

The birth of another universe brings death to our own!

**STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET**

# CRUSADE

*The Second Major Engagement of Lotus Fleet*



**STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET**

# **CRUSADE**

**LOTUS FLEET SECOND FLEET ACTION**

Forum roleplaying session

from November 20th 2011 to February 14th 2013

Including:

Several Starship Applications' responses

David Calhoun's Junior Officer Cruise

Azimuth Horizon: Homecoming

Azimuth Horizon: Assembly

Azimuth Horizon: Preparations

Azimuth Horizon: Operation Horizon

Azimuth Horizon: Aftermath stories

Novelization by Kheren

Story concept by Caltern & Evshell

Edited by Jeff T

Cover by Kheren & Calderwood

## **DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

### **Starbase 10**

Evshell as Fleet Captain Allen Samji

Naesk as Lieutenant Junior Grade John Mandella

Athos as Lieutenant Junior Grade David Calhoun

### **USS Lotus**

Redding as Captain V'rell Gould

Josh Vincent as Lieutenant Junior Grade Josh Vincent

Jae Onasi as Doctor Jolie Bindo

### **USS McKenzie**

Crist as Captain Daniel Crist

Sorripto as Lieutenant Sorripto

Snowfire as Lieutenant Snowfire K'Leysa

### **USS Alsea**

Caltern as Commander Rachel Rivers

Niomo Lire as Lieutenant Commander Niomo Lire II

Jureth as Lieutenant Oseno Jureth

### **USS Spectre**

Joester as Captain Daniel Summers

BLZBUB as Commander David Rogers

Tritter as Lieutenant Junior Grade Michael J. Tritter

### **USS Artemis**

Kheren as Captain Kheren

Draxii as Commander Michael O'Conner

Jeff T as Lieutenant Syntron

*"It is beleived that  
this universe was born out of fire;  
and that  
the fire of creation would show us the light,  
the doorway to Paradise.  
But,  
there are those who do not beleive;  
they wish to smother the fire, to close the door.  
They will fail."*

The Prophet  
First Revelation

## PROLOGUE

In the infinite field of stars, lightning struck.

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

The lightning bolt left an after image that was then as suddenly followed on it's crooked path by raging fire.

Like flames of a forest fire running on a lone denuded branch, The tongue of orange-golden fire followed the exact erratic trace left by the lightning bolt and the entire stary sky went ablaze.

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

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

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

And then, it flared anew; larger, brighter, lingering longer across the heavens.

As if it would never die out.

After the fires subsided once more, something was left imprinted briefly in one's eye, like an after image; and before the inferno blinded the eye, one could discern it again: what looked like a clear, translucent, slightly luminescent snowflake floating in the star-studded darkness of space; a delicate, intricate starburst of thin, whitish lines spreading in all directions like a very complex web across the heavens.

It was beautiful.

But in an instant, the entire star-like flake blazed from within. Bright orange fire spread across all the crisscrossing lines to highlight each one with thick, liquid flames spreading along them all across the vastness of space, as if to touch and burn the very stars themselves.

It was frightening.

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

It was monstrous.

But what was most frightening, most monstrous, was that this cosmic fire burned farther and deeper than just across the physical universe.

It consumed even minds, hearts... and souls.

\* \* \*

The figure awoke into a darkness, swirling with the muffled voices of a hundred beings, blurry faces of which floated in and out of his view.

The dark, mysterious man with the ridged face started out very serious, but changed so quickly to a grin before the man laughed in mirth... and a second later he was gone.

The man with the black eyes... so black... felt like a mentor, someone who had guided him at one point in his life... so black and serious were the eyes, though... and sorrowful.

The red haired woman, who's muffled voice he could hear crying out, "return to me, love!"

The older woman, sang a lullaby, so soft and sweet like nothing he had ever heard before... no, he had heard it... but where?

*Where... where am I?*

*Who am I?*

All the figures now repeating, "... up... wake up... wake... UP!"

The figures vanished as a bright light shone into his face.

"Wake up!" he could hear as someone shook his arm.

"I think he's waking up!" the voice of a boy said excitedly to the one beside him.

"Yes, Joshua, now go help your mother," the elder voice replied before he saw the man sitting down beside him. The excited young man ran to do as the elder man, his father assuredly, instructed.

He looked around and realized he was laying on a floor in a narrow corridor...

*No... on a deck*, he remembered.

Why did he remember that? What was the difference?

He was naked except for a long jacket that was draped over him.

"Whe... where... am I?" he croaked, trying to find his voice.

"Here drink this," the man said as he handed him some water.

He drank greedily but the man stopped him before he could make himself sick.

"Easy there, take it easy."

After he had his fill, the elder man said:

"I am Brother Kyle, Captain of our modest little vessel, and monk of our Order. You are on the HCS Guiding Light. We found you, miraculously floating just near the Horizon. We risked much to retrieve you. Some... power... was keeping you alive out there."

*The horizon?* he thought. *Are we at sea? But I feel no rocking... not even the slightest...*

He looked around some more and the realization hit him.

"We're on a... starship..." he said to Brother Kyle, who simply nodded. "But you said, 'horizon'... I know of no horizon in space... I was floating in... SPACE?"

He tried to get up. He was sick of all the riddles and he needed to know what happened, where he was, who he was... But the pain was so intense, he collapsed.

"Easy there. You may have been protected, but you still have space sickness. Just relax, a doctor is on his way and then we will get you set up in a proper bed."

Brother Kyle was very nice and his voice was so relaxing. He felt... comfortable... there, and slowly his exhaustion overcame his curiosity and he fell back to sleep.

The next several days were a blur... a haze of medical recovery, mixed with teachings from the monks on the ship, as they headed back to "the Heart", as they called it; some sort of stone-sculpted building, like a temple, on some unnamed planet of some forgotten system.

They were calling him The Prophet. They said that he had been sent through the Azimuth Horizon by the Preservers to lead the Horizon's Children into the New Galaxy.

He asked the man in the mirror about it. But the face that looked back at him was that of a man he did not recognize; part Bajoran and part Human, but without the typical cultural earring. He was bald, with a short-cropped goatee.

A man he could not name.

And so, he took the name they gave him, a name that did strike some distant memory, seemed somewhat to go with the face of the stranger he saw: the Prophet.

All the new terms and concepts... he couldn't quite get it straight. The Prophet... Somehow it sounded familiar, almost... appropriate. Somehow, he felt that they must be right, because, as unbelievable as it sounded, he had survived the very deadly harshness of space for a time unknown. It could've been hours, or even days, even more, the monks told him. It was a miracle. It was a sign.

Yet, at times, he was angry... furious with them, for what they said. He lashed out but they accepted his anger with grateful stubbornness. Which made him even more angry... and still they bowed to him. It seemed like he had just been reborn; he told them... and now they were telling him everything would all go away yet again in favor of a new galaxy? They explained that it was just another sign that he was sent by their Preservers. Born anew to lead them out of their current turmoil of existence.

He slowly came to terms with it, and even began to believe it fully. It resounded with some vague, undefined memory, from somewhere deep in his past, in his life... or was it another? Slowly but increasingly, he listened to them and to those confused inner feelings. He could believe it; he *wanted* to believe it...

And in the end, he did.

And he believed it so much that he would kill for it to be true...

It was all that he had, all that he was... or wanted to be?

It was so confusing; but it was also... so right... so good.

Weeks later, he was fully into the role, into the belief, into the destiny he now accepted as his. He began running missions... commanding their forces like an old pro. His mind was naturally very cunning, very strategic. He could see angles that the others had missed, and it just served to further solidify their faith in his leadership. Among the most faithful of them all he promoted a woman, a Rethian Lieutenant Commander of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers named Ty'reynyk, who then became a Starfleet double agent and his second-in-command. Like many of her orange and red-scaled reptilian-descended species, slit-eyed and spine-headed, she was a natural born fighter and well trained in technical skills and ship operations.



And so, the Prophet sent her on their most ambitious mission up to that point: to hijack a Starfleet ship of the line for their own purposes; and of course, he chose the very ship that had revealed the Azimuth Horizon to this universe: the USS Artemis.

She failed.

She lost her entire squad, which was most of the cult's Starfleet officers, and he was furious with her; but she took it all in willingly. All his anger and hate, she just absorbed, like it fed her.

It was the same with all of them. Sometimes, he wished they would shout back... tell him he was wrong... but they never did. He never had the satisfaction of that conflict.

Deep down, despite his convictions, his feelings, he thought something was wrong, because he didn't feel the way they all did. Anger and hatred didn't fuel him. It didn't collect and multiply inside him like it did for them. Even at the heart of their celebrations to thank the Preservers of the coming days of bliss, he always felt somewhat like an outsider... somehow... different. But he wasn't sure why.

Maybe it was his differences that made him stand out as The Prophet... and so, he usually put it out of his mind to focus on the ultimate mission.

He didn't feel it again for over a week... until *they* came...

The day of the delivery was the day the feelings The Prophet thought he had put behind him came back.

It was like any other mission, except for the fact that they had some outside help. Some... contractors... or mercenaries, with a ship. He didn't like having to hire outside help, but Ty'reynyk suggested that they couldn't afford to waste their best people on a simple delivery job.

He consented, and told her to inform him when the job was ready and they had left. He was in his lavish rooms in the temple, praying to the Preservers, kneeling with his back turned toward the open door, when he heard the man walk by. He turned slightly to see the man... the mercenary captain... peek in, but he faced away quickly. He did not want outsiders to see his face, so he gestured to the guards standing by the door to close it on the captain.

He hesitated slightly in his prayer. The face seemed familiar. And that feeling he felt a few days ago started to come back.

A few minutes later Ty'reynyk entered.

"Have they completed the transaction?" he asked her without turning.

"Yes, Prophet, but... there's a problem."

He slowly finished his prayer and rose from his kneeling position. He turned to her and said:

"Would you care to enlighten me?"

She shifted nervously.

"Yes, Prophet. It appears that part of their crew has gained access to a secure location... and downloaded data. We are trying to find them now."

He was unusually calm.

"Let me know when you find them, and what they were attempting to access."



"Should I sound the security alarm?" she asked.

"No, let's *NOT* alert them to the fact that we know," he said, suddenly feeling frustrated.

He tried to turn back, but she stopped him.

"There's something else... on the security monitors."

"Follow me," he said, as he led her and two security guards up to the upper level to the security room. They reviewed the video records and concentrated on those showing the mercenary crew hired for the delivery, especially those that stole the data.

The ones who broke in and retrieved the data were Cardassian and Human. He didn't recognize the Human, but the other... His face brought back that odd feeling he had thought he had buried some time ago.

"Please look at the other recording, the one on the main habitat section," politely suggested Ty'Reynyk.

The other video was from the upper level, showing a Vulcan female, unusually dark skinned and with astounding white hair... and was that a...?

"He's RETHIAN," he said through clenched teeth, as he looked at Ty'Reynyk and back to the video to compare their similarities. Head spines, golden-slitted eyes, orange-scaled skin... There could be no mistake. There was the feeling again...

*What was that?* he wondered. It now noticed for the first time that it seemed to happen when he saw certain people... like this Cardassian and this one.

"A Rethian..." he repeated.

She cringed.

"Yes... I know, I should've CHECKED! There are very few of us outside of the homeworld. And only two in Starfleet, besides me... This one. And... this one... I know this one... intimately."

He started to become agitated.

"Yes?" he growled more forcefully.

"Prophet, I... Please forgive the failings of this humble servant. It was just a routine delivery and their background checked out! But I should've checked it *myself!*" she repeated, fists clenched in frustration.

She looked at the small screen, then at him and finally at her own feet, silent for a moment before she finally blurted out:

"He's... Starfleet."

And now, the storm was upon them all.

## CHAPTER ONE : SPARKS

It was very late in the evening when Commander Allen Samji was finally finished with all the day's work. Managing Starbase staff, cargo ships and civilians, as well as the four Lotus Fleet vessels on missions and the one that was currently in refit, was a sixteen-hour and seven-day job. He slumped down on his bed with a loud crash and, with an undignified grunt, he began tearing off his boots and flinging them across the room. As his feet fell to the bed, his eyes shut and he was instantly asleep.

The all too familiar, two-toned ring that woke him up meant that either someone was at his door or he had a message.

He groaned as he lifted his head off the pillow and sat upright. He wondered how much time had gone by and checked the chronometer... one hour! *Ugh...* he wouldn't have even gotten into the Delta-wave portion of his sleep yet, he knew, and that meant no restful benefits.

He threw on a robe and saw a light blinking next to the monitor on his desk. Upon pushing the button, he was greeted with the familiar face of Admiral Janeway.

Surprised, he hurriedly attempted in vain to make himself look presentable. She smiled.

"At ease, Commander."

"Ma'am, it's a pleasure to see you. What can I do for you?"

"Commander, I've been informed you have a lot going on, and I'm sure you are very busy, so I'll try not to take too much of your time. I've been told some very promising things about you by Kotari."

"I am honored," Samji said, taken aback. "He was my mentor and it is always good to hear that he still thinks highly of me."

"Rightfully so," Janeway responded. "It's not flattery, I'm sure. Let me get to the point, though. In the last two years, Starbase 10 has ceased to be simply a starbase and has become Lotus Fleet's home and headquarters and a critical asset to Starfleet operations and Federation policies. We need someone there who can oversee and aid in all the various ships' missions, provide guidance to the Captains, and... if absolutely necessary, pull rank if the need arises. That person is you."

Samji was utterly surprised. He simply stared at the screen with his mouth agape in an undignified manner.

"Commander?"

"Y-yes ma'am, sorry ma'am. But... I think that honor should fall to Fleet Captain Kotari," he objected.

"*Rear Admiral* Kotari," she corrected him, as his rank had apparently just changed, "has been reassigned as overall commandant of your entire sector. We decided we need someone onsite with the ability and familiarity with what is currently happening. It is clear there are many forces that will soon be at work regarding the Azimuth Horizon, and I fear they may all come down on you at once. We can't waste time bringing someone else up to speed. Rear Admiral Kotari is too... advanced in years... to be dealing with such stress; and his expertise is needed as part of the joint Chiefs of staff of Starfleet to handle the overall galactic situations the Federation must deal with. He will in fact also be overseeing directly an elite intelligence branch dealing specifically with this Horizon's Children threat, so don't worry about his position. I believe he will be quite occupied, more happy... and very well taken care of."

"Aye, Ma'am," was all Samji could muster.

"You are hereby promoted to the rank of Fleet Captain and given command of Lotus Fleet Operations. Make us proud, Fleet Captain," Janeway said with a grin.

"I will, Ma'am, thank you, Ma'am."

He sat for a while at his desk and then stumbled back to the bed and lay down.

Right... like he could sleep now...

A few, too few, hours later, the freshly promoted Fleet Captain Samji made his way to his office in order to contact a former member of Lotus Fleet who had submitted a request to return to duty after a much-needed sabbatical. He contacted the officer at his home in Italy, Earth.

Niomo Lire the Second, Starfleet Lieutenant Commander and former starship commander, smiled as his display came to life and the Fleet Captain's face appeared. It was 1000 hours and he was finishing up breakfast in his family's small cottage on a hilltop in southern Italy.

Samji started off with a formal greeting and explanation of his call.

"Lieutenant Commander Lire, I don't believe I have had the pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Fleet Captain Allen Samji. I arrived shortly after the Borg War to manage Starbase 10 in Speaker-of-Name's absence, and I believe at that point you had already left for Earth. I am contacting you about your request to return to duty."

Niomo took a moment to put down his espresso cup on the desk.

"*Bonjourno*, Fleet Captain. Yes, I did put in my application a few weeks ago. Italia is a beautiful country, but I miss the hum of a warp core under my feet. I think I've had enough rest."

Needing to judge the officer's mental state and ability to return to duty, in addition to a general human empathy for the person's situation, he then asked:

"How are you faring Commander?"

*I knew this would come up*, Niomo thought. It had been almost a year.

He chuckled.

"I am well, thank you! But I fear that my life of running an entire ship has come to a close.

Stick me in a dark closet with a hyperspanner in my hand and I'll be happy. I'm a year older, and a year wiser. I'll leave the captaining for the young kids."

Samji simply smiled and reflected for a moment on the fact that it was ironic that, in their current times of constant war and destruction, it was the young kids who had to step up and be called "Captain".

Save for Captain Kheren, the Andorian ship commander of the USS Artemis, this officer was older than all the current captains in Lotus Fleet; and yet, he appeared to have no ambition to return to his former commanding role. Despite their established directive, to seek out new life and new civilizations, the Federation was trapped in war. And war was a game for the young.

Niomo was already thirty-four. Too young to retire, but too old to re-school himself, Starfleet was his only option. He had spent the past year reading about most up to date technologies, along with working on a few new warp theories. He hadn't been overly successful, but he felt it was due mostly to a lack of a real warp core at hand. Even the great LaForge was never perfect either.

"How are you enjoying Starbase 10? I have a cousin that used to be an Admiral up there in the early days of the Hromi sector exploration. Retired back to Italy before the whole Borg assault. Calls it the 'Best decision I ever made!' Haha! Part of the reason I decided to return to duty. He still hears whispers of what Lotus Fleet needs, and Engineers was one of 'em."

"We certainly do!" Samji replied. "I am very happy here at Starbase 10, thank you Commander. It is quite breathtaking. This base, which amounts to a small city, has everything I could ever need. And yet, being right on the edge of Federation space, we're practically staring into the face of the enemy... or potential enemy... or should I say ennemies, since we are close to both Klingon and Romulan borders and facing the Delta Quadrant, former Borg space and still home to oh-so-nice neighbors like the Hirogens and favorite emergence point of the Undine. The sense of safety mixed with danger, the feeling of being home but also exploring space... it is quite exhilarating."

Niomo laughed.

"I remember my time on the USS Lotus quite well. It was my first posting, after all. Starbase 10 is a magnificent station. I'd love to talk with the engineers who built her one day."

Samji shifted gears at that point, into an uncomfortable subject.

"Now, Mister Lire; I know you probably want to just leave this in the past, but I must ask about the incident that got you demoted."

He looked down at the PADD he was holding.

"I'm just going off your record, here, but it says here that upon being ambushed by the Borg shortly after the Borg War began, you commanded Task Force Charlie to fight rather than retreat. We lost much in that battle."

Niomo sighed as the Fleet Captain recalled the events. Slowly nodding his head, he felt a flush come onto his face.

*Even after all this time, I still feel embarrassed,* he realized.

To this day, he still believed that he had made the right call. The Borg did not just "Go Away" if the other side turned tail.

*Not that I can say that out loud after the JAG's official verdict.*

Samji looked up and could see that his words were painful to the officer.

"I wonder, though, if you would've fared any better had you retreated," he offered.

It wasn't charity. He truly felt that it was an impossible decision, despite the Starfleet JAG panel's decision that retreating was the "right" one.

"After having this time away for reflection, what do you think you learned from the whole experience?" Samji asked.

He wanted to see how the experience could benefit their current situation when they were at the verge of war with multiple factions.

"I've learned that there is always an unlimited amount of other options, Fleet Commander. Although, I come to this decision using the most current technologies and tactics. In the past, the options to a Captain were simple. 'Run' or 'Fight'. However, today they are also weighed by 'Strategy'. Today, I can think of four different ways to jam Borg sensors long enough for the fleet to complete a full withdrawal."

He paused to take a sip of his espresso.

"I can also use the same techniques to cripple a cube to keep it out of an assault indefinitely. Even if a battle is not hard, diplomacy is another option. I may just be a simple space-boy, but I know how to negotiate my way out of a bar crowded with Klingons or Romulans."

Niomo stopped for a moment. He nodded and completed his thought.

"If I could fight that battle again, I would. Despite what JAG has said, I contest that fleeing would have yielded similar, or even worse results. The battle was won. Despite our losses. But that is the past. I look toward the future."

Samji nodded with respect to the officer. Until that point, he had only seen doubt and uncertainty, but now he saw what he was looking for in the man: A commitment to what he felt was the right decision and a willingness to tell the younger, yet still senior officer, the truth as need be.

He smiled.

"That's good enough for me, Lieutenant Commander. Welcome back to Lotus Fleet," he congratulated. "And I look forward to welcoming you back in person to Starbase 10. As soon as you can, make the proper arrangements to come here."

Niomo gave the Fleet Captain a big broad smile.

"Ho Ho, Fleet Captain! Your call is of good timing. I can catch the next ship out to '10 by this evening. I'll see you in the morning, in about... two months from now, give or take a week. I'm glad to be back. Do you require anything else of me?"

"No, take care, Commander and see you then," and with that, Samji shut off the connection and returned to the daunting task at hand of attempting to protect and contain the Azimuth Horizon.

The, it really hit Allen Samji that it was finally time. Operation Horizon was becoming a reality, and it was time for the ships of Lotus Fleet to return and prepare for the task of containing the Azimuth Horizon anomaly.

As the Fleet Captain in command of Starbase 10 headed back to Operations on the station, he thought over the current state of all the Lotus Fleet ships.

The USS Lotus, the flagship of their fleet, now recently equipped with the best technology available, could be classified as the most advanced, or at least the most modern, ship on active duty in the whole of Starfleet. Captain V'Rell Gould had been overseeing the refit and was not hesitant to request every advantage available, and Fleet Captain Samji had no reservations to oblige. Being of the Intrepid class of heavy scout vessels, the Lotus already had the fastest warp core in the fleet, but it was now even faster, able to approach a speed of warp 9.989 and more efficient, thanks to recent improvements by the Starfleet Corps of Engineers. It was also outfitted with transwarp technology obtained by Voyager from Borg salvage and studied, re-engineered, and perfected over the years from the federation's own centuries old "Great Experiment" research. It required massive amounts of power and would only be able to be used once without requiring additional maintenance, but it still would allow the Lotus to jump into the fray if needed and at a moment's notice. The ship had already been equipped with ablative regenerative hull armor, but it was improved to defend against recently discovered subspace weapons. Multiphasic shielding was of course programmed into the energy defense grid to allow the ship to navigate safely through the Azimuth Horizon. Additionally, the phaser beam arrays and torpedo launchers were increased and made more efficient, as more modern torpedoes were added to the ship's armory, including transphasic warheads originally designed for countering the Borg's ability to so quickly adapt and modulate their shield frequencies.

Samji then looked up the current status of the other ships of the fleet.

The Defiant class destroyer USS McKenzie, under the command of veteran Lotus Fleet Captain Daniel Crist and the Prometheus class multivector assault warship USS Alsea, commanded by novice captain Kalten Siduri, were on important investigations into the activities of the Horizon's Children and the Klingon Empire respectively. These missions included classifications even he didn't have the authority to see, but he gave them strict orders to return within the next two months, no matter the state of their mission, so that they could take part in Operation Horizon.

He then thought about captain Daniel Summers' Akira class modular cruiser, the USS Spectre. Officially classified as Missing in Action and presumed lost, the Spectre had saved their starbase from a radiation surge out of the anomaly before disappearing. Those brave heroes would be specially honored, but only after Operation Horizon was complete and the sector was safe again.

Then there was finally the last major vessel assigned to the sector, the Ambassador class deep space explorer of Captain Kheren, the USS Artemis. This was the very starship that had first discovered the impending cosmic catastrophe. She herself was returning... after a final, critical but ultimately quiet survey mission of the Azimuth Horizon.

At least, that is what he had to keep telling himself so that he would repeat it that way to others. In truth, the Artemis was coming back from a bewildering time travel incident now highly classified by the Office of Temporal Investigations. As it were, it showed that Lotus Fleet in particular as much as Starfleet in general didn't need any Azimuth Horizon to experience 2interesting times2 in the damning Chinese sense of the word.

As he stepped into Operations, he said to Ensign Grok, his faithful Ferengi Operations officer:

"Mister Grok, we will need to set up a meeting for all the senior staff of all of our ships. Use the biggest briefing room on Deck 3 with the auditorium seating. Tentatively for two months from now, but we will see when more ships return."

*It was time for them to come home... he thought, and save the Federation... nay, the Galaxy, yet again.*

"Fleet captain Sir, then called out his Ferengi aide, there is an officer here telling me he is reporting as ordered."

*Ah yes... Lieutenant Junior Grade Michael J. Tritter.*

Fleet Captain Samji didn't know much about the man who he was meeting with. He did his job adequately, albeit with lackluster, according to the Captain from his last post, Daniel Crist of the USS McKenzie. He was quiet and kept to himself most of the mission. Still, his previous posts indicated his skill and ability at both the Tactical and Security aspects of the job were proficient, so Samji was quick to accept his transfer to the Spectre at the time he requested it... which was at a point when Samji knew Captain Summers' ship was headed toward Earth on the tail of a Klingon ship... and never heard from since.

It was a different story, now, however...

It was thus a young but towering mountain of an officer that entered his office and with a firm handshake as he greeted him. Well over two meters tall and a hundred and fifty kilos, he was blue-eyed and blond haired, with a buzzcut toting an expressionless pale face with a thick square jaw. From his size to his expression, he was the typical Starfleet security man, those affectionately referred to as the "red shirts" even if such a uniform had been out of use for more than a century now. But the nickname from the dangerous times of legendary Captain James T. Kirk was still in vogue and this particular officer certainly filled the stereotype perfectly.

"Good morning, Lieutenant; thank you for joining me."

A silent nod was all that he received in acknowledgement, but that was not unexpected with his recorded psychoprofile and behavior. So, the new commandant of the Hromi sector got right to the point.

"I wanted to call you in here because, as far as we know, the Spectre is M.I.A. and presumed lost. I'm not sure why you felt you needed to leave the McKenzie, and frankly it's none of my business. However, it means that, assuming the Spectre does not return, there is not an opening for you right now, except to help us out on Starbase 10. We likely have some very powerful enemies on their way here and we'll need your skill in combating them. I know it's no starship, but perhaps your time here will be rewarding nonetheless."

"Aye, Sir," was all the man said.

He gave the officer his assignments and list of department officers on Starbase 10 before dismissing him.

\* \* \*



He was on a couple days of leave. His arms hurt. They ached from excitement, lust. Those wrathful, fleeting feelings of distress, anger and love.

One last punch sent the bag falling to the floor a foot ahead of him with a thunderous THUD. It wasn't his brute force that dislodged the punching bag's chain from it's binding to the fabric. It was old. The place was old. His life felt old being there.

The dust from the seemingly Thor's Hammer-like ripped-open object falling from heaven's grasp started to settle. He stared at the punching bag lying in front of him on the floor.

He had wondered if all his life needed was a new chain. Some new fabric. Some new filling.

"Computer, end program."

He stepped into the hallway from the yellow-lined black walled room that was the idle holosuite. He was almost dripping with sweat. He'd forgotten his towel. He was on auto-pilot as he walked towards his quarters. His quarter Vulcan blood rearing it's subdued head, flashing his mind with emotions. He's exhausted just let them roll over him and back into his subconscious.

He entered his room and went straight towards the sonic shower. The lights were still off but he noticed a humanoid figure sitting on the couch backed against the window. He dashed back towards the door, grabbed a rifle from the wall mount to the right and trained it on the black form on the couch. Those emotions came back and blurred his vision.

"What the HELL are you doing in my quarters! Move and I WILL disable you! Computer, lights at full!"

Proper Starfleet confrontation verbiage spewed out of his mouth at full volume. He was ready to fire as soon as the lights rose. He ended up glad his intentions weren't as strong as he'd thought. The lights rose to full brightness. It was like a supernova had imploded. He had only been in the darkened room for a matter of a minute or two before noticing the intruder. But that was long enough for his pupils to start to dilate.

The dark figure on the couch illuminated, along with the rest of the room with what seemed like enough power to light up half the sector. The figure's face squinted and grimaced at the bright lights. He must have been sitting there for a while.

"Jesus, calm down, Mandella."

If it had been anyone else's voice, anyone else's face, he would have have been a hair away from knocking him dead. In his blind fright and rage, he had set the rifle to kill.

"What the hell, Hutch!", he said as he lowered the rifle. "Do you make a habit of sneaking into people's quarters and playing stalker? Do you know how close you were to a funeral... Ensign? You are still an Ensign right? And do you know what TIME it is? It's almost midnight!"

"What do you mean, still?" He said, only hearing distractedly the quip about his rank. "Psh, I just figured I'd drop by. Didn't even know you were heading this way, much less were actually here. Thanks for the invite, by the way."

"I was getting around to it. And by the way, don't change the subject."

He activated the safety on the rifle, noticed his mistake of setting choice and clipped it back on the mount, grateful his finger hadn't slipped.

"Why couldn't you have just called me up instead of acting in as my Guardian Demon? I've got enough of those."

"Y'know, for ol' times sake."

Hutch stood up from the couch and stretched out his arms.

"Actually, I came by hoping you'd be here. You weren't, so I made myself comfortable. Sitting in the dark. Taking a nap. Like some kind of house cat..."

Why he chose to nap on the irresistibly comfortable, standard fulfillment, Starfleet quarters couch instead of his own bed was unknown. He was a little scatter brained sometimes.

Sam Hutch has been John Mandella's bud since year one in the Academy. Though they still couldn't figure out exactly why they were friends. He was an overall average man. Medium build, medium height, brown hair, brown eyes, tanned skin. His apparent mediocrity had misled many; misled them to believe he couldn't kill a man if he had to. Misled many to believe he hadn't. Misled most to believe he was just a regular human.

"Get over here, you bastard."

Hutch walked over and extended his hand for a formal shake. Mandella grabbed his hand, pulled him over and gave him a hug. It'd been at least a year since he'd even heard from him, much less seen him in person.

"It's good to see ya again, buddy."

Hutch backed up away from Mandella. John had forgotten about his still damp shirt. Hutch was a little germaphobic and easily stressed out when it came to "contaminated items" of personal wear.

"Egh, come on! Why do you think I just wanted a hand shake? Sheesh, Mandella, take a shower."

Hutch twitched a little and then symbolically dusted off the front of his uniform.

"I was trying to... until my resident stalker here was almost vaporized," Mandella said while shaking his fist at him. "Unless you wanted to watch, that is."

He kidded, hoping to drive Sam out of his already violated quarters and avoid any more unnecessary confrontations and heart fibrillation.

"I'm good, Mandella." He said waving his arm in disapproval. "You seem like you've got other business to take care of. Meet you in the mess in the morning?"

Hutch was quite adept at convincing people with simple common sense. It worked.

As usual.

Hutch left Mandella's quarters. John walked around the corner to the bathroom. He leaned over the sink and stared at himself in the mirror. Seeing Hutch brought back memories of the Academy, which chained to memories after the Academy which followed the all too familiar track back to his assignment at "Lamp Post".

He leaned forward. Something fell out of the breast pocket of his shirt and towards the sink. His reflexes saved it before it fell in. Mandella opened his hand and looked down.

**If speaking is silver, then listening is gold.**

That phrase, inscribed onto a gold-pressed latinum pendant, was the the motto of Listening Post LP-10; "Lamp Post."

And so, later, after a good shower and a short but restful sleep, Mandella made his way to the mess in the morning and singled out Hutch, sitting near the windows of the room, mirroring his earlier scene in John's quarters. He pulled back a seat and sat down at Hutch's table.

"Now you don't smell so much like a Targ. Well done. Could've used a little less cologne though, Mandella. I can hardly breathe."

He wafted his hands in front of his face.

"I'm not wearing any cologne, Hutch." John said as the Lieutenant who had recently sat down at the table next to them rose up from his chair and stared at us disdainfully.

"So, fruity is your natural body odor then? What are you, Andorian?"

The Lieutenant needn't speak a word before Hutch started babbling at Warp 8, spewing apologetic pre-constructed statements from his archived inventory of excuses and explanations. Mandella had stopped listening to his rambles many years ago. No one ever really understood or heard *any* of it, but the other party almost always felt the need to downplay whatever "incident" Hutch was trying to wiggle himself out of. No one was sure how he did it.

"Very well, Ensign. There's never a need to be offensive. Remember that." Said the inflated ego balloon wrapped in a uniform.

"Yes, Sir. Again, I didn't mean any offense." Hutch said as he repeatedly bowed his head and pleaded.

He should have become a diplomat.

They finished thier breakfast and parted ways once again. Hutch was on his last day of shore leave as the entire starbase was now effervescent with intense activity, noticeable even after the whole week of frantically evacuating all civilians usually found in Lotus Fleet's headquarters. The goodbye was rather scripted, stiff and correct.

They would never really ever say, "Good-bye". It was always, "Until next time." One never wants to close off the universe to someone you want to see again.

*Never leave goodbyes, just good memories.*

He had learned that from Scott.

\* \* \*

"Bridge to Lieutenant Calhoun."

Lieutenant Junior Grade David Calhoun finished his gamma shift bridge duty as the Tactical and Security officer about a half hour ago. David was currently serving on board the USS Excalibur, a Sovereign-class starship which also happened now to be under the command of his father, Captain Mackenzie Calhoun since its last commander, Captain DeSalle, had been promoted to Klingon Task Force Command on the USS Thunderchild with all the border trouble brewing.

The Excalibur was David's first assignment coming out of the Academy where he had started out as a security team leader and then stationed as the gamma shift tactical officer on the bridge. A month ago, David had received his promotion to Lieutenant Junior Grade and had decided to apply for a transfer to Lotus Fleet, the most elite of all divisions of Starfleet; the very one that had spearheaded and ultimately gave the final blow when the United Federation of Planets singlehandedly put an end to the Borg menace on the galaxy.

Undersandably, not every officer could simply apply to join this exceptional group of officers; even less among those few even qualified. To be finally selected...

David felt suddenly nervous, a strange mixture of apprehension and hope.

"Calhoun here, go ahead bridge," David finally replied after a short pause.

"You have an incoming subspace message from Rear Admiral Kotari."

"Thank you bridge; I'll take the message in my quarters."

He was already on his way back to his quarters having grabbed a dinner in Ten Forward. Within a minute, David was at his personal computer terminal and punched in his personal code to access the real-time subspace communication. The symbol of the United Federation of Planets appeared and then was replaced with the image of a Boslic Rear Admiral who David assumed to be Kotari.

"Good morning, Sir; what can I do for you?" David asked, getting straight to the point.

"I am Rear Admiral Kotari, formerly Fleet Captain for the Hromi sector. Since there are still some transition paperwork to be done before my successor take over, I am handling your case. I have reviewed your application to transfer to Lotus Fleet. I have to say I am generally wary of those who have apparently made their way off of the merits of their parents."

Kotari's words infuriated David. *You pompous, judgmental, opinionated...*

It was a good thing that he had learned to keep an unreadable exterior, a perfect poker face that never gave away what he was thinking. Instead, David just gave the rear admiral a cold, hard stare. He was extremely confident in his own abilities and he thought that his service record spoke for itself.

*I have earned my rank and my position without any special treatment*, his whole attitude shot back silently at the officer on the small screen.

Calhoun didn't back down and Kotari respected that. David noted that his tone and facial expressions softened a bit and the Fleet Captain said:

"Your record so far speaks for itself though. Your Academy scores, Kobayashi result, the hand-to-hand training you learned from your father and demonstrated in the Academy, and the incident with the Romulans underscores your tactical expertise and inborn and learned abilities. Both Captain Gould and I agree that your presence on the USS Lotus will be an asset, as well as your final test to prove yourself to Lotus Fleet."

Kotari's words calmed David, and actually gave him some hope that the rest of this conversation would bear fruit to better news. The rear admiral's final words included instructions to get to Starbase 10 and report in to a Captain V'rell Gould. At this, Calhoun's mood brightened. His application had been accepted!

More than that: he would become the chief of tactical and security aboard the Intrepid-class USS Lotus, nothing less than Lotus Fleet's flagship.

"Thank you, Sir; I look forward to proving my worth to Lotus Fleet," Calhoun replied. *And to make you eat your words.*

Finally Kotari said:

"Good luck out there, be safe, and keep your ship safe, Lieutenant," and signed out with a nod.

The screen displayed the UFP emblem after the Boslic officer signed off. David turned his monitor off, sighed.

*I hope that Captain Gould is more open-minded than that fool.*

"Computer; locate Captain Calhoun," commanded David.

"Captain Calhoun is on the bridge," the computer intoned.

That made sense as the captain typically was on duty during alpha shift. David walked out of his quarters and headed to the bridge. When he didn't see his father immediately, he walked over to the ready room door and depressed the chime.

"Enter," he heard the captain state.

David walked into the ready room and saw the captain sitting at his desk.

"David, come in and have a seat. I just got the notification from Rear Admiral Kotari that your transfer to the USS Lotus has been accepted. I expected nothing less of course; your skills demand nothing less. This is a significant step in your career; becoming a department head," Mackenzie stated. "I'm certain that you will be hearing from your mother soon enough with her congratulations."

"Rear Admiral Kotari is under the impression that I've gotten to where I'm at now because of my parents' positions," David stated dryly. He went on to explain what the Kotari had stated and how the conversation went.

"The only influence that I have placed on your career," stated the elder Mackenzie, "is on what ship you would serve, not if. It is typical for Starfleet brats, such as you, who turn around and serve in the Fleet to get that same reaction from first generation officers such as Kotari. Most likely Kotari are simply testing you and how you react; it sounds as if you passed."

David had not thought of that, but then he was much younger and newer at this than his father who had served for quite a number of years, not only in Starfleet but as the heroic Xenexian warlord. Mackenzie and his son continued their conversation as Mackenzie gave some fatherly advice and imparted some relevant experiences to David.

Captain Calhoun finally informed David that he would take a class IX shuttle to Starbase 10 where another officer who was transferring to the Excalibur would return it. David was scheduled to depart at 0800 hours the following day.

Upon leaving the ready room, David spotted Lieutenant Commander Zak Kebron at the tactical station. Lieutenant Commander Kebron was the Excalibur's chief of tactical and security and was David's supervisor. The tactical and security chief had already received Calhoun's transfer orders and was working on changing the duty schedule. After discussing a few departmental matters and imparting his congratulations to David, Calhoun headed back to his quarters to pack and prepare for his journey.

It would take approximately twelve days at warp 6 to reach Starbase 10 from the Excalibur's current position, thirteen light years away en route to Regulus, but shuttle travel often seemed longer than it really was.

At 1630 hours, one of David's friends dropped by and wanted to have a drink in Ten Forward to wish him well. Upon arrival, he was surprised to find that an impromptu party had been arranged. David had made numerous friends during his time on the Excalibur, to include the senior staff and most of the security force on board. The main lounge was packed and the party went on for a good five hours before beginning to break up.

Ensign Elizabeth Tyler, a Human security officer who David had developed a casual relationship with during his tour aboard the Excalibur, walked David back to his quarters. It was a good thing he was already packed and that the shuttle ride was twelve days, because David did not get much sleep that night.

The next morning came almost too quickly. At 0730, David got dressed and headed to shuttle bay 3 where the shuttle was berthed. Upon arrival, David was greeted by Captain Mackenzie Calhoun, Commander Burgoyne 172, the first officer from Eminaar 7, and Lieutenant Commander Zak Kebron. His father came in last and presented his son with a sword.

"This is a sword of Calhoun," Mackenzie stated. "I had it made for you when you were commissioned and have been waiting for an occasion to present it to you. It seems only appropriate now that you're taking on a position of leadership."

David took the sword and looked it over. It was a Xenexian short sword, had the patterns appropriate for Xenex and the town of Calhoun. The Starfleet insignia was on the hilt of the sword.

"Thanks dad. Who knows, I may find opportunity to use this sword someday."

The three senior officers said their farewells to David and departed the shuttlebay to allow him to begin his preflight checklist. After about ten minutes, David opened a channel to the bridge.

"Lieutenant Calhoun to the bridge; preflight complete and I'm ready for departure."

"Acknowledged; Shuttle 2, you have clearance to launch. Safe journey and good luck David," responded the operations officer on duty.

The shuttle bay officer received the same orders and engaged the slightly permeable level 1 force field to keep the atmosphere in the shuttle bay in, but allow the shuttle to pass through. Then the massive shuttlebay door opened and revealed the starscape beyond. David eased the class IX shuttlecraft off of the deck and through the force field. He was now in open space. He took a moment to do a fly-by of the Excalibur.

Nearly seven hundred meters long, over three million metric tons, sleek and profiled like a titanic dagger, the Sovereign class was equipped to handle all the mission parameters of Starfleet, be it colonisation, exploration, assistance or peacekeeping. But with her heavy phaser arrays, multiple quantum torpedo launchers, powerful shields and thick armor plating, this was first and foremost a battleship.

*She is a beautiful ship.*

He then set course for Starbase 10 and engaged at its maximum speed of warp 6. As the shuttle jumped to warp, David looked out at the streaking stars.

*This should be a restful twelve days trip.*

After about nine days through his trip, as David's eyes began to feel heavy from the lack of proper sleep the nights before, thinking about the excitement that laid ahead of him serving in the hot tri-border region between the Federation and both Klingon and Romulan empires, his attention began to waver from piloting the shuttle. But an alarm blared, bringing him back to an attentive state.

"Vessel on collision course," the computer stated. "Impact in 5, 4, 3..."

The shuttle's autopilot system kicked in, dropped out of warp, and veered out of the way, just as a small vessel whizzed past. It was bigger than the shuttle he was in but not by much. It had a sleek, triangular look reminiscent of a Prometheus-class, in shape, but certainly not in scale. The ship was clearly a fighter, but not one seen before by any Starfleet officer.

As the shuttle came about and to a stop, another ship streaked across the viewscreen. This one was a familiar short-range interceptor used primarily by Federation civilian colonies for planetary defense.

On the shuttle's sensors, the interceptor could be seen firing several phaser shots in the direction of the fighter. One impacted its starboard engine, causing it to spin around wildly. The interceptor passed right by the fighter and began coming about for another pass, clearly intent on destroying the ship.

The shuttle beeped and indicated there was a communication coming from the injured fighter:

An S.O.S.

David quickly brought his shuttle's shields and weapons online. He then set a course to place his shuttle between the unknown vessel and the interceptor's likely approach trajectory. Calhoun wanted to get close to the unknown ship in distress, but not too close as the ship was still moving erratically. While David's shuttle was moving into position, he opened a channel.

"This is Lieutenant David Calhoun of the Federation Starship Excalibur," Calhoun declared. *I am in one of the Excalibur's shuttles after all.* "Interceptor, you have disabled the unknown vessel. Whatever he did to antagonize you, he's no threat now. Break off your attack; I'll take it from here."

As Lieutenant Junior Grade Calhoun's shuttle moved into position, the Interceptor began its approach run towards the unknown vessel.

*Well, David thought, it's either going to fire at me or go around me.*

The interceptor slowed its approach and a response came over the comm.

"Starfleet vessel. You are interfering in the legal proceedings of our planet in the matter of our apprehension of this fugitive. Move aside or you will be fired upon."

"Don't listen to them!" came another voice, which came from the fighter David could see contained the markings H.C.S. Rebirth. "They mean to kill me, not apprehend me! If they can't have this ship, they'll destroy it and me in it!"

The interceptor had more firepower than Calhoun's class 2 shuttle, but the shuttle was more maneuverable, especially with Calhoun being rated a level 7 pilot. The sensors confirmed that the shield generators were about equal in output, but since the shuttle was smaller, David's shields would take a bit more of a pounding.

"Interceptor, you are in interstellar space outside of your star system and within Federation space. As such, you will answer to Starfleet's direction. Now stand down and let's discuss this. If you are truly interested in justice, and you have been wronged, then you will have no problem allowing both sides of this story to be heard. I invite one representative from your party and the pilot from the HCS Rebirth to join me on my shuttle. But first, everyone needs to stand down their weapons."

As a precaution, Lieutenant Junior Grade Calhoun acquired a transporter lock onto the pilot of the HCS Rebirth. If push came to shove, David could at least save the pilot and outrun the interceptor.



In the long minutes after Lieutenant Calhoun sent his message, the interceptor was as silent and unmoving as a frog waiting patiently for the fly. Clearly they were deciding whether the firefight would be worth it, if they could launch a surprise attack to take out both opposing vessels at once.

After what seemed like hours, they finally responded.

"That vessel is our rightful technology and we will not let it fall into any hands, even Starfleet. But we will send over a representative to discuss the terms of *his* surrender," the voice spat, emphasizing the word 'his' with particular disgust.

"I will submit to the will of Starfleet," the voice from the Rebirth responded.

"Stand down your weapons and then your shields; prepare to be transported and be unarmed. This will be a peaceful discussion. Signal when you are ready. Calhoun out."

David was no fool. As a precaution, he set up two force fields within the shuttle. The first isolated him in the cockpit and the second bisected the rear portion. This essentially created a "T" within the interior of the shuttle.

By that point in time, Lieutenant Junior Grade Calhoun had received ready signals from both ships. As ordered, both ships had disengaged weapons and shields and were ready for transport.

David lowered his shields and initiated transport. He chuckled to himself as both parties had energy weapons on them; Calhoun ably disabled the weapons before materialisation.

"Welcome aboard gentlemen; let's talk."

The species of the man that beamed in to David's right side from the interceptor was unknown to him. He had a slightly protruding forehead ridge, with pronounced ridges where many humanoids' eyebrows would be. Otherwise, he looked quite similar to a human, except that the digits on his hands were not separated, but rather were fused together with a thin webbed cartilage between the finger bones.

To David's surprise, the man on the left from the Rebirth looked Vulcan... he had enough experience to be able to distinguish them from Romulans.

As they both materialized and took a few seconds to adjust to their surroundings, they simultaneously turned to each other and swiftly reached their hands to their belts, only to find nothing to reach for.

David's greeting drew their attention for a slight second before they lunged at each other, only to both be thrown back by the invisible forcefield dividing the shuttle.

David simply stood with a cold, hard stare while they attempted their various attacks, and upon their giving up and looking at him with defeated stares, at last said:

"If you're ready to talk, let me know."

The Vulcanoid on the left simply grinned.

"I am in the Federation's debt. Proceed, please."

He then turned to the nearest chair and slumped down into it, in a manner quite unbecoming a Vulcan. The man was clearly tired and weary from his run from the authorities.

The man on the right simply nodded and waved his webbed hand in a dismissive gesture.

A quick glance at the console in front of David confirmed the race of Vulcan for the fugitive and gave him the designation Malcorian for the other. He was one of a very few from his planet who had learned of the Enterprise-D's contact with his species, and had found a way to venture out into space.

The only nearby Federation colony was a newer one on Adelphus IV. It had been repopulated after the Borg had wiped out the native population almost thirty years prior. A recent alert notification on the file for Adelphus IV indicated that the Federation had lost communication with the colony and that the two ships sent to investigate were classified as Missing In Action.

"Gentlemen," David began, "as I stated before, I am Lieutenant JG David Calhoun. I was on my way to Starbase 10 when my shuttle almost ran into you."

David turned to face the Malcorian on his right. He seemed more agitated than the Vulcan and besides, in Federation law, the prosecution starts and then defense concludes.

"The computer states that you are Malcorian; that the Federation made contact with your species on the eve of your species discovering Warp capabilities but that your leader at the time, a Chancellor Avel Durken, chose to hold off any further contact to allow the Malcorian society time to adjust to new capabilities and prepare for the knowledge that they were not the center of the universe. One Malcorian, Minister Mirasta Yale, who was primarily responsible for your society's advent of warp capability decided to leave her planet and explore the universe. I am a little surprised to see a Malcorian. Would you please introduce yourself and calmly inform me of how you came to be in possession of a Federation interceptor and what your side of the story is of this conflict? Considering the range of your interceptor, where are you based out of?"

The Malcorian turned to David and introduced himself.

"I am Karster Durken, Lieutenant, grandson of the Chancellor you mentioned. I found out about my grandfather's dealings with the Federation when I reached the age of maturity, fifteen Federation standard years after it had happened. It was in a heavily secured computer file that I just happened upon one day while doing my job as Chief Security Officer of the capitol complex."

His agitation decreased slightly as he told his story, but continued to keep the details of it vague, dodging David's direct questions.

"I confronted my father who was Chancellor at the time and he either denied all knowledge or was truly never told about it. My conclusion was that either my grandfather or my father was keeping secrets even from his own family, and my anger drove me to find a way off my planet. I took security jobs for various Federation colonies, cargo ships, and security organizations and now, nearly thirty years since I left home, I am the Chief Security Officer of the colony on Adelphus IV!"

Durken said the last part proudly. He clearly felt the job was important, but he was obviously hiding something about the specifics of the job.

"My superiors directed me to either obtain or destroy that ship and I intend to do it," he voiced threateningly, clearly agitated once again.

"Well Mr. Durken," began Calhoun, "I am also a Chief of Security so in that, we can relate. You've explained the 'how' of how you, specifically a Malcorian, found your way out here. But you haven't begun to explain what this man," indicating the Vulcan, "has done to be wanted either dead or alive. Furthermore, you stated that you are from the colony on Adelphus IV. The Federation lost contact with that colony weeks ago and so too have we lost contact with the USS Sentinel and the USS Cayuga who were sent to investigate and lend aid. Can you shed any light upon what is going on at your colony and what happened to the Sentinel and the Cayuga? As a fellow officer of the law, I'm sure that you understand the importance of a thorough investigation."

Before Durken had a chance to speak, David reached over to the console nearest him and activated a recording device. As the Chief Security Officer of Adelphus IV began to speak, Calhoun sent a subspace transmission to Starbase 10, informing them of where he was and who he was with.

*I'm certain Lotus Fleet will want to know about this.*

The Malcorian became even more agitated, as if he knew his life was in danger, but David could not ascertain why this was. Durken should have known well enough that David, as a Federation officer, would never hurt him outright and the forcefields were up between all of them.

"I think I've been generous enough with my responses," Durken replied, shifting nervously. "This man is inconsequential. I will be taking our fighter back with us. You can deal with him."

He reached for a device on his wrist which appeared to be a site-to-site transport device, but before his hand could make contact, he froze, paralyzed, as if caught in a stasis field. He fell to his knees and looked over at the Vulcan, barely able to angrily voice the word "No!" as the pain became worse and he began to convulse.

David could see now that the Vulcan was staring intently at the man with deep, unbreakable concentration. He was standing with the primary two fingers from both hands touching each of his temples. Despite any protestation from Lieutenant Calhoun, the Vulcan would not stop.

Before he could even lower the forcefield to forcibly stop the Vulcan, the Malcorian breathed his last breath and collapsed to the deck.

It all happened so fast. After Karster Durken dropped to the deck, David hit the controls that lowered all forcefields. Though the Vulcan now seemed weak, Calhoun still surmised him as a threat which needed to be neutralized. The instant that the internal force fields dropped, Calhoun did a swift side kick to the Vulcan's head, knocking him to the deck. David saw that the Vulcan wasn't unconscious, but was clearly weak and not from the kick to the head.

Calhoun already had his phaser on him, so he grabbed a med-kit and rushed to the Malcorian's side, quickly scanning him with a medical tricorder.

"You will find...that he is dead," said the Vulcan with a strained voice.

Unfortunately, the medical tricorder concurred with that assessment. It showed that death was caused by a seizure. David drew his phaser and aimed it at the Vulcan.

"If you so much as look at me or move to place your fingers to your head, I will stun you," promised Calhoun. "WHY did you kill that man? More importantly, HOW did you kill him? Vulcans are touch telepaths, not to mention pacifists."

Seeing someone killed without provocation enraged David; after all, the Malcorian had come willingly and in good faith to the shuttlecraft which was under Calhoun's command and therefore, under David's protection.

The Vulcan moved to sit up, but did not make eye contact with Calhoun, nor did he moved to touch his head, which was now bruised green from the kick he had received.

"I'm waiting for an explanation," demanded the Starfleet officer.

The Vulcan sighed and resisted the urge to rub his aching head.

"The kick was unnecessary, Lieutenant. I am on your side."

"Not from where I'm standing. You're lucky I didn't just shoot you," retorted Calhoun.

"That man would've killed you as soon as he got the chance. The only reason he didn't attempt to destroy your shuttle immediately is that he knew it would give me time to affect a repair to Rebirth and escape."

"Many have tried to kill me; I'm still here."

The Vulcan then turned and looked into the eyes of David Calhoun and saw that the young Starfleet officer didn't believe him.

"I am K'rassit. I was part of the same security force as Durken... at least, until my rebellion. But it wasn't a security force for a Federation colony, as you suspect. That colony is gone."

He spoke with force, but paused for a moment to let the realization sink in.

"Are you trying to say that the re-built colony on Adelphus IV has been taken over or destroyed?"

"Why do you think you lost two of your ships? I stood by and did nothing while Durken ordered their destruction," K'rassit said bowing his head.

He then turned toward a console showing the nearest system, with a planet highlighted in red... Adelphus IV. He pointed toward the planet.

"The colony is there, but our organization has taken it over. You may have heard of the Horizon's Children? That man was not your ally. As I said, he would've killed you without hesitation the moment he got the upper hand."

"I believe in our Prophet, the Preservers, and the Rebirth, Lieutenant," K'rassit said proudly, and David noted that the word he used was not in reference to the damaged fighter. "But I didn't sign up for hostage taking or killing of innocents. Directly or not, that... man..." he spat the word with disgust, "slaughtered thousands on the colony, and he didn't deserve to live, Lieutenant."

"That doesn't tell me how you were able to kill him," Calhoun retorted.

"As for the manner in which I killed him, well..." K'rassit winced and turned away from the Lieutenant to rub his head, hoping that what he had said so far, and the fact that he wasn't looking at David would prevent his immediate stunning. He kept the other hand down just in case.

K'rassit turned back to face David.

"Have you heard of the V'tosh ka'tur, Lieutenant? In your language it roughly translates to 'Vulcans without logic'. We are a sect that has lasted for centuries, in the shadows. While most of our Vulcan brethren spend their long lives focusing on logic, meditation, and mathematical and scientific intellect, we have focused our efforts throughout the centuries on the psychic aspects of the Vulcan mind. The efforts of our ancestors have allowed us to move beyond the need to touch our subjects and have given us an inherent aptitude in the ability to cause pain and even death."

K'rassit seemed very prideful of this fact. The Vulcan might have turned away from the Horizon's Children, but it was clear he was still proud of the *V'tosh ka'tur*.

"As you might have guessed, my abilities were highly valued by the Horizon's Children security force," the Vulcan said with a smirk. "I may be illogical and kill, but I don't want to kill innocents, Lieutenant. This is why I was bringing you the prototype. I was fleeing to Starbase 10 to hand over the ship to Starfleet. The prototype is the very first ship able to fly directly through the Azimuth Horizon with no ill effects."

K'rassit paused to let all that information sink in.

"If that's true, then you have a very valuable piece of equipment. This technology would be valuable to the Federation and since you were already going to deliver it to Starbase 10, you won't mind if I tractor your ship and tow it back..."

A beeping noise started emanating from the device that the Malcorian had tried to press prior to his death.

"Commander Durken, please respond," came a voice. "Do you want me to beam you out? Durken? Durken!"

"This is going to go over well," Calhoun intoned sarcastically.

The body was then beamed away and immediately Calhoun put up the shuttle's shields and opened a channel to the interceptor.

"Interceptor, this is Lieutenant Calhoun. The Vulcan has killed Commander Durken, and I have him in my custody. There's no need to..."

The shuttle shook violently as a beam attack hit the shields. The red alert klaxon went off.

"I think it's time we left Lieutenant, what do you think!?" shouted the Vulcan over the noise. "You need to let me go, Lieutenant. You need to distract him while I make repairs to the fighter engines."

Calhoun took control of the helm and immediately accelerated and jinked the shuttle around, avoiding the next round of phaser fire from the interceptor. The inertial dampers couldn't quite keep up with the acceleration and K'rassit was thrown off his feet.

"You might want to sit down...this might get a bit bumpy," David smirked.

K'rassit rubbed his head and sat up.

"You won't be able to flee and tractor the fighter at the same time," K'rassit added, sensing David's thoughts. "I promise I will do what I originally intended, Lieutenant, and give your Starfleet the gift of Rebirth. If not, you can hunt me down and kill me yourself. I won't resist. but we'll both be killed if you don't let me go now!"

"How fast can your ship travel? If it cannot outrun the interceptor, then there's no point in returning you to your ship."

"At peak capacity, the Rebirth and the interceptor are equally matched for warp speed," K'rassit informed Calhoun. "However, with the damage sustained, even with the quick repairs, it may not be able to run at full capacity."

The shuttlecraft shook as it took a glancing blow from the interceptor. The Starfleet officer returned fire and pivoted his craft to come up behind the interceptor.

"Which means that this shuttle can catch you if you attempt to run; that's a promise, not a threat K'rassit. I'll beam you back to the Rebirth and allow you to effect repairs. Signal me when you are ready to go to warp. I'll concentrate my fire on the interceptor's engines in order to disable it and buy us time to reach Starbase 10. Are we clear?"

K'rassit quickly thought it over and agreed that it was a good strategy.

"I'm prepared to transport when ready Lieutenant."

After a few moments where Calhoun performed a series of maneuvers and returned fire upon the interceptor, he finally stated "energizing" and transported K'rassit back to his ship.

Once again, Calhoun maneuvered the shuttle in behind the interceptor where it had no weapons arcs. As it turns out, the interceptor pilot was not a talented at the helm as Calhoun, not to mention that the interceptor was larger and less maneuverable than a class IX shuttle. As the interceptor's shields began to weaken, it turned and began to make a run at the Rebirth.

David opened a channel to the Rebirth.

"K'rassit...the interceptor is making a run for you. Put up your shields if you have them or get out of there."

After a few moments of hearing nothing, Calhoun began to worry,

"K'rassit!"

Calhoun continued to fire on the interceptor, bringing down its aft shields. The interceptor fired on the Rebirth and thankfully the weapons discharge hit the Rebirth's shields. Calhoun fired two more shots, hitting the interceptor's warp nacelle and impulse engines.

"Lieutenant Calhoun, I'm ready to depart," K'rassit finally responded. "Set a course for Starbase 10 and engage."

The Rebirth leaped into warp followed shortly by Calhoun's shuttle.

The interceptor was left far behind.

As the two ships approached Starbase 10 several hours later, the voice of Ensign Grok could be heard over the comms on both vessels.

"Unidentified vessels, this is Starbase 10. Approach no further without valid identification or we will be forced to open fire."

"Lieutenant, if you please?" came the voice of K'rassit.

David sent the appropriate security codes over a secure channel and a request to allow the vessel to be docked at Starbase 10.

"Please have a security team meet us at the transporter room," he added.

"Unknown vessels, you are cleared to dock," Grok transmitted to K'rassit.

Fleet Captain Samji was on his way to Operations when he received a message from Ensign Grok.

"Sir, a Lieutenant Junior Grade David Calhoun has arrived... and he has an interesting guest. They're beaming to Transporter Room 4."

"Thank you Ensign, I'm on my way," Samji replied.

As the new arrivals beamed down, a security team arranged on either side had their weapons pointed at the pad. Two of them approached and took hold of the Vulcan.

"Lieutenant..." the Vulcan said with a disappointed look toward David.

"Sorry, K'rassit. I did as you asked, but you still must answer for your crimes."

He turned to the security officers.

"Place this man under arrest for the premeditated murder of one Karster Durken, and for espionage, due to his alleged association with the Horizon's Children."

His honor forced him to also tell the truth about K'rassit's willingness to assist the Federation.

"Please also let it be known, however, that he did of his own accord, escape the Horizon's Children with valuable technology, at great risk to himself, and *may* have been intending to deliver it to Starbase 10."

"How very generous of you," the Vulcan said, sarcastically, as they led him away to the brig, leaving Lieutenant Junior Grade David Calhoun free to prepare his transfer to Starbase 10 and eventually to the Lotus as Chief Tactical and Security Officer.

And leaving him with a lot of questions still unanswered.

\* \* \*

Across the light-studded blackness, a crackling tendril of light suddenly flashed out of nowhere, tearing the silent darkness of space with a brief flash of intense light. The lightning bolt left an after image that was then as suddenly followed on it's crooked path by raging fire.

Like flames of a forest fire running on a lone denuded branch, The tongue of orange-golden fire followed the exact erratic trace left by the lightning bolt and the entire stary sky went ablaze. Behind it, a titanic deflagration suddenly flared out like the detonation of a supernova that whisked out the dim lights of the stars everywhere, as if the entire universe suddenly bursted into flames. A huge ring of fire filled the void, with a blindingly white center and tiny dark specks swirling like flakes of ash within its flames.

And then, it flared anew; larger, brighter, lingering longer across the heavens.

As if it would never die out... and in the end, devour everything.  
It was beautiful.

It was frightening. It was monstrous.

But what was most frightening, most monstrous, was that this cosmic fire burned farther and deeper than just accross the physical universe.

It consumed even minds, hearts... and souls.

Even if it was here but a holographic projection on the holodeck of a starship.

An Ambassador Class starship like the USS Artemis had two standard holodeck facilities, both located on deck 6. Because such facilities combined light projection, forcefield, transporter and replicator technologies, safety protocols were traditionally especially well secured and could only be removed by the Captain, First Officer or a minimum of two officers of Commander rank or higher with appropriate autorization codes and security level 9 or higher.



But here, by order of Lotus Fleet Command, even such bypass had been permanently removed from all Lotus Fleet starships. Because there were holoemitters throughout the ship for emergency medical and technical purposes, no accident or abuse could now be possible when activating holograms. "Safeties off" was no longer an option and the restriction was hardwired into the system so that it would simply go offline if this procedure was even forcibly attempted through its circuits or programming.

But, even then, it did not make this interstellar fire storm any less intimidating.

Standing in the void like some primeval god, the athletic Andorian captain contemplated both the vision and the effect of the cosmic inferno on both outer and inner worlds... and shivered.

Kheren was Andorian, born and bred of a people of fire from a world of ice; he did not shiver. Not physically... but he still felt a coldness looking at the holographic image of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly that chilled him to the soul.

*We found this thing... this destructive force that now will consume the universe...*

His thoughts brought him back to the rescue operation that had brought them first face to face with this anomaly born of another universe; the maiden voyage of his ship, the famous Stalwart Guardian of the Federation of the Cardassian war over half a century ago, revived, refitted and recreated to face the challenges of the twenty-fifth century. But how could even the starship Artemis, or any starship, face *that*?

*We fought this thing...* he then recalled, saving an ancient civilization from this hellish inferno devouring the heavens... even when others, then the Klingons, tried to interfere with their own fiery thirst for conquest, as devouring and senseless as that anomaly itself.

The life-like projection before him ebbed and flowed like a spreading sea of fire. It entered our universe through subspace fractures, both natural and artificial, and then was drawn out at a frightening speed towards any gravitational point, destroying nebulae, planets, stars, everything it merely touched. Kheren recalled how the immense mass of the X'ell Dyson shell alone had stretched the immense inferno towards it; he could see how the more massive stars did the same as the anomaly inexorably expanded in sudden, unexpected flaring bursts; in the inhabited sectors of space, it even raced accross the stars with horrifying swiftness and intensity, like the warp-travelled Klingon and Romulan empires, Cardassian and Ferengi territories and through the heart of Federation Space... even the distant and vast Dominion or dead Borg space and its abandoned transwarp conduits; even the far away Illythirii empire, who's entire technology was graviton-based, and so was engulfed even deeper and faster than all the rest...

There was no place to run, no place to hide in this entire universe; or maybe any universe...

They could only stand and fight.

*But who will?* wondered Kheren, looking at the overwhelming catastrophe spreading throughout the cosmos.

The painful memories of the Artemis third mission flooded him with the same burning pain as the very touch of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. Had it not been for Starfleet regulations and preparedness, his ship would have been commandeered by a rabble of deluded crewmembers somehow convinced that the anomaly was a "Sign from God"; the final work of the half-mythical Preservers who once seeded sentience throughout the galaxy and now opened the doors of paradise to their children.

Or so they claimed to believe.

Kheren, like all Andorians and most citizens of the Federation in this day and age, was utterly baffled by such irrational beliefs. A most patient individual, he could easily tolerate such archaic thinking by simply ignoring it and letting others deal themselves with their own confusion. But when it was the excuse and the tool, the weapon for power-hungry people to manipulate others through violence, pain and destruction, like those self-proclaimed Horizon Children, both his patience and tolerance were snuffed out faster than the anomaly did with stars and planets.

And then, there were also rumors, if not reports, of the Klingons and the Romulans blaming the Federation for this cosmic fire threatening all and both howling for blood...

This devouring hell burned not only in the sky but in the hearts of people. It threatened to consume not only all worlds but all reason.

*How can we, a handful of Starfleet officers, fight all that?* he asked the burning thing silently.

It was phrased like a doubt. But even in his mind, it resounded like the shouted answer to a challenge.

Kheren Kalel Th'Ch'Leryll Keth Reiji had never shied from a challenge.

Not so long ago, he had learned of the Romulans even attempting to change History... and the Artemis, only one ship, one crew, managed to stop them. Now, the whole of Lotus Fleet, the finest task force of Starfleet maybe second only to the USS Enterprise's First Fleet, was gearing up to face it all.

And that filled his mind, his heart, his soul, with hope.

Kheren Kalel Th'Ch'Leryll Keth Reiji, commanding officer of the starship Artemis, Starfleet officer of Lotus Fleet, master duellist of Andoria, had no intention of seeing this one be his first defeat and his last fight.

"Computer; integrate Operation Horizon to the simulation."

"Inputing new parameters to the simulation. Activate when ready." answered the calm, soft feminine voice of the ship's computer.

"Proceed."

At his order, a projection of a starbase appeared near him, where five starships launched towards the fiery phenomenon, encircling its awesome vastness and, slowly but surely, fought back the inferno, contained the flames and finally tamed hell itself with the works of hundreds of minds and the courage of hundreds hearts.

*Hope...*

"Computer; integrating all known operating procedures of each named faction and of ships and starbase planned for this operation, add to Operation Horizon interference from the Klingon Empire, from the Romulan Empire and from the Horizon Children. Compute each individual interference, random combinations of any two of them, and finally all of them together."

"Inputing new parameters to the simulation. Sequence of altered simulations completed and labelled as ordered. Activate when ready," answered the ship's computer core, processing trillions of data streams together in seconds.

"Proceed with first single interference simulation: Horizon Children."

Kheren then watched and learned. He was not one to throw himself recklessly into the fire.

He was hopeful, not blind.

\* \* \*

Under the lights of the immense interior of Starbase 10, it was shining like a delicate teardrop jewel, two small nacelles connected by short, wide pylons to a sleek hull elongating smoothly into the oval saucer that made most of the ship's distinctive shape.

Resting in her cradle of gantries and magnetic moorings, the USS Lotus, flagship of the most elite division of Starfleet, looked like a sleeping dolphin waiting for the tide to come and free it to roam the vast cosmic sea.

From the highest level of the promenade, anyone could walk around the whole starbase on the ten meters-wide, kilometers long of elevated boardwalk that circumvented the widest part of its inner hull, to admire all the magnificent vessels that were berthed inside the colossal space construct. But at the moment, there were only two of them: the sleek and slim Intrepid class short-range explorer USS Lotus, and the much larger and massive, yet still graceful and elegant Ambassador class long range explorer USS Artemis.

The unusually athletic and dark-hued blue-skinned Andorian leaning on the safety ramp to gaze outside knew well both ships; he was the commanding officer of the Artemis since the end of the Borg Invasion... and before getting this first command, he had been the chief of tactical and security aboard the Lotus.

Captain Kheren loved his ship; he would not trade it for any other, smitten by the noble lines of the Ambassador class, lines shared by none other than the legendary USS Enterprise C of Rachel Garrett almost century ago. No other type of ship could inspire him more than those that had bear the name Enterprise, from the original NX-01 of Captain Jonathan Archer and even more the Constitution design of Captain James T Kirk to that of all the others that followed, from the Excelsior class of John Harriman and the Galaxy and Sovereign classes of Jean-Luc Picard and up to the soon to be commissioned Odyssey class... this latest, newest design possibly the only one that could ever tear his heart away from his Ambassador class starship... if ever.

But at the moment, his silvery eyes and peculiarly retractable antennae were not looking at the Artemis, but at the Lotus.

Kheren had always been completely indifferent towards the Intrepid class design. It definitely lacked the majesty and splendor of the classic ship of the line. Despite its impressive capabilities and sleek looks, it utterly failed to inspire him like the time-honored capital vessels always did... Well, maybe not the Sovereign class; after all, it looked just like a giant-sized Intrepid... Yet, he still held some love in his heart for the Lotus.

The premier ship of Lotus Fleet had been his first deep space assignment; in fact, his only deep space assignment before he rose to the captaincy of the Artemis. After the Romulan attempt to capture Starbase 10, barely a few weeks after being assigned there straight out of the Academy, Kheren's direct involvement in repelling the assault had immediately granted him a promotion from Security Master Chief Petty Officer to Ensign and, even at such an unprecedented low rank, to lead of the tactical and Security department of the flagship herself.

From then on, under the wise and exemplary command of the Efrogian Acting Captain Felez Connora'tu, he had quickly risen to Acting Executive Officer of the Lotus, serving aboard her up to and through the terrible Borg War.

*Captain Felez Connora'tu... Commander Mark Robertson... Lieutenant Commander Quinn Calhoun... Chief Ben Smith... Chief Barile N'Arti... Doctor Darum Bains... Doctor Chayanna Driam... Lieutenant Edward Tomah...*

The names rang in his head as he looked at his old ship, resounding in his heart with the deep echoes of fond memories, all precious... even the bad ones. The Lotus was certainly not in his future; but it was the steadiest, longest part of his past, at least in Starfleet, and thus the foundation of where his present would lead.

*My old ship...*

There was nothing to be seen that could alter his remembrance of the prestigious vessel he had first served on. But the Andorian knew that this USS Lotus he was gazing at bore little resemblance now to his former ship. He had seen the reports about her overhaul with the very latest technologies of the Federation: the fastest warp drive ever, regenerative metaphasic shielding, improved phaser arrays and torpedo launchers, increased payload of transphasic warheads... even a functional, if limited use of transwarp capability, all added to its already tried and tested twenty-fifth century frame, its original regenerative ablative armor plating and state of the art sensor suite... The flagship of Lotus Fleet was, simply put, the most advanced starship in the Federation outside of the upcoming Odyssey class, of which it took all the latest developpements it could cram into its three hundred forty-four meters long, seven hundred thousand metric tons frame.

This USS Lotus was more than the flagship of Lotus Fleet now; it was the spearhead of the best of Starfleet to be launched at the heart of the cosmic catastrophe looming over the horizon.  
*The Azimuth Horizon...*

Callused hands clasped before him, chitinous elbows on the handrail as he leaned his powerful body forward to peer with all four eyes through the huge transparency, Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis nodded silently to himself. he had run enough simulations to have no doubt left in his mind.

If there was but one ship that could lead them all to conquer this new challenge, to tame this new menace and have them prevail against the odds, *all* odds, it was indeed the USS Lotus.

And the starship Artemis, the resurrected Stalwart Guardian of the Federation, would stand by her side.

Brand new or not, The flagship of Lotus Fleet still had the same heart, the same soul it ever had since the first day Fleet Admiral Nova himself had flown her from Earth Spacedock to here, to lead the way to the stars and the future.

"Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead," Kheren recalled outloud from her dedication plaque.

It almost made his rigid face smile.

His heart did.

Michael O'Conner, first officer of the Artemis, stepped onto the promenade with a small smile. He was happy to be back; as far as he knew the last mission had be quite boring... even if the meeting with the Office of Temporal Investigations agents had said otherwise. He did not recall anything so, to him, it was no more real than a holostory. The boredom had not subsided.

As he glanced around the promenade, he couldn't help but notice his Captain staring out the window. He never understood the attachment some officers had to their ships. While he did think the Artemis was a pretty ship, it was still just a ship to O'Conner.

He moved his gaze from the captain to a nearby replimat and headed over there. After sitting down he ordered an iced tea and waited for a meeting he expected to be called for sooner or later; after all, there was a storm over the horizon.

The captain of the USS Artemis was still on the high balcony of the promenade, alone and looking out at the USS Lotus when the few pedestrian there parted ways before the towering presence of another Andorian coming towards him.

Even on a station as big as Starbase 10, with never less than tens of thousands of people at any given day, there were still very few beings that matched the well over two meters of height of the blue-skinned, platinum-haired woman in a starship security uniform that came up to Kheren to stand at attention beside him, icy grey eyes and antennae down on him.

"Captain Kheren; reporting all level 1 security measures are being implemented by all departments... and Mister Jackson has left the Artemis."

The dark-hued Andorian, leaning on the handrail on his elbows, hands crossed before him, lowered his head a moment. Lieutenant Junior Grade Bradley Jackson may have had served but for a short term on his ship as chief of tactical and security, but they had been through a lot together even in so short a time. In fact, they had found the both of them propelled together with two more of his bridge officers and several other of Lotus Fleet two hundred years into the past by the Q entity... then again, according to Temporal Investigations, by a Romulan incursion the rest of the universe knew nothing about... not even their own memories.

And all this time, the young Human had served with all the best expected from a true Starfleet officer. Starfleet Command had also recognized his worth; barely back on Starbase 10, Jackson had been recalled for special training at Starfleet Security back on Earth. Whether he was to receive or provide this special training had not been specified.

Nevertheless, it now left the USS Artemis without a chief of security and tactical... and that, on the eve of a major engagement with terrible forces looming over the horizon.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Tyvya," Kheren said to the giantess. "Since we do not know if Command will have a new security and tactical chief to assign to us before our next assignment, you will have to assume the position for the time being."

"Understood, Sir."

The captain looked up at the towering Shen, eyes twinkling and antennae curving inward.

"I am surprised you did not apply yourself for the position. After all, you have been with this ship since day one. None knows better her tactical and security measures than you."

For a moment, Tyvya just blinked, her own antennae wiggling in obvious uncertainty. But then they straightened as her surprisingly clear, soft voice answered:

"Permission to speak freely, Sir?"

Kheren nodded.

"Sir... I joined Starfleet to fight its enemies in space... not on paper."

The commanding officer of the Artemis straightened up, obviously confused by the comment.

"All officers of Starfleet have a duty to keep the peace and protect the Federation, even at the cost of their very lives. And within Starfleet, those serving in security vow to do so first and foremost. However, the higher you go into the chain of command, the less you handle a phaser and the more you handle a PADD; department meetings and reports, armory and payload inventories, scanners and diagnostics statistics... for the people under your command, for the people over you, First officer and captain, for Starfleet Command..."

"And... that... annoys you, Lieutenant?"

"No, Sir... it angers me."

This she needed not to explain to him. They were both Andorians.

When danger loomed, Humans had two basic instincts deeply imbedded in their very genes: fight or flee.

Andorians had only one.

"There will come a time, Kheren then offered, that your expertise and experience will leave you little choice but to face higher responsibilities; fight for more than just an away team, or one captain... and against more than just the enemies outside."

"Yes, Sir... but does it have to be *now*?"

That too, Kheren understood. Looking again at the Lotus, he could hardly believe that it was barely two years ago that he was an Ensign aboard her. The extraordinary, and tragic, set of circumstances that had piled upon one another to shoot him to the captaincy of the starship Artemis were unprecedented... and still overwhelming, intimidating even... and definitely humbling. It had taken a long time for him to just live with the responsibilities he had been honored with, even as he did manage to prove himself worthy of that immense trust he had been given. But, glancing once more at the USS Lotus, he almost wished that he could still be just one officer with simple, limited but clear duties.

Almost...

"You can still clobber somebody with a PADD," he commented, not realizing a Human would have seen it as a joke.

"Do not tempt me... Sir," Tyvya retorted. And she was not joking either.

Both their eyes and antennae looked at one another in understanding.

"Very well, Lieutenant. Let us hope Command will find somebody to shoulder the burden. Until then, I count on you to do it... and to make it as bearable as possible when Command do send us someone to take the lead."

"Thank you, Captain. With your permission, while all departments conduct our full security measures for the next two weeks, I will set several anti-boarding and counter-insurgent training sessions for the security department."

"You will find several simulations already programmed on our holodecks," suggested Kheren. "I will join you for the training later myself."

"I... we are looking forward to it, Sir." she said, almost managing to smile despite her own lack of facial muscles. But her antennae were waving with definite interest as she looked at him before straightening up again at formal attention, then turned around to get back to the ship.

Humans had many words to speak of both war and love.

Andorians had only one.

Not far from the upper ramp where the captain of the Artemis leaned on again to quietly look outside once more, Lieutenant Commander Niomo Lire was scrolling through yet another detailed log of the maintenance required for the three warp cores of his latest assignment as chief engineer, the Prometheus class warship USS Alsea.

Ever since arriving at Starbase 10, he had kept his nose down in the books. He had been out of service for a while, and wanted to make sure that technology had not advanced any further than he thought it could. To his satisfaction, he found that not much had changed... at least in the Engineering Department. His only fear was trying, and failing, to remember the names of his very large department. Even with his short stint as a Captain, he still barely remembered the names of his bridge crew.

Niomo rolled his head back and let out a long puff of air, stretching his arms into the sky.

"Ah, well, I'm sure it will all work out. Not like I'll have to rush into duty." He said out loud to no one in particular.

He had been sitting in a crowded deck cafe. The station seemed busier than he remembered from years ago. He took a sip of his double sugar coffee with milk. As he rested his head on his hand, he lazily looked out of the viewport into deep space. He had been finally arriving at the headquarters of Lotus Fleet yesterday, only to learn that his assigned ship had already left to answer a possible Klingon incursion. And so he could only but find things to occupy himself while waiting for the Alsea to return home.

He had tried to inquire as to a timetable of their return, only to be stonewalled for "Need to Know" reasons. He never understood all the red tape that ran around Starfleet these days, but he had come to expect it at every turn.

Finishing his coffee, he picked up his PADD and left the cafe, taking his daily stroll around the promenade, saying hello to some friendly faces, most of whom outranked the Lieutenant Commander by now, or to just watch people come and go on their business. It was boring, but he enjoyed the quiet time.

He knew it would not last. There was a storm over the horizon.

"Cruising speed of warp 8..." Niomo muttered to himself, as he continued to read his PADD. "The Alsea is quite the ship."

He looked out at the USS Lotus, as she sat in drydock, remembering he said the same thing about the flagship all those years ago. He turned away from the viewport and leaned against the handrail, scanning the crowd. He noticed a very tall Andorian female walk past, antennae bobbing around like another set of eyes; which in fact they were. He glanced back the way she came, to see another Andorian, unusually buff and dark-skinned for his kind, staring at the Lotus.

"None of my business," he said to himself.

Niomo rubbed his eyes and started scanning around the Alsea's schematics again. He determined that if he could link all three cores together, he fancied that he just might be able to create a way to breach warp 10 and for sustained amounts of time. He'd need to talk to the Chief Science Officer of the ship to see what work could be done on the shields themselves. He knew coming into the position, that a 9.9 maximum cruise rating would bother him. It was just too close to 10 to *not* try.

Niomo turned around again, and glanced again at the Lotus. Niomo could tell that there were many improvements made to the ship. New phaser arrays... torpedo launchers seemed to have been added as well.

Niomo laughed, recalling the dedication plaque, and said:

"Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!"



The ultrasensitive hearing organs in Kheren's antennae picked up the words even through the distance and the buzz of the promenade. Without thinking, he kept his four eyes outward and replied outloud:

"And so... open your heart and fly with the wings of eagles."

It was de very motto on the dedication plaque of the USS Alsea.

Having recently finished his series of interviews, Fleet Captain Allen Samji walked along the Promenade looking for a bite to eat, and saw the large Andorian leaning on the rail on the raised platform above him.

He stepped onto the nearest short lift that rose up to the circular deck and approached the Captain just as another Andorian, a gigantic female, left his side.

He heard him say something about wings before he approached.

"Welcome back, Captain. I hope your survey mission was as uneventful as you had hoped it to be upon each assignment since you took on your current position."

He wasn't sure if Temporal Investigations had spoken to Kheren yet, so he was attempting to keep up the ruse.

The commanding officer of the Artemis straightened up as Samji greeted him.

"Yes, Sir... thank you, Sir. *That* mission certainly was."

He knew the starbase commander alone would catch the hidden meaning behind his words; that they both knew what they could not talk about, especially on a station promenade. Not only had they shared together a time travel experience provoked by the Q entity during the very survey mission he was refering to, but Kheren and his senior bridge officers had just a few hours ago been made aware by agents Dulmer and Luksly of the Office of Temporal Investigations of what had really happened during their voyage; how the entire crew of the USS Artemis had, also during this time, found themselves in a Federation-less, all Borg future of Romulan doing and how they sacrificed themselves in a time loop to restore History. And of course, their immediate superior officer, the new commandant of the entire Hromi sector, had been debriefed as well.

So, they both read in each other's eyes what they both knew and would not need to say.

"By the way, congratulations for your promotion to Fleet Captain," Kheren said without a pause, so as to smother any curious attention to their conversation. "In this difficult time, I do not envy you the huge responsibilities you have decided to face. But rest assured that my crew and I will be with you all the way, Sir."

Samji smiled and chuckled slightly at the remark.

"You likely know as well as I how much 'deciding' was involved, Captain."

More seriously he added:

"But I appreciate it nonetheless."

he made a pause signifying a change of subject.

"While we will certainly be involved in meetings in the days to come to discuss it, what did you learn on your survey mission?"

There was no ruse involved in this question, since he'd learned what he needed to know about the Artemis crew's knowledge of the subject.

"I haven't had a chance to read the reports. Anything to add to our existing knowledge of the Anomaly or working plan for Operation Horizon?"

"Well, Sir, I do recall that two things did come up that had not been noticed during our original study, " revealed the Andorian. "One was that my tactical officer reported that prolonged exposure to the anomaly depleted the antimatter in our torpedo warheads the same way reported about ship's warp cores. After a week near the vicinity of the anomaly, the quantum ones were down to half strength while the photon ones, them being entirely antimatter-based, became good for nothing more than a light show."

Mere fireworks allegedly did help in stopping the Romulans from altering the timeline, but potential defusing of ammunition could prove tactically critical if they were to face hostility near the anomaly. Giving Samji time to ponder on this bit of data, he waited before adding:

"The other thing we discovered is much more significant. My chief of ops noticed that the mere mass of our ship was enough to shift the anomaly around. It seems that it is drawn to gravitational effects, even minute ones. That helps explain why it seems to rush at star systems like a hungry beast each time it reemerges into our universe."

Again letting a moment pass for the Fleet captain to assimilate the information, Kheren paused before conjecturing further:

"My science chief will be better able to detail this, but in a nutshell, this anomaly travels through universes by way of subspace fractures but, once in ours, expands along gravitational eddies."

With something that almost looked like a smirk, the Andorian added:

"Lucky for us, *our* ships are not singularity powered. Imagine what will happen to a Romulan ship, powered by a micro black hole, when it will come just a bit too near this thing..."

Already, Kheren's keen tactical mind had thought of several opportunities if and when confrontation with the Empire would happen during the planned operation. And he could see in the light of the Fleet Captain's eyes that he was probably starting to envision them too.

But the captain of the Artemis already shoved it all to the back of his mind. The real menace was not flying a starship. The real menace was not even alive.

Samji considered the Captain's response and slowly nodded before looking back upward to meet his eyes.

"Thank you, Captain; some very interesting things you discovered that will hopefully help us in the event we need to deal with resistance to our plan."

He then realized he was supposed to meet with Doctor Jolie Bindo, the former chief medical officer of the USS McKenzie just returning from a junior officer cruise with some of Lotus Fleet's new recruits.

*Never time for lunch*, he thought.

"Well, I must take my leave. You will soon gather your most senior officers for a briefing. Ensign Grok will fill you in on the details as they become available. Until we meet again, Captain."

Giving the Andorian a brief nod, he headed back toward his office.

Jolie caught sight of her *Imzadi's* sandy brown hair as she stepped off the shuttle that had just docked at Starbase 10. A broad smile danced on her lips.

"Shian! I thought you were on duty today!"

"Darn the luck, no one decided to have any problems with their brains today," the neurologist grinned.

He folded her into his arms the moment she set down her case and kissed her long enough to make some of the passengers avert their eyes.

"I'm so glad the Borg didn't assimilate you on Anari Prime."

"With no connection to the dead Collective, it would have been hard. The techniques we learned fighting Sedin served us all too well when some of the Borg attacked."

Jolie shuddered.

Shian tightened his arms around her.

*Shh. You'll be OK. She's gone and can't hurt us anymore.*

*I know*, she responded through their telepathically-linked minds.

Shian released her, then picked up her case.

"I haven't had dinner yet; the replicators were down. Let's drop this off in your quarters and find out if the mess has them back online yet."

They headed down the docking bay corridor to her designated room.

"I wonder where the next mission will be. The anomaly that the McKenzie went through has me very concerned."

"I'd rather have you here on the starbase," Shian smiled down at her.

Jolie's cheeks blushed pink.

"I know."

She looked at the bright starfield out of the many windows on the promenade. A fuzzy stripe of brighter starlight angled through it; the axis of the galaxy. She sighed at the majestic beauty.

"I can't get enough of space, though. There are so many discoveries, so many treatments waiting for us to find them, so many amazing people and cultures...."

"It's OK, Jolie. I already know the Goddesses destined you for space."

He put his hand to his chest.

"My *Imzadi's* heart is shared with the stars," he sighed, looking to the heavens.

Jolie laughed.

"We need dinner before the mock drama gets any worse."

When Jolie and Shian reached her quarters, she saw a message waiting for her already. It was from Starbase 10 command.

"Captain Samji wants to see me immediately," she said. "I wonder what that's about?"

"I wonder when we'll get dinner."

"Shush, you. Hopefully it will be a short meeting."

He set her case down by the closet.

"I'll find a table for us in the mess hall and meet you there after you finish."

Both headed back out of the door they had only just entered.

The Starbase was coming back to life slowly as ships were returning and new officers were finally being assigned to fill up all the vacant positions on the various Lotus Fleet ships. The amount of people Fleet Captain Samji passed on the Promenade would increase five-fold in the days to come, as they prepared for Operation Horizon and the likely fight they would have to face from several different agitators.

Looking down at a PADD, Samji nearly bumped into a young Ensign who was running along to fix a replicator malfunction in the mess hall, which was the reason for the long backed up line he saw moments earlier. The Ensign looked up at who she almost collided with and her face went pale before she mumbled, "Sorry Sir!" and hurried along to the mess hall.

The PADD he was looking at contained the service record of Doctor Jolie Bindo, Commander, Lotus Fleet. The experienced and decorated officer who had survived the Borg War and was instrumental in saving many lives during that troubled time was interested in taking the Chief Medical Officer position on the flagship of their fleet. He was quite familiar with her exploits, but he needed to review her record nonetheless. It was a formality just like the meeting he was heading toward in his office.

As Allen Samji arrived at his office, Doctor Bindo was already there waiting for him.

"Doctor Bindo, thank you for meeting with me," he greeted her, shook her hand, and sat down.

"I'm going to get straight to the point. This interview is basically a formality and I really just wanted to have a chat. I'm approving your transfer to the Lotus, of course."

The doctor had to stop a moment to catch her breath.

"This is a great honor, Captain Samji. There are any number of outstanding doctors in the fleet."

"You are the best, most experienced doctor we have in Lotus Fleet and it is only fitting you be assigned to the flagship."

With that out of the way, he said then:

"Now, how are you doing? I haven't seen you since shortly after the Borg War was over. I understand you had a little run in with more Borg. I just want you to know that the people of Anari Prime were very grateful for all you did for them. Hopefully the Borg are sufficiently injured enough that you won't have to deal with them again for a long time."

"The ones we brought back will give Medical and Science plenty to study. There was a small colony of passive Borg that we managed to contain to protect the colonists; and the liberated Borg from the colonists. I'm not sure whether we can trust them not to assimilate again, to be honest, even without a Collective... but they are currently incapable of it. It will be an interesting dilemma for Starfleet Command to handle."

"Hopefully our medical team here at Starbase 10 will keep them from assimilating anything until we get them out of our hair."

Samji chuckled.

"Well, we'll be having a very interesting meeting soon about what to do with the Azimuth Horizon situation and the various potential threats to both the Starbase and our ships. Until then, please report to Captain Gould and get prepared for your transfer over to the Lotus. Congratulations and thank you, Doctor."

He stood and escorted her from the office before she took her leave to prepare for the days ahead.

The moment the doctor left Captain Samji's office, she reached out for Shian's mind.

*"Imzadi, I'm being transferred to the Lotus as Chief Medical Officer!"*

*"Oh my Goddesses! The flagship? That's fantastic!"*

*"Meet you on the promenade."* In their minds, it sounded as an invitation as much as a promise.

Again alone on the promenade's balcony, Kheren gazed a while more at the Lotus and then at his own ship, the Artemis, docked alongside the sleek flagship of Lotus Fleet, dwarfing her with her sheer mass, five times in metric tons as that of the Intrepid class ship. She was also twice as big and each of her main departments had enough crew alone to fill up the entire complement of the Lotus.

Even knowing how extensive her refit had been, her design was still the very image of an earlier, more peaceful era, when peaceful exploration had been the main goal of Starfleet. An era before the Cardassian war, before the coming of the Borg and of the Dominion. Before the "interesting times" ancient Earth Chinese wisdom seemed to have cursed them with today. She was a grand old lady, carrying herself with dignity and nobility despite, or maybe because, of the venerable age of her classic lines. Even updated to state of the art technology as she were, even with the few additional innovative improvements given to her by her resourceful current crew, the Artemis was still outpaced, outgunned and generally outperformed by all the other ships of Lotus Fleet in most respects... except in one:

Her crew.

On the starship Artemis, Starfleet standards of excellence were strictly and unfailingly enforced; and then pushed up two notches above. It had started with her very first commander, the legendary captain Gregory Harrison back in the days of the conflict with Cardassia; it had been revived and tightened further under the severe leadership of Captain Kevin Froud as he was given command of the resurrected Artemis; now, after a year under the captaincy of one of the very rare Andorian ship commanders in Starfleet, no vessel known could boast higher standards than those **on Captain Kheren's ship**. From marksmanship and hand to hand combat to reporting on shifts and at meetings, from safety procedures to research protocols, the Artemis was no place for the idle and the self indulgent; more than a few officers had found this out the hard way as they came and went under her demanding captain. Some even barely lasted a few weeks... but all those that proved themselves capable of such upmost dedication and excellence became part of the most exemplary team of officers and crewmen Starfleet could ever hope for; a crew that, when asked to sacrifice themselves to preserve History, did so without any hesitation... even knowing that no one would ever learn or remember them for doing it... not even themselves.

And that was all thanks to the team of senior officers that served on the bridge of the Artemis; Commander Michael O'Conner, the most experienced and cool-headed executive officer in Lotus Fleet; Lieutenant Syntron, already proven to be the most thorough and creative science officer in the elite division of Starfleet; Doctor Caius Castiel Aquila, who's competence and efficiency proved to be way beyond his years; Chief of Operations Danik Brie, who showed himself able to face any challenge with success; Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott the Third, who carried well the proud name of the legendary miracle worker of Starfleet...

Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis was proud of his ship; not just because he loved her design and all that she represented, but because he was first and foremost proud of the crew he was serving with.

Because of them, she truly deserved the words on her dedication plaque; words that came up to his lips as he gazed at her graceful curves under the soft lights of the starbase:

"The Sun Never Saw Her Like Outside Olympus."

As his gaze wandered a bit, Kheren caught sight of the man also looking out at the docked flagship. A head shorter than the Andorian himself, he was a well-built, light-skinned Human male looking to be about three to four standard decades old, brown-haired and blue-eyed, with that kind of keen expression towards the ship typical of Starfleet engineers. The golden collar of his grey and black uniform confirmed his career path, and showed three pips, one hollowed, to mark him as a Lieutenant Commander.

Kheren frowned; one of the few expressions his few facial muscles were capable of. He had never seen this man before.

Since the terrible devastation of the Borg War, Starfleet had lost a large number of experienced officers; and Lotus Fleet in particular, being an elite division and having been on the first line during the quick but terrible War of a Thousand Cubes, barely had any left. Kheren's own meteoric rise to captaincy alone testified about the severe lack of senior officers nowadays.

It also meant that all senior officers of Lotus Fleet knew well one another, even knew at least by sight or by name and reputation every senior bridge officer of each of the five starships serving in the tri-border sector.

And there stood a man of obvious experience, maybe enough to captain a ship himself, wearing the Lotus Fleet uniform. A man the captain of the Artemis did not know.

The last time he had met an unknown senior officer around here, a few months ago, she also had been an engineer, straight out from the Starfleet Corps of Engineers; Commander Ty'Reynick.

And soon enough, she had gathered religious fanatics around her and fomented a mutiny aboard his ship.

Starfleet security regulations and the Artemis' own improved antiboarding protocols had managed to quell the takeover attempt; and now, reinforced further, his ship and crew filtered and regularly checked thoroughly since, it would be easier to invade even Starfleet Headquarters than his ship.

But that did not mean those Horizon Children, or the Tal Shiar, or Klingon mercenary spies could not try it again.

*Not on my watch*, Kheren vowed to himself silently and, in an astonishing forward gesture for anyone who knew him and his natural aloofness, he went straight towards Lire.

He did not offer his hand; Andorians did not shake hands as they were wary of being touched, especially by a potential enemy... which, in their culture, could even be one's own father or one's own daughter. But his four eyes were pointing straight down at him and his chin was still lifted in the posture of respect typical of his kind; his voice held just enough warmth to be agreeable while being still formal.

"Kheren, Artemis. Welcome to Starbase 10, Lieutenant Commander."

Niomo smiled at the Andorian as he spoke.

"Niomo Lire, Cap... I mean, Lieutenant Commander. Sorry, old habits. I'm the new Chief Engineer of the Alsea... should she ever decide to come back."

He laughed at his own joke.

"Thank you for the welcome. It is good to be back on the station."

He left his tone friendly and calm. It wasn't often a Captain needed to talk to an engineer that was not from his ship. But then again, the reading the Alsea's technical manual was getting rather boring.

In a few moments, Kheren's Andorian senses told him much of what he wanted to know and some tenseness immediately left his mind. The ease and relaxation of the man, almost homely, were not faked; his tone of voice, speech pattern, heartbeat and body heat were steady enough when he spoke, despite being, as expected, quite surprised at being suddenly addressed by a ship captain. And neither his name nor the name Artemis did seem to register with him, not as it would have for any cult member, Klingon operative or Romulan sympathiser.

The lapse in his speech was also as telling as the stability of his stare and of his quite Human bio-aure; any trained operative would not have had any such kind of slip as the one he made with his own rank. It was too natural and too revealing at the same time for it to be anything but genuine.

And so was the man, Kheren decided then. But he kept himself attentive nonetheless.

"I have been on board the Alsea once," he told Lieutenant Commander Lire. "A most impressive combat vessel... and even more, quite the engineering marvel. You must feel especially proud to be chosen to serve aboard her."

Niomo nodded in agreement.

"Yes, Sir. Although I haven't seen the insides of her yet, the technical manuals seem to agree with your statement. As for being proud, you could say that I am I suppose. I used to serve on the Lotus. As an engineer, it's hard to think of another ship after being the first one to maintain the the flagship's warp core on her maiden voyage. Though, I suppose with time I'll become proud. We'll see how she treats me."

Niomo laughed again.

He had never thought about being proud of being on a ship before. To him, it was just fun. Fun to learn about all the quirks of her systems, fun to see her react to modifications in the right way, and sometimes, even fun to see her react poorly when he cursed a part of her. However, he always knew that his ships were his home.

*And I suppose that means I am proud of them,* he thought.

"Ah, this is where I heard your name; I thought I recalled it from somewhere," admitted the Andorian. "I too had the honor of serving on the Lotus, almost straight out from the Academy and until I got my command position on the Artemis. But that was before your time... and I was chief of security and tactical and only an Ensign at the time."

Niomo leaned against the railing smiling.

"It isn't often that someone recalls this old 'gneer. I thank you, haha. I wish I could tell you about my other adventures and positions. But the list is fairly small. I had a Captaincy. But, it was determined that I should be an engineer instead. So, here I am."

*Interesting...*

Kheren wondered if this Niomo Lire had been part of the great personnel shuffling scheme that agents Dulmer and Luksly had detailed following the time altering incident his ship had been involved in; an elaborate, complex shifting of promotions and postings that ensured that the crew on his ship would be the same as the one that was now part of a time loop that saved History...

The Andorian wished that it was not so; knowing that the necessities of his own actions would have cost a fine officer his captaincy was not easing his conscience.

He shook himself back to the present. He assessed the man as typically Human; mixing duty and pleasure, fun and work, enjoyment and responsibilities constantly and with equal ease. He did envy them that ability.

"So what can I do for you, Sir?"

*Well, he's about as socially graceful as I am,* inwardly smirked Kheren at the question. But as silently he quickly corrected himself. *Then again, I suppose being suddenly addressed by a ship commander not being his captain is bound to have him wonder why.*

"You can be careful," then answered the captain of the Artemis with sudden seriousness. We are about to go against a force of nature my crew and I faced head on several times already... and at the same time against a few misguided, unscrupulous groups that will not hesitate to slit your throat and that of everyone aboard your ship to serve their honorless delusions. They tried on the Artemis a few months ago... they might try again, but this time on yours.

His four oculars went straight into the two eyes of the Human.

"Have a care, Lieutenant Commander. Because of her unique engineering, the Alsea will be a prime target... and so will you."

Niomo's smile faded quickly.

"I was wondering why I was reinstated so quickly. I suppose I should not be surprised, with everything that is going on. You will have to excuse me, I haven't been briefed on the current situations surrounding the station. In some ways, I'm as green as a fresh ensign. Is there..."

"Shian, really!" Jolie Bindo loudly said, brushing a strand of red-gold hair back over one of her ears.

Her beloved had met her as planned on the promenade as she was making her way towards the replimat. He had swept her up, twirled her around once and she had exclaimed and laughed outloud, before he now set her back down on her feet.

Cut off, Niomo turned towards a shout, a playfully reproachfull exclamation coming from a Betazoid woman in a blue collared uniform accompanied by a station doctor and he grinned.

"Did the fraternization rules change while I was away?"

Jolie glanced around to see how many beings were watching. A few rushed by, one engineering brown-haired officer even waved at her, smiling but several personnel walking through the promenade just smiled at their brief outburst as they continued on. Jolie noticed that Shian and she had caught the attention of not only the Human engineer that had waved at her, a man she didn't recognize; but the other was a huge dark blue Andorian. His silver eyes and rigid antennae were pointed straight at her, assessing her a moment. The recognition registered for both of them.

The doctor waved at Captain Kheren, not quite suppressing the red flush that bloomed across her cheek.

Kheren had followed Lire's gaze to the Betazoid couple who's sonorous joy he had also



overheard. he instantly recognized Doctor Bindo and raised a hand in response to her waving.

*Blushing? Did my mental screens falter?*

Always wary of opponents able to read his intentions, the former master duellist of Andoria had trained for years, not only to control his body language, but his surface thoughts as well, so as to leave no clue to a mind-reading opponent... he even had several feints using those techniques.

*I must be slipping...*

"So when do you have to report?" Shian asked Jolie.

Kheren shut them off from his sensitive hearing, simply turning his rigid antennae back to focus on the engineer beside him.

She checked her PADD.

"The message from the Lotus says I meet tomorrow with Captain Gould for the morning briefing."

Her *Imzadi* put an arm around her shoulder as they started walking towards the mess again. He leaned over and spoke in a soft tone, his breath brushing against her ear.

"Good. Tonight you're mine."

Niomo Lire laughed as he waved back again at the woman, and then turned back to the captain.

"Sorry, Sir, bad question for a superior. Back to business."

He cleared his throat and continued;

"Is there something major going on? Besides what you have just told me, I see major enhancements have been made to the Lotus, who was already the most advanced ship in the fleet. Additionally, I've noticed a lot more activity on the station. Not just officers on R&R, either. Security, Maintenance, Science officers too. Everyone seems to be in a rush to get things done. The atmosphere is very...tense. Should I be on the lookout for things out of the usual?"

Niomo realized after he spoke that his smile had faded, and his voice was more concerned and serious than inquisitive.

"Indeed you should, Lieutenant Commander; beyond Tal Shiar or Klingon operatives, you might have even dangerous fanatics among your very crew. You and your engineering staff at least should make regular thorough checks of all systems on your ship to prevent any sabotage attempt... and make sure regulations are followed to the letter. We lost half a dozen good people on my ship because of such lapse and lack of stringent precautions."

Looking around he added:

"Something major you wonder? Well, I expect Fleet Captain Samji to call a general senior officers meeting anytime soon and everything should be made abundantly clear to you then. For the moment, I can tell you this: mobilizing the fleet to contain an anomaly threatening the entire universe while deluded people wish to thwart us, Klingons prepare to go to war over it and Romulans blame us for it... I would say this qualifies as something major."

Niomo frowned.

"Juuuust Lovely."

He sighed as he scratched the back of his neck in frustration.

"Learning about the Alsea's systems is going to be hard enough. Now I need to be on the lookout for systems that are out of sync? Looks like I'll need to be using the current engineering teams more than I thought. I thank you for your information. I was hoping to be rejoining during peace, though. I do so enjoy Risa shore leaves," He laughed.

"If you will excuse me, Lieutenant Commander, but I too have a ship to attend to; *au revoir*," said Kheren and with that historical quote bowed slightly, Human-style, as was expected with the sentence to take his leave from the two officers.

The new chief engineer of the Alsea had enjoyed his conversation with the Andorian, even if most of it was dark forecasting.

"Ciao, *Capitano*. Thank you for the enlightening conversation. I myself need to keep reading into the Alsea's systems. Knowing Starfleet, I'll be required to perform a long overdue maintenance in half the needed time. And I still don't know where the secondary and tertiary warp cores link into the primary drive shaft."

As they parted ways, Niomo went back to his temporary quarters on the starbase and illuminated the room. He gazed lazily out the window, hoping to see the Alsea; or at this point, any Prometheus Class starship. He had been on the station for more days than he wanted to count already, studied pretty much everything he could, and knew he still wasn't ready. Unfortunately, the holodecks had been reserved for the past few days by the host of researchers and planners preparing the fleet operation of the next days, so he could not run some practice simulations. Upon examining the program he had brought along with him, it seemed that the ship's roster had not been updated since its maiden voyage. Niomo could have reprogrammed the file, but he knew that as soon as he finished, the Alsea would dock.

His luck just worked that way.

He sighed, as he stepped out of his sonic shower and put on his uniform. After loading up the Alsea's shield harmonics file to his PADD, he wandered out of his room and eventually made it back to the Promenade. The busy scene of officers going to and fro with hurried looks on their faces had not changed. However, after a quick survey of the docking area, he saw that there were a few new ships... just not the Alsea.

He ordered a cup of coffee and sat down at a table. Slowly reading through Sternbach's original harmonic manual of the ship, he sipped some coffee, silently desiring some kind of action to happen.

Meanwhile, Captain Kheren had left him with a much relaxed step than when he had first approached the Alsea's chief engineer. The short exchange had convinced the Andorian that this Niomo Lire was the genuine article, not any Tal Shiar mole, Klingon infiltrator of religious extremist. Had he been one, words like "misguided," "unscrupulous," "honorless" and "delusions" and reducing the Azimuth Horizon to a mere "force of nature" as Kheren did speaking to him would have immediately elicited a reaction from any fanatic of whatever cult or government arrayed against what the Federation intended to do. The elite among them would control themselves well and skillfully hide their reaction, be it emotional or intellectual; but a reaction they would have still; a telling change in breathing, heartbeat or body heat and odor or of the electromagnetic field surrounding all living beings, or a brief change in the eyes, in the voice, in the posture... The ultrasensitive antennae of an Andorian skilled in body language, knowing what to look for and intently looking for it would have not missed anything.

Satisfied, Kheren finally could extract himself from the social gathering and return to the Artemis. Being the only captain around, and the one that made the very discovery of the Azimuth Horizon at that, from the ship that made the longest and deepest contact with it, in all sense of the words, his presence was bound to attract more people.

Kheren was not comfortable with people... even his own.

And so, he left Alther and Lire and went by the replimat, coming near his first officer seated there.

"All's well with our beloved goddess, Number One?"

O'Conner chuckled a bit to himself, as he hear his captain. He wondered at times who enjoyed the mythological names, the crew or the captain.

"I would hope so, Sir. But I did leave her in the hands of Syntron; never know what kind of trouble those vulcans will get in."

Kheren felt the mirth of his XO and as usual failed to get it.

*Was it something I said?* He wondered as usual.

As hard as he tried to grasp Human humor, he still failed to "get it" as they said... well, most of the time. And so, as usual, he did not mind any of it and just took the man's comment in stride.

"Indeed, Commander. Unless you have anything to discuss, I'll be on the ship until the staff meeting is called out. Enjoy your moment of peace and quiet while you can. You more than earned it after all."

*The goddess Artemis herself, if she exists, sure knows we all do...* he mused somberly. *But I fear we will not enjoy the rest for long.*

*The storm is coming.*

"Thank you, Sir. Keep her warm for us." O'Conner say with a smirk as the captain left.

As Kheren exited the replimat, O'Conner noticed the woman he was waiting for entering the place. With a big smile, he headed over to her and gave her a warm hug before they moved off to a comer.

At a nearby table, Doctor Jolie Bindo noticed him with the woman officer, a Human of the Mongoloid Human subspecies. There were a number of other officers she also recognized in the mess as members of Lotus fleet ships, the Artemis and the Lotus mostly. She had met some of them at the Festival of the Holy Rings a year ago after the Borg War, a few many times only in passing after that, so she wasn't familiar with all their names.

The Commander she recognized, since she had heard this was the new XO for her new ship.

Jolie saw a young engineer discreetly watching. She nodded acknowledgment at the lieutenant then headed for the docking area.

The new CMO of the Lotus arrived quickly at the docking ring area reserved for the flagship of Lotus Fleet, her new assignment. Doctor Bindo greeted the security team of the Lotus at the ship's airlock after passing through the ship's forcefield. They clearly had studied her profile carefully. The recognition in their eyes was immediate, although they studied her intently just the same.

"The captain is expecting you, Doctor Bindo," one of them said. "Lieutenant Endin will escort you to the bridge."

"Thank you," she replied.

The human security officer was tall, and Jolie had to take quick steps to keep up with his long strides. They arrived at the bridge very quickly.

The lieutenant nodded briefly at the other security officer on the bridge to make sure he saw the doctor arrive. He nodded back at his fellow security teammate and turned hard eyes on the doctor. Nothing was going to escape his notice.

Jolie approached the captain.

"Captain, I'm Doctor Bindo. Permission to come aboard, Sir."

After a cordial and brief meeting with the Captain and senior crew of the Lotus, Jolie had stopped by her new quarters on board the Lotus Fleet flagship to drop off her satchel before heading to sickbay to meet the medical staff there.

There was already a message indicator blinking. It was from Starbase 10's Chief Medical Officer.

Doctor Michaels himself appeared on screen.

"All section and ship chief medical officers are to report to Starbase 10 Medical amphitheater for Grand Rounds on the anomaly we face ahead. It is imperative we be prepared to minimize casualties and maximize effective treatments. Grand Rounds will start in four hours. Attendance is mandatory unless patient status requires your medical care."

Doctor Bindo sent off an acknowledgment stating she would be attending.

\* \* \*

After the trip back home, Scotty had been glad to be back in a bunk on Starbase 10. As chief engineer of the starship Artemis, Lieutenant Junior Grade Montgomery Scott, third to bear the illustrious name of the legendary Miracle Worker of the famous starship Enterprise, had had a rough week. Maintaining an eighty years old, twenty-fifth century refitted vessel in top condition while exposed for a prolonged period to the deadliest space anomaly ever recorded had been no picnic. And then, coming back to learn in a classified meeting that they had been involved in a timeline-shattering event had turned fatigue into a headache.

But neither History nor the ship had blown up, so he finally got back wind and wits about him. He exhaled a sigh of relief when he finally decided to head to the Promenade to get something to eat.

*I wonder who is out there today. Maybe I'll meet someone new.*

With this thought, he grinned slightly and head out on his journey within the kilometers-wide space station.

His steps out of the transporter room of Starbase 10 brought it to the promenade and towards the replimat where he intended to get a good meal. Although his brown hair rose slightly above medium height for a caucasian Human male, his brown eyes easily spotted the taller forms of his two senior officers on board the Artemis already in there.

Nodding to O'Conner, the Andorian captain walked out of the replimat and in turn saw his chief engineer coming toward the entrance.

"Ah, Mister Scott; is the ship as well restored as you seem to be?"

"Heh. It's alright. Could be better, but I'm happy with the results so far. Figured I'd get something to eat while I can. I'll have to head back and make sure things are going as planned."

Scotty briefly smiled, and continued on walking to the replimat. He had woken up not long ago, and was pretty hungry.

He walked up to the replicator, and spoke his choice clearly.

"Buttermilk pancakes with syrup and butter, and then a cup of black coffee."

All of this materialized on a tray. Smiling, he took it, and sat at an empty table. Scotty looked over into the rest of the replimat. He saw the Betazoid woman in the blue-collared uniform and recognized her from those who had been hailed a year before as the heroes of the Borg War.

*Is that THE Doctor Bindo? Should I go introduce myself?* the engineer wondered with a smile.

*Feeling casual now today, don't we?* observed Kheren with amusement as he reflected on the way his chief engineer had talked to him; as if he was but another crewman.

Then again, he had not asked for a formal report nor in a formal manner, so the attitude was understandable.

Even in the same circumstances, Kheren himself would have never done so with any senior officer, let alone his commanding officer; but the high, rigid standards he set for himself at all times needed not be imposed on everyone else everytime and everywhere. There was a time for disciplined duty and a time for relaxing.

*Enjoy it while it lasts*, he silently wished Scott, O'Conner and everyone else as he resumed his return to the Artemis.

The storm would come soon enough.

Scotty recycled his plate through the replicator, and decided that the Artemis is where he should be for the time being.

He started heading off to the beam in point, and after he reached it, he tapped his combadge.

"Artemis, one to beam up.", he spoke clearly.

"Identity confirmed, subatomic scans activated, bio and cortical scans online; energizing," came the response.

A moment later, he rematerialized in the main transporter room of the ship, the security guard still at attention before the door and facing the platform as the transporter chief greeted him.

"Welcome back, Chief."

"Thanks."

Scotty smiled at the transporter chief.

"Are there any issues I need to be aware of?"

"Nothing specific to report," answered the woman behind the console. "All security protocols pertaining to both engineering and operations during docking protocols are underway alongside those of security and tactical, science and medical. With the major fleet operation upcoming, the powers-that-be are pretty adamant about us not being caught flat-footed... like we had been... the last time."

The people in Scotty's department all remembered too well the aborted takeover attempt the Artemis had been subjected to. The highest number of casualties had been in engineering.

No one on board would now allow any such tragedy to ever happen again.

Scotty nodded at the chief, and then walked to the turbolift.

"Main Engineering," he said as he entered the circular cabin.

When he got there, he entered a beehive of activity, as the engineering crews were completing shipwide level 1 diagnostics. Pieces of checked and serviced equipment still lied around and the hum of numerous tricorders filled the air and teams of operations officers from Lieutenant Brie rechecked, PADDs in one hand and measuring instrument in the other, what the technicians of Scotty's department had already checked with eyes and hands, sensors and programs.

The people of these two technical departments had all been the first of the ship's complement to be thoroughly examined physically and psychologically by the medical department and had both completed the added checking of the science teams before going through each and every single system of the huge starship from bow to stern, ending up with main engineering on the eve of the next mission. Between them all, they had literally dismantled and rebuilt the entire ship piece by piece from the inside out.

The USS Artemis would be as ready and performing as her first day out in space... and no one would be able to sabotage even the sliding panel of a locker.

So, even this late, there was still work to be done.

As Scotty looked around, a gruff voice rose from behind him.

"Here; take this to the recyclers."

Just as he turned, a pile of replaced wall panels landed in his arms from below, blocking his view of the small, rotund black-hued and bushy-bearded Tellarite Lieutenant Junior Grade passing him by without glancing at him while growling:

"And don't just stand there; people are working here! Panels; recyclers; shoo! shoo!"

Scotty went to recycle the panels. He would ask questions later, when there wasn't so much work being left to be completed.

After he had taken the panels to the recyclers, he entered his office, sat down and logged into the terminal in front of him. Scotty pulled up the file of both the work being done, and the of this dark-hued Tellarite he had crossed path with. He did not recall him from any previous meetings with the engineering crew of the ship.

Soon he was speaking to himself.

"Hmm... Lieutenant Junior Grade Marksus Sangliar. Why does that name sound familiar?"

He then came across the reason why...

"Ah yes. The maiden voyage report." he exclaimed outloud.

Lieutenant Sangliar had been the acting chief of Engineering when the Artemis first launched. His personal experience with the anomaly started to fascinate the young engineer; but the more he read on, the more he felt another, heavier feeling settle inside himself.

Dread.

\* \* \*

Chief of operations Lieutenant Junior Grade Danik Brie strolled into Transporter Room 1 aboard the Artemis in order to beam down to the station. The blue-skinned, bald Bolian nodded to the Ensign manning the console. The Bajoran woman's face was familiar, but Danik couldn't immediately place a name.

It was to be expected. Danik really only had one mission under his belt with this crew. It was going to take some time to learn the names of everyone in his own department alone which had well over a hundred people to start with, out of seven hundred and fifty crewmembers, by far the largest crew of any one vessel in Lotus Fleet.

"Heading to the Starbase, Sir?" the Ensign asked.

"That's right. Lots of traffic going back and forth since we got back, I imagine, Ensign..."

"Radia. Yes, Sir. Time in space dock means a lot of work for transporter crews. I imagine for a lot of departments."

"True. Ensign Broth sent me a requisition list that must have taken up an entire terraquad in the memory banks. I had to send it back with orders to shorten it."

The Ensign Radia's eyes narrowed slightly.

"He's not still requesting three-day Bajoran shrimp, is he?"

Danik paused a moment before answering. While he understood that most non-Bolians weren't fond of "ripened" foods. His Master Chief of Services was staunchly of the opinion that the rest of the crew was in dire need of broadening their palates, sometimes forgetting that other species did not have a Bolian's unique constitution.

"There was a request..." Danik began and Radia visibly shuddered. "...but subsequently rejected, Ensign. Don't worry, I'll keep our enthusiastic gourmet from giving the crew food poisoning."

The Ensign relaxed with a deep sigh.

As Danik took his position on the transporter pad, he nonchalantly added:

"But in return, I expect everyone in my department to be glowing in their praise the next time he attempts Lissepian stew. Energize."

He smiled a little when he saw the color drain from Radia's face as the phase transition coils converted him into disassociated particles and sent him streaming to the Starbase.

Captain Kheren was at the beaming coordinates when Lieutenant Brie materialized. By his own orders since the incident with the Horizon Children, no beaming on or off the Artemis were allowed except by the ship's own transporter system; which were calibrated to automatically filter any boarding attempt by anyone not authorized and expected, analyzing them in transit down to the subatomic level for the correct identity match and all possessions scanned, identified and taken care of in case of any doubt... and so where the lifeforms themselves. Any other way around or detected discrepancy would automatically activate the anti-boarding protocols; and they were far less pleasant than the security checks.

The Bolian blinked at him.

"Greetings, Lieutenant," said Kheren. "All is going well with our resupplying I hope?"

Danik blinked in surprise when he rematerialized right in front of his Captain. He didn't know what the odds of that were, although he was sure their Vulcan Science Officer could tell him. It took a moment for Danik to realize Kheren had asked him a question.

"Yes, Sir. Our resupply is proceeding as expected. I just came down to oversee some of the work directly."

"Very good, Lieutenant. Once done, allow yourself some time off to enjoy our stop here at the station. We will be called to duty soon enough."

Kheren liked and respected his chief of ops. After all, he may have been assigned to the Artemis barely over a week ago, yet they had already shared together a long scientific study mission and even a time travel experience; two, according to the Office of Temporal Investigations agents that debriefed them the moment they had docked.

The Bolian officer certainly had proven himself through it all. The captain of the Artemis was glad to have such an officer on his bridge, especially with what was waiting for them in the days ahead.

"I expect a senior officer meeting to be announced soon. See you there, Mister Brie."

Kheren let his chief of operations leave the beaming site with antennae curving inward in amusement at his surprise... and some definite satisfaction.

If even a senior officer of the ship could be surprised and confused by the security protocols of the Artemis, the ship was all the more secure from any intrusion by anyone else.

And this was not even the tip of the iceberg.

"Kheren to Artemis, he said through his combadge; one to beam up."

He felt the telltale tingle of the transporter and the starbase dissolved around him to be replaced by the setting of his ship's transporter room 2.

"Welcome aboard, Sir," purred the black-furred Caitan woman at the door, her hand relaxing from the type 2 phaser at her hip.

"Your fork has been beamed to the armory for inspection and will be returned shortly, Sir," then added the transporter chief with a barely suppressed smile.

"Glad to see you are alert and applying our safety protocols properly, Ensign Wayne," the Andorian complimented the woman. He had pocketed one utensil from the replimat to test the transporter security protocol and, like all the random check he always did personally to try to surprise them and keep them on their toes, his crew performed as adequately as he expected since the averted mutiny attempt from the Horizon Children cultists a few months back.



"Subatomic scan also confirms you are who you think you are, Sir," answered the Human auburn-haired woman in all seriousness.

"And why am I in transporter room 2, Lieutenant Mrrriish?" the captain now asked the felinoid security officer by the door.

"Chief Engineerr Scott's maintenance teams arre still underrgoing level 1 diagnostics of all systems as perr ship securrity prrotocols, Captain," explained the Caitan woman. "They are currently worrrking deck 10 wherre trransporterr rroom 1 is located. Rrandom deck worrk orrder by apprrropriately designated perrrsonnel as perr ship rregulations, Srrr. Lieutenant Brrie's own ops technicians will check theirr worrk afterrwarrrds as planned."

Satisfied that sabotage attempts this time would be prevented, Kheren nodded appreciatively.

"What about the science department?" he now asked as he came to the door the security officer unlocked for him.

"Misterr Syntrron and his people will have the entirre computerr network's full diagnostic and serrvicing completed as scheduled, she answered, down to each individual PADD on boardr. The worrk on all sensorr pallets is alrready done and internal scans are ongoing as usual."

"Very good, Lieutenant. I will be in sickbay for my mandatory medical and psychological examination, now that the whole crew must be nearly completed."

"If I may be so bold to say, Srrr... Doctorr Aquila must be delighted to have the most complying captain in Starrfleet, " Mrrriish purred with obvious amusement despite the respectful tone and posture.

"I do hope so, Lieutenant, because I certainly am not, " shot back Kheren as he exited the transporter room to head for the nearest turbolift.

He hated sickbays and medical procedures and positively loathed having his brain probed; he had had enough of them since his unusual birth in an Andorian genetic laboratory. But he hated even more having his ship and his people threatened and hurt. And so, he forced himself to lead by example and complied with the stringent security measures on board he had implemented himself that made his ship at least as hard to infiltrate as any section 31 installation.

And infiltrating the Artemis would be the easiest part. She had been a target once.

Now, if they ever tried it again, she would be nothing less than a trap.

He just hoped the starbase and the other ships of Lotus Fleet would be as cautious. He would certainly talk about it with the other captains when they would meet.

There would be no time to plug holes in the boat and chase off rats when the storm would rage upon them.

His thoughts made the way from the transporter room to sickbay seem as instantaneous as the beam in itself as he brought his thoughts back to the here and now when the doors to the Artemis impressive medical ward parted before him.

"Is there a doctor in the house?" he asked outloud.

He was not at all aware that this was considered a most classical joke.

After all, he was not Human.

Doctor Caius Castiel Aquila, chief medical officer of the USS Artemis, was not in sickbay at that moment. He was in his quarters, his medium-sized, slim frame slouched over a table with his brown, short-haired head in his hands, his pale features drawn, his soft brown eyes closed shut.

Defeated.

Small gears, springs, and and other parts were scattered all across his darkened quarters.

*Death of the patient recorded at...*

He could not finish the thought.

The main spring of a pocket watch had a bit more power than he had anticipated. When uncoiled, it had startled him and he had dropped the uncompleted antiquated timepiece.

With a sigh he swept up the parts into a small container.

Doctor Aquila then stood up and walked away.

He stopped just short of the door of his quarters and let out a deep breath. He took a glance over at small table where he had several notes of positive quotes. They were no help now.

Caius hated meeting new people in new places and had always been a bit socially awkward. Occasionally, he managed to suppress his anxiety, but, for some reason, he had been really on edge and avoiding social interaction like plague.

"Do what you fear and fear disappears," He muttered to himself.

He stepped through the doors and decided to head toward the Promenade.

That is when he heard the call from the ship's internal channel. It was the voice of his assistant, Doctor Fredieric Lumquist.

"Doctor Aquila; please report to sickbay immediately. This is an emergency."

And he sounded definitely stressed; almost... frantic.

Aquila rushed toward a turbo lift and tapped his comm badge.

"On my way."

All of his previous anxiety seemed to vanish. It was time to work. But he entered sickbay not sure what to expect.

"Ah, Doctor, please, this way!" urged the balding Doctor Lumquist, positively beaming.

He brought him straight to the nearest biobed where one pateint was already waiting patiently.

It was the captain.

And Doctor Lumquist was quick to explain his called emergency.

"This is the first time in the history of this vessel that her commanding officer walked in here on his own two feet; and for nothing less than his physical. Please Doctor; we must act quickly before he changes his mind or some unforeseen catastrophe, again, calls him away!"

The words were all banter; but the tone was earnest enough.

"This is to actually help *prevent* catastrophe, Doctor," said then Kheren, to both of them. "As per ship security regulations, every crewmember and person coming on board this ship between missions must submit to a complete physical and psychological examination. And I do mean *everyone*... wether they like it or not."

His tone was deadly serious. Obviously, he was talking about himself as he was about anyone else; because it was most obvious that he resented being in sickbay.

But he was an officer leading by example.

"Ready when you are, Doc... I suppose... "

Doctor Aquila frowned for a moment. He was not amused by this. A routine medical exam, even for the captain, could be handled by any doctor on duty, and was by no means an emergency.

"Your strict adherence to medical and security protocol is commendable, captain." He said as he retrieved a medical tricorder.

He proceeded to start scanning captain Kheren.

"In the future, please refrain from classifying routine procedures as emergencies." He said with the plain matter-of-fact tone normally used by Vulcans. Maybe they were rubbing off on him.

Normally, Caius might have been slightly amused by the joke, but he wasn't having a particularly good day to begin with.

"Hey do not look at me, retorted the Andorian with wide eyes and curving antennae; it was not my idea... Although, come to think of it... yes, overall, it *was* my idea."

His silvery stare now became steely as his cranial appendages lowered to point at the chief medical officer.

"Last time we had trouble on this ship, we lost nine people... and that, because we failed to check the dozen others among our own that caused their death. I did not put up these stringent regulations for my own enjoyment, Doctor Aquila. You of all people, knowing my medical record, you should be most aware of that. But you should also be aware of all those security regulations and supervizing them yourself. When I see my chief medical officer not on the job when a level 1 examination of the entire crew is mandatory, I *do* feel a sense of emergency."

Relaxing his stance a bit, he smoothed out the edge in his voice when he added:

"I am not saying at all that you are not doing your job, or that you are not doing it well, Doc. Far from it. What I am saying however is that this is not an easy ship and I am not an easy commanding officer. Expect to be under very demanding conditions on the Artemis. So this is as good a reminder as any."

"Captain... I'm going to hand you a PADD with a series of questions, which you will need to answer on a scale of one to ten. With one being almost never and ten being always."

The senior medical officer of the Artemis offered his captain a psychological assessment questionnaire. It had questions like "How often do you feel that others are plotting against you?" and "How often do you feel helpless?" "How often do you feel the need to be in control?" The list went on.

Caius believed the questionnaire was a better gauge of mental health than an interview with a counselor. People seemed to be more honest with a test than a person.

While the medical instruments were still probing his body, Kheren took the PADD and, in barely minutes, went through the entire questionnaire then handed it back dully filled to his CMO.

"Do not be surprised, Doc. My psychoprofile clearly states that I have a deep and clear awareness of myself. And I have been prodded in and out since childhood by more doctors than we have on this entire Starbase, all Lotus Fleet ships included. Fact is, if you ever see me do this any slower, consider it a first sign of something being wrong with me."  
Caius looked over the PADD.

"I didn't mean to offend you. Just consider that the way I feel about sick bay and the health of this crew is probably very similar to the way you feel about the operation of this whole ship. When you leave your first officer, or someone else in charge of the bridge. You need to know that you can trust them to handle routine operations. Let's suppose that you were paged by your first officer about an emergency on the bridge during your off duty hours, only to find that everyone is actually following protocols?"

He continued after a short pause.

"Now don't get me wrong. When the Artemis is ready to launch, we'll have so many people coming to sick bay, that we'll need all hands on deck to get through the physicals, and I'll be here. But when we're at a star base, people come and go in small handfuls, and the normal duty shifts should be able to handle it."

"You know... if we called it 'decontamination' instead of 'mandatory physical' I bet people would be more willing to get this examination. It sounds more 'urgent'. Anyhow, the assistants should be cross referencing our examination logs with the transport logs at the beginning of every duty shift. So if someone... forgot to come to sick bay upon boarding the ship, we would be able to remind them."

Caius seemed to be getting into a better mood. Work, and talking about work, always made him feel better. He was in control of his own domain, not a fish out of water.

"Perhaps we could also train whomever operates the transporter to usher people toward sick bay upon arrival?"

Kheren listened to his chief medical officer with growing satisfaction. Despite his young age, especially in his profession, he showed the kind of professionalism and dedication he expected of everyone on his ship, but most of all his senior officers. No emotional outburst or any show of attitude; better yet, he answered with constructive ideas and maintained his cool even when jabbed by his commanding officer.

Doctor Aquila just proved that he was exactly the kind of officer he was himself talking about: competent, effective but most of all, reliable.

"You make very good points, Doc. You are in charge of the health of this crew, not only after any harm but to prevent any possible harm to come to them."

Seeing the doctor most attentive as they spoke of his responsibilities, he elaborated:

"After the tragic attempt by the Horizon Children cult to take over this ship, Mister O'Conner and I devised the security protocols, notably those regarding the entire medical department. But as for the actual implementation of them, I do leave them in your capable hands."

Standing up from the biobed, he lifted his chin in typical Andorian respectful fashion to Doctor Aquila.

"If you need to implement any joint protocols to better do it, I am all for it. This joint action with transporter operations you speak of, for one... Please work it as best you can with Chief of Ops Brie and report all recommendations to Mister O'Conner. Our first officer will certainly be glad to help as well."

Looking a bit around like someone getting his bearings, the Andorian concluded:

"Well, Doc. If you certify me physically, emotionally and mentally fit for duty, and being who I pretend to be, I will take my leave. We have a critical meeting to attend to soon."

"You are free to go."

"Thank you, Doctor Aquila. And please, make sure you have all relevant medical data from our last study week ready for the senior officer's meeting when it will be called; I expect some time tomorrow or the day after, at the latest," the Andorian left in parting.

Before he reached the exit, he turned again towards his CMO.

"You know, no one went so often or stayed for so long and so close as we did. All the operation will rely heavily on our knowledge and experience with the anomaly and its effects. Despite the other medical officers being of higher rank than you, you will certainly be called to lead the medical aspect to this fleet operation at some point, sooner than later. Be ready, Doc."

"Computer, please name any personnel that have not had a level 1 physical examination since boarding the Artemis."

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Montgomery Scott the third, Chief Engineer," the computer chimed back

Caius tapped his combadge.

"Mr. Scott, please report to sickbay."

Scotty tapped his combadge in reply.

"Yes, Doc. On my way."

He then walked out of Engineering and headed to Sickbay, via the main turbolift. Soon, Scotty entered the medical center of the Artemis and caught the captain before he left.

"Sir!" he said as he quickly snapped to a rigid state.

Kheren stood with his chief engineer near the doorway and lifted his head in greeting to the young man. Although he still felt terribly awkward with this Human ritual called "little speech"... or "small talk"... whatever... the Andorian still tried his best to indulge in it since, despite the inordinate high amount of Andorians on the Artemis, his ship was mostly crewed by Humans.

"Mister Scott! Everything good with you and the health of our ship?"

"Can't say for my own engine yet, Sir, but yours will be ship shape in no time," he answered with a smile of deserving pride.

Then, a message came over the comm channel in sickbay. Unless they were of a personal nature, all communications from the Starbase were routinely made heard to the entire crew. The Captain knew the importance of having his crew as quickly and as well informed as possible, especially on the eve of a major engagement like the one laid out before them.

And so, everyone could hear the voice of the Chief Medical Officer of Starbase 10.

"All section and ship chief medical officers are to report to Starbase 10 Medical amphitheater for Grand Rounds on the anomaly we face ahead. It is imperative we be prepared to minimize casualties and maximize effective treatments. Grand Rounds will start in four hours. Attendance is mandatory unless patient status requires your medical care."

"I leave you now to the good ministrations of our doctor, chief. They will not do much on this crucial meeting if he arrives late."

Doctor Aquila took note of the announcement as he looked at the chief engineer.

"Mister Scott, please have a seat..."

Scotty nodded at the doctor, and sat on a biobed.

"So, I assume this is part of the new procedures? I thought I read something about this in the updated security information."

"Yes, everyone that comes aboard must have a level 1 physical examination. Even the captain."

Caius didn't make much small talk, he needed to finish the exam and then attend a meeting of the chief medical officers.

"You're good to go. But before you do, could I ask you one small favor?"

Scotty nodded.

"Sure, Doc. What's up?"

Doctor Aquila presented a small container full of small gears and other assorted metal parts. There was absolutely nothing else but mechanical parts to be seen, no electronic component at all. The engineer's curiosity was immediately evident in his eyes.

"This used to be an antique pocket watch..." explained the doctor. I'd be in your debt if you could have a look at it for me."

Scotty smiled and pat the Doctor's back.

"Of course. I'll take a look at it, and get it back in working order as soon as I have the time. Granddad liked these things, and he taught me a thing or two."

The doctor smiled back, obviously relieved and hopeful.

"Thanks. I'll let you get back to work, and I've got a meeting to get to."

Caius then nodded in salute to him, leaving the box of parts in his hands and, after signalling to Doctor Lumquist to take over in sickbay, headed without delay toward the transporter room.

Scotty nodded back at the doctor and, his examination completed, left sickbay holding the small container of watch parts. He decided to head back to Engineering, and have a talk with the Tellarite he had just met earlier, just to make sure he knew he was here.

\* \* \*

After Vulcan chief of science Lieutenant Syntron finished updating all of the modified sensors, computer and data systems of the ship, he went to check on the progress of all of the probes on the Artemis. He wanted to ensure that the Artemis was prepared for any eventuality; especially as they would be traveling back to confront the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly once again.

Terrans have a peculiar expression; necessity is the mother of invention. However, in the void of space when repeatedly confronting a trans-dimensional menace like the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly, it appears to also be left for Vulcan science chief as well.

It was not Syntron's intention when he initially boarded the Artemis to invent, modify, synthesize and rethink systems in engineering and science on the spur of the moment in order to survive. Yet as an officer, this was what he and his crewmates faced and achieved, repeatedly, in order to prevail under a series of extenuating circumstances throughout each of their missions. Their last mission was no exception; with a moment of crisis looming at any given time until their eventual arrival back to the Starbase.

Most of the other officers were on leave on Starbase 10, but Syntron scheduled his meetings on the Starbase for a later date and time to allow the opportunity to get his department functioning beyond the one hundred percent capacity well before their launch date.

After confirming the condition of each probe and checking on the available materials for further modifying any given probe, he headed back to his office on Deck 14 to prepare a thorough report for Captain Kheren. It would be one less item the Captain would have to be concerned about upon his arrival: to see that the Science Department and equipment were functioning above optimal requirements.

As he was entering information into his report, he noticed Lieutenant Valencia Irksos popping her head into his office and with a playful tone of familiarity inquired:

"Well Mister Science Chief... do I need to go down to Engineering and borrow a lever to pry you away from this department and off of this ship?"

Before he could respond to the peculiar interrogative, the assistant science chief continued:

"Yeah... all of the science officers from our ship and others are wondering why you are giving them all the cold shoulder."

With a slightly raised eyebrow Syntron queried:

"What could the temperature of one of my appendages have to do with..."

With an exasperated sigh and the rolling off her eyes, she cut him off and said:

"They are wondering why you haven't joined us down on the Starbase. We already discussing some of our insights and modifications with them but it would seem appropriate to have our mastermind there to explain everything in your oh-so-Vulcan detailed and precise way." She stated somewhat mockingly.

*More Terran idioms* Syntron realized. He turned back toward his PADD and continued inputting information.

As she stood there somewhat perplexed but equally determined to get a response, he then stated offhandedly what he had decided.

"You can inform these... concerned individuals that I will be finished in approximately two point thirty-seven hours, and after completing some personal business that I need to attend to, I should be arriving to the Starbase in approximately three point fourteen hours. That is, unless you have other questions to ask or assistance in some other capacity, Lieutenant. If so, I would then need to recalculate the additional time required to fulfill these obligations."

Lieutenant Irksos smirked knowing that he was toying with her; although she also knew that he would never admit to this. She had learned that this Vulcan had a very dry sense of humor... about as dry as the deserts on the planet Vulcan itself.

She just smiled and said:

"Well then, Chief... we'll look forward to seeing you on the Starbase in three point fourteen hours... approximately of course" she added with a wink as she turned and disappeared beyond the Vulcan's sight.

He merely turned his back to the door and continued working on his Science department report.

As he resumed his work, a tall shadow fell over him.

The doorway to his office, left open by the departing dark-skinned woman, was now almost entirely filled by the towering frame of Lieutenant Junior Grade Tyvya. The Andorian giantess had to lower her head slightly to clear the antennae on top of her thickly platinum-haired head from the top of the entrance, making her look like she was slightly bowing to the chief of science as she asked:

"Lieutenant Syntron; I would like to have a word with you at your earliest convenience, Sir."

She worded it like a request, but it sounded almost like an order... or a plea.

As a Vulcan, Syntron was not used to feel or display emotions, let alone understand them; but still, his familiarity with so many non-Vulcans in Starfleet had made him well aware and perceptive of the emotions of other species. And there was an unusual number of Andorians on this ship so that he had begun to understand all the complex expressions their antennae conveyed that their rigid faces could not.

When he noticed the agitation of her cranial appendages, he decrypted their meaning immediately: she was agitated and made commendable efforts to restrain herself. Something was brewing inside of her.

Like an incoming storm, he could have thought... or a growing fire...

Or both.

As she spoke to him with her brief words and her perceptible body language, the Science chief turned his full position and attention to the rather tall blue-skinned Andorian security officer.

"Lieutenant Tyvya, now is as convenient as any other time... in fact, perhaps actually better; with only a limited number of crew members aboard."

Syntron realized that there was no sense in delaying their discussion since her stress level would only serve to exacerbate her current state of agitation.

"Please have a seat and begin," he encouraged in a composed manner.

"Thank you, Sir."



Once seated, she looked at him with her four oculars for a moment before saying:

I have two questions for you, Sir, if I may. First one is of a tactical nature. Since it seems that I will have to be acting Chief of tactical on our upcoming fleet operation, unless one officer suddenly reports from Lotus Fleet Command before launch, I have to assess all the tactical assets of this ship; especially one implement of your own devising: the space sonar you configured out of our main deflector dish."

She paused a moment to collect her thoughts before specifying them.

"The space sonar allowed us to nullify the interference of the Mutara nebula when you first made it for the Artemis; it also worked perfectly well within the Azimuth Horizon anomaly during our research week. My question is: can it be used in normal space to pinpoint a cloaked ship... and can it be somehow used through the entire tactical sensor array and not just from the deflector?"

Syntron nodded affirmatively at the Andorian tactical officer.

"The space sonar utilizing a modified deflector configuration does indeed work perfectly well as a cloaked ship detector, Lieutenant... however; one drawback is that even though it provides a very precise unveiling of a cloaked vessel, it requires the Artemis to actually face the target in order to do so. Therefore, it also requires the virtual perfect coordination between navigation and scanning... which is something that the joint console of the bridge or the multitask one makes quite possible; that is, once the synchronization procedure has been mastered."

What Syntron could not convey to Tyvya was that he had already tested this device in their last mission as they pursued the Romulan Warbird Terix that had traveled back into the past in order to try to change the future. But only the bridge senior officers of the Artemis had been debriefed by Temporal Investigations after this mission and, therefore, she knew nothing and could be told nothing about this very highly classified time traveling event.

"Is there anything else I can assist you with, Lieutenant?" he asked, noting that all four oculars of the Andorian security officer were focused directly toward him.

The giantess took a moment to compose herself before finally saying with obvious unease:

"My second question is of a rather... personal nature, Sir."

Making another pause, she finally asked what was obviously really on her mind.

"Lieutenant Syntron, you are Vulcan; I know for a fact that Vulcans are not emotionless as many believe, but rather masters at fully controlling and suppressing their emotions.. especially the most... intense ones. What I would like to know is... what do you believe could possibly be effective to get to someone with that much self-control?"

The science chief carefully analyzed the question posed to him by the somewhat, uncharacteristically, hesitant Andorian; but what she was specifically inquiring was somewhat ambiguous to the Vulcan. He opted to seek greater clarification.

"Lieutenant Tyvya, are you asking what method or technique would likely be effective in generating an emotional reaction or response from someone with a high level of mastery over their emotions?"

"I'm... not sure what I am asking..." she blurted out, antennae waving in all directions as if she was drunk or highly agitated.

The towering blue-skinned woman suddenly stopped herself, as if she was struggling not to lash out in rage and barely managing to restrain her limbs from crushing the chair she was sitting on.

If one thing was known of Andorians, is that they were a passionate, violent race... And they were the first to say it. And at this very moment, it was clear only Starfleet discipline stood between this and whatever storm raged within her.

Syntron symbolized that last wall and she obviously has sought him because of both his officer status and his Vulcan nature.

But the wall was already seriously battered.

"I guess... something... to make that person accept those emotions. Something to make him see them and... live with them and those he could share them with..."

Seeing the Andorian's reaction and the strong emotions seething beneath a very thin veneer of wavering self-control, Syntron surmised that Tyvya was desperately trying to seek a solution to gain a foothold on her own rampant emotions while attempting to maintain professional protocols. She was an extremely dedicated officer and one that the Captain relied on extensively. Syntron realized that he would need to assist the Lieutenant in whatever manner she was willing to accept.

The challenge was how to broach this without intensifying the problem.

He looked at the Andorian serenely and stated "There are methods that Vulcans have used, even with non Vulcan species, to help train an individual to develop techniques for more effectively taking control of their emotions."

He paused for a moment and then proceeded delicately.

"One method involves guiding an individual through a series of meditative steps... each designed to allow the individual to begin to center their emotions. Through a regiment of sessions and subsequent daily practices, these techniques are enhanced and advanced."

The previously waving oculars were now beginning to settle down and focus onto the Vulcan Science officer. He decided to proceed on.

"Another method, although more unconventional, has been effective in the rare cases performed in addressing more severe cases of emotional conditions."

With a bit of trepidation, Syntron continued.

"It is a deeply personal thing...it involves a Vulcan mind-meld. This as you may be aware, does carry a level of risk since it could be physically debilitating for both parties. The pressure changes could also potentially aggravate an existing condition. At the conclusion of the meld, each mind may also retain some knowledge of the other. Again Lieutenant... a very personal and somewhat risky approach."

Tyvya thought for a moment, listening intently with both antennae at every word the Vulcan said. Then she took a deep breath and looked straight at him:

"I understand. Now, please tell me, Sir... can we bypass or... reverse that process?"

Listening to the Andorian almost pleading for a minimally involved and swift solution, Syntron could sense that the giantess was grasping for an immediate remedy. Regrettably, he had none to offer.

"Unfortunately Tyvya, there is no way to simply bypass strong emotions, especially from as passionate a species such as an Andorian."

The Vulcan science chief thought for a moment, and despite initial hesitation, brought his discussion down into an even more personal level.

"Vulcans themselves Lieutenant have strived for millennia to be in command of their emotions, yet even we lose some level of control at times; especially when *pon farr* takes a hold of us."

Syntron had never discussed this aspect of his world with anyone; especially an off-worlder from a different species; and a fellow Starfleet officer serving on the same ship nevertheless. It is a very private matter within Vulcan society, yet he couldn't help but see this as a way to make his point succinctly.

"During *pon farr*," he continued, looking down for a moment "adult Vulcan males undergo a neurochemical imbalance that takes on a form of almost madness; especially from a Vulcan's viewpoint. The imbalance during *pon farr* can be transferred to others via a telepathic mating bond. It can also be transferred to other species during the same telepathic bond. During the ancient, pre-Surak times, Vulcans would normally kill to win their mates. After the Time of Awakening, when our people eschewed unbridled passion for pure logic, the *koon-ut-kal-if-fee* was adopted, and many Vulcans became telepathically bonded at youth. There are but two options open to Vulcans that remedy a *pon farr*: Taking a mate or taking a life."

He slowly looked back up at the Andorian once again.

"This is why I brought this very personal matter into our discussion Lieutenant. If you are seeking a way to most effectively reign in some level of control on these emotions, then I would recommend that you consider submitting to a mind-meld; despite the risks previously mentioned. There is a high probability that it would have the greatest and most immediate impact, but it would also require following up with a series of very specific intensive meditative sessions that you conduct within the privacy of your own quarters; that is once you are instructed on how to conduct them."

The long-haired platinum head shook as the antennae flattened in mounting irritation.

"You misunderstand me, Sir. I do not want to *suppress* passion; I want to *free* it!"

Her facial eyes looked away as her cranial appendages resumed their chaotic wavering.

"And... it is not about *me*..."

Syntron was perplexed by her response.

"I apologize for the misunderstanding. Perhaps Lieutenant, you should seek counsel elsewhere, because my level of experience is most certainly not in any capacity related to allowing my emotions to run rampant. This seems more like what crew members have done in the holodeck during their off-duty hours. Many of the crewmembers on a variety of ships concoct an assortment of holodeck scenarios to allow them to free up a variety of pent-up emotions."

He then queried further.

"If this issue is regarding someone else, Lieutenant as you've indicated, I must also acknowledge that there also seems to be a significant amount of constrained emotion within you as well. I mean this not as a criticism, but merely as an observation."

"That's putting it mildly..." she mumbled, closing her eyes for a moment.

Then she looked again at him.

"Sir... I know counselling is not your area of expertise... but Vulcan discipline is. I hoped you could tell me how to... to reach out to someone with such discipline deeply ingrained in him by his own fear of the very emotions he is repressing. To... have him accept them... live them... share them..."

Slowly she rose, head hung low.

"Sorry to have bothered you with this, Sir."

He looked sincerely at the Andorian.

"This has not been a bother Lieutenant; but perhaps a bit perplexing. If I am permitted to inquire, who is the officer that you are harboring such intense and overwhelming concern about?"

The Vulcan could see that the towering, fearless, powerful Andorian giantess was suddenly turning a very deep shade of purple.

And it took a long moment before she finally blurted out what she was withholding.

"It would have been so simple on Andoria... But in Starfleet... "

She could not say more; but she had already said more than enough for the keen analytical mind of the chief science officer of the Artemis.

The peculiar Ghelnoid physiology of Andorians was totally incompatible with all Humanoid life, even similarly cobalt-blooded ones like Bolians or Kalthurians; and the passion of their heart, as complex as their unique biology, could only be brought out by those of their own kind.

And there was in all known space only one Andorian who was known, even reknowned and on both worlds, to have been schooled in the Vulcan disciplines of the Kolinahr. He was known as the Blue Adept.

But Syntron knew him by his real name. He knew him quite well indeed.

In that moment, the mystery became crystal clear. There could only be one Andorian that could be causing such a torrent of emotions from the giantess: the Andorian Captain Kheren himself.

But what advice could he offer to her?

This was an Andorian that even studied for a time on Vulcan and therefore had learned, developed, and began to master techniques to suppress his propensity toward violence and other extremely forceful emotions. It is what has allowed him to prevail under the direst of circumstances throughout all of these challenging missions.

Like the control rods in old style nuclear fission reactors, his techniques kept in check a volatile exponential reaction that would occur and explode uncontrollably if fully released.

He looked at the Andorian security officer.

"Sometimes, Lieutenant, it is a very dangerous proposition to release a very powerful force unchecked; especially one that has been consciously suppressed and carefully maintained for so long. Captain Kheren prides himself on his intellect and self-discipline. To undo this would be to absolve him of his role and ability to serve to his highest level as the Captain aboard this starship. Is there truly any need aboard this ship that would surpass this function?"

Her head hung down as if a death sentence had been given to her.

"... Of course not, Sir."

She then took a deep breath, rose to her full frightening height and looked at Syntron with a blank face and unblinking eyes, even if her antennae were still waving this way and that.

"You have helped me see more clearly... and much to think about. Thank you, Sir."

And with a respectful, human-like nod, she left.

After the noticeably gloomy Andorian giantess exited out of the Science Chief's office, Syntron turned his attention back to completing his tasks in preparation for his departure from the Artemis and his arrival to Starbase 10.

He was planning to initiate a Science conference with the other Science Chiefs from each of the other Starships of Lotus Fleet.

After the remainder of his Artemis preparations were complete, he began to compose a message to the other science chiefs. He was calling for them to meet in Science Conference Room 1 on Starbase 10 at 09:00 the next morning. He had already reserved the room and was requesting that they each bring their data, ideas and a good measure of innovation with them as they would collectively begin to develop their game-plan to contain and nullify this dangerous phenomenon known as the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly.

This would be no easy task by any means, but at least the Artemis had recently completed a thorough analysis and investigation of this anomaly by carefully circumnavigating their way around the entire entity.

They had also developed some unique and effective means to combat its effects and in some cases quash some of the anomalies negative impact on the ship and her crew. The crew of the Artemis was also quite adept at quickly and efficiently sealing up subspace fractures that opened and functioned as a portal for tendrils of the anomaly to enter into their time-space like fingers ripping open a gap for violent parts of the anomaly to crawl through.

Syntron's immediate goal was to work with the other science chiefs to assemble the innovations created from all of the crews from each of the Lotus Fleet ships into a collective barrage of offensive and defensive armaments and strategies that could be coordinated and employed once their mission was under way. Logically, the better prepared they were, the greater their likelihood of success in achieving their goal: to rid the quadrant, their galaxy, and perhaps all else that remains from the devastation that this monstrosity was bringing with it.

After the message was sent to each of the science officers aboard each of the Lotus Fleet's starships, Syntron walked down to transporter room 1 and was soon beamed down to Starbase 10.

Checking the time upon his arrival, he noted that he was only eleven point thirty-two minutes off of his estimated time of arrival that he had anticipated in his discussion with his assistant chief of science, Lieutenant Irksos, just before her departure. His next objective was now to meet with his own science team before the conference in room one would commence. With his science PADD secured in its hand-crafted satchel on one shoulder, the science chief of the Artemis was now on his way to his designated meeting place with his science team.

\* \* \*

Barely hundred of meters from the immense structure of Starbase 10, a warp burst flashed against the black canopy of twinkling stars and the distinctive silhouette of the USS Spectre appeared suddenly, abruptly slowing down to sublight speeds and firing all thrusters to break and maneuver its large saucer shape under which a pair of slim warp nacelles extended behind and under an arching pylon supporting a large torpedo pod.

But, despite its streamlined looks, the Akira class cruiser was still well over four hundred meters long and massing three million metric tons; she could not divert her closing trajectory so close to the starbase before her deflector screen clipped and tore off one of the main subspace antennae of the station.

Captain Daniel Summers sat in his ready room awaiting to get close enough to Starbase 10 to send a communique. The vortex was reopened by the Spectre crew and the USS Spectre reappeared in the correct time to find that, fortunately, nothing seemingly had changed.

"Captain, we are within communication range of Starbase 10."

"Aye, Captain."

Then the impact reverberated inside the hull and slightly jolted the entire ship.

"Report!" immediately barked Summers, his dark Betazoid eyes inherited from his mother rising to the ceiling.

*What now?*

"Sir... we reemerged much too close to the starbase... we... And we... kind of... clipped their main antenna..."

The captain brought his hand to his brow in a very Human gesture inherited from his father.

*We manage to pursue and eliminate a Klingon Kvort class battlecruiser back in time to prevent a catastrophe in early twenty-first century then get back to the twenty-fifth... and we can't even maneuver around a five kilometers wide space station...*

"Understood; get me Commander Samji" Daniel said as he got up from his desk filled with reports as well as the one he was completing for their most recent assignment and walked back unto to the Spectre's bridge.

First officer David Rogers vacated his command chair upon his arrival but still stared at the speaker sitting at the tactical console for almost ten seconds before he erupted into a belly hurting laugh.

Trying to speak, he could only sputter disjointed words.

"Within ... range?"

Choking on the words, David sat in his Exec seat and tried to control himself. They were barely eighteen hundred meters away from the station. Looking at the view screen, he watched the bent and destroyed comm tower spinning away from the Spectre. His only thought; since he had been in command during the incident, he was probably going to have to pay for that.

On one of the higher balconies of the Promenade, a stocky, blond-haired, blue eyed man with the physique, the stare, the stance and the uniform typical of a security officer watched the spectacular arrival of the Akira class starship. Lieutenant Junior Grade Michael J. Tritter had found himself back on Starbase 10 for a while now, after separating from the McKenzie before she had gone out to some covert mission several days ago.

He had requested the transfer. Things just did not work out for him on the small, confining warship under the command style of Captain Crist. Michael needed much more directiveness than the veteran ship commanding officer of Lotus fleet was ready to give and his own abrasive nature does not go over well with most of his crewmates.

Since he had been made well aware of the new Fleet Mission coming up by Fleet Captain Samji himself during his transfer period, and the pressing need of Lotus Fleet for all able-bodied officers, he had reevaluated his idea of resigning his commission and asked for a new ship assignment instead.

He was curious about what it would entail for him. Although he kept such a desire to himself. For his part, the newly promoted Fleet captain had been crystal clear in what was expected of him. He didn't know much about Tritter, except that he did his job with diligence, according to the Captain from his last post, Daniel Crist. However, he was quiet and kept to himself most of the mission and showed a disturbing lack of initiative for an officer responsible for an entire ship department.

His previous posts indicated his skill and ability at both the Tactical and Security aspects of the job were proficient, so Samji was quick to accept his transfer request at the time he requested it... which was at a point when Samji had learned they were headed toward Earth on the tail of a Klingon ship. It was a different story, now, however...

The young officer had entered his office and with a firm handshake he had greeted him. A silent nod from the man was all he had received, but such reaction was not unexpected. So Samji had gone right to the point.

"I wanted to call you in here, he had told Tritter, because as far as we know, the Spectre is M.I.A. and presumed lost. I'm not sure why you felt you needed to leave the McKenzie, and frankly it's none of my business since there were no reprimands on your record from your commanding officer. However, it means that, assuming the Spectre does not return, there is not an opening for you right now, except to help us out on Starbase 10. We likely have some very powerful enemies on their way here and we'll need your skill in combating them. I know it's no starship, but perhaps your time here will be rewarding nonetheless."

Upon receiving an affirmative from Tritter, he then had given the officer his assignments and list of department officers on Starbase 10 before he having him take his leave.

Since completing this first duty, Tritter had been idly milling about Starbase 10, the man seemingly just walking about the area; but something seemed to be on his mind, judging by his frown and tight-lipped mouth.

His new ship had been classified as Missing In Action. But now, he was looking at her docking within the immense structure of the space station. He then made his way to where the ship was docked. One the way, he used the large windows to give her a good once over, curious as to what ship he has found himself upon: wide saucer, downward nacelles directly behind, modular pod on top; it was not the most recent design but her lines still looked modern, state of the art, efficient. And she was big; easily four times the size and almost nine times the mass of his former ship, the biggest vessel in Lotus fleet save for the classic-looking USS Artemis.

Soon enough, he would meet those he would serve with aboard the USS Spectre.

Right behind him on the same level, Fleet Captain Allen Samji was walking back to Operations to coordinate all the new arrivals. The USS McKenzie was on its way back from its sensitive covert mission against the Horizon Children cult... he really needed to speak with Captain Crist about that... and there were plenty of new recruits pouring in on shuttles and transport ships.

As he passed through the Promenade, he saw that Dulmer and Luksly from the Office of Temporal Investigations were still there after their classified meeting with the senior officers of the USS Artemis, leisurely finishing off bits of a meal as they appeared to wait for something. He sighed a bit, wondering why they were still there. After his encounter with Q, those guys were associated with a sour taste in his mouth.

After a couple of hours of working in relative silence in Operations, Ensign Grok's raspy voice broke through and surprised him a bit.

"Sir!" he shouted, a little overexcited. "The Spectre is here! And they clipped off an antenna!"

Samji turned, shook his head, and raised an eyebrow saying, "The...? They WHAT!?"

Finally, as he was able to process the information and trying to push down an overflow of emotions at hearing the entire Spectre and her crew were safe again, he said, "Th-the Spectre? They're back? I can't believe it!"

He and Grok were beaming and he walked over and gave him a hearty smack on the shoulder that almost knocked the little guy off his chair.

His smile then changed to a frown as he said:

"Why did they not contact us sooner?"

"Apparently and according to accounts, Grok answered, they just appeared out of nowhere. There was however a large amount of chronitons detected upon re-entry."

Samji thought of the Temporal Investigation officers and sighed again.

*Of course... they are always... on time.*

"Open a secure channel," he said to Grok.

"USS Spectre, this is Fleet Captain Samji. Welcome home!" he greeted. "Upon docking, your entire crew will be subject to a one-on-one review with agents Dulmer and Luksly of the Office of Temporal Investigations, starting with the Captain, then the First Officer, then Senior Staff, followed by the Junior officers, and finally the crewmen and civilian contractors. You *should not* move from the docking area or speak to anyone until your meeting is complete. Sorry for the abrupt welcome and... glad you're safe.

"Understood, Fleet Captain... I guess congratulations are in order, Sir. Thank you for the warm welcome and we will be standing by awaiting the Temporal Investigation's teams arrival" Daniel said with a bit of cheer and with a sigh of discomfort as he hated the very idea of having to talk to Temporal Investigations.

"They have been here for... some time, " corrected Samji, knowing an easy joke when he heard one... and these multiplying temporal incidents of the past few days were no laughing matters.

"Thank you Captain," Samji now replied to the congratulations from the Spectre commanding officer; "I'll look forward to reading your report when TOI is done with you. And... we'll talk about that antenna later," he added, this time with a genuine grin, before closing the channel.

A short while later, two men in dark grey, unremarkable suits, carrying small, nondescript briefcases, came aboard, flashing high security level authorizations that would have been normally expected from admirals. Agents Dulmer and Luksly of the Temporal Investigations entered the Spectre bridge with authority and a purpose.

"Ah Gentlemen, welcome to the USS Spectre," said the pale haired, dark-eyed medium-sized man in black and grey uniform wearing four pips on his collar. "I am Captain Summers. We will all do what we can to help you in your job and make this as quick and easy as possible."

"It is never quick and easy, Captain," the smaller, slimmer one, Dulmer, said with a snap.

"Ok, well then... you must also understand that there is no need to undermine my authority here in front of my crew. If you will follow me, you can use my ready room for your interviews with the crew."



"Thank you, and pardon my partner, Captain, he is a bit tight-winded lately... and we will be starting with you, Captain Summers," Luksly, the tallest, broadest of the two said with not even the shadow of a quirky smile.

"Understood Gentlemen; please this way" Daniel said with the point of his hand in the direction of the ready room door.

After all having a seat in his office, the investigation started.

"Captain, we understand you traveled back in time to the year 2011 of the old Terran Gregorian calendar, is this correct?" Luksly asked first.

"Correct; we followed a Klingon K'Vort class ship into a vortex of their own making that brought us to that time period," Daniel responded.

Dulmer stood straight in his chair with his arms crossed at his chest and a stern look on his face.

"What where they there for?"

"I do not entirely know as I have not had a chance to read Commander Rogers full report yet and I do not wish to speculate. We do have a few of them in our Brig at the moment however; you can ask them." Daniel replied without flinching, blinking or moving at all as he started to feel the atmosphere change to a negative mood.

"Very well; we were not aware of that. We will take them into custody after all this is said and done. What happened that you do know about?" Luksly asked and hunched over the desk looking at Summers.

"Well, we got into the timeline after seeing them create and go into a temporal vortex that we also entered, expecting that they intended some mischief with History we might have to prevent. And sure enough, we noticed that there were Klingons on Earth where they had warped at maximum to reach. I had Commander Rogers my XO, Lieutenant MRall my science officer, Lieutenantt Shar Noor my Chief Engineer and two security officers go after them in disguise at a location identified as the most powerful particle accelerator of the time, the very one that pioneered serious research on Earth on antimatter."

Both agents looked at each other and nodded without a word as Summers continued to report.

"We had trouble getting a hold of the away team for a while... Then, there was an explosion down there and, a few moments later, we were able to get the away team and the prisoners I told you about. As they were brought on board, the Klingon cruiser attacked us, so we put on the DYCEP system and fought them until we had no option less but to ensure their destruction."

The Betazoid hybrid spoke in what seemed like one breath, obviously unnerved by the whole affair as much as by the two stern men listening to him with piercing stares..

"The incident is in the history books," revealed Luksly bluntly, his eyes on the computer desk terminal of the captain's where he had recalled historical data from the ship's own extensive computer banks. "It is part of footnotes about the initial difficulties and accidental setbacks in early antimatter practical research of Earth."

"What about the pieces of the Klingon ship, what happened with those?" Dulmer then asked as if to the both of them, with a little more sensitivity then he had showed before... but not by much.

"There was nothing left of the ship to salvage or take in that would harm the timeline. If you do not believe me, check the computer records as they are unchanged from our travels."

"We are done with you for now, Captain, but do not go anywhere for the next few days," Dulmer added after looking at his partner and getting a nod.

"Until next time then, Gentlemen," Summers said, got up and walked out of the ready room to return to the bridge.

"Commander Rogers, your up with the Temporal Investigators. In the meantime, I will be aboard the Starbase meeting with Fleet Captain Samji."

Rogers nodded at Captain Summers and watched as he departed the bridge. He then walked purposefully toward the captains ready room, entered and faced the Temporal agents.

"Lets get this over with, shall we?"

Approaching the replicator, David ordered up a glass of cold water, and as the glass materialized in the unit, Dulmer and Luksly began.

"Commander Rogers," Dulmer said first. "I understand that you are half Romulan. Does not your rather unique heritage conflict with the ideals of the Federation?"

His glass half raised to take a sip of water, Rogers paused and stared menacingly at Agent Dulmer. Suppressing his sudden urge to anger, David responded in kind.

"Sir, at no time in my career have the Federation's and my ideals ever conflicted. Could we stay on topic please?"

Luksly stepped forward between the two and interjected forcefully.

"Gentlemen, please. Let's not get into the past just yet. Commander, if we may continue. We have looked over the Spectre's logs and have a few questions about your away mission to Earth's surface. We are given to understand that you took aliens down with you to the surface. Do you consider that standard procedure for a visit to a primitive planet?"

David looked at the agent for a second, formulating a neutral response.

"Sir, I assure you, all precautions were taken to conceal the identities of Lieutenant Shar Noor and Lieutenant M'Rall Michaels. Circumstances on the surface required the expertise of those two officers."

Taking a small breath, Rogers continued with his own rebuke.

"And calling two of my Starfleet officers aliens is not going to engender you to my good graces while I am left in command of this ship, gentlemen."

Having said that, David walked around the two agents to Captains Summers' desk, set his glass down carefully on the table and sat down, leaving Dulmer and Luksly to either stand or take any remaining seat on the opposite side of the desk. Dulmer remained standing and the slightly smaller agent took a seat to Rogers' right before continuing.

"I understand your comradeship Commander. So tell us, what exactly happened on the surface. Where did you go? What did you do?"

Thinking slowly, David tried to piece together the time from beam in to returning to the ship.

"Well now. Under appropriate disguise, my team and I beamed to a secluded area and proceeded to infiltrate the complex. Scanners showed Klingon lifesigns there. Once underground, we were blasted by a bomb planted by the warriors. We lost one crew member in that. Once we found the Klingons, we subdued the four of them and beamed them back to the Spectre."

It was an extremely brief explanation for a rather tense hour or two on Earth's surface, but David was in a bit of a hurry. He had his ship to look after. There hadn't even been time to look into the ships' damage report yet.

Continuing on, David tried to wrap up the interview.

"Once I was beamed back to the ship with the last warrior and he was thrown in the brig, I returned to the bridge. I assume you are aware that we had to destroy the Klingon cruiser?"

"We are aware of that battle, Commander," Dulmer stated. "But we must know; what did you do on the surface? You mentioned a bomb. What damage did it cause? Did you intercede in that destruction?"

Sighing inwardly, David paused to take a drink of water, then once again set the glass down carefully before responding.

"The blast that killed my team member destroyed a magnetic constrictor device. I used my phaser to create an appropriate looking failure in a nearby system that would give an appearance that it's failure caused the explosion and subsequent damage to the magnet. I assure you gentlemen, our main concern at the time was preserving the timeline. We took nothing off Earth that we didn't take down with us. And," David added emphatically, "we left nothing there to implicate either ours or Klingon presence."

David had purposefully left out the additional Klingon bomb that had been transported up. It's presence would only add to the questions the two agents seemed to be full of.

*'They're certainly full of themselves,'* David thought smugly.

Standing up abruptly, David addressed the pair.

"Now gentlemen, if I may get back to my ship, we have extensive repairs to complete and this line of questioning seems to be complete."

Looking down toward Luksly, Dulmer barely nodded.

"Very well Commander. We'll let you get back to your precious ship. For now!", he added meaningfully. "See to it that you keep yourself available should any other items of interest to Temporal Investigations come up."

Motioning toward Luksly, Dulmer turned and the pair left the ready room. David stood there, looking at the closing doors. Trying to control his exasperation toward the two agents, he looked back at his glass of water.

*I should have had a Romulan Ale,* he thought whimsically.

Sitting back down, David thought for a few minutes, trying to erase the interview from his immediate concerns. They were directed toward the Spectre now, and her damage.

Rising again, David made his way back to the bridge and the awaiting repairs. The glass of water, half empty, remained forgotten on the desk.

By that time, Captain Daniel Summers had walked out of the command center of his ship and traveled unto the station and over to Starbase 10's Operations station.

"Fleet Captain Samji," Summers said as he walked into Operations.

Samji, surprised, turned to see Summers standing at attention, waiting for the starbase commander to address him. He moved over and offered him a hand to shake with an implied at ease.

"That didn't take too long, I guess it wasn't that bad after all," Samji remarked. "Have a seat."

After they sat down on either side of a small interactive conference table and Engineering display, the new Commandant of the entire Hromi sector looked at the commanding officer of the Spectre with a stern stare.

"You overshot the mark a bit, couldn't you have come back sooner so we needed being so worried?"

Seeing the confused look on the Captain's face, he explained.

"Have you checked the chronometer? It's currently stardate 87252.4... Captain; you've been gone for over two months!"

Shocked at the news, Summers stumbled for a response.

"I, uh... wow! Two *months*? I can't believe it! I guess I was so in the moment of the situation in Earth's past that I had not realized... Besides, time travel isn't a precise science, at least to us non-Vulcans" the captain of the Spectre responded with a slight smile. "I apologize for the worry we have caused the fleet; it seems as busy as a bee hive in here. I haven't seen it like this since just before the Borg invaded."

Samji's expression changed from judgmental concern to acceptance and he smiled.

"Well you are right of course. I'm just glad you got back now, specifically. As you noted, the Starbase is quite busy. We are preparing a plan that has been developed by Lotus Fleet scientists to stop the Azimuth Horizon. We'll need all the ships we can muster out there for this plan to work."

He then lowered his voice as if it were a secret, which it wasn't... but it still felt like one.

"We also have the possibility of up to three different aggressors working to stop us, destroy the anomaly, destroy us, or some combination of those things."

Samji stood, indicating it was time their meeting came to a close.

"So get your crew together, Captain, work on repairs, and be prepared to launch at any time. We'll discuss our plans in more detail at a meeting tomorrow."

Later, having returned to his quarters from starbase medical, Rogers had quickly run a ship wide diagnostic and integrated that with damage reports from all over the ship. This global report now in hand, David tapped his combadge.

"Computer? Locate Captain Summers."

"Captain Summers is in his ready room."

Leaving his quarters, David was only half concentrating on that destination as he thought back over his recent, and very first, away mission. Although technically a success, Rogers was gloomy over his mission to Earth's past. He had lost Ensign Willing and Chief Coleman was still in the Spectre's sickbay. Her prognosis, by acting chief medical officer Lieutenant Lucas Desrosier, was sketchy. He had said the next twelve to twenty four hours would either see her through the crisis; Or they would lose her.

His musings ongoing, David looked around and found himself in front of Captain Summers' ready room doors. Shrugging his shoulders to work out the stiffness from the recent

ministrations to his own wounds on the starbase, David signaled for admittance.

"Come" Summers replied to the chime of the ready room door as he finished reading a message from home, putting the padd down on the desk as the doors opened revealing Commander Rogers.

"Commander; what can I do for you?" Daniel asked with slight sympathy as he felt mixed emotions from his first officer.

Entering at the proffered invite, Rogers walked purposefully across the small room and stopped in front of the desk. Placing his PADD onto the polished surface, David slid it half way across the desk then resumed his attention stance, commenting on the contents contained within the device.

"Sir, the Spectre damage reports and casualty list. As requested."

Keeping the formal stance, David's thoughts still wandered slightly. Images of Ensign Willings' inert body kept intruding, along with haphazard images of other dead crewmen. A hypothetically destroyed body of Doctor Kwak, the Specter's acting chief medical officer during the mission, also kept surfacing in his thoughts. Why they intruded, David could not fathom, as he had not been near the little doctor when he had died. Perhaps the Ferengii and the other lost souls of the mission were ghosts haunting Rogers personally, for failing Willings.

Awaiting dismissal, David swayed slightly on his feet. It had been only two hours since his release from star base medical, and he was somewhat tired. However, he tried not to let it show.

Rogers noted the anguish across Summers' face as he read through the casualty list. Knowing himself how he felt about losing one of his away team members, he could only sympathize with what a ship's captain must feel when his crew were killed, or even injured for that matter. Not withstanding the casualties though, the Spectre had to continue on.

"Sir, as you can see, the ship took extensive damage to the forward shield generators and the port torpedo launcher on deck C sustained heavy damage. Three of those tubes are out of commission."

The casualty list was self explanatory, but David thought that Captain Summers would want to know some of the arrangements as well.

"Doctor Kwak's body is being returned to Ferenginaar. Ensign Willings' family requested similar arrangements. I took the liberty of sending them a subspace message giving them our condolences."

That had been one of the hardest things Rogers had ever done. Extolling the virtues of a deceased crew member to their family was easy, but telling parents that their son was dead? David would rather have cut out his own heart.

David coughed lightly and continued, eager to get this over with.

"The base has us in line for repairs ASAP, captain. We should be back to full health by eighteen hundred hours, day after tomorrow. The only reason for the extra time is because of the damaged DYCEP plating that needs repair. It is a demanding and meticulous job, considering its nature."

Taking Captain Summers' nod as a permission, David turned and left the ready room. Like himself, he thought perhaps Summers needed time alone to come to terms with the deaths.

David knew he did.

As he walked the corridors and decks, seemingly aimlessly, he noted each department and checked off its readiness on his PADD. Not an overly boring chore, but a complete inventory on the Spectre's readiness status needed to be confirmed to Captain Summers before he left the ship.

Finally returning to the bridge, Rogers visited each main station, lingering slightly at the engineering console. He ran his fingers lightly over the icons, careful not to activate anything. Thoughts wandered through his mind at his rise to executive officer of the Spectre, and sometimes he wished he could be a simple engineer again.

*Hell, most times,* David thought bemusedly.

finally reaching his chair to the right of the center seat of the bridge, David entered his PADD contents into the computer. The ship was ready for launch, and could be parked outside of star base 10 to make room for another, more needy vessel in her stead. That was just standard parking, so David left orders for the beta shift to move the Spectre outside to a standard parking orbit of the base, then stood up and headed for the turbolift. He would freshen up in his quarters before heading over to the star base promenade.

He wanted something different for supper, and the massive base, Lotus Fleet's home in the Hromi cluster, offered a varied and above standard array of victuals for her multitude of denizens.

Having assured himself that the bridge was in good hands, David returned to his quarters and retired.

It had been a very long day.

Some time after his first officer exited, Captain Summers tapped his combadge.

"Captain Summers to Lieutenant Junior Grade Michael J. Tritter; please report to my ready room as soon as possible."

Daniel tapped his badge one more time, ending the communication. Then, as he waited for a response, he sat there finishing reviewing the report that he had just recieved from Commander Rogers only a few moments ago. He then started writting his report to Lotus Fleet Command while he awaited the newest crewmember of his senior bridge staff to arrive.

On the lower level of the Promenade, a tall, heavysset young blonde-haired, blue-eyed, late thirtyish-looking man in the gold-collared black and grey uniform of Starfleet ship security acknowledged the call. Michael J. Tritter had found himself back on Starbase 10 after separating from the McKenzie before she launched for her last, undisclosed mission. Things just did not work out for him on board the warship, at least not as he expected them to work out. His abrasive nature did not go over well with most people, and the closeness inside this small starship had not helped.

But he was not going to stand on the sidelines because of it. He had been made well aware of the new Fleet Mission coming up by Fleet Captain Samji. He was curious about what it would entail for him... although he kept such a desire to himself.

He had been idly milling about the starbase for a few days now, the man just seemingly walking about the area, although he was on security duty on the station until he would be assigned to a new ship. But the way he looked without seeing, something obviously seemed to be on his mind.

He had heard his new ship, the Akira class USS Spectre, had been classified as missing in action and that worried him... until a few moments ago when he heard like everyone else on the immense space station that she was back and docking.

He made his way to where the ship was docked and then proceeded to give her a good once over, curious as to what ship he has found himself upon. He immediately noticed the battle damage on the large saucer and along the lowering strut of one of the two slim nacelles below.

It was intriguing; but, soon enough, he would know all about it. he would make sure of that.

And soon enough, he would meet those he would serve with aboard the Spectre. Starting now with his new commanding officer.

Tritter, hearing the request from the Captain. simply replied:

"Aye, Sir."

And, within a few minutes, a firm knock was heard on the Captain's ready room door.

"Come in" Summers replied and the doors opened to reveal the Spectre's new Tactical Officer.

"Ah, yes welcome aboard the Spectre, Lieutenant. Please have a seat" Daniel said as he motioned for the chair in front of himself.

Once the door opened and he heard the Captain speak to him, he nodded slightly to the man and made his way inside. He then took a seat in front of the Captain as directed and made himself somewhat comfortable in the seat; being nearly two meters tall and a hundred and sixty kilos does not make most chairs comfortable.

"I just wanted to meet you and welcome you... and lay a few guidelines down. First, before anything else, I expect you to do your job at one hundred percent every day and that you follow orders. Second, I do allow feedback from my officers as long as it is in a respectable manner, so if you disagree with anything, please let me know courteously. Finally, if there are any issues, you may come to myself or Commander Rogers; our doors are always open to our crew. Do you have any questions or anything to say at this moment in time?"

The new bridge officer of the Spectre did not seem off put by the stern nature of his new commanding officer's word, in fact, he oddly appreciated it.

"Fair Enough. No questions, Sir" was the reply given, his voice of a deep tone with heavy German accents mingling about in his words.

"Very well then. Repairs are all completed from our last mission, so I guess the only thing to do is get familiarized with the ship and its crew; especially your department. And if there is any questions, just ask," Summers added as he stood up and offered the tall man a firm handshake.

Tritter nodded slightly to him, then rose to his feet.

"Aye, Sir," he replied to the man.

He looked at the profered hand for a moment and then gave it a firm shake, although careful to not crush his commanding officer's much smaller hand.

\* \* \*

The USS McKenzie had just arrived in the system. The tiny ship could be seen entering the spacedock of Starbase 10, her distinctive saucer-shaped hull with her encased warp nacelles inside and under her flat hull making her stand as starkly apart from the classic lines of a starship like the USS Artemis, or even the more streamlined, modern lines of the USS Lotus, as her diminutive size. At barely one hundred and twenty meters long and three hundred and fifty-five thousand metric tons, it was five times smaller and ten times less massive than the Ambassador class, even still three times smaller and less than half the mass of the Intrepid class flagship.

But, despite her small size, she was almost as fast as the flagship of Lotus Fleet, the only ship more agile than the Stalwart Guardian of the Federation and still sported more firepower than any other ship save the Prometheus class USS Alsea and with a low sensor profile only surpassed by the unique DYCEP system of the USS Spectre. She was purely a combat vessel with barely five dozen people to man her, yet she carried the same heart and soul as any other Federation starship serving in the most elite division of Starfleet.

She moved quickly, trying to dock just under the deadline for the fleet meeting about the upcoming major operation called against the threat of the Azimuth Horizon. A moment passed and she slowed to a crawl and inched closer to its docking arm. After a few seconds, she was finally docked and back home, alongside the other four vessels assigned to Starbase 10.

The crew could now be seen disembarking, a few of them, the senior officers, still wearing roughed civilian clothes and the remnants of expressions that told of a difficult mission barely over... or, maybe, of personal issues still unresolved.

Captain Daniel Crist, the most experienced active Lotus Fleet captain, was currently in his quarters, in this smallish vessel doubling as his ready room, still dressed in the black outfit he had worn in the latest covert mission completed by the McKenzie crew. With the information they had retrieved, completely reviewed and reflected upon during their trip back home, he rose from his desk only a good hour later... and only then took the time to change into his regulation black, grey-shouldered and red collared uniform.

After a few more minutes, Crist exited his ready room, in full uniform, and a PADD in hand. The PADD contained the data they had retrieved.

He wondered how he would convince the rest of the fleet about it all. He barely believed it himself and *he* had been *there*!

*This will make quite a storm*, he thought with a bitterness that almost made him laugh mirthlessly as he took the personal data storage device and finally left his ship.

Crist walked through the corridor of Starbase 10 towards the office section of the base without pausing to meet anyone by word or eye until he came to the door marked Fleet Captain Samji and tapped the panel to ring in. A moment later, the door opened and Crist entered.

He stepped up to Samji's desk.

"Fleet Captain. I'm here with the data taken from the Horizon Children cult. I've glanced over it and it seems to be everything we've ever wanted to know about them."

"Welcome back, Captain, thanks. Have a seat," Samji gestured to the seat on the other side of the desk and sat down himself.

He took a long read through the information Crist handed over on the PADD. He hadn't seen it yet, or even received a report, as he didn't want to risk even a secure transmission from the McKenzie.



Captain Crist waited patiently for his new boss to finish and then, finally, Samji put the PADD down on his desk and just sat back with a long exhausted sigh.

"That's a lot to take in," Samji said at last.

He put the surprising subject about Sisko aside for the moment to focus on the cult's data.

"Every strategy, agent in Starfleet, and plan of attack, including the very day and time they will be here. This is unbelievable, Captain. Without this, and with all the other things we have to deal with right now, we would've been hard pressed to fight back against this attack, especially with the coverts they have, even on Starbase 10. Now we at least have a fighting chance. And destroying the Maru means that they might still go through with these very same plans, thinking they were destroyed. Great job!"

He again wanted to jump right in and talk about Sisko, but gave Crist a chance to accept the praise and respond.

"Thank you, Sir," Crist said. He was rather concerned about Sisko now, wishing he had grabbed him when they had the chance. "What about Sisko, Sir?"

The Fleet Captain considered the amazing turn of events he was reading about.

"Hmm, yes, that's an unbelievable situation. We need to try to bring him back and restore his memories, but it's not going to be easy. He will fight to return and he may never be restored to his old self. Something happened to him out there beyond the Azimuth Horizon that none of us can know for sure of."

"It says on his file that, during the Borg Invasion, he worked closely with Lieutenant Commander Sorripto. Perhaps it will be best if we can have him on the extraction team if we decide to go in. Your ship is best suited for this kind of mission and, having Sorripto, makes it the most obvious choice. However, remember that keeping the Horizon's Children at bay, until the anomaly can be secured, is above all our top priority, even beyond rescuing him. Is that understood, Captain?"

Crist took a moment to breathe. What he was about to say was a little hard, but he knew it needed to be said.

"Yes Sir. As the Vulcans would say, the needs of the many."

He took another breath to switch topics.

"So, what is this operation I've heard about, or would you rather reveal it to everyone at once?"

"I think it would be best to wait and go over it once," Samji replied.

He stood, indicating their meeting was coming to a close.

"Along with your senior bridge officers, we'll need you to be present at a briefing sometime in the near future and we'll discuss the whole thing there. Thank you Captain, that'll be all. I have some... other things to attend to," Samji added.

He appeared to be distracted and was in fact thinking of the Alsea and wondering if they were in danger.

After Captain Crist left his office, and it was nearing lunch, Fleet Captain Samji requested Ensign Grok to set up a secure call to the Alsea which had been scheduled to report in about its mission that morning.

He went to Ops and Grok greeted him upon his arrival.

"Channel is set up and ready, Sir."

"Alsea, this is Fleet Captain Allen Samji on Starbase 10. Report in, please. What is your status?"

The voice that replied was unfamiliar to Samji, and it was drowned out by the sound of explosions and people shouting. It was interspersed with crackling static.

"Can't talk... base 10... firefight with... got information..."

Three words were loud and clear enough to be unmistakeable:

"... Kang attacked us!"

Samji replied louder,:

"Alsea come in! I'm having trouble receiving your transmission!"

The response was then even more sporadic and difficult to make out.

"We can't... transmiss... disturb... Horiz..." and it was completely cut off.

Samji turned to Ensign Grok and sternly said:

"Secure channel to Rear Admiral Kotari... now."

The little Ferengi's deft hands swiftly maneuvered over the console, setting up the necessary protocols to allow the Fleet Captain to give his report of the two separate Klingon attacks to Kotari.

What he found out from the Admiral was that there were yet several more separate reports throughout Federation space of incidents where the Klingons had claimed simple misunderstandings or that the Federation side had instigated the quarrels.

The attack on Lotus Fleet and Earth's history were the two final proverbial straws. Kotari put in a call to the Federation Ambassador to the Klingon Empire who met with the President and Joint Chiefs. The proceeding meeting with Chancellor J'mpok and his staff did not serve to ameliorate the situation, and resulted in the Chancellor denying all knowledge of the attacks and claiming that the Federation was attempting to drum up false claims to gain footing in their negotiations. Eventually, his pure Klingon rage was released in the usual bout of Klingon profanity and equating the President and the rest of the Federation to dishonorable targs, before he withdrew from the Khitomer Accords and severed all communications.

What was feared by the Federation for the past forty years had become a certainty: war with the Klingon Empire.

\* \* \*

Sitting back in the chair in the small bare, empty quarters he had been called to, Lieutenant Sorripto, chief engineer of the USS McKenzie, looked across the bare, empty desk at the Federation inspector across from him. Nodding, Sorripto spoke slowly and calmly.

"So I get what you are saying, but I fail to see the problem with what happened."

Taken aback by his calm demeanor, the Federation investigator rubbed his eyes, flipped through a page on his PADD.

"I read your Captain's reports, and the personnel files. No one is taking away anything that you did on that mission; you saved the lives of several of your crew. But what interests the office of the Starfleet Inspector General is how you did it."

Raising an eyebrow Sorripto shook his head slowly.

"I told you this already, inspector; I just reacted. I grew up on Cardassia during the rebuilding after the Dominion War. There were pockets there where survival meant fighting every day."

"Lieutenant Commander Sorripto, you are the first Cardassian in Starfleet and no one is taking your life or your sacrifices away from you. I served on two ships that aided Cardassia; I know how hard things got. That does not explain the tactical gear, the hidden weapons, the devices, the sabotage skills... and do not even get me started on how you smuggled all those things past the security sensors aboard the McKenzie."

Sorripto smiled slightly.

"Captain told you everything, didn't he? Oh well, I was kind of hoping he would leave the part about my jamming device out."

The inspectors eyes opened wide.

"*Jamming* device? *What* jamming device?"

*Oops. Guess the old man did not tell them everything,* Sorripto laughed inwardly to himself.

"Nothing, forget it. Long story. Now, as I said before, growing up on Cardassia means that you have to learn how to survive. Before Garrak's democratic union really took hold and the security forces and schools were restored, there were pockets of Cardassia that reverted back to the primitive days of the military rule of the Union."

Entering some information on the PADD, the inspector tensed slightly.

"Ok look, I do not know who you are trying to fool but the gear that was described in your message, gear which is magically gone with no trace, is far from any military gear you would have gotten from your father."

Sitting up slightly and pointing a finger at the inspector, Sorripto's tone turned more serious.

"Careful with your next words Sir my father is not a part of this investigation."

"I will be the judge of that, but, for the time, I will leave him be."

Sitting back in his chair Sorripto motioned for the inspector to continue.

"So, an Engineer on a Federation ship smuggles aboard his own weapons and gear that he received from his deceased father. Then using those weapons and gear managed to kill a dozen security forces, break into a secured computer room, and aid in hacking an advanced security system. None of that seems the slightest bit suspicious to you? Nothing at all would cause you ask where you got that training? Lieutenant Commander Sorripto, there are unanswered questions, and I assure you I will be back."

Smiling and trying not to laugh Sorripto nodded.

"Of course you will; you would not be doing your job if you did not ask those questions. I look forward to seeing you again. You may go, Lieutenant Commander... for now... but not too far."

As the inspector gathered his things and left the room, Sorripto kicked his feet up on the desk and laughed.

Waiting for a minute, Sorripto smiled as he also left the small room to return to his quarters on board the McKenzie. Once there and keeping the lighting low, he reached through the holographic projection of a control console on his desk. Removing a small token, the Cardassian looked at it and smiled.

The mark of the Obsidian Order was something even a non-Cardassian could recognize.

Walking over to his rack of personal mementos on the wall, Sorripto kneeled down to the empty space under the rack. Using his tongue to dislodge his left second molar and spitting it into his hand, he pressed the small button disguised within the false capped tooth.

As the button was pressed, a small box became visible, like a starship decloaking and Sorripto slid the box out from under the rack and placed it on the desk. Smiling at the sight, he laughed softly outloud to himself.

Opening the case slowly, he tossed the Obsidian Order mark into the box where it landed and rolled over, falling into the lower level of the box with a ping. Metal against metal. Sorripto reached into the box and removed a second small metallic token, the one his Obsidian Order medallion had fallen against. Shaking his head and smiling again, he threw the other token into the box where it landed and rolled over face down, allowing the words carved into the back to become visible.

Glancing once more over the words written there, Starfleet Lieutenant Commander Sorripto, chief engineer of the USS McKenzie of the elite division of Starfleet, smiled at the phrase that glanced back at him:

### **What No Man Will Do Must Be Done... For This Is Section 31**

\* \* \*

The first bridge officer to disembark right behind Captain Crist was in fact his chief science officer, Lieutenant Snowfire K'Leysha. She sighed heavily as she stepped out of the McKenzie onto the docking area of Starbase 10. Space inside the several kilometers enclosed by the headquarters of Lotus Fleet was awash with ships, most of them freighters bringing in last minute supplies and then running like hell for the tenuous safety of further into Federation space.

At a meter eighty-eight and merely sixty kilos, the ebony skinned, Ivory haired woman in a color-matching Starfleet uniform looked reed-thin, fragile and delicate as she stepped onto the base deckplates, her violet eyes still outside, roaming through the transparencies at the flat saucer shape of her ship and then beyond in the vast enclosure inside the kilometers of empty space within the vast radius of the starbase.

nowfire had never liked stations. They were too big, too slow. Big targets with no way to duck and dodge. And there was no comforting hum of engines and reactors, the sheer mass of the station drowned it out. Was it any wonder then, that she found it hard to sleep aboard the monstrosity that was Starbase 10?

She had returned to her quarters earlier that night, but had found herself unable to find rest. And therefore she had returned to the promenade, to meditate under the starfield and to wait. The Alsea still had yet to return. And that was...worrying. There was a tense feeling to the night around her, as if the universe itself was holding its breath, waiting for....*something* to happen. Then there came the sigh. It was very sudden, pulled from the lungs of those other still awake at this late hour by shock, and her eyes flicked open, flicking from side to side until she found the cause of the collective gasp.

The Alsea had returned. However...she wasn't as pristine as she had been when she left. Truth be told, she looked a bit of a mess. Oh, the outward appearance was more a sham than anything else, the smooth transition from warp to impulse drives showed that. But the peppering of teardrop shaped burn marks, iconic evidence of disruptor weapons, did little to put her at ease. It wasn't worry about major internal damage, it was fear of what those burns, those insignificant pinpricks against a ship of the Alsea's caliber, might herald for the future.

And then, there were the sleek shapes of the actual ships of Lotus Fleet. Closest to her own Defiant class destroyer were the Lotus and the recently arrived Spectre, nuzzled against the side of the station, a multitude of umbilicals and docking connections holding them almost as a mother would hold her children.

And then there was the great, sweeping bulk of the Artemis, sitting in a stable orbit a few kilometers away at the inner edge of the sprawling starbase. With her prow jutting away from the station towards the immense spacedoors opening to the void, she appeared as both vigilant guardian and restless explorer, anxiously awaiting any daring intruder or her next escape into the vastness of space.

It was a magnificent sight; and yet, at the same time, it was wholly insignificant. For it wasn't the ships of the Fleet that made it what it was.

It was the people.

The multitude of different races and ideals that blended together to produce the best of Starfleet, was but the tip of the whole tapestry of life and sentience that was the United Federation of Planets. And it was fortunate that they were so. For they now faced a threat from a power that was, in its own way, even more powerful than the Borg had been.

Conventional weapons would not be able to stop the Horizon anomaly. The only way to stop it was to unravel the riddle of its very existence, a riddle that now seemed inextricably linked to one of Lotus Fleet's own... and whatever had forced him into the repression that had shattered her shields when they had met.

It had been a covert mission, as difficult as it had been swift; infiltrating this new Cult of the Horizon Children that had not so long ago tried to steal a starship, the Artemis, the very ship that had revealed the coming of the Horizon. Passing as mercenaries to get into their secret sanctum and steal their database had been both risky and harduous for the senior officers of the USS McKenzie; they had succeeded, but only through sheer luck and at a personal cost for more than a few of them...

And a cost was still left to be paid, as the spirit guiding this cult had been born of the Federation, of Starfleet, of Lotus Fleet itself... A brave and selfless man all had mourned, who now had come back from oblivion, a selfish, treacherous leader of lost souls.

Her thoughts shied away from that last part, jerking back from the terrifying example of what she *knew* her own people had once been able to do to each other.

It hadn't been easy to free themselves from the oppression of their own delusions, but it had been *possible*, and she knew the stories. Dawnsong's fall at the hands of Silencebane; the corruption of Ilium by Matriarch Thoughtweaver... the list of terrors that could be inflicted by the Gifted was a long and deeply frightening one. And although Snowfire knew that no Ilythiiri could use their Gifts that way anymore, not after the centuries of social conditioning that had taken place after the Reformation, the evil that had powered them lingered still in their souls. And so it seemed, in those of these so diverse people.

The thought furrowed her snowy brow. But then, she shook herself and headed for the promenade. It was time to meet the rest of the fleet at last.

And look towards the horizon.

She looked down at the PADD cradled between her legs and one hand came up, tapping in a sequence and triggering a sensor analysis of the energy signatures on those burn marks. It didn't take long to complete, and when it *did* finish up, Snowfire almost swore aloud.

Klingon weapons. Ninety-eight percent certainty. Not quite definitive, but damn close. And then the full implications of that possibility slammed into her.

"Sweet Goddess..." she whispered.

Suddenly rest didn't seem like an option anymore. She rose from where she was sitting, tucked her PADD into a pocket of her uniform, and turned towards the science labs. She had work to do. And precious few hours to complete it in.

Snowfire stepped through the doors of Starbase 10's Astrogation lab and smiled and she took it in. It might not be quite the level of state-of-the-art that she had enjoyed on Earth, but it should be more than sufficient for what she wanted to do. Today's work concerned, as had the work of every day since the ship she served on as chief science officer, the USS McKenzie, had returned to the starbase, was the Azimuth Horizon anomaly that menaced all life in the galaxy.

*Well, that might not be quite true, she thought. When you considered that the Horizon seemed only to follow degraded pathways in subspace, flowing down the fractures, then it could be said that the anomaly only threatened the races who used warp drive. But then again...*

Science Lieutenant Snowfire Ke'leysha was Ilythiiri; white-haired, black-skinned, lavender of eye, with a smallish frame and elfin features, she was of a proud, ancient spacefaring humanoid civilization recently met by Starfleet at the edge of known space that, in her mind, was among those chosen ones to be spared by this upcoming catastrophe.

But those thoughts mattered little. The majority of spacefaring races in the Milky Way used warp as their primary faster than light drive. When enough star systems would be consumed in this cosmic fire, the rest of the galaxy would crumble and die right behind them. And that threat needed to be stopped.

But to defeat such a threat, you must *understand* it first. And it was for that very reason that Snowfire had spent the last several days working herself almost to exhaustion, trying to pin down the location from which the Azimuth Horizon had been spawned. It had taken scores of simulations, almost a full day of reprogramming a copy of the cartography software and a herculean effort on the part of the Starbase's computer systems. But she might, just *might* have it at this point.

She stepped forward into the lab, moving up to the control panel and tapping in a series of commands before connecting a PADD with her modifications.

"Computer, initiate simulation Horizon's Edge." She said, watching the holographic display spring into life before her.

"Working." Was the only reply of the soft but cold, feminine voice of the computer for now.

And then, as the simulation played out, the violet eyes of the Illythirii widened with the image as she saw that, not only did it expand towards and over her native sector of space, but it even did so deeper and faster than any other parts of the galaxy save maybe where there was a larger concentration of giant-class stars, neutron stars and especially black holes.

*Subspace gives it passage from that other universe into ours... but gravitation pulls it outward within normal space!*

It meant that there was no place in the galaxy that would be spared the catastrophe... and especially not where there was a spacefaring civilization solely based of gravitic sources of energy.

It was truly frightening... and monstrous.

\* \* \*

From the USS Alsea's chief of security office, Lieutenant Oseno Jureth closed his piercing green eyes and pinched the ridged arch of his nose under the straight line of his black regulation haircut then finished up his after action report on the battle with the Klingons and, with a tap on his console, submitted it to Executive Officer Commander Rivers though he knew that anything dealing with this battle was likely to be immediately classified by Starfleet.

With that done, he turned his attention to his own department and put in commendations for both Cat Steele and T'Lana as well as promotion recommendations for both of them. They had performed extremely well under the circumstances dating back to their adventures on the Lotus and both deserved to be recognized for their performance.

Jureth sat back in his chair and let out a long slow breath. It had been a tense couple of days for him as his tactical department had played a fairly prominent role in this mission. He was happy with the performance of both the equipment and his people but he knew there was room for improvement. With that in mind he checked the chronometer on his console and saw that beta shift had just come on and then tapped his communicator.

"Oseno to Sirrrith, please report with your team to holodeck one for training."

"Aye Sirrrr." was the alpha shift supervisor's response.

Jureth stood, straightened his black and grey, gold-collared uniform over his broad, tall imposing frame and headed out of his office, his mind already turning to the upcoming training session.

An hour later, after finishing the training session with Ensign Sirrrith's Beta shift, and with the Alsea well on her way back to Starbase Ten, Jureth finally found some time to just sit in his quarters and decompress.

He had contemplated using the holodeck for a holonovel or something along those lines, but decided that he just needed to be by himself for the moment.

"Computer, begin log entry,"

"Recording."

### **Security Chief's personal log**

**Stardate 87124.48.**

**Both the Alsea and myself have been through quite a bit in the last couple days. At dinner the other night Captain Siduri asked me to officially become the Alsea's second officer. I was slightly shocked considering the confrontation we'd had just after launch regarding his interference in the security drill I conducted. At the same time I was pleased that he had that kind of confidence in me and hopefully I will be able to justify it. The ship performed well in the confrontation of the Klingons. It was our first test of the multi-vector assault mode since relaunch and from a tactical standpoint the ship was flawless. The Klingons never stood a chance which begs me to wonder why they picked a fight with us. Surely Captain Ja'rod, one of the most experienced commanders in the KDF knew we were more than a match for his battle group. I can't help but wonder what we'll find waiting for us when we reach Starbase Ten. Something tells me this isn't the last we've seen of the Klingons.**

"End Log."

Satisfied with the log entry Jureth checked his personal terminal and found a message from his mother, Mira, on Deep Space Nine.

*"My dear Jureth; word has reached me that you've transferred from the Lotus to the Alsea and that you've been promoted again as well! Not that you took the time to inform your mother of that or anything.*

*I did get the job on DS9 like I hoped. I'm working in the research lab analyzing data from a major spatial phenomenon. Starfleet's science corps has distributed it to almost every major station with hopes that the more eyes on the data the more solutions they'll get. They won't tell us what it is or even where it is which makes it hard to analyze it, but the data is very interesting.*

*Enough of my rambling though, I'm sure you have better things to be doing than to listen to your mother talk. Everyone sends their love, and try to find some time to write in your busy life. I love you, goodbye."*

Jureth smiled at the message from his mother. He was happy to see her back working in the science field again. It was something that she had all but given up to raise Jureth after his father died, and now with no more children to raise she needed something to occupy her time. Oseno scolded himself for not at least sending a brief message to his mother about his transfer, and he resolved to once they were back at Starbase 10 and compose a proper message.

For now though, the Alsea's Chief of Security moved from his desk to his bed and in minutes was asleep, not even realizing how exhausted he was.

But as he lost consciousness, others were just coming out of it.



Captain Kalten Siduri opened his hazel eyes to the sight of the Emergency Medical Hologram peering at him from above.

It was not the best way in which a man wished to wake up!

"Good morning sleepy head." the holographic doctor intoned as Kalten struggled to rise. "Now, now, lay still. You gave yourself quite a bump there!"

The artificial medical officer, assuming the duties of chief medical officer in the absence of any formal one assigned yet to the USS Alsea, motioned towards Kalten's light ash-blond head as the pain running through his brain forced him to lie back down with a groan.

Feeling around his own skull, the commanding officer of the Alsea found the source of the pain. On the very top of his head, throbbing, was the largest bump he had ever felt on a still living human head!

"Damn it, what hit me?" He asked.

"Well, Captain, it seems that the Klingons didn't like our esteemed guest paying them a visit after all. From what I'm told, and mind you, no one tells me anything down here, alone, in the sickbay, without anyone to keep me company...."

Kalten interrupted the Doc's ramblings.

"Can it Doc, you know as well as I do you can go anywhere on this ship...don't try and pretend this is the old USS Voyager!"

"...Of course, I could just pop out and say hello, but I'm so busy with this experiment, or that injury, etc...well...as I was saying..."

"Good...hurry up!" the man interjected

"Well... really, Captain! How is a man meant to talk with all these interruptions? Anyway, you got thrown across the bridge, again, and hit you head! Simple really; I've repaired the serious damage. You were actually in a very bad way; in fact, if it were not for my amazing skills you may well have died!"

"Thanks Doc, I owe you, again."

*Why is it that whenever my ship goes into combat I get the hell kicked out of me?*

Kalten was thinking he would have to invest in a crash helmet for combat actions soon. First it was in a runabout during a Romulan attack on Starbase 10; then it was when this ship he was piloting for his first deep space assignment crashed on a desolate planet; then again, during the furious battle of the Borg War... And now, dancing with Klingons near a spatial anomaly!

Seat belts might be nice too... or this Personal Inertial Dampener he had heard about that the engineers of the USS Artemis had been recently playing with.

"Doc, get me my bridge staff...I want a full update."

"Of course, Captain; as long as you promise to stay still for the next day!"

"A *day*? You have to be kidding me! I'll make you a deal....I'll give you four hours and I'm gone."

"Eight."

"Six, no more."

"OK, you have a deal... Now, don't move!"

The medical hologram smiled to himself as he walked to his office. He had tricked the Captain into the exact amount of time he wanted him to rest for. He sat down and called up the bridge.

Kalten lay back, smiling to himself. He had tricked the artificial doctor into thinking he had won the haggling. Kalten was no fool; he knew that he needed rest. The lump on his head attested to that... but bringing the overzealous medical program to limit rest was satisfying.

This time, he would return to Starbase 10 standing on his own two feet for once.

In the science office of captain Siduri's ship, Chief of science Lieutenant Junior Grade Pel was looking over her report one final time to check for errors. She had just finished writing up her Reflex System for the Starfleet Science Journal. She did some fiddling with the design to make it compatible for most of the fleet if they so chose. That way, her design could help others, not just the Alsea, to detect and avoid plasma tendrils coming out from subspace fractures before they actually sprouted into normal space, like they did around the Azimuth Horizon anomaly.

Thankfully, besides creating the Reflex system she had been relatively uninvolved in the actual fighting that had just concluded near the anomaly and with the Klingon 'negotiations'. And Pel was good with this. Mysterious spatial anomalies? Bring it. Klingons? Not so much.

*And what an adventure that had been!* She reflected on the last several days, action packed as they had been.

Her mettle as a science officer had been tested, and, she felt, proved... At least a little. The diminutive Ferengi felt like she had passed her wedding night jitters; a human phrase, but applicable in this situation.

She stretched her small limbs from her lithe body and nodded her bald, bulbous four-lobed head to herself, submitting her report with a tap of her metallic hand prosthesis. The report would now fly on the wings of subspace to consoles, padds, and various recieving items of science officers everywhere. It wasn't the first thing she had published in Starfleet Science Journal, but it was by far the most interesting and relevant to their current situation.

Which, from the subspace message she had recieved not hours before, had gotten considerably more complicated. The Klingons had withdrawn officially from the Khitomer Accords... and Lotus Fleet had been recalled to Starbase 10... every ship.

Her Ferengi senses were tingling as much as her immense ears. Secrets and science and Klingons and the Horizon. A powderkeg if she ever saw one.

Well, it was time to go to the bridge and resume her post. Edain, her gruff Cardassian assistant, was keeping her seat warm for her since way too long now. She rose and strode quickly but calmly out the science office door and to the nearest turbolift.

As she stepped into the command deck of the prometheus warship, Pel was greeeted curtly by Executive Officer rache le Rivers with a smile and a quick order:

"Take the conn, Lieutenant. I need to contact headquarters while we prepare to head back."

Now waiting for the ferengi science chief to recover from her surprise enough to acknowledge the order, the red-haired woman stepped off the bridge and went straight to the commanding officer's workroom. From the Captain's Ready Room of the Alsea, Rivers opened her secure channel to Samji on Starbase 10.

"Commander Samji, this is Lieutenant Commander Rivers. We've set a course back to Starbase 10. Mission accomplished, the Klingons have returned to their side of the border; though Captain Siduri has been injured in the fight. I've been informed that the EMH has put him in stasis until we can get him properly treated."

Samji heard the transmission while working very late in Ops. It was eight hours until their big meeting.

"Commander, good to hear your voice," he told her. "I'm glad the Alsea is OK. It's actually Fleet Captain now, I've been put in charge of Lotus Fleet as a whole and Kotari has been promoted to Rear Admiral."

"Congratulations," said Rivers a little taken aback. She remembered her old mentor, Captain Speaker-of-Names, who had risen quite quickly from a security officer on the USS Lotus to a Captain in charge of it, but he still had the far away support of a Fleet Captain from Starfleet Command, Kotari. From a tactical standpoint and with the current situation in the sector, she supposed she saw the logic, however, in having now the Fleet Captain active in the field.

"Sir, the Klingons have given us some trouble, but we showed them the door, so to speak. Admiral Redding has found the ident..."

Fleet Captain Samji cut her off.

"I'd rather not discuss specifics of the mission, Commander, even over a secure channel, especially considering we have known infiltrators," he said with a sigh. "Please make your way back to Starbase 10; maximum warp. That should get you back in a little over two hours."

Rivers nodded.

"Thank you, Sir. Glad to come home. Anything else for us, Sir?"

"That will be it... good work out there... all of you," Samji replied and closed the channel.

Rivers entered the bridge where the chief of security had just entered.

"Lieutenant Oseno, please take us back to Starbase 10 around the anomaly... give it plenty of leeway... maximum warp."

She then went down to sickbay to check on the Captain.

From the command chair, Oseno turned and acknowledged the first officer's orders.

"Aye, Commander."

Jureth then looked straight ahead to the helm position.

"Helm, take us home, and around the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, maximum warp."

"Aye, Sir." the helmsman responded.

Jureth sat back in the command chair, feeling comfortable in it for the first time. After his experience in the battle with the Klingons he felt that perhaps he actually could handle command should it ever be passed to him.

Three hours later, he opened the ship's log from the armrest terminal on the command chair.

### **Starship log, supplemental Second officer Oseno reporting:**

**The Alsea is almost home. Our battle with the Klingons behind us, it will be good to see the halls of Starbase 10 again, even though we've only been gone for a few days. Captain Siduri is still recovering in Sickbay and Commander Rivers is filling him in on our experience while he was... napping."**

"We're coming up on Starbase 10, Lieutenant."

"Very good, Mister Hunter; take us out of warp."

"Aye Sir, dropping to impulse engines."

Jureth opened the ship's intercom.

"Attention all hands, this is Lieutenant Oseno on the bridge. We are approaching Starbase 10; prepare to initiate docking procedures. All hands to your arrival stations, and welcome home. Oseno out."

He then addressed the ops station

"Open a channel to Starbase 10."

"Aye Sir, channel open."

"Starbase 10, this is USS Alsea requesting docking clearance."

"Alsea, this is Starbase 10 Operations; Fleet Captain Samji here. Docking permission granted, welcome home Alsea."

"Thank you Sir; we will see you shortly. Alsea out."

Jureth smiled and then addressed Shawn Hunter.

"Mister Hunter, take us home."

"Thrusters only, Sir?"

"One quarter impulse Mister Hunter... steady as she goes."

From his helm station Shawn Hunter smiled.

"Aye aye, Sir."

The mighty Prometheus Class warship glided gracefully yet at the breakneck speed of eighteen thousand kilometers per second between the great spacedock doors and, under the expert control of Shawn Hunter, came to a swift, impressive stop on all retrothrusters flaring, nestling herself between the formidable USS Artemis and the fleet flagship, the newly refurbished USS Lotus. She shuddered softly as the docking clamps engaged and Shawn spun around in his chair.

"Docking clamps engaged. Docking umbilicals extended."

"Very good Mister Hunter."

Jureth stood and addressed the rest of the bridge.

"Thank you all, I hope everyone gets some rest and relaxation. Dismissed."

The bridge crew shut down their stations and exited, leaving Jureth alone with his thoughts.

Engineering officer Niomo Lire was staring out of the starbase's Promenade viewports when a Prometheus Class starship proceeded to dock like a launched torpedo between the Artemis and the Lotus. He could see some disruptor burns and photon detonation scorch marks on her hull.

For a few moments, he let his eyes drift back down towards the PADD he had been reading. As always, he muttered some of the words he read, quirk he never really was able to kick out of himself;.

"Alsea...forward thrust...matrix 9.6 divided by the sum..."

It was around the second paragraph before he picked his head up and looked at the Prometheus again. He blinked a few times while staring at the ship.

Niomo finally realized what he was looking at.

*My ship. The Alsea.*

He sprang to his feet, knocking over his cup of coffee, barely dodging the spill and keeping the liquid off his uniform. After a quick cleanup, Niomo approached the glass and looked at his new home. The Alsea, it seemed, had seen some action. It wasn't anything a fresh coat of paint couldn't cure, but he didn't know what internal damage was done. As much as he hated it, he'd probably let the current crew deal with the repairs while he got to know the command staff and unique systems.

He tapped his comm.

On the bridge of the Alsea, Jureth was just finishing up noting the ship's docking time and status in the log when the comm system came to life.

"Lieutenant Commander Niomo Lire to USS Alsea. Your new Chief Engineer is requesting permission to come aboard."

"Commander Lire, Lieutenant Oseno here, Chief of Security and Second Officer. Permission to come aboard granted. Captain Siduri and Commander Rivers are indisposed at the moment, but you're welcome to see the quartermaster and inspect engineering at your leisure though much of the crew has begun to disembark. I'll note your arrival in the log and notify the captain and so that you've reported. Welcome to the Alsea, Oseno out."

The joy and relief Niomo Lire felt with the return of the Prometheus class warship was felt all the way up to the operations center of the Starbase.

"Fleet Captain, the Alsea has arrived," Ensign Grok intoned excitedly after he had heard the request from Lieutenant Jureth to dock and acknowledged in the affirmative.

"Thank you, Ensign," Samji replied evenly, belying a similar excitement felt at the return of their last ship home to Starbase 10.

He checked the nearby chronometer: 0300 hours...

He sighed and then made a starbase and shipwide announcement.

"Lotus Fleet, this is Fleet Captain Samji. All of our vessels have returned safely home. All senior officers from all Lotus Fleet ships and Starbase 10 are to report for a debriefing at oh-seven-hundred. Those on Alpha shift will need some rest, because you will not get another chance for some time. Take the opportunity; that is an *order*," he finished firmly.

Nodding to Grok, he then took his own leave to his quarters to get the few hours of rest that would allow him to then face the next great span of however many hours it would take to protect Lotus Fleet, the Federation, and the Galaxy.

## CHAPTER TWO: FLAMES

"Computer, begin recording, personal log Josh Vincent."

"Recording," answered the familiar disembodied feminine voice.

**"Personal log, stardate 87169.8:**

**It has been strange working alongside crewmates for these past few days, but I've grown to like it. I've been working on my own for so long that I forgot how it felt to know that someone will have your back. My crewmates aboard the Alsea have all been fantastic, which made this decision much harder than I'd hoped.**

**The USS Lotus, flagship of the fleet, the most advanced vessel in Starfleet, is ready for action and there is an opening for a Chief Security and Tactical Officer, a position that I've trained for my whole life. I have applied for a transfer to the Lotus so that I may take up a position where I can help the fleet most.**

**If my transfer is approved, it will be hard to leave the crew of the Alsea, but this move will be best for everyone.**

**I don't know when the transfer will be decided, but with the entire fleet recalled and preparing for action, either against the Klingons, the Romulans, the Azimuth Horizon, or all of the above, I may have to face this threat at my current station. Either way, I know that I will be serving alongside some of the best officers in the galaxy, and we will make it through. Now that repairs are complete and Operations is ready to go, I may get some rest before tomorrow's briefing."**

"Computer, end log."

\* \* \*

It was quite early in the morning and Fleet Captain Allen Samji had gotten barely any sleep. The events of the night before, with the Alsea arriving so late forced him up into the late hours, finally only giving an announcement of the impending meeting at 0300. He watched, feeling a bit overwhelmed, as all the various Lotus Fleet officers filtered into the conference room with stadium seating that were arranged in a semicircle around a gigantic holographic display behind him. The seats rose to an area where three sets of sliding double doors were arranged around the circle and were opening and closing with a "swish-swash" sound as each officer entered. They were on Deck Seven of the massive city-sized Starbase 10, home to Lotus Fleet. The room they were in took up almost the entirety of Deck Seven, and yet the deck itself was barely a tenth of the diameter of the Promenade Deck in the middle of the base.

He waited for all the senior officers to arrive, carrying a cup of Darjeeling Tea that he sipped at as he approaching some of the officers when they entered.

The first person he encountered was Kletan, a Trill science officer that had left Starbase 10 a few months prior. "How was the joining?" Samji asked. It was his first opportunity to speak to the newly joined Trill since he arrived.

"It was satisfactory, Fleet Captain, thank you," his new Science Chief responded. "Rexil is unnerved to be all the sudden in such new environments and company, but my relief to actually be back balances it out somewhat. Thank you for my new post and rank, Fleet Captain, and congratulations on yours."

"Thank you," Samji replied. "Speaking of unnerving," he laughed, and gave Lieutenant Commander Kletan Rexil a friendly pat on the shoulder before moving along.

He saw Lieutenant Commander Marksus Sangliar, the Tellarite chief who had transferred from the Artemis coming in as he moved toward his Operations Officer and Second Officer, Lieutenant Commander Grok who was standing with his Executive Officer, Karen Schmidt. She was a new transfer from Starbase headquarters, sent after he voiced his objection to have been given the task of running an entire Starbase and Lotus Fleet on his own. Her job would be to take some of the general base management tasks off his shoulders so he could focus on their ships during this busy time.

"Welcome to Starbase 10, Commander Schmidt. Has my Ferengi friend here gotten you all set up?" he asked.

"Yes, he and the Quartermaster..." she struggled for a name for a moment... "Petty Officer Stock were most helpful, Sir," she said with a smile.

"Least we could do," Grok replied, "to make you comfortable, so your mind is properly focused on the events to come."

Samji nodded in agreement, and then saw some of the ships' officers arrive. He moved along toward the newcomers and let his First and Second Officers continue their discussion.

Michael O'Conner yawned, as he walked down the corridor to the main conference hall. While he would have preferred to continue his short vacation with Akari, duty had called them both back and away from each other. Now that the fleet was back in port; he knew that it was time to deal with the Azimuth Horizon, or the Kheren Anomaly as he liked to call it. So he wasn't surprised when he had been called in for an early meeting with the fleet's senior staff.

Quietly, he entered the conference hall and made a byline for the replicator.

"Black tea, Iced." He commanded to the replicator's computer.

As he waited for his tea, he glanced around the room and smiled to himself as he saw the Tellarite engineer, Sangliar. O'Conner had always liked working with them; nothing was ever good enough for them so they always pushed to be better.

After this moment of thought, he grabbed his tea and took his seat.

His shipmates were about to join him soon enough.

\* \* \*

## **Captain's Personal Log**

**Stardate: 87169.9**

The Artemis has gone through work and resupply for the upcoming major fleet operation regarding the Azimuth Horizon anomaly that, thankfully, did not seem to keep my name... at least in official scientific circles. Despite the award and commendation received for having it discovered under my command, I hope to leave a better mark on this universe with my name than that of the "Kheren anomaly."

It sounds too much like a reminder of my own birth to me.

My worries however are not about this, nor even the security concerns the probable interference by cultists, imperialists and conquerors on this operation might be; with the strict observance of Starfleet security protocols now in effect on board, not to mention the ones we added, the Artemis is now harder to infiltrate or sabotage than Starfleet Intelligence Central. And even with the remote possibility that it would, our new measures will take care of it faster and cleaner than a baryon sweep.

Fact is; my ship is now the perfect trap for anyone who would try.

No; my main concern is about my own senior officers.

Although they assume their duties with their usual diligence and proficiency, I sense... what... fatigue? Apprehension? Doubt? Oh they answer orders readily and promptly enough... But once they acknowledge, they seem to quickly lapse into silence, immobility, slide quietly into the shadows... No comments, no recommendations, no expressed thoughts, not even objections or grumbles... until I feel like I am all alone on the ship.

First Officer O'Conner has always been a man of few words and of quick, direct, simple acts so this is nothing new in his case; but Chief of Ops Brie is rather quiet nowadays, especially for a Bolian, a species so well known for its congeniality; Chief of Science Syntron has completely isolated himself since our return, typical for a Vulcan one might think... but not at all of him; acting Security Chief Tyvya, whom which I have known for the longest time among them all, seems strangely irritable and unusually introverted; with no assigned CMO, sickbay sounds like it's full of deactivated EMHs; as for chief engineer Scott... I barely got three words and glimpses of him since he came on board... it almost feels now like he has never been on board.

Is this what Humans mean when they say: "lonely at the top?"

If so, then indeed the captain's job *is* at the very top... and the loneliest of all.

But I can't help wonder: how can this be?



## **Or even... why?**

Out of his ready room and of the access corridor to step to the bridge right up to his command chair, the athletic Andorian ship commander opened a general comm channel.

"All senior officers of the USS Artemis, this is the captain; report immediately to Starbase 10 main conference hall for senior officers briefing."

Straightening his strikingly athletic frame and then his uniform, Captain Kheren left his ready room just as a door to his right opened to let his chief helmsman join him in the short corridor to the ship's main conference room. Lieutenant Junior Grade Aguk Snow's coppery face was almost as dark as the indigo-blue one of his Andorian commanding officer, but his obsidian eyes were darker still, while the silvery pupiless eyes of Kheren flashed like beacons under his scarred brow. They both wore their hair long, as allowed by Starfleet regulations, but where those of the Inuit helmsman were jet black, the Andorian's were as white as snow.

On top of his head, the pair of antennae that sprouted from each side wiggled with the mounting excitement otherwise masked by his frozen expression as they both entered the main meeting room of the Artemis. There, another set of antennae on top of a long, flowing white mane greeted them with the same emotion, from almost two and a half meters up the towering frame of the Artemis' current acting Chief of security and tactical, lieutenant Junior Grade Tyvya. The Andorian shen finished inputting coordinates into the two-man transporter pad installed in the conference room as part of the upgrade of the bridge module several months ago before she said in a voice surprisingly soft in someone of her gigantic size:

"I'll transport right after you and Mister Snow, Sir."

And true to word, she joined them in the corridor leading to the starbase's conference hall seconds after they had materialized there. The two junior officers stepped behind their captain as he silently led the way to the vast meeting hall.

There were already several officers present and Kheren was gratified to see that his First officer, the tall, red-haired Commander Michael O'Conner, had beaten him to the finish line even when he had taken several days of leave before today's meeting. The quiet efficiency of the man never ceased to amaze the Andorian, now as much as since the first day they had met when the Artemis had launched under the Lotus Fleet banner.

Going to make a hell of a captain as they say on his planet, mused Kheren coming down to join him. And I will be loosing a hell of a First Officer when that day comes. But he can not stay in the shadows forever... not when Starfleet is in such a need of good, experienced officers... especially now. But in the meantime...

"Commander O'Conner; glad to see you could make it in time to serve with us once again," Kheren said, stretching his previous thoughts into his heartfelt greeting.

O'Conner nodded to his captain.

"Good to see you, Sir."

As he sipped his tea he noticed the disheveled officers entering the room. To O'Conner this was a good indicator of starfleet's knowledge of the Azimuth Horizon.

He then went to take another sip of his drink before pausing and asking Kheren:

"So, did Mister Syntron come up with a plan, or are we just going to wing this?"

"Neither, Number One. The main plan has already been established with our freshly minted Fleet Captain even before we went to the Mutara nebula months ago. If there are any changes, these will be decided here and now. Of course, all the research done by our chief of science and his team this last week will weight substantially on how we will finally proceed."

"I heard the Alsea just did some dancing with the Klingons near the anomaly," chimed in the giantess Tyvya from behind them. "With the incidents we ourselves went through with the Romulans and this religious cult, all related to the anomaly, we must expect some radical changes."

"We barely have enough ships to try and contain the phenomenon," commented then the Inuit helmsman with a frown. "If we have to face the possibility of interference or even battle with several opponents at the same time, I can't figure out how we are going to pull this off."

"That's why we are here, Lieutenant," retorted Kheren, his attention on the officers entering the great amphitheater. "And I do have myself a proposal ready for that."

"I'm sure you do, Sir," offered Tyvya softly. There was something more than simple confidence in her commanding officer implied in her remark... but it seemingly went unnoticed by everyone.

Tyvya and Snow sat behind them and they waited for the rest of the Artemis senior officers to join them.

He almost smiled, the rare muscles in his face barely allowing him to. Having his team present before any of the other ships was a small point of pride to him; not that it mattered any, but he was captaining the oldest, least performing vessel of the fleet; he liked to think that his crew however, stood second to none.

They certainly proved it in all of their past missions; but it was up to them to show it in the small details as much as in the big endeavors, like O'Conner exemplified so well.

And so, he sat with apparent patience but with a small trembling in his cranial appendages as he hoped to see his science chief, his chief of operations and his chief engineer beat everyone else to the punch... and for this crucial meeting to commence.

There was a destructive force out there that was coming inexorably towards them as they sat here, preparing to discuss how they would face it. Each and every officer of Lotus Fleet would be needed to even attempt to do so... to survive... and ultimately prevail.

And so... time was of the essence.

Everyone felt it, especially aboard his ship.

"Make sure all the restocked provisions have been stowed, Thankhuun," A Bolian wearing the gold of Ship Operations instructed a tripod Edoan, as they walked down the corridors of the U.S.S. Artemis. The pair were Lieutenant, Junior Grades, the former being the ship's Chief of Operations, Lieutenant Danik Brie and the latter his first Assistant Chief, Thankhuun Cheonghi. They walked briskly while discussing the last few details of the Artemis' resupply.

"Yes, Sir," came the reply. "I have done this before."

"I know, Thankhuun. Sorry. I'm just a little nervous. You had already handled all of this when the Artemis launched for the survey, and all I had to do was report in and take over. I just want to make sure I'm not forgetting anything."

"Lieutenant Lamartine and I will be sure to, how is it the humans put it? 'Have your back?'"

The Captain's voice being broadcast had then interrupted their conversation.

The two officers looked at each other. This was the call the entire crew had been waiting for. Even though no official declaration had been made as to the nature of the conference, the rumors and gossip making the rounds aboard the station pegged it as being the final briefing before Operation Horizon was executed. Having only joined the crew recently, Danik could only imagine the excitement that must have been running through the crew like an electric current.

The Stalwart Guardian was getting ready to do what she did best, protect the Federation by meeting a threat head on. Only this time, it was like the final showdown with a nemesis.

"Let's get started on the pre-launch protocols," Danik said to his companion. "Once Lamartine get's down to Auxillary Control, I'll beam down to the station. Don't want to keep the Captain waiting."

Some time before, the other newest member on board, Montgomery Scott, third to bear the name, had awoken on the Artemis with the alarm ringing.

"The time is now 0600. The time is now 0600 and one second."

The chief engineer of the starship Artemis groggily had said to the computer:

"Cancel alarm."

As he had stepped out of bed, he had noticed that he had a message from the Fleet Captain commanding the headquarters of Lotus Fleet, summoning all senior officers of all ships of the fleet to a briefing on Deck 7 of Starbase 10.

And so, shortly after he awoke, he then heard the order from the Captain, confirming what the message from the Fleet Captain said.

Scotty was already dressed in his newly pressed uniform, with his Lieutenant Junior Grade pips shining on the collar, and so walked out of his door to reach the main transporter room.

Once he arrived, he signaled to the transporter chief. The chief had heard the announcement and knew exactly where to send him. Soon, Scotty felt the familiar tingling feeling and then he was on Deck 7, soon after coming into the conference hall to join with the other senior officers of his ship.

"Good morning, Mister Scott!" greeted Kheren with a nod of welcoming. "I hope our Great Lady is ready for the Ball?"

"She'd rather quickly die on the dance floor than slowly fade away sleeping on the porch, Sir," Scotty replied with a proud smile. "All security protocols and level 1 diagnostics completed; all systems primed, checked and ready to go, captain."

The Andorian nodded his thanks to his chief engineer as he returned his attention to the officers of other ships filling up slowly the vast amphitheater. His low words were almost for himself:

"Alright... let's dance."

\* \* \*

Just as the science officers' meeting on Starbase 10 was commencing, two Starfleet officials wearing matching military-like uniforms and stern expressions abruptly entered the room and headed directly toward Syntron's position.

After flashing digital identification badges briefly for his eyes only, Syntron nodded affirmatively in acknowledgement to each of them. He then presented his PADD to a nearby colleague with his presentation notes and information regarding the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly along with detailed listings, diagrams, files, and actual footage of the modifications implemented to the various systems throughout the ship that he and his crewmates had developed and implemented aboard the Artemis over the past missions. Since the Artemis was the ship in the fleet with the most extensive experience analyzing and interacting with the anomaly, Syntron was prepared to discuss with them the methodologies and strategies that the crew of the Artemis had developed throughout these interactions, confrontations, extensive scientific examinations and the subsequent procedures that they had employed as they confronted this immense threatening menace emerging from subspace fractures throughout the sector and continued to expand in scope and as the foremost hazard throughout the region.

However, based on the arrival of this pair of Starfleet representatives he already knew quite well from the return of their latest mission a week ago, this opportunity to personally present these files was now, at best, implausible.

After running through rudimentary instructions with his colleague regarding his relevant files on the PADD, Syntron stood up and excused himself from his fellow scientists as he walked out of the meeting room escorted by the Starfleet officials on either side of him like a pair of shifting rigid bookends.

The eyes of the remaining scientists just followed their progress out beyond the entrance as quizzical expressions silently etched themselves across their faces. As the doors suddenly swished closed, the silence that hovered over the previously engaging conversation in the room was daunting as each science participant attempted to break the spell and refocus their attention by shuffling through the materials positioned before them.

Syntron silently strolled with his escorts along the elongated circular corridors of Starbase 10 leading to a turbolift. After inserting a unique key into the lift access panel, they descended into the bowels of starbase until they exited the lift on an undesignated level. They walked along a long unmarked path and then proceeded onward toward an unmarked door with a series of elaborate security measures implemented in order to gain access.

Entering the sparsely bedecked room, they walked toward an extended desk in the central section of the room. It was topped with a series of unusual devices and equipment and surrounded by several unadorned chairs. He was then signaled to sit in a specific seat. He complied and knowing that another important meeting involving Captain Kheren would be following his science meeting, he then inquired stoically to both of them:

"Would you gentlemen now explain precisely why it is that you have led me here?"

"All in due time, Lieutenant," simply said the smaller one called Dulmur.

"No, we are not joking." added the heavyset one called Luksly.

\* \* \*

Snowfire sighed as the final simulation ended, reaching up and rubbing her eyes.

*By the Goddess I'm tired*, she thought blearily, blinking sleep-sand out of her eyes. She hadn't had more than four hours of sleep in the last thirty-six hours. Even for her, that was pushing it by a fair margin. But there hadn't been time for sleep, not with the Horizon bearing down on them. She had had things to do and sleep, as usual for her, had been a secondary concern. But now she had what she needed. Or at least enough of it. She uploaded the results of the final sim onto her PADD, terminated and deleted the simulation, and checked her watch.

*Oh-Four-Forty. Thank the Goddess.*

Moving on autopilot, she made her way towards her quarters, unconsciously taking in the whirlwind of activity going on around her as the men and women manning Starbase 10 kicked their preparations into high gear. Reaching a set of temporary quarters on the Starbase itself, she set an alarm for 0645 and collapsed into the bed in the small room. She was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

*"Snowfire."*

She twitched in her sleep.

*"Snowfire, sister, you are needed."*

Violet eyelids flickered open and shut in the characteristic patterns of REM.

*"Daughter, sister, clan-sib, open your eyes."*

Murmurs of the Ilythiiri tongue slipped from her lips, her body shifting in discomfort.

*"You must WAKE!"*

Her eyes snapped open and she was suddenly, inexplicably, awake.

She shook her head, trying to clear it of the web of dreams she had been caught inside, trying to make sense of what had happened. She glanced at her chrono and absently typed in the command to deactivate her alarm. Rising from the bed, she shucked off her uniform and slipped into the shower. She wasn't going to waste the opportunity waking up earlier presented.

Fifteen minutes later, she walked through the doors of the Level 7 conference room in a fresh uniform, her hair slicked back into a neat ponytail. She glanced around, taking in the arriving officers, and then headed for the cluster from the Artemis. They had had the most practical experience with the Horizon anomaly and she wanted to see what they had to say. Well, that... and she was intrigued by their captain.

The Andorian watched the approach of the black-skinned, white-haired female alien with obvious attention and curiosity. She was definitely of the Vulcanoid type and not just from the shape of her ears and of her elfin features; Kheren had been around the kind long enough and close enough to recognize their characteristic mental presence with his bioneural sensitive antennae. From the corner of his eye, he could see Tyvya stiffen as her own cranial appendages reacted as well; but she didn't have the mental shields he had learned from the Vulcans and so felt her natural Andorian distrust of telepaths kick in a short moment before she could compose herself again.

It was the very first time both of them saw an Ilythirii, and the peculiar colors of her uniform made her all the more stand out from the rest of the few Starfleet officers present. She was not very tall but she expressed an exceedingly high level of self-assurance that did not escape the keen senses of the captain of the Artemis, trained for decades in the subtleties of body language. She might have been holding a PADD with recognizable scientific data and her question one expected from a science officer... but she moved and stared at him like a fighter.

*Fascinating individual*, he couldn't help but admit to himself silently.

"Captain Kheren, Commander O'Conner, Lieutenant Scott," she greeted formally, with due deference to their ranks. "It's good to see the people with the most practical knowledge here. I was wondering if I might pick your brains for a minute or two before the conference starts in earnest."

"Greetings, Lieutenant... K'Leysha, right? From the McKenzie if I recall correctly, " said Kheren to welcome her. " May I also introduce you to two others of my bridge officers with as much experience with the anomaly as we have: my acting chief of security, Lieutenant Tyvya, and my chief helmsman, Lieutenant Snow."

Indicating in turn the Andorian giantess and the copper-skinned Human, he then answered her:

"We're all here to work together so, if we can provide you with anything that might help you help us all tackle this situation, we will sure do our best."

At that moment, Danik Brie walked through the doors of the conference room aboard the Starbase. The room reminded him of some of the lecture halls back at the Academy, albeit on a smaller scale. A small knot of officers had formed around a tall Andorian Danik recognized as his Captain. As he approached, he noted the presence of Commander O'Conner and Lieutenant Scott, as well as an officer he didn't recognize, although the two solid pips he noted on the peculiar white collar made the black-skinned, white-haired vulcanoid woman.

He stood a step back from the group, not wanting to interrupt his Captain.

But then, Kheren noticed the young Bolian and motioned him over by introducing him to the Illythirii woman.

"And here is my chief of ops, Lieutenant Junior Grade Danik Brie. He is the one who confirmed without a doubt the anomaly's high sensitivity to gravimetric forces when in normal space."

As the two officers exchanged the usual pleasantries humanoids usually did in such circumstances, the four oculars of the Andorian suddenly noticed the pair of blue collared officers that entered, one he recognized as Doctor Jolie Bindo of the McKenzie... no, the Lotus now... and the other the man he had noticed with her at the replimat yesterday.

And then he saw the third one coming at the entrance behind them.

Shaved bald, the medium-sized individual had strikingly handsome features that an easy smile and mesmerizing purple eyes highlighted over the Lieutenant Commander pips he wore on the blue collar of his standard black and grey uniform. No one, and especially no woman in the room, could help it but glance at him as he entered.

He was Deltan.

There was no forgetting that face once you had seen it. And Kheren knew him very well indeed... and so did the newcomer the Artemis captain, as he widened his smile in his direction and swiftly came towards him.

"My, Doctor Nasaro-Myth! For a man who resigned from Starfleet..."

"If you don't mind, Captain Sir, I'll explain what happen. Your *revered* Admiral Kotari invoked a little known, seldom used, activation clause..."

"In other words: they drafted you, " finished Kheren with definite amusement in his voice and obvious pleasure in seeing again the man who had once saved his life on the operation table, years ago.

"I thought this was *your* idea..." then said the Deltan, frowning yet still smiling at resuming a friendship he had missed.

"Well, Doc, there's a thing out there..."

"Why, even after three hundred years of space travel, is something we don't understand still called a thing?" cut in Elliago Nasaro-Myth with obviously feigned outrage, paraphrasing the famous quote. "Anyway, I understand the difficulties.. I was there the first time, remember? I came to nurse you through them of course... as your Chief Medical Officer, if you would have me, Sir."

"Most obliged, Doc. Let me introduce you to the crowd here. Commander O'Conner and Lieutenant Tyvya you already know..."

Kheren proceeded to introduce the Deltan to the rest of the bridge crew, only his chief of science still missing minutes before the meeting... and finished with the Science officer of the McKenzie, Lieutenant Snowfire K'Leysha.

"Sir..."

Kheren half-turned towards Tyvya as she whispered:

"What about Doctor Aquila?"

"He was recalled, like Lieutenant Jackson... just in time, " whispered back the captain, just loud enough for his officers to hear.

Like their tactical chief Tyvya was now replacing, Caius Castiel Aquila had been transferred abruptly right upon their return from their survey mission of the anomaly. Aquila had been their CMO during their last mission that had sent them through time; one classified by the Office of Temporal Investigations. Speaking thus, they alone would really understand why, and on who's authority, he had been so suddenly replaced by the returning Deltan Doctor.

The Andorian could not help but wonder also if Elliago's sudden return, especially back to the Artemis, had not been also part of those same orders.

Snowfire acknowledged the newly arrived officers with a smiling nod, the suspicion of the Artemis's security officer only barely scratching her shields. Once it would have had sunk into her like a knife, but she could accept it now. She raised an elegant eyebrow at the Captain's whisper, a sudden burst of tension slipping through the space around her. And then it receded as quickly as it had come.

She didn't enquire. She knew that many were fairly uncomfortable around telepaths, and passive receptiveness was probably not going to help with that. And so, she spoke out loud what was on her own mind.

"It was the reaction to gravitational effects I wanted to enquire about actually." She asked. "I've run a few simulations and looked over your reports. considering my postgraduate area of study, as well as my people's scientific and technological speciality, it would be fair to say that I'm somewhat of an expert on gravitic manipulation. But I was wondering exactly how the Horizon reacted. From a personal viewpoint."

She shrugged, eyes swirling with sparks of vivid interest. The Horizon was a puzzle she was equal parts terrified of and intrigued by, and her scientific side was determined to help deal with that consequences of that puzzle. "Reports give a lot, but there's something about the personal touch." She said in way of explanation.

"My science officer would have been more qualified to discuss this with you," Kheren answered then. "But, to summarize it in layman terms and as I understand it... or felt it as you say... Well, it is as if it was the opposite of a black hole... but not as a white hole that would push everything out; rather, it seems to be itself attracted by all masses it nears as it expands... even something as small as the gravitons of a ship's shields will make it react."

He lifted both his callused fists between them to better illustrate what he said.

"It is somewhat like this: once it drops into normal space from subspace through fractures, he began, mimicking those fractures with his spreading fingers in one hand, it expands towards the surrounding masses, like those of star systems."

His spreading hand slowly covered his fist, plainly showing what it all meant.

"Now, do not ask *me* why. What I *can* tell you, however, is that subspace fractures are what allows it to come from its own universe into our own and at high warp. Then it spreads out faster than the best impulse speed possible as it consumes the very fabric of normal space. And the closer and larger the masses accross its path, the faster and wider it does."

Then, the tactician in him took over from his scientific mind.

"At first, we calculated that a black hole could somewhat divert and even swallow it like a drain would do with a spill. Well, it would... but then, because it also moves through subspace, this anomaly can bypass such obstacle and continue expanding as it emerges at another nearby fractured point in our universe."

Snowfire nodded steadily at the Andorian's succinct explanation, her hand coming up to rest on her chin as she listened and watched. The Captain had a gift for getting things across simply, and that was impressive when you considered what he was trying to explain.

"Interesting." She said in way of response, her tone calm. Her posture changed, becoming somewhat more confident as if an idea had just been given confirmation that it could work. "I thought so..."

She paused for a second.

"Although this is a question likely more suited to your science officer, how do you think the Horizon would react if, theoretically, one could project the effects of a singularity into subspace?"

"This is not a scientific asesment mind you but, I would say that it could react in a pretty messy way, to say the least," he said. "Not only does subspace follow different laws of physics than normal space and which we barely understand, but it contains an infinite number of domains, of which we know very little. I would not dare try to blindly play with it on such a cosmic scale... Who knows, that may very well be what created that anomaly in the first place."

He sighed again.

"And there is also another universe on the other side of that anomaly... one which we know nothing about so far except that it is definitely smaller than ours. The consequences of what we might do to save ourselves over here could become catastrophic over there unless we are very, very careful."

\* \* \*



Rachele Rivers gasped and startled awake, clutching her hands to her chest as it rose and fell sharply. With effort, she brought her hands down, smoothed them against her rumpled bedcovers, realizing both her skin and sheets alike had been dampened by sweat. She cursed, stumbled out of bed, and splashed her face at the sink, uncaring of the mess she made of the countertop. The first real rest she'd had since the battle with the Klingons, and somehow she felt worse than when she'd gone collapsed onto the bed.

"Computer, time," she implored, breathlessly in the dark.

"The time is oh-five-fourteen hours," came the dutiful reply.

Too early. Far too early for such an important day. As she ran a towel through her hair and along her face she briefly toyed with the idea of just going back to bed. Almost as quickly, she discarded the idea as she peeled off her sweat-soaked sleepwear. As she pulled on her robe, cinching the belt tight across her waist, she closed her eyes and exhaled in frustration. "Klingons," she had muttered, for they had been the subject of her nightmares.

She padded about the room, restless for a moment longer before coming to a conclusion: only meditation could ease her frustrations.

Shortly after, plain candles lit the room, flickering slightly with each movement of the air currents. In through the nose, count to thirty. Out through the mouth, count to thirty. Steady your mind. clear your soul. A flash of phaser fire, the impact of a torpedo against the stark green Klingon hull. In through the nose, and exhale once more.

Echoes of her frustration tugged at her mind, tried to pull her away from her meditations. She was a combat veteran, so why did she feel like she'd killed her first man again? Jem'hadar, Romulans, Kzinti...she'd faced them all down. She took another deep breath in, exhaling with mental measure. Time ceased to exist as she sat there, wrestling with her inner demons, struggling to find peace.

"All hands, this is Lieutenant Oseno on the bridge. All senior officers are directed to report to Starbase Ten for a briefing by zero seven hundred, Oseno out."

Blue eyes shot open, one hand leapt to her chest once more to feel her heart pounding. It had been so quiet, her mind so wrapped around this latest mental wound of hers that the broadcast had startled her worse than a trainee on their first live fire exercise.

She sighed and ran a hand through her hair, grumbling as she checked the time: 0615. Still time for a sonic shower if she hurried.

The Alsea had barely finished docking when Fleet Captain Samji's call for a meeting had come through, and Lieutenant Junior Grade Josh Vincent was still busy finishing up his repairs. After nearly three hours of making repairs and writing reports, Josh decided to follow the Fleet Captain's orders and get some rest. When he awoke, he was shocked by the time.

*Zero-six-fifty, I can't believe I forgot to set my alarm. I can still make it on time if the Chief will transport me from here,* he thought as he rose from his bed.

"Chief Jones, Lieutenant Vincent here," Josh called on the combadge. "I need you to transport me from my office to Deck 7 on the starbase immediately."

"Aye, Sir, transporting now," came the transporter chief's reply.

Within seconds, Josh was walking down the corridor on Deck 7. He had been here only a few days before, but Starbase 10 seemed like a completely different place than before; now there were officers everywhere.

*Wow, he thought, The fleet is calling in everyone for this mission, there must be more to deal with than just the Azimuth Horizon.*

He stepped into the main conference room with time to spare, so he scanned the room for any familiar faces. When he didn't see anyone from the Alsea in the room, he took a seat near the door and waited for the briefing to begin.

Some time before that, the automated wakeup tone of the Alsea's computer had jolted Jureth out of a deep sleep at 0600 hours. He had stayed up until nearly 0200 the night before, reading Starfleet's latest intelligence reports on the disposition of the Klingon Empire's assets as well as working on ways to improve the response time of the Alsea's security teams. He had also issued a general recall for the entire tactical and security department after the ship received Fleet Captain Samji's message about the early morning briefing, despite not receiving any orders to do so.

After a quick sonic shower, Jureth pulled a crisp new duty uniform and had the computer replicate a nutrient bar for him as he didn't want to waste time going to the ship's mess to eat breakfast. He munched the bar as he walked down the passage of the Alsea and then rode the turbolift to the ship's bridge.

As he entered, he saw Cat Steele standing at the tactical console. He nodded to her and noted she was wearing her new rank of lieutenant junior grade which she had received after he requested a promotion for her for her actions during their recent confrontation with the Klingons and the Azimuth Horizon. After acknowledging Cat, he proceeded to the ship's command chair where an operations ensign that he didn't recognize was sitting comfortably. The human male stood as soon as he spotted Jureth.

"Status, Ensign."

"All quiet, Sir. No new orders from Command."

"Any sign of the captain or Commander Rivers?"

"No, Sir, I've not heard from either of them."

"Thank you, Ensign. I will be heading to the Starbase for a briefing. Please remain in command until I return or you hear otherwise from the captain or XO."

"Aye, Sir."

No word from either of the Alsea's most senior officers meant that Jureth was still technically in command of the ship, though being in space dock made that less crucial than if they were in action and the CO and XO were disabled in some way. He made his way over to Cat who frowned at him.

"Have you even left the ship?"

"No, I had things to do."

"You work too much, Oseno," she said disapprovingly

"It comes with the job."

"So does the occasional rest and relaxation."

"There will be time for that later."

Jureth's old friend only shook her head in admonishment.

"I'm headed to starbase for the briefing. I want you to run up to date diagnostics on all the weapons systems, implement normal operating security protocols, and start our training sessions again. Its time to get back to work."

"Aye, I'll get on it."

"Thanks Cat, see you when I get back."

She nodded absently and went back to tapping commands into the ship's tactical console. Oseno took a step toward the turbolift and then stopped.

Satisfied with his previous announcement recorded so that the computer could call out all senior officers at the appropriate time, Jureth rode the turbolift down to the lower decks and proceeded to the ship's number one transporter room. He nodded to the chief manning the console.

"Over to Starbase 10, Chief."

"Aye, Sir... energizing."

The transporter gripped Jureth and then deposited him a moment later on the transporter pad of the massive Starbase. The young female transporter operator smiled at him.

"Welcome to Starbase 10."

"Thank you," Jureth replied

The Bajoran security chief of the Alsea exited the transporter room and pulled out his personal PADD to check the exact location of the morning's briefing. It didn't take him long to make his way to the meeting room.

As he entered, he noticed that many officers were already gathered. The only two he recognized were Fleet Captain Samji and Captain Kheren of the Artemis whom he knew by reputation more than anything else. As he found a seat by himself, he also noted that none of the Alsea's other officers were present and hoped they would make it on time. Sitting down, he extracted the PADD again and proceeded to go over the briefing background information for what was at least the fourth time. After skimming the documents again he decided he wanted something to sip on for the briefing and so moved to find the nearest replicator.

"Vulcan spiced tea, warm."

The beverage materialized in front of him and, as he turned around, he noted the arrival of Josh Vincent, the Alsea's ops boss. He walked over to where Josh had seated himself.

"Good morning, Mister Vincent." he said cordially "How was the time off? Were you able to relax?"

"Good morning Lieutenant," Josh replied. "I got some rest in after finishing up repairs. How are things in the tactical department?"

"They are coming along. Being in command since we docked has taken up some of my time, and I want to tighten up our response times, but that will come with training. I'm also quite pleased with the performance of MVAM and the weapons systems, and I've requested they add a dozen transphasic torpedoes to our inventory. Whether we get them or not is a different story."

Jureth sat down next to Josh before he continued

"What about Ops, are things as you like them?"

"Things are going good in Ops," Josh replied. "All of the systems are repaired and ready to go back out."

Josh welcomed Jureth's company. He had felt vulnerable as he sat alone surrounded by the groupings of the other crews, but as his crewmate joined him, he felt secure.

Jureth nodded at Josh's statement.

"Ready to go is good. I can't shake the feeling that we're in for more of a test than a small squadron of Klingons."

"I know the feeling. It is quite spectacular to see the entire fleet assembled here," Josh agreed. "I'd bet the Romulans that I ran into just before joining the Alsea have something to do with that."

Jureth frowned, he hadn't considered the possibility that the Romulans might be involved as well... though that didn't change the Alsea's tactical response that much.

"Klingons and Romulans...that formula does not sit well with me at all."

"Me neither folks," Fleet Captain Samji replied as he approached and heard the end of the conversation.

He had not spoken to either officer since their respective transfers to the Alsea and he was anxious to catch up.

"Mister Oseno," Samji greeted the Alsea Tactical and Security officer with a handshake and then the Operations officer in turn. "Mister Vincent, your experience with Romulans was more pleasant than a large majority of Starfleet can claim to say. What do you think of our chances of reasoning with them?"

"Honestly, Sir, I think it depends on which commander we're facing," Josh began. "Overall, I think we should expect a fight if they're coming after the Horizon too; but, if there's one thing I've learned about Romulans, it is to expect the unexpected."

Samji frowned.

"Yes, unfortunately I'd tend to agree. We'll go over it more soon, but my first impression is that we're not going to be dealing with the most diplomatic of the enemy. It is likely the Commander you encountered was even quite against their current government."

"The Romulans are the wild card I think, Sir," Jureth said. "Based on our encounter with the Klingons, I think we know their intent even though I don't understand it."

"I wholeheartedly agree with that," Josh agreed. "They sure seemed set on giving us a thrashing."

Oseno nodded.

"It doesn't make any sense though. From a tactical standpoint, they had to know they were outmatched, but they attacked anyway."

"They are no Vulcans, for sure," Samji agreed. "Often, their sense of honor will get in the way of logical thinking that even we Humans or Bajorans can manage."

He then saw an officer arrive at the distant doors with loose coveralls tied around his waist and a tired but satisfied look of someone who had been working all night. Approaching the replicator, he was followed in by a young woman in blue.

"If you'll excuse me, Gentlemen, I'm going to head for the doors to greet newcomers," Samji said with a nod and began his climb up the towering seating arrangement in front of him.

Jureth watched the Fleet Captain move away towards the entrance to the conference room and, as he turned back to say something to Josh, his communicator chirped.

"Alsea to Oseno."

Jureth frowned as he recognized Cat Steele's voice. She knew he was here for the briefing. What could possibly be important enough to bother him.

He tapped the communicator and responded.

"Oseno here, what is it?"

"Sorry to bother you, but I thought you'd want to know that you've received some gifts from Starbase 10; twelve of them to be exact."

*Twelve...*

It took Jureth half a second to comprehend what she was saying and then it dawned on him: the transphasic torpedoes he'd requisitioned!

"Excellent!" he responded with excitement in his voice

"I just have one question; where do you want me to put them? Our torpedo bays are full."

Jureth only thought about it for a moment before replying.

"Move some of our empty casing to the cargo bay. Six forward, six aft."

"Understood, Alsea out."

Jureth turned to Josh with a smile.

"Seems like the prophets reach extends beyond Bajor. Those should give us some extra punch."

"They should indeed. If we run into the Kang again, we'll be able to disable it without getting any more scratches on the hull," Josh replied with a chuckle.

All the while the Alsea tactical chief and chief of Ops talked, waiting for the meeting, another senior officer of their ship was still fast at work.

*So, all I need to do is reset this capacitor and sync it to the left conductor...*

Niomo had been working on one of his warp cores for about seven hours now. When the Alsea had docked, he had run straight to his new warp cores, the Prometheus class warship being one of a kind with three separate power sources, one for each of its independent combat section composing the whole revolutionary multivector assault design. The main warp core required little maintenance, so he left it to his still nameless assistants. He took the more difficult task: the core from the secondary hull had received stress fractures in its bracing and needed to be repaired. He didn't know who the last Chief was, but it looks like he didn't monitor the dextrim stress levels of every hull. Deciding that the job was mostly complete, and that the ship would not have a warp core crashing down a few decks, he slid out from the Jefferies tube he was working in and sighed. His coveralls were blue and black with exhaust and grime, his face was no better. But it wasn't like he had anywhere to go.

Niomo returned to the main section of engineering and surveyed his new home. He had all of his crews on call working. He recalled his conversation with the Andorian Captain of the USS Artemis and knew that the Alsea would not be having any extended R&R. Niomo didn't mind that so much; he had a few years of vacation to make up for.

He stretched and nodded; most of his teams had been working for ten hours straight. It was time for a break. He tapped the closest terminal and activated the engineering room's wide range intercom.

"Attention Engineering teams A, B and C. We are taking a five hour break. Report back around 1200. Teams D and E, keep going for another five hours and then we will switch off. Thanks for your hard work. Section chiefs, shoot me a status update on the work you've done before you hit the sack. Dismissed."

Niomo started to walk out the door when a female ensign with a flushed face ran up to him and started to shout.

"SIR! You're still here? We thought you left for your conference a half-hour ago!"

Niomo cocked his head and put his finger to his temple.

"Conference? I'm sorry, Ensign, I'm... not sure I know what you are talking about. Calm down and tell me what you mean."

She swallowed and took a deep breath.

"A call came in from the Starbase about three hours ago, at 0300. It requested all senior staff to report for a conference at 0700! We all assumed you heard it. When you disappeared, we just assumed that you had left early for the meeting..."

The ensign looked down at the ground.

*Is that guilt on her face? Oh well, no time to worry!*

Niomo nodded in thanks.

"Thank you for letting me know, Ensign. Enjoy your break."

Niomo turned and hurriedly walked out the door.

"Computer, time."

The computer bleeped and responded.

"The current time is 0650."

Niomo sighed and started jogging down the hallway to the turbolift. No time to change, I'll have to tie the top of my coveralls around my waist. At least I kept my uniform on under it. Upon walking out of the turbolift, he proceeded to the transporter room. He smiled to the chief and walked into the pad.

"Starbase 10, please. Close as you can get to this "conference" everyone is talking about."

The chief stared at him for a moment before responding:

"Sir, you do know your face..."

"Yeah...Hazard of the job. I'll fix it on the way. Energize." Niomo was already unzipping his one piece coverall to reveal his clean uniform.

"Yessir. The conference is on Deck 7. I'll transport you right outside the room. Give you some time to... freshen up."

The chief was hitting buttons, grinning.

Moments later, Niomo was back on Starbase 10, amidst the hustle and bustle of busy crewmen. A few gave him strange looks, apparently surprised to see an officer with smudges on his face. Niomo stepped aside to take a sleeve of his coverall and turn it inside out. He then used it to wipe off his face.

He saw the sleeve become dirty, so he assumed it worked. He returned the sleeve to its original position in a knot around his waist and gave his face and hair a quick rub to make sure they were somewhat presentable. At least he didn't smell.

Niomo took a deep breath and walked into the conference room. By his estimation, it was still before 0700. It had been a while since he had been in a briefing but he was glad to be back. It was then that he realized that everyone was holding a PADD... except Niomo. He spotted a replicator in the far corner of the room and made a beeline for it. He responded to the nods and greetings of other officers as he made his way to his goal.

Upon arriving, he replicated a PADD and then a cup of coffee. He took a sip and breathed a sigh of relief. When it was time, he found a seat and prepared to receive his mission.

After the ninety seconds or so it took for Samji to make his way up to the upper section of the large conference hall where the replicators were situated around the sides and back of the seating, he noticed the smudgy Engineer in coveralls he had seen earlier take a seat. It was Lieutenant Commander Lire as he had guessed. He extended a hand.

"I thought I ordered everyone to get some sleep, Mister Lire."

Samji saw the officer had been working hard to get the ship ready for her mission and secretly admired the man for his dedication, but didn't let it show... at least not yet.

Niomo still wasn't used to the hustle and bustle of such a large meeting. When he heard his name spoken, he was a little surprised. Quickly, he turned in his chair to look at the voice addressing him.

"Ah, Fleet Captain... Hello." Niomo took the man's hand and shook it firmly. "I suppose you've never known a real engineer then, Sir. As Montgomery Scott used to say: 'I'll sleep wen I'm dead, sar.' Or at least I imagine he'd say that."

Niomo laughed at his own joke.

"Don't worry, Sir. I will get some shut eye before the Alsea embarks on her mission, scout's honor."

He sighed, and rubbed the handle of his coffee cup.

"She needs a lot of work done, though. I'd give her a day at least before I'd mark her ready for departure."

The work required on the ship was extensive. It had been some time since the ship had received a once over...even for a newer model Prometheus. He was already thinking of ways to redirect work teams in order to accelerate the repair time.

"Good to hear, Commander," Samji replied, his features softening a bit since the last rebuke to portray his appreciation for the officer's work.

Then, his attention was caught by muffled voices coming from the outside corridor

"This Azimuth phenomenon has me very concerned," Jolie said to her *Imzadi*, Doctor Shian Andres, as they both walked to the meeting of the senior officers. We have so little data on short and long term effects; if telepaths and empaths are affected, what medical preventatives we need to use for certain species, you name it."

Shian shrugged one shoulder and squeezed her hand at the same time.

"All we can do is work through the problems as they come. No sense borrowing trouble."

"True. Still, I'd rather be prepared than not."

"You've been assigned to the fleet's flagship. I think if anyone will be prepared, it'll be you and the Lotus staff."

Jolie stopped a moment as they approached the meeting room.

"Promise me something, Shian,"

He turned, his onyx eyes searching hers.

"What is it?"

"If you can't reach me telepathically, just know that I'm OK unless someone finds my...remains."

He reached up with a hand to caress her cheek, then brushed a stray lock of her hair behind her ear.

*"What are you not telling me?"* he spoke into her mind.

She frowned at the thought, not quite understanding why she said it, either.

*"Call it a premonition,"* she replied.

He tipped his head to the side, eyes studying hers.

*"I WILL find a way to reach you if that happens."*

A brief smile lit across her lips as she squeezed his hand in return.

"We'd better go in to the meeting before we're late."

They joined the other officers filling the room and found seats. Jolie absently tapped at her chin, wondering about the Azimuth Horizon as the swirls of excitement, fear, dread, and sheer medical curiosity tore through her mind.

They were deep in conversation and did not appear to notice the Starbase commander looking at the both of them. Not meaning to be too intrusive, Samji nodded and simply said:

"Good morning, Doctor."

Jolie turned as she heard the greeting and instantly recognized the commander of Starbase 10.

"Fleet Captain Samji! Hello, Sir. Have you had the opportunity to meet Doctor Shian Andres? He came out from Betazed after the Borg Invasion to treat our telepaths. He's one of the finest paracortical neurologists in the galaxy. We've been poring over the medical data to try to anticipate injuries and illnesses so we can be prepared."

Shian inclined his sandy brown head at the fleet captain in acknowledgment.

"Good to finally meet you, Sir."

"And you, Doctor," Samji said with a smile and similar gesture. "Apologies for not knowing your name, although the manifest on an entire Starbase can be daunting,"

Samji chuckled.



"Have you two met Lieutenant Commander Niomo Lire?" he asked, gesturing to the Engineer beside him. "His 'patient' is now our Fleet's beast of a warship, the Alsea."

Niomo grinned at the Fleet Captain's joke. He raised his cup in greeting to the two doctors.

"The Fleet Captain exaggerates my abilities. I am only a simple assistant compared to the work that my engineering teams are currently doing. Pleased to meet the both of you. Have you been with the Fleet long? There are a few faces I don't recognize, yourselves included."

Jolie grinned at the patient reference.

"Better you than me, Lieutenant Commander. I prefer live patients to machines any day. I've been with the fleet for awhile. I was assigned to the McKenzie during the Borg Invasion, served here on SB10 for a little while, and just recently got assigned to the Lotus. I enjoy the medical challenges we see on a Starbase, but I'm looking forward to time in space again. The stars call."

"I'm new to Starfleet; I joined after the Borg invasion," Shian added. "We had a lot of telepath neuro injuries to deal with, and that's my particular area of medical study. Starfleet needed my help, and I couldn't turn them down. The neurologists here are some of the finest I've had the honor to work with, so I'm delighted to be part of the crew now. I don't have the same space bug Jolie has, so I'm more than happy to stay on the Starbase."

"You have your hands full fixing up the Alsea, Lieutenant Commander. It sounds like it's your passion, too," Jolie said after that.

Niomo nodded in agreement.

"Aye, Ma'm, it *is* a passion. It gets a little touch and go when Romulans try to burn our faces off, but an engineer always manages. I'm sure it's the same for Doctors."

Niomo laughed.

"But it's good to know Starfleet is bringing in some of the best and brightest in. I know I take a trip or two to sickbay once a week for various burns and such. Sadly, I'm stuck with an EMH. I hear they aren't any more sociable than they were a few years ago."

Niomo paused for a moment, to recall his time on the Lotus so many years ago.

"The Lotus is and was a good ship. Serve her well. The doctors who have served on her still say that if you listen hard enough, you can hear my shouting the time I seared one of my fingers off and had to get it reattached. Let me know if you hear anything. Didn't know medical professionals were so superstitious."

Niomo shrugged and shook his head.

"Not that I can recall that event. The good doctor knocked me out."

Samji uttered a short laugh,

"Huh... something I was not aware of and is quite surprising."

He then saw the bright red hair of Lieutenant Commander Rivers out of the corner of his eye.

"Excuse me Mister Lire, I have something to ask your XO. Doctors," he said in acknowledgement of the other two as he strode up the stairs further toward the entrance.

The doors swished close behind Lieutenant Commander Rivers, who strode in quickly. Clashed in her right hand was her personal PADD, currently displaying the time: 0654.

She hadn't had much time to work with her hair, so today her red locks were pulled into a simple ponytail held in place with a metal clip styled after the standard Starfleet combadge.

Her blue eyes widened briefly as she looked around the room, taking in all of the command crews already there.

This would be a briefing unlike anything she'd seen since the Borg Invasion.

As Rivers was taking in the scene before her, it was interrupted by the familiar visage of Fleet Captain Samji approaching her with a smile and a nod.

"Commander, it is good to see you back and in one piece. I was quite enamoured reading the report of your run-in with Klingons. Good work."

After a pause, Samji continued.

"Your ship is well represented so far," he said, gesturing to the grouping of Josh and Jureth, as well as Niomo. "Will the good Captain Siduri be joining us soon? I would like to personally extend my praise to him as well."

Rivers brow creased with worry while her gaze lingered on Niomo.

"No, Sir. I checked in on him before I arrived. Captain Siduri's condition worsened overnight." She paused, at a loss for what to add to that, it seemed, but finally, she switched subjects. "Gold uniform. He's our replacement for Mister Lan? Not Betazoid I hope?" she asked, alluding to Lan's warp core intoxication, a condition that left the Alsea without a chief engineer during the fight.

"That's troubling," Samji frowned. "I hope his recovery is swift."

but they both understood that it would not be swift enough before the Operation would be launched. What the Commander of Starbase 10 said next was no surprise:

"I think it goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway, that you'll have to take on the role of Acting Captain for now."

Lieutenant Commander Rivers nodded, and continued listening. Samji continued to address her other subject with less malaise. Looking again to Niomo, he said:

"He is, and no he's not... that is to say, Lieutenant Commander Niomo Lire is your replacement Chief Engineer, but he is not Betazoid. Italian, I believe. As to your Acting XO, it is your choice, but I would recommend Oseno Jureth. Although Lire outranks Mister Oseno, Oseno's experience with both the ship and the crew is a plus. Additionally, Mister Lire has expressed his desire to stay clear of command for the foreseeable future. I doubt he will raise much of an objection."

Samji looked at the chronometer and said in parting;

"It is nearing our meeting time, so I will let you get settled."

The redhead nodded in agreement, only adding:

"Oseno was my first choice as well, since the Captain made him Second Officer."

\* \* \*

Sorripto glanced one more time at the mirror, looking his uniform over before beginning the days work. Rubbing his right hand with his left, the Cardassian still felt the cramping pain from his exploits during the McKenzie's last mission.

"I swear, Sorripto, not yet fifty and you are getting old on me faster then I care to think," Sorripto said to his tired and worn reflection.

The final encounter with his old friend Joey still weighed heavily on Sorripto's mind; as did the investigation into the events that unfolded. The investigation went nowhere and he was not suspected of any wrongdoings or misdeeds; but the stress of the questions and lingering doubts still took their toll on the Cardassian.

As Sorritpo splashed water and his grey, bony face and rubbed it off with a towel, he took a deep breath and looked back up at the worn figure before him.

*"He is still alive, and I will find him."*

Shaking the distracting thoughts from his head, the cheif engineer of the starship McKenzie hung the wet towel and headed out the door towards Engineering.

Upon entering the small but powerful heart of the ship, Sorripto walked to his desk and, thumbing through a PADD, allotted the daily tasking to the engineering team. That's when he got the attention of a passing crewman.

"Chen! Come here for a moment."

Walking over, the engineering crewman nodded to his Cardassian Chief Engineer.

"Crewman, here are the assignments for the day. It has been a rough week for all of us, so assignments are pretty light. I want you to make sure ACE gets these and distributes them. Once everything is done, get some rest and let everyone know they have to take time to relax. Everyone has been walking on eggshells around me but tell them as I'm telling you that I am fine."

"Yes, Sir. But... Sir, if I may..."

Realizing the seriousness of the tone of Crewman Chen, Sorripto put down the PADD and nodded.

"Sir, stories have gotten out about what you did on the mission. Some of us were questioned. There are still a lot of bad feelings among some in Starfleet, Sir., towards Cardassians, and now we are working for one who is good at killing people."

Laughing, Sorripto spoke.

"Chen, I am not going to kill anyone if that is what you guys are worried about."

"No, Sir. It is just..."

Patting Crewman Chen on the shoulder, Sorripto calmed him.

"Just what? If there is a worry, you can tell me."

"It is just that you never talk about your past; and now, you acted like some spy soldier something. It is the first time that any of us have ever seen you..."

"Seen me what?"

"Well, Sir. The first time any of us have seen you... act Cardassian."

Taken aback slightly, Sorripto's shock quickly turned to humor.

"I guess that's because I am Cardassian, Chen".

Patting the Crewman on the arm as he walked out of his small office space, the chief engineer laughed.

"But you knew that when you married me."

Crewman Chen could not help but laugh as Sorripto walked away. Tapping his combadge, Sorripto then became serious again.

"Sorripto to Captain Crist. Sir, Engineering is manned and ready. I apologize, Sir ,but I forgot where you said to meet. Where is your location so I can give you my further reports?"

Captain Crist had stepped onto Starbase 10 after going over all the maintenance logs. He had made sure the McKenzie was ready to go at a moment's notice. After walking through the large starbase, he had entered the conference room. There was a large attendance already. He had noticed a lot of familiar faces, one of which was his easily recognizable Illythirii Science officer.

Crist had just sat down laying a PADD on his right knee and waited for the meeting to begin, when his chief engineer's call reached him.

Crist tapped his combadge.

"I'm currently in the main conference room here at the starbase. If you see any of the Senior staff, bring them with you. And hurry, the meeting is about to begin."

Tapping his combadge Sorripto responded immediately.

"Aye, Sir, on my way there now. From what I understand, I am the last one, so no promises on finding everyone."

Working his way to the main conference room, Sorripto walked in and glanced around the room seeing a lot of familiar faces. Nodding to his fellow crewmembers, Sorripto met eyes with Crist and tapped his temple finger, saluting, acknowledging his Captain.

Walking past the crowds towards Crist, Sorripto noticed Sangliar, the Tellarite engineer he had crossed paths with before the Borg War. Walking forward, Sorripto deliberately bumped into the Tellarite who was at waist level to the large Cardassian. Looking down, Sorripto winked, "Sorry Sangliar, I was looking straight ahead and did not see you down there."

Patting Sangliar on the back in what would be called more a strike, Sorripto spoke as he walked away.

"Cheer up old friend. I will catch up to you when this is all said and done."

Sorripto knew the grizzled old face well and could see the smirk forming as he walked away. Walking towards Captain Crist, Sorripto grabbed the last open chair and sat down.

"Sorry I am late, Sir. Did I miss all the good parts, or am I just in time for the boring stuff?"

Summers tapped his combadge.

"Attention Senior Staff, this is the Captain speaking; please report to Starbase 10 for Briefing. Summers out."

With that, Daniel walked onto the transporter pad and had the Chief transport him from the USS Spectre to just outside the meeting hall inside the space station.

As he was walking in, a voice rang through his head briefly; it was that of his father.

*"I am proud of you"* was all that was said in the confines of his own mind.

He brushed it off, thinking that it was caused by lack of sleep the last two nights.

"Ah, Fleet Captain, good to see you again. Maybe, one of these days, we can meet under better circumstances," Daniel said as he put forth his hand in the friendly manner of a handshake.

"Ah, yes, I do hope so as well, Captain," Samji responded with a smile. "Just do what you do best with that old but impressive feat of engineering, the Spectre, and I'm sure we'll be able to meet again with breaths properly exhaled."

He looked around for signs of others from the Spectre, and added:

"Where's the rest of your crew, Captain? Not sleeping in I hope."

A mixture of seriousness and levity to lighten the mood graced his question. As it was still several minutes prior to the time indicated, and he was not one to quibble over a few minutes here or there when the ultimate meeting and launch time would be an order of magnitude larger, the question was mostly in jest.

Before he could answer, Samji said to Summers:

"I hope to commence with more discussion later within this meeting, but for now I must take my leave to greet the crews of some of our other ships." And with a nod, and seeing some other officers arrive, he moved along up the aisleway.

Following an intensive day of extensive repairs, all still ungoing at breakneck pace, Commander David Rogers finished touring the Spectre, checking all departments for readiness. His report complete, he forwarded it to Captain Summers for his perusal. All systems were at peak efficiency, having ran and passed level two diagnostics.

The repaired tubes on deck C and the forward shield generators had seen the most activity during the repair cycle, but the hardest repair was to the dynamic concealing exterior plating system. It had burned through in several places during the encounter with the Klingon cruiser, and most of the plate's nearest the exhaust emissions ports had needed replacement.

Satisfied with the ships readiness, Rogers made his way down to the docking umbilical and exited the ship onto Starbase 10. Assuming a leisurely pace, David strolled the docking bays, looking over the multitude of vessels within the bays. All of the capital ships of Lotus Fleet were docked, excepting the Prometheus class USS Alsea, which was still on a mission int the very sector of space where the Azimuth Horizon anomaly was located.

He had initially thought about visiting some of these vessels; their names resounding in his mind on the many accolades they had garnered over the past few years. But knowing the upcoming mission with the Azimuth Horizon, he knew that they would be all busy with readiness repairs and requisition transports.

Taking a nearby turbolift, up to the Promenade, he entered a nearby restaurant, ordered a small meal and took the tray out to the walkway to find a seat. Finding one overlooking the Spectre, David sat down and proceeded to eat, pausing between bites to look over the massive Akira class ship.

His ship.

Well, not really "his;" he was not her captain... But as the name implied, he was, as her executive officer, in charge of her operations, translating the commanding officer's decisions into actual operating orders and going in his stead on away missions to lead operations outside the vessel. Fact was, and especially with a very lax and non-directing captain like Daniel Summers, he was essentially acting as a ship commanding officer without the actual title and responsibility; and this was the very final step before earning a command of his own.

And so, it was quite legitimate for him, as for any Exec of every starship, to look upon the Spectre as "his" ship.

A short while later, he returned to the Spectre and went straight to work with the Andorian chief engineer Shar Noor. Like him, he felt the urgency to have the vessel ship shape as soon as possible for any possible contingency. And the two of them did not waste any time or word.

"Okay, it should be good to go. Let's send me over first."

Rogers and Shar Noor had spent the last two hours getting a quirk out of the transporter system. It had manifested itself after the return from Earth's past and was probably due to a chronometric cross-circuit. Not dangerous; just annoying in that the biofilter had a tendency to not recognize random non-biological patterns. Having completed a level one diagnostic and going over the pattern buffer, biofilters and imaging scanners, the two were confident that they had eliminated the glitch.

Placing himself on the main transporter pad's centre spot and holstering his personal padd, David nodded for the Chief Engineer to initiate transport to the conference room on deck 7 of the star base.

"Energizing." announced the Andorian.

Materializing just inside the main conference room doors, David momentarily looked about at the assembled crew's of Lotus Fleet, then noticed that it was slightly chilly in the large amphitheater. Looking down at himself, shock replaced his puzzled frown.

He had successfully transported across, but the biofilter had decided that his uniform was not necessary.

David stood, sans uniform, clad only in his standard utility belt and comm badge. Spinning about quickly, David slapped his combadge hard.

"Shar!", he shouted hurriedly. "Beam me back!"

Just before the energization occurred, Rogers' motion at the conference doors triggered their sensors, and they hissed open to reveal the corridor outside, teeming with base personnel going to and fro. A handful of these were standing about chatting and had glanced over when the doors had opened. They were startled to see the naked Half-Human, Half Romulan framed in the doorway. A couple of the female yeomen smirked; one lieutenant let out a wolf whistle while a third, a commander, showed a definite frown of disapproval before David was caught in the transporter beam and faded from their sight within the transport haze.

"No need Commander," Shar said before David could utter a word. "I've corrected the problem already. The biofilter read your uniform as hazardous and kept it in the buffer. I bet that was embarrassing," he added with a grin.

Not bothering to reply, David just glared at his shipmate, the 'Duh' expression showed his thoughts toward the chief engineer's joke sufficiently. Shar was adjusting the filter controls already.

"Got it, Commander. A slight discrepancy between the filter's organic phase variance settings. We're good now."

Stepping off the pad, David moved toward the controls.

"Okay, Mister 'We're good now'! You go first!"

Once Shar Noor was in position, David energized the system, watching the controls closely, and beamed him into the conference room. His combadge shipred immediately.

"Safe and intact, Commander. See ya in a few seconds."

Confident now, Rogers set the controls for a thirty second delay, walked to the pad, and took position. As the timer reached zero, David was beamed back over to the starbase conference room. As he materialized, David quickly checked that his uniform was still with him then, slightly red faced, he followed his ship mate toward Captain Summers, trying to avoid eye contact with anyone in the room. David casually took a seat next to Captain Summers and the Andorian engineer sat on Summers' other side.

A quick glance told Rogers that the three were the only officers to get to the conference hall in time for the meeting, and David silently berated his officer's for not being able to show up. But, perhaps they were too busy preparing the Spectre for the upcoming mission and had lost track of the time.

Even so, David knew that Summers would be sharing a few choice comments with the senior staff once this meeting wound up.

Oseno had heard the familiar whine of a transporter beam and his natural paranoia as a security officer had kicked in at the thought of someone beaming directly into a conference room full of the most senior officers of Lotus Fleet. As the figure had materialized, Jureth had not recognized the man but, whoever he was, he had appeared stark naked! Many heads had turned, and some had laughed; but Oseno had been the only one who reacted.

He had stood up out of his chair, drawn his phaser, and started for the entrance. No sooner had he done his move towards him that this man had dematerialized again and Jureth had stopped in his tracks, but his phaser still out, expecting a return appearance. The transporter beam reappeared but the subject that beamed in was not the same. Then, moments later, the naked man, now in a commander's uniform, had beamed back into the room and moved to find a seat with the officers of the USS Spectre. Oseno had then returned his phaser to its holster and had gone back to his seat, shaking his head.

The naked man's arrival, both of them as it were, had not escaped either the four keen eyes of the captain of the Artemis. But he had nodded respectfully at the first officer of the Spectre as he passed by.

Andorians had no taboo whatsoever regarding nudity; but Kheren knew well that such was not the case with most humanoid... especially Humans, full blooded or otherwise. And so, he hoped his short but obviously respectful gesture would help the man get back some of his dignity.

After all, there were now more important things to worry about.

Kheren had not missed either the alert, cautious response of the Bajoran officer with Lieutenant Commander pips and security gold on his collar. Again he nodded, this time in appreciation as much as respect, exchanging a glance with Tyvya, his own acting chief of security.

*If they should all become alert like this, we might just pull this off against the odds,* he thought and saw the same thought in the icy blue eyes of the giantess.

They both remembered painfully how their ship had almost been commandeered by an impostor and by savage fanatics, just because they had become lax in mere basic security protocols. From then on, they had all vowed on the Artemis to never fall prey to such complacency ever again; and especially not in these trying times.

Now, it would be easier to infiltrate Starfleet Command Headquarters than the Artemis... but Kheren felt relieved to see that other officers in the fleet had caught on.

Yes, he thought again, *we just might...*

Niomo had been enjoying his conversation with the good doctors when his eyes had also caught the familiar glimmer of an incoming transport. What arrived, however, was not so normal. Or wanted.

A naked man.

His jaw dropped open and he had to blink a few times. Moments later, he heard giggling from a group of female officers and crewmen. All Niomo could do was shake his head and cover his face with his hand. Soon after, the man teleported away.

*Someone won a bet, I'm sure...*

"Doctor, you do not know of any medical illness from working in a warp core all day that can result in seeing naked people, do you? Because if you do, I need to go to sickbay..."

Jolie heard the urgency in a man's voice to beam him back to his ship, and she looked back over his shoulder to make sure all was well. She saw the back of a tactical officer, phaser already drawn and pointed at a stark naked half-Romulan. Seeing beings without [clothes](#) was hardly new for someone who was both Betazoid and a doctor, and the lack of dress didn't embarrass her as it did some of the other crew, who were blushing or trying to hide chuckles behind their hands as they averted their eyes. Being out of uniform clearly had distressed that particular officer however, who ran from the room.

"No, nothing wrong with your eyes, Mister Lire. He was quite nude. Although why he's ashamed, I can't quite understand." She shrugged a shoulder.

Later, Niomo saw the man return; this time in normal uniform. He shook his head as the man passed, at least Niomo could say that it had never happened to him before.

Nearby, the Ops officer of Lire's ship, Josh Vincent, had heard the sound of a transporter as his coffee materialized in front of him, but he didn't think much of it because he himself had used a transporter to get to the meeting on time. But, as he had turned to get back to his seat however, he had then glimpsed a naked man dematerializing; a man who now rematerialized moments later with a uniform.

Josh was surprised to see that only one officer had strongly reacted to the naked man appearing.

*When you've seen as much as these officers, I guess naked men appearing out of thin air just isn't exciting anymore,* he thought.

As he neared his seat, he saw Fleet Captain Samji glaring at the crowd of assembled officers and knew that it was time for a more grave discussion. He quickly took his seat and waited for the meeting to begin.



Samji looked on in amusement at the scene. A little bit of a laugh was good for the spirits before such the daunting task ahead of them.

However, it was time to begin the serious part of the meeting soon, so he had to look like the disciplinarian he didn't want to be. He simply stood with arms crossed and a stern stare at the XO as he walked past down the stairs, and everyone seeing the Fleet Captain's disapproval began to lower their conversations and laughter to a low murmur.

He looked at the chronometer. They were already past the time when the meeting was originally supposed to begin, so he slowly made his way back to the stage and podium set up in front of the large holographic display. On his way there he searched the crowd thoroughly for the rest of the Fleet's most senior officers and was coming up with a few missing, most notably, the Fleet's Flagship Captain.

His thoughts briefly went dark. If this was the amount of discipline they were dealing with to combat the Azimuth Horizon and all associated enemy factions, they were doomed.

But he remained ever hopeful for a turnaround and a pulling together of all in that room and others yet to come... for the fate of the Galaxy in the days to come.

All oculars of Kheren followed the movement of the fleet captain towards the podium. The crucial meeting for Operation Horizon was about to be called to order.

And that started to worry the Andorian.

The meeting was already late; yet, his chief science officer, on who's research a lot had been based on for this venture, had yet to report. Vulcans were well known for their exactness and Lieutenant Syntron had never been any exception... until now. Something was wrong.

He tapped his combadge after getting a direct link to the Artemis.

"Captain Kheren to Lieutenant Syntron, please report at once to the main conference hall of Starbase 10."

As he spoke, he looked at Tyvya. She understood and made herself ready to start looking for the missing Vulcan on his next signal.

As he waited for his science officer to respond, Kheren then noticed that other people were notably missing; there seemed to be no medical officer present for any of the other ships except for the Lotus... who's only senior officer in the room so far was the CMO, Doctor Bindo. The Spectre seemed also to lack a tactical officer, the Alsea her captain... Even this veteran captain V'Rell Gould he had heard in command of the flagship, and thus all of them in the field, was nowhere to be seen.

His few facial muscles nevertheless managed to convey a definite frown as he took all of it in.

After returning from his most resent inspection of the Lotus' refits, the one Kheren was worried about entered his quarters on board his renewed ship and let out a deep breath.

"Shower" V'rell Gould, captain of Lotus Fleet's flagship, mumbled, and got undressed.

He was covered in small bruises and even had some small cuts where he had scraped his knuckles on the primary drive coupler earlier in the day. He had been up more than eighteen hours straight since they found a flaw in the coupler, requiring the entire drive section to be removed and then recalibrated. But it had been worth it.

*Nothing beats the sound of a properly aligned anti-matter flow regulator,* he thought and smiled to himself.

The shower lasted a full fifteen minutes and had made him a bit drowsy, but his work for the day wasn't done yet so he got out and pulled his pants back on.

"Computer, start personal log."

The computer efficiently complied with a happy beep.

### **Captain's log**

#### **supplemental:**

**The Lotus is undergoing her final refit adjustments and should be space worthy in a matter of days.**

**I plan to perform a shakedown cruise at the earliest possible time but, in reality I'm not sure if it's for the ship or her crew, I guess in the end its both.**

**Ever since taking this position from Commander Felez, I've had my share of doubts and interpretations; no small wonder having lost my last command to the Borg I suppose. But, I will not let this hamper my command. I'll summon up my father's blood if that's what it takes.**

**I will not let my crew, or the fleet, down.**

As he was finishing up, someone chimed his door. It was his Yeoman, Markel.

"Sir, you asked me to remind you about the meeting?"

Gould looked at him blankly for a second; then his eyes closed painfully and he started getting dressed.

"Ahh.. yes, thank you, Lieutenant. I've been so deep into these reports.. that will be all."

He shuffled around the room, grabbing his PADD and jacket as he went.

"Fine.. thing.. be late for your first.." and then noticed the recorder was still on. "Computer, end log," which it did.

When he was ready, he tapped his his combadge.

"Gould to transporter room 2."

Only seconds passed before he got a reply.

"Transporter room 2 here. What can I do for you, Sir?"

"I need a site to site transport to the level 7 meeting hall inside the base, any problems with that?"

"Well, Sir, we can do it but with all the safety redundancy's in place to prevent unauthorized transports, except in the main transporter room of course, non-organic equipment might not make pass the filters, Sir."

Gould thought it over.

"Well, I'm just taking my PADD. I'll risk it.""Well, Sir, that would include your uniform as well... just saying."

*What a nightmare that would have been,* he thought.

"Fine, site to site from my position to the main transporter room, as soon as possible chief."

"Aye, Sir, energizing no."

The room hummed and Gould was gone.

The captain of the flagship came practically skidding to a stop in the hallway just short of the meeting room and briskly walked the rest of the way. The doors were just being closed as he slipped into the room. The access door sighed; but it was to admit a medium-sized vulcanoid male with four pips on the red collar of his standard black and grey-shouldered uniform.

*Captain Gould, at last... Kheren's mind identified with relief; a very brief sense of relief. Now... where in the deep waters of Hell is MY Vulcan?"*

During a pause in his conversation with the science officer of the McKenzie, his four eyes conveyed his feeling to his acting security chief. With a slight nod, Tyvya straightened up her towering frame and strode out of the room to go in search of their missing science officer.

Gould looked around at the faces and realized he had never met any of these people personally since he arrived at starbase 10 months ago.

*Not really surprising*, he thought. He had been rushed off on his first mission and then kept busy full time with the refit as soon as he had returned to the station with the survivors of planet Neural, the first and so far only inhabited world to fall under the fires of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly.

*Still, I should have made some effort to meet some of them.*

He recognized commander Jolie Bindo from her file and walked over to her, introducing himself.

"Captain Vir'ell Gould. Nice to finally meet you in person, Doctor," he said and sat down next to her. "We should compare notes before the meeting gets going."

The auburn-haired Betazoid didn't have a chance to stand at attention before the Lotus' captain sat down.

"Pleased to finally meet you, Sir. Fleet Captain Samji is getting ready to start the meeting right now."

She noticed the scrapes on his hands and quickly looked him up and down to make sure there were no other injuries that needed her attention. She nodded at his hands.

Gould looked at her questionably then smiled.

"Oh these?" he held up his fist to show the knuckles better. "I never even notice anymore, you get used to scrapes after a few decades, commander, don't worry about it"

"I'll tend to those cuts as soon as the meeting is done, Captain, unless they're bothering you too much right now."

The doctor scanned them visually and decided they were minor enough not to override him medically. "It looks like Captain Samji is going to be a few more minutes. Is there anything in particular you wished to discuss?"

"Hmm.. well, your file says you served aboard the USS McKenzie during the last Borg incident and even treated some of the telepaths after it was over. Do you think this event left any lasting scar on this fleet? I myself lost my last ship during the conflict and have had scant little time to reflect on it since then."

It wasn't hard to see that it had left an impression on Gould.

Jolie rubbed her chin in thought.

"It was a major battle, Captain. We lost a lot of fine people, and many more were injured physically and mentally. Entire crews have had to reshuffle and reform, and that kind of change also has an impact as people have to learn their new positions and interact with new beings. The question isn't if it left a scar. The question is how big of a scar, and if it can be treated. Under normal circumstances, I would have the Counselor see anyone showing signs of distress about this, but there's been so little time. Still, I think I'll have the Lotus' Counselor do some baseline evaluations of every crewmember when we get underway. We might not have a lot of time for formal long-term treatments, but we can catch problems and treat them before they become overwhelming."

Gould nodded with agreement.

"Excellent idea, Doctor; see to it that everyone on board is brought in for at least one face to face session over the next few weeks."

The doctor tapped a message into her PADD.

"I sent the order off to the Counselor, Sir."

A few moments later, her PADD beeped. Jolie read the message, quirking an eyebrow, and then shook her head as she sighed. She looked over at the Captain of the Lotus.

"The Counselor just messaged that all the senior staff should go first. She wants to see us at our earliest availability. And she made that an order."

Gould smirked.

"Who watches the watchers is it? fine with me. Make sure no one has a poor excuse to get out of it. Tell them I authorized temporary discharge of duties if you have to, and absolutely NO exceptions."

"Very well, Captain. I'll go first in order to get it done and out of the way before we get busy with any potential casualties. I recommend you go second before our tasks make us all too busy. You'll be an excellent example to the rest of the crew, too."

Jolie's eyes crinkled a fraction in amusement despite her attempt to suppress it.

It suddenly dawned on him that the good Doctor had roped him into taking this evaluation himself and that was never his intent. But seeing as he was already roped..

"I can't promise I'll be in the first line up doctor; this meeting should determine that. but I assure you I'll be along as soon as possible" and gave her a stiff reassuring nod of the head.

Oseno had seen the stern look on the face of Lotus Fleet's field commanding officer as he surveyed the chaos after the arrival of the naked officer. Jureth could tell that Samji wanted to begin, and then the Bajoran caught the arrival of his former commanding officer, Captain Gould.

He hadn't seen the captain since his impromptu transfer from the Lotus to the Alsea at the end of their rescue mission to Neural and, at the risk of delaying the Fleet Captain any longer, Jureth left his seat and his now lukewarm tea momentarily and strode briskly over to where Gould was conferring with a medical officer that Oseno did not know.

"Captain Gould, Sir; it is good to see you again. Did the refit go to your expectations?"

Gould looked around and wondered how he could have missed his former CSO.

"Of course not, they'd be completely lost without me. But its good to see you again Oseno, arm all healed up I take it? When we get a chance later, we should talk."

At the mention of his arm, Oseno recalled for a moment their desperate fight with the Mugato creature during the Lotus final mission before refit. There were several times where he was sure the creature was going to kill him and truthfully, if it hadn't been for Captain Gould, that may have happened.

"Yes, Sir, the arm has healed nicely. The docs did a good job patching me up. I'd be happy to speak with you whenever you like, Sir, but I suppose we had all better find seats. The Fleet Captain looks like he's chomping at the bit. Talk to you later, Captain."

Oseno turned and made his way back to his seat next to Josh Vincent and the rest of the Alsea's command crew, waiting for the briefing to start.

Near him, Niomo Lire shifted in his seat again, just as he did when he had seen the Fleet Captain move towards the front of the room.

*About time*, he thought.

He had been monitoring the Alsea's engineering teams through his PADD, but he still did not feel right about it. A ship's Chief wasn't supposed to let his repair crews do all the work. He began to unconsciously tap his finger on the arm of his seat, becoming more impatient. It must have become annoying to some, possibly even loud, as other officer's eyes drifted towards the Alsea's chief engineer before returning back to their hushed conversations.

Niomo didn't really care about that though. All he wanted was to have a short and sweet meeting that got him back to his ship ASAP.

Not far from the Alsea crew, Daniel Summers noticed his First Officer and Chief Engineer take a place around him and greeted them both as he usually does, with a smile and a handshake.

"Well this meeting isn't going to start for a bit so, lets mingle a bit shall we?"

Summers motioned for the two men to join him and he headed straight for Captain Kheren of the USS Artemis.

"Hello Old Friend," Daniel started. "I hope we are not interrupting?" he asked with a kwirky smile, awaiting the reply from the large Andorian surrounded by his fellow shipmates.

Kheren turned towards the captain of the USS Spectre only when he noticed his crew glancing behind him at the approaching officer. His natural deafness to sounds behind him didn't show however, as he turned very naturally to say:

"Captain Summers! Seems we only meet when there is some dramatic event going on!"

He welcomed the commanding officer of the second largest vessel in the fleet with a callused hand from him to his team.

"May I present to you my bridge crew. Commander O'Conner and Doctor Nasaro-Myth of course you already know from way back when we all fought off those Romulans from this very starbase..."

The Andorian proceeded then to introduce Scotty, Brie and Aguk.

"And this is Lieutenant Snowfire K'Leysha, the science officer of the McKenzie."

He felt a bit akward introducing a science officer that was not of his crew when his own science chief was inexplicably missing. But he hid his growing concern.

"Captain Summers saved my life that day while risking his own. Then, we met briefly again shortly after the Borg Invasion, during the memorial for his lost chief engineer... Lieutenant Sisko, wasn't it? And now, we meet once again on the eve of facing a cosmic catastrophe."

Looking again at Daniel Summers, he finished:

"Blue is not your lucky color I gather."

Like all Andorians, Kheren was still struggling with humanoid humor. The structure of it was so alien, he missed the point most of the time, be it when he accidentally did a joke as much as someone else told one. But he kept trying... The propension of Humans in particular to laugh at the face of death itself, a trait he admired and envied, had always fascinated him.

And so, even with a rigid face incapable of really smiling despite his best efforts, he tried. he was not one to give up on, or even refuse, a worthy challenge.

"No, it is not, apparently..." Summers said with a chuckle.

Rogers had followed Summers over toward the group of officers, hoping silently that his accidental first beam in would not be a subject brought forward. Knowing Captain Summers though, he doubted that would occur. As the tall Andorian introduced his officers beside him, David nodded perceptibly at each as they were introduced. Commander O'Conner, Rogers' equivalent on the Alsea and the two lieutenants Scott and Brie, wearing engineering and command uniforms respectively. Doctor Nasaro-Myth he had heard about during his brief recovery in star base medical after the Spectre's return from earth's past, but Aguk he had never met or seen before.

The mysterious lieutenant K'Leysha was somewhat of an enigma to David. He really didn't recognize her species, but he nodded politely to her in turn. What had piqued his interest though was mention of a Romulan attack, and David glanced between the two captains inquisitively as the tall Andorian captain finished speaking.

"For my crew's introduction, then said Summers, this is Commander David Rogers Executive Officer and Lieutenant Shar Noor Chief Engineer, my Tactical Security Chief should be along shortly."

As they all indulged in little speech... tiny speak... small talk... whatever Humans called it, Kheren watched the officers that were accompanying the commanding officer of the Spectre. The highest ranking one, a red-collared Commander, was most assuredly his exec; with mixed Vulcanoid and Humanoid features, there was nevertheless a certain unfamiliar poise behind his proper Starfleet one which came from neither. Alone by himself, this officer showed how deep, rich, intriguing and complex life in the United Federation of Planets could be.

But then there was the other one. the Andorian.

Light blue skin, straight frontal antennae, the Andorian wearing junior grade pips on his golden collar was of pure Bishee heritage. And he was also quite young. Those were usually the most traditionalists among their people. But either he was enough of a natural master at hiding his feelings to make a Vulcan Kohlinar master proud, or he was amazingly oblivious to Kheren's identity.

*No... there is not an Andorian in known space that ignores who and what the abomination is. Not oblivious... unconcerned?*

Kheren had joined Starfleet to escape the unforgiving narrowmindedness of his own kind. Was this one proof that Federation wisdom and ideals were finally melting the kilometers of eternal ice that was trapping the soul of doomed Andoria?

*Hope... is that not the very basis of what we are?* the captain of the Artemis thought as he glanced up at the huge Federation banner hologram dropping from the ceiling between those of Starfleet and of Lotus Fleet, directly over the head of Fleet Captain Allen Samji on the central podium.

*And hope will be our best tool against what we have to face,* he thought grimly.

O'Conner finished his iced tea and then jabbed at the other crew with a teasing smirk.

"Is the Spectre doing well in my absence, Captain Summers? I do hope that the misaligned bio filters weren't a sign of bigger problems. We wouldn't want to have to leave you three and that fancy ship behind."

Michael O'Conner's jest with the Spectre's officers reminded Kheren of the days when he had exchanged such friendly barbs with the former first officer of that ship when he was himself exec of the Artemis. But the sour and sweet feeling of nostalgia was quickly swept away when he was reminded of another officer, as he saw Tyvya return to the conference room with a definite cloud over her eyes.

He excused himself a moment to meet her halfway between their seats and the door.

"Sir... Lieutenant Syntron is at a meeting."

"The meeting is here, Lieutenant, " growled the captain of the Artemis.

"Not the meeting with Rear Admiral Kotari... and two gentlemen we all recently met... Sir."

Kheren's antennae wobbled wildly as his eyes became but mere slivers of metal. The commander of the entire Hromi sector... and agents Dulmur and Lucksly... of the Office of Temporal Investigations.

"Indeed, we ALL did, Lieutenant, including of course Mister Syntron. So what in Hell's Deep Waters is this about?"

"The only answer I got was; remind your commanding officer that he will be informed in due time..."

Kheren looked up at the giantess somber face with a frown of his own.

"Is that a joke?"

"I would not know , Sir."

Both Andorians looked at one another with a telling angle of their antennae.

"Humans..." grumbled Kheren with a sigh as he motioned for her to come back with him to join with the rest of the Artemis officers still discussing with those of the Spectre.

"You were not advised about this, Sir?" then whispered the towering Andorian Shen.

"Not in so many words for sure,," he hissed back between his teeth. "I received no direct call about this."

"What about your messages?" she insisted in a low voice as they neared the group.

"Haven't looked at them since yesterday. No time... I spent all night in the holodeck with the simulation from astrometrics... and with final extensive security checks of the ship... preparations for the mission... and this priority operation at a boiling point..."

"Your Yeoman did not tell you?"

"What Yeoman?"

Tyvya straightened to her full two and a quarter meters of height.

"My point exactly... Sir."

Her four eyes, ever alert from her towering height, all noticed the huge form that filled the entrance door before coming towards them. He was Human, male, young, and of a definitely unusual size that matched hers. Of course he was much more massive, as Human Andorian ratio was the norm, but he wore the same uniform as she was, down to the rank on a golden collar... but with obviously much less confidence as he tried to slide along a wall to approach in an unobtrusive manner and join the Spectre's bridge crew.

There was also signs of annoyance, almost aloofness, in the body language of the man towards this vast, crowded place that was almost... Andorian. Or was it something else?

*I think his kind would call him a... the... new kid on the block?* she thought before shifting back her attention to the rest of their surrounding, in the pure reflexive attitude of a security officer.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Michael J. Tritter had indeed been on standby until the Spectre had returned to Starbase 10 and barely had time to take note of its current security detail and arrangements that he had been made aware of the upcoming Fleet action and had made himself ready for it by gathering all the data he could on the security files accessible to him on the whole operation.

He had almost lost track of time, so heavy was the data about it and especially the multiple implications of what could happen out there if any misstep was made. Finally seeing that he was almost late, Tritter made his way to the meeting area aboard Starbase 10.

He was not a fan of crowds. And so, he mentally gathered himself as he entered the room which naturally was relatively filled with people. Such a thing gained an instant guard put up by the man, not liking this at all. Michael looked about for individuals he knew, although he saw more individuals he did not know than those that he did.

He moved along the wall, finally finding the crew of the Spectre.

He made his way over that direction and carefully sat in a chair near to the group. He shifted a bit and took his time to take tally of the people in the room. He simply folded arms across his chest while he waited for some overpaid bigwig to open his mouth and spew something he won't be interested in at him.

Tritter noticed the gigantic blue-skinned female looking at him as he approached, but he returned the gaze; no emotion showed in his eyes. He is definitely not a fan of this crowd however and preferred a few to a multitude. He simply looked about the room, studying the occupants as he kept to himself, not much of a talker.

He had noticed Captain Summers, but also noticed that they were otherwise engaged. He waited until they finished and rose to his feet, having decided it would be smart to report to his new CO.

He took a few steps towards the man, stood at the position of attention, than his heavily accented deep voice stated:

"Lieutenant Michael Tritter reporting, Sir", his German accent creating some interesting sounding words in his statement.

"Ah Welcome Michael; everyone, this is our new Tactical Security Officer Michael Tritter. This is Captain Kheren of the USS Artemis and his crew; and this is Commander David Rogers your XO and Lieutenant Shar Noor, Chief Engineer of the Spectre. Please join us and relax a little. There is no threat at the immediate moment. Besides, one never knows when you may get the next opportunity to do so."

As he finished, he sensed the uncomfortableness of his Security Chief the same time he noticed Kheren's change in demeanor as he returned from talking with another of his crew Daniel assumed.



"Captain, a word privately please?"

Kheren glanced once at the hulking security chief of the Spectre and immediately sensed the almost Andorian aggressive aloofness and near Edoan uncertainty of the Human; a most dangerous and volatile combination, especially in one expected to go defuse and solve trouble before it begins and supposedly trained to do so. The way he talked and looked at others betrayed a wariness, maybe even a lack of heartfelt respect for senior officers that could have been expected of a conscript grunt in the Klingon empire... not from a ranked volunteer in his chosen profession as they *all* were in Starfleet.

*Hang in there, kid...* he silently wished this Lieutenant Tritter. *You will not get anywhere alone... Trust me, I know...*

But then, the commanding officer of this bear of a man asked to talk privately with him.

Simply nodding, he went with Summers in an isolated section of the huge amphitheater, out of earshot; including Vulcan and Andorian earshot. His four oculars looked straight at his friend to signify his readiness and willingness to listen.

"Is everything alright?" asked the captain of the Spectre. "I kind of sensed a hint of distaste from you a moment ago when the Lieutenant came to talk to you," Summers said, concerned for his friend, fellow Starfleet Captain, fellow fleetmate.

It took a moment for the Andorian to sort things out from what the captain of the Spectre was asking. The half-Betazoid had apparently sensed his reaction to the attitude of his chief of security but seemingly confused it with his annoyance at the forced absence of his own chief of science revealed by his own tactical officer.

"Nothing you or I can not handle, Captain Summers," Kheren finally chose to say. "At least, if we can count on our own officers as much as Fleet Captain Samji can count on the both of us. These are trying times for the Federation, for the Fleet... and for each and all of us. Last time, during the Borg War, you were already in command... but I was not. The responsibilities I face now are certainly prominent in my mind."

He shook his wide shoulders as if to free himself from some invisible yoke.

"But I will manage; after all, I just have to look at you or Captain Crist to see how to be worthy of those four pips."

"Thank you my friend, I appreciate the kind words. They mean a lot coming from you... and indeed, we have our work cut out for us all," Summers said with a slight tap on Kheren's shoulder as they walked back to their group. "May we fare better than we did against the Borg and the Romulans... and, as far as I am concerned, you have earned your four pips and no need to look to me for guidance in the matter; you just keep doing what it is that you do best and you will be an Admiral one day."

"That's what I'm afraid of..."

The Andorian spoke from the heart. And it was not the first time he had such thoughts. He had been rising so fast among the rank and file since his graduation from the Academy that he had always felt inadequate for the responsibilities so quickly entrusted upon him... until recently, as he finally assumed his captaincy following several extraordinary events... and most of all, the help of an exemplary crew. Finally, he knew he had met his first, best destiny: command a starship.

*And I'll be damned if I ever let anyone or anything pull me away from that chair.*

As both captains rejoined with their officers, Kheren saw that Fleet captain Samji was getting ready to start his briefing and assume command of the upcoming fleet operation.

*Better you than me, my friend.*

\* \* \*

While the most senior officers were assembling in the conference room, over one kilometer below them, at the bottom of the station, the Vulcan K'rassit sat patiently in the Brig.

Biding his time, he waited for just the right officer to come on duty that he could manipulate to his means. Just over twelve hours earlier, he had been brought in by the Security and Tactical Officer, Lieutenant Junior Grade David Calhoun. Calhoun had been sent over to Starbase 10 to begin his tenure on the USS Lotus and had unexpectedly run into this Vulcan who had been trying to deliver a very important prototype vessel from the Horizon's Children to Starfleet. He had killed his persuer and Calhoun took him into custody.

Atypically, the Vulcan seethed with strong emotions that he had felt since being stuck into this small cell.

*Betrayers, he thought. They are no better than "the Children" and I'll show them how they'll pay for their ingratitude.*

The exact type of officer he was waiting for arrived with Alpha shift. Senior Chief Petty Officer Tykylpa was a Bolian who had arrived for her shift as Brig Officer. Her position was dull but she used the time to study and continue to submit her application to Starfleet Academy each and every year. Her persistence was admirable, but the boring job had proven to slightly dull her wits. And being Bolian, her innate congeniality made her very susceptible already to what he had in mind.

"Excuse me, Ma'am," K'rassit said in Bolian, a language she hadn't heard for seven years since leaving home. The familiarity and comfort of home caught her off guard and she struggled to stifle the emotions that surged at the thought of returning there.

"Yes?" she responded, simply, in Federation Standard.

"There is something important you must know," he said, again in Bolian.

"Well... what is it?" Tykylpa asked, this time in Bolian as well.

"You must come closer. I must look into your eyes if I am to know I can trust you."

Figuring it wouldn't hurt, as the forcefields were in place and working at peak efficiency, she stepped closer until the whole person came into view. He was typically Vulcan, but had the signs of intense emotion she normally only saw in Humans, Bajorans, and other such species who were less inclined to hide how they really felt.

K'rassit reached up to his temples with both hands, and placing two fingers on either side of his head, he closed his eyes and focused intensely. At first, she screamed out in pain. The emotions she felt were like a raging wave washing over her and disorienting her such that she couldn't tell which way to swim for air. Eventually the water broke and she was floating along in the sea, barely conscious, struggling to breathe. Seeing herself in front of the cell from outside her body, she watched, frozen, as she herself opened the cell door.

"Thank you, dear," Tykylpa heard him say as he began to focus more intently. Even through the fog, the pain returned even more intensely than before until suddenly it broke. She fell, and the impact with the deck shook her awake such that she could see the shape of a man tumbling across the floor, locked in combat with the Vulcan. K'rassit reached toward her unknown savior and grasped the phaser at his belt. He shot the man point blank and rose, escaping from the Brig.

Outside, she heard another struggle, and a familiar voice, before yet another phaser shot was both heard and seen coming through the door. A body fell to the deck and then the source of the familiar voice entered, grasping her firmly with strong hands. She saw the face, familiar nasal ridges and earring of her superior, Master Warrant Officer Kama Stranik, before her strength gave out and she fell unconscious, her body going limp in his arms.

In the conference hall, Lieutenant Commander Ssta'elia, Starbase 10's Security Chief, heard the report from her main Brig Officer, and her unblinking reptilian eyes were typically unemotional in their response.

"Thank you for the report, Chief" she said and moved toward the stage area at the bottom of the hall to pass the information on to Fleet Captain Samji.

"Sir," her voiced hissed. "The prisoner K'rassit has been killed in his escape but has badly injured Brig Officer Tykylpa and Lieutenant Junior Grade David Calhoun, who had fortunately entered just as he was attempting his escape and subdued him, saving Tykylpa's life.

As Samji glared at her, she went on to say:

"Chief Kama informed me that he had had his own weapon knocked away in the struggle and just barely survived a phaser shot directed at him before he was forced to turn the weapon on the escapee. Additionally, I would like to take full responsibility, as even though Tykylpa disobeyed my order to stay far away from the prisoner, I had not given her enough information about his telepathic abilities."

Samji took in all this new information calmly, but his brain was struggling, trying to process it all, and it made him angry. Internally, he struggled to ask why, before all the work ahead of him, the simple act of keeping a prisoner secure should be so difficult. Taking some time to cool down, he said:

"Nonsense, Commander. Orders need not be understood, just obeyed. But I think Tykylpa has suffered enough right now. Let us just be thankful we lost no one and we still have the technology this K'rassit brought back for us. No punishment for anyone is necessary. And, right now. we need all the people we can get."

"Aye, Sir," Lieutenant Commander Ssta'elia replied. "Tykylpa should recover quite soon, but I have been informed by the doctors that Mister Calhoun's injuries were quite severe."

"Very well, Commander, thank you," Samji replied.

The thought of the flagship now without a tactical officer hit him with a wave of brief dismay. It was then that he remembered Lieutenant Junior Grade Vincent's desire to transfer into a Tactical position that they just didn't have room for at the time. Now they had the room and there was no time for the usual formalities. He approached the officer and was straightforward, not wanting to waste much more time.

"Mister Vincent. You are being transferred to the USS Lotus as Tactical and Security Officer. The Alsea needs you, but we need someone with your experience in the field, and specifically with the Romulans. Congratulations," he said, evenly.

"Aye, Sir," Josh replied, somewhat shocked. "Thank you; I didn't expect a transfer this soon."

He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts; he was happy to be moving to a tactical position, but wondered what happened to the officer that held that position. He had also begun making checklists of everything that he needed to get done in order to leave the Alsea's Operations department in good condition and to familiarize himself with the Lotus's tactical and security officers and systems; and get his new department in fighting shape before the upcoming mission began.

*Moving officers on the eve of a major operation seems strange, he thought. I'll have to settle in quickly, it is good that I've already studied the Lotus's specs when I heard of her refit.*

"Sir, I would like to request that Ensign Nidiri Kiels, my current assistant chief, be transferred with me," Josh requested. "She is trained in security tactics and keeping her with me would make the transition much smoother."

Sitting next to Josh as Fleet Captain Samji received news of the escape attempt, and then ordered Vincent's transfer to the Lotus Oseno's former position, Jureth grimaced that a crew that had gelled so well together during the confrontation with the Klingons was being broken up. At the same time, he was happy for Josh because he knew that a tactical position was what the operations officer really wanted.

"Congratulations...I think," Jureth said "Seems you'll be taking my old post. Don't let Captain Gould give you a hard time, he's an...interesting commander."

"Thank you," replied Josh, somewhat worried about Captain Samji's hesitation to respond to his request. "If the Lotus's Security department is anything like what you've done with the Alsea's department, my job will be much easier."

The Bajoran Lieutenant nodded.

"I had implemented similar policies, though I fear a lot of the officers that were aboard when I did so were reassigned during the ship's refit. The new crop will be yours to mold, and the only advice I would offer is that the more bumps and bruises they take in training, the less they'll take in combat."

Finally, Samji came out of his daze.

"Of course, Lieutenant, you can bring the Ensign. Excuse me," he said to the officers with a distracted nod and made his way back to the podium.

Lieutenant Junior grade Sainthill, freshly off the transporter pad, just made his way to the conference room on Deck 7 of Starbase 10 at this very moment. He had just finished up his first deep space tour on the USS Noble and, after months of providing support for a newly established colony, the change of venue was as welcomed as his new promotion. but hadn't left him with much time to get ready for this unexpected priority call.

Arriving briskly in the conference room, Sainthill looked around at all the unfamiliar faces. He spotted an empty chair near the back of the room and claimed it as his own as he waited for the briefing to begin.

The meeting was late, coming up to the 0730 mark. Samji begrudgingly began tallying a list of all those who had failed to show up to either make a note on their record or discuss it with their Captain.

One such officer was engineering Lieutenant Junior Grade John Adams. He was running down the hallways of Starbase 10, PADD in tow. He knew he was already a bit late, but the announcement for the meeting didn't give him enough time to finish a critical duty.

*I hope the Captain doesn't get too upset,* John thought as he accessed the door to where the meeting was being held. The doors swooshed open and there sat many officers already in the midst of conversation. John quickly and quietly moved towards the USS Lotus crew sitting arrangement and sat in the chair designated for it's Chief Engineer.

He sat, put his PADD down, adjusted his uniform and a few of the tools in his pockets hoping no one would take offense to his tardiness.

*Finally...a REAL starship mission instead of border patrol.* John thought excitedly while he listened to the discussions going on.

When all the officers were assembled and seated, Fleet Captain Samji could see that they were seated in groups, primarily sectioned off by ship. For now it was okay, but he wanted some interaction between them to promote new ideas. That would come later. He noted that even the officers from Starbase 10 who were there were also in one section off to the right. His Second Officer, and newly promoted Chief Operations Officer, Lieutenant Commander Grok was seated there, his tiny frame barely showing above the seat in front of him. Around him were Lieutenant Commander Ssta'elia, the Saurian female newly in charge of his Security, Lieutenant Commander Marksus Sangliar, the Tellarite who had been transferred from the Artemis, Lieutenant Commander Kletan Rexil, a Trill science officer who had recently returned from his joining on Trill, and Doctor Hugh Michaels, the Chief Medical Officer.

Samji nodded to his assistant, Adria Benile, and she tapped a few buttons to bring up a holographic image. He cleared his throat and began.

"Welcome everyone," he said, and then got straight to the point. "We're here to discuss Operation Horizon. Primary goal: to stop the Horizon's expansion and stabilize it such that our ships, upgraded with the appropriate technology, can explore this phenomenon. Remember, it is still our primary mission to boldly go where no one has gone before, and this certainly qualifies. If we can secure it and protect lives without destroying it, it is our duty to try."

Samji then moved and gestured to a screen where it was listing these mission objectives:

"If that doesn't work, we need a plan B. If we can't stabilize it, we will unfortunately need to destroy it. However, there may be no safe way to do so, which is why it may be easier to stabilize anyway. If possible, though, I want simulations that will give us an option that will work to completely destroy it without causing more harm than good."

He made a pause before going on further on that point.

"Now, recent reports from our Lotus Fleet ships, in addition to other Starfleet vessels and operatives in the area, suggest that we are looking at resistance from three separate forces."

He gestured to the screen again, which changed to display images of some Romulans with names and details below, in addition to a description of their known objectives.

"First, the Romulans. With the recent destruction of Romulus by the Hobus supernova, the Romulans are anxious of anything even near their territory that has the power to wipe out systems. Their goal is simple: to destroy the Azimuth Horizon at any cost. Operatives indicate that their intended methods are simple explosive force."

On screen appeared a vulcanoid female with strangely softer, almost human-like features.

"This is Empress Sela, female, approximately sixty-five years old, self-proclaimed ruler of the Romulan Empire," Samji said, pointing to the stern image of an older Romulan woman in an elaborate dress. "Distinct from other Romulans, in that she was a human hybrid, she had blonde hair and less defined upper ear protrusions. "Daughter of late Starfleet Lieutenant Natasha Yar from an alternate timeline. Sela has gone mad with power, rage, malaise, and fear. Much of it was brought on by the Hobus Supernova event. She has disbanded the Romulan Senate and has alienated much of her race, but maintains her rule with an iron fist. Any dissenters are swiftly executed, making an example to others who try to oppose her. The Romulans' former ambassador, who had defected to us shortly after she took power, has verified much of this information. She demonstrates no illusions of diplomacy with the Federation and has confirmed her intent to destroy the Azimuth Horizon. Her only suggestion when confronted with the death and destruction on both sides of the Neutral Zone due to this asinine plan? Run or die."

Pointing to the second image, that of a square-faced, craggy-features full-blooded Romulan with thick lips and slim eyes, Samji spoke with seriousness in his voice.

"This is Admiral Tomalak, male, approximately a hundred and two years old, and second-in-command to Sela. He will most likely be leading the assault and be aboard their most powerful ship; most likely a Scimitar Dreadnought. When he Commanded a ship for the Romulan Empire in the 2360s, he was reported by then USS Enterprise Captain Jean-Luc Picard to be, quote: 'a typical Romulan Captain in every way; but reasonable when reason was the only option' unquote. It seems his reasonableness has run out in his old age."

There were a few more images shown, which were Romulan ship commanders known to be loyal to Sela, but Samji elected not to go over them in detail for the moment, first pausing to see if there were any questions or suggestions about the Romulans and their intent.

Antennae perking up, the Andorian captain of the USS Artemis spoke bluntly.

"The anomaly is clearly and firmly within Federation territory, parsecs away from Romulan space. Any direct attempt by them to use force against it means violating Federation space and with engines of destruction. Simply put, Sir: this would become the starting point of a catastrophe, not just for us but even more for their shattered empire. We're looking here at a new Federation-Romulan war."

He let the cold wave of sudden fear and horror sweep the assembly behind his dreadful words before asking with obviously very carefully chosen ones:

"Sir, what is Starfleet doing on the diplomatic front to convince this... Empress... of the... dire... consequences of her, let us say, hasty plan?"

"Diplomacy has been tough, as you can imagine," Samji answered. "It is clear the Empress is making rash and emotional decisions, and, as I noted, many of her own people are attempting to rebel or escape. Starfleet has essentially assessed her state as insane and have judged further attempts at diplomacy to be futile."

Niomo rubbed his chin throughout the entire briefing of the Romulan problem. He did not know what to think. Had he been off duty long enough to see the Romulan Empire splinter so? He had heard reports, but nothing this serious. He raised his hand and spoke up.

"I appologize for my ignorance, but what is this Azimuth Horizon? I can gather it is something that can surpass the magnitude of the Hobus disaster, but I've yet to be keyed into the specifics of what it is, or what it can do."

"The Azimuth Horizon will be explained in more detail in a little bit after we review the list of hostiles. To make a long story short, however, it is a four-dimensional wormhole to another 'universe', for lack of a better term. While the epicenter is fully formed in our universe, the tendrils spread through subspace at high warp. However, the entirety of the anomaly will not spread that fast, which is why we're still here. In bursts it will appear in normal space along well-established warp routes, causing plasma storms and cosmic-scaled destruction."

Niomo paused for a moment to gather his thoughts on the Romulans themselves.

"As for the Romulans go, I can't say that I fault Empress Sela for her actions. However, I see them less as a desire to 'protect' her Empire as much as prevent anyone from harnessing the Horizon's power. Depending on the science behind it, they may also desire to take that power for themselves. Imagine a device that could generate the Hobus Supernova whenever the user feels like it. It would not be a good day for anyone who could not defuse it's power. And what do the Remans think about this? Last I had heard, they were none too pleased with the Romulans and were looking for a way to strike back. Have we attempted any diplomacy with them?"

"As to the Remans," Samji said, nodding to Mister Lire with a look of appreciation for the thoughtful question, "I have not been informed of any talks, but I will bring it up with Rear Admiral Kotari ASAP. Despite our differences, they could be powerful allies and are in proximity to greatly affect the outcome."

Niomo took in the Fleet Captain's information with a sense of foreboding.

"Thank you for the information. A bit out of my department, but I can understand the gravity of such an anomaly. It also makes the strangeness of Sela's response clear. The anomaly may be parsecs away, as the good captain pointed out, but if it can expand at all, eventually it will reach into Romulan Space. I think we all know that the Romulans have always been the proponents of a First Strike mentality. It is unfortunate they do not want to give us time to analyze it on our own. It would probably be wise to split our task force between defense and analysis. That way, even if the Romulans do show up, we will have ships at the ready to protect our lesser armed vessels."

Niomo was sure that his task force idea was already floating in their briefing at a later slide, but he felt it was always good to plant seeds of ideas early and make sure they sprout on time.

The Lotus' CMO waited until there was a free moment for the Fleet Captain to acknowledge her for her question.

"Sir, do we have the latest science and medical data on the anomaly? If we're going toe-to-toe with the Romulans, we'll also need to be prepared for disruptor and plasma damage. I hope to the Four Goddesses that they don't have any thalaron generators."

Jolie shuddered at the thought of being turned to ash within moments of exposure to thalaron radiation. She then mentally prepared a priority list of likely supplies to be on hand while she continued to listen to the meeting.

"Thalaron weapons are a distinct possibility that we need to be prepared for," admitted Samji. "As you know, there have been medical studies in regards to defending our bodies against the radiation, so please coordinate with all our medical staff to implement those in the field."

"I had a brief run-in with a Romulan vessel researching the Horizon in the Alpha Onias system not too long ago," Josh Vincent said then in turn. "The ship's commander was very friendly, in fact I would still be adrift in space if he had not given me a lift. With the Empire as unstable as it is, I think our best chance at peaceful dealings will come with individual ship commanders. If we are able to start negotiations with the Remans or another faction, it shouldn't be too hard to convince some of the ship commanders to work with us."

*At least, I hope that Sub-Commander K'Chek wasn't the only peaceful commander,* he thought before speaking outloud.

"Unfortunately, the fractured nature of the empire that gives us a chance at peace also makes the possibility for the use of thalaron weapons by a particularly disgruntled commander much more real," he added in response to Commander Bindo's concern.

The redheaded commander seated next to Niomo nodded once Vincent had finished speaking.

"I don't mean to criticize the diplomatic corps; my father is an ambassador after all... but I would agree with Mister Vincent. If the Romulan powerbase is as fractured as it sounds, we should be treating each warbird as a sovereign nation. It seems now would be the time to once again pursue the reunification process Ambassador Spock began."

She frowned.

"Starfleet is still recovering from the Borg, we in the Alsea just came back from a fight with Klingons, Captain Speaker's still out there fighting the Kzinti – we need to make new friends wherever we can find them."

It was at this point that Starbase 10's Diplomatic Chief, Lieutenant John Vanhook, spoke up. The man stood up, and as he did so the light in the Conference Hall illuminated the faintest amount of gray beginning to form in his hair. He was slightly out of shape beneath his red uniform, but nothing he couldn't take care of with a few weeks' hard workout. It was clear that despite his rank, he was aged more than most officers in the room, but he was well versed in his subject.

"You are right, of course. What the Fleet Captain was referring to was diplomacy with the established Empire and the Empress herself. However, they would never rule out the opportunity to gain favor with individuals in the ranks. Defection of and cooperation with the enemy's officers is always a sound strategy in any fight."

Samji then nodded.

"Quite right. What sets us apart from our enemies and what has brought us this far is our values as Federation citizens and Starfleet Officers. We must never forget that, even in war, to fire upon an enemy should be the last resort, and if we can reason with these commanders, we should. Our prime target will be Admiral Tomalak, and while it would certainly be a blow to the enemy to kill him and destroy his ship, it would be an even greater triumph to bring him to our side."

Samji thought back to previous encounters with the Romulans.

"We have seen a time when Captain Picard was able to work together with that very man toward a common purpose. We are well aware that Voyager even tried to convince a Romulan Commander from the early twenty-fourth century to contact Starfleet years later to tell them of Voyager's fate. While the message was never received, we know that the Commander had accepted. Romulans are similar to any other race in their diversity. There will be evil ones and there will be good ones. Most of their citizens just want a safe place to live their lives in peace. If we can give them that, they deserve it; and, who knows? maybe we'll see enough good come of this struggle to see a new race interested in becoming part of the Federation... and Ambassador Spock's best and most noble goal realized."

Putting aside his musings and coming back to reality, Samji continued.

"Don't misunderstand me. Empress Sela may be insane, but I didn't mean to infer that she wants to destroy her own people or let the anomaly destroy them. She wants just what we want: A safe place for her citizens to live. She just is mistaken in her approach and distrustful of our ability to stop the anomaly or even work together with them to stop it. She does not believe it can be contained... only destroyed... through force. She understands the risk that she may make the situation worse, but is willing to bet the lives of everyone in the galaxy that her method will work."

"We of course, are not," he finished, sternly.

The same sternness was heard then in the voice of the half-Romulan captain of the Lotus Fleet flagship, the next senior officer present:

"I for one do not believe the empress is insane. My mother spoke often of Sela and equated her 'oddness' to her human blood. If one thing should be understood, it is that if she wants us to look right, we must check to our rear, for that is where the dagger lies waiting."

He nodded no as if to himself.

"She will try to find a way to make this an advantage to her, or it has no use at all. And while she would not ignore that threat the Azimuth Horizon brings to her people, she will allow others to harness it for her, and I think that's just what she has planned for the Federation. She will attempt to use us to keep the Klingon's in check while she explores other avenues."



In a few words, Gould had brought back to everyone the true nature of the Romulan culture: always look longer and deeper than the surface.

"And I offer this advice, he added: accept no Romulan ship as a friend even if it is known to you. 'A lie today is an advantage tomorrow' is one of their most famous sayings. And we well know that deceit is a favorite tactic among the Romulans. So I suggest that while we don't look for enemies in every ship we meet, remember that they're not friends either."

"They would be watched closely, of course, and every bit of information taken with a grain of salt and verified," Fleet captain Samji said. "As for her sanity, I can't speak to it personally, but every indication from Starfleet Intelligence points to her simply trying to blow up the Azimuth Horizon with conventional weapons... in order to collapse it," he said strongly, letting that information sink in.

It was clear that this point of information was both important and not yet very well stated. Captain Daniel Crist moved slightly forward and spoke.

"The issue with the Romulans is dire for sure, but what about the Klingons? Will they be making a play or leave this situation alone?"

No knowing anything of Klingon's past Federation literature, Captain Gould then decided not to comment on that aspect. Others were more qualified than he.

Figuring it was a good enough segue as any to the next part of the introduction, and that if anyone had anything more to discuss about the Romulans an opportunity would exist to do it after his initial rundown of the hostile forces, Samji nodded and replied:

"Our intelligence points to the Klingons being a very real threat."

He motioned to Chief petty Officer Benile and the display changed to a similar layout with images of the aggressors and information on their goals.

"This information was obtained by the Alsea and Admiral Redding, as well as the Spectre," he said, nodding in turn to each group seated before him. "Admiral Redding has left to report back to Starfleet Intelligence. We also obtained some information from interrogating a spy for the Klingons in our own science team on Starbase 10."

After letting them all study the display, he continued.

"The goal of the Klingons is slightly different than the Romulans. They don't want to destroy the Azimuth Horizon; they want to use it. The spy we found was passing information to the Klingons about the ion pulse method that we discovered. This method allows us to effectively close up tendrils of the Anomaly. The only reason we haven't attempted it yet, beyond a simple test, is because it just serves to divert the affects of the Azimuth Horizon in a different direction. While we don't want to destroy the Romulans and Klingons any more than our own people, the Klingons have no such reservations. It is clear they want to use it to their advantage to create a situation where they can control borders and divert the Azimuth Horizon toward whatever enemy they choose. Captain Ja'rod attempted to destroy the Alsea to keep this information from getting back to us."

The implications of harnessing the power of a spatial anomaly for destructive purposes escaped no one.. especially when Klingons were concerned.

"That was discovered by the Alsea," Samji added, "but the Spectre has also encountered and thwarted an additional plan of theirs. A Klingon ship went back to the year 2011 to Earth and attempted to destroy the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland. It appears the goal was twofold. To deny the Human race certain important scientific discoveries leading to warp travel, and as an additional bonus, to kill the mother of Zefram Cochrane, who was working there at the time before she gave birth to him. They wanted to create a situation where the Federation didn't even exist."

Samji thought about what the Artemis crew was most likely thinking as well at that point, but couldn't say: Exactly the same thing the Romulans attempted in a now looped timeline where alternates of the very crew seated before him were still stuck.

And one officer from that very ship spoke up then.

"Fleet Captain; does Empress Sela or the Klingons actually know anything about the anomaly or are they merely interested in it because we are?" O'Conner asked, wondering how much of a tactical advantage the anomaly would be.

Acknowledging Commander O'Conner, Samji answered:

"It is clear the Romulans have not studied it enough and whatever information we attempt to pass on is immediately dismissed as 'Federation trickery'. We do know, however, that the Klingons the Alsea encountered were studying it in depth, and as I've already stated, seem to be planning to use it as a weapon."

Newly arrived Lieutenant John Adams then made himself heard:

"Fleet Captain, I completely plan on obeying every order Starfleet gives me, but I feel that this question is in order: How do we know the Romulans are wrong in their assumptions? This AH seems to be capable of devouring everything in a very short timeframe. Why not even take this opportunity to repair any diplomatic ties with our Romulan neighbors by helping them do it. Why not destroy it before it's too late?"

It was worth a shot to John. John was used to having all ideas freely available on the table, as this very much was a viable option.

Samji paused for a moment, and silence filled the air as he attempted to bring his fractured answers to the various comments and questions into a logical flow in his mind. The tension in the room was palpable, both from the impending fight and the strong opinions coming out.

He broke the silence looking at Lieutenant Junior Grade John Adams.

"And that is the issue with what they are planning. We cannot just attack this anomaly like as if it is some behemoth starbase. While our primary mission is to contain it, we very well may have to destroy it, you're right. But we should be prepared with intelligent, scientific studies, which we still need to formulate... not firepower."

He explained further.

"Our scientists have studied the anomaly enough to know that any such show of force will only serve to feed into the energy of the phenomenon while also widening the cracks in subspace that are allowing the Azimuth Horizon to expand even faster. This is why we believe what they are planning will doom us."

Oseno sat silently and listened to the various contributions to Fleet Captain Samji's briefing. All of his fellow officers made good points and asked pointed questions. Many of them were things that Jureth had been thinking himself.

*The Romulans and the Klingons, he thought; I wonder how we managed to offend the Prophets so much...*

Oseno knew from the Alsea's experience that the Klingons were not in a mood to negotiate and it sounded like the Romulan Sela wasn't going to be any better. From a tactical standpoint, the Alsea's second officer could see that the Federation was in trouble, caught between two of their own worst enemies. Truthfully the suggestion by the young Lieutenant Adams was one that Jureth had been thinking himself: this anomaly was causing more trouble than it was worth. He finally decided to put a voice to his thoughts.

"Sir, with all due respect to the science involved, I can't help but agree with Mister Adams. The Federation and Lotus Fleet are in a bad way after the all-out assault by the Borg. Tactically speaking, Sir, the best thing we could for ourselves is to find a way to safely destroy this thing before we end up in a two-front war that even we can't win. We know that Ja'rod isn't planning on doing any negotiating, and the Romulans... well, Sir, frankly working with them might be easier than trying to negotiate with them. Though I admit Captain Gould makes a very valid point regarding their trustworthiness or lack thereof. That said, Sir, I can't come up with any scenario in my mind where we can contain the anomaly for study and not end up losing more ships and more good people. To me, Sir, that doesn't seem like an acceptable trade off."

Oseno finished his thought and probably could have said more, but he realized that his point was on the verge of possibly being disrespectful. It was his passion that had gotten him in trouble in his career before and he reeled it in this time before he did too much damage. In truth he could see a couple of heads in the room nodding in agreement as he spoke, but he waited to hear the Fleet Captain's assesment of his contribution.

From the crew of the Artemis, a strikingly melodious voice caught everyone's attention as Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth asked to be heard.

"Sir, I am no soldier and will not speak of tactical considerations here; but I am a doctor and will speak of life and our moral responsibility."

The Deltan stood up and smiled to make sure not to sound harsh, but his mesmerizing purple eyes held a definite light of the dire seriousness that filtered through his soft tones:

"I was part of the only crew that went all the way through this phenomenon and back; what many must keep in mind here is that this anomaly is not just a big supernova running wild: it is also the doorway to an entire different universe... smaller than this one, but no less relevant."

He paused to let everyone come freely to the implications he was about to spell out.

"Whatever we will do, or will happen because or despite of us, here on our side, it may very well have consequences on the other side... and for all life there. While on my way back here, I read a report from the USS Spectre about the discovery of a new energy lifeform that may possibly originate from this other side. One thing for sure; this other universe looked to us from our brief stint there as potentially as filled with life as ours."

He looked straight at Allen Samji then.

"I have no clue how any destructive attempt on this side will affect this pocket universe... and its inhabitants..."

His gaze then swept the room, meeting each and everyone present before he asked to each one of them in one single breath:

"Do you?"

O'Conner looked to his doctor and asked:

" Given the level of stellar development we saw, why do we assume that the anomaly is anything more than just a biuniverse wormhole?"

The Deltan looked askance at the First Officer of the Artemis.

"I don't follow you, Commander. I mean, what I'm saying is: shouldn't we care about what will happen in the other room if we blow up from our side a photon grenage on the doorstep?"

"Fleet Captain, I have to agree with my colleague," Doctor Bindo then said. "If we can at all contain the anomaly instead of destroying it, we should... no, MUST. We cannot in good conscience risk destroying an entire universe full of lifeforms. We are Starfleet. We seek out new lifeforms. We do not participate in their wholesale destruction."

The Deltan nodded with respect to Bindo as he sat down. There were indeed too many men of war here and not enough men, or women, of peace. It was thus their own responsibility as Disciples of Hyppocrates to remind them all of theirs.

Niomo stood and looked to the two doctors who had just spoken.

"I do not believe that the Fleet Admiral, or anyone else in this room, would ever suggest that we must destroy the anomaly without a proper attempt at a peaceful solution. However, I think we can all agree that if we cannot find a way to contain the anomaly, one of the other factions will make a move. It is a harsh reality, but if push comes to shove, we will find a way to stop our universe from being absorbed by the Horizon."

Niomo paused for a moment to think about what he just said before continuing.

"Jean-Luc Picard once said, 'The Prime Directive keeps us from allowing our emotions to overrule our judgment.' I believe here too, we must put our emotions aside. Yes, we will do what we can to contain this anomaly...but Starfleet or not, if it requires us to destroy a universe to protect our own, then so be it."

The Deltan doctor of the Artemis frowned, briefly losing his easy smile as his voice took harder tones:

"In other words: the ends justify the means, Lieutenant Commander? Sorry but I do not work for Section 31. I'm a Starfleet officer and a doctor; my duty is to seek out all possible alternatives for life, not rely on an easy way out meaning death, even to people I will never know."

"I honestly do not wish to destroy the anomaly," then said captain Daniel Summers in turn. "I have a missing crew member in that thing and I will not stop attempting to look for a fellow Starfleet Officer until I am left with no other options; until he has returned safely or his corpse is found. His family deserves at least some closure."

Samji listened patiently to the debate going on as he marveled at the insights and discussion on both sides. Truly these were not only the best soldiers and fighters of the Federation, but the best minds and diplomats as well. However, he had not expected the morality discussion to come up quite yet, and unfortunately some of the officers were making assumptions based off of incomplete information.

Therefore, he took the opportunity of a pause in the debate brought on mostly by Commander Lire's firm, deeply thought-provoking statement and Doctor Nasaro-Myth's equally profound argument to interject.

"It is clear that there are emotions on both sides of this discussion," Samji started. "How could we not be emotional when we learn of the possibility of the destruction of either our entire universe or another one? Faced with that prospect, although the best-equipped, I find it difficult to believe even a Vulcan could fully contain it."

"To answer Mister O'Conner's question definitively, he is right that it is indeed a wormhole or gateway to the other Universe, not the Universe itself. The Artemis has been through it to the other side, and by all our studies we can be certain that even the incorporeal beings encountered by the Spectre could not even live there."

His voice became firmer and more confident as he spoke in an attempt to demonstrate his authority on the matter that even the best minds of Lotus Fleet was still uncertain of.

"While it is true that we do not know that destroying the Azimuth Horizon would necessarily destroy the other universe, we also do not know that there wouldn't be ripple effects extending through and possibly causing the same kind of anomaly to form on the other side. If that happens, we are forcing it on a universe that may be less technologically equipped to contain it than we are."

"Sir, since we are worried about the effects both in this universe and the other one, will we be sending the Lotus to the other side to monitor the effects of our efforts?" O'Conner asked as he realized he had just volunteered the Lotus for a part of the mission that might just trap them in another universe. "Perhaps they could even assist from the other side, Sir."

He shook his head and paused because the next thing he was about to say was something he could hardly stand to utter. But it had to be said.

"As Starfleet Officers our oath tells us we must preserve life at all costs, only second to our Prime Directive. We absolutely cannot sacrifice an entire universe to save our own."

He looked out into the faces of his officers and saw anger, frustration, and sadness from those who could not control their emotions the way a Vulcan could.

"I'm sorry Mister Lire, but you are wrong. I don't mean to single you out, as I'm sure we all thought it at one point or another... but you are the one who spoke up. But I fault myself. I did not fully explain the Azimuth Horizon yet, as I was not expecting this discussion while going through a list of potential enemies. You and many others here may not be aware, but this is definitively our fault."

Niomo sighed and simply responded, "Very well, Sir..." and sat down.

*I am beginning to remember why I retired in the first place. I was wrong to think Starfleet had changed. We'll see who orders what when we get out there and are forced to act.*

He looked down at his PADD and began reading the Alsea's engineering reports his teams had been sending him. It was clear that they would need the Alsea's firepower when the Romulans and Klingons came knocking

Samji let the realization sink in before moving to an explanation.

"The anomaly itself appears to be natural and it is also theorized that it has actually been around for centuries. It is only our constant high warp travel over centuries that has given it the ability to spread beyond the mere speck of space it had previously inhabited. The Federation, Romulans, Klingons... we have all contributed to this problem. This is our doing and we cannot force it on another universe and make them pay for our mistake."

After a pause to let some people consider that revelation, he moved on.

"While this discussion is meaningful in that it allows us to discuss our potential problems, our solutions and reveals the opinions on both sides, it is also meaningless. What I mean by that, is it's not going to change anything. Our orders are clear and they come from the Federation President and Starfleet Joint Chiefs themselves."

He then listed the priorities he was given from those highest sources.

"Our first priority is to find a way to contain the Anomaly. Failing that, our second priority is to find a way to collapse and disperse the Anomaly, but only if we are absolutely, one-hundred percent certain that it will not affect the other universe."

Now came the revelation that no one was expecting. They were sure he'd say the last resort would be to use force or firepower to try to destroy it. However, he said instead:

"Our final and last resort is to begin and coordinate mass evacuations... through the Azimuth Horizon."

He knew this would cause an uproar even in such a well-ordered and highly trained crowd. He himself had a negative, emotional, knee-jerk reaction when he first heard it. However, he also knew all the repercussions that such an order would cause, and didn't need to hear them shouted back at him from his officers. If things got out of hand, he would order silence, but for now he waited for the inevitable response, silently hoping it would be a thoughtful and respectful one.

Jureth could only sit in stunned silence when he heard Fleet Captain Samji's decree that the Federation and Starfleet would refuse to destroy the Azimuth Horizon without one hundred percent proof it would have no effect on whatever alternative galaxy existed on the other side. To retreat, to simply give up, and try to run from this thing whether it was self induced or not was unacceptable to him both as a Bajoran and as a tactical officer. He wasn't sure what to say, or even what to think... His father had died defending the Federation; and for them to give this order was unthinkable.

Finally, Jureth stood up so as to be heard above the murmurs that were going around the room

"Fleet Captain... Sir... I lost a father before I was ever born in the service of Starfleet and the Federation. Nearly everyone in this room has lost friends, or family to the many enemies that have tried to dismantle what names like Jonathan Archer, and James Kirk helped to create. For the chain of command to give such an order as you have just passed down... is unacceptable. If that is insubordinate then, Sir, I apologize, but what is being asked of us in the event that we cannot contain the anomaly is to simply give up, and that, Sir... is borderline insanity."

Niomo's ears perked up when he heard an officer bring up running away. He did not move his eyes away from his PADD, but he silently nodded in agreement. Sadly, he knew that it was yet another moot point. The Powers-That-Be had already decided what officially would be done.

*But what would be done unofficially would be up to each and every crew at the Azimuth Horizon.*

As he listened to the response from Oseno Jureth, Samji began to get angry at how easily it seemed some of these officers were willing to sacrifice so many unknown lives. He couldn't blame the officers for responses which he willingly invoked, however, and tried to control his emotions as he spoke.

"Lieutenant, first of all... as I stated, this is our very last resort after all other options are exhausted. We have the best minds in the known galaxy to draw on, many of which are in this very room. Can we first focus on the fact that we are all fighting for our very existence and we will use whatever resources we can? We will fight for as long as is reasonably possible. We will pool the best and brightest Starfleet has to offer, and work together to reach our goal: to contain this thing and make it so we can live with ourselves."

He calmed down a bit and tried to explain the view of his superiors.

"We're not talking about running here. Quite the opposite. We're talking about preserving our way of life. When your house is burning down, do you try to escape and find a new place to live, or do you stand in it and blow at it futilely until the whole thing collapses on you and your family? If you could save your house by diverting a fire that you yourself accidentally started to your neighbor, would you do that?"

He took a long breath.

"Here's the hard truth: If we destroy an entire universe... and remember, we're not talking about a planet, or even a galaxy... a universe..." He let the vastness of such a word sink in. "If we destroy a universe because we couldn't stop something that we ourselves were the cause of, we've effectively destroyed the Federation anyway. Do you want to live in that Federation? I'd rather die. And I think Captains Archer, Kirk, Picard, and all the great figures of our history would agree."

He had one more thing to say before moving on, and it had to be said, despite the tense mood in the room that felt like a poison cloud threatening to choke and overwhelm him.

"If we've exhausted all options and we can't contain it or close it without harming the other universe... if the house is burning down... the only thing left to do is move to that other house. No matter where we go in this universe, the Anomaly will follow. It continues to gain speed exponentially, in fact. We have a year before it will reach Sol."

Everyone looked at one another. many obviously had no clue about the scope of this catastrophe until now.

"That is enough time to evacuate in phases. People can live on our biggest starships for decades if necessary. We have the ability to build even the biggest of them relatively quickly. And if the only option is to preserve life, we must try. The Federation is defined by its citizens... not its planets or starbases or other material things. We must try to save them at all costs. And even if we could possibly travel to another galaxy, the Anomaly would overtake us before we got one tenth of the way. The only other option is through to the unknown. Truly where no one has gone before."

Through it all, David had sat listening to the shift of debate; the pro and con of every idea that had so far been brought forward. During the revelations about the adversarial attribute's of the Empress Sela, and subsequent discourse on the Romulan faction ideals, he had kept himself out of it.

Being hybrid with half Romulan blood kept him silent on the subject. The revelations brought to him during his tenure at Star Fleet Academy had shown him that there was much prejudice toward anything Romulan still underlying the human complement of Star Fleet. Nay, the Federation itself even. Thus, David had prominently kept himself distanced from anything remotely connecting his mother's species, whether it be actual or conjecture. But now, there was a new subject on the table, brought forward by the Fleet Captain just now, and David found it time to voice his own thoughts into the debate. Rising from his seat beside Captain Summers, he paused momentarily to let the assembly know he wanted to speak.

"Sir, if our orders are as you stated, this whole debate about the anomaly is meaningless. We contain it or we move. I cannot think for one minute that containment is beyond the quadrants best minds, and I also cannot see this galaxy moving through the anomaly to a new, and unknown, home. Therefore, our course is clear. If we fail to contain it, then we could move, but within this universe. The Magellanic Cloud galaxies are only seventy-five thousand light years distance."

Rogers paused a moment, letting the distance sink in. Moving the galaxy's population was not an option, in his opinion. The multitude of factions that would fight over the positions within a new galactic home was beyond comprehension. Just the Klingon and Romulan species alone would want the whole new home galaxy for their own power base. Not to mention any of the other powerful groups in the Delta and Gamma Quadrants. He hoped similar thoughts occurred to the minds of those assembled. Looking discretely about the hall, David could not see the two who would vehemently oppose his idea, but he also knew that they would be listening somehow.

Luksly and Dulmur.

"Baring this move however, I have a thought that has perhaps crossed the minds at Starfleet Command and even the President himself, but I feel I must put it forward for discussion."

Facing Fleet Captain Samji again, David stated what, to him, was the obvious solution to the short term danger presented by the growing Azimuth Horizon.

"Sir, I put forward that we go back in time and take care of this anomaly in its infancy. We know where it is; we know what it is, and back then, we should be able to influence its course out of the home galaxy."

Knowing the uproar this would cause, especially with Temporal Investigations, David studiously avoided looking about again, and simply sat down again.

"I like your thinking, then answered Akllen Samji; and I like options being discussed, but we will not be going back in time. It is a clear violation of the Temporal Prime Directive."

None of them knew that it would additionally be a futile effort. Starfleet Officers from the twenty-ninth century would prevent any such interference and set them right back into having to solve the current situation they were in.

"Going back to the other question posed by Mister O'Conner. It will not be the Lotus, but we will be sending a ship. I will be going over that a little later on," Samji replied simply, and waited to see if there were any more questions before finally getting back to going over the Klingons involvement.

As the crews of the Artemis and the Spectre were seated one beside the other, Captain Kheren made a gesture towards the first officer of the Spectre and whispered for his ears alone:

"Mister Rodgers, if *you* do have a sure and safe way to travel back in time to a specific moment of History, and back, *I* would certainly want to hear about it. I would love to captain a timeship."

Of all officers in the room, maybe even in the whole of Starfleet, no one knew better than Kheren how hazardous, dangerous and unpredictable the primitive time travel ways known so far to modern science were. Beyond the simple fact of the Temporal Prime Directive, there simply was no good way to accurately ensure efficient and safe travel accross time; sending any ship on such an attempt was so full of potential disaster itself as to disqualify the option from the start.

Rogers nodded perceptibly at the Andorian Captain's whispered words. The thought of traveling back to the Azimuth Horizon while it was still a mathematical point in space was not an insurmountable problem, to his thinking anyway. Whispering back, David acknowledged the Artemis' captain's words.

"I brought the Spectre back. The same calculations apply."

Kheren didn't answer but his stare told clearly to the first officer of the Spectre that he knew more, a lot more, than he was telling; and that same stare told him with absolute conviction: no they do not. You were just damn lucky... this time.

*Else, we would solve ALL our problems like this, no?* he mused half seriously as his attention was brought back to the subject at hand.

He already knew the problem was not *if* they could contain the anomaly; nor even how. All this had already been taken care of. And this surprising evacuation idea through the anomaly, even as a last resort, was only good for them in the Federation... and its neighbors, at best... not for the rest of the universe. No, The remaining problem was: would they be *allowed* to contain it, by all those other factions bent on putting the whole Alpha and Beta quadrants to the torch for their own narrow sighted goals?

The next words of Fleet captain Allen Samji about this would be telling.

Captain Crist spoke up, after listening to the discussion.

"As for destroying the anomaly, do we have access to Red Matter? If my memory serves me correctly, Ambassador Spock possibly used Red Matter to destroy, or eliminate the thread of the Hobus Supernova."

*And we saw how THAT turned out,* thought Kheren grimly.

Crist took a breath.



"Now, I am not by any means saying we should destroy the anomaly. I for one, find this anomaly fascinating, at least from the little information I've seen. We should be trying to keep this unique anomaly, even with the threat it poses."

Crist sat back continuing:

"To contain the anomaly, if it was created by warp drives destroying sub-space, could we not use the same thing to fix, or should I say contain the anomaly. Perhaps, sub-space beacons, emitting a field that would act as a shield, containing it."

Crist took a moment to think how this meeting had been side tracked.

"But I think we can discuss what to do, and how to do it, in a bit. I believe we were discussing the enemies, or I should say the factions and people that we may be dealing with. Fleet Captain?"

"This is preposterous!"

Captain V'Rell Gould's Romulan blood peaked just then.

"Are they honestly suggesting that we evacuate the entire universe into a new one? doesn't anyone understand what a fools errand that would be? When your house burns to a point you cant stop it you contain it so it doesn't spread, and then you rebuild one.. you don't move into your neighbors house!"

He looked exasperated at the idea.

"If it is our fault and I for one am not convinced that it is solely the case, that changes nothing. If a child should set the fire you don't let the house burn as some sort of object lesson! We must strive to hold back this blaze and failing that extinguish it."

Frowning and finger-pointing, the Half-Romulan then added:

"While I do not know in detail the extent of the life forms on the other side it is clear that they too must be notified and be required to act in the interest of both sides, how would they feel about this idea? untold trillions of new life forms occupying there space? not well I imagine."

He took a breath, calming himself.

"If this situation is as dire as you've laid out then our course is clear: inform the rest of the Alpha Quadrant first, then combine our resources to create a solution to stopping and perhaps reversing this effect. There is no other choice."

Samji felt defeated. He couldn't live with the choices they had available, and having to explain something even he couldn't fully cope with left him exhausted and hopeless. He bowed his head in front of the podium, attempting to gain strength, but he couldn't without support from his fellow officers. He just sighed and shook his head, trying to rid the many thoughts reeling through it and looked up. It is time to move on, he told himself.

"Regardless, we don't have the time to debate the moral implications of this. For better or worse, it has already been decided. If there's nothing more anyone has to say, we will do our duty and carry out our orders and right now that means getting back to the briefing on our opponents and the Anomaly itself."

He paused and looked around the room, attempting to gauge whether their professionalism would allow them to be focused on the task at hand.

Oseno sat down on the rebuttal from Fleet Captain Samji. All he could do was shake his head.

To think that Starfleet Command and the Federation would even consider a quadrant wide evacuation was preposterous to him. Then his former commander, Captain Gould, spoke out with gusto and Jureth wanted to stand up and applaud his former CO for calling out the chain of command on such a ridiculous notion. At the same time, Oseno realized that his own statement along with Captain Gould's were both pretty close to gross insubordination even in the spirit of such an open discussion.

It seemed to Jureth that the Federation was taking the moral high ground in a situation where they needed to be less idealistic and more realistic.

Jureth sighed even as the heated discussion was going on...and wondered if the order was given to evacuate would his Starfleet training be able to override his sense of outrage.

Sitting up straighter again after the leaned whisper, David again listened tensely to Samji's words. *'It is a clear violation of the Temporal Prime Directive.'* Of course, those words had to be said. Temporal Investigations would be listening, so best to cover one's nether regions. But, once the Horizon storm engulfed this galaxy, anyone's interference; either good or bad, future or past, was improbable. They wouldn't be around to interfere in one way or another, the galaxy would be gone.

David surreptitiously glanced at Captain Summers beside him. The man had been silent so far through all of this. David wondered what was going through his mind on the subject. What were his plans regarding the Spectre and crew? Would he blindly follow Star Fleet orders as put forward by Fleet Captain Samji? Fight the anomaly until it is contained or run from the burning house? Or was that tactical mind pursuing other avenues not yet brought forth.

Unaware of the whispered conversation Commander Rogers and Captain Kheren were engaged in, Rivers stood up from her seat, turning to look around the conference hall, blue eyes taking in everyone she could see before turning back to regard Fleet Captain Samji.

She took a small breath and arched one eyebrow.

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." She stated simply. "This was stated by one of the most revered figures of Starfleet and Federation history. It's the basis of logic for problems such as this, and on a human level it's the basis of courage, bravery, and honor too."

"We in security," she began, for in her mind she still hadn't adjusted to the fact that she was first officer and acting Captain of the Alsea, "whether we realize it or not, all act on this principle. We defend the Federation, our loved ones, our friends and allies from threats they can't handle. The science and engineering teams, our commanders and Captains, even, and sometimes especially, our shipboard bartending staff... all those people are under our protection."

She frowned.

"The safety of those many can only be assured by the actions of we few."

She paused.

"That's in my heart. My task. My duty to uphold, and I'm sure it's in almost every other security officer's heart here as well. This thing...this Azimuth Horizon."

She waved to the display screen.

"It's a threat to our loved ones, it's a threat to our friends and allies. Just a wave of one of its tendrils can take the mightiest Klingon vessel out of a fight. I've seen it personally... and without Lieutenants Pel's and Vincent's ingenious work, it would have likely taken the Alsea out of the fight too."

She exhaled, placing her palms on the edge of her armrests, leaning forward, looking around again.

"Every fiber of my being screams, 'Take it out! Figure out a way to destroy this thing before it destroys us.'" But from everything I've read and experienced and heard, this thing isn't some Borg drone coming for our crewmates, or a Romulan boarding crew intent on expanding their empire's borders. It's a bomb."

She looked around once more.

"It's a bomb set in the middle of the universe, with everyone held hostage. And just like we don't fire phasers and quantums at bombs because we don't want to kill everyone we love, we can't fire phasers and quantums at this Horizon thing. Security procedure is clear for bombs we can't just beam into space and warp away from: neutralize the bomb's threat. Diffuse it. Make-it-not-a-bomb-anymore."

She turned her gaze finally back towards Samji.

"Which is what it sounds like our orders are, Sir. So, I'm with you."

The tension in the entire giant room was showing on the single face of Samji; but the man held true to himself as much as to his discipline and to what truly defined what it meant to be a Starfleet officer and a Federation citizen. He faced the panic of junior officers with the calm and patience of a seasoned leader.

*I like this guy*, thought the Andorian captain of the starship Artemis then... as if he didn't know already. But now he clearly knew why.

Kheren stood up. His deep commanding voice boomed over the mumbles and grumbles.

"Fleet Captain Samji; we are not here to debate Federation wisdom or Starfleet's decisions, but to make them so. The USS Artemis stands ready to serve."

He knew his words sounded quite 'toy Soldier' especially to Humans. But truth be told, most people in the room didn't even know yet what they were talking about and were already making ill-advised recommendations, disputed still unheard orders and even already planned rash actions based on their own inexperience and individual feelings. Their body language screamed it with every minute passing by.

Kheren had no qualm about focusing their negativism on him if it would silence them long enough to stop talking and start listening to Samji. Then, hopefully, a few would calm down and learn how they could beat the odds.

Fleet Captain Samji felt that maybe the discussion would take a turn to the matter at hand, and if not with support of the ultimate goal, then at least support toward focusing on what really needed to be done by two of the Fleet's Captains.

Then at the outburst from the Flagship Captain, Samji, visibly annoyed, buried his head in his hands. He then glared at them.

"Look, I don't think some of you understand. We're not talking about evacuating trillions of people in a few hours here. Or even a few days, or even a year. Starfleet is not run by complete incompetents, after all. This is a situation where we have time. Not a lifetime, but time nonetheless. All they are saying is that the few planets that are very much in danger of being overtaken in the next few days or weeks will have to be evacuated. Yes, we could move them all out further toward Sol and beyond. And we could keep doing that over the months that it takes us to keep trying to stop the anomaly while fighting off whatever resistance we continue to invoke from the other factions involved. We can try to jam them into the hundreds of already populated inhabitable worlds in Federation space. Or we can venture out. To discover new planets. Ones that are hopefully inhabitable but unused by the sentient life that exists there. It won't be a mass invasion. It will be a trickle at first while we see what's out there. As humans did when we first began exploring space over three hundred years ago."

His voice beginning to tint again with anger, he said further:

"And those of you who call yourselves Starfleet Officers... who cower at the notion of exploration of new lives and new civilizations... you jump to conclusions about one simple statement and declare your superiors to be insane. Without asking any questions, or trying to understand the full meaning behind it. Well there's no time right now to explain the Federation's plans even if I knew all the details myself!" he declared almost shouting now.

Swiftly recovering his calm he continued on a no less hard and grave tone:

"But you don't need to know them. All you need to know is that if we don't contain the Azimuth Horizon in the coming days, you will aid and participate in the first part of the evacuation. Scout ships will be sent through to find suitable, uninhabited worlds. Ships will be boarded with people who are willing to leave, and they will be sent through... before their planets are overrun and obliterated. And we will aid our citizens in erecting settlements."

He pointed to the back of the conference hall.

"Now, those who would like to continue to declare our superiors insane are free to walk out those doors and send them a subspace message informing them of that fact yourself. Those of you who would like to contribute to our work to contain this anomaly right now, however, will give me your full attention while we discuss the Klingons."

Samji was fairly certain nobody would be actually taking him up on that offer, but he stood in silence for a long time while he gave them that very opportunity.

Oseno listened again as Lotus Fleet's commanding officer rebuffed the entire room though he was sure the about ninety percent of the Fleet Captain's statement was directed at himself and Captain Gould. As Samji finished his tirade and offered the door to anyone who would continue to voice dissent Jureth shifted in his chair though he did not stand.

He had sworn an oath, and he would uphold it...for now.

The Lotus' CMO lifted only an eyebrow at Captain Gould's outburst. She made a couple of taps on her PADD, sending the order to the ship's Counselor to move his stress evaluation up to the very top of the list of all crew. Right after the meeting. Something was bothering him deeply, and it would do neither the Lotus, nor Starfleet, nor the Captain himself any good if it was not immediately resolved.

Jolie looked at the image of the Azimuth Horizon, its giant, jagged lines of energy radiating from the center. It reminded her of a massive cancerous tumor, tendrils of death leeching away life as it spread through its host. Modern medicine had long ago eliminated the need for toxic chemotherapies that poisoned the patient nearly as much as the cancer itself, or heavy doses of radiation that killed normal tissues along with the abnormal. Now, medications and nanites targeted only the cancer cells, turning them off completely and re-engineering the DNA to prevent replication, or cutting off their energy source, or sometimes even convincing the body that the cancer was indeed an invader, and teaching the host to build antibodies that killed off the cancer cells just like it did for bacteria and viruses.

Ideas swirled around her head. Klingons and Romulans would be irrelevant if none of them survived the Horizon. They had to focus on curing the infection rampaging through the universe. Starfleet had to be the one to treat the universe first, before the Romulans did the old Earth equivalent of bombarding patients with therapies that hurt as much as they helped.

*This Azimuth Horizon is like a cancer. We need to cure it rather than treating it. The Romulans are trying to kill it, the Klingons are trying to re-engineer it. We need to do several things to prevent both factions from doing their worst, and we need to do it before they can act. When oncologists treat cancer and immunologists treat infections, they do it in several ways. They cut off the cancer's energy source, they make it so the cancer can't continue to grow by re-wiring its DNA, and they teach the body to fight off its own invading cells like it does with bacteria.*

*We need to cut off the energy supply at its source. Also, right now, the Horizon travels along these subspace fractures. We have to make those fractures too hard for the Horizon to continue to travel through them. We also need to 'rewire' the Horizon so that it can't continue to spread.*

The last thought convinced her that she just might need to see the Counselor right after the meeting, too.

*We need to teach our universe itself how to recognize the Horizon as an 'invader', and help it build its equivalent of 'antibodies' to fight off what has become a raging infection.*

Her onyx eyes flicked back and forth between the hologram of the Horizon and the scientific and medical data on her PADD as her mind raced for the answer that seemed so very close but infuriatingly out of reach.

Josh did not hesitate to question orders if they were given without thought, but he also knew when his orders had been thoroughly examined by superiors, and this seemed to be well thought out orders. Instead of joining in the discussion of their current orders, Josh took the time to inform his assistant chief, Ensign Nidiri Kiels, about their transfer to the Lotus. Tapping away at his PADD, he ordered her to ensure that the Alsea's operations department was completely ready for the officer that would be taking over that position, and to pack her things and prepare to move to the Lotus as soon as the briefing was over, and finally he asked her to pack up his few belongings and wait for him to return and file his final report.

Once he'd given his orders to Nidiri, he started browsing through the personnel that would be available to him on the Lotus. He was a little unnerved, but not really surprised, that most of the personnel had just been transferred to the Lotus after the refit. The ship's master-at-arms was a twenty-five year Starfleet veteran, so he, at least, had experience, even if it wasn't with the Lotus.

*I was really hoping that someone would have more knowledge about the Lotus than I do, he thought. I guess we'll just have to learn her moves together.*

Just as he was nearing the end of the Lotus's security roster, he watched as his new CO stood and spoke with a tone that was very nearly insubordinate. He would have expected this from one of the other junior officers, but not a veteran captain like Gould. He glanced across the room to see his other future crewmates' reactions and noticed the Lotus's doctor tapping her PADD and watching the captain.

Josh hoped she had some way of calming the captain down before they set out on Operation Horizon, or else the mission could get very... interesting.

Now back in his seat, Captain Kheren exchanged glances with his crewmates and sighed.

"Does anyone read reports anymore?" he whispered softly to them. "We know how to contain the anomaly; we even tested it successfully months ago. We can do it, all of us together, in but a few days. The problem is those who would interfere: Romulans panicking... like them; Klingons damning everything for their own survival... like them; Cultists unaware of true facts... like them..."

"Maybe you should present your proposal, Sir," suggested Tyvya in the same low tone. "It might help calm things down."

"And the other possibility for evacuation besides running away or invading another universe," Elliago then chimed in.

The Andorian nodded to his doctor but then shot back:

"No. I'm not in command here, Samji is. It is his call and I will not undermine his authority by stepping up to play 'Savior of the Alpha Quadrant'."

"Sir?" voiced helmsman Snow for all of them.

"It would not only be overpretentious, but a ship captain showing lack of confidence in his own superiors like this would validate to all the indiscipline and insubordination brewing here. No; Starfleet may already have an excellent plan and I want to hear it out before I start yelling and pounding fists. Or if Fleet captain Samji wants to make my plan known, he will call me out. He already knows I have one. He does read reports."

"And he stands up for Federation ideals, especially when they may be sorely tested," commented the Deltan Doctor.

"Else we make these ideals meaningless," added Tyvya looking at her commanding officer.

She knew like all of them that this was his own steadfast belief. And he voiced it plainly enough when he lifted his silvery gaze back to the podium to say:

"That is why I listen... and obey him."

Michael O'Conner glanced at his captain. While he might agree with the sentiment, he did not believe that there was anything wrong with peacefully questioning leadership. There was just a time and a place for it; but in this instance he agreed with him: this was not it.

Gould's eyes did not follow the Fleet Captain's gesture indicating any who disapproved could leave. It was a showy, empty gesture.

Instead he straightened up and nodded respectfully.

"My apologies, Sir, I had not intended my view point to be quite so vigorous. Rest assured that regardless of any beliefs I may hold at the.. logic.. of this situation, it shall not impede my oath as a Star Fleet officer. The Lotus stands ready as you see fit Fleet Captain."

He decided that he had pushed to far with these people, being a relative newcomer among them he had not earned the right to speak in such a manner as he had done, right or wrong. These people had worked together, knew each other and bled together. He was expecting too much of them to soon.

Samji just nodded with respect at Captain Gould's apology.

"Now, as I was saying, there were three incidents, one with the Artemis months ago and more recently one with the Alsea and one involving the Spectre. The Federation has declared all of these incidents acts of war. After years of cold war and hostilities between our peoples, it has finally come to a tipping point and forced us into a real war with the Klingons. It is clear it was their goal all along to attack us as soon as they could as we were licking our wounds from the Borg War. While we have a chance for Romulan hostilities to lessen and perhaps even finally make them into allies, our fragile peace with the Klingons that we have held onto for years is breaking."

Samji then acknowledged the images behind him and pointed to an old Klingon in the first spot.

"This is J'mpok, male, age unknown. He succeeded Martok as Chancellor of the Klingon Empire after he slew Martok in ritual combat in 2393. He denies any knowledge or responsibility of all of these acts against the Federation and claims the Alsea attacked first. However, in response to the Federation's demand for an explanation, he withdrew from the Khitomer Accords and declared war."

Moving on to the second image, he said:

"This is Ja'rod, son of Lursa, who was daughter of Ja'rod, his grandfather. Born a year before his mother's death, he is approximately forty years old. As I previously mentioned, Ja'rod attacked the Alsea and attempted to destroy her. She got enough of an upper hand to send Ja'rod back to Klingon territory in a damaged Negh'Var. He will most likely be leading the assault once they recoup their losses and attack again."

Everyone listened intently now and so, after a short pause, Samji resumed his expose:

"We believe because of the Alsea's efforts, their part in this will most likely be delayed, unlike that of the other two factions."

He hoped the necessity for him to be authoritative earlier would not stifle any useful or necessary conversation going forward, so he added;

"If anyone has anything to say, feel free... as long as it is about the Klingons, not the Anomaly, which we will be discussing in due time."

The commanding officer of the USS Spectre then addressed the assembly.

"Now when we went up against the Klingons and chased after them into the past, we noticed that there was something wrong with their cloaking device. We know that their cloaking device and their engines are tied into each other, so there is a possibility that the Klingons and the Romulans as well may not be able to cloak at a certain proximity to the Horizon. So, if we need to, it may be something we can use to our advantage if it comes down to it."

Summers ended his speech with his arms folded across his chest, an unusual stern look on his face where a smile usually was kept.

"There are a lot of chronitons coming out of the anomaly, explained Lieutenant Tyvya then; after a time, they cumulate on shields and hulls, in effect 'powdering the invisible man' and thus making any cloaked ship detectable. Adjust your tactical sensors to chroniton emissions and when you spot a mass of it moving in a predetermined cohesive pattern without dissipating, then you got a target. An *unshielded* target I might add."

Niomo looked up from his PADD for a moment to catch the attention of the Fleet Captain. Once he had the floor, he returned his eyes to the PADD and began speaking.

"What about other Houses? As far as my memory goes, some houses have always been more aggressive than others. Any chance we might create a Klingon Civil War? Or do they all think we are weak and easy prey? Anything to buy us some time, weaken the Klingons, is a win-win."

Oseno Jureth nodded in agreement with Lieutenant commander Lire.

"If we could turn them against each other it would definitely be beneficial. On the other hand, Sir, what about General Worf? I know he has sworn off contact with the Federation, but could an appeal from Ambassador Picard, Admiral Riker or Captain Data change his mind? Convince him to negotiate with J'mpok on our behalf?"

All Starfleet officers were of course familiar with the exploits of the famous crew that had once been led by Jean-Luc Picard. Jureth had done quite a bit of reading regarding Worf when he was going through his tactical training in the Academy and knew enough about the general to know that he might perhaps be willing to talk to his former captain or first officer.

With a glance at both her senior officers, the Andorian giantess Tyvya filled the silence left by the questions from the other officers with further information:

"Fleet Captain Sir; months ago, the Artemis had to repulse a Klingon incursion attempting to conquer the X'ell Dyson sphere hidden not far from the anomaly. When they finally fled, well, what was left of them, they were... escorted... by our First Fleet up to the border; and there, they witnessed their summary destruction at the hands of a Vor'Cha task force."

After a pause, the acting security and tactical chief of the Artemis concluded:

"Sir, either the Klingon High Council wanted to officially erase any trace and witness of their own foiled scheming... or there are indeed opposing factions within the Empire... some maybe outraged at the lack of Honor of others. There is truly more than meets the eye here."

Upon hearing the Fleet Captain once again asking for questions, the first officer of the Artemis also took the chance to add to the discussion.

"Fleet Captain, since the Federation is now officially in a state of war, when can we expect support from other fleets, Sir?"

Samji nodded at the officers who spoke up with gratification for their input.

"Our forces are spread out along both borders making sure that neither faction slips through while we're focused on the Azimuth Horizon. However, I expect we will see a full show of support within the week. It is up to us to hold out until then, though. We have recalled all the remaining Lotus Fleet ships, including the Republic and the Wisconsin, which will both be here sometime in the next day. The Pittsburgh was on the Kzinti border and has further to travel."

He then addressed Lire's and Tyvya's comments for the benefit of all.

"It would always be desirable to attempt peace with the individual Klingon Captains as with the Romulans. However, I fear that their loyalty will be much stronger. Their honor binds them to follow the Chancellor, so unless we can prove him to be dishonorable, I do not believe we will succeed there. My guess is they indeed did destroy their own ships to show the Federation they had nothing to do with the attack on the X'ell homeworld, but recently it's been harder to deny their involvement, especially when one of the players was Chancellor J'mpok's right-hand man."

His gaze then went to Oseno while he still addressed the entire assembly..

"While the Federation has attempted to contact General Worf, there has been no response. Not only was Worf once part of Starfleet, but the current Chancellor came to power by killing Worf's closest ally and mentor, Martok. While we know he was given control of Martok's house and warriors, you can bet he is being watched one-hundred percent of the time. I am sure if he knew of J'mpok's true intentions, he would join us, but we have no way of getting through to him, as it would be suicide for him to accept a call from the Federation behind the Chancellor's back... not to mention dishonorable in his mind."

Niomo sighed as the Fleet Captain gave his response.

"If what you are saying is true, then it makes the Chancellor's declaration of war even more prudent. He has automatically locked us out of any chance at diplomacy or contacting Mister Worf."

Niomo rubbed what was becoming more of an 11 o'clock shadow on his chin and sighed again,

"So, like the Romulans, we just have to sit back and wait for them to make their move. Do we have any idea as to what kind of fleet they are sending at us? I'd have to assume it is much larger than whatever Sela is rounding up."

The engineer finally lifted his eyes off the PADD and slowly looked around the room from his chair. Sometimes he wished he had remained a simple engineer back before the Borg invasion. He seemed to keep thinking less like an Engineer and more like a Captain. But since he already was doing so...

"Hmm...Fleet Captain. Best case scenario, we contain the Azimuth Horizon. What then? Are we going to have two wars on our hands anyway? What are our operatives and diplomats saying about these other faction's feelings if we are successful?"

Samji nodded in agreement with Lieutenant Commander Lire's assessment.

"The belief is that once we contain and fully secure the Azimuth Horizon and Starbase 10, the Klingons will back down."



He explained further.

"The Klingons know they can't win a full-on war with the Federation and they will also be having to deal with the other factions too. While they will likely be sending ships through further toward the Sherman system in the guise of open war to try to distract us, their primary goal is here... their only hope is to fight us off enough and destroy Starbase 10 such that they will be given a few hours' worth of time to bombard their side of the anomaly with the ion bursts. They know that's all the time they would have before reinforcements arrive, but it would be enough to exponentially increase the rate of growth toward Federation space. They need the Anomaly to seriously cripple us so that they can then actually attack us in traditional means. If we contain the Anomaly and reinforcements arrive, they have no play."

He made a pause so that everyone could digest this estimate a bit before continuing.

"The Romulans and the other hostile force I will be presenting next will be a different story. We do not believe they will stop until they destroy us or themselves. But each of these forces is orders of magnitude smaller than that of the Klingons as you stated."

He shook his head in exasperation and with a shrug.

"Other than the major players, we really don't know what we're up against in terms of numbers. Expect the worst and do your jobs well. That's all we can say right now."

Samji's voice perked up.

"Our best bet will be to try to goad them into coming for Starbase 10. The base has superior firepower that will decimate even the toughest dreadnoughts they can throw at us."

But then he shook his head again.

"However, with the Klingons, we can't allow them to form a beachhead on their side of the Anomaly, or they will be able to complete their goal anyway. So we have to fight them there too... on the exact opposite side from Federation space."

Jureth listened to everything that Fleet Captain Samji was relaying regarding both Worf and the Klingons. Meanwhile he was making various notes on his PADD regarding what the Klingons were capable of. He'd already seen how the Alsea handled a small Klingon battlegroup so he wasn't all that concerned about even the heaviest of the Klingon warships. Still he made a few notes on possible tactics and types of ships he might see so that he could develop some effective attack patterns for the Alsea.

As he was concentrating on the Klingons another thought entered his mind: the Dominion. This would be a perfect opportunity for them to make another play for the Alpha Quadrant especially with the major races at each other's throats. He raised his voice toward the Fleet Captain again.

"Sir, is Starfleet monitoring any potential activity from the Dominion? I hate to say it Sir, but this would be a perfect opportunity for them to try and take us all down."

Kheren listened to the words of the Bajoran officer from the Alsea and nodded appreciatively.

"Here is a fine strategic mind for you."

Everyone knew that that, following the Dominion War, the invaders from the Gamma Quadrant had been stripped of all their military forces and of any right to muster one up again, beyond what was needed for planetary defense of their home systems in their own space. Types and tonnage of ships were regulated by the Klingon Defense Force, the Romulan Star Empire Navy and Starfleet; so was the size of fighting forces, deployment of personnel and equipment and anything else that could possibly allow them to rebuild a potentially threatening military force.

Officially, the Dominion had been declawed and defanged with a tight leash held by their three hands. So had been the Breen Confederacy that had allied with them and even the Cardassian Union that had ultimately turned against them.

Yet, the Breen had recently resurfaced with a small but significant military force despite it all; and some Cardassians opposed to the current state of things and believing in the "True Way" of their defunct empire had managed to do the same. Thinking the Dominion itself would not be able to do so was dangerous complacency. The same had happened on Earth after their so-called First World War; the small beaten country had been similarly stripped and held under an even tighter military and economic fist. And barely two decades later, it launched and nearly won a Second World War that devastated two-thirds of the planet.

"You think he might be right, Sir?" asked Tyvya.

"When bears fight over a seal's carcass, they forget the wolves lurking in the bushes," answered Aguk Snow.

"And the wounded survivors become a meal themselves," understood the giantess.

"Fortunately for us, dumb bears, one bird is watching," added Kheren to the imagery as he lifted his chin in the typical Andorian sign of respect towards Oseno Jureth. "If we're lucky enough to have but one such officer on each ship, we will prevail."

"And the Owl of Wisdom will guide us, " added Snow looking at Allen Samji.

"If we listen," concluded the captain of the Artemis.

He said this while noticing the new tactical officer of his friend's ship, Michael J. Tritter, had taken a seat after the formalities with his new CO and stayed near to the crew he was now assigned to.

The man had shifted a bit to get comfortable, arms folded across his chest, but seemed intently focused on those speaking around him, obviously making mental notes of things they said he felt to be important. He leaned slightly forward, one behavior he probably exhibited uncsciously when interested in the goings on around him.

Although the security and tactical officer of the Spectre didn't not speak, his body language said plenty about what was going on in his mind and how very engaged he was with what was going on. nevertheless, Kheren could see that he remained focused primarily on his new CO, evidently so that he could figure out how the man worked, as it were.

The Dominion.

With all the other things going on, Samji hadn't even considered it as a threat. Similar to this Azimuth Horizon anomaly, it was once a power so formidable it threatened to equally overwhelm and annihilate all races and factions in the Alpha and Beta quadrants.

Samji knew the current overall 'sit rep', however, and all communications and travel through the DS9 wormhole were heavily monitored. Additionally, it had been common practice for the last thirty years for any officer or ambassador in any position with a potential to cause harm or open up Starfleet's security to intruders to be regularly scanned for Changeling DNA.

"I do not anticipate the Dominion making a play here or being much of a threat," Samji responded. "However, I will mention it to Rear Admiral Kotari when we speak next."

He explained his reasoning further.

"In addition to our security measures since the Dominion War, and our intelligence on their activities, the simple fact is that their only point of entry is through the wormhole at Deep Space 9. Unless they have developed superior transwarp or slipstream capabilities and perfected it to a greater extent than we have, they would first have to take DS9. Then even if they accomplished that, which is unlikely as we have the capability to collapse the wormhole at the first sign of any attack, they would still be on the opposite side of Federation space! I find it hard to believe even the Klingons would be able to muster that kind of force right now."

After a pause for all others to reflect on the data, the starbase commander added:

"Now, granted, there are certain forces they have used as proxies in their first war and could again: Jem'Hadar, Cardassian 'True Way' terrorists, and Breen. But from our intelligence reports, there has been no attempt between these fractured groups to come up with any sort of joint attack."

Oseno nodded in acceptance of Fleet Captain Samji's answer to his question. Jureth knew it was far fetched but he felt as if he had to bring it up. He hadn't fought in the Dominion War, but his father had and when he was younger he had been slightly obsessed with Dominion and Jem'Hadar tactics due to his father's death at their hands.

"Thank you, Sir. I knew it was a stretch, but I felt I would have been remiss if I hadn't mentioned it."

Josh was looking over the tactical systems on the Lotus while listening to the other officers talk about the Klingons. Josh had been on the Alsea when it was attacked by the Klingons only a few days ago, so he knew that at least one ship in the fleet could hold its own against the Klingon attack force. The Lotus, despite being one of the oldest designs still in service, was currently the most advanced ship in Starfleet; but he would need to know its capabilities inside and out in order to be ready for the Romulans and anyone else that joined the fray.

When his fellow officer from the Alsea stood and asked about the Dominion, Josh's gaze snapped up as he was thrown back to his childhood. He had grown up fatherless because of the Dominion, for whom he had been angry and fearful for his entire life. Part of him wanted the Dominion to come; Starfleet had beaten them once before and he could have a chance to do it again. But part of him was admittedly scared of the thought. The Dominion had been a tough match for the combined powers of the Federation, the Klingon Empire, and the Romulan Empire, and now the odds would be reversed, so the outcome may be much darker than the Dominion War.

When Fleet Captain Samji responded with confidence that the Dominion would not be able to join in this fight, even if they wanted, a sense of relief swept over Josh, but he couldn't help but remember the Breen sneak attack on Earth during the War.

*It may be unlikely, but I best be prepared for it just in case,* he thought.

With the Dominion now sitting in the back of his mind, Josh returned to the specs on his PADD and awaited information on the fleet's next opponent.

Captain Kheren also listened to the briefing on the forces rallied against them and, although appreciative of the broader vision of the Alsea tactical officer, felt more important to hear about one last threat definitely involved in their upcoming operation.

"Fleet Captain Sir; it might be so that that any threat from the Dominion, or any other force aside from the Romulan and Klingon empires, might be remote at this point. But there is one specific threat we still have to hear about and consider carefully. The Horizon Children Cult."

He knew the other starship commanders and their officers might be unaware of this menace; or worse, take such a menace too lightly. And so he spoke, his voice heavy and dark with the memories of the half a dozen of his crew that lost their lives to the cultists.

Niomo unconsciously snickered at the remark about children.

*What can children possibly do to us? They probably can't even see over the consoles,* was what he wanted to say. But self-control prevailed, as did logic. These were probably some big kids... With the mention of the Horizon Children, Crist spoke.

"The Horizon Children are indeed a threat. My crew's last mission dealt with them quite a bit. Although our mission was a success, we barely got out of their base alive... not to mention escaping there space. If it wasn't for the McKenzie, we'd be dead. They should not be taken lightly; they are extremists, religious fanatics, and they will take any action necessary to accomplish their tasks. In fact I wouldn't be surprised if they would use kamikaze attacks on us, or, on the ground, suicide bombers."

Motioning to Summers, he started to add:

"However there is some good news. From the mission we recovered valuable information about the group. Such as..."

Then Crist stopped himself. He didn't want to reveal classified information, assuming it was classified.

"Well, I don't want to steal the Fleet Captain's thunder. If the information we recovered is discussed or some of it is still classified, I'll let the Fleet Captain bring it up."

Oseno's ears perked up at the mention by Captains Kheren and Crist of a third party to all of the Azimuth Horizon drama. He wondered why he hadn't heard anything about these Horizon Children before now. Perhaps he wasn't reading Starfleet's intelligence reports close enough, something he made a mental note to correct.

While Captain Crist was still speaking, Jureth connected his PADD to the Alsea's computer and accessed the intelligence reports the ship had received. As the chief tactical officer, his access was relatively high though there were still reports marked captain's eyes only that he could not access.

He combed through several mundane reports on things he was already aware of until he came across a general intelligence bulletin for all starships. The bulletin detailed recent actions of the religious cult named the Horizon's Children, including several of their recent hostile activities. Starfleet Intelligence had classified them as a bona fide threat and warned all starships to steer clear of the area of space the Children considered theirs. Jureth wondered how he had missed such an important message and scolded himself for not being more thorough. Then he fired off a note to his assistant Cat Steele to focus the security training sessions on repelling boarders.

Finally, Jureth began digging through the Federation network, pulling down everything he could on the Horizon's Children. He pulled several newsnet articles, and public statements by the group. Then, while he waited for Fleet Captain Samji to continue the briefing, he began to read.

Gould listened to Jureth's concerns as to the Dominion without much concern. As the fleet captain pointed out it, was unlikely they could strike so far away from DS9, at least in the foreseeable future.

But these Horizon children as they were called got his attention. He too felt Jureth's frustration at not knowing enough to fully contribute to the conversation and his personal knowledge of Klingons was limited to mostly diplomatic situations, having spent much of his career near Romulan space.

And diplomacy was after all his field of expertise..

"The USS Lotus is the best refitted ships in this sector as well as having been shaped in part to counter the effects of the anomaly; and while she can hold her own in a fight, she was never meant to be a ship of war. I would like to volunteer the Lotus to contact these Children and arrange a more mutually beneficial relationship between them and the Federation. It could also be that they have an insight that we lack regarding the anomaly and they may even be willing to help reverse its growth with the right encouragement."

*Or perhaps they may show us how they created it?* he mused.

"I cannot think of a better ship than the Lotus to handle such as mission, Sir."

*Certainly not the Artemis... nor me,* chuckled Kheren silently in his own mind.

The Andorian was proud of his ship and would not exchange it for any other in the fleet, even the souped up USS Lotus. But his pride did not blind him; not only was the Artemis much, much older, less advanced despite its own recent refit, significantly slower, less armored and armed than the flagship, but it was the very ship where the cultists had attempted their first coup... and where they had all been stopped and even their leader apprehended. Approaching them with his ship would not just lack the prestige of the flagship; it would be seen as a provocation.

The captain of the Artemis however still felt pride, but this time for serving in Lotus Fleet, with these officers, like this Oseno Jureth tactical officer and this Captain Gould he knew nothing about. Despite the deadly menace they were facing and all the forces raised against them, the commanding officer of the flagship still looked for the peaceful solution without fear or prejudice; something Kheren found he himself had a hard time to do where these murderous religious fanatics were concerned.

"And there's a Starfleet officer for you," he now commented to his crew.

Then he raised his voice so as to be heard by all.

"Captain Gould, I commend you for your dedication to peace and the spirit of cooperation in these trying times. My crew and I faced these cultists before; although I believe your project is admirable, you should know this: the Horizon Children seem indeed to know in a rather vague way that the anomaly is an opening to another universe; but in typical religious confusion, they seem to believe that we want to destroy it. That's why they act so violently and irrationally against us."

The Andorian then turned towards Allen Samji.

"Sir, it should be possible to show them how wrong they are; show them that our operation is in no way planned to destroy it but to simply contain it; and even more, show them our desire to keep it open for exploration and contact with its potential inhabitants. The possibility of colonisation over there is of course also in our minds; why not by them? They could be offered this opportunity, if they but ceased their mindless violence against others."

He made a pause to let everyone think of it before concluding:

"If Captain Gould is willing to make this overture, I believe he should be fully supported in this. We will still be prepared if they reject reason and opt for violent insanity; but peace and friendship are always the best tool against war and enmity, Sir."

O'Conner listened to the captains talk with a raised eyebrow before replying.

"Sir, I would have to disagree. Even with the Lotus' tactical upgrades, it is still a science ship at its core. Should the Romulans show up and begin to enact a plan to destroy the gateway, having the Lotus would give us the best chance to defeat any plan the Romulans might come up with."

He then looked toward Captain Summers.

"If we insist sending a ship to the Horizon Children, the Spectre is the clear choice. Not only is it led by an experienced Half-Betazoid captain but, should contact turn hostile, she can handle herself in a fight and get away clean with her DYCEP systems."

"Not a science ship commander; a short range scout ship refitted with the most recent technology there is against the effects of the anomaly. And the Lotus was reassigned as a diplomatic ship as well, which is why she was given to me."

The look on his face was pure Vulcan logic. No pride could be seen there.

"The Spectre is no doubt up to the task, as is her captain, but the Lotus and I are here just for these kind of missions. If the Fleet captain green lights this proposal of course." Gould said and gave a respectful nod to Samji.

Kheren nodded without replying to either the flagship captain nor his Exec, just glancing in turn at O'Conner, Summers, Gould and Samji.

That was what he liked most about his First Officer; he always had alternatives and his own insight to offer, making decisions all the more easier in a crisis, either providing a needed missing option or enough of a critical stand to help evaluate another. And here, of all the people in the room save Summers, Michael O'Conner was the most familiar with the Spectre's capabilities, the ship he believed was the better choice for Gould's peace mission; he had been her first chief engineer before becoming her executive officer prior to join Kheren on the Artemis.

Now, whether this was truly the better option, or even that Kheren agreed with it or not, it was not for the captain of the Artemis to dispute or decide. After all, he did not know yet what Lotus Fleet Command had planned for this operation.

So the Andorian said nothing and just waited for the fleet captain to speak, while mentally readjusting his own plan with these added possibilities... in case it would be required of him to offer it, if need be.

Daniel Summers sat there and listened to everything being said before adding his own two cents in on the matter; something he had learned to do in the many years he had spent as a Tactical Security Officer in Lotus Fleet before being entrusted with the captaincy of the USS Spectre.

"I agree the Lotus should be the one to go if such diplomatic mission is attempted. With her recent refit, she is more adept to handling the effects of the Horizon. The Spectre would only be damaged. We would be best served to assist the Alsea in the recovery of Lieutenant Commander Sisko and the containment of the Azimuth Horizon itself... especially considering her speed, maneuverability and the fighter-shuttle wings we will have loaded out in our hangar bay. In case we do have a fight on our hands, we will be able to launch the fighters and outnumber any opposition that may try to stop us. Fleet Captain, you have my full support and cooperation in your decisions and I will do everything in my power to make this all work; especially helping to get through to Mister Sisko. As far as that is concerned, being that I am Half Betazoid, I may be able to assist Commander Rivers in contacting Sisko in his subconscious mind where his true self presumably presently resides. It might be due to the creature that took control of his body... or might still be in control. Whatever the case, I might succeed in bringing him back using some tricks we used against the Borg."

Summers shuddered as he mentioned his long defeated Nemesis... and thinking of his long lost father who would never be found again after the Borg's destruction.

Niomo for his part sighed as he heard the two officers bicker back and forth about who's ship was better. He had served on both the Lotus and on a Akira class as an engineer and knew for a fact that the Lotus was a better fighting craft than an Akira. Not to mention it had better science facilities too.

*And since Starfleet just refitted the Lotus with new equipment specifically for surviving the Horizon, I highly doubt the Fleet Captain will be sending her to just talk, he thought.*

But it wasn't his concern. He knew the Alsea was the strongest ship in the fleet, so he wouldn't have to worry about diplomacy. He just needed to make sure the phasers got power and the shields stayed up.

Samji listened to the suggestions and counterpoint with interest, but stopped them before it became much of a debate. After all, they hadn't even been briefed on the Horizon's Children unless they had read the preliminary reports and the discussion was premature.

"Let's back up," Samji said, raising his hand, palm outward authoritatively. "Before we decide how to approach them, I want to go over the major players and their goals so that you have better information to base your discussions on."

Once he had all their attention again, Samji continued.

"The Horizon's Children is indeed a fanatical religious cult. It is comprised of all kinds of races, which makes them the most difficult to identify. This means we need to maintain the highest level of security at all times," he warned. "Their goal is yet again different from the other two: to let the Azimuth Horizon expand and overtake the entire Galaxy. While the Horizon's tendrils do follow populated warp trails, the overall mass of the anomaly spreads and encompasses every inch of space. It is calculated that if we don't stop it, the Azimuth Horizon will reach Starbase 10 in about three days. If current trends continue, it will reach Sol in one hundred and forty-five days, reach the center of the galaxy in two-hundred and thirty-eight days, and encounter the Andromeda Galaxy in about thirteen months."

In the deep, shocked silence that ensued his doomsaying report, Samji paused to let that information sink in and then continued.

"The Horizon's Children want this to happen. They believe that the Preservers seeded all humanoid life in the Galaxy and that the Azimuth Horizon was created by them to wipe the slate clean. They believe the Galaxy has become too corrupt and this is a way of creating it anew. Only the worthy, those who believe as they do, will be able to pass through to the other side; and thanks to Lieutenant Junior Grade David Calhoun, we've recently obtained a fighter called 'Rebirth' with technology that they had built to allow them to do so. We will be researching this technology for use in our own ships. This will be the primary job of our Engineers until we launch."

Yet again, Fleet Captain Samji brought up a display showing the top two leaders along with a few other important players. He pointed to a Starfleet dossier containing an image of a man of Bajoran and African American descent.

"First, we have Joseph Daystrom Sisko, male, age twenty-seven, former Lieutenant Commander in Lotus Fleet and Chief Engineer of the Spectre. Formerly thought lost to malicious energy beings from the other side of the Azimuth Horizon, he has apparently lost his memory and has been recruited by Horizon's Children. They believe him to be some sort of Prophet sent by the Preservers to lead them into the new Galaxy. He has clearly been brainwashed and it would be ideal if we could capture him alive and bring him back to try to restore him and undo the damage done to his mind."

He moved on to the next image, that of a reptilian looking humanoid with orange skin and two rows of spines along its head, Rethian woman. "Ty'reynyk, female, age thirty-four. She appears to be Sisko's second-in-command and led the failed assault on the Artemis. Formerly a Starfleet officer, she used her position to gain a foothold situation that was thwarted by the valiant efforts of the Artemis crew. She'll most likely be on whatever most powerful ship they were able to obtain; reports indicate most likely a Cardassian Keldon class. Whether Sisko will accompany her is yet to be determined."

They all looked at those images with various feelings etched on their faces. But the Fleet captain was adding:

"We don't have a whole lot of time and we need every ship focused on trying to contain the anomaly. If we get threatened, we should, of course try to attempt diplomacy with individual ship captains, but unfortunately we just can't spare a whole ship on formal, lengthy negotiations. Our best bet is to try to find out which ship Sisko is and send a strike team to remove him forcibly. At that point, we may be able to use his relationship with Captain Summers and Lieutenant Commander Sorripto to bring him back and try to get some valuable information about the cult."

Sorripto's mind wandered as the brief dragged on his thoughts continuing to be dragged back to his encounter on the McKenzie's last mission. He was still shaken by seeing his friend in that state and could not shake the lingering feelings of guilt.

*You are out there somewhere Joey and I promise I will find you,* Sorripto thought.

As Sorripto sat, distant, combing through the memories of that fateful day, something in the brief snapped him back into the real world. His heart sank as he looked up and saw the picture of his friend projected on the big screen. The chief engineer of the McKenzie gazed the picture over, trying to calm his nerves that were now overpowering him. As he gazed back again through his memories, Sorripto saw flashes of something he could not figure out. The flashes felt more like remembering a dream instead of a memory. There is little in the galaxy stronger than a well trained Cardassian mind and Sorripto prided himself on his mental prowess. As the visions became more constant and more blurred, the Cardassian tried feverously to shake free the images and concentrate on his friend.

*Damn you Joey. I heard the scream. I saw the conflict! you are in there somewhere!* Sorripto screamed within his own mind.

He knew that somewhere in these flashes was the answer. Somewhere locked away deep his aged Cardassian brain was an answer to the image before him. That man he saw on that forsaken place was not his friend and Sorripto knew that, somewhere in the flashes, somewhere in the blurred images swirling in his mind was the answer on how to save his friend.

Shaking off the images, Sorripto nodded to the few now concerned looks directed his way as his obvious state of discomfort had now taken over his face. He had, for the first time in his life, been unable to remember and that discomfort turned to worry and slowly to fear.

Sorripto breathed deeply and tried to relax his mind. These images would make sense and he promised himself that nothing would stop him from unlocking this puzzle.

Standing up, he cleared his throat to speak. The side conversations quickly silenced as the image of a large Cardassian imposing himself in the conversation was not something easily ignored and it easily drew the attention of the room.

"Sir if I may? If there would be any attempt at a rescue I volunteer to lead the assault team."

The murmurs in the room could be heard even by Sorripto's aging Cardassian ears. The crowd wondered why an Engineer would think himself qualified for a tactical operation and even some grizzled veterans were still taken aback by a Cardassian volunteering to rescue a Bajoran.

"Sir, anyone who has read the briefing from the McKenzie's last mission knows that I possess a unique set of skills and, if there is any time those skills can be put to use, it is now. Sir, there are two reasons that I see myself as the man to lead this mission... actually, the *only* man in this room that should be on this mission. Hell, I would offer to go alone if I thought you would let me."

The murmurs among the crowd dimmed slightly as Sorripto continued.



"Sir, not everyone joins Starfleet wanting to kill people and, whether you want to admit it or not, that is exactly what anyone who goes to retrieve him is going to have to do. I have dealt with these fanatics before and, if they see him as some god prophet, they will defend him to the death. Any good soldier can tell you whether it be Jem'Hadar or Klingons there is nothing more dangerous than an enemy that is all but wanting to die. I have killed people before, Sir, and it is not easy... and trust me when I say it does not get any easier."

Taking a deep breath Sorripto continued.

"Any mission to remove a man as revered as Sisko is now will only result in the need to kill. you can sugar coat it all you want, Sir, and ramble on some logistics or planning, but to take away a prophet from fanatics, people will have to die. My training has given me the skills to take life and my past has left me with little reason to doubt my abilities to do so. More than that, Sir, Sisko is my friend and I know better then anyone here what he is capable of. That, Sir is why I volunteer."

As Sorripto leaned back to sit, a voice came from the crowd.

"What's the other one?"

Sorripto stood and looked in the direction of the voice.

"You said there are two reasons you should go; that is only one. What is the other one?"

Letting out a deep sigh Sorripto spoke slowly.

"We might have to kill him."

The room went silent as the serious tone of the Cardassian took total control of the room.

"The sad truth is Sir if we cannot save him we might have to kill him. Joey Sisko is my best friend and I know that, somewhere in that shell on the screen, he is in there."

Clenching his fist to control the anger, Sorripto continued to speak.

"If he has to die, it should be for me to pull the trigger. And personally, Sir, I will be damned if I let anyone else make that choice."

*I just hope to Galor it does not come to that,* Sorripto thought then.

As he sat down, the serious look on his face turned somber. Sorripto knew that things could turn sour fast and he knew his friend's life would depend on it. He wanted to bring his friend home alive and these blurry flashes in his mind were the key to not just bringing him back, but getting him back.

Kissing his clenched fist, the Cardassian promised himself that no matter what happened he would find the answer. He knew that this could be the end to a journey that started so long ago. Sorripto promised himself he would not stop until this was over and Joey was home. As the seriousness settled in, he knew that he could not fail, not for himself or for his friend.

He was bringing Joey home. Sorripto knew that, whether he saved Joey or whether he did what had to be done, Joey was coming home and one way or another. Sorripto promised himself he was going to save him from the radicals that had destroyed his friend.

*You will come back with me old friend... With your shield or on it.*

Kheren looked intently at the Cardassian, his eyes, his face, his hands and listened carefully to his words, his tone of voice, his breathing. It was as if he was reading an open book; and what he was reading there was definitely not good.

"He sounds like an Andorian on a vendetta," whispered Tyvya in his antennae. "I myself can come up with several easy ways to do such a rescue without killing anyone... especially the one that needs rescuing."

The Andorian captain nodded to the giantess and spoke with the same low, whispering tone:

"That is something we Andorians do understand better than any other isn't it? Nothing blinds more than anger... except grief. And he is overwhelmed by both."

"It is easy to see that he is the *worst* person to send rescuing that officer Sisko," she quietly commented then.

"Let's hope he is the only blind officer here," simply shot back Kheren, looking intently at how the other commanding officers reacted to the understandably legitimate but short-sighted passion of the Cardassian... notably at Captain Crist, Sorripto's commanding officer... but especially at Fleet Captain Samji; the one on whose shoulders all responsibilities fell today and would rest on in the coming days ahead.

Niomo sighed in his seat and squeezed the bridge of his nose with his fingers in annoyance. The meeting was getting off track, and people were starting to get delusions of grandeur. Clearly this Joseph Sisko had made a great impact with certain members of Lotus Fleet. So much so that they would disregard their roles in the upcoming mission and single-mindedly try to "rescue" him; a brainwashed former officer and possible enemy.

He almost did not speak up, but his Italian passion made him respond. "Lieutenant Commander. I think we can all understand your desire to rescue your friend. Just like we understood the Commander's desire to volunteer the *Alsea*. However, we all have our duties; and yours, like mine, is in the Engineering room. Not running around like a Commando. I am sorry to say this, but just like our previous debate on how to deal with the *Azimuth Horizon*, all this volunteering everyone seems to be caught up in is moot. Starfleet Command has most likely already decided our positions in this operation."

He looked down at the Fleet Captain, and continued, his impatience getting to him, "Fleet Captain, if we could continue with the briefing? The *Alsea* will not fix herself...and it sounds like I need to work on a bit more than just the scratches in her hull if we want to survive those tendrils."

Fleet Captain Samji's information on the *Horizon's* Children was much along the same lines of what Jureth had been able to find in public record. The thought of a Cardassian Keldon Class destroyer didn't necessarily bother the *Alsea's* tactical officer as his ship had proved more than a match for a Klingon *Negh'var* and certainly could handle a ship that was designed around the same time as the *Negh'var*. Truthfully, in Jureth's mind, the only vessel he was concerned about tactically would be the possibility of a Reman *Scimitar* entering the fight.

Jureth hadn't immediately thought that Starfleet would try and recapture the wayward descendant of Benjamin Sisko. Oseno supposed he should have known that Starfleet and Lotus Fleet wouldn't just let one of their own go, especially if he was indeed brainwashed. Like the *Alsea's* new chief engineer, Jureth figured the *Alsea* would be perfect for that assignment but she was also the strongest ship in Lotus Fleet and might be more suited to defending the Fleet's efforts to contain the *Horizon*.

Whatever assignment was in store for the *Alsea*, Jureth was eager to get his preparations started so he hoped that the briefing would be coming to an end soon.

Sitting beside the Bajoran, Niomo Lire's mouth started watering at the sound of new technology. After the Fleet Captain was finished, he stood and attempted to hide the anticipation in his voice.

"Fleet Captain, can you go into more detail about this "Rebirth" technology? A short dialogue will save me time when I need to start looking at the design specs. Additionally, as far as we are aware, these Children use ships they pirate? Have they been able to purchase or design anything bigger than the fighter we acquired?"

If the Children were only using pirated ships, Niomo felt a little bit more at ease. While still dangerous, a pirate crew would be a lot more simple minded in their combat strategies.

*Let's see how they like a Multi-Vector Assault Mode battle...*

Commander Rivers, now acting captain of the Alsea, had sat pensively in her chair as she regarded the data being displayed, quietly taking in all the information and attitudes of her fellow Starfleet officers after her unheeded speech. Her thoughts dwelt on that speech, and how illogical it was for the others to have seemingly disregarded her contribution; and how illogical it was for her to dwell on the imagined slight.

Her eyes drifted over to Oseno as she propped her cheek on her right fist, and noted that he was dutifully taking in the information about the Children. An inward, private sigh followed as she pushed aside yearnings for her past life as a security chief, an emotion quickly followed by sudden, abashed shame as she realized she hadn't been giving the attention Samji's information deserved.

Straightening up a bit more in her chair, she lifted her eyes to the display screen... and gasped.

*Joey Sisko?*

Her radiant blue eyes widened as she stared at his dossier image. She sat forward in her chair, riveted to what the fleet captain was saying. She was all ears now, and when he finished with the details, she spoke up; nearly tripping over Lire's query with her own.

"Sir." She began, then shot an apologetic glance to Lire. She began again. "Sir, I would like the Alsea to deliver that strike team."

*Deliver? Hell,* she realized: she wanted to lead that team herself.

"You know I'm..." she searched for the right words, then shrugged and said, "familiar with him, and if he's truly lost his memory, I may be able to help him recover it."

The words were tumbling out of her mouth before she could really think about them, which explained the faintly startled expression on her face when she brought up memories and their recovery. Still, she pressed on.

"If nothing else, if the Horizon's Children poses as much a threat as you say, they're both the most immediate danger and the one the Alsea should be facing down."

When Commander Rivers spoke, Oseno's eyes turned up from his PADD and fixed on the Alsea's former first officer. He was surprised by her reaction to the mention of Lieutenant Commander Sisko; and then, when she stated that she was familiar with the Emmissary's descendant, he began to wonder exactly how familiar.

It didn't take him long to figure it out though. Rivers' body language did most of that for him. Clearly, the commander had a special relationship with Sisko of some sort.

When she volunteered the Alsea to be the Lotus Fleet ship to strike the Children, Jureth nodded appreciatively. His only reservation was whether Rivers was doing it for the right reasons or not. He didn't know much of Rachelle Rivers, but Oseno could only watch and observe and hope that she would be able to remain objective throughout this mission.

The Alsea's chief engineer, still standing after almost being interrupted by his Captain, could only grin. However, he then started to frown.

"Far be it for me to object to my Captain's desires, but I am sorry, the Alsea is better suited for protecting our science ships from all three factions. Not just one. I may have little experience on the actual ship, but her specifications are clear. She's a warship...a... tank. I understand trying to retrieve this Mister Sisko is something that is important to you, M'am; but there are more important roles for us to fill."

Niomo looked the woman straight in the eyes. He could sense the anger; so he added.

"But... I am sure that we could have a commando team placed and ready to react, if the situation does present itself and we can grab him without sacrificing our entire arsenal."

*Once again. More Captain than Engineer.*

Once he was finished, he simply sat down and returned to his PADD. His teams were still working on the Alsea and he longed to be back with them.

From the USS Spectre group of senior officers, First Officer David Rogers sat musing throughout the continued briefing, noting the varied points brought forth by the participants. When Summers voiced his opinion on the containment of the Azimuth Horizon and not its destruction, he thought it a moot point.

*We'll eventually have to destroy it, David thought.*

The volunteering of the Lotus for a diplomatic mission to this Children cult was also, in David's mind, a lost cause. Religious cults variably did not conform to the usual diplomatic entreaties. And the Alsea's executive officer pushing forward Lotus Fleet's only Prometheus class vessel for a rescue mission was not a good idea, no matter the cause. The Alsea was needed for defense, not rescue. It was what she was designed for. That type of mission was better left to the McKenzie or Lotus, in Rogers' opinion.

Mention of the Horizon Children's capabilities did not worry the Spectre's executive officer much. At most, if this Ty'renyk even had a Keldon class, they could be easily handled by any ship in the fleet. And fighters, unless attacking in massive numbers and using suicide tactics, were also no match for any Lotus Fleet vessel. Only if this cult had gotten hold of some Breen Bleth Chaos class fighters, or Klingon S'kul class ones, was David even remotely worried.

Glancing around the gathering once more, David waited for the meeting to wrap up. Starfleet had decided to contain the anomaly first, and everything else seemed secondary. He also hoped that the Wisconsin, the Republic and the Pittsburgh would arrive promptly to assist, because he had the feeling that a containment mission was just the tip of the iceberg in the upcoming days.

In silence, Captain Kheren also reflected on the data provided by Samji and realized that, as much as he wanted a peaceful solution to everything, it would prove difficult; especially with the Horizon Children.

With a sadness that tettered on the edge of anger, the Andorian now finally realized that the Horizon Children truly looked like a lost cause.

Kheren understood passion like the one that was driving these cultists... but at the same time, he was totally baffled by these people fueling such passion with completely irrational ideas of death and annihilation that had no ground in reality.

Andorians held no belief in the supernatural. On Andoria, even the old religions had known their own gods as being made in *their* own image, not the opposite as Humanoids, from Bajorans to Terrans, had or still beleived. Out of their own prehistory, physiologically pragmatic Andorians had never attributed to natural phenomena or things and events any relation to the supernatural. A Jihad, a religious war, the very idea of causing death and destruction based on such a flimsy thing as faith, was utterly alien to them.

Even more, mass destruction for any reason was just as inconceivable to Andorians. To them, it was the upmost example of utter insanity and barbarism. In all of its History, longer than other spacefaring civilizations, Andoria had never known anything like a global war, never knew the large scale devastation that had almost destroyed worlds like Earth with its three world wars or even Vulcan before the reform of Surak. This idea of letting the whole universe burn for their own egotistical needs was even more insane to an Andorian than any ridiculous belief in the supernatural.

But considering both together... dangerously insane.

Indeed, no Andorian in his right mind would ever willingly follow such madness; neither would any Vulcan, as their own inbred logic would instantly disregard such murderous irrationality for what it was. But as for others...

Kheren stood up to be clearly heard.

"Gentlebeings; my crew and I have faced these cultists before. I sincerely hope that a peaceful settlement can be achieved with those who fail to see our true intent, even them. I support any endeavor in this regard and I am willing even to have my crew and myself involved in such peace efforts if need be."

His four oculars swept every pair of eyes in the room as he explained:

"The Klingons want to take for themselves the destructive potential of the anomaly before anyone else can do so against them; it is the predictable attitude of a people for which survival, war and conquest are one and the same. But once they will realize that the Federation is working effectively to deprive everyone, including Starfleet, of that potential, they should be easy to persuade to relent."

Lifting a callused hand towards the images of Sela and Tomalak, he continued to speak with the same neutral tone.

"The same can be said of the aggressively fearful Romulans. They simply want to destroy the anomaly as the easy way out of a catastrophe; a catastrophe they already had a painful taste of when their homeworld was destroyed by the Hobus supernova merely decades ago. But they too should be amendable if convinced that Lotus Fleet is willing and able to effectively defuse the threat for good."

His voice then turned cold as he added:

"The cultists are, alas, not so easy to deal with. Klingons and Romulans can be reasoned with; their actions are based on reason, even if their reason is based on wrong data and unfounded fears. But the Horizon Children's motivation are solely based on, either irrationality or worse, manipulation of everyone, including themselves, by a few megalomaniacal egos. One or the other, they act out of insanity, not reason. They *want* the catastrophe to occur. They declared themselves mercilessly uncaring of all lives but their own, including the lives of innocent children; lofty judges, jury and executioners of entire civilizations, including those barely emerging; self-proclaimed chosen ones separated from everything that would die and be lost forever for their own selfish sake."

He looked at Captain Gould.

"We should nevertheless try... but it might prove futile to try to reason with insanity."

And then, he looked at Summers, Crist, Rivers and finally Samji.

"Gentlebeings, I urge you all to immediately implement the strictest security measures as we did on the Artemis. Their attack on my ship, costing the lives of seven of my crewmen, did not come from outside but from within my own crew. We all must be especially vigilant; this madness can spread everywhere, in every mind that eschew reason. As I speak, there could even be a cultist here with us in this very room."

As Fleet Captain Samji stood and considered all the different points of view, and hearing the various officers offering up their service and their lives to save one man, his pride in this Fleet and what they could accomplish returned as a great counterpoint to his disappointment of their earlier reaction.

He remained silent, but was deep in thought, considering all the options. His strategic mind was on overdrive, considering all the angles. He now knew that whatever choice he made, they would support him; but if he was wrong, the entire Galaxy hung in the balance. It was too much pressure for a newly minted Fleet Captain.

And so, after offering up all their opinions, the officers, seeing how he struggled, had to sit in silence for what seemed like hours... each silently hoping that their suggestion would be the one to be taken. Then the words of Niomo Lire came back to mind. Samji held out a hand to silence him and anyone else that would speak. The officer's valid suggestion that many in the room were acting too much with their emotions was drowned out by his clear frustration and petulance at the importance of this meeting. Samji was concerned that he either hadn't given his subordinates clear instructions to carry out in the two hours he was away or that he felt that they were incapable of doing their job. Without clear planning, the mission they all faced would be chaos... despite the best efforts of the Engineer to repair and improve the Alsea... and chaos was just what all their enemies were hoping for.

First, he considered the Lotus, the first ship to be offered up to the cause. Not for a strike team, but for diplomacy. Captain Gould's record was clear, but Samji agreed with Kheren. Out of any of the three factions threatening them, the Horizon's Children were the least likely to respond to diplomacy. They had already seen plenty of evidence of how their religious devotion and fanaticism would blind them to any attempt at reason. They did not want to make a deal. They were in it for one thing, and one thing only: to allow the Horizon to "remake" the Universe into what they believed was the Preservers' new gift to the faithful.

Captain Gould's diplomacy skills would need to be used to bring one of the other factions to their side... but who? Based on his lineage and history, the obvious choice would be the Romulans. But he considered the benefit in his approaching the Klingons. Would it not show a very clear sign to the Klingons that they were serious about peace to have not only the Flagship Captain of Lotus Fleet, but a Vulcan and Romulan hybrid present their case? Besides, the Alsea was the only clear choice to deal with a Romulan Scimitar and he had his doubts that not even Gould could fully convince Admiral Tomalak of the error of his ways, especially if Sela was with him on board.

But what about Rivers' offer of the Alsea to deliver the strike team to the Horizon's Children? Certainly the full force of that single ship would be enough to overpower anything the Children had obtained. Their most powerful ship being a Cardassian Galor cruiser or similar with support from old Mirandas, Defiants, and even smaller fighters, so the Alsea was way too powerful to waste there. After all, the Children's tactic was to strike from within, so sending the Alsea to their base of operations with a potential sleeper agent ready to hand her over to the enemy was a definite wrong move.

It was also clear that Rivers was acting somewhat out of emotion. It struck him for a moment that this could potentially sound like pre-twenty-first-century sexism, but he pushed the thought aside. A man could and would just as easily act out of emotion too, but in this case it just so happened to be a woman. However, he realized then that if it were logical to send the Alsea, he would... and so the matter of her intent was moot.

The remaining ships were easy. The older Artemis, regardless of her modern refit and excellent crew, was obviously not even a choice to begin with. The Spectre could act as a cruiser and, with its DYCEP, a tactical assault vessel against the most powerful of their enemies. That left the McKenzie... and Mister Sorripto. Just like Rachele Rivers, he was acting on his emotions, and wasn't fit for the job... not to mention that he wasn't a Security Officer, despite his Cardassian abilities.

Samji, however, had no doubt that both of them would be critical for trying to turn the wayward officer once he was safely back in Starfleet's hands and he wanted at least one of them there. Samji would send the McKenzie and Sorripto would be there for Sisko if and when they extracted him. But, hoping the officer's professionalism would win out over his wrath might be a long shot; so Samji would have to send someone else in instead.

All these thoughts went into his mind a maximum warp. then, he straightened his uniform and cleared his throat to get everyone's attention.

"First of all, Mister Lire's question was somewhat stepped on, so I will address that first. I am sorry Commander, but I am not an Engineer, so I don't know the specifics. All I know is that the ship has the ability to somehow safely navigate one of the Azimuth Horizon's tendrils and arrive intact on the other side. What I do know is that it is a bit more graceful than the brute force method using metaphasic shielding that is our current best option."

"I can help with that, Sir," came a gruff voice from an area near to where many of the Starbase personnel were seated.

Many turned to look for the owner of the voice, only to see a level, gradually sloping plane of heads. A few officers around the voice slouched down in their seats and pulled their head down between their shoulders so that the speaker could be finally be seen to be standing in front of his.

"Our engineers have been furiously studying the vessel since it arrived," said Lieutenant Commander Marksus Sangliar. "Meet me after this briefing, Sir," he added, in deference to Mister Lire's age and experience despite their being of equal rank, "and I will explain in more detail."

"Good. Thank you Mister Sangliar," Samji said, seeing the Engineer shrug and take his seat again and disappearing among the mass of heads of taller beings around him.

"About this discussion on who should rescue Mister Sisko. The bottom line is that unless anyone else has a better suggestion, all our ships will need to keep moving to contain this Anomaly. I will go over our preliminary plan soon, but please just keep that fact in mind as we discuss strategy," Samji asked of his officers, trying to adjust their thinking toward more of a dynamic, 'us versus them' strategy instead of a static, 'me versus you' one. "It is possible that we will contain the anomaly and never get the chance to rescue him. Unfortunately for him and some of you here, that will have to be a valid option to take into account."

At that moment, the starbase commander looked straight into the eyes of the Cardassian engineer.

"Lieutenant Commander Sorripto, the McKenzie will need you at your post", he said apologetically, "or she may fail. If she fails, the rescue is meaningless."

Hearing this, Sorripto knew that there were those there that doubted what he said. After years of learning how to read faces, he knew several thought he was angry, wrong, and even crazy; but they knew little of what was at stake here. They murmured to themselves about saving lives but lives were not going to be saved so easily. Sorripto watched the Vulcans, Humans, and Andorians passed judging gazes upon him. Dead give away all of them. This openness is why he knew they were wrong.

*Arrogant fools. They think this is some standard beam out,* Sorripto thought angrily.

Continuing to look around the room, Sorripto watched as some understood him, but most just blew him off. He was right about these fanatics and he was the only person in the room who had fought them before. He knew what they were capable of and he had been in situations like this before.

Standing again, Sorripto spoke loudly, a tone that politely told the crowd to silence themselves. they were going to need to hear this.

"Well, I can clearly see that my first suggestion fell on deaf ears; and it is sadly understandable. The McKenzie is the best ship for a quick strike and trust me when I tell you she will be more than ready. I have made modifications and advancements to her that would put her launch design to shame."

Speaking more seriously now, Sorripto continued.

"I can see people wanting to dismiss me, judge me, hell even remove me from the mission; but you have to understand that I may speak like an Andorian on a blood crusade or a Klingon with an oath, but there is none here that can understand what is going on here better than I."

The words elicited deeper frowns around him. But the Cardassian engineer was not finished.

"Sir, you said "despite your Cardassian training..." Well, with all due respect, Sir, there are parts of my personnel file that are closed for a reason. Brushing me off as an angry engineer would be not the wisest choice. I am an Engineer but, as I said earlier, I am better trained and equipped to do what you ask than any of those Marines you want to send."

A cold silence welcomed his words as he went on further after taking a breath.

"I am a Starfleet Officer and I will stand at my post," then declared the Cardassian." The McKenzie will be ready for a fight and she will survive; I swear to Galor on that one. But know there is more going on here then a simple beam out. We are talking fanatics and believers that will fight to the death more then any of you have seen before. I have been there when we tried to take a Vorta from some Jem'Hadars and that is nothing compared to the loyalty you will see from these men."

Glancing over at the tall Andorian woman leaning over and whispering to her Andorian commanding officer, Sorripto nodded and continued. He knew she judged him more than anyone and knew inside she knew nothing of the horrors he had seen in life.

"Anyone here who even for a second thinks they can rescue him without having a fight on their hands or without loss of life is fooling themselves or worse, putting lives in danger that could be saved by sending the right people. Everyone here knows the fight that is going to happen here; people are going to die on both sides. No offense to anyone here but planning on the potential of death will beat out planning around thinking everything will be fine. Trust me when I say that no plan and I mean, no plan that involves a direct confrontation to save Sisko will end without someone dying, whether we want them to or not."

Glancing around the room Sorripto, knew that several in attendance had not quite settled in to the fact that there were going to be casualties and perhaps lots of them.

"I know there are those here who doubt me and I understand that. But I warn you... no I beg you; do not think even for a moment that any part of this mission is going to be easy. Especially not rescuing Sisko. You would have an easier time in a fight against a thousand Romulan ships then fight a thousand of these believers trying to defend their prophet."

Watching the faces around him, Sorripto could read their eyes. Years of Cardassian and special training meant that he could read faces. Some were changing their minds, others realizing he was right, while others still passed him off. Sorripto knew that no level of understanding would change their minds. There were still those here that doubted he should go and doubted what he said.

*I just hope that no one dies because someone here thinks they can do this without having to fire a shot.*



"I have overstepped my bounds and I apologize... but understand that what you see from me is not anger or some thirstful quest for vengeance; this is an understanding of what has to be done. Sisko is my friend and I want him back... but I am not volunteering because I want to hurt the people who hurt my friend. I volunteer because more than most, I know what we can expect in there. I am better trained and equipped to fight than most of those Marines you are sending. This is not a crusade; this is the truth. And with all respect to those in here glaring down at me now, trust me when I say I have seen things and know things that most of you could only imagine."

Reaching into his pocket Sorripto pulled out a small medallion. Glancing down Sorripto read the inscription.

### **What no man will do must be done. For this is Section 31.**

Since the realignment years ago, Section 31 had shed its evil shell as an operating entity that would kill blindly and break every law to achieve some twisted version of justice. Section 31 had since become more of a secret society that could be the cloak and dagger needed by the Federation the last thirty years. It was now more like the CIA of twentieth century Earth or the early democratic Obsidian Order. Despite what people still holding onto grudges wanted to believe, Section 31 had become the good guys; they just still did not exist and they certainly were not willing or wanting to take credit for any of what they had accomplished since the Dominion War. Looking up at the man leading the briefing, Sorripto knew he would understand.

*No one here can know what I have done; can understand what I have been through and they may not want to listen to me, but maybe they will listen to this.*

With that, Sorripto tossed the medallion to Samji and with a nod spoke more words than could be spoken in a lifetime of conversation. Sorripto's stern look and nod said he was ready, said he would maintain his professionalism and his cool, and most importantly. Sorripto's eyes said to relax the fears of judgment. Sorripto would do what was needed to be done whether sent to the other ship or ordered to stay in Engineering. Sorripto wanted to help and was the best man for the job, but orders come with a cost and Sorripto would do what must be done.

*What no man will do must be done.*

Sorripto knew that expression all too well and now someone else could start to share in how well he knew that. With the simple nod, Sorripto sat back down.

"ENOUGH!"

Niomo shouted while slamming his hand on his armchair. If he was mad at the other engineer before, now he was furious.

"Lieutenant Commander; sit down and remember who you are. You are an Engineer. NOT a Marine, Commando or Shining White Knight! I personally do not care what kind of training or past history you have. All I care about is who I can work with to better our ships. And if you feel you would rather have a phaser than a hypospanner, then change the color on your collar and be done with it. If it is as you say and we cannot easily recover Sisko, then we will just destroy his ship. But that is not for me, *you* or anyone who does not give the orders to decide. The Fleet Captain *has* given out his orders. We have *our* jobs. Do *yours*. Remember: The Needs of the Many. *You* are the *Few*. Your Captain, your crew, your ship, your fleet, the universe, *they* are the many; they need you at your station, making sure everything is fine. But, of course, if you still do not think that it is where you are meant to be... Then quit and join Security."

There were many eyes that were looking at him. Most, if not all, did not remember the former Captain, and the history behind him... mostly because most of it was classified by Starfleet Command. If he was a younger man, and this was not a full fleet briefing, Niomo would have already started a brawl. The engineer, this Chief Sorripto, was thinking too narrow-mindedly.

He took a deep breath and calmed himself down. His voice lost its anger, but his eyes still looked like they were on fire.

"I apologize for my bluntness, but one man cannot alter the plans of this operation IF he even shows up. Let me ask you a question: let us say that, yes, the Fleet Captain decides that you can go on your rescue mission. What happens if something goes wrong on the McKenzie? What if she gets destroyed or captured but you successfully retrieved Mister Sisko. Are those acceptable losses to you? They are not to me."

Niomo finished his diatribe and just shook his head. He wanted to hear more about this anomaly and get out of this briefing. He did make a note to apologize to the Commander of the Alsea. She had been silent ever since his comments and he did not feel terribly pleased about it.

Oseno had been well into making notes and plans when the Cardassian officer began his diatribe. Oseno listened, and observed and then the chief engineer of his own ship angrily rebutted the Cardassian and Jureth thought they were going to have to call in a security detail. At this point he kept his eyes on both men in case their emotions spilled over into physicality. It wasn't the Cardassian Oseno was worried about, it was what the Cardassian would do to Lieutenant Commander Lire.

One might think that Jureth would be uneasy with a Cardassian in the room, especially since the wounds of the Cardassian Occupation of Bajor and the Dominion War were only just beginning to heal on Oseno's home world; and perhaps Jureth might be a bit wary of the man if he hadn't been wearing a Starfleet uniform. Still, some of the things he said were directly contrary to what Fleet Captain Samji had ordered and to Starfleet's ideals in general.

Not that Oseno hadn't ever done anything contrary to Starfleet's edicts... the scar on his face was proof of that.

Even though he was aware the base had its own security force Oseno merely watched and stood ready to intervene if necessary.

Kheren for his part had listened to the Cardassian's outburst with astonishment. The man was so blinded by his own arrogance and anger that he spoke as if he truly believed that he alone knew what they were facing and how to face it... when he had not even listened when the captain of the Artemis had spoken about the attack on his ship; *his* crew had suffered and *died* at the hands of those fanatics *months* before this overpretentious engineer had even heard of their name!

And *his* crew had effectively neutralized them all in *minutes*... without even *injuring* any one of them.

Lucky? maybe... Well prepared? Most assuredly. Whatever vaunted training and experience the Cardassian boasted for himself, it was clearly inferior even to mere basic Starfleet Academy training; or again, he was emotionally compromised so much as to forget something as basically simple as... the stun setting.

No; the man's problem was not just his lack of judgment and self-control; it was much worse: the real problem was his attitude.

This Sorripto wore a Starfleet uniform; yet, he understood nothing of what it meant: at the core of Starfleet, of the entire Federation, was the sanctity of sentient life. Sometimes, alas, preserving such life meant using violence; sometimes, that violence lead to death. Any Starfleet officer knew that, at one point, he might have to go as far as to kill... But a true Starfleet officer saw violence and especially killing as the *last* resort, *not* the first, best and only way to solve problems.

Because it never did.

When Sorripto threw to Allen Samji the small bauble he had been pocketing, the Andorian's quadriscope vision clearly saw enough of it to read what was engraved on it.

Then he understood why the man was so wrong in word and intent. The man was not angry or mad as much as he was *immoral*.

And Kheren was not the only one to think so. The chief engineer of the Alsea, this Lieutenant Commander Niomo Lire he had met yesterday on the Promenade, lashed out with an outburst of his own; but his was about duty, integrity and responsibility.

His were the words of a true Starfleet officer.

And so, the commanding officer of the Artemis kept quiet. There was nothing more to add that would ever convince someone like this Sorripto of the errors of his ways. And the man was not his problem anyway. But Kheren sincerely hoped that his commanding officer, Captain Crist, would watch him closely and reign him in properly before he needlessly caused any loss of life; be it his own, that of their enemy or worse, his alleged friend... his crew... or all of them.

*When a man has only death on his mind, only death he will sow*, thought the Andorian as he finally dismissed this Lieutenant Commander Sorripto from his own mind.

Sorripto sat back and politely allowed the other to vent. It was clear that he had struck a nerve perhaps too many nerves, but these nerves needed to be struck. As only a Cardassian face could do Sorripto glanced at his Captain and nodded. The story was simple and true.

Sorripto had just committed the ultimate Cardassian combat room tactic. Unifying a group of people against one man and striking the right nerves was common place in old Cardassian war rooms. Everyone was angry and focused and whether they realized it or not they were now better soldiers and Sorripto had just single handedly improved everyone's chance of survival.

Watching the rest of the room Sorripto saw Kheren, Lire, Oseno, and others dismissing the Cardassian. These people were serving on ships using modifications of Sorripto's own design, whether engineers like Sangliar wanted to admit it or not. Emotions can change like the breeze and the winds in this room were blowing hard.

*Hell, half the people in here want to make it back just so they can tell me I was wrong... if they only knew. Also who was that that told me to change my colors... last I checked Security and Engineering wore the same color*, Sorripto laughed silently to himself.

Looking back up Sorripto saw the reaction from Samji as he glanced over the medallion. If there was anyone in the room that would recognize it Samji would. Sorripto saw the usual expression as the debate raced over what it meant. A threat? A warning? Or something darker? Section 31 had not quite shed its reputation and Sorripto was a Cardassian associated with that order... if there is anyone who had to worry about a history of bad reputations it was him. Glancing up Sorripto and Sanji's eyes met and with a slow respectful nod Sorripto said his peace.

*There is more at stake than you know. I will do what I am told and stand my post but there is more at stake here. Trust me. You do not have to like me but trust me on this one.*

Sorripto's eyes spoke volumes.

Now directing his glance to Niomo, Sorripto simply shook his head. There was an understanding of his frustration, and it was that anger that Sorripto was fueling. This man knew what it meant to do the right thing and Sorripto watched as he tried to bully the Cardassian, not a smart move as Sorripto knew a physical altercation would end poorly for the man across from him but that knowledge is not something Sorripto lead on.

*Anger and pride! Now we are talking. Mental note I owe that man a drink when we get back, he will want to hear my story.*

Sorripto made a mental note of the arrangement.

With all that could be said already said, Sorripto sat back and listened. This mission had more at stake than anyone knew and Sorripto now found himself anxious to start the mission. And so, his attention returned to Fleet Captain Samji.

Fleet Captain Samji had let the young officer speak and the rumblings in the room get louder, but figured it wouldn't do any good to shout them down. What the Cardassian had been doing was bordering on... *no was...* insubordination; but he was well aware that, despite giving his orders, he had not specifically ordered everyone to not speak. He took the opportunity now to be clear this time, once Sorripto's diatribe and the outburst from Niomo Lire was just barely below an all out brawl.

Samji spoke firmly, but calmly. He didn't want to add to the already heightened tension in the room.

"Everyone will refrain from speaking until I ask for your input. That is an order."

He flipped the medallion over in his hand. He knew what it was, but the meaning of why it was tossed his way escaped him. Was it a threat? A subtle hint that if he did not allow Sorripto to lead this assault team that some shadowy entity would see that he was replaced? He hoped it was just a reminder of what Samji already knew of his past associations.

But Samji didn't need a resume; he had already established that the Marines from Starbase 10 would be doing the extraction. If Sorripto wanted to be leading strike teams and killing enemies without a second thought, he should've stayed in Section 31.

"The Marines we're sending are highly trained, but specifically for extractions. They are ready to kill, *if necessary...* as a *last* resort... as *any* Starfleet security officer is as well. The McKenzie is free to send whatever security officers along are needed. You, Sorripto, are *not* the first in the entire Federation who has learned how to extract a prisoner, willing or not, and you will *not* be the last,"

Samji spoke with authority but remained calm despite the irritation building inside of him.

"I should not have to explain my orders; as a Starfleet Officer, it is your duty to execute them without debate... but I will. The McKenzie needs you as Chief Engineer so that the ship will remain in one piece for the Marines and Sisko. Additionally, you will need to be in one piece so that you can assist in his recovery. The importance of this plan relies on both you and the McKenzie staying alive... otherwise, it has *no* purpose."

As he was reading the notes on his PADD, the Alsea's newly assigned engineer began yelling at the Cardassian engineer across the hall, who had been giving an impassioned speech on why he should lead the marines, and Josh's attention snapped back to the meeting. He had remained silent for much of the briefing, instead choosing to watch and listen as he was trained to do while working with Intelligence. It was because he was watching, that he saw what the medallion that the Cardassian tossed to Samji was; this wasn't the first time he'd seen that medallion, but he had hoped that he wouldn't find more of them outside of the intelligence organizations.

Josh was relieved when Fleet Captain Samji shut down the argument and ordered no further interruptions in the briefing. He was itching to get out of the conference room and report to his new posting so that he could prepare his department for the Klingons; and every time an officer interrupted the briefing, that took away valuable time that he needed to get things in order.

Hoping everyone remembered his order to remain silent, the commander of Starbase 10 gathered his thoughts for the next part. Then he addressed the captains.

"You will each be assigned to a faction, but this is just a preliminary attempt to balance our forces. There may come a time where the Captains will have to decide what's best: diplomacy, fight, or lead."

He explained each of these three tactics further.

"Diplomacy; it should always be the first thing we try. Failing that, you may need to fight. If it is your assigned faction, you will be expected to fight if you think that the battle can be won. If it can't be won without support, or if it is not your faction, and you are engaged in other responsibilities, your best response will be to lead. Lead the enemy to one of our ships assigned to them. This will be our base tactic, but I expect all tacticians between ships to discuss strategies above and beyond, after this briefing."

"The McKenzie will be assigned to the Horizon's Children. The McKenzie is a first strike ship and it will not survive an all-out assault. Therefore, we need all the other ships taking on the big guys: the Romulans and the Klingons. Once the lead ship is identified, and we can confirm it is holding Mister Sisko, and the opportunity presents itself, the McKenzie will go in with a Marine strike team."

Samji further explained to the confused looks in the crowd at the mention of Earth Marines... something that hadn't existed for over two centuries.

"Some of you may know that since the Borg War, Earth has been concerned with its own security. The Vulcans, Andorians, and many others have always had their own defense force protecting each planet separate from Starfleet, and Earth has decided it was time to take some of the burden of protecting the planet off of Starfleet's shoulders by doing the same. With the recent events, they have assigned a detachment to Starbase 10 to upgrade its security with an option to use them on specialized search and rescue missions. The Wisconsin and the Republic will also be assigned to the Horizon's Children and will wait in the shadows until it is time to cover the McKenzie's escape."

Crist nodded to the duty that would be carried out by his ship.

"The McKenzie will not let you down. If the opportunity comes forth, we'll get back our missing man. However the mission does come first."

"The Lotus and the Spectre will be assigned to the Klingons," Samji continued, and nodding to Captain Gould and addressing his inevitable argument, he explained; "If you feel you can be up to the task, Captain, I want your diplomatic efforts focused on the opportunity of turning the biggest military force of the three to our side. If you can get past Ja'rod's anger, I believe you might be able to convince him of the logic of working together to contain the anomaly for good, for the benefit of both sides."

Gould went blank when the fleet captain handed out his assignment. But the point of debate was over, there was nothing left to do but get to the job at hand... no matter what were his personal feelings about it.

As he was personally addressed, he went silent rather than speak against his commanding officer's wisdom. But Samji's words echoed hard in his mind.

*I believe you might be able to convince him of the logic of working together to contain the Anomaly for good, for the benefit of both sides... Convince the radical leader of a group of Klingons that LOGIC is the best way to go? was he kidding?*

He was ready to accept not getting the mission he was sure he was best suited for, contacting the Children... but *this*?

It felt more like a punishment.

For just a second, he wondered if that wasn't the case; retaliation for his outburst earlier? But he dismissed that immediately. He didn't know Samji all that well, but he was every bit as true an officer as he was; the dedication of his people proved that much.

Captain Gould started going over his next steps. He had to coordinate his actions with the Spectre's captain, Summers, and see if they could come up with some sort of strategy they could use.

But inside he felt empty and... cold.

When Fleet Captain Samji explained the Lotus's part in the operation, Josh Vincent immediately began pulling up all the tactical data he had on the Klingon fleet, including the logs from his recent mission on the Alsea.

While he would be comfortable taking on any of the factions, he was glad that it was the Klingons that he and his crewmates would be responsible for; the Romulans were known for their guile and deception, but the Klingons used straightforward tactics. Strategic concerns weren't his only reason either; he believed that the Klingon commanders were far more likely to listen to reason than the Romulans, who tend to think with their emotions far too often. If the Klingons could be persuaded to assist the fleet, or at least stand down for the time being, this operation would become much simpler.

Not waiting for an answer, the Fleet captain finished detailing his plan.

"Finally, the Alsea and the Artemis will be assigned to the Romulans." He explained his reasoning there simply. "The Alsea has the most firepower and the Artemis will stand up to the biggest beating. If they bring in a Scimitar, both ships will be needed to try to stop it."

Predicting several backlashes, Samji said with a firm tone:

"This is my decision and my orders."

He relied on their professionalism as Starfleet Officers and the chain of command to then get them smoothly to the explanation of the Azimuth Horizon and the preliminary plan he spoke of.

"Well people, the Alsea will be the sword... and we will be the shield."

Upon hearing the Fleet Captain's orders, Kheren nodded in silent acknowledgement. Then, as the assembly discussed in reaction to these directives, he spoke softly to his bridge officers.

"Mister Scott; you will increase ship's shields, inertial dampers and implement forcefields over all key areas of the ship. Work with science officer Norbert Baoule on this; energy fields is his area of expertise... and with his brother Robert, the power and propulsion expert from your department. Prepare damage control teams for major work while under fire."

The Andorian turned his white-haired head the other way around.

"Lieutenant Tyvya, Lieutenant Snow; you will conduct together preparation for evasive maneuvers and cover fire so that the Alsea will be able to concentrate on the offensive. Get in touch with the Alsea's own helm and tactical officers to coordinate. Prepare also for insertion and recovery of boarding teams and secure our own antiboarding protocols."

"Aye, Sir," both the Andorian giantess and the Inuit helmsman answered together.

"Doctor Nasaro-Myth, you will have to prepare yourself and the EMH grid for treating casualties; not only from our crew but from other ships as we are the largest one and may be called upon for rescue operations as much as for prisoner containment. Also, prepare for irradiation protocol in case we have to face thalaron weaponry and our metaphasic shielding fails."

"I will have all my department at the ready, Captain," answered the Deltan with a smile. But his smile faded when Kheren shook his head.

"No doctor. You will keep the entire EMH grid operational and only keep *two* medical field teams. Since we are expected to take the pounding, I want to reduce casualty risks as much as possible."

Not waiting for the doctor or anyone else to recover from surprise, Kheren addressed his chief of ops:

"Mister Brie, you will convert as much of our systems to automation as possible and provide back up resources to the EMH grid, the inertial damper systems and the forcefield matrix. I need the Artemis to be operational with less than a tenth of its normal complement. And I want bypass systems programmed to keep us operational when we will take damage."

The Andorian finally looked at his first officer.

"Number One, you will select seventy-five officers from our crew to man the Artemis and assign the rest to temporary duties here on the starbase. All departments except Security will be reduced to mission-specific essential personnel only. Favor security officers with cross training in technical duties to fill up our crew with as little personnel as possible."

His silvery eyes then looked straight at O'Conner.

"I also want you to thoroughly study diplomatic and tactical options regarding Romulans. Your counsel will be most needed. And if I am put out of commission, I want you to be fully able to face the Romulans on your own, be it accross a conference table or accross a battlefield."

O'Conner paused a moment at hearing Kheren's order to bring sown to seventy-five crewmembers the ship's complement. He was shocked by the request and for a moment he began to think of who to turn away but then he just stopped and thought of his sister, his brother, his parents, and Akari. Deep down he knew he couldn't ask someone to watch from the sidelines.

"Of course I will study our enemy... but, Sir, I will have to refuse the transfer order, Sir. I can't in good conscience turn away officers and crewmember away from a battle that could determine the fate of their loved ones, the Federation, and perhaps the galaxy as a whole."

Kheren was completely taken aback by Michael O'Conner's stand. In all the time they had served together, not once did he *ever* refused an order, even those he had doubts about. But now, he was... and the Andorian completely failed to understand why. What he said was so absurd that it took him a moment just to gather his thoughts and put them into words.

"So, instead, in good conscience, you would prefer seeing seven hundred brave Starfleet officers die uselessly?" the Andorian asked with disbelief in his voice. "This is no time for Human macho posturing, Commander. We do not need a full crew for a one light year trip where we are ordered to be the voluntary target of the most powerful battleship the Romulan Star Empire ever fielded; possibly armed with a superweapon and with only a thin energy shield between us and radiations that dissolves organic flesh in seconds."

With a tone that tolerated no doubt, he declared then:

"I care about the *lives* of my crew, Number One, not their egos."

Taking a breath to stay calm, the captain of the Artemis looked again at his First Officer.

"They can just as well serve this operation, protect their loved ones as you say, by serving here on the station... or as relief crew for all ships if things go sour... and live on to go and ensure the safety of those loved ones, without coming with us just to serve as meat shields. We only need seventy-five crewmembers to pull this off and probably die trying... any more will not help and only offer more lambs to the slaughter."

As he spoke, Kheren could see that he was not getting through to the man. And to see O'Conner, of all people, risk like this charges of insubordination from his commanding officer that could very well cost him his position, his rank and his career made him pause... long enough to consider this time not the reasons, obviously lacking in this bold refusal, but the emotions behind it.

And the crew of the Artemis was mostly Human... like Michael O'Conner.

Kheren sighed and looked again at him, his voice still hard but completely leveled.

"I hear you, Number One. Now hear me. You will transmit my orders, those of Fleet Captain Samji and everything I just said to you, faithfully, to *every single* crewmember. Then and *only then*, if any crewmember openly and without any coaxing *freely* express his desire to still be on board when we go, *only* such crewmember will be allowed to. Am I making myself clear, Commander?"

O'Conner was equally taken aback by Kheren's reply. While he understood that the Captain wished to protect his crew, he was starting to sound like he had already given up any hope of victory or at least any survival hope for the Artemis.

Michael wasn't there yet; nor was he going to let the Artemis be a mere meat shield. She might not be the most advanced ship of the fleet but he had full trust in his fellow officers. Wether it be in Snow's maneuvers, Scotty's repairs or Nasaro-Myth's medical skill.

"Of course, Sir. I would not wish to drag any of the crew in to battle, but I fear you might have too little trust in our crew and our Maiden of the Hunt. She might not be the prettiest or quickest girl at the ball, but she still makes a head or two turn... and not just a hull to take fire as the fleet captain sees us, Sir."

While he did also trust in Tyvva's weapon skills, O'Conner was still a weapon engineer. So he wasn't about to just let them become a Romulan target drone. To O'Conner, there were many arrays and torpedoes just waiting to be tweaked and tuned up.

"Always hope for the best but prepare for the worst... I learned that one from Humans," said the Andorian in a slightly more relaxed tone. "I *do* trust both ship and crew; its the Romulans I do no trust."

Kheren took another deep breath and finally conceded to his first officer.

"Hopefully, your faith in our Goddess, or should I say, *our* faith in our ship, ourselves and each other, might just be what we need to pull this off. I will let you see what our shipmates say about it then."

Within the Alsea's group of officers, Oseno Jureth listened as Fleet Captain Samji relayed the orders that the Alsea and the Artemis were to take on Admiral Tomalak and the perhaps less than sane Empress Sela. As soon as the order was given, Jureth began pulling what data he could on the Romulan Scimitar battleship. It would be a formidable opponent for the two ships to take on if it came to battle. Diplomacy was not Jureth's department however, unless of course Commander Rivers were to become disabled, in which case the Alsea's fate would rest on his shoulders.

He shook that thought off though, not even wanting to consider losing another senior officer in battle. Oseno already felt as if he'd failed in allowing Captain Siduri to become injured.

Jureth also pulled dossiers on Tomalak and Sela to his PADD for reading later. He wanted to analyze the Romulans leaders to see if he could gain any insight into their battle tactics. He also entertained the thought of asking Commander Rivers to substitute some of the science and ops personnel for trained security officers or even their own complement of marines in case they had to repel boarders or possibly even board a Romulan ship.

Oseno was also thinking it was a good thing he had added transphasic torpedoes to the Alsea's weapon complement. In a fight, if they used them first, it would take the enemy by surprise.



The Bajoran tactical officer then stood to be recognized as he had a couple of questions about the Romulans.

"Sir, do we know the location of the Romulan Admiral Donatra? She aided Captain Picard when he defeated Shinzon three decades ago. Perhaps she could be convinced to join us as well. Along those lines, Sir, do we have any further intelligence regarding the size and disposition of the Romulan forces?"

"We are really not sure of the Romulan forces, or any for that matter, except for a vague indication that the Klingons will have the most firepower and the Romulans second to that," answered Allen Samji. "Remember, this has all been happening so fast that we haven't had time for in-depth intelligence. Sorry, but I can't be more specific. All we know is that previous reports are that Sela loyalists have at least one Scimitar, but I wouldn't count out the possibility of several D'deridexes and Warbirds. As for Admiral Donatra, we are not sure of her status at the moment, but I will present your question to Rear Admiral Kotari, Lieutenant. Thank you."

Oseno nodded to Fleet Captain Samji before taking his seat. It would have been nice to have an ace in the hole like Admiral Donatra, especially since she'd been so helpful to the Enterprise during the Shinzon crisis, but he supposed that the Prophets couldn't give them everything they wanted.

As the other officers began asking questions, he turned his attention back to his own PADD. The prospect of facing down a Romulan Scimitar was not high on his list of things he wanted to do in his lifetime, but the ship was not impossible to take down and the good news is there would likely be only one of them. He wondered about the possibility of thalaron weapons, and cringed inwardly. If the Romulans decided to make that play, there would be little anyone could do to stop them.

On the other hand, Oseno thought, maybe we won't even have to engage them. He knew Commander Rivers and Captain Kheren of the Artemis would do what they could to try and talk Sela and Tomalak down from their decided course of action; but he also knew that it was likely that diplomacy wouldn't work. His uncle used to say that if a Romulan was giving you a hug it was more than likely that they were looking for a good place to stick a knife.

Oseno's mind was working overtime as he made notes on his PADD, and he had another thought about the Horizon's Children. Someone had said the cult had attacked the Artemis from within. He knew that most of the crew of the Alsea had come on after the ship's refit was complete and he suddenly became concerned. Could the fanatics have agents on the Alsea? Was there anything he could do to root them out? Could he trust anyone on the ship he didn't know?

The natural paranoia of being a security officer went suddenly into overdrive. He needed to rescreen records, conduct security sweeps of the ship, run security drills, run tactical simulations for battling the Romulans...there was suddenly an awfully long list of things to accomplish, and very little time to do it in.

Before Samji could attempt to move on again to his overview of the Azimuth Horizon containment, Captain Summers' voice then was heard as he stood up, getting ready for a response and to prepare his ship for departure.

"One last question, Sir, before I start to prepare the Spectre. The McKenzie is a Defiant Class starship and, if I am not mistaken, it does not have a shuttlebay due to its size. So my question is; should I lend a small detachment of shuttlecrafts to aid the McKenzie and the Marines? I will be changing the Spectre's layout to have the fighters loaded, so there will be quite a few shuttles to spare for extra support against the Horizon Children."

Samji nodded at the Captain of the Spectre.

"Well, the most viable boarding option would be transporters, but it doesn't hurt to have a Plan B, thank you, Captain."

To the statement by the Spectre's Captain, Crist responded in turn:

"The McKenzie does indeed have a shuttlebay. However it only has space for three shuttlepods, that's about it. I have little doubt the transporter won't work. Shoot till the shields drop then transport in, quite simple if you think of it. But again, the mission to stop the Children comes first."

Samji began the next and last part of the briefing.

"So, we're all aware of the factions in play and who's going to take on what responsibilities there. Now onto the actual mission to contain the anomaly."

Samji adjusted the image to show a holographic representation of the sector with Starbase 10 and the Azimuth Horizon in the vicinity, its tendrils appearing alarmingly close.

Turning back around, he then saw Commander Michael O'Conner's raised hand and sighed audibly, clearly annoyed at another interruption that, to be fair to the officer, was adhering to the letter of the law if not the spirit.

"Yes, Commander?"

"Sir, do any of the factions know of the other factions' plans?" O'Conner asked clearly with a plan in the back of his mind.

Kheren glanced at his First officer with pride in his eyes. Not only was he restoring order by example in his proper application of meeting protocol, but his very question showed that he had kept his focus despite all the distracting emotionalisms in the room.

The Andorian understood immediately what O'Conner had in mind and mentally applauded him.

*The enemy of my enemy is my ally... even if he is also my enemy*, Kheren quoted silently to himself. *Good thinking, Number One.*

Samji also knew where the Commander was going with the question, and so he answered the implied question instead.

"The Romulans have been very vocal about their intent, so I wouldn't be surprised if the Klingons and Horizon's Children know about it. They will both be willing to stop the Romulans for their own reasons. This may give us an edge in negotiations with the Klingons, Captain," he added, with a nod to Gould.

His eyes snapped back to the rest of the assembly.

"Similarly, everyone knows about the Children's intent, but there will obviously be different levels of pushback against what they're planning, the Klingons least of all."

Making a pause, he then added:

"The Klingons have been very secretive about their plans, as we had barely discovered it in time, thanks to the Alsea. Captain Ja'rod knows that it was discovered, but they will likely attempt it anyway, thinking that we will not be able to stop them. If discovered, however, the other factions would welcome it. The Horizon's Children, because any effort to extend the Anomaly in any direction is in line with their goals; and the Romulans loyal to Sela, because they would welcome the destruction of the Federation to make it easier to achieve theirs."

He continued to support his earlier point concluding:

"Therefore it is clear that our best option for diplomacy is with the Klingons, as I have previously stated, at least for fighting against the Romulans. The second best effort would be to ally with the Romulans against the Children."

"More than that, Fleet Captain," then chimmed in Kheren. " If they all know each other's intent, this means that they also will have to divide their forces between us *and* the others... maybe in some cases even ignore us for a time in favor of a greater enemy than we are."

Seeing many eyes blinking confusedly in his direction, the Andorian explained further.

"The Horizon Children will assuredly go directly against the Romulans as *they* clearly intend to *destroy* the anomaly; the Romulans themselves will immediately go against the Klingons because they *know* that they are *most* hated by them and so that they *will* be their *first* target, would the Klingons ever take control of the anomaly. As for the Klingons, they might just go for their hated Romulan neighbor first, but whether or not, they will *still* strike hard at the cultists because it is basic strategy to eliminate the weakest adversary first; more so for Klingons if this weaker opponent has shown itself as dishonorable as the cult has."

He turned back again towards Samji.

"Sir, as always, knowledge might prove our best weapon. *All* relevant information must be quickly and widely broadcasted, made fully known to *all*. It will not free us completely from danger of course, but it will most assuredly lighten the opposition against us... long enough for us to try and possibly reason with some of them... or in all eventuality, long enough to have a better chance to complete containment of the anomaly."

O'Conner nodded in agreement with his captain.

"As my captain said, diplomacy is great and all, but in this case, we should be able to get the different factions to fight for us without their knowledge. But I will have to disagree about the wide broadcast. Neither the Klingons nor the Romulans would believe it... though that is a good reason to send it."

The first officer of the Artemis paused a moment and grinned before continuing.

"We should just supplement that broadcast with a message that states the Klingons intend to kill off the Romulans first, that also understates the size of their fleet, and lastly says we are going to be late. This should be sent on a somewhat secure line. They will believe it more if they have to work for it."

Kheren chimmed in after O'Conner:

"No need, Commander; we just have to provide all the raw information we have about each other on open channels. They are all able to check and figure things out for themselves. And then, they *will* act even more for their own selfish interests... which will then free us a bit do what we must to save us all."

Before another debate could erupt, Samji cut them off.

"Clearly some sort of level of information dissemination is required. The specifics we can decide on later, however."

Speaking to all, he then said, "Please direct your attention to this holimage."

The image of the Azimuth Horizon was sectioned off into four parts. The first one he pointed to was the closest to Sol and it was highlighted in blue.

"We'll be designating this as Quadrant One. This will be the location least likely to be approached by any hostiles and will be our starting base of operations. However, we will want to eventually draw some of them here to take advantage of Starbaes 10's superior firepower."

He then moved clockwise to the next section highlighted green, which was closest to Romulan space.

"This is Quadrant Two and will be most likely the area approached by the Romulans while they attempt to fire on and destroy the anomaly."

Again, moving clockwise he gestured to the third section highlighted red, which was near Klingon territory.

"Quadrant Three was where the Klingons were attempting their 'test' and most likely where they will try again. Ion pulses at this location would cause the Horizon to expand the fastest toward Sol."

The last section was highlighted orange.

"This is Quadrant Four and is nearest to many of the systems that have been taken over by the Horizon's Children, so expect them to be there. They will also likely be trying to sabotage and destroy Starbase 10 in Quadrant One."

Samji turned away from the holographic display.

"The basic tactical plan will be for all Lotus Fleet ships we have available to first disable the multivariable subspace matrix on their warp engines. They will then go to maximum warp and circumnavigate the Horizon. Navigation routes will be disseminated to each ship in order to coordinate the efficient and all encompassing navigation in a ring around the Horizon. The purpose is really to damage subspace as much as possible, but in a path which WE define. We'll also need to collect whatever unused warp drives we can and overload and detonate them at certain spots along the path. This should serve to create a circular subspace rupture around the Anomaly."

As he spoke, the holographic display illustrated eight ships circling the anomaly several times at a greatly increased rate, leaving trails behind them. Eventually the lines formed a mesh around the anomaly in the shape of a ring.

"This will create the warp trails that the anomaly follows, and hopefully it will fill in the area like so..."

As he said this, the image then showed the Azimuth Horizon expanding to match the geometry of the mesh.

"We expect the initial journey around the anomaly to take twenty-four hours. Because of differences in maximum warp factors possible, our slowest ship, the Artemis will only be able to get around the anomaly once and halfway in that time, whereas the Lotus, our fastest, would be able to get around slightly more than three times as much. These calculations are based on if we have NO interference from the various factions. Therefore, any fights you need to engage in will slow this down; so we will have to make our skirmishes or diplomatic efforts as quick and efficient as possible."

The eight ships surrounding the anomaly in the holoimage then arranged themselves around it, two to a Quadrant.

"Whenever it is determined that there is enough a subspace rift encircling the anomaly, we would need the Wisconsin and Pittsburgh to go to Quadrant One, the Artemis and Alsea to Quadrant Two, the Lotus and Spectre to Three, and the McKenzie and Republic to Four. They will then simultaneously fire the ion pulses, of which I will allow Captain Kheren to explain shortly, since it was his science officer who is currently unavailable who discovered this technique."

"We need to iron out more of the details and likely issues surrounding this, but that's the basic plan. So... any questions?" he asked, hesitantly.

Daniel Crist nodded with the Fleet Captain announcing the job the McKenzie would be undertaking. He lifted his hand and began to speak.

"Sir, will we be taking care of the other factions first or will we first make our laps around the anomaly?"

Samji turned towards Captain Crist.

"As for what order to do things in, you will have to do what needs to be done when the problem presents itself. We have no way of knowing when each faction will show up, but I will be coordinating with tactical officers who will be watching our borders in shuttles and using a tachyon grid to detect cloaked vessels. Therefore, I should be able to give you a bit of a heads up."

Niomo, keeping with the new order, raised his hand. After being acknowledged, he stood and began.

"I agree with the overall plan, Fleet Captain. But has it taken into consideration the effects of any other Factions' plans? For example, we know that the Klingons will attempt to use Ion Pulses to accelerate the anomaly. While we are going in circles, couldn't the Klingons start their plan and disrupt our ultimate goal of sealing the Horizon in a circular pattern? I highly doubt that any of the factions would just sit idly by while we attempt our strategy."

Niomo rubbed his chin while he took another moment to think. He looked down at his PADD and pulled up additional specifications on the Alsea.

"Additionally, you are counting the Alsea as just one vessel. All three of her sections are warp-capable. While the overall warp speed might decrease, I might be able to push the Tertiary Hull's MicroCore warp speed closer to 9.4 or 5 in around twenty-four hours. Only a guess though. Either way, it looks like all we care about initially is getting enough rifts surrounding the Horizon. Using quick theory, if I reduce energy drain from the MicroCore from everything that was not shields, life support and the engines, I probably could pull it off without major modifications to the systems. Not totally sure what systems we will need to survive the Anomaly though. I also can't guarantee that the Tertiary Hull will not break down and need a pick up..." He looked at Commander Rivers, "Of course, this would bring down any tactical abilities of the Alsea as a whole, should we become engaged and the tertiary hull was still lagging behind, or unable to support the other two sections. Suppose this's my CO & XO's decision, not mine."

He sat down, ideas flooding his mind. He started taking down notes for possible redesigns of the MicroCore. Possibly even upgrading Engineering to house a larger core.

*There isn't enough time however. Sounds like Samji wants us moving out within the day.*

He sighed. He wished he had a mission under his belt before he had to make modifications to a warp core he didn't fully understand.

Oseno listened as the Alsea's new chief engineer entered his thoughts regarding using the Alsea as three separate vessels in the Azimuth Horizon plan and was immediately against it. While the Alsea's three sections could possibly speed up the process that Fleet Captain Samji had outlined it would put Louts Fleet at a distinct disadvantage in any fight. Trying to contain his thoughts and observe the decorum the meeting had taken on Oseno also raised his hand and waited to be acknowledged before standing.

"With all due respect to the engineering experience of Commander Lire, and my lack thereof, as the Alsea's tactical officer I couldn't in good conscience support anything that would separate the Alsea for any reason other than to engage an enemy. As the commander pointed out if one or two sections lagged and were separated from the others then the ship would be nearly crippled in a fight, and quite frankly I don't expect the Romulans to be in a talking mood. As we proved during our confrontation with the Klingons the Alsea is incredibly effective when all three sections work in tandem to take down an enemy force. Separating the ship would be...suspect tactics at best, and deadly at worst. So, tactically speaking Sir, the Alsea needs to be in one piece while participating in the containment of the Horizon and have multi-vector assault mode available to take on anything that might get thrown our way. I would, of course, defer to my commanding officer's wishes but that is my recommendation."

Oseno finished and took his seat again. He felt he'd made his point well hopefully without disrespecting LtCdr. Lire at all even though he thought the human was crazy for suggesting that they gimp the Alsea in such a fashion.

The engineer nodded and shrugged.

"Oh trust me, Lieutenant, I completely understand it would weaken the Alsea. Like I said, I defer to you and the Commander on this decision, barring any override from the Fleet Captain. I was merely suggesting that if we could finish our operation faster than the other factions can arrive, and avoid a fight all together, then it would be beneficial to inspect all avenues to achieve that goal. Either way, I'll still be making some modifications to the microcores. It's what I do when I get bored."

It was unfortunate that the Tactical officer was not fully thinking outside the box, but he had to commend him for not backing down easily.

*Tactical officers... always looking for a fight. Even when it might be possible to avoid a fight altogether.*

As he listened to the Alsea officers arguing their approach as to how to best involve their ship in the task ahead, Captain Kheren stood to request the floor. Once he got it, he turned all four oculars towards the crew of the warship, his own tactical mind in full gear.

"Gentlebeings... why not do both? My ship and yours are both assigned to the same sector of the anomaly and to the same opposing force. Since the Artemis is the slowest ship in the fleet, albeit with the largest warp field, it would be no effort for the Alsea to stay in formation with us even in multivector assault configuration. This way, we would provide the largest subspace trench and no less than four deflectors to close fractures. but not only would this more than compensate for our slower progression, but the Alsea would be already deployed and ready to face efficiently any aggressive opposition coming our way."

Marking a pause to let them think upon his words, the Andorian finished by adding:

"My ship is also the least tactically advantaged; but with the extra reserve power we have from our refitted warp core, we can easily extend shield cover to any pressed section of the Alsea if need be... and add twenty phaser arrays and five hundred torpedoes to any needed counteroffensive if we fail to talk the Romulans out of their plans. So, I see no problem in following both your sound advices."

Samji nodded appreciatively to Captain Kheren.

"It would indeed be beneficial to attempt to consider all such creative plans but, remember, realistic limitations at all times. I like the idea of using the MVAM for enhancing the rift even further... after all, if the power consumed for the operation is more than double, so too will be the effects on subspace. However, if that is how we approach it, I agree that they should stay in formation at all times so that the ship can reform if necessary."

Samji then remembered one more important thing he needed to bring up before they could clear out.

"Alright, you know our enemies. You know who you are ordered to engage, and you are aware of the preliminary plan for containing the anomaly. Now, the last thing we need is a secondary plan... to safely collapse or dissipate the Azimuth Horizon if all else fails," he said, with a gesture asking for input from the science officers and others who might have any idea not yet thought of.

Gould sat taking in the ongoing debate with only a passing interest. He watched as the Cardassian claimed an odd kind of moral superiority in taking on the task of killing his friend, realizing like most there that it would exclude him from the choice more than anything else. Even after being dressed down by Niomo his steadfast arrogance persisted. It was amazing to watch.

Several times, the captain of the flagship made to put in a suggestion, wanting to contribute to the conversation, but it seemed pointless.

He didn't know enough to contribute anything, the Azimuth Horizon was only newly discovered by him and only as an obstacle on his first mission. The children he'd only just now learned about, and it seemed he would have nothing to do with them anyway.

Only luck would bring him into contact with the Romulans, if you could call that luck. But at least, he knew how to deal with them... but the Klingons? what the hell was going to do with them? they hated Vulcans.. they despised Romulans.. and they were at war with the Federation! negotiations would be.. difficult.

Without realizing it he slumped a bit at the thought and sighed.

He looked at the Andorian and his crew. They all seemed so confident, so sure of their ability... and wondered if he would ever have something like that again. Thoughts of the USS Dusenbergs destruction blurred into his mind but he shook them off. Now wasn't the time for that.

He would do his job and he would do it as best as he could. There was nothing else he could do. If it was to be his roll to play back up to the Spectre, so be it. They couldn't all be heroes.

But try as he might... one thought picked at the back of mind refusing to be ignored..

*What if... they just don't trust me.. with another ship?*

Again standing to ask for the floor, Kheren looked at the starbase commander.

"If I may, Sir, I beleive I can offer this alternative from what has been thoroughly researched and field-tested by Mister Syntron, my chief of science, and the rest of my crew."

Following a nod from the fleet captain, the Andorian stepped down the levels of the amphitheater to join him on the central podium.

"With your permission, Sir..."

Then he called outloud:

"Computer: link with USS Artemis computer; on starbase main conference room holoemitter, display ship records from stardate 87057.8."

As the tridimensional representation came to life, Kheren addressed the assembled officers. "You may all request from starbase's databanks technical and research specifications needed to quickly and easily adapt your systems for the task," he began. "But to put it simply and succintly: since polaric ions are capable of generating waves of subspace fractures, inversing them reverse the process and effectively close these fractures."

On the holodisplay appeared an excerpt from the recorded logs of the Artemis, from the time it had discovered the X'Ell Dyson shell; indeed, the titanic spherical construct the size of a solar system could be glimpsed against the background of stars from time to time, as the recorder followed the gyrations of the USS Artemis before the cosmic inferno of the Azimuth Horizon. Another, much smaller disc-shaped craft could be seen as well, eventually revealing itself to be the detached bridge of the Ambassador class refit.

"As you can see, we already field-tested the procedure successfully and, with it, averted the destruction of the X'Ell homeworld. By recalibrating the main deflector dish to emit anti-polaric ion pulses, we could use it in concentrated beams directly into the fractures and, in effect... stitch them up."

On the tridimensional image, both crafts were darting white bursts of energy from their front end. Each time a pulse struck an emerging tendril of plasma, the blaze was blown out like a candle flame.

"As you can all guess, our one ship alone could not neutralize enough of these fractures to even begin to smother an anomaly of this magnitude. But just as obviously, a concerted approach with all the fleet's ships would cut off some of those lines of expansion while we also entrench its overall growth with directed subspace fractures from our adjusted warp geometry. This will give us the best chance to permanently trap this thing within its own current subspace and normal space domains. And if not... with enough time and luck, possibly cut off all its doorways into normal space."

Making a pause to let everyone digest the data, the Andorian took a breath and then added:

"From reports of Lieutenant Pel, the chief science officer of the Alsea I read this morning, we can also implement a field-tested sensor-nav reflex system of her own devising that will allow our ships to predict the emergence of a plasma ejection from a subspace fracture. By connecting this sensor-warning system to navigation and to our modified deflector emissions, each ship will be able to effectively detect, steer clear and close up any emanation of the anomaly before it strikes. And, to be on the safe side, implementing the Metaphasic Shielding Program Laforge One will further guarantee the safety of all ships and crews, even those without ablative regenerative armor. This way, we will dig our firewall around this cosmic blaze... or, if it comes to worst, eventually hope to cut off all its entry points into our universe."

Kheren ended the projection.

"Configuring our ship's systems this way should also help us better concentrate on dealing with any... interference... while effectively caging, or smothering, the Azimuth Horizon."

Saluting Fleet Captain Allen Samji, the commanding officer of the Artemis stepped down from the podium and went back to his seat.

"Thank you for your input, Captain Kheren," Fleet Captain Samji then said. "While not exactly an alternate plan, it will help supplement our main one and give us more time and allow for our ships to more safely skirt the edge of the Anomaly."

Niomo smiled as the Fleet Captain and Captain Kheren sided with him on his discussion with Lieutenant Jureth. After the Captain was done explaining his anti-polaric ion pulse plan, he started speaking.

"Not to back track on you, Captain, but are you sure you want to fly in formation with the Alsea? Your ship may be the slowest, but without any modifications, the tertiary section can only reach warp 8.0. Assuming I can actually pull off modifying an entire MicroCore in a day, I'll only be able to get her to 9.5 at best. As far as I can understand the Fleet Captain's plan, but I believe it sounds like he wants to have as many ships as possible complete laps. If you slow down with us, that might make problems, no?" Looking to the Fleet Captain, "Maybe you could shed some light, sir. What is better? Having more ships making laps or fewer ships completing more laps?"

Niomo cleared his throat.

"Either way, Captain, your plan seems sound. I am no scientist, so I cannot judge the plan on its full merits, but I feel that from an engineering standpoint, these modifications should be fairly easy for even an ensign to do. However, speaking of this anomaly...how did it start? Not to sound pessimistic, but what happens if it opens again somewhere else?"

He sat down after he was done to let the remaining officers discuss other plans that he was not involved in. He had his mission and now he needed to make sure the Alsea was ready.

The starbase commander now looked at him. Turning to Niomo, Samji then said:

"If you can get it to 9.5, essentially four ships at that speed would be preferable. We would designate this route as the main trench and you would go from Starbase 10 around once, and then another quarter to deal with the Romulans if they are making trouble in Quadrant Two. The other ships will be able to supplemental trenches that will not be quite as attractive to the anomaly's path, but will be our backups. If you can't get it to near that speed, it will not be enough to get around even once, and at that point the two ships travelling together at 9.6 would be the better option."



Niomo looked up from his PADD for a moment to acknowledge the Fleet Captain.

"9.5 will be a stretch, but we'll do our best. That is an eighteen point seventy-five percent increase in a warp core that isn't really designed to be pushed that far. 9.4 might be more reasonable. It might not seem like much to an untrained person, but it's lightyears apart. As I said, no guarantees. I'd enjoy not exploding into a ball of fire."

Samji nodded. Glancing then at Captain Kheren, the starbase commander then added:

"The Artemis will also be able to carry the most amount of warp cores for detonation around the main trench," Samji explained, then realized he needed to mention another task. "I need a volunteer to coordinate the collection and distribution of those. We'll need to attach computerized thrusters to each that will allow them to stay at the designated area, and we'll also need to time their overloads so that the explosions will occur synchronously."

he now looked at his own aide.

"We may need to go around to many of the civilian cargo vessels and strongly encourage them to donate their warp cores to the cause. We will, of course, build each a new one at a later date."

After a nod of acknowledgement from Grok, he went back to the chief engineer of the Alsea.

"To answer your second question, Mister Lire; no one yet knows how the Anomaly came to be... only that it happened centuries, millenias ago and has only now become a problem due to our high warp travel routes. Our best bet for the future would be to catch it sooner if it happens again and use our plan, if it works, when it is smaller."

Lire nodded in agreement, then opened his PADD and started drafting orders to his engineering staff.

## **USS Alsea engineering staff**

### **Priority message.**

**All staff are ordered off duty as of receipt of this message. Report back to duty at 1000 sharp. Any warp specialists are to begin disabling MicroCore 3 for immediate modifications. Additional orders will be given when I arrive on site.**

### **Chief Niomo Lire**

He sent the message out and began drafting a second message to his assistant, Lieutenant James Thompson. A man he fully trusted since his days aboard the Lotus when they were both assigned there. Thompson had advanced in rank, but once again had fallen under Niomo's supervision.

### **Thompson,**

**Classified mission coming through, make sure the MC3 is not tampered with in any way. Supervise all major disconnections. I don't need a coolant tube sealed and sabotaged with Trilithium Resin. Briefing still on-going. Will contact when ready for beam-out. Work Smart and Carry on.**

**Niomo.**

Jureth could only shake his head as he listened to the plans the Alsea's Chief Engineer, Captain Kheren, and the Fleet Captain laid out for the Alsea. He didn't like, not one bit.

In his mind, separating the Alsea, even in formation with the Artemis, was a mistake; and he had the uneasy feeling that it was one they would regret. He was sure Captain Siduri would have never gone along with such a plan but, unfortunately, the captain was not here to object.

He noted Lieutenant Commander Lire's satisfaction that his recommendation was being taken over Oseno's own and shook his head again.

*They're making a mistake, Jureth thought. Lire is going to rush modifications on warp cores that are already highly modified, and might just get us all killed in the process never mind the poor tactics of it.*

The human phrase "playing with fire" immediately entered Jureth's mind and he had visions of one of the Alsea's warp cores overloading, or going completely dead and leaving the most powerful ship in the fleet crippled.

"Prophets help us," he said quietly though not loud enough for anyone save perhaps Josh Vincent sitting next to him to hear it.

Oseno then turned his attention back to his PADD and fired off orders to his assistants Lieutenants Steele and T'Lana.

**Initiate full shipboard security sweeps for contraband weapons, explosives, and anything else out of the ordinary. Sweep all major spaces, and crew quarters and if anyone gives you trouble send them to me, or arrest them and confine them to the brig. Also, it is likely the ship will be opearting in MVAM shortly after departure, so confirm MVAM assignments and make sure all sections have appropriate security complements and weapons. Finally, set up a computer guided review of all personnel records. Search for anything that might indicate a person is not whom they say they are or could have potential ties to any fanatical organizations. These orders are to be carried out immediately.**

### **Lieutenant Oseno**

Jureth then turned his attention back to the briefing even though he was tempted to walk out and take charge of the Alsea's security preparations himself.

Standing up after a short discussion with both Lieutenants Scott and Brie, his chief engineer and chief of ops, Kheren spoke, once he got a nod of acknowledgement from the Fleet Captain.

"Sir, the Artemis has seven cargo bays available; but if we are talking about warp cores of various size from different civilian ships, most of them cargo ships, and taking into account their magnetic bottle and containment housing, we, the largest ship in the fleet, might not be able to carry much more than that same number... and the other ships being much smaller, maybe none at all. The average starship warp core is between five and ten decks high."

Before anyone could frown at the problem, he offered his solution:

"However, this starbase has many hundreds of warp capable shuttlecrafts, all using a standardized format of micro warp cores only a few meters in lenght. Cannibalizing them could provide all ships with much more power cores for our purpose; the Artemis and certainly the Spectre could then carry hundreds of them and even the McKenzie could bring at least half a dozen herself."

After looking around at his fellow starship commanders, the Andorian brought back his four eyes to Allen Samji to finish his proposal.

"The detonation control would be here, at the starbase and, with the thousands of technicians here and on each ship, we can implement this very quickly. If an evacuation becomes necessary, all the deprived shuttles would still be able to operate efficiently at impulse. Since the anomaly can close in as fast as a subspace signal, their warp capability would not make a difference anyway... but many cores detonated between here and the Azimuth Horizon would shield their escape at worst... and at best, allow us to mine the entire area of the anomaly and contain it all the more efficiently... not to mention help deter any... interference along the way."

With possible need for the McKenzie to carry warp cores, Crist spoke.

"Sir, the McKenzie won't be able to carry any full scale warp cores; however, we could carry the smaller versions, as Captain Kheren said. If it is necessary, we could clear our shuttle bay for extra room. Although I think I'd like to keep at least one shuttle pod, just in case it's needed. Either way, the McKenzie is ready, just give the word."

As he listened to his captain, O'Conner couldn't help but wonder why people thought that warp cores were more than just antimatter generator.

"Sir, if we need antimatter explosions this base has nearly thirty thousand photon torpedoes. Unlike the more advanced quantum and transphasic torpedoes, photon torpedoes are still at their core a basic antimatter/matter reaction. For the operation, we could easily install a timer or remote detonator on them. Also, if we need larger explosions, we can give them a fifty percent higher yield without bending safety regs, or we could just use more of them."

"First of all," Samji replied, "Captain Kheren has a point. The warp cores in our Starbase's shuttles would be a more viable option."

"As for the Commander's suggestion, we need something that will interact with subspace to cause the actual rift. A photon torpedo has no interaction with subspace. We'll need an actual warp field to form or be forming when the core explodes."

The disembodied voice of Lieutenant Commander Sangliar spoke up again from within the crowd of taller people surrounding him.

"In that case, Sir, a warp core will not be good enough either."

Samji mentally kicked himself for missing the obvious. In the turmoil he had forgotten the warp theory 101 he had been taught at the Academy.

"Of course, Mister Sangliar, you are correct. Without the nacelles, we of course will not have the necessary warp field just from a warp core."

He began to think of another solution, hoping at least someone in the conference hall could free him from the responsibility...

Kheren realized that his first officer had cleverly provided quite a valuable insight to a novel, dramatic situation that until now had them all thinking vertically. Although the captain of the Artemis was no engineer, he was a tactician, albeit one with a degree in cosmology... enough to understand what was discussed. And like all Andorians, he was pragmatic by nature. And so he simply chimed in.

"Sir... why not use the shuttles themselves then?"

With all eyes on him, he felt dutybound to explain:

"Basically, yes, warp cores are just big bombs. Torpedoes should do the trick as well if in sufficient numbers and grouping... but pinpointing them inside subspace fractures to have them interact properly without drifting or losing signal would put a uncertainty into the plan... Also, torpedoes can not get from here to the anomaly, so we would have to carry them and deploy them like mines, just like we would have done with the cores. I don't know about you, gentlebeings, but the idea of cruising through a minefield while enemies may come and shoot wildly at us is suddenly worrisome to me... whether we use warheads or power cores..."

Shaking his head, Kheren looked at the starbase commander.

"Sir, piloted shuttles have weapons, shields and evasives to defend themselves... and pilots who can bring them in place and start a cascade failure of their power core right at the proper moment, like after we have dealt with interference, as we retrieve them and clear the zone before the final detonation."

The chief engineer of the Alsea paused for a moment to kick himself over the problem of the warp cores. He should have realized it as soon as it was said. He then began to think about what Captain Kheren had just suggested.

"I like your idea, Captain. Both the delivery and the method are much more easily controlled than what we originally had in mind. Going more into the minutia, isn't it possible for us to pre-program the shuttles ahead of time? I'd hate to think what would happen if the Children got installed as said shuttle pilots. It would also reduce the chance of a fatality for that section of the mission. Finally, assuming the good Fleet Captain is not going to be aboard any of the ships on this operation, it allows him to control everything from the command center here at the station.

O'Conner raised an eyebrow at the idea of piloted bomb, from the man that wanted a skeleton crew only minutes before.

"That might work, Sir, but you would need an instant detonation not a cascade failure. The warp bubble would collapse before the warp core safety features would fail. I believe a better choice would be class V to IX probes. The effects of the storm should hide them well enough and we can put a detonation charge on them without endangering starfleet pilots."

Samji nodded appreciatively at all the officers providing solutions. Not only that, but they were presented calmly and with respect, not shouted angrily or sown with indignation as with previous topics.

"We'll certainly be able to program in an instant detonation at the correct moment while the shuttle is at warp. Probes have some of the same flaws as torpedoes in that they can be so easily damaged and will have to be pinpointed into the existing fractures rather than being able to create their own fracture to tie into the overall trench."

he nodded to the officers present.

"I like all these suggestions, gentlebeings. I will have to agree that I would prefer we program the shuttles to do the job rather than risk lives. We will operate them remotely from Operations here. We have two-hundred Danube-class runabouts and three hundred Type-9 shuttles. These are our oldest models and will be perfect for the deployment. It's costly, but anything to survive this will be worth it. This will also leave five hundred more newer shuttles on the starbase in case we need to evacuate. Of course we want to cause enough of a subspace rift encircling the anomaly, but not cause explosions within the anomaly itself, so we'll need our science officers to run some simulations to determine the desired number and location."

Samji took a deep breath and stood straighter.

"You have your orders, and it is up to your ships' leadership to decide how to execute them. Strategies should be discussed and I want you to be sharing your ideas with other officers from the other ships that share your role, not just your own ship. Come up with as many ideas as possible and present them to your XO's and Captains. I'll remain here to answer any additional questions, but I think this meeting has fulfilled its purpose."

Hands behind his back at attention, the starbase commander finished:

"May good fortune smile upon us all," indicating that it was indeed time to get to work.

As people were getting up to leave, Sorripto watched a group of officers walk past him. Addressing the group as a whole, Sorripto spoke.

"On my planet we have a saying. While not direct, it roughly translates to the voice of reason will often come from the most unreasonable man in the room. People want to talk about a few stragglers as experience. Congratulations; you just won a fist fight with a small security guard and are now claiming you have the experience to take down a special operations soldier. When the time comes, I hope someone here listened to the dumb Cardassian in the back of the room."

Walking around the group, Sorripto did not wait for a response. Instead his body language said that was as close to an apology as they were going to get, and as far as he was concerned this conversation was over.

*I just hope when the time comes that someone here listened to what I say.*

## CHAPTER THREE : FLAMES

*FREEDOM!* Niomo thought as he stretched in his seat.

The, as he stood, he looked to the other members of his crew.

"If you will all excuse me, I have a few matters to attend to."

He turned and looked for Lieutenant Commander Sangliar. After he found the shorter Tellarite, he approached him just as he walked outside the conference room.

"Lieutenant Commander, I believe you promised me a look at a top secret fighter?"

After a quick glance around the room, O'Conner turned to the crew of the Artemis.

"We know what we need to do, so let's get to it."

And with that, the first officer of the Artemis stood up and he too went to Sangliar outside of the conference room.

"Yes, what of this secret fighter? You didn't break it yet did you?" He said with a smile.

Niomo nodded to the Commander.

"Lieutenant Commander Niomo Lire, Sir. New Technology is made to be broken. Hopefully we will be able to see how she ticks."

"Aye, Sir, if you'll follow me," Sangliar said succinctly.

The Tellarite was all business and he wanted to get the information to the Engineers as quickly as possible without the usual pleasantries associated with meeting a new officer.

He led whomever would follow to the nearest turbolift.

"Shuttle Bay 23," he ordered the cabin, which sent them hurtling down ninety decks through the Starbase to the desired location.

Fortunately, the turbolift's complex mapping system sent them to a horizontal tube to take them a quarter of a way around the circular base, and outward such that they would have a minimal walk across the kilometer-wide deck from their departure point.

They then entered the shuttlebay which had several engineering officers and crewmen walking back and forth between some of the older shuttles and speaking in low but intense voices and occasionally shouting out an order or recommendation. It made the whole bay hum with mixed voices like an old Earth market bazaar.

In the far corner was a compartment usually used by the base to keep illicit cargo obtained by security teams that regularly search the contents of civilian cargo ships that are using the base for their transactions. When they approached the compartment, Sangliar keyed in some commands near the door.

"Authorization Sangliar Alpha-two-niner-Gamma."

The door slid open to reveal a sizeable room with various boxes shoved hurriedly to the side so that the fighter could be piloted in through a large opening on the other side.

The fighter was a small craft compared to most similar vessels, even a Maquis raider. It had room for one pilot only. It was slender but longer than a Type-9 shuttle. Two men were on top with a panel open to grant access to the engine beneath and were carefully disassembling certain parts and laying them carefully on an antigrav lift beside them. A third was below, waiting for the necessity to take command of the lift in order to move the parts aside on the ground where they had them all assembled in groups based on their function. They nodded to Sangliar when they saw him, and simply went back to their work. They knew of his distaste for pleasantries and figured they would not be introduced to the other engineer standing beside him... at least not yet.

"We're carefully reverse engineering the thing," Sangliar said to Niomo, "so feel free to lend your assistance if you have the opportunity. All parts and connections are being meticulously mapped out."

He gestured for Niomo's PADD and with a few swipes of his fingers he instantly brought up all the specs that the engineers had documented so far. He handed the PADD back to Niomo.

"The main problem with being inside the anomaly is its effect on matter and antimatter. Atomic and subatomic reactions increase exponentially causing the warp core to quickly move toward a cascade failure. Impulse engines and thrusters are affected as well. Anything reacting with the environment will be affected. In fact, the only thing keeping our atoms from being torn apart instantly is the ship's shields. Therefore, the only way to travel through is to brute force your way through the entry point and rely on inertia to carry you through to the other side. Slowing down, stopping, starting from a stopped state and turning are all impossible. If your ship gets stopped for any reason, the only way known to get out is what the Artemis did: to use the tractor beam to collect a series of debris to make a wall and then fire a salvo of torpedoes in close enough proximity to cause the force of the explosion to propel your ship outward. That, of course, comes with its own set of problems."

He glanced at the parts already laid out on the antigrav sled.

"Something about this ship allows the impulse engines to function at least for a short time. We also found this graviton generator, which perhaps would allow for the ability to slingshot around asteroids, debris, and other objects within the anomaly," he added, pointing to the part. "This may be why the ship was built to be so small."

Niomo thought about what the engineer said. It was difficult to comprehend the fact that a small ship could somehow get around the anomaly without a problem, but larger ships with more sophisticated equipment were destroyed.

"Does the ship have a warp core? Where is it getting it's power from? From what I briefly read during the briefing, it seems as though everything needs to be running on battery power. Maybe this grav generator is somehow making a Hampster Wheel that can recharge the batteries when they get low. Of course, the generator itself needs power, so it creates a paradox. However, using the batteries' original power as a source, it would be possible."

The Tellarite nodded.

"It has a micro-warp core that has a maximum of Warp 6, but I doubt that's how they're navigating the anomaly. More than likely the key is in the impulse drive."

"Hmmm. Possible. What have your boys found so far?" Niomo asked.

"Not much, Sir, in regards to the impulse engines," Sangliar responded. "I was hoping you and the other Engineers could take a look."

"Very well." Niomo nodded. "I suggest the first thing we look into is how the engines were getting power. If we can figure out a way to supply our impulse engines with power, even for a limited time, that does not drain our reserve batteries...Well, that would be a fantastic discovery."

"Right you are, Sir," Sangliar said, handing him a hypospanner. "Let's get to work then."

The pair focused primarily on the impulse engine, examining anything that looked out of the ordinary. It was clear that the Horizon's Children had some very good designers and mechanics working on the thing. It looked as well built and designed as anything Starfleet could put together, and thinking about it, the Tellarite presumed that they probably were previous Starfleet officers.

Then, seeing something interesting, Sangliar crawled deeper behind the engine so much that his entire short frame almost disappeared within the belly of the ship. A small bioneural circuit gel pack was sectioned off with just a few EPS conduits running between it and the engine. It was near a separate dedicated power conversion module and he noticed a switch that had a manual override. Reaching in with his left hand, he triggered the manual override and grunted with shock as a forcefield appeared just inches from his face. Jumping back, he gathered his wits quickly from the shock and motioned to the small enclosed area. It appeared to section of the circuitry and power conversion module and actually release the couplings to the engine to section the whole thing off inside.

After recovering from the initial shock of almost having his nose surgically removed from his face, Sangliar turned to the more experience Engineer.

"Sir, do you think?... it is like a floodgate," he said, trying to explain his thoughts. "Protect the power source with a forcefield just like the Artemis had to do with the warp core. But then, once a certain amount of power has built up, release the forcefield and allow it to feed the impulse engines for a short burst. Perhaps that's why they need the graviton generator; to supplement their way through the asteroids and debris and allow for navigation through quick slingshot calculations when the engine is off and protected."

Niomo shook his head as he had been daydreaming over the schematics.

"Sorry about that. Uh...your theory is sound, but I was under the impression that we needed to have our warp cores deactivated completely. Unless.....could it be possible that that force field isn't like a standard field? What if their generator has been modified to deploy a metapahsic shield? Like a shield within a shield. It would provide a stronger resistance to the anomaly and possibly allow a warp core to remain on line, generating a small amount of power."

He put a finger to his forehead.

"It still doesn't make sense."



"Oh, I doubt they're using the warp core," Sangliar responded. "The interior of the Anomaly seems to be quite small in fact, so the warp core is absolutely unnecessary anyway."

Michael O'Conner had been quietly watching the two work for a while; then, he smiled to himself as it clicked in his mind.

The cultists were using a very basic binary control scheme. He had read about this before on other projects, most notably the ancient V2 rocket of twentieth century Earth. A binary motor only had two modes; on or off. If the crews were to run the cores like this, they could turn off the cores before they started to overload, allowing the cores to generate medium amount of power... in theory.

After getting a bit lost in his own mind with this idea, he finally chimed in.

"True, a warp field would be useless... but a reinforced binary pulsing warp core would be able to maintain enough energy in the EPS grid to feed all the graviton generator and create a shell of gravitons."

As he continued he moved to examine the vessel's thrusters.

"This should allow for normal impulse operations. With a few modifications, we could do this on a larger scale... though I wouldn't suggest running other systems on a pulsing warp core. I would suggest that we would run everything else on batteries, as we wouldn't have time to properly determine the maximum frequency we can safely run a core."

Niomo shook his head.

"Good thinking, Commander. But I don't think that is how this fighter operated."

He tapped on his PADD and brought up the adjusted schematics of the ship, with the power conversion module that Sangliar found.

"Look. this looks more like a fusion reactor than a warp core. Which makes sense. Instead of risking a warp core breach, they just worked around it; using something that the anomaly wouldn't affect. Additionally, because most of our ships are larger than this fighter, we probably would be able to set up larger, or multiple versions. We should easily be able to supply us with enough power to recreate this "floodgate" to give us impulse at minimum."

Niomo looked at the fighter's engines, trying to see if there was anything different about them.

"That being said, I do agree that everything else should be run on batteries. Though, we'd be poor engineers if we couldn't at least present a mostly dangerous plan to run the ships off the reactors."

Looking to Sangliar he asked then:

"Besides the energy generation and gravitron generator, is there anything different about this ship than ours? Different metals? Types of energy used ?"

"Not that we've found yet, Sir," Sangliar replied, in a similarly matter-of-fact manner. "I think we have come up with a best case theory. Let's run some simulations. The Starbase computer should have parameters similar to the ones recorded in the Azimuth Horizon, albeit with some manual tweaking by me, since they tend to break the known laws of physics."

Sangliar moved to a display on the side of the cargo bay which interfaced with the central computer.

"Computer, begin a simulation; Environment: Azimuth Horizon Sangliar One."

He looked at Lieutenant Commander Lire.

"Let's start off small, shall we?"

"Computer, add the USS McKenzie to the environment," Sangliar continued. "Initial velocity zero. Warp core state is off, with a level 10 forcefield erected around it."

If a Tellarite could smile he would have at that point.

"Now comes the fun part," he added gruffly.

The possibility of working on new engineering cases and designs was what he lived for.

"Computer, how many redundant deuterium reactors does the McKenzie have?"

"The USS McKenzie has one redundant deuterium reactor," the computer said in reply.

"Add four more, take two offline, and use the other four in a repeating cycle, overlapping each cycle by twenty-five percent."

It was similar to the way ancient Earth pistons operated. Each cylinder contained a piston that moved up and down, but in all vehicles, their movement was staggered. Most four-cylinder vehicles had pairs moving in tandem, but occasionally the places where they attached to the rod would be staggered in quarters, as these reactors would be. This was especially the case on the eight-cylinder ones.

"Activity time of cycle required," the computer commanded of the Tellarite Engineer.

"Let's say five minutes," Sangliar responded.

It had been at least that long until the Artemis had realized their predicament and shut off the engines.

"Erect a forcefield around each reactor and include a physical switch for the EPS conduit such that it will retract as the forcefield is raised. Cycle the forcefields on as the reactor is turned off. Modify the deflector to create a graviton generator that will be aimed at each nearest asteroid or large debris the McKenzie encounters. Simulate the success rate of the McKenzie's escape from the Azimuth Horizon using these parameters as well as for differentials in the cycle timing and number of reactors."

Since it would take a while, before he told the computer to begin processing, he waited for any input from the others in case he had missed a detail.

As Sangliar looked at the other engineers, Niomo just nodded.

"Look's good to me. We can't find out what's wrong until we break something. And that something, luckily, is a computer program; not a real ship."

O'Conner trusted the Tellarite and his engineering people.

"Let's see it."

"Computer, process the simulation," Sangliar said, and then watched as the data was processed and a holographic projection of the USS McKenzie was seen beginning to move through and make a path around several large asteroids that had been pulled into the Anomaly. It plotted its course out and continued to use the bursts of the impulse engines and various calculations around the asteroids to slingshot its way through turns.

The scenario and others were played out using the different defined parameters until Sangliar said, "Disable visual representation," at which point the computer was able to process each of the hundreds of iterations at full speed.

"Simulation complete," the female voice of the computer stated, and the results were displayed in front of them. With more redundant reactors or higher cycle times the damage was greater, but too few or too short of a cycle and the ship didn't receive enough power to make it through. It displayed the most ideal setup although several different combinations resulted in success.

Sangliar said finally, "Computer, run the same simulation for the other four ships and send all five results to the Captain, XO, and Chief Engineer of each."

Satisfied, he turned and motioned to the officers who had accompanied him.

"I'm going to keep looking over this thing, but you might want to consider returning to your ships. I'll be sure to pass on anything else I find."

"Thanks for all your hard work Marksus," Niomo said. "Let's hope nothing drastic changes in the specific simulations. Just remember that the Alsea will be flying in MAVM formation. That's three ships with smaller engines than 1 one."

He thanked the other engineers before tapping his combadge.

"Alsea, one to beam up directly to Engineering."

Niomo dematerialized and left Starbase 10.

"Let's hope this works in real life. Would hate to have to come back and haunt you." O'Conner jabbed at the Tellarite as he left the cargo bay the old fashion way.

\* \* \*

As the meeting came to a close, Josh nodded to Jureth as they both stood and moved off. Josh made his way out of the meeting room and beamed back aboard the Alsea.

"Thank you Chief," Josh said as he stepped off the transporter before tapping his combadge.

"Vincent to Kiels," he said. "Is everything ready for our transfer?"

"Yes, Sir," came Nidiri's reply. "I've gathered our belongings and informed the department staff about our transfer."

"Very good; meet me in my office in ten minutes and we will head to the Lotus together," Josh said as he stepped into the turbolift.

"Operations office," he ordered as the turbolift doors closed.

As he arrived in his office, Josh was going through a mental checklist for his transfer. He sat at his desk to file his final report aboard the Alsea.

"Computer, begin recording."

**Chief Operations Officer's Log, Lieutenant Junior Grade Josh Vincent, stardate 87170.86.**

**This will be my final entry as I have been transferred to the USS Lotus, effective immediately. My assistant chief, Ensign Nidiri Kiels, will be joining me aboard the Lotus, so I recommend that Ensign Shawn Hunter, the current chief flight officer, take over the department until the captain finds a replacement. All systems have been repaired from the encounter with the Klingon fleet and are fully operational.**

"Computer, end log."

He paused for a moment before moving to the next item on his checklist.

"Computer, begin recording a message for Acting Captain Rivers."

**Captain,**

**I received orders to report to the USS Lotus as Chief of Security just before the Horizon briefing. I have filed my final report and made all operations systems ready for action. In order to properly prepare the Lotus' security for the upcoming operation, I will be departing with Ensign Kiels immediately. I speak for both of us when I say that it has been an honor serving with you. Good luck and stay safe.**

"End recording."

Just as he finished his message, Nidiri came into the office carrying two duffel bags. She left them by the door and took a seat across from Josh.

"Are you all ready to go?" she asked.

"I believe so," he said, pausing to run through his checklist one last time. "Yes, let's head out."

The two officers grabbed their bags and made their way to the transporter room, where Chief Jones was waiting.

"Best of luck on the Lotus, Sir," the transporter chief said. "If you're ready, I can beam you aboard the Lotus now."

"Thank you Chief," Josh replied, "but I'd like to beam back to the starbase first. I need to check in with Captain Gould before I get settled on his ship."

Josh stepped onto the transporter pad next to Nidiri and gave Chief Jones the order to energize. As the two officers appeared outside the meeting room on Starbase 10, Josh made his way to a security officer standing near the doorway.

"Has Captain Gould left the meeting room yet?" he asked.

"No, Sir," replied the officer.

"I guess we'll wait for him here," Josh said to Nidiri as he moved to the side of the corridor to wait.

He then turned and sent a message to Captain Gould's PADD informing him of his transfer and that he was waiting outside the conference room, hoping that he did not interrupt his meeting.

Because, as the general meeting broke up, Captain Gould finally raised his hand.

"Fleet Captain? if I may, I would like to ask all the ship captains to remain a moment longer, when everyone else will have exited the room, if you would."

As they waited for the room to empty itself, the Half-Vulcan whispered to his CMO.

"I'll be along in a few minutes. I don't expect this to take long."

After the room was cleared, Gould went on.

"I wish to bring up the unspoken possibility that we have and most certainly don't want to use.. the Omega directive." He let the words settle in before going on.

Then he followed quickly by adding:

"Also, creating a sub-space rupture using a series of preset tri-cobalt devices should create an effective 'fire break' against the anomaly, literally destroying its mode of travel. I don't make this suggestion lightly I assure you, but I think the option needs to be explored before it's too late to contain the effect, if only as a last resort."

He sat back waiting to see how this idea would be considered.

"People, get in touch with your colleague on the Alsea and discuss joint preparations and actions with them," ordered Kheren just as he heard the request from the flagship captain.

Once they were all alone with the starbase commander and Gould brought up the classified Omega molecule idea between them and the use of tricobalt devices, Kheren's antennae flattened on his white-haired skull a moment before he took a deep breath and spoke as calmly as he could.

"I'm sorry Captain Gould, but I can tell you this from our own extensive research of the anomaly; tricobalt devices may have a disastrous effect on the Azimuth Horizon; They are well known as explosive devices in normal space but their specific effect on subspace itself has not been clearly documented; we could end up with a worse problem than we have now on our hands... not to mention that they have the same limitations that just disqualified probes and torpedoes, plus their too limited availability."

His silvery eyes then hardened despite his usual self control.

"As for the Omega molecule; regardless of the illegality of it, I certainly will not exchange a cosmic-scaled catastrophe for another... and in the mere attempt prove all our adversaries to be right about us."

An Andorian's face was almost expressionless by virtue of lacking enough muscles to convey emotions. But his tone of voice and his stare alone told that he would not relent on this, orders or not.

Crist then spoke,

"The omega particle is a good idea; however the results of this will be one that may will find unacceptable. The resulting explosion will make warp travel within a large radius incapable. The end would leave much of the space that we operate in unusable, for years to come."

The Andorian could not believe what his antennae were hearing.

*A... GOOD idea? Starfleet officer recklessly disregarding Federation law they have SWORN an OATH to uphold is a GOOD idea?*

But the captain of the McKenzie was still talking; and not reassuring Kheren about the morality and integrity of the officers he was serving with...

"If we were to use the particle, we would need a fairly large explosion and maybe it would be far larger than we need it to be. Not only would it put Starbase 10 in danger, but countless worlds as well. Remember we now rather little of the omega particle, as the Federation has only studied the particle for a short time then it blow up."

*Not to mention it would obliterate everything Starfleet stands for!* silently shivered Kheren inwardly, a feeling exceedingly uncomfortable and unfamiliar to someone born on an icy world.

Then Daniel Crist added:

"Plus there is the fact that we have not made any omega particles for quite some time, as they were banned. Hints the omega directive, to destroy the particle at all cost. There is also the matter of keeping the particles stable, and get them into position. With all the hazards of the anomaly, that would be suicidal. One bump to cause containment to fail, and your dead."

*Suicidal is the right word,* mused Kheren angrily, using all of his impressive self-control to keep quiet. *How can a Starfleet officer, a ship captain of such experience as him, as both of them, even consider debating the mere technicalities of the second most illegal thing in galactic history...and of so grave consequences to the very universe? This is not the Starfleet I have sworn to serve with, the Starfleet I believe in...*

At this moment, the Andorian realized that his thoughts would certainly be caught on by the Betazoid captain, Daniel Summers. But at this moment, he didn't care. He needed all his focus to just keep calm and keep even his rigid face as blank as an iced stone.

But his cranial appendages were flat on his head and both silvery eyes mere slits of burning, molten metal.

Gould shook his head dismissively.

"I never suggested the use of an Omega particle. I only related its ability to disrupt subspace for a clearer understanding of my objective and besides, as far as I know, we have no such particle with which to use. And no way yet exists to create one.. so the idea is moot."

His voice took a sterner tone.

"But I will be clear on this point: IF such was at our disposal, I would be suggesting we prepare for its use. The loss of this station, the loss of the nearby worlds indeed, of the Federation itself are secondary to the loss of the entire Galaxy. It disturbs me greatly that anyone here would think otherwise."

At this, his eyes glanced over Kheren. He had worked with far too many Andorians not to know when one was upset, yet alone outraged.

"As I already stated I am NOT suggesting this tactic; in fact I'm against it entirely. As a twenty-year Starfleet engineer, I know full well the implications of what I'm suggesting, likely so more than anyone else in this room. Nonetheless we should... no, must be prepared for it, if all else fails."

He went to the console and quickly improvised the chart already displayed.

"By placing tritobalt mines along this vector with proper timed detonation sequencing, we create a perforated subspace 'tear-a-way' line around the Azimuth Horizon, then after adjusting a starship's warp core, run along this line causing a subspace rupture that would ring the AH. Doing some very hasty calculations, we need two days, assuming we have tried the other option first... and thirty-two thousand tritobalt mines to achieve the desired effect."

He then walked back to the table.

"If successful, this would seal off the anomaly permanently without harming it or the universe on the other side. We could even prep an artificial wormhole so that travel to and from the affected area would still be possible."

He sat down, his face emotionless.

"Again, I do not recommend this as a first option, only as a last resort."

Kheren looked at Gould straight in the eyes; with all four of them.

"So, you, Captain V'Rell Gould, are the kind of officer to which the ends justify the means. Then know this: I am not a Section 31 agent; I am a Starfleet officer."

The Andorian took a breath to stay calm before continuing.

"If we can not live by our values, our ethics and our given word, than what we stand for, what we may die for, means nothing, are worthless and only deserve to die. I tell you this, and to all of you, right now: I will oppose with all my heart and soul any endeavor whatsoever based on this despicable attitude. And I will neither be a part of one or discuss it any further."

Kheren stood, clearly signifying that any further word entertaining talks of Omega molecule, subspace weapons, or any other immoral and illegal act would send him right out of the room without a glance back.

"Alright, I've heard enough."

Samji's voice came suddenly from the stage where he had been half listening and half coordinating with his engineers on the Starbase to begin the necessary programming of the shuttles and their warp cores.

He had not been sure why Captain Gould was making a connection between tricobalt weaponry and the Omega molecule, but since he had only just recently been made aware of the phenomenon upon becoming Fleet Captain, and not having time to read over the massive amount of data associated with the molecule, he decided to wait and hear what he had to say and defer to the judgment of the people in that room who had had time to process the molecule's existence.

But the discussion seemed to be moot. The connection between Omega and tricobalt continued to elude him, and they had access to neither.

"First I'm going to note something that hasn't been considered. Any law or restriction set forth in the Khitomer Accords is now null and void due to the fact that the Klingons have withdrawn from their part in it. So I would see no illegality in using them. However, we do not have tricobalt weaponry or the time to make any, so I see no reason to entertain it further. We do not have access to Omega and that is still a Federation-stated directive we will adhere to, regardless."

Samji stepped forward to finish.

"Now, if there's nothing more you as Captains would like to bring up with me directly, I suggest we get started as we have a lot of work to do."

Calming down, the Andorian captain nodded, Human fashion.

"Only this, Sir; I would suggest to my fellow captains and yourself to have all chief tactical officers review the Artemis' entire security protocols for each department and apply whatever they see fit to ensure that they will not be sabotaged, infiltrated or otherwise hampered by the Horizon Children... if they have not been already. This is how the cult operates; not from fleets of ships but from within. As we speak, they may even have some of their crewmembers converted. I urge extreme caution, Sir."

Gould also stood up, straightening his uniform.

"No, Sir. I have stated a viable option as best I saw it, as is required of me, nothing more."

Then he turned to face Kheren.

"We have very different views on what makes a good Starfleet officer, Captain. To me, your way seems... at best... selfish, bent on honor before all else. I believe in duty, no matter what the cost; but either way, you are my brother in arms, I would trust you as such and honor, if not agree, with your ideals. Do me the courtesy of doing the same in return," and held out his hand to Kheren, ready to match his grip if he should take it.

His words were hard and designed to match insult for insult. If he was right it had to be done this way or the Andorian would never respect him again.

Kheren looked at the offered hand, disliking the gesture like all Andorians.

"Indeed we both lie at opposing poles, Captain Gould. And now we both know where each other stand. You stand for duty no matter what the cost; I stand for truth and integrity no matter the challenge."

Then, he clasped the man's hand with his heavily callused one, grasping with just enough strength to convey with respect the resolve and sincerity of his words. Liking the Human-style gesture or not, he knew its deep significance to many species and here performed it most solemnly.

"As long as we both follow the ethics of the Federation and the duties of Starfleet, you will always find me by your side and ready to offer my life for yours."

Summers stood there motionless and silent with his arms crossed on his chest, listening to the whole argument going down before him. Now that it was over, he finally spoke.

"I for one want to agree with the Fleet Captain and Captain Kheren; but no matter the danger we may pose to every world in range and the starbase itself, it still would have been a valid option, provided we had tricobalts or access to the Omega molecule. While I may not agree with said option, I do believe in looking into all options before making a move that will determine the fate of our known galaxy. As a famous Vulcan once said, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

Daniel then addressed the Andorian captain.

"Kheren, inform your Tactical Officer that Lieutenant Tritter will be in contact very soon for those security details you spoke of."

The commanding officer of the Artemis did not restart the argument with his long time friend, even as disappointed as he was by his words. Kheren had said what he thought about it already and they all knew what he would do... or rather what he would never do: disregard morality for convenience, out of fear or short-sightedness. So instead, he laconically acknowledged the request from the captain of the Spectre.

"Very well, Captain Summers. And as they say on Earth... may fortune favors the bold."

Without another word, the Andorian left the room also.

*The needs of the many...*

Kheren had never accepted this dismissal of things based on heartless numbers only, always rejected this philosophy of disregard of individual rights and value for the sake of some arbitrary perceived majority... How he hated that cold, logical sentence that could excuse even the worst atrocities and tyrannies of History... just like could the "ends justify the means" attitude his fellow commanding officers all seemed to espouse.



It was a typical heartless Vulcan mindset, allegedly attributed to the famous Ambassador Spock. But to that quote, he had always opposed that of another legendary Starfleet officer of the ambassador's acquaintance: Doctor and Admiral Leonard Mc Coy:

*In this galaxy, he quoted in the silence of his own mind, there is a mathematical probability of three million Earth-type planets; and in all the universe, three million, million galaxies like this one. And in all that... and perhaps more... only one of each of us.*

Kheren would never coldly accept the sacrifice of even one just solely for the sake of many. It was something that could not always be avoided, especially in Starfleet, of all places... After all, they all swore to do just that with their own lives, each and every one of them Starfleet officers... And at any point, a commanding officer might just have no choice but to sacrifice a few lives to save numerous others...

But that didn't mean he had to like it; let alone make it a life motto.

He never did... and never would.

With this last handshake, the meeting between the commanding officers of Lotus Fleet was over.

First to exit the vast conference room, Daniel Summers left the meeting halltapping his combadge.

"Summers to Lieutenant Junior grade Michael Tritter; get with the Chief of Security from the Artemis for plans to protect the Spectre from the Horizon Children. She has all the details you will need to keep them from taking over the crew."

His own executive officer however had already started to make things ready for the Spectre. David Rogers had left the meeting immediately upon breakup and then stopped outside the nearby restaurant. When the other ship's officers from the meeting caught up with him, David addressed them individually, starting with the Spectre's tactical officer, Lieutenant Tritter.

"Mister Tritter, I suggest you coordinate with the Lotus' tactical officer and familiarize yourselves with quadrant 3. You can also take that time to work with Lieutenant Shar Noor on getting the Spectre's engines ready for the encirclement of the horizon anomaly."

Turning to the next officer, David continued, addressing the ship's Andorian engineering officer.

"Lieutenant, after you and Mister Tritter have gotten the warp engines ready for the first phase, see if you can grab as many torpedoes from the base's stores as feasible. They need not be weapons ready as we basically just want the warp engines on them. Once you have that nailed down, contact the Lotus engineering officer and familiarize yourselves on the two ships' specifications."

Anticipating the engineer's beginning gesture that the two engineer's were quite knowledgeable about Intrepid and Akira design parameters, David raised a hand in a stop motion.

"I know what your thinking but you know as well as I that we engineers like to tweak our systems. Please get the latest on the Lotus' capabilities from Lieutenant Adams on the Lotus and make sure he is up to speed on our upgrades as well."

Lastly, David faced the Spectre's science officer, Lieutenant Michaels.

"I believe you should contact base operations and get all you can from the science department on the horizon anomaly. Then perhaps meet with the other ships science departments and correlate the information for the Spectre's computers. I especially suggest contacting the Artemis' science officer, Lieutenant Syntron, as he has the best information on it."

Knowing that they were all already thinking along these lines anyway, David summed up his small briefing with a smile.

"Okay, I now you were already thinking all this beforehand. Just let's get to it. I am headed to the ship to see to the module fit. If I know Captain Summers, he wants it swapped out yesterday. Okay? Briefing in two hours ... let's get it started people."

Turning away, David eyed the restaurant longingly, but passed up the temptation. He would grab something from a replicator on the Spectre while he oversaw the module refit.

Meanwhile, Captain Daniel Crist had nodded to the other Captains, as the last part of the meeting was over. He had risen from his chair and exited the conference room to tap his commbadge as he walked briskly to the nearest transporter room of the station.

"All McKenzie crew, prep the ship for launch. All senior staff, make sure your departments are ready for the upcoming operation. I want a status report in thirty minutes."

After leaving the meeting room behind the Betazoid captain of the Spectre and the Human commanding officer of the McKenzie, Gould checked his PADD to find Lieutenant Vincent left him a notice and while do so nearly ran into him just outside the room.

"Good to have you with us Lieutenant," said the flagship captain and motioned for him to follow as he searched for Doctor Bindo.

After the briefing, the crew of the USS Lotus was the first out to go assume their preparations. Science Lieutenant Junior Grade Sainthill made his way down the corridor to head for the Lotus. It had been a long day but there was still a lot to be done.

*If it wasn't such a danger, the anomaly would be something I would love to have the opportunity to study for years to come, he mused as he walked to the nearest transporter room. As usual though, there is always something threatening our way of life or are very existence.*

A short beam out and a brisk walk later, h arrived in his quarters on the Lotus and began going over all the calculations again for the upcoming plan to deal with the anomaly.

As Jolie Bindo herself had left the conference room behind him, she had found herself meeting deep, mesmerizing purple eyes and a charming smile from a bald-shaven Deltan wearing the same uniform as she was.

"Doctor Bindo I presume?"

The smile widened at the age-old greeting joke.

"I am Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth, chief medical officer on board the USS Artemis. I am pleased to finally meet the heroic medical officer of the Borg War."

The Lotus' CMO couldn't help but flush pink at the praise. She waved it off.

"We all did what we had to. I was blessed enough to come out unscathed."

His praise was obviously sincere, but his handsome face was starting to get creased by deepening lines of worry.

"Doctor, I think we should find some place quiet to discuss certain... difficulties our officers and crews may have to face in the upcoming days."

She tipped her head in thought at his concern for their respective crews.

"I agree that we need a medical briefing. I thought of a simple way to know if any of the Horizon Children are masking as our crew. We can scan the cerebellar neural patterns and compare them to their baseline scans. If they're different, we'll immediately know if it's an imposter."

"Already ahead of you on this, Doctor," retorted Elliago with a respectful smile. "Not that we're so smart; but we on the Artemis were once manipulated by a false admiral... and we are the first and only starship hit by the cult, months ago, and we had time to learn and prepare... not to mention that our captain is himself a former tactical chief of your flagship."

He offered her a PADD on which was already highlighted: "ship medical security protocols, USS Artemis" and a list of measures he summarized for her. "As you will see here, we have implemented thorough procedures into our ship routines since then; A level 1 full medical and psychological examination of the entire crew when docked, using the entire personnel, as well as for any individual coming on board for the first time; A level 2 complete medical and neurological scan from the EMH grid every shipboard day; a level 3 internal sensor scan to compare with established records at the start of every shift for both leaving and incoming shifts; a level 4 sensor sweep every hour for contaminants or unregistered lifeforms, inside and outside of the hull; level 5 random computer scans of crew health status during every shift, also good for locating any unrecorded presence, from bacteria to intruders. Decontamination protocols and level 3 examination are in effect with every transport, boarding or away team return. All the medical data, down to the subatomic level, is recorded and updated for each transport on and off the ship which are done exclusively with shipboard transporters. This way, any discrepancy is immediately detected and automatically keep the suspect in beaming transit for further identifying before rematerializing, be it on the pad, in sickbay isolation, in the brig, back to its point of origin or dispersed in space..."

The last sentence was said with a somewhat sour tone, but the Deltan doctor quickly smiled again.

"Stringent measures to be sure; but this way, even a changeling or a genetically disguised Undine will not manage to slip in or out undetected. Of course, any refusal to undergo examination at any point is sufficient ground to be immediately relieved from duty and confined, or removed from ship complement. Captain being no exception... by his own orders."

This time, his smile grew even wider. But his eyes remained most serious. If there was one single person in the entire galaxy that was most apprehensive, almost hostile, to medical and psychological examination, it was Captain Kheren. If even he submitted to, more than that, ordered such severe measures, it showed how grave things were.

"Of course, Doctor, this all does not remove your privilege of ordering a medical examination of anyone you have reasonable doubt about their physical and mental health."

She rubbed her chin as she considered the difficulties to which Doctor Nasaro-Myth referred.

"We have a number of personnel who are still raw from the Borg war and yet are facing this new threat. I'm concerned about stress disorders. I've ordered the ship's Counselor to do a full review on all officers..."

"Pardon the intrusion, doctors..."

Gould gave a respectful nod to the Deltan.

"When you're done here, meet with Lieutenant Vincent for his post check in and send him right to me on the bridge. We have some work ahead of us."

He then looked at them both almost suspiciously.

"Unless of course this discussion needs to have me in it?" I

Josh followed Captain Gould to the two doctors down the corridor.

"Hello Doctor, Doctor" Josh said as he nodded to Dr. Bindo and the Deltan doctor in turn. He then motioned to Nidiri as he said, "This is my assistant, Ensign Kiels, she'll be needing a check-up as well."

Jolie turned towards her captain and new crewmates, feeling a brief pang of sadness as she turned her attention from the handsome male Deltan. She smiled inwardly.

*Even I am not immune to the male Deltan pheromones....*

She acknowledged her new crewmembers with a warm smile.

"Welcome to the Lotus. We'll get you both taken care of quickly. The ship's computer automatically adds you to our exam schedule when you transfer, but if you have a meeting conflict we'll work with the departments to figure things out."

"Thank you Doctor," Josh said to the CMO. "I will stop by the infirmary after I get settled in."

Turning to Captain Gould, Josh said, "If I may take my leave sir, I would like to get settled in right away. I'll report to you on the bridge right after my check-up."

"No need Lieutenant. I'll be going back with you."

Jolie Bindo then looked at Gould.

"Captain, you may not have had a chance to see the medical orders from the ship's Counselor, but he has set up a schedule for meeting every single crewmember." She smiled wryly. "We thought it would be wise to get your meeting with him out of the way as quickly as possible so you could focus on the Lotus. Congratulations, Sir. You get to go first."

"You too, my dear Captain," chimed in Elliago as Captain Kheren, coming out also from the amphitheater, just strolled by. "Chief Counselor Lyrya is already waiting for you on board, Sir."

Without stopping, the Andorian glanced at him with an expressionless face; but his antennae had flattened on his thick white mane with obvious angry annoyance. His sigh was clearly audible as he walked away, head slightly bowed.

Facing her own commanding officer, Jolie gestured towards the handsome Deltan.

"Doctor Nasaro-Myth and I were just discussing the idea of a medical briefing with the senior medical officers. We need to go over likely medical and psychological problems and appropriate medical protocols to limit casualties."

"Good," absently said Gould. Then he looked straight at his CMO. "Doctor Bindo, unless you plan on holding up your exams until I'm available, I won't be going first. Seeing as I have yet to acquire an XO I will have to double up on that job as well and I have a lot to coordinate before we launch with the Spectre."

He cut off any objection with a wave of his hand.

"I will make myself available at the first opportunity, which should be shortly after launch. That's the best I can do. Until then... Mister Vincent your with me."

Gould turned and walked off, feeling just slightly pleased with himself.

"Aye, Sir," Josh said as he turned and followed his captain towards the Lotus.

Jolie quirked an eyebrow at her Captain's blatant disregard of medical orders, and she planned to have a discussion with him about it--but not in front of an officer from another ship. She tapped her combadge.

"Counselor, the Captain has informed me that the Lotus launch is going to delay him for his appointment until after launch. Set his appointment for one hour after launch, mandatory per Starfleet medical regulation 121."

The captain could try to wiggle out of that one, but not without risking being removed from command in the process.

Elliago watched with amusement as Jolie Bindo dealt deftly with the ridiculous tradition of sickbay-allergic captains that seemed to be something taught in Command school, so cliché it was now in Starfleet since the days of Captain Kirk.

It was particularly amusing to him as he considered that he served with the one captain in Starfleet, a mutant abhorred all his life by his own people, who was most justified to apprehend medical examination; and yet had himself ordered and followed the most stringent starship medical protocols in Starfleet!

Jolie turned back to the mesmerizing Deltan.

"Now, Doctor, we were discussing Artemis protocols," she said as she tapped his medical security methods into her PADD for immediate implementation on the Lotus by the medical staff. "I will definitely discuss right away these with our Tactical Chief. I imagine this should be a fleet wide protocol anyway, if it's not."

"That's what my captain strongly suggested," reminded Elliago. "But even medical security protocols are under the authority of the captain, First officer and chief of security of each ship, not us, sawbones. But we should insist on them anyway. Nine people died on the Artemis... nine lives that would have not been lost had these precautions been implemented when the cult assaulted us."

After a pause he added with a very serious tone:

"Frankly, the Artemis is the last potential target now; and your ship, the flagship, certainly on top of the list. All I can say is any of the other ships ignoring the protocols we propose will do it at one's own risk, at the risk of their own crewmates' lives."

She tapped her PADD again to invite the other CMOs in Lotus Fleet to join both Dr. Nasaro-Myth and her in the vacant meeting room next to the main room they'd just exited.

"Now, let's go over the stress disorders and medical conditions we'll expect from the anomaly itself. I'd also been wondering if there was some way for us to figure out if normal space itself could be changed in such a way that it could 'fight off', so to speak, the anomaly cancer, for lack of a better analogy. Obviously the science is very different, but the concept is the same. I think if we can teach a body to fight off infections and cancer with science, we can figure out the equivalent for healing these subspace fractures."

The Deltan's eyes widened and he nodded with visible surprise and admiration.

"A cosmic cancer... of course! The uncontrolled flaring, the virulent damage, the expansion through inner passageways... Doctor, I salute your insightful intellect. Pure genius!"

Nodding with obvious excitement, Elliago added then:

"What we need now is someone with deep scientific knowledge of the anomaly to discuss this further. And as luck would have it, we have here the foremost expert on the Azimuth Horizon in the whole galaxy..."

He tapped his combadge.

"Doctor Nasaro-Myth to Lieutenant Syntron. If you have a moment, Lieutenant, please join me and the fleet's medical staff in meeting room 7A here on the starbase. We have a most interesting theory about combating the anomaly that requires your unique expertise."

Syntron tapped his combadge as he headed back out of the conference room and responded as he walked back toward the turbolift.

"Acknowledged; I'm on my way now."

Following the acknowledgement of the Vulcan, Elliago smiled again at Jolie.

"Mister Syntron is the one who devised the suturing procedure of subspace fractures using inverted ionic pulses from the main deflector," he reminded her from the general meeting earlier, as explained by Captain Kheren. "He and the Artemis science team have directly studied extensively the anomaly for more than a whole week and even mapped the entire subspace fracture grid we will all use to... cage the beast. If anyone can make your novel approach valid, it's him."

He turned his bald head towards the room's door when it wooshed open to admit the tall, bearded, green-tinted and pointy-eared chief science officer of the Artemis.

Syntron walked toward the small gathering of Lotus fleet medical officers. With his PADD tucked in his hands positioned on his lower back as he approached them, he nodded and stated:

"Lieutenant Syntron reporting as requested. How may I be of assistance?"

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Lieutenant Syntron," Jolie said as she gestured to an empty chair at the conference table.

Once they were all seated, she explained for the benefit of the Vulcan:

"Doctor Nasaro-Myth and I were talking about medical problems we might encounter with the anomaly. During the meeting with Fleet Captain Samji, it occurred to me that this anomaly acts very much like a cancer: spreads rapidly through any route it can, takes over with mindlessness, prevents normal tissues from functioning properly. We have cured cancer by teaching the body to recognize the cells as invaders, cut off its ability to get nourishment from the health tissues around it, and even to reprogram the cancer DNA into normal DNA again. I know cosmology and astronomy obviously don't work the same as medicine, but could we still not apply some of the concepts? Cut off the subspace routes to prevent spread? Keep the anomaly from gaining energy from the universe around it? Perhaps we could even teach our normal universe to recognize it as 'foreign' and protect itself?"

She laced her fingers together and tapped her forefingers in thought, and then looked at the Vulcan Lieutenant with an intensity that made her onyx eyes glitter.

"I know it probably sounds crazy, but there must be some way to heal the galaxy."

The Deltan smiles warmly at that idea.

"Well, cutting off routes for it to spread any further, that's what we are going to do with this whole operation, thanks to what we know of subspace fractures made by misaligned warp cores and, of course, the suturing of fractures themselves with the inverted ionic pulse emitter of our dear lieutenant here," started to say Elliago with a nod towards his crewmate. " But that is like covering a wound to stop bleeding and prevent infection; what we're looking for here is if we could have the body, here normal space, repair itself... cure the cancer instead of just stopping it."

"This is a rather curious approach to this phenomenon." Syntron began, "However, from a biological point of view, Doctors, I'm not certain that we can even begin to rely on any type of biological remedy to resolve something that is inorganic in nature... other than perceiving this endeavor metaphorically. In this case, with this anomaly's ability to dimensionally shift between space-time, our solution does seem to be limited to somehow mending the subspace fractures throughout the quadrant to prevent it from entering our space at all."

The Vulcan science officer then paused for a moment and considered how much these doctors were familiar with what they specifically learned about the anomaly and their procedures during their last missions on the Artemis. He then continued with a brief summary.

"During our previous missions, we reconfigured our sensor arrays and our modified deflector enhancements, including a directional space sonar, to feed the data that we collected surrounding the ship and beyond immediately to our systems in the science stations. Our reprogrammed Astrometrics lab computer, in conjunction with the updated interface to the Stellar Cartography computer, provided instantaneous data analysis and projections, and thus we were able to directly follow and predict virtually all anomaly activities, via imminent subspace fractures, in and beyond our proximity range... even before they occurred. We then developed the means to instantaneously recalibrate all of these signals to tactical, science and ops stations and consoles on both the main bridge and the auxiliary bridge to provide preventative countermeasures. This provided us with the advantage of effectively countering these subspace fractures with the upmost speed, precision and efficiency before the anomaly could emerge and spew out additional damage. Or, to paraphrase this old Terran medical axiom, we employed an ounce of prevention that was certainly worth much more than a pound of cure."

He resumed after a brief pause

"So Doctors, since we are not dealing with an entity with a built in immune system or other defensive means, elucidate how you intend to surgically "cure" this lifeless anomaly?"

"I know it's not organic, of course, so to a degree the concept is indeed metaphorical," Jolie said, tipping her head in thought. "However, when a host is without an immune system, we can provide a cure that gives the being the proper immune system. In the old days, we used to use transfusions of blood products to provide the needed white blood cells, or we immunized to teach the body how to recognize that antigen to fight it off the disease. Now we use nanites to reprogram the infectious or cancerous cells. Yes, that's an organic being, but DNA is still a chemical that can be altered. A neuron is organic, but it creates an entirely physical electric potential that travels from negative to positive or vice versa. We can predict that electrochemical potential and reroute it, even reverse it if we need."

She brushed a lock of auburn hair behind her ear as she pulled up the holoinage of the anomaly and the subspace fractures through which it traveled.

"Just like a cancer, the anomaly can, as you noted, travel through these fractures. We need to continue 'healing' them to prevent the easiest route. But what if it bursts through somewhere else here at the center, like a tumor grown too large?"

She stabbed at the large glowing region.

"This is what we need to figure out how to shrink or remove it from our space-time continuum. We can't use organic means, but we can use the ideas. The anomaly translates into our space because there is something here that allows it to, and we have whatever it needs: a chemical, or a particular energy signature, or something else that fuels it. It's mindless just like lightning is, but lightning travels because it seeks the opposite charge. It's mindless, but that's still what it requires. Not only do we need to seal the fractures, but I think we need to repulse it electromagnetically; make our universe an environment that is hostile to its growth. If we can use nanites to create electrochemical signals to repulse cancer cells, we might be able to use some devices that key in on the electromagnetic spectrum of the anomaly in order to create an electromagnetic field that repulses it. That would buy us more time to seal the fractures, particularly on the larger breaches."

Elliago nodded as the chief medical officer of the Lotus explained her approach to the problem, until she spoke of electromagnetism.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Mister Syntron, but I seem to recall that, on our first encounter with the anomaly, it was noted that it had no gravimetric or electromagnetic energy; no mass and no polarity. Obviously, this means any kind of EM pulse will not affect it; nor can we tractor it away. But I think you are still on to something here, Doctor. What about the nucleonics and chronitons? Lieutenant... could we affect them or use them to affect it the way Doctor Bindo suggests?"

Nodding his head in affirmation, the science officer appreciated what the Doctors were conveying.

"Perhaps" Syntron said; "the anomaly is not seeking like lightning an opposite charge but spilling into our system as water behind a dam seeps as cracks begin to emerge. The greater the number and size of the cracks, the more water is able to escape. The question is, doctors, will our time and resources best be utilized focusing on an attempt at controlling the anomaly itself to some degree, or instead, directed toward preventing it from continuing to enter into our time and space? Or to carry on with the previous analogy, will we try to control the vast amounts of water and immeasurable potential energy restrained on the other side of this wall, or do we fix the cracks in the dam holding back this lethal anomaly?"

After a brief reflective pause and a shifting of thoughts, Syntron continued.

"You are correct Doctor Nasaro-Myth in that the anomaly has neither mass nor polarity and emits no gravimetric or electromagnetic energy. Yet we found that we could manipulate to a small degree the outer edges of the anomaly by using a graviton beam to append an additional gravitational pull on the anomaly followed by a high level anti-graviton beam to equally repel the perimeter of the anomaly within close proximity. This theoretically shouldn't work yet somehow influences the shape of the anomaly's perimeter. But this manipulation unfortunately is on a relatively minuscule scale and doesn't at this level solve any major factors of the overall threat... unless we construct a way to upscale this method and perhaps implement this in conjunction with other procedures."

Syntron then studied the holographic image of the anomaly and the subspace fractures as he elaborated.

"In reference to nucleonics, it would be a challenge to affect the quantum behavior of atomic nuclei within an anomaly that shifts its existence in and out of our time and space. Could they be use in conjunction with chronitons and their temporal properties? This is something to consider. However, since extensive old warp trails and possible chroniton traces from cloaking devices of starships could have been potential catalysts to these subspace fractures emerging to begin with, we'll need to proceed cautiously to avoid exacerbating the situation we are attempting to resolve."

Looking away from the holoimage for a moment, Syntron then postulated:

"So perhaps the question for the moment is this... since we can now effectively detect these subspace fractures before they occur and we are able to suture these fractures using inverted ionic pulse emitters, is there a way to upscale and expand all of these known quantities, techniques and systems... perhaps in combination with other methodologies to eventually corral and push this anomalous intruder out of our system altogether?"

"You tell us," chimmed in the Deltan with a wink and a smile. "You're the expert here."

He glanced then at his colleague from the flagship.

"Doctor Bindo, I still think your on to something here with your idea of treating this anomaly like some invading germ or spreading cancer into our universe seen as a living organism..."

His purple eyes glazed over for a moment before he suddenly turned back towards the Vulcan.

"Mister Syntron; since our universe is not lacking in nucleons, even in space, could chronitons be possibly the way to, I don't know... stimulate them like some antibodies to work against the anomaly?"

An eyebrow was slightly raised as the science officer peered toward Doctor Nasaro-Myth as he responded to his comment and his inquiry.

"At this point, doctor, several methods could be possible, but nothing is certain... other than the eminent danger that this anomaly presents."

Reflecting again on the Doctor's proposal, Syntron spoke in his typical detached tone.



"In using chronitons, even if employed by chroniton torpedoes, I would be concerned about some type of chronokinetic rebound that could strike any nearby ships resulting in temporal fractures in the regions around the existing subspace fractures and within the ships themselves if the reaction was unexpectedly swift. What type of unforeseeable consequences these temporal fluctuations could create is also a consideration. However, it may be possible to set up a series of simulations on our ship to safely test some possible scenarios; including a chroniton factor. But the actual results would obviously not be known unless these were conducted in proximity to the anomaly itself."

"If we had any such chorniton torpedoes, that is..." observed Elliago with a heavy sigh. "I will certainly not debate you on the subject. Back at the Academy, I barely made it out of the temporal mechanics basic course alive and sane."

He had heard of these exotic warheads... but only that they were still highly experimental... and highly classified.

Jolie's forehead knit together as she considered all the information.

"It must be gaining energy... or anti-energy if appropriate... from somewhere however, or it wouldn't be growing as fast as it is. We definitely need to suture the fractures, but we also need to cut off whatever is in this space-time that is allowing it to grow. We can only seal so many fractures at one time. I'm betting one of the engineers can come up with a way to scale the suturing process up to a macro level."

She frowned harder.

"Wait... you said you could predict the imminent fractures. That implies you can predict the timing. Can we not somehow synchronize the chronitons to the anomaly's appearance in our universe, and then use the nucleonics to repel it or even drain the energy from the anomaly?"

Syntron listened attentively to Doctor Bindo's proposition.

"We were basing the predictions of these subspace readings on the physical measurements were receiving from the high level of chronitons detected from our enhanced sensor arrays, rather than any sort of regulated timing of energy... like that of a pulsar. From what we have gathered thus far in our extensive examination of this phenomenon, its activity seems to be more chaotic than synchronous."

Focusing his gaze back onto the image of the anomaly, Syntron continued with his thought.

"As you know, this anomaly with its plasma-like composition is normally camouflaged by matching frequencies of typical background radiation in space. Its concealment is only revealed as the emerging tendrils of the anomaly escape out of the subspace fractures in a given area of proximity."

Then an idea began to coalesce in his mind.

"Going back to perceiving this endeavor metaphorically in terms of biology... what about hypothermia? As you well know, Doctors... biologically, this is the condition in which the core temperature drops below the required temperature for normal metabolism and body functions to continue. However, in this case, we're dealing with the high temperatures associated with plasma-like energy. It is very cold in space. Theoretically speaking, if we deprived the anomaly of the extreme temperatures required to maintain its high energy state, then the energy of this anomaly would reduce to the point of deionization; reverting it back down to a mere gaseous state of matter."

The Deltan nodded pensively then spoke almost as if for himself.

"Make sense... but... with a cosmic phenomenon nearly three cubic parsecs in size... that would requires a mighty big bucket of water..."

The thought may have sounded ironic, but still, it pointed out to the very cosmic-scaled scope of the problem... and such scope being a problem in itself, above and beyond the very thing they were facing. And so, Elliago looked again at his shipmate.

"Any idea how we could do that? Herakles had a nearby river to deviate and with it clean the Augean stables... We are not that lucky."

Syntron reflected deeper into the possibilities of initiating a deionization cascade effect within the anomaly until he was struck with a possible method.

"The tendril-like whips that emerge from subspace are exothermic extensions from the plasma reactions of the anomaly entering into our time-space." The Vulcan scientist explained then. "Like a multidimensional doorway. Theoretically, we should be able to inject a cooling agent into this threshold before sealing the fractures using inverted ionic pulse emitters. Therefore, to use Doctor Nasaro-Myth's metaphoric 'bucket of ice water' reference, we could strategically launch a series of customized trilitium probes from each of the fleet's starships that once simultaneously detonated at designated areas around the anomaly, could theoretically eliminate sizable aspects of the fusion reactions occurring within the anomaly, and thus significantly impact its allegorical metabolism. The resultant shockwaves would theoretically be trapped within the anomaly's own dimension of space/time since it would be deprived of the energy required to expand through any remaining subspace fractures."

Elliago frowned as he listened to the Vulcan; not so much because he had a bit of a hard time following the scientific principles behind the proposal as he was preoccupied with the larger view of things. And this he put into words.

"Trilitium... a substance that can even make a star go nova... not your run of the mill firecracker you know. What about the consequences for the wormhole to to this other universe inside of it... and for this pocket universe itself?"

"Indeed" Syntron acknowledged. "This is a rather ambitious proposal. However, if we implement a minimal amount of trilitium in each probe, then the reactions would be more implosive than explosive. Our intention is to nullify the anomaly's energy not contribute to it. In addition, if each probe is strategically placed within the perimeter around the anomaly, then the resultant oscillations of shockwaves as an inverse result of the implosion would theoretically counteract each other through the destructive interference of each set of waves... or at least thwart the preponderance of potentially destructive waves within the given region of the anomaly. This should minimize any potential damage inflicted on either system; certainly less than the damage already caused but this dangerously relentless anomaly."

The Deltan doctor's purple eyes suddenly widened.

"Wait! It just occurred to me; this is possibly how the Romulans intend destroying the anomaly! With a plasma torpedo!"

He could already see the eyebrow of the Vulcan arch up in typical fashion, but he plowed on, dread etching his voice.

"I'm no tactical officer but, aren't trilitium isotopes found as toxic waste product of matter-antimatter warp cores... and in Romulan plasma torpedoes? Isn't that why the first ones back in the twenty-third century were so terribly powerful? Today they have been toned down because of the difficulty of stabilizing those isotopes I suppose... But now, suppose that the Romulans have solved that problem..."

He didn't have to finish. Everyone knew of the Soran incident back in 2371 that had caused the collapse of the Armagosa star and nearly that of the star Veridian, only to be stopped with the loss of the USS Enterprise D of then captain Jean-Luc Picard. With a star of sufficient mass, the inhibition of nuclear reactions from even a small amount of trilitium could lead to a supernova. With a first generation Romulan warhead shot in an anomaly of a cubic parsec in size...

"We must tell the captain!" he simply said.

Jolie's elation at the possibility of solving the anomaly problem while minimizing the casualty risk turned to utter dread as she listened to Syntron's elegant proposal, then catching Doctor Nasaro-Myth's mental image of a cubic parsec of space exploding.

"And if the Romulans use too much trilithium, the galaxy dies."

Her face was white as she stood.

The Deltan nodded to her with a strained smile.

"Doctor Bindo, thank you for your input; it will certainly be of importance to our later efforts dealing with this phenomenon."

Then he turned towards the Vulcan.

"Mister Syntron, I think you and I have to return at once to the Artemis. Since our ship is one of those tasked to face the Romulans, our captain must be advised immediately of what we have discussed here."

As he talked, Doctor Bindo had already called the Lotus and beamed out in a shower of sparkling lights.

"Agreed" Syntron acknowledged as he stood up and activated his combadge.

"Syntron to Artemis... Two to beam up."

Within a matter of seconds, their molecules shimmered out of existence from their meeting room on Starbase 10 only moments after Doctor Bindo was transported to the USS Lotus.

As Syntron arrived aboard the Artemis, he activated his combadge and contacted Lieutenant JG Valencia Iksos. He instructed his assistant science chief to have a science meeting set up in his office with all of his department heads in twenty minutes. This would allow him time to stop at his quarters and get situated and prepare for the meeting.

After arriving in his quarters on deck 2, he activated his computer terminal and commanded it to broadcast a specific selection of classical music at a pre-designated volume. Meanwhile, he showered and changed into a fresh uniform. After which he consumed a bowl of Vulcan claulanees and jenespera; an equivalent to Terran cactus fruit and peppers respectively while he sipped on Vulcan spiced tea.

Syntron then sat down in front of his terminal monitor and began reviewing all of the latest department reports so that he would have an updated reference point when he discussed the current status of the various departments with each team member. Even though he possessed an eidetic memory, he always kept an updated and detailed record of all events and interactions on his PADD so that information could be accessed and cross-referenced at any given time.

Afterward, he added a synopsis of his recent meeting on Starbase 10 in a classified file. Not the one with Temporal Investigations, but the discussion with Doctor Bindo and Doctor Nasaro-Myth. He would not discuss the details of this meeting with his science team until he had an opportunity to share his thoughts and tentative proposal about the anomaly with Captain Kheren. It would be premature to share any aspects of these possible aggressive tactics with such an ominous anomaly to his team before such a discussion occurred with the commanding officer.

After completing his remaining tasks, he terminated the music. With his PADD in hand, he headed down to deck 14 to his assembling science staff.

\* \* \*

With Fleet Captain Samji's dismissal of the assembly, Jureth had immediately stood to make a beeline for Commander Rachele Rivers. Even though his plans for the mission were foremost on his mind, he needed to find out the condition of Kalten Siduri.

Whether it was true or not Oseno felt responsible for his CO's injury. He approached the striking red haired first officer quickly so as not to detain her if she had other business to attend to.

"Commander, I wanted to inquire about Captain Siduri's status...how is he?"

The acting-Captain of the Alsea reluctantly turned to Oseno. She had been beelining as well, but out of the room. Ever since Lieutenant Commander Lire had met her eyes... now, ever since she had flinched away from them, she had been brooding, silent. She had been glad to get away from the room, and felt just a bit peeved when Oseno caught her. She ran a set of fingers over her ear, tucking back imaginary stray strands of hair before steeling herself to look towards another of her officers' eyes.

"I was just about to find that out myself," she found herself saying, internally realizing that was indeed her plan. Acting-Captain. She wanted out of that role as soon as possible, and inwardly cursed a thought tangent that had her Captain in an unrecoverable coma. No, Captain Siduri would be okay, struggling with the doctors of Starbase 10 to let him out early so he could join the tail end of that Captains' meeting she decided she was not meant to join. And then she would be free. Able to take the time she needed to get used to the First Officer role, used to Command before she sat in that dreaded Chair.

At a loss for something else to tell the current acting-First Officer, whether he knew it or not, she spoke with a teasing tone.

"Wanna come with?" With a half-hearted smile, she added by way of explanation; "Visual confirmation on whether we have to be Acting-Captain and Acting-First Officer, or get to do our jobs."

Oseno tried to read Commander Rivers as she spoke and he got the impression she was not optimistic about Captain Siduri's recovery. Still. perhaps seeing the captain would give him his own type of solace.

"I'd be happy to accompany you, Sir." Oseno finally replied. "Then, regardless of what roles we're in, it would seem we have work to do."

Before Rachele Rivers could make one more step with Oseno Jureth, a deep but soft voice stopped her.

"Captain Rivers..."

Inwardly, the Alsea's commanding officer cringed, dutifully turning to face the voice's owner. The athletic Andorian that came up to her had a very cold expression on his amazingly dark-hued blue face and the antennae sprouting out of the side and top of his long, thick mane of snowy hair were moving in a peculiar way, as much in and out as up and down, like a snail's eyestalks. But his voice was warm if firm and his eyes were kind although there was the shadow of a recent raging storm in their silvery light. Her own blue eyes lingered on his, eyebrows pinching together slightly at the traces of anger she could see.

There was a towering giantess of his own kind with him, paler of skin but still darker than the usual Andorians seen on the station and with the same pair of receded antennae as his, instead of the more frontal ones most were accustomed to. Already she was addressing her tactical officer as she was herself spoken to:

"We have not formally been introduced; I am Captain Kheren of the starship Artemis."

He did not extend his hand towards her. He certainly knew the Human gesture, but Andorians as a habit did not do that. His stance however clearly showed that he treated her as a fellow officer and an equal, regardless of her lower rank and her provisional status. Rivers regarded him briefly, hand seeming to come up for just a moment before she folded both arms behind her back in a very Vulcan-like manner.

"Sir, Lieutenant Commander Rivers of the Alsea."

"I am sorry to hear about your commanding officer's condition. Hopefully he will get well soon."

Andorians were not much into socialities. But despite its brevity, the wish sounded sincere. Then, he lost no more time before speaking about what was on his mind.

"Your ship and mine are tasked to face the anomaly and the Romulans together. As soon as it will be convenient for you, we will have to meet and discuss this."

It was less than an order but more than a request... and once she'd clued in on that, the young redhead blinked once.

"Sir, perhaps now would be a good time. Mister Oseno and I are headed down to the infirmary to check on Captain Siduri's condition and your tactical officer," she glanced over at Tyvya, or rather over and up, before continuing, "...could continue exchanging notes along the way."

She paused, then reconsidered.

"Unless this is the sort of thing better left to a briefing room?"

Between Borg, Romulans, and Kzinti invasions of her home turf, the attractive young woman had gotten used to impromptu meetings held whenever there was space to talk, many times with a phaser rifle hugged to her chest. There was decorum, she reminded herself as the words left her lips.

Andorians were pragmatic by nature and Kheren was no exception in this. He simply nodded to the suggestion and, with a callused hand, invited her to lead the way.

"Lieutenant Oseno Jureth..."

The voice was clear and soft, almost sensual as it fell from high over the head of the Bajoran. It was quite startling coming from the almost two and a half meters tall Andorian female coming to stand before him. With the typical willowness of her species, she looked even more towering than she already was.

"Sir, I am Lieutenant Junior Grade Tyvya, acting chief of security of the Artemis."

She didn't have to state their need to discuss their joint operation. It was plain enough just with her imposing presence and the way her antennae wobbled down towards him from the top sides of her long, thick platinum mane and her icy blue eyes unblinkingly looking straight down into his own.

As they started to walk, her commanding officer lost no time either.

"You might not remember, Captain Rivers, but we both met briefly before; when the Romulans tried to take over this very Starbase a few years back. I recall you being the assistant of Security Chief Speaker-of-Names then, while I was only a Master Chief Petty Officer in security at the time, barely assigned a few days before and fresh out of the Academy. And, merely days later, I was out of the infirmary and promoted to tactical chief of the Lotus. That did not leave us much time to... socialize... But we did share this bout with the Romulans then..."

Kheren made a pause to let her recollect the incident before asking:

"It's been some time... So I would like to know, what is now the extent of your experience in dealing with Romulans?"

"To be honest, not much beyond our shared bout back then," she admitted with a sour face. "Until very recently, I was on the other side of Federation space with Captain Speaker-of-Names on the USS Pittsburg, dealing with the Kzinti situation."

The captain of the Artemis nodded in understanding.

"Nevertheless, I'll still look for your input when I will try to reason with the Romulans, once we find them."

He noted her surprised expression.

"My chief of science came up with another use for the inverted ionic pulse when we went into the Mutara nebula a few months back; besides finding and closing subspace fractures, it can be used as a kind of space sonar to pinpoint any physical object, whether it emits anything or not like the perfect cloak of the Scimitar class dreadnought we are expected to face. True it is limited to the ship's forward arc... but it is better than waiting for them to attack us or the anomaly while still unseen. They will also clearly know when we will "ping" them; that might help in putting them in a mood to talk."

As they walked down the corridors of the immense space station, Kheren made a pause to let the red-haired woman digest the idea. Then he went on.

"Now, regarding our joint operation; I propose that, once we get to our designated zone of operation, the Alsea should immediately go to multivector assault mode and both ships maintain condition red. This way, not only will we be fully ready to instantly respond to any enemy presence, but our four warp engines will dig a significantly larger subspace trench than any other fleet deployment. While in formation, the Artemis will be able to extend her own shields over your hulls, providing them with a second layer of protection, at least in the first moments of an attack. Afterwards, the Artemis will maneuver to provide full cover. And while your ships will be free to engage the enemy, we will have enough phasers and torpedoes ourselves to offer support... but most of all barrage whatever they will attempt to do against the anomaly."

Again, he paused to let Rivers ponder a bit what he was proposing.

"At warp 7, my ship's cruising speed, it will take us thirteen hours to get to the anomaly. Up until then, we may discuss this further if you come up with a better plan."

Oseno fell back a few paces behind the two captains as the group walked down the passages of the sprawling starbase. He did so not only out of respect, but so that he could have his own conversation with the towering Andorian tactical officer of the USS Artemis. As he fell into step beside Tyvya, he never realized that Andorian women could be quite so tall. Not that he'd met many in his short Starfleet career, but the ones he had met had all been about his height.

Oseno had to admit to himself he was intimidated by her before he could bring himself to speak about the current tactical situation, which wasn't one that he approved of at all, but after several seconds of pacing Tyvya he started the conversation.

"It appears as if my Chief Engineer has convinced the fleet captain that it is somehow a good idea to have the Alsea in three pieces for most of this mission. I think they are making a mistake, and an unnecessary one at that. That said, it appears that what I think has little bearing on their decision so I suppose that you and I will have to figure out some measure of coordination between all three sections of the Alsea and the Artemis. I would start by recommending we dedicate a comm channel to our group specifically and leave it open to facilitate coordination."

"Agreed," said Tyvya, adjusting her usually long stride to match that of the smaller officers before and alongside her, out of habit long acquired since well before she left her homeworld to join Starfleet. Although Andorian females were as a rule taller than their male counterparts, as well as the average humanoid, she was even taller than most of her kind and had learned quickly to fall in step with others; as a security officer, the shocking effect of her bursting to her full speed and stride when someone tried to bolt away, or to step between a charge and danger, was an advantage she routinely exploited. And beside, it was just more polite and practical for a conversation.

Reflecting on the concerns of the Bajoran, she lowered her four oculars to him with something her rigid face approximated to a frown.

"You're the tactical officer of your ship; no one should know better than you what is best for her in a tactical situation; and it is under your authority and even more, that of your captain, not your chief engineer and not even any higher ranking officer of Starfleet. And no one becomes captain of a starship if he or she is such a fool as to not at least listen to the expert advice of senior officers, especially to the ship's *tactical* officer in a *tactical* situation."

She paused a moment, evidently thinking about something.

"I'm a bit confused though... Isn't the multivector assault mode the most powerful and effective configuration of the Alsea? If so, why, instead of waiting and losing critical time, deploying her immediately as we arrive on the theater of operation would be a mistake?"

Oseno nodded.

"It is indeed our most powerful tactical configuration. My concern lies more in the modifications that Commander Lire will be making to the Alsea's warp cores to facilitate each section being able to participate in the containment of the anomaly. They will be rushed, and if they should fail under stress or if one of the Alsea's sections were to lag behind the others and then have to turn and face a threat the ship would be crippled significantly. Perhaps I am thinking too negatively, but I think that I would be remiss in my duties if I didn't take into account anything that could hamper the Alsea's ability to fight."

Oseno knew why Tyvya was questioning his thinking and she was right, but his concerns were for the overall ability of the ship to fulfill its role as a warship. Perhaps he was just being paranoid, but he still had the same bad feeling he had as soon as he'd heard Commander Lire's plans to modify the Alsea.

"I see; well, any modification to the ship must be approved by the captain... who's approval should rely on the recommendations of all senior officers, most notably his exec... and, in a tactical situation, his tactical officer of course. So I would dare say this is the first battle lying before you, Sir. To bring you up to speed, Lieutenant, the Artemis is the lesser tactical unit of the fleet. But we still have twenty type X phaser arrays and three burst V torpedo launchers, two fore and one aft. With our standard complement of two-hundred and fifty photon torpedoes and as many quantum torpedoes, we can fire up to fifteen warheads at a time for over thirty salvos to support your own offensive. But our best asset will be our defensive capabilities. With our original sternback V impulse engines, our speed and maneuvering can keep pace with ships two classes below ours; our sheer mass will make us a prime target, freeing you for the offensive and we sport the same ablative armor as a Defiant class and a capital-class shield grid we can reinforce or extend with a lot of extra power from our refitted Class VIII warp core."

Taking a breath, she then summarized it all.

"In short, we can take more pounding than any other ship in the fleet not blessed with the regenerative ablative armor of the Lotus... and will be the obvious and willing target of enemy fire. So, our best role will be to offer cover and fire support to your attacking units. To quote the captain: you will be the sword; we will be the shield."

Oseno smiled at the giant Andorian woman.

"That's still an impressive cadre of weaponry for a shield. I took the liberty of adding a dozen transphasic torpedoes to the Alsea's stock when we returned from our confrontation with the Klingons. My thought would be to fire them in the opening salvo of an engagement to surprise and confuse the enemy. We could use them to target shields, or engines and possibly cripple a large target at the outset of a fight. Captain Siduri and myself have also drawn up some computer guided attack formations for the Alsea as well that will allow us to focus our firepower. I am still concerned about the possibility of facing down a Scimitar though. It has to be the single most formidable vessel in the galaxy short of perhaps the Borg cube."

Tyvya's icy blue eyes reflected the concern etching the Bajoran's voice.

"Scimitar class Romulan dreadnought... almost nine hundred meters long and one point four kilometer's wide; almost five dozens disruptors, over two dozen photon tubes, possibly also a thalaron radiation emitter... primary and secondary shields... and an advanced cloaking device virtually undetectable, with a massive power core able to produce enough energy to keep it cloaked with shields and main weapons operational... "

She shook her head with a dark expression on her rigid face.

"Our only advantage against it will be maneuverability... we might possibly also have the numerical advantage, but this is assuming there will be no escort for it."

The towering blue-skinned female made a pause and then looked suddenly at Oseno with a bright glare in her facial eyes.

"Lieutenant, with its capability to fire under cloak, a Scimitar battleship can only be detected at the precise moment it fires... but I read that your chief science officer adapted your sensors to provide a reflex program to navigation when a subspace fracture about to flare up with the anomaly's plasma was detected. How about... using that program on our tactical sensors and systems to detect weapons lock and target them ourselves as they are about to fire?"

Oseno listened as Tyvya rattled off the stats of the Scimitar Class and it did nothing to improve his mood. He knew the vessel was dangerous, but perhaps not quite realized just how dangerous until Tyvya laid it out in front of him. When she mentioned Pel's program Oseno's expression changed slightly as he considered the possibility of adapting it for tactical use. Jureth realized that he had made a dangerous assumption that the Romulans would confront them before any battle and he now realized that they were just as likely to shoot first, and not ask any questions at all.

"That is an excellent idea Lieutenant," Jureth finally acknowledged "If we could do that we negate the Scimitar's advantage of being able to fire while cloaked, or at least give ourselves a few precious second with which to perform evasive maneuvering. I can work with Pel and see about making the necessary changes to the program, and once we've made them on the Alsea I could send the exact specifications to you. I don't think it will take much to make the changes, but I will admit that writing computer programs isn't always my strength either. My other major concern about engaging the Romulans is the possibility of the Thalaron emitter you mentioned. If they have one, and we are unable to take it out immediately...."

Oseno trailed off as his mind contemplated the dark possibility of the Romulans using a Thalaron weapon against Lotus Fleet.



The renegade Shinzon had eliminated the entire Romulan Senate with only a small Thalaron generator. A weaponized version could destroy all of Lotus Fleet, and Starbase Ten leaving the Federation vulnerable to being conquered by Sela and her group of thugs.

"Here is where we becomes the shield to your sword," then retorted the giantess with almost the hint of a smile. "As I said, the Artemis has been refitted... with a Sovereign class type IX warp core; since our ship is confined to warp 9.6, structurally unable to withstand the 9.9 warp speed it can provide, this leaves us with a lot of extra power for tactical use... like boosting and extending shields. Now, all Lotus Fleet ships will have to implement the Metaphasic Shielding Laforge Program One to their standard shield grid because of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly we have to deal with. This modification allows a ship under its active shield to withstand even the radiation and energy output of a star's corona; and thalaron radiation, for all its lethality to organic matter, is still but electromagnetic in nature. So, as long as such shielding is active, we will be safe."

She paused before adding the tactical considerations this implied.

"Because of this and the fact that deployment of the thalaron emitter is slow and power requirements demands that the ship uncloaks, most probably also to be stationary, we only have to fear it if our ships are disabled; shieldless and unable to move. With your ship able to become three and our excess power allowing us to strengthen and extend the Artemis' own shield to cover any of your attacking hulls, the chances of this happening are slim... unless their conventional but massive arsenal does the trick... or destroys us in the first place anyway. That is much more the threat we will have to face than such exotic doomsday device."

Pausing again, Tyvya glanced at their commanding officers walking a few paces before them as she finished:

"That being said, we should nevertheless prepare fast evacuation protocols with shuttles towing escape pods away from any thalaron blast zone. That is why Captain Kheren wants only a skeleton crew on board the Artemis... as she will be, on top of this threat, expected to offer herself as the prime target of all that massive Romulan firepower."

She did not continue her thinking outloud, out of professional respect; but she did think back how completely oblivious to this had been her own first officer, Michael O'Conner. The man had objected to the point of blatant insubordination to the life-preserving wisdom of the captain, out of some misplaced, foolish ego-thumping Human emotionalism.

Tyvya was Andorian; she could accept emotion; but she could not accept foolishness.

She had also noticed his confusion and surprise when their captain had suggested manned shuttles to implement the warp core fence around the anomaly, as if their commanding officer had now ordered people to their death. There was a universe of difference between being aboard a small, nimble, shielded craft, far behind battle lines and being aboard a four million tons starship offering itself as bait and target right up in the face of the enemy. O'Conner was a fine engineer and an admirable officer; but he was obviously no tactician.

Musing on this, the giantess understood now the quandary Oseno Jureth had been facing with his own chief engineer. But just as she had said to him, she said silently to herself that tactical considerations had to be approved by the captain... after listening to the tactical officer. And Kheren, for his part, had proven that he indeed listened to his officers when he had relented a bit to O'Conner's typically Human irrational outburst.

She would see that he listened to her as well. And thinking about it all recalled something else.

"Oh, and by the way, Sir; a Scimitar also carries at least one complete wing of Scorpion class attack fighter shuttles. Since they are armed only with disruptors and the Artemis alone has more than enough phasers to obliterate them in the first minutes of an engagement, they do not pose much of threat... unless they are used to divert our firepower long enough to allow the mothership to accomplish her main objective; destroy the anomaly. And if our shields go down, they could then do a lot of damage; Romulans would not hesitate to use suicide runs."

Tyvya then brought out from her belt a PADD she gave to Oseno.

"Here you have all the Artemis security protocols we strongly suggest you implement on your ship; on all Lotus Fleet ships *and* the starbase, as it were. Romulans never did boarding actions for all the centuries we have fought them because, just like taking prisoners, it's simply not in their military doctrine. But Remans have been known to do so... and we may not face Klingons who relish doing both, but an inside strike attempt is most expected from the Horizon Children. They simply don't have the firepower in space to accomplish their goal... but they may have one sympathiser even among our crews and one man is enough to pose a significant threat if left free to act in our midst."

After giving the PADD to the Bajoran, she stopped as their commanding officers arrived in front of the infirmary.

"If nothing else, Lieutenant, I will return to the Artemis and finalize tactical preparations there. I will ask our science chief and our chief of ops to establish a link between our tactical sensors and yours. This way, whenever a sensor or a phaser from any of our ships finds a target or a shield modulation, all our units will instantly pinpoint it as well."

Oseno accepted the PADD from Tyvya and quickly synched it with his own transferring the security protocol data before handing it back to the towering Andorian.

"Thank you Lieutenant. I have rather stringent security protocols in place on the Alsea already, but I will use yours to fill in any gaps that I may have. As we speak my security teams are conducting security sweeps of the Alsea, and searching all crew records for any possible connection to the Children. It's a pleasure conversing with you Lieutenant Tyvya, and we'll see you out there."

As his conversation with Tyvya concluded, he continued to follow the two commanding officers as they continued toward Starbase 10's sickbay.

Standing still behind them as they moved away, the tactical chief of the Artemis activated her personal communicator with her surprisingly slim fingers.

"Artemis; one to beam up."

A moment later, the giantess found herself in the main transporter room of Captain Kheren's ship.

"All boarding security protocols are checking positive, Lieutenant," said the Vulcan security guard standing near the door inside the transporter room, after receiving a nod from the transporter chief. "Your subatomic signature and your cerebral emissions confirm that you are who you appear to be and as much in full control of your faculties as when you last left."

"You sure, S'Kon?" she said then. In her hand, she pointed a phaser at him. "Your power pack has been drained in transit, Lieutenant," calmly replied S'Kon, his hands still crossed at his back... where his own phaser was. "The blade you had hidden on your person was beamed separately to the armory."

She stood up, antennae curving inward in obvious satisfaction.

"Good. How about the rest of the security protocols?"

"Engineering, Ops and Science have completed level 1 diagnostics of all ship systems; all confirming no system alteration or foreign element present. Medical reports all crewmembers have been through physical and psychological level 1 examinations; one cult sympathiser and three potential ones have been transferred off the ship to starbase security for further questioning. All security and tactical systems, programs, supplies and personnel checked and prepared for the mission. All safety protocols are in effect."

Tyvya nodded, visibly satisfied.

"*This time, no one* will catch us flat-footed because of our *own* carelessness," she commented, as much a compliment as a vow. "I want a general meeting of the entire security personnel in conference room 4 in one hour. The Captain will be back shortly."

The Vulcan nodded in acknowledgement.

"We'll be ready for his test as well, Lieutenant. We'll get him this time."

Moving past him through the wooshing sliding door after he unlocked it for her, she strode beyond the second security guard stationed outside the entrance towards the nearest turbolift. The Andorian giantess raised her antennae with satisfaction. She knew they were as ready as they could possibly be; yet, there was still a lot to be done before departure for the critical operation laid out before them.

\* \* \*

Gould and Vincent materialized aboard the Lotus within the main transporter room. Gould took little time for pleasantries.

"Welcome aboard the Lotus Mister Vincent. After you check in with the quartermaster, meet with the security division and prepare for the screening. Expect a lot of complaining. After that's in the works, report to the bridge for your command transfer as chief of security. We'd do it first normally but were on a tight schedule and Lieutenant Tomah, our acting CSO, can hold the fort until you get there."

Without pausing for a breath he tapped his combadge.

"Gould to Lieutenant Adams."

"Aye, Sir?"

"I shall be arriving shortly at main engineering, I'd like to meet my chief of engineering before we start getting on our way. Nothing too extreme so don't start polishing the brass... but I don't want to see anyone sleeping down there either."

"Aye, Sir."

"Very good; Gould out."

The transporter operator added in.

"Captain, a Lieutenant Thomas Sainthill also checked in while you were at the meeting."

Gould nodded.

"Excellent. I was starting to worry we'd have to leave without a science officer. Let me know when Doctor Bindo arrives as well... and find out if she wants you to transfer any recently acquired bio-filters for her tests... I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"Master Chief Petty Officer Janin Olsen... and we haven't met until now.. Sir." she said with a professional tone.

"Oh right, well... carry on, Olsen."

She gave a stiff nod.

"Aye, Sir."

Then Gould looked at Vincent.

"I'm sorry Lieutenant; did you have any questions for me?"

At this moment, Jolie Bindo stepped off of the transporter pad where she'd been beamed aboard. Her PADD was in hand, with all the medical security procedures from Doctor Nasaro-Myth and the scientific data from her discussion with both him and Lieutenant Syntron. She tapped her combadge.

"Computer, locate the captain."

"Captain Gould is in main Engineering," came the pleasant female computer voice.

She jogged to a lift and took it to the Engineering section. She caught sight of the hybrid captain, wondering absently if there were conditions that affected them in particular. She filed it away to research after launch.

She caught his eye and signaled that she needed to speak with him. When he acknowledged her, she spoke in low tones for his ears and the chief engineer's only.

"Captain, I have urgent scientific data for you. Mister Syntron, Doctor Nasaro-Myth and I came up with a theory to not only stop the anomaly, but possibly to neutralize it to the point that it can no longer enter our time-space. But we also realized what can happen if the Romulans have come up with this same technique but used it incorrectly... to destroy it. Doctor Nasaro-Myth also went over medical security protocols that I highly recommend you evaluate for implementation on the Lotus. We must speak on the the Romulan threat as soon as possible."

She allowed the image of an exploding cubic parsec of space to be read by the captain to punctuate the urgency of her request.

Gould still had not met with Adams and was in a slightly impatient mood when Jolie appeared. His first thought was that she was going to nag him yet again about the test and was relieved that it wasn't about that.

"Lets see here.." he said as he read over her findings. "It seems well thought out enough... I'm not sure I agree with the overall effective threat from plasma, but it is possible. I'd say its worth considering, Doctor. You said Mister Syntron was part of this discussion right? well, I'm sure their captain will relay it to fleet captain Samji for review. I'm afraid I'm not the best one to suggest it."

He had a manner of annoyance in his voice, with just a hint of sarcasm. He handed the PADD back to her.

"Take this information to our new CSO Sainthill and have him back you up. If Captain Kheren has decided not to pass it on, *then* I'll put my name on it."

Jolie nodded. She thought momentarily about the annoyance and sarcasm, mentally reviewing what she'd said to see what had triggered it. There was nothing that she could think of. She filed it away as a data point for the Counselor.

"Aye, Sir. I'll discuss it with the CSO, then. If you approve, I can take these medical security protocols to TacSec to discuss implementation. I'll need to get baselines stored for future reference as we get underway. That'll be done in conjunction with all the Counselor assessments to minimize interruptions."

After being dismissed, she turned and left to find Sainthill.

Several minutes later, Bindo's communicator chirped.

"Lieutenant Tomah to Doctor Bindo; the captain said you need something ma'am?"

A short while later, Josh Vincent left the quartermaster's office and began jogging to his new office. He was late for his own department meeting because it seemed that every new crewman had checked in with the quartermaster at the same time as him. On the bright side, his wait had given him time to study the layout of the Lotus, so he was able to reach his office quickly. He entered his office and walked past his department's senior officers to sit behind his desk.

"My name is Lieutenant Josh Vincent and I'll be taking over the tactical and security department as of now," Josh began. "I wish we could have more time to get to know each other before we went into action, but there isn't time right now. I'm going to quickly go over some departmental changes now, and you will be fully briefed on the situation later today."

He paused for a moment as he scanned the new faces seated before him. He saw Ensign T'Pala, a striking brown-haired Vulcan woman who was the senior brig officer, and Ensign Rainn Tahndi, a pale Bajoran man who was the senior security officer. The last new face was that of long-time veteran Chief Warrant Officer Jacob Parks Junior, the lead investigations officer and newly appointed master-at-arms.

Josh gestured to Nidiri standing beside him.

"This is Ensign Nidiri Kiels, my first assistant chief of security. After this meeting, she will coordinate with all of you to make the changes that I outline here, while I meet with the captain. All personnel must receive evaluations from the ship's counselor; we will be starting with senior officers and working our way through the entire crew, so be ready when you are called."

"Sir," interrupted Ensign T'Pala, "if we are preparing for a fleetwide operation, it is not illogical to spend time unnecessarily talking to counselors when we could be prepping?"

"I know that it's not ideal, Ensign," Josh replied, "but these screenings do serve an important purpose. No matter how much we prepare, if the officers and crew aren't able to handle the upcoming stresses, we will fail; and it is an order, so we will all do it."

T'Pala seemed satisfied with the answer as she made no further objections.

"Secondly," Josh continued, "there have been some recent infiltrations into Lotus Fleet, so I want you, Chief Parks, to do security checks on all newly transferred personnel, including myself and Ensign Kiels. Any questions Chief?"

"How far should I dig, Sir?" Parks asked.

"I want basic security checks on all personnel that have been transferred since the refit," Josh replied. "If you find anything suspicious or if anyone was transferred in the last few days, run full background checks. Ensign T'Pala, I'm going to need you to ready the brig to potentially hold infiltrators; these may be people who you know, or your friends, so I need to know that you are ready for them."

T'Pala nodded.

"I'll be ready, Sir."

"Very good," Josh responded. "Lastly, I want all security personnel to start practice sessions in close-combat operations immediately. Ensign Kiels, I want you to head up this training; Chief Parks will be busy with investigations, so work with the other master-at-arms, uhm... Mister Fischer I believe. If there are no further questions, you are dismissed."

"Aye, Sir," the officers said in unison as they stood and exited the office.

Josh stowed some of his belongings in his office before following the officers out. He made his way to the turbolift and rode it straight to the bridge. When the turbolift doors opened, he stepped onto the bridge and addressed Lieutenant Tomah, the acting CSO.

"Lieutenant Josh Vincent reporting for duty as Chief Tactical and Security Officer," he stated to the older man.

A middle aged human male looked around at him and gave Josh a smile.

"Ah, welcome aboard, Lieutenant Vincent and welcome to the heart of the Lotus." Then he glanced away and mumbled: "Or, ah, is that main engineering? I suppose this could be the brains of the ship but, ah, wouldn't that be the computer core? Ah, anyway, welcome, Sir."

The older man looked him up and down.

"Ah. let me make a guess; this is your first command post is it? It seems like Lotus fleet Command sends all their best and brightest to me for training in the field; the last *four* CSO's all came straight out of the academy!"

With a small, sour smile, he then mused outloud:

"Most are captains on other ships now, but, ah, do they drop a line to old Tomah from time to time? of course not."

He then looked at Vincent and sighed.

"You'll be the same I'm sure."

Vincent had the feeling he had somehow upset the man... without saying a word. But Tomah got over it quickly.

"So, Sir, ah, what are your orders?" he said still with a smile.

"This is my first security command," Josh replied, grinning at Tomah's energy. "I was the chief operations officer aboard the Alsea for her last two missions, but Fleet Captain Samji thinks I can better serve the fleet as the chief of security on the flagship for this operation. My orders are to report for command transfer as chief of security. And," he added, "this is definitely the heart."

Tomah's smile brightened.

"Ah, that's what we like to hear, Lieutenant."

Then, the older man frowned a little.

"Pardon me for asking, Sir, but, ah, do you have any experience in security at all? It would be asking a lot of, ah, even a miracle worker like myself to prepare someone like that to run the entire department, ah, if you get my meaning."

He seemed genuinely concerned.

"I studied tactical and security at the Academy," Josh replied, "and I served in Starfleet Intelligence, where I ran several security operations, from graduation until my transfer to Lotus Fleet. Most of my operations are classified, so you'll just have to take my word on it. My assistant, Ensign Kiels, specialized in shipboard security at the Academy, and served in the security department at Starfleet Headquarters, so she can help you fill in the blanks in case I miss anything."

He rolled his eyes.

"Classified, classified... classified! Ah, is there anyone in Starfleet who's files isn't classified? that's what I liked about our former captain Felez; the man was, ah, straightforward and as honest as they come. Ah, well, it is what it is I guess. But I don't remember all this sneaking around when I was your age; or maybe I just wasn't, ah, interesting enough.."

He gave another heavy sigh.

"So anyways.. I hear theres some sort of new, ah, security procedure we have to initiate?"

"Yes there is," Josh replied. "We will be implementing more strict measures to keep the Horizon's Children from infiltrating our ship. I know the basics of the plan, but we must contact the Artemis to get the details of their security, which we'll use as a template. I've also told my investigations officers to start security checks on all new crewmembers to look for any irregularities."

"That may be harder than it should be, Mister Vincent," the captains' voice moved past them as he just exited the lift. "More than seventy percent of the crew are new to the Lotus. If there are any Children among them, it may take some time to pick them out."

He sat down in his chair and looked around at them both.

"And I'm still a little unsure as to how they can infiltrate the Lotus in the first place. Are the Horizon Children a known race that can blend in with the Alpha Quadrant species? Or is it being suggested that Federation personnel are willingly helping them..." He stopped short of saying "destroying our universe" in front of the rest of the bridge crew. It wasn't the time for them to know that. "I find the notion unlikely at best."

He then opened the ship wide comm system.

"Attention all hands, this is Captain Gould; we have a launch time of one hour and fifteen minutes. Have all sections report readiness to the bridge in one hour. All senior officers will report to the briefing room in thirty minutes for pre-launch orders. Gould out."

"Not a man of a great many words is he?" Tomah mumbled but smiled anyway.

Gould stood up and walked over to the two security officers.

"Your top priority is saboteurs. The ship is as ready as she'll ever be, so the best we can do is try and keep her that way. If we have any on board, I want them in my brig before they get a chance to so much as scratch the pain job; is that understood, gentlemen?"

"Yes sir," Josh replied. "I will start implementing strict security measures immediately. As I understand it, the Children is a cult made up of races from throughout the quadrant. It is likely that they will try to penetrate our defenses by persuading a Starfleet officer to join their cause. I believe they used an officer aboard the Artemis to attempt an attack there; as such, prevention and detection of sabotage is part of their protocols that I will use, starting with a room by room search of the ship for stowaways or unauthorized devices."

Josh then turned to the side and tapped his combadge and pulled up his PADD.

"Ensign Kiels, this is Lieutenant Vincent."

"Kiels here, Sir," came the woman's reply.

"I'm sending you new security protocols," Josh said, "Please go over them with each shift leader and begin implementing them immediately. First though, I need you to do a count of all weapons on the ship; all security personnel should be issued a type-1 phaser and all other weapons must be stored in secure areas. While alpha shift is finishing up its duty shift, activate beta shift now, and perform a level 5 visual sweep of the entire ship, keeping an eye out for any signs of sabotage; contact me immediately if you find anything strange."

Turning back to the captain Josh said:

"There are several other protocols that should be put into place, so I will work with the other department heads to secure the ship as completely as possible."

"Very good; try have a section report ready in time for the meeting."

"Yes, Sir," Josh responded to the captain.

Then with a nod, Captain Gould walked into his ready room. He sat in the chair furthest from the door, pulled out his PADD and waited. He was five minutes early but wanted to see in what manner his people came to the meeting, he read his PADD while he slowly drank his coffee.

Josh Vincent turned to Edward Tomah.

"Is there anything more that needs to be done in order to make the transfer official, or may I get my report started?"

"We just have to pop down to my... I mean... *your* office, for a little privacy and perform the coded command transfer, easy as pie."

Then he waved at the lift.

"Shall we?"

And the two men left the bridge.

Josh followed Tomah through the corridors and into the security office, where he had left his bag after his meeting only a few minutes ago. He moved next to the desk and waited for the elder man to begin the coded command transfer.

A short while later, he walked into the conference room, carrying his PADD, moving towards a chair near the captain. He had just finished the coded command transfer from Tomah, so he was now officially the chief of security. His teams were busy sweeping the ship and preparing for their upcoming operation, which required many changes in security procedures throughout the entire ship. In order to get all of the departments on the same page for these changes, Josh had prepared a rather large report for the first meeting with his new comrades.

"Hello Captain," he said as he took his seat. "I've had a look at the security procedures from the Artemis that we'll be implementing, and I've gotten my department started on making these changes. There are quite a few things that will affect the other departments, so I'd like to go over them with the department heads before I make the final changes."

"A reasonable concern Lieutenant. I look forward to it."

This, Gould figured, would be a good test of how well they might work together.

Newly commissioned science chief Sainthill entered the conference room and took a seat near the head of the table where the captain sat.



"Hello Gentlemen" he said as he pulled up the work he had been egrossed in earlier on his PADD.

With everything going on, it was important that everything was double and triple-checked. He had looked forward to this posting, so he had to make sure he brought his "A" game.

Gould looked up from his PADD.

"Did you get a chance to talk to Doctor Bindo yet? She had some interesting ideas about how we might approach the AH situation."

As the science lieutenant entered the room and took his seat, Josh Vincent received a message from his assistant with the report on the search of the ship. He was busy reading the report and did not notice the captain's question to the other man.

"Captain," he then interrupted, "security teams have covered half of the ship with their search for sabotage. They found two crewmen in a jefferies tube that they weren't scheduled to be in; both men are being held in the brig. I can have the matter investigated further if you like, or we can transfer the prisoners to the starbase so we can get underway on the mission and investigate after we've fixed the anomaly."

"No, conduct the interrogation aboard ship. If they've caused any damage I want to find out first hand as much as we can about.." started to order the captain of the flagship, but then he was interrupted.

\*Captain Gould, priority message from fleet captain Samji coming through, Sir.\*

Gould glanced around the room then stood up.

"Come on." he said simply to the others.

\* \* \*

Oseno looked down at the motionless form of Captain Kalten Siduri and closed his eyes in a silent prayer to The Prophets. Jureth was not an overly religious man but he still believed, as all Bajorans did, in the deities that resided in the only stable wormhole in the galaxy. He had asked for this moment alone with the captain specifically to ask for The Prophets' blessing on his former commanding officer. After a moment Oseno opened his eyes and lingered by Siduri's side for a moment longer.

"I'm sorry, Sir," he said quietly. "I promise you that I will bring Commander Rivers and the Alsea back from this."

Finally, Oseno turned and left Starbase 10's medical center. As he made his way back to the transporter room, he studied at length the security protocols that Lieutenant Tyvya had given him and immediately sent nearly all of them to Lieutenant Steele to have them implemented on the Alsea. No one was going to sabotage his ship if he could help it.

Next, he turned his attention to the Romulan vessels they were most likely to encounter. Even though he could call them up on the computer at any time, Oseno set about memorising the specifications of each of the Romulan vessels. He was so absorbed in the data on the PADD that he bumped into a female commander he'd never met before.

"I apologize Ma'am, I.."

"You weren't watching where you were going, Lieutenant," she said. "Its okay, but perhaps you should save your reading for when you aren't walking the passages of a major starbase."

"Aye, Commander."

After that, he put the PADD back on his belt and finished his trip back to the starbase's transporter room. As he stepped up on the pad he turned to the operator.

"To the Alsea, please," he directed and as an afterthought he added; "directly to the bridge."

"Can do, Sir," the Human male ensign replied.

Shortly after that, the transporter energized and, when the familiar tingling grip released him, he noted he was not on the bridge, but standing in the Alsea's main transporter room.

"Welcome back, Sir," the operator, a middle aged Human female, said. "Bioscan completed in transport; you are Lieutenant Oseno Jureth."

"Am I?" Oseno reached for his phaser only to find it missing

"Your phaser has been returned to the armory, Sir," the operator said smiling. "Since you had it with you when you left, it did not get keyed to your signature and was therefore deemed a possible threat. You may retrieve it after it has been properly keyed to you."

"Good work Chief, I see Lieutenant Steele works quickly."

"Indeed, Sir; she was here only about ten minutes ago."

"And the filtering programs are in place?"

"Yes, Sir; she was dragging one of the junior engineers with her, Sir. He didn't look particularly happy about it."

That comment elicited a laugh from Oseno as he stepped down from the transporter pad. His second in command of the Alsea's tactical department was as feisty as they came. In a different time and place, they might have been more than just good friends, but they were both dedicated Starfleet officers and neither would let their friendship interfere with that.

"Thank you for the warm reception Chief; have a good day."

"You too, Sir," she replied.

Jureth made his way to the armory and properly checked out his phaser which was now keyed to his bio-signature so that only he would be able to operate it. In fact, every security officer aboard now had such a phaser assigned to them, and any unassigned weapons such as phaser rifles and the Mark I stun grenades Oseno had requisitioned before their first mission to the anomaly were kept locked in weapons lockers with passwords that only himself, Cat Steele, T'Lana, the armory officers, and Captain Rivers knew.

Jureth then made his way up to the Alsea's bridge and, as he stepped onto the bridge of the mighty warship, reality suddenly hit him. With Captain Siduri being disabled that made him the Alsea's Executive Officer. The ship's tactical and security readiness was still his responsibility, but so was now the overall readiness of the ship. He moved down to the XO's station and then thought better of it and returned to the tactical position where he was more comfortable. There, he opened the ship's intercom

"Attention all hands, this is..." he paused for a moment debating internally how to refer to himself "this is the XO on the bridge. All Alsea personnel are recalled to the ship beginning immediately, and all departments should begin launch preparations. Department personnel should make readiness reports to your department heads and all department heads should make readiness reports to the bridge. Oseno out."

Closing the intercom channel Oseno tapped his combadge.

"Oseno to Steele,"

"I'm here boss."

"Where exactly is here?"

"Cargobay 2, we're sweeping all the storage containers for tampering. Your orders."

"I know Cat; who is working on the crew record scans?"

"T'Lana."

"Okay, thanks; Oseno out."

Oseno closed that channel and opened another.

"Oseno to T'Lana."

"Go ahead, Sir," replied the Vulcan's stoic voice

"T'Lana, what is your position?"

"I am in medical, Sir. The Doctor and I are working on profiling certain crew members."

"I will meet you there shortly; Oseno out."

It didn't take Jureth long to make his way to the Alsea's sickbay where he found T'Lana and the Alsea's holographic doctor standing in front of one of the computer panels.

"Ah, Lieutenant," the doctor said "Nice of you to join us. I hear that you are now the first officer. I will need to redo your physical and psychological assessment."

"In a minute, doc," Jureth said. "I need to speak with T'Lana."

"Fine, but don't wait too long, I do have other things to do you know."

Oseno stepped up beside T'Lana.

"How are the crew reacting to the new regs?"

"Most of them see it as unnecessary, Sir, but we have identified two Horizon Children sympathizers among them, and the doctor used his authority to have them immediately transferred off the ship."

"Good; how much of the crew have you been through?"

"Fifty-five crewmembers Sir,"

"Good; keep at it."

"Aye, Sir."

Oseno turned back to The Doctor.

"Okay doc, you may poke and prod me at will."

"Be careful what you wish for Lieutenant," The Doctor said with a smirk.

As all this was going on, chief engineer Niomo Lire rematerialized on the transporter pad of the USS Alsea. He looked bewildered at the officer manning the transporter terminal.

"Uh, why am I here?"

Chief Warrent Officer Jones looked at the engineer and simply stated:

"New transporter regulations, Sir. I've scanned both yourself and your belongings to make sure you are who you say you are. Lieutenant Commander Jureth says everyone has to make a stop here first before continuing on to their final destination."

Niomo sighed as the officer started punching in new commands to transfer him to engineering.

"I guess with all the sabotage, everyone is being overly cautious. Thanks for the heads up."

He was quickly transported to main engineering, watching as a few officers walked around checking systems. He hit his combadge and made a broadcast to all the engineers onboard the ship.

"Attention. All engineers are to report to Main Engineering for a full briefing. It will start in ten minutes."

Niomo moved to his console and started bringing up the design schematics of the microcore as well as the redundant reactors that they would need to improve upon. He did not know the exact schedule that the Captain wanted to adhere to so, he assumed he had a few hours, at most. He began to think that the modifications needed on the microcore would take more than that, but he'd try his best. Worst came to worst, they'd fly as one ship. He was sure that Mister Jureth would enjoy that fact.

As he worked, he saw engineering filling with many sleepy faces. He picked Lieutenant Thompson out of the pack and brought him forward.

"James, we've got a big job to do. We need to basically build additional redundant fusion reactors to power our impulse engines. Additionally, we need to modify the tertiary hull's microcore in order to bring it's maximum warp to around 9.4. Oh, and we have six hours at most."

Thompson's eyes went wide as the chief told him what was going on.

"Sir, with all due respect... There's no way we'd be able to make those kinds of modifications to Core 3 in a few hours. It might be doable in twelve, and that's with a fully moving team. We've already had requests from Commander Jureth to monitor our staff for possible spies. I spent most of my time while you were gone watching people work. As for the reactors, it's doable. It'll be tough, but I think with some assistance from Ops we can get it done."

Niomo nodded as the man talked. He knew that Thompson was correct, but no engineer should ever say 'I don't have enough time.' He slapped the man on the shoulder.

"Yep. Your concerns are noted. I'll want you supervising the fusion reactors. Pick who you need. I suggest Ensign Brenes. Looks like he has a lot of experience with these MVAM impulse engines."

Turning to his mostly assembled crew. he then spoke louder with voice accustomed to command.

"Ok people. There's a lot of work that just got thrown in our laps, and only a few hours to get them done. I want Shift A and C to work with Lieutenant Thompson here on setting up additional fusion reactors in all 3 MVAM sections to power our impulse engines. James, pick two officers who will supervise the other two sections of the ship. You've known the officers for longer than I. These reactors will keep our parts flying when we deactivate our warp cores. That being said, Shift B will work with me to make some modifications to Core 3. She needs to hit Warp 9.4 for about twelve hours."

Some murmurs went through the group as Niomo gave out his orders.

"Yes," he responded, "I know that we are being asked a lot of. But this is to save the universe. There's a creepy anomaly out there that's trying to eat everything we hold dear. We will stop it, but only if we can get these systems working. Ok, I am sending all the information we have on the anomaly to your PADDs, use it. Everyone, get to work!"

Thompson stepped up and turned to the group.

"Ensigns Brenes and Sparbok. You will lead the teams on building the reactors in the primary and secondary hulls, respectively. I'll split the shift's up now; follow me."

The large group separated as the officers moved to their assigned locations. Niomo looked at the 15 officers that remained from Shift B.

"Alright people. Let's get to work. Our first order of business will be to increase the matter-antimatter reaction amount so that the core can distribute a higher amount of electro-plasma. However, to do that, we'll need to increase the amount of deuterium and anti-deuterium the core receives. And finally, to ensure that we do not explode, I want all primary EPS conduits reinforced. Ok. Alpha, Bravo and Charlie teams will work on the reinforcement. Delta and Echo will take the reaction intermix change. I'll be supervising everyone, so do not hesitate to ask for assistance. Ok people. Let's roll."

Niomo walked with his teams to core 3 and watched as his officers started going to work.

It was going to be a long day.

As he worked, he realized that he had not gotten permission from the Captain to make the modifications.

"Captain Rivers. I'm requesting permission to modify the tertiary hull's microcore, as well as add the needed redundant fusion reactors to all three sections of the ship. I doubt there will be a problem?"

Rachelle Rivers was behind the desk in the captain's ready room still trying to organize herself when the call from her chief engineer came in.

"Those are the modifications discussed at the briefing correct? Proceed as you outlined to the Fleet Captain Commander, Rivers out."

Niomo smiled.

"Roger Cap. Lire Out."

Later, Niomo finally wiped the sweat off his brow. He had been working for hours straight. The exact amount, he did not care to know. However, as far as he could tell, he and his team had finished the extensive modifications to the Alsea's microcore and, through some simulations, it seemed as though she would be able to put up Warp 9.45 for 12.75 hours without any major breakdowns. Any further than that and Niomo wasn't sure what would happen. Those simulations varied from "Instant Explosion" to "Slow Structural Failure."

He had not heard from Thompson's team since they split up. Niomo, recalling the briefing about saboteurs, was a bit worried. Hitting his communicator, he contacted the Lieutenant.

"Lieutenant Thompson, come in."

"I'm here boss, what's up?" a gruff voice responded. Niomo silently breathed a sigh of relief.

*Why am I getting so worked up over this?* he thought.

"Er, we've finished the modifications on our end. How close are your teams to being done?" Niomo asked. He wasn't looking forward to going back to work. "Should I send some people to help?"

The man on the other side laughed slightly.

"No need, Commander. We are just finishing up. Whomever designed this "Floodgate" was a genius. It should provide the Alsea and her sections with plenty of thrust for a very long time. Computer sims are coming in green as well. Shouldn't have a problem."

Niomo nodded to himself. It looked like his engineers proved themselves worthy of their titles.

"Very good, Lieutenant. Once your teams are completely finished, everyone goes off duty to rest before the mission."

Thompson confirmed the order and the conversation ended. Niomo looked to his team and thanked them for their hard work before sending them to get cleaned up and to bed. Niomo, however, returned to his office and gave a once over on the repair reports. He had left the exterior repairs to Starbase 10's crews, and it seems that they had been completed hours earlier. With his tasks complete, and no other orders coming in from the captain, he put his head down and grabbed some sleep until he was called.

The Alsea was ready.

He hoped.

\* \* \*

Cargobay 1 of the starship Artemis was the largest room available to Lotus Fleet personnel outside of Starbase 10. Even then, it was quite filled with the seven hundred and forty-six crewmembers all assembled on its wide, empty expanse, except for the senior bridge officers who were all on the catwalk overlooking the immense room.

All the chatter and whispers then died out instantly when a voice suddenly clamored:

"Captain on deck!"

Kheren was not fond at all of this particular protocol; in fact, he had all but banished it under his command. To him, it was as pompous as it was useless. On the bridge of a starship, even the bridge of the largest vessel of Lotus Fleet, it didn't take more than a second or two for all bridge officers to notice him, or anyone else. And in his pragmatic mind, they had better things to do than stand at attention each time he poked an antenna.

But here, in such a vast room with so many people packed in with so many questions and apprehensions in their minds, it did feel useful for once. And as soon as he joined with his senior officers on the catwalk, he wasted no time.

"By order of Lotus Fleet Command, the USS Artemis is being called to serve on Operation Horizon, aimed at neutralizing the threat of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. All of you have been near and even through this phenomenon and back numerous times, more than anyone alive anywhere. You know better than anyone else what we have to do and the risks involved."

He paused as he could observe the looks of acknowledgement and the expressions of remembrance on the vast sea of faces leveled at him.

"Our venture will be a joint one with all the ships of Lotus Fleet, and the Artemis is specifically paired with the USS Alsea, the most powerful warship available this side of the Neutral Zone. But this will not make things any easier. Doctor..."

The chief medical officer activated a large holographic display over the heads of the entire crew complement assembled in the cargo bay, using the emergency holographic emitters disseminated throughout the immense room to conjure up the image of a dark, wide-winged vessel resembling some giant bat of metal. Kheren then explained further:

"The Artemis and the Alsea are also tasked to stop a Romulan attempt to destroy the anomaly, which would threaten not only this universe but the other universe we have all been to once. We believe this attempt might involve what you see here: a Scimitar class dreadnought."

Now there were whispers and mumbles across the whole room, carrying a feeling of surprise, even of dread, the captain did nothing to alleviate.

"This ship is four times our size, twice as protected, carries three times our phaser power and ten times our torpedo fire; and it can use all that while perfectly cloaked, beyond any conventional capability to detect. And if you think all this is dangerous enough, think again..."

As the Andorian captain spoke, the image of the monstrous Romulan starship expanded as some vast crown of curved spires deployed slowly all around its central hub, like a hand opening to grab everything before it.

"This type of warship has been known to be also outfitted as a giant thaloron radiation generator, large enough and powerful enough to obliterate all life on a planet in a matter of seconds. Against this, only metaphasic shielding can offer any possible protection."

He didn't have to say more. Any Starfleet officer who had been in actual combat at least once, as they all had on the Artemis, knew well that losing shields during a space battle was a most distinct possibility. And so, Kheren went straight to the point:

"Our ship will be called to offer cover and protection to the USS Alsea as it concentrates its greater offensive power against this formidable foe... and any escort it might also have to boot. This means that this ship, because of her size, power reserves, armor and shields, will have to expose herself willingly to the brunt of enemy fire. Computer projections estimate, at best, severe damage... and casualties."

They were all silent now, either from shock or from dismay, or both, it was up to each of those hundreds of individuals. And as he spoke, the silver eyes of the Andorian commanding officer went to meet each and every stare he could see.

"Unless we first manage to reason peacefully with the Romulans, confrontation is a high probability and the damage level will be unavoidable; but we *can* minimize the casualties... and we will."

Straightening to put his hands behind his back to stand at attention before his own crew, Kheren then spoke with a strong, firm voice

"This ship will do its duty with the smallest crew possible; I ask for no more than seventy-five volunteers, including senior officers and myself. I do not want heroes, bravos and prideful opportunists who think they must be aboard, out of some misplaced sense of personal honor or need to prove oneself. I want officers and crewmen ready to do their duty, follow orders instantly and unflinchingly... and who will not expect to come back alive."

The silence was so deep in the immense cargobay that one could almost hear the confused thoughts that were carried by all the stares that were exchanged among the hundreds assembled. Kheren waited a moment before concluding:

"Those who will stay on the starbase will do so with no prejudice to their record or to their assignment and status aboard this ship. They will in fact prove themselves sensible and reliable officers, showing that they know they can contribute more significantly to the fleet's effort by serving as anomaly-experimented personnel here at Fleet Command Center than by needlessly sacrificing their lives just to serve as cannon fodder."

He sighed.

"To the few needed here on board that would, free and sound of mind, still elect to stay and offer their lives... please report immediately to First Officer O'Conner. But please remember this; the more who will, the more deaths we will have to mourn afterwards. Seventy-five lives is already too high a price to pay."

The Andorian lowered his head a moment as if shouldering an immense weight, then finished by ordering with a barely audible voice:

All department heads, report to conference room 1 in thirty minutes."

To O'Conner, this moment needed an inspiring speech to rally the crew to full readiness, but instead Kheren merely looked like a defeated man before the battle had even begun. His ideals were in the right place but, as the saying goes, plans only lasted until the first contact. Should the Romulan dreadnought not show or its thaloron weapon prove to be missing, or thwarted by the Artemis' shield, having the ship understaffed could be pointless at best or deadly to the fleet should larger than expected forces or unexpected forces arrive.

But more than that, O'Conner had no desire to serve on a ship with a captain that in his mind had already planned to die in a suicidal run.

Without any further word, Kheren looked one last time at his crew then left the catwalk and the cargobay, leaving only thoughtful silence in his wake.

As he did so, Michael O'Conner could only stare dumbfounded at his captain, his respect for this once rising star all but gone.

Only one voice was heard after a moment. It was the same that had proudly announced the arrival of the commanding officer; and now, it spoke only one word, with a tone slightly strangled by emotion.

"Dismissed!"

O'Conner quietly walked out of the cargobay, heading for the mess and a drink to think with.

Syntron was not fazed by the grim announcement given by the stern Andorian commander to the entire Artemis crew. In fact, he was prepared to meet with Captain Kheren to discuss several pertinent ideas and proposals related to confronting the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly that potentially connected to the impending Romulan attacks on the anomaly as well. Having just completed the meetings with his entire staff, it was confirmed that the science stations were primed and his team was ready.



He knew without a doubt that all of his department heads would choose to participate in this mission. They were experienced and operated at maximum efficiency; even under the direst of circumstances: as they had demonstrated during all of the previously perilous missions.

After the captain dismissed everyone, Syntron walked away slowly with his assistant science chief Lieutenant Valencia Irksos and the head of the Astrometrics lab, Lieutenant T'Val, by his side. It was a hushed saunter at first as they moved away from the crowd, until Lieutenant Irksos turned and stated rather firmly:

"You know that I am not going anywhere Sir... We are in this together until this mission is resolved; one way or another!"

The intensity and conviction in her voice left no doubt in the science chief's mind that she was fully committed as she stopped and faced him directly as she spoke.

"Understood, Lieutenant," Syntron acknowledged to Irksos. "In that case, your next task is to immediately streamline our science department. Determine the minimal amount of crewmen required per station and then work with your staff to establish which crew members that are willing to remain would be best suited to fulfill each requisite position. It would be preferable if you could select individuals that have multiple specialties... to help fill in any imperative vacancies that occur during this mission."

It was again a grim reminder to the dangers that lay before them on this ominous two-pronged mission.

"Ultimately, Lieutenant, including you and I, we will need to narrow down our staff to about eighteen total science crewmen."

Before either officer standing with him could respond, Syntron added:

"I need this finalized list ready in twenty-three minutes... prior to the upcoming senior staff meeting. I will be in my office preparing my final notes for this meeting."

He then turned to T'val and stated stoically.

"You will assist her with this task."

"Yes, Sir," the Vulcan woman acknowledged.

"Dismissed," Syntron then stated as he headed out of the cargo bay and back toward his office.

Nineteen point five minutes later, Syntron was presented with the revised science crew list from Lieutenant Irksos. There were twenty names on the registrar; each was mapped out with specific primary and secondary duties.

The human assistant science chief, noting Syntron's subtle reaction to the elevated total number explained succinctly:

"This is as small and efficient a group that I could narrow down from the one-hundred and fifty-three available science crewmembers. Any further reduction would jeopardize our ability to handle any given number of emergency situations that could arise during this mission."

Sitting in his science office, the Vulcan science chief looked up from the PADD to the black-skinned woman standing rigidly in front of his desk and nodded.

"Noted Lieutenant. Please have the remaining crew packed and ready to depart the ship as expeditiously as possible."

Transferring the crewmember file to his PADD, he returned Lieutenant Irksos' PADD back to her as he then stood up.

"I have a meeting with the Captain and the senior staff. Depending on the outcome of this meeting, we may need to utilize some of our additional science crew members before we depart. I will apprise you of any possible strategies and consequences ascertained at the conclusion of our meeting."

Walking toward the exit Syntron, turned and added:

"Meanwhile, Lieutenant, meet with your abridged crew and run them through a series of potential emergency exercises throughout the science stations; preparing them for a variety of given system failures and lost crew members. Note the outcome and your recommendations based on these scenarios in your next report."

"Yes, Sir," was the quick and decisive response of Lieutenant Valencia Irksos.

Syntron headed out of his office and toward the turbolift.

All this time, Captain Kheren stood in silence before the large transparencies of the conference room adjoining the bridge via a short corridor, waiting for the arrival of his senior officers; those that would elect to face death with him in the cold darkness of space.

"You certainly have a way with words..."

The Andorian did not turn to greet his chief medical officer, nor did he answer the sarcasm in his voice. And so, the Deltan simply sat in the nearest chair to the door with a smirk on his handsome face but a definite seriousness in his purple eyes that etched his otherwise pleasant tone of voice.

"After all we've been through together, they deserve to know the truth... and they need to decide for themselves how to face the truth," finally grumbled Kheren after a moment, without turning away from the window.

"Of course... but did you need to be so blunt and so gloomy about it? So... Andorian?"

This time, the Andorian turned to face Elliago squarely.

"Do I look Human to you, Doc?"

"No... but most of your crew is." argued the Deltan.

"Yes Doc... and yes, I am Andorian; I am ready to fight with all eyes open until victory or death. But I am *not* ready to pep talk those people into delusion, with bombastic promises of glory, duty and honor and false hopes of triumph and victory that can only come at the cost of our own blood, *their* blood. Some of them have families; some of them *want* families..."

Elliago kept quiet. He knew how the concept of family was most important to Andorians. Especially to this one, who was denied any. After a moment, the Deltan then slightly shifted the subject.

"It will be difficult to handle this ship with such a small crew."

"Doc, this is an Ambassador Class starship," reminded Kheren. "One man alone can handle this entire vessel at the multitask operations console. And it does not take a lot to use this ship as a target to cover another... Which is why, the less will come, the less deaths we will have on our conscience."

"You speak as if we were only going out there to die..."

"Doc, I do *not* intend to die out there... and even less to have *anyone* die out there for no reason. We will be hit first, hard and often and then we will come back for more; and we will have to stay there and take it in full until we prevail or fail. Going into this with a full crew, with scientists and nurses and technicians and so many people that will make no difference but to the deathcount would be more than irresponsible; it would be unworthy of my duty and responsibility. I am the captain; and the first duty of the captain is to his crew, even before that of his ship."

His four eyes bore straight into those of the Deltan.

"And *nothing* is more important than my crew."

Elliago simply nodded, finally starting to understand the lonely Andorian outcast that was his commanding officer.

But one that already understood it all for a long time now entered the conference room at this moment. Her antennae had caught all the conversation from the moment she had walked into the corridor leading from the bridge to the meeting chamber at the other end. Waiting until only silence followed the last words of the captain, acting chief of tactical Tyvya then stepped beyond the sliding door and went straight to Kheren, PADD in hand.

"Tactical summary with Alsea tactical chief Oseno Jureth, Sir," she said as she handed him the data retrieval apparatus. Kheren looked at its content and, after a moment, nodded approvingly.

"Sound approach. Good man this Oseno Jureth. between you two, we have a good chance to pull this off... all the more if we can significantly reduce the cost in lives."

"About that, Sir," the giantess then asked. "If we are boarded with a reduced crew..."

"Lieutenant; in over three hundred years, even before the birth of the United Federation of Planets, the Romulans almost never attempted a boarding action. It is simply alien to their way of thinking and their doctrine of war. And with their current objective aimed solely at destroying the anomaly, especially with such a massive ship as the one Starfleet Intelligence has warned us about, doing so would be totally pointless, even idiotic. Romulans might not be logical as their Vulcan cousins, but they are not idiots... and like them, they are very intensely focused."

"Sir... they might have Reman troops on board," then objected Tyvya; "and they did board the Enterprise during the Shinzon incident."

"Make sure our antiboarding protocols are fully active then," agreed Kheren. "And with a reduced crew, cutting life support in unoccupied areas to concentrate more power on our defensive systems will certainly make us a risky target to board as well."

"I'll see to it, Captain," she acknowledged as she sat on the second side of the triangular table to wait for the other senior officers to join them.

The door wooshed open and all eyes were drawn to the peculiar three-legged gait of the Edoan assistant chief of operations Cheonghi. The red-skinned face seemed even redder than usual as he smiled sheepishly and went to his commanding officer.

"Sir... Captain; I have just been informed by Lieutenant Danik Brie that he will be... staying on the starbase."

The six-limbed officer gave him a PADD in which Kheren found the transfer request of the Bolian engineer that had served as his chief of operations for the last months. In polite words, he explained that he understood the need to minimize casualties in the upcoming operation and that he would prove more useful as an anomaly technical consultant on the base than just as another button pusher on the Artemis.

He also recommended a list of operations crewmembers that were cross-trained in security and medical, or engineering and piloting, that would prove more valuable than specialists like him during this operation... enough to assume all essential duties, support damage control and medical teams and even pilot every craft on board.

Kheren sighed and nodded. He had hoped to be able to count on Brie to be there; but he understood his reasons... and those between the lines. Bolians too had family ambitions that went beyond the obligations of the service.

"Very well, Mister Cheonghi. You will therefore now serve as our chief of ops. Please have a seat."

The Edoan again smiled awkwardly, looked at the unorthodox table and finally chose to sit with his peculiar spread-legged tripod stance beside Nasaro-Myth, reassured by the presence of the friendly Deltan doctor.

The door opened again, this time to admit a tall, bald, black-skinned man who stood at attention before the captain.

"I guess Mister Scott has decided to stay on the station, Mister Baoule?"

The assistant chief engineer looked a bit surprised for a short moment before he nodded and acknowledged formally.

"Aye, captain; he sent his transfer request to your ready room a short while ago. He asked Lieutenant Blakely to replace him on board, but she then requested that I do so instead so that she may remain assistant chief engineer... with your approval of course, Sir."

"Glad to still have you and Lieutenant Blakely with us, Mister Baoule," simply acknowledged Kheren, moving a hand towards the conference table.

"You should not lack engineering personnel either, Sir," declared then the black man with a small smile. "I hear there is currently a challenge between engineering and security as to which department will have the most on board when we will launch."

"WE have fifty percent of our people cross-trained as technicians," commented Tyvya with obvious pride and confidence.

"I'd prefer for those who will to compete as to which will have the most of them alive when we return," gloomily retorted the Andorian, silencing for a moment the burgeoning friendly verbal bout.

As Baoule sat beside the giantess and quietly resumed their amiable dispute to lighten the tense atmosphere, they all now only waited for the science chief and the First officer to arrive so that they could finalize their next rendez-vous with destiny.

*IF they will come...* thought Kheren.

The Vulcan had been unscrutable as ever, even after his terse, cold speech to the crew; and there were as many logical reasons for him to stay on board as there were for him to stay on Starbase 10. As for O'Conner...

Kheren had noticed the change of attitude of the man over the past week, since their return from their week long study of the anomaly... and the revelation by Temporal Investigations of their astonishing part in a dramatic time travel incident. Afterwards, the man had been silent, isolated, offering nothing to support or advise his commanding officer and fellow crewmates, spending all his time with people from other crews...

Still, his blatant insubordination at the meeting had surprised him and he had relented a bit then, trusting the experience of the man; but the way he had looked at his captain during the meeting with the crew afterwards... then moving off, without a word to anyone... O'Conner visibly did not understand at all what they were getting into, how they could best face it... or worse, he didn't *care*.

And just as bad; the Andorian had immediately perceived from the body, the face and the eyes of his first officer that he seemed to have lost all respect and trust in his captain. It was the same attitude he had seen former chief engineer N'Eligahn show months ago towards O'Conner himself, and eventually to the entire command staff, when things didn't go the way *he* thought best.

*Maybe its about time you get your own captaincy*, then wished him the Andorian... although he now wondered, reflecting on what was happening, if he was not instead cursing him with such a wish.

Exiting off of the lift onto deck 1 just then, the Vulcan science chief headed directly to the conference room. Upon entering, he noted Captain Kheren standing resolutely toward the window with his back to the meeting table. Sitting quietly at the triangular table was Docotor Nasaro-Myth, engineer Baoule, operations officer Cheonghi and acting chief of tactical Tyvya.

Syntron could sense a bit of apprehension in the air as he sat down across from this imposing Andorian female as she was busily entering information into her PADD.

Syntron surmised that this overtly preoccupied demeanor was mostly a result of the upcoming mission and her reluctance to once again have the role as the chief tactical and security officer aboard the Artemis thrust upon her. This was a position that she handled most masterfully in the past, yet, illogically, she had no inclination to accept the role permanently.

But Syntron also recalled their brief meeting in his office at the conclusion of their last mission when the giantess, in her own convoluted manner, eventually professed her conflicting emotional reaction and attraction to the commanding officer of the Artemis. Recognizing the futility of such an affinity toward the captain, she declared her intention to suppress all superfluous emotions to allow the captain to focus on his primary role to command this ship, and for her to fulfill her duties efficiently as well; clearly a confounding burden for her to bear.

Glancing toward the intently preoccupied Andorian officer, Syntron simply stated:

"Felicitations, Lieutenant Tyvya."

Both antennae on the thick platinum mane of the Andorian woman shot up in surprise as she raised her clear blue eyes towards the bearded Vulcan.

"Sir?" she asked, obviously confused.

Syntron could sense that Lieutenant Tyvya felt a bit awkward as he peered back into her eyes; as if reacting to him suspiciously knowing her well-guarded and most discomfoting secret.

"I was merely acknowledging your presence here, Lieutenant; and conveying continued success to you as our representative of both the tactical and security departments once again."

For a moment, the towering blue-skinned woman looked at him, eyes blinking. Then she shrugged.

"Thank you, Sir... I guess. Well, as Humans say, somebody has to do it. We certainly can't leave our captain alone with so much ahead of us now, can we?"

The way she said it, it sounded more like a solemn vow than a simple statement of fact.

First officer O'Conner paused as he stood outside the conference door. He had spend the last thirty minutes collecting the crew's many requests to both stay, leave and even transfer. As expected, all of the Andorian and Klingon officers had quickly elected to stay.

Oddly enough, all of the senior science officers had chosen to stay. Also, while only a couple of the Bajorans had elected to stay also, the remainder had asked to be transferred to other ships in the fleet, living up to their fighting spirit. A number of Humans had asked the same but the majority of them and the other races making up the crew of the Artemis had elected to stay behind after the captain's "everyone is going to die" speech.

All in all, a total of ninety-six had elected to stay on board, thirty-nine crewmembers and fifty-seven officers. A further one hundred and fifty-one however had requested transfers to other ships in the fleet... and Commander Michael O'Conner was one of them.

He was asking to be transferred to the Spectre. It had not been an easy choice for him; he truly had grown to love the old girl. Michael had always believed one made one's own fate and if the captain believed they were going to have to throw their corpses in front of the Romulans to slow them down, it was an almost certainty that Kheren was going to do just that and ignore any other options. So, while O'Conner had no doubt he would willingly go down with the ship, as the saying went, he himself had no plans to be Kheren's cannon fodder.

After a taking a deep breath, O'Conner glanced around the bridge as if it was his last time before stepping in to the room, nodded to the officers and took his seat, his report and transfer request in hand.

Even in the diffuse reflection of the transparency he was facing, Kheren could clearly see that his first officer entered as a man with his mind made up. There was a purposefulness in his step and a blankness in his eyes that together spoke of it plainly enough.

*Hope for you that you made the right one, Michael*, the Andorian thought before he acknowledged his arrival with a nod as he turned and went to sit beside him and face the rest of the senior crew.

"Gentlebeings," started Kheren without any formality, "you all know the mission laid out before us, the resources we will have available and the challenges we will have to face. Status report of each of your departments please."

"Medical stands ready for the worse, captain," Elliago Nasaro-Myth first said. My twelve senior doctors will be with me and we have thoroughly updated and checked the EMH shipwide grid with emergency protocols and supplies. Cargobay 1 and the Bow will be converted as supplementary sickbays, so we will even be able to care for any casualties other ships might need to have treated if their own smaller facilities can't suffice. Fortunately with such a reduced crew, we will not need it much for ourselves, even if things come to the worst."

"Engineering is ready as well, Sir," now reported Robert Baoule. "I have three shifts of skeleton crew but our twenty-one very best engineers are with us. Level 1 diagnostic of the entire ship has been successfully completed and the secondary computer core is fully programmed for automated damage control and circuit bypasses to face even the worse damage. Sir, the Artemis has never been in better shape and she can stay operational even with more than fifty percent of her hull and system destroyed. Also, we received technical specs from Starbase 10, courtesy of Marksus Sangliar, about how to convert our propulsion to some alternating impulse drive that allegedly will allow us full mobility within the anomaly."

"Ops will provide seventeen cross-trained officers to also support either medical, engineering or tactical as needed, captain," now stated the Edoan Cheonghi with his typically shrill voice. But there was only confidence in its deceptively shy tones. "Each is also an accomplished pilot, including Mister Snow our chief helmsman; we can launch all our shuttles together if ever the need arises and all auxiliary crafts have also been checked, primed and placed in full readiness. We also rechecked all systems after Engineering went through them; the Artemis is in the best condition ever, Sir."

Tyvya then made her own report.

"Security and tactical personnel, systems and programs have been extensively prepared for the apprehended confrontation, Sir, be it in space or aboard. We have our twenty-six top personnel volunteering, including of course Lieutenant Mriish and Ensigns S'Kon, De Paul and Graalthrii, the security officers that came with you and I from the Lotus. All are also cross-trained as technicians and medics with piloting experience. Cargobay 3 has been converted into a large brig capable of holding several hundred prisoners under sealed reinforced bulkheads, transport inhibitors, level 10 forcefields and anesthazine gas. The reduced needs for life support will provide us with a lot of extra power for internal security, maneuverability, shields and phasers. All our tactical systems have been checked, primed and our torpedo complement has been doubled with starbase supplies: five hundred photon torpedoes and as many quantum ones are available for our three burst V launchers. Tactical sensors, communication channels and programs have been integrated with those of the Alsea and the Pel sensor-reflex program added to serve both against the anomaly and any cloaked ship, as it is also linked to Mister Syntron's spatial sonar. We might be called to offer ourselves as a target, captain, but we will definitely not be an easy target."

Kheren now turned his four oculars towards his chief science officer.

"Captain Kheren," Syntron immediately responded; "all primary science stations have been thoroughly tested and re-tested and are currently operating at optimal levels. Lieutenant Irksos has created a science team manifest abridging our complement of one hundred and fifty-three science crew members down to that of twenty requisite members. Each remaining individual is currently engaged in a series of emergency and cross-training exercises throughout each of the science stations in various configurations in preparation for a multiplicity of given system failures and potential incapacitated crew members. The crew members not remaining aboard are currently packing and preparing to depart the ship."

The Andorian nodded to his bridge officers then turned to his first officer.

"You confirm these numbers, Commander? Anything more to report?"

O'Conner glanced at his fellow senior officers. During the academy, O'Conner had studied the works of Sun Tzu, so while he was proud of his peers' fighting spirit, he was honestly surprised by it. As the art of war says, the general who wins the battle make many calculations before the battle is fought, but Kheren's plan seemed to only have calculations. As far as O'Conner could figure out, Kheren's plan was either to talk the Romulans down or the Artemis died so that the Alsea can defeat the Scimitar. That just didn't sit well with O'Conner, as there were no plans for the escorts, if the scimitar didn't show, or options to support the other sections of the fleet should the need arise. To him, overall, it was just a shortsighted plan that he wanted no part of; but he was a Starfleet officer, so he would do his duty should he be denied his transfer.

"Yes, Sir," O'Conner said as he slid the PADD to the captain. "Thirty-nine crew members and fifty-seven officers requested to stay on board. Additionally one hundred and fifty-one crewmembers requested transfers to other ships of the fleet."

He made apause before taking an even sadder tone.

"As do I, Sir. I still think this plan of yours is shortsighted and the Spectre could use an experienced Chief Engineer; few officers in this fleet know Akiras as well as I do."

Syntron's thoughts were abruptly interrupted by First Officer O'Conner's stunning announcement of his impending departure to the Spectre. He has been an integral member of the Artemis senior staff for many of these challenging missions and the loss of his respected leadership would certainly create a noticeable void on this potentially treacherous undertaking in which they were all about to embark; especially with a skeleton crew manning the ship.

Understandably at this point in the meeting the science chief hadn't even been provided the opportunity to share his proposal with the Captain or the first officer; not that this would have any impact on his decision... but the discussion may perhaps have at least opened proverbial doors to other options and opportunities in regards to their impending strategies.

Kheren did not turn his head as the PADD slid in front of him. His four eyes went down to it, and he took all the time needed to read it with the respect and attention it was due. He then sighed, input his autorisation to the document and gave it back to O'Conner.

Then he stood up to face him. If he felt any surprise, his rigid face did not show any of it. But in his silvery eyes, there was a definite emotion clouding them.

Disappointment.

O'Conner still acted with the proper decorum; but he had clearly lost all respect and trust in him and his crewmates, even after all they had been through together. His very superficial criticism of a plan he had but just learned only summary reports of the broad lines a moment ago, showed a lack of judgment that was simply appalling for an officer of his years. And this very transfer request simply compounded plainly this severe lack of judgment; the man was not only ready to go and remorselessly bump out a competent engineer for his own personal benefit, not only was he pretentiously expecting his former commanding officer, Daniel Summers, to go with it, but he needlessly asked to step down to a lower position on his former ship, when he was the best man in all the fleet to provide no less than three ships with the first officer they desperately needed... and one of them being the flagship no less.

Even more; the Alsea was in need of the mosr experienced officer available to replace it's captain... and he just overlooked it all, deciding that he would save the day for the galaxy as a grease monkey and not as a proven command grade officer.

The Andorian however refrained from even just suggesting it to his departing XO. Since the man clearly had no respect for his judgment, not enough even to have come up even once with any objection or proposal for the whole last week they were preparing for this operation, Kheren doubted that his suggestions would even be considered. With his current state of mind, O'Conner might even reject these opportunities just because he despised so much now the one making them.

Better let the man himself, hopefully, think of it, since he thought so highly of his own private judgment.

Kheren stood at attention before O'Conner.

"Best of luck to you, Mister O'Conner."

The dismissal was as clear as it was final.

O'Conner sighed lightly as Kheren gave his authorization. For a moment ,he had hoped the Andorian would reject or at least try to talk him out of it, but it seemed that he had no interest in that.

"Best of luck to you as well, Sir," O'Conner said with a salute before heading to the door. Pausing at the door he added, "and may the old girl bring you all back safety."

And he really did hope whatever plan Kheren had created and implemented without his input worked and didn't get them killed.

"Now for the hard part..." he mumbled to himself as he quickly headed to his now former quarters. As O'Conner packed his remaining personal effect, he took a deep breath and then requested communication with the USS Spectre from the chief of the boat on the bridge.

Kheren had watched the man leave with a curious feeling of emptiness inside of him. For a brief moment, he had felt as if O'Conner had regretted his decision, now that his captain had endorsed it. But now, he shook himself out of the feeling. He was obviously projecting his own regrets on the departing officer. Michael O'Conner had made his decision a long time ago, as the Andorian knew him well enough to have learned that he never made rash decisions; and a whole week of silence and absence up to the last minute told about it well enough.



Michael O'Conner had made his decision. And Kheren for his part still respected the man enough to let him assume his own decisions and not stand in the way of his chosen destiny.

Sitting back down, now alone on his side of the triangular table, he turned towards his remaining officers.

"Well, gentlebeings; in case Mister O'Conner would be right; any further inputs and recommendations you feel relevant for this mission?"

There was a moment of awkward silence as everyone, each in his own way, adjusted to the brutal departure of one most had served with since the Artemis' launch. But they were professionals all; and *they* fully trusted the captain who had lead them out of the anomaly thrice, helped them to succeed in a first contact with an advanced species while repulsing a klingon incursion, to prevail against a deadly rogue AI and in facing a cosmic-shattering time paradox.

Robert Baoule blinked. If there was but *one* captain in this *entire* Fleet who *never* went half-cocked into *any* situation, who even *expected* the unexpected, it *was* Captain Kheren. That is why, as always, he was now asking for recommendations, for his specialists to flesh out his plan. Baoule recalled that it was *this* very preparedness that had made a former chief engineer storm off of the Artemis!

O'Conner's reasons simply made no sense to him. However, he understood that the man had to decide his own fate, and that the captain would not in this stand in his way. But Baoule put it all behind him. He was not a counselor; his concern was for the ship.

"Sir, all on board should wear PIDs," the acting chief engineer recommended. " This way, we can reduce inertial dampers to provide much more power to propulsion, shields, deflector and structural integrity, increasing both maneuverability and protection. And any possible boarder will conveniently smash into bulkheads."

"If I may add," then chimed in Doctor Nasaro-Myth, " with so few people aboard, at least all engineering and medical personnel should be in hazard suits, security people in combat armor, and ops people in flightsuits. This will not only reduce casualties from hull breaches and hazards, but it would allow us to shut off life support on two-thirds of the ship and reduce decompression damage without hampering us... but further hamper uninvited guests."

The Deltan doctor spoke with his usual easiness. He had not been surprised. In fact he had expected this after the First officer's insubordination at the fleet meeting. O'Conner visibly had just looked for an excuse to bail out for some time now, even if with unfounded reasons as those he gave. Throwing his resignation in the captain's face like this was his second attempt in mere hours to corner and publicly provoke the Andorian, evidently to have him emotionally compromised before other officers for some hidden personal agenda. Unfortunately for him, Kheren was anything but the typical short-fused Andorian. Despite all the time they had known each other, O'Conner had completely misjudged his commanding officer. Elliago just hoped now that the man could live with the consequences of his own actions and decisions.

The Edoan acting chief of ops didn't know what to think. Cheonghi in fact never understood why so many humanoids so often went out of their way to create conflict, even without any good reason to do so. Why couldn't they talk it out like any civilized being? He shook his head and smiled to chase off his uneasiness before saying, his voice a bit shriller than usual:

"Sir, the transporter protocols for security and medical alerts could also provide our crewmembers with site to site transport if anyone has to move throughout the ship, avoiding all uninhabitable sections and speeding up responses and actions on board. With our skeleton crew, the computer now certainly can handle it all."

"All of this will considerably improve our efficiency in combat as well as for rescue and evacuation scenarios, captain," concurred acting security chief Tyvya. "Speaking of which, Sir, I propose for the trip that all of us but one should go again one last time through all the basic possible tactical situations we have trained for all week, adding the new one we now expect. The holodeck is ready as we speak, Sir."

"All but one?" inquired Elliago with a skewed stare at the giantess.

"Why yes... you, Doctor," she said. "You're the only one of us who vowed to never do harm... but you have enough basic training to keep the ship fly straight and watch sensors from the multitask station while we, bloodthirsty barbarians, sharpen our swords."

Tyvya tried to talk with a light tone, but everyone heard the growl of her anger still boiling. She had almost tore the table off the floor to throw it at O'Conner's face when he had, *again*, publicly insulted the captain and now betrayed him at a crucial time... And he miserably failed his exec duties when over a hundred of their crewmates turned rats fleeing his twisted vision of a sinking ship! Or was this unfounded fear the *real* reason he himself was fleeing?

Her anger was also towards herself, not seeing it coming; and truth be told, her attention was not focused on him... So It had taken every ounce of her Starfleet discipline to grip her chair and stay silent while the man simply abandoned them all with but token respect and not a thought about what they had all shared together for so long.

Maybe Syntron's presence right next to her had helped her stay outwardly calm; but inside, she knew she would not forgive Michael O'Conner for what he had done and especially how he had done it to his crewmates, to them...

To *him*.

Fortunately, the voice of the Vulcan, last to speak out, helped her keep quiet and dim the fire in her icy blue eyes.

After a slight pause following the other officers' reactions and subsequent recommendations, Syntron cautiously said:

"Captain, I do have a proposal for you to consider regarding our upcoming mission."

Syntron then explained:

"Meeting with Doctor Jolie Bindo and Doctor Nasaro-Myth on Starbase 10, we examined their options of eliminating the ominous threat of this enormous anomaly in this endeavor metaphorically; in terms of a biological approach. The doctors were struggling in their discourse to determine a cure or remedy to address the anomaly as a macro cancer-like invader. While they were all engaging in this dialogue, I came up with an alternative proposition. If we viewed this situation as imposing hypothermia within the entity instead, then, theoretically speaking, we could devise a method to deprive the anomaly of the extreme temperatures required to maintain its high energy state of existence. If successful, then the energy of this anomaly would eventually be reduced to the point of deionization, causing the anomaly's plasma-like power source to revert back down to an innocuous gaseous state of matter."

Kheren listened intently to his chief of science. Having himself cosmology studies in his personal background, he could easily follow the reasoning the Vulcan was presenting, and with great interest.

"Captain, this means that this mammoth endeavor will result in an equally precarious solution. This proposition, if approved, would commence with preparing a series of trillithium probe, each containing a minute amount of trillithium precisely placed into each probe and equipping each of the probes' exterior with metaphasic shielding. These adapted probes would then be divided up and placed within each of the fleet's starships participating in this aspect of the mission."

"Easily feasible while en route, Sir, since trillithium isotopes are a toxic waste of our warp cores... all the more now that we are misaligning them," offered Baoule then. "Shielding something as small as a probe however is problematic."

"What if... we instead adapted the Laforge Metaphasic Program 1 on their navigational deflector field?" asked Cheonghi.

"Yes... *that* might do the trick... at least long enough for a class IX probe to do the intended... snuffing out job." agreed the tall, bald black-skinned man with a shiny white smile.

Kheren acknowledged the observation as Syntron resumed his recommendations.

"Each ship could then be positioned at pre-designated coordinates around the anomaly. Then the probes could be strategically launched to enter into nearby subspace fractures. As they crossed through the subspace thresholds, the fractures would then be sealed using the inverted ionic pulse emitters; trapping the probes and their ultimate reactions solely within the time-space of the anomaly as the ships immediately warped out of the region as a safety precaution."

"Engines will have to be realigned first, Sir," remarked Tyvya, "or else, we will dig behind us a subspace fracture for it to catch us by the seat of our pants."

Again, the captain nodded to the remark, his attention still on Syntron finishing:

"The probes would automatically be aimed from different coordinates and travel slowly toward the center of the anomaly. Then, once simultaneously detonated by synchronized timers, the net implosive force could potentially eliminate sizable aspects if not all of the fusion reactions occurring within the anomaly. The resultant oscillations of shockwaves as an inverse result of the implosion would theoretically counteract each other through the destructive interference of each set of waves and thus, minimize any potential damage inflicted on either system."

As the Vulcan finished, Elliago Nasaro-Myth then added:

"Captain... there is one other thing. We know Romulans are aware of trilitium's effect on plasma..."

"Yes... their plasma torpedoes, especially the ancient ones, have a trilitium component," completed Tyvya. Then her eyes went wide as she looked at Kheren. "Sir! If... if the Romulans use those on the anomaly..."

"It would make the Armagosa supernova, even the Hobus one, look like a firecracker," finished the Andorian captain. "And if they do come with a ship that can fire up to *twenty-seven* of them at once..."

The silence was now ominous.

"And I thought shielding the Alsea alone was going to be risky," mumbled Baoule. "Now we'll have to shield the whole monster as well..."

"Mister Syntron," then ordered Kheren; if you have not done so already, send your data and report to Fleet Captain Samji so that he can make all the fleet aware of all this and prepare accordingly."

"Affirmative, Captain," Syntron responded as he slid over and activated his PADD.

He then brought up a series of proposals related to the anomaly that he had been recently modifying. After scrutinizing each individual report, he carefully integrated the concise components of each of them to provide the most comprehensive amalgamation of all the relevant data files. After entering in a brief introductory synopsis of the pertinence of the file to the upcoming mission along with a summary of the comments and suggestions of his fellow senior officers that he had noted during the discussion, he immediately forwarded the completed file and message directly to Fleet Captain Samji.

After activating the transmit button, Syntron looked back up to the commanding officer and confirmed:

"Data files and report sent Captain."

Kheren then looked straight at the Vulcan.

"One other thing, Lieutenant; as the senior officer on board, I will have to ask you to double up as first officer of the Artemis. I need someone I can trust by my side if *I* ever falter."

Syntron noticed the four oculars of the Captain peering directly at him and noted the serious nature in the tone within his second message.

"I will abide by your request to fulfill the position of first officer."

Although he was bewildered at Commander O'Conner's sudden departure, Syntron knew that the captain would need a replacement that would be reliable and forthright; especially given the volatile nature of this upcoming mission. He easily possessed the experience and skills to adequately fill this role. But one question was still lurking in Syntron's mind:

Would he excel beyond mere sufficiency?

The captain lifted his chin in typical Andorian gesture of respect.

"Thank you, MISTER Syntron. Your service will already be most important in the upcoming days. I am hereby promoting you as acting Lieutenant Commander; your effective promotion was due anyway, so I'm just barely anticipating on official approval... which will however have to wait after the operation... a successful operation of course. "

Kheren now turned to the rest of the bridge crew.

"Now, let us use the time before launch to refine as much as possible our part in it, make sure we cover all contingencies... then, we'll try to surprise ourselves with the improbable."

And so, they all went to work.

\* \* \*

"Commander O'Conner to Captain Summers. Sir, I respectfully request a transfer to the USS Spectre, Sir."

Summers was just walking onto the bridge to go to his office when he heard the message from O'Conner relayed to his chief of the boat. he took the call himself immediately.

"Permission granted Commander, provided it is ok with your present Captain."

O'Conner paused at Summers' reply. For a moment, he thought of Kheren, but then he grabbed his bag and stepped out of his former room on the Artemis.

"He is, Sir. He is..."

With that, he quickly made his way to the transporter room and to his new ship... well, his former ship.

A short while later, he boarded the Spectre and then without a word to the transporter chief went straight to the engineering deck

"Crewman!" O'Conner commanded as he stepped into main engineering.

The young officer quickly turned and replied.

"Sir?"

"Where is everyone?" The commander asked as he glanced around the nearly empty room.

"Commander Rodgers has alpha and beta shift resting for the trip."

"Ah."

He then tossed the crewman his bags.

"See those are put in to chief engineer's office."

"Aye, Sir."

O'Conner then turned and made his way to the warp core. Leaning against the rail, he gazed at and smiled.

"It's good to see the old girl."

Moments later, he tapped his combadge.

"Commander O'Conner to Lieutenant Noor. I have been assigned as the Spectre's chief engineer. I need a report on the engineering prep work."

After a short, cold pause over the channel, the Andorian seemingly stunned with surprise replied with a very controlled tone:

"We have acquired additional two hundred torpedoes; one hundred photons and one hundred quantum."

"Very good; use your contact on the station and see if you can trade our shuttles for some fighters."

There was another, awkward pause before Shar Norr grumbled:

"Yes, Sir."

Tapping his communicator again, O'Conner called another officer. Obviously, he had studied the latest crew roster of the Spectre well before he came on board a few minutes before.

"Commander O'Conner to Ensign Price. I need you wrangle me the parts 3 additional backup reactors."

"Uhh, aye, Sir." came the uneasy, confused reply

O'Conner then looked around the room once more and muttered under his breath.

"Hope we have enough time."

After confirmation of Commander O'Conner from the Artemis requesting permission to transfer, Summers decided to get a hold of his XO and senior staff to find out how things were going.

"Captain Summers to Spectre senior staff; please report to the briefing room in thirty minutes for a situation update on the ship and your departments. Summers Out"

Daniel then went back into his office, shaking his head in wonder with a slight sigh as the doors hissed shut behind him. He worried about the upcoming mission and its possible endings. He tried not to dwell on such things often, but this one was a bit too close to home for him.

Facing cosmic anomalies had never turned out well since he took command of the Spectre; last time, he had lost Joey Day Sisko, his chief engineer, only to find him now an enemy, leading an insane cult against the rest of the galaxy. He sat at his desk a moment to compose himself and gathered his data for the meeting with long, slow breaths. Finally, he headed to the briefing room.

The captain's voice through the comm system caught Rogers finishing up his walkabout through the Spectre, checking off readiness of the multitude department heads and their stations. With a sigh, David entered the final tally in his PADD, holstered it in its place on his left hip, then left deck C in the upper weapons pod via the turbo lift.

"Bridge"

As he was about as far away from the bridge on deck 1 as he could conceivably get, the lift took nearly five minutes to thread its passenger down and through the ship. Eventually, David felt the slight stop of the cabin as it halted and the doors swished apart to reveal the spacious Akira bridge, bustling with activity with the delta shift currently manning the helm of the battle cruiser. Although normally the Spectre ran on a three shift rotation, David had instituted the fourth shift for the upcoming fleet mission, feeling it a necessary precaution to reduce the hours each shift served before rotation. He saw no need to burn out the crew with this hectic, fast paced action portended.

Nodding to the lieutenant currently sitting in the centre chair, David crossed the bridge and entered the short hallway toward the briefing room. Pulling his PADD again from its holster, he approached the room's doors and they slid apart to admit him. Captain Summers sat in his customary seat at the head of the curved table and David nodded a greeting and took his accustomed seat to Summer's right, placing his PADD on the table before him.

"I think we're as ready as can be Captain", David smiled.

After a few moments, Michael O'Conner joined the meeting, quickly taking a seat.

"Good to see you again, Captain" He replied before nodding to Rodgers. "Commander."

And without standing for any ceremony, he reported:

"Engineering is ready for a normal battle, Sir. If we expect the need to fight in the Horizon itself, we will need another hour to collect the supplies for backup deuterium reactors."

"Very well Mister O'Conner get on it," said Daniel Sumeers to greet him. "We should have that much time. Commander Rogers, this is Commander Michael O'Conner, our new Chief Engineer."

The captain then abruptly turned back to his new bridge officer.

"And since you are more than qualified, I would like you to be the Second Officer as well."

David nodded at the young man in a friendly greeting but wondered what had brought him back to the Spectre. Regardless, David was sure he would find out soon enough, even if he had to encroach on Captain Summers' good sense to do so. As executive officer, he wondered what the executive officer of the Artemis was doing here, being dropped into his lap as the Spectre's chief engineer. He trusted Summers' decisions, but as an engineer himself, he tended to look at the department as his own, no matter who was chief. But beside all of this, David made a mental note to peruse Commander O'Conner's file.

"Welcome aboard, Mister O'Conner. Good to have you. I will, of course, notify Lieutenant Shar Noor of your arrival. He has been swamped with getting the ol' girl ready for the upcoming mission with our flagship along with battling a case of Andorian shingles. Needless to say, his steadfastness to duty is very, uhm ... Andorian."

O'Conner smiled and nodded.

"Of course, Commander. She will be ready to play with some Klingons."

\* \* \*

On board the starship McKenzie, there was a flurry of activity that made people feel like there was five times the mere five dozen people assigned to the diminutive vessel. Walking into engineering, Sorripto looked over as the engineering crews lined up for quarters and their underway assignments. Grabbing a PADD off the desk, Sorripto began to call out tasks, leaving the names to be filled in by the crewmen who knew their qualifications and skill sets.

"We need a level one diagnostic of all internal containment systems. I need a level three diagnostic of the transporter system. We need a level two recalibration of the Heisenberg compensator on transporter pad 2."

As Sorripto read off the assignments the engineering crew walked off to complete their underway tasks.

"I have some work to do on the power relays if anyone needs me you know where to find me." Glancing up Sorripto added; "Chief Reichman you are with me."

Walking over to the power relay, Sorripto began to pry open the panel from corner to corner.

"Chief, we need to talk. I pulled every string I could muster to get you assigned to this ship. Even back when I was the Science officer, I knew I wanted you here and now more than ever I know you are someone I can trust."

As the Cardassian continued, Chief Reichman nodded in understanding.

"Some friends of ours are out there and will expect things of us when the time comes and more than ever we have to be ready for them."

"We, Sir?"

"The McKenzie has to be ready Chief. An old friend is counting on it."

Pulling off the panel, Sorripto began to remove chips and calibrate them for a diagnostic. glancing over his shoulder, Sorripto noticed a lone crewman who had clearly heard some of the personal conversation. Flaring up, Sorripto yelled at him:

"Move along, Davis! You have tasks at hand!"

Removing the final chips from the panel before him, the chief engineer of the McKenzie began the diagnostic scan.

"Computer; estimate time remaining for diagnostic."

"Twenty seven minutes."

"Perfect. Chief you should come with me; there is more work to do and we still need to talk."

The Cardassian let his eyes wander, observing his crew busy at work prepping the McKenzie for her upcoming mission. Making mental notes of the tasks still at hand, he turned his head and motioned for the Chief to follow him. Grabbing his PADD and tool kit, Sorripto and chief Reichman walked to the ladder and climbed down. Echoes of them talking could be heard as the large Cardassian climbed down and faded from sight.

Reading over the possible tasks at hand, Sorripto mumbled angrily under his breath.

"All that work on the shields and now we have to recalibrate the frequency again."

Tapping his combadge, Sorripto spoke.

"Captain, this is Sorripto in main engineering. I am reading over the specs for the anomaly. Our current shields are going to be insufficient and based on these reports from Mister Sangliar he seems to be using a similar modulating frequency like the shield frequencies I helped develop when we fought the borg."

Entering some information on his PADD Sorripto continued to speak.

"Sir, with your permission, I will have to reroute power from several internal secondary subsystems to provide the power needed to install and configure the shield modulations. At worst, Sir, it will set our schedule back three hours... but we should be able to get underway and join the fleet on time."

Crist tapped his desk console's comm button in his ready room.

"Crist here; do what you need to do, Lieutenant Commander. I want this ship ready for whatever we encounter."

All the while in Sickbay, a Human male walked from bed to bed. He had black hair and a beard to match. He was checking over the systems of the biobeds. Once he was done, he said:

"Ok, everyone, gather around."

With the medical staff coming together, the man spoke again.

"For those of you who don't know, I'm Lieutenant Kinstar. I know this transfer is rather sudden but I hope that all of you can come through despite me being new. So I here we have a new mission, now I'm not sure what this will entail, but we will do our jobs to save and treat the crew if there are any injured. So let's get to work."

He pointed to the highest ranking junior officer assembled in the small infirmary.

Lieutenant, set up a triage center in cargo bay 2 and the mess hall. But only set up the mess hall if we head to yellow or red alert. I don't want to disturb the crew; need to think of moral after all. Ensign," he said to another, "go through the sickbay stores; make sure we're stocked up on everything we may need. Ok, let's get to work people. If anyone needs me, I'll be in the Captain's Ready Room, reporting to the Captain."

While he started to make his way to the bow of the ship, helmsman Hughes was already there, sitting at his station on the bridge. He had been going over the course the McKenzie would be taking during the mission. He rose after being satisfied with the course he was given and any corrections they could make. He made his way to the shuttlebay, to make further arrangements.

The Defiant class vessel's only shuttlebay was small and would never be considered a main shuttle bay on any of the larger ships in the fleet. It contained only one small auxilliary craft, the shuttlepod Grissom. He walked up to an engineering ensign who worked in the shuttlebay.



"Ensign, I need the auxiliary shuttle pads to be cleared. All workbees and shuttlepods except, the Grissom here, are to be removed. We may need to store micro warp cores there for deployment, for our mission."

"Yes sir, that shouldn't be a problem. I'll get some pilots from the Starbase to fly them out. If you'd like, Sir, I can rig something to hold the micro cores."

"That would be great Ensign; please do."

"Yes, Sir."

Hughes then looked around and thought; *deploying micro cores, almost like the Defiant deploying those mines at the Bajoran wormhole all those years ago.*

Hughes then left the shuttlebay and headed for the Captain's ready room.

At that very moment, Lieutenant Shran walked through the McKenzie and entered the Armory. There he met with the security teams to give out orders.

"Ok men, we are about to embark on our mission. This mission will be a fleet wide mission to stop the anomaly that we have come to know for the past few months now. Our job is simple, to defend the McKenzie at all costs. We will also be joined by a MACO team, who, if there is an opportunity, will board the enemy and complete a special assignment. So please work with them as if they were any other Starfleet officer, and show them the hospitality of the McKenzie. Now everyone arm yourselves with a hand phaser and go onto your patrols. If we are boarded, rifles will be issued out. You're dismissed."

Everyone then proceeded to grab a phaser and left the Armory. As everyone left, Shran grabbed his own phaser and took a last look around the room to make sure everything was in place and ready to go. He left and made his way to the cargo bay.

He entered the cargo bay and a six-man team was present getting their gear ready for the operation. Shran walked up to the team and spoke.

"Who is Lieutenant Commander Jolan?"

A brown haired Betazoid man turned around.

"That's me; and you must be Lieutenant Shran."

"Yes that's me. I'd like to welcome you to the McKenzie. If you need anything please contact me and I'll get it for you."

"Thank you, I'd like you to meet a few of my team members; Lieutenant Durat'Eklat," motioning to a Jem'Hadar officer, "and yes he's really Jem'Hadar. I can explain later. And this is Lieutenant Noble," motioning to a Human with characterisitc Borg implants on his face. "These two are my two right hands, or right and left hands." He smiled.

"It's a pleasure."

Shran began looking over the Jem'Hadar and former Borg officer.

"If you're ok with these officers, I guess I can be. Anyways, I'd thought it was a good idea to come here and meet you guys. I'm about to report to the Captain and I think it may be a good idea for you to join us."

"Yes, that's a good idea. Durat, make sure everything is in order, and I'll be right back."

"Yes, Sir."

Shall we, Lieutenant?" invited the Betazoid.

Shran and Jolan left the cargobay and walked to the Captain's Ready Room.

"So ... a Jem'Hadar and a Borg, huh?" Shran asked.

"Weird huh, yeah... I thought the same too, but they are some of the best officers I've ever worked with. Durat, defected a few years back, and joined Starfleet. He joined the MACO's after they were reformed, and was assigned to me. Best weapons specialist I've ever seen. And Noble... after the Borg Invasion, we rescued several Borg; Noble was one of them. Best science officer I've seen. I've made it a personal mission to create the best team possible."

"So you trust them?" Shran asked.

"Oh yes, I'd place my life in their hands. Truth is, I have on more than one occasion... saved my life."

"Well, I can't wait to see them in action." Shran said with a smile.

They arrived at the door which leads into the Captain's Ready Room.

"Well, here it is; ready?" Shran asked.

With Jolan's nod, they entered.

It was a quick walk and a short turbolift hop; yet, Hughes arrived a short while later and, as he stepped in the ready room, he noticed the Captain sitting behind his desk, as well as Shran sitting on the couch, and an unknown Betazoid man with Shran. A minute later, another unknown man, a Human this time, entered, this one wearing medical blue.

"Sir, announced the helmsman, I've made arrangements to have all our shuttles removed except for one. I've also gone over the course we are to take and made any possible corrections that we can make."

"Good work, Hughes," complimented Crist. "Let's wait for our other two officers, so we can begin."

Snowfire shook her head as she stepped through the door to the McKenzie's ready room, her eyes, although shadowed by tiredness, bright and alert. She had made her way to the bridge as soon as she could after checking one final piece of analysis. And there was something...off. Normally she was easily confident and self-assured. But this time...

This time, something was different. There was a hesitance to her step, seemingly brought about by constant glances at the PADD in her hand. It was like someone had just handed her the access codes to the universe. And she was terrified of them.

She nodded an acknowledgement to Hughes and Shran, cocking her head slightly at the new arrivals but clearly welcoming of them before turning to Crist.

"Captain. My apologies for my tardiness, I had to check a final piece of data regarding our...quarry."

She shook her head again, this time slightly slower.

"I don't have anything definite yet, but what was said at the conference gelled with a few of my own ideas. And...I think I might have a way to permanently contain the Horizon. And in a prison that almost no one will be able to break."

At Crist's nod, she slid into a seat.

"But that aside, I believe we have a rather important mission ahead of us. Any modifications to the plan, or is what was said at the conference standing at present?" She asked.

Crist turned and answered Snowfire.

"Well, as it stands, what was discussed in the conference is what we will be doing. However, I'm sure there can always be modifications to the plan if a new idea or new data comes to light. I'd like to hear what you have, but let's wait for our chief engineer first," he said with a smile.

"Ah welcome Lieutenant Commander Sorripto. Now that we are all here, let's get this meeting going. Let's start off with introductions."

Crist rose and made his way around the desk to the black-haired man who wore a blue uniform.

"This is Lieutenant Epit Kinstar. He will be our Doctor during the mission. Doctor, do you have anything to report?"

Kinstar nodded.

"Sir, I've gone over the ship's sickbay, and I've gone over our supplies, and everything is in order. I have the medical staff, converting a cargo bay for a triage center, and possible the mess hall as well, but we'll wait till we need to, I don't think we should interrupt the moral of the crew."

"Good thinkin, " agreed Crist.

"Anyways, the medical staff will be ready if we're needed."

"Good work Doctor."

Crist moved over to Shran and the new guy.

"This is Lieutenant Commander Res Jolan. As you may know, we have been assigned a MACO team. In the event that we need extra security or if there is a chance to board the enemy to get an asset, they will be the ones undertaking that mission. Jolan is the leader of that MACO team, that has been assigned to us. Mister Jolan, do you have anything to report?"

"Yes Sir; we have everything set up in Cargo Bay 1, and are prepping as we speak. Once this meeting is over, we should be ready to start our patrols."

"Very good, Mister Jolan. Please be aware that you will be reporting to Lieutenant Shran. He will be the chief of security on this ship, is that clear?"

"Yes Sir, I can live with that."

"Good. Lieutenant Snowfire, we are now at you. You said you had an idea about containment of the anomaly?"

Snowfire raised her head at her call, and nodded slowly.

"Yes." She said simply, before rising from her chair. "May I?"

She indicated the room's holoprojector, and at the Captain's nod connected her PADD to the display and tapped in a few commands. Two wire-frame planes shimmered into being in the centre of the room and she indicated them.

"Imagine the upper plane as subspace, the lower as what we know as normal space."

She brushed a strand of white hair away from her mouth, tapping a few more keys on the PADD. A roiling disc of golden flame expanded into being on the subspace plane.

"The disc, as you can likely guess, is the Azimuth Horizon. As you all know, the Horizon expands into normal space through subspace fractures and follows the path of least resistance whilst in subspace; much like water flowing downhill."

The hologram showed the lower plane cracking ahead of the disc, and the section of disc approaching it drop into the crack and spread out through it.

"Now we know, thanks to the efforts of the Artemis, how to close the fractures that the Horizon propagates through. And this mission we are about to embark on will, hopefully, contain it."

On the graphic, a transparent cylinder surrounded the disc, its lower edge almost, but not quite, touching the plane of normal space.

"The problem is," she continued, "is that this containment will be extremely fragile and remarkably simple to break; with the nature of such breaches being potentially catastrophic."

The hologram showed a small section of the cylinder touch the plane of normal space, and a cone of gold exploded out along it, transitioning swiftly back into subspace and spreading out at prodigious speed.

"As you can see, anything in the way of the area of the breach would be swiftly overwhelmed by the anomaly. However, there may be an answer."

Snowfire stopped for a few moments, squeezed her eyes shut, and then hit a final sequence on her PADD. Another section of the cylinder lengthened and touched the normal space plane. As the gold flowed down it, a cut-off circle extended perpendicular from the plane of normal space where the cylinder touched it, passing into the subspace plane, through the disc representing the Horizon, and then back down to normal space where the other section of the cylinder touched the plane.

"Wormholes."

She paused for a moment, allowing the visual representation to continue. The golden disc of the Horizon poured down the cylinder into the ring connected to it, emptying steadily out of subspace into the link extending through it. And then the cut-off ring disconnected from normal space, trapping the golden Horizon within. She waited again, allowing the picture to sink in before continuing.

"An artificial wormhole, created via the methods Dr Lenara Kahn refined in light of what we learnt from the MIDAS Array could, theoretically, act as a permanent and far more secure prison for the danger the Horizon poses to the galaxy. If we opened two subspace fractures into the Horizon, and at the same time created an artificial wormhole with its end's at each rift, we could funnel the entire Horizon into the fundamentally infinite space within the wormhole and seal it inside."

Snowfire's violet eyes sparkled with excitement.

"We might not be able to put it out, but with this we can *contain* this anomaly until we work out a way to make it safe. Once we have the link established within subspace and the Horizon 'vented' into it, the only way to get it back would be to reopen the wormhole. And we would be the only ones with the means to open it."

Snowfire looked across at the other's in the room, desperately hoping they understood, and she smiled.

"Don't you see? We can *fix* this."

"Hmm, that's very interesting. I do have a question or two. From what I know about wormholes, they are two points in space that are connected. So if we were to use a wormhole, wouldn't the anomaly just end up somewhere else and the problem will continue? Also to my knowledge, the last known experiments of creating artificial wormholes, only lasted twenty-three point four seconds, or a minute at the most. How will we be able to create a wormhole and keep it open for an extended amount of time?"

Snowfire shook her head gently at Crist's response.

"I'm afraid you misunderstand the theory, Sir." She said respectfully, indicating the hologram. "As you can see here, a wormhole consists of two apertures in space-time, connected to each other by a subspace conduit. If the apertures are opened over two artificially created rifts into the Horizon, then the Horizon would, following its basic nature, pour out of subspace into the wormhole conduit. And as the size of the interior of those conduits are, for all intents and purposes, infinite, the Horizon would simply empty into it and imprison itself."

She waited for words and images to settle orderly in her commanding officer's mind before continuing.

"As for your other question... Sir, that test took place over thirty years ago. Since then, Doctor Kahn and many others like her have continued their work. The Pathfinder Project and Operation Watson were milestones in the Federation's understanding of wormholes, and those acted as springboards for Doctor Kahn and those working with her. And beyond that," Snowfire paused for a second, then sighed, "beyond that is the fact that my people's primary form of faster than light travel mode involves the creation of stable artificial wormholes with no fixed destination point."

The words came out all in a rush, and Snowfire found herself short of breath.

"I'm sorry, Sir, I would ask that any mention of that statement would be removed from any report you file on this matter."

She sunk into a chair, almost shakily.

"I...I came perilously close to breaking my oath to the IDF, the Illythirii Defense Force, by saying that. And it doesn't really matter, because if we don't contain the anomaly, then everyone dies. And that puts me in an incredibly difficult position."

She took a breath to calm herself before adding:

"I don't think, I *know*, Sir, that the current theory on how to create an artificial wormhole will work. How I know that? I can't tell you without clearance from an Admiral or higher. It involves knowledge that my people are, incorrectly in my opinion, unwilling to share with yours. As for the energy cost? The Horizon can pay that. Once the apertures are linked, subspace itself will ensure the wormhole remains stable. In fact, Sir, we could use a series of phase-conjugate graviton beams to stabilise or even seal the wormhole. And as long as we're the only ones with the correct phase rate, we're the only ones who can open the wormhole."

Snowfire slumped in her chair, looking up at her commanding officer.

"I know I'm asking you to trust me with a lot here, Sir, but *please* give me that trust."

She raised her eyes, meeting his with pain-studded amethyst, and her final words were almost a whisper.

"I know Starfleet can do it. Just let me show you how."

"Very interesting," said the commanding officer of the McKenzie. "That plan sounds good. However, as this is a fleetwide mission, I'll let the fleet leadership decide. So I'll pass the idea onto the Fleet Captain. But know the main plan is to contain it without destroying the anomaly, so Starfleet can study it or interact with it. But again, the decision will be up to the Fleet Captain."

Crist turned to Sorripto.

"Ok, what do you have to report about engineering, Lieutenant Commander?"

Realizing it was his time to speak, the Cardassian turned to the captain and began to speak.

"As I stated earlier, Sir, the shield modifications are being implemented now. The idea behind is something similar to the shielding of the nanoprobes during the Borg wars. A constant modulating shield that adjusts and reconfigures based on the effects of the anomaly. I also was able to finish the reroute of the internal power matrix to the transporters. The McKenzie has the best transporters in the fleet, Sir, but now we should be able to lock onto a spec of dust through the interference. Only thing was, Sir, the sensor output is only at one hundred and thirty percent of design capabilities, which is below my original goal. On a secondary note, Sir, I was going to give Chief Reichman my access to the engineering protocols as we need a second set of hands to be able to do what I can do to the system. I trust him and he has not let me down so far. I picked him personally back when I started in the Science department as an ensign."

Looking around at all the faces that were not present for the battle with the Borg, Sorripto laughed.

"Seems like another life time ago, does it not, Captain?"

"Indeed. Very good work, Lieutenant Commander. We will be launching soon, so get everything ready to go. Now, as you all know, we have our task with handling the Children, and the Republic will be helping if they can. I've spoken to the Captain of the Republic, and we have discussed a plan. I'm not going to go into details, as we don't want the Children to get wind of it. But I will say this; the McKenzie and the Republic will be stationed on different edges of our quadrant. This is to allow a maximum area that we can cover, so we'll be on our own. If any of your officers ask, you may say that. As opposed to the rest of the plan, I am not at liberty to say. I hope you can understand this. Also, all essential areas of the ship will have armed guards, this will include the bridge, engineering, the armory, main deflector, the torpedo rooms, and a few other locations. Anyone who enters these areas must have high clearance to enter. Lieutenant Commander Sorripto, if you need your teams to repair anything in a restricted area, I'm afraid you'll need to see to it personally."

Crist took a moment to pause, then added:

"Now, I believe that's all, so get your stations ready for launch. We may need to launch in a hurry. If everything goes well, we'll be launching in two hours. Your dismissed."

As Crist watched, as the officers left the ready room, he then began reviewing the data from Snowfire to send it to the higher ups.

\* \* \*

Starbase 10 had not seen such a flurry of activity since the Borg Invasion. All of its hundreds of decks accross its kilometers-wide expanse were alive like a beehive with added tasks, material and personnel. Within its huge confine, the ships of Lotus Fleet were just as busy gearing up for the momentous challenge they were about to face, crews feverishly working at readying the vessels and brushing up on training while senior officers refined the last details of their mission in long, tense meeting sessions.

It was no different in the vast command center of Lotus Fleet's headquarters. The only place that seemed quiet and calm, like the very eye of this storm of life and activity and apprehensions, was the starbase commander's ready room.

Sitting in his vast office overlooking the whole control room, Fleet Captain Allen Samji was reading a report on the station's readiness. All civilians from the base had been moved to safety out of the sector and all was in readiness for any emergency evacuation of the entire remaining Starfleet personnel if things came to worse. The five hundred shuttles needed to secure the corralling of the anomaly in its own subspace pocket was almost complete. And there was that new research report from Lieutenant Syntron of the Artemis regarding a way to... *cool down* the anomaly itself? This was worth a more extensive study and he sent orders to this effect, along with the Vulcan's data, to his own chief of science, Lieutenant Commander Kletan Rexil.

But there was more to consider in this last hour of readiness. There was also a flurry of last minute transfers from the Artemis that had him frown for a moment. Captain Kheren had ordered all but fifteen percent of his crew off his ship; being tasked to offer himself as the enemy's prime target had prompted the Andorian to act so that casualty risk would be minimal; and his ship might be the oldest of the fleet, but it *was* in fact quite able to function efficiently even with such a reduced complement. Samji understood his reasoning, that of a man more preoccupied with saving lives than winning battles. So apparently did two of his senior officers, chief engineer Montgomery Scott III and chief of ops Danik Brie, who had elected to step down and serve here on the base of operations. So did no less than four hundred and ninety-one officers of the Artemis. Now, Samji could count on almost five hundred of the very best first-hand experts on the anomaly in all fields of science, engineering, Starfleet operations, tactical and medicine, here at the center of operations! This was some good news he welcomed heartily.

But still, a hundred and fifty-one of the Artemis most junior crewmembers, obviously inexperienced and frustrated by this order, requested transfer to other ships... although one of them was certainly *not* an inexperienced, junior officer; Commander Michael O'Conner, none other than the executive officer of the Artemis!

Samji could not fathom why the man asked to step down from his prominent responsibilities and go back to the subservient role he had assumed on his former ship. Fear? Lack of confidence? Loss of faith in his own ship or commanding officer? Disagreement over command decisions? Or... what?

Whatever the reason, Captain Kheren had approved the request and Captain Summers had accepted the transfer, shoving down to an assistant position his current chief engineer, Lieutenant Junior Grade Shar Noor, to welcome back his former executive officer and chief engineer. With a sigh, the starbase commander confirmed transfer approval, confident that his two captains knew what was best for their ships as well as for Commander O'Conner... and the mission at hand.

However, he summarily rejected all the one hundred and fifty-one ship-transfer requests of the rest of the crew and reassigned them all to the base as relief crews. He was certainly not going to disrupt the other ships with an overflow of disgruntled, hot-headed, impulsive or unfaithful junior crewmembers! This blatant lack of faith in their captain was the sure sign that they just might not be proper Starfleet material. Their records and basic training and oath of service would in fact be seriously reevaluated the days after this operation.

*If* their ever were to be days left after the operation...

Then, a call interrupted him. it was the distinctively stern but classy-sounding voice of his Exec, Karen Schmidt.

"Fleet Captain Sir..."

"Yes, Commander?"

"I think you better come down here, Sir."

Samji lost no time to join up around the situation display at the center of the command well; all his senior officers were already there, and their faces all shared the same frown, whatever species they belonged to. They were all looking at a holographic tactical map of the tri-border region where at one end flashed a blue dot representing Starbase 10's location, in a light blue triangle topped on one side by a green area and at the bottom by a red area. Each of those were lined with little blue points representing Starfleet surveillance outposts along the two borders.

And, a light year distant from the starbase's location, according to the given scale, also equidistant to the two borders, there was a golden dot of flame over a parsec in diameter. They all knew all too well what it represented:

The Azimuth Horizon anomaly.

Before the starbase commander could state the customary 'report' call, his tall, stately second in command said:

"We have a situation, Sir."

Tapping a few controls, Schmidt then brought up a new flashing dot; dark green, slowly moving around. As they all looked at the display, the woman reported:

"This unidentified signal has been quite accidentally located equidistant to both Starbase 23 and Starbase 157 by their astrometrics sensors as it moved at high warp along the Neutral Zone. The tachyon grid we deployed there did not."

"Since exceedingly few natural phenomena move faster than light, it immediately attracted attention as you may have guessed," chimed in the Trill Chief of Science Rexil, his skin spots seemingly more vivid than usual on his pulsing temples. "One probe was sent from New Providence around the Jouret star system and, before they lost the signal, it transmitted this..."

The image zoomed vertiginously fast towards the dot and, at first, it looked just like a field of stars; then there was some kind of ripple effect, barely discernible. A moment later, an ominous dark-green bat-shaped spaceship flickered slowly into view... then, there was a sudden flash of light from one of its wingtips that blinded everyone and the image disappeared, returning the display to the original tactical overview.

In the thick silence that followed, the low, gruff voice of Starbase 10's Intelligence chief Lieutenant Commander Ja'Hark, in typical Klingon abruptness but distinctively tempered by Starfleet decorum, was heard:

"This confirms Starfleet Intelligence reports, Sir; this Scimitar class dreadnought has been identified as the only one the Romulans still have: the IRS Shavok, flagship of Admiral Tomalak, Commander Kraetaek, Imperial Hero commanding. Although crewed only by Romulans, Intelligence believes this ship is in every aspect identical to her sister ship, the prototype IRS Scimitar, once used by former Praetor Shinzon... including the thalaron generator."

A cold dread now shook everyone's spine accross the vast control room.

"So... they broke the Treaty... they are declaring war..." whispered Hughes Michaels, the chief medical officer of the station.



"Oh they are much more clever than that, Doctor," then said Lieutenant John Van Hook, the chief diplomat on Starbase 10. "Still reeling from their civil war, they would not risk direct confrontation with a stable Federation with harassing Klingons at their back. Our chief of flight operations has found out their trick... Lieutenant Koral?"

The oddly-named Vulcan tapped in turn a few controls and a thin shimmering line appeared from the slow-moving point back towards where the green and red areas met at the point of the blue triangle formed by the delineated Federation Space. his almost monotoned voice nevertheless fell heavily on everyone's ears.

"We received a border report that Klingon outpost 11 fell to a sudden Romulan attack a week ago, led by a dreadnought according to the same reports. Using long range sensors from successive Starfleet assets along its trajectory, we have been able to manage a satisfactory approximation of its course from Romulan space."

Now, they all could see that the Romulan warship had flown around Jouret star from between both starbase 23 and 157, following but not encroaching the Neutral Zone itself until it went by Klingon outpost 11, then seemingly turned sharply towards Starbase 284, round Lambda Hydrae... and then the reconstructed path disappeared into Romulan territory bordering Klingon space.

Lieutenant Commander Grok, Samji's trusty Ferengi chief of ops, voiced what they all suddenly understood:

"There is no Neutral Zone treaty between the Romulans and the Klingons; they crossed into Federation space through the edge of the Klingon border... and so never broke the Treaty!"

"Which does *not* stipulate anything about being into one another's territory..." completed starbase's chief engineer marksus Sangliar, with a typical Tellarite snort. "Clever devils these pointy-eared, green fiends... as always."

"And if you think that's the worse of it, you are all damn fools... gentlemen," now chimed in the chief of strategic operations in the same characteristic Tellarite gruffness as his darker-hued compatriot Sangliar beside him.

"Show me you're not the worst of us, then, Lieutenant Jorga," shot back Samji with an almost dismissive tone, well accustomed to the peculiar show of respect through verbal abuse of his officers from Tellar Prime.

"Hope you tall folks can still hear anything with the thinner air up there... Sir. Well, it seems that, as we saw on the probe transmission, they have some problem with their cloak; probably resulting from damage suffered during the outpost attack; so after encountering the probe, they tried to hide themselves by going through the edge of the Paulson Nebula... But both us and Starbase 23 are extensively studying it on astrometric sensors and so recorded their passage there. Simply put, so that even you people can understand; we now know how they intend to stop the Federation from interfering with their intended plan of destroying the anomaly... Koral?"

Called again, the Vulcan activated another set of buttons and produced this time another shimmering trajectory line, this one going forward to show the estimated destination of the briefly detected warship.

All but the Vulcan Koral and the already knowing Jorga gasped. It was clearly obvious that the Romulan warship was *not* going for the Azimuth Horizon anomaly.

"At their current estimated speed of warp 9.9, the dreadnought will cross those twelve light years from the nebula to Starbase 10 in thirty-four hours."

It didn't took that many seconds for Fleet Captain Allen Samji to react.

"Mister Grok! Alert both the Alsea and the Artemis; they are to launch immediately to intercept that ship!"

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FIRE**

**Captain's log**

**Stardate: 87171.3**

**We have been ordered to cover one quadrant of the Azimuth Horizon in the operation planned to corral it in subspace. The USS Alsea has been assigned to the same coordinates, as it is the most likely to be targeted by an expected Romulan attempt to destroy the anomaly with methods that could instead spell doom for the pocket universe inside... as well as our own.**

**While the Alsea, the most powerful warship in the fleet, will be the sword to oppose the Romulan attack, be it from one dreadnought or a task force of warbirds, or both, the Artemis is tasked to be the shield, for both the Alsea and the anomaly. With her sheer mass, power output, maneuverability, armor and shields, not discounting its vast array of phasers and torpedo rate of fire to offer cover or intercept any Romulan plasma warhead midflight, she is best suited for that role. But it clearly means facing head-on high levels of damage and casualties.**

**On my order, all nonessential personnel were removed after the ship was brought to full readiness. With fifteen percent of our crew on board, this Ambassador class refit can still operate at peak efficiency while dramatically reducing casualty risks; this multiplies our power reserve, all around tactical efficiency, survivability under fire and our support capability to the rest of the fleet... even give ourselves the most extreme options available, like self-destruct or ramming, without jeopardizing crew safety.**

**The Romulans are in for many surprises if they think this old lady is fragile and weak. With a full week of training and preparation from every department and crewmember, to be rounded up during our thirteen hours of travel to our rendez-vous with destiny, this ship is now as ready and able to face what lays ahead as any would ever be.**

**I commend all crewmembers who showed faith in this ship and a true sense of duty and discipline; not only those called to directly risk themselves in this endeavor, but also those who wisely stayed behind, at my request, to serve on the starbase a critical, useful role no cannon fodder on board the ship ever would. These Starfleet officers truly know what duty and heroism means; their help and cooperation ensure that this ship, her crew, will prevail and come back home.**

**On the starship Artemis, there will be no dead heroes; only living saviors of the galaxy.**

"Bridge to Captain Kheren!"

The high-pitched yet gravely voice of Chief of Ops Cheonghi could raise the dead. It had no problem catching the Andorian commanding officer even in deep concentration over the study of the apprehended enemy. His four oculars lifted sharply from the schematics of what was known of the Scimitar class Romulan dreadnought.

"Kheren here."

"Sir! The Romulans are on an attack vector towards Starbase 10! We have orders to intercept!"

In one smooth, lightning fast motion, Kheren stood and exited his ready room to almost crash through the next door leading to the bridge.

"Emergency launch!"

The voice of the Edoan then blared from bow to stern:

"Yellow Alert! All hands to launch stations! This is not a drill! This is *not* a drill!"

By the time Kheren took the five steps from the door to his command chair, the entire vessel was lighting up, engines roaring and systems firing up, the Artemis coming brutally alive like a dragon suddenly awake from its deceptive slumber. Already primed for imminent departure following the last meeting, it did not take long to bring merely a hundred crack officers to readiness.

On the bridge, the turbolift poured out moments later Doctor Nasaro-Myth, Lieutenant Irksos and chief engineer Baoule to join Tyvya and Snow already there with Cheonghi as they refined systems for the expected operation.

"What's the rush?" half-joked the Deltan CMO as he slid in the medical command chair to activate all biomonitors and communications to have the order confirmed and clear channels for departure.

Kheren just sat straight in his chair, looking from his armchair data monitor towards the main viewer, showing the starbase's huge spacedoors already opening before they had even disengaged moorings. Yellow alert blared accross the entire space station and inside the starship. On the lower corner of the screen, they could see the angular form of the Alsea also lighting up to full active mode.

"It's a Scimitar alright... and coming *this* way."

"*Here?*" exclaimed Aguk Snow without lifting his darting eyes or running fingers from his navigation board. "What about the anomaly?"

"They figured we're the most immediate threat," reasoned Valencia Irksos checking the sensor grid to full readiness.

"Or the easiest," grumbled Tyvya as she primed all tactical systems.

"All stations report ready for launch, Captain," the Edoan ops chief reported, all three hands almost a blur on his multitask console at the forefront of the bridge, just below the screen.

"Full power at your command, Sir," added Robert Baoule, turning from the Engineering station to address the Andorian in the center seat, who's voice then resonated a few seconds later throughout the entire four million tons frame of the ship.

"This is the Captain; a Romulan battleship is heading towards the starbase. Our orders are to intercept. Contact in twelve hours. All hands look alive! Time to show them what Starfleet's Finest can do."

Syntron was updating files and preparing for the upcoming mission only moments after leaving the officers' briefing when the announcement blared throughout the science chief's office and adjacent department rooms on deck 14. He swiftly closed all files and headed out of the office and turbolift. Arriving on the bridge, the activity had mushroomed during the brief amount of time from which he left into a contemporaneous flurry of procedures and cross-communications as the crew readied the ship for an immediate launch. Without delay Syntron stepped over to the main science station and relieved Lieutenant Irksos of her post.

He began engaging all science consoles into activity as he began to bring all sensors online.

Meanwhile, he turned to his assistant chief of science and commanded:

"Work with T'Val to get Astrometrics and Stellar Cartography fully operational and synchronized."

He then turned toward the Andorian Captain who looked sternly around him and inquired;

"Orders Captain?"

The Vulcan spoke knowing that he not only was inquiring in regards to his science chief obligations, but also now as the First Officer of the Artemis.

But the Andorian was already a step before him.

"Lieutenant," he said to the black-skinned woman before she made more than three steps away from the science station; "You will assume your science chief assistant duties on the bridge science station."

Then he looked up at the tall bearded Vulcan and pointed a thumb to the command seat at his right hand.

"I need you here, Lieutenant Commander."

Returning his silvery eyes towards the main viewer and the vista of stars beyond the now widely open spacedoors of the starbase, he then ordered:

"Take us out, Number One... and fast."

Although Syntron had been in charge of the Artemis as an acting commander during a previous mission, it was rather peculiar for him now to relinquish his post at the science station and officially assume the First Officer's station. This entirely changed his role within the ship and on this mission.

"Acknowledged Captain" Syntron responded with a slightly raised brow as he stood and relinquished his spot back to Irksos who nodded with a smile as he maneuvered his way literally to the right side of Captain Kheren and sat down.

Noting the fully opened space doors on the viewscreen and having witnessed the skillful capabilities in previous missions of the chief flight control officer, Lieutenant junior grade Aguk Snow, positioned readily at the helm, freshly promoted Lieutenant Commander Syntron prepared to bring the Captain's command of an immediate and fast launch to full execution.

Nodding to Doctor Nasaro-Myth, Kheren then contacted the station master of Starbase 10.

"Starbase 10...This is the Artemis requesting permission for an immediate launch."

Within seconds a confirmation was received.

"Permission granted. You are clear for launch Artemis. Best wishes!"

And as the voice still seemed to linger in the airwaves, Syntron immediately addressed the helm officer.

"Lieutenant Snow, full impulse... Now!"

Then within the blink of an eye the Artemis shot out of spacedock like a bat out of hell; or as the Vulcan calculated... at 75,000km/sec.

As they zoomed into the vastness of space he then added "Helm, bearing 280 mark 15. Engage warp engines and bring us to warp 9.6 as swiftly as allowable."

Anyone on the bridge who blinked missed the fearsome sight of the seemingly small rectangle of stars jump at them as the starship rushed out of dock. Anyone who did so from the starbase viewports or from any other ship would have sworn the largest vessel of Lotus Fleet just disappeared as it shot out at a quarter of the speed of light from its berth.

In his command chair, Kheren almost choked on the laugh he strongly repressed after a sudden brief shock of surprise hearing Syntron's order. They must have broken all docking rules in the book on this one... and sent Starfleet clerks rushing to write a score of others on the spot!

The Andorian should have known; after all, *he* was the one who ordered a Vulcan to get them out "fast!" And Vulcans were well known for their exactness...

"Er... we have cleared spacedock, Sir," confirmed helmsman Snow, unable to wipe out the wide grin from his coppery face.

He had been reprimanded once back at the Academy for having done exactly that on board a training shuttle once; but doing it outside of a simulator with a five hundred meters long, four million tons starship... that was something else! Must be some kind of record broken here...

"We are free and clear to navigate," he added after clearing his throat to recover some professional composure.

"I bet we are..." commented Kheren noncommittally.

"Full warp power at your discretion, Sir," then said acting chief engineer Baoule, his eyes and fingers recording all the data he could from the never before attempted brutal launch they had just gone through.

"Status on the Alsea?" then asked Kheren.

"Starbase 10 reports they've been alerted same as we did. They still have to launch though," reported Elliago from his comm panel at the right of his chair. He for one felt no compulsion about chuckling over what they had done.

"The Prometheus class is much faster than even our souped up refit, Sir," said Tyvya then seemingly very serious; unless you knew what sharply curving antennae meant for an Andorian. "They will eventually overtake us before our rendez-vous with the Romulans even if they move out up to two hours behind us."

This was enough to reassure the captain of the Artemis. Sitting back in his chair he then ordered with a confident voice:

"Warp speed."

The starship Artemis, having completed its majestic turn towards the given coordinates, suddenly jumped like a streak of colors into an exploding flash of light and was gone.

Back at Starbase 10, lights had flickered for a brief moment all the way up to Operations.

"The... Artemis has launched, Sir."

Samji closed his eyes, repressing a sigh. He had for a moment made the same mistake that most people did about Captain Kheren; because of his unfailing and unshakable faith and loyalty to Federation ideals, most thought him a "by the book" kind of commanding officer. Indeed he *was* a firm adherent of Starfleet rules and regulations... but even close associates sometimes failed to realize that he did so *only* as long as one was there *to do* the job.

"Never throw the book away until the last page..." he mumbled, quoting the Andorian captain.

"Sir?"

"Never mind, Grok. Has the Alsea been alerted too?"

"Yes, Sir... but they still have to acknowledge. They just logged finishing up on engine modifications..."

"Wake them up again. And patch me to the other ships."

"Channels open, Sir."

The starbase commander took a breath then stood straighter before the viewing screen.

"To all ships; a situation has arisen. The Artemis and the Alsea are sent out immediately to intercept a Romulan dreadnought on course towards our position. USS Lotus, USS Spectre; hasten your preparations. If the Klingons fancy to do the same, we need to find out real quick and be ready. USS McKenzie; we don't need to have the Horizon Children capitalize on this situation... move out as soon as you can."

Taking another breath, Samji then ordered:

"Starbase 10 is now on security alert."

As the condition yellow sign flashed everywhere, he sighed between tight lips, a frown deepening the lines of his bronzed, bearded face. His gaze lost itself in the vista of space beyond the immense transparencies surrounding his command center, the deceptive stillness and tranquility of the stars only deepening in his mind the cold darkness between them that crept into his heart.

He couldn't help but worry about the fact that, while enemies came at them, there was, out there, a fire still spreading.

With the abrupt departure of the USS Artemis and still waiting on the Alsea to acknowledge readiness to follow, the command center of Lotus Fleet's headquarters had been shaken with a sudden surge of activity that barely settled down with the condition yellow now putting half of the entire station's complement at their post, with the rest on standby. The department heads of Starbase 10 were still grouped around the large holomap where tactical sensors and computers poured out in schematic display and columns of data updated information about the current position of the intercepting Ambassador class starship and the, estimated, location of the approaching Romulan dreadnought.

When it became evident that not much would likely change for the next hours, Allen Samji broke the ominous silence that had made every beep and chirp of surrounding consoles as loud as torpedo detonations.

"Status report on the Operation."

"Anomaly's position and rate of growth unchanged from last measurement," was the first answer heard. Lieutenant Commander Rexil then added: "Estimated time before contact ; six days six hours and six minutes."

Samji looked at him as if to make sure he was not joking; to which stare the Trill chief of science shrugged.

"Give or take a few minutes..."

The starbase commander then turned towards the Vulcan Koral in charge of flight operations.

"All five hundred shuttles are ready to depart for the final phase of the containment operation. At their fastest speed of warp 6, it will take them approximately twenty-two point four hours to get to the anomaly's coordinates and about three point sixty-seven days for all of them to modify engine alignment and get into position to... "picket the fence" as Mister Sangliar so colorfully but adequately likes to say."

"Commander; order them to launch immediately, warp 5."

"Sir, you might want some more coffee. this should bring them on the theater of operations in forty-one hours; with nearly four days more needed to deploy, this does not leave us much time to complete the operation."

"I know, Mister Jorga; please cut on your caffeine dosage. We might know now where the Romulans are but I do not intend to send fifteen-hundred people out there, before our ships are in place, just to be simply shot down by marauding Klingons and Cultists."

"No confirmed reports on Horizon Children activity in the sector," then stated chief of Intelligence Ja'Hark as if on cue. "Artemis and Lotus have reported and transferred to us several sympathisers and suspects among their own crews, and we caught a dozen here on the base. All are detained and interrogated as we speak; but three managed to commit suicide before we could stop the rest of them and remove their deathpills. As for the Klingons, Starfleet Intelligence confirms a task force was launched near their border yesterday; nothing much known yet except that there is at least one capital ship with its escort. At best speed, they could be in the vicinity of the anomaly in less than two days at the latest."

"Ships status, Mister Grok," then asked Samji with a deepening frown.

"Artemis on course to intercept the Romulan battleship still believed to be en route towards us," answered the Ferengi chief of ops. "Still waiting on Alsea's confirmation to follow the Artemis. All other ships are still in final stages of preparations."

Samji closed his eyes and sighed before looking at the statuesque woman standing on his right.

"Commander Schmidt; verify that their essential supplies are on board and then order them out now; they all will have no less than three hours to chat among themselves while en route to their designated zone; and I don't care if they don't have time to load their crate of Château Picard."

As his executive officer contacted each docked starship, he turned towards his chief medical officer as the Deltan made his report.

"Emergency protocols are implemented and ready to face catastrophic situations, including emergency evacuation of all personnel. Five hundred remaining shuttles and four transport ships are on standby."

Samji then shifted his eyes to the starbase's chief of the diplomatic corps.

"We have attempted contacting the X'ell, Sir," reported John Van Hook apologetically. "Captain Kheren suggested it, using his name and a recorded plea he himself made this week to ask them for asylum. No reply so far..."

"Keep trying, Mister Van Hook. Send a message buoy at them or even a piloted shuttle with some of your consulars on board to knock at their door if subspace channels fail. Their Dyson shell has as much inhabitable areas as no less than thirteen times the surface of all the estimated M class worlds of this whole galaxy... and it is now impervious to the anomaly's effect, thanks to *our* technology the Artemis provided them with a year ago. They could help save all sentient life in this galaxy... they should... they *must*!"

Samji rubbed his face to chase the lines of worries that were multiplying on his somber face before asking:

"Anything to add to ruin my day as usual, Mister Sangliar?"

The Tellarite barely answered the customary insult with one of his own as he reported glumly:

"Boy do I wish... Sir. All station's systems are checked and operational at full capacity. Power reserves are at maximum and as long as we can maintain metaphasic sheilding around the starbase, we will be able to survive even if the anomaly would swell to engulf us... although I would not wish to spend the rest of my life in a three-kilometers wide universe with just the rest of you people. I do hope the birdies will agree to make some room in that big cage of theirs... if all hell breaks loose..."

"We're not there yet, chief," said Samji with a firm tone. "We still have a few aces yet to play in this game."

His eyes were up looking to the numerous viewers around them showing the USS Lotus, the USS Spectre, the USS McKenzie and the USS Alsea.

On the USS Spectre, almost an hour had passed since the briefing Summers had held with the senior staff. He was sitting in his ready room, just meditating and thinking about the near future that could and possibly will change the face of the galaxy forever, when he was interrupted by the ops officer on the bridge.

"Captain; incoming message from Lotus Fleet Command."

"Put it through in here, Ensign; thank you"

"Aye, Sir."

The crisp orders of Allen Samji then resonated through his private speakers.

Daniel sat and hoped that the Klingon's were farther away to give the Specter the time it needed to get its final preparations finished and checked before launch, he also hoped the Lotus was ready as well. Resolute, he walked out onto the bridge.

"Ensign open a channel to the Lotus immediately"

"Aye Sir, channel open"

"USS Lotus this is the Specter please respond."



Summers felt his heart sink to his toes just as it always did before a battle, especially one as large as this one. Awaiting a response, he sat in his command chair looking intently at the view screen for a long moment. Then he opened a channel to the rest of the ship.

"Attention all senior staff; please report to the bridge immediately. Summers out."

Sparks fell around the engineering team as the men finished installing the last structural support of the first backup reactor. O'Conner stood back and watched with a smile.

"Commander O'Conner to the bridge. On my way, Sir."

O'Conner then turned to Kurt Eriksen. "Kurt while I am on the bridge I need you to keep me updated on the process."

"Of Course, Sir," the young engineering officer replied as alpha shift continued its fierce work the reactor.

As O'Conner left the cargobay he tapped his combadge.

"Commander O'Conner to Lieutenant Corrett. How goes the refits?"

"My boys have retrofitted five fighters with a third reactor and upgraded them with metaphasic shields. They should fly like a dream through the Horizon. Oh and call me Rikki, bossman." The sassy female officer replied.

Grinning O'Conner replied with a satisfied tone.

"Keep up the good work, Rikki."

Minutes later, upon entering the bridge, O'Conner went to his station and pulled up Kurt's latest report.

"Sir, the first of the fusion reactors is up and running."

O'Conner paused a moment to do quick calculations. Taking in account the shorted and smaller shifts requested by the XO and not taking engineers away from key duties or the main reactor installations, he figured he could get another twenty-five fighter shuttles ready to go out. Alpha should be able finish off another five before going off shift, then hopefully the other shifts could possibly also get five each and perhaps another five from Rikki's team before the Klingons showed up.

Going by the engineer standard of under-promising to fake over-delivering, O'Conner added his recommendation.

"Sir, I can get you twenty-five Kanedas ready to fight in and around the subspace fractures by the time we arrive at the Horizon."

"Do your best, Commander," acknowledged the Betazoid hybrid in the command seat.

David entered the bridge and found Captain Summers at his centre seat engaged in conversation with someone on comms. Slightly surprised, but none the less resolute, Rogers crossed behind the tactical station and went to his own seat beside Summers' chair, handing his PADD to the captain before sitting down.

Rogers PADD contained the complete synopsis of the ship's readiness, from a completed level one diagnostic to the load out of the forty Kenada fighters in the Spectre's huge flight bay. Each fighter had a full load for their micro torpedo launchers along with a pair of mark twenty-five photon torpedoes mounted out board.

Also listed was the fact that all ten workpods and the six shuttle pods had been swapped out to the star base and replaced with another six fighters, similarly loaded as the ship's squadrons.

This left the four Danube's and two of each of the type six and seven shuttle pods. Other items of note were the readiness of the down-loaded LaForge Program One and the full availability of reserve power for the metaphasic shields and DYCEP armor for the Spectre.

In short, the Spectre was ready to launch.

\* \* \*

As Captain Gould, science chief Sainthill and tactical officer Vincent entered the bridge, the main screen was just coming on, showing the fleet captain's face.

"To all ships; a situation has arisen. The Artemis and the Alsea are sent out immediately to intercept a Romulan dreadnought on course towards our position. USS Lotus, USS Spectre; hasten your preparations. If the Klingon's fancy to do the same, we need to find out real quick and be ready. USS McKenzie; we don't need to have the Horizon Children capitalize on this situation... move out as soon as you can."

Gould signaled Vincent and Sainthill to go to their posts as he sat down in the captain's seat and pushed a button on his arm rest.

"Attention all hands, this is your captain. Make ready to depart station immediately, all crew to their stations. The ship will be going to red alert as soon as we clear station. This is NOT a drill. captain out."

He then turned to look at Vincent.

"Anyone still off-ship, have them beamed directly to a holding area for inspection before their allowed into active duty, I don't want anyone taking advantage of this situation."

Next he looked at Sainthill.

"As soon as we're clear, start scanning for any sign of cloaked vessels, and I don't care how slight the chance it might be; tell me if you see anything out there."

The Helmsman spoke up.

"Captain, we're being hailed by the Spectre."

Gould nodded.

"I can guess why; open the channel."

The helmsman nodded.

"Channel open, Sir."

Gould stood straight in front of the view screen.

"Gould here Spectre; we just monitored that last transmission as well and are preparing to exit station at this time. How's your situation, Captain?"

"Well Captain Gould, as you can see by all the reports I am getting, we are just as ready as we can be. Our fighters' prep work will need to be finished along the way, but that shouldn't take too long I hope," Summers responded to the Lotus Captain. "In the meantime, Captain, if there is anything we can do for you, please do not hesitate to ask," Summers responded with a smile on his face.

"Good to know, Captain Summers" Gould replied. "My ship will take sentry position on one side of the station. I recommend you do the same. It will double our detection and response time to any attacks conducted under cloak. In the meantime, I'm going to see if I can get any more detail on our situation, it just doesn't 'feel' right to me."

As the communication ended between the two paired ships, science chief Sainthill reported to his station and began running diagnostics on the sensors to ensure they were performing optimally when they launched. They could not afford to miss one cloaked ship if any were out there.

At the captain's signal, Josh took his station on the bridge. When he heard that a Scimitar was headed towards the starbase, he knew that this day was going to get very interesting. As the captain answered the Spectre, Josh sent a message to his security teams:

"As per the captain's orders, we will beam all Lotus crewmembers that are on the station directly to holding cells before they are released for duty. Ensign T'Pala, as you are the senior brig officer, I need you to search each of them thoroughly. We can't afford to have any saboteurs get onboard now. Chief Parks, leave your investigations team to finish background checks and head to the brig; two crewmen were found making unauthorized visits to secure areas of the ship and I need to know why they were there and if they sabotaged anything. Ensign Kiels, how much longer will you need to finish your sweep of the ship?"

"The sweep will be finished in twenty minutes, Sir," came her reply.

"That's not good enough," Josh responded. "Take Petty Officer Joken's squad from alpha shift and get it finished in ten."

With orders issued, Josh stood ready for launch. While he awaited the orders to move out, Josh began running through all of the tactical systems and security measures to ensure that his teams would be ready for the Klingons. If they were half as zealous as the Romulans regarding the Horizon, the Lotus' refit would be in for a harsh test of strength.

\* \* \*

"Sir, a message coming from Starbase 10."

"Put it through here." Crist said.

"To all ships; a situation has arisen. The Artemis and the Alsea are sent out immediately to intercept a Romulan dreadnought on course towards our position. USS Lotus, USS Spectre; hasten your preparations. If the Klingons fancy to do the same, we need to find out real quick and be ready. USS McKenzie; we don't need to have the Horizon Children capitalize on this situation... move out as soon as you can."

Crist tapped his console to close the message. He then tapped his combadge,

"All hands, prepare to launch. Bridge contact the Wisconsin and the Republic, we will be launching in ten minutes."

Crist sat in his ready room. They were ready to face all odds but those odds seemed to stack quickly against them. Crist had been going over the information about the Horizon Children, hoping to get an edge on them, learning their tactics... but now, events were rushing at them... literally.

Crist rose from his chair and made his way to the bridge. Once there, Hughes and Shran were already prepping the ship for departure.

"Sir," then said helmsman Hughes, "were ready to go. Just give the word."

"Good; all stations, report readiness." Crist ordered.

Crist then tapped his commbadge and spoke.

"Bridge; contact Starbase 10. I'd like to talk to Fleet Captain Samji."

In the vast command center of Starbase 10, Ops chief Grok turned his large bulbous bald head towards the bearded man still leaning against holographic the tactical display showing the expected phases of the upcoming operation.

"Sir; the McKenzie is hailing; Captain Crist on the channel."

Samji simply nodded and straightened himself and his uniform as he turned towards the second of the smaller monitors dedicated to each ship of the fleet.

Crist waited a few minutes as he stared at his computer, which had the UFP logo on the screen. Then the familiar symbol faded away and the face of Fleet Captain Samji's appeared.

"Captain Crist," simply said the Starbase commander in greetings.

"Sir, thank you for taking my call. I have another idea, developed by my science officer."

"We need every idea we can come up with, Captain. My chief science officer is already looking over one provided by Lieutenant Syntron from the Artemis that could, as a second phase of our operation, further ensure defusing the anomaly... literally. Send Lieutenant K'leysha's findings and proposals here to Lieutenant Commander Rexil. Be sure we'll also look it thoroughly over. If it can even further ensure our success, we will certainly consider it."

After getting acknowledgement from the commanding officer of the McKenzie, Samji asked pointedly:

"Status of your ship, Captain Crist?"

"I've just finished my meeting with my senior officers. We are making the final preparations as we speak. And I'll compile a report for your science officer."

"acknowledged. Report readiness for departure as soon as possible. The fire is still burning out there, captain. Samji out."

Crist nodded as the transmission closed. he then tapped on his computer and began making up a briefing of Snowfire's plan. He added the presentation that Snowfire had given during the briefing. Crist then attached contact info for Lieutenant Snowfire.

"...and have Daniel upload his new algorithms, simulations are showing a fifteen percent increase increase in scan resolution with them active."

Snowfire's voice cut through the sharp hiss of the bridge door opening and she lowered her voice as she crossed the room.

"I want every member of the department secured with a PID before we launch. And that includes you, Nolanis. If I have to, I'll come down there and make sure you've done so *myself*."

There was a mumbled answer to her earplug and she smiled.

"Good. Snowfire out."

The ebony skinned woman slid into her chair at the science officer position and turned to face Crist.

"Science is secured and ready for launch, Sir."

Then, a firm yet slightly amused voice was heard over the speakers:

"McKenzie, this is Adam Wyatt of the Republic. We are about to head out for Quadrant Four. Full round of Saurian brandy is on the last one there."

\* \* \*

As the Artemis sped on her way to intercept the IRS Shavok, Syntron and Kheren began discussing basic functional necessities; including scheduling the duty shifts of the Artemis with a reduced crew. They determined that, of the remaining crew, due to the nature of their species, forty-seven could effortlessly go sleepless for more than thirty hours nonstop. This included the Andorian captain and the Vulcan first officer, as Andorians required only three to four hours of rest per thirty-two hours and Vulcans could postpone ill-effects for days with their sheer force of will.

To ensure that the entire crew was well-rested, alert and yet prepared for the upcoming confrontation with the Romulan ship, the first officer ordered the remaining crew of 126 to rest for the next seven full hours. While they were resting, he divided them within Engineering, Operations, Flight Control, Security, Science and Medical into three comparable shifts and spread the forty-seven crewmembers requiring minimal sleep accordingly among each shift.

It was during this time that Kheren decided to confer privately in his ready room with his newly appointed first officer. They both had to make themselves as ready as their crew to face the critical situation they were rushing into and there was little time to do it... or even just to settle Syntron in his new command role.

Thinking like a scientist was hard enough; but now, the Vulcan would have to also think like a diplomat, a soldier, a technician and a humanitarian while keeping in mind the ethics of the Federation, the rules of Starfleet and their mission orders all at once, keeping a primary concern for a crew nevertheless sworn like him to give their lives for it all. He would have now to think like a starship captain. It was a fine balancing act not many were ready to try... and even less able to do.

Although he knew well that Vulcans on duty were no more in need of "socialities" than Andorians, if not in fact even much less so, Kheren nevertheless offered him sustenance and refreshment considering the long hours of discussion they would share before the ship reached its designated coordinates. He replicated for himself a plate of crispy-cooked bacon, heavily salted, with a glass of Cardassian fish juice at room temperature, also salted, which he called his "Captain's Brew." Then, once Syntron had stated and obtained his own choices, the Andorian wasted no time in getting to the point.

"What are your thoughts about what lies ahead of us, Number One?"

After sipping for a moment on a cup of spiced Vulcan tea radiating at a scalding temperature, Syntron replied:

"In regards to the impending Romulan ship, their apparent attack of a Klingon outpost followed by their current heading toward Starbase 10 would indicate that we are evidently approaching an imminently dangerous confrontation, Captain."

"Now that you mention it... there is something odd about this," retorted Kheren between bites on one of his golden-hued strips of meat. "That a Romulan warship attacks a Klingon outpost, that I can understand. That a Romulan warship invades our space to take us out as the first step of their "final solution" for the anomaly, that I can understand also. What I can *not* quite understand is why the *same* warship would do *both*."

Before the typical Vulcan eyebrow could come up, the Andorian explained:

"Risking coming at us with howling Klingons at their heels is quite a foolish move... and I have yet to meet a foolish Romulan."

"Foolishness is indeed the sister of wickedness... as a respected Terran noted many centuries ago," Syntron replied before adding: "Yet, a wise man gets more use from his enemies than a fool from his friends."

He took another sip of simmering tea and then asked:

"The question here then is... what useful information can we learn from these recent acts of aggression from this Romulan?"

"My point exactly," agreed Kheren, munching a moment on the problem as much as on his meat. "Guess we will have to ask *them* then... *if* we are lucky enough and they are in the mood to talk."

He took a long sip of his pudent beverage before asking in turn:

"Now, let us assume for a moment that all this is planned... Attack a Klingon border outpost... sneak around cloaked for a week near the Neutral Zone, virtually circumventing the anomaly they are supposed to target as far away as they can within our space... then charge at us full throttle from the Paulson nebula... Why?"

"Possibly a decoy, Captain? If I know my Romulan cousins at all... these blatant solo acts of aggression seem a bit too clumsy and obvious to be to be all that is in play here. We'll need to keep our sensors in full detection mode for any deception that is quietly lurking in the shadows as our target approaches."

"Now *that* would at least *start* to make sense," agreed Kheren. "See to it that your sonar-styled configuration is fully active and manned at all times; it might be the only thing able to locate a Scimitar class vessel through its alleged perfect cloak... or any friends or foes in its wake. I'll see to it that Starbase 10 and the Alsea are both made aware of this possibility."

Taking another swallow of fish juice, he then inquired;

"Anything else on your mind, Number One?"

Syntron finished the last vestiges of spiced tea before he inquired.

"Indeed Captain... I was wondering what our tactical and contingency plans would be in regards to addressing and possibly confronting this potentially treacherous adversary?"

"That would be telling," shot back the Andorian deadpan.

The unchanging expression of Syntron then had Kheren slap himself inwardly.

*Yeah... an Andorian trying barely understood Human humor on a Vulcan...*

Standing up, he motioned for his first officer to follow him. A short hop thought the secondary turbolift brought them to deck 8 and the forward part of the ship. Together they entered the main lounge affectionately called "The Bow" for its location and curving shape. It was uniquely decorated with authentic wood panelings and furniture, with a sky-like holographic ceiling and grass-green carpeting. It was also decorated with animated holopictures of wildlife and hunting scenes from worlds all over the Alpha Quadrant.

"Of course, now started the captain as they entered, we will try to talk some sense into them. Hopefully, they will be in the mood to listen. But, if not... or if we fail to make them forget about their insane plan..."

Moving past the full-sized bronze reproduction of the eighteenth century sculpture "Diane Chasseresse" of the ancient Earth goddess that gave her name to the ship, Kheren went to a specific holovid that showed some sunlighted expanse of high herbs distantly profiled by a snow covered peak and tall gnarled trees. In the scene could be seen a couple of small wild pigs slumbering contentedly under the sun... and a massive, tan and black lion stalking them.

Turning halfway towards the Vulcan to let him observe the tridimensional scene unfolding, the Andorian then asked him:

"Let me rephrase your question this way, Mister Syntron; how can two small pigs ever manage to defeat a full-grown hungry lion hunting them?"

The holodisplay then showed them the answer. As the enormous predator pounced on the male pig, the small beast started squealing and running around in circles, the lion's fangs inches from its corckscrewed tail. Then, the female pig appeared right behind the lion, joining the circling chase... and suddenly took a savage bite in the cat's behind. Startled, the lion abruptly stopped and turned around to start chasing the female... only to be led into a new circling chase that ended when the male in turn attacked the predator from behind, forcing him to turn again on him and again expose its backside to the pursuing female... and so on, until, tired, bleeding and bewildered, the lion simply ran away.

"There are many ways to defeat a stronger opponent. But they all involve the same ingredients: a small dose of luck, a lot of courage and guile... but best of all: teamwork. "

Thinking about the challenging concepts of humor that the first officer learned while in Starfleet Academy, Syntron inquired rather stoically in response the Andorian's allegory:

"And which pig is it that were are to portray Captain ... should the need arise?"

"Obviously the first, the big, fat one," said Kheren, oblivious to the humor in their exchange. "Let us hope that the Alsea will be the small fast one guarding our back."

"Interesting" Syntron said as he gazed intently at the display. "And who will it be that will attempt to engage this lion through discourse into curtailing their predatory intentions?"

"Diplomatic talks are always the responsibility of the most senior representative of the United Federation of Planets present," quoted the captain of the Artemis.

There was no doubt in his tone about who he was talking about.

With the slightest ascension of a brow, the first officer inquired as he turned to face toward the senior Andorian officer:

"Have you determined the method in which you will broach this topic with the Romulan commander?"

"Romulans are notoriously not as easy and straightforward to deal with as Klingons," immediately admitted Kheren as he looked far away at the stars streaking towards them through the immense transparencies looking beyond the prow of the ship. "One thing though; they *always* want to believe, or at least make *you* believe, that they are in the right, *even* when they *know* they are not. Openly caught violating our space with an armed warship on an attack vector will easily point out that they are not and doing so is the surest way to have them start talking; and talking is often a favored weapon of them. The real question is; *do they* want to talk? or will we be able to... convince them to?"

His four oculars still looking out at the streaking lights, he sighed.

"In truth, Mister Syntron, if they ever say anything, now that they have committed themselves to this course of action after all those failed diplomatic talks, I fear it will only be the words of Earth's Sieur de Frontenac: "*je vous répondrai par la bouche de mes canons*": to you I will reply with my cannons..."

Kheren's voice then became as resolute as his silvery gaze lost in what laid before them.

"But we *will* try... and if words are not enough... we do have sticks and stones."

The first officer nodded in acquiescence to the despondent yet realistic postulations of the Captain.

"Whether they fall by ambition, blood, or lust, like diamonds they are cut with their own dust," Syntron stated rhetorically.

He then pondered further.

"And which of these five enemies of peace will they be carrying with them like concealed faux talismans of conquest as they travel in haste toward us: avarice, ambition, envy, anger, or pride? Or perhaps a deadly combination of all of these to justify their compulsive aspirations?"

Then looking out toward the stars the first officer noted:

"It will indeed be a challenge to employ diplomacy under these conditions Captain. From the first word uttered they will likely initiate a parry of justifications on their part and level accusations toward the Federation in respect to their own self-serving actions and objectives whilst working to turn and use your own words against you."

Kheren glanced sideways at Syntron with an expression that almost looked like a smirk.



"We have a saying on Andoria: as long as someone keeps talking, he is not killing you. I'll welcome and gyrate with any dance of words they will enjoy doing, as long as it deters them from attacking anyone... or anything. If this but allows the rest of the fleet to complete the operation before those Romulans have a chance to compromise it, we will have done our part."

His gaze now turned back to the stars and hardened as much as his tone of voice when he finished:

"but we will be ready if they stop talking."

Syntron turned his gaze from the stars back to the focused and resolute Andorian Captain.

"It has been generally stated Captain that in warfare you defeat the enemy's will to fight rather than his ability to fight... but in this upcoming probable altercation, it would seem best to somehow accomplish both with the Romulans... if conflict arises."

Looking back toward the stars again he pondered "A worthy challenge it seems would be in determining how specifically we would be able to accomplish such a proposition."

"Mister Syntron, there are basically only nine ways to strike with a knife; but you will know how to counter it only when it will come out of the sheath. The easy part is to prepare for each and all of them; the hard part is to choose the right one when the blow comes."

The Andorian raised his silver eyes to the darker ones of the taller Vulcan to say:

"You will get my answer in a little less than twelve hours, Number One."

Syntron turned back toward the commanding officer of the Artemis. He could readily detect that behind those cool silvery eyes and the apparent calm exterior lurked a warrior preparing for battle; be it with words, weapons or both.

As first officer now, Syntron knew that he had to be there by the Captain's side; and if the conditions presented themselves, to react and respond instantaneously without even a word spoken.

He then thought back to an axiom that he had heard long ago; even before the academy.

*Man does not enter battle to fight, but for victory. He does everything that he can to avoid the first and obtain the second.*

They were now traveling at warp speed to confront such a destiny.

"Indeed Captain," he then affirmed. "We shall continue this straightforward aspect of our mission with decisive preparation at the forefront of our efforts until the moment arrives when we encounter our adversary."

He then added with the calm confidence only logic could provide:

"We will be prepared, Sir... for whatever is ultimately unsheathed."

"A... logical assumption, Mister Syntron."

The first officer nodded slightly in respect to the commander's comment.

"Any other orders at this time Captain?" Syntron inquired as he stood determinedly before him.

For a moment, it looked as if Kheren hadn't heard. Then, finally, as if speaking to himself, he spoke almost in a whisper.

"There is still something odd about this whole thing I can not put my finger on. They are not intent on stopping us but on simply blasting out the anomaly, so... why target Starbase 10? Why not any one of those they already passed by, Starbase 23, Starbase 157, or Starbase 284? Those are the ones in this sector guarding the Neutral Zone; any one of them out of commission would open a wide gap for their forces to go through... But then, we would intercept them... as we are doing now... And going through all this convoluted flight pattern they did to avoid violating the Neutral Zone, only to attack and end up starting a war anyway, would serve no purpose..."

He stopped and turned upward his four eyes towards the taller Vulcan.

"Mister Syntron; work with Mister Cheonghi and Mister Baoule on effective countermeasures against jamming. I want our eyes and ears fully open when we will meet them; whatever happens, we need to stay in contact with the Alsea and Starbase 10."

His gaze went back to the streaking stars and the darkness from which they came.

"They're hiding something..."

"Acknowledged." Syntron responded.

"We will ensure that all long-range and proximity sensors are fully operational and finely tuned. In addition, we will prepare multiple custom Class-V medium-range reconnaissance probes with enhanced spatial echosensors to detect any cloaked vessels or signal jamming devices in approximation to our vicinity as we head toward our coordinates."

Thinking strategically he explained further.

"When launched, these could theoretically compensate for any endeavors implemented by our adversaries to deceive, deafen or blind us as we approach the Romulan ship... and any other potential cohorts."

"Make it practical then," agreed the captain of the Artemis.

"Yes, Sir" the science chief responded. Overseeing the preparation of the sensors and the subsequent probes would be where his science duties would temporarily supersede his first officer responsibilities; even though they were relatively connected in this instance.

Syntron excused himself from the commanding officer of the Artemis and headed back toward the turbolift.

Descending to deck 14, he walked out of the lift and moments later into the Astrometrics lab. Afterward, he began discussing his plans with Lieutenant T'Val. She along with second assistant science chief Baoule, the only human in the science department still awake and working during this shift would put their team together and begin work on preparing the custom Class-V medium-range reconnaissance probes after all of the ship's sensors and enhanced spatial echosensors were thoroughly tested and recalibrated... if needed.

The Vulcan estimated that these operations would be completed in approximately three point fourteen hours. This should allow plenty of time to have the probes loaded and ready for launch long before the Romulan ship arrived.

While work was progressing flawlessly on the reconnaissance probes, Syntron took a sojourn to the Arboretum. As he entered the lush botanical environment, he heard a voice emanating from behind a collection of tall green plants.

"Well... our infamous science chief and now new first officer is honoring us with his presence," she almost whispered as he walked in.

"Greetings Ensign Muller," Syntron said to the head of his xenology and biology department just as she stepped down and began brushing soil off of her hands and smock. "I thought that you were resting during this shift, Ensign?" the first officer questioned.

She just sighed as she approached him.

"I was resting for a while, but then I became too restless just laying there. So I got up and I thought I'd spend the last part of my resting time here working with my babies... it is quite relaxing... you know?"

Seeing that her question was rather rhetorical, he ignored it and continued walking.

"Ah..." she said as if an epiphany had just enlightened her. "You are here to check on the progress of your Vulcan plantings. "Well then... come along," she added with a sincere smile as she reached over and took him by the arm and guided him toward the vegetation that they had acquired as seedlings.

They started growing these plants in the botany section of the biolab and then transplanted them during the beginning of their previous mission into the Arboretum after they had germinated and grown. The amount of growth that occurred during the time that he last saw this vegetation was quite startling; except perhaps to a Vulcan.

Ensign Muller just beamed with pride standing beside the lush growth of vegetation.

"It is like having a living piece of Vulcan here with you, isn't it Lieutenant Commander?" she inquired passionately.

Before he could respond, she nodded enthusiastically.

"You see here, you have some of these snap beans, peppers, and lettuce already to pick. The fruits, broccoli, and onions are almost ready as well," she stated as she showed him the ripening specimens. "Would you like to take some of these now?" she inquired excitedly. "I can get you a basket and we can fill this up in no time..."

"Well... Ensign..." Syntron answered somewhat awkwardly; "I am still on duty now. It would be quite inappropriate to for me be walking throughout the ship with a basket of vegetation as I am..."

"Nonsense," she interrupted as she released his arm and scurried over to snatch an old fashioned wooden basket lurking behind some plants nearby.

Before he could respond, Ensign Muller was already scrutinizing the available crop, seizing the prime specimens and then adding them into the basket without haste. Within a few moments she had filled the container with a selection of fresh Vulcan vegetables. She proudly handed the basket to the first officer who hesitantly accepted it as if it were some type of questionable biohazard.

Knowing the expected human response, he nodded in appreciation.

"Thank you, Ensign. I will endeavor to make use of these items."

With a smile and a laugh she retorted;

"All you need to do is eat them, Lieutenant Commander... Just eat them."

And with that, she merely gave him a slight nudge toward the turbolift and he was on his way... straight to his quarters before he needed to explain to anyone why he was walking around with a basket of vegetation; a conversation he would prefer to avoid.

After Syntron had left, Kheren stayed a while longer in the Bow, looking at the stars, unmoving. Then, after a time of introspection, he glanced once more at the holodisplay of the smart wild pigs before heading out of the main lounge to the nearest holosuite. The holosuite was smaller than the holodecks they had on his large starship, but since he was to be alone, it would serve his purpose just as well.

"Computer; from the latest intelligence reports and data we have on the IRW Shavok and her crew and command staff and estimated goals, adding astrometric data of the expected rendezvous point, establish a diplomatic simulation and two tactical simulations, one with the USS Alsea and the other without it, based on current USS Artemis capabilities, available resources and crew complement."

"Computed," answered barely a few seconds later the disembodied feminine voice of the ship's computer.

"Set up a bridge simulation along those parameters and run diplomatic simulation first."

"Program complete. Enter when ready."

The door wooshed open and Kheren stepped in. He knew a simulation would not guarantee success by any long shot; but it would at least help avoiding any obvious failure. The next hours would not be wasted.

\* \* \*

Sometimes, the captain's chair was a lonely place aboard a starship, and Rachele Rivers was finding that out now.

Never even having expected to be on a command track, she had found herself as the first officer of Lotus Fleet's USS Alsea and now, with the grave injury to Kalten Siduri, Rivers was asked to command the Alsea during Operation Horizon. As she contemplated all of this, the terminal on the ready room desk demanded her attention. When she activated it, it was the face of Starbase 10's XO Commander Karen Schmidt that greeted her.

"Captain Rivers; Starbase 10 has detected the presence of a Romulan Scimitar Class warship in Federation space. Fleet Captain Samji has ordered the Alsea and the Artemis to deploy immediately to intercept this vessel and discern its intentions."

Rivers acknowledged Schmidt with a nod.

"Understood Commander; we'll depart as soon as I know my Chief Engineer has finished with the warp drive."

"Good luck, Captain, and good hunting. Schmidt out."

Captain Rivers rose slowly from behind the ready room desk and strode onto the bridge.

"Captain on the bridge," her tactical officer, and now first officer Oseno Jureth announced.

"Thank you Lieutenant, but we can forgo that formality I think. Status report."

"I've implemented the new security measures throughout the ship, Sir," Oseno replied. "We've found three Horizon Children sympathizers among the crew and the Doctor transferred them off the ship. All major systems are showing online and functioning Captain."

"What about engineering?"

"I've not heard from Commander Lire."

Rivers nodded and tapped her comdadge.

"Rivers to Lire; Commander, we've received orders to depart immediately. What is our warp core status?"

Upon hearing the communicator bleep, Niomo jumped from his desk where he had fallen asleep.

"Il *Colosseo*!" he shouted in automatic response.

Asleep on his desk! Something he had not done since sleeping in grade school. Rubbing his numbed face, he cleared his throat.

"Ahem. Sorry, Captain. All systems are go and all modifications have been complete for..." He paused to check the chronometer on his desk. "...Hours. We are good on my end. I just have to fully power up the cores. I'm powering the primary core now; and as we fly, I can open up the secondary and tertiary cores. Lire out."

Niomo's fingers started to fly over the console as he started to input his activation command codes. The warp core began to hum to life even stronger than the idle state they had been in since modifications had been completed. Smiling to himself, he tapped his communicator.

"Lire to the Bridge. You have full power. Should I unlock the warp nacelle speed restraints?"

Rivers contemplated the question for only a moment before answering,

"Yes Commander, and get those other cores online as soon as possible. We will be in need our multi-vector mode shortly after departure, Bridge out."

Rivers then turned to her XO. "Mister Oseno, coordinate with the Artemis and take us out."

Oseno nodded.

"Aye Captain."

Jureth looked to the ops station.

"Get me a channel to Starbase 10, and get the joint channel with the Artemis set up as we discussed before, Ensign Wynn."

"Aye Sir, channel to Starbase 10 ops open."

Oseno nodded in acknowledgement.

"Starbase 10 operations, this is USS Alsea requesting permission to depart."

"Alsea, permission granted; you have priority clearance for departure."

"Acknowledged," Oseno replied. "Alsea out."

Jureth looked down at the helm where Shawn Hunter was seated, awaiting the order to put the Alsea into space and then he looked at Rivers who nodded at him, confirming that he should be the one to give the order.

"Mister Hunter, clear all moorings and take us out."

"Aye Sir," Hunter replied as his fingers danced over the helm controls of the Alsea. "Mooring umbilicals retracted, all Starbase personnel and workbees clear. Engaging maneuvering thrusters."

The gracefull lines of the Alsea, freshly repaired after her confrontation with the Klingons, slid clear of her berth and approached the mighty spacedock doors of Starbase 10. As she did, the great doors slid apart revealing the vast space ahead. Jureth stood as they cleared the doors and turned back to Rivers.

"We have cleared spacedock, Captain."

"Good work Lieutenant; the bridge is yours. Coordinate with the Artemis and inform me when we reach the intercept coordinates."

"Aye Sir," Oseno replied and Rivers stood and exited the bridge to the ready room.

Hesitantly, Jureth sat in the center seat and then addressed Wynn at ops again.

"Is that channel to the Artemis ready yet?"

"Aye Sir, channel is open and secure."

Oseno nodded.

"Good work Ensign."

Oseno stood again before attempting to reach the Artemis.

The USS Artemis had been moving out for half an hour at almost two thousand times the speed of light and crossed a tenth of a light year when the call came from the Alsea. Immediately, Doctor Elliago nasaro-Myth, alone on the bridge at the multitask console, spoke out loud through the computer channeling of his own call:

"Captain Kheren; incoming hail from the Alsea."

The Andorian, having barely started his diplomatic simulation, took the time of two heartbeats to realize the holographic doctor seating besides him on the simulated bridge had not spoken and that the call had come from the ship's real inner channel.

"Computer, hold."

As the entire holosuite froze around him, he then answered crisply to the real chief medical officer:

"On my way, Doc."

As he swiftly exited the holosuite, he said outloud:

"Computer; implement new communication protocol for intraship communications. Reinstate twenty-third century whistling hail when an actual communication is sent throughout the ship. Do not allow this signal in simulations. Command authorisation Kheren --- white-alpha ---"

"Command code recognized. Protocol implemented," confirmed the computer, easily able to catch the ultrasonic words of the Graalek language integrated in all of the Andorian captain's command codes.

Not a good idea to get confused between fantasy and reality... especially now, admitted Kheren from this last incident.

As he stepped onto the bridge, he went to stand before his large old style command chair.

"On main viewer, Doc."

"USS Artemis, this is USS Alsea Lieutenant Oseno speaking. We have cleared spacedock and are ready to coordinate operations at your direction."

Kheren recognized the Bajoran Lieutenant from the general meeting and that had accompanied Acting captain Rivers and him afterwards, the one that had impressed him with his keen mind and sound judgment despite his relative inexperience. Tyvya also had noted to her captain his sharp sense of tactic and security protocols and necessities. He nodded in acknowledgement to Oseno on the screen.

"Good to hear from you, Alsea. We are currently on course to the estimated position of the approaching intruder at our maximum speed of warp 9.6."

He stepped down to the navigation station and computed for a few seconds before adding:

"Moving out now at warp 9.9, you will overtake us in... forty-eight minutes. Once we are together, we should intercept together the Romulans in the next eleven hours. We will have several hours to discuss and prepare our joint action once you rendez-vous with us."

Oseno nodded in acknowledgement of the senior officer's orders.

"Understood Captain; we'll see you shortly. I will keep this channel open and secured in the event you need to relay any additional information, Alsea out."

Oseno immediately addressed Shawn Hunter at the helm

"Plot that course Mister Hunter, maximum warp."

"Aye Sir, course laid in."

"Give a moment, I want to give Commander Lire a warning."

Oseno toggled the comm unit on the command chair.

"Bridge to engineering, we're going to maximum warp Commander. Just wanted to give you a heads up."

Niomo responded positively.

"Affirmative. The warp core is warming up and will be ready shortly. The other cores are powering up now and should be ready a few minutes after the primary core."

He looked to a few of the engineers that were staring at the massive warp core.

"You there! Spread the word that we are going to be hitting 9.900. Make sure to monitor the stress fracture rate. I don't want to come apart before we see combat."

"Understood Mister Lire; let us know when we have it. Bridge out."

Niomo looked to the ceiling as Oseno gave his order. He sighed and motioned for his assistant to come into his office. He closed his eyes for a moment and thought about his orders. James Thompson was a man who would one day be a Chief Engineer, Niomo knew. It was time to see him tested to his limits. When he opened his eyes, Thompson was at his desk.

"James, I want you to take over here. If we are going into MVAM, I want to be with core 3. I'll take Brenes with me. Use Warner as your second. The Secondary Hull shouldn't have any major problems. Sparbok and Stark should do fine together."

Thompson only nodded. Niomo could tell that he was worried. It was the first time he had sat in what the engineers called "The Chair." It wasn't on the bridge, of course. It was at the heart of engineering.

"James, I have full confidence in you." Niomo responded to his silence, trying to make the man more confident.

Thompson smiled slowly.

"I know, Sir. I'm ready,"

Niomo smiled back.

"I'll be leaving now. I'll probably be wanted on the Bridge. It's part of the tertiary hull anyways. Might as well take my 'official' station for our event. I'll watch you from there, if you need me."

The two men said their goodbyes and separated. Niomo went to his replicator and retrieved a cup of coffee. He then looked around and found Ensign Leo Brenes. After drawing his attention, Niomo notified him of his new duty.

"Leo. I want you to be my eyes down in tertiary engineering. Head over there now, please. I'll be on the bridge coordinating power systems on all three sections. Read over the modifications I made to core 3 and let me know if you have any questions before we separate.

Brenes smiled and responded.

"Sure thing. I'll let you know if I have any problems."

The two men exited engineering and boarded a turbolift together. The ensign got off at tertiary engineering and Niomo exited onto the Bridge.

"Anyone need any coffee?" He stated with a raise of his cup and a smile.

Oseno smiled back then toggled the ship wide intercom.

"Attention all hands, this is the XO. We will be moving shortly to intercept a Romulan vessel that has encroached on Federation space with unknown intent. Multi-vector assault mode is almost a certainty. All hands should report to multi-vector assault stations in preparation for this action. That is all, Oseno out."

Jureth wasn't exactly one for motivational speeches. He just wanted to give the crew information about what was going on. Just enough to prepare themselves and hopefully not enough to panic them. He looked back at his assistant tactical officer.

"Weapons and shields, Cat?"

"Online and standing by, Sir."

Oseno nodded . It seemed the Alsea was primed and ready for what was to come.

While all this was going on aboard the USS Alsea, Captain Kheren straightened from the nav console after the subspace transmission was terminated, his antennae straightened with obvious satisfaction. Raising his head slightly, he said outloud:

"Kheren to Tyvya and Syntron; rendez-vous with the Alsea on our present course in forty-eight minutes confirmed. Both of you meet me on the bridge in forty-five."

"acknowledged, Sir," came back over the bridge's speakers the throaty, soft feminine voice of his acting tactical chief.



Syntron, just arriving back to his quarters, laid down the woven basket and activated his combadge.

"Affirmative Captain. I will be there."

*Gives me just enough time to go back play around with the diplomatic sim,* he thought as he exited the bridge to get back to the holosuite he had left.

"Carry on, Doc," he said in parting as the turbolift doors closed on him.

The Deltan returned his attention to the controls with a smirk on his handsome face.

"Here we go again," he mumbled to himself.

\* \* \*

Karen Schmidt, who had been talking in the background, now addressed her commanding officer.

"Sir, the Alsea is confirming launch orders. They have to start up their warp core as it had been put offline for extensive modifications. But those are completed so their departure is scheduled in thirty minutes."

True to the starbase executive officer's words, the request for launch of the Prometheus class warship came half an hour later, to which flight control officer Koral confirmed launching priority and directives. Through one of the large transparencies ringing the command center, they all saw the sleek, dagger-shaped form of the four-nacelled Alsea move out, turn and jump into a flash of light on the same heading taken by the much larger but much slower USS Artemis.

The Vulcan flight officer then turned towards Samji.

"USS Alsea's departure confirmed, Sir. ETA with the Artemis; forty-eight minutes. ETA of both ship with the intruder is eleven hours, thirty minutes according to last sensor contact."

"If they find them," grumbled the starbase commander. "Wouldn't be surprised if this Romulan managed to slip past them, with that cloak of his."

"They will have to work hard for it, Sir," science chief Rexil chimed in while he studied the last report from the USS McKenzie's science officer transmitted by Captain Crist. "Lieutenant Pel confirmed implementation on all three sections of the Alsea of the sensor and deflector modifications her colleague Syntron from the Artemis came up with. Between the Artemis and the Alsea, the sensor coverage of their improved sensor capabilities will assuredly locate them if they maintain a trajectory towards us."

"And that will be the easy part," growled Lieutenant Commander Grok, his immense Ferengi ears catching the whole conversation even across the vast, busy, noisy room from his ops station.

"Captain Kheren is a decorated diplomat and experienced tactician," said Samji with a confident tone, "and he can now count on a resourceful Vulcan scientist as his right hand. And both Commander Rivers and Lieutenant Jureth have more than proven their mettle as well... not to mention that Niomo Lire, their new chief engineer, is one of the most experienced officers we have in service. If anyone can find and stop those Romulans, it's them."

Lieutenant Koral's calm voice rose again.

"Sir; the shuttle fleet has launched."

Everyone's stare went to the large windows to watch tiny luminous dots fill space with moving stars. Five hundred shuttlecrafts poured out from the various landing bays of the immense starbase and grouped into over a hundred of small squadrons that disappeared in flashes of lights as they warped out, creating a firework display that spontaneously broke the emotional tension in the command center in a thunderous applause.

Samji let the people vent out their tension in this abrupt display of hope and optimism. It was at the heat of their whole effort after all. But, contrary to the self-serving delusion of pessimistic and cynical people, hope and optimism did not mean any less realism and pragmatism.

"Any word from the rest of the fleet?" he asked then in a sobering tone.

"The Republic has just confirmed launch and is heading at warp 8 towards the designated area where the Artemis and the Alsea will join with her for their part of the operation. The Wisconsin, the Steamrunner, the Aurora and the Pittsburgh have confirmed readiness and already moved out, waiting for their command ships to join them," answered Commander Schmidt, her hands at her back in her usual formal posture. "The Spectre and the McKenzie have powered up, but we still awaits confirmation; no word from the Lotus either."

"Come on people, get this show on the road," mumbles Samji, looking again at the lead ships of Lotus Fleet still berthed inside the vast cupola of Starbase 10.

He was thinking about the Klingons, coming with an undefined force of ships to claim the anomaly as their cosmic tool of conquest; Samji knew that they would not be as lucky as they were with the Romulans in seeing them coming. They might even already be there...

And there was the Cult; the Horizon Children's foiled attempts to again infiltrate their ships and even the base or gain support within Lotus Fleet was but the tip of the iceberg they were in their path. The McKenzie was the only other ship and crew besides the Artemis with any actual experience with the cultists... and it was not much. Whatever they had in mind, they might already have set in in motion.

*Let's hope the Klingons are the ones to find out first... and both break a few teeth on one another,* prayed Samji silently.

He was starting to fear that they would all be late for the party.

"Sir; ships are reporting readiness."

"About time," growled Samji as he turned towards his exec, the woman pointing at the monitors dedicated each to one specific ship. Nodding to Karen, he stepped closer to them as one woman's awesomely beautiful face despite the utter baldness of her head appeared over that of a Nebula class starship, its wide oval saucer sporting two flat warp nacelles underneath and a large fight pod on top where class XI shuttles were finishing docking maneuvers.

"Starbase 10, this is the Wisconsin; we are ready to depart for Quadrant One," said the sensuous yet firm voice of the Deltan.

"Thank you, captain Onia," acknowledged Samji. "Captain Speaker-Of-Names, is the Pittsburgh also ready to depart?"

On the monitor next to the one showing the gorgeous commanding officer of the USS Wisconsin was seen the image of a New Orleans class vessel, similar to the Wisconsin but for upswept nacelles and added pods on the aft section of the flat, oval primary hull. It faded to display the startling tiger-like head of the only Kzinti to ever serve in Starfleet.

"Affirmative, Fleet Captain."

The curtness of the answer from the naturally low, growling voice emphasized the nervous flapping of the batwing-shaped ears expressing the slight annoyance of the massively built felinoid. There was only one female captain in the entire complement of Lotus Fleet and the Kzinti had been matched with her. He obviously still had to work at completely going over his instinctive racial prejudice against females. Kzinti females were barely sentient, so it had taken several years for Speaker-Of-Names to realize and accept that such was not the case with other species. Not to mention that, in his culture still not part of the United Federation of Planets, even a past fierce enemy, everything had to be earned, from respect to belongings, even down to their very names.

Captain Onia had proven herself more than enough to him during the Borg Invasion, when during his command of the entire operation from Starbase 10 he had witnessed her attempt to peacefully stop the Borg advance by sharing her overwhelming sensuality with the Borg Queen, breaking her Vow of Celibacy with her Ferengi first officer to try and convince Sedin of renouncing her mad campaign of annihilation against the Federation. It had almost worked... and Onia's willingness to sacrifice her career and even her sanity to try and stop a war without bloodshed had not gone unnoticed, even from the Kzinti officer. Samji knew he would not stay indisposed for long once they started working together again.

"Wisconsin, Pittsburgh, you are free to depart. Godspeed."

"We will earn our savior's names today," answered Speaker-Of-Names.

Onia only smiled and winked.

The small viewscreens reverted to external view in time to show both ships moving out of the immense interior of the starbase on all thrusters, then making some distance quickly on full impulse once outside before a distant pair of flashes confirmed their warping out towards the Azimuth Horizon anomaly.

The voice of Lieutenant Koral then came from the flight control station.

"Fleet Captain; the USS Aurora and the USS Steamrunner are reporting in."

Two other small viewers lighted up. One showed another Nebula class starship but with its upper pod dedicated to laboratories and study rooms, as befitted a Starfleet Academy ship under the Lotus Fleet banner. The other displayed the peculiarly flat, unusually rectangular and characteristically angular frame of the prototype of the Steamrunner class of escort vessels, one of the smallest designs of Starfleet. Samji looked at them both with visible relief and satisfaction in his voice.

"Our first good news of the day. Lieutenant, tell Commodore Brigham to position his cadet cruise school ship coreward and Captain Ramabai to do so rimward. Both will maintain standard synchronous orbit around the starbase. We'll keep them as our reserve for either the operation... or the evacuation."

"Or if the Romulans get past the Artemis and the Alsea..." whispered Karen Schmidt to Allen Samji's ears alone.

At that moment, the distinctive voice of captain V'Rell Gould resonated throughout the command center.

"Port control this is the USS Lotus requesting clearance to exit the station, all lights are green I repeat, all lights are green."

"Lotus, you are clear to leave station at this time, maintain port speed until you have cleared the station."

The helmsman gave a confused look and his captain, then replied:

"acknowledged, port control; maintaining port speeds."

He then looked around the bridge and shrugged.

"I wonder what that was all about?"

Edward Tomah gave a chuckle.

"Seems a certain blue-skinned captain left in a hurry earlier. I think their still scrapping the paint off the door as we speak."

Gould shook his head and mumbled the word 'reckless..' but said nothing of it. He had his own problems to concern himself with.

"Helm, once clear, put is into position to best support the other vessels, we may not be a fighting ship by design but most of the rest of them are even less so."

As the ship cleared the station Gould opened a ship wide announcement.

"All hands, red alert, man your stations. red alert."

In the command center of Starbase 10, Lieutenant Koral turned towards his commanding officer with the characteristic raised Vulcan eyebrow.

"Sir? the Lotus is moving into support position of the Aurora and the Steamrunner."

"Confirmed, Sir," then said Commander Schmidt also frowning. "They have implemented Condition Red on board."

Samji sighed to refrain from blurting out an expletive.

*What the hell does he think he's doing? His Romulan side is flaring up it looks like...*

"Grok, patch me to the Lotus."

"Channel open, Sir."

"USS Lotus, this is Lotus Fleet Command. Belay your current action and prepare to proceed to your designated operation area. Once the Spectre undocks, best speed to Quadrant Three as planned."

Almost in the same breath, Samji then ordered again to his Ferengi chief of ops:

"Give me the Spectre."

"Go ahead, Sir."

"USS Spectre, this is Fleet Command. The Lotus is already out and ready to proceed. Launch immediately and best speed to Quadrant Three."

His tone of voice was firm and hard enough to make it very clear that he was getting impatient with the delay. The anomaly was still spreading like wildfire accross space, the Horizon Children had already tried again to infiltrate them all, the Romulans were already on their way... and, if anything, Klingons were not known for procrastinating. Things were picking up pace and, ready or not, it was time for action.

Their whole universe was at stake.

Aboard the Lotus, Lieutenant Vincent was standing by at his controls when the message came in to stand down from red alert, but Gould had not yet replied or ordered this to be done. Almost with a wince he acknowledged the order.

"Bring us to yellow alert, Mister Vincent, but everyone is to remain at station until further notice."

He was obviously annoyed... but an order was an order and so he did what he was told; but he felt like a fool for doing it.

"Keep a weathered eye for any sign of a cloaked vessel, Lieutenant Sainthill. I'm not as comfortable as our fleet captain about standing here being an easy target as he seems to be."

The man obviously knew nothing of Romulan tactics. The very fact that their flagship could be seen surly meant they were drawing them out.

*Malfunctioning cloak? Please... oldest trick in the book...*

It was a trap.

Grok then addressed his commanding officer:

"Sir, the Spectre is fully powered up and ready to go... but still no confirmation from Captain Summers."

Mumbling an expletive, Samji went closer to the communication board.

"USS Spectre, this is Starbase 10; the Lotus is already out and waiting. We have suited up personnel that can go out and push if you need it..."

He interrupted himself before he said something even more acidic and instead turned towards his Ferengi chief of Ops.

"Grok, if they are not out in five minutes, *tow* them out."

"The Lotus is complying, Sir," then officially confirmed Commander Schmidt from the reports she got of Lieutenant Koral at flight control.

"Good," simply grumbled Samji.

Whatever had gone through the flagship captain's mind about waiting at red alert for thirty-four hours straight until the intruder would possibly be in range, when their most powerful warship and their largest starship were both already out to intercept it in less than twelve while two others stood guard already, the starbase commander could not fathom. But at least Gould showed discipline and had put back his priorities straight.

The fire was spreading out there.

Samji however knew that the captain of the flagship had extensive experience with Romulans; he of all people certainly knew their way of thinking. Reflecting on his seemingly panicking reaction, Samji concluded that the man possibly feared a Romulan trick with this seemingly threatening dreadnought... and that might just have been the reaction the Romulans hoped for.

Yet...

"Lieutenant Commander Ja'Hark," he then asked; "report from the Neutral Zone tachyon grid and surveillance outposts?"

"Negative so far, Sir," the intelligence chief answered with his characteristic gruff Klingon voice.

"Keep constant contact with them..." insisted Starbase 10's commander. "And with the Klingon border watch as well."

"Aye, Sir."

This was no time to panic, second guess or fall asleep.

Just as he was thinking so, the voice of Captain Daniel Summers came through the open fleet channel.

"Spectre here Fleet Command sorry for the delay in our response we are ready and leaving port as we speak, good luck Fleet Command we will see you soon" Summers responded quite annoyed that for some reason he could receive messages but not respond, I'll have to get O'Conner to take a look at that later no time right now we need to be ready.

"Sir, their Ops chief is reporting comm problems only just now resolved," reported Lieutenant Commander Grok. "That's why they were long in answering and requesting departure."

Samji sighed and rolled his eyes skyward.

"Understood. Confirm priority departure spacedoor B. Clear their moorings from up here and release tractor hold."

"They are free to navigate," confirmed lieutenant Koral after a few seconds.

"USS Spectre, full thrusters out and join with the Lotus. Proceed to Quadrant Three now."

On the viewer, the flat disc with low-angled nacelles so distinctive of the Akira class cruiser slid between docking pylons and quickly through the huge opening filled with stars.

"Commander, once we are clear, take us to Quadrant Three best possible speed. I will be down traveling through Engineering and Security to take a look around and check our operational readiness with my own eyes... to give me a little peace of mind," Summers said as he got up and walked off the bridge and into the turbolift.

"Aye Captain," David Rogers responded.

"Engineering" Daniel muttered and the normal hum of the turbolift sounded as it descended and moved through the ship.

Rising and moving to the now vacated center seat, David stood before it and co-ordinated tasks.

"Helm, prepare to match course and speed with the Lotus. Comms? Open a channel to her."

The small chirp preceded the almost immediate response from the comms officer. "Channel open Commander."

"Lotus, the Spectre is ready on your mark. We have your six, Captain."

Gould responded to Captain Summers.

"Thank you, Spectre. Linking nav systems for tandem warp now.." h

He looked at his helmsman who gave him a nod.

"Engage!"

Down in main engineering of the USS Spectre, the massive core pulsed rhythmically, awaiting a simple press of the helmsman's finger on an icon button.

Sustained warp 6 was standard cruising speed for an Akira class, but the Spectre was poised to follow the flagship of Lotus Fleet, so her matter-antimatter reaction assembly would sustain warp 9.8 for about twelve hours if need be.

In a few moments, the Spectre and the Lotus were side by side facing away from Starbase 10 and towards the distant, tiny flare of gold-orange light that looked like a nearby star but that was in fact a blaze about to devour the cosmos; a blaze they were tasked to put out, against all odds... and anyone who would try to stop them.

Matching to the second, the two ships powered up their warp drives and vanished, leaving behind only a brief stretched after image to mark their passage.

They were on their way.

After a moment, the starbase commanding officer looked at yet another monitor. It displayed the slim, elongated but classic capital ship lines of forward top saucer, lower secondary hull and two upward nacelles of an Excelsior class Lakota refit. Straightening his uniform, the bearded man turned again towards his statuesque exec.

"Commander, do we have any readiness confirmation from the Republic?"

"Aye, Sir. They are as we speak taunting the McKenzie."

Then, a firm yet slightly amused voice was heard over the speakers.

"McKenzie, this is Adam Wyatt of the Republic. We are about to head for Quadrant Four. Full round of Saurian brandy is on the last one there."

"Hughes open a channel," Crist said with a grin. "Oh, we'll be there. And I like my brandy cold."

"Understood; good luck, Captain."

"You too. Just hold tight at the designated location, I have a feeling we'll need you."

"We'll be there."

The channel closed. Then Crist spoke again.

"Hughes, contact the starbase. This is the McKenzie, Captain Crist speaking, we request permission to head out."

"Your clear, McKenzie." Came a voice over the comms.

"Thank you control. Hughes; take us out."

"Aye, one quarter impulse."

But just as the moorings were cleared and the impulse drive heated up, the entire ship was shaken by a brief vibration. before anyone could inquire, the voice of Starbase 10's flight control came over the speakers.

"USS McKenzie; you were ordered to follow standard regulations and proceed out of spacedock at port speeds. Power down impulse engines now and tractor beams will deactivate once you activate thrusters until you have cleared spacedocks."

Obviously, someone not only remembered the crazy departure of the Artemis, but the flying stunt the McKenzie itself had pulled on her last mission. Flight control had been watching them closely it seemed... And true to word, they were released from tractoring only once their impulse had been back to idle state and their thrusters flaring at readiness.

The McKenzie began to move, and cleared the doors of the spacedock.

"We've cleared Starbase 10, Sir." confirmed the helmsman.

"Good; go to warp 9, on course for Quadrant Four."

"Aye, ETA, five hours forty-five minutes ."

"I want a coded channel from the Republic when they get into position. "

"Aye," acknowledged the Andorian chief of tactical. "I'll make sure they do, Sir."

As the flat disc of the compact warship moved away from the starbase on impulse, the Republic had already flashed away at high warp. So had done the Lotus and the Spectre almost at the same instant. Once Captain Crist's ship followed, Fleet captain Allen Samji sighed audibly and stated solemnly:

"This is Starbase 10; Operation Horizon has begun."

At the heart of the command center of Starbase 10, the huge holographic display installed there allowed Samji and his senior officers, if not in fact anyone in the vast circular room, to see a live representation of the entire sector. At a touch or a word, the display could zoom in at any point on any scale in the entire 20 light years-on-a side cube of the Hromi sector to show in visual representation, tactical display or hard data, any information or event available in real time, compiling constantly what was transmitted from subspace relays, long range sensors, linked starships or probes and compared, added or enhanced by computer data stored in the immense computer cores of the base.

It had an omniscient quality to it that was a bit overwhelming, even to a seasoned officer like Fleet Captain Allen Samji. But despite the uncomfortable feeling, it was certainly handy in their present situation and what they were attempting to do.

Save the universe.

Standing arms crossed in front of his chest, the golden-skinned, bearded man barked out:

"Situational report."

"USS Artemis and USS Alsea are together on course at warp 9.6 to intercept the Romulan dreadnought still beleived to be bound for our position," answered his executive officer, Karen Schmidt. "Interception estimated to occur in eleven point forty-seven hours, halfway between Beta Caeli and Rho Puppis along the edge of our sector. No other report of Romulan activity."

"Yet..." mumbled Samji, but he signalled the dignified-looking woman to continue.

"USS Aurora and USS Steamrunner are in synchronuous orbit with us, assuming guard duty and ready to assist in any evacuation or fleet support action if need arise. USS Pittsburgh and USS Wisconsin are en route to the anomaly's quadrant of operation one at warp 9.6; estimated time of arrival and confinement operation initiation is four point six hours. USS Lotus and USS Spectre en route to quadrant three at warp 9.8; estimated time of arrival and start of confinement operation is four point eight hours. No report of expected Klingon presence in that region so far."

"Oh they'll be there," assured Allen with a frown.

The real question was: as ambushers... or as hunters?



"USS McKenzie and USS Republic just started towards quadrant of operation four," finished Schmidt with the same clinical tone as she almost always adopted on duty; sometimes even off-duty; "USS McKenzie is at warp 9, estimated time of arrival is five point seventy-five hours. USS Republic is moving at warp 9.2; ETA with designated theater of operation is five point two hours."

"Good," said the starbase commander with a nod. "They're trying to throw off the Horizon Children's timetable, if they planned anything against us or the operation itself, by coming in out of synch."

"Which is most probable, judging alone by the infiltrators we flushed out on most ships and over here," the woman added.

"Most but not all..." then chimmed in Lieutenant Commander Ja'Hark. The Klingon intelligence officer looked even more edgy and annoyed, if that was possible. "We received no such report or suspects from the McKenzie."

"That does not mean they have not found any," pointed out Samji with a joyless smirk. "My guess is that Captain Crist might have some plan to lure them into revealing themselves before they are ready and exploit any weakness that will thus be revealed."

"A fearfully risky game," commented Ja'Hark gloomily.

*Not for a man willing to have a Section 31 Cardassian agent as a chief engineer...* thought Samji as his eyes roamed the tactical tridimensional display and the tiny dots of blue light representing the ships of Lotus Fleet, most of them converging towards a huge ball of golden-orange fire with a blindingly white center.

\* \* \*

The entire bridge shook under the impact of fiery flashes that filled the main viewer, the ominous dark shape of an immense bat-winged starship filling the entire frame with greenish weapon ports flaring in rapid succession.

Then, came over the din of shouts and chirping systems a distinctive whistleing sound.

Hey it works! said the Andorian gripping the center seat as the chief medical officer's voice came overhead.

"Bridge to Captain Kheren."

"Computer, freeze program."

All sounds and vibrations instantly stopped around him and everything and everyone just froze in an eerily way as he then said again outloud:

"Go ahead, Doc."

"Sensors are showing the approach of the Alsea at high warp from astern. Distance three hundred billion kilometers and closing. ETA fifteen minutes at present relative speed and heading."

"Thank you, Doc, I'll be there shortly... Signal the Alsea but stay at warp. Oh, and congratulations. You sound like a veteran bridge officer already."

"Heh, I'm just reading outloud the nav monitor, Captain Sir."

Kheren stood up from the simulated command chair and strode off the fake bridge through the turbolift door that, instead of a lift cabin showed one of the ship's curving corridors.

"Computer, end program."

As he exited the room, everything disappeared to leave a small empty cubicle behind him. With swift strides, he reached an actual turbolift door as he activated the communicator on his chest.

"Mister Syntron, Chief Tyvya, please meet me on the bridge now."

A moment later, he stepped in the command center of the starship Artemis and stood before his wide command chair, waiting for the incoming warship to answer their hail.

"Acknowledged Captain" Syntron responded a few seconds after the commanding officer's arrival on the bridge as he closed a file on his PADD and headed out of the science chief's office on deck 14.

On his way out of the science department, he noted to Lieutenant T'Val working in the Astrometrics Lab that he was heading up to the bridge. He arrived on the bridge and as he exited the turbolift, the tall Vulcan headed straight for the science station before he realized that his post on the bridge now was in the executive's chair on the right side of the Captain.

Old habits are sometimes hard to break; even for a Vulcan.

He turned to Doctor Nasaro-Myth who was now manning the science station's sensor monitors along with navigation and communications on the multitask station.

"What is our current status, Doctor?"

"On course towards the estimated trajectory of the Romulan intruder at warp 9.6. All systems on green status. Crew currently in final preparation training mode as ordered before rest period... except for us of course."

As he spoke, he tilted his head towards the turbolift doors which parted to let in the towering frame of acting chief of security Tyvya, her antennae wobbling in expectation. She went straight to her tactical console forward and to the right of where Captain Kheren was still standing. Looking at her tactical sensors readout, she reported curtly.

"No sign of the intruder on long range scans. No signal yet from the space sonar either. Estimated time of contact, eleven hours, thirty-nine minutes. The Alsea is closing in astern and will parallel our course in less than twelve minutes."

All four of them looked at the main viewer where Elliago shifted the viewing angle to aft and magnified the image to show the pointed prow of the Prometheus class warship overtaking them with ease.

Aboard the streaking Alsea Jureth sat quietly in the command chair. He had not seen nor heard from Captain Rivers since the ship launched from spacedock, and knowing the strong emotional involvement the striking redhead had in this mission Jureth didn't disturb her until Cat Steele addressed him from tactical.

"Contact, bearing dead ahead. It's the Artemis Sir."

"Thank you Cat," Jureth replied "Mister Hunter, time to intercept?"

"Twelve minutes, Sir," Hunter replied "Should I match velocity as we approach?"

"Affirmative Lieutenant. As we draw up behind her match course and speed."

"Aye Sir."

Jureth tapped his combadge

"Bridge to Captain Rivers."

"Go ahead Lieutenant."

"We are approaching our rendez-vous with the Artemis Sir."

"Very good, I'm on my way, Rivers out."

Rachele Rivers closed the comm channel with her XO and opened one of her own.

"Rivers to Lire, Commander please join us on the bridge if you aren't already on your way."

"Already here. These seats are comfortable Captain." Niomo responded.

With that order issued Rachele left the solitude of the Alsea's ready room and strode onto the bridge of Lotus Fleet's most powerful warship. Even as she did so her mind drifted somewhat thinking of him...thinking of Sisko, but she mentally shook the thoughts away. She had her own mission to complete.

"Status report."

"We are coming up on the Artemis now Captain," Jureth replied "I've ordered Mister Hunter to match her course and speed."

"On screen."

The Alsea's viewer shifted and the image of the refitted Ambassador class starship filled the screen. There was a time when some would have questioned the addition of such an old vessel to Lotus Fleet, but no one did so anymore for the Artemis had more than lived up to the expectations placed on her.

"Hail the Artemis." Rivers ordered

"Channel open," Ensign Wynn replied from operations

"USS Artemis, this is Captain Rivers aboard the Alsea. Sorry we're late."

Kheren looked at the enlarged image of the fiery-haired woman with the raised chin that for his people expressed respect.

"Fashionably late I think you Humans calls it... Welcome to the hunt, Alsea. Captain Rivers, I suggest we keep our present course and speed while we confer about our coming meet and greet with the Romulans. The farther from Starbase 10 we will intercept them, the safer it will be... and the sooner we do, the less chances they will have time to attempt their alleged mad scheme against the anomaly. The Artemis cannot withstand any greater speed our overpowered engine core could normally deliver, but on the other hand, we can maintain warp 9.6 indefinitely; and it is certainly no great strain on your own engines."

Without much of a pause, the captain of the Artemis indicated the two officers besides him.

"Let me introduce to you my chief medical officer and , for the moment, relief navigator, Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth, My tactical chief, Lieutenant Tyvya you already met. This is Lieutenant Commander Syntron, my new executive officer. If you would give us a moment, we three will settle in my ready room to discuss with you on this secured channel you provided us."

Turning to the giantess and to the Vulcan both on his right, the Andorian then said:

"Please come with me. Doc, you have the conn."

"Oh, joy." grinned the Deltan as the trio went to the door at the left and disappeared.

A moment later, Syntron, Tyvya and Kheren sat around the captain's desk, looking at the wall monitor retransmitting the image from the Alsea.

On the Alsea, Niomo turned in his chair towards the captain.

"Ma'm, I suggest that we move our location to your ready room as well. This is a highly sensitive mission, and all."

"Agreed Mister Lire," Rivers replied as she glanced around the bridge, attempting to figure out who the remaining ranking officer would be. She finally settled her eyes on the Alsea's Chief Helmsman.

"Mister Hunter, the bridge is yours."

With that order, Rivers turned and moved toward the ready room with Oseno close behind her. As Jureth followed what was now his third captain in just a month's time, he was becoming increasingly more concerned about his current role on the ship. He had tried to stay as current as possible with what was happening in tactical and security but he was also having to review and approve requests from science, engineering and operations that an XO would normally have to approve. It also bothered him that he would likely not be at tactical if the Romulans decided to slug it out with the two Starfleet vessels.

He brushed those thoughts away for the moment as he took one of the three chairs in the ready room, with Captain Rivers taking the one behind the desk and the Alsea's Chief Engineer taking the other.

Once they were all facing one another across their respective monitors, Captain Kheren took the lead of the meeting. Although basic regulation stipulated that command fell to the ship with the greatest tactical advantage, here the Alsea, he was however the highest ranking officer present, both by seniority and actual rank. Basic chain of command thus reverted authority to him. Nevertheless, he understood the reasoning behind the tactical regulation and thought best to make the best of both it and the obvious chain of command necessity.

"Captain Rivers," he began with typical no-pleasantries-and-to-the-point Andorian pragmatism, "we both know what we are up against and that tactical advantage lies with your ship, despite the designated status of mine and the experience of my crew. Therefore, although I will lead this joint action, yours and your officers' input will be most important here."

The Andorian then went into details.

"We can be reasonably confident that the new scanner developed by Mister Syntron here, coupled with the sensor-reflex nav system your own chief of science came up with, will allow us to flush out the Shavok. My intention is to first try to speak and reason with them. As I said, your own input in this diplomatic attempt will be most welcomed. I suggest that you join me openly during those talks. Besides your needed help, I am taking into account the fact that Romulans lead by pair, as evidenced by their typical bridge configuration; here we know Admiral Tomalak is supervising the actual ship commander, Kraetaek. I hope that adopting this same dual leadership will either please them into a false sense of familiarity or destabilize them, or both."

Rivers nodded.

"I have no problem with you taking the lead here Captain. My diplomatic experience is not anywhere near as polished as yours. I certainly would prefer to talk rather than fight that behemoth and Tomalak has proven in the past to at be somewhat reasonable though his frame of mind since the destruction of Romulus is rather unknown. While I don't understand the particulars of Lieutenant Pel's system, I do know that it is programmed into the computer and operating at this time. If they lock onto us we should know it. My tactical chief and acting XO has already put the crew at their MVAM stations so we can separate faster as well."

Jureth nodded in agreement with Rivers statement.

"If I may Captains, I have expressed my concern to Lieutenant Tyvya about the probability that the Shavok is housing a Thalaron weapon. If that is the case I believe it should be disable as quickly as possible if it comes to a fight."

The Andorian giantess turned her platinum-haired head to better talk to both crews.

"Fortunately, the thalaron emitter takes several minutes to deploy and activate, does so in a very conspicuous manner and its enormous energy requirements forces the ship to shut down engines, shields and weapons. Hardly practical in ship to ship combat unless the opponent is utterly motionless... like a starbase."

She made a pause before adding:

"Taking it out also seems only possible from the inside, if we rely on the only confrontation ever done with such a system."

Kheren nodded as he looked at the Alsea officers on the viewer.

"Taking it out is a necessity, in case they would manage to get past us and reach Starbase 10. Any suggestion as to how we could neutralize it?"

Niomo spoke up first. He wasn't a tactical officer, but the solution seemed obvious to him.

"Sirs, from an engineering standpoint, the easiest way to neutralize it would be to cut its power. As Miss Tyvya has stated, it takes a great deal of power. Our primary target should be their power transfer subsystems. Even if they do not use the weapon, that target assists us in stopping their weapons as well. Additionally, should we knock out their power, they might be more open to diplomacy, even if it had previously failed. A second option, although almost impossible to do, I think, is to make our people immune to the Thalaron weapon's radiation. Possibly as simple as a shield or deflector frequency change...it would be something I'd already have had to been working on though."

Kheren's antennae wobbled this way and that as he was obviously thinking hard. Finally he said:

"Mister Syntron here could go into more detail, but I do recall that thalaron radiation is electromagnetic in nature; the best shielding we have currently cannot stop one hundred percent of the electromagnetic spectrum... and only a minuscule amount is enough for its biogenic properties to eradicate us."

The Andorian however nodded to the Alsea's chief engineer as he added:

"However, your idea of disabling their power distribution system is interesting. Making it our primary target however is easier said than done. A Scimitar class dreadnought has primary *and* secondary shields... and like us, they can reroute power to subsystems. On a ship of that size, it could take quite some time before we knock it out effectively... unless any one of you has an idea how to solve that problem?"

"Transphasic torpedoes," Jureth said in response to Captain Kheren's question. "The Alsea is carrying a dozen of them, and they could be loaded and fired at any time."

The Andorian captain nodded appreciatively.

"Congratulations on your foresight... and your resourcefulness in getting these, Mister Jureth. Both ships will have sensors linked and looking at the most vital locations of the power distribution system Mister Lire pointed out to us. A dozen is rather scarce... every shot will have to count. But if you aim right and at the right time, it just might do the trick."

"If we bait them and lure them to focus their attention on us, the Alsea should have clear shots, Sir," chimmed in Tyvya.

"Be the shield to the sword," summarized Kheren, recalling their strategic position.

Then, his antennae perked up and even stretched forward, in this unique way of his. His silver eyes sparkled as he winked at Syntron and then looked at the Alsea's crew on the screen.

"Tell me... what do you know about Terran wild pigs?"

"I hear they are a lot like Targs," Niomo responded, "but less aggressive. They also make good bacon and porkchops."

Jureth was perplexed by the Andorian captain's question, even after Niomo responded readily; but then, the Alsea's chief engineer was human. Oseno was certain the confusion was showing on his face even as he answered

"I was only on Earth during my time at the Academy Sir, I didn't see much of the planet's wildlife."

Rachele Rivers wasn't sure what the Artemis' captain was driving at either. Instead of answering his question she raised an eyebrow and waited to see where the Andorian was going with his statement.

"Each lifeform in this universe has something to give, be it from mere sustenance to new thoughts," said Kheren. "Yes, Mister Niomo; similar but less aggressive... but they are also far more intelligent."

Quickly, he transferred a copy of the holographic record he had showed Syntron earlier in the lounge of the Artemis. The scene of two small but smart tandem-working pigs defeating a powerful, hungry lion was as funny as it was revealing.

"Be it this way or another, if the Romulans are not smart enough to turn back with words alone, we will have to be smart enough to... convince them otherwise. Once the Artemis exposes herself to the Shavok's attack and makes the Shavok expend and expose itself running in circles, the Alsea will have the opportunity to deliver telling blows... covered again by our harassing riposte once the Shavok decides to turn against you... and, with a lot of skill and a bit of luck, our big bad lion will be left with no options but pounce away... or bleed to death."

The tone of voice of the Andorian took a deeper, darker tone.

"One thing is certain: they are Romulans; if things come to worse, they will give no quarter... and they will never surrender."

Niomo watched as the images of animals fighting off other stronger animals starting to display on the wall monitor. He had to suppress a laugh as he could only assume that this was the Andorian's way of saying that they could defeat the Romulans. Niomo wasn't concerned, however. There was a reason the Romulans tried to steal the Alsea's prototype back in the day. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and realized something.

"Captain, In these images, we see animals fighting other animals. However, this is not fully the situation in our case. Yes, basically, we have the same problem. Two 'weaker' entities must fight off a stronger enemy. However, we are not two pigs or two dolphins. We are not equally matched in strength. No offense intended, Captain Kheren, but you are more akin to a turtle to our pig. A shield to our delicious sword. Might I suggest, at the Lieutenant's permission, to share our quantity of transphasic torpedoes? If I know our ship's weapon ports, we would only be able to spare two or three...but it might help draw them off us while we reposition for our next attack run."

"Every strategy and tactic ever conceived, even by your revered Sun Tzu and Alexander or Napoleon, already existed in nature... but most never notice them, let alone learn from them. And you forget, Mister Lire, that this battle, if battle there is, will be fought at impulse speeds; it may be slower at warp, but this Ambassador class can easily outrun and outmatch the Scimitar class warbird at those lower speeds. And that is in *standard* conditions. It is no frivolous whim of mine that I demanded that most of my crew disembark. With our PIDs and more power to inertial dampers drawn from a dozen decks' life support and power systems added to our excess warp power, this ship now can outmaneuver even yours; it will be able to move in ways that, beleive me Mister Lire, will throw your shoes off... "

"Knock your socks off, Sir," quietly corrected Tyvya.

"Right, Lieutenant... In short, gentlebeings, when I was ordered to have my ship shield yours, I willingly accepted the order. But if the Artemis will play bait and target, it will be a damn hard one to catch, count on that."

The Andorian captain paused before adding.

"As for transphasic torpedoes, a couple of them will not make much difference for us. Better you keep them for the telling blow when our friend out there will be too occupied trying to get his hands on this swift, nimble old girl."

Niomo grinned as the Andorian explained their situation again. He could only smile and nod.

"Old girl indeed. If you require any assistance from myself or any additional engineers, please feel free to ask. But I have to say, Captain; whomever though of conserving power by shutting down entire decks is a genius. A bit harder to do for us, since we need to be able to give a skeleton crew to three sections but it's something I'll look into. Any extra power would do wonders for our speed and firepower."

"Well, not everyone would agree," retorted Kheren, remembering his former first officer storming out of the Artemis because he thought in fact the very same idea utterly foolish; "but necessity is the mother of invention. Its only the sheer size of this ship coupled with the efficiency and simplicity of its handling, especially thanks to our multitask console, that makes it possible... and hopefully successful."

Nodding to the Alsea 's chief engineer, he added:

"We do have many hours before contact; feel free to visit, Mister Lire. I am sure your engineering mind will find the blend of early twenty-fourth century and state of the art twenty-fifth century technology on board rather... fascinating."

The captain of the Artemis then took a breath before saying:

"Now that we all seem to agree on how to face the adversity ahead, I still have one question to submit to you all..."

The four oculars of the Andorian went to each one of them as he asked:

"Why are they doing this?"

Syntron looked around the room attentively to see if there was a response to the Captain's fundamental question. The Vulcan had already proposed one possible rationale for the Romulans daunting course of actions during the bridge officer's meeting on the Artemis a while ago. He was certain that the Captain was checking now to see what the others sitting in the conference room were thinking; therefore the first officer of the Artemis sat there silently and awaited their response as well.

Niomo shook his head and shrugged.

"Doing what? Isn't this part of Operation Horizon? The Romulans just want to destroy the Anomaly so it can't destroy them. I appologize if I've missed some details, engineers rarely get all the details beyond 'Make shields work good.' We figured that the Scimitar would come, and so it has. We just need to stop it....Right?"

He looked around the two room for a face that agreed with him, but instead he saw looks as if he had grown an extra head.

Kheren however had remained completely impassive, as if he expected the comment. And indeed, he explained further.

"Well that's just it, Mister Lire. If they are out there to destroy the anomaly even at the risk of a second war front, this time with us, why are they sending their most powerful warship under cloak towards Starbase 10? The time they took to carefully avoid crossing the Neutral Zone to come in position to do so, destroying the starbase would do exactly what their convoluted route wished to avoid in the first place: declare war on the Federation. And furthermore, as far as the Azimuth Horizon is concerned, it serves no purpose; even if they succeed in destroying the base, our operation will be over by the time they even get to the anomaly afterwards. Hence my question; why are they doing it?"

"They don't have *two* scimitars, do they? Even a mechanic like me can guess that there are probably two groups of Romulans on their way. From different directions so we can't stop both groups. Especially if one of those groups has been extremely.....loud on their approach." Niomo responded. "Romulans do everything for a reason."

The Andorian's antennae perked up as he acknowledged the engineer's assesement.

"Our thought exactly, Lieutenant Commander. Mister Syntron has our science team already preparing a group of probes to serve as counter measures for any attempt to jam our communications and sensors. We will also modify their own navigational deflector as we did with our ships, so as for them to also use the Syntron space sonar and cover a larger area against any other cloaked presence."

He looked in turn at Lire, Jureth and Rivers as he then asked:

"Any further suggestion, Alsea?"

Niomo raised his hand slightly.

"Captain Kheren, I noticed that none of your engineers were at the Rebirth simulations. Did you upgrade your impulse engines to incorporate Commander Sangliar's Floodgate Drive? I'd hate to have to tow your Old Girl out of the anomaly once she runs out of battery power."

"My former First officer, Commander Michael O'Conner, was there and left us his report before he went to become the chief engineer of the USS Spectre. Moreover, Chief Sangliar was himself our first chief engineer on the Artemis; when he sent his own report to all ships of the fleet, rest assured that we were the first to get it... so that he could rub my nose in my mistake of letting him go back then."

There was a definite feeling of bitter sweetness in the soft, deep voice of the Andorian. But then, he became all business again.



"Mister Baoule, my current chief engineer, is a starship power and propulsion specialist. He is currently finishing the recommended modifications. But have no fear, Mister Lire; the Artemis went through the anomaly thrice already, *without* the new improved drive; she may not run fast, but, even through a storm, she always manage to walk back home."

As no one seemed to be bringing any more comment or suggestion after a while, Kheren then said:

"We have almost half a standard day before contact. I suggest everyone take a full rest period and use the remaining time to get ready for the best... and the worst. The Romulans are obviously setting us for a trap, so, any insight or idea anyone might have on the trap until then will certainly prove crucial. There is an anomaly out there that is not waiting for us to settle our little misunderstandings with our neighbors to incinerate everyone and everything. let us expect the unexpected... and be ready."

"We will be with you all the way, Captain," Rivers said "and together, we will not fail. Alsea out."

The time for talking was over... and the time for action was fast approaching.

On the Alsea, the communication ended and the officers started to leave. Niomo called after Lieutenant Jureth.

"Lieutenant! I'd like to have a few words with you. I feel like we got off to the wrong foot at the briefing. I'm Niomo Lire from Italy, Earth."

He stuck out his hand.

Oseno was just onto the bridge when the Alsea's chief engineer called after him. He stopped and turned to face the human and accepted the handshake.

"A pleasure to formally meet you Commander." Jureth said. "Lieutenant Oseno Jureth, and it was nothing personal, simply a disagreement. It happens and if the warp cores hold up under your modifications you'll have proved me wrong. Personally, I hope I am, because I don't want to consider the alternative."

Rachele Rivers listened to the discussion between her acting XO and her chief engineer. She considered Niomo Lire for a moment and almost wondered why he would prefer to remain in engineering and then stopped herself. It was the same reason she would have preferred to remain a security chief, and she respected that type of dedication in an officer. She also suspected that her XO would prefer to be at the tactical console instead of the first officer's chair. Rivers could read the slight stress on his face, but she didn't feel it was more than Oseno could handle. Otherwise she would have had him removed.

\* \* \*

Farther into the bowels of the Akira class starship USS Spectre, the turbolift doors opened and Summers headed into Engineering where he saw everyone hard at work. It put a smile on his face. He quite enjoyed walking through the ship and watching his crew hard at work; it was very personal to be able to get around once in a while to see the crew and meet and talk with them from time to time. It helped with morale... at least, Daniel thought it did.

"Captain on deck!" The new graduated officer announced, as Kurt noticed Summers stepped into main engineering.

O'Conner had quickly followed Captain Summers to the engineering. And upon seeing Kurt and the rest of main engineering's skeleton crew stand at attention. he couldn't help but smile.

"Mister O'Conner," he said as he came up to his new chief engineer, "sorry for not saying I was coming but I needed to get off the bridge and thought it might help morale to walk around a bit to the crew and show that I am confident in them and all the work they do. How's everything coming along?"

"It's going well, Sir, but most of the engineering crew is with Lieutenant Noor and Ensign Baltazor installing the additional deuterium fusion power generators in cargo bay 3. The rest are with Lieutenant Corrett on the flight decks, refitting her fighters."

"Outstanding, Commander. Everyone, as you were. If you are working and you see me walk through here, please continue your work. Do not snap to attention on my account while you are working, I am a very lax Captain as you may notice. Please continue the great work you are all doing, I appreciate it."

Summers then turned to O'Conner.

"Lets go see how everyone else is doing."

Junior officer Kurt stood there looking slightly embarrassed, standing at attention few moment longer before forcing himself to relax.

"Uhh yes, Sir," Kurt replied before handing a PADD to O'Conner. "Sir, at our current rate of speed, only the first of the three of the reactors will be available by the time we arrive at the anomaly."

O'Conner sighed lightly as he looked over the PADD. Kurt was correct. The commander's estimates were based on the Artemis' maximum speed, not an Akira's. It was a silly mistake but there was no time to dwell on it. He tapped in a few quick commands on to the PADD, before handing it back to Kurt.

"Looks like we are going to need some coffee, Kurt. Wake up the other shifts and get them to work. We need to be ready when we get there. Oh and get someone to check on the comm system"

"Yes, Sir" Kurt quickly replied before darting off in to the engineering offices.

Smiling, O'Conner turned to the Captain.

"Sorry about that, Sir, he is fresh out of the Academy. Lead on, Sir."

The Captain of the Spectre chuckled.

"We were all there at one point in our careers, Commander. There is no need to apologize; it is his first assignment. He will in time learn the way things run and what to expect from his Commanding Officer and staff" Daniel stated as he patted Commander O'Conner on the shoulder as they headed towards Cargo Bay 3 to see how the projects there were going.

Upon arrival in Cargo Bay 3, Captain Summers noticed a beehive of activity as numerous crewmembers went on doing their jobs so intently, none noticed him and Commander O'Conner walking in.

The cargo bay was clearly divided into three sections. On the right side, Ensign Baltazor and a crewmember worked carefully on a nearly completed reactor. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Shar Noor and his crew worked at a feverish pace to complete the installation of a second reactor's structure. Lastly, there lay crates and pallets of equipment, clearly the third reactor's parts.

O'Conner hoped that, with the additional shifts, they would have time to have each of them fully functional along with the standard reactors and all shielded against the storm's [effects](#).

"Sir, it will be a push but I promise you we will be ready to fight Klingons no matter what they throw at us, Sir."

After a short pause, O'Conner grinned. But his grin was quite dry.

"Though if you could fight outside of the storm, that would be great."

He spoke with a small smile as he noticed the first of beta and gamma shifts engineering crews start to arrive in the cargo bay.

"Very good, Commander... because I *do* expect the Klingons to show up and they never do so without a fight. We will do our best to stay out of the storm, but it may be our best chance at defeating any Klingon vessel that will not listen to reason. And who knows how many ships they will have," Summers said with a sigh.

He turned and left the cargobay and headed towards the flight deck.

"Let's get over to the flight deck. I would like to get back to the bridge before we arrive and you back in Engineering, I have a feeling we will need you to get your hands dirty to help speed things up a bit, Commander."

As they entered the flight deck, they could see nearly the same buzz of activity they had seen in the cargo hold. Engineers swarmed around a number of the small fighters, looking like a cross between antique jet planes and modern shuttlecrafts. Then, before they could investigate more, a tall Half-Orion woman turned towards the pair.

"You checking in on little ole me and my boys?"

The pips on her collar and her enchanting smile were dead giveaways that this was Lieutenant Rikki Corrett, the lead fight operations engineer.

"Indeed we are Lieutenant. How are things down here today?" Summers responded with a smile and a chuckle.

"Hmmm..." Rikki smiled at the pair and tapped her lip with her painted fingernail as she pondered the question. "Well..."

She turned around and stepped toward the forest of fighters.

"Well I did get six more of these beauties."

Smiling, she ran her hand over the hull of one of the fighters.

"But bossman over there is making the boys juryrig them to fly through the fire," she said with a motion at Commander O'Conner. "It takes about three of my boys an hour to make one of these babies fireproof, but what the bossman wants, the bossman gets."

Then she showed a sly smile.

"Them's Klingons won't know what hit'um."

Michael O'Conner stood there quietly, clearly impressed by Lieutenant Corrett.

Summers had a smile twice the size of Starbase 10.

"Excellent Lieutenant, because, for some odd reason, I have this crazy thought that the Klingons will not be wanting to talk. Very well Lieutenant, we will leave you to your work. Tell your boys I said to keep up the good work. All of you, I am impressed with everyone and I now know that I have the best crew in Lotus Fleet."

"Of course they will, Cappy. Klingons love to talk. They just be never listening." She replied with a smile before adding; "Now if you two don't mind, these babies wouldn't be fixing themselves up. "

Without waiting for a response, she turned and walked towards the flight engineers with a sway of her hips.

"She does have a way with her... words, Sir." O'Conner said with a grin.

He then turned fully to Summers.

"I need to be getting back to work as well, Sir, if you don't have any more questions."

"She certainly does, Commander," Summers said with a chuckle. "And no, you may go back to your duties. Thank you for walking with me. I will be on the bridge if anything pops up... oh and, Commander, before you go..."

Daniel leaned in a little closer to O'Conner to whisper in his ear.

"Keep an eye out for anyone acting out of the ordinary. There may be a possibility of the Horizon Children infiltrating the ship so, be on your guard."

With that being said, Summers backed up and awaited a reply.

"Of course, Sir," O'Conner replied.

He didn't really expect any on this ship as most of the children's followers would focus on the Republic or the McKenzie. After that brief moment of thought, he followed Summers out and headed to cargobay 3.

The captain nodded and left his chief engineer, heading back for the bridge.

\* \* \*

As the flagship of Lotus Fleet jumped to warp, captain V'Rell Gould stood up and walked around to the security station.

"Secure from yellow alert and begin the security checks, Mister Vincent. Lieutenant Commander Tomah, a word if I might?"

Tomah gave a surprised nod and the captain turned to walk into his ready room. Tomah started to follow him but whispered to Vincent as he passed:

"Ah, I might need a sealed file after all..." and gave him a wide-eyed expression.

Within seconds of undocking, the Lotus had gone from blue alert to red alert, and now back to yellow alert.

*If we keep changing alert status like this, my security teams will be tired out before we get to the Horizon,* Josh thought.

Josh acknowledged the captain's order to secure from yellow alert with a nod, and began issuing orders to his teams throughout the ship. Josh laughed quietly at Tomah's comment, but before he could reply, the officers had moved into the ready room.

"Ensign Kiels, how are the men doing with the changes in alert status?" Josh asked into his combadge.

"They have responded very quickly," Nidiri replied. "Especially considering the new procedures. All weapons are being secured for yellow alert as we speak and beta shift is taking up their posts after the sweep was finished."

"Very good," Josh responded. "I know they just finished a sweep of the ship, but make sure beta shift performs a level 3 search as their shift is starting. Also, keep Joken's squad active for a few more minutes; I need you to take them and do full searches of the two areas that the unauthorized personnel were found. Search every inch of those areas and tell me immediately if you find anything."

"I'll get on it immediately, Sir," she acknowledged.

Josh then spoke to Chief Park's combadge:

"Chief, how are the interrogations coming along?"

"I think these two may just have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, Sir," came Park's reply. "They are both scared and confused, not defensive. I'll keep pressing them, but this is not behavior normal to criminals."

"Thanks Chief, keep me updated," Josh replied. "Ensign Kiels is checking over the areas where the men were found and if she finds anything, I'll send you details to better concentrate your questions."

Just as Josh finished his conversation, the beta shift bridge officer, Ensign Tuk, came onto the bridge to relieve him.

"Man the secondary console Ensign," Josh said. "I'm going to stay here a little longer."

Meanwhile, in the captain's ready room, no sooner than the door closed that Gould started talking.

"You've been on this ship for over four years now and almost all of it at the security station, either during second shift or as a fill in for the CSO, is that not correct?"

Tomah looked a little nervous.

"Aye sir, that's, ah, as it is, Sir."

"And yet," Gould went on, "You've never shown any interest in taking the lead position. Why is that?"

"Well, ah, Sir.. uh.. it's just that, ah, I'm one for knowing a man's place in life.. if you, ah, get my meaning, Captain."

Gould shook his head.

"Not really, lieutenant Commander; do tell."

Looking extremely uncomfortable, Tomah went on:

"Ah, yes, Sir. It's just that.. ah, well, I like where I am and what I do, Sir. The men that they send to me to be trained.. ah, as I see that is.. all leave better men than when they arrived and I can't help but feel it's the reason I'm here, Sir, and there's no finer moment in a man's life than the one where he feels he's found his place, Sir."

Gould seemed satisfied with his answer.

"I need an XO for this coming mission, and the standard is to bump up the highest ranking officer on board to the position, as you well know... which on this ship seems to always have been the CSO"

Tomah smiled broadly.

"Aye, this was, ah, the case with Kheren... and Jureth as well. Ah, seems to be the way of it aboard the Lotus... So far, it's worked very well, Sir.. Ah, if I may say so, Sir."

"So it would seem," Gould agreed. "But I'm asking you to fill the roll of first officer, Lieutenant Commander, nonetheless."

Tomah's smile dropped hard.

"Ah, Me, Sir? the XO? But, ah, I.. well, ah, that is.."

There was some elated surprise on his features and a hint of apprehension in his dark eyes but couldn't seem to find the words.

"You're by far the most experienced man aboard the Lotus. I've no doubt you know every nook and cranny, every system and emergency system on board, even after the refit. You've held critical stations in times of crisis time and again and never failed in your duties. Of the original crew that is left, all know you and respect you, while Mister Vincent and myself are relative unknowns to them."

Gould walked up to him.

"The only question that remains is; do *you* want the job?"

Gould's look was very neutral, very Vulcan like.

Tomah looked away for a second and bit his lip, then straightened up and looked more serious.

"Yes, Captain Gould, I would very much appreciate this opportunity, Sir."

Gould turned away and retrieved his PADD from the desk.

"Good; as soon as we see you in, I want you to take command of the bridge while I undergo my examination for Doctor Bindo.."

He handed him the PADD.

"Here is what I expect to be accomplished in my absence."

Looking very serious, Tomah took the PADD.

"Of course, Sir, I'll get right to it."

They then went to the computer and the captain granted him full privileges and rights as the Lotus's first officer.

Afterwards, as Gould and his new exec were leaving the captain's office, Edward Tomah spoke up.

"Ah, Captain?"

Gould stopped and looked at him.

"Yes, Number One?"

Almost against his will, Tomah smiled at the designation.

"I won't let you down, Sir. That's a fact."

Gould gave a slight nod.

"See that it stays a fact, Lieutenant Commander." he said with a small smile of his own and went out to the bridge to inform them of the nomination of their new XO.

## CHAPTER FIVE : BLAZE

Two flashes of light blotted out the brightness of the stars as the ovoid shape of the Nebula class USS Wisconsin and the more classic shape of the New Orleans class USS Pittsburgh dropped out of warp. The comparatively slow speed of their impulse propulsion sent them swooping together gracefully and solemnly from the dark star-studded field of stars towards what seemed to be utter empty space.

Then, before them, space itself seemed to ripple like troubled water, then tore apart as a flaming light erupted as if to devour all the starlight of the heavens. Before both starships now burned across the entire field of stars a large fiery sphere of light and fire. The immense sun-like ball of searing white light surrounded by golden-orange tongues of fire was so overwhelming that, for a moment, no one on the bridges of both ships could do anything but stand in awe at its brute elemental power and vastness. To the eyes of all, the Azimuth Horizon anomaly pulsed almost like a living, malevolent thing from some hellish nightmare.

Even at this distance, the pulsing anomaly shook slightly the frame of both ships as it emerged into normal space, reverberating all the way to their bridge. Its low, deep growl echoed in the voice of the towering three meters tall felinoid sitting in the overlarge command chair of the USS Pittsburgh.

"Assume planned position for the operation and make sure we do not draw this thing to us," ordered Captain Speaker-Of-Names, his slitted eyes blinking at the cosmic inferno on the main viewer.

"We are at five billion kilometers from the anomaly's corona's estimated position by the end of the planned confinement operation," confirmed the helmsman. "Moving into flight grid 1 to commence operation."

"Pel sensor system active; we will avoid sudden eruptions automatically in case our mass draw this thing closer to us," reported the chief of science from his station.

"Syntron deflector system active; ready to locate and suture subspace fractures met on our planned trajectory," now confirmed the woman sitting at the ops console.



"Matter-antimatter power drain registering within acceptable limits," then notified the chief engineer. "Depolarization of impulse drive also within acceptable predicted parameters. Thrusters fully operational. batteries isolated from the anomaly's effect."

"No other ship in the area, Sir," added the tactical officer. "We have lost contact with Starbase 10 due to heavy subspace interference from the anomaly; contact with the Wisconsin is difficult but stable."

"Captain Onia is confirming the Wisconsin in position at the planned coordinates," finally said the Pittsburgh's exec. "At warp 6 to maximize trench effect, we should meet halfway through the confinement operation in twenty-two hours."

The Kzinti captain nodded.

"Confirm our own readiness to the Wisconsin. Implement engine misalignment and begin immediately. Time to put the fire out."

As the bridge crew started issuing orders and activating systems to implement the cosmic-scaled operation they had prepared for, the science chief tried to address his commanding officer.

"Captain; just before launch we received research material from Starbase 10 for a second phase of the operation. It has been theorized that we could smother the anomaly's plasma deflagration with probes modified as trillithium emitters. While we go through the confinement work, I would like my team to conduct further study and simulations on this theory to confirm its validity and feasibility."

Speaker-Of-Names turned a concerned face towards the man.

"Trillithium? Isn't that what was used to turn a star into a supernova years back?"

"Yes, Captain; as the warhead charge of a torpedo. The proposal here is to instead use minute quantity in a controlled fashion to bring the plasma reaction in the anomaly back to an inert gaseous state, slowly and from multiple points, instead of a sudden localized explosion as in the case of a star collapsing."

"Well, make sure your studies are thorough and your simulations cancels out any potential risk before doing anything," growled the commanding officer of the Pittsburgh. "We don't need to precipitate this catastrophe any faster than it already is spreading. If, if you are *certain* that it would work, have engineering help you start modifying every probe you need to implement it... but wait for further orders."

He then turned towards his executive officer.

"Try to transmit this to the Wisconsin so that they can work on this as well. We will discuss and decide on this once we meet tomorrow."

"Aye, Sir."

"We're ready, Captain," then confirmed the chief engineer.

"Alright crew. Let's get this show on the road. "

The upswept warp nacelles of the starship flared up and, in a flash of light that for a moment rivaled the brightness of the monstrous cosmic blaze nearby, the USS Pittsburgh went to warp, starting to disrupt subspace by leaving in its wake a subspace fracture that, once met by another flaring out of the anomaly, forced it to plunge into it to be drowned and swallowed.

"Trench is working, Sir," reported the tactical officer from his own sensor readouts. "nearby fractures are drawn into it and their extension channeled as predicted."

"Wisconsin reporting the same from their own end," added the First officer after ending his ordered communication with Captain Onia's ship.

"Let's hope it goes as well for the others out there," growled the Kzinti. "Time for us all to earn our name."

He knew that they were the only ones not threatened directly by some enemy intent on sabotaging their efforts to save this universe. His warrior' spirit raged at being left out of a possible fight, but his Starfleet discipline reigned it in with the thought that he could rush to their help if need be... but the fight he was locked in now, against a mindless cosmic monster, was even more important than clawing at a few deluded cultists, some bullying Klingons or even treacherous Romulans.

And so, he followed his orders... but his claws kept coming in and out of his huge paws following the same rythm as of his heart.

\* \* \*

The harsh light of the small screen flashed like lightning strikes across the hazy gloom of the small room. And the rough, harsh voice barking from the terminal's speakers smothered even the deep, permeating hum of the powerful engines propelling the huge warship across space.

"Commander Ja'rod, Son of Lursa of the House of Durass; you have been singled out for this glorious command in the name of the mighty Klingon Empire. You will execute this mission with the strength and resolve worthy of song and tales and return a hero of the Empire... or not at all."

The face on the small screen that spoke those grave words was wrinkled as much by age and scars as by anger and determination, the white curly hair and thin beard making the dark-hued face even somber. In the steely eyes burned a fire that could be heard roaring through each word spitted between bared fangs:

"This Azimuth Horizon is a great power to control, dominate. We will *seize* this power, so that no one can use it against us... and use it ourselves to crush our enemies!"

The fluttering lights of the small computer terminal's screen flashed on the rough, yet disturbingly roundish features of the younger Klingon warrior staring in silence at the image, etching every bony angle of the pointy furrowed brow and the jutting chin within the frame of long, coarse dark hair and beard. The one named ja'ro sat in silence, listening to the older man with all the respect due to the Chancellor of the Klingon High Council as he continued:

"Your task force will take control of this region of space and annex it to our territory. Do *not* let the hypocritical Federation try to stop you, first with twisted words to fool you and then with potshots to scare you before they may muster enough courage to really fight for their own claim and finally flee before your own. They are *not* friends! They are *enemies*! "

Ja'rod nodded at these words; he still felt deeply in his heart the scars left by that last batle he had to concede to one of their warship barely a week ago, that left his own ship crippled as his pride. Not this time...

"Do *not* let this miserable religious cult, born out of their own decadent corruption, waste your time with their meaningless religious prattle before they try to stab you in the back. They are *not* worthy warriors! They are enemies!"

A sneer contorted the task force commander's features. He despised fools who believed such nonsense instead of the only truth: salvation was meaningless; only death with honor meant anything in this life and the next. And he would show them...

"And especially, do *not* let whatever scheme the Romulans have hatched for their own perverse ends trick you; they are *not* allies! They are *enemies*!"

At this, the heir to the Durass name frowned but still said nothing.

"Ja'rod, son of Lursa of the House of Durass; you will *crush* all our enemies and bring power to the Empire! *Q'APLA!*"

The screen went dark and silent. It had been a recording, sealed for until they crossed the border, so that no transmission could be traced back to them by the surveilling Starfleet outpost. It was the third time he listened to it, this one last time as they were about to engage in the final phase of their glorious campaign, one that would finally bring back honor and power to his House, lost before his own birth when his uncle tried to seize, then overthrow the Council and rule the Empire. But Durass had failed.

He would not fail.

Getting up, Ja'rod strode out of his office from the back of the immense bridge of his ship. It was so vast that it looked and felt like the command center of a station rather than a battleship. It took him a short walk just to reach the jutting pedestal at the front end where his command throne dominated the crescent-shaped pit where all the bridge stations were, under the immense main viewer. Sitting in his high-backed command chair, he looked at the customary tactical display on the wide screen, showing their current sector, their position nearing its center like a small flashing red dot... and two others coming together at an opposite angle. Loudly he barked:

"Report!"

Below him in the pit, right at his feet, his first officer answered promptly in Battle Language:

"Approaching designated target area. We are cloaked, all tactical systems and propulsion at full. Long range sensors detect two vessels on approach to sector; Federation transponders confirmed."

"Show me."

From the sensor data and its own memory banks, the computer reconstructed the actual representation in real time of the two signals; one a small, fish-like vessel with stunted nacelles and the other a much larger saucer with lowered nacelles behind it that the first mate immediately identified:

"USS Spectre, lax half-Betazoid, Half-Human Captain Daniel Summers known to be in command, Ak'ra class battlecruiser: three torpedo launchers each with five photon tubes, all facing forward except two aimed port and starboard, three phaser arrays type X, standard shield and armor, flight deck pod carrying possibly up to a hundred fighter shuttles, Kaneda class. It also has a crude camouflage plating system useless in combat."

"A lot of things are useless in the Federation," grumbled Ja'rod, "including the Federation itself. What of the other? Isn't it the infamous USS Lotus?"

"Yes, *Ja'Qi*; USS Lotus, unfamiliar Half-Romulan, Half-Vulcan captain V'Rell Gould last reported in command, 'Ntrep'd class heavy scoutship: recently heavily refitted, especially in tactical and propulsion systems, exact modifications unconfirmed. Still sporting transphasic torpedoes and regenerative ablative armor."

"What is the tactical summary on this... armor?"

"Extremely resistant to all known weaponry, based on replicator technology. Thus, limited in use as they can only maintain it from material stocked on board as it dissipates under fire. This exceptional protection comes at the cost of reduced offensive power. Phaser arrays and other emitters get covered so that only torpedo ports are left operational. No handicap to maneuverability however."

Ja'rod nodded, tactics and battle plans already flashing behind his dark eyes.

"Possible reinforcements?"

"Nothing from coreward has been detected. Two other ships have been detected rimward, as of yet too far away to be identified. Estimating speeds of warp 9.9 at best, it would take them then at least well over four hours to answer any distress call."

The commander clasped his hands loudly.

"More than enough time to send them all to their earned place among the dishonored on the Barge of the Dead. Open our encoded and scrambled channel to the task force on short range burst."

"You may speak, *HoD*."

"This is Ja'rod to all ships; prepare for glory!"

\* \* \*

All their eyes were closed.

A soft golden-reddish light played softly on their features, almost softening them all up as if they were but masks of wax. None even seemed to breathe as they all faced in the same direction, all behind the lone figure nearest to the wide transparencies, his own form and most of his features buried under a long hooded robe of Tholian silk reflecting the very hues and colors that bathed the small room.

This silent, frozen scene was replayed on every deck, in every room of the vessel floating among the stars, slowly cruising towards the still distant yet immense burning fire of the heavens blazing before her flat, wedge-shaped prow. The same scene was also replayed on every deck of every ship, much smaller and slower, that followed in the wake of the great fish-shaped golden-hued vessel leading them in solemn procession towards the heart of the fire.

And at the head of the leading starship, on the vast observation deck, the hooded figure's eyes fluttered; as if the light hurt his eyes despite his closed eyelids. or perhaps, what was making him stir came from within, not without.

The faint lines marking his short flat nose followed those of his furrowing brow, but the rest of his dark-hued, bearded face remained blank. The conflict then suddenly faded as soft footsteps came up from directly behind him. Another figure, tall, lean and more softly curved under its more formal attire, came to kneel besides him, whispering softly without turning her spine-covered, reptilian head to the man.

"They come."

The man with obvious Bajoran and Human heritage just shook his head slowly with a small sigh escaping his pressed lips.

"Two ships," the reptilian-looking woman added still whispering. "one is old, under the command of a crafty but careless man; the other is the ship of the blasphemous crew that profanated our sanctum."

The man lifted his face to the far away firelight of the heavens but said nothing.

"The blessed ones on board the old ship have been disposed of; their martyrdom has already been acknowledged in our prayers. But a few might still be able to serve us... but I fear it might not be enough. There is one among the blasphemers... the darkness in his soul and the blood on his hands will try to reach you, to touch you..."

The hooded man nodded and sighed once more, head bowed. His voice was almost a mere sigh itself when he said:

"Do what must."

The spine-headed woman bowed; enough to hide the sudden gleam of fierce pleasure in her large slitted golden eyes. Then she rose and softly padded away from the assembly.

Once the door shut behind her, she took a brisk pace while opening a channel from a wrist communicator.

"Bridge; condition amber. Alert the escorts and prepare for profanation of our sacred exodus. Blood will fuel the fire of salvation on this day. All be as Will the Prophet."

Her last words were echoed throughout the great battleship as it suddenly flared to combat readiness.

As she emerged from a turbolift to step on the long bridge, she went directly to the command chair that dominated the stratified levels of the command center, from her command position down to the oval-shaped viewing screen occupying the entire front part of the ovoid room. All around, a motley crew of people, wearing almost every known uniform in the Alpha and Beta quadrant, readied stations and systems as a soft amber glow permeated the air.

"Status report."

"The caravan is bound to the Gates of Paradise at full impulse right behind us," reported one officer, this one a full-blooded Bajoran woman. "Convoy standard formation is steady, our escorts at securing points as per your orders, Lady Ty'Renick."

"Tactical report," then asked the reptilian woman called Ty'Renick.

"Two Starfleet vessels approaching sector," now answered a young Bolian male wearing a Starfleet cadet uniform with the Red Squadron sigil on it's collar. "Sensors identifies the largest as the USS Republic, refitted Excelsior class Lakota configuration."

"Captain Wyatt's ship," recognized Ty'Renick with a smirk. "I know him and even more his obsolete ship; he'll be no match for us."

"The other is Defiant class; USS McKenzie."

The commanding woman's smile faded and a dangerous light sparked in her slitted eyes.

" Captain Crist... Snowfire K'leysha... Sorripto..."

The names, especially the last one, were spat like curses, with so much venom that a heavy, cold silence swept the entire bridge. Everyone knew those names; they were more than the names of those who would try to desecrate the Heavenly Fire and shut close the doors to Paradise; they were the names of those who had come and profanated their sacred home itself, dared to insult and threaten the Prophet himself! Tried to take him away from them and destroy their faith!

They were those who would die first.

Ty'Renick stood and raised her left fist at the screen, as if those distant ships could see her, hear her:

"I declare the Jihad on those who would deny us the promise of our Faith! May we all see that the coldness of space deny them and their souls the warmth of the Eternal Flame of Redemption! By the Will of the Prophet, let us pledge our lives to their death!"

"Be the Will of the Prophet!" all shouted as if of one voice, standing and throwing their left fist at the stars.

"We will all stand by your side and see his Will be done, my beloved."

Ty'renick slowly sat back and smiled. Her bony hand went to the one that clasped tenderly her own shoulder and her eyes went up to meet those of the man standing at her side, her First in command, lowering towards her the same gentle smile, the same golden, slitted eyes, the same reptilian face, the same spine studded head.

"Yes, beloved," she said softly, a wild light in her eyes reflecting his own. "Fate has brought us together; Faith will keep us together, here and beyond. Fate now brought our most hated enemy before us to test our Faith, our Love; both will be proven strong and true before the Gates of Paradise."

"Be the Will of the Prophet," answered the man. Without turning his eyes from those of the woman, he then ordered: "All hands, stand ready. Helm; plot attack pattern One but maintain course and speed and standby until they try to intercept us."

The Orion male sitting at the navigation console nodded and acknowledged.

"By your command, Lord N'Eligahn."

Several billion kilometers away, the sleek, elongated shape of the USS Republic dropped out of warp in a flash of light. Immediately, the man at the tactical station turned towards the older one in the center seat.

"Captain; several ships in this sector. Distance: nine million kilometers; bearing: 45 mark 10. They are moving at full impulse towards 285 mark 15... straight towards the anomaly, Sir."

"Mister Leong; Identify and ETA before they reach the anomaly's corona," asked the blonde woman sitting at the captain's right.

"At current speed, they will reach the corona in three point seven hours," answered the Asian man looking back at his monitor. "About a dozen civilian ships of various origins, mostly old freighters, a few passenger liners, two commercial scouting ships, one Kobayashi Maru class neutronium tanker in the lead... They are escorted by three ships: an old Hideki class Cardassian light cruiser on the port side of the convoy; a refitted Maquis raider on their starboard... and rear guard assumed by a... a patched up Jem'Hadar attack cruiser."

"Lifesigns?" then asked the captain.

"Nearly three thousand humanoid lifesigns of various types distributed accross the entire convoy, Sir," reported the slim, stern Vulcan from the science station. "Thirty-five percent Humans, thirty percent Bajorans, twenty percent Cardassians, the last fifteen percent composed of various species from both Alpha and Beta quadrants... No Andorians, no Romulans, no Tellarites and no Vulcans however."

"No one pragmatic, devoted, argumentative or logical in the cult," sumrized Captain Wyatt with a smirk. "Typical..."

"Also typical... they are all allowing themselves to be blindly led towards self-destruction," added the woman at his side with not even the hint of a smile.

"Sir?" then said the Vulcan with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes, Mister Revik?"

"Interference from the anomaly makes readings difficult but... there seemed to be an energy pattern in front of the lead ship that I can not identify."

"Speculate," ordered Wyatt coming forward in his seat, as if his eyes could see what their sensors tried to pinpoint.

"I can think of only one possibility, Sir; something cloaked."

"Yellow alert," then ordered the commanding officer of the Republic.

As the klaxon blared from one end of the ship to the other, sending additional crewmembers to vital stations, shields were raised, phasers pre-heated and one torpedo already slid into a forward tube.

"Raise them, Mister Leong."

"No answer, Captain; interference from the anomaly might be too much for civilian comm systems, especially on those old ships."

"These three escort ships are military issue, even old as they are," retorted Wyatt. "And there may be a cloaked warship in their lead. Open all comm channels."

"Hailing frequencies open, Sir."

"This is Captain Adam Wyatt of the starship Republic. You have entered a restricted area. Veer off and follow our instructions or you will be charged with illegal flight and taken into custody. You have two minutes to comply."

"They will be in range by that time. Sir, " confirmed Leong. "They are not aknowledging our hail."

"Repeat it at fifteen seconds interval. Ready tractor beams; target phasers on their impulse drive; ready torpedo for a shot accross their bow to rattle them a little. Contact the McKenzie and report situation."

"We cannot raise the McKenzie from here, Sir," then said the tactical officer. Interference from the anomaly prevent any transmission beyond a ten million kilometers at best. And if they maintained their inital speed, then they are thirty-three minutes behind us, Sir."

Wyatt sighed.

"It's up to us then... Mister Revik; prepare a log buoy from a class IX probe and launch it to intercept the McKenzie. At least they will know what's going on sooner and will know they have to hasten."

After a moment, the Vulcan said:

"Log buoy launched. It will intercept the McKenzie in sixteen minutes if they are still following their flight plan. Assuming they decide to go to maximum warp once they get the data, they will reach us in 18 minutes."

"Let's hope these loonies will listen to reason until then... but I fear this will get ugly pretty soon," grumbled Wyatt.

"This is Captain Adam Wyatt of the starship Republic. You have entered a restricted area. Veer off and follow our instructions or you will be charged with illegal flight and taken into custody. You have one minute to comply."

The updated, repeated summon resonated through some static like some kind of disembodied voice lost in limbo accross the bridge of the command ship.

"As always, these idiots think people will be as docile and well-behaved as they are just because they flash their oh-so-mighty Starfleet badge," sneered with head spines flaring the Rethian male standing beside the command seat.

"They despize our resolve just as they despize the Truth they pretend to hold so dear," acknowledged the Rethian woman in the chair. "But as always, they come with words of law and order, pretend at peace and understanding but hold weapons of force ready to smite us if we deny them."

"They will blindly follow those stupid Starfleet protocols of theirs and try to warn us, then to convince us, then to restrain us, then to disable us even before realizing that they can only stop us by destroying us," mocked N'Eligahn. "And then, they will debate about it and probably try the whole useless cycle again."

He lowered his golden eyes to Ty'Renick.

"We are *not* Starfleet."

"Not anymore," agreed the Rethian woman. "Now we are the Blessed Enlightened Ones. And we are now touched by the Sacred Light of Heavenly Fire as we stand before the very Gates of Paradise."

She lifted her pointed, bony chin to the rest of her bridge crew.

"This be the Will of the Prophet; prepare to punish the Infidels."

The tactical officer turned towards the command podium.

"Lady, the escorts are worried about the convoy's safety."

N'Elighan stepped down and went to him so that he could directly talk to the fleet.

"All of you of the faithful, hear me; Starfleet comes to impose on us their will, the will of the unbeleiver, the will of the sinner. Do not let fear seeds doubt in your belief of the Truth! Only the Will of the Prophet must be obeyed! He showed us the Light! He brought us to the doorway to Paradise! We have chosen Salvation for ourselves as free people! And these hyppocrits would pretend speaking for a free people and yet refuse us our rights; they would treat our prophet as a mere criminal because he spoke the Truth! This shall not be! Defend your prophet! Defend your Faith! Defend the faithful!"

"This be the Will of the prophet!" clamored several voices through the speakers , all accross the bridge, throughout the ship and the rest pf the small ragtag fleet.

On the viewer, the three escort ships moved away from the convoy to intercept the incoming starship.



"The convoy will be defenseless..." whispered Ty'renick to her lover with concern as he returned to her side with a self-satisfied smirk.

"The convoy is in no danger," he retorted with a sneer at the screen. "You know as well as I do that Starfleet would never even think to harm civilians and defenseless ships, even in a time of war. Even against ships attacking them at full power, they will show restraint. They are tied by their rulebound mentality and their foolish, unrealistic morality and stupidly believe it will make them prevail."

"Have a care, my love," Ty'Renick warned. "These are faithless sinners. Pushed far enough, they will foreswear their rules and morality... like they did under Benjamin Sisko back during the Dominion War."

"Because they can only be but children of this universe," explained N'Eligahn. "Sisko showed them the truth of this universe... but still many do not accept that truth. They refuse to see the inherent violence, cruelty and corruption in it, still childishly wish it to be peaceful, kind and pure. He then gave us the Prophet, to spread the Word and guide us to the Light, to a new, truly sanctified universe... But now that the Light is showing plainly the universal filth, they still close their eyes to the light, deafen themselves to the Word of the Prophet... and even refuses us our right to our Salvation that would show the error of their ways, their weakness born out of their lack of faith and their own corruption."

He straightened, hands behind his back and head high.

"As always, because they know their ways being wrong, they will be too weak to do what must."

"But WE will not," vowed Ty'Renick.

And on the main viewer, they watched the three escort ships closing in on the USS Republic.

"The three armed ships are on an attack vector, Sir!" warned Lieutenant Leong as he turned towards the captain of the Republic. "They're charging weapons!"

"Red Alert!" ordered Wyatt, gripping the slim armrests of his command chair. "Warn them off!"

"They're jamming all our comm channels, Sir!" Leong said as he targeted phasers and loaded all torpedo tubes, an eye on the shield output readout but then looking at his tactical sensor monitor. "These three ships have military-grade systems!"

"Evasive! All power to shields and back us away from the convoy! Do not open fire until we're out of weapons range of those ships! I don't want stray shots to threaten those civilians!"

It became pretty obvious that the three guard vessels of the convoy had no such worry. As soon as they came within range, they opened fire. The entire ship vibrated under the combined salvo and the shields of the much larger starship absorbed the impact of this first volley. But it would not be able to do so indefinitely. Already, the Republic was veering off to move away, shifting angle to dodge the next attack coming from three separate directions.

Then, before the Excelsior class refit could make any significant distance, it was suddenly boxed in by the sudden appearance of a fourth vessel... much larger and threatening than even the other three combined.

"Captain! Cardassian battleship decloaking astern, Galor class!"

"What?"

Then, everything was but sparks, smoke, fire, tremors and shouts, all Hell breaking loose... right before the gates to paradise.

\* \* \*

The next five hours had been strangely, even eerily quiet as all ships had rushed to their theater of operations and everything on the starbase was ready for either tactical condition or mass evacuation. On the holodisplay, the progression of the ships looked deceptively peaceful; even the glowing orb of the anomaly itself became like any other representation of a Sol-type yellow-white dwarf, so familiar to most people quietly working in the command center around it.

It was so calm and quiet for so long now that Samji, just out of a few hours of rest since deployment, almost jumped out of his seat when Grok's screechy voice called out to him.

"Sir... who was here before we resumed our shift?"

"The starbase commander looked at his returning Exec and she checked her own command board before answering:

"Gamma shift, as usual...is there a problem, Lieutenant Commander?"

"Just something odd; some of our systems are currently on a level 2 diagnostic cycle."

"Which systems?" inquired Samji.

"Station thrusters; secondary sensor grid; tractor emitters; secondary computer core; industrial replicators."

"All non-essential systems, at least for a while. What's so odd about it?"

"Well, that's just it, Sir; they're all non-essential systems that have been through a level 1 diagnostic a week ago along with the main ones. So... why do they need a level 2 diagnostic now?"

"Who authorized the work... and when?" then inquired Samji.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Montgomery Scott, the new Gamma shift senior engineer, Sir," answered Karen Schmidt, just at the end of Gamma shift. The diagnostic is under supervision of Gamma shift senior ops officer Danik Brie."

"They both came from the Artemis' senior staff, no?"

"Yes, Fleet Captain," nodded the stately woman with her usual formality. "My guess is, they are both overzealous regarding security matters. Their former captain was rather quite stringent on the matter, as you know. Old habits die hard..."

Allen Samji just made a noncommittal grunt.

"Mister Grok, find me the current assistant security chief on duty... what's his name again? Mandella... yes ; I'll ask this Lieutenant Junior Grade John Mandella to make an impromptu inspection of those serviced areas. Scott and Brie will expect it and they will see that we do take station security as seriously as they do... And it will be a good opportunity for this new officer to see why Lotus Fleet is called the elite division of Starfleet."

"Aye, Sir," answered the Ferengi chief of operations.

\* \* \*

"Captain, were aproching the drop off point. ETA five minutes."

The helm officer had an excited tone to his voice. Captain V'Rell Gould was walking slowly, somewhat impatiently around the room since half an hour ago, looking at the other stations.

"Understood."

And so saying, he walked back to his command seat.

"If I might say so, Sir, your looking a bit on edge."

Tomah had taken the seat to the captain's right, looking over the situation reports being sent to him on his aemrest monitor.

"Ah... It's too easy. I hate it when it's too easy."

The commanding officer of the Lotus Fleet flagship stopped mumbling and gave out a sigh.

"I can't help but feel that the Romulans pushed us out early, that they.. wanted us to get going with this plan.."

Then he shook his head.

"But thats just not possible, is it? Perhaps I spent too many years seeing Romulans in the shadows... but it's something they would do."

While his captain was musing outloud, Sainthill countinued monitoring the sensors with great dilligence.

"Still nothing on long range, Sir, but thats' no guaranty no one's out there of course. Even with the upgraded sestems, there quite a bit of intreference from the Azimuth Horizon."

"Thank you lieutenant; stay on it. When we come out of warp, I'd like a short range sweep of the area."

"Aye, Sir."

The newly commissionned science chief of the USS Lotus went back to his work.

Tomah got up and walked over to Vincent.

"I'll be to busy to hold your hand much shortly..." he said with a smile "Anything more you need to know?"

"Yes, Sir," Josh replied. "I had a brief chance to glance over some of the upgrades made during the Lotus' retrofit, but I was wondering if there are any upgrades that I should pay special attention to; anything that I'll need to know in-depth to make it through Operation Horizon?"

Tomah gave it a quick thought.

"Unless we have'ta go into the thing, I don't think so. They pretty much just upgraded the new systems to include the anomaly's effects, but for the most part you can't tell the difference." The Helm officer interrupted.

"Coming up to drop off point, thirty seconds.."

Gould was still thinking.

*What were the Romulans after? I'm was fairly sure it's was a ruse to draw us out, but then.. nothing.*

He looked out at the viewscreen, at the stars streaking by.

*And what about the timing? Could that have just been a coincidence?*

He frowned at the idea.

*What if...*

"Coming out of warp now, Sir. The Spectre is matching us" Tomah informed him.

The two ships dropped out of warp close to each other with precision timing, the area was empty with the Azimuth Horizon burning across their viewscreen like a misshapen wall of fire.

Sainthill spoke up.

"No sign's of trouble, Captain. Shall I signal the Spectre to procede to it's target point?"

Gould sat looking at the screen for a few seconds longer.

"No."

The Vulcan-Romulan hybrid stood up, walking a few steps closer to the screen. Many of the bridge crew glanced at each other. He then looked at Sainthill.

"Lieutenant, perform a tachyon sweep of the area; tell me what you find"

"Captain" Sainthill retorted, "If your intent is to uncover any cloaked vessels, it would take several days to check the local area with any efficiency."

"True enough Lieutenant, but I'm not looking for ships exactly. But.. *they* don't know that, do they?"

Gould knew that if he was wrong about this, If there were no ships waiting for them here, he would come off looking very paranoid in front of his crew.

"Mister Vincent, signal the Spectre to go to red alert on my mark and change their position to our rear guard."

Seconds clicked slowly by as Sainthill continued to scan and Vincent relayed Gould's request.

"Aye, Sir," Josh replied as he sent the captain's orders to the Spectre. Once he'd sent the request, he sent a message to his number two, Ensign Kiels, telling her to prepare for combat and boarding parties.

As he completed his message, the sensor readout in front of him caught his eye.

"Sir, I'm detecting some unusual particle displacement at the edge of the anomaly," Josh reported. "The dispersal pattern suggests that these may be warp trails that have been distorted by the anomaly. If that is the case, there were at least three vessels here recently."

And true enough, they were not alone. They had been expected.

"Ja'Qui... they're dropping out of warp. Initial contact confirmed: scout vessel USS Lotus and battlecruiser USS Spectre. Both in file formation, scoutship leading; bearing 045 mark 20, heading 120 mark 10. Distance, nine hundred thousands kelikams."

In the high-backed chair dominating the entire bridge stations pit between his pedestal and the large vidscreen, Ja'rod sat with one elbow on his wide right armrest, gauntleted fist clenched, leaning forward with his dark eyes glaring at the image of the sleek fish-shaped Intrepid class and the much larger saucer-shaped Akira class following it closely. On the tactical screen just under the main one, data on both Starfleet vessels scrolled, both from computer banks and from passive sensor readings. Not much could be confirmed this way from what Intelligence had gathered before their departure; but using active sensors would have betrayed their position.

"Have they detected us?"

"No, *HoD*," answered the research and surveillance officer on his right. "Current Starfleet sensor technology has yet to match our latest cloaking development... except for those recent reports about a... Syntron Space Sonar as they have dubbed it."

Ja'rod grunted and rubbed his face with his left hand.

"Sounds more like Federation misinformation to me. They certainly had nothing special on this Prometheus warship that we met with the Negh'Var last week."

"Nevertheless, if it's real, reports state that it can only be implemented through modification of their main deflector dish. So if they have such a system, it can only sweep their forward arc. As long as we stay away from their bow, we'll remain undetected."

"Until we strike," then growled the task force commander. "Move in to attack posture Krug One. All weapons on manual targeting of their propulsion systems; warp, then impulse. Prepare to decloak and fire at my command."

"Torpedoes loaded, *Ja'Qui*," reported the woman sitting in the mobile tactical tower as it turned towards the main screen on his left. "Ready to energize disruptor banks and cannons."

"*No!* Keep those disruptors cool so that they will not detect their energy surge... And transmit our tactical directives to the other ships as we decloak and send our first volley, not a second before!"

"My Lord," then started to protest the woman; are we... are we going to strike from behind and out of concealment with no challenge given or received?"

Ja'rod turned an angry glare towards her.

"There is a reason why Houses such as yours are disappearing, Naelar, daughter of Kempec," he spat with a sneer; "it's because, like you, they foolishly stick to obsolete values of Honor instead of having the courage like us, Durass, to do what it takes to achieve glorious victory!"

The tactical officer swallowed her pride and her anger but her eyes were smoldering as she retorted dryly:

"Dead men learn nothing; if we destroy them, Starfleet will just send more ships..."

"We will immediately destroy *one* of them and send the other one limping back to its masters, to tell them of our might and of our claim to this part of space. By the time they stop quaking in fear and then try to talk their way out with the High Council, we will have established a beach head here and a full fleet to secure it."

He then looked at her squarely, lifting his chin arrogantly.

"If you don't have the stomach for the battle, woman, I can relieve you and send you to prepare our *ghagh* and *targ* meat for our victory feast."

With a snarl, she gripped her controls and glued her head to her targeting scope.

"Ready to fire at your command, *HoD*," she growled.

With a furrowed brow, Ja'rod turned slowly in his seat to look over the rest of his bridge crew at his feet.

"*Qa'pla!*" they shouted, silencing any further argument from the woman sitting at tactical but more intent at quelling any doubt about themselves from their overlooking commanding officer.

"*Nadem GosS...*" he said, satisfied. "Helm; overtake, move behind and over them, point blank range."

On the screen, the two unsuspecting Starfleet vessels' sterns grew larger as they closed in, their assault vector trapping both between them and the awesome raging inferno of the anomaly barely fifty million kilometers away. Like a vengeful ghost stalking unsuspecting mortals, invisible claws extending to rip their souls from their bodies, the Klingon command ship moved to assume under cloak its chosen attack posture.

Death was about to strike. And it pointed a leather-gloved finger at the displayed scene.

"Tactical... target... this one."

The officers on the Spectre could not have noticed the massive behemoth that would have looked like a bird with a large hammerhead had it not being cloaked, slowly creep around behind the relatively smaller vessel. When, in what seemed like hours, the stern finally came to a stop after it's long, sweeping drift, the cloaked monster sat, waiting on its prey to make a move.

Finally, the tactical officer on board responded to his Captain's command.

"Weapons lock confirmed, Sir. Ready to fire disruptors on your order."

"Hold," Ja'rod said quietly in Klingon.

He was waiting for something to happen, but the officers weren't sure what yet.

"Tell our escorts to flank the lead ship and hold position. And tell them that if anyone gets an itchy trigger finger, I will personally cut out and eat their heart," he added with a sneer.

The sensors of the Lotus continued to sweep the area designated by Samji as Quadrant 3. There were at least two other cloaked ships in the vicinity stalking their prey and continuing to fly in a pattern to avoid detection. The Captains of these ships wondered when their leader would give the signal. They were sick of the dishonorable cat-and-mouse game he played. But they were not idiots, though. They knew if they defied his order, they would pay for it, and dying for disobeying orders would send them straight to the Barge of the Dead.

And so, they waited and continued their game.

But then, one of them was not so adept at it than the others and got too close to the Lotus. Any Klingon officer knew the safe proximity while under cloak, but their Captain led them within the area where certain spatial effects would be detectable to a very proficient science officer. The Tactical officer said as much to his Captain and received a swift uppercut to his jaw, knocking him flat on his back for the trouble. Regardless, he ordered flight ops to back off and waited some more for their leader to give the word.

On board the USS Spectre, things were getting tense, as if some threat was felt closing in on them. Studying the specifications of the Syntron deflector system upgrade, First Officer Rogers sat in the center seat overlooking the conn and ops stations. Behind and above him, Lieutenant Tritter at the Tactical station worked diligently overseeing the ships readiness. The engineering console behind Tritter's left shoulder flickered with activity as it's personell kept the Akira class vessel in tip top condition. Off to David's right at the starboard science station 2, the assistant science officer, Lieutenant Sean Andrews, busily studied the Pel sensor system install as he readied it for implementation once they reached the anomaly.

Suddenly, a loud chime pinged throughout the ship and the helmsman brought the Spectre out of warp directly behind and slightly above the USS Lotus, matching her every move precisely. David glanced up at the viewer to see the Intrepid class flagship of Lotus Fleet silhouetted against the raging glory of the Azimuth Horizon some fifty million kilometers ahead. Behind David, lieutenant Tritter spoke casually.

"Notice from the Lotus commander. Prepare to go to condition red on their mark."

"Understood Lieutenant. Go to yellow alert now."

As the multitude of panel lighting throughout the ship started pulsing their yellow hued warning, the ship's computer announced the changed condition to the crew. Rogers pressed the ship wide communications icon on the chair console.

"All hands, we have arrived. Captain to the bridge."

"Sir," broke in Lieutenant Andrews. "Detecting a tachyon sweep from the Lotus."

*Did Captain Gould suspect a cloaked ship?* thought David then.

Shaking his head, David berated himself sternly.

*Of course he did. There could be Klingons out there already.*

Looking past Tritter to his right, David caught the eye of the mission operations officer, Lieutenant Tara'el V'oritel.

"Mister V'oritel, launch squadron 1 for combat patrol and prep squadron 2."

Eighteen decks down, the starboard fighterbay doors slid open and the twelve Kenada fighters of Squadron 1 began their launch sequence. The three fighters in the first wing swiftly started to lift off the deck. As the second group began their ascent right behind it, they saw the first three crash into a level 10 forcefield that dropped down the instant the doors were fully open.

Astonished, the pilots set down and put a call in to the emergency damage control team in the fighter bay. The call was unnecessary, as the stalwart crew was already rushing to put out the fires that blazed in front of the bay doors, as well as calling in an emergency medical team.

Lieutenant Shar Noor who was working on the remaining fighters' "Floodgate" configuration saw the whole thing and rushed to the nearby control room to scold the Ensign in charge of the bay for the tragic mistake, only to find him dead on the deck, a phaser shot on stun at close range. It had to be someone he trusted...

He tapped his combadge.

"Security and Commander O'Conner to Fighter Bay 2 control immediately!"

All the while, Daniel Summers was just getting into the turbolift.

"Bridge."

As the doors opened, he walked out onto the ship's command center and noticed they were no longer at warp. Yellow alert was on and busy people scurried all around the bridge.

"Report" Summers stated as Rogers stood up from the center seat and took his own and Daniel sat in the vacated command chair.

Eventually wrapping up his short status report to Captain Summers, David finished by adding his reasoning for the fighter launch when collision alarms suddenly sounded. A sharp tremor swept across the bridge and the main mission operations panel behind Rogers pulsed a blinding white and exploded from a power feed back from the explosion six decks below.

The Spectre's flight control officer, Ensign Charles Grissom, was thrown back from the console to land in a heap at the base of the tactical station. Rising quickly, David made his way around and up the gangway toward Grissom, tapping his combadge on the way.

"Hangar bay 1. Report!"

After a quick check with Kurt, O'Conner replied with a sober tone.

"O'Conner here, Bridge."

He glanced down at the dead operations officer.

"We got a problem. Ensign O'Hare is dead, shot in the back. Whoever shot him also erected a level 10 forcefield, blocking the hangar doors and killing crews of three fighters."

O'Conner sighed lightly. He would never be able to understand this cult and their followers. These senseless minor attacks did almost nothing to slow them down. They merely aggravated Starfleet; but if their goal was to die for their Storm, they were working well to do that.

Fortunately, Kurt had shown himself to be a good adjunct for O'Conner and, while O'Conner might not have the security mind of his former commanding officer Kheren, he wasn't naive either. Not only had he personally confirmed his officers and crewmembers as soon as he had come on board, he had also installed a three-man engineering team system and Kurt had been tracing locations of the crew watching over the staff as they finished up the last of the refits to the Spectre and her birds just before departure.

"Bridge, we will need fifteen minutes before we can launch any more fighters." O'Conner stated clearly before sitting down at the flight control station and removing the front panel of the launch console, among which functions was the safety controls of the ship's openings and their emergency forcefield grid.

He started to check for any more sabotage or damage before clearing the station's memory and resetting it.

And found nothing.

Summers on the bridge listened intently as the communique came through from O'Conner.

"Very Well Commander, do what you can; Summers Out"

Daniel ended the conversation and stood at the edge of his chair.

"Report" he snapped with a determination that sent shivers down his own spine.

*Calm down Daniel he thought. Can't let them get the best of you, especially on your ship. This is what they want, to get you aggravated so you make a mistake, a costly one, so for God's sake calm down.*

"Sir. The Lotus is actively scanning for cloaked vessels. In light of this ... mishap, in the hangar bay, I recommend we initiate a level 3 security alert and trust to Captain Gould to alert us to any outside contacts."

Still tending to Ensign Grissom, David looked up at the tactical console beside him.

"Mister Tritter, mobilize your security details. We need to find out what, or who, destroyed three fighters inside our own ship!"

"Agreed, level 3 security alert it is," acknowledged laconically the big, burly blonde man.

All the while, the dire predicament of Michael O'Conner's new assignment had not gone unnoticed either on board the flagship flying before Captain Daniel Summer's Akira class cruiser.



"Captain!" science chief Sainthill exclaimed excitedly. "We're detecting multiple explosions aboard the Spectre.. main shuttle hangar!"

As if expecting something like this, Gould immediatrly shouted out:

"Red Alert"

Tomah hailed sickbay just as the tactical alert horns started to blare accross the entire vessel.

"Doctor Bindo, stand by to receive possible casualties from the Spectre."

Over the comm, Bindo's voice came back.

"What happened? did we.."

But Gould cut her off.

"You'll be informed as the situation dictates, Doctor, bridge out"

He couldn't have her tying up the line... and he didn't like the timing of all this.

Sainthill spoke up just then.

"Sir, should I try to hail the Spectre?"

But Gould shook his head.

"Unless you think their comm might be down, no; they'll call us if they need us. You stay on.."

But Sainthil's panel chimed at that moment, distracting him.

"Captain; tachyon sweep is detecting a possible ship, bearing.. Sir, its just off our port aft."

"Helm! bring us about!" the commanding officer of the Lotus barked and quickly returned to his seat. "Get our nose pointed at that signal and the rest of us between it and the Spectre. They may need time to to recover."

Any second now he expected a Romulan warship to decloak infront of them, and if they didn't, he'd make them... with a low yield photon barrage.

*But what did this mean? how did they sabotage the Spectre? were they somehow working with the Children?*

He wanted some answers, and he was damn sure planning to get them.

"Shields are up, weapons are charged and targeted on the location of that signal," Josh reported as the ship swung around towards the contact. "Security teams are arming and will be in position shortly."

The young tactical chief paused for a moment as he read a message from Ensign Kiels.

"Sir, new security procedures call for senior bridge officers to be armed with Type II phaser pistols; I had not transferred the required pistols to the bridge storage compartment yet, so my assistant is bringing them now."

*How did I forget that?* he thought. *It is a good thing that Nidiri is here to back me up.*

Onboard the USS Spectre, Captain Summers assessed the situation and thought it best to contact the Lotus and find out if anything similar happened to them and go from there.

"Get a hold of the Lotus," Daniel said as he stood up straightening his uniform jacket.

Aboard the flagship, Lieutenant Sainthill looked up from his readings.

"Sorry, Sir, I've lost the reading... and the Spectre's hailing us."

"Put them on" Gould said facing the screen.

As the image of captain Summers appeared, he went straight to the point.

"We've detected the presence of at least one cloaked vessel in the area, Summers, but we expect as many as three, I'm going to try and flush them out. What's your situation aboard the Spectre? do you require any assistance?"

"Negative Captain; we should be fine here and our fighters are ready to fly. I suggest letting out some fighters to assist you."

"Understood captain Summers, as much as I'd rather do this diplomatically, we just don't have the time for cat and mouse conversations. Ill begin my sweep in two minutes. Good luck, captain."

"Commander Rogers," then ordered Summers once channel was closed with the flagship, "get a report from the area of the explosion. Commander O'Conner, get the flight teams prepped and ready for launch. If the Lotus' hunch is correct, we're gonna need as much firepower as we can muster from us and the fighters,"

"O'Conner here, Sir. We are ready down here. Lieutenant Corrett and her crew finished the last of the refits."

The newly appointed chief engineer had now just finished locking all major ship engineering functions to his section heads and of course himself and the other chief officers. Just as a precaution, he had also spread his engineering officers throughout the ship in teams of three to keep any further sabotage on his department in check.

After hearing O'Conner's report, David Rogers strode back to the tactical station above and behind Captain Summers to look over the current tactical status. Confident that launch bay 2 was ready, he gave instructions to the CAG officers down there.

"Lieutenant Gariman. Launch stingray squadron and take CAP over the Lotus. Lieutenant Tess, follow with epsilon squadron for cap on us."

Firefly squadron was the one that had hit the force field, and would still need to regroup into launch bay 2 with it's remaining fighters. David was confident that the teams in the bays would be hard at work getting those remaining fighters transferred over to the second bay in record time.

"Let's hope its just me being paranoid..." Daniel said as he himself walked around the bridge, "but... Rogers and Tritter, make sure all weapons are ready to fire. Load torpedo bays to maximum. we'll try a spread pattern first, then a volley if we find a target. I get the feeling we are walking into a firestorm, to put it nicely. Go to Yellow Alert."

Summers sat back down in his command seat, looking apprehensively at the main viewer and the image of the Lotus flying before them.

Aboard her, after Gould closed the channel, he went to tactical chief Vincent.

"Prepare a firing pattern of torpedoes at maximum spread, starting from that signal's last known position. I'll see if I can get them to leave the area the easy way first; but be ready for a return strike, Lieutenant."

"Fore tubes are loaded with photon torpedoes and a full spread is programmed," Josh responded to the captain. "If there are any ships out there, they'll get a good shock from us, Sir."

The commanding officer of the flagship then turned to the combined ops and science station on the other side of the bridge's aft section.

"Sainthill, give me an open channel."

The science chief immediately did so and nodded to his captain.

"Unidentified ship, this captain Gould of the Federation starship Lotus. Cloaked vessels are not permitted within Federation space and so, your presence here is considered hostile. You are ordered to reveal yourselves immediately and explain your presence and purpose within this area. You have one minute to do so or we will act to defend ourselves. Please respond now."

The waiting was making the First Officer on the Klingon command ship distressed.

"Sir, why do we not attack? We have the advantage!" he hissed to his Captain, but in a low voice that only he could hear.

"Are you questioning my willingness to fight?" Ja'rod shot back.

"Of course not, My Lord," the First Officer apologized. "It's just that... I would be lapse in my duties not to point out the opportunity for a clear victory when it presents itself."

"Patience, my friend," Ja'rod said, calmly, as he continued to stare straightforward through the viewscreen at the stern of the Spectre. "We will bide our time until our friends are ready. Then we shall strike. *Q'apla!*"

"*Q'apla!*" responded the First Officer and began to tap out a rhythm on the nearest console as he sang.

*Qoy qeylIs puqloD.*

*Qoy puqbe'pu'.*

*yoHbogh matlhbogh je SuvwI'*

*Say'moHchu' may' 'Iw.*

The song, honoring both Kahless and the warriors on their ship at the same time, reverberated throughout the bridge, proudly sung by the Klingon warriors within; proud but also anxious for battle. The only one not singing was Ja'rod as he brooded over the ship in his viewscreen, wanting to strike, but knowing doing it prematurely would compromise their true mission.

A little while later, as the singing diminished, he got his chance. Through an encrypted comm channel, the message he was waiting for came through.

"In place" was all it said.

"Now, we shall send these *petaQ* to their rightful place on the Barge of the Dishonored Dead! Decloak, shields, fire all disruptors!"

As the Klingons cheered, the officers carried out their orders swiftly. The three ships circling the Lotus remained cloaked, but the ship that appeared behind the Spectre was nothing they ever expected.

The Borthas dreadnought was a closely guarded secret the Klingons had been working on for years while their good relationship with the Federation and lack of prying eyes afforded them the luxury of easy security and secrecy of the project. The original prototype of the class, it had been renamed "Gowron", which meant "Horizon", in honor of its first mission.

What the officers on the Spectre saw appearing right behind them was a ship very similar in shape and style to a standard Negh'var, short angular nacelles in stunted thick pylons from a blocky hull that elongated and tapered to a prow shaped like a hammerhead... but being about a hundred and fifty percent bigger; its massive girth between its two nacelles spanned the entire length of the Spectre, the second largest ship in Lotus Fleet, twofold.

"Sir, a ship is decloaking behind the Spectre," Josh reported on the bridge of the Lotus.  
"It's...it's huge!"

His fingers ran across the console as he double-checked the readings on the monstrosity that had appeared.

"The readings are correct. It is much larger than a Negh'var class, but similar in appearance," he said. "There is nothing in Starfleet records about this ship. I don't think that this is the ship that brushed into our sensors either, it is much too large to have maneuvered between us and the Spectre."

"Oh my god!" The Lotus's navigator yelled out as his screen lit up from not just the multiple readings, but the very large blip appearing behind the Spectre. "Three ships sir, and.. and i don't know what.."

Gould jumped from his chair.

"Put it on screen."

The image of the dreadnought overfilled the screen for a second until it auto adjusted to a more viewable size. Although he was surprised that it was not the ship he had been expecting, it might have well of been for all its size.

"Vincent, use those torpedoes to blind it. Let's give the Spectre a chance to get underway!"

At best, the wide spread photon barrage would buy them a few seconds, blinding their sensors, but it was better than nothing.

And then, the disruptor fire started in on them.

"Helm, try and keep the smaller ships between us and the bigger ship! Tactical, coordinate fire with the Spectre! We need to increase our odds and take out some of the smaller ships! Inform Captain Summers of this tactic. Once we've taken out the little ones, we can outmaneuver the big one."

"Aye sir," Josh replied as he began putting commands into his console.

On the Spectre, a young Ensign let out a screech.

"Ca... CAPTAIN" he yelled in a shaky voice. "We have a... problem!"

Summers turned around to face him. But it was Michael Tritter who, more calm but still visibly shaken himself, explained:

"Extraordinarily large klingon vessel just decloaked behind us, something the likes of which Starfleet has never seen before! Dreadnought class!"

"Onscreen" Summers stated.

As the image of the massive ship appeared, his jaw dropped,

"Red Alert! evasive maneuvers! Get us away from that thing and get me a read out on its armament! Load everything and start firing! Aim for weapons first!"

Daniel ran towards his seat as he blurted out his orders, his thoughts just as stressed.

*A Klingon DREADNOUGHT? Really?*

On cue, the Birds of Prey around the Lotus decloaked and began firing on the smaller science ship just as the Spectre took the full brunt of the Gowron's weapons array. The smaller ship put up a good fight with its own set of phasers and the full complement of the Spectre's fighters streaked out and split into two groups, one toward the Lotus and the other to the massive ship. A few were shot down instantly due to the disruptor fire that began to pepper the back of the Spectre, but most had already exited prior to the shooting. They then began circling the large ship, attempting to take out its weapons array first and the large ship's phasers just could not keep up with the fast maneuvers of the fighters. Although it was like bees buzzing around a large, thick-skinned elephant, their distraction was sufficient to allow the Spectre to maneuver away before their shields were down even fifty percent.

Unfortunately, the messages sent had been lost because the Spectre continued to fire on the larger ship's weapons as it maneuvered, against the plan set forth by Captain Gould; and the Birds of Prey were able to more easily shoot down the fighters from that squadron. Their fire was focused on one of the Klingons fighter ships and it shortly lost shields and struggled to cloak and escape from being the prime target for the incoming vastly refitted Intrepid.

As the Lotus now swung towards the Klingon behemoth, several Birds of Prey decloaked around the ship. A full spread of torpedoes shot from the fore tubes of the Lotus and detonated just before impact with the giant battleship, giving the Spectre a few seconds to maneuver completely out of the line of fire without being pulverized by disruptor bolts.

On the bridge, Josh was furiously tapping his console to track each of the targets and fire on them without hitting any of the Spectre's fighters as they buzzed around like hornets attacking the enemy.

"Torpedo spread away; the battleship should be disoriented for a few seconds," Josh reported. "Our shields have taken hits from the Birds of Prey, but most of their fire is concentrated on the Spectre and its fighters."

As he was reporting to the captain, the Lotus's phasers struck another target, punching through its shields in a matter of seconds and causing minor damage.

"We've punched through the shields on one of the escort ships, Sir," Josh said, "but we've cause only minor damage to its hull. I'm sending another message to the Spectre to maneuver clear away from the battleship."

He set phasers to a pre-programmed firing pattern on the Birds of Prey and began his message:

His board lighted with immediate confirmation.

"Message is received, Sir," Josh reported upon resuming phaser control.

The Spectre shuddered violently as the Gowron pounded away on it's back side, Still in the shuttlebay flight control center, Michael O'Conner grasped the console near by to steady himself as he tapped his combadge.

"Kurt Report!"

"Dorsal shields at seventy-five percent and falling. Minor damage to EPS systems on decks 3 to 7; repair teams 4, 7, 16, and 21 responding."

"Keep me up to date with any major failures."

Not awaiting Kurt's response, he then turned to Rikki, who was overlooking the situational flight console's sensor readouts.

"Stingray 2, 5 and Epsilon 7 down, boss. Stingray 3 and Epsilon 5 reporting major damage."

After hearing her report, O'Conner nodded.

Even with their new metaphasic shielding, the Federation Peregrine class attack fighter was an outdated design from when his parents were fighting the Dominion wars and only worked in large groups. In any case, metaphasic shielding properties were useless in combat and they simply lacked the sturdiness and firepower to tackle a large ship like that.

The chief engineer tapped his combadge again.

"O'Conner to the bridge; Sir, we need to launch the rest of the fighters. They are getting pounded out there."

Receiving a nod from Summers on Commander O'Conner's request, David replied to the launch bay

"Go ahead Commander. Launch them."

Turning back to the tactical station, Rogers looked over the display, trying to correlate some pattern from the flurry of ships and fighters. Then, the message arrived from the Lotus.

"USS Spectre, this is tactical from the flagship; Captain Gould has ordered us to coordinate attacks for maximum effect. Concentrate first on the remaining Birds of Prey. When they are disabled or retreating, we and your fighter squadrons will be able to outmaneuver the massive battleship for more effective attacks."

Quickly scanning the display again, David noted the weakened shields on a bird of prey that took direct fire from Captain Gould's ship. Tapping the proper icon on the tactical display, Rogers motioned for concentrated fire on that ship.

"Fire torpedoes. Pattern 'Punch-three-one.'"

The main launchers on the Spectre spat out three photon torpedoes, one after another in rapid succession. A half second later, a quantum torpedo launched in their wake. Reaching the small bird of prey, the first trio of weapons did a one, two, three punch on the same exact forward ventral shield point of the Klingon ship, punching through on the final hit. Quickly behind it, the quantum torpedo swept in past the now collapsed shield grid and hit the bird of prey in the engineering hull, just abaft of the neck. The resulting explosion split the small green ship in two, spinning out of control and eventually, the larger aft section disappeared in a jarring explosion when its core reached critical.

"Good shot. Concentrate phasers on the Lotus' target. Helm! Mirror our position in opposition to the Lotus. Well pincer them."

"One Bird of Prey down, Sir," Sainthill relayed off from his sensor readings.

The navigation officer made a happy "yes" sound.

Vincent confirmed that the Spectre was moving into position on the second Bird of Prey but was taking heavy fire from the Dreadnought.

"Target's Port forward shield is moderately damaged, Captain. They're tuning away from us."

Gould shouted out:

"Helm! Heading 125, full impulse! Mister Vincent! Hold photons until my order but continue phaser barrage!"

As the more maneuverable Klingon escort began to adjust its course, it found itself turning into the Spectre, its weakened port forward shield exposed to either one ship or the other.

Their commander then did the only thing left to him: he engaged his cloaking device to slip away from the danger zone.

At that very moment, Gould yelled out:

"Fire torpedoes!"

Without hesitation, Vincent did so. The two torpedoes streaked along at their intended target. Too late, the commander of the Bird of Prey picked up their launch signal as his ship began to fade into nothingness, vanishing from the Lotus's viewscreen and sensors, only to reappear a split second after the torpedoes struck its unshielded port aft section, ripping off its port nodule and half of the secondary hull.

Vincent smiled.

"Ship destroyed, Sir."

But Gould didn't pause for congratulation.

"Helm, get us between the Dreadnought and the Spectre. Let's see if we can put a fresh shield to it."

"Captain," then reported science chief Sianthill; "the remaining Bird of Prey has cloaked and the Spectre took another hit to their engineering section from the Klingon warship, it's unlikely they could take another hit there, Sir."

"That's accounted for."

Gould moved over to Vincent.

"The Bird of Prey will be going for the Spectre's aft section. Plot the most likely course from its last location.."

The ship then shook from disruptor fire.

"Forward shield down to sixty percent, Captain," cut in Josh Vincent gripping his console. "Minor damage to the primary hull."

But Gould went on.

"Once you think you have it, fire a barrage. Let's see if we can give Captain Summers a target to work with."

He gave Vincent a reassuring shoulder squeeze and went back to the command chair.

Another round of weapons fire rocked the ship.

"Shields down to forty-three percent."

Gould shook his head.

"Understood."

Josh began furiously tapping his console as he calculated the most likely approach vector for the Klingon vessel and, after a few seconds, he was ready.

"Position calculated, firing torpedoes now," he reported as he hit the launch button.

Torpedoes burst forth from the front of the Lotus and raced towards empty space just behind the Spectre. They all detonated in fiery explosions a few meters apart and, soon, their flashes were joined by a larger flash from the decloaking Bird of Prey.

"Direct hit, Sir," Josh said. "We've disabled their cloak and caused severe damage to their hull."

Right in the thick of it all, the USS Spectre followed frantically the battle that raged around her.

"Captain, the Lotus just found a cloaked Bird of Prey with a torpedo salvo; it is decloaking aft!" the conn officer reported.

"Fire torpedo spread alpha omega seven and all aft phasers!"

"Aye, Sir!" as Michael Tritter responded, his fingers flashing across his terminal and, just as quickly, the firing ensued, half a dozen torpedoes bombarding the Bird of Prey' barely raised shields.

"Bring us around facing the target and let's finish this one off before we start on the big boy... else we'll end up like their friends," Summers ordered before tapping his chest communicator. "O'Conner; report! How are we doing down there?"

"Goose dive right!"

The chatter of the Spectre's fighters echoed throughout the fight control room as chief engineer Michael O'Conner watched over the commotion with calm resolve. This had been his place for many battles on the Thunderchild. How he had missed this when he had served as an exec on the peaceful explorer that was the Artemis!

Then he jumped slightly at the captain's message. The tall, bearded red-haired man then quickly stepped up and moved outside of the flight control room with a PADD in hand.

"All fighters away, Sir; we have lost eight birds and six crewmembers, five more are heavily damaged with as many wounded. But squadron leaders report that hammering concentrated torpedo and phaser fire brought the port shield down to ten percent on whatever that thing is."

Seeing on the navigational display that the Lotus was taking care of the Bird of Prey escort, the chief fight operations officer had directed the remaining fighters to the huge Klingon dreadnought. O'Conner couldn't help but see it as a swarm of wasps attacking a bear.

O'Conner paused a moment at that thought, but then listened at the real time report Kurt was giving him.

"As for us, Sir, aft shield down to twelve percent, hull breaches on deck 4, 8, and 11, aft phaser array heavily damaged and the aft EPS grid is a mess. But emergency forcefields are holding and repair teams reporting. Though if we keep getting hammered like this, Sir, there soon won't be any ship left for those crazed cultists to sabotage."

"Thank you Commander," answered Captain Summers as he closed the intraship channel. "Helm, bring us to that larger ship's port side and fire everything we've got. Maybe if we damage them enough, they will flee for their lives"

"Aye, Sir," answered the pilot, his voice heavy with bewilderment at the captain's unfounded optimism. Klingons, if anything, loved a good fight.

And for them, a good fight was a fight to the death.

A million kilometers away, nearer to the Azimuth Horizon, five more Birds of Prey escort ships suddenly decloaked. They were positioned at various intervals around the arc of the AH closest to Klingon territory.

As they decloaked they sent a message indicating readiness to Ja'rod on the Gowron and he responded with a command.



"Begin ion pulse bombardment."

The ships had been waiting the whole time, but would not be able to use their ion pulse generator with the cloaks eating up all their power. The distraction afforded them by the attack of the Bortas-class ship allowed them to begin their primary mission.

Meanwhile, on the Gowron, Ja'rod grinned maliciously as he ordered another large photon torpedo attack on the Spectre's aft section; but the ship had luckily just maneuvered out of the way toward the larger ship's port side.

"Fire all disruptors from the port array!" the Captain raged, standing and forcefully shouting a string of Klingon curses at being deprived of his killing strike.

All three supporting Birds of Prey had been disposed of by now by the Lotus and the sleek flagship was coming in to make itself a target to the Gowron.

"Focus remaining fire and torpedoes on the Intrepid-class," Ja'rod ordered and their helm officer maneuvered to directly face off the opponent.

Calming down a bit, he motioned to his Tactical Officer.

"Once you get the Spectre's shields down completely, send a boarding party. Since they can outmaneuver and avoid our torpedoes, it's the best chance we have to destroy them... from the inside out."

As the Gowron continued its assault on the agile Akira class cruiser, O'Conner could only smile as he listened to the fighter chatter.

"So that's your play."

The Klingons had finally shown their hand and it was a good play that would have worked with any other ship in the fleet; but while neither the Lotus or the Spectre could do much against the five new Birds of Prey, there was still thirty-six fighters with thirty-nine remaining photon torpedoes that could.

As fighters broke away from the Klingon bear and swarmed towards the fresh new targets, the Klingons had a choice of duty or battle. A choice needing to be made quickly as the Spectre's fighter wings raced their way through the fissures of fire, to bear down on their targets.

The chief engineer was just forgetting one thing: for Klingons, duty and battle were always one and the same. Thus the choice was instantly made and they bore down on them all, weapon ports blazing ferociously.

Another volley of torpedoes shot forth from the Lotus and tore through the remaining Bird of Prey of the first squadron, which erupted in a burst of flame.

"Sir, the target has been destroyed and the Spectre is now concentrating fire on the large ship," Josh reported. "Five more targets have just decloaked near the Horizon; the Spectre's fighters are moving to engage. They got the port shield on this behemoth down to ten percent before breaking off. I suggest we try to keep it busy while the fighters take care of the new contacts."

"Agreed; concentrate all fire on that shield and bring us into a parallel course with the Spectre. Try to keep both ships on the same weapon arc of the Klingon so as to reduce its overall strength."

Gould turned to the helm officer.

"Helm, be ready to cover the Spectre's turn away so we don't leave their aft shield open to return fire."

The ship rocked again from weapons impact and chief tactical officer Vincent spoke up with more stress in his voice than usual.

"Captain, shields down to twenty-three percent. I advise we go to full armor form."

Gould shook his head.

"Not yet. If we do, then the Spectre gets all the attention and we'll lose phaser capability. That port shield needs to come down first. After that, we'll put the armor up."

The two ships started their run. Phasers and torpedoes lashed out at the larger ship, all striking the same area of the behemoth. In response, the IKS Gowron unleashed its own barrage, visibly shaking the Lotus' main hull, breaching the shields and creating disruptor burn marks across the external plating.

"Shields down!" warned Josh Vincent.

"Hull breach on deck 5!" shouted science chief Sainthill.

But Gould, his experience correctly interpreting the vibrations felt from the last volley on the ship's frame, had already activated the ablative armor from his override control panel.

"Helm! keep us between and as rear guard of the Spectre!"

The helm officer gritted his teeth and held on to his panel.

"Aye aye, Sir!"

The Lotus Fleet flagship labored to remain on its course as the ablative armor formed over the hull, piling up from bow to stern as successive plates generated by the industrial replicators dotting its external surface. But before it could fully coat the vessel, a final disruptor blast struck the secondary hull just above the port warp pylon.

The effect was devastating. The large whitish beam gouged the aft of the much smaller Federation starship, slicing into engineering.

The impact on the bridge was barely felt, but the effect was widespread. Main power went down, propulsion, weapons, helm and main sensors went off line.

The Lotus was effectively dead.

\* \* \*

The massive two and half kilometer-wide Starbase full of over two thousand Starfleet officers and almost ten thousand crewmen continued to slowly drift, but accelerate toward the Azimuth Horizon. Lieutenant Commander Grok was furiously entering commands to try to regain access to thruster controls.

"USS Aurora, report!" Fleet Captain Samji said.

"The Starbase continues it's trajectory," came the response, "and has accelerated to a hundred and fifty percent of our previous speed, Fleet Captain."

"Damn!" the Captain shouted. "Computer, isolate all command and operational functions to Ops, authorization Samji-Epsilon-Blue-Four-Three-Six."

"That function is not available," came the voice of the computer.

The wrinkled, weathered face of Lieutenant Commander Sangliar poked his head from under a console.

"Sir, the diagnostic loop is shutting us out of all command systems, there's no way around it... at least not manually. I am attempting to break the diagnostic loop by simulating damage to the station's life support. The safety lockouts in place should halt all diagnostic routines so that the imagined damage can be fixed."

"How long?" Samji asked simply.

"Thirty minutes, twenty if I'm lucky and you do not interrupt me... Sir," the Tellarite responded gruffly.

"Very well, carry on. Any ideas people?"

"We could destroy the thrusters," Lieutenant Commander Ssta'elia said.

"Hmph, typical for a Tactical officer, to always resort to destroying things," responded Lieutenant John Vanhook, the oldest and arguably the least violent person in the room, excepting possibly Dr. Hugh Michaels. His diplomatic role suited him well. "That won't stop us anyway."

"No, but it will keep us from accelerating and buy us more time to regain control. We don't need the thrusters on that side right now anyway and we will still retain the ones to move us away from the Anomaly."

"Steamrunner, this is Fleet Captain Samji. I need you to target and destroy our thrusters on the opposite side from the Anomaly only."

"acknowledged, Fleet Captain," came the voice of the Steamrunner Captain. "You'll need to lower your shields."

"No can do, Steamrunner. We've lost control of our systems. You'll have to poke a hole," responded Samji.

"He's kidding, right?" the Tactical officer on the Steamrunner bridge said, with a sigh. "With the shields that behemoth holds, that will take hours."

"Uhh, Fleet Captain, I don't think we have the time for that. You'll have to find a way to lower them."

Allen Samji swore under his breath.

"Very well, Steamrunner, stand by."

"Maybe we should focus on regaining control of our power systems first," suggested the Trill science officer. "Without power, our shields will be gone and the thrusters will cease. The Steamrunner can then damage them so that, with power back on, they won't restart."

"Very good suggestion, Mister Rexil," Samji said. "Lieutenant Commander Ssta'elia, take Lieutenant Mandella and escort Mister Sangliar."

He nodded to the Tellarite.

"See if you can't shut down all power systems manually except for Life Support and Weapons."

While they were speaking, a neurologist, Lieutenant Shian Andres, had entered and was consulting with Dr. Michaels.

"Belay that!" shouted Michaels, earning a cold stare from Samji. "Sorry Sir, but there may be a medical reason not to send Mister Mandella."

"May I send Ssta'elia and Sangliar?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir," the Doctor responded.

"Is there anyone I can send to accompany them?"

Doctor Michaels punched a query into the nearby console selecting all Security officers on the base grouped by species.

"No, Sir."

He shook his head, woefully.

With a nod from Samji, Ssta'elia and Sangliar made their way to lower engineering on deck 256.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade John Mandella to Operations," Samji then said over his combadge, so that he would have a Tactical and Security officer on hand. "Now Doctor, would you mind telling me why I just sent two of my senior officers without an additional security escort down to an area that may be crawling with saboteurs?"

Shian Andres answered instead.

"Because, Sir... Vulcans, Andorians, Tellarites, and Saurians are the only known races immune to the infection those very saboteurs are carrying."

Just then, a tall man in a gold-collared uniform walked in. He stood at attention before Samji, who noticed an ever so slight point to his ears hinting at some Vulcanoid ancestry.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade John Mandella reporting for duty, Sir," said the man, just before Samji could ask Doctor Andres what the hell he meant by "infection".

"Thank you Mister Mandella," replied Samji. "Just a moment, however... you'll probably want to listen to this. Please elaborate, Doctor."

Doctor Andres cleared his throat.

"Well, Sir. We had been doing some studies on the Horizon's Children that were captured on the Artemis several months ago. We were trying to define a medical or psychological virus or disorder that may have led to this kind of behavior in Starfleet Officers."

Doctor Michaels then explained further.

"We had a theory, but we only had six people, which wasn't enough of a sample to thoroughly define the cause. However, we've recently had a large influx of new patients to study in the last day or so, and we believe we've come to a conclusion. Doctor?"

Being given the chance to present the findings to Samji, Shian eagerly jumped in.

"What we've found in many of the patients is a strange neural reading in the High Beta wave signature. Normally, that's a sign of psychological distress, but these patients were otherwise normal. This alteration is actually caused by a foreign energy signature present in their entire body. Small bursts of energy, when near the brain are causing the High Beta wave to be malformed. It is like, for lack of a more precise term, an incorporeal virus, Sir."

"Why are the four species you mentioned immune?" Samji asked.

"Well, Sir, the effect is only present when the brain is in the High Beta wave state, which only occurs during intense mental activity. The species I mentioned tend to be more logical, practical, and less quick to anger or be emotional; even Andorians. Despite being known for their intense passions, Andorian emotions only flare when they paradoxically have a definite reason to, thus, not spontaneously or haphazardly as for those species usually deemed emotional. A vague, unconscious impulsion would not trigger any more reaction than any unreasonable emotional feeling up in them. While analyzing data or forming a conclusion, all of the subjects' mental state is in that range, but only for a very short time. When not being called on for those very specific, short tasks, those species tend to move to the Low Beta or even Alpha wave state where the infection has no effect. To be clear, Sir; they are infected. However the infection causes no symptoms in them."

Doctor Michaels then spoke with a clinical tone.

"Strong emotional states tend to elicit heavy Beta wave activity when the brain would otherwise be less active. Humans, Bajorans, Betazoids, Klingons, Rethians... especially Deltans are therefore at greater risk."

"Where did this thing start?" asked Samji.

"Well, we're not certain," answered Doctor Michaels, "but since it clearly originated on the Artemis, we think it came from the Universe on the other side of the Azimuth Horizon."

"Of course it does."

"This," Andres went on, "is supported by the fact that the only other lifeforms encountered from there, by the crew of the USS Spectre, are incorporeal. Sir, it also seems to be highly contagious. We recommend that anyone who was in continuous contact with the Artemis crew or anyone in contact with those people, and on down the line, be examined; and, if infected, confined behind a forcefield if they're not one of the immune species. Those that are immune should limit contact with others. From the Spectre mission, we've learned that these incorporeal beings had to be behind a forcefield with a continuously modulating frequency, so the same would apply to the virus."

"That would include me then," Samji said, referencing his meeting with Kheren.

"Sir, we already scanned you and you're clean. It must not have been consistent enough contact."

"So there is an easy way to scan for these things?"

"Oh yes; we can distribute the specs to the ship Engineers to have them modify their medical tricorders," said Andres.

"And inform the Doctor's of our findings," added Michaels.

"Good, please do so," Samji replied, and the doctors moved off to get that information out.

Samji then turned his attention to the Tactical and Security officer still standing quiet and silent beside him.

"Now, Mister Mandella. Your chief is currently busy trying to regain our control of this station. Now that we have the means to scan for infected cultists, I need you to put together a team to route them out and secure them behind the forcefields. You'll need to look beyond your officers to crewmembers of Vulcan, Tellarite, Andorian, or Saurian species for this job, and you personally will need to stay away from anybody infected you find, as I doubt being a quarter Vulcan will be sufficient."

"Aye, Sir. Understood! I'll gather and disperse them." Exclaimed Mandella as he saluted Samji.

He turned away with a sharp movement and tapped his combadge.

"Attention all Security Personnel: All crewmembers of Vulcan, Tellarite, Andorian and Saurian ancestry report to Deck 7 Conference Room 7 ASAP."

Mandella hastily walked towards the turbolift with long strides.

"Deck 7," He said as he entered.

The conference room was already swelling with crewmembers as he approached. He barked from the hall to the increasingly growing crew.

"Anyone with less then three quarters of said species standby in Conference Room 6. You will be the Support Team. The rest of you, file into Room 7."

Mandella walked to the head of Conference Room 7 as it filled with crew members.

"You're being tasked with locating, reporting and confining any indivisual infescted by a virus now being defined on your tricorders. You find them by way of full sweeps of all areas. Direct any other personnel to designated safe areas throughout the station. You will confine any found infected person by way of sectionary bulkhead force fields of modulating frequency. Report to Engineering for modified tricorders for detection of infected people. Dismissed!"

Mandella proceeded to instruct the crew members of the Support Team in Room 6 of similar activities, though they would be following after the main sweep and maintaining the force fields and reporting additional information.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Jorga was beginning to regain consciousness in Auxiliary Control, after taking a console explosion to the face. He had plasma burns all over his body and winced in pain as he moved his hand to his combadge. His thick, Tellarite skin was the only thing that has saved his life, but he was still in bad shape.

"Jorga to... Samji. Need, medical assistance... Children..." he got out before passing out again.

Hearing this, Samji immediately alerted the medical team and told them to send officers of just the four known immune species. He also put a call in to Mandella.

"Lieutenant, I recommend you search in the vicinity of Jorga first; and please, perform an investigation on the console that exploded to see if that will help you narrow down the saboteur's identity."

"Understood, I'll have a detachment en route." Mandella replied to Samji's report from his combadge.

Alpha and Beta teams had just arrived at Engineering for modified tricorders. Mandella was monitoring the teams from a console in the conference room until they had started sweeps and he could return to Ops.

"Mandella to all units in Alpha Team; I need a detachment en route to Lieutenant Jorga's location in Auxiliary Control."

"Aye, Sir, this is Squad Alpha 2; we're en route, ETA 5." Reported Master Chief Petty Officer Romero, leader of an Alpha detachment squad of five crewmen.

The team collected modified tricorders from Engineering staff and were en route to Auxiliary Control. They arrived down the corridor from Auxiliary Control and proceeded in squad formation. They cleared the hallway and were at the entry door to Auxiliary Control.

The door did not open automatically.

Romero pried the doors open as two other members reared their rifles through the doorframe to clear the area. They could spot the exploded console and Jorga on the ground nearby.

"Romero from Squad Alpha 2 to Mandella; we are at location. No hostiles detected. Securing area."

"Good, keep me informed." Mandella replied as he exited the conference room and made his way to Ops. "Mandella to Samji; a squad is at Jorga's location. They're securing the area. Will advise."

The squad entered through the doorway.

There was phaser fire from the right, near the exploded console and Jorga. The Children had made their way in. The squad barely avoided the fire as the door jam above them heated with energy. The Children's phasers were at full power.

"Ambush!" Yelled Romero as he and the team leapt for cover in the room. Whatever cover there was, it wasn't enough. The squad was down to three from five and they couldn't tell how many Cultists there were.

"Romero to Mandella, we've been ambushed in Auxiliary Control! Requesting ba-aaaccc-kk-rrrrrrrrrrr - kxzzzt..."

"Mandella to Romero! Do you copy? Mandella to Romero!"

Mandella had just arrived in Ops and was operating a console while briefing the staff that the teams had been sent out when he received the transmission.

Romero and two other members were hunched behind various consoles and crates as they tried to report what was happening. But nothing was getting out.

"Screw this; on 'Three' we counterattack, got it?" Romero ordered the remainder of this squad. They each nodded reluctantly.

The phaser fire had temporarily ceased. Either the Children were scared off or they were posed for a full frontal assault as soon as the squad poked their heads up. Either way, this was the time for action.

"One..."

"Two..."

"Th-..."

His last count was cut short as a photon grenade was detonated near the remainder of his squad.

Hearing this grenade a couple decks up, Ssta'elia turned back toward Sangliar who had been working on taking down most of the power systems.

"How much longer?" she hissed.

"You Saurians are so impatient... I almost have it," he grunted. "I just need to reroute a few more EPS conduits to cycle the majority of the base's systems into a recursive shut down program and then secure it so it can't be undone. Five minutes tops."

The Saurian Tactical and Security officer let the Tellarite's jargon go in one tiny ear and out the other until he said, "five minutes."

"Good. As soon as you're done, get back to Ops ASAP. Sounds like someone needs my help."

She lithely sprinted down the hall to the nearest Jeffrey's tube; she didn't want to be caught in a turbolift when Sangliar took the systems down. Then she deftly made her way up three decks and then in the direction where she heard the noise. Finding the nearest access hatch, she opened it slowly, and looked through to see a cloud of smoke and several of her fellow Security officers laying inert on the ground. One remaining person, who she recognized as Romero, was coughing and heaving to clear his lungs of the smoke but otherwise seemed to be unhurt. Despite his name, he was three-quarters Vulcan... otherwise, she'd be concerned of the allegiances of the one man who had survived the massacre of his team.

"Romero!" she hissed, directing her voice such to get his attention without alerting the Children to the fact that anyone had survived. "I'm going in... cover me!"

The man nodded.

Using her lizard-like agility, she braced herself against the back wall of the tube and came plummeting out like a torpedo. In mid-air, she turned and saw two surprised men, one a Bolian and the other a Human, who tried to draw their phasers but were cut down with two expert shots from the Saurian before they even were able to take aim. While recovering and attempting to stand, a third person drew her phaser in time to get a shot off and struck Ssta'elia in the shoulder with a glancing blast before a full stun shot from Romero leveled her.

Advancing into the room, Ssta'elia turned to thank Romero for the assist when a fourth attacker who had been hiding the whole time came up from behind a workstation and fired a shot directly into her back. Her already wide eyes filled with shock as she collapsed into Romero's left arm. At the same time, he used his right to finish off the final attacker and laid his commanding officer on the ground in front of him.

"Medical emergency!" he said firmly into his combadge; but it was unnecessary.

A medical team was already on their way in to care for Jorga and the rest of the wounded and turned the corner to meet them just as he spoke. They immediately went to work on the unconscious, wounded reptilian officer.

Romero turned and, without any show of emotion at what he had just experienced, simply exited the room in order to make his way back to Ops to report in to Mandella.

As he did so, all the lighting powered down around him and a low, red lighting appeared to replace them. It was clear Sangliar had accomplished one of their tasks, but there were still likely to be more Children to round up before the day was through.

In Ops, starbase commander Allen Samji said:

"Looks like Sangliar got the job done. Grok, let me know when communications are back online."

Romero arrived in Ops and went straight to his superior to report in his unemotional but distinctly human-like way of speaking that he picked up from his father and grandfather.



"Sir, we managed to route out what should be the last of the Horizon's Children members. There was an insane firefight, Sir. They even used grenades. Our team took a fair amount of casualties in the process. Four dead, two injured. I take full responsibility. Lieutenant Commander Ssta'elia arrived to help me and was also injured in the process. It appears that she's going to be alright, but will be in sickbay for a few days, I reckon."

"Looks like you're our new Chief Tactical and Security Officer, Mister Mandella," Samji chimed in.

Before he could respond, Grok reported.

"Sir, communications online."

"Put us..."

"I put us through to the Steamrunner, Sir."

Samji shook his head in amusement at the Ferengi's prophetic impetus then spoke up, looking at the slim form of the Steamrunner seen outside through the vast transparencies.

"Captain Ramabai, this is Samji. Please come in."

"Ramabai here."

"Shields are down. Please commence firing on our thrusters... just the ones opposite the Anomaly," he reminded them.

"Very well, Sir... firing sequence will commence in three minutes."

The communication ended and the ship began to move into position.

"Samji to all hands on deck 260, sections 3 and 4. Please clear all outer ring areas and remain at least one bulkhead away from the outside edge of the Starbase. You have three minutes to clear the area."

He turned to his exec.

"Commander Schmidt, please take Ops and commence the operation. I will be reporting to Rear Admiral Kotari about our progress."

Momentarily after Samji left, the tall, stern woman turned towards the science station.

"Mister Rexil, monitor the area for hull destabilization. Also keep an eye on life support."

She tapped her combadge.

"Doctor Michaels, be ready to receive casualties. There shouldn't be any because we cleared the area, but better to be prepared."

"Starbase 10, this is Steamrunner. Ready to begin firing."

"Yellow alert! Acknowledged, Steamrunner. Begin."

As the Steamrunner fired targeted phaser blasts at each thruster along the edge of deck 260, the officers in Ops could hear the faint explosions. They were no bigger than a typical photon grenade, like the one that went off in the computer core recently. Yet, Kletan Rexil reported:

"Commander, hull destabilization detected near the third thruster."

"Seal it off."

"Aye, Sir," he responded and erected a forcefield just before the explosive decompression occurred, forcing all the air and loose items in the adjoining maintenance area out into space. As ordered, everyone had evacuated the area, so there were no casualties.

The remaining thrusters were knocked out without incident.

"Operation complete, Commander," the Steamrunner reported. "Your acceleration toward the Azimuth Horizon has ceased... but of course, you will still have to find a way to halt your current momentum."

"Thank you Steamrunner, we'll let you know if we need anything further," Schmidt replied.

By then, starbase chief engineer Sangliar had returned to Ops.

"Mister Sangliar, how long to get our propulsion back online?"

"The cultists really locked down which ones were firing and messed up the other ones so we couldn't slow down. It will take at least a day for a full reconfiguration."

"We can't wait that long, ma'am," reported Grok. "With the projected spread of the anomaly, we'll be within range of its outermost tendrils in thirty hours."

"But will that make a difference?" asked Schmidt. "The anomaly is spreading faster than this Starbase can move anyway."

"Yes, but we certainly don't need to be moving closer at any rate," Grok replied. "If we can somehow stop our momentum now, that gives us all the more time to move away once Mister Sangliar has repaired the thrusters. And even though we wouldn't inevitably be able to escape, it gives our ships that much more time to complete the containment operation."

"Very well. Bottom line is we need to stop our progress now if we can," Commander Schmidt said. "Any ideas?"

Mandella shrugged off the news of his sudden and grim promotion and focused on more pressing matters: stopping the drift of the Starbase. He paced and mumbled to himself with expressions of brilliance and then disappointment. Ideas were dissected and then refused, until the last one.

"Sir, I think I may have an idea..."

"Go ahead, Mister Mandella."

"If we can't stop the drift of the starbase from onboard, perhaps we can overboard. Anyone ever surfed?"

There was some confused silence following the half-Vulcan's question. He went into details.

"If we could generate a large enough wave of energy between us and the anomaly, we could at least soften our drift, if not, gain some backward thrust. If, of course, we can survive the push. We'll have to increase structural integrity field and all anomaly-facing shields... but I think it may work if we can afford the ordinances... and provided we're clear to use certain, rather dangerous means."

The aging but still beautiful Commander twirled a lock of her auburn hair as she thought. She was no science officer... heck, barely even qualified for deep-space missions, she mused. Her previous missions had all been from behind the desk. Just like her superior who was presently reporting in to Rear Admiral Kotari, she had rose through the ranks as an administrator and had been called to Starbase 10 just like many of the other senior officers in the room to supplement the base that had been quite destructively cleared of staff by the Borg War. She had not expected to be put in a position to make on-the-spot decisions, but rather to fulfill an administrative role, managing the staff.

She turned to the Joined Trill science officer for support, and her expression was enough to cause him to jump in and provide his analysis of the plan presented.

"One of my previous hosts," Rexil started off thoughtfully, "was a pilot, with experience riding shockwaves. This is the same concept, just on a much larger scale. I think it could help. We won't be able to put the shockwave directly in our trajectory; any surfer knows you can't surf perpendicular to the wave, or the board would just cut right through. It would have to be a series of waves, the first one almost propelling us further toward the Anomaly, but then gradually moving around the base until it begins to send us in at least a ninety-degree trajectory from our current course; just like when the surfer rides the wave down the beach but then eventually it will move to shore and cause him to either follow it along or ditch off in order to pick up the next one."

Commander Schmidt tried to wrap her head around the concept, but trusted in her officers to do what was best.

"Very well, she nodded. You two work together to come up with something both tactically and scientifically sound and get it ready for the Fleet Captain. Sangliar, can we get those shields back online? We wouldn't want to attempt this without them!"

"Yes, Commander... twenty minutes at most," he reassured her.

"Right, get to it," she said and the officers quickly went about their duties.

She hoped the Fleet Captain would be done soon in order to give the final approval of this radical plan.

Although Mandella's focus was tactical, his heritage and personal path had led him through many scientific studies, even beyond the standard Starfleet Academy teachings. He was a practical, pragmatic man and sought out any area of study that could be applied to his career, often resulting in new ideas and strategies. He turned his attention to Rexil.

"I'm no scientist... but wouldn't a more segmented radial pattern initiating from between the Starbase and the Anomaly in succession around the outer circumference of the Starbase produce a more desired backward directed thrust? You are correct, however, that the first wave set off between the two bodies would not affect the Starbase's forward trajectory much... but the successive blasts, starting at that location, would create a more stable, directed energy wave pattern away from the anomaly... in my opinion... but, again, I'm no scientist."

"I'll defer to your... surfing expertise, Lieutenant," Rexil responded. "Just tell me where to reinforce the shields and you can handle the explosions, being the Tactical officer after all."

\* \* \*

Josh reached for the type-II phaser on his belt and pulled it to the ready as soon as main power went down all over the bridge of the Lotus. He'd seen enough reports about Klingon combat practices to know what happened when a ship's defensive systems went down.

"All security teams on high alert," he ordered across the comms, hoping that they were still functioning. "Sensors are down, so we won't be able to see them coming."

"Sir, tactical systems are down and I think there is a gap in our armor where that disruptor struck. I can't be sure because sensors went down so fast, but I think that we best be prepared for boarding parties," he reported to the captain.

"Captain.." Sainthill added in. "The armor will prevent beam in's when fully deployed but it only reached ninety-three percent completion. There are gaps on decks 4, 8, and 13 that may be too small to actively target with ships weapons but that certainly can permit boarding attempts; but such an attempt would be highly hazardous."

"Risk hardly ever slows down a Klingon," shot back the voice of V'Rell Gould as the emergency lights came on. "Mister Vincent, concentrate your efforts in those areas. I'll head to engineering and see what I can do to get all the lights back on. Mister Tomah, you have the Conn."

As the captain and chief of security headed out towards the emergency exit shaft to the lower levels, Edward Tomah looked around at the bridge officers that were left.

"Ah, well.. at least look busy people. We need to, ah, be ready when the time comes."

And so saying, he himself went to man the security station.

Vincent and Gould exited the turbo lift on deck 4.

"Lieutenant, I'll take a squad to engineering, secure it and see what I can do to get us running again. You secure the other two gaps in the armor. And while I want you to be efficient, there's no need to hurry. The longer we can hold them off in here, the more time we'll have for repairs before they start shooting at us again."

He waited to see if Vincent had any questions before taking five officers with him and heading off to engineering. Gould reasoned that both crew and holodeck areas would be clear of non-combatants, as most of the crew would be at their stations.

On the way there his communicator beeped.

"Sainthill to Gould; it's audio only but we have the Spectre on the line, Sir."

Gould tapped his badge.

"Patch me through."

A second passed.

"Go ahead, Sir."

"Spectre this is Gould. Abort your attack on the larger warship and support your fighters. Stopping the expansion of the Horizon takes priority. We'll hold the dreadnought here as long as possible but direct combat against it would be futile with just our two ships. I repeat, engage Birds of Prey and prepare to begin your run. Do you comply Spectre?"

"I copy you Captain Gould. Good luck; we will be back soon. Summers out."

Summers activated his combadge.

"O'Conner; do what you can. We are breaking away from the Lotus to take out the other two Birds of Prey at the Horizon and help our fighters."

Meanwhile on board the flagship, Josh went quickly to the armory after Captain Gould headed off. Grabbing a type-III phaser, he also took one of the combat knives that he was surprised to find stocked there; the legacy of one former Andorian chief of security. He informed his second, Ensign Kiels, of the situation.

"As you've probably noticed, main power is down, but we managed to deploy our armor, so we have some protection. Unfortunately, there are three gaps in the armor that may be used to transport boarding parties to us. The captain has taken a team to secure engineering and try to get us running again. I need you to take a team to the gap here," he said as he pointed to the unsecure area on the map that he'd pulled up. "I will take a third squad and secure the final gap. Be careful and don't take any unnecessary risks; we need to hold off any boarding parties until power gets brought back online."

With that, he took his five-man team out the door and towards the nearest gap in the armor. Josh led the team as they stacked on the corner of the corridor when they'd arrived near the gap. He ducked out quickly to scan the area ahead and spotted a Klingon boarding party just arriving.

"I've got five warriors ten meters down the corridor. They are just beaming in, so it will be easier if we hit them quickly," he whispered to his team. "Luchs and Wavers with me; the rest of you stay on this corner and prepare to fire. Phasers on heavy stun, fire on my mark."

When he finished giving orders, Josh waited until the Klingons were looking the other direction, then he, Luchs, and Wavers sprinted across the corridor and took cover. He gave the signal and all six officers moved into firing position and fired at the intruders.

Two warriors went down in the first volley, but the rest quickly turned their disruptors towards Josh's squad so they had to take cover once again. Josh saw another Klingon beaming in, so he leaned out and took him down before he knew what was happening.

"You two head around and make sure none of them sneak out through the other corridor," Josh ordered Luchs and Wavers.

Josh and the other three officers maintained contact with the boarders while these two moved to flank them. A few seconds later, Josh heard phaser fire from down the corridor and got a message from the flankers.

"Sir, we stopped one warrior trying to flank," Petty Officer Luchs reported. "We can advance on their rear and pin them in."

"No," Josh replied. "Just keep them bottled up for now. They're not endangering anything vital, so there is no need to rush."

Josh leaned out and shot another warrior as he stepped out to fire, but had to take cover quickly as two more Klingons beamed in and fired. As he turned to retake his cover position, a bath'leth crashed down where he was standing and cut his rifle in two; the warrior had swung with enough force to cleave a man in half, so he nearly fell over when he only met the resistance of a rifle. Josh instinctively raised what was left of his rifle into his face with one hand while grabbing his knife with the other. He quickly pulled his knife from its sheath and forced it into his opponent's throat while he was still stunned. As the warrior fell away, Josh saw two bodies lying on the other corner, one Klingon and one of his security team. He tapped his combadge to issue new orders to his flanking team.

"Luchs, move in on their rear. We just got hit by a scout team, so we need to finish this fight and search the area for more," he said.

"Moving in now, Sir," replied Luchs.

Josh watched as phaser fire came at the invaders from their backs as they moved into the corridor to avoid it. Chief Petty Officer Kendricks stepped out from the corner opposite Josh and took down the last of the Klingons with ease. Now that the bulk of the fighting was over, Josh moved to check on his fallen trooper, Crewman Terris. As he checked his vitals, only to confirm his fears, Ensign Kiels reported from the other gap.

"We arrived just as the Klingons started moving out, so we were able to effectively ambush and subdue them with no casualties," Nidiri reported.

"Very good," Josh replied. "We found at least one scout team on our deck, so we are searching the deck for more. I suggest that you do the same. Leave a team behind to deal with any other attempts by the Klingons to get on board."

"I'll get right on it, Sir," she replied.

Josh then turned to his squad to issue orders.

"Split into teams of two and search the immediate area for any more scouts; engage if you can do so without high risk or call for reinforcements if you find any Klingons. I'll remain here to ensure that no more warriors beam aboard. Move out."

Finally Josh reported to the captain.

The dire predicament of the Lotus Fleet flagship did not escape the bridge officers of the USS Spectre, even amidst disruptor fires and torpedo blasts from the aggressive Klingon task force.

"Captain, the Lotus took a hit that prevented their armor from fully deploying," reported tactical chief Tritter, blinking between the main viewer and his tactical readout.

Summers banged his right armrest with his fist.

"Crap! Alrighty then; lets give her as much cover as possible. Helm; move into position. tactical; start firing everything. Aim for the weakened shield grid of that dreadnought."

"Aye, Sir," answered both officers simultaneously.

"Commander Rogers; see if you can get a hold of the Lotus and find out what help we can provide."

At that very moment, after a quick glance at his PADD, chief engineer O'Conner tapped his badge.

"O'Conner to the bridge. We are running on fumes down here, Captain. Aft shields are down; Lieutenant Noack is keeping the bow and port shields up with reinforcement from deflector pulses, but they won't last much longer if we keep getting pounded like this."

The Birds of Prey around the Azimuth Horizon released their first set of inverted ion pulses toward the anomaly, which froze it in place just in that small arc; but the swells and tendrils began to increase in speed outward in every other direction than toward the Birds of Prey.

While they were moving on away from the battle nearby toward their next objective point, their sensors picked up the Spectre's fighters speeding toward them. The Captain of the lead ship contacted Ja'rod.

"*Jaqui*, the fighters will be here before we are able to release our second set of pulses. Shall we engage them?"

"No, we have a mission to complete. I order you to stand ground and focus whatever auxiliary power you have into shields and your ion pulses."

"But, *Jaqui*..."

"Are you questioning my order?" raged the Klingon Captain in charge of the operation.

"No, *Jaqui*... *Q'apla!*" said the other Klingon and cut off communications.

While they were charging their ion pulse emitters, the fighters reached the first ship and began to engage.

"They're not... fighting back..." then one dumbfounded pilot spoke over the radio.

The spectre's fighters had began their attack with standard tactics but, within moments, it was clear that the Birds of Prey weren't going to shoot back. So, instead of weaving and dodging between the warships, they formed up behind the lead Klingon warship and concentrated their fire.

While each fighter was no stronger than a well equipped runabout, thirty-six of them concentrating on a relatively small target like a dozen-crewed vessel were a force to be feared. With their coordinated fire, they easily ripped through the aging Bird of Prey's aft shield and a wave of a dozen microtorpedoes to the klingon's engines sent it in all directions with a blinding deflagration of a ruptured warp core.

With one down and four to go, the three dozen fighters slipped behind their next target and continued their assault, though as they did so, not one of the pilots trusted that it would be this easy for long.

On the Gowron, Ja'rod saw an opportunity. The Federation ships were vastly outmatched, and the Lotus was no longer fighting back. The Spectre was still hitting them on the port side, but it was a slow process that was hardly chipping away at the massive outer hull.

"Lotus' shields are down, *HoD*," reported the Tactical officer; "but there's some sort of hull armoring now covering it that is very resilient to our torpedoes. It appears propulsion and weapons are down too."

"Can we transport through that plating?" asked Ja'rod.

"Negative, *HoD*. However, it appears there are some small portions where it was not fully deployed that we may be able to squeeze a transport beam through."

"Send a boarding party. I want that ship intact. Kill all the crew."

The Tactical officer nodded. After some setup, five teams of a half a dozen Klingons were ready to be beamed into various points within the Federation vessel, including crew quarters, near the holodecks and just outside Engineering.

"*HoD*, we're going to have to do this one at a time for each group," the Engineer noted. "It will take about a minute per warrior, because we're going to have to realign the transporter after each beam-in due to the pinpoint accuracy we need to squeeze through these gaps."

"Do it," Ja'rod ordered. "It should take them several minutes to organize their forces and a bit longer to reach the boarding points. We should have enough warriors beamed in to each location by then."

"*HoD*, the only transporter frequency able to squeeze through those gaps does not match our shield frequency. If we do this now, we'll have to lower shields," the Tactical officer advised.

"I know that," Ja'rod seethed. "This ship will hold out long enough even without shields."

"But the officers near the port hull..."

"Will earn their honored place in *Sto'vo'kor*."

With the order given by the Klingon Captain, the warriors began boarding the Lotus with disruptor pistols and bat'leths in hand.

One of the Lotus security team yelled out a warning and shoved Captain Gould up against the wall as a disruptor shot buzzed passed him from one of a pair of Klingons positioned down the hallway. A fire fight immediately broke out between the two groups.

In the short time it took the fighters to destroy the Bird of Prey, the other four were able to release another volley of inverted ion pulses. They were slowly but effectively forming a shell to protect Klingon territory from the effects the rest of the quadrant would suffer.

Had they known it was only a stopgap measure and that the anomaly was still going to take over the whole Galaxy, including the Klingon Empire in a matter of years, they might have seen how stupid and foolish this action was.

But Klingons were not known for their thoroughness in science... or even caring about death, even their own.

One Klingon, the Captain leading the squadron, did see something foolhardy however. He did see his fellow Klingons dying with no honor. They did not fight back and they just died for the sake of a scientific experiment! It was something the Federations would do... sacrifice themselves for the "greater good" regardless of their personal honor; but not a true Klingon.

This, he could not stand for.

He ordered a Bird of Prey to follow him toward the fighters and for the other two to continue in the opposite direction... to fire more pulses closer to Klingon territory.

But the other ship and his own tactical officer, he commanded to fire at will, and the dozens of fighters swirling around them began to feel the full force of disruptor fire and photon torpedoes that two outdated, but nevertheless powerful Klingon warships could muster.

"*Jaqui*, two of the Birds are breaking formation," the Tactical officer on the Gowron reported.

"What!?" roared Ja'rod. "Hail the squadron leader."

"What are you doing?" he growled when the face of the Klingon appeared on his viewscreen.

"We can do away with these Federation pests and continue our mission later."

"You will get back in formation and complete the mission. That is an order!" Ja'rod raged.

"My apologies, but I will sacrifice no more of our kinsmen to dishonorable death! We will only die fighting!"

The communication cut off and Ja'rod scowled.

"Disgraceful, disobedient targ. I will hasten his journey myself. Focus all fire on the traitorous Bird of Prey. Let the other one live to see the punishment for defiance!"

"Yes, *Jaqui*," the Tactical officer said with hesitation.

He knew they were traitors, but still... it was a fellow Klingon ship. His internal struggle did not stop him from doing his duty, however and he fired all disruptors and torpedoes past the Lotus and the Spectre and, in several seconds, destroyed the Bird of Prey and several of the Spectre's fighters that were unfortunately too close to the explosion or in the line of fire during the barrage.

Upon losing a few of their fighters, the Spectre's squadron backed off of the remaining Bird of Prey, just in case the Gowron decided to continue its assault.

"They're shooting at each other now!" one of the pilots exclaimed with joy, pushing aside the death of his squadmates for the time being.



Starfleet officers were trained to be detached when a job needed to be done and delay their emotional responses until an appropriate time. The pilots were especially adept at this, and received extra training in the tradition of ancient Earth Air Forces. Pilots had to maintain exceptional reflexes at all times when in flight and strong emotions could mean the difference between life and death.

"Now if we can just get them to continue that, we won't have a problem," another added over their comm channel.

The squad leader attempted to corral them back on mission.

"Alright, cut the speculation. We still have a mission to perform... and we're not doing good enough," he added as he detected another round of ion pulses from the remaining two Birds of Prey.

He then ordered the fighters to pursue the remaining two, leaving their old target's fate to the actions of the Gowron.

The Bird of Prey did not wait around however and actually went ahead of the fighters toward its fellow ships. The Captain figured he'd have more chance with them then facing on the Gowron alone and its trajectory would at least make Ja'rod think it was obeying orders.

The lead Klingon Captain had the same thought however, seeing Ja'rod decimate his fellow Klingons. He would not stand for it anymore and ordered the other two to follow him. They all formed up and headed for the fighters.

"Keep 'em busy," the lead fighter pilot ordered, knowing the Spectre would arrive soon to finish them off.

The unexpected turn of events froze the bridge officers of the Spectre for a good three seconds before Lieutenant Tritter confirmed from his tactical readouts:

"Captain! The Gowron just fired on one of its own Birds and destroyed it! It appears that it was starting to engage our fighters..."

"Very well; get us over there, Helmsman, maximum speed."

"Aye, Captain."

By the time the ship arrived, the fighters had disabled one ship's engines and weapons and lowered the shields on a second by half.

"Commander Rogers," then said Summers, "get as much info as you can. We will barely have a few minutes to get a game plan together."

Quickly punching keys, David loaded what data he thought necessary and transferred it to his and the captain's terminal. Summer was just sitting back more deeply in his command chair as David leaned towards him as close as he could as, without pause, he activated the center screen's tactical display.

As the tactical map of the immediate region coalesced into view, it showed the third quadrant of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly and the relative positions, in green and red icons, of the Lotus, the Spectre and her fighters and the red Klingon ships current locations, all updated in real time.

David took a breath and, in a soft yet agitated whisper covered by the din of the bridge on high alert, spoke his mind. He ignored the colorful display completely.

"Sir, you know I would never object to you in front of the crew. But we cannot just abandon the Lotus!"

Summers sighed as the Commander spoke.

"I know Commander and thank you for that; I understand where you are coming from, but we still have a mission to perform and I do believe most of her ablative armor is up, so the Klingons will have a very hard time getting to her and her crew. Right now, there is not much we can do for them and I do not wish to leave those Birds of Prey free to kill off the rest of our fighters and continue messing with the Horizon. It is unfortunate that we left the Lotus, but she will be fine until we return to her. Right now, we need to take out those remaining Birds before we can get back to the Lotus... and I would like to do that as quickly as possible. Suggestions?"

With a reluctant nod, David accepted Summers' statement but, with a smirk, brought up an addendum of his own.

"If I may suggest, Sir... Could we at least leave the Klingons a parting gift? Let's say, a full spread from the aft tubes?"

Turning his attention back to the holographic display, David continued with his synopsis.

"It is well known, Sir, that Birds of Prey are weakest on their ventral hull, farther aft of the joint section of the engineering hull and neck. I suggest we come up underneath them. I would suggest all available power to forward weapons and a full spread. That, coupled with the remaining fighter arsenal on the same point, should punch through their shields and then their hull with relative ease."

Daniel Summers took some few seconds to carefully ponder Rogers' thoughts on the situation, trying to find any holes in his tactic or things he would not agree with... and could not find anything. Not that there was much time for lengthy tactical studies.

"Very well make it so. Fire aft torpedoes immediately and coordinate with the fighters on our new game plan so we can get back to the Lotus ASAP and assist them."

David nodded an affirmation and, grinning, turned and ordered the spread fired from the aft tubes at the dreadnought harassing the Lotus, giving particular instructions that the pulse fire tubes give a fast double launch. He wanted their 'gift' to be impressive.

Sitting back in his exec chair at the right of the captain's, David studied the tactical display still showing on the forward viewer for a second, then called to comms.

"Open channel to the fighter squadrons."

A moment passed then a quick chirp emanated throughout the bridge, signifying an open connection with the Spectre's remaining fighters. Taking a quick breath, Rogers outlined the attack plan on the three remaining birds.

"Squadrons! Follow our lead and prepare to target these coordinates in sequence. Attack pattern Epsilon Delta."

While he spoke, David punched icons on the arm rest that sent targeting highlights to the fighters, pinpointing a specific area on the ventral hull of the port Bird of Prey, aft of the engineering hull where it joined the neck of the Klingon ship. Once he finished, Rogers caught the helmsman's attention.

"Helm, full impulse. Bearing 310, mark 339. Bring us up under them."

As the Spectre leaped forward under increased thrust, it spewed out two torpedo's shot aft from her tubes, quickly followed by another pair. All four sped swiftly above and past the armored Lotus, speeding toward the weakened shield of the large dreadnought pounding on it. The Klingon warship was beaming landing parties aboard the stricken Lotus fleet flagship as her shields were down and her armor visibly not totally deployed.

The first pair of missiles punched through the leading edge of the huge Klingon vessel's port warp nacelle and erupted with a spectacular explosion that blew off the sharply edged front twenty meters of the nacelle. The second pair of torpedoes collided seconds later on the forward port side, four decks below the Klingon bridge. Because of an abnormal glitch in the pulse launch of the second of these pair, they were seconds apart. The first torpedo detonated on contact and cratered a huge hole into the hull of the dreadnought beside her navigation deflector and destroyed the Klingon port fire control room. Immediately afterward the second, and last parting gift from the Spectre swept through the plasma cloud of the first eruption and smashed on through another bulkhead.

But there was no explosion. The pass through the plasma debris had interrupted the firing sequence of the warhead.

Within the immense somber hull, a Klingon warrior picked herself up off of the floor of the corridor where she had been thrown when that last torpedo had smashed partway through the wall nearby. A shrill whistle and a gathering wind denoted escaping atmosphere around the puncture. She stared mutely at the short snout of the unexploded ordinance sticking almost a full half meter into the hallway. The faint whine of the trigger mechanism within the torpedo bespoke of its interrupted detonation.

Slowly, the Klingon female began to back away from the slightly smoking weapon.

On the Spectre, captain Summers straightened up and leant forward as an Ensign at tactical reported the unexpected event.

"Is there any way to manually detonate it from the Spectre?"

"Yes Captain, but not from the distance we are at now, we might be able to do so on our return to help the Lotus."

"Very well, Ensign, make that a priority for yourself on our return to do so."

"Aye Captain"

"Commander have the squadrons confirmed our new plan of attack?"

"Yes Sir, they have. I used attack pattern Epsilon Delta."

Tapping a couple of icons on his arm rest control panel, Rogers brought up the planned attack on the tactical display on the main viewer. The Spectre would sweep in under the left-most bird of prey and unleash a volley of combined phaser and torpedo fire, followed immediately by the fighters behind her with their own weapons. Once completed, the Akira class ship would loop over the centered enemy, using phasers to keep it at bay while diving under the starboard bird to repeat the Epsilon Delta attack on it, then swing back in an immelman type loop to attack the remaining enemy escort warship.

"Hopefully, Captain, we can accomplish a quick triple here and get back to the flagship ASAP."

"Let us hope so, Commander," agreed Summers before tapping his combadge and, almost in the same breath, asked into it: "Commander O'Conner, report; How are things in engineering?"

The chirp of a combadge activating preceded the voice of Michael O'Conner.

"I'm routing all auxiliary power into the structural integrity field and our shields are slowly recovering. My team has repaired any remaining sabotage damage. I need five minutes and then we're good to help with those Birds if necessary."

As the battle raged on in and out of the Spectre, another battle was going on around and within the Lotus, as Gould's security team walleied for position with the handful of Klingon warriors trying to hold them back.

So far, he had only lost one of his five-man team to incoming fire and dropped three of the intruders, but they didn't seem to be making any headway. A young human was in charge of his team; Gould regretted never learning his name.

"Every time we get one, another jumps in. It's like their spawning over there, Captain!"

Gould knew what he had to do, and he didn't like it one bit.

"Lieutenant.. we need to rush that position and get to engineering. We just don't have the time for a drawn-out fight."

The man looked at him blankly for only a second then nodded in agreement.

"OK... men, were going in! On me!" he yelled to the two other security officers with him.

He waited until they were ready, then let out a yell and charged down the hallway, followed closely by the rest. Gould brought up the rear. He had to restrain himself from directly joining them and even charging in first; for all he knew, the engineering team was dead in there and he was the last person on board that had a chance to get main power back on. He couldn't afford to be the self-sacrificing hero in this.

The fight was fierce and only one man was still standing at the end. Gould had managed to get in the last shot as he came up, taking the last Klingon out before he could follow through with an attack on that last security officer. The lieutenant and another man were down; he couldn't be sure if they were dead or not, but the last man had only a single cut down the right side of his chest and it didn't appear to be deep.

"Stay on guard," he said sternly as the officer started checking on the others.

Gould pulled out a transport inhibitor and set it up, but just before he could activate it, another Klingon materialized right near him. Because the Klingons had much less concern for safety, the Imperial transporter technology did not use an annular confinement beam and thus was both quick and silent... but this time not fast enough. The security officer shot him before he could draw a bead with his pistol, the force of the concussion phaser rifle bolt slamming him against a nearby wall.

Not stopping in his work, Gould spared only a glance at the Klingon as he fell and activated the inhibitor while touching his combadge at the same time.

"Gould here. Zone 1 secured; we have wounded. Proceeding to primary objective," he reported and motioned for the other man to follow him.

*I only hope Vincent won't have to make a choice like that one anytime soon...* He thought.

Gould and the security officer reached the door to main engineering to find it was sealed. The readout on his crewman's tricorder showed clear however. Gould started manually overriding the controls.

"The section must have sealed up when engineering was breached."

"Well.. whatever it was, radiation or vacuum, it's gone now, Sir," the other confirmed as he pocketed his tricorder to better heft his weapon.

The reinforced door opened as the Half-Vulcan pushed the last button.

A hazy mist seemed to fill engineering but it was thin enough to see through well enough. Several men could be seen laying around and, in short order, they found chief engineer Adams unconscious near environmental controls.

"He's alive, Sir."

Gould nodded, checking the display.

"They had a coolant leak. It looks like Mister Adams managed to cap it off before they all suffocated... amazing."

He moved then to the main power control settings.

"Main power went down purely as a matter of protocol; the last hit ruptured a plasma conduit that backburned into the core... or would have. if the failsafe had not engaged. Just a bypass and a reset and we should be back on line. And... here... weeee... go."

The warp core started the throb again and various controls came back on.

"Gould to bridge; main power restored, Mister Tomah. What's our situation?"

"Hold on, Sir; sensors are just now coming back on line... aww Hell! full reverse!"

*Gould don't ask what's going on*, the captain sighed inwardly. He instinctively reverted to being an engineer and brought the impulse engines to full power; the navigator did the rest.

His communicator demanded his attention again. The voice of his XO was then heard addressing him this time.

"Captain, the Spectre is still engaging the Birds. They just launched a volley of torpedoes at the big ship, but its just shrugging them off."

"Understood; keep laying fire to the weakened shield area and try not to let them damage any one part of the Lotus too much. We need to keep that ship focused on us for the time being and give Summers a chance to finish off those BoPs."

While all this was happening, Gould was getting ready to return to the center seat... until his eyes followed the nearby guard's finger pointing to the wall closest to the recognizable impact mark of disruptor fire on duranium hull plates. His smile turned grim. He walked closer to the area he was looking at as he activated his communicator.

Outside, the Klingon warship loomed over the Lotus, carefully swallowing the tiny ship into its large bay, the sleek primary hull of the Starfleet ship already slipping inside. The Lotus lit up and, for a second, seemed to stop moving, holding it's place just inside the Gowron; but that was an illusion. The Lotus was building up speed and simply matching the larger ship with its backward flight until, quickly enough, she reached full power and pulled away.

The Gowron then suddenly turned away so as not to expose their now vulnerable open docking bay to incoming fire.

"Good God! What I wouldn't give for an armed photon right now!" Tomah said as the huge bay doors of the Imperial dreadnought closed before them.

He was interrupted by the voice of V'Rell Gould comme over the bridge speakers again.

"Commander, contact the Spectre and see how their doing. If they're clear, tell them to start the Horizon run now. We'll catch up as soon as we finish dealing with the Klingons."

"Are you coming back to the bridge, captain?" asked his freshly-minted XO.

The captain of the flagship gave a deep sigh and looked again at the wall.

"I've got something I have to look into.."

He shook his head as his eyes followed the jagged crack that ripped its way through the entire length of engineering, right through the bracing for the port warp nacelle.

The voice of chief of security Josh Vincent then came over the captain's combadge at this very instant.

"Captain Gould, we've secured the two beam-in points. At least one team of Klingons got past us, but we took them down and we're searching the area for others."

As Josh knelt next to the body of his fallen team member whose phaser he was pointing at the beam-in point down the corridor. He couldn't help but think about the first time he had lost a comrade. It had been two years ago while he was on a deep cover assignment in the Romulan Empire and his partner's cover had been compromised. The soldiers came in the night to take him away, but the Vulcan did not go peacefully.

"Sir," Petty Officer Luchs said as he tapped Josh on the shoulder, "we've searched the deck. There are no more Klingons around."

Josh acknowledged the report with a nod as the rest of the team took up positions covering the beam-in point. he then stood up and tapped his combadge.

"Lieutenant Vincent to Mister Tomah; with power back on-line, the armor should have finished its deployment... can you confirm?" Josh asked. "And if the sensors show no more intruders in my area or Ensign Kiels's position, I should be returning to the bridge shortly."

"Ah, you're clear to return to the bridge, Lieutenant Vincent... and Godspeed to yah," Tomah replied.

Vincent gave a quick briefing to his teams and started off for the bridge. He then noticed petty officer Janine Olsen carefully checking the area ahead.

"The main transporter's power had been rerouted," she explained, "and I can't get a hold of main engineering. Is it clear down there yet, Sir? I do hold A level 2 engineering degree; I'd like to be of help if possible."

"I believe the area is clear, but I will send an officer to escort you there, just to be safer," Josh replied to the petty officer.

He stepped around the corner and motioned for Ensign Kiels, who was just leaving the armory, to join him.

"Nidiri, I want you to escort Miss Olsen to engineering," he ordered. "Then lend a hand to Ensign T'Pala at the brig. She'll have her hands full with the Klingons that were stunned in the fight."

All three entered the turbolift, which first went to the engineering deck where the pair of women exited and moved towards main engineering. Josh then rode it back up and exited on the command deck of the flagship. He stepped out and relieved Edward Tomah at the tactical station.

"Thank you for taking over, Sir," Josh said. "I can take it from here."

"Ah, very well."

And with a nod, Tomah resumed his work at the command chair but added over his shoulder:

"Did you, ah, get a chance to check on the Captain? I don't like him working alone down there."

"Don't worry, Sir," Vincent said while checking his tactical display. "I sent him some help, I sent Petty officer Olsen to assist him with a guard..."

More weapons fire impacted the Lotus, interrupting and distracting him. The ship was being pummeled horribly by both disruptor and torpedo impacts, but all to very little effect as the more maneuverable Intrepid class starship simply changed facing to keep only armored

surfaces exposed. Even while she was still unable to regenerate her hardened shell, she was proving to be quite a tough nut to crack.

"The Klingons must be going out of their minds," the helm officer said with a smile.

Edward Tomah however had gone silent looking the viewscreen, where the huge warship seemed to fill outer space entirely.

"Continue sporadic torpedo fire," he ordered. "We want to keep them, ah, thinking this is a fight and not just a delaying tactic."

And then, suddenly, he stood up and walked to the turbolift.

"Take over Vincent. I'll be back, ah, in a few minutes."

The First officer left with those words, ignoring any words of shock or protest at seeing the senior officer leaving the bridge during red alert, right when they were fighting for their lives.

But chief of science Sainthill looked over at Vincent from his own station with a curious expression that amounted to the Vulcan equivalent of a shrug and went back to his work.

At that moment, the sound of incoming fire could be heard against the hull, an odd, dull thumping that few members of the crew had ever heard before; the sound of weapons fire striking an unshielded ship... and doing no damage.

Except to what the commanding officer of the Lotus Fleet flagship was looking at... on the inner bracing of the nacelle.

He had a tricorder out and was now walking along the length of the fissure.

"Ensign..." he said to the remaining security officer with him; "you're clear to return to your station. Evac Mister Adams and the rest to sickbay and see if you can have them back as quickly as possible, I'll see if I can increase the dampeners to relieve some of the stress off this area."

Nervously eyeing the damage, the guard nodded.

"Aye, Sir. Sickbay, medical emergency; four to beam in from Engineering."

Within seconds, he and the injured personnel were gone in a flurry of light. Gould went to his task.

Quickly, he set up an improvised field projector and jury-rigged it to use its stabilizing energy field to help reinforce the structural integrity of the damaged hull. He paused, moving his hand to his pistol when the doors opened... but relaxed as Olsen walked in. She saw him and got a nervous look until he moved his hand away from the weapon.

"Petty officer Olsen, Sir; we met before."

Gould nodded.

"I remember you. What are you doing here, Olsen?"

He went back to work, aligning the projector, as he spoke

"Lieutenant Vincent sent me, Sir. He thought I might be of help, Sir, I have an engineering degree.. Sir."

She was so nervous it was almost cute.

He looked at her oddly for a second, then sighed.

"Ok then; check to see if the warp field modulator was affected by the energy displacement of the structural integrity field. I'll finish up here and then we'll work on reinforcing the lateral plasma injector."

As she started checking the modulator, Gould watched her carefully for a few seconds and then spoke up again.

"You know what? better check the injector first.. If that goes, the rest wouldn't matter."

She looked at him suspiciously, then smiled and moved across the bay to check the injector.

Gould finished setting the projector and stood up.

"It just needs a cycling unit regulator. I'll be right back."

But then, Olsen's phaser came up in a flash.

"I don't think so, Captain..."

His right hand twitched but he didn't go for his own phaser.

"Let me guess; your one of the Children?"

She shrugged.

"What gave me away? If you don't mind me asking."

The phaser was held steadily on him.

"I make it a habit to know all my crewmembers that have engineering experience, in case the need arises.. You don't have any. I checked your file."

He shrugged as well.

"It's an old habit from my chief engineering days."

"Well, at least it wasn't my acting."

She gave an amused look.

"Not that it matters much, since you and everyone else on this ship will be dead soon."

Gould's face got deathly serious.

"Your no Horizon Child, are you? You knew every inch of this bay and how to work it; your training must have been extreme... Spy?"

She gave a slight smile.

"Let's just say I represent a group of people that would rather see this whole universe just fade away... and all I have to do to make that happen is stop this ship. That and letting the Klingons destroying the Spectre won't hurt either."

She shrugged again.

"And I'll be safely away in your personal yacht, Captain, watching it all fall apart."

Then her face went grim.



"Lovely talking to you, Captain Gould, but our time is up."

And with those words, she pressed the fire button.

Nidiri stopped for a brief second to make sure that what she'd just heard was correct. Quickly deciding that it was, in fact, a phaser shot, she turned with her rifle at the ready and entered the engineering bay.

The captain lay a few meters inside the room; but, as she scanned the area, Nidiri did not see Petty Officer Olsen.

She knew Olsen must be in the room somewhere, so she kept her eyes up as she moved to check the captain's vitals.

"Ensign Kiels to bridge," she said into her combadge. "Medical emergency in engineering; the captain has been hit. He is still alive, but he is unconscious."

"Beam the captain to sick bay immediately," Josh Vincent ordered to the ensign manning the ops station. "Ensign Kiels, what happened down there? How was the captain injured?"

"He was hit by a phaser, Sir," she replied as the inert body of Captain Gould dematerialized from engineering. "There is no sign of Petty Officer Olsen. I believe she shot the captain."

"Stay put, I'm sending a security team to you now," Josh ordered Nidiri. "When they arrive, I want engineering locked down and searched. We can't afford to have our people hitting us from inside while we're fighting the Klingons."

The chief of security, who hadn't had time to take up the command chair since Commander Tomah had hastily departed, typed-in orders for the security team on the security console.

"Commander Tomah is on his way down to you as well... I think... so, keep your eyes opened for him. Bridge out," he said.

He then stepped to the command position as Ensign Hermann relieved him at tactical.

"Fire a full torpedo spread at that behemoth, Ensign Hermann. Try to find any weak spots in their shields and hit them as hard as you can," Josh ordered as he waited for word on the captain.

As the commanding officer of the flagship rematerialized on the main med bed, Doctor Bindo ran a scanner over him with precise, practiced moves.

"He's got several minor phaser burns and concussive shock... nothing life-threatening. I'm going to try and revive him." she noted outloud and applied a hypo to the side of his neck.

Gould's eyes flittered open.

"Doctor Bindo? I'm in... sickbay?"

He raised up on one arm, holding his other hand to his face.

"Captain, can you remember what happened?" Jolie said with a concerned look on her face.

"I was talking to Olsen... she had a phaser.. Right, now I remember.."

He stood up with a wince.

"I recalibrated the field projector to scatter an incoming phaser shot. I guess it didn't work as well as I planned it."

"It worked well enough, Captain. You're still alive." the chief medical officer of the Lotus said with a smile.

He didn't smile in return.

*Yes, but why am I still alive?* he pondered silently.

"I have to get back to the bridge"

And without another word, he trotted off out of the emergency ward and into the adjoining corridor towards the turbo lift.

"Gould to bridge!" he said, tapping his combadge. "Give me a status report!"

He was surprised to hear security chief Josh Vincent's voice instead of that of his XO, Edward Tomah's.

"Captain, it is good to hear you're okay. Ensign Kiels is locking down the engineering bay where we believe Petty Officer Olsen is still located. The Klingon boarding parties have been cleared and we are..."

"Sir, incoming torpedoes from the direction of the anomaly!" interrupted Ensign Hermann. "They came from the Spectre, but they're going to come real close to the hull."

Outside the Lotus, four torpedoes shot past the Lotus mere meters away from the ablative armor and smashed into the Klingon cruiser.

"The torpedoes took out their port fire control room," Hermann reported. "One of the torpedoes did not detonate and is now lodged in the ship."

"Very good! Move us to their port side and concentrate fire on the weakened area," Josh ordered before continuing with the captain. "Sorry for the interruption, Sir; we got a little surprise from the Spectre. We are maneuvering to the Klingon's port side to capitalize on the damage done by Captain Summers' ship, which has moved towards the anomaly to stop the Birds of Prey from firing their ionic pulses in there. Mister Tomah left the bridge just before you were shot; I assumed that he was headed for engineering."

In transporter room 2, the form of a woman just then quickly materialized on the pad. A phaser could be seen in her hand.

"What?" she cried angrily.

"Hold it right there, Olsen."

Edward Tomah moved around the control console of the transporter, himself also holding a phaser.

"Don't even bother. I deactivated your weapon during transit."

She looked at it then tossed it aside.

"What are you doing? I gave you your orders, "Tomah!" Now your upsetting our plan to replace the captain."

Tomah frowned, looking very unlike himself. His typical speech pattern was noticeably all but gone at this very moment.

"*Your* orders were to be my replacement "Olsen..." but that wasn't enough for you, was it? you wanted to destroy the ship, didn't you? I cannot allow that."

"You fool! we could wipe out this entire empty space forever! if command knew of this situation, they *would* allow this course of action, you know that!"

Her face seemed to morph as she spoke, losing control of her form slightly.

"No, I don't believe they would. I can't... such a crime goes beyond the scope of reason. To condemn them *all* to death? even if they did order it, I would not follow such a command. now, you will surrender to me without further incident, and I will arrange for your "escape" later.

She looked at the phaser then back at him.

"This must be done. There is no other way."

"Please don't.."

As he started to speak, she started to shift, moving at him quickly.

He fired and the phaser beam struck her dead on.

And it was set to kill.

She gasped and staggered back. He shook his head sadly and fired again.

"Tomah to the bridge. Ah, I have secured Olsen in transporter room 2 and she is incapacitated. I need a security detail down here pronto."

As he stood over her half deformed body, he then added in a sigh:

"Ah, I don't think she was Human."

Captain Gould had just re-entered the bridge as Tomah said this.

"Good job, Number One. Make sure you get her safely secured in the brig, then get back to the bridge."

Tomah's voice brightened

"Ah, is that you, Sir? glad to hear your voice! When I, ah, registered a phaser shot before I yanked her out of engineering, I feared the worst."

"For good reason... but we'll compare notes later, Gould out."

As he walked over to Security Chief Vincent, one of the security officer yelled out, "Captain on the bridge!" and Gould painfully winced.

"Its like someone's playing the drums on my head.." he said to Vincent.

"If I may, Sir, that may be the continuous impact of incoming disruptor fire you are feeling" Science Chief Sainthill offered.

"Is that what that is?"

Gould returned to his chair and looked up at the ceiling as if he might see the hull buckling.

"What's the status of the Klingon ship?"

"Their port shields are severely weakened," Josh replied. "The Spectre took out their port fire control room with a torpedo barrage and we have just maneuvered onto their port side to exploit that damage."

After typing in a few commands on the console, Josh added:

"I've sent Ensign Kiels and her security team to assist Mister Tomah with his prisoner."

"Inform them I believe it's an Undine."

Not waiting for his bridge crew to recover from their shock and surprise, Gould ordered with a little annoyance creeping in his voice:

"From what I got her to admit before she tried to kill me anyway... So, take appropriate measures."

"Aye, Sir" Vincent replied.

The captain of Lotus Fleet's flagship then looked at the Klingon dreadnought on the main screen.

"Tactical evaluations?"

Vincent was of course the first to speak up, as Chief of security and tactical.

"Armor is holding, but were running low on torpedoes, Captain. The thing can take a lot of damage, Sir."

"Shields are now available again at forty-five percent at your order, Sir..." Sainthill added. "But.. "

Gould turned his head over his left shoulder and looked over at him.

"Go on, Lieutenant."

"Sir, I estimate a sixty-three percent probability that, combined with the Spectre, we could disable the Klingon ship given its current condition... but this includes a ninety-four percent probability that the Spectre would also be disabled in the conflict, and forty-seven percent that the Lotus would also effectively be so as well."

Gould gave a heavy sigh.

"Understood; a battle for another day. Helm, break off contact and plot a course for the Spectre. Tactical, stand by to drop armor and bring power to all weapons. Helm... Picard maneuver. Put us in the middle of it as fast as you can, while we still have surprise on our side."

He looked around the room. Josh Vincent then spoke up.

"You are aware, Sir, that Klingons do have faster than light sensors; the Picard Maneuver will not fool them as they did an old, outdated Ferengi cruiser a century ago..."

"But it will still allow us to micro jump instantly into position before they can react to their readings," countered the captain. "Their sensors are certainly better, but Klingons are still Klingons; and like all predators, they can be surprised and freed with indecisiveness by a seemingly defenseless prey suddenly jumping at their throat."

The young tactical officer nodded in appreciation of his commanding officer's assesment.

"Read, Captain".

"Course plotted, Sir" the helmsman stated.

Gould nodded looking at large ship on the screen one more time.

"Engage"

For less than a second the ship jumped to warp while simultaneously dropping the armor and raising its shields. The Klingons expecting the Lotus to remain engaged with the dreadnought did notice it but could not yet react at the very moment their alarms went off; by then, Vincent had his targets.

"The Spectre just blasted the port Bird of Prey and its fighters are moving in to finish it off," Josh reported when the Lotus dropped out of warp. "It is currently looping to attack the starboard ship, so I'm targeting the middle enemy and firing."

The Lotus moved in behind its target as the Spectre looped overhead and Josh fired a full phaser barrage which dropped the Klingons' remaining shields. Just as the shields dropped, the nimble, refitted Intrepid class Starfleet vessel followed with a torpedo salvo which tore into the ship and destroyed it.

"Target destroyed, Sir," Josh simply said.

"Excellent work everyone. Helm, start plotting a course for the trench maneuver around the Azimuth Horizon. Sainthill, contact the Spectre and tell them we're out of time and must start phase 1 of operation Horizon immediately. That dreadnought will have to wait."

What was left of the Klingon Birds of Prey squadron was too damaged and too few in numbers to effectively threaten their mission; and they just didn't have time to play "devil in the dark" with them.

From the bridge of the USS Spectre, the explosion could be detected and seen through their viewer, bursting out of one side of the hull of the Gowron.

"Sir, it appears that some shots fired from the Lotus impacted the unexploded torpedo," reported Lieutenant Tritter. "They're effectively disabled."

"Very good," replied Captain Summers. "Helm, in five minutes, set a course towards those Birds of Prey, full impulse."

"Sir, the Lotus is already ahead of us. It looks like they repaired their damaged engines and are on course to assist with the Birds of Prey," the huge security and tactical chief excitedly announced when one of the two remaining Birds were destroyed, and with a bit of disappointment added; "the other one has cloaked, Sir."

"Very well, let them run," replied Summers. "Helm, plot a course in the containment loop pattern given to us by Fleet Command. Maximum Warp."

He tapped his combadge again.

"Engineering, adjust the warp core to allow the subspace rifts to form at maximum warp," said Summers to O'Conner.

"Yes, Sir, we need command authorization to remove the lockouts."

"Right. Computer, remove the Engineering lockouts for post-warp-five protection. Authorization: Summers-three-delta-five-two."

Following those words, he finally turned towards his left and to his Executive Officer.

"Commander, see if you can formulate a plan to avoid any unwanted visitors as we commence this containment loop. We're already behind schedule and the mission requires it to be completed without any more interruptions."

"Aye, Sir" responded Rogers and he moved to Tactical to formulate a plan.

## CHAPTER SIX : INFERNO

Crist had sat there on the bridge for about five hours. During those five hours, he had spent most of it on the Bridge, but had spent some time in the ready room. Now, he sat again in the center chair, staring at the viewscreen. Up to this point, nothing special has happened. Just then, Jolan entered, walking onto the bridge.

"Lieutenant, my men are good. They are patrolling deck 1 as you ordered."

"Good work," answered Andorian chief of security Shran, antennae perking up.

Crist looked around the bridge. He could see how well his crew were coping. Their preparations and duties thus far, were just as he'd expected both to be. Crist then motioned to Jolan and Shran.

"Would you two come with me? I'd like to have a word with you both."

Crist got up from his chair and left the bridge, with Shran and Jolan following. As he exited, Crist nodded to the two guards who were stationed outside the portside bridge doors. Crist walked into his ready room and waited for Shran and Jolan. After they had entered, he locked the door behind them.

"Are you two all set?" Crist asked.

"Aye Sir," answered the Andorian. "With the concerns of possible intruders on board, I've checked my men personally. I have ruled out about seventy-five percent of my men as possible threats. Those men have been armed with hand phasers as well as rifles and stationed at the ship's key points as well as on patrol duty of the ship. The others have been stationed at non critical areas and will only be given type 1 phasers. If there are intruders onboard, we'll capture them, just as you planned."

"I know the Lieutenant told me of this plan, but I still think it's risky," Jolan then said.

"No point in starting a witch hunt now," Crist retorted. "That will get us nowhere. If there is someone onboard working for the Children, we could use them to get information."

"If you say so, Sir," the marine officer acknowledged blandly.

"Mister Jolan; are you and your folks ready? And can you trust them all?"

"I trust them completely, Sir. And yes, we are ready. Just find the ship, and we'll head over to get our missing man. We will patrol deck 1 until that time. The way that it's set up, we can quickly make it to transporter pad 1, on deck 1, to board the enemy."

"Good work, the both of you. So, with security safe, we just need to watch the rest of the crew. With any luck, anyone dumb enough to try something will be captured; and if not, then we shouldn't have any problems."

Just then, a voice came over the comm.

"Sir, incoming message from a log buoy, it's from the Republic."

Crist tapped his comm badge,

"Alright, I'm on my way. Guys, get back to your stations. I have a feeling were going to work earlier than expected."

The three men exited the ready room. Crist and Shran returned to the bridge.

"Ok, let's hear the message."

Hughes began to read the message from his console.

"It seems the Republic detected a Children fleet heading into the anomaly. They moved to intercept them and request we join them as soon as possible."

"Is there anything else?"

"No, Sir."

Crist sighed.

"Hughes, intercept course, maximum warp."

"Aye; it will take us eighteen minutes to get there."

The McKenzie changed its course and increased speed.

Minutes ticked by.

"ETA?"

"Two minutes, Sir," the helmsman answered his commanding officer.

"Shran, go to red alert. I want torpedoes loaded, shields up, and phasers charged when we drop out of warp."

"Aye."

The ship lights began to dim, and red lights began to flash.

"Hughes, drop us out of warp."

Aye. We've reached the location of the Republic; dropping out of warp."

The McKenzie reintegrated normal space and continued at full impulse.

"Shran," then called out Captain Crist.

"Shields up, weapons primed."

"Good. Snowfire, where's the Republic? And what else is out there?"

Snowfire looked down at her screen for a moment, then looked again. Fingers dashed across the board in a whirlwind of movement, isolating energy traces and beacon signals. Then she raised her head.

"The...the Republic's gone." She said softly. "I have an impulse trail leading into the plasma corona of the anomaly. And with the debris patterns, it's almost impossible that they had an active shield grid. I know the Republic's record, and I know that they'll do their best to improvise some sort of protection... and likely succeed. But against the Horizon, you need metaphasic shielding to have any chance of surviving for an extended period."

She sighed.

"It looks like this just became a rescue mission in addition to everything else."

Then refocused on the multiple unknown, but presumably hostile, dots on the display before her.

"We've got what looks like the Horizon's Children fleet ahead of us. Multiple contacts, mostly civilian vessels carrying the majority of the cult. Three...wait, four escorts. A Cardassian Hideki class light cruiser on their port, a retrofitted Maquis class raider to starboard and what looks like a severely patched Jem'Hadar attack cruiser bringing up the rear. I'm also detecting a rather impressive masked energy pattern at the head of the convoy."

She tapped keys on her panel and then nodded.

"From what seems to have happened to the Republic, I would guess that that pattern is the Children's main punch. Assume the three light vessels are intended to bracket us into a perfect position for a salvo from that ship..."

There was a sudden flurry of activity from the helm station, and Hughes eyes and fingers frantically moving across his panel.

"Captain! I have no control over navigation!" He exclaimed.

And on the main viewer, the ominous fire of the Azimuth Horizon suddenly loomed threateningly towards them; and all across the small starship, the whine of warp engines building up to maximum activation was heard.

\* \* \*

"We lost them, my Lord."

It took a lot of restraint from N'Eligahn not to strike the man sitting at the tactical station. Nevertheless, the man cringed under the burning stare of his golden eyes. Without a word, he stepped back to the smiling Rethian woman in the command seat.



"Their shields were down and their propulsion damaged," she reminded him as they looked on the main viewer at the small field of debris dispersing with the last flashes of burning plasma before the awesome background of the Azimutuh Horizon's celestial fire. "Even if they managed to survive our last attack, these sinners will not last long inside Heaven's Fire."

He didn't say anything for a while. He knew from first hand experience that, without metaphasic shielding and pulse propulsion, no ship could withstand for long or escape the plasma inferno and the huge neutronium debris swirling in the corona of the anomaly. Their first disruptor volley had succeeded in knocking out the shield grid of the USS Republic just as planned, and then, their following photon torpedo spread had succeeded in severely damaging their impulse engine. Since warp power was useless, even fatal within the Azimuth Horizon, this left the Excelsior class vessel powerless to survive or escape the fiery maelstrom where their frantic efforts to evade attack had plunged them in.

Yet, N'Eligahn felt uneasy. If anything, Starfleet officers might be fools, but still, they were resourceful. A few scattered debris was not enough to convince him that they had truly won.

"Have the convoy scan for them once they get inside the Horizon," he cautioned Ty'Renick. "Don't count them out until you see their lifeless, broken hull."

Visibly not convinced but nevertheless prudent enough, she nodded to their tactical officer who transmitted the order.

"Damage report!" she then asked with an authoritative tone.

A male voice came in from the intercom.

"Engineering here, My Lady. Warp speed is knocked out, one impulse reactor offline and a few targeting sensors burned out; damage to external plating. Repair teams have been sent."

"How long before repairs are completed?"

After a few seconds of silence, Ty'Renick repeated her question, a slight tone of impatience creeping in her voice.

"Engineering; I asked a question."

She was about to burst into an angry shout as silence again answered her for a few more seconds when, finally, the engineer at the other end of the comm responded:

"Sorry, My lady; as I said to Lord N'Eligahn when I left the bridge earlier on his order, no central comm down here you know... I had to contact each team in turn to get their..."

"I asked for a report, not excuses." she cut him off impatiently.

"Half an hour for warp; half that to bring the impulse engine back online. We still have two fully functional impulse engines."

"Hull plating?"

"Ah, well, even with transporter and replicator support, it would require half an hour of extravehicular work..."

"Send a team out," N'Eligahn then ordered.

"Err... now, My Lord? But... if we are attacked again..."

"We will need that armor," finished the Rethian coldly.

"My Lord..."

"Chief engineer; what is the First Truth?" suddenly asked Ty'Renick to the engineer over the comm channel.

"This universe was born out of Fire; and the light of the Heavenly Fire will show us the doorway to Paradise," immediately recited the man.

"And what is the Second Truth?" she asked then.

"The Prophet will come through the doorway and open it for all; and all who will listen to him and follow him over the Horizon will be The Blessed Children of the Horizon."

"And the Third Truth?"

"The needs of all Children... outweigh the needs of the few... or the one," then answered meekly the voice of the man.

"Report when the work is done. See to it personally, Chief," ordered N'Eligahn before cutting off the communication.

Ty'renick sighed and opened another channel.

"Sickbay; casualty report."

"They are just starting to come in," replied a female voice this time. "I'll get back to you on that."

The Rethian woman gripped her armrests as her eyes became mere slits and her voice turned into a hiss.

"I want to know now, Doctor!"

"Make an internal sweep with ship sensors then!" shot back the woman's voice. "You're the one on the bridge, not I! This is a sickbay, not a damn command center! You'll get a report after they all report in... or finish dragging the bodies here! Sickbay out!"

Both former Starfleet officers on the command podium shared an angry glare but, before they could say anything else, the voice of their tactical operative rose in alarm:

"My Lady! Starship approaching sector at high warp... Defiant class!"

"The McKenzie..." simply said N'Eligahn, a smirk now stretching his orange-scaled face.

"Status, speed, vector and time of interception," demanded Ty'Renick.

"Status undetermined, coming at over warp 9.9, bearing from high port astern, ETA about five minutes!"

"This is sloppy report, tactical!" N'Eligahn said with a hard tone.

"Best we can do at this distance, My Lord! The anomaly's heavy subspace interference..."

"Battle stations!" interrupted the reptilian woman in the command chair. "Stay under cloak and begin outflanking maneuver as before. All escorts on planned triple interception course the moment they drop out of warp and begin their idiotic peacekeeping Starfleet routine."

"I know Captain Crist," N'Eligahn whispered to her then, as they prepared the same ambush that had caused the Republic's quick demise. "He's experienced but unimaginative. And he's not a meticulous planner, relying mostly on instinct like all good Starfleet captains... if there is such a thing anymore. Surprising him will not be difficult... and he barely have five dozen people on board his ship... or so he thinks."

"Well then," suddenly retorted his lover with a growing, cruel smile, "our martyrs will be most successful. All of them... everywhere they are."

\* \* \*

"It has begun..."

The voice of the Prophet echoed throughout the large room, into the minds of every pilgrim of the rag tag cultist fleet and seemingly throughout the entire sector, as, almost simultaneously, those that had chosen martyrdom as their way to paradise obeyed the dictates of their faith.

Because security officers Tyvya, Oseno Jureth and Josh Vincent had enforced their diligent implementation of all the harsh security protocols devised by Captain Kheren, the Artemis, the Alsea and the Lotus were spared from cultist assault.

The others were not so lucky.

"Captain Onia! our engines are shutting down!"

The Deltan commanding officer of the USS Wisconsin shot out of her chair.

"Engineering, report!"

"Captain! the cultists are..."

The strained voice of chief engineer Kraytine was cut short by the distinct whine of a phaser blast. Then, another voice came through the speakers:

"We are the Horizon Children; this ship's power is now under our control. You will obey our orders... or we will destroy it."

Onia looked at her bridge crew then glanced at the main viewer. Then, she saw that the Pittsburgh had just ejected its warp core.

"Who is responsible for this!" roared the towering captain of the Pittsburgh.

"Unknown, Sir!" his first officer answered while his fingers ran frantically over his console. "Sir, it seems there was some computer commands infiltrated into our system; it automatically ejected our warp core at a preset time!"

"Find me who's responsible! We swept that ship thoroughly for intruders and infiltrators before we left the starbase!"

"We did, Sir... but it appears the computer tampering was not done by anyone on board... it was done from the starbase, while we had been docked and connected to their main systems."

At that same moment, on Starbase 10, Operations was suddenly alerted by security.

"Ops! Security team 6 here, in maintenance section 3; we have found two unconscious officers! Lieutenant Scott from engineering and Lieutenant Brie from operations! We're rushing them to main sickbay!"

At the same moment, another message came from the USS Aurora.

"Commodore Brigham to Starbase 10; starbase, we are registering boosted thruster activity from you; you are moving at one quarter impulse toward 090 mark 12... towards the sector of the anomaly!"

"Fleet Captain Samji! our systems register no momentum and no propulsion system active. Sensors do not register change of position!" reported Lieutenant Commander Grok, trying to manage the hundred of communications suddenly cluttering up the airwaves. "Systems are in a diagnostic loop; we can't know if we're actually engaging or disengaging them or doing anything at all!"

And, as security officers moved out to answer the sudden alert, they were repelled by forcefields erected at every egress from the room.

"Every access to major sections of the base are isolated in level 10 forcefields, Sir!" then confirmed Lieutenant Jorga from the security console... just before it exploded right in his face from a sensor feedback.

And, on board the USS McKenzie, things looked just as grim. The moment the Defiant class starship dropped out of warp, her prow aimed on its own towards the unforgiving fires of the Azimuth Horizon, warp engines flaring up again.

The sudden plight of the McKenzie was immediately noticed by the command crew of the Cult's cloaked lead ship.

"My Lady; the unbelievers, ship is veering off from us towards the Horizon... their warp engines are flaring up!"

"Their shields are going down, My Lady," added the tactical officer.

"Thus be the Will of the Prophet," answered Ty'Renick with a joyless smile and a lifted satisfied chin. "Let their sins be cleansed by the Fire of Heaven; and would they repent with their final breath, they will earn Salvation along with our martyr now guiding them towards the Truth."

In reverent silence, they watched as the now defenseless warship's prow completed a ninety-degrees turn to face the full flaring of the Azimuth Horizon.

On board the USS McKenzie, a voice reported through the bridge's speakers.

"Bridge, Jolan here; somebody barricaded himself within the computer core room! And life support has been deactivated in there! Tricorder reads one lifeform, Bajoran."

"Captain, we appear to have been compromised by Children agents." Snowfire said, her comment coming on the very heels of Jolan's. "Stand by."

She tapped a few keys with one hand, the other hitting her combadge.

"Nolanis." She said calmly.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Initiate Scream."

Two decks down, Snowfire's science team closed their eyes and connected three rather unique modules into the McKenzie's primary data transfer conduit. And at the same time, Snowfire slid a similar device into her panel, eyes sliding shut in sudden concentration. She knew what she was doing, but this was going to be a test in practical application of theory for her team. She only hoped they had learned enough.

*Anti-intrusion and security software within almost every known culture has one crucial flaw.*

The words, spoken calmly in a voice only Snowfire knew, echoed through her head and those of her team.

*In every observed case, systems have proven themselves incapable of reacting efficiently against an attack mounted not through conventional 'hacking' methods, but through supplanting the datastream with the psionic energy of a Gifted.*

Panels all across the ship flickered, many going dark as datastream was replaced by concentrated thought.

*It is a powerful method, but unfortunately flawed in the details. For one thing, it requires at least two Gifted to attain any level of control over the systems of an average warship. More give expanded control and percision; also extending the period over which such control can be maintained.*

Security protocols blooming into full functionality were swept away by the sweeping waves of energy, their powerful bastions of no effect against that which simply blew them away ahead of itself. And then they slammed into the computer core and every light on the ship flickered in shock as data suddenly became thought.

Snowfire reached out ahead of herself, seeking for the helm controls as Nolanis and Daniel split away from her towards the shield control circuits. The final member of their link anchored their connection to themselves with her typical mental solidity.

*And the other flaw was the chance of overload. A typical starship's computer calculated millions of operations per second. Exposure to such an entity, and that is the only correct word, was an experience in and of itself.*

Snowfire held that last part to herself, though, fighting through rising buzz of millions of calculations pouring through her head. She had experience with this. The others didn't. Not as much as she did at least. And with Keladry's help, she could survive it. She found the helm controls, carressing the interface with gentle mental fingers. Then she reached into it, searching for the lockout as her compatriots did likewise to the shield systems.

They could do this.

They *had* to.

Aboard the Galor-class named "HCS Prophecy" and ommanded by the General Lord N'Eligahn and the Second-in-Command, Commander Lady Ty'Reynyk, the twisted, infected minds of all the so called "Children" watched with pleasure as the little Defiant-class struggled against the pull of the Azimuth Horizon. Now close enough that its pulsating light blinded the bridge crew such that they had to put filters on the viewscreen, the ship no longer needed the saboteur in the Engine room to navigate them toward it.

"They seem to be fighting better than expected. Shall we hasten their journey to salvation or damnation, my Lord?" asked Ty'reynyk.

"Perhaps we should ask the Prophet, my Lady," answered N'Eligahn and withdrew to the Captain's ready room of the ship.

As he returned, followed by the robed, bearded figure of the Prophet of the Horizon's Children, those on the bridge bowed their heads and looked away. Slowly, the Prophet lifted his head to look at the viewscreen and threw back his hood. Those on the bridge who did happen to still be looking finally turned their heads in fear, as it was the first time they even saw a glimpse of his visage. Eyes wide open, the Prophet was frozen while his mind raced back to a life he once knew but had for so long forgotten.

"Defiant-class... McKenzie..." words he remembered from that past life buzzed through his ears.

Suddenly the image of a Cardassian... the one who had invaded his temple and had caused his previous pain... came hurtling at him from out of the small ship heading toward the Horizon. He ducked away from that roaring, approaching face with fear. This caused those on the bridge to look around confused and bewildered.

Their prophet... afraid?

N'Eligahn, worried now for his Prophet's dedication, reached for the weapons console.

"Stop!" shouted the man formally known as Joseph Daystrom Sisko, holding his arm out to the Rethian. "You shall... let them be... for now. The Preservers will decide whether they are worthy of Salvation through their actions here."

Inside the Computer Core room of the starship McKenzie, the Bajoran officer baricaded in there praised the Preservers with his last breath before losing consciousness.

But the course was already set and the forcefield was still up.

As the consoles flickered around the ship, Chief Engineer Sorripto sat in the McKenzie's smallish engineering room in a fully lit and functioning office. Looking around as other consoles in the space flickered, the Cardassian jumped out of the chair in his office.

*What the hell?* he thought angrily.

Running over to the main control console, Sorripto began to open up schematics of the internal network. He had built this mainframe's design from the ground up over the last few years. With it, he knew every circuit, component, and more importantly internal code on the ship. The images the chief engineer saw on the screen were not of his system.

Pounding the console, Sorripto yelled.

"There is a virus in the system; we need to contain whatever the hell this is quickly before it spreads to anything else!"

Just as the Cardassian began preparations, the buzz of an alarm snapped him back to reality. The voice yelling from across engineering might as well have been sitting at the same console.

"Sir, the power grid is becoming unstable! We are losing core containment!"

Running over to the core, Sorripto could see physical ripples in the shields surrounding the matrix and core itself. Yelling at the top of his lungs, he pounded again his fist on the console in front of him leaving a damaging dent and crack.

"Enough! No cheap two bit virus and broken code fragment is going to destroy my systems! We need to isolate this and we need to do it now!"

Looking around, the grey-skinned, bony-faced chief engineer continued to yell.

"Reichman! Let's shut this thing down!"

Running over to the isolinear matrix component, Sorripto ripped the panel away, throwing it behind him. With the speed of a casino card dealer, he went on shuffling isolinear chips and realigning the entire matrix. The frantic calls of the engineers behind began to fill the Cardassian's ears

"Reroute emergency power to the containment grid!"

"Containment is down to sixty three percent!"

"We are losing core containment! The shield is failing!"

Hearing the frantic calls, Sorripto began to move faster, tossing and flipping isolinear chips throughout the entire panel and deck plate openings. The idea he had was simple. By rapidly increasing the algorithmic calculations of the systems, combined with a changing computation cycle, it would make the secondary series of coding unstable and allow for isolation and removal. By changing the stability of the code which the virus was attacking and replacing it would make the spreading of the internal virus harder.

"This virus is moving faster than me... I will not get beaten! Not today!" Sorripto laughed outloud to himself.

The Cardassian looked around as the panels and consoles in engineering began to stabilize and the lights returned to normal. Running over to another isolinear control box, he slid down the ladder and again pulled the cover off from another console, again throwing the cover carelessly behind him. As he began once more to shuffle chips frantically, a call came from behind him.

"Sir! with all due respect, by realigning the control grid, you are only going to strengthen the lockout on the navigation controls!"

Turning around to see a crewman behind him, Sorripto kept working as if to quietly say he knew but did not care.

"Sir; you must..."

Cutting off the crewman, he yelled while never once stopping his work.

"I will realign every system on the ship if I must! Whatever this code is, it has shut down the power grid for core containment. There are so many secondary connections and subroutines I installed in this system, even the most advanced computer virus would not comprehend the damage it would cause by attacking even a minor system! Yes, I saw the message about the navigational controls; but if I can't get the core shields back under control, the fact that we can't navigate is meaningless!"

"But Sir! You can't just..."

"I can't just what? Keep control of the engineering systems within engineering? Keep the starboard shields online?"

Finishing the final swaps, Sorripto turned to the crewman.

"Do you want to know why the core just fell apart on us? The fact is that I used the same shield power matrix for the core as I do for the secondary shielding around the deck control areas. I did that because it consolidated power closer to the ship, not only making it a hell of a lot more efficient, but safer. My problem, crewman, is that someone who clearly does not understand the complex nature of my changes has attempted to alter the code through what looks like a virus. A virus! When this thing attempted to shut down the deck control shields, it shut down an entire power grid. Care to guess what life support systems are consolidated with the power to the navigation control room?"

Cutting off the crewman before he could finish, Sorripto ran back up the ladder and climbing out of the top he tapped his combadge.

"Captain, this is engineering. I will have a report for you here in a moment. I apologize for not updating you on the alarms."

Running over to Chief Reichman, he looked down at the console.

"Chief, all systems should be stable. Why have you not isolated the virus?"

"Sir... I don't think this is a virus; at least, not one I have ever seen."

Shaken by the assumption, the Cardassian pushed the Chief out of the way and began to analyze the data before him.

"Chief, are you seeing this?"

"Yes, Sir, I am. That is what I was talking about. The coding is not attacking the current subroutines... it is replacing them with an entire new data stream. One that is a hell of a lot more complex than anything I have ever dealt with."

Looking at the algorithms on the console, Sorripto stepped back, slowly raising a bony eyebrow. Something had gotten into the system and was replacing entire sections of the internal coding with an advanced control subroutine. Looking up, he slowly asked the question on his mind.

"Computer, process and identify the algorithm currently in subcontrol section 3."

"Algorithm isolated. Identified as organic."

"Analyse."

"Analysis complete. Subroutine is consistent with brainwave activity of a humanoid telepathic species. Further data required to analyze specific genus and species."

Balling a fist, the plated hand of the Cardassian came crashing down on the console.

"I have a feeling I know what is happening here. Chief, you are in charge."

Sorripto walked towards the exit of main engineering.

"Aye Sir, but... where are you going?"

"To have a talk with someone!"

Pain exploded through the neural connections as Sorripto frantically realigned the control grid, the number of calculations pouring through Snowfire's mind exploding exponentially into a steady haze of swirling code. False-light glared and spun in front of closed eyelids, the feedback slamming through her and the link between the rest of her team. The entire system flickered, the web of neural energy fraying at the edges under the strain of millions of operations every second. Snowfire's face tightened, muscles going taut in unconscious reflection of her mental state. Recalibration hammered her thoughts, overwhelming her in a sea of calculation that swelled in size every second.

And then... then...

*Snowfire, this is illogical. Do not destroy yourself here. Let the few help the one.*

Keladry's presence...solidified beside her; and the sea that threatened to drown her receded.

It didn't vanish, but it faded enough, pushed back far enough by the Vulcan's aid to be bearable. The mental equivalent of a raised eyebrow sped across their link, responded to with resigned amusement.

*You really think we didn't guess, Lieutenant? We're science officers. And you picked us for our knowledge of mental techniques. What else were you expecting? Let us share your burden, so that you can help save us.*

Snowfire shook her head gently in the physical world, then concentrated as the link between the four expanded to share the strain of the computer's operations, focusing on her true goal. Mental fingers traced the lockout pattern around the helm controls, flowing across it and finding stress points in the programming.



She had felt the shockwaves their control had sent through the systems and was very sure that she was going to have to apologize to a Cardassian in the near future. But at this point they didn't have much choice. Break the lock, or the Horizon consumed them.

*All right you son of a bitch, let's see how you like this!*

Mental fingers compressed, the energy behind them sharpening and the questing tendrils became a lance. Snowfire's breath hitched for a second, then blew out.

*Goddess guide my hand. And let me be right.*

The lance slammed down on the helm lock, punching through it in a blaze of mental force and she held her breath.

*Come on, come on. Break you bastard!*

Sorripto barely got a few steps out of main engineering when Chief Reichman came running up behind him.

"Commander! Whatever the hell is going on with the computer, it is getting worse!"

The Cardassian stopped in his tracks and ran back into engineering, running over to the primary controls near the core center. Checking the readings, he saw that the power grid was fluctuating again. Sorripto worked quickly to override a series of security protocols.

"We need to strengthen the controls; whatever those guys are doing, they seem to be getting better at it. Chief, you now have whatever access you need, but don't abuse it or it is my ass."

Running up the ladder an engineering crewman yelled.

"Commander, where are you going? The only system access up there is navigation control."

Looking back down, Sorripto glared to his crewman.

"You have your instructions. Allow me to deal with the navigation issues. Keep those shields stabilized. If anyone asks, I will deal with the science team later."

*Light!*

Snowfire's vision came apart in a furious blaze of sound and color, the override on the navigation controls shattering around her and she dived bodily into the unravelling maelstrom. Her focus on the rest of the system collapsed, pulling back from the searing millions of formulae within and dropping full control of the system back. Half a dozen consoles flickered again, mainly on engineering as the normal data stream started flowing.

*Snowfire, what are you doing?* She heard Keladry speak into her mind, her tone concerned.

*Completing the sequence,* she responded faintly, all her mind focused on breaking the final commands input into the system by the lost soul in the computer core. *If I don't, we go to maximum warp straight into the mouth of the Horizon. And somehow I don't think we want that.*

The last was droll, almost amused by the fatal possibility.

*But... I think I know something that I can do.*

Her thoughts sharpened, her angle of attack changing and she slid into the centre of the controls for a single, infinitesimal moment.

*Two can play the warp drive game, Children. I hope you like our hand.*

The McKenzie spun in place, her shields flickering as tendrils of the swirling gold Horizon spun out towards her. Then her engines flared, their blue flashing into incandescent white. Stars could not compete with that brilliance, and against it, even the Horizon seemed to pale and withdraw. And to the eyes of her crew, it did. Or at least, it seemed to, shrinking away behind them as the ship leapt across the fabric of reality towards those who had orchestrated the attempt to obliterate her and all aboard.

And then they stopped.

Another blazing white star flared ahead of the sensor distortion at the prow of the Children's formation as she dropped out of warp, the last vestiges of her fading warp bubble sending the vessel beneath skittering aside as she swept past it. The entire ship reverberated at that faint impact, ringing like a bell as the inconceivable power of her stardrive took the impact. The McKenzie raced the length of the formation, her elongated form snapping back into itself as she passed the last ship in the convoy; the Jem'Hadar attack cruiser. She spun again, Snowfire's final command lining her up with a shot into the belly of the heavily patched craft.

Snowfire's eyes flickered open, her hand retrieving the device from the console as the mental link between herself and the three others of her science team faded. Their job's were done.

Then the exhaustion hit.

She turned her head to the Captain, struggling for every last degree of movement, and forced a battered brain and exhausted lips to form a coherent sentence.

"Captain. I believe ...we have a perfect...shot." She collapsed forward in her chair, body going limp as her conscious mind surrendered to the siren's call of slumber. She never even felt herself hit the ground.

Crist had been staring at Snowfire, hoping she could solve the problem that the crew had been facing, and not know how she would do so. As she snapped out of her trance, she spoke. Crist turned to the tactical station.

"Shran, you heard her, fire!"

Shran nodded, and tapped away at his console. The McKenzie opened fire, firing several bolts from the pulse phasers. The Jem'Hadar attack ship took the several hits, and within ten seconds it exploded.

Crist looked over to Snowfire, to say good work, but then noticed she had collapse.

"Crist to Sickbay; medical emergency!"

The McKenzie's troubles had been solved, and the crew managed to bite back on their fear and surprise as they had been trained to. They did not really understood how they had jumped to the Children's fleet's position and destroyed one of their escorts... but now they were back in control and ready to face the worst.

Crist tapped his panel.

"Jolan, status."

Jolan tapped his combadge.

"We managed to get the door to the computer room open. I'm sending in one of my officers. We should restore normal control to all systems in a moment."

The captain of the McKenzie then ordered:

"Noble there's still a containment field up. Use your Borg implants to adapt to the fields frequency and pass on through."

The pale man with Borg implants nodded and placed his right hand on the forcefield. Anyone there could see the field reacting and holding the man's hand back. A moment passed and then, Noble's hand began to pass through, slowly. As a few more seconds passed, the movement of his hand passing through the shimmering energy barrier went deeper and faster. Noble closed his eyes and stepped through.

Noble was a liberated Borg and, because of that, he had to breathe. He suddenly struggled to do so as the air was extremely thin within the computer room. He managed to reach the main console and began tapping away. A moment later, the force field in the doorway lowered and the sound of air rushed in. Noble fell to the floor, kneeling, taking in the air that had just reentered the room.

The MACO team rushed in and secured the area. Jolan kneeled down to check the vital signs of the inert engineer near the computer controls who had caused the problem. He was dead.

Jolan rose, walked over the Noble, and kneeled again placing a hand on Noble's shoulder.

"Nice work. You should head to sickbay."

"No, Sir, I'll finish up here."

Noble rose after regaining his breath and worked the console once more. It only took him a few seconds before he reported;

"Sir, whatever happened, most of the systems are already back under our control. I've disabled what the intruder did, so we can return to normal systems."

Jolan patted Noble's shoulder and tapped his combadge.

"Captain, the computer control room is secured. All tampering has been reversed and the intruder is dead."

"Good work," Crist responded.

When he finished speaking, Doctor Kinstar entered the bridge and moved over to Snowfire, lying unconscious in her chair at the science station. Crist noted his coming then turned his attention to the front part of the bridge.

"Hughes; evasive maneuvers. Shran, open a channel to the Children. Let's try to talk to them."

*The chances are low that they would talk, since we took out one of their escorts, but it's worth a try,* Crist thought bitterly.

Then, he straightened himself up and spoke with calm authority.

"This is Captain Crist, of the McKenzie. We have reports that you attacked the USS Republic. Come to a stop, and prepare to be boarded."

*Not very diplomatic... But I think its gone far beyond that now,* Crist thought.

At that moment, the bridge of the cultists' command ship was struck with stunned silence as the viewscreen showed the shower of fire, sparks and debris that stood instead of their rearguard ship.

"My Lord!" cried the Tactical officer on the HCS Prophecy; "they've already taken out one of our escorts!"

"What?" roared N'Eligahn as he spun around toward the officer, his anger unfairly focused in his direction. "How is that possible?"

Just a few moments before it had seemed like the little ship was going to be lost in the anomaly forever. In fact, he had recently been on that ship as its first officer not more than a week ago and he knew it did not have the capabilities it just demonstrated.

"Shields up, red alert!"

"It appears, my friend, that they still have some tricks we haven't planned for," came the quiet voice of the Prophet from within his hooded robe, as he stared curiously out at the image of the small, flat, oval Federation warship now appearing on the screen.

N'Eligahn shot a concerned glance toward his counterpart, Ty'Reynyk. Without words, they confirmed each others' doubts and thoughts at the apparent admiration their prophet was showing toward the heretics. Rethians were not powerful telepaths, but mates could link their thoughts through their sensitive head spines at a short distance.

At the familiar voice coming from the speakers, the spiritual leader of the Horizon Children froze and looked lost in front of all the bridge crew. This was not good for morale, especially at such a critical juncture of their journey. N'Eligahn made a quick gesture and the Prophet led away by Ty'Reynyk back to his quarters.

The officers on the bridge looked around and exchanged concerned glances, but one icy stare from General N'Eligahn made them all return their gaze to their duties. The former Rethian Starfleet Commander sat in the command chair and nodded to the Tactical officer to open communications.

"How wonderful to see you again, Captain," he said. "It would be my pleasure to personally show you the path to paradise... the gift given to us by our Preservers. Instead of those nasty boarding parties, why don't you come by yourself and we'll have ourselves a nice, civil discussion."

Crist looked at the view screen as if he was hallucinating.

"N'Eligahn? How did you..."

Crist stopped himself. He took a moment to recompose himself.

"Well I'm rather surprised, Commander. But I believe I said, prepare to be boarded. I will not be joining them. Lower your shields, this doesn't have to get ugly."

N'Eligahn's expression changed from false pleasantry to anger.

"You should know we will never back down. This is our salvation, and if you interfere, you will be cut down with all the rest of the unbelievers."

And with that, he signaled to cut communications.

"Tell our other ship to come about and hold fast, bow to our stern. They're going to want to maneuver around behind where our weapons are weakest, but we won't give them the opportunity. Fire all phasers; target their weapons systems first," the Rethian ordered.

As the remaining escort ship maneuvered in full reverse around and behind the Prophecy, the shots from the lead cultist vessel streaked out and began hammering against the McKenzie's shields.

Sorripto worked frantically to realign power to navigation. As the ship rattled suddenly, he yelled down to the lower level.

"REPORT!"

"Sir! The bridge reports that we are being fired at by two ships!"

Sliding down the rails, the chief engineer glanced in the direction of Reichman and nodded slowly. No words were exchanged, but Sorripto's eyes said everything.

It was time.

Chief Reichman nodded back and ran over to a power relay, removing its cover. He began to frantically isolate the power relays to the ship's weapons and shields. Sorripto called over to him the few crewmen left in main engineering.

"Listen up. Chief Reichman, Ensign Chan, and myself will stay here. I want everyone else to report to secondary battle stations. We need to be ready for all catastrophies."

As the Cardassian turned to pick up a PADD, the rest of the engineering crew left main engineering for their secondary stations. Picking up the PADD, Sorripto nearly dropped it as the ship rocked again from another barrage of weapons fire. Looking at the ensign before him, Sorripto spoke quickly.

"Chan; you were on the scanning crew in the lockout room, correct?"

"Yes Sir. I ran the tri-area scans for evidence."

"Did you find anything?"

"Honestly, Sir, I did; but it was what we expected. There was Bajoran DNA on the console and the panel. The intruder must have cut himself because there was a lot of traces of Bajoran DNA fragments."

Sorripto raised an eyebrow slightly and opened a drawer in his desk.

"What do you mean, a lot of traces?"

"Well, Sir, we never detected any life signs and the only evidence we have was from the residual traces which were strong enough that even if the intruder was not Bajoran, our external sensors would have been unable to identify them."

Reaching into the desk drawer, the Cardassian laughed.

"So what you are saying is that you proved the man in there was Bajoran. Should we not be looking for him instead?"

"Well no, Sir; security is already on it. It is just... it was too cut and paste, Sir. I mean, he bypassed your programming lockouts, which are the most complex I have ever seen; and he bypassed security protocols and then managed to beam out of a space that was shielded."

Sorripto raised an eyebrow as he thumbed through the drawer, listening as the young ensign continued.

"What I am saying, Sir, is; if you want my honest opinion... there is no real certainty that shows the saboteur was Bajoran."

The scream of phaser fire silenced Ensign Chan mid-sentence as he fell to the ground. Walking slowly behind him, Chief Reichman smiled while holstering a hand phaser.

"That's because he wasn't."

Shaking his head at the Chief, Sorripto stepped over the fallen ensign. Walking to the power relay console, he pushed a few keys and spoke outloud.

"Computer; activate protocol file name children; authorization Sorripto alpha alpha zero one zero."

Looking up, the chief engineer of the McKenzie smiled as the lights dimmed and panels in main engineering popped and sparked. The indicators showed the shields and weapons were being powered down. It would only be a few more moments before the bridge noticed.

"Shall we depart old friend? One last thing before we go."

Pointing up a blue diode in the top corner of his office, Sorripto signaled for the phaser Chief Reichman was carrying and, upon grabbing it, fired at the diode, destroying it.

"I scrambled alert internal sensor designed for weapons fire detection. The bridge will show weapons fire in every space aboard. I would say that should keep them busy for a while."

Gesturing towards the side hatch out of main Engineering the Cardassian waved.

"After you, old friend."

As the Horizon Children's ships opened fire on the McKenzie, Captain Crist motioned to his bridge officers in turn, all sitting so close to him on the diminutive yet highly functional oval-shaped bridge of the smallish Defiant class warship.

"Hughes, evasive maneuvers. Shran return fire; take out their escorts first and then we will finish off by disabling that command ship."

Turning sharply to face the fanning out enemy squadron with all its formidable armament, the oblong, compact disc-shaped McKenzie began to attack once more.

"Hughes, try to get behind them." Crist ordered.

"No go, Sir, their dispersal to attack us in an inverted conical pattern from all frontal angles is making that impossible," Hughes reported.

"Damn! Shran, make your shots count! We can't let loose any stray shots," the captain said.

*Cowards! Their convoy is right behind them; if anything gets through, those civilians are toast. And they know we will hesitate to fire if civilians are in the line of fire,* Crist thought.

"Down one Hideki; targeting the last escort. There, Maquis raider gone. All escorts destroyed." Shran finally reported as the ship rocked both from enemy fire on their shields and the power of her own overcharged weaponry.

"Good work. Now, let's disable that Galor." Crist said with a smile.

But his Andorian tactical officer was not smiling, even if his rigid face could have been able to do so. His antennae however shot up in surprise, wobbled in confusion then lowered in mounting anger.

"Sir, I'm losing power to the weapons! Torpedo launchers are now offline! Now the shields are failing..."

"What's going on?" Crist demanded.

"I'm not sure... It seems power has been diverted." Shran replied.

Crist tapped his side panel on his command chair.

"Engineering! We are losing power to our weapons and shields! What's going on down there?"

There was no answer.

"Engineering report!"

"Sir, Shields are about to fail!" Shran warned.

"What about our armor generators; have they been affected?" Crist asked then.

"Checking... no, Sir; we still have power and control over them."

The ship shook violently as weapons fire now penetrated the weakened shields and impacted on the ablative armor covering its hull. But minor damage report started to come as much from the bridge speakers as through the access ways to the rest of the diminutive starship.

"Activate regenerative plating now!" Crist shouted.

As the McKenzie continued to get battered by the Children's much larger Cardassian battlecruiser and the shields finally failed completely, the industrial miniature replicators peppering the hull flared up and quickly spread a second armor covering all over the ship, like overlapping scales stretching from bow to stern. In seconds, the entire form of the Federation vessel was encased in a new, greyish covering that absorbed incoming fire by dissipating their energy as it boiled away, only to be immediately replaced by a newly replicated layer.

Only the flagship Lotus had this revolutionary defensive feature... and fortunately, also the second oldest starship in Lotus Fleet, the no less famous USS McKenzie. And now, it saved her from enemies both without and within.

"Hughes, continue with the evasive maneuvers." Crist said.

Regenerative ablative armor was a formidable defense, but it was not infallible and it depended as much as shields on their power availability; and it effectively reduced their entire offensive power to forward-facing phaser cannons and to torpedoes only, as all phaser strips on their hull were now covered by their new plating.

*N'Eligahn... he knows this ship. He knows the weakness of this armor. Should I continue the attack or back off?* Daniel Crist wondered silently.

"Shran continue to fire; disable that Galor fast!" he finally decided a second later.

He then tapped his side panel again.

"Jolan, get your team to Engineering. Find out what's going on down there!"

Jolan voice came up instantly over the comm.

"Aye, Sir, we're on our way."

The clanking of the armor extending could be heard throughout the hull of the diminutive five-deck ship. Confused, Chief Reichman looked over at Sorripto.

"You did not disable the armor?"

The Cardassian laughed.

"Of course not. The ship needs some kind of defense. The truth is, I do not trust our friends among the Children not to kill them. The shields dropped first and by now the weapons have failed. There will be no boarding parties right away, but the day is lost for her."

"The day should be lost, but you left the armor online. Now she can repel boarding parties and possibly get the systems working again."

"Not today Chief. The weapons and shields are fried, they do not have the parts to repair them right away, and the lockout on the replicators to produce what they need will keep them busy for a while. This is not my first run through taking a ship out from the inside."

Patting the bulkhead, Sorripto continued.

"I have had free range over all her systems for some time. There is not a circuit panel, relay, or isolinear chip I am not familiar with. I took her apart one piece at a time and had everything set up exactly as it should be. Even our telepathic friends will have no luck with my lockouts and disabling."

Confused still, Reichman raised an eyebrow.

"They were able to do some damage to the navigational lockout."

Smiling and shaking his head, the McKenzie's chief engineer motioned for the Chief to keep walking.

"Chief, that was a system interface lockout. I physically destroyed relays and isolinear circuits; there is no unhacking an explosion."

Nodding, the Chief moved along through the corridor with the grey-skinned Starfleet officer, stopping at the first access panel. Pulling the cover off, Reichman flipped through the chips and wires. Finishing the realignment, he reached into the pouch he was carrying and placed a small blue device onto the panel and replaced the cover. Signaling for Sorripto to follow, the Chief laughed as they continued on.

"Well, that should fix that problem. They will be in for a rude awakening if they try and realign weapons power through auxiliaries. I just feel bad for whoever opens that panel."

The Cardassian slowed his walk.

"You planted a bomb? That is what those are! I knew they looked familiar. You are using tricobalt detonators."

"Exactly; and they are tuned to the same frequency as our isolinear matrix. Poor souls will never pick that up with a tricorder."

Sorripto signaled for Chief Reichman to continue on as he pulled off another panel in the access corridor.

"I will disable the secondary systems you keep on with the auxiliary matrix; we will meet at the rendez-vous point."

As the Chief turned the corner, Sorripto cut the wires and removed two isolinear cards. Stepping back, he then removed his Cardassian phase pistol and fired a low power burst into the panel. After the sparks subsided, he replaced the cover and looked to see if the Chief was around. When it was apparent to him that he was alone, he ran over to the access cover that was rigged. Using his fingernail, he carved a small symbol in the corner of the plastic panel.

Small but unmistakable, it was the chemical formula for tricobalt.

At that very moment, Jolan and his MACO team rushed into main engineering. They moved through the room quickly, scanning every corner with their eyes. Within a few heartbeats, they could see that the room was empty.

Jolan tapped his combadge.

"Captain; engineering is empty, Sir. There is also severe damage down here." He motioned to Noble, the former-Borg officer as he added; "we'll see if we can get systems back online."

With a quick look over, Noble nodded to show his estimation that the systems were done for.

"Sir... bad news; whoever did this knew what they were doing. There is no way we can get this up and running in time."

Crist's anger could be plainly heard over the comm.

"Jolan, find who did this, NOW!"

"With pleasure, Sir."

He closed the channel before ordering:

"Noble, you stay here. See what you can do. You and you are with me," he then said while pointing to the nearest pair of security officers, one of who was the Jem'Hadar officer.



Jolan and his two officers left engineering to attempt to catch the saboteur. They were about to jog through the corridor from the farthest part of the diminutive warship when they noticed almost a hundred meters up ahead, at the other end of the long central corridor a junior engineering officer standing next to a panel. He pulled it off, obviously to perform repairs but, before he could place the panel on the floor, the whole section exploded.

The bridge shook.

"What the hell was that?" Crist asked.

"Explosion, deck 2!" reported tactical chief Shran. "Sir, it was in the middle of the ship!"

"How the hell did that happen?"

"Unsure. Sir," said the Andorian, signalling for a report from the MACO leader.

The explosion had blown the MACOs backwards and to the ground. Alarms began blaring and, as the three dazed, deafened and slightly burnt security officers looked where the engineer had once been, they could now see through the smoke clearing from emergency ventilators that the entire corridor was charred and obstructed with debris; but the unfortunate man's body had been utterly blown to burning bits and out into space. Beams from the superstructure had fallen from the breached hull, making passing through this section of the corridor impossible. Only emergency forcefields, automatically erected with the first blast wave by internal sensors and computer security protocols, had kept the entire deck from depressurizing after the first effect of the shockwave. Automatic extinguishers now fought small pockets of fire.

One of the MACOs, the Human, noticed then that the panel that had been just removed by the engineer had tumbled beside him; he reflexively examined it and then, with a frown, showed it to Jolan.

"Who the hell marked this with a tricobalt symbol? Bet it was the guy who planted the bomb, cocky SOB. Fortunately, this was but a micro charge, probably but a few molecules; anything bigger would have blown up the entire ship!"

Jolan rose.

"Let's go. We'll take the other corridor over. We need to kill this guy."

The three MACOs ran off to catch up with the saboteur, coughing on wobbling feet and with blurry eyes as Jolan now made a short report through his chest communicator as they hurried to the other side of the small starship.

"Jolan has reported it was a micro-tricobalt bomb within the weapons auxiliary circuitry, Captain; must have been the saboteur."

*Any larger quantity would have registered on our security sensors when this bastard brought it on board, understood Daniel Crist. Else only a few grams would have been enough to destroy the ship completely.*

But the commanding officer of the USS McKenzie was not one to linger much on past events and what ifs, especially not in the middle of a battle.

"Shran, I need those weapons back."

"I'm working on it, Sir. The damage control team is running power lines from the impulse reactors. It will be crowded in the corridors but we should get minimal power to the weapons quickly."

Suddenly a beep went off on Shran's screen.

"There, we have starboard pulse phaser 1 online... but only at fifty percent power. That's the best we can do."

"Good work," barked Captain Crist straightening from his chair almost as if he was about to bolt out of it. "Hughes; attack pattern Kirk Omega!. Shran; fire at will."

The starboard weapons port opened up, and a few blobs of phaser fire spurted out towards the commandeered Cardassian-made warship.

Not far from where the MACO team resumed pursuit of the saboteurs, the people in the science lab had just managed to wake up from their mental link with Lieutenant Ke'leysha as she lay crumpled in her seat, unconscious and unmoving but breathing shallowly.

"Theoretical discussion aside, I think we can leave the exact specifics of what the three of us and the Lieutenant did until we're out of immediate danger." Ensign Nolanis May stated calmly to her subordinates, brushing a few razor thin strands of hair out of her grey eyes. "Jaylen, Tanya, see if you can... inconvenience our apparent saboteurs." She ordered as she pointed the out of commission Illythirii to Ensign Keladry.

"With pleasure, ma'am." Tanya replied, as she and her colleague snatched up two somewhat modified tricorders. "Engineering went down first, and there seems to be a total penetration of ship systems. Makes the responsible parties rather obvious if you think about it."

She tapped a quick sequence on the device's keypad, and smiled slightly.

"Got him. He's got ship systems... well, most of them at least, I'll give him that. But there's more than one way to trace someone. Especially on a ship this small. Jaylen, you good?" She asked, as the woman in question returned from another section of the lab with something that, had it been observed by someone half blind, could have theoretically been thought to be a phaser rifle.

"Good, ma'am." She acknowledged, her voice low and smooth. "Lead the way."

The two vanished out of the lab, heading in the direction of the two engineers, and Nolanis turned to Keladry.

"How is she doing?" Her voice colored slightly with concern for Snowfire's condition.

Keladry shook her head.

"She seems to be all right, but her mental presence is severely reduced. She still got mental shields, but that's about all."

The Vulcan hybrid sighed, shaking her head while looking at the dark-skinned, white-haired and pointy-eared comatose woman.

"She's out for the foreseeable."

"Damn."

Nolanis blew out a breath then straightened.

"All right, I guess this last bit is up to us then. Daniel, do we still have full power?"

The Betazoid's lips curved in a small smile.

"The lockouts disabled the weapons and shields and scrambled most other security systems. But they left *us* alone."

He tapped a few keys on the panel in front of him and nodded sharply, his next statement victorious.

"We've got enough for Clean Sweep."

"Good. Stand by to initiate, I'm going to fill in the Captain."

She tapped her combadge and spoke.

"Captain Crist, this is Ensign May. We've been monitoring the situation and...we have something for you. I hesitate to give the specifics over an open channel, but suffice to say that, if it works, it will disable the remaining threat to the operation in a non-lethal manner. If it doesn't, it'll do nothing. All we need is the right positioning."

She paused for a moment, then added:

"We also have a two-person team tracking the saboteurs movements. I'll relay their movements to the MACO teams. Orders?"

Daniel Crist tapped his panel to respond but didn't speak immediately. He had to take a moment to think what to say. At this point, he didn't really know who to trust anymore, but he shook off that idea.

"Do what you need to do to get my ship back. And inform the MACOs of anything about the saboteurs. Crist out."

He then turned his attention to the front part of the bridge and the image of the ominous fish-tailed Cardassian-made cruiser confronting them.

"How long will it take to take out their shields?"

Shran spoke without turning around from his brightly flashing tactical board.

"Sir, it will take around forty-five minutes. Our armor will fail well before that. I estimate armor failure in twenty-three minutes."

Crist frowned.

"Great..." he spat with obvious sarcasm. "Let's hope our engineer can fix this before that happens."

Unfortunately for Daniel Crist, his engineer was not working to solve the very problem he had himself initiated... and he was out to fulfill an agenda all his own.

The hum of a transporter beam filled the corridor as Sorripto and Chief Reichman materialized near the entrance to shuttlebay 3. Looking over at the Chief Sorripto pointed towards the door.

"You go on and secure us a shuttle and wait for my signal. I will go and override the controls to allow us to leave."

Nodding at each other, both engineers parted ways. The Cardassian could hear the Chief opening an emergency hatch as he ran down the corridor.

Coming himself upon an engineering station, Sorripto got to work disabling the control fields around the shuttlebay. The access indicator alarms buzzed as even he, as chief engineer of the McKenzie, was denied access.

*Hmm they seem to have locked me out of the system. I guess they figured out Engineering was deserted... took them long enough.*

Sorripto laughed to himself.

*The advantage of programming the access database is that I know everyone's information.*

Working away at the console, Sorripto transferred power through a series of back grids that he had created, diverting power away from the areas around the shuttlebay. As he worked to program a loophole in the targeting matrix, a voice called out from behind him.

"Freeze! Sir please step away from the console and place your hands on your head."

Looking over his shoulder, Sorripto saw a three-person security detachment standing behind him.

"Step away from the console," repeated the man leading the small squad.

Laughing, the Cardassian raised his hands and slowly placed them on his head. As one of the security officers reached for his combadge, Sorripto lunged out at him, elbowing him across the face and taking his phaser, firing shots almost in the same motion and knocking down the other two security personnel.

Aiming the phaser at the bleeding officer on the ground in front of him, Sorripto smiled.

"Do me a favor, young man. Tell Holmes that Watson sends his regards."

Showing the bleeding officer the stun setting, Sorripto fired, knocking him unconscious.

The, reaching into his pocket, Sorripto removed his Section 31 medallion and tossed it in on the floor.

As he walked away, he reajusted the power setting on the phaser and fired a shot destroying the panel behind him.

Sitting in the shuttle cockpit, Chief Recihman sat impatiently as the Cardassian finally came through the shuttlebay entrance. Running over to the shuttle, Sorripto ran up the back and, before he could even join the Chief in the cockpit, the hatch had already closed behind him just as, in front of their stolen craft, the shuttlebay doors began to open.

"Perfect timing as always, Chief."

As the doors began to close again once their vehicle cleared the landing deck and shot out into open space, both saboteurs ran to the small two-man emergency transporter pad and, with the press of button, a blue hue enveloped them and they were both gone.

Jolan and his MACO team just then managed to cross to the next corridor. They had been running through deck 2 in order to catch the intruders-saboteurs that had caused havoc throughout the ship and they finally ended up at transporter room 2, where they met a pair of security officers.

"Report," immediately asked Jolan of them.

"No one came through this way," answered the tallest of the two.

"Damn it! Where could they have gone? Security teams cut off all accesses to other areas of deck 2; this was the only place they could go."

Just then, a voice came over the comms.

"Engineering Ensign May to MACO team leader. Sir, we have detected a site to site transport outside the shuttlebay."

"Damn! Why can't they just give up?"

Turning to the Security team guarding the transporter room while spitting out a few more expletives, Jolan ordered to the pair stationed there:

"Stay on guard."

Then, Jolan started off running.

"Lets go team."

Several minutes later, the MACO team made it outside the small and only shuttlebay of the diminutive Defiant class starship. There, rifles up searching for enemies, they noticed three security officers unconscious on the ground, one of them with a bloody nose, right outside the door that leads to the shuttlebay. Jolan gave his squad a signal and they moved in quickly, one at a time.

Another security officer was found inside on the sill of the door once it slid open, this one dead. The shuttlepod was still there, so Jolan motioned for the MACOs to circle around the back, hoping to trap the intruders. They opened the shuttlepod's hatch and, when hatch was parallel to the floor, the MACO circled to the back to get a clear shot at whoever was in the minuscule auxilliary craft.

"Empty?" asked Jolan before sighing with frustration between his teeth: "Where the hell are they?"

Then, he brusquely tapped his combadge.

"Captain Crist, we seemed to have lost the intruders; but we'll keep looking."

Crist sat in this center chair with a frown.

"Understood."

He turned then his attention forward.

"What's the status of our weapons and armor?"

Shran looked up from his tactical board as he answered his commanding officer.

"We still only have the one cannon still operational; armor failure in fourteen minutes."

At that same moment the captain of the mKenzie pondered his options, others of his smallish crew were also working feverishly to provide some from him. In the science lab, science officer Nolanis muttered a highly antiquated swear word as news of the two saboteurs filtered down through channels, and her fist clenched tight as it thudded into the table in front of her.

"Daniel?" She asked tightly, heavily controlled emotion crackling beneath her words. "Are we ready?"

"One more sequence." The night-eyed male responded, fingers tapping quickly on the board in front of him, realigning pieces of the science bay's somewhat considerably enhanced energy grid.

Snowfire had done a lot of work on the lab to make it hers, and one of the multiple pieces of that had been a total rework of the interfaces between the lab and the rest of the ship. She'd done that at about the same time she secured a conduit to the central processing units and isolated the lab's power grid from the rest of the ship just like sickbays usually were on starships. Engineering hadn't even been involved in the rework, most of it only requiring simple adjustments that anyone who graduated the Academy could do. And all the systems and parts had come in filtered through the science requestions system.

Most of her team had thought her paranoid, especially when she had ordered them not to pass any details of the alterations on to the other departments. Now though? Now they understood... and were truly thankful that their superior had taken the precautions she had.

"Done."

Daniel's hands flicked through one final mad dash of keystrokes, then stilled.

"Clean sweep primed."

"All right then."

Nolanis tapped her commbadge again.

"Captain, if you would have Helm bring us to the position we're transmitting now, we are in a position to resolve the current situation."

She transmitted a position that brought the McKenzie in under the Prophecy at medium range. It would prevent her from bringing all of her phasers to bear, but phasers didn't matter for Clean Sweep. It simply needed the correct positioning.

"Standing by."

Crist tapped his panel.

"Report, Ensign. What is your plan?"

Nolanis replied quickly, nodding once at Daniel.

"It's... complicated, Captain. And I'd rather not discuss it on a channel that may be compromised. I promise you, we *will* explain later but, for now, you need to trust your science officers. We have a way to fix this. Just get us under the Prophecy. We'll take care of the rest."

Crist took a moment to think. This was an impossible choice. If they did nothing, the chances of survival were slim; and if those officers were intruders, then it would be over. Either way, things did not look good. Crist took a deep breath and made a decision.

"Do it, do what you need to do to get my ship back."

*If they were intruders, then they won't really need my permission to do it, Crist thought. I sure hope this is the right course of action.*

"Do it, do what you need to do to get my ship back."

"Aye sir." Nolanis replied firmly, tapping the commbadge to close the link. "Daniel?"

"Clear to go."

"Hit it."

\* \* \*

The hum of the transporter echoed in the transporter room as Sorripto and Chief Reichman materialized on the transporter pad aboard the HCS Prophecy. Nodding to the crewman standing before him, the Cardassian laughed and slapped his Human companion on the back.

"Good to be home eh, old friend?"

"So you made it?" replied the Bajoran standing behind transporter controls. " Her *Majesty* was doubtful your plan would succeed,"

He sighed, referring to Ty'reynyk with a tone of less respect than the sarcastic title he had bestowed on her usually required.

Reichman chuckled back to the transporter operator.

"Well, soon we will be victorious and, upon salvation, we will not have to deal with the likes of her, or anyone else for that matter except the Preservers."

A quick bow of the head, in reverence to the original farmers who they believed planted the seeds in the Milky Way for all humanoid life, halted the three momentarily before they moved on.

Back on the bridge when, Lord N'Eligahn shouted "status", the man at tactical hastily provided an update.

"My Lord, if we can keep up this assault, we'll have broken their hull in approximately fifteen minutes. Orders?"

"My lord, then interrupted the operations officer, "we have two new recruits just beamed into transporter room 2."

"Recruits? I didn't know about any recruits!" the Rethian roared, turning back to the tactical Officer for an explanation.

"My... my Lord... you ordered not to be disturbed about every little conversion... Sir."

"That was before I knew you imbeciles were bringing them onto this ship... the Prophet's ship!"

He turned to Ty'reynyk who was avoiding his line of sight.

"Did you know about this?"

She nodded.

"It was an operation to bring some officers over from the McKenzie. There was a human... Reichman... and a Cardassian... Sorripto."

"WHAT?"

His fury was palpable as he looked at her with enlarged, piercing golden eyes within a flush scaled face topped by bristling head spines. He ignored her confusion and turned to the security chief.

"Take security to transporter room 2 and detain them!"

As Sorripto stepped down from the PADD, the door to the transporter room opened and several armed guards walked in with their weapons drawn. Pointing at the Cardassian Starfleet officer, the guards surrounded him as he raised his arms, smiling.

"Morning gentlemen; come to greet me aboard I see."

Looking at the guards, Chief Reichman spoke angrily.

"What are you doing? We own our whole plan to Sorripto here! He is as loyal to our cause as any of us!"

Looking over at the chief, the nicer dressed of the guards who was also clearly their leader snapped back at the Chief.

"There is no plan, you fool! No one knew you were coming and no one expected you to bring him..."

Before Chief Reichman could speak, in a flashing streak, Sorripto grabbed the barrel of the rifle pointed closest to him and punched the guard, knocking him to the ground. Flipping the long weapon, he threw it towards the other two guards before drawing his own pistol and shooting them down. Leaning slightly, Sorripto elbowed the still surprised guard behind him, rolled forward and spinning on his back to end up on the deckplates facing the opposite direction, shooting him and the last guard beside him who's own rifle shot missed him by a hair's breath. He rolled into a standing posture and fired a last shot into the guard whom he had struck to the ground. In a matter of seconds, there were five dead guards on the floor at the feet of the Cardassian who was breathing slightly heavily.

As he stood, Chief Reichman yelled and drew his phaser to fire a shot right into Sorripto's back.

Sorripto just turned his head slightly to look back at him.

The Chief fired again and then again... all with no apparent effect on the large Cardassian who still stood there, smiling before him.

Reaching into his pocket, Sorripto pulled out a small object and laughed. Rolling the coin sized object between his fingers, he walked over and grabbed the phaser from the stunned Chief Reichman before walking over to the locking control panel to close and seal the door.

Flipping the object back over to the Chief, Sorripto laughed once more.

"Do you know what that is, my friend?"

The blank stare on Reichman's face told the whole story.

"Those are called stun disks," continued the Cardassian, still smiling. "They were a little invention of the Obsidian Order for their covert missions. The idea is quite simple; you activate the little disk and place it on someone's person. Then, you can use a weapon that fires a glorified light show to activate the disk which creates a strong stun. It can cause minor pain and even the illusion of death for a few moments... but no one has to die."

Looking down at his weapon, Reichman could only mutter a few words.

"You treacherous bastard..."

Sorripto cut him off.

"You see, they served a practical purpose but they can also be used for finding and planting traitors. Or for leading people into fake mutinies to test loyalty and all the while no one actually has to die for the cause. They are quite brilliant inventions in that regard. Starfleet started using them covertly about twenty years ago."

Pulling out a small time piece from his front pocket, the chief engineer of the McKenzie looked down at it and nodded.



"By now the McKenzie is probably wondering why no one was killed during our little mission. I figure by now they also noticed that the panel you planted the explosions behind was reinforced with our latest neutronium alloy. Your explosion did nothing but throw at a heavy door at someone; at best a minor inconvenience. Combined with the targeting chips left in front of the hatch and the power reinforcement to the targeting systems, this, my friend, was the worst mutiny ever."

Sorripto laughed once again at the facial expression of his would be co-conspirator.

"They should really start asking questions about what is happening here... right about... now..."

As he spoke, the timer in his hand went off with a small signal. he nodded as if to himself but kept explaining.

"As we speak, all the power and systems of the McKenzie should be turning back on. I hope they do not spend too much time fretting about that virus being on a timer or the fact that their targeting controls are now locked on that weakened section of this ship's starboard plasma conduit."

Clenching his fist, Reichman pointed a trembling finger at the mocking Cardassian.

"You are some kind of double agent! You are a traitor to the cause!"

Shaking his head, Sorripto just smiled.

"You are always thinking so black and white. I am here to save a friend... oh, and on the way out, stop you and your band of crazy psychopaths from hurting anyone else."

Just then, sparks started coming from the sealed door. Sorripto pointed to it with his thumb over his shoulder.

"Well, looks like they want to get in here. Too bad... I had so much more to tell you. Well, I guess there is just one more thing left to do."

Sorripto pointed his pistol at Reichman.

"Chief... I honestly never liked you... and your fired on me."

The lifeless body of Chief Reichman slumped to the ground when he fired a blast.

Walking over to the fallen mutineer, he removed the Starfleet combadge from his jumpsuit.

"And you never deserved to wear this."

Removing a portable emergency transporter emitter from his pouch, Sorripto attached it to his arm and, as the doors opened, he waved to the guards attempting to enter and vanished in the very recognizable hum and light of a Federation transporter beam.

And suddenly, right after he was gone, everything went crazy then completely dark.

\* \* \*

As the McKenzie swooped in low beneath the Prophecy, spinning around the warship's powerful disruptor blasts, thin beams of shimmering light shot from her deflector dish to impact on the much larger ship's shields. Light flickered on the shields, the beams cycling frequency madly until they located and matched that of the shields of the Prophecy.

"Frequency locked, all systems charged." Keladry reported from her station.

"Fire."

Lightning exploded across the stars, shearing cleanly through the frequency blind spot in the shields of the Prophecy and slamming into the ship's hull, rocking it with the sudden impact. Eddies of blue-white energy danced and frolicked along the length of the fish-shaped vessel, burning through power conduits, detonating sensor and weapon clusters. And then, another bolt of lightning crashed into the reeling Cardassian-made cruiser, hitting it squarely on its engine column. Impulse engines died, warp core crashing into inactivity due to emergency protocols, the whole power overload throwing the vessel on to emergency battery power.

No weapons. No shields. No power other than life support and basic replicator functions. The Prophecy was dead in the water.

Nolanis smiled, a slight edge of ice piercing the satisfaction of a job well done, then tapped her combadge again.

"Target neutralised, Captain."

Crist tapped his side panel.

"Understood."

Then he turned to security chief Shran.

"Confirm."

Crist wanted to make sure, before lowering the armor and sending an assault team on board, that the enemy was effectively helpless or at least sufficiently vulnerable before committing lives any further. The captain of the McKenzie was a little paranoid today; but today was a day to double and possibly triple check the security, as current unfolding events showed all too plainly.

"It's confirmed," the Andorian said from his station once he checked his readouts. "The enemy ship is disabled. Their weapons and shields are offline, and their power systems are dark."

"Good," Crist said with a sigh, then taking a moment to think before he spoke again. "lower the armor. Hughes, move us into transporter range."

He tapped his side panel again.

"Jolan, get your team to the transporter rooms. It's time."

Crist then turned to Shran again.

"Once they are over there, reactivate the armor. I don't want to take any chances."

Jolan's team, still currently in the minuscule and cramped shuttlebay of the small Defiant class warship, received and acknowledged the message before addressing his team.

"Alright, you heard the man; lets get moving."

He then turned to the lead security officer who had arrived to the scene after the MACOs.

"Need anything else before I go?"

"No no; you do your thing, we'll be fine here. Go get them," the officer said with a smile.

Jolan nodded with a shark smile of his own, and started jogging off. He rejoined his team, and they remained jogging through the corridor on their way to the transporter room. It was as if there was a parade on the ship as the MACOs ran through the narrow corridors and, despite all the commotion of the last minutes, the crew of the McKenzie just stopped working for a moment to watch the MACOs pass.

They were off to war.

The heavily armed squadron finally made it to the three transporter rooms on deck 1 and four of them ran up onto the smallish transporter pad of each. Jolan however didn't step up at their head. He remained off the pad to give a pre-battle speech through their combadges, as much as for morale as for testing their team's communication.

"Men, you know what the mission is and you know our record. I have no doubt about any of you. In the Navy, during Earth's Second World War, those who would rescue the team of a downed craft or a crew from a sinking ship were rewarded ice cream. We'll, let's succeed in our objective and maybe the Captain will follow suit and revive this glorious tradition. So let's do our jobs and get our man back."

Jolan then jumped onto the pad and spoke one last time.

"Move out."

The transporter man nodded, assuming that it was the call sign to energize. And in each of the three compact rooms now filled with armed officers, the MACO team disappeared from the transporter pad.

\* \* \*

On the bridge of the Lotus Fleet flagship, Edward Tomah entered in the refitted Intrepid class' command center, first going over to check Vincent's post before returning to his own XO chair at the left of the captain's.

"The prisoner has been secured behind a class 3 force field, Captain. Security is working on it now."

Then he sighed audibly.

"Why does it turn out all the pretty new girls are spies or assassins?"

Gould cracked a smile but said nothing on the matter.

"Helm, as soon as we get confirmation from the Spectre, start our run."

The helm officer acknowledged the command and waited. Several excruciatingly long seconds passed before Sainthill finally spoke up again.

"Spectre acknowledges the order, Captain."

"Very good; helm, engage main engines," Gould said as he sat straighter and straightened his uniform, eyes blazing towards the screen and the face of the enemy.

With a defiant disruptor shot from a crippled Bird of Prey bouncing off it's shields, the Lotus quickly angled itself into position and warped away, leaving both dead and dying ships behind to solve their own problems.

They had enough of their own to deal with.

"Mister Sainthill, give me an all system readiness report as soon as its possible. Vincent. make sure were not being pursued, then join Tomah and myself in my ready room. We have to decide what to do about our prisoner."

"Aye, Sir," Josh replied to the captain's orders.

With that, Gould walked into his ready room with Tomah in tow.

"Sainthill, you have the bridge."

The young security and tactical chief of the flagship Lotus then checked the sensor readout on his console to make sure the Klingons had not followed them when they warped away. The few red dots that remained were barely moving, so it was apparent that they hadn't pursued the Lotus at warp. When Josh was satisfied that they were not being stalked, he left his station and entered the ready room.

Captain Gould was seated in his chair behind the desk and First Officer Tomah was seated across from him. Josh took the seat next to Tomah.

"Sensors are clear, Captain," Josh reported. "We should be alone for a while now."

At that moment, the very subject of the flagship captain's new and latest concern was taken care of in the vessel's small but very well furbished sickbay.

"Fascinating species, these Undines.." the EMH said as it worked to keep it alive behind the level 5 containment field it had been confined within the isolation ward. "Either of these two wounds could have killed a Gorn... and yet, it persists."

Doctor Bindo was following his actions via monitor.

"I'm more interested in how she managed to get past our security screening," retorted the Betazoid woman, taking care to keep her mental shields up against any possible telepathic assault from the creature; somethign they were already well known for. "At the very least, we'll have to inform Lotus Fleet Command that the Undine are still able to do that..."

She scrunched her eyes at the screen and sighed.

"Is that a subclavian pulmonary artery? what an odd place for that to be... Well... if nothing else, this is the first time we've got a chance to work on a 'live' Undine."

With a twitched eyebrow, the EMH responded with a slightly sarcastic tone typical of it's early programming.

"You know of course that 'it' might not be a she. We still don't know if that race even has a male or female distinction. In any case, *it's* fairly lucky to even be alive."

Bindo looked over at him.

"I'm not sure I'd call it luck, considering her, *it's* future..."

Then, Jolie paused and cocked her red-haired head to one side, blinking her wide, deep dark eyes.

"But why do you say it's luck anyway?"

The EMH shrugged.

"If Lieutenant Commander Tomah had known what to shoot for, our uninvited *guest* would be quite dead now. He barely missed hitting vital areas with both phaser hits. A few centimeter more to the right and this would have been an autopsy."

"And even then, I'd insist on the force field," JolieBindo said with a shake of her head.

The EMH smiled at her.

"That's understandable. We know from Voyager's records how invasive their biology can be. Infection from their tissue can literally eat an adult humanoid alive from the inside out. And their excessively complex genetic structure makes fighting it almost impossible. Even Borg nanoprobes are powerless to assimilate it. As a photonic lifeform, I of course am immune."

The smugness of the last remark was also typical of early holographic programming and Doctor Bindo was quite familiar with it. She therefore ignored it to concentrate on their patient.

Back in the captain's ready room, Captain Gould, First Officer Tomah and Chief of Security Vincent had an impromptu meeting about their alien intruder as the Lotus moved into its final staging point before beginning the Azimuth Horizon containment loop. The rest of the ship remained a flurry of activity. Engineering was still working on the damage to the substructure of the ship caused by the Klingon dreadnought. Security had been posted outside sickbay due to a very dangerous intruder, a shape shifting Undine that had gained access to the ship by posing as a new crewmember. It was for this very reason these two men met with the commanding officer of the flagship of Lotus Fleet.

Gould sat back and gave a bit of a sigh. His face and hands still showed the minor burnt marks he had received from his encounter with the Undine.

"How the Undine got aboard is an important factor but, for now, we have bigger concerns. We need to minimize any damage it might have done posing as Petty Officer Olsen, paying special attention to the transporter systems obviously."

Tomah nodded in agreement.

"I suggest we take the system down until we can, ah, run a full check on it, Sir."

"Agreed; and I guess I have you to thank for my timely rescue, Mister Tomah? If not for your last second beam out, it's very likely Olsen may have been sitting in this seat right now," Gould said with a slight smile.

"Well, ah, Sir..." Tomah mused, "I'd had some suspicion in regards to Olsen somewhat earlier on. She was becoming, ah, very friendly with me since the day she arrived. And me being, ah, a married man and all, of course wanted none of that."

Then he shrugged.

"But I couldn't find anything amiss in her record and her screening checked out.. so I, ah, let it go as it were, Sir."

Gould looked at his field-appointed executive officer with obvious sympathy.

"You did what you should have in this case. But, in the future, if someone strikes you as odd, share it with the rest of us, Commander."

The Vulcanoid captain then gave a smug looking smile.

"Especially if they're hitting on you."

Tomah looked indignant but quickly looked down.

"Ah... aye, Sir."

"So, any thoughts on our prisoner?"

"The Undine are not to be taken lightly," Josh replied. "We should keep it behind a level 10 forcefield at all times. The EMH, and only the EMH, should operate on it. I'll send a security team to sickbay to watch it until it's stable and then it should be transferred immediately to a holding cell."

Josh paused for a second before continuing.

"I don't even like suggesting this when we've already got so much to deal with, but replacing you in the middle of a fight would have raised too much suspicion; I don't think that was it's end goal. There may be something bigger at play here and there may be more Undine operatives on board to carry it out."

"Ah, Vincent has a point, Sir" Tomah agreed. "I suspect that I was the original target and the Klingon attack gave it the opportunity to, ah... 'trade up,' as it were. But, given both it's recent posting to the Lotus and the the nearly complete revamping of the crew, it's not likely that it could, ah, have a co-conspirator, Captain"

Tomah all but shrugged then.

"Not to say we shouldn't, ah, keep an eye on our guest, of course."

"Very well. Mister Vincent, see to the prisoner transfer and containment and, Mister Tomah, begin a check of Petty officers' personal quarters and work areas. You know the ship and crew best; see if you can find anyone this intruder might have been in regular contract with. I don't want to start a witch hunt and have our people seeing spies in the shadows, but see what you can do."

Gould rubbed his eyes.

"Sainthill and I will begin the containment loop as soon as the ship is in position. Any questions?"

"No questions from me, Sir," Josh responded. "I'll get right on it."

With that, the young chief of security stood, left the ready room with long strides and moved across the bridge and into the turbolift before the office door completely closed behind him.

As the doors to the ready room closed behind Vincent, Tomah looked at the door for several seconds before noticing that Captain Gould was looking at him.

"Something else, Tomah?"

The newly appointed first officer of the flagship frowned and then shrugged.

"I'm sure it's nothing, Sir, it's just... ah, well, I would have thought young Mister Vincent might have a question or two. It's just seemed he was in a bit of a hurry to, ah, get going."

Gould pondered Tomah's words for a second.

"I'm sure the young man is anxious to prove himself, Tomah. There's a lot for him to deal with on what is only his second deep space assignment after all."

"Ah, indeed, Sir... and for all of us for that matter," the greying man agreed.

He got up to leave but hesitated in front of the door. Gould looked up at him from his desk.

"Out with it, Tomah. What's really on your mind."

"Well, ah, Sir..." He looked hesitant again. "You did say I should, ah, speak up more, Sir..."

Gould cocked his head.

"Go on."

"It's just that, ah, petty officer Olsen arrived just shortly after Vincent was given full security control. And if it was, ah, me trying to get a man onto an enemy ship, a fresh officer heading to the bridge of the flagship would, ah, make a compelling target, Sir."

Gould sat back in his chair.

"I suppose he would."

He rested his hands on his chin.

"Have you been given any reason to suspect he's not who he claims to be?"

Tomah shook his head.

"Not a thing, Sir. Seems, ah, straight and proper to me. Spot on what you'd expect of a capable Starfleet officer."

After a seconds of pause he went on.

"If you like, Sir, I can, ah, look a little closer into his recent activity... sort of keep an eye on him as it were."

It was Gould's turn to look uncomfortable. What was the best course of action here? If Tomah's instinct was right, he just sent one spy to guard another... not to mention that Vincent had security override ability for the whole ship. But there really wasn't any proof; nothing that was more than mere conjecture.

"Ok do it, but keep it subtle, Tomah. I don't want him thinking we can't trust him."

Tomah smiled.

"Not to worry, Sir. He'll never know I'm there."

The Lotus XO gave a nod and left the room. Once the door closed he said it again, in a lower voice that only he himself could hear.

"He'll never know I'm there."

Meanwhile, the young man they were worried about stepped into sickbay followed by his security team, all carrying rifles. The EMH was working on the prisoner while Doctor Jolie Bindo looked on from the other side of the force field at the stern-looking group entering her sickbay.

"Doctor Bindo," Josh said as he walked towards the red-haired Betazoid woman. "I will be securing the prisoner here until it is stable enough to be beamed to the brig. Please inform me when we will be able to proceed."

"Lieutenant, the patient is behind a level 5 force field," replied the chief medical officer of Lotus, "and he is in no shape to threaten anyone. Now, I will not have an armed security team in my sickbay. Please remove yourselves to the corridor. As for the patient, it should be stable within the next hour."

"Fine Doctor, my team will wait just outside the door, but I am staying," Josh said firmly. "And please make that a level 7 force field, just to be safe."

With that, Josh signaled his team to move into the corridor and wait, then contacted Captain Gould to report.

"Captain, Lieutenant Vincent here. Doctor Bindo says the Undine should be ready for transfer in under an hour," he reported. "My team and I will remain here until then."

Over the next half hour, Captain Gould went about working with Chief Engineer Adams in engineering to adjust the warp core to allow the subspace tearing at high warp speeds.

"The engines shouldn't have any problems with the adjustments, Captain. The Lotus was designed to make such alterations as needed." Adams said. "The problem is with the substructure fracture."

Gould agreed.

"I was afraid of that. If we have to remain at a high warp speed for an extended time, the stress will likely enlarge the fracture to a dangerous degree... Is there anything we can do to lessen the effect? Perhaps if we applied integrity dampening anchors along the support grid.."

Adams made a face.

"It MIGHT help... a little. But short of a few weeks in drydock, well, there's just nothing we can do."

Gould let out a sigh.

"Very well; do what you can. But, no matter the outcome, we will complete our mission to seal the Azimuth.. no matter the cost."

With a nod to his chief engineer, he left engineering and headed back to the bridge. As he entered the lift, Tomah called out to him.

"Hold the door, Sir!" and quickly joined him. "Thank you, Captain."

"Any luck with your search of petty officer Olson's quarters?" Gould asked after telling the lift to go to the bridge.

"Ah, most of her logs have been sent to be processed, but I doubt they will be of any use, Sir. I did however find something... suggestive... about our Mister Vincent."

"Turbolift: Stop." the Half-Vulcan said and it did. He then turned squarely to face his first officer. "And what would that be?"

Tomah seemed just a bit startled by the sudden stop but recovered quickly.

"It's, ah, not much at all, Sir. As I said, it's just, ah, suggestive. Seems that Vincent and Olson met twice off duty the first two days he came aboard, both times in plain view in the lounge area. It's quite possible that it was, ah, just a coincidence, Sir; their shifts are coinciding of course."

Gould seemed unimpressed.



"That's barely suggestive, Tomah, Vincent as our new chief of security on board would certainly stop to meet a new crewmember."

"Ah, aye, Sir, of course. It's just that.. well, I checked Olson's time sheet for that period and, ah, it seems she asked to change it for an earlier time.. which just so happened to be, ah, the same time Vincent was in the lounge.. both days.. Sir."

Gould put his hand to his chin in thought while Tomah waited quietly.

"She could have been trying to get close to him, the new man on the bridge. But it's possible there's more to it and we just can't take any chance... not with the universe in the balance."

He shook his head in annoyance.

"Computer, locate Lieutenant Vincent."

The computer chimed with its standard monotone.

"Lieutenant Vincent is in sickbay."

"Tomah, go up there and have him take another screening, captain's order. Tell him I'm having all the command crew going through it, starting with him because he's already there. Make sure you get the security team that's there to back you up if need be."

Tomah looked grim.

"Ah, I hope it's not what it looks like, Sir. He's a fine lad, I'm sure of it."

Gould nodded showing no expression.

"You have your orders, Lieutenant Commander. Turbolift, resume."

At that moment, in sickbay, the EMH walked out of the confined area, making the forcefield shimmer briefly as his photons crossed the energy barrier and without even noticing it came back into the room still working on a data PADD, eyes lowered under a deep frown.

"It might interest you to know, Lieutenant, that I ran another full DNA code check on our patient... and do you know what I found? She's an Undine"

Vincent looked at him questioningly.

"Yes, we already knew that.."

The EMH held up a finger.

"Yes, but my point is; my scan detected *now* that she is indeed a Undine. This raises the obvious question; how did she get past my *initial* check *and* the transporter scan? I see no indication that she ever had anything, biologically in any case, that would allow her to do so."

"That is an interesting question Doctor," Josh responded. "Is it possible that you malfunctioned? Or that your program has been tampered with?"

"I beg your pardon?" The EMH actually looked insulted by the question. "I can assure you, Lieutenant, that my operating system undergoes a routine check everyday and a complete check twice a week."

It then went back to the readout, but not without leaving to the young man a stern look before he went further into details.

"And, as you of all people should be well aware of, my program has the same security access as the ship's main computer. Only the captain can authorize any change to my program."

Then, the holographic medical officer raised an eyebrow at him, along with a sarcastic tone of voice.

"Perhaps you should go see if *he's* malfunctioning."

"I didn't mean any offense, Doctor," Josh replied, somewhat defensively, "but programs have been known to malfunction in the past, even advanced programs such as yourself."

*I didn't know the captain before the mission started, so I don't know if he's had any sudden changes,* Josh thought as he spoke. *I wonder if the doctor may be on to something here.*

"Last time I checked, human malfunction was your area of expertise," Josh then said. "So, you tell me: is there any medical reason to believe that the captain, or any of the other officers, are involved?"

The doctor looked surprised.

"I really didn't mean for you to take me so literally... but it is a valid question."

He looked at Vincent thoughtfully for a second.

"Well, captain Gould has managed to successfully avoid his physical since returning to the ship although that's hardly surprising. Captains have always been the worst patients after all. Commander Tomah seems to be going through some personal issues at home with his wife and I'm sure that affected his stress levels, even if he's not showing any blatant signs of it. Our science officer has been extremely tight lipped, even for a Vulcan, or so I'm told... and has been subtly complaining about being around Humans all the time.."

He then pointed a finger to his balding forehead.

"And, oh yes.. we have a new chief of security that is trying very hard to prove himself to his new captain, which sometimes makes one jump at shadows."

The EMH then smiled at him.

"I think that's about it.."

"Point taken Doctor," Josh said with a slight laugh. "Please, let me know when the prisoner is ready to be transferred."

Just then, first officer Tomah entered the room with two security officers flanking him.

"Ah good, your still here, Vincent."

He nodded to the two officers who then stood on either side of the doorway.

"The captain wants all senior staff officers to undergo a second screening. An' seeing as you were, ah, already here.. he figured you should go first."

He smiled warmly.

*Strange that the captain would make a security decision like this without even notifying me,* Josh thought. *Unless he thinks I can't be trusted... Well, anyway it couldn't hurt for all the staff to be tested again.*

"I think that sounds like a good idea, considering the situation that we're in," Josh replied. "I assume, since you're also here, that you'll be screened after me?"

Tomah's eyes looked away as if the thought hadn't crossed his mind, but shot back to Vincent quickly.

"Well, ah, of course I am. The sooner we get this over with, the better, ah, don't you think?"

The Doctor looked back and forth at the two men who suddenly seemed uncomfortable with each other.

"Well then.. just hop up on this bio bed, Lieutenant. We'll have this settled in just a few minutes."

He patted the foot of the bed in an attempt of levity.

Tomah held his hand out to Vincent.

"Ah, I'll need to hold your weapon lad; standard procedure, you know."

"Of course, Sir," Josh said as he handed over his phaser and hopped onto the doctor's bed. "Let's do this Doctor."

"Ah, nothing like a willing victim.. so to speak. And I should point out, Lieutenant Commander, that you too are here for a screening; regulations you know." The doctor said, eying him skeptically.

Tomah frowned then removed his phaser as well, handing both to one of the other guards.

"Ah, I was think'in of waiting 'till my turn... but I guess fair is fair."

He then smiled at the guard.

"Let's hope he's not one of em. He's got three of the four weapons in the room now."

As the doctor worked, Tomah came over and stood next to him.

"Ah, don't worry about it, son; the captain has reason to worry. But I don't think for a second you're, ah, one of them devils... and I told him as much."

"Thank you for that, Sir," Josh said as the holographic doctor continued the exam.

After a few minutes, Jolie Bindo, going from one injured crewman to another between the fully occupied biobeds of the small sickbay, wandered over to watch the EMH working silently at his main medical console and, as she looked at the visual display of the genetic analyser, she frowned and pointed at the monitor.

"What's that odd-looking thing in his DNA?"

The two guards at the door started to look tense hearing those words. One actually moved his hand closer to his phaser.

"It's a deformity in the strand, quite normal I assure you. Everyone has them, you're just looking at a program I designed to seek them out and highlight them," the EMH said quite plainly. "In fact, it's the absence of such genetic 'dead ends' that has proven helpful in uncovering Undine infiltrators. Put simply, because of their own ultracomplex DNA they midify to simulate our own, they end up not having enough of them."

From his biobed, Edward Tomah said "Ah" and glanced at Vincent beside him on the other bed.

"Hear that Chief? the more, ah, imperfect we are, the better."

Then he winked and smiled.

"I must be one of the most, ah, human people alive then."

The Betazoid chief medical officer of the Lotus smiled back at him and moved on with a nod of approval to her electronic counterpart towards her next injured patient. The artificial doctor however raised an eye brow at him.

"I'll be the judge of that, Commander."

He then looked over at Vincent.

"All clear, Lieutenant; you can get up now."

As the young man jumped back on his feet, the EMH glanced sarcastically in his direction while he addressed Tomah.

"One hundred percent not-undine, Commander. But of course.. It's possible I might be... malfunctioning."

"I'm sure you're functioning perfectly, doctor," Josh replied with a smile.

He then turned to Tomah.

"Sir, if you're satisfied here, I'd like to get this prisoner into a cell as soon as possible."

The first officer of the Lotus gave him a mock surprised look.

"Not going to, ah, stick around to see how imperfect a human your superior officer is then? But your right of course, duty before pleasure."

And so saying, he nimbly jumped up on the bed.

"If the doc here says your, ah, you, that's good enough for me. Your clear to transfer the prisoner, Vincent."

He then looked over at the EMH while pointing at the two armed security officers watching the whole scene with attentive eyes.

"Now Doctor, would ya, ah, kindly tell these folks that I'm pure Human with this test? I'd like to, ah, get back ta work."

Despite his apparent lack of concern, the thickening accent in his already peculiar speech pattern betrayed his nervousness at being prodded so deeply by the medical scans. This did not escape Doctor Bindo, even as she was a few biobeds away and tending to a burned crewman. As a Betazoid, she was naturally sensitive to such details from people nearby.

To ease her own nervousness, she opened her telepathic sensitivity to the older man. She would not scan his mind but simply let herself be receptive to any psionic emanation that could come from him. From a normal Human, she would not get anything but void and silence, as most Human were not psionically endowed. But an Undine was essentially a psionic creature; in their natural state, they could only communicate through telepathy and they were deeply emotional, lashing out with violent and aggressive thoughts as spontaneously and forcefully as Klingons would boast and bellow. It would take an exceptionally well-disciplined one to put a lid on what was their basic psychic make-up.

And even that so much effort, a well-trained Betazoid psychologist like her could notice.

Thus, she listened with more than her ears to Edward Tomah. But now, it was the new chief of tactical and security, Lieutenant Josh Vincent, that spoke.

"Now that you mention it, Sir, the prisoner is unconscious; it can wait for a few more minutes. You had the patience to wait for my test; it would be rude of me not to stay for yours."

Josh moved to stand between the security officers as he took his phaser back and watched the doctor begin Mister Tomah's screening.

It had been obvious, even without any telepathic probing, that the Lieutenant had been surprised, if not even a bit annoyed, by this sudden medical security check without him, the actual chief of security, authorizing it or not being previously informed of it; even worse, being the first target of it. Without voicing his feelings nor getting out of line, he was now getting even while doing his work... and making sure everyone else would notice it, especially his superior officers.

*Smart young man*, Jolie silently appreciated.

Minutes passed as the screening was underway and no one seemed to have anything else to say.

Finally the EMH looked up from his instruments.

"Test complete, showing pure human DNA strains. You may return to work, Sir."

Tomah smiled and got up.

"There we go! Ah, it seems were all who we say we are after all."

He retrieved his phaser.

"But the captain is right to be careful in this situation; ah, buggers could be anywhere."

He turned then to address the two security men.

"Right then... When I arrived, I found you two outside. I don't care who ordered that, but I'm going to, ah, assume it wasn't your idea. From now on, you stay in here with Vincent until he dismisses you, is that clear?"

"Aye, Sir!" both men said in unison, standing at attention.

"Carry on, Mister Vincent," finished the first officer of the Lotus and he left sickbay.

Josh then turned to Doctor Bindo to finish up his business.

"Your prisoner is stable, Lieutenant," the Doctor said as Josh turned to her and after receiving a nod from the EMH.

"Thank you Doctor. We'll be out of your way momentarily," the chief of security replied. He then spoke into his communicator; "Vincent to T'Pala; are you ready to receive the prisoner?"

"Aye, Sir," the Vulcan brig officer's soft but calmly authoritative voice replied. "The cell is prepared and guards have been posted. I will activate the force field immediately after transport."

"Very good; Transporter Chief, beam the prisoner from sickbay to cell 2, on my mark... Mark."

As soon as the Undine had disappeared from the confining biobed, Vincent turned and left the room, followed closely by his security officers. He tapped again his combadge as he walked.

"Chief Park; I want you to oversee the interrogation of the prisoner," he ordered. "Find out what its mission was and find out if it has any help onboard."

"Aye, Sir," replied the ship's appointed investigations officer. "I'll find out what it's doing here."

Josh closed the channel and, with his security team boarded, the nearest turbolift and headed to the bridge. Just before the turbolift arrived at the bridge, Josh turned to his security officers.

"I want you two to head back to sick bay," he ordered. "Not only will you be securing the area as called for in regulations, but keep track of anyone who goes in and how long they stay. Report to me if you see anything out of the ordinary."

"Aye, Sir," the officers said in unison.

Some time had passed before the ship had been finally made ready to start its entrenching run at the edge of the Azimuth horizon anomaly. Gould, Sainthill and Adams had just finished preparing the ship as best they could. Gould went out of his way not to involve Vincent or Tomah during this time, letting Tomah do his job authenticating Vincent.

"One bit of bad news, Captain," Adams said at the pre-launch briefing. "Simulation's on the effect of this operation shows considerable damage will occur within the substructure. We should be able to hold it together, Sir, but.. well, I don't quite know how to put it."

Gould held up his hand.

"I understand, Adams. Such prolonged damage might render the Lotus structurally unsound."

He let the words hang for a few seconds.

"But It changes nothing I didn't cover before, No matter what the cost, this mission must succeed."

There was unshakable conviction in his voice; but he didn't look happy about saying it.

Adams took a breath.

"Aye Sir, of course."

The Half-Vulcan sighed in turn.

"Everyone to their stations. It's time to move out."

Gould gave them all a quick nod then he and Sainthill left for the bridge while the chief engineer headed back to engineering. On the turbolift, Gould and Sainthill stood side by side, stoically, like two Vulcans would.

Gould glanced at his science chief. He seemed uninterested in talking, but Gould knew better.

"I'd like your opinion... I mean, your logical evaluation of the situation, Mr. Sainthill." He said calmly.

Sainthill seemed to consider this first, then responded with a careful tone.

"I can see no flaw in your logic, Captain, the needs of the many always comes first over personal loss. It just seems that we might try harder to find an alternative to the destruction of our vessel. You seemed rather quick to accept it, Sir.. although not to any unreasonable degree."

Gould didn't look at him or respond right away. but then he sighed.

"Very well... After mission starts, take whatever resources you need and start looking for that alternative... if there is one."

Still looking as if he was bored with the conversation, Sainthill agreed.

"Of course, Captain..." and then said in a whimsical human kind of way; "I'll see what I can do."

The turbolift opened onto the bridge and Josh Vincent left his two men to ride it back to the brig deck while he stepped out and moved towards his post.

"Captain," he said, "the prisoner is secure in the brig and is being questioned by my investigations officer."

"Very good, Mister Vincent. Take your post."

Gould watched thoughtfully the man dismiss his replacement. Medical obviously had him checked out. One less worry for the commanding officer then... It was a good thing to know for sure that you had someone you could trust at your back.

The commanding officer of the flagship then sat down and pushed a button on his chair's armrest.

"All hand, this is your captain. We are beginning our primary run to contain the Azimuth Horizon event. This will create considerable strain on the Lotus' substructure and power systems. Report anything you see or even feel amiss to your supervisor immediately; anything could be important so all, be vigilant. Once completed, we will have done our part to stop the expansion of the Horizon into, not only Federation Space, but to our whole home galaxy as well. Keep on your toes everyone...and Godspeed to us all. Captain Gould out."

He then looked over to his helmsman.

"When ready, Mister Moor, start our first pass."

With a quick nervous nod of his bald, blue head, the Bolian Lieutenant keyed the final sequence and the ship leapt into warp.

\* \* \*

"Lieutenant Tritter, what is the status of the DYCEP?" asked the first officer of the Spectre.

"No damage, Sir, and as it hasn't been used yet, it has full reserve power," responded the blond colossus in his usual flat tone of voice, as if nothing had happened in the last hour. But there was enough sweat on his lowered brow and lines on his square face to show that he had not been at all oblivious to the drama they had just managed to live through.

Rogers noted the resolve of the young, inexperienced officer and smiled inwardly. Quite a baptism of fire for one's first real deep space assignment. He knew the man had served on the McKenzie briefly before coming to the Spectre; but it had been very brief, most of the time off-duty on a scientific mission, albeit an exciting one... but nothing compared to what they had just faced. But he had kept his composure, showing why he had been made part to the elite Starfleet division of Lotus Fleet.

"OK, I want you to program a procedure to drop out of warp and deploy the DYCEP. Trigger it on the detection of any hostile ship... heck ANY ship that doesn't have a Federation-encrypted signature within the vicinity. Maybe then they'll just pass us by. While we're at warp, we should be hidden by the effects of the anomaly until they're right on top of us," assured Rogers.

Tritter just nodded and went to work on the modifications.

Moments later, O'Conner reported in from engineering.

"Sir, the modifications to the warp core are complete."

"Good work, Commander," Summers said as he moved back to his chair and took a seat.

"Well, it's not that hard to misalign a warp core, you know," retorted the former Artemis Exec and now new chief engineer of the Spectre.

Summers smiled and closed the channel. Then he lifted his head to face the helm station in front of his seat.

"Warp 1. Engage."

The helmsman acknowledged and swung the mass of the Akira class ship around before they burst into warp toward the fiery sphere ahead of them. He plotted in an orbital course that would take them up and over the side of the Anomaly facing the portion of space where the Klingon border stretched out. Going slightly above and below the anomaly, the Spectre had the special orders and distinction of sealing any loose tendrils that were not following the warp paths that ships generally took parallel to the galactic plane.

"Take us slowly to warp 9.8 and hold there," ordered the captain.

They would be able to maintain that speed for twelve hours before needing to stop and stabilize the structural integrity field; and that was for the short term. With all the numerous high warp swoops ahead of them, it meant that they would have to effect a major overhaul of the engine once this whole operation would be over. The Spectre would be quite worn out before it's time.

But then again, what was a ship's fate when the whole universe hung in the balance?

"I want a full status report each twelve hours," finished Summers.

The first report however came much sooner; less than eight hours later. Just as First officer Rogers was about to return to his chair after a much needed period of rest, Lieutenant Andrews from the tactical station, who had relieved chief of security Tritter hours earlier, spoke up.

"Sir! Reading a massive disturbance near the Paulson Nebula sector! Holy ...! It's lighting up the entire area! Distance, one point three five parsecs. It can't be a nova if readings are right, but definitely a tremendous explosion of some sort if it can hit our sensors from this far and through the anomaly's interference."

Looking at science 2 now, David thought a moment. Not many things could cause such a deflagration; nothing natural to be sure...

As the commanding officer of the Spectre also stepped off the turbolift to resume his duties in the command chair, Rogers kept his eyes on the science monitors but addressed him in a worried tone.

"Captain, we have what seems to be an abnormally powerful explosion on long range sensors, coming from about six light years from our present position. Sir... that is the Alsea's and Artemis's theater of operations...where they were sent to intercept the Romulan dreadnought." barely seated in, Summers immediately rose from his chair as his heart sank to his toes.



*Kheren I hope you and all those with you are alright,* he inwardly sighed.

"Get me any and all info on that explosion, for lack of a better term, so we can make sure nothing of the like happens here. Everyone else, get back to work. We can not afford to worry too much about what is going on elsewhere. We have our own problems to deal with.

\* \* \*

"Come in! What is your status? Do you have the intruder?" the Rethian woman called Ty'Reynick demanded through the Prophecy's intraship comm of the guards currently lying unconscious in the transporter room.

"If you want some thing done right..." she muttered when only silence answered her.

With a black-clawed finger of her orange-scaled hand, she tapped another button on the comm panel.

"Security team 2, find out what's going on down there. I'm right behind you."

"Aye, my Lady."

Moments later, as she finally made her way to the transporter room, she saw the security team attempting to revive their fallen comrades and that Chief Reichman, their agent aboard the Lotus Fleet warship McKenzie, was half-laying, half-sitting and speaking with the security officer in charge. He noticed her and fell back while trying to futilely stand at attention.

"Sorripto, my Lady... he's a traitor..."

"Clearly..." was the only response.

"I failed you," he said, lowering his gaze and expecting a wrathful punishment.

"Only the Preservers may judge that," she sighed, too exhausted to scold. "Security team, with me. We will find this traitor and put an end to his interference."

Just then, the entire ship shuddered and went dark and everyone froze in their tracks.

One by one, the security team flipped on the light attachments on their weapons and they hurriedly followed Ty'reynyk who was already on her way out into the corridor. They followed her to the nearest access hatch.

"He is clearly causing havoc in Engineering. The turbolifts and transporters won't be functional so we'll have to climb down."

As she was getting ready to climb in, she heard the distinctive hum of transporter beams and a dozen lights materialized further down the corridor.

Jolan and his MACO team beamed in right in front of her, several meters distant. They swung there weapons around to scan the area for the enemy with the searchlights atop of them. The ship had barely stopped to rock violently as power throughout the ship finished shutting off. The McKenzie had indeed managed a last ditch effort to disable the Prophecy.

It had worked, as now the weapons, shields, even the warp core were all offline. The only power source available was battery power. The emergency lights then came on and so, the rooms and the hallways around the boarding party were now barely lit.

A split second felt like an eternity as the lights from each set of weapons were locked on each other and then the shooting began. The MACOs training kicked in and they didn't even wait for the order from Jolan. Two of Ty'Reynyk's men in the front were instantly cut down from the stun fire and were propelled against some of the other Horizon's Children cultists behind them. Ty'reynyk dove into the nearby open hatch of a jefferies tube as several phaser blasts whizzed past her spinning head and the rest of her team were dispatched quickly and efficiently.

A MACO ran toward the hatch and fired a few shots after her, but she was already too far in and around a bend.

"Stephens, Arturo, secure the area. The rest of you with me," Major Jolan ordered as he continued down the corridor with the rest of his assault group.

Luckily for them, some of the ships' power systems for lights, communications, and turbolifts were already being restored, so he loaded half of his team into the nearest one and sent them to secure Engineering. The other half, he took with him toward the bridge.

Once out of sight and realizing no pursuer was coming after her, Ty'reynyk went to another deck and punched the nearest wall comm panel to report when she saw the power restored.

"Lord N'Eligahn, we have intruders on board."

Without a word filtering through his silent snarl, he pointed with a stabbing finger at his tactical chief and the Bajoran, as if on cue, instantly dispatched whatever security teams they had left to go hunt them down.

Now, only two designated guards remained at their post, in front of the lounge door. Those two were the best they had and were stationed on either side of the Prophet's door and never moved. They were former Starfleet special forces who had never been bested in hand to hand combat and wore full protective armor and personal shields. The Prophet's Keepers they were referred to; and they were ready to give their lives for him... but for sure not without a fight.

The lights overhead flickered and dimmed as the ship's technicians still struggled to restore power. After Sorripto's program brought the power back on the McKenzie, it did not take long for her to disable the Prophecy and Sorripto knew this was now his chance.

Running over to an access panel, he got to work accessing the internal sensors and it was with these that he noticed the energy signatures down the corridor from the transporter room he had just come from. It did not take the Cardassian long to figure out that the MACOs were onboard and that his time was limited. They might have been well trained, but Sorripto knew that they were not invincible and knew they would not leave here unscathed if they attempted to take the bridge. Working frantically, he ran emergency power through the transporter systems and locked on to all Federation signals if they needed to leave. He could now beam them all onto the McKenzie whether they wanted him to do it or not.

Working his way through the darkened bowels of the ship, Sorripto did what he could to avoid the security crews which were now on their way to war against the MACOs. Arriving at the turbolift just below the bridge, he dropped his satchel and emptied his pockets. He knew it was going to take every trick he could muster to get past the guards at the door where one Human lifesign was registering on his tricorder. Two men Sorripto knew he could not beat in a direct assault.

The Cardassian engineer began to work on his makeshift holo emitter and kept sheathed his tachyon combat knife. The blade was designed to penetrate personal shields, being made of a tightly focused tachyon beam from a small but powerful if short-lived emitter.

It was an assassin's weapon, one to be used once and quickly. he would not waste it in any drawn-out fight with elite guards he could not hope to take by surprise; one maybe, but not two.

Or... couldn't he?

*The only problem is going to be getting close enough to stab them and slowly enough to hurt,* Sorripto thought.

Having only a few minutes and coming up with the best plan he could, the McKenzie's chief engineer entered the turbolift and signaled for deck 1. The doors closed with a woosh and Sorripto was off.

The doors to the turbolift on the bridge opened and, as he stepped out with both his weapons drawn, he fired a barrage of blasts, the first striking N'Eligahn, just as he spun around, knocking him back against his command chair, unconscious before any sound could come out of his barely opening mouth. The others quickly took out the unarmed officers right at their consoles. The Cardassian then pointed his two pistols at the guards at the door. Both had reacted instantly to his intrusion, but barely had time to raise and aim their rifles at him that the turbolift doors opened again and an entire Federation assault team poured out, firing phaser blasts towards them. Obeying their well-oiled reflexes, they thus rolled for cover and began returning fire towards the onrushing squad while Sorripto crouched low behind the bridge railing.

As one of the guards dodged a phaser blast, he swung the butt of his rifle to the closest Federation intruder right in front of him... passing cleanly through him.

Looking back to his brother in arms, the guard instantly yelled a warning.

"It is a trick! They are holograms, all of them!"

"Not *all* of them!"

Sorripto lunged his energy knife into the synth mesh area below the shoulder blade of the guard in front of him. The slow penetration of the blade caused the guard to drop to one knee as the holographic figures around him blinked and then faded away. As Sorripto brought up the blade and then powered it off, the man fell his heavy armor crashing hard on the deck.

Looking up, the Cardassian rolled behind the comm console and drew his phase pistol. The second royal guard aimed his rifle at the console as Sorripto slowly stood from view and smiled.

"They say you have never been beaten in hand to hand combat. Well, neither have I. I say we settle this like the soldiers we are."

The guard nodded and, in a simultaneous motion, Sorripto and the guard threw their weapons to the ground.

As Sorripto stepped out from behind the comm console, he raised his fists, as did his opponent.

"Like soldiers..."

"Like soldiers..."

The guard yelled as he lunged towards the Cardassian, his first swing missing as his grey-skinned opponent ducked, but his second, a well-planned uppercut, connected with his bony jaw... and passed right through his face.

As the guard's hand was passing through Sorripto's face, the real Sorripto lunged from behind the console, stabbing the guard in the same mesh spot as he had stabbed the first.

"Well... I am not a soldier; I am an engineer."

Removing the knife, the guard dropped to one knee and, clenching his fist, Sorripto swung with thirty years of rage and frustration, crushing the heavy armor helmet as it connected. The crush of armor and bone faded as the guard fell heavily to the floor, lifeless and dead.

Taking only a moment to compose himself, Sorripto grabbed his phase pistol and walked towards the ready room door. As the double panel whooshed open, he was a moment dazzled by the fiery brilliance of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly lighting the whole room with ocre and gold in all its flaming glory. Then, he glimpsed a silhouette before the orange-golden light, like a shape bathed in an aura of power. A tall, well-built brown-skinned man in a long gold and orange robe, a close-trimmed beard under a lightly creased nose highlighting his regal features, was standing between him and the large monitor. Slowly, the stately and dignified silhouette turned to face him squarely, a slight frown on his features.

Before the robed man could speak a word, Sorripto, who at this point was breathing heavily, fired a shot into his chest.

The prophet slumped down on the richly carpeted floor, unconscious.

"Time to go home, old friend."

Sorripto grabbed the unconscious body, threw it over his shoulder and walked towards the turbolift, now hoping to run into his Federation colleagues along the way.

The bodies strewn across the Prophecy bridge as evidence of Sorripto's success in extricating Sisko were what N'Eligahn first noticed as he rose from what seemed like a long, deep sleep. Through his blurred vision, the faces of the figures lying on the deck were familiar, but he was not sure why. His head pounded and he winced in pain with every heartbeat that sent blood rushing from the wound on the back of his head. Reaching back with trembling fingers he felt the blood trickling down the back of his neck and he panicked.

"Help!" he shouted to the void around him.

What he thought was 'help' anyway. If anyone would have been there to actually hear him, it would've come out as gibberish. He had a concussion.

Suddenly, a training which he was not sure where he had received it kicked in and he located the nearest medical kit under a wall console. Removing a dermal regenerator from the small case, he passed it over the back of his head a couple times and felt the stream of blood lessen and finally cease. He knew it wasn't a permanent fix; that would require a laser suture and that suture performed by a real medical professional. But it would have to do for now.

His sight was still blurry but, as best as he could, he stumbled toward the nearest entryway and down the corridor he found on the other side.

At the same time, Res Jolan and his team of Starfleet crack soldiers had been making their way toward the bridge and came around the corner to see a Cardassian carrying an unconscious Bajoran. An older Bajoran in the MACO team who had been through the occupation as a child but had lived most of his life on Earth still had to stop himself from instantly shooting Sorripto where he stood. But the commando leader had already recognized him.

"Halt!" shouted Major Jolan. "Drop your weapon and release the prisoner! Lieutenant Sorripto, you are under arrest for treason, attempted murder, dereliction of duty, assault, destruction of Starfleet..."

Throwing the unconscious body of Sisko to the elderly MACO soldier, who stumbled backwards from the weight and the force, Sorripto fought back every urge he had to say the first things that had come to his mind.

He knew the man's eyes, because they were eyes he had seen before; this soldier before him hated Cardassians, and so, he knew talking to him would go nowhere. Making sure to not lower his weapon, Sorripto looked straight at Jolan.

"You have to get him out of here. Get him back to the McKenzie and save him. Think whatever you want about me, but you have to save this man."

In a gesture of faith, the Cardassian turned his phase pistol towards the ceiling and with a slow, controlled gesture holstered it.

Before Jolan or the anyone from the team could respond, he then passionately pleaded for everyone's lives.

"This is the ship of their great prophet; him. They will want him back and the Children will stop at nothing to get him back. They are already on their way here, right now. Their ships number close to thirty, and even without any damage, the McKenzie would not stand a chance."

Pointing to Sisko, Sorripto continued with the same clinical tone.

"You have to get him to the McKenzie and get out of here. They want us all dead. Their reinforcements are closer then ours, and the only way this situation will end well is for us to save Sisko."

Letting out a deep sigh, he slouched slightly and rubbed his tired eyes.

"You can think whatever you want about me and my methods but I did what had to be done to rescue my friend and I am going to do what has to be done to save our ship and defend the Federation..."

"That's all well and good, Mister Sorripto, but I have my orders. There's no reason why we can't bring back Sisko and you and if I have to take you down, I will."

At that, the MACOs surrounding him, save the older one carrying Sisko, all raised their rifles, which were on stun and aimed down their sights at Sorripto.

Even on stun, that many shots at such a close range from trained precision marksmen would risk killing him if he tried anything.

They didn't get the chance to find out, however, as Ty'Reynyk had crawled out of the nearest access hatch behind Sorripto and, seeing the man holding her unconscious Prophet so unceremoniously, cried out in rage.

"Blasphemers! Return him!"

The outraged shout was echoed by a disruptor volley from her, very lethal, toward Sorripto and Res Jolan.

Highly trained Jolan had a slightly better vantage of the woman and, just as she shouted, he reached forward and pulled Sorripto back behind him. The first shot penetrated his side below his right shoulder. He dropped his gun and fell to his knees, eyes wide with shock.

Retaining his senses for a moment longer, he used his left arm to wave a signal at the MACO team who had begun firing back in a retreating maneuver to take Sisko and leave.

With only a moment to react, Sorripto drew his own pistol and fired at Ty'Reynyk, barely missing as she rolled out of the way, aiming for a second shot. Jolan reached up and grabbed Sorripto's arm, looking up at him.

"Go..."

Looking back at the MACO, the Cardassian smiled and then yelled:

"Time to go home, boys... Computer; now!"

As the command left the Cardassian's mouth the MACOs and Sisko disappeared in a hum and a faint blue glow just as Sorripto raised his shot towards Ty'Reynyk. She fired faster, hitting him in the stomach. Sorripto fell against the bulkhead behind him and slumped over.

Fighting the effects of the disruptor, he did what he could to raise his own weapon... but but could do nothing more.

Sorripto looked up as his vision faded in and out and saw Ty'Reynyk walking and then standing over a fallen Jolan.

As N'Eligahn stumbled around a corner, he saw the scene unfold before him. He suddenly recognized the woman as his own former mate, she who had one day remorsefully laughed at his deep feelings for her in the name of some crazy faith she had abruptly decided to devote herself to. Rethians like them were creatures of slow but deep feelings, their passions only rivalled by those of Andorians; and all turning into searing fires of irrational hate and resentment when spurned. N'Eligahn recalled a moment a troubling scene between him and a former, blue-skinned and white-haired commanding officer that had finished spiralling down the Starfleet career he had so much wanted to live, and the emotional pain that had started, nurtured and propelled it to this day. But even that deeply resented moment in his life had been but a clandle flame compared to the blazing inferno that had almost consumed him the day *she* had left him.

And there she was, she who had wounded him like no one ever did before, be it by blade or by deed or word, shooting a man who fell to his knees, his pain a pale but visible reflection of the one in his memory.

He watched without really seeing as many men wearing Starfleet combat uniforms just disappeared behind them and then, in front of the glow of the transporter, the view of the reptilian figure in the familiar gold uniform was the sensory information his brain needed to bring back all the memories that the injury had buried.

He knew everything he did over the past several months, but he didn't know why. The pain he had caused came rushing back as if to fill the void left by the madness that was miraculously knocked out of his head. He grasped his head with both hands and fell to his knees, silently screaming out in agony.

But then, grief and despair turned to anger and purpose as Sorripto, the man he knew now as a fellow officer and comrade from the USS McKenzie, was shot by Ty'Reynyk. He slowly reached down and extracted a knife from a holster within his boot. The MACO was on his knees grasping his side and N'Eligahn followed Ty'Reynyk as she moved toward him.

"The Prophets find you unworthy," she sneered as she raised her phaser to point at Major Jolan's head.

Jolan, still conscious if even barely, smiled.

"Yet somehow they see fit to send me a redeemer," he shot back.

He watched her confused look quickly turn into shock as N'Eligahn buried his knife deep between her shoulder blades.

She dropped her weapon, falling dead beside Jolan.

"Thank you," he choked.

"Don't... mention it," struggled N'Eligahn, "we... divorced... long ago..."

He then fell unconscious again and collapsed beside the two other inert figures.

Shaking the cobwebs loose from his mind, Sorripto slowly forced himself back to his feet and, with a slow wobble, walked towards the injured Jolan and the now unconscious N'Eligahn. Clutching his burned stomach, Sorripto saw the blood seeping through the body armor concealed under his uniform, blasted as his personal shield had been overloaded by the point blank discharge. He may have had a worse injury in the past but he did not remember when.

Reaching into his pocket, the Cardassian withdrew the only two portable sight to sight transporter units he had left; the one he had prepared for his own use and that of his deluded friend he had come to save and was now finally safe. Leaning in, he smiled.

"The children ships should be here in a few moments."

Letting out a deep sigh to hide his pain, Sorripto's smile faded as he continued.

"Time to go home. I will see what I can do to buy you as much time as I can, but you have to get back and get the McKenzie out of here."

Before Jolan could say a word, the former chief engineer of the starship McKenzie cut him off by slapping the transporter disc on Jolan and N'Eligahn. As they both disappeared in a blue column of light, Sorripto shakily rose back to his feet. And with a new composure, he walked slowly towards the turbolift.

As the doors closed behind him, Sorripto pressed the controls for the bridge. the inescapable conclusion of his actions truly took hold in his mind just then.

The end was near.

Sorripto looked up and smiled.

\* \* \*

On the McKenzie, the MACOs beamed in with currently called The prophet and former Starfleet engineer Joey Day Sisko among them, and the transporter officer immediately called for medical and security personnel to come clear the room. They took Sisko and put him in medical stasis in the ship's sickbay.

Moments later, the unconscious N'Eligahn and the barely aware Jolan beamed in too without the transporter being activated and despite their raised shields.

The remaining well-trained officers were quick to react nevertheless and took N'Eligahn's unconscious form to put him in the same medical stasis. But before Jolan would let them also take him to treat his wound, he waved over to the nearest MACO Lieutenant. Breathing heavily, he grunted in his ear.

"I need to talk... to the captain... now."

The MACO team leader refused treatment until his request was granted, suddenly finding enough strength to push back the medical personnel trying to calm him down.

"The Captain! I... need to speak to the Captain!" he commanded again.

The medical Lieutenant nodded with a sigh and helped him into a sitting position before tapping his combadge with the hand not supporting the Major.

"Captain Crist, I have Major Res Jolan here. He has something urgent to report."

Jolan did not wait for any acknowledgement from the ship commander to speak in a ragged voice.

"Captain, you have to send my team back for him... Sorripto... is not a traitor... he saved... Sisko. He saved... all of us."

With the last words, his voice gave out and his eyes closed.

The medical team wouldn't wait any longer and beamed him directly into a stasis chamber. The small warship's sickbay was not sufficient for treating phaser blasts of that magnitude; and so, he would be kept in suspended animation until they returned home and there he would be treated properly.

Crist received Jolan's message and he quickly tapped his side panel to respond.

"WHAT, Major? What are you taking about? Major?"

The voice of the current medical officer came over the comm; it was Doctor Kinstar.

"Sir, the major is unconscious. We had to get him to a stasis chamber. I'll keep you posted as soon as we have finished diagnosing him and making sure he will be ready for treatment once we get back to base. Kinstar out."

Crist heard the anxious request behind the words; but he needed answers.

"Fine, get MACO second in command up here, Durat'Eklat... NOW."

"On my way," came the deep, rumbling voice of the MACO Jem'Hadar.

*Sorripto? Isn't he here on board? What the hell is going on?* wondered silently the captain of the McKenzie.

Crist tapped his side panel.

"Engineering; where is Mister Sorripto?"

The voice of an engineer he didn't immediately recognize came through.

"He's not here, Sir. Last time we saw him, he left with Chief Reichman. he didn't come back either, Sir."

"Find me Sorripto." Crist ordered and closed the channel with an angry fist before eyeing the tactical and security station. "Shran, see if your security teams can locate him."

The Jem'Hadar officer the entered the bridge. It was a sight that startled the bridge crew even in the current circumstances; it was, to say the least, extremely rare for a Jem'Hadar to serve in Starfleet, let alone be found aboard a Starfleet vessel without pointing his weapon at someone. Ignoring the sideway glances at him, the imposing grey-scaled alien in MACO uniform walked up to Crist and stood at attention.



"At ease," Crist said. "Now, what the hell is going on? What's all this bull about Sorripto?"

"Sir," answered Durat'Eklat , "while on the enemy ship, we ran into Sorripto, who had our target, the lost officer Sisko, with him. We were ordered by the chief engineer, the highest ranking officer among us there, to take Sisko and return to the ship. Moments later Jolan and an unknown man beamed aboard, but with no Sorripto."

"Are you SURE it was Sorripto?"

Durat'Eklat didn't skip a beat.

"Positive, Captain; the Major was also positive."

Shran then turned from his station.

"Sir, the search has end up with no sign of Lieutenant Commander Sorripto."

"What in the world is going on?" Crist said under his breath.

\* \* \*

As the doors to the bridge whooshed open, Sorripto stepped onto the bridge and walked over to the central engineering console. Reworking power and controls, the engineer transferred all ship main controls to the tactical console. Stepping over there, he spoke.

"Computer; how long until the tracked warp signatures arrive?"

"Target arrival is estimated from this mark in two minutes, fourteen seconds."

Working at the console, Sorripto rerouted all the ships power to the core and nacelles'electroplasma distribution network, overloading them both. The alarms from the computer immediately buzzed around him but he cut them off with an impatient flick of his trembling, bloody finger.

"Rerouting life support is inadvisable."

The Cardassian Starfleet officer continued his work, laughing lightly.

"Well, I do not plan on living for more then a few more minutes anyway. Two to be exact... Computer; override all internal safety protocols. I only have one ship here; I better make it count."

As Sorripto continued, he watched on the viewscreen as ships began to warp in to join the half dozen ones already bound for the searing blaze of the Azimuth horizon anomaly. First one, then three, ten, then thirty. Sorripto watched as the ships surrounded the Prophecy, all getting very close. The sounds of hails could be heard through the communication board as the vessels of all kinds, shapes and sizes began to lower their shields to beam crew over. Sorripto knew it would only take the ships a few seconds to realize that there was barely any lifesign on the Prophecy, and barely afew more to realize what the communication silence could mean. But those few seconds were his only chance... and all that he needed now.

As the first teams began to beam onto the bridge, Sorripto looked at the men as they stared at the disheveled, bloody Cardassian in a burnt and torn Starfleet uniform standing in front of them. Their eyes showed their confusion, but also their fanatic determination.

"We have you now; you are all alone."

As his disheveled, worn face gave way to a final smile, Sorripto spoke slowly.

"A wise man once said; every man must do two things alone; he must do his own believing and his own dying... well, today, gentlemen, I do both. You lose your prized ship, your fleet, and I get my friend back. I would say, that is a cause worth dying for alone."

With a salute, Sorripto took in the weapon shot that hit his already dying body. But as he had purposely leaned forward, he fell with his finger pressing the final button in his sequence and a sudden flash engulfed the bridge, his mind and the whole universe in and around him.

\* \* \*

On the viewscreen of the USS McKenzie, the bridge crew watched as numerous inbound vessels warped in and surrounded the Prophecy. As these ships got closer, they registered several transporter signals between them and the Cardassian-made battlecruiser. The Prophecy turned to meet them and slowly worked its way into the center of the small fleet.

"Sir!" suddenly exclaimed tactical officer Shran, his antennae bristling over his snowy cropped hair; "I read a warp core breach in progress on board the Galor cruiser!"

"Captain, look!"

As Crist looked at the viewscreen where helmsman Hughes pointed a shaking finger, the view of the Galor class Prophecy' fin-shaped stern appeared to burst into flames.

"Deploy armor! Hugues; full astern, emergency speed!"

The small, damaged Defiant class warship suddenly covered itself once more with a thick, hard armored shell and brutally moved backward and away at three-quarters of the speed of light; barely enough to get out of the radius of the impending catastrophe.

And then, with an awesome flash, a massive explosive force only an uncontrolled matter and antimatter reaction could achieve engulfed the Prophecy and spread outward as if a second Azimuth Horizon was born out of the first covering the stars in the background.

As it expanded, the conflagration grew in brilliance, engulfing all the Children ships. Each burned for a fraction of a second before exploding themselves, adding to the detonation and spreading it even farther. The powerful circle of explosion was followed by smaller ones and ended up in as fantastic a blast as many had ever seen since the fleet battles during the last Borg War.

The McKenzie was buffeted by the fringe of the explosion as it closed the distance at the speed of light between the retreating vessel and the center of deflagration. But the quick reaction of the elite bridge crew had cleared them just far enough to avoid any serious damage beyond a few armor plates.

Then, within a few seconds, the vast vacuum of space sucked the life out of the fire and, before anyone on the McKenzie could recover from their surprise, floated in front of their widened eyes a moon-sized debris field of charred and smoldering remains. The remains of the Prophecy and the entire fleet of the Horizon Children.

"Scan the debris, for lifesigns," ordered Captain Crist.

The ensign manning the Science station turned around with a grim face.

"There is no lifesigns anywhere within the debris field, Sir."

Crist turned to face the ensign.

"Scan again; intensify the scan resolution."

The ensign was a little startled.

"Sir, the scan was at it's highest sensitivity. There are no lifesigns there."

"What?" Crist barked out.

He stopped speaking as he realized the way he was acting. He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. Then he exhaled, and opened his eyes to regain his composure.

"Thank you, Ensign. Please scan the area for signs of the Republic. I believe Lieutenant Snowfire detected an impulse trail before we were ambushed."

As the young officer began to comply, Crist for his part began to think to bring down his emotions.

*How can Sorripto be gone?*

Only silence would ever answer him.

Moments later that felt like an eternity, the Science officer of the McKenzie spoke.

"Sir, there is no longer any sign of the impulse trail of the Republic. I believe the recent battle and final explosion removed any clear engine trace in the area. However, computer logs have recorded the initial detection of their impulse emissions toward the anomaly's corona. We can set a course in the direction that we detected it leading to, and hope, despite all the heavy interference around here, to pick up on the trail again when we get there."

Crist sighed to get his mind back to the business at hand.

"Very well; send the coordinates to the helm. Helm, set and engage course when ready," he said, motioning an engage signal with his right hand.

"Course set and engaged, Sir," helmsman Hughes acknowledged.

The McKenzie moved away from the large debris field. Crist watched as the specs of metal became smaller and smaller. There probably was no bodies to recover as they had been most likely vaporized by the explosion. But still, leaving an officer, or worse a friend, thus behind, was truly unsettling.

But they had to move on... make this sacrifice meaningful.

Several minutes had passed when science officer Nolanis, filling up for the still out of commission chief of science Snowfire Keley'sha, spoke again.

"Sir, I've picked up the impulse trail of the Republic once again... heading fifteen, mark 5."

"Hughes..." Crist simply said, and the helm officer changed course to follow the given trajectory.

Another ten minutes later, the McKenzie came to a stop at the very edge of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly.

"Are you sure this is the end of the trail? Did the Republic enter the anomaly?"

Nolanis quickly worked his fingers and eyes at his station.

"One moment, Sir... scanning... The end of the impulse trail seems to have turned radically; an ancient Earth automotive terminology to describe this is called fishtailing. I'm also detecting warp particles... which could indicate they jumped to warp at this point... or their warp core exploded. Sorry, Sir, but with all this subspace interference pouring out from the phenomenon so close, it's hard to figure out which of the two... I've also scanned to area; there is some debris out there, definitely from a Federation ship... but there's not enough mass to make up for an entire vessel, especially not one the size of an Excelsior class like Captain Wyatt's ship. I believe they escaped by jumping to warp, Sir."

His console then started beeping.

"One moment, Sir. Sir... I've found something."

The Science officer took a moment to work at his console, while Crist stared at him, hoping for good news this time.

"Sir, it's a log buoy... from the Republic."

"Let's hear it." Crist said while turning his gaze forward.

"It's encrypted. Decrypting now. Here you are, Sir."

Over the comms, a firm Human male voice could be heard.

"This is the Federation starship USS Republic, Captain Adam Wyatt commanding. Starship McKenzie, if you find this buoy, know that we have retreated from the area after receiving extensive damage from enemy fire and direct exposure to the Azimuth Horizon anomaly in our attempt to escape. We have heavy casualties and severe damage and therefore we have set a course back to Starbase 10, at warp 3. In the shape we are now in, we are unfortunately unable to help you with the Children, or the anomaly. Godspeed, McKenzie... This is the Federation starship USS Republic, Captain Adam Wyatt..."

"It's on a loop, Sir." Said the science officer.

"Well, at least they will be ok." Crist said, then exhaled forcibly. "Hughes, since the Children are no longer a threat and we have completed our mission involving them, set a course for our containment run starting point. Finally, we can start containing this anomaly."

Hughes, "Aye, Sir."

The scarred but still operational starship McKenzie then moved away from the USS Republic's buoy and from the edge of the anomaly, angling towards the flight vector that would allow it to dig the subspace trench planned when they had left headquarters.

*Finally*, thought Daniel Crist, wondering now for the first time about the fate of all the other ships of the Fleet.

## CHAPTER SEVEN : HELLFIRE

The large command center was lighted with green-hued colors but no battle alert klaxon blared at the sharply pointed ears of the crew, hunched over glowing stations. Such emission could have been picked up by enemy sensors and betray their exact position.

They were not ready for that; not yet.

The round door slid sideways to let the tall, old officer walk onto the bridge. Like one, all the officers in the command center of the ship turned toward him and brought their closed right fist to their heart and bowed, before returning to their duties. Looking them all over with his beady dark eyes and a small smirk on his thick lips that made his gaunt, angular features look even more threatening, the white-haired newcomer, wearing the uniform of an Admiral of the Imperial Navy and the badge of Empress Sela herself, stepped up to the raised dais where two seats overlooked the entire bridge.

He took the starboard-sided one as the other was already occupied by a taller, more muscular and younger officer with the same green-tinted skin, thick V-shaped brow and pointed ears but with hair as black as the night and eyes as grey as cold steel. His uniform as much as where he sat proclaimed him as the ship's commanding officer.

His voice also held that commanding, arrogant tone typical of those who were born out of nobility, raised through military discipline and self-forged through force of limbs and will in difficult times. His words were short and to the point as dagger strikes:

"They are coming, Admiral."

The Admiral sighed and crossed his hands in his lap as if some weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"Identification, Commander Kraetaek?"

"Two starships; one is the USS Alsea, Prometheus class, under the command of newly promoted Captain Kalten Siduri, a Human."

"Ah yes, Prometheus class... We know all about that one now, don't we? And we did expect them to send their most powerful warship if they became aware of us. Obviously they *did* become aware of us at some point, no?"

Around them, bridge officers cringed at the implied reprimand. Their vessel had the very best cloaking device ever developed... and yet, they had been spotted and now on the intercept course of enemy ships. But Commander Kraetaek, curiously, did not cringe at all; in fact, he smirked back at his superior and his voice sounded fully confident, almost to the point of arrogance.

"Judging by their current speed and distance and calculating from their best response time to it, they must have spotted us when we crossed the edge of the Paulson nebula and recorded the disturbance our passage did to the stellar dust most dense there. These Federations are incorrigible stargazers after all..."

The Admiral just nodded and kept his eyes on the small, oddly-shaped viewing screen before them.

"A pity they send this prize to us with but a novice in command; this will be too easy and might end too soon for our needs. What about the other ship?"

"Identified as USS Artemis...Ambassador class."

Kraetaek spoke almost as if he restrained a laugh. But he quickly sobered up as he saw that the Admiral was not smiling at all.

"Ambassador class... now that is interesting..."

"Admiral Tomalak; It's an old, obsolete and short-lived design of Federation capital ships, no longer in service except for this obvious antique," said the ship commander with a raised eyebrow at the Admiral's curious frown. "It's no match for us..."

"Commander Kraetaek..." interrupted the senior officer, this "antique" is pacing a state of the art Prometheus class warship. It has been obviously upgraded... and remember that one such vessel in the past had alone thwarted our war of conquest of the Klingon Empire just as it began."

Kraetaek again sobered up. Like all Romulan officers, he knew well the historical disastrous campaign of Narendra III... and the one ship that had sacrificed itself to gain the trust and respect of the whole Klingon Empire: the USS Enterprise... Ambassador class. At the time, that vessel had proven a match alone to several of the best Romulan warbirds of the time.

And as if he had read his mind, Tomalak completed his thought outloud:

"If they upgraded such a ship, it means that it will certainly have some surprises in store for us... And I don't like surprises, Commander. Moreover, I just finished reading the Tal Shiar investigation report about the failure of Operation Victory; there was a faint warp trail leading to the location of our hidden temporal station made before it exploded. The signature was close to that of a Sovereign class Federation warp core... but not quite. Now, if they wanted to upgrade and refit an Ambassador class with a new warp core..."

Kraetaek understood. He knew enough of Starfleet technology to figure that this would indeed explain how such an old design could now rush at them at warp 9.6.

"Who's in command of this ship?" suddenly asked Tomalak.

"According to Intelligence, one captain Kheren... an Andorian."

The admiral lifted an eyebrow in perfect imitation of Vulcan amazement.

"Andorian? Ah yes, the Andorians... the warriors of the Federation... Now this is all getting more and more... interesting..."

Despite his long career in the Imperial Navy, Tomalak had never met an Andorian, especially not one in command of an opposing vessel. But he knew about them; deadpan, almost as emotionless as Vulcans... until they became violent. And they were in fact highly passionate, even physiologically geared towards violence. No wonder so very few of them ever rose to command in this weak, peacemongering Starfleet of theirs.

"Admiral, they are on an intercept course. Do we alter our own to elude them?" asked Commander Kraetaek.

"No, Commander; they are playing right into our hands. Let them believe in their own perceived cleverness and flush us out as they *expect*. And then, we will have them exactly where we want them to be."

\* \* \*

On the Artemis, preparations and rest schedule were followed as they rushed at supraluminic speed towards the apprehended confrontation. Disregarding the need for rest at this time, Syntron turned toward the Andorian commander and inquired:

"Specific recommendations for additional preparations during this time, Captain?"

"You tell me," half-joked Kheren.

With a subtly perplexed expression hinted across his face and a slightly elevated brow, Syntron gazed at the Andorian Captain.

"Sir?"

*Clueless Andorian trying Human humor on a Vulcan again... riiiiight...* Kheren mocked himself inwardly.

"The entire crew is preparing for a combat situation; engineering and science are preparing for enemy sensor and communication interference; I am preparing for a diplomatic situation; the Alsea is preparing to face all situations with us. Do you see anything else?"

Syntron pondered for a moment before he responded.

"Since the science aspects of my duties at this time are secured and ongoing progress is currently being handled most diligently by Lieutenant Irksos and her team, perhaps I could assist you in some capacity in your diplomatic endeavors."

He then added nonchalantly "You have appointed me as your executive officer, it would therefore seem logical that I would be involved in... at a minimum... selected aspects of this process."

The Andorian nodded.

"Come along then. let us put those few hours to good use. Lieutenant Tyvya, carry on with the combat exercises as scheduled and keep in touch with the Alsea's own preparations."

"Aye, Captain," acknowledged the giantess.

They all exited the captain's office, their minds already focused on what laid ahead. especially Kheren's mind. That the Romulans were hiding something behind their bewildering attack vector was hiding something, that much was certain. The question was... what?

It kept nagging him at the back of his mind all the while Syntron and him went back to the holosuite and worked on possible peaceful approaches to the situation. They were hoping for the best... and preparing for the worst.

But again... what?

After completing several hours of diplomatic simulations with Captain Kheren and after enduring a relentless barrage of pestering from the CMO to rest, Syntron eventually retired to his quarters.

But he felt no need to rest; in fact, his mind was too actively contemplating the multitude of possible scenarios that awaited them on their intercept course with the Romulan intruders.

Diplomacy was their main prerogative, but he knew that these distant relatives of the Vulcans were often not keen on resolving their issues through diplomacy. In fact, once their mind was made up, they were downright overzealous in their implementation of their goal; even at the cost of their own lives, let alone the lives of others.

At this point, everything seemed too predetermined and linear. There had to be more to what they were intending and implementing than how things seemed.

Syntron reached over and activated his communication terminal.

"Syntron to Lieutenant Irksos."

The assistant science chief immediately responded.

"Irksos here, Lieutenant Commander... what can I do for you?"

Speaking now as the science chief as much as the first officer, he responded:

"Have the first round custom class-V medium-range reconnaissance probes loaded and ready for launch. I want to send them out in one point forty-five hours to scout and scan the areas we are approaching long before we arrive there. Initiate dispersal pattern Alpha One-A."

"Acknowledged, Sir. Is there anything else?" the assistant science chief inquired.

"Keep monitoring all sensor scans and notify me immediately me of any unusual readings, no matter how insignificant they may seem at the time."

"Yes, Sir. Irksos out."

As the communication ended with Irksos manning the science station, Syntron walked over to his Terran violin case sitting on the top of a shelf and carefully removed the old instrument from it. He had not attended to this instrument or his Vulcan Lyre since their last mission. He began plucking the strings and turning the tuning pegs until each string matched the correct frequency. Then, after rosinning the bow, he pull the hairs of the bow across the strings, bringing to life the tones and resonance of the instrument.

Even though he had only been playing this violin since his days at Starfleet Academy, he found this instrument peculiarly intriguing. There was an almost logical aspect to its symmetrical design and tonal qualities, yet it was also almost uncharacteristically pivotal at times in aiding and focusing his thinking processes.



As he began to run through a series of musical exercises on the instrument, it was as if he was simultaneously preparing and organizing his mind with all of the thoughts lurking about in different parts of his brain. He was striving to use the instrument as a means to sort through these ideas and begin to compose them into pragmatic and coherent strategies. He was also trying to place himself into the perspective of his adversaries and see the situation from their eyes.

*What are they truly preparing for out there?* He pondered as he began unconsciously playing an ancient violin concerto.

The same question had the captain of the Artemis toss this way and that on his couch. He would not require any sleep before at least well over a day from now, and only three to four hours at most; with all the things going on in his mind, he barely closed his eyes for an hour before waking up again, fully alert, even frantic.

He went to his desk and activated his computer terminal. He keyed in a tactical map of the sector and marked on it the estimated position of their incoming opponents and themselves, the postulated trajectory of the intruder from its detected presence in the Paulson nebula and before that by the starbase 23 probe, its unexpected point of entry through the edge of Klingon territory after destroying the Klingon outpost a week ago and finally the location of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, their expected target their whole travel had avoided completely.

*Why?*

Destroying Starbase 10, as they seemed intent upon, would not stop Starfleet from its own goal, which was not destroying the anomaly as the Romulans wanted; chances were that they would in fact not only fail in seeing their goal achieved, but lose the engagement sooner or later as Starfleet forces would rush to stop them; and they surely knew that. They also knew for certain that such an attack was as much a declaration of war as crossing the Neutral Zone... which they carefully avoided to do. And yet, they were coming...

*Why?*

Decoy... That was quite consistent with Romulan thinking. They all had agreed on that. Sending their most powerful vessel to threaten them would undoubtedly draw attention to it; thus helping in hiding their true goal.

*Their true goal...*

Then it hit him like a fist.

His callused hands almost crushed his combadge across his muscular chest.

"Kheren to bridge!"

"Baoule here, Sir."

At this moment in time, the entire non-Andorian and non-Vulcan crew was up and at their post while the others took a few hours of rest to be as alert and ready as they were when the time came. It seemed now that that time had to come sooner than anticipated.

"What is our current status?"

"Maintaining interception course at warp 9.6 parallel to the Alsea. Crew at full readiness. ETA estimated in about four hours. Mister Syntron wanted to send scouting probes ahead but, since probes would be unable to exceed warp 9 anyway, they would arrive behind us and serve no purpose so we are keeping them in reserve..."

"Send them out immediately, bearing... 115 mark 92."

"Sir, Lieutenant Irksos here. This would send the probes towards..."

"I *know* where they will be going, Lieutenant. Launch them, *now*. Wake up Mister Syntron, if he ever went to sleep in the first place, and patch him to my quarters. And get me the Alsea, Mister Baoule."

As the Vulcan was lost in thought performing, he was abruptly snapped out of it by a call from the bridge. He reached over and engaged the signal.

"Syntron here." The first officer responded.

"Sir, Lieutenant Irksos here. Captain Kheren just hailed me and wants you immediately patched into his quarters. Standby... I'm patching you through now."

As he walked over and placed the violin and bow back into the instrument's case, he heard the sound of the intracom engaged. Walking back toward his terminal he stated simply:

"Syntron here, Captain; you hailed?"

"Number One, I think I figured out what the Romulans are up to... but I need your opinion to make it more than just a hunch. I also want the Alsea's senior officers to chime in on this; because, if they too agree that I may be right, it will be up to them to make sure they fail... before it is too late for us, and the rest of the universe."

Niomo caught Rivers sitting in the command chair just looking at the streaking starfield and the graceful curves of the USS Artemis flying just in front of them and so, he went to the Captain. Saluting, he spoke in as official as a tone as he could muster.

"Ma'am, I'd like to apologize for my comments earlier at the general briefing. I meant no offense to the importance of this Sisko man to you."

Rivers fixed her eyes on the engineer and was silent for a long moment before replying.

"No offense taken Commander. It is a...difficult subject to deal with."

Before she could consider Joseph Sisko any further Ensign Wynn from operations interrupted.

"Captain, the Artemis is hailing, Ma'am."

"On screen," Rivers said without hesitation.

The dark blue face with the silvery eyes and the weirdly-moving antennae on the thick snowy mane that filled the large viewer was starkly etched with worry despite the lack of facial muscles. And it was even more plainly evident in the harsh tone of his voice as he swept aside any social pleasantries with his very first words.

"Captain Rivers; my exec is also on the comm on this so that him and you with your senior staff may confirm my suspicions. I am still deeply worried and puzzled by this incoming attack. Now, do we all agree that Romulans definitely favor guile over brute force?"

"Indeed Captain, the Romulans are much more likely to try to outwit us than they are to attack us directly."

The Alsea's captain wondered what Kheren could be driving at and at almost the same time she noted that her XO had returned to her side and appeared to be contemplating the question as well.

There was method to Kheren's questioning. He wanted to see if, with the same thoughts that those he had, they would come to the same conclusion as he had. He never trusted his instincts as Humans were fond of suggesting; in fact, it had taken him years of harsh study under a Vulcan master to bury his instincts deep within himself. He did not just mistrust his instincts; he feared them. And so, he had cut all contact with them as much as he could.

But then, left only with his rational judgment, with no "gut feeling" to warn him or help him challenge his thoughts, he needed the thoughts and feelings of others like Rivers, Jureth and Niomo, even Syntron. He *could* be mistaken.

He just hoped that, for once, he was.

Nodding, the Andorian pressed on:

"Do we also all agree that, however different they have become from their Vulcan ancestors, they are still just as highly focused in whatever they define as their goal?"

Rachele Rivers was well aware of Vulcan focus and knew as Kheren suggested that the Romulans were just as single minded when they wanted something. Next to Rivers, Jureth was contemplating the direction of the conversation as well and he believed he understood when the Andorian was going with his line of questioning. Before Rivers could respond to Captain Kheren her XO jumped in.

"Sir, do you suspect our being out here chasing this monstrosity of a starship isn't a coincidence?"

"We already know it is not," reminded them the captain of the Artemis. "We knew this ship was coming. Now, it is bound on an attack vector towards Starbase 10... but, what *is* the *real* reason they come into Federation space... what is their *real* goal?"

Listening to the officers of the Alsea attempting to unravel the mystery of Kheren's questioning, the Vulcan first officer turned to his commanding officer and stated:

"Perhaps Captain, with all due respect, you could... how do the Terrans put it... 'lay your cards on the table'... which if I understand the expression correctly, translates to just convey your thoughts on what you believe the Romulans may actually be implementing in regards to their genuine strategy."

"If I wanted to give *you* your opinion, I would not be asking for it now, would I?" retorted the Andorian with some impatience. Then more calmly he explained further: I have no fact to support my thoughts... yet. And I could be dead wrong... literally. So, before I commit us to this plan I have in mind, we need to call forth the very strength of the United Federation of Planets. If a Vulcan, two Humans and a Bajoran get to the same conclusion as an Andorian, then we just might yet guess the right peril we face... and have a chance to stop their *real* plan."

Looking at them all on his splitscreen display, he asked again:

"Which *is*?"

Niomo swivelled in his chair to look at the conversation occurring behind him.

"Call me a targ, but you might be overthinking things, Captain. From what we saw in the report, we only caught the Scimitar by chance. If those science vessels were not in the area, we'd have no idea that she was gunning straight for Starbase 10. From a logical standpoint, their actions fit the bill. Cutting off the head of Starbase 10 from the rest of the Operation is, what I believe, paramount. Assuming that they have at least one agent on the entire starbase, it would be easy for them to know our plans involving the shuttles. If it was me, I'd go for Starbase 10 as well. There is really no rush to get to the Azimuth Horizon once our forces are scattered to the winds."

Kheren said nothing. He wanted to hear what the others would say about all this first. Syntron was somewhat perplexed by the Captain's reaction to his statement. As the silence continued on and yet no one said another word, he then strived to clarify his point again.

"I do not believe I was implying the implementation of any plan, Sir; especially one that has not even been presented. You initiated this meeting, Captain, stating that you had an idea about what the Romulans may be planning. I am also cognizant that you are awaiting input from each officer. However, the odds seem improbable that we will all reach a similar conclusion at this moment and then will have ample opportunity to enact a potential strategy within this limited amount of time we have available before we even reach the point of interception. I was merely recommending that we could accomplish this intention by directly discussing the probability and practicality of your epiphany, rather than waiting for others to arrive to a similar conclusion. It would also seem unlikely that any action would be taken unless agreed on by these very officers present."

He then finished in his usual stoic manner, bringing his hands behind his back at attention.

"As your executive officer, it is my duty to present you with alternatives I see available, Sir... just as it is your prerogative to disregard them."

Kheren listened and understood the core of what the Vulcan was saying; Syntron trusted his judgment... and he wisely reminded him that there was not much time left.

The Andorian just hoped that the others would also trust him as much as his new First Officer did.

"Alright then. We agree Romulans use guile, not force to achieve their goals and that they never loose sight of their goals. Here, we all know that their goal is the destruction of the anomaly."

Those were bare facts and so, he did not elaborate on them. He then gave them his entire understanding of the situation.

"Regarding their goal, destroying Starbase 10 would accomplish nothing; by the time they would arrive, our operation would be over... or the Klingons, as their Tal Shiar operatives surely informed them about, would have taken control of the anomaly, with *their* Empire as their first target. Moreover, if they managed to dispose of both the Artemis and the Alsea, certainly not without significant damage, they would still have to face at least two more starships and the full might of a starbase. And more to the point... why bother circumventing the Neutral Zone if not to avoid open war with the Federation... and then start one anyway with such a blatant attack?"

It had nagged at him since the moment he had been made aware of it; the perceived charge against Starbase 10 simply made no sense. Unless...

"Mister Lire, I do not beleive that we discovered their presence by chance; they did a week long travel accross the entire sector, passing by two starbases and a ring of outposts, revealed themselves by attacking a Klingon outpost they could have slipped by the same way, then by blasting the first probe that crossed their path, which had not even detected them yet... then left a clear trace of their passage in a nebula, a mistake only a novice Romulan commander would have made... a novice in command of Sela's *flagship*? No, Mister Lire... they *wanted* us to see they were going after Starbase 10... and to *beleive* we were oh so clever or lucky to see them coming. That is the first requirement of a good feint; the opponent *must* beleive it is the real blow coming. the more threatening the blow, the better."

He made a pause so that they could reflect a bit on the idea before finally saying:

"And while we are distracted, diverted and delayed to meet this *obvious* threat... one or more *cloaked* ships that entered our space in its wake can go undeterred straight for their *real* goal; *the anomaly*."

As the Andorian captain of the Artemis spoke a light went on in the Oseno's tactical mind. The Shavok was a distraction, the Romulans didn't want to destroy Starbase Ten, they wanted to destroy the anomaly. Fleet Captain Kotari had said as much during the briefing, and now the Romulans had succeeded in delaying Starbase Ten's planned operation to contain the anomaly by drawing the Artemis and the Alsea away.

"And we," Jureth said "have played right into their hands. They have succeeded in delaying our planned action against the anomaly and while we are chasing the Shavok, I would agree that as Captain Kheren stated there is another Romulan vessel, or fleet of vessels moving into position to accomplish Sela's goal of destroying the anomaly all together."

"We could not ignore the most massive warship in two quadrants moving on us with a thalargon cannon... and they knew it quite well," retorted the commanding officer of the Artemis. "No fault of us going out to challenge it; no choice in fact. if we had ignored them, they would just have changed course to rejoin with their real attack force and catch us in a pincer maneuver later. They still can... so, we can not ignore the Shavok, even guessing the whole true move now.."

Rachele listened to her XO and posed the obvious question: "If that is the case, then the question is what do we do about it?"

Niomo crossed his hands over his chest. That does make sense, he thought to himself. Gruffly, he responded, "What do we do Captain? We find them before they realize we did and blow them to Hell and go on with our Operation."

Kheren nodded.

"Fortunately, Mister Syntron here still doubles up as my chief of science. He had the foresight of preparing a squadron of warp-capable probes with his special sensor. I sent them out to flush out this possible second force between the anomaly and the border a while ago."

He activated his communicator on his chest.

"Lieutenant Irksos, report."

"Captain," answered the soft voice of the dark-skinned woman at the science station of the bridge; "I was just about to do so; long range sweep with the Syntron sensor on our probes have picked up four cloaked objects directly inbound for the anomaly. Mass, displacement and speed suggest at least two D'Deridex class warbirds and possibly two Valdore class war eagles."

Kheren looked at the others on his screen with a telling look.

Now, they knew.

"ETA with the anomaly"

"Tyvya here, Captain," chimed in the throaty voice of the Andorian giantess acting as tactical chief of the Artemis. "At the maximum Warbird speed of 9.2, they are three light years from target zone and will presently reach firing distance with the anomaly in sixteen hours. If they start now to burn out their engines to match the War Eagles and get there sooner, at warp 9.6, they will be there in twelve."

"How long before we intercept them?"

"Sir... our own maximum speed is warp 9.6... and we're eight light years from the closest interception point... that's *thirty-six* hours away, Sir."

Rachele Rivers listened to the conversation between Kheren and his subordinates and she knew what needed to happen.

"Captain Kheren, the obvious choice here is that the Alsea should move immediately to intercept the Romulan task force. At our maximum speed, we can intercept them in time to engage and delay them, if not stop them altogether. However, that leaves the question of the Shavok."

"That leaves the question of the Shavok to us," agreed the Captain of the Artemis. "Lieutenant Tyvya; ETA with the Romulan ship?"

"Two point six hours, present speed. We're barely over half a light year away now, Captain; they had us on their passive sensors for quite a while now."

"So... if we split up now, they will know it."

Niomo frowned as the two ships discussed splitting up.

*There must be some other way...* the engineer thought. But nothing was coming to him.

He initially thought about raising the idea of leaving the tertiary hull with the Artemis and letting the other two sections deal with the convoy.

*But that would slow down their arrival time. It would still leave us woefully underpowered here and there.*

There was nothing else that he could do, but sit and let the Captains decide what to do. But he knew, if diplomacy failed to stop the Shavok, it would be a miracle if the Artemis would return in one piece.

The Andorian mused for a short moment then looked at the image of the Vulcan on his monitor.

"Mister Syntron; am I right in assuming that a tachyon burst can blind passive sensors for at least a few seconds?"

Syntron sat and reflected... subtly nodding an affirmation regarding the Captain's hypothesis. Participating in an earlier meeting with the Captain, the First Officer had also suggested that the IRS Shavok was possibly being used as some form of decoy or distraction. He just was not assured what this diversion was masking. The recent confirmation of the probes' sensor discovery of the additional cloaked vessels rapidly approaching the anomaly helped to clarify their actual intention that the Captain proferred; which was even more lethal than a confrontation with a massive warship like the Scimitar.

What was equally disconcerting to the science chief was that Syntron himself had devised a potential method for disabling the anomaly that would not be as ruthlessly careless and prospectively volatile as the Romulans or Klingons may tempt... with probable catastrophic repercussions. Yet they were all still too far from these ships to intervene with the Romulans and their imprudent schemes.

Syntron turned to Captain Kheren.

"How prepared are these Romulan ships to endure the imminent subspace fractures and the accompanying tendrils of powerfully violent energy that will strike their ships when actually encounter them? We have carefully prepared a series of countermeasures over these past missions to address and compensate for all of these hazardous conditions... but having not experienced what we have faced encountering this anomaly repeatedly, these Romulans have not learned the lessons we have eruditely garnered."

He looked intently at the Andorian Captain.

"They may not be as well-equipped and ready to face this anomaly as they may perceive."

"I agree, Number One. Their very plan shows their lack of knowledge about the anomaly. But these are Romulans; they are creatures of duty. Sacrificing their lives for their Empire is so ingrained in them, they will not even blink once about it. And with four ships able to send salvos of plasma torpedoes five million kilometers away, one is bound to hit their target; and as your own research revealed, only one warhead could be enough to turn the anomaly into a metanova."

Looking then at the woman commanding the Alsea, the Andorian spoke with all the seriousness he could muster in his soft, deep voice.

"Captain Rivers; you will need all your firepower to intercept any projectile they launch as much as those ships themselves. But maybe, if you show them our data, especially the plasma-defusing solution of Mister Syntron, you might just peacefully end this and convince them to forfeit their ill-conceived attempt. I'll certainly try it with the Shavok. Hopefully, one of them out there will listen."

Kheren turned again towards his First Officer.

"So, Number One... what about that tachyon blindness?"

"I can have the tachyon burst configuration I mentioned ready in about nine point thirty-seven minutes, Captain."

"I have something a little less conspicuous in mind... but I take that as a yes."

Kheren addressed once more the commanding officer of the Alsea.

"Captain, I have an idea..."

Twenty minutes later, a voice rose on the silent bridge of the Scimitar class warbird Shavok.

"Admiral... they're dropping out of warp."

On his own command chair, Tomalak looked at the tactical display with a furrowed brow.

"distance?"

"Half a light year, Sir."

"You're sure of that? Both of them?" now inquired Commander Kraetaek, also turning towards the tactical station in his chair besides that of the admiral, the same frown on his angular face.

"The Prometheus warship shifted position behind the Ambassador cruiser a few minutes ago," now reported more in detail the officer. "The mass and size of the larger ship is hiding it from detection."

"File formation to hide their numbers," recognized the admiral. "Do they really think they can fool us so close to contact now? Pathetic..."

"We did loose sensor contact for a few seconds, Admiral," admitted the tactical officer, not without some hesitancy in his voice, his eyes glued to his monitor so as to not meet those of his superiors. "The unusually large power signature of the cruiser made for a massive tachyon burst as they reintegrated normal space. Since there is no other signal, we can only assume the smaller warship is still hiding behind it."

"Why have they dropped out of warp? Engine failure? Changing course?"

As if to answer Tomalak, a loud "ping" was heard through their eavesdropping comm channels as if reverberating throughout the hull. Then another... and another...

"Got a positive contact, Sir," Valencia Irksos confirmed to her commanding officer as the same loud signal was also perceived a moment later on the bridge of the Artemis.

"Bearing 0 mark 5, half a light year distance; mass and displacement matching that of the expected Scimitar class signal, Sir," specified Tyvya at tactical.

"Is the Alsea away?" asked the Andorian, reviewing again data of the Scimitar class scrolling on one side of the main viewer. Again, the giantess reported:

"Aye, captain; their jump to warp 9.91 was perfectly timed with our reentry into Einsteinian space, right from astern and at close range. They must have taken some of our paint along with them... But it most assuredly blinded their sensors long enough to be out of detection range by the time they got functional again. They will think we are still futilely trying to hide them behind us. By the time they will get to close range or bring active sensors online, the Alsea will be well on her way to intercept the Romulan task force."

"And now, they must know that we dropped out of warp so that we could spot them," added helmsman Aguk Snow.

"Let's make sure of that," then said Kheren straightening up in his oversized twenty-third century-style command chair. "Open a channel to them."

"Channel open," confirmed Doctor Nasaro-Myth with a smile on his handsome face.

"This is Captain Kheren of the Federation starship Artemis. IRW Shavok, we are monitoring your illegal incursion into Federation space with a heavily armed vessel. Unless you stand down, this will be treated as an Act of War."

"That should grab their attention alright," mumbled Elliago still smiling. But his smile was strained. The Romulans now knew without a doubt that they could not hide anymore; if they took this as an excuse to fight...

And, on board the Romulan dreadnought, Admiral Tomalak grunted a sinister laugh at the threat from the Captain of the Artemis.

"Hail them," he stated simply.

"But that will give away our position!" shouted Commander Kraetaek. "And *I* give the orders here."

"By all means, Commander, do what you think is best. But once you fire, your position will be known anyway. You know how Starfleet types like to talk, however, and we do not need to destroy them, only distract them. Why not give them what they want?"

The Commander raged, but thought it over and decided that it was of course the right action. Why risk a fight with two of Lotus Fleet's most powerful ships when you could simply talk?

"Hail them," he repeated to his communications officer, gesturing to his seat, allowing Tomalak to proceed with the discussion knowing he was much more adept at it.

The Admiral's old but still hard and stern face with his pointed, white eyebrows appeared on the Artemis' viewscreen.

"Captain, I am Admiral Tomalak. My sincere apologies for our intrusion," he said with the usual Romulan snide, false smile. "But we had heard of some radicals trying to seize control of this Azimuth Horizon and we could not let them succeed. We came to offer our help against these... what do you call them... 'Children'?"

The Andorian stood up in an obvious gesture of respect. his voice was soft but firm, the tone proper for an officer talking to a senior one.

"Tomalak? THE Admiral Tomalak? The one that fearlessly faced the Federation flagship at Galorndon Core and then outwitted Captain Jean-Luc Picard himself at Nelvana III?"

The Andorian Captain having typically not picked up on, or ignored, the subtle humorous jab levied toward the Federation in reference to enemies labeled 'Children', Admiral Tomalak decided to take a more straightforward and equally respectful approach.

"The very same, Captain, though you flatter me. Your Captain Picard was a formidable opponent... some would say I was just at the right place at the right time... 'good luck', as the humans call it?"

He then quirked an eyebrow.

"But shall we not involve the *other* Starfleet captain in the vicinity in this dialogue we have formed? It seems proper decorum and respect would require it."

Kheren nodded in obvious agreement, but then retorted with unquestionable frankness.



"Unfortunately, the officer in the center seat of our escort is no captain. I would not disrespect the Admiral by having him discuss delicate matters of interstellar relations with a mere junior officer."

Playing with the aristocratic mentality of the Romulans, he knew Tomalak would be hard-pressed to dispute the point, especially with the silent, brooding ship commander and war hero forced to silence besides him. The longer Kheren could keep the Romulans unaware of the absence of the Alsea, the better.

But after this parry, it was time to counter strike: An acidic smile could almost be guessed on the rigid face of the Andorian.

"You are certainly aware, Admiral, that our last war with the Borg left Starfleet sorely depleted of too many experienced officers. Unfortunately, the Empire did not deem worthy to... answer our request and offer its selfless and courageous assistance, back then."

The underlined message was clear: you really must think us foolish children to make your lies so transparent. And your pretense at honor and courageous selflessness does not impress us at all...

The captain of the Artemis let this moment of embarrassed silence sweep the Romulan bridge before taking the offensive and asking pointedly:

"May you care to explain, Admiral, why the Empire *now* feels compelled to... help us... with a mere *domestic* affair?"

"I can't speak for the decisions of our superiors at the time, Captain," Tomalak said, somberly, in what almost appeared to be a sincere apology.

He presumed his air of snide superiority quite quickly, however.

"All I know is that now, at this moment, we have been sent to offer our assistance, and to be frank we weren't sure how far this cult had succeeded in infiltrating the Federation. Can you deny, Captain, that this renegade component has succeeded in gaining a foothold in not only several of your ships, but as high-ranking officers aboard your station? How could we be sure you weren't completely infiltrated to the highest levels?"

With a smile, he added:

"I notice that you decided not to bring up the fact that we were cloaked. Diplomatic of you, I'm sure. But why do you believe we did so, while at the same time, freely decloaking at your hail? Did you consider it might have been to ascertain the state of your Federation before potentially revealing ourselves to your enemy?"

More sternly, he continued:

"I will admit that our presence here is not entirely selfless. When the Borg attacked, it was only the Federation that was at risk at the time. These Horizon's Children threaten the entire Galaxy by helping the Anomaly expand. For this reason, we will not allow them to take over the Federation. One way or the other, they will go down. You can graciously accept our help..."

His final words were soft, but with an undertone of a harsh growl.

"Or you can defy us be destroyed along with them!"

Kheren looked back at the Romulan with a stare that was as much hot steel as his voice was of cold silk.

"So... you would kill us to save us, Admiral? Truly you have moved far away from the logic of your Vulcan cousins."

The Andorian sat back in his command chair before continuing on the same calm tone but with the same hard stare:

"Your fears are totally unfounded and your facts in error, Admiral. The Horizon Children have no mean or intention to touch the anomaly; they just wish everyone to let it be, because they believe it a doorway to paradise. *We* on the other hand have worked and already started to implement no less than *three* effective ways to stop it's expansion, defuse it and ensure that it will never again threaten our universe."

Sitting back in his chair, Kheren then softened his gaze just enough to show the sincerity of his words.

"You are an intelligent man, Admiral Tomalak. Let us share with you our knowledge and research. We will all wait on our current respective positions, to defuse this apparent violation of space and avoid any regrettable mistake, while you examine as thoroughly as you like our data and see for yourself that I speak the truth."

Crossing his fingers between his knees as he sat forward to plunge all four eyes into those of Tomalak, he finished with a slightly harder tone:

"Consider the alternative carefully, Sir. Would you *really* choose to be remembered by History as the man who's impatience left war in heritage to his people, already threaten by the Klingons, barely out of civil war and of a cosmic catastrophe that decimated your empire?"

There was more here than just a genuine attempt at solving the situation peacefully; Tomalak had intended to divert and delay them from the anomaly, long enough for his covert task force to reach it before it could be stopped. Staying in place here, as Kheren offered, would serve his goal perfectly and he would bask in having fooled the idiot Starfleet captain... unaware that his task force *was* about to be intercepted.

And with all the subspace interference coming from the direction of the Azimuth Horizon, there was no way for them to know it; no subspace message could get to them and no sensor sweep could read anything from over there.

Now, either they would review the data and realize the utter folly and uselessness of their plan and turn back, at best; or at worst, realize too late that time had played against them instead of the other way around. Again, they would, at best, realize their gamble lost and return to Romulan space... or at worst, prove themselves utter fools and start a two-front war, caught between a needlessly roused up Federation and an already harassing Klingon Empire; a war their own shattered empire could never survive, cosmic-consuming anomaly notwithstanding.

A moment, Kheren glanced at Elliago sitting on his left in his CMO command chair. The Deltan simply nodded. Again.

*All right, Tomalak, silently said Kheren with his eyes; your next words will either prove you to be the great man my own words told of you in front of your own men... or you will call out yourself a witless fool. Your choice now.*

"Very well, Captain, I will review your data," responded Tomalak dryly. "However, I would request that as a return of the good faith developing here, you tell your fellow Captain, or Acting Captain, if Captain Kalten Siduri is no longer in command, to reveal his ship from the Artemis' shadows. After all, how could we develop true diplomatic relations and cooperation while all the while my people know that Starfleet's most powerful warship is lurking behind yours, waiting to attack?"

"Oh, and to of course show we're serious about cooperation..."

He then turned to Commander Kraetaek.

"Shields down."

"But... Sir..."

"NOW!" growled Tomalak.

The massive bird-like Scimitar then immediately registered zero shield energy on the Artemis' Tactical console.

Turning back to the viewscreen, the Romulan admiral said to the Andorian on the screen:

"I will return in ten minutes after I had time to verify your data. I am looking forward to speaking to your fellow Captain, 'Acting' or otherwise, as even such a temporary position deserves to be treated with respect and included on these negotiations."

And with a wry smile, he turned off his viewscreen.

"This is a mistake!" the Romulan Commander raged. "They could attack with a volley of torpedoes any minute and we'd be defenseless to stop them!"

"They won't... Starfleet never attacks first, Commander. You should know that by now."

"Then WE should," the Commander retorted, green blood boiling through in anger. "Why should we waste time mincing words when we can simply destroy them? They're no match for us! Then there will be no Starfleet left to stop our forces, AND we can take their Starbase as well!"

"Against a refit Ambassador and a Prometheus? Don't be stupid... it won't be as easy as you think. No, we will wait. They are hiding something about the Alsea that I intend to find out."

Not much could embarrass a ship commander quite like being shot down and humiliated by a superior right in front of his crew. So he sulked off to his Commander's ready room, leaving the Admiral to study his precious 'data'.

Once the Romulans cut off communications, Kheren turned his head to his right at the Vulcan who had silent stoic and silent but with a most alert mind behind his deep gaze for the whole exchange.

"Number One; see to it that the Romulans receive our data on the Azimuth Horizon anomaly and our methodologies to tackle it; *all* of it."

Nodding affirmatively to the Captain, Syntron responded:

"I will have these comprehensive files completed and ready for transmission in two point fourteen minutes."

As he compiled the files for transmission, the First Officer of the Artemis experienced reservations regarding the last file on the imposed hypothermia reaction proposal. And so, a fraction over two minutes later, the Vulcan turned toward the Captain and informed him that the files were ready for transmission. Then he added:

"This is quite a calculated risk, presenting them with all of this data and these plans, Captain. Utilizing the information contained within these files has the potential to literally backfire on us, should the Romulans ultimately choose a path of deception rather than that of cooperation."

"I understand your caution, Lieutenant Commander; being honest and truthful is always risky... but never as much as being deceitful and hiding the truth."

Straightening in his seat to exult confidence as much as keep it stolid within his own heart, the Andorian looked back at the main viewer.

"Let us be scientific about it, Mister Syntron; one step at a time."

There was so much data that it would certainly take quite some time for the Romulans to sift through it, even if only looking at the three plans Samji, Syntron and K'leysha had come up with. All that time would allow not only the Alsea to intercept the covert task force, but for the rest of the fleet to effectively be well on its way to corral the anomaly. It has been almost twelve hours now since the operation began; telltale signs of the containment should very well start to be detectable by now. And it would further confirm that the data was thorough and genuine; they would see that the Federation had things firmly in hand and especially that there would be no danger involved for the Romulan Empire.

"Captain, the Shavok has lowered shields." confirmed Tyvya.

"Both of them?"

"Aye, Sir. Primary and secondary shields. They have come to a complete stop, as requested. Their weapons however are on standby but no target lock. We are still much too far away in any case, so any manual targeting to hide their intentions would be impossible until we close in."

"Alright then; lower ours and stand down from tactical alert but maintain security alert."

"Aye, Sir, we are secured from general quarters."

"Helm, all stop."

"Helm answering all stop, Sir," soon reported helmsman Aguk Snow.

From the left hand of the commanding officer of the Artemis, Doctor Nasaro-Myth leaned towards his captain.

"Seems our bluff is being called..."

"We'll have to call up their own bluff, then," shot back Kheren with an audible sigh of relief. "Maybe for once we will settle things like civilized people, even if it is with a few harsh words."

The Andorian sat deeper into his large seat and crossed his thick arms on his wide chest.

"Now, we wait on our celebrated Admiral to see the light."

"You sound like a cultist," whispered the Deltan with a smirk.

The long, glowering stare Kheren shot back could have melted the bulkheads.

Things were just as tense on the bridge of the Romulan warbird Shavok. As the Romulan Commander left the bridge, Admiral Tomalak continued giving orders, to the annoyance of the first officer who had just taken the Commander's seat.

"Bring up the data the Artemis has transferred on operations station 2."

"Sir, it's still transferring," said the Sublieutenant at communications.

"They must really want to keep us busy... very well; transfer all of it to the station in my quarters. But first have the computer analyze and emphasize the most important parts. And inform the Artemis that my time to speak with them will be moved back."

"Yes, Sir."

As the call was received by the Deltan doctor on the bridge of the Federation starship, Kheren simply nodded and crossed again his arms on his thick chest.

"Step one over and done; now we wait... but with all eyes open, people. Step two might just surprise us."

\* \* \*

"We're away Captain," Shawn Hunter stated; "on a direct intercept course with the Romulan convoy at warp 9.91. Time to intercept just over eight hours."

"Good work, Mister Hunter," Rivers replied, "and we have the data from Mister Syntron?"

"Affirmative captain," Jureth replied checking the console on the XO's chair. "We can transmit it to the Romulans as soon as we intercept them."

Rivers nodded and turned to her chief engineer.

"Mister Lire, how is our warp core holding up?"

"Hold on a second." Niomo responded as he read over the data coming in from the matter-antimatter reaction systems. "She's running cold and strong, Captain. We can possibly increase speed to 9.985 if we are willing to risk the stress."

Checking the engineering team status, he spun his chair around to look forward.

"I've placed my people in Assault Mode locations. If we need to separate immediately after dropping out of warp, we should be able to bleed off most of the stress put on an emergency stop and separation."

Rivers gave a wry grin.

"I don't think an emergency separation will be necessary. We will try to reason with the Romulans first, and only engage them if we must."

She then turned back to the helm.

"Mister Hunter, you heard the Commander; put the pedal to the floor."

"Aye Ma'am, Increasing speed to warp 9.985. Estimated time to intercept is now four hours five minutes."

The Alsea increased her speed as she streaked toward her rendez-vous with the Romulan convoy. Jureth, seated in the XO's chair, looked over to tactical where his trusted right hand Cat Steele was standing.

"Cat, tactical status."

"The board is green, Sir. Phasers and torpedoes online and in standby. Shield generators online and in standby. We're ready to show our teeth if we have to."

Oseno nodded. He already knew that Cat would have everything ready to go, but not being in control of the ship's tactical systems was frustrating for the young Bajoran. This type of situation was what he had trained for as a tactical officer and he would much rather be in Cat's position than where he was. Still, he had a job to do and he would do it. Jureth had made that promise to the incapacitated Captain Siduri back in Starbase 10's medical center and he intended to keep it.

Aboard a Romulan D'deridex cruiser, the Centurion at the science station reported just then:

"Commander; possible contact, bearing three-one mark three-four."

"What is it?" the Commander ordered.

"It's hard to make out with all the interference from the anomaly, but it is definitely a ship of some sort."

The Commander moved to the navigational display, a frown creasing his v-shaped bony brow and lowering his pointed eyebrows.

"That heading is almost directly from Starbase 10. Tactical, raise shields and cloak. Transmit same command to all other ships... but tell our Valdorees to maintain visibility. They already know we're here so let's give them something to look at."

"By your command," acknowledged the woman sitting at the tactical station.

"Helm, move off, bearing three-one-five. Full impulse."

After almost an hour of reading and consulting with the computer, Admiral Tomalak on board the IRW Shavok stretched and moved to the replicator to get another cup of Earl Grey tea, an annoying Human drink he had come to rely on, thanks to Picard.

The voice of the Centurion First Officer then came over the comm, calling him.

"Admiral Tomalak, here."

"Sir, we've received an encoded message from the D'vinn. They say a Federation ship is on its way."

"Appears my suspicions were well founded. The Alsea is not with us," Tomalak replied. "Tell the Commander of the D'vinn to not engage."

"Sir, there was no direct communication because of their proximity to the anomaly. It was transmitted from a cloaked probe." He hesitated, then added: "Admiral, I can't find Commander Kraetaek anywhere. Shall we set a course for the anomaly?"

"Not yet," Tomalak replied.

"But Sir, our orders..."

Tomalak cut him off, with force.

"I'm well aware of our orders! You heard me Centurion. I am coming to the Bridge."

He set down his unfinished tea and moved across the door to his quarters. Opening it, he was surprised to come face to face with a disruptor pistol. The owner, Commander Kraetaek, had the pistol in his left hand and a bottle of Romulan Ale in his right. His communicator pin was missing.

"Commander...?" Tomalak said, a question laced with a slight threat.

Commander Kraetaek said nothing but waved him back into the room.

"Admiral Tomalak, I place you under arrest for treason. I appoint myself summary judge, jury, and executioner."

His slightly slurred speech finished, he smiled and attempted to hold the pistol straighter and more directly at the Admiral's head.

"How do you plead?"

"You're drunk Commander," Tomalak said evenly, without flinching.

"I'm off duty... you made damn sure of that, didn't you?"

"Very well. I plead not guilty. Now give me the weapon, Commander. Are you really so stupid as to think you can get away with killing the Empress' right hand?"

"If she knew how you betrayed her... you wouldn't be so glib... *Admiral*."

The Commander spat the last word with contempt.

"You have no idea of the intricacies that are involved here. You just want to fight. I understand that, but trust me... there's more that needs to be learned first."

"Learning time is over... for you. You put our mission at risk, that's all I need to know."

The Commander had said all he needed to, and Tomalak knew it. He closed his eyes with acceptance as the cold titanium of the disruptor was pressed against his flesh.

At that moment, the doorbell to his quarters chimed and Tomalak's eyes snapped wide open. Capitalizing on a chance provided only by the Commander's inebriated state, he swiftly grabbed the pistol which fired off a shot past his head into the bulkhead, causing alarms to blare. Taking hold of the disruptor, he smashed it across the Commander's head and knocked him out cold. The Uhlan who, at the First Officer's request, had originally come to see what was taking the Admiral so long, entered and saw him strike his Commander with a pistol. He instinctively drew his own weapon.

Unfortunately for him, the Admiral was more spry in his old age than he looked. Before the Uhlan knew it, a disruptor blast was carving a large hole in his chest and he collapsed dead a second later.

After exiting his quarters, the Admiral blasted the door controls to make it more difficult for the officers to learn from the Commander what happened. Hiding his weapon, he made his way to the transporter room, occasionally shouting, "he went that way!" to the security officers passing by.

Upon entering the transporter room, the Sublieutenant on duty turned and looked at him with suspicion. Unfortunately for the confused officer, Tomalak didn't have time to trick him with talk and just shot him dead where he stood. Using the console's communication controls with his own overriding command codes, he activated the subspace emitters of the warbird.

"Artemis, this is Tomalak. I request political asylum! Lower your shields so I can beam over immediately!"

The sudden call over the speakers of the Artemis' bridge made everyone there look at one another in genuine disbelief.

Kheren looked sharply at his tactical officer.

"Both ships' shields are still down, Sir," Tyvya confirmed to his silent inquiry. "Sensors detect a security alert status on board the Shavok... and indications of weapon fire inside."

As she turned to add something, her captain raised a hand to interrupt her before she could speak.

"Mister Cheonghi; lock on to that comm signal and have any lifeform in a two meters radius beamed aboard, full security protocol."

The Edoan chief of Ops immediately went to work. Then turning towards the Andorian giantess at tactical, Kheren quickly explained:

"A very clumsy and ineffectual trap if it is one, Lieutenant. Stay alert for any sign of hostility from the Shavok and have security take care of our guest."

"Tyvya to Mriish," then called out the chief of tactical; "take Ensign Tylok with you and see to our guest in brig cell 1 until further notice."

"Aye, Lieutenant," came back the purring voice of the Caitan woman. Between her sharp senses and reflexes and the Ensign's Betazoid mind probing, there would be no trick from their unexpected guest as he would be directly beamed into a security holding cell, with any item or weapon on his person scanned, deactivated and removed in transit, be it a simple transponder beacon sewn into his clothing or an implanted molecular detonator within his very flesh.

A Romulan Admiral requesting asylum was an almost unheard of happenstance; but sending a living bomb aboard an enemy starship was standard Romulan tactic. Tyvya was taking no chances.

"I too doubt it to be a trap, Captain," then said Elliago. "Tomalak undoubtedly knew our shields were already down for a good while... and an experienced man like him is well aware that we can transport through our own shields. For him to ask for us to lower them indicate a highly distressed state of mind. If this slip is not genuine, then he is the galaxy's best actor."

"We soon shall see," nodded the Andorian captain, his four oculars straight at the ominous warship on the screen.

Sitting forward, elbows on knees, in that familiar posture of his when decisive action was about to be taken, he simply said:

"Step two."

\* \* \*

#### **Captain's Log: supplemental.**

**We should be coming up on our planned intercept of the Romulan task force soon. Though I am prepared to do my duty, I hope that it will not come to violence and that the Romulan commander will see reason.**

As Rachele was finishing her log entry, the communicator in the ready room chimed.

"Bridge to Captain Rivers," came the voice of her XO, Lieutenant Oseno

"Go ahead, Lieutenant." Rivers replied.

"We're coming up on the coordinates, Captain."



"I'm on my way, Rivers out."

Rachele stood up and straightened her uniform before walking out onto the bridge of the Alsea.

"Status," she demanded calmly.

"Coming up on the intercept point, Captain," Oseno stated again

"Tactical?" Rivers asked Cat Steele.

"Nothing yet, Ma'am... wait, contacts, bearing three one three Captain. Interference makes it difficult to tell how many, but I know their engine signatures are Romulan."

"Helm, take us out of warp and close on the contacts at half impulse. Yellow alert, shields up."

The Alsea dropped back to real space, using normal deceleration and bore down on the Romulan vessels.

"Contacts are a little clearer now, Ma'am," Cat reported. "Romulan Valdore class, two ships."

"Valdore.." Rivers mused

"They can't be alone," Oseno said stating what Rivers was already thinking.

"Lieutenant Steele," Rivers ordered; "use Mister Syntron's sensor modifications to find those other ships."

"Aye captain...standby..."

Cat's fingers deftly manipulated the Alsea's tactical sensor array, tying it in with the main deflector and running Commander Syntron's modification program. Then she set the sensors to their maximum output and rescanned the area. Soon enough, the startling sonar-style sound of the modified system sent back a definite echo.

"Additional contacts Captain, cloaked, definitely Romulan, most likely D'deridex class from detected mass displacement. Still, just a guess," Cat added "There's enough interference that I can't positively identify them."

Rivers nodded.

"Open a channel; let's give them something to think about."

Cat nodded, indicating the channel was open.

"Romulan vessels, this is Captain Rachele Rivers of the Federation starship Alsea. You are in Federation space in violation of Treaty. Please set course and return to Romulan space immediately or we will be forced to treat your squadron's incursion as an act of war."

On one of the cloaked D'deridex that had previously moved out of range, the task force commander listened with amusement to the voice of the female Captain.

"With pleasure, my dear," he said under his breath. Then louder he said but not on the comm, only for the benefit of his crew: "Too late for that, Alsea! We have the upper hand and war was already declared by our Empress, whether you knew it or not!" he laughed loudly to inspire his bridge. "Come about and make haste toward the Alsea. We shall give them a nice surprise."

His mistake was not knowing their ability to at least partially detect his ship. Fortunately for him, the Azimuth Horizon made the readings spotty at best. Meanwhile, the Valdorees that weren't cloaked ignored the warning and began charging weapons; but their attack pattern was directed, not towards the incoming Federation starship, but to the Anomaly instead.

At the tactical station, Cat Steele detected the charging weapons and targeting of the Romulan vessels and immediately notified Rivers.

"Captain, they're charging weapons, but they're not targeting us. They're targeting the Azimuth Horizon. Also, the cloaked vessels are changing position, moving to intercept us."

Rivers frowned.

"Romulan Commander; I know your plan. But I have data that proves the Azimuth Horizon can be contained. What you are planning will only make it worse. We are transmitting our data on an open channel now. Please acknowledge."

She used the terminal on her command chair to initiate the transmission containing the data they'd received from the Artemis. Rachele was determined to follow Samji's directive and not engage the Romulans unless she absolutely had to, but she was not afraid of a fight either. She was after all, a highly trained security officer at heart.

Beside Rivers. Jureth was on edge. In his head, he just knew the Romulans weren't going to listen to reason and the Alsea would be forced to eliminate them. He wanted to give the order himself, but Rivers was the captain and he would follow her lead despite his own feelings.

Niomo sat with his back turned to the Captain; however, he had to give her credit. He would have already destroyed the cloaked ships and demanded the surrender of the remaining Valdore. But then, that would have meant war. The next few minutes would decide what happened to the Romulan ships and his. Already he was beginning restoring the power balance between all three warp cores in preparation for separation and a combat situation. As he was working, he thought of an idea.

"Captain," he stated as he turned his chair, awaiting acknowledgement. "It might be possible for us to bluff the Romulans. Clearly at least one of their cloaked ships does not realize we can see them. If they fire upon us, we will have to destroy them all. We might be able to release a controlled antiproton burst from our deflector. If we burst in random directions and then multiple times directly at the cloaked vessel, hopefully they will *think* we can see them. Even if it's just for show. Or they could attack us... and we wipe them out."

The engineering officer then shrugged. He never liked diplomacy.

Rachele listened and considered the engineer's idea as he was talking. It was non lethal and might just bluff the Romulans into turning tail and heading back for the Neutral Zone. She nodded at Niomo.

"Do it, and do it quickly, Lieutenant Commander. If they open fire, especially if its on the anomaly, I won't have any more options."

"Aye, Ma'am. Lieutenant Steele, feed the lead D'deridex's updating location into my console. Powering up the deflector array."

As he generated the particles he needed into the array, he also added in some other minor particles that would give the burst an easily visible green shine. He hoped that this would add to the act, as it is much easier to believe you have been touched if you see yourself being touched.

"Deploying burst. Random targeting Mark 12, 47 and 1. Directing burst wave towards the D'deridex...I register something as being there, but if I didn't know it was a ship, i'd just assume it was space dust. Retargeting the D'deridex and firing again. And again. Ok Captain. If they still think they are cloaked, I'd say we have a war on our hands. And while I'm at it, I'll play tactical officer and remind you that, once they decloak, we will lose the chance to take them down without shielding. Sorry if I stepped on your toes, Lieutenant Steele."

"No problem, Sir," Cat said in response to the engineer's apology. "It is a good idea."

"Indeed, good work Commander," Rivers said to Lire. "And I understand the technology of the Romulan cloak; but thank you for the reminder. Mister Oseno, recommendations?"

Jureth contemplated Rivers for only a moment before answering.

"Captain, they clearly are prepared to eliminate us to carry out their plan. I recommend we engage them Ma'am, disable their weapon systems if we can."

Rivers closed her eyes in thought. Her XO made sense and the Romulans very presence in and refusal to leave the sector was already a gross violation of interstellar law.

Rivers watched the viewer as the lead Romulan vessel was illuminated by Commander Lire's anitproton burst. And now, she had a decision to make.

With no response from the Romulans regarding the data transmission, Rachele was running out of options and out of time. She could not let them fire on the anomaly under any circumstances; but if the Alsea fired first, she could engage the Federation in a war they couldn't afford.

The Commander on the D'deridex that had been moving toward the Alsea smiled as the colored radiation bursts surrounded his ship. He had suspected their ability to know his location, but this confirmed it.

"Sir..." the officer at tactical muttered nervously.

But the Commander simply said; "Hold!" and waited for the expected follow up response.

"Red alert, engage multi-vector assault mode." finally ordered the captain of the Alsea. "Mister Oseno, I'll need you to command the secondary section."

Jureth acknowledged Rivers order with a nod.

"Computer, site to site transport, secondary battle bridge. Authorization Oseno thirty one bravo juliet."

The transporter acknowledged the Bajoran's command and whisked him away depositing him on the secondary battle bridge a second later. Jureth noted that thanks to his earlier order the crew for the Alsea's secondary section was already in place with Ensign Murtaugh taking replacing Cat Steele at tactical.

"Mister Lire, you are my only other officer with command experience. Can you take command of the tertiary?"

Niomo watched as Jureth transported away and prepared to do the same. The lights had dimmed to Red Alert status, and he could already feel the ship vibrating.

"I'll see you on the other side, Captain. Assuming my modifications to Core 3 don't light my pants on fire."

He looked to the ceiling and stated:

"Emergency Transport, Tertiary Bridge."

He arrived on the smaller bridge moments later and nodded to the officers who were already taking their places. He sat down in the Captain's chair; a place he had never wanted to sit again.

"Time to shine people. Battle Stations. Tactical; hold fire, but let's let them know we aren't amused. Target one of the cloaked Warbirds."

On the primary bridge, Rachele Rivers still stood just forward of the command chair, but then the ship's computer intoned:

"Multi-vector assault mode separation sequence initiated... separation in twenty seconds."

Rachele took her seat immediately and looked around at the bridge crew. They were all veteran officers, and they were all ready.

"Separation in ten seconds... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two... one..."

The Alsea shuddered as the mag-lock system disengaged and the mighty warship split into three powerful entities. On the main bridge, Rivers opened an intership communications channel and began issuing orders.

"All sections, this is the Captain; our first targets are those cloaked warbirds. We will engage the closest target. The attack pattern will be largely automated."

With her orders given, Rivers addressed the ship's computer,

"Computer, initiate attack pattern Siduri One."

"Acknowledged; specify target."

"Take coordinates from tactical console."

"Acknowledged; initiating."

The Alsea's three elements moved in coordination using the former captain's preprogrammed attack maneuver which was very similar to the legendary Kolvoord Starburst maneuver. Rachele watched their still cloaked target on the viewer. She wondered if the Romulans had any idea what was about to happen to them.

Seeing the very thing he was waiting for come to fruition, the Romulan commander grinned again, and said, "NOW!" which also broadcasted over the open comm to two Mogai escorts that had been completely still behind the much more massive D'deridex battleships the whole time and therefore unable to be detected, even by the Alsea's improved sensors. All three ships decloaked at once, raised shields, and charged weapons; the Mogai targeting the secondary and tertiary hulls that had just passed them and the D'deridex targeting the primary that had been taking the lead.

On the bridge of the Alsea's primary section, Cat Steele detected the new arrivals as they decloaked.

"Captain! Two more contacts, Mogai class, decloaking with the warbird!"

"All sections, evasive maneuvers!"

The Alsea's sections broke off their preconfigured attack and swooped past the Romulan ships on their first pass with no shots fired.

Acting Captain Rachele Rivers was not amused.

"Lieutenant Steele, show them what we've got. Load and fire transphasic torpedoes at the lead warbird. Three round volley."

"Aye Captain, transphasic rounds loaded! Firing!"

On the secondary battle bridge, Ensign Murtaugh detected the two new arrivals at the same time as Cat Steele did and just as Rivers' order for evasive maneuvers came over the comm.

The Alsea's secondary section juked as the transphasic torpedoes flew away from the torpedo launcher of the primary section.

As the transphasics hurtled toward their intended target, the Mogai began firing their disruptor cannons directly into the secondary and tertiary hulls of the Alsea, attempting to knock out their weapons while at the same time the D'deridex launched a similar attack, but with multiple disruptor beams at the primary hull. Their fire being divided, the impact on each of the three parts that would've otherwise lowered the shields of one ship completely was divided as well and no damage was incurred to the hulls themselves.

The D'deridex was not so lucky. It maneuvered to port, away from the anomaly, but slowly of course due to its massive girth. It took seven of the nine transphasic torpedoes to its starboard broadside. Their shields blocked much of the damage that would've otherwise obliterated the ship, but, being transphasics, much of the deflagration spread through multiple subspace layers got through their specific shield frequency and put puncture marks all across the Romulan vessel's hull.

The Romulans then responded by loosing three targeting heavy plasma torpedoes at each of the Alsea's parts before attempting to come about to its undamaged and still fully shielded port side.

"Stay with the primary section's target, fire phasers," Jureth ordered.

The phasers, firing through the pockmarks on the starboard side, knocked out the D'deridex's impulse engines and weapons, leaving it to drift helplessly, only halfway through its turn.

The Mogais, however, were still very much alive and punished the secondary and tertiary hulls with as much disruptor cannon fire and regular plasma torpedoes as they could muster.

Jureth nearly fell out of the command chair as the plasma torpedo from the Warbird impacted the shields.

"Status report!"

"Shields at eighty percent and holding, Sir," Ensign Murtaugh reported. "Minor hull damage from plasma but no breaches."

"Warbird status?"

"heavily damaged Sir. She's out of the fight."

The ship shuddered again under the withering disruptor fire of the Mogai escorts. Jureth's knuckles were white from his tight grip on the chair's arms.

"Return fire! Helm! Show them our backside! Murthaug, torpedoes, full spread!"

Meanwhile, the Valdore, left alone to carry out their assigned task, fired a salvo of trilitium-enhanced plasma torpedoes directly at the Azimuth Horizon.

Rachele Rivers gripped the arms of the Alsea's command chair as the primary section shuddered under fire from the warbird.

"Report!" she demanded

"The warbird is heavily damaged, captain," Cat Steele replied. "Engines and shield offline. The escorts are continuing to attack the secondary and tertiary sections, and we've taken a plasma torpedo hit. The shields are weakened but no hull breaches. Captain, we have a new problem. The valdore have launched projectiles toward the Azimuth Horizon!"

"What are they?"

"They look like Romulan standard plasma torpedoes, but I can't be sure."

"Time to impact?"

"I'm uncertain, Ma'am."

"Can we intercept them, Lieutenant?"

"I don't know; the Horizon is interfering with our tactical sensors... but I could try to target them manually with our phasers."

"Mister Hunter, get us in position to intercept those projectiles!"

"Hang on," the veteran pilot said as he pushed the primary hull to her full speed, moving away from the D'derridex warbird.

Rachele did not like leaving Oseno and Lire to deal with the Mogai escorts, but the ship's rear torpedo launcher was mounted on Oseno's secondary section and, if she could help it, she was not going to allow those projectiles to reach the Horizon.

"Lieutenant Steele; as soon as you have a good shot, open fire!"

"Aye Captain. Hold her steady, Hunter."

"I'll try but we're pretty close to the Horizon!"

Cat activated the manual controls on the tactical console and got what little amplification she could from the ship's sensors to help guide her shots. Targeting as many of the projectiles as she could as the Alsea began to shudder under the influence from the unstable space near the Horizon, Cat lined up her shot.

"Firing phasers!"

On the Tertiary Hull, Niomo was fairing as well as Jureth. Sparks flew from a near by console as their shields took another torpedo blast.

"Sir! Shields down to seventy-five percent. The Romulans seem to be focusing on our section, Sir!"

Niomo rubbed his brow. He knew that he was flying the slowest and most unmaneuverable section, but he never expected the Romulans to know that as well. Their time on the original Prometheus they had almost succeeded in stealing decades ago served them well, it seemed.

As he ordered the ship to fire on the same Mogai that the Secondary hull was lining up its own torpedo launcher to, a call came out.

"Commander, the Valdorees have opened fire on the Horizon! The Captain and the Primary Hull are moving to intercept!"

"On Screen!"

Niomo cursed as the viewscreen changed to the plasma torpedoes speeding towards the Azimuth Horizon.

"Tactical, target the Valdorees. Give them something to worry about. Alert the Secondary hull that they are on their own with the Mogai. Open a channel to the Primary Hull."

"Open, Sir." the Ops officer reported.

"Captain, I wouldn't suggest going too deep into the Horizon without recombining. We didn't plan for any separated flights into it. I'm not sure how the Flood Gate impulse engines will fair without the rest of the ship's backup batteries and generators. I'm providing cover for you against the Valdore. Best we can do."

Rivers heard her chief engineer's warning and acknowledged it.

"Understood, Lieutenant Commander; I'm just trying to give Lieutenant Steele a shot at those torpedoes."

Aboard one of the Valdore's, the tactical officer alerted his Commander.

"Sir, the primary hull is charging weapons."

On screen they could then see the phaser blasts streak by and flirt with the Valdore's starboard side, but none actually made impact.

"No hits, Sir."

"They're not firing at us. Hard to starboard!" the commander shouted.

"Sir..."

"Do it!" he commanded, and the ship began to put itself between the Alsea's primary hull and the torpedoes headed for the anomaly.

Cat Steele's toned reflexes and steady hand allowed her to shoot down six of the eight torpedoes before they got near. A final well-timed shot streaked a bit through the Valdore's shields, lighting them up briefly and continued on toward the seventh torpedo, which exploded near the last one and set it off.

These minor explosions were right on the edge of the Horizon, but it was enough for an invisible tendril of the anomaly to feed off of and expand outward instantly.

No one would've known of its existence had the Valdore not been close enough that it began to be pulled by the massive graviton differential. The ship lurched to the side as it fought against the pull, but eventually it lost the battle and with a deafening pop, it disappeared along with the tendril inside the fiery cosmic blaze.

Meanwhile, the other Valdore turned to face its aggressor. The tertiary hull was peppered with disruptor fire as the Mogai continued facing down the secondary one.

"Load another round of plasma torpedoes, in case we get another shot," the Commander ordered. "Come about."

The Valdore continued to fire its disruptors as it tried to maneuver as close to the anomaly as possible.

The flaming tendril that had swallowed the other Romulan ship then continued its growth toward the Mogai and threatened to completely encircle and trap the primary hull of the Alsea.

Rachele Rivers watched in horror as the Azimuth Horizon swallowed up the Valdore, and then quickly came back to her senses as she watched the tendril continue to spread.

"Evasive maneuvers! Mister Hunter get us out of here!"

"Aye, Captain!"

Shawn Hunter's fingers streaked deftly over the Alsea's helm controls, turning the primary hull hard away from the anomaly and pushing its engines to full power at the same time.

As they tried to make their getaway, the Alsea bucked hard in the unstable space, but Hunter was an expert pilot and he'd dealt with these tendrils before. He fought against the anomaly's pull on his ship. As the Alsea bucked, Rachele Rivers lost her grip and was thrown from the command chair, landing hard on the deck. Her head exploded and despite her strong will, blackness overcame her.

"Captain!" Cat Steele yelled and much as Jureth had done when Kalten Siduri had been injured barely days before.

Cat leapt over the tactical console to check on her commanding officer. She felt a weak pulse and realized that everyone on the bridge, except Shawn Hunter, was looking at her for orders.

"Activate emergency medical hologram!" Cat yelled and the ship's holographic doctor shimmered into view.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency."

"The captain is injured, she hit her head!"

"Move away please." the photonic doctor instructed

Cat moved and then, as the doctor went to work on Rivers, she bolted back up to the tactical console, opening a comm channel to Oseno and Commander Lire.

"Oseno, the captain's been injured; she's out cold!"

On the bridge of the secondary section, Jureth heard the distress in Cat Steele's voice as she came over the communications channel.

"Murtaugh, give me a visual on the primary section!"

The battle bridge's viewer showed the distressed primary hull of the Alsea as she moved away from the growing subspace tendril. Instantly Jureth knew that it was time to leave this party. He'd seen what those tendrils could do to a ship, and now in command, he wasn't about to let them get the Alsea.

"All sections, this is Lieutenant Oseno; pull back from the anomaly now!"

The helmsman on the secondary section didn't have to be told twice. She pushed the ship's engine to full impulse and the secondary hull streaked away from the Azimuth Horizon.

"You don't have to tell me twice!" Niomo indeed shouted back at Jureth through the subspace channel between them. "Helm! Get us the Hell away from the Horizon. Don't even let the tendril look at us. Ops, status report."

"Shields down to fifty-seven percent but holding. Batteries at eighty-nine percent. No injured. Damage control in process. I think the Primary Hull has taken damage. I can't get a good reading because of the tendrils. Secondary Hull is in the same situation as us. Both Valdores were taken by the anomaly. The D'deridex is out of commission. Only the Mogais remain."

"What are the Mogais doing?" Niomo pondered. Their mission had failed; they were no match for the Prometheus class warship.

"Once the Valdores were destroyed, they ceased their attack. They might be planning on continuing the mission by themselves, Sir."

"Very well. Keep all weapons targeted on the Mogai closest to the anomaly. Don't let them fire anything else at it. If they start to cloak, open fire. Do *not* let them run."



Niomo heard Aye Sirs from around the bridge. He sat back in the command chair and rubbed it's armrests. It did feel good being a captain again. But that wasn't why he was here. This was only part one of the operation.

They still needed to seal the Azimuth Horizon away for good.

\* \* \*

Tyvya listened to the report from the brig and turned towards her captain.

"Sir, brig reports our guest is clean and identity confirmed."

Kheren nodded, fully confident that even an Undine in genetic disguise hiding a molecular explosive within its own flesh would have been recognized and neutralized by the severe security protocols dilligently applied by his carefully selected crack crew.

"Have security escort him immediately up here. Maintain full intruder protocols."

"Here? On the bridge, Sir?" wondered the giantess..

"And quickly, before his pals over there start screaming accusations of abduction through the mouth of their torpedo launchers."

The order was given; and when the captain of the Artemis said "quickly", they all knew he meant it. And so, a few seconds later, their unexpected Romulan guest appeared within the annular confinement beam of a site to site transport, flanked by Caitan security officer Mrrish and Betazoid colleague Tylok, both a step behind with a phaser compression rifle held accross their own chest. Following safety protocols, the computer was tracking him as well, ready at the first sign of danger to confine him within a localized level 10 forcefield where he stood on the bridge.

Kheren did not rise from his seat or even look a centimeter away from the main viewer as he greeted them.

"Welcome to the Artemis, Admiral Tomalak. From what do we owe the singular honor of your unexpected visit?"

"No time for pleasantries, Captain," replied Tomalak. "I recommend you go to Red Alert and leave this place immediately. Your fellow ship will need assistance as well and I don't believe either the Commander of the Shavok who just tried to kill me, or that of the D'derdiex that will be lurking around the Alsea will wish to talk."

The Romulan had barely spoken that the voice of Tyvya rose from the tactical station.

"Sir! Shields just snapped on!"

"Full evasive, pattern Kirk Epsilon!" instantly barked Kheren.

As if on cue, the Shavok let loose a volley of plasma torpedoes that no ship in the Federation could ever hope to match. Several struck the Artemis, burning partially through her shields and setting portions of the hull ablaze.

Under such a warhead barrage at such close range, the Federation vessel would have been instantly vaporized... as it not been for the old twenty-third century automated shield activation program tied into tactical sensors that Kheren, since his days as tactical chief on the Lotus, had insisted on implementing then and afterwards on board his ship the very day he took command. As soon as a target lock or a weapon port lighted up in the vicinity of the tactical sensor array, the computer instantly activated all defensive measures even before the red alert klaxon was heard.

The Artemis thus, scarred with blazing pockmarks and blackened armor plates, survived... but still reeled under the onslaught.

Following that up was a series of disruptor fire like a horrifying green light show that struck the shields from several different angles, coming from the tips of the massive wings of the Shavok that spanned even the Artemis' girth twofold, wrapping her in their fiery grip. Several of the disruptor blasts punctured through the shields and knocked out auxiliary systems, but no real damage was done to the key systems yet.

Keenly on the alert like the rest of the bridge crew since facing the monstrous warship, helmsman Aguk Snow was already sending the surprising agile starship in a corkscrew flight around and away from the Shavok's main armament's firing arc and range.

"Kirk Epsilon, aye!" he retorted. "Shavok pivoting but not pursuing," he added with a perceptibly puzzled tone.

"Report!" ordered the Andorian in the center seat.

"Hull breaches on decks 4 aft, 10 and 11 port and 23 to 25 forward!" first answered chief engineer Robert Baoule from his master display behind his commanding officer. "Automated damage control systems activated. But warp power transfer compromised, reserve fusion reactor 1 and 3 offline and near twenty-five percent of our batteries are melted scrap."

Another impact shook the entire starship.

"Secondary power transfer to nacelles, deflectors and shields offline; rerouting... but we lost at least fifteen percent system efficiency" then completed Ops chief Cheonghi, all three arms flying over the multitask console before him, just below the main viewer where the monstrous Scimitar class dreadnought tried to strike with rays of green fire the much smaller but nimbler Federation starship.

"Shields down to fifty-one percent!" then reported Tyvya. "Armor plating at twenty-one percent forward and port side! Target lock not responding; targeting manually. Port forward phaser array and torpedo launcher inoperative!"

"Attempting to jam their target lock with sensor feedback," now announced Valencia Irksos from the science station on the other side of the aft part of the bridge. "But we lost a couple of sensors on our forward port angle."

"No casualties," finally told Elliago Nasaro-Myth to the captain's left ear. "All ravaged decks were unoccupied. Seems your idea of a skeleton crew is saving a lot of lives, Captain Sir."

"Let's keep it that way," grunted the Andorian. He was not one to gloat or pat himself on the back for his foresight. All the egos he had bruised back then for those officers that had showed little faith in him meant nothing compared to the lives that were spared now. Then and now, that was all that ever mattered to him.

And they were far from being out of the fire yet.

Sparks flew around the bridge of the Artemis, and a console exploded quite near where Tomalak was standing. As he recoiled from the blast, he shouted:

"Recommend we leave at once, Captain!"

Thumbing over his shoulder the burned out auxilliary station and the Admiral, Kheren simply shot back:

"Secure all moorings, Admiral... Stormy seas ahead."

"Catching on out of habit the peculiar seafaring speech of their commanding officer, the guards moved Tomalak to the empty seat of the blasted console. Tylok extracted from it's side panel a personal inertial dampener he fastened on their guest while Mriish kept her sheathed claws on the Admiral's padded shoulder as the Artemis trembled from another disruptor shot on her weakening shields.

With the security team securing him, Tomalak was able to take a look at one of the readouts.

"Shavok is charging its Thalaron generator!"

"We surprised and confused them it seems," estimated acting science chief Irksos from her sensor readout. "The thalaron weapon requires several minutes and all their available power to work; they can't deploy and use it if they arm torpedo launchers, fire disruptors, keep shields up, cloak or even try to move... and it's next to useless against a moving target like us."

"Either they're panicking, lack competent leadership... or both," added Elliago nodding his bald head towards the secured admiral.

"They did not maneuver," confirmed helmsman Snow. "We have moved at five point two million kilometers, out of weapon range, Sir."

"Keep us there and bring us about on their stern," ordered Kheren. "Baoule, Tyvya, bring our shields back up as full as possible. Irksos, Cheonghi, reinforce them with deflector pulse and reserve power."

The Artemis swiftly completed its flight to position herself at one of the least well armed angle of the powerful warship and where their thalaron emitter was totally unable to target. It took no time for the faster, more maneuverable Ambassador starship to get there while the other futilely worked to activate its doomsday weapon, thus unable to counter the maneuver.

"Doc, open a channel to the Shavok."

"Channel open," the Deltan immediately answered.

"Romulan vessel; this is the Federation starship Artemis. Stop your attack! Admiral Tomalak requested asylum on board our ship. He will address you presently."

The captain of the Artemis sat deeper into his large chair as he then said without turning his gaze away from the screen:

"Please calm down your people, Admiral... for *all* our sakes."

"The Commander wants me dead as much as you, Captain. Why do you think I had to request asylum?"

And sure enough, on the immense battleship, the Romulan Commander and war hero Kraetaek and come back to scoff openly at the transmission.

"We will not hear the traitor of the Empire!" he said, but only to his bridge crew as he made a signal to his communications officer to cut off all transmissions.

To confirm the Admiral's words, the Shavok turned and moved toward the Artemis in an attack vector, this time without the thalaron generator. It seemed that the pause in the fighting gave the Commander a chance to clear his head or get his troops online. When it got back in weapons range it began firing disruptors again. They were more ineffectual than before due to the Artemis jamming their targeting lock, but nonetheless, the deadly barrage continued to lower their shields.

This time, in addition to just firing on the shields, when they could aim, they focused all their fire on the Artemis' impulse engine subsystem.

"They're aiming for our engines!" confirmed Tyvya, her fingers trembling with restraint over the firing controls. "Shields down to forty-seven percent even with deflector reinforcement!"

The Artemis shook under the Shavok's salvo. Despite their ship's nimbleness and speed, the sheer massive power of the dreadnought was enough to batter the Starfleet vessel even as it managed each time to get back out of range as the Romulan ship tried to close in.

"Hull breaches on deck 15 and 17 aft, damage control in progress!" announced Baoule. "External armor and hull plating over secondary impulse engine is gone, internal armor exposed; crew quarters and cargo bay 2 also exposed to space. Primary impulse overheating under strain!"

"Trying to compensate with plasma venting," then said Cheonghi. "Unused subsystems are handling the power rerout."

"Fortunately again, no one hurt yet," reported the chief medical officer from his own command chair. "If those sections had been crewed, we would have now at least a hundred casualties and twice as many wounded."

"We managed to get out of range again... for now..." confirmed the Inuit helmsman as a lull came to the pounding against their buckling shields. "They're slow and cumbersome alright, but they can cover quite a bit of space with all those weapon ports!"

On the Shavok, the Commander was realizing the same thing and roared in frustration.

"Helm, keep with them!"

"Sir, we can only maneuver so much. The Artemis doesn't want to fight and can keep up this dodging and getting out of range indefinitely."

"How can we close the gap. Tactical?"

"We could divert power from auxiliary and shields into weapons. It would increase our firing range."

"Do it now!" Kraetaek ordered, his drunken blood lust fully flushing his face a solid tint of green.

"You missed your chance to get away, Captain," Tomalak roared angrily at Kheren as if he could hear his former subordinate accross space.

"Wrong Admiral... *they* did," shot back the Andorian now with equal irritation. "Security; since our guest decline to even try and save his own people, beam him off my bridge back to the safety of his cell... deck 9. He'll answer for them about this act of war before the Federation Council."

"Captain... they're out for blood now... But the Artemis does not have the firepower to face alone a Scimitar class dreadnought," grimly estimated Tyvya. "And since their initial surprise attack, they left us in no shape to take that kind of pounding for very long."

"I know," answered Kheren with a tone that had no hint of resignation whatsoever. Quite the opposite.

"But we can't let them continue on their way to the starbase... or the anomaly... If they calm down and realize they can simply ignore us and go away at full warp, we will never be able to keep up. "

I know, " he repeated with the same growling tone.

Coming forward again on his seat, all four eyes to the screen, Kheren's typically Andorian "fight or flight" physiological response to danger started to show as he ordered in an almost detached tone of voice:

"Lieutenant Irksos; cut jamming," he said before turning towards the Vulcan at his right to add: "Mister Syntron, your expertise is needed to handle sensors to maximize our jamming effect once we will need them again... on my mark."

"Affirmative Captain" Syntron quickly replied.

As his First officer moved to the science station, Kheren brought his gaze forward again.

"Helm; keep our starboard flank to them and, on their next volley, all stop. Prepare for high energy turn and... nine seconds emergency impulse, bearing 090 mark 2."

"Sir?" wondered Lieutenant Snow also looking at the nav screen.

"On my mark," insisted Kheren. "Engineering; keep our power steady, all reactor, battery and warp power to shields and all impulse power to propulsion; Ops, standby to launch all lifepods on my command."

"Err... aye, Sir," acknowledged a puzzled Cheonghi.

"Doc, use site to site beaming to proceed with phase 1 of evac procedures."

"Phase 1? But that will only..."

"Save everyone on board," again cut the captain. Then he glanced at the Andorian giantess at tactical. "Lieutenant Tyvya; standby for emergency disengagement protocol at five seconds from my mark, *exactly*."

"Emergency disengagement, mark plus five... Aye, Captain," she said, tapping her board to readiness. Her own Andorian reactions had already grasped what was about to come... knowing the Romulans would not.

When the Shavok's sensors became fully operational again and confirmed target coming again into range, it pounced readily on it.

"Fire at will!" the Commander shouted as the increased range allowed them to bridge the gap and hit the Artemis with all it had. Its next volley struck the starboard shield in full. The Artemis swerved, listed on a side and came to a stop, like a harpooned whale on a shoal, just out of range again of the monstrous dreadnought.

"We have them now!" Commander Kraetek said with a cruel smile. "Our victory is at hand! For the Empress!" he shouted.

The Romulan warbird then rushed in for the kill, all weapons charging up once more, their targeting computers now unhampered with the sudden failing of the jamming emissions of their wounded prey. Eighteen disruptors and a dozen torpedo launchers spat fire and death from the bird-like bow as the Shavok swooped straight for the finishing blow.

"Mark!"

Then, everything happened at once.

Jamming emissions suddenly hit again full force the tactical sensors of the Romulan ship, disrupting it's aim in mid-firing sequence; just as all the lifepods of the Starfleet vessel bursted out of its ravaged hull like a blooming flower between the volley and its intended target... which suddenly wasn't there anymore.

As over two dozen lifepods were pulverized instantly by the incoming fire, and others nearby exploding as well from the proximity blast, they acted like antique chaff to cover from sight and harm the sudden pivot and flight of the starship..

It took a few seconds for Romulan sensors to clear out from the unexpectedly blinding explosion of the densely packed lifepods, barely managing it because of the returned jamming emissions... barely enough to see then the Starfleet vessel coming at almost the speed of light... straight at them.

It took a few seconds more for the crew of the Shavok to realize what was happening... and to even accept what was happening... and then, they had barely seconds left to react.

"Sir, they're... heading straight for us!" the Romulan tactical officer shouted.

*"Hard to port! Emergency evasive! All power to impulse..."*

It could never have been enough.

The immense pursuing warbird barely started to move it's ponderous mass away that the onrushing Artemis rammed it fully in the prow. The Romulan Commander pondered with his last thoughts the unlikelihood of a Federation suicide run and watched as a massive blur of white hull barreled into them. The ensuing antimatter explosion from its rupturing class 9 warp core created an explosion powerful enough to knock a small moon off it's orbit, already pulverizing the colossal vessel before its own power core itself could even explode. And when it did, it added to the deflagration tenfold, creating a sudden burst of energy that flared up like a miniature nova visible parsecs away.

\* \* \*

Just as the three parts of the Prometheus class battleship were about to deal with the Romulan Mogais, the subspace sensors on all three pieces of the ship lit up. About a light year away, in the area where they had parted ways with the Artemis, a massive explosion was detected which ruptured subspace, causing an alert in the faster than light sensors finely attuned to detect such subspace anomalies.

The Mogais saw it too and jumped on the chance of a distraction to try and cloak and move off back toward the Romulan side of the Azimuth Horizon.

Aboard both the primary and secondary sections of the Alsea, Cat Steele and Alaura Murtaugh were alerted by their tactical consoles to the massive explosion and subsequent subspace rupture. The Alsea was well clear of the anomaly now and the remaining Romulan ships had ceased firing on the much more powerful Alsea.

Alaura alerted Jureth.

"Lieutenant, sensors just detected a massive explosion, Sir."

"Where, Ensign?" Jureth asked, suddenly getting a bad feeling in his stomach.

"Near the last expected intercepting position of the Artemis, Sir," Alaura said softly.

A silence fell over the bridge after Alaura made her report and Jureth closed his eyes, praying to the Prophets that this wasn't what it looked like.

It was Cat Steele's voice over the comm system that broke the silence.

"Steele to Oseno, I just detected..."

"I know, Cat," Jureth said evenly, interrupting her. "Ops, bring Commander Lire in on this call."

"Aye, Sir," the ops officer replied. "Channel is open."

"Commander I'm sure Ensign Celes at tactical has informed you about the explosion. We need to put this ship back together. I'm going to initiate the recombination sequence."

"Sir," Alaura interrupted "the Romulans are cloaking."

"Let them go, Ensign. We've foiled their plot. Send a dispatch to Starfleet Command alerting them to the position of the Warbirds. She may not be here by the time that backup arrives, but we have bigger problems."

"Aye, Sir."

Niomo chimed in, adding his two cents

"I'd rather see them space dust, Lieutenant... but as much as I disagree, I'll go along with your decision. Tactical, let the Romulans go. Initiating recombination sequence on my end. I'll be in main engineering if you need me."

"Computer," Jureth intoned; "initiate ship recombination sequence."

"Acknowledged, recombination sequence initiated..."

Minutes later, the Alsea shuddered as the interlock system brought her pieces back together again. Jureth immediately rushed to the ship's main bridge. When he entered he looked for Captain Rivers, but didn't see her and addressed Cat Steele who was in the command chair.

"Where is the captain?"

"The doc took her to sickbay."

Jureth tapped his combadge.

"Oseno to Sickbay; Doctor, how is she?"

"Unconscious," was the terse disembodied reply

"Will she recover?"

"Eventually, but not if you keep bothering me; sickbay out."

Oseno looked at the command chair for a long moment, knowing that, technically, it was his as the acting XO. But right at this moment, he would have given anything to be back behind the tactical console. The bridge crew was looking to him and, finally, he walked to the command chair and sat down.

"Ops, open a channel to the Artemis,"

"Open Sir,"

"USS Artemis, this is USS Alsea, Lieutenant Oseno calling; please respond."

"No response, Sir," replied the operations officer after a moment of silence.

"USS Artemis, this is USS Alsea, Lieutenant Oseno calling, please respond."

Jureth looked at the ops officer who simply shook his head.

"Keep trying to hail them. Mister Hunter, lay in a course to the Artemis last known expected position at this point in time, maximum warp."

"Aye, Sir."

Jureth tapped his combadge.

"Oseno to Lire. Commander I'm sure you're quite busy, but I need to know if we can go to maximum warp. We've lost sensor contact with the Artemis and she's not responding to our hails."

Niomo had just arrived in engineering as Jureth called.

"At this point, I'd suggest 8.5 at maximum. I still have to go through the damage report from the Primary section. My teams are just returning from their posts with data."

Niomo turned just as Thompson, Warner and Brenes walked back into the room. They quickly entered his office and began to give their reports. Most of it was good news. However, as he feared, one of the interlock couplings had broken and fused one of the primary coolant pipes closed. It would take hours to create a workaround.

"Lire to Oseno. As I feared, we lost one of the primary coolant lines to the core. It will take hours to get full power back online. I can run power from the secondary and tertiary cores, but the system wasn't designed to support the primary core like this. As I said before, maximum warp is going to be locked at 8.5. we can go to 9.0, but only for half an hour. Your call."

Without waiting for a response, he called out to his officers.

"Thompson, Warner. Get started on the repairs, take everyone you need. Brenes, work on rerouting power. Have Sparbok help you."

After the officers left his office, and his door sealed, he brought up the sensor scans of the explosion from astrometrics. He spoke again to Jureth.

"Lieutenant. I just looked over the sensor scans from the explosion. Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

Before he answered the Alsea's chief engineer, Jureth issued orders to the helm.

"Mister Hunter, you heard the commander; warp 8.5 to the Artemis' last known position."

"Aye Sir, course laid in."

"Engage."



As the Alsea went to warp, Oseno Jureth turned his attention back to Niomo.

"Sorry to keep you waiting Commander. What can you tell me about the explosion?"

"I'll start with the good news then...I've seen readings like this before. It's a warp core breach of a Scimitar class warship. It looks like the Artemis was successful in defeating her. The bad news? The sensors also report a Federation signature in that explosion. The Artemis is gone. I don't know if this was a scuttle attempt by Captain Kheren, or if the Scimitar's destruction took them by surprise...but we probably should initiate Search and Rescue operations as soon as possible. At least until Starbase 10 gives us something else to do. I can get you Warp 9...Captain"

"As long as you're sure she won't come apart on us." Jureth replied not acknowledging the engineer's use of the title Jureth believed he hadn't earned.

On Starbase 10, the sensors, the only thing really back in working condition, lit up.

"Massive explosion detected, bearing 215, Sir, at about five light years," the Trill science officer intoned, his voice belying the fact that he knew exactly where it was and likely what had happened. "It's created a multitude of subspace ruptures that are all lighting up on our sensors."

"Are you sure, Commander? That would put it exactly where the Artemis and Alsea were heading," Samji said regretfully.

"Confirmed, Sir."

"Attempt to hail them over subspace," he said and, when he got the confirmation nod, he spoke. "USS Artemis, this is Starbase 10. Come in."

No answer was given, so he tried it a couple more times.

"USS Alsea, this is Starbase 10. Come in."

On the bridge of the Alsea, it was Cat Steele who alerted Jureth to the incoming hail.

"Oseno, we're being hailed; it's Starbase 10."

"Put them through."

"USS Alsea, this is Starbase 10. Come in."

"Starbase 10, this is Alsea, Lieutenant Oseno here; we read you."

Samji breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad you're alright, Alsea, we feared the worst. What is your position and do you have any information about the Artemis' position and status?"

"We're managing Sir," Jureth replied. "We left the Artemis to engage the Shavok approximately four hours ago, Sir, to intercept a cloaked Romulan task force sent to destroy the Azimuth Horizon. We were able to successfully intercept and were forced to engage them when they fired on the anomaly. Captain Rivers has been injured, Sir. I am in command. We are making best speed back toward the Artemis last known position, Sir, but she's not responding to our hails and we've lost all sensor contact. I hate to say this, Sir, but at this point, I am assuming that the Artemis is lost."

Samji shook his head and thought about the likely lives lost in despair. The steadfast Captain Kheren, his ingenious and innovative newly minted First Officer Syntron, and all the others that may have given their lives to keep the Romulans from coming to destroy Starbase 10 with their horrific thalaron Generator, or ruining their plan to contain the Anomaly, threatening all life in the Galaxy. It was to be their time, it was certainly the most noble and courageous deaths he could imagine, and at the very least, Captain Kheren's forethought acted to save hundreds of others.

He pushed the thoughts away, however, and focused on the task at hand at the mission.

"I would have to agree, but let us not give up hope yet. Very admirable job thinking of the Romulans' diversion and stopping them."

With the verbal summary, the Alsea had also sent over a full detail of the battle.

"It looks like they did get a minor shot off and it affected the Anomaly just as our scientists theorized. It would've been the end of our mission had they truly succeeded in their plan and the anomaly would've spread one-hundred-fold. Congratulations are in order, Lieutenant."

Samji did not wait for the expected thanks.

"As for your current course, I'm ordering you to come about and return to the Azimuth Horizon to continue your primary containment mission."

Before Jureth could object, he quickly continued.

"Unfortunately, we can't afford to use the Alsea on a rescue mission. It is very important we contain this thing before the Romulans or Klingons get a chance to do anything else. Although it will take more time, I will send the Wisconsin and Captain Onia to go assess the Artemis' situation."

Jureth frowned at the Fleet Captain's order to turn the Alsea around. He did not like the idea of leaving whatever survivors there might be to whatever elements they might be exposed to. The Alsea was here, now; it would take the Wisconsin nearly a day to reach the Artemis last known position. Jureth's first instinct was to close the channel and continue on course to the Artemis position and, for a long moment he considered doing just that. In the end, his obligation to follow orders won out over his strong Bajoran emotions.

"I don't like it, but understand, Sir... and we will comply, Alsea out."

Jureth closed the channel himself from the command chair and addressed Shawn Hunter.

"Mister Hunter, bring us about and make best speed toward our assigned containment area."

"Aye, Sir," Hunter replied easily making the course correction.

Jureth then looked over at Cat Steele.

"Cat dispatch a class IV probe toward the Artemis' last known position. I want data on whatever is out there."

"Aye... probe away."

Jureth nodded and then opened a channel to engineering.

"Bridge to engineering; Commander Lire, I hope your repairs are going well. The Fleet Captain has ordered us to proceed to our Azimuth Horizon containment station. We're going to need those warp cores."

In Engineering, Niomo was watching sparks fly out of some of the consoles.

"No!" he shouted at the crewman. "Reroute power through Console 23-B! B! This one was C."  
He sighed and rubbed his brow in frustration as the Lieutenant's voice rang out. Niomo closed his eyes and listened to the report.

"No way is she going to maximum warp without picking up some spare parts. We'll need a new secondary coolant pipe as well as some new EPS mains to replace the ones we are burning out bypassing some other damaged systems. My estimate was accurate before; 9.0 is the best I can give you. If you want more....well, I suggest leaving the primary section behind and running the operation with the Secondary and Tertiary sections. Their warp cores don't have any major damage and can run at their full operating efficiency. Or at least higher than 9.0. Additionally...it would allow us to leave the primary hull behind...We'd make the Fleet Captain happy by helping seal the rift. And if by chance, the Primary hull found it's way to the Artemis' last known coordinates, that would just be a bonus, if you catch my drift. Not that I would *ever* suggest going against orders, Sir."

Jureth listened to the obviously harried chief engineer of the Alsea, and contemplated his suggestion and implication for only a moment. He had already chosen to follow orders over his emotions and he'd already decided that, with the fate of billions of lives staked on Lotus Fleet's successful containment of the Azimuth Horizon, now was not the time to disobey orders.

"Fleet Captain Samji is dispatching the Wisconsin to look after the Artemis' fate, Lieutenant Commander; and I've dispatched a class IV probe to get us whatever data we can before the Wisconsin arrives. We are proceeding to our containment zone. I will inform Fleet Captain Samji of our diminished warp velocity and he can make the necessary changes in the Azimuth Horizon containment plan. Keep up the good work, Lieutenant Commander, Bridge out."

Niomo sighed as his conversation ended. Starfleet once again was making a mistake. Why order them to sit at the anomaly and wait for the other sectors to be ready when they could reach the Artemis and wait at the same time. They had beaten the Romulans back. All that was left to do was make sure they didn't have a tendril wrap around them. And to wait.

He tapped his communicator and flatly stated:

"Warner, where are you? I'm coming to help."

A nervous voice responded.

"I'm in tube 45 Double D. We found a fused coolant line sector and are trying to figure out a way to bypass it."

Niomo nodded to no one and retorted:

"I'm on my way."

He quickly started scaling up the ladder to the closest jefferies tube entrance. Minutes later, after taking a wrong turn, he arrived to find Warner and Thompson trying to diagnose the problem.

"Status report?" Niomo inquired.

He already knew what the answer was going to be, but he wanted to see if his subordinates did as well. Thompson sighed, looking at Niomo and then at the pipe.

"This is just one of the fused pipe feeds. Our scan located a dozen more. We shut down the coolant control so we could work on the pipe, but we don't even know where to start. We can't just rip out the pipe and replace it. There's still coolant in the tube, even if it isn't flowing."

Niomo nodded.

"Good answer. Warner, suggestions?"

The woman looked down at her tricorder and shook her head.

"The only suggestion I could give would be to deactivate the warp core and flush the coolant line. We'd be able to remove the section and at least give it a temporary patch. But that would take hours, and only a few engineers know how to correctly place the patch without freezing their hands off."

Niomo nodded again. He was happy that the nervous Ensign was taking the initiative.

"I agree. And, if you haven't noticed, we are at warp speed under the orders of Starfleet. Shutting down the warp core is not an option..."

"What about the bypass?" Thompson interrupted. "We could increase the flow of coolant from lines 3 through 6. They should be able to handle the extra pressure."

He used his PADD to quickly generate a diagram of the proposed bypass and showed it to the other two.

"I initially thought the same," Warner responded, "but if you look at the ship as a whole, you'll see that it reduces the amount Core 2 and 3 receive. Power levels do not increase by a great deal."

Niomo sighed.

"For now, let's go with that. I'm getting cramped sitting in this tube. Let's discuss the rest in my office. I assume you both have the scans you need from here. We also have to deal with those mains we are overexerting."

The other two officers nodded, and they all began crawling their way out of the tube.

On the main bridge, Oseno Jureth closed the intercom channel and sat silent for a long moment before looking at ops officer Ensign Wynn.

"Wynn, get me Starbase 10 back."

Wynn nodded as he opened the necessary channel.

"Go ahead, Sir."

"Starbase 10, this is USS Alsea, please respond."

"Alsea, this is Starbase 10 Operations.."

"Starbase 10, is the Fleet Captain available?"

"Negative Alsea, he's tied up with a little bit of a crisis at the moment."

"Understood," Jureth replied wondering exactly what was going on at headquarters. "Please inform him that our primary warp core sustained damage during our engagement with the Romulans and, for purposes of Operation Horizon, we are limited to warp nine."

"Acknowledged Alsea, Starbase 10 out."

The channel to the starbase closed and Jureth sat back in the command chair. It looked like, for the first time in awhile, the Alsea crew would get a chance to catch their breath while on their way back to their planned containment operation. He reflected on everything that had happened and how he had managed to end up in the chair he was sitting in. As he did so, he was reminded of Rachele Rivers laying down in sickbay and decided he needed to get off the bridge. He stood up and looked down at Shawn Hunter who was the senior officer besides him on the bridge.

"Mister Hunter, you have the conn. Let's get some relief up here for everyone. I want them rested when we reach our containment coordinates."

"Aye, Sir," Hunter replied as he left the helm and one of the auxiliary bridge officers took his place.

"I'll be in Sickbay," Jureth said over his shoulder as he headed for the turbolift.

When the lift stopped, Jureth moved down the corridor and entered the Alsea's Sickbay. The ship's holographic doctor, a Mark IV replica of the original Mark I EMH from USS Voyager, was running a medical tricorder over the inert form of Rachele Rivers. Jureth approached the biobed on the opposite side from where the doctor was working.

"Doctor, how is she?"

"As I said before, she is unconscious. Smacking one's head on the deck of a starship will tend to do that."

"Your prognosis?"

"She will need several days of treatment at a major medical facility. I can keep her in stasis until we can get to a starbase."

"But she will recover?"

"Eventually yes."

"Can I have a moment?"

"Certainly, I just finished my hourly scan."

The doctor moved away and Jureth closed his eyes once again asking for the Prophets to send their touch down upon his injured commander. Even though his rational mind knew that it wasn't true, he still felt in his heart that, as a security chief, he had failed somehow.

Jureth opened his eyes and looked down at Rivers' motionless form. He had promised Kaltén Siduri he would bring the Alsea home and he made the same silent promise to Rachele Rivers now.

"Standing there isn't going to heal her any faster,"

Jureth turned to face the sound of the voice and came face to face with Cat Steele.

"Maybe not, but I wanted to check in just the same."

"Go rest Oseno, or I'll have the doctor sedate you for six hours. Like it or not, you're in command... and you're the one who needs to be rested most of all."

Jureth grudgingly accepted that his friend was right, even though he could think of at least ten things he needed to do. In response, he tapped his combadge.

"Oseno to bridge."

"Ensign Tomek here, Sir,"

"Ensign, if you need me, I will be in my quarters for awhile."

"Understood Sir; bridge out."

Jureth looked at Cat.

"There, happy?"

"Yes, now go."

Oseno made his way back to the crew quarters section of the Alsea and, within minutes of laying down on his bunk, he was out like the proverbial light.

\* \* \*

In the blackness of this region of space, only the bright but distant, yellow-white glare of Beta Caeli fell on the immense field of debris slowly swirling before the dim lights of the other faraway stars. This mass of twisted pieces of burnt metal of all shapes and sizes however was not expanding from what remained of the afterglow of the colossal explosion from which it was born; on the contrary, it was slowly but surely receding towards the small, deep darkened center where even the last traces of the deflagration were disappearing, like swallowed into nothingness.

One piece of floating metal however was alone moving slowly but steadily away from the rest of the coalescing debris field, alone still carried by the momentum left from the massive detonation. It was the largest by far, and it was not dying embers and flames but low flickering lights that defined it's round, disc-shaped form.

Within the primary hull of what has been known as the Federation starship Artemis, lights finally flickered back fully to life from ceiling panels and on consoles starting to chime and chirp again. And on the bridge, light brought back life again as all the silhouettes present stirred back to full readiness, still seated at their posts thanks to the personal inertial dampeners they had all been wearing.

The first voice to break the soft music of the systems and instruments, all resuming functions and starting autotmated diagnostics, came from the center seat in a croaked, soft bark.

"Report."

"Sir... emergency saucer separation was successful," first answered the towering Andorian woman sitting to his forward left. " Tactical sensors report no other presence in a one parsec radius. Our secondary hull fully rammed the target. Enemy ship destroyed."

There was no cheer on the Artemis bridge. Even while doing their duty in safeguarding the Federation and themselves, triumphant against a vastly superior force at the dire cost of sacrificing their own vessel, no one aboard took joy in taking lives, even enemy lives.

Recovering from the barely averted shockwave as a result of the massive explosions emanating from the two colliding starships, Syntron was equally stunned by Kheren's seemingly fanatical decision to ram full force into the Shavok. Nevertheless, this unexpected action actually eliminated the imminent threat posed by the daunting ship and its maniacal commander.

Syntron then stood and faced the chief medical officer just as Kheren voiced his own concern.

"Survivors?"

"Aside from our distinguished guest of an Admiral in the brig, none from the Romulan vessel," grimly confirmed Doctor Nasaro-Myth from his own internal and external sensors. "But all crewmembers safe and accounted for."

From the center seat, Captain Kheren sighed as much with regret as with relief.

"Ship status."

"Minimal damage to aft ventral plating," immediately reported acting chief engineer Baoule, sweat glistening on his bald, dark-skinned pate. "No further damage beyond the earlier hull breaches we suffered on decks 4 and 10, notably crew quarters and cargobay 2, and the heavy damage to our port side sensors, ventral phaser array and torpedo launcher. We have full impulse power, reserve power from our fusion reactors and half our batteries."

Syntron then looked over to the multi-task station.

"Any additional information, Lieutenant Cheonghi?"

"All primary hull systems fully operational except for long range sensors and communications which went offline following the proximity blast we went through," then added Ops Chief Cheonghi from the multitask forward console. "We lost all content of cargobay 2 but we still have enough reserves left for seven hundred people for three years."

"Tactical sensors fully operational except in our lower forward port arc," Tyvya told her captain. "We have the same blind spot where our ventral port phaser array and torpedo launcher were destroyed. We can however compensate if we use any of the 95 probes we still have available. We have minimal metaphasic shielding and two-thirds of our torpedo complement left."

"Our initial speed and the wavefront of the collision threw us clear out of the blast zone and six hundred thousand kilometers out of the debris field," now reported chief flight control officer Aguk Snow. "We are currently floating free but with no momentum. We are holding steady four light years from Starbase 10; at full impulse, it will take us eight years to get back. However, we still have our primary shuttlebay with two class X, one class XI and one class VIII shuttle which, like our bridge module, can make warp 6 and bring us back in four days. But it would take about three trips back and forth to evacuate everyone."

Acting chief of science Valencia Irksos was last to talk.

"Our current position is point nine light year from the Japori system orbiting Beta Caeli. The fourth planet is L class, barely inhabitable with a thin oxygen-argon atmosphere but no sentient lifeforms, according to latest survey. It would however suffice if we are forced to seek shelter, supplies or to make any emergency repair or landing."

Looking at the chief engineer, acting executive officer Syntron ordered:

"Lieutenant Baoule, have damage control start with closing the breach in cargo bay 2. Afterward, have them then check over all power systems and integrity field."

"Aye, Sir." simply answered the bald dark man. "I recommend also that we endeavor to repair our communications as soon as possible while we're at it. They must have registered our fireworks back at Starbase 10 and if they have tried to raise us, they will certainly be worried by our silence."

"And hopefully have someone able to come and look for us," chimed in Helmsman Snow. "But even at maximum warp, it will take them at least half a day to get here... that is, *if* they can come. There is still that anomaly out there to worry them maybe more than lil' ole us."

The Vulcan then looked over to the multi-task station.

"Lieutenant Cheonghi, begin a diagnostics of all systems and afterward work out a plan for long-term space travel options... in case no rescue efforts are initiated."

"Right away, Sir," dilligently retorted the six-limbed Edoan.

Addressing the chief tactical and security officer, Syntron stated to the Andorian giantess: "Lieutenant Tyvya, put together a team of security officers to assist damage control in effecting repairs, focusing initially on the keys sites throughout the saucer. Also, have tactical continue scanning for any vessels in the vicinity... friendly or otherwise, and report anything at all that might come into range."

"acknowledged."

Focusing his attention next back to the science department, the first officer then addressed his assistant science chief now manning the science station again.

"Lieutenant Irksos, keep using available scanners to continue checking all nearby star systems and any additional options for any M class planets nearby... just in case we need an emergency landing at some point as we proceed in our situation here."

"As you know, this is a fairly well known and mapped out part of space, Sir," the black woman added to her nod of agreement. " We're more or less lost in our own backyard, so to speak. I will bring you shortly a list of all inhabitable worlds in order of reachable distance and travel time relative to our current propulsion capabilities and supplies."

Kheren let his Vulcan acting first officer give all the appropriate operational orders to secure their current situation and provide for their immediate survival. He took a moment of silence after that to assimilate all the information provided by his bridge crew. Then, He signaled the chief medical officer beside him to open a shipwide comm channel.

"This is the captain. We have successfully stopped the Romulan threat against Starbase 10 and, hopefully, the USS Alsea has stopped the one against Operation Horizon. By this time, the rest of the fleet should be well on its way to corral the anomaly and put an end, at least in the short term, to this menace. We now have our primary hull left and all the resources to survive and get back home. Again, you have today proven your devotion to duty, your courage and your worth. Now, and until we complete our task and return home, I will ask for each you to keep this faith you have shown in your worth, your courage, in yourself and each other for a while longer. All hands, secure all stations and report to your deck officer, then take a break. We will all be called again to do our duty soon enough."

Once the channel was closed, Kheren stood up and strode towards the left hand door of the bridge as he ordered:

"All senior bridge officers, report to the briefing room in fifteen minutes."

When the time came for the highest ranking officers of the Artemis to convene, all departments had reported status and progress to their chiefs, which in turn transmitted everything to the command bridge chair of the acting executive officer. Now, the Vulcan had in hand all the current details of their remaining capabilities when Chief of the Boat Andre Hollet came up to the bridge with the relief bridge officers taking the positions of Snow, Cheonghi, Baoule, Tyvya, Irksos, Nasaro-Myth and himself. The seven bridge officers then silently went through the lefthand door of the bridge and the short corridor that, past the captain's ready room, led to the secondary turbolift and the main conference room. They all sat in their customary places around the old style triangular table, Baoule, Cheonghi and Snow on one side, Tyvya, Irksos and Nasaro-Myth on the other and the last one facing the large windows was occupied by First Officer Syntron and Captain Kheren, now turning from the windows to face them and take his seat.

They were all familiar now with his habit of thinking in front of the large transparencies showing the vastness of space, as if the innumerable lights of the stars were as many muses that had inspired him so many times his unpredictable, unorthodox, sometimes even bewildering plans in the past; as if, in his mind, the stars themselves were part of his bridge crew.

Or maybe he did that just to calm himself down.



Even after all the adventures they had all shared over the years, very few even suspected the fiery passions that boiled deep within him behind this cold, stoic exterior he offered.

Tyvya knew; and not just because she also was Andorian. But she kept as quiet and professional as the rest of her shipmates, not even glancing at Syntron who alone knew about her own passions. She too was born of a people of fire from a world of ice; she too could bury desired passion under needed discipline as Kheren did... at least for now, while they had still problems to solve and duties to finish.

As he came out from his contemplation to sit with his officers, Captain Kheren immediately voiced both:

"People, we are left with an impulse ship five light years from where our duty now calls. Our part in the containment of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly is evidently severely compromised."

He made a pause to let everyone to also ascertain properly their situation. Then, looking intently at each one of them in turn, he said with a firm, determined voice:

"But, before we decide to send out a distress call and wait for a rescue, or proceed to return home and abandon our part in the operation, I want from you all to give me any other possible idea, however outlandish, to beat these odds and still do our duty. You have proven yourself time and again the best crew any ship and captain could ever count on. So, people... I want options."

Acting Chief Engineer Robert Baoule was first to talk.

"Captain; we have no warp core available, except for the small ones on our four remaining shuttlecrafts and on the bridge module. Even all together, their output is too negligible to substitute for our lost main core. Almost a day has passed since we set out and it would also take them almost five days at their maximum speed of warp 6 to reach our planned theater of operations; by then, if containment has not been completed, their presence would come too late anyway. Sir, if we are to contribute somehow in the effort against the anomaly, it must be in some other capacity."

"I am open to suggestions," repeated Kheren in an almost ironical tone.

Sitting in the meeting as the senior officers began assessing their present circumstances and their possible options, First Officer Syntron seized the moment and immediately spoke up.

"Captain, we must get back on course to the anomaly. With the Romulans imprudent attempts to destroy this phenomenon, they will instead most likely add the proverbial fuel to the fire, making it literally impossible for us to counteract their galactic faux pas."

He then added seriously and stoically:

"Our window of opportunity to successfully complete our mission is rapidly diminishing. We can't afford to expend much more time than we already have."

Leaving this troublesome thought dangling like some foreboding scythe above their heads, Syntron knew that the Captain was going to need another option. He spent his time before the meeting continuing to complete an analysis of the area and the resources immediately available to create another option. He was now ready to present his first idea.

"Captain, in regards to our overall plan to defuse the anomaly, our intent as previously discussed was to systematically impose the equivalency of hypothermia within the entity itself by strategically launching a series of carefully prepared trillithium probes throughout key areas of the anomaly. When simultaneously activated, the trillithium within these probes would theoretically react to reduce the extreme temperature within the anomaly which is required to maintain its high energy state of existence, down to the point of deionization; thus causing the anomaly's plasma-like power source to revert back down to an innocuous gaseous state of matter."

He then paused for a moment before proceeding to explain further.

"We still have ninety-five percent of our probe complement available here in the saucer section. Unfortunately, we lost our main trillithium supply when the main section of our ship collided and destroyed the Romulan vessel. This initially seemed to have ended our chances for implementing our strategy regarding the anomaly. However, I decided to intensely scan the region in a large radius around the collision site to see if there were any remnant traces of trillithium among the wreckage and debris."

Syntron gazed back down to confirm the data registered on his PADD while the meeting room remained as silent as a crypt.

Looking up he stated then:

"Captain, according to repeated scans, there is enough trillithium scattered throughout this area to fill all of all remaining probes with the requisite amount... with some amount to keep in reserves. However, we would need to immediately send out the remaining shuttle collectors to carefully harvest the residual particles strewn throughout the debris."

"With the few shuttles we have left, that would take a couple of hours at least," said Aguk Snow, "but it can be done."

"With the time needed to convert all our probes as trillithium emitters, we could be ready to implement their deployment in about five to six hours," added Irksos. "However, not all of them can go to warp and only a very few of them can go beyond warp 2. Considering also the distance and chances of drifting, malfunction, collisions and other hampering factors, natural or not so natural, launching them from here towards the anomaly is not a valid option."

"How about using torpedoes instead?" asked Doctor Nasaro-Myth. They can go at more than warp 9..."

"But their range is limited to less than five million kilometers before their micro warp engine burns out," retorted Tyvya. "However, they can be converted into class IX probes, even if only short range ones; with the few spare torpedo casings we have added to them, we could make our trillithium devices count go up to four-hundred and fifty-three."

"Adding some more hours to get ready," the acting chief of science said. "And this is only if the rest of the fleet finished containing the anomaly as planned; if not, any gap in the subspace trench would only serve as a funnel for the plasma to eject forcibly instead of dying out."

"Creating the most titanic, powerful plasma cannon in the universe... as the Klingons probably have in mind," Ops Chief Cheonghi reminded them with a shudder in his shrill voice.

They had almost forgotten that the Romulans were not by far the only opponents to their efforts to save two universes. And the rest of the fleet would have to deal with them as well. For a moment, they all had a thought for the Lotus, the Spectre, the McKenzie and the rest of the Lotus Fleet ships which, like the Alsea, could still be locked in mortal combat with all those shortsighted forces.

But, if the Artemis alone had prevailed against her own terrible opposition, they were then confident that all their colleagues and friends would also. Hope was the fuel of success after all.

Kheren listened to the exchange and kept silent for a moment before turning again to the Vulcan beside him.

"Assuming best conditions prevail and the anomaly has been successfully contained within its own subspace domain by the fleet as planned... would less than five-hundred of those... trillithium devices be enough to defuse the plasma reaction of a nine cubic light year anomaly?"

"Theoretically speaking" Syntron replied, "that should be more than sufficient to initiate the deionization process; that is, if we recalibrate the precise amount of trilithium in each device and then position these appropriately throughout the anomaly. However, as discussed, we will not be able to achieve our objective from our current location. We will be required to be positioned within close proximity to the anomaly to accurately place and simultaneously activate these devices in all the optimal locations."

Then Syntron was silent for a moment before he spoke again.

"I also have an idea about reducing our distance from the anomaly, Captain, but it is rather... unorthodox and potentially quite perilous."

"You mean, more perilous than letting a cosmic anomaly burn down this whole universe?" countered Elliago with a dry smirk.

Kheren shot a half-amused, half-reproachful glance at the chief medical officer.

"Risk is our business," he quoted from James T. Kirk himself.

"And judging by our last action back there, we're indeed quite in business..." shot back the Deltan, looking out at the stars outside as if he could see the debris field they had left in their wake.

The Andorian sent a telling look his way before turning again to his first officer.

"Let's hear it."

Following a brief pause after the Captain's prompt request, Syntron began to explain his proposal.

"As you all recognize, as a consequence of the saucer separation and the resulting collision of our stardrive section directly into our adversary, we did indeed cause the destruction of the Romulan vessel. However, the cost of this event was that we also sacrificed our drive section which obviously contained the ship's warp drive... in addition to the majority of the ship's weapons systems. Without our main propulsion available, we are now limited to mere impulse speeds."

Taking a brief moment to slightly shift himself in his seat, the first officer then continued with the same clinical tone.

"Therefore, we are also very limited in our current options as far as traveling to any chosen destination. In endeavoring to resolve this dilemma, I recognized that we needed to look beyond the availability of options within our ship. I then realized that our potential answer was positioned within range of our ship: the microsingularity that had powered the Romulan vessel is now a free floating singularity in space, since the encasing ship has been blown to bits. Therefore, it stands to reason that, theoretically, we could approach the perimeter of this singularity with the saucer section at our highest available impulse speed, then curve around the intense gravitational force. Now if we continue this process repeatedly, we should increase our momentum to eventually reach warp 1."

Syntron looked around swiftly to see if the bridge officers or the Captain signaled any overt perception that this plan was too reckless, but detected no such extreme indication. He did however note perhaps a few apprehensive expressions. Nevertheless, he proceeded on with his thought.

"From this point, we should then also be able to continue these increasing revolutions... building up our speed at the completion of each cycle until we ultimately reach the maximum warp factor we could sustain... perhaps warp 9.99. At this point, we would slingshot the saucer at this high warp velocity directly towards the anomaly. Mathematically, at warp 9.99 we would reach the perimeter of the anomaly in five point five hours and thus allow us the opportunity to implement the hypothermia procedure previously explained."

For the next moment, not a sound was heard. Then, Doctor Nasaro-Myth's voice broke the stunned silence, voicing everyone's thought.

"The slingshot maneuver? Wouldn't this send us into a timewarp?"

Valencia Irksos answered him as she shook her head.

"You need to already be at high warp to be accelerated by the gravitational pull beyond spacewarp and into a temporal warp. Here, we're not doing anything much different than using the gravitational forces of the singularity to accelerate until we break the light barrier. It's a space travel concept that was already theorized on Earth during the twentieth century, but it was forgotten once Zephrom Cochrane came up with his matter-antimatter warp drive."

Aguk Snow nodded in sudden understanding.

"Since a singularity is infinite gravity, we could do so if we angle ourselves just right to fall into it and at the last moment deviate out. Theoretically, if we repeat it enough time, looping around it again and again, we could indeed achieve any specific warp factor up to the warp barrier... maybe even up to timewarp even."

"Why don't we do just that then?" asked Elliago. "Go back in time before this whole mess began and fix it?"

"Temporal Prime Directive, Doctor," immediately reminded Kheren to him and everyone.

"Unless we have evidence that this anomaly is the result of a deliberate temporal alteration, it would be as immoral as potentially catastrophic to attempt any meddling in actual historical events... like the emergence of this anomaly. It is a fact of the here and now... so we have to deal with it here and now."

"Not to mention the shape we are in," then said Robert Baoule. "We're not in tip top shape to begin with. Flying close to a black hole, even as small as this one, angling to escape its attraction, will put enormous stress on our superstructure. And this plan calls not only for master flying precision up close and personal with it, but to repeat it many times. This thing might be a well of infinite gravitational energy like all singularities, but it is still a microscopic one; flying near enough of it without being caught and torn apart will also require masterful monitoring on sensors in perfect coordination with navigation."

Cheonghi's typical shrill and croaky Edoan voice added to the tension born of all the implications that were discussed:

"And then, even concentrating all available power to structural integrity field and shields, it will be quite a wild, bumpy ride, to say the least. One wrong trajectory calculation, one error in maneuvering at the wrong moment... and we will be fully part of that debris field out there."

"Like that stopped us before..." drily commented the Deltan doctor, glancing at his commanding officer.

Kheren exchanged another look with him before finally ordering:

"Mister Syntron; take charge of the trillithium harvesting and of the conversion of all probes and torpedoes immediately. We will have all those hours to get our comm back up again and see what help Starbase 10 can provide... and prepare for this... wild ride if we have no other choice left. Mister Baoule, Mister Cheonghi; work on bringing comm back online and to reinforce our structural integrity as much as possible. Mister Snow, you will prepare yourself in holodeck 1 for the cumulative slingshot maneuver until you can do it as easily as coming out of spacedock. Lieutenant Irksos will assist you and program all needed parameters. Lieutenant Tyvya, Doctor, prepare all safety measures to safeguard the crew for such a flight... and for any emergency scenario if it fails or leave us in a bad shape afterwards."

They all acknowledged silently their orders. In each of them, there was relief that they would methodically and wisely try to make contact and rejoin again the fleet to do their duty; but there was also excitement at possibly having to attempt that which had never been done before: gravitational hyperpropulsion and cosmic-scaled plasma deionisation.

Such was the mind and heart, the soul of a Starfleet officer.

Kheren rose to end the briefing with most famous words.

"Make it so."

\* \* \*

About a half hour later, Niomo nodded with approval with Warner and Thompson sitting in his office. They had come to a decision about what to do about their repairs, but protocol dictated that the Captain make the final approval.

"Lire to Oseno."

"Oseno Jureth's communicator is deactivated per order of Lieutenant Junior Grade Steele." bleeped the computer.

Niomo sighed and pressed the brow of his forehead with his fingers.

"Engineering to the Bridge. Anyone still awake up there?"

"Sir, Ensign Tomek here. What can I do for you?"

"I need the Captain. Is he still around? I couldn't contact him directly."

"Negative, Sir. Something we can help you with? Lieutenant Steele asked for some peace and quiet for the captain. He's been up for about a day now."

"Son, everyone in engineering has been up for three, myself a bit longer. Don't start with me on that. So unless you want the neolithium phased sublining of the suprafiring chamber coil to overheat, and us with it, I'll be needing the Captain...."

The other two engineers looked at Niomo, shocked. There was no such thing as a neolithium phased sublining of the suprafiring chamber coil. It was just pure gibberish. Hence, the group could almost hear the Ensign on the bridge mentally going through every technical manual he had studied and every Starfleet regulation for the situation.

"Err... I... err, understand, Sir. Err... I can contact him from here..."

"No need. Just give me a direct channel." Niomo flatly stated.

He was exhausted and there was little time for rest. His Italian frustration was clearly showing through.

"Aye, Sir. Authorization granted. Bridge out."

As the comm line closed, Warner was the first to speak up.

"Sir! That was a breech of at least four regulations, not to mention incredibly rude!"

Thompson only shook his head.

"Up to your old games again, boss? I thought your retirement would have made you more like Santa Claus. Jessica, you haven't been with Niomo for long. But I served with him on the Lotus as well. He's a sarcastic man, who easily becomes rude. But he's the best engineer we could ask for."

He shrugged in defeat.

"You learn to deal with it."

Niomo smiled.

"You are both right. However, if we want to deal with not burning out our EPS main, then we need to get these modifications approved. And we can't wait for Sleeping Beauty to wake up. That being said..."

"Lire to Oseno."

Jureth was dead asleep when the voice of the Alsea's chief engineer came over the ship's intercom system. His finely tuned security officer's reflexes caused him to sit bolt upright at the interruption and reach for the phaser that was sitting on his bedside table. When he realized that it was the intercom, he set the phaser down and responded.

"Oseno here, go ahead Commander."

"Morning sleepy head." Niomo started in a motherly voice. He quickly turned serious, "My team and I have determined that to maintain this speed, we need to make modifications to the EPS main in Cargobay 4. Keeping it simple: It will basically attach two dialysis machines to keep the main from blowing out on us. It's simple to make, but we are going to have to disconnect it from the entire system to make the final attachments. That part should take five minutes. But. That's five minutes without main power to the warp core. During that time, we'd like to shut down the main core and make some slap job repairs on our coolant lines. We won't have the hours needed to repair the whole line, nor do we think these minor repairs would make the pipe usable again. We just want to get some of the repair work started now while the core is offline anyway."

Niomo paused for a moment while he brought up the next idea.

"Speaking of the coolant lines, we determined that, besides shutting the main warp core down for hours and make delicate repairs to the line, the best thing we can do is reduce power from the main core and shunt it to Cores 2 and 3. That's what is putting the extra strain on the Primary EPS, if you were wondering. We'd also increase the flow of coolant to these cores...and hope that we don't lose another coolant line. They're designed to take the amount of warp core coolant we're sending, but designed and recommended are always two different numbers. Our workaround wouldn't increase power by a significant amount. We'd be able to hold 9.1 for seventeen hours. However, I would not recommend activating MVAM until we can repair that line. The primary section would be dead in the water. Those are our recommendations. Orders, Sir?"

Jureth could only shake his head at what Niomo was telling him. Like all Starfleet officers, he'd taken a basic engineering class at the academy, but that had been cursory at best.

"I took basic engineering just like any other officer, Lieutenant Commander, but I apparently need a refresher. Bottom line; with the primary core offline, what is the impact on our current course and speed? Can the other two cores sustain us while you effect the needed repairs, or do I need to take us out of warp? I don't like the idea of being without MVAM, but we can hold our own as a single unit as well. And finally, what is the overall impact of our core status on our capabilities for Operation Horizon? I apologize if I sound uninformed, but I haven't been around a warp core since the academy, let alone something as sophisticated as our engines."

Niomo rubbed his brow as he pointed to motioned to Warner to respond.

"S-Sir," she responded, "I think it would be best to drop out of warp for forty-five minutes. That includes shut down and start up times for the core. It is possible that both cores could sustain us and we could keep flying...But there is also the chance that there isn't enough coolant flowing to both cores to maintain warp 9 and we would have a cascade failure and blow up. If we slow to warp 1 or 2, it might still be safe...B-But I think it's best to just stop and let the repairs go. It's only forty-five minutes, right?"

Niomo cut in as she finished.

"As for our course and speed, once the repairs I suggested are complete, we will be able to maintain warp 9.1 for seventeen hours, Warp 9.15 for seven and Warp 9.2 for four. I don't recall the Fleet Captain telling us how long we'd need to spin in a circle, but I'd guess we'd still make our target time. That's where we stand, Sir."

"That's all I needed to hear. Repairs approved Commander. I will have the helm stop us shortly. Oseno out."

Jureth closed the intercom channel, threw back the sheets on the bed, and got up. He put on a fresh uniform, strapped on his holster and phaser; he was still a security officer after all. He made his way up to the Alsea's bridge. As he entered, the Vulcan ops officer, Tomek, turned his head to face the acting commander of the Alsea.

"Sir, we did not expect to see you for awhile."

"Change of plans, Ensign."

"Sir, I should tell you that Lieutenant Steele indicated that, if you showed up on the bridge, I was to 'throw you out'"

Oseno smiled slightly.

"Well, Lieutenant Steele is not in command now, is she?"

"No, Sir."

"Just checking," Jureth replied. "I have the conn Mister Tomek."

"Aye, Sir."

He nodded as Tomek stepped aside and moved to one of the auxiliary bridge stations. The Bajoran then stepped in front of the command chair and addressed the helm.

"Helm, take us out of warp, and resume course on full impulse."

"Aye Sir, dropping out of warp."

The pinpoints streaking by on the Alsea's viewer shrunk until they looked like regular stars again, and Jureth opened the intercom.

"Bridge to engineering; she's all yours, Commander. Let me know when you are ready to resume warp speed."

Closing the intercom, the acting captain of the Alsea turned to tactical where gamma shift's duty officer Garth Allen was at the console.

"Mister Allen, yellow alert, shields up. We know there are at least two hostile factions left out there and I don't want to be caught in an ambush."

"Aye Sir, shields up."

"Do we have any data from our probe yet?"

"Yes Sir," Allen replied "the probe arrived on station a short time ago. I'm not a scientist, Sir, but the probe is reporting multiple subspace disturbances in the area as well as a significant amount of debris. Its internal diagnostics are indicating sensor interference from the subspace disturbances, and that it may change course to alleviate that."

"Very well, let me know if it comes across anything significant such as life pods or a Federation transponder signal, and funnel the probe data to Captain Onia on the Wisconsin as well."

"Aye, Sir."

Before Oseno sat down in the chair, he issued one final order.

"Ops, send a message to Starbase 10 informing them we've dropped out of warp to make repairs to our primary warp core."

"Aye, Sir," replied the ops officer whose name Oseno didn't know.

Jureth watched as the bridge crew worked and realized that, without even knowing it, he was acting like a captain. He was giving orders and having them carried out and the people carrying them out trusted him to guide them through the remainder of the crisis involving the Azimuth Horizon. As a security officer and tactical specialist, Oseno Jureth was supremely confident in his abilities; but as a ship captain, he wasn't nearly as sure.

He could only hope that the Prophets would smile on one of their sons so far from home.

In Engineering, Niomo called out to the engineers he put in place before the Alsea slowed.

"Alright! Cut power!"

"Warp core deactivation sequence initiated," the computer bleeped, confirming the nods he saw from the crewmen he ordered to watch the power levels.

Niomo watched as he saw the blue-white color started to fade from the warp core's tube as it turned a dull blackish-blue.

Thompson checked in first.

"EPS Mains are clear. We are starting our repairs and modifications. The EPS must have been shunting more power than we estimated. It's a mess in here. I'm going to need some extra time to make sure we have everything clean."

Niomo frowned.

"Very well, Lieutenant. Take your time. I don't want to become a marshmallow."

He closed the channel and spoke again.



"Warner, status."

A male Vulcan voice spoke up.

"Sir, this is Sparbok. Ensign Warner is currently in the middle of removing the buffer between the pipe and the coolant line. She has requested... silence."

"Very well. Notify me when she is finished."

Niomo could only laugh as the comm closed. With a smile he looked down at the diagnostic that was running on the warp cores. Units 2 and 3 were holding the power fairly well, though he had not taken a yellow alert into consideration. The extra power being drained by the shields was starting to push the system into the red.

"Someone increase the flow of coolant into core 3 by seventy-five percent. Initiate the flood gate system. Deploy a Level 10 force field around the impulse engine drives and start running them off of that. Lock power drain from all non-essential systems to eighty percent. Any reserve power that starts building up is classified as restricted to engineering and warp core integrity."

A call came out above him.

"Sir. Core 3's numbers have return to nominal. Matter-Antimatter reaction is holding. Wait... now Core 2's readings are starting to fluctuate. There isn't enough coolant getting to both cores. You'd think they would have built her to handle this kind of operation!"

"Stow it crewman," Niomo quickly responded. "Reduce Core 2's intermix ratio from twenty five to one to thirty-five to one. That should reduce the amount of coolant needed."

He sighed quietly.

"Computer, run a level 4 diagnostic on the Warp Core coolant tube lines."

The computer bleeped in response as his assistant above him responded.

"Negligible impact on the core, sir. It's still not getting enough coolant."

Niomo cursed.

Moments later, the computer responded,

"There are multiple stress fractures at locations leading to warp core number 2. There are locations of complete blockage to primary warp core. Manual override of coolant flow from Engineering. Recommended repairs, increase coolant flow to warp core 2 to compensate for reduced total flow, shut down warp core to perform repairs."

"Yeah, yeah I know."

Niomo looked up at the warp core. Sometimes, he did not believe that a simple tube could destroy an entire ship.

"Alright people, you heard the lady. Increase core 2's coolant levels by forty-five percent... Keep the intermix ratio where I set it..."

He pulled up the system read out on his console.

"Ok, Ok. She's coming back down to Earth. For now. Until we can get the primary core online, let core 3 take the brunt of the power requirements. 2's being too temperamental to be required for any heavy drain."

He activated his comm and asked for Thompson.

"How are you doing on your end?"

"We are pretty much done here, Sir. Took a few minutes longer than expected... but the dialysis machines are in place and have been tested. They'll support the EPS systems. We're just waiting for the OK to reactivate the Main and see if she works for real."

"Very well. I had some trouble on my end. When you'll come back, we'll look into it in more detail. I hope you like jefferies tubes." Niomo joked, ending the call and starting a new one. "Lire to Sparbok. Has Warner killed you yet?"

Sparbok responded as only a Vulcan could.

"This is hardly the time for jokes, Sir. I belie..."

"My team is all done, Sir. These patches should help the coolant at least trickle into the pricore." Warner said, cutting Sparbok off. "We are returning to Engineering now."

"Negative, Warner. I need you and your team to look at the coolant leads for Core 2. Computer's telling me there's some stress fractures. Must have been from our fight. She isn't accepting as much coolant as she should be. Wear some gear, it might be cold in there."

Niomo could hear Jessica sigh. He knew he was pushing his entire staff beyond their limits, but these repairs had to be completed.

"I know how you feel, Jessica. Just a few more hours." he said, trying to sound more sympathetic than exhausted.

"Aye, Sir. On my way. Warner out."

Finally, Niomo contacted the bridge.

"Lire to Jureth. We have finished most of our repair work. We are currently snooping out a final problem which has just popped up. We'll need to stay at low impulse for another ten minutes. The lights haven't gone out up there, have they?"

Moments before Lire's voice rang out over the intercom, the bridge lights flickered for only a second before returning to full power. Jureth wondered just what exactly was going on down in engineering until he heard the commander's voice.

"Not exactly Commander though we did have a flicker a second ago. I will have the helm dial back the impulse engines. Can I do anything else to help alleviate any of your issues?"

Shawn Hunter, back at the helm after several hours rest, heard the conversation the acting CO of the Alsea was having with engineering and immediately slowed the ship to one quarter impulse without needing being ordered to.

Niomo sighed.

"Honestly Oseno, taking down shields, going to full stop and cutting power to everything that isn't environmental controls would be a big help. But if any of that wouldn't make us vulnerable, I would have already done it myself."

Jureth could hear the frustration in the engineer's voice. He hadn't realized that the Alsea had sustained that much damage during their fight with the Romulans. Turning the ship dark would indeed make them vulnerable, despite the fact that they were in Federation territory; but at the same time, Jureth knew the Alsea needed to be able to fully participate in the coming containment operation. Oseno realized this was the type of decision that a captain had to make, and he also realized that the decision was his and his alone.

"Mister Allen," he said addressing the current tactical officer; "Anything on sensors?"

"No Sir, no contacts at this time."

Jureth stroked his chin in thought, and finally made up his mind.

"Mister Hunter, all stop."

"Helm answering all stop, Sir," Hunter replied

"Mister Allen, cancel yellow alert. Take our shields and weapons offline."

"Aye, Sir."

"Mister Tomek, cut power to all non-essential systems, but leave me reserve power to sensors, internal communications, weapons, and shields in case I need them."

"Aye, Sir," Tomek responded and, as his fingers manipulated the auxiliary console, the Alsea began to go dark.

"Okay, Lieutenant Commander," Jureth finally said to Niomo; "I've done everything I can from up here. Get us back up and going as soon as possible."

"Affirmative, Captain."

Niomo was silent for a few moments. He had not expected the Tactical minded captain to go against his expected programming and leave the ship mostly defenseless. Fianlly turning to his staff, he then shouted:

"Alright, the Captain has graced us with some reduced power drain. Let's get our work done and get on our way!"

He saw Brenes running over to him with a PADD in his hand.

"Sir, here are the new power readouts."

Niomo took the PADD and smiled. With the reduced strain from the shields and other non-essential systems, core 2 was well back within parameters.

"Excellent. Return the core to standard settings. She should be alright."

Brenes nodded and moved away to make the adjustments, leaving Niomo to silently reflect the repairs that had been done.

Thompson walked in moments later, a inquisitive look on his face.

"Alright, boss. What's going on? We should have finished by now."

Niomo turned to him and shook his head.

"A diagnostic brought out some stress fractures on some of the coolant lines going to core 2. We could probably apply patches while the ship was at full speed, but why risk it?"

"So the pipes themselves are flowing fine, but they could break? Hmm..." Thompson asked, rhetorically.

Niomo ignored the question, and instead questioned him about his prior task.

"How did the dialysis machine go? We all set?"

The junior officer tapped on the PADD he was still holding and brought up the system readout on the EPS mains, which looked ready to be powered back up.

"We should be good to go, Sir. Just have to flip the big switch." he responded, motioning to the warp core.

As if on cue, Warner called in.

"Commander, we've located the fractures. The repairs are very basic and shouldn't take much longer. We can power up the pricore whenever, I guess."

Niomo frowned. He had no problem with officers being relaxed around him, but guesses were not acceptable.

"Where were the fractures? Chance of them opening up?"

"Uh... ports Alpha Charlie and Gamma had some cracks. Oddly enough, the holding bracket leading to the core was also misaligned. I've tasked someone to find the part and replace it. Assuming we don't get into another firefight within the next ten minutes, we should be fine. It's strange though, these fractures don't seem like they were from the battle. But I've been stationed here for months. We've never detected them before..."

"Strange indeed. I'll note it in the log. I'll be started the warp core back up in three minutes." Niomo interrupted.

He had to smile. Warner seemed to either stutter her way through a conversation, or she never stopped talking.

True to his word, three minutes later, he initiated the warp core start-up procedures. The computer beeped in acknowledgement, and like watching the previous scene in reverse, the warp core started glowing it's classic blue-white again, dimly at first but steadily growing until it would be fully pulsating within half an hour.

"Thompson?..." Niomo said, glancing over his shoulder.

"Dialysis initiated, and working as planned. We have no problems shunting the extra power through that main. We are good to go."

Niomo nodded without responding, he was too busy monitoring the warp core's coolant lines. "OK, it looks like we have a fifteen percent increase to coolant flow. Core 2 is running fine, no further signs of fracture. All other repairs have been complete....Ok. This will have to do for now."

Tapping his combadge thirty minutes later, he reported this to his staff.

"Alright everyone, good work. Skeleton crew Gamma is on call. Everyone else is on rest until we are needed."

Turning to Thompson and Warner, he smiled.

"Excellent work you two. You deserve your rest."

The two officers thanked him and the group went their separate ways.

"Niomo to the bridge. Warp speed is back online. Locked in at Warp 9.2 maximum. If you need me, I'll be in my quarters."

"Understood Commander, get some rest... And, Commander... good work. Bridge out."

As Jureth closed the link, the main lights on the bridge came back on and auxiliary consoles resumed their readouts. Jureth looked to Tomek, who nodded.

"All systems are coming back online, Sir."

"Thank you, Ensign," Jureth replied. "Mister Hunter, resume course to our containment station... warp 8."

"Aye, Sir."

The Alsea lit back up on the outside as well and, at Shawn Hunter's command, shot back into warp.

As the powerful warship finally resumed its journey towards her assigned theater of operations, Niomo Lire walked into his quarters and slumped into his seat. He was exhausted, but it was not time for rest just yet.

"Computer, record Personal Log Alpha 4-B."

The computer beeped in response and silently began recording.

### **Chief Engineer's log.**

**Stardate: Hell if I know.**

**It's been some time since I've worked for days straight. I can't believe I ever let it go. My staff is top notch, and I was lucky to be placed with one of my old crewman from the Lotus. More importantly, we survived two Romulan incursions...although not without getting dinged up...Including the Captain. I hear she's down for the count. I was ordered back into The Chair during the fight. I missed that too, but I doubt I could ever do it again. Anyways. The primary hull took a hit from the Horizon's tendril and lost a lot of power. Which is unfortunate, since it houses the primary warp core. We were able to jury rig some repairs but, speaking candidly, they won't last more than two days before we have to redo the work. I haven't told the acting captain that...just yet.**

He stretched and removed the top of his uniform.

"Computer, pause."

After a quick trip to the sonic shower and a refresher, he returned to his seat.

"Continue."

**More importantly, we discovered stress fractures on core 2's coolant pipes. I won't shout sabotage at the top of my lungs....but I'm already starting to sniff around. I'm already having the computer go through sensor logs of that area since the Alsea returned to Starbase 10 and I took over. It could be a case of poor engineering from my predecessor, as improbable as it may be... or we could have a problem. I believe I heard our now current captain mention that they had removed saboteurs from the ship before launching, but I doubt it possible they removed all of them. I've already erected level 10 forcefields with my clearance codes around the impulse engines. I'm thinking of doing the same around the warp cores and jefferies tubes access ports. We have the second largest engineering staff in the fleet due to our three warp cores. But I'd hate for tactical to have missed something...**

He stretched one final time.

"Computer, end recording, save. Lock Niomo Romeo Delta 4."

The computer bleeped in acknowledgement. Niomo stood went to his bed and collapsed into an immediate deep sleep.

\* \* \*

Once again, the crew of the Artemis was going to push the limits of their technology, of their wits and of their courage in an attempt to outmaneuver the grave circumstances they were once again facing.

Ironically, for Lieutenant Commander Syntron's perspective at least, this now seemed to be a routine expectation from this ship and this crew.

Syntron grabbed his PADD and headed out of the main conference room and back onto the main bridge. They would need to prepare these shuttles quickly to begin the harvesting procedure. Navigating these shuttles through a debris field while a powerful singularity nearby dangerously tugs at these small vessels while they strive to remain on course to gather the scattered residual trilithium... this was not going to be an easy task by any means.

As he headed toward the turbolift, Syntron engaged his combadge.

"Ensign Sheeneea, meet me in shuttle bay 1. I am going to need you to pilot my shuttle on our upcoming harvesting mission. Notify the remaining pilots that we are going to need additional experienced and highly skilled shuttle pilots for this endeavor. I will provide you with additional details upon my arrival."

"acknowledged," answered the clear voice of the Andorian navigator. "Chief Cheonghi is already sending requisitions of personnel and flight preparation orders for all our shuttles. I'll be waiting for you on board Arrow 1, Sir."

The first officer entered the turbolift and directed it down to Shuttlebay 1 on deck 6. Arriving into the shuttle bay, Syntron walked among the bustling activity as the crew members for each shuttle and the flight control group were hustling around to prepare each shuttle for their harvesting mission. The first officer then espied Ensign Sheeneea gesturing a wave from the doorway of Arrow 1.

"Greetings Ensign Sheeneea, what is the status of departure?" Syntron inquired as he arrived at his designated shuttle.

"Ensign S'Kyn confirms our departure readiness in ten minutes, Sir," the Andorian pilot answered.

Her pale blue skin and forward antennae revealed her to be from the more familiar Bishee subspecies of her icy world rather than the rarer Thallassan type of darker, side-rear-mounted cranial appendages of their commanding officer or acting tactical chief. Although far from being anywhere near the giant size of Tyvya, she was still almost as tall and willowy as the Vulcan first officer, as was usual for females of her kind.

They both slid into the small, narrow two-seat cockpit of the long range stealth shuttle from which they would lead the operation with its superior sensor capabilities. With the help of Arrow 2, the other class X shuttle, they would better triangulate sensor scans to amplify detection of the faint particles they were after.

"The conversion of all our bussard collectors to filter in trillithium will be ready by that time," she then confirmed him while doing all pre-flight checks along with the strict security procedures now imposed on every ship operation.

"Noted Ensign" Syntron replied.

He engaged his PAAD as the team of shuttle crews prepared for their mission. He began calculating parameters involving the distance of the scattered particles compared to the gravitational force of the singularity. He noted that a significant portion of the trilithium particles were now in closer proximity of the phenomena than previously registered and they were increasingly being pulled toward the vortex of this singularity. They would need to scoop up these particles first. However, this placed them dangerously close to the powerful influence of its gravitational pull. The escape velocity of these small shuttles would be quite limited compared to the mass and power of a starship. Therefore Syntron was creating a minimal threshold proximity distance for each shuttle to adhere to so that they wouldn't be pulled into its formidable whirlpool and crushed.

After he completed his parameters for each shuttle, he sent the information to Captain Kheren, Chief Cheonghi and to each shuttle pilot. He noted that there was no margin for error in this mission in terms of lives, shuttles or acquired trilithium. According to his calculations, any further delay or mishaps would jeopardize their ability to gather enough trilithium to fill the required minimal levels of this key ingredient within each probe.

Checking the time, Syntron noted there was three minutes and twenty-seven seconds left until shuttle departure. It would now be up to the shuttle manager and the pilots to use the information provided to map out their overall flight pattern among each of these shuttles to maximize their procedure within this limited opportunity yet follow the lead of the first officer and his skilled pilot the Andorian Sheeneea as the forerunners of this mission.

When time was up, Ensign Sheeneea showed the first officer of the Artemis the flight plan defined by on-duty chief flight officer S'Kyn.

"Sir, we face two difficulties in our operation. The first one is the fact that the greatest percentage of particles to be harvested has already moved nearer to the singularity. But Chief S'Kyn agrees we can solve this with skimming the gravity well."

The Vulcan's raised eyebrow told the Andorian woman that he was not familiar with the nav term and so she explained:

"It's an old orbital flight maneuver dating back to the earliest use of artificial satellites. By accelerating at a certain angle to a gravitational mass, you can effectively rebound on it at a certain point each time it pulls at your own mass; somewhat the reverse of the slingshot maneuver which drops toward the gravity source instead of away from it. This way, we can "buzz" around the event horizon like bees on Earth do around a flower to collect our "pollen" with minimal stress on our structure and systems."

Her tone became more worried.

"The second problem is more challenging for our pilots. All this time, we will have to navigate within a debris field. Calculating the movement of the debris is not that hard for the ship's main computer which then can relay flight correction data to each shuttle. The problem is that this field, instead of expanding like it should normally from an explosion, or even stay stable like a natural field, is instead shrinking under the pull of the singularity in its center. In other words, the more time we will spend in there, the harder it will be to maneuver. And shields, being graviton-based, will not be available, as it would react to the singularity and throw us into it like a stone in a well."

They were now both seated in the small cockpit of their command shuttle, all waiting for him to order them out... and lead them through duty and danger towards success. They all knew what they were expected of and what they were about to face; they all hoped that he, the first officer and leader of their away mission, would now know how to do it.

Looking stoically at the pale blue Andorian female piloting Arrow 1, the Vulcan first officer commanded:

"Ensign Sheeneea, the word is given. Move us out and into position for this operation."

"Aye, Sir," she answered, her fingers already running over the flight console while sensor and engineering controls lighted up before Syntron as she spoke out into the comm: "Artemis, this is Arrow 1; we are ready to proceed."

The voice of Captain Kheren answered her.

"Arrow 1, you and your squadron are free to proceed. Good harvest, Number One."

"Acknowledged, Captain Kheren" Syntron responded as he then reached over and switched to an audio two-way channel rigged up specifically among the shuttles. "All shuttles prepare to initiate launch... commence with the launch sequence... on my mark."

The first officer took one last glance around the shuttlebay and then witnessed the immense bay doors parting from the center.

Upon completing the final opening sequence of the bay doors and noting the view of open space leading out among the stars, he announced:

"Initiate launch succession ...now."

One behind the other, the remaining auxilliary crafts of what was left of the starship Artemis exited the primary shuttlebay at the back of the saucer-shaped remain of the once two-hulled starship. The bullet-shaped class X stealth shuttles went out, then the more familiar boxy-shaped class VIII shuttlecraft emerged, followed by the largest and newest of them all, the sleek class XI shuttlecraft, proven successor to the old runabouts of the late 24th century.

The four small vessels went to full impulse towards the globular mass of debris slowly but surely swirling like flotsam drawn to a sinkhole, towards an invisible center of gravity pulling at them with the weakest of all the four forces of the universe; yet, the only one amplifying with mass... and now exerted a mass collapsed into infinity. A bottomless hole where even light would never escape.

"Cruising at full impulse, all sensors nominal," reported all shuttles to Sheeneea in the squadron lead craft, and she adding her own to their commander. "Distance with debris field is six million kilometers; ETA with periphery of the blast zone is one minute and twenty seconds present speed. Debris field is eight hundred thousand kilometers in radius and shrinking at one kilometer per second. Dispersed mass and nature of debris consistent with that of a collision between a Starfleet vessel of large size and a Romulan vessel of more than five times the mass of the other ship. Expansion of debris field from the initial blast has now stopped and is in a process of contraction due to the nearby attraction of a singularity in it's exact center. Singularity's nature, size and emissions consistent with known power source of Romulan propulsion systems, albeit much larger than usually known. "

Looking at her navigation sensor, the Andorian pilot then added:

"Sir, the field's increasing density will make piloting hazardous within it if we still want to collect the thrilithium particles nearest to the singularity."

"Acknowledged, Ensign," Syntron responded as he studied the data updated on the shuttlecraft sensors and initiated a comparative analysis on his PADD.



He could see the shift that was occurring in the debris field as it continued moving in closer proximity to the singularity. They would need to move swiftly.

Looking intently at the capable pilot, the first officer said in his usual clinical tone most characteristic to his Vulcan heritage:

"You are familiar with the parameters of this vessel in terms of propulsion, maneuverability, agility, and hull durability, Ensign. Logic dictates that it would be counterproductive for us to end this mission by having this craft and passengers pulled into this singularity. Therefore, if we use the pull of this singularity to our advantage and remain outside of the approximated Roche limit of the gravimetric forces, we should be able have this phenomenon assist us in coalescing the trilithium into a tighter range than these particles are presently located. The negative aspect of this occurrence that has been pointed out is that it will also funnel in larger aspects of debris from the destroyed ships. Therefore we will be cognizant of both conditions simultaneously."

As they were less than a minute from the collection zone, Syntron switched on the two-way audio channel and announced:

"Shuttle pilots, we shall make our first pass in a diagonal formation. Our vessel Arrow 1 will be the one in closest proximity to the singularity. Do not navigate beyond this threshold. The gravimetric forces are much too powerful. Have weapons ready for any larger unavoidable objects that appear in your path and are deemed hazardous. However first notify all pilots if phasers are to be engaged so that the remaining pilots can adjust their course accordingly. Collectors should be set to maximum intake. We will analyze and compare our results at the conclusion of this first run."

As they began entering the perimeter of the debris field Syntron ordered;

"Engage particle collectors."

The four small crafts entered the slow moving dance of twisted, burned and torn metallic debris, going against the current yet nearer the center of the swirl, dodging the biggest ones, letting the smallest ones bounce on their deflector field and sending warning hails and phaser shots to obliterate the most threatening ones flying in their paths. The tapered front end of their nacelles glowered from red to blue as the filters installed accumulated trilithium in their currently unused warp engines thus allowing fast and efficient collecting of the dangerous residue without clogging their systems.

As they flew in, the quartet of ships angled themselves towards the center of the whole field where readings of the desired particles were highest; and where the concentration of debris was also densest and moving faster than everywhere else.

"Sir, Sheeneea then said to the Artemis first officer seated besides her, I think I have an idea how to bring the odds more in favor. If both us and Arrow 2 fire our torpedoes at the debris closest to the singularity, we should not only clear our path but the residual photons should highlight the accretion disk of the singularity... and help us better navigate near it."

She was no scientist but she knew enough about basic cosmic phenomena, photons and physics to think her idea plausible. Fortunately, the officer beside her and leading the whole expedition was the former chief science officer of their ship; if anyone could tell her if she was right or wrong, it was him.

Syntron looked away from the readings on the shuttle sensors for a moment as he gazed at the lightly blue-skinned pilot and contemplated her suggestion.

"Admirable suggestion Ensign. A quick and effective adaptation during a critical mission is indicative of a competent crewman."

Whether she recognized it or not, this was equivalent to high praise coming from the Vulcan science officer.

"Indeed," he continued, "this could eliminate upcoming large debris from our path while providing a visual cue to those following in our wake. Let's swing around Ensign, and prepare to make another pass while implementing this procedure. But first, notify your counterpart on Arrow 2 along with the other two shuttles of our modified intent."

The first officer then looked down and continued analyzing the current sensor readings.

Suddenly, there was a blinking flash from the cockpit transparency and the whole shuttle vibrated around them. Before the Vulcan could even say 'report,' Ensign Sheeneea said in a suddenly alarmed tone:

"That came from where Arrow 3..."

Immediately, the cockpit speakers confirmed her fears.

"Mayday! May... Kxzzzt! This kzzzzt! Arrow 3! Kzzzzt! torpedo kzzzzzt! detonated kzzzzt! intact plasma warhead hidkzzzt... in debris fiel... kxzzzzt! Lost main power, hull breach... kxzzzzt! Kzzzzzt! life sup... kxzzzzzt! fail... kxzzzzt! Ensign...kxzzzzzt! Kxzzzzt! injured! Kxzzzzzt!...day! May...kxzzzzt! Kxzzzzt!"

On sensors as well as through their portside porthole, they could indeed see the flaming, blackened form of the class VIII shuttle in distress, silhouetted against a glowing, fiery plasma flare.

And it was quickly and steadily swelling towards them.

"Ensign!" Syntron exclaimed; "full evasive!"

He then immediately engaged the shuttle audio channel.

"All shuttlecrafts, immediately disperse away from Arrow 3! Arrow 8, get those people out!"

He knew full well that the advanced type 11 shuttle was the only one among them that housed a two-person transporter and a large aft compartment. It just hoped they could save the crew of the doomed shuttle without falling to the same grim fate. But, although it had merely fifteen thousand kilometers in range, it was more than enough for the largest craft in the squadron to grab the signal of the two injured crewmen and whisk them away just before the plasma deflagration caught up with the damaged shuttle.

The Vulcan commander then opened a channel to the ship.

"Artemis, we have an emergency aboard Arrow 3. Master Chief Petty Officer Olsen in Arrow 8 should be attempting to transport out the crew to their shuttle, but ready your transporters in case they are unsuccessful. Afterward If possible, attempt to beam over the bussard collectors with the gathered trilitium into a secure area on the cargo bay, or at least off of the shuttle."

As he said so, he then saw the second detonation that highlighted the complete destruction of the class VIII shuttlecraft and it flared amidst the plasma fire that was still expanding towards them. The craft was utterly lost but, thanks to the prompt and effective reactions of the first officer of the Artemis, the crew had been saved and they sped swiftly away from the limited range of the plasma warhead. Its last aftershock shook and rattled them as it died out, but there was no significant damage beyond the paint on their hull.

"Sirr! We got themm!" roared Ensign Mirrex in typical Caitan glee. "Crewmman Denail has only superficial burrrns but Ensign Nerroth is in a bad shape."

There was no answer from the Artemis. Obviously, communications were still down and under repair.

On the bridge of the ship, everyone however had followed on sensors the chain of events, up to the rescue beam out and the escape of the squadron from the blast radius.

There was little chance of another intact warhead left amidst the debris field but, following events in his own CMO command chair, Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth trusted that the Vulcan first officer and his team now would erre on the side of caution. It was certainly wiser, especially since at this point, they only had three shuttles left to gather the precious particles on which their next involvement in Operation Horizon relied on. And with only one of them with a transporter, they could not risk another stunt like the last one.

The musings of the Deltan chief medical officer were interrupted by the voice of Ensign Norbert Baoule at the science station. The twin brother of the chief engineer was filling in for Lieutenant Iksos while she worked with chief helmsman Aguk Snow on their planned flight stunt around a singularity. Although he had a regulation haircut instead of the shaven head of his brother, the resemblance between them, in features and in tone of voice, was uncanny. His science blue collar did help also to distinguish them.

"Sir... short range sensors are detecting at extreme range an object coming on an intercept course at warp 9, bearing 275 mark 12. Straight from the direction where lies the Azimuth Horizon. Even at this distance, interference from te anomaly makes reading difficult."

"Yellow alert," Kheren said, keeping his relaxed posture in his large command chair but darting all four oculars at the main viewer with obvious alertness. "Stay with it Ensign. Lieutenant Tyvya, track it too with tactical sensor and get ready to lock phasers at the first sign of hostility. With our comm still down, we'll have to play safe."

Whatever that object was, it clearly knew where to find them. And an intercept course was not a positively friendly approach. The Andorian, following Starfleet rules of engagement, restrained himself from taking a potentially aggressive posture that could precipitate a conflict unless there was clear and immediate danger. But there were three shuttles out there, much more vulnerable than even what was left of his ship.

He kept the ship at yellow alert; but his mind was already under condition red.

Narrowly escaping the intense detonation along with the resultant shockwave and having received no reply from the Artemis, Syntron addressed what remained of his squadron.

"Arrow 8, return immediately to the Artemis with our injured crewmates. Arrow 2, rendezvous with us outside of this zone... back near the Artemis to determine what our next move will be."

With Arrow 3 destroyed, the ability of Arrows 1, 2, and eventually 8 to collect enough trilitium in the given timeframe and their current circumstances had just neared all the more the threshold into relative improbability. The mind of the Vulcan first officer and chief scientist was now working overtime and at full capacity trying to avoid this consequence at all cost.

*There has to be another option or opportunity for resolution* he contemplated intensely as their shuttle now brought them back on course toward the remainder of the Artemis.

"Sir... the shuttles are moving to the debris field rim. Arrow 8 is heading straight for us at full impulse."

"What's going on out there?" wondered Kheren outloud. "Status of the shuttles?"

"All undamaged and apparently fully functional, Sir," reported Tyvya from her tactical sensor readouts.

"No comm still?"

"Not yet, Captain," ops chief Cheonghi said with a shake of his bald, red head mimicking that of the Deltan doctor manning all communications. "Damage was external so we still need a few hours to completely replace, recalibrate and test a new external comm system."

"Arrow 8 is coming about," announced helmsman S'Kyn with Vulcan clinical tones. "They are sending a navigational landing signal to our nav sensors."

"Bring them in," ordered the Andorian commanding officer of the Artemis. "Get a report from them about current mission status."

"What about the others?" asked Elliago. "With comm channels offline..."

"Time to go low tech," shot back Kheren.

A moment later, the occupants of the shuttles could see the navigational lights of the Artemis saucer section flicker rhythmically on and off in a definite pattern Ensign Sheeneea immediately recognized.

"Mister Syntron; the Artemis is hailing us for a report with nav lights. Morse code, Sir."

With a slightly raised eyebrow.

"Intriguing."

He then looked intently at the Andorian pilot and ordered:

"Signal back to them Ensign. Let them know that Arrow 1 and 2 are heading back toward the ship... and inquire about the status of our crew members from Arrow 3."

A moment later, Captain Kheren had the whole picture and issued orders through the improvised communication system now working between him and his first officer.

"Ensign Neloth and crewman Deral taken care of. Arrow 8 on its way back to you. Keep spectral sensor contact to maintain comlink. resume mission."

After the signal was received from the Artemis saucer and decoded on the shuttle, they were instructed to continue the harvesting mission.

Syntron redirected the three remaining shuttlecrafts to turn around. As they approached the perimeter of the rubble, he reconfigured the vessels back into an efficient sweeping pattern toward the debris field.

The loss of a shuttle was annoying as it would slow down their harvesting of the trilitium particles they needed; but with still several days before Operation Horizon would be completed, it was just a minor setback. And it just gave them more time for repairs. They were not going anywhere soon.

For a moment, the Andorian captain toyed with the idea of establishing a faster, more effective albeit still antiquated lasercom link with Arrow 1, like they had also used with the navlight trick during the Borg war when the Collective were jamming all channels back then. But now, he realized their flight through a condensing debris field would constantly interrupt the beam that had to be kept between them to work. Morse code through nav lights was less dependent on such a constant link, even if it still required visual contact; but he knew how to improve that.

"Ensign S'Kyn; angle us perpendicular to the debris field and establish synchronous orbit around it with the squadron movements inside."

The saucer section of the Artemis turned on its axis to continue flying around the field on its rim from the shuttles' perspective, like an old American silver dollar rolling around on a table, fully showing all the lights at the edge of its three hundred and twenty-two meters of diameter.

"Lieutenant Tyvya; send a class III probe in the field to look for any other possible floating hazard. Have it map and identify thoroughly each and every piece of junk out there and transmit the data to the shuttles. I want no more surprise package while they work in there."

A moment later, the small device was ejected from their only working torpedo tube left and flew all around and inside the debris field. Protected by its own deflector array and structural integrity field from both occasional collisions and the distant effect of the microsingularity, it immediately started sending data to Syntron's command shuttle. It would eventually spiral down the gravity well like the rest of the debris despite its own impulse engine, but by that time, it would have scanned each and every object and particle within the area.

With the loss of Arrow 3, the workload of the away mission and their number of sweeps increased, yet they were slowly building up their collection of trilithium with each passage. All three shuttles were now working their maneuvers further away from the singularity than when they first started, and continued a gradual increase in distance with each passage.

Checking the levels of trilithium collected on all the vessels, the first officer of the Artemis calculated that they had procured a total of sixty-seven point fourteen percent thus far after an additional two point seventy-nine hours of harvesting. The skills of the pilots had improved in precision, as indicated by the results of each passing sweep. However, the levels of trilithium scattered in the region was proportionally decreasing. At this current rate, Syntron calculated that they would complete the harvesting procurement with a hundred and seven point three percent of required trilithium in approximately one point thirty-six hour. That is if no other unseen incidents interfered with the remaining harvesting mission.

The captain of the Artemis then sat back with his powerful arms crossed on his large chest and making a satisfied nod. Syntron's work should proceed without further problems now... unless they were interrupted.

"Anything on that incoming bogey, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Sir," answered Tyvya. "It's a probe, Captain."

"By configuration, velocity and signal output, class IX... Federation, Sir," added Norbert Baoule, now using the intact deflector dish and the Syntron spatial sonar configured there to boost his own sensor power.

"The Alsea," deduced Kheren, as the Starfleet advanced probe came from the exact direction the powerful Lotus Fleet starship was headed last time they were in contact.

"They must have registered the deflagration of our ramming of the Shavok on their long range sensor," added Baoule, coming to the same conclusion as his commanding officer. "Not able to raise us due to our comm system failure, they sent that probe to investigate our status."

"And, since they were able to send it at this time, confirm the Romulan plot has been thwarted, one way or another," Tyvya chimed in.

Kheren nodded to them all, his four eyes lost in the vista of the peaceful starfield on the main viewer.

"I believe this kind of probe has an optical sensor..." he mused aloud.

"Standard sensor pallet with added mission specific modules, six thousand five hundred telemetry channels at two hundred and thirty megawatts with fifty transponder echo channels and an isolinear memory capacity of three thousand four hundred kiloquads," detailed the dark-skinned science officer. "It's usual main use is as an emergency message capsule to be sent to the nearest starbase or... ship known location."

"Is it transmitting anything?"

"Nothing, Captain," Elliago Nasaro-Myth reported from his CMO command chair, overseeing all communications, as few as they were currently.

"But its scanning protocols are all fully active and aimed at our general location," completed Tyvya. "So it's not an emergency capsule but effectively sent to search for us."

The Andorian thought for a moment.

"Doc, use the computer to translate our logs into Morse code and transmit through our navlights to that probe. Ensign Baoule, get the transponder code of that probe and reprogram it to return to its point of origin. This way, whether they receive the transmission through the anomaly's interference or get back the data physically when that probe catches up to them, they will know what happened, what we are doing... and that we will be coming."

A few moments later, with the computer finishing transmitting all the logs recorded at almost lightspeed to the optical sensor of the probe, they could all see on the screen a sudden, characteristic flash of light.

"Probe away and transmitting back to source," confirmed Norbert Baoule. "If they are not receiving transmission as we speak, the hard data will reach them in seventeen hours."

"Good. Doc, I believe you have two patients needing your care. I'll go with you," then said Kheren, standing up with the Deltan to move towards the right hand door of the bridge and the turbolift cabin waiting for them there.

"Sir," then asked Cheonghi from the multitask station, "If the Alsea saw the explosion, Starbase 10 must have too... and all the more clearly, so angled out and so far away from the anomaly's interference. They may have sent either the Aurora or the Steamrunner to our rescue. Do we hold position until they arrive?"

"At best speed, it would still take them nine point twenty-one hours to reach us," noted helmsman S'Kyn. "Assuming they went to warp as soon as they registered the deflagration on subspace long range sensors, they will still be a parsec from us when we will have completed our trilitium harvesting and our priority repairs."

"If they send someone," the Andorian giantess at tactical chimed in. "We have no current data about the tactical situation; they might be tied up with their own problems with the Klingons... and the Horizon Children... or interpret their scan of us as our utter demise and forego any rescue attempt, at least in the short run. Or they might have assigned it to the Alsea... which, for one reason or another, could only send a probe."

"Maintain current procedures as planned," Kheren ordered then after listening to the discussion between his officers. "We can not risk second guessing the situation, especially not in such critical times. Once Mister Syntron gets back with the trilitium, we will implement our warpspeed loop and resume course and mission to anomaly quadrant two. At worst, any rescue ship will witness our departure."

"Assuming that it will work," commented S'kyn with a cold, neutral tone.

"Hope, Mister S'Kyn."

"Hope is not logical, Captain."

Kheren turned around in the turbolift cabin with an expression that was almost a smile.

"Neither is the whole of this universe."

As predicted by the first officer of the Artemis, they were done an hour and a half later, their bussard collectors filled with trilitium particles. The three shuttles completed their last sweep which brought them all out of the edge of the diminishing debris field towards the remaining section of the Artemis.

At that moment, their communication board came to life with the soft, musical voice of Doctor Nasaro-Myth.

"Arrow 1, this is the Artemis. We have reestablished short range communications. Judging by your current trajectory on our sensors, you have completed your mission. Please confirm."

As they were completing their final verification of the precise amount of trilithium captured, an audio signal was received from the Artemis.

The first officer positioned on Arrow 1 engaged the communication's switch.

"Syntron here. The accumulative trilithium count on all three shuttles has been confirmed. This aspect of the mission has now been completed and we are currently enroute for a return back to shuttlebay 1. The engineering and science teams there should be prepared upon our arrival to begin the next phase of this operation in preparation of the torpedoes for the trilithium infusion process."

The deep soft voice of Captain Kheren then was heard over the comlink.

"Well done, Number One. You and your team will take a break with Alpha shift while we take care of your harvest and continue our repairs. Ready or not, we will be attempting our breakaway maneuver in six hours. Artemis out."

"Acknowledged Captain" Syntron replied as he closed the link and focused his attention on the details of the infusion process on his PADD to ensure that all of the steps and precautions were precisely and meticulously mapped out.

After this procedure was substantiated, he forwarded the completed file to the beta shift leaders just as the shuttles were approaching the opening of the shuttle bay doors. The three remaining shuttles gracefully landed within the open bay of the Artemis saucer without incident. Syntron personally notified each team member exiting the shuttles of their off-duty status and then ordered them to their quarters for a rest period during the current shift. He wanted them well-rested and prepared for the upcoming multi-gyrating singularity maneuver they were about to attempt. There would be no margin for error in executing this maneuver or any second chances. It was literally either success or obliteration; a circumstance that the crew of the Artemis had unfortunately faced on more than one occasion throughout their challenging missions. But fortunately, they had each time beaten the odds.

So far.

\* \* \*

**Starship's log:**

**Stardate:87172.9**

**Lieutenant Oseno Jureth, acting commander reporting.**

**As noted previously, an injury to Captain Rivers as we engaged the Romulans near the Azimuth Horizon has left me in command of the Alsea. We are currently moving at high warp to position ourselves to participate in the Azimuth Horizon containment operation and should be in position to begin our sweeps around the Horizon shortly. I do not know the status of the rest of the Lotus Fleet ships, save for the Artemis which I fear has been lost with all hands. As for this ship, I feel I would be remiss in not noting the dedication of this crew and their amazing response under extreme circumstances, particularly the engineering department in dealing with the repairs to the warp core. There will be commendations for them all if I have my way, but that can wait. Now it's time to get to work...**

**Security Officer's personal log:**

**This is the absolute last place I ever wanted to be. I am a lot of things: a Bajoran, a security officer, a weapons officer...but I can now add to that list a commanding officer. Prior to the events of the last few days, my idea of being in command was leading a security detachment on a starbase or perhaps even at Starfleet Command or on Deep Space Nine. Now, with Captain Rivers injured, I find myself in command in the very real sense. I also find myself exposed at least when it comes to the crew of the Alsea. I know Cat knows that I don't want the center chair, it was never in my plans for my Starfleet career; but I have to wonder how many of the other crewmembers see my discomfort as well despite my attempts to hide it.**

**Still, like good officers should, they are carrying out orders, even the ship's boisterous chief engineer who I half expected to attempt to pull rank on me. I did my research and I know the man was a captain at one point, and I have to wonder why he's toiling around in the engine room instead of taking command. Perhaps it's because he loves his main job too much; he and I have that in common. Still, he insists on calling me captain, which I suppose I am... but that doesn't mean I have to like it...**

**For now, I only hope that the rest of our part in Operation Horizon will be much calmer than the beginning. The loss of the Artemis is a major blow to our operations and I can't help but feeling like we left them there to die...may the Prophets watch over them...wherever they are."**

**"Computer... end log."**

Jureth closed the terminal on the ready room desk. He had elected to use the ready room because he did not want to go down to the security office with the ship maneuvering so close to the Azimuth Horizon. He stood up from behind the desk and exited the ready room onto the Alsea's bridge.

"Report," he demanded as he approached the command chair

"Steady on course at warp 8, Sir," Shawn Hunter said

"Cat, sensor contacts?"

"No hostile contacts. I am picking up signatures from the Lotus and the Spectre on the bleeding edge of our sensors, but interference from the anomaly is preventing me from getting a good read on their positions."

"Security status?"

"All of the teams have had several hours rest as you ordered."

"Order T'Lana to resume stepped up security patrols and place armed guards outside critical spaces."



"Aye, Sir"

Jureth opened the intercom.

"Bridge to engineering; I need to know our MVAM status. The Fleet Captain's original plan called for us to be separated and in formation as we made our sweeps around the Azimuth Horizon."

"Crewman Jones here, Sir. As far as I am aware, Commander Lire suggested we only separate if desperately needed. I can wake him if you want the specifics. We are still only a skeleton crew down here."

"I understand, Mister Jones," Jureth replied already knowing that that was the likely response to his question; "and no, don't wake the Commander unless you need to. For now, I will keep the ship together. I will be ordering Mister Hunter to take us to warp 9 shortly. Bridge out."

Closing the intercom, Jureth closed his eyes for a moment. Lotus Fleet's perfectly laid plans had gone slightly awry. He hoped the rest of the ships of the fleet were faring better than the Artemis had.

"Mister Hunter, begin our first containment run around the Azimuth Horizon. Increase speed to warp 9 and keep a sharp eye for those tendrils."

"Aye Sir, coming to warp 9."

"Ensign Wynn," Jureth said to the operations officer

"Yes, Sir?"

"Send a message to Starbase 10 and all Lotus Fleet vessels that we are beginning our run around the Horizon."

"Aye, Sir."

As Wynn sent out the message to their compatriots, the Bajoran acting ship commander sat back in the command chair. The only thing he could do now was wait while the ship worked at entrenching the deadly expansion of the fiery anomaly lighting with gold and crimson their sleek triangular hull.

About ten minutes later, Niomo Lire returned to his office in engineering, wearing a fresh tan jumpsuit over his Starfleet Uniform. As he entered, a short man came up to him.

"Sir, Crewman Jones. The Captain was looking for you while you were resting. Did he find you?"

"Nope." Niomo retorted as he shook his head. "What did he want?"

"Status of the warp core and a question about separation during the Operation." the crewman responded.

"Fantastic. Thank you for letting me know."

He let the man walk away to go off duty as he contacted all of his staff.

"Skeleton crew Charlie is now ordered to rest. Begin Alpha Beta Charlie shift schedule. Alpha on deck in ten. I will be on the bridge."

Before he left, he checked the primary display in his room to make sure there were no problems. There were no reports of any irregularities. With that, he proceeded to the Bridge.

Upon arriving he caught the attention of Jureth.

"I heard you were looking for me, Captain?"

"Hmm?" Jureth said as he looked up "Yes, I had a question regarding our ability to separate. If you recall, Fleet Captain Samji had originally called for us to be in MVAM and using all three of our warp cores at maximum in the containment operation. I didn't know if your repairs had improved our ability to separate or not."

"Hmm." Niomo responded in the same tone as the Captain. "I'd have to run some simulations. Yes, it is *possible*... but as a best guess, the primary hull would be restricted to Warp 6. Second and tertiary would be at their normal warp 9 capabilities; maybe a click or two less. Have we heard from the station recently? I'd like an update on the Artemis."

"No, I've not heard anything from Starbase 10. Fleet Captain Samji made it clear the Wisconsin would investigate the Artemis.. though I did launch a probe before we left the area."

Niomo frowned.

"Sounds like Starfleet hasn't changed one bit. You'd think they'd let us in out of the dark. Has your probe sent any data back yet?"

Jureth turned and looked over at Cat Steele at tactical.

"Cat, the probe?"

"Sorry, Sir, I completely forgot..." she replied as she tapped commands into the console

That was incredibly unlike Cat to forget something like that and Jureth couldn't help but wonder; if the stress of their mission was having such an effect on the former Marine, what must it be doing to the rest of the crew?

"Last signals from the probe were received...just before we started maneuvering around the anomaly. As we noted before, multiple subspace distortions in the area of where we last detected the Artemis. Also... detected... Federation transponders! Shuttlecrafts, Sir!"

"They're alive.." Jureth said softly.

"Wynn, get me Starbase 10." he demanded of the Ops officer.

"I'll try, Sir, but the Azimuth Horizon is going to play hell with the subspace array."

The dark haired human manipulated the controls for a moment and then spun in his chair to face Jureth.

"The channel is open, Sir, but I can't guarantee they can hear us."

"Understood," Jureth replied before trying to raise Lotus Fleet's headquarters. "Starbase 10, this is the Alsea; do you read?"

Niomo had already sat down and started pulling up command systems.

"I'll boost the gain on the transmitter by fifteen percent. No guarantees though."

The subsystems that he had to float through to find the transmitter were nebulous. Whoever thought having so many connections to one part of the ship was insane. However, he eventually find the system he needed and proceeded to increase power to it, improving the signal. Or so he hoped. He still kept a close eye on the warp cores. They were already being stressed more than he wanted. The extra drain from the comm array wasn't something he had expected.

"Starbase 10, this is Alsea," Jureth repeated; "please respond."

Jureth looked at Wynn who shrugged.

"There's no way to tell if they can hear us or not, Sir."

"What about the Wisconsin? Can we reach Captain Onia?"

"We're closer to Starbase 10 than we are to the Wisconsin, Sir. If they can't hear us, it is unlikely that Captain Onia will hear us either."

Jureth sighed.

"Leave the channel open to Starbase 10, just in case they come back to us. Mister Hunter, how is she handling?"

"Only fighting a little. Don't worry, Sir, I can keep her under control."

"I don't doubt it. It seems our only recourse for now is to continue with the containment mission."

\* \* \*

Once again the senior staff of the starship Artemis met in the main conference room, around the triangular table over which floated a tridimensional display of the saucer section; what was left of the once eighty years old majestic Ambassador class. The detached primary hull was seen angling itself towards a black spot like a hole floating between them all as the copper-skinned Inuit helmsman, Lieutenant Aguk Snow, explained:

"With the precise astrometrics provided by Lieutenant Irksos, all simulations and following tests showed us the best approach angle for our loop around the microsingularity. The first problem will be going during the initial loop through a short time dilation period, of which we can not exactly estimate the effects."

"Now wait a minute," objected Elliago Nasaro-Myth; "I thought we were going to avoid any time warp..."

"We are, Doctor," explained Valencia Irksos then. "But to use the infinite gravimetric pull of the singularity to make us break the light barrier, we will have to push our engines to emergency impulse speed as we get accelerated by that pull; and with the considerable loss of mass we went through when we left our engineering hull in the Romulans' faces, we may go well beyond the normal 0.95c, probably up to 0.96 or even 0.97... but that will leave us at least a few nanoseconds in Einsteinian space before a warp bubble appears after the last 0.03c the singularity will provide us."

Aguk Snow finished while looking at Captain Kheren.

"For us, it will be a few heartbeats; but to the rest of the universe, it will be like several hours at least, if not days or even more, depending on how fast a warp field will form around us and take us out of normal space. At best estimates, we calculate emergence in one to five days from now... just in time to complete Operation Horizon as planned. At worse..."

"We might get frozen at the edge of lightspeed for ever." completed the Andorian, nodding in understanding.

"At least it never happened during the simulations," said the helmsman with an optimistic smile.

"Well if it does now, we'll just push the reset button," shot back sarcastically the Deltan doctor.

Kheren ignored him and addressed again his Chief Navigator.

"That's for the first pass. What about the following loops?"

As the display started showing the starship orbiting the black dot faster and closer with each revolution, Snow answered:

"Once we complete a loop and get a warpfield, each successive loop will be angled closer to the gravity well to add more gravimetric pull to a renewed impulse power thrust, building up a new layer of subspace and taking us one more warp factor up after each pass. The next problem will appear once we get to the warp 5 treshold."

A power graph came up beside the display as science officer Irksos took over the presentation.

"It is no surprise that it took almost a century between Zephrom Cochrane's warp 1 flight and Jonathan Archer's first warp 5 starship; and then almost another century to get from his NX-01 USS Enterprise to Christopher Pike's Constitution class successor. Power-fuel-consumption-velocity ratio reaches a peak halfway through the warp scale, before it smoothes out through the laws of conservation of energy."

"In other words, it takes more energy to go from warp 1 to warp 5 than to go from warp 5 to 10," summarized Elliago.

"Yes Doctor, although the initial ratio problem starts again beyond warp 9.1 until you need infinite energy to reach infinite speed; warp 10."

"I'm a physician, my dear, not a physicist. What does it mean for us?"

Aguk Snow then spoke again.

"It means that, as we will go for warp 5, we will have to fly the ship at a much sharper angle towards the singularity. One error in trajectory or distance... and we will plunge right into it with no force in the universe able to pull us away. You can imagine what will happen when a three-hundred meters wide structure will try at warp 4.9 to enter a three micron-wide aperture..."

He then looked up once more at his commanding officer with a smile he tried to make reassuring.

"Again, Sir, all simulations went well."

"I'll keep my finger on the reset button anyway," smirked Nasaro-Myth with a dry humor he did not really felt.

Kheren now shot a quick glare at the Deltan before asking after a few seconds of silence, looking at the display and the increasingly faster orbiting of the replica over the table:

"Estimated maximum speed and time of arrival to our destination?"

"We will not be able to go beyond warp 9 without high risk of losing flight control and falling into the gravity well," said Snow. "At warp 9, it will take us twenty-three hours from here to anomaly quadrant 2... that is, not counting a few days of relativistic time... if we're lucky."

Kheren nodded. Then he looked at the dark-skinned bald Human sitting between the Inuit pilot and the Edoan chief of Ops Cheonghi.

"Ship status?"

"All systems nominal, except for long range sensors and communications. We finished external repairs along with the rebuilding of our damaged port torpedo launcher and phaser array, so all that is left are internal repairs. We will be done with them during our flight towards the anomaly. This will leave ample time to finish the torpedo and probe conversion into trilitium emitters following Mister Syntron's instructions. With two launchers, deployment will be a bit slow but steady."

"It will take us fifty successive salvos to deploy them all with two operational burst-five launchers," confirmed Tyvya seated with Irksos and Nasaro-Myth on the other side of the triangular table. "I recommend doing it over a three minutes period to avoid any risk of overheating the tubes... and just so you know, we will be left only with six phaser arrays once we're done."

"Let us hope the Alsea will have taken care of the Romulan problem by the time we get there... and that the rest of the fleet will have done as well with the apprehended Klingon and cultist threat," wished the Andorian captain. "Crew status, Doc?"

"All in high spirits and good shape aside from Ensign Neloth which I will keep in sickbay for at least another day; her burns were pretty deep... but she'll be recovered just in time for our big light show. All this talk about "gravity propulsion" and "warp speed without warp engines" has everyone pretty excited. Well, almost everyone."

The smirk he shot back at Kheren left no doubt about who felt less than enthusiastic over their next planned course of action.

With a short, silent laugh, the dark-hued Andorian then turned his silvery eyes towards the tall bearded Vulcan sitting on his side of the table.

"Any further word, Number One?"

The first officer nodded affirmatively in acknowledgement.

"As Lieutenant Irksos indicated, all simulations for our impending breakaway maneuver with the singularity have been conducted and honed to within acceptable parameters. The success of implementation nevertheless is contingent on absolute precision throughout each stage of this procedure."

Allowing a moment for the gravity of this statement to be absorbed, the first officer then continued.

"In regards to the trilitium-infusion process, according to recent calculations, we shall have thirty-four point seven percent of the trilitium emitters completed by the time we are set to initiate the breakaway maneuver. The remainder of this process will be completed while we are warping back to the perimeter of the anomaly and will be finalized before we enter this region."

After a brief pause and with a look of stern concentration, the Vulcan first officer added:

"This final aspect though is clearly dependent on the forthcoming maneuver proceeding accordingly during the breakaway from the singularity."

"In other words; we fumble, we blow it... and us with it." smirked Elliago.

Kheren just nodded and asked all around:

"When will we be ready to go?"

"Further training and simulation will not improve our chances at this point," admitted Aguk Snow. "Ready as we will ever be, Captain."

"All major systems ready, Sir," answered the shrill voice of Cheonghi. "Our structural integrity field and inertial dampeners are fully operational, but I strongly recommend personal inertial dampeners still to every crewmember. Dancing around a black hole is bound to shake us up a little."

"Full impulse power at your disposal, Captain," followed Robert Baoule. "Warp field controls will be ready to monitor and control our warp status once we reach warp 1... although without a warp core, it will be very interesting, to say the least... and tricky. But we can do it, Sir."

"Sensors have been calibrated for the output of the singularity and linked to navigation; any fluctuation will be detected and compensated for," announced Valencia Irksos.

"All safety measures regarding flight in hazardous conditions have been implemented," then said Tyvya.

"And the entire crew is primed and ready to go, eager even," chimed in Elliago Nasaro-Myth. "Emergency protocol is in place both with personnel and EMH grid."

Again, the Andorian just nodded but then ordered:

"Doc, have a log buoy prepared and jettisoned towards Starbase 10 describing our last twenty hours of activity and what we are preparing to do. Whether we manage it or not, at least they will know what has happened."

"Will do."

Kheren stood up.

"Time to go, gentlebeings... and, especially now more than ever, may the winds be at our backs. Sound red alert."

As the klaxon blared all across the remaining primary hull of the starship Artemis, the bridge officers also stood up and immediately poured out of the room and into the short corridor that led to the bridge and their assigned stations.

Kheren stood at his seat before the triangular table, watching them unhesitantly go to face all perils of the unknown; deeply believing in their duty and the values it stood for, calmly confident in themselves, their ship and their commanding officer... moved as much by hope as by resolve. The Andorian had never felt more proud than today at having these particular officers still with him in this pivotal moment for the whole galaxy. He had served with so many officers since he graduated from the Academy; some great, some good, a few not so good; but now, those that were here with him, that remained with him despite all odds, those were undoubtedly the best there were. He felt humbled and honored to be with them, come what may.

But most of all, as much as they felt confident in him making the right decisions once more, he felt confident that *they* could pull this off, beat the odds once again; because *they* were there with him.

Amazingly, as he walked out of the meeting room, last to make it to the bridge, there was a smile on his rigid face.

Syntron scurried out of the conference room behind the other officers and, upon his arrival back on the main bridge, sat down in the executive officer's seat besides the center chair.

He took a moment and rechecked all of his specs and then gazed around carefully at the bridge crew as they prepared for this monumental event about to occur.

This was going to be a very coordinated effort among a variety of officer across several departments and sections of the ship. But now, the time for dress rehearsals were through. The main show was about to commence and this team of highly trained and dedicated officers aboard the Artemis would have to execute this operation like the performance of a finely-tuned and prepared symphony engaged in the performance of their lifetime.

Which in reality they were.

"Mister Syntron," reported helmsman Snow from the console in front of him and to his left; "helm ready for launch; flight path computed."

"Sensors calibration to focal point of flight and link to nav control optimal, Sir" then confirmed science chief Irksos from over his left shoulder.

"Power nominal; structural integrity field and inertial dampeners at maximum, Exec," now said chief engineer Baoule to him from behind his right ear.

"All personnel, activate PIDs now," said tactical and security senior officer Tyvya in front of him, not only to him but to the entire ship through intraship channels. Then, as all the bridge officers put on and activated the harness that would ensure their survival from the shearing forces they were about to invoke, she confirmed to him: "All personnel reports ready under condition red status, Lieutenant Commander."

"Emergency protocols confirmed; damage control and trauma teams at the ready; EMH grid on standby," Chief medical officer Nasaro-Myth. Then he addressed the entire crew complement: "All hands, prepare for maximum impulse acceleration up to light barrier breakthrough."

"Deflector field at one-hundred and seventeen percent output; all systems are green," completed chief of ops Cheonghi.

Now, they all waited for the word to be given.

Captain Kheren then came up to the bridge and sat in his big command chair, looked straight out at the main viewer and the deceptively quiet looking field of stars before saying:

"Log buoy ready, Doc?"

"Already in launch tube 1, Captain."

"Lieutenant Tyvya; launch the buoy."

There was a soft, far away echo and then a flash of light on the screen.

"Log buoy away, Sir. Estimated time of arrival at Starbase 10: twelve hours." confirmed the giantess.

The Andorian then glanced at his Vulcan first officer.

"Number One, please lead the maneuver. After all, it was your idea."

"acknowledged, Captain," Syntron responded with a very serious expression etched across his face, like that of a stalking predator.

Moving himself into a posture of alertness and total concentration, the first officer steadily leaned forward as he gave his next order.

"Helm, ahead full impulse. Move us into position, and then follow the projected angle of approach for our initial pass."

"Aye, Sir; ahead full; heading 110 mark 5."

The Artemis saucer responded to the keyed in commands of the Inuit helmsman as she thrust forward and toward their small but extremely powerful target that was positioned ahead of them.

Looking at reddish brown skinned helmsman, the Vulcan second in command added:

"This first loop will be critical, Lieutenant Snow. Be certain that our angle of trajectory and velocity are precise."

"Yes, please..." muttered Elliago seated right behind Snow and watching him intently, hands gripping the armrests of his chair.

The navigation display showed an overlay of the calculated trajectory that the maneuvering commands of the pilot on his controls brought exactly over that of the actual ship heading, pitch and yaw. As the velocity readout indicated seventy-five thousand kilometers a second, the entire ship vibrated slightly.

"Please?" repeated with more insistence the Deltan doctor.

"We're entering the edge of the debris field, Sir," then explained Cheonghi with his usual shrill voice; which didn't help in reassuring the chief medical officer. "At this speed, some of the larger debris are getting pulverized on our deflector field while we now have but less than a third of our mass left."

"It's not even bothering our structural integrity field, Doctor," added Baoule behind the command podium.

"Well, it's bothering *me*," grumbled Elliago.

Aguk Snow interrupted the banter addressing again the first officer.

"We're in position and moving steadily towards the breaking point, Sir. Gravity field of the singularity is starting to pull at the helm controls. Ready for emergency impulse."

Syntron vigilantly studied the velocity, course and position readout as the Artemis approached its optimal calculated vector and at the moment of precise alignment stated authoritatively:

"Engage NOW, Mister Snow!"

Echoes of the Vulcan's voice still ringed in the air when the helmsman of the Artemis brought impulse power to maximum levels that, in perfect synchronisation, Ops chief Cheonghi redirected to the propulsion system instead of letting this excess power routinely refill their batteries. Despite the added layer of their individual dampeners to the ship's own that chief engineer Baoule kept at maximum and a bit more, they all felt the sudden acceleration that followed the tugging gravity line of the singularity they were rushing at. It was more a trick of the mind than any actual perception, played on them by the rising whine of the engines and the vibrating of the deckplates under their tensed feet; but going at near the speed of light in this manner certainly left an impression on them all, even the veterans among them.

"Zero point five c... point six... point seven... point eight... point nine... "

The whole frame of the ship shuddered and resounded as if it was intermittently banged on like a gong by some unseen titan outside. They all knew it was debris from the field around the singularity that they were flying through. At their increasing velocity, their deflector field was hitting them out of their path with increasing force, literally disintegrating them and creating a trail of metal dust and particles around and behind them like a streaking comet.



Yet, the noise was as ominous as it was becoming deafening with each passing second they flew faster and faster still.

"Point nine-one... nine two... nine-three... nine-four... nine-five..."

This was the normal maximum any starship could manage with impulse power pushed beyond their normal limit. It was usually risked only in combat situations or dire escape circumstances as it required everything from the inertial dampeners to avoid time dilation effects. And now, the Artemis, bereft of two-thirds of its original mass and still sporting one of the most powerful and efficient impulse drive ever devised, went even beyond.

"Point nine-six... nine-seven..."

Then, before everyone's eyes, everything started to blur and blend; shapes, colors, sounds, even feelings and thoughts became like they were suddenly plunging underwater, slow, thick, diffuse, distant. People, consoles, lights, sounds were doubled, trebbled...

"N-i-n-e... e-i-g-h-t... ... n-i-n-e... n-i-n-e... ... .."

A sudden white flash blinded them as if from everywhere down to their very soul; a thunderous deflagration slowly crept seemingly from within themselves and outward to fill up the entire universe... and beyond, for all eternity...

And then, in an instant, they were all looking at a streaking field of stars rushing at them.

"*Warp one!*" shouted Aguk Snow.

Anticipating their possible incapacitation, they had programmed the main computer to take over during the expected time dilation phase. They all saw the ship's nav monitor confirm that they were already pivoting at warp 1 at the apogee of their first orbit around the singularity before they could escape it's gravitational pull, already adding it to their faster than light speed for the next pass.

"Power, SIF and deflector field holding steady," reported Baoule with a definitely relieved voice.

"All systems nominal," added Cheonghi from the multitask ops station right before the warfield vista on the wide screen.

"Sensors recording expected data and confirming loop maneuver successful," Irksos then reported. "But exact effect of time dilation will only be possible to calculate once we return to normal space."

"Too late to worry about that now," said Kheren sitting deeper in his large, boxy command chair. "How's the crew, Doc?"

"No casualties... except for a few churned stomachs," Doctor Nasaro-Myth mumbled. The slight greenish tinge of his own bald head seemed to confirm his diagnostic for the benefit of anyone looking at him.

"Congratulations, Mister Syntron," Tyvya said without turning from her tactical board, eyes on the main viewer. "You have achieved warp speed without warp drive. Zephrom Cochrane would be proud... if not jealous."

Himself grinning with his own eyes seemingly hypnotized by the streaking lights on the screen, Aguk Snow finally reported:

"Coming about, bearing 180 mark 355, speed warp 1.01 and climbing... ready for second loop, Mister Syntron."

He sounded like a first year cadet on his first shuttle piloting lesson.

Nodding an acknowledgment to helmsman Snow and Tyvya manning the tactical station, Syntron was inwardly struggling to recover from the queasiness that was lingering throughout his body as he fought back the sensation following the few seconds of time dilation they had gone through before he could speak again.

"Stay on course, helmsman... steady as she goes."

This was as much to himself apparently as it was a command to the crew and the ship... as he strived equally to steady himself.

Looking down and checking the readings again, Syntron was refocusing his attention and could now see that they were approaching the next calculated vector point in the second phase of this operation. The ship had somehow managed to remain in one piece and they were currently on course for the next phase of this maneuver. Yet, somehow, this operation itself seemed to be unfolding like some bizarre earth-like vaudevillian show; evoking smoke, mirrors and twisted perceptions that were challenging his very discernment as they had forced their way into warp speed.

Slowly regaining his composure once again, he assiduously followed their precise path until, within a few moments, the next vector point was rapidly approaching. Then once again at the optimal point the first officer commanded:

"Engage again... NOW, Mister Snow!"

And once again, the chief flight officer of the Artemis turned the first officer's order into a sudden acceleration of the vessel. Usually, using the impulse engines during warp flight would add but a small fraction to a starship's actual velocity; not enough to make any difference to faster than light travel and so, that energy was usually saved for other systems while at warp. But here, under the accelerating pull of an infinite gravity well, that fraction played indeed a definite role in pushing the vessel beyond it's current speed without producing it by itself.

And so, the increasing whine and vibration of the remaining engines made them all feel the acceleration the pilot reported:

"Warp one point one... warp one point two... one point three... one point four... point five... point six..."

This time, there was no banging and shaking as their first past had already cleared their path of all nearby debris... until they came near the focal point of their orbit, closer to the pulling singularity where debris from the earlier explosion were also drawn and coalescing before being swallowed by the microscopic black hole in a splash of disintegrating particles; something the even much larger starship had to take great care to avoid as it went by it, nearer than the last time.

"point seven,,, eight... nine..."

There was a new blinding flash and deflagration on the viewing screen, this time quite familiar.

"Warp 2!"

Again, all departments confirmed all green and the helmsman completed the second orbiting to angle again for the next one and their next warp jump, each time coming closer to the singularity, each time at a greater velocity. Repeating the looping maneuver from one to the next, the Artemis climbed the faster than light scale surely and steadily.

"Warp 3."

"Warp 4."

And then, the entire bridge started vibrating again as they came about one more time for the next warp threshold, this one the next most critical one: warp 5. With the power build up in their momentum and the tightness of their next flight close to a hard-sucking bottomless pit, relying on computer calculation alone was now as useless as trying to fly visually. Actual sensor monitoring of the singularity's fluctuations during the whole pass was now required to make the last second minute corrections that would send them beyond the critical threshold... or being pulverized, either by plunging into the infinitely crushing gravity well or by reentering to quickly and without controlled power into normal space.

Captain Kheren turned towards his first officer and former chief of science.

"Mister Syntron, this is where your expertise on sensors will be most required. If we miss this one..."

He did not have to finish his sentence.

"Understood Captain." The first officer replied.

Meticulously keeping his eyes fixed on the readings emanating from the nearby micro singularity, the first officer continued monitoring the sensors intensely as they approached the upcoming critical moment in their endeavor to go to warp 5 and beyond. They were balancing the ship on the slightest margin of a tightrope as they strived to maintain their distance and trajectory to and from the singularity itself. The tension among the crew now was excruciating as were the potential consequences of any errors.

Still monitoring the sensors and not bothering to look up, Syntron calmly stated:

"Mister Snow, increase the angle of our approach to the singularity by forty-seven point three percent, on my mark."

Then the seconds ticked by as if in slow motion while the first officer began this crucial count. The entire shaken saucer section of the Artemis continued being pulled increasingly toward the powerful gravitational phenomenon.

"Five... four... three... two... one... Engage!"

The mounting whine of the impulse engines was now followed by an increasing groan from the entire hull as the Artemis flew at a sharper angle towards the unseen infinite mass of the microsingularity pulling at them with the full force of its gravitational field they were attempting to skim again, closer than ever before.

"Warp four point one... warp four point two... warp four point three..." counted up the copper-skinned helmsman.

"Structural integrity field straining!" warned chief engineer Baoule. "Inertial dampeners overheating to compensate..."

"Adding shield power to field; sending deflector pulse to reinforce shield output!" added Cheonghi as one hand flew over controls while the other two reflexively gripped the edges of his multitask ops console.

Despite their personal inertial dampeners strapped to their waist and chest, they all felt the Artemis shake around them as the noise of the straining engine rose in pitch and loudness.

"Four point four... four point five... four point six..."

"Navigation sensor readings becoming fuzzy !" exclaimed Aguk snow, his fingers glued to his controls, his eyes wide and his jaws clenched. "Helm sluggish, trajectory unconfirmed!"

"Distorsion effect from the proximity of the singularity!" explained loudly Valencia Irsos from the readouts of the science station as she stood beside Syntron.

"Point seven!"

"Structural dampening field is..."

"Point eight!"

"Power fluctuating..."

"Point nine!"

"Gravimetric forces are..."

"Helm control..."

They could barely hear each other now, deafened by the engines trying now to angle them away from the edge of the immense gravitational field they were skimming dangerously close, to add their increasing velocity to it and once more sling away from it.

If they could...

"Breakaway NOW, Lieutenant!" Syntron bellowed to compensate for the vociferous shriek of the strained impulse engines straining to push beyond their threshold of mechanical tolerance.

The tortured saucer of the Artemis not only sounded like it was going to be ripped apart from the sounds of twisting metal but it felt as if was now occurring; with its almost out of control structural vibrations reverberating throughout the remainder of this once mighty starship.

"Trying, Sir!" shouted back the helmsman straining to tame the buckling vessel with frantic fingers. "We're going to..."

There was a thunderous noise and a blinding flash, a sudden, brutal explosion of energy that shook them all despite their harnesses... and then, silence... and a strange, floating feeling... nothing moved but the dim light of stars...

Until it was all broken.

"Warp 5!"

As people regained senses, balance and wits, they could all see the streaking lights of stars on the main viewer coming at them in the familiar warp field effect of faster than light travel.

Even before Snow could retake control of the ship, the nav computer followed its programming and was already bringing about the Artemis for the next slingshot course around the singularity.

"Report," asked Kheren fighting off a wave of dizziness as he sat straighter in his chair.

"No significant damage, Captain," first answered Robert Baoule. "Structural integrity field holding at ninety-three percent; inertial dampeners holding at ninety-seven percent. Power down to eighty-eight percent but steady."

"Rerouting reserve power to impulse reactors to compensate," then said Cheonghi. "All systems coming back online and showing green."

"The crew?" inquired the Andorian to the Deltan reseating himself at his left.

"Banged up but not the worse for wear... so far," Elliago confirmed from his internal sensor readout and listening to crew reports on the intraship comline. "Please don,t do this again..."

"We still got a few loops to go, Doc; but should be much smoother this time... Lieutenant Irksos?"

"Aye, Captain. Beyond the warp 5 barrier, we will need much less power to achieve higher velocities until we get to warp 9... but sharper piloting as we will angle each time closer to the singularity."

"*Closer?* You're kidding, right?" exclaimed the chief medical officer. "This was quite close enough for me, thank you very much! I think I left my digestive tract back there... at least what I had in it..."

"Relax, Doctor," shot back Tyvya with a glance in his direction over her left shoulder; "this will be the easiest part."

"As soon as I find that reset button..." mumbled Nasaro-Myth gripping his medical command chair with both hands and looking intently at the warpfeld on the wide screen before them all.

Even though theoretically they had just completed what they had anticipated as the most challenging aspect of this series of slingshot maneuvers in breaking warp 5, the strain on the ship and crew was definitely taking its toll.

As they again approached apogee in proximity to the singularity and then began their trajectory back toward the next loop, the apprehension was mounting in the crew parallel to ensuing stress on the vessel. It was like being trapped in a large galactic elliptical rollercoaster that became more insidiously treacherous with each passing revolution. But they had made it this far and would see this through... one way or another.

Syntron quickly regained his equilibrium this time and recalculated the angle of approach.

"Lieutenant Snow, recalibrate our angle by an additional fifteen point six percent and increase thrust at the given mark."

"Changing course 016 mark 21, Aye," the helmsman acknowledged.

Counting silently to himself this time, the first officer watched their progress transpire on the computer screen and issued a command at the given moment.

"Now, Lieutenant!"

The far away sound of the engines slowly went up once more and, this time, the flight went so smoothly that they were all surprised when a sudden flash announced what Aguk Snow confirmed:

"We are at warp 6, Sir. Coming about 180 mark 323, adding compensating factor of fifteen point six percent as ordered. Ready for next pass."

"All systems nominal, Lieutenant Commander," reported Cheonghi with evident relief in his nevertheless shrill tone of voice.

"We're holding up quite well. Full power at your disposal, Exec," added Baoule.

Irksos took over the science station as Syntron could now return to his executive chair after noting for himself the clarity and reliability of sensor readouts.

"Are we there yet?" asked Elliago Nasaro-Myth to no one in particular.

"We are almost to our final breakaway point, Doctor," the first officer replied as he sat back down in the executive chair by the Captain's right side.

He acknowledged the chief medical officer's desire to end this apparent vicious cycle of revolutions around this micro singularity. However, under their current condition, this was their only method available to gain enough velocity to travel back to the anomaly and finally complete their mission. In fact, they were most fortunate to have such an option placed in their proximity; even if this was ironically provided by the hands of an adversary out to destroy them and who's very destruction had put them in this predicament to begin with.

Syntron turned his attention back to the helmsman.

"Mister Snow, continue toward perigee and engage full speed once again, this time though at Lieutenant Irksos' mark."

As his assistant science chief was directly monitoring the sensors now and had witnessed repeatedly the procedure of the first officer as they surpassed each warp threshold, she was the one to ready them now. Before she could protest, Syntron turned and faced her and stated seriously yet serenely:

"For every important event, Lieutenant, there is a first time."

He then turned back and faced the main viewscreen.

"And all good things must come to an end," grumbled the Deltan doctor.

"You think our warp looping a good thing, Doc?" inquired Kheren without looking at him.

"Are you kidding? Of all the crazy, foolhardy, frightening stunt..."

"Then you have nothing to fear, Lieutenant Irksos," the Andorian said, still looking straight at the viewer; but his antennae were curving sharply towards one another.

"Get ready, Mister Snow..." then chimed in the dark-skinned woman at the sensors; and... mark!"

The now familiar voice of the impulse engines, distorted by the distance and the warpfield effect, rose to confirm their acceleration, although the computer rendering of the starfield at warp on the main screen did not change. The effect was too minute to be noticed by organic senses at almost four hundred times the speed of light; but with the increasing pull of the infinite gravity well they were flying by closer than ever, it brought their warp bubble into further compression and thus, propelling them faster still.

"Warp six point one... warp six point two... warp six point three... six point four... six point five... six point six... point seven... point eight... point nine..."

A sudden flash of light.

"Warp seven!"

The entire revolution had been so smooth this time that they felt as if they were still using their lost warp core. And, as before, the helmsman brought about the surviving saucer section of the Artemis to face again the invisible singularity, again at a sharper angle than before to brush it anew at an even greater speed than before. When the science officer gave him the signal, he sent again the vessel into a minute increase of speed; minute because even going well over two-hundred thousand kilometers per second was infinitesimal compared to their current velocity now well over six hundred times the speed of light. But even such a small addition was picked up and amplified immeasurably by the terribly powerful gravitational force of a mass collapsing on itself into infinity.

There was another rise in pitch from the impulse engines, then another sudden flash.

"Warp eight!"

One last time, Snow angled the Artemis into the tightest possible safe orbit around the microsingularity, waited for the science chief signal and, when it came, flew the three-hundred meters wide disc-shaped frame in a close loop; but this one, instead of coming as a standard orbit like all the others, took a larger angle out and away from the gravity well.

The Inuit pilot now hunched over his console. This last one would be the closest and to the singularity, at their fastest speed yet and this time ended up out of the ecliptic. Too close and they would fall for ever into the bottomless cosmic pit; too far and they would not gain breakaway speed; too soon and they would loose all their momentum and crash back into normal space as a new field of debris; too late and they would be trapped in orbit of the collapsed singularity.

The signal came; the engines roared; the flash blinded them again...

"Warp nine! And... on course towards quadrant 2 of the Azimuth Horizon!"

There was a cheer all accross the bridge and then, its echo was heard on all remaining ten decks of the starship Artemis.

"Confirming estimated time of arrival at twenty-three hours, Captain," finished Aguk Snow grinning.

"Well done, people," said Kheren through internal ship channels. " All personnel will resume normal ship routine and take appropriate rest period as scheduled until we reach our destination. Any after effect from our... warp launch shall be reported to the chief medical officer immediately and without fail. All systems will be on level 3 diagnostics and confirmed at optimal efficiency before we arrive, including those currently needing repairs and all auxilliary crafts. Conversion of probes and torpedoes into trilithium emitters will resume and also completed by that time. Report readiness to first officer. Captain out."

Turning his big swiveling chair towards his rear left, the commanding officer of the Artemis asked the dark-skinned woman sitting at the science station:

"Can you estimate the result of our time dilation period, Lieutenant?"

"Not until we finish repairs on the long range sensor grid, Sir. But you will have the exact stardate before we drop out of warp at our target zone."

The Andorian' antennae dropped slightly in mild disappointment but then perked up when he spun back towards his right and the Vulcan sitting in the exec chair.

"Well, Number One; so far you are two good hits out of three. Your trilithium harvesting was successful, and so was your warp speed loop maneuver. If your plan to snuff out the plasma fire of the anomaly work just as well, I will have no problem at all getting official recognition of your new field rank and status from Command."

Finally achieving a warp 9 velocity without warp engines and currently back on target for their destination toward the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly, the first officer nodded in acknowledgement to the words of appreciation from the Artemis Captain.

"Thank you Captain Kheren. Despite our challenging circumstances, we have been most fortunate in implementing our... unique solutions."

He then reflected on what specifically lay ahead of them as they were warping through space in the remaining battered saucer section of the Artemis.

"In regards to our third and most challenging resolution; extinguishing the threat of this anomaly... With your permission, Captain, I would like to supervise the completion of the remaining sixty-five point three percent of the trillithium torpedoes and the probe conversions into trillithium emitters. In addition, I was contemplating that perhaps there may be a way that we could use the coldness of space surrounding the ship among other potential options as a means to chill the torpedo launchers between each firing... if needed to protect them from overheating damage due to multiple successive launches. Perhaps with the assistance of Lieutenants Baoule and Blakely we could discuss the possibility of such options."

"I'm sure the Starfleet engineers who came up with the torpedo launchers design already took their working environment into account... but I'm not one to say. Do as you see best, Number One; you do have practically a day before you. Keep me posted."

And so saying, Kheren stood up and headed towards the door leading to his ready room.

"I'll be in my office for the remainder of the Alpha shift if anyone needs me. I have to prepare for a board of inquiry once we return... assuming we all do succeed in this Operation Horizon."

From her tactical station, Tyvya turned sharply towards him.

"Sir? Why would you face a board of inquiry?"

He stopped before the door just short of the distance needed to have it open before him.

"Why, I lost a ship in the line of duty."

"But... but you saved us all! And possibly this whole mission and the rest of the galaxy along with it!"

The Andorian turned to face his tactical chief with his chin raised.

"No, Lieutenant; *you all* saved *yourselves*, with your own discipline, your own competence and your own courage. And Lotus Fleet will be the one to succeed in this mission, in saving this galaxy; not I, nor even this ship alone. But *I* was the one to order the Artemis' destruction. *I* am the one responsible; and I *will* be called upon to assume that responsibility. *All* that, Lieutenant, is what Starfleet is all about: duty, teamwork *and* responsibility."

In the silence that followed his words, the commanding officer of the Artemis left the bridge, letting the closing door sigh at his back.

\* \* \*

The unexpected destruction of the Artemis' stardrive had set the initial containment plan back a few hours. Add to that the fact that the McKenzie had been in a long campaign against the Horizon's Children and the disruption of the Lotus and the Spectre by the Klingons and the plan was not looking good.

Additionally, Fleet Captain Samji fretted over not being able to communicate with any of the ships. Whatever extra power they were able to use to boost the carrier wave signal was gone and their auxiliary power was used up having been all delegated to shields for their surfing ride through photon torpedo explosions in order to stop their continued trajectory toward the Anomaly and turn them around.



"What can we do to get communication up so we know if the mission is even possible anymore?" he asked Ops in general.

"Well we have the shuttles..." Trill Science officer Rexil mused. "Shouldn't we be able to send a signal through them?"

"They're close enough to the anomaly now, so that they will suffer the same disruption," the Tellarite Engineer pointed out, arms crossed and brow even more furrowed in thought than his usual brooding mien.

"True, Mister Sangliar. But some are coming back... they need to bring back the pilots of the ones that will be exploding," pointed out his first officer, Karen Schmidt.

"Right, and then we should be able to create a line of shuttles between the starbase and the abandoned ones. The empty shuttles' proximity are close enough to cut through the interference. And they will automatically rebroadcast distress calls based on Starfleet regulations!" said Rexil excitedly.

Suddenly a quite unique noise none of the officers had ever heard before came from the usually serious and professional Schmidt, and they realized it was a giggle. She clapped her hand over her mouth and felt the hot flush of her cheeks which were bright and red as an alarm klaxon.

"Something you'd like to add, Schmidt?" Samji asked, with a mixture of confusion and shock at hearing a laugh at such a time.

"Sorry, Sir, no... it's just that... I realized the shuttles would be arranged like a speech bubble..."

"A what?" the Tellarite asked.

"It's a human thing... in ancient illustrated stories called 'comics'. I used to read them as a child."

Samji was quite familiar with the concept.

"How very apt," he put simply. "Now, let's get Operation... Speech Bubble..." he added as he grinned toward Schmidt to put her at ease, "into effect. Rexil, I want you to coordinate here. Schmidt and Sangliar, take a shuttle to start redirecting returning shuttles into the appropriate pattern. Finally we'll hear what's been going on out there!"

\* \* \*

"Starbase 10, this is Captain Onia of the Wisconsin, please come in..."

The message at last had made its way into the communications system of Starbase 10 after hours of being repeated through an automated system by the Wisconsin. Samji nodded to his Ferengi Operations officer, Grok, who knew his Captain wanted to make a connection to the Wisconsin, and then spoke.

"Captain, this is Fleet Captain Samji, we read you."

"Finally," said the concerned image of the Deltan female figure who appeared on Starbase 10's screen. "We've been attempting to contact you for hours. We feared the worst."

"Apologies Captain, but we had a situation that required us to shut down all systems other than life support for a while. What do you have to report about the Artemis?"

"Well, to start off, the crew seems to be safe." She allowed the good news to sink in before continuing. "When we originally began our automated message, we had been able to see the results of the explosion through long-range sensors. The Scimitar-class ship was completely destroyed, as was the star-drive portion of the Artemis. However, the saucer section remained, and while we couldn't verify the exact status of all the crew, we assume Captain Kheren was able to get his crew onto the saucer section, even if he had to sacrifice himself in the process. The saucer section has also incredibly gone to warp toward the anomaly."

Her unfortunate theory left mixed emotions in the Fleet Captain who felt joy in the safety of the Artemis crew, tempered with the hesitation left at the prospect of Kheren's sacrifice, and then confusion about her latest statement.

She elaborated on that revelation further.

"Sir, our more recent investigation has shown that they used the microsingularity left by the Romulan Scimitar to accomplish this feat. Before this singularity had consumed all matter in the area, we did some scans of the debris and noted that there were no residual trilitium particles in the area, which is unusual in an explosion of this magnitude of a Romulan ship. There were also several warp trails in the area that could only have been left by shuttles. We assume the Artemis had collected the trilitium and went to the anomaly to continue Mister Syntron's contribution to the containment effort."

Her tone became more concerned afterwards:

"Sir, the Artemis apparently went into time dilation when it approached warp 1 through combining emergency impulse speed with the gravitational pull of the singularity. It has now shifted out of our temporal reference and there is no clue when they will reemerge... if ever. For them, it will be a scant few seconds... but for us..."

The Deltan woman didn't have to explain further. Every Starfleet officer was well aware of the Einsteinian time dilation phenomena when approaching light speed outside of the nearly instantaneous jump to warp speed allowed by current stardrives. Either the Artemis would reappear in time... or it would not make any difference. But Samji had to consider the here and now and support all their current efforts, not undermine morale with concerns about things out of their hands. And so, he said with firmness:

"All very good news. Thank you for the update, Captain. It seems the Artemis has things under control. Please return to the anomaly to assist in containment."

"Aye, Sir." Onia nodded and ended communications.

"We've detected another automated communication, Sir," Lieutenant Commander Grok said; "from the Alsea."

"Put it through."

And when the communications link was established, Samji saw a distorted and corrupt video signal, but could just barely make out Lieutenant Oseno Jureth. He turned to his science officer Rexil.

"Can you clean it up, Lieutenant?"

"I can try to boost the carrier signal by shunting extra auxiliary power, but we'll only have several minutes for the communication," said the Trill, and Samji nodded his approval.

After the picture was improved, Samji spoke in a clipped tone.

"Alsea, this is Starbase 10, we read you... somewhat... through the anomaly's interference."

Before Jureth could ask the inevitable, he held up a hand.

"Our communications system has been down for hours, Lieutenant... sorry for the black-out. Also, we only have a few minutes of decent signal, so make it fast."

"Aye Sir," Jureth replied. "A Class IV probe that I dispatched toward the Artemis last known position reported transponder signals from Federation shuttlecrafts, Sir, in the last data stream we received from it. You also need to be aware that we are unable to engage MVAM without the possibility of catastrophically damaging our primary warp core. Even if we could get the ship separated, Sir, the primary section would only be able to make warp 6 because of damage sustained during our fight with the Romulans, making it useless for the containment operation. As of now, we have begun maneuvering around the anomaly at warp 9."

"That would slow down the containment operation significantly," commented starbase XO Keren Schmidt with a deep frown on her face.

"Hmm, very well, Lieutenant, that will have to do. We can't afford to have one-third of your ship so far separated from the rest," Samji decided, certain this would put the tactically-minded Lieutenant at ease at least a little bit.

He then asked pointedly:

"Tell me, Mister Oseno, did your probe happen to ascertain anything about the fate of the Artemis beyond shuttle transponder signals? On our side, the Wisconsin has reported that the entire saucer section has actually gone to warp! We're also concerned about the fate of the crew, as the Wisconsin was not able to determine an exact casualty count."

Niomo gasped as he spun around in his chair.

"The *saucer section*? Sonnova... How... Of course! Slingshotting around the microsingularity from the destroyed Scimitar! Very impressive, Captain Kheren..."

Jureth turned and looked at Cat Steele for an answer to the fleet captain's question ignoring the engineer for the moment.

"Cat, were there Artemis log files in the probe data?"

"There are...but there's something else it looks like the probe recorded a data stream...from the Artemis saucer section in old morse code... the computer is translating it... yes, Sir, Captain Onia is right! Captain Kheren used his stardrive to ram the Romulan ship and evacuated all his crew to the saucer. Then they went to warp; according to what the probe sent back, they used the singularity to slingshot themselves into warp back toward the Azimuth Horizon."

Jureth looked at the fleet captain.

"It seems that Captain Onia is on to something, Sir, but I think Commander Lire may something to add...Commander?"

Niomo closed his eyes for a moment, deep in thought.

"Hmmm. Well, two things come to mind. Firstly, they clearly do not have any communication systems, or else they would have contacted someone. Secondly, I applaud Kheren for trying to get his ship back into the operation, but I am not sure how useful they will be. If for some reason they need to decelerate, they might be trapped or dragged into the anomaly. I'd hate to be the one to tell Kheren to abort his mission, but from the bits of information I have, I'd try to get something to contact them and try to get them home."

Samji listened to the new information and opinions with interest. He didn't think now was the right time to be worried about what the other ship was doing as it appeared they had competently succeeded in staying in this mission.

"They still have impulse," he reminded the Engineer, "so I don't see why they couldn't safely navigate near the anomaly. As for recalling them, I don't feel it is my place to do so. As far as we know, Captain Kheren is still the most experienced commanding officer with the Azimuth Horizon phenomena; it was discovered under his command after all and he went to it more often than anyone alive. That means it's his decision and his alone whether to stay in or not. We need that trilitium anyway if Lieutenant Commander Syntron's theory is accurate."

The starbase commander made a pause before adding:

"Captain Onia reports that they disappeared from sensors after going to warp, likely due to a time dilation effect from doing it without warp engines. When they reappear, if they reached Warp Nine, it will take them 23 hours to arrive to accomplish their part of the mission. If you're also limited to Warp Nine, it will take you 39 hours to go around the entire Anomaly. Depending on where you are when they reappear, you may be able to provide them with support when they arrive, but you may not. And this is all assuming you don't run into any more trouble..."

No one had forgotten the enemy forces arrayed against them; but he still felt bound to remind it to the crew which had seemingly dealt with their own opposition. Now was not a time to fall into any false sense of security when fanatics and Klingons could suddenly choose them as a new target.

"Good luck, Lieutenant, Lieutenant Commander," Samji was able to add with a nod to each man before the connection became too distorted and fuzzy again to continue the exchange.

Niomo sighed and shook his head as the screen went back to an exterior view.

"Captain, do you ever think Starfleet knows more than it lets on?"

Jureth let out a sigh of his own.

"If I said no Commander... would anyone believe me?"

Then turning his attention back to the bridge crew, he ordered:

"Keep us steady on course, Mister Hunter; maintain warp 9."

As the Alsea continued on course, one of crew was not quite as dedicated as the others to the ship's mission. The human, a junior engineering crewman, had finished his scheduled shift in engineering and was now making his way toward the Prometheus Class vessel's secondary computer core where he hoped to stall Lotus Fleet's operations until his Horizon's Children comrades could disable the rest of Starfleet's efforts and send them all to paradise.

He had thought his operation would be over before the Alsea launched as the Vulcan security officer and the ship's doctor had removed his co-conspirators from the ship. Then the inventive chief engineer had foiled his sabotage of the ship's warp core. Now, the would-be saboteur knew there were security officer's about so he had tried to time his moves as the shift's changed. As he arrived near the secondary computer core, he found no one in sight. He opened the manual access panel and set about bypassing the lock on the door, using his engineering authorization.

In the ready room, Jureth sat contemplating the path that had taken him from security chief to commanding officer, and whether or not he was going to continue along this track when the Alsea's mission was over; assuming they all survived. Rachelle Rivers was still technically the Alsea's captain, but even the doctor couldn't say how long still her injuries would put her out of commission. At the helm of the Alsea, Shawn Hunter was carefully watching his readouts as he navigated them at high warp around the unstable Azimuth Horizon.

Suddenly, the early warning program that Lieutenant Pel had installed on the ship sounded a proximity alarm.

A tendril from the Azimuth Horizon rapidly materialized in front of the vessel, seemingly from nowhere. The automated program setup by the ship's science officer raised the shields and immediately began an emergency deceleration of the Alsea as Lieutenant Hunter frantically began correcting her course. Hunter and the ship's computer were quick but not quick enough as the Alsea came into contact with the edge of the tendril. The Alsea shook violently and alarm klaxons screamed throughout the ship. Jureth was nearly thrown to the deck as the starship dropped out of warp and he practically ran out onto the bridge.

"Report!"

"Sir we've hit a tendril!" Hunter reported. "Pel's early warning program saved us from being destroyed!"

"Damage report! Commander Lire, warp core status?!" Jureth demanded.

In Engineering, the now prone Niomo staggered to his feet and fell into his chair. He was lucky that he had moved away from his desk a moment earlier, as he might have hit his body on the metal of it.

He heard the Captain call for a report as he brought up the damage assessment.

"Sir, Primary warp core has suffered no damage. Secondary core... minor fracture to the matter inducer; and we might have a small crack and leaking plasma, which we can seal. Tertiary core... thank God, it has suffered no damage the computer can detect. Not sure we'd have the replacement parts for any more damage to her. I'm sending teams out for visual confirmation now. To be safe, I'm erecting a level 10 forcefield around all three cores and I'm limiting us to warp 2 for now. I'd highly suggest moving us away from this beastie."

Above the noise of the alarm klaxon, Jureth responded with a strained tone.

"Thank you Commander and I agree! Bridge out!"

As he closed the intercom channel the Bajoran then yelled:

"Computer, silence that damn alarm!"

The computer bleeped in compliance and Jureth nodded.

"Much better, now, Cat where is that tendril?"

"Off our starboard quarter."

"Mister Hunter; put some distance between us and the anomaly...carefully."

"Aye, Sir."

As the Alsea maneuvered slightly away from the Azimuth Horizon, the saboteur, Crewman Michael Krease, was picking himself up off the deck. When the tendril had hit, he had been thrown clear of the door pad and now, as he approached it, he saw his access work had been reset. He cursed under his breath and started about reentering the codes.

Unbeknownst to him, one of the acting captain's ordered security patrols had arrived on his deck and was beginning its rounds. The saboteur finished the remote access code and the doors slid open just as Security Petty Officer Percy and Crewman Valdoff rounded the corner of the corridor chatting idly.

Percy heard the whoosh of the door and saw the back side of the man walking inside.

"Did you see that?" He asked Valdoff.

"Da," the Russian replied, "I saw it."

Percy drew his phaser.

"Let's check it out."

The two security officers moved quickly to the door which had closed by this time and Krease had locked it down again.

"It won't open," Percy said to his partner.

"Ve should call eet in," Valdoff said in his thick accent.

Percy nodded and tapped his combadge.

"Percy to bridge; Sir we have a problem."

While the two security men were reporting their issue, Krease was already at work. He had logged into the secondary computer core and was working on accessing the main computer banks but, with the extra security measures in place since launch, it was taking him longer than it should have.

On the bridge, Oseno Jureth received the security patrol's report.

"This the bridge; Oseno here, Mister Percy. What is it?"

"Sir, Valdoff and I are outside of the secondary computer core and, as we came around the corner on patrol, we saw someone enter; but now, we can't get in."

"Acknowledged, Percy. Stand fast and guard that door."

"Aye, Sir."

Jureth turned to Lieutenant Steele since she now took over his former security leadership duties.

"Cat, take a team go get whoever that is."

"Aye, Sir; on my way."

As the athletic woman left the bridge, the acting captain of the Alsea issued orders to the computer.

"Computer, restrict all command functions to the bridge consoles, authorization Oseno six-one-bravo-juliet."

"Acknowledged; command functions now restricted to bridge consoles only."

"Computer, isolate secondary computer core from main core using security firewalls; authorization Oseno six-one-bravo-juliet."

"Acknowledged; secondary core is now isolated from primary core. Warning, there is now no back up computer core."

Jureth nodded and tapped his combadge.

"Oseno to Steele; status?"

"Just left the armory," she replied. "Proceeding to secondary computer core."

"Keep me apprised; Oseno out."

Down in Engineering, Niomo gathered his assistants. Once again, he was calling upon them to fan out across the ship and conduct repairs.

"Ok, I will make this quick people." He started, using a seriousness they had seldom seen in him, even after all they'd been through so far. "Warner, check the coolant pipes for all three cores. Once you confirm their status, check in with me. Take two other officers... extra eyes and ears never hurt."

The young woman nodded.

"Aye, Sir. Should I check our prior work too?"

"Affirmative. Give every inch of those pipes a once over. We can't afford to have a leak we can't detect with the computer."

He turned to Thompson and continued.

"James; go to Cargobay 4. Your old friend needs a check-up. Can you do that alone? I'd like to send repair teams out to other decks.

Thompson nodded.

"Should be fine. I'll call in if I need any help."

Niomo sighed. He was about to continue issue orders when he noticed two security officers walk into Engineering and take position beside the door. After a moment, he continued.

"Brenes; take a team and go to the tertiary core. The computer didn't register any faults, but that doesn't seem right. We took a major hit. Sparbok, core 2. Same orders. I'll remain here to coordinate and check the primary core. Dismissed."

As the officers hustled out of the room and called out to other engineers to help them, Niomo contemplated the security officers. He took a step towards them, before shaking his head and contacted the bridge.

"Lire to the Bridge. Two security officers just took position down here. What is going on?"

Waiting for Cat Steele's call that she'd apprehended their suspect, Jureth was only a little surprised to hear from Commander Lire.

"It seems one of the security patrols saw an uninvited guest enter the secondary computer core, Lieutenant Commander. Whoever it is locked down the door and I've sent Lieutenant Steele and a security team to open it. The extra security in your space is a precaution and I've locked out command functions from everywhere except the bridge as well as isolating the primary computer core from the secondary. I expect Steele will apprehend the suspect shortly and I will restore everything to normal; but for now, I'm not taking chances."

Niomo sighed as the com channel closed. He guessed that his sabotaged coolant line theory was correct. He was still fairly shaky on who or what these "Children" were, but he supposed it didn't matter.

As the two men were conversing, Cat Steele and her team were moving quickly down the corridor and approaching the secondary computer core, all of them armed with compression phaser rifles from the ship's armory. Cat was also carrying three Mark I stun grenades or "flashbangs" as they were commonly called. As they came up on the computer core room, they were greeted by Percy and Valdoff who were standing outside the door.

"How many?" Cat asked Percy

"Just one, Ma'am, that we saw."

Cat nodded and turned to the Vulcan Ensign behind her.

"S'Lerek, the door opener."

As S'Lerek moved forward, he produced a manual door override that would release the lock on any door on the ship. They were kept under constant watch in the ship's armory and Lieutenant Oseno had ordered they only be checked out to security officers, the captain, and the XO. S'Lerek attached the override to the door and looked at Cat for instructions. She then spoke to the team softly

"S'Lerek will release the door; Percy and Valdhoff will pull it open and I'll toss in a stun grenade. That will bring whoever it is out. If you have to fire, make sure you check your shots. We don't want to fry the computer core if we can avoid it."

She made eye contact with each one of them and received affirmative nods.

"Okay; S'Lerek, enter the code."

While the Vulcan security ensign operated the door release, inside the computer core room, Krease was panicking. He couldn't access the ship's primary computer core at all. It looked as if the secondary core had been completely isolated from the system. In the back of his mind, he knew that could only mean one thing: they knew he was there, and they were likely coming for him.

As S'Lerek stepped away from the door to the secondary computer core, Percy and Valdoff each grabbed one side of the door and pulled. Slowly, the door opened and Cat grabbed a stun grenade from her belt and primed it.

"Eyes and ears," she said to her team so they would be able to react once the grenade went off instead of being paralyzed by its effects.

When the door was open, Cat rolled the grenade into the room. Krease ducked down behind the terminal he'd been working at, holding a small hand phaser he'd smuggled aboard the Alsea before the security chief had cracked down on the ship's security. As the door opened, Krease expected a security team, but nothing happened... until he heard the clank of something hitting the starship's deck. Before he could reach it, the flashbang went off and the brightest light Krease had ever seen filled the room, followed by an ear splitting pop. The would-be saboteur was instantly blind and deaf.

The Alsea's security team stormed the room, lead by Cat who swept her phaser rifle in front of her and moved to the right side of the room. S'Lerek, right behind her, went to the left with the rest of the team; "cutting the pie" and sweeping the entire room.

It was Cat who found Krease curled up behind the terminal.

"Hands!" she yelled. "Let me see your hands!"

Krease was unable to comply, but Cat's yell was enough to bring the rest of her team to her location. Ensign S'Lerek lowered his phaser rifle and swept its tactical sling to one side as he knelt over the immobile Krease. With the poise attributed to his species, the Vulcan secured the phaser Krease had been holding and then used magnetic binders to secure his hands behind his back. Two other members of the team pulled the man to his feet just as his vision was beginning to clear and Cat tapped her combadge.

"Steele to bridge; we have the suspect. All clear."

From the command chair, Jureth had been waiting anxiously to hear from the security force. In his mind, he wanted nothing more than to be the one leading them, but instead, he was sitting and waiting, unable to control the outcome of their assault on the computer core room. When Cat's call finally came through, Oseno did his best to hide his relief from the bridge crew.



"Good work Cat. Bring him to the bridge. I'd like a word with him."

"Aye Sir, Steele out."

Jureth nodded in satisfaction that his people had done what he'd trained them to do and then activated the ship's intercom.

"Attention all hands, this is Lieutenant Oseno. We've had an incident in the secondary computer core and a would-be saboteur has been apprehended. The arrest was the result of two alert crewmen reporting something they saw. We already know that these cultists are devious and will stop at nothing to hinder our operations. So I'm asking all of you to stay alert and be aware of anything unusual in your workspaces. Keep up the good work. Oseno out."

Jureth closed the channel and then addressed the computer.

"Computer, restore all command functions to normal authorization Oseno Bravo Juliet six-one."

"Acknowledged; command functions restored."

"Computer, reestablish link between primary and secondary computer cores."

"Acknowledged; secondary computer core link restored."

As the computer carried out Jureth's instructions, the bridge turbolift doors opened. Cat Steele and two other security officers stepped out, followed by their prisoner and two more security officers. Jureth rose from the command chair and faced the man that Cat brought forward.

"Who are you?" Jureth demanded of the man

"I am one of the Chosen, " the man replied, "and you have no hope of succeeding. We will all go to paradise together!"

Jureth scowled.

"What was your mission?"

"To deliver this ship to the gates of salvation!"

Oseno had heard enough. He looked at Cat.

"Lock him up and throw away the key. Make sure he's guarded around the clock and erect level 10 forcefields around the brig. He'll stand trial when we get back to Starbase 10."

"Aye Sir."

The security team and their prisoner departed and Jureth activated his communicator.

"Oseno to Lire; things should be back to normal, Commander. Let me know when its safe to resume our previous course and speed."

"Understood, Captain." Niomo responded, "I..."

He was interrupted by a flash on his console. He opened the channel.

"This is Lire."

"Commander, Warner here. We finished checking the warp cores and our prior work. Everything still looks fairly stable. Core 2 does have a plasma leak, but it isn't serious. I left some of my crew there to patch it. I'll check on it once I'm done here....here being the core 2 Matter Inducer. It's fused. We are going to need to shut her down while I replace it. After that, we should be fine."

"Understood." Niomo responded and closed the engineer's communication. "I assume you were listening Captain? We will have to disengage core 2 for about a half hour. It shouldn't affect our ability to go to warp speed...but it will cripple our maximum speed to warp 6 at maximum. We could go faster, if needed, but with the damage we've taken, I'd rather not push her. During that time, we should be able to repair any other ruptured conduits and other minor damage we suffered during the tentacle hit."

"Understood, Commander Lire; do what you have to do and keep me updated. Oseno out."

As the comm closed in engineering, Niomo stood and replicated himself a cup of coffee. He sipped it for a few minutes as James Thompson walked back into his office.

"I checked the EPS main, Sir. Everything is fine. Should I start taking teams and checking the rest of the ship?"

The Alsea's chief engineer thought for a moment before answering.

"Yes. The final damage report just came in a few minutes ago. Read it over and disperse the crews. We will be taking core 2 offline to repair that inducer, so you've got thirty five, forty minutes. Use that time to fix anything that got banged up."

Niomo handed the man a PADD with the report. Thompson took it and frowned.

"There's a lot here. Only forty minutes? I'll prioritize any conduit ruptures, I suppose..."

"Do what you can," Niomo responded. "I will be here helping with the the inducer replacement."

With that, Thompson turned and left, calling some crewmen to begin repairs.

At the same moment, on the bridge, acting captain Oseno Jureth returned to the command chair and addressed the helm.

"Mister Hunter, resume our course around the anomaly, warp 6."

"Aye Sir, course plotted and laid in."

"Engage."

The Alsea accelerated back into warp, resuming her course around the Azimuth Horizon. The Bajoran rose from the center seat and walked up behind Shawn Hunter.

"Thank you for your excellent work, Mister Hunter. I'll be in the ready room for awhile. You have the bridge."

"Just doing my job, Sir... and aye, Sir."

Jureth left the bridge and sat himself down behind the desk in the ready room. That had been a close call with the subspace tendril and the Alsea didn't need any more of those. He would have to thank the crafty Ferengi science officer if he ever saw her again.

Jureth leaned back in the Alsea's ready room chair behind the large black desk, reflecting on recent events. The subspace tendril the ship had grazed had set their trip around the anomaly back several hours and he didn't even know if what they were doing was having any effect.

They had no sensor or communications contact with any of the rest of the fleet or Starbase 10 for that matter and likely wouldn't until they finished their circumvention of the Azimuth Horizon. They were deaf and blind, and short of not one but subsequent commanding officers.

The only thing the Bajoran tactical officer could do was shake his head at the entire situation... and wonder how the ship's chief engineer was getting on with the repairs. He decided not to bother Commander Lire just yet though, but tapped his combadge to another signal.

"Oseno to Steele,"

"Send it...Captain," answered the familiar energetic yet definitely feminine voice.

"Stop calling me that," he growled in annoyance.

"Well, you are..."

"Not really. I'm just keeping the seat warm."

"If you say so..."

There was a short pause before Oseno finally asked:

"How is our prisoner?"

"Locked up tight, and forcefields are in place."

"Good... how are the teams?"

"They're managing... Don't worry about it, you have an entire ship to run."

"They're still my people."

"Let T'Lana and I handle it, Oseno."

Jureth sighed, Cat was right, but he didn't like all this waiting... and even less all this relying on others to do the job you asked of them... and assume the consequences of your mistakes in your stead, with no way to do anything about it when it happened.

"Alright, you win. I'll see you when you get back to the bridge. Oseno out."

Jureth sighed again and began looking at his padd where duty rosters from the other departments were awaiting his approval. Without anyone ready to assume XO duties since he had to take command, that meant that he was forced to assume the command style of a century before, when starship captains had to do it all alone. This administrative burden added to all the responsibilities and decision-making duties did not help to endear the job to him.

Nevertheless, he *would* do it... for now.

An hour later, Niomo contacted him.

"Captain, You can return to our cruising speed. All repairs are complete. I'm still running some diagnostics, but I don't expect anything to pop up faulty. As before the tendril, Warp 9 is clear."

After closing the channel, the Alsea's chief engineer sipped his coffee and leaned back into his chair. He had worked some miracles in the past day after all.

Now back in the command chair Jureth acknowledged the all clear from engineering.

"Thank you, Commander. Please pass along my thanks to your entire team. You've done excellent work under extreme circumstances, bridge out."

Oseno then looked down at the helm.

"Mister Hunter, resume top speed of warp 9. Let's finish this."

"Aye Sir, increasing speed to warp 9."

Jureth sat back in the command chair as the Alsea accelerated. It would take them nearly another full day to finish their coralling of the anomaly barring any other unforeseen problems. The Bajoran couldn't help but wonder what had happen to the rest of the fleet in the three other quadrants of the whole containmentment operation.

And what would happen next.

\* \* \*

## **Captain's log**

**Stardate: unknown**

**We have successfully managed to achieve warp speed despite the loss of our stardrive and currently moving towards our designed theater of operations. For his technical achievement in this and in conceiving the trilitium emitters that will put the threat of the Azimuth Horizon to rest, My first officer, Mister Syntron, should be awarded the Cochrane Medal of Excellence. For his demonstrated leadership and excellence in his assigned responsibilities, I also ask that his field commission to the executive chair be officially confirmed and for him to be considered for promotion. Commendations also to the entire crew of the Artemis, which has shown the best of what is expected of Starfleet officers in the direst and most difficult circumstances.**

**These circumstances lead me to order the ramming of the Romulan dreadnought with our stardrive to stop its incursion, nullify its threat to the sector and avoid interstellar conflict. Despite the blatant act of war the Empire committed by violating our space with cloaked warships, openly threatening the security of the Federation and attacking without provocation, I am confident that the Federation Council will not answer them with a formal declaration of war; the very shame of their dismal failure and of seeing their unforgivable duplicity exposed when we will return Admiral Tomalak with proof of their actions will be so much, I suspect the Empire will go into another of its periodical isolation period and, for a while, crawl back into the shadows. Between the shattering of their civilization after the Hobus catastrophe and this last crushing defeat, they will be left too vulnerable to consider further military or covert action outside of their territory, let alone war.**

**We are now left with our primary task; contain and nullify the threat of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. Our maneuver to achieve warp speed however has exposed us to time dilation for a few seconds. How much time elapsed in normal space as we transited near the speed of light has yet to be ascertained, as our long range sensors are still under repair. Hopefully, merely hours or days will have gone by; but we might reintegrate normal space years or even centuries after.**

**Let us hope that, in whatever time we will find ourselves in, Lotus Fleet will have prevailed and there will still be a universe to welcome us back.**

### **Captain's Personal Log**

**Whatever the outcome of my decisions, I have to assume full responsibility about our final fate as much as about the destruction of my ship.**

**When I set out for this mission, I knew that there was a distinct possibility that the Artemis would be destroyed, as we were ordered to literally shield the Alsea in a potential armed confrontation with the incoming Romulan Dreadnought Shavok. That is why I ordered most of my crew off the ship before we launched; unnecessary exposing to sought out mortal danger the lives of unneeded science researchers, maintenance technicians, junior security personnel and relief nurses would not only have been useless, it would have been criminally insane, especially on a ship already rigged to be fully operational with but a handful of people. Alas and despite all we had been through, a good number of my crew, including my former first officer, was too overwhelmed with childish impulses of imaginary glory and egotistical misplaced pride to understand, or even keep fate in the judgment of their commanding officer. I regret the loss of so many good people; but I have absolutely no regret whatsoever in my decision. They might all resent me or even despise me for it; but they are still alive to do so.**

**However, when we set out to face the Romulans and the anomaly, I expected heavy and crippling damage; shields usually break during any intense swordfight and we were ordered to be the shield to the Alsea's sword. But I truly did not expect to go and ram the enemy. I am relieved that my foresight allowed me to quickly evacuate the reduced crew to the saucer section and use its last resort separation feature to do so without losing any of them. But the fact remains: I ordered the destruction of the starship Artemis.**

**Starship commanders losing a ship rarely if ever get another command; such opportunities are still rare and only given to someone proven wise enough and responsible enough to assume such a privilege. The destruction of one's vessel hardly qualifies...**

**I am ready and willing to assume the consequences of my decisions. In my own judgment, this was the only option left to me to ensure the safety of my crew and of the citizens of the United Federation of Planets against an overwhelming enemy force who could have destroyed us at any moment and, repeatedly and without provocation, almost managed to do so; or worse, an enemy who could have easily escaped us, with no possibility for us of stopping that faster, more powerful enemy before it could have reached Starbase 10 or the anomaly or any other target and cause untold destruction and loss of life.**

**I hereby state here for the record; I deeply regret the loss of so many Romulan lives, regardless of the circumstances that brought upon such a tragedy. But, would the same circumstances arise again, I would make the same decisions and take the same actions without hesitation. Because the steps I took, and the order in which I took them, were all the proper steps to ensure the safety and security of the United Federation of Planets and of my crew.**

Kheren ended the log recordings and kept looking out at the streaking stars beyond the high and narrow window of his ready room. His logs would be the first things scrutinized by the board of inquiry that would inevitably come when they would get back to Starbase 10. The loss of a starship required a full investigation into the circumstances of this loss.

It was not a question of putting the blame on anyone, be it the ship's commander or anyone else; it was the necessary step to take note of those circumstances and make every effort to ensure that such a loss would not happen again.

Of course, the easiest way to do that was to remove the former commander from further opportunity to repeat the tragedy...

Kheren was fully aware of that and ready to accept such a judgment. He had been given the responsibility of commanding this ship. He had made the decision. He had destroyed her.

If he was to be removed because of his decision, then so be it. He was already mourning his beloved ship, his first, and most probably last, command; but he regretted nothing. The Romulan threat had been nullified... the simple fact that the anomaly was still there was proof enough that the Alsea had, one way or another, stopped the Romulan task force... And, most importantly, no one under his command had paid for it. They were all alive; they were all safe; they were all to be commended.

To him, that was all that mattered.

Starfleet vessel captains are to consider the lives of their crewmembers as sacred. In any potentially hostile situation, the captain will place the lives of his crew above the fate of his ship.

This was much, much more to him than Starfleet General Order 17; it was at the core of his being. They were more than shipmates or colleagues; they were his clan, his family. And to any Andorian, even more so to Kheren Kalel Th'Ch'Leryll Keth Reiji, master duellist of Andoria, self-exiled Messiah and Abomination of his people, nothing came before family... his crew... not even one's own life... or career.

His musings were interrupted by the chime of his ready room door.

"Enter."

Syntron stood outside of the Captain's office and entered upon hearing the barely audible invitation of the commanding officer emanating from behind the door.

He stepped up to the desk and announced:

"Captain, we now have seventy-one point two percent of the trilitium emitters complete. Lieutenants Baoule, Blakely and I have worked out a back-up strategy to ensure that the torpedo launchers will remain within recommended temperature parameters during our succession of torpedo discharges."

"That is quite earlier than I expected. Good work, Number One."

Although listening attentively to his report, the first officer could sense that the commanding officer was indeed preoccupied with other thoughts at that moment. He then chose to break his standard etiquette in his inquiry.

"Sir, are you... *concerned* about the potential outcome of the Starfleet board of inquiry following the conclusion of our mission?"

Kheren sat down into his chair behind his transluscent desk, nodding to the Vulcan to do the same. He took a moment to gather his thoughts before replying.

"I'm more concerned about keeping this crew alive and whole... and have a universe to bring them safely back to. But then again, loosing one's ship is always a matter of concern. As for the... potential outcome, as you put it... well, maybe I am."

The Andorian made a pause and then leaned forward on his desk and crossed his fingers between them.

"You're a logical being, Mister Syntron... I know, it goes without saying... so, what do *you* think?"

Looking intently at the brawny yet troubled Andorian Captain seated before him, the first officer responded in his ever stoic manner.

"Considering that we are here now, Captain, able to engage in this conversation... it just seemed virtually improbable that we would have that luxury then, as we stood on that bridge at that moment and faced that maniacal Romulan commander controlling that menacing warship intent on our destruction."

The first officer eased his stance slightly in the seat opposite of the Captain as he tried to gather his thoughts into words; which in most circumstances was effortless... but not in this situation.

"I strived to think of a logical solution at that time, Sir... yet, I was unable to formulate a viable option. Your call, Captain, as bold and dangerous as it initially appeared, accomplished what the most revered captains throughout Starfleet History have been able to accomplish on such rare occasions: turn imminent death into a fighting chance for life. We are still here, Captain, and we may yet have the opportunity to at least attempt to bring an end to this anomaly's path of destruction. The Romulan commander aboard that ship, in his reckless rage, left you no alternative in regards to what you had to do to ensure the safety of this crew... and afterward, with their intent to potentially attack Starbase 10 and then heedlessly ignite the anomaly... Sir, I am confident that Starfleet will recognize your actions in context of facing this invading force and the widespread ramifications that would have been a result if you had neglected to do so."

Syntron was not certain if he was being clear in what he was trying to convey, so he added:

"Captain, you also possess Romulan Admiral Tomalak... who requested asylum aboard this ship. He will be able to corroborate these extenuating circumstances... in addition to every bridge officer who stood beside you when you made that call... and will stand beside you again before any board of inquiry."

Kheren listened to the elaborate analysis of his Vulcan first officer with no apparent reaction on his rigid dark-blue face; but his antennae wobbled slightly to the rythm of Syntron's words, not just because his sense of hearing was there but because they were highly sensitive to his emotional state. But even another Andorian would have had a hard time reading them at the moment.

He wasn't even sure how he felt himself.

After a moment, he sighed and nodded.

"You are about to tell me that a desperate action is the only logical choice in a desperate situation. I hope there will be enough Vulcans on the board to see it that way too. "

He stood up and went to the replicator to order his infamous captain's brew and a cup of Vulcan spiced tea he knew Syntron favored. Once he gave it to him, he went around the desk and back to his seat as he added:

"As for our distinguished guest, who can predict what he will tell? He is Romulan; his sense of duty, inbred since infancy and held up throughout his long career, will make him say and do whatever he will judge best for his Empire. He could not care less about me and our rules . He asked for asylum; he did *not* surrender. No Romulan *ever* would; and even this asylum request is unheard of since Admiral Jerok, half a century ago... But our logs sent to both Starbase 10 and the Alsea will speak unabridgedly about what happened back there."

The Andorian took a sip of his thick grey smelly drink.

"I am of course much gratified... no, deeply honored, by the vote of confidence and show of loyalty you express for yourself and on behalf of the crew... but in the end, I alone will still have to answer for what happened. No one should take the fall for me or with me; no one shall or will."

Before he took another gulp of the pungent brew, he finished:

"But the sentiment... I am sorry Mister Syntron.... the *thought*, is most appreciated."

Syntron took another sip of the Vulcan spiced tea as he listened to the carefully chosen words as the Captain concluded his statement. Then, with a slight hesitation, he responded.

"With all due respect Captain, there is not a crew member currently aboard this vessel who would perceive standing up for you and your decision as taking a fall. You stood before the entire crew prior to this mission and unabashedly presented the dangers awaiting us and warned us that we would most likely not be coming back alive. We reduced our complement to a skeleton crew as ordered and despite the obstacles and hazards we have faced thus far, Captain, not one crew member has perished. If we in fact had a full crew as in previously missions, many would have lost their lives in the attack from the Shavok. Again, this too is a merit of your foresightedness and leadership. Placing this in logical perspective, Sir, a loss of the stardrive section of a relatively antiquated starship as the only Federation casualty in these circumstances is no small feat; especially given the role that this played in allowing us to resolve two major obstacles simultaneously."

Syntron then took another long sip of the Vulcan spiced tea as he gazed intently at the Andorian Captain before him.

Kheren listened to the words of the Vulcan with a mixture of surprise and... let's face it, pride. And the way he spoke, completely dispassionately as he exposed the cold hard facts as only one of his people could, made them all the more vibrant and passionate to him; indeed because of his utter lack of emotion when voicing them. His firmness, his calmness, his clinical detachment over it all made what he said all the more convincing.

"One thing I will say for you, Mister Syntron; you do know how to lift your commanding officer's spirit. I believe your predecessor would have preferred for me to do the same, to uplift the crew with promises of success and words of total confidence in our upcoming triumph, instead of drumming them down with the cold hard truth," he said after a moment, nodding to Syntron. "Not everyone is logical as Vulcans or Saurians or disciplined as Klingons or Andorians... notice how all but one Bajoran on board requested transfer. But that is the past now; I believe luck had as much to do as my... foresight in our continuing survival; that and even more the trust, discipline and dedication of those who stayed on board... and also those who stayed behind."

He drank a bit of his brew before adding:

"As for our sacrifice being the only one... I truly hope that you are right. We know the Lotus and the Spectre were headed into the sector directly facing a possible Klingon incursion... As the McKenzie and the rest of the fleet might be facing interference from the Horizon Children cult. May our loss, indeed, be the only one."

Syntron nodded in affirmation as the Captain spoke regarding the rest of the fleet.

"In regards to this Captain, the next task I will work on is to bring our long-range communication systems back to full-functioning mode so that we will have the ability to determine the actual status of our remaining fleet by restoring our ability to communicate with our allied ships once again. I will be assembling additional crew members to complete this undertaking as quickly and efficiently as possible."

"Agreed. Mister Cheonghi should help you with this. He's most familiar with all ship systems and resources. And Mister Baoule can provide you both with the engineering personnel and equipment. You should also see that our long range sensors are fully operational by the time we will get to the anomaly. With all the subspace interference it causes, we will need both in top condition for them to be of any use at all."

"Acknowledged Captain. I will oversee the restoration of both of these systems utilizing our key personnel as recommended."



As he stood up in front of the desk, Syntron then inquired:

"Is there anything else, Sir?"

Kheren stood up and went around his desk to stand before the taller Vulcan.

"You know, with all this excitement and your excellence at performing your new duties, I never asked you how you feel about being executive officer..."

"Feelings about my change in title aboard this ship are irrelevant, Captain," Syntron responded respectfully with an elevated eyebrow held in place.

Kheren's antennae perked up and curved slightly inward with the amusement heard in his voice.

"Mister Syntron, you are Vulcan and I am Andorian. Our two peoples go way back... And *I* was trained several years by a Vulcan master. So you very well know that *I* know better."

Releasing the brow and standing a bit more at ease while facing the Captain, Syntron then supplemented his initial response.

"I find that my role as executive officer is more efficient... in that I am able to directly implement and complete a multiplicity of tasks in various departments simultaneously without the need to obtain authorization from a series of individual officers; just the Captain. This saves time, effort and energy."

The first officer pondered for a few additional seconds before speaking further.

"In addition, I can offer my services and ideas to several departments in a manner that is unique compared to representing the perspective of only the science department."

Then, this time without hesitation, he concluded:

"And lastly but nevertheless importantly, this role affords me the opportunity to interact with the Captain directly in discussions and decisions that impact all aspects of the ship, her crew and a mission, such as the one we are currently undertaking. This has the benefit of keeping my mind appropriately active and engaged, as any Vulcan should expect to accomplish if they are to continue to increase their intellectual diversity and leadership capacity as a representative in Starfleet."

"Well, I am glad you *feel* that way, Mister Syntron," Kheren shot back with the same amused tone. But this time, it was also laced with satisfaction and relief.

Standing straighter before his XO, the captain then said with his chin elevated in the typical Andorian posture of respect:

"Your service aboard this ship, be it as chief science officer or as exec, has been nothing but exemplary. I for one do feel fortunate and honored to have you on board my ship... well, what's left of it... and for the time we have left. Carry on, Lieutenant Commander."

Bowing his head slightly as a sign of respect and then looking directly up at commanding officer again, Syntron responded.

"Thank you Captain for the complementary assessment of my service aboard this ship... even if this includes now only the mere remnants of it. I shall nevertheless endeavor to honor this bestowal of acknowledgement and gratitude with continual service that is commendable and efficient."

Kheren nodded.

"Well as they say on your planet, Mister Syntron; *Vu dvin dor etwel*... your service honors us."

Returning to his desk, the captain just added:

"if there is nothing else, Number One, I'll release you to your duties. But do not forget to take some rest before we get to the Azimuth Horizon. We do not know yet what condition we will truly face once we get there."

"acknowledged, Captain," Syntron agreed as he turned and headed out of the door.

As he walked back onto the bridge of the Artemis, the first officer knew though that there was a multitude of imperative objectives that needed to be addressed before any rest would even be considered.

As he stepped onto the Artemis command center, acting tactical officer Tyvya rose up to her full towering frame.

"How is the captain's mood, Mister Syntron?"

Knowing the multiple levels from which her concern may have emanated, the first officer took a moment to consider the question carefully before responding.

"Considering our current circumstances, the Captain's mood, as you expressed, appears rather sanguine."

He then added:

"But as you realize, Tyvya, this skill of determining one's disposition is not one my specializations."

The Andorian giantess simply nodded and signalled Lieutenant Mrrriish to take over for her as she stepped towards the lefthand bridge door and disappeared behind it.

"Mister Syntron," then said chief engineer assistant Patricia Blakely, "Mister Baoule would like you to join him in torpedo magazine room 1 to finalize the preparation of the trilitium probes."

"acknowledged, Lieutenant Blakely. Notify Mister Baoule that I am proceeding there now."

The first officer headed to the turbolift and engaged the device.

"Deck 9."

The lift began its swift decent to the lower levels of the saucer section. Syntron stepped onto the corridor on deck 9 and headed directly toward the torpedo magazine room.

Arriving into the dwelling filled with the casings and a variety of components from disassembled probes and torpedoes scattered in an orderly manner throughout the room, the first officer caught sight of chief engineer Robert Baoule.

Walking up to the engineer assiduously presiding over the flurry of activity transpiring all around him, the first officer inquired:

"What is our current status of this operation, Lieutenant?"

The bald black man flashed him a shining smile.

"Steady as she goes, Sir. At present rate, we will be ready an hour ahead of schedule."

Around them, a dozen technicians were working like clockwork over as many torpedo casings, one opening the casing identical to that of a class VIII or IX probe, disassembling it before moving it to the next crewman who removed the warhead to give it to a security officer before him with a disposal unit for the antimatter charge.

His neighbor replaced it with an adapted sensor package of which a technician behind him had reversed the circuitry that would emit instead of recording radiation emissions. The reconfigured projectile went to the last crewmember installing the trillithium container to the emitter before sealing shut the casing and sending it down the torpedo tube magazine. With two teams working like this in both torpedo rooms, it was evident that the chief engineer's estimate was more than probable.

Looking up again at the Artemis first officer, Robert Baoule then said:

"I just received word from the captain; the twenty-five reserve torpedo casings are to be configured with life support systems, rigged with an internal firing control mechanism and brought to the shuttlebay."

With a subtly upcast eyebrow, the first officer inquired:

"Is the Captain preparing for an unanticipated voyage for the some of the crew members Lieutenant?"

"I guess it might have to do with the fact that we jettisoned all our escape pods as chaff when the Romulan monster was trying to vaporize us," retorted Baoule with a smirk. "And, knowing our captain, he certainly wants to make sure that if things go from bad to worse, everyone on board will have a safe way out."

As he continued to watch the procedure of the probes being assembled, Syntron propounded rather unassumedly:

"Lieutenant Baoule, in regards to the trillithium probe preparations, this may be an unnecessary precaution, but as I began to cogitate the environment into which these probes would be launched I conceptualized the possibility of implementing a trillithium stabilizer into each probe to ensure that none of these devises detonates prematurely once introduced into the range of volatile regions within the anomaly. I have since that time briefly devised and mapped out a rough design of such a device that perhaps you and your engineering team could refer to as a potential option."

Syntron handed the chief engineer a schematic of the stabilizer from his PADD.

"It could be set up that the stabilizer would only be deactivated upon the activation of the probes detonation sequence. Otherwise, the trillithium would be held in a stable containment field until such time. We could retrofit the previously completed probes in approximately four point thirty-seven hours and implement this in the remaining probes directly as part of a modified process."

"We might have some people put on a double shift for that but we're not on a vacation cruise anyway," answered the chief engineer.

The first officer then looked at the chief engineer and stated dispassionately:

"The decision to implement this precaution is of course up to your discretion Lieutenant, since it would require additional time and materials to complete; that is if you and your team even deemed this step necessary."

The bald black man looked at the schematics and nodded in approval.

"Makes sense to me. We'll work on this right away."

"acknowledged Lieutenant, I will notify the technicians involved in this process of the impending additional step in the procedure. You can train a technician in your new shift to supervise the preparation of the completed probes for minor disassembly in anticipation of the implementation of the stabilizer. Then you will have the opportunity to translate this plan from

concept into a working prototype that we can simulate and test prior to the actual construction of this device."

"Aye, Sir."

After transmitting the new directives to the engineering department, Baoule looked straight at the Vulcan.

"Tell me, Mister Syntron; do you really believe that we will be able to pull this off? Seems to me that, after all that we went through and the state we are now in, our reserve of luck might run pretty dry by now."

The first officer looked intently at the chief engineer before responding.

"Luck, Mister Baoule is merely a feckless superstitious belief that good fortune occurs beyond one's control; without regard to one's will, intention, or desired result. Determination, patience, courage, a resilient crew and a logical strategy are the key requirements to improve any situation... including this one, Lieutenant. Our continued adherence to and implementation of this axiom have allowed us to persist and endure despite overwhelming odds throughout all of these challenging missions. This approach is currently seeing us reach this point as well, Mister Baoule, and we will proceed in the same logical, intelligent and calculated manner as we conclude our preparation of these probes and ultimately launch them into their designated regions of the anomaly."

Looking back towards the technicians assembling the probes he added:

"What occurs after the array of probes are activated within the periphery and internal areas of the anomaly is yet to be ascertained, Lieutenant... but this will have more to do with the completeness and precision of our implemented strategy than any form of luck."

The black-skinned engineer smiled broadly.

"I knew you were going to say something like that. But I needed for me and the rest of the team to hear that sober, articulate Vulcan rationale of yours."

Then, Baoule winked at him and whispered:

"Just for luck."

Syntron responded rather deadpanned.

"It is rather intriguing yet perplexing Mister Baoule the manner and moments in which humans and several other species choose to incorporate humor and other extraneous irrelevancies into relatively unusual and often challenging circumstances."

Then with what almost what could be interpreted as a sigh he added:

"Nevertheless, Lieutenant, if my predictable response to your emotional inquiry has somehow efficaciously motivated you and your team to some degree to fastidiously persevere with our mission, then, perhaps, this was not a complete misapplication of conversation."

"Err, well.. . that one I didn't quite expect you would say..."

Facing back toward the team of technicians again, the first officer redirected the chief engineer.

"Let us now, Mister Baoule, focus our attention back to our immediate task at hand and bring our trillithium stabilizers concept to fruition."

"Of course, Sir."

The two officers then walked to the engineering station and began uploading then modifying the stabilizer design specifications to fit into the confined space of the reconfigured probes and torpedoes.

At the same moment the First officer went to join with the technical crew, tactical chief Tyvya stood before the ready room door of Captain Kheren.

For some time, she just stood there, the ultrasensitive receptors of her antennae taking in even through the closed panel the sound of his pacing in the small office. She knew Kheren never paced; if he was doing so, now, then it meant that he was so agitated that even his astounding self-control was starting to slip.

At this moment, she wasn't sure about her own either.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed the chime button with a swift jabbing finger. On the other side of the door, the footsteps stopped. There were a few seconds of silence before rose the familiar deep, soft voice.

"Enter."

He was standing near the small transparency, the streaking display of stars playing in his silvery eyes, giving his stare and almost feral quality as he blinked at her.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"That was going to be *my* question... Sir."

Kheren kept quiet for a long moment, looking at empty space as if she was not there with him in the small room. Then, he finally asked her:

"How long since the last time you went to Andoria?"

The question seemed to bring her off-balance a moment.

"Quite some time... right after the Borg War; and I stayed only but for a few days. Nothing changes much back home... eternal as the ice, as we say there."

He kept silent again for another moment.

"I never returned since I left to join Starfleet. I do not regret putting back my former life for this one... except sometimes, when so many lives were lost because of what I decided... and so many more yet depend on what I will decide next."

The giantess listened to him with close attention, well beyond his words... even to the words he was not uttering outloud. She could hear his heart beating in his thick chest behind every thought that were making his antennae slide in and out of his white-haired skull, something only he could do by virtue of this mutation of his that had estranged him from his own people. She understood what he was saying... but even more what he was feeling.

"You are not alone you know... not... anymore."

It took a moment for Kheren to fully register the tone of voice as much as the words of the towering Andorian woman; then, the sensitive olfactory receptors also within his antennae reacted to her body odor and the bioelectric sense beside them noticed the altered state of her bioaura. On any other Andorian Thaan or Chan of his age, all of this would have been completely inconsequential. But he was no ordinary Andorian male; he was a fusion, a genetically engineered mutation combining both male genders of his species, an astounding, many said monstrous, attempt to alter the Andorian race to save it from extinction. As a result, his physiology was now as lively and active as that of any Human.

And she knew it.

Tyvya was already coming up close to him, her four eyes darted from high up her towering height down on him like the stare of a hunting predator. Her own antennae were detecting as well all the signs his own powerful body was increasingly betraying with each step she took towards him.

Then, the deep soft voice of her captain stopped her with a cold tone.

"Lieutenant... as you were."

Andorians were passionate, a people of fire from a world of ice; and the female genders of the species even more so, much more aggressive than those of any other species; but all Andorians were also born and bred with a strict sense of discipline. And so, his tone and his words froze her for a moment between two loud heartbeats, barely one step from him. Then, as her heart started to race again, his calm yet authoritative, powerful yet maddeningly soothing voice resounded deep within her.

"Lieutenant... we will all reap the fruits of success... when will come the proper time to do so.. But I alone must bear the responsibility if we fail."

For a moment, she blinked her large, almond-shaped blue-eyes down on him. Then, slowly, she straightened her towering frame, relaxed her sinewy arms and sighed heavily. But her fists stayed rigidly balled each side of her stiffening body.

"Aye... Captain... see that we *don't*."

And with that, she turned around, almost painfully so, and slowly exited the ready room that had become so small a moment ago.

Now, to the commanding officer left alone in it, it felt suddenly very cold and empty.

And outside the captain's ready room, Tyvya paused for a moment, letting her heart slows down a bit before she moved again on her long, powerful legs to the secondary turbolift at the other end of the corridor. Once she got inside, she tapped her combadge.

"Tyvya to Lyrya."

A soft, almost musical voice came back to her.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Don't you 'Lieutenant' me, 'Doctor'. We need to talk. *Now*."

A short while later, Kheren exited his ready room and went also to the secondary turbolift. When he exited the cabin, it was to walk in the eerily empty corridors that led to the aft upper part of what was left of his once magnificent starship, where was located the Owl's Crest, the ship's observation deck and arboritum.

It was his favorite place to recollect himself and gather his thoughts when he felt most pressurized by circumstances. The miniature forested landscape felt utterly alien to an iceworlder like him, with its peaceful meadows and clusters of trees, bushes and flowers from a hundred worlds under the vast panoramic vista of the stars streaking overhead and behind; but it was this peacefulness, the alien beauty of this quiet place that he had always found most welcomed when the clicks and beeps of the ship started to sound too much like the wild beatings of his own heart.

As was his habit, he went right before the aft transparency... and was shocked by the sight of an infinite sea of falling stars receding quickly behind into utter darkness; the familiar sight of the two large, flat warp nacelles jutting from the rest of the ship was nowhere to be seen now. The Andorian also noticed for the first time the complete silence around him; they were at high warp and yet, there was no trace of the familiar throbbing of the powerful warp core now gone; not even the soft hum of the impulse engines now dormant.

It was all as bewildering as it was sadening... and sobering; it focused even more deeply his thoughts from what they had been through to what was still laying ahead.

"I knew I'd find you here."

Kheren did not turn to face the bald, smiling Deltan that came up right beside him before the window so that his antennae could pick-up his rich, soft voice.

"The computer told you," the Andorian replied flatly.

"Didn't ask the thing. But since your shift has ended, that you had ample time to finish up your reports in your ready room and current circumstances are much too tense to let you relax in your own quarters, you were either on the holodeck or here. I saw Lieutenant Tyvya stomp into the counselor's office like a raging tigress... so I guessed you would be here."

"What is the connection between here and Tyvya?" the captain asked with a sideways glance at Doctor Nasaro-Myth.

"That's not exactly the connection I made," retorted Elliago purposely not looking back at him.

Kheren snorted.

"If you are implying some sort of... how do Humans call it? Siblings quarrel..."

"Try lovers quarrel..."

"You are lost way too deep into your Deltan mind. She is a Lieutenant and I am her commanding officer..."

"Like that has anything to do with it..."

"It has everything to do with it."

"If you say so... Captain Sir."

The Deltan doctor wasn't looking at him at that moment; he was almost choking to refrain the laugh rumbling in his throat.

Kheren however was not laughing at all. He turned his dark-blue face squarely towards Elliago, antennae quivering to the rythm of his conflicting emotions.

"Doctor... you of all people know about my condition. And you know very well what it means for Andorians."

The Deltan was definitely not taken aback by the words or the tone they were voiced with.

"It means that, for all intent and purposes, you are the only one among your Ghelnoid kind that has the same... biology... as all of us, Humanoids, have."

"Tyvya does not," flatly pointed out the captain with a growl.

"She seemed rather frustrated when I saw her stomp into sickbay, but I don't think she went to see Counselor Lyrya for a session," then shot back Elliago with a telling smile.

For a long moment, Kheren just blinked back at him, antennae straight up in genuine surprise. but then they drooped low as he turned his silvery eyes away.

"It's not just a question of... biology, as you say, Doc... On Andoria, family matters more than anything. Klingon house honor, Romulan blood pride, Cardassian family duties... even Human love for their children... all together, they still pale in comparison to Andorian family ties. There is now ay to explain it, even among us; we just know, feel it... outworlders never can..."

"Then, my dear Captain... how can you deprive yourself..."

The Andorian turned swiftly to face him again, antennae lowered over his slitted eyes.

"Because I *must*! For the very sake of that family I can never have!"

"I told you; because of your unique physiology, you are way past your species normal fertility period and still able to..."

"Because of my... unique physiology, Doctor, I *dare* not!"

To Deltans, relationships, commitment, love, procreation, family... they were all one and the same and as natural and vital as breathing. None of those could exist without the other; a Deltan could not even exist without any one of those essentials of life. It was obvious in the face of the Chief Medical Officer that he failed completely to understand what Kheren was saying or why he was suddenly feeling so emotional.

And so, Kheren faced him fully and asked:

"Tell me, Doctor; what do you see..."

"I see a tall, powerfully built, mature Andorian..."

"Like everyone else... except Andorians," interrupted the Artemis captain. "What any Andorian would see, Doctor, is a darker skinned Ghelnoid with an abnormally massive body and impossibly retracting antennae... in short, Doctor, a mutant, a monster, a freak..."

He took a long breath to calm himself down before continuing.

"On Andoria, indeed, in any part of space where my people can still be found, everyone knows me, knows what I am; the product of an illegal genetic manipulation to alter our very species... an abomination."

"Andorians are proud and passionate to be sure, captain, but even then, Andorians are a highly civilized, sophisticated people..."

"So is yours, Doctor, and Humans... Nevermind laws and ethics of science and society, but tell me; what would all this "highly civilized, sophisticated Humanity" think if someone told them that he created as their next necessary evolutionary step against upcoming extinction a person fusing both their genders?"

This time, Elliago was silent, pondering all the implications that suddenly dawned in his mind about what the Andorian was saying. He was an artificially made fusion between the two male genders of his unique four-gender species; the first and only Andorian who could even procreate naturally with Humanoids; one of a kind on a dying world with an ancient culture still imbedded in traditions dating back to prehistory. And the most enduring, key tradition of all was the founding and raising of a family; more than any culture in known space, procreation defined everything that was Andorian. Altering it was altering the very essence of the Andorian race, culture, society and beliefs, from it's very core to it's tiniest detail. Even the disturbing notion of a genetically engineered Human hermaphrodite conveyed little of the impact made by the very existence of Kheren Kalel Th'Ch'Leryll Keth Reiji.

"So, Doctor," then said the commanding officer of the Artemis, "do you see why I can't even consider the matter? Especially with one of my kind, let alone one of my own officers?"



The Deltan nodded with a slight tilt of his bald head. He nodded with respect to his captain then stepped away to leave him alone and turned to exit the Owl's Crest. But, just as he was about to leave, he stopped for a moment near the door and turned back to him. Then a small smile crept back to his lips.

"And... what does *she* think about this?"

\* \* \*

In the torpedo room of what remained of the starship Artemis, Syntron and Baoule had gone from a rough design to a working prototype of the stabilizer within forty-three minutes. After running the prototype through a series of arduous physical and electromagnetic tests and computer simulations, then fitting the stabilizer like a designer glove into the oddly-shaped cavity of a probe, they were now ready to replicate the additional stabilizers for the remaining probes. Afterward, they had added this additional step into the assembly process and within five hours, all previously assembled probes were retrofitted and complete. They were putting the final touch on the last round of probes as Syntron ordered the first round of completed probes to be placed into the launching tubes.

The first officer then activated his combadge.

"Captain Kheren; the first round of trillithium probes are ready for deployment and we are currently completing the final rounds of assembly on the last set. What is our current ETA for the anomaly's perimeter?"

"According to ship's chronometer, we will drop out of warp in about fourteen hours," answered the deep voice of the Andorian ship commander. "Good work, Mister Syntron. My compliments to the entire crew. Once everything is set up, make sure everyone gets enough rest before we reach our destination."

"Understood Captain. We will have this entire crew and others throughout the ship ordered to rest as we bring on a small replacement team to monitor all systems in each department until our arrival into the vicinity just outside of the anomaly's perimeter. We will then recall the off duty officers back on duty and give those remaining some rest times as well. This way everyone should be reasonably well-rested and alert before we enter the targeted area and prepare for the actual deployment of the trillithium emitters."

"Carry on; Kheren out."

After the last of the work was complete in the engineering department, Syntron traveled throughout the remaining departments of the Artemis saucer to meet with each department head. Despite all of the damage endured during the Romulan attack, the crews had managed to bring the majority of systems and the structural integrity of the saucer section back into working condition.

No small feat given their current circumstances.

All crew members had been functioning virtually non-stop at high alert accompanied by elevated stress getting to this point, but now it was time for the crew to step back, relax and rest both their minds and bodies.

It was the first officer's responsibility to see that each department had a plan in place and complied to ensure that this arrangement transpired before they faced what would ultimately be the most demanding and challenging aspect of this problematic mission; facing and then attempting to extinguish this perilously massive and volatile anomaly.

Syntron's combadge then beeped at him, demanding his attention. The voice that came up was almost identical to that of chief engineer Robert Baoule, yet slightly faster and with a colder tone.

"Mister Syntron, Lieutenant Baoule here. May I ask you to come to auxiliary control room? I think we might have a problem with our sensor configuration."

Norbert Baoule was the twin brother of Robert Baoule, a scientist specialized in astrophysics and cosmology with an exceptionally high level of expertise with sensor technology. Only his blue collar and short-cropped dark curly hair distinguished him from his gold-collared, bald sibling; that and, contrary to the extraverted, jovial Robert, his utter, almost Vulcan seriousness.

If he felt compelled to ask his former department chief and now executive officer about something, it could only be because it was serious indeed.

As he walked out of engineering and headed toward the turbolift, Syntron responded immediately to the call.

"I am proceeding there now, Mister Baoule."

The turbolift arrived to deck 5 and the first officer walked into the auxiliary bridge room. It looked like a simplified, more compact version of the main command center of the vessel, albeit with no chair for either the exec or the counselor or doctor. He spotted the twin brother of the engineer standing near the sensor console.

"What seems to be the problem, Mister Baoule?" the Vulcan inquired stoically as he approached the assistant science chief.

The dark-skinned man turned an uncanny replica of the chief engineer's face towards the first officer of the Artemis.

"It's the Pel sensor system, Sir. As you know, it is devised to detect and react instantly with navigation corrections to both the forming of subspace fractures and the incoming burst of plasma within such fractures. But here, take a look..."

The scientist activated the display on a computer simulation on the auxiliary science station where the Artemis, shown in its current diminished configuration, flew towards and inside a representation of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. At first, nothing was noticeable; and then, the saucer-shaped craft started to sway, then to buckle more and more suddenly and rapidly until it literally spun out of control and crashed into one of the floating neutronium masses peppering the plasma swirls. A second try showed it being destroyed by engulfing plasma. A third ended up with the ship disappearing inside a subspace fracture, leaving but a few debris behind.

"As you can see, Sir, the system was made to help a starship avoid the destructive tendrils of the anomaly, but only while flying at the periphery of it. Once inside however, these fractures are so numerous and form so rapidly and unpredictably from every conceivable angle that the computer simply can't cope with it. The nav system becomes overloaded and we quickly lose control until we either crash or burn... or both."

Straightening up, Norbert Baoule absently slid his left hand through his thick, short curly hair.

"And as you know more than anyone else, the successful deployment of the trilitium emitters must be done deep enough to avoid those same plasma and subspace eddies dispersing them out of alignment before we activate them all at once."

He looked now straight at the taller Vulcan.

"In other words, Sir; to have any chance to succeed, we have to get in there blind and risk being destroyed... or go in and fail... and be destroyed."

Comprehending the dire simulation the science officer was implying and presenting, Syntron inquired:

"Have you apprised your brother in engineering of this situation?"

"Negative, Sir. I called you first the very moment I finished up this study and saw the results."

The first officer then added:

"It would appear that we could use his expert perspective and recommendations regarding the engineering aspects of this problem. In addition, we should also bring in this discussion our helm officer Lieutenant Aguk Snow, assistance science chief Lieutenant Irksos, tactical officer Lieutenant Tyvya, and assistant chief engineer Lieutenant Blakely for their input and ideas regarding these simulations and our potential options. Perhaps together we can come up with a way to resolve this, or at least improve our odds before arriving at the perimeter of the anomaly."

"We'll all be there as soon as you call for that meeting, Sir. We still have a dozen hours to go before then," acknowledged Baoule. "I can send all the data to each officers if you want."

"That would be most beneficial Mister Baoule. I shall have the meeting set up at the earliest available time in the conference room. This will provide you the time necessary to forward all data and concerns to each officer, and then allow each officer involved an opportunity to reflect on options and possible questions prior to the start of the meeting."

As the first officer took leave of the science officer and headed back toward the exit, he turned back and stated:

"Your acute attention to detail and subsequent appropriate protocol may have assisted us in a capacity we had not yet anticipated in this mission. With the tremendous risk inherent in this undertaking, every detail entangled in our procedure is most prodigious and vital. Carry on Lieutenant."

Norbert Baoule just nodded in thanks to the very Vulcan-styled praise. He might have looked just like his twin brother, but he was definitely less expressive. Obviously, that didn't mean however that he was any less appreciative of his superior's words.

Afterward, Syntron stepped onto the turbolift and ascended up to the main bridge.

Taking his seat by the Captain, visibly busy in finalizing his report for Lotus Fleet Command with added data from all the bridge stations, the first officer leaned over and discreetly provided a synopsis of the information that Norbert Baoule had presented to him in the auxiliary bridge and then notified the commanding officer of the upcoming discussion set for the conference room.

"Very good Number One. You are the foremost expert on this anomaly and we have the most experienced crew of all in tackling it. The twins alone just made it once again abundantly clear. So, you lead this one. Bring me the finalized plan in my office within twelve hours."

After responding to the Captain's attestation, the first officer extracted his PADD and began preliminary work for their upcoming anomaly conference. There were numerous factors involving departments throughout the ship to consider in this endeavor to extinguish the voluminous anomaly that they were zooming toward; especially contemplating that only the virtually ramshackled and patched-up saucer section of the Artemis remained in this dangerous quest of theirs.

Seventeen minutes later, the assembled group of officers were gathered around the triangular conference table on deck 1. Syntron did not hesitate to commence with the discussion once the last expected officer arrived and was seated.

"Each of you received notification and the data projections from Lieutenant Norbert Baoule regarding projected consequences of our entering into the anomaly to discharge the trillithium probes in our current condition. It is our intention to discuss possible solutions to these challenges that affect every department represented here to counteract or nullify these potentially hazardous circumstances."

The first officer leaned back slightly as he gazed around and then proceeded.

"This is an open discussion and therefore there will be no proctoring of the dialogue in any turn-by-turn basis and the only protocol is to allow each person to finish speaking before questioning or responding. Your input does not need to be limited to your field of expertise. In fact, our solution may be cross-departmental and amalgamated."

Syntron then looked around the table.

"Please begin."

"To put things succinctly," first said science Lieutenant Norbert Baoule, "our deployment of trillithium emitters to extinguish the plasma reaction of the anomaly requires that we enter it to ensure its success. However, the Pel system designed to safeguard a ship against emerging plasma tendrils will not only be useless once in there, it will cause us to quickly lose control of the ship and lead to our destruction."

"Meaning we will have to fly in there just like we did the first time," finished helmsman Aguk Snow with a somber tone.

They all recalled their first foray inside the Azimuth Horizon months ago and how they had barely managed to escape destruction from the fiery plasma storm hot enough to instantly burn them to a crisp... and the swirling masses of neutronium in there, large enough to crush them... or small enough to puncture their hull like a phaser shot through tin foil.

"Not quite," then said Robert Baoule, the Artemis chief engineer. "Thanks to chief Sangliar back on Starbase 10, we now have a modified impulse drive that can allow us controlled flight within the anomaly."

"And the Metaphasic Shielding LaForge Program 1 will at least protect us fully from the plasma storm itself," added tactical chief Tyvya. "The only things we would have to watch for are the plasma ejections and the floating neutronium masses... but this time, we won't have any torpedo to push them out of our way... and both tractor beams and phasers will still be useless."

"And even that, only for as long as we have power," then reminded them the Edoan chief of Ops Cheonghi. "You all recall that the anomaly drains unshielded power sources rapidly. Without the reserve power of a warp core and because active engines can only but expose our power output to the anomaly's effect, we will not last long in there on impulse power and batteries alone with shields at full."

The chief engineer could only nod glumly.

"The modified engines were designed to travel through the anomaly... not to loiter in it."

"And we need to stay inside for a significant time just to deploy the emitters and activate them," added his brother, the scientist.

Silence stretched between them, as they pondered the difficulties ahead of them.

The first officer listened attentively to the multitude of challenges the team of officers around the conference table presented; until a moment of dreadful silence seemed to envelop and hover within the room. As the ideas began to coalesce within Syntron's mind, he eventually offered his thoughts to the team around him.

"To conserve our energy issue, perhaps we will need to run a series of simulations to determine the minimum threshold to safely reduce our metaphasic shielding while traveling through the anomaly. In addition, we will need to evaluate and immediately shut down all additional non-essential systems throughout the saucer. Meanwhile, we could design a flight path through the anomaly to effectively use our impulse drive to launch and deposit probes from behind the saucer in a timed and coordinated procedure without any requirement to slow down our trajectory. Science and tactical stations could use our modified sensors to detect plasma ejections and the floating neutronium masses and coordinate with helm to steer around such hazards."

Syntron then began to put all of these obstacles in perspective within the immense scope that this undertaking represented and stated:

"Perhaps also, it may be necessary for us to elicit assistance in this endeavor from the Alsea."

"If she's still there," said Cheonghi, slightly lifting all three hands upward. "We don't know if she survived her encounter with the Romulan task force she was sent to intercept... or if she will still be near the anomaly when we will arrive. We don't even know exactly *when* we will arrive."

"Sir," then added Robert Baoule, "rationing our power consumption may add a little time overall, but the anomaly's drain on our power will still occur. So our time in there is limited. We *can* run impulse drive on batteries alone; we will have too after a while anyway... so in any scenario we will look at, we will be on a short schedule."

"The main problem, Sir, is navigation," reminded Norbert Baoule to the Vulcan and everyone else in the room. "The conflicting eddies and currents of the plasma ejections are barely predictable with our enhanced sensors; it occurs most within that swirling inferno which is under the variable influence of any and all gravitational masses nearby, down to the most minute ones... but then again, only when it is in our space; remember, it took us a full week just to map it once. And then, the multitude of debris inside it have no gravitational or electromagnetic force to direct their position and movement as we normally see in normal space."

"And now, we have no effective way to push them away, let alone scratch them," chimed in Tyvya with a growl. "When we will be down to batteries, we will have either enough power for the impulse drive or the shields... not both. And without the metaphasic shielding, we won't last more than a couple of minutes in there... at best."

The science Lieutenant sighed.

"In short, Sir, this will be like swimming nude and exhausted, with your legs only, in a mountain torrent during a night blizzard on Andoria."

"Kayaking..."

The strange word made everyone turn their eyes toward the copper-skinned helmsman. Like someone tore out of a dream, he blinked at everyone before finally explaining:

"Back on Earth, my people did this for thousands of years; navigate wild mountain torrents on board small one-man skin-hulled rowboats we call "kayaks." It requires the unique skill of feeling the currents to steer away from rocks and strong waves that could break both your craft and your spine at a moment's notice. Quite fun, actually..."

Tyvya rolled her eyes and shook her head, mouthing "Humans" under her breath before asking:

"And I suppose you... enjoyed this... fun-filled navigation style before?"

"Since I was five years old," he grinned back at her. Then he became serious again as he looked at the first officer; "Sir, I have class A7 certification in powerless and sub-orbital flight since my Academy days. I can fly the ship manually on thrusters the same way if I get constant pinpoint readings of neutronium masses directly from sensors... but it also will require us to ride the storm with minimal inertial dampening for me to... "feel" the plasma currents."

"This means a mighty rough ride," interjected chief engineer Baoule. "The stress on the hull will tear it apart if we stay longer than we should... or if we get brushed too close too often by a plasma ejection or too much debris."

"Just like kayaking," agreed Aguk Snow with a joyless smile. "Sir, I can do this... unless we can come up with a better option."

For a long moment, only silence answered him.

Syntron considered this aberrant proposition for a moment before responding.

"Unusual circumstances elicit atypical solutions."

The first officer then looked around at the differing expressions conveyed on the officers around him. They did not appear too keen or optimistic regarding this suggestion. He then declared "Unless someone else sitting here can offer a more viable recommendation than Mister Snow, then I would advise that he begin preparations to implement his kayaking maneuver."

He then aspired to reiterate what they already knew in an attempt to ferret out additional ideas.

"Granted, these are formidable circumstances... and we have very limited assets; except the talent and resourcefulness of the officers sitting around this table. Therefore, we must strive now to benefit from this available resource."

Gazing sternly at the remaining officers he inquired "Who else here can evoke an unconventional suggestion or thought that we could somehow implement in our approach to protect our ship from the anomaly; knowing that we will be utilizing minimal inertial dampening as Mister Snow navigates his way through?"

"Well... with inertial dampeners at minimum and running on thrusters only, all the more power to our shields," noted Robert Baoule outloud. "it will be a rough ride but at least we will not get cooked or mashed that quickly."

"Sensors resolution can be calibrated specifically for all those known hazards inside the anomaly," added his brother with the eerily same tone of voice. "it should give us better warning to allow for course corrections."

Cheonghi, the Edoan chief of Ops, nodded his bald, chitinous red head.

"The main danger is power surges or drain from our EPS grid. We still have enough time to reinforce it and implement programmed and manual instant switching to secondary and tertiary circuits if that occurs."

"Emergency evacuation procedures will be set on standby if all come to worse," said Tyvya. "The captain already ordered some of our remaining torpedo and probe casings to be converted into one-man lifepods; with the bridge module and our remaining shuttles, that should allow to squeeze everyone out if we have to abandon ship."

"*If* we have time," grumbled helmsman Snow before adding more forcefully; "I still have a few hours to train in the holodeck before I have to turn in. We have on board the most extensive data ever about the anomaly... and I've been through it twice already. I'll be ready, Sir."

Everyone seemed also ready to support his unorthodox endeavor as best they could from their own designated post. Then, the towering Andorian chief of security turned her four oculars towards the Vulcan first officer.

"Sir, if you need more... unconventional... suggestions, I suggest you talk to the captain about it when you will go to him to have this plan approved. You can already see how his influence rubbed on some of us."

Her head nodded towards the Eskimo chief flight officer. But all the others were grinning.

Syntron nodded affirmatively at Tyvya and then gazed at the now animated officers sitting around them both.

"In that case, let us conclude this meeting to allow everyone the time and opportunity to prepare for the raging rapids awaiting us."

They all grinned even more at the imagery conveyed by the Vulcan's unexpected words, then nodded in acknowledgement.

The first officer then stood up and announced "Dismissed."

Syntron then walked out of the conference room and back onto the main bridge.

The Captain was not present.

Syntron then sat down at his post besides the center seat and activated the computer.

"Computer, locate Captain Kheren."

Within seconds the synthetic response stated "Captain Kheren is on deck 8, aft section."

*The observation deck*, the first officer thought. *This is where the Captain goes to sort out troubles and concerns*, he recalled from previous missions.

He then addressed the Chief of Security and Tactical who had just taken her post.

"Lieutenant Tyvya, you have the conn."

"Aye, Sir."

Syntron then walked back to the turbolift and descended to deck 8.

After exiting the lift and walking past the fragrant arboretum, the first officer spotted the Captain gazing out of the aft observation window into the vastness of space. He approached him and stood at attention within his proximity and stated stoically:

"I have an update regarding our impending dilemma, Captain."

With just a curiously Vulcan-like raised eyebrow, one of the few facial movements his rigid Andorian face was able to make, Kheren signified clearly to him that he was ready to listen.

The first officer then thoroughly presented the details of the exchanges that recently occurred among the officers during their meeting in the conference room, along with a summation of their intended plan to the captain of the Artemis for his assessment and possible approval.

He held his gaze up at the inscrutable Andorian standing before him.

"What is your appraisal of these courses of action Captain?

"Unorthodox, dangerous and uncertain."

The tone was cold, the facial features frozen, the antennae wavering. But, despite the tenseness in his muscular body, his silver eyes went up to meet the darker ones of the Vulcan with a most familiar glint of excitement that crept up in his voice. Even more; a definite sense of pride and satisfaction in what he heard from his XO about what all his officers did... and intended to do.

"Business as usual for this ship and crew. Carry on, Number One."

"Affirmative" the first officer replied; acknowledging that once again the crew of the Artemis was by default compelled by circumstances to implement unconventional and risky methods in an attempt to achieve both survival and any hopes for success with their forthcoming mission.

As Kheren stood gazing outward toward the enormity of star systems and such beyond the large observation window, Syntron turned and took leave of the captain once again. Their operation was just sanctioned; although rather peculiarly. It was time now to ensure that everything was in place and ready to implement before they reached the perimeter of the anomaly.

The first officer arrived moments later back on the bridge and relinquished Tyvya back to her tactical duties. He removed his PADD from his satchel and perused through the files and messages received to determine the progress and status from each department at this point in time.

It was now a matter of waiting for all of the remaining pieces of this operation to come together. And at that very moment Syntron was having this thought, so was his captain.

Reflecting upon the events since he took, or rather was shoved in, command of the Artemis, Kheren could not but wonder if all this was not the result of some occult orchestration. Some would call it Fate, but Kheren did not believe in Fate... not beyond what one's own decisions and actions, and of everyone else around, could lead any individual to. Then, the sheer complexity of all those actions and decisions from countless individuals across the cosmos made it all way beyond any understanding, even for the most advanced living or artificial mind or group of minds.

And yet, as a starship commander, he was expected to somehow deal with it... and not just for himself, but for hundreds on his ship under his direct command, and for the rest of Starfleet, for the whole United Federation of Planets... perhaps even more.

Now, looking at what was left of his once magnificent starship, rushing towards an uncompleted task to an unknown time, he wondered:

*Did I fail?*

He was ready to accept that; to bear the responsibility of making the wrong decisions and condoning the wrong actions. But he was not ready to share that burden with the rest of his crew, bound to fall with him if he alone faltered.

And so, while the rest of the crew best prepared everything for the worst, so did he.



\* \* \*

The astounding powerless warp flight of the USS Artemis was about to reach their chosen rendez-vous with destiny. All members of her skeleton crew were now alert at their posts, the most senior and experienced officers seated behind their consoles on the main bridge, getting everything ready for action.

Before them, on the large main viewer, the familiar scene of warp speed flight sent stars streaking by around the unseen disc-shaped hull of what remained of their once majestic starship; proof that there was still a universe left to greet them when they would reenter normal space. But, in the very center of this deceptively peaceful vista, glowed a fixed, single brighter point of light; a luminous yet diffuse golden-orange fire, right accross their path; the Azimuth Horizon.

Like an ominous beacon from some unnamed Hell, it heralded the end; maybe the end of the universe... assuredly, the end of their journey, comes what may.

They all looked at it, in silence, but ready to report their readiness to First Officer Syntron as soon as he would step onto the bridge; ready to execute their final orders as soon as Captain Kheren would come and give the word.

The moment of truth was upon them all.

After visiting with each of the remaining departments heads throughout the saucer section of the Artemis to confirm their preparedness status, Syntron returned back to the bridge and took his place besides the center seat.

As he gazed into the image of the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly glowing menacingly yet still rather small on the center of the main viewscreen, he turned his head slightly and reported to the staunch Andorian commander of the ship seated seemingly undaunted beside him.

"Captain, all departments confirm their readiness to proceed with the mission."

"Thank you, Number One. Sensor readings?"

"Long range sensors are recalibrating themselves as we speak, Sir," answered Valencia Irksos from behind him. But the modified acoustics of the bridge allowed even his unidirectional hearing to catch her answer as clearly as any Human. "Preliminary readings confirm the presence of the anomaly as expected but no exact measurement as to its current status yet. but at least, we know it hasn't engulfed the whole sector yet."

"What we can ascertain however, is that current stardate is 87175.97," added Norbert Baoule, the other scientist on the bridge now manning the auxilliary station between science and engineering. "Time dilation from our initial spacewarp loop was limited to merely hours in relativistic space."

"Still alive and still on time... Let us count our blessings," commented Elliago Nasaro-Myth, once again seated on the other side of the command chair from the Vulcan First Officer.

"Anything on subspace channels, Doc?" then asked Kheren while looking straight at the main viewer, muscular arms crossed with one callused hand holding his chin pensively.

"Nothing; our comm system is back online but we're heading straight for the interference area of the Azimuth Horizon. Starbase 10 and the rest of the fleet are almost right on the other side... and we are right between the anomaly and the rest of the sector; we'll have to wait until we are at short range distance of anyone to attempt any hail, Captain Sir."

"Still blind and still deaf... let us count our curses," grumbled the Andorian.

Straightening himself with a short sigh, he asked in a clearer tone:

"ETA?"

"One point forty-seven minutes, Sir," immediately answered Aguk Snow from the helm station.

Kheren leaned forward to let his elbows rest on his parted knees, hands joined between them in his typical alert posture in the large command chair. He counted his breathings before nodding to Syntron.

The first officer acknowledged the captain's go-ahead signal and then addressed the chief flight control officer manning the helm.

"Lieutenant Snow, prepare for your... *kayaking* maneuvers."

"Paddle is out, Sir," grinned briefly the Inuit helmsman before turning serious again; "Ready to drop out of warp at your command."

This was definitely a crucial moment. Being at warp without any warp engine, they had no way to disengage the warp field outside of applying deceleration through the impulse engine until the forced inertia would simply make them fall back into normal space. Not a complicated maneuver but one that would prove rough for ship and crew; and once done, they would have no way to readily implement warp speed again.

"Inertial dampeners at maximum; all crew report PIDs activated," added chief engineer Baoule as he tapped his own personal inertial dampener as did everyone else on the bridge, his eyes on the structural sensors of the computerized visual representations of what was left of the starship Artemis. "This is going to put quite some strain on our engines and hull, Sir. damage control parties are standing by."

Syntron then addressed the Andorian giantess operating the tactical station.

"Lieutenant Tyvya, prepare for the launching of the first round of trilitium torpedo emitters."

"Both tubes full and reload chambers online," she confirmed with her fingers on her board. "Dispersal pattern programmed and ready. Activation of the emitters on standby until full deployment is complete. Once we enter the anomaly's corona, estimated time for phase 2 is fifty seconds of successive firing salvos and twenty-eight minutes for complete positioning."

Syntron stared intently from the first officer's seat of the bridge at the image of the perilous anomaly, beginning to expand in scope within the main viewscreen of the Artemis saucer, while they continued their warp pace directly toward it. He realized that once they brought their warp speed to a halt, they would have no opportunity to regain that velocity again; they unfortunately no longer possessed a warp drive. Therefore, like everything occurring throughout this mission, timing was critical.

This also meant that they would not have the availability to warp the saucer out of harm's way should the need arise.

After determining that they have arrived at the maximum best juncture to the anomaly and their mission, the first officer turned to the Inuit helmsman and stated resolutely:

"Mister Snow... take us out of warp."

"Aye, Sir."

The hum of the impulse engine, an incongruous sound when looking at the star-struck warp flight scene on the main viewer, rose around them in the eerie silence left by the loss of their warp core barely more than a day ago. Before their eyes, the stars settled into a deceptively fixed field of diamond dust spread across the black velvet of space.

And right in the center of this sparkling display, like a golden nugget sparkling in the sun, was the Azimuth Horizon.

"We are back in normal space, ninety million kilometers coreward from the anomaly's corona, twenty minutes at full impulse from contact," reported Aguk Snow in the breathless silence that followed their transition from subspace.

"Captain, I have a vessel at 62 mark 12 on a parallel course to the anomaly's perimeter and moving at warp 9 across our flight path," then said Tyvya, looking reflexively from her tactical display to the main viewer and back. "Distance, fifty-four million kilometers. Interference from the anomaly makes identification difficult."

"Ping them," ordered Kheren, all four oculars on the large screen as if he could see the other ship despite the immense distance.

A deep echo, all the more startling because of the unusual silence of their warpcoreless vessel, reverberated around them, a long, hollowed "ping" that suddenly bounced back at a higher pitch when it struck the hull of the other ship. She would also hear the sensor contact from the powerful Syntron space sonar as the same echoing sound striking her frame and so, they too would detect the presence of the saucer section of the Artemis... if they hadn't done so already when they had come out of warp. There was no hiding from them anyway.

"Got them," confirmed Valencia Irksos. "Converting sensor scan to visual output and magnifying."

"On the bridge screen, the image shifted from the star-studded blackness of space with its distant fiery anomaly to an almost blinding gold and orange backdrop against which was clearly profiled an arrowhead-shaped starship with four slim, glowing nacelles directly aft. Kheren's deep voice definitely conveyed the smile his rigid Andorian face couldn't.

"The Alsea."

\* \* \*

### **Ship's Log: stardate 87176.0**

**Oseno Jureth, acting commander reporting.**

**Our trip around the anomaly is nearly complete. After nearly thirty-nine hours and one encounter with a subspace tendril, the first part of our mission is at its end. I remain in command of the ship and the crew, while exhausted is performing admirably particularly the engineers. We did manage to catch a saboteur and are holding him in our brig until we arrive back at Starbase 10. I don't know what his goals were, but suffice to say he failed to achieve them. Now, we will see what the other side of the Azimuth Horizon holds for us.**

Jureth closed the terminal on the ready room desk and proceeded back out onto the bridge. Shawn Hunter rose from the command chair at the sight of the Alsea's acting captain and Oseno nodded in acknowledgement as he approached.

"Report, Mister Hunter."

"Sir, we have nearly completed our circumnavigation of the anomaly. In a just about five minutes we will be close to where we..."

Hunter broke off as Ensign Wynn interrupted.

"Sir, I have a sensor contact."

"What is it, Ensign?"

"I'm not certain, Sir; interference from the anomaly... Perhaps if we come out of warp..."

Jureth nodded.

"Mister Hunter..."

"On it, Sir."

Shawn returned to the helm station as the covering ops officer moved away and Jureth himself sat down in the command chair vacated by his pilot.

"Throttling back, coming out of warp, Sir." Hunter reported.

"All stop."

"Aye Sir, helm answering all stop."

"Mister Wynn?"

"Resolution is clearer, Sir. Sensors are classifying it as a ship."

"On screen."

The object from the sensors appeared on the Alsea's viewer and Jureth could see through the interference that it was vaguely round in shape. Suddenly a thought popped into his head and his heart began to beat faster.

"Mister Wynn, magnify."

The distorted image enlarged and Jureth knew what he was looking at before Ensign Wynn opened his mouth

"Sir it's..."

"The Artemis," Jureth said softly, finishing the ops officer's sentence with a smile starting to cross his face.

"Lieutenant T'Lana, confirmation?"

"Negative, Sir," the Vulcan at the tactical console replied. "They are not transmitting and ID signature."

"Mister Wynn, open a channel."

"Open, Sir."

"USS Artemis, this is USS Alsea, Lieutenant Oseno calling; do you copy?"

As if in answer, there was a strange, hollowed sound reverberating from the hull itself, as if the entire ship was a gong someone outside had just banged. It sounded astonishingly much like the sonar sound of ancient Earth submarines; and indeed, it was the unique, distinctive subspace contact of the Syntron space sonar touching their entire structure which vibrated enough to be carried through by their own inner atmosphere.

A moment later, the main viewer fizzled for a second before displaying a slightly discolored and frayed but clearly visible image of an indigo face framed with a thick snowy mane topped by far-parted antennae, lighted by startlingly bright silvery eyes and with a severe expression that contrasted drastically with the joyful tone of the deep-resounding voice.

"USS Alsea, this is the Artemis. Sorry we are late for the clean-up. We are relieved to see that you at least managed to show out your own uninvited guests without too many bruises."

Then, the rigid face of captain Kheren managed to frown perceptibly.

"Lieutenant Oseno? Is Commander Rivers alright?"

To Jureth, even through the interference, the stalwart Andorian's face looked a bit haggard. At the same time however, the senior officer was a welcome sight. but, the Bajoran grimaced almost as if he was in pain at the mention of Rachele Rivers.

"I'm afraid not, Sir," Oseno said grimly in response to Kheren's question. "During our engagement with the Romulans, Captain Rivers was thrown from the command chair and received a severe head injury. She is in stasis in sickbay, though the doctor is optimistic she will recover with treatment from Starbase 10's extensive medical facility. I have been in command since we ended the battle."

"And to think some believed that *my* ship is cursed with so much sabotage on board..." mused aloud the captain of the Artemis. Then his four oculars darted straight at the Bajoran.

"Lieutenant, you are the fifth person I have seen in that chair in less than a year. Now, I want you to *stay on* that chair at least until this whole mess is over. We will provide you with some of our PIDs; the Personal Inertia Dampeners we have successfully tested here since I took command. With my reduced crew, we have a lot of them available to easily equip your entire ship complement. At least, *you* will not be thrown out of that chair... that is, until your engineer can build you a safer one."

It truly sounded like a joke to ease up the tension of the words. But it was obvious in his eyes that the Andorian had no clue about how humorous his last comment had been.

"My security officer will make arrangements with yours for the beaming transfer once we rendez-vous in... eight minutes, present speed. Then we both with my First officer and yours will discuss how we will next handle the fire out there."

"Understood Sir, we'll see you shortly; Alsea out."

Jureth addressed his helmsman and friend sitting before and below him just by lowering his eyes from the main screen to the navigation and tactical station.

"Mister Hunter, maintain present course and speed and bring us within transporter range of the Artemis."

"Aye, Sir."

On the Alsea's engineering deck, Niomo Lire had been sitting at his desk, one hand covering his face. To the other engineers, he seemed to be deep in thought; however, he had been catching up on some much needed rest. That rest was disturbed when Thompson ran into his room.

"Sir, we've dropped out of warp."

Niomo quickly stood, albeit woozily.

"Have we heard anything from the bridge?"

Thompson shook his head.

"No, Sir. But according to Command's plan, and our reduced warp capabilities, we still had another three hours of travel time, plus the return to the starbase."

The Alsea's chief engineer rubbed his cheek, partly to wake up and partly to think. He felt the stubble of a beard growing in as he sighed. He had not returned to his personal quarters since the tendrils struck the ship, catching cat-naps at his desk when he found some peace and quiet.

"We would have known if she was breaking apart. Felt it too. Clearly, it's a non-technical stop. However, let's normalize the warp core intakes. If we aren't putting a strain on the cores, no reason to have one run hotter than the others. Divert power from tractor and transporters if you need some extra power to balance everything. I doubt we'd need them out here. Last sensor sweep showed no ships in the immediate area."

Thompson acknowledged his orders and quickly left the room, relaying what was needed to his fellow officers. Niomo turned and brought up an engineering status report to confirm to himself that there was nothing technically amiss about the Alsea. Finding nothing, he decided that he needed to contact the bridge.

"Engineering to Bridge. Sir, we dropped out of warp. Is this your doing? I'd like to get home before this anomaly tries to eat us again." Niomo asked, allowing a bit of frustration to flow out.

They had stopped far too much on this journey, and the ship needed a stardock more than spit-and-glue repairs.

Jureth heard the frustration in the engineer's voice but, knowing that the entire engineering department was likely just as exhausted as their department head, the security chief-now-acting commander of the Alsea let it go and simply answered Niomo's question.

"Yes, Lieutenant Commander, it was on my order. We've found the Artemis, or what's left of her; Captain Kheren and his crew are going to need our assistance. To that end, I'd like you to act as the XO when we meet Captain Kheren; or if you'd prefer, I will take Lieutenant Steele with me instead."

I will meet you at transporter pad 3, Sir." Niomo quickly said as he moved out of his office. "Thompson!" he shouted, looking around for the other engineer.

"Sir?" Thompson replied somewhere above the chief engineer's head.

"The Artemis has shown up. Captain and I are going aboard. You are in command here. Ready four away teams for emergency repairs. Last I heard, the Andorian captain felt he only needed a skeleton crew. God knows how many engineers were included. Simulate what tractors and warp field enclosure around them would mean for our systems, should we need to get out of here in a hurry." Niomo stated as he left the room, heading towards the transporter room.

He arrived in record time, still wearing his dirty engineering jumpsuit. Only the transporter officer was in the room, so he decided to wait.

On the bridge, Jureth nodded satisfied at the engineer's response, he had half expected Lieutenant Commander Lire to want to remain with his precious engines, especially given the stress they'd be under in the last few days.

"Mister Hunter, range to Artemis?"

"Almost there, Sir; intercept in two minutes."

Jureth tapped his combadge.

"Oseno to Steele; meet myself and Commander Lire in transporter room 3, please."

"Understood; be there in five."

Jureth closed the channel and tapped the device again.

"Oseno to Sickbay; doctor, please send a medic to transporter 3. We'll going aboard the Artemis."

"Acknowledged; sickbay out."

"Sir," Shawn Hunter said just then, "we are in range, Sir."

"All stop, Mister Hunter... and the bridge is yours."

"Helm answering all stop, Sir. I have the conn, aye Sir."

Jureth left the bridge and rode the turbolift down into the Alsea's superstructure and when it stopped, he made his way to the transporter room. When he arrived, he found Lire, Steele and a medical officer waiting for him. He approached the medical officer.

"You have a standard med kit, ensign..."

"Marques, Sir; and yes, plus some additional painkillers and radiation treatments if needed."

Jureth nodded and motioned the group up on to the pad, then he tapped his combadge.

"Oseno to bridge; signal Captain Kheren we are ready to come aboard."

"Aye, Sir," came Shawn Hunter's reply. "I'll let you when I get a reply, T'Lana is showing their shields are still up."

"Understood; Oseno out."

Niomo gave the captain a inquisitive look.

"I'm surprised they have the power for shields. Let alone warp power. I am very interested to see how they pulled that off... and what the structural integrity field looks like after their little stunt."

Jureth turned to the rest of the party and shrugged, and then waited for the Artemis to respond.

On the main viewer of the starship Artemis, the dagger-like shape of the Alsea showed it's sleek hull pockmarked with leftovers from the short but intense battle it had been through. Behind it, the blazing fires of the Azimuth Horizon silhouetted it against a golden glare of raging energies.

"The Alsea is within transporter range on a standard parallel course with us," confirmed Tyvya from her tactical sensors.

"They are requesting permission to beam aboard," Elliago aded from his own console.

The silvery eyes of the captain beside him blinked twice.

"Lieutenant Tyvya, initiate Security Protocol 1 and come with me. You too, Mister Syntron. Doc, ask Counselor Lyrya to join us in transporter room 1. Mister Cheonghi, you have the conn."

And so saying, not even waiting for the answering "ayes," he rose from his chair and headed for the turbolift with his officers in tow.

The ride was nevertheless swift from deck 1 to deck 10, the lowest remaining level of what was left of the once large starship. Once they were all inside the room, Kheren stood on the right side of the transporter console with his First Officer and his arriving Chief Counsellor while Tyvya herself went behind it, leaving both security officers Mrrish and Graalthrii each side of the locked door.

"I have four lifesigns on sensors from their own transporter room," reported the Andorian giantess from the transporter scanners readout. "One Bajoran, three Humans; combadge signals identified and matching Starfleet medical records."

Kheren tapped a callused finger on the readout twice then crossed his hands behind his back.

"Energize."

On board the Alsea, the telling tingling and dancing lights of a transporter beam were noticed by all. When the beam out was completed, both Acting Captain Oseno Jureth and Chief Engineer Niomo Lire stood in the oddly old styled-modernly equipped transporter room of the Artemis, facing from the transporter pad the Andorian ship commander and his officers.

And they were the only two people that were beamed in from their ship.

"Subatomic scan in transit completed. Identity confirmed, Sir; physiological and brainwave scans match records. No weapon or potentially threatening instrument, biological, chemical or otherwise harmful element detected. Transmitting transport confirmation to Alsea," then said the towering chief of security.

At the door, neither the black-furred Caitan female nor the compact, bearded Tellarite male relaxed their vigilance or posture, despite the time taken by their chief to thoroughly scan each and every atom of their guests and everything on their bodies before materializing them and dropping the level 10 forcefield that had been erected between the transporter pad and the rest of the room.

"Mister Oseno, Mister Lire... welcome to the Artemis," greeted Captain Kheren formally in typical Andorian reserve, with no offering Human handshake or Bajoran bow. "Lieutenant Commander Syntron and Lieutenant Tyvya you already know; allow me to present also my Chief Counsellor, Lieutenant Lyrya."

The tall, willowy woman with a blue collar topping her formal black and grey uniform bowed her thickly haired head, hair as white as her almost translucent skin and from which a pair of typical Andorian antenna sprouted. But she did not look at them; her large, white eyes were focusing on nothing before her. Like all of her rarely seen kind, especially in Starfleet where she had been the first of her people to ever join, she was blind.

But, as everyone knew about the Aenar, the most elusive, half-legendary subspecies of Andoria, she was a telepath; one that could even best famed Betazoids.

Obviously, the captain of the Artemis did not rely on machines alone to ensure the safety of his ship and crew.

"Please forgive our... proceedings with your coming aboard. I am sure you understand that this is no time to be lax," Kheren then said with sincerity but with no hint of any regret or apology in his deep, soft tone. "Please come and join me in our lounge. We have much to discuss."



"I'd be happy to join you Captain Kheren," Jureth replied, attempting to be as respectful as possible to a much senior officer who was immeasurably more experienced than himself; "though I don't understand why you left my other personnel on the Alsea. Lieutenant Steele is my defacto chief of security and tactical officer and the other member of my crew was a medic with extra supplies and radiation treatments in case any of your people need them. I understand the urgency of the situation, Sir, but if we can help your ship or your crew, please allow us to do so."

The Andorian looked squarely at the Bajoran.

"I distinctly recall that I asked for you and your XO, not for a rescue team."

Not being very sociable to begin with, even by Andorian standards, Kheren was nevertheless aware that his abrupt remark might ruffle some feathers in these Humanoids. And so, with a softer tone, he added:

"Thank you for your concern, Acting Captain Oseno, but even with our skeleton crew, I still have at my disposal as much if not more technicians and medical personnel than you have aboard your entire ship. There is not much of ours left, granted, but what is left is in perfect working condition and my whole complement is safe and sound for the time being."

Niomo didn't move from the pad. There were more important things to do than sit down for a cup of tea and chat about universal happenings.

"Forgive my rudeness Captain Kheren, but we do not have time to chat in the lounge. I would like to get to engineering as soon as possible and get my staff working on repairs and stabilization of your science experiment here." Niomo stated, looking around in the room, mentally making repair notes. It seemed as though the remains of the ship had been through some tough times.

Jureth looked over at the engineer, but didn't rebuke him or apologize for him. This was a man who had commanded a starship; he didn't need a green commander, nevermind one that he technically outranked, making excuses for him.

And obviously, what seemed to be rudeness from a Human was not even making the Andorian captain blink as he retorted with the same tone as that of the Alsea chief engineer:

"I am not inviting you for tea and cookies, Mister Lire. My ready room is rather cramped for all of us... The Bow, our main lounge, is also our observation deck, facing directly our foe... and I prefer to look face to face at my enemy before I decide to kill him. Old duelling habit..."

His heavily callused hand showed them the door the towering Andorian woman was unlocking for them.

"Thank you for your offer of assistance, Lieutenant Commander, but unless you can install us a brand new warp drive and nacelles in the next few hours, there is nothing you can do that my own chief engineer and his people already did in the last thirty hours; and the science part has been thoroughly worked out by Mister Syntron here and his team, something that our precipitated departure prevented all of us to discuss back at the starbase. What we now need is to debrief one another as to what has been done... and what must be done next."

And he lead them all out of the transporter room towards the nearest turbolift.

Niomo silently followed along, tapping on his PADD. Using short hand code that he and Thompson developed while they were on the Lotus, he developed, encrypted and sent a message to his friend.

"T- Art room has no paint. Return drawing supplies to the closet and return to your desk. L"

Something seemed off about the Andorian; and Niomo was not taking any chances. The sensor readings of the Artemis had shown obvious signs of damage and multiple serious structural weaknesses. Not to mention the reduced staff, of which Niomo was positive were not all engineers. His staff almost reached the current crew compliment of the ship, despite the Andorian's comments of having more technicians. Not to mention the fact that Niomo was the best engineer in the fleet. Niomo had survived a long time by following his gut. And his gut was screaming for him to get off this shard of a ship as soon as possible.

Oseno listened as the Andorian captain corrected his chief engineer and, by default, executive officer. Then he followed Kheren and the rest of the group out of the transporter room. As they were walking, Oseno's combadge suddenly came alive.

"Alsea to Oseno,"

Jureth recognized Cat Steele's voice and knew that she was checking up on him after being left behind on the ship.

"Oseno here, go ahead."

"Sir, is everything okay?"

"Commander Lire and I are fine, thank you. Maintain station keeping, and keep your eyes open for any threats."

"Understood, Alsea out."

The channel closed and Jureth noted that he was getting a curious look from Tyvya, the Artemis security chief.

"My chief of security," he said by way of explanation; "she's a former Marine, and nearly as paranoid as I am."

"No need to explain, Sir," the giantess answered matter-of-factly. "On Andoria, where even your own sibling can slit your throat over any slight, *lack* of paranoia is considered insanity."

Then in turn, she explained herself:

"Since the take over attempt of the Horizon Children on the Artemis a few months back, the security onboard is second to none in this Quadrant. For example, here on this ship, no communication whatsoever can come in or out without being detected, monitored and authorized from our own comm central... including PADD encodings."

As she spoke, her eyes were falling down from her well over two meters of towering height to the Alsea's chief engineer. It felt almost as if her rigid face was smiling; but it was the smile of a crocodile.

Jureth noticed the look that Tyvya was giving Lire and wondered what his chief engineer was doing, and then decided he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

"It might interest you to know that we caught a saboteur of our own. He tried to access the ship's computer, but one of my security patrols saw him enter the secondary computer core and we were able to isolate him and detain him."

Nodding an acknowledgment, the first officer of the Artemis stated dispassionately:

"Consequently, Lieutenant Jureth, this is incontestably why the Artemis has instituted such intensive security measures... to readily avert any such occurrence from transpiring within this ship again."

"I certainly understand, Lieutenant Commander," Jureth replied. "One of the reasons I took to heart the recommendations Lieutenant Tyvya gave me before we left Starbase 10 was to prevent such a thing on the Alsea. Unfortunately, one of the Children's agents slipped through the screening process. Fortunately for us however, the security patrols I instituted proved their worth."

"Indeed, Lieutenant," Syntron responded. "Such measures as those that you implemented aboard the Alsea should have proved to be most effective in thwarting any saboteur's destructive intentions."

"True enough," Oseno replied, "but really, I have Captain Kheren and Lieutenant Tyvya to thank. My security protocols were adapted from those the captain had set up during his tenure on the Lotus, and the recommendations Tyvya gave me after our briefing on Starbase 10. Without them, the Alsea might be drifting in space, or worse. That said, we certainly seem to have larger things to discuss. The mission orders in the Alsea's computer have us slated to return to Starbase 10 after circumventing the anomaly, but I take it you have something different in mind, Captain Kheren."

Niomo frowned, shaking his head.

"Whatever we do plan, captains, we should not prolong our journeys beyond another ten hours. The miracles myself and my team have worked to keep the Alsea from imploding will be in the textbooks next year. We will not survive any additional... friendly nudges... from the anomaly. Our initial scans of the Artemis state the same. If at all possible, I highly suggest we transfer whatever plan is to one of the more healthy ships. I'd even agree with coming back at a later date! With all the other factions beaten down, we can shut the anomaly down at our leisure."

By the time the chief engineer of the Alsea spoke, they had reached the Bow, the main diplomatic lounge, social area and observatory deck of the Artemis. As in all large starships, this was a vast, curving stateroom at the very front of the saucer section's rim, like the celebrated Ten Forward of the no less famous USS Enterprise D of living legend Jean-Luc Picard. On the Artemis however, it was on deck 8, not deck 10, but most of all, it had a look and flavor quite unique and distinctive to a ship named after an Ancient Greece's Goddess of the Hunt; the roof showed the holographic successive skies of planets of the Federation and the floor covered with a green carpet reminding everyone of grass; every piece of furniture and wall-mounted paneling were of authentic wood from multiple worlds and on the walls hung tridimensional animated scenes of various hunting scenes from History across as many planets, enhanced by a soft aeration system carrying wind and floral fragrances from those diverse ecosystems. In the center of it all, at the end of the customary serving area, loomed the life-size bronze rendering of the goddess herself; *Diane Chasseresse*, the masterpiece of 18th Century sculpting master Jean-François Houdon, still displayed at the Louvres Museum of Earth in Paris, France.

But everyone's attention was quickly drawn to the large curving wall opposing the bar, where vast transparencies displayed the universe outside; and looming over everything, the fiery inferno of the Azimuth Horizon.

As they sat at a table on an elevated dais at one end of the lounge, the obvious Captain's Table, the master of the starship Artemis offered no refreshment. True to his word to Niomo Lire and in typical Andorian pragmatism unfettered by social niceties, Kheren eschewed any attempt at distraction or casualness and immediately came straight to the point.

"You are quite right, Mister Lire; as they say on your planet, always in haste but never in a hurry. I would agree that, once the first phase of Operation Horizon is completed, we should fall back, take a breath, effect repairs and return afterwards to complete the job."

The "but" was hanging in the air as plainly as a torpedo blast. And the Andorian quickly dissipated any doubt.

"Unfortunately, there are forces at work against us. Despite their crushing defeat, the Romulans will not sit back and just wait for us to do our thing; and whatever the fate of the Klingon forces that might have been arrayed also against us, you can be sure a simple defeat, even a major one, will not douse their will to come back into the fight and complete their goal. As for the Horizon Children... how can you fully stop and ideal, even a twisted one and especially a destructive one like theirs?"

Speaking like the professional tactician he has been since joining Starfleet, he added:

"Even as we speak, any one if not all of those forces might be launching their retaliation against us. And by your own words, Lieutenant Commander, time is not on our side. If we are to face another Romulan task force in the next hours or days, I fear we might not be so successful in the second round. Therefore, we must act now... while we still can."

Looking at the two officers of the Alsea sitting in front of him, he finally asked:

"So... what is the current status of the operation?"

"Sir," Jureth began in a measured tone, "this is our first circumnavigation of the anomaly, and I have not heard from any of the other ships of the fleet. In fact, our communications and sensors have been useless since we started navigating around it. During our engagement with the Romulans, we suffered a fair amount of damage to not only our warp cores, but the structural components that allow the Alsea to separate and recombine. We also encountered a subspace tendril that, if not for Lieutenant Pel's detection program, might have left us adrift... but still, it didn't help our already diminished warp cores. Our max speed right now is warp 9. We are unable to engage multi-vector assault mode and will not be able to do so again until we've had significant repairs. Commander Lire and his team have performed on the fly repairs and modifications just to keep us operational. Our tactical systems are still functioning fully so we could hold our own in a fight. As I said before, our orders indicate we were to return to Starbase 10 after we finished navigating the anomaly and prepare for the next phase of the operation. However, Sir, since you are the senior officer present I will proceed as you deem fit."

Kheren didn't move or even blink as the acting captain of the Alsea made his report. Once the Bajoran finished, his silvery eyes glanced at his first officer and former chief of science.

"Mister Syntron; what is the latest sensor reading on the anomaly?"

As the officers of the Alsea and the Artemis were conversing back and forth, Syntron was scanning through his sensory data on his PADD and continued to do so as he responded to the captain's question.

"According to our latest sensory analysis, Captain, the energy output of the anomaly has increased by zero point zero-zero-one percent since last reading forty-two hours, twenty-one minutes ago. But, according to calculated projections, the power output of the anomaly continues increasing at a rate of zero point fifty-three percent faster than previously recorded."

The first officer looked up from the PADD and without waiting for a question.

"These readings indicate a definite rise in the anomaly's energy levels."

he looked back down angularly to his PADD and working through additional data.

"The current spread of the phenomenon is ninety-three million kilometers beyond last measured boundary, and now its rate of expansion seems to have stopped."

Looking up again, Syntron finished his analysis with a cold tone of voice.

"Unfortunately, there are no clear measurements currently registering on our ship sensors. However, subspace fractures were detected at the periphery of the anomaly and they were all converging on subspace holes dotting a large one along the recorded path of the Alsea."

"That must be the one that almost smacked us into the middle of next month," Jureth stated. "Sounds like nothing we're doing is having a whole lot of effect."

With a slightly raised eyebrow, the first officer of the Artemis responded to the statement as he looked squarely at the acting commanding officer of the Alsea.

"Lieutenant Jureth, you may be minimizing the level of impact that you and your crew actually had on the perimeter of the anomaly. The subspace trench made by the misaligned warp core off of the Alsea alone has apparently been successful in corralling the expansion of the anomaly in this section of its perimeter... with all subsequent fractures in its wake effectively stopped by it."

As Syntron continued reviewing and compiling the data on his PADD gathered before they lost sensor contact, he explained things in more detail.

"Our analysis also corroborates that the deeper subspace holes indicated in our data are each at the calculated coordinates given to the shuttles sent from Starbase 10 to "picket the fence" around the anomaly's perimeter, to further ensure the stability of our first phase of the operation."

As he spoke, Syntron's slanted black eyes gazed around slowly at each of the officers seated at the Bow's Captain Table in the lounge of the Artemis.

"Accordingly, the overall lack of expansion measured from the anomaly to the size dreaded by initial projections would suggest that the other ships may also have been successful in their endeavor; although a complete circumvolution of the anomaly would be necessary to actually confirm this. However, this augmentation of intensity also corroborates such a success; the result of a subspace compression of the plasma reaction as it can no longer expand freely across normal space."

Oseno shrugged off the stern Vulcan's correction.

"I'll admit to not being a scientist, Sir. So, if we are having an effect on the anomaly, the question still remains as to what we do next. Do we have sufficient resources to continue with the next phase of the operation? The Alsea is short a couple dozen torpedoes in that regard."

Cogitating briefly the acting commander's question, Syntron placed his PADD onto the table and bestowed his full attention to the Bajoran officer.

"There is a trade-off on these results, Lieutenant. Although the anomaly has been effectively corralled for the moment, the plasma pressure building within its core is mounting much faster than we anticipated. There now exists a potential danger of implosion if the reaction continues to expand and burgeon within the confines of the subspace trench."

Gazing for a moment at the anomaly itself displayed through the wide expanse of the bay windows, the first officer paused before continuing with his analysis.

"Our efforts thus far have successfully provided a reprieve... but, sooner rather than later, this plasma reaction will build-up until it will blast out the only avenue left to it: the entrance to the pocket universe. Therefore, and to address your question, Lieutenant, we simply cannot afford to delay phase 2 of the Operation much longer... or else we may have saved our universe at the price of another."

Allowing for the magnitude of that foreboding message to sink in for a few moments, Syntron proceeded with his recommendations as he brought his attention back to the officers gathered around the Captain's table.

"Therefore, we will immediately transfer over additional trillithium emitters for your crew to utilize for the next phase of this operation; which we must begin expeditiously. However, this will also place us in the quandary of having virtually no margin of error in our deployment. Because of this, precise positioning and timely detonation of these trillithium probes within the anomaly is paramount if we are to achieve the desired effect of nullifying the plasma reactions throughout the vast region of this expansive phenomenon."

Glancing around at each of the officers positioned around him, Syntron summarized their situation with his final words.

"To put this rather bluntly, we will not have another opportunity, additional materials or remaining time available for a second attempt at this aggressively cumbersome endeavor."

"And that will not be as easy as it sounds," then said Kheren. If he was making an attempt at levity, none of his too few facial muscles betrayed such intention. In fact, his tone of voice was even lower and deeper than usual. "Mister Syntron's team found out that the Pel system that so aptly saved your life will spell doom for any ship going deep within the anomaly... where there is no choice but to go to ensure this successful deployment of the emitters."

Using one of the holoprojections of wildlife nearest to them as a display screen, the captain of the Artemis showed the Alsea senior officers the simulation studies science officer Baoule had shown to Syntron and their unavoidable disastrous result of flying into the cosmic inferno.

"Fortunately, our helmsman came up and trained with an effective, if somewhat unorthodox solution."

With his words, the Andorian added the flying simulation chief navigation officer Aguk Snow used to prepare for his manual thruster flight around the neutronium masses and on the eddies and currents of the plasma maelstrom.

"We already have on board more than enough probes to do the job," added Kheren. "But, in addition to our surplus we will bring aboard the Alsea, both our crews should work speedily on implementing the modifications on your remaining probes as a back up to our own... planting operation... in case something goes wrong."

His ominous stare that started with these last words deepened even further.

"Your torpedoes however should remain operational as part of your arsenal. If we are confronted again by hostile forces while working on the anomaly, your ship will be the only one able to fight it off."

Before any of the two officers of the Alsea could comment, the ship's internal comm channel came alive with the soft, musical tone of Lieutenant Lyrya's voice, as she had left them earlier to relieve Doctor Nasaro-Myth from communications monitoring duties.

"Bridge to captain."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Sir, We are receiving a subspace transmission."

The antennae of the Andorian captain shot up in obvious surprise.

"Through all this interference?"

"Yes, Sir. And it's from Starbase 10."

\* \* \*

Samji had been up for over thirty-six hours straight. His head was beginning to droop in the quiet Operations office as there was nothing really that they could do but wait. The sabotage performed by the Horizon's Children on the starbase had long been quelled, the saboteurs were in the brig and relatively docile, and engineers were doing their job and working to fix any remaining damage.

The sound of a loud female voice echoing through the room shook him fully awake.

"Starbase 10, this is Commander Schmidt; come in, please."

*At last! How long has it been since she left on one of our remaining shuttles to oversee that improvised subspace comm relay line out there?*

Samji brushed away the thought, moved to the comm panel and activated the channel.

"Commander, good to hear your voice. Are we set up?"

"Assuming the other shuttles rebroadcast properly, I don't see why not. The manned ones between Starbase 10 and the anomaly have verified that the signal is working up and down the line."

"Very good," Samji said. "Send the signal."

Rexil nodded and broadcasted the pre-recorded message.

"This is Fleet Captain Samji to all Lotus Fleet ships. Please respond. You will need to also utilize the standard Federation distress frequencies to respond."

On board the starship Artemis, he slightly elevated eyebrow of the first officer was the only physical reaction he offered to the surprising announcement just stated from Lieutenant Lyrya's voice coming from the bridge and then the announcement in the very voice of the commander of Lotus Fleet's headquarters.

Although the Vulcan officer did ponder reflectively on how the team on Starbase 10 managed to cut through all of the interference emanating from the anomaly to somehow reach them in this locale, Syntron merely turned his gaze to Captain Kheren in anticipation of his response.

The Andorian blinked his silvery eyes while his antennae straightened up with the same obvious surprise and puzzlement. But his voice stayed even as he answered promptly, knowing his telepathic communications officer had already modified transmission according to the requirements given by their headquarters.

"Starbase 10, this is the Artemis. Captain Kheren here, with Acting Captain Oseno Jureth from the Alsea right beside me. We are pleasantly surprised and deeply relieved to hear you, Fleet Captain."

"As I am to hear you, Captain Kheren," Samji replied.

Looking around the room, he saw each of his officers gesture a silent 'hurrah' or give a slight nod of approval that the Artemis crew was safe and sound. He passed along their sentiment.

"It was good to learn of your success at saving the lives of yourself and your crew, but hearing your voice helps morale around here. I won't go into details right now, but you can thank my first officer and the other officers here for our ability to communicate."

"Indeed we do, Sir," replied the Andorian. "For a while, we thought we were going to find nothing but a sea of flames out here... Judging by our universe still being whole, for now at least, we assume the other ships' missions were successful."

"We know that the Wisconsin, Pittsburgh, and Steamrunner are navigating around the Anomaly, and likely unharassed at least on your side thanks to your dealing of the Romulans. We have no news from the Lotus and the Spectre, but I'd guess if there were Klingons, they're keeping them busy and away from the other ships."

The Starbase commander then shifted his attention to the Bajoran sitting next to the captain of the Artemis.

"Mister Oseno; was your containment pass successful?"

"Sir," Jureth replied, "we were able to successfully navigate the anomaly. However, as I said before we began, we did so at warp 9 and were unable to separate the Alsea due to damage received during our battle with the Romulans and the saboteur now...relaxing in my brig."

"Very well, Lieutenant, thank you for your report," Samji said in a reassuring tone. "This is why we are implementing the many different ideas from all the different officers who suggested them, including the trilitium-enhanced torpedoes of Mister Syntron and the looped singularity containment from Lieutenant Snowfire K'leysha. Additionally our shuttles, which are providing the means for our communication, are set up in place and programmed with the remote warp plus detonation procedure to widen the gaps that you and hopefully the other ships have created, and of course there is the ion pulses that will act against the Anomaly as water does against lava to harden the shell."

There was a brief moment of silence.

"With all these efforts combined, the setback of one piece should not eliminate the possibility of our success!" Samji finally said confidently.

Speaking of special guests," then chimed in Kheren, you will be interested to know, Sir, that I have aboard one of my own; Admiral Tomalak."

Letting the surprised silence stretch a bit across the subspace channel, the Andorian then added:

"He was leading the Romulan expedition against the anomaly from the bridge of the Shavok but, as he studied our data we sent him and understood the magnitude of their error, his ship commander took command of their mission and, according to him, tried to assassinate him. He requested asylum and we managed to beam him over but even he could not stop his rampaging subordinate before we were forced to destroy their ship. We've confined him to our brig until you see fit to grant him or not his request, Sir."

Samji nodded and said, "acknowledged," but the revelation seemed lost on him.

If there was any astonishment at having captured such a well known and historic Romulan representative, it was buried deep down. He was more concerned about the operation to come and making sure all the little pieces fit together and all the ships were performing well on their parts of it.



"I trust you are ready to implement the inverted ion pulse procedure on your side. Once I know the other ships are in place, I'll signal the shuttles to explode; that will be your sign to begin. Until then just sit tight."

"Sir, we are not only ready to complete phase 1 but phase 2 as well," assured Kheren with a nod of acknowledgement to his first officer and chief of science. "Thanks to Mister Syntron, and with the help of the Alsea, we will be immediately ready afterwards to dive in and deploy five hundred trillithium emitters to snuff out that fire... at least long enough for all of us to catch our breath and later have the fleet finish the job with Lieutenant Keley'sha's wormhole loop final phase."

He straightened himself.

"Awaiting the word, Sir."

Just then the signal broke down and the faces on the viewscreen became skewed. "Captain can you hear me?" he waited for a response, but could only hear a faint part of a word now and then.

"Can you get them back?" he said to his Operations Officer Grok.

"Trying to compensate, Sir." After he entered several more commands on the console, the screen just went black. "Sorry, Sir, the signal's gone."

On the Artemis, as the image of the Fleet Captain began to waver and then disintegrate into mere static, Syntron turned toward the Andorian chief tactical officer and inquired.

"Lieutenant Tyvya, is the loss of signal from us or the source?"

Before Tyvya could respond, Niomo interjected:

"Assuming they were bouncing the signal off of shuttles, one of the com array's could have overloaded...or it could possibly be more interference from the anomaly. We might be able to raise them again using the Alsea. I don't recall seeing our communications array on the damage report."

By the time he finished speaking, the Andorian giantess had received report from the bridge.

"Our systems were fully restored and no malfunction has been detected. The loss of signal is definitely from an external cause, but sensors cannot yet analyse that cause due to interference from the anomaly."

On Starbase 10, Samji opened another channel.

"Karen, come in. Anything on your end?"

The two in the shuttle had already been hooked in on the existing signal due to being part of the chain of shuttles that had routed it around the Anomaly. Therefore they were already in the process of analyzing the issue.

"It looks like we have lost two shuttles in the link, Sir," replied Sangliar.

"Can you route around them?"

"Yes, but the signal will be spotty. There you go, try now."

"This is Starbase 10 to the Artemis, come in."

The faces previously seen in the conversation appeared back on the screen. They were recognizable, but not as crystal clear as before.

"Captains," he said, addressing Oseno Jureth as well as his Acting Captain status warranted. "We seem to have lost two shuttles from our link. Can you investigate?"

"Romulans again?" the Alsea's chief engineer and acting first officer chimed in.

Jureth thought for a moment before responding.

"Possibly, but we took it to them pretty hard. I would say the more likely culprits are the Horizon's Children or the Klingons. Unless there are Romulan ships out there we failed to account for."

"And it could be due to the destructive unpredictability of the anomaly itself," said Kheren. "With long range sensors inoperative this close to it, and even short range sensors hampered as well, there is little else to do than move out and see up close."

The captain of the Artemis had been curiously quiet for a while. Looking alternatively to the acting captain of the Alsea near him and the slightly distorted image of the starbase commander, he finally sighed audibly. But his stare was straight and unblinking, his voice calm and firm.

"The Artemis is still fully maneuverable at impulse; in fact, even more now than any other ship in this region of space... but doing so and maintaining shields is heavily taxing on our energy output. This means our defensive capability is quite diminished, never mind our still pristine armor plating. And our offensive capability is now severely reduced as well, with only a fifth of our original phaser arrays left and all our torpedoes converted into probes."

Kheren was quite aware that he was the highest ranking field officer in their sector but, as he just stated, he was also just as keenly aware that his ship was definitely not the one with the highest tactical advantage.

The Alsea was.

And that meant, according to regulations, that command of their small force now fell on the shoulders of Acting Captain Oseno Jureth.

Jureth considered the situation in front of them further and, as Kheren spoke, the Bajoran felt the Andorian's gaze resting on him and he realized that there was a reason for it. He briefly recalled the regulation that allowed command of a squadron to pass to the ship with the greatest tactical advantage... and suddenly, he got a feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Thanks to that regulation, the young lieutenant now held positional authority over the captain with irreplaceable experience. Jureth knew that there needed to be an investigation of the issues with the shuttle and tried to think of an alternative to leaving the Artemis to fend for herself... again.

"Sir," Jureth said, addressing Samji; "the Alsea is capable of investigating the problems with the shuttle, though I would hesitate to leave Captain Kheren and his people to fend for themselves... again. Would one of the fleet's reserve vessels be closer?"

Samji looked at Lieutenant Commander Grok for this answer.

"Nothing within six hours, Sir," the young Ferengi replied.

"How far away is the disruption from the Alsea's current position?" Samji asked.

"It appears to be shuttles 256 and 258, Sir. That would be approximately 500 billion kilometers from their position."

Samji shook his head as he turned back to the screen.

"It falls on you, Captain. We need those shuttle secured and the link up. If another one of those shuttles goes down, you will lose operational support again and we'll be back to every ship to itself."

Knowing Oseno's feelings on the subject of prematurely separating the Alsea, Samji did not want to get into another dispute, nor override the officer's authority on his own ship. So he first hesitated before offering his suggestion.

"Would you be able to take your two fastest hulls to investigate and leave the remaining one in support of the Artemis? The faster you can go the better, but even at Warp Nine you can make it in..." he paused as he calculated the approximate time in his head, "just over fifteen minutes."

Syntron nodded individually to his Captain as he spoke.

"If the Alsea leaves behind one section of their vessel, we could begin with the next phase of our operation by preparing our vessels for the kayaking maneuver. We could then start placing these trilithium probes within the interior of the anomaly."

The first officer of the Artemis then gazed once again at the image within the wall-mounted viewscreen of the main lounge they were all assembled in.

"I am just ... for a lack of a better term... apprehensive, regarding our timeframe here, Fleet Captain... while the anomaly continues on its erratic and increasing build-up within this now confined area and we are just stationary here, potentially within its grasp."

Jureth listened to the suggestion from Samji and the input from Commander Syntron and he could almost feel Commander Lire cringe at the thought of separating the Alsea. Still, he realized he may not have a choice.

"Sir," he finally said with the nervous apprehension of a junior officer about to contradict a superior; "if we separate the Alsea, the possibility exists that we could cause catastrophic structural damage to one or all of the hulls and we almost certainly won't be able to put her back together again. Not without help from a shipyard anyway. So, the question is: will separating the Alsea hinder or help us succeed?"

Samji nodded in acceptance of the response.

"You know the status of your ship better than I, Captain. It was merely a suggestion, but I don't want you to risk your ship, because that would mean risking the security of the Artemis and the mission as a whole."

His gaze shifted to Syntron.

"I haven't forgotten about your concern, Mister Syntron. In fact, if you proceed with your trilithium probe plan, am I right in remembering you have to be in the Anomaly to proceed with it? If that is the case, Mister Oseno, you don't have to worry about providing for their security as I doubt an enemy will be able to follow them in there even if they wanted to."

Fleet Captain Samji rubbed his forehead, alluding to fatigue; and he was also overwhelmed trying to keep all the different ships' mission objectives straight in his head.

"In fact, Mister Syntron," he asked before Syntron could respond to his first question, "I am still not quite confident in my understanding of the plan. Could you give me a brief summary of the actions you will perform and what it accomplishes?"

Syntron was caught a bit off-guard by this request since all of the information regarding their plans and procedure had been duly discussed and noted. But then he realized that Fleet Captain Samji had been out of their conversations since their run-in with the Romulans and the sacrifice of the stardrive.

"Certainly, Sir. I will endeavor to provide you with a brief synopsis of our intent. First off, Captain, we have a number of obstacle and limitations to contend with. Without our stardrive, we have no warp capability. Without the reserve power of a warp core, we will have very limited power available once we enter into the anomaly. We will have metaphasic shielding to initially protect us from the plasma storm itself, but this will be limited as well since the anomaly drains unshielded power sources rapidly... Our active engines will expose our power output to the anomaly's effect. Implementing inertial dampeners at minimum and running on thrusters only will help maintain reserve power to our shields, but we will need to stay inside the anomaly for a significant amount of time just to deploy the emitters and activate them... which will again continue to drain all available power."

With only a mere breath, Syntron paused then continued.

"While traversing the violent eddies and currents of the plasma ejections of the anomaly, we will not have torpedoes available to push the floating neutronium masses in there out of our way this time, since they were all used to manufacture enough trillithium probes. Both tractor beams and phasers will be useless against such masses of highly compressed matter. Therefore, while monitoring and preventing power surges and drains from our EPS grid and instantly switching manually to secondary and tertiary circuits if any occur, we'll be monitoring specifically calibrated sensors to detect hazards within the anomaly to give us better warning for course corrections as our helmsman Ensign Snow "kayaks" the ship past all obstacles and into designated positions to deploy our trillithium emitters."

He then looked intently at the image of Samji as he summarized their intention once again.

"In terms of expected outcome... To put this succinctly, we will be imposing an almost anti-endothermic like reaction equivalent to the biological phenomena of hypothermia within the entity. Basically, we will be using the trillithium emitters to deprive the anomaly of the extreme temperatures required to maintain its high energy state of existence. If successful, then the energy of this anomaly would eventually be reduced to the point of deionization, causing the anomaly's plasma-like power source to revert back down to an innocuous gaseous state of matter."

Syntron concluded it all with the most simplest expression he could find in Human idioms.

"We would be pulling the plug on its source of power."

Ever the tactician, Captain Kheren then gave further data.

"The only problem, Sir, is that even such a solution can only be temporary at best. If anyone would detonate but a few trillithium torpedoes into that inert mass, it would ignite it anew, just like it was done a few decades ago with the Armagosa star. Worse, it could even possibly start a chain reaction that could turn the anomaly into a meganova a cubic parsec in size... something to make even the Hobus catastrophe look like a candle flame."

The Andorian made a pause so that everyone could grasp the full meaning of his dire words.

"I fear that is what the misinformed Romulans unknowingly almost did here before we stopped them. Starfleet could certainly not muster enough ships to safeguard round the clock for the next millenia such an immense region against any possible intrusion by one lone ship with a full payload of torpedoes. So our... snuffing out... of the anomaly can only be considered as a secondary measure; and one we have to implement, Sir... and sooner than later."

Punching into the transmission the science files from their latest sensor readings and research, Kheren waited for the Ferengi officer seated nearest to Samji to confirm reception with a nod before explaining himself.

"Our subspace corralling of the anomaly by the whole fleet, if successful as far as we expect it to, might cause the plasma reaction to be compressed within the containment area; if that occurs, it could have nowhere to go but through the only outlet left to it... through it's center; the entrance to the pocket universe."

His silvery eyes bore into those of the man on the wall-mounted viewscreen.

"In saving our universe, we may multiply the threat to another a thousandfold. With Mister Syntron's plan, we could at least postpone this apprehended catastrophe. That is... if we succeed."

Samji listened intently to the conversation and was thinking about how, if the return flow of the plasma effects through the Azimuth Horizon into the pocket universe was a reality, it would've been his doing in causing such destruction. But, thanks to the excellent analysis and thinking of the officers under his command, they could very well prevent such a tragedy.

Once the blue-skinned captain of the Artemis became silent, the commander of Starbase 10 nodded.

"Very good. While the corralling of the anomaly is necessary, we still need to wait for contact to occur with the other ships before we can proceed. Therefore, Captain Kheren, as soon as you are ready, you will commence the deployment of the trilithium enhanced probes. Report in when you have returned from the attempt."

"acknowledged, Sir," answered the Andorian.

Kheren almost breathed a sigh of relief. By taking charge of the entire operation and directing the ships again, Allen Samji had resolved the uncomfortable command dilemma the rules had almost forced upon the young Bajoran officer next to him. Suddenly thrown into the command seat of the most powerful warship of the fleet by the accidental incapacitation of his commanding officer was burden enough; having to decide also the actions and fate of *two* ships during a catastrophe scenario... and that over the head of a more experienced captain cursed with only having but a remnant of his once proud vessel... that might have proven too much even for the best of them.

And that, thanks to the ingeniously established communication line between them and headquarters. With the rest of the fleet about to join for the final phase of the operation, ensuring that this communication line remained secure thus became almost as important as facing the anomaly itself. Now tasked with tackling the Azimuth Horizon itself, Kheren could already guess that Samji would entrust this other major responsibility to the Acting Captain of the Alsea.

And indeed, the Fleet Captain continued with his eyes shifting to the young Lieutenant.

"My understanding is that you have been assisting the Alsea in preparing some of their own. They will be backups in case your attempt is not altogether successful. Therefore, while the Artemis is doing that, the Alsea will investigate the destruction of the shuttles,"

Then he nodded to Oseno Jureth.

"Report in when you arrive with your threat assessment."

Jureth frowned as the commander of Lotus Fleet passed along his orders. He didn't like it one bit, but he also couldn't think of a better solution, and if there was something jeopardizing the success of Lotus Fleet's efforts it needed to be dealt with and quickly and the Alsea was by far the most qualified vessel not to mention the closest. So, despite his own private reservations Jureth responded

"Aye, Sir; we will get underway immediately, provided Captain Kheren needs no further assistance."

"No need to worry, Lieutenant. We will shout real loud if it gets too hot."

Kheren, in typical Andorian cluelessness, spoke with a face as straight as that of his Vulcan first officer.

"Fleet Captain Samji, we will report to you in about two hours if all goes as planned... for once," he said to the wall screen. "Artemis out."

Kheren returned the viewer back to it's reconstituted scene of primitive Earth's mammoth hunting then rose and nodded, Human fashion, to his guests.

"I will escort you back to our main transporter room. "

And while his left hand showed them the door out of the vast lounge, he turned to his right towards Syntron.

"Number One, make us ready for phase 2 by the time I'll join you on the bridge."

"We'll be ready, Captain" Syntron acknowledged as he then turned to head back to the bridge and to his station to confirm the status of all trilithium emitters loaded and poised to be launched.

Syntron also initiated a precisely calibrated sensory system set up to triangulate the ionization effects of the plasma in each region in which the trilithium would be detonated as the emitters destabilized the plasma reactions. He would then be able to measure the immediate impact that each series of detonations will have on the anomaly in quantitative terms.

By the time he was working on those settings, Oseno Jureth had motioned to Commander Lire and they had followed Kheren back to the main transporter room of the Artemis. Now, as they stepped up on the pad, Jureth looked back at the Andorian.

"As they say on Bajor, Captain; may the Prophets guide and watch our paths."

"But still, let us keep our own eyes close to the ice we step on, as we say on Andoria," retorted Kheren in parting.

A nod from his white-haired head sent the Alsea officers back to their powerful vessel in a shower of sparkling blue light. He stood a moment before the empty platform, lost in the depth of his own thoughts.

"As fine a pair of officers as anyone can find, Sir," then said Tyvya from the door, breaking the ineghtening silence. "That veteran engineer and that young Lieutenant both."

"They are Lotus Fleet; they are the best," acknowledged Kheren before finally turning towards her and stepping to the door and the corridor beyond it's sliding panel. "Come on, time to get back into the fire... literally."

"The fun never ends," sighed the Andorian giantess.

\* \* \*

The odd mix of the old and the new of the Artemis' transporter room faded and both Jureth and Niomo found themselves back in the uniformly stae-of-the-art-looking transporter room of the Alsea where Cat Steele was waiting for them with a security team. Cat nodded to Ensign Celes who stepped forward with a tricorder and scanned first Lire and then Jureth before turning to Cat and nodding.

"Transporter buffer identification confirmed, Lieutenant," she reported. "It's Commander Lire and Lieutenant Oseno."

"Thank you, Ensign," Cat replied. "Welcome back, Captain," she said to Jureth with a smirk if for no other reason than to poke at her friend.

Jureth didn't react to Cat's good natured barb but turned to Lire instead.

"Lieutenant Commander, as soon as I get to the bridge, we'll be going to warp 9. As Fleet Captain Samji indicated, it won't be for very long, but do whatever you need to do to make sure our warp core doesn't go critical on us."

Jureth stepped down from the transporter pad and motioned for Cat to follow him. She did so after dismissing the security team just as they entered the turbolift.

"Bridge," Jureth commanded to the cabin's computer.

"So, what did you find out?" Cat asked as the lift began its ascent.

"Captain Kheren and I spoke with Fleet Captain Samji. Starbase 10 used the shuttles they have in place for the next phase of the operation to bounce a signal off of. Unfortunately, they've lost one of the shuttles and the fleet captain has ordered us to investigate."

"We're leaving the Artemis again?" Cat asked incredulously if not wit a bit of anger in her voice.

"It has to be done," Jureth replied calmly. "Fleet Command needs to know why that shuttle went dark."

The lift stopped and the doors opened depositing them onto the bridge. Cat moved to the tactical station and Jureth to the command chair where Shawn Hunter rose to greet him.

"Report, Mister Hunter."

"Still at station keeping, Sir; no other changes to report."

"Very good, I have the conn."

"Aye, Sir." Hunter replied, returning to his helm position.

"Mister Hunter, I am sending you a set of coordinates," Jureth said as he tapped in the shuttle coordinates on the command chair console. "Set a course, warp 9."

"Aye Sir, course plotted and laid in."

"Execute, Mister Hunter."

On that order, the Alsea maneuvered clear of the Artemis and, with the crackling plasma of the Azimuth Horizon as a backdrop, burst into warp.

\* \* \*

With both starship officers' acknowledgement, Samji had closed the channel and turned to his officers in Ops.

"Tactical," he began, looking at Mandella. "I want you to be ready with responses to aid the Alsea for whatever threat scenarios you can think of."

"Engineering," he then said and paused. "Who do we have taking over for Mister Sangliar?" he asked looking around the room.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Daxos, Sir," came the voice from an enthusiastic young Talaxian officer already standing at attention.

"Ah yes, welcome to Ops," Samji replied.

Being the only one of his Delta Quadrant originating species in Starfleet, from the very first colonists of that race now coming closer to fully join with the Federation on beset of Delta Quadrant ambassador Neelix, formerly of USS Voyager fame, the commander of Starbase 10 instantly recognized the officer from his dossier, but had not had a chance to meet with him personally since he was a new arrival sent during this all-too-busy time.

"Please assemble a team to support the Artemis with any Engineering expertise you can provide in case they have a difficult time tackling the inside of the Anomaly. I want solutions that will allow them to easily replicate parts and perform quick patch jobs to keep them afloat."

"Thank you, Sir. Aye, Sir," Daxos replied and went back to his station to assemble his team.

Everyone in the Operations Room of Starbase 10 were busy with the important tasks set forth for them. But they were the best, and most elite people in all of Starfleet. Fleet Captain Samji was working closely with the Alsea, the Tactical team compiling a list of potential enemies going forward and the best way to counter each one in turn; the Security team was still locking down Starbase 10 and confirming the allegiance and intentions of every officer on the base; the communications officer was still trying to use the shuttles around the anomaly to contact the remaining ships; and Lieutenant Rexill, the Trill science officer, sat calmly at his station, attempting to estimate the location of the ships while keeping everyone up to date on the status of the Azimuth Horizon.

The remaining department, Engineering, was currently led by that young new officer who had just arrived the day before. Lieutenant Junior Grade Daxos was given the daunting task of estimating the effects of the anomaly on the crippled remains of the Artemis and providing quick solutions when... or if... they came out of the immense space maelstrom upon completing their task. The assignment would've been difficult even for experienced engineer Marksus Sangliar, the Tellarite who was still on his way back from his away mission; he for one had time to study the massive amount of data that had come back about the phenomenon; in fact, Sangliar had been there, on the Artemis, when it had been first discovered and explored, even flying the shuttlecraft that led the large starship out of it through a subspace fracture.

And so, it did not seem fair to give such a huge, critical task to the newly arrived Talaxian, but he was not going to give up easily. He just needed more information... and quickly!

Daxos approached the Trill chief science officer, clearing his throat nervously.

"Lieutenant Commander Rexil, Sir, I need as much information about the anomaly as time permits. First, I understand that it is expanding rapidly, but what exactly do we know about the effects it causes? Also, is the Artemis the only ship we've had on the inside of the anomaly? Do we have any data from the inside?"



Rexil smiled at the young officer as he turned to face him. One of his past hosts had been a teacher and mentor so he was very sympathetic to the officer's situation and willing to provide any assistance he could.

"Yes, it is expanding swiftly, but in a way it is also expanding slowly."

He grinned at Daxos' confused look at the paradox.

"The rate of expansion is directly proportional to its size, which means that the rate is exponentially increasing. Therefore, we believe that it may have even started over a hundred years ago and just now has grown big enough to even be recognized as to what it truly is."

Punching in a visual display of the recorded data they had on the phenomenon, Rexill started to answer the talaxian's questions more thoroughly.

"There is another reason why I say it moves both swiftly and slowly. The true rate of growth is always through subspace, and thus is at warp 9.99997. However, any expansion is limited to its being able to find a nearby entry into normal space through existing subspace rifts. These rifts have been mostly created through years of polluted warp travel along standard paths; you are of course aware of the limit to warp speed travel set forth in 47314, which was established to counteract the pollution I speak of, before warp engines were reconfigured to prevent this effect."

Daxos seemed lost for a moment, but then his face lit up.

"Ah, so the rate of growth that we are observing is in fact indirectly influenced by the amount of warp pollution. Fascinating! But that is related to the corona; what about the heart of the anomaly and the effects there? "

"The effects you ask of in the core of the anomaly are intense plasma fires and increased gravitational eddies. Of course, beyond that, there is still a risk. Where space seems to be calm millions of kilometers away from the visible anomaly, there are still random events where the anomaly will spill out into normal space. This is not seen, but detected, if a ship is close enough, as a strong unknown force. In these instances, it has pulled ships in, including the relief ship Jeanne Mance, the starship Artemis that officially discovered it on it's maiden voyage to rescue her and a Romulan vessel one of our officers encountered, which answers your second question; the only ships that we know of that survived are those last two. When we looked back, over the past few decades, there have been some reports of ships lost while traveling within several light years of this area. Most likely they got pulled off course for some reason or another and ended up not following their defined travel course, so there was never a known common denominator until now."

The young Talaxian now looked slightly worried.

"Wouldn't the anomaly just keep expanding to nearby polluted areas? What evidence do we have that points to areas with high pollution keeping the anomaly at bay?"

"We are the ones limiting its ability to expand in such a way, so travel around the core of the anomaly will be safe for the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours. The polluting factor I spoke of was fixed a few years after it was discovered, so that we could travel at increased warp factor again when necessary. By removing this fix from our ships, Lotus Fleet is essentially digging a trench around the anomaly so that the warp tendrils will follow this circular route and essentially be trapped in a confined area of space around it's own central core."

The display now added to the scientific data the phases of Operation Horizon as it had been planned and as it was now occurring in real time as Rexill concluded his presentation.

Daxos then sounded as much confused as he looked.

"Did you not just say that the core of the anomaly was filled with plasma fires and gravitational eddies?"

"Yes, although data from inside is still limited. We do not know exactly what the environment is, but we believe it is surrounding a bridge of some sort between normal space and subspace. The area inside is devoid of all electromagnetic and gravitational forces beyond what is brought in from the outside like a ship or the debris of an asteroid or planetoid. These foreign masses have their own gravitational pull clash with one another when they get close enough to one another in that gravimetric void, while the lack of electromagnetic force wreaks havoc on our impulse and warp engines by sucking their own energy output to it, which thus requires a balance with the environment outside of the ship just to be able to function in there... and even that, only for a limited time."

Satisfied with his knowledge of the anomaly so far, the junior officer continued with his next concern.

"Very well. What do we know about the current status of the Artemis? I understand by the latest report that they were heavily damaged and working with a skeleton crew, but still scheduled to dive inside again for the second phase of the operation?"

"As I mentioned, the Artemis is attempting to stop the... lava flow... the spread of the anomaly by essentially cooling the plasma reaction. We have already spoke of how they are an effect of the Azimuth Horizon, but it seems that they are also, paradoxically, a catalyst. The plasma reaction is fueling the spread, so it is compounding itself; thus the exponential expansion."

"Aha, so the Artemis is inside the core of the anomaly. Am I correct in assuming that we have not yet had ships inside the actual Azimuth Horizon pocket itself, and that the data you mentioned from the inside was recorded by probes?"

\* \* \*

"Ship status."

The deep voice of Captain Kheren broke the soft hum of the bridge stations as he stepped off the turbolift to come with a few long strides to his large old-style command chair. Before him, the towering yet graceful shape of tactical officer Tyvya slid to the chair beside the copper-skinned Inuit helmsman to check the main tactical board, from where would be launched the volleys of trillithium emitters they hoped would extinguish the raging plasma fire consuming the heavens on the large viewing screen in front of them all.

After thoroughly confirming the overall status of each department once again, Syntron turned toward the commanding officer and responded as stoically as was usual for him.

"All stations are reporting in as prepared and standing by. Therefore, all things considered Captain... we are ready to enter into the mouth of the dragon once again."

Kheren sat straighter in his seat, shrugging off a chill; a reaction quite noticeable coming from an iceworlder like him.

"Remember, Number One, that, without the protection of our metaphasic shielding, Andorians are among those most badly affected by the anomaly; and me even more and faster than any. Be ready to take over instantly if I falter at any point. I want no casualty because of any sudden weakness of mine."

"Going in on thrusters only, we will have full power for shielding, Sir," then said chief engineer Baoule in a confident tone.

"And I'll be watching you, Captain Sir," added to his left ear Doctor Nasaro-Myth with a knowing smile and a mischievelous sparkle in his eye as he nosed towards the side compartment in his own medical command chair where his full medkit was stored.

From the turbolift door she was guarding as per ship's security alert protocol, the Caitian security officer Mrrish nodded silently with her black-maned feline head to her commanding officer and then to Tyvya, confirming that she was ready to take over for the Andorian giantess if she too would suffer from any ill-effect of their new journey through the fiery maelstrom.

"Automated flight and deploy program will implement in case of bridge crew incapacitation, Captain, until a new crew is called by computer alert to take over," confirmed the Edoan Cheonghi, his three arms flying over his multitask ops console.

Kheren nodded, took a deep breath and bent forward to put his elbows on his knees in his typical ready for action posture when in his command chair.

"Guess it is now or never then. Mister Syntron... the word is given."

Nodding in response to the Captain's statement, Syntron turned his attention to the copper-skinned helmsman.

"Move ahead, Lieutenant Snow, full impulse... and have your oars ready to paddle and steer us through."

"Quite poetic, Number One... I did not know you had it in you."

The rigid face of the Andorian did not move. But there was as much definite amusement in his voice as in the inward curve of his antennae.

The rigid face of the Andorian did not move. But there was as much definite amusement in his voice as in the inward curve of his antennae.

Without even a hint of a facial expression across his impassive Vulcan exterior, Sterling merely stated:

"Just a bit of contamination from my years spent in Starfleet Academy , Sir."

The curve of Kheren's antennae just got more pronounced.

"indeed... Human behavior is most contagious, almost like assimilation. No wonder the Borg feared the Federation so much."

And then, his cranial appendages straightened and pointed forward in obvious inner tension when the golden fire of the Azimuth Horizon filled the whole screen as it engulfed what was left of the starship Artemis.

"Entering the boundary of the anomaly," announced Aguk Snow from the helm station. "Full impulse momentum carrying us nicely into the operation area. Thrusters on full."

Feeling several jolts to the saucer section of the Artemis, Syntron turned to the chief engineer and inquired "How is our metaphasic shielding holding up thus far, Mister Baoule?"

"Fine I would say," interjected Elliago Nasaro-Myth. "The captain is still conscious."

For his part, the bald, black-skinned man Syntron had addressed kept leaning towards his engineering display as his fingers ran across the console below while he answered the Vulcan First Officer.

"Impulse power off propulsion and fully transferred to shielding and structural integrity field. External hull temperature and radiation levels within safe parameters. We're holding up quite well..."

There was a long tremor that shook the whole ship around them that quickly subsided to let him finish.

"... as long as Mister Snow keeps us from those rocks and shoals out there."

"The computer is trying to calculate the gravimetric pattern of the nearby neutronium masses to feed navigation with course correction predictions," said Valencia Irksos from the science station. "But as we know from past travels inside this phenomenon, our own mass is perturbing these patterns."

Another tremor shook the deckplates.

"Expect more than a few bumps along the way," she finally concluded.

"Rough seas..." simply commented Snow in a voice lowered by concentration as he flew the starship amidst a maelstrom of fire peppered with immense black stones the size of cities. Then in a clearer voice, he reported: "On course to launching coordinates, Sir."

Syntron scrutinized one more time the detailed map on his armchair PADD and could see that they were now indeed approaching their first set of coordinates.

"Prepare to launch first set of trillithium emitters on my mark. Lieutenant Irksos, stand ready to begin analyzing all incoming data on the resultant reactions."

Several moments later, Syntron commanded with the confidence only a scientific mind could inspire in such a moment.

"Initiate first launch sequence."

From the lowest part of what remained of the Artemis, where the saucer section had once been connected to the rest of the stately [Ambassador class](#) stardrive, the two main forward torpedo launchers glowed red with activating power. Although designed nearly a century before, the Burst 5 launchers were still among the most potent projectile weapons devised by Starfleet, each capable of firing up to five rounds in any firing pattern desired. This capability was the key to the vessel's ability to accomplish its current task, as all torpedoes had been converted into class VIII probes since those used the same casing, deflector, navigation sensor package and propulsion system as photon and quantum warheads.

Following the dispersal grid calculated by Syntron made possible by the competent guidance of Tyvya and Snow, their old school tandem console allowing perfect synchronism between tactical and navigation, the first of five paired groups of five probes each shot out simultaneously from under the wide saucer and flew away like an expanding firework within the flaming maelstrom.

"First volley away," confirmed Tyvya. "Second volley is being loaded and primed."

"Receiving telemetry," then reported Irksos from the science station. "First deployment on course."

"Their warp signature is fading," added Baoule from the engineering one. "Expected power drain complete. They are travelling on their initial firing momentum now."

"Ready for activation of trillithium emitters," announced Cheonghi with his bald, chitinous head bobbing on his scrawny neck between his console readings and the large viewing screen as if he was following the probes with his eyes as much as with his monitors.

This was the most crucial moment of their whole operation and, at this very moment, most held their breath in anticipation, if not apprehension. Only the Vulcan Syntron seemed coldly detached and impervious to the tension gripping everyone else's throat.

Calmly calculating and verifying the precise position of the first set of modified probes within the anomaly, Syntron looked up and spoke with assurance,

"Activate emitters... Now."

As the trillithium was activated from each of the probe emitters positioned specifically within the periphery of the anomaly, the overall effect within the region was almost instantaneous as the deionization reaction caused the energy output of the anomaly to abruptly decrease to an almost vapid level. Even the gravimetric pattern of the nearby neutronium masses along with the increased radiation and temperature they were compensating for within the Artemis saucer dropped in all of the immediate areas around the ship within proximity of the emitters to virtually nonexistent levels. The ship went from riding the dangerous waves of a storm to a dead calm sea. The contrast was astonishing; as was their silenced reactions within the ship to what they just witnessed.

"Telemetry coming in from the first probe deployment," reported Irksos without looking up from her sensor display. "Plasma temperature and reaction dropping steadily to ninety-eight percent of original levels. General gravimetric lines also stabilizing by two percent. Readings are consistent with theorized operational model."

"Translation; it's working," commented Elliago with a dry smile then a wink at his commanding officer to his right. "This poor girl has been exposed way too much to our Vulcan Exec."

Kheren did not acknowledge the Deltan's jibe nor the report from the science station. He kept all four oculars fixed to the screen.

"Coming about to deployment grid 02," now announced helmsman Snow as they all felt a slight but perceptible swerve of the entire deck that the inertial compensators struggled against.

"Salvo 2 loaded, primed and ready, Sir," said Tyvya at the other side of the long twin-station console before the command dais. "Salvo 3 on standby."

Focused on the data, maps and telemetry displayed on his science PADD, the Vulcan first officer was carefully recalculating and verifying the precise position of the next set of modified probes within the anomaly. As the probes were aligning into optimal position, Syntron looked up.

"Prepare to activate the next salvo of emitters... engage."

Within mere moments, the deionization reaction in this region caused the energy output of the anomaly to abruptly dwindle; calming the energy and space around them once again.

From the underbelly of the Artemis, clusters of probes were fired in succession as the vessel swung on the plasma eddies like a canoe on a torrent that becalmed itself in its wake, the raging waves of fire replaced by an orange mist floating peacefully where raging tongues of golden flame churned moments before.

"Metaphasic shielding holding," reported engineer Baoule just as the ship shook with an ominous vibration when a sudden flare of plasma pushed an immense black mass too close for comfort before Snow at the helm veered away from it. "Inertial dampeners at full capacity."

"Salvo 5 away, readying salvo 6," counted outloud the Andorian giantess at tactical.  
"Overheating of the launchers under expected levels."

"The plasma reaction is coming down steadily, now at ninety percent," added Irksos.

Then, as the main viewer showed still more fire resorbing into inert gases and the inferno slowly calmed down before their very eyes, the voice of science lieutenant Norbert Baoule came from the auxilliary station he was manning between the engineering one of his twin brother Robert and the science post of Valencia Irksos.

"Captain... sensors output is becoming clearer as we proceed... And... I am registering something... peculiar with the anomaly."

Kheren straightened himself in his chair but kept his four eyes riveted to the screen.

"Define peculiar, Lieutenant."

"Sir... I am registering what seems like to be a collapse of the central core of the Azimuth Horizon. Sensors definition are not optimal but, according to my current readings, it is proportionate in speed and intensity to the decrease of the plasma reaction we are causing."

The Andorian blinked.

"The entrance to the other universe..."

"Is starting to close, Captain." finished Baoule.

\* \* \*

**Ship's Log, stardate 87174.4**

**Lieutenant Oseno Jureth, Acting Commander, reporting.**

**We have broken off from the Artemis on orders from Fleet Command to investigate the reason behind the disappearance of two of the shuttles that had been positioned for the next phase of the Azimuth Horizon containment operation. While I am concerned about leaving the Artemis to her own designs a second time, it is necessary for the success of the operation.**

"Bridge to Oseno,"

The disembodied voice of Shawn Hunter finished Jureth's log entry for him and he tapped his combadge to respond

"Oseno here."

"Sir, we are coming up on the designated coordinates."

"Thank you Mister Hunter, Oseno out."

Jureth closed the terminal, rose from the desk and exited the Alsea's ready room out onto the bridge. Shawn Hunter stood from the command chair as Jureth sat down and resumed his helm station.

"Take us out of warp, Mister Hunter."

"Aye, Sir; cutting warp drive and engaging impulse engines."

The warp field disappeared, replaced by the searingly bright plasma of the Azimuth Horizon.

"Mister Hunter, close on the shuttle coordinates, one quarter impulse." Jureth ordered.

"Aye, Sir,"

The Alsea maneuvered carefully to the spot between where the two shuttles reported lost were supposed to be stationed. They were now even closer to the anomaly than they were but they were still at a safe distance and no longer had to worry about the growing tendrils which were wrapping themselves around the fiery maelstrom by following now the paths defined by the ships.

"Sensors?" Jureth asked of Cat Steele.

Cat looked at the sensor readings which were a mix of true results and interference from the Horizon.

"I'm detecting wreckage consistent with a Federation shuttlecraft just off our port side, Sir..."

"Just the wreckage of one shuttle?" Jureth asked suspiciously.

"Yes, Sir."

"Fleet Captain Samji indicated that there were two shuttles destroyed. Where is the other one?"

"Is it possible he's mistaken, Sir?" Ensign Wynn asked from Ops.

"Possibly, but I'm not taking chances. Red Alert, shields up."

The Alsea's alarm klaxon blared, announcing the Red Alert status to the entire ship and the ship's personnel once again returned to their battle stations.

"Cat, see if you can increase sensor resolution and filter out some of the interference to give us a better idea of what happened here."

"Yes, Sir,"

The security woman punched in several commands, attempting to reduce the noise in the sensor readings being generated by the Azimuth Horizon. It wasn't easy; the plasma reactions played havoc with the ship's electronics. After a couple of minutes, she had what she was looking for and the computer beeped at her as it analyzed the data. She did not like what she saw.

"Sir, the sensors are not finding any trace of the other shuttlecraft, not even debris or residual energy... but they are picking up traces of a portal to fluidic space."

Jureth practically jumped out of the command chair.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Sir," Cat said firmly. "The readings are consistent with what the USS Voyager recorded regarding the passage used by the Undine, otherwise known as Species 8472."

Jureth used the console on the captain's chair to open the ship's intercom.

"Attention all hands, this is the Captain. I am invoking ship's security alert protocols at this time and for the foreseeable future. All security officers report to your stations and secure all vital spaces, make security reports to Lieutenant Steele on the bridge."

Jureth closed the channel and turned back to face the bridge crew.

"Mister Wynn, get me Starbase 10."

"Channel open, Captain." Wynn reported

"Starbase 10, this is Alsea; do you read?"

"Alsea, that was quick," Samji himself replied, impressed at their efficiency. "Have you determined the fate of our shuttles?"

"Yes, Sir," Jureth said grimly. "one of the shuttles is destroyed...we found the wreckage, but the other... Sir, we've found traces that a portal was opened to fluidic space. I believe the other shuttle was stolen by an Undine infiltrator, Sir."

Samji's jaw dropped and he was silent as he tried to process the information. "Undine!?" he finally repeated in astonishment, and then recomposed himself. "What would they want with one of our shuttles?"

"Sir, could be they were curious why we had so many empty ones out there and they're working on finding our time sequence warp and detonation. In fact, it's likely they already have," offered his Ferengi third-in-command, Grok.

Samji nodded.

"It seems like the most plausible explanation."

At that moment, Mandella stepped in and handed him a PADD with the data they had been compiling. About a dozen likely enemies with strategies for dealing with them, ranging from diplomacy to a direct assault. Undine was at the bottom of the list, clearly having just been added. The race hadn't been encountered by the Federation for decades, and only in the Delta Quadrant... And, the last they had heard, then Captain Janeway had formed a temporary truce with the species.

He looked up from the PADD and spoke to Jureth.

"We recommend you open with talks first. Remind them that their last encounter with us as a species showed them we wouldn't be kicked around. Remind them we didn't want to invade their space... that in fact we have no interest whatsoever in fluidic space... and that Janeway was their ally once."

Before Oseno Jureth could take his leave, he lifted a finger at his image on the screen.

"Oh and one more thing. We can't have a mere Lieutenant representing the Federation in diplomatic negotiations with a species we haven't encountered in over thirty years. Therefore, I am hereby granting you a field promotion to the rank of Captain, effective through the end of Operation Horizon."



Samji then proceeded to punch in several commands to transfer an encrypted package containing the codes and classified data only accessible by Federation Captains, including the secret Omega Directive. It would be waiting for him at his ready room console under a heavy security code only able to be lifted through his current acting command code, a DNA scan, and voice activation.

"Congratulations, Captain Oseno," he said with a smile that he knew the poor officer would probably dislike more than appreciate. But he had already proven his ability to handle the role and would not be able to argue himself out of this one.

Jureth started to object to the Fleet Captain's orders. He was a security officer, not a diplomat. But a look from the fleet captain stopped him and the Bajoran knew there was no getting away from this order. So instead, he asked a question.

"Thank you, Sir...but, Sir, are you ordering me to attempt to enter fluidic space? Wouldn't the Undine see that as a threat?"

Samji looked at him confused, and then realized his mistake.

"Well, no... I assumed they must be lurking around there still. I meant to preface it with *if* they engage you."

*I must need some sleep,* he thought. *I'm confusing what I thought with what I actually said.*

"Understood, Sir... Any further orders in the event we don't encounter the Undine? I can replace the two lost shuttles with ones from the Alsea. That should allow the operation to continue as planned."

"Aye, Captain, that would be ideal," Samji agreed. "regardless of whether the Undine show up. I'm sending you the program that needs to be installed on the shuttles for the operation. Once you're finished, if they haven't caused you any trouble, return to your previous coordinates to support the Artemis."

"Understood, Sir; we'll proceed immediately. Alsea out."

The channel closed and Jureth thought for a moment about who would carry out the shuttle placement and in conclusion could only come up with one person.

"Mister Hunter, download the shuttle program and get yourself another pilot. I want you to take charge of the shuttle mission."

"Aye, Sir,"

Hunter rose from the helm position and the standby operations officer, whom Jureth recognized as warrant officer Jones, slid into the spot. Jureth then turned to Cat Steele.

"Any sign of the Undine out there?"

She shook her head.

"No contacts on sensors, Sir, Federation or otherwise; and there is a Priority One message from Starbase 10 waiting for you."

"Alright, I'll be in the ready room. Lieutenant Steele, you have the bridge."

"Yes, Sir."

Jureth exited the bridge to the ship's ready room and, as the door closed behind him, he let out a sigh. This was not where he'd envisioned his career going when he joined Starfleet. In fact, he speculated he may be the most reluctant officer to accept command in the history of the Federation.

He thought about the great captains throughout Starfleet history; Archer, Kirk, Picard, Sisko, Janeway, Riker, and wondered if they'd had any reservations about taking the command chair. It didn't really matter, as officially as it could possibly be under the circumstances, he was now truly the captain of the USS Alsea, whether he liked it or not; and he didn't have to like it, he just had to do it. He sat down at the desk and opened the terminal where the Priority One message alert was blinking at him.

"Computer, access Priority One message."

"Authorization code required."

"Authorization Oseno Bravo Juliet Six One."

"Authorization code accepted, voice verified, please stand by for DNA verification."

The computer, using the ship's internal sensors instantly verified the Bajoran sitting at the desk as current security chief Oseno Jureth.

"DNA scan complete, identity verified, accessing Priority One message."

Jureth read through the data contained in Fleet Captain Samji's message, including the Omega Directive which Jureth had heard of but had thought was just a rumor until now. It was a bit shocking, but Oseno knew he didn't have time to be shocked. There were other things in the message, policies, procedures, and his official field promotion which he transferred to the ship's computer.

"Computer, recognize Oseno Jureth, Bravo Juliet Six One."

"Authorization recognized."

"Computer, change command code, new code Oseno Six One Delta Sierra."

"Code changed."

"Computer, as per directives encoded and verified from Fleet captain Allen Samji, transfer command of USS Alsea from Commander Rachele Rivers to Captain Oseno Jureth. Authorization Oseno Six One Delta Sierra."

"Transfer of command confirmed and verified with Starfleet Records. All shipboard access codes changed to new commanding officer Captain Oseno Jureth as of stardate 87174.4."

Jureth nodded in satisfaction and walked over to the replicator, punched in several commands and the unit first produced a new uniform tunic in command red, and then the four rank pips that were universally recognized as the symbol of a Starfleet captain. If he was going to do this, he was going to do it properly and so Jureth donned the new uniform top and fastened the rank pips where they belonged. Then he walked out of the ready room and back onto the bridge.

"Captain on the bridge," Cat Steele said with a smile as he entered, even though it was not proper protocol given the ship was still at Red Alert.

"As you were," Jureth said brusquely.

Cat returned to the tactical station and Jureth took his place in the command chair, tapping the intercom.

"Bridge to Hunter, what is your status, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, Chief Ryland and I are programming the shuttles now. We should be ready to launch in ten minutes."

"Understood; keep me posted. Bridge out."

Jureth sat back in the chair realizing that the only thing he could do now was wait.

\* \* \*

The estimated half a day maintenance and report time came around twice afterwards on board the USS Spectre, where they needed to pull out of warp for several hours each time. The first one had been uneventful. They were still too far from the Starbase and too close to the Anomaly to report in; and so, with the efficient repairs of the Engineering team of Mister O'Conner complete, the ship was underway again in mere hours.

The second time they dropped out of warp, they heard the automated distress signal coming from the ring of shuttles around the Anomaly.

"USS Spectre, this is Starbase 10. If you can hear this, please broadcast your response through the emergency distress channel."

"Open a channel," Summers said and nodded to Rogers who carried out this modification. then he raised his short-cropped blonde head to answer. "Starbase 10, this is Captain Summers. Good to hear your voice, I hope everything is alright."

"Everything's fine from our end, Captain," came the voice of Fleet Captain Samji. "We just needed to utilize the distress signal for the shuttles to automatically rebroadcast it."

"Understood. Fleet Captain; we have our part of the containment almost complete. Orders?"

On the situational display occupying the center of the starbase's control center, data shifted to include the confirmation of containment of the fiery anomaly it represented with a real-time holographic image.

"What is their position?" Samji asked, turning to his science officer who was conferring with their new Engineer.

"Quite near the Alsea and Artemis initially planned position, Sir," he responded.

"Well, that's a bit of luck. You may want to check in with the Alsea and the Artemis at the first, best opportunity, Captain. Afterward, stand by for the final stage of the Operation."

"Sir... Yesterday, our long range sensors registered what looked like an explosion in the sector where the Alsea and the Artemis were sent to intercept the Romulans. Any data about this?"

"The Artemis lost her stardrive destroying the Romulan dreadnought but her saucer section with it's entire crew are safe and sound, currently working on the second phase of the operation within the anomaly."

Daniel was speechless for a moment. How this dramatic scene had played out was almost beyond his imagination; not to mention how a saucer section deprived of warp drive had impossibly managed to get so fast from five light years away to it's current declared activity in the anomaly's sector.

*Some tall tale you will have for us, Kheren my friend!* he chuckled inwardly, shaking his head in disbelief.

He also recalled that the Andorian had purposely reduced his massive crew to a skeleton one when he had heard that he was going to tackle the most powerful ship ever deployed short of a Borg Cube with only the Alsea for support. This surprising decision had surprised, even shocked several people, notably the former Artemis First Officer that had then stormed away from her to come back to his previous chief engineer position here on the Spectre.

*Seems like you had some good foresight,* he congratulated again the unorthodox captain of the Artemis in his mind, hearing that he had saved his entire crew despite the loss of two-thirds of his massive ship.

"I'm eagerly awaiting to hear Captain Kheren's report, Sir," he admitted then outloud. " And what about the Alsea?"

"They had to split from the Artemis before the interception of the dreadnought to stop a Romulan task force bound to destroy the anomaly," summarized the starbase commander. "They managed to abort that threat and they too have completed their own confinement operation in their quadrant. They are now investigating some problems with our comm shuttle chain. Your own trajectory should soon bring you fairly close to their coordinates. Get in contact with them and await further orders. Starbase 10 out."

"Aye, Sir," Summers replied and closed communications.

\* \* \*

Syntron stood up straight as he gazed into the main viewscreen as an eyebrow elevated slightly in reaction Norbert Baoule's statement.

"Fascinating."

The first officer then turned to Captain Kheren.

"This outcome was something we neither anticipated nor saw in multiple simulations." Then, after a brief reflective pause, Syntron inquired; "Recommendation, Sir?"

"Please do, Number One," said Kheren before he sat deeper in his overlarge chair. "Helm, all stop. Tactical, hold probe launch."

"Answering all stop, Sir," Aguk Snow answered with both voice and fingers running over his piloting board.

The image on the screen froze but the ship shuddered then seemed to sway slightly to the right.

"Which does not mean we are fully immobilized..." apologized the Inuit pilot as he still struggled against the eddies and currents of the nearby plasma waves.

"Salvo 6 on standby, Captain," now Tyvya confirmed beside Snow.

"Mister Syntron," then ordered the Andorian, "work with the science department and find out what is going on... and fast. We can stay in that inferno for just so long..."

He didn't had to finish about a whole universe hanging in the balance as well.

Maybe even two.

"Acknowledged, Captain" Syntron replied as he engaged his com link. "Science team leaders... Update all of your sensor readings and collected data. Then meet in the briefing room on deck one in four minutes. We have a mystery to unravel and imperative decisions to make. First officer out."

He stood up from his post, grabbed his PADD and walked with purpose back toward their meeting room.

*Often the best laid plans...* the first officer reflected as he solely entered into the room.

A minute later, the Vulcan was seated around the peculiar triangular table of the main birefing room with Assistant Chief of Science Valencia Irsos, Norbert Baoule and Lieutenant T'Val, the head of Astrophysics and Astrometrics and the only other Vulcan left among their skeleton crew. Although logic had made Captain Kheren's request for minimal ship complement as sound to her as to all the other Vulcan crewmembers who had remained on Starbase 10 upon launch, the same logic had told her that her seniority in the astrometric department made her essential for the operation regarding a cosmic anomaly. She was in fact the highest expert on the anomaly within this galaxy, even beyond her former chief of science, as she had been there when the Artemis had discovered it and flown completely through it in and out.

And so, the four of them met to discuss the latest unexpected developpement with the bewildering Azimuth Horizon.

As the one taking up Syntron's former position since his promotion to the Executive chair, Valencia Irsos was first to speak and sumrized the data they had brought with them.

"In a nutshell, Sir, here is what we have observed; the size of the wormhole linking our universe to the one discovered at the heart of the anomaly is shrinking in direct proportion, both in size and time, to the resorbtion of the plasma reaction our trillithium emitters are causing."

"And there is more," chimed in T'Val, her long, straight dark hair framing from her delicately pointed ears the furrow of her brow, deepened by the sharp angle of her arched eyebrows. "According to astrometrics, the change in volume and temperature of the plasma when going from an active state to an inert state within the confinement area we have created in our universe is pushing the remaining reaction out at an exponential rate from the actual defusing reaction... and into the other universe, as access to it is disappearing."

"In simpler language, Sir," then added Baoule, "we throw the storm back where it came from faster than we becalm it. We will manage to extinguish it, alright... but only on our side. At the same time, we will expand it on the other side and trap it there behind a closed door... where there is nothing to stop or even channel it's expansion in normal space."

In the silence that followed, the entire room trembled, as if expressing some deep dread felt by the entire vessel.

After as moment where the three scientists exchanged a few nods, Lieutenant Irsos drew her own conclusion.

"Sir, our hypothesis is that the plasma reaction is somewhat either responsible for creating that opening between the two universes or for maintaining it's current presence... or both... and that the very existence of that aperture is what prevents either universes from being already drowned in cosmic fire. Our observations shows a direct correlation between our actions against that plasma reaction and the existence of the aperture. Therefore, our recommendation is to abort phase 2 of our operation."

Syntron was attentively listening, correlating and analyzing the information presented by his team. Once they concluded their assessment and recommendations, he responded.

"I understand the complexity of the dilemma we are now facing. However, the problem is... if we completely abort this process now, the driving force of this anomaly will once again continue to expand and perhaps threaten both universes. If this conduit is a type of cosmic doorway between these universes, then we must strive to determine a way of having the energy driving this phenomenon somehow reach a state of equilibrium. This would potentially solve two issues. First, it would prevent the Azimuth Horizon anomaly from dangerously expanding into both regions. Secondly, it could eventually provide a stabilized gateway into the other universe."

He then contemplated the complications involved in this premise.

"What we need to do now that the reactions have subsided where we have used the trillithium emitters is to send in a series of probes to scan and analyze these regions and beyond. They may provide us with a greater detailed assessment regarding the driving the forces within this phenomenon that we were unable to detect previously when the energy output was operating at much higher levels. Once we begin to understand these mechanisms within the anomaly, we may be able to determine another course of action."

"I calculate that we do not have sufficient time remaining to do that at our current position," then objected T'Val with a calm that contrasted sharply with the gravity of her words. "As you can see on the last recorded data, the closure of the aperture is continuing still, because of the current emitters deployed. The magnitude of their action is of course limited to their current minimal number, but the effect is still ongoing... and as Lieutenant Irksos pointed out, in an exponential manner."

The black-skinned woman nodded and went even further in their analysis.

"Sir, not only do we have to stop sending trillithium emitters, but we have to deactivate those already operating. It will take much longer than previously planned with all the emitters we were about to send out, but them alone will eventually cause the anticipated catastrophe anyway unless we stop them."

"On the other hand," then pointed out Norbert Baoule, "if we do remove them, then the plasma reaction will flare up again full force... and right in our faces."

As if to underline his gloomy prediction, another tremor made the ship tremble around them.

The first officer again listened heedfully to the assessment and warning from each of his science team members before responding to these associates surrounding him in the briefing room.

"Based on your collective assessments, it would appear then that our course of action would logically fall somewhere between what we are currently implementing and doing nothing at all. Perhaps... we may need to reposition the ship and the current emitters from their present locations and then begin to decrease the level of emissions on these emitters until we are able to achieve a more stable energy output level from the anomaly, rather than the complete deionization effect we were initially aiming for."

Irksos punched the latest data to the holographic display hovering over the triangular table between all of them and made the computer visualize the calculated projections as she answered her superior officer.

"That would work, Sir, but only in postponing the inevitable. As long as those emitters are active, even as few as they are and at the lowest setting we could bring them, the deionization will continue and eventually close the aperture, trapping the remaining fire on the other side to burn unimpeded."

"And there is an approximately ninety-eight point fifty-three percent probability that we will not be even able to do that," then said T'Val as she added the trilitium emitters schematics to the astrometric display and correlated both set of data to illustrate her words. "Because of the extreme level of interference in this area and as a safeguard against possible attempts from hostile forces to ignite the plasma again, we made the emitters automated once launched, as no remote control is possible. We may have only ten percent of the deployment done but, given sufficient time, even a single active emitter is enough to eventually cause the collapse of the entire Azimuth Horizon."

"Which means we need not only to stop deployment but to remove them one by one... or shoot them down," concluded Baoule, receiving a nod from the Vulcan woman for his logical conclusion. " But out here, phasers and tractor beams do not work, shuttles or thruster suits would not survive and we have not a single torpedo left."

This time, there was no vibration to fill the cold, hard silence that stretched between them, making the moment all the more ominous.

As their superior officer remained silent, obviously pondering their predicament in every minute detail as he was so well known to do, Valencia Irksos then looked up directly at him.

"Sir... there might be a way to disable the emitters already launched, even without phasers, tractor beams or torpedoes..."

"You're not thinking of ramming them with the ship I hope," voiced Baoule with obvious concern.

"No, not with the ship..."

"The other probes..." then concluded T'Val with unfailing logic. "Removing the trilitium emitters from the torpedo casings and sending those as inert projectiles would safely destroy the deployed ones to let the plasma reaction reassert itself and re-equilibrate the whole power system of the Azimuth Horizon... possibly even reopen fully the passage to the other universe."

"Manual firing? Without target lock against two meters long objects in this stormy weather? Lieutenant Tyvya is good but even for her, this will be quite a feat," observed Baoule still dubious.

"Not so much at point blank range," countered the Vulcan woman with her continuing logic.

"Where we would be then fully exposed in half a ship to the revived fury of the elements," insisted the black-skinned man.

"We did manage to survive twice already in such adverse conditions. Statistically speaking, despite our current situation, the probability of us surviving a third time are..."

"I can do the math, thank you," interrupted Baoule before sighing. " And even if we do beat the odds again, we will still be back to square one, with a threatening cosmic firestorm poised to burn everything down."

"Maybe not..." then chimmed in Irksos as she looked again at Syntron.

From behind his side of the triangular table, Sterling gazed intently at his team before he finally spoke again.

"We have been in more immediately perilous situations within this anomaly than we currently are now. So, I want you to continue to work as a team until you determine a viable solution."

After another short moment of silence, Valencia Irsos answered him.

"We do have one, Sir..."

She looked at the others before she finished with one last word.

"Snowfire."

\* \* \*

"Hunter to bridge; we're ready down here, Captain."

"Very well, Mister Hunter; proceed."

"Aye, Sir, Hunter out."

"Ops, Jureth said, straightening up in the command chair; "monitor the progress of the shuttles."

"Yes, Sir," Ensign Wynn replied. After several minutes, she reported: "Shuttle Bay doors opening; shuttles away."

"Hunter to Alsea," Shawn's voice came over the comm; "Do you read?"

"Affirmative, Lieutenant," Jureth replied. "We have you."

"We are going to move the shuttles into position now, Sir."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," Jureth responded and then ordered Wynn: "Put them on the viewer, Ensign."

"Yes, Sir, coming up now."

The Alsea's viewer displayed the two shuttlecrafts as they carefully maneuvered into position near the one remaining shuttle from Starbase 10. They did so deliberately and one at a time, but it still only took the two skilled pilots about twenty minutes to position the their crafts.

"Hunter to Alsea; we are in position and the shuttle program has been activated."

Hunter's voice was distorted, but still clear enough for Jureth to make out his report.

"Understood, Mister Hunter; stand by for retrieval."

Jureth closed the channel and tapped his combadge.

"Bridge to Transporter Room 1. Bring Mister Hunter and Chief Ryland home."



"Aye, Captain, transporting now."

A few moments later, the transporter operator reported completing the task.

"I have them, Captain."

"Acknowledged, Chief. Please send Mister Hunter back to the bridge."

"Aye, Sir; transporter room out."

"Now," Jureth said aloud; "let's see if the Undine are still lurking about."

Moments later, a series of concentrated beams of yellow plasma came shooting from the direction of the anomaly itself, threatening to weaken the shields and damage the hull of the Alsea's shuttles, causing the hull to catch fire in several places and which would have slowly burned through to the inside of the small crafts if not for the automated hazard emitter systems installed that were programmed to collect and dispose of active plasma.

Following this was a slow, powerful yellow fiery torpedo, measuring about half the size of the shuttle itself.

On the bridge of the Alsea, Cat Steele reported what they could all see.

"Captain, something is firing on one of the shuttles! Its coming from the direction of the Azimuth Horizon!"

"Source?"

"Unknown... too much sensor interference. Sir! Plasma torpedo inbound!"

"Cat, target and shoot down that torpedo! Helm, get us in range!"

"Aye," Warrant Officer Jones replied from the helm.

"Aye Sir... targeting..." Cat said brusquely.

Just as she had done with the torpedoes fired at the Azimuth Horizon by the Romulan ships, Cat used computer guided manual targeting to line up the the plasma torpedo as the Alsea maneuvered toward the shuttle.

"Firing phasers," Cat said and the Alsea lashed out with her phaser arrays.

The first couple of shots missed, but with Cat correcting her aim, the next shots were true and the torpedo exploded before it could impact the shuttle.

"Extend our shields around the shuttles Cat; and, Mister Wynn, open me a comm channel, all languages, all frequencies"

"Aye," Cat replied. "Extending shields"

"Channel open, Captain," Wynn reported right behind her.

"Unknown vessel, this is Captain Oseno Jureth of the United Federation of Planets starship USS Alsea. Cease your attack on our shuttle and identify yourself."

The attack didn't cease as more plasma beams futilely attempted to cut through the shields and several more plasma torpedoes exploded against the invisible force that existed just meters away from the shuttles. Eventually realizing that only minimal fires were being laid upon the surface of the shuttle, the source of the attacks began to reveal itself.

It appeared first as if a hole had opened in the anomaly. What looked like a brackish-blue lake was framed by the fiery light of the Azimtih Horizon, and from those waters emerged two pincer-like protrusions. Following this came the main body of the ship in a cylindrical form, and at the end three fins expanded like a menacing claw.

For several moments, the Alsea and the alien ship remained motionless, in deadlock as the Alsea waited for a response, whether verbal or hostile, they weren't sure.

Then, a video was transmitted and displayed on the viewscreen. They were surprised to see a Human face; that of an old man in a red Starfleet Uniform with Captain's decorations. The uniform was at least 30 years old however, and everyone instantly recognized the face before them; it was the very face that they had seen on a memorial statue in the gardens of Starfleet Academy.

Boothby, the former head gardener of Starfleet Headquarters and the Academy, back on Earth.

It was familiar, yet a bit menacing as, instead of being framed by a beautifully tended flower garden, he was surrounded by three massive two and a half meter tripedal aliens. These were instantly recognizable as members of what the Borg had once defined as species 8472; the extradimensional intruders that called themselves the "Undine" in federation Standard.

While there had been several skirmishes with Undine ships and soldiers in recent years accross the Alpha and Beta quadrants, no formal talks had ever taken place since the USS Voyager had encountered them in the Delta Quadrant. The "man" standing before them who would call himself "Boothby" was there as well. The lifespan of the Undine was unknown, but it was assumed to be quite long. Of course it was impossible to know his true age, as the aged visage of Boothby was worn as an extremely hi-tech bio-disguise.

Once they had used this in an attempt to better undrstand and eventually infiltrate the Federation, in the end only to use it to better communicate with the Starfleet officers that thwarted that plan. Now, the undine was using that same tool to speak to the Alsea.

"Captain. I have been chosen to speak with you. As you probably know, we normally communicate telepathically. However, this form has been something I have grown used to over the years, and it provides an easier way for me to tell you... that your species is finished. This anomaly that you have yourselves created with your carelessness will be your undoing. We welcome its destruction of your intrusive dimension that has dared to invade and pollute our own universe. You have no chance. Stop fighting, it is futile. Take whatever time you have left and make peace with your demise."

Without waiting for a response, he cut off communications and the ship began firing again; this time directly at the Alsea.

The Alsea rocked slightly as the plasma beams impacted her shields.

"Shields holding," Cat Steele reported; "but protecting the shuttles is going to strain them eventually."

"Cat, return fire," Oseno ordered. "Full phasers and quantum topredoes."

The Alsea struck out with her phaser arrays and a volley of quantum torpedoes that barely phased the Undine ship, which continued its barrage of plasma beam fire and responded with torpedoes of its own.

"Enemy shields holding," Cat said as the Alsea shook again. "Our shields are down to eighty percent."

Jureth was shocked to see one of the most powerful vessels in Starfleet barely scratching the alien vessel. And while that feeling only lasted a few seconds, it was enough for him to know that his ship was going to need help to get through this fight.

"Keep up the fire! All reserve power to shields!" Jureth said. "Mister Wynn; open a channel to Starbase 10 using the distress frequency broadcast only"

"Open, Sir."

"This is Captain Oseno of USS Alsea to Starbase 10 or any Lotus Fleet or allied vessel; we are under attack from an Undine vessel and request immediate assistance. Coordinates to follow."

Jureth cut the channel from the command chair and spoke to Wynn again.

"Repeat that message on the distress frequency Mister Wynn; and give them our coordinates."

"Aye, Sir."

Shawn Hunter entered the bridge at that moment and retook the helm station from Ensign Jones.

"Your timing is perfect, Mister Hunter. Evasive maneuvers. Cat, pull our shields back. They don't want the shuttles anymore; they want us." Jureth ordered.

"Aye, Sir," both officers responded nearly in unison.

The Alsea maneuvered away from the shuttle formation and presented her reinforced starboard shields toward the Undine vessel as yet another plasma torpedo rocked the ship.

"Shields at seventy five percent, Captain," Cat replied even as she returned fire on the enemy ship. "Enemy shields at ninety percent and holding."

Another volley of plasma fire struck the Prometheus Class warship and Jureth rocked forward but was held in place by the automaton strapping that deployed from his belt across his body. He was instantly grateful to Captain Kheren for the personal inertial dampener the Andorian had provided. Behind him, an auxiliary console short circuited, showering sparks outward and the engineer manning it was thrown to the deck.

"Computer," Jureth ordered, "Activate Emergency Medical Hologram!"

The Alsea's replica of the ship's doctor from USS Voyager shimmered into view.

"Please state..."

"The auxiliary console exploded. That man is hurt!" Jureth said, cutting him off and the doctor went to work, mumbling something about Starfleet captains as the Alsea was hit hard by another plasma torpedo.

"Shields at seventy percent! Minor damage to the port side hull" Cat said with urgency in her voice.

Jureth knew that they were fighting a losing fight, but they had to keep fighting. Operation Horizon had to succeed and if the Undine were allowed to continue, they could simply ambush individual ships until Lotus Fleet was eliminated and the galaxy was lost.

No, this had to stop here, even he had to sacrifice the Alsea and her crew to do it.

\* \* \*

On the bridge of the Artemis, motionless within the raging plasma tornado of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, Captain Kheren was drumming his fingers on the wide armrest of his old style command chair, a sure sign of the heightened tension in the air when considering the patience and composure he was well known for. But he was still Andorian and his nervousness was finally getting the better of even his famous self-control as he waited for his science department to resolve their new quandary... and that, while they struggled to stay in one piece amidst a cosmic inferno with only a thin layer of metaphasic energy covering them.

Once more, the battered starship shuddered under the awesome power of the anomaly around them. At the helm, Lieutenant Snow wrestled with the controls to steady them manually, almost getting toppled out of his seat despite the PID he was wearing.

"Stay on course, Mister Snow," advised Kheren behind the hand his chin was resting in.

"Aye, Captain. The plasma reaction might have become inert near us, but those shifting subspace fractures and errant neutronium masses are not."

"And they're both getting closer," added Cheonghi, assuming sensor monitoring duty from his multitask ops station, his beady eyes almost bulging out of his bald, chitinous head as he spoke. "Our own mass is slowly but surely pulling at them."

Then, the rich, musical voice of Elliago Nasaro-Myth filled the following moment of silence with definite concern and puzzlement.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Doctor?"

"I'm getting something... on the emergency channel. It's very faint because of all the interference but... I caught the words "Alsea" and "attack" with an incomplete set of numbers... they look like a set of coordinates."

Kheren almost shot out of his chair, his antennae suddenly arcing forward as if he was about to fight.

"They are under attack! Do we still have from HQ the coordinates of the disabled shuttles they were sent to look for?"

"Aye, Captain," immediately confirmed Tyvya. "But, Sir... we are in no shape to provide tactical assistance if the most powerful warship available is itself ..."

"Lieutenant, you know General Order 6 as well as I do," retorted the Captain with an impatient tone. "In case of an emergency call, all orders and activities are to be postponed to answer it. And as far as we know, we are the only ship around... or able to even barely hear their call, let alone answer it."

"But, Sir, us answering it is even more dubious," then said Snow, turning in his chair towards his commanding officer. "We only have impulse power. Even at emergency impulse speed and giving her all she's got, it will take us almost a month to get there."

"Even so," now objected Elliago, "there might be survivors..."

"We'd be lucky to arrive there and find any escape pods to retrieve," finished Cheonghi glumly. "If it's the Romulans again, they will mercilessly shoot them down."

Kheren sat back in his chair and struck his armrest comm panel with a slap of his callused hand that startled everyone into sudden silence.

"Mister Syntron! I need you and your staff back here now!"

"On our way, Captain," the first officer immediately replied as he signaled the team to head back to the main bridge.

The captain closed the channel even before he could hear the reply and stood up before his command chair.

"Sound red alert!"

Just as the alert klaxon blared to the rhythm of pulsating red lights flaring up around them, the entire ship suddenly shook and buckled so suddenly and violently, they almost all toppled onto the deckplates.

"What now?" growled the Andorian captain.

"Subspace fractures!" reported Aguk Snow as he righted the trembling ship under them. "We got caught between two of them just as they formed each side of us!"

"They're both pulling at us unevenly and interfering with our nav sensors!" added the Edoan at the multitask ops console, all three arms flying across the panel. "We can barely chart a course through all that interference!"

"Captain! If we stay here we will break apart!" warned Chief Baoule. "That, or some plasma ejection will find its way through one of those fractures and fry us through our depleting shields! The gravitons powering them are being drained fast!"

On the screen, the hellish maelstrom of the Azimuth Horizon extended several crackling bolts of plasma fire around its blinding center, like the burning fangs of a monstrous beast eager to devour them.

There was barely time for a new tremor to make the entire ship groan before Kheren came up with his plan and made his decision. Still standing feet apart before his command seat and keeping his eyes toward the main screen, he signaled Doctor Nasaro-Myth with his left hand to open the shipwide channel.

"All hands, this is the Captain. All science, engineering and tactical personnel are immediately ordered to shuttlebay 1. All operations and medical officers will report at once to the bridge."

He made a pause, took a deep breath and sighed audibly before he spoke again with finality in his deep voice.

"All hands, abandon ship. I repeat; abandon ship."

In the shocked silence that followed Captain Kheren's implacable order, the groaning of the entire superstructure around the Artemis' bridge officers echoed the very emotional stirring that painfully teared them up within their own hearts.

Then, after an eternity that lasted but for a few seconds, acknowledgements poured out from the ship's internal communication channel from all departments of the wounded starship.

As he stood firm before his command chair, Kheren took several seconds to look at the conclusion of the research meeting report on the PADD handed to him by a pale Valencia Irksos as she slowly went back to her science station. T'Val, the other science officer at the interrupted meeting, had already taken the secondary turbolift at the other end of the access corridor so as to report as ordered to the shuttlebay for evacuation with the rest of the science crewmembers.

"Sir..." finally said Norbert Baoule a moment after he had stopped, zombie-like, before the auxilliary station, glancing at the sensors monitor ; " the whole exponential build up of trilithium effect that is affecting the Azimuth Horizon will go unimpeded if we don't deactivate the launched..."

"Understood," the Andorian answered, cutting him off.

A deep rumble shook the whole ship around them as if to smother any argument. Kheren still kept his four oculars on the orange and golden fires of the cosmic inferno before and around them as he handed the PADD to Doctor Nasaro-Myth for transfer to the ship's logs. He took barely a few more seconds to ponder on the whole situation before he gave his next order.

"Mister Syntron; you will be in command of the bridge module and in charge of the evacuation. Every escape craft will move out at maximum warp. From here, we know that their momentum will be enough for them all to clear the corona before their engines fail. Once back into normal space, you will leave an emergency buoy for the rest of the crew to be picked up by Starfleet and proceed at maximum warp towards the Alsea's coordinates to provide assistance."

Syntron looked quizzically at the Andorian captain who remained solely focused on the shifting image of the anomaly on the main viewscreen.

"Acknowledged," the Vulcan first officer replied before inquiring; "If I may ask... what is your intention during this procedure, Captain?"

"I'll pick up our marbles," simply answered Kheren, pointing at the erratic tactical monitor displaying intermittently the position of each of the fifty trilithium emitters they had already deployed.

Recognizing the danger involved within his intended metaphor, Syntron now gazed apprehensively at the commanding officer and explored deeper.

"How is it that you intend to accomplish this, Sir?"

Kheren was well aware that the Vulcan was asking outloud so that his captain would state the facts that his logical mind had already deduced; not for his benefit, but for that of the rest of the crew, their growing concerns clearly etched on their pale faces.

Normally, the Andorian would simply have sent them on their way with their orders; no commanding officer of a vessel had to explain himself and his orders, and they all knew that. But on the other hand, these men and women of so many varied species, cultures and planets had become, over the time they had all served under his command, much more than just fellow officers. Many of them had become close colleagues... a few maybe even more than that...

By the rules of Starfleet, he owed them no explanation. But by the rules of the heart, he owed them everything.

"The auxilliary control room has the same multitask station as the one here on the bridge," he finally answered, pointing at Lieutenant Cheonghi's forward console. "I graduated top of my class from the Academy in helm and tactical training. Thanks to the superb design of the Ambassador class, one person can manage the whole ship from there; all the more easily now that I will not have to bother with two-thirds of it... or with the safety of the crew."

The ship groaned and shook to remind them that time was not on their side.

"The Alsea needs immediate assistance but this ship will never get to her in time. The bridge module can. As you will provide them support from our own crew, the Artemis and I can stay to repair the damage we have done."

With a telling stare, Kheren finished with a sentence he thought he would never himself have said.

"The needs of the many, Number One..."

Syntron did not need the remainder of that axiom completed for him; he knew it all too well.

"Understood, Captain. We will get to the Alsea expeditiously," the Vulcan stated with a telling look.

He then addressed the remaining bridge officers in a loud voice.

"All hands, prepare for emergency bridge module separation. The Aegis has a mission of her own"

Syntron looked over to Tyvya.

"I need you and your team to help oversee the evacuation of the remaining crew into the shuttles left and the escape pods we made out of our last torpedo casings. Everyone needs to be accounted for and registered and then all confirmed data is to be sent to my PADD. Ensure that every craft moves out at maximum warp and coordinates their rendez-vous point."

The giantess did not answer. She simply stood, looked a moment at her captain, then left with long, purposeful strides.

The first officer of the Artemis now turned and faced Irksos at the science station.

"Lieutenant, I need you to work with chief engineer Baoule. Take charge of the preparation of the emergency buoy with a wide-range distress beacon. This will need to be ready for launch by the time we fall back into normal space."

"Aye, Sir," she acknowledged after audibly gulping for air.

"Mister Snow, I will be counting on your continued flight and navigational expertise. Prepare us for warp six after the separation is complete."

"I might even be able to shave off a few million kilometers for you with the proper trajectory," he promised, not daring to look at his commanding officer standing behind him.

"Mister Cheonghi... prepare us for Aegis separation."

"Separation sequence encoded and ready to go at your command, Sir," the Edoan answered, his voice even more shrill than usual, his face cringing with obvious apprehension and hesitancy even as his three hands finished tapping the keys on his operations console.

The ship again trembled and groaned as if expressing his own sentiments, as those of the entire crew.

Then, glancing back at the captain, the first officer of the doomed starship Artemis stated discreetly his own concerns.

"Somehow, Captain, it doesn't seem fitting to leave you out here alone to clean up a situation that I am responsible for designing and implementing. This should be my responsibility."

"Responsibility falls to the commanding officer, Mister Syntron," retorted Kheren, now looking at him, "not to he who follows orders and do his best. We can try and resolve this with minimal lives at risk, namely only mine, while we may all help save lives as well. I am in command; I have to and will assume full responsibility."

The bridge slanted slightly as a deep, ominous rumble followed a sudden flare of gold and orange on the screen.

"Metaphasic shields down to seventy-five percent!" now warned Baoule from the engineering station. "Inertial dampeners straining beyond specs limits! Sir, I don't know how you will manage to fly her, avoid those fractures and flares, eliminate those emitters and all the while hold her together if..."

"If I do not, Engineer, then you will all know what *not* to do to succeed the next time you try," the Andorian said, cutting him off with a cold, hard voice.

Listening to the report from the chief engineer and the Captain's response, Syntron straightened up and prepared his resolve to counter the Captain's order.

"Sir, under these hazardous conditions along with the metaphasic shielding currently diminishing and the known debilitating affects of these surroundings on your Andorian physiology, I am requesting that you reconsider these orders. We can complete the evacuation and see to the safety of the majority of these crew members vacated from the ship upon the completion of the Aegis separation. Once they are away from this region and secure, we can move out of range of the affects of the anomaly and attempt to contact the Alsea to confirm its actual status. If they are not in dire need of our immediate assistance or if we would be unable to even arrive in time to aid them, then we could team up using these remaining two sections of the Artemis and a very limited crew. At that point we could attempt to resolve our situation with the emitters and the anomaly... together. However Sir, you must have a non-Andorian officer with you to assist in case you become delirious or incapacitated. It would be highly illogical and most likely fatal for you to remain on this saucer alone in this attempt."

At that moment, the Azimuth Horizon itself underlined the Vulcan's words. The entire vessel groaned and tilted to one side as it slightly spun on its axis like an antique sailship in a sea storm. They all grappled the nearest fixed object to steady themselves as even their PIDs strained to keep them from falling in a heap over one another and Kheren, the only Andorian among them all, almost fell back into his command chair as his antennae retracted a moment into his white-haired skull in their unique but most incapacitating way.

"Sir! The emitters effect is increasing exponentially!" reported Irksos, still gripping tightly the science console.

"So is the strain on our superstructure and the drain on our shields!" added the chief engineer, seat glistening on his blade, dark skull. "The auxiliary craft can make it out... but not the rest of the ship! We simply can't get enough speed out of impulse engines alone before one of those subspace fractures..."

Kheren held up a hand to interrupt his gloomy report as he straightened himself, his eyes turned inward as he thought about Syntron's words. Knowing him as he did now, he realized that, if he denied him, his first officer would uneeringly follow the most logical course of action from the current situation and his own convictions; either relieve him from duty under regulation 361 section C for attempted suicide as proof of being unfit for command... or simply nerve pinch him to take his place... if not both.

All this went through his mind in a fraction of a second.

"Very well, Number One; you may join my private party... but *only* you."

The finality of his tone shut off all other mouths that were starting to open around him. There was no more room nor time for any further protest or argument.

As the main turbolift allowed the first evacuees to come to the bridge, Kheren went to the opposite door and stopped before it to turn and speak again, above the ship's groans.

"Doc, You will take command of the evacuation and the rescue mission."

"You *can't* be *serious!*" exclaimed the astonished Deltan.

"You are the highest ranking officer left, you have bridge command experience... and you took a solemn vow to save lives. No one is better for the task. Counselor Lyrya will assume your position. The big chair is yours now, Doctor."



"Oh... joy..." said Elliago Nasaro-Myth with a resigned tone, closing his eyes and sighing audibly, a sound that reminded them all of the stirrings of the battered hull around them.

For an instant, the Andorian captain let his stare roam over all the pale, silent faces turned with widened eyes toward him, until his eyes finally fell to his right on the bronze plaque hanging on the wall next to him.

*The Sun Never Saw Her Like Outside Olympus*, it read under the name of the ship and the names of all of those who had conceived and built her almost a century ago; the last of the magnificent Ambassador class starships.

*And never will it do again*, he added in his own thoughts, with a strange, bittersweet mixture of pride and regret.

Then, he stood straight and lifted his chin high in the typical Andorian gesture of respect but, at the same time, with an almost Human expression of defiance.

"Gentlebeings, it has been my greatest honor serving with you all."

As the ship continued to quiver, Syntron grabbed his PADD and then awkwardly stepped up behind the Captain. He then turned back to momentarily face the chief operations officer.

"Mister Cheonghi... begin a forty-five second countdown to bridge module separation starting now."

"Aye... aye, Sir..." blurted out the wide-eyed Edoan. "And... good luck."

The first officer turned back to face the commanding officer of the Artemis.

"Ready to proceed, Captain"

In the freezing silence that again gripped everyone on the bridge, Kheren and Syntron exited through the left hand door and went to the secondary turbolift at the end of the short corridor that stretched beyond.

"Deck 5, he ordered the turbolift.

As they rode down half the levels left of the Artemis, the Andorian spoke without looking at the taller Vulcan standing stoically next to him.

"You had a good plan there, Number One; fall back, regroup and tackle again the problem on two fronts..."

Before Syntron could say anything, there was a deep rumble and a deeper tremor that almost sent them on the floor, grabbing the circular walls of the cabin just quickly enough to more or less keep their footing.

"A shame the storm did not agree with it," Kheren finished with a curious and incongruous mix of regret and amusement in his deep voice.

In a few quick steps beyond the opening door, they reached the emergency bridge, the standard auxilliary control room aboard every Starfleet cruiser since the legendary Constitution class of almost two centuries before. Kheren shifted a chair in the center of the nav-tac joined console as he pointed the multitask station in front of it to Syntron. The Vulcan would be overseeing both sensors and the status of their hull and shields while he would use his piloting and tactical skills together, launching the ramming torpedoes and keeping them on course... and alive long enough to disable the fifty trillithium emitters they had infected the anomaly with.

As he sat between the two stations and their numerous and different controls, he soon came to truly envy his Edoan Chief of Ops Cheonghi and his extra arm.

After a short while and several more tremors making the entire vessel tremble and swerve like a frail raft in a fierce storm, they heard a loud clanging echoing from right above their heads. They both instantly knew that it was the bridge module detaching itself from the rest of the battered saucer section. On the main viewer before them, they could now see it moving off to follow out of the danger zone in flashes of forming warpfields the three remaining shuttlecrafts that had launched from their last shuttlebay left, all of them framed by two dozen bright flares made by the torpedo lifepods shooting out of their two tubes at warp 9, disappearing beyond the enflamed border of the Azimuth Horizon.

The Aegis, the bridge module enhanced barely months ago after their third mission, was itself warp capable, heavily armored, armed with phasers and microtorpedoes with full shields and jamming emitters. With luck, it would arrive in time to support the Alsea against whatever threatened them as a small but capable escort vessel... or, at worse, provide a full complement of cross-trained specialists and experienced bridge officers to provide assistance in health and repairs to survivors... if any.

It was much to ask for out of fate to be sure. But that was the only way to bring faith to comply with one's hope; demand everything out of it and willfully push it in the right direction.

And so, despite the dire situation he and his first officer were left in, he now sighed with relief. At least, his crew was going to be safe. That had been his first and main concern since this whole grand operation had been planned... in fact, since the day that same fate had thrown him forcibly into that command chair.

And if it was to be his last... then so be it.

"Alright, Number One; see if you can find us those trilithium emitters in all that smoke and fire. Time to sweep that floor clean."

As the captain of the Artemis was finally making peace with his own turbulent thoughts and emotions, the door to the emergency bridge swished open. Then, his eyes opened even wider than the parting doors seeing the unmistakable silhouette that entered.

"What in the blue hell are *you* doing here? You were ordered to evacuate with the rest of the crew!"

"My apologies, Sir," Tyvya said with not even a hint of regret or true apology in her stern voice. "I missed the launch because I had to bring you these."

As she went behind him to sit in the tactical chair beside him, the Andorian giantess deposited four objects in his lap. Two were his bellium *ushaan-tors*, the transluscent crescent-shaped blades proclaiming his duelling mastery, gleaming like her icy blue eyes. The other two were small display cases; one contained his Starfleet medals; the other, four Andorian wedding rings, three of them blackened. These were his only possessions of values and she obviously had gone to his cabin to retrieve them and bring them to him.

Kheren didn't know if he had to feel grateful or angry at her. In fact, he felt both ways at the moment and it gave a strange tone to his now strained voice.

"Your duty did not require you to..."

"*This* has *nothing* to do with *duty*!"

Her retort was so sudden and forceful that, for a moment, he was left speechless. Then, and for the first time, he truly saw and understood that gleam she had in her eyes almost every time she had been talking to him; especially like that; especially now.

And that too left him speechless for a moment more.

There came a sudden, stronger tremor around them; but he did not feel it. The one in his heart was way much stronger.

"No other soul would I ever share the end or eternity with," he said then.

"Always loved that story," Tyvya said in response as she slid her chair before the tactical station as Kheren returned to fully face the helm.

Then, to the inquisitive high eyebrow of Syntron, he returned a slight nod.

"*Romeo and Juliet*... the original Andorian version of course."

Syntron knew the deeper reason for Tyvya's presence and the gathering of his coveted items, but he would not betray her confidence. He also knew that there would be no way that under these circumstances would the Captain be able to remove her from the post that she had just assumed. Apparently the Andorian commander realized this as well.

Breaking the tension a bit, the first officer responded with his usual deatched tone.

"If you are referring to the old Earth allegorical play set in Verona, Italy, of the uncontrolled amorous tendencies of youth along with bitter rivalries of families and clans, it is indeed a symbolic tragedy demonstrating the futility of allowing unrestrained emotions to overshadow logic."

Both Andorians looked at him with stone faces; but their antennae were curving sharply inward in unbridled amusement.

"Spoken like a true Vulcan," commented Kheren with mirth in his voice.

"Yes... how sad it is that they miss so much..." added Tyvya with the same tone.

And then, the entire ship groaned and trembled as if in protest, bringing them all back to the here and now.

"Alright people," ordered Kheren, all four oculars back to the piloting console, "we have a job to do and little means and time left to do it. Number One, find us those probes. Lieutenant Tyvya, be ready to fire those duds."

"Hitting even one of them in this storm will be the wildest stroke of luck!" observed the giantess as her fingers readied manual firing of their two torpedo launchers and linking her tactical sensors to those of Syntron's multitask board.

"With one, yes..." agreed the captain. "That is why you will send a full spread of ten at each single target in a widespread pattern and at point blank range. I will get us into position as soon as Mister Syntron finds us one."

Moving his left hand over to the science monitor of his multitask station while keeping his right near the engineering controls, Syntron began using the available sensors to detect the positions of the trilithium emitters. Fortunately, he could use the available sensory instrumentation in the console to locate a reconfigured device one at a time in a manner similar to how ancient Earth pilots would navigate their crafts through vicious storms using instrumental readings of spatial locations rather than visual cues within the environment; which in their present circumstances had nullified their visual acuity. Although their positions may have been modified slightly in reaction to the storm's effects, the emitters were basically still operating in their deposited positions. Syntron had the initial projected position of each probe mapped out on his PADD which he uploaded to his current console. Then once they were in range of each emitter, the first officer could set the sensors to detect the emission of trilithium to fine-tune their current placement.

"Captain, I have located the position of the nearest emitter. I am now forwarding the coordinates to Lieutenant Tyvya's station. The accuracy of the position is approximately ninety-two point thirty-five percent. Therefore, you may be able to reduce the number of torpedoes as well to three per emitter if launched in close triangular formation."

"Recommendation noted."

A long rumble and a groan around them then seemed to voice some deep protest.

"But let us stay on the safe side. Lieutenant, fire tube one only, Nova pattern, full spread... on my mark."

"Tube one, Nova pattern, full spread... on your mark, Sir," the towering Andorian woman beside him acknowledged, again all business.

Before their eyes, the swirling fires of the anomaly grew in intensity as they swerved between massive remnants of planets that had been consumed by the immense cosmic storm. Now crushed on themselves by their own mass to the size of buildings, they were nevertheless still big enough and more than dense enough to pulverize the crippled starship at the merest contact, even through their depleting shields. Soon enough, something emerged from the golden waves of gases they were plowing through; it was small, dark, barely visible if only with the blinking beacon that flashed out of it. And it's only when it became close enough for the sensors to render it in computerized visuals on their viewer that Kheren gave the word in a cold, calm voice; the sure sign of strain in an Andorian.

"Fire."

"Torpedoes away," answered Tyvya with the exact same tone.

From under the belly of the battered saucer, one torpedo tube lighted up. A large blob of light shot out and, barely a few hundred meters away, spread out into five smaller lights in a star-shaped pattern. Two of them collided with the flashing object a scant dozens of kilometers beyond that, their inert mass breaking it apart along with them in a strangely subdued impact that left no spark of explosion; just a sudden shower of tiny debris spreading out like dust in the winds of the storm.

"Target destroyed," confirmed the giantess from the sensors relay Syntron had provided to her tactical monitor.

"Smooth sailing all the way," commented Kheren, more a wish than an actual observation.

And at that moment, a violent shake almost made them all bang their heads on their consoles despite the PIDs they were still wearing.

"You're sure you can keep us afloat?" asked Tyvya, her four oculars straight at the viewing screen and the fiery tendrils of plasma now suddenly lashing out around the crippled vessel.

"You worry about those targets, I will worry about the helm," he shot back as the trembling ship swirled away from the rekindled fire.

"It's my head I'm worried about."

"Complain to Syntron then; he's managing the shields... Now, one down... forty-nine to go."

"Thus said last the hero, as rained down upon all the fires of heaven," then said Tyvya in a sententious tone.

"I do not recall that quote," finally observed Kheren after a moment.

"Farewell Artemis... unpublished... yet... she shot back.

Silence now fell upon them all as they concentrated on their perilous task.

They had completely lost track of time as they swam over the waves of flames.

Even the shipboard chronometer could not accurately maintain the correct timeframe; the uneven interference of the anomaly and of the subspace fractures, crakling their endings in temporal flux at them from all sides, sometimes even from several directions at once, were also throwing the moving neutronium masses caught in the eddies and currents of plasma in a frighteningly chaotic dance all around them.

Nevertheless, each time Syntron reported the location of a trilithium emitter within the fog of inert gases they were navigating, a sudden burst of small blue flares amidst the coppery mist made streaks of lights that ended in tiny dust clouds as one or more inert torpedoes collided with a probe and obliterated it. Then, a sudden spurt of orange and gold flames forced them to steer away before being fried by the rekindled plasma gas around them.

They were more than halfway through their dangerous hunt when Syntron's sensors flashed a new set of data before his eyes.

Monitoring the plasma reactions in the regions of the anomaly surrounding the battered Artemis saucer, the Vulcan scientist perceived a new trend starting to emerge. He quickly recalculated the data once again before addressing his commanding officer.

"Captain, it would seem that our initial speculation about the trilithium emitters' effect on the plasma reactions may have been correct after all... but as we did not know then the relation between the reaction and the wormhole itself, we overestimated the number of emitters required to accomplish this goal. I initially hypothesized that we needed a complete deionization of the plasma to contain the overall reactions within the anomaly, but it now appears that, as an alternative, we could use but a few of these emitters to stabilize the reaction... similar to how control rods were used in old Earth style fission reactors to control and contain nuclear reactions. According to my sensor readings, they are now recording that the plasma reactions are beginning to stabilize within the anomaly as the number of emitters has diminished. I've calculated that if we nullify one more trilithium emitter, the effect should bring down the reactions to a state of equilibrium; at least enough to establish a balance between the plasma reactions and the level of diffusion. The result of this may not be enough to completely extinguish the anomaly, but theoretically sufficient enough to forestall any further growth of the anomaly on either side of the..."

Just as the first officer was explaining his revelation regarding the anomaly, several warning signals appeared simultaneously on the engineering console as the ship began to shutter and reverberate. Syntron then swiftly switched his attention to the engineering monitors.

"Captain, impulse power is down to ninety-five point three percent and is now beginning to deplete rapidly. Metaphasic shielding down to fifty-three percent and our structural integrity field has diminished to forty-seven percent."

As if to accentuate these announcements, the saucer began to rumble and grind with the sound of painful twisting metal echoing throughout the remaining saucer. Syntron continued with his report, though now at an elevated volume.

"Sir, our hull is compromised on decks 7 to 9, and now it is beginning to buckle on both deck 5 and 6. Inertial dampeners are also being strained well beyond design limits... if they continue at this rate..." Then looking up briefly from the console to the Captain, the Vulcan finished calmly; "...they may collapse at any moment."

At that moment, several additional warning signals kicked in. Syntron looked back down at the monitors and persisted even louder with his report.

"Life-support systems are beginning to fail, Captain... and the remaining automated emergency back-up systems have just activated..."

"Cut life support from all decks and sections except for the emergency bridge," immediately ordered Kheren. " Reduce life support in here to the barest minimal requirements for Vulcans and Andorians, divert all reserve power to structural integrity field... and find us that last probe!"

As the conditions on the remaining saucer section were reduced to barely survivable levels, Syntron continued his analysis of the nearest available emitter. He allowed only minimal energy to remain at his station in order to continue utilizing the console and sensors.

The entire ship swerved to one side as if caught in a sudden broadside current and the bridge tilted like the deck of a sailship caught in a sea storm before righting itself again.

"Mister Syntron... "

The temperature rose sharply within the auxilliary command center they were occupying; quite comfortable actually for a Vulcan, especially one well trained as many of his brethen in mind over body techniques, but almost beyond the tolerance level of iceworlders like Andorians; especially for Kheren, his mutated genes making him even more sensitive to heat than normal Andorians like Tyvya. But they were both sweating profusely now, filling the rarefied air with a sharp fruity scent. The low level of breathable air remained manageable for Syntron because of the same mental disciplines and a life spent within a much thinner atmosphere than Earth's while the partially osmotic system of his cobalt-blooded colleagues did all this naturally for them. Nevertheless, with the gravity also reduced to a tenth of normal, this was anything but comfortable... and added to the stress of being buffeted within the battered remnant of a starship by a raging plasma storm crisscrossed by crackling subspace fractures, Kheren was glad he had spared those inhuman conditions, and their incoming fate he now dreaded, to the rest of his gallant crew.

He just hoped now that, despite all odds, they would be spared that grim fate as well.

"Mister Syntron... now would be a good time."

After plotting the location of the final target, Syntron sent the revised coordinates to both Kheren and Tyvya.

"Coordinates of the emitter sent" the first officer stated as he then gazed back up to the viewscreen.

It would now be in their capable hands to accomplish this challenging task before the saucer section continued to collapse or met some other undesirable fate.

As they were shaken each time a bolt of subspace lightning flashed by or a plasma flare blinded them, the Andorian giantess kept reporting over the increasing groans and rumbles with a tense but steady voice.

"Target in range in 5... 4... losing optimal distance and firing angle... Now back on course, in range in 4... 3... 2... firing angle lost, compensating... ready to fire in 4... 3... 2... 1..."

"Both tubes, full spread, Fire!"

Echoes of Captain Kheren's voice followed the ten small stars that, just as the whole emergency bridge tilted sharply again under a sudden wave of plasma, shot out from under them and spread out towards the tiny beacon of light flashing amidst a golden fog streaked with white lightning bolts and flaming flares of orange light.

And so they watched, helpless, as they all disappeared within the swirling maelstrom of fire and smoke.

"Readying next full volley!" shot Tyvya between two expletives and over the din of creaking hull plates and wall consoles spurting sparks and electric arcs, as her fingers flew over the torpedo firing controls.

Kheren said nothing. His hand struck hard his own panel, crakling the covering and sending forward the entire ship in a sudden full impulse run.

A second later, there was at their feet a distant booming they didn't even feel. On the lower part of the screen, lights and debris rose briefly like when one splashed his feet at a run through a mass of dust and sand or snow and ice.

"Target destroyed!" reported the towering chief of tactical with a releived sigh.

"Well done, people," sighed Kheren in turn.

Then, as if in protest, the Artemis buckled violently and slid again on a side and at a sharp angle, this time staying in it's skewed angle as the suddenly revived fires of the plasma inferno filled their eyes with flickers of ocre and gold through their viewing screen. Even their PIDS struggled to keep them in their seats with arms gripping consoles in earnest, sparks and smoke erupting all around them.

Syntron toiled at the multitask station attempting to gather accurate readings despite the wavering illumination and diminishing life support within the shuddering damaged saucer. As the symptoms of the violent reactions then calmed for a moment aboard the remaining section of the once mighty ambassador-class starship, the first officer rechecked the sensor results.

"Captain, sensor readings indicate that the plasma reactions are now renewing and stabilizing." Cross-referencing the data the first officer elaborated; "It also appears that no further expansion is registered beyond the last reported area."

"Good work, Lotus Fleet," Kheren exclaimed with a releived sigh and rubbing his sleeve accross his heavily sweating brow, thinking of all the other ships involved in this tall order of theirs. If their efforts were now succeeding, obviously the Lotus, the Alsea, the McKenzie, the Spectre and the rest of the fleet had done their own part.

After additional analysis of the data, Syntron looked up from the console.

"These readings imply that the anomaly itself has shifted into a more stabilized state of containment," the tall Vulcan said in a controlled yet clearly astonished tone. "As a result, I am also reading no further collapse of the interspatial aperture. It would appear.. perhaps as a consequence of this, that the wormhole has established a level of stability as well; at least for the time being. In addition, the remaining trilithium emitters are active and secured in their position and function."

The goods news from the first officer was then punctuated by another trashing by the forces emanating within their precarious area of space. It was as if this phenomenon was purposely reminding them that their minor accomplishments would pale compared to the dangers still surrounding them.

Feeling yet another extensive jolt to the saucer, the first officer checked the sensors.

"A subspace fracture caught us at the periphery from behind us, and it is steadily pulling us towards it. At its current rate, penetration will occur in twenty point three seconds."

"And it was going so well..." commented Tyvya, also sweating under the increasing heat from the anomaly their reduced life support and shields were exposing them to.

Then, additional concussions occurred as Syntron continued with his report.

"Captain; another subspace fracture has formed under us.... and yet another is emerging above us as well. This is cutting off all potential escape routes since the rekindled plasma reaction is now preventing any attempt to move forward as well with the ship in its current status. In addition, the anomaly is confusing our long range sensors, making positioning and course plotting virtually impossible."

Gazing back to his commanding officer, the Vulcan then stated the obvious.

"As it currently stands, Captain, we are now trapped here."

"Status report," asked Kheren between two sinister groans from the hull around them.

Looking down at the engineering section of the console, Syntron rattled-off the current ship status one at a time; which was equivalent to adding drops of despair onto an already gloomy outcome to the two highly emotional beings now sharing this terrible fate with him.

"Metaphasic shield currently registering at fifty-three percent; at this rate, it will collapse completely either in thirty-four minutes or as soon as impulse power reserves will be all drained. Hull plating at eighty-one percent, but will dissipate in fourteen point three minutes once shielding is lost, and then it will be directly exposed to the plasma reaction of the anomaly. Structural integrity field continues to collapse; only battery power is now maintaining it... which currently is reading at ninety-four percent."

The ship creaked and again tilted and turned like so much dead wood amidst furious waves.

"Helm is dead! Even thrusters are not responding... I have no control over anything!" the Andorian blurted out, his whole body drenched in sweat, antennae swinging wildly and popping in and out of his thick white mane plastered to his earless skull.

"My sensors are inoperative... tactical systems shutting down automatically to avoid overload..." now added Tyvya, herself also sweating and swaying in her seat as the dizzying effect of the anomaly on her own senses started to affect her as well. " And we left all our escape pods in those Romulans' faces back there..."

The ship itself then let out a long moan, like a dying beast drowning.

In their final endeavor of somehow subduing the plasma within the anomaly, Syntron recognized that they had actually accomplished more than what they had initially set out to achieve with their mere three member crew. However, at this point with no options remaining to curtail the impending destruction of the remainder of their battered vessel, it would seem that this success was about to be paid for with their ultimate sacrifice.

*Now... what again did Captain Picard said James Kirk's final words had been?* wondered Kheren at that very moment as he fought the overwhelming dizziness that was rapidly fogging his mind.

And then, it came back to him... to his mind and down to his lips.

"Well... it was... fun."

Amazingly, his rigid face now was grinning widely.

He nodded respectfully to the blurred form before him that he knew was that of his admirable Vulcan First Officer, then glanced to his right. Tyvya was now holding his callused hand in hers.

She too was grinning.

Gazing momentarily as the two Andorians shared a tender last moment, the first officer of the once fierce and proud starship Artemis merely leaned back and closed his eyes as he placed himself in a deep meditative Vulcan trance in preparation for their final moment together.



The words of Sydney Carlton in the Charles Dickens classic tale swirled into his thoughts.

*It is a far far better thing that I do than I have ever done before. A far better rest that I go...*

Before their eyes came a final eruption of searing, blinding light, like billions of stars swirling and exploding in pure blue-white glory.

\* \* \*

"Sir, distress call incoming."

On the USS Spectre, already flying at high warp towards quadrant 2 of their theater of operations around the Azimuth Horizon, the voice of tactical lieutenant Tritter broke the dull silence that had crept around the entire bridge. They listened to the faint call the giant blonde man had reported about and, after a few more moments of silence, the young Ensign at navigation turned and with a shocked expression looked back at the command well.

"Did they say...Undine?"

"Appears that way," Captain Summers replied calmly. "Plot a course to the Alsea, maximum warp."

"Aye, Sir," the helmsman replied and the glow of the Azimuth Horizon streaked across the port side of the viewscreen as the Spectre burst over their current warp 9 velocity.

Because they had already been on course at high warp towards that very region of space for quite some time now, they arrived barely a few minutes later at the scene of the arrow-shaped ship being pounded on by the larger Undine vessel as it retreated in order to come around for another pass. The crew of the Spectre could see yellow plasma fires burning through the hull on their starboard side.

"Open a channel."

"Channel open, Sir," instantly responded Tritter.

The Alsea shuddered again under another volley of plasma beam fire and Jureth gripped the sides of the command chair tightly.

"Shields at sixty percent, enemy shields at eighty five percent!" Cat reported.

Suddenly she practically shouted because she couldn't believe what she was seeing

"Captain, there's another ship coming in! It's one of ours! Akira Class, USS Spectre. They're hailing Sir."

This is Captain Summers. We're here to offer assistance, but it's your lead, Captain. Just tell us what to target."

"Captain Summers, this is Captain Oseno and are we ever glad to see you. Target is the vessel at our three o'clock. It's an Undine vessel of unknown make. They destroyed one of our shuttles and made off with another. Near as I can tell, they want the containment effort to fail so we will be destroyed. I'd prefer we don't let them succeed."

"You got it, Captain," replied Summers and, after closing the channel, addressed his senior officers before him on the Bridge. "Let's send out the rest of our fighters, give them something else to shoot at. Deploy the DYCEP and go in dark. Come around their starboard beam and hit them from behind while the Alsea has their attention from the fore."

"Aye, Sir," came various replies as the orders were carried out.

Rogers spoke up then.

"Captain, there may be another way around fighting... if we can make it work."

They may have outnumbered the ship, but they nevertheless didn't appear to have the edge, so Summers was open to any alternative suggestion.

"I'm listening."

"Well, we know that they are highly xenophobic, despite assuming our form, and want our space to fall because they're paranoid about an attack. They think the Azimuth Horizon will do it for them, but there's no reason to directly assume that their fluidic space would be safe. If we could somehow convince them of that, through some sort of evidence, that it won't be safe, then perhaps they'd even be willing to help us to stop it."

Summers nodded.

"Maybe we can't prove it, but there's a chance we may not have to. We have the technology from Voyager to open a portal into fluidic space, correct?"

"If we do that, we'll just enrage them further..." Rogers answered, but was cut off by the Captain.

"Yes or no is sufficient, Commander."

"Yes, Sir."

"How is it done, and can we do it with just the Spectre?" Summers asked.

Rogers moved to the nearest console.

"Computer, pull up ships logs, USS Voyager, circa 51000. Search for terms 'fluidic space' and 'ship modification'."

The computer displayed a series of text-based entries which were transcripts of Captain Janeway's logs, all dealing with both fluidic space and modifications made to Voyager. With a quick scan he found what he was looking for.

"Here it is," said Rogers at last. "Seven of Nine modified the navigational deflector to generate a series of graviton beams that opened a specific artificial singularity. This singularity was an interdimensional rift to fluidic space. However, many of Voyager's systems were actually a more modern design than our current ones, and I'm not sure we can pull it off."

"What about the Alsea?" Summers asked.

"They should be able to make the same modifications. The Prometheus-class is in many ways designed off of the Intrepid-class. The best bet would be the Lotus, of course, but out of the two of us, the Alsea would be better."

"Open an encrypted channel and send them this data."

"Aye Sir, channel open, data sent."

"Captain Oseno. We're making our way around to flank them, but we have another idea that may get their attention even more and possibly make them stop fighting. Have your engineer take a look at the modifications we sent. Would that be doable?" Summers asked.

Jureth looked down at Ensign Wynn who nodded.

"Receiving data, Sir."

"Send it to Lieutenant Commander Lire down in engineering."

"Aye, Sir."

Jureth then addressed the Spectre.

"Understood, Spectre. I will have my chief engineer get on that immediately."

Unfortunately, they didn't have the luxury to just wait for the Alsea's veteran chief engineer to study the details. The Undine vessel was continuing its full-on assault on the Prometheus class warship as the Spectre deftly and quietly snuck around the rear of the larger extradimensional ship.

"Can we get a lock on their weapons systems?" Summers asked.

"Sorry, Sir, I'm having trouble isolating any of the systems," responded Tritter. "The vessel composition is too unusual."

"Very well; fire on their aft port, full spread. Let's see what we can get," Summers said.

As the phaser fire flashed out on the viewscreen, it darted between the various fighters swarming the ship and impacted the Undine's shields one at a time. It was clear that Tritter was having to manually target each blast to avoid hitting the fighters, the pilots of which all implicitly put their trust in him.

The Undine ship was not as discerning and fired back at the Akira class starship with plasma beams that burned through two of the fighters that got caught in the crossfire.

"Shields at ninety-three percent, Captain," reported the towering tactical officer.

"Rogers to Alpha Squadron leader; stay on their starboard side," then ordered the First Officer.

"Full spread of photon torpedoes," commanded the Captain right behind him.

Four of the light-emitting projectiles hurled out of the Spectre and partially impacted the Undine shields while also exploding on the hull close to its engines. It was powerful enough that they shut down and the ship's movement became just a drifting motion in the direction it was previously headed: toward the Alsea.

Jureth gripped the arms of the Alsea's command chair as the ship was buffeted again by fire from the Undine vessel. The powerful warship of the shape-changing race was alternating its fire between the Alsea the Spectre in a fight both Federation captains knew was one of attrition. Jureth knew he had to do something... and suddenly, he had an idea.

"Cat, stop firing. Helm, all stop!"

"Helm answering all stop, Captain," Shawn Hunter replied with strain in his voice.

"Aye... Sir," acknowledged Cat Steele with as much apprehension in her own voice but held her eyes to the main viewer with the same steady confidence in the Bajoran as the helmsman.

Jureth turned toward the engineer manning the Alsea's auxiliary console.

"Ensign...make us dark."

"Sir?"

"Cut power to everything, leaving minimal power to life support and the viewer;but be ready to bring us back to full on my command."

"Aye, Sir... stand by."

Slowly, one by one, the Alsea's systems began to shutdown until, finally, the ship appeared to be adrift in space; and indeed, she was drifting slowly toward the Azimuth Horizon anomaly.

Cat Steele for one hoped her friend knew what he was doing... and that the Undine weren't able to see through their ruse.

Aboard the Spectre, Captain Summers saw the Alsea lose power and stood up from his command chair.

"Tactical, report! What is the Alsea's status?"

"They appear to be dead in the water, Sir... but... I'm detecting no damage to their warp core or power systems."

At that moment, Summers understood... and resigned himself to the role of spectator so he could see what this young Bajoran had in mind.

As the Spectre, the Alsea and the Undine battleship were caught in their silent dance of death before the raging background of the fiery maelstorm of the Azimuth Horizon, a new flash of light appeared after those of detonating torpedoes on blazing shields and sizzling beams against burning hulls. It flared briefly like a dying star, almost invisible before the raging fires of the anomaly, then coalesced into the shape of a small disc-shaped craft with extended smallish warp nacelles under and behind it.

From where it emerged out of subspace, it was virtually undetectable by the sensors of the three battling vessels, like a plane coming directly from the direction of the sun; but from that same angle, it could instantly gaze fully on the entire battle scene. And as it was obvious that the huge extradimensional warship was disabled and hurtling like a rogue asteroid towards the dazed USS Alsea, the small vessel sped at full impulse towards them.

"This is, ah, the Aegis... Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth of the starship Artemis commanding. We come to offer assistance."

The voice was incongruously soft, melodious and warm as it was heard through Starfleet subspace channels; but it was also obviously tense, nervous and hesitant, the voice of someone unused to command and thrown headfirst into an unwanted and overwhelming situation. But still, there was purpose and determination in the tone.

There was a frighteningly long, tense moment of silence as the massive alien vessel tumbled still towards the unresponding Federation warship.

"No response, Doctor," finally confirmed the soft, clear voice of the white-skinned, blind Andorian sitting at the left of the command chair where the blue-collared Deltan rubbed his sleeve on his bald pate.

On the screen, they could also see the flat, rounded shape of an Akira class starship, apparently motionless as well with several small fires burning on it's scarred hull.

"People, I need options here," he said, looking on the viewing screen at the two ships on a collision course.

"Tractor beam, " then offered Lieutenant Mrrish, the black-furred Caitian woman sitting before him and to his right at the tactical station.

"We don't have enough mass or power to stop a ship that size!" protested Robert Baoule, now sitting in the executive officer chair, his own bald head glistening with sweat as well.

"No," agreed Aguk Snow at the helm, "but we may be able to apply enough pull to deviate it just far enough to avoid a full collision."

From the auxilliary station, Baoule's twin brother, Norbert, shook his head.

"The odds against that succeeding..."

"Are better than those of sitting here doing nothing," cut off Mrrish with a low growl.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Do it!" ordered Elliago from the command seat.

"Allocating reserve power to tractor beam," answered the Edoan Cheonghi as his three hands did just that on his multitask console.

"Full power to engines; you have emergency impulse ready," engineer Patricia Blakely then added right after him, her long blonde hair flying as she turned from the engineering station to report.

"Optimal stress point for course alteration located and locked on; tractor beam angle and intensity calculated; transferring to tactical sensors," then said Valencia Iksos from the opposite science console.

"Ready to activate at your command," confirmed Mrrish, her intense, slitted blue eyes fixed on her target.

"Trajectory computed and laid in," finished Snow , hands poised over propulsion and steering controls.

"Execute!" shouted Baoule, gripping the armrests of the XO chair.

On the giant screen, the huge, greenish tree-like shape of the Undine warship seemed to roll right at them as the smallish bridge module of the Artemis flew over and towards the top of it's finned stern.

Tension hung in the air on the Alsea's bridge along with smoke from damaged consoles and the crew watched the Alsea's viewer as the Undine ship now ignored the Spectre and began to move into a position for a kill on the seemingly disabled Federation warship.

"Easy, now," Jureth said softly. "Just a little closer... Now! Full Power!"

The Alsea sprang to life, seemingly coming back from the dead as her shields, weapons, engines, and auxiliary systems suddenly returned to full power.

"Mister Hunter; evasive maneuvers, pattern Oseno Alpha. Take us toward the anomaly."

"Aye Sir, but... *toward* the anomaly?"

"I have faith in you, Mister Hunter... and in Lieutenant Pel's sensor modifications."

The Alsea slipped away from the grasp of the great Undine warship with their course taking them closer to the Anomaly, and the Undine ship changed tack to stay in pursuit. As the Undine ship changed its course to pursue the resurrected Alsea, Jureth smiled

"That's it, follow the leader. Mister Hunter, be ready to answer all stop on my command."

"Aye Sir... standing by."

"Range to the Undine ship?"

"Half a klick and closing, Sir." Cat reported.

"Now Mister Hunter, all stop!"

The Alsea stopped dead in her tracks, again shutting down its engines and waiting for the Undine ship to catch up.

On the bridge of the Aegis, everyone froze before they could fully implement their desperate saving maneuver as they saw the Federation warship play its dangerous game with the much larger alien battlecruiser.

"Look Doctor; the Alsea was playing dead to better lure them," instantly understood the Caitan woman at tactical.

"Confirmed; the Alsea's readouts show her in full fighting condition," added Robert Baoule analyzing the sensor data his twin brother had just sent him.

"Shows you why I shouldn't be sitting in that chair," mumbled Elliago with false annoyance. "Alright, Sheeneea, back us off from the war zone; let's give them room to maneuver and no worries about little ole us."

The Spectre had its role to play as well, and continued its assault on the large Undine ship, following it in the same manner as it followed the Alsea.

The Alsea turned toward the Undine ship, firing whatever weapons and using whatever energy it had left. The Undine ship continued to pursue, but focused some of its fire on the Spectre. The plasma beams tore through the Akira-class ship's hull, knocking out its shields and weapons and leaving it defenseless.

"Doctor! The Spectre!"

"Signal them we have medical and technical people ready for them!" Ordered the Deltan. "Plot safest course to get to them!"

The Undine ship closed again on the Alsea; and yet, Jureth Oseno waited.

Then, as the Undine were about to unleash another fusillade of plasma fire, the console on the command chair beeped and the Alsea went full impulse seemingly instantly.

As she did so, the Azimuth Horizon fulfilled its role in Jureth's plan, reaching out and wrapping a subspace tendril around the gigantic vessel. Without the ingenuity of the little Ferengi science officer that had provided the Starfleet vessel with a reliable mean of avoiding the cosmic treachery of the anomaly, the Undine ship began to be pulled toward its flaming maw.

Jureth stepped toward the two forward consoles.

"Mister Wynn, open a channel to the Undine vessel," he said, placing his hand on Wynn's shoulder.

"You're on, Sir."

"Undine vessel, this is Captain Oseno Jureth of the USS Alsea. I couldn't help but notice you are in distress... and would like to offer our assistance, provided you agree to leave this sector peacefully and allow us to continue our mission."

He made a pause before adding with a steely cold voice:

"Otherwise, I will leave you to the mercy of the Azimuth Horizon... and I will open a portal to fluidic space to allow the Horizon to swallow your entire civilization."

Another well-timed pause preceded his final words.

"I await your response."

\* \* \*

Time passed slowly as the USS Lotus made its long winding path around the Azimuth Horizon. V'Rell Gould spent much of this time walking around the bridge, checking stations, most notably the engineering station. From time to time the ship would rumble and sway as it ran along patches of plasma ejections from the anomaly and stations would flicker in and out slightly. But all these things were expected and adjusted for.

Chief Vincent was watching his panel closely.

"Approaching next launch point, Captain."

"Understood; you may fire when ready," Gould said for the fifth time that day.

Vincent waited a few more seconds then pushed buttons on his console when targeting symbols aligned on his screen. It made the standard firing weapon signal that it always made.

"Probe away, Captain"

"Confirmation on data, Sainthill," the captain said without looking around.

Silence followed for what seemed like minutes before chief of science Sainthill confirmed the probe's data.

"Probe data confirms current containment parameters conforming to established computer projections."

Gould gave a nod and continued his restless vigil. Several more minutes passed and he returned to the engineering station.

"Status of the damaged area? are we still in projected range of structure failure?"

The engineering Ensign nervously checked his readings again before daring to answer his captain.

"Actually, Sir, it's less so.. At the anomaly's range current rate of breakdown, we should be in the clear long before structural collapse."

Gould looked at him skeptically then checked the reading for himself and, sure enough, the superstructure 'rip' had barely been affected at all by their high warp speed run so near the Azimuth Horizon.

"I guess the ablative armor is reinforcing the area better then we figured."

He smiled at the man.

"With any luck, we may still be able to fly home under our own power after all."

With that, he walked off, leaving the ensign also smiling but still feeling somewhat a little sick.

"Luck..." he murmured.

At that point, Josh Vincent got something of a puzzled look on his face and started to say something, stopped himself then finally rechecked his board and then looked up, clearing his throat.

"Captain.."

But then, he stopped again.

Gould looked at him but said nothing. Now fully under the interrogative gaze of his commanding officer, the young lieutenant straightened himself, took a breath and finally spoke.

"I thought I picked up a signal but.. no, there it is again.. very faint."

Gould walked over to his station but still said nothing so as not to disturb his tactical officer.

"It's a distress signal," Josh reported, "Federation.. I think, it's very close to the event horizon of the anomaly... operation quadrant 2."

"Are there any of our ships out there, Sainthill? Perhaps civilian traffic?" Gould said as he moved over to the ops station.

Sainthill checked his readings, cross-referencing them with his computer logs.

"Nothing Federation is supposed to be in this area but the Azimuth Horizon task force, Captain; this was the sector assigned to the USS Alsea and the USS Artemis before they went out to intercept the Romulans before we left Starbase 10."

He linked his sensors to those of the tactical section and correlated data both on his console and in his head.

"Subspace interference makes accurate readings difficult even with our highly advanced sensor suite, but there is little doubt that this signal is at the edge of the anomaly. But there are also in direct line from it several sudden and brief emissions much closer to us, therefore well inside the anomaly's corona... They read as trilitium particles, which is not consistent with anomaly data. Could be the emitters planned for phase 2 of the operation... But, none of the assigned ships were tasked to go so deep inside the Horizon, Sir."

Gould thought about it before responding. The bridge crew, well drilled to answer any call for help out there is space, waited to spring into action... all but Gould himself. Being the captain meant considering all the issues before reacting to such a sudden event.

"Projected chance of solvable solution in a best case recovery effort in achieving our primary goal?"



Quite simply, he was asking Sainthill if they had time to check it out and still complete their mission, but knew better now of his new science officer than to ask him in a way that offered debate.

Sainthill did some quick calculations and checked his readings.

"We have one hour, forty-three minutes and twelve seconds of non-adjustable time in which to lend ourselves to such an endeavor, Sir. Given the likelihood of a best case scenario is less than twenty-three point fifty-six percent of a chance, not even adding in the unknown factors of..."

"Best.. Case... yes or no, Mister Sainthill?"

The stoic science lieutenant at the sensor station gave him a placid look.

"Yes, Captain, with an additional twenty-three minutes, thirty-seven seconds remaining."

"Helm! plot an intercept course!" Captain Gould ordered, turning away from Sainthill and returning swiftly to his seat.

Helmsman Moor smiled as he acknowledged the order.

"Already plotted, Sir. On your word."

"The word is given.. and good work, Lieutenant. Engage!"

And with that, the Lotus barreled headlong into the storm.

"Shields are holding and stable, Captain. The shield modifications are working within expected parameters," Sainthill confirmed as he watched the readings closely while everyone else was mesmerized by the swirling fires and waves of gold and orange they were plowing through. "ETA to signal source; two minutes fifteen seconds."

Gould remained in his seat, suddenly very aware that his refitted old ship really needed a swivel chair for this sort of thing.

"Anything yet, Mister Vincent?"

He knew that there was a risk of finding nothing but the scattered remains of a starship and its crew.. But someone was sending that signal and that meant there was a chance that that someone was still alive. Yet, they should have seen something as big as a starship by now.

In the back of his mind, he played with the idea of who's ship it might be. The distress beacon was too garbled in this plasma inferno for any kind of positive ID. But in all probability, it was either the Alsea or the Artemis... if it was one of their ships at all. If he had to choose, it would be Captain Kheren's ship, the USS Artemis; Not so much because of its captain himself, but because the ship herself was the only one that ever braved that storm. But she was still very old despite state of the art refits... even older than the Lotus.

He had little doubt it's captain could brave the storm of the Horizon... but he'd need a good reason for doing so.

Gould's commanding voice shook the bridge back to life.

"Alright people! Find me some survivors... and I mean now!"

"Done, Captain," came an almost instant reply from Sainthill over the commanding officer's left shoulder. "The signal source is just at the perimeter of the storm, detecting several small vessels and very small objects that could be escape pods."

A thought of explaining 'irony' to his science officer crossed the Captain's mind but he ignored it.

"See if you can hail them."

Sainthill tried to hail what appeared to be the largest vessel they could detect at the edge of the anomaly's corona; by configuration, a class XI shuttlecraft.

"This is the USS Lotus. We are responding to your distress beacon. Are you receiving us?"

There was a long crackle of static before a rough, growling voice finally could be heard through the interference once the ever efficient science officer managed to filter it out with their improved transmission systems.

"About *time*! This is Arrow 1 from the starship Artemis, Lieutenant Graalthrii here. You don't come out very clearly, Lotus, if that *is* you... And we don't have you on sensors. If this is another *blasted* Romulan trick..."

Before answering the irascible voice, Gould addressed Vincent.

"Check the immediate area for any indications of Romulan ships."

Then he turned his head to his opposite shoulder to Sainthill.

"Put me through."

There was a bit of static before the science chief doubling as ops officer nodded to the half-Vulcan in the command seat.

"This is Captain Vir'ell Gould of the starship Lotus, authentication code Eridani-Two-Green-Four. We should reach your position within the next minute. Did you manage to complete your evacuation of the Artemis? is captain Kheren available?"

The fact the Artemis commanding officer himself wasn't talking to them now was already a bad sign.

While waiting for a reply, Gould gave a nod to his first officer who nodded back and got up, walking over to the tactical station.

"Ah, Vincent, have all available areas cleared and ready for incoming survivors and wounded. Clear the cargobays if you have to and tell the crew they'll be, ah, sharing bunk space. The Artemis has five times our crew; its, ah, going to be a tight fit for certain."

"Aye, Sir; teams will start clearing the necessary space immediately," Lieutenant Vincent replied while Tomah hit the comm panel at his station.

"Bridge to sickbay; Doctor, warm up every biobed and holo-emitter we have. There may well be hundreds of wounded coming aboard very shortly."

Doctor Bindo's clear voice came back after a few seconds to take in the news.

"Understood, Mister Tomah. If possible, try to separate any of their medical personel into areas designated for wounded, I'll sure need them. Trying to do it with our own staff alone after everyone will be aboard would be a nightmare."

"A good idea, Doctor, but I can't promise anything; bridge out."

Then, with a tense look at Vincent, he went back to his captain.

There was again some spurts and hisses coming from the speakers and a few garbled words before the comm signal became clear enough once more to make audible the rough voice of Lieutenant Graalthrii.

"Our... bold... captain stayed aboard with our... unfazable... first officer to try some crazy stunt to correct the mess we have done with those probes... And I guess our... stern... tactical chief is with them too, because it doesn't take long to headcount and kick overboard a skeleton crew like the one we set out with from base!"

Indeed, the three shuttles and twenty-five makeshift one-man escape pods on their sensors that drifted at the edge of the monstrous space anomaly would account for not even ten percent of the entire standard crew of a massive Ambassador class starship like the Artemis.

"Sir," now reported tactical chief Vincent, "I've scanned the area and I don't see any Romulan ships in the sector, although it is never a certainty when considering their cloaking technology. However, there is a large amount of debris, roughly fifty billion kilometers from the edge of the Horizon. Mass, composition, and dispersal of the debris suggests that the battle involved over half a dozen vessels, D'Deridex or Valdore Class, maybe both. I'm also detecting several residual signatures from engines and weapons; there are both Federation and Romulan signatures there. One of those signatures is definitely from Prometheus class engines, Sir."

"What?" Gould said astonished. "What the hell happened here?"

He looked back up to the screen.

"Lieutenant Graalthrii, stand by for recovery and I want you and any officer relevant to this situation to beam over first and meet me. I need to know the situation and if there's anything that we can do for your captain."

"Heh, with the rest of the senior officers on the Aegis out there to answer the Alsea's distress call... that would be me, Captain Sir," grumbled Graalthrii through the bridge's speakers. "Ready to beam over."

"Mister Sainthill," Gould then said as he quickly moved over to the ops station; "we know there's at least three people left on the Artemis. Find a way to get to them... and do it fast!"

The young chief of science gave his commanding officer an almost pitying look.

"That will not be possible, Captain."

That stopped Gould in his tracks. But, before he could challenge it, Sainthill went on.

"I anticipated your request and have concluded that any such attempt would facilitate the Lotus' entrapment and likely destruction as well. And, regardless of a successful retrieval of Captain Kheren and his remaining crew, the window of opportunity before successfully completing our primary objective, the Azimuth Horizon's containment, will have expired."

Gould looked around at the silhouette of the Artemis on the main screen. The face of the angered Andorian arguing with him back at the meeting loomed in his mind's eye.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Sainthill said calmly, "but the Artemis, and every one left onboard.. are beyond our help."

\* \* \*

On the cramped bridge of the USS McKenzie, things had gone terribly quiet after their tragic confrontation with the Horizon Children. The death of Sorripto was hanging like a heavy, dark shroud over all, even after all the trouble and peril his gung-ho actions had caused. The cult had been stopped, their Prophet, former Starfleet officer Joey Day Sisko, now saved and in preventive custody and being already put on counselling to ascertain his obviously confused mental condition; and so was N'Eligahn, also formerly of Starfleet and also under mental duress, needing as much psychological aid as medical care. But even such result would not justify the cavalier means the chief engineer had taken; not in the eyes of Starfleet at least.

But the point was rather moot now. The price he had paid was more severe than anything a court martial would have ever brought down on him.

Those thoughts filled Daniel Crist's mind as he came back from a short but much needed nap, at least in the eyes of his CMO, to resume his place in the center seat. It could have been longer, but Lieutenant Shran's voice had wakened him with urgency. Instead of replying, he had stood up, gone through the door of his smallish cabin and with one step, through the one next to it leading to the bridge.

As soon as he entered and even before he could sit, his Andorian tactical officer turned from his console, a blue-skinned hand to the earpiece he was holding with one hand in front of his forehead-sprouting antennae.

"Sir, I'm picking up two distress calls, very faint; one from the USS Alsea, and the other is from the automated disaster beacon of the USS Artemis. Orders, Sir?"

Crist took a moment to think.

"Anything from the Lotus and the Spectre?"

"Negative, Sir."

Crist deliberated a moment with himself before he spoke again.

"We'll keep on our mission. But increase speed to maximum. With any luck, the Lotus and Spectre are assisting them, as their sector is closer to theirs. We will stick to our mission and, once we round the anomaly to the point where we are closer, we will open up contact to see if they need help. Might as well do part of the mission if we have to travel to assist."

"Aye... Sir."

The surprise and hesitation in the Andorian's voice and eyes was shared by the rest of the bridge crew. This was a clear violation of Starfleet's General Orders, as a request for assistance was absolute priority to any other mission order or task and demanded immediate response. But Daniel Crist was the captain; he alone would have to answer for his fault.

Hopefully.

Just then, Doctor Kinstar walked onto the bridge.

"Ah, Doctor, report."

"We have some injuries, all of which are being treated. We do have three deaths due to our saboteur. We have placed our two guests into stasis pods. I felt that was the best option, considering their current mental condition."

"Thank you Doctor, good work."

The helmsman's voice filled the short moment of silence that followed.

"Sir; we're ready here and I have go's from all stations."

"Good; engage Mr. Hughes." Crist said with a motion of his hand.

\* \* \*

The viewscreen on the Alsea popped on with the visual response from the massive ship. The face of the old man that had previously threatened them appeared, framed again by several Undine. The man was seated in a makeshift Captain's chair, apparently crafted for his needs in his form of the faux-Boothby, but around him, the Undine were floating in a viscous liquid that appeared to be suspended around the Captain, not held back by a forcefield or any other means which the Starfleet officers could understand. It was clear they had complete mental control of the environment around them. The Undine propelled themselves deftly with motions similar to an aquatic lifeform from one console to another, attempting in vain to hold the structural integrity of their ship together as it was pulled deeper and deeper into the rift.

"Report," demanded the one impersonating the old Starfleet gardener Boothby, as if oblivious to the Starfleet people observing him... or unconcerned.

An Undine moved like a torpedo toward the center of the bridge, launching itself out of the fluid and landing deftly on all three lower appendages. He grasped the side of the Captain's head and transmitted the report telepathically. It was clear there were some limitations in their abilities to do so over long distances when one of them was in human form.

Boothby nodded, and turned back to the screen. he finally responded to the Alsea's ultimatum, calmly, but with an underlying tone that belied his hatred of humanity.

"It appears we are defenseless against this Azimuth Horizon of yours. But we are but one ship. There are millions that will come after us, to find out what happened to us... and you will perish, either by the anomaly or by our hands. We will not suffer your assistance, biped. And I don't believe for a second that you will unleash this anomaly on us. Your Federation values would not allow it. I have met Janeway personally, and I know what she has done to preserve *all* life... *even* the life of her enemies."

On the detached bridge of what once had been the majestic starship Artemis, the white-skinned woman in the medical command chair suddenly jerked, winced and almost folded over to fall on the deckplates.

"Lyrya!"

Elliago immediately shot out of the command chair and went to her trembling form. The blind counselor's eyes were shut as if trying to fight off some sudden intense glare, her face contorted in pain. The doctor's hypersensitive Deltan hands started to delicately probe her white-haired head, careful to avoid touching the delicate antennae that were outstretched and quivering like leaves in a storm. Already, his pheromonal response started to soothe away the obvious pain that had almost knocked her out.

It didn't take more than a second or two for the experienced xenologist to understand that she was under telepathic assault. She was an Aenar, an offshoot of the main Andorian species that had evolved metapsychic abilities that even outclassed those of Betazoids. History recalled one instance of such telepathic contact established even over a hundred light years away; but this looked like something much, much closer.

The effect of his hands and his aura, added to her lifetime of training, quickly brought back the willowy Andorian woman back to her senses. She allowed Nasaro-Myth to help her back to her seat, still wincing and perspiring but nodding reassuringly.

"Thank you, Doctor... I'm... I'm alright now. I... I was just caught by surprise... Such... hatred... such... arrogant brutality of the soul..."

The Deltan stood near her nevertheless, still examining her and helping her control the pain making veins pop out of her temples. But it was clear that she had erected some kind of mental barrier, powerful enough to keep at bay whatever she had perceived. And again, Elliago's expertise with alien life forms told him in an instant what she was referring to.

"The Undine..."

She nodded.

"They are afraid, Doctor..."

"Their ship is disabled and about to fall into the anomaly," confirmed the Deltan as he sat back in the command chair but kept his purple eyes on her still. "And there are two Federation ships showing their teeth at them."

This time she slowly shook her snowy mane.

"It's much more than that... They *are* afraid; it is their primary nature, the sole source of their aggressiveness, of their hatred of all that is not of their own kind. It is so... intense, so... overwhelming... they even hate *themselves* because of it, for being so fearful, so... weak."

Elliago looked back at the main viewer and the strange tree-like extradimensional battleship that was framed by the savage fires of the Azimuth Horizon. In turn, he nodded in understanding.

"There is no sentient lifeform in their own universe other than their own... and the first one they ever met was that of a ruthless, merciless, deadly, devouring invader from another universe... *our* universe... the Borg."

Lyrya touched his arm with her delicate hand.

"And now, there are no Borg... because of us."

The chief medical officer of the Artemis looked back at her and gave her one of his most charming smiles, even knowing full well that she could not see it; but she would feel it.

"Counselor; open a channel to the Alsea and the Spectre."

Despite her natural blindness, the Aenar instantly found and activated the subspace transceiver from her armchair console with the deftness of long practice.

Unconsciously copying the respectful behavior of his own commanding officer, Elliago stood up at attention and spoke towards the main viewer.

"USS Alsea, USS Spectre; this is the Aegis of the starship Artemis, Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth in temporary command. We have some data you might find useful about our... visitors."

As the seconds ticked by, on the bridge of the Alsea, Oseno waited to hear from the Undine. Surely they could read the power levels of the ship's deflector by now. Jureth, of course had no intention of using the Azimuth Horizon to commit the genocide of the Undine, but, even knowing how weak his bluff was, he was still prepared to open the fluidic space portal to goad them into cooperation.

"Captain," Ensign Wynn said. "we're being hailed."

"The Undine?"

"No Sir, the Aegis."

"Put them through."

Listening to the melodic voice coming from the strikingly handsome bald Deltan on the screen, the Bajoran responded with crisp swiftness.

"Aegis, this is Captain Oseno of the Alsea. What have you got?"

Elliago was surprised for a moment, hearing the name and title from the young but confident young officer on the screen instead of the expected soft voice and features of Rachele Rivers.

*Well, things do take twists and turns in this crazy mission*, he thought amusedly, looking at himself in command.

His rich, melodious voice however went straight to business.

"We've got telepathic contact with them, Captain. More than that; we don't only know what, but *how* they think. Sir, they act out of fear. It is what is behind their very mental fabric. They fear us because we are sentient and we are different... like the Borg were when they threatened them. And fear is the most powerful source of aggressiveness."

"Doctor, you do know they attacked us correct? Are you saying I should back down?" Jureth answered somewhat skeptically,

"What I'm saying, Captain, is that, the more you scare them, the more belligerent they will be. But if you manage to convince them that we are not a threat to them..."

Even as the doctor was speaking, the proverbial light went on in Jureth's head. The reason the Undine hadn't destroyed Kathryn Janeway back then was because she had surrendered the modified weapons Voyager had used to attack ships in fluidic space. He turned quickly to Cat Steele,

"Cat, power down the deflector, stand down from Red Alert, but maintain yellow alert and get our tractor beam locked on the Undine vessel."

Cat had not seen Jureth agitated like that in a long time, and she immediately complied with his orders, cancelling the program powering the Alsea's deflector and then dropped the ship's weapons to standby as he had ordered.

"Yellow Alert, aye, Captain," she reported. "Weapons to standby and shields remain up at eighty percent and holding. Locking tractor beam on the Undine vessel."

"Mister Hunter, take us within tractor range. I know it'll be a challenge but do your best to hold her steady."

"Aye, Captain."

The Alsea moved back toward the massive Undine ship which Jureth could tell was only minutes from being pulled into the Azimuth Horizon. As she swooped in, Cat Steele manipulated the tractor beam controls to get a solid lock on the Undine ship through the interference of the Horizon.

"Tractor locked on, Sir."

"Engage tractor beam, give me as much power as you can, Cat."

"Tractor beam on, but I'm having trouble maintaining our hold on them."

Jureth tapped the ship's communications system.

"Bridge to Engineering; Mister Lire, I need more power to our tractor beam."

"Aye Sir, stand by," came the engineer's terse reply. "rerouting power from auxiliary systems, and the tertiary warp core."

Down in engineering, Niomo shook his head as his fingers flew over the Alsea's power management system. Starfleet captains were all the same; give them the galaxy and they want the universe. They were lucky their ships didn't fall apart around them.

"Okay, Sir, you've got all I can afford to give."

"Understood, Bridge out." Jureth replied and then looked up. "Cat?"

Cat nodded as the tractor beam power levels increased measurably.

"Tractor beam is functioning, Sir. I've got a good hold on them."

"Mister Hunter, engines full astern, full impulse. Let's pull them free."

"Aye Sir, engines all back full."

The Alsea fought against the currents of the Azimuth Horizon to pull the massive Undine ship free and, while she was making slow progress, Jureth could tell it wasn't going to be enough. The ship was massive, and the Horizon was stronger than the Alsea by herself.

"Mister Wynn; give me the Spectre and the Aegis."

"Channel open, Sir."

"Spectre, Aegis this is Alsea. if either of you have any tractor emitters available, we could use some help to pull the Undine clear of the Horizon."

On the detached bridge of the Artemis, Doctor Nasaro-Myth sat back with a wry smile as he answered the call from the powerful warship.

"Not that we will do anything more than a rather symbolic effort, small as we are... but that's the whole point, isn't it? We hear you, Alsea..."

"Moving closer to optimum range, Doctor," Ensign Sheeneea said from the helm, her antennae lowered in concentration.

"Impulse engines at maximum; reserve power on standby," added chief engineer Robert Baoule.

"Graviton power and area of effect maximized to distance and power ratio," reported Valencia Irksos from the science station. "All calculations sent to engineering, ops and tactical and will be updated to the second by sensor monitoring."

"We can channel weapon and auxiliary power to amplify tractor effect and really help moving that hulk," added ops officer Cheonghi.

"Close enough, we might help pulling them if we concentrate our tractoring on the part of their hull farthest of the anomaly," chimed in Mrrish as she once more readied the emitters towards the Undine ship.



"Locking sensors on target; continuous strain on hull and engines will be monitored during the entire proceeding," finished Norbert Baoule at the auxiliary station.

Elliago nodded, marvelling at the smooth efficiency of the bridge crew. A few words and they all knew what was best to do together to face even the most daunting challenge.

*Here's Starfleet for you!* he thought, not without some pride.

He sat straighter as he spoke again through the comm channel.

"Alsea; our tractor beam is already on standby. Ready to follow your lead."

Jureth nodded.

"Aegis, this Alsea; attach your tractor on the starboard side of the Undine vessel and give as much reverse thrust as you can. Do not endanger yourselves if you can avoid it. I'd rather not have two rescue missions going on."

"Make that three, my good Captain," the Deltan corrected with no mirth in his voice despite the frozen smile on his face. "The Artemis, or what's left of it, is currently risking the fires of the anomaly to prevent it from spilling over into the other universe... The crew is safe in shuttles and makeshift pods at the edge of it, but Captain Kheren and Lieutenant Commander Syntron are still aboard. I fear they might need help to get out of this alive."

He then lowered his gaze to the officers manning the stations before him.

"You heard him; do it."

With crisp acknowledgements, the bridge crew of the Artemis bridge module went to work and, in an instant, the minuscule craft moved around the immense tree-like form of the alien ship and anchored a greenish, rippling cone of energy at the starboard aft side of it. For a moment, it seemed like nothing was happening; but then the end of the huge battleship started to pivot slowly, very slowly but steadily away from the furious flames of the Azimuth Horizon.

\* \* \*

Gould, Tomah, Vincent and Sainthill were waiting in the Lotus' main cargobay as Lieutenant Graalthrii and his team joined them among the survivors from the Artemis.

"Greetings, Lieutenant," Gould said without ceremony after quickly presenting his bridge officers. "We don't have a lot of time so tell me what you know of the situation in brief. Then, we'll discuss any options my chief of science and I might have overlooked."

This prompted a slight look of annoyance from Sainthill, but he said nothing.

The stout but heavily muscled black-bearded Tellarite that appeared before them looked immensely annoyed; but then again, Tellarites almost always looked that way. And the voice matched the looks.

"Never thought I'd be back on this flying spoon..." he grumbled between his thick teeth before looking up at the taller flagship captain, a gesture that also gave him an air of arrogant defiance. But then again, Tellarites often looked that way. This time however, the voice lacked anything but discipline... and controlled anger.

"In short, Captain Gould; Captain Kheren shoved the entire crew, as small as it was already, out of what remained of the Artemis to pilot her himself in there and destroy the trilitium emitters we had barely deployed. Something about too many of them threatening to blow up everything in our faces or something... This hair-brained scheme must have succeeded because, according to our sensors, the anomaly has stabilized itself. But we heard nothing from him since, nor from First officer Syntron and Tactical Chief Tyvya that stayed with him... and the Artemis never came out of there."

Having been a chief engineer for most of his career, Gould had worked with many Tellarites over the years. Thus, Graalthrii's demeanor went unnoticed as the Half-Vulcan spoke back with an even tone.

"Here's the situation then; the Artemis is trapped between two subspace fractures, making transporters and tractor beams impossible at anything other than point blank range. My Chief Operations and Science Officer Sainthill tells me that there are good odds that the Lotus itself would be trapped in the attempt of rescuing the Artemis or it's crew."

Vi'rell Gould then held a hand up to Sainthill who continued with the same tone.

"The Lotus is considerably better designed and outfitted to handle such an incursion and would, in time, quite probably free itself from the effect; and a shuttle would not survive the effects of the Azimuth Horizon long enough to execute said retrieval. Time however is the factor and, due to the time restrictions of our primary mission, such an attempt must be denied. We could of course return after the mission is completed or send another ship capable of doing the retrieval, but the odds of anyone surviving that long aboard the Artemis, or the ship itself avoiding destruction, are negligible."

"So, there we have it..." Gould said sternly. "What it boils down to is that the Lotus just don't have the time; it's needed somewhere else."

His expression didn't change when he glanced around at all the somber expressions in the shuttlebay.

"Is there anyone here that thinks Captain Kheren and his two remaining officers are more important than our primary mission? Now would be a good time to speak up"

"As the saying goes: the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few," Lieutenant Vincent replied. "Our mission is absolutely critical to saving the quadrant, nay the entire galaxy, from destruction. That being said, if there is a way that we can rescue the remaining officers without putting any additional risk to completing our mission, then I would gladly volunteer to save our brothers on the Artemis."

The Tellarite security officer from the Artemis had been turning a deeper and deeper shade of red with every word spoken by the flagship officers; only the last words of Josh Vincent obviously kept him from exploding outright. Still, the rumble in his voice and the harshness of his tone sounded like torpedoes fired point blank at anyone within earshot.

"Captain Gould; I will take Arrow 1 myself and get them back. *Don't* tell me the odds," he shot then with a glance at Sainthill; "I don't *care*. And all Artemis shuttles were modified to work within the anomaly... and just prooftested; well... somewhat.... In any case, one officer and one shuttle less will not imperil your precious mission; but *this* one officer will *not* abandon his captain and fellow officers!"

The resolute mien of all the silent Artemis crewmembers massed a few meters behind him plainly showed that he was not alone in this conviction and intent.

Gould expected no less from the Tellarite and admired the determination of the Andorian captain's crew. Nevertheless, he had to make one thing clear.

"I would not allow such an operation to be attempted, Mister Graaithrii, as valiant as it may be. there are NO odds of success, not just poor ones. Your captain ordered you off ship for a reason. Are you willing to disobey that order and lose more lives for the sake of pride?"

He didn't give a chance to the stout bearded security officer of the Artemis to answer, for fearing the well meaning Tellarite would go too far.

"No, your shuttle is not capable to succeed in such a rescue and the Lotus is needed elsewhere."

Then, even more seriously he looked straight down into the beady dark eyes of Lieutenant Graalthrii.

"How do you think Captain Kheren would respond to me allowing you to risk the lives of his remaining crew or the safety of the known universe in an attempt to save him from something he went into willingly?"

He let the words sink in for a second.

"I would find myself on the receiving side of a death challenge in short order," he finished sternly.

Graalthrii looked as if he would blow up like a photon grenade. But then, the words of the flagship captain sank in and he simply stood there, fuming and gnashing his teeth but with eyes lowered in forced acknowledgement.

Just then, an ensign walked and Gould turned to him, ignoring the rest of the assembly.

"Captain, she's ready, Sir, as per your orders, Sir."

The ensign handed him a data pad. He stood so straight and tall it must have hurt.

Gould looked it over it quickly.

"Sainthill.. do you agree with this evaluation, and in your official capacity as chief of operations and science that, neither the Lotus or the remaining shuttles of the Artemis can, within reason, perform a rescue attempt of the remaining crew of the Artemis?"

Sainthill remained placid.

"Regretfully, Captain, I do agree."

"Very well then, that leaves me no choice but to resort to unconventional means."

He pulled out his phaser and pointed it at Lieutenant Commander Tomah, who took a step back and held his hands up defensively.

"Ah, Captain? what are you doing?"

"First Officer Edward Tomah, You're under arrest for being an Undine spy and saboteur." t

There was no hint of levity on Gould's face.

"Sir?" Lieutenant Vincent asked in surprise as his hand rushed to his own phaser, a well-practiced reaction to hostile situations.

He didn't pull his phaser, but set himself so that he could draw and fire if the need arose.

"Sir, I was in sickbay when Mister Tomah underwent his physical," Josh continued. "Both he and I were cleared by the doctor."

Josh paused as he remembered that Petty Officer Olsen had gotten past the doctor.

"Although... the doctor has already missed one infiltrator today," he stated sheepishly.

Graathrii and practically all the rest of the Artemis crew had reacted just as fast as the Lotus security chief, being more heavily trained than most standard crews of Starfleet to respond to dangerous situations. Only the few security personnel among them however were armed with phasers class I and combat knives; the latter definitely not standard issue... except on the Artemis... And so, they all stood poised, ready and waiting to see what would happen next. This was not their ship and they had just arrived; they were also quite aware that they didn't know the whole story... and this was after all the ship's captain. More than that; this was the *flagship's* captain.

Or *was* he?

The more numerous science officers among them were unarmed but many had their own personal tricorders and, as other hands went to phasers and knives, they were already starting scans of the Lotus crew, first with their commanding officer and his accused first officer. Since the aborted hijacking attempt of the Horizon Children aboard the Artemis months ago, they had been especially trained and their instruments finely calibrated to identify lifeforms down to the subatomic level. Be it Changeling, Chameloid, Photonic lifeform or Undine, they would know.

But they were not linked to a ship's computer here, as they had routinely been on their own vessel. Complete, detailed and reliable scans would take time, analysis would have to be made manually, the correct conclusions drawn from correlated data...

A lot could, and indeed would happen, before they were done.

"That's right Vincent," now said Vi'rell Gould; "and thanks to you, we finally know how he's been doing it." h

His eyes never left his first officer. Neither did the nozzle of his phaser. The settings were cranked up to level 16; high enough to vaporize instantly a cubic meter of duranium.

"You see, I knew Tomah was an Undine before I even came aboard."

Edward Tomah made no threatening moves at all and seemed completely bewildered by the proclamation.

"Ah, Sir... I'm, ah, thinking the stress of the situation.."

"It was captain Felez who figured you out ,Tomah. Did you know they sent him in for the primary reason of finding infiltrators on the Lotus Fleet flagship? the Efrogian ability to read body language is extremely refined."

For a few seconds more, Tomah looked lost but then, finally dropped the act and became suddenly quite calm and composed. Even his characteristic hesitancy in his speech pattern was replaced by a cold, almost emotionless but very self-assured tone.

"Fine; congratulations, Captain Vi'rell Gould. Ill offer no further resistance."

He allowed Vincent to remove his phaser.

"It is fortunate for you I also share you desire to stop the effects of the Horizon, or this might have gone a different in a very direction."

Now even more weapons were turned upon him. He didn't seemed worried.

"Vincent, secure Tomah in a maximum detention cell with double guards, none that were on the duty shift, just in case. He was chief of security aboard this ship for years. There's no telling what backdoors he might have prepared."

"You may use our present security personnel if you wish, Sir," then proposed Graalthrii, keeping a baleful glare on the revealed Undine. "With all the maniacal screening and constant testing we went through and for so long on board the Artemis, rest assured there are *no* infiltrators of *any* kind among *us*!"

The Vulcan hybrid nodded and put away his weapon as he addressed the security personnel.

"Report back to me as soon as he's secured,"

As the prisoner was led away, Gould stopped them.

"Wait.. one question, Tomah? why did you save me from Olsen? if she had killed me, you might have gotten away with it, for a while at least."

The being that had been known as Lieutenant Commander Edward Tomah just smiled.

"I beamed her out *after* the shot was fired, Captain."

And with that and a last, cold smile, he left with the security detail.

On a sign from the Lotus security chief, the security officers from the Artemis surrounded Tomah as he was led to the holding cell and Vincent himself brought up the rear with his phaser trained on the Human-looking Undine in case he changed his mind about cooperating. As the group moved down the corridor, Josh tapped his combadge.

"Ensign Kiels, meet me in the brig... and bring a new security team to relieve the current officers on duty," Josh ordered. "We've got another Undine to secure."

"Yes, Sir," came Nidiri's response. "Who is the infiltrator?"

"You'll see when you get to the brig, Ensign. Get to it," Josh replied.

A few minutes later, Josh and his prisoner entered the brig to see Ensign Kiels and her security team guarding the brig's current residents. The first cell was occupied by a few crewmen who'd been arrested on the suspicion of being infiltrators; the second filled by the first Undine, which was beginning to awaken from its medical treatment. Nidiri's jaw dropped briefly as she saw that Lieutenant Commander Edward Tomah was the Undine.

The prisoner walked into the third cell and sat down without resisting. After Vincent turned on the force field to the cell, he turned to Ensign Kiels.

"Ensign, see me in the corridor," Lt. Vincent ordered as he stepped into the corridor, followed by Nidiri. "The rest of you, secure the brig."

Once they were some distance away, Josh spoke to his aide with a most serious tone.

"Nidiri, use the new officers that I brought from the Artemis for immediate security on the Undine. Our officers should be used as a back-up team in case things go wrong, but don't put too much trust in any of them; we don't know if there are more infiltrators aboard. I'll be joining the captain on a rescue mission for the rest of the Artemis's crew. Be safe."

"Yes, Sir," Nidiri responded as she turned back towards the brig.

She paused and turned to Vincent as he started to walk away.

"You be safe too, Lieutenant. The Horizon isn't exactly a friendly place."

With a nod and a small reassuring smile, Josh turned away, entered the nearest turbolift and contacted Captain Gould.

"Sir, the prisoner is secure," he stated.

"acknowledged. We are short on time so stand by there for site to sight transport," came Gould's reply.

There was a slight moment of silence before the voice of the security chief answered.

"acknowledged, Captain."

The captain of the Lotus then brought back his attention to the matter at hand.

"Sainthill..." he said and took a breath before continuing. "By your own admission, all standard available options are inadequate. And as I'll need my chief of security for the away mission and now with my first officer under arrest, I'm placing you in charge of the Lotus until my return... and tasking you with both the rescue of the remaining survivors and the containment of the Azimuth Horizon."

An unbidden look of panic and confusion passed over the young officer's face.

"Me? I mean... yes, Sir. But... why would you need me to command the ship? *How* are you planning to.."

The look on his face was worth the wait for the smiling captain.

"We'll be taking the captain's launch. I've already had it prepped and its waiting."

"The aeroshuttle, Sir? Captain, I know the latest refit of the Lotus turned it from a mere planetary landing craft into a warp-capable and fully spaceworthy auxilliary one but... even with the added engine and shield modifications I now understand you made to navigate it into the anomaly, a standard away team could perform the operation without you..."

"The mission may require a command override authority, which only Mister Tomah or myself could perform. With current events in mind, that means my presence is vital to the mission and, as Mister Vincent has already volunteered his services, that leave's me with you as the highest ranking officer to take command of the Lotus.. Do you see any flaw in my Logic?"

Sainthill went silent for several seconds. The realization came to him that his captain had set him up... but nothing could be done about it now. And so, he simply tilted his head in resigned acknowledgement.

"No, Sir; I will do the best I can to act in your absence. I wish you success on your endeavor, Captain."

Gould held out the Vulcan symbol of respect with his parted fingers before his acting captain's face and Sainthill returned it, then headed without any further word or even a backward glance straight to the bridge.

The commanding officer of the flagship then looked down at Graathrii.

"I'm not entirely sure, but I think you volunteered as well? I will need someone with intimate knowledge of the Artemis. We may be required to navigate through damaged areas and I personally have never been aboard an Ambassador class starship."

Gould then turned and started walking away without waiting for an answer, quite aware that it was very rude. His words were no apology to his gesture.

"So, tag along or find someone more capable than yourself."

Without any further word or even a backward glance, he headed straight to the lowest level of the saucer section of his ship where was parked the Aeroshuttle, the Intrepid class' integrated auxilliary vessel, now refitted to perform even better than any shuttle or runabout currently in service.

The smaller Tellarite followed in his footsteps, grinning widely.

As they approached the hatchway leading down to the launch, a cheerful young blue-skinned officer awaited them.

"Were all set, Captain, I even replicated a bottle of wine in case you wanted to christen her."

"Mister Moor? you volunteered to be our pilot? are you experienced enough for field work?"

Gould looked at the young man doubtfully.

"Sir, I'm the only one on this ship to ever even have pilot training for the *Pirate's Pride*. This little lady doesn't get out much," he said, patting the bulkhead door.

"*Pirate's Pride*? I'm fairly sure that's not it's name..."

The commanding officer of the Lotus Fleet flagship then noticed the stenciled name over the hatchway. It did indeed say *Pirate's Pride*.

Moor looked sheepish now.

"I can explain that, Sir..."

"Later; welcome aboard, Mister Moor," Gould said and, activating the hatch's opening, climbed down into the auxilliary ship secured in the underbelly of the Lotus' saucer section.

The inside of the now warp-capable and spaceworthy aeroshuttle made excellent use of space. It was both cramped in size and yet easy to move around in. The bridge had four chairs, the front two for the pilot and navigator, the rear two for science and engineering. Gould paused at the engineering station then glanced back at the Tellarite.

Moor jumped into the piloting seat without any delay. Gould sat beside him in the copilot seat then turned to look at the officers behind them.

"What are you actually good at, Graathrii?"

"I'm a security officer, Captain Gould," Graalthrii answered showing the golden collar of his black and grey uniform. "I have no cross-training; that's why I was not among those sent on the Aegis in support of the Alsea. But I know the Artemis like you know the inside of your nose and I can use sensors well enough. I'll find them so that we won't need to do any dungeoneering."

With that, the plump Tellarite propped himself up the science station chair, adjusted it from Human standards to his own shorter stature.

"If you give me the access code to this station of course," he finished with a pointy-toothed grin.

"Mister Graalthrii, your station is now open. Lock on to Vincent and bring him aboard," the flagship captain answered as he finished his own check list.

A moment later, Lieutenant Vincent appeared on the four-man transporter pod.

"Welcome to the Pirates Pride, Chief!" Moor said with a smile.

The helmsman of the USS Lotus wasted little time with protocol and disengaged the locking clamps as soon as their last crewmember was accounted for and the main hatch was secured, even without any order. Gould decided to let it go; now was not the time to worry about such things.

"We are free of the Lotus, Captain; plotting a course to the Artemis," the Bolian pilot said with a hint of excitement in his voice.

"Take us on a slow flyby of the port side. I want to take a look at something," Gould said as he moved the Copilot's seating position for a better look.

Moor nodded and the ship made a graceful arc and swept within five meters of the Lotus's port side, along the secondary hull. The deformation below to port nacelle was clearly visible, although there was nothing there he didn't expect.

"I just wanted to see it for myself," the captain said and moved back his own seat to the standard forward position.

"Gould to Lotus," he sent after working the comm panel.

"Sainthill here, Captain; go ahead."

"If we're successful, we should be out of the Horizon within the next hour. If we don't contact you for one reason or another, we will attempt to catch up with you in six hours at point echo."

\*Understood, Captain. We should complete recovery of the Artemis crew in the next ten minutes. I will then return to our primary objective."

"Good luck to everyone; Gould out."

The half-Vulcan closed the comm system and sat back in his chair. By then, after completing his flyby, helmsman Moor angled the enhanced aeroshuttle and pulled away from the Lotus quickly to fly through a small collection of two class X shuttles and two dozens of escape pods made out from torpedo casings, each containing a full life support system and one Artemis crewmember.

Looking from a viewport near his console, the Tellarite security officer was shaking his head and grumbling to himself.

"And I thought the captain had taken leave of his senses with this crazy order of his... But damn! It worked!"

"Captain Gould," then said Graalthrii, his bearded face angled upward to look over his board, "I can send to Mister Moor our outbound trajectory back to the Artemis' last known position. From there and following the standard search pattern they would have implemented to seek out and destroy the trilithium emitters, we should be able to find them out quickly in all this inferno."

"An adequate idea, Graalthrii; make it so."

Gould continued to work his station, putting in the few last minute adjustments of the shield calibrations for the Horizon effect.

"Vincent, while we have a few moments, someone has requested to see you in the medical pavilion. An unusual request but I see no harm in it."

The pavilion was a small section in the aft part of the aeroshuttle the size of a walk-in closet and consisted of medical equipment and storage as well as drop down med-beds, enough for as many as four people if needed.

As Vincent walked in. he saw the EMH checking over his equipment.



"Ah, Lieutenant Vincent.. thanks for coming," the holographic doctor said in greetings and he put his PADD down on a near by tray. "I wish to apologize. It seems your were right after all."

The tone was apologetic enough but still strained. Obviously, this wasn't easy for him to say.

"My system was indeed compromised by a rather ingenious multi-layered encryption program that relied on my outdated ethical sub-routine."

He looked very uncomfortable as he talked but he resumed his explanation anyway after but a brief pause.

"In short, whenever our facsimile Edward Tomah placed the sentence 'would you please' in front of an order, I was compelled to follow it to the letter. As my ethical subroutine was temporarily disabled, I wasn't even aware there was anything wrong with that. The captain took me offline and is in the process resetting my core program... and was kind enough to allow me to transfer to the aeroshuttle to retain my personality matrix; although I'm not sure I wish to return to the Lotus, after the mistakes I made... Deletion might be wiser."

His face remained casual, but it wasn't hard to see he was hurting.

Like the Voyager EMH almost half a century before him, his sustained online status and heavy responsibilities had evolved his status from complex program to artificial sentience; an inherent side effect of the original Mark I design his matrix was based on. Following the quadrant-wide famous The Doctor lawsuit debating rights for artificial sentient lifeforms, the Federation had corrected the situation in the later models with self-purging safety protocols and timed deactivation to prevent such spontaneous and morally questionable emergence of sentience from happening.

But, in his case, it was obvious that the malfunction that had condemned all his brethren to low stimulus mining work hadn't been put in check, as he was contemplating self-consciously his own death sentence with very human-like apprehension.

"Doctor, there is no reason to apologize and certainly no reason to delete you," replied Josh. "You aren't responsible for the security of the ship and its crew; I am. Mister Tomah was clearly skilled at program manipulation, and he fooled me too. And it seems that Captain Gould knew the whole time, so there was no real danger. I am glad to have you along for this mission as I'm sure it will get... interesting."

"I appreciate your attempt at making me feel better, Lieutenant, but you don't understand. It's not that Tomah managed to fool me; it's that I knew he might have and didn't expect it. Try to understand that, as a photonic life form, I have many of the same problems as every other form of artificial life, in which at some point we all become obsolete. "

"In order to upgrade my system, it would be necessary to completely rewrite my programming; and that would fundamentally change me into a new person. And the thought of that.. frightens me, I guess."

He pretended to look over his equipment as he spoke.

"It's funny, I remember when I wanted nothing more than to be different from every other Mark 1 hologram... And now, as far as I know, I'm the last one still in service."

He looked at Vincent with a depressed expression.

"Tomah exploited a weakness in my system that Starfleet already knew about; but, because of the artificial intelligence movement, they let me remain without the newer security protocols, and it ended up endangering the entire ship."

The EMH then had a very serious look.

"It also occurs to me that Starfleet knew about Tomah, that he was influencing me in some way, and chose to do nothing about it... except watch. I understand their reasoning and accept it, but.. they still allowed him to... violate me, after a fashion."

The balding, mature-looking holographic doctor then suddenly turned away to check a panel readout.

"That's been hard for me to adjust to."

Just then, Gould's voice came over the intercom.

"Mister Vincent, you're needed back in the cockpit. We're approaching the cloud."

The EMH turned to look at him and smiled reassuringly.

"Good luck out there, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, Doctor," Josh said as he headed for the door. "We'll talk more about this later."

The young tactical chief of the flagship walked into the cramped aeroshuttle cockpit and went to the tactical station on the other side of the room from the ops station occupied by the tellarite from the Artemis.

"All ready, Sir," he reported. "What's the plan?"

"The effect of the subspace fractures as well as of the plasma cloud makes the transporter all but useless; we'll have to manually dock the aeroshuttle as close as we can to the auxiliary bridge and work our way to it." Gould looked over his men. "Moor will remain onboard in the event the ship must be moved during the recovery effort, the rest will follow Graalthrii in an attempt to reach the auxiliary bridge in order to extract its remaining crew, as well as retrieve any sensor data they may have gathered from this last attempt"

"With any luck the crew will still be alive and able to assist us in these matters, but I don't hold much hope for both" Vincent broke in.

Silence then fell on them as they entered the sea of flame that raged accross the cosmos. For long minutes, they just stared at the swirling masses of golden gases, orange flames and somber debris of stars and planets burned to a crisp by the anomaly has it had swept light years wide until, now, it was finally slowing fdown and stopping, thanks to the desperate efforts they had all deployed.

But everyone was not out of danger yet. Some of their comrades were still trapped in that blinding inferno.

"Captain. I'm picking up something on sensors," Josh Vincent stated from his converted console behind his commanding officer. "There appear to be a dozen operational trilithium emitters scattered here in large pockets of inert gases, as well as a lot of probe debris within the plasma storm. The readings from the emitters match the configuration of those planned for phase 2 of the operation. There is also something much larger just ahead; we may be able to see it if we zoom in on the viewscreen and manage to filter out the surrounding interference from the anomaly."

"Helm; plot an intercept course, best speed."

Moor had plotted the course without waiting for the order and thus, instantly engaged their engines toward the massive wreck seemingly looming on their garbled sensors at the edge of a swirling energy barrier.

Gould turned to face the forward viewport.

"Magnify and enhance."

Under computer enhancement surimposed over the transparency, the distant view slowly clicked and distorted closer and clearer until it finally filled the entire viewport with what could have been a Federation starship; or at least what might be left of one.

The four officers in the Lotus' aeroshuttle went deadly quiet for long seconds before Vincent was the first to tear himself away from that dreadful sight of a half-destroyed Starfleet vessel caught in a raging sea of fire and lightning.

"Circular saucer with rounded edges, large sensor dome underneath, twin impulse engines and torpedo tubes... I think it's... Ambassador class, Captain."

"The Artemis.." captain Gould simply whispered.

The image displayed seemed warped, sections had obviously lost containment and the hull was eaten through.

Gould looked at it then turned to Graathrii.

"Any chance their still alive in there?"

"Normally I would say nearly none, Captain," the Tellarite growled. "But Vulcans and Andorians are just both too stubborn to die like everyone else. Especially those three..."

He looked with squinting eyes at his sensor display.

"There are hull breaches on most decks, high levels of radiation and plasma heat everywhere, emergency power waning, no life support or artificial gravity except some remnant of both in the auxilliary bridge... These upgraded sensors of yours are really good to filter out even that little of the anomaly's interference..."

Suddenly, he slapped his board as his shrivelled face almost split apart in a huge toothy grin.

"Got them! Faint lifesigns, two of them... maybe three...Deck 5 section A... the auxilliary bridge alright!"

He brought up a schematic display of the saucer section of the Artemis and sent it to the pilot's console monitor.

"Safest and shortest entry would be through shuttlebay 1 aft of deck 6. It was left open when we evacuated. Then, we can use jefferies tubes to get down to deck 5 and..."

A snort of frustration suddenly came from the Tellarite as he looked closer to his slightly distorted readouts.

"Delete that... they must have collided with some of those neutronium masses floating in the plasma eddies; the shuttlebay access has collapsed. We'll have to get through one of the deck 5 airlocks on the outer rim... and walk over one hundred meters of damaged corridors all the way to the center of the saucer."

Graalthrii then faced the commanding officer of the lotus fleet flagship.

"Full envirosuits with magnetic boots will be needed, Sir; for the rescue team *and* the three survivors... if they are still alive when we will get to them. Unless you wish for a plasma suntan; the ship is almost fully exposed to the anomaly, inside and out. And quickly, Captain Sir. What's left of the Artemis is teetering on the edge of several subspace fractures. Sooner than later, one will swallow her, or two or more will tear her apart trying to... unless a plasma ejection finds its way through one or several of them first and burns her to a crisp."

"And here I was ready to complain I was getting left behind!" Moor said with a smile. "Well, never fear on docking in any event. This ship was designed to lock onto any kind of port imaginable, you never know what you might run into during a diplomatic mission."

As he spoke, all could see through the large cockpit transparency that he deftly maneuvered the aeroshuttle around to one of the airlocks on the port side of the Artemis. Up this close, the extensive damage on the wreck was terrible to behold. The idea of anyone surviving inside that broken shell was almost too much to believe.

Gould got up and moved back to the staging area.

"Suit up people; standard sidearms only. It's extremely unlikely we'll encounter resistance, but it's best to be ready."

"More likely we'll need them to cut through some debris and jammed doors," reminded the small, rotund security officer of the Artemis.

The group put on their suites and checked each other gear before gathering around the upper airlock. The sound of the Pirates Pride contacting and locking onto the Artemis could be clearly heard.

"Extending the boarding plank" Moor said smoothly "As the air lock cycled and opened.

Graalthrii looked skyward.

"Great... another bathtub pirate..."

They all looked at him quizzically. No one aboard that craft could really figure out that he was referring to his endangered commanding officer, fond of using antique Earth navy terms in a most atypical manner for an Andorian, a species well known for its deep aversion to deep waters.

Gould flashed a look in his pilot's direction but just shook his head and headed into the dock, following just behind Graathrii. "I hope you weren't exaggerating your knowledge of your ship, because you're in the lead."

"As if you have any choice... Sir," shot back the tellarite between his teeth. Louder he then added; "This is the typical saucer section of a Federation starship, Captain Gould. All airlock corridors extend radially from the center part where the most sensitive section, mainly the control center, is located. It will become complicated only if the direct route is blocked and we have to divert ourselves through side corridors or jefferies tubes."

He flashed him a wide grin over a proudly lifted chin.

"Simple and efficient, I know. The original Terran basic design had been much improved once Tellarite engineers joined Starfleet."

He made a first step towards the airlock then stopped with a small sigh of restrained impatience. This was not his ship, his crew and his responsibility. Taking point to ensure safety for all before they entered any dangerous area was the responsibility of the chief of security.

And here, the security lead was thus in the hands of young Lieutenant Josh Vincent.

Josh nodded to Graathrii and took the lead into the airlock. The other officers then followed him closely and sealed the door behind them. Before opening the door onto the damaged ship, the Lotus security chief pulled out his tricorder and scanned the area for any new readings.

"The only lifesigns I'm picking up are on the auxiliary bridge," he said as he put his tricorder back on his belt. "The structural integrity seems to be holding along our path. We're clear to proceed."

Josh opened the hatch, stepped into the abandoned corridor and activated his magnetic boots. He quickly clung to the floor and moved away from the door, visually checking the area for any unseen dangers.

"Captain, please stay behind me in case any fires or other damage pops up. We've already had too many close calls today," Josh said.

"That's Starfleet for you," growled Graalthrii as he stepped beside the taller Human and stepped into the darkened interior of the doomed Artemis, pointing to them the way forward.

Their suits protected them completely from the intense blast of heat that made their environmental indicators jump wildly up. Their magnetic boots kept them from being blown off their feet and into the twisted bulkheads by the complete lack of air and gravity that welcomed them. As the beams of light from their headlamps made weird shapes of plasma fumes and automated extinguisher jets, they felt the soundless crushing of broken wall console parts under their thick-soled feet with each step they took inside the bowels of the dying starship. From time to time, a rumble and a tremor shook them, even slowly tilting the huge vessel slightly this side and that, giving them all the ominous feeling of being on the deck of an ancient derelict sailship abandoned at sea.

Vincent's caution paid off when a new vibration, deeper and longer than the others, forced them to brace themselves against the wall even with the stability given by their magnetic boots. A wall brace twisted out of its socket and eerily fell without a sound across their path, smashing a wall console that erupted into a shower of debris, sparks and flames.

No one was hurt and they managed to step over and around the debris to resume their prudent progression. But it brought more than awakened wariness to the minds of the three Starfleet officers; would there truly be anyone still left alive in there?

They would soon know. Before them loomed a closed door beside which a wall panel said: Auxiliary Control Room.

Gould moved up and looked at the door over.

"Graalthrii, start the manual bypass on the door. Vincent and I will set the field emitters."

The door of course was secured for both security reasons as well as environmental ones. It would not open under such conditions without a command bypass. Phasering through it would take too long and it lacked power to open even if they could convince it to do so. They would literally have to cut off the security locks and handcrank it open, a process that would take about 5 minutes to complete and would leave a gap just large enough to get through. But it would be enough.

Gould and Vincent removed four two-foot long emitters from their carry packs and clamped each on either side of the door, then switched them on. The doorway was immediately covered with a shimmering blue environmental shield. If it worked properly, it would keep the auxiliary control room at its current level of atmosphere for as long as an hour.

"E-seal in place, Captain; system is secure," Vincent said after double checking each one.

Graalthrii grunted as the last lock fell open and started turning the crank manually, but after a few seconds, Gould replaced him.

"No offense, but we're in a hurry."

The Vulcan-Romulan hybrid applied his much greater strength to the task. As the doorway opened enough to allow access, he nodded for them to go in while he opened the doorway just a bit more.

"Go!, I'm right behind you."

Because it was his ship and because he was more worried about his captain and shipmates than he would have ever cared to admit openly, the Tellarite security officer of the Artemis didn't think twice and went in first through the low-intensity forcefield. With a grunt, he squeezed his ample girth between the two partly open panels and went inside.

At once, he saw within the eerily silent emergency bridge the tall bearded Vulcan seated at the forwardmost console, sitting straight with his head bowed and his eyes closed on his serene feature as if he was simply taking a nap on the job. The heat and radiation permeating the room from the anomaly outside made the skin-close electromagnetic aura of his PID shimmer dully and intermittently around him.

Then he spotted the two forms, also slightly shimmering under their own failing PIDs' emergency life support field, sprawled over the double station behind him; the awfully tall Andorian giantess shoulders and head were draped over the forward part of it, her long snowy hair falling in front of her face, while her left hand held the right one of the athletically built Andorian captain of the Artemis, his dark-hued, sweat-covered face flat on the helm controls.

Despite his earlier recommendation, Graalthrii had not brought spare suits for the survivors; almost right as he had said it, he had remembered the abnormal size of his own department chief. Tyvya would never have fitted into any standard one, so instead, he had grabbed battery packs from the reserve locker in the aeroshuttle. He could see that he had rightfully estimated that the PIDs' own power reserve would have been near depletion if not completely drained by the anomaly's effect by the time they would reach them. He went immediately to all three inert bodies, ejecting their dying power cells from their belt socket and slapping the new ones in place.

At least, they could now be kept alive and moved back to their waiting rescue craft even through outer space, as long as it did not take too long... And that, if they were still alive.

Syntron's breath was steady but so slow it was almost imperceptible. Tyvya's own breathing was dangerously shallow.

As for Kheren, it looked like he was not breathing at all.

Gould worked his way into the room with the rest and took everything in with one glance. He pointed at the two blue-skinned officers sprawled over the helm and tactical station.

"Can those two be moved safely?"

"They'll die if we don't!" shot back angrily the Tellarite as he lifted his comatose captain in a fireman's carry.

He was simply too small to even try with the well over two meters tall Andorian woman.

Gould already knew it was a pointless question anyway, that they would have to try no matter what. He had spoken out of training and habit, his mind already focusing on the third survivor.

"I'll see to him" he said as he made his way over to the Vulcan.

He looked over the seated, unconscious Vulcan, noting that he was not even perspiring despite the searing heat the built-in arm-tricorder of his suit registered.

"No obvious injuries; he's in a healing trance," said the captain of the Lotus as he checked Syntron's eyes. "I'm going to attempt to wake him."

He placed his gloved hand on Syntron's face. Gould wasn't as confident as he sounded; he'd only briefly studied telepathy on Vulcan as a young child and, to be honest, it was an attempt to impress another student, a girl. It ended badly with an embarrassing memory from his early childhood, the not yet fully stoic young girl giving him the worst insult a Vulcan could offer; a small but definitely derisive smile.

He pushed it aside. That was more than forty years ago and this was no time to dwell on such trivial matters.

"My mind to your mind.." he intoned.

He only needed to wake him up, to let him know it was time to leave; a simple brushing of minds, of awareness that would stir him up to full consciousness... although from Syntron's point of view, it would feel more like getting jabbed with a sharp stick.

*Climbing a path upward... could it be Mount Seleya? Intense heat... can barely breathe... darkness enveloping... flashes of light streaking by... climbing...reaching... yet getting nowhere... darkness becoming dominant... breathing more difficult... heat intensifying... can't find the alter... what am I searching for?*

*A presence... approaching from the darkness... sounds blurred... then... a jolting pressure... in my mind... thoughts forming into words... words into fragmented meaning...*

*But... there is a barrier... impenetrable... a labyrinth... sounds echoing all around... deep recesses of a dream-like state... spinning... lost... losing footing and equilibrium...*

In his mind, Gould could see the Vulcan trying to find his way back and reached out to the flailing Vulcan.

*A hand... out from the mist... reaching for mine... A voice... unfamiliar.. calling out from the vast emptiness...*

*Take the hand that is offered and together we shall find our way..*

In the make-believe reality of his unconscious self, the hand gripped his own. It pulled gently for him to follow.

*Distant thoughts spinning and encircling... hull breaches... emergency force-fields not responding... impulse power drained... spiraling downward... Now, a phantom hand grasping from nowhere... pulling... words echoing...*

*Together we shall find our way...*

*Who? find our way to where?*

Then, the hand in his mind pulled him up to a higher level of consciousness. But a barrier still existed, separating them.

*Cannot break through this barrier...*

A long tremor suddenly shook the entire deck and the whole ship seemed to tilt all the more towards the subspace fracture that loomed on the static-filled viewing screen near Gould and the still unconscious Syntron.

"Time's running out, Captain Gould!" bellowed Graalthrii through their comlink, already puffing under the unexpectedly high bodyweight of his inert commanding officer. "You will have to carry him, Sir... Maybe a good smack could wake him up? Or how about a kiss?"

"Not... yet..." the captain of the flagship managed to respond.

It seemed he just wasn't good enough to pull Syntron back to consciousness. Only then could he...

Suddenly, Syntron inhaled deeply, violently, as if he might be struggling the breath.

Gould stepped back slightly, moving his hand down to the Vulcan's shoulder, steadying him. After waiting a second longer, he brought his other hand back and savagely struck the Artemis first officer with an open palm. The blow was so fierce that it would have knocked him out of his seat if Gould hadn't held him down.

Two more blows followed in rapid succession, each as powerful as the last.

Suddenly, in the far away mind of Syntron, a force crashed through the barrier... and jolted the unconscious Vulcan again... gripping him until hot air rushed into his lungs. His eyes, sealed shut by sheer will, gradually found the capacity to begin to open. He then glimpsed a hand moving swiftly to slap his face and instinctively reached up and caught it before it struck him again.

As he began to regain control over his faculties, Syntron held tightly onto the arm that he had caught as he cleared his throat. Looking at the diffused figure standing before him he responded with a gravelly voice.

"That will be quite sufficient."

Then, gazing around, the first officer of the Artemis was indeed surprised to even be alive... unless this was yet another part of this dream-state he was caught in. This was all rather unclear. Still somewhat incoherent, he hazily inquired to the figure looming over him.

"What is our status?"

"Critical!" puffed out Graathrii as he was about to slip his ample girth sideways through the parted door of the emergency bridge, Kheren's body over his thick shoulders. "No time to discuss this with a comitee... Sir!"

As if to confirm those words, there was a new, deeper tremor and, somewhere in the bowels of the condemned starship, a low, ominous groan was heard in the overheated, rarefied atmosphere of the dimly lit room as it tilted even more sharply than before.

Knowing the the Vulcan would not appreciate politeness at this moment, Gould just nodded his acknowledgement, then immediately moved over to the science station.

"Vincent, you and Graathrii take Captain Kheren *carefully* back to the aeroshuttle. Syntron and I shall follow shortly with Tyvya as soon as we can secure the Artemis logs."

He then glanced back at the tall, bearded Vulcan.

"Are you functional enough to be of assistance in this endeavor? we need any mission logs on your current project as well the captains log."

Even as Gould spoke, he was accessing the ships logs, but logically assumed Syntron would be more suited to the job.

Syntron stood up rather unsteadily at first but soon regained his composure as he reflexively dusted himself off, despite the energy cover of his PID preventing any such accumulation.

"I will gather all of the recent logs and data," stated the first officer of the Artemis as he reached down on the floor and grasped his PADD that had been understandably knocked over and banged around a bit. He activated the device and determined that, despite its scratched up appearance, it was still functional. He walked back to his multitask station and began transferring the remaining data and information to the comprehensive data already stored within its contents.

He then looked over at the flagship captain.

"Sir, you may begin to prepare Tyvya for our departure."



Syntron finished gathering the remaining data and immediately clipped the PADD to his side. He then walked over to the towering Andorian giantess and, with a nodded signal, he and Gould carefully began lifting the bulky chief tactical and security officer from her post. They managed to clear her of the console and worked out a method to move her unconscious body steadily through the corridors and over the fallen debris throughout their pathway. It was an awkward endeavor as Syntron wore no magnetic boots to anchor him to the deckplates outside of the emergency bridge. He had to find purchase as best he could, even on the bulkheads as his free-floating body moved this way and that with each of their movements. Vulcan as he might be, he perspired and breathed heavily maneuvering thus through the dangerous environment as the minimal life-support of his PID strained against the one hundred meters of heated vacuum he had to go through. Eventually, they made their way to the aeroshuttle and they gingerly positioned Tyvya down into its limited aft bay where the EMH was frantically hovering over the comatose form of Captain Kheren.

After sparing a concerned glance at his comatose commanding officer, Syntron then looked up at Gould.

"I have one more errand to complete which will take me approximately three point forty-five minutes."

Without waiting for a reply, the Vulcan first officer took a handlight from the airlock locker and was back out into the corridor, traversing like a swimmer among the rubble. He found his way to a blocked jefferies tube and swiftly removed the debris covering it. After opening the hatch. There was clear passage. He strapped on an additional oxygen mask taken in a nearby tool locker and activated the gases as he climbed up three deck levels and forced the door open. There was not much remaining of deck 2. Using the light to lead the way, he maneuvered his way into his quarters, checking the time.

*One point seventy-nine minutes*, he mentally noted.

He searched among the fallen and damaged debris until he found the two buried cases he was looking for. He swiftly cleared the rubble off of them and strapped them both to his back. He headed back to the jefferies tube and descended swiftly back to deck 5. Exiting the hatchway, he ran on all four along the bulkheads and even the ceiling, dodging his way back into the aeroshuttle as he deposited the cases onto the floor.

"Ready to launch."

Graalthrii looked up from his station with a wide-eyed stare. The trembling of the dying starship Artemis was shaking them as well.

"You wish!" he exclaimed before turning towards Captain Gould. "The Artemis is being torn apart and twisted out of shape by the nearby subspace fractures; the locking port has been deformed by the hull stresses so much, we can't disengage the locking clamps!"

The agonizing groan of the Artemis reverberated throughout their own craft and, through the cockpit canopy, they stared at the tilting view of the raging fires of the anomaly, framing a space-time deformation gaping at them like an opening maw with jagged teeth of raw, brutal energy, closing in to swallow them all.

With little time to spare, Josh's mind went straight to a desperate plan.

"Sir, we can use our phasers to cut through the docking clamps. We've got our environmental suits, so we can easily survive the time that it would take to close the hatch after cutting free. We'll just need to hold on to avoid being sucked out by decompression."

"That's *blown* out," the Tellarite shot back with a shake of his head. "Mammalians..."

"Agreed," said the captain of the Lotus to the both of them and pulled off his phaser.

Without another word, both flagship officers, still fully suited, closed their helmets and moved into the airlock as the captain gave his instructions to his security chief.

"The shuttle's uni-docking port will work again us. We'll have to cut the control lines aboard the Artemis to release the outer clamps or we won't be able to re-secure the outer air lock."

Once back inside the Artemis, Gould and Vincent removed the maintenance panels around the docking clamp control systems.

"These lines here!" Gould said through their comlink as his gloved finger pointed them out. "Sever these three lines and it will release the receiving clamps into neutral pressure. Then we can manually disengage them from the airlock."

As Vincent went about phasing the connections, Gould did the same on the other end of the hatchway. As each connection gave way, a grating, groaning sound could be heard as the clamps lost pressure.

Then, just as they each were about halfway through, the ship again shook violently. The room started to bend in around them and the resulting pressure caused the remaining clamps to give way, causing the uni-dock to fold in like an accordion. Gould and Vincent were tossed about the room but the young Human managed to get a foot back on the ground and steadied both himself and the captain before starting to make a try back to the shuttle.

Gould stopped him.

"Too late! Inside!" he ordered as he pushed him out of the room and deeper into the twisted bowels of the dying starship.

"Moor! Break free! Do it now!" he yelled over the comm.

The aeroshuttle's engines flared and the Pirate's Pride grinded against the airlock for a second more before ripping free. Pieces of the uni-dock could be seen spinning away into space in its wake as it flew slowly away from the huge derelict.

"Damn it!" Moor yelled, "Graathrii, we need another place to set down!"

"What good would that do?" the Artemis officer snarled, grim-faced. "The docking port is scrap.."

Moor looked at his controls desperately.

"Well, we have to do something! You're an engineer and he's a Vulcan! one of you come up with a smart idea!"

"All Tellarites are *not* engineers!" roared Graalthrii. "I'm a *security* officer and I'm *not* cross-trained as a technician! Why do you think I am not with the other cross-trained crewmembers on the bridge module instead of *here*, in your glorified shuttlepod?"

Back on board the Artemis, Gould and Vincent had abandoned their mag boots and started pulling themselves down the hallway, half floating, half bouncing. The ship seemed intent on killing them as the hallway continued to collapse around them, following them up the hallway as it went.

"The whole section must be collapsing!" Gould managed to get out. "Head back to auxiliary control!"

Twice they were nearly cut off before they finally sailed into the room and the lower but definite gravity still in place inside brought them down to a light but firm footing. The room groaned and several panels popped out but the reinforced room still held under the terrible pressure on the ship's already weakened structural integrity.

"That was fun," Vincent said, breathing heavily. He didn't sound like he meant it. "Do you think the shuttle got out?"

Gould sat down at the engineering station, he too sounded winded.

"I think so, but it's out of our hands now."

Vincent looked around the dead, quiet control room and let out a sigh. Neither man said much.

There was no way out and they both knew it.

As Gould wondered what he could say to his chief of security, he looked over the engineering station out of habit.

*At least I'll go out manning something I love,* he thought.

Then, he noticed the impulse engines critical system alarm. The only thing holding them in place was on the verge of failure.

"Or maybe we can go out being useful one last time," he said outloud.

"Sir?" Vincent said as he joined his captain.

"I'm going to overload the impulse engines past critical and disengage the shutdown override." the Vulcanoid hybrid said as he worked the controls. "The first part is easy; it's barely holding together as it is."

Waning klaxons blared to life as the shutdown failsafe was overridden. The computer agreed.

"This procedure is not recommended."

Gould paid it no mind.

"If this works," he continued explaining, "it will cause a temporary destabilization in those local subspace fields intersecting so close to us and each other within normal space. That should give the shuttle enough time to break free..."

He looked at Vincent.

"It's the best we can hope for."

He said this apologetically. The computer then gave out it's last warning.

"System will reach critical in one minute, forty-three seconds."

Gould just sighed.

"No way back now; it can't be stopped."

There was however no such resignation on the aeroshuttle christened Pirate's Pride, flying like a worried hen over the doomed USS Artemis.

"There's nothing left to do, boy! We're out of options!" The annoyed Tellarite growled at Moor.

"I won't accept that! I'm not abandoning my captain and Vincent!"

The Bolian pilot continued piloting the shuttle around the Artemis, looking for any sign of... well, anything.

"Look, Blue-face; even if they survived, which is unlikely to say the least, we can't dock! And the transporter's useless! We'd have to be inside the Artemis to use it. We are out of options!"

The small porcine-looking officer crossed his arms impatiently. over his barreled chest. But the fierceness in Moor,s own eyes and voice did not relent.

"Oh, now that you have your people back, you've lost your nerve? well I.."

Then, the Lotus' helmsman's face went blank.

"Inside..." he mumbled.

Then, he gritted his teeth and hit the collision alarm.

Acting instinctively, Graathrii set himself down into the copilot seat. he tapped his chest out of habit to activate his personal inertial dampener; but like the rest of the evacuees from the Artemis, he was not wearing any. He looked out at through the cockpit canopy at the looming starship suddenly filling up their entire field of vision.

"What are you doing?"

He watched as Moor brought up the weapons system and armed the forward torpedoes.

"Taking your sound expert advice, engineer," retoted Moor and then he snalred; "Computer! batten down the hatches!"

The computer responded with an odd sounding male voice

"Aye, Captain Moor."

The Tellarite's own bellowing voice sounded even worse.

"I am *not* an *engineer*!"

Outside the Pirate's Pride, the aeroshuttle's ablative armor grew into place, coating the craft in the same replicated nanite armor the USS Lotus had.

The Pirate's Pride then swung around and faced the main cargobay's distorted door and Moor fired the micro torpedoes even as he opened up the impulse engines. The torpedoes struck, ripping through the warped, unprotected door. The hole that resorted was impressive... but not impressive enough.

"We can't fit through that!" Graathrii shouted, bracing himself as the shuttle raced at opening.

"Sometimes.. you just have to punch your way through it," Moor whispered, quoting Admiral Janeway from her early days as captain of the USS Voyager.

The ship slammed into the cargobay door, going about halfway through, then finally and abruptly jamming itself into place.

With deflector screens and inertial dampeners at full intensity, the jarring within the heavily armored ship was minimal. No systems where damaged and nobody was hurt. The Bolian at the helm looked at his shipboard status monitor as he spoke.

"See if you can raise them. I'll get us free."

With that, Moor disengaged the ablative armor. The voided space alone left by it's instant removal was just enough to free them. The entire craft floated mere centimeters from the torn-out bulkheads.

Fortunately for them, the transporter node was in the nose of the shuttle. If they could get a lock on the away team, they would be able to get them out.

Graalthrii literally rolled out of the copilot seat to stand behind Moor at the station he had previously occupied. He frantically ran his thick fingers over the controls, grumbled between his clenched teeth, punched the console with a snarl then jabbed a stout finger hard on the panel before he finally slapped the hard palm of his hand on the edge of the board.

"Ha! Got them!"

And then, a red light flickered under his short, wide, flat nose and his squinty eyes blinked twice before he growled some expletive in his own native tongue.

"And I got an impulse engine overload in progress! The Artemis is about to blow!"

With the scanned signals complete, Syntron swiftly moved over to activate the transporter.

After engaging the bioscan lock and boosting the signal, he moved the three sliding controls to immediately activate the site-to-site transport.

The shimmering effect of the transporter commenced.

Vincent had not expected to see the inside of the Pride when he opened his eyes after a long blink, so it took him a second to realize what had happened. After quickly accepting the fact that he may yet make it out of here alive, he grabbed on to the nearest wall to brace himself for the explosion that was to come.

Graalthrii looked at the two officers in their soot and grim-streaked spacesuits with a forced sheepish smile and a deep frown on his wrinkled, leathery face.

"Welcome back, Captain Gould... Mister Vincent... Now, can we go... *Please?*"

Beneath the composed veneer of his cool Vulcan demeanor, Syntron surreptitiously breathed a quiet sign of relief as he released his grasp on the transporter controls.

Gould, startled by the sudden deliverance, removed his helmet and looked around him, obviously disoriented.

"How did.. No, Moor! I set the.."

But the Bolian officer cut him off.

"Were on top of it, Sir... But you might want to hold on!"

And as he said so, his fingers flew over the helm controls. The shuttle backed out of the shattered baydoor and spun in place in one fluid motion, so fast in fact that the already taxed inertial dampeners couldn't keep up entirely and anyone not seated either stumbled or swayed in place for the turn.

Moor reengaged the armor as soon as they were clear of the starship's hull and set the impulse engines to full power. At first, the small craft sped away at breakneck speed from the doomed Artemis, but then, mere seconds later, the overall speed dropped quickly as the pull from one of the subspace fractures began to affect their small craft.

"When the Artemis' impulse drive will ignite, it should create a caustic wave that will temporary defuse the effect from the fracture.." Gould relayed to his helmsman while strapping himself in the copilot seat once more, still wearing his spacesuit.

"And blow us out of the area?" Moor finished and grinned. "Lets go surfing..."

Just then, on the now deserted auxiliary bridge of the wrecked ambassador class vessel, panels sparked and the already distorted walls buckled even further under the stress of the failing hull. Only the voice of the computer gave it any feeling of life as it gave out its final words to a crew that was no longer there to hear it.

"Critical systems failure in 10 seconds.. warning, critical systems failure in *kxzzt*... 8 seconds... 7... 6... 5... 4... 3... *kxzzt*... 1..."

The effect was impressive. The overloaded impulse engines shattered what was left of the once massive starship with a silent, blinding flash of bloated light and ripped the saucer section into three parts which very quickly became swallowed up by the nearest of the subspace fractures.

The starship Artemis was gone.

Four seconds later, the shockwave struck the Pirate's Pride.

The turbulence was incredible but the little craft held as Moor kept its nose ahead of the wave for another ten seconds before the shaking subsided.

"*That was not fun!*" growled Graalthrii, still gripping hard the edge of his seat.

Now free of immediate danger, the aeroshuttle was again able to fly within the altered anomaly. Where they were, most of the plasma reaction had subsided to mere dense pocket of inert gases left by the remaining trillithium emitters, the eerie golden-hued tranquil area surrounded by distant rings of raging fire and of the chaos of floating planetary debris that marked the edge of the Azimuth Horizon.

Gould let out an exhausted sigh.

"I'm not sure how you pulled it off, but thanks everyone."

Moor seemed quite pleased with himself.

"It was Graalthrii's idea, Sir... in a roundabout way at least," and patted the console. "With a lot of help from the Pirate's Pride of course."

"Before we get back to the Lotus, you're going to need to explain that.. but not right now," Gould said as he gave him a stern look and stood up. "Right now, I need to get out of this suit and check on our passengers. Come on, Vincent."

He moved towards the rear of the shuttle as he gave his next order.

"Set a course back to the Lotus and engage when ready."

No sooner than the words came out of his mouth than the ship was on its way.

"Aye, Captain," Moor said with a smile.

Syntron looked up from his station and reported in a typical matter-of-fact manner.

"All systems functional... no appreciable damage noted."

"Easy for you to say," shot back Graalthrii rubbing his behind. But regardless of his own bruises, he was glancing at the aft section of the shuttle. "But what about Lieutenant Tyvya and the Captain?"

After Vincent and Gould geared down, the captain of the flagship stopped outside the medical kiosk. Tyvya was awake but quite dazed and attempting from her wall-mounted bed on one side of the small room to watch the doctor work on her captain, but she was obviously exhausted from the prolonged heat exposure and stayed prone on the pallet

"Doctor?" Gould asked softly.

The EMH didn't look up from his work.

"I don't know yet, Captain." he answered as he checked his reading again. "I have complete medical files for Andorians, from some of the greatest physicians in the know galaxy, but Captain Kheren was genetically modified and, as such, difficult to adjust for. It would seem he was affected more severely than a normal Andorian would have been.. The best we can hope for is to try stabilize him until we get back to the Lotus... and fast."  
"If.. when we get him back to the Lotus.. will his chances improve?"

Gould said with an eye on Tyvya.

The doctor went silent for a second then glanced at his commanding officer with a somber look.

"We'll have to see."

Gould nodded in understanding and walked back up to the bridge.

"Tyvya is doing ok, she should be up and about in no time." he said to the others in the cockpit, smiling. "We should be hearing about Captain Kheren shortly, but I thought you deserved to hear some good news at least."

"Hay.. I think were looking at a bonified successful rescue mission," Moor said with a grin, then looked at Graalthrii. "Speaking of it, don't you owe me a life debt or something now? I could use a good engineer for this baby."

"Do you see antennae on my head or what?" half-laughed, half-growled Graalthrii. "I'm a Tellarite! I'm not bound and blinded by archaic and stupid concepts like honor! You saved me by saving *yourself*... and even that, because *I* was here to provide the brains to it you lacked! And speaking of honor, it was *your* Starfleet honor *and* duty to save me and all of us! Ha! life debt..."

The portly officer went aft, shaking his head with genuine, or pretty well faked, disbelief.

As he came to the medical kyosk, he grinned at Tyvya, his immediate superior, as she sat slowly on the wall-mounted bed where she had laid until revived by the EMH.

"You okay?"

"I just treated her for her radiation poisoning and the dermal regenerator took care of her burns and abrasions," answered the medical hologram as she only nodded, visibly still quite groggy. "The short term minimal life support of those... whatever they are that they were wearing, was just enough to prevent any irreparable damage. She's strong and her semi-osmotic circulatory system will make the shots I gave her work pretty quickly. She just needs time to recuperate."

His grin faded looking at the grim expression on the holographic doctor's face floating over his still unconscious captain.

"And why is the captain not up and dancing?" he asked pointedly. "He's strong as a Gorn."

Suddenly, the EMH took Graalthrii by the arm and led him to the very end of the small room, purposely behind where Tyvya sat as much as possible. Even then, his voice dropped to a whisper.

"Well that's exactly the problem, Lieutenant. Captain Kheren's mutated physiology made him much stronger than even the usually high Andorian norm because his metabolism his even more hyped up than usual with abnormally high levels of testosterone. This means that he does heal more quickly, yes...but also that systemic damage like heat and radiation trauma work faster and deeper within his cell structure..."

"Computer; connect universal translator to EMH program," grumbled the Tellarite, blinking uncomprehensively at the artificial doctor.

The EMH gave out a sigh that was not just one of annoyance.

"It means, Lieutenant, that, like someone with a severe allergy, the heat and radiation he was exposed to reached critical levels sooner for him than the others."

"He's *dying*!"

That was the voice of Tyvya from the other end of the room, trembling with both anguish and anger on the edge of her bed, her eyes burning towards them both.

The EMH let his own eyes rise to the ceiling.

"Those antennae certainly can't hear anything rearward... but Andorians do twist their heads around as much as anyone can..."

He went to the Andorian giantess as she stood, wobbling on her feet, her four oculars now straight at Kheren's unmoving form on the other side of the kyosk.

"Calm down, Lieutenant. This shuttle is pretty fast. When we'll get back to the Lotus..."

"He *will* be *dead*!" she cut him off angrily, rising to her full intimidating height to look down on him with blue eyes like steel flashing under the sun. "Look at him! He's grey all over... he's getting almost as white as an Aenar!"

"Lieutenant, there is no stasis pod in such a small craft and I've used all the medicines we have on board to repair the dermal damage, slow down the cellular decay and dull the pain as much as possible. The discoloration is due to his own body struggling to heal... but his immune system is too sensitive to that type of damage to fully compensate for so much suffered so quickly. I can keep him in an artificial coma to try to slow down that crazy hyped-up metabolism of his to prevent the damage from spreading too fast... But there's nothing more we can do for him right now..."

"Yes, there *is*!"

With a purposeful stride that even a level 10 forcefield would not have stopped, the towering woman went to the lying form of her captain. She bent over him, her eyes suddenly going misty and wet, her face drawn with deep lines of anguish and sadness as she brought it close to his while her long, thin fingers went deeply and softly into his thick white hair on each side of his head.

Quietly, the EMH came behind her, making obvious effort not to roll his eyes.

"Lieutenant, As romantic as it is, I doubt very much that a kiss will help him much."

"Because *you* are not *Andorian*, Doctor."

As soon as she finished speaking, Tyvya's brow touched his and her antennae lowered to slip between her fingers, deep into the snowy hair of Kheren, burying themselves into the top of his skull... where his own antennae had reflexively retracted in their own unique mutated manner when he fell unconscious.

Her eyes closed, she just laid there on top of him, unmoving, breathing deeply. For a moment, her breathing then seemed to become more difficult and she paled visibly, almost matching the greyness of Kheren's ailing skin. And then, slowly but noticeably, her breathing eased, colors came back to her face and hands. The worried lines on her face softened... and slowly, very slowly, a smile spread on her lips.



And slowly, very slowly, Kheren's breathing rose higher from his thick, muscular chest under her, until it matched her own, breath for breath. The taunt lines on his own face also smoothed out... and slowly but perceptibly, his skin started to return to a bluer color.

Eyes wide, the EMH had immediately brought up his medical tricorder over the two, staring alternatively at his readings and at them.

"Amazing! His metabolism has stabilized! Their autonomic and synaptic signals are matching one another's... somehow... fusing themselves from two distinct signals into one that is both and neither... Like you would find in... their progeny? I... I don't understand..."

"I do, Doctor," then said Graalthrii as he came up to him to also look at the embracing Andorians. "That is how Andorians kiss; by touching antennae. But this is more than just a kiss. They call it the *Shelthreth*... the Bonding. I think this is the first time any outsider ever witnessed it."

The holographic medical officer of the Lotus looked once more at his tricorder and then kept his eyes on them, obviously recording the whole scene through his own data storing matrix as he mumbled to himself.

"Fascinating! I have of course in my files the peculiar telepathic rapport established between Andorian mates, which goes much deeper and farther than even the Vulcan *Koonut Kalifi*... so much that, when one of the mates die, the three others will often die as well, even parsecs away... and quicker than *Pon Farr* would an isolated Vulcan male... That means psychosomatic sympathy is built and strengthened through psionic contact... But I had no *idea* it could go that deep and so completely..."

"They are a most passionate people," the Tellarite whispered with a grin. "That's what makes them so utterly crazy."

"Love conquers all, love cures all ills of the body, the heart and the soul... I know the proverbs, Lieutenant. But... I am a doctor, not a philosopher. I never saw... passion... as an effective cure... until now. She *is* saving him with a kiss!"

"You're not Andorian either. Your matrix is obviously based on limited Human parameters."

The EMH turned to the Tellarite with a visibly insulted expression.

"I'll have you know, Lieutenant, that I am programmed with the combined total medical knowledge of a hundred inhabited star systems and six thousand years of healing practices, from Human Voodoo and Tellarite mud cures to Deltan laying of hands and Vulcan healing trances. I am fully competent in the physiology of most sentient lifeforms..."

His voice then lost it's edge when he looked back at the two unmoving, embracing officers.

"But these Andorians... these Ghelnoids, half-mammalian, half-insectoid, they are so... *alien*... they make it look like even Vulcans come from New Jersey!"

Meanwhile, back in the cockpit, Syntron, the third survivor of the Artemis, worked industriously at the tactical console, attempting to establish communication with the flagship, but with no success. He retraced the process with a level 4 diagnostics and found there were no system errors. He finally turned to the commanding officer of the Lotus.

"Captain Gould, I am unable to establish communications with the Lotus. It could be a residual effect of the explosion from the overloaded impulse engines on our systems... or perhaps our proximity to the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. As we continue to move further away from this region, I will continue to work at resolving this situation."

Gould looked at the controls over his shoulder.

"Well, we expected some difficulty... keep on it."

He then sat back down in his chair and swiveled it to his right to look at his Bolian helmsman.

"Alright Mister Moor, let's hear it."

"Sir? oh! right.."

The bald, blue-skinned pilot checked the controls quickly then turned to face his commanding officer.

"Well, it's not that complicated, really. After the last refit, I went to pick up the aeroshuttle from the maintenance bay with a friend of mine, ensign Simmons... and we had been talking about a hollodeck novel called 'Pirates Sunset' where you take command of a Terran Spanish sloop called the 'Poisoned Blade' during the end of the 18th century in an earth sea sector called the Carribeans. It's mostly about running from a military force called the British Navy and how.."

The look on Gould face suggested he get on with it.

"Well, it's a great story, Captain. Especially from someone like me, born on a peaceful watery world where we did have a long maritime History but no such... high flying adventures."

"And the Pirate's Pride?" Gould said patiently.

"Oh, well... When I arrived to pick up the aeroshuttle, my friend said: "Nice looking ship you got there, Bobby" that's my Academy nickname by the way, Bobby, because of the way I bobbed in the water when I was the captain of the Academy swim team... Anyway, There was a Tellarite dockmaster there and he asked me what the ship's registry name was and I... kinda... ignored him long enough to finish what Simmons and I were talking about and said; "Aye, she's ah Pirate's Pride."

He did this with a bad English accent.

"Well, Tellarites aren't well known for their patience.." At this he glanced at Graathrii, "or their sense of humor; by the time I looked around, the dockmaster was gone."

He shrugged his round, smooth shoulders.

"I didn't find out until after I'd returned to the Lotus what had happened... the same way you did, Sir; I saw the lettering on the hatch."

Gould just sighed.

"Ok, but that was over a month ago, Moor. Why is it still called the Pirate's Pride?"

"Well... to be honest, Sir, I checked the shuttle mission log and since it had been commissioned, its been put into service zero time... I figured no one would even notice the name change, ever. Next time we were in port, I'd just get it fixed."

The Bolian then smiled slyly.

"And I rather like the name as well."

Gould gave him a quizzical look.

"It's never been on a mission? ever? but you said you had used it before."

Moor smirked.

"No, Sir, I said I was the only one with any experience piloting her... from the Lotus to spacedock, and back again."

Gould sat back in his chair.

"You know what? fine, keep it. Consider it a reward for above the call."

Moor smiled broadly.

"Thank you, Sir! I'm sure my surly engineer and I will take good care of her."

From the back cabin, they could all hear Graathrii snorting out.

*"I-am-not-an-engineer!"*

Moor just laughed.

"You do know I'm referring to the name, right? not the ship." he said with a skeptical eye.

Moor just looked away.

"As you say, Sir."

Syntron was still monitoring the science station. If this story meant anything to him at all, he didn't show it.

"Still no contact with the Lotus, Captain Gould. We should be well clear of any communication hazards by now."

Goulds smile faded.

"ETA to Lotus?"

"Twenty-seven minutes.. if it's where it's suppose to be, Sir." Moor said after checking his readings.

Gould just nodded. There was nothing to add really. Any number of problems might have occurred; Romulans, Klingons, superstructure, engine or communication failure, problems with the Azimuth Horizon itself.. the list was just too long. He didn't want to get bogged down in speculation.

"Keep an eye out for traffic, Mister Syntron. These are not friendly waters."

Moor practically giggled.

"It does get to you, doesn't it, Sir?"

twenty-five long, silent minutes later, Syntron located the Lotus.

It was adrift and running at minimal power, making its signature difficult to spot, especially this close to the raging inferno of the Azimuth Horizon towards which it was slowly drifting.

\* \* \*

With the additional help from the Aegis, small as it was, Jureth could see the massive Undine ship begin to move away from the blinding glare of the Azimuth horizon's fiery maelstrom. He suspected the Spectre wasn't answering and joining in because she was too busy with damage control to be of much help. This would have to do.

"Bridge to engineering."

"Lire here, Captain,"

"Mister Lire, give the impulse engines any extra power you can. Divert from weapons if necessary."

"Aye, Sir; engineering out."

Jureth rose from the command chair and walked down behind Shawn Hunter.

"Mister Hunter?"

"Impulse engine output rising, Sir, one hundred and five percent; one hundred and ten percent..."

With the additional power to the Alsea's impulse engines, the Bajoran could see on the viewer that the Undine vessel was nearly free.

"Just a little bit more," he said under his breath.

Down in the Alsea's engineering department, a power conduit went out with a sharp POP and a shower of sparks.

"Dammit!" Niomo said aloud. "You two," he yelled at two junior engineers, "bypass that conduit now!" and then he tapped his combadge.

"Engineering to Bridge; Captain, we just lost a power conduit on the impulse drive circuit. I hope your almost done with what you're doing up there because we're falling apart down here. Lire out."

The look on Oseno's face went from determination to concern.

"Mister Hunter?"

"Confirmed, Sir, impulse engine output falling. One hundred percent, ninety five percent..."

"Shouldn't they be free enough to have their momentum carry them the rest of the way, Sir?" Ensign Wynn suggested from the ops station.

"Maybe...Hunter?"

"It's possible, Sir, we've given them a heck of a pull. but with that crazy anomaly so close..."

"Cat," Jureth ordered; "disengage tractor beam and signal the Aegis to do the same. Helm, get us out of their way."

"Aye, Sir," the two officers replied in unison.

Jureth spoke aloud again.

"Undine vessel, this is Captain Oseno of the Federation Starship Alsea. You should be free of the Azimuth Horizon... and free to take your ship home, if you wish."

On the Aegis, the subspace message was heard by all as they looked at the greenish alien vessel now floating free in the cold peace of normal space; all but Doctor Nasaro-Myth who looked directly at the ship's chief counselor.

"Lyrya, how are the Undine reacting?"

"Confused, Doctor... They have a hard time grasping all at the same time both the concept and the fact of a perceived weaker enemy defeating them and of that same enemy helping them afterwards, despite that they had attacked them first. Such things are utterly new and bewildering to them."

He knew that her own, deeply imbedded racial code of honor would not normally allow her to probe another sentient mind without permission. But here, she didn't have to. Just lowering a bit her mental barriers would be enough to receive the powerful Undine telepathic emissions. And that is precisely what she had done.

"As long as they are not thinking about resuming their violence..."

"Not anymore, Sir. But I wouldn't call their thoughts anything resembling regret or gratitude. It's more like a mix of... curiosity, puzzlement... and resignation."

On the Alsea, Oseno Jureth looked at his friend at the tactical station.

"Cat, readouts? what are they doing?"

"Nothing yet, Sir, but I'm not detecting any plasma buildup that would indicate they're getting ready to fire again either."

"Keep our shields up. I don't want to appear aggressive, but I'm not stupid either."

"Engineering to Bridge."

The chief engineer's voice rang out over the otherwise quiet bridge and, from his sour tone, Jureth knew that this wasn't likely to be good news.

"Go ahead, Mister Lire."

"I just wanted to congratulate you, Captain. Your little escapade up there has damaged the impulse engines beyond my ability to repair them. We are limited to half impulse, Sir, until we get back to Starbase that is... And, honestly they might have to drydock us, again, for this one."

The Bajoran ignored the engineer's tone and his jab because he knew that he'd asked a lot of the entire crew, but especially engineering over the last several hours.

"Thank you for the update, Lieutenant Commander... Bridge out." Jureth calmly replied.

With a frustrated sigh, he looked again at the Undine ship hanging in space in front of them, wondering exactly what the aggressive aliens were thinking.

"Oseno to Aegis; Doctor Nasaro-Myth... do you have an idea of what the Undine are doing?"

It took a moment for the reply to come over the channel.

"Well... they're... thinking."

The Deltan knew he wasn't saying much by that statement so he elaborated after a short pause.

"It seems, Captain, that rescuing them after they attacked us is almost beyond their understanding. As far as Counselor Lyrya can tell, they first started to think that this was some kind of trick or trap to finish them up... until they realized that they were already as good as dead before we pulled them out of the fire... literally. On one side, their aggressiveness is definitely subdued by sheer puzzlement; but on the other, as to what they will do next... your guess is as good as mine."

"I hate guessing," Jureth replied, "but I hope they decide to leave town. we still have work to do."

The Bajoran sat down in the command chair of the Alsea, and resigned himself to the fact that all they could do was wait and see what action the Undine would take.

As she listened to the exchange from the bridge module of the Artemis, counselor Lyrya glanced at Elliago who nodded back to her and her soft, clear voice chimed in.

"Captain Oseno Jureth... most predators will simply move away from you if they realize that you are neither a prey about to flee or a challenger about to pounce. I suggest we all move away at a slow pace, but with full sensor and weapons lock on them, until we are all out of each other's weapons range... then come to a full stop, warp engines down. This way, they will know they can safely go away... but that we are keenly waiting for them to do so."

"Understood," Jureth replied and then addressed his crew. "Helm, all back, one half impulse, take us away from the Undine, but don't make any sudden movements. Tactical, phasers online, and load forward torpedo tubes. Maintain a lock on them until we are out of weapons range."

"Helm all back half-impulse," Shawn Hunter acknowledged.

"Weapons online, torpedoes loaded and locked on the enemy vessel. Sir" Steele replied in turn.

The Alsea slowly began to back away from the massive Undine warship as fast as her damaged impulse engines would allow her to. Jureth continued to watch the Undine vessel on the viewer as the distance between the two ships opened and, after several minutes, Lieutenant Steele finally informed Oseno that they were no longer in range of the Undine ship.

"We are out of weapons range, Sir, target lock lost."

Jureth nodded.

"Mister Hunter, all stop. Keep our shields up, Cat."

"Helm answering all stop, Sir." Hunter confirmed.

The Alsea hung in space and, again, awaited movement from their adversary, with her captain desperately hoping the Undine would take the opportunity to leave the area. The battle had cost them time, and the damage was starting to take its toll on the Alsea.

The whole maneuver was followed on the main viewer from the overcrowded autonomous bridge of the Artemis, with the monstrous Undine battleship hanging over them like the proverbial Sword of Damocles.

"They're moving at half-impulse out of weapons range but with sustained sensor lock on the Undine ship," purred tactical officer Mrriish, her voice reverting to her natural growl under the tension permeating the whole bridge.

"Follow her, Sheeneea," then ordered Elliago to the Andorian woman at the helm with shortened breath; " niiiice and slow. I don't think our unwanted visitors out there will see us much as a threat, small as we are... but let's just show them that we are all on the same page here."

With the same, slow, weary movement, the Aegis also backed off from the immediate vicinity of the Undine vessel until it stopped alongside the powerful Prometheus class warship.

There was a long moment of stillness that seemed to grip all of space around them. Then, there was a sharp cry of pain as Counselor Lyrya again doubled over and almost fell off the medical command chair, her usually rigid Andorian face now contorted in a mixture of pain and anguish terrible to behold.

"Lyrya!" again exclaimed Elliago turning the big swiveling command chair to place his soothing hands on her. "Are the Undine..."

Then, his own empathic hypersensitivity brought her deep pain right to him.

It was a pain beyond that of the mental or the physical, deeper than a suffering of the heart and soul. It was agny and anguish like felt by not one but many persons together, almost unbearable, one that even death would seem to be unable to erase from one's own being. It was not any mere telepathic assault; it was like the very feel of life seeping away from one's every fiber tensed to fight against it.

And it had nothing to do with the Undine.

On the overcrowded bridge, everyone was paralysed with indecision, unable to fathom what was going on.

All but Ensign Sheeneea, the Andorian woman at the helm.

"Everyone, stay where you are!"

She pushed away any who would try to come close to them and went herself to Elliago and Lyrya and forcibly separated them, pushing the Deltan roughly back into the command seat while taking care not to touch the Aenar herself.

"What... what is..."

"It's the *shelthreth*, Doctor!" Sheeneea answered him while making sure no one else would try to touch Lyrya trembling with obvious pain and anguish.

"The Andorian bonding? But... but the conselor's file says she's unbounded..."

"Yes, Doctor... she was... But it is happening, right now!"

Recovering his composure, the chief medical officer of the Artemis tapped the side of the medical chair, careful not to get again in direct contact with Lyrya as he took out from the side compartment a medical kit, from which he activated a medical tricorder to immediately monitor her. The bewilderment on his face matched his fascinated curiosity.

"What do you mean, it is happening now? I thought Andorian bonding required four partners to..."

"It does," answered Sheeneea, despite turning purple with obvious embarrassment having to speak about it. In normal circumstances, Andorians never discussed such matters with offworlders. But these were obviously anything but normal circumstances. And so she went on; "but Counselor Lyrya is no ordinary Andorian: she's Aenar. Her telepathic powers are formidable. If she has started bonding with another Andorian and that Andorian now is completing the bond, even interstellar distances will not matter. She will feel the connection, feel their presence, feel them living... and dying... and sharing it all with them."

Elliago's face and eyes showed plainly that, according to his tricorder, this was exactly what was happening.

She was dying.

\* \* \*

Syntron looked up from the console to report.

"Scanners are operational, Captain Gould. At this moment, there are no hostile vessels found in proximity within this region. I have located the Flagship. It is adrift just ahead of our current coordinates. However, even though the Lotus is registering only minimal energy levels, I am noting that our scanners are detecting the biosigns of the Lotus crew... in addition to the remaining members of what was the crew of the Artemis, according to the recorded combadge signals. They are all alive, Sir... but I would venture that, either something within the ship itself is preventing transmission or reception of communication signals... or they are incapacitated, somehow unable to respond."

"Well..." Gould mumbled as he thought it over. "At least, their at the rendez-vous point, that should mean they completed their mission. Fortunately, the Pirate's Pride has it's own docking port and should automatically cycle in place when we lock in. Mr. Moor, take us in."

"Aye, Sir."

The Bolian maneuvered the shuttle underneath the saucer section. It was harder than Moor thought it would be since the ship was adrift and they had no docking beam to follow or tractor beam to reel them in. This made the hook up take much longer, making some of the crew irritable from the wait.

"Take you time, Moor, I doubt more than a handful of shuttle pilots have tried this maneuver," Gould said reassuringly.

Moor swallowed and thanked him for his patience.

"Lucky for us you're a pilot, not an engineer..." commented Graalthrii with a sly grin. "You *are* a pilot now, aren't you?"

Several minutes later the ship locked into place and everyone started scrambling.

"Vincent, Graathrii and Moor, you're with me. Watch for targets but be mindful of friendlies, we'll head to the bridge. Syntron and Tyvva, secure Captain Kheren for transport to sickbay. but for now hold the landing bay. we might have to fall back to the shuttle."

He set his phaser to heavy stun as he talked.

"Keep in mind we had at least two Undine's onboard that might be free now, so don't completely trust anyone and do not split up."

Syntron didn't had time to do anything more than walk aft before he saw Tyvva bodily lift the inert form of Kheren against her own towering frame, their antennae still intertwined and swaying softly. Then, in a slow, trance-like manner, she turned with him in her arms to walk out of the aeroshuttle with the EMH opening the way, thanks to the holographic grid spread out throughout the Lotus as was now the standard on all Starfleet vessels.

"I'm sorry, Captain," the holographic doctor then said, " but I must exercise my medical authority here. Don't ask me how... yet... but this... bonding between them is fusing their metabolisms. We must bring Captain Kheren to sickbay at once to treat him fully if we can, or put him in stasis if we can't, before we find ourselves with *two* Andorians dying here."



And so saying, he guided the giantess to the nearest turbolift with a weary eye and a beeping medical tricorder in hand. But, as soon as his arm passed outside the shuttle, his tricorder dropped noisily to the ground as his arm disappeared, stopping him short with a surprised look on his face. He drew his arm back and it reappeared.

"You forgot, Doctor; you were technically relieved of duty. The ship's computer no longer recognizes you."

Gould then went over to a comm panel beside the hatch.

"Command functions are still online. Whatever's happening, the ship's still under our control."

He typed in a set of commands then spoke to the panel.

"Computer, reinstate clearance for the emergency medical holographic program."

"Clearance code with voice pattern recognition required."

He cleared his throat.

"Gould, 777, Alpha, 79."

"Code accepted; reinstating program."

"OK, Doctor, you're clear... but, for the record, you do *not* have authority to countermand my orders in this sort of situation. Try that again and I'll have you transferred to a garbage scowl. Next time, you may *suggest* a course of action. Now get them to sickbay."

It was fairly obvious the doctor managed to annoy him.

"Fine," sighed the EMH with definite annoyance in his own voice that matched the captain's; "next time, we'll let them die while you drag me before a court martial to debate Starfleet rules regarding medical precedence in the chain of command."

He kept his stare on Gould as he started for the turbolift.

"Doctor, If I didn't agree with you I never would have let you back on the ship." But he was starting to feel foolish about all this, arguing with a hologram in front of the men.

"Well... you're the captain... Captain," finally admitted the artificial medical officer and, with a fleeting smile, nodded to him before going into the turbolift, guiding in the zombie-like Tyvya and the comatose Kheren.

Gould looked at each of the faces around him, then motioned for Vincent to take the lead.

As they moved through the halls crew members could be seen strewn about the deck, as if they simply dropped on the spot, Vincent recognized it right away from security training classes.

"Anesthizine, Captain." He said after checking one of the downed crew. "They should be fine when it will wear off; no long term effects."

Nodding, Gould motioned the team to keep moving. Shortly after, they reached the bridge to find it in the same state; everyone was unconscious at their posts or nearby them.

"Moor, Vincent, to your stations; let's get the ship back up and running. I don't see Sainthill in here."

He moved to the captain's ready room.

He and Graathrii approached the door cautiously and Gould opened it. They could see Sainthill laying face first across the desk. Graathrii moved in first, checking for any hidden intruders while Gould backed him up, but the room was otherwise empty.

Once he checked that his chief of science was merely unconscious like the others, he tapped his combadge.

"Gould to EMH; what's your status? did you arrive safely and in time at sickbay?"

He noticed that his personal viewer had a message waiting for him.

From Commander Edward Tomah.

"Sickbay here, Captain; my... patients just settled down again and I am monitoring their status as we speak... "

There was a short pause before the voice of the EMH was heard again, somewhat distant, as if he was talking to himself rather than reporting to the ship's commanding officer.

"Fascinating... According to the xenological database, Andorian bonding requires four mates, one of each of the four Andorian genders, a unique reproduction mechanism unknown anywhere else in all of known space but on Andoria. But... here, Captain Kheren already provides the two male elements all by himself due to his genetic mutation... Lieutenant Tyvya registers as a Shen, the fertile female part of the bond... but... they would still need the fourth and last, a gestative female member, to complete the bond... Yet, they *are* bonding..."

Another moment of silence went by.

"Captain... please check on ship sensors; according to my readings, there is a strong neurogenic field in contact with them. Not the one generated by the bonding process; something coming from elsewhere... from *outside* the ship!"

Graalthrii nodded to get approbation from Captain Gould and went to the science station to look at the sensor readout.

"Confirmed; neurogenic emission coming from... Hey, these are the same coordinates as those given by the USS Alsea's distress call! Where the Aegis, the Artemis bridge module, was sent to answer it!"

On the intraship channel, his voice then regained all it's usual firmness as he now fully and clearly addressed the flagship captain.

"Captain... it is... over."

An ominous silence followed for what seemed to be a second of eternity before the EMH reported:

"Lieutenant Tyvya has... disengaged herself and is regaining full awareness. Captain Kheren's vital signs... are still weak but fully stabilized and rapidly recovering. I should be able to revive him safely in a few minutes, once I complete my examination."

Listening to the message voiced from Sickbay regarding the condition of the Andorian captain and his security chief, the brow of the Vulcan science officer involuntarily raised angularly as he followed the entire phenomenon with keen interest. One word came instantly to his lips.

"*Fascinating.*"

\* \* \*

In the command chair of the Artemis bridge, the only thing left of the once Stalwarth Guardian of the Federation, life and death decisions had been taken countless times. Now the one sitting in that chair, Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth knew it was his turn to make one.

And fast.

Swiftly, he took a capsule of cordrazine from the medkit and fixed it to a hypospray, then added a long, rigid needle to the nozzle; a hypospray would not work through the semi-chitinous skin of an Andorian. But, before he could inject the potent life-saving medicine into the trembling Aenar, Sheeneea stopped him with a firm hand. A moment he struggled reflexively to free himself, but Andorian women were just as strong as the male of the species; which meant that it would have taken a Vulcan's strength to break that grip.

With a very human-like shake of her head, she made him understand that he could not and should not interfere.

But then, almost as suddenly as the pain had come, a deep sigh escaped the pale lips of the white-skinned, blind Andorian woman. Her face returned to her familiar smooth, rigid mask of serenity; even more than that, it seemed to faintly glow with something that went beyond relief, almost rapture. Her flattened antennae slowly rose to wave softly as her white pupilless eyes closed, no longer crying.

There was a long moment of silence before Lyrya slowly rose herself to a straighter posture in her chair to turn her blind stare towards Doctor Nasaro-Myth with a pale but easy smile on her wet lips.

"It is... over. All is well, Doctor."

Taking a moment to examine her nevertheless with his tricorder, then with his own purple eyes, he reflexively smiled back at her.

"And... If I may ask... who is the happy bride... and groom... I mean grooms?"

Her smile became as bewildering as her unlooking eyes.

"Wouldn't you like to know..."

As all this was going on, stillness had gripped the entire bridge of the USS Alsea. Watching the Undine ship on the viewer as she hung in space while "Boothby" presumably was trying to figure out just what the hell was going on, Oseno Jureth suddenly remembered that the Spectre was still out there, and that they hadn't responded to the rescue mission of the Undine ship.

"Cat, status on the Spectre," He demanded.

"Adrift," Steele said grimly, "and she's drifting toward the Horizon. I'm detecting almost a total loss of power. Unless they start moving under impulse power and soon, she'll be pulled into the anomaly."

On the silent birdge of the drifting Akira class vessel, the acrid taste of the burnt tactical console brought Rogers back to consciousness and to the reality of battle. Undine weapons fire had smashed through Spectre's shields and cut into her hull on decks 4 through 9, destroying EPS conduits and interrupting power to the weapons arrays and shields systems. Feedback had exploded within the tactical, helm and science consoles, knocking their occupants unconscious. Captain Summers sat slumped in his seat beside Rogers, apparently knocked out by the same explosion behind them as David must have been. Perhaps Rogers' Romulan physiology had brought him around sooner... or maybe the recorded telepathic presence of the Undine had affected his half-betazoid commanding officer more deeply... Whatever the reason, he was the only one stirring on the entire command center of the Spectre.

David spoke to the ship.

"Status?"

Quicklly checking Summers' vitals David found him alive and apparently unhurt , just unconcious, as the computer responded to his question.

"Weapons systems offline. Shields offline. Engines offline. Hull breaches on forward decks 4, 5 6 7 8 and 9. Emergency forcefields are in effect. Hull breach contained."

The first officer of the USS Spectre stood, fighting a passing wave of dizzyness and a ringing in his ears. Looking around the bridge further, he saw the helm and comm consoles sparking and emitting the same acrid smoke that had roused him. Brodt lay slumped on the deck beside the helm chair. Reaching him quickly, David also checked his vitals while calling aloud for assistance.

"Medical teams to the bridge."

All the while, the impersonal voice of the Spectre's computer droned on about the ships status.

"Transporters offline. Communications offline. Impulse power offline. Warp core offline. Life support ... minimal."

Making his way through the bridge crew, David found them all alive and unconcious. Standing at last at the tactical console, he tried to get it working, tearing off panels and replacing many burnt out isolinear chips as quickly as he could from their maintenance panels on their side. Soon, the main viewer came online in a burst of hazy static and David could make out the shapes of the Alsea and something he recognized with a start as the detached bridge of a starship, flying like a large shuttlecraft beside the Prometheus class warship; a bridge module the computer identified as belonging to Starfleet vessel NCC-64121 USS Artemis.

Even more amazing, both were finishing towing the massive Undine shipaway from the blazing fires of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, filling up the screen like a sea of fire.

*What the hell?* Rogers thought perplexedly.

Surmising there must be a reason for the action and noticing that there was no visible weapons fire occuring, David turned his attention back to the Spectre, adrift and gradually being herself pulled toward the pulsing behemoth of the deadly anomaly. Jumping over tactical and landing with a roll in front of the inert form of Captain Summers, David rushed to the helm seat and frantically tried to bypass the destroyed circuitry within it, hoping to get some maneuverability out of the thrusters. Anything to slow the inexorable pull toward the whirling fire storm merely minutes away. The ever calm voice of the computer replied with stoic, neutral calm.

"Thruster power at two percent and rising."

Regardless of their effect, Rogers punched the reverse icon and fed all available power to the reverse thrusters. Making sure the drain was negligible at two percent full reverse, David got up to run to the turbolift and, hoping it worked, instructed it to main engineering. The ship was merely slowed, buying some time to get more power, which David intended to accomplish, with or without aid, in main engineering.

With a jerk and then surge, the doors closed and the lift started toward main engineering.

Aboard the Alsea, everyone watched as the disc-shaped Spectre fired weakly her thrusters to try wrestling herself free from the anomaly. But it was her own mass that was providing the gravitational effect sending her towards the devouring flames; it would take much more than that to avoid being swallowed by the furious cosmic inferno.

Jureth cursed in Bajoran under his breath before reaching out to the Aegis.

"Aegis, this is Alsea. Doctor, we have a problem. The Spectre is adrift toward the Horizon. Can you give me any idea on what the Undine are going to do? Will moving to assist the Spectre upset them?"

Elliago listened to the captain of the Alsea with a frown, getting confirmation of the Spectre's status from nods coming from both Mrriish at tactical and the Baoule twins at their respective stations. His own gaze went with his words to the recovering Aenar at his left.

"Counselor, I know you've been through Hell just now..."

Lyrya just smiled at him and nodded. For a moment, her eyes squinted in barely restrained pain but quickly she relaxed and answered the doctor.

"They're still confused... But, if I use some basic psychology here, I would suggest that, realizing that we treated them as we treat our very own should help them finally understand and accept the situation... at least enough to move away peacefully back to their own universe. They might be fearful to the point of savagery and arrogance by nature... but they are sentient, intelligent beings after all."

Nasaro-Myth's voice then rose with his eyes to address the ship to ship comm channel.

"You got that, Alsea? Preaching by example..."

"Understood Aegis, Alsea out."

Jureth thought for a moment and then issued similar orders to what he had just moments before

"Mister Hunter, close on the Spectre, maximum possible impulse power. Cut as soon as you're close enough for the tractor beam, get her under tow."

"Aye, Sir," both officers replied as one.

The Alsea moved from her position and closed on the adrift Akira class ship with all the speed her damaged engines could muster. As they did, Jureth stood from the command chair.

"Mister Wynn, let's try to raise them."

"Channel open, Sir."

"Spectre this is Alsea, Captain Oseno calling; do you copy?"

"No response, Sir. It's possible their subspace array is damaged."

Jureth nodded and then tapped his combadge.

"Oseno to T'lana,"

"T'lana here, Sir."

"Meet me in transporter 1 in five; we're going aboard the Spectre."

"Aye Sir, T'lana out."

Jureth then called down to engineering.

"Oseno to Engineering. I know you're busy, Mister Lire, but I need two of your best to meet me in transporter room 1. The Spectre needs our help."

"Understood Sir; they'll be there."

Sickbay was next on the list.

"Oseno to Sickbay. I need two medical personnel to transporter room 1 immediately."

As the chief medical officer acknowledged, Cat Steele cleared her throat and Jureth turned toward her.

"Sir, you're not going anywhere. You know the regulations as well as I do and you're the Captain now."

Jureth smiled and turned toward the helm.

"Are we in position, Mister Hunter?"

"Yes Sir, coming up on the Spectre now."

"Engage tractor beam."

"Tractor engaged... We've got them, Sir."

"Mister Hunter, all back, half impulse."

"All back one half, aye Sir."

As the Alsea began to pull the Spectre away from the Azimuth Horizon Jureth turned toward the turbolift.

"You have the bridge, Lieutenant Steele" he called over his shoulder as the doors closed.

On the main viewer of the Aegis, what remained of the company and crew of the starship Artemis watched as the mighty Federation warship towed the sleek modular cruiser away from the grasp of the burning anomaly. A cheer went up as they saw the successful rescue attempt underway while the saved Undine vessel still maintained its position some distance away, undoubtedly watching the whole scene as an echo of their own fate a moment ago.

"Advise the Spectre and the Alsea that we have three dozen cross-trained technicians and medics ready to be sent over and assist them," ordered with a smile the Deltan in the center seat.

The feeling of relief was short-lived however, as the black-furred Caitian woman at tactical suddenly growled.

"What is it, Mrrriish?" asked Elliago with genuine concern suddenly wrinkling his handsome face.

"And what about the Arrtemis? What about Misterr Synttrron and the Captain? We left them to rroast in therre!"

"It was Lyrva whose soft, crystalline voice eased the dread that was now shadowing every face on the packed bridge.

"They're out of danger now."

"You surre? How can you tell?"

"Tyvva is with him... I mean, with them."

In a flash, all the people that had been on the bridge in the last minutes understood how she knew... and what she meant. Especially Elliago Nasaro-Myth, who raised his eyes to the heavens then shut them with a shake of his bald head.

"Oh boy..."

## **CHAPTER EIGHT : FIREWALL**

**Captain's Log:**

**Stardate: 87170.9**

**The last couple of hours were spent reviving the crew and settling in the crew of the USS Artemis for the trip back to starbase 10. After a careful check of the ship's systems and key equipment areas, no sabotage from the departing Undine infiltrators could be discovered. With the exception of a single missing warp-capable shuttle, everything is as it should be. The loss of the USS Artemis will be a blow for Lotus fleet but she served as a key example of the dedication and resolve of her captain and crew and her sacrifice will not be one made in vain. It is also with a high heart that I add that there was no loss in crew personnel due to its destruction; all hands are safe and accounted for, thanks to their commanding officer's foresight and bridge crew efficiency.**

Gould sat back in his ready room chair and took a breath and rubbed his forehead before he continued with his log entry.

**Tomah's escape came as nothing of a surprise but it was a risk we had to take in order to retrieve captain Kheren and all relevant data on his 'experiment'; although I had hoped he could be held long enough for me to return to the ship. Any responsibility for his escape, I claim for myself. The crew acted by the numbers. My orders to observe Tomah in order to track down his superiors was optimistic, to say the least, but I find myself wondering at many of the orders I have been given of late..."**

He shook his head.



"Computer, hold recording and strike that last remark."

"Last recorded sentence deleted," the impassive voice of the ship's computer confirmed.

The Vulcanoid commanding officer of the Lotus Fleet flagship sighed with a dry smile as he mumbled to himself.

"..but I'm sure Starfleet intelligence had it's reasons."

Then, louder, he ordered:

"Computer, resume log entry."

"Recording."

**Tomah had his escape well planed out in advance, using, of all things one of Kheren's old security counter insurgency programs that he was supposed to have deleted, along with Kheren's access from the time that he had served as chief of security on board the Lotus. Instead, he modified and used it to distribute the Anesthizine without so much as an alarm going off as well as cut power to the brig forcefields. The ex-chief of security had made many such programs and many were truly inspired, but most outside standard code, something he is well known for; this was one such program...**

Gould made a mental note to continue using it if he could.

**Security department reports after Lieutenant Vincent's thorough investigation that Tomah managed to trick one of his guards into setting off the program by asking him to deliver a data storage device to Science chief and acting ship commanding officer Sainthill, knowing full well the man would turn in the information to his superior. Accessing the module triggered the program, taking out most of the crew before anyone knew what was happening. He then freed his accomplice and they both stole a shuttle to reach the coordinates where were the Alsea, the Spectre and the Aegis, the Artemis detached bridge module... and a waiting Undine battleship. He signaled the Artemis's command module and told them that a we would be running silent due to the detection of a Klingon Dreadnought in the area and to stand by until further notice. Then he used the anomaly's sensor interference to get to the Undine ship, which then warped out and presumably back to Fluidic Space. The shuttle itself would be found later still adrift.**

**With that, our containment operation has been successfully completed and we will resume course back to headquarters for further orders and much needed rest and repair.**

Gould got up and closed his log, returning back to the bridge.

""ETA to Starbase 10, Mister Moor?" he asked while standing behind the Bolian pilot busy at his forward console.

"About an hour at maximum warp, Sir, barring Undine, Romulans, Klingons and the occasional act of God, of course," he answered with a grin.

"No promises," the captain said but more to himself. "I'll be down in sickbay, I'd like to speak with Captain Kheren, if at all possible, before we arrive.. Keep a weathered eye, helmsman."

Flashing an even bigger smile and going into a bad roguish, seafaring Terran accent, Moor responded gingerly without looking at him.

"Aye aye, Captain Sir!"

As the Lotus moved away from the storm outside, another one was raging inside, within the confines of sickbay.

"DO YOU *REALIZE* WHAT YOU HAVE *DONE*?"

It was an astonishing, if not frightening thing to behold; Captain Kheren was up beside a biobed, propping himself up with it as his silver eyes shot lightning bolts towards the giantess Tyvya standing tall in front of him, his voice growling in an almost animal-like low rumble and yet with the bellowing power of a thunderstorm. it was as if he was about to jump at her throat like a savage predator, only held in check by some remnant of self-awareness, obvious confusion and disbelief and definite weakness and dizziness.

Doctor Jolie Bindo herself was beside him, not daring standing between them, wincing slightly as her telepathic senses were overwhelmed by the sheer fury pouring out like lava from the Andorian captain.

"She saved your Life, Captain..."

"By forfeiting her *own*!" he cut the Betazoid doctor's attempt to mollify him.

"I have chosen freely," Tyvya then said with unerving calm.

But she said it in Graalek, the Andorian language, too low for the universal translator to pick it up. Only Kheren heard and understood... and he paled visibly, as those were the final words sealing solemnly and irrevocably what she had done.

Kheren almost fell back on the bed, reeling, his callused hand going to his sweating, scarred brow.

"Captain Kheren," then said Bindo with all the official attitude she could muster, "this is my sickbay; here I am in command. I will not tolerate further outbursts like this, even less any threat..."

The dark-skinned Andorian looked at her with blinking eyes. Jolie didn't need any Betazoid sensibility to know that he was repressing tears.

"You... you do *not* understand. I am *not* threatening her... I am *pitying* her."

It was now Tyvya's turn to shout in anger.

"How *dare* you! I *made* the choice! *We* made the choice! *All* of us! Even *you*! The bonding could *not* have been made without *your* consent, *even* in a coma! I *know* who you are, *what* you are and what it means for *us*, for *all* of us... and so does *she*! "

Kheren was now silent, eyes closed and shaking his head, his antennae waving weakly in every direction.

Doctor Bindo already had some privileged experience with Andorians, especially regarding their unique mating physiology. A year ago, she had even helped successfully in a difficult Andorian delivery back on Starbase 10, something very few offworlders had ever done or even witnessed before. And so, she understood all that was implied behind those words.

She also knew the source of Kheren's anger... and despair.

As a genetic mutant, the product of secret, illegal genetic engineering fusing both male genders of his species, he was called an "abomination" by his own people, much more feared and despised than the ancient Augments of the horrible Eugenic Wars on Earth ever were. All his life, he had been rejected and ostracized because of his very nature. And so, under the rigid, millenia-bound traditions of Andoria, any mate of his would be so damned as well, as accomplices in this terrible crime, if not as avowed perverts and declared revolutionaries trying to destroy all that had been the defining nature of the Andorian people.

It was a terrible burden to bear, one that he had chosen to bear alone, that he could and had bared alone.

But not anymore.

"Lieutenant... I know from his medical file that the captain is... rather unique. I know Andorians require four mates; the captain by himself fills up the two male parts of the quad; you obviously are the fecund Shen from the female part... but, who is the child-bearing Zhen?"

"Lyrya... my ship's chief counselor."

Kheren's voice was so low, it was barely audible. It was filled with regret, sadness, confusion,.. but at the same time, full of some definite resignation and something much deeper, like... a new and bewildering sense of fulfillment, completeness, of belonging long sought after.

It took a moment for Bindo to recall the name and the officer. But it was hard to forget individuals as medically distinctive as captain Kheren or his ship counselor.

*An Aenar... Now that will prove very, very interesting in the times to come...* she thought not without some slight amusement along with the wonderment it brought to her mind.

Kheren was now again looking up at the towering Tyvya beside him.

"I would never have damned anyone, especially you, or her, like this... I could never have done this to you..."

His voice was now soft, so soft it felt like a gentle snow falling in a clear night. Tyvya's own voice became like a gentle breeze blowing softly over a snowy landscape sparkling under moonlight.

"I know... We know... That's why we *chose* to do it... for *you*... for *us*."

He sighed heavily.

"Your lives on Andoria will be..."

"Over," she cut him gently, taking his hard, darker hands in hers. "We are Starfleet officers now...and together... for ever."

They were still touching hands and looking at each other when Captain Gould entered sickbay.

\* \* \*

Time seemed to freeze for eternity within the cramped confines of the bridge module of the once starship Artemis. In the old twenty-third century-style command chair, Chief Medical Officer Doctor Elliago nasaro-Myth looked without seeing it at the still lifeless Undine battleship bathing in the orange and golden hues of the Azimuth Horizon. He was suddenly brought back from his thoughts by the purring voice of tactical officer Mrrriish.

"Doctorr... we have a ship coming out of warrp 1 million kilometrerrr starrboardd, bearring 270 marrk 175, full impulse. It's a Federration shuttlecraft, class XI. Trransponderr signal identifies it as from the USS Lotus ."

"I read two lifesigns aboard," added Valencia Irsos from her sensor readout. "Humans, one male, one female. There are combadges signals identifying them as Commander Edward Tomah, ship executive officer, and Petty officer Janine Olsen, both of the USS Lotus."

"Now what are they doing here?" wondered the Deltan like everyone else. "open channel, please."

"Channel open," confirmed Lyrya, still groggy a bit but, with her mental shields fully raised, she was completely spared the invasive thoughts of the nearby Undine while she recovered from her bonding. And with her deeply inbred racial code of honor against intrusive menta contact, she did not try to scan the newcomers's mind to answer the Doctor,s question, especially not when such information could be obtained by more conventional means.

"USS Lotus shuttlecraft; Commander Tomah, this is Doctor Elliago nasaro-Myth in temporary command of the Aegis. Do you copy?"

"There was a long moment of silence but, before the Deltan could repeat his query, a male voice was heard through the speakers.

"Ah, this is Commander Tomah. Glad to see you're safe, Doctor. The rest of your crew has been taken care of by the Lotus. You might want to, ah, go and join them. Sending you the flagship's coordinates."

Everyone on the bridge was holding his breath.

"The captain and first officer?"

"Ah, Captain Gould himself has gone to retrieve them. They should be ok too by now."

There was an audible collective sigh of relief accross the Aegis.

"And may I ask why you are here, Commander? In a shuttlecraft?"

"Ah, we,re here to negotiate with the Undine, Doctor. Both officer Olsen and I are, ah, most experienced with the natives of Fluidic Space. We might succeed in convincing them to return to their own universe... of their own free will."

From the double console before the command chair, the caitian woman turned lifted her black-furred head from her monitor readout.

"They are heading straight for the Undine ship, Doctor. They will meet with them from between their hull and the anomaly."

Elliago nodded but not without a slight frown. Something was a bit odd in this whole situation but he could not say what. The amazingly convenient timing of the shuttle's presence perhaps, or the still unexplained silent immobility of the Undine warship after all that frantic exchange of fire and harrowing salvage effort from the anomaly's grasp... as if they had been waiting for them all this time. But there had been no transmission at all from them and none outside their own to them... And no one had reported the Undine,s presence to headquarters yet, as much as he knew... So, how could they be here, now?

"That would be most impressive, Commander, " he said noncommittally after a short pause. "Do you require any assistance? We have fully trained and experienced people here that could..."

"Ah, negative, Doctor. We are all good here. Please standby for further contact. Shuttlecraft out."

The deltan was left with his mouth halfway open and more questions caught in his throat as he watched the tiny spacecraft disappear before the blinding glare of the Azimuth Horizon. He looked down at Mrriish and then sideways at Irksos.

"They're right in front of the Horizon, Doctor. Sensors are out; but their trajectory was still towards the Undine ship," finally confirmed Irksos apologetically.

They waited several minutes in silence, until, suddenly, lights flared up from the massive alien warship.

"They're powering up engines!" reported Mrriish.

"Any contact from the shuttle?"

"None, Doctor," answered Lyrya. "They do not answer hails either."

Then, on the viewing screen, the Undine vessel suddenly moved at increasing speed then warped out to disappear in a brilliant and brief flash of light.

"Doctor?" then said Irksos. "Sensors are picking up a faint signal... I think... It's the shuttlecraft."

"Move closer and try to hail them!" ordered Elliago with mounting dread in his voice.

After a moment and careful trajectory realignment by Sheeneea at the helm, they finally could make out the sleek auxiliary craft from the flagship. It was floating without any lights on, slowly starting to tumble forward like a sleeping fish in a calm sea.

"It's completely powered down. I read no lifesigns aboard," reported the assistant chief science officer.

"Are they..."

"No, Doctor; the shuttle is empty."

"They were kidnapped!" exclaimed Mrriish with a growl.

"I don't think so," said Norbert Baoule from the auxiliary station. "There is no indication of weapon's fire, disturbance or organic residue from wounds or struggle. No alien transporter signal either; but the shuttle's own transporter was activated, just before automatic shutdown of all systems was implemented. I tried to access shipboard logs but they have been wiped clean before transport was effected. And the life support had been configured on a very curious setting..."

Visibly baffled by this turn of events, Doctor Nasaro-Myth took a moment to digest the news then sighed with perceptible frustration.

"Take it in tow and let's move back towards the Alsea and the Spectre. Now that the threat has been removed from the vicinity, we'll take care of our wounded first and then we'll try to figure out what this was all about."

As the officers on the detached bridge of the Artemis went to their work as ordered, Elliago sat further in the overlarge command chair with a mumble for himself alone.

"Somehow, I don't think we'll like the answer all that much."

With his away team gathered in the Alsea's number 1 transporter room, Jureth adjusted the phaser on his belt slightly and, as he prepared to step onto the transporter pad, his combadge chirped at him.

"Bridge to Captain Oseno."

"Go ahead, Cat."

"Sir, we're detecting power levels rising aboard the Spectre, Sir. Her warp core has just come back online. Not only that, but the Undine ship has moved off, Sir, under some odd circumstances."

"Define odd, Cat."

"I think you're going to have to see it to believe it."

"On my way, Oseno out."

Jureth turned to the assembled crewmen.

"It seems the Spectre has managed to right herself without our help. Thank you for coming. You are dismissed."

As they filed out, Jureth grabbed and stopped T'Lana, his Vulcan assistant tactical officer.

"Lieutenant, how are our people holding out?"

Jureth was concerned about the state of his small but well trained security force. The entire ship's crew had been stretched to the limit, but he needed the security teams more alert than the average crewmember and he wanted to be sure they got rest if they needed it.

"They are...tired, Sir," T'Lana said in reply.

Jureth nodded.

"Stand down from security alert Lieutenant. Maintain guards on our critical spaces, but get as many people rested as you can."

"acknowledged, Sir."

Oseno made his way back to the bridge and, as he exited the turbolift, he quickly demanded an update from the bridge crew.

"Report! What happened out there?"

"Like I said," Cat Steele stated, "you're going to want to see it to believe it. Computer, replay USS Alsea sensor and visual logs from time index 130 on main viewer."

The computer bleeped in compliance. Jureth looked up at the ship's viewscreen and watched carefully as a Federation shuttle came seemingly out of nowhere and made for the massive Undine warship until it was lost between it and the glare of the Azimuth Horizon. Then, just as quickly as the shuttle had appeared, the Undine ship left the battlefield, exactly as Jureth had hoped they would do.

When the recording ended, Jureth sat down in the Alsea's command chair and hailed the Aegis.

"Alsea to Aegis; Doctor, what just happened out there? I've seen the recording, but I don't really understand it. Do you know who was in that shuttle?"

"That is a rather good question, Alsea," answered the voice of Nasaro-Myth through the comm channel, his usually jovial face now darkened by puzzlement on the main viewer. "According to our sensors and their own admission, this shuttle came from the flagship and was occupied by First Officer Edward Tomah and Petty Officer Janine Olsen, bound to discuss terms with the Undine... We lost all comm and sensor contact with them for a while, blasted anomaly interference... But now, we are towing back to you their shuttle. We found it adrift near the last position of the Undine ship, empty and completely powered down. As far as we can tell, they were not abducted; they beamed out of their own accord, presumably on board the Undine vessel just before it warped out."

The Deltan paused a moment, as if listening to someone off screen telling him something the microphone did not pick up. Then he looked back at Jureth through the vid screen, his face even more etched with confusion.

"Alsea... our first investigation indicates strange things; the shuttle's log was wiped clean, down to their programming core; so was the transporter buffer record and the onboard sensor record. But the life support system was oddly calibrated, quite uncomfortable by Human standards... We made a comparative check and found out it was in fact calibrated to the exact parameters of those found on the Undine ship. Either they readied things to receive an Undine on board... or..."

He did not finish his sentence. What he implied was clear and disturbing enough.

"Or they were both Undine infiltrators.." Jureth said finishing the Doctor's thought. "I knew Tomah when I was the security chief aboard the Lotus. I would never have suspected he was Undine."

He cursed under his breath, this time in Cardassian, before continuing.

"We will take the shuttle into our main bay. I'm sure Starfleet Intelligence will want to go over it with a fine tooth comb. I will report our situation to Starbase 10 as well and request further instructions, Oseno out."

Jureth closed the channel from the command chair and addressed Shawn Hunter.

"Mister Hunter, take Lieutenant Steele and go to the main hangar bay to receive the shuttle from the Aegis. Cat, make sure its secured and lock it with a security authorization code."

The two officers left the bridge and standby operations officers replaced them at their respective positions. Jureth opened a channel to Starbase 10 From his communications console, using the same distress frequency as they had before. The two prepositioned shuttles were still operating as the Undine had forgotten all about them once they engaged the Alsea in combat, so Jureth assumed the channel would work.

"Starbase 10, this is Alsea, do you read us?"

It was late in the afternoon on March 5th, 2410 when the call came through to Starbase 10.

"Starbase 10, this is Alsea, do read us?"

It had been a long string of tensed hours on Starbase 10 with no communication from any ships since they last heard of some trouble with their shuttle comm network. Fleet Captain Samji had been busy organizing repair teams and security teams to finally get the base back in order but now, they had been idle for too long waiting for any news from the operation front and nerves were fraying. The call from the Alsea finally jerked everyone awake with a collective sigh of relief.

"Aye, this is Samji. Good to hear your voice, Captain Oseno. What do you have to report on the situation?"

Jureth filled him in on the details of the savage attack by the Undine, their eventual defeat due to the deft luring maneuver by the Captain leading to their defeat at the hands of the Azimuth Horizon; the very thing they were trying to allow to spread... and the helping hand they received from the ships they had attacked.

Jureth took a breath before responding "Sir, while we were repositioning the shuttles we were attacked by an Undine warship. If not for the timely arrival of the Spectre the Alsea might very well be in pieces at the moment. After a pitched battle I was able to lure them toward the Azimuth Horizon by powering down the Alsea enough to make them think we were dead. Once the Horizon had them Sir, I gave them the option of accepting our help and they refused to do so. Thanks to the telepaths on the Artemis bridge module Sir we were able to determine that the Undine act out of fear wholly and totally. So, I changed our strategy and we pulled the them clear of the Horizon and allowed them to leave freely. The Aenar on the Aegis seem to think they were confused, and dumbfounded by the fact that we would help an enemy when we could have just as easily left them to die."

"It sounds like you gave them something to think about alright," responded Samji.

"Yes Sir, but there is something else Sir. Just before the Undine warped out, while I was preparing to beam over to the Spectre with repair crews, a shuttle from the Lotus arrived baring Commander Tomah and a passenger. The informed Doctor Nasaro-Myth that they were here to negotiate with the Undine. As it turns out Sir I believe they were both Undine infiltrators returning to their base of operations. They left the shuttle behind and transported willingly to the Undine ship, and the environmental controls of the shuttle had been modified to match those aboard the Undine vessel."

"That is troubling news. We will have to check for more infiltrators on the Starbase," again replied Samji. "At least it sounds like the Artemis crew has survived another one-in-a-million. I would like to hear it directly from Captain Kheren, however."

"So would I, Sir," agreed Oseno Jureth. "It promises to be quite a tale."

The commanding officer of Starbase 10 nodded then signalled his comm officer to switch to the fleet-wide channel now relayed by the shuttlecrafts lassoing the Azimuth Horizon from their own position.

"Fleet Captain Samji to all Lotus Fleet ships. Please come in on this channel if you can hear this."

\* \* \*

Before the Undine ship had completely warped out of the system, the one known as "Boothby" ordered a long-range scan of all vessels in the area. With the telepathic abilities of all the Undine on board able to enhance lifeform detection of their bio-engineered ship systems, the sensors were able to pinpoint the location of all ships within a ten light-year radius.

Once done, the frontal part of the battleship emitted a greenish cone of light that seemingly pierced the very fabric of space, opening a portal between this universe and the one it had come from.



Now, as the long skeletal ship pierced its way through the clear, viscous fluid that encompassed its home universe, an Undine science officer stood next to "Boothby" with his slender digits wrapped around the leader's head to communicate the details of his sensor report.

When he finished and broke the telepathic bond, "Boothby" nodded and turned to the communications officer. because of his Human shape, he reflexively used vocal speech rather than direct mental contact.

"The situation is worse than I thought. Contact the rest of the communal. We're going to need more ships," he ordered.

\* \* \*

One by one, the hails came from all Lotus Fleet ships able to hear the subspace call from their headquarters, since they were well within the vicinity of the shuttlecraft network that carried the signal to avoid interference from the anomaly.

The first voice to answer was the unmistakable melodious tone of a feminine Deltan voice.

"Captain Onia of the Wisconsin. We're here, Sir, at your designated coordinates for the Ion pulse operation."

"Steamrunner, reporting in, Sir," then said the lower tone of Captain Rumabai.

"Pittsburgh, ready at your command, Sir," growled right behind the unforgettable voice of the Kzinti Captain and former Starbase 10 commander Speaker-of-Names.

"Doctor Nasaro-Myth, reporting in from the Artemis bridge module Aegis," then soft, charming voice, that of the Deltan chief medical officer of the lost starship.

After a moment, a stern and tired but still firm voice filled the speakers.

"This is Captain Crist of the McKenzie. We're here and ready, Sir. The Horizon's Children are dead or scattered and we have two special guests in stasis. Sir..."

Crist's voice made a pause before he added in a definitely more subdued tone:

"Commander Sorripto didn't make it, but his actions saved all of us, including our guests."

There was a heavy moment of silence as everyone in the command center of the station heard that an officer, more than a few had known personally, had fallen in the line of duty. It stretched for some time before another voice finally came from the speakers.

"Commander Rogers of the Spectre here, Sir. Captain Summers is currently unconscious and being treated in sickbay. I have assumed temporary command and repairs are underway."

There was then another moment of silence that seemed like an eternity to Samji. There were one ship that hadn't reported in yet and the status was only partly known due to the telepathic bonding of an Aenar. One was the flagship herself; the other was the ship they now knew had been lost to the dreaded anomaly, but amazingly with not one soul lost with her.

On board the USS Lotus, both Captain Kheren and Captain Gould reacted simultaneously to the call from the flagship's bridge.

"Bridge to Captain."

"Go ahead," they both said together.

The Andorian lowered his head in apology and to let Gould answer as was his prerogative. He was not in command... not anymore.

On the intercom, the bridge officer's voice went on after a little moment of surprise.

"Sir, we have Starbase 10 on a clear subspace channel. Fleet Captain Allen Samji is requesting a status report from all ships of the Fleet."

"Very good, Lieutenant; patch it though to me. I'm sure Captain Kheren will want to join in as well."

"Channel is open, Sir" replied the Lieutenant.

"Gould here, Fleet Captain; reporting in, Sir."

"Good to hear your voice," Samji replied. "Is Captain Kheren there?"

"Aye, Fleet Captain, as are his first officer and chief of security. We were successful in recovering the crew of the Artemis, if not the Artemis itself, Sir. I'm happy to report there where no casualties."

"Good. Then, you will have Lieutenant Commander Syntron there with you to coordinate the next plan phases from the science department's perspective."

There was a pause as Samji raised his baritone voice and his bearded face to address the whole Fleet in his most official tone.

"Too all ships: we will be out of contact after this phase since the shuttles will be destroyed in order to dig the trench. Reconvene afterward at the position of the Alsea and Spectre. We will set off the mid-warp detonations of the shuttles from here. You may want to back off a bit if you are too close to the Horizon. But remain close enough to fire off the ion pulses. That phase must be complete within 2 minutes of shuttle detonation."

As Samji continued the briefing, he motioned to his Trill science officer.

"Mister Rexil, my science officer, will fill you in on the next part."

Rexil spoke with the expected coldness of a scientist explaining a basic phenomena.

"Since Lieutenant Snowfire K'Leysha and Commander Syntron are on opposite sides of the Anomaly, I'd like them to initiate Phase 3. Precise coordination of both phases of the operation is paramount, so please coordinate your chronometers to do so at 1900 hours."

Waiting for both parties to acknowledge synchronizing their shipboard chronometers, the Trill scientist made a pause before resuming details of the operation.

"I'm sending data on phase 3. Since this is theory only at this point, there will likely need to be mid-operation adjustments, so you'll probably want to run quite a few simulations and discuss your findings before we blow up the shuttles. If there is any unknowns, be sure to let us know..."

Rexil paused at that statement. He knew he wouldn't be receiving any questions going forward. Under orders from Samji, he didn't mention the true source of the idea to essentially lock the Anomaly into an artificial wormhole, leaving Starfleet, and specifically Starbase 10, with the keys, was from Snowfire K'Leysha. Instead, the proceedings, communications and reports made it seem like it was developed by scientists on Starbase 10. They would be the ones to publicly receive credit, so as to protect the Ilythriian officer from punishment by her own people.

The Illithyrii Empire had its own prime directive about sharing what it perceived as its technology; mainly gravimetric and wormhole applications; although the federation was already knowledgeable in both, this sudden inspired use of these principles while an illithyrii exchange officer was directly involved could have raised suspicions... with possibly dreadful, if not deadly, consequences for said officer. Hers were not a forgiving or tolerant people...

And so, documents classified at the highest level would officially record her true contribution and ingenuity while available data would cover it up as a purely Starfleet plan.

*Assuming that it succeeds*, he mused.

"That is all," he added out loud, glad to be officially off the hook for a plan that he barely understood himself.

"Very good," then said Samji to finish off the discussion. "We will reconvene at 1700 hours to destroy the shuttles. Get what you need to get ready before then. I will leave this channel open in case any questions arise."

As the com channel was closed, Kheren jumped off the biobed he was on and, while Doctor Bindo diligently scanned him with her medical tricorder, he addressed the commanding officer of the Lotus.

"Captain Gould, if I may, I would like to witness the final phase of the operation from your bridge."

"I expected as much, Captain Kheren... as long as my chief medical officer agrees..."

The Betazoid woman powered off her instrument and nodded with a smile that had more to it than a simple acknowledgement.

"Amazingly enough, Captain Kheren is as strong as the proverbial ox... or whatever equivalent there is on his homeworld."

"We do have them on Andoria, Doctor..." Tyvya chimed in with a smile of her own mirroring that of the smaller woman. "It's just that they too have antennae... and a chitinous carapace; they're much more akin to the milkfleas Earth ants farm on Earth than any bovine... but still, they are indeed... quite... vigorous."

The former commanding officer of the starship Artemis took note of the smile both women exchanged and, keeping his head high, he then purposely looked only at Vi'Rell Gould.

"What is left on my crew aboard could assist your own if you so wish, Captain. Lieutenant Tyvya here is my second highest ranking officer available among them so she can help coordinate both crews. Mister Syntron could join us on your bridge for the operation."

"Vary well, coordinate your crew's activities with Mister Vincent."

On this simple signal from Gould, they all went to their respective stations.

Listening to the detailed message from Fleet Captain Samji, Syntron was already contemplating this next phase of the operation as he received the summon and came first to the bridge. Once there, he gazed downward at the chronometer on the Lotus. One hour and thirty-seven point four minutes until the scheduled destruction of the shuttles; from that point on, their long-range communications with the Starbase and others would be nullified. They would need to have their specific procedures established and in place before the 1700 hour deadline arrived.

As soon as the two captains stepped into the command center, the first officer of the former Artemis asked Captain Gould to engage a communications channel that would link them with the USS McKenzie positioned on the other side of the anomaly. A nod from the flagship captain allowed him to reach the smallish warship, thanks to the comm network erected by the cleverly laid out starbase shuttlecrafts.

"Lieutenant Commander Syntron aboard the Lotus to the McKenzie... I am attempting to reach your CSO... Lieutenant K'Leysha. Is she available?"

On board the USS McKenzie, the message was received by Captain Crist who then inquired his science chief's status in sickbay.

"She's starting to come around, Captain. Stand by..."

"Lieutenant?"

The voice is quite soft, threaded with suppressed worry, and the woman on the bed in sickbay responds to it faintly, eyes flickering faintly.

"Ensign...May?"

The smooth voice is cracked.

"Yes ma'am," the Deputy Chief smiled faintly. "We were worried there for a bit, Ma'am."

"Had...worse."

Snowfire tried to chuckle, but the dryness of her throat turned the attempt into a gagging cough.

"Water?"

"Right here."

May handed her a bulb of cool water, which she brought to her mouth and sucked greedily on, the fluid seeming to revitalise her as it hits her mouth. Several moments later, she pulled herself upright, legs dangling off the side of the bed.

"You all ok?" She asked, voice stronger now and far less...damaged.

"We're all fine. The modifications held. We lost the Commander, though," she said. "Apparently he was a triple agent."

Snowfire smothered a vicious curse and shook her head.

"So... it would be Phase Three of the operation you're here about then, wouldn't it."

"I...yes. Lieutenant Commander Syntron has been trying to contact you. The Artemis was lost, but the crew got out... with some help from the Lotus."

Snowfire nodded.

"Good."

She pushed herself up from the bed.

"Doctor? I'm needed in my lab. Ensign?"

She walked out, Ensign May just behind her. Fumbling in a pocket, she pulled a hypo free and pushed it to her throat. There were a few moments as the stim went to work, then her step straightened and she headed directly to her lab.

Waving away the welcome of her subordinates, she slid into her station.

"Nolanis, Daniel, I'm going to need the two of you working up a subspace tensor matrix. I'll tell you the exact point on the Cochrane range that we're going to need once I've conferred with the Lieutenant Commander. Keladry, I need you to reconfigure the deflector dish to emit a continuous magenton pulse. Tanya, Jaylen, start reconfiguring the active sensor grid to emit phase-conjugate graviton beams." She tapped a few buttons on her console, accessing Syntron's transmission. "Oh, and Nolanis, if you could tell the Captain that it might be a good idea if we head for the Starbase. If we're doing this, we're going to want a gatekeeper. And we can move one hell of a lot faster than Starbase 10."

She then turned back to the screen of her station and tapped a final button to open the transmission.

"Lieutenant K'Leysha here, Lieutenant Commander. This would be about Phase 3 of the operation, I assume?"

Hearing the clear and articulate voice of the Ilythiri woman, Syntron responded with his usual detached tone despite the direness of their current situation.

"Affirmative, Lieutenant. I have analyzed the data received from Captain Crist and we are currently preparing to proceed with phase 3 of the operation. As you may be aware, we were able to complete phase 2 of this operation with the trilitium emitters, although at the cost of the remaining Artemis, except what remains of the Aegis bridge module."

Gazing down at his PADD, the Vulcan scientist focused on the forthcoming coordinated mission as he continued his communication.

"According to recent calculations, we will need to generate a subspace tensor matrix to 27,354 cochranees, and then send out an intersecting magneton pulse using each of our ships. The pulse emitting from each of our ships on opposite sides of the anomaly should then interact with the matrix to produce the appropriate subspace distortion which, if coordinated precisely, will create an opening in the space-time continuum in the designated region."

Syntron then paused for a moment as he continued entering data in the simulations he was executing in his PADD.

"However, Lieutenant, an unknown factor in this equation will be the actual effect related to the duration of these pulse drains on each ship's available energy. We may need to make some modifications rerouting additional energy as this procedure progresses."

Again came an eyeblink of hesitation, but Snowfire seemed to quash it much more swiftly than before and the Ilythirii Lieutenant nodded. They didn't have much time left anyway, so working out the sequence would be all important at this stage.

"A series of pulses would definitely be a wise idea," she replied, "although, all things considered, I would advise that we shorten the interval between attempts to five minutes at the absolute most. If there are still some that wish to stop us, the pulses will be obvious in the extreme in conjunction with the tensor matrix. As for system order...I would recommend auxiliary power, warp drive, shields... after redeploying the Lotus's ablative armour... and then, impulse engines, external sensors if you have other ships there or deploy some shuttle as eyes, and then weapons. Beyond that... possibly try shutting down power in unused portions of the ship."

She shrugged.

"With all that though, I'd recommend shortening the interval to a minute between pulses. Then it should be more than possible."

Syntron added the information into his PADD at the rate in which the Ilythiri scientist articulated her recommended course of action. Although he was a bit weary of shortening the time-frame between each pulse to this degree, he recognized this was merely one in a series of many calculated risks that had occurred throughout this perilous endeavor with this anomaly. After swiftly readjusting his protocols, sequence of events and reduced intervals, he responded back to the scientist on the other side of the anomaly.

"All procedures are now confirmed and in place, Lieutenant. Awaiting detonation of the communication shuttles to begin the countdown to the implementation of phase 3."

"I'll see you on the other side then, Lieutenant Commander." She said simply, bringing her hand up in a salute. "In the hope that you won't need it, good luck."

She stood, tapping her combadge, and opened a channel to bridge.

"Captain?" She asked. "After the shuttles are destroyed, I'm going to need everything we've got to get us to Starbase 10 by 1900 hours when Phase 3 will commence."

"Understood Lieutenant." Crist replied, nodding to Hughes then opening from his armrest control a channel to engineering. "Simmons, I am going to need maximum power to the warp engines."

Hearing the call in Engineering, Ensign Simmons, now acting chief engineer of the McKenzie responded with a telling sigh.

"Aye, Sir. I will give you all I can manage... but we are still trying to put everything back in order here, Sir."

"Back in order?"

"Aye, Sir; it was the way Commander Sorripto used to run things. He had a huge network of power relays taking and giving power to each other. It maximizes our power beyond limits I thought possible but, with him dead... er, uh, not here to walk me through... what I am looking at, I can't really make heads or tails of what might get damaged if I route power the wrong way. "

"Understood; give us what you can and then get back to work. I do not have time for a learning curve."

With a new sigh, Ensign Simmons got back to work.

*Who would have ever thought I would be wishing this hard for a Cardassian to come save the day?* He thought with bittersweet feelings.

Back at the main panel, Simmons carefully worked to boost power to engines. A small alarm warning showed a power drop in the main shuttlebay. Simmons silenced the alarm and continued to work.

Within a few seconds, it cleared and power read at one hundred and fourteen percent of official specs.

The McKenzie then turned in place, lining up on course for the home of Lotus Fleet, and waited for their science officer to give the go ahead to proceed for the final part of their operation.

On the Lotus, Captain Kheren had listened to the scientists discussing the final points of their operation while watching Captain Gould and his crew bring the Lotus to full readiness, for once having nothing to do but watch others at their duties. That left him free to reminisce on his own past experience on the flagship. On this very bridge he had first set foot for his first deep space assignment as a freshly minted Security and Tactical Ensign... a lifetime ago it seems. He had then served as her CTSO under then Captain Felez Connora'tu, until the Borg War and the final secret mission into the Neutral Zone that had precipitated the retirement of the Efrozian ship commander and his own transfer to the newly recommissioned USS Artemis.

They had refitted the Lotus just before Operation Horizon had been initiated, but the bridge was still the same as he remembered; only the faces had changed... and he himself was now but a passenger.

*I lost my ship... and so, here I am, a simple spectator while others still have duties to perform, a task to finish. Will I too be sent into retirement... or worse... to captain a desk?*

The Andorian slowly shook his head, chasing away the nascent gloomy thoughts from his mind.

*None of this will matter if there is no universe left . We did our bit for King and Country. Time for others to save us all.*

As Lieutenant Vincent stood on the bridge of the Lotus, listening to the fleet's science officers discuss the next phase of their plan, his combadge chirped.

"Lieutenant, all crew are back to normal and we've completed our initial security sweeps of the ship," Ensign Kiels reported. "Tomah and the prisoner are the only crewmembers that are unaccounted for. All-in-all, the security division is ready to go."

She paused briefly, and an audible sigh could be heard over the channel.

"Sir, I want to apologize," she started. "You left me in charge of the ship's security while you were gone and I failed. I let Tomah get the better of me and he could have completely destroyed the ship. I..."

"Nidiri," Josh interrupted, "Tomah was in charge of security on this ship long before you or I got here. He'd been planning this escape for a long time. You and your teams acted exactly as you were supposed to; don't blame yourself for this. And, Ensign, try to get a quick nap before we start on the next phase. You've had a busy day and I need you on your A-game for the rest of this mission."

*It was my fault, I should have known that he had something up his sleeves, Josh thought. He gave up far too easily. But I've got things to do now, there will be time for regrets later.*

"Thank you, Sir," Kiels responded, "I'll do that."

When he was done speaking with Ensign Kiels, Josh turned to report the situation to Captain Gould.

"Captain, my teams have finished their sweeps of the ship," Josh reported. "No further sabotage was found and Tomah is the only missing crewmember. Tactically speaking, we are ready for the next phase of the operation."

Gould looked at him for a moment, blinking, then nodded.

"That's... surprising... but I'm glad to hear it. I guess he meant what he said about agreeing with our mission and decided not to get in our way."

Without any conscious intent on his part, Kheren had moved to the right side of the bridge so as to not get underway with the crew's work and had stood in silence just before and below the tactical station. Despite his natural deafness to sound directly behind him, he had heard every word of Josh Vincent's conversation, thanks to the well thought out acoustics of the bridge allowing sound to travel clearly towards the center seat, wherever it came from. Listening to the young chief of security, he felt a sudden feeling of remembrance that almost got a sigh of regret out of him. It seemed like it was just yesterday that he himself had been chief of security of this ship; that he had stood at this very station, with the same concern and sense of heavy responsibility that etched the man's voice.

Hearing about Edward Tomah had also brought back to his mind those first days aboard the flagship. The man that finally was revealed not to be one had been the very first soul to welcome him aboard, to guide his first steps into deep space duty and support him when he took the head of the department he should have been granted with, if only by virtue of rank alone, if not simply seniority and experience.

At the time, Kheren had wondered about the apparent lack of concern and ambition of the man, so uncharacteristic of a Human, let alone a Starfleet officer, even one claiming to look forward to upcoming retirement.

The Andorian now knew why; but he could not have imagined the truth of it all as it had now been revealed.

He dismissed thoughts of his own failings at the time just as Vincent had done with those of his assistant chief over the comm. Indeed, Tomah had prepared himself well and far in advance, even beyond the time Kheren himself had been assigned aboard the Lotus. Not even their highly sensitive Efrogian captain of those days, Commander Felez, had had any suspicion. Some times, you could not win them all...

*Indeed... Kheren thought, once again seeing in his mind's eye the last moment of his own ship, his first ship... maybe his last command. Starfleet is understandably not to keen in offering another command to one who already lost one, whatever the reason... The Board of Inquiry will certainly pick apart with a fine comb every single decision I made that lead to this loss... and find whatever reason Command will need to make sure that I never have a chance to do it again.*

He lifted his head and brought his four oculars to the big screen where the ships of the fleet could be seen as they moved into their assigned position.

*Or worse; they might even try to promote me and commend me so as to justify giving me command of an office... Well, I can always decline a promotion... and ask for a tactical position again. Anything but flying a computer console.*

Looking back at the chronometer, Syntron could see that the countdown was less than one hour and twenty-eight point two minutes. He realized that this would allow him time to set up the series of power reductions with the crew of the Lotus. He did not have the familiarity of this vessel that he had with the Artemis. Fortunately though, the crew of the Lotus was more than capable of handling this task. He also had crewmembers of the Artemis available to lend a hand in each of the departments as well.

With the communication line now closed with the Ilythiri scientist on the McKenzie, Syntron stepped away from the science station and approached the commanding officer of the Lotus.

"Captain Gould; will there be any additional ships or other fleet support available in our vicinity to assist us in phase 3 of this operation? It will commence in one hour and twenty-seven point six minutes."

"Not unless Lotus Fleet Command has acquired a few new ships we haven't heard about." He said with a slight shrug. "We'll have to make due with what we have."

\* \* \*

**Captain's Log**  
**Stardate 8714.85:**



**The Alsea with measurable assistance from the USS Spectre, has successfully fended off and Undine warship which attacked us without provocation. The Undine are an intimidating foe and something tells me this was not the last that Lotus Fleet or the Federation will see of them. We are about to enter phase 3 of Operation Horizon, and it will be the coming actions that determine the fate of the entire galaxy. For all of our sakes I hope that we are successful otherwise we will have few options left, and I for one do not like any of them so, as I prepare to ensure the readiness of our science department I know that we cannot fail.**

**I find it sobering that I have ended up in command of the Alsea. It reminds me of just how real the risks we take are, and that at any given time we may find ourselves doing a job that we never had in mind for ourselves. Still, I vowed to Captain Siduri before we left Starbase Ten that I would bring this ship home, and I will if I have to do it piece by piece.**

Jureth closed the terminal in the Alsea's ready room and stepped out onto the warship's bridge and observed the crew at work. They were the ship's third shift crewmen as he had ordered everyone to get as much rest as possible while they prepared for the third phase of Operation Horizon. The officer in the command chair, Ensign Tomek, looked over at the Jureth and started to get up, but Oseno waved him off. Jureth then proceeded to the turbolift and rode it to deck five where he found Lieutenant Tor, the science department's temporary commander.

The Cardassian stood up as Jureth entered and Jureth looked at the man for a moment knowing all too well that it was Tor's people that had enslaved Jureth's father, mother, and all of Bajor for years.

*He had no part in that*, Jureth reminded himself internally, and then he questioned the science officer.

"Mister Tor, are we ready for the ion pulse portion of the containment?"

"Yes Captain, I have the mission data programmed into the computer and we are ready to initiate the pulse on your command."

Jureth nodded.

"Good; I want you on the bridge for that part of the mission."

"Aye, Sir, as you say, I will be there."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. See you in a couple of hours."

"Aye, Sir."

Jureth returned to the bridge, and this time he took the command chair from Tomek who returned to one of the Alsea's auxiliary stations.

"Helm, back us off from the shuttles, to a distance where their detonation will not interfere with our deployment of the ion pulse. Senior Chief Ferar, advise the Spectre and the Aegis to do the same."

"Aye, Sir," responded both watch officers in unison.

The Alsea backed away from the positioned shuttles and settled herself at a distance where they would be unharmed by the massive detonations of their warp cores.

"And now," Jureth said to no one in particular "we wait."

On the only surviving part of the USS Artemis, the message from the lead ship of their specific group was acknowledged by Counselor Lyrya and relayed to the Deltan Doctor still in command.

"Not that we will do much of anything in this glorified runabout of ours," Elliago mumbled.

Then looking up at the screen where the two starships of Lotus Fleet were taking up their designated position for the upcoming final phase of the operation, he spoke more loudly.

"Advise both the Alsea and the Spectre that we will stand by at the rear with three dozen cross-trained technical, scientific, medical and security personnel available for them."

"Message sent and acknowledged by both ships, Doctor," the Aenar confirmed after a moment.

"Doctorr," then said tactical officer Mrrriish, "I rrecommend that, while the otherr ships work on phase 3, that we use ourr own sensorrs to monitorr the sectorr against any furrther ... interruption."

The Deltan nodded his bald head in her direction, the ever charming smile back on his handsome face.

"I knew there had to be a reason why the captain did not lord alone on the bridge of a ship... Let's just do that. Those Undine did leave in a hurry... but who knows why... where... and for how long?"

"And Romulans could try again to interfere," reminded them Ops chief Cheonghi with his shrill voice. "And there was talk of Klingon meddling from the Spectre's theater of activity..."

"Never rains but it pours," commented Elliago in response. "All the more reasons to be vigilant while the others work at saving the universe."

"Not that we have anything better to do anyway," offered with a smile of his own chief Baoule acting as his XO from his right hand.

"Right," agreed the Deltan.

As the ships made their preparations, Fleet Captain Samji was finally able to report in to Rear Admiral Kotari, back at Starfleet Headquarters. The Boslic man was just about to call as Fleet Admiral Jamie Donaldson was still deep in emergency meeting with the rest of the Chiefs of Staff of Starfleet.

All the time Lotus Fleet was engaged in their bold and extraordinary endeavor, the rest of the United Federation of Planets were preparing contingency plans and disaster scenarios, in case Operation Horizon failed; even if there would not be all that much to do once the entire universe would be on fire... and already was, with Klingons, Romulans and Undine about. But the tension on the Rear Admiral's face eased ever so slightly listening to the detailed report the Starbase commander sent him.

"So the containment is about to be finished in the next few hours," Samji finished, completing his review of the main points of the report.

"Good work to you and your Fleet," the grey-haired and bearded Boslic man said from behind his desk in San Francisco, way back on Earth almost a hundred light years away. "I knew you could handle it when I gave you that position. Your fear of not having enough mission experience was clearly not justified," he then said, managing a slight smile... as much as he could under the circumstances.

"It was all thanks to our officers, Sir," Samji replied, proudly. "They all showed a dedication above and beyond. I couldn't have done it without them."

"We have a ship on its way to back you up," Kotari said, bringing a slightly surprised look from the Fleet Captain.

"What ship, Sir?" Samji asked.

Kotari just gestured to the monitor indicating the details being transmitted to the screen. It was clear he was being coy for his own amusement, but the specifications were transmitted in full.

"Hmm... interesting..." Samji said with an excited tremor, while trying to maintain a straight face in front of his mentor. But it didn't fool the Fleet Admiral's assistant for a second.

"Last I heard, it will be docking in ninety minutes at Starbase 10. Good luck, Fleet Captain. Kotari out."

Samji took a moment to calm himself from the brief moment of excitement then turned to his Ferengi Operations Officer.

"How long until detonation?"

"Fifteen minutes, Sir," Grok replied, and, anticipating the Fleet Captain's request, he flipped on the subspace emergency channel that would again be routed through all the shuttles.

As Samji began saying "Activate...." Grok already had replied.

"Channel active, Sir."

Samji smiled, thinking back to an old Earth television show he enjoyed watching occasionally on archival recordings.

"Thank you, Radar."

He then straightened his posture and his face towards the communication screen.

"Fleet Captain Samji to all Lotus Fleet ships. Prepare to activate the containment ion pulses in just under fifteen minutes."

While the Andorian was musing, the readiness call from Starbase 10 came over the fleet channel. After listening to it and to Captain Gould's acknowledgement of readiness, he came by the command chair to address the Vulcanoid hybrid.

"If I may, Captain, I would like to make my report to headquarters."

Getting permission from the commanding officer of the flagship, Kheren stood at attention before the viewer.

"Fleet Captain Samji, this is Captain Kheren on board the USS Lotus. Sir, I have to inform you that the USS Artemis was lost following our encounter with the Romulan dreadnought and then as a consequence of completing phase 2 of the operation. Fortunately, no loss of life resulted in this event, thanks to the swift and efficient intervention of the flagship, her officers and crew. They should all be commended for the excellence in fulfilling their duty, as should the crew and officers of my ship."

He made a pause to let the succinct information sink in... not so much in Samji's mind as in his own heart. Then he concluded with a heavy but firm tone.

"You will have a full report upon our return. I will then stand ready for a complete debriefing before the Board of Inquiry. In the meantime, I remain at your disposal and under the authority of Captain Gould on board the Lotus."

With a nod to both the main viewer and to Captain Gould, he stepped back and to the side of the bridge now to let others do the work without him being in their way. By will as much as by fate, his own part was over and done.

\* \* \*

After one last check in with all the ships, Samji turned back from the viewscreen to check the chronometer and verify readiness with his Ferengi Operations Officer.

"Lieutenant Commander Grok, are the shuttles ready for the next phase of our operation?" asked Samji.

"Aye, Sir," Grok replied. "All shuttles are responding to pings and the warp detonation programs are responding as ready."

"Very good, commence the countdown," the Fleet Captain ordered.

With the press of a button, the Ferengi initiated a cascading program that would propagate through all the shuttles around the Anomaly.

"It requires a command code, Sir," the Ferengi replied.

"Samji-Omega-two-hotel-niner."

The female voice of the computer chimed in with the audible version of the countdown.

"Sixty seconds to detonation."

"This is it. All Lotus Fleet captains, prepare your ion pulses to be distributed completely around the Anomaly within two minutes of detonation. Let's close this thing up and come on home!"

"Forty-five seconds to detonation."

"Sir," said Lieutenant Rexil, the Trill science officer. "I'm getting readings on long-range sensors."

Samji moved to view the officer's console and saw the blips appearing near the Romulan border; quite near, in fact, to where the scimitar had snuck through the previous day and had resulted in the destruction of the Artemis' stardrive in a bold sacrifice to stop it. Fortunately, the detection matrix Starfleet had installed along the border seemed to be untouched in the enemy's bullheaded determination to launch attacks as quickly as possible.

"Thirty seconds to detonation," the computer informed them.

"What are you reading?" Samji asked.

"I can't be sure, Sir, but it appears to be a mix of D'deridex, Negh'var, Valdore, and various Birds of Prey, both Romulan and Klingon."

"Together?" Samji asked in disbelief.

"Yes, Sir... unless the sensors are wrong."

"Fifteen seconds to detonation."

"What's their destination? How long?" asked the Fleet Captain.

"They appear to be on an intercept course with the Alsea. At their present speed, an hour at most, Sir."

"Ten seconds to detonation," droned the computer's soft voice.

"That's not enough time. Grok, cancel the detonation!"

"Aye, Sir... It also requires a command code," Grok said, after swiftly punching in the preliminary shutdown sequence.

"Five, four..."

"Damn! Samji-Omega..."

"Three, two..."

"Zero, one, zero!"

He stabbed his finger towards the communication station and a nod sent his head back up towards the large viewer of the ops center in front of him.

"All Lotus Fleet ships! This is Captain Samji. A large contingent is moving in toward the Alsea. Klingons and Romul..."

That was the last the ships heard from the Fleet Captain.

As all the ships surrounding the Anomaly watched through their viewscreens, they could see the shuttles before them suddenly warp the space around them, then explode in front of the backdrop of orange fire, like little firecrackers popping when thrown into a fire. When the fire, smoke, and debris from all the explosions in front of them dispersed, they could see faint lines of white start to form and spread, like the cracks in a glass pane with too much pressure put on it. The cracks came out from the fire in front of them and wended their way toward the ring of debris left by the shuttles.

Once the cracks came together at the debris field, they merged, and grew outward like many creeks joining to form a large river. The white ring expanded and expanded until it was all the various ships could see in front of them. The effect could be felt as well, as everyone felt the gravitational shear pull them forward toward the direction of the Anomaly. Then finally, the orange fire, previously dimmed from a raging forest fire to a small campfire, thanks to the efforts of the Artemis' trilitium-enhanced torpedoes, raged hotter than it had ever been before. It hurtled outward, toward all ships and, in a matter of mere seconds since the shuttles had exploded, it was bigger than ever.

To those viewing it, it seemed like the anomaly was going to overtake them all and burn down the whole galaxy in mere hours.

But then, at the very last moment, the fire stopped, as if it was contained within the white ring that they could still see before them.

The fire was looping in on itself, contained by the massive ring of subspace tearing.

But it wouldn't be contained for long. Just like lava filling up ravines and ditches around a volcano, eventually the subspace rifts and the fire would build up to a point where it would have no other place to go and would spill out into normal space again... or back into the defenseless pocket universe it had originated, leaving the whole of Operation Horizon for naught.

The ships of Lotus Fleet had but minutes to seal it off and contain the raging inferno for good.

Standing right before the tactical station on the USS Lotus' bridge, Captain Kheren watched helplessly and not without a certain feeling of fear as the onrushing tidal wave of fire rolled towards them on the large viewer; he had been inside the Azimuth Horizon more often and longer than anyone else on this bridge and had felt it's debilitating and destructive effects more than he would ever cared to. More than anyone else, he knew what was coming to engulf them.

Pure, utter chaos.

Even when the subspace containment ring did it's job and coralled completely the waves of raging cosmic fire, he still felt uneasy. Now, everything relied on the soldering effect of inverted ion pulses on the anomaly's paths into normal space and then on the caging miracle of looping wormholes around the one connecting them to this other universe where the whole inferno had been born; or rather, from which that other universe had been created from.

It was already an incredibly daring endeavor to even consider; and now, they were about to attempt it under enemy fire.

*Klingons and Romulans joining forces against the Federation with the anomaly as the spoil to share between them? he considered inwardly upon hearing the interrupted warning from headquarters. Most unlikely... Rather, they coincidentally happen to come at us from the same angle of intrusion, where their borders meet... And, once they take notice of each other racing for it, they're more likely to jump at each other's throat out of sheer hatred, mistrust and contempt, especially with the anomaly hanging before them as a prize... Klingon Honor could never forgive the Romulans for their treacherous massacre of defenseless civilians at Khitomer, no matter what; and the shattered, vulnerable Romulan Empire can not afford to allow such a bitter and deadly enemy access to the cosmic power of the Azimuth Horizon.*

As he mused over the situation, Kheren glanced with concern at Captain Gould and noticed the empty exec chair at his left. The Andorian's four eyes went back to the main viewer with apprehension.

*IF... these are really who they appear to be...*

Gould stood up and moved around the bridge as he talked.

"Mister Vincent, due to the Lotus's hull condition, use of the ablative shielding will be mandatory. And, as we are running low on torpedoes, if you can borrow some from the rest of the fleet, please do so... Otherwise we will only be useful as a diverting target."

He then noticed the former commanding officer of the Artemis eyeing his empty first officer's chair but made no quick actions on the idea that it inspired.

"Captain Kheren... a word?"

As he spoke, he moved to the far end of the bridge.

The Andorian followed him with a completely frozen face. Gould kept his voice low but not overly secretive.

"Captain, I find myself in need of a first officer, preferably one with ship board experience. But I would not wish to presume on you to step down to the rank of second in command under me, so... is there anyone you'd like to suggest for this position?"

He tried to make it clear between the lines that he wanted Kheren for this, but still wanted to leave him a graceful way to decline. Loosing his ship must have had a heavy impact on him, especially considering the inherent passions of his people; but then again, work was certainly the best way to get him off any sullen mood and over his loss... Not to mention that Gould did need him and his invaluable experience, especially with the Azimuth Horizon. No other captain had had more contact with the phenomenon; heck, they unofficially even named the thing after him, as it was under his command that the starship Artemis had first discovered it's existence!

Gould, Lotus Fleet, needed him; and he needed to get back into the action... one way or another.

The way the Andorian looked back at him, it was almost as if he would burst out in laughter; obviously, only the seriousness of their current situation restrained him. But his voice did carry an echo of bittersweet amusement as he answered the Vulcanoid Captain.

"After loosing my ship, I will be lucky if I will even be able to keep my uniform, let alone my rank. Seconding you might very well be my last opportunity at starship command duty... And in this time of need for the Fleet, there is no place or reason to let my ego inflate larger than this... thing out there."

He made a pause to regain his full composure and his tone became as cold as the wind of his homeworld when he spoke next.

"My own first officer would have been ideal for you, but he's otherwise fully engaged in the current operation... which should resume in a matter of minutes now. So... I will be honored to second you, Captain Gould."

He stepped toward the chair at the left hand of the captain's and stood before it.

"This feels like old times."

As he sat in it, it felt indeed like it was just yesterday that he had sat in this very chair, during the Borg Invasion. And it somehow felt also like a closure, the end of a cycle for him.

At least, if this was to be his last command duty, it would be where his whole Starfleet career had soared since his first deep space assignment; the flagship of Lotus Fleet.

And now, he immediately fell into the familiar role:

"Captain, the shuttles have all exploded and the containment ring is in place. We now have less than two minutes to implement the inverted ion pulse emission... Awaiting the word, Sir."

The Lotus was as ready as she would ever be, as Gould watched the timer expire.

"Activate the pulse, Sainthill. Vincent keep your eyes on the scope, I don't want any surprises while we're trying to save the universe.. no pressure here," He said it with a look of anxiety while glancing at Kheren.

"Aye, Sir," Josh replied. "It appears that the enemy force is heading towards the group of vessels on the other side of the anomaly, so we should have some time. I'll keep my eyes on the sensors just in case there are more coming this way."

Now back in an active role, Kheren started immediately by familiarizing himself with the ship. On the armrest monitor of his exec chair, he brought up the refit specs of the Lotus. Knowing already the former specs of his old ship where he had served from Security Ensign to Lieutenant Commander first officer, he instantly spotted the most important change... and his tactical planning mind was already at work before he even finished reviewing them all.

As they initiated the final phase of their operation, he addressed the commanding officer of the flagship with a calm, soft tone, mostly for his ears.

"Captain... the Lotus is now equipped with an experimental version of the original Federation transwarp drive, which requires no transwarp conduit at all. I summarized that it could probably be used only once in its current untested state, but that means we can still finish our mission here and then get to the Alsea's sector in time to assist them... if things come to worst."

He already guessed Gould's next concern and answered before he voiced it.

"As for torpedoes; you still have most of your probes on board. Mister Syntron is already quite familiar with converting torpedoes into probes and established a working protocol to do it in a very short time. He... logically... can do the reverse as easily... especially considering that most of the crew that assisted him with this are on board this ship."

"Assign whoever you need. I wouldn't want to show up to a fight all bark and no bite."

The flagship commanding officer then contacted engineering.

"Gould to Adams; looks like we're going to need that transwarp drive after all. Make sure it's ready and run a system simulation against the damage to our substructure. It wouldn't do us much good to get there and fall apart."

"She'll be ready, Sir. I've just applied another patch of bubble gum to the fracture and I'm sure it'll hold a while longer." Adams said cheerfully.

Realizing Kheren was unaware of the exact current state of the ship, Gould quickly explained the meaning of the odd comment.

"During our fight with the Klingon dreadnought, they scored a lucky hit and damaged our substructure rather severely. That and staying at extended high warp circling the anomaly has only made matters worse. So far, the Lotus has held together... but we need to keep an eye on her."

He patted his armrest nervously.

"When this is all over, we might both be out of a ship."

"Let's hope we have enough bubble gum then," the Andorian said.

When he saw the smiles and stifled laughs his words brought upon almost everyone around him, he almost smiled himself.

*At last I got it right!* he silently congratulated himself.

Human humor was so difficult to master... but what a tool it was when facing the direst odds; what testament to the uniqueness and valor of the Human spirit it conveyed in circumstances such as theirs. Kheren had tried so hard for years to "get it"... It seems the bonding he had made with Tyvya and Lyrya had given him more than a second chance at life...

Getting back to the present, he opened the intraship channel as he spoke to Syntron, the only one who had not laughed... but his raised eyebrow had been enough for his former captain.

"All crewmembers of the Artemis; report to forward and rear torpedo magazine chamber on the double; implement probe-to-torpedo conversion of all class VIII and IX probes. Mister Syntron will oversee you shortly after we have dealt with the anomaly."

As he got confirmation from his crew, Kheren turned again to Gould.



"That will give us only twenty photon torpedoes, Captain... but if we augment their yield with trillithium resin, like the Romulans do with their plasma torpedoes, they should pack quite a punch. In the same manner, we could use an old twenty-third century idea and get more power output to the phasers by channeling their power input from the warp engines... as they did on the Loknar class destroyer back in those days... assuming they survive the transwarp trip of course."

"With only twenty torpedoes, we're going to need some more power to the phasers," Lieutenant Vincent said. "If we need to use our armor, those twenty torpedoes will be all that we have. I can send one of my security teams to lend a few extra hands to Adams."

Gould thought it over but dismissed the idea.

"If it comes down to fighting without the armor, we'll need every bit of power to maintain the structural integrity field, a little more to the phasers won't change the outcome much if we're in formation... but I'll be damned if I'll have to be rescued in the middle of the battle because the ship's falling apart."

He then mused aloud a moment.

"Besides... if it takes more than that with the whole fleet there, I don't think much of our chances."

He regretted saying it even as it came out of his mouth. A starship captain should never sound discouraged about something like this. If they did indeed run out of torpedoes during a battle, this moment may play out badly later in the minds of his crew.

He tried to reverse the damage.

"But it won't be just us this time will it? If it comes down to it, we'll do our part but, this time.. their facing all of us. God help them."

"I still recommend we at least prepare the relays for phaser amplification, Captain," Kheren retorted with his usual calm tone. "If and when the armor fails, and especially if shields fail as well, we might need that cover fire if we are just to survive a bit longer. And it will more than add a little, as you know; doing so will double our firepower. Yes, it might fry those relays eventually, but when and if we get down to this point, it won't matter much then... However, those few more moments could give us the little edge to ensure victory... or time to evacuate before being destroyed."

The Andorian was showing the multiplanning mindset that had justified Starfleet in rushing him into command of a starship. He never settled with just a plan B like almost everybody else did, but always had a plan C, D and even E in mind as well... and always in the forefront of them all, the safety of the crew. That's why he had succeeded in accomplishing the miracle of losing a four million ton starship without a single loss of life... and obviously intended to repeat the feat on the Lotus... if things came to worst.

But here, it was Vi'Rell Gould's decision to make and, despite being of the same rank, Kheren assumed fully his exec role; he provided his advice while he made sure everyone was clearly aware that the flagship captain was the one in command.

At first this annoyed Gould but that soon faded into the back of his mind and he just nodded

"Never hurts to be ready for anything, make it so number one."

A slight smile crossed his lips. He'd actually managed to forget for a second how much they tended to disagree, but if he denied him this suggestion, the Lotus would be worse off for it. It's always good to have a back up plan, as long as you don't over do it of course.

"Aye, Captain," answered the Andorian and he nodded to Security and tactical Chief Vincent before using the ship intracom to send the necessary instructions down to engineering and the weapons rooms.

Then, once everything planned was fully ongoing, he looked up at the main viewer to observe their critical last part of their operation; the one that would either save two universes... or damn them all.

\* \* \*

At the same moment, aboard the Alsea, freshly-minted Captain Oseno Jureth heard the frantic call of Lotus Fleet's Commander and could scarcely believe his ears. The Romulans, and Klingons together and they were headed straight for Lotus Fleet. Moreover, they were headed straight for his ship. Once this realization dawned on him, his mind switched into tactical mode. Somehow between the Alsea and what was left of the Spectre, they had to fire the required ion pulse while keeping the Romulans and Klingons at bay. He knew he only had one choice and he knew it might mean losing lives, but the ion pulse had to be fired.

"Tactical, can you confirm Starbase 10's sensor readings?"

"Aye, Sir," replied Cat Steele. "I've got them in between bursts of interference from the Horizon, Sir."

Jureth nodded and opened a channel to engineering.

"Oseno to Engineering; Mister Lire, can the Alsea separate?"

"Sir, I told you earlier, if we separate, there is no putting her back together, and I can't promise the two other micro cores will hold up."

Jureth thought about the engineer's assertion for a moment, but only for a moment. Separating the Alsea would increase their small battle group's fire power and the alpha and gamma sections could defend the beta section while it fired the ion pulse.

"I'm sorry, Mister Lire," he told the man "but we have no choice. I want you with the primary core, but I want your two best engineering teams to spin up the two micro cores and prepare for multi-vector assault mode."

Thompson was silent for a moment before responding with a sullen "Aye Sir, Lire out."

Jureth looked over at his Cardassian science officer.

"Mister Tor, report to the secondary battle bridge. You will need to transfer your program to the command console there and use it to fire the ion pulse when the time is right. You will be in command. I'm sending Steele and Wynn with you along with Lire's engineers."

He turned to Cat Steele.

"Cat, take Celes team and protect the engineers and Mister Tor at all costs."

Cat Steele looked at her friend with intensity in her eyes. This was what they had all signed up for; to protect the Federation, its people and, in this instance, the galaxy.

"Aye, Sir."

As the officers left the bridge, bound for their positions, Jureth hailed the Aegis and the Spectre.

"Alsea to Aegis and Spectre; I assume that you heard Fleet Captain Samji. There is a combined Klingon-Romulan battle group headed our way. I am making preparations to take the Alsea to multi-vector assault mode. Our primary and tertiary sections along with the Spectre will engage the enemy while the Alsea's secondary section will fire the ion pulse at the required time. Under no circumstances can the enemy ships be permitted to disrupt the firing of the pulse. Aegis...get yourselves to a safe distance and try to stay out of the line of fire."

"Aegis here," came the unmistakably rich voice of the Deltan Doctor in command of what remained of the starship Artemis, etched with obvious controlled tension. "We concur. We already have much experience in hiding ourselves from detection with the anomaly; we will proceed with the operation... and nobody will see us. But, Captains... try to reason with them. Send them all our data about the anomaly and our operation, ask them to review it, maybe even join us in the effort. It would have worked before with the Romulans if the Shavok commander had been reasonable..."

Elliago then stopped for a moment, as if interrupted by some thought just occurring to him... A moment later, he spoke again, his smile even heard in his voice.

"Captain Oseno... dispatch an... escort to your main transporter room; we have a special guest for you that should help you to find a possible peaceful solution... at least with the Romulans. Standby..."

Once acknowledgement was received, there was an shimmering column of light coming on the pad of transporter room 1 of the Alsea, which materialized into the form of a tall, lean, grey-haired and dark-eyed, pointy-eared and heavy-browed man in a Romulan Admiral uniform.

Without moving, the old Rihansuu looked straight at the security guards welcoming him and spoke with an authoritative tone yet filled with both respect and urgency.

"Tell your commanding officer that Admiral Tomalak of the Romulan Star Empire needs to speak with him immediately."

The security officer in the lead of the transporter room detachment, the Vulcan T'Lana, raised an eyebrow toward the aged Romulan now standing in front of her. She had, of course, read about the man who had battled numerous times with Captain Jean-Luc Picard, such things were required reading at the Academy, but she did not understand what he had been doing aboard the Artemis bridge module. Nevertheless T'Lana tapped her combadge

"T'Lana to bridge. Captain, our visitor is here."

"Who is it, Lieutenant?"

"Admiral Tomalak, Sir."

There was a pause on the other end and T'Lana had no doubt that her captain was having some of the same thoughts she had had. Oseno was not highly logical being Bajoran, but she found him a capable commander even through all of the stress he must be under.

"Escort him to the bridge immediately, T'Lana. Oseno out."

T'Lana motioned to the other two security officers and to the Admiral and with her in the lead the small contingent made their way from the Alsea transporter room to the nearest turbolift as red alert lighting lit the passageways of the Prometheus Class warship.

The turbo lift whisked them to the bridge and as they entered Jureth, who had been seated in the command chair stood and turned to faced them. He nodded to T'Lana indicating her involvement was complete and she dismissed the security detail before returning to the tactical station.

Oseno sized up the Romulan who stood in front of him now. Jureth had heard of the man, certainly, there wasn't a Starfleet officer who hadn't. His encounters with the Enterprise-D were legends of a sort particularly one in which Captain Picard had gotten the drop on then Commander Tomalak with a trio of Klingon Birds of Prey as his backup. Looking at Tomalak now Jureth couldn't possibly imagine the circumstances that had allowed the admiral to end up aboard the Artemis. Perhaps he would ask Captain Kheren about it if he ever had the chance.

"Admiral, I am Captain Oseno, commanding officer of the Alsea. The good Doctor seems to think you can help us get out of this somehow. We tried reasoning with the Romulan battle group your people sent to launch torpedoes into the Horizon. They weren't in the mood to talk, and neither was Captain Jar'rod the last time we encountered him."

Jureth recalled the incident where the Alsea had handily dismantled a group of Klingon ships and likely would have destroyed Jar'rod's Negh'var if Admiral Redding hadn't intervened. He knew Jar'rod would not be interested in negotiation.

"What makes you think, Sir, that this encounter would be any different?"

The Admiral's sneer, made famous by History itself, was but for a moment glimpsed on his starkly etched face before he took a most authoritative and official posture and tone of voice to speak.

"What *I* think, or *you* for that matter, *Captain*, is irrelevant. We try nothing and we have a galactic war on our hands. And this is *exactly* what my people thought all along of *your* intentions with this... *thing* out there."

He gestured towards the screen and the ominous glare of the Azimuth Horizon. Then he sighed.

"I have reviewed your data and I know now that we were sorely mistaken. And it seems a few of us are still. And it's not just a question of security for the Empire, but of preventing the whole universe to burn. We Rihansuu are proud and wary, Captain Oseno... but we are not fools... not all of us."

He straightened himself before continuing, resuming his official mien.

"I am not only an Admiral of the Empire, but the *senior* Admiral of the Imperial Navy. My word carries the highest level of authority, save for the Empress herself. When I will command the Romulan fleet to turn back, they *will* obey... or else be branded for all eternity as traitors to the Empire, like that fool commander of the Shavok, who's name shall never be spoken again."

The famous sneer now came up as Tomalak saw the doubt in the Bajoran's eyes.

"Don't dismiss what I have just said, Federation. Your people have no sense of Honor at all, so I understand why you do not grasp what I have just said. We are creatures of duty, Captain. To us, life is utterly, totally meaningless without it; disobeying a superior officer is nothing less than condemning your very soul and that of your entire family, for all generations before and after your own... not only in the eyes of others, but in your own heart. Only a demented one like he who shall not be named again could ever even consider such a thing... unless... he had been *ordered* to act in this fashion."

The elderly Romulan officer could see that Jureth was starting to understand where he was getting at. But nevertheless, he spelled it out.

"Only another Admiral could have done so... or the Empress herself. In one case or another, it spells treachery, as plain as this alleged Klingon-Romulan joint attack does. Whoever ordered one or the other will be denounced as the vilest traitor of our Empire's History, along with anyone associated with him... or her... even their entire family, if these ship commanders refuse *my* order. Not only because I am senior Admiral, but also because I can now claim to the Right of Vengeance for the assassination attempt made on my person. They will all know this... in their *heart and soul*, Captain."

A wicked smile now played on his wrinkled face.

"Whoever the traitor is, he... or she... expect me to be dead now. But I am not. And now, disobeying an order from me would bring doom to him... or her. But, obeying me... if I'm proven wrong afterwards, I can be officially and honorably eliminated as a traitor; but if proven right, any high ranking officer responsible for these treacherous acts will be eliminated, thus pruning Fleet Command of bad blood and bringing honor to the throne. And... if the Empress herself would be revealed as having any knowledge of this... Well, who do you think, in the eyes of my entire people, will become most revered as savior of the Empire... and sought after to depose her as the next Praetor?"

Jureth looked into the eyes of the Admiral and he understood. But there was a part of him that didn't believe; Captain Rivers was lying in a stasis unit because of the Romulan battle group they'd encountered earlier in the mission and he was hesitant to give the Romulans or the Klingons another shot at the Alsea.

Still, he knew that, even with the Alsea separated, they would stand little chance against the full force of both empires. If Tomalak was right, and they could turn the Romulan fleet against the Klingons, then Jar'rod would be forced to retreat or die.

If he was wrong, then Jureth would fight to his last breath to make sure the ion pulse was fired at the right moment.

"Alright, Admiral; when they arrive, I will put you on and you can give your order. I just hope you're right; otherwise, we are all going to have a very bad day."

Oseno turned away for a moment and addressed the ship's computer.

"Computer, ready all multi-vector assault mode stations and prepare to engage multi-vector assault mode on my order. On separation, slave tertiary section to primary under computer control."

"Command accepted; standing by for multi-vector assault mode."

Jureth looked at Tomalak.

"Doesn't hurt to be prepared."

"Indeed, Captain Oseno. But if we are to die, it will be with honor, because it will be for our duty, a duty we will all have dedicated ourselves to up to the very last moment... and knowing that our enemies will, very soon after us, lie in ashes from their own treacherous folly... and from *that*."

With his hand, he showed the main viewer where burned the golden and orange fires of the Azimuth Horizon.

\* \* \*

Back on Starbase 10, Samji was frantically looking for solutions to the renewed attack that wouldn't result in what was left of Lotus Fleet being utterly destroyed. He had called a meeting with his senior staff, or those that had not been seriously injured, and they were seated around a table in front of him near a series of windows that happened to show the fire of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly in the distance. It was now bigger than ever, and not only because they had been forcibly moved closer to it...

He stared at it with concern and the heavy weight of responsibility lining the forehead and cheekbones of his youthful but weary-worn dark-skinned face.

He shook off the feeling of dread that came from seeing the anomaly renewed, knowing that it wasn't his issue to solve anymore. He had passed that burden along to the ship commanders that were there to do their duty and put a stop to it, whatever the cost.

Turning toward the officers assembled before him, including his First Officer and Engineer who had both recently returned from the shuttlecraft deployment mission; the very shuttles that were now bits and pieces of debris swirling through the anomaly's edge like dust specks found the massive tornadoes of Earth's American midwest.

He had explained the situation and they were now debating different options.

"We can't contact the Lotus but they've heard the distress call. Maybe they'll provide support," offered Lieutenant Jorga.

"In just under three hours, *if* they set out now," argued Rexil, pointing out that it would probably be too late at that point to do anything anyway. "And they have to stay where they are for Phase 3 of the operation."

"The transwarp drive could still be used," grunted the Tellarite Engineer. "It hasn't been used yet. One jump and after that they'd have to come back to Starbase 10 at low warp to get the drive repaired... but it's an option."

"Of course... if all the variables came together, it is an option," responded First Officer Karen Schmidt. "There's still the issue that the enemy will arrive long before Phase 3 is complete."

She frowned and showed her age through her own set of worry lines defining her forehead. She was actually quite a bit older than Samji himself, but was still very fit and attractive... when she wasn't running on no sleep for the last thirty hours, like now.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," Samji snapped. His usual calm demeanor was breaking down under the stress. "Let's not talk about what they might do. Let's talk about what *WE can* do!"

The silence that followed was not encouraging.

"There just isn't enough time, Sir," finally responded the tactical officer on duty. The young Ensign was looking down while he said this, as he was not too keen to give bad news to his superior. "There is approximately forty-five minutes left before they could even possibly get there. Perhaps the Alsea and Spectre will finish their part of the operation and be able to retreat in time. They are fully aware that they'll stand a much better chance tactically if the fight occurs here, near the Starbase."

"It is indeed likely that they will follow them here," Karen agreed. "At this point, taking the Starbase is a better move for them than messing with the anomaly more. Both the Klingons and Romulans will likely see this as a useful if not necessary base of operations and, after our presumed defeat, will fight amongst themselves to claim it."

"I'd rather not leave that to chance..." replied Samji, drifting off wearily.

"Sir... you may have to contact Captain Paris," Grok said finally.

He was the only other one to see the communique sent from Rear Admiral Kotari, and was saving this for the inevitable conclusion when there was no other option that could be conceived.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. He's not going to like this," Samji said with a shake of his head.

"Tom Paris? Of USS Voyager's fame? I thought he's been overseeing the new development projects at Utopia Planetia," inquired Commander Schmidt.

At the inquisitive looks in the room, Samji summarized his classified information to them.

"He has... but they have sent him to bring us one of his new designs: a heavy-explorer that they've been designing and building for eighteen months now. They decided that we need the support. It's apparently the most top of the line engine built to date, designed by Captain Paris himself, and more importantly: it presumably has a stable transwarp drive."

Eyebrows were raised at this statement, in anticipation and excitement, even from the usually up-to-date Tellarite. They were all aware of the Lotus' current transwarp drive, which as far as they knew had not been tested yet. It was a cobbled-together project by Starbase 10 Engineers from salvaged Borg sphere and cube parts following the invasion, but it was inefficient and required a massive amount of power to operate; and as Sangliar had mentioned, it could only be used once without the need to repair it again, which was a massive undertaking made easier at a starbase.

The new engine was likely also made possible by salvaged Borg tech recovered by that devastating war. Only this time instead of being pieced together in a hurry, it was slowly and methodically examined, researched, and reverse-engineered by dozens of technicians and engineers at Utopia Planetia. Therefore, it would be stable and efficient; the first one ever to come out of Starfleet.

"Back at Starfleet Headquarters, he's occasionally informed me of how he's managed to go thirty-eight years without going into transwarp and intended to never attempt it again. I'm going to have to ask him to break his streak."

Following the excitement were confused looks accompanying the obvious question hanging in the air. It finally was addressed again by Samji.

"They had to rush the ship out of drydock early and the drive has not been thoroughly tested. They wanted to allow time for that to occur here."

Silence again fell into the room. It was of Historical note that the last time Starfleet attempted to harness transwarp travel, it had resulted in utter failure; partly from sabotage, but mostly because of scientific and technical limitations. Even the Borg had only managed to achieve it at the cost of titanic artificial conduits, and even then only to reach but a few fixed galactic positions, which made it barely on par with the more autonomous but equally constraining and even more complicated quantum slipstream drive.

"It seems the only option, however," he continued. "I will get on the comm and ask him to get as close to the Alsea and Spectre as he can manage. They still won't be a match for the full enemy force, but they can cover the backs of the Alsea and Spectre as they high-tail it back here."

And with that, the meeting was dismissed... but not before Doctor Michaels, silent up to that point, asked one remaining question.

"Sir, if I may ask... what is the name of this new ship?"

Samji had been purposefully avoiding answering this question, but he finally had to smirk at the irony of what he was about to say...

"It's the U.S.S... Horizon."

And with that, Samji left the conference room with a half dozen officers behind him looking wide-eyed at each other in astonishment, before continuing straight through Ops to his personal office to make that all-important call.

A moment later, the quadrant-wide well-known face of Captain Tom Paris appeared on the viewer in Samji's office. He smiled his equally famous charming smile at seeing his old friend and former student.

"Allen," he said, "it's good to see you well. Or I suppose I should call you 'Sir' now!"

"There will be none of that," responded Fleet Captain Samji in mock anger as he smiled back.

After so many years, he could never imagine his former Starship Design instructor and thesis adviser calling him "Sir". But despite the warm feelings and proud remembrances, he suddenly became serious again and looked into the wrinkled but healthy face of his old mentor capped with a mop of greying, dirty-blond hair.

"We could really use your help, Tom."

"I hear you have quite a doozy on your hands... and that you're givin'em hell. Good job, Allen," he said in support to try to ease the tension.

Then became more serious himself.

"I'm sorry Starfleet couldn't give you more support. There's more on the way, but they had short notice and everyone's still recovering from the Borg War."

"Even you it seems," Samji said, pointing to a still reddish scar across the old Captain's face.

"Yeah, I thought I was a goner," confirmed Paris. "Until I saw all those cubes just explode in front of my eyes. I've dealt with many cubes in my days on Voyager, but that was one for the books."

Despite his position on Utopia Planetia, Paris, along with many other captains who were thought to be in retirement had been recalled to command warships. Especially those closer to Sol, due to how far the Borg had been able to penetrate into Federation space. The Borg were no more but there were still threats looming over the horizon, both the cosmic phenomenon and the figure of speech one, as witnessed by current events; and so, Starfleet had been reluctant to dismiss the veterans immediately after the war, thus why Tom Paris was still on the active duty roster.

Turning back to the situation at hand, Paris spoke with a calmness he might not have been truly feeling.

"Well, we're about seventy-five minutes away, Fleet Captain. What else can I do for you?"

"You're not gonna like it..." warned Samji.

"Uh oh. Do I need to be seated?" the elder man joked.

"How would you feel about testing out that fancy new transwarp drive?" Samji asked.

Paris' previously jovial face turned instantly into a frown.

"No..."



"Fraid so. We need you to go to these coordinates as fast as you can."

Samji sent him the details and he looked over it.

"If it works, it would cut our trip down by about 95%," Paris replied as he punched in a few calculations while performing some of them in his head. "Would put us there in about 8 minutes."

"That would be fantastic. Don't worry, I'm sure it will be fine. You've gone through before... if you hadn't you'd still be out there in the Delta Quadrant, right?"

"Yeah, thanks to a little help," Tom responded, speaking of a visit they had from a future Janeway who had guided them through. It was also his engine this time and he knew everything about it. "We'll provide your officers whatever assistance we can... Sir," he added, in respect, despite Samji's wishes. "You can count on that."

"I know, Captain," Samji replied in an equal show of respect. "Best of luck."

And with that, he closed the comm and sat back, realizing that it was pretty much all up to them now. All he had to do was wait...

And hope.

\* \* \*

"We're ready for transwarp on your mark, Sir", said the young helmsman aboard the USS Horizon.

"Engage," said Captain Paris, not without a slight bit of hesitation in his voice.

The ship lurched from its previous speed of Warp 9' streaking field of stars into a conduit-like realm of long streaks of light that hurled them forward toward Starbase 10 at a speed approximately two hundred and fifty thousand times the speed of light. Not being the true theoretical maximum transwarp that he had experienced once in his life, it was not instantaneous. However, they did arrive in a fraction of the time it would've taken them previously; in eight minutes, they were sitting between Starbase 10 and the Alsea, about five hundred million kilometers away from the Azimuth Horizon. Even at that range, the anomaly could be seen burning in the distance like a globe of incandescent fire.

"Set a course for the Alsea's position," ordered Paris.

But just then, a squadron of Klingon ships dropped out of warp in front of them.

"Klingons, Sir," said the Tactical officer. "Two Negh'Var class battle cruisers and half a dozen Birds of Prey."

"Hail them," ordered Captain Paris.

"They're not responding, Sir," said the Tactical officer. "They're charging weapons!"

"Shields!" Paris ordered. "Red alert!"

The Birds of Prey began circling, firing their disruptor beams at the large heavy explorer. The ship attempted evasive maneuvers as its massive saucer section, which was slightly bigger than that of a Galaxy-class, and quite similar in shape, away from the direct line of fire.

"Point us in the direction of the Alsea," Paris said to the Helmsman.

"Course plotted and liad in," the pilot responded swiftly.

The captain turned his blue eyes to the Tactical officer.

"Target their engines."

The Horizon had the ability to fire dual phaser beams from all six arrays and the Birds of Prey were quickly disabled, although they continued their fire on the large ship.

"Shields at thirty-seven percent," the Tactical officer said. "No damage to our structural integrity."

Just then the bridge shook. A torpedo hit from one of the Negh'Vars slightly penetrated their shields and caused hull damage on the aft ventral hull.

"So they want to play it that way, huh," Paris said. "Quantum torpedoes, full spread."

The Tactical officer fired a volley from the aft launchers and disabled the attacking Negh'Var's engines as well.

"Get us out of here," Paris ordered and the ship jumped to warp 1.

As speed increased, the Helmsman said, "Sir, I'm having trouble getting past warp 5."

"Damage?" Paris asked.

"Not sure, Sir. It does look like one of their beams got a lucky shot on our port nacelle."

"Paris to Engineering. What seems to be the problem?"

"They knocked out one of our anti-matter fuel injectors, Sir. We're working on it."

"Fine, Paris out," he replied and then said to the helmsman. "Get us there as fast as you can, Ensign."

"Aye, captain."

The grey haired officer in the command chair then looked at the blue-collared officer sitting in the chair to his left. It was the new medical command chair that Lotus Fleet itself had introduced and that was now becoming the standard on every new Federation starship; something their old EMH would certainly have appreciated back in the days on board Voyager.

"Get me Starbase 10," he then ordered the ship's counselor sitting there.

"Samji here," said the Fleet Captain's image a moment later on the shiny new viewscreen.

"Fleet Captain, we got in a little bit of a scuffle with Klingons. You may have some coming your way, but we slowed them down a bit. They'll have to repair their warp engines first."

"Thanks for the warning, Tom," said Samji. "Minimal damage I hope?"

"We scratched a little paint and are having a few engine problems, but nothing your dedicated corps of Engineers can't polish up when we get back. We're well on our way to see what we can do for the Alsea."

Samji nodded and the viewscreen returned to the stars streaking by in the more familiar pattern of standard warp speed as they headed to their new destination a little slower than they had anticipated.

And at that very moment, the Azimuth Horizon began to stretch against the containment loops that had been put in place and connected by the shuttle explosion. Certain areas were already showing an intense buildup of plasma fire that would've already exploded directly outward had it been able to break through, just like a solar flare trying to escape the radioactive fission occurring in a star.

Luckily, some of the other Lotus Fleet ships were right on cue to begin the containment. Their respective science officers had already been preparing their deflector dish to emit the inverted ion pulse as clearly detailed by Lieutenant Commander Syntro. On the order of Captain Onia of the Wisconsin, Captain Speaker-of-Names of the Pittsburgh and Captain Ramabai of the Steamrunner as well, the crew began firing the ion pulses in a dispersal pattern toward as many points on the anomaly as they could target.

The order had been given by Fleet Captain Samji to not let this process wait for more than one or two minutes after the shuttle detonation, so this process had kept the anomaly from expanding out beyond the containment like a balloon with too much air.

Unfortunately it also meant that, in those areas not being taken care of yet by the Alsea, the Spectre, the McKenzie, and even the flagship Lotus, the anomaly would eventually bulge out and break through the unsealed portions.

They had to act soon or be overwhelmed... and then the whole universe along with them!

On the bridge of the USS Alsea, Jureth had followed Admiral Tomalak's purposely dramatic hand motion and, as he gazed also at the infernal horizon of fire, a voice came over the intercom.

"Tor to Captain,"

"Go ahead, Lieutenant"

"Sir, we are out of time! We need to fire our pulses now or the Horizon will start to escape containment through the wormhole and into the other universe!"

"Understood, Mister Tor; standby for separation, Oseno out."

Jureth looked over at Tomalak.

"You may want to hold onto something, Admiral."

He then sat down in the Alsea's command chair.

"Computer, engage multi-vector assault mode."

"Acknowledged; multi-vector assault mode engaged. Ship separation in sixty seconds."

The mechanical servos and struts holding the Alsea together began to disengage as the ship's computer released magnetic interlocks one by one. Slowly, the Alsea separated once more into three battle capable starships, each packing a considerable punch but, when attacking together, gave the warship a task force's tactical superiority over nearly any single foe.

This separation procedure was different from the previous others though, because, as the Prometheus class starship separated, cracks began to appear in several of the struts and interlocks were sheared off. The damage the ship had absorbed during her confrontation with the Romulans and then the Undine now was showing. There would be no putting the Alsea back together in flight this time.

"Multi-vector assault mode active," the computer chimed.

Jureth tapped his combadge.

"Oseno to Tor; begin firing the pulses as soon as you can."

"Aye Sir, we're moving into position now."

Jureth nodded and opened another comm channel, assuming as per regulations his leading role in their tactical group as commander of the most tactically powerful vessel present.

"Spectre, and all remaining Spectre fighter groups, this is Alsea. Our secondary section is commencing firing of the ion containment pulses. All vessels should take up support positions. When the Klingons and Romulans arrive, no one is to fire a shot unless you are fired upon. Alsea out."

Jureth closed the channel.

"T'Lana; show me the secondary section."

"Aye, Sir."

The Alsea's secondary section appeared on the main viewer and, as it did, the first ion pulses left the ship's deflector, bound for the blazing fires of the Azimuth Horizon.

Commander David Rogers, the one now seated in the center seat on the bridge of the USS Spectre, accepted the transmission from the Alsea.

"Understood Alsea."

Sighing heavily and not without some pain, David called sickbay again for an update on Captain Summers' status. It seemed like an hour since the last on, but reality's heightened pace put the actual elapsed time at only fifteen minutes.

"Medical; Bridge. How's the Captain?"

The reply was immediate, likely due to the fact that the staff were getting interruptions from Commander Rogers every ten or fifteen minutes. David had never had any real desire for a starship command of his own. Engineering was his first love, stretching back to his forays around the Alpha and Beta quadrants upon numerous ships; dragged along with his father on his many forays to different worlds.

But there he was now, in the captain's chair... for better or worse.

"Bridge; Sickbay. Captain Summers' condition has not changed. Sickbay out."

Although he could understand their response, David actually felt a grudging admiration in the tart response. He realized he was nagging on them, but the Spectre needed her captain. Especially now, with the azimuth containment happening and the addition of an enemy war group approaching. Turning resigningly away from thoughts of Summers returning to take command, Rogers got down to business: ensuring the safety of all during the final, critical phase of the operation.

Tapping a comm's key on the chair's right arm, David issued orders to the remaining Spectre fighters.

"Squadron 1, take up defensive positions around the Alsea's second section. Stay with it. Squadron 2, deploy defensive pattern Gamma-5. Keep out of sight until needed."

That accomplished, David looked to the helm.

"Get above the Alsea sections, fifty thousand meters. Tactical? Deploy DYCEP. Let's not assume they cannot see us. Soon, maybe, they won't be able to until it is too late for them... and we all might look less threatening if there is a heavy cruiser less around here."

As the plates started to encase the scarred disc-shaped form of the massive Akira vessel, she slowly but methodically disappeared from most sensor equipment and even plain sight. The Alsea sections and fighters knew where she was by tracing her emissions from the maneuvering thrusters but, once the Spectre reached her hovering attitude well above the Prometheus' second battle section and slowed to a stop, even they were hard pressed to locate her nearly invisible bulk.

Hopefully the enemy were also deceived into only noticing the three Prometheus class sections and her one small squadron of fighter protection. The other squadron, magnetically attached to the main Alsea section's pylons, were powered down, awaiting their moment to attack.

If necessary.

It was a tense ninety minutes that the ships of Lotus Fleet went through as they monitored the Azimuth Horizon's taming operation progressing. Their ion pulse dispersal had been deployed as much as could be expected and possible for their small fleet of ships and it was as if water was being poured against the flames of the anomaly while the pulses did their job to seal up the fractured rifts in subspace. The flames that had previously been attracted to the large rifts finally began to dissipate and, thanks to the trilithium probe deployment, the Starfleet officers on the various ships could see that the flames were more show than substance, to their collective relief; like the brilliant light of flames being attracted to kerosene, not incredibly hot like the burning coals of a blacksmith's forge.

They still had to let the fire subside before locking the door, however, so the ships had to remain in place, still monitoring the process, all the while possibly being exposed to attack from all fronts.

The Alsea was the first to encounter such a threat as a D'deridex warbird dropped out of warp within close sensor range, followed by two Valdore warbirds, two Mogaii escorts, and two squadrons of three Birds-of-Prey.

Immediately upon decloaking at weapon's range, the D'deridex in the lead hailed the Federation warship and identified itself as Her Royal Empress' Ship, the I.R.W. Regalis.

Upon hearing the name, Admiral Tomalak, standing on the upper part of the Alsea's bridge, raised an eyebrow... and then the corner of his mouth. If the Empress herself was here, now, it meant only one thing; she knew, somehow, of the supposed demise of her commanding Admiral and was now compelled to take matters into her own hands.

If it was to avenge his death or to profit from it, her reaction upon seeing him alive and well on the bridge of a Federation starship would be immediately telling. Sela was only half-Romulan and even less self-controlled than a Rihansuu, well known throughout two quadrants for her spontaneous, unveiled reactions; her features and tone of voice alone would instantly reveal the truth.

Then, he would know exactly what to say.

At a nod from Captain Jureth, the communications officer opened the channel allowing the Romulan woman who was the leader of the entire empire to appear on the viewscreen. The faintest of age lines showed on her otherwise youthful looking face, belying her age of sixty-five. Her sunny blond hair, otherwise unheard of among Romulans, was due to her human side and a trait passed down from her mother. It was an odd counterbalance against the darkness in her eyes and in her soul. Her v-shaped brow, heavy for a Human but light for a Romulan, furrowed in contempt as she stared down the young Bajoran Captain who now had the role of representative to the entire United Federation of Planets thrust upon him due to these current unusual circumstances.

"Captain," she said with her soft, clear voice where seemed to perpetually echo some barely restrained arrogance, "we are hereby seizing this area of space and the anomaly and starbase within it for the Romulan Empire. I suggest you run back to your starbase and disseminate this information to your Starfleet Command, so as to have time to prepare and make way for our arrival."

"I am Captain Oseno Jureth of the Federation starship Alsea. As you well know, this is Federation space. Laying claim to it, or firing upon any Federation ships, would be considered a violation of the treaty and an act of war. Even with your Klingon friends, Your Highness, you can't possibly hope to take the starbase. Now that I've told you what you already know, Your Highness, I have someone here who would like to speak with you."

Jureth turned and nodded to Tomalak.

"Go ahead, Admiral."

The grey-haired Romulan Admiral walked calmly up to the viewscreen, standing beside, but slightly behind the Captain in a show of respect. He addressed his Empress in a pleading tone with arms extended, hoping to calm her murderous mind and bring it back to logic. After so many years, the Admiral realized the trait so revered by his cousins from across the stars had some advantages.

"With all due respect, Your Highness," he began, "you do not have all the facts. It is my duty to make sure that my Empress is aware of all such details so that she may make an informed decision. Captain Kheren of the Artemis has provided me with information that leads me to believe that our current plan will indeed result in the destruction of all space, Federation and Romulan and Klingon, alike."

"Traitor!" seethed Sela with surprise at seeing him alive, "You're the one who murdered your compatriots in the Shavok and defied my wishes. Why should I listen to you when I have already dismissed these so-called 'facts' when they were perpetuated by Starfleet? Our own scientists disagree."

"Again with respect, Empress, our own scientists are blind... or afraid of you."

His voice rose in anxiety and frustration.

"I can see it with my own eyes that what Starfleet says is a fact... an important one!"

Tomalak calmed himself and continued.

"I know you're afraid, my Empress. After all we've been through, with an anomaly like this already destroying our world, we all are. We're afraid Makar, our new home, will be next. But if you continue in this course of action, you'll be making worse the very thing you're afraid of... and dooming us all."

Then he straightened himself and his voice took a firmer, more decisive tone.

"And I am *not* a traitor, Empress Sela. You of all people should know that it is well within my right to execute a subordinate who disobeys my orders or attempt to eliminate me. Despite that fact, it was not I who killed him or destroyed our ship. It was he who forced that upon himself."

Sela sat back at this, her temper receding.

"We need... time... to deliberate on this."

Then, not wanting to appear weak or complacent, she added:

"As for you, Captain, I would strongly suggest you do as I say. Do you really believe this is all the ships we will bring? Our previous attempt on your starbase was one of stealth and subterfuge. This time, we will launch on all-out attack and here are some things that *you* already know. Even with seven ships, your starbase was almost lost in a battle with one borg cube. Your current vessels have already been either decimated or put through battle with at least four different enemies in the last few days. You will not survive an all-out assault and you are well aware of it. And thanks to the Borg, you have no support available in the vicinity. Retreat... before it is too late."

And with that, the viewscreen cut out and returned to a view of the Romulan ships either motionless or, like the Birds-of-Prey, circling around their Empress' ship to protect her.

Tomalak barely restrained a sigh as he looked at the screen. Then, he turned to Oseno.

"Captain, I think it is time for me to take my leave of you. The longer I stay on board your ship, the more my compatriots and my Empress might think that I am held hostage... a futile gesture against us, as you well know; we do not take or care for prisoners. But we do care to avenge one of our own, especially if he seemingly sacrificed his life in the line of duty. Time for me to return and further try to defuse this conflict... before both our people suffer irreparably and for no reason."

Jureth nodded.

"Very well, Admiral, you are certainly free to leave. I on the other hand am not. I must maintain my position until we are certain the Azimuth Horizon is contained."

"I would expect nothing less from you. *Jolan Tru*, Captain..."

With a respectful military bow, Tomalak saluted the Bajoran and followed the security guard that escorted him to the nearest transporter room. Without a word, he stepped onto the transporter pad and waited for the technician to beam him over to the Romulan flagship.

After a moment, the woman behind the console looked at him with a slightly apologetic look.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but I can't raise the Regalis to get transporter authorization; communications are jammed at the source."

The old Rihansuu smiled then.

"Standard procedure in a battle zone, Ensign. Please allow me..."

Tomalak stepped down the transporter pad and went to the console, closely watched by the guards at the door with his escort already reporting everything that was happening to the bridge.

*They're not the feeble fools so many of us think they are*, thought the Romulan Admiral.

But then again, he had had more direct dealings with the Federation than most officers of the Imperial Navy, and not with the least of them, starting with legendary captain Jean-Luc Picard of the most famous USS Enterprise. He for one certainly knew better... but to see them in action had a sobering effect on him.

*No one will ever win any war here today... Today is not the day for the Romulan Star Empire to conquer the galaxy; today is the day to make sure we all continue to live in one.*

As he thought so, his fingers tapped a certain command code on the console, one only known to a very few circle of high-ranking commanding officers of the Empire. It was meant to save from capture their most important people from any possible enemy abduction, when resources were available.

And here, they certainly were.

The code became instantly obsolete the moment it was used... but it did its one time job perfectly; it went right through Romulan scrambling codes and it would soon be followed by the response program it was planned for.

As Tomalak returned toward the transporter pad, a form shimmered into existence right in the middle of it.

It was Sela herself.

"What the... *Tomalak*?"

"We need to talk, My Lady Empress,"

And as he said so, Tomalak had stepped up to her and embraced her as the transporter beam caught them again and dematerialized the both of them to send them back to the nearest safe place for them the computer program could detect; to the bridge of the Romulan command vessel.

The Alsea's security detail, led by Ensign Garth Allen, immediately started to react, but before they could move the two Romulans were gone. Allen looked at his teammates, and at the transporter chief who could only shrug her shoulders and shake her head as if to say she had no idea what had just happened. On the bridge the Alsea's computer detected the transport and the console on the command chair began chiming at Jureth.

"Bridge to transporter 1, what's going on down there? Is the Admiral safe?"

"Sir, Allen here; we were having trouble transporting the Admiral. He entered a code in the console and a Romulan female beamed in and then they both beamed out."

Jureth could scarcely believe his ears. What had Tomalak done?

"Who was the female Romulan?"

"Not sure, Sir, but I think it was their Empress."

Jureth had to consciously prevent his jaw from dropping to the floor in front of the bridge crew. He knew that Admiral Tomalak was bold, and devious, but surely he did not kidnap his own Empress!

"Mister Wynn, hail the lead Romulan vessel. Find out if Admiral Tomalak is aboard."

Wynn attempted to carry out the order, but after a moment shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Sir, no response. Communications to the Romulan ship are being actively jammed."

"Send the request on all channels and all frequencies, repeating until we get an answer."

"Aye, Sir."

From the command chair, Oseno opened a coded channel to the other Federation ships.

"This is Alsea to all vessels; nobody so much as flinch."

Jureth suddenly had a very bad feeling about all of this.

\* \* \*



Snowfire was very, very tired.

It didn't look like it. In fact, had one looked at most medical readouts that could be taken regarding the young Ilythirii at the particular moment, she would seem perfectly fine. The issue was not so much tiredness of the body, which she was keeping at bay through a stim patch that she knew quite well she was going to pay for later, it was fatigue of the mind; which was in itself a far more dangerous thing considering the current situation.

But she had the entire program done now; and Keladry had quadruple checked it.

The McKenzie had completed its ion pulse run swiftly, and was now only a few minutes out from Starbase 10, where she would have a leading role in quite possibly one of the most complex scientific operations in recent Federation history. And Snowfire was, tired. Running a quarter of a starship with your mind and then having to get up not long afterwards and formulate a program with as full a set of redundancies as she could work into it, whilst overseeing the ion pulse operation and just worrying in general... that was rather stressful. And that was combined with worries over power curves and drive equations and...well...not inconsiderable problems with the McKenzie's power conduits, after the whole psionic running of the ship thing which had led to the Science section being forced to rewire half of their systems to route the power shunt through them.

And not to mention the lack of skilled personnel aboard this box of a ship following the engagement against the Horizon's Children.

But it was done. Finally.

The tensor matrix was set, passive sensors reconfigured to project it across the area where the wormhole would form. The deflector array, even after all the abuse it had been subjected to, was online and ready to fire the magneton pulse. The active sensors were a push of a button away from a phase-conjugate graviton beam spread that would seal the wormhole after it had formed. She had even managed to fit in a talk with Hughes and the Captain regarding evasive maneuvers if they were forced to take such action.

In all honesty, they were lucky there. With the passive sensors acting as the conduit for the tensor matrix, the McKenzie would be able to dip and dance to her heart's content... so long as she ended up with her deflector dish pointing at the right place when the right moment came.

She just hoped it would be enough. It had to be.

Because they wouldn't get another chance.

\* \* \*

"Sir... there is another ship coming in."

Jureth looked at his Vulcan tactical officer and sighed although his hands gripped his armrests reflexively, expecting his bad feeling to materialize just about now.

"Klingon?"

"Negative, Sir; and it is not Romulan either, judging by the antimatter warp signature. It is a configuration I feel... quite... familiar with..."

And as T'Lana spoke, it appeared before their very eyes out of the blinding flash of light of warp to impulse transition. It had a vast, circular primary hull, much reminiscent of that of the USS Artemis but much bigger; bigger even than that of a Galaxy class starship. The secondary hull looked in fact much more similar to that same class, although there was a lower part adding several decks under its belly and the aft section was elongated and thinned much like that of an oversized Intrepid class. Two pylons shot straight out at an angle in a style reminiscent of the old Constitution class but the nacelles were definitely the double-coiled ones of the galaxy design, albeit much longer, following the distinctive ratio to hull of the no less famous Excelsior class.

But despite the resemblance to several previous designs in its overall parts, this was no hodgepodge assembly, but clearly a brand new, shiny design that brought the best of two hundred years of starship development in one, majestic form; and it was as enormous as the D'Deridex of the Romulans, almost looking like a mobile starbase with its sheer size, numerous weapons arrays and multiple shuttle bay doors.

The ship dropped out of warp next to the Alsea, just as the Romulan Admiral was beaming back to the Regalis.

If it had been anyone other than a Vulcan manning the Alsea's tactical console when the vessel appeared on her scopes, the shock would have been quite evident. T'Lana, however reported it much like she did everything else, calmly, and dispassionately.

"Captain, they are hailing."

"USS Alsea, this is Captain Thomas E. Paris, of the USS Horizon. I hear you could use some backup."

Being Bajoran, and unlike T'Lana wearing his emotions nearly on his sleeve, there was almost nothing Jureth could do to prevent the shock from stretching his jaw and creeping into his voice at the astounding sight of the magnificent vessel and getting a call from one of the most famous Starfleet officers alive today to boot.

"Horizon... this is Captain Oseno Jureth of the Alsea. I don't know where you came from... and frankly, I don't care. But, in a nutshell, it seems Empress Sela aboard this D'Deridex is bent on claiming Starbase 10 for herself, though I think Admiral Tomalak is trying to reason with her... But I can't be certain. My secondary section is currently firing inverted ion pulses toward the anomaly in support of our primary mission and the rest of us are just hoping the Romulans don't decide they really want to stop us. So, yes, Captain Paris, we could use some help."

"We've got your back, Captain," responded Paris.

"Prepare to raise shields at the first sign of trouble and target the Birds of Prey," ordered Paris to his bridge crew. "Don't make us look aggressive yet; we don't want to be the ones to start something."

At the exact same moment, the same words were uttered by Admiral Tomalak as he addressed the Empress of the Romulan Star Empire, just as they materialized on the pad of the main transport chamber of the IRW Regalis.

"We did not, Admiral; they did! With that... thing out there!" Sela retorted angrily as she promptly freed herself from the taller officer's grasp, then looking at him as he was barely coming to her knee. "You want them to finish off what the Hobus catastrophe started?"

Tomalak had a hard time restraining the crooked smile that stretched his thick lips.

"You know as well as I do what exactly caused the Hobus supernova... But I can tell you this, on my sacred Honor as a Rihansuu officer who gave his entire life in the service of the Empire; the Federation has nothing to do with this... destructive anomaly... at least, nothing more than we do. it is a natural phenomenon from another universe that spilled out into ours because of our use of warp drive... theirs... and the Klingons... and *ours*. And if we interfere in their effort to stop it, it will consume all of space... theirs, the Klingon Empire's... and *ours*."

For a moment, the blonde half-Romulan looked at him with clear suspicion in her eyes. Then she sighed and motioned for him to follow as she stepped down from the transporter platform and out of the room. She kept silent all the while they walked briskly in the agitated corridors of the huge vessel, frantically preparing itself for battle. The ride in the turbolift was equally silent, until she ordered it to stop and seal itself just before bringing them to the bridge.

"I only accept this as fact because of your oath and your name, Admiral," she then began with some frustration edging her clear voice and making her speak faster as she was known to when upset. "When I heard about the Shavok's destruction, I became convinced of Federation intent to wipe us out. And now you're telling me they actually try to save us all?"

"Your Highness, you know very well that I bear no love for the Federation, professionally and personally. Even History knows it... But I must confess that they came to me with indubitable proof of what I just told you... and with no ill will towards us... even when the Shavok Commander, who's name I will never speak again, went against my orders, attempted to assassinate me with his own hand, and then launched an unprovoked attack against Starfleet. Had he succeeded, the Empire... the entire universe, would be condemned by now."

Sela thought long and hard before she spoke again, this time with much more calm and deliberation.

"And why would he, he who's name is now forever gone, disobey you and go against reason like this? He was one of our most trusted officers, your aide for so many years, a decorated ship commander, a war hero... I can't understand how he, of all people, could suddenly turn into such a mutineer, an assassin and a fool like this..."

"Neither can I. But the fact remains... and now, here we are about to do what he had intended to do; start a war with the Federation that would cripple both our cultures... especially ours as fragile as it is after a catastrophe of our own... and allow a cosmic firestorm to wipe everything that's left afterwards."

Again, the Empress of the Rihansuu thought for a moment. The she sighed.

"We need more time to think this, to plan and to prepare. If the Federation is indeed working to save the universe, as they are so fond of doing, we would truly be fools to interfere... for now. But, Admiral, we can not retreat and loose face like this. And we can't either join with them in this endeavor as if we were but their puppets. Our position in the Alpha and Beta Quadrants is tenuous already; doing one or the other would weaken us severely in the eyes of all our enemies... especially the Klingons. They would see this as a major sign of weakness, enough to launch an attack against us."

It was Tomalak's turn to think for a long moment. Then he nodded.

"You are right, of course, my Empress. But here is what I propose; this anomaly surrounds a wormhole giving access to another universe, a pocket universe acording the Starfleet's own data. The USS Artemis, the ship that showed us the truth and honorably defeated the Shavok in a most Rihansuu way, has even been there once herself and confirmed the existence of this new, uncharted, and *unclaimed* territory. If, in exchange of a cease fire and us leaving this part of space, we demand from this... Lotus Fleet, a solemn promise to hold a treaty conference about sharing custody of this wormhole access... and equal share of this new universe..."

Sela's hawk-like blue eyes lighted up as a smile stretched her small lips.

"We would maintain a position of strength, guard ourselves against possible treachery and get new resources for the Empire... all with the help and approval of the Federation! Oh they dare *not* refuse us this! A proposal of peace and collaboration for the benefit of our imperiled people... but with us as equal partners in control... Oh, this would be irresistible to their sensibilities..."

Tomalak shared her smile.

"And if there is one thing these Starfleet officers, especially their ship captains, can be counted on, is to be true to their words. Believe me, I know... "

"So do I... most annoying sometimes... But this will serve us well."

She turned and, still smiling, reactivated the turbolift.

"Glad to have you back, Admiral."

Tomalak simply bowed to the oh so rare compliment from his Empress.

By the time they reached the bridge, both had wiped out their smiles and, all business, stepped into the vast command center of the Romulan battleship. Everyone stood up as they entered, more than a few with eyes widened in awe at seeing in the flesh one of the most celebrated officers of the Imperial Navy. They even smiled when the Empress herself showed him the right chair of the dual command seating customary of Romulan ships. Up until now, she had seated there alone, the ship commander deferently staying up by her left side since they had left their new capital. The gesture showed not only that Tomalak was received as an honored surviving officer from deep inside enemy territory, but as a genuine hero of the Empire... or about to be confirmed as one.

Sela herself sat with a practiced grace and looked up at the viewscreen before her.

"Open a channel with the Starfleet vessels."

"Your Highness," then said the ship commander standing again at her side, "we are under communication jamming, following your prepared strategic plan of attack. We will open fire in less than one..."

"Belay the attack order," she cut off curtly. "We will now prevail with words, not fire."

"I do not think so, your Highness."

In the instant those words were uttered, the sound of disruptor pistols sliding out of holsters was heard.

Across the entire bridge, half a dozen officers were aiming their sidearms at the other half. One at the comm station brought her hand to her own; she was instantly shot, her entire body disintegrating on her seat.

The ship commander's own pistol was right at the temple of Sela. This close and at maximum setting, the shot would not only kill her, but continue right through her and kill Tomalak in the same instant. And now, his voice was as burning as disruptor fire.

"We have worked too long and hard to get to this moment. You will not spoil it and prevent us from preserving our own space from the threat of your alien universe with your despicable feebleness."

The strange words... the despising tone of voice... The last time Admiral Tomalak heard such a speech, it had come right before a treacherous blade had come for his life.

"You... you are *not Rihansuu!*"

Without moving his eyes from the both of them, the ship commander simply smiled.

"Proceed with the attack."

Jureth waited tensely aboard the Alsea for the Romulans to do something...anything... and when the first disruptor shots were fired, it really came as little surprise.

The Alsea rocked, her shields holding, and Jureth's spirits fell slightly. He had hoped that Tomalak could do something to convince Sela to break off her attack, but now the young captain had little choice left to him.

"T'Lana, return fire, focus on disabling their weapons. Computer, execute attack pattern Oseno Alpha-1 and compensate for loss of secondary section."

Jureth keyed open the secure comm channel.

"All Federation vessels this is Alsea; we have been fired on by the lead Romulan vessel and are responding in kind. Weapons free, fire at will. Keep them off our secondary section as long as you can."

The primary and tertiary sections of the Alsea, the latter controlled exclusively by computer, swept forward and swooped toward the lead Romulan vessel, firing phasers and quantum torpedoes as they did so, drawing fire from the Birds of Prey. The two sections crossed over and lined up for another run.

The Spectre and the Horizon both jumped to life, shields raised and weapons charged. They each took on one of the Valdore that were flanking the lead D'deridex, leaving the lead ship to the Alsea.

"Focus fire on that left Valdore," ordered Paris.

Their first attack sweep provided considerable damage to the Romulan warship's weapons and, on the return, they finished the job, effectively taking it out of the fight.

One squadron of Birds of Prey broke off and headed for the secondary hull of the Alsea that was still engaged in the ion pulse operation.

The Spectre was overwhelmed, fighting the remaining Valdore and two Mogaii escorts, being peppered by weapons' fire on all sides. And so, it was up to the Horizon.

"Disable their engines!" Paris ordered and the Horizon took off toward the Birds of Prey, firing their dual beam arrays at all three of them simultaneously.

Two were disabled and adrift before they themselves got the incoming starship into their own firing range, but one was able to make it to the secondary hull and began firing plasma weapons at the stationary ship section.

"We need to protect the Alsea's secondary hull!" Captain Paris ordered. "Take out both his weapons and engines if you can."

The Tactical officer nodded and fired all available phasers and a high yield quantum torpedo salvoes at the Bird of Prey. The weapons and engines were instantly disabled and the final quantum torpedo burst through the shields, taking the port nacelle clean off. The ship veered off toward the anomaly and was pulled apart by one of the sudden plasma ejection pouring out of some remaining subspace fractures not yet closed by the ion pulses.

The Horizon left it there, drifting aflame and began to circle back around toward the main part of the battle.

As soon as the battle started, the Aegis bridge module had backed off to a safe distance on the command of Doctor Nasaro-Myth and was able to oversee the battle from a safe distance. With the sensor work of both Lieutenant Irksos and Lieutenant Baoule, Lieutenant Mrrish helped by giving periodic reports of enemy movements over the secure comm channel that Captain

Jureth opened up. Just then, she noticed a few sensor echoes in the outskirts of the combat zone.

"Horizon, watch your six," Mrrish said.

The reason for her call became evident as a Negh'Var battleship, along with several Klingon Birds of Prey, uncloaked behind the huge federation starship and began firing.

"Aft shields! let's lead them away if we can," Paris ordered.

He wanted to give the Lotus Fleet ships as much time as he could to finish their operation. Fortunately, the Klingon ships took the bait and followed the Horizon more toward the center of the battle, but away from the anomaly and the secondary hull of the Alsea.

"Shields are holding, Sir, but we won't be able to outlast this assault for long," reported the Horizon's Tactical officer.

"Very well; set a course for the anomaly. Raise metaphasic shielding and initiate the Pel program. Let's take advantage of one of the things this ship was specifically built for."

*Let's see if that Klingon courage extends beyond their intelligence,* Paris thought.

Thanks to his wife, he was all too familiar with the courage of the race, but also their agonizingly stubborn persistence. And now, he was actually counting on it.

At that moment, the Alsea's two fighting sections maneuvered in and around the battle continuing to make strafing runs at the Regalis and making themselves the center of the fight. The bridge rocked and the engineering console showered sparks as the ensign manning it dove for the deck.

"Shields at fifty three percent, Captain," T'Lana reported; "tertiary section shields at fifty six percent."

"Status on the warbird?"

"It has sustained moderate damage, shields at sixty percent and damage to propulsion and power systems. Their weapons are well shielded, Sir."

"Status on the secondary section?"

"They are continuing to fire the ion pulses, Sir," T'Lana confirmed after another glance at her sensor readouts. "The Horizon has kept them well protected."

"Keep them focused on us, Lieutenant. Computer, attack pattern Oseno Sierra-2." Jureth ordered

The two sections of the Alsea came nearly together as they sliced through the Romulan formation, taking phaser shots at the various Valdores and Birds of Prey, then they both unloaded a volley of five quantum torpedoes at the Regalis before separating again and diving under the massive warship and emerging on the other side. Unfortunately, maneuvering at only half impulse was costing the Alsea and allowing the ships surrounding the Regalis to have better firing angles on the Federation ship. The primary section shuddered again under disruptor fire and Jureth knew they couldn't keep this up much longer.

"Alsea to Aegis," Jureth said over the comm channel. "What's the status of the anomaly? Are the pulses working?"

"Aye, Captain," reported Nasaro-Myth, after receiving a nod from both Irksos and Baoule, his science officers. "You may stop when you deem it necessary. The anomaly appears now to be within the acceptable parameters established for Phase 3."

"Understood Doctor. Mister Tor, did you hear that?"

"Yes, Sir," came the Cardassian's reply. "We're breaking off now and coming to assist."

"My target, Mister Tor; come into formation and fire at will."

The Alsea, with all three pieces in formation once again, left the Romulan command ship where it was for the moment and focused on one of the Valdore's that had been harassing the Spectre. With her full firepower and her tactical advantage in attacking from several angles at once, Lotus Fleet's most powerful ship hit the Valdore hard and punctured her shields, doing damage to her primary hull and knocking out her main power source, leaving her out of the fight. Jureth then turned his ship back toward the Regalis for another attack run.

\* \* \*

On the other side of the anomaly, Lieutenant Vincent stood on the bridge of the flagship, watching his brand new enhanced sensors closely. The immediate area was clear for now, but the rest of the fleet was heavily outnumbered and taking a beating from the Romulan and Klingon armada.

It seemed that negotiations had ended.

"Captain Gould, the rest of the fleet is likely getting hit pretty hard," the tactical officer reported. "I advise that we jump to their assistance immediately once Lieutenant Commander Syntron is satisfied with our ion pulse activity."

Syntron looked up from the console he shared with Sainthill.

"Correction, Lieutenant. The ion pulse operation has been finalized and has been satisfactory in accomplishing its goal. We are well within the established parameters necessary to begin Phase three. And it is nearing 1900. Captain, if I may begin?"

With a nod from Gould, Syntron checked a few readouts then addressed the tactical chief again.

"Lieutenant Vincent, if you please. The deflector has been adjusted to fire a magneton pulse. While I monitor the sensors, please be prepared to fire on my mark. We may need more than one attempt, so be prepared."

"Aye, Sir," Lieutenant Vincent replied and stood ready at the Tactical console.

"Sixty seconds. I am generating a subspace tensor matrix to 27,354 cochrane's which will prime the area for the artificial wormhole to form."

"Tee minus three, two, one, mark, Lieutenant," Syntron announced and Josh Vincent fired the magneton pulse just at the correct time.

On the McKenzie, science lieutenant Snowfire Keley'sha was doing precisely the same thing. Unfortunately at that moment, the Negh'Vars and Birds of Prey that the Horizon had passed and dhampered earlier now dropped out of warp and began firing on the McKenzie.

"Captain, we would do a lot better if we didn't have any interruptions," Snowfire suggested.

"This is Captain Crist to Starbase 10. Do you have any support you can send? We have Klingons giving us a hard time."

"Aye, this is Fleet Captain Samji. We already have the Republic heading back to your position."

Unfortunately, because of the damages sustained earlier against the Horizon Children forces and having little time for complete repairs, she did not show up soon enough and a torpedo from the Negh'Var shook the McKenzie just as tactical officer Thran was also firing the magneton pulse at exactly 1900. This caused the power to fluctuate.

"It didn't do it!" the Andorian apologetically reported.

"Fire again!" Snowfire ordered, and he complied.

This time, the magneton pulse hit the mark, but it was a few seconds off.

"We may need to do that again in five minutes," Snowfire then warned Crist.

On the Lotus, Syntron was noticing the same thing with the sensors.

"The artificial wormhole is not forming," he reported.

"Damn," muttered Vincent. "Ready on your mark to try again, Mister Syntron."

"Adequate work, Lieutenant," was the response, which could be considered high praise from a Vulcan.

The Republic, now warping in and opening a phaser barrage, was keeping the Klingons busy, although the old Lakota refit Excelsior class cruiser was greatly outmatched by the more modern warships. Again, the Starfleet vessels were taking a beating. The McKenzie used the five minutes to assist, heading straight for one of the Birds of Prey and firing all its phase cannons and quantum torpedoes on its port side. The Bird of Prey limped away and cloaked before the small but powerful Defiant class starship could finish it off.

"Sixty seconds to next magneton pulse, Captain. I need you to face us toward the anomaly again."

"You heard her, Hughes," said Captain Crist. "And try to get us out of their weapons range too if you can."

"I'll do my best, Sir," said Hughes and the little ship zipped away at full impulse after faking out the Klingon ships and making them think that it was heading out for Starbase 10. That gave them ample time to fire the magneton pulse in peace.

"Tee minus three, two, one, mark."

On both ships, the count was given and, this time, the pulses were fired at the exact same second, causing the subspace inversion field to form between the two points and a wormhole suddenly opened. The opening was small on the cosmic scale... barely big enough for a ship to fit through. However, on the Lotus' side where it was basically inside the Anomaly, the matter began pouring through. Plasma fires and debris went swirling into the small opening as if a vacuum hose was sucking up the anomaly itself. The subspace fractures widened and the force began affecting the Lotus.

"Back us off," ordered Captain Gould.

They fought against the pull of both the wormhole and the subspace fractures until they were a safe distance away and the loose items on the bridge stopped moving toward the viewscreen.



The immense plasma tornado burned brighter and brighter as more plasma was collected at the aperture, but after several tense minutes that seemed like hours, the Azimuth Horizon was finally pulled into normal space and then, the opening itself was sucked into the artificial wormhole, which had grown in size since its initial inception to become bigger than even the stable one discovered in the bajoran sector at Deep Space 9.

After the matter in the vicinity was either consumed or dispersed enough to no longer trigger the plasma reaction and render newly formed vertion particles dormant, the wormhole closed.

A few minutes went by in utter silence on the Lotus and then they heard a transmission from Captain Crist.

"This is Crist on the McKenzie for the Lotus. Can anyone hear this?"

Nodding to Syntron, Gould answered.

"Loud and clear, Captain Crist."

"This is Lieutenant Snowfire. We can initiate the phase-conjugate graviton beam I presume?"

"You presume correctly, Lieutenant," now responded Syntron. "The Azimuth Horizon is sealed."

The two science officers then initiated the beam with their respective modified deflector dish. The one on Syntron's side sealed it indefinitely. The one on Snowfire's was sealed with a specific frequency that would be highly classified, presented only to Starfleet Captains on a need to know basis only, rotated frequently, and used as a key only to admit Starfleet ships through.

"Good work," said Captain Gould who then ordered, "Initiate the transwarp drive. We have some fellow ships to assist."

"All hands, prepare for transwarp drive!"

At the command of Kheren, everyone on the bridge and within the entire length of the flagship of Lotus Fleet put on and activated the PIDs his own ship's first engineer had developed for the Artemis launch... a lifetime ago it seemed... and now available to the whole fleet. It would protect and secure every crewmember, seated or not, far more than the old seat restraints would have done at the time of Starfleet's original "Great Experiment" more than a century ago. It was a wise precaution, as what they were going to attempt, although apparently successfully tested by this brand new USS Horizon that had come so swiftly to their aid, had yet to be used on this much older design that was the Intrepid class USS Lotus.

In truth, the experimental new version of the Federation transwarp drive bore no resemblance to the crude conduit-using Borg transwarp technology and was in fact more akin to what the Delta Quadrant reptilian species called the Voth used... and to what Tom Paris had experimented with once during one of the many experiments the USS Voyager had made to find a way to get home... although on a much more measured manner. It was in fact true transwarp, free-navigating beyond the standard warp barrier into a whole new speed scale not unlike that of warpspeed; thus, instead of accelerating from lightspeed by a cubic factor, it did so with warp speed, so that, if transwarp factor 1 was virtually the same as warp 1, which was the speed of light, transwarp 2 was eight times warp 2 or five-hundred and twelve times the speed of light, same as warp 8... but when you got to transwarp 3, it became twenty-seven times warp 3... or the theoretically impossible warp 27... an astounding near-twenty thousand times the speed of light!

No wonder the engines and computer would be compromised after such a feat. At the same speed the USS Horizon had used to come to them, transwarp 4, they would get from their current position to any part of the Anomaly's sector in barely over two minutes!

And so, Kheren did not neglect to activate his own PID and make sure his captain had done the same. better safe than sorry, as Humans said...

*And now, to come and save the say...*

All the while his former first officer had directed the scientific effort of their operation, Kheren had reviewed in real time the military situation around the anomaly. With the Azimuth Horizon's interference now gone, he signaled Lieutenant Sainthill to link a direct sensor data feed to his XO chair armrest console. He was now quite aware of the developing situation on both side of the anomaly's sector and knew how to translate Gould's order into operational directives.

He was momentarily distracted by the specs of this new vessel Starfleet had fielded to assist the Alsea and the Spectre against the Romulan force; it was a masterpiece of starship design, eliciting genuine wonder and admiration from him... and a pang of sadness as he noticed how it resembled in purpose and shape his own lost Artemis.

But his distraction did not last long enough for anyone to notice.

"Tactical; deploy armor immediately to support or structural integrity. Let's not take any chances."

There was a low, muffled clanking sound as replicators outside the hull materialized a thick layer of armoring scales all over the sleek form of the Lotus. Thus covered, it would be nearly impervious to enemy fire... and hopefully well protected and reinforced for the upcoming travel.

"Armor deployed and stable," confirmed Josh Vincent from behind the command well.

"Load all tubes and set for pinpoint single shot fire on command only. "

"All tactical systems ready, Sir," Vincent then instantly reported.

"Helm, course; 187 mark 5, transwarp factor 4."

"Course plotted and laid in; transwarp at your command, Sir," announced helmsman Moor with a definite tremor of excitement in his voice, if not of genuine pride. After flying the Pirate's Pride, he was to take the flagship into it's first transwarp flight. What a great day this had been!

There was a tense moment of silence before Gould, sitting very straight in his command chair, finally gave the word.

"Engage!"

On the screen, it looked at first like any other jump into warp as the initial part was indeed an acceleration beyond warp 2.3; and then, the fast moving stars became long streaks of light, almost forming a tunnel of thin moving colored lines around them. It went so smoothly and ended up so swiftly, barely a few minutes later, that no one really realized what they had been experiencing... or noticed anything special... until several yellow and red lights flashed on both the helm console and at the engineering station.

"Engineering to bridge!"

"Yes Mister Adams," answered Kheren, taking care of ship management while Gould looked over at the tactical situation they had moved in. "Good work with your first transwarp travel."

"Thank you, Exec; hope you enjoyed it..." answered chief engineer Adams, " because it will not happen again until we get back to base for major repairs... and that, only at low warp, mind you. The engines seem to have bore the strain well enough, to my surprise I would say... but our structural integrity is compromised. Without the armor, we would have simply disintegrated in mid-flight. Fact is, we might have to keep it up until we get back; I'm not sure the integrity field will be enough, especially if we take any more serious damage."

"Cross your fingers then, Chief, as you Humans say... and keep chewing bubble gum. Bridge out."

The Andorian finished his talk with engineering just as Gould ordered:

"Alright, the McKenzie just completed the operation but both Crist's ship and Wyatt's old Republic are taking a beating and they can't take much more of this. We must cover them while they get out of here."

Instantly, Kheren once again acted fully his XO role.

"Mister Moor; heading 45 mark 15, full impulse. Bring us right between this Bird of prey squadron and the Republic, attack pattern Nova-Alpha."

With a brief glance over his shoulder, Moor complied; this was the oldest pattern in the USS Lotus' book, the "damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead" that was the very motto on the flagship's dedication plaque. And so, barely arrived on the scene, the Lotus streaked past the scarred, plasma-leaking Excelsior class vessel and seemingly going straight at the two K'Vort class Klingon destroyers coming about to pound again on the Republic.

"Mister Sainthill; link tactical sensor to deflector dish and send pulses alternatively at each of them both. Mister Vincent, target lock on each and prepare to modulate torpedo yield. "

With a puzzled look between Sainthill and Vincent, they both complied. The curious ping sound of enemy volleys impacting their regenerating plates was heard as, on screen, the incoming Klingon ships fired disruptors at them.

"Armor holding at 98%," Josh informed them.

Gould however quickly understood what was going on and flipped a comm switch open.

"Republic, this is the Lotus; Wyatt, get out of here now."

"Copy, Lotus. Gould, I owe you one, so you better get your butt out of there too afterwards, you hear?"

The much larger cruiser turned away to comply as the smaller form of the onrushing Intrepid class starship nevertheless covered it from the Klingon's firing angles, with no time for them to maneuver around their new adversary. Nor did they care to... as expected from them.

Then, Sainthill's head shot up from his console readouts.

"Sensor pulse is successfully reading their shield frequency!"

He and Vincent now both understood what Kheren had been planning; since because they were covered by their armoring they could not use their sensor-linked phasers to decipher enemy shield frequency, he had replaced them with emissions from their necessarily uncovered navigation deflector to use it in the same manner. Hence the down-the-throat attack pattern he had also ordered.

"Torpedo ready!" shouted Josh.

"One and two; fire!"

Two glowing blue-white stars shot out from under the elongated saucer of the flagship and each went right through the Birds of prey shields to impact the bulging front of their boom section. Both warships exploded as the Lotus shot between them.

As she turned around, the Republic limped away far enough to jump into warp.

"Now, the McKenzie," ordered Gould.

Things then got both easier and more complicated. Noticing the deadly arrival of the newcomer, the Klingons moved to assess this new threat with typical swiftness and efficiency. Half of their remaining forces circled around to chase the Lotus.

They were thus able to relieve significant pressure from Captain Crist's ship; but now that the Klingons were behind them, they could not use the same deflector trick that had helped dispatch two of them so quickly.

The battle thus raged anew and fiercer than ever.

About a half lightyear away, the majestic USS Horizon was circling back around toward the field of battle after dispatching a couple Birds of Prey in the anomaly before she was herself consumed by the artificial wormhole. The Klingons' frustrating and ultimately devastating pursuit of the Horizon through the anomaly ended with the first ship getting stuck in a subspace rift that the Horizon's Pel-sensor-drive alarm link had automatically jumped away from; the second Klingon ship burned up in the fires of the anomaly without the advantage of the metaphasic shielding. The Negh'Var class, however, did not pursue and instead moved toward the battle again, focusing fire on both the Alsea and Romulan ships alike.

The Spectre and Alsea continued to take the brunt of the damage and torpedoes from all sides started puncturing the hull. Hull breaches on all decks on all four ships were evident to the Horizon as they scanned the damage.

"Get us in there," Paris ordered, and the helmsman punched the enormous hull of the brand new ship through all the plasma and disruptor fire coming from the enemy vessels, her enhanced shields and armor-reinforced hull blocking enemy fire enough to give respite to the Lotus Fleet vessels. Paris winced as a few of the beams nevertheless punctured the shields and cut swaths across the hull. The plasma beams and torpedoes also created some considerable plasma fires that however were being periodically put out by the automatic plasma suppression hazard emitters.

"Sir, it appears the anomaly is completely dispersed. We have full sensors now."

"Well I think it's time for a graceful exit."

As the Captain of the ship with the best tactical advantage, he took it upon himself to issue orders, but he didn't make it sound as such. Despite regulations, he had enormous respect for Lotus Fleet and his officers; not only because of their crucial part in foiling the Borg Invasion a year ago, but now for literally saving the universe in this incredible Operation Horizon. The prophetic name of his own ship, now involved in the closing act of this grand event, did not escape his notice; it made him if anything, even humbler for it.

Over the secure comm channel, he spoke with authority yet with definite pride and respect.

"Tom Paris to all Lotus Fleet ships. I strongly suggest we retreat to assist the McKenzie and the Lotus and then return to Starbase 10... maximum warp. I'll cover your retreat."

Commander David Rogers was first to acknowledge him.

"This is the Spectre; roger that. Aegis, you may want to hitch a ride in our flight bay. It should provide enough room if you enter in from the foredeck."

"We'd welcome the ride, Spectre," Doctor Nasaro-Myth replied and helmsman Aguk Snow did just that as the Spectre turned and approached, orienting the bridge module forward and backing in as the Spectre came toward it. It was a tight fit, but the skilled fingers of the Inuit pilot guided the module in smoothly, leaving mere centimeters on either side and topside to clear the flight bay's docking port.

The Spectre then streaked out of sight at warp 9, leaving the Horizon and Alsea.

The Prometheus class warship bucked hard as she was buffeted by disruptor cannon fire and the ship's computer sounded a warning to the Vulcan at the tactical console.

"Captain, hull breach on deck 6."

"Seal the breach T'Lana," Jureth demanded, "and dispatch damage control teams."

"Aye, Sir."

The next report was from Lieutenant Tor in the secondary section.

"Captain, the anomaly has dissipated! I believe the Horizon has been sealed!"

"Confirmed, Sir," Ensign Wynn said from ops. "I'm reading communications from the Fleet. The Lotus, the McKenzie and the Republic are engaged with a Klingon battle group. Captain Paris is recommending we retreat to assist."

At the one auxiliary console on the Alsea's bridge that was still functioning, science officer Ensign Michael Bryant looked at his readings and then looked again, and only after the computer confirmed his suspicions did he spoke up.

"Captain, we have a problem, Sir; I'm detecting signs of the intradimensional portal we saw earlier."

"The Undine," Jureth said grimly.

"Yes Sir, but it's not just one ship, Sir."

"T'Lana?"

"Confirmed, Captain; tactical sensors are showing as many as twenty targets!"

Jureth's jaw nearly dropped. Indeed it was time to leave this party and as quickly as they could do so.

"Oseno to engineering; Mister Lire, can we put this ship back together?"

"Negative Captain! We suffered major structural damage during the separation!"

"What about the micro cores?"

"By some small miracle Sir, I managed all this time to tweek them enough so that they are both capable of about warp 6."

"Understood, Oseno out."

Jureth closed the intercom and turned to the main viewer but addressed the ship's computer.

"Computer, plot a course to Operation Horizon Quadrant 2 and disseminate to all sections."

"Acknowledged," the computer replied "Course plotted and loaded to all navigational systems."

He then answered the call to fall back, feeling releived that the burden of strategic command had been lifted from his inexperienced shoulders with the arival of the much more powerful cruiser of Tom Paris.

"Alsea to Horizon; Captain, we have a new problem. Undine vessels emerging from a portal, possibly as many as twenty ships. I agree it's time to leave."

"Roger that," Paris acknowledged before looking at his pilot. "You heard the man; get us the heck out of here!"

As the Horizon came about to make its retreat, the Undine ships started appearing through the portals that were forming, all along the edge of what used to be the Azimtuh Horizon anomaly. They went first to the closest ships, the Romulan warbirds, destroying them immediately.

A few began battling the Mogai escorts and the Negh'Var, but most headed straight for the D'deridex and green and yellow plasma beams and torpedoes began streaking across the blackness of space in what looked like a horrific light show.

"Get out of here, Alsea," Paris ordered,

On the Alsea, Jureth gave a simple order in response.

"Computer, engage previously laid in course."

All three of the Alsea's sections finished getting in formation and then as one warped away from the battle.

"Let us do the same. Maximum warp," Tom Paris said to the helmsman.

But, before he could carry out the order, the Tactical officer said, "Sir! a shuttle is emerging from the Regalis. The Regalis is firing on it. One lifesign... Sir? it's Human... *and* Romulan!"

\* \* \*

Minutes ago, on the bridge of the IRW Regalis, half the crew had watched with the same horrified expression as the one painted on their Admiral and their Empress the new violent storm raging through space; a storm now of their own, unwilling, making... one that would now swallow their Empire, the Federation, the whole quadrant, into an inferno of destruction and suffering as final as that promised by the Azimuth Horizon.

"Escort her Highness and the Admiral to the brig," ordered the traitor ship commander to four soldier that came to the bridge to answer his summon. "Upon our return to the capital, they will be both charged with dereliction of duty and treason against the Empire."

One sub-lieutenant started to protest; the commandr shot him where he stood.

"Anyone else wants to join them in disgrace?" he asked with a sneer.

Sela almost jumped on him at this moment; but a firm and much stronger hand restrained her. Tomalak looked her in the eye and very subtly shook his head.

The sudden deep serenity in his eyes, the hard resolve etching his face, the mall confident smile at the corner of his lips, they all told her what he neede her to understand. The Empress of the Romulan Star Empire might have been impulsive and emotional, but she was exceptionally perceptive and very intelligent, qualities enhanced by her Human side; and what she had inherited from her Romulan blood was the cunning and indomitability her own stare and features now shard with those of Tomalak.

Silent and stoic, both went with solemn dignity with their guards. But before they entered the lift cabin, Sela turned and looked the traitor in the eye. her voice was soft as that of a lover and venomous as that of a snake.

"Whoever you are... know this; you, and all of those with you.... are already dead. *Jolan Tru Rihansuu !*"

As the lift door closed on her vicious smile, the officers of the bridge still loyal to her stood straighter and answered with their own *Jolan Tru Rihansuu!*

The sacred words reverberated for a long time on the now silent command center of the ship as they jumped on their captors, only to be swiftly killed by the alert mutineers, but not without taking a few with them.

The surviving traitors were barely numerous enough to assume again command of the massive D'Deridez warship that the computer had been running all this time in pre-programmed battle actions. This had cost them significant tactical advantage that the Federation ship had exploited, but in their usual meek and half-hearted way. But now, the Klingons had showed up and they were not sparing in their attacks against both the Imperial Navy and Starfleet.

It was time to get back to the real problem at hand.

As he sat in one of the chairs of the dual command podium, the ship commander noticed for the first time the new Federation starship that had suddenly appeared on the scene. For a moment, he blinked with genuine awe. The starship was of the most familiar Starfleet design of a saucer necked to a secondary tubular hull underneath sporting two pylons holding a pair of long nacelles upward at the aft. But the lines were quite distinctive of any specific class he had ever studied... and it was truly huge, seemingly as much as their own one thousand and two-hundred meters, four point three million tons D'Deridez!

As it started firing formidable fire from impressive dual phaser arrays and spewing volleys of high yield quantum torpedoes, it felt more like they were fighting a mobile space station than a starship; but seeing it maneuver with the speed and grace of a heavy destroyer, shrugging off both Klingon and Romulan disruptor fire with exceptionally powerful shields, he knew that this was truly a battleship, one like the federation had never fielded... until now.

The commander saluted this USS Horizon with genuine respect. Its power would offer a well-remembered and celebrated challenge and her charred, broken hull a splendid trophy.

And as the flagship of the Romulan Star Empire plowed with renewed deadly vigor into the fray, deep in its immense bowels, the allegedly deposed Empress and her faithful Admiral were led into the darker sections below, where were located the cells usually used to discipline crewmen. Contrary to popular belief, it was not Klingons who never took prisoners; that they did aplenty, as showed their famous Rura Penthe prison planet and their invention of the mindsifter to extract information from captured enemies. It has always been the Romulans, since the very early days of the First Romulan-Federation War of the late twenty-second century. Thus, the guards escorting Sela and Tomalak, as well trained and alert as they were, were not all that ready for what happened next.

The ship had shook regularly under outside bombardment from enemy fire as they walked the corridors. But when they reached the cell blocks and were about to confine the couple into the same cell, one especially violent salvo rocked the entire massive warship, enough to send them all off balance.

This was the exact moment Tomalak had waited for.

As he fell, the old admiral angled his body to slam one of the guards. Grabbing his rifle, he tore it off his hands to swing it, his butt in the face of the other nearest one, then rolled on the face of the third as it fell hard on the deckplates to rise up on one knee and shoot the fourth one point blank in the gut... his movement now shielding Sela from them.

"Go! The tertiary shuttlebay is one deck above us! Go!"

"What about you?" she suddenly shouted as she started to run then stopped to look at him with wide eyes.

He shot two other guards before the last one, the one he had stolen the weapon from, lunged at him and tried to wrestle his disruptor rifle away from him. deftly, Tomalak disengaged the pistol part that made up the aft part of the elongated weapon and shot the surprised guard in the face.

"Stop acting like a Human woman and be our Empress! GO!"

And with those words, he ran the opposite way, pistol in hand, towards a new group of guards coming at a run from the other end of the corridor.

"Jolan Tru... Tomalak," she whispered at his back before diving into a maintenance tube to climb swiftly to the deck above.

She stepped a moment later into a deserted corridor and, as the entire warship trembled with the echoes of the savage space battle raging beyond its reinforced hull, she swiftly came to the lower aft section of the titanic vessel.

Two guards stood before the access to the tertiary shuttlebay.

As they saw her, they stiffened their stance. Then they bowed in deference to her.

Obviously unaware of the situation, they stepped away when she came to the door. But then, a group of guards appeared from the other end of the passageway and started running towards them when they spotted her.

"Stop her! She's a traitor to the Empire!"

The two guards then immediately stood in front of her; then past her as they instantly opened fire at the incoming squad, mowing them down in a few volleys.

In the silence that followed, the guards took again their guarding post each side of the door, leaving the way open for Sela, bowing to her.

"Come with me," Sela then said to the both of them.

"Our duty is to give our life to ensure yours, your Highness," objected one with a solemn, determined tone not even a ramming starship could have shook. "We must stay here."

"I want your names, both of you, so that your faithfulness and courage shall be forever acclaimed and remembered," she then asked with great dignity.

"Remember us as two among all of those who swore to die for their duty to the throne, your Highness," said one. "Those of true *Rihansuu* Honor who will not soil their sacred word because of lies screamed in a corridor."

"*Jolan Tru*, your Highness," simply said the other.

With that, she bowed deeply to each of them in turn before stepping through the door. Just as it closed, she saw another squad of armed soldiers enter the corridor. The sliding panel removed from her sight the two guards throwing themselves on one knee before it to start shooting at them and cover her escape.

She moved swiftly now; she would not make their sacrifice... or that of Tomalak, a vain one.

And she would avenge them... *all* of them... and especially *him*.

There was no one in the smallest shuttlebay of the warship, as it only held maintenance pods and cargo shuttles that were useless in a combat situation. So it was left unmanned during battle alert. Without a pause, she entered one cargo shuttle and activated the pre-launch sequence with expert practice. She might be the Empress, but for a much longer time she had been an officer of the Imperial Navy, taking years of hard work against heavy prejudice because of her mixed heritage through each and every rank until she rose to prominence. Flying a shuttle had been one of her most basic skills long even before that.



When the small craft was ready for launch, the access door blew away as a group of soldiers bursted through the sparks and the smoke. They instantly spotted the only active craft and started shooting at it, but their ahnd weapons could not do more that scar the thickened plates of the cargo ship.

With a baleful glare towards them, Sela lifted her craft from the deck, flew straight at the closed space door and activated the one small disrptor installed in front of her shuttle. She shot open the bay door, instantly exposing the unprepared soldiers to the deadly vaccuum of space as she flew out the instant the security forcefield snapped into place.

Around her, space was crisscrossed by green and golden streaks of burning lights, flares of blue-white, red and greenish fires, zooming masses of greenish, brownish and bluish hulls dancing one around the other amidst all the silent, deadly chaos. her diminutive craft shook with the savage violence erupting all around her, warning lights and klaxons envelopping her, then rumbles, tremors, sparks and smoke...

*Jolan Tru...* she finally said with defiance still in her voice. In true *Rihansuu* spirit, she accepted her incoming death; but in fierce Human wrath, she just regretted not sharing it with those that deserved it more than her.

\* \* \*

The shuttle was badly damaged and almost destroyed when Paris finally realized who that strange shuttle occupant could be.

"Get a lock on her!"

He knew Starfleet Intelligence would want to have a talk with the newly anointed Empress of the Romulan Star Empire... and mysterious child of a Romulan general and a captured Starfleet security officier from an alternate future that had survived the battle of Narendra III, the event that had sealed peace between the Klingon Empire and the United Federation of Planets for the better part of a century. What she could tell could only be most... revealing.

"Beam her to the brig!"

"Aye, Sir. We've got her."

"Time to go. Engage!"

The ship jumped to warp and followed the others to finally rendez-vous with the rest of the Lotus Fleet ships near Starbase 10.

Meanwhile, as the battle between the Lotus and McKenzie and the Klingons raged on, a stalker watched from the distance. The Lotus had dealt with this behemoth of a ship before, and it sat in its protective veil of cloak to see if it would have to reveal itself or not.

It wasn't looking good for the Klingons and Chancellor J'impok, leader of the High Council of the Klingon Empire, could see that. He had been transferred on the Gowron after the spectacular failing of the previous ship's commander, Ja'rod.

J'mpok's intent was to take Starbase 10, but he would need more ships to do so. He couldn't afford to lose the Negh'Vars that were currently being assaulted in such a way by what started out as a tiny Defiant-class and an old Excelsior and was now backed up by Starfleet's elite division's reknowned flagship. He had to act, now.

"Attack!" he ordered, and the ship moved toward the Lotus, intent on destroying it at once from cloak. The ship, enormous and powerful as it was, matching the vaunted Scimitar class of the hated Romulans, could maintain the power to stay cloaked and still fire torpedoes at the same time.

The Horizon was the first to arrive from the other battle group despite being last to leave, as it was able to maintain its top non-transwarp speed of 9.985 effortlessly. The issues it had previously had been keeping it at warp 5 had been quickly repaired by the Chief Engineer while they were out of warp and it was now able to beat the Alsea and the Spectre to the new combat zone.

When it arrived, the Tactical officer reported on their status.

"Sir, the Lotus is being attacked by two Negh'Vars and... nothing, Sir. A... a cloaked ship!"

"Manual fire. Fire at the source of the torpedoes," Paris ordered and the Tactical officer was able to find the Bortas-class Klingon ship and force it to decloak in order to activate it's shields.

"Good lord, it never ends with these folks," Paris said, with a hint of exasperation. "Let's show 'em the way home, shall we?"

The Alsea, in pieces, came out of warp after the Horizon due to her limited warp potential and as they did Jureth assessed the situation. The Horizon was providing relief to the Lotus and the McKenzie was fending off her attackers as best she could. Jureth took several seconds to assess the situation, and then watched as a massive Klingon battlecruiser shimmered into view after several torpedoes impacted her hull and deactivated her cloaking device.

"Computer, attack pattern Oseno Alpha-1, all sections."

The Alsea then jumped into the fray focusing her considerable firepower on the massive ship in front of her. After her third pass the Alsea's primary section rocked hard under disruptor beam fire from the massive Klingon ship. Jureth looked to T'iana.

"Damage report!"

"Shields at thirty three percent, quantum torpedo complement depleted, hull breach on deck 6, multiple hull breaches in secondary section sealed with force fields. Tertiary section is in the best shape, Sir, with minimal damage to secondary hull."

Jureth knew the Alsea had taken a beating. All the Lotus Fleet ships had, and he couldn't even imagine what the crew of the Artemis was dealing with right now... but he also knew there was no retreating until the threat to Starbase 10 had been dealt with.

"Fine, we're out of torpedoes, we'll hit them with concentrated phaser fire."

He tapped the command console.

"Bridge to engineering; give me everything you've got to phasers and shields. You can take it from the torpedo launchers, we're out of torpedoes anyway."

"Acknowledged," Came Niomo Lire's terse reply

Jureth gripped the command chair as the Alsea rocked again.

Whatever it did, that...thing out there was going down.

On the USS Lotus, the mixed crew of Artemis and flagship personnel watched the main screen or through transparencies as Klingons decloaked in attack formation aiming straight at the USS McKenzie and the USS Lotus, the three battling parts of the Alsea now joining the magnificent USS Horizon to intercept them.

"Mister Syntron; status of the operation?" asked Kheren as he calculated the rate of approach of the warships and their angle of attack.

"The Azimuth Horizon is now secured and the threat of the anomaly has been nullified. The Klingons will soon find that they are now waging a pointless battle. But given their inherent bloodlust, that might not stop them anyway from attempting to destroy us."

"If only out of spite," agreed the Andorian.

Then he turned to the commanding officer of the flagship.

"Captain Gould, there is no reason for us to do the same."

The bearded Vulcanoid in the command chair nodded in agreement.

"Time to show the better part of valor, then. Mister Vincent; keep the armor up in case they fancy a pursuit and signal the others that we are disengaging. Mister Moor; best possible speed back to Starbase 10."

"That will be warp 4, Captain," Kheren reported then. "Mister Adams says he's all out of bubble gum."

Despite everything, the crew of the Lotus erupted with smiles and even a few giggles as the battered, scarred and tired flagship of Lotus Fleet veered off and jumped to warp... and back home.

In her wake, a few more passes against the massive Klingon battleship and the Alsea had had enough. Her hulls were scored from disruptor fire and multiple hull breaches in all three sections were being barely contained by the ship's computerized containment fields and her damage control teams. Acrid smoke was filling the bridge and the ship's young Bajoran commander gripped the arms of the command chair as the Alsea was struck this time by two photon torpedoes.

"Status!" Jureth shouted.

"Shields at twenty percent, Sir," T'lana reported; "hull breaches on decks 3 through 6, multiple hull breaches in both the secondary and tertiary sections. Transporters, replicators and deflectors damaged. Captain, if I may, Sir, there is a human saying that states that he who fights and runs away lives to fight another day. It may be...cliche, Sir, but I believe it is logical in this situation. If we retreat now, Sir, and the Klingons choose to follow us, the Starbase's defenses along with the rest of the Fleet regrouping there will decimate them."

The thought of retreating from a fight Jureth was certain they could win bothered him. Perhaps it was his Bajoran nature, or perhaps it was the tactical officer in him, but, deep down, the newly-minted captain knew his subordinate was right. If they stuck around any longer, the Alsea would likely be destroyed. And more important than a victory to a captain was the safety of his crew.

He nodded at T'lana and gave the order.

"Mister Hunter, get us out of here, all of us."

"Aye Sir, plotting course for Starbase 10, maximum feasible warp is factor 6."

Jureth activated the comm array.

"Alsea to Horizon; we can't take it anymore and the rest of the fleet will soon fly away. We are retreating to regroup at Starbase 10. I advise you do the same. Let them follow us if they have the guts. Alsea out."

With a nod to Shawn Hunter, the warship's battered sections entered a diamond formation before going to warp.

On the Horizon, Tom Paris nodded to the departing Alsea on the screen as his massive vessel trembled on the concentrated onslaught of all the remaining Klingon warships now angrily taking it out on the last and most powerful Starfleet vessel still in the battle zone.

"Alright, let's follow the leader... but before we go, let's leave our bellicose friends out there a little warning... Tactical; activate Lotus Array."

"Aye, Captain," acknowledged the officer with a grin.

As the Klingon force closed in on every angle on the huge Starfleet ship, her top and bottom phaser array on the saucer section came up from the hull, forming over and under it a ring of glowing energy that suddenly shot in all directions with huge, pulsing beams of golden-orange destructive energy. Channeling the very power of the warp core into the double phaser emitters, the Lotus array was not only named in remembrance of the elite division of Starfleet that had successfully held the Borg in check, but because it looked as if a flower of fire spread her fiery petals in all directions at once. Each and every ship in range was instantly hit by a massive discharge that either burned out their shields or punched through and gouged their armor plates, leaving streaks of sparks and plasma like bleeding wounds on them.

Even seasoned and fearless warriors as the Klingons were aghast at seeing this fearsome display of raw power. Their attacking ships veered off and spread out in panic, leaving space wide open for the USS Horizon to warp out and back towards Starbase 10.

\* \* \*

Last Starfleet ship still on the scene, the McKenzie weaved in between two Klingon ships, firing cannons and using evasive maneuvers to avoid the barrage of disruptors coming at her. As she turned and fired flying through the debris of a destroyed ship, the call came over to disengage the battle and head back to Starbase 10. Calling down to Engineering the command was quick.

"Mister Simmons, we need all the power we can get to go home... so get us out of here."

"Aye, Sir."

Working at his station, Simmons saw the same indicators from earlier of a power drain in the Shuttlebay. Rerunning power from the secondary reserves had no effect on the apparent damage. Looking around, he yelled his commands as he grabbed his tools and ran for the door.

"I am heading for the shuttlebay. As soon as that power drain stops, reroute all power to warp engines."

As the door to the shuttle bay opened, Simmons walked past one of the shuttles and he immediately saw a rain of sparks coming from one of the panels. As he removed the singed wires, he felt a pressure to his back.

Slowly turning around, Simmons saw two masked figures... and one had a phaser rifle pointed right at his back.

The other masked man used his head to signal for Simmons to stand up, just as a call came over.

"Sir, this is engineering; is everything all right?"

Nodding to the armed men, Simmons pressed a few buttons on the panel and turned it off.

"Everything is fine here. Restore power to the engines and tell the bridge warp is good to go"

As Simmons stepped away from the panel, the two men lead him to one of the shuttles which had three other of those intruders standing around it. Before he could say a word, Simmons caught a glimpse of a necklace one of the men was wearing.

He knew that symbol. He had seen it many times before. With an almost defeated sigh Simmons spoke to the men at the shuttle.

"The Children, I presume?"

Nudging him along, the armed man pushed the acting chief engineer towards the men around the shuttle. He knew they needed him for something, else they would have shot him the moment he had intruded upon them. He was just hoping they would keep him alive long enough for him to find out.

As he approached the three other masked men, they waved for him to follow them as they boarded the shuttle and sat him in the chair in front of the second console. Pointing the first of the men that had signaled him spoke and handed Simmons a PADD.

"You see this. You are going to configure this shuttle to work with this and then you are going to pilot us away."

Reading the PADD, Simmons look of worry turned to one of confusion. He had seen this equation before but had no idea how the Children had ever got a hold of it.

"Transphasic beaming? How did you figure this out? This is still in the experimental phase within Starfleet!"

Slapping the back of his head, the man yelled back.

"Silence! No questions! That technobabble confuses the hell out of me; but you are going to make it work. With the transporter configured like that, we can beam through anything including the shields of your ship. We will take this shuttle, beam the Chosen One away from his prison and return to our homes.'

*They mean to take Sisko!* the engineer realized.

Like everyone else on board the tiny warship, he had learned of the true identity of the Horizon Children's Prophet they had rescued; a former Starfleet engineer who had gone missing in action after sacrificing himself to lure away from the USS Spectre a malevolent energy being they had encountered near the Azimuth Horizon. he had been a dear friend of the former chief engineer Sorripto, who had in turn given his life to rescue him from abduction and brainwashing by the cult.

But they were obviously not all gone with the destruction of their flagship... nor giving up their holy man that easily.

Just then, the characterisitc glow of a transporter appeared in the back of the shuttle, on the emergency transporter pad there and Sisko, still unconscious from his medical treatments, appeared. The largest of the masked guards immediately moved over and sat Sisko upright on a pasenger seat, checking on him.

Thern, even in the confines of their craft, they all heard the telling whine of the warp engines flaring up. As the McKenzie weaved past two Klingon ships, the blue hue of her nacelles filled the surrounding space and, with a low hum, she was gone, heading towards Starbase 10.

The ship had only been to warp a few moments when the call came over to the bridge.

"Medical to bridge! We have an emergency!"

Jumping from his chair, Crist's eyes met with those of the other bridge officers, all of whom seemed very concerned.

"Sir! It is Sisko... he is *gone*, Sir!"

The captain of the McKenzie didn't waste time with obvious and pointless questions.

"Computer! Locate half-Human, half-Bajoran lifesigns!"

"One such lifesign is located in the shuttlebay."

Clearly angered by the answer, Crist issued his next command quickly.

"Security to shuttlebay... NOW!"

And as all this was ongloing, the masked men were already preparing their escape with the only shuttle aboard the diminutive warship. Speaking out from the back, a member of the Children now spoke to Simmons, his voice stern and younger-sounding through his mask.

"Wait a minute! What do you mean, Starfleet has not developed it yet?"

Taken aback slightly by the shock of what they had done already but even more by the importance of what they had on hand, Ensign Simmons did what he could to explain what he was looking at.

"Transphasic beaming was developed by Starfleet during a recent battle with the Borg. fact is, your... Holy man here was one of the two lotus Fleet officers who came up with the working theory of it... what you have here. The idea is that, by shifting the transporter beam out of phase, the beam can penetrate shields, phased armor, even the electromagnetic field of a borg Cube... or a cloaked ship..."

Pausing, Simmons just realized he had answered his own question.

*A cloaked ship!*

Pounding the console, the young-sounding man cut him off mid sentence.

"Well, that is all fine and good... But can you implement it in this shuttle?"

"Yes of course; but, trust me when I say you do not want me to."

Angered by the young engineer's refusal to help, the man drew a knife and his tone quickly turned from stern to threatening.

"You will help us, or you will feel pain."

Putting his hand up the engineer cut him off before he could add anything further.

"Do not take my suggestion as a refusal. Just understand that, if I implement these power variations, this shuttle will explode the second it goes to warp."

His hands shaking to the point where he nearly dropped the knife, the man punched Simmons across the face with his free hand.

"*Liar!* We implemented these across every ship loyal to the children! Do you mean to have me believe that our great engineering minds would condemn the Children to death?"

Spitting blood from his mouth Simmons looked up at the bearded man and pointed to the screen, where could still be seen the ever expanding cloud of debris that had been the Prophet's flagship.

"The answer is right there. Just look. You are routing power through your secondary stability matrix of the warp core. While it will give the transporter the extra power you need to enter multiphase, you will create an instability in your warp core. The first time any ship with these changes goes to warp, the core will collapse on itself."

Pushing Simmons to the floor, the first man read the screen and stabbed his knife into the console with a deafening thud and with such force, it not only sliced through the metal but left a large fist shaped dent.

"He is right, dammit he is right! They have killed us all!"

Before the man could finish his thoughts, the sounds of struggle by the door grew louder. Those present knew they had been discovered and that the security team outside the door would be in within a few moments.

Looking back down at Simmons, the man removed the knife from the console and leaned in with an almost psychotic smirk.

"Well looks like this is the end. Too bad for us Starfleet never figured out this transphasic beaming thing..."

Putting the pieces together in his head, Simmons looked at the larger of the two masked guards who had stepped up from treating Sisko and was slowly walking towards the man with the knife. Smiling through the blood in his teeth, Simmons laughed.

"No too bad for you it was someone from Starfleet who did..."

As Simmons smiled, the bigger masked guard grabbed the armed man and with a quick and snapping motion broke his neck. As the man fell lifeless to the floor, the masked guard grabbed the knife and threw it into the chest of the smaller masked one, the impact knocking him over. Grabbing the rifle that had dropped, the big masked guard pointed at the other three cultists still alive and signaled for them to raise their hands.

As Simmons, the masked guard and his three new prisoners exited the shuttle, the door to the shuttlebay opened and security forces entered with their weapons pointed at them all.

As calls to lower weapons rose with the tension, Simmons stepped in between the large masked man and the security team.

"Wait! Stop! He is on our side..."

Pausing slightly and turning, the engineer added after a short pause:

"At least I am pretty confident he is on our side."

Nodding, the big masked man placed his rifle on the ground and reached for the lower clasps on his mask. As he slid the mask up, the pale grey skin and scales of his neck came in to view, followed by the bones on his chin and, finally, familiar piercing green eyes.

As the mask hit the floor, Simmons smiled and glanced over to see several of the security forces fighting back smiles as well because before them stood their old Cardassian crewmate, lieutenant Commander Sorripto.

Tapping his combadge, Simmons alone spoke.

"Bridge this is Ensign Simmons. Captain, you need to get down here."

Moments later, the woosh of the shuttlebay doors echoed through the silent room as Captain Crist, accompanied by a small medical staff who had also been called, entered the small hangar.

Crist stopped dead in his tracks as his eyes met those of the tall Cardassian before him. Forcing out a few words, the commanding officer of the McKenzie spoke in shock.

"*Sorripto?*"

Nodding to the Captain, Sorripto smiled and spoke with a very tired but firm tone.

"Last time I checked, Sir. But before anything else, Sir... Joey is in the shuttle. He's safe and still unconscious, but I urge you to see to him. The state he's in requires medical assistance."

By the time the medical team had entered the shuttle and back out with the unconscious former engineer on an antigrav stretcher to rush him back to sickbay, Crist had composed himself.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Mister Sorripto but... why aren't you dead?"

"Transphasic beaming," answered Simmons for him.

The Cardassian nodded and explained further.

"I programmed the equation for transphasic beaming into a padd and hooked it to the Cultist's ship after disposing of their people in their own transporter room. I didn't know for sure if it would work, but it was my ace in the hole in case things went on badly... as they did. When the Prophecy started to fall apart around me, I activated it from their bridge and found myself out of phase, thus escaping the explosion and floating in space, only kept alive by that PID thing the guys from the Artemis had provided to the fleet... waiting and hoping for a ship to cross the same space that I was occupying. That's how luckily I found myself back in here, when the ship came closer to inspect the debris, as I hoped she would. When I rematerialized, I was groggy for a moment and lying inside that shuttle... just as those infiltrators met outside of it and discussed their plan to reclaim their Prophet and escape with him... after sabotaging this "ship of blasphemers and infidels" as they called it. Fortunately, they weren't aware of my presence so I managed to eliminate one of them and take his place to better observe when and how to thwart their scheme. That's when Simmons came. The rest, he can tell you as well as I."

Captain Crist looked at him with a disbelieving stare; but then, here he was, the man they all had thought was dead. Only his story could make up for this miracle.

Smiling, Sorripto addressed the group as much as his commanding officer.

"I sincerely apologize, Captain... and submit myself to you for reprimand and any actions you see fit. In my quarters, behind the painting on my wall of a Cardassian sunset, you will find a PADD that explains my orders, allowed actions, and mission from Section 31 and Starfleet intelligence. I can get in a lot of trouble for sharing that with you, Sir, but I owe you that much and I respect you more than enough to stop the cover ups."



Nodding, Crist gestured for Sorripto to continue.

"As Ensign Simmons over there has figured out, the Children are no more, Sir; and those three over there are your chief of tactics, containment, and interrogation. The three vile war criminals the Children had declared capturing them a bonus."

As some of the security officers stepped forward to escort the Children prisoners away, the Cardassian winked to them and then looked back at Crist.

"As for the ship, Sir, I am to understand that the McKenzie is in need of a Chief Engineer. With Chief Reichman dead for his crimes and Ensign Simmons dual-tasked as our deflector expert, I would like to volunteer my services. Of course, Sir, if you will have me... I will have to volunteer as a civilian since it seems Starfleet ended my commission after you reported to them that I came down with a bad case of death."

Cracking up, Simmons interjected.

"A bad case of death?"

Laughing along with him, Sorripto winked at Simmons.

"Well, I got better."

Looking back at his Captain, the look in the big Cardassian's eyes turned more serious.

"I want you to know, Sir, that I was always and will always be loyal to the Federation, this ship and you. I will volunteer as Chief Engineer or allow myself taken into custody if you see fit. You are my Captain and the McKenzie is my baby. All I ask, Sir, is for the chance to ride her home and let History take its course from there."

Captain Crist stood and thought over his choices a moment, before giving Sorripto a cold hard stare and waving a nearby security officer over.

"Crewman, place Mister Sorripto under arrest."

As the security officer approached the Cardassian, he added:

"Escort him to engineering, where he will be preemptively serving out part of whatever sentence is handed down to him from his court martial... in community service."

He eyed the taller Cardassian.

"Get us home... Engineer Sorripto," he said, softer now, with a slight grin.

At that moment, the Horizon took one more pass at the Bortas-class battleship, causing minimum damage but covering the escape of the Lotus Fleet ships by using itself as a shield to block the many incoming disruptor blasts and photon torpedoes. They swooped upward, showing the Klingons the massive ventral side of the saucer section that extended three hundred meters in diameter. The advanced self-healing hull was scarred and on fire in many places, but was still holding up quite well against the onslaught.

Unfortunately, when the shields lowered between twenty-five percent, a lucky torpedo shot broke the streak.

"Report!" demanded Captain Paris.

"Hull breach deck 43, aft section. Emergency forcefields holding, no casualties."

"Let's keep it that way. Get us out of here," he said, nodding to the helmsman.

The helmsman pulled down on the virtual stick in front of him, causing the Horizon to continue on its looping course, pitch up until the ship ended up inverted. Firing maneuvering thrusters, he was able to roll the ship around until it was oriented in the established galactic normal plane and then warped away the short distance toward Starbase 10.

A few seconds later, they dropped out and the sight they saw was disheartening. Dozens of ships lined up in formation around the Starbase and the Lotus Fleet ships all in a line in front of the Horizon. Additional Romulan ships could be seen off to port and, on the other side, Klingons waited, also eying up their prey. The Gowron had indeed decided to follow them, knowing it would have company and dropped out shortly after the Horizon, maneuvering itself into formation with the rest of its own attack fleet.

For a long, tense moment, no one moved, all ships as still as the cold, uncaring blinking stars behind them. The Klingons were former allies of the federation, still restrained by their sense of Honor but the Romulans were their hated enemy, as formidable as they were; the Romulans feared and envied the federation and despised the Klingons but, if they could take on any one of them, they could not face both at the same time; as for the Federation, they did not want a fight with either but had to stand against this uncalled for invasion of its recognized area of space.

On all Starfleet channels, the voice of the starbase commander was then finally heard, breaking the ominous silence thickening with every passing second of this Mexican stand-off between forces that all wondered who would attack who and when.

"This is Samji to all Lotus Fleet ships. Don't fire a shot, even if they attack the Starbase. I want you to stand by to collect evacuees if the need should arise."

The order came through on all the bridges of all the ships, and the less senior officers dropped their heads in despair. Their home was being attacked and they weren't being allowed to defend it, in favor of their lives.

"What'll we do, Sir?" asked Grok in the Operations center of Starbase 10.

"Get me in a conference call with whoever will answer. Maybe I can work out a truce."

"Aye, Sir."

Samji retreated into his personal office to speak with Chancellor J'mpok, who immediately responded to the request for a conference, as well as the Romulan Commander who arrived quite a few minutes later, likely after a debate between the commanders of the various ships about who had the tactical advantage and would be allowed to speak.

"You will die for this insolence!", shouted J'mpok, after being told by the Romulan Commander to stand down. "I am the Chancellor of the High Council of the Klingon Empire. Where is your so-called Empress to lay claim to the sector?"

"She is too important to deal with this little matter," the Romulan responded, slyly. It was both a dig at the Chancellor himself and also a way to conceal the true answer. He could not reveal that she was declared dead, as being admittedly leaderless would be a telling sign of weakness in front of the Klingons.

"But I suggest we decide who we want to fight right now. It will be easier to debate our claim on this sector once Starfleet has abandoned it."

"We will not," Samji replied coldly. "Your intimidation tactics are useless here. I suggest you leave before you lose the remainder of your ships. You have no idea what you're up against."

Unfortunately that was not entirely true. The amount of cruiser and dreadnought-class ships the enemies had brought would likely decimate the starbase before the battle was through. However, the part about losing many ships was still true.

Their forces would also be cut down massively by the numerous arrays of phaser banks and quantum, transphasic, and tricobalt torpedo tubes Starbase 10 was outfitted with. But losing ships was something only the Federation was truly concerned with among the group gathered there. The Klingons welcomed it. Romulans tolerated it as long as it gained them territory.

Lotus Fleet would only come out on top if the Romulan and Klingon forces fired on each other first. And it didn't look that way.

"I agree. Despite our differences, the Federations are the obvious first target," J'mpok replied, ignoring Samji and crushing his only hope.

"At least give us time to evacuate," Samji replied. "There's no need to destroy your new prize in order to gain it. We will go peacefully as long as every Lotus Fleet officer and Federation citizen is allowed to leave in our ships that we have waiting."

"Agreed. You have two hours, Fleet Captain," the Romulan Commander at least said respectfully. He was ambitious but not bloodthirsty.

Hesitantly, J'mpok responded with a somewhat disappointed look in his gnarly face.

"I... suppose... we can do honorable battle against these *PetaQ* after you leave," he said.

As Samji left the office, he said ironically, "Great. We've succeeded in uniting Klingons and Romulans! They both want us dead or gone."

The silence that greeted him in the Ops central room was telling enough.

"Get me a secure channel to all the Lotus Fleet ships and the Horizon. Ask the Captains to call me from their ready rooms."

Then, he returned to his private office to wait for them to be assembled. Once the group was all settled, Samji filled them in on the status.

"So, basically we have two hours to either leave or come up with a plan."

Jureth was stunned to see the numerous enemy ships surrounding Starbase 10. He had thought for certain they had given both the Romulans and the Klingons all they could handle and then some. Now as Fleet Captain Samji asked for answers as both a captain and a tactical officer he was dismayed to find he had none.

"Sir," he said trying to measure his tone, "we need to do as they've asked. Even with the addition of the Horizon, we cannot fight them all. My ship is falling apart, and I suspect the other captains will tell you the same. We do what Captain Sisko did, Sir; we get out with what we have and, when we can, we return and take back what is ours."

"Paris here, Fleet Captain. I agree with this recommendation. But you should know something; we have Empress Sela in... our care. Surely her Romulan sense of honor will have her speak on our behalf to have her own people stand down... if not, her practical sense then."

"Or they will demand her return... and attack us if we refuse them or try to bargain," stated Vi'Rell Gould, the most experienced among them with the Rihansuu people. "Sacrificing one's life for duty and Empire is second nature to them. Sela is both Human and Romulan; this means she is greedy and fearless, cunning and devious, relentless and faithful. She will trick us in releasing her with false promises and then turn around and order a full scale assault... after allowing us to retreat, in.. gratitude... for helping her."

"I agree with Captain Gould... and Captain Jureth," said Kheren, sitting beside the flagship commanding officer.

The sweat on his scarred brow showed that his multiplanning mind was feverishly at work, despite the very few options now left to them.

"Time is our best weapon now. And so, we should look for the diplomatic option first. Sela will be much more... cooperative once we debrief her and release her later after negotiating terms with her. Then we will have only the Klingons left to deal with; and they are after all an honorable people, once our allies. In any case, a battle here and now would be foolish, when we have just gained the opportunity to save our people... and to let them weaken one another fighting over the starbase. We can always come back... but not if we never go away. We can always rebuild a base... but we can not bring back the dead."

Before they could settle on much, Grok then burst in to Samji's office.

"Sir! I'm sorry but... there's transdimensional portals opening up on all sides of the Starbase! It seems the Undine were not content in their previous battle."

"Seems we need a new plan," Samji said, frozen with shock.

They both returned to Operations to where they could see the battle unfold.

And, the instant the first ships appeared in normal space, they began firing on Klingon and Romulan ships alike.

Three Undine ships streaked past the line of Lotus Fleet ships and headed straight for the Gowron. Their consistent yellow plasma beams tore through the armored hull and, taking advantage of damage already done by Lotus Fleet, they were able to disable weapons instantly and cause several hull breaches in the massive Klingon warship.

Before they could come around for the final killing pass, the huge ship obviously had had enough. The Gawron closed off its hull breaches with forcefields and escaped at high warp.

Other remaining ships weren't so lucky. The Negh'Var and few Birds of Prey left that had been with the Gowron from the beginning were destroyed instantly. Two D'deridex warbirds of the Romulans, including the one the commander Samji spoke to was on, were destroyed instantly when the Undine went into their six-pointed star formation that combined their firepower into one massive beam of planetary-scale destruction, as well as a dozen more massive Undine ships tearing through their ranks of escort vessels.

After mere seconds of this battle, the remaining Klingon and Romulan ships that could still do so warped away, running back to their respective empires.

That left the Undine ships, about two dozen of them, surrounding Starbase 10 and the Lotus Fleet ships. They came to a crescent formation, turning to face them.

They did not fire. But they also did not hail. They seemingly waited patiently for Samji to finally gather his wits and say to Grok; "hail them".

The familiar visage of Boothby finally appeared on the Operation's main viewer.

"It is good to see a familiar face," Samji said warily.

It was disconcerting to see the old, benevolent countenance of an Academy legend, knowing it was but a genetically-created mask for a domineering three-legged, amphibian-looking telepathic alien from another universe.

The commander of Starbase 10 now could also see two other human-looking figures on the alien bridge, flanking Boothby on either side and recognized them instantly; the missing and former crewmembers of the flagship Lotus, Petty Officer Sarah Olsen and Lieutenant Commander Edward Tomah. They both stood with arms crossed, a slight smirk on their faces. Whether it was from the decimation of the Klingons and Romulans or the fact that they were once again seeing former "friends" and "colleagues", Samji was not sure. He wasn't even sure if the Undine had true emotions or if Olsen and Tomah were just so used to mimicking human behavior that they did it reflexively.

Lyrya, the Aenar counselor from the Artemis, currently on the Spectre, knew however the real answer to that.

"I sense, overwhelming joy..." she said to herself.

Only Doctor Nasaro-Myth who was beside her on the bridge of the Spectre heard.

"The confusion, fear, and hatred... all gone. The only thing that is left is great joy... and contentment."

Samji did not have the advantage of a telepath in Operations, however.

"What can we do for you?"

"Boothby" spoke in a calm and encouraging voice.

"Nothing, Fleet Captain, except to say... we understand now. Your Alsea, Spectre, and Aegis ships have showed us what we needed to see to believe. You only care about preserving life."

He hung his head shamefully, and continued.

"That is all we ever were concerned about, Allen. It took us a long time... much observation from within your own world and a final act of compassion, to finally admit it to ourselves. And we knew, finally, that the only chance we had of saving our race, as we have been concerned about all this time, was to work with you. Certainly not against you, at least. We were only threatened by the anomaly when the Klingons and Romulans were risking it remaining open or worse, making it expand and possibly use it for their own destructive purposes... and for a time, we thought that you were too. We should have known better... We *do* know better now."

Not waiting for a response, he spoke finally with a calm, dignified expression.

"We will leave you now in peace and we know you will be... 'watching our backs', as you Humans say."

Samji stood in shock and simply nodded in respect before the viewscreen changed to a view of the Undine ships surrounding them. Their portals opened back up and they vanished, leaving just the Lotus Fleet ships and the wreckage and debris of several enemy ships in their wake.

Captain Kheren, after a long, quiet moment, was the one to finally break the silence.

"Peace... to all those of Good Will."

## CHAPTER NINE: EMBERS

The door to the sickbay of the starship McKenzie wooshed open and Sorripto walked in, followed by his security escort. Although it was apparent the crew trusted the Cardassian still, despite all that had happened, protocol required the escort until the Captain's reports with Starfleet were filed.

As Sorripto walked into medical one of the medical staff approached him.

"Lieutenant-Commander Sorripto; what can I do for you."

Looking over to the enclosed medical bed where Joey Day Sisko lay still in his educed coma Sorripto nodded towards him with his head.

"I came to see my friend, if that is ok?"

Looking at Sisko and then back several times at the Cardassian towering over him, the medical crewman looked at the young security officer behind Sorripto. The young officer nodded as if to grant approval while at the same time silently assuring the medical staff everything was ok.

"I guess there is no harm. I have heard stories of you two working together to build that nano technology on the Borg back then... Really interesting stuff."

Smiling, Sorripto waved his finger gently at the medical crewman.

"Tell you what; you give me an hour in here and I will meet you over a cup of coffee and tell you all about it."

"I guess I could step out for a bit."

Walking towards the door, the medical crewman gestured for the security officer to follow. The officer glanced at Sorripto and stood firmly in place. Looking up at his escort who, while just doing his job, was clearly taking things too seriously for his taste, Sorripto laughed.

"Come on now, I am harmless. I mean, be honest; if I wanted to escape from you, do you think you would still have me in custody or even know where I am?"

Taken aback slightly by the brashness of the Cardassian, the young officer stepped back and almost acted as if to reach for his phaser. Continuing to laugh, Sorripto smacked the security officer.

"I am kidding! Come on now... You are intimidating... you really are! Seriously, I am quite scared to try anything."

Finally getting the joke, the young security officer laughed softly and nodded to Sorripto, stepping out of sickbay and leaving him alone with Sisko.

As he pulled up a chair next to the bed Sisko was lying in, the Cardassian patted his shoulder. Reaching into his pocket, Sorripto pulled out a small vial, the type that fitted a hypospray.

Looking at the vial and then back at the former prophet of the Horizon Children, he shook his head.

"Well my friend, this is the part of the mission where if I did not think you could be saved. I was supposed to kill you."

Throwing the vial against the wall, it shattered and the greenish liquid dripped down the wall, collecting into a small puddle amidst the broken glass.

"Honestly, by that many pages into my orders, everything got so boring and I did not read much more after that. Just between you and me, I did not read most of those orders. I just kind of went with the flow after I figured Reichman for the traitor that he was."

Putting his feet up on another stool, Sorripto leaned back in his chair and continued.

"I want you to know something, Joey... something that I have never told anyone before... not even you. I owe you my life. You saved me from myself and what I could have been. Through the Academy, I had Dean Miles O'Brien and he told me outside of the academy that life in the fleet would be very different. I thought getting through the Academy was tough... but nothing prepared me for how much the fleet, and people who had actually fought in wars with my people, were going to reject me."

That had been a shock to him, as prejudice was quite rare in the Federation to begin with, even rarer within Starfleet where beings from over a hundred worlds mingled with the explicit desire to work together. But the war had left scars most deep in certain people coming down from family lines of Starfleet officers... and those he had had to content with, until he fell for the classic syndrome of the tree hiding the forest behind it.

But his thoughts were already moving beyond those difficult years as he spoke them outloud.

"It was on Starbase 10 that, of all people, a young half-Human, half-Bajoran, who had been out of the Academy just like me, stepped in and saw an engineer and a man with ideas and not just a Cardassian. When I found out the Borg were coming and the people who were going to need me to save their lives still hated me, I had reached the end of my rope. You showed them and more importantly me that my blood is the blood of the Federation... not just the blood of a Cardassian. All for one as they say, right?"

The quote made him smile.

"We have been best friends since we met, but when I saw the chance to save you, I owed you that much... not just because I know that, somewhere in that child-washed mind of yours is the great man I met, but because you saved my life. And no self respecting Cardassian ever forgets a life debt."

Sitting up in his chair, Sorripto leaned closer towards Sisko.

"I have heard stories of aliens in the Federation who want to be better because of it. Well, I want you to know that I am better because of the doors you opened for me. The scary part is that I actually kind of like this kinder me... well minus the fact that I killed a few thousand people to save you... But they were all bad, so I shed no tears..."

Hard lines had appeared on his grey features. But then, he blinked and took a deep breath before speaking up again, this time more softly.

"Now where was I? Oh yeah... I would say, call us even, but there is still the matter of the new us... Well, this is another fine mess you have gotten me into. So... what do we do now?"

As Sorripto spoke, Sisko shifted slightly and his eyes fluttered under his closed eyelids.

The dream was so vivid. Sisko could detect the familiar scent of freshly mowed grass from Kendra province, on Bajor.

It was his childhood home, he realized, sprawled out in the valley below him. He stood on the hill and breathed in the sweet air of the pristine countryside.

At the bottom of the hill, also admiring the homestead stood... himself?

Confused, he called out... he wasn't sure why.

"Don't let them take you!" he shouted.

He was strangely fearful of unknown entities that could not have been on Bajor. But he felt this warning of the non-corporeal entities that had taken him into the pocket universe of the Azimuth Horizon needed to be shouted.

*I could stop it this time!* he thought. *This time would be different...*

The figure turned at the sound of his voice. And all the sudden, he realized his fallacy. The smiling face that looked back was not his own... He automatically placed his fingers lightly on his nose and rubbed the subtle ridges as he stared down at the figure that looked like him, so much like him... but did not have the typical feature of his Bajoran ancestry.

Joseph Daystrom Sisko slowly descended the green hillside and approached the figure warily. He looked like Joey, but not quite. The initial defined difference in the nose gave way to subtle differences in the facial structure. His head was also completely bald, unlike Joey's close-knit style. Also, the face was not old... not much more than his own... but it was full of years of wisdom.

Joey's approach was like a child's but not of one running to the safety and familiarity of a loved one. Instead, he was like a child approaching a great but unfamiliar hero. He knew him, but not personally. He was a figure from history books, not to be spoken to or touched or held.

Nonetheless the figure beamed with a smile as wide as the valley they stood in. He held his arms out and Joey said one word... "Grandpa..." before falling into the comforting embrace of his father's father.

After the initial emotional euphoria wore off, his fear and doubt began to flood back in, and he pushed the man away.

"I'm... dead?" he asked, suddenly realizing the implication of meeting his long-lost grandfather.

"No, son," Benjamin Sisko replied, with a chuckle. "Not exactly."

"Then, this is a dream..." Joey replied.

Benjamin shook his head.

"I can't... qualify it... for you. It's not a science experiment."

He sighed.



"Look. Everyone has a certain destiny that they have to figure out for themselves. No one else can do it for you... or even explain it to you. It took me a long time to figure that out..."

He drifted off and stared back at the house he had commissioned to be built for him and his son when he was still commanding officer of space station Deep Spce 9... before he was lost.

"At one point, I thought that was my destiny," Ben said, pointing at the house. "My ultimate goal to retire to this land and live out the rest of my life here. I realize now that I was wrong. It was to build a life for your dad and you... and to sacrifice my own so you could have that life."

Joey just shook his head. He still didn't understand where he was or why he was there when there were things happening around him. Battles to be won or lost. A whole universe in peril. If he was dead, he could accept that. There was no way to do his part and he could move on. But, if he was dreaming, he would need to wake up.

"Is it the prophets that have done this... who have brought me here?" he asked, still trying to find the answers he sought.

His father had always told him stories of Benjamin's last act in service of the "wormhole aliens" as he called them. His mother always rolled her eyes and said "Prophets" when he did that. Regardless of their belief, they both thought that Benjamin was still alive in some form or another... and he always believed it too.

Ben shrugged.

"It's possible... I'm not even sure if it was them who brought me here."

He motioned for Joey to follow him and they started walking side by side toward the house.

"I like to think so, son. Maybe it's my reward for helping in their struggle against the pah-wraiths."

Like a child, Joey protested vainly.

"Then, why couldn't they have rewarded you by just sending you back? They could've given you your time with dad... with me."

Again like a child, he dropped his head in stubborn self-pity.

Ben reached out and pulled his grandson's chin up to match his gaze. He smiled.

"They would say that time is irrelevant. They really didn't even have a concept of time until I explained it to them. I think maybe... I was sent here to wait for you."

Joey was shocked at this realization. He was thinking how being sent somewhere for almost thirty years to wait for one thing meant that it was his fault Benjamin was there. When he had been serving as chief engineer of the USS Spectre and the ship had fallen prey to a war between energy beings on the fringe of the anomaly, he had tried to save them by luring away the "evil ones" with his own body and mind, taking a shuttle to drag them away and into the fires of the Azimuth Horizon. That's where he had been found later by the Horizon Children, with no memory, his unexplained survival seen as a sign of the truth of their faith. But if he hadn't gone with those aliens to the other universe opened at the heart of the anomaly, not only might the cult not have been born, but Benjamin wouldn't have needed to be here for him. He could've been sent back to Jake and his life in Starfleet.

But when he turned to apologize, he saw the smile on his grandfather's face and read the pure joy and contentment that it represented. Also, the fact that he wasn't aged that much maybe meant that it hadn't felt like thirty years for him at all.

*Time is irrelevant*, he thought back. *Maybe so...*

He could relax, he realized, and enjoy his time there, however long that was.

And so, after many cups of coffee and over a light dinner of homemade bread and marmalade, they were able to catch up and enjoy some conversation. Many were about Jake when he was young, and Joey was sure his father would be embarrassed to know he was finding out about them.

But when the sun set in the made up or imaginary place they were in... whatever dimension or heaven it might have been... Joey began to wonder again why he was sent there and what was so important that the Prophets would've needed to send Benjamin, their Emissary, there to wait for him.

"Well son," Benjamin said then, "I don't know how long it will take before our questions are answered, but you must be tired."

He got up to clear the dishes.

"You can sleep in your old room... I'll get you some..." he faded off and Joey turned to see what he was staring at. As shadows fell across the threshold of the open doorway near the kitchen they were sitting in, the answer was finally made clear to him.

A dimly lit figure stood in the doorway. This time, Joey noted that the face did look exactly like his, except that the eyes pierced through him with a bright red fire.

"We will not abandon our children!" he seethed. "Let the will of the Preservers be done!"

Without hesitation, the figure raised a hand containing a phase pistol.

Shouting "No!" Benjamin leapt over the kitchen table and pushed his grandson to the floor. As the figure fired the pistol, Benjamin was struck in the side and fell next to his grandson, near his feet. The motion caused many dishes from the table to fall to the floor, including a long sharp kitchen knife that they had been using to cut the bread.

With his last few breaths, Benjamin crawled up to shield Joey from several more phaser blasts that the figure fired. His now lifeless body protected Joey until the figure growled in frustration and descended upon them.

The dark copy of Joseph Sisko let his guard down for just a moment to roll Benjamin away. Joey used that opportunity to grab hold of the knife. His combat training kicked in and, without hesitation, in one swift motion, he drove the knife directly into the neck of his duplicate.

The eyes remained open, but the red faded away as the blood spilled from his neck and the lifeless body fell with a thud beside his grandfather's.

Joey then tried to revive the old man, but the wounds were too severe. So as the world around him faded away, he sat with his arms around Benjamin and wept, repeating "Grandpa, I'm so sorry."

On the bio bed in the McKenzie, when Sorripto was done speaking, Sisko began moving about. His forehead was soaked in sweat as he fended off some sort of imaginary foe. Then he cried, saying "Grandpa, I'm so sorry" over and over, before finally opening his eyes.

"Sorripto?" he asked, after seeing his Cardassian friend. "Why are you in Kendra?"

It took a few moments before he fully noticed his surroundings and sat up quickly.

"By the prophets, Grandpa!" he shouted, in a pained voice.

Crying out again, he grasped his head, quickly realizing there was a physical pain to also deal with.

Finally, he looked around.

"What is going on? Isn't this... the sickbay of the McKenzie? Where are the Horizon aliens?"

He spurted out each question in quick succession until Sorripto calmed him down.

Grabbing Sisko by the shoulders, Sorripto kept a firm grip and relaxed it slowly as the half-Bajoran began to calm down, the apparent shock of discovering his true surroundings beginning to fade.

Staring deeply into Sisko's eyes, trying to read the thoughts behind them, the Cardassian saw a calm silence and the familiar face of his friend; the face that he had not gazed upon in a long time.

Leaning back slightly Sorripto smiled.

"Joey? So you *were* in there somewhere. Glad to see you again, my friend. Hope the head is alright. You did take quite a beating these last few weeks."

Walking over to the replicator and getting a glass of water and a large glass of Bajoran Sweet Tea, Sorripto walked back towards Sisko, who was now fully seated upright, handing him the glass of water before he sat back down.

"You look like a man that has more questions then could ever be asked... And with all that yelling about a granpa and aliens, I am afraid I have developed a few of my own."

Leaning in to touch glasses together, Sorripto put his feet up again and leaned back.

"Tell you what; you just tell me what you remember of the last year or so and I will fill in the blanks."

Shocked and confused, Sisko turned to Sorripto.

"A year?! Last thing I remember, I was volunteering to escort one of those non-corporeal aliens that had taken control of me back through the Azimuth Horizon. They were going to destroy the Spectre... I had to do something."

As he continued to think about it, certain experiences began returning to his mind.

"They wanted to study me. I remember being in a laboratory... it wasn't anything like we're used to, in terms of matter and energy. It was like they were reversed in their universe... or used differently. It's hard to explain. I guess they exist of pure energy and they consume matter directly. Not through eating it, like we do..."

Sisko stumbled around to try to find an analogy that would represent the process and finally his face brightened for the first time since he woke up.

"More like a plant's photosynthesis!" he said, excitedly when the realization hit.

It was good for him to begin thinking scientifically again as it pushed away the emotions.

"I remember they returned me to our universe and I was happy. Somehow, they kept me alive in space, but it was so painful. It was cold... I was picked up by a cargo ship... then after that, it's very blurry... until I woke up in Kendra province. It must've been a dream... My grandfather was there and he saved me from some evil impersonation of me..."

Sisko's mind wandered as he tried to recall everything.

"Children... Preservers... what children?" he asked suddenly, turning to Sorripto as he said it. He knew it was important, but wasn't sure what it meant.

Looking at Sisko, it became apparent to the Cardassian that his friend had no recollection of how long he had been gone or of his time with the cult. Thinking for a moment as if to soften the blow, Sorripto knew he was never one for breaking things gently, so he decided that bluntness would be the best course here.

"Well Joey, there is no real easy way to put this, so I will give it to you straight."

Sighing at the task before him, Sorripto continued.

"After your time with those aliens, you came back and were, well, for lack of a better word, possessed or taken over by something evil. It reminded me a lot of the story Dean O'Brien used to tell me about when his wife was taken over by a Pa-Wraith. It was you, but it was not you... I hope you understand that."

"Either way, after the new you... that is, the controlled you, came back from your time with those aliens, you were taken in by a group calling themselves the Horizon's Children or something like that and they accepted you as a kind of prophet. Well, under your prophetic leadership, they fought to keep open the Azimuth Horizon and making no attempts to close the rift caused even worse instability in space and nearly destroyed the universe."

Seeing Sisko taken aback by the story, Sorripto quickly tried to turn his explanation of things into a bit of a higher note.

"The fact is that all of Lotus Fleet came together to stop the Children and seal the rift in order to save the universe. Well that was their plan anyway."

Leaning in slightly Sisko asked slowly.

"But not yours I take it."

Laughing, Sorripto could not help but have an almost bragging tone as he told his friend about his role in all of this.

"Oh no not by a long shot; you know me too well. I was recruited by some old friends at Section 31, who are trying to clean up their act a bit apparently, and I was tasked with destroying the Children and killi... er, bringing you back."

The Cardassian leaned forward as if he was going to share a secret. His voice became very soft and low despite being laced with obvious pride.

"It was quite ingenious actually. I built myself up as a traitor and, after some unfortunate sabotage, I got myself to your ship and beamed you to the McKenzie, destroyed the attacking children's fleet and then fitted their remaining ships with a power fault that would destroy them the second they went to warp."

Finishing his own glass of sweet tea, Sorripto put the empty glass down and slowly sighed as the rest of his story was not as happy.

"Well, after a few battles with Klingons, Romulans, and Undine, Lotus Fleet managed to seal the rift and, with the cost of only a ship and a few in the yards, we came out of it with minimal losses and all objectives met. Hell, I even heard some rumblings that we made peace with the Undine."

Leaning in again, Sorripto pointed his finger into Sisko's face and his eyes, filled with a lifetime of being hated, told a story of their own.

"You have to understand one thing Joey; no one knows what you did while you were their prophet and leader and, since I sort of killed off all your witnesses, no one really ever will. But frankly, it is better that way because that man, that evil spirit that you told me about, is not you, was not you, and never will be you. The only reason some of us are alive is because, somewhere in your head, there was conflict and that conflict gave us opportunity to escape once... and gave me the inspiration I needed to convince some people you were worth saving."

He made a pause before continuing on a gentler tone.

"I pray that you do not blame yourself for anything you might hear or might remember. The good inside you won out and, at the end of the day, that is all that matters. Sad that you missed such a great mission though... it would have made a hell of a story for your father to write about."

Sisko nodded repeatedly while listening to Sorripto's reassurances and then looked long and hard into the Cardassian's face, as if analyzing something.

Finally he spoke in mock anger.

"I'm just astounded you're not in shackles after all you said you did out there. What the hell were you thinking!? I bust my hump trying to dissuade people of the typical stereotype of the scheming, spying Cardassian and you go and do something like that!"

Then he grinned.

"Well, at least you'll have one friend at your board of inquiry or court-martial or whatever. I don't suppose they'll take the word of someone who's missed out on the last year of his life, but I'll do what I can. It's... it's the least I can do."

Getting the obvious point that he had missed before, Sorripto agreed with the irony and started laughing.

"I had orders from Section 31 and Starfleet Intelligence; the worst they can get me on is that I did not quite follow them... come to think of it I did not follow them at all."

Snapping his fingers, the Cardassian chuckled as he continued.

"I did singlehandedly wipe out a fanatical terrorist organization. That has to count for something."

As the two laughed, the medical crewman and security officer reentered sickbay and walked towards the sound of laughter. Seeing Sisko upright in his bed and laughing, the medical crewman gasped while fumbling for a medical tricorder.

Standing up, Sorripto smacked the medical crewman on the shoulder so hard it nearly knocked him off balance.

"He is fine. See, I told you everything would work out."

Pointing towards the broken glass and pool of liquid that had formed from the vial he had smashed against the bulkhead, the Cardassian chuckled again as he walked towards the security officer at the door.

"Oh, and I spilled some poison that you are going to have to clean up... I would put some gloves on before I touched it if I were you."

Extending his hands towards the young security officer, the smile on Sorripto's face only grew.

"Well, my shift in Engineering is over. Shall I go back to jail then?"

As the security officer escorted Sorripto towards the door. the Cardassian turned towards Sisko and pointed.

"You are going to speak at my hearing if I have one. I am going to hold you to that."

Sorripto winked as he stepped out the door.

"Oh and Joey... good to have you back."

\* \* \*

### **Captain's Log**

**Stardate: 87174.85**

**Seeing the Undine rescue Lotus Fleet and Starbase 10 from what was most certainly going to be a devastating defeat was....sobering to say the least. To have them credit myself, the Spectre, and the Aegis with changing their view of the Federation was surprising though I would submit that the credit belongs more to the telepaths on the Aegis than anything. Without them I would not have had the foresight to change my strategy and we might very well be in an open war with the Undine as well.**

**As for the Alsea, I'm afraid that it will take more than time to heal the wounds that our battles have left. I am reminded very much of an old Earth children's poem about a character that falls off the wall and it takes "all the king's horses, and all the king's men" to put him back together. I suspect though that the Alsea may have seen her last battle in service to the Federation. The structural damage is severe, and her warp cores are nearly burned out, but if this is her last fight then she will be remembered as having given everything she had and then some in defense of those things we all hold dear. Her crew has done the same, and there will be awards for all, and memorials for a few, but none will forget what has transpired in these last few days.**

**As for me, as we prepare to dock at the base my field promotion will likely end, and I will go back to doing what I was trained to do, being a Starfleet security officer. That would suit me just fine, though after being in command of a starship it may seem mundane to some. To me, it is what I am, but if I ever find myself in command of a ship again I will not have the same reluctance to embrace the responsibility.**

Jureth closed the terminal on his ready room desk as the door chime rang.

"Come."

The doors parted revealing his old friend Cat Steele. She was back aboard the primary section along with the rest of the crew as Jureth had ordered them all beamed back and had slaved the other two sections to the primary via the main computer.

"Cat, welcome back."

"Thanks," she said with a smile. "It's definitely good to be back. That was one hell of a ride... Sir."

Jureth nodded.

"Yes, yes it was. Hopefully things will be quiet around here for awhile."

Cat shook her head.

"I doubt it. Lotus Fleet doesn't seem like it's a quiet place."

Jureth smiled.

"You know, you're probably right."

"The base is asking about docking, they want to know if we can reassemble for docking procedures."

Jureth laughed.

"Tell them we'll need three bays."

"Aye, Sir," she said with a smile. "You know you did good out there, better than I would have."

"Thanks Cat, it wasn't easy."

"It's not supposed to be Oseno. You know what we used to say in the Marines? The only easy day, is yesterday."

"That has more truth to it than most people know."

"C'mon, let's go home."

The old friends shared a quick hug and stepped together onto the damaged bridge of their ship. Cat moved to the tactical station, but Jureth stopped and took a look around at the battered nerve center of Lotus Fleet's most powerful ship. Sure, it was damaged, and broken, but...it was home.

"Captain," Ensign Wynn said from Ops as Jureth sat down. "Starbase 10 has cleared us to dock, bays 7, 8 and 9."

"Understood Mister Wynn, thank you. Mister Hunter, initiate docking protocols, and take us in."

"Aye, Sir, docking protocols initiated."

The Alsea slid through the doors of Starbase 10 with her three sections in single file formation. The angular saucer section led first and glided into place near the battered USS Republic, and then her other sections under the precise control of the ship's computer followed suit. After several minutes, Shawn Hunter announced what the loud clang reverberated through the hull told everyone.

"Docking sequence complete Captain, we are moored."

"Thank you, Mister Hunter; and thank all of you for your hard work," Jureth said to the bridge crew. "Dismissed."

One by one, the officers filed out until only Jureth remained.

"Computer; power down bridge stations, and lock all command functions authorization Oseno Six One Delta Sierra."

"Authorization acknowledged, bridge stations secure, command functions locked."

Jureth nodded and his combadge chirped.

"Doctor to Captain Oseno."

"Yes, Doctor,"

"You asked to let you know when it was time."

"Thank you, doctor. I will be there shortly; Oseno out."

Jureth closed the comm channel and then initiated a site to site transport that sent him to the Alsea's sickbay. As he materialized, he was met by the ship's holographic doctor.

"She is stabilized and ready for transport, Sir."

"Thank you, Doctor,"

Jureth took his place next to the stasis unit and the Doctor gave the order.

"Computer, two to transport to Starbase 10 main infirmary."

The computer beeped and the transporter beam swept the Bajoran and the inert human woman away. When they reappeared in Starbase 10's immense medical bay, a doctor and two nurses moved instantly to the stasis unit containing the inert form of Rachelle Rivers. Jureth stepped out of their way and watched as they moved her to their main trauma bay. Knowing that his commander was now being well taken care of, the Bajoran stepped over to the nurses station where a young Trill lieutenant was making notes in patient files.

"Can I help you, Sir?" she asked when she noticed him standing before her.

"Yes, Lieutenant; I'd like to talk to someone about this scar..."

\* \* \*

As the Lotus finished docking and stood down from alert, Lieutenant Vincent stood at his console on the bridge. He'd been staring at his sensor readings long after the other officers stood down. Even Captain Kheren and Lieutenant Commander Syntron had taken their leave of Captain Gould and the young chief of security still stood at his station.

"Lieutenant, we're docked at the starbase. It's probably okay for you to blink now," Ensign Kiels, the assistant security chief, said to him, half joking.



"Since we left Starbase 10, I let Klingons board the ship, an Undine infiltrator shoot my captain, the first officer, another Undine, slip past me and, on top of all, both prisoners escape from my brig," Josh responded bluntly without taking his eyes off the scanners. "And then, the same Undine that disabled the ship using *my* security guards and knocked out the entire crew saved us from the brink of defeat and just left. I'm *not* letting my guard down again until I'm completely satisfied that we're in the clear."

Ensign Kiels placed her hand on Lieutenant Vincent's arm and leaned in closer.

"Josh, let's take a walk. You can't stand here forever; let Ensign Hermann watch the sensors for a while," she said.

After a few moments of hesitation, Josh waved the other tactical officer over and stepped in to the turbolift with Nidiri.

"Do you really blame yourself for all of those things?" Nidiri asked.

"Yes I do. I'm the security chief and, as such, the security of the ship is my domain. The Klingons, the Undine, and the hull fracture that's practically tearing the Lotus apart; responsibility for all of those lies with me," Josh responded.

"Then the credit for surviving all of this is yours too," replied Nidiri. "Your security teams successfully fought off a full Klingon boarding action, stood toe to toe with the Klingon flagship, and helped secure the Horizon, all while our XO was working to sabotage us."

Nidiri stepped out of the turbolift as it stopped and Josh followed, thinking on what had been said.

"And where is the XO now? He's gone, leading his armada to... where?" retorted Josh.

"You weren't even on the ship when he left. You were busy saving Captain Kheren, Lieutenant Tyvya and Lieutenant Commander Syntron, without whom this whole operation would have been a waste," Nidiri sternly replied. "You were following orders and doing your work as part of a team. And now that team is doing its part to keep us safe while we write our reports and repair the Lotus."

The tone of Nidiri's last response startled Josh. He stopped and looked up to see that the two had arrived at the security office. Josh turned and made eye contact with Nidiri for the first time since they had left the bridge.

"I know you're right, Nidiri, but I've been fooled too many times today and I can't let it happen again," Josh replied solemnly. "The Lotus isn't exactly in a position to fight if anything does happen, so I guess I just need to get some rest, after writing my reports of course. You should relax too, you were great out there. And thank you for talking me down."

With that, Josh hugged Nidiri and stepped into his office. He looked at the PADDs strewn across the room as he sat at his desk.

"Computer, start recording."

## **Security Chief's Log**

**Stardate 87174.9**

**It has been a wild operation. We encountered just about every enemy of the Federation, but we came out on top. The Horizon anomaly has been sealed and the attacking forces are destroyed or in retreat. The Undine, who infiltrated the Lotus, attempted to take over, and after incapacitating the entire crew, escaped, ended up saving Lotus Fleet and Starbase 10 from being ravaged.**

**Several minor victims in my department from the fighting and one casualty: Crewman Terris. The ship is being held together by its ablative armor due to heavy damage to its structural integrity from the Klingons.**

**Honestly, I don't really know what to think about all of this right now. I need to get some rest and look more closely at all that happened. For now, I've got to check up on the rest of my officers. They've been working very hard and seen a lot... and I need to make sure they're all okay.**

"End recording."

As time went by after the docking of the Lotus Fleet flagship, much of Captain Vi'Rell Gould's time had been spent in engineering since returning from his debriefing with Lotus Fleet command. Gould and Adams, his chief engineer, had the somewhat dismal task of determining if the reconstruction of the USS Lotus's superstructure was even feasibly possible after all she had been through.

Gould gave yet another heavy sigh.

"We'll have to strip the ship down to its subframe all along the secondary hull's port side before we can even begin to work on the problem of that breach."

Adams nodded in agreement.

"That will take two or three weeks easy. Too bad we can't just beam in a new substructure like it was a piece of the hull, Captain."

Gould shook his head. It was a daunting task. The Lotus had taken a torpedo hit by a Klingon dreadnought and cracked her frame; no damage could have been harder to fix short of a missing section from the primary or secondary hull or the loss of an entire warp engine. But the use of both high warp and the transwarp drive had caused the initial damage to spread throughout most of the secondary hull, fracturing it in several key areas.

"Were looking at.. um.. six months of repair time in drydock I'm guessing... before she'll be spaceworthy again." Adams said with an annoyed tinge to his voice.

Gould used his best Vulcan voice in response.

"Engineer Adams, I find your evaluation of the situation overly optimistic."

Both men smiled with dry irony.

Adams turned and walked away slowly while looking around the bay.

"There's been some talk... We've been pushed back of the supply list... Nothing too unreasonable, but... still..."

Gould leaned against a console.

"They want to get the ship that are least damaged first up and back out in the field... and I'd have to agree. The Lotus won't be going anywhere for a while... but that's not what you want to know, is it?"

Adams gave him a look that might mean 'maybe,' so Gould went on.

"I just don't know yet, truthfully. The Lotus took a lot of damage and she's an old ship design. It's possible she might be decommissioned to make way for a new ship, but nothing's final yet."

"Yes, that's what I was thinking alright, Sir."

He looked around the room again.

"My gut tells me that's the way it will end. Perhaps they'll turn her into a museum or even a cadet cruiser... she could be fixed up enough for that I think."

Gould had seen that look in an engineer's eye before... like in his own eyes.

"I'll miss you you know. It's hard to find an engineer that can put up with another engineer for a Captain." Gould said with a grin.

Adams laughed a little.

"That plain am I? well your right of course. Where she goes, I plan to follow, for better or worse... but we'll have to see."

His face then brightened a bit.

"But you'll be getting a shinny new ship then? Let's face it, you do sit the Lotus with a great deal of fondness.. one engineer to another."

Gould shrugged.

"She's a good enough craft for her age, but I always felt she was ill-suited for a flagship. The demands are too heavy for a scout ship, even this one."

He then held up his PADD.

"Exhibit A through D right here," he said seriously.

"Maybe so.. maybe so.. but she did wonders in her time. No one could have asked more from any ship." Adams said with a smile.

"I'd never say otherwise," Gould agreed and straightened up. "I think I'll leave you two alone for awhile. I need to check in with Vincent."

Gould waved and walked out of engineering.

Adams watched him go for a few seconds and then went back to work.

"Don't you mind him, old girl. Either way, I'll have you flying again, even if it is just for one last flight home."

\* \* \*

It has been a day now since space had been on the verge of being consumed by the very flames of Hell. It has been merely an hour now since space had been streaked with the fires of wrath. And it was barely a minute now since Captain Kheren stood on the bridge of his own ship; the only thing that was left of her.

Before the battered USS Spectre had docked inside the huge interior of Starbase 10, the Aegis, the detachable bridge module of the USS Artemis, had been launched from the large shuttle bay pod atop the disc-shaped cruiser where it had taken refuge, freeing it of its considerable bulk to allow her surviving fighters to return to their berths. Then, the ovoid auxiliary craft had entered on its own power to dock at a lower inner pylon, there to disembark her remaining crew. The three dozen or so officers and crewmembers rejoined with the rest of the Artemis personnel that the flagship Lotus had returned safe and sound with the three remaining shuttles from the Ambassador class starship lost in the Azimuth Horizon anomaly.

One hundred and seven tired but proud people of the USS Artemis were then greeted by seven times that number; the rest of their crewmates that had elected to stay behind on orders of their captain to better help Lotus Fleet headquarters in facing their cosmic-scales challenge... and avoid unnecessary loss of life. Now that the dramatic events of the last days were known, already told all around the starbase and beyond, even the hundred or so former crewmates who had asked for a transfer out of frustration or wounded pride when they had been ordered to stay behind recognized the wisdom and foresight of their former captain, acknowledging his sole desire to avoid exposing lives needlessly to danger. They all realised that, not only their expertise and experience had benefited the Starbase in its numerous difficulties with sabotage and then with facing the challenge posed by the anomaly, but also that, had they been granted their futile show of misplaced bravery, they would in all probability have suffered... or died... or caused that of colleagues and friends.

In the end, the whole episode reminded everyone now what it meant to be a Starfleet officer; to serve and protect, to uphold and promote life... and peace. Their sacrifice had ensured that.

And none understood it more now than the one that was at this very moment standing alone on what was left of the once Stalwart Guardian of the Federation; their captain.

Around Kheren, all the stations had been powered down and the entire vessel was under condition blue; her power coming from the base itself just enough to keep her functional, albeit asleep. The lighting was low, a soft blue -tinted light that deepened the already dark blue complexion of his face, etched with fatigue, bittersweet relief... and most of all, sadness.

It was a documented fact that Andorian faces had few muscles to express even their powerful emotions. And it was well known that the captain of the starship Artemis was as closed as the proverbial Aldebaran shellmouth. Yet, it was plainly visible on Kheren's face what he felt at the moment.

In silence, he had toured the entire deck, from the secondary turbolift and into the conference room in front of it with its large transparencies, its two-man transporter pad and its oddly old-fashioned triangular table, then going to his ready room now empty of any personal belonging, and finally at the other end of the short corridor onto the bridge proper. Slowly, he had walked to each and every station and sat in each chair to look at the overlarge one, as old-fashioned as the meeting room table; his chair, just like the one legendary James Kirk used to have, installed right after the death of Captain Kevin Froud, the Artemis first designated commanding officer. He had been crushed in his own command chair by a falling wall brace from an antiquated Cardassian booby trap left by a war long gone... And now, Kheren felt as if that very crushing weight pressed on his heart.

The ship had followed its former captain into oblivion.

The Andorian now stood before the wall near the main turbolift, silent, unmoving. His four eyes were focused on the bronze plaque that adorned it. Slowly, reverently, he unfastened it from the panel and cradled it in his powerful arms, reading the inscription etched on it.

**U.S.S ARTEMIS**  
**Ambassador Class - Starfleet registry NCC-64121**  
**Launched Stardate 17605.8 - Nesrun Fleetyards**  
**Andor Sector - United Federation of Planets**  
***"The Sun never Saw Her Like Outside Olympus"***

*Nor will it ever again*, Kheren thought with only a deep sigh to betray the thought, like a single tear of mourning.

All the while, having beamed directly to Starbase 10 following the completion of their long and difficult mission, Syntron walked deliberately toward his temporary quarters within the base as he clutched in his grasp the only remaining possessions he had garnered from his quarters of the Artemis: the cases which ensconced a crafted Vulcan Lyre in one hand along with a hand-crafted Terran violin in the other.

As he stepped in stride toward his destination, his mind began to re-evaluate the rather illogical choice he made to travel hastily through the treacherous conditions of the damaged starship, caught in a deadly cosmic storm, to retrieve these items before barely leaving the unstable bridge section. These were merely musical instruments, yet somehow the loss of these crafted items had somehow motivated his rather impulsive actions. Was it that they were not replicated items but carved and assembled from trees of their native worlds? Was it the effect that performing on these specific instruments had on him that allowed him to meditate more comprehensively? He did not reach a conclusive answer as he entered the temporary quarters on Starbase 10 and set both instrument cases down besides a standard clothes bureau.

The Vulcan officer pondered these thoughts for a few more moments before he activated the nearby computer system.

"Working," was the only audio acknowledgement the synthesized voice provided.

"What is the current location of Captain Kheren?"

After a brief lag, the response from the computer resonated within the quarters.

"Captain Kheren is on the remaining bridge module of the Artemis docked above the shuttle bay hangars of deck 95."

Syntron closed down the computer link and headed toward the nearest transporter. Moments later, the Vulcan was beamed into the center of the Aegis and observed the Captain staring intently at the bronze plaque now positioned firmly between his hands.

"A memento, Captain?" Syntron inquired respectfully, standing merely a few feet behind the Andorian officer.

The Andorian barely heard the voice of his executive officer, not just because of the limitations of his auditory senses in his rigid antennae, but also because he had been deeply lost in thought. Only because of the echo of the Vulcan's voice on the wall, inches in front of him, did he caught the words. And so, it took a moment before he turned slightly and pointed to his brow, displaying scars from past duels he could have easily erased with modern surgery but still kept, just like the large phaser scar on his chest, under his uniform, collected during his first away mission as chief of security of the Lotus.

"I'm rather fond of them."

There was silence between them, as they both turned to face the silent, deserted bridge of what once had been the most venerable and majestic starship of Lotus Fleet. A vessel that had been born in a time of war, forged into a legend and now gone in a blaze of glory.

She had been nicknamed "the Stawart Guardian of the Federation" in her first life as capital ship during the Caradassian-Federation war. In her brief new life, she had served with distinction in remarkable missions. In the end, she had sacrificed herself in stopping a direct threat to Starbase 10 and then as a major instrument in saving the universe itself from the Azimuth Horizon she had herself first discovered.

The USS Artemis now would be mentionned in one breath with ships like Enterprise, Voyager and Defiant. A fitting tribute to her. Any ship captain would feel elated to have been part of her legend.

And yet, Kheren felt cold, empty.

He was staring blankly at the wall where the viewer would have been activated, had the ship been operational. His voice sounded strangely hollow.

"By the stars, Syntron... what have I done..."

The Vulcan officer could hear the despair that accompanied the solemn expression of the captain. Again, he addressed him with the soft voice of reason and logic, even though the Andorian's stern gaze was focused on a blank wall before him.

"Sir... you have done what had been required throughout these missions... and as a result, you were able to exchange imminent death into a fighting chance to live. You have been repeatedly instrumental in the success of this mission alone while saving the lives of countless beings within and outside of the Federation. We could not have accomplished our objectives in this mission with the anomaly and the adversaries we faced without the swift and effective decisions you commanded... while also putting yourself in harm's way to ensure their only chance of success."

The Vulcan now looked straight at him.

"You did what was necessary, Captain... and there is nothing to regret in your decisions... Sir."

Kheren looked up at the taller officer with an amused glint in his eye.

"Nice quote... Hope it will be deemed appropriate by the Board of Inquiry. Despite everything good that could be said of what we have done, I still lost my command. Starfleet has never been fond of captains losing ships... and with the current attrition we have suffered since the Borg invasion..."

They just stood there for a long moment, in silence, side by side, like two brothers mourning their deceased mother or sister.

Then, suddenly, the Andorian took a deep breath and squared off his wide shoulders, lifting his head with his antennae pointing forward; all the signs of one of his kind getting ready to fight.

"Mister Syntron, your services to the Federation, to Starfleet and to this ship has been nothing short of exemplary, a credit to her command and crew and to her name and legacy. You have earned commendation and I would say at least a promotion... if not your own command. Whatever the outcome of the inquiry, I will make damn sure this does not reflect badly in any way on your Starfleet record. I will ensure that all credit due is shared by you and each and everyone who served aboard her from the day she was re-launched. And if there is any blame to bear, I will... as I must... as her captain."

Again, he raised his stare at the bearded Vulcan.

"The Old Lady deserves nothing less."

Even as a Vulcan, Syntron could appreciate the captain's concern and focus on the future of his crew.

Yet, there were far more pressing issues in the mind of the Vulcan than Starfleet promotions and accolades: the consequences that this dedicated Andorian captain could be facing for effectively fulfilling his duties despite the direst circumstances imaginable.

"Indeed, Sir... However, my record is of little consequence in this situation. It was not as if the commander on that Romulan dreadnought left you a viable alternative to death with his indiscriminate and cataclysmic actions. Even Admiral Tomalak had to beam off of the ship and request immediate asylum to escape his murderous intent. His testimony will corroborate with that of our own when the appropriate time arrives, Captain."

"With what just happened out there, I would guess his testimony will be a little hard to get," Kheren said with as much bitterness as dry humor in his voice. "Given the recent circumstances, the Romulan Empire might just close itself once more for the next fifty years like the last time they had been so soundly defeated."

The Battle of Tomed had indeed sent the Romulans in hiding during the entire first half of the twenty-fourth century. And on this day, History had somewhat repeated itself... Although knowing the USS Horizon had their Empress as a guest might make things go easier eventually. But you never knew with Romulans.

"I'll settle fine with yours, Number One," the Andorian added after a moment. "At least that way, they will get the facts straight."

With a somewhat serious hint of a smirk veiled across his face, the Vulcan responded in kind.

"Of that you can be certain, Sir. I have already been mentally composing my testimony since before our arrival back to the Starbase. With what records I have stored in my PADD and what data I can download from the remaining computer banks here on the Aegis, I will be fully prepared to address any concerns or criticisms that any board of inquiry could present."

Amazingly enough, the same shadow of a smirk seemed to appear of the rigid face of the Andorian.

"I knew there was a reason why I named you First Officer."

His silvery gaze went slowly over the entire bridge one last time before he finally spoke with a calm, firm voice.

"Well, we've had good practice in facing open fire with that anomaly out there. Let's go then."

Together, they stood at attention one moment before the empty bridge, in a final, silent salute, before turning as one and taking the turbolift out.

## **Captain's Log**

**Stardate : 87174.95**

**This is my last entry as captain of this vessel.**

**The USS Artemis has served the United Federation of Planets with distinction, the last of the great Ambassador class starships, carrying until the very end the legacy of its predecessors, matching the nobility of its contemporaries and setting a shining example to her successors. No ship ever deserved better her dedication words: the sun never saw her like outside Olympus. But her last wish is certainly that every ship will hereafter follow in her wake as they open new frontiers, face new challenges and perpetuate all that we stand for.**

**She truly was the Stalwart Guardian of the Federation. She sacrificed herself after eighty years of service for an ideal: that of a safe, peaceful and beautiful universe, full of life , wonders and challenges. May she never be forgotten and remain a beacon for all of us, as we continue to go where no one has gone before.**

**\* \* \***

## **Personal log**

**Stardate : 87174.95**

**I....remember the first thing that the instructor at the Academy told me. He said it was a quote - paraphrased mind. One that I had to look up afterwards actually.**

**"You're going to stumble, make mistakes, I know... more than a few before you find your footing. But you'll learn from those mistakes. That's what Starfleet is about."**

**I guess he was right. It's difficult, finding a place in a world that you really don't know. Especially after your own has been blown to pieces by the actions of those you looked to for guidance... and absolutely had to trust. And now, I'm finding myself there again. Stumbling. Looking at what I've just seen, and what I was taught. What I experienced on Earth before being transferred out here to Lotus Fleet.**

**Starfleet's finest. Sometimes...I'm not so sure. Especially now.**

**I always knew that Starfleet Intelligence existed I guess. And, yes, somewhere, I guess I knew also that there had to be a darker side to the organisation that was so different...and in so many ways that was good!... from my own native Illithyrri Defense Force. I mean, yes, my people have their good sides. But we've...suffered. A lot. Humanity suffered a century or two. We lost so many times more. And that hurt us. Part of the reason, I think, that we created something that was a defence force first... and everything else second. Starfleet...well they're having to become that now. But humanity has an infectious way of making any darkness seem like but the moment just before the dawn. And it shows by how they rose from the ashes so differently to us.**

**But now I'm there again, and I can feel myself slipping. And, yes, I know why.**

**Sorripto.**

**Oh yes, I know there should be a rank there. But...I can't give him that. Not after what he did.**

**Maybe it's foolish. Definitely hypocritical, considering all I've done. But...I was sorry for it. He doesn't seem to have even given it a thought. Could I forgive him for that?**

**Maybe.**



**But I could never trust him. And I can't understand why he's even being allowed to 'help' here. He betrayed us once.**

**I...**

**No.**

**It's settled.**

**I sent my transfer papers. I'm getting off the McKenzie the moment we dock. And then, I'm going to try and find someone to talk to, before I do something that I know I'll regret... regardless of how good it might feel. And try to find someone to talk to. My team's good, yes. But they need their rest. And... I don't think any of them could help right now.**

**End log.**

Snowfire sighed heavily as she exited the turbolift onto the promenade area of the starbase, her heart heavy with a mix of anger and sorrow and a touch of helplessness. She'd gotten the same room as last time on the starbase and threw her duffel bag on the regulation bed and turned around and out of the room almost as soon as she had gotten in.

She couldn't stay on the McKenzie any longer. Not with everything that was there. But just sitting in her quarters wasn't going to help. Not if she wanted to avoid a court martial offence that would likely send her home in utter disgrace into a situation she really did not want to be part of. And that stayed with her as she crossed the deck quickly, ignoring those clustered around tables in small cafes and replimats, quietly celebrating the success of their mission.

*Success...but at such a cost. And...why did it not really feel like victory?*

Not for her. Not after everything she'd had to do...

Her feet took her almost unconsciously out towards a railing, one overlooking a viewport out into the starfield that had finally cleared. A part of her mind noted another person there, but the rest of it just altered her course so that she was far enough away from whoever it was so as to not intrude.

She...wasn't looking for conversation.

Well, yes, she was, but... no. She...it was...

She sighed again, slowing to lean forward against the railing and look out over the panorama of stars, each now safe from the horror she had helped cage. That was something at least, wasn't it? Some small penance paid for all the lives she had helped wipe from reality in that other life of hers, before Starfleet. Maybe she'd be able to pay it all in the end. But did it really matter? Not to the universe. No. But to herself?

Perhaps...

What about others?

She looked across to the side, at the person who she had known was there, and blinked a moment. Captain Kheren, staring out into space with...was that a commissioning plaque? It was...wasn't it. It made sense, didn't it. Something to remember his ship by.

She knew that feeling. Losing a ship was never easy... even when you got all of the crew out alive.

She took a few careful steps along the railing towards the Andorian. Oh, he must know she was there, but it was the courtesy that mattered...somehow. Stupid parents and their stupid etiquette tutors; but, in the end, it helped. Sometimes.

Maybe now?

"The Sun never Saw Her Like Outside Olympus." She quoted softly.

Until then, Kheren had not noticed the Illithyrii; not because of his deafness to anything directly behind him, but because his mind was wandering accross time and space, lost in memories of the last day, the last month, the last year... back to day he had been thrown into the command chair up to the last moment he had been forced to leave it.

But then, he heard the soft voice quoting the words burning his silvery eyes and that brought him back to the here and now... and the feeling of emptiness that had never truly left him for a good while now.

"Nor will it ever again," he answered mechanically without moving his eyes from the vista of stars spread beyond the wide transparency.

Silence stretched between them for a moment before he looked at the white-haired, black-skinned Vulcanoid woman standing beside him. Her uniform was that of the fleet, except that her shoulders, instead of the usual grey, were white as her long hair, marking her as a member of Starfleet's officer exchange program. She looked lithe and delicate, but he knew this could be misleading when his own people, slender and thin by most humanoid standards, was in fact stronger and more resilient than most of them.

He recognized her now. They had talked a bit before the operation had been launched and her scientific expertise had provided the final part of it, following that of Syntron his own science chief, to finally triumph against the anomaly.

But, at that moment, he didn't know what to say. Already ill at ease with social rituals, his heavy heart did not help him find words for this short talk... no, small talk... most humanoids seemed to enjoy.

"Lieutenant Snowfire K'Leysa of the McKenzie... he simply said in polite greeting.

"Of the McKenzie no longer, Captain." She corrected, blowing out a long breath.

As he had studied her, she had studied him. Not the same as others of his species, more defined and...subtly different in manner besides. There was the darker blue skin, of course. And the eyestalks that he could retract that,apparently, was also part of what made him an abomination to his people.

But yet...no. It did not matter.

And...perhaps this was...

Maybe?

"And it will, I think." She continued gently. "Maybe not for you, maybe not now or even for a long time. But ships never truly die, Captain. Their names lie eternal, woven in the words of their stories and the hearts of those who flew them. But...that isn't what you're feeling right now, is it."

It wasn't a question.

"For you, for a Captain, it is the hardest duty to leave behind the place that he has made his ; that has become a part of him. But he must nonetheless, for that is the great duty that he holds. Ships... perhaps even more to my people... become living things in their own way.

Certain systems will 'misbehave', some will just work better than others, and throughout it all the blood and bone within the walls of metal will give her that life far more than anything else."

She reaches across slowly, and softly taps the quote.

"You gave everything to make her that. To make her shine such that maybe, just maybe, she would be as bright as she is said to in the Olympus of Greek legend. And...you succeeded, I think. But still is that hard duty. That hardest of promises that you have no choice but to uphold... for your honor cannot let go if there is a way for you to continue. The Federation is...different that way from many others, you know?"

She gestured out at the starfield, from where Romulan and Klingon had come.

"But you, I think, are beginning to understand for yourself the terrible secret that all Captains... and yes, Admirals too... work so hard, and successfully, to keep hidden."

She tapped the plaque again.

"You can move on, you can start anew, you can continue. But you can never forget."

She stopped, head dropping until her eyes met the floor, and her next words were bare whisper.

"Just as I cannot..."

The words of the Illithyrii struck him first like fine dust, than grains of sand, then turning into gravel, rocks... until realization hit him like a ton of neutronium bricks.

She had been there before... She understood... and most of all, she was right.

Ships, like people, lived on and could only be honored by the living memories of those who moved on to perpetuate all they had given farther into the lives of those that they had left behind.

He looked once more at the dedication plaque of the Artemis, then tucked it firmly under his arm, to keep it as safe and warm as he now felt.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he finally said with the smile in his voice that his face could not convey. "You have lifted from my heart a burden that was slowly but surely sinking me downward and into a very cold and dark place."

He looked at her and saw his own barely lifted cloud now hover over the slender woman.

"You seem yourself to carry your own dark stone as well. Anything a former starship commander can help you with? I already owe you that personally, on top of what all of us in this universe owe you for finishing taming the Azimuth Horizon."

Snowfire felt a slight warmth inside of herself, a feeling of accomplishment, that she had managed again. She had helped, she had given hope instead of destruction and sorrow. And...yes, he was right that she had helped again but...oh...yeah.

"A stone that is the reason for which I left the McKenzie mere minutes following our docking here on the Starbase. I... I could not stay there. Not without doing something that I would truly regret."

She shook her head.

"I do not know if you are aware of the story, but..."

She raised her eyes slowly, and her voice turned rough with anger.

"Lieutenant Commander Sorripto," she made the title almost a curse, "abandoned his post during our fight against the Horizon's Children. He did so... apparently... on orders passed down by Starfleet Intelligence and something called Section 31. He sabotaged our vessel, assaulted several members of our crew, forced the use of a highly dangerous psionic technique to keep us alive, and then... after miraculously returning from the dead... was allowed free run of the McKenzie on our way back to the starbase."

The words were tight, clipped and almost mechanical in delivery, and then she slumped forward against the railing, white hair slipping down on either side of her face to hide it behind a silken veil.

"I...I thought Starfleet was *better* than that..." She said at last, very quietly. "That...maybe all I had read in the Academy, all I had seen there, and most of what I have seen *here* was not an elaborate lie. But..."

Her head kept on moving, side to side, as if a broken mechanism.

"There was no apology in his mind for what he did. No sorrow for those hundreds that he killed when he destroyed the Prophecy... which we had already disabled!"

She didn't shout, but the words were intense, rippling with emotion that she was so clearly having a great deal of trouble containing.

"And then, apparently, he was back... and he was allowed into Engineering once more as a chief engineer, an officer... a *Starfleet* officer... after everything he had done... and..."

She finally met Kheren's eyes, her own violet irises burning with a mix of sorrow, tightly leashed vicious fury, and...disappointment.

"So I came here... and now, I remember what you said yourself, once. That the ends do not justify the means. Not in Starfleet."

The look in her eyes turned almost despairing, in addition to all else; and she did spoke next in a desperate plea.

"Was that the truth?"

Kheren was deeply moved by what Snowfire reported. He felt surprise, disappointment, anger and finally a cold determination that was his most deadly feeling, the one he could least control when confronted with what he could never tolerate; hypocrisy... and worse, accepted hypocrisy, whether by sheer stupid blindness or willful denial, he couldn't care less.

He had offered her to ease her burden; and now he was instead sharing it with her!

But then, what he saw in her luminous eyes, what he heard in her soft voice, what he read in her dark features, all that gave him pause and renewed his own convictions, calming him down with the serene firmness of his own morality, now reflected in someone else's soul.

For that alone, for people like her, he would stand and fight and die.

He looked at her with a light in his eyes that left no doubt as to the soul that shined behind their silvery hue.

"Yes, Lieutenant; it *is* the truth; and the truth is the first thing we stand for, right before peace and the sanctity of sentient life. Even Starfleet Intelligence, short of the errors of a few individuals, do stand by those values. If anyone there erred in judgment, he or she will be held accountable and will face the stern judgment of Federation Justice. Starfleet is not without flaws and free of mistakes; but it always face it's responsibilities and work to make things right, even when it is to correct it's own wrongs... and do everything not to repeat those mistakes again. That is why we have an Academy in the first place."

He took a breath and looked outside, at the cold, silent stars. He did not trust his frozen face and burning eyes to spare the young woman from believing he was aiming his growing anger and despising judgment at her when he was feeling so incensed by his very own words, hardening his voice to make each word a blow.

"But Section 31... that lawless, anachronistic aberration left over from a bygone era of barbarism and immaturity, that... foul, disgusting thing is *not* Starfleet; it is not even *Federation*, whatever self-serving lie they try to tell themselves and us. Even their flaunted name is a blatant lie; read the Articles of the Federation and you will find *no trace* of that Section 31 they pretend justifying their existence with. Their very existence, at least as much as their actions, is an insult to what the Federation represents, an excuse for self-serving powermongers to justify their vile manipulations, a pretext to harbor and condone every extremist, criminal and egotist under a false banner of righteousness. Their existence makes everything we stand for a lie and their actions turn every achievement of ours into a farce."

He took a deep breath to calm himself down. Then he dared to turn to face her. but his eyes were still smoldering.

"That, I know first hand; when I joined the Academy, they sought my combat expertise. But when I found out that the advanced training class for elite Starfleet marines was in fact a cover for a school of assassins, I left... and believe me, it was not pretty when I did. And even today, they steer far and clear from me because they know that, would they dare try anything against me or any one of my people, then Andoria would not only hunt them down to the last one, be it for centuries... and we're frighteningly good and relentless in doing so... but Andoria, a founding world, would leave this hypocritical, perverted, corrupted United Federation of Planets immediately; this would be the beginning of the end for the Federation they so much pretend to serve and protect; and we of Andoria would make sure the whole galaxy knew about it."

Now more calm, he sighed and looked more gently at Snowfire, as if finally seeing her.

"I have not read yet the reports from the Operation. But I remember this Sorripto from the fleet meeting, the outrageous stance he took to flaunt his incompetence behind righteous anger with talk of needless killing and half-baked rescue plans... and the shameless pride he showed when he revealed his Section 31 affiliation. It is nauseating just thinking about it again... and to hear it among officers of Lotus Fleet, of all places..."

He took another breath to contain his anger rising again.

"Now, If what you say happened the way you describe it, this Sorripto can but only face very serious charges before a court martial. If he did receive orders to do as he did however, this will be his only defense and the real culprits, those who gave the orders, will be found and sanctioned accordingly. But pity him if he acted on his own... and invoking Section 31 is for him the surest way to find no leniency whatsoever with Starfleet Command."

He almost smiled, so bitter he felt.

"I do not understand why an honorable veteran like Captain Daniel Crist could tolerate that such an obviously untrustworthy, unfaithful and dangerous individual roam free on board his ship. If there is one thing a ship captain has at heart, or should have, it is the safety of his crew. No loose cannon can be tolerated. Would only one of those things have happened on my ship, I would have personally thrown him out through a torpedo tube. And I am *not* speaking figuratively."

He nodded to the Illithyrii and his voice became much more gentle.

"But I do understand how you feel. I would have done exactly the same; at least, I would like to believe that I would have shown your restraint and do as proper as you did. We Andorians are a violent, passionate people... and one thing we can not tolerate is treachery. But we do admire courage and integrity. Both you have aplenty, Lieutenant; what you just did proves it. More than even what you did today, that alone will have you earn a place on a ship worthy of a true Starfleet officer... worthy of you. Of that, I have no doubt."

He clasped tighter the dedication plaque under his arm.

"Would I still have a ship, I would have been honored to have an officer such as you. And she would have liked you too."

And as the words flowed over her, Snowfire...Listened. She let her shields weaken, ever so slightly, enough to feel the emotion pouring off the Andorian before her, each swell coming in perfect harmony with the words of the moment. She felt the subtly shifts of feeling that made him look out over the stars instead of facing her; and inside she was thankful. She sensed the determination, the steely resolve. And beneath it all...there was no falsehood. He spoke truly. He could do little else. Not without becoming something that he would likely rather die than become. Fire and ice, caged in a body of flesh, but tempered by a deep knowing of what he was. And it helped. Bit and pieces, dust and sand and metal and stone. That flowed out of him, and she felt those feelings, found kinship in that steady stream.

And...the cracks in her soul, those pieces that had been scared and terribly wounded by the events of the past days, they stopped bleeding.

"I think, Captain, that I owe you a thank you just as sincere as that you gave me." She said quietly. "For reasserting my belief in something better than that which stained my hands with blood of billions. And, who knows?" She shrugged eloquently, white hair flipping from the movement of her shoulders. "Maybe what I do now can count for something, even after all I've done. And maybe I can be worthy of the title you granted me, that of a Starfleet officer."

She looked out again, at the icy points of light shining in the blackness beyond the viewport, her eyes seeing something other than those stars. Domes of fire, rising blue, white and red from the green and blue orbs of habitable planets, stretching up high... so high that they almost seemed to rise above the heavens... and then dissipating into a shred of superheated plasma, leaving nothing beneath them but charred ash.

And then there were the comm channels....the screaming horror from the stations and satellites and...

*No!*

She cut off the turmoil, cut it off hard with an extremely quick shake of her head; so fast that it was more shiver than shake.

And then she looked across at Kheren, and sighed sadly, eyes dimming.

"Can there be redemption for that, do you think?"

The Andorian was no empath; in fact, he scored so low on the Starfleet Psionic test at the Academy that even Betazoids had some slight trouble connecting with his mind. But he could listen... and think... What he heard from her soft voice were troubling revelations; he knew next to nothing about her people, except that they were a powerful spacefaring culture somewhere beyond what was used to be called Borg Space, in the far reaches of the galaxy. But it seems they knew deep strife and woes, and she was shouldering much of it on her slender shoulders. What he thought then was that, like him, she had found the Federation and Starfleet to be the levers to lift that burden off her heart; and so, like him, she could not bear that anything... or anyone... would dare threaten them.

But what he felt from the Illithyrii was even deeper; so much like what plagued his own soul that he could only look at her for a long moment before words came.

"Redemption? I do not know. But hope? Yes."

He put his callused hand on her slender shoulder; a most rare move from him. But he wanted his words to ring deep in her. He wanted her not just to hear them, but to feel them.

"A great person is not one that never falls, but one that stands up again after a fall and keeps on going straight and true... regardless of the howling winds at one's back, the slippery ice under one's feet or the snow blowing in one's face. We can not change the past... nor should we. It is what shapes us, makes us who we are in the present, for good or ill. But what we *can* do is build a better us, by building a better future. That *is* after all what the Federation is about.. what it has *always* been about... and what it *must* always be; for everyone... yes, everyone... even this Lieutenant-Commander Sorripto... and us both."

*Hope.*

The word seemed to twist in her mind, the countless meanings of the word flickering across her thoughts as she spoke it. It had once seemed so easy... so simple to reach that bright and powerful place where all would simple flow as part of a greater pattern. The *Talya* teams, the gravitonic fury that they had released on the Borg to keep them at bay, all of it had been part of that pattern. Except parts of the pattern didn't agree with it anymore. The pieces of the pattern, each a free individual of the Council, they were changing. But the Council wasn't changing as quickly as the pattern that made it. And her hope had died at Vanguard, along with twenty five billion sentients, in the blazing fury of anti-matter annihilation.

Not even the Federation had managed to rekindle that.

Except...

She looked at the Andorian in front of her. Properly, truly, Looked. It was hard, oh yes, it was hard. But seeing was believing; or so the humans said. And she wondered.

If not hope, what was it that had driven her to show the Federation how to cage the Horizon? She beleived her people could have done it when it inevitably threatened them. But she wasn't...she wasn't willing to let that happen. But was that all? It didn't...it didn't seem like it.

So... what else was there?

Trust?

Trust in the ideals of this state of many worlds, so at odds with her culture? Again, a part of the puzzle; for if she had not trusted then she would not have been so hurt by the betrayal of the same. So she trusted the Federation. But did she believe in it? Could she truly agree with the words and emotions that Captain Kheren espoused? That he lived and breathed and, arguably, *was*?

She wasn't sure. But...that was better than nothing, wasn't it?

"Thank you, Captain." She replied finally. "Again. I do not know if I truly believe what you have said there, but I'm getting there. And it's people like you who help me do that." Her hand came up as she moved back subtly until she caught his arm in a clasp. It wasn't a handshake; Ilythirii didn't do handshakes. And it didn't really mean what a handshake did. But it was enough.

Kheren was abit taken aback when her body motions announced that she was about to grab his arm; his duelling instinct and Andorian upbringing were geared for instant violent response when something or someone was about to touch him without being invited to; but after years among Humans, who touched each other, everyone and everything else at the first opportunity, he had learned to curb his instincts and decrypt the true intention behind the gesture. Now he could handshake without breaking someone's arm by reflex; and the back step the Ilythirii had taken before raising her arm had told him it wasn't an attack, but a gesture of trust and friendship.

And so, he not only allowed it, but he returned it back.

Seemed they both had learn more than a few things in Starfleet.

"Thank *you*, Lieutenant. For this... and for having being with us at the crucial moment. My first officer, who not so long ago had been my chief of science, showed me the final sensor readings and calculations confirming that, had we not finally caged the anomaly the very moment we did, by the time it would have bursted out of this one sector alone, even the giant black hole at the center of the galaxy would not have been enough to stop it. By now, this whole universe would have already been on course towards annihilation. We were lucky that you were here with us when it was still possible to do so. I hope we will have you with us still for some time to come."

And with that, he lifted his chin to her, in the very Andorian gesture of respect.

"Now if you will excuse me, I must go make my report to Fleet Captain Samji. And then, I have wives to... report to also. Please take care of yourself, Lieutenant Snowfire K'Leysha."

And with that, he walked away towards the nearest turbolift, his head higher and his step lighter than they had been since a good while.

\* \* \*

The buzzing of the alarm awoke Sorripto from sleep. He rubbed his eyes and sat up on his hard bunk. Despite being detained, he was still allowed to work monitored engineering shifts aboard the docked McKenzie, pending a Starfleet decision on what to do with him. As the Cardassian sat up, he looked out the forcefield of the brig and saw that his usual security escort was not present.

Standing and rubbing the remaining sleep from his eyes he called out.

"Hello? Guys, it is time for my shift. I might be detained but I would still like to make it to work on time."

Hearing no response and still seeing no one, Sorripto called out again.

"Guys? hey! anyone... hello?"

As Sorripto approached the force field of the brig to tap on it and get someone's attention, his finger approached the field and... nothing. His hand passed right through where the field should have been.

Waving his hand through the fieldzone twice more, Sorripto stepped out of the brig cell into the holding area and looked around, seeing no one. Walking towards the door to leave the holding area, he walked up to the door,,, which did not open.

Stopping at the door, Sorripto reached for the panel to use the manual opening, when the sound of a slow clap caught his attention. Turning, he saw a familiar face, with neatly parted black hair and dressed all in black, of a man sitting at the control desk. Meeting eyes with him, the Cardassian's fist clenched and any good feelings from the past seemed to leave with a tense breath.

"Jameson."



As the man stood, his slow clap stopped as he reached and adjusted his collar. Smiling at the fuming Cardassian, the man spoke with a cold, almost condescending tone.

"Hello Lieutenant Commander; nice to see you again."

Before Sorripto could say a word, the man in black continued with the same satisfied smirk on his face.

"And you look so well rested. Weird because I have heard how busy you have been these past few months. Speaking of which, we need to talk about your little change of heart with your..."

Cutting off the one named Jameson, the Cardassian belted out with such force and anger his throat began to hurt.

*"Where are they? Where is my family?"*

Putting up his gloved hand, the man in black only shook his head.

*"What family? I read through your record, Lieutenant-Commander and everything in there says you were an only child. Your mother died during the Dominion bombardment and your father shortly before you joined Starfleet... So tell me... what family?"*

Using every ounce of strength in his being to not clobber the man before him into a pulp then and there, Sorripto yelled back.

*"You have my family! where are they? I did everything you asked, now let them go!"*

Shaking his finger in a reproachful way, the man in black retorted back.

*"But you didn't do everything we asked now did you? Did you?"*

Sighing, Sorripto's breathing became slowed.

"No."

"Exactly. So, now you want us to uphold our end of the bargain; you uphold yours. I notice that Sisko sits in medical... alive. Oh, I did hear your little speech."

Tapping his chest with one finger the man smiled, the smile of a snake.

"Got me right here. It did, really... If I cared any more, I would have shed a tear. He has no idea that that was a goodbye, does he? However, that does not change the fact that he is up and around, walking and breathing."

"Joey is no longer a threat and he remembers nothing! There is no reason to kill him."

Slapping Sorripto, the man showed a tone other than arrogant for the first time during the exchange. Now he was authoritative and overbearing, the tone of someone in power.

"I did *not* ask you to make decisions now, did I? You are here to do a job for us and you failed to do that job. You seemed to have everything going for you too. You acted the villain at the meeting to get the traitor to trust you, then you sabotaged your ship and got aboard the Prophecy... But, once you were free to follow through with the rest of our plan, you disobeyed me. You failed and do not seem to care. Now, what will it take?"

Reaching into his pocket, the man in black pulled out a little PADD with a picture on it. The picture was of two female adult Cardassians and one young girl, all of whom looked remarkably a lot like Sorripto.

"How much more persuasion do you need, Lieutenant Commander?"

Looking at the picture, Sorripto focused on the little girl, his sharp memory flashing through every picture of her he had seen. The wind, the glare, the color, the clothing, everything was falling into place. Sorripto had seen that picture before. The picture he was looking at was old; in fact, it was three old pictures digitally put into the same frame to become like one. As the realization of what he was looking at set in, the Cardassian fell back and sat on the bench outside one of the brig cells. Placing his hands over his grey face, he composed himself as best he could; he knew what an altered photo meant.

In the hands of villains like Jameson and Section 31, it meant they had no way of taking a more recent one.

Choking out a few words, Sorripto asked in a sad and almost begging tone.

"When did they die?"

Realizing how quickly Sorripto had put together the bluff in his hand, the man pocketed the fake picture and shook his head in amazement.

"Cardassian memory never fails to amaze me. Still, I have no idea what you are talking about."

Snapping back, Sorripto stood, his eyes welling with anger which were covering the tears.

"*When?* Dammit tell me *when!* You killed my family! At least tell me when they died!"

"They were gone long before this mission even started. Too bad too... I thought for sure you would follow our instructions to the letter. Now... what I am going to use for leverage?"

Snapping his fingers, he spoke on a false joyous tone.

"Well, there is always Sisko, Captain Crist, or that pretty black girl."

Almost jumping from the bench, Sorripto had finally had enough and his anger got the best of him. Grabbing the man by his lapel, the Cardassian shoved him into a wall. He was filled with such anger that he was nearly foaming at the mouth as he screamed in the man's face.

"*You keep them out of this all of them!* I will burn for what I did for you, *bastards*, but I will not see anyone else involved in your little game!"

Gently swatting at Sorripto's hands, Jameson coughed slightly when he was released and recomposed himself, adjusting top and collar again.

"Well, that seems to be your red button now, doesn't it? That pretty little black girl... You care about her, don't you?"

"She is my friend; they all are."

"That is not what I meant and you know it. Well, I guess there is a heart in that cold boney Cardassian soul of yours after all. Too bad. I was just starting to like you. And as for our game, as you so lovingly call it, is not over is it? You were supposed to kill Sisko to avoid what he knows about the Federation getting into outside hands. You were to eliminate the Children and find the traitor aboard the McKenzie. I said nothing about saving the crew or Sisko."

Now feeling in control again, the man in black brought his hands behind his back, resuming his overbearing posture.

"And stun disks? Really? Was it that important to you that no one died? You spent more time during your escape undoing all the sabotage from Chief Reichman, by the time you left, the McKenzie was never in any real danger. I mean, Hell, that psionic technique that nearly killed your Illithyrii friend was at that point practically unnecessary. You're pathetic. In fact, you're the worst traitor ever."

Shaking with rage, Sorripto only shook his head.

"I am *not* a traitor. Not to the McKenzie, not to the Captain, and certainly not to the Federation. I saved everyone that deserved to be saved and killed everyone who needed to die."

"The Prophecy was disabled... Surely they could have been spared while you were on your crusade to save the day."

"I *had* to destroy the Prophecy. I know that Section 31 wanted to get their hands on that ship because of its adaptable cloaking device. I used it to destroy the fleet that had just come in. They would have destroyed the McKenzie in a few minutes."

With an exaggerated slow clap, the man continued to mock Sorripto.

"Exactly, Lieutenant-Commander. You did what had to be done. You saved them all and they want you to hang for it. Except Crist... Anyway, letting you walk around the ship, he seems to think there is good in you, somewhere. If only he knew that you are not only the worst traitor ever, you are the worst hero I have ever seen. Your ability to follow simple directions are also in question. You think you can pull a stunt like that and there won't be consequences? When you sign on the dotted line, we own you and will continue to do so until we decide otherwise."

"Sign? You kidnaped my family! I had no choice!"

"You did have a choice apparently. Sisko lives, no Prophecy cloak... and there is still the matter of everything that you know."

His anger giving way for just a moment, Sorripto cracked a faint smile.

"There *is* all the things that I know... or should I say, the things the Federation knows."

Catching the subtle threat in his words, Jameson perked up slightly.

"That is right, you murderous blood-sucking bastard. Every order, every word, every video and message... I saved them all. Every log and input, even the records from your shuttle when you recruited me."

As the man attempted to speak, Sorripto snapped again, silencing him.

"I am not finished, you worthless slime! I also have the information on section 31. Every member, traitor, supporter, sympathizer, murderous mission, illegal double dealing, double agent, triple agent, mole, sleeper, and merchant who sold you information."

Attempting to stand strong against this obvious non-bluff, the man attempted to correct Sorripto.

"You are lying. there is no way you could have that kind of information."

With his tongue, Sorripto popped out one of his back molars, spitting it into his hand and held it into the man's face. As the man in black glanced down at the molar, sticking out of was a cerebellum nanite probe.

This was the piece used by the Borg integrate the mind and steal the thoughts of those being assimilated. Section 31 had experimented with using it for intelligence gathering, with mixed results. Seeing Sorripto with one could only mean one thing; the man in black's fears were confirmed as Sorripto continued waving the tooth in his face.

"No, I did not have that kind of information... but you did."

Raising an eyebrow, the Cardassian clenched his fist around the tooth and, with a right cross that could drop a large mammal, he punched Jameson across the face, knocking him to the floor.

"You killed my family and held me hostage for some damn intelligence gathering mission. You want to lecture me about evil? What I did was wrong and I deserve to pay, but section 31 is the *true* evil. In a universe where the Federation can make peace with the Undine, where a Cardassian risks everything to save a Bajoran and where those that once called me friend will want justice no matter how much truth comes to light, an evil entity like section 31 has no place. You are a relic of a darker time, destined to rot away from history like the plague or an unjust war. Everything needed to take Section 31 down forever and more is sitting on the desk of one of the best and most loyal Captains in Starfleet. When he reads what I gave him, your game will be over. The Federation needs to thrive and will not do so until the cancer that you have infected the galaxy with is gone forever."

As the Section 31 officer stood, the swelling already showing and blood trickling out both sides of his mouth, Sorripto bellowed out all the more.

"You want to know why I did what I did? Because I saw my opportunity to end evil once and for all. I have lost the trust of my closest friends and will never know the pleasure of serving aboard a Starfleet vessel again, but if I take any solace in what I have done, it is that I will know that the murder of my family was the last crime to ever be committed in the name of Section 31."

Suddenly, his mounting rage abated like a fire doused by a sudden downpour. Amazingly, a smile started to cross his thin lips.

"I guess I was wrong about one thing, Jameson..."

"Oh? and what's that?"

As Sorripto finished speaking, he nodded to the man in black as if telling him to turn around. As the operative slowly turned around, he saw himself surrounded by the barrels of a dozen phaser rifles, all pointed at him.

"I was wrong, Jameson. I guess Captain Crist did read what I left him already."

As the security forces detained and cuffed the man in black, Sorripto walked back over and entered his cell, sitting down on his bunk. Letting out a deep sigh, he stared at the security forces who curiously eyed the Cardassian as they reactivated the force field to the brig. Sorripto let out another deep sigh as he pulled out the small PADD he had taken from Jameson's pocket.

Seeing the pictures on the PADD, the security officer standing guard outside the cell inquired.

"Who are those ladies, Lieutenant-Commander?"

Looking back at the picture, Sorripto smiled.

"Those were my sisters."

Confused, the security officer who had served with the Cardassian since the day he had come aboard, even shared a few meals in the mess with him, inquired again.

"Sisters? I thought you were an only child?"

Putting the PADD down and resting his head on his bunk, Sorripto wiped a tear from his eye and almost choked on the words.

"I am now."

\* \* \*

After the Hearings had concluded, Lieutenant Commander Syntron had made his way back to his temporary quarters on Starbase 10 several weeks later. As he began to undress after the intense formal inquiry, he began to ponder about his future in the fleet.

Although he would not describe it as such, he was a bit apprehensive, trying to estimate if Captain Kheren would not only be exonerated on all charges related to the loss of the USS Artemis, but given any commission to a new vessel. However, the Vulcan was not certain where he himself would now be assigned, given all of the changes in command that had occurred due to numerous events that had transpired throughout this mission. In fact, he had not even an inkling of what to even expect. All that he knew, based on the message flashing on his computer monitor, was that he was expected to attend a ceremony on the Starbase that was to commence in only a few hours: an event that he perceived with unspoken trepidation.

These type of social events seemed to be a rather awkward amalgamation of formal and yet informal intentions and thus elicited somewhat contradictory interactions. Some officers throughout such an evening tended to overindulge in their consumption of intoxicating beverages and became overly friendly, obnoxious, opinionated, or aggressive. Others were rather passive and reserved. This Vulcan didn't fit into either of these categories and therefore always appeared in his perception to be a bit out of place.

But duty was duty.

Suited again in the formal attire of the fleet, the Vulcan officer stepped out of his quarters at the appropriate time and traveled the distance to the ceremony in a subdued yet deliberate manner.

\* \* \*

He had gotten on the first transport that he had been able to catch when he had heard.

A beautiful ship, one of his ships, the Alsea, needed him again. Now, as the transport drew near to Starbase 10, Lucius stood on the transporter pad with his tool bag in hand. He couldn't believe the things he'd already heard about what they'd done to her... But soon, he would find out and then, he would help her. Starfleet sent him because he was the best... and only he could make the Alsea fly again.

As he waited the transporter operator finally nodded to him.

"It's time, Sir,"

"Hmph.." was all Lucius said in acknowledgement

The transporter beam whisked him away and he appeared a moment later on the transporter pad of the starbase where the young operator looked at him with a smile.

"Welcome to Starbase 10, Sir." she said.

"Well," he growled. "What are you waiting for? Send me to my ship. Send me to the Alsea."

The operator's smile faded.

"Excuse me?" she said before the realization dawned on her "Oh, you're Mister Lucius. They told me to expect you."

"Yes yes, just send me to my ship."

"Of course; which section?"

Lucius glared at her.

"What do you mean, which section?"

"The Alsea wasn't able to reassemble before docking."

"Hmph...send me to the primary bridge."

"of course."

The transporter grabbed Lucius again and he materialized on the circular command center of the USS Alsea. As he the acrid smell of battle filled his nostrils and under the dim lighting, his eyes took in the damage caused by repeated shorts of the ship's electrical system. Lucius sighed audibly... and then his eyes settled on a young Bajoran in a Starfleet uniform pointing a phaser at him.

Jureth had come back aboard the Alsea to recover Captain Rivers' personal effects from her quarters... and to see the ship he'd gotten quite attached to one last time. He had been shocked initially by the sound of a transporter beam, but had reacted quickly, drawing his phaser and waiting for the figure to discover him, rather than making his presence immediately known to the potential intruder. Look before you shoot, his Academy instructor Tuvok had always said, in typical Vulcan obviousness.

The old man in a gold-collared uniform looked at him with obvious outrage.

"Put that thing down! Who are you? and what are you doing on my ship?" Lucius practically yelled.

"*Your* ship?" the young man said. "I don't know who you think you are, but this is *my* ship and I suggest you explain yourself before I have Starbase security take you into custody."

"Your ship," Lucius grumbled "I suppose that makes you the captain."

"Yes, I am Captain Oseno Jureth."

"What have you done to her?" the older man asked with anger, waving a trembling hand around the bridge "Captains are supposed to bring their ships back safely! Why is she in pieces?"

"I still don't know who *you* are and, until you explain that to me..."

"My name is Lucius."

For a moment Jureth didn't recognize the name; then, something in his head clicked.

"The engineer..." he acknowledged slowly, lowering his phaser

"Yes, yes, now you answer *my* questions... Why is my ship in pieces? what have you done?"

"Me?" Jureth responded "I did nothing, the Undine, the Romulans, the Klingons, *they* did this," the Bajoran said, gesturing around the bridge

"Hmph..." Lucius grunted. "A poor excuse... Can I get to work now, *Captain*?"

"Of course," Jureth replied. "I was going anyway."

Lucius went over to the engineering console on the bridge and mumbled to himself as he started working. Jureth looked at the odd engineer one last time and then tapped his combadge.

"Oseno to Starbase 10, one to transport from the Alsea."

Moments later the transporter beam whisked him away. he too had duties to attend to... and he too was now starting to grumble about them.

*Ceremonies...*

Jureth hated them, always had. He had even tried to find a way to skip his Academy graduation ceremony, but Professor Tuvok had found out and had Academy security escort him to the parade ground. Escaping it today, on a starbase... no chance.

He looked at the chronometer on the desk of his assigned quarters at Starbase 10 and then tugged at the collar of his dress uniform. He hated the blasted thing. Jureth stood up and glanced in the mirror one more time, looking at the two lieutenant pips that had replaced the four captain pips he'd worn when in command of the Alsea. It wasn't that Fleet Captain Samji had told him his promotion was no longer in effect, but he had assumed that, once the mission was complete, he would go back to his previous rank and responsibilities.

He adjusted the phaser on his belt, refusing to even go to an awards ceremony without it, and then his door chime rang.

"Come in." he called.

Catherine Steele walked in, dressed similarly to Jureth, complete with phaser.

"Are you ready yet?" she asked

"Do I *have* to go?" Jureth replied

"Yes, you *have* to go; and since Tuvok isn't here to have security escort you this time, I guess I'll have to do."

She grabbed his arm and Jureth feigned resistance before allowing her to pull him out the door.

The two security officers rode the turbolift to the appropriate deck, exited and followed another group of attendees into the banquet hall.

It was well over a month after the events of the Azimuth Horizon fleet action when things were finally beginning to settle down. The repairs were well underway on many of the ships and some of the officers were beginning to be anxious to get underway on a new mission, or for some, begin their leaves of absence.

However, the senior officers of all the Lotus Fleet ships were detained by Fleet Captain Samji at Starbase 10 because he wanted to take the time to recognize their heroism, bravery, creativity, perseverance, and dedication. The banquet would provide him that opportunity, as well as the opportunity for them to socialize and relax a little bit; all very much needed after what they had gone through.

In the banquet hall, there were various holographic banners and pennants across the far wall commemorating the nine ships that had taken part in the Fleet Action. In the middle, hanging over the stage, the image of the now decommissioned USS Lotus with its signature saucer section pointed forward toward the tables signified its place as former flagship of Lotus Fleet. Flanked on either side, it was accompanied by the agile McKenzie and the powerful Alsea, the next oldest ships of the line. The largest ships were displayed on the outskirts, the prominent Spectre, and finally the newest ship, the majestic Artemis, which had enjoyed a short time in the Fleet as the first line of defense against the Azimuth Horizon. Perhaps it was fitting that the Artemis' first mission had been to be the very first vessel to explore the center of the Horizon and its final mission and destruction stood in parallel to that of the anomaly. There was some kind of poetic significance to this... or at least many wanted to believe it so.

Again, on either side of those ships, the remaining four ships were also presented: the Republic and Wisconsin first, and then finishing up with the Pittsburgh and Steamrunner on the very outside edges of the hall.

The McKenzie, Alsea, Spectre, Pittsburgh, and Wisconsin would all remain in the command of Lotus Fleet for missions of less vital importance, but two new ones would be given to fill the gap of those decommissioned, reassigned, or destroyed. The USS Horizon was already displayed prominently above the Lotus to signify both its own part in the Fleet Action and its place as the new Fleet flagship. Another vessel still in its prototype stages and under classified status had yet to be revealed to the Fleet.

Below each ship, and for the Starbase itself, was listed the name, rank, and position of all senior officers that had served in the Fleet Action. Those were the officers that were making their way into the banquet hall this day, to take their places at their respective tables, the order of which mirrored that of the banners. On either side of the large room floated large holographic banners with both the Federation and Starfleet logos.

Fleet Captain Samji was busy greeting various people and engaging in lengthy conversations, giving the officers time to arrive and in turn socialize among themselves. Many took advantage of the long table of hors-d'oeuvres that lined the far wall. All were very finely dressed in their spotless dress uniforms and therefore those in the area of the buffet table were being extra careful with the food.

Many admired the image of the new Lotus-class starship, the USS Horizon, and were wondering who would be assigned to serve on the flagship. No commissions had been assigned as of yet, so they were all officially on duty on the Starbase. As for the other new, mysterious starship, gossip abounded aplenty... but no one knew a thing.

It would not be long before Fleet Captain Samji would take the stage and begin announcing the well-deserved promotions and awards to be granted that evening. In the meantime, the great hall was starting to fill up with officers in formal whites and blacks.

Right as he came in, Oseno Jureth took in the holograms of the ships of Lotus Fleet, his eyes settling on the hologram of the Alsea. It was going to be a shame to leave her, but from what he had heard, she would fly again...someday. He saw Fleet Captain Samji making rounds and greeting guests, and then from behind him he heard a familiar voice.

"Lieutenant Oseno, it's good to see you again."

Jureth turned and came face to face with the always striking Rachelle Rivers. He had heard that she had recovered from her injuries, but he hadn't had the opportunity to seek her out until now. Her red hair was tied back into a perfect tight pony tail behind her head, and her features showed now signs of the trauma she had suffered in the battle with the Romulans.



"Captain," Jureth replied warmly. "I'm glad you're up and about."

"I hear I have you to thank for that, and for bringing the Alsea home as well."

"It was my job, Sir." Oseno replied remembering that Rivers was not keen on being addressed as Ma'am.

"Still, it couldn't have been easy," she said. "I read some of the reports, and your tactics against the Undine were superb."

"Thank you Captain, that means a lot coming from you."

"You're welcome, Lieutenant,"

Jureth saw her eyes drift to the side. He followed them and saw Fleet Captain Samji heading their way.

"Good to see you up and about and back in charge of the Alsea, Captain," Samji said to Rivers.

"Thanks, Fleet Captain, it's good to be back. I'm just sorry I wasn't able to help when you really needed me, but I'm anxious to return to duty."

Fleet Captain Samji put his hand on Jureth's shoulder.

"You had a fine stand-in who is sure to work his way back up to the position quite soon. Come speak to me later, Mister Oseno and we can figure out where you'll be best suited. I think you've earned at least the ability to choose your own posting even if a position of Captain is no longer available."

Jureth nodded.

"Yes, Sir, I will do that. And thank you for giving me that option. I know you don't have to. If I have to leave the Alsea, I wouldn't rather see her in any other hands than those of Captain Rivers."

"Thank you, Lieutenant, Fleet Captain," she said to each, nodding in turn, and then said, "I will take my leave of you. There's someone I'm anxious to speak to."

She turned away and walked toward the Starbase 10 table, where Lieutenant Commander Joseph Daystrom Sisko was seated.

He had not felt like speaking to anyone since his return from the Horizon's Children, so he kept alone to himself, hoping to just get through the ceremony and back to his quarters where he had been trying to piece together what had happened.

He then saw his friend who he had previously worked with during the Borg War and had developed feelings for at one point, walk toward him, her beautiful milky face framed by stunning red hair, her white uniform with the white vest portion denoting the Captain's rank. It was odd... The last time he had seen her, she was a Lieutenant, still at a lower rank than him, and now she stood before him in an authority that made him shift uncomfortably before standing up at attention, as was typical when meeting a Captain for the first time or after a prolonged time away.

"At ease, Lieutenant Commander," she said with her typical sheepish grin that belied her wish to be a Tactical and Security Lieutenant again.

"Captain," Joey said in response and then took his seat after she did. "Congratulations are in order, I guess. The last time I saw you, you were a Lieutenant."

She gave him a look of slight irritation.

"Call me Rachele, please. Thank you Joey. But... I still haven't had much experience with it. My real first command put me in a coma."

"Hopefully your next one will go smoother. Do you know where they're sending you?"

"Patrolling the Klingon border. It should be relatively quiet; it seems they have taken heavy losses, and are fearful of Undine retribution. It is good to have someone else on our side, for once. We owe it all to Lieutenant Oseno there," she said, nodding in his direction. "He showed them mercy and made them realize the error of their xenophobic ways."

"Quite an impressive achievement," Sisko said. He then turned and directed his gaze squarely and wholly into her eyes. "I'm sure you will prove yourself equally capable, Rachele, as I have always known you would."

"Thank you, Joey. That means a lot... really."

She then shifted out of his gaze uncomfortably so he couldn't see a slight tear begin to form in her right eye and cleared her throat.

"How about you?" she said, with a greater vocal dynamic so as to make it clear to those around her that she was maintaining distance as a Captain should. "Have they assigned you to a vessel yet?"

"Not yet," he said. "I hope to just continue on as an Engineer or Science officer."

He had been an engineer by trade, but studied science, specifically cybernetics, at the Academy. His grades in both fields were excellent, so his options were quite open.

"Hopefully it is quiet so I can continue working on the project I started before the Borg War," he continued. "I want to integrate the neural matrix of a hologram into the positronic body of an android. It would allow a hologram to temporarily take complete human form for away missions. If I am successful, it would provide even more freedom and equal rights to the hologram than is even afforded by a portable holoemitter."

"That would be quite an impressive feat, Joey," Rivers responded, impressed. "You'd be a Soong and a Zimmerman combined if you could pull that off."

"Well maybe," Joey said, modestly. "They are the ones that created each piece from scratch. I'd just be putting them together. It's not quite as impressive as either one individually."

"Regardless, every vessel nowadays contains an EMH and even sometimes an ECH and ESHes," he said, referring to the lesser known Emergency Command Hologram and Emergency Security Holograms. "What I hope to do is to request that one of the android Starfleet officers be on my team and would agree to help me with the project."

"Well I just know if you do, you'll succeed," Rivers said, confidently. "Excuse me Joey, I think I will rejoin the Alsea table. It looks like Fleet Captain Samji may be itching to start the ceremony soon. Take care, my friend."

"Be safe, Rachele," Joey said, standing up as she did.

She hadn't mentioned anything about the incident and his role in the Horizon's Children group, whether brainwashed or not. He was thankful for that, because it reminded him that he should only look forward, to the future, not back. He would stop feeling sorry for himself, and prove himself as an officer and a scientist.

He watched her walk away with a slight longing before taking his seat again to wait for the proceedings to begin.

Jureth watched as Rivers walked away and observed as she interacted with the man Jureth only knew as the one the Cardassian had rescued from the Horizon's children.

"Something between those two..." he said quietly to Cat Steele.

"Ya think?" she said sarcastically. "Doesn't take a warp theorist to see that."

"We might as well sit down," Jureth replied then to change the subject. "I'm sure the Fleet Captain will want to begin soon."

Cat nodded and the two security officers moved casually through the crowd towards where the crew of the Alsea was seated. But they would have to wait some more before the whole main event started. Other officers were only now entering the great hall.

As he entered the banquet hall for the required event, Syntron gazed around the room at the holographic banners, images of the fleet ships, information acknowledging the senior officers that had served aboard each of these ships; including his former ship, the Artemis, that no longer existed. Then he brought his gaze to the multitude of guests that filled the cavernous room. They included a potpourri of species and colored outfits of all ranks adorned with medals and ribbons acknowledging contributions made to Starfleet and Lotus Fleet. This was to be the main thrust of this event, and perhaps, sometime during or after this event, his commission, placement and future would be determined and revealed.

Already among the attendants, Captain Vi'Rell Gould walked around room meeting everyone he could. The Half Vulcan - Half Romulan veteran starship commander was still a relative newcomer to Lotus Fleet after all... and he didn't know very many of the other officers personally.

Although not assigned to a ship at the moment, both he and his former tactical and Security Chief, Josh Vincent, remained in contact, awaiting their orders. He expected that Vincent would show to the great hall sooner than later.

As Gould passed the ships display, he paused to look over both the Lotus and the Artemis, two ships he would likely never forget. He held his glass out as a small salute of respect.

His eyes then moved over the newest flagship to be introduced into Lotus fleet and noted to his own personal opinion that it was much better suited for the job than the Lotus. Not that she didn't have her charms, the Lotus, but the flagship needed to make a statement; it needed to stand out as a symbol of all the achievement, prosperity and nobility that the United Federation of Planets stood for and, if need be, put fear into the heart of an enemy... at the very least, make them worry a bit.

He mused for a second longer then wandered back into the crowd and smiled as he saw Captain Kheren of the late, great starship Artemis and his wives all walking together into the hall.

He'd never seen a man look so reluctantly smug.

"I think you look dashing. Don't you agree Lyrya?"

"Quite true, my dear Tyvya."

"You two are definitely partial in your judgment," growled Kheren.

They did make quite an impression the three of them; his athletic frame cut sharply by the white short vest, slim black pants and dark blue shirt of his formal wear. Similarly, both Andorian women each side of him wore a similar dress uniform, except for the white shirt of the pale-skinned Aenar counselor on his left and the red one of the towering giantess Tyvya to his right, and both of them wearing long skirts that clung to their shapely legs with each step they took.

Kheren still grumbled as he looked straight before him so as not to cross the eyes of anyone.

"This shirt is the same hue as my own skin. It is like I am half-naked, bare-chested under this too short vest."

"Like I said; dashing," repeated Tyvya.

Lyrya only giggled. She could only perceive colors with her antennae, her facial eyes being utterly blind. But she had no problem looking through her mate's own eyes. Since their mating, the mental link between her and the other two was now constant.

Although he kept his dignity as best he could by looking straight ahead, he missed none of the details around him. The honor stand with the ships prominently displayed brought a sudden wave of sadness to his heart as he instantly spotted the banner of the USS Lotus, the first ship he had served on, now to be retired with all due honors... and that of the Artemis, the last ship he had served on... now lost forever in a blaze of glory.

The feeling struck his Aenar wife and she squeezed his arm gently, sharing the feeling with Tyvya as well.

"Not to worry," the giantess whispered, "they will give you another ship soon enough, you'll see."

"It will be a fighter shuttle, if I am *that* lucky," said Kheren. "Fitting... In this outfit, I look like a bad holonovel space pirate."

"Like I said..."

Tyvya was interrupted by the approach of the handsome chief medical officer of the lamented Artemis, Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth, quite elegant in his own formal uniform. His dazzling smile and sparkling purple eyes did nothing to alleviate Kheren's discomfort. And the charming but always mischevelious Deltan knew it quite well.

"My, but ain't we look dashing tonight, Captain Sir!"

Kheren just closed his eyes as both his wives giggled anew.

"You mind if I borrow one of your ladies for a dance or two?" inquired Elliago with that charm of his that even Kheren could not ignore.

"Please, Doc... take *both* of them."

"We're never far from each other anyway," Lyrya reminded them all as she lowered her antennae to him before she and Tyvya took the Deltan's arms and went with him to sample the buffet. The rest of Kheren's senior officers were also there, nodding to him in greeting.

Kheren sighed and shook his head; but there was more than mild amusement in his eyes and the curve of his antennae. Even he would have dared to say even... contentment... and peace.

His four oculars then caught sight of several other officers now also present in the stateroom. He first went to the one he knew best and from his very first days as an officer of Lotus Fleet, greeting him in the traditional Human-borrowed Starfleet way of shaking hands.

"Captain Summers. Glad to see that you have recovered from your ordeal on the Spectre."

"Captain Kheren," the Half-Betazoid answered, his handshake warm and energetic. "Indeed my friend, I am, and thanks to no small degree to my First Officer. I believe you haven't yet being formally introduced to Commander David Rogers here."

The Andorian offered his hand to the slightly taller but broader man whose hazel eyes stood sharply in contrast to his dark hair.

"Ah yes... the infamous naked man. Glad to finally meet you Commander... and in uniform. You look... dashing."

Remembering the embarrassing incident from the previous fleet meeting, David blushed slightly and extended his hand to shake the offered one from the large Andorian.

"Please Captain, the incident shall remain in the past. And I am most pleased to meet you in person, Sir. Your reputation precedes you."

There was no telling from the well-controlled tone and expression of the man if this reputation he was referring to was good or bad; as the captain of the starship that first discovered the Azimuth Horizon anomaly or as the one who lost his ship in there... But the truth was in both anyway so, Kheren did not dwell on the comment but followed suit.

"As does yours, Commander. Thanks to you, the Spectre and your captain, my long time friend, came back home through both cosmic and enemy fire. We owe you much."

"None more than me," acknowledged Daniel Summers with a genuine smile and a nod to his First Officer. "But I have already been told that the Spectre and I will be reassigned to patrol the Klingon border following our latest confrontation with them. Unfortunately for me, Commander Rogers here will be reassigned to a more prestigious and, unfortunately for *him*, less easy duty. If you're lucky, Kheren my friend, you will get him along with your next command."

"I will certainly need a *lot* of luck for either," admitted the Andorian with a heavy sigh. He then looked again at Rogers. "Any thought about your next assignment or career plan, Commander?"

"Honestly, Sir, I was field promoted to commander and Spectre's XO position by Captain Summers so fast... and death-defying missions rushing at us one after another at warpspeed... This is the first time I had since coming to the fleet to even pause and think... And all I draw is a blank!"

"Believe me, I know the feeling," the Andorian said with obvious sympathy in his voice. "Well, the fleet is in a major changing phase at all levels, from personnel to ships to assignments... even the starbase itself I heard. I guess there will be a lot of work and choices for an officer of your accomplishments to inspire you."

"And what about you, my friend?" Summers asked pointedly.

It took a moment for Kheren to put his thoughts into order and then into words.

"That is a rather good question."

His four oculars went to the Artemis display to his two wives at the buffet table before seeing his first officer in the room being met by Lieutenant Ke'Leysha, the Illithyrii woman. He thought about going to them, but it would have been rude to intrude; besides, they were probably going to speak of things even him with his university degree in cosmology would not be able to follow.

But he needed to move away from a conversation he definitely didn't want to have... and for more than a few good reasons.

If you will excuse me, gentlebeings, I will take my leave of you and move to my assigned place. That might speed up things a bit so that you may get as soon as possible all the credit you are due after this operation."

Summers could easily perceive through his Betazoid half the uneasiness of the Andorian. He could not read his mind because of the Vulcan disciplines Kheren had learned before joining Starfleet, nor would he have dared to without his consent. But his feelings were evident even to someone without his powerful empathic abilities, so the captain of the Spectre didn't press the issue. On the contrary, he offered his support.

"Good idea, my friend. I'll do just the same."

They all took leave of each other and Kheren went straight to the table assigned to the senior officers of the Artemis. He was not much into socialities anyway. And so, he just stood there, once again feeling the connection between himself and his lost ship, enjoying it one last time. He accepted a glass of prune juice from the tray of a passing waiter, curious to taste what the Klingons found so extraordinary in the fruity Earth beverage.

But first, he lifted it towards the holodisplay of the Stalwart Guardian of the Federation he had been blessed to command her resurrection... and cursed to send her to her final, well-deserved resting place.

"Here's to you, My lady," he simply murmured.

Snowfire Ke'Leysa had arrived early to the ceremony, old habits associating with her rank and timing her arrival accordingly in advance of most others in the Fleet. She had remained seated off to one side of the chamber, watching carefully as the other officers of the fleet arrived and mingled. Interesting though, seeing all those there and still being different. Sometimes it wore a bit, she had to admit. Being the only one of her species here. But the benefits were worth that loss. Especially clearer now than they had ever been before. She had spent a long time talking with herself about her actions on the McKenzie... as well as those of the others who had been aboard with her... and her mind was far clearer than it had been. In no small part, she thought with a smile, to the actions a particular Andorian who had looked rather amusingly uncomfortable with his two new wives. Maybe she might talk to him about that later if he stayed as clueless. Probably not for a long while, but if nothing else, the conversation could be a magnificent study piece.

For all her gentle smile though, she was quite aware of those around her. And when she noticed Lieutenant Commander Syntron entering the hall, she stood and made her way across the hall to him. They'd only really 'met' once, over a viewscreen during the final stages of sealing the Azimuth Horizon and she wanted to talk to him without the stress of having to save the universe present at the forefront of both their minds.

And all that aside, conversation with Vulcans was always fun.

"Lieutenant Commander, it's a pleasure to meet you in person at last." She said, holding out an ebon hand in greeting, Human fashion. "I had planned on talking to you at the Fleet Conference, but it didn't work out. Your work is quite inspiring."

Syntron turned to see the Ilythiiri female extending her petite hand outward in a gesture of respect as she spoke. He gazed at her flowing pallid hair that shone in contrast to her dark complexion and realized that she was taller and more slender than he expected.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he acknowledged as he released the grip on her delicate hand. "In combination with your work, it would appear that we managed to nullify the imminent Armageddon that seemed at many times to simply be overwhelming us."

Then, changing the direction of the conversation, the Vulcan officer leaned in slightly and lowered his voice.

"Have you garnered any reliable information about your next assignment, Lieutenant?"

Snowfire chuckled and shook her head at the question.

"None at all I'm afraid. I mean, I'm hoping for a place on one of the new ships, but one can never be sure."

She shrugged easily.

"We'll probably find out in the next week or so as Command gets everything sorted out. Might be a bit longer, might be right here tonight. But they'll come."

White teeth flashed in her dark face as she smiled gently, eyes betraying her years.

"Do you not appreciate the tentative thrill of uncertainty, Lieutenant Commander?" She asked, her tone playfully curious. "Considering your profession, I would think you might be used to it by now."

The Vulcan did not answer but looked thoughtful for a moment. Snowfire then pressed on.

"If Captain Kheren gets a new command, as I suspect he will... for all that he seems to believe that his loss of the Artemis will deny it to him... do you intend to continue on as his Executive Officer if the option presents itself?" she asked, moving steadily towards the Artemis's table. "Or do you plan on seeking a command of your own?"

The Vulcan Science officer literally slowed, almost to a stop, to ponder this possibility.

He turned to face the Ilythiiri science officer.

"I am not privy to the intentions of the fleet or those in Starfleet. But it would seem highly illogical not to have Captain Kheren assume command of one of the new vessels, given his notable command experience and expertise in such a position."

He then gazed upward momentarily at the models of ships adorning the banquet room as he continued.

"In terms of my future role in the fleet... I would be honored to continue to serve as the Captain's executive officer. However, there are numerous changes looming within the fleet in the aftermath of these past missions; especially in terms of addressing the Azimuth Horizon anomaly on more than one occasion. Ship loss, extensive damage to several others and potential vessel decommissioning coupled with a multitude of scattered and weary officers may be among the various factors contributing to some fundamental changes in leadership; along with other roles throughout the fleet."

Then gazing back to the Ilythiiri female in close proximity, he shared quietly his last thought.

"No such option to command a vessel has been presented to me, Lieutenant. There are many fine qualified officers in Lotus Fleet capable of assuming command."

Then could be guessed on his long, bearded face the mearest shadow of a slight smirk.

"To use a Human expression, Lieutenant, I suppose I would cross that bridge when I arrived to the river... that is, if this even becomes an option."

"No doubt there are," Snowfire replied, matching the Vulcan's suggested smirk with one of her own. "However, I somehow doubt that they might have such a glowing record as yours. 'Instrumental in the defusion of a threat to the universe' has a nice ring to it, does it not?"

She seemed quietly oblivious, probably deliberately, to the possibility of such on her own record.

"I would not be surprised if you are picked for such a duty, Lieutenant Commander. But I guess, as you said, we must see if the bridge is built before you attempt to cross it."

She cocked her head.

"Or take your seat upon it, I guess. Either could be true."

The Ilythiiri woman paused a moment before speaking once again in a more serious tone.

"I apologise if some of my questions seem strange though, it is a reflection of the culture I was born to more than anything else."

Her smirk softened, turning to a gentle smile.

"Attaining command of a vessel is rather more complex there than it is here actually. But," another shrug, this one more eloquent such that it set her air to movement, "that is no doubt a task for another time."

She gestures around.

"Although I am curious. Is this a celebration? Or a memorial? Or both?"

Having finished his discussion with Fleet Captain Samji and Captain Rivers for quite some time, Oseno Jureth had left Cat Steele to make her way to the Alsea table as he spied Commander Syntron and the dark skinned woman who he remembered from the initial Operation Horizon briefing, but whose name was escaping him. He moved over to where they were conversing as he still felt he owed something to both Syntron and Captain Kheren for having left the Artemis not once, but twice to fend for themselves in dangerous situations. As he approached, he caught the last piece of their conversation, let the female lieutenant finish before inserting himself.

"Hello, Commander Syntron," he greeted the Vulcan, "and Lieutenant," he said nodding to her "I apologize, but I've forgotten your name, but it is good to see you escaped what I understand was a harrowing ordeal on the McKenzie."

Syntron gestured an acknowledgment to the former chief tactical and security officer who had been thrust into command of the Alsea in their last mission upon their Captain's sudden incapacitation. They too were dealing with their own set of challenging obstacles as they responded to adversaries along changing orders and priorities.

"It is good to see that you too survived our last set of ordeals to be with us today... is it Captain Jureth now?"

"Not anymore, Sir. My field promotion was only in effect until after the completion of the mission. Captain Rivers will be retaking command of the Alsea... once they put her back together."

He paused for a moment before continuing.

"And, Sir, I'm sorry about the Artemis. Perhaps if we hadn't left you alone with that dreadnought, she might still be here."

Syntron could see remorse shadowed in the eyes of the Bajoran as he spoke.

"Lieutenant Jureth," Syntron responded with whatever empathy a Vulcan could possibly conjure. "you have nothing to apologize for. You in fact performed your duties admirably and effectively under the most difficult of situations. You successfully assumed command of your vessel when your captain was rendered unconscious and managed to complete your obligations with diligence. The circumstances of the loss of the Artemis were well beyond the scope of your command and responsibility."

Jureth nodded.

"Yes Sir, I know that... But some part of me believes that, together, we could have defeated the Shavok, and still stopped the Romulan battle group even if the tactical officer in me knows it isn't true. I think your people would call it an emotional response; Bajorans just call it being stubborn. It can be a...drawback sometimes. What about you, Sir? Do you know where you'll be headed?"

Syntron nodded perceptively as the Bajoran officer spoke rather candidly.



"That sense of responsibility and introspection of what transpired seems to be fundamentals of your inherent leadership, Lieutenant. However, reason dictates that, even functioning as a leader, there is no way that we are able to accurately determine the outcome of events. Therefore, we can analyze the situation, and speculate possible alternates, but then we must move beyond this point as we prepare for the future."

Addressing the question posed to him, the Vulcan paused for a moment as he gazed around the converging guests within the banquet hall before responding to it.

"In terms of where I will be summoned to serve the fleet and in what capacity... At this point, I would surmise that Lotus Fleet, in conjunction with Starfleet command, is in the midst of decision-making with all of our positions. Meanwhile, I would speculate that there are official hearings and numerous meetings and discussions upcoming working toward finalizing these determinations."

Syntron then looked directly at the Bajoran.

"Any thoughts or preferences to your commission and placement, Lieutenant?"

At that break in the conversation, Snowfire finally found the will to speak.

"Wherever it might be, Lieutenant Jureth, I would be honoured to serve with you." She said softly, holding out her hand to him. "Lieutenant Snowfire K'Leysa. Formerly of the McKenzie; although you won't get me back aboard her at phaser point after our last mission."

Her tone darkened, shifting between restrained anger and disappointment, then cleared as she continued speaking.

"What the Lieutenant Commander says is very true, but coming from experience and my reading of the initial reports, you did everything you could... and not one thing of it wrong."

She shook her head.

"What the Romulans sent against us was unprecedented, far larger a task force than I doubt any of us expected. And for all that we paid for that, we succeeded. I know it might not help now," she said, her voice a cocktail of emotions, "but I would ask you to simply trust that you did all you could. I know you already know that."

Jureth nodded toward Snowfire taking her proffered hand.

"Thank you, Lieutenant, I appreciate it. As for me, Sir," he said, turning back to Syntron, "rumors are that there may be openings on the Horizon, and it would be a fine ship to serve on I think. I'm a security officer, Sir, and there's a good chance I could go back to that which would be fine with me."

The Vulcan considered the Bajoran's response carefully.

"Choosing a path in which you excel and have extensive experience is logical, Lieutenant... but if I may also present something for you to consider; you have also demonstrated during this last mission a genuine aptitude for a more comprehensive leadership role aboard a starship. Perhaps due to this experience, you will also consider a role on the Horizon that could utilize such a propensity; that is, if one avails itself to you."

"Perhaps I will, Sir," Oseno replied. "I have to say, being forced into a command role changes your perspective about such things. There was a time where the only command I aspired to was head of security on a major starbase, but being in command of the Alsea altered that aspiration. When the time came, I didn't want to give up that chair, even though I know Captain Rivers will take good care of her. I believe it was Captain Kirk that said; Don't let them do anything that takes you off the bridge of that ship."

Syntron grinned subtly as he concurred.

"Indeed, Lieutenant... Captain Kirk... a wise, if not somewhat... unorthodox officer at times; ultimately turned out to be quite a renowned leader himself. However, if memory serves, it was also the wisdom of those trusted officers around him that helped him to recognize that this was where he truly belonged; even after he stepped out of that role and into that of an Admiral."

Then he looked seriously at the Bajoran officer standing before him.

"You, lieutenant... could provide such insight to the captain of that vessel, whomever it may be, until the time comes for you to assume the center seat once again as the commander of your own ship."

"Thank you, Sir, that is good advice. I will keep it in mind when I speak with Fleet Captain Samji about my orders. It was nice to talk with both of you, but if you'll excuse me, I'm going to join my shipmates. Enjoy the ceremony, Lieutenant Commander, Lieutenant."

Jureth nodded to both officers, and stepped away to join the Alsea table before the ceremony began.

Lieutenant Josh Vincent paused and looked at the assembled officers as he stepped into the banquet hall. Among the crowd he saw the impressive figure of the former Artemis's captain and his wives, his first officer the Vulcan Syntron, Captain Jureth, Josh's former crewmate from the Alsea, and his captain. Gould was just walking away from the fleet's ships displayed on the wall, so Josh began heading for him.

"She was a good ship, Captain," Josh said as he walked up to Gould's side. "It's a shame that she's being decommissioned, but she served us well. Have you heard anything about your new orders?"

Gould cocked his head in Josh's direction and gave him a little smile.

"Actually Vincent, I've decided to go a different route," he said with an almost apologetic look. "Admiral Stockner contacted me and offered me a position back with my old fleet near Star Base 42, but this time he upped the annie by offering me my choice of command."

He took a drink before going on.

"To be honest, Josh, I never felt like I belonged in Lotus Fleet. Oh, their a good bunch of people... but the command style is just to erratic for me. I like to do things that make sense... guess its just the engineer in me."

Then he looked at Vincent.

"Your a fine officer, Vincent. I don't suppose there's any way I could talk you into coming along for the ride?"

It was hard to tell if he was serious or just wanted to see what Josh might say.

"I'm sorry to hear that you'll be leaving, Sir, but I'm glad that things are going to work out for you. Thanks for the offer to join you, but this is the first fleet that I've actually belonged to, so I think I'm going to hang around for awhile," Josh replied. "After years of bouncing around the quadrant with Starfleet Intelligence, it is really nice to know that people have my back here. I like being able to form real relationships now and I don't want to lose the ones that I've started here."

Gould gave a chuckle.

"Don't blame you one bit. That's why I'm going back after all. Still, never hurts to ask.."

The Vulcanoid Hybrid held up his glass to Vincent and they clinked them.

The truth was, Gould had grown fond of his chief of security, to an almost unprofessional level.

*Best to leave some things unsaid*, he mused again.

Smiling at Vincent's handsome face, he spoke in a casual manner now.

"Let's go mingle; see if I can heap any praise on you before I go."

Josh smiled at his captain.

"That sounds great to me, Sir."

With that, the two officers of the now retired USS Lotus moved into the crowd and mingled with their fellow Lotus Fleet officers.

Before Fleet Captain Samji directed his purpose toward getting up on stage, he had one more stop to make. He approached the Starbase 10 table where Captain Tom Paris sat as an honored guest to the proceedings, and the old ship designer stood to greet him.

"Very nice arrangement, Fleet Captain," he said, motioning to the holographic ship displays, and particularly admiring the Horizon.

"Thank you, Captain Paris. I'm honored that you would choose to stay and acknowledge our fine men and women who served us so well. You are to be thanked as well for your part."

"A small part to play, in comparison," Paris said modestly.

With the formalities over, he shifted to the informal kind of conversation he was more used to.

"So, how do you like the ship, Allen? It'll be hard for me to part from it. I've grown accustomed to the big gal."

"It's magnificent, Tom. This Horizon-class is more than I could've hoped for. We really had a need to modernize our fleet, and this is a great step forward."

"Sure is... you can rename her, y'know," he said with a grin. "Sure you've have enough of 'Horizons' for ten lifetimes. You're retiring the Lotus... what about using Lotus dash A?"

Samji nodded.

"I'll have to say it was my initial reaction. But you know what? I kind of like it. It shows that we are moving forward, but not forgetting what brought us here. We may have been dragged down by one Horizon, but on the sea, there's always another one you can set sail for. We have grown too accustomed to fighting battles in our own turf. We need to be explorers again, Tom. Let us boldly go toward that horizon... and beyond... as we were meant to. It's a perfect name, Tom."

Captain Paris nodded in agreement.

"I like it Allen. You could rename the class though. Wouldn't require changing her paint, just some computer records. The Lotus-class... the first ship to ever be classed with that name, if my memory serves."

"U.S.S. Horizon, Lotus-class," Samji softly said, as if sounding it out for the first time to see if it fit. Then he repeated it more proudly, and confidently.

"Perfect."

With a grin, he gave his friend a pat on the shoulder and a handshake.

"I better get started before the crowd gets restless. Take care, Tom."

"You too... Fleet Captain," Paris said with a grin, and took his seat to wait for the proceedings.

Fleet Captain Samji looked around at the gathered officers from on stage and decided that it was about time to recognize all the brave men, women, and gender neutral officers before him. Thus he cleared his throat, which echoed out through the large hall, thanks to the amplification in front of him. It caused everyone to look his way and, if not already seated, they did so, and the murmur of conversation eventually died down.

"Wow..." Samji started unexpectedly. "I stand here thinking about the fact that we have awards to give out today. Awards that have been reviewed and authorized by Rear Admiral Kotari and an official recognition by Starfleet of your heroic, creative, and ingenious actions. But a mere piece of platinum, a token, does not measure up or even begin to honor what you have done in this past week."

His voice began to rise in volume as he went on.

"You have succeeded, against overwhelming odds... in spite of four separate factions who were all intent on our destruction... you succeeded in saving the Federation, but also those who were out to destroy us. You have saved the whole Galaxy."

With pride in his voice, he boomed as much as he beamed.

"Not only have you secured the Azimuth Horizon, but you have also subdued the Klingons, captured the Romulans' leader Empress Sela, decimated the remainder of the Horizon's Children cult, made what looks to be a long lasting peace at last with the Undine and, as it turns out, we have even succeeded in ridding ourselves of the vile cancer within the Federation that was known as Section 31. The details of that last part will be classified for some time, but suffice it to say, we will be better off without them."

There was much astonishment on all faces at this last revelation, but no one had time to comment on it as the commanding officer of Starbase 10 went on.

"History will remember Lotus Fleet for what we have sacrificed... and what we have done here! It is Lotus Fleet that has made our lives, and the lives of future generations, safe again!"

A cheer and applause burst out throughout the hall from the officers assembled there. It lasted for minutes and, eventually, Fleet Captain Samji had to hold his hands out to ask for silence so he could continue.

"The Federation, ladies and gentlemen... is in your debt. We will attempt to repay that debt here tonight... in whatever miniscule way possible."

He took a pause and stood straight.

"Please rise for the playing of the Federation Anthem."

The gathered group listened proudly and with respect as the brass instruments rang out in a symbol of the Federation they all loved, stood for, fought for, and unfortunately that many... too many, had died for.

When the music ended and they took again their seats, Samji pulled out a PADD listing the official awards. He began by describing the process.

"I want to note that, while there are many awards that will be distributed in the weeks to come, these are the ones that will be given to our most prominent and highest ranking officers. This is not meant to diminish the achievements they so rightfully deserve, but for the sake of time, we can not possibly verbally announce them all. A full list will be available, of course, to anyone who wishes to take a look."

Everyone was looking at him with eyes as full of pride as their faces expressed their stoic humility as they all felt that they had done but their duty. Samji's own face and voice however, was all pride.

"Also, we will be giving out some awards to those who took part in several missions immediately prior to the Azimuth Horizon Operation. Since we were involved in planning efforts, we of course, did not have the time, or frankly the need, to worry about such a thing as awards at the time."

"We will proceed in the order of the ships, starting with the Lotus."

"Captain Vir'Ell Gould, commanding officer of Lotus Fleet's flagship, receives the Starfleet Command Decoration. He successfully led the Lotus through Operation Horizon while secretly hunting an Undine agent aboard his ship. These actions clearly demonstrated a superb ability to lead and maintain control over a hostile insurgent situation."

Applause rose to congratulate the Half-Vulcan, Half-Romulan veteran officer.

"He also receives the Starfleet Medal of Honor, which is our highest award, only given to a very few amount of Starfleet officers throughout history. For leading the fleet in the successful Operation Horizon and for personally leading a rescue mission aboard an auxilliary craft to save senior officers of the crippled starship Artemis within the dangerous area of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. Captain Gould truly deserves to be recognized among the greatest Starfleet officers that have served since the Federation's founding."

More applause rose even louder than before at the announcement. Then Samji went on.

"His tactical and security officer, Lieutenant Josh Vincent, will first receive the Starfleet Tactical Decoration for his actions on the Alsea prior to the operation. This award is given to Mister VIncent for taking command of the Alsea's tertiary section and engaging the Klingons with strategic thinking while simultaenously commanding the section with distinction."

After the expected applause, the Fleet captain gave further recognition to the young officer.

"For his actions in the Azimuth Horizon operation, Mister Vincent receives the Starfleet Award For Valor for defending the Lotus from the Klingon flagship and from Klingon boarding parties and taking part in the rescue of the Artemis command crew after the ship's destruction. Josh will also receive a promotion to Lieutenant Commander. Congratulations, Mister Vincent."

Fleet Captain Samji, then turned to the McKenzie table.

"Captain Daniel Crist, commanding officer of the starship McKenzie, will receive the Starfleet Command Decoration for successfully leading a covert operation against the Horizon Children Cult, bringing back precious data that helped to defeat them, while also commanding the lead ship that accomplished this feat."

Samji took a moment to gather his thoughts and the words he had carefully chosen for his next announcement.

"Lieutenant Commander Sorripto, chief engineer of the USS McKenzie, while currently under arrest for actions taken during the operation, still deserves an award for actions taken prior to the Azimuth Horizon fleet action. He receives the Star Cross for effective mission planning and on-site action during a covert operation against the Horizon Children Cult that helped identify key figures of the group, which lead later to the rescue of lost officer Joseph Daystrom Sisko."

There was a strange, subdued reaction to the proclamation. Some officers were ill at ease with the rumors about the cardassian officer's actions and their consequences; many were not clear about it all; but most at least recognized his valor with polite applause, at least for what he had accomplished before.

Samji quickly went on with the award listing to end the discomfort.

"Lieutenant Snowfire K'Leysha, chief science officer of the McKenzie, will receive two awards for actions taken in the Fleet Action. The reason for the first one, the Vulcanian Scientific Legion of Honor, is classified..."

The reason for the classification was in fact to protect the young officer from fallback from her own people if they ever learned the true reason that she was receiving the award. Only the Captains and a handful of science officers in the room, along with herself, would truly know why. She provided the hypothesis and established the theories and calculations leading to the use of artificial wormholes that permanently secured the Azimuth Horizon anomaly from threatening the universe... a knowledge her people would wonder if it was out of genuine Federation research... or some traitorous disclosure from her part of their own technology they wanted to keep for themselves. She had worked selfishly, maybe even at personal risk, to help save them all; the least Starfleet could do was to protect her in turn.

"Luckily the second award can be stated most freely and well-deservedly," he said with a smile and a few people chuckled at this. "For sacrificing her safety and for ingenuity while performing a telepathic override of the McKenzie's systems that allowed her to temporarily disable all systems throughout the enemy ship, the HCS Prophecy, she receives the Lotus Fleet Medal of Distinction."

"Lieutenant K'Leysha will also receive a promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Commander. Congratulations to you!"

"Now for the Alsea," he said, turning again past the group of Lotus officers, and facing those at the identified table. "Captain Rachelle Rivers, commanding officer of the USS Alsea, will receive the Starfleet Command Decoration for effective battle strategies during the battle with the IKS Kang, as well as for attempting diplomatic solutions to an otherwise impossible situation involving the ship commander, Ja'rod."

The woman turned as red as her hair under the acclamation of the crowd. Fortunately, Samji saved her by going through his next name on the award list.

"Lieutenant Oseno Jureth, chief tactical and security officer of the starship Alsea, receives the Grankite Order of Tactics for actions prior to the Fleet Action, ingeniously using plasma ejections of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly in facing successfully a Klingon incursion. He also joins several fine officers receiving the Starfleet Command Decoration for exemplary leadership in taking command of the USS Alsea against a Romulan incursion, during Operation Horizon and against an Undine incursion. Finally, for demonstrating true integrity and diplomatic ingenuity by saving an Undine ship from the grasp of an Azimuth Horizon rift, thus resulting in the operation receiving the assistance of the Undine during the final minutes of the Operation, Oseno Jureth receives from Starfleet Command the Silver Palm for diplomatic success."

The Bajoran officer remained stone-faced throughout the applause he had earned along with the commendations. But anyone who knew him felt his pride in having done his duty as well as he had wished to. Cat Steele certainly knew it as she squeezed his arm to silently tell him.

But Samji was not finished with him.

"Furthermore, for taking on the command of the Alsea when needed, Mister Oseno shows significant aptitude for leadership and also receives a promotion to full Commander. Congratulations, Commander!"

A new round of applause managed this time to have him lower his head modestly. But the pride was visible in his small smile. But he shared it only with Cat.

On the podium, the Fleet captain turned towards his left, to an empty chair next to him.

"Lieutenant Commander Niomo Lire II had to leave suddenly for personal reasons, but we wanted to acknowledge his hard work. He will receive the Starfleet Engineer's Decoration for extreme dedication and commitment throughout two separate missions in keeping the Alsea in fighting condition under combat and hazardous space situations."

Applause still rose despite the experienced officer's absence. And then, Samji turned his attention and that of everyone else to the next table under the fleet ship's representations.

"For the Spectre, Commander David Rogers, Executive Officer, also receives the Starfleet Command Decoration for efficiently assuming command of the USS Spectre when his captain was incapacitated during Operation Horizon."

The commander would also receive the Temporal Ribbon of Excellence for thwarting a time alteration event from Klingon agents on early 21st century Earth. However, even the fact that he would receive this award would be highly classified, as it is whenever it is granted. Samji therefore did not mention it publicly; he would see to it when he would personally deliver it privately with the other award later on.

The commanding officer of Lotus Fleet's headquarters then turned towards the last starship table.

"Last but not least, the crew of the lost ship, the USS Artemis."

There was a sudden short moment of silence, as if everyone in the room mourned the celebrated Stalwart Guardian of the Federation. before it could freeze the ceremony however, Samji spoke again, with the same pride as when he had begun this award listing.

"Captain Kheren and Lieutenant Commander Syntron will both receive the Starfleet Medal of Commendation for actions prior to the Fleet Action. These awards are granted for most meritorious conduct in the line of duty during preliminary preparations of Operation Horizon."

In truth, another time altering event had occurred, this time involving the Artemis, that required the classification of the true reasons behind the awards. Syntron deserved it for self sacrifice, direct involvement, and definite leadership in restoring the timeline; and for theoretical and applied advancements in temporal mechanics. And Captain Kheren was receiving it because through his leadership, the company and crew of the USS Artemis selflessly and anonymously sacrificed all with him to restore the timeline and to fully resolve a time paradox in a most exemplary manner.

But again, such actions were sealed by order of Starfleet Command and the Federation Council, also to help preserve the timeline. So Samji did not disclose the details; but the round of applause showed plainly enough that those details were not needed for everyone to accept the honor that was bestowed on them. And so he continued with his presentation.

"Mister Syntron will also receive the Daystrom Award for extraordinary commitment and work towards a solution to the Azimuth Horizon's runaway reaction and also for overseeing the operation that sealed the Horizon entirely. For demonstrating his aptitude as a First Officer in this operation, he will also receive a promotion to full Commander. Congratulations Commander!"

Fleet Captain Samji waited for the well earned acclamations to die down as the tall bearded Vulcan remained impassive as ever. Then he looked straight at the dark-hued Andorian seated at the center of the Artemis official table.

"Captain Kheren will also receive the Christopher Pike Medal of Valor for extraordinary leadership in saving the crew of the Artemis while sacrificing his own safety, and moving without hesitation toward completing the next phase of the operation with only a portion of the ship intact. Finally, he deserves the Starfleet Citation for Conspicuous Gallantry for putting the needs of Lotus Fleet and the Federation ahead of his own life on numerous occasions during Operation Horizon in the face of clear and present danger."

Allen Samji was well aware that all this was little consolation to a commanding officer that had lost his ship and was about to face a board of inquiry regarding that loss; but the Andorian, stoic and disciplined as he was so well known for, bowed his head fractionally to acknowledge the recognition nevertheless.

Samji lifted his head and looked at the entire assembly when silence returned.

"Congratulations to all for receiving these awards and promotions!"

A final, thunderous round of applause echoed through the banquet hall from the many different species and genders assembled there, pronouncing their appreciation for the efforts of the officers recognized that day.

"Thank you all again, and everyone please enjoy the refreshments," Fleet Captain Samji said before stepping from behind the podium.

"One moment everyone."

The voice of rear Admiral Kotari suddenly cut through the applause and congratulations already filling up the hall. Everyone turned to face the stand again and, indeed, the Boslic officer was now standing there, motioning for Fleet Captain Samji to join him.

As the two leading field officers of Lotus Fleet stood face to face, Kotari spoke with a voice filled with authority, solemnity and pride.

"Operation Horizon stands as the latest of the finest examples of what Starfleet is all about; dedication, resolve, cooperation and competence, all uplifted with unswerving selflessness and faith in the forces of life, peace and the brotherhood of all sentience, from this universe and even beyond. Lotus Fleet is the elite division of Starfleet; but such a status can never be bestowed; it can only be earned... earned by the people willing to give the time and effort to achieve what we set ourselves to accomplish, through both perils and promises... people like Fleet Captain Allen Samji."

There was a thunder of applause following the words of the Boslic man. When the acclamation died down, Kotari spoke again. In his hand, he held a small velvet-covered box he opened to let the ambient light play on the gold and silver highlights of the medal that lied in it.

"For the display of exemplary leadership in the most difficult of situations, Starfleet Command is awarding Fleet Captain Allen Samji, Commanding officer of Lotus Fleet's Headquarters and forces in the Hromi sector and head officer of Operation Horizon, the Prentares Ribbon of Commendation. Congratulations, Fleet Captain."

Again, applause rose throughout the great hall as Kotari pinned himself the prestigious award on Samji's white dress uniform. Then, after exchanging a proud and respectful stare, they both turned to face the applauding crowd. Again, the Rear Admiral waited for the applause to die down all by itself before looking at all the officers and fleet members massed before them. His gaze became stern and his voice hard in the silence and the stillness.

"What is this? I thought there was a celebration to be held here!"

And indeed, from that moment on, there was.



## EPILOGUE

The sun was setting over the waves of the Pacific ocean, past the fog-diffused silhouette of the historical Golden Gate Bridge, sending moving colors of fire, blood and gold through the thin but high windows. They were aligning themselves like glass columns in a crescent behind and over the elevated podium where stretched a long curved black glass table, nine high backed black polished wood chairs behind it. Those tall, slim windows were cut and set as to form together in the grey stone wall a huge delta-shaped form that was instantly recognizable as the Starfleet symbol, always kept clear and illuminated by either sunlight, moonlight or starlight; indeed a clear representation of Starfleet's first and most important value: Truth.

And today, in this great hall of glass and stone, truth was about to be sought out and exposed.

There was a surprisingly huge crowd in the numerous seat of the amphitheater that faced the dais. A lot were wearing uniforms of Starfleet Academy, whose main grounds were nearby the great Hall of Starfleet Command. Many however were obviously serving Starfleet officers from all ranks and file, most enjoying shore leave or being awaiting transfer to new assignments and duties. And there were more than a few civilians, allowed in because they either represented the Federation government or Federation media.

The truth to be told today was indeed of widespread interest.

Among all those attendees, there were representatives of almost every member-world of the United Federation of Planets; such was the achievement of harmonious peace and prosperity by the Federation. Most dominant faces were of course those of Humanity, on who's very native world sat this part of the central headquarters of Starfleet, the Federation's best institution and instrument. But there was nevertheless an inordinate amount of blue faces, topped by uniformly whitish hair where antennae sprouted and waved, creating a strange moving motion in the crowd that mirrored the movement of the vast sea beyond the tall, thin windows.

Andorians, among the founders of the Federation more than two hundred years ago, were said to be a dwindling species; some said one facing extinction. Yet, they were quite numerous here today.

Indeed, the truth to be told here was to be of keen interest to them.

A sudden hush fell on the throng as a green-skinned woman in the standard uniform of a Starfleet Lieutenant opened a side door then went to stand at one end of the podium. Three white and red figures entered and made their way to the podium and the center seats behind the table. Each was carrying an old-fashion book, amazingly thick and heavily bound. Each wore the uniform of a high ranking Starfleet Officer, with rows of pins on their chest denoting their long list of accomplishments in service of Starfleet and the Federation. All three walked completely and purposefully out of synch, a symbolic gesture to express that they had transcended mere discipline and, more to the point, were here not to apply it but to enforce it.

They all stood before their seats, placing their thick book before them and waited until the whole crowd fell totally silent before sitting down, in order of rank; the one in the center first, a grey haired and bearded Boslic man with the pins of a Rear Admiral; then a Human male with salt and pepper short hair and startling green eyes also wearing the Rear Admiral rank; finally, the one with the Fleet Captain insignia, a dark-hued, dark bearded Human with intense black eyes.

They were all well known figures of Starfleet; veteran heroes of the Borg War, officers of the famous elite division of Starfleet that stood bravely in front of the enemy advance barely two years ago... and prevailed; and most recently, literally saved the universe from a cosmic catastrophe that would have consumed everything in flames.

Lotus Fleet.

Once they were seated, the Boslic Admiral took a small metallic gavel and struck three times the small bell resting on the table in front of him.

Now was the time for the Truth to be known.

His resonant voice, although on a firm but normal tone, nevertheless was carried clearly even to the farthest member of the assembly by the exceptional acoustics and excellent sound system of the amphitheater.

"This Hearing is now in session. Under the auspices of Rear Admiral Harry Pierson of Starfleet Command and Fleet Captain Allen Samji, Commandant of Lotus Fleet headquarters, I, rear Admiral Kotari, Commandant of the Hromi sector, will now preside this Board of Inquiry regarding the loss of the starship USS Artemis, registry number NCC-64121, on stardate 87174.7 in the tri-border region of Federation Space."

The Admiral waited a moment to make sure that silence and order prevailed despite the abnormally huge crowd present for what was basically a common procedure when a starship was lost; although the circumstances and especially the identity of the ship in question were far from common.

"This Board of Inquiry will look into the command decisions and actions of the USS Artemis assigned commanding officer, Captain Kheren, to determine nature of responsibility in the loss of aforementioned starship."

All eyes went to the figure seated at the foremost row of seats, one set apart from the rest by a rail behind the few seats and a table before it. there sat a lone figure, tall and athletic, his skin of a dark blue color making his snowy mane and silver-hued eyes stand out sharply. He too wore a Starfleet uniform, the white one of ceremonious occasions, just like the three high ranking officer facing him from above the podium, with the rank insignias of a starship captain and an impressive array of commendation pins on his own thick chest.

To him, Kotari now spoke directly.

"Captain Kheren; before this hearing starts, and as is your right, do you object to any of the officers present to judge your case, or to Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta of my office to act as prosecutor to these proceedings?"

The Andorian captain, one of the very few ever in Starfleet, stood up.

"No objections, your Honor."

Kotari nodded almost absently, as if he had fully expected the answer. But the seriousness of the moment was never in question in his eyes or in his voice.

"I understand that you declined legal counsel, again as is your right, for these proceedings?"

"I have, your Honor."

This time, the Boslic officer did not look as if he expected the answer. If anything, he almost looked like he regretted hearing it.

"Please be seated. We will now proceed."

There was barely a pause before the clear, sensuous voice of the Orion woman in the Lieutenant uniform called out the first witness.

"The board calls for Lieutenant Aguk Snow."

The lithe, copper-skinned man with dark hair tied into a ponytail that rose from the audience and went to the stand sent a brief nod towards the Andorian ship commander before he sat in the lone chair facing squarely the podium. As he sat, a biosensor light came up under his right palm and the unmistakable voice of a computer interface linked to it was heard.

"Name; Snow, Aguk. Serial Number; 20100609-S4. Rank; Lieutenant Junior Grade. Position; Chief Helmsman and Navigator. Assignment; USS Artemis. Commendations; Starfleet Academy honor graduate, former leader of Nova Squadron at Starfleet Academy; former leader of Red Squadron at Lotus Fleet Academy, three times commended by Starfleet Command."

There was no point in using the antique procedure of swearing to tell the truth, only the truth and all the truth; the machine would instantly detect any falsehood from a thoroughly complete live biometric scan, down to brainwave patterns; and all Starfleet officers were already sworn on their Honor to the truth to begin with. But there was still a small one to ascertain calibration and operational status of the person taking the stand.

"For the record, please state your current rank and full name," Leeann'Eeta asked.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Aguk Snow," answered the young officer.

"Certified," said the computer voice.

Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta then walked up to him to stand from his right side, thus facing him with the judging panel on her right and the assembly on her left.

"Lieutenant, please summarize the context in which the starship Artemis was lost."

"Yes, Ma'am. The Artemis was lost following two separate events; a direct encounter with a Romulan battleship, and then a day later a direct exposure to the Azimuth Horizon anomaly."

"Please provide us with the location and navigational situation during the Romulan encounter."

"Open space at sublight speed. We were four light years out from Starbase 10, four light years from the Rho Puppis star system boarding the Paulson Nebula, eighteen light years from Starbase 23 guarding the Neutral Zone and twelve light years from starbase 157."

"Who gave the order to go to this location, Lieutenant?"

"The order came directly from Lotus Fleet Command, Ma'am."

"What was the nature of the order?"

"Intercept at once and with all due haste a Romulan dreadnought, identified as the Imperial Romulan Warbird Shavok, Scimitar class, on course to Starbase 10 from those coordinates, with alleged hostile intentions."

"Please identify for us the vessel and commanding officer under whom you were called to serve and follow on those orders at this moment."

"Starship Artemis, Captain Kheren commanding."

"And how did Captain Kheren answer the order?"

"He ordered immediate departure from spacedock."

"At what speed did Captain Kheren order that departure?"

"Maximum warp, which for the Artemis was warp 9.6, Ma'am."

The questioning lieutenant looked at him squarely.

"Now, I want you to be very precise, Lieutenant Snow. At what speed did Captain Kheren order departure from the first moment you boarded the ship with those orders, sat at your post and activated propulsion?"

For a moment, the Inuit officer seemed to hesitate before he answered.

"Full impulse, Ma'am."

"What was the exact location, and I insist, the *exact* location, of the starship Artemis, when this order was given?"

Again, Snow had a brief pause before he finally answered.

"Inside Starbase 10's docking area."

There was a low murmur in the assembly. Even legendary James T. Kirk never exceeded one-quarter impulse power in such circumstances and, thus at nineteen thousand kilometers a second, had been called reckless. Four times that speed, inside an artificial structure...

The stirring subsided only when Rear Admiral Kotari lifted his eyes over the whole crowd. But like most of the people there, he was frowning.

Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta then resumed her questioning, once silence was reestablished.

"And what does Starfleet regulations state as to speed limitations while inside spacedock?"

"Maneuvering thrusters only... Ma'am."

The silence that followed the helmsman's statement was even more telling than the rumbling of voices that had been heard a moment before. There was a brief pause before the Orion officer spoke again.

"Lieutenant, you were at the helm when the USS Artemis was lost, exact?"

"Partly, Ma'am. I was indeed at the helm when we lost the stardrive section. But I was not piloting the vessel when we lost the saucer section."

"Who then was at the helm when the saucer section was lost?"

There was definite unease in the voice of the Inuit now.

"I... can not confirm or deny the exact individual who manned the ship at that moment, Ma'am; I was under evacuation orders with the rest of the crew and away aboard the bridge module when the actual loss occurred."

"Who was designated then to replace you at the helm and pilot the saucer section?"

"Captain Kheren... he chose to man the ship himself... what was left of it... from the emergency bridge."

The Orion woman took a moment to let the information sink in before she questioned the man again.

"While you were at the helm, Lieutenant, how did you loose the stardrive section?"

There was no mistaking the uneasiness in Aguk Snow's answers now.

"Captain Kheren ordered ramming speed against the Romulan dreadnought."

A low rumble of voices rose once again from the crowd, and kept on sending low tremors across the entire hall until the bell on the podium rang to silence them all.

"Order," simply called out Kotari before addressing the Orion prosecutor. "Please continue."

"Lieutenant Snow; the IRW Shavok was identified as a Scimitar class dreadnought. the USS Artemis for her part was registered as Ambassador class; the Ambassador class starship has no tactical saucer separation capability. Although the USS Artemis had been refitted with state-of-the-art technology, it still had the same basic spaceframe, meaning no tactical saucer separation capability. How then did the saucer section survive a ramming attack against another vessel with three times it's size and mass?"

"The Ambassador class is capable of emergency saucer separation, like all cruiser-class starships since the days of the old Constitution class," answered Snow, his voice now more firm. "This means that, although the saucer can't be reattached without full shipyard facilities, it's nevertheless equiped with release bolts and the main impulse engine of the vessel to allow quick escape from a catastrophic situation, like a core breach. Captain Kheren used this feature by ordering intraship beaming of all personnel to the primary hull before detachment of the saucer from the stardrive at the exact moment of collision... and at precise predetermined vector, ride safely away the energy front of the explosion."

There was no mistaking the pride of the man in describing the bold maneuver he had essentially performed under orders. There were more than a few murmurs of astonishment in the assembly. The precise angle and remarkable piloting skill required to pull out the feat, not to mention the sheer courage required, some even said insanity, was not lost on anyone... But they all quickly quieted. There were only cold stares coming down from the Bench.

The Orion Lieutenant's voice was just as cold.

"One last question, Lieutenant Snow; Even at emergency impulse and accepting the preposterous notion that such speed could have been maintained all the required time, it would have taken over five years to reach from where the interception happened, according to your own words, and the location of the anomaly. Now, if the saucer section only has impulse drive once separated from the secondary hull... how could it reach at the recorded stardate the Azimuth Horizon anomaly coordinates where it was finally lost?"

The pride did not abate from Aguk Snow's voice when he answered.

"Lieutenant-Commander Syntron, our First Officer, came up with the idea and calculations for doing repeated slingshot maneuvers around the microsingularity left from the remnant of the destroyed Romulan ship's stardrive. By looping around it's intense gravimetric pull at an increasingly decreasing angle, we were able to generate a warpfield from the momentum and altered energy output from the impulse drive. We then build it all the way up to warp 9 by repeating the process, before breaking orbit towards the anomaly's coordinates and reach them twenty-three hours later."

The statement created a definite stir among the assembly. The sheer inventiveness and boldness, some even said craziness, of the described maneuver struck everyone's imagination and started spontaneous technical and scientific discussions among many of the attendees... until the bell rang again to silence them all.

"Order!" said Kotari, this time with much more firmness than before.

"I have no further question for this witness," then declared Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta.

Kotari looked at Rear Admiral Pierson and then at Fleet Captain Allen Samji. Both just nodded. The Boslic senior officer then addressed the witness directly.

"You may step down."

Helmsman Snow stood up from the witness chair and went back to his seat in the assembly, sending again a nod to his captain as he passed him by.

"Call in the next witness," Kotari ordered.

The Orion woman turned away from the stand to glance at a PADD that she had positioned at her designated table at the front of the audience, and then glanced up.

"The Board calls Lieutenant Junior Grade, Robert Baoule."

The tall, black-skinned bald man came down the aisle with a small, sheepish smile to sit at the witness chair.

"Baoule, Robert," said the computer. " Serial number: 20070212-S3. Rank: Lieutenant Junior Grade. Position: Chief Engineer. Assignment: USS Artemis. Commendations: Starfleet Academy honor graduate, three times commended by Starfleet Command."

"For the record, please state your current rank and full name," Leeann'Eeta asked of the new witness now sitting in the scanning seat.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Robert Baoule," answered the young officer.

"Certified," said the computer voice.

Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta wasted no time.

"Lieutenant, what exactly was the propulsion and maneuvering capability of the USS Artemis, and how did it relate to the original Ambassador-class starship?"

There was no mistaking the characteristic ship engineer's pride in the tone of voice of the man.

"The original Ambassador class came up with a specific system of thrusters and impulse drive especially made for it that gave it exceptional speed and maneuverability at sublight speed. It clearly outmatched ships of it's original era and even today could only be outmatched by smaller warships like the Defiant class. The refitted Artemis still used that original system."

He made a pause before going on about the next part.

"As for warp capability, it's original cruising speed was warp 6 and maximum velocity recorded at warp 9.2; quite impressive in those days. The refit Artemis however was retrofitted with a class IX engine which several engineers tweaked further, so that it's final performance rating was warp 7 in cruise mode and warp 9.6 as a maximum sustainable speed, because of design limitations."

The Orion prosecutor nodded and followed that up with another quick question.

"So clearly I can assume it had the far superior capability to outmaneuver a Scimitar-class Starship, and most likely be able to surpass it at high warp. Am I right?"

"No Ma'am. As recorded by the first encounter with such a vessel by the USS Enterprise E several decades ago, the Scimitar class was then able to match speed and maneuverability, if not overtake and outmatch, a Sovereign class starship, which could reach warp 9.7 and even 9.985 for some time. And this was over forty years ago. Assuming the Romulans did not sit on their thumbs, a recent version of this class of vessel might even outperform these original capabilities."

"Thank you, Mister Baoule, no further questions."

"You may step down," said Kotari.

The process was repeated to call Valencia Irksos to the stand. The tall, equally dark-skinned woman that came down to sit in the witness chair wore the blue collar of a science officer, which the computer confirmed as soon as her hand touched the sensor.

"Irksos Valencia. Serial number 19850816-A4. Rank: Lieutenant Junior Grade. Position: chief of science. Assignment: USS Artemis. Commendations: Starfleet Academy honor graduate, four times commended by Starfleert Command."

For a moment, the prosecuting Orion spoke as if thinking outloud, looking at no one in particular.

"So, we have established that, through heroic and necessary actions, according to two of his crewmembers, Captain Kheren was able to both destroy the Shavok and save all on board crewmembers who were safely taken on the remaining saucer section of the USS Artemis."

The green-skinned woman then turned to the stand.

"Lieutenant Irksos, why do you believe it was necessary for Captain Kheren to again risk those crewmembers by heading toward the Azimuth Horizon anomaly?"

The big brown eyes of the seated woman blinked twice before she answered.

"Well... these were our orders, Ma'am. We were assigned by Lotus Fleet Command to participate in Quadrant 2 of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly region for Operation Horizon even before we were ordered to intercept the Romulan incursion. To my knowledge, those orders had not been rescinded."

The Orion's brow furrowed.

"Yes... but the typical assumption would be that the orders would not be expected of your crew with only half a ship that only had impulse capability. Unless I am wrong about the expectations of Fleet Captain Samji."

All eyes turned to the younger man seated at the bench to the left of Rear Admiral Kotari. In the silence, he glanced up from his PADD where he was taking notes.

"You are not wrong, Lieutenant," he said simply in a low voice

Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta nodded and continued, pointing at her PADD.

"I can see here that the USS Wisconsin was on its way to your position, having been dispatched on a rescue mission immediately upon the quite visible destruction of the Shavok. What was it about the Artemis that you needed to complete your mission? Was the Wisconsin not sufficiently capable in this task?"

"With all due respect, Ma'am... Fleet Captain..." the young woman said with a slight flush to her dark cheeks, "the typical assumption is also that Starfleet officers are duty bound to their very best in fulfilling their orders and duty; even more so in Lotus Fleet. It so happen that we came up with a workable solution and succeeded in implementing it to do just that. And at the time, we had no knowledge of the Wisconsin's approach."

"And why was it that you were not able to be contacted?"

"Three reasons with each one sufficient in itself to answer that, Ma'am. First, the residual emissions of the Shavok explosion nearby disturbing subspace, hence communications. Second, the interference output of the anomaly, almost in line with the Starbase and the trajectory of the Wisconsin, that had already cut us off from headquarters since our departure. Lastly, and according to recorded stardates from reports now filed, we were already experiencing time dilation effect from our slingshot maneuver to implement space warp when said message could have been sent."

The green-skinned Lieutenant looked at her PADD to confirm the data then nodded.

"Lastly: you were aware that you could not participate in the first phase of the operation, due to the lack of warp drive. What did the Artemis crew need to accomplish that you felt would not be possible or done more easily by the remaining ships?"

For a moment, Valencia Irsos seemed to hesitate; but then, she lifted her chin.

"Ma'am, Operation Horizon was a desperate attempt to pit our few available resources to counter a cosmic-scaled catastrophe, compared to which the Hobus supernova would look like a birthday candle flame. Not to mention that direct interference from several foreign and domestic forces was expected to further complicate things. All the ships were sorely needed just to have a hope of succeeding. As we found ourselves with a means to try and implement a one-time-only warp flight, we had two choices; return to base and eschew our duty, in high probability compromising the entire operation... or continue on our original orders and go to where duty called. We chose the latter, Ma'am."

"An honorable sentiment, granted," the Orion replied coldly, "but you didn't actually answer my question. What, specifically, did the crew decide needed to be done once arriving at the Azimuth Horizon?"

"Phase 2 of the Operation, Ma'am."

"Very well," the prosecutor said, looking at her PADD, and scanning the contents of the Operation with her finger, finally coming upon the section labeled 'Phase 2'. "Please verify that you are referring to the trilitium-enhanced torpedo operation."

"I am, Ma'am." the science officer instantly answered.

"Was the Artemis the only ship tasked with this part of the Operation from the start?"

"No, Ma'am. All Lotus Fleet ships were. But," Irsos said before the Orion woman could do anything more than open her mouth, "as I specified, we had few resources; two ships were sent to each of the four established theater of operation to cover the entire anomaly with the planned trilitium probe deployment. The Artemis was assigned to area 2 along with the USS Alsea. Regardless of us having, even in our damaged state, as much probes to launch as the next best equipped vessel in the fleet, our absence would already compromise that coverage in no small part. As the Alsea had been diverted to intercept a full Romulan task force and contact was lost with her as well, we had no way of knowing if she would herself be able to do her part. So there was a distinct probability that we alone could be left to do the job."



"But I see here that each ship was tasked with circling the Anomaly in Phase 1 and that you arrived at your designated spot while that was still occurring, am I right?"

"According to the record, Yes, Ma'am. At the time however, interference from the anomaly made that determination impossible to ascertain."

"How long did it take you from the time you arrived to prepare the torpedoes and be ready to go into the Anomaly?"

"They were prepared en route during the twenty-three hours of travel from the interception coordinates to quadrant 2, so we were at full readiness when we arrived."

"You must've spent a little time there. It shows here you made rendez-vous with the Alsea..."

"That is correct, Ma'am."

"Why was the Alsea not elicited to help with Phase 2 then?" the Orion prosecutor asked.

Before Irksos Valencia could answer, though, Samji spoke up.

"I can answer that. I ordered the Alsea to investigate two lost shuttles that we had set up around the Anomaly."

Some murmurs of interest came from the audience at that remark. If Samji ordered the ship that could've assisted the Artemis away, then it slightly tore down the prosecutor's argument.

The young Orion woman, taken aback, cleared her throat before resuming her questioning.

"Um... very well. What about the Lotus? It shows they arrived during the Artemis' mission within the Anomaly. If known they were still in Phase 1, could you have not have waited for the Lotus, which was tasked to circle the Anomaly every five point three hours? Was the timing that critical?"

"As I stated earlier, we had little knowledge of the status of the other ships of the fleet. Even when Starbase 10 ingeniously established a communication network with a shuttle chain acting as subspace relays, the few reports we received were that the other ships were all engaged in combat. Moreover the planned trajectory of the ships did not crisscross one another, in order to maximize the subspace trench coverage. With intense interference from the anomaly, detection of a ship even with short range scanners was problematic at best, impossible with long range scans. And yes, timing was critical to stop the catastrophe before it became irreversible... especially with so many hostile forces arrayed to hinder us. We knew we were over twenty-four hours behind schedule already. As we observed that the anomaly had not grown as far as expected for the time elapsed, and the Alsea confirming having completed it's own part of phase 1, it was estimated that phase 2 was due to commence. Without a warp drive, we had no other contribution to provide anyway; but we had enough probes to complete phase 2 alone if all came to worse. And so we were ordered to proceed."

The frustrated prosecutor moved as if to ask another followup question, but then changed her mind and, with a slight bow of her head, said, "No further questions."

"That is probably sufficient anyway," Rear Admiral Kotari noted. "Thank you, Lieutenant Valencia," he said, with a slight smile and nod from his chin covered with a greying beard. "You may step down."

Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta then called the towering Andorian security officer, Lieutenant Tyvya. As she came down the aisle to take the stand, the giant Andorian shen looked down at the Artemis captain with curving antennae. On the left one was a polished ring that matched the one on Kheren's own left ring finger. There were a few gasp in the Andorian audience as several were connecting the significance of both, one from their own culture but the other from Human custom.

There was no time to speculate on the fact however as the computer confirmed the giantess' identity.

"Tyvya. Serial number 19690806-A8A. Rank: Lieutenant Junior Grade. Position: Chief Tactical and Security officer. Assignment: USS Artemis. Commendations: Starfleet Academy honor graduate, eight times commended by Starfleet Command."

"Please state your rank and name," asked the prosecutor.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Tyvya."

"Verified," stated the computer voice.

The prosecutor took some time to gather both her wits and her thoughts before proceeding.

"Lieutenant Tyvya... what is your Tactical analysis of the Artemis' situation prior to the destruction of the Shavok?"

"We were outgunned, outpowered and only managing to avoid destruction because of our better maneuverability... which could have been nullified with any successful hit on our impulse engines. With fifty-two disruptor banks and twenty-seven plasma torpedo launchers on the Shavok, it was just a statistical question of minutes before that would have happened."

Her tone was curt and dry. She was obviously determined to cut through the chase and make the facts plain and simple for all.

"Do you believe, strategically, there were zero other options but for the Captain to sacrifice the stardrive of his ship by ramming the Shavok?"

"I do. Even upgraded to modern specs, an Ambassador class starship alone does not have the necessary firepower or armor and shield stamina to incapacitate, let alone destroy, a Scimitar class vessel. The first record of confrontation between one and a Starfleet vessel showed that even a Sovereign class battleship could not manage to do it, even with the help of two Romulan Mogai warships... until it too rammed it."

"Moving to the trilitium torpedo operation. Did the Captain order you to stay aboard with him and Mister Syntron while ordering the rest of the crew to evacuate in the Aegis bridge module?"

This time, the firmness of the giantess wavered.

"No, Ma'am."

The Orion frowned.

"So... you disobeyed an order from your Captain?"

"No, Ma'am. I went to his quarters to save his personal belongings and return them to him before joining evacuation. But when I did so, the bridge module separated and all the shuttles and makeshift escape pods had left."

Some renewed murmurs from the audience were silenced by a stare from Kotari. The prosecutor continued.

"And why were his personal belongings so important to you?"

Admiral Pierson, The JAG officer on the right of Rear Admiral Kotari, interrupted before Tyvya could answer.

"I don't believe this witness is the one under scrutiny today, Lieutenant. Stick to questions specific to Captain Kheren's actions."

"This may be relevant, Sir. Could I please just ask two more questions related to this and then I'll let it go."

The three men conferred silently and then Kotari nodded sternly.

"Two more questions."

"Thank you, Sirs. Lieutenant Tyvya, I repeat; why were the personal belongings so important that you'd be willing to risk disobeying a direct order to evacuate?"

"They were the only things left to him from the homeworld. The only things that... defined him... his life... his heart... his soul. His last link to his own people. They could not be abandoned to burn into oblivion."

There was definite underlining passion behind each word. And those seated nearest to the Andorians in the crowd could see them slowly nod in answer.

As an Orion female, the prosecutor had a unique, distinct ability to sense the passion, and more, within the Andorian seated before her. The marriage was no secret to Starfleet, but the Orion even had a temporal sense of her passion and knew that the words spoken by the Andorian giantess about the past were directly linked to her feelings for Captain Kheren and not a present-tense realization of those feelings.

Finally, she asked the all-important question.

"How long were you and Captain Kheren romantically involved?"

Tyvya seemed genuinely startled by the question. But then the mere shadow of a smile seemed to come to her lips.

"It depends from which point of view you make the calculation, Ma'am."

"I'm not... sure I understand your meaning," the Orion responded.

The shadow of a smile was definitely in the eyes of the giantess and in the tone of her voice.

"From my point of view, it started when we both served aboard the USS Lotus in the tactical and security department. For his part... I believe it started on the emergency bridge of the Artemis... when we were about to burn up."

The Orion dropped her head slightly and knew why the Andorian was almost smiling. It was not the proverbial smoking gun she was hoping for that would make her case. If Captain Kheren could've been seen to have other things on his mind, a lot of other decisions he had made might've come into question. Instead she simply sighed and nodded.

"No more questions," she said and proceeded to the next witness. "For our next witness, the Board of Inquiry calls Lieutenant Commander Syntron."

Hearing his name announced by the prosecutor, the tall bearded Vulcan officer stood up and purposefully approached the bench. He had been listening carefully as the interrogation commenced through all of the previous witnesses. He then proceeded to sit down and face the Orion prosecutor without a hint of emotion or expression.

"Syntron. Serial number 20120806-V2A. Rank: Lieutenant-Commander. Position: Executive officer. Assignment: USS Artemis. Commendations: Starfleet Academy honor graduate, Vulcan Science Academy honor graduate, Decorated by Starfleet Science, Temporal Ribbon of Excellence, the Star Cross, five times commended by Starfleet Command."

"Please state your rank and name for the record," asked the Orion prosecutor.

"Lieutenant Commander Syntron."

"Verified."

The computer voice echoed throughout the room as usual and then was silent as the participants in the room awaited Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta's first question

"Lieutenant-Commander," she began, facing the stoic Vulcan and glancing at her PADD to check a few notes; "how would you describe the command decision Captain Kheren made to deal with the Romulan ship Shavok?"

"Logical," Syntron stated concisely and without hesitation.

"You don't believe it was rash or risky? Do you believe all other options were considered first before such a dire action was taken?"

"All such command decisions have a level of risk inherent within them, Lieutenant. Was this decision rash? No. In this specific case, the decision was logical in that this alternative, based on all of the conditions described by the previous witnesses, was the only viable option that would allow the crew to survive... as opposed to the entire ship being destroyed along with crew."

The Orion murmured, "mhmm" and then shifted gears from the fight with the Romulan Scimitar which seemed to be getting her nowhere. "When you were in the Anomaly and the Captain ordered the crew to evacuate, did he order you to remain with him to help with the retrieval of the trilithium probes?"

"Negative."

The Orion seemed interested now.

"Hmm, does that seem like a particularly logical command decision to you?"

Maintaining his stoic posture, Syntron responded in a calm, clinical tone.

"From the Captain's perspective, his first priority was to ensure the safety of his crew. I discussed with the captain that it was not only logical for me to accompany him in this aspect of the mission, but it was compulsory. Vulcans, as you are aware, Lieutenant, are quite adaptable to high temperature conditions. The environmental conditions that exist within the anomaly have a potentially devastating effect on the physiology of a species such as Andorians and therefore, someone more tolerant of these conditions needed to accompany him in this endeavor. In addition, the implementation of the trilithium emitters was my recommendation, my area of expertise, and to a degree, it was also my responsibility to ensure that this final phase of this operation was completed successfully. Captain Kheren logically concurred."

"Yes, but as I understand it, only after some convincing by you. It seems that in this case, if it wasn't for you, he may have passed out and failed to achieve the objective, threatening the entire other Universe, which is something Fleet Captain Samji very strongly argued against doing. Do you believe that Captain Kheren may, at times, put individuals in his crew ahead of the mission?"

"Negative," he stated assuredly without an ounce of hesitation. "In fact, his focus remained on the mission despite all odds mounting against that of a probable success."

"So, I take that to mean that, had you not spoke up and had instead immediately followed his order to evacuate, you believe he would've been successful, by himself, despite that all the time his Andorian physiology would have been especially affected by the anomaly?"

"There is no logical means at which to ascertain the outcome of events that did not occur, Lieutenant. I am the Captain's first officer. It is my duty to discuss options and make suggestions regarding missions and their protocol just as it is the Captain's duty to listen and consider them. This is what we have done throughout our missions together and, despite all odds and difficulties we have faced, we have been successful in completing our missions while also ensuring the safety of our crew... Just as we have done in this case, Lieutenant."

"Very well, Lieutenant-Commander. That is all I have for you, thank you," the prosecutor said, moving back to her table to review her data on her PADD before the next, and final witness would be called.

"You may step down," Kotari said to Syntron, who did so with the same cool, detached manner that he had shown when he had approached the witness stand.

Syntron, somewhat surprised by the abrupt conclusion of the questioning by the prosecutor, simply stood up and walked back toward the seats among the audience. He could see Captain Kheren sitting off on the side, calmly waiting but the Vulcan could recognize a trace of anticipation in his expressionless face.

The Andorian looked up at his first officer and, with a nod, thanked him for his truthfulness. Of course, the Vulcan would have said that such gratitude was illogical as he only did his duty and told the truth; but Kheren was not Vulcan and he did feel that illogical gratitude nevertheless. And he knew that, despite all, Syntron would understand, if only on an intellectual level.

And so, he waited for the final moment, to which everything else had been a build up. Now was about to come the time for him to truly face his responsibilities.

As expected by the assumed order the prosecution would call their witnesses, the Captain was next up on the stand.

"The Board calls Captain Kheren," said the Orion prosecutor with a slight waver in her voice.

She was not looking forward to interrogating such a highly decorated and well-respected figure. It was clear from the many commendations from his bridge crew, that no matter what regulations she may choose to throw at him, he had certainly done no wrong. In fact, she thought, she admired him for what he did manage to do and how many lives he had saved.

Nonetheless, she had a job to do this day, and it was to attempt to discredit him in any way possible. Only in that way would he then be fully absolved.

The Andorian stood up and walked calmly to the stand, looking straight at the high ranking officers on the bench as he sat down.

"Captain Kheren. Serial number 19580529-A8A. Rank: Captain. Position: Starship Commanding officer. Assignment: USS Artemis. Commendations: Starfleet Academy honor graduate, Andoria Laibos university science honor graduate; Andoria duelling Honored GrandMaster; Honorable discharge from the Andorian Imperial Guard captain rank; Decorated by Starfleet Command, Decorated by Starfleet Science, Temporal Ribbon of Excellence, Lotus Fleet Medal of Diplomacy, the Star Cross, Starfleet Medal of Commendation, Citation for Conspicuous Gallantry, Christopher Pike Medal of Valor, fifteen times commended by Starfleet Command."

"Please state your rank and name for the record," once again asked the Orion Lieutenant of the witness sitting in the witness chair.

"Captain Kheren Kalel Th'Ch'Leryll Keth Reiji."

"Confirmed."

There was a hush within the assembly as he disclosed his full name. All the Andorians in the vast room, and those familiar with Andorian culture, knew that in doing so, he was giving the Board of Inquiry a singular honor, a total recognition of authority... or formally challenging it.

But only Captain Kheren, for the moment, could tell which.

After the computer voice was silent, the prosecutor turned and stared long and hard into the Captain's stony expression, trying to find a hint of regret or any other emotion she could play off of. Eventually she gave up that pursuit.

"Captain, what was the purpose for leaving most of your crew behind on Starbase 10?"

"As per General Order 29; preserving them from unwarranted risk."

Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta simply nodded.

"And how many officers were removed?"

"All in all, six hundred and thirty crewmembers, including officers."

"Leaving one hundred and seventeen," Leeann'Eeta continued.

"Correct," the Andorian acknowledged.

"That's quite a difference!" came the shocked voice from the prosecutor. She was play-acting the response and exaggerating the shock for emphasis. "Do you not believe that every crew member on your ship is necessary and vital to the operation of the vessel and to especially such an important mission?"

"Not in this particular instance," Kheren said with no hint of doubt in his deep voice.

"And why is that Captain? Certainly in battle you need every hand available to provide for the safety and well-being of the ship and her crew? Even botanists and xenolinguists are Starfleet Officers. All Starfleet Officers are cross trained to take over simple emergency medical, tactical, or engineering duties and they could be called to step up when those that are specifically trained in those roles are injured or killed. Leaving only fifteen percent of your crew seems like a big risk, a risk to the ship AND the mission, especially considering that a large portion of that remaining crew was science officers!"

"The Artemis was crewed for deep space exploration. This means that the large majority of it's complement is made up of research scientists, maintenance crews, assistant technicians and complementary security officers. These were not required for a short range, high-risk, emergency mission as defined by Operation Horizon. They would have had little if anything to do and would have been unnecessarily exposed to clear and direct danger we were ordered to face."

Kheren looked at the bench as he continued his answer.

"As per Starfleet regulations, at least forty percent of the crew is crosstrained between medical, technical and security duties. On the Artemis, I pushed that standard to fifty. However, we were not just part of a science mission to stop a catastrophe. We were ordered first to intercept a much more powerful battleship with only one other starship as back-up; and with clear orders to act as protection, if not as a decoy for that tactically superior ship, as we ourselves clearly lacked the firepower to face it. The strategic approach was sound; but it meant that the Artemis would take the brunt of the attack. This in my mind spelled high casualty risk, a risk even crosstrained xenolinguists and botanists needed not to face."

"Did your crew continue to follow the standard eight-hour duty shifts during this time?"

"No. We shifted to four shifts of six hours to ensure full rest and recuperation before meeting with the enemy, after we thoroughly prepared ourselves for the task. On the Artemis, Security and Tactical was already routinely following such a schedule."

"Can you explain then why so many of your crewmembers challenged your judgment by asking for a transfer upon receiving those temporary reassignment orders?"

"I myself, no. I can not understand how Starfleet officers who served with me for so long suddenly decided that, being ordered to provide their unique expertise to help headquarters, instead of uselessly risking their lives were they had little to contribute otherwise, found it grounds to ask for a transfer. I asked my ship's counselor about it, and she pointed out that all those that left were either Bajoran or Human, with psychoprofiles of high personal pride, ambition and aggressiveness. Such traits are common to most Andorians; yet, no Andorian would ever act this way, as we believe in discipline and service above personal gains. So your guess is as good as mine."

"I can imagine how it would be difficult for any Starfleet Officer to be told that his or her services are unwanted or unneeded," Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta noted. "Whether they logically understood your true reasons or not, emotionally, they may have felt betrayed... especially if they didn't agree with your assessment of how necessary their expertise may have been."

"That is exactly what *I* do *not* understand, Lieutenant," agreed the captain. "They were explicitly told that their expertise with the anomaly *was* needed; but *not* as cannon fodder. It was to be most helpful to the starbase however, to best direct the whole operation. Furthermore, Starfleet officers should accept a commanding officer's assessment and orders, whether they agree with them or not. If they have genuine objections and feel that they must bring them up, they should either come to him and discuss the matter, or else file a formal complaint. None of them did either of those things. They simply went away... including Commander O'Conner. He, however, did voice his own personal complaint... but right along presenting to me his request for transfer and those of all the others. I understood then that he only wanted to say his piece and would not listen to whatever I would say, and that he presented himself as the leading officer in this rejection of my leadership. Therefore, I signed his transfer orders along with the others. We all serve willingly in Starfleet; I was certainly not going to coerce them in following my lead if they had no faith in it anymore."

The Orion was silent for a moment, apparently considering whether to press the issue, and then said, "Moving on to the actual operation, why did you order full impulse out of the spacedock, knowing full well it was against regulations?"

"General Order 24; If a commanding officer deems that an individual or group of individuals pose a threat to Starfleet personnel or Federation civilians, he may take any action deemed necessary to secure the safety of those threatened. There was a Romulan battleship heading under cloak at high warp within Federation space straight for Starbase 10, not answering hails or having any authorization to be there and on such a course. This fell under General Order 8: Upon sighting a warship within Federation space and identifying it as belonging to a foreign power, the commander of the Starfleet vessel shall determine the reason for that craft's presence in the vicinity. If there is conclusive evidence that the vessel has hostile intentions, the Federation vessel may take appropriate action to safeguard the lives and property of Federation members."

Kheren then looked at the Orion woman.

"We were ordered to depart at once and intercept them before they had any chance to threaten Federation worlds or installations... or the operation itself, which was on a critical timetable."

The Andorian then turned his dark face from the Lieutenant once again towards the judges.

"And I did not act against regulations. Regulation 1 clearly states that General Orders supercedes any and all other rules, regulations and orders in the field. I therefore followed the first regulation and obeyed the general orders most relevant to the situation."

"Very well, Captain. How much time do you believe you saved by not following standard departure procedures?"

"It would have taken at least ten minutes to move out of space dock on thrusters alone; then, at maximum impulse, no less than twenty minutes to clear the regulation distance before engaging warp at one hundred million kilometers. So at least half an hour. By that time, according to known speed of a Scimitar class vessel and calculating from it's last known location, it could have been in position to threaten the Japori star system lying in their estimated trajectory when we would have intercepted them."

"In the fight against the Shavok, if you had retained the Alsea's help and succeeded in defeating the scimitar with your combined forces, you could've then both been more powerful in the fight against the rest of the Romulan forces at the Anomaly. Why did you engage the Romulan ship by yourselves, directing the Alsea to leave, knowing they could've helped to turn the tables in the fight?"

Kheren looked a bit surprised by the question, as if the answer was self evident. But then, he recalled that this was a board of inquiry about his command decisions. Whether right or wrong, they needed to look at them all in the open. So he answered with a very professional tone.

"It was a strategic decision, to which Captain Oseno Jureth had to concur since, as the commanding officer of the ship having the greatest tactical advantage, he was responsible for it. The Romulan task force was heading for the anomaly, with the intention of detonating it. In essence, they would have precipitated the very catastrophe we were all rushing out to prevent. By the time we would have possibly defeated the Shavok, and there could never be any certainty of that, the Romulan task force would have reached the only completely undefended quadrant of the anomaly."

He did not have to explain what the consequences would have been then, so he went on with the rest of the strategic situation.

"The Shavok had to be stopped; and so did the task force. Without possibility of calling for back up or for even such back up to get anywhere needed in time, the only option that seemed left to us was to engage both fronts at the same time. That meant therefore splitting our forces. It was estimated that the Alsea, being able to convert into a three-ships task force, was best suited to oppose the four Romulan warbirds... leaving the Artemis to deal with the lone Scimitar battleship."

The Orion prosecutor seemed satisfied and did not press the issue any more.

"Why did you choose to pursue the course of retrieving the trilitium emitters with a severely damaged saucer section, knowing that the chances of success were severely low and that the opportunity existed to wait and call on help from your fellow Lotus Fleet vessels?"

"At the time that decision was made, the saucer section was as yet not significantly damaged and fully operational. The Alsea had sent a distress signal. As far as we knew, all the other Lotus Fleet ships were themselves fully engaged in their own part of the operation; and any able to free itself would be bound to answer the Alsea's call. And, no, there was neither the possibility to call for help nor time to wait. Interference from the anomaly prevented any contact. By then, the emitters we had launched as per our orders were already destabilizing the whole anomaly well over what had been calculated; it would have sent it back through the wormhole at it's center to destroy the other universe beyond. It was in fact, a matter of minutes. And so, I ordered evacuation so that the crew could be safe and answer the Alsea's call for help, leaving my first officer and myself to correct the situation in time with maximum efficiency and minimum risk of personnel."

Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta felt defeated. She was exhausted and felt that she had found absolutely nothing of substance to even come close to convicting the Captain of incompetence or neglect. So she simply bowed her head.



"No further questions; the prosecution rests."

"You may step down," Kotari then said to Kheren.

Lieutenant Leeann'Eeta moved back to her assigned seat and position to await what she felt would be an inevitable decision.

*I have to be the first prosecutor in history to ever fail so miserably in an inquiry case involving a destroyed ship,* she thought.

As if reading her thoughts, Kheren stood up and lifted his chin in typical Andorian fashion to show the respect his words conveyed.

Thank you, Lieutenant. You have been very thorough in questioning my decisions. Your efficiency was frightening at times. I am sure that now or later, no captain will be left erring in his duties after what you have done here."

And with those words, he went back to his seat.

The Orion wasn't sure if the words made her feel any better. Despite feeling like she was receiving the words of the Captain in order to spare her feelings, she did appreciate it nonetheless. She nodded with respect and thanks as the Captain passed by her and then resumed reviewing her thoughts of what had occurred and perusing her notes to make sure there was nothing obvious she had missed.

She felt defeated; but, at the same time, she was glad. She had done her professional best to break the officer, and he was still left standing and firm in his certainty of having performed his duty to the best of his ability. And personally, she did believe it so as well. She had done her job, just like he had done. There had been little doubt of that in her mind. Now, after hearing all those testimonies and the words of the captain himself, there was no doubt left.

But the decision was not in her hands.

"We will take a short recess to deliberate and return to make our decision," the Boslic Rear Admiral said and the three judges exited the room through a doorway in the back that led to an antechamber where they would come to a decision.

Kheren looked back among the immense assembly that had witnessed the entire proceeding. People were talking among themselves and sending stares in his direction. He could have easily listened to most conversations out there or read through all their facial expressions and body motions, but he felt too exhausted to even try. He let the voices turn into a soothing drone and the sights blur into a sea of moving colors and shape to find this inner center of calm his former Vulcan master had finally managed to help him find, after all those years he had struggled to tame the savage beast that dwelt within him.

Their words and stares did not matter. He had lost a ship. It was now up to his superiors to determine if he did it because of circumstances or because he was at fault.

He truly did not believe that he was. He had loved that ship. Her beauty, her fame, her prowess, she had been his first true love. He knew that he would have as much care, devotion and attachment to any other ship he would ever command... if Starfleet would ever dare give him another command... but never quite like he did for her.

Things were out of his hands now. It was an unusual feeling; and he didn't like it. But there was nothing left to do but wait and assume the consequences of his actions.

That is what he had always been ready to do. Now... just as then.

He did not have to wait long. The three senior officers reappeared within minutes, and the swiftness of the decision surely meant that nothing was really at question. However, for the Andorian Captain that also did not really give an indication as to which way they had voted, as decisiveness could have swung in either direction.

Rear Admiral Kotari spoke first.

"We have come to a decision."

The other two took their seats, but he remained standing. With arms folded behind his back, he went to a nearby window and looked out among the stars shining in the clear evening in San Francisco. He then turned and addressed the assembled officers, motioning with one hand at the night sky.

"Space is a most inhospitable place to travel, is it not? We have known this for ages. We have traveled among the stars for what seems like ages. At this time, almost all people in the Federation are so at ease and feel at home on a starship. We almost forget how a single partition of duranium or transparent aluminum separates us from the complete and utter vacuum of space."

He stepped back behind the podium where the other two senior officers were seated.

"The loss of a starship... of our home among the stars... is not a trivial thing. Relatively speaking, the amount of people who have been given the responsibility to command such a vessel are few. Among them, those that have lost a vessel and live to tell about it are few as well. The most minute percentage of those will receive another commission. It is almost unheard of."

"Hmm...." the Rear Admiral murmured thoughtfully, as he pondered what the Vulcans in the room might calculate as the odds of such an occurrence. "As I said, the loss of a starship is not trivial. However, do you know what is even less trivial? Even more tragic? The loss of a single life. A single life is worth much more than any starship. And Captain Kheren has succeeded in saving one hundred and seventeen of those lives... while preserving six hundred and thirty more from undue harm."

The Admiral held out his hands as if countering an imaginary argument.

"Oh sure, we as Starfleet Officers all take an oath and are expected to give our lives for our ship. No officer will argue that it is their duty to do so. But we do not give our lives willingly to protect what really amounts to a collection of duranium, titanium, deuterium, plasma, and isolinear circuits. No, we willingly offer our lives to protect our ships... because it means protecting all the other lives on that ship."

"Saving lives," he said simply. "That is what Captain Kheren has done. That is what Captain Picard had done on stardate 48650 when losing the Enterprise-D to protect an entire planet of people. And of course we all know that he received another commission. And we're all better off for it."

"Admiral?" he said, leaving the floor to the JAG officer, and taking his seat finally.

Rear Admiral Pierson held up a PADD and spoke.

"In the official ruling of this Board of Inquiry, and by a unanimous decision by three senior officers, Fleet Captain Allen Samji, Rear Admiral Harold Pierson, and Rear Admiral Kotari, Captain Kheren will hereby retain the rank of Captain and will receive a commission as commanding officer of a new ship prototype currently being assembled and, at this moment, delegated to be commissioned for Lotus Fleet."

All the while the senior had been speaking, Kheren had stood up at attention, as per protocol. When judgment finally fell, there was no sign of any emotion on his face.

But the way his breath came out and his whole body seemed to slack like a taunt bowstring slowly released to rest, it was obvious that he had been dreading the worse. Thus, it took him some time for the last words of the Admiral to go through his mind and reach his consciousness.

*What? A new what? A prototype? What...*

He could not go further into the thought as the outburst from the floor was deafening. Whether in joy or outrage, he could not tell. But the bell before Kotari rang loud and insistent to silence everyone and everything, even his own thoughts for the moment.

Only once silence had resumed did the three senior officers rise.

"This concludes the proceedings," Rear Admiral Pierson said.

He then banged on the bell three times, as he had done when opening the board of inquiry session. He then gave his final words.

"Congratulations, Captain, and thank you all for your attendance and for the information hereby given by the witnesses."

The three senior officers exited again through the same doorway where they went to make their decision, in the same carefully studied disorderly manner they had entered, their thick books left on the table as a reminder of their authority and power they had exercised on this day. The two admirals exchanged a few words before parting with a handshake and Kotari turned to give a few words to his direct subordinate before leaving him also after a handshake. Fleet Captain Samji then eventually made his way into the lobby of the headquarters to meet with Captain Kheren and his assembled bridge crew.

There was quite a commotion in the immense lobby adjoining the court room. Despite its babylonian size and multiple levels, the place seemed to be overflowing with Starfleet officers and crewmen congregating at the door. When Captain Kheren came out, a thunder of applause greeted him; to which his usually frozen face answered with very visible astonishment... and more than a little embarrassment. But there was also joy and pride in his expression, when he looked at the people around him.

They were all the remaining crewmembers of the lost starship Artemis; the one hundred and seventeen that had shared their captain's ordeal and the four-hundred and seventy-six ones that had dutifully followed his orders and contributed to Starbase 10 leading Lotus Fleet to success.

And then, there were more than a few officers among those who had requested a transfer, now fully understanding their former captain and his true intent and sobered by his own steadfast following of duty and responsibility. And most of them were already asking to be reaffected back under the Andorian's command.

Before he could more than thank a few of his closest officers for their faith in him, Fleet Captain Samji came to him and whispered a few words to his lowering antennae.

And before anyone could realize what was happening, he was gone with him by a side door, both officers with serious faces; although again, Kheren's own rigid face was stretched with emotion, now a new one.

Astonishment. Almost... disbelief.

Nevertheless, he followed his commanding officer, ready for his next order; ready to do his duty to the best of his ability and in accordance with what the Federation and Starfleet had always stood for.

As he always was, always had been... and always will be.

\* \* \*

On the turbolift, Fleet Captain Samji made his way from Operations down the almost complete height of the massive Starbase 10 to deck 297. The man he was escorting was Judge Advocate General in the Hromi Cluster, Rear Admiral Harold Pierson. He was also accompanied by the attorney for the defense, Commander Torva Prestin. Perhaps unfortunately for Sorripto, the first Cardassian in Starfleet, it so happened that this one, the only attorney available, was a Bajoran.

Upon entering the Brig, Fleet Captain Samji asked the JAG to step aside and he and the defense attorney approached the cell where the former chief engineer of the USS Mckenzie was being held.

"Mister Sorripto, you caused quite a stir. I believe you have a lot of good officers who will be speaking on your behalf, including me, however."

He waved to the admiral.

"The admiral will be overseeing your court martial. I believe you will have a challenge ahead of you as he is a stickler for the rules. I will leave you in the capable hands of Commander Torva Prestin until you two are ready to commence the proceedings."

Commander Torva approached the cell as Samji walked away and spoke in a detached, almost too professional tone of voice.

"Mister Sorripto, a pleasure. Please tell me your version of the events so I can better understand the nature of what you are accused of."

Sorripto looked through the force field at the young and physically small Bajoran that sat on the other side. The irony was not lost on Sorripto as a young Bajoran, who was clearly born after the end of the Dominion War, was defending a Cardassian on trial for crimes committed while saving the grandson of the emissary. A smile crossed Sorripto's face as he leaned in to answer the question.

"Word travels fast in this galaxy, so I will spare you the details and give you the short version."

Cracking his knuckles Sorripto began his telling of the events that had landed him in that cell.

"About a year ago, a representative from Section 31 contacted me with a small mission, under the promise of revealing some information about my mother that I did not know. The mission was simple and surprisingly not illegal so, when I was done, this agent Jameson showed me some pictures of women he claimed were my sisters. I did some research on my own and confirmed that my mother had three children before her and my father married. This was kept a secret because my father was using his position in the Cardassian military to aid the resistance against the Dominion."

There was a subtle but nevertheless twitch of surprise from the young attorney. For a Bajoran, it was always a surprise, not without some level of disbelief, to hear of cardassian alleged involvement against their own people. But the attorney kept silent and listened politely.

"To make a long story short," then added Sorripto, "this information quickly became a threat when Jameson revealed to me that my sisters were being held prisoners and would only be released after I did one final mission for Section 31. They revealed to me that there was a traitor aboard the USS McKenzie, the ship I was serving on as chief engineer. I was to get into his graces, sabotage the McKenzie, and in the delay secure the cultist vessel the Prophecy... and kill Joey Day Sisko, their identified spiritual leader."

Commander Torva reviewed his notes while Sorripto told the story from his side.

"But that is not what happened at all..."

Cutting off the young lawyer, Sorripto nodded.

"Not even close. After undoing a lot of Chief Reichman's sabotage, making sure no one aboard the McKenzie was hurt, I made sure that no part of Section 31's plan came true. I saved Sisko, destroyed the Prophecy taking out the Children's fleet, then escaped to capture their high ranking officials. After that, I turned over the information I had gathered on Section 31 to Captain Crist and turned myself in for my role in the whole affair."

Commander Torva furiously made notes on his PADD while Sorripto was talking and finally looked up with the usual analytical stare he tried to present.

"Was it necessary to destroy the Prophecy? From what I see here, it was already disabled..."

"Destroying the Prophecy was not easy but it had to be done. I had discovered a communication that there was a large fleet of ships loyal to the Children en route to the Prophecy's location. There were thirty ships and even at full strength, with many Children ships remodified for speed, they would have destroyed the McKenzie. I only had a few minutes to act, so I got the McKenzie crew off the Prophecy got to the engineering console on the bridge and sent the Prophecy into a warp core breach. The explosion destroyed the fleet as they dropped out of warp since none of them had their shields up yet."

The Cardassian made a pause and his eyes seemed to look far away for a moment.

"A friend of mine once told me there is always another way; whether you ever figure it out or not there is always another way. I wish there had been another way... and I will have to live with what I did. But I destroyed thirty-one ships, including the Prophecy, of a fanatical terrorist organization and chose to save the crew of the McKenzie. I still see faces when I close my eyes, but if I lived ten thousand lifetimes, I would save the McKenzie ten thousand times."

Torva nodded with respect to the Cardassian.

"Very well; I just have one more question before we proceed to the trial. Why did you not tell your Captain what you were doing?"

As the true weight of the question sank in, Sorripto sat back slightly in his chair. This was the question that was the hardest and easiest to answer at the same time.

"The fact is, I wanted to... I really did. But... no matter how much I wanted to and no matter how much Crist deserved to know the truth, I could not tell him. Section 31 had my family and I was not done putting all the information on who was with them together yet. I have served under Captain Crist since right after the battle with the Borg at Starbase 10. I know him very well. I know that he would have done everything he could to both stop and help me at the same time, and that would put him and the entire crew in jeopardy."

He took a moment to sigh.

"Captain Crist is a good man and a better leader and I owe him my life more times than I can count. Section 31 would have gotten to his family and friends like they did with mine. We know that they are not above that. The truth is, the only way to keep him and the crew safe was to keep them in the dark."

*The Cardassian didn't need the help of his friends, huh? Typical Cardassian arrogance,* Torva Prestin initially thought, and then caught himself. This was no time for the prejudice of his parents to come through and disturb his own thought process. It was only honorable for him to consider his client as completely innocent until proven guilty in a court of law and no matter what race of being sat before him that is what he would do.

"That will be hard to defend against, I think, but we will do our best," he said, hopefully. "Everyone who will speak for you is already present in the conference room where the proceedings will be held. Are you ready?"

Sorripto looked over at the young Bajoran as his eyes turned from interest to anger. Sorripto knew that look. He had seen it many times and could only wonder what terrible thoughts towards Cardassians were going through the young Bajoran's head. Smiling and nodding, Sorripto could only shake his head.

"I am ready. Are you?"

"As I'll ever be. I must tell you, this is the most high-profile case I've ever taken. Usually it's the occasional smuggler or thief you see out here in the edges of Federation space. But a Starfleet officer on trial for such momentous events as what happened out there at the edge of oblivion... Now that is something else."

Commander Torva waved the guard on duty over who unlocked Sorripto's cell and placed shackles on his hands. The pair joined Samji and Rear Admiral Pierson who had been talking out of earshot and they made their way back up almost the whole way to Deck 1 where the proceedings would take place.

As Sorripto followed Prestin to their designated seats at the front of the auditorium, he noticed Captain Crist, Joseph Sisko and Ensign Simmons in their seats, waiting to be called on. Fleet Captain Samji took a seat among them. On the stage, in front on either side of the seat designated for Rear Admiral Pierson, there were four places for the other JAG officers who would be added to the final tally taken on Sorripto's fate. Facing them, at attention, was Commander Sh'meel, the Saurian who would be making the case for the prosecution.

His hissing, sinister voice resonated through the chamber.

"All will rise before the court!"

Pierson had gone to a side door and now brought the four high ranking officers with him to the stand, all walking in that deliberate disorder that symbolized how they transcended the system; that they *were* the system, and that system would not bear it's full weight upon the accused. They all took their seat after Pierson lowered himself and, with three taps of a small thin gavel on a silver desk bell in front of him, the crowd was silenced.

"This Court is now in session. I am Rear Admiral Harold Pierson, Judge Advocate general for the Hromi sector. With me on my right are Commodore T'Lia of the Vulcan sector and Commodore Jeremiah Krawstrewski of the Regulus sector. On my left are Commodore Ming Chan of the Alpha Centauri sector and Commodore Pakris Koshon of the Pi Canis sector. "

He waited a moment, looking at both the prosecutor and the defense attorney before he spoke again.

"If there is any objection to any or all of the present judges for this proceeding, please state as such and new ones will be appointed."

"No objection, Your Honor," immediately said prosecutor Sh'meel.

Prestin looked at Sorripto who remained impassive, then stood to answer.

"No objection, Your Honor."

Pierson didn't even nod as he spoke with a very serious tone.

"So will it be recorded in the Court logs. We will commence the proceeding of the Court Martial of Lieutenant Commander Sorripto. The charges are: dereliction of duty; sabotage; conspiracy leading to sabotage of a starfleet vessel and endangering Starfleet personnel during a critical operation; failure to report to his commanding officer; insubordination; willful destruction of civilian property; murder of six thousand eight hundred and forty-seven lives on board thirty-two vessels."

The silence in the room was so thick that it seemed like everyone was paralysed in crystal clear air, until the Judge Advocate General spoke again.

How does the defense plead?"

Standing respectfully, Torva spoke with clarity and confidence.

"Not guilty, your Honor."

There was a collective gasp that sounded as if all the air in the great hall was sucked out after those words. Pierson hit his bell once before any further outburst could follow. Depositing his gavel slowly and ostensibly to make the point, he then looked at the attorney.

"Very well. The charges have been listed. We will proceed with the defense's opening statement."

Out of respect, Torva turned to the Cardassian and, with a look and slight nod of his head, it was clear he was asking the Cardassian if he would have an interest in making his own opening statement.

Glancing to the young lawyer, Sorripto nodded and stood up behind the desk as Torva gestured for him to step forward.

He was led to a lone seat before the bench where, once he sat, a light came to life under his right palm, followed by a computer voice.

"Sorripto, serial number 76101011-CP1. Rank: Lieutenant Commander. Position: Chief Engineer. Assignment: USS McKenzie. Commendations: the Star Cross, five times commended by Starfleet Command."

"Please state your rank and name for the record," asked Pierson.

"Lieutenant Commander Sorripto."

"Confirmed," answered the computer, confirming the calibration of its sensor system to all the physiological and neurological responses of the subject as it would speak. There would be no lie, no deception; only proof of the subject's sincerity as to the facts given.

"You may proceed," now said the judge.

Sorripto cleared his throat as the Bajoran lawyer sat down behind him. Nodding to the bench, the Cardassian began to speak. The emotion and conviction in his voice echoed through the chamber and was missed on no one in attendance.

"Wow. Those were some strong words were they not? Treason, murder, sabotage... but you know what word stuck out the most, what word struck me the most? That word was duty. That one word is why we are here; not just why I stand before you, but duty is what drives and more importantly allows a Cardassian to wear this uniform. It is what allows a young Bajoran to defend a man that the galaxy tells him he should hate. Duty is what set every man and woman in this room on the path that lead them here. Duty is a strong word and is what we are actually here to talk about."

He paused to see if his words had any effect or were to be spoken in vain. He could see that he had everyone's undivided and honest attention. Inwardly he sighed with relief; in a Cardassian Court, he would have been brought in with his guilt already established and exposed publicly only to satisfy the people's sense of justice, of seeing the accused punished. But not here. This was a true court of justice where he could plead his case, defend his case... or at least speak the truth.

This is what had sent him to Starfleet in the first place. And so, with renewed confidence, he spoke again.

"However strong of an idea and a feeling duty is, there is one word that was missing from the list of charges that should echo through every ear as well. That word more than any other is truth. Truth is the universal law of the galaxy. Truth shows no bias, does not and cannot lie, and more than anything else, truth and the pursuit of truth is the reason the Federation exists. I am a Starfleet Officer and my first duty and the first duty of every Starfleet officer is to the truth, whether it's scientific truth or historical truth or personal truth! Truth is the guiding principle on which Starfleet is based and if we cannot find it within ourselves to seek the truth, no matter how much any of us does not want to believe it, then we do not deserve to wear the uniforms of our forefathers."

These were historical words once uttered by living legend Jean-Luc Picard. But in the voice of Sorripto, they sounded no less potent. And thus, his next words became all the more important.

"Do I stand before you an innocent man? No. I do not and I will attempt no lie to convince you otherwise. I committed acts many will question and, some will even argue, are against the rules. They will tell you it is their duty and yours to condemn me and send me away forever, but the issue here is why. Starfleet was founded on principles of gains and means and the belief in the good of the whole. With that comes the truth about consequences and the truth about what drives a man to do anything. The truth is, the great equalizer of any bias or duty and the truth will show you, not just the story of how and who, but the more important question... the truth will show you why."

After a slight pause to let the varying statements sink in, Sorripto nodded to acknowledge the end of his statement.

"The accused may leave the stand," said the judge.

Once the Cardassian was back to his attorney's side, there was a long moment of silent stillness, as the words spoken sank in. Then, Pierson spoke.

"It is indeed the duty of this court to seek the truth, but to also establish and enforce the rules... and if any of those rules were broken, we must adhere to the punishment established for those violations. The discipline of the service demands judgment of the ends and the means equally."

He then gestured to the prosecution seat.

"Commander, please call your first witness."

In a hissing voice, the prosecutor stood and obeyed.



"Starfleet Command calls Captain Crist to the stand."

Captain Crist made his way up to the podium before the JAG officers and sat at the seat provided for him. Again, the palm light glowed under his hand as it had done with Sorripto.

"Crist, Daniel. Serial number 5270801-S3E. Rank: Captain. Position: Commanding officer. Assignment: USS McKenzie. Commendations: Starfleet Academy Honor Graduate, Starfleet Command Decoration, Decoration for Gallantry, Medal of Distinction, ten times commended by Starfleet Command."

"Please state your rank and name for the record," asked Pierson.

"Captain Daniel Crist."

"Confirmed," said the computer.

"Your witness," then said the judge to the Saurian prosecutor who stepped beside the seated ship commanding officer.

"Captain Crist, what is your opinion of Sorripto's actions in the operation?"

Crist thought a moment before responding.

"I believe he got the job done and I am safe and here to prove that."

"But what of the accusation of disobeying orders? Of dereliction of duty? Does that not incense you, that he would skirt your orders so?"

"I found it a little difficult at first to understand why he was doing it... I did feel angry. But mostly confused. When I later found out why he did it, I understood."

"And why was that?" the Saurian hissed.

"Because his family was in danger," responded the Captain.

"A family he only found out about thanks to the very man he accuses of soliciting him into the heinous acts he performed in this operation."

Crist simply nodded. The prosecutor then turned toward the bench to conclude.

"Interesting... I find it more likely that he was on a mission to kill as many people as he deemed worthy to die for the sake of Starfleet, without the benefit of due process. No further questions."

"Your witness, Commander," the JAG then said to Torva.

The Bajoran looked over at Sorripto with a confused look, leaning near him as he spoke softly.

"Well, they obviously want to paint you as a murderer. That kills the defense I was working on."

Smiling, Sorripto looked up at Captain Crist who sat on the stand with a pale and emotionless expression. Sorripto thought for a moment and then remembered an old lesson Crist actually taught him. Leaning in towards his defense counsel, Sorripto whispered his suggestion.

"Crist recruited me after our fight with the Borg. Ask him about my time against the Borg."

Nodding, Torva stood up and addressed the Captain.

"Captain Crist; the records show that you asked for Commander Sorripto personally during the encounters with the Borg at Starbase 10 during the last invasion by the Collective of the Alpha Quadrant."

"I did," Crist responded.

"How many Borg died at Sorripto's hands during those battles?" Torva asked to a slight gasp from some in the crowd.

Nodding Crist almost cracked a smile.

"None."

"None? Not a single one? This senseless murderer could not bring himself to kill a single Borg drone?" Torva asked.

"Not a one. Actually, it was Commander Sorripto who designed the independent link in the nanites. Him and Lieutenant Joey D. Sisko specifically developed the nano technology to free the drones instead of killing them. I chose Sorripto because any man who can show that kind of compassion for his enemy, especially such a relentless and unforgiving, merciless ennemy, is a man I wanted on my crew."

"Interesting... So, Sorripto chose to save the lives of Borg drones at the risk of... what? Just..."

Torva was cut off as Crist continued.

"Actually, there is more."

"Oh?" Torva leaned in to hear the rest.

"Sorripto programmed the nanites with a secondary cutoff design. It blocked the Borg implants in the frontal lobe."

"And what did that do?" Torva asked.

"Essentially, it made it impossible for the converted drones to remember any of their acts while they were drones. He gave them all a fresh start."

Looking back at Sorripto. Torva was confused. This fact was not in any of the records and he had studied the main battle of the Thousand Cubes War many times. Crist sensing the confusion, explained further.

"There is no record of that, because Sorripto did not want anyone to know and risk the liberated Borg from having to suffer."

"So... he spared their lives, then spared their conscience as well? That does not sound like a senseless killer at all, does it, Captain?" Asked Torva as he walked back to the desk.

"Objection!" then interrupted the prosecutor. "The defense is leading the witness and asking him for a conclusion."

"Sustained," agreed Pierson. "Commander Torva, you will restrict yourself to questioning the witness."

"I beg the Court forgiveness," the Bajoran said before turning again to Crist to rephrase.

"As a starship commanding officer, what is your overall assessment of his actions and performance as a Starfleet officer?"

"Ecclectic but effective. As I said before, Lieutenant Commander Sorripto would only kill if he felt it was the last resort. I also can only imagine how much he is hurting from the death he caused during his acts saving the McKenzie, no matter how necessary they were."

"No further questions for this witness," Torva said as he nodded to Captain Crist and then to the presiding panel.

"You may step down," Pierson said to Crist.

The prosecution next called Ensign Simmons to the stand, since he was the one to see Sorripto's actions before he left and after he returned during the relevant incident from which all the charges had been brought out.

Again, the computer sensor droned out the identity of the witness while recording his biometric parameters to ascertain his sincerity.

"Simmons, Gregory Andrew. Serial number 47583845-S4M. Rank: Lieutenant Junior Grade. Position: Engineering officer. Assignment:USS McKenzie. Commendations: once commended by Starfleet Command."

Once identity was authenticated according to the standard proceedings, Sh'meel came up to the young officer.

"Ensign Simmons," the prosecutor began, his Saurian accent holding out the end of the name. "What is the last phrase of the oath you took when you joined Starfleet?"

"To defend the Federation and its principles, Sir," Simmons replied.

"And could anything at all compel you to abandon those very principles?" he asked, again holding out the last word for effect.

"I am sure there is, Sir." Simmons said with a slow nod.

"Is that truly the case?" the prosecutor asked; "or are you just saying that to make Sorripto's actions, your senior officer and colleague, seem justified? If they are so easy to abandon, what are we even fighting for them?"

"I never said they were easy to abandon. If you want me to answer that, then you can ask that question instead. You asked me if I can think of anything that could cause me to abandon my Starfleet Oath and I said I could not think of anything, but I am smart enough to know that just because I cannot think of anything does not mean no reasons exist."

"Then you don't understand that there are NO reasons to abandon the Federation's principles, do you?"

Torva stood up and raised his voice

"Objection! The witness is not on trial here. The prosecution is harassing the witness."

"Sustained," once again acknowledged Pierson. "The prosecution will withdraw from this line of questioning and focus on the case of Lieutenant Commander Sorripto."

"Withdrawn," the prosecutor said, knowing immediately the objection was valid. It did not matter to him; it was in the minds of the people in that room already. He turned away from the witness to make it clear he was no longer going to badger him about it. but his harsh voice did not offer any apology as he addressed the bench.

"Perhaps all Starfleet officers need to be on trial. It seems there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the oath we took rampant throughout our ranks. Perhaps, it is due to all the wars and struggles we have faced in the last couple years. The bottom line is; if you ever abandon the Federation's principles, for any reason, then there is no point to defend them, is there? But I humbly submit to this Court that is exactly what we stand here for today."

He turned back toward the witness.

"Very well, Ensign Simmons; I will be very clear about my question this time. Would you ever abandon Federation principles to save the life of three family members?"

Simmons cleared his throat and fought back a slow emotion. This man just said that every Starfleet Officer should be on trial because they are willing to stand up for what they believe in if given the right reason. As emotions and memories stirred in his mind, the young engineer could not tell whether he was angry or annoyed by what he believed to be a blatant and obviously stupid comment. Fighting to get his mind back to the question at hand, Simmons wanted to but could not answer it.

"I mean no disrespect, Sir, but I cannot answer your question. At no point in my life have I ever had three family members at the same time, so I am afraid I am not familiar with the emotions that protecting your family would bring out in someone."

The prosecutor shot a frustrated look at his legal team sitting on the opposite side of the room from Sorripto and Torva Prestin at the obvious oversight of missing Simmons' family situation.

"My apologies, I meant no disrespect either. No further questions."

He turned and for a moment caught the hopeful look on Torva's face at the glaring mistake that was so emotionally charged, it had the potential to sway the whole trial. When the JAG offered the floor to the Bajoran attorney, he simply shook his head. He was in the lead and didn't want to risk making a similar mistake.

"You may step down," then ordered the judge.

At the request of the prosecution, the trial then took a short recess. Torva and Sorripto were able to confer in private.

"I think it's going quite well, don't you?" the defense attorney asked him.

"Agreed, but you know what the strangest part is?"

Torva leaned forward, intrigued.

"What is that?"

"Captain Crist, Sisko, Simmons, and I lost count of how many faces in the crowd I recognized. These are people who could have just as easily turned their back on me for what I did, but instead, they sit and many of them even speak for me. I did what I thought was right, but seeing these people who I respect here for me, I have a moment in my life with no regret."

Torva nodded.

"I just hope that character witnesses will be enough to counter-balance the serious charges put forth."

Smiling, Sorripto nudged the Bajoran on the shoulder.

"If my character stays intact, most of these charges cannot exist."

"Personal opinions can't override fact," Torva warned. He glanced at his chronometer.  
"Nevertheless, it is time to return."

The pair went back into the courtroom where the prosecution was already waiting, anxious to call their next witness.

The JAG officer, Rear Admiral Harry Pierson, ordered the proceedings to resume with his small bell ringing and allowed the Prosecution to call the next witness.

"The Prosecution calls Captain Kheren to the stand," said the Saurian Commander Sh'meel.

As the doors to the room slid open with a woosh, everyone turned to see the Andorian Captain enter. There was a definite murmur of surprise at recognizing his athletic form in the white dress uniform and his unique indigo skin. Rumor had it that he was just returning himself from a board of inquiry regarding the loss of his own ship, the famous USS Artemis, the Stalwart Guardian of the Federation for nearly eight decades; a board of inquiry that had not only exonerated him of any and all command fault, but had even declared him an exemplary commanding officer who had saved many lives while risking his own before terrible odds.

If anyone could have known what the chief engineer of the McKenzie had gone through, and was going through right now, it was him. Nevertheless, he passed, without a look to anyone, between Sorripto and the Bajoran defense attorney on his left and the prosecutor on his right to take his place in the designated seat on the stage at the front.

"Kheren," said the computer; "serial number 19580529-A8A. Rank: Captain. Position: Starship Commanding officer. Assignment: pending; formerly USS Artemis. Commendations: Starfleet Academy honor graduate, Andoria Laibos university science honor graduate; Andoria duelling Honored GrandMaster; Honorable discharge from the Andorian Imperial Guard, captain rank; Decorated by Starfleet Command, Decorated by Starfleet Science, Temporal Ribbon of Excellence, Lotus Fleet Medal of Diplomacy, the Star Cross, Starfleet Medal of Commendation, Citation for Conspicuous Gallantry, Christopher Pike Medal of Valor, fifteen times commended by Starfleet Command."

"Please state your rank and name for the record," once again asked the judge of the witness sitting in the witness chair.

"Captain Kheren Kalel Th'Ch'Leryll Keth Reiji."

"Confirmed."

The defense attorney Commander Torva, was suddenly visibly nervous. Obviously, he had not been warned about this next witness; and this witness, being the most decorated commanding officer of the elite division of Starfleet, his presence called out by the prosecution, did not bode anything good for his client; if anything, Captain Kheren was known for being able to whip out unexpected and unorthodox solutions to difficult situations without even scratching so much as a coma off the rulebook. If anyone could utterly demolish any chance for Sorripto to justify his wild actions, it was this Andorian.

"Admiral, I fail to see how this witness is relevant to the case at hand. As far as I know, he was not even a witness to the events in question."

"He is not a witness, but rather an impartial consultant to answer questions about Starfleet oaths and codes of ethics," the Saurian prosecutor countered.

Saurians scaly faces could not smile; but their mouth was always stretched into a permanent one that had now some definite qualities of a smirk when looked at with the glint in the large eyes and the tone of the hissing voice.

"Please continue," Pierson said, motioning for Kheren to be ready for the first question.

"Captain Kheren. You have served the Federation for how many years?"

"Four years as a Starfleet officer. Twenty years as an officer in the Andorian Imperial Guard."

The Saurian nodded, and continued on.

"And in all your years as a Starfleet officer, have you faithfully and consistently defended the Federation and its principles? Which, as you of course know, is the final portion of the oath every Starfleet officer takes when he or she is given a commission."

"Yes, Sir, I have."

"Do you believe that it is always the case that we must defend those principles, or would certain situations give someone the right to break them?"

"Sir... it is my firm belief that, if you can not stick to your principles, especially when they are being tested, then they are not principles; they are hobbies."

Some in the crowd chuckled at that statement and with a hard stare to remind them of the seriousness of what they were speaking of, the JAG tapped again on the silver bell in front of him and called for complete silence.

"There will be no further outburst from the floor," he ordered sternly.

The prosecutor nodded to the JAG with respect and proceeded.

"Not even to save the lives of innocent people? You wouldn't, say... disobey orders or commit acts of treason so that those innocent people might live?"

"No, Sir. There would be no need to do so."

"No need?" the prosecutor asked, slightly taken aback and confused. "And why is that, Sir?"

"Because, Sir, the fundamental basis of all principles of the Federation, and all directives, rules and regulations of Starfleet, and all orders that must come from them, are based on one thing: the sanctity of life, especially sentient life. All those rules and regulations, directives and principles have been thought out, tried and tested over hundreds of years; some date back from earlier laws and rights thousands of years old. I simply can not imagine a situation where you would need to go outside of those principles to save lives. They are all *designed* to do so."

"What if you were forced, under duress by someone who held innocent lives in their hands, to disobey orders, abandon your post, kill, and commit acts of treason? What if the choice to stick to your principles meant that this person would immediately kill those people? Would that not be a situation where you would have to make a defined choice between the lives of innocent people and your principles?"

"Are you asking me personally, Sir, or as a general attitude one might expect of a Starfleet officer?"

"You are a Starfleet Officer... one who said that our principles must be adhered to. So the answer, I would think, would be both."

"Yes, Sir... The result would be the same... but the reasons would be different." Kheren followed up, explaining; "in both cases, I would answer you as I did the previous question. I would not compromise on those principles because those principles are the very tools to resolve the situation."

The Saurian struggled to understand his meaning. The closed-off Andorian was making it difficult for him to make a point and seemed to be going in circles.

But he persisted, knowing that if he did manage to get the point out, the status of his case would be greatly improved.

"Maybe I'm missing something then. I made it clear that, in this hypothetical scenario, if you stuck to your principles, then this person would kill the innocent people. Imagine that he is watching your every move. How do you propose you would save them then?" Commander Sh'meel asked, challenging the Captain with a ferocity almost as if he was cross-examining the defense and not his own witness.

But it would take much more than an aggressive question to shake an Andorian.

"Sir, the basic attitude of the predator is to strike at the weakest prey. If someone chooses to threaten people in exchange for your cooperation, it is because he knows that you will falter in your belief. If it is known that you will never compromise, no matter what, then the threat becomes meaningless."

Kheren leaned forward a bit, made full eye contact with the prosecutor and continued on.

"But, if I accept the hypothetical situation you describe as happening still, it is already well known from thousands of years of such crimes on dozens of worlds that abductors never release their hostages alive, unless forced to. Therefore, obeying them to save lives is as pointless as refusing them. The result is the same: they will die. So, the only way to save them is to outwit the abductor; and for that, you have centuries of cumulated experience, your fellow officers, your captain, the whole of Starfleet to help you. And there are many many ways to get that help without arousing suspicion and to use that help to succeed in saving those lives. It is a question of resourcefulness and resolve. And if you nevertheless fail to save them... then you can sure make certain the culprit is brought to pay for his crime... and the lesson made known to anyone who would ever think of trying the same thing again."

Leaning back, he finished with the striking blow the prosecutor was hoping for.

"Compromising on your principles to satisfy the culprit in the hope of him sparing those lives is simply a foolish wish."

If the Saurian had been able to smile at all, he was doing so right now. With that final statement ringing in the ears of the five-person panel of the JAG that would make the conviction, he knew he had what he needed and could relax a bit and let the defense question the Captain.

"No further questions from the prosecution," he said and allowed Torva Prestin to continue the questioning.

Torva stood, composed himself slightly and approached the witness stand. The Saurian had a smug look about him. Torva knew he had what he needed. Clearing his throat he prepared to ask the first question.

"Captain Kheren are you aware of the current fate of Section 31?"

The silver eyes of the Andorian narrowed as his antennae pointed forward; a sure sign that his anger was suddenly flaring up at the mere mention of the occult agency. His voice nevertheless remained calm and composed.

"I do not have any interest in Section 31."

Sensing the clear anger in the Andorian before him Torva saw that he liked where this was going.

"Well I do, Sir, as should you. You stated a moment ago that logic, fairness and regulation would dictate that one in the situation which was described would outwit the kidnapper, correct?"

"That is your opinion, Mister... one I do not share. And to answer your question, yes, among other things."

"Opinion... yes... good choice of words. Now, speaking to my point a moment ago; are you aware that dozens of agents, sleepers, sympathizers and hired guns for Section 31 are already in custody and hundreds more are being chased and hunted down throughout the galaxy? Are you aware that section 31 is no more and, before this trial is over, that ruthless band will be but a stain on our memory? Did you know that?"

"No I did not. As I said, Sir, I have no interest in the matter. But now that you mention it, I am glad that, finally, the United Federation of Planets found the courage of its own convictions and the true light of its own values to guide and guard itself. Thank you for validating my beliefs, Sir."

"We agree on that, Captain. Section 31 should not have been allowed to exist in the first place. Now, since you are not aware of the news of this organization, I take it that you are not aware that the intelligence that Starfleet is acting on was singlehandedly provided by Commander Sorripto? The truth is that, no matter what happens at this trial, history will remember what Sorripto did. Even as someone not responsible for writing the history books, I know they will tell the tale of the man who, to steal your words, outwitted section 31 and brought about its downfall. Would you call that outwitting your attackers and bringing them to justice?"

The Andorian frowned at that statement; something of a feat considering the few facial muscles an Andorian's face had.

"Are you asking *me* to pass judgment here, Sir?"

"Not at all, Captain. I am just asking you to compare your point. You stated that logic, fairness, and regulation would dictate for the ransom victim to outwit the kidnapper and bring them to justice. Would you say, given the, for lack of a better word, best of the situation at hand, that Commander Sorripto did just that?"

"Objection," the Saurian prosecutor hissed, " the defense is leading the witness. Captain Kheren is not a witness to the related events."

"Sustained," Harry Pierson responded, and directed his attention to Torva. "The defense will please frame questions in the generic sense in relation to Starfleet principles and regulations. We can't expect the witness to know specific details about the events leading to this trial."

Nodding to the judge, Torva continued.

"Aye; I will rephrase. Captain, would you say that, in order to best preserve Starfleet regulations and the code that makes the Federation what it is, an organization like section 31 must not be allowed to exist and, more importantly then, that it must not be allowed a hand in starfleet missions and protocol?"

"I would, Sir."

"And given undue duress, would you, as an expert in regulations and the importance of Starfleet's missions, be grateful to whomever removed section 31 from history?"

The Andorian sat back, nodding respectfully to the Admiral and looking directly at him with his four oculars.

"Sir... I do not know the particulars of this present case, so I can not give any comment about it. However, the line of questioning I was submitted to from both the prosecution and the defense seems to point out to me one very simple but crucial question: do the ends justify the means? Do good consequences exonerates one for bad actions?"



He made a pause as if to let everyone think for themselves about it before giving his own answer.

"Morally, Sir, this is certainly debatable... at least for some. But, in my opinion as a Starfleet Captain... as far as Starfleet is concerned, it is not; if Starfleet allows it's own officers to do whatever they believe is right when they fancy it, regardless of the demands and the discipline of the service, Starfleet simply can not function. By approving the wrong actions of an officer, whatever the good reasons behind those actions or the good consequences coming out of them, it would send a clear message; rules are meant to be broken. Chaos rules."

With a conviction that made his deep voice all the more vibrant, Captain Kheren spoke directly to the bench; but the light in his eyes seemed to go as far away as where had laid the Azimuth Horizon.

"When an officer breaks the rules because he feels that he must follow his own convictions, he should be respected for standing up to his beliefs... but he can only earn this respect by accepting the consequences of his transgressions. When Admiral Kirk stole the Enterprise and acted against orders to save his friend Captain Spock, he acted according to his own conscience... and accepted *demotion* without flinching. I stand by such integrity, Sir."

Leaning in, Sorripto whispered something to Torva and, looking back at the Cardassian, Torva nodded and stood.

"Your honor request permission for a recross statement?"

Pierson nodded,

"By all means."

Standing and looking straight at Captain Kheren, Torva motioned towards Sorripto.

"Captain before you step down, know that we are here today because Lieutenant Commander Sorripto is standing for his actions as well as submitting for justice. He said you worked together and he wanted you to know that much. No matter what happens here, take that message back with you."

Clearing his throat Torva continued.

"Your analogy of Captain Kirk was fitting. He was demoted and then assigned command of the Enterprise. Those willing to submit to justice and those whose consequences are deemed worth the actions, as was the case with Kirk, do you believe there is room in Starfleet regulations for punishment and forgiveness at the same time?"

The Andorian turned to face the attorney. His tone was very serious.

"Yes, Sir, I do. But I refute your statement of consequences deemed worth of actions. Sir, Kirk was *demoted*; he was *punished*, and that, *regardless* of the good consequences of his wrongdoings. That his punishment pleased him, Starfleet, the Federation or anyone else among us is irrelevant. The ends did not then, *do not* now, justify the means."

He took a breath before continuing.

"I am Andorian, Sir. Forgiveness is not something that comes easily to my people. But this is not the Imperial Guard. If anything, Starfleet taught me this: dead men learn nothing. If we are to be the enlightened instrument of an evolved society among the stars, then we must never forget or let forget... but always we must try, at least try, to forgive."

"I hear you, Sir. And, as a Bajoran defending a Cardassian, Captain, I could not agree with you more."

Sensing the follow-up questioning was complete, Rear Admiral Pierson stepped in. He nodded to Captain Kheren indicating that he would be permitted to leave the witness stand.

"You may step down."

The Andorian stood up, saluting the Admiral and stepped down to exit the chamber. He left just as he came, looking straight before him... except for one small glance towards the Cardassian.

Pierson addressed Sh'meel.

"Are there any other witnesses for the prosecution?"

"Negative, your Honor."

"Are there any other witnesses for the defense?"

Turning to the panel, Torva looked back at Sorripto and the two nodded at each other. Looking towards the audience and then back to the panel of judges the Bajoran attorney gestured towards the crowd

"For my final witness, the defense calls Lieutenant Joseph Daystrom Sisko."

A murmur went up amongst the crowd when the name was mentioned. Some present were aware of the story of the brainwashed Starfleet officer who was made to be Prophet to the fanatical Horizon's Children cult, but they were not aware of the full connection to Sorripto. Many also noted with surprise how another Bajoran happened to be so closely tied to the Cardassian.

Sisko approached the stand, trying to avoid direct eye contact with those in the audience. He was still not sure how some would react to him. He knew he caused some there some pain, whether directly or not, whether it was his fault or not, and it hurt him to think about it all. He needed to stay strong for the coming questions and to help his friend.

He sat and waited for the questions to be presented by the fellow Bajoran officer, Torva Prestin.

"Sisko, Joseph Daystrom," said the computer; "serial number 70200927-B3. Rank: Lieutenant. Position: Chief engineer officer. Assignment: USS Spectre. Commendations: Starfleet Academy Honor Graduate, Starfleet Engineering Decoration, Medal of Valor, five times commended by Starfleet Command."

After the bald, dark-skinned half-Bajoran stated his rank and name for the computer's calibration and for the record, Torva approached the stand and nodded to him.

"Thank you for being here today, Mister Sisko. I know this must be hard for you."

Sisko simply folded his hands in front of him and nodded in response.

"I will keep this as interjection-free as possible for the sake of narrative, Mister Sisko. Can you please, in your own words, explain what happened on the day Sorripto brought you back to the McKenzie?"

"Honestly, I don't remember much. I could tell you what most people here already know from reports, but I don't believe you would want to hear that, as it is not my report."

He made a pause to clear his throat. Then he spoke with calmness.

"When I first arrived on the McKenzie, I woke up in their makeshift medical area where they had been keeping me in stasis until they could return to Starbase 10."

He looked over at Sorripto and nodded.

"My friend Sorripto was there when I awoke, and he informed me about what I did... what he did... and that he had rescued me from my mental and physical imprisonment in the Horizon's Children cult. At the time, I had forgotten everything from the time I was taken into the Azimuth Horizon to when I woke up there... except for a very intense and personal dream."

He paused, now a bit unsure. Raised on Bajor, he had been used to deep spirituality a lot of other Federation worlds would now label mere superstition; he did not want such prejudice to mar his testimony. But then again, he could not ignore it. So he was careful as he resumed it.

"Over the past couple days, I have begun to piece together some memories of my time on the Prophecy, the ship's command ship. I remember being in the Gul's ready room beside the bridge. Then Sorripto came in and attacked me, presumably to knock me out. That little bit is coming back, along with some of the... awful things I had to do..."

He choked up on the last phrase, and then was silent.

"Take your time, Mister Sisko. You said you remember little flashes of memory? How much of the tactical side of the Children do you remember? As in ships, strengths, weapon capabilities and those kind of details?"

"No real details come to mind. I remember there was a core group of Horizon's Children ships. I remember the Cardassian one I was on quite clearly; a modified Galor class cruiser with a cloaking device."

He struggled to think back, but couldn't piece together the last bit until finally he realized what was missing.

"N'Eligahn! *He* knew all the details," Sisko exclaimed. "He was running the show, tactically."

Unfortunately the Rethian who had shown to have countered the brainwashing just as Sisko had done and could've possibly filled in the details was still in a medical stasis. His wounds were so severe that Doctor Michaels had to call in a specialist from his home world who wouldn't be arriving for a few weeks.

Understanding the importance of what was just said, Torva decided drastic measures were in order. Turning to the address the judges, Torva spoke with firmness.

"Your honor I believe that N'Eligahn, formerly Lieutenant Commander and First officer of the USS McKenzie before he resigned his Starfleet commission, can still be a witness to the facts at hand here. With the Court's permission I would like to suggest a mind meld to put clarity on the facts at hand."

At this request, the Saurian prosecutor's head jerked up and he immediately sprung to his full height.

"Objection! The witness' testimony would be under suspicion if he is in a... coma!"

The judge turned and looked to Torva Prestin for a counter.

Understanding the importance of the issue Torva knew he must get the mind meld approved by the courts. Looking up at the judge, he countered with his argument.

"Your Honor, all medical tests conducted as well as basic stasis data shows that N'Eligahn, while in a coma, still maintains total brain activity. The idea that his testimony would be in question is a moot point because, as Vulcans have proven for centuries, the mind meld works with a direct link to the brain and not to the physical body. I have personally been involved in trials where mind melds were used as evidence when taken from people in a much worse state than we would find N'Eligahn."

Taking a deep breath, Torva paused before he added further arguments.

"The fact is, your Honor, that the only way to ascertain with absolute certainty the details of the Children and their tactical stand, which would lead to directly address the murder charges against my client, would be with some form of testimony from N'Eligahn."

Harry Pierson thought about this for a moment, realizing that he was indeed correct that the previously banned and misunderstood Vulcan practice had indeed enjoyed over two hundred years of better understanding and common use. Additionally, the Vulcan people have been known for their honesty and it would be a rare thing for a Vulcan, especially one chosen at random from all those on Starbase 10, to lie about any fact discovered during such a procedure.

With a nod from the other four officers on the bench, the JAG officer answered.

"Objection overruled. Let us see what memories the Rethian has tucked away."

"Your Honor," the Saurian hen said, "I object then on the grounds that it could endanger the Vulcan. It is well-known now that part of this Horizon's Children cult was brought about due to a bio-engineered virus, the source of which is still unknown."

The JAG didn't even require a response from Torva that time and turned to look directly to the prosecutor.

"From what I understand, Commander, the Vulcans are one of the few races that Lotus Fleet has determined to be completely immune."

"Yes, but that is while their logical barriers are in place. A mind meld removes all trace of these."

"Very well..."

Pierson turned to an Ensign who was serving as a bailiff. Please consult Doctor Michaels to determine if he believes this process will be safe. Then ask for a Vulcan volunteer," he stressed the word heavily, "from the Starbase who will be willing to administer the mind meld."

Finally he turned back to Torva.

"Commander, while those resources are pursued, if you have any additional questions for the witness that will not rely on testimony from N'Eligahn, please proceed."

Nodding graciously to the panel, Torva turned back towards Sisko and continued his questions.

"Mister Sisko; the stories of your friendship with Lieutenant Commander Sorripto are almost something of legend throughout the fleet. I mean, the first Cardassian to wear the uniform and the grandson of the Emissary as best friends... it is quite a tale. The one thing that no one disputes is you two know each other better than anyone."

Looking back to Sorripto, Torva still addressed Sisko.

"With that being said, one of the charges here today has to do with treason. Is it possible that Sorripto is a traitor who decided to change sides mid-act as he has been accused of doing?"

Joey shook his head.

"I don't believe that for a second. I haven't known Sorripto for very long, but I can tell you one thing. He is dedicated to his friends and the Federation, and to protecting both at all costs... even if it means sacrificing his own life. He may have committed treasonous acts, but if he did so, there had to be a reason other than actual treason for doing so, and it would have had to have been under extreme duress."

Agreeing with Sisko Torva continued.

"So, we agree then that calling Lieutenant Commander Sorripto a traitor is both incorrect and fails to state the true nature of the facts at hand. This is clearly not a black and white issue. Continuing on with the idea of duress, how difficult would you say it would be to get to you while you were aboard the Prophecy?"

Joey thought for a moment and realized that the answer he wanted to give differed a bit from what he honestly thought. The computers in the room would immediately read his intentions if he was even bending the truth as he personally saw it, so he answered honestly.

"I believe that Starfleet is made up of the best and the brightest and that hasn't changed for hundreds of years, nor will change for years to come. I believe that a well-trained, well-equipped group of security officers would have been able to breach the security on the ship I was on to retrieve me, or kill me if the direst of needs to do so would have arisen. I think they would have had trouble... it certainly would not have been easy in the least bit... but it could have been done."

"Would there have been casualties?"

"There's no way to know that, Sir," Sisko answered simply and honestly.

"Allow me to rephrase. During the entire operation in which Sorripto committed the crimes he stands here, there was not a single casualty. Well, one, if you count Sorripto killing the traitor Chief Reichman during his rescue of you. Think about that... not a single casualty. So let that be the question instead then. In all your time with the Children, knowing what you know about them, would all that was accomplished from your rescue to the destruction of their fleet have happened with zero casualties?"

Sighing, Sisko responded, knowing what Torva was looking for and wanting to satisfy him, but wanting to also give the honest answer.

"Again, Sir, I can't answer that for sure. If you're asking if I guess there would be casualties? I am no Vulcan, but I would guess that the probability would be fairly high that there would be. But none of us can know what could have happened in circumstances that didn't occur. As we all know, Starfleet security officers are highly trained to avoid casualties, to both sides, whenever possible."

Looking around the courtroom, Torva saw the debate in everyone's eyes. Sisko could not give him the answer he was hoping for, no matter how much Sisko might have believed it, but the thoughts were there. The Bajoran knew that a few at least were certainly now asking themselves if his murderer of a client did not in fact save lives. At least he hoped for it.

At that point, the bailiff re-entered the court room and signalled to the JAG, Rear Admiral Pierson, that they were ready to bring in N'Eligahn and the Vulcan who volunteered to do the mind meld.

"Are there any more questions for this witness from the defense?"

"Not at the moment, your Honor."

"Very well. You may step down."

The bailiff walked forward and handed the judge a PADD.

"We will now accept testimony from the former Lieutenant Commander N'Eligahn, former general of the Horizon's Children cult, through the proxy, Master Chief Petty Officer Sularak."

A gravlifted biobed was pushed from the back of the courtroom to the front, containing the prostrate body of N'Eligahn. The Vulcan beside him received a nod from the JAG and Doctor Michaels and proceeded, reaching his hand through a defined opening in the medical forcefield to allow contact with the spined, scaly orange head of the Rethian below him. He placed the fingers of the hand on one side of the green face.

"My mind to your mind; your thoughts to my thoughts. I am the General in charge of the Horizon's Children forces."

Eventually, his eyes rolled back slightly and his eyelids flickered and the JAG turned and nodded to Torva to begin his questioning.

Torva began his questioning without hesitation and with one of the most pointed questions.

"Mister N'Eligahn, do you believe that a Defiant-class starship like the USS McKenzie had a chance to stand up against the Prophecy and the first strike force that supported it?"

"In prime condition, yes. But the McKenzie had only minimal shields, weapons offline but regenerative ablative armor on when the prophecy faced it.

"So with minimal power drops to the shields, no weapons for a few moments, and full armor still intact, with your knowledge of the Children's capabilities, was the McKenzie in any danger in the initial battle?"

"Yes, Sir," N'Eligahn replied through the Vulcan's voice. "The McKenzie was in danger, with shields being down for a short time. But the crew evened the odds by disabling the Prophecy's weapons somehow."

"The McKenzie survived the first wave, but tell me about the second fleet of ships. Tell me about the ones that Sisko called to the aid of the Prophecy."

The Vulcan winced in pain before speaking again.

"Sisko didn't call them. I did. Sisko was acting... strange. I couldn't think of anything else except destroying the McKenzie... I needed to do it to rid myself of my past. I called in all our remaining ships... at least two-dozen... to finally end it."

The pain on Sulurak's face became more pronounced.

"I can see now, Sisko was slowly breaking the brainwashing... overcoming the... disease. I... did too and was shot by... my love... oh my..."

Sulurak gasped in pain and quickly withdrew his hand. The unusual pained look on a Vulcan's face betrayed an intense feeling of loss and despair and he fell to his knees, causing gasps to echo out through the courtroom.

Doctor Michaels rushed over and began scanning him with a medical tricorder.

"I'm sorry," Sulurak said. "I can... continue," and he struggled to get up.

"You absolutely will not," the Doctor protested and, shaking his head in apology to Rear Admiral Pierson, he helped the Vulcan exit the room, followed by the bailiff pushing the antigrav biobed containing the Rethian who unknowingly helped his old comrade more than he could've known.

Watching the scene unfold, Torva stepped backwards as the Vulcan was escorted from the room. Medical personnel tended to N'Eligahn as they took him out of the room as well. The defense attorney rubbed his brow and stepped back forward.

"That was intense. I apologize to anyone who that may have upset."

Looking at the judges, Torva continued with a more passionate yet controlled tone.

"The point is made however, your Honor. The McKenzie would have been destroyed by the Children's fleet and there would have been casualties in rescuing Sisko and N'Eligahn. Once again it comes down to the truth... and the truth is that, while costly, the destruction of the Prophecy and the Children's fleet was the only way to save the McKenzie."

Motioning to Sisko, Torva finished his thoughts.

"I can imagine there is nothing more that Mister Sisko could add that has not already been made clear. The defense has no further witnesses your honor; the defense rests."

"Very well, Mister Torva, Mister Sh'meel," judge Pierson said nodding to each in turn. "The Court will hear closing arguments, starting with the defense. No rebuttals will be heard. Commander?"

Motioning toward Sisko, Torva began his final remarks.

"That man is alive today because of Lieutenant Commander Sorripto."

Gesturing to the crewmembers from the McKenzie who were in attendance, Torva's passion flared as he continued.

"Those men and women are alive today because of Lieutenant Commander Sorripto."

Clearing his throat and adjusting his collar the Bajoran rolled into his next thoughts.

"The charges before my client today are treason, murder, disobeying orders, and leaving his post during red alert. Let me address each of those once. First, we have treason. Everyone who has spoken today, even some who came to speak against Lieutenant Commander Sorripto, have told the story of a loyal and honest man. A man loyal to the Federation and proud of his uniform. Lieutenant Commander Sorripto followed the orders of corrupt intelligence agents and got strong-armed by an evil organization who was holding his family hostage. All the while, he protected life and fought for the core values of the Federation. This man is no traitor, never was, and never will be."

The silence swallowed the echoes of his words. Whether this was a good sign or not, he could not tell. nevertheless, he went on.

"Second, we have murder. The case was pleaded that the Prophecy was disabled and did not need to be destroyed, therefore doing so was murder. As you have heard from the leaders of the Children, there was a fleet inbound; the McKenzie was reeling from a fight, and Lieutenant Commander Sorripto had to act fast. He used the crown jewel of the Children's fleet to destroy their ships. In one action, he stopped a ruthless and well equipped terrorist organization and single-handedly saved the lives of every single person on the McKenzie. Was there death? Yes. But it was in no legal or ethical way murder."

Once again, only silence answered his passionate plea. But at this point, such passion and conviction could not be stopped. And so, he spoke still.

"Finally, we come to orders and leaving his post. Lieutenant Commander Sorripto took an oath to serve the Federation to the best of his abilities. The truth is, his abilities were best served by leaving his post. Lieutenant Commander Sorripto left his post to follow a traitor and in that act saved the lives of Sisko, N'Eligahn, and every single person serving aboard the McKenzie."

Taking a deep breath Torva looked at the rest of the assembly.

"Section 31 had taken Sorripto's family hostage and recruited him into a mission of deceit and lies. He used this as his chance to stop evil once and for all. Not only did he single-handedly take down the Children, but he took down Section 31. The black eye and stain on Starfleet's history for almost a century is now gone forever because of the actions of one man. As I stated when this trial started, no matter what happens here, history will remember the good and heroic things that Lieutenant Commander Sorripto did."

Prestin turned towards the prosecuting table.

"We are not looking at a murderer, or a traitor, or a bad officer. We are not looking at a villain or a thief or even a liar. That Cardassian that sits before you, is here because he wanted judgement and did what he had to do to protect and save the lives of his friends, his ship, the Federation, and the whole galaxy."

He finally addressed the bench.

"Is Sorripto blameless or innocent? No, I don't believe that and neither does anyone else. But I challenge any man here to tell me he has no skeletons or shadows in his past. The question before us is whether the ends justified the means, and the truth... the greatest principle of Starfleet... is that Lieutenant Commander Sorripto did the right thing at the right time and for the right reasons."

Torva took his seat and the floor was given to Commander Sh'meel.

He stood up and began by addressing the bench.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the case here is not a case of whether Sorripto is a good man. The case has to do specifically with the choices that that man made."

There was no apparent emotion in the Saurian's voice; indeed Saurians were utterly emotionless. Yet, the strength of his words fell as powerfully as those of the Bajoran that had spoken before him.

"I think what needs to be noted is how many times the defense mentioned how Sorripto did things, and I quote, 'single-handedly'. I have not always been a prosecutor. I served for plenty of years on a ship, and it is in fact how I came to be at the rank of Commander. I can tell you that, in all my years of service, I have never once felt that I was forced to do things single-handedly."

The argument was potent. Starfleet was all about teamwork. The Federation itself was all about cooperation. Thus, this line of argument had a noticeable effect on the people listening to it. And so Sh'meel went on.

"The defense wants you to believe that Sorripto had no other choice. but, as Captain Kheren so eloquently put it... by following the Starfleet guidelines and principles, anything can be achieved... and it can be done the right way, with your fellow officers to have your back. Starfleet does not need, if I may use an old Earth term, 'cowboys'. Cowboys are those that take matters into their own hands and do what they feel they need to do... and damn the consequences. Starfleet works best when officers work together, and it has been proven time and time again that this is how we solve problems in the best way possible."

Now, the Saurian, whose dark eyes looked straight at the defense table.

"Sorripto may have planned his whole operation with the skill of a master strategist and executed it with perfect precision... or he may have gotten lucky. Either way, the end result was that, yes, lives were saved... but lives were also lost. Who is *he* to make those decisions, though?"

The blow was telling. And now, Sh'meel took the whole crowd as witness.



"On his own initiative, and after disobeying orders and abandoning his post, he took the resources of a ship and took it upon himself to perform the operation his own way, without any knowledge, support or approval from his fellow officers and, more importantly, his Captain. Perhaps his Captain may have allowed him to go on that ship by himself to rescue Sisko and destroy those other ships. We'll never know... but it was not *his* decision to make, it was his Captain's."

Once again, he addressed the five judges.

"In Starfleet, we do not, and *must* not, set a precedent that incorrect actions can be taken without consequences, just because the ends happened to leave a positive result. It is up to you, of the panel, to avoid setting that precedent, right here, and right now. Thank you."

After a moment of reflective silence. Rear Admiral Pierson spoke.

"Very well, Mister Torva, Mister Sh'meel," he said nodding to each in turn. "This hearing will adjourn while we make a decision."

Pierson rang his bell once and stood up.

"All will stand before the Court!" ordered the bailiff as he had done before all those proceedings began.

The JAG officer and the four other senior officers who would make the decision with him departed through the rear doors, into an antechamber where the fate of Sorripto would be decided.

As the courtroom stirred, Sorripto, even with his weaker Cardassian ears, could hear the talks and the discussions throughout the room. Sorripto knew he had broken rules; he had thus submitted himself for judgement. But he still could not believe how divided the room was. While the clear majority were people who, it seemed to him, thought as his crew and lawyer did, he could see disappointment and sadness in the eyes of many.

*No matter what happens here, there will be a long road to recovery*, Sorripto thought then.

As Torva looked around the room, the Cardassian patted him on the back.

"You know, you did alright. Really, I mean that. No matter what happens here, I want you to know that I appreciate everything you have done for me. It is almost funny how often my life overlaps with Bajorans helping me. Maybe one day I can return the favor."

Laughing Torva retorted with a bittersweet tone.

"Just try not to kill off an entire terrorist group when you repay *my* favor."

As the chief engineer of the starship McKenzie smiled, he nodded to his attorney.

"Of course... but no promises."

Torva started to laugh, but then looked back at Sorripto to see if he was serious; to which the Cardassian only winked in response.

The five judging officers came back into the room from the antechamber in a line, prompting a silence to quickly fall over the assembled crowd. The JAG officers took their place and Rear Admiral Pierson signalled all to be silent with three strokes on the silver bell in front of him.

"We have come to a decision," he began. "It is not a simple one, so please bear with us and reserve any reaction until we are completely finished with the verdict."

He then began to read from a PADD.

"Those of us in the JAG office recognize that certain rules and laws were broken here by the defendant. We can not simply ignore these acts and set a precedent that would allow them to be repeated whenever an officer feels it is justified to do so."

He shifted his gaze directly to Sorripto.

"However, we must also recognize that many of the acts committed here were not only successful in bringing about the safe return of Joseph Daystrom Sisko, but it also resulted in the dissolution of Section 31. We do not believe Sorripto acted in malice or intent to harm the Federation, and we also believe that he was under significant duress at the time."

There was a moment of silence as Pierson wanted his next words to be clearly heard and understood.

"The judgement of this military tribunal is such: On the charge of treason, the defendant has been found... not guilty."

A brief stare was elicited from the Rear Admiral as a few in the crowd were not able to contain their surprise or relief, and the serious face silenced any further disruption.

Then the JAG continued.

"On the charge of murder in the first degree, the defendant has been found... not guilty for reasons of self defense and defense of Federation lives and property."

A general feeling of heaviness was lifted from the courtroom after those two charges were read. They were the most dire and the most serious, and could have resulted in a long prison time for the Cardassian.

Rear Admiral Pierson then moved on to the less serious charges.

"On the charge of sabotage, the defendant has been found... guilty. However, this court recognizes that the acts were part of a necessary operation toward the goal of gaining the Horizon Children's trust, so in this charge, the sentence will be partially commuted."

This time, there was no obvious reaction. Pierson could then follow suite.

"On the charge of disobeying orders, the defendant has been found... guilty on all counts."

The silence was approval enough of the judgment. Although seemingly trivial, this sent the clear message that, whatever one did for good or ill, discipline was always paramount.

"And, finally, on the charge of dereliction of duty, the defendant has been found... guilty on all counts."

Before anyone could react, he quickly followed up with the sentencing phase.

"Sorripto will hereby be sentenced to a term of no less than six months and no more than two years in the maximum security penal colony of Jaros II. Upon being released, he will be given the option to return to active duty upon completion of a four-month course at Starfleet Academy dealing with ethics and Starfleet regulations, to make sure he is reminded of the importance of these things. Upon completion of the course, he may be placed on active duty at the rank of Ensign and be given a new start to allow him the opportunity to earn back Starfleet's trust and the pips that will represent that trust."

"Bailiff, please escort the prisoner to the brig. Court is recessed."

Three times the bell tolled. And with that, the JAG exited the courtroom, followed by the other officers, and the bailiff and two security officers approached Sorripto and Torva, signalling the Cardassian to go with them.

Sorripto walked with his hands electrically bound as two security personnel walked in step behind him. As they started to move out of the courtroom, a faint voice could be heard from the distance. As the call got louder, even the low hearing of the Cardassian recognized the voice of Ensign Simmons.

"Wait... Sir, please wait!"

Sorripto looked to the guards who were escorting him and they nodded in approval for him to stop. Looking up, the former chief engineer of the USS McKenzie saw his old assistant running towards them, trying to catch his breath. Breathing heavy, Simmons fumbled through his first few words.

"Sir, wait please... I have something for you."

Smiling, Sorripto looked back at Simmons.

"Calm down, my friend. Take your time catch your breath. Also, no need for the Sir thing anymore Simmons. We are the same rank now... or I will be when I'll finish up serving this sentence."

As his breathing slowed, the young Human calmed down and continued.

"Of course. I'll bet you still make Lieutenant before me though."

Laughing, Sorripto simply shook his head.

"Simmons, I'll bet I make Lieutenant before I am out of prison"

Confused, Simmons raised his eyebrow.

"But Sir... I thought you could not..."

"Simmons, it was a joke. Loosen up you are going to fall apart before you reach thirty. Now, what is it that you have for me?"

As Simmons began to hand Sorripto a small blue case, the Cardassian attempted to reach for it but was unable to move his hands high enough because of the electronic shackles. Looking over at the guard to his left, he nudged his hands up and looked down at his shackles.

"Could you please... for a moment?"

The young security officer simply shook his head no in disapproval.

Smiling, Sorripto chuckled.

"That is fine I guess I will get it myself."

Moving his hands and wrists slightly before the guard could speak, he was holding a set of open shackles and handed them to the young security officer.

"Hold these for me would you?"

The officer, taken aback by the ease of Sorripto's escape, looked to the older officer behind the Cardassian but could see that he was openly laughing at the situation and clearly saw the Cardassian's escape as a minor joke and no threat. Nodding, the younger security officer grabbed the shackles.

"Now Simmons, what is that?"

"It is your award, Sir. I will bet there are others but this is the only one from the ceremony. You were awarded the Star Cross."

Opening the small box, Sorripto looked down and saw the shiny silver and blue medal and was struck by its brilliance. He had seen awards before, even won a few, but the Star Cross is something special indeed and Sorripto was grateful for Simmons' effort. Closing the box, he saw Simmons who looked back both confused and sad.

"You seem troubled Simmons. What is on your mind?."

"I am not troubled, Sir. It is just that... I still can't believe they are sending you away after all you did."

"I did a lot, Simmons, including break some rules. I did what had to be done and I make no apologies for that. But I knew there would be consequences. That is why I came back."

Smiling, Simmons nodded.

"So I hear you might not be staying around the colony for too long anyway?"

Sorripto was surprised that word had gotten around already. He had just spoken with Captain Mali that morning.

"You heard about that already? Wow this is a small station. Yes, Captain Mali is already trying to get me a release program to go work for him on the Federation nanotechnology research facility on Mars."

"That sounds like a good deal... but why Mars?"

Laughing, the former chief engineer of the USS McKenzie nodded to the young security officer who had signaled to wrap things up.

"Well, I am one of the Federation's foremost minds on nanotechnology and there are some Borg bits there that the True Way was using that need studying as well. Plus, just between you and me, it is Mars... and something like that is a really good way to keep an eye on me."

Stepping away, the Cardassian raised his hands back up as the guards reshackled his hands. Walking away towards the outside access doors, Simmons called out again.

"Sorripto?"

Looking back, the escort and their prisoner stopped again.

"You may go to jail, you may have made a few people mad, but you did the right thing. Years from now, when everyone here is dust in the wind, history will remember you as a great man who did a great thing."

Sorripto smiled.

"History only remembers great deeds if you die doing them, Simmons. To be a truly great man requires a life of great deeds and I far from qualify for that category."

The Cardassian then tossed the medal case back to Simmons who caught it in surprise.

"Will I ever see you again, Sir?"

Sorripto looked over and simply shrugged. As the large transparent doors closed, Simmons waved with the medal case and Sorripto walked out of view.

Just then, crewman Tolo, the young Bolian who had worked with Sorripto before, hurried over, sad that he missed his former chief's departure. Looking down at the medal case, he inquired to Simmons as to its presence in his hands.

"Sir, did you not give Sorripto his medal?"

"I tried, Tolo. He gave it back to me. I guess he is finally done with Starfleet."

Opening the case, Simmons was shocked to see the medal missing and in its place the Galor locket Sorripto wore around his neck and had a reputation for never removing. Looking down at the design, Tolo seemed confused.

"I do not understand."

Holding up the locket, Simmons smiled and laughed aloud.

"It is a message Tolo."

"A message?"

"Loud and clear too. I am going to hang on to this and give it to him... when he comes back."

Sharing a smile, Simmons pocketed the medal case and he and Tolo walked away, knowing they would see their friend and mentor again.

As the assembly then followed outside, with a low rumble of murmurs from solemn faces, one solitary figure stood apart from the rest, leaning with two hands on the railing of the balcony overlooking the entrance to the judgment hall. His skin was deep blue, his hair pure white and his eyes of a shiny silvery hue.

Beside him, a towering figure came to put her lighter blue hand on his. On his other side, another delicate and much smaller hand, this one as white as his hair, touched the other.

"Is it over?"

Kheren did not turn to look up at his two and a half meter tall wife Tyvya even after she spoke, nor at his other spouse, the Aenar Lyrya. But he did answer her in a very serious tone.

"It is never over. Whatever you do always stays with you."

All three looked at the tall, dignified silhouette of the Cardassian Sorripto as he was led by security personnel to the detention shuttle which would whisk him out to a penal colony to serve his sentence.

"It will be hard on him," commented Lyrya. "He truly did the best he could what he thought was best. It is difficult to understand, let alone accept, punishment for that."

"It will be much harder when he will come back," countered Tyvya. "Being sent back to Starfleet Academy where everyone will know what he had done... resuming service as an Ensign with every fellow officer judging him, watching him..."

"He is Cardassian," then said Kheren. "Of all people, they know how to endure. Their entire civilization was almost destroyed twice, once by their own warlike foolishness and then by their own mistake of siding with an invading force against their neighbor. But they have learned... And now they are prospering again, even beyond the prejudice and resentment they earned in the past decades. And so will Sorripto. He has faced his responsibilities with composure. Now he needs to learn from his mistakes. And if he ever finds in himself the strength to be at last a true Starfleet officer, he will not only endure; he will prevail."

"You think there is a lesson for all of us here?" asked Lyrya, with a tone that suggested that she had already guessed the answer from her husband's mind.

"Do not throw away the book before the last page," said Tyvya, quoting her husband's favorite motto and looking at him, her own antennae curving inward. "That's what you were about to say?"

"No... I was rather thinking... His best friend is Bajoran; some of his deeply ingrained spirituality must have rubbed on him. If that is the case, he must be starting now to realize that rules and regulations, orders and directives are nothing more but nothing less than a reflection of the values we all stand for. So... I guess he has quite another quote now in mind."

"Like what?"

The Andorian captain seemed to think a moment. Then his four oculars went up to the transparent ceiling high above them, where the stars twinkled at them.

"What someone on Earth, now long forgotten, once said. The way to Heaven; turn right and fly straight."

**THE END**

