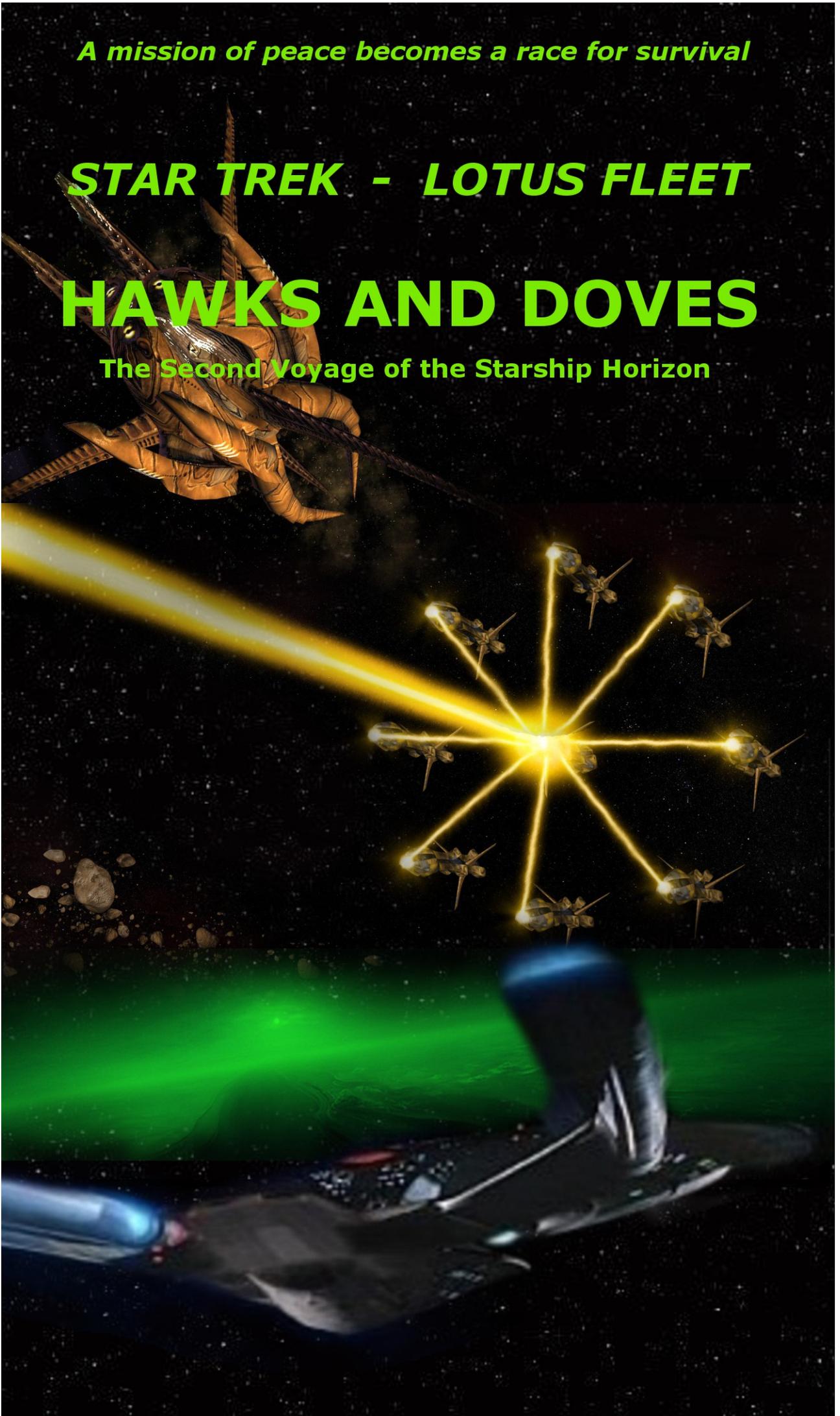


A mission of peace becomes a race for survival

STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

HAWKS AND DOVES

The Second Voyage of the Starship Horizon



STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

USS HORIZON: HAWKS AND DOVES

SEASON 3 EPISODE 2

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Kheren as Captain Kheren

Redding as Commander Neal Stanley Redding

Jureth as Commander Oseno Jureth

Snowfire as Lieutenant-Commander Snowfire K'leysha

Evshell as Doctors Zero One One-One One Zero

and Commander Joey D. Sisko

Jeff T as Lieutenant Elisha Leone

Niomo Lire as Lieutenant J.G. S'Tan Solius

AlexSomers as Lieutenant 1st class Alexandria Somers

Forum roleplaying session

from March 11th 2014 to September 27th 2014

Novelization by Kheren

Cover by Kheren

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

Gowron
Chancellor of the Klingon Empire
from 2367 to 2375

PROLOGUE

The vista of stars that stretched beyond looked no different than from any other vantage point of the milky way galaxy... except for one singular feature. It looked like a curiously flat nebula of greenish hue, stretching towards intergalactic darkness like some remnant of a heavy fog. The boundaries of that strange area of space could not be seen... because they expanded outside of our own universe and into another.

It was not just an area; it was a doorway, the entrance to a realm where the laws of physics and the evolution of life had taken a different twist. It was a different kind of existence, a different kind of life; yet it was still close enough to allow direct interaction, interpenetrate energy, matter and life of known space the way creatures of land and sea on a far away planet called Earth had sometimes shared the same world. It might have been another universe, but it was still a part of the vast tapestry called material reality.

Like a primordial fish parting the murky depths of primeval sea to breach the sands, an elongated form, as greenish and luminous emerged from that foggy frontier. It looked vaguely like a squid from Earth's seas, a long, cylindrical body with stiffened tendrils at one end and a bloated horned and bulbous head at the other extremity. And it looked just as alive even in the cold, airless expanse of outer space. But there was no doubt despite it's weird organic appearance that this was in fact a vessel of some sort.

And it did not appear alone.

Just as it crossed the greenish, foggy frontier, blobs of liquid green fire flashed beyond it. Then there was like a yellowish bolt of lightning that scorched it's rear bulbous end.

In the silence of space, no scream could be heard; yet, one could be somehow felt as the living ship shuddered under the cruel bite of the lightning. Like an angry beast, the ship extended horns towards its own greenish wake and spewed out glowing fireballs of its own. They splashed right in the front of a trio of smaller, fishlike crafts as they barely emerged from the other side, hot on the trail of the larger, fleeing vessel.

In an instant, all three pursuing ships were engulfed in greenish liquid fire and then exploded like deep seatrench fishes suddenly brought back to the surface. In moments, all that was left were flaming debris that spread out behind the larger vessel like bleeding, eviscerated corpses.

At a speed that challenged that of light itself, the now solitary craft flew further away from the green, hazy boundary, deeper into space. But in the silent stillness that followed its last exchange of fire with its now destroyed pursuers, it stopped still in view of the entrance to the other universe. Like a tired beast slowly recovering its breath, the living ship floated motionless under the soft, distant lights of stars that highlighted the frontier of the galaxy.

Then, one tiny tendril emerged from its front and started to pulse gently, like an eye blinking.

No mechanical or electronic device could perceive the signal that the tiny blinking light was sending.

It was telepathic.

CHAPTER ONE : WHERE NO ONE HAS GONE BEFORE

"Captain Kheren,"

"Rear Admiral Kotari, Sir."

The face on the screen was that of a Boslic man; mostly Human-looking with fair-pinkish skin except for the fine small ridges on it's high brow crowned with greyish short hair, as steely and perfectly groomed as the small close-cropped beard that gave the face a most dignified mien. The lips were thin, the nose straight and the eyes small and beady, the pupils so large they almost filled the entire eyeball as the heavy brow frowned before the other sitting in front of the terminal.

This one was definitely not Human. The skin was of the deepest blue, almost indigo in color, and looked thicker and harder than Human skin, making the face look like a rigid mask. The lips were wide but thin, the nose large but straight and the eyes were of a silvery color where no pupil was discernible. But what made the figure look definitely alien was that, on the top side of the thick, long mane of snowy white hair, a pair of antennae sprouted like the eyestalks of a snail.

And at the moment, those eyestalks were darting straight at the screen along with the silver eyes as the soft yet authoritative voice from the speakers again broke the silence.

"I hope everything is good aboard your shiny new flagship of yours, Captain?"

The deep voice of the blue-skinned captain resonated with the same soft authority as that of the Admiral on the viewer, even as the words spoke of deference to his higher rank and responsibilities.

"She is a beauty, Sir. Truly a masterfull achievement in starship design and technology."

"But she's no Artemis."

The statement was said with a tone that evidently was meant to be understanding, as it voiced what had been left implied by the commanding officer's acknowledgement. And he took a moment before nodding.

"No, Sir."

"No ship, no matter how marvelous, how superior or how glorious and noble, can ever replace one's first command. Your Horizon is in every bit superior to that venerated refitted Ambassador class we entrusted so swiftly upon you, even if she had been the Stalwarth Guardian of the Federation for almost eight decades. Yet, as large, advanced and powerful the Horizon is compared to the Artemis, you still think about her don't you? It's like when you first fall in love; you can never feel it with another woman quite like that again."

Captain Kheren nodded again to Rear Admiral Kotari. He didn't say a word. Andorians were as a rule poorly adept at what Humans called small talk; in fact, they despised it. And Kheren even more than most. Pragmatic to the core, he waited for the sector's commanding officer to come to the point of his subspace call, knowing full well that Kotari himself was not fond of the practice himself. If he indulged in it, especially with Kheren, it was because he was preparing ground for something much more significant.

The Andorian was not disappointed.

"Captain Kheren; I am sending you a mission briefing and orders. You will acknowledge them, confirm your willingness to proceed, then brief your crew and confirm their own acknowledgement to those orders. Then you will proceed with the mission towards the enclosed coordinates. At once, Captain."

As the Rear Admiral spoke, the orders and brief he was speaking of passed before the Andorian's eyes. The more he read, the higher his antennae rose until they were straight up and rigid like horns.

"This is... unprecedented, Sir," was all he could find to say after a moment.

"To say the least. But you understand why the Horizon is the only ship that can do this mission. And I'm not just talking about her technological prowess; yes she's one of the very few ships that can reach those coordinates in a sufficiently short time; one of the rare vessels able to cope with whatever wonders and perils might be found during this mission; and the only vessel capable of pursuing this mission for as long as it might take... But also, and most importantly, she 's the only starship with the very team that could possibly succeed."

Silently, Kheren looked back at the Boslic officer on the screen. Kotari didn't waste any time to spell things out.

"This mission requires the very rare combination of diplomats, scientists and soldiers that are also proven as among the best in all those fields and especially true to our ideals, our laws and what we stand for. This is no game for cowboy diplomats and gung-ho space jockeys who think rules are meant to be broken and ends justify means. This is only for true Starfleet officers in the purest sense of the word. You, Captain, are such an officer; and so is your First Officer, Neil Redding."

"That he is, Sir," acknowledged the Andorian Captain, heedless of the compliment for himself.

"Yours and Redding's experience and excellence in command however would fall short without the correct crew to help you both. Fortunately, you have also among your officers that Bajoran Commander, Oseno Jureth, the one who managed to allow this... unprecedented opportunity to even happen."

"He's proven himself as much as Redding, Admiral," agreed Kheren. "Sir... was he asked for specifically?"

"Indeed he was, Captain."

There was silence again for a moment. Kotari finally spoke again.

"I'm sure you already grasp all the challenges such a mission will pose; most notably in regard to communication, data gathering and understanding. But as luck would have it, you also have aboard the two best telepaths in Starfleet."

"My wife, Lyrya... and Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysha."

"Aye, the only Aenar in Starfleet... and Snowfire K'Leysha. She's also among the best science minds in service at the moment, even if she's not completely Starfleet... still an exchange officer with the Illythirii government..."

"Which might just be best for us regarding this mission, Admiral."

The Boslic man looked askance at Kheren. So he explained what he meant.

"How best to prove the validity of our action than by showing how well and good we can work with those even not of our kind?"

Kotari's eyes flashed in understanding.

"You're already proving yourself the right choice to lead this mission by this single remark, Kheren my friend. Fact is, we will even go further and have you joined by one who would have been beleived to be an enemy of ours."

"Sir?"

"I understand that your chief engineer has returned from the now famous "Tess Trial" with the intention of stepping down from that responsibility to further his research in cybernetics."

"Yes, Admiral. It is a great loss for the Horizon's engineering department; but even after being granted his promotion and new assignment, Commander Joseph Sisko has asked to stay onboard as one of our head researchers. So it is not as we are loosing him entirely..."

It was obvious that the Andorian wanted the matter set aside for the more intriguing one the Admiral had hinted that. Kotari knew it and finished the thought.

"We are assigning you a new chief engineer for the Horizon. He might be of low rank in our chain of command but his expertise has already been groomed before he put on our uniform. His name is S'Tan Solius... He's... Romulan."

Now Kheren understood.

"Enemy indeed, Sir... between K'leysha and him, there will be no doubt left that we are true to our word when we speak of the brotherhood of all sentient life... and that they too may chose to be a part of it. but that does not mean it will be any more easy."

"It might prove downright dangerous," added Kotari with seriousness in both his voice and his stare. "Even if we think that we know who and what we might be up against... as I said, the perils match the potential."

"Fortunately, we are one of the rare vessels carrying not only the largest and best trained security complement in Starfleet, but a complete squad of Starfleet Marines as well," retorted the Andorian with no false pride or pretend humility in his voice.

"But that might not prove enough," then said Kotari. "If your escort craft, the Polaris, is out there with that squad while you get yourself into serious danger, you will need your own team of soldiers to pack enough punch with your security personnel, even with your other wife Tyvya doing her usual fine job. That's why we are sending you Lieutenant Alex Somers and her own team of highly trained specialists. She might be the only Marine commanding officer out there who can think with her brains instead of her phaser... And thus can help you make things better and not worse."

"I will make sure of that, Sir," promised the Andorian, lifting one finger of his heavily callused hand.

"I'm sure you will," said the Admiral. "Now, do you believe your current medical officer and staff will be willing and able to face the biological and medical... particulars of what.. and who... is awaiting you?"

"011 and 110 are Bynars, Admiral; the only such pair serving as Starfleet medical officers. Being computer-interphased organic humanoids, they are uniquely suited to rise up to the challenge. And knowing them both, they will be quite enthusiastic at resuming what the Doctor from Voyager alone had the chance to study."

"Good. But as complex and demanding research will prove to be on board your ship, even more difficult will be managing it all for weeks... possibly months... maybe even years before this mission is finally completed, without any contact or support even if things come to worst. Such a task would require nothing less than a starbase. We can't build a starbase over there... but we can send the next best thing..."

"With Elisha Leône, my chief of Operations, the Horizon will be able to accomplish that task, Sir," completed Kheren when the Boslic man left his sentence unfinished. "She might still be a freshly-minted Lieutenant, but after our little trip to the edge of the galaxy and back, she is one of those who allowed us to do so in one piece and grew up pretty fast in her uniform. With her dedication and hard work setting an example to all of us, yes, the Horizon will do it... and come back home."

Kotari nodded.

"Well, having an Orion woman might even add some... incentive to our friends out there."

"As little as we know of their biology, I doubt they would find her pheromones alluring, Sir," commented the Andorian.

"Probably not... but she's... green. That might do the trick."

The joking tone clearly marked that the discussion was at an end. So did the Admiral's next words.

"You have your orders, Captain. Safe journey and good luck. A lot of our hopes... and dreams... travel with you."

* * *

In the immense forward lounge of the starship Horizon, Commander Neil Stanley Redding, First Officer of the USS Horizon, was talking to the only kind of councilor he ever felt he could trust.

A bartender.

I know I'm as 'old fashioned' as they come, Nathan, and I can't imagine that as time progresses that will improve... but I just don't know if I'll ever get used to synthetic people..."

He took a swallow from the glass he was holding.

It chased away his thirst... for a while... but not the memories.

The few he still had left.

A frown crossed his face as he laid there and started to remember how it led to the fight with Claire and their eventual break up. She had had a hard time coming to terms with his 'death' after the Crenan incident and had insisted he quit security, or she'd leave him.

And she did.

But life goes on... and he had remained aboard the Ajax II as it's first officer for a few more years, until he had been offered his first command of the Constellation class heavy cruiser Taurus.

He did a lot of patrol missions in that old ship.

There was one combat action against a Romulan warbird where the bridge had been smashed by the detonation of a plasma torpedo and he had managed to evacuate the few survivors out through the escape hatch before he had... died?

Was that right?

No...

He had been at the mining facility.. his arm broken and burned... It had taken him weeks to rig a rescue signal out of what was left of a mining shuttle he had managed to find off site.

Every day it had seemed the air was getting harder and harder to breathe. He had found out later that the life support system was worn out and that the accident had ruined the thin atmosphere of the planetoid. Eventually, he had needed a vaccsuit to walk around beyond one sealed area he had converted into his survival camp.

After being rescued, he had remembered what a shock it had been to find out that twenty-three years had passed since the facilities destruction and that, according to Starfleet records, he had only recently been reported as dead at age 57, Captain of the USS Taurus.

It was at this point that Starfleet assigned a task force to investigate the 'Redding Phenomenon' and what followed was two years of poking and prodding, the construction of the Black Point retrieval station on Crenan and Redding's threat of resignation, and thus exposure and unmonitored incidents, if they would not allow his to return to active duty.

They obliged by promoting him and giving him command of an experimental transwarp modified vessel, the USS Response.

Redding's memories of the Response, like most of his memories now, was not the sharpest. It was more like he was watching a movie about his life and occasionally thinking 'I don't remember it happening that way' every now and then.

It wasn't until after the disappearance of the USS Response in 2325, fourteen years after his last death, and his return to Black Point for a third time, that a system was created to collect stored memories using Doctor Ira Grave's synapse-t-isolinear chip transfer technique.

Considering the many holes in his memory from 2288 to 2325, it had been decided that his original memories would be recreated using the then new holodeck technology, extracted from ships and personal logs as well as eyewitnesses that had been still available at the time. These memories were then recreated and played, the role of Commander Redding being played by himself in a holo environment. This process took two years and each time reunited him with his ex-fiancee, Claire Tannon.

Being reunited with Claire, now seventy years old, had caused Redding to fall into a depression that had made him leaving Starfleet on a granted personal leave for the next seven years.

Is that what had happened?

Maybe... or maybe...

He had gone Klingon Space under the official title of Federation diplomat. He was a well received diplomat among the Klingons, engaging in fights as their peculiar 'diplomatic style' demanded, even earning through the process the command of a Klingon light cruiser named 'Black Heart' and was involved in several border skirmishes along the Romulan frontier.

Had he?

No...

His long illustrious career into Starfleet Security had seen him rise to the rank of Admiral and become one of the heads of that division, involved in the most classified projects of the Federation, those that even the now defunct and infamous Section 31 didn't even know about... like Project Legion... and more recently, Project Millennium, where he had been inspecting the progress on the experimental micro-singularity powered quantum slipstream drive... when the malfunction had threatened all those technicians he barely had given time to evacuate, as he alone had tried to contain the breach... and then... then...

Then, I did not... died...this time... No... And yet... I... came back.

And eventually, it came back; most of it. Each time he died, he came back. It had gone on from year to year, ship to ship and death to death.

The death of his first wife.

The death of his brother.

The death of his best friend.

The destruction of his ship while in the Borg task Force.

Death-change-rebirth, followed by restored memories and new assignments.. over and over again for a total now of six times over one hundred and fifty years.

And now it was coming to his last stored memory, he had just received orders to report to Lotus fleets commander officer for placement aboard their newest flagship, the USS Horizon. He remembered worrying about weather or not it too would fail as it's predecessors had.

But this time, this time it had been different. He did not die that day on the secret spacedock installation of project millennium. The Admiral had survived his seemingly fatal injuries and went back to report to Starfleet Intelligence.

And yet... he came back.

"Synthetic people..." he grumbled again to the bartender. "Take this 'Tess THING' that they're all breaking their backs for; just a computer program right?"

Knowing better than to interrupt the half drunk Commander, Nathan the barman simply smiled and nodded at him.

"Right" Neil said confirming his own opinion. "So why did I.. I mean the other me, the Admiral, think she was worth erasing the last hundred.. something.. years of my life to save her for?"

Then he smiled at his own joke

"Get it? he "saved" her."

He drained the last of the amber liquid from his glass and slid it back at Nathan.

"You've had enough, sailor. Ready for your detox yet? or do you want to enjoy this for a bit longer?"

Nathan Cross had the kind of voice that made you want to listen to him. It was pleasant but firm and had a way of making you feel just a little bit better about the world.

Neil nodded as if in reply, not actually answering the question.

"Your a good man Mr. Cross... Sure, hit me with a chaser."

Nathan reached under the bar and pulled out a kit that contained a single dose hypospray and injected Redding's left wrist with it, reloaded it and put it away.

"Next time, I'll need a doctor's note for that, Commander. But this time, it's on the house."

It was obvious that Redding's head was already clearing as he sat up straighter and straightened up his uniform.

"Thank you Nathan; I appreciate a bartender than understands the limit of a customer, and for allowing me to drink my own whiskey in the lounge," Neil said with a smile.

Nathan held up the small jar filled with cubes and gave it a shake.

"I have no idea where you would get concentrated alcohol cubes in this day and age Commander, but they sure seem to work well enough."

Redding grinned but offered no explanation.

"You hold on to them if you don't mind, I had a real problem with that once, so it's safer to leave them here."

Cross's smiles was soothing and reassuring.

"Of course Commander, no problem at all."

With a nod Redding got up and left the lounge.

As he went out, he almost collided with a bewildering ensemble of limbs that spread out before him in obvious surprise. Assistant chief of ops Cheonghi was Edoan; hairless chitinous red skin, lanky body with three arms, one right in the middle of it's cylindrical chest, and three-legs, one where a tail would have been on a more familiar lifeform. Each hand had three fingers, one opposable, and all looked quite dextrous. They were all raised in front of him as he backed off hurriedly with surprising swiftness to avoid colliding fully with the tall, large-shouldered dark haired and eyed Human that had obviously surprised him.

His voice was shrill and high-pitched; not that unpleasant but it always made Cheonghi look perpetually anxious even when it rarely was the case. This time though, it added to his surprised reaction in an almost comical manner.

"Oh! Commander Redding, Sir! My apologies, Sir! Sir I was just about to look for you. The captain wants you to round up all senior bridge officers, including the new ones, for a staff meeting before departure."

From a small table in one corner of the lounge, the Bynar doctors -- or 'doctor' as some called them, since they were a dichotomy; both a single thing and two things at the same time, looked on at the patrons, observing their behaviors. They sat side by side on a single side of the table, enjoying a coffee after a long shift spent patching up the final victims of the Khan holoprogram. They spoke silently using the networking installed in parallel to their central nervous system, sharing thoughts on the various species that they observed in the lounge.

A few Humans, Bolians, and Bajorans were enjoying drinks off duty and conversing happily. Several were solitary; mostly Vulcans, Andorians and Tellarites, reading PADDs and sipping various teas, coffee drinks, and Cardassian fish juice; popular among the Andorians who wished to emulate their Captain. The Bynars specifically noted the difference between these two types of social behaviors and noted how even with all the similarities among the different races, there was still very clearly defined stereotypes that existed for a reason. Of course, in the Federation, no one would ever have a reason or desire to be prejudiced based on those stereotypes, but it was clear they still existed.

Their coffee and socio-anthropological observations were both coming to an end when they saw the ship's Executive Officer, who they were quite familiar with due to their excursion in their previous mission, exit and almost collide with the assistant operations chief. Both making an intelligent guess that he was in a hurry to inform them of the inevitable pre-launch bridge officer meeting, the Bynars simultaneously rose and shuffled out to follow Commander Redding out of the lounge.

* * *

Moored on the outer docking rings of Starbase Lotus, with the base itself as a mural-like backdrop the USS Horizon provided those aboard the starbase with a fantastic visage. The flagship of Lotus Fleet sat silent as she underwent repairs from her encounter with Khan's USS Nemesis. Aboard the ship, the corridors were more silent than usual with much of her crew on leave, and those that remained aboard were in the middle of a sleep cycle. In effect, it was a peaceful night aboard the Horizon.

But not for everyone.

Oseno Jureth, the Horizon's Bajoran Chief of Strategic Operations, walked at an even pace through the ship's quiet corridors. He had just left the Horizon's integrated escort the USS Polaris after conducting yet another inspection of the Aquarius Class Destroyer's repairs. Oseno told himself he was just being thorough as the escort's commanding officer, but the truth was his constant presence was beginning to annoy the engineering crews. The Bajoran had slept very little since the Horizon returned to her home base and while others were on shore leave Jureth chose to busy himself with tasks that either didn't need to be done immediately, or could be delegated to junior officers.

Oseno did these things to keep his mind busy. Every time he closed his eyes and drifted to sleep the images from the Nemesis came flooding back to him. Images of his crew in antimatter containment pods being tortured by Khan Noonien Singh.

In particular those of the Vulcan T'Lana whom Khan had chosen to use as leverage to press Jureth into giving up the command codes of the Polaris. The silent agony of the woman's facial features were burned into Oseno's mind. Every time he saw them the feelings of failure he had felt after returning from the Nemesis raged inside him. So, he chose simply not to experience them by not sleeping, and keeping himself occupied with things that a senior officer aboard a starship wouldn't normally be doing.

Now, Jureth approached one of the Horizon's holodecks to immerse himself in a workout program he'd brought with him from the Alsea. It contained a mixture of Klingon Mok'bara, and Earth martial arts such as jujitsu, and judo. It was effective in keeping up his martial skills as well as taking his mind off of everything else around him. As he approached the holodeck he was surprised to see the doors part and reveal another of the Horizon's crew, and one of his staff. It was his diplomatic specialist, the El-Aurian Adira Yiral. She smiled warmly at him as he approached

"Good morning Commander, up early for a workout?"

"You could say that, yes." Jureth replied not really wanting to let on that he had been up most of the night.

Despite the Bajoran's attempt to hide his sleeplessness it was not difficult for Adira, who had become quite adept at reading the galaxy's more emotional species during her diplomatic career, to pick up on the fact that Oseno seemed...tired for lack of a better word. His response to her perfectly normal question had been measured, and there was a weariness in his physical features that was not normally there.

"Commander, forgive me for prying Sir, but are you feeling okay?"

"Of course," Jureth replied with a half smile "just trying to keep up with all of the repair work."

"Actually Sir, from what I hear you've been around the Polaris quite a bit, and at odd hours."

How does she do that? Oseno thought.

It was not the first time Yiral had revealed that she knew more information than she had initially let on. Aloud Jureth tried to deflect the comment.

"I am the Polaris CO, Commander, it is my job to make sure her repairs are proceeding as scheduled."

"In the middle of the night?" Adira replied with a slight twinkle in her eye "Sir, if I may be so bold, I've heard that Counselor Lyrya is quite good at her job. Perhaps you should contact her."

"That is bold Commander," Oseno replied slightly irritated at the suggestion "have a good morning."

"Of course Sir," Adira replied cheerfully "and please call me Adira!"

Jureth shook his head as he entered the holodeck, and then engaged his work out program. After the workout though, alone in his quarters Jureth thought hard about Adira Yiral's suggestion, and eventually came to the realization that the El-Aurian diplomat was probably right. If he didn't find a way to get some sleep he would be no good to anyone, perhaps Lyrya could help him get some of the images out of his head.

"Computer, is Lieutenant Lyrya aboard?"

"Affirmative."

Oseno tapped his combadge, "Commander Oseno to Lieutenant Lyrya."

The call did not rouse the Aenar chief counselor from sleep. Like all Andorians, she needed but four hours of sleep per thirty-two hours, the actual length of the Andorian day; she had been already up and doing her daily meditation while her spouses were also up and about, security lieutenant Tyvya moving out for a firing exercise on the shooting range of the ship and Captain Kheren taking a water shower. Unlike other Andorians, her skin was not blue but milk white; and the large eyes on her elfin face were colorless, pupiless orbs, obviously sightless.

But like all others from her icy moonworld, she could still see colors and movement through the photoreceptors of the antennae that rose from the top of her forehead and thus move around with ease. They were also housing her auditory organs which were as sensitive as those of a Terran dog; hence why Andorians avoided the shrill, displeasing standard sonic showers for the more ancient types of cleaning ritual. Thus, she was activating her combadge almost the moment Oseno's voice was heard over the comm.

"Yes, Commander; what can I do for you?"

"Lieutenant, I was wondering...do you have any openings in your counseling schedule?"

"How about right now?" proposed the Aenar.

Part of Jureth wanted to find something else to do, some inspection to conduct, or supply request to approve.

"That would be fine. Where can I meet you?"

"Wherever you would feel most comfortable, Commander."

The Aenar did not read the Bajoran's mind; her cultural code of honor, her professional code and her personal discretion forbid her to telepathically pry into others minds. But it did not take any psionic power to perceive the deep concern that was heard in Oseno's voice. She didn't know much, even with the praise and respect her husband shared with her about the commander he had worked with against the threat of the Azimuth Horizon and more recently in saving the Horizon from a transwarp eddy; but she had noticed the poise, discipline and professionalism of the man even under pressure and after dire situations. It would take much to shake such a person. And that is what she felt in the tiredness of his voice; something shook him deeply.

"We can use the forward observation lounge, there is enough of the crew on leave that likely no one will be there."

"I will meet you there."

"Thank you, Oseno out."

Jureth, not wanting to get allow himself to come up a reason to not go, immediately left his quarters and started for the Horizon's forward observation lounge. The walk and turbolift ride were not lengthy, and he found the room empty when he arrived. The observation port itself was closed, but Oseno remedied that with a command entered into the control panel. The blind retracted revealing a fantastic view of Starbase Lotus and the space around it. A few work bees flitted by as the morning work crews began their shifts, but mostly it was the starbase painted against the blackness of space. Oseno stood facing the port, arms clasped behind him and contemplated the scene. He thought back to his home, Bajor, and a time when he had first come to understand that his father had been a Starfleet officer. Jureth had been too young to remember his father of course, Karrath had been killed mere months after Jureth was born when his starship was attacked and destroyed by Jem'Hadar ships, but from the moment the young boy had found out what his father's career had been Jureth wanted to follow him to the stars. Jureth's mother had discouraged it, not wanting her son to someday meet the same fate as her husband had, but the stubborn young man that Jureth became would have none of it. On his own Jureth had sought out Kira Nerys and her sponsorship for his application to Starfleet Academy, and now here he was aboard one of the Fleet's most prestigious ships contemplating giving it all up.

These were Oseno's thoughts when the door to the lounge opened behind him.

When the ship's counselor came into the vast room with its immense transparency open to the stark vastness of space, she was probably the only person on board who didn't pause at the awesome spectacle of the universe.

But not seeing the panoramic view didn't mean she was really blind to it; she could sense even without trying to the awe it generated in others... like the one lonely figure that was already there waiting for her.

"Greetings Commander."

Oseno turned from the observation port.

"Good morning Counselor; thank you for taking time to see me."

"Is that what Humans call a joke, Commander?"

Her wide pupilless eyes blinked at him.

The lack of facial muscles in the Andorian face prevented her from smiling; but the tone of her voice was light enough to convey her intention to ease their meeting with the light jest. Her antennae were curving inward in the equivalent of a smile Andorian made and Oseno might now be sufficiently familiar with the ghehnoid species to catch it as well; after all, his ship sported one of the largest Andorian crews in Starfleet and his commanding officer himself was Andorian.

The Aenar waited for Jureth to initiate conversation and decide if he wanted to stand or sit in any of the comfortable chairs dotting the vast observation lounge. He was troubled and there was no need of her formidable telepathic powers or keen empathy to be made aware of it.

Until the counselor pointed it out, Oseno hadn't realized what he said and then when she asked him about what he said he wanted to smack himself in the head, but instead he offered a half smile.

"I'm sorry I.....I'm just so tired I didn't think before I spoke"

Jureth sank down in the nearest chair and motioned for Lyrya to sit as well. "I'm sure you can tell this already, but since we returned from our mission, I haven't slept well or much at all to be honest."

She sat gracefully despite her blindness, with slow, deliberate movements that were strangely soothing to watch, almost as if she glided in slow motion instead of walking and moving around.

"You've been through not one but two life and death crisis in a row without pause that related not only to yourself but also to friends and colleagues. What you experience is expected from most sentient species except those that have been dulled through it, either genetically like Klingons, through constant intense exposure like Andorians or through extraordinary discipline like Vulcans. fact is, you being inconvenienced so soon after the events is a good sign. Too many times, these... difficulties surface months, even years later, causing many psychological and sociological problems which become difficult to resolve so long after."

She blinked at him looking directly at his face just as if she could see him.

"The easy solution is medication; but sometimes, when the scars run too deep or later reopen through other stressful situations, it only postpone, or worse, expand the inner wound behind a veil of numbness, until it damages you beyond help. However, addressing the problem as soon as possible with your conscious mind is hard, sometimes painful; but in the end, it helps start a real healing process."

She leaned towards him, her antennae pointing straight at him.

"Can you tell what exactly troubles your sleep?"

"Khan..." Oseno said with pain in his voice "While I was aboard the Nemesis he demanded I give him the command codes for the Polaris. Of course I refused, baited him, goaded him, told him I would rather destroy the asteroid and everyone on it rather than give him what he wanted."

As Jureth told the story to the Aenar counselor the memories flooded back to him. The dead bodies on the bridge, the smell, and Khan...as if he were standing in front of the Bajoran again. Oseno closed his eyes for a moment and then continued

"It was as if he knew what I would say. He put my crew in antimatter containment pods, and then he activated one of the fields. Lieutenant T'Lana, an officer that was with me on the Lotus, and the Alsea, and one that I've come to respect and admire greatly, was inside. He...raised the power on the field, and I could see her pain, the agony on her face, and I....I couldn't watch it...I surrendered the codes for the ship."

Jureth felt the beginnings of tears trickle down his face, tears of frustration, anger, and sadness but still he continued looking at Lyrya "I saved their lives...but I failed them. I failed them, I failed the captain, Starfleet, Bajor, and the Federation...because I gave him exactly what he wanted. Without the codes to the Polaris, the Nemesis wouldn't have had enough antimatter to get underway...."

Lyrya was silent, listening to him; not so much to his words than to his voice, the way those words came out. That's where the real person was, the one in torment. When he stopped speaking to get back in hold on himself, she allowed some time for him to resume his thoughts if he wanted to.

Jureth trailed off...the Bajoran had spent his tired mind in getting that far, and needed to stop before he completely broke down.

As silence went on, she broke it before it became a weight on his already crushed conscience.

"It is not for me to judge your actions as an officer. That is for the captain to do. But tell me this; had you not given your access code when T'Lana was being tortured before your very eyes, what would have happened?"

"I...don't know...I assume that he would have killed her, maybe killed them all...or maybe he knew I would break and never intended to kill them at all."

"Let's assume the worst; they're all dead... and so are you; would it have stopped him from getting what he wanted?"

"Probably not," Oseno admitted "Though my death would have slowed him down. Only I had full command access to the ship."

Jureth wasn't trying to be contradictory, he was being honest. In the chaos surrounding the first launch of the Polaris he hadn't had time to designate a second in command for the ship, and so no other officer aboard had the command authorization that the Bajoran had.

"Did he truly want your ship... or just what was in it?"

Oseno had to think about that question, he had assumed at the time Khan wanted the Polaris, and her weaponry. In hindsight it was likely that Khan had only wanted to strip the ship of her antimatter, and parts to repair the Nemesis damaged systems.

"In hindsight, it is probably safe to say he would have probably had the Jem'hadar strip her for parts in addition to siphoning off her antimatter."

"Of course, at the time you couldn't have known. But then, at the time, did you feel as troubled as you feel now?"

"Troubled....no. Scared...yes, for the lives of my people and for anyone else he might hurt in his attempt to exact his revenge."

The Aenar cocked her head on a side, as if to hear him better; which was meaningless since she had no ears, the antennae on top of her head doing the job as good as the ears of Terran dogs. but it gave her a concerned, attentive expression that was meant to both soothe the man in front of her and keep him in a rational state despite the emotions she deliberately stirred in him.

"Your people suffered then... so did we... and you... but all are now safe and sound and Khan will never be able hurt anyone else again... thanks to you. So... what is troubling you now?"

"I wish I had a simple answer for you Counselor," Oseno replied with resignation "All I know is that nearly every time I try to sleep I relive the events that happened on that ship, and I see T'Lana's face as Khan exposes her body to the magnetic containment field. It is as painful now as it was then, and yet I can't say that I would have done anything differently. I find myself wondering how I can face my people and my friends, and if surrendering my ship to Khan makes me unfit to be a Starfleet officer. If you look in my medical records you will find a note regarding a scar that I had which was the result of fight with a Cardassian on Risa. I left it the way it was to remind me of the results of my own stubbornness and arrogance. I had it regenerated after Operation Horizon believing I'd changed as a man and an officer, but now I wonder if that was really the case. I played right into Khan's hands from the moment his Jem'Hadar first tried to get the command codes from me. I acted with the same stubborn arrogance that I did with that Cardassian on Risa..."

She blinked her sightless eyes at him; yet it was as if she was staring into his very soul.

"Did you... really?" she asked. But her tone was not truly a questioning one. And then, it became that of a genuine question; " Can you please refresh my memory and tell me what is General Order 17?"

"Starfleet General Order 17," Jureth quoted directly from his Academy lessons; "Starfleet vessel captains are to consider the lives of their crew members as sacred. In any potentially hostile situation, the captain will place the lives of his crew above the fate of his ship."

Oseno saw what the counselor was getting at and truthfully he hadn't considered that particular order in the midst of placing all the blame squarely on himself. So, surrendering his ship was justifiable...legally anyway. He sighed aloud "That justifies surrendering the Polaris command codes, and I suppose in the midst of all of this I hadn't stopped to think about it. If that is the case then, why do I keep reliving those events? Why do I feel so responsible for their pain?"

"Could it be because you just don't like to loose?"

Oseno leaned back, of course he didn't like to lose. He'd never met a Starfleet officer, much less a security officer, that did. Could that really be the only reason?

"Of course I don't," he said voicing his thoughts aloud. "I don't know any officers, much less any security officers, that do. Do you really believe that is all it is? My own unwillingness to admit that Khan beat me?"

She didn't smile. She simply couldn't. But her antennae sharply curved inward.

"Did he?"

Jureth caught the change in the Aenar's antennae. While he had no way to read the meaning, something he made a mental note to correct, he also caught the meaning of her question.

"I suppose he didn't. I escaped, my people escaped, even Tess escaped, and my ship was liberated thanks to Commander Redding and his team."

"And yours," added Lyrya. "Your entire crew was back at their post when Commander Redding brought everyone back. They also saved all the refugees of the Jem'Hadar camp, Lieutenant-Commander K.Leysha along with you and even freed the Jem'Hadar from their own meaningless exile and self-chosen enslavement. Moreover, can lost everything; his base, his chance to return and conquer, even control of his ship-body when the Admiral Redding hologram confronted him."

She made a pause to let all the data of their successful mission before continuing.

"Please refresh again my memory. Who again was it that risked his own ship and crew to allow the Horizon to reach safely the edge of the galaxy and find this threat and those lost people? Who was it that brought aboard the Nemesis the datachip containing the Admiral Redding hologram...and allowed to rescue Tess? And who was it that risked his own life to hamper and distract Khan long enough for all this to happen?"

"To be fair, I had no idea what the data chip contained, other than Commander Redding's previous memories, and knowledge," Oseno pointed out "as for the rest of the events...that was me." Jureth realized at that moment what Lyrya was trying to tell him. "I didn't fail at all..." he said softly "so, is it all in my head, and if so how do I fix it?"

"Go see T'Lana," simply said the Aenar. "Your mind is lingering in the past. Seeing her now, speaking to her now, working with her now, will reorient you away from the past... and towards tomorrow."

Oseno nodded "I will, thank you Counselor. I think that it may still be a little bit before I'm able to not see those images so vividly, but you've helped me a great deal today."

"As the Vulcan are fond of saying, we come to serve," Lyrya answered with a nod of her white-haired head. "And as any doctor will tell you, true healing is done by the patient, not the pill. "

Her pale, delicate form rose with a grace that almost made one believe she was floating.

"By the way, remember that the captain asked Starfleet to recognize your valor and also certify you as the commanding officer of the Polaris. Maybe you should try dreaming about your new career as a decorated starship captain, even if it is under the great wing of this big bird," she added, rolling her eyes around as if to look over the immense starship around them. "Active dreaming is an easy skill to learn and will do much for your psyche. If you wish, I can start you with some basic exercises."

Oseno nodded in reply "I'll welcome anything that will help."

"Come by my office when you have time before you go to your quarters," she then offered in parting.

"Thank you again," Jureth replied standing "oh, and something else, I don't think I ever had a chance to thank you for your help during Operation Horizon. Without your guidance as to what the Undine were thinking I might not have had the insight to change my strategy."

"I just happen to have bigger ears than yours, Commander, " simply acknowledged the Aenar, wiggling her antennae. "You are an exemplary Starfleet officer and a perceptive individual; at the first hint, you would have tried the peaceful solution over the violent one and probably achieved the same success. You're quite like my husband in that regard; always choosing life over death, peace over violence, reason over base instinct.... but always ready to do the right thing the right way. That's probably why he respects you so much"

Oseno nodded solemnly.

"Bajor... and I suppose the galaxy at large, have seen too much war and death in our recent history. I personally think it's about time for some peace, even if I do have a tendency to keep a phaser at my side. When I started with Lotus Fleet I was the prototypical Starfleet security officer, I believed Phasers were for peace and quantum torpedoes for diplomacy. Having to take command of the Alsea changed a great deal about my thinking as did working with the captain. I am a better being, and officer for having experienced both of those things. Now, I believe I have a friend to visit. Thank you Counselor, enjoy the rest of your day."

Lyrya looked as if she was smiling although none of her rare face muscles moved. But the feeling was felt never the same as he soft, empty eyes lowered in answer before she did a small bow and left.

Oseno lingered a moment looking out again at the magnificent view of the Starbase..

"computer, close blind."

With that command Jureth turned and left the observation lounge heading for Sickbay. Upon entering the Horizon's medical facility Oseno inquired briefly with the duty officer regarding his friend's condition.

"Excuse me Ensign," he said pleasantly as he walked up to the desk. "Can you give me the status of Lieutenant T'Lana?"

"Of course," the dark haired human woman said with a smile "One moment Sir." She tapped a few commands into the console in front of her, and then looked up

"It seems the lieutenant regained consciousness this morning. She is resting pending evaluation for release to duty."

"May I see her?"

"Yes Sir," the young officer replied pointing toward a row of biobeds. Oseno scanned with his eyes and found the Vulcan woman whom he considered not just a colleague, but a friend as well. Jureth walked over to the bed side and T'Lana looked up at him with what still appeared to be tired eyes.

"Commander, I am told that we have been back to base for some time."

"T'Lana, it's good to see you awake,"

"Thank you Sir, the doctor informed me that my injuries were quite severe."

Oseno nodded solemnly and took a moment before he responded "T'Lana, I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry, the injuries you sustained could have been lessened if I had given Khan what he wanted."

The Vulcan looked at him and her expression did not change "Commander, as I understand the events that took place there was no action that you could have taken, therefore it is logical that you have nothing to apologize for. You did not inflict my injuries, and you acted in the manner prescribed by Starfleet regulations."

Oseno felt somewhat relieved by her response to his apology. He should have known that T'Lana would not hold anything against him, but he had let his emotions overwhelm him. Counselor Lyrya had been right, and some part of him knew that she had been even during their conversation. He smiled at T'Lana

"Thank you T'Lana, I hope to see you up and about soon. The ship needs you, and I need you."

"The Bynar tell me that they wish to observe my condition for a short time longer, but that I will be cleared to return to duty soon."

Oseno nodded, "Get some rest. I'll see you soon."

Jureth left Sickbay feeling that his mind was somewhat rejuvenated, and felt that with some rest his body would soon follow.

* * *

The Flagship. This was not something that S'Tan could have ever expected.

When he read the Rear Admiral's request for crew, he would have been hard pressed to not feel elated. He had heard the stories from his former comrades. How Starfleet was overly cautious and unaccepting of Romulan servicemen...but this? This took the cake.

Although a large portion of his brain was shouting the fact that it was a trap, a test or some other sort of way to remove him from active duty, he felt ready to prove himself.

They would fail.

When he arrived on the ship, he took his small rucksack and proceeded to the Officer's section of the circular primary hull. As he walked, he took in every sight that he could. The sleek hallway, the bright glow from the deck lights. All polar opposites of a Romulan craft whose decoration was designed with only function and utility, not esthetic appeal in mind. They were also all green. That was the biggest change. Here, bright blues from the consoles, signaling the ship was docked, yellow/white lights from the floor and ceiling and the gray/silver wall and carpet... everything was fresh.

A fresh surrounding for a fresh start, he thought with a satisfied grin on his sharp, angular, green-tinted, beardless features, making his thick V-shaped brow and pointed ears look even more prominent.

When he arrived at his quarters, the doors whooshed open quietly and he walked in. The room was far bigger than anything he was used to on a Romulan ship, even the biggest ones. He expected this, as he knew Humans enjoyed all sorts of strange amenities, but a small part of him was happy to have an area to spend some quiet time working out or reading up on this new starship. He dropped his sack on the bed and pulled out it's only contents; a small blade, a small fuzzy child's toy that most humans would call a "teddy bear" and finally his Romulan rank pips & insignia. He had fought with Starfleet Security for a few days to finally have him allowed to take the insignia. They were afraid that he would summon the Romulans down upon the Horizon with some hidden emitter or something, he guessed... like he wanted to see them again any time soon. But after a while, he was able to convince them that if he agreed to have another engineer rip out any communication systems, they would let him have the trinket from his past.

He put the pips and insignia on his desk so that they would face anyone who sat down. The stuffy toy went to it's appropriate location, on his night stand and the blade he slid into his belt. It was the only family heirloom he was able to take onto a Romulan ship, and he'd be damned if he'd leave it in his room on the first day of his new life.

Even here in the Federation, on a Starfleet vessel.

In S'Tan's mind it served two purposes. Firstly, it was to spit in the eye of the family he left behind; to show them that they did not need to control every aspect of the public's life to do something good. And secondly, he wanted to show Starfleet that he was a Romulan and even if he did wear the golden engineer's uniform for the rest of his life, he would still, and always be *Rihann'su*; Romulan as they called his people.

After exploring his quarters for a few more minutes, he decided it was time to see this new transwarp thing of theirs. It was all very strange to him, as he was used to using quantum singularities to propel ships. Not Antimatter reaction, Transwarp and hocus pocus. His instructors at the Academy had said he was up for the task, but S'Tan had to wonder, as he walked down the corridor to the turbolift.

Am I ready?

His trek through the vessel was certainly an unusual one. This was so huge a ship, it felt like going through a space station. Sure, a D'Dridex was just as voluminous, but most of a Romulan cruiser's volume was empty space within the hollowed ovoid form of the bird-like-with-curved-wings hull. Not *this* ship; built in the most famous saucer-secondary hull-twin nacelles on elevated pylons configuration of Starfleet's cruisers like the legendary starship Enterprise, the Horizon was truly immense. It was also full of the most varied crew ever found outside a mercenary unit. Romulans and Klingons and almost all other spacefaring cultures were homogeneous societies where different people were either enslaved or forced into a subservient role; there were practically never anything else but Klingons on a Klingon ships, Hirogens on Hirogens ships and *Rihann'su* on Romulan ones. Here, by the time S'Tan had crossed the almost one kilometer from his quarters to main engineering, even in the restricted confines of the turbolift, he had crossed path with at least a dozen different species; Humans and Vulcans of course but also the half-insect, half mammalian Andorians, feline Caitians, hairy porcine Tellarites, blue-seal-like Bolians, nose-ridged Bajorans... even an incredible three-legged, three armed Edoan. Much more amazing however were the obvious hybrids among this crew; a half-Vulcan, a half-Klingon, mixed races of Humans... It was hard for a Klingon of mixed blood to ever survive, let alone succeed in their Empire; it was unheard of in the Romulan Empire; and certainly not in their navy. But here, in the United Federation of Planets, even in Starfleet, Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations was not just a philosophical view; it was a thriving reality.

Even one from an alleged self-declared enemy state was welcomed.

When the Romulan engineer reached the thick double doors that gave access to the main engineering section of the colossal starship, he was greeted by two security guards. One was Human, pale of hair and skin, with a heavy-lidded stare that gave the impression that he was daydreaming. The other was a Saurian, nearly two meters tall, sleek red skin with black scales and enormous unblinking yellow eyes. That was another thing peculiar to this ship; security aboard was even tighter than on a starbase. Not only were all the vital areas of the ship guarded by a pair of armed officers sporting not only a hand phaser and a very atypical pair of combat knives strapped to their boots, but his arrival on board had been so heavy with security measures it would have made anyone think he was targeted as a spy; boarding the ship was only allowed through the ship's own systems and control, scanning and sensory checks done before, during and after coming or leaving cross-checked with recorded orders and files... and all that while in condition blue!

Only Romulans were usually that paranoid. But then again, this was the latest, most advanced vessel in Starfleet and the flagship of Lotus Fleet, it's most elite division, who's headquarters were right at the door of both Klingon and Romulan empires and facing the tip of the infamous Delta Quadrant from where Borg, Hirogens and Undines had come; and at their back, the sector of space were had raged most of the Dominion war. being too cautious was certainly not a sin here.

On seeing the two security officers, S'Tan immediately started thinking about possible defensive positions to take. He tensed his muscles and prepared for an assault. Although he assumed that this was just a standard operating procedure, he was positive that the Tal'Shair already had a death-mark on his life, and he would not be caught unawares. The fact that there was so much security onboard was not lost on him either. He made a mental note to check to see where the security was most stationed: logical high security locations, or just areas that he frequented...

"One moment, Sir, if you please."

That came from the heavy-lidded eyes blond man. He entered a few commands on a wall panel, checked the readouts of a small monitor, eyed the blade at the Romulan's hip, checked once again then nodded to his reptilian comrade before turning again to S'Tan.

"Access to engineering as Chief Engineer and too all sensitive areas of the Horizon is confirmed for you, Lieutenant. The doors will now open when you will come, provided you wear your combadge. It's unique signal will be matched with the brainwave scan and biometric readings of the door's sensors to confirm your identity and allow you entry. Security inside main engineering and all accross the ship is now informed of you being here. Welcome aboard, Sir."

"Very good soldier. Has any of my other staff checked in yet? I know Humans are notorious for wanting the maximize their R&R, so they usually arrive as late as possible, correct?" He questioned the blond security officer.

To be frank, S'Tan didn't want to meet anyone yet. He was not the greatest people person, and he saw the looks he was getting while walking to engineering. Additionally, he still was not fully confident in his ability to keep such a sophisticated warp drive online for long periods of time. He needed time to do his own research onboard, where the security systems were open for his use, versus on the Starbase...

Listening with obvious attention to the new chief enginner's question, the security officer had but the faintest of smiles on hil small lips.

"Ensign De Paul, if you would please, Lieutenant; and this is Ensign S'hississ. I suppose you might beleive so, Sir; but this is the flagship; if you are here, it's because you're the best at what you do; so is everyone else aboard. Moreover, this is Lotus Fleet's flagship; and you do not get to be assigned to Lotus Fleet if you maximize R&R instead of work. But most of all, this is Captain Kheren's ship; you don't stay aboard, let alone get aboard, if you do not strive to do your best. Captain Kheren is a very patient commander.. but he is not a tolerant one."

The young blond man returned to an attention posture.

"Gamma shift is in there, Lieutenant. I beleive you will find them eager to meet you and to start working with you right away... if you feel up to it, of course. You're the boss around here now, Sir."

"Excellent, Mr De Paul. Mr Hissssss, as you were soldiers."

S'Tan nodded to the two officers and walked into engineering. As he ventured to the room, he was awe-struck by the design of the room. Everything was efficient and spacious. Very unlike the Romulan engineering rooms; they were tight, dark and not to mention incredibly dangerous thanks to the singularity. After taking in the view, he strode quickly towards his office and sealed the door. He had never had his own office before. Like with his quarters, the Romulan ships did not feel that officers needed their own rooms.

What was there to hide? was always the excuse given to any crewmen foolish enough to ask. But now? Now he had his own room to store any data that he found interesting without anyone ever knowing. He sat down behind his desk and the display lit up, showing him the current status of the Horizon. All systems were either offline or in docked mode. He leaned back in his chair contently.

This is cause for celebration, he thought.

Looking around, he discovered a replicator alcove.

Yet another difference, he silently joked to himself.

S'Tan walked to the machine and made his request.

"Romulan Ale."

The computer beeped in rejection.

"Romulan Ale is not allowed to be replicated due to current Starfleet Standard Regulations."

He sighed.

"That is something I will need to correct as soon as I get some free time. Fine. Computer, Osol Twist."

He took his cake and sat back down to celebrate by himself.

Someone buzzed at his door.

Since the door was semi-transparent, he could see that beyond waited a rather tall Human woman with long pale hair tied into a ponytail, wearing the same pips as he did on the golden collar of her grey and black uniform.

S'Tan quickly cleaned off his hands.

"Enter."

He would be lying if he said he had wished the door was solid durasteel and he could have ignored the chime. She came in and smiled.

"I'm Patricia Blakely, in charge of Engineering's Gamma shift. Welcome aboard Lieutenant... Solius, is that correct? I will be one of your assistants, along with Lieutenant Robert Baoule who takes charge of Beta shift. I'm pleased to be the first to welcome our new chief engineer." She stood at attention, obviously quite at ease with the change in leadership in the department.

"Gamma shift is about to end and I'm happy to report that all systems are ship shape for departure whenever that will be."

She then smiled again, this time with definite pride.

"I don't know how much familiar you are with recent Starfleet technology, Sir... But wait until you take a good look at our advanced impulse drive and especially our transwarp propulsion system; just let me say, Lieutenant...you're in for a treat."

"Greetings Lieutenant. Yes, I am Lieutenant Solius. Please call me Link. Starfleet suggested I take on a more...non-Romulan name to increase crew acceptance of having an enemy of the state on board. As for the technology...I prefer to fly ships that have only a miniscule chance of spontaneous combustion, but I am indeed interested in learning about the new systems. I have only started reading up on the basics of the new technology, so I am hoping that you will be able to lend me a hand when things get tough."

He smiled at the woman, trying to scan her facial features to detect any hint of disapproval of being skipped over for Chief. Or of the fact that he was Romulan. He couldn't see it, but that was to be expected. Starfleet was always quick to accept new members, even at the cost of angering others.

As if she had read her mind, she smiled again and eased his apprehensions.

"We're here to serve, Sir... Link... I'll be happy to lend a hand, whatever you wish to be called. Regardless of what Starfleet might think, you will never find enemies here, except those that you will wish to have. As for your other concern, well... I myself refused a proposal for chief engineer a while back just to remain under Captain Kheren and get aboard this ship because, for one thing, all other ships will go down in flames before his does; simple statistics, you know; he already went through that."

She was obviously referring to the well known loss of the captain's previous command, the legendary USS Artemis, sacrificed to the fire of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly to help stop it from destroying this universe. Patricia wondered if he was aware as well that, prior to that final act of sacrifice, the Artemis had also used her stardrive to destroy a Scimitar class Romulan dreadnought threatening Starbase Lotus and the whole Azimuth Horizon operation. Being Romulan, *he* might be the one holding a grudge...

She put the thought aside as she became all professional in tone and posture.

"You might want to talk to Robert... Lieutenant Baoule, about our systems; he's our chief expert in propulsion. He's even well cognizant about Romulan singularity drives, the best in Starfleet on the subject... It's something of personal interest to him. I guess the both of you should enjoy talking shop quite a bit."

"Mister Bowl, you say. What an interesting name. I will get in contact with him as soon as I am able. Now, please go get some rest. I fully expect this mission to be...eventful. Dismissed"

She turned to leave, but not quickly enough to hide the grin his awkward pronunciation had brought to her lips. How she would love to be a fly on the wall when her fiancé would meet their new chief and be called a cooking ware... This was going to be a very... interesting mission.

He spun in his chair away from the Lieutenant and began contemplating his new post. Secondary and tertiary chief of engineerings. Yet again, so much was different from Romulan activities. What else could be different. He was sure he would find out. He was most interested in learning how crewmen interacted during a mission. He was used to one hundred percent business, but already knew that was not Starfleet's way. How strange indeed.

* * *

"Told you you could do it without me, didn't I?"

Snowfire smiled brightly at what she was beginning to call her Circle as the numerous psionic members of her department and even some outside of it, pulled back out of the system she'd designed and then programmed for them to practice technopathic interface with. It was a clever little device, not much compared to a starship main computer, but it was easily capable of creating enough cycles to stress people.

The link to the built in medical scanners on the Horizon allowed the device to make sure it didn't push anyone using it too far on the rare occasion that Snowfire or one of her subordinates on the project weren't there to supervise, and over the last several weeks she'd been training the volunteer only group to carry out steadily more complicated technopathic scanning or control routines. She'd managed to beg her way into getting her hands on a set of yes, outdated but still adequate, system patterns from some of the other polities that the Federation had routine conflict with, so that she could train and train her Circle on interfacing with different hierarchies.

But this last one had been the most complex challenge she'd put them through yet.

It was possible, hard, but possible, to interface with computers from a distance using Technopathic techniques. You lost quite a bit of fine control and raw power when you did so, but in a group, it was possible to lay all of that on an extended group of anchors. The Circle had been working on that sort of thing for about a week now, but this was the first time that Snowfire had set up a test where she wasn't in the link to help them. They'd had to find the system they needed to access, get inside of it and then successfully run through one of the more complex control routines in the face of steadily increasing cycle output. She'd known it had been a major test of their abilities, especially when she'd placed them in a room on the opposite side of the starbase from where she'd placed the system, but they'd done it and the pride in her voice was anything but fake.

They'd all had the basic skills to boost and transfer, every person capable of psionics did, but most had never even contemplated the idea that it was actually possible. Naomi, one of her lab assistants who had no psionic abilities to contribute, was nevertheless having a field day with all the data they were producing for her and Snowfire saw some very interesting reports in her future. All to the good that, and she'd managed to reconcile some pieces of the Oath she'd sworn a bit further. It had taken some actual conversation with her sister but the traffic control on the Starbase were actually beginning to get used to the Sunstream at last. Acting as Voice for her clan, Starseeker had several stages of the Oath released on Snowfire's request; hence the current all but public training sessions.

That brought other thoughts to her mind for a moment. The looks Starseeker had given her into some of the evolving views on the Federation were...complicated. They weren't bad, and that was a true relief, but they were too hazy to be called good either. The factions in and out of the Council were shifting around, and although the view on the Federation was becoming more accepting, the fact that the Vision hadn't formed yet was a worry. And then there was Shatterglass's idea that there was something beneath the surface here, stealthily directing action and reaction.

It was...well, it would be crazy but for the fact that Snowfire had been a member of the *Talya*. She'd asked Star to take back a message to 'Glass to keep looking, but to do so *carefully*. She'd also sent back several sealed dispatches to her old commander in the *Talya* and two more for contacts in the Illythirii Defense Force. Even after her reaction to Vanguard, the last genocidal operation of her people before the Great Change, she had pull in the IDF, and honestly, it was about time she started using it.

But here...here was something that certain members of the High Command were going to burst blood vessels over when they heard about it. There was nothing they could do about it, because she'd had the sections of her vow pertaining to them released, but it would be interesting to see the reaction. Yet considering some of the things she and the crew of the Horizon might encounter out in the black, this sort of practice was probably a very good thing.

And she really had to get around to inviting Councillor Lyrya to sit in and join these sessions. She'd not wanted to so far because of...just feelings, in the end. But with those on the way to at least temporary resolution, it was workable. She'd ask...soon. And that brought her back to the moment at hand.

"You know, you said that about being able to beat Engineering at nullball, Ma'am," Daniel, another Human assistant in the Science department, replied with a tired chuckle.

"Well, you did, didn't you?"

Her smile was teasing, but only gently, and half of the Circle groaned theatrically.

"Yes, Ma'am."

They chorused jokingly, and she laughed herself.

"Well then..." She shook her head, then her smile returned to one of simple pride and her voice softened. "But seriously, you've done incredibly well getting this far in only a few weeks. Give it a bit more practice and I'll honestly pity anyone that tries to force their way into the heads of anybody on the Horizon. Even if they're stronger than any of us individually, very few species actually know how to merge their psionic potential like I've taught you to do. And when you take the Horizon and match it with an ability to tap the empathic net, you produce a level of protection that is very rare."

She left the words 'outside of my people' unsaid.

"Anyway, that's all for today. Break to quarters, and I'll see you at the next meeting."

The group broke up quickly at that, usually some stayed late to talk with her but today had been very tiring so just about everyone wanted to get back to their quarters and get some rest. Snowfire, on the other hand, had some more correspondence to finish. She reached her room on the Horizon quite quickly, the ever constant but deftly unobtrusive security measures were almost unregistered by her now.

She sat down on the chair Star had brought for her from home. It had always been her favourite. She sat there for a long few moments, simply taking in the feel of the piece of furniture that was very distinctly of her people, and then reached for the PADD on the desk in front of her.

Playtime was over; she had some work to do.

It was only minutes after that a subspace message was forwarded to her personally. Then, for a while, she just sat there after she called up the message when it came in, as if incapable of fully understanding the words formed by the letters of the message in front of her.

She'd never...not for a moment even considered, even after she'd heard the Captain recommend it... She blinked a few times, then peered at the display again, at the text that might be able to both set her free of her past and be the spark for a conflict that could swallow all she loved and tried to stay calm.

It was difficult.

A simple message really though, acknowledging receipt of a request made by her Captain, to have her fully accepted as a commissioned Starfleet officer and not just an exchanged one from her homeworld... and laying the matter now in her hands. As expected by the Federation, leaving it to her. Then again, as far as they knew the choice was hers. And honestly it was, but it also wasn't that simple. She shook herself, then hit a button to transfer the message to her PADD.

She had no idea what to do. But she did know that there was someone who might be able to help her figure out what she *wanted* to do.

It was a short walk to the captain's quarters from her own and she barely even noticed the crew around her nodding as she passed, lost in a world thrown abruptly sideways. Definitely not long enough for her to settle herself, or work out what she was going to say. Yet she knew her Captain, and if anything words from the heart should reach him. Some might not think so, but she knew better. She'd seen him very close to his worst. Not many could say that.

Even then, she hesitated at the door to his quarters, fidgeting in a display quite unlike her usual self as she looked from the PADD to the key on the door half a dozen times in quick succession.

She must have looked utterly shell-shocked. She was.

Would he really...of course he would. And what about...stupid; one of them's a Councillor.

She shook herself again. She hadn't come this far just to back out now. Not a chance. She was better than that. So with that set in her mind, Snowfire took a deep breath and touched the button linked to the room's admission chime.

The door slid open and at the same time she heard falling water in the background, there he was, wearing a casual attire she had never seen him in before. It looked somewhat like a training outfit except that the forearms and shins were tight-fitted into what looked like wrappings of white, silky fabric while the rest of the costume was very loose fitting. The front of the shirt was partially open and revealed part of his muscular chest and a wide angry scar across it, obviously a phaser burn. He himself was glistening with sweat and a distinct fruity scent rose from him.

"Lieutenant Commander K'Leysha; sorry about my appearance. I just came back from a training session with Tyvya. But what brings you into this neighborhood?"

"I..."

She fumbled the words, trying to work out exactly what she wanted to say even now. Goddess take it all, leave it to the truth! She held up the PADD with the single loaded entry and passed it across to him with a shaky hand.

"This."

She stopped, and for a moment it seemed as if she would wait for a reply as he took the PADD. But then she looked straight at him, and there was no mistaking the confusion and pain wrestling within her. And her next words were as a plea.

"Why?"

Kheren took the PADD and merely glanced at it, knowing full well what this was all about. After all, he was the one who had initiated the possibility. He motioned for her to enter the room and let the door slide behind her. He guided her into an adjoining office where they would be both alone. It was a smaller version of his ready room, a personal workspace with but three chairs including his own around a crescent-shaped desk with a single terminal on the left side. There was a replicator slot on a wall and, on the other, a bronze ship's dedication plaque; that of the USS Artemis, his first command. The only other feature in the otherwise spartan room was a small glassy table on which rested a translucent tridimensional chessboard.

Once they were both in he handed her back the PADD and looked straight at her with all four oculars.

"Because you earned it. The real question is; do we?"

"I..." Snowfire shook her head, drawing in a deep breath as she fought for control, then looked right back across at Kheren. "It isn't that simple, Captain." She said finally, gentle fingers tapping momentarily on her uniform. "And it's not wholly my choice choice to make."

She shook her head sharply to prevent any possible interruption.

"Trust me, it isn't. I swore an oath Captain; to serve and protect my people, and that is not something within my ability to break."

She sighed.

"We take our oaths very seriously. Captain. Never sworn rashly, in anger or in sorrow. But sworn in foreknowledge and willingness under the eyes of the Goddess. It's why we swear so few." Black fingers tapped again on white fabric.

"I can't make this choice until I know that in doing so I will not make myself an Oathbreaker." Kheren clearly heard the capital letter on that word. "To do otherwise would destroy me, my family, and any chance of peace between our peoples. Not because I have no freedom, I do, but because in this I chose to give up my freedom over three hundred years ago. And if I am to make this choice, I must do so in freedom. But does the Federation deserve me? Does this ship, this crew?"

Her eyes softened.

"Of course it does, Captain."

"Glad to hear it," the Andorian answered. "As for your concerns; yes, Lieutenant-Commander, it *is* that simple. Putting aside the fact that the Federation would never threaten your people, or any other people in the first place, Starfleet would never ask you to forsake your kind, your heritage or yourself just for the sake of the uniform. What Starfleet will ask of anyone choosing to wear it's uniform is to swear an oath to the Truth, to the preservation of Peace, to the respect of all Life, especially Sentient Life; and with and through all that, to protect the Federation from all threats with one's full capabilities and even with one's own life."

He made a pause before resuming what he obviously deeply believed in.

"It is a deep, serious and far reaching commitment, yes. But most of all, it is one taken consciously and freely. Anytime one find that the requirements of his faith, his culture, his species or his homeworld, or of his personal beliefs and allegiances make one unable to fulfil this commitment, then one is free and urged to resign from Starfleet... or forget wearing that uniform."

His four eyes went straight at those of the Illythirii woman before him.

"Let us play a hypothetical scenario here; imagine that you decide to serve in Starfleet as a full-fledged officer; then, after years of obeying it's rules and chain of command, of exemplary dedication to Starfleet objectives and Federation ideals... the Illythirii declare war on the Federation. What would you want to do?"

"I would want to stop it." Snowfire replied, her eyes suddenly dark. "But if the Council declared war, it would be from a position of what they believed to be total superiority. My reports on the Nemesis have shown that the Federation is capable of constructing what we would call true warships. The data already gathered on the Horizon and Phoenix pointed to the possibility and the Nemesis confirmed it, yet even then the UFP is terribly outgunned."

She looked down at her hands, seeing in her mind the blood that coated them from Operation Vanguard.

The Andorian's antennae curved inward in their typical smile.

"The Federation has been outgunned by it's enemies since the the very beginning of it's existence; from the Earth-Romulan war of the 22nd century to our last war with the Borg two years ago. Outgunning us will in no way guarantee victory ; the Borg annihilated themselves before us because of such crude misjudgment. As they say on Earth; what matters is not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog."

The black skinned woman looked up at Kheren for a long moment, a minor war raging in her mind as images flashed across her mind. Kheren didn't have to be empathic to recognise that look. There was worry there, deeper worry than he'd ever seen from the Lieutenant Commander, and a very gently rebuke behind it, but then she shook her head and the look vanished as she continued.

"But that...that isn't the point and I can't go any further talking about it anyway." She looked back up. "The choice to join Starfleet is mine, but it is not one I can make without being freed from the oath I swore to the IDF. And for that I need time to talk to them. I know you will accept that, but can you *understand* it?"

"More than you will ever realize," answered Kheren with a far away look in his silvery eyes. But it lasted only a moment. "You would want to stop it, you say. Now, there would be two ways to go about this; help us do it as a Starfleet officer, using our rules, our methods, our tools... or resign and go back to your people and try to stop it from that end. The key point here is your freedom of choice; to be free to either stay or go and thus achieve your goal as *you* think is the best way. And to that question, the answer is; you would be completely free to stay and help or go back to your people. Then, as of now, the choice would be and *is* yours alone."

He looked pointedly at her.

"Freedom and free will are not just words for us; they are the core values of our lives and what we wish even to our enemies, what we protect and cherish as much as Peace and Knowledge. Starfleet is not a conscripting institution; neither is the Federation. We never even ask someone to join us; we *offer* the opportunity... and only to those who can freely and willingly understand and accept to uphold what we believe in. If the other party truly and knowingly believe it would be mutually beneficial, it can then join us and share our values, our methods and our goals... and in the process, enrich us with it's own uniqueness. "

He pointed at her and at himself in turn.

"Infinite diversity in infinite combinations; that is the true nature of the Federation; it's *true* strength. That is why no bigger gun ever could triumph over us. I could tell you that joining fully our ranks will allow you access to what we have, what we are, especially in Starfleet; you would fully gain our trust and allowed access even to our dreams. But in truth, it is what you will bring to us that will be most valuable; your richness and your uniqueness, and that of your people through you. And hopefully ours to you... and eventually one day to your own kind. To grow together bigger and better than the sum of us. That is our wish; but it will be *your* decision... and yours alone. "

Kheren then crossed his callused hands behind his back, taking Starfleet's formal attention stance.

"Take all the time you want. Your fate is, and always shall be in your hands. In the meantime, your help will be, as always, most appreciated."

"Thank you Captain." Snowfire nodded, standing slowly. the nerves and worry gone or at the very least subsumed now. Yet she paused a moment before taking her leave. "Before I leave though, I would like to make sure you know something. I volunteered to join the IDF, Captain. I joined it because I saw in it a means to enrich our people in a way very similar to Starfleet, and in many ways I have been proven right. I swore the Oath to them in clear mind and with full willingness, it could not have been made entire without both those things, and all who have become part of the IDF before or since have made the same choice. Simply...remember that, Captain. One day you might have to."

He straightened to look squarely at her.

"Glad to hear your people and ours share similar outlooks and values... and that you do believe firmly in them, Lieutenant-Commander. But I will be frank with you; having to deal between them and us, *that* is *your* problem, *not* mine. I am the captain of this ship and I stand for Federation ideals, for Starfleet's way and all the values both try to make true in this universe. And as long as you will serve on this ship, you will do the same, regardless of your personal reasons behind it or how you want to dress yourself. But, the moment you think you might be in conflict with the requirements of this service and your former life, oath or beliefs and freely decide choosing the latter is the moment you will leave this ship. Do I make myself clear, Lieutenant-Commander Snowfire K'Leysa of the Ilythirii?"

"Crystal." She replied quietly, and there was a sadness in the word, as if Kheren had missed something terribly important. But she didn't speak further.

She came to attention for a short moment, nodded once, and then withdrew. She'd need to get a message off before the Horizon's next mission came through, and she had a file of personal correspondence that she really had to reply to.

* * *

After spending time exploring the fleet starbase and procuring both personal and professional requisitions, the Orion Ops officer of the flagship transported directly back to the Horizon. This time though, there were no security concerns regarding this olive-green skinned woman outfitted in full starfleet attire boarding this vessel. In fact, the security team were all very congenial and accommodating as they conducted their thorough security protocols upon her arrival.

Moments after the formalities had concluded, Lieutenant Elisha Leône stepped inside her quarters and swiftly deposited her procurements temporarily on her bed. She then carefully removed a variety of wrapped items from the large satchel, cautiously unwrapped each one and then selectively arranged them individually around her quarters. It was her intention now they she had made it through her first mission on the Horizon to embellish her quarters with a more personal and artistic touch.

This was the first individual quarters that Elisha had ever had bestowed upon her and the comfort this brought was not lost on this woman who endured and survived a very perilous upbringing.

After Elisha finished modestly redecorating her quarters, she followed a path back to the turbolift and directed it to deck 19. After stepping out of the lift, the Orion casually strolled past a series of crew quarters, the hydroponics facility and thus arrived upon her destination: the ship's Arboretum.

The Ops officer entered the sizable room and deeply inhaled the scent of fresh vegetation all around her. Her duty shift would not begin for a while yet, so she strolled slowly among the greenery for a while, touching and observing the varied flora and fauna as she found her way to a secluded location surrounded by a variety of interestingly scented flowers. Elisa then elected to sit on a small bench nearby and closed her eyes, allowing herself an opportunity to relax and get lost in a multitude of scattered thoughts.

She heard soft footsteps nearing her position. The soft padding of feet stopped a moment. Then an equally soft-spoken tone of voice was heard.

"I apologize for intruding, Lieutenant. There is rarely anyone in this part of the arboritum so i did not expect to find you here."

The voice was sincere but completely devoid of warmth or any other emotion. It could only belong to a Vulcan. And indeed it was Ensign S'Kon, one of the security officers that were serving under Captain Kheren since the days the Andorian had been an Ensign himself and chief of security and tactical aboard the former flagship, the USS Lotus.

"It was not my intention to disturb your meditation. I will find another spot."

Upon hearing the unanticipated voice address her, Elisha immediately popped open her eyes and stood up to observe the even more unexpected Vulcan security officer standing before her. With her hands carefully clasped behind her back, she offered a slight bow to the ensign.

"There is no need for that, Ensign. I am Elisha Leône and do not claim any of these spots for my own. You are welcome to have a seat and join me for a moment... if you aren't too busy."

The Vulcan obviously was taken aback by the response. For a moment, he just stood there, looking at her with his slanted black eyes, puzzlement raising slightly one arched eyebrow of his triangular face near the square line of his short-cropped jet black hair. Then he bowed slightly to her and took the offered space on the bench.

"Delta shift is still in effect for the next fifteen point fifty-three minutes. I was just looking for a peaceful and isolated spot before I attended my usual security duties at transporter room 1. However, sharing this moment with you will prove a welcomed opportunity to break the routine; something important to do in my line of work."

He sat very straight and as far as possible from her as he could on the bench, yet facing her, not ignoring her at all. He was looking at her in a far away manner that showed that he did not concentrate on any specific part of her but looked her in her entirety and even included their immediate surroundings. His voice remained even and almost cold, yet his eyes were inquisitive as much as his words.

"You did a remarkable performance as a newly assigned junior officer during our maiden voyage to the edge of the galaxy; especially when we were confronted with the Khan Noonien Singh-impersonating artificial intelligence that controlled the warship Nemesis at that asteroid Jem'Hadar refugee camp hidden in the nebula."

It was not so much praise as it was an assessment of her as a fellow officer. Vulcans as a rule would not indulge in stroking someone else's ego since they had none of their own by virtue of their implacable self-imposed logic and rejection of feelings and emotions. They were however creatures of vast curiosity with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and understanding.

Elisha's smooth, flawless complexion deepened to a slightly darker shade of green as she blushed in response to the unintended praise received from the Vulcan security officer.

"Thank you Ensign for your kind words."

Then turning to face the Vulcan directly as he sat down, she continued.

"I also find that a break in routine is always a welcome opportunity for me as well; even though I haven't been here long enough to establish too many of them," she noted with a smile.

"Lieutenant; since we are now engaging in conversation for our mutual enlightenment, may I ask you a question of a personal nature?"

"Not at all Ensign. What did you want to ask?" Kalynda inquired back to the Vulcan security officer.

"You are from Orion; and you are female. As current data would state, the Orions are still unable as much as they are unwilling to join the Federation mainly due to their centuries old practice of slavery... which includes the females of their own kind. History told us that the real enslavement however was done by the women themselves over the men, through the remarkable power of their interspecies-affecting sexual pheromones. Assuming this to be true, why would you desire to pursue a career in Starfleet, a life path that would certainly be much less easy and profitable for you personally?"

Initially, Elisha was not only surprised by the nature of the question, but personally insulted by its derogatory presumption. She felt a flash of anger ignite within her that she had to consciously restrain before responding back to the Vulcan. Yet somehow she also wanted to laugh hysterically at this absurdity as well. It was a most unpleasant dichotomy brewing within her.

It took a few moments, but once she had reined-in some control over both antagonistic reactions, she looked back directly at the Vulcan to respond.

"Should I equally assume Ensign that you as a Vulcan selected your career pursuits and choices based primarily on your neurochemical imbalances during Pon far? she inquired rhetorically.

Elisha then retreated somewhat as she consciously tried to address his inquiry more straightforwardly.

"It is exactly that type of presumption, Ensign, based on my heritage and gender, that motivated me to not only be drawn into Starfleet, but to prevail despite such conjectures that I have had to endure and confront throughout my life... even as I fought to gain acceptance into the Academy itself "

She managed to respond with civility and poise; although still feeling rather offended.

Elisha then turned away for a moment as she still fought to regain her composure. She knew rationally that this was merely an inquiry by a rather curious Vulcan and not meant as a personal insult. Yet the nature of his deduction unintentionally stung Elisha at her core. Nevertheless, she was determined to somehow enlighten this fellow officer rather than lash out at him as she may have instinctively been compelled to do.

Closing her eyes again for a moment, she began to center herself.

"I was brought into existence by parents that I have never even met and then abandoned far outside of Federation domain from a line of such slave traders Ensign. From that moment on, I had to physically and psychologically battle my way to even survive. As a child, I had never known what it was to be provided with long-term shelter, steady meals, any sense of security or even a hint of compassion enduring that way of life."

She then opened her eyes and responded candidly to the Vulcan.

"There were no profits that held any meaning to me to be gained abiding such a lifestyle Ensign, only continued exploitation. There were no opportunities to succeed beyond that which my physical endowments had brought me at a very young age... along with the countless waves of relentless pursuers that wanted to possess and use me."

Slowly breathing in the fresh aroma of the striking flowers nearby also aided Elisha as she continued.

"My pheromones along with my physical appearance could be an extremely potent weapon on most males as you insinuated Ensign... beyond that which you as a Vulcan could even imagine. But I possess other gifts too that no one around me was even willing, let alone able to see. But they were there... deep inside of me... longing to be acknowledged and given a chance to be examined and explored. But such opportunities were never available to me... when merely perceived as a very desirable, young Orion female to everyone. That is, until I was finally able to escape into Federation space."

Elisha then reached up and picked off one of the fragrant flowers and brought it close to her face. She examined it as she inhaled its sweet fragrance.

"Like this flower Ensign, most sentient beings that come across it see only its beauty and appreciate its appealing scent. But this particular flower also possesses many medicinal values beyond its superficial appearance and aroma. Fortunately, there were others that were able to see beyond its exterior and discover how useful this flower could be as a healing agent for a variety of species. Perhaps it is one of the reasons why it is here in the arboretum on this ship... or maybe it is just here for its sensory appeal."

Looking quizzically at the Vulcan, she inquired further.

"What would you speculate, Ensign?"

"Speculation is a pointless exercise when empirical data and validated information is readily available, Lieutenant. Vulcans do not... speculate. The first use of a ship's arboretum on starships is to supplement artificial air recycling processes with organic sources. Beyond that purely utilitarian function, it also serves as a psychological and sensory support for most sapient life forms during long space travels. Even Vulcans find this a preferred environment for meditation and rest than cabin walls or even a holodeck recreation. As a complementary benefit, an arboretum allows study and observation of a closed ecosystem and the build up of a small source of vegetarian dietary products and, as you aptly pointed out, medicinal plants, roots and herbs, again to supplement standard stores. On a security standpoint, the presence of unknown harmful microorganisms left undetected by internal ship sensors could also possibly be noticed early if the more delicate living organisms here start to show signs of alteration."

He then nodded to her fractionally.

"On the same note, and with all due respect, I did not insinuate anything, Lieutenant. I merely wanted to pursue a line of inquiry from a most reliable source to better understand a people that has been eluding us for centuries. There was no intention to judge or criticize your people or you personally, only to understand. However, despite my warning, I seem to have elicited in you a negative emotional response. Please accept my apologies. Emotions is not something that we Vulcans understand all that well as we are born and bred to weed them out of ourselves. I have caused you discomfort with my inquiry. I shall discontinue immediately and leave you to allow you to regain your inner harmony. With your permission, Lieutenant."

And so saying, he nodded again to leave her be.

* * *

After finishing her basic training Second Lieutenant Alexandria Somers was waiting for her ship to come in. During this wait, she went back to the day when she had told her Father of her career plans. Now her father was a retired Colonel in the SFMC and still held that rank, but in an honorary capacity, as he was an influential Ambassador to the outer Klingon Colonies. She lived on a vast estate, expensive looking and reeked of wealth as the Ferengi mentality would have it; as it was the twenty-fifth century on the old Terran calendar, it thus still looked majestic and, while her family was looking richer than the Ferengi Grand Nagus, the economy of this century was such that only Gold Pressed latinum was the frontier currency when such crude awkward economics were ever needed. But on Earth in the Eurasian Territories once known as United Kingdom, in a country once known as Wales, no such currency was needed since the founding of the United Federation of Planets.

Alex remembered; she was walking joyfully up her path to her family estate with a big smile happy with the choice, as she entered her home and got a look from her father.

Oh hell, he knows, she thought.

"What is it daddy?" she asked.

Samuel Somers was a hulk of a man. He looked tough and acted such and in truth he was and his look could melt duranium. Now his look was directed at his daughter.

"Dammit Alex, why did you enlist in the Starfleet Marine corps? I wanted better for you! By all rights you should have followed your mother into the diplomatic corps; after all, you can be quite skilled at negotiation when you need be."

She gave her father one of her 'I am cute and you know it poses.' He softened a little, but not much. And when he was upset, he spoke in the Welsh Gaelic tongue.

"Namyn paham a Marine 'n ieuanc Arglwyddes?"

But why a Marine Young Lady? Alex replied back Do you not know dad that I am more like you than I am mother? In the same dialect.

"Gwna 'ch mo adnabod dad a Dwi hychwaneg cara 'ch na Dwi fam?"

He sighed heavily and absently scratched his head.

"Paham nei hon ata? ach yn cerdded at anrhega 'm rhyw 'n frith blew"

Alex switched to English.

"Why am I doing this to you? Going to give you some grey hairs? Aw c'mon dad, you know I was heading in this direction; otherwise, you would not have put me through basic Klingon combat training on Boreth... but I am sorry, Daddy" she said hugging him.

He sighed heavily and hugged his daughter back and kissed her on the top of her head.

"You know, honey, you are absolutely correct and I could never stay mad at you" he said with affection all anger now gone. "Also there will come a time when you will be asked to make a choice, whatever you decide I will support it."

She breaks away and looks up at him and suddenly...

Suddenly Alex was back in the present.

"The USS Horizon has just docked, all newly assigned personnel can board in five minutes" The computer voice said.

"Oh well" She said. Then got a good look at her new ship.

"In the name of all that is holy!"

She exclaimed at seeing the largest ship she had ever seen. It was nearly as long as half the starbase itself; so immense that, despite having clearly over forty decks and a visible neck linking her forward saucer section to her elongated lower secondary hull at the end of which protruded a pair of straight angled pylons under elongated flattened warp nacelles, it still looked almost as slim and low profiles as a twenty or so decks and neckless Sovereign class.

"Heads up lads our ride is here," she said to her ten Marines behind her.

As they came to the transporter room, the transporter chief greeted them by asking for their boarding orders. Once looked over, they were transmitted to the barely docked starship.

"Please wait; I need to transfer transporter control to the Horizon."

Seeing their expected raised eyebrows, the chief smiled thinly to explain the unusual protocol.

"Sorry people, but this is the flagship; even more so, this is Captain Kheren's ship. By his express order, no one is to beam in or out except through the ship's own transporter grid."

"May I ask why," coldly said Somers.

"Their security protocol will have you analysed on a subatomic level, identified with your genetic, biometric and encephalographic data from Starfleet Command cross-referenced with your boarding orders and checked for any alteration before being materialized on their transporter pad. In yellow alert conditions, that pad would also be encircled within a level 10 forcefield and a full security detachment. And don't be alarmed when you find out all your gear is not beamed with you; everything will be scanned in transit and all but replicated clothing sent to the appropriate location within the ship; weapons in the armory, personal effects in assigned quarters and so on. And ship security will take charge of you once you're aboard. And one word to the wise; those security officers have been trained for years by the captain himself and one of his wives well beyond the stringest requirements of Starfleet and fought everything from Klingons to Borg. Believe me, these people know how to dance. So be nice." Ten minutes later the eleven Marines board the Horizon. They were greeted by a standard 6 man-squad Starfleet security, at their head a towering Andorian Giantess that made even the tallest men among them look like kids. One thing the marines noticed instantly was that they were all of various species, including a Betazoid, a Caitan, a Vulcan and another Andorian among them; the second thing they noticed was that all had a pair of combat knives strapped to their boots, one evidently meant for throwing.

"Welcome aboard the Horizon," greeted the Andorian giantess. "I am Lieutenant Tyvya, acting chief of security. You men will be guided by these fine officers to your assigned quarters and debriefed about ship protocols."

She then turned to look down from her towering height at Alex, recognizing her leadership of the incoming squad. She was not smiling; Andorians didn't have enough facial muscles to do so. But the tone of her voice was polite as much as professional, soft as much as firm.

"I guess you will want to report in immediately to the captain. Please follow me.

Alex turned to her men.

"I will go seek out the Captain" She said and left her men to be guided through the immense vessel by the security detachment.

As her men went to their assigned quarters and settled in, Alex followed Tyvya along a long hallway and into a turbolift.

"Captain's Ready Room" she said when the doors had closed.

Minutes after she had left her troops she was standing outside the Captain's Ready room as the imposing Tyvya pressed the buzzer.

"Come."

The voice from the other side of the door was deep and soft at the same time, a sound of controlled power like the hum of a warp core. Tyvya let Somers enter but stayed outside as the door slid shut behind the Marine officer.

The Captain of the starship Horizon stood up to greet her. He was as tall as her and looked quite athletic to Human eyes; which meant that he was massive for an Andorian. His skin was a deep indigo color, darker than any Andorian, making his typical white hair stand out in almost as sharp a contrast as his silvery eyes. The antennae on his head were located farther back, marking him as of the Thalassan subspecies rather than from the more familiar Bishee. And they were making very unusual moves as they lowered towards the woman, like the eye-stalks of a snail.

He did not extend his hands in greeting in the customary Human manner popular in Starfleet. Andorians did not like to be touched by strangers. But heavy calluses were still clearly visible on his hands, like those of ancient martial arts masters back on Earth. His movements also betrayed a lifetime of training and spoke of a harsh, dangerous, unforgiving existence.

Yet, his eyes were friendly even if his face was austere and his voice perfectly balanced between stern professionalism and respectful congeniality.

Alex instantly noted that he was not the typical Andorian. His movements on the other hand were cat-like. Alex instantly knew he was typical of his kind in this; he was a warrior. It was disconcerting to see such a powerfully built Andorian, especially considering that, as a rule they were routinely twice as strong as any Human, whatever of their four genders they belonged to. As she lowered her salute, the Captain spoke.

"Lieutenant Somers... please take a seat. Can I get you anything?"

Taking the offered seat and her minimal diplomatic training came out, especially the way she sat and looked at him.

"Bloodwine please, Captain" she responded and found the chair quite comfy.

Kheren went to the replicator and asked for the famous Klingon beverage and for something he called out as "Captain's Brew", a light grey sirupy liquid with a fishy scent. He gave the bloodwine cup to Somers on his way to his own seat behind the translucent desk where he had apparently been looking at a PADD before she came in.

He did not drink immediately from his glassy cup, putting it on his left as he crossed his powerful hands in front of him on the desk to look at her with all four oculars.

"Have you been made aware of the specific nature of your assignment aboard the Horizon, Lieutenant?"

The question was stated with a warm but firm tone, without any attempt at social amenities. In typical Andorian fashion, the captain wasted no time with small talk or polite pretense and went straight for the heart of the matter.

Alex took a large sip of her replicated Bloodwine.

"Replicated is not the same as the real stuff," she commented, then looked directly at Kheren and she smoothly place the mug on the Captain's desk without looking and sat back with a cat-like ease. Thinking a moment. "As for why I am here, I have no idea, Sir. I was told the Horizon needed the extra Marines so I brought nine others along with me. All of them have, how shall I say, unique skills... as do I."

She spoke looking directly at Kheren with a mischievous smile that played on her lips.

"But other than that, Sir, I have no idea," She finished.

The Andorian nodded, obviously expecting the answer he heard.

"There will be a full briefing session for all senior officers and then a general meeting of the entire crew before we leave the starbase. For the moment, I will just say this; we are heading for a critical diplomatic mission with unparalleled scientific and technical opportunities... involving one of the most dangerous species ever encountered in totally uncharted territory."

He paused for a moment but his four eyes never left those of the Human woman before him.

"This means that we will be away for quite some time in hazardous conditions with no assistance or support while facing unknown dangers."

Then, his voice, still deep and soft, nevertheless took a definite tone of command.

"Obviously, we will need more than the standard security people, even the crack ones I have under my command. We will need real soldiers... but not walking photon grenades. Do you understand what I'm saying here, Lieutenant?"

"I understand Sir; this is why I brought along a group with particular skills, the heavy stuff I will leave up to the Major you already have here. Mine are specialists in their fields," she said after a pause. "Starting with me, I have skills in basic recon and demolitions; I make bombs of all sizes. I am also an expert sniper and can fly any shuttle starfleet currently has in active service, also I have some unofficial training in Diplomacy, thanks to my father and mother," She said with a shudder. "My second in Command, Second Lieutenant Jasmine Donovan has assault skills and she is also a pilot like myself. Then there is Chief Warrant Officer Chris Kildare; his speciality is demolitions as in he defuses them. Warrant Officer Jennifer Griffiths is the dedicated Sniper. Master Sergeant Ioan Jones he is a recon specialist."

She paused for effect. He didn't even seem to notice. Obviously, he was not sensitive to theatrics. That reassured her because Andorians were known for their volatile temper.

"Gunnery Sergeant Jefferson Thomas is the unit's heavy weapons guy. Sergeant Sarah Jane is our rifleman. then we have Selerib Shran, the unit's Andorian Tech and resident computer hacker. Klingon Corporal Du'Ralle is our marine and assault specialist. Then we have Corporal T'Lania, my Vulcan Assault and Communications Specialist. Finally, the Romulan T'Rrhaien Llewii; she is our spy and, when needed, the unit's Intelligence expert."

There was a long pause before Kheren spoke. Clearly, he was not impressed.

"Fly-jockeys, saboteurs, spies and sharpshooters we can have by the dozens. What we really need and is most rare, is having those skills *and* that diplomatic acumen *you* have, Lieutenant. That and discipline and a cool head that never forgets *why* we are out here in the first place. That is why *you* were called in, Lieutenant Somers, *not* your team. Your team, you are free to choose and prepare and lead... but under my authority, as I myself must answer to Starfleet Command... and Starfleet to the Federation Council. I want this to be perfectly clear; we need thinking, peacekeeping soldiers for such a delicate and dangerous mission, not a Dirty Dozen."

Alex did not like the look she was getting.

"I was not told the type of mission I would be needed for, Sir, so I brought a selection of Marines that will fill any situation," Alex said by way of explanation as she took another swig of her Bloodwine.

The Andorian for his part had not yet touched his curious grey beverage. he was entirely focused on her as he answered her unasked question.

"To be honest with you, Lieutenant, nobody knows exactly what we are getting ourselves into. Your foresight here is already a first sign of choosing you being a good decision. "

He paused a moment as if to better gather his thoughts before resuming.

"The only thing we can be sure of is of our own intentions when we will commit ourselves to this endeavor; we are on a mission of peace. We intend to establish, ensure and enforce peace, first, last and throughout it all, whatever happens. That being said, your presence is necessary because we may be on the side of peace, but that does not mean we will be the lone musician if the old lion comes in the glade."

"Ah, I see, the walk softly but carry a heavy pulse cannon in your back pocket approach" she nodded and honestly wondered if the Andorian Captain would understand.

"That is good counsel too, in what seems to await us," agreed Kheren. "But I was referring to a Human Zen philosophy parable. I read in your file that you are proficient in the wakizashi, the short sword of your Earth's antique warriors called the samurai... and adept of their twin-sword Daito Ryu style. I assumed that you would be familiar with that story, a reflection on the spiritual outlook that was what truly made those warriors so efficient."

He took a sip of his curious "Captain's Brew," and went on.

"The story goes like this; once there was a musician, who's music was so pure, so perfect, so beautiful, even the most savage animals stopped to listen. One day that he was in glade playing his flute, all the animals of the forest had gathered around to listen in rapture. Then came a old lion. The old lion looked a moment at the other animals and then at the musician. The lion went to him, killed him and ate him."

The captain made a pause, sipping his drink again before continuing.

"All the other animals were horrified. "What did you do? Why did you kill him and eat him? His art, his music was so perfect... how could you do such a thing?" All the animals, outraged, shouted thus at the old lion. But the old lion kept his back to them and went on his way, not even looking or answering them. The old lion was deaf."

Putting down his cup, Kheren again crossed his fingers on the desk before him.

"In this universe, no matter how good and pure our intentions and actions may be, there are unfortunately still a few deaf lions. But that is no reason to let ourselves get eaten."

She took on the subject of the blades first.

"Well Captain, I use twin wakizashi blades and have done before, as for my outlook its pretty much hack and slash in a melee fight, as my adrenaline runs hot and high; it is also the case of kill or be killed. They never met me," she said with a confident smile as she leaned forward and pulled out a small pole shaped item that was thick but only fifty centimeters in length as she looked at Kheren who was probably wondering what it was; but his face showed no emotion.

Okay, he must have studied on Vulcan, she thought.

"Also Captain even though my blades are in my pack," she told pointing to her kit-bag next to her, "I am always armed."

She held out the short pole up and pressed a small button. A strange but familiar sound of an expanding pole was heard as it stretched into the full length of a quarterstaff. She looked at him with an evil smile.

"I am prepared for anything, Captain," she stated and the reverse of the opening noise was heard as she closed the staff down and deftly replaced it on her belt, then took a sip of her Bloodwine.

"Good... that means you are as well prepared *not* to use it," he pointedly retorted, taking a sip of his brew to make a pause. Then he looked again straight at her. "Being in a killed or be killed situation, backed to a wall and cornered, these are the marks of a stupid, inept fighter, or at least the sure proof that you made a serious error. As my Vulcan teacher would agree; violence is the last argument of the imbecile. When you are down to that kind of dialog, when taking life becomes the only answer to a problem, then, even if you win, you have failed."

He turned his hands up, as if to show the heavy fighter calluses they bore.

"This I know first hand, Lieutenant. And this belief is what is behind every decision I take, especially command ones. And I expect, and *demand*, that all those under my command to know and keep it in mind at all times."

His silvery eyes took a momentary far away look as he continued.

"From my Starfleet record, you might be aware that I made first contact with the X'ell of the Dyson shell found in this quadrant. What you might not be aware of however is that, at the time, my chief engineer admonished repeatedly to crush the Klingons already invading that world and impose our help on the inhabitants. They had refused it outright because they considered us to be violent, moronic, barbarian children, just like the warriors of the three Klingon wings already bombing and invading them. "

It was he now that made a pause for effect.

Good, she thought, he is testing me as well.

"Had I followed my chief's recommendation," he then resumed, "we would have attacked the nine Klingon bird of preys with my sole refitted Ambassador class and then forced our benevolence on the X'ell. Had we won this way, you can imagine the damages and the casualties on both sides... But more to the point, consider this; the X'ell would have never accepted our help, ready to die before betraying their belief as we would have done then... They never would have signed a treaty of cultural, scientific and technical exchange with us... and we would have been in open war with the Klingon Empire in this entire sector for the last two years; a war that would have left us unable to tackle the Azimuth Horizon catastrophe that would have by now destroyed this whole galaxy. More violence, more destruction, more deaths and suffering... up to total oblivion. In short, slugging it out and winning would have been the same as if we had lost to those Klingon ships."

The Andorian sat back, still looking at Alex, his hands again crossed before him. He wanted the marine officer to fully grasp the implications of what he was saying, of what it meant to be under his command. She Locked gazes with Kheren

"I and my troops fully understand Starfleet's position. I did not mention their professions as in to boast, I mentioned their specialities, they will act as Starfleet Officers even though they are marines they will act accordingly."

Now I fully understand why Andorian and Vulcans were at logger-heads for so many decades she thought.

"Papa never raised a stupid girl, Captain. The men I have were hand-picked by my father to accompany me" She said then, becoming bashful. "I think he was thinking of keeping his little girl safe; how little he knows me" adding a bashful smile. "As for my reactions, I have yet to be back into a corner."

She then developed a deadly tone, but it was not directed at anyone; it was a general type of tone.

"I have never been caught in such a close melee situation but I have been trained to get out of them, hopefully on this mission I will not need such skills, I feel that I will need to use my unofficial diplomatic skills, if I understand what you are saying, Captain."

Despite his rigid face, the commanding officer of Lotus Fleet's flagship looked satisfied. At least his voice told it plainly enough.

"I hope for the later and fear the former, Lieutenant... and so does Starfleet. That is why *you* are here and not some stuffy water-blooded diplomat or some berserker, jelly-brained man-at-arms."

He stood up, walked to the narrow window of his office overlooking part of the immense starbase his ship was docked outside of. Without looking at her he spoke with an even tone but one that beared no discussion.

"There are only four ways to go about things, and especially here, Lieutenant; the right way, the wrong way, the Starfleet way and *my* way."

He turned to face her again from accross the room.

"On my ship, the *right* way is *my* way, which so happens is the Starfleet way. So, there is only one way to go *wrong* here. Do I make myself clear, Lieutenant first class Alexandria Somers?"

The last was typically Andorian; using someone's full name was a sure sign that this was as binding as a solemn oath for him.

Despite genetics, you're still traditional Andorian, she thought.

"Is it not always that way, Captain? Be it ship or be it a Starbase?" She asked.

"I wish it was," retorted Kheren with a far away gaze. "There are some officers who sometimes believe that any means are validated by their own personal beliefs, regardless of the consequences on everyone else or on the service. They throw the book away at the first opportunity just because it is so easier and more convenient for them to break the rules and do whatever they fancy is right. To that I say; do not throw the book away before reading the last page."

Again he looked at her. His antennae were now curving inward.

"And if there is still nothing when you get to that last page?" she asked.

"*Then*, it is time to write a new one."

Only her iron discipline prevented her from laughing. But she still smiled coldly and nodded.

"So, beside MCO, what other duties will I be expected to undertake while on this ship?"

"We are about to embark on a critical mission, possibly for an extended period of time, with no help or support; and we are still lacking an assigned chief security and tactical officer. Lieutenant Tyvya has been assuming this task up until now, and quite proficiently; however, she is all too familiar, too much in tune with my way of thinking. And she is Andorian like me. Against what we might be facing, I need someone on the bridge with combat experience and with another way of looking at things, who can come up with something I would *not* think of."

He stood straight before her.

"Do you think you are up to it, Lieutenant?"

She looked at him hiding her shock.

"Yes I am, Captain; don't get me wrong, I am honored, Sir; while the ship is en-route, I will go through all the current procedures and see if I cannot improve on them, I will do all this before coming onto the bridge. I may end up recommending some changes be implemented, but it will be for the better, but I will know more after I done my rounds."

"I am always open to improvement," answered Kheren. "Those protocols are all available on our files but you might prefer to see Lieutenant Tyvya for a complete review of them, which you will probably find among the most elaborate you might have ever seen anywhere. You had a first taste of it when you came aboard. Once I had my ship, the Artemis, almost taken from me by terrorists while I was away; you can rest assured this will never happen again."

There was a determination in his stare, in his voice, that contrasted dangerously with the lack of expression in his dark blue face.

"As for tactical protocols, I make sure everyone under my command follow as rigorously as I do Starfleet's rules of engagement. Those you will have to take up with Starfleet Command if you want to propose any change... and without my support, unless such change follows something akin to your planet's Code of the Shaolin, which is my personal stance as far as conflict is concerned."

Thinking the young woman might not be familiar with that obscure historical reference, he spelled it out.

"Avoid rather than check, check rather than hurt, hurt rather than maim, maim rather than kill; for all life is precious and none can be replaced."

Kheren stood straight as he spoke.

"This was called the Way of the Shaolin by ancient contemplative monks of Earth. You may call it *my* way of dealing with adversity now. But there will be no discussion about the subject, now or hereafter and certainly not if we are facing a combat situation. If you think you can not abide by such rules and prefer a more warlike, murdering stance, I suggest you ask immediately for a transfer to the Klingon Defense Force."

This time, his eyes and his tone matched the hardness of his expression.

Looking sternly at the Andorian but keeping a low respectful tone despite the anger she felt at being prejudged, the only form her anger showed was using Kheren's full rank and name.

"Oh how you misjudge me, Captain Kheren. You of all people should know that you cannot judge new crew on ethics and such or actions. Gauge them on the possibilities maybe, but I will ask that you not prejudge me or assume something I am not"

She paused.

"There must have been some event that happened to you in the past, Captain Kheren, that caused you to adopt this outlook."

She held up her hand to indicate she was not finished.

"While I agree with your outlook and rules, do please expect some changes in security precautions; they will be minor for the ship itself. From our conversation here and now, I will not touch on Tactical as you seem to have it the way you want it and why mess with something that works" She said with a hint of a smile. Then continued on without pause. "Rest assured, Captain Kheren, while I will follow the guidelines set out and your rules and such, know this; I am no pushover and do not take kindly to challenges, in whatever form they arrive. On this ship, you are the boss and I shall look at things that way and will act accordingly as per my training and upbringing"

"See that you do," he said with a serious tone.

"I may be a brat from a wealthy and influential family, Sir, but my father did not raise me that way. He was a career Marine and he wanted me to follow my mother into diplomacy, but I followed the way of the warrior, like him."

Once again she paused as she gauged the Andorian's response to her words.

Dang it! Nothing! So hard to read this rigid Andorian face of theirs, she thought, then decided to become all professional again with all emotion she was feeling now well hidden she returned to her normal tone.

"So Captain, how do you want to introduce me to your bridge crew and when do you want me to report to the bridge?"

Kheren listened to the whole tirade without interrupting. His expertise in body language told him much that he wanted to know, beyond the words and emotions she was offering. Once silence had come again between them, he spoke with the same even tone

"There will be a senior officers briefing shortly, where I will introduce you to the other bridge officers. By virtue of rank and position, you may access the bridge at any time to familiarize yourself with the tactical station. Since you are also a certified pilot, you might want to take a look at the helm right beside it. Feel free to do so, or with any other station you might believe useful in any tactical situation... including mine."

Then, the fire in his eyes was plain to see.

"You are quite right, Lieutenant; too often I saw officers swearing their oath to Starfleet, only to discard it and all that it stood for when it was best convenient for them or the challenge was too hard for them to keep faith in it. There are still too many Siskos, Ross, N'Elighans and Sorriptos in Starfleet, those who think the ends justify the means or that rules are meant to be broken; *not* on this ship. And if you are saying here that you do not like to deal with challenges, then this is not the ship for you and you might want to consider an easier posting; this ship's mission and this crew's dedication is to go out and *meet* challenges. But I am confident that this is truly why you accepted this assignment in the first place."

The light in his silver eyes suddenly became as cold and hard as steel.

"I *might* be *misjudging* you, Lieutenant, but I am not *prejudging* you; I am not even considering if you do or do not know what I am saying. I am *telling* you plainly and clearly the way it *is* under *my* command. There is no pushing around on this ship; there is a *chain of command* you will follow *without fail*, regardless of your training or upbringing or wants or wishes or needs. There are General Orders and Rules of Engagement and Starfleet Regulations and ship rules. *All* recommendations are *always* welcome. I even *hope* and *ask* for them. But that in no way means they will be accepted, let alone implemented. I *already* have everything as I want it aboard this ship; anything from you that, *on my sole judgment*, might further improve what has been established, *I* will thank you for... *and* decide upon. "

He made a pause to let everything sink in, then pointed a callused indigo finger at her.

"You may run your unit and perform your duties as you see best fit to follow orders you are given *and* under the parameters given. You are a soldier, so I know that you will understand this. If I say weapons on stun, you better not pull out those swords and start chopping heads off... unless there is *absolutely* no *other* way; and you better be ready to back it up hard and fast because if I find but the *slightest* alternative you have overlooked, rest assured that *your* head will roll off from that uniform of yours."

It was hard to tell if he was speaking figuratively or not. After all, Starfleet regulations since the founding of the Federation allowed Andorians their duelling rights aboard starships. It was plain however that he was not threatening her but stating facts he wanted to make very clear; and that he was using them to test her, to size her up... and to warn her about what she was getting herself into.

The flagship of Lotus Fleet.

Meeting his steely gaze with one of her own as with cat-like grace she fluidly sat back in the chair, her gaze never leaving his.

"If you are going to roll heads, Captain, I can assure you that you will not be chopping mine off; and even if you managed to, I would have inflicted crippling damage to yourself and while my father may mourn my passing and accept my disobedience, he will not disown me, but trust me when I say that you will have nowhere to hide, Captain, as he will have his revenge in what-ever form he deems fit." She said, aping his tone but remaining non-threatening. "But as for the advice, consider it heeded. Now, we both know where each other stands on such things; Captain and, trust me,. I know the difference between frag and stun settings; so do my men and we will not fail you."

Then she became deadly serious.

"But should I deem a situation dangerous to you, Captain, be assured that I will take appropriate measures to ensure your safety as will any of my men I have brought with me. A Starfleet Captain is too valuable to lose and, if such a situation arises, we Starfleet officers will be the only ones left standing," She said, affirming her loyalty to her new Captain but leaving out if the weapons would be on stun or frag when she protected Kheren.

Surprisingly, Kheren laughed. It was a genuine good-hearted laugh, one that was not only ringing with amusement but with respect.

"Pray to whatever supernatural force you may believe in that neither will ever come to pass. Be it you, your family or whatever species would be responsible for my demise, no one would survive the vengeful wrath of my wives. Keep it in mind; they are both... Andorian."

Then he too became serious again.

"I hear you, Lieutenant. Although I am not in the least impressed by boasting and bravado, I appreciate your frankness, your boldness and your dedication as much as your competence. Still, remember that *my* judgment always prevail, be it before, during or after. I told you plainly where I stand and what I stand for; as long as you follow that stance, we shall face the challenges of this universe instead of each other. It will be more beneficial for this ship, this crew and the Federation, even if it may not always be as much fun."

He stood at attention, hands behind his back, showing unequivocally his respect to her as much as he had exposed his authority moments before.

"Unless there is anything else, Lieutenant, you may settle in. We'll see each other again no later than when the mission briefing will be called."

Taking his tone as her cue that the meeting was over, Alex stood.

"Nothing more, Sir" she said and picked up her kitbag and her case that had her unorthodox weapons. She got as far as the door, paused and turned to face Kheren. "What deck are my quarters on, Sir?"

"Deck 2, senior officers' quarters. But you may just ask the computer and it will guide you there. Welcome aboard, Lieutenant."

"Thank you Captain, see you at the briefing," she said and the door closed behind her as she left the room proper.

* * *

Oseno Jureth woke from his first full night's sleep, and then some, since the Horizon had been back from her maiden voyage. It didn't take him long to pull on a fresh uniform and step out into the cavernous corridors of Lotus Fleet's flagship. He smiled and nodded at both familiar and unfamiliar faces as he made his way to the docking bay of the USS Polaris. As he entered the bay he passed by the two security officers outside after allowing them to confirm his identity and took stock of his ship. Her hull plates showed no signs of the stress they'd encountered during the ship's tumultuous launch from the Horizon and subsequent encounter with the Nemesis. In fact, the ship looked as she had the first day Jureth had laid eyes on her with the exception perhaps of the two MACO soldiers standing vigilant guard outside her docking hatch.

"Commander!" exclaimed Major Duncan MacGregor "Tis good to see you up and about Sir."

"Thank you Mac, I'm glad to see my security measures haven't lapsed."

"You've nary a worry with Fireteam Echo on the job, Sir." he said with a smile

"You don't look any worse for the wear from your incarceration either, Major."

Mac's expression changed to a look of disgust.

"I wish we'd had a proper crack at those Jem'Hadar. Woulda taught them a lesson."

"I know you would have," Jureth said. "I'm just glad we all got back alive."

"Aye, that we did, Sir."

"You know, Major, I hear our new security chief is a MACO officer."

"Aye, heard o' the lass I have, has quite the reputation."

"A good one I hope."

"Aye, that she does, best an brightest and all o' that."

Oseno smiled.

"Good, I also hear your squad is being transferred under my command."

"Aye, I heard that as well, Sir. Lookin forward to it."

"Good, I'll be aboard ship for a bit."

"Aye, Sir."

Oseno boarded the Polaris and again found her much like the first time he'd come aboard though this time he felt the familiar hum of the small ship's warp core as he made his way to the bridge. Once there Jureth wasted no time in taking the command chair and pulled out his personal PADD. He had an office aboard the Horizon of course, but he had found working aboard the Polaris almost comforting plus he was less likely to be disturbed here.

CHAPTER TWO: ALL THE KING'S MEN

Most crewmembers of the Horizon were veterans of Lotus Fleet, many coming from as far back as the Borg War, a few even from before that when the Romulans attempted to take over the newly established headquarters of the elite division of Starfleet. All however, including the newest ones, were already experienced officers among the best the Federation could offer; a rare few even from beyond that. Therefore, no one was surprised at all when the intraship comm as well as that of Lotus Starbase blared the announcement.

"All senior officers of the USS Horizon to report to the ship's main briefing room in one hour. Repeat; all senior officers of the USS Horizon to report to the ship's main briefing room in one hour."

As the announcement was made, Captain Kheren was already in the designated meeting chamber, waiting. His back was turned from both the entrance and the old style triangular table he has expressly requested for his ship. It was basically the same one seen two centuries ago aboard the legendary Constitution class cruisers that had made legends of James T. Kirk of the Enterprise or Igrilan Kor of the USS Eagle; there was one side for the science officers, with direct access to computer facilities, another for technical ones with access to both engineering and security monitors and the third one for the command personnel with controls for all communications systems. The antique tri-screened central monitor was of course nowadays replaced by a full holographic projector, supplemented by a large wall screen opposing the transparencies showing the immense vista of stars beyond the starbase they were docked outside of. There were nine chairs around the table, colored as per department, and the table made it so that everyone was slightly sideways to everyone else and no one facing one another directly or in a lower, farther down seat, as was the case with the conventional "banana table" usually found on ships since the last century. When Kheren brought his officers in here for a meeting, it was not to assert rank or confront individuals; the triangular arrangement by sections made for a closer exchange of ideas between colleagues with a clear definition of who was talking for what department of the ship, and that was the way he wanted it.

With his quadriscopic vision, the Andorian commanding officer of the flagship would be able to discreetly observe each officer as they entered through the reflection of the transparency before him. The vibration of it would transmit the sound of their voices even as they were behind him, in his auditory blindspot. It was his habit of being there before everyone else, so as to observe their arrival and learn about them as they came in; the order of their entrance, their walk, their unguarded face and stare as they first went through the door, their very first act when coming in, if they would partake to a drink or not and which one, when, how and where they sat, who they talked to first... all those details among so many others others told him who he would be dealing with, estimate how they would respond to the upcoming challenge... and how to best tell them.

Especially now; because what he was about to tell them might have more than a few decide to ask for a transfer.

Hands crossed behind his back in the attention posture of Starfleet, Captain Kheren looked at the stars and waited for his best people to arrive.

With what the stars were now calling him out to do, he would need them.

The Orion Lieutenant had just finished a shower after returning from the ship's Arboretum and was donning a crisp new uniform when the call came in announcing the upcoming senior officer's meeting. As she finished a brief ritual of very minor primping, she exited out of her quarters clutching her PADD at her side as she took the turbolift straight-up to deck 1. She exited out of the lift and stepped onto the main bridge and headed directly for the Ops station. The Bolian Dorin Rixx was manning the station as expected, and he was about to rise when Elisha signaled for him to remain there.

"I have a senior office's meeting that I will be heading to momentarily, so you may as well remain here until I return" she notified him as she approached.

His mild disposition and easy-going manner showed throughout his body as he spoke.

"I was already planning on that, Lieutenant Leône, I just wanted you to have access to the console before your meeting."

Elisha Leône smiled sincerely at the azure blue officer.

"That is appreciated Ensign, but I'm only going to update my PADD here directly from the station before I depart for the meeting."

As she spoke, Elisha transferred all of the updated ship information to her PADD and then excused herself for the meeting. She not only strived to be punctual, but Elisha preferred to arrive early to most meetings. This provided her with an opportunity to get situated and prepared before any of the formalities began.

As she entered the briefing room, Elisha could see the conference table with the sole individual in the room. As she approached the Captain's, back she could also briefly see his reflection on the transparency.

"Hello Captain" the Andorian acknowledged respectfully as she sat down with her PADD at the designated command side of the triangular table. She then engaged her device as she started perusing through various updated files.

Greetings, Lieutenant. Your new pip fits you well."

He was refering to her brand new promotion following their maiden voyage that head sent them to the edge of the galaxy and back, finding a lost Jem'Hadar prison camps and a forgotten murderous ship AI, she had showed poise and efficiency under fire that had seen her quickly earn her new rank.

And she's going to need all of it again, he thought, musing upon what was awaiting them.

In engineering, S'Tan had been going over the basics of the improved impulse engine designs when the Captain's order came in. It was strange for him to be given so much time before being ordered to report. So he decided that he would go over the engineering personnel files.

The stories that were told were some of the most fantastical things he had ever read. Most would make good holo-novels, if it wasn't for the fact that he knew all of these events occurred in the past year or so. Starfleet truly was amazing. Whilst the Romulans were in-fighting and killing their own people in a fool-hardy attempt to etch out their own new corner of the universe, Starfleet was defending *everyone else*.

After taking a few minutes to finish examining his team, S'Tan stood up picked up a blank PADD and proceeded to the briefing room thirty-five minutes early. Being on-time was almost a death sentence on a Romulan craft. Obviously, Starfleet was less intense in their demands, but he was sure that being simply 'on-time' would still not be looked upon well, if Captain Kheren's track record was anything close to being true.

He tapped his communicator as he had seen so many other Starfleet officers do on Romulan surveillance videos.

"Lieutenant Bowl, please report to Engineering as soon as possible. I have been summoned to a briefing. Please prepare the ship for a hundred percent power and launch within the hour."

Surprisingly, the computer's voice responded to his call.

"There is no member of the crew registered under that name."

S'Tan stopped in the threshold of his now open office door. "Excuse me? Computer, locate both assistant engineering chiefs."

"Lieutenant Patricia Blakely is in the officer's mess. Lieutenant Robert Baoule is in his quarters."

He sighed.

"Mister... Baw-ouu-le, we can dispense with the pleasantries for now. Please report to Engineering as soon as possible. I am off to a briefing. Please prepare the ship for immediate departure."

There was a brief silence before a puzzled voice answered over the comm.

"Sir? Aye, Sir. On my way."

S'Tan nodded as the line closed and quickly made his way to the turbolift.

The Romulan engineer arrived on deck one and proceeded to walk to the briefing room at a brisk pace. He arrived at the door and took a step inside. As he entered, he instinctively surveyed the room for any potential danger. He only found the Captain and an Orion woman wearing a red-marked uniform. He also took notice of the room. Especially the seating arrangement. S'Tan could immediately tell that it was designed for equality, even though there was none on-board a starship. He also noticed the color-coordinated chairs. Hideous. He decided immediately to keep these thoughts to himself, but to lodge a suggestion in at a later time to restore the room to a more structured environment.

"Captain Kheren, I presume. I am Lieutenant S'Tan Solius."

He started, turning his gaze towards the back of the woman.

"And Miss..."

"Lieutenant Elisha Leône," the Orion female nodded slightly as she spoke. "Chief operations officer."

He nodded in acknowledgement.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade S'Tan Solius. Engineering chief."

He took his supposed assigned seat and looked to the Captain. Kheren nodded his white-haired head to him, antennae wiggling slightly. When he had sent his request for a new chief engineer, Starfleet had said they would send him the best one they could get their hands on; the first transwarp ship of the Federation deserved nothing less.

Well we will soon find out if their estimate is true, won't we? Kheren told himself silently, again his mind on their new assignment.

"Welcome aboard, Lieutenant Solius," the captain said out loud. "I hope you had time to take a good look at our engineering section."

S'Tan let out a sigh at this comment. "Aye, Sir. I have, but not as much as I need. I will most likely be relying heavily on my assistants for a while. I assume they are the best available?"

"I will let you be the judge of that, Chief. They both went through the discovery and demize of the Azimuth Horizon, twice against the mad AI Khan of the USS Nemesis in the Mutara nebula and at the edge of the galaxy, first contact with the X'ell of the nearby Dyson shell and even through time once. Baoule was also on the starbase when the forces of a Romulan dissident tried to seize her. And they were on hand for the entire trial run of this ship. I believe they should prove adequate to assist you."

There was no disguising the pride in his voice but also the firm belief that his new chief engineer was the right person for leading them both.

The doors slid open again and the imposing frame of Commander Redding walked in with a nod and gave a crooked smile to everyone. And astute person might have noticed that his eyes paused ever so briefly on Solius before moving on, but his face remained pleasant.

"Good afternoon all, Captain." The last he added with a nod to Kheren and took a seat placing a slightly oversized klingon mug down in front of him, the wafting smell coming from it could only be Earth coffee.

"I hope this new mission has more of a challenge than the last; almost felt like a cadet cruise to me." and smiled broadly.

If the Andorian caught on the Human-style sarcastic joke, he gave no sign of it. Most of the time he didn't anyway.

"I think you will find this one up to your high standards, Number One," answered Kheren.

He was not joking. Neil Redding was experienced beyond his years and in things most Starfleet officers only read about in reports of exceptional ships and crews like those of the Enterprise, the Voyager or the Defiant. But what they were about to get themselves into would be on par with the best those legendary starships had gone through.

And hopefully, we too will get back home so that others will read about it, Kheren wished for in the privacy of his mind.

Commander Oseno heard the call for the staff meeting and finished up a couple of adjustments to the Polaris tactical systems and then left the destroyer bound for the briefing room. As he stepped out onto the massive bridge of the Horizon, he was once again impressed by the enormity and at the same time the beauty that Starfleet's engineers managed to incorporate into the ship. He caught sight of Adira Yiral sitting at the strategic operations console and stepped over to her.

"Com..." Oseno stopped himself remembering how she'd asked to be addressed "Adira, I'd like you to join me for the briefing. I've heard... rumors about our next mission."

The fair haired El Aurian smiled a knowing smile at him "As have I; and if what I've heard is true, it will be quite interesting. I would be happy to join you, Sir."

The pair made their way to the briefing room where they entered just slightly behind the Horizon's first officer. Oseno motioned Adira to follow him as he stepped over to where the captain and first officer were speaking.

"Reporting as ordered, Captain," Oseno declared when there was a break in the conversation. "Sirs, I've asked Commander Yiral to join me as I've heard certain... rumors regarding our mission and thought she might add some unique insight."

"Her experience alone will undoubtedly benefit us in the very least; good thinking Commander Oseno," agreed Kheren with a welcoming nod to both of them. " Please take a seat, Commander Yiral. It is for this very reason that I already asked Commander Sisko to join us as well, even if he chose not to be a bridge officer or a department head anymore."

And they hopefully will take over if you or any of the others decline to go and face what is about to fall on our heads, but this he kept to himself as he looked at both Redding and Oseno.

"Thank you Sir," Adira responded bowing slightly before finding a seat at the briefing table. Oseno nodded to the CO and XO and then joined his subordinate.

Jureth found himself wondering if he should have brought Variel Palos, his intelligence specialist, with him as well, but Oseno also wasn't sure that he completely trusted his fellow Bajoran either. He wasn't sure why, but he was suspicious of the intelligence officer though there was nothing to confirm that Palos was up to no good...yet.

Putting that aside he sat quietly and looked over a few more details of the Polaris final repairs as he waited for the briefing to begin rather than attempting to socialize with the other officers.

As if on queue, at the Captain's mention of Commander Sisko, the young half-Human, half-Bajoran officer entered the briefing room.

Being quite familiar with the Horizon by now, he knew ahead of time, the configuration of the seats around the center table. With nine seats around the triangular table, he had calculated ahead of time that there would not be enough seats for all senior bridge officers, and himself. Captain Kheren, Commander Redding, and Commander Oseno would be seated in the red command chairs, 011 and 110, along with Snowfire in the blue science chairs, and finally, S'Tan Solius and Alexandria Somers. would occupy the gold security and engineering seats, with Elisha Leone likely occupying one of those due to the addition of Oseno Jureth in the tri-command structure unique to the Horizon.

Therefore, he immediately took a seat to the side of the room next to Yeoman Ensign Blackbird and Ensign Yiral, allowing those already assembled who would possibly feel threatened by his continued presence on the Horizon to instead be at ease. He knew that new personnel might be unsure why another Command level officer was on the ship; and certainly the brand new Chief Engineer might be unnerved by the presence of the former Chief Engineer who had willingly stepped down in order to focus his efforts entirely on the well-being of their new inorganic guest.

Smiling and nodding at those who caught his eye on the way in, he quietly took his seat without announcing his presence, and waited for the briefing to begin.

The doctors similarly shuffled in and quietly sat at two of the three unoccupied science seats such that they could be near to each other.

When Snowfire heard the announcement, she was elbows-deep in a mess of calculations in support of theoretical expansion from currently accepted hypotheses on the nature of psionics and how they interacted with reality. She hadn't realised it at the time, but her demonstration at the first lecture she had held about her people where she'd preformed thesar allure, had thrown an extremely large wrench into the heart of the Federation's theories on how psi capable individuals could affect the world around them. She'd been really, really tempted to push a copy of the Crystalmind Theorems that were hidden away in the steadily becoming more ordered mess of files that was the Ilythirii cultural database, but she'd decided against it. Where it came to this subject, her people really did know than the Federation, but passing that on into their hands rather than letting them work it out for themselves would be... bad. She wasn't even really sure that this had anything to do with her Oath anymore.

Somehow she didn't think so.

Knowledge without the wisdom to use it...that wasn't knowledge at all. Not really, and certainly not in the way that really mattered. This way Naomi and her colleagues would have the double advantage of being able to approach the subject with clear minds... and possibly discover new avenues of understanding... as well as the fact that they'd be able to compare their findings with the papers from her own people. And that...well she knew that her people were grasping towards a new leap from the current plateau of psionic understanding. And this could be just the catalyst that they needed to enable that jump. Some of the things one of her brothers had been talking about that that might make possible...

But for the moment, that was the future. And in the present, she was needed somewhere in the next hour.

"Alright Naomi," she smiled at the Bajoran specialist as the announcement registered to her as well, "I'll drop in again this evening if prep for our new mission isn't too taxing."

They both chuckled at that. Snowfire had surprised her department a bit in that, how easily she was able to delegate - and to do so effectively as well. Sure, she could be a strict taskmistress sometimes, but she also had an almost uncanny knack for knowing exactly how far to push people. You might finish your shift tired, on occasion even exhausted, but when you woke up afterwards to find that you had nothing cluttering your free shift it was worth it. She laid down the PADD she'd been working on, as well as the sheets of scrawled over hardcopy she favored, as she just worked better with those, packed them away and then headed for her quarters.

A shower and change left her with forty minutes remaining, so she set an alarm and then absorbed herself in work on one of the new anti-stress systems that she'd been working on after their maiden voyage. Self-activating force field interference protocols could help a lot in all manner of situations. It was just getting the matrices on the system down right that was being complicated. She'd see about asking Commander Sisko to have a look at it for her. She knew force field mechanics to a competent level, but she had never been trained as an engineer herself. He had.

Her alarm chirped at her half an hour later and she loaded up the program onto a fresh PADD. She'd made some progress, but not as much as she was pretty sure Sisko or the new ChEng would be able to have done in her place before heading for the briefing room. She entered right on the heels of the Commander and Doctors 011 and 110, noting the reflective surfaces with some interest and respectful amusement. Clever.

She slid into her seat, nodding directly at the reflectives on one side that would carry the gesture straight to the Captain's eyes in silent acknowledgement before nodding to the rest of the command crew. It was a good group, and they had a few new ones for this mission... or so she'd heard.

A new jig, you could always tell by the way their pips shone, and if she remembered right not just one of those. Snowfire had done a fair amount of reading on the Romulans, but she'd been reserving judgement on them until she actually had the chance to meet one in person. Whilst one was only a small sample, you could draw a lot of conclusions about culture from them in how they acted. It was a useful skill to have, and one she'd been taught in the *Talya* for its uses as a designation tool. Having taken her seat she grew very still, observing and listening on multiple levels as she waited for the meeting to start.

Alex had dumped her stuff in her new quarters and began to unpack. It had been an hour since her meeting with the Captain, now his voice came over the Communications system.

"No rest for the wicked" she said to herself and collected her tunic and put it on as she left her room and made her way to the Turbolift. When she was in and the doors had closed she called out her destination to the computer.

"Main Briefing Room."

The turbolift whisked her to her requested deck and the wall panels flashed her the direction to her stated destination. Sometime later, she walked to the briefing room.

She entered and saw that all the others were seemingly there; the captain, three commanders, two of them Bajoran, a lieutenant commander from a black-skinned, white-haired and purple-eyed Vulcanoid species she had never heard of before and four wearing lieutenant pips that made her pause; a pair of Bynars, an Orion woman... and a Romulan.

"Greetings all; I am the new Marines squad leader and Chief Security and Tactical Officer," She announced.

S'Tan turned his chair to see the new arrival. Unlike all of the other officers that had step foot into the room, she was the only one to announce the fact that she was new. That being said, she also confirmed the thought he had been having since he arrived. Ans what she *was* certainly raised his eyebrows.

This was not the "fru-fru science and exploration are the best" Starfleet that was always laughed about in Romulan Mess Halls.

He couldn't tell if this was a standard position onboard the ship, or if this was a mission specific placement. Either way, he would watch his step. The Romulan *Gai'Shian* were known not for their intelligence but for their instincts and ability to kill with any item within reach. He had to assume the Starfleet version was no different.

He nodded coolly to the woman and turned in his chair. He had little interaction with the land combat side of the Navy back home to begin with and this would not change in Starfleet.

From his seat Oseno Jureth looked up, slightly surprised at the sudden announcement from the ship's new chief of security. It was hardly protocol, but neither was having four command level officers aboard one starship either.

The security officer in him assessed the young, but obviously charismatic woman in front of him and wondered exactly how a Marine officer was going to fair in the roll of a ship's security chief. Marines were not exactly known for their people skills, though the team under his command was social enough. He remembered briefly Major MacGregor's description of Lieutenant Somers as being known as one of the "best and brightest" young Marine officers in Starfleet. Oseno looked around the room and noted the ship's Romulan chief engineer reaction, or lack thereof, and then stood up and introduced himself.

"Lieutenant, welcome aboard; I am Commander Oseno, Chief of Strategic Operations. Your reputation has preceded you, according to the commander of my strike team. I was once a security officer myself, and am quite familiar with Captain Kheren's protocols, having used them on both the Lotus and the Alsea. If there is anything I can do to help you get acclimated, please don't hesitate to ask."

Walking over to the Officer who addressed her, Somers stood at eased attention before him.

"Thank you, Sir. I did not know the Major knew me or heard of me. But if you have any questions yourself, please ask. I have some unofficial diplomatic training so I am not your normal standard issue Marine. I come from an influential family, the type that would be considered wealthy on any planet that would still use currency."

She laughed at her own comment, as the Federation no longer used any form of currency in all but the very new fringe colony worlds. Then she looked briefly over to the Romulan then back to Jureth.

"What is up with the Romulan, Sir? I have seen warmer Breen than that one; and yes, I noticed his lack of reaction to my announcement and arrival. Tell me, did I err by announcing myself? It is how it was done in the privileged circles I grew up in."

"These are not the circles you grew up in, Lieutenant Somers," Snowfire noted politely, her elongated ears easily picking up the exchange happening not more than two meters from her.

She hoped that her interruption into the conversation would serve as a blunt enough instrument to show that S'tan had all but certainly heard what Somers had said as well. She leant forward to rest her elbows on the table, her black fingers twining together below her chin; but not as a rest for it. It came to a stop with her violet eyes fixed on the red haired marine officer across the table. It was an entirely single motion, that movement, one that spoke volumes in regards to Snowfire's physical state and level of training both.

"With that said," She smiled slightly, nodding at Jureth, "I would certainly advise taking up Commander Oseno on his offer of aid if you feel the need. He's a fine officer; one of the best in my most humble opinion."

At least when he isn't trapped in a self-doubt loop, she very carefully did not add.

It wasn't like she tried to pick things up from the people around her, but to a given degree, especially with more emotional species, she really couldn't help it. Acting on what she felt was a whole different kettle of fish, as a human might say; but she was very good at not doing so. Which was probably a very good thing.

"Welcome aboard," she finished with instead.

"Gentlebeings..."

The soft and deep voice of Captain Kheren brought everyone's attention back around the table. With Redding at his right and Oseno at his left, Sisko sitting behind them as a command grade advisor should, he looked to the left hand side of the triangular table where sat K'Leysa and both 011 and 110 with Yiral backing them up as science advisor; then to the right where newcomers Solius and Somers each side of Leône now looked at him with that strange mixture of calm patience in their faces and eager expectation in their eyes that was so typical of Starfleet officers.

Once again, the final frontier was calling out to all of them.

"Before I expose the details of our upcoming assignment, let me formally introduce everyone to everyone else. "

Standing up as was his habit when he started a meeting, his right hand indicated the large dark-haired man that sat on his right.

"Commander Neil Stanley Redding, executive officer; when I am not available, he is the master of this boat. Please report to him on a regular basis."

Then, his left hand went to the Bajoran on his other side.

"Commander Oseno Jureth, Chief Strategic Operations Officer; he commands the USS Polaris, our Aquarius class integrated escort ship and supervize all military-related activities on this vessel."

The Andorian shifted slightly his athletic frame to let everyone see the third red-collared officer on their side of the table. The bearded half-Bajoran also wore three pips on the collar of his standard grey and black uniform.

"Commander Joey Daystrom Sisko, our former chief engineer and now cybernetics specialist. Although not officially heading any department, I would like all of you to consider him as our informal Technical Operations Officer and benefit from his expertise and experience whenever needed. I certainly will. That is why I asked him to join with us today."

Facing again the others around the table, the commanding officer of the flagship turned his silvery gaze to his left where sat the black-skinned, pointy-eared elfin woman in the only non-standard uniform on the entire ship; hers was white instead of grey on the shoulders and the combadge looked more like a star-shaped jewel than the usual delta-shaped communicator-monitor.

"Lieutenant-Commander Snowfire K'Leysha, Chief of Science. As an exchange officer from the Illythirii people, her presence alone will add tremendously to our chances of success in this upcoming endeavor."

His eyes and antennae went then to the small, blue, bald female Bynar pair sitting with her.

"Lieutenants 011 and 110, Chief Medical Officer. Of course you already know them since you had to go through the mandatory physical examination upon being assigned to this ship and coming to Starbase Lotus; hence you could not even have come aboard in the first place."

He then shifted all their attention with his to the calm, silent woman at the end of their side of the table.

"Lieutenant Adira Yiral serves Commander Oseno on the Polaris as he himself assists me here on the Horizon; being both a Starfleet officer and El-Aurian, she is also a most attentive listener and was asked to be part of this discussion for that very reason."

Now that was certainly deemed intriguing by some of them. El-Aurians were extremely long lived and had a kind of attunement to life and the universe that could reveal things beyond any perception or instrumentation or even reasoning and imagination. Her presence alone suggested that this was not going to be your run-of-the-mill exploration or patrol mission.

But Kheren was now looking at the third and last side of the conference table and the last three officers there, Yeoman Miramane Blackbird standing a pace behind them, ready to attend to anyone's need so that the meeting would go uninterrupted... and recording it all on her PADD for the Captain's later needs.

"Lieutenant Elisha Leône, Chief of Operations. She is in charge of every management aspect of the ship, no small task considering alone her size and complement. Please go to her for any power, personnel or material need aboard... and to make sure that she knows about it."

Looking beyond the green-skinned woman, the commanding officer of the flagship of Lotus Fleet brought everyone's attention to the last pair of officers with them, both the only new faces to them all. First, he indicated the Romulan officer sitting with Vulcan-style discipline and Human-like intensity beside the Orion chief of Ops.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade S'Tan Solius, our new chief engineer. Like Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysha, he brings much more experience to this ship than his rank would let you believe... and again, his sole presence also will be an asset in our next operation."

He did not let them ponder long again on this cryptic remark. His hand went to the tall, athletic, red-haired and blue-eyed pale-skinned woman who had announced herself earlier, the only green-collared person in the room.

"Lieutenant First Class Alexandria Lynne Somers, Marines Command officer and our new chief of tactical and security aboard the Horizon. She is in command of the new Marines unit that came aboard and will join us for this mission."

Now that was surely enough to raise eyebrows on more than a few faces. Having purely military crack units on anything but a warship in times of war was almost unprecedented; you almost had to go back to the historical trek of the NX-01 Enterprise against the Xindi, back in the days just before the very founding of the Federation, to find such a case.

Not to mention that the Horizon already had one Marines squad attached to the Polaris... and that her own standard security personnel were in all intent and purposes as well-trained as standard Marines and already more experienced and battle-hardened than most, having being trained and put under fire by Captain Kheren himself during his eventful and unorthodox career.

Kheren stayed on his feet as he addressed them all.

"Last week, standard Federation time, a subspace signal was transmitted to the attention of the Federation Council. It had been relayed by subspace relays to Sector 001 all the way back to the farthest one at the outward galactic rim of the Beta Quadrant."

He activated controls on his side of the table. In the center hovered the image of an old but well self-maintained twenty-fourth century subspace relay, obviously active. No one heard any signal... but Kheren knew that there was at least one person among them who was already picking up the signal and the content it transmitted before he explained further.

"The signal was reconverted in standard comm transmission by the integrated universal translator of the relay from it's original format. The message was... telepathic."

And switching on the translated version, they now could all hear the message.

"To the United Federation of Planets, we send our greetings and our wish to negotiate peaceful and mutually beneficial relationship..."

As it continued, it was evidently an offer for a Peace Treaty. But everyone's attention fled from the mere words as the holographic view beyond the satellite relay shifted slowly around and leaving the sight of the last stars of the milky way until it brought in full view a luminous, greenish background that blotted out even the blueish line of the great galactic barrier most where already familiar with from their last mission.. and the source of the transmission.

It was an elongated yellow, green and grey form with bulbous protrusions at the back and branch-like appendages up front. It was hard to tell if it was either an odd-shaped starship or some huge alien life form living in outer space; but in truth, it was both. Even those in the room who had not yet actually experienced meeting such an organic-looking vessel instantly knew what it was... and who it belonged to.

The Undines.

Raising her hand, Alex Somers was the first to break the astonished silence that had spread across the room.

"Excuse me, Sir, but I have to ask; apart from the peace overtures, do we truly know why the Undine want peace? I only ask as this is a radical change in their ways as they consider all sentient life in our universe as weak. So do we know what as actually changed? I am used to the other shoe dropping, Captain, and with my background, upbringing and training, I am highly..."

She paused, looking down at the floor for the appropriate word, then when she had it looked up

"...dubious of their true motives" She diplomatically concluded.

"No, we do not, Lieutenant Somers," admitted the Andorian, after sitting down to better listen to what was being said around the triangular table. " Although during Operation Horizon, some managed to come to a truce with some of them who had already experienced previous contact with our kind during the USS Voyager journey. "

His silver eyes glanced at the Bajoran to his left before he concluded his answer.

"That is why the Horizon is called to duty and not a vessel from the diplomatic corps... or a squadron of warships."

S'Tan nodded in agreement. Frowning, and not waiting to be recognized, he spoke up.

"Let me say what we are all thinking. No. No peace. This race has been far too detrimental to our societies to be just allowed peace. Have we all forgotten the fact that they can and have impersonated high ranking officials? Romulans have not. If a borg cube came floating around asking for peace, would we even consider it before firing every torpedo our ship had into it's hull? Of course not. Additionally, this is *not* the Borg. They are not more technologically advanced than us. If push came to shove, we could beat them back. Easily. There are far too many variables involved with the Undine to even take the risk of coming in contact with them."

"You may say freely what you *believe* to be what we're thinking, " Snowfire replied in a tone that was barely above a whisper. Her eyes were shut, lips parted very slightly in an all but picture perfect appearance of rapture. "But the truth of my thoughts may surprise you."

Her violet eyes slipped open, as if unconsciously, flicking to look across and up at Kheren and, when she spoke, it was not just as a Lieutenant Commander of Starfleet.

"What crime is so horrific, so utterly terrible, as to be beyond forgiveness? None that the Undine have committed I would say. Remember that, in their eyes, *they* are the ones who were invaded. Every action they have taken has been to defend themselves from us, *all* of us. Polity, race, it does not matter. From their perspective, our *universe* set itself upon theirs at the bidding of the Borg who, even at their most terrible, some still offered an attempt at forgiveness."

She shrugged.

"How can we do anything less than simply go to hear their message in full?"

Then she frowned.

Yet, you are of course correct in one way. This is most certainly not the Borg. The Borg were, in the end, little more than a sentient plague upon our existence. And yet, even when presented with that truth, some tried. And against all odds, some even succeeded. Captain Picard, Seven of Nine, Unimatrix Zero... those are but a handful of names tied to such work. The Borg could not be reasoned with in any way that my people could find, so we learned to fight them. We learnt to wield weapons of terrifying power that, in the end, taught them that our borders were sacrosanct against their intrusion. I... *we*, cannot hope to understand what your peoples experienced at their hands. But they were not the Undine, whose only motive behind their crimes has been fear."

She let her eyes slide shut again, immersing herself into the flow of the pulsing message and pointed at the display.

"But there is more even than that, that none of you here, I am afraid, can understand. I cannot explain it, not properly, but one cannot speak mind to mind and thought to thought without some layer of emotion wending its way into the words. Those words that you hear with your ears, I feel in my being. And in them, although Empathy cannot be truly perfect, I find no deceit. In every way that I can analyse, the sender of this message sent it in good faith."

She pulled herself free from the message again, blinking a few times to clear her mind.

"And that, combined with the fact that the Undine are a race of sentient beings capable of change, would be enough if the message itself was not such already by the tenets of the organisation that we all serve...in one way or another."

S'Tan crossed his arms, momentarily defiant.

"And what, pray tell, shall we do when this does turn out to be a trap in some way? Mourn our dead, licking our wounds all the way back home?"

He sighed, partly out of realization of what he was arguing as well as understanding he would not win in this room. He imagined the conversations and arguments at Starfleet HQ when his own distress signal had went out and the Dewpoint had been ordered out of it's way to retrieve him.

"Out of everyone here, I fully understand forgiveness the most. Starfleet accepted me with open arms. I am going to work to have some tricks up our sleeve in case of emergency... Captain, I apologize for my outburst."

"No need to apologize, Lieutenant; this is not the bridge... and this mission has not started yet," answered Kheren. "If your honest opinion, as that of every senior officer present here, was not needed, I would not have called for such a meeting."

So saying, the commanding officer of the flagship was at the same time stating both what he expected of his officers and how he expected them to behave; now... and later.

And now, he became silent again, waiting for the rest of his people to do as Solius, K'Leysa and Somers were doing; help him come to a decision.

S'Tan shrugged his shoulders,

"Understood. I just don't understand why they would want to contact us. As far as I have ever heard about the Undine, they have cared little about what we thought of them. Any time we have encountered them, it has ended in combat. What could have possibly changed to make them decide to come all the way to see us?"

To this point, Commander Joseph Daystrom Sisko had been silently observing the meeting from his seat near the edge of the conference room, until the assembled officers had all but forgotten about his presence. However, upon realizing that the new Chief Engineer had not heard about or even read up on the Azimuth Horizon mission that had resulted in the very olive branch they were discussing, he realized it would probably be helpful to provide a little perspective, to avoid unnecessary debate over the intentions of the Undine that had contacted them.

Sisko stood and cleared his throat.

"Perhaps, Lieutenant, the fact that we saved their leader's ship, and he returned the favor by calling in a fleet to drive out the remaining attacking Klingons and Romulans..." He caught the Romulan Engineer's eye at that point to see if there was any recognition or anger there, but saw only interest reflected in the face, "... in order to save the lives of myself and those of half of the people in this room, might have something to do with it."

He continued to remain calm and spoke at an even keel, despite the emotions that had welled up while listening to S'Tan's stone. Sisko had to tell himself that he had befriended a Cardassian with similar tendencies and remember why he became best friends with him, despite being part Bajoran himself. It was for that reason and for the fact that the Romulan at their briefing table could speak freely, that they fought so hard for the Federation ideals... the very ones that Solius argued against.

"We do not shoot first and ask questions later, and when we are given the chance to make peace with an enemy, as Starfleet Officers, it is not only an opportunity, but an obligation," he added, stressing the last word sternly. "You will have to forgive my lack of knowledge about recent activities. I've spent the past few months in Starfleet Intelligence's 'Academy.' No information in or out. At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if you told me I was the last Romulan. And, Sir, there *is* a reason I left my family behind. I understand how needlessly aggressive they have become. If you say that the Undine are here only for peace, then I will have to assume your history with their leader supersedes my knowledge of prior Undine activities."

S'Tan once again crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat, deep in thought about the possibility of actually stepping foot on an Undine ship. Their computers would be his to play with...If they even used computers...

Redding watched the conviction in the faces of his fellow crew mates, and although interesting it was ultimately pointless to him. On his own ship he rarely made time for meetings such as this preferring to outline a mission and give out assignments to his people.

He did of course encourage them to speak their minds on the issue if they felt they needed to, but he had never felt compelled to ask for an opinion.

"I think it's a dangerous stance to think you understand your enemies motivation, just because a cannibal greets you doesn't mean he's not planning to eat you." He said this with a shrug. He took a breath. "Personally, I think it's a trap in one form or another, even if they themselves don't think of it as one. But in the end it doesn't matter if it is or not, we have to take this chance and find out. Because even a lie, if properly handled, might become the truth."

Jureth listened intently to his colleagues discussion, gathering his thoughts. Next to him he could sense that Adira Yiral was doing the same. Finally after Commander Redding had said his piece, the Bajoran spoke.

"I am of a mind to agree with Commander Sisko. Most of us present saw with our own eyes Undine vessels wiping out the flotilla that besieged our home starbase. I personally experienced the Undine first hand. Thanks to Lieutenant Lyrya, I can tell you that it was our own actions that have given credit to the Federation in the eyes of the Undine. Even after their initial encounters with Admiral Janeway and the Voyager they saw us as a threat equal to the Borg. When we eliminated the Borg their fear of us grew, we were no longer just a threat... we were *the* threat to their home. Yet I believe that it was one act, and I am not saying this simply because I was directly involved, the act of the Alsea saving their vessel just as we would one of our own, despite the fact they were an enemy who had attacked us first...that is what has led to this. I believe that they understand now that we do not simply wish to destroy them out of hand like the Borg. Could it be a trap? Of course it could, but consider this: if the Undine were seeking to attack us, why wouldn't they simply just do so? They have the ability to open portals from fluidic space at will and could bring immense numbers against us. Why go through the trouble of asking us to a meeting? Should we take precautions? Yes, but those precautions don't have to include a battery of quantum torpedoes primed in their tubes. I said something recently to another officer that I'd like to repeat here; I was, not long ago at all, the prototypical Starfleet security officer. I believed that phasers were for tact and quantum torpedoes for diplomacy. Facing the Undine during Operation Horizon changed my way of thinking. This galaxy has seen far too much war and destruction in its recent history; this is an opportunity for peace and I think that we have to take it."

Beside him, Adira Yiral was nodding her head and did not have much to add to her superior's statement, but what she did say resounded in the room.

"My people were all but wiped out by the Borg, and those of us that survived were scattered across the galaxy. How do you think the Undine felt, when we did the same thing to the Borg?"

Trust an El-Aurian to put your nose in your own dung, Kheren inwardly said to himself. His wife Lyrya had done the same thing once; pointing out that their final disposal of the Collective had been so near the line between animalistic self-preservation and determined genocide that it would not take much of a moral shove to send them over the brink and make all of their proud morality a farce. From the former Section 31 to the actions of individuals like Sorripto, who all thought anything was justified once they chose to call someone else "the bad guy," showed it plainly enough.

Yes, they had given several opportunities for the Borg to stop and desist; Captain Onia of the USS Wisconsin had even almost convinced their Queen with a sharing of love and compassion... but even that had ultimately failed. And for sure, they had not all been exterminated utterly; there was a whole colony of liberated Borg even here in the Hromi sector, living in peace under the protection of Lotus Starbase... Not many knew of this; not many today were so willing to forgive and to respect the right of all life to existence in this universe as they outwardly boasted to.

Even the admirable Jean-Luc Picard had once called the Borg "without redemption."

That might have been true... but once you accepted that, it was way too easy afterwards to state the same about any other perceived or declared enemy. And once you did that, you were just as the Klingons, as the Romulans, as the Dominion... as anyone else you might think of... but then, there was no longer a United Federation of Planets but in name only.

Kheren certainly knew that; he was Andorian. But even he, born and raised of a passionate, violent race on an unforgiving planet, in a culture where cold-blooded murder was the social norm, had learned to do better, to *be* better; that peace and life *were* what was worth *any* risk.

But what about the others now pretending to share the same values, wearing the same uniform as he did?

That was why he had really called this meeting for.

And so, he kept silent, waiting for the rest of his officers to speak out.

Then he would make a decision.

The Bynar doctors then spoke, 011 followed by 110, as was their custom.

"The biological and medical knowledge..."

"... that we could learn alone..."

"... is worth the possible risk..."

"... to one ship and..."

"... her crew."

To assist in their explanation, 011, who was in the center seat, reached her almost childlike arm up to the console in front of them, with some effort, and entered a few commands to bring up the physiological overview of the Undine species.

"Doctor Joe..."

"... the Voyager's Medical Hologram..."

"... discovered that..."

"... their immune system is..."

"... able to instantly adapt..."

"... to any foreign substance that..."

"... enters their system..."

"... whether viral, biological, chemical... "

"... or artificial. Our medical..."

"... knowledge has advanced to..."

"... the point where we can treat..."

"... almost any disease, even those..."

"... as deadly as cancer. However..."

"... there are still a few..."

"... maladies that we..."

"... have not yet been able..."

"... to cure: Darnay's Disease..."

"... Sakuro's Disease and..."

"... Iverson's Disease, just to..."

"... name a few. If we could..."

"... harness and synthesize, or..."

"... at least study this..."

"... phenomenon, it would..."

"... advance treatment of illness..."

"... beyond anything we..."

"... could imagine!"

There was a moment of silence before Kheren looked at the only officer who had yet to give an opinion about the situation.

"What are your thoughts on the matter, Lieutenant Leône?"

Elisha Leône sat there silently as the opinions regarding their upcoming mission were volleyed around by the various officers present in this briefing. She listened to their words very attentively, but was also a little put-off at moments due to the earlier conversation that occurred with the Vulcan in the Arboretum. As has transpired many times in her life, she knew what it was like to be prejudged and have assumptions made about her based primarily on her gender and species. But she swiftly pushed these troubling thoughts to the side for the time being and focused on the discussion at hand. In this particular case, she understood the concerns being raised regarding the Undine and the shaky history that members within the Federation have had in their dealings with them. She was mentally weighing all of the statements and opinions being presented as the conversation progressed. There was passion and logic interweaving among a mixture of aspiration and apprehension as the words flowed back and forth across the triangular table.

When all of the others had finished speaking, Elisha saw the eyes of the Andorian Captain fall upon her as he directly inquired about her thoughts on the matter. After taking a few moments to collect her own thoughts, she offered her perspective.

"Preconceived notions are the locks on the door to wisdom" the Orion woman began, as she gazed watchfully to those around her as she continued speaking. "Many of us sitting here around this table would not have even been invited to be a part of a meeting such as this at an earlier point in time because of our origins alone... had it not been for someone among the doubtful and suspicious who accepted the risk to look past the paradigm of the day in order to see into the potential of someone different than what was deemed acceptable."

Elisha did see a need to elaborate on the substantiality of this statement any further, so she proceed on.

"As has been pointed out already, the Federations' initial encounters with this species were not the most productive or even beneficial. Yet this is often the case when strangers from different worlds come across each other in less than ideal circumstances. Yet our recent encounter with the Undine demonstrated that we could work cooperatively together; even under dire circumstances, to our mutual benefit."

The Orion woman leaned back slightly in her chair while she reflected a bit deeper.

"While attending the Academy, like many of you here, I had the opportunity to read a variety historical references from many different worlds. For some reason, the words of a human from more than a half a millennia ago came to my mind as I was processing a variety of thoughts as everyone spoke. This human stated I destroy my enemy when I make him my friend."

Elisha looked directly at the Andorian commanding officer.

"I realize that there are many legitimate causes for concern and great risk involved in proceeding with this mission. Nevertheless, this is a very unique opportunity for us alone Captain, and that ideal in that simple statement from that long gone Human seems to be focusing and channeling my advocacy to proceed. I therefore recommend that we should open our closed fist along with our minds and seize this chance, despite any apprehension or suspicion we may harbor."

S'Tan placed his elbows on the table as he leaned in. He clasped his fingers together and put his hands to his nose, making only his eyes peer out over them. It was time to be serious.

"If we are going to quote dead Humans, then let us also include their Military Leaders; All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near. Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush him."

he took a breath before finishing.

"We have already discussed, *ad nasuem*, what we *feel* we should do as good little Starfleet officers, but we have not heard what, exactly, Starfleet *wants* us to do about this visitor to our Quadrant. Our orders will override any personal feelings and we will be able to adapt to any.....situations....positive or negative."

He put stress on the words *Feel* and *Want* because they all knew why they were here. This wasn't about grudges or personal feelings. It was about getting the job done and making sure you arrive home alive. S'Tan suspected that a few of the crewmen around him would even sacrifice themselves for the mission. Foolish, of course, but noble. It was time, in his mind, to hear what their mission was to be.

And at worst case, I will do what I have to do to get my new boat home safely, he silently concluded to himself.

"Our orders are both simple and difficult," Kheren answered. "Investigate and proceed. We have discretionary powers, within the guidelines of our General Orders, to determine from this situation what is best in regard to what the Federation stand for; the inherent right of every species to exist in this universe in peace and prosperity, to promote the brotherhood of sentience and mutual sharing of space, goods and knowledge and to ensure it all without compromising the safety of our own people."

He looked around. His face was as expressionless as ever but nevertheless, everyone felt that he was smiling. His curving antennae certainly told as much.

"To add my contribution to the quoting game, I will give you the words of Garth of Izar; give the other the chance to become your friend before you force him to become your enemy."

Kheren had chosen his quote deliberately; Captain Garth was the Human who had become the benchmark of all great starship captains from James Kirk onward and who had written Starfleet's Rules of Engagement still in force more than two hundred years later. But although they all knew about his illustrious career in the early days of the twenty-third century, they also knew how that great life had ended; in a asylum for the criminally insane before revolutionary neuro treatment finally cured him in the last days of his life in a penal colony.

If there was one example of what could be the cost of their dedication to Federation ideals, this was it. And he wanted that on everyone's mind when he next spoke. His gaze went from Leône to K'Leysha then Yiral, down to 011 and 110 to end on Oseno and Sisko.

"As a starship captain, I am empowered with ambassadorial status to evaluate and begin relations with a foreign power, to be later ratified by the Federation Council; with a full diplomatic corps already on board, the *Horizon* is as capable as any official diplomatic delegation to respond to this offer, investigate it for as long as needed with her full ten years of complete autonomy and attempt to lay the foundations for anything lasting and worthwhile for both parties."

His silvery eyes then focused in turn on Redding, Somers and Solius.

"However, Starfleet is well aware of the inherent dangers in such a situation, especially considering that, so far away from Federation Space, there will be no support available. That is why the Horizon is sent to this rendez-vous; sending one ship will not be interpreted as a threatening response... but the Horizon has almost the firepower of a space station, capable of tactical saucer separation and with a support combat vessel, a full wing of fighter and stealth shuttles and now two squads of Starfleet Marines that make her capable of best facing alone those possible dangers."

Now he lifted his head and looked at everyone.

"And make no mistake people; the perils are as great as the promises here. In that regard, all of you are quite right. And it will be weeks, maybe months, possibly even years before we may get back home... if at all. "

He made a pause to allow that to sink in before he continued.

"That is why, for this mission, only volunteers will come; even among civilians and family members that would elect to stay on board. There will be a general assembly of every crew member, personnel and resident of the ship to fully present what we are about to embark upon. There will be no negative mention on anyone's record for deciding to relinquish to come and all efforts will be made to relocate or reassign every individual choosing so to everyone's best interest; but once committed and underway, it will be for both better and worse."

Still sitting, he nevertheless straightened himself and his uniform before concluding.

"Now that you know and offered each other both sides of the situation, I want to know who among you will accept this challenge."

Sitting up straight, Alex Somers spoke first.

"I will accept the challenge, Sir; otherwise why am I here."

"You were sent here because you are the best person to do the job we expect of you; but that does not mean you *have to*," the Andorian pointed out. "General Order 27 states that no Starfleet member shall be required by the assignment of standard duties and responsibilities to undergo extended separation from his family. I want you and everyone else that will decide to come to be perfectly clear on that. You understand and accept that you might not see your family again for a long time to come, Lieutenant?"

Shrugging comically, the tall red-haired woman didn't hesitate, looking straight at her CO.

"My dad's a Marine Diplomat, my Mom in the diplomatic corps; they will understand, so it will not be a problem, Captain."

"Glad to hear it; it would be hard to find someone with your qualifications this close to launch," answered the Andorian with obvious satisfaction in his voice.

S'Tan spoke up next.

"I will go as well, Sir. My only family wants me dead, so I would rather be out in the middle of nowhere, seeing first hand unexamined Undine technology instead of on a starbase that the Tal'Shiar could easily infiltrate."

He nodded as he finished speaking.

"I would like to make a request, however. I request that myself and all of my staff be permitted to carry phasers, if they so choose."

He held his hand up before anyone could interrupt, as he saw the looks he was getting from around the room.

"Don't worry, I won't wear it to any Diplomatic meetings, which I assume I am not going to be privy to anyway."

"These will be issued in case we go to red alert, Lieutenant," the captain explained to answer his request, "along with the doubling of security officers assigned to all key areas of the ship, like main engineering, which are already doubled when we go to yellow alert and always garded and under restricted access otherwise to begin with. As chief engineer under general quarters condition, your personal code will allow you access to all armories and to use all available replicators and transporters to provide gene-encoded weaponry to personnel. As senior officer, you are yourself allowed your own phaser 1 during yellow alert... but not the rest of the crew, except for certified security personnel... and now our Marines."

His tone of voice made it clear this was not open to discussion. And those who had served with him on the Artemis knew why; once, renegade officers sympathetic to the cause of the Horizon Children terrorists had tried to seize his ship, only to be foiled, barely, by the already stringent security measures he had implemented back then. Since this incident, the only one where he had ever lost lives among his crew, he had brought ship security protocols above even what could be found at Starfleet Intelligence Headquarters. Solius and Somers' experience with the normally routine boarding of the ship upon their arrival had shown them but a small example of these.

And there were even a few only the first officer and himself knew about.

S'tan nodded as the Captain finished his comments. It was all the response that was needed. He tapped on his console, sending armament orders to Baoule, noting the senior engineering staff was to arm themselves in a red alert event. He knew that this order was a warping of the captain's words, but he would rather take a verbal lashing, something every Romulan lived with every day, than allow the Undine to seize the ship.

He was not of Starfleet blood. He was Romulan; and his blood told him to prepare for the absolute worst.

And so he would.

Touch, yes. See and hear....that's something different. Snowfire mused, idly doodling field interaction equations on another sheet of hardcopy. *If the ansibles are functional, we'll be able to communicate as long as we're in n-space. And given the transit time to our deployment area, engineering a system based off of the Pathfinder Project of the 2370s should be easily within our capabilities which would give us limited real-time communication. Such a system would also allow us to keep Starfleet informed on our progress, which is something I would think would be in all of our best interests.*

She was just trying to be helpful at this point though, for those who would be more comfortable being able to talk with their families, at least some of the time. For Snowfire herself, ten years was nothing. She'd spent far longer at the Great Academy, for all intents and purposes totally alone, and in this mission she'd be among those who she knew to be friends. And a decade was a minor price to pay, her only worry being if the Vision formed whilst she was away.

Oh quit with the messiah complex Snow, she told herself after a moment, shaking the worry away. She might be able to help when all of that came due, but changing things? Maybe, just maybe, but not on her own. And her siblings could hold the fort for now, like they'd been doing for years now. And the Vision would form when it formed, that was the way of things.

"I have little fear of time, Captain. And," she smiled ever so slightly, "is a ship not also a family in itself?" That was something Starfleet and the IDF shared. "Aboard a vessel of thousands, one is only alone when they wish to be."

"It certainly is... at least for some of us," acknowledged Kheren.

Clanless, ostracized by his own kind, self-exiled from his harsh homeworld where he had never been accepted because of his mutation, his two wives already serving under his command, it was certainly true for him. He nodded appreciatively to Snowfire.

The Bynar doctors then spoke up, together as usual.

"For our part, we are..."

"... parent-less, and have no ..."

"... strong connection to our..."

"... adoptive parents. We have..."

"... no problem being on..."

"... active duty ... "

"... for years, or decades..."

"... if necessary."

They then shifted in order to access, a second time, the science console in front of them, which was still displaying an image and information about the Undine, identified by the Borg as Species 8472.

"As far as our..."

"... security is concerned..."

"... detection is the best..."

"... method of prevention. The..."

"... Undine have a unique ability to..."

"... change their form ..."

" not only visually, but..."

"... genetically. This makes it..."

"... impossible to differentiate them..."

"... even at a genetic level ..."

"... from whatever lifeform ..."

"... they are impersonating."

"However, their method of..."

"... impersonation is not..."

"... without flaws."

Again, interacting with the console in front of them, the holographic display changed from an image of the monstrous, tri-legged form of the Undine to an image showing a very complex three-dimensional representation of a chemical compound.

A mass conglomerate of thousands of spheres of various colors and sizes, that represented molecules, were connected via grey tubes and there were several obvious recognizable patterns mixed with seeming chaos. Over each sphere floated a series of letters and numbers indicating the abbreviations and numbers of atoms, isotopes, and ions that made up each molecule.

There were also several noticeable areas of completely empty space where there was clearly missing data.

Again, the doctors spoke.

"This is the..."

"... partial representation of..."

"... the chemical compound necessary ..."

"... for the Undine to maintain ..."

"... their impersonation. As you can see ..."

"... it is quite complex..."

"... and what Starfleet Medical knows..."

"... about the compound is..."

"... incomplete. It was..."

"... reverse engineered from..."

"... a sample obtained by ..."

"... Admiral Chakotay, then Commander ..."

"... when he became intimately involved with..."

"... one of the Undine."

"With the exact chemical representation ..."

"... of the compound, we could..."

"... detect any Undine who has..."

"... recently used it."

They paused to let the enormity of that statement sink in. Without their means of infiltration the Undine would only be able to resort to conventional means of combat, which had proven to be less impressive when compared to the power of the Borg, already defeated and wiped out by the Federation.

O11 then interacted with the console, which highlighted the incomplete parts of the compound and filled in the gaps.

"Unfortunately, the sample was..."

"... incomplete; and without a..."

"... complete representation, we cannot..."

"... hope to use it to..."

"... identify them."

"This is another reason why..."

"... we must attempt..."

"... to make peace. If we are able to..."

"... negotiate with the..."

"... 'Boothby' leader who is ..."

"... bringing us to the table to..."

"... receive an untouched sample of..."

"... their compound, then we will ..."

"... not have to worry about..."

"... infiltration again."

It was clear that Starfleet Medical had already communicated at least part of the Horizon's upcoming mission to the Bynar doctors, who had been ordered to obtain this compound at all costs, and thus had come to the briefing prepared.

"I of course can't speak for my people," Jureth stated then, "but you can be assured, Captain, that I won't shy away from what's ahead of us. My recent experience with the Undine alone makes me suited for this mission. My parents were both Starfleet officers at one time, some of the first Bajorans to serve, they didn't back down from their challenges and neither will I."

"Thank you, Commander; the success of this mission would have certainly been compromised without your involvement," said the commanding officer of Lotus Fleet's flagship with obvious relief in his silvery eyes.

Then he turned his metallic-hued stare towards each one of the officers who hadn't yet spoken, to see who would respond next.

As his eyes fell on Redding the large man simply shrugged.

"I never give myself the luxury of deciding if an assignment is something I want to do or not Captain, only if it's something I won't do. Because unless you give me an illegal order, I will find a way to do it, I guess I'm just 'old school' that way."

He took a breath.

"I think this mission is borderline unnecessarily dangerous, and at this same time impossible to ignore. If anyone wants out now is the time to speak up because tomorrow will be too late."

He sat back into his chair.

"For me? that moment was when I signed up with Starfleet."

"I share your sentiment," acknowledged Kheren, "except for the unnecessary part; working for peace, no matter how dangerous, is why Starfleet exists in the first place. But of course you know that. Your experience and judgment will be most needed in this. And if I would ever give an illegal order, I expect you not only to refuse it, but to make sure everyone else did as well... and, most of all, that I would not do so again."

Anyone that had served at least once with the Andorian knew that the chances of he doing so were as probable as a hologram bleeding honey. But that made the message all the more clear; uncharacteristic behavior while confronting a telepathic species would most probably mean that their commanding officer was compromised... and that the safety of the crew, the ship, the success of the mission and the safety of the Federation and what it stood for were more important than himself.

Only Elisha Leône and Joey Sisko had not yet spoken. To them the captain now gave his full attention.

Sisko spoke first.

"I joined this ship voluntarily so that I would not be stuck on the Starbase, and additionally, so I could tend to a special charge that I have been granted the privilege to watch over and help. She needs to be on this ship with the only family she knows... those who were on the previous mission and helped her find her freedom. I am the only one who knows enough to maintain her new form, as I am the one who created it. I certainly can't back down or hide away now."

"Thank you, Commander; your own experience and judgment will also be an asset for this mission, I have no doubt," thanked the Andorian. "As for Tess, we have to keep in mind that she is not just an artificial intelligence rescued from the supercomputer of a lost warship; she is a legally recognized sentient artificial lifeform, with all the privileges and rights given to any other sentient being under Federation law, a registered Federation citizen and a graduated Starfleet officer sworn to duty just like all of us. Please make sure that if she comes along, it is just as freely, knowingly and willingly as any one of us. Therefore, I understand that your decision might be provisional to hers."

Again, only the chief of ops of the Horizon was left last, this time to answer the call to duty as she would choose; for her sake... and theirs.

The Orion Ops officer sat quietly as the conversations continued among the senior officers as she had done throughout this gathering, until they all had spoken once again in response to the captain's inquiry.

Once all was silent, she spoke.

"I have no home other than the one being provided for me on this ship, nor any family to leave behind. I have been surrounded by danger and deception for the majority of my life Captain, so this aspect of the mission is irrelevant to my decision."

Elisha Leône then gazed around assiduously at her fellow senior officers before continuing.

"My only concern is that we earnestly enter into these forthcoming diplomatic meetings with a genuine intent to establish working relations with this species. That we not allow fear, distrust and preconception to cloud our judgment and dictate our actions or reactions; regardless of the time or efforts involved to accomplish this."

She then looked directly at the captain.

"I have sworn an oath of allegiance to Starfleet and I will fulfill these obligations regardless of any personal sacrifice. Your words Captain are an assurance that we will follow this mission with the best of intentions toward peace and prosperity. I am here to serve and therefore offer my services in whatever capacity you deem necessary for this mission."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," said Kheren nodding. "And rest assured, Lieutenant, and all of you, that we are going in with open hands, open hearts but also with open minds *and* open eyes."

He did not ask either Miramanee Blackbird or Adira Yiral; both had nodded with confident smiles on their faces. They would anyway have time afterwards to reconsider, if they so choose, with the rest of the crew. And so reminded the captain to them all.

"There will be a general meeting of everyone aboard in the main cargo hold at twenty hundred hours. Everyone wishing to go along on this assignment will do so willingly and knowing all the implications, with no consequences for opting out; those choosing to stay will be temporarily reassigned as well as their family if required. As for the consequences for coming, only time will tell. But everyone, all of us included, will have to brush up on Federation Articles and Starfleet General Orders and Rules of Engagement; once we will be out there, we will *be* Starfleet *and* the United Federation of Planets."

He stood.

"We will launch tomorrow exactly thirty-two hours after that general assembly. Once we will be underway, there will be no stopping and no turning back. "

Then he looked at each one of them in turn.

"Any last question or recommendation?"

"I got nothing," Alex Somers said, looking at the others.

As no one else spoke further, Kheren straightened himself and his uniform.

"General assembly in cargobay 1 in eight hours; departure in forty hours. See to it, Number One. Thank you all."

* * *

Snowfire waited a few hours after the meeting before she went to see the Captain, she'd wanted to make sure that she had everything all pulled together in a way that would be easily translatable and also to work out exactly how to explain it all. What she'd been doing with her Circle, the training she'd given them, and what that training would allow them to do.

And... perhaps far more importantly, what that would create in the ship and how it was usable. She'd need to lay it all out on the table very clearly given its connotations, but for the mission they were heading into it could be vital. The ability to meet the Undine on equal terms, or at least hold the ship against psionic intrusion if it came to that, would be a god-send. So as it turned towards evening...ship time at least.

She gathered up all of her data and asked ship to tell her where Kheren was.

It wasn't really anything that could be called a surprise to find that he was in his ready room, it wasn't late in the day yet and he seemed to often keep hours that many humans would have called borderline insane. Then again, he wasn't human. Andorians needed only four hours of sleep per thirty-two hours period, the "Andorian day," to begin with.

The walk to the Ready Room was one that she'd become used to, in that it was also the route to the Horizon's bridge; and she was happy for its familiarity. It helped settle her, that stretch of corridor and turbolift ride. And for what she was about to explain and ask, she needed that settling.

Even with the circumstances of their mission, instituting something like the *kyrol* that protected the ships of the IDF had the capacity to be a stretch, especially when you factored in what the empathic net could allow her to be capable of as long as she was close enough to the ship. But in this case, she couldn't not ask. It could help protect them, and that was the least that she could do for the ship whose crew was beginning to become family.

You looked out for family.

She reached the bridge, crossing it with a nod and smile to the duty officers present, then tapped the stud linked to the Ready Room's admittance chime.

"Come."

The door slid open to reveal the Andorian at his desk with his yeoman, the copper-skinned Human Ensign Miramanee Blackbird at his side, PADD in hand. They were both hunched over his desk terminal as the Illythirii chief of science appeared before their lifted eyes.

"Make sure the quartermaster has everything on this list and that both Commander Redding and Lieutenant Leône get the manifest as well before and after everything has been checked."

"Aye, Captain," answered the Amerind woman looking on last time between the screen and her PADD, tapping something quickly on it.

"That we will be all for now, Yeoman."

With a nod, Ensign Blackbird left the room, leaving a second nod to Snowfire as she went by her on her way out. Kheren then sat down in the chair behind his translucent desk, inviting his lead science officer to take the one opposing him on her side of the desk with a gesture of his hand.

"What can I do for you, Lieutenant-Commander?"

Snowfire took the seat without speaking, then look up across the desk to meet his metallic-heud eyes. As to be expected, he'd been working on getting everything ready for the launch. She hoped this wouldn't take too much time away from that, but if not now...well, later would be worse. She laid her PADD on her side of the desk, placing her hands delicately on her lap, then began speaking.

"It's about the training that I've been giving about twenty-five percent of the psi-capable personnel among the Horizon's crew, Captain. And considering exactly what it is, it has relevance to our upcoming mission."

She nodded to the PADD.

"It's all in there, but I'll lay it out for you now."

She reached up and tapped a button on the device, activating a hologram of the Horizon that hovered above the desk between them.

"What we have now is a passive psionic detection net, which you instituted during our maiden voyage."

She nodded at the display as a film of light surrounded the ship.

"It'll pick up just about any attempt to communicate through telepathy or empathy, and that's good. But considering where we're going, and just in the aid of enhanced security, there's another measure that I've laid in the basic training for whilst I've been teaching the Circle technopathy."

She tapped another control. Panes of light spread out around the Horizon, almost as if another set of shields around her in response to that command, and Snowfire smiled faintly.

"This is what my people call a *kyrol*, the best translation I can give is the old Terran Greek term *aegis*, or shield in Standard. It's a form of active psi defence that can protect an entire ship against intrusion or attack. It's a communal effort that shares a lot with the other joint techniques that I've been allowed to teach, so putting it in place would be simple enough. But it pertains most to this mission in that it would protect us from any psionic intrusion by the Undine... *if* they make the attempt."

She paused for a moment, letting that sink in.

"There is, however, another side to this coin. One that might not be one that you would like to use, but still could be vital to our survival if we are ever faced with a full-fledged psi attack."

She tapped another button, and this time a subtly different light spread out across the entire vessel. She reached up to indicate it.

"This...this is what we call an empathic net. The translation is sketchy, but it does the job. It's a reservoir of psionic energy that results from something like an Aegis being in place for continuous periods of time. The passive protocol you instituted has created a weaker version, but nothing that could add anything if you tapped it. This... this can."

Her finger tapped the light a second time.

"Without going into theory that you really need to work out on your own, when you maintain active psi effects tied to objects you get leakage into the object. And that leakage can be...tapped. Think of it as something akin to a battery."

"With something like that, given the reports I've read on the subject, I am confident that if necessary we could not only repel psionic incursion but also go 'outside' and actively confront an attacker on an equal footing. It's not something that I would do without your express permission, but *if* this is a trap, even if its not a trap for us but our contact, it could be a vital edge."

She lowered her hand back to her lap, chewing on her lower lip.

"It's not something that I offer lightly, and it's not something that I'm sure is even within the ethical boundaries of Starfleet itself but... you give your Captain everything that you can. If it's not something that they're happy with utilising, then you don't use it. But you have to let them, in this case, you, make that choice."

Kheren knew little about psionics. In fact his own abysmal score on the psionic testing routinely done by Starfleet upon entering the Academy almost registered as a form of natural shielding against it, so unreceptive he was to it. The only actual experience he had with it was the Andorian marital bond he now shared with his wives that extended beyond the confines of space or perception; and he guessed that even this normally natural psi-link of his species had only been possible with him because one of his wives was Aenar.

But as little as he knew or understood about it didn't mean that he discounted it or didn't see the practical applications of it; especially in a strategic and tactical sense when they were about to meet a very alien, potentially aggressive and dangerous species who's natural form of communication was telepathy.

"I will look into this in greater depth with Counselor Lyrya later on," promised the Andorian after a moment. "This is tremendous work, Lieutenant-Commander. If this works as you describe, then you have given us a genuinely effective way to protect and even defend ourselves if things come to worse. You are right that I may not like all that it implies... but even if I do not like them either, I know that sometimes we have to fire phasers."

He pondered for another moment, looking at the data which was expertedly offered both in simple, concise and understandable terms for someone like him and in elaborate, precise scientific details usable by those truly knowledgeable in the field. Snowfire K'Leysha was her usual thorough self and yet evidently aware that she had not only to do the work properly but to communicate it effectively; Kheren was seeing here that her time among many people of different species and cultures not as familiar with the subject as her own had served her well.

"I can see the value of what you are proposing. But that brings four questions to my mind. One; is this or something derived from it usable as a communication tool? Two; will this work for our non-psionically endowed crew as well and if so to what degree? Three; will this create a kind of group-mind where thoughts would be perceived by others? I'm asking this because I know more than a few who would balk at the idea of having their thoughts bared open."

He made a pause to let her first ponder his questions but also to make the last one predominant in her mind as it was in his.

"Fourth and last; is there any risk involved?"

"The basic practices are exactly the same across the board in communal work. All you need to do is know how to ..."

She cut off with a rueful grin.

"Sorry. To answer your first question simply, yes. It's a derivation of the communal technique that allows psi-capables to boost others. Given the level of psionic potential available aboard this vessel and with either Counselor Lyrya or myself as the focus point, I have little doubt that we could punch messages across interstellar distances. I'd need to teach the Counselor how to act as a focus. I've studied the cultural records and there really *isn't* anything there of a similar nature... but it isn't a hard skill to learn, just to master."

She shrugged.

"As to its effects, see it as a psionic deflector grid. It's pretty much that simple. Any attempt to break through the Aegis will get stopped beyond the hull of the Horizon so long as the link is strong enough. If the known levels of Undine psi-potential are accurate, the Circle that I've been training will be capable of holding off small groups of them. Larger ones if you want to hold back my response capability, as in that case they can tap the Net as well. It will protect all those aboard equally." She said with a striking finality. "And no, it will not create a Groupmind. Not unless those within it chose to create one, which is in the end their choice and won't pull anyone else in but those who wish to be. And what is shared in a Groupmind stays within it. That's something that I'm afraid I can't explain, but am totally secure in stating. As to risk..."

Snowfire sighed.

"Captain, of course there is risk. But the risk is so much greater if the crew is not protected. The risk to myself is greatest, as the primary focus of the shield."

She held up a hand quickly.

"No other could do so, Captain. And regardless of what I may be, I do believe in protecting my family. This ship in many ways is part of that family now, and I would give my life freely to protect it. With that said though, there is little danger of that. If the shield is breached, even in such a way as it could harm me, the link to it will be severed without conscious thought. We shall shield the Horizon, but I am the only one who can create the *aegis* that will let us do so. That places on me a certain strain, but it is one that I am fully capable of adapting to without harm. The only other possibility of risk is one that would in itself be a result of a situation full of it and that I would honestly discount. But, an answer is nothing if it is not full."

She nodded at the haze of light that represented the empathic net.

"If I use that to go 'outside', as it were, there is a risk to myself in that I will be engaging in what amounts to mental combat with other psi-capable entities. However out of every member of this ship's crew, I am the only one who is both mentally and emotionally capable of doing something like that. I can train others, and I will if you will let me and they are willing; as I will teach them how to hold the *aegis* without me. But in the end, 'outside' they will not be me. And there is little arrogance in the statement that I am the best trained and most experienced combat capable psi in the quadrant."

Kheren listened to his chief science officer then pondered a moment longer on everything she had said. It had been obvious in his eyes that the comments about family had touched him deeply. Then he nodded.

"I may know next to nothing on the subject, but I understand enough of what you are telling me to see indeed that this is something to consider with all seriousness. Very well, Lieutenant-Commander; see to the implementation of this... *Kyrol* for the Horizon and her crew. Make sure that you train enough people to support you in case of strain or possibly take over for you if you are put out of action. As with any tactical measure, we need a contingency plan if this weaken or fail. But I am sure that you will have already thought about it, given your usual thoroughness and your obvious experience in this. Also, keep Commander Redding, Commander Oseno and Lieutenant Somers, our new chief of security and tactical, informed about this. Do not hesitate to also involve our Doctors as well if need be. In both our best and worst case scenarios, this might just be the best tool we will have at our disposal."

The Andorian lifted his chin in his usual show of respect.

"Well done, Lieutenant-Commander... and thank you."

* * *

Jureth had been toying with the idea since they returned from their previous mission. It was only a concept, and would take some support to implement, but he believed it would benefit the Horizon and her crew.

What he was envisioning would gather all of his specialists in one space and allow them to all contribute their expertise to any given situation from a central hub as opposed to having them spread out throughout the ship, a strategic operations nerve center of sorts. He would ask the captain for permission later; first he needed to find out if it could be done. So, he entered the ship's bridge looking for the Horizon's chief of operations, Lieutenant Elisha Leone. Finding the Orion at her station he approached her, and addressed her directly.

"Hello Lieutenant; I have a question for you."

Looking up from her console, Elisha Leône responded immediately to the strategic operations chief.

"Certainly. Proceed with your inquiry, Commander" she noted with a keen eye on the Bajoran.

"The Horizon is a large vessel, to say the least... and I was wondering what type of spare spaces we have. My goal is to ideally take a spare conference room or something that size and turn it into a... nerve center of sorts for my strategic operations specialists. It would mean repurposing the space, and adding consoles, displays and other equipment. I have not spoken to the captain yet, I wanted to find out if it could be done first."

Thinking for a moment about his request, Elisha turned and pulled-up a comprehensive display of the entire desk listings of the Horizon from her station. She studied all of the decks and their allocated spaces for quite a while as she cross-referenced specific details. She then zoomed into a specific area on her display with an image and a blueprint.

After making a few calculations, she turned back to strategic operations chief as she responded.

"Perhaps, Commander, I could partition off a section of one of the Cargo bays on Deck 27 near the entrance." She gestured as she pointed out the region to Oseno while continuing. "This would give you the option to design the room's specific size and capacity based on your anticipated needs for equipment, personnel and features, while also placing you and your team in relative proximity of the turbolift and the Polaris, should an emergency arise while a meeting is in session."

"That would be ideal, if the captain approves of course," Oseno replied as he studied the blueprint. "Right now, my people are spread out throughout the ship, but I think I could use their talents better if I could consolidate them. As I said, I think I wouldn't need much more than the size of a conference room. Thank you, Lieutenant; I will have more information if the captain tells me I can take away one of his cargo bays."

The last sentence was accompanied by a smile and Oseno turned, heading for the captain's ready room where he rang the annunciator and waited.

Kheren had just finished reviewing his chief science officer's proposal for the ship's revolutionary telepathic shield grid and was about to send his approval code to log it all in the ship's computer. Hearing the chime, he punched in the code then straightened himself in his chair.

"Come."

The door slid open to reveal his strategic ops officer in the doorway. He could hear his heartbeat well enough to summarize that the Bajoran was both quite enthusiastic and slightly uncertain about something; and his body language was nothing but professional. So this was business and this was important to him... and directly related to the ship, hence why he came to his commanding officer's office. That was exactly what he had gathered from Snowfire K'Leysha's visit not that long ago when she had come to propose her *Kyrol* project. And he greeted Oseno the same way.

"What can I do for you, Commander?"

Jureth stepped into the ready room and took a moment to compose his thoughts before he spoke.

"Sir, I've been toying with an idea since we've been back. Right now my people are spread out throughout the ship. I want to consolidate them, into one space. I'd like to create a central space for Strategic Operations...a nerve center if you will. I spoke with Lieutenant Leone to see if it could even be done and she believes she could partition one of the cargo bays near the Polaris docking bay to create a conference room sized space. I would populate it with workstations and consoles where my specialists could take real time data and information and analyze it, along with being able to work together to build them into some kind of unit. All of this, of course, is contingent on your approval."

Oseno finished his presentation and then waited expectantly for his CO's response. He believed he had a good idea, and hoped the captain did too.

Kheren took a moment to think about what the Bajoran proposed. But it didn't take long for him to assess the proposal.

"I wonder why Starfleet... or me for that matter... never thought about this. I guess we all fell into the pattern of seeing the bridge as the focal point of command on a starship, more so when there is an auxiliary bridge usable when the bridge module is away *and* a battle bridge in the engineering section for saucer separation tactical operations... But considering the size of this ship and especially what the Polaris' role is, what you propose makes a lot of sense."

The Andorian stood up, went to the window of his office to look out at the vista of stars beyond the transparency.

"Where we are going, we need both to centralize our operations and at the same time make sure that our nerve centers are not knocked out with one lucky shot... And instant response time might prove critical if things come to worse."

He turned to face his strategic operations officer.

"Since our chief of ops agrees that we have the resources to implement it, you may proceed, Commander. Thank you for your proposal... and make sure Commander Redding and Lieutenant Somers are informed, as well as our chief engineer; I would not want Lieutenant Solius to implement Romulan anti-sabotage measures were he to discover an unregistered connection to data and power systems."

Oseno smiled slightly at the reference to the ship's chief engineer.

"Yes Sir, I will likely need engineering's help anyway. I will work on getting the project started and hopefully get it at least partially running while we are travelling to our meeting with the Undine, and I will submit the appropriate paperwork of course."

"Ensign Blackbird will certainly make sure that you do."

Kheren's Andorian face could not smile but his curving antennae did the job.

"Anything else, Commander?"

"No, Sir, Thank you. I will work on this right away."

Later that day, Oseno related his newest idea to First officer Redding.

"I have to admit, I like the idea, Commander" the big man said and gave an affirmative nod "Seems odd to me that no one ever thought of adding a situation room to one of our Federation starships before, at least not that I can remember... and I was around before holodecks."

he gave a kind of dismissive shrug.

"I wonder if dedicating a type 4 holoprojector would be a good way to keep it situation adaptable. You know, for furniture and various displays."

He was sure Jureth knew that the type 4's couldn't produce anything as complicated as a true holodeck but was dependable enough to not require the main computer to keep it running if there was any type of system failure.

"An interesting idea, Sir. I suspect that I'll have to bring that up with our chief engineer. What I'm looking at so far is several multipurpose consoles that could be adapted by whatever officer is using them for their current task; a central display much like a main conference room would have so that information from any console could be displayed for everyone to view, and possibly a small laboratory workstation so that my science and medical specialists could run short term experiments. I've even considered asking for an emergency transporter pad though I don't know if that can be done."

Oseno offered the XO his personal PADD which displayed a rough outline of what the room would contain, showing the possible positioning of six multipurpose consoles in three pairs of two spread out on three bulkheads. The lab station was placed along the furthest bulkhead from the entrance to the room, and in the center was a central display unit that would be connected to the ship's computer and would display whichever information was most needed, be it from one of the room's consoles or data from the Horizon herself.

"I see" Redding said looking it over. "From the looks of it, I don't think you really need me trying to give you pointers, do you?"

He continued reading for a couple more minutes.

"I'd say you have your ducks in a row, Commander. Let me know if there's any way I can be of help."

And so saying, he handed him back the PADD. With a smile and a quick nod of the head, he was gone again.

After the exchange with the Horizon's XO, Oseno made his way down to main engineering and, entering the cavernous space containing the ship's pulsing warp core, he located the Romulan Chief Engineer of the Horizon.

"Hello, Lieutenant," Oseno greeted S'tan Soilus as he approached. "I was wondering if I might take a moment of your time."

S'Tan adjusted his posture to Attention and saluted his superior.

"What can I do for you, Sir?"

Oseno was slightly surprised by the salute but then he remembered that the man had been a member of the Romulan military where that type of decorum was expected. The Bajoran mimicked S'Tan's gesture, though he suspected that his form was probably a bit off and followed it with a proper Romulan greeting

"Jolan Tru. I am working on a project that Captain Kheren has approved. Lieutenant Leone will be partitioning off a cargobay near the Polaris docking bay to create a sort of situation room or nerve center for my Strategic Operations department. I will be populating the room with several consoles and a central display that I would like to connect directly to the ship's network so that my people can examine real time information from sensors, tactical, and LCARS. I was also wondering if installing a small transporter pad would be possible. Obviously I know you have a good amount of work on your plate so I wouldn't expect you to attend to all of this personally, but I wanted to keep you informed and to find out what the odds are we can have most of the project up and running by the time we reach our meeting with the Undine."

The engineer slightly squinted his eyes as the officer's use of the Romulan language. He kept his eyes squinted as his Commander explained what he wanted.

"That sounds more like a Romulan Investigation Bay. I am surprised this ship did not already have such a location. Our Captain seems to fear every bump in the night, except the one we are about to fly straight at."

He sighed, the insanity of the mission had still not cleared his mind.

"I can devote a few repair crews to assist in setting everything up, barring any damage that needs to be repaired. I am worried about the system drain that the systems will take. I'll have to figure out something to divert power away from the room when we are in combat... but not so much as to make the room worthless."

Hearing their conversation just a pace from the console he was working at, Robert Baoule flashed them his bright white smile, making his dark bald head all the more somber. But his voice was as friendly as it was professional.

"If I may be allowed to interject... There might be a simple way to solve that problem, Sir; the Polaris."

With a few touches on his panel, the assistant chief engineer brought up between them a tridimensional holographic display of the ship's schematics, using the emitters of the hologrid spread throughout the ship including their present location. As he spoke, the computer zoomed in on the lower half section of the Horizon's schematics display and highlighted the relevant parts with coded colors as he explained his idea in more detail.

"Since this strategic room is essentially for the need of Commander Jureth and his staff and crew, it is obvious it will be mostly if not always used while the Polaris is docked... and left unused when she is launched. Thus, we could provide all the needed power for that new section with ample to spare from the Polaris' own power core even at idle status. The hook up would be quite simple to implement, especially with that room so near the ship's docking bay... and no power at all from the Horizon would ever be needed. Even more; in case of a catastrophic situation where all the ship's bridges and even main engineering are lost and main power as well, this would allow this strategic room to be converted as a last resort emergency command center from which the power of the escort ship could be harnessed and channeled for the basic needs of the main vessel."

S'Tan nodded.

"I agree that it is the simplest solution. However, what should happen if the Polaris is forced to disembark? I am sure we can send some data to the Information Center, but it would lose a great deal of functionality...Would that be an issue, Commander?"

Oseno considered for a moment what the two engineers were proposing, not being an engineer himself he was relying on his basic Starfleet engineering classes to understand what they were saying.

"The odds are, if the Polaris is not docked, most of my people will be aboard her, unless she is being used for a very specific mission or for some reason she were removed for major repairs or something along those lines. So, I would say that your proposal Mister Baoule should be a viable solution to the power problem."

"Very well," the Romulan concluded, "The repair teams are yours. Now if you will excuse me, I would like to learn more about this transwarp system before I make us implode outside of the starbase."

"That would be explode, Sir, " Baoule reminded his superior officer with a big, friendly smile, knowing by his comment that the Romulan was thinking of the microsingularity-powered starships of his homeworld and not the matter-antimatter powered one he was now in charge of.

As a propulsion expert, Baoule was as knowledgeable about microsingularity drives as he was fascinated by them; with the exception of Solius himself, he was probably the best specialist on the subject in the entire Federation. Working with the Romulan officer was a dream come true for him. Now he could learn from the source... and as far as he could see, from one of the best. The way Solius was adapting to Starfleet technology was nothing short of astounding and said much about the qualifications of this otherwise junior officer. Baoule would make sure to step up his game to his chief's standards as best he could.

Solius saluted the officer and turned his back to return to work.

His assistant then turned his smile back to the Bajoran Commander.

"I will start the work with Lieutenant Leône and the ChOps and ChEng of the Polaris as soon as possible, Sir. Even at the tremendous speed the Horizon will be flying, it will take us at least a month if not two to get to our theatre of operations, to use your own terms. You will have at least a functional room, if not a fully equipped and operational one, by then."

* * *

Captain's Log

Stardate: 87999.8

The Horizon has been tasked to answer the call for a peace summit transmitted by the Undines, at the other side of the Beta Quadrant, where opens the only naturally opened point of contact between our universe and their own Fluidic Space.

Our transwarp drive will allow us to reach this destination faster than most ships in Starfleet ever could; but the importance of this delicate, potentially hazardous mission may require us to stay out of contact and support in that unknown sector of space for an extended period of time, possibly longer than any other starship ever could manage to. Sending several ships to answer the peace proposal could be misinterpreted as a hostile response by this very paranoid species, forcing the Federation to limit contact with but one vessel; and that lone vessel would be exposed to as many potential hardships and dangers as there are hopes and promises for peace and discovery. As with the ship, the crew would have to be exceptionally gifted, efficient and experienced in all areas of Starfleet operations, from diplomacy to scientific studies to tactical situations. When considering all those variables, only one starship could hope to attempt this momentous task.

The Horizon.

And so, with all systems checked, primed and ready, we are about to be on our way.

Captain's personal Log

All crewmembers and occupants have been thoroughly debriefed about the mission and everything it entails. Everyone was given the choice to commit oneself and possibly one's family to this long lasting, demanding, risky but challenging and promising operation... or to decline without loss of honor or merit and be helped in relocating. Starfleet officers of course routinely welcome, even seek such opportunities; but doing so far away from family and friends for such an extended period, or risking them along, is not something to treat lightly. But despite it all, less than ten percent of the crew complement and not even twenty-five percent of the ship's population chose to desist. To these we wish the best; to the others, we give our thanks.

Going boldly where no one has gone before; these words are but a Starfleet mantra nowadays. But in regard to what lay ahead of us beyond that next star to the right, those words ring truer than ever. We are going out to meet the wonders and the promises of the stars, to share peace and knowledge throughout this universe... and maybe now even beyond.

And I could not have wished for anything else... or with any better people.

Captain Kheren strode to the vast bridge of his ship and stood before his command chair, right between where sat Commander Redding his Executive Officer and one of the Bynar Doctors manning the medical command chair. Commander Oseno stood by the First Officer's side while Counselor Lyrya did the same near the tiny form of 110, as they both usually did.

On his left, Chief Science officer K'Leysha sat at Science Station 1 with her assistant Norbert Baoule standing by at Science 2, while on the opposite side of the command center, Chief Engineer Solius monitored everything from the main Engineering station with Robert Baoule assisting him. And of course, right behind the captain stood Both Tyvya as bridge guard and yeoman Miramanee Blackbird, ready to assist the Captain in anything that would otherwise distract the rest of the bridge officers from their main duties.

Looking forward at the enormous viewscreen and her vista of stars spreading to infinity behind the saucer shape of Starbase Lotus, the Andorian could then look down at the rest of the officers manning their bridge stations; on the right, Alex Somers at tactical; on the left, helmsman Aguk Snow completed the last preparations for departure; and between and in front of them both, Elisha Leône got all green lights from every department of the ship.

They were ready.

"Starbase Flight Command confirms all clear for departure, Captain," reported Lyrya.

Arriving on the bridge, Alex Somers took her seat at Security-Tactical. She still felt a little out of place as she was the only one wearing a green undershirt, but she fully expected to be referred to as Lieutenant Jg or Mister while on the bridge. It was after all protocol. Working at the console for a moment, she then swivelled her seat around.

"Captain; Tactical and Security reports ready and all green," she said.

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

Kheren focused his antennae on the young woman, hearing the rythm of her heart, smelling her body odor and registering her bioelectric aura that all allowed him to interpret her body posture and facial expression.

At his console S'Tan was not having a good time. Despite the similarities of the Romulan systems to Federation systems, the console was giving him issues. He had finally been able to enter through a backdoor, and set the matter-antimatter reactor limits and control the coolant flow. All the while, Baoule was standing behind him, silently observing.

"Mister Bawool, if you would like to assist me, I am running simulations when we eventually jump to Transwarp. Each time, I seem to be miscalculating the energy required from the cores and we explode. Which is something I'd prefer to avoid."

The bald, black man smiled broadly at the way his new chief mangled his name. Obviously he was finding it quite amusing as he did nothing to correct him and went over from engineering station 2 to station 1 in answer to the summon.

The Romulan ran the simulation again, and showed the numbers to his assistant chief. Baoule pointed out his error quickly. S'Tan may have passed the base engineering courses easily, but the fact remained: He had never monitored a real warp core before. Singularity Drives behaved much differently, and adding in the requirement to jump to Transwarp within the next few minutes was adding unneeded pressure.

He nodded to Baoule and reported to the ship's commanding officer.

"All energy levels are green, impulse is at full power. Ready for launch, Captain."

"Understood, Lieutenant Solius. Ready us for warp speed, standby transwarp drive."

Then, after a short moment of silence, looking at the main viewer and the image of the docking pylon the ship was moored at outside of the starbase, his cranial appendages curved slightly inward as he addressed Somers.

"Lieutenant; have you ever piloted a starship out of spacedock?"

The MACO officer lifted her red-haired head slowly, blinking her wide eyes. Without turning, she answered with a nevertheless firm voice.

"Never, Sir."

Kheren exchanged a stare with Helmsman Snow who then vacated the pilot seat to stand by it with an inviting smile to the woman sitting at his right. The captain looked straight ahead.

"Take her out, Lieutenant Somers."

"Aye, Sir."

The athletic woman slid fluidly into the vacated seat and looked at the new console before her. She had enough tactical experience to understand immediately what this was all about; the captain wanted to know if she could be counted on to handle ship steering if her main pilot would be otherwise unable to. Alex had basic training in piloting like any Starfleet officer and sizeable experience with flying shuttles of all kinds; but there was a whole world between a craft a few meters long and a starship over a kilometer in length. Fortunately, they were not docked inside the starbase as most starships would have been; the Horizon was simply too big, even for Earth Spacedock, let alone Starbase Lotus, hence why the flagship was docked at an outside pylon, towards outer space. The risks of a wrong manoeuvre were quite minimal here... so it was obvious the commanding officer saw it as a perfect time to examine the capabilities of his newest bridge officer.

Challenges indeed, Somers recalled from her meeting with the Andorian.

"All ship stations and starbase flight command confirm green status for departure, Captain," she announced after reviewing the unfamiliar yet well laid-out console before her, marvelling at the efficiency and practicality of it's design. No wonder since legendary Tom Paris, former ace-helmsman of the famous USS Voyager, had a hand in the design of this vessel. "Thrusters and impulse nominal, all speeds available through warp and transwarp drives."

Kheren did not take his fixed stare away from the main viewer and the stars blinking back at him.

"Thrusters, Lieutenant Somers."

She didn't know why but several people around her let out a sigh of relief. Then she recalled what she had read on her way to Starbase Lotus and her new assignment. The last time Captain Kheren had ordered a ship out of spacedock, it had been at full emergency impulse; a breakneck maneuver that alone would have cost him his command, hadn't he been able to use Starfleet General Orders to fully justify his action at the board of inquiry following the later loss of his ship in the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. This time though, it looked as if Captain Kheren for once would strictly follow launch regulations.

After all, it was a well known fact that Andorians never did anything without a sound reason.

With a nod, the MACO woman put her hands on the steering controls.

There was a sudden jerk throughout the entire vessel, shaking everyone in their seats, anyone standing having to stumble or brace onto the nearest console or bulkhead to regain their balance.

Alex bit her lower lip and frowned. She was used to small, tactical crafts and she had expected this immense hulk to be slow moving and cumbersome, steering like the antique galleons of her seafaring Earth ancestors; instead, the merest touch gave an instantaneous response from the colossal structure as if it was but a nervous stallion waiting for the slightest opportunity to bolt. As she adjusted herself, she then noticed that Aguk Snow had already put a hand on the console to steady himself before she touched the buttons... and that the captain had not voiced any surprise or annoyance at all. He was still looking at the stars as if nothing had happened; but she knew his attention was all on her.

And so was that of Snow who, also looking at the stars, leaned fractionally near her to whisper in a reassuring tone of camaraderie.

"I know the feeling."

In truth, he was referring to his first piloting duty on board the late command of Captain Kheren, the USS Artemis; when he had been assigned to the late, great Lotus Fleet explorer, a seventy-year old refitted Ambassador class cruiser, he had expected to fly an old, ponderous bucket of bolts... and had almost crashed it in the starbase doors on her first flight out, so responsive was the revamped controls and systems of what outwardly looked then like an antique. No one had really noticed because they were at the time hurrying to an emergency rescue operation and with their captain killed in a sabotage attempt, forcing then first officer Kheren early into his first command; no one that is but Kheren himself.

But Captain Kheren never held a mistake against anyone under his command if they showed the integrity, competence and resolve to correct themselves. And this is what Aguk Snow knew what the Andorian wanted to know about his new bridge officer.

Somers showed herself quite up to the test. This time, her hands were moving delicately and precisely over the controls and the image on the screen moved slowly and gracefully before their eyes while nothing was felt under their feet.

"Thrusters at full, moving away from docking pylon at one thousand kph," reported Somers, her voice betraying nothing of the sound made by her heart. "We have cleared docking zone."

"Full impulse," ordered the Andorian in the center seat.

There was only a slight hum heard and the stars on the screen barely shifted before their eyes, even as they accelerated to a quarter of the speed of light.

"We have full impulse speed, all systems nominal," now announced the red-haired officer at the helm. "We have cleared traffic area."

Several seconds went by and Kheren said nothing. Everyone was at their post, doing their job; yet, Alex felt like each of the two thousand individuals on board were watching her, even through bulkheads dozens, even hundreds of meters away. But she had been looking down at a rifle muzzle pointed at her often enough to keep her cool and again use this much lighter stress from her current predicament as fuel for her reflexes.

"Warp 1."

It was now obvious that Kheren was testing her basic piloting skills and let her be familiarized with the Horizon's helm position, so that he would know what she would be capable of during the mission; and so would she. The captain was not taking any chances with this assignment, or with his ship... or her.

Alex activated the warp controls and the familiar sudden streaking view of stars preceded and followed the blinding flash of the light barrier being suddenly broken as they reached the speed of light.

"Warp 1," she confirmed aloud in a calm, professional tone. She felt a smile of satisfaction creeping to the corner of her lips but kept it down. It was hard not to feel elated at being in control of so much power under the tips of her fingers.

"Implement steady acceleration to warp 8, standby transwarp drive."

The smile faded faster than it had threatened to come to her lips. Warp speed was familiar enough; but transwarp speed, no one except those that had been aboard this ship before her had ever experienced; and from the report of the maiden voyage of the Horizon she had read, it hadn't gone all that smoothly.

And that had been under the hands of Aguk Snow, one of the very best helmsmen in Starfleet.

Taking a quick breath, Somers followed the captain's orders, not even blinking once the whole time as she reported their status in real time.

"Warp 2... warp 3... warp 4... warp 5... warp 6... warp 7... warp 8; cruising speed holding steady, Captain. "

The time had come. Again, sitting like a statue, Kheren never moved his silvery stare from the star view before him and his deep, soft voice resonated with echoes of calm confidence across the silent bridge, several long seconds later.

"Transwarp 2."

It took a moment for Alex to make the calculation and understand the test. Transwarp 1 was exactly the same as warp 1; warp 1 to the cubic power, just like warp 1 was the speed of light to the cubic power, hence both being one times one times one the speed of light. The same way, transwarp 2 was warp 2 to the cubic power or two times two times two; warp 8. Except for the breaking of the warp threshold and the corresponding different visual computer representation of their astounding travel speed on their main viewer, they should not feel the transition; *if* she handled the helm right.

Alex took a breath again, blinked once then pushed the controls.

The far away humming power of the warp core suddenly rose like in those old historical files of the first Constitution class cruisers accelerating. A very faint tremor under their feet betrayed the awesome power now coursing throughout the titanic starship. On the screen, there was a new flash, just as if they had again just broken the light barrier. Then, the stars streaking toward them seemed to come from a coalesced center right in front of them, streaking by while shifting from red to blue in a dazzling display of bright colors that mesmerized her for a moment. Seconds went by and no one spoke; they all knew this was a wholly new experience for her and they recalled themselves how they had felt the first time they had known that they were beyond any velocity scale experienced before. But finally, the MACO Lieutenant brought her mind back to her task.

"Transwarp 2, Sir."

This time, she could not retrain the smallest of smile on her lips as she contemplated the transwarp field streaking before her eyes. They had transitioned from warp to transwarp with barely a shudder of the deckplates.

"Steady acceleration to transwarp 4," simply answered Kheren.

This time, Alex managed the helm controls with a newfound confidence. Not only in herself, but in her new ship... and in her captain.

Transwarp 3... " she then reported after a moment and a new explosion of light before their eyes, moving the center of coalesced stars seemingly a bit farther away from them on the computer-generated image. There was again another flash and a new distancing of the edge of infinity before them and then she finally said: "Steady at transwarp 4, Captain."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Somers. Well done. You might wish to use our travel time to implement some tactical simulations at transwarp velocities from your station. Mister Snow, you may resume your duties."

"Aye, Sir," they both answered, exchanging a smile as they took back their assigned seats.

"ETA, Mister Snow?"

"Sixty-nine point sixty-two days, Sir."

It took a moment for everyone, not just Alex Somers, to fully grasp what had been said; they were going to cross about fifty thousand light years in barely over two months! Any other starship would have taken almost a century to travel the same distance!

"And we'll have to go through the Mempa sector," the Inuit helmsman added with a grin.

"How long before we cross it?" asked the Andorian.

"An hour, captain. By the time their sensor grid notice us, identify us and launch any interception at us, the Klingons will only be able to take over our residual warp trail."

Kheren stood up and straightened his uniform, nodding to Counselor Lyrya as she opened a shipwide channel.

"Now hear this; we are underway to the outer edge of the Beta Quadrant. The Federation has entrusted in us the hopes and dreams of universal peace, prosperity, learning and brotherhood with another universe, another sentience... without compromising the safety of those we represent. You have all volunteered for this momentous task and you will do your best to succeed. And we will succeed... because we are the crew of the starship Horizon... we are Lotus Fleet. All departments, you have two months to brief yourselves with the particular of our mission and prepare for the unexpected. Make those months count. Captain out."

Turning towards his ready room, Kheren showed his chair with a callused finger to Redding sitting at it's right.

"You have the bridge, Number One."

As he went to his office, followed briskly by his Amerind Yeoman, Tyvya lowered herself slightly toward him as he passed by the turbolift where she stood guard.

"Nice speech; you're getting good at this... Sir."

"Power down, Lieutenant," Kheren abruptly whispered back.

None of them smiled, their faces couldn't. But Kheren's antenna were swaying in annoyance as those of his wife curved in amusement.

As for very Human Miramanee Blackbird, it took all of her Starfleet training not to giggle; but the smile on her face was enough to be noticed by her captain and the look he sent her as they disappeared from view behind his ready room door stifled it soon enough. Almost.

CHAPTER THREE: FIRST CONTACT

Captain's Log

Stardate: 88185.2

The Horizon has reached the edge of the Beta Quadrant, an uncharted region of space even by the Klingon Empire and the Romulan Star Empire occupying the opposite part of this sector of the galaxy. Only the Borg Collective ever came to this frontier... and those they designated as Species 8472; the Undines.

This is where the USS Voyager logs, following the Unimatrix Zero Incident, reported the only known natural connexion between our universe and the other universe known as Fluidic Space; the point of origin of the strange, powerful, dangerous and very alien people that called us to meet here and discuss Peace.

We are approaching the rendez-vous point with open hearts... and open eyes.

On the large viewscreen before their eyes, the streaking stars had reverted to dispersed pinpoints of lights, amazingly few of them to the eyes of seasoned spacefarers; unless you remembered that this was the edge of the galaxy. Barely a few parsecs away would appear the luminescent blue ribbon of the Great Galactic Barrier separating the Milky Way from the dark inergalactic void beyond it's boundary.

But this was not the sight that greeted them upon dropping out of transwarp. Before their eyes stretched a foggy green and yellow luminescence, somehow like a very thin nebula of dense gases with blurred edges. No one aboard the starship had ever seen this before; very few from this universe ever had. But they all knew what it was; a boundary... the point where a fixed singularity on both sides of two universes binded them together like an entryway to and from this universe to that other one.

Fluidic Space.

"All Stop."

"Answering all stop, Captain."

Silence followed the short exchange between the Andorian in the center seat and the copper-skinned Human at the Helm.

"Recommend Yellow Alert, Sir," then offered the red-haired Alex Somers at the right of helmsman Snow, her fingers already hovering over the security alert controls that would send the entire security, medical and damage control teams at standby status, secure key areas of the ship, raise shields, heat phasers and load a single torpedo in a forward tube.

"Standby, Lieutenant," answered Captain Kheren looking straight at the screen.

"With all due respect, Sir, we know the Undines are waiting for us nearby... a species well-known for it's power and agressiveness..."

"That we do not want to provoke needlessly with a combat readiness posturing, Lieutenant," finished Kheren with not a hint of impatience or annoyance in his soft, deep voice. "Let us play nice, people; we are here to talk Peace after all. "

"They should have detected our presence by now," Somers added, nodding curtly.

"We will give them time to compose themselves. Stations keeping; let's stay here for a while. Open hailing frequencies and send friendship messages in all languages and forms. Passive scan of the area before us then active scans but no tactical scans yet. Science; sumrize to us what we know about this other place and the people we came to meet here. Before we move forward, I also want Strategic Ops, Ship's Ops, Medical, Science and Engineering final recommendations... and yours too of course, Number One."

From his station, Oseno Jureth was communicating with his developing strategic operations center. Several suggestions were passed up by his people who were occupying the partially finished space and receiving real time data from the Horizon's sensors both tactical and exploratory. There was one in particular that he noted which came from Doctor Julianne Lowe.

"Captain,"Jureth then said;"Doctor Lowe, from my staff, has suggested that she would be able to reproduce the modifiednanoprobes that Voyager had on board at one time, and that we may wish to modify several of our weapons in case this goes badly. She isn't sure if we could hide such an experiment from the Undine though."

S'tan Solius, for his part, had spent the better part of their voyage preparing his team for an emergency situation. He watched all of the data flow in from his crews and spun around on his chair to face the rest of the bridge.

"Sir, I might be able to modify the shields to protect the Doctor's experiment for a short time in order to keep the Undine unawares... but I have no experience with their technologies. I have no idea what they are capable of scanning for."

The Romulan sighed, shaking his head.

"As much as I hate to admit it, I don't think it is the best maneuver to take so early in this game. I would suggest, however, that we start locking down all priority locations, in case they try to infiltrate and use their shape-shifting abilities."

First officer Redding nodded as he too looked at the Andorian ship commander.

"I'd advise against all such actions, Captain, primarily because of this mission's diplomatic position."

He looked apologetically around the room.

"But more realistically, because they would be watching for just this sort of thing and could use it as an excuse for claiming that we breached the trust first, weakening our position at the bargaining table."

Deep down, he knew an even better reason; *After you walk into a trap its too late to prepare for it*, he thought gloomily.

"I've been in a few similar situations. It's too late to be careful now."

"I concur with Commander Redding, Sir... but not for the same reason," chimed in Alex Somers, turning around to face the command dais. "On the battlefield, we Starfleet Marines know from experience that it's never too late to be careful... quite the opposite; when you realize you're in a minefield, you have to be even more careful where you put your foot next. That being said, Captain, I agree with Commander Redding that fabricating the Voyager nanoprobes is not advisable."

"What is your tactical assessment of that proposal, Lieutenant?" asked the Andorian.

"Captain, it's been decades now since they were first hit by that kind of weapon, the first one which ever harmed them... the only one since their universe was touched by ours with the invasion of the Borg Collective of their space. It is therefore highly improbable that they have not by now developed and perfected, even tested, an effective defense against such an attack."

"In other words," summarized Counselor Lyrya, "we would fail tactically and diplomatically at the same time with one single stroke."

"Hence," concluded Kheren, "why we stay out here and first think about where to put our foot next, as you said, Lieutenant Somers. So, anything else, people?"

"To go over again what we know," Snowfire spoke quietly from her station into the hush, "the Undine are a highly advanced species who have scorned the use of the physical sciences in the most part and put great focus into the sphere of biotechnology. Their ships, whilst they function in a similar way to our own in most ways that matter on a tactical and strategic level," she gave a nod to Oseno and Alex, "are entirely organic... and indeed living constructs. We are as yet unsure of if the relationship between the Undine and their Bioships is one of complete control or some variant of symbiosis, although observed relations seem to indicate the former on the part of the Undine themselves. Bioships are capable of self-repair on a level that surpasses the Borg, are capable of produce extremely dangerous bio-electric plasma discharges, and are extremely durable. The exact nature of their sensory system is unknown however, as is the nature of their warp drive."

She gestured to the portal on the viewscreen.

"Fluidic space must have seemed like a paradise to the Borg when they first discovered it, a place where everything was, as far as we know, biological in some way or another. Consider also that they saw the Undine as the pinnacle of evolution. The level of biotechnological capability shown by the Undine is all but without peer however, and coming with that came an extremely powerful...for lack of a better term, immune system that could protect against assimilation. We all know how that turned out, with the Borg themselves being forced to accept the USS Voyager's bargain for safe passage through their space to come up and get the resulting nanoprobes modification. Fluidic space itself is very strange compared to normal space, hence the name. We're unsure as to if warp travel functions within it, although it would make sense considering that bioships are capable of warp in our dimension."

"The USS Voyager entered and navigated Fluidic Space without any problem or need for modification," Aguk Snow chimed in, keeping his eyes on his nav board so as to be able to instantly respond any order from the captain. "Maybe sensors have to be recalibrated to take into account the physical differences between both universes, but no report of that has been recorded from their journey; hence even the less performing computers of the time had apparently been able to automatically compensate."

"Thank you, Mister Snow," Kheren answered. His silver eyes went to the Illythirii woman at Science Station 1. "Your recommendations, Lieutenant-Commander?"

"As to my own recommendations," she took a breath, eyelids flickering for a moment, and smiled, "I have none that have not already been given. The Aegis is settled and at full strength and the empathic net is coming up nicely. If you need us, we'll be there. All stations are ready to respond to whatever might face us."

The Andorian nodded as his gaze went to the other officers on the bridge.

"Anything else? Medical? Ops?"

"Whatever you have, ladies and gents, better make it fast," then said Norbert Baoule from Science Station 2. "Sensors are registering mass displacement and concentrated energy and bio signals within the border of Fluidic Space."

From behind the captain's chair, the clear voice of Yeoman Blackbird was just a whisper.

"They're coming."

Jureth informed his people via internal message that the nanoprobes were a no go, and warned them that the Undine were in bound, and to stand by. At that moment Lieutenant Commander Adira Yiral appeared on the bridge and took up station next to Oseno.

"Commander, your timing is impeccable," Jureth said in a voice just barely above a whisper.

Yiral offered the knowing smile that Oseno was becoming used to seeing from her.

"I am a member of the Diplomatic Corps Sir, I couldn't possibly miss this."

She remained next to him, arms clasped casually behind her back and they both waited for the beings from Fluidic Space to make their appearance.

Before either the Orion woman at Ops or the Bynar doctors could come up with any information or advice, the forcibly frozen voice of Alex Somers broke the silence.

"Vessel coming from the Fluidic Space border now on elliptical course towards our position at full impulse... now slowing to half impulse and veering to adopt a parallel course to our own trajectory at same facing to come alongside our starboard; distance seven point seven million kilometers. By configuration, Undine Behemoth, Tethys Dreadnought Class. Weapons systems activation, negative; defensive systems activation, negative; active scanners operation, negative."

"Somebody read Starfleet's Rules of Engagement," commented Kheren.

That was enough to ease Alex' fingers that were hovering near the red alert button. But her eyes still were unblinking and looking sharply at the image on the large viewer before them as the voice of Patricia Blakely rose from the secondary engineering station where passive sensors and technical analyzing systems and data feeds had been assigned.

"Confirmed, Sir. Passive scan reads; length, three point two kilometers, a third only being the main hull, the rest forming the appendages housing secondary solar collectors, secondary bussard collectors, sensor systems and warpfield producing systems of unknown power source. Main hull ninety-six meters in diameter with, according to recorded data, main solar and bussard collectors erected in a forty-eight meters radial tripod arrangement around a rift generator... what they use to breach our universe from our own then back. "

Picking up on it, Somers looked at her own tactical scanners in passive mode then at the data scrolling on her tactical monitor.

"Defense system recorded with no conventional shielding or armor but instead as self-regenerating hull of bio matter and a nebula generator; the pores alongside the hull able to exhude fluidic matter to form a warp and sensor inhibiting nebula of corroding agent to which it is itself immune. Offensive systems registered as bio-pulse weapons acting also as a point-defense system against enemy projectile or kamikaze-run assaults, a central rear targeting main bio-pulse cannon and a nebula warhead launcher that can use their defensive fluidic nebula as a detonation matrix for large scale damage."

"Well... so much for diplomacy..." grumbled Yeoman Blackbird.

"Captain" then chimed in Aguk Snow, "I made some calculations following their approach and maneuvering under our passive scans. According to this, their maneuverability is quite poor; slow to accelerate and decelerate, no more than thirty percent of our own, overlarge turn radius four times as ours and limited facing capability, about three times slower than our own. However, these figures would stay constant even under atmospheric pressure which my guess is, would not affect their structural integrity."

"A Galleon... broadside heavy but flunders when the wind's abeam," grumbled the Andorian in the command seat.

"Sir?"

"Big but slow," translated Kheren from his old Earth navy talk he had caught on during his Academy days, fascinated by this adventurous and daring period of Human History.

"Captain..." then announced Lyrya, " they are healing us on standard subspace comm channels, answering our friendship messages with what ressembles our own transmission... oddly old one however, like those they used like thirty or forty years ago in Starfleet..."

"What they learned when they encountered Voyager..." understood the captain. "Ship to ship, Lieutenant."

"Channel open, Sir."

He stood up, adjusted his uniform then put his hands behind his back at attention stance. "This is Captain Kheren of the starship USS Horizon. I offer you greetings from the United Federation of Planets. We are on a peaceful mission of exploration and we came here answering a call of friendship from the people of Fluidic Space."

On the main viewer, the image of the enormous, greenish squid-like vessel wavered to show in it's place the stern features of an old man, a Human with thin, wavy whitish hair and pale piercing eyes in leathery face. For a moment, the man on the screen peered at them, giving the impression of looking in turn at each one of them individually and resting his gaze longest on K'Leysha, Leône and finally Tyvya, Lyrya and Kheren himself. On his face, it was plain to see that he was quite surprised by the appearance of these individuals. His words next confirmed that impression.

"In your universe, I have taken the name and appearance of the one you called Boothby. I speak for my people who several of your decades ago made a truce with your Captain Janeway of Voyager... and a few months back made peace with the one you call Captain Oseno of Alsea, whom I see is with you, as requested. I see that the rumors of Federation diversity are true; you Captain, and many of your crew, I have never seen or heard of your likes before. This bodes well."

"Sir,. As a starship captain, I am empowered to act as a fully accredited ambassador on behalf of the United Federation of Planets. Note however that the Horizon is also carrying a fully staffed diplomatic corps that will be able to work with you on any agreement in a fully official manner. Lieutenant Yiral here will head this delegation. It would be our pleasure to invite you on board the Horizon to discuss all matters that we might find of mutually beneficial import."

"You speak eloquently, Captain... but I have to say I am confused that your Federation send only one vessel in answer to our summon. This does not bode well."

At this, Kheren frowned, about the only expression his rigid Andorian face could manage.

"The Horizon is much more than just one vessel, Sir; and I am not speaking only of her size. You may see it for yourself if you accept our invitation to..."

"I am afraid that I can not leave my ship unattended, Captain Kheren of Horizon."

Kheren's eyes darted around to his officers and it's Robert Baoule at Science station 2 who answered the question etched in his stare.

"He's alone on board, Captain. Those bioships even as large as this one are said to work in some kind of symbiosis with a single pilot... that would be him, Sir."

There was a short moment of silence as the Andorian reflected on the information and their situation before he adressed the one personifying Boothby on the screen.

"Then I suggest, Sir, to meet with you on your own vessel, if that is possible."

"Agreed, Captain Kheren of Horizon. But this ship is not designed to accomodate many lifeforms, even as small as yours. You will be able to bring no more than eight of you... among which I request Oseno Jureth of Alesa, as of he alone among you we know first hand of integrity and courage worthy of a superior being."

Kheren glanced at the Bajoran to see if he agreed with the demand of the altered Undine leader.

"As no doubt you have discovered by now," then said Boothby in his raspy voice, "your sensor systems are unable to penetrate the living hull of my companion. Your transporter technology will not allow you to come aboard. You will have to use an auxillairy craft to bring your people to me."

"Understood, Sir. We will rendez-vous with you at your convenience."

"That would be now, Captain Kheren of Horizon."

"Maintain position at your present coordinates, Sir. Our diplomatic party will reach you there in thirty minutes."

The alien nodded and the image wavered back to that of the odd-looking living starship hanging on their starboard bow.

Still standing, Kheren let out a small sigh through his small nostrils.

"Well that did not went to bad... Number One, you have the ship. If anything happens, I remind you that the safety of the crew comes first and the mission or anyone involved with it comes second. This is to be a mission of peace but not a suicide one. I expect you to take care of our crew, then our ship and then of our mission in that precise order."

"Begging your pardon, Sir," then said Ensign Blackbird before Redding could even respond to the order, "but since Commander Oseno is to be part of the delegation and has proven skill and experience..."

"He can certainly do the job," cut Kheren, "except that he is not the captain of this ship and therefore can not act as an official ambassador as required by this mission. That is why I have to go, Yeoman, and not him alone or even Commander Redding, as would be normal for a standard away mission."

"Sorry to insist, Captain, but if Commander Oseno would take the Polaris over there, and that huge ship can certainly accommodate it as easily as a shuttlecraft, that requirement of Federation Law would be adequately fulfilled without you having to risk yourself over there."

"That would be true, Yeoman... except that diplomatic responsibility always fall to the most senior officer present in the diplomatic talk area," then said Kheren flatly.

"Yes Sir, but the risk..."

"Oh clock clock, Yeoman..."

Several people smiled and stifled a laugh hearing the otherwise stern Andorian suddenly speak thus. Miramanee Blackbird was one however who did not laugh but frowned in obvious confusion.

"Sir?"

"You being a mother hen."

This time she understood; but she was far from being amused. And just behind her, the towering form of Tyvya showed the same frown as hers. But she said nothing.

"Now," finally said the Andorian looking around. "Commander Oseno and I have no choice but to go and perform our duty as best we can. Lieutenant Yiral would certainly be an asset but this to be a voluntary first contact mission. Who else wants to come along for the ride?" Somers instantly rose up before Tyvya had made a single step from her guarding post and, being senior, had the privilege to speak first.

"General Order 13, Sir; no flag officer shall go into a hazardous area without properly armed escort."

Kheren's antennae curved inward and he shot an apologetic look at his gigantic wife before looking back at the red-haired woman.

"Alright, Lieutenant; your diplomatic savvy will also be useful I am sure. Who else?"

While the rest were forming the away mission, Redding prepared a Delta Flyer for use.

"Lieutenant Moore's up on rotation Commander, shall I get him ready sir?" The Deck Officer responded to his order.

Redding thought about it for a second then approved the assignment.

"That's fine. Expect the team within the next fifteen minutes, Redding out."

"Captain, the Dusk is being prepped for the mission and Lieutenant Moore has been assigned, at your discretion, Sir."

Kheren was certainly no more telepathic or even empathic as the next Andorian, which was significantly lower than the average Human, but he was a master at body language and certainly could hear the hesitation of his usually forceful XO in his choice of words.

"Problem, Number One?"

Redding thought a moment before answering. His concerns were oh so many... but at the moment, they concentrated on Moore. It wasn't that he questioned the man's ability; but he wasn't as sure about his tact on a diplomatic mission.

"Not really, Sir; I was just considering Moore's, shall we say, 'outgoing' personality, on a sensitive mission. But seeing as his exposure to the single member of their crew should be minimal at best, why not?"

The big man shrugged his wide shoulders.

"He's more than qualified for the mission."

While the captain was discussing particulars with Commander Redding Oseno turned to Yiral with a grim look.

"Commander.."

"Adira" She corrected politely

"Adira, as much as I would benefit from your expertise..."

"You want me to stay here," the El-Aurian finished in a somewhat defeated tone even though she was trying to hide her disappointment behind learned professionalism.

"I need you to take command of Strategic Operations. Go to the SIC, work scenarios with Lieutenant Hunter and Major Macgregor. I will take Lieutenant T'Lana with me, she is Vulcan and logical enough to serve as my foil. If this goes bad, Adira, Commander Redding will need Strategic Ops to get out of it."

"Sir... if you order me to stay I will. But I am a diplomat, not a command officer... and while I appreciate the insight of the Vulcans more than most, Lieutenant T'Lana is a security officer and would be better suited to developing exit strategies. Commander, this is the chance of a lifetime for a diplomatic corps officer; don't order me to miss it."

Oseno considered the woman's request, but there was something else too. As she spoke, he detected a certain urgency in her voice that went beyond just the desire to be a part of the mission and he lowered his voice as he addressed her again.

"Adira, is there something wrong?"

Adira Yiral had anticipated the question before Oseno asked it. It wasn't so much that she thought something was going to happen... it was just... a feeling. Such things were not uncommon amongst El Aurians and most other sentient species didn't really know how to interpret them.

"No," she said quietly; "not wrong, Commander... It's... a feeling."

Oseno searched her features.

"What is it? Are they deceiving us?"

"I don't know, Sir. As I said, it's just a feeling."

"Alright, you're with me. If you get any indication..."

"You'll be the first to know, Sir."

Oseno turned to the Captain.

"Sir, Commander Yiral will be joining us, at her request. I will leave Lieutenant T'Lana in charge of Strategic Ops and the Polaris should she be needed."

"Thank you, ambassador. Your presence will certainly make all the difference," thanked the Captain.

S'Tan was the next officer to speak up.

"I think it goes without saying, Sir, an engineer is always needed. Who else will recode their replicators to give us actual food?" the Romulan joked, as he was attempting to lighten the mood. "But yes, I'd love to be there and take some scans. Might be able to leave a Trojan Horse in their computer systems, if need be, as well. Speaking frankly, Sir, an Undine ship of this magnitude should not be sent for a diplomatic rendez-vous. Something's wrong here."

The man stopped speaking for a moment and his eyes squinted as he thought.

"Sir, what if this is not a representative, but a defector? His comments about not bringing more ships is very strange. Or at least, to me it is..."

Kheren nodded.

"Going in with open minds and open eyes... well said, Lieutenant. I agree with your assessment. So, you will join Commander Oseno, our resident ambassador Yiral and Lieutenant Somers and Moore to accompany me over there. Mister Moore will remain in the shuttle to... ensure our prompt and safe return, so there is room left for three more. Anyone else feels up to it?"

"I am." Snowfire spoke up with her customary softness from her station, eyes alight with excitement. "If for no other reason than that I am here as more than simply myself, I would go. Yet there is also the fact that if this does indeed go sour, I will be able to better protect you all if I am there with you."

She was referring here to the psionic screen she had worked with the majority of those aboard the Horizon to raise around the vessel. It would protect those aboard, but it wouldn't help those outside of it. Not unless she or another of the nexus personnel went with the team, and whilst they might be good...they weren't her.

No one else spoke up.

"Very well," then said Kheren. "Oseno, K'Leysha, Solius, Somers and Yiral, go get your formal dress uniform and anything else you require for this... momentous occasion. Then, meet Lieutenant Moore and me in Shuttlebay 1. We embark in twelve minutes."

He then tapped his combadge.

"Commander Sisko; please report to the bridge."

Turning to Redding, the Andorian gave him a nod as he stood and went towards the turbolift.

"Your Exec should be here shortly, Number One. The ship is yours."

"It's sooner than I would have liked, Captain, but never worry, I'll keep her safe for you." Redding acknowledged with his trademark crooked smile.

And with those final words, he entered the lift's cabin, turned around and gave a nod to both his wives before the door slid shut on him and the rest of the bridge crew accompanying him.

Lyrya and Tyvya exchanged a glance before returning their attention to their respective console. The low angle of their antennae told well enough of their annoyance, maybe even forboding concerning their husband. But he was also their commanding officer; and they were Starfleet officers. And so, they kept silent and attentive to their work.

They didn't even have a prayer. Andorians had no superstitious beliefs to fall upon in such times.

Now and for the first time, they both wished that they had.

CHAPTER THREE: THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

S'Tan stood as the Captain left the room. Turning to Baoule, he spoke out.

"Mister Baoule, It took me four months to learn how to say your name. Don't let this battleship imp... explode. I'd hate to have wasted my time."

"Not to worry, Sir," the bald black-skinned human answered with his trademark smile. "I wrote a ship's loss technical report once and it took *me* four damn months to do so."

The Romulan engineer turned towards the turbolift and proceeded to his quarters. He had twelve minutes to code a virus. So he sat down at his terminal and started writing the program which, he prayed, would shut down the Undine vessel and transmit it to any nearby enemy ships. He could only hope that the Undine systems were similar enough to infect. The program would enter through an innocent system, like audio processing, and proceeded to imbed itself silently in all systems until called upon to cripple the vessel. It would take hours, if not days, to repair it's damage.

With only a few minutes to spare, he ran out of his quarters, dress uniform hastily thrown on, PADD in hand, and walked to the shuttlebay.

No surprise, Somers and the captain were already there, discussing final security preparations with Lieutenant Moore, the exuberant and easy-going pilot that on the Horizon was second only to chief helmsman Aguk Snow in talent, expertise and experience. As the Romulan approached the conical form of one of the two Delta Flyer shuttles aboard the flagship, he could pick up the end of their conversation.

"No weapons, Lieutenant Somers?" was wondering the pilot with a frown, looking at the captain with dubious eyes. "I know this is to be a diplomatic flight but..."

"Exactly," answered the taller red-haired woman. "These are Undines. The core of their belief is that the weak is unworthy to live; if we come to them armed, it will be an admission of fear, therefore of mental weakness born of physical inferiority and thus of our unworthiness. It will doom these talks from the start."

"Like Klingons," understood Moore although still a bit worried. "You insult them by showing you do not consider them enough of a threat to *bring* weapons at the bargaining table. Still..."

"Lieutenant Somers' recommendation is a valid one," added Kheren with a reassuring nod. "But we are not going there without a few precautions. That is why you will stay on board the Dusk to whisk us out at the first sign of trouble... and why our friendly neighborhood doctors have given us these subdermal transponders. You will be able to beam us back to the shuttle even through their organic hull."

"Moreover, we are not totally defenseless," pointed out Somers looking at her commanding officer. "In Human form, Undines are physically not much better than the average Human; in that shape, what hurts us hurts them."

S'Tan walked up to the group and motioned to his ceremonial honor sword on his hip.

"We will not be defenseless on the Undine ship. I consider this part of my dress uniform, and it has been used to spear a human once or twice."

"What about their mental powers?" now asked Moore only half-convinced.

"Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysa said that she will extend her mental shielding protocol to us while we are over there," answered Somers with a very clinical tone. In this she had no more experience than any of them and had to rely entirely on the Science Chief. "This will also apparently ensure that we may also stay further in contact with the ship."

"Not mine, Lieutenant." Snowfire spoke softly as she approached the shuttle, coming like all the others from her quarters.

She'd taken a bit longer to get ready though, the IDF dress uniform was rather more elaborate than that of Starfleet. And the Treaty mandated a fusion of the two that was making it more complex. It was still unmistakably Starfleet in its colours, barring of course the white in the place of a unit code, but the cut was very different. Designed for swift movement in a way that even the most advanced form fitting clothing couldn't quite match.

"Not mine," she repeated, a slender black-skinned hand indicating the ship around them. "The *Aegis* is formed from the strength of almost every Gifted aboard this vessel, to call it mine would be to dismiss their strength. It is a fragment of that which I shall carry around us all into the Undine vessel, and that shall protect us from any attempt to influence our minds."

She smiled, the expression incredibly calm.

"In a very real sense, I will carry a microcosm of the strength of the very Federation. That is our shield."

She looked to Moore.

"Does that settle your concerns, Lieutenant Moore?"

"I guess it will have to do. Beside, if they ever did read my mind, we'd know it by the 'cringe factor' on their faces."

And so saying, he wiggled his eyebrows up and down in a suggestive way.

"And our chief engineer is bringing in a Greek within our horse," said the captain to the Romulan with them. "Your.. safeguard is ready, Lieutenant Solius?"

The Romulan gave a dark smile to the group. "Indeed. I will attempt to deploy it as soon as we land and I can get near a computer. Once I run some scans, of course. Wouldn't want to trigger any alarms. I just need some alone time with their computers. Their Computer Core would be best...but most difficult to get to undetected. Especially if this Undine is 'attached' to the ship, as we believe. But at worst, anything with wires that's connected to the main systems will do. It will just take longer to install."

It had been a long time since he needed to play cloak and dagger, he licked his lips in excitement. Usually, it was his own ship he was infecting, to make fellow engineers look bad when repairs would fail to correct issues...but this? This was actual covert operations.

Excellent.

Moore snorted.

"Good idea; and when they figure out were trying to sabotage their computer we can always blame it on the Romulans."

He paused and made a thoughtful face.

"Yep, can't see how that might go wrong."

"Hence Mister Moore, Mister Solius, why we will keep this in reserve *unless* and *until* we need to do it," said Kheren with a stern tone, looking at the chief engineer with a look that invited no discussion. "And also why I asked Lieutenant Blakely and Lieutenant Skon to come and stay with our pilot to back us."

As he spoke, the powerful-looking Vulcan security officer and the tall blonde engineer were coming up to them. Both were in standard uniform, like Moore, and both also brought the tools of their trade; Skon was in battle armor with a tricorder, a phaser rifle, a hand phaser and stun grenades; Blakely was in an engineering suit with a hand phaser of her own and a complete engineering toolkit including a technical tricorder. The captain greeted them with a nod before continuing.

"Lieutenant Somers, you will brief en route Lieutenant Skon about rescue and retrieval operation in what little we know about Undine ships. Lieutenant Solius, you will do the same with Lieutenant Blakely about your program and how to possibly use it in a bioship' systems."

The blonde woman smiled at both the ship's commanding officer and her chief but her voice was all business.

"As far as we know, Sir, Undine vessels do not have any wiring as we understand it; but certainly there is some manner of transmitting data throughout the vessel, especially if there is but one occupant in such a large thing. Once docked to it, we should be able to get some readings. They certainly won't be surprised or offended if we do so then; after all, we meet to learn about one another no? We will have to adapt... or improvise... but we'll find a way."

"See that you do," the Andorian retorted, "but *only if* it becomes *necessary* and *not before*."

Then, when Oseno Jureth and ambassador Yiral finally joined them, he addressed everyone.

"This is a diplomatic mission; and here, we are the United Federation of Planets. Regardless of their telepathic ability being thwarted or not, we go in with caution... but we go in with integrity and the true spirit of universal brotherhood that is the very foundation of our Federation. We go and meet them with only the sincere intention of establishing lasting peace and true friendship with them. Do I make myself clear, people?"

S'Tan saluted his superior.

"Aye, Sir."

Nodding to the Romulan and sharing a look with each and everyone in turn, Kheren boarded the Dusk with his away team in tow. Moore went straight to the pilot seat and started pre-flight procedures while Oseno was offered the tactical station behind and to the left of Moore while K'Leysha occupied the Ops and Sensors one on the opposite side of the Bajoran's. Solius was left with the chair beside the technical and engineering console turned around right behind the Yllithirii science chief, leaving Captain Kheren to stand between all of them as there was no other station left. There were folding seats available in the rest of the cockpit which the others, Yiral, Skon and Blakely used, but the Andorian preferred to stand, his partly insectoid physiology making him immune to tiredness, cramps or discomfort even in long periods of immobility.

Snowfire opened a channel on sign from her commanding officer after he himself got a nod from Moore.

"Horizon, this is Dusk. Pre-flight procedures completed. Request permission to depart."

"Permission granted; good luck, Dusk."

The voice of flight control officer Sheeneea was heard throughout the ship and up to the bridge. And so was relayed that of Moore.

"Engaging thrusters, clearing shuttlebay 1 in ten seconds... We have cleared shuttlebay 1, en route to destination."

Snowfire reached out with her mind, projecting a message into a mind she had come to be able to recognise quite well; her only equal aboard the Horizon, Counselor Lyrya.

"I pass to you our shield of adamant, to hold and to be. Watch over our home."

"Aegis fully active and operational; you proceed with our full cover protection... and all our hopes."

"I carry it with me, Counselor," was Snowfire's gently reply, behind it the feeling of a parent's smile. *"Look to your duty, in holding the Horizon. And trust me to look to mine."*

The final thought sent held all of the power of an oath.

"I will not fail."

At full impulse, it took barely a few minutes to cross the millions of kilometers between the two huge vessels. As they approached the rear end of the Undine ship, they flew in between it's immensely long tentacle-like protusions until they came near the bulbous front part of the gigantic greenish hull. That's when the captain made a sign to Oseno to open a ship to ship channel.

"Undine vessel, this is Captain Kheren on board the shuttlecraft Dusk with the diplotic delegation of the United Federation of Planets coming as per your request. We request permission to dock."

There were a few seconds of silence then, through the canopy of their cockpit, they all saw several hundred meters away an opening forming within the hull expanse right where the tentacled spires emerged to stretch and expand towards and around them. It looked like it simply appeared as a rip in the very fabric of the hull and expanded in a circular pattern to open access to a glowing yellowish cavity within the ship.

"Anyone else suddenly remembers the tale of Jonah?" grumbled Moore as his hands gripped his controls as if he wanted to jerk them away from the mawing aperture.

"I remember that Jonah got out," said Blakely from far behind him.

"Hope somebody listens to you too, lady," Moore retorted glumily.

And then they were inside.

* * *

As the Delta Flyer shuttle Dusk made its way to the massive Undine ship, Neil Redding watched its progress on the main view screen. No sooner had it entered the vessel that he turned to Tyvya, now their acting chief of security and tactical.

"Yellow alert, Lieutenant; put all stations on stand-by and prepare a boarding party scenario and have a team standing ready."

Without waiting for a reply shifted his attention to Ops.

"Lieutenant Leone, It may become necessary for us to enter Fluidic Space, as well as maintaining it's entryway, if that's even possible. See what you can do."

Just then, Joey Sisko entered the bridge.

"Reporting in, Commander, I..."

He stopped when he noticed that the bridge was springing to life.

"Did something happen?"

"Redding shook his head.

"Not a thing, Commander Sisko; just running a few drills and working a few 'what if' scenarios. Speaking of which, I think the Polaris could stand a launch drill seeing as its commanding officer is off-ship. We should see how she does with a different commander, that kind of thing. Feeling up to it?"

Before he could respond, Tyvya spoke up.

"Commander, the Captain clearly relayed his.. disinterest.. in going to yellow alert as it might suggest distrust on our part for this meeting,. Are you certain this action is necessary?"

"In my opinion, yes, Lieutenant. The situation has changed since we arrived. Our Captain and a fair amount of the bridge crew are now aboard that ship."

He turned back to Sisko.

"And I for one HATE to be caught unprepared."

From the utility console that Commander Oseno had set up for Strategic Operations, the Vulcan Lieutenant T'lana rose and spoke up.

"I would agree with Commander Redding," she stated. "The probability that this is something other than an open diplomatic meeting is sixty three point five-one percent. The Undine are not known for their openness despite their actions during Operation Horizon. Per Commander Oseno's orders, I have been running simulations with the officers in the Strategic Operations Center from my console. Major MacGregor and his team are prepared to assault the Undine vessel if necessary and have adjusted their weapons to compensate for Undine physiology. Preparation for other contingencies is a logical course of action."

Redding smiled.

"Nicely done Mister Oseno," He said out loud. "Coordinate your findings with the CSO, Lieutenant T'lana, so we're all using the same playbook."

He then walked over to Tyvya. "Not to worry, Lieutenant, we're not launching ships and weapons will stay on standby until further notice. We will do nothing that might suggest unprovoked aggression on our part."

It was rare for either of them to come eye to eye with another person, it was almost as if they might be challenging each other.

"I do not think the Captain would agree, but it's within your authority, Commander," Tyvya responded simply with no hint of emotion.

After a few more seconds passed and neither of them had looked away, Sisko interrupted. "Well, I'll just go and find Major MacGregor then. Shall I, Commander?"

This prompted Redding to turn his head and address him directly.

"Very good Mister Sisko, carry on."

He then he returned to the Captains chair. He took a breath and looked at the ship on the view screen.

"Sixty-three point five one percent you say?" Directing this to T'Lana. "And they say Vulcans can't be optimists."

"I was not attempting to be an...optimist, Sir." T'Lana replied. "My calculations are based on what we know of the Undine and the fact that they have succeeded in luring us away from any possible support from Starfleet. But there is a large quantity of unknown information and I was unable to be more exact. My personal opinion, Commander, is that the chances of this meeting resulting in conflict of some type are much higher."

Redding shook his head ruefully but kept a slight smile on his face.

"Understood; now get to it."

He returned to observing the Dreadnought on the main viewer.

Several minutes passed by with minimal chatter on the bridge, and Sisko reported in that he had started the launch drill for the Polaris.

At no time did Redding look away from the main screen.

" Anything new to report on the Dreadnought, Tyvya?"

Her voice had a slightly dry tone to it.

"No Commander, no indication of charging weapons or a self destruct activation.. Sir."

Redding sighed slightly.

"The days still young, Lieutenant.."

* * *

As the Delta Flyer settled gently on her skids, they felt for a moment as if the whole shuttle was sinking. Then before they had even fully realized that first feeling came taht of rebounding up again to settle comfortable on a strange grey-green surface, surrounded by arching green walls under darker greenish arched columns between wich pulsed on each side a single row of yellowish bulbs.

The computer confirmed that outside the hull, conditions were stabilizing to standard Terran norms; oxygen-nitrogen compound, 1G gravity, 1 atmospheric pressure, 15 degrees Celsius.

"Mister Moore, you will be skipper here while we are gone. Keep our sails unfurled and the ship on a floating anchor," ordered Kheren as everyone else made their preparations to disembark. "Ensign S'Kon, you keep watch and listen at all times to our open channels on our transponder frequencies so that those walls will not completely silence us. Lieutenant Blakely, keep your finger over the transporter button and your eyes on our transponder signals."

"Aye, Sir," the three of them answered together.

"The rest of you...let us go meet our new friend."

And so saying, he let Somers open the hatch and secure the way for him to lead them all to their rendez-vous.

As the team left Moore looked smugly at his two companions.

"See that? he left me in charge of the house while he's gone. The man knows leadership potential when he see's it."

"Indeed, Mister Moore," answered the Vulcan security officer with a very straight face. "This is a good opportunity for you to start to learn something."

At least Patricia Blakely's muffled giggle told that someone found it funny.

As soon as they stepped out of the Delta Flyer, they all could immediately feel vividly the strangeness of their surroundings. The air was too pure, the temperature too well balanced for even the extremes of them, the slightly disturbing smooth yet firm and warm flesh-like contact of the floor much more akin to walking on someone's back than on any deckplate or even soil they had ever stepped on. Around them, the high curving, smooth and slightly glittering walls with their rib-like columns arching over them and from one end to the other of the large hangar truly gave the impression of being inside the belly of some immense beast. A row of softly glowing yellow orbs stretched between those columns and looked as much as felt as so many alien eyes staring at them.

They had time to take it all in before an opening yawned on the wall directly in front of them. Again, the disquieting impression that it was a mouth opening to swallow them could not be avoided in anyone's mind. The captain deliberately spoke to tame in everyone as in himself the emotions that such an image evoked.

"We came without fear to stare at the wolf's jaws; time to go see what it really has in it's guts."

"Quolloquially put, Sir... but we are ready," the Marines Lieutenant answered, her stare high and unflinching, he voice calm but curt, her face a stone mask.

S'Tan, who had begun taking tricorder readings the moment they disembarked, was not amused. The readings were telling him that they were in-fact, walking through a living being. Most of his scans were being reflected, but what he could see was amazing. Unfortunately, what he could not detect was any way of inputting the virus. The only source of technology he could even see visually were the yellow orbs scattered around the room. He understood why the Borg wanted this race so badly. Without being allowed to rip through the 'skin' to get to the internal systems, he couldn't even begin to understand how it functioned.

Kheren was flanked by Somers on one side and Oseno on the other while K'leysha followed right behind him with Solius and Yiral in tow. As they progressed, Somers spoke aloud with her combadge on an open channel as per security protocol, to inform the shuttle of their progress, test their comlink with them on a continual basis and thus have their back up ready to pull them out of trouble if it suddenly started... or to retreat back to them in case trouble instead struck those left behind.

"We are entering the adjoining deck of the hangarbay; the door is slowly closing behind us as we enter a long curving corridor with the same features as the hangar itself except that there is no column-like archways, just smooth circular walls with smaller glowing orbs making one line on each side... most probably internal sensors as much as lighting sources..."

"Lieut... Somers, your sig... ..king up. Switch... .. transpond... sign..."

As they went deeper inside the vessel, they never saw any room or adjacent corridor opening anywhere, nor any console, wall panel, access port, maintenance well, jeffreys tubes hatch or anything else but smooth glistening greenish walls with little yellow lights. It was like one single, long, uniform and seemingly endless corridor with walls as disturbingly smooth, spongy, humid and warm as the floor, curving this way and that before them. Somers continued her report as they walked at a leisured pace to wherever this sole road was leading.

"You hear that, Lieutenant Commander? And you Lieutenant?" Kheren asked of K'Leysha, as he knew her hearing was superior to the Human norm, and of Solius, although he wasn't sure a Romulan had the same keen auditory sensibilities as they had emigrated eons ago from thin-aired Vulcan to a planet with much denser, Earth-like atmospheric pressure. "These seamless doors open before us as we approach and close after our passage."

"Just broken garbage, Sir." The engineer responded.

He stopped fruitlessly scanning the ship and redirected his tricorder in an attempt to boost the signal.

It failed.

"We're being herded, Captain," understood his chief of security from what he was describing. "This will make any retreat or escape rather complicated."

"Lieu...nant So... do ... copy?"

"Three to five, Lieutenant S'Kon. You're on transponder frequency?"

"Affir...tive; best we can ... at ... moment. Transport... signal shows ... same def...ciency. Lieu...nant Blakely ... work... to compens...te."

We will keep all channels open and maintain continuous report , Ensign, so that you have a constant to work on."

"Acknow...dged, Lieutenant."

"Difficulty maintaining contact with Dusk, Captain," then officially reported the red-haired woman to her commanding officer while they still walked along the sinuous passageway. "They're working on a way to strengthen the signal."

Kheren simply nodded, understanding the implications and integrating the risk factor into his multiplanning thought process he was quite known for, even among his already naturally tactically-minded predatory species.

S'Tan sighed.

"Looks like we are going to need permission to speak with our ship, Sir. Everything I am trying gets negated almost instantly. It's almost as if each room we enter is a self-contained bubble. My active scans can't even see the prior rooms as soon as the door closes."

The engineer thought of an idea at that moment. Turning to Lieutenant Somers,

"Lieutenant, please give me your tricorder."

The woman donated her scanner to S'Tan and he went to work syncing up their sensor emissions. The Lieutenant looked at the engineer strangely, so he explained.

"I believe you read about 'Hanzel and Gretel' when you were a child? Romulans have a different story, where ghosts devour the children, however, the principle they used was sound. If I use your tricorder as a loaf of bread, I can use it to see if we can puncture these lead walls..."

After setting up the frequency broadcasts and overriding a safety protocol or two, he was able to make the Marine's tricorder emit a high-frequency burst every minute. He assumed that they were still close enough to the shuttle to use it as a homing beacon, if need be, as well. He wedged the tricorder against one of the yellow orbs and made sure his tricorder picked up the signal before they walked through the door. Once it closed, he stopped walking.

"Now we wait..."

They didn't wait long before the voice of Ensign Skon came to them much stronger and clearer than before.

"Dusk ... away team; we are receiving a ... stronger signal now. We follow you on ... commlink and transponder sig... Channel open ... transporter on standby."

"Well done, Lieutenant Solius," complimented Kheren. "Dusk, keep watch. We should reach rendez-vous point soon."

Before them, another aperture opened and they entered a large ovoid room where the pulsing lights were much more numerous and arranged in patterns that, although not quite really recognizable at first glance, felt oddly if only slightly familiar. On the walls and on top of certain protrusions, even on the floor in a few places, they formed what looked to the Starfleet officers like console controls. And in the middle of it all stood Boothby. Or rather, it was the form of the old Starfleet Academy gardener taken by an Undine leader, as reported by the famous logs of the starship Voyager and those much more recent of the USS Alsea during Operation Horizon, then under the command of Oseno Jureth. And, after nodding in welcome to Captain Kheren, to him the obvious leader among them, it is to the Bajoran that the figure of the old man first spoke.

"We meet once again, Captain... or is it Commander now, if I am to interpret your rank insignia correctly? It seems strange to me that you would be so demoted after being the first in successfully convincing some of us that you Federations are neither prey nor predator."

Boothby, or rather the Undine impersonating him, then turned to face the Andorian.

"Captain Kheren of Horizon; from my meeting with your Captain Janeway of Voyager, I understand that you speak for these people here."

"I carry the responsibility, yes," answered Kheren with a polite nod of his white-haired head, "but we all are here to speak together to you and your people as representatives of the United Federation of Planets and what it stands for."

With a hand he indicated all the others one at a time.

"Commander Oseno Jureth you already know; and his interaction with you during your meeting is fully representative of what the Federation is all about: peace, the respect of life and universal brotherhood... with the strength and resolve to ensure it. And with us are those who's very diversity exemplifies our dedication to share these values with all; Lieutenant-Commander Snowfire K'Leysha is chief of science under my command, but she is from outside of the Federation, yet a friend who came to us on behalf of her own people to partake with us, just like you, of the benefits of this sharing. Lieutenant S'Tan Solius is Romulan, a people not only out of our Federation, but for a long time our self-declared enemies, just like yours; yet, he is my chief engineer, proof that even among enemies can sprout the seeds of friendship."

Solius himself was a bit startled by that last remark. He was realizing with surprise that he himself had not seen all that his coming over to the Federation had truly meant. Suddenly, something was dawning at the back of his mind; but he couldn't dwell upon it because the Captain was still speaking.

"Lieutenant Alexandria Somers is of Earth, as you already can see, and my tactical officer. You know quite well about Humans and their strength, equal in peace as in conflict; she exemplifies how deeply committed we can be to work for peace as much as to preserve it. And finally, this is Lieutenant Commander Adira Yiral, our on-board ambassador, herself from a species that was a long time ago decimated by your own deadly enemy, the Borg; among all of us, she can best understand what you went through... and where we want to go next, with you."

As the Andorian captain introduced his companions each in turn, the polymorphed Undine looked attentively at them, one at a time, obviously trying to fathom in their eyes what the words he heard truly meant. After a moment of silence following the introductions, he turned again his attention to Kheren.

"Good words, Captain Kheren of Horizon. You're already familiar with us..."

The Andorian shook his head.

"The worst thing to do when you first meet someone is assuming you already know those persons before giving them a chance to truly open their hearts to you."

Boothby thought about those words for a moment then nodded.

"I tend to forget that your kind is not telepathic like ours. And in this form neither am I, actually. Regardless, there is both logic and wisdom in your words."

He took again a few seconds before resuming.

"My people has a very basic outlook; the weak shall perish. This has been our way of life for as long as we existed. When the Borg invaded our space, it was the first time in our long History that we saw another sentient species, someone not of our own kind. It was something that we had not even ever conceived before. And they came upon us to... assimilate us, to... consume us, as the strong does upon the weak. *That* we understood quite well. But weak we are not. We blasted them out of our space and were on the verge of annihilating them in their own space when *your* kind appeared. And then, they chased us out of their space with your kind's help. Even more, you entered our own space and threatened our very survival."

"But may I remind you, Sir, that once the point was made, that invading our space was not an option, the USS Voyager left your realm without further threat and closed its access so that even the Borg would not threaten you again."

The Undine in disguise nodded in approval to Kheren's assessment, even if his face was still set in a deep frown.

"Agreed; but the fact was, your Federation showed us that now we were the weak. To our mindset, this was intolerable... even frightening. It meant to us that we should perish."

Kheren was about to protest but Boothby raised a hand to stop him.

"Of course, we would not accept this. My guess is that you are also familiar with me, this form that is, from your Starfleet records. You know that I took this form initially, as did several hundred of my kind, so as to study you and test your strength and weaknesses prior to infiltrate your Starfleet Command as a first step in invading your space and vanquishing you."

"Yes, Sir," admitted the Andorian. "But that plot was aborted when you reached an understanding with Captain Janeway and her crew. My guess is that this resolved the quandary."

A crooked smile appeared in the craggy human-like face.

"You assume this because of our message that brought you here. But I'm sure that you considered that this could be a trap... yet you came."

"That we did, Sir," Kheren admitted without hesitation. "But, in *our* view, it was worth taking the risk."

It took again some long seconds before Boothby cocked his head to one side and looked at him with a renewed frown.

"Are you trying to tell me that you would welcome invaders?"

"No, Sir, we would not... but we would welcome friends."

Kheren's answer did not seem to surprise Boothby. Yet, it took a long moment of obvious pondering before his gravely voice was heard again.

"Since the dawn of our consciousness, eons ago, my kind never had even the basic concept of friendship... until very recently. As a purely telepathic species, that strange, alien concept has been propagating among us as a very sharp, unique image... that of a humanoid face."

And as he spoke, he looked directly at Oseno Jureth.

All the while, Adira Yiral was saying nothing, just looking at the Boothby figure with a frown. Kheren noticed her expression.

"Something wrong, Lieutenant-Commander?"

The El-Aurian didn't answer immediately. She continued for a few seconds to stare at the Undine in human form and then she spoke with a voice that showed no doubt.

"You do not want just our friendship... you want... our help?"

"Your comrade is very perceptive," then admitted Boothby once again facing the Andorian captain.

He looked at each of them in turn once more before continuing.

"There is something you have to understand about us; contrary to the Collective or your societies like your Federation, we have no society as you understand the term. Fact is, we do not understand the term ourselves. This also is a novel concept for us... and it's mental representation is this."

With a gnarly finger, he pointed at the combadge on the chest of Kheren; or rather, at the symbol it was shaped to show... the smooth-curved delta-shaped symbol of Starfleet.

"We Undines are, each one of us, a world unto itself. Each one of us is born out of the very elements of our universe, what you call Fluidic space. Each of us is born with and from the ship-entity we travel in, grow in, live in and die in. This entity we are in, what you define as a bioship, is not just a mere vessel to travel in space; it is my mother, my father, my brother, my spouse and my child all in one. It is my whole world.... and it is me... and I am it... and my whole world."

It took a moment for each of the Starfleet officers to grasp the full meaning and the implications of what was now revealed to them.

"In simple terms," then said Yiral, "you have no society and exist, all of your kind, as pure individuals?"

"Like the absolute opposite of the Borg Collective," summarized Kheren.

"Essentially, yes," agreed Boothby with a small sad grin. "That's why the Collective frightened us, angered us and why we hated it beyond the mere fact of their attack against us. When they came and we saw what they were, for the first time in our entire History, we were all thinking and acting like a community; all individuals working for a single common goal. Beyond individual survival through the simplest law of survival of the fittest that had been our way from times beyond memory, our goal had become a common one; to eradicate that which by its very existence was the very denial of our own. And because we felt that the weak was destined to perish, we pooled all our forces and wills into that common goal."

"This was so novel and thraumatic an experience to your kind , you extended it to us when you encountered Voyager and Starfleet," immediately understood Alexandra Somers, thinking out loud. "Our own group pattern, our societal life, you saw as something akin to that of the Collective."

"I should not be surprised how you Humanoids quickly understand even without reading minds," nodded the Undine. "Yes, that's why we attempted to impersonate you and trained ourselves to learn how to think and act like you in order to infiltrate and conquer your kind with our mock-up Starfleet Academy training grounds, the one your starship Voyager discovered. That is where we developed the genetic-altering compound that allows me to have this Human body you now see. We had to do it before you came after us, like the Borg did... And you had proven yourself even more a threat than the Borg, since you also were individuals yet living in this communal structure we barely could comprehend... and cope with. We had a fatal weakness..."

"But then, things changed..." guessed Yiral and again Boothby nodded in agreement.

"Our last meetings with Voyager left us... confused. The truce we struck on our training ground as sharing your form started to make us feel as you do... The lost one hunted by the ones you call Hirogens that Janeway's crew helped to hide, heal and escape, an experience none of us had never ever lived through, let alone conceive before... And then, when we discovered the massive destructive anomaly that threatened not only your universe but ours, we again met you..."

Again he turned to face Oseno.

"We tried to capitalize on your difficulties and distraction from that cosmic menace, attacked you... but then we also fell prey to the phenomena. Then you, Oseno Jureth of Alsea, with your crew and your other ships, you pulled us out of the brink of annihilation and let us go free to return home. Once more, your kind had baffled us with that attitude that neither predatorial instinct nor prey reflexes could explain. And when we returned among our own kind, it spread among us like wildfire."

Hearing those words, Kheren's antennae sprang up suddenly.

"Like... an infection."

They all looked at him, even Boothby, although the transformed Undine was smiling in shared understanding. Kheren shared that understanding with the others.

"They are telepathic; it is their only mean of communication. Once an idea appears in one mind... it spreads and is shared by all. So now, they are all confused by these totally new alien ideas of... peace, compassion, friendship... helping one another... living all together for the betterment of each individual."

Boothby looked at them all as he confirmed the words of the Andorian.

"You can not conceive... except for you maybe, Lieutenant-Commander Snowfire K'Leysha... you cannot imagine how fast, how deeply this... infection spread among us. And even you can't imagine how it... disturbed us."

"Confusion... anguish... death," then said Yiral in a soft voice, as she caught on the feelings of their host.

"All of us were left confused... most of us experienced anguish for the first time, an anguish that would not leave us... and some of us could not even continue to live with it. Captain Kheren of Horizon, my people is on the verge of a major evolution..."

"Or... revolution," said the El-Aurian pointedly.

Once more, Boothby nodded and smiled with a strange mixture of wonder, joy, sadness and fear in his old leathery Humanlike face.

"I alone lived through all those experiences, enough to cope with them and find out a way to resolve this. That is why I sent my message to your Federation. To better my kind, or at least help it... if not save it."

Kheren looked at the others and then back at Boothby, his antennae suddenly flaying wildly.

"You... you mean *yourself*... alone..."

The realisation then also struck Somers like a punch in the face.

"You do not come to speak for your people... because you have *no* people. You're *all* individuals, each with it's own mind, dreams,wants, fears, ambitions... So there might be some who do think and understand as you do and would agree with what you are attempting to do here, be it because they want to or simply to survive this... trauma. But... as for the rest..."

And then, the whole universe shook.

* * *

"Commander!" Elisha Leone broke in from the Horizon's bridge ops station with a sudden tenseness in her soft voice. "I was scanning to rip into Fuidic space as you requested and.. I.. I think I'm reading an incoming ship, Sir. But... with the distortion, it's hard to..."

Redding stood up.

"On screen." He said sternly.

An Undine ship did indeed pass through to breach, it's look was unmistakable.

"Lieutenant Lyrya, hail that ship and find out what their intentions are" Redding said turning to look at her.

But Elisha just pointed at the screen.

"Commander! look!"

Redding looked back to see several more ships coming in quickly behind the first. Their positioning looked unmistakably aggressive. There was no mistaking their speed, trajectory, angle and positioning; they were coming in on an attack pattern in an offensive formation.

"Red Alert!" Redding yelled out.

Klaxons blared and T'Lana from her station immediately began requesting real time analysis from the group of officers in the newly activated Strategic Operations Center. Down in the nerve center the Capellan tactical specialist, Lieutenant Kalaar, and Intelligence Officer Variel Palos, were taking in the data from the ship's systems as fast as they could. The Bajoran Palos grimaced at the tactical data.

"This isn't good," he commented.

"No," Kalaar replied "It is not. They have enough firepower coming through to wipe out a small battlegroup."

"I'm recommending we beam our people back."

"I agree; we have to get them out of there,"

Palos relayed his recommendation to T'Lana who immediately turned to Commander Redding

"Commander, it has been recommended by my people that we beam our delegation back to the Horizon immediately. The Undine now outnumber us two to one."

"Again with the optimism..." He mumbled.

"I'm detecting nine Nicor class cruisers commander!" Tyvya read out from her tactical sensors readout now in synch with those of Leone sitting in front of her.

Nine cruisers and a dreadnought, Redding thought bitterly. The odds were impossible. He had to fight off the instinct to retreat from the situation or risk the loss of the Horizon.

He never even gave T'Lana's recommendation a thought. They'd never be able to beam them off a bioship even if they could find them, witch they could not.

"Leone, try and raise the Dusk, they might be able to."

"Sir!" Then interrupted Tyvya. "The Undine ships are setting course to the Dreadnought... The're firing weapons!"

Redding looked genuinely surprised, but only for a second.

"Open hailing frequency!"

The Aenar in the medical Command Chair to his left did so and confirmed with a tense nod, her wide sightless eyes glued to the viewer her antennae could only make her see the colors of the fast-moving shapes.

"This is Commander Neil S. Redding of the Federation starship USS Horizon! While we cannot interfere with Undine politics, we have people aboard the ship you are currently targeting! You will cease your attack now or we will move to defend them! Please comply!"

But he didn't wait for a reply.

"Tactical, target weapon systems only and if they don't break off immediately, fire at will."

He knew they would not, but the effort had to be made. He was as eager for peaceful resolutions as any Starfleet officer... but he would not stand idle for long while his commanding officer and fellow crewmates were in danger.

If these Undines only wanted a fight, they were going to get one.

* * *

Around the diplomatic delegation inside the Undine battleship, everything tumbled and went dark for a moment, as if some brutal titan had suddenly struck the entire vessel they were in. They were all scrambling as best they could to get back on their feet when some of the yellowish orbs lighted up again, enough for them to discern one another and the form of Boothby sprawled on the floor under some dark green liquid oozing on him from several cracks in the now flaking wall.

Another jolt almost sent them back down as Kheren spoke out loud to be heard through his combadge.

"Dusk, report!"

"Don't know, Capt..." came back the voice of Robert Moore slightly distorted. "We're blind ... here. It's something ... outside!"

In the mind of Snowfire K'Leysa then appeared a vivid image, as if she was herself in outer space, outside the bioship, from some far away distance. What she saw was nine dagger-shaped vessels with prongs in front and small wings forming a triangle behind that zoomed out of the greenish halo of Fluidic Space. The sleek ships looked much like the Undine dreadnought in style, texture and color but they were much smaller, although this still made them several hundred meters in length. From the angle of view she was getting, the Yllithirii could see all of them converging fast towards Boothby's huge squid-like starship. And they were all firing at the resting dreadnought.

Everything shook again around them and gloomy yellow light fought weakly against oppressive darkness. Something clammy and wet and burning splashed on a few of them.

"Dusk! Emergency transport, now!" ordered the energetic yet calm deep voice of the Andorian.

"Sir... we still have ... interference. We can ... transport two of you at ... one time!" responded the voice of Patricia Blakely.

"Captain! Look! Boothby... he's hurt!"

The Andorian's keen eyes instantly saw what Somers was squinting at. The sprawled form of the Undine was lying against the far wall in a pool of greenish liquid that came from the cracked bulkhead. He was barely moving but his body seems racked with spasms and convulsions as if something was trying to jump out of his bruised skin. His hand was weakly waving to him.

The whole bioship trembled again... and again.

Kheren managed to get to the Undine and knelt beside him. There were no visible injuries on him and yet, it was as if his whole body was about to burst with blisters everywhere. With a trembling hand, Boothby pointed to the console nearest to them both. As Kheren touched it, an aperture appeared like an opening mouth. Inside he saw what looked like a small flat coffer. Opening it, he saw it contained what looked like a wicked-looking dagger with a handle of a greenish hue similar to that leaking from the walls.

The next impact almost sent them all tumbling again on the floor. Vapors hissed from the ceiling and leaks spurted anew all around them.

The captain didn't hesitate.

"Dusk! Transport back Oseno and Solius! Then K'Leysa and Yiral; Somers and me last! Start flight back to the Horizon at once! Energize!"

"Instantly, the Bajoran and the Romulan disappeared in a shower of sparkling blue and white lights, although for a moment it seemed to take forever.

S'Tan arrived inside the shuttle to see the shocked and worried faces of the crewmen they had left behind.

"Move aside!" He shouted, roughly pushing Blakely away from her console.

He took over and began diverting all power from the systems to boost the transporter and sensor systems. The air instantly became still as the purifiers shut down.

"Solid locks made on the Lieutenant Commanders!"

He slammed on the energize button before almost instantly manually inputting commands to the system to reset and recharge the transporter.

At that moment, the Yllithirii science officer and the El-Aurian ambassador were beamed out with the same agonizing slowness. Somers even had the time to see Adira's face suddenly contort in fear and her hand starting to rise up as if to warn them... but then she was gone.

Kheren took out the three-needled object from the coffer, and put it into the trembling hand of Boothby.

When Alexandria turned to her commanding officer several steps away, there was another shock and she had to grasp the nearest console-like protrusion to stay on her feet. That's when she saw the Undine plant the three-pronged needle-like object deep in the chest of Captain Kheren.

"Captain!"

Then, the transporter beam caught her before she made even one step towards him.

Through the slow, tingling sensation of the transporter beam, Alexandria had just enough time to see the Andorian suddenly turn a sickly blue-green shade and moss-like tendrils spread out from under his uniform to his neck and hands before he collapsed beside the trembling Undine, his own body starting to trash with racking pain, leaking dark fluid splashing on him from the walls as the whole scene shook and disappeared in sprouting yellowish vapors.

On the shuttle, the Romulan nodded in approval as the two women arrived. Once again he began to get the locks on the last two members of the crew. He easily gained the lock on the Marine, but the Captain's lock was too weak. The interference was growing stronger and even with full power, he could only transport one at a time. He hit the enegrize controls and tried to get a pin-point lock on something Andorian.

Then, Somers was looking at the cockpit entrance of the Delta Flyer and at the surprised face of Patricia Blakely. Even the otherwise imperturbable Vulcan S'KOn had an eyebrow raised in obvious surprise. The face of Solius was that of a very angry man.

"The captain!" both women shouted together, one in surprise, the other in despair.

Everything trembled and tilted around them and they were thrown on the floor as the engines behind them whined. Only S'kon managed to stay up, gripping the console with Vulcan strength, his voice louder to be heard above the noise of the impacts against the hull surrounding them like a hollow bell.

" I'm loosing his vital signs. Interference is confusing the scanners... can not get a positive lock..."

S'Tan struggled to his feet, using the console. He attempted again to get the final lock.

"We. Need. To. Leave." He muttered, shaking his head.

He started to return the power to their correct systems and powering up the engines.

Somers half ran, half stumbled to the door separating them from the cockpit.

"Moore! Don't leave yet! We still have to get the captain back!"

"If we don't leave now," the pilot shouted back, "this whole hangar bay will fold like a crushed egg with us in it!"

The Marine hesitated between running to the helm and forcing the controls down herself and jumping back to the transporter console and try herself to retrieve Kheren or go through the hatch and try to bodily retrieve him. Both her colleagues in the aft part of the shuttle were just as frantic as her, even the Vulcan.

"No use, Lieutenant... signal lost."

"Skeletal lock!" shouted Blakely as she came back up and beside S'Kon, her fingers already running on th controls.

But S'Kon shook his head.

"There is no skeleton to lock on to, Lieutenant."

"Andorians mostly have cartilages! We should be able to..."

"The scanners find no bio matter other than that of Undine physiology."

"I've abducted a few Andorians in my time, Lieutenant! The system should be able to see him easily...He's not there any longer...Moore, get us out of here!" The Romulan said sternly; though for a moment, he blinked, questioning his last statement.

How can he not be here anymore....

At that moment, there was a sudden jolt, like a mighty push along their longitudinal axis and despite the inertial dampeners, there was a distinct feeling of tumbling end over end for a few seconds before their minds, their inner ears and their stomachs settled back.

"What happened?" shouted Somers still in the doorway.

"We... we've been pushed out clean of the Undine ship!" answered Moore with an astonished and almost angry tone. "Some king of tractor beam..."

"We have to get back!" insisted the security chief rushing into the cockpit with Solius where Oseno, K'Leysha and Yiral were.

"Yeah but how? And where?"

Through the canopy, she understood instantly the frustration of the pilot. They were already in open space several hundred kilometers away from the stern of the immense Undine vessel and pushed away fast by some barely discernible green beam. And their sensors could no longer detect the hangar access in the battered hull. The dreadnought was moving at full impulse towards where could be seen the almost just as huge form of the flagship of Lotus Fleet.

* * *

Neil Redding was gripping the arms of the captain's chair in mounting anger at the senseless violence displayed on the screen when his combadge buzzed him like an annoying bee. It was Commander Joey Sisko from the Polaris.

"Ready to launch, Sir."

"Negative, Commander. With these numbers, the Polaris would be more of a liability. Go to engineering. I fear we're going to need you there very soon."

He closed the comm as the Andorian giantess spoke icily.

"Firing main phasers, Sir."

Beams of energy lanced from them towards the dagger-like shapes attacking the immense tentacular form of the Undine dreadnought when Ops officer Leone reported in.

"I'm unable to hail the Dusk, Commander; but I am reading more disturbances coming through the gate... "

"Six more incoming ships, Sir," acting tactical chief Tyvya confirmed.

And then, the Horizon herself shook from multiple blows.

"Shields holding; returning fire," Tyvya reported as her blue fingers stroke the keys on her weapons controls.

"Helm," Redding ordered; "one half impulse and bring our port shield to bear on the main group while you try to get us closer to the dreadnought."

"Captain," Aguk Snow answered mistakenly with the pressure of the battle pulsing throughout the bridge, "the dreadnought... she is coming about... veering towards us!"

The next few minutes consisted of battle maneuvers and system response checks aboard the Horizon, the ship was holding up surprising well considering the odds.

"Confirmed Commander; the Dreadnought is not engaging any enemy ships... and on an intercept course," Tyvya reported as she fired a volley of quantum torpedoes that spread among the swarm of smaller cruisers like glowing droplets of fiery water, spalshing them with violent energies.

The Horizon herself rocked with the blows of even more incoming fire.

"Shields down to forty-two percent!" the giantess followed up.

Leone's face then lit up "The Dusk, Sir! I have the shuttle on sensors, moving away from the main ship.. looks to be in a tractor beam pushing her away from the firing zone."

Redding had been fast running out of ideas and had been on the verge of ordering a withdrawal from combat. But then, an obvious sign of relief crossed his face.

"Helm, get us to them! Ops, stand by for emergency transport as needed!"

He suspected the Dusk was in no danger from the Undine, at least not directly. The Strategic officers just confirmed to him what he had already guessed; the tactic employed by the Undine six-ships assault group had been to keep the Horizon occupied more than an attempt to destroy them. It was the Dreadnought they wanted, pure and simple. The other nine Nicor class warships were all left free to concentrate their attack on the huge squid-like battleship.

But now, that same Undine dreadnought was coming to them, placing its gigantic bulk between the Horizon and the harrasing group. Instantly, they broke off their attack on the Starfleet capital ship and joined the others in firing on it as it passed among them.

And then, again to the surprise of everyone barely understanding what had just happened, the titanic tentacled warship went past them with the swarm of cruisers coming up after her full weapon ports blazing.

"The... the Dreadnought... " Aguk Snow said with complete bewilderment on his coppery face; she's... she's is altering course... heading... heading for the rift, Sir. "

"But its taking considerable damage," Tyvya besides him added, a deep frown managing to crease even her rigid Andorian face.

Leone for her part suddenly looked distressed. Something was really wrong here but she had no clue what. Just a... dreadful feeling, like when an orion captain planned the self-destruction of his slaveship to avoid capture...

Something awful was about to happen; she was dead sure of it.

* * *

Around the Delta Flyer, bolts of greenish lights sheared the blackness of space, blinding them like lightning, some streaking towards the Horizon, others converging on the vessel of Boothby. It was already blistered and blackened in numerous spots all along its green and yellow body and some glowing fumes and liquids were coming out in places. From every direction, long, sleek, pointed ships zoomed in and out like angry hornets, spitting their glowing green energy beams at their massive targets with every pass.

"Shields up at full. Sensors detect fifteen intruders, Nicor cruiser class, six of them attacking the Horizon. The ship is under heavy fire, taking damage... The rest of the intruders are all concentrating fire on the dreadnought moving at full impulse towards the Horizon," reported S'Kon back in the tactical seat.

As those words were heard, Snowfire felt something trying to tug at her mind. It was like someone trying to shout something but too far away to be heard. It felt like an order... or a plea... or even more deeper than that, like the instinctual urge to flee.

"What the Hell is this?"

Somers voice drew back the Yllithirii's attention with that of everyone else back to the dreadnought. The squid-like battleship had moved suddenly between the squadron firing on the Horizon and their target, drawing their fire away from the pounded Starfleet vessel and instantly dragging them along in pursuit.

And then, as all Nicor ships took the chase, Boothby's ship veered off towards the luminescent border of Fluidic Space. All around the massive hull, debris spread out from the intensity of firepower that shook its titanic frame. Yellowish particles started spewing out like sweat from pores all accross its pockmarked and burnt surface

"Correction; nine of them are now regrouping a hundred kilometers astern at five hundred meters from the lead one, position 180 mark 15, taking a radial formation..."

"That's their planet-killer firing pattern!" immediately shouted Somers, remembering what she had studied of the Undine encounter records from Voyager.

"The *what?*" The Romulan interjected.

"They're going to destroy Boothby's ship like a twig in a bonfire!"

On the bridge of the Horizon, T'Lana was also monitoring the situation and even her cool Vulcan exterior seemed to crack a bit through the tension in her otherwise overtly calm voice.

"Commander; several ships are breaking off and moving into a formation of... Commander; that particular pattern is used for destroying planets."

It didn't take much imagination to figure out the target.

"Is the Dusk in any danger from the attack?"

Tyvya did a quick check.

"Yes Sir, there is a..."

"Good enough!" Redding cut her off. "Tyvya, target the central ship's primary weapon!"

"Targeting now" she said.

The eight ships were only seconds away from triggering the attack when Robert Baoule spoke up from the engineering station.

"Should I extend the shields over the Dusk, Sir?"

He had hesitated only briefly, out of uncertainty.

"Proceed! Tyvya! Wait for conformation!"

Redding could have kicked himself for not thinking of it first, but didn't dwell on it. Almost within the same breath, Leone confirmed the shield cover as Tyvya announced her attack.

"Firing phasers!"

It was at the exact moment that the central Undine vessel, receiving energy beams from the eight others surrounding it like spokes of a wheel, fired its devastating blast.

From the colossal starship as well as from the tiny Delta Flyer class shuttlecraft, they all watched as a yellow cloud suddenly spread around the fleeing battleship like glowing blood offered to the scent of the pursuing cruisers. Their beams were already converging on the central vessel in their formation who was pulsing like an overheated phaser cannon.

Then S'Kon's voice broke the cold silence gripping them all in the shuttle.

"They are opening fire."

A monstrous beam of energy suddenly tore open the very heavens near them, so near their instruments short-circuited and sparks flew from some of them before the emergency circuits kicked in. The whole shuttle shook like a leaf in the wind and they were all blinded by the colossal flare tearing space towards Boothby's bioship. But by then, the particles excreted from the dreadnought's hull had quickly formed a yellowish cloud around it that spread out rapidly to form like a miniature nebula. In seconds, the shape of the gargantuan bioship was all but indiscernible within that cloud of particles. And that's when the horrific monstrous planet-shattering energy beam struck.

On the Horizon, the large bridge screen was full of light that even the flare compensators had a hard time adjusting for. The ship was rocked moderately by the incoming wave of death.

Again, they were all blinded. It was like a huge explosion of light, as if the Big Bang was happening all over again. In the eerie silence of space, it felt like suddenly opening eyes waking up from a nightmare in the bright light of dawn. Then, slowly, the brightness dimmed until, for a moment, there was only blackness with an afterimage of the explosion imprinted for seconds before their eyes.

When they all blinked their vision back, from the ship as from the shuttle, they all stared in open-mouthed silence at what was left after the conflagration. Everywhere around them, in the coldness of space between them and the greenish glow of the border to the other universe, numerous clouds of fiery debris challenged the number of stars before their eyes.

Looking around with senses and sensors, the escapees on the Dusk saw the Horizon very close by, battered but whole, having obviously extended her shields to cover the Dusk. A signal on their comm board hinted that their ship was seeing them too.

But of the fifteen bioships that had come to spit out destruction, nothing was left but small clouds of debris slowly expanding with halos of yellowish particles still clinging around them.

And of the immense bioship where last they had seen their captain, there was nothing left but a cloud of slowly fading yellow flakes and a few pieces of blackened debris still drifting slowly towards the first greenish wisps of Fluidic Space.

On the Flyer, the Romulan looked over at all of the depressed faces of his fellow crewmen.

"What are we waiting for?" He bluntly stated. "Bring us in to dock with the Horizon. I have a ship to fix."

He turned his head slightly to the left, as he saw his console lighting up in red.

"And a shuttle it appears; our life support is failing... Your Starfleet systems do not seem to like Romulan engineering ingenuity."

Oseno looked over at the Romulan as his mind raced, trying to come up with ways to get them out of this situation. As much as he didn't want to believe it, they had to presume that Captain Kheren, one of the most decorated officers in Lotus Fleet, was dead... or at the very least a prisoner of the Undine. The diplomatic mission they had thought they were on turned out to be a defection... and an ambush, all at the same time.

Somewhere in his mind, it also dawned on the Bajoran that he was now the senior officer aboard the shuttle.

"Mister Solius, how much time do we have? Do we need to beam back to the ship?"

The engineer's back was turned to his console, but his response lacked urgency.

"Oh, probably in the five to ten minute range. Should be more than enough to get us back onto the ship without passing out. Death is not likely, Commander... at least for us."

Oseno nodded, and glanced briefly at the chorus of defeated yet somehow resolute faces around him. If the captain was alive, they would find him.

Captain Siduri... Captain Rivers... and now, Captain Kheren; This was the third time Oseno had had something happen to a commanding officer in his presence and, frankly, he was tired of it.

"Mister Moore, get us back to Horizon."

* * *

"Damage report!" Redding yelled out instinctively.

But even as he did so, he saw both Tyvya and Lyrya suddenly collapse like puppets whose strings had been cut. The Emergency medical Hologram instantly appeared on the bridge to see to them and, after a brief scan, reported their condition with deep frown on it's holographic face.

"They're in a coma. There is no concussion or brain damage that I can detect. It's like their mind suddenly just decided to... shut down. But, if I am to give a preliminary diagnostic, I can see only one possible cause; Andorian matrimonial loss trauma. "

There was utter silence as everyone looked at him, even as the sudden deadly quiet and emptiness of space filled the screen before their blinking eyes. In the echoes of the last instants of the terrible battle, the soft voice of the emergency medical hologram sounded like a funeral toll.

"I will have them both immediately transported to sickbay for further examination and monitoring. I will not mince words here; when a member is... lost... in an Andorian union, the deep telepathic bond between them is severed and the resulting trauma can cause such a state of shock... even the death of the rest of them ..."

His face was still gloomy when the transporter beam whisked the three of them off the bridge.

Redding face went blank.

"The Dusk?" he finally whispered, fearing the shuttle too had been destroyed.

But Caitian officer Mrrriish, taking over for the disabled Andorian giantess at tactical, alleviated that fear with that peculiar feline purring voice of hers.

"The Dusk is okay, Sirr... a hundrred meterrs off our porrt bow."

"Tactical report," the big man in the center chair asked then after a short moment to barely sigh with relief.

"They'rre... all gone... the crruizers... the drreadnought.. all of them, the Undines."

"Commander?" Leone then said timidly. "The Dusk is coming in for docking."

Redding shook the moment off.

"I want full decontamination in place, for the ship and the crew. Have medical standing by for assistance. "

He stood up making his way to the lift.

"T'Lana, you have the Con. Start damage assessment and repairs and have Ops do detailed ship review and tactical full sensor sweeps. If there's anything out there, find it and make sure we can deal with it. I' m going to report immediately to the captain in person."

He got into the turbolift.

"Main shuttlebay."

T'Lana did not even have time to respond to the XO's order as he left so hurriedly, a strange foreboding expression on his stern face as the door slid shut on it. Instead, she stepped over to the command chair and surveyed the bridge to get her bearings.

"All stations, damage report," she ordered calmly. "Operations, updated ship and personnel status. Tactical and Science, sensor analysis of both the surrounding area and the rift. Coordinate with the Strategic Operations Center if you require assistance. They are standing by to aid as needed."

She spoke with a calm, professional manner. Yet, her mind was already racing with analysis of the battle and all the data fed to her by the SOC and her own senses during the short but intense event. Her logic told her things that threatened to disturb her emotional control.

There was no explanation as to why the Undine force came to attack one of their own... unless there was a discrepancy between the presence and the alleged purpose of this battleship out here and their interest... whatever one or the other may be. But there was even less logical explanation as to how the Undine dreadnought maneuvered during the conflict before it had disappeared in a cloud of leaking nebulous energies fired by a planet-destroying beam. E

First, ejecting the Delta Flyer with a tractor beam within the confines of its immense arms had allowed the cruisers to close in and start their strafing attacks and prevented them from noticing and threatening the minuscule shuttlecraft; not a profitable tactical maneuver. Then, coming towards the Horizon had not been an attack; no salvo or even ramming movement had been attempted. The only thing it had accomplished by this action was to put her under the direct line of fire of more of the attackers, those that were until then only harassing the Starfleet vessel. Passing between the Horizon and her assailants had only managed to draw them all out after her... and only then did the battleship veer off to apparently flee towards the illusory safety of the Fluidic Space rift... before it had been... vaporized.

And what of this strange cloud of energy vapors that she exhaled around her like a smoke screen prior to the final detonation that destroyed all but the two Federation vessels left behind at a safe distance from its epicenter? It was reported that such Undine battleships could create detonating nebulas as a cover against enemy sensors and fire... but here it only seemed to amplify the already monstrous power of the planet-killer megabeam.

It all made no sense.

And yet...

The logical mind of the strategic officer would not dismiss the problem. And as she sat and waited for the ordered reports.

The dreadnought had purposefully protected the shuttle and its occupants to allow it to return safely to the Horizon and not share her peril and her final fate, until the Starfleet ship herself could take her under her own protective shields.

Then, it had at the same time moved to cover the starship with her own mass and defenses from the half a dozen cruisers attacking it. This drew the fire of those vessels to her and she then proceeded to drag them away from the Federation vessels and bring them all behind her along with the rest of the attacking battle group.

Then she flew away at full emergency impulse, never returning fire but activating her defensive nebula cloud, either to cover her escape through the Fluidic Space opening... or to cripple her pursuers as far away as possible from the starship and her shuttlecraft.

T'Lana could only come up with one plausible explanation to all this strange chain of events.

Whoever was controlling that battleship had done everything in its power to protect and save from all harm present and future the Starfleet people caught in the deadly crossfire.

Whoever it was had been evidently first and foremost concerned with *this* ship and *this* crew, knowing exactly how both the enemy and the Federation crew would react... and acted upon it to ensure the safety of that same ship and crew over any consideration, including the destruction of every threatening ship... even at the cost of it's own destruction.

And from this theory, as she looked at the empty counselor chair at her left and at the black felinoid female sitting there instead of the familiar tall white-haired, blue-skinned silhouette, she could conclude only one thing.

That made even her usually stoic Vulcan features suddenly show the same cold, blank, stern expression as she had glimpsed on Commander Redding's face. It also made her rise slowly from the Captain's chair.

It was illogical to be sure, and yet, that chair had suddenly felt as cold as the mythological embrace of death.

CHAPTER FOUR : BEYOND ANTARES

Starship's log

Stardate: 88185.6

First Officer Redding reporting

It's been three hours since the destruction of the Undine Dreadnought and the loss of Captain Kheren, last seen aboard her.

We have made every effort to make sense of the situation but have very little to go on; and the lack of survivors from any of the Undine vessels as well as it's unresponsive government, if it can be called that, leaves us with no leads to follow.

The loss of one of Starfleet's top starship Captains would be tragic enough; but to not know the reason why is unacceptable.

Following the decontamination of the Dusk's crew, I assembled all involved officers into the main conference room to see if we can answer any of the questions that might not have been noticed separately.

But I don't hold high hopes for a satisfying answer.

In the main conference room of the Horizon, Redding was going over their final moments with Captain Kheren, for the third time.

".. and just before you beamed out you saw the Undine known as Bootby attack the Captain with this... three bladed knife, is this correct, Lieutenant Somers?"

At the word 'this,' a close approximation of the device came up on the display, taken from their description of it.

"Yes, Commander Redding," answered the red-haired woman. "Stabbed him in the chest, right about here."

She placed a hand on her chest. Andorian hearts were positioned almost exactly as that of Humans, surprisingly enough when considering their weird physiology, so her gesture and account were accurate enough.

Then, her eyes got a faraway look about them as she remembered what followed.

"I'm not sure what happened next... There was a lot of fluid from the damaged ship and it was like it was attracted to Captain Kheren. It started spreading over him and.."

A moment, she hesitated.

"And then, you think you might have seen tentacles?" Redding repeated from her earlier description. "Coming out of the Captain?"

Somers simply nodded her head, looking a little uneasy.

He nodded and addressed Snowfire K'Leysa.

"Have you finished your evaluation of the debris field of the Undine conflict?"

"I have... and it seems you were correct, Commander," she said with a firm resolve etching her black elfin features." By mass and residual energies measurements of the debris and comparison with recorded masses and power outputs implicated in the deflagration, the wreckage of the Undine Dreadnought cannot be accounted for in the remains of the battle. We must assume therefore that it managed to escape during the confusion."

Oseno's eyes brightened.

"Are you saying that you think the Captain is still alive?"

Moore smiled.

"Well that shouldn't surprise anyone. The guy's got a history of... not dying... as good as anyone I've ever known!"

The pilot was certainly one to attest to that; he had been part of the rescue operation from the USS Lotus when Kheren, Tyvya and his first officer Syntron, now commanding officer of the USS Phoenix, had been left for dead on the remaining saucer section of the USS Artemis within the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. And the story of the maiden voyage of that vessel, thought to have been lost when the anomaly had first been discovered only to reappear a month afterwards with all crew accounted for, had made headline news across the Federation back then. Beating the odds had been a trademark of their lost commanding officer's career.

Solius smirked a little and sat back.

"So let me guess; now you want to enter Fluidic Space and rescue your captain? Very... Federation of you. Let me just remind you, for the sake of discussing this option, that the report from your USS Voyager clearly indicates that warp technology is inoperative within Fluidic Space. The slight quirks of the laws of physics in there are enough to prevent the creation and maintenance of a stable warp field. So, if we go in there, it will be... slow."

"Redding to sickbay," was the only response of the big man at the head of the table.

"Yes, Commander Redding," intoned the two Bynar doctors.

"What's the status on Tyvya and Lyrya?"

"Both patients are..."

"... stabilizing Commander. We see..."

"... no reason to..."

"... suspect further..."

"... difficulties."

The voices were hard to read. They sounded... anxious.

" But we should not..."

"... attempt to..."

"... awaken them, but rather..."

"... allow them to..."

"... awake on their own."

"Agreed; let me know when either of them do or the situation changes," Redding said and he closed to line.

He then turned to face the group.

"All junior officers are dismissed, thank you."

There was a momentary pause as everyone decided if they were a junior officer or not, but Moore got the hint.

"Oh.. you mean me? Ahh yes then, off I go... by myself."

And rather awkwardly he shuffled out of the room.

Leone felt a sudden urge to follow him but kept her seat.

"Actually..." Redding followed up, "Make that everyone but Sisko, Snowfire and Oseno. I have some issues I'd like to cover."

With that Leone and Somers went back to their posts, but Solius remained in his chair.

"I'd rather stay, if it's all the same to you, Commander"

Redding seemed to consider it then nodded his head.

"As you like."

He then returned to his own seat. After a pause, he started to talk bluntly.

"The Captain is most certainly still alive; that his wives are still alive themselves is almost clear enough proof of that."

He looked at each other in turn before he spoke next with a very serious tone.

"But there could be more to it than that. I think it's possible that the one you saw being stabbed wasn't the real Kheren."

He let the words sink in.

"Captain" Oseno started not really knowing where his train of thought was going to take him, "prior to its destruction, Boothby's ship shield the shuttle, and drew fire away from the Horizon. Why would *he* do that? Tactically, it makes no sense. He should have directly retreated out of the combat zone, in best probabilities back to fluidic space."

Oseno stopped for a moment as he had another thought.

"Computer, display known Undine ground weaponry from all recorded encounters."

"No result found." the disembodied feminine voice replied.

Oseno nodded slowly.

"Sir... the Undine have not been known to use any type of weaponry. All the records I've seen involve only hand to hand fighting or telepathic attacks. What if that... dagger... wasn't a dagger?"

"And what if the Apples are grapes?" Solius interjected. "Either way, Commanders, Captain Kheren isn't coming back any time soon... if ever. I suggest we look to the future and return to Starbase Lotus and repair."

He picked up a PADD and skimmed through the damage report.

"My teams are reporting heavy damage to the shield matrices. The Undine anti-proton weapons wreaked havoc on our systems, and we need to be prepared for what is to come."

He put the PADD down and closed his eyes.

"Mister Oseno can vouch for what I heard on the Undine ship. This creature specifically stated that not all Undine were... pleased with our existence. I highly recommend we return to Starfleet and apprise them of the probable invasion of our space."

Redding almost scoffed.

"Not all of them being pleased with our existence is something of an understatement, Mister Solius. Starfleet is well aware of the fact."

He then pointed a finger at him.

"But I agree that, for the time being, Captain Kheren is beyond our help... one way or another."

He gripped the back of his chair as he stood.

"The fact that the dreadnought shielded the Dusk doesn't prove a benevolent motive, Oseno. If their goal was to make sure you reported back Kheren's death, it would be necessary to do so. Do not think to understand the wisdom of your enemy, lest you forget your own."

That was a Klingon proverb he had quoted.

"With respect, Sir," Jureth said evenly although clearly perturbed with his new CO, "the conduct of the Undine ship and the Boothby being do not fit with any recorded encounter. Not only do I believe Captain Kheren to still be alive, I believe we should go after him."

Redding didn't say a word for a moment. Then, he looked at them all.

"This isn't a wild hypothesis I'm just throwing out. There is a basis for it. Now, what I'm about to tell you can't leave this room, is that understood?"

The Romulan chief-engineer Solius grimly nodded. Of secrets and privileged information, he was quite familiar with from a lifetime in a society where success and failure, life and death, depended on them.

Redding took a breath and began speaking in a dry and deliberate tone of voice.

"Ten years ago, Federation Intelligence set up a highly covert program designed to monitor incoming starfleet applicants for the possibility of Undine infiltration... not to mention a few other changeling species. To this end, after much testing, it was decided to employ Efrogians as our 'bloodhounds' to root out possible intruders.

He sat back in his chair.

"The reasons were twofold; first was because they had once been a primary member to daily Federation operations. Until the integrated officer program came along, it was considered a rare thing not to have an Efrogian as a science officer or navigator aboard a starship, as their species were unrivaled in single field activities, meaning that, if for example an Efrogian was at the helm, he knew everything that could be known about it. They even out-matched Vulcans in any single fields of science. But then, we instituted the IOP, which of course meant every officer had to have training necessary for all operational posts, bringing about the Ops officer role, one that has to learn to not only manage a ship but to also use both navigation or weapons systems at least to a functional level. Efrogians were incapable of keeping up with this new wider-field competence directive and so were slowly phased out of active duty over the next two decades. It was decided then that this made them ideal for counter espionage; primarily due to their unique form of empathy."

He held his hands out spread as he talked.

"Efrogians don't actually sense emotions like a Half-Betazoid might; at they actually do is that they 'read' body language to a degree we can't quite yet understand. The end result is that it's nearly impossible to fool one with pretending to be something you were not born too, as no amount of training known can completely and constantly alter how you move, breath, walk and so forth, and especially not to the level of someone that was raised that way. A very good, well trained operative with advanced dissimulation technology, like Lieutenant Edward Tomah aboard the USS Lotus, can still slip through... but in the end, Captain Felez, the Efrogian in command of the Lotus Fleet flagship at the time, did eventually manage to identify him."

He stood up and walked around the room.

"We keep an eye on everyone classified as a potential infiltrator, including people like Mister Solius here..." He waved in his direction. "For very specific reasons, we also considered Kheren a possible Undine infiltrator."

He stopped walking behind his chair and looked at the Romulan.

"Both were top candidates in their fields with prior military history of outstanding service, much of which is classified or 'lost' and hard to verify, but who's talent almost guarantees them swift advancement in the ranks and eventually placement within Starfleet command itself. In the case of Captain Kheren, his ostracism and self-exile from Andorian society due to his unique, and by the way illegal, mutation, were convenient shadows to cover his past; an they were a nice excuse to many astounding attributes and feats he was known for, like his abnormal strenght, resourcefulness, accuracy and resilience, even by typically high Andorian standards. He even survived phased infection, a normally fatal disease to his species."

Again he paused, quite aware that what he was telling had a definite impact on them all. And he was far from finished.

"And then, his meteoric rise to command through a series of remarkable feats and actions showed him repeatedly to conveniently be just at the right place at the right moment to tip the scale of important events; on Starbase 10 to play a key role in repulsing the Romulan attack while fresh out of the Academy; assigned to tactical seniority aboard the flagship of Starfleet's elite division while barely an Ensign, the very department where the infiltrator Tomah was in... in time to alter events during first contact with the Circoids; helping Starfleet infiltrate a ship Romulan space, then withdrawing at the most appropriate moment to both avoid capture and intervene significantly during the Borg Invasion; surviving the bridge accident that killed his commanding officer right next to him during the launch of the refitted USS Artemis and thus inheriting her command in time to discover the Azimuth Horizon anomaly; then being on the lead of the discovery of the new Dyson Shell and first contact with the X'ell while repulsing a Klingon incursion; again there when someone masquarading as a retired Lotus Fleet Admiral allegedly manipulated him to find the lost USS Achilles and the Khan AI born out of the ship's megacomputer; then recently, during the fortuitous retrieval of war prisoners lost decades ago at the very edge of the galaxy, brought back the original AI of the Achilles on our last mission, as you recall... and which is currently on board... a ship he himself had sent to this remote location during the first encounter with her; his key role and the astonishing string of his usual unorthodox decisions, acts and events accomplished under his command during Operation Horizon where he lost the Artemis, leading to his commission to the captaincy of *this* new flagship, the largest, most advanced starship in Starfleet History... the only ship able to get to the afore mentionned POWs and the lost starship and to fulfill *this* present mission. And then on top of it all, there is that highly classified file about his allegedly routine study mission of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, sealed even beyond Admiralty level security clearance by both Starfleet Intelligence AND the Bureau of Temporal Investigations... "

He sat down again.

"From the day he graduated with the Highest Honors from Starfleet Academy, Kheren already had scored an eigthy-eight probability to be an infiltrator. I myself was so convinced of it back then that I had him placed as soon as he became an officer with then Commander Felez on the Lotus, to keep an eye on him, determined to catch Kheren and use him to unravel the Undine spy ring."

The big man sighed.

"But... as time went on, Felez had been himself convinced that Kheren could not be an Undine. At the time, I wasn't willing to accept that and kept Felez on him, although I fear doing so might have helped Tomah, now revealed to have really been one, to stay under the radar as long as he did."

Redding sighed again. He seemed a little upset by that.

Jureth for his part was puzzled. It made sense to him that Starfleet would be watching for possible Undine infiltration; but he wasn't sure where Redding was going with all of this.

"What are you saying, Sir?"

S'Tan nodded as the Acting Captain spoke. He looked upon him with a very calm face, not wanting to reveal he desired to stab the man for suggesting he was a spy.

"I think he is saying that our lost captain was probably not a spy, Undine, or what have you, and that we should move on. Something must be done about the Undine incursion. They will go forward with their plan, whatever it is, now that they managed to lure us here... It's what I would do if I was in there shoes."

Oseno furrowed his brow and shook his head.

"I don't think the Undine incursion, as you put it Mister Solius, was an incursion per say. They were after their Boothby, that much was clear. The question is why... Why would they turn on their own? Boothby told us that all Undine are individuals and that not all thought or acted as he did. I believe we've unknowingly put ourselves into the middle of something here, Sir."

"Agreed, perhaps even something akin to an Undine civil war," Redding acknowledged. "I can no longer be sure if Captain Kheren is or is not, or perhaps even *was*, an Undine infiltrator as the case may be. But I received a reply from Starfleet Command just prior to this meeting and my request to pursue this matter into Fluidic space has been denied. It seems they are more concerned with upsetting the possible peace process than about the fate our missing captain, for which I can't really blame them."

He spoke with a detached, professional tone but he didn't seem particularly happy about it.

"The Horizon has been ordered to complete repairs and return to Starbase Lotus for a full debriefing and possible reassignment."

He looked down and gave a little sigh.

"How long until repairs are completed at optimal efficiency, Mister Solius?"

The engineer frowned.

"Optimal efficiency? Maybe six hours. Our engines are fine... but I wouldn't suggest transwarp until I had a chance to shut down the entire engine system and run a full diagnostic. That would take hours all on it's own."

"Would it?" Redding said with a Vulcan-like raise of his eyebrow. "So... your saying that the ship wont actually be repaired until that point?"

He thought briefly before speaking to no one in particular, as if thinking outloud.

"Well.. Starfleet was very *specific* in it's orders that the *Horizon* was not to be allowed into Fluidic space... and that we were to return when repairs were *completed*."

The way he stressed certain words didn't escape anyone's notice.

He then walked over to the display panel and, in a seemingly absent-minded manner, flipped through a few images, stopping on one displaying the spacial rift to fluidic space.

"So... I expect you to finish any and all repairs that do not require outside assistance before we return. Is that clear Mr. Solius?"

The engineer squinted his eyes as what the commanding officer was saying, or rather what he was *not* saying, came together in his mind.

"The diagnostic is only to check to see the status. If something is wrong, it could be a day or so to jury-rig a repair. Or it could just be a waste of time... But protocol states I need to run it for a complete repair... Sir."

Redding nodded, his face blank. But the trademark crooked grin started to creep at the corner of his mouth.

"In the mean time, I did have the Polaris assigned for a few drills before this situation started. And she was undamaged and won't be needed for the repairs, now would be a good time I think to implement such drills... If you agree, Commander Oseno. It's still under your command after all."

Oseno furrowed his brow again. And then, it dawned on him that Redding was giving him his ship... and time...

But his response gave none of that away.

"Aye Sir... if those are your orders." he said dryly. "Though, as acting executive officer, I'd like to put on record that I object, strenuously, to our orders...Sir."

The Romulan raised his eyebrow as so many Vulcans had done in the past.

"I am confused by your objection, Commander. Wouldn't most Starfleet officers want to go jaunting around to save their missing Captain? You sound as heartless as I would in your position. Promotions for everyone keep moral high."

Before Oseno could address Solius's remark, Redding turned to face them.

"That will be all, Mister Oseno. See to your duties."

Jureth could be quick to temper and Neil didn't want this to turn into an admission of possible guilt.

"If you have a moment Solius," he then added, this time to the chief engineer, "I'd like to speak to you alone."

His tone was a serious one.

Oseno leveled his best security officer stare at the Romulan engineer for only a moment before acknowledging Redding.

"Aye Sir," he said tersely before coming to attention and exiting the Ready Room.

It was probably for the best. He had work to do and didn't have time to argue with anyone anyway.

The Romulan simply smiled to the tactical officer as stared at him. He was used to this sort of nonverbal communication, and on a Romulan ship, it might have meant he would have slept with his hand close to a Honor Blade. But here? A meaningless taunt.

"Aye Sir." He responded to Commander Redding as he leaned back in his chair while waiting for the Illythirii Science officer, all this time silent, to leave also. But she had yet to voice her own opinion on what they had been discussing.

"Given the nature of the area of space around us, Captain, if the Polaris is going to be conducting drills, I believe that it would be in the best interest of scientific enquiry if I could join them. We've had very little contact with fluidic space portals, and a permanent one like this is a rare opportunity to study."

Snowfire half-mused as she looked up at Redding with knowing eyes.

"Given also the possibility of further incursions into the area, I would like to request permission to take part of the Aegis Circle with me to ensure that they take place in full security from any attempted mental assault. I've already worked out who I'd need, and most of them would also serve to bolster the Polaris's science department to a level I would think capable of conducting a properly thorough survey."

She flicked her gaze towards Solius, the cool amusement in her eyes twitching at the edge of her mouth.

"I believe that Lieutenant Solius could also be of great use in the event that the unusual nature of the space around us causes problems for the Polaris's systems. From what we have observed so far, the portal is not precisely stable in its dimensions; and if the Polaris were to come to close to it in synch with one of its shifts in dimension, it would require the upmost of even the best engineer to prevent serious consequences."

A single eyelid flashed a wink at the two officers, and then she stood.

"If you do not object, I will prepare a list of temporary transfers for the purposes of maintaining an Aegis on the Polaris whilst leaving enough of the Circle here to protect the Horizon."

Redding smiled at her.

"If you think lieutenant Solius is crucial to mission success, I will, of course, assign him to the project. And as for the Aegis, your recommendation sounds reasonable enough. Proceed at your own discretion."

"Aye, Sir."

Snowfire nodded, gathered up her PADD from the table and moved swiftly out of the room in pursuit of Jureth. As the door slid shut, the two remaining officers heard her call after him.

"Commander, a moment of your ti-"

Once the two of them were alone, Redding looked back at Solius.

"It seems our discussion will have to wait lieutenant; you're needed aboard the Polaris and I'm sure you'll need a little time to brief your own people in engineering, unless... you wish to assign someone better qualified than yourself to the Polaris?"

The remark was obviously meant to dissuade any rebuttal that might follow.

"I am experienced enough to hear the order, not the question, Commander. I will join the Polaris...this time."

With a smirk, the engineer exited the room, picking his PADD off the table.

As soon as he himself had exited the conference room and crossed the bridge, Oseno had motioned for Commander Yiral, who had been sitting at the Strategic Operations station, to follow him. The pair had one foot in the turbolift when Jureth heard the call from the Horizon's science officer behind him. He stopped mid-stride, turned and saw Snowfire coming toward him.

"Go to the ship, Adira. Tell Mister Hunter to get her ready to go." he said to Yiral

The El-Auran simply nodded as the lift doors closed and Oseno then addressed the chief science officer coming up behind him.

"Lieutenant-Commander... what can I do for you?"

"We've never had a chance to examine a portal like this up close before, Commander," Snowfire said in way of an answer. "And while the Horizon certainly possesses more advanced science facilities, it's not going to be doing more than station-keeping during the repair period. We could launch probes, but we might not get them back due to how the portal shifts. As the Polaris is going out on drills, I requested permission for myself and a small team from my science department to join you so that we could get full scans."

She paused, then tapped her head in a leading gesture.

"The team would also contain enough psi-capable individuals to form an Aegis around the Polaris, in the... unlikely as it may be... event that the Undine attempt a psionic incursion. Given the capabilities of the Undine, leaving a ship as powerful as the Polaris without a psi-defence like that the Aegis could provide would be a considerable tactical error, one that Jureth would no doubt have noticed himself.

The Strategic Ops Officer of the Horizon nodded with thoughtfulness. He glanced at Lieutenant Solius as the Romulan went by them to give instructions to his assistant Blakely at the engineering station and then glanced at the closing doors to the conference room where Commander Redding was now alone, their back to them.

The glance did not escape the sharp attention of the Illythirii woman.

"Commander Redding approved of my release, Sir... but the Polaris is your ship. To me it would feel wrong not to ask for your approval to accompany you aboard her."

"Welcome aboard, " simply acknowledged the Bajoran as they both entered the next turbolift.

* * *

As the crew went away to begin its preparations to go into Fluidic Space, Commander Redding sat in the conference room thinking dark thoughts. Was encouraging them to 'skirt around' orders from Starfleet really the right way to handle this situation? If the Polaris ran into trouble how would he come to their aid?

It was one thing to throw his own life to the winds of uncertainty... but theirs?

The one thing he was absolutely sure of, without the shadow of a doubt, was that Captain Kheren would not have approved of this and would most likely have done everything to stop them from attempting it.

But that was the kind of man Kheren was. Redding followed a different philosophy.

The flame yields scars.. scars build resistance.. resistance brings character.

This mantra often came to him at times like this.

And so, if the crew wanted to try to find their lost Captain, he wasn't about to stop them.

Redding walked over to the bulkhead windows and looked out into the void, noting his own reflection looking back at him. It caused him a little start.

For a second, he thought it was an older man with his face looking back at him skeptically. But it vanished almost as soon as he noticed it.

"Forget it old man, there's no room for second thoughts."

He turned away and exited the room.

As the door slid close, a shadow appeared on it; the shadow of a what looked like a man.

A disembodied voice spoke as if from far away and through a defective combadge.

"report, Commander?"

Another similarly disembodied voice then was heard.

"As expected Admiral... as expected."

CHAPTER FIVE : ENEMY MINE

There are no sounds in space... but there was in the organic substance that composed the universe called Fluidic Space. This strange universe was more akin to a sea than to the star-filled void of the universe Humans are familiar with. Where dark matter made up the large part of our universe's mass to account for the gravitational constant, here it was a fluid, translucent, barely material and yet full of eddies and currents, ebbs and flows, that surrounded and permeated everything.

In our universe full of billions of stars and billion times more of planets, comets, asteroids, dust clouds and particle clusters, life was deemed a rare and wondrous miracle. In Fluidic Space, the universe itself WAS life.

And just as energy brought matter which in turn brought life, so did the living universe here bring about intelligence and then conscience.

And now, this living universe and all the sentience it gave birth to were being shaken to the core.

The Thing looked like a massive cloud of energetic particles, yellow-green and luminescent, pulsing even, like some huge living swarm. It moved with near-luminic speed through the liquid-like void. A low throbbing sound came out of it, like the lowest discordant note of a thick piano chord being rasped over and over with sandpaper. It filled Fluidic Space and resonated to its far corners like the grave toll of an ominous bell.

Towards this huge cosmic cloud flew three dagger-like shapes, green and grey, with two pointed prongs forward and short stubby wings behind. They had come from three different directions and were now converging on the mysterious cloud. If Human eyes would have been there to see them, they would have called them Nicor-class cruisers. Each one was a starship several hundred meters long entirely made out of biomatter from Fluidic Space itself; a lifeform born out of the very universe itself, living in it like a fish in the sea. Each one had aboard a single sentient being, three legged, with leathery grey skin and an elongated face were sentience flashed in a pair of dark eyes with cross-shaped pupils.

Sound could travel through Fluidic Space... yet, none came to respond to the sinister call of the strange cloud. Between the three intelligences that converged towards it, no word was exchanged; yet, their minds spoke. They did not communicate deliberately; they were each wrapped in one's own thoughts and feelings. Close as they were, it was however as if they spoke to one another.

" It looks like... a probe"

"It comes from Outside... from the Other Side."

"It feels... wrong. It sounds... alien... it smells like... death."

" It is from... Here... but also from... out There."

" It is... silent... like a dead thing... No! There is... there is... something... "

"A... a presence..."

"It... it is... from... Outside... It is..."

"An invader!"

The three Undines did not discuss or agree on anything; yet, they all became of one mind. And at the same time, all three bioships opened an aperture between their elongated pointed prows, like a mouth glowing with greenish dragon fire.

"KILL!"

Three thoughts shouted as one in the silence between two tolls of the mysterious cloud. From the front of each living vessel shot a brilliant beam of glaring green light, destructive rays of energies that could gouge a Borg Cube like a slab of butter. The three beams struck the cloud with a blinding impact all at the same point.

And then, the particle field suddenly swelled and bursted in all directions like a cloud of dust suddenly blown by a fierce wind.

" Evasive!"

This was the last thought perceived in this part of Fluidic Space.

In seconds, the strange cloud engulfed all three bioships as they tried desperately to bank away from it's brutal expansion. In an instant, they disappeared like dead branches caught in a sandstorm.

Then, the luminescent cloud resorbed itself. It's swelling dissipated rapidly, leaving again but the huge pulsing presence that had attracted those three vessels.

And of them, nothing was left but a field of burning debris and glowing particles.

The cloud emitted again it's long, sinister, low, discordant note. It echoed ominously as it continued unabated it's seemingly majestic and yet incredibly fast course into the living universe.

Right towards the very heart of Fluidic Space.

* * *

Captain's Log USS Polaris

Stardate 88185.7

Commander Oseno Jureth commanding

Commander Redding has ordered me to take the Polaris out for a series of drills. I intend to follow his orders, and if that gives me a chance to do some exploring, then so be it. I don't believe Captain Kheren to be dead, and I am hoping that we might find some clue while we're out here that we can take back to Commander Redding and Starfleet Command.

Jureth surveyed the small bridge of the escort USS Polaris and noted that each of his people was at their station, diligently getting the powerful little ship ready to go. Of course most of them were not aware that Oseno intended to take the ship into Fluidic Space, but he knew that each of them would act accordingly when the time came. Then there was Commander Snowfire K'leysha and her Aegis. Jureth had given them what space he could mostly in the ship's makeshift science area. He knew why they were here, but they were still taking up space that might be needed for triage in the event they found themselves in combat. Oseno rose from the command chair and addressed the bridge crew

"All stations, report go, no go for launch."

"Helm go," Shawn Hunter responded with his usual confidence.

"Tactical go," Kalaar stated in turn.

"Ops go," came the voice of Variel Palos, the intelligence officer whom Jureth had assigned as the ops officer for this mission mostly so he could keep an eye on him.

"Science go" replied the soft voice of Cera Ji'lian.

Oseno acknowledged them with a nod, and then tapped his combage.

"Bridge to engineering; Mister Akaal, are you ready?"

"As we'll ever be, Sir. At least we're not launching at transwarp this time."

Oseno smiled at the gruff Andorian's reply, remembering all too well the daring launch that had helped save the Horizon from hurtling itself outside of the galaxy at infinite speed during the trial run of her transwarp drive. "Very good, stand by for launch."

He closed the channel.

"Lieutenant Palos, get us clearance."

Palos opened a com channel to the hangar control station.

"USS Polaris to Horizon hangar control; requesting launch clearance."

"Polaris, you are clear for launch,"

"Captain, we have clearance."

Oseno nodded.

"Mister Hunter, if you would please?"

"Aye Sir, disengaging umbilicals and clamps, docking bay opening."

"Clear all moorings and take us out."

"All moorings clear, power to aft thrusters."

The Polaris slowly maneuvered out of the docking bay opening and into open space for the first time since she was violently thrown from the Horizon during the ship's maiden voyage.

"We are clear of the Horizon, Sir" Hunter reported after several minutes.

"Alright, Mister Hunter, let's stretch her legs. Take us away from the Horizon, one half impulse and then increase to full impulse after ten minutes. We'll run a full impulse for another ten and then take us back toward the fluidic rift. Mister Palos, report to the Horizon that we'll be conducting some engine trials before testing the sensor systems at the edge of the fluidic rift."

"Aye Sir," both officers responded in unison.

Oseno sat back down in the command chair as the Polaris began to accelerate away from her mother ship.

The Romulan engineer let the officers around the bridge squawk their responses and beat their chests in the usual Starfleet rituals. After all stations had reported in and the ship had launched, he turned away from the engineering console he was monitoring and gruffly commented to Oseno.

"Let the record show that I think this is a waste of time. Though I do have to say, I like this Starfleet I've joined. Let me know where I am needed, Sir."

To an untrained ear, his comment would only sound like a proud Romulan not wanting to take time merely testing the engines of a ship seldom used. However, S'Tan knew how to keep his comment vague enough so that only Oseno and Snowfire would understand that he was referring to the fact that they were disobeying Starfleet's direct orders.

Oseno glanced over at the engineer and raised an eyebrow. He knew exactly what Solius meant but, for the benefit of most of the bridge crew, he thought worthwhile to answer his comment.

"We have been ordered to conduct drills, Lieutenant, and so we shall. The ship was damaged severely during our maiden voyage and her systems never received a full test. If you wish to help, I'm sure that Lieutenant Akaal in engineering could benefit from your expertise; or you are welcome to remain on the bridge if you wish."

The Romulan smiled.

"Oh, I am sure that I would not be welcome in another engineer's engineering. Too many checks in the kitchen, I believe you say. I will remain on the bridge."

He turned around and began to analyze the engine outputs, speaking over his shoulder.

"I didn't read anything about damage to the Polaris in the mission debrief from your prior mission. What caused it?"

Oseno smiled.

"We launched the ship while the Horizon was at transwarp, then there were the Jem'Hadar... and the rest... Well, it's classified."

"Coming up on the ten minute mark, Captain," Shawn Hunter reported. "Increasing speed to full impulse."

"Thank you, Mister Hunter," Oseno acknowledged. "Inform me again when we make the turn."

"Captain?" Snowfire called up from the bay she and her science-psi team had taken over for the duration of the cruise. "We're all set down here. Separation from the Horizon Aegis went as expected and we're ready if the Undine come calling."

She paused, as if checking a screen.

"On that note, the rift will be shifting again in the next five minutes, so you'll want to watch for that. Then again, if you're willing to get close, the possible gains of being able to monitor a shift like that up close are hard to quantify."

"Understood, Lieutenant-Commander," Oseno replied. "I want to test our sensor arrays on the rift, so I will make every effort to get as close as we can."

Then he addressed his expert helmsman again. "Mister Hunter, time to cut our test short. Take us back toward the anomaly, full impulse."

"Aye, Sir," Hunter replied. "Coming about, setting course for the rift, full impulse"

"Lieutenant Ji'Lian, full power to sensors," Jureth ordered.

The Polaris made a swift one hundred and eighty degree turn and streaked back toward the fluidic space rift. Jureth tapped commands into the console on the command chair, pulling up the program that he would activate as the ship approached the rift.

He had written it with the help of both T'Lana and Shawn Hunter and it would lock the helm controls temporarily, allowing the Polaris to enter the Fluidic Space rift and then, after several seconds, the program would terminate and delete itself, making the Polaris entry into the other universe appear to be a helm malfunction.

The Romulan once again turned around.

"Sir, Let the record show, I object to this defiance of Starfleet's orders."

He paused for a moment before continuing.

"The ship's systems are at full power and ready to cross the boundary."

"Lieutenant," Oseno admonished the engineer, "I said nothing about intentionally entering the rift..that would be in direct conflict to the orders I was given..."

"Approaching the fluidic space rift, Captain," Shawn Hunter reported, breaking in.

"Thank you, Mister Hunter," Jureth replied as he subtly tapped the command chair console "Slow to one half impulse.."

"Aye, Sir."

Hunter tapped the helm but nothing happened and despite knowing what was going on he had to act like he didn't.

"I can't slow our speed. Helm not responding captain!"

"Mister Palos, bypass," Oseno ordered.

Palos attempted to shunt the helm control to his operations station and found that he could not.

"Unable to access helm controls, captain. The system is frozen."

"Sir, we are going enter the rift!" Hunter announced.

"Shields up!" Ordered the Bajoran.

The Polaris entered the fluidic space rift at full impulse power and, as she emerged on the opposite side, Oseno's program terminated. As planned, it erased itself from the computer system. The ship continued on for several seconds at full impulse before Shawn Hunter reported he'd regained control of the ship.

"Helm appears to be responding again, Sir."

"All stop, Mister Hunter."

"Answering all stop, Captain."

"Where are we?"

"Approximately forty-seven million kilometers inside Fluidic Space, Sir," Lieutenant Ji'Lian reported from the sensor console. "I can't be more exact, Sir. The navigational sensor array appears to have sustained some negative effects from entering the rift."

"I will attempt to boost the signal using the deflector dish," S'Tan interjected. "I might be able to pierce the Fluidic Space's anomaly. It would function as a burst and require time to recharge, however. I do not want to risk constant use and burn it out so as to leave us stranded without space travel capabilities."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Solius... Well..." Oseno mused, "since we are in Fluidic Space despite ourselves, we might as well do some exploring... Lieutenant Ji'Lian, scan for any sign of Boothby's dreadnought."

"Aye, Captain."

Oseno tapped his combadge.

"Oseno to K'Leysha; Lieutenant-Commander, can you detect any telepathic sign of Captain Kheren?"

Snowfire's voice was courteous, yet slightly strained.

"We're examining the area. The biological nature of a great deal of it means that imprints should last quite a lot longer; but picking out a single strand will take time. A moment, please."

Leaving the link open, she turned her concentration back to the search of the area around them for the signature of Kheren. She knew that mental signature very well, even if it was hard to reach. She'd never tried more than finding it however; not only was it extremely rude to do anything more probing, but there was the truly formidable Aenar linked to him.

A part of her spared a thought for that person; that *friend*. She hoped she'd be able to bring her husband back to her.

Tracing telepathic residue was sort of like building an electron microscope out of your brain. It was very hard to do, no less than marginally exhausting; and trying to use it in space was like trying to find a quark in a mole of deuterium. But...this wasn't space. Not really. Very few places in normal space had a concentration of organic matter this high, and that helped immeasurably. So it was more like *only* trying to find a needle in a haystack the size of your average shuttlecraft.

As it happened however, Snowfire and the rest of the Circle were...motivated.

"We've got a trace." Snowfire's voice was far more tired than it had been three minutes ago, but it was also triumphant. "I'm routing the course to the helm console. We'll tell you if it changes. It's degrading faster than expected but, as long as we stay on it and it doesn't start degrading faster, we'll be fine. I would advise, however, that we drop a beacon here in the event that our navigation systems are damaged and we need to find our way back to the rift."

Jureth could hear the exhaustion in Snowfire's words and knew that she was likely trying very hard to keep a good feel for where the captain was. The Bajoran didn't really understand telepathy itself as it wasn't an ability most Bajorans exhibited.

"A good idea, Commander," Oseno replied. "Please try not to over exert yourselves if you don't have to. I will leave a line open to the bridge."

Jureth then directed his attention to the bridge crew.

"Mister Hunter, take the coordinates from Commander K'leysha and get us moving; and drop us a nav beacon while you're at it."

"Aye, Sir."

"Captain, I think I can help us with a track," said the soft spoken half-Orion Cera Ji'Lian from her science station

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," Oseno prodded her.

"Computer, display sensor readout on main viewer." Ji'Lian ordered.

The computer beeped and complied, displaying the Polaris' sensor data on the ship's main viewer. The display was two boxes with incoming data on the left side and a stored pattern on the right side.

"Our incoming sensor data is on the left and the sensor readings of the Undine ship from the Horizon are on the right. As you can see, Sir, there are faint traces of the pattern in the incoming data, but it has been altered in some way... It's the same ship... but with slight variations in its signature. I can't really explain it, Sir"

"It's okay, Lieutenant; feed that pattern to the helm. Mister Hunter, cross what Commander K'leysha gave you with what the sensors are telling us."

"yes, Sir."

The Polaris set off, moving deeper into Fluidic Space, searching for the missing ship that might hold the crew's missing captain. As they began to follow the trail, Jureth couldn't help but think of stories he'd heard of Earth's famous tracking dogs called bloodhounds and that the Polaris a little like an animal on the scent.

"Sir, what exactly *is* the plan?" S'Tan asked. "Say we find Captain Kheren; then what? The Undine clearly wanted him. I am not sure that they will just give him up if we ask politely."

He did not have much faith in finding their lost commanding officer, nor did he really care one way or the other. But he understood the loyalty that the others were showing and wouldn't get in their way.

For now.

"The plan, Lieutenant, is that, if we are able to find the captain alive, I will attempt to negotiate his return. If I can't do that, I will consider options available to retrieve him by force, including the use of the two highly trained MACO units currently aboard the Polaris. If neither of those options is feasible, then, as much as I would not want to, we would return to the Horizon and report our findings to Commander Redding. If we find nothing in the next twelve hours, we will return to the Horizon with nothing to show and I will answer to Commander Redding as he sees fit as by regulation. As soon as Mister Hunter had control of the ship again, I should have taken us back the way we came. Does that answer your question... Lieutenant?"

Oseno added the last bit to remind the engineer that he was still the junior officer. By right, the Bajoran could have simply dismissed the question as he was in command; but he believed that some officers weren't honest enough with their subordinates and, since he wasn't required to keep his designs for this expedition a secret, Jureth had no issues discussing them with Solius.

Solius nodded.

"Yes, Commander, it does. I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page. And now that I know we are here to look for our Captain, I can better adjust the sensors to attempt to detect ships that have recently been in our space. Or at least give us a direction to compare to the Voodoo people over there."

"Very good" Oseno said with a nod. "Lieutenant Ji'Lian, anything?"

"We're still on track Sir," Ji'Lian replied "but nothing on sensors."

"As Xenophobic as the Undine are known to be," T'Lana said speaking for the first time, "it is curious that we have not been challenged yet."

"I'm hoping they won't notice us." Jureth responded.

"That seems...unlikely.," the Vulcan replied

* * *

"Commander Redding... we are receiving a transmission... from Starfleet Command. It's encrypted, Sir."

The shrill, raspy voice of the Edoan ops officer Cheonghi broke the tense silence that had gripped the bridge, the whole ship even, since the return of the Delta Flyer from the battle with the Undine. Sitting at the left of the command chair, the six-limbed, orange-skinned humanoid had squeezed his strange frame into the Medical Command Chair to handle communications, monitoring all subspace traffic for any signal that could give them hope... or worries.

By the sound of his voice, it was presently the latter. The entire crew was aware of their orders to come home... without their captain. They were also quite aware as to why the Polaris was now out performing her... drills... and that Commander Redding was having them all cruise on a very thin line between their duties and their hopes; a line that could break at any moment.

Like now.

"Out here, already?" wondered Aguk Snow, stopping his incessant fidgeting over the helm controls, as if he was about to hurl the Horizon into the opening of Fluidic Space looming like a greenish scar against the blackness of space on the main viewer. "We're two hundred light years on the other side of the beta Quadrant from Starbase 212, the nearest Federation installation. It would take well over two months for a subspace signal to reach us from there!"

"How did we receive any orders to come back to base, then?" suddenly growled the feline-shaped Caitian officer Mriish sitting at his left at tactical.

"These were sealed orders already encoded when we left Starbase Lotus," explained Miramane Blackbird, her tone as somber as her copper-colored elfin features. "They were activated once Commander Redding logged the... absence of the Captain."

She might have been among the newest members of Captain Kheren's bridge crew, yet she had already developed the same bond as the others for her now missing commanding officer. After all, she had been the one working most often and closely with him since the launch of this ship... and like all the others, she had witnessed the way the Undine dreadnought had seemingly sacrificed itself to save them all from the Undine attack... and with it, their Captain. That was bound to leave a deep impression on her.

"Subspace relay station 194 is forty light years closer to us," then said Norbert Baoule from the main Science Station. "And that station is itself about forty light years distant from the star Taurus at the rimward edge of the Beta Quadrant. There were exploration and colonisation projects planned by Starfleet in that sector for some time now; if such was the case... and if a subspace relay network had been in the process of being erected from there..."

"Then such a signal would have taken maybe half the time... or maybe even less to reach us," understood Snow now looking straight at the image on the large viewer before him as if he could somehow look all the way back there. "But even so, such a transmission would have been sent at best weeks before our departure."

As the bridge officers thus speculated, the communication panel on Redding's right hand signaled that the transmission had been received, recorded, decrypted and readied for him. Now, everyone was silent, busy at their task; but of all people, he certainly knew that all their attention was riveted on that little chime announcing its readiness.

Redding decided to take it in private so that the rest of the crew would not be implicated if he had to go against orders. But of course, Snow was right. It just wasn't possible this could be directly related to current events. Starfleet wouldn't receive his situational update for at least a month or two.

"I'll take it in the captain's ready room."

He couldn't bring himself to say 'my ready room.' It was too soon for that.

He sat down looking at the screen and wondering would could have happened since they left. How ironic would it have been to be a warning about Kheren's possible Undine status.

"Computer, play message," he said after giving the proper codes.

On the wall screen of the captain's office, the image was grainy, with faded colors and occasional glitches as if it was about to be cut off. But there was no mistaking the uniform and the rank bar on the red collar, the round-jawed features, the large pale eyes and the short-cropped snowy mane of the man looking directly back at Redding. This face was famous across the entire Federation as that of the man who had captained the USS Al-Batani spearheading the Arias Expedition during the Federation-Cardassian War and lead Operation Watson that made possible the return of the USS Voyager. He was also the father of the very man who had himself lead the designers of the USS Horizon, the man who would have been her captain... had it not been for a certain Andorian commanding officer of the most elite division of Starfleet being suddenly chosen over him after Operation Horizon.

The face on the screen was that of Admiral Owen Paris. And Admiral Owen Paris had been declared dead following the destruction of Starbase 234 during the Borg War.

But if Neal was surprised to see him, and not just because of the obvious direct link despite the vast number of parsecs separating them, the same sentiment was quite evident on the face of the admiral staring directly back at him.

"Redding ?"

The surprise on Admiral Paris' part was more than just at seeing him there. Both knew each other well, if only on a professional level and both had been about the same age when they last met; and now, he was looking at a man half a century younger. Redding's accident that had brought him back to his present youth was part of the currently highest classified secrets of Starfleet. Even a high-ranking officer like Paris didn't know anything about it besides rumors. At least, he shouldn't have.

But Owen Paris had not risen up the ranks by flying a computer console. He quickly regained his composure and the trademark stern attitude that had made him so feared at Starfleet Academy when he had taught survival courses there.

"Where is Captain Kheren?"

He could not suppress his own surprise

"Paris? Owen Paris? Good God, man, I actually thought you were dead.. I was at your wake!"

For someone like Redding who prided himself on expecting just this sort of thing, for once he didn't see it coming.

"I did my best for Julia but Tim and B'elanna were besides themselves."

He intentionally said Thomas Paris' first name wrong. Due to the clandestine nature of their work people that worked close together often left little codes for each other so they could be sure they were talking to the real person. This was their code. One of them would mispronounce his son's or daughter-in-law's first name, and the other would off-handedly correct it.

"Well, the reports about my death were, as the saying goes, greatly exaggerated... but it couldn't be helped. You know how it is, especially right after a major war... But the transmission is a bit garbled, Neal, I heard you say Tim and B'elanna instead of Tom and V'eelanna..."

Paris was using the same subtle coding behind the smokescreen of their difficult connexion to apply the same precaution. After all, it was Redding who was nearest to a potential infiltration treat at the moment. Confirming one another would thus look inconspicuous even to a clever eavesdropper. Neither he nor Redding would respond with any useful or sensitive information until both did. But Redding could see no reason not to answer his question.

"The captains currently missing and... presumed dead, Admiral."

He was glad to see Paris's gristled old face, he wasn't just another desk riding Admiral who would simply insist he abandon the search.

"We are currently undergoing repairs and conducting a thorough search of the area while we do."

It was clear now HOW Admiral Paris was reaching them, even if he didn't know the exact method. He had been in charge of the Pathfinder program after all, and that managed to reach the lost starship USS Voyager all the way in the Delta quadrant.

There was a dark expression on the old officer's face as he listened to the commander's words, as if they were voicing some dreadful thoughts in his mind. The gesture seemed as much to interrupt Redding as to chase away those specters.

"Send your full report in a compressed data stream as we speak. I will look over it after this link is broken... which will happen in about twelve minutes, when the class B pulsar the MIDAS array is currently aimed at will complete its cycle. Then it will only be available again in two weeks... by which time it will be way too late to save you... and us all."

So that was it. As one of engineering expertise, Redding knew a great many things about it. The MIDAS array made use of cosmic field collector and transmitter hardware like those of any standard space installation like Jupiter Station. But here, the central faceted dish and three outer articulated antenna paddles could bore deep through subspace to pick up faint whispers of signals that might normally had been considered lost through energy dissipation over tens of thousands of light-years. The longer, multi-panel collectors comprised the omnidirectional detector system, which told the array to slew around to maximize signal energy input.

Different energy levels could be focused by the dish into a mobile feed horn cab riding hundreds or even thousands of meters away from its docking base. The cab contained banks of subspace preprocessors running at supraluminal speeds and could transmit preliminary results to the array's main computers and then to Starfleet Headquarters by way of standard subspace communication relays.

This is what had allowed Starfleet, over a quarter of a century ago, to re-establish contact with the USS Voyager then presumed lost. By firing a tachyon beam at the pulsar, a micro-wormhole had been artificially formed for seventeen hours every thirty-two days to allow hyper-subspace communication accross galactic distances. The Pathfinder Project had been refined since Operation Watson by it's own creator, Commander Reginald Barclay, who's bald pate could be glimpsed at a console behind the Admiral; now, direct communication could be established even to the farthest corners of the galaxy, even if only for a brief period relative to the specific cycle of the particular pulsar they managed to be able to bounce the signal over and create the quantum singularity required for the transmission.

These thoughts were interrupted by the voice of the admiral on the screen.

"We have established this link because a critical situation has arisen. The Klingons managed to... intercept... the Undine's message... and they... learned... about the departure and mission of the Horizon. At the Council Meeting this morning, Ambassador Kamarag of the Klingon Empire openly accused the Federation of secretly building up an alliance with the Undine. The representatives of the Romulans and the Kzintis, even those of the far away Illythirii and even the much closer to home Andorians have expressed... deep concerns about this, following these revelations... unwisely... hidden from the rest of the Council members."

He made a short pause so that Redding could fully grasp all the implications of such dissention and mistrust between galactic powers already at each other's throat... or worse, among friends. Then his expression became even more somber.

"The ambassador also assured the Council that the Klingon Empire would not sit by while the Federation hid it's cowardly plots behind the smokescreen of some official disbanding of it's former treacherous Section 31. As we speak, a task force of three Klingon *Vor'Cha* class battlecruisers with an escort of three squadrons of Birds of Prey has already been launched from their far away outpost on *Adh'Lara*, Epsilon Canis Majoris on our star charts, the closest inhabited star of your current side of the Beta Quadrant. Two more such attack wings are in preparation to follow from deeper within the Empire. At maximum warp, the first group will reach your coordinates in two days... but they will have you on their sensors in half that time."

Paris this time did not leave time for the large man to ponder the issue. He brought them out right in the open.

"Peaceful relations are still broken between the Federation and the Empire, on the very fact of Undine infiltration as it so happens... about which they had been right all along as we *now* know... and for the last ten years we've been dancing on a thin wire over the threat of a general war. Even if the Klingons are aware of the transwarp capability of the Horizon, which is more than likely, knowing of the time of departure of the Lotus Fleet flagship and detecting her on the other side of their quadrant at *this* time clearly imply that Klingon Space had been violated. Even without the accusations of conspiracy with a self-declared enemy of every sentient being of our galaxy, this alone is enough under Interstellar Law to have the Horizon seized and her crew taken into custody. And *you* know what *that* means if the *Klingons* are the policemen, *especially* here and now."

Now Paris was silent, obviously expecting Redding to come by himself to the obvious conclusion... and the decision he should make.

Redding did indeed understand. He had spent decades living with or fighting against the Klingons.

"With any luck, we'll have our repairs completed and the Polaris back before they get here Admiral. Once back in transwarp the situation becomes moot. But regardless, I can assure you they WILL NOT be taking this ship as a prize. It's the Andorians I'm concerned with to be honest. Handling them will be problematic to say the least."

Andorians could be quick to temper and in this case my have a personal motive as well; Captain Kheren.

Kheren's status as an 'abomination' among his people might be fueling their suspicions as to the nature of the mission. Redding wished he knew more about why Kheren left to join Starfleet; it could make all the difference in avoiding a cultural breach in the Federation.

"I can only suggest that the Federation Diplomatic Corps do what it can in that regard, Admiral Paris, but I will do my best to defuse them *if* they come too. They're still founding members."

"Yes... hopefully," grumbled Paris with a deep frown on his round face. And his words echoed the thoughts Redding himself was having. "I've never been much in contact with them... never even had one on my crew or my staff during my whole career in fact. But at the Council meeting today, it was said that they were... quiet. Now, I don't know much about them... who does... but, for some reason I can't explain, this is disturbing me more than if they had made an outburst like the Klingons did... Something happened in the last weeks, but no one seems to know anything about it. They are certainly not talking; after all, they have more experience and expertise about security and covert activities than any sentient race known in this galaxy. And now, amidst a very delicate situation, one of their own is missing ... and a very prominent and very peculiar one at that, which is saying a lot when talking about Andorians."

The admiral was silent for a moment, as if about to say more than changing his mind with a deep sigh.

"We'll leave diplomacy to the diplomats and politics to the politicians... but we'll have to do our part in this delicate game. Commander Redding, recall the *Polaris*. She too must not be found in the vicinity when the Klingons come into sensor range... and time must be allowed for your energy trails to dissipate. As soon as feasible, you will proceed back at best possible speed to Starbase 212."

"We plan our rendez-vous with the *Polaris* in twelve hours or so, as they are currently out of communication range. That must be our minimal departure time. The Transwarp drive should be operational well before that, Admiral, although it kicks up quite a warp signature, so we may limp out of the area at normal warp speeds first and then switch to the transwarp drive."

Deep down, Redding would have preferred to stay and fight the Klingons and would not feel bad if it came down to that; but he had his orders and diplomacy was never to be handled lightly.

But he knew that running from them would only make things harder later, if he beat them down here and now they might even drop it entirely. Klingons were predictable like that; they respected straight forward strength.

He sighed.

"I'll do my best to keep this from become a political incident Admiral, if that's possible"

Owen Paris' frown deepened, if that was even possible.

" This is much too close for comfort, Commander. Twelve hours would not be enough to completely dissipate your warp trail. Klingons might not be the sharpest scientists in the galaxy, but they're not idiots either and their instrumentation is not worse than ours... Moreover, they *expect* to find you here; they will certainly be *very* thorough in their search. And once they find out evidence of your presence, the Federation is as much in trouble as you yourselves will be if they start chasing you... which we both know they will do."

" Ah... one, one minute... Admiral Sir."

That was the voice of Commander Barclay who raised briefly his head from behind his console. The admiral sighed and then looked straight into Redding's eyes.

"The Federation's position in the current political tension will hinges on your decisions. The last thing we want is Starfleet to be the spark of a galactic war. It is *imperative* that you were never there, as far as the Klingons... and the rest of the galaxy,,, are concerned. Same for the *Polaris*; if things come to worse, she is to be considered expendable... and a galactic hazard. Do I make myself clear, Commander Redding?"

"Completely, Admiral; but, for the record, I disagree with this course of action. If this is somehow Starfleet's fault, then the worst thing we could do is try to cover it up. And if it's not, then running from it is certainly a fool's errand."

In truth the thought of running and lying as if they were thieves in the night didn't set well with him at all.

"Noted, Commander," simply said Paris between two brief glitches of the image. There was a cold moment of silence before Redding spoke again.

"And please note that I don't accept that either ship or any member of their crews are expendable for this cover up. Regardless, I'll see that your orders are followed. The Klingons will never know we were ever here, Admiral Paris, even if..."

But the signal was starting to break down and so, he added a few parting words.

"Watch for me at Blacks Point and hope you don't find me..." and the signal dropped.

To say the situation annoyed him was an understatement, even more so because the Admiral was right; this was a situation that needed to be covered up.

And God, did he need a drink.

"Captain to all senior officers; report immediately to the Captain's ready room, Redding out. "

He hadn't meant to call himself the Captain but, now, such worries were past so he didn't give it a second thought.

It wasn't really his way to talk to the other officers and ask their opinion on a situation, but they had at least as much as he riding on what they would do next.

Besides, he mused, it's what Captain Kheren would have done if he were here, so they would expect it.

* * *

It might have looked like a mere asteroid, some lump of brown-green rock floating in the aqueous realm that was Fluidic space. Yet, it was much more than that.

It was alive.

Essentially, it was a monocellular lifeform that had been born from and within the very fabric of this universe. Although it was of the most rudimentary structure of life, it was of gargantuan size, several kilometers across and massing millions of tons. It was not totally unlike the immense amoeba-like space roaming lifeform that the Constitution class USS Enterprise had encountered and killed a few centuries ago; indeed, that earlier entity might have also been produced from this very living realm and somehow had escaped to the Milky Way galaxy by some freak accident of colliding universes. nevertheless, this one was smaller, more compact and much simpler even in structure.

And it was occupied.

Within the titanic cell-like living structure, dozens of Undines roamed. They had been born there, and despite their numbers, they rarely if ever came across one another physically, each engrossed in his own peculiar self-contained life in symbiosis with the giant lifeform around them. Telepathically however, they were as closely interlinked as they were genetically. Here, contrary to the rest of Fluidic Space at large, absolute individuality was not the only truth and law; here, the Undines had developed a group consciousness, born out of closeness and ready to expand even beyond. It was a new step in the evolution of life and intelligence in this universe that was waiting for the right spark to ignite.

The spark came to them in the form of a strange, luminous space cloud.

" Reading; energy output of excessive magnitude "

" Reading; object at the heart of the particle cloud."

" Reading; consciousness within the object... sentience... "

" Negative... reading; as the object... "

" Negative... too faint to be consciousness "

" Object trajectory altered... homing on our thoughts."

" Proof of sentience..."

" Inconclusive; only proof of conscience..."

" Inconclusive; only proof of perceptivity."

" Thoughts from here perceived... but not understood? "

" No answer to call... Except trajectory change."

" Reading interception course. "

In the vastness of Fluidic Space, the strange, ominous luminescent cloud had slowly but definitely angled its seemingly aimless course towards the massive inhabited living structure. As it came closer, the particles at the outer edge of it touched the monstrous cell and it began to shake and tremble, then its outer layer started to shrivel like a leaf burning in a bonfire.

Within the bio-structure, surprise, confusion, pain and fear started to burn in all the minds as their body started to react the same way to the transmitted contact with the yellowish particles. Voiceless, they could not cry out; but their minds shouted with terrible intensity across the vastness of Fluidic Space their last thoughts.

" Cloud is energy field of some kind! "

" There is an object within the cloud! "

" Warning! Our thoughts are possibly being perceived as an attack!"

" Heading; the Heart of Life!"

These were the last coherent thoughts that came out of the colossal living structure, before it was engulfed within the vast cloud of energy. Then, there was a last, powerful telepathic shout before everything became silent again.

When the cloud moved past the gargantuan bio-station, all that was left was a lifeless lump of matter, darkened and shriveled, pockmarked by burns already getting cold in the fluidic void of space. From the mysterious mass of yellowish radiation and energy came a deep, low, discordant sound that reverberated like a funeral bell across the expanse of Fluidic Space as it resumed its course deeper into the organic universe.

Behind it, it left but the last remnants of the final thoughts of the now dead Undines; thoughts of anger, of pain, of fear... and of a feeling never experienced before in this universe.

Astonishment.

* * *

The Polaris continued on for several more hours with no signs of any contact following the traces of the dreadnought that had disappeared with Captain Kheren aboard. Oseno was dismayed that they'd found nothing so far.

How far could the ship possibly have gotten? Would they even find it? Was he taking these people to their deaths by venturing in to fluidic space? The last thought only entered his mind briefly, but he wouldn't be a normal being if it hadn't; and he certainly would be a normal commanding officer. Oseno resolved that whatever happened, the chance of retrieving Captain Kheren was worth it.

It was Lieutenant Kalaar from tactical that finally broke the silence with his deep bass tone.

"Con, tactical, new sensor contact, Sir. Undine vessel, Nicor cruiser class, bearing zero-one-zero mark two five zero. They are on an intercept course, Sir."

"All stop, Mister Hunter. Let's see what they have to say."

"Aye Sir, answering all stop."

The Polaris slowed to a stop as the Undine vessel approached, and the tension aboard the Starfleet ship could be felt as they waited to hear from the usually aggressive aliens.

On the screen, the now familiar greenish dagger-like shape of a Nicor starship was becoming bigger and bigger by the second. Like looking through water, the weird organic fluid that gave this universe its peculiar name had a somewhat amplifying effect even on the computer-generated imagery the sensors offered to their eyes. The representation was deceptive as the alien organic ship was still millions of kilometers distant; but it looked a lot more closer... and it was definitely getting closer... and fast.

The way the strange vessel flew towards them however was a bit disconcerting. It was like it couldn't keep her prow forward as she came straight at them.

Kalaar was frowning as he hunched over his sensor readout.

"Sir? The Undine vessel is coming towards our position at half-impulse... and slowing; ETA forty-seven seconds. But... "

He looked up at the Bajoran in the center seat.

"I read no energy output."

"And I read only residual life signs," now added Ji'Lian. "Merely a faint trace like that found on a... a freshly dead corpse."

Helmsman Hunter then rose his head sharply to the screen where the elongated shape of the Undine cruiser started to slowly tumble end over end, closer, much much closer.

"It's *not* on an interception course! It's on a *collision* course!"

"Mister Hunter; evasive maneuvers!"

Shawn Hunter reacted immediately to Oseno's order pushing the Polaris impulse drive into full reverse and firing her forward maneuvering thrusters simultaneously. The seconds ticked off tensely but the combination of the thrusters and the building power of the impulse drive was enough to kick the escort backward and just out of the way of the hurtling ship.

"Helm, now that we're safe I want to know what happened on that ship. Pursuit course! Mister Kalaar, ready a tractor beam."

"Aye, Sir," both officers responded.

The Polaris lurched from reverse to forward motion and chased down the near powerless Undine vessel. Shawn Hunter deftly brought the ship as close to the drifting vessel as he dared.

"This is as good as it gets, Captain."

"Mister Kalaar," Oseno then ordered, "let's grab her."

"Aye, Sir," the Capellan responded; "tractor engaged. We won't be able to hold her for too long, but it should be long enough to get some detailed scans."

the Bajoran nodded.

"Mister Hunter, can we slow her down?"

"We could try, Sir, but she's a lot bigger than we are."

"Good point. Try to match her velocity as best you can. Mister Solius, any opinion? Are we reading anything significant? "

The Romulan shook his head.

"Negative on readings , Sir. Just the same readings; no life signs, minimal power being generated or used. No shields that I can detect either. As for trying to scan, I don't see the point. We barely know anything about the Undine, or their ships. I am not sure a scan will get us any new data."

He paused for a moment while he thought of something useful.

"Sir." He continued, "if I could bypass a few of our security systems, I could divert all power to the tractor, creating a bigger 'net' than the norm... It might be enough to stop the ship or at least slow it down for a few minutes. We could prepare a boarding party and get some boots on the ground to investigate."

Oseno considered Solius' suggestion about boarding the Undine vessel. The last time they'd gone aboard one of the alien species ships, they'd lost Captain Kheren. But they needed information and this ship was the best thing they had right now. Something was going on in Fluidic Space, and Jureth wanted to know what and whether or not Captain Kheren was involved. At the same time, however, they were inching closer to his self imposed twelve hour deadline for returning to the Horizon.

"Do it Lieutenant; and let me know when you can step away and I will have two of the Marines meet us in the transporter room."

"Captain," T'Lana said, "it would be unwise for you to go to the Undine vessel yourself. You are the only command rank officer aboard the Polaris."

"Objection noted, Lieutenant; but I'm going over there. You will be in command while I am off the ship, as Commander K'Leysha will be joining us as well if she is able."

"Aye, Sir," T'lana replied, even though she disliked Oseno's reply strongly.

It was not logical to send the commander of a vessel into a dangerous situation. Yet, it seemed Starfleet officers did that routinely, usually over the objections of their subordinates. She found it puzzling.

Jureth turned his attention to Snowfire.

"Oseno to K'Leysha; Lieutenant-Commander, I am taking an away team to the Undine vessel we currently have under tow. I'd like you to join us."

"That is part of my duty as Chief Science Officer, especially at a time like this, Sir. On my way to the transporter room."

* * *

Redding sat down and waited for his officers to arrive.

He had already gone over every option he could come up with on their next course of action and knew he was almost certainly going to go with a particular one not all Starfleet officers may have found appropriate.

Times had changed since he had first joined Starfleet.

It was expected of him to meet with senior officers and gain their insights and opinions on anything and everything that was the least bit questionable. Seeking the advice of others was not of course discouraged in the command structure he had originally been initiated into; after all, no one could be expected to know all angles of a problem. But in *this* day and age, it seemed it was considered standard procedure to do so; or else some councilor will start asking you about your relationship with your mother...

He took a breath and frowned.

He should be concentrating on his objectives but his mind decided to focus on Blacks Point, the monitoring station that disguised his 'return point' whenever he died.

He never remembered dying of course, or even truly being 'reborn' on the platform; only that he would be confused and in pain from the broken bones in his left arm. Not long after that came the news.. that everyone he had ever known was now dead, and that the memories of his 'other lives' would be downloaded into his head, so he could go on being a good soldier for the Federation.

He had refused once, or at least that's what he remembers. And then, he had lived among the Klingons for a few year,s thanks to a short but memorable wrestling career that made him well liked by the Klingons. That much he remembered without any help and a smile crossed his lips, thinking about how he had finally managed to pin the Vulcan champion Servan Nox. No human had ever managed to do it before.

But the time for reminiscing was over. The sound of the door sliding open meant it was time to get back to work.

The first person to enter was yeoman Blackbird. A PADD in her hand as always and her eyes on the large man on the side of the triangular conference table facing the door, she went straight to the replicator slot in the wall, reay to provide him with whatever nourishment or beverage he would ask for, just as she was ready to inform him and everyone of the administrative and legal consequences of the decisions they would be discussing. Many commanding officers could have felt mildly annoyed by that bureaucratic counselling, but, fortunately for Redding, the Amerind woman had been schooled by a captain who's motto was: do not throw the book away until the last page... but if you still find nothing, *then* it's time to write the *next* page.

Whatever Redding would decide, she would be there to take care of all the paperwork and administrative hassle for him... and help him find the best way to achieve his goal without compromising his career; especially if, as rumor would have it, it meant finding again their lost captain.

The door had barely closed behind her that it swished open again, this time to admit the officers called for this meeting. With acting chiefs Tyvya and Lyrya in medical stasis, they were now replaced respectively by the black-furred Caitian woman Mrrriish and the dark-eyed Betazoid Marleena Sirris. With them came in assistant chief of science Valencia Irksos and assistant chief of engineering Patricia Blakely. All these women hand been with Captain Kheren since his very first command, some even way back when he himself had started his career ans Ensign and chief of security and tactical aboard the original flagship USS Lotus. To say that they had personal interest in the rumored situation to be discussed was a certainty.

They all seated themselves around the three sided table as had been customary under their currently absent commanding officer. Counselor Sirris and Astrophysicist Irksos sat on the side at the left of where redding would sit with his acting Exec Commander Sisko, leaving seats for both Bynar doctors having yet to join them. On the opposite side to theirs and to the right of Redding sat Blakely and Mrrriish, the technical lead officers who would soon be joined by chief of ops Elisha Leône.

Only one seat would remain empty, on the third side where the Command officers would be. And they all were keenly aware that it is that emptiness taht would be at the center of their mind their words and their decisions in the next minutes.

The door slid open again and Lieutenant Leône came in, nodding to Redding before sitting between the Caitian and the blonde woman, her green skin slightly paler than usual.

This was but her second deep space assignment since joining Lotus Fleet and already she had gone through astounding situations; but losing one's captain was not something a junior officer was always prepared for, even less when two colleagues were severely incapacitated and on the verge of death after that loss. Elisha had grown fond rather quickly of the captain's wives as they had welcomed her readily as a colleague, nevermind her being an Orion woman and former slave. It was quite obvious the whole situation was upsetting her greatly.

Yet, she was there and ready to do her best as the best Starfleet officers could ever be.

The door slid once again to admit the last senior officers of the Horizon. Commander Sisko went to the same side of the table as Redding and nodded to him before sitting to his right. Behind him, the diminutive form of both Bynar doctors trotted without acknowledging no one to the last two unoccupied chairs, beside the black-skinned woman currently leading the science department.

Redding noticed Yeoman Blackbird and requested a black coffee, took a drink and thanked her. Then he looked at the senior officers of the ship.

"I apologize for the short notice people, but a situation has come up and we literally have no time to work out a solution."

He stood up.

"As most of you are aware, the Horizon was ordered to return to Federation Space in the event that the diplomatic operation failed and return immediately, without her captain if need be."

His face was rather grim.

"We just received an order to further enforce our return to Federation Space that can't be ignored or interpreted. We have to leave within the next hour or face being the instigators for another Klingon-Federation war."

Their eyes were all on him, grim as his own, their silence telling clearly enough how well they understood the situation. Redding went into the details.

"As we speak, the Empire has tasked three *Vor'cha* battle cruisers and nine Birds of Prey from Adh'lara to intercept us and commandeer the Horizon."

Redding decided to leave the part about the Andorians out of his briefing, at least for now. It might distract from the current problem and could place an undue strain on the crew, many of which were Andorian.

"But this is of little concern because no matter what, we cannot be here when they arrive. This has been made our top priority by Starfleet Command even above the retrieval of the captain, the *Polaris*, or the destruction of the Horizon itself."

He let the words sink in.

"Then, it is safe to assume, Sir, that calling us to this meeting means one of two things; either you have a way out of this situation you want us to be aware of, possibly approve, or that you wish for us to help you find one."

Valencia Irksos spoke with a detached, professional tone. Yet the intensity in her dark eyes could not be mistaken. She had been with Captain Kheren from the day he had inherited command of his first ship, the late USS *Artemis*. Like most of them, she had been witness, even part, of the ways the Andorian never broke the rules even when doing exactly the opposite of what was expected of him, do what was right even when the orders seemed to dictate otherwise. The way she looked at Redding, it was clear that she expected the same kind of stunt out of him.

The same look was discernible in the slitted blue eyes of Lieutenant Mrrish and those much rounder but just as blue of the assistant chief engineer Blakely. There was concern however in those of newer bridge officer Leône; in those of Yeoman Blackbird as well, less apparent in those of the half-Bajoran commander and nothing at all in the bulging orbs of the Bynars; but there was more than just concern for the situation in those of assistant chief counselor Sirris.

She of all of them was most aware of who Redding truly was. He may certainly be just as competent and effective an officer as their missing commanding officer, but he was definitely more experienced... in very different ways... and a very different person altogether, and not just because he was Human and not Andorian...

She knew who he was... and now guessed what he might be capable of.

"You are correct in assuming I've formed my own plan, lieutenant, but it's my hope that you and the others will come up with a solution that I had not considered."

He walked around the desk to join them more directly.

"Here are the variables I can see; in the next hour, two at most, we must decide to abandon any hope of recovering Captain Kheren, attempt to contact the Polaris to either tell them their own, or that they must return to us within the hour... or they have to disappear also without using their warp drive."

No one spoke. They had understood as much from the moment the coming of the Klingons had been revealed. Redding went on.

"In the mean time, we must try to erase any trace of our presence in this area as thoroughly as possible, then leave with sufficient time for our warp trail to dispartate, which is no more than an hour for our warp drive, or two for our transwarp drive. Alternatively, we can disappear right here anytime in the next twenty-four hours before the Klingons come into sensor range."

He sat back down and looked around the room.

"This is the part where someone needs to come up with a better idea than I have, because no one here will like that one."

There was a moment of silence before Valencia Irksos finally spoke, her voice, soft and husky, nevertheless filling the room.

"I may have another option, Sir... but it is you who might not like it."

Everyone was looking at her. The black-skinned woman for her part was looking outside, through the transparency, at the greenish, luminous rift that separated this universe from another.

"Not being a 'Q' and knowing everything, I'm willing to entertain any idea at this time, Irksos. My 'liking' it or not is the least of my concerns."

Redding said with a hand gesture to go on.

"Fluidic Space, Sir," she then said explicitly, her head nodding in the direction of the transparency. "If we go through the opening, we will vanish from this universe.. and our impulse trail will dissipate much more quickly and rapidly than a warp trail. Even more so if we go in with thrusters only."

Mrrriish's large slitted eyes lit up.

"If we go in therre, we would escape the Klingons without being noticed, rretrieve the Polarris... and possibly the Captain!"

"That may be... but what about the remains of the battle?" then said Patricia Blakely. "Analysis of the debris or even just the surrounding radiation residue will reveal to the Klingons our weapons signature and thus our presence just as readily as any warp trail."

"Going into..."

"... Fluidic Space will..."

"... also have us..."

"... risk encountering..."

"... hostile Undines..."

"... beleiving we are..."

"... invaders."

The unusual tandem speech of the Bynar doctors brought a moment of silence.

"And once we are in Fluidic Space, where spacewarp physics do not apply, how are we to get out of there without being caught in the act if they stay around just for that purpose?" then added Elisha Leône. "I don't know all that much about Klingons, but I can tell you that Orion slavers would keep watch for days, weeks even, if they smelled a potential prize nearby. Seeing that a battle occurred here, they might conclude that we escaped in the nearby opening... or went in there to avenge ourselves from the attackers... or to flee..."

"We may also encounter Undines sharing the sentiments Boothby had," answered Valencia Irksos, turning towards the Bynars. Then she looked at the Orion chief of ops. "According to the Voyager logs, Undines know how to open temporary rifts between their universe and our own. If we found one of those sympathisers, it might be willing to open a passage for us somewhere else... safe in Federation Space."

"But the Klingons will still know that we were here," insisted the blonde engineer.

"Most assuredly," now said Counselor Sirris, looking at her then at Redding. "But if we are gone, I mean utterly gone, then they will have no tangible proof of it... or that it was the Horizon specifically... and only *they* would know that Starfleet fought a battle at their backdoor; in crude words, saving their butt."

"They would not like that to be known for sure," Mrrriish growled with a display of fearsome teeth.

"Klingons, most of all, would not easily admit they owed their safety to the Federation, that we fought their battle for them," Sirris agreed. "But they might also believe that we sacrificed ourselves to prevent the very invasion they would have accused us of orchestrating."

"Like at Narrenda Threer, when the Enterprise C sacrificed herself to deter a Romulan invasion force of Klingon Space," Mrrriish recalled aloud.

The Betazoid counselor nodded, still looking at Redding.

"My estimate is this: Klingon Honor would demand that they acknowledge this sacrifice and at worst forget their accusations, at best possibly reconsider their current enmity with the Federation as they did back then. Still, if we have not so honorable Klingons coming here, then they would discover the proof of the battle, possibly of our involvement, and if so erase those traces and claim the victory for their own. Either way, we can get away clean... *if* we get away without leaving a trace."

"That does not seem very honorable where we are concerned," Blakely then commented somberly. "We did after all violate Klingon Space coming here. That at least is true. Now, Captain Kheren certainly knew this when he ordered our course here. Why did he do that? I can't believe he didn't know what the consequences could be... and then would play some cover up game afterwards... That's not like him at all."

They were all looking at Yeoman Blackbird. Because of her position and because of both Kheren's wives in a coma, she alone, of all people, would know about the Captain's intentions or orders or any possible explanation to this mystery.

The Amerind woman simply returned their blank stare with her own dark eyes.

Then, they all looked at the only other person left who might possibly know or understand something.

Executive Officer Neil Stanley Redding.

"I suspect he did know the consequences of coming here, Sirris, given his final orders that we return without him." Redding mused. "But I don't think you understand Klingons very well. The fact that the Enterprise C died protecting the colony itself held very little meaning to them. It was the way they did it, taking overwhelming odds before going down, that is the stuff of Klingon legends."

"We didn't 'die gloriously' for their sake... point taken, Commander."

He shrugged.

"Regardless, the very fact we survived the battle means they could have done it themselves. As far as their concerned, We just stole their kill. Off the record, Blakely, I agree with you; but our personal feelings must be set aside as we do our job. They say 'cover it up,' then that's what we do. Anything else is to think we know better than every one else above us, and I'm just not that sure that's the best way to make decisions."

"Aye, Sir," the blonde woman said. There was little conviction in her tone, more like resignation. But she was a Starfleet officer and she would behave as one.

He took a deep breath and stood up.

"Very well then; we shall join the Polaris in Fluidic Space and toss our fate to the currents of another universe. Given the nature of this decision, it will be on my order alone that this is done. Since it won't be possible to allow any of the crew to remain behind that don't agree with it, no general notice will be given."

"Aye, Sir," they all said as one.

"Since we are not in a hurry to warp out anymore, we have twenty-four hours to cover our tracks before the Klingons come into sensor range. In that time we have two objectives; One: cover our tracks. We need to find a way to scrub this area clean of our presence here. When are ready to leave, I don't want more than background radiation left in this area and a few scattered particles. Find a way to make it work, people."

"If we cross our warp and impulse trails with thrusters only within this whole timeframe, we will have enough time to break up those patterns sufficiently so as to make them effectively unrecognizable accross this whole area," suggested Patricia Blakely. "I can work with Lieutenant Snow to plot the best flight course in this area to achieve this. Moreover, moving on thrusters only will considerably reduce our presence to their sensors."

"Removing all traces of the battle would take too much time and effort for us to accomplish," then added Valencia Irksos. "But if they only find Undine traces, they will only be left with what appeared as it truly was; the result of some internal conflict spewing out of the confines of their space."

Redding continued after them.

"And two: close the gateway to Fluidic Space behind us. They can't confirm anything if they can't follow us... and I'm sure they will try. If there's any way possible to do this, find it... and by any means necessary."

He paused looking around at the faces in the room.

"Our course is set so, if you have any complaints, keep them to yourselves. But I'm always open to constructive criticism. So if you have anything of value to add, now's the time."

There was a brief moment of silence before the assistant chief science officer spoke with a frown on her dark brow.

"Closing such a vast aperture can only be done one way, Sir: with a massive ouput of energy. The only way we could possibly do it with the ressources that we have would be to enter the rift and then, once on the other side, sacrifice our spare warp core by detonating it with every and all the quantum torpedoes we have on board simultaneously."

"And *that*, Sir, would register *instantly* on the Klingons' sensors..." added Elisha Leône, "and those of every other sensor grid oriented properly from here to the other side of the galaxy.... and on the other side as well, in Fluidic Space. Not a 'covert action' to be sure."

Redding listened intently to his officers.

"Well, at least Starfleet would know we were successful in covering our tracks." He said with a bemused look. "Detection is for the most part irrelevant, they already know where to look and will find something when they get here. If anything it will back up the idea it was infighting between them OR that we died gloriously in battle."

he paused. Then his trademark crooked smile started to stretch his lips.

"But I do believe I have another option for closing the rift.. or at least an idea." Redding was always a bit hesitant suggesting ideas involving science or engineering solutions. Being from the twenty-third century holodecks and multiphasic shields were hard enough to grasp.

But if it's one thing he did have a hold on, it was Transwarp theory.

"What if we create a static transwarp shell around the aperture using the warp core as a focusing point/anchor for the effect? and then collapse the shell in a controlled reaction that should collapse it into a pit point 'hole' between the two dimensions."

Redding demonstrated this simply with his hands, ending with his hands clasping together.

"This effect already happened aboard the USS Enterprise sometime around star date 44161, everything inside the bubble was crushed or destroyed, their not sure really, but the point is we may be able to duplicate this effect but on a 5 fold scale using our Transwarp drive."

"It shouldn't destroy it, but no ships will be using it any time soon, and it may be possible in the future to reopen it as well." Redding let them think his idea over knowing that what he suggested might not even be possible.

Irkosos, was an astrophysicist; Blakely was a warp propulsion specialist; they instantly grasped what Redding was talking about. The look and the nod they exchanged spoke as clearly as their words.

"Big Bang theory will agree with your proposal ,Sir," the black woman said, especially if it has been demonstrated once. And it would reopen naturally after a while, once the warping of space would settle back over time. The trick would be to move away before being caught in the collapsing effect ourselves."

"It might at worse knock out our transwarp for thirty minutes, the time needed to restart it again after the energy release, " added the blonde engineer. "Our standard warp propulsion, not being used directly for the effect and requiring relatively much less power, would be fully operational for several seconds; not that it would matter anyway since no warp field can be formed within Fluidic Space."

"The added benefit," then said acting security chief Mrrish, "is that the Klingons will not be able to rreopen it anytime soon; unless they either develop Transwarp drive or sacrifice the warp core and all the torpedoes of several of their ships... weakening significantly any threat of pursuit and confrontation."

At that moment, the ship's intercom came alive.

"Bridge to Commander Redding! Baoule here, Sir. Our long range sensors are picking up a faint signal, bearing 180 mark 125, closing in at warp 9.965. ETA twelve hours."

Everyone in the ready room knew what lied at those coordinates; the Klingon Empire.

"They must be burning up their engines to go that fast with *Vor'Cha* attack cruisers," Blakely understood immediately. "They're on a no-return run."

"But Birrds of Prrey can't keep up such a pace, even with overtaxed engines, " the Caitian woman declared. "They will not have their escort squadrons when they'll arrive."

"And this also means they are desperate to catch the Horizon," Marleena Sirris concluded, " for obvious reasons."

Elisha Leône then looked pointedly at Redding.

"Sir, the sensor suite of the Horizon is much more advanced than the best ones Klingons currently have; this means that, for the moment, they are not yet aware of us... and will not be for the next six hours."

Redding stood up.

"Then, proceed with the area clean up immediately. Use the Delta fliers if necessary to speed up the process. Mrrish I want you to have a fail safe in place in the event the warp bubble fails, this would include using our own warp core if it comes down to it."

"Aye, Sirr. We will prrepare the jetisonning of the rreserve warrp corre along with all ourr complement of torrpatoes except forr one full salvo. Lieutenant Irrksos basic prproposal will follow if ourr firrst attempt fail with the main warrp corre collapsing effect you prproposed," the felinoid woman answered Redding.

He then looked to his engineering team "Sisko and Blakely, you know your assignment. Let Mirrish and myself know when its a go. "

Aye, Sir," answered Sisko in turn. " I suggest we also use all the other auxillairy crafts we have along with the Flyers. This would accelerate the clean up procedure by a factor of three."

As they stood up, he finished his orders.

"All but Leone are dismissed."

As everyone went to their assignments, he spoke to the Orion woman.

"Lieutenant, I'm requesting you to take a shuttle along with Mister Moore into Fluidic Space to see if you can raise the Polaris and get an update on her situation. The element of risk is high so I wont order you to do it, but your the best qualified for the job. Please feel free to ask questions or make suggestion before answering.

There was barely a wrinkle on the gree-skinned face as the young chief of operations pondered what was asked of her. Then she took a deep breath and looked straight into the big man's eyes.

" Risk is our business... isn't what Captain Kirk once said?" Elisha said. "I joined Starfleet to make a difference in this universe with my own life, Sir. I'm ready and eager to serve."

A smile then crept on her plush lips.

"And if the Undines object, I know Mister Moore will fly us out fast and safe, just like the last time."

"Moore's a undisciplined character to be sure, but I've learned over time that their the best at doing things others would rightly back away from. But my patience only goes so far, I'll not tolerate disrespectful treatment of a fellow officer." Redding said with a serious tone.

"Not to worry, Sir; managing unruly males is what us Orion females are most famed for," she said with a smile to melt a planet's core.

"I sure you can handle yourself, but if a situation becomes disruptive, I expect you'll inform me."

"Aye, Commander," she said more seriously but still with the shadow of the seductive smile on her lips.

He gave her a half crooked smile of his own.

"I'm glad you stepped up for this assignment, Lieutenant,. Good luck out there."

CHAPTER SIX : THE HEART OF LIFE

The away team assembled in the Polaris transporter room with Major McGregor and his subordinate Master Sergeant Pierce in full battle gear in front of the officers led by Jureth. Lieutenant Somers had briefly objected to being left behind as Jureth had left the bridge, but he had pointed out that it would be up to her to retrieve them if something went wrong. Oseno had issued phaser rifles to Solius and himself leaving Snowfire to carry whatever scientific instruments she wished. Once they were all on the transporter pad Jureth nodded to the transporter chief.

"Energize"

The familiar hum and glow of the transporter gripped them and whisked them away. When they rematerialized they were in near darkness. The marines switched on lights attached to their weapons and swept the immediate area for threats and finding none stood at the ready. Oseno switched the light on his phaser rifle on as well and played it around the immediate area. The interior was very similar to the dreadnought that they had been aboard prior to the attack, but was scarred from some unknown damage. The atmosphere was stale and carried a smell of...death.

"Commander K'Leysa, lifesigns?"

The dark-skinned, white-haired Vulcanoid woman had activated her tricorder the moment they had materialized, her sensitive eyes needing only the instrument's lighting to see clearly about and what her instrument was telling her in colors, numbers, graphs and colors. Although it was standard-issued, she had extensively modified the instrument to work best with her own analytical methods and personal data base crammed with the Starfleet one.

And that included here telepathic abilities.

"Affirmative, Sir," she answered after a moment. "But... faint... and getting fainter still. I'm no medic but these readings are not unlike those of a diseased organism at the terminal stage of a virulent infection. What I detect however is not biomolecular but subatomic in nature; high levels of residual baryon radiation, the same type of irradiation Starfleet periodically uses to sweep starships utterly clean of all micro-organisms. This... vessel was exposed to a vast and intense field of baryons all over its external surface, so much that it penetrated deep within its entire frame. Sir... This... bioship is... dying,"

Snowfire closed her violet eyes a moment then opened them, looking beyond the nearest curved corridor aligning faint embers of glowglobes away from them.

"There is a single mind aboard... I can't determine if it is from a single occupant or from the ship itself... a few hundred meters from here towards the prow. It 's so diffuse and faint that it did not even register to our groupmind on the Polaris. I am myself just getting it only after a moment of being aboard. And Sir... it too is... dying."

S'Tan began to survey the area, sweeping his rifle's light across the room. He took out his tricorder and began gathering technical information. Upon hearing Snowfire's comments, he added his own department's analysis.

"There's barely any power being generated. If you asked me first, I would have equated the ship to what we would experience if the dilithium was exhausted. The ship is powering down. It seems as though everything is truly connected."

He tapped his tricorder and brought up the tractor beam's information.

"Either way," He continued, frowning, "we need to keep moving. I may have forgotten to mention, but life support is currently being drained from the Polaris. We have thirty minutes to return before there is not enough air to support the amount of life aboard the ship."

Oseno had to restrain himself from nearly having a heart attack as his head jerked in Solius' direction.

"That would have been a piece of information to be volunteered, Lieutenant! Why are we draining life support from my ship? You can explain while we move. Major, if you will... and quickly, please."

"Aye" was McGregor's only reply.

While his team was trained for a variety of missions, he understood that the primary role of Marines in situations such as this was to be first in and last out. He motioned to Pierce and the Marines led the way down the passage toward the coordinates that Snowfire had given for the location of the sole being on the vessel.

The Romulan suppressed a grin as the Bajoran overreacted to his actions. He explained his science as they moved through the dying ship.

"As I explained on the Polaris, Sir, I had to bypass multiple layers of security and protocols. I hoped you would understand that meant more than just shutting off the coffee maker. I had to reroute enough power to sustain the beam while I was away from the ship. The only system that could do that in such a small vessel is Life Support. Additionally, I felt it would have made a few of the crew members whom were left on board very...unhappy. Therefore, silence is superior to creating a false panic."

This Nicor class cruiser was but a quarter of the length and width of the dreadnought they had previously boarded. yet it was built almost exactly the same way as far as it's innards went. It took them barely a few minutes to go from the aft section to the prow where the control center was located. Along the way, all the glowglobes on each side were either faintly pulsing, darkened or sometimes even burst open like rotten eggs. The walls were also darkened in streaks and patches like half-burned flesh, seeping thick fluids as from lacerations and a kind of yellowish, sickening sparkling on their dull surface. It truly felt as if looking at the skin of a sick living being; one afflicted with a virulent, fatal sickness.

All along the way, openings had been left open like festering wounds, showing beyond their irregular frame other passages looking just as badly afflicted as the main one they were following. At the end, the passage opened to a control center much like that of Botthby's vessel, albeit on a much smaller scale. In there, the half of the Marines covered the exit and the room from their weapons' sights, two outside the others inside. The other half had entered to cover with their rifles the sole occupant of the ship.

The three-legged, massive leathery Undine was lying on the floor like a wounded horse. His skin showed the same markings as the hull of his living vessel, his eyes also darkened and glazed. It barely reacted to the arrival of the humanoids around it, lifting a weak three-fingered hand towards them, his large triangular face upturned and panting silently.

Then it turned halfway towards Snowfire.

The Illythirii suddenly stumbled, raised a hand to her white-haired head and used the other to brace herself on the nearest wall. When she touched it, she suddenly shook as if receiving a sudden electric jolt.

For a moment, she panted just like the Undine. Then, the creature closed its eyes and its head fell slowly to the floor with its raised arm. The skin turned a pale grey as it lay still, unbreathing.

Snowfire herself leaned panting on the now greying wall for a moment before coming back to her feet to look at Oseno with eyes getting quickly as clear as they usually were. But there was a haunting shadow over them that leadened her voice as she spoke.

"Sir... I... it... This ship... it encountered... something; something huge, like a cloud of stellar dust moving at faster than light speeds... moving with... purpose, yet... dead... Living yet without thought, dead to the mind... But still moving with... intent. It is moving towards a specific point of Fluidic Space, something called the... the Heart of Life."

Snowfire shook her head like someone trying to lift the cobwebs of a bad dream from her mind.

"There were two others like this ship that met this... giant luminescent cloud. The three of them were... killed as they touched the cloud with their own weapon discharge... like... like..."

She didn't have to finish. The scene she was describing reminded them of how Boothby's dreadnought had destroyed the Undine attack force, emitting a large cloud of irradiated particles that reflected in a huge explosion the energy of their powerful beams a thousandfold. And it also reminded some of them of another thing, something they had all learned about in History courses at the Academy; when a massive, unknown object looking like a titanic cloud had come from deep space, ravaging Klingon Space and then Federation Space as it had relentlessly moved towards planet Earth.

"V'ger..."

The word came out so quietly from Oseno's mouth that almost no one heard it at first. The Bajoran was a student of the adventures of Captain James T. Kirk, but perhaps more so than other cadets had been as Kirk had fascinated a younger version of Jureth. The man's command style and ability to think on his feet had earned him every bit of the reputation he had acquired. The encounter and neutralization with the V'ger entity, morphed from what had once been an ancient Human space probe, was just one of the many legendary adventures attributed to Kirk and his crew. Now, the description of the energy cloud sounded near identical to the one that had carved its way to Earth so many years ago.

Oseno looked at Snowfire with concern.

"Lieutenant-Commander, are you alright? What you are describing sounds exactly like Captain Kirk's encounter with the V'ger entity."

The chief science officer of the Horizon blinked once.

"Yes, Sir, I'm fine. It was just... bewildering. The minds of the Undine are quite... peculiar, especially that they do not think in terms of fixed concepts, in words or even language as we do; more with raw perceptions, emotions and intuitions although ordered with a cold, implacable, almost mechanical logic yet fueled by exceedingly centered self-awareness. The thoughts of this one were mingled with the basic consciousness of his ship and they were both very... intense as they felt themselves dying."

She shivered briefly as if to free herself completely of some afterthought or bad feeling. Then she cocked her head a moment before answering his comment.

"Your assessment is a valid hypothesis, Commander. What I got from this Undine matches in many aspects the incident you mention. Although the energy cloud this ship encountered is smaller and considerably less powerful than the eighty-two AU and twelfth power field of the V'Ger entity, it is nevertheless large enough and strong enough to obviously disable severely many good-sized starships in mere seconds. And it moves at high impulse towards a determined sector of this universe for purpose unknown."

She paused then closed her eyes a moment before opening them again straight into those of Oseno Jureth.

"What I got also was a definite image that reminded me of something else, much more recent; just before annihilating the attack fleet that was about to destroy the Horizon and our shuttle, the Undine dreadnought we had boarded had produced an vast energy and particle field; a field that created devastating detonations when concentrated energy of high intensity were fired to it and funneled those amplified detonations back toward the source of energy. What I saw in this dying Undine's mind was basically identical... only much larger and intense."

She made another pause to let her commanding officer digest the implications of what she was saying. Then, she spoke plainly.

" Sir, we now know the Boothby impersonator's vessel, the largest ever seen so far from their universe, was not to be found in the debris field after the battle. We now know about it's defensive field... and this energy cloud plowing it's way into the heart of Fluidic Space. And we know that the Undine who commanded this vessel is dead..."

Now she stopped, clearly trying to rein in the emotions that she feared could hamper her reasoning. Hope was like the tide; it could carry a ship safely to the shore or it could crash against the rocks and everything along with it.

The engineer scoffed at the situation.

"The Tal'Shiar always told us that V'ger was a made up superstition to cover up a Federation super weapon. That being said, I think that it is time to return to the ship and seal the portal between our space and fluidic space away. Let the Undine deal with their own problems. Let's be honest... this 'Tree of Life' doesn't sound like something we want to be around when the space dust atomizes it."

Oseno's own analysis did not quite agree with the Romulan's, far from it; and he said as much.

"I don't believe that to be a realistic option, Lieutenant. If I am reading what Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysa is telling us correctly, I think we may have at least partly caused this problem. Well, not us directly, but a Starfleet officer... which means the Prime Directive has been violated, and we are obligated to attempt to correct it. Am I right, Lieutenant-Commander? "

"Yeoman Blackbird herself couldn't have said it better, Sir."

Aware that the chief engineer was even greener than her regarding Federation policies and yet, as logical and reasoning as she was, Sowfire addressed him next.

"If this energy cloud is the same as the one produced by the dreadnought, a vessel we know was not destroyed by the battle near the boundary with Fluidic Space and was not to be found afterwards in our own universe, then it is plausible to assume that this object tearing it's way through the Undine's universe is that same vessel. And there was only one being still alive aboard when we left: Captain Kheren."

The Illythirii woman did not bother to recite the specifics of the Prime Directive to him; if he had not sworn that he knew, understood, accepted and upheld that most sacred law of the Federation, he would never have set foot on a Starfleet vessel to begin with. And if she knew one thing about Romulans, is what Honor and the Word Given meant to them.

The engineer sighed in defeat.

"I understand. Let's assume for a moment that it is the Captain who is controlling the death cloud. Adding in the fact that he is/was a secret Undine operative, why would he be rushing towards this Heart thing. Why not go the other way and finish his mission of destroying the non-Undine?"

"We lack sufficient data to answer those questions," admitted Snowfire. "For one thing, the way the dreadnought acted to save us all from the attacking force would be quite consistent with the behavior and mind of a starship captain, especially ours. On the other hand, this deadly and massively disruptive course towards what seems a most significant part of this universe is completely wrong for Captain Kheren. If both events are related to him, then there is a key piece of the puzzle we are missing for the moment."

Her purple eyes now focused sharply on those of the Romulan.

"And so you should know, this... Undine operative statement is *not* a fact at all; it is merely a vague and unfounded suspicion coming from a man whose very troubled life was based on secrets, deceptions and deceits. I have been in contact with Captain Kheren for some time now; had he been an Undine, I would know without a doubt, believe me. But to offer you a more objective evidence, there are his wives; the Andorian matrimonial bond could never have developed if the captain had been anything but a full-blooded Andorian... And any substitution later on would have been immediately detected through it. You are Romulan; don't fall prey to Human suspicions and fears."

Oseno stepped in at that moment and stopped the conversation between the two officers.

"Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysa is correct. The captain was suspected at one time of being Undine, but was cleared completely of any suspicion. His own security protocols which are in place on the Horizon and the Polaris are designed to detect imposters. All of that aside, we need more information. Lieutenant-Commander, unless there is anything we can do for the pilot, we should return to the Polaris so that Lieutenant Solius can stop the drain on the life support system. Then we will meet and decide to either return to the Horizon for help or continue on our own."

"I'm sorry, Sir, but this Undine has no cerebral activity left whatsoever," said Snowfire with a sigh. The ship itself is barely registering any life sign now and getting fainter still.... although there is some weak flaring up here in this control room... But it too is fading."

The Romulan ignored the science officer's attempt at flaring his emotions and hefted his rifle onto his shoulder while checking his tricorder.

"There is no rush. We have ten minutes to return to the ship. The crew should be none the wiser, though the air might be smelling stale to the more acute noses on board. Nothing that pulling a wire out in the environmental systems can't make real."

He turned around to inspect the room one last time. If he had more time, he'd have loved to pull every wall off the ship and see what makes these ships so unique and powerful. However, he assumed that they would be getting a chance very soon to get far too close for comfort.

Nodding to the engineer, Snowfire started recording as much data as possible from what was left of the Undine and his ship before they left. She kept most of her attention on the last flare up of life signal that was coming from the control room, especially from a wall section that looked like some oval-shaped compartment seemingly full of fluids, like a cistern. The recording beeping of her tricorder got slower and fainter and dimmer until the moment it stopped altogether, the greenish liquid in the semitranslucent wall ovoid becoming darker and thicker like some drying dye.

And then, there was nothing left but to leave what had essentially become both a tomb and a corpse.

"That's it, Captain." Snowfire said quietly. "Unless there's anything else, we should leave. Standing in a tomb is not my idea of respectful."

Oseno nodded and tapped his combadge "Oseno to Polaris"

"T'Lana here, Sir."

"We've learned all we can here and we're ready to come home."

"Understood; the transporter room is standing by."

Oseno took another look around the control center of the Undine vessel and at the now dead pilot, and bowed his head for a moment.

"Do not let him walk alone, guide him on his journey..." he said quietly, which was a portion of a Bajoran prayer for the dead, before tapping his combadge again. "Oseno to transporter room; five to beam back. Energize."

The transporter took them and deposited them in the Polaris small transporter room where Somers was waiting with a security team.

"Your weapons have been returned to the ship's armory. Please stand still," the tall red-haired woman ordered as she scanned the away team with a tricorder. "Commander Oseno, welcome back; Lieutenant Commander T'Lana is waiting on the bridge."

"Did she get promoted while I was gone?" Oseno said with a smile, knowing that Somers was testing him in the preapproved manner. "When I left, she was a Lieutenant."

"Apologies, Sir," Somers replied. "You may proceed."

Oseno turned to the other officers.

"Once our security chief clears you, Mister Solius, fix our life support. Then, you and Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysha meet me in my ready room in thirty minutes."

The Romulan nodded.

"Go ahead chief."

Somers glanced at her tricorder.

"Lieutenant Solius, good to have you back in one piece, I'm sure you're eager to return to main engineering."

Of course she new full well that the lieutenant had *not* been in the Polaris engineering room since their departure from the Horizon. Solius held up his hand in rejection.

"Sorry Marine. I'm sure that Lieutenant Akaal doesn't want a third wheel in there. I came here on the bridge and I'll stay there until we're back with the Horizon."

The security chief nodded.

"You can proceed, Sir, thank you."

Next she addressed Snowfire.

"Commander, K'leysha, welcome back. Ready to get back to the bridge?"

"Not unless the Circle decided to move there whilst I was gone," she paused, forehead wrinkling for a moment, "which they haven't."

She smiled.

"I might be needed up there later on, but for now I'm quite happy with them."

Somers nodded.

"Proceed, Lieutenant-Commander."

As Somers was clearing the Marines Jureth returned to the bridge.

"Report," he ordered.

"We are at station keeping, Sir" T'Lana reported. "The tractor beam is still engaged on the Undine vessel. We have seen no other significant sensor contacts."

"Release the tractor on the Undine vessel, Mister Kalaar. Mister Hunter back us off to a safe distance."

S'Tan took Jureth's order for him as well. He restored power to Life Support, Environmental Controls, Sensors, Shields, Weapons and the Warp Core Integrity Field. He also restored the alarm systems that should have been blaring since he had bypassed standard security protocols and tampered with the systems to keep them alive on the derelict bioship.

As the rest of the bridge officers complied, Oseno turned back to T'Lana.

"Lieutenant, in my ready room please."

He scanned the bridge as the Vulcan woman complied. Then he spoke to his helmsman.

"Mister Hunter, you will have the conn when you've finished maneuvering."

"Aye, Sir."

With the Polaris hold on it broken, Oseno watched on the viewer as the dead bioship resumed it's drifting meandering course through fluidic Space. He then followed T'Lana into his ready room where he sat behind the desk and motioned her to sit on the other side. Then he brought her up to speed on what they had learned aboard the Undine ship and she raised an eyebrow as he finished speaking.

"If Captain Kheren is the cause of this V'ger-like entity, Sir, why is he continuing to move into Undine Space? Why not return to the Horizon and attempt to signal us?"

"I don't know," Oseno admitted. "I don't even know if we can catch up to the ship, and if we do... then what? As much as I hate to admit it, our best option may be to return to the Horizon and report what we've found. I will see what Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysha and Lieutenant Solius have to say first though."

Once they were together, the chief engineer of the starship Horizon did not wait long to give his assessment of the situation.

"As much as I want to be done with this brown wasteland in space, Sir, I do not believe that returning is the best solution. We have no idea how to open up a portal to Fluidic Space and, let's be candid; Starfleet is most likely chewing Acting Captain Redding a new... ear. If we return, we will *not* be coming back."

The Romulan paused for a moment, as an idea came to him.

"I believe that we could twist the situation to our advantage in terms of getting permission for an ...'extended stay', if you will. Assuming Captain Kheren is the one controlling the Death Mist, then it is a Starfleet problem. Therefore, as the only Starfleet officers in the area, is it not our duty to solve this conundrum?"

Oseno nodded.

"Yes, as I said, if the Prime Directive has been violated, we are obligated to try and correct the damage done. Our dilemma is our limited resources, the Horizon would be significantly more capable of resolving this issue. The aperture that we came through is the only permanent one in existence. It is still there, that's why we left a nav beacon behind. We also have Voyager's method for opening a portal should we require it though we'd likely blow out our navigational deflector using Seven of Nine's graviton beam."

"Sounds like you are suggesting to return to the Horizon. I'd be better equipped to handle any extreme stress on the deflector dish... but do we want to run the gambit that Starfleet doesn't haul us off?"

The engineer had spent some time in a Romulan prison once for 'improper use of computers during duty' but his family was able to have him released before he was executed. He assumed Starfleet prisons were much less harsh, but none the less, he was not fond of the idea of returning behind a forcefield.

The Bajoran sighed.

"Starfleet really isn't in a position to haul us off... at least right now. I'd like to hear Commander K'Leysha's opinion, given that she is the senior science officer aboard and definitely has more knowledge than myself on whether we can stop this...ship or not."

Snowfire entered midway through the conversation between Solius and Oseno, having been touching base with her Circle down below to get a full mental check-up from them. She'd been pretty sure that she'd held her own boundaries in the link to the dying Undine, but it helped to have people that could make sure. But now, as the room fell silent again, she spoke.

"I've had a little time to process the nature of the situation we face, and whilst I don't know the full capabilities of the Polaris as well as I do the Horizon, I believe that this death cloud is something that we can stop. At the very least, I can promise even odds."

Proceed, Lieutenant-Comnader," invited the commanding officer of the Polaris.

"Given what I gleaned from the mind of the Undine we encountered before he died, the strength of the field around the presumed dreadnought is considerable. It is not, however, invincible, and one thing that both have that most Undine bioships do not is a deflector shield. If we modify the deflector to create a full particle screen, it would be theoretically possible to reach the core of the field without suffering severe rad exposure. Moreover, from what we have observed it might well be possible to force the field to expend itself by firing torpedoes modified to emit a finely tuned burst of baryon radiation on detonation. By using the sensors within the torpedoes to observe the field, we could use them to create destructive interference patterns that would disperse the particles over a massive area."

She paused, forcing herself to remember safety concerns; it was still hard for her Illythirii upbringing.

"A full particle screen will be far more of a strain on the Polaris's generators, but we'd have a clear safety margin. The only problem is that severe intensification of particle density against would continually heighten the power requirements, but if we hold enough modified torpedoes in reserve we should be able to disperse the field faster than it can reform for long enough."

And here was the hardest part of the plan.

"From what I saw, I cannot believe that Captain Kheren is not the intelligence controlling the bioship that must be at the core of the death-field. My link to the Undine, however, leads me to several conclusions that I had not considered previously. The level of connection between bioship and Undine is far deeper than we've ever imagined, this being a large part of what makes those ships so deadly. But, in this case, I believe the result of the field's course tells us a lot. From what we saw of the Captain before we were transported out, he was being merged into the bio-dreadnought to give it a new commander. But that process is one that, for all of his mental strength, I doubt he was able to adapt to fully. From what I saw of it, there are very few in all of known space that would be capable of doing so. But the ship was under attack, and as the connection is so deep the effects of an attack on a ship are felt by its pilot. Consider the likely reaction. Groggy, unknowing of your full capabilities, you find yourself in immense pain and under attack. A presence in your mind tells you your capabilities, and you find a way to destroy that which hurts you. But in doing so, you likely lose yourself... if only for a while. And so the ship defaults to your last command, mixed with its own instincts."

"I believe the ship is trying to return to its home, but is also still in receipt of its new commander's order to destroy any who attack it. This would explain its vector and extremely aggressive posture thus far. I may be off on the exact specifics, but this is most definitely a problem that we must resolve if we do not wish to reignite a war that you," she nodded to Jureth, "so valiantly opened a pathway to stop. And it is the contradiction of order and instinct that offers us our best chance."

Snowfire tapped her head gently.

"Between myself and the Circle I have brought with me, I believe I can break into the connection between the bioship and Captain Kheren, but only if we can open a clear pathway where the radiation cannot interfere with our attempts. At that point, I will lead an attempt, with the full backing of my Circle and the Polaris's empathic net, to break into the link and pull the Captain far enough clear of the bioship that his rationality returns to him. Given what I know of him, and what I've now had the chance to observe first hand, I believe that given a clear path, the Circle and I can succeed in this."

She looked again to Jureth.

"It is in the end your decision, Captain. But I believe that the plan I have outlined, at its core, is our best chance of successfully preventing the Field of Death, as the Undine calls it, from reaching the Heart of Life. And so too, preventing the reignition of an utterly genocidal war between two universes."

Oseno paused taking in all the information that the science officer was relaying. He was a tactical officer, he understood torpedoes, phasers, and targets. The science of most of this plan was largely beyond his comprehension, particularly the telepathic portions of it.

"Lieutenant-Commander, this may be an oversimplified question," he said "but do you think the captain would stop if we simply hailed him, or is he likely too lost to recognize us as friendly?"

"I very much doubt that a hail would register... if it was received at all." Snowfire replied. "It would, in my judgement, be more likely to attract hostile attention. The bioship is the primary intelligence in the merge right now; otherwise, the ship would have been heading for Andoria. And I do not believe that it is even capable of listening, unless its commander wishes it to. Given the likely state of that commander, subsumed into a merge, a technological hail is more likely to be seen as an attack."

"Hmm...that is a good piece of information..." Oseno mused and looked at each of the officers in turn. "Based on the information at hand, and your expert opinions, I believe we need to do what we can do to try and mitigate the damage being done to the Undine as a race. The Prime Directive has been violated, even if it was done unknowingly, and Starfleet, and by proxy the Federation has been placed in the middle of something akin to a civil war. We are the only Federation representatives in this are of space, and so we will act. Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysha, work with Mister Solius and with anyone else you require to make the systems modifications necessary to carry out your plan. We will move at the best speed we can manage in Fluidic Space toward the dreadnought's destination. We will remain at yellow alert with our shields up as it is possible we will encounter hostile Undine vessels along the way.

The Romulan snapped to attention to acknowledge the command.

"Aye, Sir."

He turned to the science officer.

"Commander K'Leysha, I can get started on the deflector dish right away, should be simple enough to do and possibly let us glide through Fluidic Space more easily. The torpedoes, on the other hand, are a bit out of my field. If you give me the exact alignment parameters, I should be able to take care of it as well. But I'd feel more comfortable if you coordinated that. I work on ships, not bayon...radiation..."

"Baryon, Lieutenant," Snowfire corrected with a smile. "I'll get the alignment parameters to you within the hour and work up an algorithm to calibrate the torpedo output to their surroundings so as to create the most effective interference pattern from each detonation. I'll run it by Lieutenant Ji'lan; her speciality is in astrophysics so she should be able to give some insight on the subject. I would ask that she monitors the effect of the torpedoes as we close. If parameters shift, I have full confidence in her ability to patch the algorithm when necessary."

This was more directed at Jureth however, as, technically, Snowfire lay outside the Polaris' internal chain of command. It was more than simple courtesy to ask Oseno for permission to borrow his CSO.

Oseno nodded in response to the unasked question.

"Whatever, and whoever you need, Commander. I'm giving you the authority to do it, I will get us moving."

The Bajoran concluded their meeting.

"Understand that the only way I will reverse our course of action is if you as my staff believe it is no longer in our best interest to continue or I somehow hear from the Horizon and am ordered not to do so. Questions?"

"Orders should it come to the fact that we cannot save the Captain?" The Romulan asked.

He knew the weaknesses of the Federation; and death from trying too long to save their fellow crewmen and officers was at the top of the list.

"Destroy the vessel and save the Undine?"

"If it comes to that..."

Oseno paused a moment. It wasn't that he hadn't considered the possibility; it was just something he had pushed off as unlikely.

"I will not allow a race to be exterminated to save a single man... and neither would he."

* * *

There were fifty-four of them, all Nicor warships able to combine in groups of nine to form five groups able to unleash the terrible mega-beam that could annihilate in one strike an entire Borg cube. They were all coming from a different direction of Fluidic Space, drawn towards a single point by one single thought.

Repel the invader!

At the center of their convergent trajectories, the thing flew uneeringly towards the very heart of their universe.

The greenish dagger-like vessels converged at high speed towards the immense luminescent cloud of yellowish particles, their pointed prows knifing through the strange, liquid-like substance of their universe like the snouts of hungry sharks. They slowed only when they came in range of their target, maneuvering so that they could assume a star-shaped formation with eight of them surrounding a ninth one barely a few thousand kilometers apart. Each of the five formations took a different angle around the vast moving object; but all were guided by a single feeling.

The weak shall perish!

The strange luminescent form plowing through Fluidic Space went on with no thought, no feeling, no emotion... but with a single, unflinching purpose... right to the heart of this universe.

All around the thing, an ominous greenish glow lighted the sides of the grouped cruisers. The eight surrounding ones sent the output of energy pulsing from their flanks right down to the ninth one between them all. The green lightning bolts converged on it and its own pulsing power swelled to a blinding halo that suddenly exploded forward in a colossal beam of destructive energy. From five different directions, the massive deflagration of greenish fire tore the very fabric of space to strike with titanic power the monstrous cloud of energy and particles. For a moment, the entirety of Fluidic Space seemed to ignite in a colossal blaze of yellow and green, like an explosion powerful enough to create a universe... or destroy it. The deflagration flashed from one end of space to the other with the brightness of a supernova. In the dense fluidic substance that made up Fluidic Space, it reverberated like the low thrumming of a subterranean explosion.

Then, everything went dark... and silent.

There was fifty-four of them, all Nicor warships... all coming from a different direction of Fluidic Space, drawn to a single point by a single thought... all guided by a single feeling...

There was, of the fifty-four ships, only burning lifeless debris left... and one single emotion floating in the strange organic ether like a last howling of dying souls.

Fear.

In the silence, only a long, low, discordant note tore space as the yellowish cloud, smaller, thinner and dimmer, nevertheless continued on beyond the vast field of debris and cadavers. It went on with the same cold indifference as, once in another universe, a Borg Cube had gone through a sector of space called Wolf 359, leaving a destroyed fleet of starships in its wake to move on towards its chosen destination.

* * *

Going from normal space to Fluidic Space was an experience much like going underwater; the density and peculiar composition of the other universe offered a slight resistance to the Delta Flyer shuttle when its triangular hull penetrated the greenish boundary of the other universe. The small spacecraft shuddered slightly as it entered the realm of the Undines and then went more slowly a few million kilometers inside like a submarine plunging into the ocean's depth.

Although Commander Redding had initially envisioned only a two-man crew for this comm relay mission, both Yeoman Blackbird and Sisko himself had privately insisted that Starfleet regulations were sound concerning such an away mission in unknown, potentially hostile territory. The acting captain of the Horizon had to allow a full away team and thus, the shuttlecraft was fully crewed when it launched.

"Report status," ordered Commander Sisko heading the away team.

"Transition between the two universes, Sir," helmsman Moore reported. "Five point three percent drop of velocity upon entry but now at constant full impulse, steady on course. We might want to use oars."

"No damage," engineer Robert Baoule answered with calm confidence, although there was a slight sheen on his black skull. "Structural integrity field stable. Power steady but the density of this... space is exerting a four point seven percent drain on engine performance. Would have been over five percent had it not been for the aerodynamic design of this craft."

"Maybe we can go for a swim while we wait," proposed Doctor Frederic Lumquist with a crooked smile and a distant voice, clearly fascinated by what he was looking at outside the cockpit transparency.

"Shields and weapons nominal," then droned the laconic soft voice of blonde-haired, blue-eyed security Ensign Germain De Paul at the tactical station. "Nothing yet on tactical sensors."

"I have the warp trail of the Polaris on scanners," said science Lieutenant Norbert Baoule, "bearing 045 mark 15. I am calibrating our instruments to compensate for the peculiar density and composition of this space. I should be able to get them on long range sensor in a few minutes."

"Counselor?"

Sisko was standing in the middle of the cockpit so as to have an eye on each crewmember and their stations while looking through the canopy at the weird swirling environment they were flying in. He noticed immediately the way the Betazoid woman flinched as soon as they came in Fluidic Space. He had thought it was because of the little jolt felt upon coming in, but now she was the only one silent and her hand was at her temple, a frown on her alabaster face.

"Sir... I..."

Suddenly, her eyes and her mouth popped wide open, her face stretched and her body went rigid as if she had received a violent electric discharge. The Half-Bajoran commander instantly was by her side, steadying her in her seat and looking at her with concern. His hand was signaling Doctor Lumquist urgently but the grey-haired healer was already moving and pulling out his medical tricorder.

"Counselor! Marleena! What's wrong?"

"Her encephalographic curve and endocrinal levels have shot off the chart!" exclaimed Lumquist, looking at his instrument.

Quickly he opened his portable medkit and took out a prepared hypospray. A quick adjustment to Betazoid physiology and he injected the black-haired woman in the neck. Instantly, her eyes fluttered and she started breathing again, slumping in an exhausted posture in her chair, sweating and panting. But a few seconds later, she waved a weak hand and stood straighter, her breathing calmer. Her face was still etched with some intense emotion that made her voice strain and hesitate.

"Thank... thank you, Doctor... I'm... I'm alright now, Commander."

"We'll get you on the biobed. You had a severe shock to your nervous system. You need rest," the medical officer said.

"I'll be alright, Doctor. It's over now," assured the counselor with a firmer attitude and a stronger voice, her eyes and face once again calm and composed.

"What is over, Lieutenant?" gently asked Sisko.

She took a deep breath then straightened herself to give her report properly as much as to mollify Doctor Lumquist still monitoring her with his tricorder.

"It came just as we entered Fluidic Space, Sir. At first, it was like a faint echo at the back of my mind... but then, it reached me fully. I've never felt anything like it before..."

"A telepathic contact?"

"Not... a communication attempt, no," the Betazoid woman specified, closing her eyes a moment like someone trying to recall a fleeting dream that had just left a strong impression but no clear images. "It felt like a... as if hundreds of voices cried out at once... and then... died."

There was an ominous silent in the cabin.

"The Polaris?" softly asked the mission commander.

"No, Sir, not the Polaris; not from any humanoid mind I ever felt. It was... alien."

"The Undines?"

She didn't confirm it, but it was clear that this could only be so.

"What could have made the Undines... shout... so loudly that you could perceive it beyond the range of our sensors?" wondered the scientist Baoule.

Marleena Sirris looked straight into Sisko's eyes.

"Anger... pain... astonishment... fear... and death," she whispered. "And something else... something so new and utterly alien to them that it sent them to their death despite their pain and fear."

"Despair?" chanced Sisko. But the Betazoid shook her head slowly.

"Resolve," she countered with a grim expression on her soft features; "a single, powerful, compelling common feeling of coming all together to a single point in space to be strong... or perish."

Silence filled again the entire shuttle for almost a minute. Then Sisko stood straighter and turned again to face the alien vista of Fluidic Space beyond the transparency of the cabin.

"Lieutenant Leône; raise the Polaris and establish a link with the Horizon."

The Orion ops officer acknowledged without raising her eyes from her console.

"Dropping a subspace relay in our wake... Relay signal loud and clear, signal even stronger than expected..."

"That's because of the higher density of this... space," scientist Baoule explained, like sounds travelling better in water as it is denser than air."

"I have the Horizon on channel 1, Commander," continued Leône. "Sending a hail to the Polaris on channel 2. We should be able to act as a link between us all in less than a minute, Sir."

"What do you think is happening out there?" asked Lumquist in a soft whisper.

"I don't know," grumbled the Half-Bajoran, crossing his arm and putting his thumb to his lower lip in thought. "But I have a feeling that we will have to work all together to face whatever is happening out here... and it's assuredly worse than facing the Klingons."

"And the Polaris might just be in the thick of it," commented Ensign De Paul in a tense, monocord voice.

* * *

Oseno stood and strode back out onto the bridge assuming with T'Lana behind him and assuming the other officer would follow suite.

"Report, Mister Hunter."

"We are at station keeping, Sir, awaiting your orders."

"Very well; return to the helm, Lieutenant, and set a course along the dreadnought's track, best speed you can manage."

"Aye, Sir."

Oseno then went over to the ops station.

"Lieutenant Palos, I want you to drop a message beacon announcing our intention to intercept Boothby's dreadnought. If the Horizon comes looking for us, this will at least give them something to follow."

"Aye Captain," Palos responded and Jureth was surprised the intelligence officer didn't offer some other flippant remark.

The Bajoran returned to the command chair as the Polaris began to move out.

It was at that very moment that the telepathic wave of the dying Undines struck Snowfire and every member of her circle aboard... and the Vulcan T'Lana as well.

She suddenly stood straight, her eyes wide and then stumbled back in her chair, reeling like someone being struck in the face with a knock out blow.

Oseno saw his friend in obvious pain, and could tell something was wrong with Commander K'Leysa as well and tapped his combage.

"Medical Emergency! Medical team to the bridge!"

The reaction from the Circle was instantaneous, every member extending and taking the mental 'hand' of all others and channelling their concentrated power to Snowfire. And well that it was, for the reaction of the Ilythirii CSO had been even faster. She'd flung her power into the Aegis around the Polaris, shielding all aboard from the worst initial effects, but leaving her standing alone until the Circle responded. And for that a brief moment she fought a futile battle against the tsunami of emotion pouring out of Fluidic Space from the minds of now-dead Undine. The Aegis cracked, the intense sense ability of a Tri-Gifted weakening her via her inability to lock her passive sensing; for if she did, she'd lose her hold on the Aegis... and her mind writhed under the onslaught.

But then the Circle was there.

Power flooded into her, the combined strength of over a dozen telepaths, all trained to a level far beyond that of most member of the Federation, combining with the power they were funnelling from the empathic net to grant her the strength to hold the psionic shield they'd erected around the Polaris. For an endless moment, even that fluxed beneath the onslaught, but then the sheer distance from which the emotion was coming caught up with it. And powerful though that signal was it was also spread out, and spreading ever further in each passing instant. Against a single telepath, or even a group that did not know how to act together, it could have been devastating, but against an Aegis with Snowfire as its keystone and a full Circle behind her it was...manageable. Only just, but an 'only just' still counted as a success.

Snowfire let out a long, shuddering breath as the moment of unbearable stress failed, releasing the power of the Circle back into itself as she assessed the state of her mind. She was ok...but there was damage there now. If she was lucky, it would subside by the time they reached the Dreadnought, but if not... she shook herself. If it didn't, it didn't, she'd survive. She had to. Then she looked across at Jureth.

"We..." she shook her head, mostly to clear it, "we just got hit by the equivalent of a telepathic sledgehammer. The Aegis around the Polaris held however, even though it was very close for a few moments."

She took another breath, straightening back up to her full height as her system stabilised.

"It was loosed by death, the death of scores of Undine and their ships. I can only imagine that a larger force gathered in an attempt to deflect the dreadnought from its course... and given the speed at which they're reacting, we likely have little time before it is confronted by vessels more in its weight class... if not larger still."

"I will be fine, I just need a little rest, but it now become imperative that we reach the dreadnought before any further response can be mustered. I can only imagine what a full reaction force might be like, considering the size of the Undine force deployed in their crusade against the Borg."

The medical team arrived at that moment and Oseno directed the corpsman and Doctor Lowe toward Snowfire and T'Lana.

"We've just been hit with a massive telepathic wave Doctor, please evaluate Lieutenant T'Lana and Commander K'leysha for any residual effects. You may want to send a team to evaluate the members of our telepathic vanguard as well."

Oseno looked over at Snowfire .

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant-Commander, but in the interest of you all I want the Doctor to do her thing."

"Fantastic," The Romulan then exclaimed sarcastically, "So now we're being attacked by ghosts. Technology can't protect us against that! I will double down the efforts to modify the deflector dish."

The engineer brought up the schematics of the Polaris' deflector onto his screen. The design was simple because of the smaller ship, but it was much harder to pull the required power. He was sure that they'd need life support, so he pushed his prior stunt aside. He eventually determined that if he increased the matter-antimatter reaction speed in the warp core, they could effectively double the power output. This of course was highly dangerous as it puts more strain than the recommended amount on the core's containment unit. Before he gave the word, he looked over at the Captain.

"Sir, A word about the modifications to the deflector dish. We might have an issue."

Oseno looked at the Romulan as he took in Snowfire's report regarding the telepathic wave, this mission was starting to take a turn he did not like.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" he asked as evenly as he could manage; another problem was just not something they needed right now.

The engineer ran his hand over his hair as he spoke.

"Well, Sir, the ship is too small to successfully just increase the deflector field's size. The Horizon would be able to handle it, with the way the warp cores are aligned. But the Polaris? It's single core isn't designed for what I'm trying to accomplish. There are two options to modify the core. Both are bad. Firstly, I can do what I did before."

He let himself stop there, as he knew the Captain would understand.

"But I don't think that is a long term viable option, as the systems are still resetting." He continued. "My only other option without more time to research is to increase the matter-antimatter reaction in the core. But it's a high danger procedure that would increase the power output. But by doing so, it would amplify our phaser output by 62 percent and increase proportionately the strain on the warp core's casing. But lets just say that the... turbulence would give an increased chance of a breach; I've already run some numbers. We'll be able to survive ten minutes in the cloud... but beyond that, I cannot guarantee that we'll leave safely."

"What if we do nothing, and rely strictly on the modified torpedoes to get us into the cloud?"

"We can use the torpedoes exclusively, yes. But as you know, there are only so many in our complement. Of course, if or when we run out, I can have the deflector plan standing by and hopefully we do not explode as I get the systems online. That probably would be the best course of action. And..."

He paused, looking down at his PADD

"Recalibrations are already mostly complete, so we are ready to go."

The Polaris moved as swiftly as she could manage through fluidic space toward a confrontation with the powerful entity that the Undine dreadnought had evolved into. The discussion regarding her deflector modifications was continuing still when they were interrupted by Lieutenant Variel Palos from the operations station.

"Captain, we're being hailed!"

"Mister Hunter, all stop," Oseno ordered, "By who, Mister Variel?"

"Starfleet signal, Sir; ID is one of the Horizon's Delta Flyers."

"Origination point?"

"Not able to calculate precisely, Sir, but they must be in Fluidic Space."

"What are the chances it's a false signal?"

"Sir, if it is, whoever is sending it is very good. The computer identified the signal immediately and there is no variance at all."

"Alright, open a channel."

"You're on, Sir."

"Hailing vessel, this is Captain Oseno Jureth of the United Federation of Planets, starship U.S.S. Polaris. Please respond and identify yourself."

"USS Polaris, this is Commader Sisko aboard the shuttlecraft Dawn," answered the Half-Bajoran standing behind the Orion chief of ops confirming with a nod the IFF signal with the escort vessel. " We have deployed a subspace relay at the border of this sector with normal space. We will act as relay as well with the Horizon. Horizon, this is the Dawn; we've made contact with the Polaris. Do you confirm subspace link?"

"This is Commander Redding; subspace link confirmed, loud and clear. Good to hear your voice, Commander Oseno. We've had a few changes in our orders since we last talked and now it looks like we'll be joining you in Fluidic Space within the next hour. I hope you've had more luck in your task than we have."

The area clean-up was nearly complete and soon they would be entering the other universe themselves, unless the Polaris just happened to be on it's way back with the captain. As unlikely as that was, it was still possible.

Once the commanding officer of the Polaris had finished his report regarding the cataclysmic situation in Undine space and the possible status and involvement of Captain Kheren in it, there was a long moment of silence aboard all three vessels. It was like they were asked to face the V'ger incident, the Borg at Wolfe 359 and the Whale Probe all at once; one of their own was unwillingly part of a powerful entity about to whipe out and entire species... or more probably die trying.

Even as deep inside Fluidic Space as she was, the Polaris could not get any reading of the actual drama being played at the heart of the Undines'universe. Without warp speed, they could not reach the stage where that drama was about to play out before it was over. And even once there, they would face not only the awesome power of the merged entity but most certainly the largest Undine fleet ever assembled.

How to get there in time... now that was the question on everyone's mind.

"Commander Redding... what are your orders?"

Before the big man could answer, tactical officer Mrrriish spoke with a grim tone in her growling voice:

"Commanderr; ththree objects on a dirrect approach vectorr at high warrp frrom 180 marrk 45, closing rrapidly... too farr away forr positive identification."

Everyone on the Horizon already knew what, or rather who they were nevertheless.

"They're still too far away for even our advance sensor suite to clearly identify them," explained science lieutenant Baoule. "Fortunately, that means also that they have not detected us yet... but at their current speed, they will get a sensor contact on us in... five point three minutes."

"And they too will guess who we are..." commented helmsman Snow, his hands already hovering over the controls, ready to send the immense vessel towards the greenish tear across space looming before them on the large viewer.

"All deployed crafts are back and secured in our launch bays," then reported ops officer Cheonghi, his shrill Edoan voice charging the air with added nervousness despite its calm, professional tone.

Engineer Robert Baoule completed the status report.

"All traces of Federation propulsion and debris have been erased. Thruster output will dissipate among standard floating space particles a little over four minutes after we leave this part of space."

"Guess it's true, no matter how long you live life can always throw a surprise at you." He said with a whimsical look.

Then he straightened himself in the command chair, took a short breath and looked straight at the main screen.

"Take us into the aperture and prepare to close it. Dawn, stand by for pick up; retrieve the Polaris's beacon and your subspace relay. I don't want any evidence left behind on that end either."

"Aye, Sir," answered Sisko and the orders were promptly implemented.

"Oseno," then said Redding, "maintain best course and speed towards the event. If for some reason we can't join you, every minute might count. If successful in collapsing the gateway, we should be able to catch up to you soon enough, so be prepared for a high warp docking maneuver upon regrouping."

Redding still would normally have preferred a stand up fight with the Klingons but, with galactic peace and the fate of another universe in the balance, he was suddenly glad that such a choice was no longer viable.

Still on the bridge of the escort ship, Snowfire spoke up the moment she heard anything about collapsing a gateway.

"Commander, if I may ask; why are you intending to collapse the naturally formed rift between both universes? Such action could easily be seen as another attack by our us against the Undine again."

Normally Redding would have been chafed by such an interruption, but it was in fact a fair question.

"Our primary orders are at this time to 'cover our tracks' in this area, lieutenant-Commander. So, we had to come up with a way to make sure that the Klingons couldn't follow us. We did however find a way to do so without destroying it... we think."

There was a small measure of doubt in his voice. After all, he was no scientist... but K'leysha was.

"I'm willing to entertain another option if it can be implemented in the next 2 minutes."

"Captain, if you seal the rift... a rift already known to exist... then, even if it could have sealed itself, it will be seen and heralded as proof by the Klingons that we *were* here. And closing it will create an energy burst so vast that it will be seen by every scanner post in the quadrant. Not to mention that it could cause permanent damage to both of the universes connected by it."

Snowfire sighed.

"I cannot in good conscience advise such a course of action."

She waved the doctor working on her away, reaching for her PADD.

"I expect that you've destroyed all sign of us on 'our' side of the rift. The only thing we need to do is make sure that the Klingons won't find any evidence of us on *this* side. Considering the *Horizon's* speed, that's fully within our ability."

She made a pause to see if Redding would object but he kept silent. And so she resumed her proposal.

"Recover the beacon we laid for you and the subspace relay dropped for this communication. Then we can use the nature of this space to our advantage."

Her fingers blurred across the PADD as she talked.

"Fluidic space's nature will distort any sensor readings except massive ones. Our sensors would have trouble finding each other at long range and Klingon hardware is not nearly as advanced in that regard. When you enter Fluidic Space, go to full emission control and initiate the protocol I'll be sending you in the next minute. It'll smooth away the subspace shear of your warp trail. It wouldn't work in normal space without severely limiting your speed, but it'll work here. Once you're far enough from the rift that you can't isolate it, you should be able to safely initiate transwarp, at which point we should be able to catch the Captain before the next wave of Undine response reaches him. So far he's only been running into fast reaction forces, I don't really want to consider what a full fleet will be like."

She tapped a final button on her PADD to send the core of the swiftly written plan.

"Will that suit as an alternative?"

On the viewer, Redding grinned.

"You took longer than 2 minutes just explaining that."

Indeed, the large Federation vehicle was making its way into Fluidic Space even as he spoke.

"I'll explain in detail later. For now, we're not destroying it. There will be no explosion. And lastly, the transwarp drive will no more work in there than standard warp propulsion so we'll have to come up with a solution as to how we may hope to catch up with the thing."

Inside he was delighted at her ambition and brilliance. He always had a thing for headstrong women.

"My orders stand, Lieutenant-Commander."

His tone was unyielding.

Oseno glanced from Snowfire to Commander Redding and, while he agreed with the Ilythiri science officer, he was obligated to support Redding as the Horizon's commander.

"We will proceed as ordered, Sir," Oseno responded, cutting off any response by Snowfire. "We will see you when you arrive. Polaris out."

Jureth signalled Variel to end the link and then addressed the helmsman.

"Mister Hunter, resume course, best possible speed."

"Aye Captain,"

Jureth then addressed Snowfire.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant-Commander, but Commander Redding is in command and we only had time to lose by prolonging the discussion. I'm sure that whatever he has planned he has thought out thoroughly. I accompanied Admiral Redding on a mission just prior to Operation Horizon and, if there is one thing I know about him, it's that he makes calculated decisions. He won't do anything that he doesn't believe is necessary, and it sounds like he has higher orders....as do we."

* * *

Like a flock of raptors diving at killing speed towards their prey, the three warships flew at extreme high warp towards the rimward edge of the Beta Quadrant. With a two-pronged triangular head at the end of a long straight neck protruding from a squat body winged each side by short, flat and thick pylons and nacelles, each vessel truly looked like a gigantic bird of prey as they went at nearly a thousand times the speed of light. Pushed beyond the safety limits of their engines and superstructure, they shook like birds in a storm and, within them, the hundreds of fearless warriors poised since the last eight hours for the upcoming battle.

On the small, spartan bridge of the one at the head of their triangular flight formation, the grised commander pushed a heavy corruscated brow over his deeply shaded black stare, crunching his squat, flat nose between it and his bearded, snarling mouth full of small pointed teeth.

"What is it?" he growled to one of his officer, a tall, muscular woman, as dark-skinned and almost as heavily browed as he was, her small plush lips parting to show teeth just as sharp as his.

"*Hod!* We will reach the target zone in the next minute, but..."

"You have locked sensors on the Federation ship?"

"No, my Lord... we have another kind of reading... a sudden burst of massive power in subspace!"

"We're under attack!" shouted the commander, pounding his leather-gaunteled fist on the wide arm of his thick metallic chair. "Gunner! Prepare to..."

Before he could finish, an alarm blared and, on the wide octagonal viewer, a blinding, greenish light flared like a tear right in the middle of the screen.

And then, everyone and everything shook as if the universe was about to fall apart.

"Tactical, report!" shouted the man in the central metal chair.

"Shields up, minor damage to armor plating!" shouted back the bearded dark giant behind the console at his right. "But weapons systems offline! No target lock!"

"Sensor overload!" added the woman gripping the detection station's console at his left.

"Structural integrity field buckling! Stress to superstructure reaching design limits!" Then came a low, rough voice over the intercom. "Magnetic containment field at emergency level!"

"Warp bubble collapsing!" finished the mustached somber youngster frantically running his gloved hands over helm controls before the raised dais where sat his commanding officer.

As the greenish wave of light went past them like a tsunami flowing over rocks on a coastline, the three *Vor'Cha* class attack cruisers emerged into normal space like so much dead branches thrown out of a windstorm, almost colliding with one another as they stumbled slowly until their pilots managed to activate thrusters and regain control of their dying flight.

Now motionless in space, the trio of warships hung in a dark patch of the galaxy where the stars were old and far between, the last ones at the edge of the galaxy. Their nacelles' bright red glow showed now but as a dull remnant of pale afterglow now. It took a moment for their eyes also to open again.

On the main viewer, only darkness, stillness and silence greeted them as it came back online. A few sparkling stars flared here and there, like the intermittent spark coming out from a few, fuming controls.

"Tactical! find the source of that blast and return fire! Engineering! Damage report!" blared the commander as he was righting himself in his command chair.

"*Hod!* Our warp core is burned out! Impulse power and thrusters nominal but... It will take a day to restore to minimal core activity and even then, only minimal warp will be available."

"This failure will cost you your head, incompetent *Targ!*"

"*Hod,* I warned you! Pushing our engines beyond safety limits could only make this a one way trip!"

"We *had* to reach this sector before the Fedrats could scamper away! Sensors! Where is that target?"

There was a moment of tensed silence before the woman at sensor station finally spoke.

"*Hod*... sensors are coming back on line now... most of them. There is... no energy signature beyond that of a residual trail from the shockwave..."

"What weapon did they use?"

The sensor officer shook her head, looking at the viewer with widening eyes, her voice hesitant.

"My Lord... we were hit by a gravitational field of large magnitude... centered three billion *kelikams* on the axis of our last projected course from our present position."

"How far are we from our target zone?" asked the commander.

"*Jah'Qwi*... we... we *are* at the intended coordinates."

Her puzzlement spread all around the red-lighted, hazy bridge.

"Am I to be cursed to miss entrance to *Sto Vo Kor* because I only have fools for a crew?" fumed the captain of the lead *Vor'Cha* vessel. "where is the Scar of Kahless?"

The woman hesitated, running her fingers over her console and looking at readouts before she dare raise a confused stare back at him.

" My Lord... the rift between here and the other realm... it is... gone."

"Gone? What do you mean, gone?"

"Closed, my Lord... It was sealed off by what appears to be a massive gravitational effect that started out in subspace."

" A gravity-based weapon? Starfleet has no such thing in it's arsenal!" protested the giant officer at tactical. "Not even the Romulans who do use microsingularities to make their warp field."

The woman nodded at his remark but she was turned her confused stare towards their master.

"It could not have been a weapon, my Lord; the scale of it was just too vast. More like... the emanation of a small singularity."

"In subspace?" wondered the commander, his eyes darting at every square centimeter of the image before him like a predator seeking a prey.

"Yes my Lord... therefore not a natural phenomenon but... much too large and unfocused to be any kind of weapon."

"A warp core breach?"

"That was my first hypothesis... but there is no antimatter residue in the sector... Only residual gravitons... except..."

She looked again at her readouts then raised her head sharply to look again at the screen.

"*Hod!* I read a debris field near the position where the Scar was located!"

"Helm! Full impulse towards those coordinates, attack pattern Kang Amber! Tactical! target the most massive object in that field and prepare to blast it out of the stars with whatever could hide behind it! Transmit attack solution to the rest of the squadron! Let's get those Fedrats!"

The three massive warships swung in unison to resume their triangular pattern that allowed them full field of fire and covering fire between one another. In a few seconds, they closed the gap between their point of reentry and the swirling field of discarded debris that was expanding slowly for all eternity before their double-pointed bows.

"*Hod*... all those debris... they're of *Those Without Honor*... Undine."

"And Starfleet?"

"Nothing, my Lord; I read only the biometal and organic traces of Undine bioships and their propulsion trails crisscrossing all over this zone... I read the energy signature of heavy weapons fire as well... but all Undine. No duranium alloy, no antimatter or ino-impulse warp trail, no standard biosigns or biomatter, no photon or phaser discharge... *Hod*, there never was any Starfleet vessel here."

"Incompetent fool! Didn't you report a large contact in this very spot an hour ago?"

"Yes, *Jha'Qwi*... and now, I read the impulse trail and the weapons discharges of a very massive vessel among those signals which moved towards the point in space where the rift used to be... but the signature is Undine, my Lord."

For a moment, everyone blinked at the screen in silence. With a growling voice as full of frustration as of puzzlement, the warship captain pointed a hand at the field of small debris on the viewer.

"Then... where is it?"

"I read a very large, powerful and peculiar trace of some large energy field that was active here recently... and that of a score of core detonations and the heaviest concentration of weapon signatures converging at it's center..."

She thought for a moment then made a report.

"*Jha'Qwi*; from the evidence I can gather, it appears that there was a battle here, between roughly two dozen warships and another much more massive and powerful than the others... probably dreadnought class... all Undine. A detonation of larger magnitude happened where it's last trace can be followed back to... which correspond to the very point where opened the Scar of Kahless. It appears, my Lord, that the Undine fought among themselves and destroyed each other... and the way back to their realm... when their most massive vessel was destroyed and all of them with it."

The commander thought for a long moment, his eyes never leaving the large screen before him, as if he could picture what had happened. There was still a frown on his heavy brow and a frustrated growl in his thoughtful voice.

"No Federation vessel?"

"It appears, my Lord, that they never came..." acknowledged the science woman. "Whether the Undine lost control of themselves, frustrated being thus stood up, or because they disagreed with this contact attempt to begin with, or for some other reason only known to their alien minds... all evidence shows a devastating conflict between them only... with no one and nothing surviving when the power core of their dreadnought detonated within the rift itself."

Another long moment of silence followed. Finally, the commander rose from his chair, crossing his arms on his wide, powerful chest holding a large metal sash studded with war medals. his eyes were still on the screen. Then he spat and turned around.

"Bah! Sweep this area. Confirm this data... but if there is but one molecule or a single rad of Fedrat presence, I want you to find it! Transmit to the rest of the squadron... and start again once the rest of the attack fleet arrives. We remain on Amber Alert for the next day! Anyone caught napping will be made part of that debris field out there!"

He spun when the turbolift door hissed and grated as if to echo his harsh, frustrated tone of voice. With a last glare that would have bore a hole through a starship's deflector shields, he stepped back and let the noisy door close on the fuming expression on his hard-etched face.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE VOYAGE HOME

There was a diffuse light all around, like that of the rising sun filtering through the waves of the ocean to briefly light up the depths before hiding again behind clouds. The very fabric of space, fluid and dense, rippled softly as if a brief gust of wind had raked the surface. It was enough however to shake every part of even the mighty starship that was creeping away from both light and wind towards where waited the tiny cylinder-shaped craft that was her escort. And she too felt the tremor and was briefly bathed in light, the distance leaving her with the same tremors as the big ship relative to their size.

Then all seemed to be quiet again in Fluidic Space. But everyone aboard the USS Horizon and the USS Polaris knew that the depths ahead of them stirred even more than that short moment they had now come through.

And there was another stirring as well; one that gripped the entire crew, hoping that they were possibly going to find and bring their captain back.

"The rift has collapsed on itself, Sir," reported the scientist Norbert Baoule hunched over his sensor readouts. "Gravitational forces are settling slowly to previously recorded parameters after the subspace effect of our static transwarp shell. I estimate the aperture will remain closed for about one standard year. Then, natural gravitational forces in the sector and within this universe will reopen it again."

"Minor stress to our superstructure from the collapse," then said his twin brother Robert from the engineering console. "Structural Integrity Field compensating. Damage repair teams already working to seal microfractures... but there will be the need for some drydock work to bring back everything to optimal condition. As predicted, unable to form a warp bubble within this pea soup they call a universe. You may use that extra power to boost up shields, weapons and systems at your discretion, Sir. But we have full impulse power and thrusters at your disposal."

"No casualties reported," then said Doctor Lumquist from the medical command chair at the left of Redding. "Personal Inertial Dampeners kept everyone safe and sound during all the shake, rattle and roll. I have reestablished contact with the Polaris."

"Dawn reporting docked and secure in shuttlebay 1, Sir," assistant chief of ops Cheonghi confirmed with his eyes on her ops station screens. "Commander Sisko and his crew on their way to the bridge. All systems coming back to nominal status. Crew is on yellow alert."

"I have the Polaris on our forward sensors," now announced Lieutenant Mriish at tactical.

"And something else, at the very edge of our scanners... some kind of... disturbance. It must be massive to register even this faintly over such distances."

On board the escort vessel, alarm klaxons blared as the Polaris felt the effects of the collapse of the subspace rift and Jureth gripped the command chair as the little escort vibrated and shook for a moment and then it was gone. The damage to the smaller ship was slightly more than that of her larger mothership.

"Damage report!" he ordered when the shaking had stopped

Before anyone could get a word in the gruff voice of the ship's Andorian chief engineer Akaal called to the bridge

"Conn, engineering, what in the name of all that is good was that? We just blew an EPS conduit on the starboard side and the power grid is completely out of whack. Warp core efficiency has been reduced to seventy percent, I think we may have some real damage there, but the containment field is holding. The computer is also telling me that we have moderate structural damage near the aft section of the ship, but the SIF field is already adjusting. I'm also reading several hull fractures, but I'm going to need help to patch them all before we encounter that...thing. Our impulse drive is limited to three quarters as well thank to the power grid issue. I can correct it but it will take time. Order of priority says I should seal the hull fractures first, Sir."

"Get our impulse drive back to full," Oseno replied. "We need the extra speed, use our reserves if necessary then pull whatever personnel you need to handle the hull fractures."

"Aye Sir, Akaal out."

Solius sighed.

"Sir, thanks to that little shakeup, my original plan is now out the window. Any adjustments made to the core would most likely cripple the Polaris and almost guarantee a core breach. We can only now rely on the torpedo plan. That being said, we can still send the idea to Blakely and Baoule and let the Horizon's superior power systems use that idea, should we....fail."

The Romulan engineer stopped speaking after ending his statement on such a dark note. He was beginning to think this would be a one way trip without the Horizon's support.

"Conn, tactical, new sensor contact... just on the fringe of detection range. It's the Horizon, Sir," then reported Lieutenant Kalaar

Oseno nodded "Good, send them a message notifying them of our damage status and that we are still making best speed toward the anomaly. Now, K'leysha, Ji'lian, what was that?"

Officer Ji'lian was first to respond as she had been monitoring the sensors.

"The rift between our universe and this one has closed, Sir. Commander Redding's static transwarp shell was successful in warping gravitational fields to seal it... at least until natural forces in the sector will eventually reopen it in the next nine to twelve standard months. What we felt was a ripple aftereffect in local gravitation from the... rearranging of space back there. Considering the density and composition of Fluidic Space, it was not unlike a massive wave thrown against our hull. The effect of course is fast dissipating with distance but it was still a good wallop this close to it."

"I'm in contact with the Horizon, Sir," then reported Palos. "They acknowledge our status report and confirm success in closing the rift. Commander Redding is on the channel."

On board the largest starship of the United Federation of Planets, the doctor in the medical command chair similarly reported to the large man in the captain's chair.

"Polaris reporting some damage to their superstructure and warp core but they are about to proceed at full impulse towards the forward disturbance. You have a clear channel to Commander Oseno, Sir."

"Glad to see you pulled through that, Polaris. It was a bit more of a bang than we were expecting but it worked perfectly."

Redding swiveled to face the screen directly.

"The Horizon came through it without a scratch, so we'll be headed your way shortly; but, at impulse speeds, you will reach the target area well ahead of us."

His gaze bore into the eyes of the Bajoran on the screen.

"Your orders are to assess the situation as best as you can but not to take any direct action. UNLESS you deem it absolutely essential, you are to wait for us. Is that understood Commander?"

He gave a nod to Sisko as his acting exec entered the bridge, followed by Moore and Leone who relieved the Edoan Cheonghi at the ops station. Moore stayed on as relief pilot near chief helmsman Snow, seemingly having nothing better to do. Redding didn't seem to notice him.

Before Jureth could acknowledge Redding's orders, his tactical officer spoke with a definite urgency in his voice.

"Sir! tactical sensors are registering numerous objects moving at near light speed towards a specific sector; by configuration, I read several dozens Nicor class cruisers, over a dozen Dromias class heavy cruisers, no less than half a dozen Vila battleships and at least one Thetys dreadnought."

"Like Bootby's ship," said officer Palos, working already to manage their available power to propulsion and tactical systems, anticipating his commanding officer's next order.

"And there may be as much coming from the other side, from beyond our sensor range," remarked science officer Ji'Lian.

"ETA of the Undine Fleet with the object; twenty minutes," finished Kalaar.

"At emergency impulse, they'll be fully engaged when we'll arrive," then helmsman Hunter told them all.

Aboard the Horizon, Redding waited impatiently as they trailed behind the Polaris and could think of nothing better to do than watch the main view screen and brood.

But Lieutenant junior grade Moore was never one to sit still when he could be moving his tongue

"...I'm telling you, Snow, this universe is too vast not to have a better way to get around."

The Inuit helmsman sighed.

"That might be true, or it might not... it's an alien universe, Moore."

Moore persisted.

"Sure but two plus two should equals four in any universe we can exist; standard laws of cause and effect might apply just about everywhere. Look, all I'm asking is that we take a look. Is that so much to ask?"

He flashed a winning smile.

"We should at least ask Redding first." Snow murmured, already working the controls.

"Naa... he's busy..."

Moore leaned in closer to whisper.

"And I don't think he'd listen to one of my ideas anyway. He doesn't likes me all that much."

Then he shrugged.

Snow rolled his eyes.

"You do take a little getting used to, I'll have to admit. But I don't think the Commander's the type to let that get in the way of his command decisions."

Moore looked over his colleague's work.

"Anything yet?"

"First, I have to reconfigure the sensor to detect ambient thermal radiation outside a troposphere, especially over a non-fixed 'open space' location like your suggesting. That would be impossible to find in 'normal' space, so the sensors don't know how to look for it ." Snow protested. "And even if your right and there are... currents out there, there's nothing to suggest one strong enough for us to catch up to the Captain before it to late."

He frowned at the thought.

"Oh com'on, would you put a big hole into enemy space and not make an express route for traffic? I'm telling you there has to be a super current right here, close by, so warships can get here on the double."

He placed his hand on Snow's shoulder, as if he might be to talking to a child. The console beeped and both looked down at it. Moore smiled. Snow glanced and nodded at Moore before speaking outloud.

"Commander, Lieutenant Moore and I found something."

Redding face was one of confusion. He had no idea they were even looking for something. Snow went on as Redding joined them.

"We detected a large thermal displacement, Sir. It's a current much like the E.A.C. on Earth, but I don't think this one is a natural phenomenon; it has an parallel current of equal strength less than hundred meters away."

"The E... what? what are you suggesting, Lieutenant?"

Redding's time on his actual planet of birth had been extremely limited. The Inuit turned to face him and explain.

"The East Australian Current, Sir; it runs between Australia and New Zealand at about seven knots. This one moves.."

Moore butted in.

".. .A LOT faster, Sir... and its heading straight to where the Polaris is going. We could catch up to them in maybe twenty, twenty-five minutes."

"The trick will be to ride this current; but it so happens that kayaking was my favorite sport when I was a young man back in my native Yukon," added Aguk Snow with a small smile, looking forward to try yet another way of handling a starship.

"We have paddles on this ship?" mocked Moore but suddenly curious at what his copper-skinned colleague intended to do.

"Kayaking requires that you alternate paddling one side or the other to best use a torrent's currents to propel yourself through their strongest direction.... without capsizing of course. It's a question of correct pressure and balance."

"And this ship has impulse exhausts on port and starboard," understood Moore with a smile and a nod. "I'll have to try that in the holodeck."

"I have a kayaking program already in the holomatrix," Snow said, then became more serious, addressing their current commanding officer; "I can do this, Sir."

Redding smiled at them both.

"Outstanding work you two. Make the necessary preparations and engage, best possible speed." ordered the big man as he returned to his seat. "Doctor Lumquist, inform the Polaris that we found a faster passage, ETA twenty-five minutes, details to follow."

"Aye, Sir," the man in the medical command chair acknowledged, as he was the one handling communication, doubling up in it as ship counselor.

He discreetly breathed a sigh of relief. Now they had a chance to do something.

The next big question would be; what?

* * *

For long minutes, they flew at high impulse in pursuit of the invading entity that had entered this universe before them, the Horizon in tow. They were still on their intercept course when the ominous silence aboard was finally broken.

"I can get us a visual... extreme magnification," Lieutenant palos stated as his fingers crawled over his console.

On the main viewer of the Polaris, the image blurred a moment as the computer worked hard to synthesize an image from all the sensor data it was receiving. It took a moment for it to gather enough information to do so an extrapolated from records in it's memory banks to fill in the blanks like color and precise shapes, but what they got was a frighteningly clear image of what was happening.

Before their eyes sprawled the energy cloud, much much larger than the one they had witnessed previously coming from the Bootby dreadnought. It was brighter also and greener than the pure yellow sparkling effect they remembered. It was moving at nearly the speed of light according to the sensor data; but on the visual representation they were looking at, it was like a slow, heavy fog rolling ponderously away from them... and towards a darker, even larger object.

At first glance, it looked like a planet; an immense, roughly ovoid object, flattenend at the poles and thicker in the middle, Pale yellowish wisps of colors swirled over various shades of greens and browns, like clouds over land masses and expanses of oceans, eerily looking like some primeval Earth with the colors of a vast puddle of oily mud. There was also a faint, subtle, almost imperceptible movement to it all, as if the cosmic-scaled object was somehow... pulsing... breathing... alive...

And, according to their instruments, it was.

"Sir..."

That was the voice of the science officer, lifting slowly her gaze from her readouts to look in awe at the image on the screen.

"This... this object the... cloud is moving towards... it's... it's about the size of the solar system. It's the densest part of Fluidic Space we have encountered so far and our scanner have a rough time penetrating it at this distance. But like everything else here, it is entirely composed of organic matter. It is so dense that it seems to form an almost separate zone within Fluidic Space, not unlike the Great barrier that surrounds our galaxy. But within that... self-enclosed area, I detect several smaller but planet-sized denser bodies, each seemingly separate yet connected to the others around it. And from each I read an... an outer layer of protein-like material confining billions of similar units of something like... like cytoplasm with amino-acids around a denser core of what appears to be... desoxyrybonucleic acid..."

Palos too blinked at the screen, his voice suddenly faint.

"You mean this... this is..."

Ji'Lian looked at Oseno Jureth with wide eyes.

"Condition: alive."

Complete silence filled the entire bridge. They could only stare at this this object with wonder, knowing that they were looking at something no one had ever seen before: a multicellular organism whose diameter was equivalent to the distance between the sun and it's Oort cloud beyond Pluto.

A living solar system.

"Relaying this to the Horizon, Sir," uttered the man at ops with a distant voice, awestruck as the rest of them.

"Sir... look..."

Lieutenant Kalaar was pointing at the particle cloud looming before the organic colossus it was moving towards. Around it, a swarm great number of sleek, greenish shapes was forming, coming from all directions. The computer had no difficulty extrapolating the data to reconfigure the image into the clear silhouettes of Undine ships converging like a cloud of locusts towards the yellowish energy field.

Before their eyes, the numerous vessels first formed a conical dispersal pattern between the threatening entity and the living star system behind them. The Nicor ships adopted their dreadful star-shaped formation prior to unleashing their massive energy beam; but instead of firing at the cloud, they redirected that massive discharge to the Dromias heavy warships amidst them that had also formed triads with the Vila battleships. These larger bioships in turn directed their amplified cohesive beam to the gigantic Thetys dreadnought in the center of them all.

From the elongated snout of the largest bioship, the overcharged discharge of colossal energies blasted so wide and so intense that the viewer could not compensate the blinding glare that forced everyone on the bridge, even the Vulcans, to close their eyes and turn their heads. They only glimpsed the monstrous beam striking the particle cloud and the colossal bioship glow like a relay about to burn out before the glare painfully struck them even through their closed eyelids.

When they blinked back at the screen, they saw that the cloud of energized particles had swelled still... and in so doing, the reflected energy discharge had but disintegrated the dreadnought, severely damaged the battleship formations nearest to it and scarring the hulls of all the others as if they had all been splashed by acid.

And the thing continued forward.

The telepathic scream of death and despair then came at them like the aftershock of a seismic tremor. This time though, the Aegis mental shield was ready.

Although even Snowfire flinched under the massive mental onslaught, there was only a brief moment of pain before they regained control and cohesion.

During that same moment, the remnants of the fleet flew in apparent disarray. Then, after a short moment, they dispersed. Before the officers on the bridge could wonder what was going on, they spread themselves all around the vast cloud, again pointing their dagger-like prows toward it. This time, however, there was no energy discharges. Like a swarm of angry bees, they suddenly hurled themselves all at the same time at the cloud.

The larger ones, almost as big as Boothby's ship had been, entered the particle field and started to disintegrate like ice cubes thrown into a pool of lava. The cloud expanded and diluted as it dissolved the larger bioships and most of the smaller ones; but many of them managed to penetrate deeper into it, diluting further the massive energy field as it expended itself to devour them. And as they were sacrificing themselves in this astounding charge from all directions, a few of the Nicor cruisers reached the darker, indistinct shape that was looming at the heart of the cloud; a long, massive, dark green shape that was seemingly ten times the size of the largest warship that had been assaulting it.

This time, the death cries were just as numerous as before but more like multiple detonations than just one huge explosion of psionic energies as they had felt before. This time, the mental barrier protecting the Starfleet ships held with but some straining from their weakest members.

Then, the entire neurogenic field became as silent and cold as the night air over a graveyard.

"ETA, five minutes," announced Hunter from the helm.

Some of those bioships that had dared the energy field managed to limp away with their hulls oozing fiery fluids like blood from ugly wounds. But, this time, they had succeeded in their intent. A few of them had made direct impact on the thing inside the thinning cloud of death.

But still, it was not slowing its unswerving journey towards the most central point of this universe; the Heart Of Life.

* * *

It took twenty minutes for the Polaris to reach the periphery of the dramatic battle that was ongoing on the outskirts of the incredible living solar system. Barely a few seconds later, the Horizon swirved from a darker ribbon within the very fabric of Fluidic Space to rejoin with her escort. All the Starfleet people in this alien, organic universe could now stare in awe at the drama unfolding.

Before the titanic entity now known as the Heart of Life, the luminescent cloud of energy particles was slowing and thinning like a fog slowly lifted by the winds. It was still too large and opaque to make out the monstrous shape that loomed at its heart, but a vague, ovoid shape of colossal dimensions was discernible still, with some protrusions at the back vaguely looking like fins and one at the opposite end seemingly pointing forward like the nose of some monstrous and dark raptor swooping down slowly for the final kill.

"Commander," reported science officer Norbert Baoule, "the object at the center of the cloud... it's much, much larger and more massive than the Bootby dreadnought; about ten times our size and a hundred times our mass. But the energy signature is exactly the same. Somehow it looks like Bootby's bioship has... grown... mutated into something else... something resembling a... a planet killer!"

They all had learned about the planet killer during their Starfleet Academy years' mandatory Federation History courses; in the mid-twenty-third century, the legendary starship Enterprise had encountered an intergalactic robotic construct of immense size and power that could destroy entire planets and fuel itself with the remaining rubble. It had cut a path of destruction across several solar systems before being finally stopped by a starship self-destruct within it.

What they were facing now was just as monstrous; but there was one major difference; this one was not a mere automaton. It was alive and it had a mind of its own.

And that mind was that of their missing captain.

"Sirr! The intruderr is taking a firing angle at the central orbiting mass within the starr system!" tactical officer Mrrriish growled.

Science officer Baoule spoke again, more worried by the minute.

"The energy particles of the envelopping cloud are not dispersing, Sir. They are being drained by the solid mass within. They also read as much more charged than our initial readings; the successive attacks against it have build up a critical mass out of them and the object is now... swallowing them within its own core."

"Like a... like a whale devouring tons of krill," whispered Aguk Snow, awestruck as the rest of them.

"I read a massive build up of energy within that... thing in there!" Robert Baoule then shouted. "Sir, it's almost on par with a star about to go nova!"

The intruder was indeed visibly slowing and altering course to align itself with the nucleus of the gargantuan life form that was the Heart of Life. Its slowness however was but an illusion born of the vast scale of the unfolding drama. And that drama was now taking a new turn as the few surviving Undine ships that had escaped destruction from the last assault were colliding with the ominous thing inside the immense, hazy energy field, imbedding themselves literally in it from all angles like arrows in a big tree trunk.

All but one; the scarred, last remaining dreadnought.

"She's coming about," voiced Mrrriish, her wide slitted blue eyes unflinching as the imposing squid-like bioship was moving to point its three-pronged prow at them.

"Her weapon ports are hot," Norbert Baoule added, looking at his sensor readouts.

"We're being identified as a new threat," then specified Doctor Lumquist, understanding it from his own biosensors data and what was seen on the screen. "Whatever strategy they implemented against the intruder, it seems to have succeeded... at least well enough for them to address our presence... as that of a new intruder."

"Confirmed," yeoman Blackbird said from behind Redding's seat. "The Aegis is reporting a hostile telepathic wave assaulting us; but they're holding."

"So that's why I'm starting to have a headache," commented engineer Robert Baoule. "Shields at full, impulse power steady, all reserve power available from our warp core, Sir."

"She's ignoring the Polaris completely," Sisko then observed.

And on board the small starship, similar reports were given to Jureth but with one crucial addition in Snowfire K'Leysha's mind; alien thoughts made all the more powerful by the converging emission of many individuals at the center of the cloud, all thinking the same thing:

"All our sacrifices were not in vain."

"Diversion successful."

"Boarding action completed."

"Implementing final phase of the assault."

"Kill!"

Snowfire suddenly turned to face the command chair.

"Captain, with the energy cloud being swallowed, we have a chance to stop this. I can pull from the Horizon's Circle in this now that they're here, and with what they can bring into this I'm confident that we can stop this before it goes any further."

Already the Circles were gathering strength, drawing links between them so that their Centre would have clear access to the empathic net that had grown into full bloom aboard both ships.

"Get us close enough to that ship and we'll stop it."

A look of deep concentration flickered across her mind.

"Kero, deal with that dreadnought and keep a channel to us open. You've got the full Horizon Circle, use it. Everyone else with me. Double anchor, triple link and me as the spear."

The mental commands flashed out in an eyeblink.

"Get us close Captain. Use the torpedoes to clear the way if we need to and if we get into trouble the Horizon should be able to transfer some of its shield strength to us for long enough for us to hold. And... don't worry about the Undine."

Even as she said that, the first blow of the conflict landed as the Circle aboard the Horizon, their Aegis holding easily considering their sheer numbers, focused their active ability on the Undine dreadnought wheeling to engage it.

Over a hundred minds lashed out as one, and the vessel stopped dead.

The Undine were naturally psionic, and indeed powerfully so. But even with the boosting presence of their ship, they could be stopped. And in this, the Circle aboard the Horizon didn't go for either ship or Undine. They attacked the link between them. It held more advantages than just taking the ship out of the equation though, proof of concept that Snowfire's plan would actually work. And work it did.

"Stop. Fighting."

It was hard to get the point across, but Kerowyn did it even as her consciousness formed the hammer shattering the link between the bioship and its pilot.

"We are not the enemy. We're going to stop the dead ship, just like we just stopped you. We hate the destruction of life as much as you, and we'll give everything to stop it here."

It's been said that lying in telepathic communication is easy, or impossible, or a whole host of other things. In the end, it really depends on the type of telepathy. In this case Kero was sending concepts directly into the Undine's mind, concepts that by nature had no ability to be falsified. Not in this type of communication.

And that would be as obvious to the Undine aboard the ship as would the nova-flare of psionic energy rolling out from the Polaris as the Circle aboard her prepared itself. It was such a strong pulse that even the Horizon's sensors detected the edge of it, and that in itself would tell them exactly what the ship was about to do.

"We don't have the time to stop now, Commander Jureth." Snowfire said softly. "Let us stop this. Before even more innocents die."

Oseno heard the urgency, the plea in Snowfire's voice, for him to do something and he did not hesitate. Standing up from the command chair Jureth gave the order.

"Mister Hunter, all ahead full, take us in."

The Polaris responded under deft guidance from Shawn Hunter and swooped toward the entity skirting the edge of the cloud.

"Mister Kalaar, Baryon torpedoes, fire!"

The modified torpedoes streaked out from the Polaris and began emitting their radiation penetrating the field surrounding the entity as the Polaris followed behind them.

"Shields up," Oseno ordered as the little escort moved into the cloud, "Mister Solius monitor our status, and if you feel it necessary engage the modified deflector, I don't care if we blow it out as long as we don't blow up. Commander K'Leysa, do what you need to do."

The engineer nodded, not looking back towards the Captain.

"Aye, Sir. Torpedoes are working as intended. Each torpedo creates a corridor that we can sail through, but they are filling up with cloud cover almost as fast as we can create them. Shields taking minor damage...nothing serious at this time. Diverting power to impulse."

And as the ship dived into the thinning cloud, a message pushed back along the connection between the Horizon's Circle and the Undine, coming from far more than simply the dreadnoughts pilot. The mind of the Illythirii science officer and of every other being linked to her perceived the telepathic shout answering their own call.

"The weak shall perish! We shall not perish! We will be strong! We will survive!"

There was an powerful emotional onslaught along with the numerous thoughts all speaking as one; anger, fear, despair, resolve... but, amidst this swirling of confusing thoughts and feelings emerged something never before known in the Undine, something that their very nature had never allowed to bloom before.

Unity.

All the jumbled mass of emotions and thoughts was shared by every single Undine, not only at the scene of the unfolding drama but everywhere else accross their entire universe. For the very first time in their entire existence as a sentient species, all of them were united in thought, sharing one single purpose: survive... together.

All but the silent monstrous entity that was still moving closer to it's target.

The dreadnought was closing in on the Horizon still, weapon ports glowing; but for the moment, it's deadly intent was thwarted as the one on board pondered on the strange, alien thoughts that had come from both the large ship and the smaller one now braving the energy cloud. How long it would remain there was impossible to tell...

Meanwhile, the Polaris closed in on the object through the thinning cloud of particles and, on the bridge, all could finally see it clearly.

It was sea green, with a most peculiar blueish tinge to it. It was also many kilometers long, indeed shaped like the whale referred to by the Horizon's helmsman but for the multi-finned tail and the elongated four-pronged snout at the other end that looked like the beak of a raptor bird. Between the four jaws of this maw, capable of swallowing whole a starship even bigger than the Horizon, a sinister yellowish glow was growing.

But that was not what made Lieutenant Ji'lian's voice rise with urgency.

"Sir, from this distance, I can now have full sensor readings on the... intruder. Bio-signature confirms that it *is* Boothby's ship... but the mutagens in its genetic make up somehow have been activated and transformed it into this... giant planet-killer. I read also several lifesigns aboard; at the bow I read some undefined biosigns closely merged with those of the living vessel... but from the stern and up to amidship, I detect several Nicor class cruisers imbedded in the hull... and at least half a dozen Undine lifesigns, moving towards the bow. I register damage to the internal structure behind their path as they progress."

"They're trying to kill it from the inside..." Jureth said slowly "Is there anything we can do to slow them down? We need to buy Commander K'Leysa and her people time."

"We have them, Commander. Just keep us safe."

These were Snowfire's last words before she closed her eyes to merge into the thought stream of her Circle. For a brief moment she surveyed the situation, her resources, for if there were to be any last minute alterations to the plan they would have to happen now. But this was a down to the wire run if she'd ever been in one. Everything came down to what she did in the next minute, how much she could do with the power pouring into her mind. Sixteen people. Nine Anchors. Six Links. And her as the Centre, the direction behind the Circle's actions. Best combat capable psi in the quadrant, she'd said. Time to earn those words.

There was no subtlety to this plan, no intrigue or complicated bait and switches, or anything complex. It was, at base, power against power, with a deep reliance on her own experience to react faster and more effectively than the ship she was about to attack. But she could do it. The Circle aboard the Horizon might be larger, and their target smaller, but size wasn't everything. And the Circle with her were the best of all her pupils. And with the empathic net of both ships behind them, they would be far from alone.

All those thoughts flickered across her mind in the instants required for the plan to form as more than the concept. Her consciousness wrapped itself inside layers of power drawn through the Circle from the nets, applying the concentration of psi potential and turning it into something real. Kero had been a hammer, and that had served her well. But this required a finer touch. And as the Circle dove forward towards the ship, it was in seeming of a spear. A spear that would pierce anything by the hands of those who were it, and it struck for the heart of the link between ship and mind connected to it. If they could see nothing else, the Undine *would* see this, and the psionic shockwave loosed by its impact would paralyze the minds closest to it beneath waves of neural concussion.

The first Undine to be affected by this wave of psionic energy, the one aboard the inbound dreadnought, reeled and staggered under its weight. Undines had no frame of reference for minds outside their own that could speak with such strength, and so affected, they became confused and temporarily lost even to one another. But the Undine boarders on the planet killer only paused as if they had heard whispers around corners, for something about the great ship shielded them from the blunt of the attack. Perhaps it was the entity controlling the ship, they could not say; and if so, was it simply reacting in self defense and they along with it? only time might tell. For now, the throng of Undine invaders continued their trek towards the brain of the immense vessel.

Sisko checked over the sensors reading.

"The dreadnought is listing, Commander; life signs are normal but their not... doing anything."

Redding squinted at the screen.

"What about the planet killer?"

"No change; her metaweapon is still building up to fire at the heart Of Life... and the Undines on board are still on the move." Norbert Baoule reported after a seconds check.

Redding stood up and joined him.

"Can we beam a party into the planet killer? get a head of them? we need to reach the captain first."

"I don't think so, Commander." the black-skinned scientist said as he brought up a quick display. "They entered through a breach they managed to punch with their own cruisers'bows near the aft section. It's the only safe place to enter the ship, with all that energy flowing around it, but even there a beam in would be a death sentence. The annular confinement beam would be scattered... and every atom within it."

Redding voice went grim.

"What if we were to get some transporter enhancers to the beam-in point?"

"Well.. yes, Sir, I suppose that would do it. But how.."

Redding immediately turned and walked to the turbolift.

"You have the bridge, Mister Sisko. Keep an eye on that dreadnought."

As the doors closed on him, Redding pulled a small device out of his hip pouch and started putting it together.

"Transporter room 6," he said to the Lift and it sped on its way. Then he tapped his combadge. "Redding to Major McGregor; is Delta team in position?"

This particular configuration of the MACO unit was so called because of its chosen members having actual training against the Undine when this mission had been laid out right from the start. Proper diplomacy always implied preparedness for it,s own catastrophic failure... as they seemed to have experienced for some time now.

"Aye, Commander Redding; twelve of my best people are standing by in transporter room 6, as instructed." He almost sounded excited to be called into action. "I do be hoping you have a need of us this time, Sir."

"I'm afraid I do, Major. I'll be there shortly; Redding out."

He finished setting up the device and slipped his memory chip into it.

"Bridge, patch me through to Oseno aboard the Polaris."

"Go ahead, Commander."

"Jureth, we're preparing to board the the planet killer with Delta squad. I want you to keep your eyes peeled for a transporter signal from Captain Kheren's ship. At least I hope that's him in there..."

The door opened and he quick timed it down the hallway.

"Delta will hold back the Undine assault force as long as they can to buy you and Snowfire time to reach the Captain... but I need to know from you; if the Captain can't be reasoned with... can you do what needs to be done?"

There was no need to explain what he meant.

Aboard the Polaris Oseno was outfitting himself along with T'Lana, and the intelligence specialist Variel Palos in addition to Sergeant Major Pierce and his Marines. Lieutenant Somers and her five-person team of Marines special ops were also getting ready with cold, swift, silent efficiency.

Alex had been the last one to see the Captain alive... and the one who most deeply felt the responsibility of losing him. She had been there to provide security, especially to safeguard the captain... and she had failed. Now that there was a chance to atone for her life's first and greatest failure, she would not miss it. She would even have disobeyed orders or resign her commission if it had been necessary to seize that chance. Fortunately for her career, her current commanding officer understood all too well that her place was there, with the rescue team.

T'Lana for her part was a trained security officer just like Oseno and Palos, Jureth knew, had seen plenty of combat action based on the amount of classified information in his personnel file. Commander Redding's grim question didn't phase the Bajoran though. Perhaps it might have in the past, but his experiences during Operation Horizon and during the maiden voyage of the starship Horizon had hardened him and made him realize that such decisions were part of the job they had all accepted.

"Commander, I've already informed my crew that we will not sacrifice a race of intelligent beings to save one man. The captain would expect no less."

"We are all of one mind here," Redding answered.

Redding entered transporter room 6 to find the large area filled with troops and gear, all waiting near one of the four twenty-two-man transporters used for large scale transports. "Ah... Commander Redding Sir; it seems we have a wee bit of a problem with the landing zone," McGregor announced with an annoyed look on his face.

"I'm aware of the problem, Major. I'll handle it," the large man answered as he walked up to their medic. "Give me eighteen milliliters of cordrazine," he ordered as he removed his uniform top in preparation to putting on a pressure suit.

The medic looked at him and then at the Major.

"You heard the Captain," McGregor grumbled hesitantly. "I didn't figure you'd be the type to juice up before a fight... Sir," he then said to Redding, not really thinking what he was saying.

"I'm going to place the enhancement beacons aboard the planet killer, Major. I'm hoping the cordrazine will keep me alive long enough to finish the job," He said it bluntly in a 'not to be argued with' way.

"Commander..." McGregor paused to think about it and then straightened up. "I'll do it, Sir. The Captain belongs on the bridge. If I might be so bold, you don't have the right..."

"Major, I appreciate that, but point of fact is that I'm the best person for this job. Not that I love the work..."

He tried to give his half smile, but it wasn't very convincing. He looked straight into the big Scotsman's eyes.

"And your right, the Captain belongs in the bridge. I'm going to make sure he gets back to it."

With that, he strapped a frame pack holding four transporter enhancers over his shoulder and picked up two more of the one meter tubular devices, one in both hands.

"Besides, I'm sure we'll meet again, Major. And we'll have a drink and talk about it."

He placed an odd visor over his face and activated the device on his hip. Although only ten seconds passed, it seemed like for long minutes he stood there, as every eye in the room was on him. Not a sound was made.

"And now, I won't forget it," he said, handing the device to a near by Ensign. "Make sure that gets to... whoever... is captain after I'm gone."

And then, he stood on the transporter platform. The Medic came up and injected the cordrazine into him and backed up. Redding face twisted slightly and his right hand shook slightly almost immediately.

"En..Energize.." He forced out... and was gone.

A minute passed before anyone made a sound.

"Did he make it through at all, Ensign?" McGregor said to the transporter officer.

"There... there was a seventeen percent degradation in the signal pattern, Sir... It's possible... I mean, some people have lived through worse... for a little while anyway."

He looked on the verge of being sick.

The transporter panel beeped making its operator jump.

"I'm picking up a signal, Sir. No... its a second signal. The first was too weak to pick up until now."

He worked the controls.

"We have a clear signal now, Sir... at your discretion."

McGregor almost jumped from where he stood right onto the overlarge transporter pad.

"Wait until were over there then tell the Polaris they can start beaming over."

His men clambered onto the platform.

"Energize," he ordered with a nod.

Aboard the Planet killer, a figure barely resembling a man dragged itself against a wall of the room. He didn't know why he did it really, and it did hurt... a lot. He just felt like he needed to get out of the way for... something...

When the suited figures started beaming in, he remembered why... and what might have been a crooked smile came to his face...

Then, he was gone.

As McGregor started putting his troops into position, the medic discovered Redding's body. He could barely look at it, but managed to run his medical tricorder over it anyway. To no one's surprise, it showed no life signs.

He turned it off and covered the body with an emergency blanket.

Major McGregor then, after a few seconds, spoke with a loud, dry, authoritative voice.

"Okay, this is as close to a choke point as were going to get. Latest intel shows them reaching this point in approximately three minutes! So get into position, move it!"

McGregor's voice pushed his men out of the daze they had been about to freeze in. The time for feeling bad about it would come later.

The sound of a transporter again filled the room. The other MACO team, the one from the Polaris, had arrived.

Jureth scanned the room as they materialized and picked out Major MacGregor immediately.

"Status, Mac?"

"A sorry state, Sir," the Marine replied indicating the body in the corner.

"The Commander?"

"I'm afraid so, Sir," the Marine said solemnly.

"What happened?"

We couldna beam in wi'out enhancers, Sir... He... placed them himself."

Guarding the perimeter, Somers team was already in position to take point, all looking even more grim when they heard the tragic news.

"We lost comm with the outside," then reported Palos, his face a mask of marble, not even glancing once at the covered body. "They will be able to follow us on their sensors only."

"I still have a mindlink with Lieutenant-Commander K'Leysha on board," corrected T'Lana. "But that also means that the Undines will be aware of us the moment we use it."

With a poise that only a Vulcan could show in such circumstances, T'Lana then showed her tricorder to her commanding officer.

"Eight Undine boarders, Sir... moving fast towards the bow. It looks like only the sphincter-like doors dividing this bioship's compartment are slowing them down; that and some kind of bio-agent in the air. I read twelve bodies lying on their trail. It's dissipating before us as we speak through some kind of breathing ventilation system that is bringing the interior of the vessel to standard levels of life support. Calculating the rate of their progression under those circumstances, at least three of them should reach the command center in five point three minutes. We can overtake them in four point seven minutes... if we move now."

Oseno bowed his head briefly and then looked up with resolve showing in his eyes.

"See that he gets back to the Horizon. Pierce and I are headed for the bridge."

"Aye, Sir."

"Request permission to join you, Sir," Somers then said with a resolve in her eyes that was a match to that of the Bajoran.

Oseno circled one finger in the air, and then took the point holding his tricorder out to guide them through the corridors toward the heart of the Undine vessel. They hadn't gone more than fifty yards when Oseno halted the group with a hand gesture and then closed his tricorder and raised his phaser rifle indicating "indicating enemy seen."

"Four lifeforms, just ahead." he whispered.

Indeed at that moment the four Undines emerged from a cross-corridor. Before they could identify the Starfleet boarding party, Oseno had fired his first shots with Pierce, Somers and Palos joining in. The Undines were down before they could react and Jureth extracted his tricorder once again.

"Let's move."

The monstrous living vessel was several kilometers long but they were easily moving at a fast pace in the smooth, round walled corridors large enough to accomodate much larger and wider Undine bodies.

The lighting was dim but they could still see well enough to move at a rapid pace; and if the air was a bit stale, smelling of something acrid and salty, it was not impending their measured breathing as they moved swiftly through openings visibly torn apart with savage strength.

After barely a couple of minutes, not even halfway through their journey towards the other end of the colossal bioship, they found the first bodies.

Three Undines were lying on the floor, their bodies contorted into grotesque postures, limbs twisted and whitened, faces livid and stretched in pain, eyes a mass of bloody pulp. The vague smell in the air was most perceptible coming out of the cadavers.

"I know what this is... this is Andorian Flu!" said Somers with a new light in her eyes. "I saw something like this once in a Gorn prison camp; one of their prisoners had been an Andorian struck down with the disease... and many of the guards had died looking just like this. It's severely debilitating to Ghelroid, Insectoid and Mammalian types of lifeforms... but potentially deadly to any other."

She looked at Oseno with uncharacteristically blinking eyes.

"I can imagine a bioship using some biochemical defense measures against intruders... but this? Sir, this would mean..."

She didn't finish her thought. But it was easy to guess.

"The Captain.." Oseno finished for her "Only one way to go..."

He pointed forward and they moved out again keeping their quick pace, even increasing their pace if that was possible and all the while Jureth was hoping the Marines behind them were going to hold off the enemy boarding party so that they didn't get ambushed from behind. They passed more Undine bodies as they drew closer to the bridge, or at least what passed for a bridge, and nearing the ending point of their trek they came upon a scene that Oseno hadn't been prepared for. There was a group of several Undine trying to get through an aperture but they seemed to be unable to do so. The Bajoran brought his team to a halt unsure of what to do, as the Undines didn't seem to notice the Federation team or if they did they didn't care. "Somers," he hissed barely above a whisper "I'm inclined to open fire, but I'm open to opinions."

In response, she showed him a small disc she had in one pocket of her combat suit. It was a portable transporter device, capable of transporting once one individual to about ten thousand kilometers to preset coordinates. It had a molecular bonding surface so that it would instantly stick on the body upon contact and at that moment activate itself. With her fingers, she changed the numbers from those of the Polaris to a higher elevation point from their point of arrival; outside of the planet killer's hull. While she was doing this, she had tapped a short coded signal and her team came to join them silently seconds later. She took similar devices from each one of them and made the same adjustments. Now, she had six of those small discs, as many as the Undines still trying to tear the door apart.

She offered one to Oseno.

"How good is your throwing arm, Sir?" she finally whispered.

Then, she gave the others back to her teammates who readied themselves. Nodding to Palos and Pierce, she made sure her phaser rifle was at maximum setting and aimed at the unsuspecting Undines to offer cover fire in case things went wrong. Both men looked at their commanding officer for his order.

"On my mark..." Oseno said quietly "Now!"

The transporter discs hurtled through the air and as they made contact the transporter beams energized and the Undines disappeared leaving only the aperture in front of them.

Oseno approached it and scanned it briefly with his tricorder which only showed it to be just like every other Undine aperture they had encountered and beyond it the heart of the massive vessel with at least one lifeform present though the tricorder seemed to be having trouble all of a sudden penetrating the ship's hull.

"Undines being able to withstand being spaced for some time, and here being their own organic universe, they should be fine... but it will take them a long time to find a way back aboard," commented Somers in a cold voice.

"Never thought a Marine could be this... diplomatic," Palos retorted with a grin.

"Just following the captain's orders," shot back the red-haired woman. "We're Marines, yes... but we are Starfleet first."

"Okay, now...how do we get in?" Jureth asked the general group.

"Chief..." said Somers and Chief Warrant officer Chris Kildare answered her summon. From a backpack that seemed to have almost grown out of his own body, the man extracted a peculiar egg-shaped object with studs all over and a flat contact surface on both ends. He showed the grenade to both officers.

"Concentrated biochemical acid with a molecular decay detonator," the demolition specialist explained. "According to our preparation research, this bioship should react to it like you would a bee sting."

The look Palos and Pierce gave him brought a small tight smile to Alex' face.

"It pays to be prepared."

On a nod from their leader, Kildare went to the door and stuck one end of the device right in the middle of the door. He was barely adjusting the mechanism when it suddenly fell and he caught it with the lightning fast reflexes of someone intimately familiar with explosives.

The door had opened.

All their weapons rose like one to cover the back-rolling Marine at the entrance. Then a voice came from beyond the opened doorway.

"Come... It is over."

* * *

For long seconds, everything seemed to accelerate. The energy build up in the bow of the planet killer, its movement towards the living solar system, the attack run of the dreadnought, the destructive advance of the Undines that had boarded the intruder... then, everything stopped.

It was like a moment of eternity, flashing in all their minds between two heartbeats until the end of the universe.

A void suddenly was felt from all the minds connected during this instant, like something emerging from the depth or moving out far away in the darkness; something that had been there but shouldn't have been... something that now was gone. Something...or...

Someone.

And then, a new consciousness manifested itself in all the minds on board the planet killer, in the conflict area and all across Fluidic Space. A new consciousness, yet instantly known to all... and a thought.

"It is over. All is well. The weak has perished."

On board the intruder ship, on the dreadnought, in the entire area and all across Fluidic Space, everyone recognized the mind thus made known. And on board the two Starfleet ships, everyone recognized the craggy, unsmiling yet serene face that appeared on their viewing screen.

Boothby.

Or rather, the Undine having taken the likeness of the legendary gardener of Starfleet Academy. He was standing in the forward central control room of his bioship. Behind him, there was a strange ovoid pod-like thing broken open like a hatched egg, still oozing some dark green liquid from its edges. On the wall to its right, an sphincter-like aperture also was ripped open, several tall silhouettes of three-legged, grey-skinned Undines standing in the broken down doorway with large eyes blinking in confusion.

"Federation people," then said the Boothby-creature with a firm voice, "stand down. There will be no more violence, no more fear, no more suffering, no more painful deaths here... or ever. It is done."

And what he stated was also perceived by all the sensitive minds throughout his ship, throughout the battle zone, throughout the entire immensity of Fluidic Space.

Aboard the Horizon, Joey Sisko in the command chair wasn't wavering just yet.

"Doctor, open a channel."

"You're on, Sir."

This is Commander Joey D. Sisko in temporary command of the USS Horizon from the United Federation of Planets. I will ask this once; where is Captain Kheren?"

"The exact same question was voiced at the exact same moment from behind the altered Undine. From the doorway behind him stood the Bajoran commanding officer of the Polaris.

The Boothby impersonator turned a small smile to him as he entered with his team in a very well coordinated and efficient covering deployment that would leave him a pile of cinders if he even twitched the wrong way. The old man's head nodded appreciatively to them and back to the viewer where Sisko stood before the command chair of the Horizon as if he was himself about to jump through the screen at the slightest excuse.

"Excellent... You Starfleet people are exactly what I hoped for... what we needed... to be strong... and survive."

His cryptic words were only met by phaser rifles powered up noisily. Boothby sighed and laughed at the same time but the joy quickly froze on his elderly features as one hand went to something that was lying below the viewing screen

From his vantage point, the half-Bajoran on the Starfleet ship could not see it. In the command center of the planet-killer however, everyone could stare at the two meters ovoid shape encased in the wall. It looked like some giant seedpod with fine tendrils sprouting out from it to imbed themselves in the wall, green as the skin-textured bulkhead itself and slightly luminous.

And in the light they could make out a form. It was in a foetal position, darker than the pod itself.

It was an Undine. But instead of the usual dull grey-green color, it was dark grey with a definite blue tinge to it.

And it was neither moving nor breathing.

"Your captain is a ... very peculiar creature," Boothby then said in his gravelly voice. "We didn't know his kind had an osmotic circulatory system and was so... susceptible to biochemical inoculations; you Starfleet people are so different from one another, it boggles the mind. The effect of our altering compound was really astonishingly fast on his physiology... and we didn't know until now that he was a genetic mutant... and completely braindead to psionics. The final result was beyond my... expectations."

"What have you done to him?"

The voice of Alexandria Somers was so cold and hard it sounded like the phaser blast she was barely restraining herself to fire at the polymorphed being. Boothby didn't seem to mind but cocked an eyebrow at her.

"You were there, if I recall correctly. I had been mortally injured by the attack of those who did not share my... vision. I needed someone to take my place; to take control of my ship and finish what I had started."

"To do what?" asked Sisko from across the screen.

The transformed Undine sighed and looked at each of them in turn as he spoke with a grave tone.

"Save my people."

He paused a moment then looked more pointedly at Sisko and Oseno while he explained.

"As I told your captain, we are a race of individuals, a chaotic, egotistical, almost solloptic species. In our own universe, we are alone; but now that we are connected to yours, we are facing what we perceive as an incomprehensible challenge to our very being and an insurmountable threat to our very existence; that, not only of other sentient species, but societal species, species that band together for a common goal, be it conquest.. or survival. Against that, we were powerless... weak... doomed to perish."

Somers slightly lowered her weapon as understanding suddenly dawned on her.

"You wanted to unify your kind... with a common threat."

Boothby turned to smile at her.

"Another of your fearsome traits, you Starfleet people, one that you share with the Borg; you understand and adapt quickly. You are exactly right. Simplistic approach, I agree, but we *are* a very simple race. The trick was to... bring to my people the same thought, the same feeling, the same conviction by focusing their attention, their emotions and their thoughts on one single thing that would show them that unity and cooperation were the best way to be strong... and survive. I and a few others, those that had worked with me before on the Starfleet infiltration project, understood all this... but many more among us did not, even after facing the Borg threat... and yours."

"And fear is the strongest emotion of all. So you wanted us to play the bad guy for you," Sisko understood.

"Yes; that's why I was dismayed, no, disappointed, that your Starfleet had sent just one ship to meet us; I was expecting at least a task force, considering the threat we ourselves were to you. Again, I misjudged your versatility, your resourcefulness and your unpredictability... but most of all, that you would genuinely pursue a mission of peace even when you should have expected treachery."

Boothby laughed and shook his head like someone realizing he had become the victim of his own joke.

"I knew my... opposition would track me down. I wanted to persuade you to accompany me here, at the very center of our universe, where our species was born, for that Peace Talk. At best, your intrusion would have forced those others to meet you and maybe your celebrated diplomatic skills and experience with other species would have convinced them; at worst, your... invasion of our space would have triggered the need to unify ourselves against your... threat. One way or the other, my people would have united, would have become stronger from that unity and would have been able to survive any future threat, real threats that would one day possibly, probably, befall us."

"But... you were... killed," said Somers with blinking eyes.

"Yes; but because it happened on my ship, I did not cease to exist. Our ships are more than just a tool as yours are; they are also our individual birthplaces; our "mothers" you could say in terms of that strange biology of yours. So when I was "killed" here, my genetic make-up was reabsorbed by the bio matrix around me and I was... rejuvenated; and our psionic link was never broken, therefore keeping alive my entire psyche. And so, here I am... again."

"Then why did you..."

"Abduct your Captain?" interrupted Boothby before Somers could finish her question. "There was little time as my opponents were threatening you, me and all I hoped to accomplish... and this rejuvenation takes some time, time I could not afford to lose... nor lose all of you. So I injected the nearest person among you with our genetic-altering compound so that this individual could become one of us and so take control of my ship, learn of my plan through the biomind connection with it and either go with my plan or provoke the same incident that could trigger in my people the change I hoped for."

"But you did not anticipate that it would be Captain Kheren," Sisko then said.

"No; even less what he was and how it would change things so much. His physiology reacted so strongly to the injection that his new body went into shock; and his complete deadness to psionics made the telepathic link with him almost impossible except at a very primal level of consciousness, similar to that of my vessel itself. Their minds somehow mingled but with neither one in complete control nor truly conscious, but nevertheless driven by similar instincts; survive... protect their people... and get back home. On top of that, the mutation of your Andorian captain flared up with the change and pushed my dreadnought, the oldest and largest of our kind, into it's next, final stage; that which you now call planet-killer."

As he talked, the Human-shaped Undine walked to the pod where laid the body of the Undine-shaped Kheren.

"As it so happened, this turned my own ship into the very major threat I initially wanted you to be. A much more serious threat than I would have ever dared to risk... but hey, it worked!"

On the bridge of the Horizon, Both Baoule brothers, Mrrriish, Lumquist and Snow were visibly startled. This was one of their captain's typical epithets!

Boothby laughed at their reaction.

"He does rub on you, doesn't he? Unfortunately even as my own being was reemerging, I could not really communicate with his mind and stop all this before it was too late. Most disturbing... but fortunately, you people were there. In the end, as I hoped, you all came out for us... you and him."

On the *Polaris*, Boothby's message was being relayed from the *Horizon* as audio only. Lieutenant Solius had remained behind to monitor the ship. He breathed a sigh of relief as the ship stood down from Red Alert, although because of the environment, their shields were required to remain online.

Sitting in the Captain's Chair, he looked around the bridge to see sighs of relief, nodding of heads and even some of the female members shedding tears.

Strange things these Federation people were. All different, and yet, so similar to one another. As much as they'd refuse to admit it, being the 'diverse individuals' that they were, the ultimate resolution of this mission had been plain to see for the Romulan as soon as the Captain had vanished. They all knew that they had to recover the Captain...or his corpse, and return home. No matter what officer was in charge, the orders would have remained the same.

Except for *his* orders. Had he been in command, he would have ignored the dreadnought and destroyed the Heart of Life, ending the Undine threat once and for all. He would have used the Undine's confusion to his advantage and secure territorial and military power. That had always been the Romulan way.

A way that now laid down in an empire that had destroyed itself.

He steepled his fingers and nodded. After a moment, he tapped the console at his chair and deleted the combat overrides he had put in place for a worst-case scenario. He smiled, as he felt... relieved that he did not have to betray his crewmates.

It was at this point when S'Tan decided that in order for this assimilation to work, and he survive, he too needed to join this crew fully. To be a part of these 'infinite diversity in infinite combination' philosophy that was at the heart of this United Federation of Planets. It was time for him to put away his Honor Blade, still hanging at his waist. It was time to eat chocolate and drink brown human ale. It was time... to move on.

He clapped his hands once to gather everyone's attention.

"OK people. Mission mostly accomplished. Open a channel to the *Horizon*. It's time to go home."

Standing up, he continued. "*Horizon*, this is the *Polaris*. Are you ready to receive us into our dock?"

When the voice of S'Tan Solius came out through the bridge speakers, it calmed down the elation that had gripped the entire crew of the flagship. Docotr Lumquist who was the only one still frowning acknowledged the call and brought Sisko's attention to it.

"*Polaris*, this is *Horizon*; prepare for reconnection. We will retrieve the away team... and the Captain. Well done *Polaris*."

As people swiftly and efficiently brought their attention and enthusiasm to their tasks, the Half-Bajoran noticed that Lumquist was in deep conversation with the chief medical officers in sickbay. By the tone of their voices and the rythm of their words, it was clear that they were not as relieved as everyone else was.

"Something wrong, Doctor?"

"That is the worst part; we don't know yet," the elderly man said with a sour expression on his lightly bearded face. "You saw that Captain Kheren is still in Undine form. Assuming this... Boothby clone gives us their genetic altering drug, we might find ourselves with a major problem fully retrieving the captain."

Now Sisko too was showing concern on his face, the same concern that had stretched his features taut when he had learned of Redding's death.

"I thought the Undine serum was designed to alter the subject down to the genetic level. It can even turn an Undine fully into human form, even down to feelings and emotions."

"Yes... and that is where our worry begins. For starters, the genetic make-up of Andorians is much more complex and consequently much more fragile than that of Humans. They are a, as yet unexplained, natural combination of mammalian and insectoid genomes. That's why you never see Andorian half-breeds except the only two ever recorded in History; Lieutenant Twebald and Commander Barile N'Arti, both the results of almost impossible, illegal and extreme genetic manipulations. That's also one of the reasons, along with their astoundingly complex reproduction mechanism, amazingly short fertility period and highly lethal cultural behavior, why the species is becoming extinct. There are less than ninety millions of them in all of known space today."

"What about Lieutenant-Commander Ke'Leysha's lecture about her people's biology?"

"With all due respect to my esteemed science colleague, this is highly doubtful.. even to the point of being pure fantasy in my personal opinion. The genetic structure of the Illythirii is even less compatible to the Andorian genome than the Human one; which is not at all compatible. The Illythirii are not even shapechangers, the only kind of species with enough plasticity to make such a remote possibility theoretically viable; and if shapechangers can certainly mimic Andorian physiology, they can no more mate with them and produce offspring than any other... especially if you add to this problem their unique four-genders reproduction mechanism."

Sisko thought for a moment. Then he shook his head.

"And what has this to do with Captain Kheren and his current condition?"

The old doctor sighed.

"Everything. I can't go into confidential medical data, but let me say this; restoring Captain Kheren is as complicated and risky compared to any Andorian than it would be with an Andorian relative to a Human. And there are very few doctors even knowledgeable about Andorian physiology, let alone his... And to make things worse, Captain Kheren has been ostracized by his own people; no Andorian doctor will consider doing it for him. "

The silent and coldness that gripped the bridge was as if the entire ship had turned into a tomb drifting forever in space.

"Your prognosis?" bluntly asked Sisko. Lumquist answered just as bluntly.

He blinked straight at Sisko.

"He might never be restored; he could be stuck as an Undine, and a mute one at that, without even telepathic communication, for the rest of his life. He might be physiologically altered; he would then be crippled for life. He might be mentally affected; anything up to and including ending up in a vegetative state. And he might simply die. There is no way to know... until we try."

And as the grim news was uttered, they all looked on the viewer of the Lotus Fleet flagship at the Undine appearing as the gardener Boothby. He turned to face Oseno Jureth.

His hand opened a compartment in a console-looking protrusion of the floor from which he took out a three-pronged syringe looking tube with some blueish liquid sloshing in it and offered it to the Bajoran.

"Take your captain with you... with this... and most of all, our gratitude. You made us strong... and more of us, *many* more of us... your friends."

CHAPTER 8 : ALL GOOD THINGS

Captain's Log

Stardate: 88273.3

Commander Joey D. Sisko reporting

Repairs and resupply are completed on the Horizon following our return from Fluidic Space. In combination with our transwarp drive, the artificial opening between the two universes that we implemented brought us safely back at the edge of the rimward border of the Hromi sector. Our sudden appearance before the long range sensors of the Imperial Surveillance Outposts, when were believed to be at well over two months away at transwarp velocities, is bound to make the Klingons puzzled, nervous and edgy for some time... the only way to make Klingons stay their typical aggressiveness. Hopefully, the incident will occupy their minds with trying to figure out what is this new popping out propulsion system of ours, 'threatening' their territorial sovereignty.

We have not heard anything from the Undines since then. No news is good news so say the old Human axiom; may it be true here.

The Board of Inquiry regarding what is now called "The Horizon Incident" found all involved Starfleet personnel absolved of any responsibility regarding the Prime Directive. As stated by Admiral Neil S. Redding who presided the inquiry: "all had been sent under orders into an unforeseen situation and all acted properly to follow those orders and correct any interference as best as could be expected under the circumstances."

Most of all, Captain Kheren was recognized as an unwilling victim of circumstances and also absolved despite the central part he played in the changes that now affect the Undines. Moreover, the actions he undertook to protect his ship and crew before he completely lost himself in the symbiosis with the bioship were commended... and any and all accusations of him being an infiltrator agent from Fluidic Space definitely put to rest.

Ship and crew, and her commanding officer, are expected to return to active duty in the next week or so.

Captain's log

Supplemental:

The portable memory core of Commander Redding is locked away in the Captain's private quarters, as per the commander's last wishes. The meaning of this device being classified by Starfleet Intelligence, it has been put there as per instructions found in the Commander's personal log and on testimony of the Ensign who received it from him. All answers to inquiries about it's meaning have been denied.

Whatever this all means, let's hope that this all for the better. Commander Redding's actions and final sacrifice have been put up for the highest postumous commendation.

Commendations have also been put up for Commander Oseno Jureth and a promotion for both Lieutenant Junior Grade and Chief Engineer S'Tan Solius and Lieutenant-Commander and Chief Science Officer Snowfire Ke'Leysha after their exemplary actions during this mission.

The Half-Bajoran barely closed the log that the ready room chime rang.

"Enter."

The sliding doors admitted yeoman Blackbird with a PADD she offered him along with a small smile.

"Status report from Lieutenant Leône on ship provisioning and from Lieutenant Somers on tactical systems," she summarized as he took it to glance at the scrolling details. "Ship is again ready and able to serve, Sir."

Sisko nodded.

"Has Lieutenant Somers and her team left already?" he then asked her.

"Aye, Commander. They have already been reassigned to the USS McKenzie patrolling the Klingon border. With all the worries we stirred up in the Empire recently, Fleet Captain Samji believes they will be more needed there."

Again he nodded. The tall red-haired Marine leader had come to him to personally announce the transfer, her face a blank, professional mask. In her stance, he had noted the pride she felt at having served well on board the Horizon in a successful operation, even if it had been under the hardest restrictions ever; the harsh life-respecting rules of Captain Kheren. In her voice, he had heard the tinge of regret at being parted so soon from a ship and crew she had already started to appreciate. But in her eyes, he had seen the shadow of self doubt and disappointment; having let her commanding officer being abducted while under her direct personal protection was in her heart a failure she would carry for a long time. Sisko knew that Lotus Fleet Command had put a commendation on her Starfleet record for her crucial part in retrieving the captain; but he also knew that she would brush it aside and blame herself for some time still.

His mind came back to his eyes as he noted the Amerind yeoman still standing before the desk.

"Anything else, Mira?"

"Sir... any news about the captain?"

The worry in her features was as plain to see as it was heard in her soft voice.

There was none in the face of the acting commanding officer of the Horizon. But there was tension in his voice nevertheless.

"It's been a month since we brought him back in stasis and Doctor Nasaro-Myth started to treat him. Last report is that he's undergoing final stage of rest and recuperation and should be back on duty by the time we launch."

"Back in command of the Horizon?"

"The board of inquiry was quite brief; Admiral Redding presides a tight court; and he grilled Captain Kheren so hard and relentlessly that I thought that he was going to relapse and turn Undine again... as the Admiral pointedly expected him to. But our captain is made of the same old tough stuff as the Admiral himself and stood calm like an oak in a storm until it passed and left him clean and whole. It was like watching for real the age-old thing of the irresistible force meeting the immovable object; none prevailed and both remained as they were. But I felt that there was some powerful mutual respect lighting up from their friction..."

Sisko stopped talking as his mind began to wander back to the investigation session that had looked hard into the events that had put the Andorian commanding officer in the delicate position of having possibly interfered with the natural course of an entire species.

In the end, it had been made clear that whatever he had done was out of his own volition and the little done that could possibly be attributed to him had been to act in the interest of galactic peace and save his ship and crew from harm; the exemplary duty expected from any good Starfleet starship commander.

Even the alleged suspicions of him being an Undine infiltrator agent were finally laid to rest, as the extensive genetic treatment he went through ascertained scientifically and unequivocally his pure Andorian nature.

Yeoman Blackbird was still worrying.

"Sir, should he be back so soon?"

"Doctor Nasaro-Myth said 'the sooner he gets back to work, the sooner and better he will fully heal; that's how it works with those crazy Andorians.' And Counselor Lyrya said much or less the same thing as far as mental health was concerned... without the crazy part of course."

""Is she alright too? And Tyvya?"

This time, Joey Day Sisko could not refrain from smiling.

"Once Doctor Nasaro-Myth succeeded in restoring the captain to his real genetic make-up, they both emerged from their coma at the same time... and rather abruptly I was told. Lyrya knocked out cold the orderly near her with a swipe of her arm and Tyvya fell from her biobed and tore it out of it's base trying to grab hold of it. They are as fine as if they had just taken a nap... although they were quite cranky until the captain finally became conscious again. This ... Andorian matrimonial bond of them three is proving to be a very potent healing process itself. That's why the captain and his wives will be back on duty so soon. They should all be back on the ship by now, resting in their quarters."

Blackbird sighed with relief and smiled.

"I'll go see them after my duty shift."

"Be careful; Andorian wives stay pretty aggressive and protective of their males for a good while after he has been threatened."

"I'll wear a combat suit."

They both giggled. But then a frown came back on the soft features of the copper-skinned woman.

"Sir... why did Doctor Nasaro-Myth... "

Joey had anticipated her question.

"Doctors 011 and 110 are top notch chief medical officers; they wouldn't be assigned to this ship if they weren't. But very few Starfleet medical officers are cognizant of both the very alien physiology of the Undines and the very weird physiology of Andorians. And to make things worse, Captain Kheren is a genetic mutant, not your typical Ghelroid. They could stabilize his condition but they could not do anything once the Undine serum failed to fully bring him back to his former self. As it so happens, Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth is Starfleet's foremost expert in xenology and is a specialist in complex genomes like Andorians... and Undines; Moreover, he was chief medical officer of the USS Artemis when the captain was in command and the single person most familiar with his peculiar physiology since those who had created him. Even for him it was still a challenge... but finally, he brought him back to us."

Miramane Blackbird nodded.

"Thank you, Commander. It will be good to have him back in the Big Chair... no offense to you, Sir."

Joey smiled.

"None taken. In fact, I'm relieved to soon be relieved. Commanding a starship is not my first, best destiny."

The Amerind woman smiled and left. After the door wooshed close, Sisko stood up and went to the window of the ready room. From there he could see the disc-shaped, lights-dotted hull of most of Starbase Lotus, as the Horizon, too big to park even in her spacious inner dock, was moored at an outer pylon. Beyond the three kilometer wide station, he looked at the vista of stars.

They were already beckoning him.

* * *

Engineering was quiet. With the warp core shut down and the Horizon undergoing external repairs, the Romulan sat, slouched and alone in his office.

"Computer, activate data backup Silicon Four-Tee Seven." He mumbled, as he thought of everything he was giving up by deciding to stay.

His screen sprang to life, powered by the umbilical cords of Starbase Lotus. A female Romulan, dressed royally and standing in an open room, appeared.

"Cousin." the holomessage started, "I have learned that you have run away from your home and joined the worthless Federation. I am not surprised. You have always been the weakest link in our family. Treason will never be accepted by our people or our family. However, I will give you one chance at redemption, should your thick skull figure out that the Federation is full of fools who dream of fantastical ideals like universal peace through conversation and not war. Download the central database of the ship you are stationed on. I know it is within your skills and abilities. Escape on a shuttle and broadcast on frequency Delta-Four-Gamma-Six-Charlie. We have advanced Raptor class ships patrolling into Federation Space. They will rescue you. Should you fail to complete this, then take my word of warning. Stay away from Romulan Space. All of my navies will be on their lookout for your face and will not hesitate to shoot first and ask questions later. I expect to see you shortly on New Romulus."

The message cut out after that, deleting itself from the data card he had put into the computer.

He blinked slowly as he sat in the glow of the Blue Alert lighting. He was surprised to see the package sitting in his room after he had arrived at the Starbase, but he knew immediately what it was for. If it wasn't for his most recent adventures with the Horizon, he might have taken his cousin up on her request. Hacking into the ship's AI core would have been a trivial procedure, especially as so many crew members were disembarking.

He sighed again. He stood and walked slowly to the replicator in his office.

"Romulan Ale."

The computer beeped in rejection.

"This item is not approved for replication."

He shook his head and pressed a few keys on the keypad next to the device. The computer beeped in acceptance and the Ale was summoned.

It wasn't alcoholic, but it was good enough.

As he drank, he contemplated on his recent decisions to defect from the Romulans, his family and earn a death mark. All for what he felt was 'to do the right thing.' And yet, at every turn, he saw himself responding, not as a Federation officer, but as a soldier of the Romulan Empire. He had learned over the past few days that what Ambassador Spock had said was true.

The Needs of the Many, Outweigh the Needs of the Few. This was the Federation way. The Romulans had lost sight of this. He now understood that. The way the Horizon crew responded to the initial call for peace talks, their reaction to losing their commanding officer and their final decision to rescue him, no matter the cost... This is what he wanted. He wanted to be one of them. To jump into the fray at the first sign of danger to a peaceful race. Not be the aggressor.

He returned the now empty glass to the replicator and reverted its settings. Stretching, he picked up the card and snapped it in two.

He would not be going back.

His home was here, on the Horizon, Starbase Lotus, and the Federation.

He shouldered his rucksack and exited Engineering with his head held high.

"This is the right decision," he told himself.

Minutes later, he had disembarked from the Horizon and was ready for some well deserved shore leave.

* * *

Commander Oseno Jureth smiled and nodded at familiar faces as he walked the passages of Starbase Lotus. He had heard she was in and wanted to go see her before they sent her out again. As he reached the docking ring, there she was as commanding and powerful as the day he'd first seen her.

The USS Alsea.

Lotus Fleet's Prometheus Class warship, and technically Jureth's first command, had returned from her first patrol of the Klingon border since her refit and the Bajoran couldn't resist going to take a look at her. The mighty ship didn't look any worse for the wear to him, not like the last time he'd seen her; basically in pieces after her separation system was damaged during Operation Horizon. The Alsea actually looked majestic and yet bristled with more weaponry than many of Starfleet's current vessels.

A voice from behind him diverted Jureth from his admiration of the vessel.

"She's just as you left her, Commander."

It was the voice of the Alsea's Captain, Rachelle Rivers.

Oseno turned to see the stunning red-haired woman standing behind him with a soft smile on her face.

"Captain! It's good to see you."

"And you as well. I hear you had quite the adventure aboard the Horizon."

"You could say that, Sir," Oseno replied with a smile remembering Rivers' dislike of being addressed as "Ma'am."

"You're still quite fond of the Alsea, aren't you?"

Jureth looked back at the ship and then at Rivers and nodded.

"I am. That ship and I went through a lot together."

Rivers smiled again.

"That you did. Well, you'll be happy to know that you will probably get to see a lot more of her."

"Why is that?"

"She's being partially retired, assigned to training cruises."

"You're joking!" Oseno said with surprise, but Rivers shook her head.

"Have you ever known me to joke, Commander?"

"I suppose not, Sir, but... surely with everything so fluid in the galaxy, they could find an older ship to use...the Alsea still has plenty of life in her."

Rivers shrugged.

"I wasn't asked for my opinion."

"What about you?"

"I'm not sure yet. That will be for Fleet Captain Samji to decide."

"Well, at least they aren't scrapping her."

"No, they aren't. At any rate, I must move on. It was good to see you, Commander Oseno."

"You too, Captain."

Rivers walked away from the docking ring and Oseno took one last look at the Alsea. Then he moved on himself. He strode back toward the living area to his quarters.

He was organizing a few things when a disembodied voice summoned him.

"Ops to Commander Oseno."

Jureth tapped his combadge.

"Oseno here."

"Sir, there is a call coming in for you from a General Alteer on Bajor."

Jureth was puzzled. He didn't recall that name at all.

"Put it through to my quarters, please."

"Aye, Sir."

Oseno moved over to the desk and opened his terminal which displayed the Lotus Fleet logo briefly. Then it was replaced by the stern and hard-etched face of an elder Bajoran in the uniform of the Bajoran Militia.

"Commander Oseno Jureth, I am General Alteer Thanos, commanding officer of the Bajoran Militia."

Jureth curiosity was piqued.

What in the name of The Prophets could the commander of the militia possibly want with a Starfleet officer that wasn't the captain of Deep Space 9?

"What can I do for you, General?"

"Commander, I will get right to the point. I have heard your name from multiple sources as you being the best at what you do and an accomplished leader and even diplomat."

Oseno smiled slightly.

"I don't know about that, Sir."

The general waved him off with a flick of gnarled but still steady and strong hand.

"The point commander, is that you are an accomplished officer, and one of the few Bajorans to receive such accolades in Starfleet. The top security officer for the militia aboard Deep Space 9 is retiring and I want you, Oseno, to take over the post. I am offering you a commission in the Bajoran Militia as a full Colonel, and the position of security commander and liaison to the Starfleet commander of Deep Space 9."

Jureth was shocked. He had never considered joining the militia when he was living at home. Starfleet had always been his goal... to follow in his father's footsteps. At the same time, Jureth suddenly realized he had surpassed his father, both in rank and accomplishment.

Perhaps this was something he should consider... His mother had always wanted him to stay at home.

"I can't give you an answer right now, General." Jureth replied after a moment. "Might I have some time to consider your offer?"

Alteer nodded with his bald head.

"Of course Commander; but don't take forever. I need time to find someone else if you turn me down. Alteer out."

The screen went blank.

Jureth closed the terminal and sat back at his desk, pensive.

Could I really leave Starfleet? he wondered.

He had come to call Lotus Fleet home since arriving on the starbase as a mere lieutenant junior grade what seemed like forever ago. He made friends, lost some, and found a respect and kinship with the men and women he'd served with here. Would he find the same things on DS9?

Say that he did; would he really be happy there?

Starfleet offered many things the militia did not. Then, there was Catherine Steele, his... well, he wasn't sure what she was right now, other than the woman he was in love with.

If he left the fleet, would he ever see her again?

Oseno decided he needed another perspective. But the man he wanted it from was still recovering from the worst ordeal of all of the Horizon's latest mission.

* * *

In the large cabin, the highest and forwardmost one on the vast saucer section of the starship Horizon, silence and stillness had gripped the place for a long time after Oseno Jureth had left. In the semi-darkness of the half-lit room, a set of eyes, two pairs of them, looked at the stars and felt their call.

And this time, the call was to his *own* heart. Alone.

"How do you feel?"

The soft voice made him turn to look into the white, lightless eyes in the snowy-skinned, elfin face framed by an avalanche of thick silky hair as immaculate as the skin. The antennae sprouting from that long thick mane were waving at his own. For a moment, they touched tenderly in the unique kiss of their people. Then he pulled back and looked at her with a quizzical stare.

"You should know, my wife; you are the telepath here," his deep resonant voice said with a surprising softness.

"Well that's just it, my husband; since your... return to us, you are like a complete blank wall to me. And to all the other telepaths on board as well, even Lieutenant-Commander Ke'Leysa."

"*Commander* Ke'Leysa," corrected Kheren.

"After all that she has done, she does deserve the promotion," then said the Andorian giantess that came up to them from an adjoining room, adjusting her uniform.

She bent her towering frame so that she too could touch their antennae with hers. Then she straightened up to her full two and quarter meters of height to look at her captain and husband with the same worried stare that their Aenar wife kept on him.

"So, you didn't answer Lyrya; you're turning into a statue each time we leave you alone for more than a few minutes. You've been like that since Commander Oseno left... and even before he came. How *do* you feel?"

For a moment, Kheren looked at them both as if he had not seen them for years; there was a longing inside of him that he had never felt so strongly before. He knew it was the return of their matrimonial bond which defied even the best understanding of telepathy, akin to what the Vulcan Pon Farr was... but there was also something else. He struggled to find the words.

"Physically I feel completely whole and rested; better in fact than I had been for years. Mentally, I feel as sharp as ever."

"That is not what I asked," Tyvya insisted, crossing her arms in front of her.

Again he took a moment, then turned to look outside again, at the stars.

"I feel... small... constrained... as if... as if I was supposed to be out there..."

"You have been cleared of all charges and put back on active duty and in command of the *Horizon*," reminded him his giant wife. "There is even talk of you getting a commendation for exemplary action even when you were... not yourself. You are getting out there again, as soon as our next orders are received."

"I know... but it is not what I mean. I mean... out there... among the stars, like... like a fish in the sea."

Both women looked at one another with wildly flaying antennae. They knew what he was referring to; the abduction, the merging as an alien life form with another alien life form, the transmutation of them both into an immense living starship that plowed through an organic universe, leaving so much death and destruction in its wake until a whole species learned to unite... or perish.

Lyrya put her hand on his powerful shoulder but he did not turn away from the blackness and horizon of stars. That's when she noticed that his callused right hand was delicately rolling between his fingers a small metallic disk that looked like a cortical stimulator, only slightly bigger and, despite not being on his skull, flashing active.

Her sightless eyes looked up into his far away silvery ones.

"What do you remember?"

He did not blink or look away from the stars when he spoke.

"Everything."

EPILOGUE

"Loading holodeckprogram Black Point retrieval. Sector Celes, Crenan system, Moon:Crenan 1 mining facility. Stardate: 53589.6."

"Make sure you double check the data buffer this time. A diagnostic bed got scrambled last time; we were lucky he didn't notice it."

The voice of a disembodied man could be heard but not seen. But a very familiar voice, that of the facility's computer, responded.

"All systems with-in predetermined parameters" It said.

"Never hurts to be sure... Have we verified the retrieval pattern yet?" He asked.

"No chroniton emissions have been detected as of this time." The computer replied.

The voice sighed.

"Well, they did just say he *might* show up soon didn't they? it's only been a year since his last... resurrection... and he's a fairly capable officer. He might not show up at..."

An alert went off.

"Detecting build up of chroniton particles in target chamber."

"Ah well, there's that then... Sync retrieval program on my mark.. now."

The holodeck lit up to show the scene of a mid twenty-second century mining facility. It was worn down and apparently poorly maintained.

"T minus five minutes until event." The computer chimed.

"I don't need a count down, thank you."

He sounded almost annoyed.

"Activating recreation."

Three figures appeared in the room; a large Human male wearing an old style maroon starfleet uniform and holding what appeared to be a broken metal bar in his right hand. His left arm hung limply and his sleeve on that side was torn and smudged with blood and filth. He stood over another figure that was laid unconscious on the floor, an alien that was not readily identifiable.

The third person, a female Human, also dressed in a maroon starfleet uniform but in much better shape, slumped half over a control station, as if she had been thrown over it.

All three stood frozen for the moment.

"Activate program sync when ready."

The figures came to life; or at least, Neal Stanley Redding did. He stood breathing hard over the crumpled body of Khronva, watching the blood oozing out of the wound on his head. Redding glared murderously down at the figure, the metal bar bobbing in his hand.

"Neil?" the woman said weakly as she carefully pushed her self upright from the console.

Redding's head jerked in her direction and he dropped the weapon, going over to her and offering his good arm for support.

"Are you okay?"

He looked over the burned spot on her shoulder, just a glancing wound.

"I thought.."

"Neil.. Neil! he activated the device!" she said frantically. "Khronva activated it and it's tracking the Ajax!"

Picking up Khronva's fallen weapon, a type II phaser, the large man cradled his injured arm as best he could.

"Can you take us to it, Claire?"

She nodded and lead the way through the facility, reaching quickly a newly excavated area. After a short jog, they entered some sort of buried structure, as alien as anything Redding had ever seen.

"What is all this?" he asked as they went.

"I don't know. I've never encountered anything like it." she said just a bit excited despite their earnestness. "But its at least fifty thousand years old, possibly even much older than that."

"That's not much of a comfort such vague estimate coming from the ship's science officer.." he mumbled almost to himself.

They entered a room with a large octagonal display set near an also octagonal control system. It was showing in the display the USS Ajax II, a Federation Excelsior class heavy cruiser. Symbols appeared around the ship as if it was displaying information about it.

"Do you have any idea what it's trying to do?" Redding asked, looking somewhat at a loss at the control panel.

"No, I'm sorry but I don't even know how Khronva got it working! At best, I have a rough description I managed to translate that they provided me, It was 'Partial Remover'.

She sounded frustrated.

"So it could be a weapon, or a transporter of some type, or maybe it just cleans passing ships! I don't know!"

Redding put an arm around her.

"It's a sure bet Khronva didn't know either, or he wouldn't have bothered grabbing you."

He gave her a gentle kiss to calm her down.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant-Commander Tannon, but I'm going to have to shut it down... the hard way."

He pulled up the energy weapon.

"Neil..." she started to complain.

"Don't worry, we'll be far away when that happens. I'm setting this to overload with a five minutes charging time delay."

He let her go.

"But first, you need to get back to the shuttle and prep it for immediate take off. As soon as you're there, I'll set this and join you. Grab Khronva on the way."

He half smiled at her.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to be late to the wedding."

She backed away still looking at him.

"Two weeks, Neil Stanley Redding, you got that? And no excuses."

She smiled back with a severe nod and pointing finger and then started running the way they had come.

Over the next few minutes, Redding set up a make-shift sling for his arm until his communicator chimed at his belt. Putting down the phaser, he used his good hand to unclip it and flip it open with a sharp wrist movement.

"Neil, I'm at the shuttle with Khronva. He's conscious now but don't worry; he surrendered without a fight. I think he has a concussion."

Neil breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good, that's one less stop on the way out of..."

But then, he was interrupted. A strange alien voice uttered the words *Relavix sufre* and the images around the Ajax turned red.

"Claire, did you catch that?" As he looked closer at the display.

"Oh God Neil! I think that's a timer warning!"

Fear leapt from her throat to her voice.

"You're out of time! You have to... to..."

"We both know what I have to do. Now get out of here, Claire."

As he spoke, he put down the communicator on the octagonal console and picked up the phaser under his wounded armpit to set with his good hand the weapon's power nuzzle to maximum power.

"But... no... I..." she stammered.

"Don't give up on me just yet. I'll melt this dam thing and get as far away from it as possible. There might not even be explosion for all we know... Now move! That's an order!"

He took aim.

He could hear the shuttle engines hum somewhere down the tunnel as it increased power. As he did, he opened fire.

The strong steady beam ripped through the control panel as he dragged it around over anything that looked important. The display screen flickered and went off. Then, some sort of alarm started echoing through the complex.

"Good enough," Redding said to himself as he dropped the weapon, picked up the still open communicator and ran from the room as fast as he could.

"Claire, I'm back in the mining facility, coming back to your position. Any sign of..."

Then the first explosion knocked him off his feet.

The disembodied voice spoke up again, calmly as if this was all perfectly normal.

"Stand by for insertion in 5... 4..."

In the holodeck, Redding managed to get back on his feet in time to feel the pressure drop. A loud rushing noise was coming from everywhere around him.

"... 3... 2..."

"Neil!" Claire screamed from the communicator. "Neil, I love.."

"1... Insertion." The voice said.

The holographic photons and forcefields Redding faded out to be instantly replaced by the real flesh and blood Redding, standing exactly in the same stance, looking exactly the same way.

"..you!" Claire finished.

Redding was still on the run but another voice came over the communicator he held.

"Commander Redding, this is Captain Somers! The jamming field is gone; stand by for emergency transport."

Redding came to a halt and within seconds, disappeared into a transporter beam.

"Okay," said the man's voice; " reset program to Ajax II simulation, and lets 'beam' Commander Redding aboard.

"Program initiated; program running." The computer replied obediently.

The figure of Commander Redding reappeared in the same place, mere seconds later, although 'here' was now the transporter room of the starship Ajax.

Redding swayed a little on the pad looking nauseous.

"We have him, Captain, but... we had a little trouble."

The voice of Captain Somers responded.

"No surprise Ensign; the whole facility just went up down there. Get the Commander to sickbay."

"You heard the Captain, Commander." the transporter chief said as two medical personal entered the room.

"No argument here; I feel lousy." Redding said, accepting the help of the two medics to keep him upright.

One of them ran a medical tricorder over him.

"I'm picking up trace amounts of an unknown radiation. We need to get you into isolation, Commander."

The other one injected him with something from a hypospray. Years of training had taught Redding not to resist primary orders such as these and he just nodded his compliance. An hour passed and he found himself in the isolation ward, being treated by one of the few doctors he'd never met in his five years aboard the Ajax.

The Doctor, a balding fair skinned human male, was just finishing working on his injured arm.

"There you go, how does it feel now?" he said with a grin.

Unknown to him, the voice was the same one as the one that had started the program he was unknowingly part of.

Redding flexed his large arm and rotated it around.

"Huh, I can't feel a thing... like it never happened."

"Well, thank you. It's nice to be appreciated once in a while. I don't get many patients you know."

He looked away checking the dosage on a hypo spray.

"In fact, you could say I'm something of a specialist. I've only ever worked on injured left arms belonging to security personnel."

His grin widened.

"Well, that's... ironic." Redding said with a confused look on his face.

Then, worry crept up on his face as he looked around the empty medical facility.

"Any word from Claire... I mean, Lieutenant-Commander Tannon?" He said with a slight look of concern.

"Your fiancée, along with her guest, arrived safely back aboard the Ajax twenty minutes after you were beamed aboard. She is fine. Khronva required surgery, but he managed to pull through to stand trial for kidnapping and attempted murder."

He was pulling down a device that was obviously designed to fit around Redding head and over his eyes.

"Now try to relax, Commander. I'm going to check you for any short term brain damage from the radiation exposure." He said fitting the device cheerfully.

"Ah... well... okay." Redding said trying to relax into the chair. "Say, I didn't catch your name Doctor...?"

"You can call me Mark One. I haven't really decided on a name yet, as it were." he answered not without a small bit of annoyance as he injected Redding with the hypospray.

Redding started to drift out slightly.

"Haven't.. what?" he said groggily.

"We can talk about it later. Enjoy the trip, Commander Redding."

The balding, sour-looking doctor walked briskly out of the room.

"Computer, start memory upload sequence," his voice said as he seemed to fade away after walking out of the room.

"Program initiated." the feminine voice of the computer chimed.

A dull buzzing feeling seemed to permeate his head, as if he was being microsonic-messaged around his temples and forehead. It was an unpleasant feeling. It reminded him of what happened after he reappeared at the site of the mining facility's destruction three days after the event.

"Upload complete" the computer chimed again. "Time elapsed, 16 hours, 22 minutes."

Redding removed the headpiece he was wearing and stretched, giving an animated yawn. The doctor returned holding a cup of coffee.

"Here you go, Commander; cream, no sugar."

"Hay Doc, ah.. nectar of the gods.." he mumbled and took a long slow sip.

"First, the good news" the Doctor said as he drank his coffee. "The Horizon did indeed successfully complete it's transwarp test run, although it did run into something classified... so I can't say what, but ship and crew made it back safely to Starbase Lotus."

"So why am I here then?"

Just once he would have liked to hear something like: "You slipped in the sonic shower." But it was always worse than that.

"On your next mission aboard the Horizon, you were part of a critical diplomatic mission to the edge of the beta Quadrant, to meet an Undine delegation at the edge of Fluidic Space. I have received no word on the Horizon's current condition; only that you might be returning to Black point and we should be prepared."

The doctor ran a scanner over Redding,s head.

"Any discomfort, nausea or double vision? "

"Doesn't seem like it..." He stood up and walked a round the room. "What's the bad news?"

The Doctor gave him a smile. "That you're here, of course. My condolences, I knew him very well after all; be nice and I'll invite you to the funeral."

Redding held his hands up in mock defense.

"No thank you; I couldn't stand to hear all those poor women crying their eyes out."

The Doctor smirked.

"Outmoded sexist comment; I see you're back to normal... whatever that is."

The medical officer sighed briefly, like someone doing routine work and getting a bit annoyed by it.

"In two days you'll be picked up by our resupply cover ship and I'll go back into limbo waiting for your eventual return."

This time he gave a real sigh.

"My job is so rich and rewarding."

"Doc, if I ever came back and you weren't here, I think I'd freak out and assume I was abducted."

He walked to the doorway of the room.

"Well, I'm off to the showers; but after that, a little 3D chess, Doc?"

"I'd like that, Commander. And of course, I'll keep the challenge level low."

He smiled again.

"Don't you ever dare do that to me. Without real challenge, life isn't worth living... even less coming back to."

Redding offered him his trademark crooked grin.

"Once again you have a new lease on life; so... what will be your next challenge, Neal Stanley Redding?"

The large man stopped on the door sill, pondering for a moment. He did not look back at the Doctor when he finally spoke with a low voice.

"That... is a good question."

He left the room and behind him, the Emergency Holographic medical officer deactivated itself, leaving the place empty and silent.

But, as the door that had shut behind Redding's large back, a shadow appeared on the panel. It outlined distinctly the silhouette of what appeared to be a man, but no detail at all could be discerned to certify if it was really Human.

From that vague apparition, a disembodied voice was heard with strange echoes deforming it as if it was speaking in a huge cavern through a defective communicator.

"Report, Commander."

Another such voice was heard.

"As expected, Admiral... as expected."

THE END

