

Just another day in the Hromi Sector... or, is it?

STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

SHORE LEAVE

A STORY OF EVENTS ON STARBASE LOTUS



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SHORE LEAVE

STARBASE LOTUS SEASON 3 EPISODE 1

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Jeff T as Captain Syntron
Jureth as Commander Oseno Jureth
Sorripto as Commander Thomas Riker
BLZBUB as Commander David Rogers
Kheren as Captain Kheren
and Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth

Forum roleplaying session
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Novelization by Kheren

Cover by Kheren

PROLOGUE

In the vastness of space, there were stars beyond numbering all accross the infinite blackness surrounding one three-kilometers wide disc-shaped construct that was Starbase Lotus, the headquarters of Lotus Fleet, the most elite division of Starfleet. Guarding the rimward frontier between the United Federation of Planets, it was the fort holding at bay the schemes of the shattered Romulan Star Empire, the bloodthirstiness of the belligerent Klingon Empire and all the possible wonders and dangers from the Beta and Delta Quadrants.

On it's smooth-curving hull surrounded by an impressive docking ring, lights shone to rival the surrounding stars in number and brightness. And nearing it, a brighter light appeared, slowing from faster than light speeds to a relatively mere thousands of kilometers per second, taking an oblong shape with metallic hues also dotted with small bright lights. It looked much like a sleek fish swimming in the dark tides of the cosmos with it's softly curved arrow-shaped prow, it's long sleet body stretching right behind it and the pair of cigar-shaped nacelles making like tail fins from short pylons directly behind at the stern.

In the belly of the massive starbase, two immense doors opened like a huge mouth ready to swallow the approaching starship. And, in the silence of space, a voice travelled on subspace currents from the station to the incoming vessel.

"Uss Phoenix, this is Starbase Lotus Flight Command; you are clear to dock, inward pylon 1. Tractor beams ready to take you in. Please assume Condition Blue... and enjoy the ride. Welcome home, Phoenix."

In the immense command center of Starbase Lotus, Fleet Captain Allen Samji walked on the high circular walkway to the transparency where the new science explorer of the Hromi sector could be seen in all it's majestic splendor. Looking out at the several hundred meters long starship entering the station under his care, he could not help but feel a sense of pride and accomplishment. After the dramatic events of Operation Horizon where they almost lost the entire universe to a ravaging cosmic anomaly, things had returned to normal at last.

Well, not exactly. As usual, Captain Kheren had found yet a new way to make things... interesting, when the shakedown cruise of his new command, the Lotus class transwarp capital ship USS Horizon, fell into a subspace eddie that threw it to the edge of the galaxy... right in the hands of a long lost Jem'Hadar prison camp that had been taken over by a mad artificial intelligence of an equally lost warship.

Looking at the brand new USS Phoenix coming home from her own shakedown cruise, Samji wondered what her commanding officer, the Vulcan Syntron, would himself have to report.

After all, not so long ago, he had been First Officer to the same Andorian captain... who's ship should soon be returning from a critical diplomatic mission to the outer edge of the Beta Quadrant to meet with the Undines of Fluidic Space...

The Hindu-born starbase commander shook his head, looking at the docking USS Phoenix. Something told him that Syntron and his crew too would not be making just a dull cruise report.

He turned to his own executive officer.

"Commander Schmidt; inform Captain Syntron that he and his crew are given shore leave until further notice... and that I await his report."

"Aye, Sir," acknowledged the tall, broadly-built woman before turning to the Ferengi manning Ops central to open a channel to the docking vessel.

Samji then went to his office. There were patrol reports from the USS McKenzie on the Klingon border and from the USS Spectre on the Federation side of the Romulan Neutral Zone that needed his attention.

PART ONE : PHOENIX FIRE

Commander Riker and Master Chief Eddington nodded to each other as young Ensign Tolo worked with two crewmen disassembling a sensor control panel. The schematics being displayed on the screen showed a steady increase in the sensor output. The Phoenix's sensors were already operating at one hundred and twelve percent of standard capacity and the output was increasing.

As Tolo prepared to put the panel back on, he glanced over to a comms screen which displayed an all too familiar face to anyone in Starfleet, especially in its elite division of Lotus Fleet.

"Thanks again, these new enhancements are wonderful. I really never thought we could improve the sensors much past what you did on the McKenzie."

With a smile and simple nod, the grey-skinned, black-haired and eyed Cardassian glancing back signed off. Eddington looked over at Commander Riker who, despite being impressed with the output, was clearly annoyed.

"Come on Commander look at that output. Shields, the Anti matter capacitors and now sensors are all operating at unheard of levels. You really can't argue with those results."

Creasing his brow slightly Riker shook his head and pointed at the now blank monitor.

"The results don't bother me old friend it is where they came from that I am just not comfortable with. Since when did Starfleet begin modifications perfected by a criminal?"

With a laugh Master Chief Eddington simply shook his head.

"Criminal? Well yeah he is currently serving punishment... But let's be honest; he is one of the greatest engineering minds I have ever seen... and to dismiss that just because of where he is seems a bit much. Besides, he still wears the uniform. He is one of us."

Riker went to speak but Eddington cut him off.

"Besides, I remember a young ensign I used to work with who served some time for disobeying orders to do the right thing. Whatever happened to that guy?"

With a nod Riker conceded the point.

"This is the here and now. How will history remember this?"

"History will remember our parents as criminals? Would you allow History to decide?"

Commander Riker shook his head. The mention of his father and the Maquis never sat well with him.

"Our parents were heroes. History will remember them in that way with time."

"History will remember our parents as traitors and terrorists. They may get some points for fighting the Dominion, but I doubt the Jem Hadar are in any hurry to make friends with History. Sometimes the rules must be bent to do the right thing."

"I just don't like it."

"Neither do I, Commander. But you can't argue with those results. Lieutenant Sorripto relayed the modifications and they have worked like a charm."

Riker's eyes opened a bit to the rank.

"Lieutenant? He was shot back down as an ensign last I heard. How do you get promoted in prison?"

"Maybe he is that good."

"He can't be *that* good," Riker mumbled under his breath

With a snap the final panel was closed and the two crewman finished their work. Riker looked around only to notice that Tolo had already left. The conversation had taken his attention away he had failed to realize the job was complete. Looking up at the final display Riker saw that output was now reading a hundred and twenty-five percent of standard parameters.

Riker glanced over to see Eddington smirking as if to say "I told you so". Shaking his head Riker simply laughed.

"That good eh? Well I can add these numbers to the report."

As he began to press the PADD Riker stopped and handed it to Eddington.

"Or you can do it. As first officer, I can delegate command reports to the Chief of the Vessel"

"But this report is barely started. This will take about three hours."

Winking as he left the room Riker laughed. His final words fading as the door closed.

"Well you better hurry up then, Captain needs it in two."

Master Chief Eddington looked over to see the two crewman trying not to laugh. With that he began to enter the numbers on the PADD as he also left the room. With a woosh the doors shut behind him and the final stage of upgrades were complete.

* * *

Captain's Personal Log

Stardate 88217.3

Following our return from Sarabande, the unofficial name suggested for the planetoid discovered during the first mission of the USS Phoenix, I have been occupied with a series of inquiries pertaining to the events that transpired throughout this mission.

The topics among these proceedings included the nanite implementation, the testing of the new quantum slipstream drive, the incident with the shuttle Sagan caught in the bubbleverse resulting in the injuries to its crew and a civilian reporter, and my decision to allow a small team of scientists to remain with a shuttle on the surface of the enigmatic planetoid.

It has been the ongoing inquiries related to Sarabande that have occupied a majority of my time over these past three weeks. Due to its perceived value and position between Federation and Romulan territory, the planetoid has remained highly classified and much debated by the upper echelon of the Federation. Those that want to allow this planetoid to continue toward its evolutionary path unencumbered by any further influence from Federation contact are in direct conflict with those that want to seize and utilize this hidden world as a clandestine base of operations. Logic during these ongoing proceedings has proven to be a rare commodity. Nevertheless, while the internal debate continues, the away team on the planetoid continue their unobtrusive observation and investigation.

Meanwhile, since the Phoenix returned to spacedock, it has been undergoing a thorough analysis of systems and integrity pertaining to the incidents that transpired among the nanites, the quantum slipstream drive and the nebula. The last word received was that no permanent damage exists from the incidents that had befallen it during the mission.

With the assistance of the nanotechnologist Stephanie Decatur, now stationed back at her lab on this starbase, the nanites aboard the Phoenix have been stabilized throughout the ship. Additionally, under the guidance of Commander David Rogers in partnership with a team of engineers from the starbase, they have theoretically rectified the conundrums associated with the quantum slipstream drive. Verification of this outcome however will be determined once the vessel is out of the confines of spacedock.

Syntron closed his log entry as stood up and walked toward the replicator in the Captain's Ready Room of the USS Phoenix. It was the first time that he had boarded the vessel since it was berthed back into spacedock at the conclusion of its first mission.

A steaming cup of Vulcan spiced tea appeared in the replicator as ordered, and the captain grabbed the handle almost absent-mindedly as he lifted the brew toward his mouth. The fragrance was potent as he took a small sip of the liquid blend. As the Vulcan was contemplating numerous thoughts related to the ship and the next impending meeting, the doorway suddenly chimed.

Believing that there was no one aboard the ship but a scattered skeleton crew, with a raised angular brow the captain immediately responded.

"Enter."

The door slid open to reveal the unmistakable presence of Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth, the chief medical officer of Syntron's brand new starship. His seductive Deltan features were drawn into an uncharacteristic serious mien. Gone was the usual charming smile. A frown creased his smooth, clean-shaven head and the light in his mesmerizing purple eyes was dimmed by what seemed like somber thoughts. He stayed on the door sill as his musical voice spoke with definite gravity.

"Captain Syntron Sir; may we speak?"

"Affirmative, Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth," the captain responded as he gestured for the Deltan to have a seat. A look of surprise was not evident on his expressionless visage.

"May I offer you a beverage, doctor?" Syntron inquired, remembering to continue with the social formalities that he had previously learned.

The Deltan stepped in and stood at attention before his commanding officer.

"Thank you, Sir, but no, thank you. And I prefer to stand, if you don't mind, Captain. This is not your usual family doctor housecall. I come to you as a concerned Starfleet officer under your command, Sir."

The formality of it all left no doubt that this was a very serious matter; at least to him.

Stoically, the Vulcan stood beside the chief medical officer.

After placing his cup on the nearby desk, Syntron gazed directly into the officer's eyes.

"Proceed Doctor."

The Deltan had obviously been thinking about what he wanted to discuss for quite some time; his response was as concise as it was heavy with meaning.

"Captain Sir; I am invoking General Order 1, the Prime Directive; General Order 4, the proper conduct when finding previously unknown life forms; General Order 13, the respect of sovereignty of non-aligned worlds; General Order 17 and 29 ; a commanding officer's responsibilities regarding the safety of his crew; General Order 31, applying the prime Directive to non-organic sentience. But, with all that, I also recognize General Order 30, the right of a starship commander to interpret the Prime Directive within all other rules but according to circumstances when encountering new lifeforms."

Elliago made a pause. Then he summarized further.

"Captain Sir, during the last mission, we discovered what appeared to be the remnants of a previously unknown spacefaring civilization. You ordered us to physically investigate first hand. You allowed us to forcibly penetrate the alien facility. You allowed us to freely tamper with what was found inside. Your crew was put to risk and even harm while pursuing further investigation, further penetration and further tampering of what had been quickly and clearly defined as previously unknown sentient territory and possessions. You finally reported to Command after marking the site as Federation property and admonished even further... direct action regarding this site."

Then, he finally looked straight into the Vulcan's eyes.

"Captain Sir, I am not here to commit insubordination and dispute your orders during the mission. I am only saying all this so as to properly pose a legitimate question, as regulation allows me to. "

He stood straighter at attention.

"As a Starfleet officer serving under your command, my question to you is this: Sir, I respectfully request to know; am I to expect the same command decisions again from you in any future similar circumstances?"

Were he not Vulcan, a smirk may have escaped from the captain's serious expression; as if the roles between these two officers had somehow curiously been reversed.

"I am quite certain Doctor that similar interrogatives and discussions have occurred between Starfleet captains and their senior staff since the first missions began."

Relaxing his stance slightly, the captain eased his arms behind his back.

"I have spent the majority of my time during these past three weeks alone involved in a variety of heightened discussions about our discovery and subsequent actions. To clarify though, the planetoid was not marked as a Federation site; although there are those now in their chambers and conference halls within the Federation that are trying emphatically to rectify this." the Vulcan noted, as his demeanor turned even more serious.

"As for what the future holds for us, this is obviously uncertain. I will say this, we are a crew of explorers as well as Starfleet officers. Interpretation of orders, regulations and directives may inevitably come into question as we find ourselves in other unique circumstances. Command decisions will be made as parameters develop and are introduced, data is analyzed, risk factors are assessed and the possibility for discovery exists. Expectations are that our missions will rarely be simplistic endeavors, and therefore weighing in all circumstances and considerations existing at the moment will be key factors in determining virtually any course of action taken."

Elliago blinked at the lengthy response then closed his eyes as if to say "Vulcans..."

But that is not what he said.

"Please allow me to rephrase my question more clearly, Sir; Captain; given the exact same circumstances... would you make the same decisions again?"

With a raised brow the captain noted "Even though logically speaking, this occurrence you present is quite an impossibility... given the outcome of our circumstances, there are a number of choices and options that were made during our mission in which I could reflect on and select differently... as there are in many choices and decisions that I have made in general throughout my life and career."

Gazing at the Deltan's rigid posture, Syntron could sense his vexation still present.

"You and I have faced more hazardous and dire situations throughout our encounters with the Azimuth Horizon anomaly alone Doctor. The decisions that were made during those times even brought our former captain up before a court facing charges after the Artemis was sacrificed. We almost lost our lives on more than one occasion while trying to save the lives of others. Yet, it was those decisions and risks taken, regardless of how a prosecutor may perceive them in hindsight, that eventually reduced the amount of potential lives lost. Those decisions are not often open-and-shut, let alone right or wrong. They are unique and must be taken in context of all of the surrounding circumstances."

The Vulcan then took a subtle but deep breath before continuing on.

"However, it is going through and reflecting on these processes and challenges that we face during such missions that ultimately enhance our experiences, build our competence and perhaps even enrich our wisdom along the way."

Elliago made a visible effort to be patient. But his patience was just as obviously running thin. He sighed after Syntron went silent, then looked again right into his dark eyes.

"Permission to speak freely, Sir?"

Syntron gave a bit of a perplexed gaze back to the Deltan. Despite his efforts to address in a thorough and congenial manner the almost taunting statements and questions spoken though a respectful tone to him, it appeared for some reason to have the opposite effect on the doctor.

"Self-expression has not been an issue for you thus far, based on your opening statements Doctor... proceed" the Vulcan replied stoically.

A small shark-like smile stretched thin the lips of the doctor. But the "oh yeah? You haven't seen anything yet" expression on his face quickly changed to one of barely repressed anger.

"Stop dancing around the issue and say it plainly; you consider that you made the best and correct decisions; well, Capt'n Sir, I do not! "

Looking at the infuriating blank, impassive stare of the Vulcan, the Deltan nevertheless felt that he had put his finger on a sensitive nerve. And so he pushed.

"You should not have sent an away team before doing thorough scans of the area, before attempting communication, before making a thorough research in our data banks or even from Starfleet Command to try and identify this... thing. You did not try all other options before risking the life of your crew in an away mission; you just sent them out there to play!"

Elliago had lifted but one finger as he enumerated all his points.

"Don't start with that infamous "risk is our business" Captain Kirk speech! We were confronted with an unknown, yes, but it clearly was at the time a non-threatening one; it didn't require precipitous, half-cocked action that could potentially endanger ship and crew so needlessly!"

The doctor was far from finished. A second finger rose.

"You allowed your away team to repeat all your initial mistakes and to violate the place without considering for a single instant that this does not belong to us! You did not think for an instant that the dampening field in the area was meant to keep away trespassers... like us! You did not even consider that this might have been the burial site, the place of worship or a preservation location of another culture that could be desecrated or lost to them by our alien intrusion! And for what? For the sole sake of our childish curiosity!"

"He lifted a third finger.

"And don't start with that great motto of "to explore strange new world and seek out new life forms and new civilizations!" Our ignorance and our curiosity do not give us a blank check to go to your venerable Vulcan Plateau of Gol, force our entry into your precious temple and trample the sacred grounds of your masters! Nor of anyone else!"

The more he spoke, the more passionate the Deltan was becoming. The fourth finger rose.

"But you didn't stop your amateurish blundering there; you allowed them not only to violate the site but, once inside, to recklessly tamper with just about everything they could put their hands on! You let them activate devices you had no idea about, further force entry into chambers you had no clue as to their purpose, significance or value to the owners... and in the process, let several members get injured and risk further harm themselves as if... as if you owned the damn place!"

A fifth finger went up; his thumb. But it was not in the mythical approval gesture of Earth's Ancient Rome.

"Now don't give me either any "no pain, no gain" kind of argument or that the risk and the pain proved to be worth it all! I can't believe you served with someone like Captain Kheren for so long and so well and never learned and understood that the ends never justify the means!"

He finally made a pause, but it was not to let Syntron answer his accusations.

"I have no idea how or why Lotus Fleet Command, Starfleet Command, the Federation Science Council or even the Federation Council itself can let all of this pass without bringing you up before a Court Martial or just a Board of Inquiry, or not even give you a reprimand for acting like a sixteenth century Earth colonialist instead of a twenty-fifth century Starfleet ship commander. Every step of the way, you had time and opportunity to stop and even backtrack from your errors but you did not, not even once, not even when you, your first officer and your crew were warned about it!"

His hand finally closed again to point an accusing finger at Syntron.

What you did, and what you allowed to do under your authority, was not Starfleet; it was not science; it was not right!"

"I must disagree doc. It felt right to me"

Commander Riker spoke as he stepped back from the natural shadow of the corner by the door. He had entered during the doctor's rant and went unnoticed due to the passion of his pleas.

"We accomplished our mission, learned more than we expected and everyone got out alive. I mean hell I even managed not to get shot for once, which is always a plus in my book. We achieved our goals and learned a great deal about an alien culture. We advanced our understanding of alien science, mathematics and culture... and did I mention I didn't get shot? The reason no one brought the captain up on charges is because he did nothing wrong."

Gesturing towards the captain Commander Riker continued

"I am a stickler for the rules, well most of them anyway, and trust me doc if I felt the captain had breached Starfleet protocol and should have been removed I would be the first person standing in this room shoving a phaser in his face"

Gesturing to Captain Syntron

"No offense Captain."

Elliago looked at Riker with obvious surprise. He had not noticed his presence at all and had thought he was alone with his commanding officer. Recovering from his surprise, he stood straighter and resumed his previously formal stance.

"Commander Riker; I was unaware of your presence. Please Captain, and you Commander, accept my apologies. Speaking freely like this to a superior officer in front of another is totally inappropriate and unbecoming of one wearing a Starfleet uniform."

He did not speak openly that Syntron, allowing this, was yet again totally in the wrong, at least morally. By allowing his chief medical officer to rant like this in front of another crewmember, and his first officer no less, he could then bring forward charges of insubordination and disrespect to his commanding officer against the doctor any time he chose. The logical Vulcan, having most certainly read the CMO's report and most probably those of the other officers who had heard his objections during the mission, undoubtedly now had expected his visit.

It was a foul trap. Elliago would never had thought it possible for Syntron, of all people, to behave like this.

And yet, the Deltan had a hard time believing so. Maybe that had never been his intention. It may just had been all due to circumstances; maybe Elliago had walked into a meeting between the captain and his exec who might have just gone into another room to let his commanding officer receive another subordinate privately. maybe it was Riker who had inadvertently stumbled into their meeting...

But, one way or the other, the Exec had, by his own admission, listened to all that the CMO had said and was now freely interfering with what was by definition a private discussion of both a personal and sensitive nature between an officer and his captain.

And, instead of excusing himself and backing out of what was not at all his business, he had instead chosen to crawl into the shadows until it was time to pounce and defend his captain. It could be deemed commendable by some; but to the Deltan, it was devious, pure and simple; and good intentions did not make dishonorable actions any more acceptable.

And that was exactly his point.

Elliago did not push on because of it. But it made him come to a decision.

The Deltan looked straight at Syntron.

"I hear and recognize your position, Captain Sir. You are now aware of mine. Therefore, I officially would like to ask for a transfer."

Syntron was first surprised by his executive officer's unexpected arrival into the Ready Room during the rather one-sided conversation with the Deltan doctor; especially with Riker's appearance occurring without his awareness. A rare occurrence indeed for a Vulcan with senses as acute as his. Perhaps it was the intensity of the doctor's rant that prevented him noticing this, but initially the captain was even more astonished by the transfer request given after Commander Riker countered Nasarro Myth's accusations.

However, as the captain began to contemplate this request to a greater depth, the incident earlier in the mission with the trill Stephanie Decatur bringing out her objections to the sentient EMH concerning the doctor's misuse of pheromones on her and others without their consent came back to him. Syntron had addressed that situation with the doctor, and as far as he was concerned, these incidents that went back for years were now behind them. Yet perhaps as a consequence of this incident, the doctor became even more rigid in his adherence to rules and regulations. Elliago's usual peaceful temperament had been replaced with one of indignation, even as he maintained a respectful tone as he addressed the captain. This was not conclusive, but was merely a hypothesis.

Nevertheless, the bottom-line was that the professional relationship between the doctor and his first officer had already deteriorated even further, as apparently was his own in the eyes of the doctor. There was no respect let alone trust remaining in the doctor's words or his expression.

Syntron looked acutely at the Deltan awaiting his response for just a while longer, and without providing any retort or clarification, simply responded.

"Transfer granted Doctor. You may gather your belongings while I contact headquarters and finalize the order for transfer. Dismissed"

"Thank you, Captain. I wish you and your crew the best."

A bit of the old, congenial Elliago returned in the purple eyes and on the softening handsome features. But the trademark easy smile didn't succeed in coming back to his tense lips. He did not look at Riker, turning his back to him as he left the captain's ready room with a calm, resolute step.

If anything, he looked relieved.

As the doctor departed, Syntron turned to his first officer.

"Your arrival, Commander, was akin to that of an ancient stealth warrior who managed to appear without detection. As such, it would seem that you caught the doctor off guard to a degree. In the future however, you may want to let your presence be known upon your arrival."

Syntron then walked over and took a seat behind his elongated desk and gestured for his executive officer to do the same.

"Regardless of this, the outcome in this situation would have been unchanged, Commander."

Syntron reached over and took a small sip of tea.

"It would appear that we will now be in need of a new chief medical officer... of which I will begin the transfer and request process expeditiously. However, I would predict that filling the role of our departing CMO will not be an easy task by any means."

Nodding Riker agreed

"It will not, Captain. Until such time however, Doctor Gray has been recognized as sentient and is more than capable of assuming those responsibilities. I requested his programming be transferred here, and have served with him for many years at various commands. He may be an EMH, but he is a certified doctor and will be more than capable of filling in, pending our next Command-designated arrival."

"Doctor Gray assuredly showed his value and competence during our last mission," the Vulcan responded. "This will be one less thing of concern during our time of transition."

Syntron made a pause to take a sip of his now tepid spiced tea.

"Help yourself to a beverage Commander, and then apprise me with details of your work since we last spoke."

Nodding, Commander Riker walked over to the replicator and ordered a Bajoran sweet tea. As it materialized he grabbed the drink, swished it around once and then took a sip. The drink was better than Riker could have imagined, but he refused to acknowledge it.

"Lucky guess" Riker mumbled to himself.

Turning back towards the Captain, Riker continued with his report.

"Sir, all system performance upgrades are complete. Master Chief Eddington is compiling the final reports as we speak. Sensors, inertial dampeners, plasma injectors and deflector output are all above a hundred and twenty percent of standard operating parameters and holding."

Taking a sip from the tea Riker continued

"I may not be the biggest fan on where the upgrade ideas are coming from, but you really can't argue with results. We are reporting system improvements across all shifts and Federation ships all over the sector are clamoring for the chance to upgrade their systems."

Taking another sip Riker concluded his appraisal.

"Speaking of shifts, Captain, Master Chief Eddington has finalized the crew rotation rosters for our time in port as well as our next duty mission. We are pending a formally assigned doctor, but shift rotations will be completed on time."

"Prepare for a trial run and complete systems test at fourteen hundred hours tomorrow. Employ the Ops Chief to secure all requisite personnel for this first shakedown. When helm has reached a safe distance in this sector, we will need Commander Rogers' team to scrupulously monitor all performance details once the refurbished quantum slipstream drive has been re-engaged. Obviously, we do not aspire to evoke similar results as our original implementation of this device manifested."

At precisely fourteen hundred hours the next day, the Vulcan captain leaned back into the center seat. It had been a whirlwind of activity for his first officer and Ops chief recalling requisite personnel back onto the ship and into the crew rotation schedule in time, but they has somehow managed to accomplish this on time.

Looking out the viewscreen of spacedock for a moment, the captain engaged ship-wide communication.

"All hands... prepare for departure. Captain out."

Syntron turned to his executive officer.

"Commander Riker. You know the procedures. Take us out."

PART TWO : OVER THE HORIZON

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 shakedown cruise after her extensive repairs. 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, months ago. 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, Rachele 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 my opinion."

"What about you?"

"I'm not sure yet, that will be for the Fleet Captain 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. Tkae care."

"You too, Captain."

Rivers walked away from the docking ring, and Oseno took one last look at the Alsea and then moved on himself. He strode back toward the living area to his quarters and was organizing a few things when a disembodied voice summoned him.

"Ops to Commander Oseno."

Jureth tapped his combadge "Oseno here."

"Ensign Grok from Ops,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.

"Go ahead and 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 and then was replaced by the face of an elder Bajoran in the orange 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 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.

"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 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.

"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.

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 need another perspective and the man he wanted it from was still recovering from the Horizon's latest mission. But Jureth hoped that Captain Kheren would see him anyway.

He made his way to the quarters the captain shared with his wives, and after standing in front of the door hesitating for several minutes he rang the annunciator.

The door slid open and Oseno found himself staring at a blue abdomen without a navel almost at eye level. Standing before him was the towering security officer of the Horizon, the giantess Tyvya. She was only wearing a very tiny bathing suit that barely covered her imposing frame. And she was staring down at the Bajoran with an unsmiling face that could have been intimidating had it not been for the antennae curving in amusement over the thick long flowing white mane, the twinkle in the large sapphire blue eyes and the light, friendly tone of the soft, sultry voice.

"Commander Oseno! I was just about to go and take a shower. Please come in."

Had it not been for the fact that Andorians had absolutely no taboo about nudity and even less attraction for any but their own kind, Jureth might have been swamped by suggestive ideas and the awkwardness of the situation; not to mention the easy misinterpretation of her words. But she didn't leave him any breath to be confused when she turned around to call inside the vast apartment.

"Commander Oseno is here! Lyrya, is he awake?"

"I certainly am, after your beloving." answered a deep, sonorous voice yet strangely soft.

Following the voice came the familiar athletic form of captain Kheren. He finished putting on a simple silk shirt over his broad shoulders and down his slim, muscular body as he came to greet the Bajoran. His giant wife left for another section of their quarters where running water could be heard. Andorian hearing was much too sensitive to tolerate the standard sonic showers. Behind him, the Aenar chief counselor Lyrya, his other wife, nodded respectfully to Jureth as she also left for another part of their vast cabin, leaving the main living area deserted but for the two men.

The Captain of the Horizon had dressed himself quickly, but not quickly enough for Jureth to miss the wide angry scar of an old phaser burn that slashed entirely his broad chest. But then, it was gone from sight and the Captain of the Horizon stood before his visiting Chief Strategic Ops officer.

Like all Andorians, Kheren did not have enough facial muscles to smile. Nevertheless, even if he did not offer his hand in the Human-style greeting adopted by almost every Humanoid in Starfleet, his whole body language spoke of friendship and respect as he came up to Oseno. And so did his welcoming voice.

"Commander Oseno, what a pleasant surprise. What brings you to this neighborhood?"

Jureth had never seen a naked Andorian, much less two in just a few moments. That coupled with the fact that somehow the captain of the Horizon always managed to intimidate the Bajoran likely without meaning to do so and, suddenly, Oseno was feeling much like the young lieutenant he had been when he had reported to Lotus Fleet for the very first time fresh out of the Academy, all those years ago. Combining that with the nature of his visit was enough to make him fumble slightly with his words

"Sir... I... I didn't mean to disturb you, if this is... that is... if its a bad time, I can come back."

The Andorian seemed not to notice at all his officer's uneasiness; or maybe he was too used to it or simply didn't care. He stepped back to allow the younger man to enter.

"Not at all, Commander. In fact, if I do not receive visitors, that counselor wife of mine will send me back to the observation ward for further psychological treatment. healthy Andorians are supposed to be congenial, you know."

The tone was light but there was some tension behind the words. Yes, Andorians were very gregarious... but only with their own kind. They were deemed quite cold, and distant with non-Ghelnoids; and Captain Kheren was notorious for being like that even with his own kind.

But, as a starship Captain, he had always strived to be less so with his colleagues and crewmates, even if only in a courteous professional manner. After all, he was clanless, orphaned and even ostracized by his people; even self-exiled from his own world for the last decade. Starfleet was his own world now; his ship was his clan and his crew were his family. And he had shared much with the Bajoran, especially in the last year. He should not, could not refuse a brother... like Oseno Jureth had become.

With his hand, he showed him the spartan but spacious living room decorated with soft blues, whites and crystalline tones that made it strangely look like the insides of an ice castle to alien eyes. The temperature was quite low within the Captain's Quarters and it made any but Andorians shiver and breath out fumes of condensed breath as if they were smoking inside.

"Computer; raise room temperature to sixteen Celsius."

It would take a moment but the room would become more comfortable for the Bajoran. As he sat down in a rather unusual round body-contouring leather-like chair that had almost looked like a large stone on the blue-white glass-like floor, Kheren went towards a replicator.

"Anything I can offer you, Commander? How about some hasperat? I just tried that Bajoran dish of yours and I find it very tasty and stimulating... especially if you add a handful of sea salt to it. I was about to make one for myself. How about you?"

It was obvious to Jureth that his commanding officer was going out of his way to act like a congenial host. It was looking almost... alien for him, who always maintained the classic professional distance between himself and his subordinates. The Captain had obviously been greatly affected by his ordeal with the Undines. He was not completely back to his former self and tried hard, too hard, to hide it.

Yet, his silver eyes shone with the laser-like sharpness of mind Oseno was familiar with. Whatever he wanted to discuss, Kheren was ready and able to listen, to understand... maybe even to help.

While hasperat was quite possibly Jureth's favorite dish from his childhood, he wasn't particularly hungry right now. Besides, the replicators just didn't seem to do the dish justice. The last time he'd had good hasperat was when he'd first reported aboard the Alesa and Captain Siduri's chef had prepared the dish.

"No thank you, Sir. I do appreciate the offer though. I came by first to see how you were, and second to elicit a bit of perspective."

Oseno normally would have paused to allow the captain to respond to the first part of his statement but he seemed to forget propriety at that moment and pushed on.

"I received a subspace call a short time ago. It was from the commander of the Bajoran Militia, who I didn't even realize knew my name. He has offered me a position with the Militia, as a full colonel and chief of security and liaison to the Starfleet commander of Deep Space 9."

There, he'd said it. And suddenly felt better for having told someone else. He tried to read the Andorian's reaction to his statement, but as usual the captain was nearly impossible to gauge any emotion at all from. It was sometimes disturbing for the security officer who'd been trained to read body language when trying to perceive potential threats.

Kheren then turned back from the wall where he was heading and sat in another body-contouring chair sideways to the right of the Bajoran. This the experienced Commander could immediately interpret as both a non confrontational seating arrangement, nullifying the oppositional nature of seating face to face, and an open gesture of trust; this was the best angle for Jureth to strike Kheren with a blade if he had been wearing one.

Although it would have been almost meaningless between naturally ambidextrous-born Andorians, it was a symbolic gesture that clearly showed to the Bajoran that his captain was now welcoming him as a friend, not as a subordinate or even just some other fellow officer.

His tone of voice as much as his next words told it plainly.

"Congratulations, Commander. This is a singular honor, a tribute to your expertise, your experience and your accomplishments. Taking such a position will make you one of the key individuals in the whole of the Federation. Deep Space 9's importance is second to none, at least as prominent as that of Starbase Lotus; it orbits Bajor, the leading world among our new Federation members and guards the only stable wormhole so far discovered, the prime access to the almost completely unexplored Gamma Quadrant and the privileged point of contact with a still unknown lifeform."

Kheren did not say 'The Prophets'. Like all Andorians, he was totally alien to any notion of the supernatural. Their own 'gods' had always been understood to be only revered ancestors and their myths the symbolic embellishment of historical events or just moralistic fables. On his homeworld, the very concept of religion, as other species understood it, never came to be until fairly recently; even then, they were more akin to social and political affiliations than anything else.

Their very basic psychological make-up and dangerous life-style made Andorians too pragmatic and too skeptical to easily submit to dogmas and unsubstantiated beliefs.

Kheren even less than most, despite his reputation of being a 'by the book' officer to those who did not know of his bewildering talent to 'put out rabbits out of hats.' Still, he had been in Starfleet long enough and mingled with 'outworlders' long enough to recognize the mindset of spiritual people like Bajorans. He did not understand it, could not acknowledge it, but he could at least leave it be... as long as it didn't interfere with his ship, his duties and the well-being of those under his protection.

But here was not the point of Oseno's visit. It looked to the Andorian Captain that his Chief Strategic Operations Officer was not here just to announce this promotion opportunity.

Patiently, he waited for the Bajoran to get to that point.

Oseno nodded.

"Yes Sir, it's an important posting...but I would have to leave Starfleet to take it. I'm uncertain if I'm prepared to do that. In terms of my career...I've more than accomplished what I set out to do. My father was Starfleet, and I wanted nothing more than to follow in his footsteps, but I've done more than that; I've surpassed him in every way possible, and to leave it all now...it's a lot to consider. I would ask the Prophets for guidance, but to be honest I've never exactly been the most devout worshiper, much to my mother's dismay."

He smiled remembering his mother constantly scolding him for not making it to services on time.

"It's not that I don't believe, it was always more that it got in the way of other things. But I suppose I'm digressing a bit. I guess what I'm asking, Sir, is; what would *you* do? Have you ever considered leaving Starfleet? If so, what made you stay? Sometimes, I wish I was more like Captain Syntron, it might make something like this easier"

Kheren's antennae curved inward in the typical Andorian way of smiling.

"I am not sure that Captain Syntron would agree with you. He just lost his Chief Medical Officer over his command decisions during the maiden voyage of the Phoenix. Nothing is easy... even if you go at it logically... because logic may always be true, but truth is not always logical."

He made a pause, obviously thinking hard about what Oseno had said. Then he sighed.

"To answer your question; no I never considered leaving Starfleet. It is the home, the *keth*, clan I made for myself, because it agrees with what I believe in... and with what I am. "

He stood up and walked a few paces as if to first face the thoughts he was about to share before voicing them; or just to decide to. He did not turn around when he spoke next, after a moment of silent introspection.

"I *did* however leave my homeworld... and I never intend to come back. But, unlike you, it was an easy decision as it was not because of a sense of accomplishment; quite the opposite... but it *was* to move to bigger and better things. And for me, *that* was Starfleet."

Now he turned around to face his guest.

"You come to me for guidance like you might have turned to your Prophets... I am deeply honored... and to tell the truth, quite at a loss to answer you. I am no 'prophet' or 'messiah' in any sense of the word, despite what some of my people may want you to believe. Yes, I have been a teacher once... but showing someone how to hold a *uushan-tor* without cutting oneself is much simpler than counselling a friend how to go on with his life."

His silvery eyes stared a moment at the softer orbs of the Bajoran. Then his dark blue finger pointed at the combadge on his chest.

"You say you went beyond your initial goals in Starfleet. But, is there anything else now in Starfleet, or through Starfleet, that could become for you a *new* goal? Isn't there anything that could make you want to stay in Starfleet?"

"Of course there is, Sir. Starfleet, Lotus Fleet, has been the only home I've known since I started at the Academy. It isn't that I dislike Starfleet at all, in fact quite the opposite. The things I've seen and done in Starfleet, I could never have done if I'd joined the Militia. The people I've served with and the officers I've helped train... the security force on the Alsea... those are still my people for the most part; and there is a lot of galaxy out there that I've seen only a fraction of. Of course, I do still have family on Bajor and I'm sure my mother would love to have me on Deep Space 9; and that is something to consider as well."

Oseno paused, as he'd noted before it was a lot to take in, and some of it he realized the captain likely could not understand as he was ostracized by his people and had no family, no clan or even a homeworld to return to.

The Andorian indeed took a moment to ponder what he was being told. The slight wavering of his antennae said how deeply he was thinking it over.

"Then, consider it from the other angle; what would you lose by staying in Starfleet... or if on the other hand you resigned your commission?"

Oseno thought for a moment.

Points to the captain for turning it around on me, but he's right, I need to examine this as best I can and that means taking everything into account.

"I have nothing to lose really by staying. My service record is very good and I hold a command rank on one of the most prestigious ships in the Fleet. If I resigned, there's no telling on what I'd miss out on not to mention the friends and comrades I'd be leaving behind. Then there's C... err... Lieutenant Steele; we're... close... and if I leave, there's no telling when I'll see her again. Of course, I do have family and friends on Bajor that I haven't seen since I left for the Academy. And, as you said, DS9 is a very important posting both to Bajor and the Federation."

Kheren blinked but his antennae curved slightly towards Jureth.

"Family is where you come from... and where you may return to... But is that really what, or who, lies now before you?"

Before the Bajoran could answer, he sighed briefly and spoke pointedly.

"And consider this; up until now, the liaison between the Federation and Bajor on DS9 had always been a Militia officer. Why could it not be now a Starfleet officer? And an accomplished and respected one from Bajor at that?"

Oseno was silent for a long moment. Obviously stirred by his problem and moved by his decision to come to him, of all people, for counsel, Kheren walked to the nearest transparency. He looked outside, at the splendid view of the ringed, disc-shaped form of Starbase Lotus and beyond, at distant lights of the stars.

After a moment, he spoke again, his eyes still to the vastness beyond.

"You asked me what *I* would do; for me there would have been no hesitation. To you, to most, Starfleet is a career. To me, it is my life; all that I want to be, all that I want to have, all that I want to share. Anyone or anything who would want to take that away from me would simply be wanting to take away my life. My wives know it; I know it. Thus, of all people in this universe, I am the least person you should listen to."

Then, the Andorian turned on his heels and walked back to his seat to face Oseno.

"K'ntaëmpl lae gleaççae den tänn Aômm... You should look at the ice of your soul, as we say on Andoria. You should listen, really listen, only to yourself."

"Thank you, Sir," Jureth replied truly grateful for his friend and commander's advice. "I will take what you have said to heart. I have a lot of thinking to do before I reply to the General. I'll be going, and leave you to your recuperation. Please thank your wives for allowing me to steal you for a bit."

"Stealing me from my wives these days is not a bother, Commander; it is a relief."

If ever Kheren was joking, none could tell by his face alone.

"Glad if I have been of any help to you. Whatever you decide, it should be what is best for you... and that is all that really matters in the end. The rest of the universe will have to deal with it."

Oseno bowed slightly and made his exit heading back toward his own quarters to get some rest as well.

PART THREE : FAMILY HONOR

Attending his step-brother's attainment ceremony, where-in a young Ferengi would auction off personal items of strong sentimental value to raise capital for their first business venture, David Rogers had bought what he had surmised was certificates of graduation and other documents, long since gathering mold in his brother's home. Upon return to Starbase Lotus, David had discovered the bill of sale within the documents, listing a young human female sold to Orion slave traders some twenty years ago. Affixed to the document had been a few strands of hair and, his curiosity piqued, Rogers had gotten these follicle's tested.

The results had been conclusive; the DNA matched perfectly with Commander Rogers' own.

It was his sister's.

Long thought dead in the attack on the luxury liner that had claimed his father's life and the rescue of himself by DaiMon Mok, this was the young human female sold as so much property from a trader who's culture at the time saw even women of his own kind as such.

The need for restitution had risen then in David Rogers heart.

Pushing aside the twenty-month old memory, but not all that far from his mind, Commander David Rogers returned his half eaten meal back into the replicator of the class XI shuttle Sagan and went forward to the pilot seat. Having left Earth after enduring a follow up psychological test, David readied himself for the docking at Utopia Plenitia, his old stomping grounds. The Sagan, fully repaired at Starbase Lotus, was being returned to Mars and David had finagled the use of the shuttle in order to comply with Doctor Nasaro-Myth's recommendation for the follow-up psych test. The alien entity's mind contact with Rogers on the planetoid mission had the Deltan bone crusher concerned.

And, David had thought, it was a complete waste of time... but fit pretty well into his long term personal plans.

For starters, his plan required him to get to the Sol system as fast as possible; not in the nearly three months a shuttle could do at warp 6. But he knew how to tweak a warp core to perform beyond it's specs... even if it would eventually burn it out. But that would in fact serve the last part of his plan fine, once he hid the shuttle on phobos, one of the two moons of Sol IV before coming down planetside through the transporter of the robot sensor station there.

Now there was the problem of his "official" return to Starbase Lotus. Fortunately, the USS Republic had needed to get rare vaccines from Starfleet's Medical and it would be travelling at top speed, crossing the eighty light years between The Hromi Sector and the heart of Federation Space in merely six weeks then back just as fast once it got the precious cargo.

Even then, the next flight back to Starbase Lotus, in time for his ship's next assignment, would not leave him a lot of time to do what he had in mind.

And then, he needed something from Mars... and the opportunity presented by the visit to Earth was not to be passed up. David could finally get his plan into effect. He just needed one small tour from an old engineering friend at Utopia Plenitia shipyards. The USS Diamond Star had awaited his "inspection" for over a year now.

Hiding the shuttle should not have been possible in the very core system of the Federation; but then, this was the first part of the actual operation he had planned... but not it's beginning.

Twelve months before the USS Phoenix' Launch with him as her chief engineer, David had been at the Vlugta Asteroid Field in the Bajor Sector. Rogers' shore leave had been a get-away to the Ferengi home world, a holiday.

In actuality, this had been a shopping trip.

His personal fortune would be the collateral for the clandestine purchase, and delivery, of the last equipment needed to rescue his sister from years of servitude. He knew that official channels would avail home nothing. Starfleet would in no way, shape or form attempt to rescue one insignificant human-romulan slave girl from dangerous Nausicaan space. The needs of the many mentality was prevalent throughout the Federation worlds, regardless of what popular belief was.

Thus, David was resigned to rescue his sister on his own.

The memory was revived by this single thought. After greasing the palm of the young Bajoran bartender with a slip of gold pressed latinum, the non-committal youth had nodded toward a back table where had sat one of those still exceedingly rare and novel female Ferengi DaiMon. Walking back toward the secluded table, Rogers had casually smoothed his overcoat, making sure his personal Romulan disruptor pistol kept from his trader assistant youth at his back hip was properly loosened in it's holster. Grabbing the back of the chair opposite the trader, David had spun it about and had himself sat with the seat back in front of him. Eyeing the woman carefully, David had dived right into business.

"DaiMon Ishil, I believe you have the item I want on your ship, the Nerrak. Let's get down to payment, shall we?"

"Commander Rogers! What? No idle chit-chat first? You *Jhumôns* are well known for your disposition for talk."

"No time, Ishil. I'm not supposed to be out here. What's your price?"

"Direct to the transaction then... alright. Forty bars."

To give the transaction some nobility, David had scowled, as expected, and had countered defiantly.

"You are breaking me! Twenty-five!"

A smile had crossed the features of the fortyish Ferengi woman as she had appreciated the counter offer.

"Your father taught you well, Rogers. Thirty seven."

Showing a thoughtful face, David had mulled over the counter offer and had responded in kind. The barter had brought back fond memories of his time on DaiMon Moks' marauder, and the thrill of the trade had been exhilarating.

"Thirty two and not a slip more," he had countered.

With a grin that showed her pointed teeth poignantly, Ishil had responded in kind.

“Thirty four... and I will throw in the power couplings.”

David had no use for the couplings, but he had not needed for the DaiMon to know this.

“Agreed. Beam it directly to the hold on this storage chip.”

This deal had cost him over half his life savings, but the item was essential to his plan. Once back aboard the supply ship bound for the Hromi sector, David had verified that the Romulan item was in running shape and had promptly left the system. He had a date with an old friend to keep on Mars, and he had not wanted to be late for that meeting.

Now, only nine weeks left before the Phoenix' next launch, David met Jason at the expected afterwork bar in complex B two hours after last shift.

The *Stem Bolt* catered to many of the workers near Utopia Planitia. Having plied his old shift boss with many drinks and retold hi-jinks of their old days working together, the expected subject of shipbuilding inevitably surfaced; as David knew it would. Moreover, knowing Jason's current assignment, the USS Diamond Star took center stage.

Rogers let slip that he had not had the chance to tour the Diamond Star, the sister ship of Lotus Fleet's own USS Horizon; so while he was still here in Sector 001, he hoped for an invitation to tour the Lotus class vessel. From his friend, it was extended as he had hoped for. Security was passed through at McKinley station without incident. A senior engineer with a Star Fleet commander in escort was not unusual enough to arouse scrutiny, especially when Jason Shroud was a senior engineer at McKinley.

After an extensive walk-through of the ship, David had managed to 'accidentally' leave his PADD connected under the command console on the battle bridge.

Four days after Rogers and the Sagan had left Mars' orbit undetected the same way he had come in and at the same core-burning warp 9 speed, the innocuous looking PADD chirped and interjected the command code override of the ship's main computer through the command interface of the battle bridge on deck 8.

It was no surprise to David that the same codes were still being used for capital ships here at Mars; they had done so for years here on vessels in dock, especially for one who merely served as an engineering platform for the new starship class. Once override was established, a cold start of the warp core and a shutdown of tractor beams and magnetic clamps was input and the power umbilicals severed by the sudden departure.

David had preprogrammed orders in the PADD, which located and beamed out any remaining technician's remaining on board with the ship's own emergency transporter grid, while the impulse drive powered up and engaged. Unmanned and under remote guidance, the massive vessel moved out of the hulking arms of McKinley station and gained momentum, leaving a wake of alarms behind her.

Later, security records would show Rogers being the last one authorized to board the ship... but a detailed analysis would eventually detect a holographic emission and a false biosignature overlaying his recorded pattern. It would not reveal who or what was behind the portable disguise... but it would make it appear that someone was impersonating Commander David Rogers of the USS Phoenix and boarded the engineering platform to orchestrate the theft with a modified PADD stolen in Utopia Plenitia supplies.

Three minutes later, the USS Diamond Star warped out of the Sol system and sped toward the rendez-vous point where Rogers already waited with his shuttlecraft.

Wolf 359.

While awaiting the arrival of his commandeered ship aboard his now warpless damaged shuttle, David replaced one of the anodyne relays with a faulty one and beamed the good one off the Sagan. When the Diamond Star dropped out of warp and coasted to a full stop amid the wreckage of the infamous first Borg encounter at Wolf 359, David carefully engaged the impulse drive and docked in the empty main shuttlebay on deck 4. Quickly making his way to the battle bridge, he finished installing the command override's on the rest of the ship's systems and set course for Verex III, in the Borderlands, at transwarp 3.

The remaining radiation from the ancient battle site would completely mask his transwarp trail when any pursuit of his warp trail would be followed there. And aside from the USS Horizon, in dock for repair and resupply and the decommissioned USS Lotus, both eighty light years away, there were no ships in the entire quadrant that could track and catch up with the Diamond Star before David could complete what he had set out to do.

After two full days installing and calibrating the Romulan cloaking device he had bought from DaiMon Ishil, the Diamond Star dropped out of warp roughly three AUs from Verex III and David engaged the cloak. Shimmering dully, the massive starship seemed to fluctuate as the powerful device energized. This newest Romulan technology, first encountered on the Scimitar in 2379 by the USS Enterprise-E under Captain Jean-Luc Picard, produced no tachyon emissions or antiproton traces, thus enabling the Diamond Star to be untraceable to current Alpha and Beta quadrant tracking technologies.

From his position on the battle bridge, David engaged the impulse drive and moved forward toward the southern hemisphere of the planet.

At a high orbital vantage point, the Diamond Star floated undetected and Rogers started scanning the large city below. He had returned the ship's sensors with a detronal sensor from the medical bay. This genetic scan had been tuned to his own DNA signature, thus enabling David to scan for a Romulan-Human Human life form the same as his own bio signature.

It wasn't long before one entity stood out on the scan; a female subject currently within a three story dwelling along the perimeter of the city.

With measured steps, David moved quickly, leaving the battle bridge and arriving to transporter room 2 near the medical bay. Using the modified scan, David tuned the transporter to the specific signature of Shelly Rogers and energized.

In the med bay, bio bed 2, the woman materialized within the predefined stasis field of the medical bed and a mild sedative applied to keep the subject asleep until David could leave the system.

Thus, the Diamond star cruised stealthily away from the planet and out of the system where, dropping the cloak, David once again engaged the ship's powerful transwarp drive and disappeared from the borderlands.

He was not all worried about legalities. Slavery was had been outlawed from the start by the Articles of the United Federation of Planets, just as the freedoms and rights of individual sentient beings were strongly and prominently defined; and Starfleet General Orders, rules and regulations were established to enforce both positions. There would be no official protest, accusations or charges brought against him for what he had done; on the contrary, he would even be commended.

Of course, the unauthorized use of a Starfleet vessel for personal purposes was another matter... so was the use of a cloaking device on such a ship...

But all in due time.

In barely a few hours, the transwarp vessel arrived at Epsilon Ceti B II in the Risa Sector.

In the USS Diamond Star's immense Medical Bay, David stood silently, staring at the inert form of his sister, in stasis within the confines of a medical bed. Her years of servitude within the Orion Syndicate were telling upon her features while her arms and legs showed signs of breakage and malnutrition.

The years had not been kind to her, and Rogers' fury burned at the thought.

His step-father would pay for her sufferings.

All of them.

Turning to the nearby console, David set up the transport coordinates and prepared the unit to transport Shelly to the surface of Risa; more specifically, into the bio bed of a small non-descript hospital within the city of Nuvia, the capital. Because of the nearby Federation Starbase 12, the beam down had to be quick and timely; scan for an empty bed, then transport and raise cloak again. For approximately forty seconds, the commandeered Lotus class vessel would be on Risan and Federation sensors, but David had the timing perfected and the escape course already programmed.

Arriving at the battle bridge, Rogers sat and started the cloak dropping procedures while simultaneously scanning the city medical centre. A bed was located in obstetrics, and it would do. The massive star ship decloaked above Risa and the confined transport beam sent his sister down to a better life.

As he watched the monitor from the med bay, David wept slightly, that he could not even risk talking with her to tell her who he was and why this had happened to her. It was better that she be a Jane Doe on Risa.

Staring at the empty bed, David reluctantly tapped an icon on the command board of his chair and the cloak reengaged. Powerful energies surged through the Diamond Star as her impulse drive threw the ship forward at full impulse and the planet fell away. Barely a few seconds later, her transwarp drive engaged and the huge ship flew beyond the normal velocity scale to the next stop on Rogers' mission; delivering him back to his fleet and then return the automated Federation starship to her owners at Mars.

The Diamond Star dropped out of warp in a protomatter nebula near the uninhabited Zeta Leporis system. Having set the programming parameters of the ships next voyage, David left the bridge and, minutes later, was leaving the ship aboard the Sagan. Once the Diamond Star left, he initiated an overpowered impulse micro-jump, which effectively blew the faulty anodyne relay in the Sagan's main power coupling systems.

Now adrift with only thrusters available, he set course to exit the nebula and proceed toward Lotus base. Most onboard power systems were offline, only minimal life support, thrusters and weak shields were left.

In the meantime, the Diamond Star, under programming, warped out of the system and veered above the galactic plane of the ecliptic, leaving the more densely populated areas behind her. Climbing to warp 2, her transwarp drive cut in and the Diamond Star jumped into the particular subspace domain known but to a very few galactic species. Reaching transwarp 5, the immense ship left Federation space, and most all other species space, travelling a light year every sixteen seconds.

The sister ship Horizon and the only other Lotus class vessel built had travelled from Mars to Lotus base in about twenty-one minutes; Over eighty light years. Thus, within the hour, the Diamond Star was already leaving the Orion arm of the milky way galaxy on her long loop back to Mars. One week later, the seemingly minuscule spec of the ship would drop out of transwarp at nearly thirty eight thousand light years above the galactic plane and sit, lost in the comparative darkness. Programmed instructions would release baryon-irradiated gas into the entire ship, killing all genetic information on her surfaces and wiping away all traces of humanoid habitation.

Once a few hours saturation would be completed, the starship would open herself to the vacuum of space and purge the deadly gas and radiation from within. Then, closing up tightly again, she would re-engaged the drives and return to Mars via a longer loop across the top of the galaxy and back into the Orion arm from the relative direction of the Sagittarius arm, falling out of transwarp and then warping to come to a stop above Utopia Plenitia about a month after her disappearance. Programming instructions then would have erased all instructions and flight logs from within her main and sub computer systems and then shut down main power and set everything condition blue.

Her owners would then come to reclaim her.

As all this would occur, David traversed the masking effects of the protonebula and within six days finally reached the periphery that allowed a weak signals to escape. Signalling Lotus Base, David requested assistance, coincidentally reaching the USS Phoenix as she was launching.

His cover story would complete his private covert operation quite nicely, giving him the alibi about never having reached Earth... already far away on his ship's next mission when the stolen ship would be found... and so obvious to all, someone else of unknown origin usurped his identity to steal away temporarily the Diamond Star for some unfathomable purpose.

He would be safe... and so would be his sister.

As for Daimon Mok, that would also be true...

But only for a little while longer.

THE END