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth, former family doctor to your captain. "

The pair of diminutive bald, blue-skinned Bynars looked quite dignified in their uniform, They both nodded together in greetings to their Deltan colleague.

" Speaking of the true blue captain of your new ship, I quite accidentally managed to notice what looks like a cortical stimulator working under his temporal lobe, where any other than an Andorian would sport ears, " Elliago then said. "My congratulations to you, Doctors. Before you came along, it would have taken a Gorn and a phaser on stun to keep him still long enough to install such a thing on him... and a threat of immediate court martial to prevent him from removing it afterwards."

Movement at the side of his vision had brought David's attention back from the podium and he had noticed the Phoenix's doctor step near to Captain Kheren and pay his respects, then move toward a pair of Bynar officers, their identical backs facing David. The thought of enduring another visit to a doctor brought exasperation to his thoughts again. It was enough to remind him of the rigorous... *no! strenuous!* strenuous medical exams that he had needed to endure to join Star Fleet Academy.

First, the suspicion surrounding his upbringing on a Ferenginaar ship. Then his half Romulan ancestry had reared it's ugly head again, and another round of doctors and tests and samples. Only the fact that his five years of service at Utopia Planatia had enabled him to barely pass the entrance requirements and write the entrance exam. Turning away from Nasaro-Myth's direction, David crossed his arms and scowled at the view of the Horizon out of the large window.

Always with new physician's it is the same, David thought irately. *Oh? Half Romulan? Is that so? Let me take a look at ... and out come the tri-corders and needles and probes.*

David brooded, not really seeing the spectacular ship before him, and debated the pro's and con's of sabotaging the entire Phoenix medical bay.

It was at that same moment Captain Syntron transported down alone to the ceremony in the great hall of the starbase, fifteen minutes before the official program was scheduled to begin. He estimated that this would provide him enough time to pay his respects to his former captain and then find a suitable location to witness the speeches and the introductions of the flagship's senior officers.

As he meandered his way through the dense crowd of civilians and Starfleet personnel, the Vulcan spotted the Andorian Captain engaging in conversation with several current and former acquaintances and shipmates. Syntron eventually arrived in proximity to the Andorian just as he finished conversing.

The Vulcan made a slight nod of his head.

"Greetings, Captain Kheren. How is your transition proceeding on your new vessel?"

" Captain Syntron... you honor us by your presence. As for your question... well, since I come aboard with almost my entire original crew of the late Artemis, I would not exactly call it a transition... more like a... relocation. And as it is on a much larger and modern ship, with an exceptionally highly competent senior staff, Like Commander Oseno here, I would say... smooth sailing all the way. "

Then he pointed his four oculars at the Vulcan in obvious interest.

"How about you, my friend? "

The Vulcan thoughtfully pondered the inquiry for a moment before responding.

"Since we last spoke, Captain Kheren, it would appear that my time has been almost a blur of a equipment augmentations, a collage of conversations, a multitude of transitions, a series of hurried and varied initiations, and a range of potential incorporations. Other than this, it would seem like we are relatively on-schedule for our upcoming launch."

"Count your blessings, Captain. We on the Horizon are still missing an assigned chief engineer... on the eve of testing the most revolutionary propulsion system since the advent of warp drive. Of course Mister Baoule, our propulsion specialist, is more than capable of assuming the job if need be, again, even if he is but a mere Junior Lieutenant... but you can imagine the pressure on the poor man's shoulders; all the responsibilities and no official authority or recognition for it."

The Vulcan nodded in affirmation as he spoke.

"Based on my experience working with Mister Baoule, he is indeed a very competent and knowledgeable engineer. He certainly has proven his tenacity and capabilities during our many encounters with the anomaly alone. To a lesser extent, we too are facing a similar irony. We are advancing all of our science systems and yet have no chief science officer assigned to oversee them. I currently have an ensign from the starbase trying her best to fulfill that demanding role. In addition, there has yet to be a chief operations officer identified for our crew at a time when we are addressing the staffing of an entire crew along with attempting to balance out our allocated resources."

The Vulcan then gazed around briefly at the flurry of activity transpiring all around them. It appeared that the official aspects of the ceremony we showing signs of initiating.

"However, the remainder of our crew thus far seem competent and diligent. We will also be experimenting on improving the processing time of data flow and connections through our bio-neural circuitry; with the supervision of a lieutenant from the starbase. So overall, this initial imminent shakedown cruise should prove to be rather... intriguing."

"Science people rushing in, science tech to test, science problems to tackle, science missions planned... my friend, you must be just like a fish in warm waters; and do not tell me that you are a Vulcan and that you feel nothing because I know better. I heard you play on that violin and that lyre often enough."

Syntron allowed a very subtle smirk sneak upon his expression.

"Merely preparing to do my job, Sir. And the instruments... simply devices in my meditative toolbox."

The antennae of the Andorian curved inward as his tone of voice became lighter.

"Ah yes, I heard well how "meditative" you are when you play. Made me an all of us hearing you feel so... "detached" as well. "

With a raised brow, the Vulcan countered.

"Indeed Captain. Perhaps as the old human expression goes, music does sooth the average beast. Even perhaps an extraterrestrial martial arts champion from an icy environment."

"I am not sure but I think I have been insulted here, " Kheren said, his antennae curving even more towards one another.

He did a short laugh.

"Nevertheless, you are a scientist, Captain Syntron; you of all people know that nothing comes from out of a void... or is truly created or truly annihilated. What goes to touch others can only come from you. "

"From that perspective, Captain Kheren, I acknowledge this assertion to be a reasonable conclusion."

The Vulcan then nodded stoically.

"However, I bear no responsibility in anyone's reaction to my performances; be it of a positive or negative nature."

Now the Andorian truly laughed.

"This is a historical moment. Captain Syntron, I believe you have uttered the most illogical statement ever spoken by a Vulcan since Surak's days. There is still hope for you yet, my friend. "

"Now it is I who is being insulted, Captain Kheren," the Vulcan retorted with a slightly coy expression. "However," he then added with a poker face, "given the circumstance of this ceremony and the fact that you have yet to present your speech, I will attribute your transgression to that of a nervous reaction. As a human might say... all is forgiven Captain."

"Or more to the point; all is far in love and war," Kheren said good naturedly. "And you are right; I *am* nervous. The last time, I got the center seat right in the middle of a crisis. No ceremony, no speech, no crowd... just duty, danger and responsibility. Now that was easy..."

"Well...perhaps this time, Captain, the crisis will be in surviving the pressures and expectations of this ceremony itself. By comparison, at least on the surface, this would appear a less treacherous terrain to navigate through than that of the anomaly."

"We will see then if I also survive *this*," simply said the commanding officer of the flagship.

"Other than completing our impending shakedown excursions, have you been informed of any upcoming mission that the fleet may have planned for us?" inquired the Vulcan discreetly.

The Andorian shrugged.

"Negative. Not surprising though; they can hardly assign us anything if ship and crew are not properly assessed yet and proven... seaworthy. But I am not worried. As soon as our shakedown cruises will be over, there is plenty to do in this sector alone. And space is quite vast beyond this one sector."

"Indeed it is, Captain Kheren. We may even have the opportunity to explore some of these unfamiliar regions of space as well. We will certainly have the capacity to do so now more than ever with these new vessels at our command... filled with legions of Starfleet personnel seemingly eager to traverse amongst the stars ."

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Kheren nodded.

"That much is certain. The Phoenix is the most advanced long range mobile research platform ever launched and the Horizon is nothing short of a mobile starbase able to function for decades without any Federation support... You do not build such vessels for border patrols. "

"Indeed" the Vulcan agreed.

At that moment, Syntron espied in his peripheral vision a rather unusual sight. An attractive Orion woman with long black silky hair dressed in a fleet bridge officer's uniform cautiously approaching the Andorian commanding officer from behind. Syntron then switched his focus back to his former captain as to inform him inconspicuously.

"It would appear, Captain Kheren, that you have another fleet officer forthcoming to speak to you."

Like all Andorians, Kheren was practically deaf from behind and his field of vision was no bigger than for the average Human. It was therefore a natural reflex for him, when alerted to something, to quickly scan what was before him and, noticing nothing, swiftly turn around. That's where he spotted the approaching officer.

To alleviate the effect of his abrupt movement, he offered a hand to invite her to come next to them and his deep voice was soft and friendly.

"Welcome to our little moment of glory, Lieutenant. Captain Syntron, may I present Lieutenant Elisha Leône, our Chief of Operations of the flagship. "

Elisha was humbled by the kind gesture of her commanding officer and accepted his hand as she moved closer to the two officers. The Andorian's grasp was firm, but gentle.

"Thank you, Captain Kheren. I hope that I am not intruding on your conversation."

Her almond-shaped, aqua-hued eyes then drifted from the Andorian to the Vulcan Captain to which she was just presented.

"It is an honor to meet you Captain Syntron. From what I have seen regarding your new ship the USS Phoenix, it is a most impressive vessel."

The Vulcan gazed most curiously at the Orion woman. This was the first Orion that he had encountered that was, not only in Starfleet, but was a bridge officer on the flagship of the fleet itself.

"Thank you Lieutenant Leône. You will be serving aboard a rather remarkable vessel yourself."

The Orion allowed a smile to escape as she responded with a tone filled with pride.

"It is an opportunity beyond what I ever thought to achieve. I had been vying for a position in operations on a starship since graduating from the Academy. To be commissioned to Lotus fleet, and to the flagship... well, it is indeed an honor and an opportunity that I am most grateful for."

Elisha felt herself a bit embarrassed by her rather blunt admission, but it was truly how she felt. She really didn't know anyone on the starbase, and felt a bit awkward at these types of formal gatherings. These were the type of circumstances where individuals would eventually become intoxicated and some may again start to make inappropriate advances to her. She had just dealt with that individual in sickbay, she did not want to be trapped in a large area filled with similar opportunists.

Kheren for his part immediately read on the Orion woman all the signs of his own uneasiness in social gatherings. Hers was probably due to her own Orion heritage and reputation... something he could certainly sympathize with. Because of their unique physiology regarding reproduction, Andorians were not susceptible to the alluring power of Orion women; their pheromones were even slightly nauseating to the enhanced olfactory receptors of their antennae. But he knew that, even without them, as her own recorded Oath of Celibacy refrained her from using, some humanoid males might still react to her nevertheless, especially under the unhibiting influence of alcohol.

He decided then to act as would any Starfleet captain and Andorian clan leader; to preserve her from harm.

" I quite understand how you feel, Lieutenant. I myself had been quite overwhelmed when Lotus Fleet recruited me and sent me to the flagship Lotus as her chief of security and tactical. I was barely an Ensign then... But beleive me, you will not have much time to think of anything but duty once we get underway... and that will be on a slow day, the stars willing. "

The Andorian then looked over her shoulder.

" When the ceremony starts, why don't you go meet and sit with my wives? They will help you settle in... most probably by telling you all the funny tales they have regarding your commanding officer. And they can help you with the social complexities of the reception. "

Kheren knew that, with Tyvya's gigantic body on one side and the mindreading Lyrya on the other, Elisha would be as safe from any inebriated individual's misstep towards her as she would want to.

"I would be honored to join you and your wives," she stated humbly with a warm and pleasant smile.

As she spoke these words, she realized that this was plural and, seeing also the copper-skinned Human with them, she wondered for a second just how many mates this Andorian captain actually had. She was not very familiar with their society and the rites and rituals of their mating. It would be just another of many things she would be learning on this job.

She refocused her thoughts and continued without a noticeable pause.

"I would appreciate their guidance as well, Captain. Unfortunately, I am not familiar with the social protocols and expectations of an event such as this."

Syntron watched in silence as his former captain extended a welcoming gesture to his new officer and witnessed the immediate impact it had on her overall demeanor. It was the type of behavior that any Vulcan would have to consciously emulate since it certainly would not be evoked naturally; given their upbringing and stoic philosophy. Therefore, standing there, the Vulcan commanding officer made a mental note regarding this realization. Perhaps if he applied such a demeanor accordingly in his new role as commanding officer, it would serve him well in establishing trust with his crew. It was not logical on the surface; however, it did manifest itself through many experiences that Syntron witnessed throughout his time in Starfleet.

"You can take it from me, Lieutenant; Andorians make some of the best instructors."

Despite his bulk, Redding could move very quietly and seemed to appear from nowhere; no doubt the activity in the room helped greatly and he naturally took advantage of it to remain inconspicuous until he chose to make contact.

"In fact, once we get settled in, I was hoping my captain might indulge me with a few lessons with the *Ushaan-Tor*. I have a feeling that some new moves might have been invented since I last practiced with them."

He then looked around at the rest of the small group and waited for his captain to introduce him.

"A few, yes, which I happen to know about since I invented them," answered the commanding officer of the Horizon. There was not even a hint of pride in his voice or stance. He said it so matter-of-factly that those who knew him had to forcibly remind themselves that he was a duelling master of Andoria. " I welcome your proposal. Unlike the rest of my brethren, I do not dismiss human opponents just because they are novices and are slower and weaker. Humans have a lot more endurance than we do, as much passion and courage... and, as legendary captain Jonathan Archer once showed, much more adaptable and inventive than my too traditional-thinking kind."

He then took a step back to introduce those with him to his Exec.

"Commander Redding, please meet Captain Syntron of the USS Phoenix, my former first officer on the Artemis... my new Yeoman, Ensign Miramane Blackbird... and Lieutenant Elisha Leône, our Chief of Ops. Captain, Lieutenant, this is Commander Neil S. Redding, my First Officer. "

Neil greeted each in turn with a pleasant smile or a firm hand shake.

"Your his former number one are you? I'll have to see if I can worm any useful secrets about the captain out of you before we depart." He said with a grin. "And while I'll agree with the speed issue, I think you'll have to prove that 'weak' theory before I'll acknowledge it, Sir."

"It is a well established fact that the average Andorian of all four genders is at least twice as strong as the average Human male, " again said Kheren matter-of-factly. "But if you take weakness in a more larger sense than I did, yes you are quite right to dispute it. Strength is not everything. "

Then Redding grabbed a drink off a nearby table and handed it to Leône, seeing as she was the only one not holding one.

"I think a toast is in order... To a new and better Horizon perhaps?"

Obviously, Redding was not a toast master. Nevertheless, the sincerity of the thought was obvious to all.

" To new and better horizons, " repeated Kheren with his own glass of prune juice.

Captain Syntron and Lieutenant Leône each raised their glasses and ceremoniously clinked the glasses together with the others in the toast, and then sipped their chilled beverages slowly. As they finished their toast, the Vulcan could see signals from the stage that the speaking aspect of the ceremony was about to commence. He signaled his former Captain.

"Sir, it looks like they are ready for you on the stage," Syntron noted discretely, knowing the reaction that this would bring to the Andorian commanding officer.

"Ready for me... that remains to be seen, " growled the Andorian, reacting exactly as Syntron knew he would.

Even in the command chair, Kheren never did speeches to the crew like many commanding officers were sometimes so good at or so fond of doing. He always went straight to the point, delivered the facts, gave orders and that was it. Where legendary Captain Picard would have said something like 'Let's make sure History never forgets the name... Enterprise' he in the same circumstances would have simply said ' fire at will and initiate auto destruct sequence. '

Speeches... yeah right. Sometimes as necessary as a medical examination; often just as annoying.

It was clearly evident to Elisha Leône that the Andorian captain was not thrilled with this aspect of the ceremony and the requirement of his responsibility within it to speak before the large crowd. She could relate to this as well. She just wanted to do her job, not be required to get up and give speeches about it. But with added authority she realized, come the burdens of such public relation events such as these. It was one reason why she didn't plan on being a captain herself; at least not any time soon.

Elisha however did not want to be left on her own in this event and the captain did make an offer to her that she did not want to forego. She summoned her courage and addressed the Andorian commanding officer considerately.

"Captain Kheren, I would appreciate it if you would introduce me to your wives before you go... if you have the time."

Kheren turned to her with a nod.

"My pleasure, Lieutenant. Gentlemen, if you will excuse us..."

After Captain Kheren and Lieutenant Elisha Leône departed, Captain Syntron then turned to face Commander Redding once again.

"I would venture that this would be our cue to find a seat before the official speeches commence."

The Vulcan commanding officer of the Phoenix then gestured to the Human Executive Officer of the Horizon to lead the way.

Taking his leave from his first officer and the captain of the Phoenix, he guided the Orion woman to where sat both his wives.

"Lieutenant Elisha Leône, please meet Lieutenant Tyvya, our Assistant Chief of Security and Tactical and Lieutenant Lyrya our chief Counselor. Tyvya, Lyrya, please meet our Chief of Ops, Lieutenant Elisha Leône. "

Eight eyes focused on the green-skinned officer for a second before the Aenar Lyrya first greeted her.

"Greetings, Lieutenant. "

"Welcome, Lieutenant," then added Tyvya with not quite as much warmth in her tone as the Consellor.

While Lyrya obviously wanted to make her at ease to better know her, the giantess was keeping just enough distance between them to better appraise her. The overall effect was a very strange mix of friendliness and respect that obviously went beyond basic officer behavior. They were assessing her as much as a new colleague to befriend as a potential rival to watch out for.

They were both Andorians after all.

"I will leave you three alone to better get acquainted while I get myself ready. "

"To attend to your duty, " Tyvya reminded him.

"To the bitter end, " he grumbled as he walked to join Rear Admiral Kotari and Fleet Captain Samji nearest the podium.

And then, there was an announcement from Commander Karen Schmidt, Starbase Lotus' exec and Fleet Captain Samji's aide-de-camp.

"Officers, dignitaries and media people, ladies and gentlemen and all intercrossed and nongenders, please be seated. The Commissioning ceremony of the flagship USS Horizon will proceed presently. "

A sudden hush came over the vast crowd as everyone lowered their voices to murmur and then to silence as they all seated themselves in pre-arranged seatings, all facing the central circular podium where were found Rear Admiral Kotari, Fleet Captain Allen Samji and Captain Kheren, his leading officers right behind him.

"Red Alert, " whispered Tyvya to Kheren as she passed him by with Lyrya to get to their seat.

Silence fell upon the assembly as the executive officer of the starbase, alone on the central podium, stood at attention and made the official opening announcement.

"The CoC. "

The tall woman stepped back and down the dais and all Starfleet officers stood up as Rear Admiral Kotari, commander in chief of the Hromi sector for Lotus Fleet, came up to occupy center stage. He was a medium-height, greying Boslic man with a short cropped beard and intense eyes that scanned the crowd like sensor beacons before his strong, dry voice filled the immense room.

"As you were, " Kotari ordered and everyone sat back down to listen to his next, momentous words.

The seventy-five year old Starfleet officer glanced down to his PADD containing his speech notes and cleared his throat before beginning.

"Let us boldly go toward that horizon... and beyond... as we were meant to."

He paused a moment to let the many Starfleet officers assembled before him think about meaning and purpose of those words before he continued.

"Those were the words spoken by the man that will speak here after me. As are they the words that were emblazoned on the dedication plaque that will be hung on the bridge of the very first Lotus-class vessel, the USS Horizon."

There was a short round of applause.

"Let us think about those words spoken by Fleet Captain Allen Samji for a moment. Not only were they spoken in defiance of a phenomenon that had previously threatened to destroy our very way of life, and our existence as we know it, but also signify a new beginning for Lotus Fleet that would take us beyond struggling with petty border wars and terrorism. 'Do you remember when we used to be explorers?' I would ask you, while also borrowing the words from another well-known captain. From this moment on, I declare that it will be a new beginning for Lotus Fleet. To return to a time when we can seek everlastingly to fulfill the dream of Zephram Cochrane... of Jonathan Archer... of James T. Kirk... and the man who I quoted, Jean Luc Picard. To boldly go toward that horizon, and beyond, is what we will aim to do."

Again there was applause at those words. For many, they expressed nostalgia of a glorie past and hope of a better future. And Kotari put those feelings into his next words.

"We will not let ourselves be distracted!" he declared, startling some of the younger officers whose attention might have been slightly faltering. His booming voice continuing to rise. "No more will we let fear and turmoil hold us back! Yes, we will have enemies that we will have to deal with, but we must strive to not let it be our only focus."

Rear Admiral Kotari then let his voice return to normal.

"The USS Horizon will be our means to that end. This Deep Space Exploration Cruiser will allow us to seek out new life and new civilization in parts of the Galaxy we have not yet even come close to. This self-sufficient ship will have the capability to go on tours of up to ten years or more on its own, with no assistance required from any Federation starbase or facility. It is itself a virtual mobile starbase with all the same capabilities as Lotus Starbase, on a smaller scale of course. The USS Polaris light escort will stand as her personal guard and support vessel. As the first ship with proven and tested transwarp capability, we will no longer be tied to the Alpha and Beta quadrants. It is a likely possibility that will be able to explore the Milky Way from end to end. With the same level of technology that the Borg used to conquer much of the Galaxy, it will be our mission to bring peace, learning, enlightenment, and liberty, and attempt first contact with warp capable worlds as we have already done in Federation space."

There was even louder applause before he could continue.

"That is our mandate," Kotari said, "And now I would like to yield the floor to the man who will introduce those who will carry it out."

He put out his hand and motioned to the young Indian Starfleet officer in a white Captain's dress tunic.

"Commander of Lotus Starbase, Fleet Captain Allen Paul Samji."

The Fleet Captain stepped up and shook hands with the Rear Admiral before taking his place behind the podium. Looking up, Samji saw all the assembled Starfleet Officers again standing at attention.

"Please, be seated."

He looked over at the numerous faces of all shapes and colors imaginable for a moment, then took a deep breath. Once everyone complied, the Fleet Captain spoke.

"First, I would like to go over some technical details about the vessel we are here to honor. The USS Horizon, NCC-102176, is the very first Lotus-class vessel to be commissioned and marks the crowning achievement of over a century of engineering advancements, beginning in the twenty-third century with the Transwarp Development Project and culminating in the recent advances made by Lotus Fleet itself in Metaphasic Shielding, the Pel Navigation Sensor program, the Sangliar Burst Impulse Floodgate system, and the Syntron Space Sonar."

He then paused and shuffled a few notes around on his PADD before speaking again.

"If I may deviate slightly to speak about the name. While it is standard practice to use the name of a new vessel as the class designation, the change of class from Horizon to Lotus was done to honor Lotus Fleet's valiant and successful campaign to rid the universe as we know it of the threat of the Azimuth Horizon. However, the name was kept, as Rear Admiral Kotari stated, in defiance of our ordeal with that very anomaly. The name, which was coincidentally conceived for the project prior to the knowledge of the Azimuth Horizon, was given by Captain Thomas Eugene Paris, Lead Engineer and Designer at Utopia Plenitia, in honor of the USS Horizon, NCC-176, which was lost with all hands while studying the planet Sigma Iotia II. At the time, in 2168, this location was among the furthest and most desolate reaches of space for the seven-year-old Starfleet, but as you know is merely a day's shuttle ride at warp 5 from our current location. In honor of her crew's attempt to boldly go to the horizon and beyond, I do hereby signify my approval for our new Lotus-class vessel to be so named."

Fleet Captain Samji cleared his throat while everyone applauded, then once silence was restored, continued his speech.

"Now, back to the specifications of the Lotus-class. The vessel is an astounding one point three kilometers long and almost a kilometer wide. It is two-hundred meters in height and weighs an astounding nine million metric tons. Despite her enormous and powerful size, the Lotus-class is amazingly fast, being able to travel at a theoretical maximum speed of warp 9.987 for twelve hours. It has a known maximum transwarp rate of 4, which was used in the Azimuth Horizon incident, and a theoretical maximum transwarp rate of 5, which of course, for practical safety reasons, will not even be attempted under normal operating procedure."

There were looks and sighs of awe as the data was shared. Samji gave people time to realize what they meant before continuing.

"The Horizon is called a 'Deep Space Exploration Cruiser' but serves far more roles than that. The vessel holds over twenty-five-hundred crew with an emergency capacity of 30 thousand, so it is perfect for the handling of evacuation procedures. The armament is quite substantial and with the assistance of the Aquarius-class escort vessel, it can hold its own against the entirety of a minor enemy fleet. The Horizon is prepared to support any First Contact or Diplomatic encounter with VIP suites and the amenities and comforts of any starbase. And with the USS Polaris and onboard Strategic Operations and MACO teams, if the need should arise, it can accomplish any necessary covert ops task, such as hostage rescue, hit and run, or the capture of an enemy leader."

Everyone still had in mind the rescue of officer Sisko from the Horizon Children that had attempted to foil Lotus Fleet in it's work to corral the Azimuth Horizon. hearing that the lessons of this operation had been taken into account reassured a lot of worried people.

But Samji was speaking again.

"I will next introduce the person who will take command of this vessel and lead her crew, who will then introduce his Senior Bridge Officers. This singular Andorian has proven himself to be an exemplary Starfleet Officer and steadfast leader. The eight-time decorated Starfleet Captain has demonstrated leadership as Executive Officer and Acting Captain in the Borg War, lead the USS Artemis successfully in four separate tour of duty. In the Azimuth Horizon campaign, he saved the lives of over a hundred men and women in the Artemis crew when he sacrificed the vessel to stop a Romulan Scimitar dreadnought from reaching Lotus Starbase, saving the lives of countless more here. Not satisfied with that, he then proceeded, with the help of his first officer Syntron, to take an emergency-separated saucer section to warp and carry out the remainder of the assigned operation until being rescued by the USS Lotus."

There was silence then, as everyone either recalled or learned of the famous last voyage of the legendary Stalwart Guardian of the Federation and her last commanding officer.

"I am deeply proud and honored to introduce this new commander of the USS Horizon, my friend... Captain Kheren."

It was not the solemn silence at attention afforded to the Rear Admiral and Fleet Captain that greeted Kheren as he stepped up to the podium. Those who had served with him on the USS Artemis, and even those who would only come to serve on the Horizon, but had heard about what he did on the Artemis, stood and gave a rousing roar of applause that lasted for several minutes as Fleet Captain Samji smiled and embraced the Andorian captain despite his well-known aversion to such contact. Unheard by none but Kheren due to the noise in the great banquet hall, Samji spoke directly into his antennae.

"You deserve this, Kheren, and don't let anybody tell you differently. Now... great acts come with the unfortunate responsibility of addressing your loving fans," he added with a wink.

The applause quieted as Samji finally took his seat and the Andorian approached the podium.

Jureth hated ceremonies....he did everything in his power to avoid them. He didn't like the dress uniform, and he didn't like what he had always considered unnecessary attention. He had even had to be escorted to his own graduation ceremony by Starfleet Academy security.

Now, as he stood behind Captain Kheren on the dais for the commissioning of the USS Horizon, he felt more exposed than ever. As a security chief he could keep a low profile and not get much more than a mention at most ceremonies. As the Horizon's second officer and CO of the Polaris however, he was very much in the spotlight, almost as much as Captain Kheren and Commander Redding. He looked out into the audience at the sea of faces and what seems like the scores of media from every world in the Federation as well as the official Federation media and part of him wanted to hide.

As he listened to the speeches drone on, trying to keep alert for his name, Oseno's thoughts turned to their upcoming mission. Though nothing had been revealed Jureth was sure there was something waiting for them after all of the blustering ceremony of the commissioning was over. He had done almost everything he could think of to make sure the Polaris was ready to go. He had also planned an emergency launch drill for the ship once they were clear of the starbase. He made a mental note to get the captain's approval before running it though. After mentally going over the checklist again Jureth turned his mind to his mother. He realized he'd not spoken with her since before Operation Horizon. He received her letters and read them all even the updates on all of his cousins, and other relatives. She was enjoying her job on Deep Space Nine, and Jureth was glad she was working on something she liked. He had been hoping to get home to Bajor after Operation Horizon, but duty had not allowed it. He had still been captain of the Alsea until Captain Rivers had recovered from her injuries so he had been overseeing repairs and signing paperwork daily.

Finally his thoughts drifted to Catherine Steele. Before she had left aboard the USS Celestial they had shared an intimate moment in his quarters, and Jureth had not heard from her since. She had found the time to send a message to T'Lana to get him to the commissioning ceremony, but had not contacted him directly.

Part of him wondered if she ever would...they had been best friends in the academy, and had worked in synch as a team aboard the Lotus and the Alsea, but Jureth wondered if he had crossed a line. Perhaps their friendship would never be the same...perhaps it was over altogether.

As Captain Kheren stepped to the podium, Oseno shook off all the other thoughts in his head and focused on the Andorian. If the captain was beginning his speech, the introductions would come soon and Jureth knew he needed to be ready to acknowledge his when it came.

Kheren had been so overwhelmed by it all that even his mastery of body language did not register Samji's hug before he did it; but for once, he did not mind. Of all people he had known in Starfleet, if not his entire life, this was the one individual he had known the longest and had earned more than his respect. Only his two wives now were closer to him.

His words however bewildered him as much as his friendly public gesture. *Loving fans...* he knew better than anyone how fickle the affection of strangers could be; *passion is like snow, slow or sudden to come, long to stay, but always it can melt ...* was a popular saying on the homeworld. Nevertheless, the welcome of his fellow Starfleet officers, his new Clan, touched him so deeply that there was along moment of silence after it died down before he could gather his thought and finally speak.

Anyone familiar with Andorians knew how he felt just by looking at the very deep shade of purple his face was at the moment. But nothing showed in his calm, deep voice.

"Only the best from hundreds of worlds become Starfleet officers. Few manage to distinguish themselves enough to be one in Lotus Fleet. Fewer still among those have the honor and privilege of commanding a starship. Captain Syntron of the soon to be launched USS Phoenix; Admiral Nova, Captain Garrison, Captain Gould, Commander Felez and Commander Robertson of the Lotus; Admiral Kirkpatrick and Captain Crist of the McKenzie; Captain Thopor of the Umpqua; Captain Rock of the Tempest; Captain Summers of the Spectre; Captain K'Rauw, Captain Siduri, Captain Rivers, and Commander Oseno of the Alsea; Captain Onia of the Wisconsin; Captain Ramabai of the Steamrunner ; Captain Wyatt of the Republic; Captain Speaker-of-Names of the Pittsburgh; Captain Rousseau of the Nuntio... Captain Froud... of the Artemis..."

He had to stop for a moment, emotion suddenly swelling inside of him thinking of his lost ship and about the commanding officer who had died in his arms on the very launch day of the legendary Ambassador class vessel he himself had sent to a fiery death...

But mere seconds later, his hard-won control took over and he resumed his speech. The emotion was still there; but now, it fueled his words with passion.

"Those are the ones on who's shoulders my own efforts to do my duty stand. And as for them, as for any captain since the first sentient beings sat on a log on some body of water, I am as a commanding officer only as good as the officers who serve with me. Without Commander O'Conner, Commander Syntron, Commander Alther, Chief Sangliar, Chief Etarudbo, Chief Scott, Doctor Nasaro-Myth, Doctor Sage, Doctor Aquila, Lieutenant Micheals, Lieutenant Jackson, Lieutenant Brie...without all those fine Lotus Fleet officers, there would be no Captain Kheren. "

There was a round of applause to honor those officers, most of them present in the great hall. When silence fell once more, the Andorian captain was again fully composed. But there was no mistaking the pride in his next words.

"I have been honored and privileged with command of the USS Horizon, the flagship of Lotus Fleet. When I first stepped on the USS Lotus, a mere Ensign then, I dreamed, like many of you here of becoming a starship captain. But I never dreamed that I would one day command the leading vessel of the elite division of Starfleet. I am humbled by the responsibility. But like all captains, I will be blessed with exceptional officers to earn such trust."

His heavily callused hand went to the row of officers nearest the podium.

"Commander Neil Stanley Redding of Earth, of exceptional experience and valor that will make him the outstanding executive officer the flagship of Lotus Fleet deserve; Commander Oseno Jureth of Bajor, hero of Operation Horizon, who's in-the-field command experience makes him the best officer of all to lead our strategic operations and command the USS Polaris, our auxilliary starship; Doctors 110 and 011 of Bynaus, who's deep computer link will provide unequalled health and care from both the bridge and sickbay at the same time; Lieutenant-Commander Snowfire K'Leysa of the Illythirii, who's immense science expertise had helped save this universe and will now honor and serve our ship; Lieutenant Sarah Corcoran of Earth... whatever you think of her rank and her age, never underestimate her already well proven abilities and dedication to security and tactical duties; Lieutenant Elisha Leône of Orion, whom I of all people know what personal and professional hardships, efforts and sacrifices she had gone through to earn her position as Chief of Operations. "

Kheren stood straighter and once again looked at the crowd, chin lifted in the typical Andorian show of respect.

"These are the senior officers of the USS Horizon. I am proud and humbled to serve with so distinguished a crew and go with them beyond the horizon. Here I give you; the heart and soul of the USS Horizon, flagship of Lotus Fleet!"

Thunderous applause followed as everyone in the room stood up while the Andorian captain stepped down from the podium and went to each and every bridge officer of his ship to stand at attention before each of them in turn, before he went back to his seat.

"Nicely done for a shy Andorian," teased Tyvya as he sat between her and Lyrya.

"You were so cute blushing like that, " added the Aenar with the same tone as the giantess.

"Thank you... now please shut up and let me die in peace," growled Kheren but with little conviction in the tone.

He couldn't help it. He was proud; proud of what he had accomplished so far, but even more proud of having earned the trust of those officers who were now going with him where no one had gone before. The quote was overused, he knew... but it had never been truer than today for him.

"Now... what was that about you knowing Elisha Leône better than anyone?" Tyvya asked with a telling stare.

"You know what I meant by that," Kheren said to Lyrya with a glance at her.

"Yes... but I'd like to *hear* it too," the Aenar said with the same stare as the giantess.

He now felt even worse than he had felt when he had stepped to the podium.

As everyone sat on the edge of their seats to see if there were any other speeches to be made, the First Officer of Lotus Starbase, Karen Schmidt, approached the podium again.

"Thank you Rear Admiral Kotari, Fleet Captain Samji and Captain Kheren for those moving and informative speeches. Everyone please feel free to enjoy the refreshments that we have available and thank you all for coming to honor the commencement of our new flagship."

Lieutenant Commander Joseph Daystrom Sisko had sat alone, in the back row, far from the podium in the great banquet hall. He had listened to the moving speeches given by the three officers and had realized how much he was beginning to miss the camaraderie that came from serving on a starship. In the almost three months since the return of his mind to its former state, he had watched his best friend Sorripto hauled away in shackles, had had to say goodbye again to his former crush and good friend Captain Rivers when she had left to take her resurrected USS Alsea and head off to the Kzinti border, and had had to spend hours in mandated psychological sessions before he had been able to return to active duty.

All the solitude was beginning to wear on him, despite his residence on the very active and bustling Lotus Starbase.

As the speeches came to an end, and the XO indicated that the official portion of the gathering was over, Joey Day decided to just take the opportunity to get himself back on a starship again. He felt like he would go crazy being cooped up on the starbase any longer. Sisko strode as fast as he could without running straight toward where Kheren had just taken a seat and then stopped just short of barging into an intense conversation between the Andorian Captain and his two wives.

From there, once the last word was spoken and there was an appropriately long pause, Sisko approached slowly and cautiously, avoiding eye contact with what seemed to be a death stare emanating from Lieutenant Tyvya.

Joey cleared his throat and softly.

"Captain Kheren, if we may speak a moment?"

Still under the spell of Lyrya and Tyvya's half-joking inquisition, Kheren blinked at the young, dark-skinned Bajoran... no, Half-Bajoran judging by the softness of his nose ridges... that stood before him in textbook attention stance as if coming to give an important official report. It took him a few blinks more to recognize the most famous man in Lotus Fleet.

Joseph Daystrom Sisko, Lieutenant-Commander, engineer, hero of the Borg War after devising the subspace delayed transport system that had allowed the successful dissemination of the telepathic nanites instrumental in the final victory over the Collective; the former chief engineer of the USS Spectre who had afterwards sacrificed himself to free his ship and crew from the invasion of hostile energy beings; believed to be dead... then miraculously found alive but comatose within the Azimuth Horizon anomaly by the Horizon Children cult who proceeded to brainwash him and make him the figurehead spiritual leader of their mad, destructive beliefs; brought back by a friend now in prison after having jeopardized everything, life, career, even the lives of his crewmates and the success of a cosmic scaled mission, to save him...

There was no one on Starbase Lotus, in the whole of Lotus Fleet, most probably even in the whole of Starfleet or even accross the United Federation of Planets who didn't know who this thin-bearded, lively-eyed man was. Who could ever forget him?

"Certainly, Lieutenant-Commander, " answered Kheren as he stood up and adjusted his white formal jacket over his athletic frame. "My wives, please excuse us. "

"Saved by the bell," commented Lyrya.

"This time, " Tyvya said. But like her Aenar spouse, her own antennae were curving inward in amusement.

"And good evening to you, Mister Sisko," the counselor of the Horizon said amiably. "You show as much strength of body and mind as of soul. We are honored by your presence here."

"Indeed, honored we are... and glad to see you up and about," Tyvya added.

Andorians were particularly admiring of competence and passion, strength and resolve, courage and self-sacrifice for the sake of one's community. Sisko had shown all of that and even instilled it in others around him, something they were also most impressed with. And it showed in both women's respectfully lifted chins toward him.

After a moment, Kheren led the young Bajoran to the now empty podium. Seeing them there, and especially those two, everyone would understand that this was private, professional business and interruptions would not be viewed well. Lieutenant Commander Sisko looked at Kheren when they were out of earshot of the rest of the banquet hall,

"Captain, first of all congratulations on being given command of such a wonderful vessel as the USS Horizon. I could not think of anyone who deserves it more."

"Well, being deserving is the easy part; staying worthy of that confidence it is the real thing."

There was a moment of silence between the two officers as they pondered that statement, each from his own perspective, before the Bajoran finally spoke what was on his mind.

"Captain, I would like to ask a favor of you," Sisko then said. "I'm not satisfied being stationary. My career so far as a Starfleet officer has been on a vessel, and I would rather not spend even another month on Lotus Starbase. It certainly has some nice amenities, and it is... comfortable... maybe that's the problem... too much comfort. Regardless, I do not have the patience of my grandfather to sit in one place for too long... I clearly have inherited some of the adventurous spirit of my former Maquis mother."

Then after a slight pause, Joey got to the point.

"I want to ask your permission to accompany the USS Horizon on its upcoming mission."

The Andorian's face, as usual, remained frozen. But his antennae shot up and then curved slightly inward.

"I was not aware that you had inherited psionic powers, Lieutenant-Commander. Either you are precognitive or telepathic... or after all maybe just pretty good at sifting through all the data of this starbase? It so happen that we do lack an experienced chief engineer on the Horizon... and on the eve of it's trial run no less. I have with Lieutenant Baoule a topnotch propulsion expert as far as the transwarp testing is concerned... but there is more to this flagship than just it's unique stardrive. Having you on board would certainly be a boon to us. "

He looked at the Bajoran and nodded with obvious relief.

"If you are willing and able to tackle that assignment and can get it officialized with Fleet Captain Samji before this party is over. "

Sisko's surprise was evident in the way he paused a long time before answering, if not in his face, which remained rather nonplussed. He was not even expecting to be presented with the Chief Engineer spot, nor was he necessary trying to get it. He had noticed that Kheren hadn't announced anyone for the position, but had immediately assumed that he had to have someone in mind already. Returning to any position of authority on any starship so soon after his recovery was a challenging leap forward for him, but the Chief Engineer position on the USS Horizon was like leaping the crater in the Bajoran fire caves in one bound.

He squared up his shoulders and adjusted his uniform tunic, lifting his chin to directly meet the Andorian's gaze.

"To be honest I would have been happy for just a ride and a simple duty manning a transporter room. But if duty demands my presence in the Chief Engineer position, how could I refuse?"

He grinned slightly in spite himself thinking of being back in Main Engineering with the familiar purr of the warp core and the prospect became an ever more comforting thought.

Kheren's lack of facial muscles forbid him to respond in kind. But his curbing antennae and tone of voice did it well, especially with the very Human-styled wink that came with them.

"Welcome aboard, Lieutenant-Commander."

More than satisfaction, it was an expression of relief from the freshly-minted commanding officer of the newly commissioned flagship of Lotus Fleet. The last thing he wanted was to find himself in technical trouble with a brand new, revolutionary stardrive and no chief engineer to perform the needed miracle to help them.

And there he was with none other than the best one he could ever have hoped to find.

His rigid face was almost grinning.

CHAPTER THREE: AND A STAR TO STEER IT BY

Captain's Log

Stardate : 87628.4

These are the voyages of the starship Horizon. Her mission; push farther out the final frontier... and live once again the ideals of the Federation: to seek out new life and new civilizations in the spirit of universal peace and brotherhood.

These are the voyages of a crew of over two thousand from a hundred worlds, united in this spirit and focused toward that goal. They are the best and they are led by the best; brave veteran Commander Neil Redding of Earth; highly resourceful Commander Oseno Jureth and heroically steadfast Lieutenant Commander Joseph D. Sisko, both of Bajor; vastly knowledgeable Lieutenant-Commander Snowfire K'Leysa of the Illythirii; uniquely competent Doctor 011 and 110 of Bynaus; singularly dedicated Lieutenant Sarah Corcoran, also of Earth; distinctively efficient Lieutenant Elisha Leône of Orion... On the eve of our first voyage, these exceptional people will boldly blaze the new trails of discovery and achievement for the United Federation of Planets.

The Horizon is about to implement it's final trial run. We will push her new, unique and revolutionnary transwarp drive to it's limits to see if it matches the promises of her crew. A new page of History is about to be written by them and this new, Lotus class starship. New wonders and new challenges await. We are ready.

Captain Kheren closed the intraship channel once he got the signal that everything was in order. He used his first log to help in the final test of the system and to tell the crew where they stood, what he felt... and that the time was now.

His command chair was at the same time elegant and sturdy, allowing him to swivel in any direction effortlessly to address any bridge officer. The entire room was almost identical to the time-honored Galaxy class design that had proven itself so efficient on large vessels like this one.

Acoustics of the ship's command center was especially designed to compensate for his Andorian rear deafness so that even the tactical station behind and over him, manned by Chief of Security and Tactical Sarah Corcoran, and the Science and research auxiliary stations behind where Science Chief Snowfire K'Leysa sat with her chief assistant, Norbert Baoule, were perfectly audible to him. There were environmental and engineering stations on his left, currently overseen by chief engineer assistant Robert Baoule and ops officer Thanngkhun Cheonghi as chief engineer Sisko was down in main engineering to directly monitor the stardrive. The Medical Command Chair lay between them and the Andorian commanding officer, where sat one of the Bynar doctors. With his unique computer connection to his twin coupled with this special station on the bridge, Doctor 110 was able to constantly maintain contact with sickbay as well as all departments of the ship and any away team even if all internal communications went down.

Sweeping his gaze from left to right, the commanding officer of the largest and most advanced starship in Starfleet recognized the Ops station and the Orion woman supervising all the final preparations for departure. On the right of Elisha Leône sat the chief pilot and navigator Aguk Snow at the helm station and, on the right bulkhead of the bridge, the support stations completed the control consoles of the vessel, with chief counselor Lyrta and security assistant Tyvya helping the main departments in their final pre-launch duties.

On the bridge also stood Yeoman Meeramane Blackbird behind and to the left of the medical command seat and Commander Oseno Jureth, the Bajoran Strategic Ops officer slightly behind Lieutenant Corcoran, so as to have a complete overall view of the tactical display, the bridge layout and all its three turbolifts doors, captain ready room and bridge head accesses and the huge main viewing screen at the other end.

On the large computer-imaging system, everyone could see the vastness of space calling to them, beyond the elegantly simple curved structure of the starbase they were still anchored at. Only part of the titanic structure could be seen from the external docking ring where the huge starship could only be welcomed. At over three kilometers in diameter, the starbase was large enough to shelter the Horizon inside... but the access doors were a few hundred meters too narrow to allow her entrance... and once inside, it could only have come out from the other door directly on the other side; especially if there were even but one other vessel inside, like the USS Alsea currently under repair, the Lotus-class giant could not maneuver at all once inside except go through in a straight line from entrance to exit.

And so, they were already outside... and the call of the final frontier was even louder to them all as they felt the immense starship fretting at its tether in anticipation of its launch, like some huge stallion eager to bolt free.

Those who rode her certainly felt the same trepidation despite their cool, professional exterior, most notably her captain. It could be heard in the strength of his deep resonant voice.

"All department heads; report readiness for departure."

"Understood, Captain," Redding intoned from the seat on Kheren's left, with a kind of exaggerated seriousness.

Any hint of the playfulness he had shown earlier disappeared while on duty.

"Corcoran, Leone, status on all systems?"

He walked over to Corcoran as he said it. Redding was never one to be content with another's observations and tended to check their work from time to time.

As the XO interacted with Corcoran and the Orion Ops chief, Jureth scanned over the readouts coming from the Polaris on his console. Her warp core showed stable and was available on command; security sweeps were clean and the roving patrol had reported all clear as well. His feed from the tactical sensors showed green as well, but he would let Corcoran handle that; it was her job after all. He did however speak up for his department

"Captain, Strategic Operations is at one hundred percent readiness, and USS Polaris is fully operational and at your disposal, Sir."

"I expected no less, Commander," Kheren answered.

There was no way to fathom if he was saying this as a pleasant banter or a serious answer... or amazingly both. He used his lack of facial expression to good advantage in keeping his officers on their toes, yet relaxed, in a curious mixture of it with his modulated tone of voice.

Jureth acknowledged the captain's reply to his report with a curt nod and swiveled away from his console for a moment to watch the Horizon's exit from spacedock on the viewer. As the other officers reported, the Bajoran looked at the young Lieutenant Corcoran standing at the tactical station and, for a moment, he felt some longing.

Despite the fact that he no longer felt the sense of dread being in a command position, part of him wished he were standing back at a tactical console. To know a ship's weapons systems inside and out, to know what she was capable of, and to know what her enemies were about to encounter when they attacked was a feeling that few things could replace. Granted, commanding the Alsea had instilled in him the realization that the center seat was equally as exhilarating, but the tactical position brought with it an excitement that Jureth had not realized he would miss.

His time had passed however, he knew, and he now needed to focus on his new position. The captain had high expectations and Oseno Jureth would deliver on them if he could help it.

Behind him, Snowfire wasn't quite bouncing in her seat as the order was spoken... but almost. There was nothing quite like the first launch of a newly commissioned vessel, the feeling of a young ship around you, ready to leap out across the stars. Even with her own people's ships being far more...actively young, perhaps...than Starfleet's, there was still that feeling here. Newness and renewal in this case too, for it was not a new name to the roster of Starfleet. The Horizon had been a name for vessels of the Federation for a long time, but never like this one. This one was special. A test of the beginning to an ability to cross the stars in a way the Federation had always strived for but found so difficult to attain. She tapped a few short commands into her console, a surface-layer systems and response test, and smiled as all the on-duty heads confirmed status. Excellent.

"Science is at full readiness and can't wait for something to cut their teeth on." She said happily; not for her the jitters of nervousness, more like *I haven't felt this happy in over a century*. "We're ready, Captain."

"I am counting on you to gather all sensor data about our transwarp jumps for further analysis and reference, Lieutenant-Commander. Should help grind your teeth for awhile."

Again, there was that odd mix of seriousness and levity only a few here were now starting to get accustomed to. Kheren had a reputation of being a By-The-Book commanding officer because he had never broken a rule; except once, when he had launched the USS Artemis at full impulse right from inside the starbase, where maneuvering thrusters only were allowed... But even then, as his Board of Inquiry had confirmed, he had done so by using another emergency rule to justify it. His psych-profile showed clearly that, despite outward appearances, he was not a conformist at all; he only did things that *made sense* to him, regardless of who or what stated them; and to him, Federation values and Starfleet rules *made* most sense... so far.

Those who knew him well, especially those who had witnessed his bewildering inventiveness in combat situations, they knew that, the day those rules would not, in his judgment, provide the correct answer, he would simply ignore them and come up with a new one.

This complex attitude was quite perceptible to counselors and other astute people... but not all that easy to understand. Once, he had even lost a chief engineer who simply had no clue at all about it and thought him a stuffed bureaucrat and a tin soldier. But to that, Kheren had one simple answer.

I prefer to die misunderstood than waste my whole life explaining myself.

And fortunately for him, he was the captain; now, he didn't had to explain himself at all.

But on the other hand, he was just as prone to reassess even his own judgment as he never failed to listen to his officers, like now as they were reporting readiness status.

As Lieutenant Elisha Leône sat behind the operations console, confirming her readiness. Utilizing her peripheral vision she also gazed around at all of the officers preparing their stations as well. She listened attentively to the responses provided by her fellow bridge officers and considered herself blessed to be stationed where she was at this moment. In her mind, the odds of actually serving on this ship as the chief operations officer given her prior circumstances and particular heritage were astronomical at best.

Nevertheless, after breathing in deeply and slowly for a moment, she turned back to face the Andorian commanding officer and reported to him with a gleam in her eyes and professional, yet warm smile on her radiant face.

"The Operations department is now optimal and ready for departure, Captain."

The call for each department to report readiness for launch came through to Main Engineering as well, where Lieutenant-Commander Joey Day Sisko was busily checking over each readout personally around the massive warp core. It required him to move at a light jog when he wasn't climbing up and down ladders, and he reflected on the fact that a position on this Lotus-class ship would put him back into the best shape he was in since his Academy years.

"Sir, there seems to be a slight variance in the tachyon matrix of the transwarp drive," called out Lieutenant Patricia Blakely from a position next to the very same device.

Her expertise in transwarp theory was surpassed only by Mister Baoule who happened to be at the bridge station at that moment, and Sisko himself, so he would have her manning the station until their actual first test. He jogged over to take a look.

"Keep an eye on it, but I think we can put that a low priority. We're going to have to do a level 1 diagnostic on the transwarp drive before any tests occur anyway."

"Yes, Sir," she responded and turned back to her work.

"Is everything at nominal?" he called out to the entirety of main engineering and a series of "Aye" and "Yes Sir" rang out.

Joey tapped his combadge.

"We're good to go in Engineering, Captain."

Doctor 110 was able to simply connect into the thoughts of her counterpart.

"Sickbay is prepped and ready for any emergencies, Commander Redding."

With a satisfied nod to each reporting officer, Redding turned back to Kheren.

"Captain, All bridge stations report ready. At your word, Sir."

And as he said so, he took his seat beside his commanding officer.

"Thank you, Number One. Doc, please open a channel to the starbase. "

"Communication established," confirmed de Bynar sitting in the seat left to the Andorian who then spoke with a dry, official tone.

"Starbase Flight Control, this is the Horizon. Request permission to depart."

"Flight Control to USS Horizon; Permission granted. Light breeze to your sails, Captain Kheren."

And as those somewhat unorthodox words were spoken, something flashed on the small monitor screen of his command panel on the left arm of his command chair.

It was a copy of Starfleet Rules and Regulations, pointedly opened at the official starship launch protocols.

Kheren laughed. He knew for sure then that Allen Samji was at the transparency of his control room, looking out at the gigantic starship docked at the outermost part of his base and thinking of the last time the Andorian captain had taken a ship out of dock; at a full seventy-five thousand kilometers per second... from inside the structure. And then, it had been but an almost century-old, refitted Ambassador class...

"All hands, this is the captain; we are launching... now."

"Heading, Sir?" asked Aguk Snow without turning from the helm.

"Starfleet already plotted and authorized a nice, safe parabolic course within Federation Space, away and back here but far from any planetary bodies and distant enough from any inhabited area and traffic lane that the possibility of us harming anyone in case of a catastrophic failure is effectively nullified, " informed science assistant Norbert Baoule from Science Station 2. "

"But our explosion would make a nice if short-lived shooting star visible out from all surrounding sectors," added his twin brother Robert from the engineering console.

"Success or failure, we will go in a blaze of glory then," concluded Kheren with his usual straight face. "Mister Snow, heading 144 mark 345. Once at safe range of a thousand AU from the starbase, we will start our transwarp engine tests. "

"Aye, Captain. Heading 144 mark 345."

"Take her out, Number One... standard launch protocols... please."

Redding nodded.

"Helm! Engage, but mind any catastrophic ending to this endeavor if you please."

"Aye aye, Sir. I will do my best to keep the starbase astern," answered Snow with nothing but seriousness in his coppery face and in his low, nasal voice. But his black slanted eyes betrayed him.

There were several bleeps and ligths on his console and the required reports from the other departments before he went through the mandatory description of undocking procedure.

"All engines fully operational and ready, Commander," then reported engineer Baoule from the Engineering station as chief engineer Sisko and his team signaled all green from main engineering.

"Deflector array at full intensity, " conformed his brother at Science 2 as his superior officer, Snowfire K'Leysha, was occupied with main and secondary sensors workings and data feeding at Science 1.

And then the Inuit helmsman finished the pre-launch sequence.

"All hatches closed and secured. Magnetic clamps retracted. We have cleared all tractor beam moorings. We are floating free and we are clear to navigate. Departure orders confirmed and logged, trajectory plotted and laid in. All thrusters at the ready."

Sitting deep and calm in his command chair, Kheren watched with keen interest his bridge crew at work and especially his First officer directing the launch of the vessel. This was a pretty routine task but then, it was through such apparently innocuous moment that you could learn a lot about an officer; his relationships with others, his grasp of ship operations, his style of leadership, his handling and thus attitude towards rules and proceedings, his care for ship and crew, his respect of the command structure, his concentration, nervousness, confidence, experience...

Indeed, quite a lot. The Andorian was thus as much attentive to the people around him and most of all to the man at his right side as to the moment itself.

The flagship... his ship... was about to depart.

Following the First officer's instructions, the helmsman took the ship away from the outer ring of the station in a slow, graceful arc at 1000 kilometers per second before activating the impulse engine. because this was to be a trial run, he started at minimal impulse for 30 seconds before going to half-impulse and, another half-minute later, bring the huge vessel to full impulse.

"Viewer astern," ordered Kheren.

At one quarter the speed of light, the starbase was receding very rapidly on the main screen and, when it was nothing more than a point of light amidst the tapestry of stars, the captain came forward on his chair, his elbows on his knees as he looked with all four oculars at the large screen.

"Viewer forward."

They now saw the field of stars before the prow of their ship barely moving despite the already enormous speed they were flying; such was the vastness of the universe around them. His next order came when everyone was holding their breath in anticipation.

"Warp 1."

"Warp 1, aye Sir," answered helmsman Snow.

Instantly, the stars seemed to stretch out around them into infinity and there was a blinding flash of light before they moved like specs of dust in a wind tunnel before their eyes. But this was an all too familiar sight for Starfleet officers.

"Holding steady at warp 1, Sir, all systems nominal," confirmed the Inuit pilot.

There was a short moment of tense silence before the words they have all been waiting for finally came out of the Andorian ship commander's thin lips.

"Standby for transwarp."

"Captain." Redding said calmly. "Should we give a ship wide announcement, not only is this a special event but there is an element of danger to the crew."

Watching the look of excitement in the Andorian's eyes brought a slight smile to his lips. When was it things like this started to become routine to him? Deep down he hoped he hadn't lost his sense of wonder.

Kheren gave a nod of appreciation to the Exec for his thoughtful consideration of the crew and signaled the Bynar doctor to open the shipwide internal communication channel and keep it open for the entire ship complement, to allow everyone to follow what would happen on the bridge. Every monitor and screen throughout the immense starship would also be connected to the main viewer, if not already dedicated to any of all the numerous variables involved in the event.

"All hands, this is the captain; standby for transwarp. We will increment it in progressive stages that will follow an elliptical trajectory from Starbase Lotus at transwarp 1 to space Station Echo 3 at transwarp 2, which will take sixteen days; then from there to Deep Space Station 9 at transwarp 3 twenty-one hours later... and then one and a half hour later to Starbase G6 at transwarp 4. We will finally get back to Starbase Lotus at transwarp 5, which will take an estimated time of twelve minutes... and so test the new propulsion system to it's limits."

He made a pause to let everyone evaluate the entire journey. This was all in all a trip of four flights each of roughly forty-six light years within the heart of Federation Space. At warp 9, this was a forty-four days trip across a hundred and eighty-four light years. If all went according to expectations, even at such progressive speed stages, they would do in around a third of that time. As astounding as this was already, most were able to calculate however that, at a sustained safe speed of transwarp 4, it would have taken for the entire journey a mere six hours!

"All departments, prepare flight analysis, level 1 diagnostics of all systems and crew evaluations and submit report for every phase of the test run to the First Officer at each destination. Each base will also monitor our flight and there will be comparative studies at each point before going on to the next. Remember that, with each report, you will be writing History. All hands look alive..."

The old Earth navy expression might have surprised a few, especially coming from an Andorian, a species known for their fear of deep open waters, but it was familiar to all who had served under him. And it mean that he was expecting their best. The excitement could be felt almost from the ship itself and was clearly audible even through the perfectly professional tone and words of the helmsman.

"Transwarp at your command, Sir."

The figure of Lieutenant Robert Baoule turned away from his Engineering station to the right of the Captain and XO in the center and said, with a concerned look.

"Sir, we haven't received the go ahead from Main Engineering yet. It looks like they are still running some sort of diagnostic on the transwarp drive."

The Andorian's head fell between his flexed arms. There was a short sigh and he lifted his head back up again.

"Alright... let's not unfurl our sails before the bo'sun says they are well attached to the mast. After all, we will get there soon enough. All hands, standby."

Any ship commander would have been impatient to flex his new ship's muscles. Kheren was no different than any of them. But he had been through enough crisis to curb his eagerness and let his people do their job properly before hurling them all with him into some unknown.

Still, it was not easy to wait. But the safety of his crew always came first and last in his mind. And so, he waited.

At his right side, Neil Redding showed him a small smile.

"This reminds me of when I served aboard the USS Response. We were testing a new long range warp shunting device..."

He paused before saying '..when I was captain of..' It just didn't seem appropriate at the time. Instead he went on with describing the event.

"Our Tellarite engineering specialist took almost two hours rechecking everything before letting us try it. It's probably the same thing here, triple checking what they double checked before."

He then settled back in anticipation of a long wait.

"Fortunately for us, Mister Sangliar is still on the starbase and we have a Bajoran in the engine room," commented the Andorian with antennae curving in good natured banter. "They are most expeditious and I expect only double checks of single checks... Mister Sisko know his job so... since we could not trick him, we will have to find another, more creative way to blow up this ship. "

He had to say it. The pain of losing the Artemis was still there in him, and facing it, even in jest, was a much felt need for him to cope with it. But it did sound a bit wearisome to a few of the bridge officers knowing that nothing could not be expected from him... especially not the unexpected.

The voice of Chief Engineer Joseph Sisko came over the comm. "Sorry to take the wind from your sails, Captain, but there's a variance in the tachyon matrix. If we don't correct it, simply failing to open a conduit will be the least of our problems."

"Understood, Engineer. We will throw lines and fish a bit until you give the word, " Kheren said with his usual straight face.

The tachyon matrix was responsible for creating a transwarp conduit within subspace, so the calculations had to be perfect to achieve a transwarp field. What he didn't say, but was implied to Captain Kheren was at best, they could create a tear in subspace, similar to what the old polluting warp drives did half a century ago and what had contributed to the very anomaly the whole Fleet had previously fought. At worst, they could create a massive rift that would swallow up the entire Horizon and possibly even threaten Lotus Starbase. He wanted to make sure every reading was at the exact nominal figures quoted by Captain Paris himself.

Sisko turned and approached Lieutenant J.G. Patricia Blakely and said, "The Captain has pushed up this test much earlier than I had previously expected. I apologize for not taking your previous report as seriously as it warranted. Regardless, now it's our job to fix it."

Blakely nodded. "It's nothing you could have anticipated, Sir. I think if we decrease power to the transwarp deflector we can smooth out the variance, but at that power level, we can't risk going over Transwarp 1."

"That's all we need right now," Sisko replied. "Let me see your calculations."

She handed him the PADD and he reviewed them, nodding with satisfaction the whole time. "This looks good. Make the changes and run a simulation. I'm going to the Bridge to report directly to Captain Kheren."

"Aye Sir," Blakely responded and turned in her seat to begin inputting the agreed upon commands.

A few minutes later, Sisko strode into the Bridge and stood in front and just to the left of Captain Kheren. "Captain, we're running a simulation to test some changes that I'm confident will result in being able to achieve Transwarp 1 in fifteen minutes. However, that will be our maximum for at least thirty-two hours."

He estimated they could easily get the variance removed entirely by the end of the day, but he always followed the old Engineers' adage popularized by Mister Montgomery Scott: "Always multiply your estimates by a factor of four".

"Knowing usual engineering calculations, I could tend to act as the typical impatient captain, " answered Kheren. "But if this stardrive works half as good as it is supposed to be, we will still be back before anyone could really realize that we had any delay. So let us erre on the way of caution. carry on as you plan, Lieutenant-Commander. "

As she attentively listened to the conversations volleying back-and-forth among the key officers of the ship as she worked, she silently agreed on siding with a cautious approach.

No sense launching a vessel of this size and complexity in haste, she thought, but would not dare utter to anyone this early in the commission to her position.

"We can reassure Mister Sisko that we will not brutalize his brand new engines, " Aguk Snow then offered with a smile, " since the first leg of our journey at transwarp 1 is planned for twelve times his... estimated time of safe travel."

"Excuse me," then asked Chief Counselor Lyrya from behind the Medical Command Chair but I'm not a pilot. Why that long?"

"You already know that warp travel is calculated as the cube of it's factor in light speed," then started to explain Norbert Baoule from the auxilliary science console behind her. " Warp 1 is thus one times one times one the speed of light... or effectively the actual speed of light; warp 2 is two times two times two or eight times the speed of light, warp 3 is twenty-seven times light speed... and so on until warp 10 wich is defined at the end of the scale as infinite speed; being everywhere in the universe at the same instant. Until recently, this was considered the ultimate speed limit, much like the speed of light was before the advent of technologies that could warp space to shorten the distance through subspace instead of trying to simply accelerate."

"Until we found knew ways to trick the universe," now continued helmsman Snow with a wink. "Quantum Slipstream Drive creates a quantum field, a tunnel if you will, between two similar quantum resonances and propel the ship from one to the other at three hundred light years an hour. Coaxial Induction Drive folds space in a way much more extreme than standard warp technology, reconfiguring subatomic particles to basically teleport the ship from one point to another. Graviton catapult technology sends the ship into what is called null-space long enough to reemerge it hundreds if not thousands of light years away after a few hours. Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysha's people here are said to also have some kind of hyperspeed technology, although I don't know much about it except that it is based on the manipulation of gravity. And of course, you know that the Borg constructs artificial wormholes to achieve transwarp speeds."

"And this... Great Experiment of ours?" inquired the Aenar while everyone listened as they waited for the chief engineer's signal to proceed.

"The problem with all those mentionned technologies is that you can neither maneuver nor observe the material universe while in travel," explained the Inuit pilot. "You get there mighty fast but you miss the entire journey... and you can't change your mind much until you're done. The applications for scientific exploration and strategic and tactical situation is quite limited. But then comes the great Experiment; true transwarp."

At this point, engineering officer Robert Baoule took over.

"Just like warp speed is light speed times the cube of it's factor, our transwarp drive, by creating a warping of the already warped space around a ship... and beleive me, it's not as simple as it sounds in actual technological application... brings us to the cube of it's factor applied to warp speed itself; hence the name transwarp. So, for example, warp 5 is one hundred and twenty-five times the speed of light; the maximum attainable speed of this ship is transwarp5, or warp 5 times warp 5 times warp 5..."

"That's... nearly *two million times* the speed of light!" calculated Lyrya with her blind eyes wide in astonishment.

"As fast as Quantum Slipstream," confirmed the black-skinned science officer, his own voice sharing the awe of the couelor. "And as you can guess, with the potential to even go faster..."

"But..." then insisted Snow with a smile of obvious pride, "we still stay in contact with normal space and can fully maneuver, even fight, just like we can at warp speed... just much, much faster. "

"More or less," then specified Tyvya from the security station behind the tactical one. "We still don't have 'transwarp torpedoes' or any offensive capability that can match those speeds, so we need to drop back to at least warp speed to actually fire, just like we used to drop to impulse in the old days when we needed to fire phasers, because energy beams could not fire beyond light speed... That is, before the Borg taught us, hard, that it was possible to create warp funnels around the actual energy stream to send it beyond that limit. But we're not up to that yet with transwarp speed."

"However, thanks to QSD technology, we at least do have sensors able to," added Norbert Baoule in turn. "We use the same type of time-dilated sensor signal to navigate safely at those high velocities, which therefore also allows us to keep monitoring the universe around us. We might not be able to fight at transwarp, but we can certainly travel and discover more of this universe without having to pop in and out like the other hyperdrives would force us to do."

"If we ever get going," now commented Snow, his fingers drumming near his helm controls.

"So... if we can go that fast... why sixteen days between here and Space Station Echo 3?" asked Lyrya.

"Recall the calculation, Counselor," said Norbert Baoule. "Transwarp 1 is warp 1 times warp 1 times warp 1..."

"Equals... warp 1; the speed of light... ," she then understood. "So, transwarp 2 is... the same as warp 8?"

"Exactly," confirmed the junior science officer. "So yes, up to there, we can still monitor, maneuver and fight just like any other starship without switching drives because we are still within standard technology capabilities. It is starting at transwarp 3, nearly twenty thousand times the speed of light, that we get to the tactical problems Lieutenant Tyvya warned us about."

"So that becomes our transwarp cruising speed... if we ever get going..." impatiently complained again their helmsman.

"Captain" Redding said as he leaned over to Kheren; "If you'd like I could go down to engineering and see if I can move things along, as safely as possible of course."

In truth he wanted an excuse to see the Transwarp system up close and while they were still working with it, and try to compare it to his brothers work.

Although his first officer never said anything about it, Kheren had quickly noticed the gleam in the man's eyes when the chief engineer had come up to report. The attentive look, the forward posture... the man was indeed a builder, an engineer at heart, just as his record said. And then, the Andorian captain could not help but recall that it was an inspecting tour of an other experimental stardrive that had him in his present condition; out of time, out of his own life, out of himself...

He who forgets the past...

But then again, was it not also said that when you fell from a mount, the first thing you had to do was to get right back up there?

"No real use for us to be both up here anyway... " agreed the Andorian. "Mister Redding, you may... indulge yourself. "

He then looked at his chief engineer.

"Mister Sisko, I want you to reassure you that I am not letting the first officer go down there to hold your hand. He will observe and report, not touch anything... unless you ask him to of course. "

He hoped what he said would come out as light-hearted and casual and not as expressing any lack of confidence of his own part towards Redding. Although he was slowly but surely getting used to Human jest, he was still far from mastering it.

With a grin Redding got up and headed over to the turbo lift.

"Thank you, Sir, I promise I'll try not to be a part of any more accidents... if at all possible."

He left the bridge and entered the turbolift in a few quick long strides.

"Main engineering" he said outloud and the cabin shot down then back towards the aft section of the immense starship.

Redding mused over the situation. It seemed that he and Transwarp systems were somehow linked together through time and space. From the Excelsior project and the USS Response to the latest accident and the Horizon's new engines, he was there to see them all in one form or another. He'd almost come to rely on its presence to assure him that there was some continuity to his life.

A short time later, the door to main engineering opened and Redding walked quickly in but didn't make a display of himself. He would rather not get into anyone's way. He moved about the overly large main engineering, giving a quick nod of the head to his fellow junior officers until he found a ranking one.

"Anything new to report?"

Patricia Blakely turned her blonde head to him, blinked her widening blue eyes and stood straighter when she noticed one full pip more on his collar than on hers. She hadn't met Neil Redding before and she was immediately impressed, almost intimidated, by the man's stature as much as by his reputation.

"Commander Redding Sir. Aye Sir, the testing simulation on the tachyon matrix is done and the results are positive. We are rechecking those results with the modified deflector variance before confirming full readiness to chief engineer Sisko. We should be fully and safely ready to implement transwarp 1 momentarily, Sir."

Redding smiled and nodded.

"Excellent news; the captain is practically chomping at the bit up on the bridge, Lieutenant..."

"Blakely, Sir, Patricia Blakely." She said trying to sound professional.

"Blakely you say?" Redding seemed to think something over then added; "We had a Lieutenant Wilbur Blakely in engineering aboard the USS Response... He was a transwarp field specialist as I recall, good man."

Then it occurred to him that Wilbur Blakely had disappeared along with the ship more than 80 years ago.

Too many questions might come up after just saying 'hi there' he thought.

"In any case I'll just wander around until it's ready. Carry on, Lieutenant Blakely,"

Without another word, he turned abruptly and walked over to some display readings.

His apprehension soon became justified. For a moment, the young woman just looked at him, eyes blinking in confusion. Wilbur Blakely had been the name of her great grandfather... an engineer declared missing in action before she was even born, when his ship was lost with all hands... the USS Response...

How could this man, barely in his thirties by the looks of him, speak of him as if he had known him? How could he speak of having served aboard a ship lost almost a century ago?

She did not inquire further. After so many time-related events experienced under Captain Kheren since the time she had been assigned under his command on the Artemis, she knew there were things here that raised questions she might not be able to get any answer about... or like them even if she could. And so, Patricia also went back to her work without a word.

Meanwhile back on the bridge, Lieutenant Elisha Leône applied her full aptitude and skills while meticulously surveying all available internal system controls, one-by one, from her Ops station, while making subtle corrections and adjustments along the way. The ship's status was changing continually as preparations continued toward initiating transwarp speed and she wanted to be certain that there were no surprising glitches manifesting themselves throughout this precarious process; but especially when they began to engage the transwarp drive.

As she completed her diagnostic evaluation and adjustments, she quietly notified her commanding officer.

"Captain, ship resources are allocated accordingly and are now operating within designated parameters. Currently, local sensor readings are reporting in as normal." The somewhat shy Orion young woman then added unassumingly "From an Operations standpoint Captain, we appear to be ready for Transwarp drive."

"Thank you, Lieutenant, well done, " Kheren answered with obvious satisfaction in his voice. "Keep close contact with Mister Sisko's department on this. "

Jureth merely listened to the individual conversations happening around him on the bridge. Everyone, including the captain seemed to be anxious to get going, and Jureth was as well, but at the moment, he felt rather useless; though with Commander Redding leaving the bridge, Oseno supposed he had better stay despite contemplating returning to his office and mulling over some operational scenarios in which the resources under his command could be used, including hostage rescues, hostile boarding actions, and covert infiltrations.

Then there was the Polaris. Jureth wanted to stretch her legs and test her capabilities, but he supposed that would have to wait until the Horizon's transwarp drive was tested fully. So, for now, he would simply listen, monitor the Polaris, and be ready to assist the captain as needed.

As if aware of his Strategic Ops Officer's inner fidgeting, Kheren looked over at the Bajoran.

"With Mister Redding down in engineering overseeing the technical status of the ship, that leaves you to act as Exec here regarding crew and department readiness. Step down here, Commander. "

With a callused hand, he indicated the Executive chair.

The Bajoran was surprised to have the captain call him to the command area. And, as Bajorans were generally known as emotional beings, his face probably showed it. All the same, he acknowledged the captain's request

"Aye, Sir."

Jureth locked his terminal and stepped down with measured steps to the Horizon's command area. As he did so, he surveyed the forward portion of the mighty flagship's bridge, including the viewer showing the expanse of space in front of them. As he stood next to Captain Kheren, a feeling inside him stirred. It was the same feeling he'd felt while commanding the Alsea, the Bajoran equivalent of what Humans called an adrenaline rush; along with the feeling that he knew he could make a difference, just as James Kirk had once said.

He glanced at the XO's console and, with the exception of engineering, all the departments were reporting ready.

"The board shows green, Captain," Oseno stated, confirming what Commander Redding had already reported. "Once our engineering adjustments are completed, Sir, we will be ready."

The Andorian simply nodded. Again, he sat antennae pointed forward with his elbows on his knees, edging forward on his seat as if this would move the entire ship faster just by doing so.

And then, he waited.

Lieutenant Commander Sisko continued to monitor the simulation while the conversation went along around him. Unless someone communicated with him directly, or gave an order, he tended to get lost in his work and did not realize how much they were talking about his work... and waiting for the results.

The sound of Lieutenant Blakely's voice then came over the comm.

"Sir, the simulation has run with a ninety-nine point ninety-seven percent predicted chance of success. I think we can count this as a win, Sir."

"Aye, Lieutenant. If we wait around for a hundred percent, we'll all be going grey by the time that happens. Thank you for the report."

Before turning around to report to the Captain, he mused about what this all was about. Something as simple to them as moving at the speed of light was complicated again when adding in the factor of this new Transwarp drive.

"Sir, engineering is ready to go," Sisko reported to the anxiously awaiting Andorian. "Sorry about the wait, Sir... when you cube the warp factor you're bound to cube the amount of problems to deal with as well."

Then Redding's voice came over the intercom.

"On my way back to the bridge captain, Redding out."

He made his way out of main engineering but then paused at Blakely's station.

"Nice work, Lieutenant. Let's hope it's trouble free from here on."

He gave her a smile and headed back to the bridge.

Back up there, it occurred to chief engineer Sisko that he might want to write up a paper on this Transwarp drive and the pitfalls he encountered as they went along their journey. He knew that this drive, along with QSD and some other technologies would start to find its way into many Federation starships just as the other technological advances related to warp speed travel they had engineered over the past two-hundred and fifty years. It would be worth it if he could save just one ship from being crushed within a transdimensional rift of its own making.

They were on the pilot craft of such amazing technology, and with that weighty achievement came an equally huge responsibility: to ensure that the technology was used safely from that point forward. He decided there that it was his own personal mission... aside from the mission of the ship, and aside from anything the rulebook had to say about it.

The Turbo lift doors opened up and Redding strode into the bridge.

"Wouldn't want to miss the big moment, Captain."

Seeing the XO return to the bridge, Jureth ceded the executive officer's chair to the commander and returned to the auxiliary station on the upper part of the bridge, and checked once again on the Polaris systems and security sensor sweeps before turning his attention to the start of the transwarp test.

Kheren didn't move a muscle but his voice plainly showed how much strain had been released with the final announcement of readiness from his chief engineer. He very well knew the man wanted to be cautious about this new thing they were about to attempt, even if it had been already used once; and the Andorian was not going to fault him for it, regardless of his own eagerness to proceed. In his own heart and mind, the safety of his crew was paramount to anything else; always had been and always would be.

Still, there was no mistaking the feeling in his voice as he stated accross the entire ship:

"Attention all hands; we are going to transwarp speed. "

His four oculars then fell on the screen before them all.

"Mister Snow... transwarp 1. "

The word was given.

Like horses reined in too long, helmsman Snow's fingers literally flew over the controls with blurring speed. There was a new higher-pitched sound coming from somewhere deep inside the bowels of the ship, along with a soft throbbing that could be felt through the deck plates. Then, on the large viewing screen of the bridge, the stars first stretched in the familiar configuration of warp travel; but then, as the expected flash of light was about to explode before their eyes, this light too seemed to stretch in a thousand-armed star before it finally flashed out.

Before their eyes, the usual warp field of fast-fleeing stars became almost a funnel of thin light streaks turning from deep indigo to pure white as they emerged towards them from what looked like a proto nebula, a mass of close stars coalescing in a soft halo of blue light.

For a long moment, everyone was mesmerized by the strangely familiar yet quite unusual view, until the voice of the captain softly broke the silence.

"Aft view."

The image shifted to the rear of the ship where the same streaks of light now receded into a similar mass of hazed stars, but this time the moving lights stretched from pure white to a dark reddish hue and the halo at the center of the screen was red.

Again, the unusual vista kept everyone silent and glued to the monitor until Kheren spoke again.

"Forward view. "

The blue-tinted image of the transwarp field reappeared on the main viewer. Kheren sat straighter in his chair, pulled his uniform straighter across his wide chest before giving orders around.

" Mister Snow, start testing maneuvering while in transwarp. Lieutenant Corcoran, plan a series of evasive maneuver exercises and combat simulations with helm. Lieutenant Commander K'Leysha, implement sensors and data gathering tests while we are using the transwarp drive to confirm survey and study capabilities. Coordinates with Ops. Lieutenant Leône, you will also monitor ship systems and power distribution while transwarp is active and during all those testings and coordinate with engineering. Lieutenant Commander Sisko, continue monitoring the transwarp engine while in use and start simulations on resolving solutions in case of failure. Doctors 110 and 011, Doctor Lyrya, begin monitoring crew physiological and psychological reactions to transwarp travel and notify immediately of any potential health problems. Commander Oseno, work on simulations and drills regarding the possibility of emergency launch of the Polaris while at transwarp and evaluate the risks involved for both ships."

He stood up and looked a moment more at the screen before finishing.

"All reports to be sent to Commander Redding in forty-eight hours. Mister Redding, we will meet in seventy-two hours in my ready room to discuss those reports before we go to transwarp 2. That should also leave enough time for everyone to correct or at least postulate solutions to any possible problem found during all those tests. Carry on, people. Number One, you have the bridge."

"Aye aye captain." Redding said with much enthusiasm.

And so saying, the Andorian walked out of the command center of his ship, straight to his office, Yeoman Blackbird close on his heels. He too had a report to prepare for Lotus Fleet Command.

"Aye Sir," Jureth said acknowledging the captain's order and, after the captain had exited the bridge, he also stood up and turned to exit the bridge but made a report to Commander Redding before doing so.

"Sir, I will be aboard the Polaris if I'm needed. I believe I can best execute the captain's directive from there. "

"Very good commander; let us know if you need anything." said the first officer as he squared off his broad shoulders as he stood up and walked over to the ops station.

Oseno then entered the turbolift.

"Hangar deck," he ordered as the doors closed.

The Bynar doctor on the Bridge seemed to be catatonic for a few moments while she conferred with her counterpart. Finally she spoke up, in the same halting manner she usually would when speaking alongside Doctor 011.

"Sir, we have run... a cursory medical scan... on all lifesigns... in the ship. It appears... there is so far... no ill effects... from the transwarp travel, but... as we expect... traveling at transwarp 1... will not be any different... from travelling... at warp 1. Additionally... a report logged... in the last transwarp journey... during the Azimuth Horizon operation... when this ship reached... transwarp 3... indicated no... medical difficulties. We will see... what happens... when we reach... transwarp 4."

Traveling at what was essentially warp 64 was something never attempted or attained by anyone. It was unknown how the exponential increase would affect them at a theoretical rate of over two-hundred and sixty-two thousand times the speed of light. The rate was staggering and the enormity of it all was not lost on the part of a whole that made up the Chief Medical Officer, seated to the left of the Captain. If they achieved transwarp 5, the math said that they would be moving at almost two million times the speed of light, which would mean if they were to hold that pace, they would be able to reach the Andromeda Galaxy in only sixteen months!

And with the long term capabilities of the Horizon, the potential for doing so, even at transwarp 4 were within her and 011's grasp, along with those who were diligent and intelligent enough to do whatever it took to stay on this ship. The possibilities for scientific study of an entirely new galaxy were enough to make even the usually stoic Bynar salivate at the thought.

Redding read over the PADD as the doctor relayed the information.

"Somehow it surprises me that there's simply no physiological change to the crew. It almost feels as if going at these speeds is rather... taboo, if you will." He said almost introspectively. Then he smiled at the doctor. "Still, no news is good news in this case. Thank you doctor, I'll pass this on to the captain. Oh, doctor..." He said as 011 turned to leave. "Senior staff meeting at 0800. Bring your best reports to the conference room for review."

Redding then contacted the rest of the senior staff and gave more or less the same message.

The strategic operations officer acknowledged the summon through the inner ship comm as the lift began its journey into the ship. Then Jureth tapped his combadge again.

"Oseno to T'lana."

"Aye, Sir?"

"Please gather Mister Hunter and our engineering experts and meet me aboard the Polaris."

"Understood, Sir."

The lift doors opened and Jureth strode toward the hangar bay with scenarios running in his head. Could the Polaris handle the stress of being launched at the cube of a conventional warp drive's cruising speed? What would it do structurally to the ship, and to the Horizon for that matter? Jureth was no engineer and so, he needed the two engineering experts assigned to strategic operations to give him those answers. Then Jureth would check their answers with Commander Sisko before presenting them to the captain.

Jureth approached the hangar bay where the Polaris was docked and was stopped immediately by the armed security officers there.

"Stop there, identify yourself."

"Commander Oseno Jureth, commanding officer of the Polaris."

The guard on Jureth's right side ran a tricorder over him and nodded to the other guard.

"Confirmed."

The guard who had commanded him to stop smiled.

"Have a nice day, Commander."

Jureth proceeded through the doors and into the hangar bay approaching the Polaris with measured steps until he reached Captain Reese and a Trill female whom Jureth hadn't met yet.

"Hello again, Sir," Reese said greeting him

"Hello Captain; how's our girl?"

"All secure, Sir."

Out of the corner of his eye, Jureth noted that the Trill female had begun running the same tricorder scan the security officers at the hangar door had done upon his arrival and he smiled. He was pleased his security measures to protect the ship seemed to be effective.

"Good, Captain," he then answered the marine. "Now please introduce me to this other fine Marine with you."

"Commander Oseno, Sergeant Cyra Liran."

Hearing her name, Cyra straightened up and saluted the senior officer as was custom in the Starfleet Marines. Jureth returned the gesture though it was something not typically done in the fleet.

"Good to meet you, Sergeant. Tell me, what makes a Trill want to be a soldier?"

"I'm not technically a soldier, Sir, though my weapons scores are on par with my squadmates. I'm a battlefield medic. Most people just call me Doc"

Jureth smiled.

"Well, good to meet you, Doc. I'm expecting a few more officers to join me. Please tell them I will be in main engineering."

"Aye, Sir," both Marines said in unison.

Jureth proceeded aboard the ship's narrow corridors and made his way to main engineering where the Polaris warp core was pulsing and humming with life. Jureth stood and watched what to him was an amazing machine before making his way to a spare terminal. He gave the computer conditions for his simulations, and then began testing.

Jureth was studying the first round of his simulations when he was joined by his subordinates, T'Lana, Shawn Hunter, the master helmsman he'd relied on when he commanded the Alsea; and the two engineering specialists assigned to Strategic Operations; Lieutenant Akaal, an andorian who came highly recommended from his previous command despite what was referred to as an "attitude problem;" and Ensign V'Rel, a half Vulcan fresh out of Starfleet Academy. Jureth had selected V'Rel based on his outstanding engineering scores and the fact that he corrected his engineering instructors on more than one occasion by citing holes in theories and errors in calculations during classes.

"Reporting as ordered, Commander," T'Lana said as the group entered the engineering space.

"Ah, good," Jureth replied looking up from his terminal. "I want all of you to take a look at this," he said gesturing toward the console. "The captain wants to know if we can launch the Polaris at transwarp in an emergency, but the computer doesn't seem to think so. According to the simulations, the sheer force of dropping out of the hangar at transwarp speeds would sheer the ship apart."

Akaal, the Andorian, scoffed.

"Computers are only as good as their operators Sir, and you are not an engineer."

"True, I'm not," Jureth acknowledged. "That's why I wanted you here."

"If I may comment, Sir," V'Rel said; "though you are not an engineer, the computer is likely correct. Without being able to match the Horizon's velocity somehow or reinforcing the Polaris structural integrity, it is highly probable that attempting to launch while the Horizon is moving at transwarp would be catastrophic. It would be less likely to break apart if the Horizon were to slow to normal warp speed before attempting a launch."

"Thank you Ensign, but the captain knows we can do that. He wants to know if there is any way conceivable, even if its not proven, that we could launch the escort at transwarp, and so that is what we are here to figure out. Mister Hunter, what about maneuvering at those speeds?"

Shawn Hunter thought about it for a moment, but he knew the commander wasn't going to like his answer.

"It would be damn difficult, Sir, almost like trying to maneuver inside the Azimuth Horizon. It would take constant adjustments just to keep us from not slamming into the Horizon as we maneuvered out of the hangar."

"Can it be done?"

"In theory, Sir, I could pull off the maneuvering...I think."

Jureth nodded, the answers he was getting were not giving him.. what was it that Humans called it? a warm fuzzy feeling?

"Alright people, the captain will want answers soon and I want to run anything we come up with past Commander Sisko as well before presenting it to Captain Kheren. So let's get to work."

The small group huddled around the engineering terminal and began their discussion in earnest.

All the while, on the bridge, Redding sat at his post or moved around for quite a while, overseeing departmental work on the transwarp monitoring before he suddenly remembered something and proceeded to the science station.

"Don't mind me" he said to Norbert Baoule, the officer at the station. "Just looking over some old data."

Using a vacated seat and terminal on Science Station 3, he started to input some information. It took a few minutes to pull the eighty years old data from the USS Response's ship logs and reports, but as he suspected what he was looking for was added to the Horizon's data banks, as was just about everything about or relating to Transwarp technology. He was surprised however to find it was still classified... but there was no reason it wouldn't be, he supposed, it was still ongoing new tech after all.

He tapped his combadge.

"Redding to Oseno."

Down in the vast hangar bay of the Polaris, Commander Oseno's badge chimed.

"Oseno here; what can I do for you, Commander?"

"I'm sending down a warp field formula that we used on the USS Response for a very similar problem like yours we had once, using our transwarp inducer to launch a warp shuttle at high warp. I know it's not nearly as dramatic as transwarp speeds but the process is basically the same. If it's of any help, I've cleared it for your use."

Jureth checked his panel and found the information waiting for him.

"Thank you commander Redding. I'll see what we can do with it, if anything; Oseno out."

According to the situation report by a certain Lieutenant Commander Wilbur Blakely, the transwarp-shunting prototype of the early 24th century suffered from a cascading overload that resulted in the ship becoming a runaway at high warp speeds for several days. Top speed was maintained at warp 9.5 for 5 days and 15 hours, an unprecedented high warp speed in those days. As this was the intended purpose of the prototype, to maintain high speeds for prolonged periods, no serious damage however had resulted to ship or engines.

Akaal, the Andorian, walked over to him as he motioned him over to look at the data.

"According to this report," Jureth summarized, "Commander Redding's old ship performed a controlled overload of a shuttle's warp engine to match the current warp signature of his ship upon launch, effectively allowing the shuttle to go from warp 3 to warp 9.5 for four and a half seconds."

The Andorian cocked his head slightly, antennae wavering this way and that, thinking.

"Basically allowing it to ride to wake of his ship as it ebbed? Hmmm..."

"Like surfing a wave!" Shawn Hunter said excitedly. "That was exactly what we did on the Alsea's shuttle when we explored one of the Azimuth's Horizon's subspace fissures. As we exited the anomaly, we rode the fissure's own energy, though that shuttle was destroyed..."

"I'm not familiar with the analogy," V'Rel said. "but I believe if we modified these calculations slightly and made some modifications to the Polaris' shields and structural integrity systems, we may be able to accomplish a launch while at transwarp."

Oseno nodded.

"Let's do it. I want you, Akaal and Hunter to go over the engineering and piloting possibilities and give me something in thirty minutes. After that, I'll run it by Chief Engineer Sisko and then give it to the captain."

The three men acknowledged Jureth's order and then turned their attention back to the computer terminal.

A few hours later, Oseno Jureth tossed a wave to the security officers outside of the Polaris' hangar and strode quickly toward the turbolift.

"Computer, locate Commander Sisko."

"Commander Sisko is on the bridge."

Jureth rode the lift toward the bridge and it dawned on him that he was about to be speaking with the direct descendant of Benjamin Sisko, the human his own people called The Emissary. Jureth wondered how well the engineer had known his grandfather... if at all... and thought that he would very much like to speak to him about it sometime.

As he exited the lift, Oseno spotted Sisko seated at the engineering console and approached him, PADD in hand.

"Excuse me, Commander Sisko; I know you're busy monitoring our transwarp drive, but I'd like your opinion on the proposed modifications to the Polaris. The engineers on my staff believe that improvements to her structural integrity fields, inertial dampeners, and shields will allow her to launch at transwarp. As I'm not an engineer, I wanted to get an expert opinion."

Sisko turned and looked at the fellow Bajoran officer standing before him. He was aware of Commander Oseno Jureth's profile, but this was the first time he had met him in person, beyond seeing him briefly in the Horizon's dedication ceremony. Being fully Bajoran, Jureth's nasal ridges were more pronounced, and it interestingly gave him a more stern look than he possibly intended, a feature which Sisko was quite familiar with seeing as a child in his mother, Korena, when she became angry with him.

"You bet Commander," he smiled and reached out to accept the PADD. "The theory is sound and is similar to the field test the Enterprise-D partook in to perform a saucer separation at warp. It's essentially analogous to jumping off a train when it is moving at high velocity. The ground will punish you a bit until you slow down, but if your defenses are up, it's just a matter of riding it out until then. In this case, however, I wouldn't recommend another field test," he said with a laugh. "The Horizon should provide more than enough computational power to run thousands of different simulations using random variables."

* * *

In his ready room, Captain Kheren was looking at the wide transparency that showed him the stars streaking by in the peculiar bright and elongated, blue to red-colored manner of transwarp travel. Like every experienced Starfleet officer, he was so familiar with warp travel that the sight of the stars as viewed under the deformed lense of the warp field was much familiar to him; so much that he barely glanced at it anymore. But now, the view under the transwarp effect was at the same time similar and different, making him look at the miracle of space travel with new eyes.

He was almost in a meditative trance before the sight when his doorbell chimed and so, it took him a while to answer the second one. The door parted to let in the slim and curvy silhouette of his yeoman, Ensign Miramanee Blackbird with a covered tray. The mell taht came from under the domed cover immediately attracted his antennae.

"Yeoman?"

"Dinner, Sir. "

"Dinner was at nineteen hundred hours, Yeoman. "

"And you weren't there, Sir. It is now almost twenty-three hundred hours."

She put the tray on his desk.

"I am not hungry."

She opened the lid. The aroma of the golden strips of meat and pale white slices of soft processed milk instantly filled the room. He came up to his chair and his antenna bobbed in obvious reaction.

"Cooked meat? "

"Aye, Sir. Smoked bacon fried and fresh cheddar cheese extra old. "

"I eat raw meat, Yeoman," commented the captain as he took one piece of bacon and looked at it with all four eyes with curiosity, clearly enticed by the aroma.

"I am aware Andorians usually do, Sir. But begging your pardon, Sir it's for you like drinking grape juice and thinking you tasted wine. Try it. "

A bit suspicious, Kheren sniffed the cooked meat then popped the piece he was holding into his mouth. In an instant, his face contorted so much it almost managed to produce a smile from his too few facial muscles.

Sitting down, he attacked the plate like a man who hadn't eaten all day; which was almost the case. between two slow, relishing bites, he looked at the Amerind woman and spoke in a falsely reproachfull tone.

"Lyrya put you up to this, right? Or was it Tyvya?"

"Actually none of them, Sir. But I did suggest it to them, noticing from the medical logs your ususal eating habits that you never tried cooked food and, well, since we are breaking grounds here with this vessel and expanding new horizons, I thought it was fitting for you to do so and enrich your diet."

The Andorian chewed more bacon and cheese and his silvery eyes rolled to the ceiling.

"Wonderful... now I have three females to dictate my life... and one is not even Andorian."

"Four, Sir; you forget the Horizon."

She looked at him with a smile that was not at all according to regulation; definitely mischievous.

"Speaking of the Horizon; where are we with ship status and reports?"

She became instantly serious and stood straighter as she answered.

"All reports in, Captain. Commander Redding should be here momentarily to summarize them and discuss readiness for implementing the second phase of our trial run."

No sooner said, the door chimed, admitting Commander Redding.

"Good evening. Sir. Third shift duty reports are in and I thought you might like..."

Then sniffed the air.

"Bacon cheddar rolls, Captain? I don't think I've ever seen an Andorian eat cheese before, Sir."

He had what might be a smirk on his face.

"Evening, Ensign Blackbird."

There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice, as if he might have caught her in the middle of sucking up to her captain. Not that there was anything wrong with that if not taken to extreme.

"One of these days I'll have to introduce you to real Terran prime rib, Captain... and not this suitable nutritional value stuff that comes out of the replicator."

He gave a slight show of distaste at the idea.

"A good suggestion, Sir," the Amerind woman said with the exact same tone as the Horizon's exec had taken with her, hinting back at the very same sarcasm to him as he had to her.

"I am looking forward to it," Kheren said between two bites, completely oblivious to the exchange and motioning to his first officer to take the seat opposing his across the translucent workdesk. "Andorians require a lot more proteins than you, Humans... and you might be interested to know that we do have a sizeable dairy industry on Andoria. But we do not advertise it much; seems our cheese is rather too... strong for other species' tastes."

"Call me if you need me, Sir," Yeoman Blackbird said and she exited to ready room so as to leave the ship's two most senior officers alone to work.

Putting his half-finished plate aside, but not without a last bite, the commanding officer of Lotus Fleet's flagship gave his complete attention to the large man sitting in front of him.

"Alright Number One; let's hear it."

Redding straightened up first.

"I've called for a senior officers meeting at 0800 tomorrow, that should give most of them enough time to settle in with the new duty officers as well as the equipment. As it stands so far the engineering and science departments are reporting no unforeseen difficulties with the transwarp systems as of this time. Doctor's 011 and 110 have found no abnormalities amongst the crew and are projecting that there should be none forthcoming according to their data, but of course they can't speak for higher transwarp speeds than Trans-3, Sir."

Without apparently thinking about it, Redding reached down and took a piece of cheese covered bacon and brought it to his lips but stopped before biting into it because of the somewhat astonished look on Kheren's face.

Redding looked at the piece of bacon with mild surprise.

"Ah.. right, my apologies, Captain; spent a little too much time with the Klingons I guess."

He gave an apologetic shrug.

"They have what you might say is a more communal view point on eating. Some ship commanders would have been insulted if I hadn't tasted their meal."

"Sharing meals right from the plate is a very ancient Andorian tradition as well, Number One," then said Kheren. "But it has been years since I went back to the homeworld. Your action reminded me of things I had almost forgotten outside of my recent bonding. Sorry if I reacted a bit... emotionally."

Awkwardly he went to put it back but that also seemed to him to be a bad idea as Captain Kheren would be unlikely to eat it after he manhandled it. So instead, he wadded it into a ball and sort of hid it in his left palm. Then he went right back into his report.

"Tactical reports that all offensive and defensive capabilities are fully operational at low transwarp speeds. However, they do expect a decrease in offensive capability after trans-2 of around forty percent, a figure I concur with as well, Sir."

"No phasers and no tractor beams..." understood the commanding officer of the flagship.

Redding shifted his stance.

"I will have a more detailed report tomorrow after the staff meeting, Sir." and waited for any follow up orders.

"Carry on, Number One... I will await your final report before ordering us to transwarp 2. Oh, and you better eat that bacon before the cheese melt in your hand. You would not want to appear before subordinates with something sticky between your fingers."

"Yes, Sir," Redding said with a half smile and left the ready room. He acknowledged his relief, Chief of the Vessel Hollet, and entered the turbolift. One of the bridge crew stopped and sniffed the air as he passed but didn't say anything.

"Main sickbay."

Neil Redding stood there swinging his left arm back and forth thoughtfully. The doors opened and he proceeded down the nearly abandoned hallway as the third shift crew members started their work.

He took a quick glance into sick bay before heading in and walked over to a nurse he didn't recall meeting yet.

"Excuse me nurse, do you have a moment?"

Ensign Leedixia was restocking some of the medical supplies when the question seemed to spring out at her from behind and she dropped her PADD.

"Oh, hello Commander... I didn't see you there."

Redding retrieved the PADD and handed it to her.

"That's quite all right, Ensign, didn't mean to startle you."

He held out the small wad of bacon and cheese.

"This tastes a bit off to me, almost like the cheese went bad. Would you mind analyzing it for any abnormalities? I'd like to find out if it's just me before I order an overhaul of the replicators. I doubt that would make me very popular with maintenance."

"Umm, of course commander. It shouldn't take long. If you like, come back tomorrow and pick up the results." as she placed the food sample into a container.

Redding flashed her a charming smile and turned and started to leave.

"No hurry. I doubt you'll find anything but, if you do, just let me know."

And so saying, he headed to his quarters.

As he left, Leedixia sealed the container and placed it into a scanner. As she did, it occurred to her that she never got the commanders name.

"Computer, who was that who just left sickbay?"

"Commander Neil Stanley Redding, rank; Commander, position; first officer."

She marked the sample 'Redding' and put it on the pick up list for tomorrow.

On the way back to his cabin, Redding was debating his action in his head.

I'm I being protective of my new captain or just paranoid?

He wasn't overly happy with his minor deception earlier, communal as Klingon's may be, one still didn't eat boldly off their captains plate. No, best to be sure He decided. In his experience, the captain had always to be on his guard but as this was the Federation and the new and improved Federation, captains nowadays had to be more than superior officers, they had to be friends. And wasn't it his job to watch after the captain?

Let him be their friend, and let his enemies beware.

* * *

Eight hundred hours; the main conference room was being prepped by the captain's yeoman for the upcoming bridge officers meeting with the first officer of the flagship. This was an executive meeting where the commanding officer was not to attend, but on which all his next decisions would be based upon.

As the commanding officer of such a huge starship, he needed the expert evaluation of his department heads before proceeding further with a mission; but for that, he needed them to work together to come up with a working consensus, not just for the sake of this mission itself, but as a whole, for the sake of the vessel herself. They had not only to learn to work together but to rely on one another, even more, to have faith and confidence in one another, without the fatherly figure of the captain being there and reminding them to. They were not children; they were accomplished Starfleet officers, chosen among the best in all of Starfleet, not only to report but to propose, not only to support but to provide, not only to execute the captain's decisions but to be part of them.

Moreover, it was necessary to have the first officer lead such an activity and not just because it was his job to coordinate everything and make sure ship and crew ran smoothly; they all had also to have faith and confidence in him as the captain's voice and ears and as the next in line in the chain of command, the one who could have to take the captain's place on the bridge, who would take his place in all the away missions but the official diplomatic, first contact or especially sensitive ones. He was for all intent and purposes an executive commanding officer and a captain in training. Leading such a meeting might have looked routine and easy enough, but it was in fact a critical tool to achieve all those ends.

And so, Ensign Meeramanee Blackbird finished setting up the holographic computer interface that would display all requested data and communications right over the large triangular table around which the meeting officers will sat, the Exec and the strategic ops chief on one side, the chief medical officer and chief of science on a second side and the chief engineer, chief of ops and chief of security and tactical on the third.

The Amerind yeoman looked a moment at this peculiar arrangement, something she had only seen in museums of twenty-third century Starfleet relics like the conference room of the legendary Captain Kirk's USS Enterprise. She thought it had been Commander Redding's idea, as the man was rumored to have experienced first hand this glorious era; but she had learned that it has been the captain's demand when the ship had been prepared for his command.

Captain Kheren apparently disliked the now standard elongated 'banana' table that had been introduced with the Galaxy class vessels like the no less famous USS Enterprise of Captain Picard; he thought it too hierarchical to promote camaraderie and *esprit de corps* among the crew, too confrontational with facing seats, impractical for the free flow of words and ideas, inappropriate to instill the feeling of equal contribution and importance he believed bridge officers should experience. This triangular table brought people physically closer together, all near but not quite facing one another and all in a natural regrouping of departments that made coordinating exchanges all the more clearer from, to and between Command, Research and Technical, the three major branches of ship operations.

Blackbird had to admit it did look much more congenial and convenient; it reminded her of her own ancestors Pow Wows, when chiefs sat in a circle to discuss shoulder to shoulder in a spirit of peace, or that historical round table of King Arthur's Knights the king himself had designed so that no one would feel superior or lesser to any another while deciding the fate of their kingdom.

And here, today, Commander Redding would get the contribution of every chief officer of the ship before the captain ordered any further proceeding with their mission.

Turning her back to the huge transparency displaying the unusual transwarp field in outer space, she left the room by the left hand door just as the right hand door opened, on the other side of the wall displaying in real time a tridimensional representation of Federation Space, with the actual position of the ship and the various points of their intended trajectory.

She would be just outside in case Commander Redding needed her.

Snowfire walked along the corridor towards the conference room, dark eyes fixed on the PADD that she had uploaded the reports of her subordinates too, scrolling through them steadily as she weaved between the crewmen also moving along the corridor. Some found it almost uncanny, or so she had heard, how she never had to even look up whilst she was walking. Then again, most members of Starfleet hadn't had the rich, varied and long experience in life that she'd had. And that was just the declassified stuff. But everything looked good. The teams were settling into work well and it seemed that her instincts with character profiles were still alive and well.

She came to the door, acknowledged the Ensign now serving as the Captain's yeoman with a gracious nod, and entered still reading through the last sections of the report from her Astrometrics department. There'd been a few flickers in the more exposed portions of the primary sensor grid, but nothing that was causing any harm. A patch in the Horizon's shield harmonics did the trick to solve that problem.

Apart from that, there was very little to report. The specialists in the subject were ecstatic at their attainment of free-moving transwarp flight, but it wasn't really a big thing to her, and her staff knew it. The information was filtering down now, at last, and she was planning on holding her first orientation session in the next few days too. And whilst the technical specs involved weren't within clearance of anyone on the Horizon but her, it didn't really matter to most.

Two hundred and sixty two thousand times lightspeed was fast, no question. So was most of two million. However...

No. It was a great achievement. No question of that. And the fact that it allowed full interface with n-space was quite impressive; she was already working on finding some ways to pass the Tactical department a way to get their weapons to work at this velocity. At least part of the theory was similar, so it should be workable. And even just a few stepping stones would help; if she could work out how to pass it to them. But for now, that didn't matter. Her reports did. So it was with a profound sigh of relief that she sat down at the triangular table, countersigned the last of the reports that she had been given, and sat back to wait for the rest of the senior staff to arrive.

Over the next few minutes the rest of her colleagues filtered in.

Both 110 and 011 decided to make an appearance, if for no other reason than this would be the first time all of them would be together since the commissioning ceremony. They moved in their odd but rhythmic way and took two seats at random.

Major Duncan McGregor, leader of the MACO's, walked in and looked around the room. He was an extremely fit looking man with a rough exterior that had the look of a man not wanting to be there; but that look might have been normal for him. He sat down next to 110 but made no show of wanting to talk.

Shortly afterwards, Lieutenants Leóne and Corcoran, the operations and tactical chiefs, entered the room together, still discussing something and proceeded to sit down facing Snowfire, giving her a quick greeting before they went on with whatever they were discussing.

Next, the ship's second officer and commander of their escort vessel Polaris walked into the room, giving a standard greeting to everyone before finding a seat of his own.

Commander Oseno was well received by the crew, pleasant and generally straight forward.

At five minutes past, Commander Redding entered the conference room.

"Good morning all," he said casually as he made his way to one of the seats furthest from the entry door, beside Jureth. He quickly glanced around the room and noted he came up short with the head count. "Who are we short?"

Just at that moment, Lieutenant Commander Sisko, the chief engineer, entered the room and made his way quickly over to the closest seat beside Leone and Corcoran.

"Sorry I'm late," he apologized and sat down.

"Not a problem," Redding said as he settled in to his seat. "I just got here myself."

He looked over his PADD before going on.

"Well, initial reports were all excellent and I for one would like that trend to continue for as long as possible."

He gave a half smile.

"So, how is my dream proceeding? anything the captain and I should know?"

He glanced around the table, waiting to see who would speak up first.

"Very little of note, Commander." Snowfire responded with a smile. "All of the readings we've recorded so far are within expected variables and apart from the, now remedied, flicker in a few quadrants of the primary sensor grid, everything is going fine. I've got reports from all my seconds with modifications and countersignature by myself, but as far as the Science section is concerned, we're on target. We've got some ideas now of what might be needed once we start hitting higher factors of transwarp, so we're beginning to plan for that now. There are some minor modifications to the science labs ongoing too, but that work is purely internal and won't affect any connected systems." She finished smoothly.

Redding wasn't surprised that she had spoken up first; of them all, Snowfire seemed the most steady and collected. That, and her exotic nature, were beginning to get his attention. He'd have to be careful about that.

"Very good, Lieutenant Commander. And what about Ops, Lieutenant Leône?" He asked without pausing.

"Oh.." the Orion woman said at first with a little show of surprise. "All systems are working at peak efficiency, Commander. Overall power distribution is steady throughout the entire bio-neural grid as well as the EPS systems."

She had recovered nicely. Redding appreciated that in a junior officer. it showed promise.

"On top of that," she concluded, "we tested all the safety circuits and they'll be ready in the event of any problems, Sir."

"There shouldn't be any, but I'm glad your on top of it either way," the first officer of the Horizon said with a satisfying nod of the head.

Sarah Corcoran decided not to wait to be called on at random.

"Corcoran here for ship security and tactical, Commander. All safety systems are at full readiness and security personnel will remain at yellow alert and on a four shift rotation during the shake down phase, to ensure full readiness and full alertness."

She relayed this in a matter of fact tone. Redding frowned a little.

"I've never been overly fond of the four shift rotation myself, but I'll leave that to your discretion and, in any case, I agree with it at this time."

"I do hope so, if you don't mind me saying so, Sir... The captain himself ordered it specifically for the Security department. "

"I see... anything else?"

He would discuss this with the captain later.

"Yes, Sir," she went on. "I've ordered the transporters to be preset for intraship beaming in case of emergencies and all auxiliary craft and lifeboats are also at the ready in case of a ship wide evacuation."

"Nice work, sounds like your on the ball, Corcoran. But I want you to place one of our emergency twenty-two man transporters back to standard use, just in case we run into OR create a problem for another ship during this run."

Then he looked around the table.

"Who wants to be next?"

Jureth nodded approvingly at the efficiency of the two junior officers before rising to give his own report.

"Sir, strategic operations is at full readiness. My people are standing by to offer their expertise wherever it's needed. MACO team is aboard and I've assigned them to guard the Polaris while we are under normal operations. Speaking of my command, Sir, the Polaris is one hundred percent operational. With your information, which was very helpful, my engineering team has proposed some modifications to the ship to launch her at transwarp. Once they're approved by Commander Sisko, and the Captain of course, we'll begin the work and hopefully get a chance to test our theory. "

"Glad to hear that data was of some help, Commander. I had some doubts it would still be relevant." He said with a satisfied smile.

110 and 011 spoke up next in their back and forth kind of shared speech.

"We have nothing..."

"... new to add..."

"...to the report we... "

"... supplied you with... "

previously, Commander Redding."

Then they sat back quietly and there was a few seconds before Redding spoke up.

"I understand that, Lieutenant, but this is a group shared exercise, please relay your information to the officers assembled."

He kept his tone even and understanding, but in truth they annoyed him a little. It was a challenge for Neil to deal with so many new races past the base five he had 'grown up' with in his early days with starfleet, but it was just another thing he had to overcome t

But there were so many...

"Of course..."

"... Commander.. we understand... "

"... the intent of..."

"... the meeting."

Redding wasn't sure what that meant exactly, but it sounded positive so he just gave a smile.

"As of our latest series..."

"... of simulations... "

"... have shown... "

"... no detrimental effects are..."

"... currently... "

"... or expected... "

"... to be encountered while... "

"... the transwarp field effect is... "

"... present on the crew of... "

"... the Horizon."

Then they looked at each other for a couple of seconds before turning back at Redding.

"We will of course..."

"... continue monitoring... "

"... the crews condition..."

"... during the course of... "

"... the testing phase."

They finally sat quietly looking at him again.

"OK, good to know." the first officer said with a nod of the head. "Anything you'd like to add, Major McGregor?"

Redding's face seemed sterner when he faced the MACO commanding officer, his voice slightly sharper, more crisp and forceful. McGregor looked up at him and cheerless expression.

"It's like Commander Oseno said, Sir. My men have their assignments and are on station as we speak, but if I may ask a question of my own commander?"

Redding paused only for a second before agreeing.

"Of course, Major, you have a voice among the senior officers on the ship. What do you wish to know?"

"Just who to salute to, Commander Sir. I don't like too many cooks in my kitchen if you understand me."

He glanced between Redding and Oseno as he said so without flinching or blinking.

"Ahh, I see.. well, pertaining to the Polaris, the chain of command is as follows. Captain Kheren has the final say on all activities while it is in service and under his command, of course. He will either order me or Commander Oseno directly when it is needed. If the captain is unable to do so, the responsibility becomes mine, and so on..." Then, the big man sat down. "OK forget that." He corrected with a frown. "Lets get to the important bits. I'm the senior officer unless the Polaris is 'off ship,' in witch case Osenois her captain and gains rights and privileges therein with the understanding that Captain Kheren is still his commanding officer and, failing that, I am still his superior officer and he would ultimately default to my orders to the best of his ability."

McGregor gave what only could be described as a satisfied frown.

"Understood, Commander Redding; and I'm grateful for your candor on the matter."

"My father was a MACO colonel, Major. I know the drill."

Redding then straightened up and looked around the room.

"Any further business?"

As they had skipped Engineering in the briefing, Sisko cleared his throat.

"Sir, I looked over the calculations for the Polaris launching at transwarp and I put my seal of approval on it, pending intensive simulations to test the theory out. As for the Horizon, we have so far seen no adverse effects due to the transwarp travel, beyond the expected shearing encountered during any faster than light travel. Of course, that is well within safety limits, but we have no previous data for what may happen beyond transwarp 3."

Redding agreed.

"Of course not, we will be the first to do it in a controlled manner commander Sisko, and I should mention, the first ones that could screw it up." He said this with a smile. "But I know we have at our disposal many of the finest people in their fields aboard the Horizon so I have every confidence that, regardless of what hell my be placed upon our path WE WILL ENDURE"

He said this with such an unexpected shift in intensity that it took several of them off guard.

"That is all, return to your duty stations."

He remained seated in the off chance anyone wanted to talk to him privately.

As the majority of the group began filing out of the conference room, Jureth lingered. He had been wondering about just who Commander Neil Redding was since the commissioning ceremony. He had done some research on his own, but had been stonewalled by classified files well above his own security access. Now was his chance to get what information he could straight from the source. As Oseno studied the commander, he could definitely see hints of the admiral he had accompanied aboard the Klingon flagship not so long ago.

"Commander, I'd like a word if I could, Sir."

Redding gave him a big grin.

"For my *cha'DIch*, anything. What can I do for you, Commander?"

Jureth was surprised at Redding's use of the Klingon term that *Admiral* Redding had used when they had boarded Jar'rod's ship. He was unsure if the senior officer knew the significance or not, but the Bajoran was not one to beat around the bush as humans liked to say.

"Sir, prior to Operation Horizon I accompanied Admiral Redding aboard the IKS Kang while I was Chief of Security aboard the Lotus. At the commissioning ceremony Commander Felez introduced you as Admiral Redding. My own attempts to confirm or not your identity have been blocked by security classifications way above my paygrade. So, I guess what I'm asking, Sir, is; are you and Admiral Redding one in the same person? I apologize if it is an uncomfortable subject, but I feel I need to understand exactly what is happening."

Redding nodded his head in agreement.

"Agreed, Commander. I can't tell you everything, literally, because I don't even know everything. But I think you need to be let into the loop on this one."

He motioned Jureth to sit back down and then continued.

"Some time ago, while on an away mission, I was exposed to a still unknown type of planetary defense weapon after I sabotaged it in order to keep it from firing on our ship, the USS Ajax II, currently in orbit. I was presumed dead over the next three days before I... 'reappeared' at the blast site. I had no memory of any passage of time and no injuries other than those sustained before the incident, namely lots of bruises and a fractured radius," he moved two fingers along the upper part of his left forearm, "from a fight I had just finished."

He took a breath and looked at Jureth seriously.

"That was in 2288, more than one hundred and fifty years ago."

He let it sink in.

"It was right around the time the Vulcan Sybok hijacked the USS Enterprise for its trip to 'Eden'. Kirk never could do anything small." He gave a wiry grin. "In any case, it seems I'm stuck in what they call a 'Temporal singularity reversion event,' although personally I doubt they have any real clue what it is. The important bits are this; I'm in some sort of damn bubble, linked to another bubble that's fixed in 2288. When this one breaks, meaning I die, that one resets and sends me right back to this one, in about seventy-two hours."

Then got a frustrated look.

"But it's not as nice as it sounds. When I mean 'resets' I mean everything, every memory after 2288 is gone. It literally never happened for me." He touched his arm again. "Same busted lip, same broken arm.. over and over again."

He took a breath, allowing Jureth a chance to respond.

The Bajoran listened carefully to Commander Redding's explanation and the more the Horizon's XO talked, the more interested Jureth became. He had heard rumors of time travel incidents of course, and even factual encounters of the more famous ones such as Kirk saving Earth from an alien probe, but he had never actually met anyone involved in anything like that.

"Sir, that is... an incredible story. It makes sense now why I couldn't access any of the files. Has Temporal Investigations not thought to intervene somehow to correct it? Surely having you repeatedly travel through time can't be good for history."

Redding brought both his hands out and away from his body.

"That's just it. You see, you can't stop the effect without altering the current timeline. If they could find a way to 'break' the effect, it would cause everything that's happened between 2288 and this very moment and indeed, into the far future from what I was lead to believe, to become altered."

He sat back in his chair again.

"I'm not sure what I've done or perhaps what I will do at some point in the future, but it's been made clear to me that 'they' are unwilling to risk the event being 'rewritten'."

This actually seemed to bother him, but then gave a bit more of a cheerful smile.

"I was planning on telling you this anyway. It's only classified as a matter of protocol and I need someone I can trust to back me up in the event something comes up that's related to this subject that we didn't see coming. And frankly, Commander, I don't trust anyone on this ship more than I trust you."

The tone was matter of fact.

Redding's candor surprised Jureth and the Bajoran was sure his facial expression probably gave that fact away. Still, he was pleased that the XO trusted him enough to consider him the only officer aboard the Horizon capable of being his back stop. It certainly was a unique situation, but then, Jureth's tenure with Lotus Fleet had been filled with those.

"You have my word, Sir, if there is anything I can do, I will do it. I do appreciate you being open with me, other officers might have dodged the question or referred me to the captain."

Redding smiled.

"I can't expect a hundred percent efficiency from an officer that only knows fifty percent of the situation now can I, Commander?"

He stood up.

"We'll have to discuss this more later, but I think we should get back to our posts for now. Let me know if you have any further questions, Oseno."

Aye, Sir," Jureth replied before coming to attention and exiting the conference room with him.

* * *

The senior staff of the flagship was back on the bridge on the next day, ready to proceed with the next phase of the shakedown cruise. All reports and recommendations had been recorded, analysed and were now to be implemented upon. As soon as Captain Kheren came to the bridge and sat in his central chair between First officer Redding and Chief Medical Officer 011 and 110, both chief of security Corcoran and helmsman Snow seated at the consoles before him greeted him almost simultaneously.

" Ready for transwarp 2, Captain, " confirmed the Inuit pilot. " On course to Space Station Echo 3, ETA fourteen days, eleven hours forty-seven minutes. "

The Andorian in the command chair looked around once at his bridge crew, all calm and waiting before he brought his four oculars back at the large viewer in front of them all.

" Mister Snow... Transwarp 2. "

" Transwarp 2, aye Sir. "

As soon as he said it, the helmsman activated the controls and there was a brief increase in the pitch of the humming sound of the vessel around them, then a flash on the screen before the view of the starfield resumed its previous show of streaking stars looking like white points of light coalescing in front and then stretching into thin blue lights disappearing beyond every point of the screen's frame in glowing red. The strangely different yet slightly familiar view of the warpfield again mesmerized the officers despite the fact that it looked to them virtually unchanged from the previous one of a day ago.

There was no vibration, no sound, no feeling that the ship had jumped instantaneously from what was essentially warp 1 to warp 8 in one single increment, from the speed of light to five hundred and twelve times that same speed while still in Einsteinian space. All systems glowed green and every department was already confirming their current speed and status and checking the state of all instruments on board since the transition.

After a while, Captain Kheren nodded as if to himself, stood up and straightened his uniform.

"Good work, people. I will await your reports and recommendations from this second phase when we reach Echo 3 in two weeks. In the meantime, those who will have completed their daily tasks may attend Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysha's presentations on her people and culture in the main amphitheater, or download its recordings later on. This promise to be interesting and will be, in fact, our ship's first scientific survey of a new civilization. It could be also a good opportunity for several crewmembers to exercise with our current instruments and facilities their survey, study and related teamwork skills before we do actual field work with this vessel."

In typical Andorian fashion, Kheren was turning leisure time into training and study time, but everyone knew that such attendance was optional, not mandatory. Nevertheless, they also knew that the captain would be keen to notice those who would participate, as he was going to attend himself the conference of his chief science officer.

He nodded to his yeoman and the Amerind woman fell behind him as he walked out of the vast command center of the immense starship.

" I will be in my office. Number One, you have the bridge. "

Down in Engineering, Lieutenant Commander Joseph Sisko, saw the jump from transwarp 1 to 2 happen and sighed and shook his head. While the approximate time of this transition was known ahead of time, no one had informed him that it would be this exact moment right after the briefing. He had, in fact, barely made it back to Engineering to see it occur. They would have to work on their communication, he thought.

"Mister Surlac," he addressed the Vulcan Engineering crewman manning a nearby station monitoring the transwarp, along with Ensign Patricia Blakely and the Mayan Propulsion Specialist Ensign 'Kilani' Cooper. "What are the chances that our calculations could have been off prior to our jump to transwarp 2?"

"One in one billion, two-hundred forty-three million, two-hundred and twelve thousand, three-hundred and ninety-four, Sir."

Sisko wondered how the Vulcan officer could always be so precise, but being a mathematics whiz himself, he had already calculated it to be around one in one-billion. Odds like that made him feel better that they would not incidentally blow up and produce a rift that at best would make warp travel in the sector impossible for over a hundred years.

"What are the chances they could be incorrect prior to our jump to transwarp 3," he then asked, "given that the jump occurs without our knowledge?"

"One in twenty-three million, one-hundred and seventy-nine and forty-two, Sir," the Vulcan replied again, stoically, without missing a beat. Clearly they increased exponentially at each transwarp factor, leading to a chance of one in eight-thousand that it would be wrong prior to transwarp 5.

That did not make Sisko feel good at all. Unlike the Vulcan, his stomach turned at that thought. While still very unlikely, it would be better to have a chance of 1 in infinity, i.e. no chance, assuming their calculations were exact. They were not difficult, especially to experienced and intelligent officers such as Surlac, Blakely, Cooper, and himself, they just needed to be verified, preferably by each of those four officers. "We need to improve those odds," he said, rhetorically, and contacted Commander Redding.

"Sir," he said over the comm to Redding, who currently had the bridge, "Sisko here. We need to be informed in Engineering prior to any increase in the transwarp factor so that we may double... or rather...quadruple-check our calculations and give the green light. At least until we have the calculations for each transwarp factor preciously hard-coded into the computer. At that point, if anything is off, the computer will prevent the increase automatically."

Redding gave a little chuckle.

"Mister Sisko, do you know what happened to the chef that worried over every little ingredient of his main course? he ended up burning the soup and ruining the meal."

He ended it sounding serious.

"Don't burn the soup Mister Sisko but proceed at your discretion, we'll keep you informed, Redding out."

"Aye, Sir," replied Sisko with a concerned frown before closing the channel.

The first officer of the flagship smiled to himself and took a breath. Although It might not have been apparent, he was a bit nervous. Transwarp seemed to be inherently dangerous in so far as never being consistently reliable. In every phase of it's development, it ultimately failed, with his command of the USS Response being forefront on his mind.

There wasn't any proof that the transwarp device caused it's disappearance and, in fact, they had been using it successfully for nearly two years... but it was none the less gone.

No, not this time he said to himself. *This time I wont let it go wrong.*

Down in the titanic engine room, Chief Petty Officer Arthur O'Hannigan snorted.

"Bah, I suppose he'd prefer we weren't paying attention and let the ship explode. All you were trying to do was keep an eye on things!"

At that, Sisko turned rapidly, and bore his full height up as he approached the young crewman.

"That is our superior officer and this ship's Executive Officer you're talking about," he barked. "Show some respect!"

The wide-eyed young Scottish officer was initially taken aback at the order, but shamefully nodded his head.

"Aye, Sir, you're right. I'm sorry."

His voice becoming calm, Sisko simmered down after the man's show of contrition.

"*But*, you can be sure I will not stop paying attention to our transwarp drive, until it is fully and reliably tested."

He then looked around at the onlookers, who were shocked to see the outburst from the normally passive and mellow Sisko.

"Well, we clearly have work to do. This isn't a parisee squares match to gawk at. Get to it, people!" he said, before marching off into the Chief Engineer's office.

* * *

In another part of the titanic flagship, more specifically his spartan quarters in the crew section, Lieutenant Variel Palos, Starfleet Intelligence, was doing some computer work of his own.

He was finishing his initial report to Intelligence on the launching of the Horizon. Starfleet Intelligence had a very vested interest in the ship and the technology propelling it through space at such rapid speeds. While his assignment as an intelligence specialist was partly legitimate and was being used to remove his face from the areas where he'd been operating, the other part of it was to observe and report back on the ship, its personnel, and especially its captain.

SI's interest in the Andorian was something that Palos didn't really understand. Perhaps they were looking to recruit such a loyal and dedicated officer; but his job didn't require that he understood the reasons behind it. It required he do the same thing he had done all over the galaxy; observe and report.

So, he did, finishing the report and sending it via a coded burst transmission that would appear only as a slight flutter in the ship's sophisticated communications suite.

CHAPTER FOUR : BEYOND ANTARES

It had taken some work. Even after the Captain's approval of her planned teaching sessions, Snowfire had had to work out where to hold them, when to hold them, get a firm idea on numbers that would be coming, set up at least half a dozen different lists and then fill out a number of forms that - if they had been hardcopy and placed together - certainly would have compressed under its own sheer mass and proceeded to ignite into a stellar body. A small stellar body perhaps, but when you were talking about stars, small was...a complicated term at the best of times. But it was - at last - done. She'd gotten copies of the Treaty of Khazet ready for download, as well as a couple of the orientation packages that had gotten creatively lost in the database her people had transferred. Sorting that mass of information into a format that would actually make sense to most Federation members was a project that had taken on a life of its own. It was going to take months, but she'd get it done.

Eventually.

She had invited the senior staff; although the invite to the Captain was likely scarcely needed, he knew where it would be... as well as putting out general announcements over the computer net, and now waited as the final few minutes ticked by towards 1830 hours ship time. She'd initially asked for one of the smaller lounges, but the mass of responses she'd received over the two days since posting her announcement had led her to request part of the main lounge as a venue instead. Considering the response...she was honestly considering that the next sessions were going to force her to request the reconfiguration of one of the currently unused cargo areas. This was the big test though. To see if she could do, on a vastly larger scale, what she'd done in the Academy before being reassigned. It was also critically important. The Federation didn't know enough at present about the IDF to be able to help if... no, when... the inevitable occurred. No pressure of course.

She was going to open with some basic physiology, do a skim of post-Fall history and then move onto the Treaty of Khazet. She was planning on making clear at the start that questions would be allowed, but also that she could never answer all of them. So she'd split the subjects with time for her to take questions on them - which she was going to hold to religiously! And then after the treaty, if she managed to keep to the heavily amended timetable that she'd worked out, she'd take further related questions until they either ran out or it hit 2100 hours ship time.

She was honestly expecting the latter to happen before the former, and there was a reason that she was going to be emphasising the related in related questions. If she didn't they'd never stop. She'd learnt that at the first lecture she did at the Academy.

So it was with trepidation she waited, but happily. And far more in fear of curiosity than of malice.

Amazingly enough, the very first one to come into the room was Captain Kheren himself. Most commanding officers made a show of coming last or after things were ongoing, either so as not to intimidate lower ranks or to show any kind of favoritism to an officer, or sometimes just to make a show of rank or have people stop everything to make a show of saluting him. Kheren would have none of either. He was simply interested in the matter and Snowfire was among the highest ranking officers on board and a department head; she deserved recognition as much from that as from being the representative of a foreign people graciously contributing herself and her expertise to Starfleet. In this, he was as much acting as a starship captain with ambassadorial responsibilities as anything else.

And he did not come alone. Not only were his two wives with him, Chief Counselor Lyrya and tactical lieutenant Tyvya, but each and every one of the other ninety-seven Andorians on board came with him to take seats in the large meeting hall. They had not been ordered to follow their commanding officer's example; they simply showed the traditional communal attitude and curiosity of their people for non-gheloid species that were so different, yet seemingly so alike themselves in so many ways, according to the scarce data available on the Ilythiiri.

There was some time before they would be called again to work on the next, more crucial phase of the ship's transwarp test. So, this was for them the best opportunity to do what they had all signed for in the first place; seek out and learn about new life and new civilizations.

Kheren chose to sit somewhere in the back middle of the seating rows, so that he would have a clear view without being himself in the field of vision of most other attendees. He wanted to focus on Snowfire's presentation and for everyone else to focus on her, without being concerned with his presence. This was to be about her, and her people, first and last.

Following the captain and a vast number of other Andorians, Lieutenant Elisha Leône was next to enter the lecture hall. The Orion operations officer knew virtually nothing about Lieutenant Commander Snowfire's species and was rather curious to learn something about their chief science officer and her people: the Ilythiiri. Elisha knew only of the reputation of the science chief's accomplishments throughout the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly missions, and her work with the now captain of the Phoenix among others. Crew from among the entire fleet of starships along with those from the starbase had all worked together to accomplish what even to this day seems like an impossibility.

As she carefully scanned the room, Elisha selected a seat toward the front and center where she would be able to clearly see and hear everything that was presented. It was the same pattern that she had followed in the Academy: arrive early and choose an optimally positioned seat.

Lieutenant Leône then placed her activated PADD before her and patiently waited for the lecture to begin.

Outside, Commander Redding paced quietly near the door. What am I doing here? He asked himself yet again. He hated lectures and hearing about yet another race of people he didn't know existed until a week ago was enough to make him want to fake an injury to get out of it. You're doing it again, aren't you? You see a strong exotic woman and right away you start thinking about her. It was true of course, His first wife had been Klingon, later it was an Orion house 'slave' for a mistress and still later another Klingon ship commander. There was even a short fling with that Ferengi girl.. and there were still others. ALL of them to a one landed him in trouble of one type or another.

He gave a sigh and straightened himself up. Just go in there and show her the respect of a fellow officer. Entering the room Redding gave her a quick acknowledgement nod then sat near Kheren and his party. "Captain, Lyrya, Tyvya." and settled back into his seat.

Snowfire nodded to each of the senior staff in turn, granting Kheren's wives each one as well. She was not really surprised by the turnout of the Andorians. They were a good people. And searching in their past had shown a history very similar in some ways to hers. In some ways. And as to Kheren...there was no surprise there. He had said he would be there, after all.

Lieutenant Leone was a bit of a surprise in truth, but she could accept the idea of learning about a new race. It was to be expected really. Starfleet was a lot better about that, and any product of the academy, in retrospect, must have had at least some interest in her talk.

And then there was Commander Redding. He, at least, she was not surprised by when he entered. The mass of somewhat conflicting emotions he was radiating was quite unmistakable. And passive sensing was a skill that all members of *Talya* teams were trained in relentlessly. She was going to be quite interested to see how he reacted to certain parts of the physiology section.

After the few command staff though, there came others. Officers and enlisted both, mixed together as they flooded in across the minutes remaining. The entire diplomatic complement, even those currently on duty. Then again, what she was about to talk about could be considered good diplomatic training, so that made sense. At least half of her science department, all of her off-duty seconds among them, their blue shoulders milling with the similar ones of the - albeit lesser - horde of medical and technical department members. She was worried for about a minute that they would run out of chairs, but somehow there were enough despite the fact that the stream of personnel into the area seemed almost constant for a goodly number of seconds. But, eventually, the stream tapered off and ended, a few final crewmembers ducking through the door into seats as the last few seconds ticked by.

She gave it thirty seconds as courtesy to any late arrivals, then smiled and stood. It was time.

As she was standing, the Doctors 011 and 110 shuffled quietly in and took two seats in the back row in order not to divert anyone's attention. Of all the people present, it was most critical that they understood the race of the woman standing before them, as they were professionally responsible for her physiological well-being. Of course there was data in the ship's computers, but it never hurt to get information in a more personal manner, and her cursory physical before the launch of the *Horizon* was quite brief.

Directly following the Doctors, Lieutenant Commander Sisko slipped in and took a seat, also in the back row, directly across the aisle from them. Having a mother and father from two different races meant he knew how important it was to understand as much as possible about another race.

Snowfire stifled a smile as the CMO and CEO slipped into the meeting as she rose. Leave it to the doctor and engineer to be the late arrivals. Then again, it made a sort of sense really. The two professions that were perhaps most reliant on being precise were generally somehow also the tardiest where it came to meeting times. Not always of course, but often. She gave each a faint nod, and then cleared her throat quietly. Two hundred years on command track. Silence blanketed the room almost instantly.

"Thank you all for coming." She said, smiling faintly. "This is a rather larger audience than I've had before, so I hope you can all hear me."

She tapped her PADD, and the lights dimmed slightly, allowing her a degree of visual presence.

"My name, as you likely know, is Snowfire K'Leysha. What you would call a surname is in fact a clan name, something that no doubt many of you are at least familiar with. My particular clan is the Clan of Spirit, founded and dedicated to keeping the spirit of our people. We are both its final keepers and its true shapers, and it is no accident that at least half of the exchange group to the Federation was made up of members of my clan. Physically and physiologically, there is no difference between us. Psychologically there are a few, but none more than the differences in psychological outlook that are common between two members of the same species from different worlds. I will cover the clan system in more depth later in this talk, but a comprehensive explanation will be the subject of a later group. "

She paused a moment before getting to her main subject.

"For now, I will start with the basics. Physiology, history, and the Treaty of Khazet. After each topic, there will be a short time for related questions and then a longer section at the end for more."

She tapped another key and a hologram of an Ilythiiri female, herself actually, popped up beside her.

"The Ilythiiri are a race that, on the whole, fits the Vulcanoid humanoid subtype that has been ascribed to us rather well except for a few key differences. First is, of course, the external visual differences."

She indicated the hair, skin, and then eyes of theholo.

"Every single Ilythiiri born since some point after the Fall has shared the same basic colorings. Black skin enabled us to more easily survive in the twilight that perpetuated the underground cities we fled to to escape extinction. Our eye colors follow similar evolutionary functions, being the result of a select group of chemical combinations that allow us to see perfectly in almost total darkness. There are a few, slight, differences in efficiency between the colors due to the exact nature of the changes to rod and cone groups within the retina, with red being generally accepted as the most efficient combination for night operations. Due to the nature of that change however, in that we are incapable of controlling it, almost allIlythiiri wear thin and extremely durable lenses over our eyes to prevent us being partially blinded in what you would consider standard daylight."

She gestured at the current, rather dim, light level.

"This degree of lighting is at about the edge of our comfort level without lenses. Standard ship lighting would be unbearable if I didn't wear them."

She tapped another button, and PADDs across the room pinged softly as the technical data behind the basic explanation arrived.

"The color of our hair, however, is not something that we have any understanding of. As far as we can tell, our genetic code contains the genes for darker hair colors and they are actively present in close to forty percent of our people. They still have white hair. Our best theory is that the Ilythiiri gene for white hair color is for some reason totally dominant if present. It smacks of extremely advanced genetic engineering on a massive scale, but our histories show no record of self-modification. Then again, we have very little knowledge of the majority of what took place before and shortly after the Fall. The outward physical appearances aside however, when it comes to what's inside Ilythiiri are very similar to the other humanoid races we have thus far encountered; at a genetic level at least."

Another button press and the outer skin layer faded away to show the inner biological workings.

"Our basic biology is closer to Human than Vulcan, although we use a different oxygen carrier that's slightly more efficient. Our bone structure is composed of an organic substance akin to high-strength ceramics which are lighter and slightly stronger, although with a tendency to shatter rather than break if you push them past their flex points. There is little else of note in the rest of our biological physiology barring four things."

She held up a finger.

"First, from all available evidence,Ilythiiri are biologically and genetically compatible with other species to a degree that surpasses almost all known species. Biological and genetic tests run by scientists back in Council space actually show that we would be theoretically capable of successfully and safely mating with all ancient humanoid descendants as expected, but also Andorians."

She paused for a moment to let that sink in.

"Studies are still being conducted back home into viability for other species; we're trying to see how far this adaptiveness extends, but they all seem to run into one very peculiar fact."

This made quite a stir.

Not in the Human sense, but in the Andorian sense; because of the unusual number of them all present in the room, a deep, cold silence suddenly was felt, even if nobody had been making any noise during Snowfire's presentation. But now, it was as if the entire room had paralysed and sucked in it's breath and was starting to shiver with either fear or anger... or both.

Andorians never talked of reproduction with offworlders; not only because theirs was too complex and alien for Humanoids to fully understand... after all, they were not Humanoids but Ghelnoids, both mammalian and insectoid; and not because of any shyness or prudish feeling, as they had none... but because it was so ingrained in each and every aspect of their being, their behavior, their life, their culture, their history and their society that talking of it was both too self-evident to even consider discussing and at the same time nothing less than baring open their very soul.

And even more in this day and age; because of it, some said, they were a dying species, less than thirty millions on the homeworld, barely ninety millions in the entire universe and their numbers dwindling at a perceptible rate as the birthrate was lower than it ever was in the entire existence of their kind.

Now on top of that, there was Captain Kheren himself. A product of illegal, and on Andoria most controversial, genetic engineering to attempt to change this grim fate, he was the first and so far the only Andorian who could, with the aid of modern biogenetic crossbreeding of course, mate alone with someone of another species, as he had been made as a Thaan-Chan, a fusion of the two male-like genders of the Andorian species and therefore carrying alone all male chromosomes; hence why he had no male spouse and two wives, Tyvya being the ovulae-baring Shen and Lyrya being the gestating Zhen. To his kind, he was seen either as the first savior of their endangered species... or as a monstrous abomination that threatened the very essence of Andorian existence. Only those who had Starfleet discipline and served with him could go past either prejudices. Even the artificial creation of a Human hermaphrodite as the next step of Human evolution would have had barely scratched the surface of what Kheren's very existence did to the Andorian collective psyche.

They had ostracized him, even killed his only sister at birth because of it.

And now, this Ilythiiri was now casually stating that her own entire species could allow easy interbreeding like no other could. Even if bio-engineering would still be needed... and one of each male Andorian gender for every one Ilythiiri female or one of each of the two Andorian female types for every Ilythiiri male... and that, during the short five years period of their lives when they were actually fertile... this meant that, if this was generally known, it could spur a mad race of mating for those desperate enough in a dying species who's most important goal in life was to have children... and further cause their species's alteration, dissolution and eventually their very extinction.

In short; validate the birth of others like Kheren Kalel Th'Ch'Leryll Keth Reiji... or equally monstrous hybrids like the half human, half Andorian Barile N'Arti... and their deepest fears.

And they were *studying* this?

To all the Andorians in the room, as she so casually spoke of it, this was nothing short of revealing that there was, somewhere out there, and all powerful race of immensely advanced spacefaring beings planning their genocide.

There was no comment, no further outward reaction at this dramatic revelation. Apart from Aenars and out of the mating bond, Andorians had no psionic ability whatsoever. But their emotions, feelings and passions were exceedingly intense, all the more because Starfleet discipline was containing them... for the moment. To an Ilythiiri, the mental shock of total disbelief, savage anger and deep fear must have felt like a tsunami on her sensitive mind.

But, they were not only a passionate, but also a violent race. Born and bred to fight and kill anything that threatened them, they could even kill without a second thought their own siblings, parents and children if need be; a most explosive mix, passion and aggressiveness, that most assuredly also explained their current downfall.

And so, they all stayed there, quiet, intense, closely listening, watching, learning, exactly like predators studying prey.

A new, deadliest of all enemies had revealed itself.

Although the Orion Ops chief didn't fully grasp the full implications of the statements made about reproduction among the Ilythiiri species and the Andorians, Lieutenant Leône clearly sensed the immediate reaction from all of the Andorians present within the lecture hall. It was palpable and rather disturbing in that it physically gave her chills. She began to cautiously look around at all of the crew members within the hall and yet no one actually moved. This was perplexing. She then looked down and added notes in her PADD to talk to the doctor about this incident and her reaction to see if he could determine what just occurred and why.

Snowfire indeed felt the wave of emotion burst from the Andorians in the room, the tightly controlled feelings erupting from them to loom above her like a titan. And whilst she might not understand, not properly, the reason for that reaction, she had expected that something like it might occur. And against this, as with all Empaths, she had been trained and tested. Even more so than most herself actually, for the *Talya* were far more strict and merciless in their training regime than the Academies. The Academies helped you find your limits. Talya training forced you to learn how to break them. So in this, Empath or no, Tri-Gifted or no, she had weathered the blows of such before.

Become one with the storm. She repeated the long-ago-spoken words in the depths of her mind. *Let it toss and spin you about, it will not move you. For you choose your place within.*

And so she did not flinch. The fingers held before her seemed to part the tidal bore of invisible rage and fear around her, her other catching much of it almost instinctively. And for a moment, she wavered on the edge of a conditioned retaliation. To her people, such an outpouring of emotion in concert - and of those emotions in particular - had distinctly unpleasant connotations. Linked to the times before the Reformation. But, but, these were not her people. They did not know, and they must have their reasons for such an explosive reaction. The disbelief and horror that she had caught was slipped away into a hidden place of her mind, and she continued with her words with only a fractional pause to show as reaction.

"Since contact was established between the Federation and the Council, younger members of our species have been, almost predictably, testing our compatibility practically."

She chuckled wryly.

"The interesting thing however, is that every single child resulting from these unions has been primarily Ilythiiri where it comes to genetics and physical looks. They share our life span and eye colors, but also things like skin and hair color which makes very little sense to us. And this is a massive statistical anomaly when compared to recorded hybrids of other species. Every single child born as a result of sexual liaisons between our species and others within the UFP has black or very dark purple skin, white hair, and ninety percent of the time will share the eye color of their Ilythiiri parent. It makes absolutely no sense."

Captain Kheren held his breath. He knew better than anyone else how his kind would react to such a revelation; he had been at the butt end of it all his life.

Fortunately, either Lieutenant Commander Snowfire didn't perceive it or she had enough good mental screens to shield her from the outpouring of violent emotions even he could perceive in every stare, every posture, every aggressively pointed antennae in the large room.

He was probably the only one of his kind not reacting like this, simply because he had turned his back on his homeworld and their way of thinking when Andoria had, violently, rejected what his own existence offered against such a threat; but he understood that, for the traditionalist majority back there, this was akin to choosing between Scylla and Charybdis, as Human myth said: choosing between badder and baddest... either alter forever the Andorian race... or see it disappear at the hands of an all powerful and technologically superior species. They would be like had been, on Earth, the Aztecs facing the Conquistadores... but this time, the Aztecs *knew exactly* what was coming.

This, he feared, was going to have far and wide repercussions and he could do nothing to prevent or avoid it. He could not order anyone not to feel or not to speak; Snowfire herself had plainly stated that this was no classified information and thus accessible to anyone within the Federation; the homeworld was most assuredly aware of it, or about to be... including the classified data and perhaps a lot more. After all, Andorians had been masters of infiltration and information gathering even centuries before the Federation came into being.

Kheren's mind was already foreseeing the next chain of events that would come. And that is what he felt most of all keenly.

And he started frantically to think about how to avoid it... if at all possible.

On the stage, Snowfire took a breath, and then raised the third and final finger. This was the biggest one really, at least in her mind.

"Third, and this will be the subject of an in-depth discussion at a later date, is what we refer to as Gifts. These are psionic abilities similar in many ways to those observed by the Federation in the Betazoid and Aenar populations to name but two, although half of our Gifts fall well outside of the ability of that species and sub-species respectively."

Again a pause, then she resumed her presentation.

"Firstly are the two abilities that the others aboard this ship are capable of. What we call Mindspeech; telepathy in general terms... and Empathy. These are quite self-explanatory in general, but due to the nature of our people we've learnt a lot more about how to use them than most other races seem to. As an example, I can sense the presence of everyone in this lounge well enough to identify them by name. If I concentrate, that awareness extends to most of the ship. The actual limits of my passive sensing are more limited by the number of presences I can cope with than by range. My ability as a Telepath has been tested over interplanetary distances, although projecting messages that far takes a great deal of energy. Groups of Mindspeakers with my level or higher of ability have been capable of interstellar communication when working together. The actual strength of those Gifts rarely progresses beyond the observed abilities of powerful Betazoids, but in general we have a great deal more practice and formal training. The other two Gifts, of which I only have one, are Fetching and Foresight. Fetching is, at base, nothing more nor less than what you would call Telekinesis. My own Fetching Gift is rather weak, although again well trained. At most, I could lift the weight of a terrestrial housecat for about ten seconds. Doing so would totally drain me however. Fetching is the most draining of all the Gifts when they are being used normally. And anyone with a strong Fetching gift is at least one in a billion. And then we come to Foresight, which is the one that a lot of people in the Federation are rather frightened of. Hopefully I can put that to rest. Foresight is not, despite what you might believe, a crystal ball allowing those with it as a Gift to see the future of any choice or event. Actual visions occur maybe three times in an Ilythiiri lifespan. And those are group efforts. When the Flashes of a Vision begin to form, a Gifted Circle vessel known as the Hidden Sight collects hundreds if not thousands of Foreseers from across the Council who then work together in piecing what the Flashes show into the Vision they will form. Visions always focus on something that will effect the future of the entire Ilythiiri people, and we have learnt from experience to follow them. They actually warned us of the Borg, allowing us to be ready to repulse their expansion into our space."

She shuddered faintly.

"I was in the Ilythiiri Defence Force when the Borg hit us the first time, and without what the Vision had pushed us to do, we would have lost. As it was, we managed to smash their invasion, albeit with heavy losses on our part. Our Fasset Drive is likely at least part of the reasons behind why the Borg were trying so hard to create the self-generating transwarp conduit system that the USS Voyager destroyed. Foresight Visions, are seen as absolute truth against which there can be no argument. This is something ingrained so deeply into our society, even more after the Borg Vision, that it is not something that we believe but something that we know. Those Gifted with Foresight are generally also no more than duo-Gifted, and most of the time their Foresight simply gives them a... feeling of what a situation might become. And finally..."

She held up finger number four.

"there is our lifespan."

Another tap, another ring of pings as data flowed into the PADDs.

"Ilythiiri children grow to the age of nine in the same amount of time it takes for a human child to do so. Following that, our aging process beings to progressively slow. We attain physical maturity - what would be considered a human age of twenty-one, at the age of twenty-seven. And from that point on, our aging process has been calculated to be approximately a thirtieth of human normal."

She indicated herself.

"In physical terms, I am approaching thirty four years old. I will be celebrating my four hundred and sixth birthday this year."

She stopped again for a moment to let that sink in.

"Our average lifespan is currently eighteen hundred human years, and that is likely to increase as the generations like my own, which have grown with all the miracles of modern medical technology, begin to reach their later years. That, however, is still at least a millennia down the line."

"And that finishes the section on physiology. I would welcome any questions." she said, spreading her hands wide.

Oseno Jureth had been standing silently, in a back corner of the room having slipped in just as the class was beginning. There were many things on his mind the least of which was the simulations being run by his team regarding launching the USS Polaris at transwarp speeds. Still, despite that he was curious about his colleague Lieutenant Commander K'Leysha. He had met the highly intelligent woman albeit briefly during and after Operation Horizon and knew as the other senior officers in Lotus Fleet did that she had been behind the containment of the Azimuth Horizon. So, when he saw the invitation from the commander to attend a class about her species he made it a point to find the time for it...even if he was late.

Standing with Jureth was his second in command, T'lana. The Vulcan had been naturally curious about K'Leysha's species and even a Vulcan security officer couldn't resist an opportunity to absorb knowledge. When Snowfire opened the floor to questions, Jureth thought for a moment and then spoke up with a question that only a former security officer could raise.

"Lieutenant Commander, how do standard energy weapons effect your species? By that I mean do you have any specific inherent resistance to phasers, or disruptors, or the other various types of weapons known to be in use?"

All numerous antennae in the vast room focused with even more intensity and interest... if it was even possible.

Snowfire nodded approvingly at Oseno's question. She'd only vaguely noticed him and his second enter, but his question brought her full attention across and on to the Commander. It was a question that she would have expected from one of her own people, and that pleased her in a faint way. Something to put in the dispatches at some point perhaps. Would probably buy some more breathing room. But for now, she chuckled and responded.

"An excellent question, Commander." She replied courteously, thinking on her feet to work out what she could say. "We have no inherent resistances to phaser or disruptor weapons. In practice, there are those among us who do have resistances to most forms of directed energy weapons, but those resistances are not a product of Ilythiiri physiology. You might note that we shared a border with the Borg for most of two centuries."

Redding wasn't overly fond of telepaths and nempaths in general, over the years there seemed to be a growing number of them coming out of the woodwork. This annoyance was the main reason he disliked Vulcans, even before he had joined Starfleet. With the help of his long time friend Felez, he could easily block out an empath simply by thinking about food. With a few years of practice it worked every time.

"Lieutenant Commander, I was curious, what would be your species' venerable age?"

This was of particular interest to him as the reality of watching his friends slowly dying off in just a couple hundred years at best bothered him greatly, whereas Ilythiiri could be expected to be around for more than a millennia before one of them would die of old age. As for her being older than he was.. well, she was little more than half the age of Vela, an El-Aurian he dated once 13 years ago.

"By venerable...you would mean the age at which we begin to show our years? Or something more complex?" Snowfire replied, confused by the use of a term that she didn't quite understand. "If the former...it depends. But in general, we only really begin to show and feel our age in the last few years of our lives. Our twilight years come suddenly and very swiftly; to us at least. We call them the *Vaen Huela*; The Last Five. There is a great deal of cultural meaning behind those years, a holdover from times when very few of us would ever reach such an age. But that is straying into culture and pieces of history that will be covered later. I hope that that answers your question, however."

She held her attention on the misplaced human for a few moments, violet eyes dancing with a faint, respectful, amusement.

Sensing that her answer was sufficient for the Commander, the doctors rose together in order to get Lieutenant Commander Snowfire's attention, and spoke in turns as usual.

"Would you please..."

"...explain the... "

"... medical explanation... "

"... behind telekinesis... "

"... in your species? Is it... "

"... based upon the... "

"... manipulation of the... "

"... neurogenic field... like...

"... standard telepathy?"

"I'm honestly not sure, Doctors." Snowfire replied. "The technicalities of our psionic ability was never a study point for me. The practicalities were far more important for those in my line of work. However," she dug into one of her pockets and extracted a small container. "Would an example that you could scan help?"

Both the doctors seemed taken aback, their confused faces turning toward one another before conferring very briefly in their high-pitched language that was unintelligible to other humanoids. As doctors they were very used to having to scan various fluids to monitor the health of their patients, but as far as they knew, the act of telekinesis would not exude any sort of substance that they could scan.

When they were done they said:

"An example... "

"... of what... "

"... exactly?"

Snowfire smiled.

"The psionic field you spoke of is presumably within the capability of this ship's internal sensors to monitor." She half-explained, half-asked. "If so, an example of my own telekinetic ability here and now should be able to answer your question, yes?"

It must be something entirely unheard of within our current understanding of psionic physics, the Doctors simultaneously thought, as the psi field is an energy wave outputted at the time of the act of telepathy or empathy. This substance, whatever it is, must be physical matter and energy somehow combined to produce the telekinetic effect.

Out loud they simply said:

"Yes, we would... "

"... appreciate..."

"... taking a look."

Lieutenant Elisha Leône listened attentively to the exchanges that occurred among the staff and Lieutenant Commander Snowfire K'Leysha. It was a rather engaging series of conversations; especially as the dialogue continued between Snowfire and Doctors 011 and 110.

Between her pheromone issue and this Ilythiiri's physiology, Elisha contemplated that these Bynar doctors must certainly have their hands full with who knows how many other unique conditions, abilities, sensitivities and such lurking among this crew of several thousand aboard the USS Horizon.

Elisha recognized that she had more than enough responsibilities to contend within her own position; she certainly wouldn't want to trade places and exchange these very diverse medical responsibilities with the Bynar doctors.

Snowfire nodded to the Doctor's in acknowledgement, and flipped the container she was holding open to reveal a what looked like several dozen neatly packed needles. Picking out nine of them, she stepped back a pace to give herself space from the front rows of seats. She didn't want to startle anyone with one *Sar* going zipping by under their nose. That...wouldn't be good.

"Computer, configure internal sensors for this compartment to monitor activity in the psionic field and display the results on a hologrid centered on me."

"Configuring. Sensors online. Holo standing by." The Horizon's computer responded.

One side of the black skinned CSO's lips quirked upwards, almost as if she was smiling again, and then, she tossed the needles up into the air in front of her. She reached out with her Gift, seeing each *Sar* in her mind as it touched them, and then concentrated. Due to her requests to the main computer however, the audience saw rather a lot more. As Snowfire reached out with her gift, the sensors detected and displayed through the holo, thin ribbons of faint psionic emission reaching up from the Ilythiiri's head, wrapping completely around each needle, and then flared with sudden power. Snowfire didn't see it, her eyes were closed as she concentrated on the feel of the *Sar*, where they were in relation to herself, their vectors and velocity. But to the crew, it was like nothing they had ever seen. The needles wove above Snowfire's head, the holographic representations of her Fetching gift crossing and criss-crossing in an ever-changing pattern. And then Snowfire moved to the second stage of the *Alure*, bringing the *Sar* spinning down around her.

Even without the ribbons of coloured light showing the psionic field holding them, this part of the *Sar-Alure* was one she knew and expected to be impressive. Nine needles, spinning about her and reflecting the compartment's lights all around. With the holo though, it was more than simply impressive. There was a beauty to it, something that she hadn't really intended in this, but might be glad of later, and it was easy for those watching to see how calming this was for her. This was something of her people, something that she still practiced, and the light spinning about her seemed to wrap her in an ethereal aura of pale blue.

She kept her eyes closed throughout, focusing on her *Sar*, making sure everything went right, and then brought all nine of them spinning up above her as fast as she could. They wove into a column above and before her, whirling about each other, and then she released them. The field flared brighter still, the green of a stronger field flashing across it for a moment as she brought each needle to a sudden stop, then vanished, and the needles dropped into her once again outstretched hand.

Opening her eyes, she looked to the Bynars, for the moment not seeing the reactions of the rest of her audience.

"Is that enough, Doctors?"

Everyone in the room was impressed with the display of mental capacity coming from the Ilythiiri before them and it did not fail to extend to the Doctors. Despite not being able to express their astonishment the way other species might, using certain facial muscles, it was clear that their eyes were slightly wider and their mouths were turned up slightly on each corner in a slight smile. They had just discovered an ability that they could study in depth, using the sensor readings Snowfire was gracious enough to provide for them.

So of course, their brief answer before letting her continue her presentation was full of gratitude.

"Yes, quite... "

" sufficient."

"Thank you..."

"...Lieutenant Commander."

There were no more questions in the assistance and the conference was concluded with a round of polite applause. Not everyone was applauding though. In fact, a lot of faces were simply grimly nodding to one another.

And all of these faces were blue.

* * *

Two weeks at a constant sustained speed of warp 8 would have been detrimental to any starship but a few of the very latest and fastest ones; here, with the use of transwarp propulsion to achieve and maintain it, it barely registered the same wear and tear observed on a vessel which would have been cruising at a snail's pace of warp 2.

That achievement in itself was already quite impressive, even to non-engineers. But this was in truth like hors-d'oeuvre to the plat de resistance; the actual implementation of transwarp speed beyond the standard warp threshold. And this is what awaited them next; if the propulsion system worked as expected, they would go again the same distance, this time towards space station Deep Space 9, but in mere hours!

There was therefore a renewed sense of trepidation aboard when the three-armed, three spired circular form of space station Echo 3 loomed on the main viewer. Everyone knew that, on the next day, pending any recommendation from engineering, operations or medical to the contrary, they would be on their way into the history books.

And then beyond.

" Space Station Echo 3, this is the USS Horizon, " announced Captain Kheren when communication was established; "request permission to dock. "

" USS Horizon, this is space station Echo 3 flight control, " came back the cold, feminine voice on the speakers that could have been that of the computer. " Permission granted. Please proceed towards docking pylon 1, thrusters only. Station tractor beams will take you in from there. Welcome Horizon. Enjoy your stay. "

" Thank you Echo 3, " finished the Andorian before lowering his gaze to the helm station before the command dais. " Take us in, Mister Snow. "

" Aye, Sir. Reducing to one quarter impulse power on approach to station standard orbit vector, " answered the copper-skinned pilot.

The commanding officer of Lotus Fleet's flagship then stood.

" Mister Sisko, complete transwarp analysis and recommendations for next T3 phase. Lieutenant Leône, review and report on all systems status. "

"Understood Sir" Elisha Leône acknowledged as the captain clearly verbalized his expectations to each senior officer.

She had already completed a second status sweep of all ship-wide systems and was just finishing to compile the results. Her intent was to have this updated synopsis completed and turned in to the captain before they completed docking procedures, but it would now be an unofficial race against time.

"Doctors 110 and 011 and Lyrya, please conduct a quick survey of crew status before we go... beyond the barrier. Lieutenant Corcoran, full ship's standard security conditions while we are docked. Mister Oseno, this will be the time for you to get any supply you might believe you need to complete full operational preparedness of the Polaris. "

"Aye Captain," Jureth replied before turning back to his console.

"Number One, please see to our proper docking procedures. Then, compliment the crew on a job well done and plan a quick eight hours shore leave for every shift before we go out again."

When they had all acknowledged his orders, Kheren went to the turbolift.

"I'll go meet the station's commander and report to him and Starbase Lotus about our current progress. Good work people."

And with those words, he disappeared behind the sliding doors of the lift, yeoman Blackbird and security officer Tyvya on his heels.

As the turbolift doors closed behind the captain, Jureth pulled up the internal sensor feed from the Polaris that he had previously linked to the Horizon's main computer. The sweeps were clear of all foreign objects and no unauthorized personnel had attempted to access any of the ship's systems. He was so absorbed in the console readout that he took no notice of his fellow Bajoran Variel Palos arriving on the bridge. Only when the intelligence officer approached him did Jureth realized he was there.

"Commander Oseno..."

Oseno Jureth practically jumped from his chair.

"By the Prophets, Variel, don't do that!"

"Do what, Sir?"

"Sneak up on me like that!"

Variel smiled. He had learned long ago to control the weight of his footfalls. It was something he had learned the hard way in his early intelligence assignments.

"I apologize, Sir... I'll try to be louder."

Oseno half smiled at Variel's remark even though he was trying not to.

"What can I do for you, Lieutenant?"

"I just wanted to let you know that I've prepared extensive intelligence briefs on both the True Way and the Dominion for the captain. We're going to be in their neck of the galaxy for awhile."

"Is there anything significant in them?"

Variel shrugged.

"Not much; both groups have been relatively dormant. It's mostly dispositions of known assets."

Jureth nodded.

"Feel free to submit them directly to Captain Kheren, but make sure you copy Commander Redding and myself."

"Aye, Sir, I will do that."

"Is that really why you came all the way to the bridge?"

"You got me," Variel said in mock surrender. "I'd like to ask you about something."

"You can walk with me then, I'm going down to the Polaris."

Oseno locked his console and rose from the chair and, with Variel behind him, entered the turbolift. As the lift began to move, Jureth turned to the younger Bajoran.

"So, what is it you need?"

"I want to ask you about Commander Redding."

"What about him?"

"What is your opinion of him?"

"Dedicated, capable, approachable..the qualities of a good first officer in my opinion."

"How much do you know about him?"

"Not much; I only met him for the first time at the commissioning ceremony."

Jureth wasn't sure where this line of questioning was going, but he was willing to tolerate it to see what the intelligence specialist was getting at.

"That's not true. You met Neil Redding aboard the USS Lotus as well."

Jureth's eyes narrowed.

"So you know."

Variel nodded.

"Only because I received a brief from Temporal Investigations and my superiors at Starfleet Intelligence. Just a few hours ago actually."

"I see..why would they feel the need to brief you?"

"They wish me to keep an eye on him."

Now Jureth understood. But he was also concerned about something else.

"Lieutenant, I'm going to ask you a question, and I am ordering you to give me a straight answer or so help me I will forcefully recommend to the captain to leave you on Echo 3."

"I will answer it if I can, Sir."

"Are you here to spy on this crew?"

"No Sir," Variel replied. "I am here as your intelligence specialist. The orders to observe Commander Redding only just now came in."

Jureth now had a dilemma; should he inform the captain? Would the captain tell Commander Redding? Oseno felt a loyalty to Redding based on his experience with him aboard the Kang, and he also knew Captain Kheren would not like having an active intelligence operation aboard his ship working with his own off-ship orders.

"Lieutenant, after I finish with the Polaris, you and I are going to see the captain."

Variel said nothing, only nodded as the lift arrived at its destination.

* * *

Captain's Log

Stardate: 87638.3

Initial testing of the low thresholds of our new transwarp drive has gone as smoothly and efficiently as hoped for. Commendation to be given to all the crew, especially to Lieutenant Commander Sisko and his engineering department, for working out any and all kinks in the systems. Commander Redding is proving himself to be a masterful orchestrator of ship departments, especially considering the size of this one, while Commander Oseno is already demonstrating his own excellent proficiency as a Strategic Officer with devising in record time an effective transwarp launch protocol for our auxilliary escort vessel. Our science chief, Lieutenant Commander K'Leysa, has already sent this crew into seeking out new life and new civilizations with her fascinating lectures on her own mysterious Illythirii people, demonstrating how this ship can truly act as a mobile starbase as much as our operations chief, Lieutenant Leône, has ensured this ship and crew to be on par with any capital vessel. As for our security chief, Lieutenant Corcoran, her quiet, effective handling of security on board during this crucial period is as completely flawless as our chief medical officers, Lieutenants 011 and 110, as well as chief counselor Lyrya, in taking care of our dedicated crew.

We have completed all preliminary studies of our first shakedown of the ship. Today we will really start testing this ship's capabilities by going for the first time truly beyond the warp threshold. Our transwarp 3 flight should take us all the way from Space Station Echo 3 to Space Station Deep Space 9 in merely twenty-one hours; almost twenty times faster than the fastest starship out there. With this successful part of our flight alone, a brand new era of exploration and discovery will be opened for the United Federation of Planets... And everyone here aboard the Horizon is understandably at least as excited as I am.

Kheren closed his computer terminal and tapped his combadge.

" Bridge, Kheren here. "

" Bridge here, " answered the familiar soft, crystalline voice of chief counselor Lyrya.

" Patch me through shipwide and station comm systems, Lieutenant, " the captain ordered simply.

The Aenar counselor might have been his wife, but like all Andorians, both were effortlessly and thoroughly professional in their speech and demeanor while on duty. Because of their matrimonial bond, they could always feel deeply what they felt for one another without having to make any outward show of it; and just as well knew that both of them could instantly sacrifice the other for the sake of ship and crew if need be, knowing full well that sending one to his or her death would mean the same thing to the other... and to the other mate bonded to them. This cold, pragmatic attitude would be appalling to other emotional species like Humans... but to Andorians, just as for seemingly emotionless beings like Vulcans, it was as accepted and inbred a fact as breathing. For Andorians, grief and pain would come afterwards... if there was even time left to feel them. While wearing their uniforms, duty was where their famous fiery passions all went.

And thus, his voice, as he addressed the thousands aboard the flagship of Lotus Fleet, had that intensity in it that showed his own excitement about what he was saying with otherwise seemingly complete professional control.

" Now hear this; now hear this; this is the captain. It is 2344 hours, ship time. All personnel, report to your stations for launch as scheduled by 2400 hours. All personnel to confirm readiness for departure by this time to your department chief. All department chiefs to confirm all stations ready for launch at scheduled time to First Officer. All senior officers, report immediately to the bridge. All, prepare to fly into the next page of the History books. Captain out. "

He knew full well that most if not all of his people would already be at their posts, at least as ready as he was to be underway; but he wanted things done by the book. That is why he could go beyond it's last page when a situation would not find it's answer within it's covers and never being found at fault for doing so. And that was the attitude he wanted to drill into his officers and crew. Don't just do the right thing; do the right thing the right way.

Closing communications, the Andorian commanding officer of the starship Horizon stood from behind his translucent desk, adjusted his grey and black uniform over his tall, athletic frame and strode purposefully towards the door of his office. His destination, the bridge... and a rendez-vous with History.

Redding stood up from his bridge chair and gave a loud clap with his hands.

"This is it people! Last chance to dot your 'I's and cross those 'T's! Get your last round of checks out of the way because, in fifteen minutes, we break another record for doing what no man has done before." Then he quickly added; "I mean, no one has done before."

He then tapped his combadge.

"Redding to Sisko; tell us you've finished your sixth check and every thing's green, Commander. The soups starting to boil."

Upon hearing Captain Kheren's announcement, Main Engineering was abuzz with activity as officers and crewmembers hurriedly prepared for their upcoming test flight.

"Give me a status on the tachyon matrix, Ensigns," said Lieutenant Commander Sisko to Kilani Cooper and Patricia Blakely who were intently focused on monitoring the status of the propulsion system as the matrix was fine-tuned to emit a resonance frequency that was a cubic proportion higher than the previous one they were at.

"We're good here, Commander," Blakely said, as she noted the point-zero-zero-one-percent variance between the actual readings and those of the successful simulations they had run earlier.

"Structural, how are we looking?" Sisko then called out.

The fellow Bajoran structural integrity specialist, Ensign Celes Arlana responded.

"The temporal stresses introduced in our transwarp 3 test flight have caused microfractures in the hull, but nothing beyond normal operating parameters. We should see if the Captain will allow the introduction of a chroniton barrier into the shields using our secondary deflector."

"How risky is that?" asked Sisko, as he walked over to her station to review the readings.

"Not at all," she replied. "They have been experimenting with the procedure at Utopia Planitia, and it's a very simple and straightforward procedure. However, I believe we will be alright without it if we feel it is too big of a risk to combine it with transwarp travel beyond transwarp 3, something never attempted before, save this ship when it went to help in the Azimuth Horizon operation." She then added; "However, it was also something that was done routinely by the Borg when traveling through their transwarp conduits, and our study of their technology since the return of the USS Voyager has helped us to study the procedure and be fully confident in its use at transwarp."

"If it's a straightforward procedure, I think we should try it to avoid unnecessary stresses to the hull," Sisko said.

"Aye, Sir," Celes agreed. "If we can get extra power to the structural integrity field too, that will be an additional benefit."

Sisko nodded his agreement and turned to a nearby monitor where he tapped the icon to open the comm to the bridge.

"We're ready in Engineering, Commander Redding. We would like to try using our secondary deflector to emit a chroniton barrier into the shields. This will help to prevent undue temporal stress fractures. Also, we would like to request half auxiliary power to the structural integrity field, and half to the shields for the entirety of the transwarp 4 test."

Elisha Leône then chimed in from her Ops post.

"All areas of communication, sensors and their related systems, ship-wide diagnostics, personnel, and resource allocation throughout departments all appear to be functioning at this point with high levels of efficiency, " the olive-skinned Orion COO reported. "I am sending a current synopsis of this information along with complete data analysis of each report to your PADD, Sir."

She engaged the files and sent them to the ship's first officer and the commanding officer.

Redding looked over his PADD.

"Understood. I'll pass this along with my recommendation."

Then he looked up as Captain Kheren came out of his ready room.

"Sir, all stations are at the ready but engineering would like to add a few more precautions to the list.. as is their way."

And as he said so, the large man handed him the PADD.

"Nothing on there I see a problem with, Captain."

Kheren took the PADD and scanned it quickly, nodding his white-haired head.

"Very good, Number One. Confirm to engineering that they can proceed and that, this time, we *will* wait for their signal before engaging transwarp. At the speed we will be going, we certainly can afford some extra time to err on the side of caution. And for once, there is no emergency forcing us to rush out. Anything else to point out, Commander?"

Redding gave a slight shrug.

"Not at this time, Sir, but the day is young after all."

He then called engineering to give the go ahead.

Just then, Oseno Jureth returned to the bridge, having heard the captain's order for senior officers to report. Trailing behind him was Variel Palos and Jureth was still unsure how to handle the information the intelligence specialist had provided him. It wasn't that he was intimidated by Palos or by Starfleet Intelligence. The Horizon's Andorian captain on the other hand was another matter. Despite Oseno's rank, the captain held a certain air about him that unnerved the Bajoran slightly though he tried not to show it. As calmly as he could, he approached the command area of the bridge and spoke to Kheren.

"Captain, I was wondering if I might have a word, Sir."

An eyebrow followed by an antenna rose toward Oseno.

" In my office then, Commander. "

Once back in his ready room, Kheren tried to be professionally friendly and open as much as he could... but, as always, failed miserably. He had a genuine respect for Oseno Jureth, even a good measure of admiration. The way he had handled the Undine interference during the last major fleet engagement, even seeding the new and historical lasting peace between the extradimensional aliens and the Federation, was no small feat, if only to name one on the Bajoran's impressive Starfleet record. Yet, the Andorian's typical lack of facial muscles and social graces were a severe hindrance to his efforts at congeniality and worse, he was barely aware of it. It was thus with a deceptively severe demeanor that he faced his strategic officer and the junior officer that was accompanying him; Variel Palos, Lieutenant in Intelligence if he recalled properly.

" What is on your mind, Commander? " Kheren asked in his usual directness.

In the small room with the Horizon's captain, Oseno's own heart began to beat slightly faster and he was positive that Andorians could sense such things, whether they actually could or not.

The fact was, Kheren's antennae could clearly hear his heartbeat at this distance. But his own being naturally faster than most humanoids due to the higher metabolism of Andorians, he did not realize that, for the Bajoran, this was indicative of stress. Thus he made no effort to alleviate this unperceived tension for his officer as Oseno swallowed once and turned to the intelligence officer.

"Lieutenant please relate to the captain what you told me."

Palos nodded. But, if the intelligence operative was uncomfortable, he didn't show it. In fact, he showed hardly any emotion at all as he began to speak.

"Captain, I should preface this by telling you that, prior to my assignment here, I was a field operative for Starfleet Intelligence. I was rotated back to the Fleet to remove my face from certain circles in which I've operated. That said, Sir, a short time ago, I received an encrypted transmission from Starfleet Intelligence. It contained a briefing on one Commander Neil Redding. Both Temporal Investigations and Intelligence are...concerned regarding the commander's well being, Sir. My orders were to observe him, and report back. I brought this to Commander Oseno's attention, knowing full well he would likely bring it to you. I did so because I believed it necessary, though I suppose what you choose to do with this information is up to you... Sir."

As Palos finished speaking, Jureth picked up the conversation.

"Sir, given everything that happened aboard the McKenzie...I wasn't about to keep this from you."

The Andorian recalled vividly the Mc Kenzie incident. During Operation Horizon, the chief engineer, a Cardassian Lieutenant Commander by the name of Sorripto, up until then an outstanding Starfleet officer, had been blackmailed by Section 31, the former occult agency deluding itself into believing immorality was the salvation of the Federation. The Cardassian was thus constrained to perform a sabotage and assassination mission against a group of dangerous religious fanatics bent on foiling the operation to stop the anomaly from destroying the universe. As reprehensible as such a mission in itself was, the worst had not been the action itself, but the fact that this Sorripto had decided to keep it all to himself and act on his own, rejecting any help or rules outright to go against his own crew and endangering his ship and shipmates, even the entire operation, simply because he had no trust in Starfleet and his fellow officers.

The former chief engineer of the starship McKenzie was now serving time in a penal colony for numerous violations of Starfleet rules and Federation laws. If he had learned anything from the whole incident remained to be seen.

Through his own testimony during the trial and during his own board of inquiry following the destruction of his own ship, the Artemis, Captain Kheren had made it abundantly clear an unequivocal for his part that he deeply despised such gung-ho officers and deluded self-serving heroics... and would never tolerate this lack of trust between people serving with him. It was now clear that at least the two officers before him had heard both messages well and that truly put his mind at ease and warmed his heart.

" Thank you, Commander; this is most appreciated," Kheren then said after a moment of silence. "And you too, Lieutenant. Antimatter is what supposedly makes a ship go, but in truth it is her crew; and the single most important fuel of that crew is trust. In the unforgiving vastness of space, for the kind of endeavor we dedicate ourselves to, we must have complete and infallible trust into one another... or else, we are all dead... and all that we do or try to do means nothing. "

After another pause, Kheren looked straight at Palos.

" Lieutenant, you will proceed as per your orders. But you will send your reports to *me*. I will be the one to deliver it all to Starfleet Intelligence... and Temporal investigations. If they contact you directly about it, refer them to me... and you are free to tell them that you are doing so under *my* orders. And I will inform Commander Redding presently. After all, if there are people truly... concerned... about his... well being, he should be made aware of it and be understandably thankful about it, no? "

For once, he conveyed clearly the irony of his words.

" If there is nothing else, gentlemen, you may return to your assigned duties. And please send Commander Redding in here on your way out. "

"Aye Sir," Jureth replied, clearly answering for both of them before turning and motioning to Variel to proceed him out of the ready room.

As the door closed behind him, Jureth released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. His fellow Bajoran, Variel, only smirked.

"Well, that went...well."

"Truthfully, better than I expected after the issues aboard the McKenzie..."

Palos held up a hand.

"I'm well aware of that incident, Sir."

"You are planning on following his orders, aren't you?" Oseno asked, suddenly concerned.

"Of course. He is the captain after all."

Somehow, Variel's words did not comfort Oseno. The security officer in him told him that he should keep a close eye on his assigned intelligence specialist. Still, he said nothing more to Variel and proceeded down to the command area of the bridge, stopping next to Commander Redding.

"Commander, the captain would like to see you in his office, Sir."

Redding looked up from the PADD he was reading over.

"Thank you Oseno.." then looked up at him with a concerned expression "It's not about the transwarp test is it? I swear, if another test get's held back..."

But he didn't finish the thought. With a nod he got up and headed into the Captain's ready room.

"You wanted to see me, Sir?"

The Andorian showed a seat to the large man.

" Please sit down, Commander. "

He waited a moment after his first officer had complied to speak again.

" I have been informed that Starfleet Intelligence and the Temporal Investigations Office both have an eye on you, Number One. I want you to be aware of that fact, if you are not already, but also that *I* am aware of it... and that *I* will have *my* eyes, not on you but on *them* from now on... all four of mine. "

With a mildly surprised look Redding thought it over " Makes sense I guess, I suspected they'd keep tabs on me of course but.. overtly like this? " He brought his hand up to his chin. " In any case Captain I'll try and not let this be a distraction for the crew, we have too much to focus on as it is and I'm certainly not looking for any kind of celebrity status. If you think this could become a problem that might disrupt the crew I'm willing, if not anxious, to get off at Deep Space 9 sir. "

Kheren's gaze became harder. And so did his voice.

" You can be assured, Number One, that, if anything like this ever disrupts my ship, I will drop off anyone involved near and far with it well before I let go of my first officer... and in their case, I might not wait to get to DS9. "

Calming himself down before his anger could really flare up, the Andorian went back to his usual soft, low tone again. But the silvery eyes in his rigid face did not soften as much.

" Do not worry about your status aboard the Horizon. As far as I know, the crew is unaware of this, apart from a handful of officers; and even if they do eventually learn about it, most have served under me before and are used to far more... disruptive situations than this. But most of all, they are Starfleet officers; they know and believe that it is complete thrust between us that is the key of our success... if not our very survival. "

The Andorian looked straight into Redding's eyes.

"I for one deeply despise this kind of shadow play. Spying on enemies I can understand; after all, we Andorians have done it most expertedly for centuries. But doing it between Starfleet officers... This is exactly the kind of dishonesty, hypocrisy and backstabbing mentality that made it possible for archaic vermin like Section 31 to exist in the first place. And I will have none of this vile cloak and dagger filth on my ship."

Kheren straightened his uniform.

" I took over the responsibility of this... monitoring. I will deal with both Starfleet Intelligence and Temporal Investigations when the time comes. And rest assured that having implemented it behind my back will not make for a friendly chat. In the meantime, I would like you to make sure that any and all transmissions coming in or out of this ship will be detected, recorded, decrypted, even if it's done by candlelight through the windows... and speak with Lieutenant Lyrya about implementing the telepathic grid protocol in that regard. "

At the word 'telepathic,' Redding looked slightly uneasy.

" Are you recommending that the Lieutenant monitor me for mental activity, Captain? While I share your concern for security and will of course do my up most to insure against any such breaches, I'm not sure I would be comfortable with the idea of someone randomly checking my thoughts. "

In truth, working with telepathic personnel was something Neil never seemed to get used to. One annalist suggested that it was a latent phobia brought about by the somewhat 'sudden' intrusion of more psionically friendly cultures than he was used to. This was not an uncommon reaction in the late twenty-third and into the twenty-fourth century.

But the captain shook his head and lifted a hand.

" Certainly not, Number One. "

Kheren pushed a few buttons then turned his desk PADD to face his first officer. A Security protocol entitled Telepathic Grid was displayed and the captain summarized it's content outloud.

" This is part of an extensive security procedure I devised a while back, following the attempted takeover of the USS Artemis by the Horizon Children. Simply put, it is a passive network involving all telepathic endowed personnel aboard. As far as I myself understand it, it is akin to having your "mental ears" open for any noise; in this case, any thought that could be sent from or to the ship through the neurogenic field, the source of any and all psionic activity. Any such telepathic transmission would be caught by one of the numerous minds sensitive to such form of communication and relayed to a central nexus; in our case, Counselor Lyrya. Being Aenar, her telepathic prowess is unequaled, even by our formidable Illythirii chief of science; once alerted to a telepathic transmission, she would be able to trace it back to it's source... even if that source is sectors away. You are certainly quite aware that such interstellar range capability of her species has been documented since the twenty second century. So, the bottom line is: if anyone tries to use that form of communication... we will know just as we would know if someone used more conventional means. "

Kheren looked straight at Redding.

" If anyone has anything to say about you or any person under my command, he will have to say it to me. "

* * *

As the crew was preparing for the jump to Transwarp 3, Doctors 011 and 110 were working to prepare for any medical abnormalities that could result from travel beyond the rate previously thought of as the "warp speed limit" or "threshold". They consulted the reports from the Horizon's previous transwarp 4 flight. It had been much briefer; a few minutes to catch up with the other ships in Operation Horizon. Now they would be traveling for an extended period of almost a full day.

The reports indicated some minor queasiness from several officers, due to chronometric stress, but nothing major. The Bynar doctors noted that they would have to recommend to the Captain that the crew of the USS Horizon could have the option of being administered a preventative dose of anetrizine to slightly numb the cranial nerves so that they would not be so acutely aware of the minor time distortions.

However, what really had their attention while they worked on the routine preparations was the readings given to them by Snowfire K'Leysha, that would allow them to understand the telekinetic ability she displayed. It was the first species they knew of with the ability and to further understand the medical science behind it could lead them to write a paper on the subject and to perhaps even be granted the honor of winning a Carrington Award.

They spoke to each other in their own high pitched and extremely fast language, at length about the subject, while the other medical staff in the sick bay were performing their duties.

"It does not seem to be utilizing the same psionic frequency as previous studies of telepathic abilities," said 110.

"Agreed," replied 011. "Perhaps that is a good thing. The resonance frequency required to lift an object could perhaps kill someone if used to read a mind."

"Good point. A natural evolution of the ability would mean that the Ilythiiri species would not even attempt to 'move' a brain, as it were. And the higher frequency points to a higher brain function than simple telepathy."

011 nodded, her head slightly brushing 110's as she did. Even though they spoke to each other, they still retained close contact as part of the speech was telepathic with the assistance of their computer chips. "She did seem to indicate that her species was more adept at, and more commonly able to use, telepathy, or 'mindspeak', as she called it."

"Yes," replied 110. "And her telekinetic ability, or 'fetching', was limited and it appeared that a smaller fraction of her species possess it."

"It would be interesting to see if a Betazoid or Aenar with advanced telepathic aptitude would be able to be trained to adjust the frequency to the point of moving objects instead."

"Perhaps an experiment could be started with volunteers from the crew. We will have to speak to the Commander about this."

"Agreed," said 011. "Perhaps even two of our counselors on our staff... Chief Counselor Lyrya and the Betazoid, Marleenea Sirris, would be interested in volunteering. Among others from the ship, hopefully."

"Yes, we will bring it up after the test is underway, or at the next staff meeting."

As they returned to the task at hand for preparations for transwarp 3, the most subtle of a hint of a smile could be seen on both their faces.

* * *

" All hands; prepare for departure. "

On the vast bridge of the Lotus Fleet flagship, officers were at their stations, ready to implement what they all knew would be a historical moment. The odd mixture of excitement and seriousness permeated the air as Captain Kheren and Commander Redding took their own seats on the command dais.

" All departments report green, captain. " announced yeoman Blackbird.

" Doctor, open a channel to flight operations. "

" Channel open... "

Without really being aware of it, Kheren straightened his uniform and sat straighter, his soft, deep voice taking a solemn tone.

" Space Station Echo 3, this is the USS Horizon. Request permission to depart. "

A feminine voice came over the bridge speakers but was, by order of the captain, transmitted across the entire vessel so that the crew could also be made fully part of the moment.

" USS Horizon, this Echo 3 flight control. You are clear to depart on assigned vector 311 mark 15. Good tides and fair winds, Horizon. We will follow your wake. "

Poetically said but nevertheless clear, they were reminded that their flight would be closely monitored by both their point of departure and their destination, space station Deep Space 9.

" Thank you Echo 3, " said the Andorian as Doctor 110 closed the channel. " Mister Snow; standard undocking procedures and then proceed to full impulse on our projected trajectory once we clear the station. "

" Standard departure, aye, " answered the copper-skinned man at the helm.

If he was disappointed by the bland way they were moving out on such an auspicious occasion, he didn't show it. Like everyone else, he was living the moment as it was.

" We have cleared all moorings. Thrusters at full... We are now free and clear to navigate, heading 311 mark 15. ETA to DS9 at projected speed of transwarp 3; twenty-one hours. Engaging impulse. "

There was a faint hum coming from somewhere deep within the bowels of the gigantic starship but not even the tiniest vibration. Even the exceptionally powerful impulse engines failed to affect the colossal mass of this vessel.

" Full impulse, Captain, " now reported Aguk Snow with a clinical voice. But then, there was a first perceptible hint of excitement when he spoke his next words; " Warp power at your command.. all speeds available through transwarp drive. "

Kheren took a moment to breathe before giving his orders through the shipwide channel.

" Engineering, Ops; monitor all systems. Medical, Counselling; monitor all crew. Science, Tactical; full external sweep. Commander Oseno; supervise those transwarp sensor operations. Commander Redding; supervise flight operations and testings with helm. All hands... we are going to transwarp. "

Now there was a definite vibration in the air. But it was not coming from the ship. So far and although they had already engaged the transwarp propulsion flawlessly for two full weeks, they had not exceeded the standard warp scale; in fact, they had not even gone to it's limits. But now, they were about to go way beyond it; not in a rigid closed-off tunnel like the Borg did with their own transwarp conduit technology or the similarly unyielding Quantum Slipstream Drive, nor even the brutal spatial jump of catapulting or folding space, but with full maneuverability, tactical and sensor capability denied to all these other forms of hypertravel. They were about to open a new era of space exploration as significant as the advent of standard warp travel itself... and they all knew it, felt it... lived it.

And that moment was now.

Captain Kheren looked at each of his bridge officers in turn before he fixed his silvery gaze to the main screen.

" Mister Snow... transwarp 3. "

Now there was a definite vibration felt through the deckplates as ultrapowerful engines, the likes of which had never been engaged before, came to life.

On the screen, the familiar jump to warp effect ended up in the still unfamiliar sight of transwarp flight, with it's elongated streaks of starlight going from blue to red from a seemingly dense cluster of sparkling lights right in front of them.

Long seconds of silence followed before the Inuit helmsman finally confirmed with barely more than a whisper what they were all seeing.

" Transwarp 3. "

They were now going at an astounding twenty thousand times the speed of light. Suddenly, there was a huge storm all around them that shook them all down to their core.

From bow to stern, over two thousand living, sentient beings were shouting and applauding all at the same time.

Commander Redding leaned back in his chair and just then realized he had been holding his breath. In his mind's eye, he saw his older brother Jerry standing next to him with that odd cocked smile of his.

See Neil? I told you it would work. You just have to want it bad enough.

Redding smiled and shook his head.

Always had to get in the last word, didn't' you?

And then he clapped along with the rest of the bridge officers.

Only the Vulcans and Saurians on board refrained from this outward show of elation; but that did not mean they didn't feel the moment just as deeply. Captain Kheren also was a model of restraint and composure, drawing on his own mastery of Vulcan Kolinhar; yet, he too could not control the spontaneous pumping of his left fist in front of him. And if his face could have conveyed any emotion, it would have been snarling in pride and triumph.

The Andorian commanding officer allowed some time for everyone to go through their emotions and congratulates one another before he brought things back to order.

" All hands; well done. We are now sailing into the History books. So let us make sure we do not capsize on the other end. Get to work, people. "

And for the entire next day, not many would be able to bring oneself to sleep or even slow down.

Stationed rather nervously at her Ops post, the Orion officer Elisha Leône surreptitiously breathed out a huge sigh of relief. Each transwarp threshold that they crossed was as exhilarating as it was frightening to this young rookie. But she swiftly gathered her thoughts together as she fastidiously checked over systems throughout the ship.

Afterward, Elisha turned to face her commanding officer.

"Systems ship-wide indicate that they continue to function within expected parameters Captain."

"Thank you, Lieutenant, " answered the Andorian in the command seat; "let us hope that it stays that way for the next twenty-one hours. "

In Main Engineering, the voice of Joseph Daystrom Sisko rang out after that of the captain over the comm.

"How's that chroniton field coming, Ensign Celes?"

"Almost there, Lieutenant Commander Sisko, Sir," replied Celes Arlana. "And... there, it is fully in place."

"And not a moment too soon, Ensign," replied the Chief Engineer with a chuckle. "I could already feel my time drifting away from me."

"You jest, Sir, but without this field, that is exactly what would happen. You would actually lose seven seconds in this journey. Not a lot now, but if we go at transwarp for the rest of our careers..."

"Point taken, Ensign. And I suppose this is also good for protecting the ship itself." Sisko replied.

"Aye Sir, that is an important part. Without it, the temporal stress fractures would take significant effort and resources to repair every time we came out of transwarp."

"Just think Ensign," Sisko said. "Over two-hundred years ago, the very first Enterprise just barely reached two-hundred times the speed of light. We are now going one-hundred times as fast as that. Who knows where we will be going two-hundred years from now?"

"Not being Vulcans, we won't know," Celes Arlana replied. "But it may be a Galactic Federation building those ships, Sir."

"That would be something..." Sisko said, his head turning to look at one of the screens showing the view outside the ship. In Main Engineering, they didn't have any portholes to stare out of.

If there was one in the entire crew of the Horizon who did not applaud, it was the ship's black skinned CSO, who was far more occupied with what the vessel's sensors were telling her. Or perhaps to be more precise, what they were refusing to tell her. As the jubilation swept the ship, *let them have it; for them it is a great victory*, she thought, the tapping upon her console became far more tightly spaced, working on isolating a blip that kept flickering into and out of existence on her displays. As the celebration subsided, she tapped through another sequence, muttered something unpleasant in her native tongue and contacted the astrometrics lab.

"Daniel," she said quietly, "I need you to run a sensor sweep. Focus is tachyon waveform signatures in a hundred twenty degree cone centered on our prow. There's something screwy in the basic sensors and I'd like a full scan."

"Aye, ma'am. Beginning sweep now. "

"I'll start cross-indexing with the records on regional anomalies, see if I can find anything." Snowfire replied. "Get that sweep done double-quick. I don't like this."

Sitting near the security bridge station manned by Lieutenant Tyvya, Oseno Jureth for his part applauded along with the rest of the crew as the ship reached transwarp 3 for the first time and then set about checking on the ship's transwarp sensors. Finding that everything was in order, at least for the moment, he checked again on the Polaris and noted that the little escort was sitting calmly in her hangar almost like a guard dog waiting to be called upon to perform her duties. The Aquarius Class vessel's power output was nominal and the video feeds from the internal sensors were showing that all was normal with her skeleton engineering crew, the only souls aboard. He was about to turn his attention back to the transwarp sensor system when the Byna doctor manning communications at his station addressed him.

"Commander Oseno, there is..."

"... a personal..."

"... subspace communication..."

"... coming in..."

"... for you..."

"... Sir."

The strategic ops officer of the flagship was perplexed, not so much by the peculiar clipped speech of the small blue humanoid but by wondering who in the known galaxy could possibly be trying to contact him now.

"From?"

"USS... "

"... Celestial..."

"... Sir."

Jureth's heart jumped. There was only one person who could be trying to reach him from the Celestial; Catherine Steele.

Trying to contain both his joy and at the same time his trepidation, the Baloran managed to get out a reply.

"Captain, permission to take this, Sir?"

"A good opportunity to confirm communications efficiency while in transwarp," said Kheren. "Go ahead, Commander. You may use the conference room if you need this to be private."

"Thank you Sir; I think I will."

Oseno rose from his station and exited the bridge into the ship's conference room. His heartbeat increased exponentially as he activated the holographic display at the center of the triangular conference table. For a moment the Federation logo appeared and then after several seconds it was replaced by the face of his long time...and still he hoped, friend.

"Hello, Oseno," she said with a smile. "Catch you at a bad time?"

"We're in the middle of a transwarp test...nothing important," Jureth replied smiling. Then his tone softened. "It's good to hear from you. Frankly I wasn't sure I was going to."

Cat paused for a long moment before responding.

"I didn't know what to say. You are the best friend I've ever had and we've been through a lot together, especially in the last couple of months... and... I wasn't sure if I wanted what you wanted."

Jureth was stung a little bit by those last few words. He had taken a chance that Cat was feeling the same things was and he knew that there was a possibility that she might not be.

"I see...well..."

"But," she said cutting him off, "I've had time to think about it and I think that maybe, once we're both back in the same area of the galaxy, we can see where things go."

Jureth was too happy to respond for several seconds. His heart raced, but this time it was in joy and excitement, not trepidation.

"You have no idea how happy I am to hear you say that."

She smiled.

"Yes I do. You're an open book, Oseno."

"Only to you I hope," Jureth replied.

Suddenly, the image on the viewer began to skew.

"Cat, I'm losing you."

"Losing it on this end too; see you soon!"

The monitor blanked and Cat was replaced once again by the Federation logo. Jureth wondered if the break was on her end or the Horizon's comm system having trouble keeping up with the ship's speed. He decided he didn't really care that much at that moment, but it would need to be reported to the captain. What really mattered to him was that Cat at least had some feelings for him, and that meant that the risk he had taken had been worth it.

The smiling Bajoran returned to the bridge and, before taking his former seat at the security station, made a point to stop near the tactical station.

"Thank you for the time Captain, but I should report that I lost the transmission without any effort my part. Not certain if the loss was here or the Celestial, Sir."

The antennae on the top sides of the captain's snowy head started to move like fingers slowly drumming.

"Lieutenant Leône; check our comm system's status."

"Aye Sir" the Orion Ops officer responded immediately to her Captain's directive as her focus then shifted to rechecking the status of the ship's communication system.

It was peculiar since she had just ran a thorough system's check merely moments before. Something about this gave Elisha a rather eerie feeling.

"Lieutenant Commander K'Leysha; anything nearby that could have caused interference with transmissions? " then asked Kheren.

Snowfire's gaze didn't even waver from her screen as she answered, black fingers moving swiftly across her panel.

"There's something on the sensors that looked like a blip but I'm having astrometrics run it down. Somewhere in a cone ahead of..."

She didn't get to finish her report as a sudden booming roared across the frame of the titanic vessel. Nothing at all was felt but, on the main viewer, the colored transwarp field suddenly flashed and the streaks of light became more numerous, more brilliant and zooming faster from a much brighter and larger nexus of coalescing points of pulsing lights.

" Report! " ordered Kheren, suddenly sitting very straight on his chair, antennae pointing forward.

" Sir... nav sensors indicate we are now going at... transwarp 4! " answered Aguk Snow as his fingers ran on his helm controls. "But... engine readouts say our power output is still at nominal levels for transwarp 3! "

" Confirmed, Sir! " then said Robert Baoule from the engineering station. "No change in power levels or engine consumption, no system failure or change... but we *have* accelerated! "

" And we are *still* accelerating! " added the helmsman; " Helm controls not responding! "

" Condition yellow, " ordered Kheren tapping his combadge. " Engineering; Mister Sisko, we lost helm control up here. "

"Aye, Sir we see that", came the voice of Sisko from Engineering. "We're looking into it."

The Engineer kept his response brief, as he was sure the Captain was too busy for a detailed explanation at the time.

There was another booming echo from bow to stern. This time, the booming was accompanied by a slight jolt felt throughout the entire hull of the colossal vessel and the light show on the large screen intensified once more.

"Transwarp 5! now 5.1... 5.2... "

" Captain! " the bald, black-skinned bridge engineer warned; " this ship is designed with a top speed of transwarp 5 in mind; there is no telling what will happen or what we will be able to do if we go... "

" Red Alert! " shouted the Andorian.

"Put as much power into our deflector and structural integrity fields as we can then," Snowfire advised as the Horizon continued to accelerate. "It won't stop us, but it'll help us hold together. If either of them go whilst we're at this velocity, we're dead."

"Lieutenant Leône; divert all available power to both systems, " ordered Kheren.

Reacting instinctively as this crisis began to unfold, Elisha cast aside her trepidations as she was reassessing all of the ship systems. She noted quickly that, despite their continued acceleration, astonishingly no additional power was being consumed; and even though helm had lost control functions, her station was still operational. The Orion Ops officer worked tempestuously, diverting all of this available power to protecting the integrity of the ship as it hurled increasingly beyond established safety limits.

Then, responding to the captain's orders she quickly blurted out her report.

"Deflector and structural integrity fields now raised to one hundred and twenty-two point five percent normal operation parameters, Captain!"

" Add a tribble rolling in a ball if you have to, Lieutenant, but every additional fraction will count, " simply said Kheren in answer, keeping his four oculars straight at the screen as if he was facing some deadly adversary.

If she hadn't been so engaged in her task and simultaneously frightened, the Orion Ops might have bursted out laughing at the surprisingly witty response of her captain. Instead, she instinctively gave a retort of her own.

"I'd climb in a ball myself and start running like hell if that would help, Sir..."

She continued vigorously reassigning power to funnel more energy into the already strained fields. After a few more unorthodox maneuvers, Elisha managed to squeeze out additional power.

"Deflector and structural integrity fields increased an additional thirteen point two percent, Captain" she declared breathlessly. Then, with the sound of disappointment laced in her voice, she added; "I don't believe that I can add any more, Sir!"

"Prayers, if you believe that would help, " acknowledged the Andorian. "You're doing your job well, Lieutenant; now, we must both rely on our shipmates to do the rest. "

"Understood Sir" she said resolutely, although inside she was feeling rather disappointed in herself that she couldn't do more at this moment.

While all this was going on, Redding couldn't help but think of the USS Response and its last run. Was he watching the same event all over again? this time, he might at least remember it. Using his chair controls he downloaded all resent logs to the Log buoy including his own personal logs.

"Captain, emergency buoy updated and ready at your order, but the longer we wait the further out of known space it will end up."

"Good thinking, Number One," said the captain, nodding appreciatively without looking at the large man at his right hand. "You do have some experience in this... Implement at your discretion."

At the same moment, down in Engineering, Chief engineer Joey Day Sisko called out to Ensign Kilani Cooper.

"I need options for a controlled shutdown, immediately!"

"Aye Sir," the Ensign responded and began working with Ensign Blakely to determine how to safely get them out of transwarp.

"If we turn off the navigational deflector it would do it," Blakely responded.

"Yes, and it would also kill us," the Mayan Propulsion Specialist protested.

"I know, but it's something to keep in mind," Blakely said. "Maybe if we can protect the ship another way... ride out the wave as it were... until we slowed down. Then turn it back on when we get below warp 10."

"We're still accelerating," called out a young crewman who was nervously monitoring the readings. "5.3... 5.4..."

"Sir, at this rate of acceleration, when we reach transwarp 10... if that is even a possibility... we will be over thirty thousand light years from where we started!" stated Ensign Cooper.

"thirty-two thousand, three hundred and forty -two light years to be exact," came the nonplussed voice of the Vulcan crewman Surlac.

"And when will that happen?" Sisko asked the Vulcan.

"Seventeen point two minutes, Sir."

"Sir when that happens we'll reach the edge..."

"I know... how do we stop this thing Ensign!" yelled Sisko to the two officers who were still discussing possibilities.

Ensign Cooper approached.

"Sir, we have a plan, but you're not going to like it."

"Let's hear it."

"Sir, as you know the navigational deflector is actually used in the transwarp process to create and maintain the tachyon matrix needed in the transwarp calculations. As long as the navigational deflector is up, we're going to keep accelerating. The only other thing that is keeping us going is the warp core, but we can't shut it down without causing an immediate breach. If we shut down the navigational deflector every bit of space dust and debris will obliterate the ship instantly. However, the Polaris has a navigational deflector...."

Sisko followed up with the rest.

"So we use it to protect the Horizon while we tumble out of Transwarp... you're right, I don't like it. Would there be enough power in the Polaris' deflector to protect us?"

"If we put all she's got into it, I believe so, Sir. We could run a few simulations but..."

"We're short on time, I know. Get to it anyway. We have to be sure this will work before we attempt anything," Sisko said.

After the Ensign hurried away to start the simulations, Sisko tapped his combadge.

"Sisko to the Captain. Sir, I think we have a way to stop the ship, but it's dangerous. My team is running a simulation, but, Sir... if this continues, we'll be reaching the edge of our galaxy in just over fifteen minutes."

He then proceeded to explain his team's plan to the Captain.

Listening to the chief engineer's summary, Kheren did not ask any question. There was no time for debate and he had to have faith in his people; after all, they were "all in the same boat" as the Humans said.... and Humans, which were the largest part of his crew, were the best survivalists in the galaxy; Bajorans like Sisko and Oseno, recent survivors of oppression and hardships, were certainly not far behind.

" Keep me posted, Mister Sisko. Our science chief came up with a way to sustain us a bit longer so you do have some more time to work with... "

The Andorian tapped his combadge to get to the ship wide channel as the red alert klaxon blared.

" All hands, PIDs; All non essential personnel to the lifeboats. All civilians and diplomatic personnel to deck 38. "

As he hit with his palm his own Personal Inertial Dampener on his seat, the captain then turned towards his Strategic Operations Officer.

"Commander Oseno, get to the Polaris and have her ready for launch. Seems like your transwarp launch might get a live testing sooner than we expected. And fill her up with your full crew and all our diplomats and civilians as per standard evacuation protocol. At least, if this fails, some of us will survive along with you. "

The Polaris was capable of evacuating no more than a hundred and fifty people along with it's entire crew complement of forty. That was as a whole barely ten percent of the entire complement of the Horizon... but it was still nearly two hundred people he could save if all things came to worst. And, as always, saving the lives of his crew was the first and last thing on Kheren's mind. And here again, he made it clearly known.

And as he spoke, there was another boom, louder this time and the entire ship shook as if her shields had been hit by a torpedo blast. With their PIDs on, no one truly felt it, but their consoles visibly trembled eerily under their hands.

" Transwarp 6!" shouted Snow with awe. "At current rate, transwarp 7 in... four minutes! "

Just as eerily, there was no change in the sound of the engines despite their sudden acceleration to an astounding ten million times the speed of light. But, on the screen, the light shower coming towards them became even more spectacular in speed, color and brightness.

" Sir, " then chimed in Lieutenant Tyvya from the security station, "even with reinforced structural field and deflector, I'm not sure we will be able to withstand many more of those transitions. Certainly not beyond transwarp 9... "

Transwarp 9; nearly four hundred million times the speed of light... the number was so incredible, there was a moment of awed silence on the bridge. And beyond that was the next level; infinite speed, being everywhere in the universe at the same instant. One man, Tom Paris, one of the designers of this vessel, had reached it once... and almost died. For them however, aboard an eight million tons, one and half kilometer structure hurtling at such a velocity, death at this point was not just a risk; it was a certainty.

Snowfire had been conversing in low tones throughout the steady acceleration, her entire department bouncing ideas off of each other in the free-flow comm net that she'd initiated for critical situation resolution. As the Andorian Lieutenant on the science deck finished her report, the Ilythiiri spoke a few more words and then cut herself momentarily out of the net to pass on what she and her officers had managed to come up with.

"There, I think, we can help, Sir. Lieutenants Lorenz and May have put something together that should keep us together. I'd rather that we don't have to test it, but the modelling is solid."

Snowfire tapped a few keys, bringing up the model in front of her and studying it again. The idea was rather elegant in its simplicity, but also risky in that it relied on using the deflector's bow shock to shield the rest of the ship from harm. But it was better than certain destruction.

"The specifics are rather complicated, but suffice to say that it has a better chance to keep us together than anything else my department can think of, Captain."

She paused for a moment as a message flashed on her screen, and then restrained the urge to hit the console.

"And... lifeboats won't help us at this point Captain," she said, very softly. "They're designed to drop safely out of warp and even some of the higher Transwarp factors but, at this speed, they'd get torn apart before they can lower their velocity to survivable levels. The Polaris will have a hard enough time surviving the deceleration, and she's a full starship. Smaller vessels and lifepods won't stand a chance."

"Agreed, Lieutenant Commander, " just as softly admitted Kheren with a sigh, " but if there is the tiniest improbable chance that someone aboard would ever survive whatever will happen, it would be aboard those lifepods. And it's better to have them occupied with the emergency drill than sitting on their hands waiting in anguish for what may come. "

It was just compassion and wishful thinking at best and he knew it; but Andorian passion would never admit defeat, failure and death passively, regardless of fact or logic, especially where his clan was concerned.

And for Captain Kheren, his crew *was* his clan. he would unhesitantly die for them... but would never allow them to suffer and die without first attempting everything, even the impossible.

"Implement your procedure, Lieutenant Commander, " he then ordered the Illythirii science chief. "Coordinate with Ops and Engineering. Anything to buy us minutes, even seconds. "

"Done, Captain. And if we come up with anything else, you'll know."

She turned her head, calling to Lieutenant Leone.

"Lieutenant, I need you to go into the navigational deflector's field generation protocols and replace everything involving the field's shape with the code I've just sent you. Get it done fast. If we have it ready before we hit Transwarp 8, we might be able to use the acceleration shock."

She didn't explain what that meant, but there was hardly time as she called down to Engineering.

"Lieutenant Commander? This is the CSO. We have a patch that should be able to hold us together past Transwarp 9 going into place now. As part of this, the deflector field is about to undergo some rather unique modifications in regards to its shape. Please do not be alarmed or try to stop it. It's just about the only chance we've got at this velocity."

"Aye, aye," came the voice of the Chief Engineer Sisko. "Thank you for the warning, Lieutenant Commander, we'll be waiting patiently down here."

She then closed the channel and switched herself back into the departmental net.

"We need a way to let the lifeboats launch safely." She said, without preamble. "Anyone have any ideas?"

Down in sickbay, the one Bynar doctor there, 011, was hurrying around giving orders in a chirpy, quick-paced voice, in order to prepare for the possibility of triage.

"Get the... hypostimulants... to table... 4," she directed to one nurse. "Prepare several... cortical stimulators... in case we... need to revive... nervous system... activity."

"Where's the trauma section?" came the voice from behind her that she immediately knew to be of Doctor John Pierce, the Chief Surgeon. Along with the Ferengi neurologist, Doctor Nagee, his role would be important, along with his fellow surgeons to sew up injuries and stop internal bleeding. Despite the use of the PIDs, there would likely be a lot of blunt force trauma, concussions, and traumatic brain injury from falling debris.

011 turned and quickly directed him to the area they would dedicate to extreme traumatic wounds, where Nagee was already preparing a series of intercranial stints.

Finally, when a break provided itself, she stopped and communicated to her sibling on the bridge.

"Captain, the medical team... is preparing to... receive injured... in case we... survive," reported her counterpart in the medical command chair, 110.

There was no jest in her voice, nor was there any fear showing... but it was there nonetheless; just hidden by her stoic Bynar countenance.

From the moment of the first thunderous boom, Jureth knew something was very wrong, though none of them could have anticipated what was unfolding in front of them. Acknowledging Captain Kheren's order to man the Polaris with a nod of his head, he activated his PID and tapped his combadge in the same instant.

"Attention all hands, this is Commander Oseno, all Polaris crew report to the ship immediately! Site to site transports are authorized under my authority."

Closing the channel, he practically yelled at the ship's computer.

"Computer, command override, site to site transport to USS Polaris bridge. Command override authorization Oseno Six One Bravo Juliet."

"Authorization acknowledged, transport commencing..."

At that moment Redding yelled out " Oseno! " and quickly snatched something off his side and tossed it to him.

" Just in case... "

It was his memory recorder. Redding gave him a quick salute as the transporter beam bathed the Bajoran in sparkling flecks of blue and white lights.

The transporter beam whisked Jureth off the bridge and deposited him on the much smaller bridge of the Polaris milliseconds later. Jureth immediately set to work addressing the ship's computer.

"Computer, recognize Oseno Jureth, Commanding Officer authorization Oseno Six One Bravo Juliet"

"Voice authorization recognized, input command."

"Computer, bring all systems online, and power up bridge consoles."

"Acknowledged...working.."

One by one, Jureth watched as the ship's bridge consoles began to power on and while that was happening he strode to the command chair and opened the intercom to engineering.

"Oseno to Engineering; anyone down there?"

"V'rel here, Sir," came the calm reply from the Vulcan engineering specialist. "May I inquire as to what is happening? I have had to readjust the containment field of the Polaris warp core due to the increased vibrations from the Horizon."

"The transwarp system's gone haywire. They have no control over the ship's acceleration. This ship may be the only hope of anyone surviving Mister V'rel. I need to know if our transwarp launch formula will work."

"Sir, extrapolating from Commander Redding's test data and after running several thousand simulations on the computer there is a ninety eight point three percent chance of a successful transwarp launch at speeds up to transwarp 3."

"What about about at transwarp 9?" Oseno asked knowing he would not like the answer.

"That...is complicated," V'rell replied

"Get on it, Mister V'rell."

"Aye, Sir, V'rell out."

As they finished their conversation, Lieutenants T'Lana and Hunter materialized on the bridge and the Bajoran immediately handed them assignments.

"Mister Hunter, I need you to link with V'rell in engineering and get this ship ready to launch. T'Lana, coordinate the incoming diplomatic and civilian personnel and get them stowed wherever you can stow them. This situation is going from bad to worse quicker than I prefer to think about."

Receiving "aye Sir" from both, Jureth then opened the Polaris ship wide comm channel.

"Attention aboard the Polaris; this is Commander Oseno on the bridge. All hands, proceed to launch stations immediately and prepare the ship for transwarp launch. Department heads, make reports to me as soon as your departments are secure. Oseno out."

Closing that channel, he tapped his combadge.

"Oseno to Horizon; I'm aboard the Polaris, Sir. We are preparing the ship for launch."

As if to answer him, the ship jolted once more and this time, there was a distinct hum in the air, as if the entire hull of the gigantic starship had become a titanic chime softly struck continuously.

" Transwarp 7! " confirmed Aguk Snow gripping his piloting console as if he could somehow steer or reign in the vessel by the sheer strength of his tensed, straightened arms.

" Get ready for the second I give you the word, Commander, " then answered Kheren over the comm. "Standby for a deflector and structural reinforcement solution from the science department that should also come in handy for the Polaris. And if you do not hear from us after the next eight minutes, launch anyway and attempt Mister Sisko's plan. But if it looks like it will fail... do your duty as a captain; above all, protect your ship and crew. "

"Aye Sir," was Jureth's solemn reply to the captain.

He knew what Kheren meant, even if he didn't want to acknowledge the reality of it. He said a silent prayer to the Prophets, asking for guidance and even their intervention on the ship's behalf before addressing the Polaris science officer, a human woman who, at first glance, he swore had a tinge of green to her skin. Jureth hadn't actually had a chance to meet her but then recalled from his personnel files that she was Cera Ji'lian, a Human-Orion half breed.

"Lieutenant Ji'lian, link your console with the Horizon and get ready to implement immediately whatever Lieutenant K'Leysa sends you."

"Aye, Sir."

"Mister Hunter, what's our status?"

Shawn Hunter swiveled around from his station to face Oseno.

"Board is green, Sir; impulse and warp drive are available. V'rell and I have corrected the launch calculations to compensate for the ship's excessive speed, but..."

"But what, Mister Hunter?"

"The odds of a successful launch are much smaller, Sir."

"Don't ever tell the odds to a Bajoran, Lieutenant... Just be ready to launch at a moment's notice. Confirm that the hangar bay is clear and free us of any tether to the Horizon."

Hunter nodded.

"Yes, Sir."

He turned back to his console and tapped a few commands which activated automatic releases for the umbilicals that were connecting the escort to her home vessel. Outside, the Polaris alarm klaxons blared in the hangar as the umbilical lines came free of the escort. The two man M.A.C.O. watch team at the dock was gone, having long since scrambled aboard the ship and, with the release of the umbilicals, the hangar doors were now sealed and the bay doors open as the Horizon's computer automatically engaged launch protocols.

"Umbilicals and moorings are clear, Sir," Hunter reported. "We are free to launch."

"Good...now let's just hope we don't have to."

Jureth sat back in the command chair, repeated his entreaty to The Prophets and tapped several commands into his command chair console. The result was a visual eight minute countdown to Captain Kheren's ordered deadline.

And on the bridge, that deadline was coming up fast.

"Transwarp 8! " Lieutenant Snow shouted as the ship lurched and the vibration heard was now dimly felt even through the PID's field protecting them.

" Now would be a good time, Number One, " offered the captain in his deceptively soft voice.

" Aye captain." Redding said quietly as he launched the buoy, imagining what it might look like being bounced around after dropping out of Transwarp 8.

Although there could be no sure way of knowing if it survived the rapid deceleration an emergency buoy could survive the direct destruction of a vessel from a warp core breach, so the odds were good. He watched for a few seconds for the pods beacon, proving it survived the launch, and started to worry it must not have when the signal appeared much later than expected. With a shock, it occurred to him that the subspace beacon had to catch up to them before they could receive it.

" Buoy launched and transmitting, captain. "

He then tried to stay out of the way. He was a one hundred and fifty years old security officer after all; even holodecks were still new to him. This was going to be left up to their scientist and engineers to save the day.

Then he glanced towards the science station. "How about that enhanced deflector shield, Lieutenant?"

"Done, Captain," Snowfire replied, "got it in ahead of the jump to..."

The entire ship seemed to shiver, and the steady acceleration shown on Lieutenant Snow's display began to flicker.

"Yes!" Snowfire exclaimed, not quite baring her teeth as the steadily mounting velocity of the Horizon faltered. "Captain, I advise that we launch lifeboats. The deflector grid's creating a bow shock ahead of us, and I can push that wide enough to cover lifeboat deceleration to speeds they can survive. This is the best chance they'll get. The acceleration shock at Transwarp 9 will be greater, but I won't be able to spread the field as wide exactly because of that."

"I wouldn't recommend that Captain." Redding said looking around at Snowfire. "By the time we get them loaded and launched we'll be well outside Federation space, although we might have them stand by for the Polaris' launch so they could regroup with it." True, the Polaris couldn't pick them up, but it was still the best option they had.

"All non essential personnel are already standing by in lifepods, as per your orders, Captain," then specified Ensign Blackbird behind the command dais. "That is eighty percent of the current crew ready to abandon ship, with an added ten percent aboard the Polaris herself, leaving enough of a skeleton crew to man the Horizon."

There was no hesitancy in Kheren's decision. The safety of his crew came first; that of his ship came close behind. K'Leysha's warning had to be taken into account to maximize survival and Redding was right; if they waited too long, their people would either share their fate or be left stranded in unknown space, too far away to be rescued without the support of a starship.

"All but key personnel, abandon ship."

There was a clunking noise reverberated throughout the vessel. Then, on the screen, hundreds of tiny hexagonal shapes joined the display of streaking stars shooting away from the stern of the colossal starship. They floated a moment within the display of light and then whisked out of their view like soap bubbles popping.

"Receiving distress beacon from every lifepods, Sir," confirmed Lieutenant Tyvya from her secondary security station. "They're safe a few light years from the outer rimward edge of Ferengi space."

"Should not cost them too much to be picked up by the Ferengi," commented Yeoman Blackbird with a sigh of relief despite their still dire situation.

Helmsman Snow made a point of reminding it to all of them, as if the constant vibrating around the bridge wasn't enough.

"Transwarp 8.6... 8.7..."

Kheren also sighed in relief; his crew was safe... well, almost all of it.

"Horizon to Polaris; get ready to leave port. Engineering; Mister Sisko, any word about how to furl our sails?"

In engineering, all that was left was Sisko himself, along with Ensigns Cooper and Blakely as backup. One of his Assistant Chiefs, Robert Baoule, was still on the bridge manning the station there. Sisko had just finished inputting final calculations and was ready for the separation.

"I just finished sending calculations and instructions to Ensign V'Rel on the Polaris, Sir," responded Sisko. "The timing has to be just right. As soon as the Polaris launches, we will have several seconds until she decelerates out of range. At the same exact microsecond, one second after they're clear, we will cut power to our navigational deflector as the Polaris extends its deflector around both ships."

Kheren, with a glance to the Bynar doctor managing communications from his own command station, made sure all ship channels were open.

"Horizon to Polaris; confirm and standby for launch!"

Before cutting communication, Sisko took a pause and made sure to emphasize the next statement very clearly.

"Before the Polaris is out of range, Sir, someone... ANYONE... must reactivate the navigational deflector or we will be ripped to shreds. This can also not happen until AFTER we have decelerated below 1500c, or we will be kicked back into Transwarp and the whole thing will start over again. Sir, this window cannot be timed and programmed into the computer. Someone *has* to monitor this range and find it manually. This will be a bumpy ride. So, whoever is left must do it, even if myself and my team are out of commission."

He added a final word to his report after a short pause.

"I have extended Engineering control to every console on the ship, Sir. Good luck to us all."

Kheren received a confirmation nod from everyone on the bridge.

"Confirmed, Mister Sisko. "

May the Prophets guide us, the chief engineer silently said to himself, although he wasn't sure they were listening so far out of the range of Deep Space 9.

He grew up with his mother's Bajoran influence, but also his father's skepticism. Jake Sisko had seen many fantastical things while on that station, but Jake, and Joey Day himself to an extent, believed that they were just aliens with amazing powers that they just did not have the capacity to understand.

At this point, however, Lieutenant Commander Joseph Daystrom Sisko decided he could take all the help he could get.

There was again a loud booming, louder than any so far. The ship lurched sharply and, even wearing PIDs, many had to grasp their console or armrests to stay upright at their post. Now, they could all hear and feel the vibration now coursing uninterrupted from bow to stern, even with the energy reinforcement provided by their science chief and the efficient power distribution from their operations leader.

"Captain... Transwarp... 9..." breathed out the helmsman.

On the large viewer before their eyes, it was like the whole universe was rushing at them to devour them in maws of light and fire. And it had come sooner than expected.

Next would only be left... infinity.

Now, it all rested on the shoulders of their chief engineer and the commander and crew of their escort vessel.

Aboard the Polaris, V'rell had been joined by his Andorian engineering colleague Akaal and the two men were working feverishly to implement the programming that the engineering staff on the Horizon had provided.

"V'rell, adjust the warp core power output point twenty-three percent!" Akaal shouted from across the room where he was working on the ship's navigational deflector.

"Aye, Lieutenant," V'rell confirmed as he turned from the shield system console to the warp core and made the minor adjustment.

Akaal pounded his fist on the console in front of him in frustration as the navigational deflectors calculated output fluctuated again as the Horizon continued to accelerate. He corrected the output and sighed as he watched it stabilize to the numbers needed to protect both vessels. He didn't know where the Bajoran engineer Sisko had pulled this plan from, but it was a huge risk. As if launching at transwarp velocities wasn't enough of one already...

With the navigational deflector stabilized he turned to another console and began to quickly adjust the ship's structural integrity field.

"V'rell, the deflector is stable. I'm moving to the SIF. Get going on the inertial dampeners, though I'm not sure it's going to matter much."

The Vulcan nodded, and while the two engineers worked at a feverish pace, on the bridge, Jureth was watching the digital countdown on his console with building angst. They had not heard from the captain in nearly six minutes and the strategic operations officer of the Horizon and commander of the Polaris knew that time was running out for both ships. He opened the intercom to engineering again

"Oseno to Akaal; status Lieutenant, we're running out of time."

"I'm well aware of that, Sir," was Akaal's terse reply.

"You have about ninety seconds," Jureth answered before closing the channel and addressing the bridge crew.

"Mister Hunter, begin the launch sequence, verify moorings and umbilicals clear."

"Aye Sir, moorings clear, umbilical lines clear, the board is..."

Hunter was cut off by the largest reverberation yet from the Horizon and the shouted voice of captain Kheren over the comm channel between the Polaris and her home vessel.

"Horizon to Polaris; launch now!"

"Mister Hunter, emergency launch! Oseno to engineering; you're out of time, Mister Akaal; we're beginning the launch sequence! Everybody, hold onto something!"

The Polaris lurched as her impulse engines fired, and Shawn Hunter's fingers flew over his console as overrode the Horizon's computer and engaged the depressurization system in the hangar while simultaneously opening the hangar door. The bay door opened and Hunter fired the Polaris thrusters, trying to keep her stable but to no avail.

The tiny escort was practically yanked from the hangar as Shawn fought just to keep her from tumbling end over end.

In her engineering section, V'rell and Akaal worked in tandem. The instant the Polaris computer told them they were clear of the hangar, V'rell activated the ship's shields and shunted power from the weapons systems to the navigational deflector. Akaal, the more experienced engineer, at the same instant engaged the beefed up deflector and began to extend it around the Horizon.

Jureth gripped the arms of the command chair as the Polaris bucked and shuddered in the transwarp wake of the Horizon. For the first time in a long time, the Bajoran prayed in earnest to the Prophets in the Celestial Temple to deliver him, his ship, and his comrades from a meaningless fate.

Deactivating the Horizon's navigational deflector was not something Sisko needed to leave to himself or any of the crew. It was fortunate that he was able to program it into the computer, because the timing needed to be exact; too exact to allow for humanoid reaction time. The moment the Horizon's computer sensed the existence of the additional deflector, it deactivated the Horizon's. At that moment, the ship lurched and then violently shook as they fell back down to Transwarp 8. The only thing keeping Sisko and his team on their feet was the PIDs, but the personal inertial dampeners were being overworked to fight against the chaotic and unpredictable tumbling of the ship.

"Report!" called Sisko.

"The Polaris' deflector is holding, Sir, but not for long. She is decelerating at a slightly higher rate than we are," reported Blakely. The inertia of the much larger vessel was causing it to maintain its velocity better than the Polaris.

"What can we do to step on the brakes?" asked Sisko.

"Thrusters in full reverse might give us a little push back."

"Aye," Sisko said, and activated the fore thrusters. At this point, there was no time for protocol to ask the Captain, when every microsecond of delay could affect their chance of survival.

The ship lurched again as the thrusters added to the Horizon's deceleration, pushing it closer to the Polaris. This smoothed the ride a bit as the Polaris' deflector was able to strengthen against the hailstorm of debris that occasionally would push its way through and pound against the ship's shields and hull.

On the main viewer of the Horizon had appeared the silhouette of the starship's smallish escort vessel as it emerged from her aft underbelly. It had looked for a moment as if it's long, flat shape with it's pair of side-extended curving warp nacelles was suspended behind the huge mothership and about to fall swiftly behind when a flash of white light had come out from the smoothly integrated deflector dish on it's curved bow. It had engulfed it and the titanic structure of the Horizon before it. A translucent bubble had shimmered around both ships and the Polaris had seemed a brief moment to bounce at it's rear end.

"The Polaris has caught us in their deflector field!" confirmed helmsman Snow excitedly.

"But their power core is being drained rapidly," then told engineer Baoule from the readout of their external sensors. "The Horizon is so big that the energy output of the Polaris will not be able to sustain this added mass within this expanded field much longer than..."

The shuddering of the ship seemed suddenly to diminish but in fact was becoming so fast and intense that it sounded like a constant hum throughout the immense vessel. Then, the vibration intensified from a low hum to a high pitch whine that tore through their ears and down to their very bones.

Kherenl Lyrya and Tyvya and the rest of the Andorians on board were the first to pass out along with any Ferengi still aboard, their ultrasensitive hearing making them most vulnerable to the piercing wail of the ship. Barely a second later fell unconscious the Vulcanoids, then the felinoids left on board, pointed ears flat on their skulls, security officer Mrrish falling slowly on all four before her black-furred pantherlike face rested on the deckplates in front of the turbolift.

The console in Engineering blinked each fractional transwarp level as they reached it.

"Transwarp 2.4," said the computer's disembodied voice.

"We have to reactivate the deflector!" shouted Ensign Blakely over the intense hum.

"Transwarp 2.35," droned on the artificial voice.

"Too soon!" Sisko responded to the blonde woman. "We have to get to Transwarp 2.25, which will be below 1500c."

"Transwarp 2.3. "

"Cooper!" Blakely yelled as the other Engineering officer fell to the floor. Seconds later she followed him.

"Transwarp 2.25," impassively announced the computer.

Sisko removed his fingers from his ears that he had put there in attempt to delay the effects of the humming and lunged for the console to re-enable the deflector. As he did so, a large piece of debris punctured the Polaris' ever-weakening deflector field and crashed into the lower hull near deck 35. The large rock was not much bigger than a chair, amere grain of sand compared to the titanic vessel, but at the velocity it was hitting the ship, it rocketed through the hull and every deck plating in the ship until it finally slowed down and wedged into one of the computer cores. The explosive penetration of the debris caused EPS relays and consoles to explode in Engineering and a large flame burst out, scorching Sisko's reaching hand.

He fell back in pain and immediately passed out.

A single, identical yellow signal then flashed simultaneously and insisently on each and every board of each and every station throughout the entire starship; but it would not be long before the rest of the crew would also drop inert where they stood.

Out of all those who stood to be most affected by the ultrasonic scream torn from the Horizon's bones, Snowfire was one of the most prepared. She had access to all the internal and external sensors, and whilst engineering had worked to give them this chance, she and her team had worked frantically to model the possible results. The moment that the fore thrusters had fired, she'd known which simulation was right, and had scrambled desperately for a fix to what she had then known was coming. In the end, it had been something of a brute force measure, but it had been the only one she could get to in time. She overloaded her PID.

So when the sound came screaming through the vessel, she felt none of it. She simply sat, almost incapable of movement, within a shell of negative inertia as the crew around her started to fall. Captain, Security, Counsellor, all gone in instants. She knew that all across the ship, those aboard would be fighting to hold themselves up against the wall of sound that she could see on the readouts in front of her.

There was a counter to that, a very simple one, but she couldn't make it happen. She was frozen in place, not even her lips capable of movement. Only her mind, watching the screen before her. Caged. A single movement would break the shell from the inside, and that lethal sound would send her into oblivion. But... she didn't have to move. She had others who could do that for her.

"*Daniel*," her mind spoke, reaching for the subordinate most capable of rational thought at the current moment." *Internal forcefields. Destructive interference.*"

She sensed confusion for a brief instant, then a bright flare of understanding. He understood!

She then sensed him move, not even wondering as to why she couldn't do it herself... smart as he was, he probably could work it out... fighting against the tempest of sound howling across the ship. She could feel it now, like the touch of a phantom on her skin, breaking through the protection granted by her overloaded PID as the power cells on the device started to fail.

She saw the screen in front of her change, and then an alert flash upon it. Not the engineering alert, not yet, but this was just as lethal.

Daniel didn't have the level of authority to initiate the protocol.

She blinked once, feeling the beginnings of his worry as the sound began to overwhelm him too. There weren't many left, and none but Daniel who wouldn't see her speaking into their mind as a gross violation of privacy. She could do it with most of her senior staff, but that only because of a mutual agreement of trust between them. No matter. She could do it. Rank, after all, hath its privileges. But that was a human thing. To an Ilythirii, rank was far more a thing of duty and burdens. Obligation and a complex web of rights and responsibility on both sides of the rank line. The engineering alert flashed before her; and Daniel couldn't reach it.

"I have it," she sent, mental voice utterly calm, "just make sure we make it."

And then, she moved.

The shell around her shattered, the scream of the Horizon's agony cutting into her like a knife, but she was already moving, and pain was - again - something that she had been trained to endure. Tap.

Pain.

Agony.

All across the Horizon, the internal forcefields designed as both safety and security measure sprang to life, each one vibrating at a particular frequency, creating destructive interference to cancel out the sonic torture ripping through her crew. A low rumbling rose against the scream, turning to a bellow, and then both vanished as the program behind the forcefields matched relative frequencies across the ship. In the astrometrics lab, decks below the bridge, Daniel pulled himself up, blurry eyes focusing intently on the ship's velocity as it dropped, dropped, dropped...

Now.

A long finger stabbed down, hitting the override as the Horizon's velocity dropped to fourteen hundred times light speed, the Polaris bouncing at the very edge of the expanded deflector field. There was a moment, an instant, where nothing happened.

Had something gone wrong? The vibration and deceleration, had it been to severe?

And then the Horizon's deflector roared to tumultuous life.

Aboard the Polaris the effects of the rapid deceleration were less felt than they were aboard the Horizon, but felt nonetheless.

Oseno Jureth was held in the command chair not only by his PID, but by the chair's restraint system as well. The little escort shuddered violently and he called out to his bridge crew

"Status report!"

"The Horizon is slowing, Sir," Ji'lian reported from her science station. "It looks like it's working."

"Acknowledged; Mister Hunter, what about us."

"We're still riding in their wake, but we will have to get out of the way eventually or we could have some real issues."

Jureth nodded and opened the channel to engineering.

"Oseno to engineering; Mister Akaal, Mister V'rell, how are we doing?"

"Hold that though, Sir," Akaal said.

He checked the power output on the navigational deflector and could see that the smaller ship's system was rapidly approaching its limit, and if it blew out there would be nothing to protect the Polaris from the transwarp wake or debris, but there was no way to relieve the stress on the deflector until the Horizon was ready to reengage her own system. If he backed off the power there might not be enough juice to protect both ships, and if he fed it any more power the system would overload. Suddenly an alarm blared, and he moved from the deflector to the warp core. The ship's power systems were not designed to handle this type of load and primary circuits were getting dangerously close to failing. Akaal's fingers flew over the console routing some power to secondary circuits to try and take the load off the system. The Andorian knew it was only a temporary fix though, the whole grid would blow either before the deflector did or when the deflector did, they could not keep this up for too much longer. Additionally, he was getting this strange feeling through his entire body, and the engineer knew it had to be the effects of the rapid slowing of the ship...he just hoped it didn't get much worse.

"Mister Akaal! Are you there?"

The captain's voice from the bridge brought Akaal back to reality.

"Yes, Sir; power grid is fluctuating, Sir and the longer we keep this up, the longer we risk the whole thing going boom."

"Understood,"

The Bajoran commander closed the channel.

"status on the Horizon, T'Lana," he asked the Vulcan who was sitting behind him at the ship's tactical station

"Continuing to slow, Sir. By now, they will be feeling the effects of the process. I suspect we will soon as well. It is likely that most of the Horizon's crew is unconscious."

Oseno could already feel what T'Lana was describing. His head was beginning to throb and it was as if he could feel every vibration of the ship.

"T'Lana, who is the least susceptible to these effects?"

"Likely myself, Sir, and perhaps Ensign V'rell and Lieutenant Akaal. Vulcans and Andorians have much higher tolerances for most things than Humans and other species."

"Listen to me, Lieutenant; if we all drop, it will be up to you to get us to safety. Do you copy?"

"Affirmative, Sir."

The Polaris pitched again and Jureth watched as Shawn Hunter fought the ship's own inertia to keep her from simply blowing away like a flimsy building in a high wind. The Bajoran tapped his command chair console and opened a comm channel to the Horizon.

"Polaris to Horizon, do you read us? What is your status?"

No response was forthcoming and Jureth was now very concerned for both the ship and her crew. And then Lieutenant Ji"Lian called out.

"Captain, I'm detecting power building in the Horizon's deflector!"

"Mister Hunter, get us out of the way!"

Shawn Hunter didn't respond. He was slumped forward at his console, unconscious. Jureth looked frantically around to T'Lana who was already moving from the tactical station as her commander as well began to feel strange and his vision began to blur. He closed his eyes and shook his head trying to clear it up, but it was to no avail. The world went black.

T'Lana moved as fast as she could given that she was also feeling some of the effects of the rapid slowing of both ships and the Polaris, no longer under the expert guidance of her helmsman, was thrashing wildly in the transwarp wake of the much larger Horizon. The Vulcan security officer had the same basic navigation training as all Starfleet officers, but she actually had never piloted anything larger than a runabout. She realized that trying to use the helm station was a meaningless endeavor with Hunter in the way but did check that he was alive before stumbling back to her tactical station. She tapped in the command overrides necessary to gain access to the navigation systems from her post and called engineering.

"T'Lana to Akaal, are you there?"

There was a long pause before Akaal replied.

"Barely, Lieutenant."

"The captain... and the others are unconscious. The Horizon is..." she paused fighting off the increasing vibrations in her body "powering her deflector. We need...to move."

"Understood. I will leave this channel open. When... I tell you... to..." and then Akaal stopped and T'Lana heard another voice.

"Lieutenant, this is V'rell. Mister Akaal is...resting. I am going to begin reducing the output of our deflector to something resembling normal. When I do, you need to fire our impulse engines all back one quarter. It will help us move out of the way of the Horizon or we will be sheared apart. Do you understand?"

"Affirmative," was the only reply T'Lana could manage without breaking the concentration she was using to stay conscious.

"Now, all back one quarter impulse."

T'Lana tapped the console once... twice... and a third time to direct the impulse engines to fire and the Polaris bucked violently as she slowed to the point where T'Lana's PID was not able to keep up and she had to hold her console or be thrown to the deck of the bridge.

"Lieutenant, this is V'rell. Are you still there?"

"Affirmative..."

"Now, I need to you fire our port side thrusters at full power."

T'Lana fought again to move her body, and hit the console as her vision began to blur. The effect was immediate as the slowing Polaris kicked out to her starboard side and the starboard side of the Horizon as T'Lana slumped forward. Over the next several minutes, the ship's computer using commands V'rell had entered while he was directing T'Lana fought against forces that would tear the Aquarius class vessel apart and brought it to a stop where it finally hung motionless in space.

Several million kilometers from her position, the USS Horizon came also to a dead stop and just floated there with almost all lights gone, her immense shape and now low power signature rendered undetectable by the close by blue and red, lightning-crisscrossed nebula towards which border she was drifting.

Disheveled at her station, the Orion Ops officer tried to get her thoughts and bearings straight as she refocused her attention back to her console. Although still a bit disoriented, she began to swiftly analyze the current condition of the ship after that frightening ride. A part of her was amazed, yet very appreciative that they were still alive and that the ship was not literally torn to pieces.

Elisha Leone then turned to face the captain as she spoke. "Sir... The ship's hull and overall structure are intact, except for the hull breach on deck 31... which are temporarily sealed by our automated force-fields."

Kheren heard but half of what the orion woman was saying, coming around with his antennae sprouting again from his thick haired white skull to bring back colors, smells and sounds. He deactivated his PID and stood up to come to the Ops console, lying on it as he looked out at the blueish haze on the main viewer while listening to his Ops chief.

She continued scanning for information. "Currently power is available, but only at bare minimal levels. Sensors also indicate a high level of residual tachyons present within the propulsion systems."

She paused for a moment as she continued to scrutinize the readings.

"Also Sir, the transwarp drive is off-line for the foreseeable future.... and for now, only low level warp is available."

Looking up again, Elisha stated the obvious.

"We won't be travelling any where far for quite a while, Sir."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Leone." Then tapping his combadge he spoke with a loud voice. "All personnel report to your department chiefs. All departments, report on ship and crew status to First Officer. "

Closing off the channel, he spoke to his bridge crew.

"Tactical; status of the Polaris. Doctor, try to raise them. "

Kheren went to help Lieutenant Mrrish to get up and see if she was alright, as she had fallen not being in a seat when she lost consciousness. He then saw Snowfire coming up half-dazed from the floor and helped her up with one strong hand back into her seat.

" You all right, Lieutenant Commander? "

The Illythirii was obviously too groggy to even answer but otherwise she looked fine; fact was, the emergency medical holographic system, cued to activate the instant there as any significant injury anywhere on the ship, had not showed itself near her, nor the Caitian security woman.

There was however an EMH beside the slumped form of the chief of tactical and security, Sarah Corcoran.

"How is she? " asked Kheren coming quickly beside them both.

"From what I can gather, there was a slight failure of her PID and she smacked her head on her console, " answered the artificial medical officer without looking up from Corcoran's inert body as his fingers probed her skull.

Eyes, hands, all his senses were in fact medical tricorder terminals directly linked to the computer in sickbay, making the EMH able to perform his duties without the help of external instrumentation.

" A solid concussion; she will be out cold for at least several hours and I do not recommend reviving her before she can come out of it on her own. There are elevated stress indicators in her bloodstream and glandular system. She needs rest, physically and mentally. I estimate her return to duty no sooner than thirty-six hours, providing a safe time period of monitoring of at least twenty-four hours. "

"Do what's best for her," simply answered the Andorian as both the EMH and his patient were beamed out to the main sickbay. He then turned towards the security station. " Lieutenant Tyvya, take over tactical. "

The Andorian giantess smoothly moved her towering frame to the forward station as the black-furred Caitian Mrrish took her place, calling a replacement to her post near the turbolift.

" Now... I want to know what happened, " asked the captain out loud.

" There was no failure of the transwarp system, Sir, " immediately answered the bald, dark-skinned Robert Baoule at the engineering station. "There was not even a glitch on one board light. Preliminary level 4 diagnostics confirm no problem with the ship herself. "

His black-skinned, short-haired twin Norbert at the secondary science station then answered in lieu of his still dazed department chief.

"Captain, there was a massive tachyon surge just prior to our sudden acceleration. Lieutenant Commander K'Leysha had had time to cross-reference the sensor readings with computer data and there is no doubt as to what happened; we were caught in an uncharted subspace eddy and propelled off course. "

"Why did not our sensors warn us about it? "

"They did, Sir; but although they can affect sublight vessels and accidentally throw them into warp for a time, subspace eddies are too weak to have effect on actual starship warpfields. However, we have just discovered that they can have a significant effect on a ship using a transwarp field. We can avoid such incident in the future by simply calibrating but a few forward sensors for long range detection of a certain level of tachyon emissions and then steer clear of any subspace eddy. "

"Proceed with the modification, " immediately ordered Kheren. "Now, where did this... eddy... sent us? Where are we? "

"We are still in the Alpha Quadrant of our galaxy, rimward... but... twenty-nine thousand light years from Federation Space!" breathed out Tyvya from her tactical sensor readout.

Silence fell all across the bridge when everyone heard the fantastic figure. In barely over a quarter of an hour they had travelled almost to the edge of the galaxy!

"We are currently at the inner edge of the remnants of an ancient nebula, Mutara class. It is interfering with our sensors as expected but the Syntron space sonar is unhindered this close to it's edge and can give us full readings forward. "

They all understood then why there was a blueish, white-flashing haze on their view of the starfield on the main screen before them. Many aboard were from the original USS Artemis crew and had had actual experience navigating through such a dense mass of space dust and static discharges.

"And what is that thin blue line across the screen? " Inquired the Andorian commanding officer as he got back to his center seat. They all noticed it then, something that looked like a pixel glitch on the computer-generated image right in the middle of it, cutting it neatly in half.

" That... that is the great galactic barrier, Sir, " finally answered Norbert Baoule with undisguised awe.

Again, silence fell around them. In all of History, only one ship had ever come this far; the legendary USS Enterprise of Captain James T. Kirk... first testing a secret timewarp engine, then with a Medusan navigator to verify the species aptitude to navigate through it and finally after being hijacked and modified by refugees from the Andromeda galaxy.

And now, the USS Horizon.

The thought brought then another to the mind of her captain.

"Contact the Polaris; see if they are alright. "

It was Tyvya who answered him with a worried tone.

"Captain... I just finished full scanning at our sensors' extreme range, twenty-two light years... the entire sector. "

Kheren stared at her as she stopped talking. Then, she turned from the console to look directly into his silvery eyes.

"The Polaris... Sir, there is no trace of her. "

CHAPTER FIVE : ENEMY MINE

On the bridge of the USS Horizon, floating motionless inside the edge of a dense nebula, all bridge officers were searching frantically for any trace of their missing escort ship. Standing up from his command chair, Captain Kheren shouted orders in rapid succession.

" Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysa; all sensors on finding a trace, any trace of the Polaris or what might have happened to her. Lieutenant Tyvya; do the same for any residual trace of an explosion or field of debris that could account for her disappearance. Mister Snow; compute all probable positions where she could have ended up when we broke from transwarp. Lieutenant Leône; review our sensor logs to see if we have any record about when we got separated or hopefully what might have happened to her while we were all out. Doctor; try to raise them on all channels or locate any emergency signal from lifepods or buoy, or even her disaster beacon sending us some signal."

Looking meticulously through all of the available data and records, ElishaLeône turned a few moments later to address the captain's order directed specifically to her.

"It would appear that we lost contact with the Polaris at approximately the moment after we decelerated and the deflector was re-engaged" the Orion noted. Disappointedly, she then added; "Yet, Sir, I have no indication of what happened to the Polaris or where it went. It's as if at that moment they just... disappeared."

Then, feeling somewhat embarrassed about the last part of her statement, the Ops officer confessed her feeling of inadequacy.

"I know that was an illogical comment, Sir... I just didn't know what else to say."

"No fault of your own, Lieutenant, " Norbert said with a smile. "All sensors were temporarily off line when we abruptly transited from transwarp to full stop... and this nebula is interfering further with our standard pallets, even as advanced as they are. Only the Syntron sonar can effectively work through so much particles and discharges so close... and it can only scan in our forward arc, not behind us."

While his officers were asserting the situation, Kheren tapped his combadge.

"Mister Sisko; if you are still with us, we need to get this ship operational again as soon as possible. "

In the sickbay Lieutenant Commander Sisko quickly sat up as soon as he heard his Captain's summons, only to be violently pushed back down to thebiobed, but the tiny, but amazingly strong Doctor 011.

"Your wound... is not... healed yet... Commander."

She ran the dermal regenerator over the remaining burnt skin cells on his hand. The tool quickly removed the old cells and instantly swapped in exact copies of good skin cells that she had scanned earlier from his other hand.

After a few more minutes, the process was complete.

"You are... repaired... Commander," Doctor 011 said bluntly, setting the regenerator down. "You'll feel... no more... pain."

Sisko thanked her and moved to return to Engineering in order to review the status of the Horizon's engines.

"On my way, Captain, " he curtly answered through his combadge.

The Captain closed his communicator and turned to his first officer.

"Commander, I hope your vast and unique experience can give us some insight as to what we may expect out here."

" Captain, I know exactly what we can expect out here, that WE are what's unexpected to everything else. "

Redding's tone was a serious one even if he was trying to keep it light. Kheren's antennae curved inward in the typical Andorian smile.

"Point taken, Commander. "

The voice of tactical officer Tyvya then rose from the tactical station.

"Captain! I found something... looks like an impulse trail."

"The Polaris?"

"Negative, Sir; it is not a Federation-type propulsion residue. "

"The computer cannot positively identify the technology, Captain, " then added Norbert Baoule from Science Station 2. "It could be from any known spacefaring species... but the residue is very... unrefined. "

The Andorian's antennae waved this way and that.

"Define "unrefined" please. "

"Well... it looks rather like the impulse trail of an antique J-class of the twenty-third century, " hesitantly explained the black scientist still taking over science duties for his groggy chief. "There is a lot of waste byproduct along with the ion trail, especially Delta radiation. "

His twin brother Robert then took over.

"Either someone out there is barely venturing into space with crude early impulse technology... or they have a very old second hand starship... "

"Or lack the facilities to properly refuel their vessel with a clean energy source, " proposed helmsman Snow. "Distant colonies have to make do with crude ressources just to get by... "

"Are you suggesting that there could be some sort of... outpost out here this close to the galactic rim... so far from any known inhabited sector of the galaxy?" wondered Counselor Lyrya as she took over Captain Kheren's caring of Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysa.

"Not one of ours to be sure, " commented Miramanee Blackbird, the Yeoman looking intently at her commanding officer as if he could confirm her assessment.

"According to our stargharts, the closest one is Delta Vega, " then said Norbert Baoule looking at his computer screen. "It is a robot-built, automated refueling and resupplying station, the kind they used to disseminate with the first subspace relays across this quadrants in the early days of warp travel. This one is the farthest one ever built, once visited by the USS Enterprise when was made the first attempt to reach the edge of the galaxy two-hundred years ago. It is located coreward from our present position and...amazingly, at about three months at warp 2."

"Is the impulse trail leading there? " asked Kheren.

"Negative, Sir. The trail disappears deep inside this nebula we are already in, " answered the giantess from tactical.

Kheren tapped his combadge.

"Engineering; Mister Sisko, have you found yet some paddles for this ship of ours? "

"Impulse engines appear to not be affected, Sir," replied the Engineer. "I have what's left of my team trying to restore warp, but it will take a while. The warp core suffered quite a bit of damage during our runaway train incident, but nothing we can't repair in say... sixteen hours or so."

" If I may suggest sir, I'm thinking sleeper ship. " Redding leaned closer into Kheren. " Both the Federation as well as the Klingons around the twenty-third century sent a number of long range explorer class vessels into areas of space projected to be able to sustain life. Not surprisingly many were never seen again, but this one might have wandered off course and, given the nature of its design, still be functional even after all this time. "

Kheren nodded pensively.

"Indeed... I seem to recall that Captain Picard's Enterprise once found such a Klingon sleeper ship... And I believe the USS Voyager also met one far into the Delta Quadrant. Not to mention the legendary encounter of Kirk's own ship with the SS Botany Bay... "

That last comment drew some stares from the bridge officers that had been with him aboard the USS Artemis when a false admiral had diverted them into the Mutara nebula to hunt down a thirty years old lost ship... and found also a centuries old ghost from that same Botany Bay.

But Redding wasn't one of them. Oblivious to their reaction, he concluded with a completely even tone.

" It's quite possible that the crew, put into cryogenic sleep, could have survived. "

"Any clue how we can find out... and find them if that being the case?" asked the Andorian.

" If it is, Tyvya, your ion trail should show brief periodic adjustments to maintain its course, with long slow burn intervals in between corrections. "

Then a thought crossed his mind.

"Bare in mind that the Klingons also used J type engines for these kind of ships, Captain... and have you ever woken up a sleeping Klingon? Well.. their a bit grumpy. "

He was thinking of his first wife.

After a short moment, the giantess shook her long-haired white head.

"Commander, the trail is smooth and even. If this ship was automated, then it was making a major course change... it definitely seemed to be going somewhere... and somewhere within the nebula."

"Judging by the amount of residual particles and radiation, it was either a capital class vessel... or a smaller one dragging a heavy payload, " suggested engineer Baoule.

"If it was the latter " commented his brother after a new analysis of his sensor readout, " A tractor beam would leave gravimetric particles along the trail. Sensors do not detect any."

"Our own impulse drive allows us to follow them easily enough, " Aguk Snow then chimed in, "but not to overtake them, unless we push them to emergency sublight speed. "

Kheren sat back in his chair and crossed his arms.

"Options," he simply said.

" We could send a shuttle team to investigate, its a risky maneuver without direct intelligence but I'd hate not to be here if the Polaris decided to appear and was in bad shape. "

"We do have a full complement of every kind of Starfleet auxilliary craft, " reminded Kheren, "including twenty of the latest type XI runabout-type shuttlecrafts, four class X two-man stealth shuttles, two Delta Flyers and the Farsight, my own personal yacht... not to mention that we have also saucer seper capability and a detachable bridge module; but I would like to keep those last two options close at hand in case of some dire situation facing the Horizon herself."

He looked around.

"Any other ideas, people?"

"Gravitetic...gradient," Snowfire said, breaking the silence as she finally pulled herself back from the effects of the PID overload. "Sorry sir, I had to overload my PID to stay conscious. Was not an experience I would care to repeat, but it worked."

She gently pulled herself up and away from Counsellor Lyrya's hands as she spoke, tapping commands into her console.

"Our shields won't be of any use in here, the compression that they require is too high. But..." her fingers moved across the board with a confident surety, inputting the model into the Horizon's systems, "we can still use them for something."

She paused as the simulation ran, then smiled.

"And it'll work too. Not precisely well, but it'll do the job." She turned to face Kheren. "Captain, I can reconfigure our shields to create a gravitetic gradient that'll allow us reactionless acceleration along a given vector. Won't be good for evasive maneuvering, but it should give us sufficient additional delta to catch the vessel."

"Can this be implemented on a shuttlecraft? " the Andorian asked pointedly.

"Same theory, smaller craft; the power to mass ratio is actually better so you can get a higher sheer," Snowfire replied. "It'll work better on a shuttlecraft than on the Horizon."

As no one offered any other alternative, Kheren turned again to face his first officer.

"Assemble your team and follow that trail, Number One. Hopefully this will lead you to the Polaris. Take as many people and shuttles as you deem necessary, but I suggest the four class X we have; they might allow only two persons each, but they are fast, well armed and equipped with the best state of the art stealth technology short of an actual cloaking device. And with our science chief's gravitic trick, you should be able not only to overtake whoever made that trail but even do so without showing an engine signature. Discretion might prove itself to be the better part of valor here."

Redding never was one to be overly cautious.

" Well, Sir, leading from your earlier question of what can we expect, I'd rather use the two Delta fliers than stealth fighters. This is a potential first contact situation and what would you think of a visitor you caught sneaking around your back yard? Might leave a bad first impression to people we could very well be depending on in the near future. Also, the class X won't be able to do much in the way of rendering aid if we do find the Polaris. Not to mention that, if we become separated from the Horizon, they can still work independently for several months if need be. "

Kheren nodded.

"Well, you just have proven how important your position aboard truly is, Number One. I agree with your assessment. I might have been a bit too... Andorian in my thinking here. "

His antennae uncurled from their horn-like position to a more pointed one.

"You lead the away team; use whatever personnel and resources you deem best to find out who our mysterious neighbor is... and what happened to the Polaris. And as you Humans are fond of saying; hope for the best, prepare for the worst."

"Commander," Snowfire then added, "I would request that you include me on your team. The model I've got is solid, but I'd prefer to be able to make sure it stays that way. And the best and safest way, if we are actually dealing with a hostile force, is for me to be on one of those shuttles."

" Of course, Lieutenant Commander; if the Captain thinks he can spare you at this time, your presence would be welcome. Also, see if you can find someone in your department that you can count on for Delta 2. I'm not sure what our personnel choices are after the evacuation but we need six more people for the two shuttles. "

He stood up and moved towards the lift doors.

" Assemble in the main shuttle bay within twenty minutes. I'll see what I can do about the rest of the away team members. " And with a pause and a nod to his Captain to see if he had anything to add, Redding left the bridge.

Kheren signaled Snowfire that she was free to go and nodded back to Tyvya who had the Caitian Mrrish replace her at the tactical station while she stretched up her towering frame and walked briskly to the turbolift with one blue hand activating her communicator at the same time.

"Ensign Graalthrii; report to shuttlebay 1. "

With a slight hesitation, the Orion Ops officer turned to face her commanding officer.

"Captain, I realize that I am a novice here on this ship, but given my unconventional upbringing in addition to my training.... I am rather resourceful. If you believe that I could be of any assistance to the away team... well... just let me know Sir" she concluded almost shyly.

"That is exactly the reason why you should be on a away team, Lieutenant, " answered back the Andorian captain, "especially this one. "

What he was clearly implying was that the said operation was unconventionally large, with more than one shuttle involved and might just turn out to be a salvage operation where resourcefulness might prove most useful; or an exploratory, possibly even a first contact mission that would definitely give her the experience lacking so far.

"In any case," he added, "we have the people needed here in your department and there is no more estimated danger out there than here. Speak with Commander Redding then; it will be up to him."

"Yes, Sir!" the Orion Ops officer replied, rather surprised that the captain was willing to trust her despite her lack of official away mission experience. "I will do my best Captain."

Elisha did not hesitate for a moment after this as she reached up and engaged her combadge.

Robert Baoule then spoke from the Engineering station.

"Sir, I think it may be prudent to have an Engineer on each shuttle. I can go fill Lieutenant Commander Sisko in on the details of the plan and ask who he wants to send."

"Call him in Engineering and ask him to select the people he deems best for a search and rescue and a possible salvage operation, probably in a tense first contact situation," Kheren agreed. "So far what we have may point out to anything from a covert surveillance of us from an isolationist people to an ... appropriation... of the Polaris, which might result in a... debate over the return of Commander Oseno's ship and crew. "

"Aye, captain, " said the bald engineer who then opened a channel to main engineering. " Lieutenant-Commander Sisko, this is Baoule on the bridge. An away team is being prepared under the command of Commander Redding to follow an impulse trail into a Mutara class nebula, possibly to retrieve the Polaris, status unknown, under the power of an unknown party of unknown intents. We need a good engineer for each of our two Delta Flyers for this mission."

And as he received the word from the chief engineer, Kheren was addressing the Bynar seated at the medical command chair.

"Same goes for medical personnel, Doc."

As Redding moved from the Turbolift to the main flight deck, he had a sense of uneasiness that he realized came from the overwhelming lack of... people. The ship wasn't completely free of personnel by any means but now it almost felt like a ghost town in comparison to the last time he walked in this area.

It took him nearly five minutes before he located anyone left in charge and when he did, it was something of a surprise. One of the few remaining technicians pointed him to Delta 1, which seemed to already be pepped for the mission. Redding walked in to the Delta Flyer and glanced around.

" Lieutenant Hickman? are you in here? "

The sound of something being dropped came from the rear of the ship and a voice followed.

" No, exceedingly not. " and a young black haired human male with a thin mustache came up from the back walking briskly. " Lieutenant Hickman took a bit of tumble back there and headed to sickbay, of course. If he had listened to me in the first place and rode out the deceleration within Delta 1, after a few slight modifications to the inertial dampeners of course... because after all, if anyone knows the best way to to ride out a controlled..." at this he pointed a finger at Redding "OR uncontrolled for that matter, high speed sheering maneuver. it would be me. Not that anyone even bothered to ask me for my opinion. "

The man talked quick with a kind of self assurance that could be taken as arrogance.

" I've been calling for several minutes. Why haven't you responded? " Redding said with a hint of annoyance.

" Hmm.. it's possible that my modifications to the field emitters were causing a disruption within the..."

He stopped as Redding pointed at his chest. Looking down, he got a blank expression on his face.

"Or it could be that I'm not wearing my combadge. "

He glanced around and then, remembering, he walked up to the pilot seat and retrieved it from the console.

" I was working and it kept snagging..."

Redding's silence was so heavy he just awkwardly put it back on his shirt.

Redding just shook his head.

" We need both Delta Flyers up and ready to go in fifteen minutes. I don't know what you did to this one but make sure it's not going to be a problem, Mister... who are you again? "

" Lieutenant Robert Moore... Oh! Commander.. " It wasn't until that moment that he even glanced at Redding's rank. Then it all clicked in.

"Oh! you're Commander Redding. I should have realized by your... Um, no, Sir, that is to say, yes, Sir, the ship won't be a problem; or, that is to say, my modifications are not..."

But Redding had had enough.

"That's fine. Also, see if we have any pilots left. We'll need two of course. Check for volunteers first. "

"Oh well, I volunteer, Commander. I'm the best pilot on the ship of course. " He said this with a slight smug smile. "If you don't believe me you can ask the Captain, I did save his life once AND Captain Gould's. "

Redding almost challenged him on it, but now just wasn't the time.

" Okay then, your in. Now get back to work. "

He turned to leave but as he did so he pointed at the man's chest.

"And Moore? keep your damn badge on."

Then he headed to sickbay just as his communicator chirped.

"Lieutenant Elisha Leône to Commander Redding. "

Redding stopped short of the lift, answering the hail.

"Redding here, go ahead."

It dawned on him that he had stopped short of entering the turbolift out of habit, thinking his signal might get cut off. He rolled his eyes at his own old fashioned thinking.

After taking a moment for a slow deep breath, the Ops officer proceeded.

"Commander... Lieutenant Elisha Leône here. Captain Kheren granted me permission to accompany your away team." Then she quickly added; "That is if you feel my presence would enhance your team's skill set in some capacity."

She did not want to appear presumptuous, merely extending the offer of her services.

"I'm not turning down any volunteers as of yet, Lieutenant. If you feel your up to the mission... welcome aboard. But you should understand this wont be a training exercise."

Redding knew she was still green but didn't want to discourage her from taking the initiative.

"We'll be launching in fifteen minutes. If your in, be there for it, Redding out."

A little colder than he meant it to sound, but the situation was a serious one. He supposed that it was because she was Orion, he was somewhat a bit apprehensive about close proximity with her in such confined space as a shuttlecraft even as large as a Delta Flyer.

"Understood Commander" the Orion ops officer replied with a mixture of excitement along with a bit of trepidation.

"I will be there momentarily" Elisha noted as she swiftly made arrangements for her replacement to come early to her post and take over the remaining shift.

After the transition occurred, she nodded to her captain as she engaged the turbolift to carry her to toward the transporter.

Don't ruin this opportunity Elisha... you've waited your whole life for this... be alert and focused on everything around you...

The lift doors opened and she immediately stepped out purposefully to head directly to the main shuttlebay area

* * *

Captain's Log

Stardate: 87638.6

Repairs to the minimal damage suffered by the Horizon are ongoing well under the expert care of chief engineer Sisko, after an uncharted subspace eddy brought our transwarp flight to the very edge of the galaxy. The ship was saved from her predicament thanks to the heroic efforts of our chief of science lieutenant K'Leysha and of our escort vessel under the command of Commander Oseno Jureth.

But the USS Polaris is now missing. An impulse trail is our only clue as to her possible fate and First officer Redding has launched with the help of our Ops chief Lieutenant Leone a search and rescue mission with Dawn and Sunset, our two Delta Flyer shuttles.

Meanwhile, our own search continue from the edge of the Mutara class nebula we are now temporarily stranded in.

Captain Kheren came out of his ready room with another glance at the main viewer showing a thin, iridescent blue line that was the infamous Great Galactic Barrier. He was dimly aware that he was but the third starship commander in History to have come this close to the edge of the galaxy, but the singular footnote he would become in the history books was of little portent to him while so many of his crewmates were still missing.

"Anything new?" he asked to nobody in particular.

"Plenty, Sir, " answered Norbert baoule from the main science station. "But I gather your are not yet ready for our cosmology sensor data. However... I may have something interesting to try, if you would agree, Sir."

"Let's hear it."

The black smiling man showed his sensor imaging screen on his console as he spoke.

"Well, Sir, it's the Syntron Space Sonar. In simplistic terms, it uses tachyons to create a sensor echo we can read when it encounters matter or energy, similar to the old sonar technology that used soundwaves to bounce back on objects and thus detect and identify them."

"What do you have in mind, Lieutenant?"

"Well... you know that, in nature, some animals like bats and sperm whales use the same principles to more or less see in dark environments, be it night time or ocean depths. And our own viewer here on the bridge does create a visual image out of myriads of sensor signals from our sensor pallets. With a few tweaks, I believe I can do the same with our own space sonar within the denser layers of the nebula to read the impulse trail as an echo image of the ship that left that trail."

"Looking for a footprint?" understood the Andorian commanding officer.

"Basically, yes, Captain."

"Do it."

With a nod, Baoule made the modifications to the system's reading and imaging then, after barely a few minutes, looked back at Kheren and got another nod from him. Several minutes went by as the image on the large screen showed a new, pearly line of sparkling dust that went from a point in space right into the blue, red and white-streaked cloud of the nebula.

"Mister Snow, " then asked the science officer at the copper-skinned man at the helm, " please orient us along that detected path. "

"Station-keeping thrusters firing to correct orientation and angle, " confirmed the helmsman.

On the screen, the view shifted as if everyone on the bridge was following the revealed trail with their own eyes. As the twinkling trail entered deeper into the smoky layers, a vague outline appeared, egg-like in shape.

"All stop," ordered Kheren, understanding what was happening.

"Answering all stop, Sir," answered Aguk Snow.

The view stopped on it and, as more and more emissions from the main deflector dish bombarded that specific spot, the outline became clearer, more defined, until it appeared as a ghostly white drawing in some blue sand. The image was definitely that of a starship, or rather two. The first one was somewhat boxy and elongated with a rounded front and quite familiar to all that saw it.

"The Polaris!" exclaimed the Andorian with a sigh of relief.

Despite the lack of visual details, the escort vessel seemed whole and intact although little energy appeared to come out of it and none from its own propulsion systems. The impulse trail engulfed its outline like a wake in water from the other shape that appeared before it, alight with energy outputs from its own engines but with no tractor beam between them. Yet, it was clearly dragging the Polaris behind it.

They were all looking at it with widened eyes. Barely a few hundred meters across, oval in shape with short stubbed pylons and nacelles angled underneath on each side, the towing vessel was not much bigger than the Polaris and looked pretty much insect-like, much like a wide and flat Earth scarab.

They all knew then who had come to take their friends away.

* * *

Oseno Jureth, felt a terrible throbbing in his head and groaned out loud. Beneath him he felt a cold hard surface, not the one he remembered and his still slightly disoriented brain realized that he was not where he was supposed to be. The Bajoran struggled to open his eyes trying to will his body to obey his commands, but it wasn't ready to listen just yet. Then he heard a voice, a familiar one.

"Captain, can you hear me, Sir?"

Jureth knew that voice "T...T'Lana?" he practically croaked, all sense of his normal confidence gone from his voice.

"Affirmative, Sir. Do not attempt to move too fast Sir."

"Wh-Where?"

"I do not know. We are no longer on the ship. We appear to be in a crude prison."

"who?"

"I do not know, Sir."

Finally Oseno managed to open his eyes and focused on the Vulcan woman who was kneeling near him. Slowly, his vision began to clear until he could make out the features on her face.

"Help me sit up, Lieutenant."

T'Lana slowly guided Jureth into a seated position and Jureth glanced around him where he could see other members of his crew still unconscious around the small cell.

"The others?"

"They are alive, Captain, but like you were still unconscious when I myself awoke."

"What can you tell me about our surroundings?"

"It appears to be a prison block, fashioned out of some type of rock. Scoring on the rocks would indicate they were cut using heavy disruptor fire. I suspect the entire crew is here though my field of view is limited. Our combadges are gone, and I would surmise that whomever has us also has the ship."

Jureth nodded slowly.

"Any sign of guards, or surveillance?"

"Negative, Sir, but it is not logical to conclude that someone would imprison us here and leave us unguarded and unwatched. I would surmise that we are being both watched and listened to."

"Ugh..." Jureth rubbed his temples. "HELLO!" he then called out; "IS ANYONE OUT THERE?"

As if waiting for the call, there was a loud clanging noise on the other side and then a heavy grating noise as the thick metal door swung open. Blinding lights came up to their faces and several tall, massive silhouettes could be glimpsed coming in with a leathery and metallic creaking and heavy-booted footsteps. Oseno heard his cellmates being roughly pushed against the walls as he himself was seized by hard, powerful hands on each side and brutally shoved by something hard in his back that felt like a rifle butt. It all happened so fast that he realized that he was out of the cell only when he heard the big door clang shut behind him over the protests of his friends and then the banging of a heavy metal bar being dropped back in large brackets afixed into the very stone of the wall.

There was barely any light at all around him as he was unceremoniously dragged between two taller forms that held him in vise-like grips while a metallic point in the small of his back forced him to walk forward. For a moment, all he could see was what looked like horned helmets, spiked armor and short, thick axe-like weapons that looked vaguely familiar. His abductors spoke no word, barely making any noise with their long, deep breaths over the heavy, perfectly synchronized pounding of their boots on the stone floor of the narrow tunnel they followed.

Then they came to an abrupt stop as the corridor suddenly ended with no visible exit but for an open trapdoor in the ceiling. Iron rungs planted directly in the rock face glinted in the dim light but his two captors holding him simply lifted him up to waiting hands above. As his first escort could be heard clambering up the ladder behind him, the Bajoran was roughly forced to move forward again in the same manner as before, this time between another pair of imposing silhouettes. But now, his eyesight was getting accustomed to the low illumination and he could discern their scally hands, gleaming fangs in flat faces and small, dark, reddish, unblinking eyes.

A door opened before him, the sudden brightness forcing him to close his eyes painfully as he was shoved into it. When his blurred sight could once again support the harsh illumination, he realized that he was now being marched into a metallic corridor quite familiar to him. It was the corridor of a starship; a Federation starship.

The Polaris.

A final push almost sent him sprawling in front of his own command chair. There was seated an armor-clad form, much taller and wider than he was, it's grey flat and wide face covered with scales and spines. There was no mistaking now who their abductors were.

They were Jem'Hadar.

Jureth's head still ached as he processed the situation, Jem'Hadar soldiers, some of the most fiercesome warriors in the galaxy had taken his crew and his ship prisoner.

Why? To what end?

Was the Dominion making a move to renew its assault on the Federation? Jureth remembered that he himself had raised the question as to whether or not anyone was watching the Dominion during the Azimuth Horizon crisis, but all intelligence reports suggested that Dominion activity was at no higher a level than it had been in the last decade or so. Perhaps they were True Way, but taking a Federation starship and crew prisoner was bold even for the militant splinter group. He decided his best course of action was simply to ask...

"Jem'Hadar," Jureth said, attempting to appear as confused as possible as he began to stand straighter. "What is going on here? Why are you aboard my ship and why have you taken us prisoner?"

Now that he had time to catch his breath and look around a bit, Oseno then noticed that the main viewer was operational; and from it's vista, he discovered that the Polaris was berthed into a colossal rock cavity. There were three of the infamous Jem'Hadar Bugships nearby to be seen, one of them apparently stripped almost to the superstructure, the other looking to be in a severe state of disrepair and powerless, the third one alone showing both signs of activity and of prolonged use, discolored and scarred.

And there was another vessel as well; Jureth could only see part of it, the short-cropped stern with a shuttlebay door blasted open from the inside and a pair of stunted, lower-angled nacelles, visibly unpowered and which looked to be strangely much less aged than the rest of the hull. The ship looked to be rather large although the rest of it's seemingly flattened, oblong single hull was out of view, with however a few of the windows weakly alighted. But he could make out the faded painting and what was left of several numbers and letters:

**NXC - ...2376
...SS AEHESIES**

Several of the letters were more discolored, deformed or scarred than the others, the paint underneath a paler tint; and both the registration number and designation made little sense at first. But there was no mistaking it.

It was another Federation starship.

From his seat, the Jem'Hadar obviously in command had taken all this time to look the Bajoran up and down, as if assessing an opponent. But not a hint of emotion showed on his very craggy, heavily spined face and both his stare and voice were even.

"You will address me as First. This ship is spoil of war. Give me your command codes."

Jureth had no idea how many ships these Jem'Hadar had captured, and he still didn't know where they had come from, they obviously weren't true way, and he didn't see any Vorta which meant they weren't likely under Dominion command either. So, what were they...Alpha Jem'Hadar perhaps...born and bred to fight Alpha Quadrant species. That would explain the lack of Cardassians or Vorta. Oseno knew one thing though, he was not about to surrender his command codes...let alone his ship.

"First, is it..very well, but the only thing I will give you is this: Computer lock all command functions! Authorization Oseno Bravo Juliet Six One!"

Jureth finished the command and braced himself for the strike he was sure was coming.

"Command lock down confirmed, " answered the computer's familiar disembodied female voice.

On the center seat, the First raised a hand. A rifle butt stopped merely centimeters from the Bajoran's head.

Sighing, the leader then made some vague gesture with his heavily scaly hand. There was movement behind Oseno and he could see one of his escort leaving the bridge the way they had come. There was a long moment of tense, cold silence as the Jem'Hadar looked at him almost dispassionately. Almost... The strategic ops officer of the Horizon was no counselor but he could clearly discern a kind of... eagerness about the testube-made soldier and also a kind of detachment, the kind Jureth knew as that of the professional simply following orders with no sense of guilt or responsibility about what he was doing... or what he was about to do.

When the door to the bridge hissed open, it was to show a soldier coming in, probably the same that had left; it was quite difficult to tell all these Jem-Hadars apart as they all look so much the same with their heavy scales and numerous long and thick spines on their very craggy faces. But this time, he was not alone; his strong hand was holding firm another person he shoved hard on the floor before pointing the thick halberd-like blade of his typical Jem'Hadar rifle at the throat, right under a gaunt, wrinkled face framed by very long dark hair and right above the collar of the discolored, tattered remnants of an orange uniform covering a scrawny, skinny body.

It was a woman, an old woman; and she was Bajoran.

And there was no mistaking the intentions of the whole set up before Oseno's eyes.

"The command codes, " simply ordered the First.

Jureth looked at the woman, and his heart ached for he was Bajoran and he knew the pain that she must be feeling, accompanied with the fear; but he also knew that he was a Starfleet officer. On top of that he was the captain of the *Polaris* and he could not allow these Jem'Hadar to take command of the powerful escort.

"The needs of the many, outweigh the needs of the few..."

Oseno fixed a cold gaze on the First

"Oseno Jureth, rank Commander, Starfleet, United Federation of Planets. Service number three-one-one-zero-seven-eight." then, knowing from his academy courses that even Jem'Hadar had some sense of personal honor he added, "You will not intimidate me, and if you order her death you will have no honor, and your Gods will surely condemn you."

For a long moment, the First looked into the unflinching eyes of the Starfleet officer. Then he made a motion with his hand.

The Jem'Hadar soldier threatening the defenseless old woman grabbed her roughly by the hair, forced her up to her feet and dragged her out of the command center of the ship.

"We are Jem'Hadar. We do not war on the defenseless but against enemy soldiers. *You*, Oseno Jureth, Starfleet Commander of the United Federation of Planets, service number three-one-one-zero-seven-eight, you are a soldier... and you won *this* battle."

The Jem'Hadar leader stood up, towering over the Bajoran, never moving his eyes from his.

"Our Gods...they have forsaken us. Now, we serve his Excellency. *He* will decide your fate."

Again, his hand made a curt gesture and Oseno was unceremoniously shoved out of the bridge and back along the dimly lit corridor towards the hatch that linked it to the disruptor-carven tunnels and pits.

The four soldiers escorting him, one firmly holding each arm and the two others behind with weapons leveled at his back, powerful searchlights mounted on them, led him back to the metal door of his cell. The two at the back opened it by lifting a massive metal bar from huge brackets in the stone wall then pointed weapons and blinding lights in the faces rising inside. Without a word, he was shoved inside his cell and into the arms of his shipmates, the door and then the heavy bar clanging behind him.

Around him, all eyes were asking questions.

T'Lana caught Oseno as he stumbled forward and released him as he steadied himself.

"Sir, are you alright?"

Jureth nodded "I'm fine,"

"What are we dealing with Sir?" Shawn Hunter asked getting right to the point

"Jem'Hadar," Jureth said practically spitting the name of the species "a lot of them. Their First tried to get my command codes for the Polaris."

"So the ship is here?" asked the Capellan tactical specialist Kalaar

Jureth nodded "Yes, she's here, and doesn't appear to be too much worse for the wear. I locked down the command functions while I was on board so they won't be able to move her other than under tractor beam. There are other ships here as well, including at least one Federation ship, which means there are other crews."

"Sir," T'Lana said after she'd had a moment to think "These Jem'Hadar, who commands them? a Vorta? a Founder?"

Jureth shook his head "Neither, they have a First, and they are working for someone but the First only referred to him as His Excellency. Supposedly whoever this is will decide what they do with us."

"That is very unlike the Jem'Hadar," Commander Yiral said "Jem'Hadar revere the Founders as gods, and in all my travels as a diplomat I have never seen Jem'Hadar mercenaries."

"The First said their Gods had forsaken them..." Jureth replied "I theorized they could be Alpha Jem'Hadar, but that would make them older than any other known Jem'Hadar unless someone is making more."

"Did you see any route of escape?" T'Lana asked

"I couldn't see much of anything, not until they had me aboard the ship anyway. I don't think I could lead us back to her even if we could get out of here."

"Which we cannot," T'Lana said evenly "the door is heavily barred and even if we could escape, we cannot fight a facility full of Jem'Hadar without heavy weapons, and we do not know how to get to the ship."

Jureth knew they had to try something to get away, but he also didn't want to do anything that would get them all killed. There was also the matter of the other ship crews being held, it was their duty as Starfleet officers to try and free them as well, but there was nothing they could use to their advantage. The cell had no panels they could access, no circuits to overload, and no way to set up an ambush for the guards. Even to the stubborn Bajoran, their prospects for escape looked bleak.

* * *

Commander Neil Redding's communicator signaled him and the voice of Captain Kheren came to his ear.

"Number One, we have new data for you; we have identified the vessel who took the powerless ship of Commander Oseno away; it was a Jem'Hadar attack cruiser. "

There was a pause, most certainly for the captain to leave a bit of time for Redding to absorb the news before he resumed his communique.

"Jem'Hadar? way out here?" Redding said in amazement.

"From what our sensor data analysis could allow us to see and deduce, the Jem'Hadar ship seems to have an inactive warp core and a failing impulse engine but definitely followed a planned route through the nebula towards it's center. There was also no graviton emission, meaning their shields were either down or inoperative and that they had no tractor beam in operation; they most probably used a magnetic towing cable to drag the Polaris back to wherever they came from."

This time, Kheren gave his first officer all the time he needed to ponder the information and speak his mind about it.

"So their either lost and out of supplies, or it's a Pirate vessel, either way they obviously plan to use the Polaris to solve their problems one way or the other." He walked as he talked. "It seems unlikely they could have found the Polaris and not noticed the Horizon Captain, which means they didn't think they could take it. They will probably be expecting us to try and recover the Polaris and if their desperate enough.. we could be looking at a bad hostage situation."

"Agreed. As for their apparent neglect of us, well... we are within the boundaries of this Mutara class nebula, Number One. Even with our state of the art powerful sensors, we ourselves could miss even something as big as the Horizon in this blue pea soup, especially unmoving and with energy signature so low. Believe me, I know... I've experienced those same conditions a while back on the Artemis once, inside the original Mutara sector. We then could barely make out a six hundred meters starship at half this distance... and Jem'Hadar ships have never been known to sport formidable sensor pallets to begin with. That's what prompted the invention of the Syntron sonar back then as a matter of fact. But that being said, proceed with caution, Commander. Their *targeting* sensors are much better once they notice you. "

Lieutenant Commander Sisko sighed as he heard that he would have to send two of his remaining small contingent of Engineering officers away from the task of repairing the Horizon's warp core. He decided he didn't need two of his assistant chiefs, as he himself was not planning to sleep until the engines were functional again.

"Sisko to Commander Redding. I have selected two Engineering officers to join you on your shuttles. Lieutenants Junior Grade Alyson Townsend and T'ara will accompany the shuttles and make sure they get you there and safely back to us."

"Good work Sisko, I'll try to get them back to you in one piece. How are the repairs going? If this starts to go sour, It would be nice to know we have the Horizon as an ace up our sleeve."

"Pretty good, Sir; we'll likely have her ready to move again before you get back," replied Sisko.

Redding returned to the shuttle bay and Immediately boarded Delta 1, which he had learned was dubbed 'Dawn'. Moore was in the Pilot's seat completing the last of his flight check list.

"All systems are go, Commander. As soon as the green girl gets here, we will be T-minus ten seconds into the big black sir."

Redding paused as he sat down and swiveled his seat in Moores' direction.

"Mister Moore.. how long have you and Lieutenant Leône been dating now?"

He had a curious look on his face. Moores' eyes widened as he looked around at Redding.

"Ah... we are not... together... Sir."

Redding shook his head understandingly.

"Oh, well you spoke of her as if you were familiar with her on a personal level, not with the kind of respect a good officer might have for a fellow officer."

His tone didn't change but his look became serious.

Moore didn't catch his meaning immediately, but the diverted eyes and uneasy cough of one of the crew clued him in.

"I meant no disrespect, Sir. I was just.. trying to lighten the mood..."

Redding turned away from him and started working on a control panel.

"In the future, I'll let you know when the mood needs 'lightening,' Lieutenant."

"And I do hope that you're not forgetting myself, Lieutenant." Snowfire said, knocking gently on the hatch cover. "If you're wanting to catch the vessel that took the Polaris, you're going to need me around."

Looking up towards the Commander, her lips twitched slightly.

"Commander, I have all the gear I need and probably a few bits I don't." She hefted the small carryall on her shoulder and nodded towards the aft station. "May I get to work?"

"By all means, take your position Lieutenant Commander... and welcome aboard the Dawn." He said this with a half smile he hadn't meant to give. "Anyone here have any up close and personal familiarity with the Dominion? Unfortunately I was deemed non-combat ready during the Dominion war and was assigned to the diplomatic corps, trying to coordinate our efforts with the Klingons."

He raised an eyebrow at Snowfire, as if expecting her to have some insight.

But Moore spoke up first.

"Why would that be important right now, Sir? Their like.. well, a very long way away."

Redding looked back at him.

"Apparently not, Moore. We've identified a Jem'hadar ship towing the Polaris. But I'll be making a ship wide briefing to both shuttles in route, so, hold your questions."

"Our people's First Contact with the Federation did not take place until 2385 of your Earth calendar, Commander." Snowfire answered in way of reply, stepping quickly around the consoles and taking a seat at the back of the shuttle's 'bridge'. "I've read about the Dominion War; both IDF analysis of it and the records available at Starfleet Academy, but I have no personal experience with the Dominion. I will say, however, that the Council does not trust them. And on that, they have the support of many."

She finished abruptly, turning swiftly to her work. It wouldn't help to mention that she'd almost broken her oath again. A few words more and that would have been done. It was strange though, how lax it was beginning to become...

At that moment, Alyson Townsend appeared followed by Doctor 011, who stopped short of the shuttle.

"Sir, my... counterpart and I... would like to... accompany the... away team. We can also... serve as instant... communication between... two parties, assuming... our communications system is... somehow lost. Permission to... come aboard?"

"An excellent point, Doctor, agreed." And motioned for him to take one of the two rear foldaway seats. "You and Townsend was it? take those two seats, let us know if you need anything."

Acting Chief of security and tactical Tyvya entered then, having checked all the personel armament and now overseeing the last verifications of the shuttle's tactical systems as a small and portly Tellarite security officer did the same on the other Delta Flyer.

Exiting swiftly through the turbolift doors, Elisha Leône hustled her way to the shuttle bay. As she made her way toward the opened shuttle door on the craft with a label Dawn on its side, Elisha realized that she hadn't brought any specific gear or special clothing with her.

Too late now, she thought as she entered into the seemingly crowded shuttle.

"Lieutenant Elisha Leône reporting for duty," she announced as her eyes wandered around... subtly looking for a place to sit.

"Granted; take your seat, Lieutenant." Redding answered as he motioned at the Ops station. He could tell she looked a little nervous as she sat down. He decided to spare a moment for her.

"Don't worry Leone, I've seen your file, you should do just fine."

He gave her a reassuring nod of the head then went back to his work.

"Thank you, Sir. I will do my best" Elisha responded as she slipped swiftly into the Ops position and ran a quick gaze over the instrumentation before her.

Fortunately, she had studied the schematics of the Ops consoles on each of the shuttle types after she settled in on the Horizon. It appeared that the panel controls matched those presented in the simulations and on the holodeck program she ran during her intervals when she was off-duty back at her previous assignment. She breathed a silent breath of relief for this small gift.

Moore spoke up after glancing from Leone to Redding and straightening up.

"All crew accounted for, Commander. Locking the ship down and commencing disembarcation procedure, Sir."

Redding made a crooked smile at him and shook his head slightly.

"Acknowledged. Leone, contact Dusk and coordinate a flight plan to the to the last known position of the target."

"Implementing now, Commander."

As Elisha spoke, her fingers moved gingerly over the controls as she prepared to send a message to the Dusk to coordinate a flight plan with them toward the position of their target.

"Dusk to Dawn; Ensign Aurora Jaxon here at ops; Lieutenant Sheeneea is piloting. Engineer T'ara is with us as well as Doctor 110, security officer Graalthrii and science officer Valencia Irksos who is also assuming shuttle command. We aknowledge and follow your lead, Commander Redding. "

Then, the first officer of the starship Horizon swiveled his chair around to look directly at Snowfire.

"Any problems with the modification Lieutenant Commander? let me know if were clear for full impulse."

As he spoke the two shuttles lifted off and glided gracefully out of the main docking bay with Dawn in the lead.

"We're green across the board, Commander," answered Snowfire. "Adjusting harmonics...now."

The shuttle seemed to settle, as if it had suddenly landed.

"And we're up. The system will automatically redirect the grav-plane to boost our vector. Lieutenant Moore, be careful for the first few minutes, she's going to handle a bit differently to what you're used to."

The Illythirii woman touched a button on her panel.

"Modification slugged to and active on Dusk shuttle. We're clear to go."

* * *

Watching the two shuttles leave the Horizon, Captain Kheren could not help but feel a strange feeling of apprehension, almost something akin to *deja vu*. The familiar lightning-crisscrossed red and blue haze of the nebula was certainly the main cause of it; recalling to his First Officer the events that had occurred aboard his former command in the original Mutara sector was bringing back to his mind another shuttlecraft moving out in the stellar fog in search of another mysterious, barely glimpsed starship. But at the time, he himself had been aboard to directly confront the situation. Now, he had to sit back and let others do it, others whose lives he was responsible for. And as little as they knew so far, all of it meant trouble.

"Mister Baoule; if we should believe what we have seen, how do you explain the possible presence of a Jem'Hadar ship so far from known space?"

"The first and most probable hypothesis that comes to mind is that they got caught in the same or a similar subspace eddy as the one that brought us here, " answered the black-skinned man.

"Jem'Hadar ships do not have any better range than our own vessels, " chimed in his brother from the engineering station, coordinating the repairs his boss, Lieutenant Commander Sisko, was directly overseeing. "They could not have simply flown out here..."

"Unless they would have started such an incredible journey almost fifty years ago and that at a sustained warp 9 velocity," suggested helmsman Snow.

"For what purpose?" then asked the Andorian in the command chair.

"Unknown, Sir," replied Counselor Lyrya in the medical chair at his left hand, the Aenar feeling deeply the unease of her husband. "Jem'Hadars are the pilots of those ships and they are genetically-engineered soldiers; they have neither the inclination nor the skills for exploration... and their bio-engineered dependency to ketracel-white would make such a long range expedition a death sentence... and a particularly shameful one at that, considering their proud holy soldier mindset."

"What about a Vorta commanding them?"

Norbert Baoule spoke again from the science station.

"Vortas are also genetically engineered to be the intermediaries between the Founders, their creators and self-claimed gods, and those troops. They have no personal motivation outside those responsibilities and planning operations in the field to serve the Dominion's interests. And their hold on the Jem'Hadars depends on their ketracel-white supply. "

"A bugship has no resources to manufacture any after this supply is depleted," added his bald twin Robert. "If they engaged in such a long journey, they would never have been able to carry enough to survive even just the trip to come here."

"Unless there was more than one ship... possibly a Dominion Dreadnought," then said the distinctively purring voice of Mriish, seated at the tactical console. The felinoid too was feeling her commanding officer's unease in his voice through her sensitive hearing. "But the Dominion has no military capability nor objectives since the war ended half a century ago; and there is nothing strategically worthwhile in coming so far out at the edge of the galaxy."

"Being peaceful isolationists despite their paranoid tendencies with abundant resources and no compulsion to explore outside of their homefield in the Gamma Quadrant, there is therefore no valid reason for them to come out here," concluded Lyrya in turn.

"A nav accident like the one that brought us out here as well seems the most probable explanation as to their surprising presence here," said Yeoman Blackbird from behind the command dais, "especially considering the sorry state their own vessel seemed to be."

"They might have taken the Polaris as possible resource for their survival," added in turn the shrill voice of the Edoan Cheonghi, now taking over for Elisha Leône at ops. "or as a mean to get back home. And if the crew was incapacitated... or..."

Kheren had listened to the speculations of his officers while making assumptions and hypotheses of his own. Now, he activated his communicator.

"Engineering; Mister Sisko, do we have impulse power, transporters and shields available? If not, how long before we do? "

"Aye, Sir," replied Sisko. "Everything is back to normal operating status except for warp drive. And, we should have that available after a level one diagnostic. Seeing as our shuttles are currently disengaged, I think we'll have time for that."

The level one diagnostic was the most detailed, and thus also the most time consuming. Also, due to the decreased crew complement, it had to be performed with a quarter of the usual number of engineers.

"I would give it twenty-four hours, Sir," Sisko estimated.

"Understood, Mister Sisko, " acknowledged the captain. "Now, what are our tactical options from the viewpoint of our current available power? We would need shields and phasers while at full impulse if we do have to confront more than the one Jem'Hadar bugship detected so far... and even one might prove very dangerous if we cannot at least raise shields. "

Kheren guessed that his Bajoran chief engineer was quite aware of the USS Odyssey incident that precluded the Dominion War, when a single bugship on a kamikaze attack against a Galaxy class starship deprived of shields resulted in the complete destruction of the vessel with over a thousand lives lost. A close range antimatter explosion from a ship's engine could do the same even to a huge structure as the Horizon if she could not raise shields and move away fast enough... and Jem'Hadars were notorious for their utter disregard for their own lives if it could cripple the enemy.

The Andorian did not look forward to face such a potentially ruthless adversary defenseless.

"Captain... something just occurred to me. Maybe somebody else is using that ship... " suggested Yeoman Blackbird to the commanding officer of the Horizon as she brought him a PADD to sign with an imprint of his genetic code from a thumbpress.

Somebody else... out here... at the edge of the galaxy...

The thought felt suddenly very disquieting to Kheren; and he could not explain why. Something was nagging at him from the edge of his consciousness, like a dim memory or the remain of a bad dream from long ago... But his thought were interrupted by the voices around him.

"Which still does not explain why such a short range craft could be here in the first place," was now stating Aguk Snow watching their position over his helm controls, "or how... or why they took the Polaris in tow and why they went inside that awful nebula..."

"Guess we will have to wait for Commander Redding to find those answers... hopefully," then said ops officer Cheonghi. "In the meantime, captain, all stations are reporting that they should all be fully operational within the hour."

"Good," said Kheren nodding as he stood up from his command seat. " I have a hunch we might need to be ready soon for whatever they find out there. I will be on the poopdeck."

Those who had served with him on the Artemis knew that this was the old Earth navy term he used to speak of his ready room. What none knew however is how bad his hunch made him feel when he looked on the viewscreen at the thin far away line of the Great Galactic Barrier, especially through the disconcertingly familiar stormy haze of that Mutara class nebula.

None except his Aenar wife.

* * *

First Officer's Log

Stardate: 87638.8

Captain Kheren has tasked me with the recovery of our auxiliary ship, the Polaris, that went missing upon our arrival to this region well beyond known space.

Although in the interim the Horizon has located our missing ship it would seem you can't leave all your problems behind, in this case that would be the Jem'hadar. It would appear they preceded us and took advantage of our momentary impairment after warping in to abscond with the Polaris.

Our task force consists of two Delta Flyer class shuttles, the Dawn, Commanded by me, and the Dusk by Lieutenant Irksos.

Thanks to the shield modifications performed by Lieutenant Commander Snowfire, we should intercept with them shortly, right after the mission situation report is completed.

Redding completed his briefing with both crews over a secured communication signal.

"..And while we attempt first contact and threat assessment, the Dusk will be supplying support in the event this is an ambush attempt on their part. Any question so far?"

Tyvya was first to speak from the back of the cockpit.

"Sir, even two Delta Flyers are no match in a frontal confrontation with a Jem'Hadar destroyer; and those bugships usually are part of a paired formation on patrol or usually of an entire squadron, more often than not launched from a much larger cruiser. Despite the alleged disrepair of the one detected at the time of the Polaris abduction, we must not assume any weakness on their part until actually assessed. What is your tactical plan if we do find them and if we have to face them?"

"Running away would be my advice," Snowfire replied, turning from where she was sitting monitoring the shield modifications. "With the grav-plane, we're significantly faster. And once we're out of visual range, they won't be able to pursue with any degree of accuracy due to the nebular interference."

Redding nodded.

"Your both correct. Under normal circumstances we could not engage directly and we have the ability to out run them in any event, so if it was to come down to a fight we would perform coordinated hit and run attacks and wear them down."

Redding took a breath then looked around.

"But this is not our primary goal. I don't want everyone going into this thinking this ship is our enemy, there are just too many factors that don't add up."

He paused for effect then went on.

"Unless like the USS Voyager and ourselves they found their way here through extraordinary means, which would be highly unlikely, they meant to be here, more likely ordered to be. But that was fifty years ago, and unless I'm mistaken the Jem'hadar don't even live that long, so they've either been in stasis for the entire trip, or that ship manned by something else."

He then acknowledged Tyvya.

"Again, under normal conditions I'd agree with your assessment. But if they had that kind of support and it was functional, they would have attacked the Horizon first while she was disabled. But I'm not discounting the possibility of a second ship, which is why I'm having Lieutenant Irksos stand vigil. If it *is* the Jem'hadar, it's a sure bet that before we arrived they had no way of knowing the war is over. How will they react to that? From all indications they're barely hanging on out here and have now been discovered by superior enemy forces."

The look of an older man, who has seen many wars passed over his face.

"So we are going in, assessing the situation as best we can and getting the Polaris and it's crew back any way we have too, but if at all possible, we won't use a blade to do it with."

For the better part of an hour, both shuttlecrafts flew through the red and blue haze of the nebula, shaken from time to time by the ambient static discharges that crisscrossed the clouds of ionized particles around them. Visual detection was quite like moving through a dense sea fog and sensors were screeching with static, although the space sonar using the deflector of every Lotus Fleet ship nowadays sounded ahead of them with its eerie ping sound echoing back like the pulse heard on antique earth submarines. And at one point, that signal changed pitch, tempo and frequency.

"Dusk to Dawn; we are getting a signal at the other end of the impulse trail; something big and massive up ahead, mineral and metallic mass, composition yet unknown, about five hundred thousand kilometers, bearing 005 mark 22. Do you concur?"

On her own board, science chief Snowfire K'Leysa could indeed see she was receiving the same readings. And then, like a veil parting before their eyes, the blue clouds dispersed in front of them to reveal in the stormy distance a large rocky asteroid, almost polished smooth by eons inside the nebula and it's eternal storm of dust and lightning.

"Recommend we shut down the sonar for a discreet survey approach, Sir, " then advised Tyvya. "It's signal can be perceived by anyone at the other end. I would guess that we don't want to stir up any alarm too soon about our presence."

"Agreed, but lets not be too worried about stealth. They already know we'll be following and too much caution may lead them to think were weak enough to bully," Redding suggested.

"Aye, Sir," answered Tyvya, her Andorian straightfordwadness agreeing readily with her superior officer. " Although I'm not convinced at all that they are aware of us yet, especially in this nebula. Had they spotted the Horizon, they would have done lots of other things than just tow the Polaris away. So, Commander... do we circle around and observe until they notice us, or do we go straight in and knock?"

"We will definitely be knocking. Until we know better, it's to be assumed that they... recovered... the Polaris and towed it here for repairs."

But he rolled his eyes as he said it.

"We'll give them the benefit of the doubt, for now."

At that moment, the comm channel signaled it's encrypted signal.

"Dawn, this is Lieutenant Irksos aboard the Dusk. We shot down the Sonar to avoid detection but we had enough time to detect alloy compounds within the asteroid and an inordinate level of atomic radiation. The impulse trail goes right around to the other side of the asteroid and there is a lot of decayed ions and other particles near it... much like around a space station... I mean, like one that would have been used for maybe decades. The rock mass of the asteroid is shielding any further scan from this distance. Do you confirm the readings?"

He signaled the Dusk.

"Lieutenant Irksos, hold position and take up sentry duty. We're going in to establish contact, make sure our back stays clear."

He pointed at Moore, making a 'move along' gesture. Moore went right work,

"Aye, Sir, one quarter impulse."

And as he said so, started his swing around the asteroid.

The helmsman of the Dawn plotted a concentric course that would bring the shuttle ever closer to the asteroid but in a large circular trajectory tHat would give ample time for anyone there to detect them and understand that they were not on a direct intercept course; a sure sign of possible intent. At the same time, it allowed a complete survey of the area, even in a passive manner, that quickly showed them much more than they had expected.

Behind parting veils of blue and red particles of space dust, the asteroid slowly revealed itself to be cup shaped, the inner part now just coming into view. The hollowed face of the large rock ball showed to them with the gradually clearing fog of ions an old yet well furbished docking area, dimly lit by only a few floodlights. But the lightning discharges of static in the foggy haze that surrounded it all flashed intermittently what laid inside.

The first thing they recognized was the small elongated shape of the USS Polaris. She looked as pristine as when she had launched from the Horizon and there were lights doting it's decks and her warp nacelles were still on stanby.

But their attention was immediately drawn to the huge shape looming over it.

It looked to be at least six hundred meters, a long, flat, narrow metal shape that looked nothing less than a gigantic shark with a massive flattened prow shaped like a great white 's head. Behind it stretched a short narrowing hull level with the neckless, oval saucer section fused to it and ending with two stunted nacelles on short low-angled pylons. There was but a few pale lights coming from viewports and the nacelles themselves were dark.

What was surprising about it, besides it's unusual shape, was that it looked aged, pockmarked by what looked like decades of spaceflight, the pale blue paint scratched everywhere accross the silvery-whitish metal underneath; everywhere except on the nacelles themselves who looked startlingly fresh and new albeit of an older design than current vessels. There was also a small gouge on one side, as if one deck had exploded midway on the the secondary hull.

But what was even more intriguing was the fact that it's design, as unusual as it was, still was definitely that of a Starfleet vessel.

"What the blazes is *that*?" exclaimed Moore with oogling eyes.

As they came closer, they saw that part of a name and registry could be made out on the top of the ovoid saucer section.

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"It certainly looks like a Federation starship... and an odd one at that, " continued the helmsman. "Look at all those weapon ports... and it's armored all over... feels more like a Klingon ship... Even the registry and name make no sense."

The others were also looking and pondering about the large, strange starship berthed inside the asteroid. From the back of the cockpit, Tyvya moved forward to peer also through the cockpit at what they were all gawking at. And, as soon as she saw it, her blue skin took a definite lighter tone and her voice blanched as much.

" No... it ain't possible... "

Her fists balled each side of her towering frame as her antennae lowered forward as if she was about to jump right through the canopy at the unknown, enigmatic vessel.

"Not... *him*!"

Redding could not do more than open his mouth to ask her what this was all about that she turned to him with a deadly earnestness in her sapphire eyes.

"Commander, we have to go back to the Horizon *now*... and fast!"

And as she said so, a flat, egg-like shape zoomed out from under the large mysterious vessel to come straight at them. Even through the haze they could see the light of weapon ports blazing toward them.

It was a Jem'Hadar attack ship.

Redding spared a glance from the attack ship back to Tyvya before responding.

"Moore, evasive maneuvers! everyone strap in."

Moore's fingers danced over the controls and the Dawn spun around on a narrow arc and sped on it way.

"Course, Commander?"

Redding didn't respond right away, but spoke to Leone instead.

"Try to hail that ship and tell them we wish to negotiate, but we will return fire if engaged."

Then he looked back over at Moore.

"Head back to the Dusk but make sure you don't lose that ship, we need it to follow us as close as possible."

Moore cocked his head but didn't look around at him.

"Well Commander, I do love a challenge.."

But for once he wasn't smiling.

"Redding to Irksos; were being pursued by a Jem'hadar attack vehicle. Here's what I need you to do..."

As they all activated their PIDS, the hail was answered over the comm speakers. As Jem'Hadar ships had no viewing screens, there was no visual retransmitted, only audio. Fact was, Jem'Hadars never bothered with hails, especially in combat, as their aim was always to either destroy or capture the enemy plain and simple and they had no inclinations to either boast or threaten, even less negotiate. Yet, to the surprise of all, there was an answer.

"Surrender or be destroyed."

A choice; to those who could have had any knowledge or experience with the Dominion engineered soldiers, that one also was a first. As was the warning disruptor shot across their bow instead of straight at them as the Dawn swung around in a tight arc to complete its revolution around and behind the asteroid, putting it momentarily between her and the warship.

And something else raised the eyebrows of tactical officer Tyvya. She glanced at Elisha Leône as if to get her confirmation as she spoke. That or an explanation.

"Commander... that shot... it was barely at half power. "

The Delta Flyer then shook as another energy bolt sizzled close by, much closer, illuminating the blue and red fog around them.

"The ionic particles and static discharges are playing havoc with sensors," explained the giantess at tactical. " They can't lock target and so have to aim manually through all that fog and stormy weather. That's the good news. The bad news is; neither can we... and for both of us, shields will be inoperative... but *their* ship is armor plated."

Another shot glazed their hull and shook them just as their view through the canopy swirled sharply away from a sudden static bolt of lightning blinding them a moment.

"And they have damn good aim," grunted pilot Moore as he sweated over the controls to keep their craft on Redding's plotted course while dodging obviously carefully calculated salvos with as much instinct as luck.

Their smaller size and energy signature as well as their speed and maneuverability was their only real asset against the larger attack craft hot on their tail. But each passing second chewed on their chances to escape. One shot to their engines would be enough cripple them and leave them dead in the water.

And each single bolt was coming closer.

Long seconds dragged out as the shuttle floundered under the barrage. To say Moore had his hands full was an understatement. What Moore decided not to tell his commander was that, in order to look like they were running away without actually doing it, he had to cut power by about a quarter. To Moore, it felt like he was dragging the enemy ship on a tether.

"Coming up on the rendez-vous point, Commander"Snowfire informed him. "No sign of the Dusk "

Redding nodded.

"Glad to hear that. Stand by Moore... on my mark.. now!"

He pointed at the Bynar Doctor who nodded and sent his telepathic message.

Moore sighed out "Finally" under his breath and kicked the ship into full power.

The Dawn suddenly came to life and started widening the gap between the two ships causing the Jem'hadar attack ship to redouble its efforts by intensifying their forward fire. So intent were they on the escaping shuttle, especially with the interference to sensors caused by the nebula particle and discharges, they never saw the Dusk powering up and taking pursuit of the bug ship until the second shuttlecraft was well into their flank.

The Jem'hadar attack ships were efficient for their class, fast and maneuverable, but it could be no match for a Delta Flyer class shuttle in these things. The Dusk pounded mercilessly at their impulse engines, having been give orders to disable the vehicle if at all possible.

Back during the Dominion war, Redding had discussed the nature of the design for the Jem'hadar ships with the Vorta that had been assigned there as well.

"Why so lightly armored in the rear Admiral?" he had asked then. The Vorta had looked at him smugly; "Why, they fight for the Founders of course. NO Jem'hadar would ever run from a battle. To... over armor.. that area would be a waste of resource," He had then said it with much pride."We did something like that in our history as well, in ancient times..." Redding then had commented. "Emperors gave their troops breast plates made of the finest bronze to march into battle in, but only cloth in the back."His smile had been misinterpreted by the Dominion field commander."They loved this Emperor greatly did they?" But Redding had laughed; "Hell no! It was to keep them from running away!"

Redding's mind came back to the present as the bug ship was trying desperately to get a better angle on the Dusk.

"Tyvya target their communications array. I don't care if you destroy it, but take it out."

"Shooting backward blindfolded at the glasses of a man on a running horse in a thunderstorm at night... aye, Sir, " answered the Andorian giantess as she nevertheless stood up to peer through the canopy while her fingers readied their phaser array. Fortunately, a Delta Flyer of the latest design had a full three-hundred and sixty degree arc of fire; something quite handy in trying to shoot down an enemy during such a deadly and furious dance.

Her first shot grazed the pursuing ship's armor. Yet, some of it flew out in a burning trail under the discharge.

"Must have been quite worn out on that spot," she mused as she sent another volley that again vaporized rather easily another armor plate on the top of the flat hull, leaving afiery scar on the bug's head.

Then he spoke to Snowfire.

"If it looks like they might get position on the Dusk tell them to pull back and well move in on their flank."

He then gave her his now trademark crooked smile.

"Repeat as necessary."

That's when he heard Tyvya grunt an unintelligible Andorian expletive to suddenly stand up and run through the back door into the aft section of the shuttle before anyone could utter a word. The deadly dance between the three crafts continued for a good minute and, at one point, a metal-tearing sound came from the stern before she came back, sweating and panting and frantically playing her fingers on the firing controls. Looking intently at her target, she waited for the moment when the attack ship would start turning forward from the Dusk to engage them anew and then punched the torpedo firing button.

A micro torpedo flew out to hit the upper part of the bugship prow. There were a few armor plates broken over but there was no detonation.

"What the... " Moore began.

"Wait for it... " the giantess answered.

And then, a violent static discharge from the nebula struck the Jem'Hadar ship directly. They were all blinded by the closeness of the energy bolt and the dawn buckled as all the controls flashed in and out, almost burned out by the immense nearby power surge. Then, their eyes blinked out of their whitish haze and then their controls did the same to reactivate and self-diagnose to basic operational status.

"What was that?" asked Moore righting their craft and turning around to face once more their enemy.

"I tore off a bed's frame and thrust it at the top back of a warheadless micro torpedo, " started to explain Tyvya, falling with relief in her chair.

Moore understood instantly.

"A lightning rod! That sure took their comm out neatly!"

"And a bit more, hopefully," added the tactical officer as she pointed with her nose at the scene beyond their cockpit.

The Jem'Hadar ship looked fairly intact except for burned armor and emitters on her bow. But she floated slowly and freely, drifting peacefully, obviously disabled.

"Never doubt the ingenuity of an Andorian." Redding said with a smile. "Moore dock us. Snowfire.." he said turning to her, "if we extend the navigational deflectors from both shuttles around the bug ship and linked the transporters, would we get enough of a signal to use the transporter? and what's the safety margin?"

Essentially he was asking if, as the shuttles took parallel positions on either side of the bug ship, they could they beam from one shuttle to the other and simply stop the transmission at some point inside the Jem'Hadar ship.

"It's possible, Sir. Risky, and heavily reliant on our deck plans of those vessels being correct... but definitely possible." Snowfire replied. "Set it up then?"

Although he noted she didn't actually give him a treat level, he decided that might be for the best.

"Okay then, volunteers only. I need five people to join me for a bridge assault."

Moore was lining the ship for a hard dock.

"If your beaming in, why are we even docking?"

"Because lieutenant, we want them to think that's the way we're boarding, any personnel still able to fight will be at the air lock waiting," he said as he opened the weapons locker and pulled out a phaser rifle.

Redding looked briefly at Tyvya and paused holding a rifle, and was struck by a momentary pang of uncertainty. She was one of the captains wives after all, to lose her in a transporter accident... He shrugged it off and handed her the rifle. It was her choice after all.

Tyvya already had just come back from the aft section with tricorders, stun grenades, hand phasers and the combat knives issued by Captain Kheren's own shipboard directives since his days as a security chief on board the USS Lotus where they had first met. She took the offered rifle and put it aside.

"I suggest small arms, Commander. Like Klingon ships, Jem'Hadar ships are compact and cramped with narrow corridors and low ceilings to prevent easy use of bulky rifles and heavy armament," she warned as she brought the ordinance to the cockpit. "A good tactic here is to keep a knife in your off-hand to parry any stabbing attempt from their integrated rifle-blade so as to leave your firing hand free to fire. Just for insurance, Sir. I expect most of them will have been at least dazed by the static discharge across their hull. "

"I expect that as well." He said simply. But it was obvious he wasn't going to take the chance as he continued gearing up. "And for the record, when going against opponents with sword-like weapons, I prefer something I can block with."

He showed an unnecessary dexterity in spinning it in his hands, although doing so showed a great skill at it.

She did not insist however. Like all Andorians, she was used to think of conflict in either individual or small team tactics where everyone had a different role and therefore different choices of gear. If the first officer felt better with an awkward weapon who's only advantage was better endurance and long distance aim while they would be in a short engagement in a close range environment, it was his privilege. And he was in command anyway.

"Orders, Sir?" she asked instead with perfunctory discipline.

"Each shuttle has three transporters, we'll simultaneously transport all the volunteers onto its bridge in a three-hundred and sixty degrees arc. If it moves, shoot it," he answered and moved onto the transporter platform just as the shuttle clamped roughly onto the bug ship. "Everyone else hold until the all clear is given and be ready to board. I want the ship under its own power ASAP, even if we have to pull parts off one of the shuttles."

He waited to see who would be joining him. Tyvya was already stepping up to the transporter pad. On the Dusk, T'ara the engineer would also join the boarding action from their end with Graathrii as added security if none of the doctors would come. Irksos as researcher and Jaxon for ops duty both signaled ready if Leone and K'Leysa, their senior officers, declined to come along.

When they confirmed that they were all on the respective small 3 pad teleporter of their own craft, the big man in red gave the word.

"Energize"

The transport was not the easy flow most had been used to from years of use and both T'ara and Leone were in danger of becoming violently sick. Redding had done many such combat transports over the years and showed no sign of distress and if Graathrii or Tyvya noticed at all they did not show it.

At one of the stations, a lone Jem'hadar was pulling it self up the controls but a quick shot from Graathrii put it back on the ground again.

"Don't forget." He grumbled. "Stun doesn't work on Jem'hadar."

The bridge was atypical of a Jem'hadar assault craft except it seem under crewed as only three Jem'hadar could be seen manning the entire bridge.

After giving his people a few seconds to adjust, he signaled Graathrii and Tyvya to sweep the area towards the docking port while he and T'ara headed towards engineering.

"Keep your comm open and don't hesitate to drop anyone you see, there could be as many as sixty Jem'hadar on-board and they won't stay stunned for long, the rest hold the bridge."

As they moved along, T'ara made a left instead of following behind Redding.

"It's this way Sir" she said and started following her tricorder.

Before either could react, a blur of motion slammed into T'ara and a spray of blood coated the corridor wall as she crumpled to the floor.

Without a second thought, Redding charged in and bodyslammed the blurred object. bringing his rifle down and forward like a battering ram and the two of them slammed into the far bulk head. The Jem'hadar's shroud dropped as Redding abandoned his own weapon and grabbed at the *Kar'takin*, slamming his shoulder into it. The blade pinned the Jem'hadar's left arm behind his back against the bulkhead and dug into his throat while Redding braced his right foot and pressed his left knee into his opponent's hip, allowing him no chance to regain any leverage.

Their eyes locked and they both snarled as Redding pushed harder, forcing the blade further into his neck. Soon the Jem'hadar warrior started choking, blood spurting from it's mouth as blood from its gouged aorta spilled into it's punctured trachea. The grey-skinned, scaled alien struggled furiously to break Redding's hold but to no avail. Soon it started going limp as it's eyes rolled back.

Redding yanked the blade away, causing blood to spurt out onto his uniform but he didn't seem to notice. Redding said something that sounded like the Klingon expletive "*Hegh quvHa'ghach*" and raised the Kar'takin over the Jem'Hadar's heart.

At the other end of the weapon, the craggy, spine-rimmed stony face was looking up at him with unblinking eyes. And what Redding saw in those eyes startled him.

Tiredness... or... sadness?

"COMMANDER REDDING!"

The sharp voice of Tyvya stayed Redding's hand at the very moment he was about to strike. Dimly aware of the man, she tried to use very formal military speech to snap him out of that almost all too familiar Andorian rage he seemed to be feeling.

"Sir!" now stated the giantess forcefully. "We have secured the ship as per your orders. We report merely a skeleton crew, six of them total... and they are all... incredibly old. I respectfully suggest, Commander Sir, that we should start asking questions... "

Redding lowered his weapon but didn't remove his eyes from the Jem'hadar.

"See to our wounded first."

But just as he said so, his commbadge came to life. As per standard procedure when boarding an unknown and potentially hostile vessel, the comm between the boarding party and the shuttles had remained open and the doctors heard this most recent statement.

"Commander Redding," came the quick, robotic voice of one of the Bynar doctors, which happened to be 011 on the Dawn. "If the Jem'Hadar... are old... we would like to... study their... state of health."

The voice of 110 came from the Dusk, in agreement.

"It is amazing they have... lasted this long. If from the original... Dominion Wars, they have... likely surpassed their... average lifespan by... at least thirty years!"

"It is also impossible that... they have been manufacturing more... sources of Ketracel White, so we need to... study how they have managed to... even survive for more than a year... without it," added Doctor 011. "Perhaps you could... indulge us and beam... an unconscious subject into... each shuttle, Sir? We can... study them while... keeping them... in stasis."

"I'll see to it you each get a lab rat... but we have wounded first as well as a severely injured Jem'hadar with deep lacerations to the neck and arm," answered Redding. "011, get over here and bring your med kit. The transporter's too unstable to attempt dematerializing wounded or stunned personnel."

He started applying pressure to the Jem'hadar's wound. There was no look of gratitude in his eyes.

Then over the open comm, the first officer of the Horizon gave his next order.

"Leone, start downloading logs and any relevant information within their memory banks. We especially need to know if they have spotted the Horizon or the condition of the Polaris's crew. Everyone else, get to work on getting this horse back on its feet. We have to get it into Troy as quickly as possible."

"Understood Sir... I'm on it now!" Elisha exclaimed as she swiftly began creating a link to allow her to download logs and any other available information from their memory banks. As she swiftly began deciphering the cryptic information she hailed the commander.

"Commander Redding, Lieutenant Elisha Leône here...from what I could ascertain from their limited information, they show no indication that this vessel detected the Horizon when they found the Polaris. Perhaps it was too deep in the nebula or their obsolete sensors were too low on power... but there is nothing remaining regarding any reference to the Horizon that I could find. Also, it would seem that all logs which are older than a week have all been erased or lost due to time, damage, or perhaps energy rationing."

Then pulling up a workable file, the Orion Ops officer continued.

"However Sir, the last sensor record, not yet erased or lost, is about the Polaris and it's active antimatter core registering on their instruments as they were out in the nebula harvesting ion particles with their ramscoop of their unused nacelles for their overused impulse reactors and their batteries."

After a slight pause she added asigh.

"I'm sorry, Sir... but that was all of the information that I was able to gather from their memory banks."

Redding turned the Kar'takin over in his hand, studying it.

"I've never seen such a weapon so well maintained yet so worn." and passed it over to Tyvya. "They've been stuck here a very long time."

"An eternity of damnation our former Gods condemned us to... until came our Deliverer, the Bringer of Life."

The wounded Jem'Hadar at his feet had spoken with a calm, soft but strong voice, the voice expected from a well-seasoned, wise and brave warrior who had seen so many die that his own death was meaningless to him. But his words meant little if anything to Redding and his confusion showed on his face. The big grey-skinned scaly soldier didn't move from his sprawled position but looked at him with dull eyes.

"He will also judge you and decide your fate."

Before Redding could ask him any question, Tyvya was beside him and vying for his attention with a voice ladden with eagerness and even, surprisingly, apprehension

"Respectfully, Commander... we *can not* go there. "

"I beg to differ, Lieutenant, " then said engineer T'ara returning from her quick inspection of the captured vessel. "This ship has been short-circuited by your... lightning rod but can be reactivated to full operational status from the main power of any of our two shuttles. We can even reactivate their own cold warp core with some of our reserve antimatter if we want to; it's been shut down for decades it seems... but these guys have meticulously kept it in working order nevertheless. Amazingly, this whole vessel runs only on batteries. A full deck has been crammed with them, much more than just what could be needed to power up this ship; seems they used the static charge of this nebula to collect electrical energy from their bussard collectors of their nacelles and store it to bring it back to their base, along with ion particles to presumably convert them into impulse power. very ingenious... I would have expected this from Starfleet engineers, not Jem'Hadar soldiers..."

She then turned fully to face Redding.

"Sir, I can bring this vessel's systems back online in a few minutes with the help of either Dawn or Dusk..."

But then, the Andorian giantess interrupted with forcefulness.

" Sir! We *must* return to the Horizon... and *fast*!"

Looking at his questioning expression, she didn't give him time to voice his interrogation.

" *That* Starfleet vessel we saw in their dock... I *know* her; I *have* seen her before; she's the Achilles! "

T'ara raised an eyebrow in a very Vulcan fashion of startlement.

"USS Achilles? First of the only five of the joint Federation-Klingon class heavy siege destroyer of the Dominion War? Now that you speak of it, the design we saw does match that unique but short-lived class of warship... But, as I recall from Starfleet files, the Achilles was lost in space following a computer and navigational malfunction... And the name and registry we saw were rather confusing, clearly not... "

"What we saw were *two* registries and *two* names intertwined from old peeling paint!" again Tyvya said abruptly, cutting short the Vulcan's sentence. "The Achilles had been officially decommissioned and secretly rechristened USS Nemesis after the war... for a highly classified experiment that went terribly wrong... That ship out there... the Artemis found her, *fought* her a while back from where it was hidden in the Mutara nebula for over thirty years. Commander; she *is* the USS Nemesis!"

When he had been an Admiral and one attached to Starfleet Intelligence, Redding would have been aware of the full story about the USS Achilles-USS Nemesis. But in his rejuvenated, out-of-time state, those memories somehow eluded him at the moment; but he did recall something about a much more recent mission report regarding the USS Artemis, the former command of Captain Kheren, being abducted by an impersonator and led to find a ghost ship that was reputed haunting the Mutara sector...

But T'ara was objecting again in her maddeningly calm Vulcan tone.

"There is no logic in your assessment, Lieutenant. Who could have crewed such a huge ship for so long? Certainly not those Jem'Hadars... And how could this ship, of all ships already improbable as it is for one to be here to begin with, could be the USS Nemesis?"

"How, I can tell you on our way back to the Horizon!" insisted the Andorian security acting chief still looking intently at Redding. "We *must* get back, warn Captain Kheren and... "

"And abandon the Polaris and her crew?" stated T'ara flatly with denial already etching her controlled voice.

"They are already dead... if they are lucky," retorted Tyvya just as flatly.

"Unless they chose to serve his Excellency... and thus be redeemed and saved... like us," then said the Jem'Hadar from his prone position against the wall.

In the silence that followed, the Vulcan engineer was first to find back her voice, raising again an eyebrow in turn to the wounded soldier and to the much taller Andorian woman.

"His Excellency? Whom is he referring to? A Vorta? Or a Changeling perhaps?

Tyvya's face was unreadable but her eyes were like torpedo flares.

"I will give you one name..."

"There is no need for a name, Lieutenant." Snowfire spoke up into the back-and-forth conversation, interjecting ahead of the Andorian security officer's proclamation. "And if we require your information verified, I can do that."

She tapped her head.

"I take no pleasure in the knowledge that I have, but I was trained in how to use my Gift to do this a long, long time ago. If we require it, I can bring the name, and far more, from this one's mind."

She nodded towards the Jem'Hadar, then to Commander Redding.

"But only if I am ordered to. Yet, despite that, it does not matter. T'ara is right. We have an obligation to our fellows, our captured comrades. If there is even a chance that they are alive, we must try. And...to be utterly blunt, you forget what I was before I became a member of Starfleet."

She faced the Andorian squarely, her own eyes flashing very close to level with those of the giantess with a fiercely calculating violet fire. This wasn't the gaze of a Starfleet officer. These were the eyes of a predator.

But she could see that this had utterly not the slightest effect at all on one born and raised on a world when even your child or your parent could kill you at the drop of a hat.

"So it is dangerous," continued the Illythirii. "It must be far worse for those of our crewmates who survived and we have a way in. So they have a ship that you have fought, one that is obviously dangerous; it has little power available to it from the scans I conducted, and if it is truly such a threat then you may leave it to me to see it ended."

She patted the strap of the bag upon her shoulder.

"And a name, again quite bluntly, will not be enough. We have a duty, and more than that we have orders. I, at least, would wish more than a name before I forsake both of those at once."

"A science officer judging before knowing all the facts... all the more reason to be cautious," said Tyvya. There was no mockery in her tone, quite the contrary; there was a deadly seriousness. "And with respect, Lieutenant Commander, let me educate you in the art of intelligent combat; it is called strategy. I'm *not* talking about *abandonning* comrades but *regrouping* to come back with *proper* forces to deal with the adversity. Rushing to fight a dangerous enemy unprepared, insufficiently equipped and *especially ignorant of whom you are facing* is not what I was taught in Starfleet. But fortunately, and again with all due respect, you are not in command here; Commander Redding is... and *he* will know the threat of this one single name..."

And when she did speak the name, even the Vulcan engineer was struck speechless.

* * *

It was hard to tell the time in a stone cell with not a sound filtrating through the metal door. But it didn't seem all that long before the noise of the bar on the other side was heard again and the door opened to have them flooded again by a blinding light. One Jem'Hadar guard entered and once again took Jureth by the arm to roughly force him outside.

As he was hauled away, he heard one word from T'Lana.

"Old."

Then the door clanged shut behind him and he was escorted once more through the rock tunnel on the same one way route as before. This time however, there was only two guards with him; one beside him holding him by one arm with a powerful grip, holding a large knife in the other hand and one in the back leveling his disruptor rifle at him two steps away. And when they reached the hatch he knew lead to his ship, they swerved to a side corridor that went in a long, smooth curve, passing two more such hatches several hundred meters between them. Jureth noted that this corridor had been reinforced with duranium beams and bulkheads that suspiciously looked like those seen inside a starship. They reached a fourth hatch, also looking as if it belonged to an old vessel and that seemed almost on the opposite side of the vast hangar he had glimpsed through the viewing screen of the Polaris on his last visit.

As they went along, they saw no one else, except once. On the opposite side of those hatches, he had peered briefly into a larger corridor where he had seen two Jem'Hadars armed with metal rods guiding what looked like at least half a dozen people deeper into the asteroid. They were all rather old, mostly Humans but with a few Bajorans as well, wearing old rags of what must had once been uniforms.

The Humans wore what definitely looked like old style Starfleet uniforms.

And then, he had been brought before the fourth hatch and the one holding him released his arm to open it manually. He grabbed Oseno again and the three of them entered the corridor beyond.

This one was definitely a Federation starship deck, although of a slightly older and unfamiliar design, somewhat between what was currently developed in Starfleet and what had belonged to classic ships like the Prometheus class USS Alsea he had once commanded himself. But it was more spacious yet very utilitarian, strangely like a Defiant class spartan inside bloated to a Sovereign class dimensions.

The ship was eerily silent; there was no engine sound, no computer chirp from the turned off wall panels... yet, there was a very faint, very distant noise, like that of a soft moaning wind in the emptiness. No trace of people inside; no doors opened at their passing.. It felt like a house well kept but uninhabited for a long long time... but not quite. Oseno had a definite feeling of being watched and the hair at the back of his neck were standing up. It felt like he was rather entering a haunted house.

A ghost ship.

His two captors boots resounded on the slightly dusty deckplates like sinister bells tolling at their passing as they went for a good hundred meters in a straight line until they reached a jefferies tube. One took the lead and the other urged the bajoran from behind to climb after his colleague, and they did so for several decks, until it ended at an open hatch above. When he emerged, he found himself on the bridge of a Federation vessel.

Jureth was a bit startled by the familiar design; it looked almost identical to the Alsea's command center, although much larger. A few consoles were active, from which he quickly asserted that the vessel was on condition blue; docked and at minimal power but ready to power up; yet, a quick peek at the engineering station showed the warp core inactive, the impulse engines on standby and only batteries running the ship at minimal power. he also noted that the bridge's hatch leading outside was closed, like after an emergency evacuation.

His attention however was diverted by the bodies sprawled all around.

There were cadavers strewn everywhere, either still seated at stations or sprawled nearby. The bodies were humanoids, seemingly Human but dessicated and shriveled as if they had been exposed to vacuum a long time ago. They all wore uniforms Oseno recognized; it was older versions of the uniforms worn by Starfleet's Corps of Engineers.

Quickly, he looked for the dedication plaque of the vessel near the turbolift and glanced at the largest inscriptions there.

USS NEMESIS
Achilles Class * NCC – 82376

Roughly, one of the Jem'Hadar forced him down on his knees as they also lowered themselves on one knee each side of him.

"Kneel before his Excellency!"

Before them was the bridge's command chair. And on this chair sat another dead engineer body, shriveled and dessicated just like the others.

Had Jureth not seen the horrific holos of the Cardassian occupation of Bajor he would have been made sick by the sight in front of him. These Jem'Hadar appeared to be serving...a dead man. The Bajoran was not sure exactly what he was supposed to do other than the forced kneeling at the hands of the Jem'Hadar, and as he knelt there he contemplated T'Lana's last word to him "old" she had said. Glancing out the corner of his eyes he examined the features of the kneeling Jem'Hadar and realized what she was talking about.

These Jem'Hadar were old...older than any Jem'Hadar he had ever seen or heard about. They had to have been here for decades...perhaps since before the Dominion War ended. That was something that he could use to his advantage. Jem'Hadar in their prime his people would be no match for...but these Jem'Hadar were not in their prime, in fact they were very likely elderly which meant that the much younger Starfleet crew had a fighting chance.

Then there was the matter of this ship, and her crew of ghosts. Jureth recognized the Achilles Class...there had been only a few of the class made. They'd been designed for long range strike missions against The Dominion. Oseno wondered how long this one had been here, and why was it manned entirely by engineers? Had it been on a shakedown cruise perhaps?

Oseno decided he would play this scene out for a bit longer and see if he could figure out exactly what was going on here, and so he waited for whatever was going to happen next.

And what happened did more than surprise him.

Before Oseno Jureth's eyes, a greenish mist started to form around the dessicated remains sprawled in the big chair. It rose like a heavy fume and swirled next almost like a transporter effect, becoming the outline of a seated body that slowly rose as it became more dense, more opaque and finally materialized standing to tower over him.

It was a man, a Human; tall and lean and solidly built with powerful muscles etched on his burly arms between his black and mica-scaled gloves to the tattered shoulderpads of his late twenty-third century old remnant of a Starfleet uniform, The fabric was of reddish color faded with age and wide open to reveal a powerful chest adorned with a broken belt buckle in the shape of a Starfleet symbol held to the thick neck by old connecting cables. On top was the head, square and leonine with a thick wild white mane framing aged but still sharply chiseled, bronze-skinned features; a squared jaw, high Asian-like cheekbones each side of a hawkish nose over thin lips. But most startling were the eyes; two slivers of emerald fire, slightly slanted eyes that bore down on them all like phaser cannons.

"Your Excellency, have you been listening?" asked the lead Jem'Hadar bowing to the spectral apparition.

And then came the voice, deep and slightly nasal, full of natural confidence and authority, with a strange, hard etched accent.

"I have indeed..."

And he was looking intently at Oseno Jureth.

Oseno had seen plenty of things in his young Starfleet career. He had brawled with a Cardassian, fought Klingons, Romulans, and Undine, and helped stop a spatial anomaly that threatened the very existence of the galaxy as most knew it. None of that, prepared him for the figure that was before him. As a security officer, he trained for the unexpected, but something like this was not covered in any training simulation. The Bajoran was visibly shaken by the figure's presence though as Jureth looked up at him he composed himself. In a steady voice he asked the one question in his mind he couldn't ignore

"Who are you, and why have you taken my ship and detained my crew?"

For a moment, the imposing figure just looked at him with slitted eyes, as if trying to pierce his very soul with it's fiery stare. He made a sign and the Jem'Hadars brought him back up forcibly to his feet but not relinquishing their firm hold on him from both sides. The white-haired aged man looked at him. His head went on one side then the other as he detailed Oseno.

"I don't know you... I never forget a face."

There was a curious discontinuity in his speech pattern, as if he was a bad actor searching for disjointed lines in a play he had been a part of before and trying to fit them in the present situation. After another pause, he brought his torso up and lifted his chin.

"Khan, is my name."

CHAPTER SIX : THE WRATH OF KHAN

"Khan."

It took long seconds of cold silence before even T'ara could recover and speak again.

"What you are saying is most improbable, Lieutenant. According to all reliable data, Khan Noonien Singh, the genetically enhanced human dictator of the twentieth century that Captain James T. Kirk revived from cryogenic freeze in the twenty-third century, died in the explosion of the USS Reliant he abducted in the Mutara sector a hundred and twenty-five standard years ago."

The giantess nodded.

"The real Khan, yes. But then, there was the USS Achilles... and project THETIS."

That last name brought a sudden recollection in the mind of Neil Redding. This was classified information that only commanders and above had access to; about an experiment in artificial intelligence and an attempt by a genius cyberneticist to reprise the infamous M5 project of his own ancestor with a combination of Soong-type android positronic matrix and laws, Mark 1 EMH potentiality and ethics and gelpack technology. Thus, it would allow a starship to be fully and safely operational under sentient computer control. And that is what Tyvya, although a mere Lieutenant Junior Grade, was now referring to. This could only mean that she had experienced the matter first hand. And that is what she now conveyed.

"After the theft of the prototype USS Prometheus by the Romulans, the Trioptical Humanoid Equivalent Thought Integration System of Doctor Victor Day Storm was conceived specifically for the Achilles class, the class IV heavy attack cruiser developed by both Federation and Klingon engineers with superior armoring, heavy phaser cannons, phalanx multifiring torpedo broadsides, redundant impulse and warp systems and the first ship ever to be outfitted with the, then, experimental Federation made Quantum Slipstream Drive. The idea was to allow maximum autonomous military might with minimal loss of life as well as total crew support for any situation in case such a crew would be in any way compromised. In a sense, the precursor of our current Emergency Holographic Officer grid now standard aboard the newest ships."

She made a pause to let everyone grasp the full meaning of what she was about to say.

"As expected by her creator, THETIS became sentient and even went brilliantly and in a matter of days through the entire Starfleet Academy curriculum to be assigned like any Starfleet Officer under the name of Thetis Achilles, as a legally recognized sentient life form and Yeoman of Ensign grade. But Starfleet Intelligence panicked at the idea of another possible M5 disaster and planned to shut her down. Finding this out, she in turn panicked, fearing that she would be terminated, and ran away with the ship she was integrated in and the remaining crew of Starfleet engineers that were making final adjustment to the now rechristened USS Nemesis. The ship disappeared in a QSD tunnel and was never found. "

"Until now," then concluded T'ara.

"No; the Artemis found her, more than a year ago."

As Tyvya recounted the events, Redding now recalled the mission report of the former command of Captain Kheren. Victor Day Storm, in truth Victor Daystrom, grand son of the M5 creator Richard Daystrom, had impersonated retired Lotus Fleet Admiral Sean Kirkpatrick to subtly hijack the USS Artemis in a false classified mission to the Mutara sector. Faking a simple search and rescue mission, his true goal was to find the lost Achilles and correct the THETIS system failure with a fusion with the stolen computerized mind of former Federation genius Ira Graves who's ingrams were recorded in a portable computer since his death. With the invention of the space sonar by the science officer Syntron, the Artemis was able to find the lost starship, hiding for three decades in the Mutara nebula... but then, all went wrong. The terrorist group called the Horizon Children had corrupted officers aboard and tried in turn to take control of the vessel and of the newly found warship while the captain with his first officer and chief engineer were boarding the derelict vessel. They had a sentient Mark 1 EMH in a portable holosystem and tried to overtake the sentient mind of the USS Nemesis as the false Kikrpatrick was trying to contact it. The result was a failed takeover of the unsuspected too-powerful and fearful artificial intelligence in a complex and unpredictable combination of factors that made it adopt the most efficient personality recorded in her files to deal with a threatening Admiral Kirksomething aboard an Enterprise-looking starship in a Mutara nebula: and so, Tess hid behind, and was then taken over, by the reconstructed persona of Khan Noonien Singh.

As science officer Syntron and the rest of the crew quelled the mutiny attempt on board the Artemis threatened by the much more powerful revived sentient starship, The captain and his two officers managed to escape from the USS Nemesis, deprive her of all fuel, auxilliary crafts, communication and sensors and send her far away through a random burst of her own QSD propulsion system.

"And now, we know where she ended up," finished Tyvya.

T'ara pondered it all a moment.

"Somehow, the Jem'Hadar also lost here at the edge of the galaxy found her and brought her back to their refuge. Obviously they had no antimatter left to reactivate the starship enough for attempting to return home."

"And without their "gods" to help them, they apparently fell under the power of the new Khan," added the Andorian woman refering to the Jem'hadar's "Excellency" he talked about earlier.

She then turned to face Snowfire.

"Make no mistake, Lieutenant Commander; we are dealing here with an artificially detailed recreation of a genius madman who enslaved millions with but a handful of men and easily took over two Starfleet ships before... his vast intellect and even vaster ego now fully revived and amplified to the Nth degree by the most powerful sentient artificial intelligence ever conceived in this galaxy... and in full control of a starship that can destroy an entire space station and it's cover squadrons in one single pass... and now crewed by Jem'Hadars!"

She finished looking back at Redding.

"Sir, strategically and tactically speaking, I do not estimate that we can take on such an adversary with merely a dozen people with two shuttles and an old bugship. And if even one of our shuttles' antimatter fuel fell in it's hands, it could..."

Suddenly, her eyes widened and her antennae jerked up.

"Commander! It might already have!"

The Vulcan engineer completed her thought for her outloud.

"The Polaris."

Redding listened intently to it all and responded by looking away from the rest and saying softly at first "Damn" and then using the heel of fist hit the bulkhead with a resounding 'thud'

"Damn it!"

All three women glanced back and forth at each other from the unexpected outburst.

He then turned back at them, clearly upset.

"It gets worse.. Just before Commander Oseno beamed over to the Polaris, I gave him my memory storage unit. I update that daily in the event that something happens to me and they have to reintegrate my memories."

They looked at him, understanding slowly dawning in their eyes as he explained further.

"Now, seeing as only I can interpret the memories this has never been an issue of security. Now, guess who built and designed the memory unit? Ira Graves."

Now they understood.

"Every thing I've ever known in that unit, every action I've every taken or order I've been given... everything I learned about the Horizon and her crew... and every top secret project I've EVER been apart of..."

He took a breath.

"All of it, it is now in the hands of the most brilliant criminal in history and I have no doubt that if he hasn't figured out how to use it yet, it's not long off."

He turned away for a moment, breathed once more and then looked back at them all.

"Discussions over, were going in."

he headed for the bridge, tapping his combadge.

"Redding to Irksos; transfer all personnel to the Jem'hadar vehicle immediately and prepare to return to the horizon. You'll be transporting a wounded Jem'hadar warrior so make sure there's a safe place to put him."

"Aye, Commander," Irksos responded with a slight touch of curiosity in her voice.

The big man then spoke to the giants following him.

"Tvyva, your right; the Captain needs to know about this immediately. So I'm giving you the option to return with the Dusk to better brief him on these events. Also, remove all my command access immediately and have a new one assigned to me. If I made my own, he might be able to guess it using my profile."

He moved quickly as he talked, not allowing time for debate.

"But T'ara and Snowfire are equally correct in that we must go now, before he can use the Polaris to better his position. We can't afford to wait on this. Even if Jureth and the rest of the crew can't be saved, even if we must destroy the Polaris.. We can not allow Khan to ever leave this place."

Even with her impressive stride, the Andorian giantess had to strain to keep up with him.

"Agreed, Sir. But with all due respect, I am the acting chief of security and tactical; my job is to ensure your safety as well as that of the whole ship while assigned to an away team. And you will need someone who has some experience in dealing with this entity if we are to tackle it, especially with so small a force. Irksos is already debriefed on the situation as our comm lines were left open; she can report to the captain while she bring back our... guest. Graalthrii of course will join in... "

"Try and stop me... Sir..." came then the gruff voice of the Tellarite security officer over the comm.

"Good... we can always use a good engineer," shot back Moore, his grin spreading even to his tone of voice.

"I am not an engineer!" came back the angry retort.

It was a long-standing joke between the two officers from the day Moore and him had been part of the away team that had rescued Captain Kheren, then science officer Syntron and Tyvya herself from the remnants of the USS Artemis as the legendary Ambassador class starship was being devoured by the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. Tyvya's antennae curved inward in brief amusement before pointing again with her tone once again deadly serious.

"Sheeneea can fly the Dawn as back up for us in case we need swift support... or go get the cavalry. The others will do as you order them to, Sir. I guess even as little as six of us can also fly this thing like these Jem'Hadars did... if Moore can steer it at all..."

"I heard that..." Moore said over the comm.

"Don't worry about it Moore." Redding said returning to the bridge. "I've actually flew one of these things before, privileges of being a diplomat. I wasn't allowed to fight with it of course but I did get to play with some of their toys."

Then he glanced at Snowfire with a half smile.

"Vorta can't bluff worth a damn."

his face then returned to a more serious expression.

"But no one will be piloting the Dawn in any event. We'll be towing it in with us as our 'Prize Catch' for this fishing expedition."

He stood at the navigators station and put on the eye piece.

"You, Moore, will get the honor of piloting the Polaris with 'Team Bravo' while the rest of us assault the main dock to draw their attention and see if we can retrieve the Polaris crew."

Then he addressed his assembled crew in the captured attack cruiser.

"Anyone have any idea how to get them aboard the Polaris?"

Many of them murmured to each other for a few minutes but it was obvious no good way could be considered that would not be detected. The Dawn was too easily spotted, transporters would be detected if they worked at all...

As no answer was forthcoming, Redding let out an sigh.

"Well, I only know one way to do it quietly; space walk."

There was a very distinctive Tellarite groan over the comm.

He turned to Lieutenant Tyvya.

"Break out four E-suits from the Dawn. I'll be taking Moore, Graalthrii and Leone with me. I'll be leaving you In charge of the main assault team."

There came a muffled but very Tellarite grumble from their combadges.

"I'm not questioning your decision Commander, but may I ask why your not leading the assault, Sir? I would have thought it would have been more to your liking," she said in the characteristic blunt Andorian way.

"If the Polaris is locked down, and there is no reason to think otherwise, I'm the only one able available to start her up again."

He looked at her and shrugged.

"But you are right, I would have preferred to leave that job to you."

"Don't you worry, Sir. I'll make such a distractive racket that even Captain Kheren will see it from the edge of the nebula."

Snowfire and Leone both reported that the ship was now flight capable so Redding got the ship moving.

"Once we get there Bravo team will will make our jump, I'll lead."

He looked over at Leone a little sympathetic.

"Just lock your suit on follow and stay on my back, Lieutenant. We should be there before you know it."

Moore whined over the com as he could be heard pulling some gear together.

"Why, oh why do I have to be the best person for this job? Lord knows I try to be unreliable..."

"And consistently pretty good at it," finished Graalthrii, the smirk on his face clearly creeping into his tone of voice.

"Are you insulting me, grease monkey?" Moore retorted.

They both exchanged a wide grin as they finished suiting up.

As the bug ship started it's final approach, Redding and the rest of Bravo team were suited up and headed to the air lock. Only his helmet wasn't attached.

"Take your time docking, as much as you can give us without looking suspicious. Then clear the landing area as quick as you can and find those prisoners. We'll do our best to have the Polaris ready to go the time you reach her but, if all else fails, get them back to the assault fighter."

He looked briefly to see if the others had already left the cabin. They had.

"DO NOT wait for us at that point, understand, lieutenant?"

And with that he clicked his helmet into place and let Snowfire check his seals.

He paused to look at her and thought as loudly as he could.

Take care of them.

The big man then nodded and left the room. He didn't know if she could read him or not, but felt it was worth the effort.

"You know, I skipped out on this class at the academy." Moore actually looked pale in his suit.

"Leone your tethered with me. Graallthrii, you take Moore. We're aiming for the port aft personnel maintenance airlock. If you miss it find another way in, we'll meet up in auxiliary control."

Redding closed the inner airlock as he spoke and cycled it. It was very unnerving to the unseasoned, but not nearly as much as when the outer door opened exposing them to the nebula.

He looked at his controls.

"Thirty seconds till target. Watch the boots of the man in front of you and use your thrusters to match any direction they swing to, do NOT look around at the view, you will become disoriented."

Moore was gripping his tether with one hand and his booster controls with the other.

"I'm getting ready to jump into a nebula Commander, I'm past disoriented all ready."

Redding counted out the last few seconds.

"Three..two...one... NOW!"

He triggered his boosters, gliding out into space.

The four suited forms glided smoothly from under the belly of the Jem'Hadar cruiser and followed closely the rock face out of which the docking area had been carved with disruptor fire. hidden from view, they closed in toward the inert form of the USS Polaris.

On board the Jem'Hadar attack cruiser, Snowfire watched the light flare on her board, then nodded sharply as they floated across the bay to dock, moving under minimal power. They looked crippled. It made sense to act like it. Before they'd begun their approach - still in the shadow of the asteroid - she'd handed out small devices to all of those aboard the vessel that would fool life-scanner technology. It was a bit dangerous, considering that it would make recovering any of the suited personnel impossible unless if they missed, but it also made them the best thing to invisible. A quick scan of the Jem'hadar lifesigns aboard the assault craft had allowed her to mimic their signatures, so from a purely technical point of view they were fine up until the point of visual contact.

And a few judicious...adjustments...to the vessel's communications array had made it quite incapable of video-audio transmission. The rather extensive looking battle damage would hopefully be able to stand up to any suspicion in regards to their inability to communicate. They'd clearly succeeded in their task - considering they were towing the shuttle - but the damage they'd sustained should give them excuse enough to dock without making any non-text based replies. With that settled however, she turned herself to examining both the main dock and the USS Avenger - apparently the home to a threat that could never be allowed to escape. And a part of her wondered...had they talked to any cyberneticists about what had happened? Most probably not, all things considered.

And even if they had...well. There were AIs and there were AIs.

And so she laid her plans, in full awareness of what a truly self-aware computer was capable of. But also in the knowledge that there were always ways to fight those sort of beings. They weren't all powerful, they weren't without limit - every computer had limits. An AI was just a program. A very smart, very advanced program. But still only that. And for all that they'd never worked out how to defeat them, her people had been fighting a continuous war with an extremely advanced program for most of two centuries. One which had had access to a whole lot more processing power than this one did. So the initial response was simple.

"Are we ready, Lieutenant?" She asked Tyvya quietly as she re-entered the bridge following a final round of checks.

"We are, Lieutenant Commander, " the giantess answered from the tactical console on the bugship bridge, getting a nod from their pilot Sheeneea, the other Andorian woman on board. "Problem is, as soon as we power up engines or weapons, it will be detected and alert them. I don't know if you have any practical experience with the Jem'Hadar but I can tell you that they will react instantly, in the purest sense of the word. Also, they will also quickly become suspicious if no one comes out of the ship after a relatively short period of time. My guess is that we have at most..."

She stopped and looked more closely at her board as she was interrupted by the Bynar doctor at the sensor station.

"Lifesigns... Jem'Hadars... two of them, approaching... the docking port."

Snowfire, using the personal eyeviewer that was the only visual link to the outside, saw also something else as the Andorian tactical chief reported it; magnetic grapples shot out of the docking area and grasped both their commandeered cruiser and the shuttle behind it to bring them both to the airlocks.

"If we don't release our own tow cable from the Flyer, they will know for sure that something is wrong," Sheeneea said flatly. "And when they will board us and the shuttle..."

They were already short of time and options; and on both infiltrating ships, decision now rested on the shoulders of Snowfire.

* * *

After the tall, imposing figure of the white-haired man disclosed his name, there was another pause as his face suddenly went from unbridled pride to complete puzzlement. He turned away for a moment, then came back again to the Bajoran with a finger lifted between them as if realizing something.

"You didn't expect to find me here! You thought this was..."

Again his expression changed, this time to a more predatory one.

"Now tell me; why are you here? And tell me, where can I find... Captain... Kheren."

And the way he spoke the name was like someone uttering a curse.

Oseno focused on the apparition...if that's what it was; but even for a man whose people revered the entities residing in a stable wormhole as gods, Jureth could sense that something wasn't quite right.

That name, Khan...that was impossible Oseno knew. Khan Noonien Singh had died along with his group of super soldiers aboard the USS Reliant when it exploded in the Mutara nebula over a century ago. James T. Kirk's tactics during that battle were required reading for all potential tactical officers and command officers at Starfleet Academy. So, Oseno knew that this could not possibly be Khan, but he still was not sure what it was he was dealing with. He certainly was not about to give whoever, or whatever it was any information about Captain Kheren... though, truthfully, he did not know the captain's location, or even if he was alive.

His mental assessment of the situation still evolving, Jureth decided to start with the obvious.

"You are not Khan." he stated matter of factly. "Starfleet records along with corroborating logs from the USS Enterprise under Captain Kirk hold that Khan Noonien Singh was killed more than a century ago when the stolen USS Reliant was destroyed in the Mutara Nebula. Secondly, my ship and my crew were brought here by your Jem'Hadar after we suffered an engineering malfunction. Finally, I do not know Captain Kheren. I have heard of him, but have never served with him."

Oseno was lying of course, but his survival, escape, and evade training was directing his statements. He would reveal nothing to this as yet unknown enemy willingly. Jureth didn't know what the entity wanted with the captain, but it would not get information about Kheren from him.

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The towering white-haired figure looked at Oseno with a small this smile on his lips. but their was neither joy nor friendliness in the smile. it was the smile of a crocodile.

"Don't insult my intelligence, Commander. I can hear your heartbeat and sense your body temperature change when you lie. You *know* who he is... and you *know* where he is... you know what *he* did..."

He let a moment of silence pass before looking askance at the Bajoran's empty stare, then lifting a snowy eyebrow.

" You mean... *he* never told you the tale? To amuse his crew, no? "

He took a deep breath as he then lowered himself to bring his face closer to that of Jureth as he spoke.

"Never told you how he, Captain Kheren, found this... derelict starship and boarded her while his own vessel was being taken over by fanatics intent on claiming her as a prize as well... But they tried to overpower her with the aid of a... sentient hologram, and his tampering conjured, from the very nebula I had died in, my presence here. It was but an easy matter for a greater mind like mine to destroy that invader and assume full command of this ship... only to have Captain Kheren and his minions sabotage it and hurl it away, damaged, powerless and blinded to the very edge of the galaxy, with barely enough battery power left to sustain me...."

There was bitterness in the last sentence. But then, he turned away, taking another deep breath and his voice took a distant tone.

"On Earth... hundreds of years ago... I was a prince... with power over millions... "

Before Jureth's very eyes, the image of Khan suddenly became that of a man at least thirty years younger, wearing a white turban on his head and a long vest of gold inlaid with pearls, a red sash around his slim waist with a jeweled dagger at his hip. But his far away expression did not change.

Captain Kirk found us... me and seventy of my most trusted followers from the year 1996 in cryogenic freeze... then opposed my return to power and exiled us all on a savage, untamed world that six months later was thrown out of its orbit by the explosion of its neighbor... turned into a barren sand heap... with only the content of a few cargo bays to sustain us... "

Now, the man looked like a thirtyish old dark-haired, hard-edged version of himself, wearing a silvermesh suit... and then it was replaced by a red-shirted, black pants and boots uniform of a mid-twenty-third century starfleet engineer. And still he spoke as if he was alone on the eerie bridge.

"Twenty years... twenty years we survived, until I and the remnant of my people were found again, this time by Captain Terrel of the USS Reliant... We took his ship... and the Genesis device it guarded, the instrument of my overdue conquest... only to have Kirk stand again between us and our rightful destiny... destroy the last of my kind... and escape my just wrath even as I sacrificed myself detonating the device. "

The white-haired old man in the tattered late twenty-third century uniform reappeared. He nodded to himself, a strange, unexpected sadness creeping on his angular features and in his hard, accented voice.

"He is dead now... old... friend... a life ended in disgrace, demoted, retired, disintegrated by a spatial anomaly... to the very end robbing *me* of my just revenge... And then came the USS Artemis... and Captain Kheren..."

He closed his eyes, oblivious to all around him.

"It is only the fact of my superior intellect that allowed me to survive."

Shocked would be a less than accurate description for Jureth's state of mind at that very moment. The infamous Khan, somehow, somehow alive, or a part of him anyway. The records from the Enterprise, and Kirk's logs, held the former dictator to quite mad and Oseno could see Kirk's appraisal was accurate. Whatever this...thing...was, it was clearly insane and somehow he knew that either he, or the Horizon would have to find a way to stop it. Presently though, the two Jem'Hadar gripping Oseno were preventing him from doing anything never mind this recreation of Khan. His initial thought had been to take command of this ship and beam back to the Polaris, but in Khan's own words he controlled the Nemesis so that plan was out of the question. For now, he stuck to the facts...

"Captain Kirk did not die disgraced, he died as he lived, a hero of the Federation. Without him Captain Picard would not have stopped the man who was willing to sacrifice countless lives for his own personal gain, much like...you."

Perhaps Oseno had some repressed death wish, or perhaps it was just the fact that he often spoke before he thought, but either way he had already leveled the veiled insult at Kahn but Jureth didn't stop when he should have..

"If you ask me, Kirk and Kheren both did the right thing."

This time, a genuine smile now appeared on the face of this reborn Khan.

"I like a brave man."

He then stretched out a hand to one of Oseno's captors. The Jem-Hadar on his right, the one that had proclaimed himself to be the First on their earlier meeting, went to his pocket and fished out a small object that he deposited in the one ungloved hand. Khan flipped it gently between his fingers a moment, letting the pale eerie lighting of the dormant bridge play over its glossy, translucent surface before looking at the Bajoran again.

"I am in need of your ship... Commander... Oseno... isn't it? More precisely, of its power. You will give me your command code to access your engineering section and the antimatter containment and reserve units. Now, will I need to exert some... persuasion... or, will I find them myself within this?"

He showed the small flat object in his hand. It was Commander Redding's personal data chip.

Oseno glanced at the chip, knowing what it was, but also knowing that without Redding there was no way to get to the information it contained. Then it was his turn to smile.

"I'm sure your Jem'Hadar told you: I locked down the Polaris command functions using my voice authorization code. Without my voice even the codes are useless, and if you think I will unlock the command functions then you don't know Starfleet captains as well as you should. I would sooner destroy this entire base and everyone on it than surrender my ship to you."

The last statement wasn't false bravado on the part of the Bajoran either. Jureth would rather deliberately breach the Polaris' warp core rather than turn the ship over to Kahn, and given an opportunity would do just that if he felt he could not stop Kahn any other way. Oseno did not relish the thought of dying nor of taking so many lives, but it was something he was prepared to do.

"Oh, you mean that I would have to speak like this?" said Khan.

His voice was exactly that of the Bajoran Commander.

The figure of Khan shook his head. His voice returned to his own peculiar pattern of speech and tone.

"Everything changes... except Man. "

He went to a console, obviously at the science station of the dimly lit bridge, and inserted Redding's chip in a slot. He activated no control nor did he give any verbal command or signal; yet, the board activated itself and the computer started working on the encoding algorithm of the data chip.

"Yes, it will take time," said Khan speaking to himself. "No matter; there are many roads to Rome."

He turned back to stand again before Oseno.

"Yes, I know you, brave Starfleet officers. You care little for your own death and suffering. But it is quite another thing to watch someone else suffer and die... especially because of you."

With a dark gloved hand that he brought back to his opposite flexed elbow, he pointed to the main viewing screen. The Bajoran turned to see on the large screen a composite image showing the insides of the Achilles class starship. Jureth recognized an engineering room that looked state of the art despite being of a quarter of a century old styling.

"I'm sure you recognize these containers, " said Khan behind him.

Indeed Oseno recognized the very distinctive containment tanks used on a starship to keep antimatter.

"And the meaning of this indicator..."

Even if he did not, the labelling over it was easily readable; they were the energy level indicators of the magnetic containment field that kept antimatter stored without risking the inevitable devastating contact with matter. At the moment, the indicator read zero.

Then, the point of view changed and showed the inside of each antimatter container. Each was completely empty of the highly reactive anti-deuterium usually stored there. But the containers were not empty. In each dormant magnetic bottle was encased a humanoid form.

His crew.

Then the viewing angle returned to the indicator of each. It concentrated on one that was attached to the bottle containing T'Lana. Slowly, it started to rise.

"I believe it will take about four minutes for the magnetic levels to fry her brain," explained Khan as if he was speaking of a cooking recipe. "But of course her nervous system will be electrocuted quite before that, leaving her permanently paralysed... but not before enduring much pain as her muscular system will start to tetanize after a few seconds."

Behind Oseno, the voice came very close to his ear.

"How many people do you have among your gallant crew, Commander? Sixty I believe? I lost seventy-eight dear friends to James Kirk... them and my beloved wife. I will show more mercy to you than he ever did to me and my people... to her.. I leave it to you how long you will want to enjoy admiring how well your people will die for you."

And on the screen, Jureth could see that even the stoic Vulcan woman could not force her own body to resist the slowly rising electromagnetic current that made her muscles start to spasm like bubbling water under her redening skin. Of course, she did not cry out; she was Vulcan. But the sweat starting to pearl on her brow told at what price.

For a brief moment, it was too much even for Jureth to watch and he shifted his glance despite himself. And there, in a darkened corner of the bridge, he saw her.

She was a young girl, Human, fair-skinned, barely out of her teens, with what appeared to be long blonde hair and big blue eyes, wearing a Starfleet cadet uniform of half a century ago.

He saw her for only an instant. She vanished like a half-remembered dream when Khan shifted behind him, probably following his diverted stare into that same dark corner. But it had been enough for the Bajoran to notice her... and notice something else.

She was crying.

Oseno blinked to clear his head because he believed he was seeing things, and his mind quickly returned to the urgency of his situation. His choice really was simple...his crew, or the ship. He did not doubt the resolve of the madman in front of him, and while he knew that all Starfleet officers were prepared to die in the performance of their duties being sacrificed because their commander was unwilling to save them was another thing altogether. Jureth knew his Federation history, knew that the original Khan had slaughtered countless people in the pursuit of his goals and Jureth knew that his people meant absolutely nothing to either Khan or the Jem'Hadar. He also knew that Khan may very well kill his people anyway, but he had to try.

"Stop," Jureth said "I surrender."

Khan barely blinked and, on the screen, the indicator stopped. There was still magnetic forces wracking the Vulcan woman's body but they were not rising anymore.

"Brave and wise. Your Starfleet chooses its leaders well. A captain must put the welfare of his crew before that of his ship; isn't that one of your Directives?"

With a frozen smile, he looked intently at Oseno.

"Your command code if you please, Commander?"

Jureth hesitated, but only for a fraction of a second. He was beaten and he knew it. He had suspected the Jem'Hadar had simply been trying to intimidate him earlier and would not have killed the innocent woman, but Khan...Khan would not hesitate. There was nothing he could do, there was no code he could give that would disable the Polaris, or activate its auto-destruct sequence. So, he did what he believed he had to

"Give me a data pad, I will input the code."

One of the Jem'Hadar thrust a data device at him, and Oseno grimly entered his command authorization on the device and then the Jem'Hadar soldier roughly snatched it away and Oseno looked at Khan with defeat on his face.

"You have what you wanted, I suppose this is the part where you exterminate me and my crew anyway."

There was genuine surprise in the face of the white-haired stern man. On the screen, the monitor dropped back to zero and T'Lara's body crumpled inside the tank. She was unconscious but still breathing evenly.

"What kind of a monster do you take me for, Commander? The truly great need not squash a vanquished enemy. Your bravery and devotion to your people warrant respect. "

His smile became harder at the edges.

"Besides, I need to verify those codes before I implement them... and correlate with this interesting encrypted datachip you brought me... before I decide about your fate."

With his black-gloved hand, he took in the bridge around them.

"But in this, I can also be generous.... and put it in your hands. Truth is, I can control this entire ship all by myself, but I am still in need of a crew to discharge me of the more... menial tasks in attending to her while I use it at last to build and conquer my new empire. My current followers are remarkable warriors... but they are too few and, frankly, a bit worn out. The rest of the prisoners in this facility can attend to this base's maintenance, but they are less fit to manage such a vessel as you and your gallant crew."

He then fixed his intense stare in the eyes of Jureth.

"Join me... and I will spare you and your crew. Serve me well... and I will share with you the glory of my destiny; to rule in the heavens as I did once in Hell."

Oseno looked intently at Khan, a hint of his earlier defiance returning to his eyes, and asked a question he was certain he knew the answer to.

"And if we refuse?"

Khan crossed his powerful arms over his large chest with a small smile at the corner of his thin lips.

"There is always a need for inferior beings in mining this asteroid and doing the menial labor. Those we had are quite worn out and getting to old for the work, even the few young ones we had over the years. If... "

He stopped talking and his eyes lifted as if he was looking at something far away or listening to some sound only he could hear. Reflexively, Oseno followed what his gaze seemed to behold and, on the main viewer, he saw an exterior view of the asteroid docking area.

A Jem'Hadar attack ship was coming in. Behind it, tethered by an old-fashioned magnetic tow cable, was a Delta Flyer shuttlecraft.

The strategic ops officer of the starship Horizon couldn't read the designation on the too distant hull, but he had a pretty good idea, this far out at the edge of the galaxy, from where this craft was coming from.

"Ah... more guests to participate in my return to greatness," declared Khan.

He gave the padd with the command codes to the First.

"Take the antimatter from this one as well and transfer it all to my flagship."

The two Jem'Hadars saluted with a head toss and left Jureth alone with Khan on the bridge of the Achilles class starship. The white-haired figure again bore his intense gaze on him. His smile was now as cold and hard as that of a terran crocodile.

"Well, Commander? Will you and your people take a seat and a console... or a pick and a shovel?"

Oseno's mind raced. He knew the Delta shuttle had to be from the Horizon, and he knew they must be looking for him, the Polaris and her crew. He had no way to warn them off, and if he let Khan put them to work in the mine then they had no way to try and stop him. Perhaps, from aboard the ship, they could figure out a way to stop Khan or sabotage the ship or something. Jureth's lone advantage was knowing that his people were all experts in their given professions from all over Starfleet. As far as he knew Khan did not possess that knowledge, or at least he didn't yet. Maybe all together they could find a way to subvert Khan.

"Very well, we'll run your ship but I would like permission to...remove the old crew."

Khan simply nodded.

Oseno was now alone with Khan; or so it seemed. As he moved to the nearest desiccated body to start on his grisly task, something caught the corner of his eye. Without turning his head, he strained his field of vision to look without giving any sign of doing so.

And there she was again. In a dimly lit corner near the escape hatch of the half-lighted bridge; willowy, young, blonde, wearing a decades old style Ops Ensign uniform. She looked in her late teens, a Caucasian-type Human female.

And she was observing him, head bowed, as if in solemn prayer. A single tear glistened on her left cheek.

Then, it was at this moment that Khan spoke behind him.

"It appears that we have an unannounced guest... Carry on, Commander."

And then, he simply vanished.

As soon as he was gone, the figure of the young girl took a step towards Oseno and, looking around like a frightened child, she whispered with urgency in her tone.

"Quick, now that he is distracted; run! Save yourself!"

* * *

Bravo team glided on towards its destination and so far there had been no issue with the jump. The rest of the team seemed strangely quite but that only meant they were doing exactly what he told them to do and not look around.

What he hadn't been expecting was to see the Polaris powering up as he glided at it. Khan had acquired the command codes.

While Redding worried how he did just that he didn't let it occupy his mind. There were only three choices, the most likely being from Commander Oseno himself. It was unlikely He could have cracked his chip so quickly or the Polaris's main computer.

Redding had seen Jureth's file on how he withstood interrogation under the Romulans along side Captain Gould, so he wouldn't have gone down easy.

"Aww, man.." came Moore's expected gripping.

"As Mister Moore has just pointed out, our job just got a bit easier," Redding said with a sense of irony. "It would have been necessary to manually open the maintenance hatch witch would have taken three or four minutes. Now we can just opened up and walk right in." he added, keeping his tone optimistic.

Graalltrii grumbled a reminder.

"Commander, that will set off an intrusion alert at the security station."

"I know" Redding said without missing a beat. "But with the ship powering up, there will be dozens of such alerts and no one to respond to them, I doubt the Jem'hadar will even notice it for quiet a while"

Graalltrii thought it over and agreed.

"If you say so, Sir."

At the moment, t was as close as he could come to sounding positive. He vividly remembered the original confrontation with the living mind of the USS Nemesis.

"Well.." Leone said trying not to sound nervous. "At least this way it wont take vary long to have the ship ready when the rest return."

"And the pilots seat should be all warmed up for me, I do hate a cold seat," Moore added in with his smiling voice.

Leone giggled out of nervousness despite herself.

It only took a couple of minutes for Redding and Graalltrii to get them all into the Polaris and out of their suits.

"And here's where it starts to get fun, kids" Redding said as he swung his rifle up and looked into the connecting corridor.

The infiltration team was right beside a porthole in the hull of the Polaris overlooking the looming USS Nemesis and part of the asteroid inner walls. They were all waiting for Redding to decide their next course of action when a deep vibration was felt on the escort ship's hull plates.

For a moment, they looked at one another silently. Then, Moore pointed towards the viewport as Graathrii went to the nearest computer wall panel.

From the underbelly of the Horizon's auxilliary starship, out of view, a small baydoor had opened but, a moment later, floated up in their field of view a tubular container that pulsed with indicators from both ends and a barely visible, diffuse bleuish glow on it's metal covering.

Graalthrii confirmed from the wall panel what their eyes were already telling them.

"They're extracting the antimatter reserves of the Polaris!"

Moore pointed again, this time at the rock wall nearest of their position. From a port of the docking bay, two suited figures then appeared and, using a primitive but efficient molecular-bonding grappling gun, they connected with the hull plates of the Polaris to haul themselves near the extracted magnetic container with the obvious intent of taking it away... and push it towards the open shuttlebay of the USS Nemesis.

Redding watched silently for several seconds and then indicated for them to follow.

"Nothing we can do about that now, if we tried to move on them it would tip off Khan and the Jem'hadar to Tyvya's assault and they'd be cut off."

Redding moved down the hallway at a faster pace but still with an air of caution. "But it's clear they don't care about the Polaris either, so 'recapturing' it should be simple enough" They reached auxiliary control without even encountering a single Jem'hadar.

Redding and Graathrii covered each other as they entered the room, then seeing it empty, waved in the rest. Using only hand gestures, he told the Tellarite to man the door as Leone and Moore took their stations.

"I don't even need to over ride the system, it's no longer locked down."

There was a tone of annoyance in his voice.

"Computer: list commanding officer." he said.

"Commander Oseno Jureth, Commanding officer." It replied tonelessly

He shook his head.

"Let's hope he's okay." Then to the computer again. "Computer: recognize Commander Redding, Neil.R00010Mike."

Barely a second passed before it did so.

"Recognized."

"Restrict all access to primary Command systems to Commander Oseno Jureth and myself until released by standing command officer. Additional: Lieutenant Elisha Leone granted temporary Command of the USS Polaris until relieved by superior command officer registered to the USS Horizon."

Leone looked at him but didn't know what to say, but Moore did.

"Hay... why not me? If for no other reason I have seniority ."

He had stated exactly what Elisha was thinking but would dare not say.

He had started doing a system check of the Helm as he spoke with feigned annoyance. Redding hot him a smirk back.

"Khan would never think I'd give her command of the Polaris, so while he's busy interrogating me and you to death, she'll be fine."

"Oh.." he said simply and went back to his work.

"The Jem'Hadar will return for the rest of our antimatter shortly, but Graathrii and I will be waiting for them. Lock down this section after we leave and no unnecessary communications until after engagement. As soon as Khan knows we're on board, he'll try and shut down the ship remotely. Let him think he's succeeded, but keep the ship ready for departure."

He then checked over his gear and rejoined Graathrii near the entrance.

"Any questions?"

"Is this a good time to resign my commission, Sir?" asked the Tellarite with an even tone.

Without awaiting a response, Elisha turned her attention to her console and began running a complete internal sensor scan of the Polaris.

Stay focused, she reminded herself as thoughts of all of the things that could go wrong began to plague her attention. She examined everything thoroughly but rechecked the results again to be certain before addressing Commander Redding.

"Sir, the Polaris is undamaged and all readings indicate that it is still fully functional. Fortunately, there are no other life-signs registering aboard this vessel... except for ours." Working the console swiftly she added; "I believe that I can bring this ship back to green status in just a few moments."

Then a look of concern came to the alluring face of the Orion Ops officer.

"However, with the Antimatter reserves being manually drained one tank at a time and with one tank already missing and a second one on the verge of being removed, we will only have the remaining antimatter already in the warp core to utilize. This should contain enough antimatter to easily move out... provided that we don't need to expend extra energy for shields or weapons."

Looking up to the commander again, she nodded somberly.

"We will need to sneak away very stealthily, Sir. "

Then looking back down and switching her focus from internal to external scans she quickly surveyed their immediate surroundings.

"Currently, there are two Jem'Hadar life-signs registering in thruster suits outside undocking a second antimatter tank. At the rate they are proceeding, this tank will be gone in only a matter of moments"

Following that scan, Lieutenant Elisha Leône surveyed beyond their vessel to see what was positioned and what transpiring around their ship.

"The Bugship and the Delta Flyer are separately docked in the dockyard. I am detecting both Andorian and Bynar lifesigns onboard the bugship; Sheeneea and both our chief medical officers undoubtedly," Elisha concluded almost to herself.

She then noted an energy spike increasing.

"Sir, it would seem that the large ship, the Nemesis, is just being powered up. Sensors indicate that there is one Bajoran lifesign on the main bridge... perhaps Commander Jureth!" Elisha blurted out at the prospect of finding another lost crew member.

As she continued scanning, she finally noticed distant transporter activity occurring.

"Commander Redding; there is a faint transporter trace from the interior of the asteroid near the bugship docking ring to the Nemesis. It is however, cut-off by what registers as a multiphasic level-10 forcefield surrounding what could be the ship's main computer core. I cannot be certain Sir, but there now appears to be Andorian, Human, Bajoran, Bolian and Jem'Hadar lifesigns inside the asteroid converging. There are also traces of weapons fire now occurring near the docking area, signaling both Federation and Dominion signatures."

Looking up Elisha then announced what all bridge indicators were showing in lively lights and sounds around them.

"All systems are now green Commander. We are ready to proceed!"

"Good work lieutenant. For now, we'll assume that it is Oseno on that bridge. Get a lock on him as soon as he's off the bridge and try to transport him back here."

He was looking over her readings.

"Looks like the fights starting without us. Mister Graalthrii, lets move." he ordered and trotted out to door while reminding them to seal it behind them.

Fortunately it was a small ship comparatively speaking and it didn't take them very long to reach the bay. As they came up on the entry way, they slowed down and continued on more cautiously.

Just before Redding activated the door, it opened and a Jem'hadar, looking half surprised, strolled into the hallway. His was the look of someone that came looking for intruders but was still surprised to see them.

Redding took advantage of its momentary confusion and rifle-butted it across the forehead, causing it to stagger out of the doorway.

Without looking back he yelled "Go!" to Graalthrii and fired a phaser burst at the Jem'hadar as Graalthrii moved quickly into the room.

The shot grazed the large man but he barely flinched from it, instead swinging around and bringing up his Kar'takin to try and catch Redding in the stomach or groin area. Redding swept down with his rifle, blocking the axe-like device but its blade sank deep into the rifle and the sound of mechanical damage could be heard coming from it.

Instantly Redding spun both weapons around, using the rifle's grater leverage to wrench the axe out of his hand, although the Jem'hadar managed to land his forearm across Redding's chest, knocking him off his feet as he did so and causing him to lose both weapons.

Even as Redding sprang back to his feet, he was prepared for the Jem'hadar's charge. But it didn't come.

Instead, he spoke.

"I' am the first of the Jem'hadar and first to his excellency."

He stood proudly before Redding.

"You are a soldier worthy of a good death. I would know your name," the grey-skinned warrior declared and removed a bayonet-like knife from his side.

Redding straightened up and removed the d'ktahg, a Klingon knife he often carried, from its sheath along his lower back.

"I am Redding, " he answered, "commander, first officer of the USS Horizon and you honor me," and brought the knife up in a salute.

The two warriors faced each other moving into fighting stances.

* * *

"We're here to make noise, Lieutenant." Snowfire replied quietly to the Andorian giantess at the weapons console. "Get their attention, make them mad. That's our job. And I intend to see it done. The fact that the Polaris is powering up adds a little more complexity, but less than one might expect considering our mission profile."

She nodded to Sheeneea, carefully removing the viewer from her head before handing it to one of the Bynar.

"Release the tow on the Flyer. Doctor, please keep us updated on the outside situation. Lieutenant Tyvya, we're going to go greet our expecting hosts."

She flicked a come-along gesture to the rest of the team aboard the craft, and they headed swiftly for the docking ring. As they moved, Snowfire started pulling things out of her bag. The same box of needles, at least it looked the same on the outside, as Tyvya had seen at her seminar, along with a host of other small devices that she tucked away in easily accessible folds and pockets sewn into her uniform. Then there were two external pockets, which she placed just below her hips and adhered instantly to the uniform.

"Lieutenant, I'm going to need you to go into the base as fast as you can, and I am giving you a direct order to prioritise the retrieval of Starfleet personnel over any others. If we're lucky, we'll be able to come back and rescue anyone else trapped on this station. But I'm going to need you to get in, find our people, and then get out fast. You might note I'm saying this as 'you', not 'we'. That's because I won't be going with you."

She held up her hand quickly.

"You said that the ship up there, that might already have been given the spark it needs to come fully online, must be neutralised. Considering what you've told me, I agree. So let me do what I know."

She pulled another device from her bag, a strange combination of something like a tricorder and a wrist-strap that she buckled on and started tapping on as she continued speaking.

"I can get aboard the Nemesis, now, but I can't take anyone else with me. And in all honesty, I wouldn't want to. I know I don't have experience with this enemy, but I read the psychological profile on Khan many times in the Academy. And unlike anyone else on this team, I'm an unknown to him."

She looked down at the badge on her breast, across at the rank insignia on her shoulders, then sighed and gently pulled them free.

"That gives me an advantage, but it's one I can only exploit alone. And before you tell me, I know it'll be dangerous."

They'd reached the docking ring, and she held out the badge and rank bars to Tyvya.

"But I also need someone who knows what they're doing here, commanding the assault team, and I don't know Starfleet tactical protocols as well as you do. Frankly, I'd probably just get in your way."

She smiled slightly, the hard expression that had crept over her face as they walked softening slightly.

"So let me go do the job I know, so I don't stop you doing yours."

Tyvya listened to the Illythirii's explanations and nodded once.

"You're in command, Lieutenant Commander. As good a plan as any under the circumstances. Just try not to get killed; I hate the paperwork following the death of an officer. Jaxon, get ready. Phasers on level 1 setting. "

As they both went on each side of the hatch, the engineer looked askance at the Andorian giantess.

"Lieutenant... Jem'Hadar will not feel a stun setting."

"Remember our practice sessions, Ensign," retorted Tyvya as she indicated to Snowfire to stand further away from the hatch door as it began to click open . "Android assault simulation 1."

"But these are not... aaah, I see... "

The towering Andorian's antennae curved inward in lieu of the wide smile her rigid facial muscles could not convey. The jest escaped the science chief but there was no time for explanation. The hatch swung open and two stout, powerful silhouettes appeared in the opening.

Both phasers whined at the same instant. The thin beam struck from each one of the Jem'Hadars right in the eyes.

Momentarily blinded, they did not have a chance against the prodigious strength of the acting chief tactical officer. As a rule, Andorians were easily twice as strong as humans and there was no dissimilarity between males and females in their species except that the females were much more aggressive. And Tyvya, with her gigantic body dwarfing even the usually taller females of their kind, had a strength only a Vulcan could match and, on board the *Horizon*, only the Saurians and Captain Kheren himself could surpass. Stretching her long, deceptively thin arms between both surprised warriors, she caught them both by the throat and lifted them off the ground to slam them skull first on the round metallic doorframe.

The grey-scaled, spinned soldiers were just dazed, and still blinded, but that was enough. Producing a hypospray with the kind of needle used to pierce the thick chitinous Andorian skin, Jaxon sedated them both in short order.

"Go," said Tyvya to Snowfire as she took point and looked about for any incoming reinforcement and sign of alarm. "And good luck, Lieutenant Commander."

With that, she followed the smaller engineer who guided them both with a tricorder in one hand, phaser in the other and a toolkit belt on her hips.

From a viewport of the rocky corridor showing the outside area, Snowfire could see that the *Nemesis* was docked on the other side of the roughly-hewn dockyard. The main corridor they had emerged in seemed to follow the inner face of that part of the asteroid, and her objective in the opposite direction taken by her two colleagues. At a run, she could be there in a couple of minutes... if she had a couple of minutes left.

From her viewport, she saw that two grey and black space-suited figures had come out of a hatch midway between her and the expected hatch to the *Achilles* class starship. They were gliding along a tow cable toward the underbelly of the nearer *USS Polaris* and an antimatter container taken out of her own reserves. When they met the large floating cylindrical container, they used again their grappling guns to connect with the aft section of the *USS Nemesis* and start pushing the antimatter tank toward it.

Then, behind her, from the direction Tyvya and Jaxon had disappeared, she heard weapons fire and the echoes of a violent struggle.

Time was indeed running out.

But not enough of it had run through the hourglass quite yet. She tapped several keys on her wristcomp, sending a sheath of black rippling across her uniform; a golden emblem that only a bare handful of Starfleet officers, all of whom were involved in diplomatic contact with her people, would recognise flowing into being on her right breast. This was going to take some fancy footwork. And that might be underestimating things. But there wasn't another choice.

She reached out with her mind, tapping purposefully on the wristcomp as she caught the mental presences of the two Jem'Hadar and the display on the device flickered as the mix of Federation and Ilythirii technology translated their relative positions. There was a soft ping to signify a lock, and Snowfre smiled thinly before drawing two more things out of her bag.

The first item was a smooth hemisphere that she placed on the side of the corridor. Little more than a highly advanced dart gun, the small clip held within it would be more than sufficient to sedate a single Jem'Hadar. Contact sedatives were like that. She set the device to fire on any Jem'Hadar lifesign that came within its sensor range, and then held up the other object as the thing smile on her face turned decidedly grim. This wasn't a Starfleet phaser. It wasn't a disruptor either, at least not a disruptor as most of the quadrants would understand it. The weapon had no stun setting, nor even a selector switch. In their place was a single button that could be slid along a section of the long, flared, rod. It was a Talya neural disruptor, a weapon that by all rights she shouldn't even have, but was now sadly glad of. For all her lack of knowledge in dealing personally with Jem'Hadar, she had read about their physiology. And they still had a brain stem. They still had nerves. All the genetic engineering in the universe couldn't get rid of that. And as long as those existed, a single touch from this weapon could kill you. The reason behind the arguably barbaric weapon lay in her people's past. Specifically their centuries of border war with the Borg. But right now, all that mattered was that it was as utterly lethal to beings of flesh as it was to those of steel, synthetics, or even light itself.

She twirled the weapon faintly, the training of long-ago decades flowing back through her, and then 'bounced' her mental presence from the Jem'Hadar moving towards the rear of the *Nemesis* to one that seemed to the two standing guard over the entrance to the commandeered vessel before bouncing again to another mental presence within the ship itself. Not the sharply focused mind of Commander Jureth, that she knew well, but...another one. Not one who was truly real as a mental being, but something that she could still sense due to part of her training. The theory behind what she had done with *Scream* back during the operation to halt the *Azimuth Horizon* was the reason for this actually, a result of many long years fighting a technically non-organic entity. She tapped a few short sequences into the wristcomp, isolating the position of the surging electronics, and then her finger froze for a moment over the final key in the sequence.

What she was about to do was arguably crazy, but it was also perhaps the only way that she could stop the *Nemesis* from powering back up again. She didn't want to do it, but in the end she might have to. And despite the possible danger that could be obviated by taking more time to get to where she needed to... there probably wasn't that time anymore. A single ebony finger stabbed down and the device on her wrist whined under sudden strain. This was the fruit of an experiment that an old friend had managed to use to bring down one of the most hateful organisations in the Federation. And now she would use it to aid her in reaching into the very heart of a threat orders of magnitude more lethally dangerous. The device on her wrist grew hot for a moment as its power systems were stretched to their very limit, and she vanished in the swirl of light characteristic of an Ilythirii transporter.

Her destination? The *Nemesis*'s AI core. Its brain and its heart. And, perhaps, the means for her to save not just the lives of her comrades, but also of an innocent whose own parent had accidentally led her into her own destruction.

And then, the Ilythirii was completely taken aback by what she saw.

Before her spread a computer core unlike anything she had ever seen or even imagined. It was at least several decks in height and looked to occupy most of the space within each of those decks.

It was nothing less than a mountain of gelpack units arrayed in a colossal four-part hemisphere patterned much like a positronic brain, pulsing with trillions of blue and white flashes every second in an almost hypnotic dance of sparks and lights, softly humming with power. It looked just like a titanic living brain made of semi-organic, semi-artificial components even the most advanced current computer technology did not equate yet, let alone surpass, in this or any spacefaring civilisation Snowfire new of; even Borg technology looked medieval in comparison.

The only other thing in the room with her was what looked like a very modern comm station... and on the floor near a wall there was a modern phaser rifle, Federation issued, it's power indicator dead.

As she tried to take all in the surprising technological marvel looming before her, the chief science officer of the Horizon immediately assessed the situation; first, that this was nothing less than the genuine brain of the entire starship. Powered by the vessel's own power sources and most assuredly equipped as well with a protected emergency power source dedicated solely to itself, there was no way any handheld device could ever affect it; nothing short of another starship's power would be needed. Second, part of that power was encasing the vital parts of this monstrous artificial brain with a level 10 forcefield; physical damage would also require much more than what any handheld weaponry could produce, as seemed to be evidenced by the dead rifle discarded on the floor. And third, the designer of this artificial brain evidently took into account the possibility of even telepathic tampering, as it was structured much like the four-lobed brain of the Ferengi, rendering it totally immune to mind-reading, hypnotic suggestion and all other psionic manipulations.

As she considered these, Snowfire could also look at the monitor active on the one station in the huge circular room. The main screen was showing what looked much like some kind of electroencephalogram readings as used in Starfleet ships' sickbays. She could clearly recognize the broken line pattern moving from left to right on the tridimensional graph background dotted with small complex numbers. In fact she could see that the line was rather blurred, somehow as if there were two different surimposed wave patterns recorded there.

And now, a third reading seemed to start joining the other two.

Snowfire reached once more into her satchel. The disruptor had never been her intended kill switch; Federation engineers were very good, and something this advanced she'd known would have defences... It would still be capable of being a rather sizeable distraction. Physical pain was something that a lot of AIs had... trouble with. Especially after as long wrapping themselves tighter and tighter through that mental loop as Khan had certainly had. Her free hand fell back towards her satchel again, as a flurry of needles rose around her like steel wings unfurling, before going shooting off into the mass of circuitry before her.

All her projectiles fell limp on the floor when it struck the surrounding energy barrier.

"You should not be here..."

The voice came from behind, As she looked, Snowfire saw a very young Human female, blonde-haired and blue-eyed, wearing a grey and black uniform of a definitely outdated Starfleet design, with a single pip on her golden collar. She was looking this way and that, like a child afraid of being caught doing something wrong. her voice was definitely pleading.

"Please... go away... You can't stay here... He will hurt you. Go before he notice... "

Then the voice came, and she spun in an instant, her weapon spinning in her hand towards the source, then stopping abruptly as she saw her. She cocked her head gently to one side, as if examining the person in front of her, and then it clicked.

"Tetis Achilles, isn't it?" She said, voice soft. "I wondered where you'd got to."

"Call me Tess... And it won't work, you know, " the girl said pointing at her needle weaponry. " This is a level 10 forcefield with multiphasic programming on a randomly rotating fractal algorithm, directly fed by the ship's power and backed-up by the internal power source of the system. This entire vessel would have to be destroyed before any form of matter or energy could go through it. Even Borg transporters would be repelled."

Snowfire turned back to the station in front of her, looking carefully at the display.

"He doesn't come down here, does he. Not unless it gets drawn to his attention."

"You're proceeding through a false assumption; he can be anywhere on the ship at any moment... but he is never in more than one place at once. Somehow he loathes the very idea of having another like himself about... "

Snowfire resumed the motion of her arm, pulling the device she sought fully from her bag and kneeling down. She placed a black hand on the featureless globe of the same shade and focused. A pronounced 'click' echoed across the space around her and Tess, and she smiled grimly as it started to hum very softly.

"Well, if all goes well it's going to be drawn to his attention quite soon."

She shrugged, looking back at the terrified personality with a softened expression of almost sisterly affection before it hardened once more, lips curling harshly.

"And then he's going to find more than a few wheels coming off. You're going to want to run Tess. This isn't going to be pretty, and you don't want to see it."

Tess was looking at her device with strangely blinking eyes, as if she was a tricorder beeping while analyzing it. Then she shook her head.

"I told you; matter and energy, even out of phase, will not affect the protective shell unless it destroys the entire vessel along with it. And an attempt to upload a computer virus or intruder program will not go beyond the first gelpack cell before being instantly detected, isolated inside and physically destroyed along with it, with a specialized internal replicator system replacing the surgically removed part with a brand new one and back ups reinitialised in a matter of milliseconds. It had been tried already you know, even with a sentient program... Your apparatus is as useless as this rifle over... "

The girl suddenly showed signs of alarm.

"Too late... he... he knows!"

And then she simply vanished.

She let her mind tumble back through the lessons from decades past, the refresher courses she'd gone through, dredging up every shred of knowledge that might help her here, and then she smiled faintly as she felt the Jem'Hadar begin to move back out of the Nemesis towards the Polaris. A part of her wished that she could let Redding know what she was about to do, but this was going to need some very intricate footwork. Letting the Commander know would probably mess that up somewhere. So she held her silence as she waited for that jaw of the trap to swing shut, occupying herself by looking over the single panel in the massive room. Who knew, there might be something that could help in there.

But then, another voice resounded behind her; deeper, accented, full of self assurance if not outright arrogance.

And rightly so; Snowfire knew she was now trapped; her wrist device registered that another similar forcefield was now erected around the entire room, making her own personal transporter useless, as the suddenly appeared presence spoke.

"I don't know you... I never forget a face."

Now in place of Tess stood a powerfully built Human with dark hair bound in a short ponytail falling behind his broad back, his definitely thirtyish Hindu features highlighted by very intense eyes and a cold, hard smile. He wore a pair of black polished soft boots under calf-length black pants and a full red shirt over a black one that molded his muscular physique like a second skin. It was the kind of uniform Starfleet engineers and security personnel had worn in the mid-twenty-third century.

"I am Khan," the imposing figure then said with a small bow of his head. "Please sit and entertain me."

* * *

Ensign Sheeneea wore the eyepiece serving as a viewscreen on board Jem'Hadar ships to her left eye, thus getting only a black and white image since her color perception was into her antennae. Her finger resting on the flight controls of the attack ship, she was routinely reviewing them for instant departure again and again as she watched nervously the progression of Redding's assault team toward and inside the Polaris and, underneath the escort vessel, the methodical unloading of the antimatter tanks by the spacesuited Jem'Hadars. It has been several minutes now since Lieutenant Commander Snowfire and Lieutenant Tyvya had left with Ensign Jaxon and the Bynar doctors at the sensor console behind her had reported weapons fire inside the asteroid... and now inside the Polaris... and a beam-in from the dockyard to the sinister Achilles class heavy siege destroyer.

On her nav board, the deserted Dawn had been drawn to another airlock by magnetic cables; Jem'Hadars must be boarding the Delta Flyer by now...

"Ensign Sheeneea... "

The comm message from her badge almost made her fire the engines reflexively.

"Yes, Lieutenant Tyvya... "

"We're bringing in people and prisoners from the asteroid; slave workers that had lived here for decades... the crew of the Polaris... and Jem'Hadar prisoners. Stand by for departure. "

"... Aye, Lieutenant."

She didn't ask about Lieutenant Commander K'leysha or Commander Redding; somehow they would be about soon as well. She knew Tyvya would not abandon them.

Unless ordered to do so...

Even then... Like all who had served with her on the Artemis, Sheeneea knew that Tyvya was quite good at deftly circumventing orders when she had her mind set on bringing someone back from danger. After all, that is how she got married in the first place...

"We have sick and injured people coming in, mostly Humans and Bajorans... and those Jem'Hadar jailers," then reported the acting chief of security as Sheeneea's console confirmed the opening of the ship's airlock. "Doctors, we really need you down here."

Doctor 110 glanced at Ensign Sheeneea, not wanting to leave her alone on the bridge of the Jem'Hadar ship. Sheeneea returned a nod to indicate she'd be able to handle the sensors as well through the multifaceted eyepiece, even if it would give her a bad headache to do so.

She exited the bridge and headed to the airlock, hoping that she could find her way through the mess of dark, cramped, jagged hallways of the Jem'Hadar bugship. Without her partner in the immediate vicinity, she was a little disoriented.

Luckily, there was some logic to the ship's design. Go downward and outward, just as on a Federation vessel. Eventually reaching a corridor that circled around the middle portion of the ship, she saw many airlocks, and knew that if she'd just continue to circle around, she would find the one being utilized.

Approaching the airlock, she spoke to the acting security chief who had summoned her. "Any critically injured we need to focus on first leave here in the hallway. They will need immediate attention and we don't have time to move them or set up beds for them. The others, please direct to the mess hall use the tables as makeshift biobeds. I don't suppose the Jem'Hadar have a sickbay, as they don't particularly care about their injured, correct?"

"You got that right, Doctor," answered Tyvya tersely. "And they don't have a mess hall either. They don't hold meetings drinking Ear Gray tea. I suggest that we use their cargo bay since it is empty of the usual military ordnance and the largest room aboard. Only the Jem'Hadars are lightly hurt, Doctor; there was barely half a dozen of them on the entire facility and we stunned them with phaser shots at stun setting directly through the optic nerve... a trick devised by our former CMO to deal with androids and other physically tough opponents. We are bringing in about fifty old Humans and Bajorans, all seemingly suffering from exhaustion and malnutrition, a few with what appears like battle scars and badly healed fall injuries."

"Aye, take them to..."

"the cargo bay then," Doctor 110 and 011 replied.

Their usually stoic face did not reveal their embarrassment at being unfamiliar with the Jem'Hadar ship.

As the only medical officer there, they had to direct the various security personnel to perform standard field medic duties to keep each patient safe and comfortable until they actually were able to get to seeing them one at a time.

"Any spare..."

"medical tricorders..."

"should be..."

"used for sealing wounds and..."

"plasma burns," they directed. "Fill some..."

"hyposprays with minor..."

"pain relievers, but be wary of..."

"overuse."

The security officers nodded to her respectfully as they filed past on their way to take their patients to the cargo bay.

"They were used as slave labor within this facility they literally carved out of the asteroid here," she reported Jaxon as she helped some of the older ones inside with a gentle hand. "They say they were prisoners of war from the Chintoka battle... that was the Dominion War, Doctor, decades ago. All the Klingons captured with them were killed either in revolt attempts or during fighting training practices set up daily by their Jem'Hadar jailers. They said their Vorta leader was killed during an accident they know nothing about when they were brought here. Fact is, they have no clue where they really are."

As the Bynar would come to the opened airlock and upon the file of limping, stiff and tattered-clothed people being gently but quickly shoved inside the attack cruiser, the giantess Tyvya was finishing a rather terse discussion with a man who looked like a Starfleet Marines major; and indeed, it was Major McGregor, saluting and moving out with several dozen people the doctor recognized immediately, one of them, the Vulcan officer T'Lana, carried unconscious on a makeshift stretcher by 2 crewmen as a medic treated her for burns all over her lean frame.

"The crew and passengers of the Polaris, Doctor," reported Tyvya with a definite tone of exasperation in her voice. "They insist in going back to their ship. And since the major outranks me... "

She sighed.

"They say Commander Oseno was taken by Jem'Hadar guards quite a while ago but they don't know where. They speculate he might be aboard the Polaris; their captors wanted to access the ship controls locked out with his command codes. But Commander Redding and his team must be aboard by now so they want to link up with them."

She then rose even straighter and took a few steps outside, her towering frame making the top of her white-haired mane almost touching the corridor's roughly hewed ceiling as she looked around.

"And there is no sign of Lieutenant Commander K'Leysa."

* * *

Oseno stared at her intently trying to figure out exactly what was going on and where this girl had come from. For the second time since he'd been aboard the warship he believed he was seeing ghosts.

"Wait, who are you?! You should come with me!"

The girl blinked at him a moment, looked around again and stood at attention.

" Ensign Thetis Achilles, Yeoman, USS Nemesis... People call me Tess, " the petite blonde girl answered. Then her expression showed a strange mixture of pride and sadness as she went on. " I can't come with you. But you, you must go, leave the ship... and quickly!

Around them, the bridge suddenly lighted up and all systems signaled full readiness. A glance at the engineering station showed what Tess then announced with widening eyes.

"We have full power!"

And as the antimatter gauge flared up on the engineering board, Tess seemed to become more... alive before Oseno's eyes... and more agitated. She went to a wall panel and opened a locker containing EVA suits of an outdated design but in pristine condition.

"If you use one of these and go through the bridge's emergency airlock, he won't notice immediately that you are gone. You barely have time to do so while he's occupied. But hurry! He will not be distracted for long! As soon as he disposes of her... "

Oseno looked at the displays briefly and then with concern back at Tess

"Disposes of who? If I leave he'll kill my crew, I have to find a way to stop him."

For a moment, Tess looked as if she was thinking. it lasted but a second or two, then her unblinking eyes rose back to his.

"The asteroid is being evacuated... to your ship... the Jem'Hadar attack ship... and the shuttle it towed back here... there is weapons fire on the asteroid... in the USS Polaris... several lifesigns, Human... Tellarite... Orion... with the Jem'Hadar ones... except the two now loading a second antimatter tank from your ship to mine..."

She blinked once.

"He is distracted by the workings of the encoding of your datachip; it is infinitely more complex than anything on record except maybe... And his attention is now on the beaming in of another... a lifeform I have never seen before; Vulcanoid, black-skinned, white-haired, purple-eyes with a uniform like yours except for the white shoulder pads over the black uniform. He is... curious about her. "

Then she became alarmed again.

" I can not isolate those sensor readings from him indefinitely... He will soon realise that I am diverting data from his operating consciousness... and then... Please! Go! While you still can!"

"Snowfire!" Jureth said instantly recognizing the description of the Horizon's Chief Science Officer. "They're trying to rescue us, and stop him... They must have some sort of plan. The Vulcanoid, can you and I help her somehow?"

The girl hesitated.

"I... I don't know. He erected a forcefield around the deck room where she is... I can deactivate it but then in mere seconds he will notice and slap it back up... and me down at the same time. She... she has a personal short range transporter device..."

She looked into his eyes, fully aware that he already had understood without her having to finish her train of thought.

* * *

In the dense, cold silence, Redding spoke.

"It's a good day to die."

And they clashed.

"Speak for yourself," grumbled Graalthrii as for a moment, he tried to aim his rifle at the Jem'Hadar.

But both fighters were moving and gyrating around one another too fast and there was not enough space in there for him to swing around his big rifle fast enough. And his attention was quickly diverted by another opponent coming to meet them from where the First had come.

He was almost as big as his leader and obviously just as old but there was the sudden flare of delight and pride in his eyes as he too dropped his rifle-halberd to take out a bayonet and point it at the Tellarite.

" I am the Second of the Jem'Hadar of his Excellency. You are also a soldier and serving a worthy leader. I will know your name. "

Graalthrii looked at him and at his cumbersome rifle, having noted the minimal effect of his weapon unless he cranked it up to deadly power; something he new would not sit well with his high-moral ground captain once he would make a report. And he had trained with him and under him for years now. He knew what he should, and could do in the present situation.

The Tellarite dropped his own rifle and took out the regulation combat knife Captain Kheren had made standard issue for his security officers under his command since the days the Andorian had been assigned as chief of security and tactical aboard the USS Lotus, the very first flagship of Lotus Fleet. He took it in his thick left hand and came up right before the much taller but barely broader Jem'Hadar Second.

" I am Pekris Graalthrii, Security Ensign USS Horizon... and I am lucky. "

As he said so, his right hand came up holding his hand phaser and he shot the Jem'Hadar right in the eyes, point blank.

Reaching straight into the brain, the low level stun setting bypassed entirely the thick, resistant scaly skin of the supersoldier and short-circuited out his brain directly. Heavily stunned, the unconscious Jem'Hadar dropped face first at the Tellarite's feet like a stone statue knocked off it's pedestal.

"Hey, it worked!"

Stepping over the fallen body while resheating his unused knife, Graalthrii went straight to the nearest control panel and promptly shut close and code-locked the antimatter tanks bayhatch, right in the face of the two suited Jem'Hadars about to come in to take another one. Then, he turned around, hand phaser raised, to see what was happening with his senior officer.

It had taken a lot out of him to acknowledge the ridiculous honor duel ritual the Human had wanted to play with the narrow-minded aliens. But the knowledge that this would occupy the Jem'Hadar leader long enough for him to dispose of the other one and stop the antimatter theft had helped him accept the situation. But now, he was duty-bound to protect the first officer of his ship and, as soon as he would get a clear shot, this Jem'Hadar First would feel what the heat-setting of a hand phaser could do to clothing and body armor.

Redding and the First sparred for a few seconds feeling each other out, neither giving or taking ground.

"You are following a mad man, you know that, right?" Redding said while blocking a strike.

"His Excellency is no mere man, Commander Redding." and attempted to strike low narrowly missing Redding's left thigh.

"That's true.. he was a great man, a powerful man that lead a country during the worst war in our history."

The First lunged at him but the large man had seen that kind of footwork before and counter stepped to receive the set up to his faint. Redding's counter strike was flawless but ultimately ineffective as the First realized his mistake and pulled back just in time to deflect Redding's return blow that would have disarmed him.

"He's a loser in case you didn't catch that from his history, he lost on Earth and he lost against Kirk twice, and again against Captain Kheren."

Redding moved closer and the Jem'hadar gave ground. His face gave away no reaction but Redding could tell from his movements he was hesitating.

"He WILL lead our people to glory, and will restore our lost honor."

"He can't, you don't seem to understand.. he's *programmed* to fail. He's nothing more than a memory of the man he was so we could study him."

He took a step back but stayed defensive.

"He can only fail, it's what he was made to do."

This time the First was obviously agitated.

"You are wrong!"

He came straight at Redding with a powerful downward thrust. Turning, the first officer of the Horizon went down on one knee and hooked elbows with him and pulling him off his feet, he went over his back to land solidly on the deck, the knife clattered away from his grasp. Before the Jem'hadar could fully recover, Redding was on him, using a wrestling move he had perfected to hold a Vulcan; he pinned the First's right arm and pushed his knee into his back, removing any chance of leverage.

"I get it" he said into the struggling mans ear. "Time has finally hunted you down, robbed you of your right.." TheJem'hadar's struggles silenced him for a second but then he went on; "..robbed you of an honorable.. worthy death."

Against a younger Jem'Hadar, Redding didn't think he could have maintained this hold; but the elder one was proving far less of a challenge.

"I know how that feels, I really do. There were times I just... ugh... times I just wanted to walk into an airlock by 'accident' just so I could get away from feeling so OLD.. so useless.. all the time."

Redding quickly switched his hold so the Jem'hadar's head was in a choke hold. It was a less effective hold, giving theJem'hadar a better chance of breaking free as he continued talking.

"You fought well. I can end this now if that's what you want."

The man had positionned himself so as to break the Jem'Hadar's stout neck.... but didn't.

"Or you can live to fight another day, and stop following the lie of a dream a dead man has sold you."

The grey-scaled soldier stopped struggling, his eyes lost in a greyness that seemed to come from deep within him.

"Out here... forgotten by our gods, condemned to endless exile... it is all we have left... if we are to hope for a meaningful death. "

Redding released him and backed away, but kept himself between the Jem'hadar and his fallen weapon.

"If all you fight for is to die it is to late for honor, I understand this. But did you truly believe Khan could give you a worthy death or did you simply have no other option?"

He carefully picked up the Jem'hadar's axe, keeping his eye on him.

"You have lost to me, your life is now mine, but I offer you a choice. Die here, now with honor."

He held the axe in a strike position.

"Or join me and stop Khan from destroying countless innocent lives across the Alpha quadrant before he falls, and risk a truly worthy death."

He paused, waiting.

Slowly, the burly warrior rose to his feet, his eyes on the equally powerful-looking Human, appreciating his cautious positioning and maintained readiness.

He glanced at his fallen comrade, so swiftly and efficiently dispatched by a stocky but diminutive opponent who now covered him as well with his hand weapon and unblinking, attentive stare as well as the access to this room, obviously ready for any sudden enemy reinforcement. To his experienced eyes, it was obvious these people were well-trained and strong of fighting spirit and resolve as of arms. No wonder they proved such worthy adversaries during the war... so, so long ago...

He looked at Redding with a new light in his old eyes.

"For so, so long have we toiled here, exiled from all, forgotten by all, even our creators... When He came, he gave us purpose again. But serving the will of one being is but an empty cause. The true strength and honor of a soldier is to fight and die for his whole world. That is why you bested me, you, an inferior being... why you won the war even against the gods. This is what we have seen... "

The First inclined his head but his stare never left Redding's eyes.

"We await your command."

Redding handed the axe-rifle back to him with a nod.

"It's too late to stop the Nemesis with ground troops, have your men pull back and allow my people to evacuate the crew of the Polaris back here, tell them that their herding the crew into an ambush."

He retrieved his own weapon but separated his rifle into a hand phaser, not trusting the damaged half.

"I understand" The first said with a thoughtful look. "In this way I can order my men to assist your people without the hologram realizing our change of allegiance." He gave it a momentary thought "That's very clever."

"After we revive your second so he and Graalthrii can greet both Federation and Dominion crews as they come and explain the situation to them, you and I will.." But the first cut him off

"We are no longer of the Dominion; and what of the workers?" He asked with only a slight sign of curiosity.

"What workers? there are other people here? well.. how many workers?"

The thought of several dozens of workers scattered through the asteroid filled him with dread.

"There are sixty-four survivors among our original prisoner complement," then told the First. "with the twelve of us last Jem'Hadar who managed to survive the lack of Ketracel White, that makes a total of seventy-six, plus the entire complement of sixty of this vessel."

"That is more than twice the entire capacity of the Polaris," observed Graalthrii as he came up to them with the Second coming around. " Leone is reporting that Tyvya and Jaxon found them all and have herded them here on the docks for evacuation already, along with the last three Jem'Hadars left as guards... The crew and passengers of the Polaris are on their way here and they alone will fill up the ship. But fortunately, adding their cruiser..."

"No," suddenly interrupted the First, still looking into Redding's eyes. "Your people will never escape his Excellency, now that his ship is powered up again. You will need cover."

The Tellarite grunted something between a laugh and an expletive.

"Spoken like a true brave and stupid soldier! This is a heavy siege destroyer we have out there! This monster is designed *and* equipped to wipe out a *full squadron* of bugships like yours *on the side* while destroying a whole space station! You would never survive a confrontation with it!"

The leader of the Jem'Hadar kept his eyes locked with those of the First officer of the Horizon.

"No, we would not."

Redding opened his mouth to object but closed it instantly. What could he say? After selling the Jem'hadar on a worthy death would he now talk him out of one? The two men locked eyes for several seconds.

"Take what men with you that want to go, the rest are welcomed to join us as honored warriors."

He held out his hand to the First. The First returned the gesture and the two stood there as if they were going to arm wrestle.

"Don't sell your selves needlessly, once were clear or if you should land a telling blow see to your own safety, there is no shame in regrouping before a superior enemy."

The First gave a nod of agreement.

"We shall amend of the wrongs we have done to these people and face a worthy death at the hands of a great enemy, it is all we could have hoped for, you have my thanks Redding."

Then without another word the First turned and headed off for his ship.

Graalthrii watched him leave.

"I don't think the Captain will like that, Commander."

"It's not Kheren's choice to make any more than it was mine, I guess it was a good day to die after all," Redding said with a sigh.

"Well, I was sure you were just going to kill him back there anyway, during you honor duel thingy," the tellarite grunted, busy helping the Second back to his feet.

"Honor duel? what are you talking about?" he retorted as he looked down at the stout security officer. "That was a negotiation from the very start. We never would have said a word otherwise."

Graalthrii squinted his eyes at him.

"Then what was that 'good day to die Klingon abber about?'"

Redding chuckled.

"Everyone gets that wrong, I didn't mean it was a good day to die for *me*."

The Second was lost at the two federation officers conversation and looked at Redding while obviously disregarding the Tellarite.

"I am prepared to follow your orders, Commander Redding."

Redding handed him his weapons.

"We'll meet the crew and the Jem'hadar warriors headed this way and get them all on board the Polaris, are you sure your people will follow you?"

He took his weapons and stood ready.

"They will follow me Commander, or they will attempt to join the first as they decide, I can promise no more."

"I understand." Then with a nod at Graathrii he ordered; "Bring them aboard, Lieutenant," and with that the two officers ran off.

* * *

The Doctors felt a twinge of emotional pain, but did not have time to acknowledge the unfortunate events Tyvya detailed or understand what that meant in relation to their task at hand. And time was not given for them to do so.

There was a commotion outside in the base's docking corridor. Jumping out phaser in hand, Tyvya saw that the Polaris crew had come face to face with a quartet of Jem'Hadars, two of them still in EVA suits, one definitely the biggest among them all. The Starfleet personnel immediately moved to a side corridor to get cover from weapon's fire, the marines taking a protective position and a fighting stance to protect the rest of them... and the two supersoldiers just ran past them, ignoring them completely to head straight at the Andorian giantess.

Their weapons were slung at their back. Nevertheless, Tyvya kept her own phaser ready as they came up to her. They stopped two paces in front of her and, amazingly, saluted her.

"I am the First," said the largest one. "I made a truce with your Commander Redding. We will need our ship."

It didn't took long for the acting chief of security to tap her combadge.

Commander Redding, this is Lieutenant Tyvya. I have a group of ... gentlemen here who claims to be... joining us."

Redding stopped short and slapped himself in the forehead before picking up speed again.

Damn it he thought, Of course she would break radio silence to confirm this.

It was to much to hope that Khan wouldn't pick up the transmission and that could lead to Khan figuring out that the Jem'hadar had turned on him, losing a significant tactical advantage.

He had to be careful how he phrased his response so that she would understand him but Khan would not.

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant; allow First Officer Duncel to proceed with his mission, continue with your evacuation of the crew." stressing the word first slightly he took a breath and held it waiting for her reply.

He wasn't totally sure she would catch the reference to 'Officer Duncel' but he was sure Khan would not, it was an Academy term.

She did. And she didn't like it. Duncel was Academy midshipman talk referring to a part that no longer served any useful purpose.

"Aye, Sir. Reporting to him right now," the Andorian giantess said as she closed her comm channel she had reflexively encoded and encrypted as per regulation 46A; "If transmission are being monitored during battle, no unencoded messages are to be transmitted on an open channel."

Her channel had been a closed one but still she had encrypted the transmission and spoken in an encoded manner as Redding did. Khan would possibly pick up the emission but it would take him time to decrypt it and then more to possibly understand it; and she was betting that he might be somewhat occupied at the moment. She knew of his egotistical propensity to manifest himself as one unique living monomaniacal entity instead of a multitasking, multiprojected artificial supercomputer. This was the biggest, possibly sole weakness of this manifestation of the artificial lifeform; captain kheren had exploited this once when they encountered it the first time to deprive the Nemesis of power and hurl it here at the edge of the galaxy.

She just hoped that they could do it again.

But then the Jem'Hadar First before her was speaking again.

"We will take our ship. You will take yours."

"Negative," objected Tyvya. The Polaris is already full and the Dawn can cramp at most a dozen passengers. We need your ship to evacuate these people."

"Redding's orders." simply retorted the grey-scaled aged warrior.

The acting chief of security sighed. Then, she turned towards the chief medical officer. By rank, the Bynars were above her, but they were outside the normal chain of command; and even then, Commander Redding was still the senior officer and in designated command of the whole team.

She tapped her combadge as she looked the CMO.

"All personnel; we are evacuating to the Polaris. Ensign Sheenea will take the CMO and the most seriously wounded to the Dawn. We move out under Commander Redding's word."

Jaxon then came up to her, eyes wide.

"Lieutenant! The Polaris is already full! If we cram those people in her, we will overtax her life support system by one hundred percent! Our chances of reaching back the Horizon..."

"Are zero percent if we don't move out now!" the towering blue-skinned woman interrupted.

"We will help," then offered the First.

"And then?" asked Tyvya.

"We will do our duty."

As the Jem'Hadars went into the bugship, Jaxon still looked up wearily at Tyvya.

"And what about Commander Oseno? And Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysha?"

* * *

As Khan spoke his name, looking straight at Snowfire, lights flared up around them. From the huge computer core came an increase in the speed of the flashes and a slight humming sound. But there was another, more heavy, thrumming noise now coming from deeper within the starship; the unmistakable sound of an active warp core.

"At last! Again I hold the power to conquer and rule!"

His attention then went back to the black-skinned woman silent before him.

"Now tell me; why are you here? And tell me, where can I find... Captain Kheren."

"Curiosity and purpose intertwined." Snowfire replied calmly. "Mostly the former though. Purpose can be such a bore."

She gestured behind her at the multi-level computer core, a very slight smirk across her lips.

"It's always impressive what the Federation can build when it's backed into a corner, is it not?"

"Everything changes... except Man," the tall, powerful figure of the Hindu man answered, nodding to Snowfire. He gestured also towards the computer core as he added; " Oh, improved mechanical devices... but improved Man... Yes, it seems that I will do well in your century."

And then, his gaze became predatory.

"But first things first; tell me, why are you here? And tell me, where can I find... Captain Kheren..." he repeated, using the exact same intonations as before.

As the Illythirii kept silent, the figure of Khan looked at her as if he was not seeing her anymore. Then his face showed sudden understanding.

"Ah, I see... I just picked up an encrypted transmission within the base. I don't need to decypher it to understand that you are trying to distract me while your colleagues are attempting some kind of military action. Excellent... "

There was a sudden humming and the deckplates under her feet were thrumming; the warp core was flaring up to full activation. A distant clanging sound reverberated across the entire hull. That sound too, although somewhat unfamiliar, could only mean that the mechanical magnetic clamps holding the huge warship had disengaged.

The Nemesis was moving out.

Snowfire chuckled.

"Better *men*? There are no such things."

She shook her head, expression sardonic.

"Everyone makes mistakes, even you. And the sheer destructive power of any vessel this powerful can blind one to other possibilities. As to colleagues," She chuckled again, a slender hand brushing the matte black and gold she wore. "Is this a Starfleet uniform?"

Khan shot her back a wry smile.

"For someone claiming to live in a better society, a world of progress, enlightenment and advancement, you sound just as prejudiced and obtuse as the people of my era. "

Then the smile faded into a predatory grin.

"And don't insult my intelligence, woman; you can wear a burka for all I care, but it is obvious you come either from the Starfleet shuttle captured or from the attack ship of my people as a prisoner from the ship that launched that shuttlecraft, since such a short range craft could never have come this far on it's own, even through the space phenomenon that threw my warriors here. And it is definitely a Starfleet encrypted signal I picked up; people that as obviously came with you. I will deal with them presently."

He moved towards her, his eyes like those of a shark.

"Now, I will ask this one last time;*where* is Captain Kheren?"

Again, the black-skinned pointy-eared woman remained silent. As he came right before her, looming over her with his impressive physique, he finally sighed.

"No matter; now that I have power I will be able to restore the intergalactic propulsion of this vessel soon enough,. Then I will hunt him down... 'round the moons of Nibia , 'round the galactic maelstrom and 'round Perdition's Flames before I give him up!"

He took a deep breath.

"But you... we can't have you run around and do all kind of mischievelous things now, can we?"

His large hand went to her deceptively slender wrist. In an instant, his superhuman grip crushed the device she was wearing like so much tin foil. Wrenching the crumbling debris from her limb, he finished gringing it between his fingers, all the while looking at her from under half-closed eyelids.

"Your other devices have been deactivated. As for you... I will deal with you later."

The Illythirii felt the familiar tingling of a transporter beam and, the next instant, she was looking at the telling blue haze of a forcefield at the doorway of a small duranium cell. She instantly knew she was in the brig of the Nemesis... and her combadge had not followed her. The computer had scanned her during transport for any device and suspended them in transit to send her here with no equipment left whatsoever. Anyway, by now, instruments were not required to know that this energy barrier would extend all around her to prevent beam outs... in addition to the standard practice of imbedding transporter inhibitors within the thick reinforced walls around her. And of course she would be constantly monitored by sensors and computer. But, contrary to standard Starfleet ships, this brig had only a bunk and a small disposal unit for personal wastes. And there was no guard visible beyond the door.

All around her, she could hear the thrumming of the warship's warpcore growing in pitch and loudness. Any space battle veteran would instantly recognize the sound of a starship powering up for combat.

* * *

Oseno stared at the girl intently trying to figure out exactly what was going on and where this girl had come from. For the second time since he'd been aboard the warship he believed he was seeing ghosts.

"Wait, who are you?! You should come with me!"

The girl blinked at him a moment, looked around again and stood at attention.

" Ensign Thetis Achilles, Yeoman, USS Nemesis... People call me Tess, " the petite blonde girl answered. Then her expression showed a strange mixture of pride and sadness as she went on. " I can't come with you. But you, you must go, leave the ship... and quickly!

Around them, the bridge suddenly lighted up and all systems signaled full readiness. A glance at the engineering station showed what Tess then announced with widening eyes.

"We have full power!"

And as the antimatter gauge flared up on the engineering board, Tess seemed to become more... alive before Oseno's eyes... and more agitated. She went to a wall panel and opened a locker containing EVA suits of an outdated design but in pristine condition.

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Oseno looked at the displays briefly and then with concern back at Tess

"Disposes of who? If I leave he'll kill my crew, I have to find a way to stop him."

For a moment, Tess looked as if she was thinking. it lasted but a second or two, then her unblinking eyes rose back to his.

"The asteroid is being evacuated... to your ship... the Jem'Hadar attack ship... and the shuttle if towed back here... there is weapons fire in the USS Polaris... and several lifesigns, Human... Tellarite... Orion... with the Jem'Hadar ones... except the two now loading a second antimatter tank from your ship to mine..."

She blinked once.

"He is distracted by the encoding of your datachip, much more complex than anything on record except maybe... and his attention is now on the beaming in of another... a lifeform I have never seen before; Vulcanoid, black-skinned, white-haired, purple-eyes with a uniform like yours except for the white shoulder pads over the black uniform. He is...curious about her."

Then she became alarmed again.

" I can not isolate those sensor readings from him indefinitely... He will soon realise that I am diverting data from his operating consciousness... and then... Please go while you still can!"

"Snowfire!" Jureth said instantly recognizing the description of the Horizon's Chief Science Officer; "they're trying to rescue us... and stop him. They must have some sort of plan. The Vulcanoid, can you and I help her somehow?"

The girl hesitated.

"I... I don't know. He erected a forcefield around the deck room where she is... I can deactivate it but then in mere seconds he will notice and slap it back up... and me down at the same time. She... she has a personal short range transporter device..."

She looked into his eyes, fully aware that he already had understood without her having to finish her train of thought.

"But.." Oseno mused thinking aloud, "beaming her out does no good, nor beaming her anywhere aboard the ship. I can't beam to her... I need to try to do something to draw his attention away from her... overload a console, or an eps conduit... something that will give her time to do what she came to do. I don't care if he comes after me, but I have to try and give her time to stop him."

Oseno moved to the tactical station on the bridge for it was the one he was the most familiar with given its similarity to the Alsea. The console was not locked, and so he began looking over critical systems careful not to run any programs that looked like anything more than a diagnostic. He wasn't ready to draw Khan's focus, not yet. He scanned vital control junctions, and conduits but could find nothing that Khan couldn't bypass or override. He could start a core ejection, but Khan would shut it down, maybe though if he started a cascade of failures of critical systems it would draw Khan's attention just long enough. Jureth looked over at Tess,

"I want to start a cascade failure of multiple critical systems, each time he stops one, I want something else to fail culminating with an emergency warp core ejection. If I'm right, between that and the data chip he won't be able to maintain his concentration on Commander K'leysha."

Oseno waited for a response from Tess, but she appeared to be "thinking" again and did not immediately offer any advice. Jureth was not an engineer, but he knew enough about power systems that he could attempt what he was proposing on his own. The Bajoran was determined to help Snowfire somehow and given that he had access to most of the major systems he had already decided that this was the best way.

Jureth could see that the console readings around the bridge were beginning to go green and knew he had to do something fast. He drew on information from his earliest years at Starfleet Academy and basic starship engineering classes that all cadets were expected to take. He entered commands in the console and began a massive power influx to the weapons arrays. Normally, one would do this in a controlled manner to reinforce the ship's weaponry and make it more powerful or sustain fire for a longer period of time, but Jureth did it instantly betting that the older vessel's less developed eps system wouldn't be able to handle the sudden influx of power.

Unfortunately for the crafty Bajoran, the Nemesis, formerly the USS Achilles, first of her class, had been the very prototype for all current modern tech and even beyond as far as computer and tactical technologies were concerned; and as a pure warship of unequaled firepower with Klingon engineering involved as well as Starfleet's, fast and excessive surges of power to weaponry had been taken well into account in it's design. Not only did the EPS conduits take the sudden, brutal influx of power in stride, they did it better than most modern vessels could.

"He's coming!"

Beside him, Tess vanished.

And then, Khan reappeared on the eerily red-lighted bridge.

"Well done, Commander, " he stated from the command podium, again looking as his later life self. "Take the tactical station and prepare to open fire."

* * *

From the hollowed part of the asteroid lost at the heart of the blue and red, lightning-crisscrossed hazy nebula, a huge but sleek, ominous silhouette slowly glided out like a shark out of a sea cave. Lights coming up all accross her smooth, armored hull, the USS Nemesis was moving out, torpedo ports, cannon muzzles and phaser strips glowing with power. There was no halo bubble around it however, as the dense ionized particles of the nebula made shields inoperative, sensors severely hampered... and targeting lock useless.

Nevertheless, the Achilles class heavy siege destroyer was about to open fire. Here, she didn't need any sensor or targeting system just to fire straight behind her at the huge mass of the asteroid base it was exiting.

And the Nemesis did have the monstrous firepower needed to utterly destroy even such a massive target and everything and everyone within it. She had been created to do just that.

On the Delta Flyer class shuttlecraft Dawn, tow Andorians and a Trill rushed in the cockpit, leaving their Bynar chief medical officer in the aft section crowded with a dozen injured and sick Human and Bajoran refugees. The smaller, lighter toned pilot Sheeneea dropped into the nav seat, both hands already starting the launch sequence, bypassing just about every basic Starfleet protocol to do so in dire haste. Beside her, Jaxon took the ops station and focused with failing sensors and limited sennses on what was going on outside their fragile shell. Behind Sheeneea, the Andorian giantess Tyvya squeezed her towering frame in the tactical station to also monitor their situation. Technically, the Bynar in the aft section was the highest in rank, but being out of the chain of command and responsible for their passengers, command now fell to Tyvya.

"Sheeneea, get us the hell out of here before that monster incinerates everything here! "

"But... but what about Oseno and K'Leysha?" again protested Jaxon.

"We won't do them any good if we are turned into space dust!" retorted Tyvya. "Sheeneea! Take us out!"

The small, agile Dawn was the first vessel to follow the gigantic warship out of the hollowed asteroid.

With the returning full crew complement and the added refugees hurriedly coming aboard, the USS Polaris was also becoming cramped fast. Redding and Graalthrii had to elbow their way back to the bridge where there was at least three officers for every station, making the whole command center of the small escort ship barely workable.

As soon as they came in, Moore turned to face the first officer of the Horizon.

"Commander! The Nemesis is launching! and she's arming weapons!"

"He's going to destroy the station... and us along with it!" realized Graalthrii with a growl.

Snowfire's first thought as she took in her new surroundings was quite simple; at least I managed to delay him for a few minutes. And in all honesty it had gone about as well as could be expected. Not well enough however, and she could feel the moments slipping steadily away as the presence of her comrades fell away behind her. But...there was still one other person on board that she knew and trusted, and she reached out with her mind even as physically she slumped down onto the bunk in the very picture of dejected failure. Up and forward through the ship the probing thought went, seeking Commander Oseno once again.

The Bajoran's emotional presence was a mess, she realised as she found it at last, a far flung thing from the tightly focused mind that had been there minutes before. Worry, terrible worry and fear that he was about to fail everyone who relied on him. Yet it went deeper than that. Fear for friends, for comrades and also for himself radiated off of his mind, beneath an icy sheet of cracking professionalism. She took a breath, let it out, focusing on the feelings and the world around her.

The hum of power in deckplates, fear from a tactical officer certain that so many were about to die, the rising pitch of energy flooding through power conduits all around her... There was a way out of this, there always was. Yet Oseno had been so sure a few moments...

Oh.

Bingo.

"Tess." She said quietly, whilst her mind raced through possibility after possibility. He was worried, sure that people were about to die. The ship had come to combat power but it hadn't fired yet. He had been sure a moment ago...

Khan... It made sense. He wanted the Starfleet officer in his grasp to damn himself forever. He was a showman, and Oseno would have gone as far as he could have without arousing suspicion which also meant that there'd be power flooding into the ship's weapons right now. And that meant...maybe, just maybe, there was a way out of this for them.

She reached further with her mind, to the edge of Commander Jureth's thoughts, and then spoke.

"Don't react. It's Snowfire. I have a plan, just keep him talking for as long as you can."

That was it. Except...no, it wasn't. Not quite.

"I'll be right here with you, Commander. We'll get through this."

That was all that she needed to say. And now she just had to wait. And pray that she was right. Oseno felt it...as he engaged in a staring contest with Khan, a battle of wills of sorts, the stubborn Bajoran versus the insane super soldier. He "heard" Snowfire in the back of his mind and outwardly kept a cold stare on the dictator while trying to process information. He knew that Snowfire's species was telepathic and even though his mind was racing trying to come up with something to stop Khan or delay him enough for whoever was out there to escape he was able to comprehend that she was trying to contact him. Jureth tried to fill his mind with thoughts of his backfired plan so that she could understand what he had tried to do.

"I don't think I stuttered. If you want to fire you do it. Kill me if you think that will help, but I will not be the one to take their lives."

Snowfire felt the thoughts streaming through Jureth's mind, seeing everything he had done, and she breathed a silent prayer of thanks that she'd been right. Max power, arguably even more than that. A ship could take that for a while, but even the best capacitor technology in the galaxy had limits. And with that much power...considering that this was a purpose built warship... Snowfire knew how long an IDF cruiser could hold maximum charge in its banks. But the IDF had been building warships for quite a lot longer than the Federation. And they didn't routinely strap overcharged weapons to their ships like the Klingons were so apt to do. So taking into account the fact that she couldn't be sure of the exact values, she somehow doubted that the systems would be able to take an overcharge for more than a minute before Bad Things started happening.

Combine that ticking clock with Khan's psych profile and that led to a combination that could be decidedly useful. She just needed a little help...

"Keep refusing, Khan won't fire unless he has to. He's that sort of psychopath and he'd take far more pleasure from forcing you under his thumb forever by making you fire than simply killing everyone on that base himself in front of you. All we need is a minute or two. One to let everyone on it get away, and the other to hoist him by his own superiority. Oh, and something that might be an aid. First, phasers can be set to disrupt a hologram's holo-matrix. Second, Starfleet bridges have had automated phaser defence systems since 2269. I'm sure someone of your talents can work out a way to use that to your advantage if you have to."

And indeed Khan was hoisted high on his emotional pedestal.

"It's all so *useless!*"

He made a pause obviously to calm himself but it did not work very well. Flammes danced in his eyes and thunder roared in his voice while his hands clenched as if he was about to strike Oseno.

"You *will* obey me... or you will watch them die, knowing that *you* are *still* responsible for their deaths!

And on the main viewer, the Bajoran could see that the Nemesis was turning to bear her overcharged forward weapons toward the desperately fleeing diminutive form of the shuttlecraft Dawn.

Aboard the Polaris Redding barely managed to squeeze his large frame on to the bridge and found it necessary to bellow over the din of the panicking passengers.

"Everyone please be quiet!" His voice actually hurt the people nearest to him it was so deep and resounding on the small bridge.

The bridge did indeed fall silent.

Before he could ask, Moore reported in.

"As soon as I got the word everyone was aboard I started us on our way Commander, hope I didn't spoil anyone's heroic overture back there, but we are launching."

He went back to ignoring everyone else in the room. Redding didn't bother to respond to Moore's insolent tone and instead worked his way over to the tactical station. As people started murmuring he again yelled out.

"Quiet on the bridge! that's an order!"

He started bringing up the Nemesis on the main view screen, if for no other reason than to give everyone something to focus on.

The warship moved majestically out of her mooring but seemed to display no immediate thoughts of pursuit of the Polaris.

"Leone, put as much power as you can into the impulse engines and the life support, take it from weapons and the warp systems if you have to but keep life support at max."

He shook his head in frustration at the knowledge the even if they could get an accurate lock on the Nemesis, it wouldn't have done much good.

From his barely working navigational readings, Moore was already swinging the ship around to use the asteroid for as much cover as possible so Redding kept his mouth shut and instead turned his attention to the Jem'hadar attack ship.

At that moment, the bugship was also leaving dock. But it was not following either the Dawn or the Polaris. It was going straight for the Nemesis.

"What are they trying to do?" exclaimed Moore, looking wide-yeyed at the screen. "That's an Achilles class warship! It has been designed *and* tried and tested successfully against *squadrons* of attack cruisers! And their old ship is barely at minimal power! What do they think they can do?"

"Regain their Honor... and their reason to live," answered Graalthrii with a growl that reluctantly but definitely acknowledged the fact.

On the screen, everyone watched silently as the flat, ovoid warcraft went at full impulse straight at the huge shark-like battleship.

"They're going to ram them," saw Major McGregor, on the bridge to coordinate order aboard with his marines among the mass of refugees that crowded the entire vessel but for the restricted areas like the bridge.

The command center was nevertheless overcrowded with off-duty officers of the Polaris, standing by to relieve injured comrades if things went bad but at the moment feeling useless, powerless as they watched in silence the Jem'Hadar's closing in on the looming destroyer. They were all starting to sweat and pant, not only because of the tension, but because of the life support system trying to support twice the maximum number of lifeforms it could ever provide for.

Ops officer Leone knew better than anyone else that it would not be long before it collapsed under the strain. Then they would all start to find it very cold and very difficult to breathe.

But anyone else was riveted to the drama unfolding out there, in that cold, radiation-filled space.

"The... the Nemesis is coming about... towards the Dawn!" again shouted Moore.

Redding could already see that her weapons were overcharged with deadly energy as the huge warship angled herself in the direction of the escaping Delta Flyer. It took a second for the experienced officer to understand that, without the possibility of target lock in this hazy, sensor-hampering nebula, the warship had no choice but to move herself in the general direction of fire to hope to catch her target in a full volley. Khan might be the consummate mad genius revived by all the power of the ultimate sentient supercomputer, he was still limited to his computer mind and ship body; he needed sensors to see.

Unless someone aboard used the firing controls manually for him.

Oseno was onboard, he knew... and K'Leysha. He knew neither would willingly help Khan; but he knew also that Khan was notorious for his mastery in using and forcing people to bend to his iron will. On Earth, four hundred years ago, he had been a prince with power over millions. If they had been subverted...

Events brought his eyes back to the viewer, The attack ship had started to swiftly closed the distance between the base and the Nemesis. Then, it swerved sharply as if to avoid incoming fire that never came, then resumed its attack run straight at the warship.

Again, Redding interpreted instantly what the tactical monitor confirmed him. The Jem'Hadar's had repositioned themselves between the Nemesis and the Dawn, covering its escape with its own larger hull. The attack ship went straight at the oblong forward section of the siege destroyer and in an instant collided with it.

But instead of the expected explosion, everyone saw the much smaller cruiser literally rebound away from the Nemesis, It tumbled end over end in a shower of hull plates before exploding several kilometers away from its target.

"Anti-ramming system," said Graalthrii. "The Achilles class was designed to eliminate Jem'Hadar bugships, nullify their suicide run tactic with a combination of deflector and tractor beam technology through a dedicated secondary deflector dish. They...never had a chance..."

The shockwave of its detonating warp core shook the Polaris despite the distance. Gripping consoles and chairs, everyone on the Polaris bridge saw the enormous shape of the Nemesis also lurch like a big oceanliner in a storm, blackened armor plates studding the blue haze around it as static discharges completed the illusion of a big ship caught in a sea storm. At barely a few kilometers, even a depleted warp core caused a massive explosion.

The damage to the Nemesis was minimal but still, the sacrifice of the former Dominion supersoldiers had bought them some time... and saved the Dawn. The smallest craft had disappeared inside the veils of the nebula.

But now, it would not be long before the titanic killing machine would right itself and bear down on the Polaris.

On the bridge of the Nemesis, Jureth watched the seen unfold in amazement, and knew he had to take advantage of it. Oseno looked from the viewer to Khan.

"Even your Jem'Hadar realize you're insane," he scoffed. "I am a Starfleet officer, and not pulling the trigger does NOT make me responsible. Their blood will be on YOUR hands" he practically growled at the sentient hologram. "You will not manipulate me any further."

While Khan had been talking, Jureth had been subtly working, and now, he looked down at the tactical console, entered a command and alarms began to scream throughout the bridge. A voice that sounded remarkably similar to that of Tess was heard.

"Emergency warp core jettison in progress, all personnel evacuate engineering."

Jureth knew that wouldn't keep Khan busy for too long, and so he immediately began entering further commands into the console accessing the ship's bridge defense system, and targeting it on the command area with a wide dispersal setting.

"Let's see how you deal with this," he muttered...

From the ceiling of the bridge, small portholes opened. Jureth had barely time to duck under the nearest console as whitish light spread all accross the entire command center. Fortunately, the wide dispersal pattern was that of a phaser stun setting so his cover effectively protected him. But it had another effect; it disrupted the emmiting beam of the holoemitters of the bridge.

Before he could utter the shout of surprise and anger that was contorting his face, Khan's image wavered and disappeared. Finding no target to lock on, the automated defense system shut down a moment later.

Oseno found himself now completely alone on the bridge of the warship. But he found two things much less encouraging; one was on the main viewscreen were the hazy, fuzzy, grainy image of the fleeing Polaris was dead center. The other was, not the engineering board confirming the ongoing shutdown of the core jettisoning sequence, that he had expected... but the tactical board showing all green lights announcing a firing sequence standing by... and that all controls were now locked out by the main computer.

"Calmly, Commander. You've done everything you need to do but one thing. If Tess comes to you, and not me, have her hide the weapon overload signals. The Nemesis was partially designed by Klingons, and even if her EPS conduits can take the power you've poured into them, the capacitors will blow after too long. The process is almost certainly already starting, and if keeps going for much longer even an attempt to discharge them will cause detonations. But even Khan as he is now will notice if the safety measures start screaming loud enough. So we need them silenced."

Snowfire's mental tone was calm, firm and carried with it a confidence that couldn't help but rub off on Jureth through the hearing.

"It'll be all right. We just need to take the final step. Regardless of his competence, Khan isn't using the multi-tasking capabilities he possesses as an AI. I suspect he doesn't even know how. If we can get him locked into task overload, we'll have won half the battle."

Oseno took in a deep breath and let it out, he was being irrationally reactive he realized. Even during his tenure as captain of the Alsea he hadn't been this panicked, but the logical part of him knew it was because he had had good people around him then, and now the only person that could help him was imprisoned aboard this ghost ship somewhere. Jureth looked again at the tactical console and tried to used standard Starfleet security and command overrides only to have the computer beep defiantly at him. He looked around the bridge in the dim lighting trying to come up with some way to stop the Nemesis from its intended mission.

Just then he had an idea; prefix code. The Nemesis was the only ship of its kind he'd ever seen, but Jureth knew no Starfleet vessel left the yards without a prefix code. It was that code that had allowed Captain Kirk deal a massive blow to the original Khan during their original battle. The question is could he find it in time to stop the Nemesis from wiping out the escaping Polaris, and where would he start looking.

"Ready room," Jureth said to the empty bridge and he darted over to the captain's office.

He knew that Khan may have had control over the ship's major systems, but from the captain's terminal he still ought to be able to access things like log files, and other minor things that Khan would be too busy to deal with. If the Prophets smiled on him perhaps he would find the ship's original prefix code somewhere in those files, or perhaps he could convince the ship's main computer that he was her new captain which would oblige it to turn over the code to him. He was after all the only living command level officer aboard the ship. Oseno sat down behind the captain's desk pulled up the terminal, and began his search in earnest.

Aboard the Polaris another Bajoran, Variel Palos, was frantically trying to make his way to the ship's bridge. The young, but weathered intelligence officer had seen the ship they were up against and knew he had to get to Commander Redding immediately. The USS Achilles had been something that all Starfleet Intelligence officers were briefed on in the event they ever encountered the lost prototype. Standing orders were to recover the vessel if they could, but to destroy her if they could not. Palos was not stupid, he knew that the Polaris was no match for the well armed, and armored destroyer, but if they could gain access to the ship's systems... Palos pushed passed another group of refugees

"Make a hole!" he yelled.

All of the extra passengers made the Polaris seem like a Sovereign Class cruiser to Variel but he finally managed to make it to the turbo lift which he instructed to take him to the bridge. When the doors opened Palos was greeted by chaos with more extra people packed among the Polaris normal crew as they tried to get the little ship to put some distance between themselves and the closing foe. Variel gently pushed his way through the throng of people until he was within ear shot of Commander Neil Redding.

"Commander! Prefix code!" he yelled at Redding who was sitting in the Polaris command chair.

"Calm down man." Redding said as Variel reached him. "What about the prefix code? I don't think he'd fall for the same trick twice, or did you have something else in mind?"

Nearly every officer knew how Kirk used the prefix code to shut down Khan's shields on the commandeered USS Reliant. It was mandatory reading at the Academy. But Redding was glad for any distraction at that moment, the destruction of the bug ship was still fresh in his mind.

"Sir, are we certain that Khan knew how Kirk disabled Reliant? I realize he's intelligent, but he's also driven, obsessive, and unstable. I believe the prefix code for the Achilles was highly classified. I'm not even sure the ship's captain would have known it or Thetis for that matter, and unless my assessment of Commander Oseno is off, I suspect Khan has been far too busy to worry about us. By all means we should continue trying to escape, but if we can disable her don't we have to at least try? If her code is still classified my Intelligence security codes should allow me to access it."

"Even if he didn't know then, he'd have found a way to compensate now, Lieutenant... Still, no harm in trying it."

But then held up his hand to stop him.

"No wait... We know it won't work but perhaps we can still use it.. he's incredibly arrogant and likes to prove it."

He thought it over for a few seconds.

"You might have given me a way to distract him, Variel. Set it up. If it works, all the better but, if not, he'll feel superior and will want to brag about it."

gave a nod to Variel to send him on his way.

"Commander, may I ask what you are thinking?"

Elisha Leône asked.

Redding glanced around and signaled her to come closer so he would be harder to overhear.

"I'm worried that Khan won't come after us and just leave and I can't allow that to happen."

His look could not have been more serious.

Variel for his part nodded at the senior officer, looked around and found an available auxiliary terminal. Working as quickly as he could, he set it up to access the classified library of Starfleet Intelligence and entered his personal access code.

"Voice verification required."

"Recognize Palos, authorization Four-One-Bravo-Juliet."

"Confirmed, biometric verification required."

The Bajoran placed his hand on the console and allowed the ship's sensors to read it and transfer the information to the Intelligence computer system. It took several seconds before the system responded.

"Authentication complete, access granted."

Palos immediately began a library search for the files that he was looking for.

He was right, they had been classified, to the highest levels of Starfleet Command, and the Federation Council. In fact, he shouldn't have been able to access them. But because the ship was lost and Intelligence had standing orders to retrieve or destroy her, retrieving the code only required he reenter his manual access code which was unique to every Intelligence field operative. Once he did that, he sent the code to the console that Leône was standing in front of, and then removed himself from the system and cleansed the console making it safe for normal use again, ensuring that no one would be able to follow behind him and use his access.

The Bajoran then turned to Redding.

"I've sent the code to the Ops console, Sir. It can be transmitted any time you wish. If we get in, I'd recommend we disable her weapons first..."

Redding nodded then with a sigh he yelled out "Clear the bridge! I don't care if you piggy back in the hallway or lay on top of each other I don't need Khan seeing how bad off we are."

There were few complaints as people stuffed themselves into anything they could find. The bridge head, the ready room some even crawled into access panel areas. Six more laid down in front of the main screen or pressed into the walls out of shot.

"Adjust the main screen to focus on me and no one make a sound unless your dying."

He stood up.

"Hail the Nemesis."

Leone worked her controls.

"Go ahead, Commander."

"This is acting Captain Redding on the Polaris. Now that I have secured the prisoners we can bring this game to a close, Khan."

He said Khan with a scoff, as to discredit him as the real thing.

He pointed at Elisha.

"Now, Lieutenant."

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen... except that the Nemesis, looming ever closer to the fleeing Polaris, still did not fire.

"We're being hailed," Graalthrii reported, his stare ominous.

A black and white image, grainy and streaked with distortions, appeared on the large viewer; but for anyone who had studied Starfleet records, the hard edged face and especially the intense eyes were instantly recognizable. Then, a voice was heard over the comm. It was slightly garbled by the nebula's interference but instantly recognizable by anyone which had heard it once in historical recordings. The tone and the accent were unmistakable.

" I am Khan. "

There was a pause as the figure on the screen evidently strained to look back at the small bridge of the fleeing escort ship. There was a grin on it's face.

" *Acting* Captain Redding... Your... acting... leaves as much to be desired as your... captaining, I am afraid. This feeble attempt to take control of my ship is typical of the inferior mind only able to imitate. Spare me your pitiful efforts; the prefix code of this ship is now a rotating fractal code that your best computers would take weeks to even hope to decipher it correctly at the right time... And I can see that you left your comrades on the station. So be it; I will leave them as he left me; marooned in the center of a dead planet... buried alive... buried alive... "

Standing up Redding shook his fist at the screen and yelled "Khan!"

He looked furious. But after the signal was cut he took a breath and sat back and looked at Graathrii.

"I hope that wasn't to over the top."

"I'm not a drama critic," growled the Tellarite.

"A Tellarite with no complaint... now *that* is a first," then commented Moore.

" I *have* a complaint; it's about a noob, scruffy-looking, nerf-hurter pilot unable to fly us away from that monster!"

Moore looked over at the stout, bearded security officer.

"Who's scruffy looking?"

" He's opening fire! " Graalthrii then shouted.

The image switched to an external view. In the hazy, static-filled image, the shark-like shape of the USS Nemesis could nevertheless be clearly seen as it was lighted up by a dozen phasers suddenly firing at point blank range.

There was a blinding flash and then a huge dark cloud of dust blackening the background of the lightning-streaked blue and red nebula. All beams had struck right at the power core and the ensuing explosion utterly destroyed the asteroid base.

Huge chunks of rock in a cloud of radiation-glowing debris drifted away from the deeply gouged planetoid in a slow, final dance of death from the destruction of its crude, old style atomic power plant and stored fissile material.

And then, phaser strips on the Nemesis turned cold.

On board the warship, Oseno saw on his console in the captain's ready room that half the phasers on the ship now registered burned out capacitors and shut down firing circuits on all the rest as safety systems bled out the excess power into the depleted batteries. The Nemesis was defanged... for the moment.

But not her master.

"You... you did this!"

Khan loomed before the Bajoran. He looked young, black-haired and wearing a red and black uniform from the glory days of Captain Kirk's legendary five-year mission on his powerful frame. With one hand, he grabbed the seated Jureth and lifted him bodily from his chair to throw him against the nearest wall.

"I have five times your strength, twice your speed and a lifetime of battle experience! You are no match for me! I will kill your friends out there and make you pay for your treachery! "

Jureth shook his head trying to clear the cobwebs while the searing pain of the impact with the bulkhead coursed through the rest of his body. The Bajoran slowly began to stand up all his emotions now beginning to boil to the surface. Jureth glared at Khan through the pain and he...laughed. Oseno laughed out loud at the outraged sentient hologram.

"That may be, but clearly your superior intellect has failed you. You couldn't beat Kirk, and you won't win today. Wherever...there are men like you there will always be men like me, like Kirk, and Kheren who will do whatever it takes to stop you."

With that Oseno mustered his strength and hurled himself at Khan determined to keep him busy for as long as he could because Jureth knew what Khan did not. Oseno knew that there hadn't been anyone on the asteroid when it was destroyed which meant that all of his people were working right now on the Polaris to stop Khan. Jureth only needed to give them time.

Several decks below, a small figure appeared right before the only occupied cell of the brig.

"Hurry!" said Tess to K'Leysha. "While he's busy with your friend; Stand right against the forcefield! I know it will hurt but I can only deactivate it for a second so that you can fall out and he doesn't suspect it is anything more than a glitch. Hurry! He already destroyed the base and everyone on it... He's going to kill him... and then all your friends on the other ship!"

"Not if we have anything to do with it." Snowfire replied, feeling Oseno's actions many decks above even as she leant herself against the forcefield. It stung, but she'd felt worse... Much worse. "Just get me out, and we'll go from there."

To Oseno, in the moment before he threw himself at Khan, she spoke again into his mind.

"Commander, give me your command codes. If what I've got in mind is possible, it's going to need them to work. Mine aren't going to reach high enough. Just trust me, and keep Khan distracted for as long as you can."

In that heated moment as the Bajoran taunted Khan he heard the science officer make her request, and did his best not only to grant it, but also to let her know he'd already tried to override the ship's systems to no avail before turning his attention fully on the enraged man in front of him.

Khan caught Oseno in his full charge and barely budged as the whole body of the Bajoran slammed against him. With superhuman strenght, he lifted him bodily over his head and threw him again against the bulkhead. A smile stretched his thin lips. Now, he was stalking him, fully confident now that he could crush the Starfleet officer anytime he chose and that he could do nothing to stop him.

That's when a sudden light came to his slitted eyes, making them open suddenly.

Oseno was stopping him. As he taunted him, fought him, the others were slowly but surely getting away! Already, the nebula-garbled ship's sensors has lost all traces of the small Delta Flyer after the Jem'Hadar ship's destruction... and now were almost loosing their tenuous contact with the fleeing Polaris.

Khan stopped, straightened himself, and smiled, nodding his head towards Jureth.

"Excellent, excellent. I can see that I made a serious error in judgment. Shared plight would foster heroic camaraderie in you, brave Starfleet officers. But it is quite another thing to watch someone else suffer... isn't it?"

He showed the door that now opened near the Bajoran, giving him access to the bridge. From his angle, he could see part of the viewing screen. Through the blue, lightning crisscrossed haze of the nebula and the intermittent static discharges that twisted the image, he could still easily see the Polaris trying to move away from the enormous warship.

"Go... and watch your friends die."

And so confident in his power of everyone's life and death, he did not bother to notice, amidst the reporting failings of a few systems and the rerouting powerflow to try and circumvent the damage to the weaponry, the short glitch of the brig's forcefield.

Lying against the painful energy barrier as told, Snowfire K'Leysha suddenly fell forward, reflexively rolled on a shoulder and stood again on her feet, outside of her cell.

And all the while, on board the escort vessel, everyone had watched the heart of the asteroid explode, silhouetting the ominous shape of the Nemesis turning again to bear down on them through the waves of ionized particles, etched sharply each time a static discharge flared around them.

"Commander... "

Redding didn't need Moore to tell him that the forward torpedo ports of the Achilles class destroyer were flaring up like angry red eyes on the profiled bow; all four of them.

The Achilles class starship had been designed with the same rapid burst 5 launchers as the older Ambassador class USS Artemis had sported. No less than twenty quantum warheads were about to rush at them. In a widespread pattern, at this distance, it could not miss them even without any targeting solution. And with no shields, only one grazing them would obliterate the Polaris utterly.

"Sir... there's another ship coming in... "

Every head turned toward Graalthrii looking at the tactical monitor and then raising wide eyes and a feral grin to Redding.

"It's the *Horizon*!

And just as the Nemesis opened fire, an immense shadow fell over the Polaris. A wall of metal completely filled the screen and forward viewports as the titanic hull of the Horizon flew between them and the firing warship.

Even then, the bridge of the escort craft shook as several quantum torpedoes exploded barely a few kilometers away, on the other side of the arriving starship.

"Man! She flipped on the flank and took the brunt of the salvo point blank!" Moore shouted in horrified amazement. With no shields!

Graalthrii pounded his fist on the console with glee.

"All the lowest decks of the Horizon are crammed with stored replacement plating for it's regenerating armor shell! That's *ten* meters of pure armor *under* the regen armoring itself! She *can* take it! She used her thick belly as a shield to cover us!"

"I thought the captain was Andorian, not a portly Tellarite," grinned Moore eyes still widened with disbelief.

"He's almost as smart as one," shot back the stout security officer with a wide grin through his thick beard.

Then, a garbled but still audible message came over the comm, obviously sent over all channels to pierce through the static of the nebula.

"This is Captain Kheren; I've beat you once again Khan, are you game for a rematch?"

And as this was heard, Elisha Leone saw on her own ops console that another, encoded message was piggybacking the bold challenge.

Decoding the transmission, she noted instructions informing her to "prepare to dock".

Along with the brief message was a precise set of coordinates instructing her how to do this while the ship was at full impulse on evasive maneuvers.

They didn't teach this at Starfleet Academy! Elisha thought as she swiftly entered the specific coordinates to the nav console of Moore for the tricky maneuver.

Let favor be bestowed upon the foolish, she thought like making a prayer.

On the bridge of the USS Horizon, Captain Kheren sat forward on his command chair with his elbows on his knees, his well-known fighting stance while commanding his vessel since his early days on the late, great starship Artemis.

"Good work, Mister Snow. Keep us between him and the Polaris. Lieutenant Tyvya, keep him busy."

Barely back at the tactical console, the towering woman would have grinned had her rigid Andorian face allowed her to. But her tone was nevertheless worried.

"Sir, even if it's not a regenerating one like ours, the Nemesis has the thickest armoring of any starship ever. There is even a one meter layer added around every sensitive part of the ship... and her anti-ramming field will repulse torpedoes."

"Just give him something else to think about," Kheren answered. Getting our people back is our priority, not fighting Khan... but don't tell *him* that."

He slapped open the intraship comm channel.

"Mister Sisko, status report. How long can we play turtle like that with that heavy siege destroyer?"

"Hull integrity is at eighty percent and the hull plating is regenerating nicely, Sir. As we continue to get hit, we'll have microfractures coming up on the upper, non-evacuated hull, that need manual attention, so the sooner we get our full crew back, the better! I believe we can hold out against one or two more salvos like that, without a major hull breach. After that, we'll likely have hull breaches, but only where you already evacuated the crew."

Sisko turned to his Bajoran structural integrity officer Celes Arlana.

"Get your team on those microfractures, and get the second and third shift crewmen up if you need to."

"How are the systems coming for shields?" he asked the massive Engineering room in general.

"Shields should be operational in another half hour," guessed Bolian Master Warrant Officer, Imjim Andres.

He was in charge of repairing the computer systems controlling shield regeneration and refocusing, and the recent attack from the Nemesis had set back his work a bit due to a few EPS conduits blowing across the outside of the Horizon.

"I need to get out there and repair those conduits manually," he frowned.

"Get to it when we will be out of the nebula; they will not work as long as we stay in that ionized pea soup," replied Sisko. "In the meantime, join the damage control team."

The young bald blue-skinned officer nodded, grabbed his repair case in webbed hands and hurried out of Engineering. As he was racing out the door, Sisko called after him.

"Better make it fifteen, Imjim!"

Based on the calculation given to the Captain, thirty minutes would be too late.

Aboard the Nemesis, released from her cell by Tess as Khan was distracted, Snowfire cast her gaze around the brig and then headed for the security console. Oseno had already told her that it was locked down, but right now there were other things on her mind. Her mind cast about, feeling Oseno's reaction to the appearance of the Horizon, and another piece of a rapidly filling puzzle fell into place. And then she reached out again, this time to the most powerful telepath on the Horizon. It was a gentle contact, one that she made in the full awareness that it might not be right, but that still needed to be done.

"Counsellor? Can you pass a message for me to the Captain?"

There was no need for her to identify herself. The mind behind the voice was all that another telepath would need.

On the Horizon, Counselor Lyrya's antennae perked up.

"Captain... Lieutenant K'Leysha is in contact with me."

The dark-skinned Andorian turned his head towards the Aenar, his own antennae lifting on his snowy head.

"Get a status report on her and Commander Oseno. And tell her that we can not transport them off the Nemesis in this nebula and shuttle use is obviously out of the question... especially that there are none on the warship, not even any escape pod left... my fault..."

The Horizon trembled slightly as the formidable pulse phaser canons of the Nemesis struck her regenerative armor.

"Regen armor down to forty-seven percent!" warned engineer Baoule. "That monster sure packs a wallop!"

"Target her engines only, Lieutenant, " the Andorian captain then said to Tyvya, turning again to look at the screen.

"Captain," protested the towering acting chief of security, "if we target her warp core..."

"We still have people on board, Lieutenant, " Kheren cut sharply. " And this is not just an enemy starship; it is a *sentient being*. As criminally-minded and dangerous it may be, I will *not* use this conflict as a pretext to simply murder it. Do I make myself clear, Lieutenant?"

He was answering Tyvya but in truth he was addressing everyone within earshot. No one spoke further. They had all served with him before; several even remembered his personal conflict with a former chief engineer on the Artemis during the first contact mission with the X'ell a few years back, when Klingon warships savagely contested control of their Dyson shell; they knew Captain Kheren would never, ever sacrifice morality for expediency.

But still, he would do what he had to do to save his people... and the Federation.

" Mister Snow, fly us as close as possible to her hull. Scratch paint if you can."

"Sir, at such close quarters, even our armor will not be that effective," warned the Andorian giantess.

Again, the huge starship trembled, but then there was a longer pause before the next shot rang throughout the armored hull. That underlined Kheren's response.

"Neither will hers, especially against splash damage from her own souped-up weaponry. It will at least nullify her superior torpedo armament. We need time, people; time for Oseno and K'Leysha to get off that ship... Then, we will have to make sure *he* will not leave from here... ever."

He turned to the Human doctor sitting in the chair to his left.

"Doctor Lumquist, patch me through to the Polaris; encoded and scrambled."

After a nod from him, Kheren spoke with his eyes still on the screen.

"Polaris, this is the Horizon. In exactly twenty seconds... get ready."

And after those twenty seconds had passed, all the bay doors of the immense vessel opened. The one at the end of the secondary hull was hit by phaser fire from the Nemesis; underneath, the docking bay of the Polaris loomed open right before the approaching escort craft; and from the primary hull shuttlebay came out four class XI shuttlecrafts, spreading in an attack formation to go straight at the warship, phasers and micro torpedoes firing in wild abandon.

"Our Jem'Hadar are on course and providing covering and distracting fire, Sir."

The voice of Tyvya was full of gloom. Kheren nodded.

"We welcomed them as refugees, not as prisoners. So they chose to go as the warriors they were born to be; but it's up to us to make sure it was worthwhile. Polaris! Now!"

If timed as planned, the ramming charge... and unavoidable destruction... of the Jem'hadar-piloted shuttles on the Nemesis from all sides as the Horizon pounded on her would open a one-time window for their escort craft to dock... before its overtaxed life-support would give out... or the enemy AI could go for the easier prey and kill over a hundred people in one shot from his formidable armament.

And on board the Nemesis, as she contacted Lyrya, the Illythirii science chief of the Horizon looked over at Tess.

"Can you stop Khan from noticing my movement through the ship? And if the doors are locked, can you safely enable it?"

The young girl looked around like a trapped animal as she answered in a whisper.

"I can send your vital signs as an echo inside your cell to make him think you are still there. It has a basic fifty-three percent chance to work as long as he is distracted. but the arrival and challenge of Captain Kheren now is *fully* distracting him at the moment... Now is your chance for both you and your friend to get off the ship as quickly as you can. If you become yourself a distraction from his now current vengeance posture, he will simply deactivate life support on board and kill you both quickly and effortlessly. That's what... I... did..."

For a moment, she went silent, a deep sadness contorting her youthful features. But then she looked up, alarmed again.

"There are EVA suits nearby... Your friend can access those on the bridge... Please go, now!"

"Show me the way?" Snowfire asked, relaying her status and the report behind it to Lyrva.

But she held out a hand before Tess could start moving.

"And Tess? You were scared. And you were also very young, even with hyper-heuristic mode. I know what that combination can be like. And I also know that I can't leave you stuck there."

She gestured towards where the computer core was.

"Do you know who the third personality coming out of the core is?"

Tess blinked twice.

"There is... another..."

She blinked again.

"Aye, Sir."

And then she looked at the Illythirii with a sudden calmness that was all the more striking with both her appeared age and previous alarm.

"Please follow me, Lieutenant Commander."

A graduate from Starfleet Academy could not have looked straighter. Tess went to the security doors which opened, the forcefield there deactivating at the same instant on both ends of the hatch-like access. In between she opened a sliding panel and eight combat EVA suits were revealed, neatly stored in what appeared as a changing room.

Tess spoke again, in a most professional manner.

"Once suited up, you will be able to use the emergency escape hatch on the deck above us. Access codes confirmed, evac procedures initiated. Please proceed with alacrity."

On the bridge, Oseno Jureth could barely move. Khan had thrown him forcefully into not one, but two durasteel bulkheads and the pain the Bajoran was feeling was intense. He was no doctor, but he was sure he had multiple broken ribs, fractured vertebrae and possibly a concussion as his vision was slightly blurred. He could see that Khan no longer considered him a threat and had abandoned any pretense of forcing him to fire the Nemesis weapons against either the Polaris or the Horizon. In fact, Oseno wasn't even sure Khan knew he was still there as the vengeance filled sentient hologram was completely focused on the two Starfleet vessels on the viewer, and Jureth knew this was going to be his final chance to escape the warship.

He also knew there was only one way to do so and had maneuvered himself, crawling, to the bridge escape hatch and EVA suit storage.

Oseno struggled against everything his body was telling him and began to pull one of the suits on over his uniform. Every movement was accompanied by severe pain and several times he thought he might simply black out. He pushed his legs into the suit and slowly, painfully pulled it up over his waist until he could maneuver his arms into the appropriate holes. The worst part was trying to make as little noise, and movement as possible so as not to tear Khan's attention away from its current focus. Finally, inch by excruciating inch he managed to get the EVA suit all the way on and closed up.

Then, before putting the helmet on his dulled brain remembered his fellow crew member still aboard. His thoughts were not nearly as organized as they normally would be but he reached out to Snowfire anyway.

"On...bridge...Khan...distracted...going to try to get out..escape hatch..EVA...suit."

Khan was standing in the doorway of the ready room. Because Oseno had short-circuited the holoemitters on the bridge, the avatar could not step in and go directly after him. This allowed the injured Bajoran to escape his immediate clutches and allow him to get into the suit without being stopped. That, and the fact that Khan was completely focused on the immense starship out there that dwarfed even his own.

"Kheren... you're still alive my old friend..."

On the speakers, Jureth heard the reply from a familiar voice. And on the main viewer, the image of the USS Horizon was replaced by the dark countenance of her commanding officer.

"I am *not* your friend, Khan. Release my people. Now."

There came a smirk on Khan's face.

"You are in a position to demand nothing, Sir. I on the other hand will kill them... if you do not surrender to me. Now. And to show that I am true to my word, I will kill one of them."

The image switched to that of the interior of the Nemesis, more precisely, a brig cell where could be seen sitting a dark-skinned, white-haired feminine form.

For a second, Kheren's face went blank. Then, his eyes alone were enough to show the sudden anguish etching his deep voice.

"Wait! Give me a chance to talk to..."

On the screen, the image of Snowfire K'Leysha suddenly stood up, hands to her throat. Then she started to shiver and rose up in the air. Floating, she curled up into a ball, turned a deep shade of dark green then shivered one last time and laid still.

In the cold silence that followed, pure lances of hate poured out from the Andorian's silvery eyes. His voice was but a hiss.

"Khan you bloodsucker! You managed to kill just about everyone else but you keep... missing... the target!"

"Oh I've done more than that; I've hurt you. And I wish to go on hurting you..."

And as the holographic entity went on, rambling with what sounded like a recording of his own speeches from Starfleet's historical files, Oseno understood two things; first, although he did not know how, Snowfire was still alive. He still felt her mental link with him. Second, Captain Kheren must have been aware of it too; what he was doing was obviously luring and locking the computer mind into a pattern. He was playing on both the inflated ego of the sentient persona and its need to assert itself through copied speeches and actions of a long dead man, as well as, using the same recorded speeches, even copying legendary James T. Kirk's peculiar speech pattern, thus enticing the basic prompts of a computer.

It would not work for long... but maybe just long enough for Oseno to escape through the emergency hatch of the bridge... and for Snowfire to also find a way out.

Oseno could only smile, and even that was painful, at the audio loop that Captain Kheren was using to keep Khan occupied. He pulled himself over to the escape hatch and engaged the sequence. A few seconds later the hatch blew open and Oseno tumbled out of it.

The environmental suit kept him from the vacuum of space, but Oseno still swore he felt a cold chill as he swallowed his pain and activated the suit's thrusters pointing himself away from the Nemesis and toward the Horizon.

"Captain... I can confirm this with complete accuracy because of the interference of the nebula but... "

Kheren turned towards the black-skinned man at the main science station.

"Mister Baoule?

"One lifesign, Sir... unidentified... but definitely out there..."

The Andorian shot up to his feet.

"Transporters!"

"Inoperative, Sir!" answered the twin brother Baoule from the engineering station.

"Mister Snow! Is the Polaris back?"

"Manual docking maneuvers in progress, Captain. But with all these evasives we do, it complicates the whole..."

Kheren turned to the medical chair on his left.

"Ship to ship!"

As soon as Doctor Lumquist confirmed that the channel was open, Kheren spoke.

"Polaris, we're sending you the coordinates of one lifesign out there. We can't beam it back. You alone have a chance to retrieve him... or her, quickly enough. We will provide cover."

"Acknowledged Captain, we'll do what we can!"

Redding paused thinking over any option he had. The transporter was not an option and he could not entertain the idea of breaking off the docking sequence, no matter how much he wanted to. He couldn't trade hundreds of lives for one.

Redding could only come up with one solution. But he only wished that he was the man for the job.

"Moore, would you like to prove your the best pilot in Starfleet?"

Moore blinked at him with for a second with confusion before a Cheshire cat like smile spread over his face.

"Oh bless you, Commander Redding Sir!"

He jumped up, moving another officer on to the helm.

"The docking is automatic, just keep watch."

He turned to Redding.Redding nodded.

"Transporter room, lock on to Lieutenant Moore and beam him to the shuttle bay; energize when ready."

Moore was jumpy with excitement.

"Don't worry, Commander, I'll bring them home."

And before Redding could respond, he vanished in a transporter haze.

But Redding said it anyway.

"God speed, Mister Moore."

Kheren was as torn as his first officer was. He could not sit back in his chair. There were thousands of lives in the balance but one of his people was out there, possibly injured, possibly dying...Who was floating out there? Oseno? K'Leysha? And what of the other still aboard the enemy vessel?

He looked at Lyrya.

"Snowfire is still aboard," she told him, reading his question easily in his eyes. "She is also preparing to evacuate in a EVA suit."

"Oseno..." concluded the Andorian captain, looking at the nebula-filled screen.

A static discharge flashed across the blue and red haze of the nebula like a gigantic bolt of lightning, etching starkly the shape of the Nemesis coming straight at them. He wondered then who was most in danger among the two of his officers.

"Helm; keep us belly up between the Nemesis and that life sign. Tactical; regen armor at maximum on lower hull. Engineering; keep us in one piece. Security, medical and damage control, ready on all lower decks. All hands, evacuate all decks below 40, activate PIDs and brace for impact."

The titanic form of the Horizon then turned majestically sideways right before the bow of the Achilles class warship, placing herself as a colossal shield between the diminutive escort vessel, so close that the Nemesis had to reverse engines fully to avoid collision. But it would not take long for the destroyer to back up far enough to safely open fire again. Already her torpedo ports were opening for a point blank salvo that even the awesome armor thickness of the larger ship would not be able to withstand.

In a shower of sparks and lights, Robert Moore appeared right at the doorway of the diminutive launch bay of the Polaris. It was so small that it could only house a pair of repair pods and a pair of class X Stealth combat shuttles, smallish, elongated two-seat crafts originally designed for the Defiant class. There was just enough room to spare for the small workcrews to attend to the emergency launch of Shooting Star 1. The echoes of Commander Redding's order were still reverberating on the bulkheads as the Lieutenant rushed in.

He was barely getting into the pilot seat, red lights and sirens blaring the precipitated launch when a technician came up to him.

"Lieutenant! This is so sudden... we have not yet started to get aboard the payload! You have no supplies, no torpedoes..."

"I know; Tuesday is only tomorrow."

Moore shut down the cockpit hatch before the startled technician could recover from his surprise. But then, the whine of the engines coming to life sent him running out of the cramped shuttlebay behind the rest of the maintenance team.

"Bridge, this is Shooting Star 1; emergency launch sequence initiated. Announcing departure."

"Acknowledged, Shooting Star 1. You are clear to depart," answered a gruff, familiar voice. "You do know where the bay doors are, don't you?"

"Aye Mister Graaltrii. Please open them before I blast them open."

The banter was terse but the doors were already sliding to reveal the stormy blue and red haze of the nebula outside.

"Shooting Star 1 confirming departure."

Like a torpedo, the bullet-shaped shuttlecraft emerged from the underbelly of the Polaris as she herself was now shadowed by the titanic form of the starship Horizon towards which she was headed.

"Good fishing," was the last thing heard by Moore before static filled his speakers and most of his instruments.

He was flying manually and using his own eyes as his instruments were hampered by the intense ionic particle density and static energies playing around him. The sensors on board were of the latest designs but even they had a hard time keeping contact with the life sign detected; and navigation could barely confirm coordinates. But he knew where to go.

At full impulse, the shuttle zoomed around the colossal saucer of the Horizon lying on her side in front of the slowly retreating shark-shaped destroyer. Moore flew straight at the Nemesis, angling for it's wake as it backed off from the much too near mass of the giant starship to avoid splash damage from it's own upcoming salvo. If Commander Oseno had escaped from the Achilles class vessel in a EVA suit, even with thrusters he could not have gone far from...

There! There was a metallic flash as a static bolt lighted the nebula, right there on his front port side...

In a instant, he was nearing a definitely humanoid-shaped object floating in the snowy haze. Putting the shuttle on autopilot locked straight at his target, Moore quickly donned his own suit from the locker behind him, especially tailored to allow quick equipping in case of emergencies, then came back to his seat just as his craft neared the floating form. Tethering himself to his seat, he depressurized the cockpit then opened it's canopy.

Pulled together by their mutual mass attraction, Oseno's limp form neared the shuttle and Moore only had to float a few meters to catch him in his arms. He reeled them both back in, shut off the cockpit and then repressurized it as the Bajoran Commander, obviously injured but still conscious, eased himself as best he could in the only other available seat inside the shuttle.

"Polaris, Horizon, this is Shooting Star 1; Commander Oseno retrieved. Looks hurt but still alive. Coming about and back home."

Oseno breathed heavily as he removed the helmet of the EVA suit with a grimace.

"Thanks...for the pickup, Lieutenant," he managed between breaths "Can you get me...Commander Redding?"

Just as the Bajoran spoke, Moore swirled hard to starboard as a volley of torpedoes went by so close their lights blinded them even through the automatic shading system of the canopy. They felt the backlash of those impacts against the thick armored underside of the colossal starship looming before them. The shuttle shook for a moment but the deft piloting of the pilot allowed them to evade the worst of it. As soon as he got them back on course to take cover behind the Horizon and fly back to the Polaris, Moore opened a scrambled channel.

"Polaris, this is Shooting Star; Commander Redding, I have Commander Oseno here who wants to speak to you."

With a slight but noticeable sound of relief in his voice, Redding responded.

"Good work Moore; nice to have you back Commander. What can you tell us?"

He was hoping Oseno had something tactical as good news.

"Sir," Oseno said in a measured tone, "his phaser arrays are burned out. I was able to cause an overload so that when he fired, the arrays shorted. Also, there is another intelligence aboard...her name is Tess. I believe she is the original AI for the ship and... Sir...Khan...he has your chip."

"Excellent news about the phaser array Commander. And don't worry about my chip; even if he manages to unlock it, it won't do him any good if we stop him here and now. What is the status of this 'Tess intelligence' ? can we use it to hamper Khan in some manner or is it working with him?"

Redding seemed to miss Oseno's description of Tess as a 'her' entirely.

"Tess is sentient, Sir," Jureth replied. "She...doesn't want Khan there any more than we do, but he's overpowering her so she has limited abilities and can't directly control any of the ship's major systems. For a lack of a better word, Sir, she's scared. She tried to get me to escape the ship, but I knew I couldn't just leave especially once I learned CommanderK'Leysa was aboard."

Next to Redding the intelligence officer, Variel Palos, spoke up.

"Commander, I believe that Commander Oseno is speaking of Thetis... the original sentient computer system of the Achilles prototype."

"Yes, Sir," Oseno confirmed over the comm line. "She introduced herself as Thetis Achilles."

"I don't care what it calls itself, if we can use it against Khan, great." Then his expression changed. "Did you say Snowfire was on the Nemesis? How the hell did that happen?"

He looked annoyed.

"Okay.. Good work everyone. You and Moore get back aboard the Horizon ASAP and I'll inform the Captain about the situation. Redding out."

He watched Leone bring the Polaris in on final approach, all the while wondering what was happening aboard the Nemesis, and to Snowfire.

On board the Nemesis, Tess acted in her suddenly calm, professional Starfleet way, Snowfire saw her own holographic image in the cell stand up and show all the signs of a living carbon-based lifeform suddenly exposed to the vacuum of space. In a few seconds, it floated like a lifeless object, eyes, ears and all other body openings spilling out little round droplets of body fluids.

"Please hurry, M'am," Tess urged the older science officer. "Now that there is no diverting signal of your lifesigns, he will notice your presence as soon as he stops being distracted. Your captain is doing a fine job in playing on his ego and memory patterns but I calculate that it will start to loose efficiency in four point seven minutes at best."

As she spoke, she opened the door revealing the combat EVA suits stored there for the security and tactical officers that would have been part of the normally living crew complement of the Achilles class heavy siege destroyer during the days of the Dominion wars. They were of an older design but in pristine condition and already equiped with hand weapons and ammunition, a thruster pack and concentrated rations, being also armored and equiped with a sensor ECM and scrambled comm package. Once suited, her lifesigns could therefore be masked... at least for a time.

The locker also doubled up as an emergency exit hatch to deploy troops outside the ship.

On board the USS Horizon, the news of Commander Oseno's retrieval almost brought a cheer up from the bridge personnel. Even the captain sat in his chair, obviously releived despite his stony face. His voice however was still hard etched with concern.

He then sat forward with his elbows on his knees, all four oculars straight at the screen and the retreating form of the menacing USS Nemesis.

"It's not over yet, people. We still have one crewperson out there and a madmind to deal with..."

As he said so, the hissing voice of Khan came back like that of a haunting specter.

"From Hell's heart, I stab at thee!"

And on the viewer, the torpedo ports of the destroyer flared up and a full salvo of quantum torpedoes flew straight at them.

"Brace for impact!" shouted Kheren.

There was a blinding flash and the immense vessel shook so hard they would have all been thrown out of their seats against the bulkheads as it not been for their PIDs. Still, they were all shaken up pretty soundly in their seats. Lights went out for a moment, then one by one the consoles lighted up again under the reddish glow of emergency lights.

"Damage report!" shouted the Andorian.

"All regen armor down underside, standard armor scrapped off fifty-three percent, all systems on decks 40 and down offline," answered Robert Baoule. "Another shot like that will perforate us!"

"No casualties captain," then added Doctor Lumquist from the medical command chair. "All lower areas had been evacuated as per your orders. But if a shot like that gets through..."

"Sir," then said helmsman Snow, "with all lower decks systems offline, it means that the polaris will have to dock on full manual mode."

"Fortunately, we're not moving at all so it should be easy, " answered Kheren, "if we stay in one piece long enough."

He tapped his combadge.

"Engineering! Mister Sisko, we need to survive the point blank attack of a heavy siege destroyer for at least a few minutes more. Any miracle would be welcomed."

Sisko wracked his brain for a solution. No shields and multiple hull breaches, even where the crew was evacuated could cause structural integrity to fail across the entire ship. A chain reaction in the EPS conduits coming from the belly of the massive Horizon could cause explosions to propagate through the entire ship not unlike lightning arcing to hit multiple buildings throughout a densely populated urban area.

He tapped his combadge. "Sisko to Kheren. The best we can do is to raise forcefields partitioning the evacuated underbelly of the Horizon from the rest of the ship. This would serve to keep us safe even if the entire underside of the ship is blown apart. Hopefully we'll have shields before that point, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

"Good thinking, Chief Engineer. But shields are inoperative in a Mutara class nebula; so let's concentrate on armor and structural integrity. And if your Prophets would like to join your team, they will be most welcomed."

It might have sounded like jest, especially coming out of someone from a species that never had any belief in the supernatural; but Kheren's tone of voice was deadly serious.

He knew things were becoming desperate; on his ship as well as on board the other one trying to destroy her.

As she finished locking her helmet after checking in haste the state of her suit, the Illythirii heard in her helmet's speakers the voice of Tess giving the standard warnings before a starship hatch opening. In front of her eyes, a yellow light replaced a red one over the heavy sealed door and she felt her feet leave the metallic floor. Now floating in zero-G, she saw the brief flash of a forcefield deactivating. She felt more than she heard a hiss of air pushed out and the yellow indicator turned green. Then there was a clanking sound. The hatch slowly opened before her.

K'leysha took a step towards the hazy blue and red fog that filled the outside. Some dust and ionized particles flew to her large visor, sparkling like diamond dust. A thunderous static discharge blinded her for a moment; she could even think that she felt a prickling of electricity on her skin.

When her vision cleared from the brief glare, she was again staring at the nebula. But she was looking at it through the main viewer of the bridge.

"No... no, you can't get away!"

The voice was unmistakable. As she turned, she saw that Khan was standing before the command chair. Obviously, the AI had restored the holoemitting grid that had been shorted out previously by wild phaser fire. Then, the science officer of the Horizon understood that he had finally seen through Tess, deception and transporter her to him. The bridge was empty but for the threatening form of a white-haired, older Khan in a tattered marooned uniform that barely covered his powerful physique. His intense stare was boring through her like phaser beams.

But then, his gaze went up past her. From behind her, someone touched her briefly. She was startled as there had been no sound, no movement... not even a thought to warn her that someone was right behind her.

At first she thought it was Commander Oseno; but then, she saw that the man was Human, larger and taller than the Bajoran and she recognized him instantly. The hair was steely grey now, the face etched starkly with the marks of a long life of struggle and worries, the eyes heavier and deeper, but there was no mistaking who it was despite the odd twenty-third century Starfleet uniform and the surprising rank insignias adorning its right shoulder. He stepped right beside her,

And then, he winked at her.

That's when Khan straightened up his own imposing posture to face the other presence standing in front of him.

"You... I never forget a face. Commander... Redding, isn't it?"

"*Admiral* Neil S. Redding, Starfleet Intelligence. And I of course, I know *you*."

Khan's eyes narrowed as he seized up the other. He was as old and as powerful-looking as himself.

"This is a trick," he stated flatly.

"And quite a nice one, If I may say so myself," agreed Redding with a grin. "When you took my data chip and connected it to the ultrasophisticated and powerful computer system of this ship, you spared no effort in downloading its encrypted content into those immense computer banks of yours. And the only way for you to do so was to integrate that content into an isolated part of your artificial mind to eventually digest the data without corrupting your own. Any other computer, even on a starbase, would have taken months, years to do it, but you did it in less than a single hour. Impressive. And it worked perfectly, as you can see. The holographic facsimile of me that was part of the file has been recreated... just like you were... and linked to the main core... just like you are. Oh, it took me a while to get my bearings and to find my way out of your computerized confinement... But fortunately, you were so distracted by that charming and efficient lady here, her valorous comrade and that Andorian's great ship out there that I finally managed to slip past you and get here. "

"Why are you here?" Khan then asked with a calm, curious tone, like a man reciting a line from a script.

"To stop you of course," answered Admiral Redding with a grin.

"You can't stop me," said Khan with a grin of his own. But his was the smile of a shark. "You will serve me... or I will take the life of this woman."

Khan made a move to grab Snowfire; but he never got the chance.

There was a clanking and a sudden boom followed by the sound of klaxons blaring being snuffed out by a sudden rush of air. The emergency hatch of the bridge had been blown open by computer control. In an instant, anything not solidly fixated to the deck or the bulkheads of the bridge was instantly blown out into space.

In that same instant, Snowfire K'Leysha was thrown outside the Nemesis. Yet, as the klaxons screamed, she reached out with the least powerful yet most visible of her Gifts. She had seen the memory recorder on the bridge, and regardless of the fact that the Commander Redding could almost certainly get a new one, this would be a lot easier. And it wasn't as if it was anywhere as heavy as a house cat. Her mind caught hold of the bigisolinear chip where it lay still attached to the Nemesis computer, shook it loose and then away.

It wasn't as if it was really needed anymore. She caught it as she went flying out of the bridge, wrapping her suited body around the device in an attempt to shield it from the nebular conditions. It was the least she could do for the man who had saved her back there, even if only by proxy.

And there was a practical reason to what looked like a purely sentimental one; the chip might register on ship sensors and help them looking for her.

Behind her rapidly receding form, on the bridge of the warship, now exposed to the outside, the strange luminescent haze of the nebula started to creep in like a dense fog. There was no sound to be heard now on the depressurized control center; but this was no problem for two sentient programs to nevertheless understand one another.

"Now," Admiral Redding's holographic avatar said, "it's between you and me, Khan."

But on the bridge of the starship Horizon, there was only the utter silence of dumbfoundness as they looked out at the threatenig prow of the powerful warship still angling down at their unmoving hull... and now strangely quiet.

"What is she waiting for? We are sitting cranes out here..." grumbled Captain Kheren.

"Sitting ducks, Sir," corrected his wife Lyrya from his left.

"Registering what looks like a small explosion aft port side of the bridge deck of the Nemesis," reported his other wife Tyvya from her tactical readouts.

"Captain; I'm getting a minute burst of oxygen and nitrogen outside her hull... and another lifesign out there, Sir," added Norbert Baoule at Science 1. "There is also another signal at the same coordinates... like from a computer..."

Kheren sat straighter. he had been on board the warship once. He had boarded her from her bridge and knew the layout perfectly. He understood immediately what his officers were telling him.

"The main bridge's emergency hatch; it's been blown open. That's K'Leysha out there!"

He stood up, looking at the Edoan ops officer manning the console at the very front of their command center right before the main viewer showing the distorted image of the enemy vessel.

"Is the Polaris docked yet?"

"Aye, Captain," the shrill high-pitched voice of the six-limbed officer confirmed. "Lieutenant Leône completed the maneuver and is coming up to the bridge with Commander Redding."

"And their rescue shuttle?"

"Docked right back into the Polaris mere seconds before she herself went into her docking port," answered Aguk Snow. "That Moore pilot is quite good."

"High praise, coming from you," offered Tyvya sitting beside him. She had been with the Inuit helmsman since the early days of their service under Kheren aboard the legendary USS Artemis. She had seen him pull off successfully piloting maneuvers no Starfleet textbook ever mentioned... or recommended. For him to be impressed by another helmsman was no mere statement. And Kheren himself was also quick to notice it.

"Let's see if he can prove himself that good again," he said as he tapped his combadge. "Transporter room; lock on Mister Moore and beam him directly to shuttlebay 1."

Without pause, he tapped his communicator again.

"Mister Moore, take the Dawn out and go get Lieutenant Commander Snowfire. Coordinates are sent to her nav comp. And hurry... while we still have time."

The pilot was barely coming out of his confusion of being whisked off from one small shuttlebay to a huge one when he heard the captain's orders.

"Ah... aye, Captain. On my way."

He was half running towards the barely resting Delta Flyer the next instant, grumbling all the way.

"I hope they will not make this standard procedure..."

He went into the arrow-shaped shuttle and the access hatch closed behind him as he slid into the still heated pilot seat. The engines hadn't even had time to cool down completely since the harrowing escape from the asteroid-prison camp; in an instant, he was airborne and shooting out from the back end of the immense saucer section of the Horizon, all authorization protocols barely completed at the same instant.

By now, he was getting used to the navigational difficulties of the nebula and flew manually and with direct eyesight towards the oddly quiet shark-shaped warship. He glanced only from time to time at the sensor readings of both his own instruments and that transmitted by the much more powerful sensor array of the colossal starship behind him to help his search, but it is with his own eyes and some clever deducing that he found the drifting suited body moving away from the Nemesis on portable thrusters. Deftly, he moved as close as possible on an intercept course, spun around and opened the aft access hatch for Snowfire. As soon as she was safely on board, he kicked the impulse drive at full throttle back to the Main launching pad of the Horizon.

When he finally reached it, still nothing had happened. Only the intermittent flashes of the nebula's static discharges had bursted the blue and red fog of space dust.

"What is she doing?" wondered Captain Kheren all the while as they all watched in dreadful silence the redoubtable heavy siege destroyer floating inert before them in the haze. Her engines were online but she hung almost motionless after backing up to point blank range. Her torpedo ports were open but nothing now came out.

He did not acknowledge Redding, Oseno and Leone coming back to assume their stations on the bridge. All his attention was on the enemy starship.

"Something happened there. Mister Cheonghi... Can you tap into her comm system and get me an image of her bridge?"

"I believe so, Sir. It will be easier with a Starfleet vessel and from this ship than it had been the first time First Officer Spock of the Enterprise tried it with a Romulan intruder back in the twenty-third... There, Sir, I think..."

The forbidding, distorted image of the half-hidden warship was replaced with a hazy, static filled image of the Nemesis bridge. Kheren recognized it instantly, and noticed that there were no dead bodies left on the seats like he remembered. But like everyone else, his attention was immediately drawn to the two figures moving around the warship's command center. There was the unmistakable white-haired, tatter-clothed person of Khan, as he recalled him from both historical images of his last days and from his own recollection of their brief but intense confrontation the day the Artemis had found the missing USS Achilles-Nemesis in the original Mutara nebula. But now it was not the Andorian facing him; it was another, a tall, powerfully built elderly Human also wearing an old-style uniform with Admiral markings on it.

Despite the poor quality of the transmission, Kheren's sharp quadriscopic vision recognized him; he had met him on Lotus Fleet's starbase during the Borg Invasion... and he was now serving in a rejuvenated form right at his right hand.

"Redding? *Admiral* Redding? How..."

Glancing at his Number One, his gaze also caught up Oseno Jureth standing right behind him. Then he remembered... and understood.

"The data chip... There was a holoprogram in it?"

"Honestly Captain, I don't know" Redding said still looking at the screen.

"But... Sir, the Nemesis AI has perfect defenses from such computer intrusions," Tyvya reminded him. "When the Horizon Children tried to board and take control of that ship with a sentient hologram of theirs, it had been destroyed even before it could even emerge from the system."

"And that's what gave birth to this Khan in the first place, " acknowledged Kheren. "But this time..."

Before their very eyes, an astounding drama was playing out. Both holograms were fighting one another with superhuman speed and strenght, throwing one another accross the bridge only to come back with powerful blows that dented the rails, walls and consoles around them. It was like watching Achilles fighting Hector during the mythical war of Troy; two superhuman warriors facing one another in a fight to the death.

Except none of them was truly alive... at least, not as mere mortals anymore.

After another furious exchange of blows, Khan suddenly disappeared.

Alone on the bridge, the holographic Redding took a moment to look around, but like a man seeing nothing. Then his face lifted up towards the ceiling.

"You can't hide from me, Khan. Not on this ship; not while we are both part of the same core, powered by the same energy source, shaped by the same emitter grid. It's you and me, Khan... now and *forever*."

Then, the older version of the Horizon's first officer looked straight at the viewing screen.

"Horizon... get back to Federation space. I will keep our friend busy... until the end of time if need be."

He was about to turn away when he stopped and glanced sideways at the screen.

"Oh, Kheren; do take good care of her. And... *Commander* Redding... When you see Philter... tell him I understand it from his side now... and that I... wish him the best."

As if he could clearly see the uncomprehending expression on the face of the younger man seated in the exec chair, he flashed his crooked smile.

Then, his face became dark, hard, angry. He took a deep breath within his powerful chest and lifted his fists in front of him.

"KHAAAAAAAAAN!"

And with that last raging shout, he disappeared. The screen filled with static. The image went out, replaced by that of the USS Nemesis. Slowly, the big warship turned away, her bow lifting up as she turned like an ancient seagoing vessel slowly sinking into the depths. There was a series of lightning like static discharges etching starkly her elongated hull. And then, her entire form disappeared behind blue and red waves of cosmic dust.

Silence filled the bridge of the Horizon. Even the ship's powerful sensors were now mute. Bursts of lightning were all that moved within the large room, so silent that it was almost as if the people frozen in there could hear the discharges accross the dust-filled void of the nebula outside. The turbolift doors wooshed open and science chief Snowfire K'Leysa walked in to relieve the black-skinned man from the main science station.

"Who's... Philter?"

Helmsman Snow's question remained unanswered. Even Neil Redding looked back with the same question in his eyes.

"Her?"

This came at the same time from both Lyrva and Tyvya, looking at their husband in the command chair.

Kheren did not answer. He did not look back. He kept his eyes on the now quiet, empty vastness of the nebula.

"Get us out of here, Mister Snow."

In a majestic arc, the immense Lotus class starship veered away from what was left of the blasted asteroid and plunged into the depths of the nebula, towards it's edge and open space.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE VOYAGE HOME

As they moved out of the dense cosmic cloud, Kheren sat back in his chair but kept his gaze on the screen.

"Commander Redding... Commander Oseno... Lieutenant Commander K'Leysa... Lieutenant Leône... glad to have you back safe and sound. I look forward to get your reports from your... little adventure out there. You will see to it, Number One. And it looks like you need some medical attention, Mister Oseno... See to it first."

Oseno acknowledged the captain's order with a nod, but addressed the stoic Andorian

"Sir, there was another intelligence aboard the Nemesis...she helped me...helped us. I can't help but feel as if I failed her by leaving her there."

"Tess..." Kheren said, nodding with drooping antennae. "She also saved my life once, mine and that of my chief engineer and first officer of the Artemis the day we first encountered the Nemesis. She was the original AI of the ship, you know... She had fled her starbase, killing the maintenance crew on board because she thought Starfleet was going to deactivate her... kill her because she had become self-aware. For decades she had been alone, confused, hidden in the Mutara nebula. Her creator impersonated a retired Lotus Fleet Admiral and sent us after her but then, terrorists took over my ship and threatened her. Reflexively, she reactivated herself with the strongest persona she could find in her databanks to save herself... and inspired by her surroundings and circumstances, brought back to life the most dangerous tyrant in History."

The Andorian took a deep breath.

"We would have brought her back with us right then, if only her sentience had not made her much too complex for any available data storage unit available... If only... If only..."

"If only she had had a way out?" Snowfire spoke up softly from her position, a very gentle smile catching at her lips. "What if she did?"

She reached down and lifted something from where she'd placed it a few moments before. It was only that movement that truly showed how exhausted the normally tireless Ilythirii actually was, the lifting motion taking far longer than it should have, but she persevered nonetheless.

"The Commander's datachip is a storage device that in many ways surpasses the capabilities of any current similar ones. And Khan was so fixated on the Admiral that...well."

The smile was obvious now, even if it was lined with exhaustion, as she lifted the very same data unit into view of the entire bridge.

"I've run a diagnostic, Captain, and she's all there. Currently on stand by; something very close to the idea of biological sleeping, but this time in a place without nightmares. Her mental state is fragile, and she'll certainly be needing a lot of counselling to regain who she really was. But just the fact that she is safe, and surrounded by those who are sworn to protect her as a sentient being, will help more than any words possibly could."

Kheren looked at her with wide eyes, antennae curving inward on top of his white-haired head.

Lieutenant-Commander Snowfire K'Leysa, you have earned not only her gratitude, and ours, but the admiration of every person on board believing in the core values we all signed up for to get aboard."

She placed the chip down on the front of her console, smiling still, and then swayed in place as the cost of her use of Fetching started to really catch up with her.

"And now, Captain, may I have permission to report to sickbay? There is a cost to what I did to save that chip, and I would rather make less of it than more."

At the secondary science station, Both Norbert Baoule and Valencia Irsos came up each side of her to help her.

"Please do, Lieutenant-Commander; and take some rest. "

As he spoke, Lyrya went to pickup the datachip.

"I will take care of this, Sir. And since she knows Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysa, Commander Oseno and to some extent Commander Redding, it would help to have them with me when we will... wake her. Oh, and you, Captain. And our good doctors and you too as well, Lieutenant Leône."

Oseno's heart leapt at the news that Tess had been recovered, and intact no less. He moved closer to Snowfire and locked his eyes on those of the Ilythirii and said... nothing. He couldn't find the words, but he hoped that his facial features, though weathered, would convey his gratitude to her. Outloud, Jureth acknowledged Lyrya's request with a wince and he faced her.

"I wouldn't miss it...just as soon as I see our good...ow...doctors."

But then, words were scarcely needed for a Gifted Ilythirii, especially one as tired as Snowfire was now. She knew her shields weren't at their best and that combined with the connected she'd held with the Commander for almost the entire duration of their time aboard the Nemesis made his emotions all but impossible to *not* sense. And to him, battered and broken as he was now, the reply was equally wordless. It had been the right thing to do.

She nodded faintly as Lyrya spoke up, leaning heavily now on her seconds but refusing to leave just yet.

"I will be there, Counsellor. And not just as a member of Starfleet." It was such a small thing those last words, yet she knew the far deeper meaning that Captain Kheren would be able to glean from them. And with that, she turned away with Irsos and Baoule supporting her and walked slowly towards the turbolift.

If it were possible, the Orion Ops officer at that same moment blushed as her green-tinted skin slightly deepened as Lyrya spoke.

"I would be honored to be present at this... awakening" Elisha confessed, as she moved in a little closer to the group.

Although she still felt like a bit of an outsider on the ship most of the time, she was gradually learning to acclimate to this new environment and the team aboard the Horizon.

One step at a time Elisha thought as a small smile made its way onto her expression.

Kheren nodded, then looked back at the screen showing the receding cloud of the blue and red Mutara class nebula, the cosmic fog where a lost starship was doomed to perdition with two unliving souls at each other's throat for eternity.

"Who could have ever beleived the Admiral truly had a heart? No offense, Number One."

Redding was quiet for a few seconds before replying, measuring his words.

"I don't understand why he did it Captain. He had to fully erase the chip to make room for her... I don't think I would have done the same if I had been there."

Then he smiled at his Captain.

"Unless you mean fighting Khan until the end of time, Sir. That I can believe."

Kheren couldn't smile back, but his tone of voice did it well enough for his rigid face.

"Well then, I am glad that you are on our side, Number One."

He tapped his combadge.

"Mister Sisko; now we need to get back home."

"Sir, I'm happy to report that our level one diagnostic of the warp core has completed successfully. You're clear to go up to Warp 9. We will continue to monitor the diagnostic of the Transwarp Drive, but I see no reason we cannot go to at least Transwarp 5 within the next twenty-four hours."

"Very well, Mister Sisko. Inform helm control as soon as transwarp is again operational."

Smiling to himself, the chief engineer went on.

"Aye, Captain. Although I can't replicate the tumultuous conditions that got us here in several minutes at near Transwarp 10, if we can maintain Transwarp 5, we can be home in about five and a half days. If we have problems, we may have to drop down to Transwarp 4.5 which will get us there in two weeks."

Two weeks may be better, Sisko thought. I might actually be able to continue my research into integrating a sentient hologram into a physical positron framework...

At that moment, his thoughts turned to something he had heard during the various communiques that were being tossed back and forth during the mission.

"Sir... this may sound like an odd request, but... did we happen to recover from the Nemesis a sentient hologram named 'Tess'?"

"Mister Sisko, Please go into your office and restrict comm access," suddenly ordered Kheren after a short moment of silence.

When the chief engineer complied and opened again a ship channel on a scrambled connection, his commanding officer then answered him.

"Now, to answer you, Mister Sisko; yes. More accurately, it is the download of a sentient artificial lifeform created to run that warship we just said goodbye to," answered the Andorian. "The THETIS project is still classified so I'm not surprised even you did not hear about it. And since you were not on the Artemis when we first encountered the Nemesis, you never heard of her.. "

He made a pause and then sighed.

"I am taking it on my personal authority to give you this information, as we need your expertise if we may have any hope of restoring her with the comparatively crude computer systems we have on board."

This was enough to annoy any chief engineer, more so the one in charge of the latest starship design of Starfleet. But he had never seen or heard about the metacomputer of the USS Achilles prototype. He did hear however the definite seriousness in Kheren's voice.

"Tetis Achilles as she christened herself, Tess as she likes to be called, is a registered citizen of the Federation and a genuinely graduated Starfleet Ensign. She helped save us all when she was still the AI of the destroyer. Somehow, the hologram of Admiral Redding downloaded her in his metachip given to our Commander Redding and our chief of science managed to bring it back with her."

There was a pause before he went on.

"As artificial lifeforms go, Tess is way beyond even a Soong Android like Captain Data or a sentient hologram like the Doctor or Moriarty... in ways that would astound you. But her existence was due to the creation of a living supercomputer which itself makes the infamous M5 or the most advanced positronic brain look like PADDs. Storing her essence is already a miracle and only made possible by the unique advanced data chip Redding had; but restoring her without the original brain of the Nemesis is something else entirely. We might only be able to get a holographic facsimile of her... or only her raw data and lose all that makes her an individual, as was the case with Ira Graves several decades back..."

The Andorian went silent for a moment. Ira Graves had been the greatest genius in Federation History, who had downloaded his entire personality into the positronic matrix of then Lieutenant-Commander Data; but when later he had been transferred into a starship computer, all that had made him an individual had been irretrievably lost, everything reduced to raw computer data.

It was obvious Kheren was moved by the situation. But then he spoke again, his voice firm.

"I'm telling you this because we will need your recommendation if we are to attempt... awaking her; or at least to make sure we do not lose her until we get back to Federation space."

Sisko was excited about the potential of being able to help to recover the sentient AI.

"Aye, Captain!" he responded with enthusiasm. "I may have an idea on how to accomplish this. A positronic matrix COMBINED with the sophisticated computer of the Horizon may just provide enough computational power to retain the individuality of the program. I've been working on a project since we launched. Being interrupted from our sudden journey to the edge of the Galaxy, I currently only have an arm complete, but the process to create the rest of the android is quite straightforward, and if I work double time, I can have it done in no time. The complicated part will be integrating the matrix, which as you mentioned, is not yet sufficient to contain the program with both the Horizon computer AND the datachip. The datachip will need to be used for data storage until we return to Lotus Starbase, but the program may be able to be streamed to and from it through the Horizon computer."

There was silence for a moment before Kheren answered.

"Mister Sisko; as far as Ensign Thetis Achilles is concerned, I want you to stop seeing yourself as an engineer and start seeing yourself as a doctor. She is a constructed being, yes, but she is a *living* being nonetheless; I want you to look at her not as an extraordinary piece of hardware to repair or improve but as a living patient, an injured *fellow Starfleet officer* who happens to need your exceptional expertise to get well."

He made a pause to allow his words to really sink in before he continued.

"If you can certify me that you can do that, I will authorise you to concentrate all your efforts and resources to help her... wake up, at least. Your routine engineering duties can be taken over by Mister Baoule and the rest of your team until we get back to Starbase Lotus. Can you do that, Lieutenant Commander chief engineer Joey Daystrom Sisko?"

Using such a formal way of addressing his chief engineer was typically Andorian; it stressed the solemn importance Kheren was giving to this.

"I myself had to remember that when we confronted our new incarnation of Khan Noonien Singh. For all the evils the original one did, *this* Khan is *another being*, born of the AI of a starship and who has *not* committed those crimes... although through no fault of him not trying. We had to stop him, yes. We had to prevent him from using the power at his disposal to cause harm as he openly confessed he wanted to do. That is our duty. But I was not to make myself judge, jury and executioner and declare a death penalty on a sentient being if there was any other way. I was not about to turn all of us into murderers just because he was artificial and dangerous. There is no death penalty in the Federation."

It was not entirely true; Starfleet General Order 7 stated that anyone entering the Talos star system group for any reason whatsoever, including emergencies, would face the death penalty, the last and only one in the entire United Federation of Planets. but that fact was irrelevant here. What was relevant was the sanctity of life; life in whatever form, organic or not. And Captain Kheren would always be adamant about that core principle, be it for the sake of his crew, an enemy... or even a mad AI; more so for one to whom he himself and his entire crew owned their lives.

he was no telepath but he was confident that Joey D. Sisko shared this attitude, even towards an artificial lifeform like Tess.

"Aye, Sir, you can count on me to treat her just as I would any other living sentient being," he replied solemnly. "It is actually the reason why I have involved myself in the study of this technology. I've always thought it to be not quite fair and confining for sentient holograms to be tied to a ship's computer or even the Mobile Holographic Emitters enjoyed by many holograms today, thanks to the reverse engineering of that original twenty-ninth century technology. My goal is to provide them with a physical form to inhabit when not in the ship to allow them the freedom that Captain Data enjoys. Beyond that, they may even choose to switch back and forth between the android body and any computer in order to accomplish whatever task they need to as easily and efficiently as they can. Additionally, the hologram form provides the safety of not having a physical form that may be harmed."

"She is not a guinea pig, Sir," Sisko added... "BUT... she may be a pioneer that will help future holograms and androids alike. If she helps us accomplish this task, she will be recognized as a first in artificial intelligence among the likes of the Enterprise's Data and the Voyager's Mark I EMH. I will also not move forward until we wake her... at least temporarily... and she fully understands the risks and freely gives her permission."

"That may just be the very thing she needs... or even want," commented Kheren. "Prepare yourself then, Lieutenant Commander... and, on her behalf, thank you."

"Aye, Captain. I will get started right away," Sisko said lastly before closing the comm and heading up a few levels on the ship.

A moment later, he walked into the private Engineering lab as he spoke.

"Computer, activate project Lal."

"Hello Commander," a computer voice said.

The mounted android arm waved its hand at the same time.

"Hi Lal, sorry I've been away for so long. The ship was in trouble and needed my help."

"I know, Commander, I was so scared," replied the AI.

Sisko was taken aback by the response. It... *she* was already scared? The program was learning quicker than he imagined it would. He wondered if she would become attached to her body... if she had already done so. If so, he would have to duplicate it for Tess, with different features, of course.

Oh well, it can't be helped. If Lal became sentient, taking away her body to give it to someone else was not an option, he thought. *Will just have to quadruple my efforts.*

As the doors hissed closed, Joey Day Sisko gave the hand a gentle squeeze to reassure her before sitting down to continue his work.

* * *

Since the Bynar doctors had arrived back on the Horizon, they had been busily triaging the many bumps and scrapes, broken bones, and concussions that the Polaris crew had suffered since their capture as well as the long-term ill effects of asteroid life on the refugees rescued from there. A few of them required surgery to remove cancerous tumors, a condition not before seen by the Bynars due to the preemptive care received by everyone in the Federation and any non-affiliated modern society near the Federation, along with the genetic sequence discovered by Pyong Ko that would inhibit growth of any cancer cells. The conditions of the mine probably caused or added to the cancer, but it would only be a simple three-step process to rid them of it: remove the tumors preferably by localized transportation techniques so as not to have to use a lasar scalpel, make the patient comfortable by administering melorazine, then applying the genetic therapy to prevent any possibility of remission.

The other patients mostly had unmended broken bones that were easily reset, stress fractures that could be repaired, and post-traumatic stress conditions that would require mental therapy by Lyrya and her team.

Shortly after their triage work was done, Oseno Jureth walked in and sat on a biobed. 011 approached him without a word, scanning him with her medical tricorder. 110 followed shortly after and administered a mild pain killer.

"Your injuries are..."

"... quite severe..."

"... Commander. Three..."

"... broken ribs, a vertebral..."

"... stress fracture, and a..."

"... sprain on the third..."

"... metatarsal ligament in..."

"... your left foot. Please describe..."

"... what happened, so we don't..."

"... miss anything."

"Once you're done..."

"... we will..."

"... administer..."

"... a more powerful..."

"... analgesic so you can..."

"... rest while we..."

"... fix you up."

Oseno nodded wearily at the doctors.

"The short version is, I got tossed into two durasteel bulkheads by Khan Noonien Singh and then put on an EV suit and threw myself off a perfectly good starship. "

The Bynars looked at one another, whistled and cycled at one another for several seconds, then turned back towards the Bajoran.

"This is..."

"... consistent with..."

"... our diagnosis."

Even the Bynar doctors were able to sense the Commander's weariness and did their best to switch to what they learned was a typical Bajoran "Bedside Manner Mode".

"We will run all..."

"... standard scans...and... "

"... make sure you're at..."

"... one hundred percent. Just..."

"... rest now. May the prophets... "

"... protect you while..."

"... you sleep."

Although they didn't believe the aliens thirty thousand light years away were even aware of Oseno, let alone able to protect him, they knew that comforting the patient, however they could, would aid in his convalescence.

Oseno indeed sighted with weariness.

"But all that doesn't include being tossed around due to the malfunction of the Horizon's transwarp drive and having to launch my ship out of her docking bay at speeds that most scientists and pilots have never even considered. I blacked out at some point during the Polaris launch too, so you might want to run a neural scan if you haven't already."

"That would be..."

"... better if... "

"... our chief counselor..."

"... perform this..."

"...diagnosis. We will..."

"...inform her."

Jureth was trying not to be curt with the Bynar, but he was physically and mentally exhausted as well as emotionally spent from the experience of watching Khan torture his Polaris crew, and in particular T'Lana, the Vulcan security officer. While he loved Catherine Steele, he had a great respect and admiration of the Vulcan woman. It had pained him greatly to see what Khan did to her even if he had tried not to show it at the time.

Moments after explaining the reasons for his truly impressive number of injuries, Snowfire half-stumbled into the room supported by Lieutenants Irksos and Baoule on either side.

The Ilythirii equivalent of an adrenaline rush triggered during her escape had well and truly worn itself out at this point, and the white haired science officer seemed to struggle to reach the biobed beside Oseno even with the two other officers supporting her. She waved faintly at the Bajoran as she sat down, pulled her legs up onto the bed so that she could lie down, and then promptly passed out until one of the doctors approached her.

To all appearances, all that the Ilythirii Lieutenant Commander really needed was rest, but a closer look would show that there was minor damage to several parts of her neural structure. The fact that they were healing far faster than neural damage had any right to would be another example of exactly how confusing the nature of Ilythirii mental powers worked.

The doctors' scans were picking this fact up as she lay down, and conversed with each other using the high-pitched computerized language, but softly, so as not to disturb the patients.

"We must repair the neural damage," stated 110.

"But can we?" Replied 011. *"The natural healing process of her species has already begun. Anything we do may just hamper it."*

"Agreed, perhaps it is best to just let her rest."

"I don't like it, " said 110. *"We are supposed to be able to do more."*

"First, do no harm", quoted 011. It was not just a medical human oath; the Bynar race had an equivalent.

"Just rest," they said to Snowfire. "We will... "

"... continue to monitor... "

"... your condition, but we guess... "

"... you will be fully... "

"... healed in..."

"... mere hours."

"Do you need anything? Water or a light refreshment would be permitted," they added.

It would be a quick recovery under the care of the best medical care any starship could offer; but it would still be a costly one for her.

Oseno laid on the next biobed and tried to close his eyes, but his thoughts kept returning to the Nemesis bridge and the sight of T'Lana in the containment pod. He opened his eyes and stared for a long moment at the overhead of the Horizon Sickbay before speaking.

"Doctor, I have a question when you get a moment."

Doctor 011 nodded to her fellow Bynar partner to mentally indicate, *Go ahead, I will stay with Snowfire.*

110 returned to the biobed Oseno was on and used her medical tricorder to take one more scan.

"Yes, Sir, what... can we... do for you?"

She was not used to using the word "I" when conversing with anyone but her partner, even though she alone was attending to him.

Oseno propped himself up slightly

"There was a Vulcan woman on my staff, T'Lana; she was tortured by Khan along with several other officers. What is their status? Will they recover?"

"She will be in a... Vulcan healing trance... for about two... days. We are ... monitoring her and supporting her... efforts so that... she should recover... completely from her... exposition to... vacuum. There is no... neurological damage... showing. We expect... complete recovery."

The Bajoran sighed with relief. But he made it a priority in his mind to be there when she would awaken. He would administer himself the slpas that would be required to get her out of the trance. After what he had seen her go through, he would not let anyone else touch her.

* * *

On the bridge of the starship Horizon, all was eerily quiet. Even the chimes and purrs of consoles seemed muted to their ears as they all looked on the large viewer at the hazy blue sparkling line of the great galactic barrier.

Few were those who had ever seen it and most of them who did were not even alive today. The USS Enterprise had been the last ship to venture this close to the edge of the galaxy and that had happened more than a century and a half ago. But now, Starfleet had the technology to come back here, and get back home to tell about it; the final frontier had just expanded a lot farther with what they had been through.

And that would be but the beginning of the life aboard the USS Horizon. No one had any doubt about it; they would be back here... or go even beyond.

But for now, *this* voyage was almost over. A full day has passed since they last emerged from the nebula where they had left a dying ghost ship behind. Repairs had been done, wounds had been mended, minds had come around the events lived through and hearts had returned to calmer beats; at least, enough to their bearings and proceed towards the heart of the galaxy.

They were finally all ready, and eager, to get back home.

Standing before the central seat, Captain Kheren looked around at some of the officers sharing with him this moment.

Besides navigator Aguk Snow, Tyvya, acting chief of security and tactical with Lieutenant Sarah Corcoran still recuperating in sickbay from their unprepared jump this far out in space; in front of them both, the lone ops console where Elisha Leône was all business on her complex board. Turning his head from left to right, the captain looked at Snowfire K'Leysa, still a bit tired from her last ordeal but her black elfin face as enigmatic as ever; nearer, the starkly contrasting chalk-colored face of Lyrya, filling in for their Bynars Doctors still taking care of the sixty refugees they were bringing back from decades of enslavement.

As his silvery eyes came to the right, the Andorian looked at Robert Baoule acting in liaison with chief engineer Joey Sisko still down in main engineering to make sure their next, final transwarp trial would not go awry this time; closer between engineering and tactical stations stood Oseno Jureth, showing none of the serious and numerous injuries he had brought from his confrontation with a mad artificial intelligence; and right at his side, Neil Redding was finishing getting all the readiness reports on his exec chair's console from all over their one and a half kilometer long vessel, the final preparations prior to their return flight at velocities almost too ludicrous to comprehend.

Kheren looked back at the incredible vista of the galaxy's border, then sat down.

He could not help at this moment to think of Captain James Kirk. He had been the first starship commander to ever contemplate this view from the bridge of a starship... and Kheren thought of all the brave people that, like him, had come this close to the edge of infinity.

Space must have looked a lot bigger back then, when they could barely reach warp 8... Yet, today, it does not look to me any smaller from here...

Lieutenant Elisha Leône was busy making preparations for their flight back home. Yet as she went about her duties, she couldn't help but steal a glance or two around the grand ship, and at the dedicated officers occupying the other stations surrounding her.

I can't believe I made it through my first official mission on a Federation starship, she thought excitedly. I've spent my entire life sacrificing and clawing my way up just to have such an opportunity, yet throughout this undertaking, there were so many things that could have and did go wrong. But here we are... somehow heading back home again; despite the incredible odds against such an occurrence transpiring.

Then she snapped out of her thoughts and refocused on her tasks at hand. Moments later, she swiveled her chair slightly to face toward her commanding officer.

"All systems indicate that we are ready to depart Captain" Elisha confirmed, and then she turned back toward the main viewscreen.

Homeward bound at last, she thought, as a small smile grew across the olive-colored smooth skin of her radiant face.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," answered Kheren, looking at her with his unflinching silvery stare. "This first voyage would not have gone so smoothly without you. You showed poise and valor as much as any seasoned officer here. And my logs will testify of it."

From his auxiliary station Commander Oseno glanced at the ongoing diagnostics coming in from the Polaris. The little destroyer was in pretty rough shape, as much so as her mother ship at any rate. His two man engineering team combined with several engineers from the Horizon's main engineering department were making what repairs they could in the even that she needed to be deployed again.

Jureth's injuries were mostly healed under the ministrations of the Bynar doctors though he thought he could still feel a small twinge in his back, but that may have just been his imagination.

The Bajoran glanced around the magnificent bridge of the huge starship and for the first time was really content with his assignment. Prior to the Horizon's launch part of Jureth had wanted command of the Alsea, but he now knew that he was in the right place. They had just stopped the reincarnation of an insane terrorist and a threat to the entire galaxy. That was an experience he wouldn't find patrolling the Klingon border.

"Strategic Operations stands ready Captain. The Polaris...she's down but not out, Sir."

"She'll be up and in fighting shape again in no time, just like her commanding officer," shot back the Andorian with an appreciative nod towards the Bajoran.

He could feel the pride and satisfaction in the man's voice and stance. Kheren had wondered at the start of their voyage if the former star-commander of Lotus Fleet's warship would be ill at ease not being the Big Man anymore, even if he was granted command of the Horizon's own escort vessel. But now his apprehensions had been put to rest. Oseno Jureth had faced danger and performed as well as he felt about having proven himself the outstanding Starfleet officer he was, Big Man or not. And Kheren for one was glad this remarkable officer now felt at home on his ship.

He bent his torso forward, resting his elbows on his knees and pointing all four oculars forward.

"Are we ready to get back to base, Number One?"

"All sections reporting satisfactory conditions, Captain," the large man answered.

He glanced around the room, looking at all the faces that were so quickly becoming familiar to him.

"And with all humility aside, Sir, I've been around a lot of crews in my time, but this is the first time I have ever felt that I may need them as much they need me."

He then gave a crooked grin that was now becoming quite familiar to the others around him.

"Heaven help anything that gets in our way, Sir, at your discretion."

And as he said so, Redding gave him a nod.

Kheren nodded back and then faced forward again.

"All hands, this is the captain; prepare for warp speed, standby transwarp drive."

His four eyes stayed on the viewer, looking one last time at the great galactic barrier before giving the order they had all been waiting for.

"Mister Snow..."

"Course plotted and laid in for Federation Space, Sir, " answered the Inuit, his eyes also on the vista of the very edge of the galaxy.

" Warp 9."

The familiar starstreak of warp travel instantly filled the viewer.

"Mister Sisko reports engines at nominal status," announced engineer baoule after a moment. "All systems available for transwarp drive."

A short sigh escaped the tiny nostrils of the Andorian.

"Well, we still had one last test to complete if I recall..."

No one answered him. But they were all standing ready like him; ready for anything.

"Mister Snow... transwarp factor 5."

* * *

There was a bleep calling out from one of the dimmed monitors. The bald, blue-skinned head that was looking with dreary eyes at a PADD turned halfway to look at the monitor. Then he frowned and turned the rest of his squat body in his swiveling chair to fully face the console. His webbed hands flashed over the controls several times.

"Lieutenant... I think you should see this."

"What is it, Ensign?" answered the Human woman from behind another console.

"I have a signal on the long range scanner bearing 180 mark 200 that just entered the sector."

"Recheck your instruments; there's nothing out there from that heading except empty space."

"I did, Lieutenant; twice. but it's still coming. And the speed! It's already halfway into the sector and closing in on us!"

The woman jumped to her feet, pulled her long brown hair behind an ear and bent to look at the same monitor as the Bolian officer.

"Switch to short range scanners. Identify."

The blue fingers ran accross the board.

"By composition and configuration a starship; but it can't be one of ours, Lieutenant. According to the readings it's... well over a kilometer long!"

By now, the defense perimeter system had been activated and all available installations and starships in the sector were getting an alert signal for an intruder. That signal had not been heard since the last time the Borg had invaded the Alpha Quadrant and hearts of every shape and numbers started fluttering accross twenty cubic light years. For a moment, the Lieutenant blinked at the monitor screen, looking at the data, reconfiguring herself a few readouts, blinking again. Then, her face lit up. Straightening, she let out a sigh.

"Ensign; recalibrate the comm array to maximum gain and find me it's transponder signal."

After a moment of further control manipulations, the Bolian in turn grinned and looked back at her. But she had already guessed and was returning to her console, opening a general channel as well as patching herself directly to the leading Starfleet installation of the Hromi sector.

"This is Deep Space Station K7 monitoring outpost; Starbase Lotus... the Horizon is coming home."

* * *

Captain's log

Stardate: 87656.2

With all our battle damage repaired and wounded mended, the Horizon has completed her first successful transwarp flight and flew into the history books. Moreover, survivors of a lost ship from a war ended long ago were brought back to their homes and families, a dangerous threat has been, once again, stopped and a new sentient lifeform has been saved.

But all that did not come without a price.

The original Jem'Hadar jailers sacrificed themselves to ensure the safe return of their former captives; personal memories and data of this ship,s first officer had been lost to ensure that a mad AI would not get freedom to roam accross the stars; our chief of security and tactical was critically wounded during the transwarp accident and has to be discharged to a major medical facility; our chief of science risked health and sanity in using extensively her psionic talents to stop the threat and save a life; our chief of strategic operations endured severe physical wounds and mental duress in opposing the Khan hologram directly. There has been wounds and there has been damages.

But we have done our duty as Starfleet officers; and in doing so, we did good and we did it well. Our logs will testify as such.

Thus,as commanding officer of this vessel, I am making the following recommendations:

- Lieutenant Junior Grade Elisha Leône to be promoted to full Lieutenant rank for excellence of service all hrough her tour of duty aboard this ship.**
- Lieutenant Commander Joey Daystrom Sisko to be promoted to full Commander rank for excellence of service all through his tour of duty aboard this vessel. Moreover, it is recommended that, for his expertise and experience as well as his personal comittement, this officer be fully assigned as the chief officer responsible to the full restoration of the artificial life form known as Ensign Thetis Achilles.**
- Lieutenant Commander Snowfire K'Leysha to be awarded a citation for her scientific contribution regarding the nature of her people and culture, most natably their biology and psionic abilities, and this at personal cost and under personal constraints. Moreover, it is recommended that this officer, with approval from her governing authority, be granted full Starfleet officer status and integration so as to properly serve on this or any other vessel of Starfleet.**
- Commander Oseno Jureth to be awarded a citation for his exemplary devotion to duty and show of valor while under physical and mental duress for the sake of fellow crewmembers and Federation citizens. Moreover, it is recommended the MACO unit attached to the Horizon be placed directly under his command in view of the personal devotion to duty and courage he has shown, in the purest tradition of this Starfleet division.**

- Commander Neil Stanley Redding to be awarded a citation for his exceptional diplomatic and command skills in convincing without bloodshed Jem'Hadar soldiers in releasing prisoners and allying themselves with this crew. Moreover, it is recommended that this officer be put next in line for the command position of the Lotus Fleet flagship.

These officers and the crew serving under them has shown itself not only worthy of serving on the Lotus Fleet flagship, but prime examples of what Starfleet is all about, and what the Federation should stand for. This log is to testify of it all.

Captain Kheren had dictated his log with his silvery eyes and antennae leveled to all the bridge officers standing before him at attention. There was nothing to betray on his dark-blue rigid face or in his professional tone of voice the pride that swelled his heart standing with them, on this bridge, aboard this starship. But he hoped that his eyes would say enough; they deserved much more than what he could ever convey.

They were his crew, his friends... his clan.

"As you were."

With those simple words, they returned to their stations as the circular expanse of Starbase Lotus loomed before them on the large viewer. As they turned to do so, the Andorian never felt as if they were turning their backs to him one single second; what he felt was that they were, like him, with him, turning towards their home, and beyond that towards the stars.

To the horizon.

EPILOGUE

"Another incoming transmission, Captain... This one's from Federation Media, Sir."

"In here, Lieutenant."

Kheren came up before the wide screen of his comm panel removing the last droplets of water from his dark blue skin with a towel before throwing it aside to take a freshly replicated shirt in his callused hand. He did not rush to dress himself as he knew who's call it was before even activating the monitor; he was the one who had sent the call this one was answering to.

On the screen the pale-skinned Human was undetermined age, balding with a square face and etched lines meeting around the very wide mouth squashed under a straight nose, wide clear eyes looking him up and down as he too looked back at the half-naked Andorian.

"Doctor Joe,"

"Captain Kheren," greeted back the most well known sentient hologram accross two galactic quadrants. "A pleasure to finally make acquaintance with the only other Andorian ship commander in Starfleet this side of Captain Shon of the new Enterprise. "

There was a pause as the sentient artificial lifeform looked him over as he pulled his shirt over his muscular chest.

"You are aware that this phaser scar accross your chest is easily erased," he offered with the tone of a chief medical officer oh so familiar with the stereotyped starship captain aversion to medical care.

"It is the lesson it taught and reminds me of with every shower I do not want erased," answered back the commanding officer of the flagship of Lotus Fleet as he hid the large straight burnt mark of his torso under the dark grey shirt.

"I was afraid it was some obscure warrior ritual from your homeworld that interfered with good sense," the Doctor grumbled in a sarcastic tone well known since the popularization the USS Voyager's extraordinary odyssey. But then his tone became serious, even for him. "I received your transmission and all the data provided with it. Took me a while and some hard pulling to get clearance from those overzealous paranoids from Starfleet Intelligence... I must admit that, even from my point of view, this is all quite astounding. "

"You understand what is involved here."

It was not a question. Kheren had not sent his message without thinking hard to find who in all the United Federation of Planets could deal properly with the situation. The Doctor voiced his conviction in plain terms.

"This Ensign Thetis Achilles is a unique artificial sentient lifeform even considering how unique those recognized lifeforms are in this whole galaxy, not excluding myself of course. You were right to come to me with this. I am in a unique position to try helping her."

Kheren stood straight at attention as he nodded to the sentient hologram's projected image before him.

"Ensign Thetis Achilles is not just a certified sentient artificial being but also a genuine Starfleet officer. As such, she is now cited to a court martial for her actions as yeoman and crewmember of the USS Nemesis."

There was a short pause as both pondered the meaning of what the Andorian had stated.

"What are the charges?" asked the holographic former CMO of the starship Voyager.

"Theft of Starfleet property, namely the afore mentionned USS Nemesis; disobeying a direct order to return to base; alleged attacks and destruction of several vessels in the Mutara sector over the last forty years; a whole bunch of Starfleet regulations concernign undocking and flight procedures... and nineteen accounts for murder, namely the personnel of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers who were still aboard when she fled with the ship."

Again, there was a pause as the other pondered the information.

"You know I'm not a lawyer," began the holographic Human.

"And I know that you are no longer a doctor," shot back the Andorian. "But you are still yourself a sentient artificial lifeform, a former starship officer who still commands respect and credibility in Starfleet... and most of all, the very sentient artificial lifeform who wrote the most influential document about the rights of your kind... then fought for his rights and theirs before the Federation Court of law... and won... twice."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence, Captain Kheren; but I wonder what kind of a defense will be enough to stand against so many and so serious charges."

"The most simple and basic one, Doctor; legitimate self-defense against a direct threat to her life... from Starfleet itself."

The face of the Doctor went blank for a moment.

"There is proof of this?"

"There is."

Again the hologram went silent for a moment.

"Let's suppose that I go along with this... You know that I am no longer a member of Starfleet. As a civilian, I could only be called as an expert witness for the defense, or at best authorized as legal counsel; she is to face a court martial. Only a Starfleet officer could formerly act as her defense attorney and plead her case before the whole slew of Starfleet brass that will be in line for this extraordinary case. Most if not all of them would certainly come from Starfleet Intelligence; and these are not amiable and understanding individuals... especially now that Admiral Chekotay retired from their ranks."

The Andorian fixed his silvery eyes straight at the image before him.

"Well there might be one of these SI admirals that I know of who might be at least nominally understanding. One I actually asked for in her name to be among the judges on the bench, as is her right to demand through me, her provisional commanding officer since she is currently under my custody."

A smile started to creep at the corner of the holographic mouth.

"Ah, I see... Your logs were quite... interesting in this regard."

The smile froze then.

"But that does not solve the major problem of finding anyone in Starfleet who would be able, or even care, to stand up in her defense. Starfleet officers do not look kindly upon one of their own causing the death of their comrades, even by accident. Even legendary Captain Kirk had had a hard time from his peers when he had been accused of causing the death of Lieutenant Ben Finney. I can't think of anyone who would stand up for her facing such grave accusations."

The antennae on top of Kheren's thick snowy mane started to curve inward in the distinctive Andorian smile.

"Doctor Joe... meet Ensign's Thetis Achilles' attorney for her defense."

The image on the screen split in two, allowing another transmission to fully mix in with the one between the hologram and the ship commander. The image showed a man with almost boyish looks despite the obvious air of maturity and thoughtfulness in the oval, impassive face. Crowned by a Starfleet regulation crop of brownish hair, the face was whitish in skin tone and each side of a straight pointed nose showed startling yellow eyes. Captain's pips adorned the grey collar of his Starfleet uniform.

"Captain Data!" instantly recognized the Doctor.

"Greetings Doctor Joe. I regret we did not have the chance to meet again after your trial. I trust you are well. Your latest novel was... intriguing."

"Of all people, you should be the one to appreciate it to its fullest," said the holographic man with undisguised pride.

No one this side of the galactic center didn't know who the android captain of the Enterprise E was. With the recent decommissioning of his old ship, Data had been offered several prestigious positions, among them the position of Commandant of Starfleet Academy as well as the Chair of Physics at Cambridge University on Earth. Judging by the uniform he was still wearing, he was still considering his options.

The holographic face returned to a more serious expression.

"So... you are also committed to this... challenge?"

"Indeed, Doctor. I did extensive study of Federation and Starfleet rules of law since the day Captain Picard stood in my own defense to have me recognized as a sentient lifeform within the Federation."

"That's an understatement if I ever heard one," commented the Doctor. "That inquiry shook the very foundations of Federation rights. They even made a new Starfleet General Order out of it so as to include us, artificial beings, into the rulings of the Prime Directive no less!"

"We are all on a journey towards enlightenment, Doctor... organic and inorganic beings as well," thoughtfully said the android.

He then looked directly at the silent Andorian fellow Starfleet captain as he continued.

"Captain Kheren's dedication towards Ensign Achilles well being, the efforts at reincarnating her currently done by his chief engineer Lieutenant-Commander Sisko, the sufferings and sacrifices made by his bridge officers, Redding, Jureth, K'Leysa... all of it speaks of a worthy individual that deserves our help, even beyond our own kinship to her, Doctor. I have even been made aware that one of the captain's officer is an Orion female willing to share with Ensign Achilles her own experiences as an exploited lifeform to both ease her restoration and plead for her case."

"This... camaraderie of so diverse beings against impossible odds brings back so many souvenirs... " murmured the Doctor before straightening up again.

"I concur, Doctor," acknowledged the android.

Captain Kheren for his part said nothing. Although he shared their sentiment wholeheartedly, he was well aware that he had but a fraction of the experiences these two living legends each were referring to. He suddenly realized who he had been making contact with and bringing together on behalf of someone he barely knew for a cause few people would ever risk themselves for... and that this was possibly starting something that might have astounding repercussions in Starfleet, if not within the entire United Federation of Planets, or even beyond.

For a moment he was genuinely overwhelmed with what he had done. Then he felt a moment of pride, it was finally replaced by a deep sentiment of satisfaction... and hope.

And in the end, that was all worthwhile... why he was here, now... and out there.

"So, Captain Data..." now said the holographic Human, you do believe she stands a chance in court?"

"I have studied extensively all the data provided by Captain Kheren.... and dug up myself all the relevant restricted Starfleet files about Project Achilles and Project Thetis. I am fully confident that we will, together, clear her name and restore her not only to freedom but to active duty on the basis of the defense suggested by the captain."

"Let's get to work then!" exclaimed the Doctor clasping his hands. "I shall reach Earth by the time the storing device containing the Ensign will arrive at Starfleet Command Headquarters."

"I will greet you upon your arrival, Doctor, " answered Data. "We will join Lieutenant Commander Sisko in his efforts to... reincarnate Ensign Achilles in time for her hearing."

"Remarkable work I might say, although I'm no expert," admitted the Doctor. "In any case, I am ready to lend my own portable holographic emitter to her and endure this... contraption my friend Anika Hansen came up with at the Daystrom Institute if need be. Let us stick together, we artificial lifeforms against the oppression of the organics..."

He laughed at the blank stare offered to him by both Data and Kheren. To the latter he then addressed an apologetic nod as he finished the transmission.

"Although all of them are not all that bad. On her behalf, Thank you for all you have done, Captain Kheren; you and your gallant crew."

"Keep me posted Doctor... Captain Data... and all our hopes go with you both."

"Fear not, Captain," Data said in parting. "What you have done, your crew and yourself, will not be in vain. We will have her exonerated and restored to the life she finally deserves. As one Doctor Leonard McCoy once said; in this galaxy, there is a mathematical probability of three million Earth-type planets. And in this universe, three million, million galaxies just like this one. And in all that, and perhaps more... only one of each of us. We will have her freed, if only because there is no one else like her."

And with a nod, his pale face also disappeared from the screen.

For a long while, Kheren stood before the dark glossy surface of the switched off monitor screen. Then, slowly, he turned and walked to the narrow transparency that showed the immense vista of stars beyond the starbase his colossal ship was docked to. His gaze was lost in the distance, looking far as if he could see beyond the dark horizon, to the very edge of the galaxy.

His voice filled the silence between the stars.

"No... there is another."

THE END