

A new universe... an old enemy

STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

BRAVE NEW WORLD

The Third Major Engagement of Lotus Fleet



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BRAVE NEW WORLD

LOTUS FLEET THIRD FLEET ACTION

Forum roleplaying session

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Cover by Kheren

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Evshell as Fleet Captain Allen Samji
and Commander Jeoy D. Sisko

Jeff T as Captain Syntron
and Lieutenant Elisha Leône

Redding as Commander Neil S. Redding
and Lieutenant Robert R. Moore

Jureth as Commander Oseno Jureth
Lieutenant Junior Grade Aron'Son
and Lieutenant Mikaela Sirius

Sorripto as Commander Josha W. Riker
BLZBUB as Commander David Rogers

Snowfire as Commander Snowfire K'Leysha

Niomo as Lieutenant S'Tan Solius

Kheren as Captain Kheren
Commander Schaell Schyssillyss
and Lieutenant Junior Grade Jonathan Livingstone

PROLOGUE

It was a rather mundane asteroid field lost between star systems, the kind of stellar debris that either randomly coalesced from mutual gravitational attraction or slowly spread apart from the remnants of some stellar body's destruction long ago.

That was part of the matter interesting the researchers of the USS Asimov, a Nova class science vessel assigned by the Federation Science Council to the region. The few hundred meters of triangular saucer section at the prow and the upward pair of nacelles at the stern closely attached to the small squat tubular engineering section had flashed out of warp several days ago. She was now just completing it's initial astrometric survey of the asteroid cluster and her main deflector dish now parted the micrometeorites swarming between the larger floating rocks in the direction of the largest of them all.

It had been designated Sarabande by Starfleet Intelligence; one of those inappropriate names designed to throw off any interest and knowledge into what was really lying there.

"Axial orbit established at thirty thousand kilometers from the surface, Captain," the helmsman reported, looking at the large asteroid, almost a planetoid by sheer size alone, that loomed on their viewing screen.

"Thank you, helmsman," mechanically reported the woman in the central chair behind him. "Sensor scan please."

"Initial report from the USS Phoenix confirmed, M'am," the man at the science station answered without lifting his eyes from his monitor. "Weak but constant interference field of some kind. Sensors are unable to penetrate the surface of the asteroid but there is definitely a sizeable quantity of alloy on the surface, consistent with the pattern of some sort of structure; configuration does not match any known cultural database."

"What about that energy field?" worried the commanding officer.

"Beats me what it is," the woman at the engineering station grumbled as he fingers ran over her console. "I don't know how but it's not only interfering with our sensors but it is also exerting some minute draining effect on our antimatter core and our impulse reactor. Our thrusters are also strained by the effect."

"Did the Phoenix report mention this?" the captain asked with definite annoyance in her voice.

"Negative, Captain," the Vulcan standing at her right answered without even looking at the PADD in his hand.

"Sloppy work," grumbled the woman in the command chair.

"Captain," then said the Vulcan, "the Phoenix made this discovery while on her shakedown cruise; these readings were interpreted at the time as possible technical deficiencies from their brand new engines."

"The Phoenix is under the command of a Vulcan, is she not?"

"Affirmative; Captain Syntron, former Executive Officer of the USS Artemis."

The woman in the chair snorted.

"A commanding officer promoted out of fortuitous circumstances from apprenticeship under an Andorian captain himself risen too quickly to command...And of course, he's a Vulcan; hence why you come up to his defense..."

Her First Officer offered her a raised eyebrow.

"Captain Syntron has earned his command through distinctive action and meritorious conduct in several critical missions. To suggest that I would need to... defend him... and moreover on the sole basis of our common origin..."

The captain waved a hand in dismissal.

"Nevermind. We however have a well-proven research ship and an experienced scientific crew... and we are here to make a thorough survey and research of this unknown site they have unearthed, under orders not only of the Federation Science Council but of Starfleet Security as well. So... what about this draining field?"

"I can't answer you right now, Captain," the chief science officer reported after a moment. "All measuring instruments report... negative. It's like there is nothing there. Yet, the dispersal pattern and effect are consistent with what we define as an energy field... except that it is registering as... negative."

"A... *negative energy* field? That makes no sense!"

"I agree, Captain... maybe it's because it is so weak that even our instruments cannot really register it..."

"This ship has state of the art scanners!" protested the engineering woman. "Have you tried boosting the signal?"

"We are already at one-hundred fifty percent of normal parameters. Still registers negative."

"It might be weak but it's definitely there... and affecting all our power systems except our batterie reserves," added the chief engineer.

"Communications are also down, M'am" the Bajoran Ops officer stated. "I tried sending out a relay buoy but, once it goes outside the field, we loose contact with it."

"So we're on our own... and we need to get closer if we are to do what we came for," the captain concluded. "Is our first survey team ready to beam down?"

"Captain, I do not recommend a beam down," said the science chief. "There is a definite danger of the transporter's annular confinement bream being distorted by the field's effect. What we would transport might not materialize whole and in proper order."

"Didn't the Phoenix leave pattern enhancers down there?"

"Negative, Captain," answered the Vulcan at her side. "They followed standard procedure and did not leave anything behind on a site not yet claimed officially by the Federation at the time. It is logical to assume that the draining effect of the field would have eventually deactivated them anyway."

The captain tapped her combadge.

"Survey team; report to shuttlebay for landing operation on the main site coordinates. Away team will join you shortly."

She then turned to the Vulcan.

"While they do our work down there, try to see if you can deactivate whatever is powering that draining field."

"Captain, if I may; this could be interpreted as interference into another species..."

Again, the captain's hand cut him off with a dismissal wave.

"Tell that to Starfleet next time we report. If they didn't bother with that during or following the Phoenix' initial mission, why should we bother any more with it ourselves?"

"Captain Ross; compounding a possibly wrong decision in one of our own is hardly ethical... or prudent."

"Disobeying order is worse, Commander Seekal; and our orders are to investigate this discovery. Let the brass debate the prudence, the ethics and the righteousness of those orders; our job is to carry them out. See to it, Exec."

With a nod, the Vulcan left the bridge with the chief science officer and chief engineer, their assistants smoothly taking their stations as the senior officers exited through the turbolift.

For a good while, all remained quiet on the bridge of the Asimov. Since orbital survey was next to impossible except with passive, unpowered means, there was not all that much they could do and it was all done in some eerie, almost foreboding silence. It would take time for the shuttle to land and deploy a relay for both transport and communication. But here, the typically Vulcan thoroughness of the USS Phoenix' report had provided clear and precise instructions as to how to proceed. And so, the Bajoran woman at ops finally announced that they were in contact with the landing party.

"Report, Exec."

"Captain, we are receiving you loud and clear. We are before the main access originally opened by the Phoenix' own away team. Request permission to proceed."

The woman in the central seat sighed. Vulcans and their obsession with details and procedures...

"Go," she simply said.

"We will report at fifteen minutes interval of our progress. We are opening the main access. Ensign Chadoo and Ensign Shirakawa remain in the shuttlecraft to keep all relays active and continue scannings and records on the surface. Now entering within the structure."

And that is how everything started on this side of the horizon.

CHAPTER ONE : THE BRAVE AND THE BOLD

In Starfleet Command's main Hearing Chamber at Earth's Headquarters, there were not many people in the stark room; five to be exact, on what was actually a very nice day in the city of San Francisco. Two human males, and one Vulcan woman, all wearing the uniform of Starfleet admirals sat at the podium in the front and arrayed behind them were the flags of the United Federation of Planets and Starfleet Command. On the left side of the room in front of the podium sat Commander Lorek, another Vulcan and, on the right, senior year Starfleet Cadet Aron'Son.

Everyone in the room knew why they were there. This hearing would decide the fate of the cadet and his future in Starfleet. In many ways, Aron'Son was like any other Starfleet cadet; he was intelligent, ambitious, and driven. The thing that set him apart was his appearance. Aron'Son was very tall and powerfully built, his skin grey and scaly with short spines framing his bald head and stern flat face with a large flat nose and small slanted piercing eyes.

He was Jem'Hadar.

Rescued by a Starfleet vessel from a drifting shuttle, treated for his ketracel white addiction and thoroughly interrogated by Starfleet Intelligence, Aron'Son had an interesting history to be sure. Still, there were those who wanted him kept in a cage like an animal and that is why these people were assembled in this room.

Aron'Son did not resent those who wished him incarcerated. In fact, he understood them. He was their enemy... or at least, he had been bred to be their enemy. The Dominion would have not allowed an enemy soldier to walk free among them and so it surprised the Jem'Hadar that he had been permitted to walk freely on Earth. When they told him he'd be even permitted to attend Starfleet Academy as he requested, he assumed he would be under guard the entire time; but he had not been. As awkward as it had been for his classmates, Aron'Son had walked freely on Academy grounds and anywhere else he wished. he had been told this was the Federation way.

Now the beings in front of him would determine if he would remain free.

"This hearing is hereby called to order," the Vulcan woman, Admiral T'Penn, stated. "Cadet Aron'Son; do you know why you are here?"

"I do, Admiral."

T'Penn nodded.

"Very well; where is your representative?"

"I do not know, Admiral."

"If the cadet has no representative, he will have to represent himself," Commander Lorek said.

"You would like that, wouldn't you, Commander," One of the older greying Humans, Admiral Marshall, asked. "Just like your boss..."

Aron'Son respected Marshall as the high-ranking officer had been on his side from day one.

"It is irrelevant what I or Admiral Redding would like, Admiral," Lorek replied. "It is stated in the process that the cadet..."

Just then, the door to the hearing room opened and a human man walked in. His clear cut angular clean-shaven features, large clear eyes and salt and pepper black hair were well known to everyone in the room.

"The cadet will not have to represent himself," the new arrival said matter of factly. "Doctor Julian Bashir for the, hum...defense, Sirs."

"You are well known to this panel, Doctor and this is not a trial, only a hearing," Admiral T'Penn said. "Very well, we will proceed. Commander Lorek, please state your position."

Lorek stood, and without moving began speaking.

"It is the opinion of Starfleet Intelligence that the cadet should remain on Earth following his graduation and not be permitted to insert himself into Starfleet. We are not convinced that his arrival is not simply a Dominion attempt to subvert the Federation and Starfleet."

T'Penn nodded.

"Doctor?"

Bashir stood nervously and straightened his uniform top before speaking.

"Yes, hum... well... Admirals... Aron'Son has done nothing but prove himself loyal since he was released from my care. He has passed every test and answered every question asked by Commander Lorek and his colleagues. He has attended the Academy with exemplary behavior, not missing a single day and scored exceptionally high in all of his classes. His instructors speak well of him every chance they get. We have here a unique opportunity to study what was once an enemy, to get to know him and to benefit from his knowledge and intellect. If Aron'Son was planning to subvert Starfleet, why would he have not done so by now? He has been moving freely at the very heart of our endeavors for four years now. He could have blown up Starfleet Command, or assassinated the Federation President, or..."

"We get it, Doctor," Admiral Marshall interrupted. "We will confer and return when we have reached a decision."

The admirals departed into an antechamber and Aron'son turned to Doctor Bashir.

"You were late."

Bashir smiled the charming smile he was quite known for.

"Only a little; How are you feeling?"

"I am fine, Doctor. What do you believe they will decide?"

"I'm confident you'll be permitted to remain in Starfleet. They will be going against all that the Federation stands for if they keep you here without reason."

It was only ten minutes before the three admirals returned and the others stood as they entered the room.

"Cadet Aron'Son," Admiral T'Prenn stated; "It has been decided that you will be permitted to graduate from Starfleet Academy with the class of 2411. Furthermore, you will be permitted to accept a provisional assignment of Starfleet's choosing with a provisional rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade as per the excellence of your academic results and Cadet Cruise in accordance with Starfleet Academy rules. Should you serve in Starfleet, with a clean service record for two years, your rank will become permanent and no further inquiries will be made of you. Do you understand?"

"I do, Admiral."

"Very well; you will be assigned to the USS Horizon of Lotus Fleet under the command of Captain Kheren. Doctor Bashir... you will accompany the cadet to his new posting upon his graduation, this hearing is adjourned."

Bashir turned and smiled again at Aron'Son.

"See? I told you."

Eleven weeks later these same words were repeated when they disembarked from the USS Republic to Starbase Lotus.

The transporter officer engaged the transporter beam and waited for the two forms to materialize in front of him. When they did, the human's jaw dropped almost to the floor as he stared at the hulking form wearing a Starfleet security uniform and the human man beside him wearing a medical uniform under a white lab coat. It was the human who spoke to the incredulous operator

"Hello; I am Doctor Julian Bashir from the General Surgeon's Office. Can you tell me where I can find Fleet Captain Samji?"

The officer stammered.

"I... that is... I can call him for you, Sir."

The officer slowly tapped his combadge, not moving his eyes off the Jem'Hadar standing quietly beside one of the most legendary medical officers in the Federation.

"Transporter room 4 to Fleet Captain Samji... Sir, you have... visitors."

The firm, clear voice on that answered sounded not at all surprised.

"Have they completed all routine security measures?"

"Ah... affirmative, Sir. ID transponder confirmed; transporter subatomic scan conclusive; personal possessions scanned, separately transported to security for direct examination and resent to temporary allocated quarters; official orders verified and approved; voice and sensory scans validated; forcefield in place during materialization with two guards in the room and two outside with no incident to report."

Aron'Son's stony face didn't register anything, but in his mind he had to be genuinely surprised; such... routine security measures made even his own coming to Starfleet intelligence look like a security check in a shopping mall.

He had heard that Lotus Fleet was the elite division of Starfleet, created after the Dominion War... but this was far beyond what he would have expected from any Federation facility; even the best Jem'Hadar shock troop would have been stopped dead in its tracks, easily neutralized, disarmed and sent straight to their brig before they would have even rematerialized on the starbase. Even a Founder would have been detected, identified and dealt with, whatever disguise it would have assumed.

As he realized this, the forcefield around the transporter shimmered off and the pair of guards, a stoic Vulcan and a lithe Caitian, positioned themselves to let them pass to the exit of the large room. More than several quick stares were aimed in his direction from the other nearby pads but the eyes of both sentinels never even blinked away from them.

Over the comm system, the authoritative voice that had answered the operator resounded again.

"Send them to my office, will you, Mister Koranksi?"

"Aye, Sir."

With a nod, the transporter chief made the two guards escort the Doctor and his astounding companion out of the area, where the two guards on the other side of the door replaced as another pair came in to take over their former post. The swiftness, smoothness and efficiency of even this casual changing of the guard left no doubt that this was indeed an elite division of the policing arm of the United Federation of Planets.

Despite the impressive security measures he could discern everywhere on the station, Aron'Son found that this was far from a mere military installation. Starbase Lotus was truly a place of living, a home for thousands of individuals from hundreds of worlds and species, a kaleidoscope of shapes, colors, movements, sounds and smells that was even more overwhelming than what Starfleet Academy had been. Oh, here there were mostly Humans as it had been on Earth, by far the most dynamic and adventurous species in this multifaceted spacefaring civilization; but here, there were many more representatives of other sentient species than the Jem'Hadar had even imagined existed in the universe, even after four years at Starfleet Academy; and they were all working and living in perfect harmony, a harmony that needed none of the artificially or military forced religious subservience to one single species like had been the Dominion.

It was indeed a marvel to behold, even for those born within it; and it said much about how this United Federation of Planets had succeeded in defeating the much older, much more powerful Dominion.

Those thoughts were cut short when, coming near the central hub of the starbase were sat the huge elliptical command center, the guards stopped, pressed achime and waited for a verbal response to "enter" before nodding to Bashir and his charge and standing aside to let them go through the door. But Aron'Son nodded that they stayed by the entrance.

He knew now that it was not just for his sake; nevertheless, to be so respected as a potential threat still touched an old chord of pride in him.

Beyond the door, they were met by a middle-sized golden-skinned man with greying well-cut hair and beard wearing the pips of a Fleet Captain on the red collar of his black and grey-shouldered standard Starfleet uniform. He offered a firm handshake to both of them, his dark eyes straight at their own.

"Welcome to Starbase Lotus; I am Fleet Captain Allen Samji, commander of this facility."

It was a credit to the man's discipline and experience that he did not show his genuine surprise, not only at recognizing the famous doctor, but even more who was accompanying him.

After offering them a seat and refreshments, even guessing that the Jem'Hadar in the junior officer uniform would in all probability decline to both, he went to sit behind his large transparent aluminum desk. Again, to his credit, he took the unexpected arrival in stride and came straight to the point.

"May I ask, Doctor, what is the purpose of you and your friend's visit to Starbase Lotus?"

Bashir cleared his throat.

"Yes, of course... I am... escorting... the lieutenant here to his new post. This is provisional Lieutenant Aron'Son and he has been assigned to your USS Horizon."

Oh, Kheren is going to just love this, instantly thought the base commander, knowing full well how parcimonious the Andorian captain was about his personnel.

But he also knew that Kheren himself, at one point, had been imposed by Fleet Command on the late Captain Kevin Froud as Exec of the also late USS Artemis. So he was hardly in a position to balk... well, not as much as he could have been.

Bashir fumbled in the pocket of his lab coat for the PADD bearing their orders and placed it on the desk.

"The orders were given by Starfleet Command, and approved, begrudgingly I might add, by Starfleet Intelligence. I won't be staying of course, but as I have been with the lieutenant since his arrival on Earth due to my extensive research on Jem'Hadar physiology during the Dominion War, those in power thought it best that I accompany him here."

Starfleet Intelligence involved in this... getting better by the second, Samji mused silently in a bittersweet manner.

Truth be told, the flagship's commanding officer's history with Starfleet Intelligence was not such a good one.

Bashir went silent to allow the base commander to read over the orders and Aron'Son stood silently by as well trying to process everything he'd seen as they'd moved through the giant facility. He had begun to gain a respect for these Humans and their ingenuity and cognitive process. His Jem'Hadar mind was still superior of course, but he could now see why The Dominion had been defeated when they attacked the Alpha Quadrant initially. These mammals were much more intelligent than The Founders had given them credit for. Even the Breen attacking their home world had not daunted them; only hardened their resolve. Aron'Son believed he had a future among his former enemies. He certainly could not go back to The Dominion; they would simply execute him.

So really, if he wanted to live, here was where he had to be.

"Well... orders are orders," finally said Samji, apposing his own command approval on the PADD. "I'm due to meet Captain Kheren soon to debrief him on his next mission; I'll inform him of these orders then. In the meantime, Lieutenant Aron'Son, you will be assigned temporary quarters here on the starbase, until you have met your new commanding officer and received his approval to board his ship. As Captain of the Horizon, he still has a final say on the matter. Be ready to answer his summon or that of Commander Redding, his first officer, momentarily."

Both Bashir and Aron'Son blinked at Samji. But only the doctor voiced their obvious surprise and confusion.

"Commander Redding? Is he related to Admiral Neil S. Redding of Starfleet Intelligence?"

"It's... complicated... and classified, Doctor," the Hindu man answered.

His attention went back to the Jem'Hadar.

"Do you have any question at this time, Lieutenant?"

"No, Sir, I do not. I will wait until I am called to serve."

"Well then," Bashir said with a smile, "it seems we are set. If you don't mind, Fleet Captain, I'll be taking my leave. The captain of the supply vessel that delivered us assured me he was departing as soon as he was done unloading his cargo and unless I wanted to walk back to Earth I had better be aboard."

Samji stood up and offered his hand to the famous hero of the Dominion War.

"I'm sorry to see you go so soon, Doctor. Please come by anytime."

Then he turned to formally address the new recruit of Lotus Fleet.

"Lieutenant, your Academy record is outstanding and your personal record clean and certified. You are as fit to serve in Lotus Fleet as anyone here. I will confirm and record this momentarily for Starfleet Command. You will be contacted soon to report to your ship; in the meantime, you are free to enjoy the facilities of this station as any other junior officer of the fleet... although I heard your kind do not as a rule "enjoy" themselves; one of the many new challenges this new life of yours will offer."

A small smile crept at the corner of his mouth.

"You should also find Captain Kheren a... stimulating challenge as well."

Aron'Son nodded.

"You are correct, Sir, Jem'Hadar do not... recreate. I have found your holodecks useful for maintaining my combat skills. Though I would like to find a way to procure a genuine kar'takin. The replicators do not make an accurate representation. And I have read Captain Kheren's personal file. It is... interesting."

"That he is, among other things," smiled Samji. "And if you read his file, then you are aware that he is, among any commanding officer this side of the Dominion, the best one to work with you; not only is he Andorian, in all the Federation the one people that share anything with your own, but his own... early personal History is rumored to be much like your own as well... And he does not... recreate... either."

The Commander of Starbase Lotus nodded to the unique junior officer standing before him.

"Temporary quarters are available for you until you get settled on your ship. Your personal things are already waiting for you there. Just ask the computer and it will guide you. Unless there is anything else, Lieutenant, you are dismissed."

"Yes, Sir."

* * *

Commander Redding made his way down the corridor towards Fleet Captain Samji's office. He had arrived on station the day before and standard operating procedure would have been to check in within an hour of arrival; but in Redding's case, it was decided he should get updated with his last memories first from his, hopefully, recovered memory recorder from his latest mission.

He disliked running into people that he might have worked with for days or even months and not have a single memory of them, so he would stay undercover until the procedure was complete. This time regaining his last memories had been something of a treat, he knew not only how he had died and why, but that for once it had nothing to do with the devastating loss of his ship or its crew. And seeing as the Horizon and its crew were both back in port, his idea must have worked.

It was an outcome that made him nearly giddy with cheerfulness.

As he approached the starbase commander's office, he passed a slender, grey-haired man wearing a white lab coat over a blue-collared Starfleet uniform and gave him a respectful "Sir" as he did so. The man just nodded in return but stopped a few paces afterwards and looked back at him opening his mouth to speak.

Then he sighed, mumbling "classified..." and continued on his way to the next transport back towards Sector 001.

Redding entered the Samsi's office and spoke to the receptionist.

"I don't have an appointment but I was passing this way. if the Fleet Captain has time to see me, I'm Commander Redding from the USS Horizon." he said with a half smile.

"I know who you are, Commander." She smiled back. "He's in with... someone... at the moment. You can wait if you want, I don't think it will be long."

The way she said it piqued his curiosity.

"Someone you say?"

She leaned in close.

"It's a Jem'Hadar!" she whispered, "in a Starfleet uniform! It came in with Doctor Bashir no less, from the Surgeon General's office."

Redding simply went "huh" and, giving her a nod, he sat down to think about that while he waited.

Aron'Son exited the Fleet Captain's officer's bound for the quarters reserved for him. As he stepped into the outer office, the Jem'Hadar noted the human Commander seated in a chair and acknowledged the superior officer with a word.

"Sir," he said with a nod before moving on.

* * *

"I think I've seen everything now."

The transporter chief of transporter room 4 was still shaking his head. Having seen a living legend like Doctor Julian Bashir come to Starbase Lotus was already something to talk about; but seeing also a Jem'Hadar in a Starfleet uniform with Lieutenant pips on his collar, that was something else.

"No you haven't yet, Koranksi," came the reply of the security chief assisting him at the console.

He was checking the subatomic scan and biomedical data against filed records of the next arrival after confirming the identification chip sent from the USS Aurora, the Academy starship of Lotus Fleet. The new security procedures were devised to ensure full identification and control of anyone coming and going from the station; even an Undine or a Changeling would be detected through these measures, which included memory check interviews and verbal traps as well as more technical means. And no one's belongings were beamed at the same place and time as the subject before being sent for separate examination. Even clothing was replaced in transit by a fresh uniform or copy of it and any weapon confiscated, examined and sent to the armory to be requisitioned later by the owner with renewed controls specific to it.

All this ensured that no subversive agent could find his way in or out of Starbase Lotus, be it an infiltrator, a chemical compound or even a single Borg nanite.

Yet, that didn't always save them all from being surprised.

"Okay, Fisher, what are you bringing in this time?" grumbled Chief Koranksi as he adjusted controls for beam in, now unlocked by the positive completion of the security procedure.

"Brace yourself; this one is also one for the History books."

On the transporter pad in front of them, a tall form shimmered and coalesced into a sight only a handful of people in the galaxy had seen. It was easily two meters tall, thin and frail looking and entirely covered with blue, purple and black feathers under its Starfleet uniform. They flared out the entire length of long arms that ended with three opposable fingers. The legs were also disproportionally long in relation with the barrel-chested, short but very wide body topped by a small round head. An impressive crest of feathers, dotted with small blinking colored lights, rose on top and fell like a large mane around the leathery face almost made up entirely of a massive hooked beak and immense golden eyes that blinked fixedly at the two humans behind the console.

They too were blinking fixedly back at the newcomer, just as everyone else also looked at him, all visibly fascinated by its starkly distinctive and novel appearance.

"Permission to come aboard, Sir?"

The voice was soft, clear and surprisingly musical coming from so tall a being. It came out without even the slightest hint of an accent, in perfect textbook Federation standard.

Koranksi and Fisher, unaware of it, both nodded slowly and silently, still transfixed by the newcomer. Then, the forcefield around the transporter pad shimmered off and he lithely jumped off the platform.

Instantly, both security guards at the door leveled their weapons at him. The forcefield had been deactivated... but neither Fisher nor Koranksi had touched any control.

The transport area was immediately cleared by the other people around and Fisher came in front of the Bird-like being with his own phaser in his hand, leaving the transporter chief to check frantically his console. For a moment, the alien looked at one another with his unnerving raptor stare, his beak half open in obvious surprise. Then he bowed rapidly to each of them in turn.

"I... I am sorry... I was told not to do that..."

"What did you do? Explain yourself, Lieutenant!" barked the security chief.

"I activated your console, Sir. Since no one was, I assumed..."

"How could you activate the console from the transporter pad... and behind a forcefield?"

One of the three nailless, feathered fingers of his left hand pointed to the blinking lights adorning its thick and long head feathers.

"My *sh'reekh'ree'ss...* my integrated cerebrocranial biotech interface allows me to use electromagnetic connexions to activate..."

"This instrument should have been beamed out from you along with the rest of your possessions!" interrupted Fisher.

"Then, I would be dead," answered flatly the Lieutenant.

In the silence that followed, he explained further.

"The... instrument... was... grown out of my own neurones while I was still in the egg... fashioned through biotechnology as I grew up... and completely part of my cerebral and neurological make-up. Therefore, it is recorded on your medical files as one of my organs... which in truth it is, even if it is artificially made. To remove it, you would have to remove my brain as well."

The security team listened with dumbfounded fascination at the mesmerizing voice of the birdman and blinked a few seconds more before Fisher cleared his throat and signaled the others to lower their weapons and return to their post.

"Hum... well... I will have to report this incident... And until further notice by a ranking officer, you will abstain from using this... capability of yours while on the starbase. Is that understood, Lieutenant... Livingstone?"

Lieutenant Livingstone nodded and stood at attention.

"Understood, Chief. Sorry to have ruffled your feathers."

It was impossible to tell from this eagle-like face if the lieutenant was joking, mocking, oblivious to what he was saying or truly as serious as he sounded. Fisher shook his head and then waved him off.

"Carry on, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, Sir."

Once the newcomer had left transporter room 4, Koranksi exchanged a look with the security chief and scowled.

"What the blazes was that?"

"That, my friend, was a X'Ell."

"A what?"

"A X'Ell. No wonder you don't know; you've been posted here only for, what, a month now? You don't know about the Dyson shell."

"Oh yes I do; I went to the Academy too you know. The Starfleet records of the USS Enterprise are mandatory in the Contemporary History classes, including the Jenolan Incident where the USS Enterprise D of Captain Jean-Luc Picard discovered an abandoned Dyson sphere around an unstable star."

"Good for you, Koranksi; but what they don't teach, yet, in History classes is that a *second* such cosmic construct, a Dyson *shell*, was discovered a few years ago in this sector by the USS Artemis of Captain Kheren... And *this* one was around a stable star... and it was *not* abandoned."

The transporter chief's gaze wandered from the pad to the closed door and the two security guards also discussing quietly together.

"The... X'Ell?"

"You just met your first one... and, according to records, the only one you and I and everyone else will likely meet in our lifetime; unless this one finishes his Exchange Officer Program tour of duty with a positive report about us to his extremely friendly, extremely advanced but even more isolationist people."

"What... they think they're too good for us?" grumbled Koranksi as he was preparing for another beam in.

Fisher just snorted, starting to check an incoming ID signal.

"And how come it's... his... name is Livingstone? That's a Human name..."

"Yeah... Lieutenant Jonathan Livingstone."

"You're joking."

"Not at all; look here at his Starfleet ID."

"*He's* joking..."

Fisher made a short laugh.

"You heard what he called that... contraption of his that allows him to activate electromagnetic instruments with his brain; well if you look at the audiorecord analysis, you will realize that you heard barely half of it; their language is partly ultrasonic, like Graalek, the Andorian language... and utterly unpronounceable to anyone without a beak and a throat like theirs. It is said also that their names are literally songs minutes long... So, they adopt simpler, more accessible Federation names when dealing with us, which they usually choose from our cultural databases. This one apparently read Jonathan Livingstone Seagull."

"You think he chose that name for a reason?"

"*Everything* they do is for a reason," simply answered the security chief before getting his mind back fully to the security control of the next transport.

While this discussion was happening, the subject of their exchange was drawing more than one stare in his direction as he walked in the large hallways of the station, despite the very diverse population he was mingling in. As much as his looks, his way of moving also brought attention to himself as it was obvious he was careful not to bump into anyone or anything as he went by with a slow, deliberate and methodical walk that sometimes made him swerve wildly or stop abruptly to avoid any collision. But despite his convoluted walk, he managed to reach the central part of the starbase where could be found the office of the starbase's commander.

* * *

The last drop of ale slide out of the glass and into his mouth.

I am finally finished, the engineer thought with satisfaction.

He had made it his goal to stare at his computer screen for his entire shore leave to learn the entire database of engineering schematics and protocols for the USS Horizon.

Lieutenant S'Tan Solius slid his chair back and stretched, for what seemed like the first time in weeks. He now understood most of the Reaction Drive's systems as well as the additional unspecified modifications made to the warp core by the Transwarp Propulsion Group scientists of Utopia Plenitia.

He finally felt like an engineer again; a master of his craft.

After feeling somewhat unhelpful on the ship's last mission, once they arrived back at Starbase Lotus, S'Tan was determined to learn everything he could about the systems he was in charge of. He spent most of his days in his room learning. It wasn't the worst thing in the universe either. He had always enjoyed his time studying on Romulus...even if what he learned was really no longer useful. Since he was one of the few Romulans on station, he was sure that he was not missed at the bar and other recreational events the starbase held.

But it didn't bother him. Especially after receiving that message from his cousin. Large gatherings of low-grade security sounded more like asking to be poisoned than fun. He instead learned. And tinkered. His starbase quarters now could easily replicate Romulan Ale. He was already thinking about transferring that programming to the Horizon, although he wasn't sure if it was worth the risk on the ship. His activities were mostly ignored by the starbase, but on the ship, he already knew of the stringent security protocols the newly restored Captain held.

After shutting down his computer, he stepped outside his office. The call to return to duty had gone out over night and he reported to his office first thing to finish up his final 'exam.' He nodded to Baoule who was walking in as he was walking out.

"Good morning Lieutenant." the man said, "Enjoy your shore leave?"

The Romulan smirked and laughed.

"I kept my head down, yes."

"It's too bad that they can't just let us hang around on the station forever. It's so much... calmer."

"I don't know you for that long, Robert, but I feel like you'd hate being stuck on the station for longer than a few weeks. I am going to the mess to get some breakfast, I will return shortly."

The two men separated and the Romulan continued walking towards the turbolift.

After a short ride, he arrived at the mess and grabbed a plate of viinerine. For some reason, most people said it tasted like slop. S'Tan always enjoyed it, as it reminded him of his mother and father. And so he ate and relaxed, in preparation for what was to come.

"Enjoying the wait, Lieutenant?"

Snowfire had seen S'Tan enter the mess from where she had been sitting over at one of the smaller tables. She'd... well... she was pretty sure that she'd worked straight through the night without even slowing down. She *really* needed to get a handle on that...

No, no, concentrate.

She smiled down at the seated Romulan, eyes bright despite the tiredness she knew had to be evident somewhere in them; then again, maybe not. The normal schedule she kept to gave her about four times the amount of rest she actually needed. And she was getting distracted again, Goddess take it.

She gestured at the seat across from him.

"May I join you?"

The Romulan smiled.

"Of course, Commander; please, join me. it's not often that I get company."

After the black-skinned elfin woman was settled he shot her a question of his own.

"Did you enjoy your shore leave?"

"More than I expected, less than I would have hoped."

She gestured to the rank insignia on her breast.

"Promotion to what is effectively command rank within Starfleet does... not make things easy for me; especially so as I am the only member of my group to gain a rank higher than your previous one."

She sighed. Then, aware that S'tan likely had no idea what she was talking about, she explained.

"I'm part of a cultural exchange group from my people's Navy, you see. It's the reason why my uniform is different. Given your own experience, I think you might understand better than most."

She was stretching here. Much of S'tan's record remained classified to her, but it was an easy guess to make,

The engineer had no idea what she was talking about. But, in usual Romulan fashion, he did not let it show.

"Yes, it is a whole new culture here. Just look at our time here in stardock. The Romulan Navy only put ships in for emergency repairs and then immediately sends them out. For us to have so much time free is very... unusual. And I had been wondering about your uniform... not that we've had any time to chat. Was this a choice of your own doing?"

"The Council's doing, my people's government, not my own," Snowfire replied.

She had to be careful here; picking up too much would... probably be extremely rude.

"It was part of the treaty we signed with the Federation ten years ago, designed to help us learn more about each other."

She carefully did not comment on the fact that she knew it had been more a method for the Illythirii defense Force Council to gather information on a possible foe than anything else.

"As for a whole different culture, indeed it is. Yet so fragile."

The words were sad, as if she knew something S'tan didn't; yet her tone changed swiftly.

"The Romulan Navy... they use singularity based systems for power, don't they?"

"Indeed they do. Incredibly dangerous system, compared to the Federation. But the Romulans are set in their ways about many things. Partly due to paranoia instilled by their own government and partly due to the fact that, currently, they make their own parts and pieces. If they changed to something... better, they might have to rely on the Federation, Klingons, Dominion, etcetera."

"Well, using them as a power source on their own *would* be dangerous. I was more wondering... well, my people's technology is heavily slanted towards gravitics. I guess I was curious to see if your people had worked out how to use them properly."

She raised a placating hand.

"I don't mean that as an insult, I must hasten to add, but it's a result of the fact that we never developed warp drive on our own. We got *that* off of the Borg."

He took a bite of his food while he collected his thoughts.

"Are there any Federation officers serving in your own Navy?"

She cocked her head at the question of Starfleet in the IDF, a smile tugging at the edge of her lips.

"By nature a treaty for mutual discovery must go both ways. There is a small group, but they are still embroiled in our version of Starfleet Academy. Ours takes a decade to complete, you see. The first wave of students will be graduating this year though."

The Romulan nodded in understanding.

"There is no need for apologetics, Commander. Unlike you, I am not here on loan. Though I am sure we are both monitored to the full extent of the Intelligence Division. The Romulans use the Singularity drives and they require full time monitoring. They are a waste of time and resources, compared to the warp cores of the Feds."

S'Tan could feel his pasty cheeks becoming inflamed with anger and remorse.

"Ever since being posted here, I have never once checked in with my engineering team to make sure they still existed. As you know, the drive is generated by a miniature black hole. There have been ships that have just vanished out of space, as their singularity drive imploded, devouring the ship out of existence. So, you may tell your superiors that, yes, the Romulans have figured it out. But every few months, we lose a ship or four to an unstable core."

He paused for a moment, letting the anger that rose up settle back down and return himself to calmness.

Snowfire was confused for a moment.

Why would there be a problem... oh, of course. They put the system together as a warp drive.

She couldn't do anything complex just sitting here, but the basic math was painful enough. High level gravitational effects had an innate effect on subspace, unless you could filter them out through interference like the Fasset Drive did whilst in wormhole space. Trying to compensate for the effects that would have on an already varied subspace terrain... she didn't really want to think about it.

The question was how much she could trust him with. Saying even the smallest thing here would stray perilously close to the restrictions she still had on her. Yet his anger was real, and he did seem comfortable here.

Where else better to take a leap?

"So your R&D focused on using the singularity to simulate a warp drive. I can understand your anger then, considering how hard it must be to keep something like that from destabilising and taking the entire ship with it; especially when taking into account the nature of subspace terrain and how fast it would change at warp speeds. I'm honestly impressed that you don't lose *more* ships."

She left it there. If he wanted to know how her people's FTL and subspace drives worked, he could ask her or try to look it up. And then end up having to ask her anyway, if he wanted to find the right file.

"I am surprised that it is not taking the Federation officers longer to get through your academy," he smirked, thinking about his time in the academy on Romulus. "I am not sure they would even survive the Romulan Navy's. But our academy is more about military might than educational experience. Going from there to here was much more enjoyable. I wasn't even fed poison!" He concluded, laughing.

Snowfire chuckled at the joke.

"Well, it's not like the entire group is graduating this year. If I remember correctly, the projections are for no more than twenty percent of the group making it to the finals... and of those?"

She chuckled again, it was surprisingly pleasant sound.

"My aunt is faculty at one of the Academies where we're training Starfleet officers. She isn't expecting more than three out of the twenty three assigned to her Academy to pass. Considering the rate at which some of them are progressing, she's quite confident that several of them will request transfers before they manage to finish. And there's nothing we can really do about the timing without invalidating our entire training process."

That was the reason that her aunt had given, and it was also one that Snowfire resolutely agreed with. There *were* other reasons of course, but those weren't the ones most at fault here. It was... well... a matter of experience.

"Even with the best work ethic and retention rate in the world, when someone is up against cadets no younger than two hundred years old who have spent at least five years in one of the prep schools we have for Fleet Academy, it's not really a fair contest." She shrugged.

"But they'll get there in the end, I'm sure."

The Lieutenant could easily tell that there were more reasons than just experience and education for not being able to graduate. Maybe if he lived long enough in the Federation he would become enraged about the unfairness of the Ilythiiri... but it wasn't his concern or place to vocalize them. He simply smiled and grinned, hoping his understanding of the *true* reasons would come across on his face.

It was at that point that Snowfire noticed the figure of the Horizon's first officer, Commander Neil Redding, entering the room. He seemed to be looking for someone and shortly spotted her and headed over to their table.

"Snowfire." he said with a grin then looked over at S'tan, "and Lieutenant Solius; perfect. You were on my list as well."

He sat down without waiting for an invite.

"I was hoping to speak to you both on a matter of inner ship familiarization between the different professional groups, namely Security, Engineering, and Science. I've purposed a team building off-duty exercise that's already been cleared with the Captain involving a Terran competition that traces it's ancestry all the way back to 3200 BC; that's more than four and a half millennia Solius... and was once called 'the sport of Kings.' I'm currently looking for promoters and team captains."

He bent forward towards them as if about to share some important secret with them, his trademark grin on his square-jawed face.

"Now, I'm sure both of you would love to be a part of such an endeavor, so I came to you first."

He then raised an inquisitive eyebrow at them.

Snowfire noticed something different about the Commander, but she couldn't yet put her finger on it.

"Sport of Kings, Commander? As far as I am aware, weren't most kings in Terran, history fat, lazy slobs who made others do their bidding?"

The Romulan quipped.

"I'd like to hear more about this. If Romulan databases are anything to go by, weren't all old age competitions 'to-the-death'?"

"Worried I was planning to challenge you to a death match, Lieutenant?" the big man said with a wicked grin. "But no, to my knowledge, there was never a single 'death match' in all that time... And you are correct; it is often played by slow, genially lazy people who, as I understand it, tend to consume quantities of low-grade alcohol, commonly referred to as 'beer' during matches."

As both Vulcanoids looked at him quizzically, he leaned forward again.

"I'm referring of course to the game of Bowling; and I would like the two of you to represent your departments."

He smiled again pleasantly, if not quite satisfied with himself.

The Romulan cocked his head.

"Excuse me? What does a food bowl have to do with combat?"

Snowfire considered bringing up the differences, but they were too small to focus on right now. Conversation could make things difficult, but that didn't mean she wouldn't look later. It didn't feel like an imposter, but who knew? The galaxy was a strange place. Yet, the answer to his question was easy enough. She gestured over at S'tan.

"What he said, officer. Except double."

Redding shrugged.

"The name might be a bit misleading, I think when people used to play this sport they wore these odd little hats called 'bowls' because of their round shape and a rim around its base, they became known as 'bowlers' and thus it became known as 'bowling' to the common people."

His look was dead serious, but Snowfire could sense he was playing with them.

"But, " he continued, "it is in fact a game in which you take a spherical object of good density and roll it a short distance in the attempt to topple up to ten placed objects referred to as 'pins'. You then add up the total score for each group and announce a winner. At the end of the season the top four teams with the best score would compete in a final match and the winner would receive an award called a trophy; and then repeat the events the following year."

He put his hands to his chin, elbows on the table.

"Mostly it's just to promote team work and interdepartmental relations."

Then he glanced over at Snowfire, giving half a grin.

"But we could do boys against girls as well."

The Romulan cocked his head, still not understanding the specifics of the game. After thinking for a moment, he suddenly nodded enthusiastically.

"Then, my team selects our pins be made of neutronium and our bowling will be made from rolling a photon grenade, with proximity detonation enabled. Your pins do not stand a chance!"

Snowfire smiled.

"And I'm pretty sure that we don't want to have to rebuild the recreation decks every time we play a round, S'tan."

Then she chuckled.

"It would give your department so much more work to do."

"Not to worry, Snowfire, munitions were outlawed in the early twentieth century and all the pins are made of the same regulated material to prevent unbalancing factors in the competition. But... as for winning or losing between boy-girl games?"

He sat back up and shrugged.

"That's the true beauty of this game you see; anyone can be good at it. It's a sport that allows you to use whatever your good at to guide your performance."

He stood up to give his gestures more room.

"Are you big and strong? you can power bowl those pins into oblivion. Are you strong and frail?" He motioned at S'tan off-handedly; "the proper lead into off the head pin is the way to go. Or perhaps your hundreds of years old with advanced hand-eye coordination... Well, there are two groups of people that I know of that can't seem to bowl; Medusans, for obvious reasons, and Vulcans. It's theorized that the prime ingredient is actually passion, with all seriousness," he said with a wave of his hand; "Because no matter how unlikely, or likely someone is to be good at the game, if their 'unto it,' they score consistently better. So in effect, anyone could be as good as anyone, despite build or intelligence... In fact, one of the best bowlers I ever knew was a Pakled... Anyway, I believe it would be an excellent team-building exercise."

Now he stood at attention as if presenting a proposal to the admiralty.

"So, sensing that there just might be a little confusion about the game, I've reserved two lanes at the bowling alley... and yes, the ship actually has one, down on the recreation deck... for eighteen hundred hours. Which, I just happen to know, is after both your shifts."

He waited a second looking them over.

"So.. any takers?"

Snowfire chuckled.

"Far be it from me to pass up on an opportunity to get to know more of the crew."

She looked over at the Romulan across from her.

"What about you, Lieutenant?"

The engineer smiled.

"Of course. I can't promise anything spectacular on my part, but I am sure it will be entertaining in some way."

* * *

Oseno had returned to the Horizon well before he was required to. There were several things he wanted to check on, and he felt it was best if he did it before everyone began returning. The ship's strategic operations center was a finished space now. The temporary bulkheads had been torn down and permanent ones erected. The center was fully integrated into the ship's power grid so it wouldn't draw any more power than any other system. All of the consoles, and displays were optimized to Oseno's own specifications and would give his officers whatever information they needed, if he stayed on that is. Jureth had still not quite decided what to tell General Alteer, the Bajoran Militia commander, who had offered him the chief of security position aboard Deep Space 9.

The offer was on his mind as Oseno manually inspected the USS Polaris, the Horizon's integrated escort vessel. Shipyard crews had repaired the microfractures in her hull, and her design engineer from Utopia Plenitia had even made a special trip to upgrade her power systems to put her in line with other escorts of her class. Oseno was just finishing a walk around her hull when he felt the presence of someone else and turned to see the smiling face of Adira Yiral, the El-Aurian diplomatic specialist assigned to his department.

"Back at work already, Commander?" she asked with a smile

"I am," Jureth replied. "There were things that needed doing."

"There are always things that need doing aboard starships, but what about you? Did you do anything for yourself?"

"I took the all the rest I needed," Oseno said as he moved back toward the bow of the Polaris

"And what about your decision?"

Oseno jerked his head away from the Polaris.

"Excuse me?"

"I'd heard you'd been offered a new position."

"I didn't tell anyone about that besides the captain... how could you possibly..."

Oseno trailed off as a smile from Adira stopped his thought mid sentence.

"I know, you have your sources," he then said with resignation.

"That I do."

"If you must know, I haven't made a decision."

"Why not?"

"because I'm not sure what I want to do."

"You've thought a great deal about it, haven't you?"

"Yes, more than you know. I even spoke with Captain Kheren."

"The captain is a wise man; that was a good choice."

"There are advantages to both positions and disadvantages as well."

"I'm sure there are... but what you should be doing is listening to this..." Adira said, pointing at his chest, "instead of this." she added pointing at his head. "This isn't a logical decision. You're trying to think like a Vulcan; but you aren't Vulcan, Commander, you're Bajoran. If there is anything I know about Bajorans after my time among them, it is that they are an emotional, spiritual people. Be Bajoran, Oseno, and then you will have your answer."

With that, she turned and walked toward the hangar exit. Oseno didn't even had time to correct her on protocol.

After leaving the Polaris Jureth walked to the strategic operations center and sat himself in the command chair in front of the main display. He sat there for a long time, reexamining every item, pros and cons he'd made in his head regarding the decision he and he alone had to make. For the first time in his life, he turned his thoughts outward, to the Prophets and asked what they would have him do.

Oseno's spirituality, or lack thereof had always been a subject of concern with his mother. He had never been overly attached to religion, but recent events had caused him to rethink some of his focus. There was no actual answer to his request for guidance of course; the residents of the only stable wormhole in the galaxy had better things to do, he suspected, than to hear the concerns of one troubled, far from home Bajoran.

Finally, after a long while, Oseno spoke to the empty room.

"Computer, initiate subspace call to General Alteer, Bajoran Militia Command, Bajor."

"Call initiated; please wait while call is routed."

Jureth sat back in the chair knowing that the call would take time to route even through the most efficient subspace relays. Subspace communications had vastly improved in recent years but routing real time calls still took the immense power of relay stations at key points between major starbases.

Finally, the computer informed him that the call was connecting and soon General Alteer's face appeared on the viewer.

"Commander Oseno, I am pleased to hear from you. Have you thought about my offer."

Jureth nodded.

"Yes, General, I have; quite a bit actually. Sir, the fact is that you made me a very generous offer for a very prestigious position. One that any officer would be elated to have..."

"But?" Alteer asked as if he already knew what was coming

"But, I'm afraid that I'm going to have to decline, Sir. Starfleet is where I belong, General. The Horizon will be departing again soon and, from what I understand, it will be a critical mission. The ship needs me and I can't stand the thought of the officers I've trained facing the unknown without me in front of them."

Alteer nodded.

"I have trained many officers in my time, Commander. I of all people understand what it means to want to face whatever comes with the men and women you serve with. Perhaps we will have another opportunity to serve together some day, Commander. Until then, may the Prophets guide and watch your path."

"Perhaps we will; and thank you, Sir. Oseno out."

Jureth closed the channel, and head for the exit...there was still work to do.

* * *

"Report."

"Standard asteroid class D, devoid of atmosphere or any signs of life despite being believed to be the remnant of an exploded planet formerly known as Neural. Nothing was left of the ecosystem or the civilization that once lived there except what the USS Lotus saved before the Azimuth Horizon anomaly expanded to this sector and destroyed it."

In the command chair of the USS Asimov, Captain Jamie Ross grunted.

"You're just reading me the Phoenix' report, Commander."

The Vulcan typically raised one arched eyebrow at this.

"I can only give you available facts, Captain. The negative energy field is nullifying our sensors as we attempt to penetrate this planet's surface. Once our probes enter it, they show failure in propulsion and sensors as power is drained and can barely land as programmed on the surface... and that only because the modification specs given by the Phoenix' Chief Engineer prevents total failure altogether."

Ross sighed.

"Can you at least confirm the original data?"

"Affirmative, Captain; oblate spheroid with a rotational bulge around it's equator, nine hundred forty-three point three three billion tons of mass; nine-hundred and fifty-three point seven-four kilometers in equatorial diameter by seven hundred eighty-two kilometers of diameter along the axis; surface temperature minus one-hundred and five point six Celsius."

"What the hell's warming that rock up?" wondered the woman in the command chair. "I'm no scientist but I went to the Academy too; cosmic background radiation within the universe is placed at around negative two hundred and seventy Celsius. There's no star or anything near enough to affect that pebble like this."

"Spectral analysis of the probes failed to ascertain the cause as they fell victim to the field at fifty-three point eight kilometers from the surface... and they brought back little more once they recharged their batteries seventy point one minutes later, enough to escape it's effect back to us," Seekal reminded her.

"Speculate... and don't tell me again that Vulcans do not. We're here to get answers."

It took a moment for the First officer to bring himself to pass over his own nature and obey his commanding officer.

"The most logical hypothesis would be an internal energy source."

"A space body that size can not have an internal molten core."

"The next logical assumption then, following both statement, would be that this energy source might be artificial in nature."

Ross looked at Seekal and grunted again.

"We *know* what is down there, Commander."

"Actually, Captain, we don't know *exactly* what is down there... and especially *how* and *why* it is there. The Phoenix had even better instruments and more personnel to conduct the research but they did not have the time nor authorization to pursue investigation further."

"That's why we are here. Anything else?"

"Same preliminary data from the probes that the Phoenix initial survey gathered, Captain... including some images."

He showed them to her on the main viewer. It was a hazy view of an apparent large volcano-like mountain near what appeared to be a series of deep valleys.

Obviously, these were the remnants of the original planetary surface this piece of rock had retained after the disintegration of the entire solar system that had once been here.

Of particular interest was a plateau between a deep valley and a rugged mountain region. Closer shots showed it as a small flat surface beside an enormous mountainous region ending abruptly as if cut cleanly by a Titan's axe and a smooth basin area away from all obstacles and geological formation and seemingly upheaved from deep within the crust of this portion of a now dead world that looked definitely artificial in nature.

"Any data from surface samples?" the captain inquired at the conclusion of the last image. "Because of the negative energy field, no such data being transmitted. Even the number of captured images is far less than we anticipated. The low power condition in which the probe was left did not allow it time and resources enough to gather physical samples either before it's programming sent it back to us."

Ross called down to the shuttle bay on the small research vessel.

"Shuttlebay," came the response from a rough voice that could only belong to a Tellarite. "Lieutenant, how are preparations going with the shuttle?"

"Sir, we have shuttle Robbie and Daneel just about ready for departure. You'll just need to let me know if there is any additional equipment or materials that will be accompanying the away teams. We are also preparing shuttlecraft Isaac as back up."

"Standby for launch," finished the captain before opening another channel. "Bridge to sickbay; Doctor Shenayam, everything ready for planetside operation?"

"Well as far as medical considerations go, this is rather simple. All away team personnel will be in full EVA suits because of the outside conditions so contamination risks are exceedingly low. Accidents are still possible however so people should be careful not to rip their clothing."

before Ross could acknowledge, the CMO voiced other concerns.

"Captain, I do not recommend going down in a shuttlecraft just yet. Navigational hazards, crash landings and very slow deployment and retrieval of personnel and material, multiply risks to away team safety in case of danger or emergencies. Vehicles should be used when transporters are inoperative or too risky to employ, not the other way around. Transporting down further add the benefit of computer molecular examination on both their way out and their way back in, safeguarding in the best possible manner against any foreign element being introduced aboard. Moreover, a transporter alcove is easily isolated with a forcefield in case of any detected unknown agent and this agent can be isolated and removed in beam transit for safe containment, study and disposal."

"Don't patronize me, Doctor! I know *my* job! Despite our many attempts to penetrate the surface of this planetoid with both orbital probes and ship sensors, we have thus far been unable to complete even a basic scan of its surface. Therefore, we have no coordinates to lock a transporter onto. We could transport someone a thousand feet or more above the surface or inversely they could end up merged into a solid object within its surface. And if we did either of these, we currently have no way of even knowing the outcome."

"Beaming in transporter enhancers would be both cheap and easy... and safer," objected the woman at the other end of the channel.

Ross grunted something like "doctors... why do they all have to act as objectors of conscience..." or something like that with an expletive tone under her breath and, after a moment, it's her Exec who answered.

"Doctor, our class III planetary probe embedded within it relay information about this enigmatic surface to us. Unfortunately, we lost all contact with the probe at about fifty-three kilometers from its surface. It is one of the primary objectives of our away teams to neutralize what is blocking signals to or from this planet. Based on the initial survey, the only backup that we'll have is the probe itself; which relay information from orbit to the surface, and then from the surface back into orbit. Other than that, Lieutenant Parkis has our last shuttle prepared as back-up as well. We will have a retrieval team assembled and prepared if needed."

On the other end, a grunt sounding like "Vulcans... why do they have to make a lecture out of every answer?" before signing out.

On the bridge, an imposing blonde man stood up his full two meters of height and squared his enormous shoulders before addressing his commanding officer.

"On my way to the shuttlebay, M'am. For security reasons, I am going to want everyone carrying a phaser. I am also going to want at least two rifles and a contingency weapon. Engineering, ops and security personnel with us will all have tricorders and will also scan constantly and reporting on anything out of the ordinary."

"Carry on, Mister Tritter."

Once the massive man left the small bridge, Captain Ross inquired about him to her Exec.

"Isn't that one from Lotus Fleet as the Phoenix is?"

"Affirmative, Captain; but after his initial selection, the lieutenant failed to keep up with the high standards of this elite division of Starfleet. He served on board the Asimov adequately since then."

"We need to be more than just adequate to do our job here," grumbled Ross, obviously not happy with being dumped an officer with a history of failure.

"Bridge, this is shuttlebay; we are ready for launch."

"Proceed," ordered Captain Ross.

And so, things started out routinely enough.

CHAPTER TWO: THE FINAL FRONTIER

"Welcome gentlemen. Please be seated."

There were six of them in the large office of Starbase Lotus' commander; Fleet Captain Allen Samji of course, with his own Exec by his side, Commander Karen Schmidt. a stern, tall, broadly built blonde Human woman; indigo-skinned and silver eyed Andorian Captain Kheren of the flagship Horizon, seemingly not any worse for wear after being transformed into an Undine and back on his last mission; his powerfully built dark-haired and eyed first officer, Commander Neil S. Redding, recently returned from what has been officially designated as "medical leave" like his commanding officer; Captain Syntron, the tall bearded Vulcan commanding officer of the science cruiser Phoenix, patiently sitting on his thumbs for numerous weeks now after the shakedown cruise of his brand new command; and his own right hand man, Commander Joshua Riker, tall, bearded and composed as his captain.

In the room were also the Yeoman of each starship; Ensign Meeramanee Blackbird of the Horizon, a lithe, copper-skinned and raven-haired Amerind woman; and Ensign Jessica Albera, the brown-haired, green-eyed one of the Phoenix. Both were there to take all the relevant notes, documents and records for their respective commanding officer about the mission they would undertake.

They all understood immediately that, this assignment procedure having called both ships, command staff together, this upcoming mission would be of paramount importance. By itself, the USS Horizon could function as nothing else than a small mobile starbase, so huge, powerful and versatile it was, complete with the first operational transwarp drive. It even came with an integrated escort starship, the USS Polaris, that had nothing to be envious of the legendary USS Defiant of Deep Space 9 and Dominion War fame. But then, the USS Phoenix was the latest and largest research vessel Starfleet itself could deploy; as an explorer, it could out do most other starships currently in service, thanks to it's advanced research facilities and equipment, dedicated science crew and it's own Quantum Slipstream Drive making it able to literally jump parsecs at a time and survey the farthest areas of space in the shortest possible time.

Indeed, if both ships were to be deployed together, this meant that, whatever Fleet Captain Samji was about to disclose, it would be big.

As if gliding on a silent breeze, the yeoman from the USS Phoenix swooped in almost without detection and deposited two replicated beverages on the table in front of her captain and his executive officer. No requests were made, but Ensign Jessica Albera already knew the preferred drinks of each of these officers during such a meeting. In her perception, that was as much a part of her job as fulfilling the technical aspects of record-keeping during this briefing. Then just as swiftly, she vanished; leaving nothing behind but the flash of a smile and a little wink.

By sharp contrast, Yeoman Blackbird stayed where she was, PADD ready. She knew her own captain never indulged himself with food or drink when at work and the first officer of the Horizon would get anything himself if he ever wished to. Both considered her a colleague, not a servant, regardless of such duties being part of her function, which was definitely a bother to her commanding officer... not to mention his redoubtable wives. They rather expected of her to record minutely every element of a meeting, even the most trivial, so that nothing would slip by later if they ever needed to get back to it.

Samji observed the disparities between the two command crews and almost smiled. Although Kheren and Syntron had worked quite well together for quite some time on the Artemis, the differences between the veteran Andorian commanding officer and the freshly-minted Vulcan Captain were as plain to see as their physical differences. And even between their Execs, that difference was also striking, even when both were Humans and of similar years. It was a marvel to see how Starfleet could bring so diverse a group of people to achieve aims well trained and perfectly homogeneous crews like those of the Klingon Empire could never match.

And that cooperation would now be paramount in what was about to be thrown their way.

"Gentlemen, I trust you are well, " Samji began.

It was not just for the sake of politeness alone. Captain Kheren was recovering from an unprecedented ordeal in Fluidic Space, where he had been polymorphed into an Undine and fused with a living starship within that organic universe; bringing him back whole and sane had been a miracle in itself. And a major part of that miracle was due to his first officer; Commander Redding himself had 'died' during the retrieval of his commanding officer, only to be "reborn" through still unexplained and highly classified conditions. Although they both had been certified fit for duty, there was still concern for his colleagues and friends in the Fleet Captain's mind; especially knowing what was to come.

This is not a meeting everyone will enjoy, he thought worryingly.

"I had a moment of lapse, Sir, but Doctor Nasaro-Myth pulled me through," Kheren then said.

"Lapse of what?" asked Karen Schmidt with an arched eyebrow.

"Shore leave, Commander," whispered Yeoman Blackbird to her.

"Well, Captain, you'll be glad to know then that Doctor Nasaro-Myth has been transferred from the Phoenix to the Horizon so that he will be right with you to prevent any... further lapses," announced Samji with a small smile.

"What about my chief medical officers?"

"Doctors 011 and 110 are being reassigned to Starbase Lotus for extensive research projects. Doctor Nasaro-Myth will be your new CMO, at least until Starfleet Command is as satisfied as he is that you have completely recovered. Of all Starfleet medical officers, he is the most prominent expert in xenology and alien genetics... including Andorian physiology and your... personal medical file."

"Understood," simply acknowledged the Andorian, with a tone to end the conversation then and there.

"Besides, he is our most experienced medical officer and therefore the best one for the upcoming task that is now to be yours, gentlemen," Samji added. "That is also why there will be some reshuffling of personnel. A replacement for Lieutenant Somers at Tactical and Security will be sent to you after this meeting and your chief of ops, Lieutenant Elisha Leone, will be reassigned to the Phoenix."

He now turned his head towards the Vulcan captain.

"Following some of your technical problems on the Phoenix, Captain Syntron, her expertise and experience gained on our largest and most complex vessel will be an important asset for your specific mission to come. And we have a new medical officer and chief of science for you as well."

As he spoke, Commander Schmidt brought to both Redding and Riker data chips that contained Starfleet records of all the new personnel for their respective ships. Redding's chip read at the top Doctor and Commander Elliago Nasaro-Myth and tactical Lieutenant Junior Grade Aron'Son. Riker's read operations Lieutenant Elisha Leone and science Lieutenant Junior Grade Jonathan Livingstone.

Samji was resuming his briefing as they received them.

"Gentlemen, at long last we are about to embark in what we all signed for; to explore strange new worlds, seek out new life and new civilizations and boldly go to expand our knowledge and life to the final frontier... and in fact even beyond."

Making a pause after this grand opening, he looked at them each in turn before finishing.

"We are going beyond the horizon."

In their eyes, he saw that they understood exactly what he meant. So he came right to the point.

"The Horizon *and* the Phoenix will go through the portal of the Azimuth Horizon, into the pocket universe discovered beyond by the late USS Artemis. Your objective; to start a new era of exploration and colonization there."

As he glanced at the full glass of iced tea nudged off to the side in front of him, it almost seemed like a smirk subtly appeared on the usually expressionless Vulcan captain's features as the words regarding the exploration of a new sector were spoken. But before Syntron could utter a syllable or inquiry, the Andorian captain had immediately interposed his own with a definite tone of disbelief in his soft but resonant voice.

"*Colonization?*"

"Yes, Captain Kheren; your Horizon will be the temporary starbase providing support and safety to the establishment of a first Federation colony on the nearest M-Class world beyond the anomaly. And you, Captain Syntron, will be tasked with your Phoenix to chart that entire first sector."

The Andorian threw a glance at his Exec before bringing back his four oculars at the commander of Starbase Lotus. The glance was met as Riker looked over at captain Syntron at the same time. It was rare to see Riker agree perfectly with anyone, but his facial expression told the whole story. If Riker knew any way of saying he had a bad feeling about this without words, it was the brief nod in agreement that met Captain Syntron's glance.

But it was again Captain Kheren who voiced it.

"You want to send *civilians* out *there*? Already?"

"I don't *want* anything, Captain; the *Federation Council* has voted to do so and Starfleet's *job* is to make it so," sternly retorted Samji.

"Of course, Sir," nodded the Andorian with drooping antennae. "I just wonder who could be... *daring* enough to... *risk* such a venture."

"Well, let me introduce you all to their head person."

Samji tapped his combadge.

"Adria, send the Governor in, please."

The door slid to admit a medium-sized, middle-aged Bajoran woman with greying chestnut hair, hazel eyes and fair complexion dressed in a very formal business suit of burnt orange color. The only adornment she wore was hanging under her stern, unsmiling face; a golden pendant in the shape of a flaming star. She walked up to them, nodded to each and went to stand between Samji and Schmidt. Hers was a deliberate stance of authority and assurance that left no doubt about who she thought was in charge.

Samji waved a hand between them as he made the formal presentations.

"Gentlemen, may I present Governor Sufra Anseh, Federation representative elected to establish and lead the first Federation colony in what will now be designated as Horizon Space. Governor, these are the people who will be responsible for ensuring the safety and success of your endeavor; Captain Syntron and Commander Joshua Riker of the Phoenix which will chart your entire sector; Captain Kheren and Commander Redding of the Horizon which will ferry you and your people to your new home and assist you in building it."

"I know of you, gentlemen," the woman said acknowledging their own polite nods as they all sat back down; "at least some of you, if only by reputation. To you, Captain Kheren, we owe the discovery of this new paradise and of the doorway to it; and to you, Captain Syntron, we owe the chance to use that doorway to get to that paradise."

Her words brought the Andorian's antennae so rigid in the air that, when they lowered like a pair of phaser cannons towards her, it looked as if they were about to break. His low tone of voice became even lower, and the usual softness was perceptibly disappearing to imply a contained but growing anger.

"Excuse me for saying so and in so blunt a manner, Governor Sufra, but you sound like the Horizon Children used to."

His four eyes were staring at the symbol on her breast.

"That is because I am of that faith, Captain; like each and everyone of the ten thousand, eight hundred and nine pioneers that will accompany me to build a new world, a new life and a new way of life out there."

Kheren rose slowly from his seat.

"Are you telling me that you intend to bring *ten thousand* religious fanatics on board *my* ship?"

"We are *not* religious fanatics, Captain," retorted the Bajoran woman, her own voice becoming as defiant as his; "we are believers."

"There is a difference?"

"Sit down, Captain," ordered Samji.

His voice was stern but deliberately soft, calm and slow; the last thing he wanted was to have a flared up Andorian among them; especially one whose mental state, while certified stable and sound, may not be as it used to be... and who was strong enough to throw even his Vulcan colleague through the wall of his office.

And he knew all too well what was behind his friend's anger.

Governor Sufra herself must have been aware of the threat an emotional Andorian could become, because her voice too became suddenly soothing; although the condescending tone of it defused most of the calming effect it tried to achieve.

"Come now, Captain Kheren; I understand your... unease..."

"Do you, Governor Sufra Anseh?" Kheren interrupted, still standing. His formal use of the woman's full name was typical of his kind when issuing a challenge. "Your... *beleivers*, once boarded my ship, corrupted some of my crew, sabotaged her and tried to take her over and seize a lost warship; then, they sent a fleet to prevent us from stopping a cosmic catastrophe that would have reduced the entire universe to cinders, all for the glory of your... *faith*. The result was forty-two dead on my ship, the creation of a deadly mad artificial intelligence, hundreds of wounded on board half a dozen crippled starships, the loss of my ship... and even abducted and brainwashed several of our best officers, used one as a figurehead hostage and forced yet another one to betray everything he stood for and suffer detention and disgrace... Do you *really* think you *understand* how I feel about this, Governor?"

"How you feel is irrelevant, Captain Kheren," answered Sufra with all pretended softness gone from her voice. "I am an official Federation representative, elected governor of this planned colony and with the mandate of establishing and leading that colony. You, as a Starfleet officer, are under an *oath* and *orders* to help and support our efforts to the best of your abilities and to obey the orders of all mandated Federation representatives... *my* orders, Captain."

Behind the fuming Andorian, Yeoman Blackbird rose and came up right behind his left side. She was convinced at that very moment that her commanding officer was about to throw his combadge on the Fleet Captain's desk and resign his commission then and there. His hard, callused right hand was already to his left breast.

Redding had served in the diplomatic core for over a decade and was used to such dramatics. Inside he was nearly as upset with these orders as Kheren, but you wouldn't have known it.

"Governor, NO ONE in this room understands obligation and duty better than Captain Kheren, myself included. But you are mistaken in that we are beholden to your orders. You get the final say on the mission project, but the Captain has final authority over the ship and its crew."

His tone was such a blank, he might as well have been a Vulcan at that moment

"If, for example, if you gave an order that would endanger the Horizon, Captain Kheren could cancel the mission. Not that that is likely of course, but it is in his domain."

The passive look on his face practically drained the emotion out of the room. With any luck, the momentary respite would calm down his captain and remind Sufra that she had limits to her authority.

Kheren's hand was still on his combadge as he too listened to his first officer. Then, he tapped on it.

"Kheren to Horizon."

"Horizon; Lieutenant Tyvya here, Sir."

Kheren looked straight at the Bajoran woman's eyes as he spoke.

"Lieutenant; implement ship's full security protocol, including the neurogenic grid with Lieutenant Lyrya. Prepare the civilian decks to receive two thousand eight hundred and nine colonists. They and all their belongings will submit to the full barrage of security measures from this moment on and for the full duration of the upcoming mission, including barred access to all areas of the ship outside the habitable decks and close-circuit computer and replicator availability. Inform Doctor Nasaro-Myth that full medical protocol is in effect. If *anyone*, including starbase personnel or crewmembers, up to and including *myself* and the command staff object to those measures, they will be expelled *immediately*."

As the governor reddened with obvious outrage, he closed the channel still looking her in the eye.

"Those are *my* orders, Lieutenant. Kheren out."

"Captain Kheren! This is an *outrage!* We will not be treated like criminals or... or *lepers!* We have rights..."

"Governor, I am a Starfleet officer. My ship, my crew and I are sworn to protect democracy... *not* to apply it."

Then, his tone became hard as duranium and his silvery eyes like phaser beams.

"I will make myself crystal clear; I will trust in the Federation Council's judgment, even if it's against *my* best judgment, and see as best as can be to the success of this mission of yours. But rest assured; if anyone, now or later, makes but one step on the wrong foot, I will personally see that this person is sedated, put into a Class X probe and shot back to Starfleet Security for detention on charges of mutiny. *This* time, *no one* will threaten my ship or my crew."

Sufra turned an indignant stare at Fleet captain Samji.

"Fleet captain, I *demand* that this... officer be relieved of this mission and a new officer and ship be assigned to us! I will *not* tolerate..."

"That is not possible, Governor," quickly cut in Samji. "The Horizon is the only vessel capable of providing all the resources and capabilities for your project. Without the Horizon, it would take a year to send supply ships in order to build the barest basic facility just to safely enable you to set foot out there; and we don't have enough available ships to do this and provide enough security for your people in case you encounter problems."

Then I demand the removal of this officer and a new ship commander appointed to the Horizon!" almost shouted the exasperated woman.

"Captain Kheren is the appointed commander of the Horizon. He has been certified fit for duty and has broken no order, rule or regulation that would justify his removal from his command," flatly stated the starbase commander. "Moreover, he complied diligently with your... orders and already is preparing his ship to receive with upmost concern for their health and safety your people and cargo, as you just witnessed, Governor."

For long seconds, Governor Sufra fumed at Samji in cold silence. Then she turned again to the Andorian and shook a trembling finger at him.

"*Your* name will figure *prominently* on my next report to the Federation Council, Captain Kheren!"

The long silence that followed was as heavy as the gravitational field of a neutron star.

During the transient stalemate lingering in the room, the captain of the USS Phoenix stood up and spoke without a trace of emotion in his voice.

"Governor Sufra Anseh, am I to understand that you intend to bring two thousand, eight hundred and nine... pioneers along with you on the onset of this mission, before any base has even been established? If this is the intention, then I must note that this is a rather illogical course of action, at best."

Barely calmed down by the tone and words of Redding, the Federation representative scowled at the Vulcan. But her voice had recovered its calm, condescending tone.

"Captain Syntron, this is exactly why we are... forced... to use this... one officer's starship," she retorted, thumbing towards the now calm Andorian. "The Horizon will act as our base while we map out and settle down on the colony site. Else, as the Fleet captain explained, it would be years before we could proceed."

Slowly, her gaze went from Syntron's eyes to the stars flickering beyond the large transparency of the office as she went on.

"You as a Vulcan would probably estimate that this waiting would be safer... more... logical... But we see no reason to delay when we have such an asset, dreary as it is, to go immediately and build ourselves a new life on a new world... in a new universe. You saw how your... colleague reacted to us who have the True Faith. because of a few impatient, misguided souls, this is how we are perceived everywhere we go; at best, as deluded crackpots.... at worst as potential criminals. Now is our chance to escape all that and start a life of faith and hapiness in our promised paradise. And the federation Council accepted our petition. Our ordeal is at an end; our time has come. our time is now."

Her attention suddenly came back to the captain of the Phoenix.

"And you, Captain Syntron, will explore this paradise for us and report to us what fruit bears our new Eden."

As Syntron didn't add anything, Fleet Captain Samji spoke.

"Gentlemen, your mission will be to explore the sector nearest to the Azimuth Horizon on the other side and establish a first permanent colony on it's doorstep. Commander Schmidt?"

The tall woman activated a holographic projector that showed them an external representation of the sector where was tamed and caged the fiery anomaly they had dealt with barely months ago. The computer simulated a plunging movement within it and, after a brief blazing light, the computer model of a solar system. As the virtual camera went through it, Karen Schmidt spoke with her throaty voice.

"This is the data gathered by the USS Artemis, the only starship we know that ever got through the AH... and came back to tell of it."

Kheren understood what she meant; at the time, there had also been a Klingon *Negh'Var* warship that had been caught with them in the then unpredictable eddies of the anomaly, along with the derelict USS Jeanne Mance. Kheren and his crew of the late Ambassador class vessel had been sent to rescue. The rescue had been successful, although the hospital ship was lost... and the Klingon cruiser had been sent back in time where it belonged. And there had also been a third vessel which had entered the anomaly, albeit not of it's own volition.

"No news about the USS Nuntio, Sir?"

Samji shook his head with a sour expression on his golden-hued features.

"None since their last transmission over a year ago. They have been declared lost with all hands by Starfleet Command."

"I never met Captain Rousseau," the Andorian said after a short moment of silence instinctively shared by all in the room. "But I knew of Shaell, her first officer; he had been my senior mentor in survival training at Starfleet Academy... and the captain of my wrestling team. We lost too many good people to this wretched anomaly."

He looked pointedly at Sufra as he spoke, noting with satisfaction how she reddened at the way he openly despised the very core of her belief by insisting on the very naturalistic view of it as a huge, terrible yet mere natural phenomenon.

Schmidt noticed it too, because she quickly went on with her presentation as the virtual view showed between them went beyond the first solar system displayed.

"As the Azimuth Horizon expanded on our side, so have we determined that it did as well on the other side. The closest solar system charted there by the Artemis was assuredly destroyed, just like, in our universe, the solar system nearest to it, the one that had included the planet Neural, was utterly destroyed."

"Captain Gould and the Lotus did save the people there, right?"

"Yes, Captain Kheren," Samji answered quickly before the Andorian could again ram a hot nail in the governor's beliefs. "Our former flagship managed to successfully lead the evacuation of the few thousands of natives and without compromising the Prime Directive any further than Captain Kirk had done a century and half ago. Your own Commander Oseno had been quite instrumental in this effort."

"There was no danger of violating the Prime Directive then," Kheren stated. "On the contrary; the Hill people and the Villagers were aware of both the Federation and the Klingon Empire since both clashed in an arms race on that planet in those days; and the Azimuth Horizon threatened them because of our own tearing of subspace through warp travel in the region. *We* were the cause of the threat to their world; we were *bound* to correct our own interference with the natural evolution of their world. Captain Gould and Commander Oseno did the *right* thing the *right* way."

The way he spoke, there was no doubt that this would be the example he himself would follow; the philosophy in which *he* believed in. And he wanted it spelled out clearly and plainly to them all... but especially to the haughty woman who would be giving him orders.

Again, the astute Exec of the starbase commander quickly brought everyone's mind away from the potential renewal of conflict to the matter at hand.

"Long range sensors of the Artemis made a quick but thorough survey of the immediate surroundings and charted several other nearby star systems that in all probability escaped the devastation of the anomaly."

The holographic view centered on one with twelve planets around a yellow-white star. There were six gaseous giants from the outer edge inward and six much smaller rocky ones closer to the stellar body. The scrolling astometric data appearing in the display stated the second and third one as being in the popularly called 'goldylock' zone where carbon-based life was deemed possible.

"On recommendation of Governor Sufra, this system has been christened Eden. Eden II and III are class M, while Eden I and IV are class D, rich in all kinds of minerals including rare ones like dilithium and topaline. The gas giants are also rich sources of all useful gases like helium and a good abundance of comets further enrich the system with a surplus of iced water and organic compounds."

"This is your objective, Captain Kheren," now ordered Allen Samji, taking over the presentation. "You will bring Governor Sufra and her colonists to both worlds with all their belongings and starting material and position yourself as their supplying starbase, providing them with early manufacturing, communication and protection until they can be fully autonomous. The Polaris, your integrated escort, will provide system patrol and your flotilla of shuttlecrafts further means of transport between those worlds. Using your saucer primary hull as a separate base while your engineering section works independently as an industrial facility, or landing your bridge module as a planetside central base, is at your discretion."

"Aye, Sir."

The Fleet Captain then turned towards the Vulcan commanding officer.

"Captain Syntron, you will be tasked to chart thoroughly this first sector of our new colonial territory. Twenty light years on a side is quite an area to cover, but the Quantum Slipstream Drive of the Phoenix will easily jump to each stellar formation within it that your advanced sensors will record. Your own Space Sonar that you invented will undoubtedly allow you to do your job even if unsuspected cosmic anomalies would hamper another starship... and I'm sending you a new Chief Science Officer from our exchange program that is, despite his... greenness, the best cosmologist you could ever hope to find. The Horizon will act as your port of call just as you will act as her emissary in case other sentient life forms are discovered in this area nearest to the portal."

"Acknowledged, Sir. We will be ready." Syntron responded to the Fleet Captain.

He then turned his attention to his first officer. He spoke softly so that only his exec could hear.

"Ensure that we will be ready for departure, Commander, and see what you can ascertain about this new CSO they are sending us."

Syntron's thoughts were however more about the naming of this target system for colonisation in a totally unknown area. Naming one after the biblical "Garden of God" had not fared too well for previous federation and expeditions.

In 2269, a group of renegades who rejected modern technological life formed the rag-tag crew of the *Aurora*, a stolen space cruiser, which escaped in search for a mythical world called Eden. Temporarily hijacking the USS Enterprise of Captain Kirk, the paradise they eventually found on their Eden concealed deadly secrets from its venomous foliage. Eighteen years later, in 2287, the crew of the Enterprise faced again a comparable fate when their ship was commandeered by Spock's half-brother and his small collection of faithful followers. The ship proceeded under Sybok's direction to the center of the galaxy and encountered not only a planet, but an energy being who introduced itself as God. This too did not turn out as intended.

These thoughts were then interrupted by the Fleet Captain himself. Samji looked at everyone in turn before speaking again.

"Any questions?"

"Just one, Sir," the Andorian captain said after a moment of silence between them all. "Are we sent out there to... promote the ideals of the United Federation of Planets, as defined by the Articles of the Federation?"

He addressed his question at the starbase commander, but his four eyes were on the governor.

"It goes without saying, Captain," answered Samji.

"With all due respect, Sir... I think it *has* to be said."

He was still looking at governor Sufra.

For a moment, she seemed to be about to retort something. But then, her mouth took a sour twist as her eyes closed with a look of dismissal before she spoke in a very cold tone of voice to Samji.

"We will board the ship momentarily, Fleet Captain."

But it's Kheren who answered.

"You and your people will board *my* ship *after* you and your people *and* mine with *everything* they bring aboard will have been fully cleared through the full security protocol aboard my ship... which I will point out include empathic and telepathic scanning. You and your people, just like mine, *will* acknowledge full knowledge and acceptance of them and any and all responsibilities and consequences delineated by them and Starfleet regulations. And no loitering around the Phoenix either."

Sufra again redened and bit her lip not to lash back at the Andorian. She pointedly continued to ignore him to address the Fleet Captain.

"Fleet Captain Samji; I officially protest this disrespectful treatment and will report this directly to the Federation Council. I urge you to make this... officer of yours to be... reasonable... or else, your name will have to figure on my report as well."

Samji sighed. But both his stare and voice were firm.

"Governor Sufra; the Federation Council approves *all* Starfleet rules... rules that in some cases date back even thousands of years...like this one; aboard his ship, a Captain is Lord after God."

"Come on now; you don't beleive..."

Samji cut her off.

"What *I* beleive, or what *you* beleive for that matter, Governor, is irrelevant. I'm sorry but, with the Horizon being the one and only ship capable of meeting *your* needs and *your* objectives, if this is the way Captain Kheren wants to conduct business on *his* ship, there is nothing no one can do about it, as long as his orders do not violate Starfleet rules and regulations."

"We will see about *that*."

This time, as she spoke, she fixed her angry stare at the Andorian who looked back at her with a definitely defiant expression in his otherwise frozen face. Then, she stormed out of the office with so much as a nod to the others.

"Charming woman," whispered Yeoman Blackbird.

Although she was more or less behind the Andorian, he still caught her words.

"Isn't she," commented Kheren. "She must have an Andorian somewhere in her ancestry..."

There was no way to tell if he was joking or not. Probably was, since hybridation with Andorians was next to impossible. Samji, for his part, was in no mood to laugh or to joke.

"Alright gentlemen; you have your orders."

"Aye, Sir," nodded Kheren. "Captain Syntron, Commander Riker... good tides and fair winds to you. We will inform you when we are ready to depart with our... guests."

And with that, he lead the way out to his Exec and his Yeoman.

* * *

The form that materialized on the transporter pad raised all eyebrows in the transporter room of the USS Phoenix. Contrary to popular belief, unusual lifeforms were not all that common to Starfleet officers, even in Lotus Fleet; despite the multiracial crowd of Starfleet Academy and the universal acceptance of differences on the one hundred and fifty member worlds, most Starfleet people were still either Human or very similar in appearance to them, like Bajorans, Centaurans, Deltans, Risans and Betazoids. Even Vulcans didn't have features all that alien to 25th century people and, up to this day, all artificial lifeforms had been modeled on the Terran frame. Those that were markedly different, like Andorians, Caitians, Edoans, Tellarites and Saurians were in fact few and far between in comparison. And that was even more true when considering starship crews where, for obvious practical reasons, the tendency was to regroup officers and crewmembers that were, if not of similar species, at least of similar physiology.

And among all of those diverse sentient beings that shared life and duty within Starfleet, there had been no distinctively Avian ones.

Until now.

To the credit of those elite crewmembers that were part of Lotus Fleet in general and of the roster of the USS Phoenix in particular, transporter chief Krystal Dontae and her Risan assistant Risal as well as security guard Randy Deloit barely showed their surprise seeing the tall, feathered form with stars in his dense mane that patiently waited for the scanners to finish identifying him and for the forcefield to wisk off.

As for the raptor-like officer now stepping down to offer his ID PADD to the chief, if he was himself surprised at being met by them, his enormous golden eyes and massive hooked beak would not reveal it.

"Welcome aboard, Lieutenant. Your orders and assignment are confirmed and recorded. Please report yourself for duty to the captain. You will find him by using the computer interface on the wall panels anywhere on the ship's bulkheads."

"Thank you, Chief," acknowledged the Avian officer.

It was only after he left the transporter room that the transporter chief realized that he had spoken to her in her grandfather's old native Celtic.

Once in the corridor, the newcomer ignored the side glances thrown into his direction by passing crewmates. he was quite used by now to the novelty effect of his presence and, anyway, he had never cared about it, understanding quite well the reaction of all those young species. Turning to the black glossy band on the wall, a few lights flashed in the thick feather covering of his head and a dotted line flashed to indicate a specific direction uin answer to his silent query. Without a word, he followed the moving lights, nodding in passing to everyone he met on his way to meet his commanding officer.

Turning the corner of the corridor Commander Riker did not look up from the PADD he was reading, it was this lack of attention that caused him to bump directly into Lieutenant JG Livingstone. As the PADD fell from Commander Riker's hands he bent down quickly to pick it back up holding the PADD Riker looked up at the officer he had just bumped into. The only sound Riker could manage was a silent startled gasp as the PADD fell to the deck again as Riker jumped back slightly. Attempting to keep as much composure as possible Riker spoke.

"I apologize Lieutenant, I did not see you there."

"Please, Sir, it is I who must apologize. I WAS looking where I was going but didn't manage to avoid you. Again, I'm sorry, Sir; I'm not yet entirely at ease in these enclosed spaces. I hope you are unharmed, Sir."

The X'Ell could not refrain himself from rubbing his own shoulder. Those Humans were as dense as stone and colliding with one was something he had always deftly managed to do... until now. He was also quite mortified at having being so distracted by the ship itself around him; a lapse he hoped the Commander would overlook from someone pretending to become their chief of science.

Pretending as if his startled reaction did not occur at all Riker continued. As he bent down to pick up the PADD again.

"You must be Lieutenant Livingstone... I am Commander Riker, first officer. I was just reading the new crew reports our Chief of the Vessel assembled."

Pointing to the PADD and still slightly shaken by a combination of shock and embarrassment from his reaction Riker pointed down the corridor and continued.

"You should check in with the Captain, Mister Livingstone; he is expecting you."

"Yes, Sir; of course ,Sir; right away, Sir," the nervous lieutenant acquiesced with a nod of his head atop his long slender neck that made the gesture all the more comical.

Nodding to the young feathered alien Commander Riker walked around him and continued on his way hoping his first impression was not as terrible as it had seemed.

And so did the new officer, wondering if this was what qualified as the 'assault on a superior officer' court martial offense he had read about.

More careful than ever so as not to bump into anyone else, the X'Ell made his way to the nearest turbolift and called for the bridge, as the computer indicated that it was where his new commanding officer was located. And again, when he exited the cabin, all eyes went to his peculiar silhouette as he stepped up to the central chair and the bearded Vulcan almost as tall as himself that sat there.

"Captain Syntron Sir; Lieutenant Junior Grade Jonathan X. Livingstone reporting for duty as Chief Science Officer."

The Vulcan commanding officer gazed up from the center seat upon the unique avian officer that just approached and spoke to him. He was a tall and slender specimen with long-limbs and purple-tinted feathers. The captain's gaze ran above the new officer's beak and into the large-spaced golden eyes.

Fascinating, the captain thought.

He vividly remembered the mission several years back involving the Dyson shell that introduced the Federation to this compelling X'Ell species.

As he stood up to greet his new CSO, Syntron's gaze into those golden eyes was only slightly lower in stature than the position of his own. With his arms folded behind him, the Vulcan addressed him.

"Welcome aboard the USS Phoenix, Lieutenant Livingstone. It is an honor to have you serving aboard as our new chief science officer. Have you had the opportunity to get settled into your quarters yet?"

"Negative, Sir. it would have been improper to nest before getting permission to roost. Your own Starfleet rules themselves specify that one must report to one's commanding officer before engaging in personal needs."

Livingstone looked at Syntron for a moment, blinking his large eyes before continuing.

"You are Syntron of Artemis, one of the Visitors, those who opened up our shell. Sir, the honor of working with you is all mine. Because of you, my people and myself have finally hatched. Hopefully, we will spread our wings and soar through the stars as you do; as I will presently in your company."

He straightened up at attention.

"Orders, Sir?"

The captain turned slightly and espied his yeoman lurking nearby as if she did not have an ear tuned to their conversation.

"Yeoman Albera, I would like you to meet our new chief science officer, Lieutenant Livingstone."

Her youthful exuberance was barely contained as she practically leaped over to join them.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir. I've never had the honor to meet someone of your species before."

"I am the first and only one of my kind, so far, to go outside our homeworld."

"Please escort the lieutenant to his quarters on deck 6 and afterward, when he is situated, to his science office on deck 8."

"Yes Sir," the golden-brown haired human responded with diligence.

As Albera started heading toward the turbolift, the captain brought his attention back to the avian officer.

"Once you are... *nestled* in, Lieutenant, report back to me and we can discuss your upcoming orders."

"Acknowledged, Captain," answered Livingstone who had not yet moved until his commanding officer had dismissed him.

With his peculiar careful gait, the X'Ell then followed the Yeoman into the turbolift, his enormous eyes blinking in every direction with obvious interest about everything and everyone his wide-angled, powerful sight could embrace, until the lift door slid shut.

As the turbolift began to descend, Yeoman Albera cast her sparkling eyes toward the new avian officer as she inquired "So Lieutenant Livingstone, what do you think of our ship so far?"

* * *

"Out of the question!"

Ensign Blackbird startled hearing the uncharacteristic outburst from her usually poised commanding officer. In fact, he had been his usual stony self since their return from the mission briefing in Fleet Captain Samji's office... until she brought one particular subject to his attention.

"Sir... the governor was especially... insistent and uncharacteristically... polite about the request."

Captain Kheren stood up abruptly and went to the transparency that allowed him to look out at the imposing starbase they were anchored to and at the unending field of stars spread beyond it's ringed, disc-shaped structure. From here, he couldn't see the USS Phoenix; despite her several hundred meters of length, she was comfortably berthed inside the starbase's docking area, like all the other ships of Lotus Fleet did... all except the immense one and a half kilometer long USS Horizon he commanded. For a moment, he looked out, saying nothing. Then, without turning from the vista outside, he spoke again to his yeoman.

"Is Commander Sisko aware of this... request?"

"Negative, Sir... well... at least, not from me, Sir."

Kheren tapped his combadge.

"Kheren to Commander Sisko."

A soft, warm voice answered him.

"Sisko here, Captain."

"Commander, can you spare a moment and come to the poopdeck?"

Despite being familiar with the captain's fondness for old Human naval terms, Miramanee Blackbird could not refrain from letting an amused smile cross her lips. The peculiar sailship term the Andorian used to name his ready room was well known to his crew; yet, it always elicited amusement to those who understood the reference, confusion to the others. She knew this was intentional; her commanding officer was also fond of keeping his people open-minded, alert and inquisitive. And despite his cold, aloof demeanor and inexpressive face, he was not above some humor in his command style... even when he himself failed to understand it. At least, that's what he said.

At this moment however, she knew he was not in a humorous mood at all.

In the middle of the spacious captain's office, a form shimmered and then coalesced into that of a middle-sized man with dark brown skin, black short cropped hair and beard and intense clear eyes with a small crease on his nose between his eyes. He was wearing a commander's grey, black Starfleet uniform and a small but elaborate earring dangling above the three golden pips on his red collar. The voice of the apparition was the same as the one that had answered the Andorian over the comm channel.

"I'm sorry to come to you through the holographic grid, Captain; I hope you don't mind... but Tess is undergoing recalibration with our grid and I don't want to interrupt it or leave her alone during this procedure."

"That will do fine, Commander. How is Tess today?"

"She is fine, Sir, thank you for asking. We have some trouble still confining without losing any part of the extreme complexity of her matrix to even our impressive holomatrix grid; even the massive computers we have on the Horizon are far below what her original computer was on the Nemesis. We will manage eventually but it is a slow, delicate process."

"And only the beginning, if I understood your project correctly," added Kheren with a nod.

"Yes, Sir... and the easy part. We do have now considerable data and experience with sentient artificial lifeforms in general and sentient holograms in particular. Tess is more complex as an artificial lifeform than even Doctor Joe of Voyager ever was, born out of a living starship computer with no equal in this galaxy since V'Ger... Fortunately, the Horizon's computer network is as powerful as that of any starbase. Just... slower. Now, we are still far from having a portable holo-emitter like the one the Doctor got from the 29th century; giving her an actual physical form that would contain all of her programming and let her experience the full range of life, beyond what even Captain Data's positronic android body could..."

"If anyone can give her a 'life' of her own, outside of her original starship body, it is you, Commander," said Kheren with another nod.

"She says she is quite happy just to be free now from her 'old' body and especially from the mad Khan AI that... shared it with her... and very grateful to all of us. In the meantime, she loves being part of the Horizon... even if it makes her feel... err... fat."

Kheren stood frozen, not comprehending. But the Amerind woman in the room with him struggled to refrain from giggling.

"Commander, I called you here to discuss something of a personal nature concerning you."

Sisko's hologram frowned at this and nodded.

"The Horizon Children."

"You know of their presence on the starbase... and that they will soon be coming aboard, as the colonists we will bring to their new home beyond the anomaly."

"Yes, captain. They attempted to contact me through a private subspace channel even before they arrived at Starbase Lotus."

"I see..."

"Sir, if I may make a personal request; I would like to avoid any... encounter with them as much as possible."

"They want to meet their... Prophet," the Andorian said with a tone of voice that said all about what he thought of the idea.

The voice and facial expression of Sisko spoke of the same feeling.

"Their... Prophet is dead. In fact, he never was; he was a lie, a fabrication of fanatic manipulating minds to lure them to a false promise. I am Joey Daystrom Sisko, Starfleet Commander, Engineer, cybernetic specialist and a son of Earth and Bajor; nothing more, nothing less... and nothing else. I believe only in the true Prophets, those of whom my grandfather is the last chosen Emissary. I want nothing to do with the cult of the Horizon. I told them so... and I consider the matter closed... Sir."

"I hear you, Commander. As commanding officer of this ship, I grant your request and will give orders to ensure it. Your engineering section of the ship will be off-limits to them as well as the officers deck and the officers' messhall and recreational areas. Communication to you will be blocked unless you initiate it yourself. If one still manages to come to you and bother you, security will be at your disposal to free you from such... harassment."

"Thank you, Captain."

With a mutual nod of understanding, the holographic emission cut off and the image of Sisko disappeared. Kheren turned his silver eyes towards his yeoman.

"You may give back the Commander's answer to the governor... along with my orders."

"Oh joy..." grumbled the copper-skinned woman. Then she straightened herself. "Sorry, Sir. Affirmative, Sir."

"At ease, Ensign; it is not with you I am angry with."

"But *she* might be angry with *you*, Sir."

"I am looking forward to it. I love a good fight."

Returning behind his transparent aluminum desk looking as if it was cut out from a bloc of ice, the Andorian sat and lifted his eyes and antennae to her.

"Anything else, Yeoman?"

"Doctor Nasaro-Myth sent... another... reminder about your scheduled check-up; and there is the new chief of security and tactical..."

"Ah yes... send him here as soon as he is cleared by ship security. I look forward to meeting this... Jem'Hadar Starfleet officer."

As she nodded and turned to exit the office, she paused at the doorway to shoot a crooked smile back at him.

"We do seem to attract the... oddballs on your ship... if you don't mind me saying so, Sir."

The dark-blue, silver-eyed Andorian pointed to his antennae moving with their astounding in and out motion.

"Comes with the territory."

* * *

Lieutenant S'Tan Solius approached the Captain's ready room and awaited permission to enter. Due to the ship's prior mission and the temporary loss of her commanding officer during the dramatic events that followed, the Romulan felt that a dialogue was needed between the two of them. He also brought with him a PADD of suggested improvements to computer systems to prevent sabotage and unauthorized access to systems. His recent experiences in Fluidic Space also allowed him now to see his fellow officers in a new light and he wanted to apologize to the captain for his argumentative position at the prior mission's briefing.

Upon entering he stood at attention.

"Sir, I'd like to speak privately about my actions prior to your abduction by the Undine."

Kheren with one hand on his desk terminal locked his door and showed him a seat in front of his desk with his other callused hand.

"What's on your mind, Lieutenant?"

"I would first like to apologize for my argumentative comments during our prior briefing. I am not used to... openness on a starship. Subterfuge and secret plans are what I have dealt with for my entire career. So to hear such a blunt plan as the one the crew came up with during your abduction made my instincts tell me that someone was going to betray us; and, usually, my fellow officers would have agreed with me. It was not the case... It made me assume the officers of this ship, if not of the whole of Starfleet, were experienced but naive. But after seeing the entire ship refuse to back down once you were proclaimed missing, I can see that it is not naivete, but hope; the hope to make the universe a better place. I am embarrassed to admit my initial opinions of the crew were so flawed."

He paused for a moment before continuing. Kheren could see in his body language as much as in his eyes and tone of voice that he was not only sincere but possibly a bit awed at his own realization. It was something he could easily understand.

Long ago, while still a young angry duellist with blood in his eyes and fire in his heart, he had met a Vulcan at the ruins of P'Jem...

"There is no need to apologize, Lieutenant. A briefing is there to have us all benefit from comments and even arguments to try and make the best decisions before things happen. That is why we try to have them; because when we are on the bridge, when things *are* happening, it is time for orders and execution, *not* comments and arguments."

He too made a pause, but it was only to give time for the point to come across in the other's mind. This point... and the one that followed.

"As for preconceptions, misconceptions... we all have them, even as we try to live by our Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations ideal. I am sure you are aware many among us made the same mistakes about you as you did about us. *You* are not the one to be embarrassed; after all, you came from a homogeneous culture where there is but one law, one rule one way of life. *We* on the other hand, with our IDIC philosophy, we *should* know better; yet, we too often fall into the same trap as you did... Only our rules and vows give us a chance to find our way back on the right track. I would state that it is rather a credit to you that you could do so as well as any of us and in so short a time. That is where your new pip comes from by the way."

"Aye, Sir. Thank you for the commendation. I am sure you are aware how Romulan Naval promotions work. Someone must die for you to advance. I am glad to see I no longer need to be ordered to schedule accidents," He said it with a joking smile.

But the truth was that he had done it a few times... even without orders.

"I thought only Klingons worked that way," Kheren said with genuine surprise. "But just so you know, I do not believe in accidents; there is *always* someone responsible, if only by negligence."

It sounded as much as a warning as a confession.

Solius continued.

"I also wanted to present you with this..."

He handed the Captain his PADD.

"While you were with the Undine and during our R&R, I took the liberty of playing the role of a White Hat. Our computer systems are highly protected from the outside, but they aren't nearly as strong if someone could implant themselves in a cozy nook of the ship. I've made minor hotfixes to holes, but I felt for the other hundred or so weaknesses, I should advise you of them and request permission to improve security. I am not sure anyone other than myself would ever be able to access ninety-nine percent of them, but it's never too late to improve systems."

"I am always in favor of productive initiatives, especially aiming at improvements, Lieutenant; but I am also aware of the typical engineer love to change things," Kheren said as he took the PADD and looked at it for a few minutes.

Finally, he handed it back to the Romulan.

"Good work, Lieutenant; looks fine by me, on a security standpoint at least. That is something particularly of concern to me as of late... But then again, I'm no engineer. Confirm validity with Commander Redding; he's much more competent at engineering than I ever could be. Proceed if he also gives you his green light. Please also advise everyone in your department about those modifications once they are to be implemented. And do not forget to inform ship security as well. Our new chief is due to arrive shortly; I understand that he may be of the very thorough kind... so, he might get nervous if he finds things not in the ship's manual."

"Very well, Sir. I will talk with Commander Redding when I get a moment. As for the new tactical officer, I'm sure he'll learn quickly that the manual gets thrown out the second the ship undocks... I suppose I will loaf about on the bridge until the briefing."

Kheren's antennae lowered right at the Romulan and his voice became just as threatening.

"Mister Solius; it is *you* who have to learn that, on *this* ship, you *never* throw the book away... *unless* and *until* you get to the *last* page; and *then*, and *only* then, will your job *be* to write the *next* page. Do I make myself clear, Lieutenant?"

Composing himself once more, the Andorian spoke with a softer tone but no less serious.

"Would have I done what you suggest when I lost my first command, you, I, this whole universe, would not even be here today. You, Lieutenant S'Tan Solius, a Romulan defector, you were selected among how many excellent and more experienced officers to be nothing less than the chief engineer of the flagship of the elite division of Starfleet. Do you know why?"

The Romulan was dumbfounded. He was not expecting his off-the-cuff comment to be taken so seriously.

"A...Aye Sir. I never meant any disrespect. Nor did I mean to imply that we follow no rules. I simply wanted to express the idea that the manual does not have all the answers, and rigid inflexibility in certain situations are a recipe for disaster. Just look at our last mission. Only by disregarding the manual did we save you and the Undine. The manual would have told us to follow the direct orders everyone seemed to be ignoring and return to starbase. But that doesn't mean I want to fly around pirating civilian freighters because we've gotten rid of the manual. I know at least that much."

"That is exactly what I mean when I say, don't throw the book away *until* the last page... and then, it *is* time to write the next one."

Composing himself once more, the Andorian spoke with a softer tone but no less serious.

"Would have I done what you suggest when I lost my first command, you, I, this whole universe, would not even be here today. You, Lieutenant S'Tan Solius, a Romulan defector, you were selected among how many excellent and more experienced officers to be nothing less than the chief engineer of the flagship of the elite division of Starfleet. Do you know why?"

"I've never put much thought into it, Sir. I am a soldier. I go where I am told."

His response was short, but truthful. He never really had questioned ship placement orders before. It really wasn't his place to think about such things. He just assumed that Starfleet felt safest with him on a ship that couldn't vanish without thousands knowing instantly.

"I will tell you then; it is because you are not only an excellent engineer and an experienced officer, but because you are not only Starfleet, you are also *Rihannsu*... Romulan; that means you are disciplined *and* crafty. The trick for you now will be to know how to be one *and* the other; use everything in the book... then go beyond it if it is found still wanting. That's what my crew has learned to do... as you saw the last time."

Kheren nodded to him in dismissal.

"Food for thought, Chief. Carry on."

"Aye Sir." The engineer responded, turning to leave.

After he was dismissed, the engineer turned and exited the room, taking his place at the engineering console, examining the system diagnostics.

* * *

Aron'Son waited impatiently on the transporter pad on Starbase Lotus for the Horizon to beam him aboard. Despite the delay however, he was still impressed by the security protocols in place aboard a Federation ship. He had not seen such precautions anywhere else he'd been on Earth, even Starfleet Command did not have such strict security.

The Jem'Hadar leveled his gaze at the transporter operator who attempted to give him a friendly smile.

"I'm sure it won't be much longer."

Aron'son's only response could only be described as an annoyed grunt, but then a beep came from the operator's console.

"Ah, the Horizon is ready to beam you aboard."

The transporter beam took him then and when he materialized he was greeted with another sight he'd never seen before. Standing in front of him was a giant Andorian woman with two security officers behind her, and off to the side a human woman whose racial makeup he did not recognize. It was the Andorian woman who greeted him.

"Please stay where you are, Ensign."

"Is there something wrong with your eyes?" Aron'son asked her coldly. "My proper rank is Lieutenant."

"Of course," the woman said with a smile "My mistake. I am Lieutenant Tyvva, acting chief of security."

"I am Lieutenant Aron'son, I am assigned as the Chief of Security of this vessel."

Tyvva's tricorder beeped and she looked up at him.

"So you are. Welcome to the Horizon, Sir."

Aron'son responded with a nod and the human woman spoke up "Lieutenant I am Ensign Blackbird, Captain Kheren's yeoman, he would like to see you. If you'll follow me Sir."

Aron'son stepped down of the transporter pad and fell into step behind the woman as she led him down the corridors of the largest ship he had ever been aboard. He didn't even know Starfleet made ships of this size. The Horizon would dwarf any Dominion vessel, and he suspected outgun them as well.

"What do you think of the Horizon, Sir?" Meeramanee asked, attempting to make conversation with the unusual officer.

"It is the largest ship I have ever seen. Even my people do not have ships this large."

"She is big, but I'm sure you will get used to the size; and the computer can help you navigate."

"Indeed...what nature of name is Blackbird? It is unusual... for a Human"

"And it is not even the real name of my ancestor," answered the copper-skinned woman with a smile, seemingly unconcerned with the abrupt change of subject... as much as for the startling fact that he was Jem'Hadar and a Starfleet officer. "*Wash-Ing-Guhsa-Ba*, Chief Black Bird, was leader of the *Omaha* tribe, the first one of the North-American plains to deal with the White traders, somewhere in the eighteenth century on Earth. The native tongue and thus real name were lost with time... Only the translation to the old English language remained when his descendants, my forebears, grew in the new society that developed there afterwards."

"You are of a unique heritage compared to other Humans I have encountered; but I have read Human history and know that your ancestors were treated dishonorably," Aron'Son commented.

Miramanee nodded gravely despite her smile.

"There is a very old saying among my people; when you look behind, you can only stumble forward."

As she guided him into the nearest turbolift, she ordered it to deck 1 and then returned the question to the grey-scaled officer.

"Is Aron'Son a genuine Jem'Hadar name or did you adopt it for our convenience?"

"My name is that given by my First when I hatched, so it is the name I bear. Jem'Hadar do not have ancestors, each First is responsible for naming the young... as I once did."

They exited the turbolift and she led her new crewmate around the rim of the vast bridge of the Lotus class capital ship.

"No ancestors... that is something our captain share with you, I was told. You two may have more in common than even he or you or anyone else might yet realize. Born of the same animal spirit my ancestors once might have said..."

They stopped before one door where she activated the chime.

"Come," said a deep, soft, yet powerful voice from beyond the sliding panel.

The black-haired woman stepped before the entrance to speak.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Aron'Son reporting for duty, Sir."

"Thank you yeoman; let him in."

She stepped back to let the door slide close behind the Jem'Hadar. He now stood alone with the commanding officer of the Horizon.

Aron'Son examined the captain as he stepped into the room. Clearly he was Andorian; Aron'Son knew what they looked like... but this one was unlike any Andorian he'd ever seen. The man's eyes themselves appeared to be unseeing, but Aron'Son knew that was not the case and he suspected the unusually large blue-skinned Ghel'noid before him saw many things that others did not.

Perhaps this assignment would be more challenging than he had initially believed.

"I am Lieutenant Aron'Son, Sir. I have been assigned as the Chief of Security of this vessel."

Kheren looked at the imposing officer before him with more than professional interest. Having trained on holodecks against simulated warriors of his kind, he was keenly aware of their power and inbred warrior nature. What Andoria had produced through millions of years of evolution and thousands of years of societal development, the Dominion had achieved through genetic engineering... and then beyond; Andorians had turned out as controlled homicidal killers in a ritualistic society where even one's children or parent could slit your throat for just a perceived slight... but Jem'Hadar were professional soldiers through and through, obedient, efficient, perfect teamplayers and unburdened by social or familial attachment, emotion or even the need for food and rest.

Having one, the only one assuredly in the whole of the Federation, report to him as a genuine officer to assume tactical and security on board his ship was an unheard-of opportunity and privilege... and, in the current circumstances of his upcoming mission, one he was not going to waste.

Thus, he did not offer Aron'Son any food or drink; the study through food choices and the simple fact of taking or not some during an official meeting would be lost on him.

Neither did he invite him to sit down; Kheren knew they never did unless seriously hurt. Their famous "bug ship" attack cruisers didn't even have seats. This one certainly would, as Starfleet vessels were manned almost entirely from seating arrangements and his file stated that his uniform was not a gift but one he earned through Starfleet Academy like all of them; but that would most probably be the only instance that he would. Kheren for his part could stand for hours without any discomfort, like any Andorian; yet, here he remained seated. As born soldiers, Jem'Hadar were said to be most responsive to hierarchy; thus, he had to feel as much as to know who was in charge and remaining seated before a standing subordinate was a clear sign of authority he sure would have caught on.

Between the both of them, children of a warrior people, the Human custom of handshaking would have been awkward at best. Kheren was not in the habit of doing it in the first place unless directly invited to; and so, he did not. For a moment, they eyed one another from across his desk, covered and just out of reach of any sudden move. All in all, it made this first meeting a very cold, austere one to be sure... but at the same time, a significant, respectful one, like that of two duellists sizing up each other and finding without a word where each other stood in relation to the other.

Finally, the commanding officer of Lotus Fleet's flagship spoke.

Tell me, Lieutenant; what do you know about Starfleet's Rules of Engagement?"

Aron'Son was silent momentarily as he evaluated the question, but quickly came to the conclusion that his new commander was testing him.

"Directive 010: before engaging alien species in battle, any and all attempts to make contact and achieve non-military resolution will be made. Directive 012: When engaged in conflict with an unknown species, all attempts are to be made to resolve the conflict using the minimum necessary force to ensure the minimum loss of life. Regulation 46C: if communications are being monitored during battle, no transmission on an unsecure channel is to be made. Regulation 191 Article 14: in combat, command in a starship group falls to the vessel with tactical superiority..." Aron'Son stopped there attempting to ascertain if his answer had been satisfactory. "there are many more Sir...though I am certain you know all of them, but if it is required I am able to continue to cite them. "

"I am sure that you know the wording of them all perfectly," the Andorian agreed. "But what do you *know* of them? What does it all say to you?"

Aron'Son thought about the question. He was a soldier because he was bred to be one and many of the things he had been taught at Starfleet Academy had gone against his very being. Yet, he had agreed to uphold them, and follow them just the same. The more he learned about the Federation the more he began to question all the Dominion had ingrained in him.

He had seen it before, his own First had acted strangely before being killed on a battlefield, and there were stories of other Honored Elders revolting even leading their entire squad in revolt only to be put down by other Jem'Hadars.

Still, Aron'Son had given his word, to uphold the values these people held dear and he would do so... to the death.

"Sir, I was well versed in the values of the Federation long before I was... exiled. My people are bred for war, trained to know our enemies better than we know our own self. The Federation, and by extension Starfleet, wishes peaceful coexistence even when its enemies would have anything but. It is as foreign a concept to me as anything I have ever encountered. In spite of that, I have sworn to uphold those values even when they go against my very existence. I still have much to learn about the way of things here, but you asked me what I know. Those are things I know."

As a mutated Andorian master duellist ostracized and self-exiled from a species, a culture and a society of violence he had himself rejected, Kheren certainly knew, of all people, what going against the grain meant. And as a Starfleet officer, he knew what a warrior's word meant to oneself; and this one had been literally made as one.

"Fair enough, Lieutenant. Starfleet's Rules of Engagement are what we strive unhearingly to follow on board this ship. And here it is in a nutshell; *always* follow the path of reason; talk to resolve a situation rather than fight, because violence is the last argument of the imbecile. Then, if you *do* have to fight, always follow the path of life; 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."

His four oculars darted directly into the eyes of the powerful newcomer.

"Do you think you can do that, Lieutenant?"

"Captain, all that I was is no longer. My so-called gods abandoned me, my squad was taken away... I was dead. The Federation and Starfleet have given me another chance to attain victory even if it is not through the way I was bred for; and so, I will uphold that way because victory is life."

"Yet," the Andorian retorted, "once a Master said that, since we will inevitably lose the final battle against death, can any lesser victory mean anything after all? To that, my personal answer is; yes, if it means life for others."

Looking up at his new officer, Kheren gave him a nod.

"As long as we agree on that, then welcome aboard, Lieutenant Aron'Son. Do you have any question at this time?"

"No Sir, I will seek a briefing on current procedures from Lieutenant Tyvya."

"She will make a fine assistant to you, Lieutenant; she's quite familiar with the ship and the crew, her protocols and my style of command from the days I myself started like you on the flagship Lotus. So are all the senior officers in your department in fact. Whatever you need to know or do, she and the rest will be there for you. Not quite a Jem'Hadar squad... but they have worked as a team for the past five years; you should find them adequate. See you on the bridge at launch."

"Aye Sir."

Aron'Son came to attention out of respect for his commander, and executing a perfect about face exited the room.

After leaving the captain's ready room, Aron'Son strode out onto the bridge of his new home and stopped. He examined the bridge noting layout, entrances, exits, Jeffries tube hatches, and tactical advantage points. No soldier ever expected their ship to be boarded, but Aron'Son knew that it was better to be prepared for the unlikely than to be surprised by it. As he scanned the area, he noted the giant Andorian female that had met him in the transporter room standing at the tactical station, and a Romulan sitting at the engineering station. The Romulan was a curiosity, and perhaps he would speak with him, but at the moment it was the Andorian he was concerned with and he approached her.

"I do not wish to interrupt you, Lieutenant, but I would like to be informed regarding all current security procedures, and any issues that require immediate attention. As I understand, you have been running my department it is a necessity that I secure all applicable information and current standing orders from you."

Coming to her towering height, Tyvya nevertheless spoke with all the deference due to a fellow officer.

"You are Chief now, Sir. You are not interrupting me; you are demanding my attention."

She then ran her fingers on the console and the data screen besides the tactical display showed the ship's security manual.

"It is true that I have been running the tactical and security department on and off since I first came under Captain Kheren, back on the days he took the same responsibilities as you do now, on the flagship Lotus; and then again when he became commanding officer of the Artemis. But you are here now, obviously because you have what it takes; I'll be happy to second you from now on. In fact, it will make things somewhat easier; being one of his wives sometimes complicate professional rapport with some officers. But in your case, and with you now giving the orders, I believe it will be no problem at all."

Her long, nailless finger pointed to the display.

"Everything you need to know is right there, Sir. The captain himself is a former officer of our line of work, so his security and tactical requirements are rather... stringent and elaborate; more than a few broke teeth and nails over them... Take the time to review them. I am as well available to answer any question you may have."

Then she looked at him with eyes like blue ice under the sun.

"Our immediate concern is the upcoming boarding of nearly three thousand civilians and their colonization material, ensuring that said cargo is safe and secured and that they have only access to appropriate but non essential sections of the ship and necessary facilities with no connection to any vital area, personnel or resource while they will be on board."

Her gaze then shifted momentarily to the door of the captain's office.

"Expect to have to implement yellow alert internal condition for the whole trip."

"Fun trip this is going to be..."

The off-hand command was whispered by the copper-skinned, dark-haired Human at the next station, that of the helm, who was apparently finishing some simulation exercise of piloting through what had vaguely appeared to be a strange mix of nebula and wormhole conditions. Realizing that he had interrupted their discussion, the man nodded in apology.

"Sorry, Lieutenant, didn't want to interrupt; I'm Lieutenant Aguk Snow, chief helmsman on this boat. Welcome aboard the Horizon. Don't worry, you'll get used to my grumblings; pay no attention to them... unless the captain does, that is."

The human's attempt at sarcasm and a joke, at least that's what Aron'Son believed they were, were all but lost on the Jem'Hadar, who focused his yellow eyes on Snow.

"Having three thousand non-combatants aboard this vessel does not seem like...fun." he remarked bluntly. "It sounds intrusive to the normal operations of the Horizon."

Snow's smile froze on his face as he returned his attention to his helm readouts.

"And I thought Mister Syntron was too serious..." he grumbled.

Aron'Son looked again to Tyvya.

"If we have not already, restricted spaces including the bridge, should be placed under guard by armed personnel, with phaser rifles. While not as effective as Jem'Hadar weapons, they will suffice in this situation as a deterrent. The colonists and their equipment should be quarantined under guard as they come aboard until their identities are verified as mine was when I boarded the ship. I presume the ship's computer will be able to assist us so that individual tricorder scans are not necessary. We will also want to establish patrols of the ship by small fire teams to further deter any potential sabotage. I will make further adjustments after I have read the current standing regulations. I have not seen our mission orders, but I will not allow the security of this vessel to be compromised."

"Well, you pretty much gave the broad lines of this ship's standard yellow alert security measures," Tyvya said to her new chief, "which includes tighter security checks on boarding this ship than what you went through. And that is the tip of the iceberg. Would you care to try to activate this console, Sir?"

As Aron'Son did, not even one light flashed on the board.

Tyvya then touched it and it came alive. She tapped her personal code and then spoke to the computer.

"Computer; recognize Tyvya, Lieutenant J.G. Security Chief, USS Horizon."

"Authorization code, vocal, visual and genetic identification confirmed," the disembodied female voice of the ship's main computer answered, having analyzed her genetic markings from the residue left by her fingers on the controls when she had tapped her personal code.

"Record my status as security first assistant and transfer my authority as security chief to Aron'Son, Lieutenant J.G."

"Authorization code, vocal, visual and genetic identity, Aron'Son, Lieutenant J.G. ready for transfer to security chief status. Captain and First officer pre-authorization recorded. Please input verbal and tactile command code to confirm."

As soon as the Jem'Hadar did so, the computer confirmed the procedure as complete. Tyvya then summarized it all.

"Ship's computer is programmed so that doors and access panels will not open and systems, even weapons, won't operate for anyone not authorized by one's duty and rank for the given area and duty shift. Of course, you, like any chief officer, now have unrestricted access; in your case, even to personal quarters like our CMO in case of emergencies... The same way, turbolifts will refuse access to restricted decks, including the bridge where no one below Ensign rank is admitted... except Governor Sufra obviously, since she's the Federation Council official on board. There is always one guard at all accesses of any sensitive area of the ship, inside and outside; that guard contingent is doubled and given phasers II and security suits at yellow alert, and again and with rifles and full combat armor during red alert."

She showed him the black-furred Caitian woman already standing next to the turbolift door, the only person on the entire bridge with Tyvya wearing a phaser.

"As for rifles, they will do fine, Sir; our standard security people are all cross-trained either as technicians or medics and nearly as well trained as Starfleet Marines on this ship... captain's requirements... and we do have marines on the Horizon as well; and they all can effectively implement crowd control with their rifles... without cutting anyone open."

Aron'Son was, for the second time in recent memory, impressed with the security precautions the beings of Lotus Fleet had undertaken. They superseded anything he came across on Earth, and were even more stringent than what Starfleet Intelligence had imposed during his brief captivity. To a normal being, even a Vulcan, such far reaching measures would probably be a lot to keep up with and to comprehend, but Aron'Son was processing all the information as Tyvya was presenting it to him.

"That is impressive, why are these procedures not standard throughout Starfleet? Even the security during my brief captivity on Deep Space Nine and Earth was not so restrictive. I could have easily escaped at the time."

"Ask Starfleet Command," simply answered the giantess.

Then, she elaborated.

"Most of Lotus Fleet ships and of course the starbase itself do apply those protocols since the Horizon Children incident on board Captain Kheren's first command, prior to Operation Horizon. Lotus Fleet is the elite of Starfleet and we are located in what is probably the hottest spot of Federation Space, right next to the Klingon Border, the Romulan Neutral Zone and the closest access point to the Delta Quadrant and even to Fluidic Space from our side of the galaxy; we are therefore quite motivated, comfortable and rigorous in applying those rules thoroughly, smoothly and efficiently. Where danger is far less felt, such measures might feel too... extreme. But they do have a copy of our manual. Funny thing is, most of them are in fact very simple to implement, like transporter autoscanning cross-referenced with medical files; many change very little of current procedures, like appointing security to all accesses; and some even unobtrusively go unnoticed, like the genetic scan and encoding of weapons and controls. Sooner or later, they will spread. This universe is unfortunately not getting more peaceful as of late, despite our best efforts."

Aron'Son nodded.

"That is true. Our enemies are plentiful. I will read the procedure manual, I will then conduct an inspection of the procedures though I am certain you have been thorough. It will help me learn to navigate the ship. Also, I would like to requisition a weapon for myself. As I do not sleep, I will be able to respond to any incident no matter when it happens during the ship's cycle."

"Security follows a four-shift schedule so as to be out of synch with the rest of the ship to throw off any timed attack plan. And it allows more officers to be better rested, alert and available at any given time. With you available round the clock, that will sure keep everyone sharp and on their toes."

On the security screen she brought up deck schematics and highlighted where the chief of security office was, right next to the imposing brig.

"Now that you are the security chief on board, you have access to the small armory in your office. You'll find all classes of phasers in there, power packs, even stun grenades and an old TR116, along with the combat knife that is standard issue for every security officer aboard. Like the big armory, yours is protected by a forcefield and now will open only to your genetic code and that of your assistants, just like the weapons themselves; even the knife locked in its sheath. Like all department heads, you are entitled to your own personal weapon and, as security chief, the only one allowed to wear one at all times. In case of trouble..."

Her hand touched the base of the console and a hidden panel slid open to reveal inside a phaser I, a med kit, a small repair kit, a respirator and even rations and something that looked like a belt buckle. That last item she took out and offered it to him.

"The latest version of our PIDs; sorry, our Personal Inertial Dampeners. The first chief engineer of the Artemis came up with these years ago and Chief Sangliar of Starbase Lotus made them more compact recently. Although one is integrated in every combat armor and EV suit aboard, I suggest you wear this one with your uniform; if ever the life support or the dampeners of the ship fail, at least you will not suffocate immediately or splatter at warp speed against a bulkhead."

She then turned her white-haired head to the Romulan engineer at his station.

"Not that I expect them to fail anytime soon, Chief. but better safe than sorry."

Aron'Son nodded with approval and examined the device.

"This is an ingenious piece of technology," he commented while fastening it to his uniform.

Even a soldier such as himself could admire a unique tool that could mean the difference between victory and defeat. He then looked at the Romulan that Tyvya had spoken to

"You are the chief engineer? I am Aron'Son, chief of security."

Another being might have been surprised to find a Romulan serving aboard a Federation starship; but given Aron'Son's current position, it was not surprising to him that one of the *Rihannsu* species would be here. It seemed that the Federation and Starfleet would accept more than just one former enemy into their units. He suspected it was something that would be perceived as a weakness by many, his own former people included, though the Romulans were another people the Dominion had underestimated when they invaded the Alpha Quadrant. The Founders believed the Romulans would remain neutral during the conflict, yet they had not and were drawn into the war by the Federation. Their intervention had allowed for the eventual defeat of The Dominion. Aron'Son had heard tales of the species who specialized in deceit and misdirection, but he never thought he would actually meet one.

"Yes, Hello..." The Romulan said as he spun his chair around, taking his headset off of his head.

He paused for a moment when he saw the Jem'Hadar officer.

"I had heard whisperings of your placement. I am impressed you survived your ketracel-white withdrawal. I once was witness to a prisoner going through withdrawals. Nasty Business. How can I help you?"

"It is not that I no longer require The White, my body now produces it naturally. Doctor Bashir was instrumental in allowing that to happen, if not for his genetic modifications I would likely not have survived, as was the intent when I was exiled from my squad. I find it strange that you would have witnessed such a thing, all Jem'Hadar would rather die than be captured by the enemy. I do not need anything, I wanted to make myself known to you as we will be working together. If the security in engineering is inadequate please let me know."

The Romulan smiled.

"Produce it naturally? Well now, you're going beyond my expertise. As long as there are no moving parts in there, I fully expect to never have to know how he did it. As for my former adventures, being fully restrained after being knocked unconscious prevents most suicide techniques. As far as I am aware, I do not need anything in engineering. Though I haven't seen our briefing yet, so I'll let that happen before I make any final judgements."

"Doctor Bashir simply restored that which the Founders took away. Before we were 'programmed' by the Founders, Jem'Hadars produced the enzyme in ketracel white naturally. Some even began to do so again after time. Doctor Bashir found that I was beginning to show signs of this and was able to speed the process up, to put it in his own words. There are no 'moving parts' as you put it...and perhaps we could discuss further your ability to ambush a Jem'Hadar soldier...these are tactics of which I should be aware should our enemies attempt to use them against me."

"Sadly, there isn't much of a tale to tell. I am an engineer, so while I got to 'enjoy' the front lines, I was never involved with the special operations the Navy was using. All I had to make sure of was that the force field around him was enough to keep him in place, but not enough to kill him. I believe a nerve agent was used, however. But as I said earlier, I understand the wizzing of machines, not the beat of a heart."

"Hmm..." Aron'Son said, "nerve agents, chemical warfare, much less honorable than face to face combat. It is unfortunate you do not possess detailed knowledge; such information would be useful. Now, I must take my leave; I have information to read and spaces to inspect for security purposes."

"Very well Lieutenant. I'll see you at the briefing." The Romulan bid farewell to the security chief and turned back to his readings while he awaited their briefing.

* * *

It was becoming a habit really, Snowfire ending up at the door to the Captain's ready room shortly before the ship departed. At least, given the last few missions, that was what it felt like to her.

Not that it had been a bad experience the last time or two... but then, *this* was different.

Anyone who'd seen her on her way to the bridge after receiving word of some of the latest orders passed to members of the Circle would have been able to tell that. The few who'd seen her working out in the Horizon's gyms and training rooms would recognise parts of the gait, but very few of them were on duty for this shift. Crewmembers who would usually offer words of greeting to her had snapped to attention as she'd stalked along the corridors towards the bridge, moving mutely out of her way at her nod or occasional salute, and only long after she'd passed would conversation begin to move again. The Circle had noticed it too, but they at least had been expecting it to some degree, and they'd taken the guillotine suddenness of her mental screens slamming into place far better than she'd hoped.

A corner of her mind knew she was going to have to apologize to them later, but that was a small, dimly heard voice compared to the one driving her.

Whatever the reason behind it, the deck-talk passed the visible consequence swiftly along. Commander K'Leysa was pissed. And as her route became more evident, the number of people who she could be angry with steadily shrank until it could be only one person aboard the Horizon.

If the automated doors governing entrance to the bridge could not slam open, her entrance on to the bridge had a similar effect. No one aboard the Horizon had ever seen Snowfire angry before. Irritated, annoyed by some problem, but never angry; not like this. And those who maybe hadn't quite believed that she'd commanded ships of her own for almost a human century knew quite well otherwise, for she wasn't even bothering to dial it down. Her entrance onto the bridge sent every member of the duty watch straight to their feet, and they seemed to almost vibrate in the tension snaking between them as she crossed the room. The pace she took wasn't quick, but it was measured, like the movements of a hunting cat. Her hand came up as she approached the door to the ready room, and she hit the admittance stud with none of the worry that she'd once had.

There wasn't any place for it in her mind.

It didn't take long for her to be admitted, and, although she wanted to make sure that this stayed private, the moment the door had swished shut behind her she was already speaking. She needed to get these words out before she said something that she might really regret.

"Permission to speak freely, Captain?" She didn't say anything else. But then again, she didn't need to to make the initial point.

It was an uncommon occurrence for Kheren to be surprised; but such was here the case. He didn't need his mastery of body language to understand that his chief science officer was angry; not only angry but angry at him. His stony face as usual said nothing but his antennae started to slowly flay this way and that in confusion.

"Of course, Commander."

"Thank you." Snowfire nodded to Ensign Blackbird, still holding her anger under tight control even then. "You may desire to dismiss your aide, Captain."

"Yeoman, you are dismissed."

With a slight pause of hesitation, the raven-haired woman nodded and left.

And with that, she... loosened the reins on her anger, holding up the PADD that she'd carried from her quarters, with the orders that she'd been passed by a member of her Circle. It wasn't illegal to pass such things on, and given her unique position aboard the Horizon where it came to this particular issue it could be seen as all but expected for this to have been passed to her. She crossed the ready room in a brace of furious steps, thumbing it on, and slammed it down on the desk in front of Kheren so hard that the casing cracked.

A single night-black digit stabbed down at the passage displayed on the PADD, orders that Kheren could remember well as he signed off on them mere hours ago, and her voice was colder than the depths of space.

"When I was first told of orders for members of the Circle to take part in telepathic screening measures against *Federation citizens*, I thought that it must have been a mistake; or have come from higher authorities... Yet, imagine my surprise when I find your signature upon them."

She looked down at the seated Andorian, eyes flashing with violet flame, and the irony of her words could have shattered glass as she cut straight to the heart of the issue.

"Where, exactly, within the principles of the Federation that you say you so espouse is there a clause that smiles upon manipulation of religious belief into a means to commit nothing short of *rape*?"

She could have continued, but she left it there. There would be time enough for all else, and the response to this was crucial.

Andorian blood was quick to boil when heated; Kheren found out that suddenly, his years of dilligent practice of self-control under a Vulcan master were on the verge of failing him for the first time in many many years. Doctor Nasaro-Myth had feared this when Kheren had been finally returned from Undine form to his natural physiology; a physiology he had to enhance forcefully to succeed in retrieving the mutated Andorian. That was now what was asserting itself on his veneer of educated self-control...

That... and painful thoughts that were not giving him peace since he had learned of his mission and in particular who it involved.

With obvious effort at keeping calm, he put his callused hands flat on his transparent aluminum desk, antennae pointed over his eyes at Snowfire.

"I do not know how *your* people do things, but we are *not* talking Klingon mind sypher, Romulan brainscans or Section 31 heated phaser under the seat here. I am sure you read our *very strict* protocol on the subject; we are *not* talking about ripping into a mind and scanning for every little dirty secret in someone's psyche. We are talking about a mental grid that would react *only* to thoughts of violence against this ship or this crew, *nothing* less, nothing *more*... which is even *less* than the *routine* use of available telepaths for interrogation of suspects or against predicted attempts at deception done *lawfully* throughout the recent *centuries*. Captain Kirk used it with the help of his first officer Spock *more* than once; Captain Picard with his own counselor Deanna Troi, like many other starship commanding officers, not to mention Federation Courts, did it *routinely*; and what *they* did was far more... *intrusive* than what I signed for *here*."

He took a calming breath before resuming.

"Even non-aligned representatives like Gropler Zorn of the Bantii at Farpoint Station knew and willingly accepted those proceedings... which themselves are *still* far *less* than what respected Ambassador Loxanna Troi of Betazed does *openly* on a *constant* basis without starting any wars or secessions. What I am doing, Commander, *is* within Federation law *and* Starfleet rules."

His own words calmed him; but the fire was lowered, not smothered. There were other... embers unworded yet, heating still under the cold icy mask of his face. Their heat could be seen in his metallic-hued eyes. That was not anything to quell the fire in those of Snowfire if the words alone didn't...

"Telepathy and the regulated use of it to properly balance freedom and security are part of our History, culture and social norm among all of us people of good will. I am sure you knew all of this *well before* you even accepted to join the officer Exchange Program."

Then his voice became suddenly as burning as hers as been cold.

"And as for Faith; under the Articles of the Federation, the right of any individual to believe whatever one wishes to believe in is respected, may it be the Prophets, the Ancient Vulcan gods or the Earthers' Tooth Fairy; but, in no way, shape, manner or form, does any cultural or religious belief *dictate or alter* rights, laws and rules. And in Starfleet, regulations clearly state that, if someone's requirements from his own culture or belief can not be reconciled with his duties, that officer should either find the best possible way for oneself to put them aside... or resign."

Again he managed to calm himself once more, this time with a sudden genuine concern in his voice and his eyes. He was realizing that, as far as Snowfire K'Leysha's people were concerned, and despite her recent fascinating lectures on the subject, he knew in fact very little of *her* own culture and beliefs.

"Is that the quandary you are troubled with, Commander?"

"You know nothing of telepathy."

Snowfire had listened, oh yes she had listened, and somewhere deep inside she marvelled at the ability for one to become lost in justification. Yet that only added more fuel to the fire, and her tone swept aside the concern present in Kheren's voice as the same black digit from before stabbed down, highlighting the specific text.

"All members of the Horizon's Children cult, and I note that you do not even give them the courtesy of a less inflammatory term, are to be telepathically scanned by Security department personnel to ascertain their identity and intent in boarding the Horizon. Any who refuse to submit to this security protocol are to be denied entrance and returned to the starbase." She quoted icily. "Every example you have just given have involved either full choice on the part of the recipient or certainty *beyond reasonable doubt* that their words cannot be trusted without verification. Further, of almost all of these examples, it is not active scanning that is at work. Ambassador Troi's ability to read people is a result of nothing but highly trained passive empathy, I have read the reports. Her daughter uses the same techniques, as do the Federation Courts. And if it was only passive scanning that you were ordering, my words would be far less harsh."

She gestured through the walls of the ready room in the direction of the starbase and their passengers.

"Yet it is *not*. You order that every member of a group of faithful, none of whom are guilty of crimes against the Federation, are to be tarred with the same brush as their extremist fellows who sought to oppose us in the sealing of the Azimuth Horizon. You say that your orders are non-intrusive, yet even if you are not aware of it that is a *lie!*"

The word slammed across the room like a thunderbolt, hurled without care into Kheren's teeth, yet there was far worse upon its wings.

It had been a good thing that Snowfire had asked for free speech in the formal manner of Starfleet; else Kheren would have shut her off instantly with authority... and not exposing himself to her anger and thus himself free as well to lash out with an anger too long contained as he stood up, eyes burning, voice just as hot.

"Don't you *understand* who *these* people are? Three of them killed forty-two of my people and brought about the worst artificial lifeform ever seen in our History; three hundred of them almost caused the destruction of the entire universe for the sake of that faith of theirs... and now you would let *three thousand* of them have access to the single most powerful and resourceful starship this side of the galactic center?"

"These civilians are guilty of nothing more than following a faith that has hurt you, and in reacting with anger and not thought to their presence you betray a principle that lies at the heart of the Federation's very existence. Infinite diversity in infinite combination. And yet here you stand, demanding that those that are of one particular combination bare their souls; and active scanning of the type you have ordered is nothing less when name and intent are involved...as penance for their passage to paradise."

Kheren could have said that what he had worded for the Governor's sake was not what he had actually ordered; the established passive protocol of his ship's security; but then again, his heart burning with anger, deep down he wasn't so sure anymore... and Snowfire certainly sensed it.

"And all this because you see in these innocents the faces of those who lost you the only crew to have died thus far under your command."

Her hand rose, again the finger of night stabbing out, but this time it was accusing. For she knew her Captain's record well, had seen and indeed experienced the loyalty that he extended to his crew. And as any new member to a ship... had it really been almost a year ago?... she had made certain to study his record before her first mission under his command. It had been fascinating reading, but the key point within it had always been that loyalty.

In most cases that was all well and good, but here? Here Kheren was confronted by those who could be seen as at the very least related to those responsible for the only deaths among his crew he had ever suffered. And that could... in fact, *had*... lead to problems.

"The decision of security for these people should never have fallen to you, for this very reason. And every word you speak to justify it speaks only to prove me right."

This time, the Andorian reacted with a visible jolt, as if actually hit by a physical blow. Suddenly he became as cold as a comet.

"Commander; are you telling me that I am emotionally compromised?"

The question was potent; acknowledging such a state was enough ground under Starfleet rules for a captain to be removed from command.

"Your examples are overwhelmingly of passive sensing instead of scanning, which goes far deeper than you can *ever* understand. Even where it is scanning alike to what you are ordering, the circumstances are utterly different. Interrogations of confirmed criminals, of suspects where it can be certain beyond reasonable doubt that it is required, or in situations where it was requested; none of which apply here. And yet that is not even the worst of it. The worst of it is what matters most, the way in which you have ordered this. You know, I am certain, that to the Children the worlds beyond the Horizon are their version of paradise. So, with anger that you could never fully express towards those who took their faith beyond the bounds of rationality, you demand that members of the moderate faithful suffer for pain they never inflicted upon you. Either they are barred from paradise, or they must expose their souls. That is no choice for those of faith, but it is not your place to inflict such a price. And *never* on innocents."

For a long moment, the Andorian remained silent, his eyes flashing between pure rationality and violent passion, between the whiteness of cold ice and that of molten metal. When he finally spoke, it was between teeth clenched as tightly as his callused fists.

"Commander... we *must* ensure the safety of the Federation; that is our very purpose. And to that end, I *must* ensure the safety of *this* ship and *this* crew!"

And suddenly, the door opened.

Having been the Captain of several star ships Redding sometimes forgot that it wasn't his ready room and tended to walk in unannounced, today was one such case.

"Captain, I need to speak to you about.. the.." The look the two officers shot him stopped him dead in his tracks.

Redding had faced down Gorns and Jem'Hadars, been in heated debates with Romulans and Nausicaans.. but THIS!

"But... uhh..." he stammered and just put his hands up as he backed out of the room.

"I'll be with you momentarily, Number One."

That was all Kheren managed to say in a tone that was so intense that it was obvious that even a simple "Aye, Sir" might have started a core breach, before the door slid shut again in front of Redding's face.

Now, they were alone again; but now, it felt more like the lull between skirmishes than the open warfare it had been a moment ago.

Fact was, it actually helped the Andorian to calm down and finally regain control of himself, effectively completing the rationalizing job Snowfire's own word had been slowly but surely doing.

Always count on an Exec to help a captain out, this reminded him as he sighed and nodded.

Snowfire looked back at the Andorian, sensing the boiling rage fighting with rationality, and though it didn't show the fire inside her softened slightly as she remembered similar conversations many years ago, where she had been the one on the other side of the desk. Kheren, for all his rising brilliance as a captain, was still innocent to the price that had only been levied against him once. A price that she knew well, despite her own skills as a commander. In her years as part of the IDF, there were many occasions on which her own emotions had threatened to override her reason. And, more often than she liked, it was not her that prevented that emotion from carrying through. It had been members of her staff, her XO or another of her command team, who had taken the issue to her and fought against it with all the passion and skill which she had called upon here. And, just as they had then - and she had on occasion before rising to command rank herself - she felt the picture in front of her click into focus. She knew where Kheren was now.

And her answer, when it came, was calm. Collected. And completely free of accusation. It was a speech well known to all Federation officers, required reading even now. She knew Kheren would know it, likely know its meaning and the reason she was quoting it to him now,

"With the first link, the chain is forged, the first speech censored," "the first freedom denied - chains us all, irrevocably."

Her eyes met the molten silver of her commanding officer's facial eyes once again, the fire in them undimmed yet somehow gentler. As if they knew the feeling of this moment, from both sides of the desk. And she kept talking, continuing into the words amended to the first quote in 2367.

"Wisdom and warning. The first time that *any* man's freedom is trodden on, we're all damaged."

She nodded at the fractured PADD on the desk between them.

"Where it comes to these people, Captain, you *are* emotionally compromised. Through no ill intent, through the best of them in fact, loyalty to all those united in service to the Federation. But compromised, nonetheless. And, somewhere, you know that."

She shook her head, errant threads of her white hair falling around her temples.

"If you didn't, you would not fight so hard."

Jean-Luc Picard; the man who had said those words while his crew and himself had fallen prey to a paranoid witchhunt. But those words went far beyond a simple warning against abuse or excess of power. They went to the heart of what the Federation was all about.

Jean-Luc Picard; with Jonathan Archer, another Human and another captain of the legendary USS Enterprise name, he was the role model for Kheren's entire career... his entire life. And here he was, thinking and acting as far from him as could possibly be.

Slowly Kheren sat down, as if returning from some extenuous ordeal but still burdened with some heavy load. He slowly lifted a hand as if to ward off a blow and then looked up at his chief science officer.

"Alright, Commander; what would you have me do?"

"Treat them as the people that they are, pilgrims seeking a promised land in peace, and citizens of the Federation; to whom our loyalty was sworn when we donned this uniform." Snowfire replied, in the same calm voice.

The fire in her eyes had dimmed, from a bonfire down to a lone silver of violet flame dancing behind them. Warning, perhaps, of what had passed between them and that he should remember it well. Yet also accepting of it in some way, as only one who had known this pain themselves could be.

"I do not ask you to lessen your security aboard ship further than you would for that, restriction of entrance to engineering spaces and other vital areas of the Horizon is not simply a matter of security but of common sense to allow this vessel to function. But ensure that the security measure you and your wives put in place... for they could be in the same place as you... are driven not by the blindness of unexpressed anger or pain but by true need."

She nodded again at the datapad.

"And, if you will, leave the matter of telepathic security to me. My people know the intricacies of these things very well, and I can adapt one of the protocols I learnt to suit this situation. And I know the line where responsible security becomes needless prying down to the nanometer."

Her hand rose again, but this time the gesture was welcoming, an outstretched offer of aid. Truth be told, Snowfire was the best choice to implement such a procedure, precisely because of her past experiences with measures of the same type. And yet her next words spoke of a far deeper understanding behind what she'd done, and why.

"Everyone, no matter how virtuous, falls sometime. For evil is always possible, and goodness eternally difficult. Lieutenant Family are the people who help you pick yourself back up when you do."

Kheren stood up again, calmly this time but no less tense and went to his office window to gaze silently at the stars for a good moment. Just like them, he looked tranquil and peaceful but in reality was an inferno of burning energies colliding, fusing, exploding, every second on the verge of blasting oneself in all directions.

Finally, he turned and came back to face her. His voice had returned to its usual deep softness.

"I hear you, Commander. I will defer to your expertise on this specific matter... and to the wisdom of your words."

Then he lifted a finger.

"But... do not inform our... guests of any change or detail of the proceeding. And do not think this is because I want to save face; I could not care less when it is about doing the *right* thing the *right* way, as you so aptly reminded me here. I want *them* on their toes, for a change. The more nervous they will be, the more hesitant any possible troublemaker will be; the more outraged they will be, the more eager they will be to leave my ship, thus for our mission to succeed... and... to go find bliss in their paradise."

"Acknowledged and understood."

Snowfire paused, considering the endless blend of emotion swirling within the room, then spoke again.

"But, if I may, talk to one of the counsellors about what happened. One who *wasn't* part of the crew of the Artemis."

She nodded at the wreckage of the PADD on his desk before scooping it up, and her lips twitched in a wry smile.

"I can't go on breaking PADDs to get the point across, you know. Our Chief Engineer would never forgive me."

"Make an appointment, Captain;" Kheren had heard this tone from Snowfire once before, on the promenade of the starbase after the end of the mission to seal away the Horizon that had threatened the entire galaxy. "And convince Lieutenant Tyvya to go to one as well. Trust me, you'll be thankful for it in time."

"Healer, heal thyself," the Andorian simply retorted, antennae curving atop his head, in lieu of the smile his face could never make, as he pointed at the crushed PADD. "As for me, you come almost two years too late; that is how Tyvya and I first met Lyrya you know. You will notice that *I* did not break anything... and *I* am the Andorian in the room."

"Yet, you are not at peace with it."

She would have said more, but the words dropped away into silence, shadows darkening her eyes as the last sentence spoken to her registered. The expression of humour flattened, and a dark presence hovered above the room.

Cultural... older and far more terrible than anything in the histories of any race of the Federation... I would break this ship to see such a thing prevented from taking hold here.

She shook her head, a part of her wondering if maybe it was time for her classes to delve into that most painful of places yet. But that was the future. This was now.

"There are such places where these measures can lead that you would not wish upon the worst of all your enemies. I did not live through the pain, but I know its price. And any of my people would rather die than see it levied again, against anyone. A PADD is nothing compared to that."

And then the clouds broke, the shadows giving way to easy professionalism.

"I'll have the new procedure ready for implementation and a synopsis on your desk within six hours."

"Very well, Commander; and thank you. You are right; peace is not an easy thing to come to an Andorian who feels his clan threatened. But at least, now I know that I have you to help me properly find it... eventually... the best way to find paradise; go right and fly straight."

* * *

Aron'Son examined the security layout of the cargo bay and turned to Ensign Kyle whom he had pulled from another duty to assist him in inspecting the ship's security status.

"The protocols here are the same as the others?"

"Yes Sir," Kyle replied; "doors coded the same and two guards around the clock."

"With the colonists coming aboard, we will double the guard," Aron'Son stated. "I want you to make the necessary adjustments in the duty roster."

"Me, Sir? but shouldn't Lieutenant Tyvya..."

"No," Aron'Son said forcefully cutting him off; "I am ordering you to make the assignment, Ensign."

"Aye, Sir."

Kyle tapped notes into the PADD he was using to document the inspection and Aron'Son nodded approvingly. There was something about this human that he liked. The man didn't ask too many questions and didn't stare at him the way some of the others did. To Aron'Son, that made him the perfect candidate to be his Third as the Andorian woman was technically already his Second.

"Now, what is next?"

"Science labs Sir, Deck 5."

"Very well, let us proceed."

The pair of security officers exited the cargo bay and moved down the corridor to the turbolift. Aron'Son had stopped by his office and equipped his personal armaments prior to beginning the inspection. Now that he was officially in charge of security, it made sense to him that he should be armed. So, on his right hip was the Type II phaser in its holster and on his left the combat blade in its sheath. Aron'Son believed the knife to be inadequate and had decided he would look into producing a weapon more fitting a Jem'Hadar soldier. The turbolift ride was silent as the pair emerged onto Deck 5 and Aron'Son stopped in front of the main science lab.

"There is no guard here yet?"

"No, Sir," Kyle answered. "There will be once we leave port."

"Unacceptable; we are implementing the Yellow Alert protocol prior to departure with the boarding of the colonists. These spaces should be guarded as they include direct access to the main computer."

"Aye Sir, I'll see to it."

Aron'Son nodded and entered the science lab. While the Dominion had scientists, none of them were Jem'Hadar and so, Aron'Son did not have much experience with them; though in attending Starfleet Academy, he had seen the value of scientific experimentation. As the doors closed behind him, Aron'Son scanned the space and saw it had one occupant, a dark-skinned, white haired vulcanoid woman in what appeared to be a Starfleet uniform; but the coloring was not what it should have been for a science officer. Her rank pips denoted her as a full commander and Aron'Son realized this was likely the ship's science officer. If that was the case, it was one of the people he had been very interested in meeting since he found out where he was being assigned.

Aron'Son turned to Ensign Kyle.

"We will continue the inspection in two standard hours, Ensign. I wish to speak with the commander. You are dismissed."

Kyle was puzzled but answered with an affirmative "Aye, Sir," turned and departed. Aron'Son walked toward where the woman was sitting.

"Commander, I am Lieutenant Junior Grade Aron'Son. I have been assigned as the chief of tactical and security for this ship."

Snowfire had been deep in communication with others of the Circle when the door slid open, and she had barely registered the entrance beyond the eyeblink required to confirm a Starfleet uniform. Two in fact, both security; but it was a small thing compared to the whirling discussion flashing between multiple members of the Circle as they began to establish the Horizon's neurogenic safety net. It was incredible to watch them work, even with the mistakes they made so frequently, for they had learned so much in the time since she had begun her teachings. She'd given them the basics, and was watching to ensure that they didn't run over any of the lesser known ethical boundaries by accident but, on the whole, she was simply having fun watching her students prove themselves. There was no finer reward for a teacher than that.

The voice, clearly directed at her, startled her and she blinked up at the officer before her in surprise.

Lieutenant...security...Jem'Hadar? Oh, of course!

She'd seen that posting notification. She held up one hand to forestall any question, bid a swift farewell to the Circle with the promise that she would be back soon to check their design and let herself drift back into full reality. Her hand dropped back onto her lap, and the faraway look in her eyes faded.

"I saw the posting order, Lieutenant." She said pleasantly, coming to her feet with practised grace and a faint smile. "I will admit to having been surprised by it, but then this ship seems to attract the...less traditional members of Starfleet."

She held out her hand in greeting, keeping the motion loose so that it could be taken as simply a greeting in itself if Aron'Son did not recognise the gesture.

"Snowfire K'Leysha. It's a pleasure to meet you."

There was something there in the room with the officer, a curiosity perhaps, that she could sense was directed at her. And she herself was curious as to what it might be.

"Can I help you at all?"

Aron'Son looked the woman up and down briefly.

"I wanted to make myself known as we will be working together; and I also wanted to see for myself that which even the Founders were afraid of."

Snowfire blinked, surprise flashing across her features at the second statement as she tried to place it. But then, memories sprang across her mind, memories of her time in Starfleet Academy first, reading of the Dominion and the vast war that had been waged against them; and then further back, deeper, into strategic meetings she'd attended as a member of her Clan delegation and also as part of the IDF ticket punching required for battlegroup command... planning sessions in response to the discovery of a vast power to the galactic west. The reason, she'd been told then, for the total cessation of continued colonisation beyond what the Federation had been found to call the Delta Quadrant. Planned responses of the time, the vast strategic construction project, still ongoing, named simply The Line. Estimates of resources that boggled the mind, planet numbers, defensive and offensive capabilities, projections of the outcome of a conflict under the current situation, fully possible given Fasset Drive technology... and the eventual decision to let sleeping dragons lie, at least until you'd forged a sword strong enough to pierce its hide.

It all hurtled through her mind in a mess of realisations, pieces dropping into place with the words from the new Security Chief.

"Oh." Was her first response.

Not particularly eloquent. But then, it was a surprise.

"I...had no idea that the Founders saw us as such a threat to them."

Yet she smiled again even as she said it and there was an edge to that smile. It wasn't, quite, arrogant; more a level of unconscious pride in her people and the service that she was still a part of, regardless of her views on some of their ethics.

"But, if you will not look askance, I will thank you for the compliment; for to me, even now a member of the IDF, it truly is one."

She cocked her head at Aron'Son.

"I hope I am a suitable specimen, if that was your only reason for coming. Or are there questions beyond the desire for sight?"

Aron'Son looked at her again.

"Initially I was conducting a security inspection but, when I saw you here, I wanted to speak with you. Before I was... exiled... I was a First, with my own squad. As a First, I had access to the scouting reports, contact simulations, and battle plans. Your species was not named specifically; they did not tell us who your people were, and of course they did not admit they were afraid. But I saw the plans and, when I saw Starfleet's briefing on your people, I made the connection. The battle plans presented by the Vorta called for massive numbers of starships and Jem'Hadar, casualty projections in the hundreds of thousands. There were restrictive orders for scouts in that area of space: "do not approach, and if contact is made, withdraw to Dominion territory at once." I want to know why, why would beings that proclaimed themselves gods show such caution? They attacked the combined races of the Alpha Quadrant and even the Borg did not give the Founders much pause; yet, when it came to your people, these so-called gods wanted no part of any conflict."

Aron'Son was not agitated, or angry, as Jem'Hadar did not display such emotions. He was simply a soldier who wondered what would cause his all powerful commanders to draw such a line. He had dismissed the "gods" of the Dominion long ago; but even he could not dismiss the rumored power of the Founders though he had never actually seen one in person. That was the basis for his question to the Horizon's science officer.

"Ah..."

Snowfire paused for a long moment, thoughts flickering behind her violet eyes as she tried to work out exactly what she could say without violating her current oaths of service. It was only curiosity, she knew that. But Starfleet Intelligence still didn't trust all of her people... and exposing parts of this to them would be wrong. With that in mind, she took a few steps back and to the side, tapping a few buttons on her workstation that onlined the mirror box she had hidden inside it. Privacy rights applied to this, so it wasn't a violation. Then she looked across at Aron'Son again.

"It's... complicated. I expect, but I believe it would be a combination of two things."

Her hand flashed across the panel, bringing up the files on her people's stardrive.

"This would be reason number one."

She gestured as a holo of the schematics appeared in the air above the workstation.

"As your Starfleet briefings will have told you, in less elaboratory terms at least, my people's technological bias is skewed vastly towards gravitational manipulation and control. Given what I know of the Dominion now, thanks to Starfleet, I suspect that your Founders know far better than the Federation how advanced our understanding of that technology is... and how it lends itself to system defence."

She paused for a moment, unsure as to if she should spell it out, then went ahead anyway.

"Not even the Borg were capable of adapting to a cage of singularities dropped on top of their attack fleets whenever they crossed the heliopause."

A tap on the panel and the holo flickered out of existence and her other hand rose to her head.

"The second reason lies in my people's Gifts. We're far but the only race in the galaxy to have such abilities, but I've gone over the records Starfleet holds since I arrived and from those, I can say that we seem to be one of the only peoples who have pushed the boundaries of what it's possible to do with psionic abilities. This ship has benefited from that expertise, in the creation of what my people would call a Circle; an organisation of the ship's psionics... and my training of the group to create additional layers of defence for it from mental attacks."

Here she was on solid legal ground in passing this along. The Federation already knew... even if it didn't know that yet.

"Even the weakest among our Gifted are able to channel their power to others. On ships and planets both, this power can be pooled for use by the stronger Gifted with a Circle of the strongest... we call them Adepts... capable of tapping the combined psionic ability of an entire planet's Gifted."

She shrugged.

"On average, one in four Ilythiiri are born with access to at least one Gift, and the training required to control and, in certain circumstances, channel it is mandatory."

She tapped her head again.

"I'm above average on the Gifted scale, although I'm quite sure I get that from my parents. I manifested Mindspeech, what you would call telepathy... and Empathy at Adept level when I was only twenty-five; and, when admitted to the Academy on our homeworld. I was found to possess low-to-mid level Fetching. That's what you'd call telekinesis. Although Master or higher Fetching is extremely rare, the capabilities of someone with it are... extreme."

Again that little shrug.

"Whilst there were likely other factors... the size of our vessels being another possibility... those two I believe would have been the primary ones in the threat level we were ascribed. With that said, however, we had no desire to engage in combat with the Dominion either, for our own projections showed that even with our technology and the strength of our navy, the IDF would take huge losses in breaking the Founders will to continue the war. Losses that we could have sustained, but terrible ones nonetheless. With that in mind, we ceased colonial expansion in the direction of the Gamma Quadrant almost a hundred and fifty years ago and focused on the construction of a defensive strategy along the Western border of our space in the event that war became inevitable."

Aron'Son thought about Snowfire's response to his question. The Dominion had encountered telepaths, empaths before in both the Vulcans and Betazoids and had swept them aside. He didn't exactly understand why the Founders would have hesitated here, but the gravitational manipulation was of interest to him. The species briefing he had read was heavily truncated he now realized. He would have to see what his new security clearance allowed him to see regarding the Ilythiri.

"Mind powers were not of consequence," he replied dismissively. "Vulcans and Betazoids possess such things and Jem'Hadar faced them and won. It is wise that you did not incur the Founders wrath, though it seems their caution was justified as well. Make no mistake, Commander, I no longer hold any loyalty to the Dominion or hold the Founders in any esteem. I simply wished to understand the nature of their motivations."

"Not like these, Lieutenant." Snowfire replied, her eyes narrowing in sudden concentration.

A whirlwind of shining metal erupted from her desk, knifing out across the space between her and the Jem'Hadar before stopping just short of his skin whilst more formed a wall of shimmering reflections between her and her guest. She made a gesture, and the needles retreated back towards her.

"I have read the Starfleet files on the subject. Vulcans and Betazoids are not trained like we are. They have little knowledge and far less practice in combining their mental strengths. My people have spent over forty thousand years honing the weapons that are our minds and, though much of what we learnt has been forbidden, more has been refined."

She gestured, and the needles returned to her, spinning back into her hand to settle there in a heap, and she lifted one up so that Aron'Son could see it more clearly now.

"These are simple *Sar*, metal needles and nothing more. But this is only a practice set, not one made for performance... or for war. And when one who can cast their mind across the void between the very stars focuses the strength of their voice on minds close to them... the result is not pretty. Believe me, Aron'Son, for you do not know. The telepaths of the Federation, for all that some on their own are more powerful, do not know even the beginnings of how to match ours together."

She laid the *Sar* aside with gentle reverence.

"A war between the Dominion and the Council would bring no victory, only death. That was the belief of the *Talya*, and Fleet Intelligence." She added the second organisation almost as an afterthought. "Upon our systems, the fleets of the Founders would break like waves upon a mountainside; yet equally would our attacks eventually grind to a halt amidst a space set alight by burning starships. In the end, as easily as we could tell, the war *would* end, but with neither our people nor the Dominion victorious. That was the reasoning behind the creation of the Line... and of all other preparations we have made since then, as surely the Founders must have prepared."

She nodded at Aron'Son.

"What you say confirms that assumption of preparation. Yet, if their only plan was ships and soldiers... which I sorely doubt... they would have suffered for it."

Aron'Son was astounded by the woman's demonstration of her power. He would not have believed such things were possible had he not seen it himself. His facial features remained stoic as was the case with all Jem'Hadar, but his mind was not like all other Jem'Hadar. It was free of the blind loyalty and programming ingrained in his people for years and it could see that Snowfire's people were far more powerful than the Dominion had admitted.

"I would not have believed your statements had I not seen your demonstration with my own eyes. I now have no doubt the Founders were afraid, or at least knew the same things your people knew. The plans I saw were preliminary battle estimates and material casualty projections. I suspect that if conflict had come, the Founders would have gotten directly involved, but I believe you are correct. Had that war come, the space between the Dominion and your people would have burned. Such a needless war is not honorable and no way for a soldier to die. Commander, I do not feel as other species do; yet, I know that I would not want to be involved in such a battle for, as you say, there would be no victory... and victory is life."

"If that is the creed you would define it by, then you are quite correct." Snowfire answered finally, her fine fingers sliding her practice *Sar* back into their holder. A routine action and also a calming one, clear from her manner. "The Dominion has been likened to a dark reflection of the Federation, a possible way in which it could have evolved given the victory of certain human instincts over the ones that currently hold sway. My people, the Council, are more of a twisting puzzle composed of pieces of each, yet where it comes to war, we are far more of the Dominion than of the Federation... although the price of our skill was horrific."

If Aron'Son wanted to find out what she meant, the records involving the Fall and the times around it were almost fully indexed again and they would be able to explain. She... didn't really want to.

"Yet, there is opportunity and possibility within us, like any other race, but...ah, it is of little consequence."

She shook her head, then her eyes brightened with a renewed interest.

"You know, for all that we know of each other's nominal polities, I don't think that either side has ever met each other before now."

She smiled slowly.

"Would you be amenable to a spar on an off-shift? I've read about the skill of the Jem'Hadar, and I would greatly value a chance to test myself against it."

Her words were light, with no deceit behind them.

"I promise that, whatever the outcome, the results shall remain aboard this ship."

CHAPTER THREE : BOLDLY GO

"Prepare the crew and the ship for launch Commander Riker," captain Syntron matter-of-factly commanded from the center seat.

Turning to face the Captain, Riker handed him a PADD containing the updated crew rosters. Anticipating an early departure, he had planned and already begun preparations for departure. The bearded man responded with an almost smug smile.

"All systems are online and ready, Sir. Just a call to engineering and pop the clutch and we are ready to go, Captain."

Facing the Bolian officer at the forward console, the Vulcan sat straight in his command chair.

"Helmsman, proceed with launching protocols."

He was about to begin issuing orders when he was interrupted by Counselor Bijou at his left.

"Captain; we just received notification that a Lieutenant Elisha Leóne was just transported over to serve as our new operations chief. She is currently going through security procedures on the transporter pad."

"Acknowledged" Syntron responded. "We will greet our new arrival at a more appropriate time. Commence with our departure."

Using only thrusters, the USS Phoenix moved slowly through the opening provided by the separated spacedock doors. The sleek, shiny form of the main explorer of Lotus Fleet emerged from the confines of the Starbase's inner docks.

"We have cleared spacedock," announced helmsman Grexx Aulder. "We are now ready to proceed onward, Sir."

As soon as it emerged outside, the chief helmsman, Lieutenant Grexx Aulder, noticed the curious flash on his panel. Listening intently to his earset, he half turned in his chair to address the captain.

"Sir! Incoming transmission... on my navigational beam? It seems to be ... "

Listening more, Aulder turned to face Syntron and Commander Riker.

"Sir, incoming distress call from ... the Sagan!"

"The Sagan?" Riker said inquisitively. "Are the new sensors working that well already?" he then turned towards the left side of his commanding officer; "Can we confirm?"

"Confirmed, Sir," the counselor in the command medical chair added from the left of the commanding officer. "I have a disaster beacon coming in from a federation shuttlecraft; registry is that of the Sagan."

"I have it on sensors, Captain," Lieutenant Livingstone confirmed in turn. Nine hundred billion kilometers, bearing 200 mark 30 and closing on an erratic course at one hundred kilometers per second; must be on thrusters only, Sir. Impulse power must be offline. I read no emissions from it's warp core."

"Sirr, the Sagan was supposed to have been rreturned to Earrrth weeks ago," reminded their new Chief of security and tactical, the Caitian woman Lieutenant Mrrrin M'ata, a very tall, powerfully built light tawny brown furred felinoid with lime green eyes and a short cropped mane. "Commanderr Rogerrs had rrequested the task while on leave so as to follow medical rrecommendations from the prrevious CMO."

Somewhat bewildered, the Captain's eyebrow raised.

The Sagan?

Then swiftly processing the fact that this was a distress call, Syntron immediately stood up and addressed the Bolian at the helm.

"Transfer the transmission to main viewscreen, Lieutenant Aulder."

From his vantage point at engineering station one near the back of the bridge Ensign Andrews, demoted a rank for his blatant misappropriation of protocols that gained him admittance to the away team mission to the planetoid, saw the hazy scene materialize on the main viewer. Static interference almost hid the features of commander Rogers, as well as making the voice transmission stutter and break apart. While Rogers' signal repeated to the bridge, Andrews ran a signal analysis on the transmission.

"... tus base, this i ...agan. Main pow ... support. Requesting assis ... "

Andrews studied the transmission and specifically, it signal strength and wave length guides. The protomatter nebula had left significant deposits upon the shuttle and these were affecting the broadcast as well as the reduced power levels of the transmission itself. He was surprised the signal had reached them from that distance at all, and proceeded to inform captain Syntron as well.

"Sir, there is considerable genetic contamination on this signal. Not within it but on the carrier wave itself. Almost like commander Rogers were trying to transmit through a membrane of something.

"The new chief of science turned his large golden eyes toward the command dais.

"Captain; if the Sagan went through the nebula itself, it could have accumulated protomatter all around it's hull, effectively creating an envelope of proteins and amino-acids thick enough to hamper electromagnetic signals. Eventually it could infect and clog all of his systems. I suggest Commander Rogers open his plasma exhausts and loop around to ignite it with his thrusters. That should burn out the covering."

"And cook him at the same time?" wondered the helmsman, quite aware like every Starfleet officer of the infamous Colbert Starburst incident of Starfleet Academy that had cost the life of cadet Josh Albert fifty years ago.

"Not if he uses his navigational deflectorr to send a boosting burrst to his rremaining shields and fly strraight," the new tactical chief added then. "Given the state of his shields, it will be hot forr a moment, but he will surrvive. As Chief Engineerr, the commanderr is obviously quite awarre of this standarrd prrocedure to rreinforrce shields in case of emerrgencies."

"But how do we communicate this to him?" now asked Counselor Bijou. "The subspace signal is weak and erratic."

"I suggest to send him just a simple image, repeated as a single, constant signal; that of the Colbert Starburst. He should understand the idea... and the risk involved," the X'Ell then proposed.

"Then we could QSD right to his position and retrieve him," finished Alder.

Rogers had planned well, but like many plots, circumstances arose beyond the scope of planning. The main use of the nebula had been to mask the appearance of the Diamond Star, the ship he had stolen to retrieve his abducted sister from the Orion slavers and, although that objective had been accomplished, Rogers had failed to account for the protomatter accumulation upon leaving said nebula under mere thruster acceleration. Thus, protomatter build-up on the Sagan's hull hampered his systems markedly.

Without sufficient power to run sensors, Rogers could not know this. Only minimal power was available now, after his intended anodyne relay failure, and all available power was running life support and the shuttles auxiliary thrusters.

Shuttle thrusters, unlike star ship RCS systems, were powered by a microfusion chamber and had nowhere near the capacity of ship thrusters powered by deuterium. Constant thrust for the past thirty-six hours had gotten him considerably well out of the protomatter nebula and, because of this, he needed to get himself rescued.

Now it was up the Syntron; and time was running out.

Immediately processing the situation and the potential ramifications of hesitating, Syntron was decisive in his response.

"Transmit the image now. Commander Rogers will comprehend our recommendation, as Lieutenant Livingstone suggested."

The captain then turned his attention towards his first officer.

"Notify Starbase Lotus regarding the content of this transmission and our need for an emergency departure."

The door to the bridge opened with a woosh and Master Chief Eddington walked through with a PADD in his hand. Hurrying over to Commander Riker, Eddington handed him the PADD for review.

"Here is the final alpha roster you requested, Commander. All newly arrived crewmen are being prepped for departure."

Glancing down at the PADD only briefly, Riker handed it back to him.

"I will take your word for it on this one. We are still kind of busy up here. Ensure all crewmen are manned at the proper stations."

Nodding Eddington took the PADD back.

"Aye, Sir."

As quickly as he had arrived, Eddington hurried back off the bridge. Turning back to the matter at hand, Riker spoke openly to anyone within earshot.

"Any updates?"

"Calculating from detectable power output, all remaining power aboard the shuttlecraft is seemingly used for life support," stated the X'Ell at the main science station. "There is no thrust power coming from any propulsion unit of the Sagan and both trajectory and speed remain constant."

Since there is no power reading from the antimatter core nor the impulse reactor, best hypothesis would be that all of what remained of thruster power was expended to clear the shuttlecraft out of the nebula and batteries are all that is left. I estimate the shuttle has forty-seven minutes of life support remaining for one full grown Human. Interception at warp 9.9 will take fifty-two minutes... one full minute after cerebral death occurs from lack of oxygen. If no interception is attempted, the shuttlecraft will reach Starbase Lotus on it's own conserved momentum in... two hundred and eighty-five years."

The young feathered lieutenant spoke in a clinical, almost cold tone; yet his large golden eyes were blinking furiously and his beak stayed halfway open as if he was trying to recover his breath.

"Understood Lieutenant, carry on." the captain responded to his new avian CSO. "We will have to at least attempt to considerably shorten that voyage, if possible."

Looking down at the controls on the center seat, Syntron then opened a ship-wide channel.

"This is the Captain. All hands prepare for departure commencing in ninety seconds."

The captain turned his attention toward the Bolian officer once again.

"Begin initiating departure, Lieutenant Aulder."

"Aye Sir" came the immediate response as Grexx began preparing for their departure.

* * *

On the large viewer of the command center of the Horizon, the long, sleek, fish-like form of the USS Phoenix emerged from the innards of Starbase Lotus with the grace and majesty unlikely typical of the starships of the United Federation of Planets. From her external docking pylon, the bridge officers of the much larger flagship of Lotus Fleet had a splendid overhand view of their companion vessel for the trek that awaited them among the stars; those that they could see and those that lay beyond even them.

The door of the turbolift swished open to admit Governor Sufra on the vast bridge. Her usual severe mien looked as hard and somber as that of a Klingon about to become Chancellor of the High Council and having to fight for it. Without hesitation, she walked up to the large command dais to stand in front of the Andorian in the command chair.

"Are all of your people comfortably settled aboard, Governor Sufra?"

Whatever she was about to spit at him, it was deftly countered by his sudden question Kheren addressed her. She took a moment to get her bearings back before answering in a curt, dry tone that was obviously toned down by her surprise to hhis expressed concern.

"They are not. It's like being aboard a prison ship."

"You most assuredly have no experience with one, Governor Sufra," Kheren said, signing over the departure readiness report handed to him by Redding.

"I do now," she countered the obvious sarcasm with one of her own. "rest assured my next report to the Federation Council will be no more flattering to you than the last, Captain Kheren. And I can tell you that one was not to your liking."

"Neither are you, Governor Sufra."

Before she could explode, he lifted his eyes and his antennae to her and his voice was as cold as the winds of his homeworld.

"Governor, we have a job to do, whether we like it or not, or whether we like each other or not. So, the best way for you to get rid of me and me to get rid of you is for you to let me do my job. The sooner we disembark you in your... Eden, the sooner both of us will find bliss. So, if you don't mind..."

His rough hand made a soft brushing gesture to the left. For a moment, the Bajoran Woman became as tense as if she had been about to slap him. Then, she bit her lip and stepped to his left, to stand in front of Doctor Nasaro-Myth. The handsome Deltan flashed her his mesmerizing smile and his dazzling purple eyes smoothed her mood better than even his pheromones could have done had he sent them out. At the same time, he spoke with his soft, musical voice to his commanding officer beside him.

"Starbase Lotus Flight Control is giving all green for departure, Captain. Fleet Captain Samji, on behalf of Rear Admiral Kotari, wishes us good tides and fair winds sailing to paradise."

Kheren made no comment and his rigid face didn't betray the slight annoyance that he felt. Lieutenant His voice was as soft and deep as ever despite it, his authority but those who knew him close heard the strange mixture of relief and annoyance that laced it.

"Take her out, Number One."

Just as Redding did so, Nasaro-Myth spoke again. This time, there was no easy going manner in his voice.

"Captain... Flight Control reports the Phoenix is requesting emergency departure... The coordinates given do not match course towards the Azimuth Horizon."

Kheren did not have to ask what was going on. On the bridge, every officer now worked to give him an answer to this obvious question of his. And again, it was the Deltan Doctor manning communications that gave it.

"They received a distress call... Their chief engineer is stranded in a damaged shuttle at the edge of a nebula."

"Patch me through to the Phoenix," Kheren ordered.

"Captain Kheren," suddenly interrupted Sufra, once again stepping in front of him, "are you entertaining the notion of delaying this mission to..."

This time, and despite the deceptive softness in them, the eyes and voice of Kheren shifted from frigid ice to blazing fire.

"Governor Sufra; a distress call instantly suspend until resolution all orders and activities, as per Starfleet General Orders. And as per those same Orders, if you start interfering with the operations of this ship, I will have you removed and barred from this bridge for the rest of the voyage as potential hazard to the success of the mission. Do I make myself clear?"

As she was about to protest, Elliago cut in.

"Sir, you have Starbase Command calling."

The voice of Fleet Captain Samji was heard over the bridge's speakers.

"USS Horizon; the USS Phoenix will be delayed for a while. She will rejoin with you momentarily. Proceed as scheduled. Samji out."

It was hard to tell if the Andorian felt further annoyed by missing this opportunity to delay the mission, or relieved that it would not be. Crossing his muscular arms over his wide chest, he sat deeper in his seat and looked straight at the Bajoran woman in front of him as he spoke to his officers.

"Resume departure... once on the way, proceed to the Horizon Portal at warp 5."

Chief helmsman Aguk Snow turned halfway in his seat to look at his captain.

"Warp 5, Sir?"

"Problem with the warp drive, Mister Snow?"

"Ah... negative, Sir, but... ETA will be... almost three days."

"You are in a hurry?"

The copper-skinned man looked a bit bewildered for an instant, then slowly just turned back to his flight controls and started inputting the necessary commands.

Of course, Governor Sufra, who had wisely moved back to stand beside Nasaro-Myth as if using him bodily as a shield, again spitted out her annoyance in no uncertain terms.

"We are, Captain Kheren! WE have suffered the outrageous delays of your unjustified security measures and now we are more than ever eager to reach our destination, if only to get rid of you! As a planetary representative duly mandated by the Federation Council, my orders prevails for this mission. Now, you will proceed at best possible speed. And that is an order, Captain!"

The Andorian looked at her, his face as expressionless as ever. His voice had cooled down.

"That, Governor Sufra, is exactly what I am doing."

"At warp 5? I am no Starfleet officer but even I know that this ship can certainly go much faster!"

"Indeed she can, Governor Sufra... but only in case of an emergency... which we are not responding to right now. Starfleet General Orders supercedes *any and all* orders given in the field. And they specifically state that, to prevent deterioration of subspace, no starship shall exceed warp 5 except in an emergency situation... to which a colonization mission do not apply."

Sufra wanted to protest... but she understood that no protest could go against the standing superceeding orders of Starfleet, not even the authority of the Federation President himself.

Of course, no one, especially not Aguk Snow almost hiding his barely restrained smile between his running fingers and his deep concentrating stare, cared to mention that this restriction did not apply to vessels equipped with the most up-to-date propulsion systems built specifically to minimize any damaging to subspace...

He simply awaited Redding's orders to complete departure proceedings.

Aron'Son witnessed the exchange between his captain and the insufferable Bajoran woman and, after checking his tactical console and the ship's weapons, addressed Kheren.

"Captain, tactical systems are fully operational; and, Sir if our 'guest' is interfering and you wish her removed...." and with the last sentenced he fixed a cold stare on Sufra before finishing; "I will see to it."

"That will not be necessary, Lieutenant, I am sure." The Romulan engineer cut in. He had experienced enough tit-for-tat arguments on Romulan ships to know this would not end well for either side. "Even if we did need to go to warp 9, that speed is off-line. A last minute diagnostic caught a tear in our subspace deflector matrices. Going faster than warp 5 increases the chance of us tearing ourselves apart. I need at least a day to fix it. I would *not* suggest making me rush, either."

The Romulan shrugged defeatedly to the Captain, hoping his act would be enough. He believed his comment would diffuse the two side of the argument. Most politicians knew nothing of starship engineering and therefore *usually* the threat of destruction simmered any hot attitudes. He did not know much about this Governor Sufra, or her Cult, but she acted much like a Tal Shiar agent on board a Romulan vessel; arrogant and headstrong. That alone was alarming to him, especially after reading the briefing PADD that was delivered. To have so many of her people on board made the Romulan highly suspicious. He made a mental note to discuss engineering security with Lieutenant Aron'Son once the woman left the bridge.

Kheren's mastery of body language told him all of what the Romulan truly meant. He felt that the point has been sufficiently made and he became conciliatory.

"Make sure we are fully operational by the time we reach the anomaly, Chief Engineer, Everyone here wishes for this mission to succeed and as expeditiously as possible... Do you agree, Governor Sufra?"

Between an Andorian, a Jem'Hadar, and a Romulan, the woman could only pause before daring letting herself go into what she truly felt. Finally, she only took a deep breath, more a sigh than anything else and, without even the hint of a smile or a nod, grumbled between tight lips.

"Yes, Captain. And let us *all* keep *that* in mind."

"Aye, Sir. Repair team is already on site," the Romulan responded to his Captain, ignoring the Governor. "All other systems nominal...though I am reading additional drain from the replicator and environmental systems.... a point O-five drop across the board on those systems. I was under the impression that the Horizon was able to support the colonists with ease..."

"Ease, sadly, does not mean without any strain, Lieutenant." Snowfire spoke up from her station, a quelling glare lancing from her towards the Romulan engineer as she tapped through a sequence on her station before turning her attention to the Captain. "As to the deflector, my department was running a series of tests prior to our entrance to the Horizon anomaly to ensure that our defences against its influences would be fully effective. The multiple software runs clashed with with the Engineering diagnostic and caused it to return a false positive."

Her eyes flickered, an edge of warning inside them even restricted by the nature of the working relationship on the bridge.

"As we are, then, not limited to low Warp speeds, and as you said yourself it will be easier for all involved if we settle the colonists quickly, I suggest that we utilise the full capability of the Horizon's excellent warp drive."

Her gaze met the Governor's as Sufra's eyes flashed around, conveying a mixture of restrained sympathy and responsible discipline, but again with that same flicker of warning. Given the reactions so far, this was going to be a delicate balancing act. But if it was, it was. And she had a duty.

"Recommendation noted, Commander," Kheren acknowledged drily. "But we will follow Starfleet General Orders nonetheless."

The Andorian was a bit baffled by K'Leysha's attempt to oh so subtly but still openly interfere with his decisions. Along with necessary precautions, a point of authority, order and fair warning had to be made to their guests; and worse, she was completely missing the point of it all out of some misguided impression that he and the rest of the crew were, what... deliberately attempting to have the mission fail? Out of resentment for past sufferings?

Yes, it was baffling that she, the most experienced of her people about Starfleet in general and Lotus Fleet in particular, did not see that they were all professional enough to reining those feelings in and do their job to the best of their abilities. If only one word alone defined a Starfleet officer, it *was* professionalism.

And yes, they *were* doing their best; ordering warp 5 was *not* a spiteful act; it gave them *three full days* under regulations to further make sure that nothing would go wrong in the mission with a people having a history of deceit, disruption and foulness out of the very beliefs they espoused above, beyond and in contrast to those of the Federation. Probably the main reason why they were engaged in this project and the Federation Council so eager to grant them their request... especially that these cultists... so far... were doing it by the rules, not with terrorist acts the first of their group had done, just because things weren't going good enough and fast enough for them.

No, Kheren was *not* hampering them; he was giving them *a chance to prove themselves*... or to damn themselves. If anything wrong would happen with this mission from those people, it would start to show in those first three days of frustrating slowness so close to their dream; and if anything did, it was far better for it to happen on *this* side of the horizon anomaly.

And then, there was the Phoenix; a distress call was the oldest trick in the book to separate vessels in order to better overpower them.

And Kheren also had no intention of crossing the border of the other universe without Syntron by his side.

But puzzlement was not alone in the captain's mind regarding the Illythirii woman. The way she acted now was starting to look like the way former chief engineer N'Eligan Etarudbo had acted on board the Artemis when they met the X'EII of the Hromi Dyson shell... before he too became sympathetic to the Horizon Children's cause when they violently attempted to take the ship... before he joined their destructive exodus...

It was more than puzzlement; it was starting to become genuine concern.

Snowfire settled back into her place at Kheren's reply, subsiding fully and, for all intents and purposes, without any sign of wishing to continue the interjection conflict. She was quite sure she'd annoyed her Captain, yet the flavour of almost worry that she could feel was almost amusing. But she had to remember that Starfleet had none of the complex internal working hierarchy that her people did. She understood why; a lot of it would drive the average Starfleet Captain to absolute distraction, yet she still sometimes had trouble separating the two working structures. And sometimes she still wondered if Starfleet constrained itself too much.

The IDF had a complex, some might even say, feudal nature to much of its command structure, designed to create the ability for subordinates to channel their concerns easily to superiors and also granting them the right to speak their minds in situations that the Federation would and, likely did, find truly baffling. Snowfire could not have counted the number of battles that that structure had won for them, yet it went deeper than that. Saying it was a right was... wrong.

The more appropriate term was duty. And sometimes, like now, that feeling that her superior was making a mistake had overridden her normally tight self control. Yet, in the end, she was glad of it, for if none would speak out, then she would. And she would continue to do so, for a free society had no need to require its own citizens to 'prove themselves'. That wasn't the point of a free society.

Kheren's thoughts were nevertheless interrupted by the Bajoran woman now staying rigid at his left behind the CMO... and right beside Counselor Lyrya eyeing it all silently.

"Am I to understand from your science officer that this ship could go faster?"

"As I said so," retorted Kheren with a deliberately calm tone. "And as I said so, we will follow our regulations. This will also allow the Phoenix to catch up with us after they complete their rescue operation and before we enter the Portal."

"Isn't the Phoenix a Starfleet vessel too? How is the Phoenix going to catch us if it is bound by the same regulations?"

The way she said it, crossing her arms under her bosom, showed plainly that she believed she had caught the Andorian in a blatant lie. Her triumphant sneer however soon dissolved with each of his next words.

"The Phoenix has a Quantum Slipstream Drive that works completely outside of subspace mechanics; there is no restriction to its use."

Now, he turned his molten silver stare to her.

"And as another useful point of information, Governor Sufra; I am not in the habit of explaining my orders; nor am I required to by any order or regulation short of a board of inquiry or a court martial. I do it only out of courtesy to you. Please do not abuse that courtesy."

Aron'Son all the while had eyed the Romulan engineer momentarily and then had turned his attention back to his console. He believed that removing the governor from the bridge would only benefit all present as she seemed to be...uncooperative, even more so than most Bajorans. He had read the official reports from what Starfleet called Operation Horizon and, while he was impressed at what Lotus Fleet had done, he was concerned regarding the reports of sabotage. The Horizon was his ship to protect, and he intended to see that there was no sabotage aboard his ship.

He would have to look over the major spaces again and ensure there were enough guards. He made a note to have a team check the auxiliary spaces for signs of tampering based on the engineer's report regarding the replicator and environmental.

From his elevated station behind the command dais, Oseno Jureth observed everything as the exchanges took place between the ship's bridge officers and the tit for tat between Governor Sufra and Captain Kheren. And he also watched the ship's new tactical officer's actions as well.

Jureth had been shocked to hear that Starfleet had accepted a Jem'Hadar into its ranks and assigned him to Lotus Fleet and, of all ships, to the Horizon. He had never met one in person and still hadn't spoken yet to Aron'Son. It would be difficult for him to do so he knew; his hatred for the Dominion and Jem'Hadar in particular ran deep, as it was Jem'Hadar that had destroyed his father's starship and, more recently, Jem'Hadar serving a reincarnated Khan Noonien Singh that had imprisoned him and the crew of the *Polaris*.

Jureth knew he would have to cross that bridge eventually, but now was not the time.

As for the governor, while Sufra was a Bajoran, Oseno did not have any ingrained sympathy for her, her cause, or her "mission." His security team aboard the *Alsea* had taken down a Horizon's Children cultist attempting to sabotage the ship's computer core during Operation Horizon and he was aware of the other attempted and successful sabotage incidents throughout Lotus Fleet. Those things alone made Oseno skeptical of the governor and her people.

Then, there was the mission. Jureth had read the brief summary of their orders that had been released and knew he would get more information at the official briefing, but he didn't like it. It made little sense to him to attempt to colonize an area of space that so little was known about. Normally extensive site surveys, and other research was carried out before attempting to colonize new planets except under extreme circumstances and Jureth didn't believe this qualified as one of those. A feeling inside told him that there was something not right about this mission and he decided now was not the time to ignore that instinct.

He sent a text message to the Strategic Operations Center and intelligence officer Variel Palos.

"Lieutenant Palos, give me everything Intelligence has on Governor Sufra."

To the captain he summarized his report.

"Captain, Strategic Ops is ready for departure and the Strategic Operations Center is online and ready. The Polaris is fully repaired and standing by as well, Sir."

"Thank you, Commander; start planning a survey of the target stellar system with your crew."

"I thought charting and survey was to be the Phoenix' job..." again cut in the governor.

"It is, Governor Sufra," the captain explained with a still patient tone, "but of the entire sector around your colony; that means exploring a cubic area twenty light years on a side. Even with her QSD, it will take a lot of time just to catalog the space bodies and phenomena in such a large volume of a totally new universe. By doing the same job on a much smaller scale, the Polaris will free the Phoenix for that larger task and further secure the planetary resources closest to your colony while establishing the best patrol circuit within it to ensure adequate protection."

"I see..." the woman said, apparently slightly mollified. "Well... if you do your job that well... I should not have anything further to... say to you."

"Then rest assured that I will *gladly* do it *all* to the upmost of our ability."

Solius at the main engineering station frowned as he tried to pull up any data on the science team running system checks and, yes, they had. K'Leysha wouldn't have security clearance to engineering diagnostic logs; so, as far as he was concerned, his ruse was still in play.

"Sir, I'd still like to send a team down to check out the false positive. There are some things computers just can't do. If we do need to accelerate, I'd like to make sure everything is good to go. You know how starbase maintenance teams are..."

"You have three days, Chief. Once we cross the border, we will be the *only* starbase in an entire universe."

"Don't remind me, Sir. Us Romulans have sailor stories of ships trying to do this and never being heard from again... because ghosts eat their crew."

The Romulan shook, shaking off the memories of creepy stories as a cadet.

"Not to worry, Lieutenant; I am Andorian. I have no belief whatsoever in the supernatural," Kheren shot with a serious tone. "And as I understand it, you have to believe for it to work."

Sufra however seems suddenly a bit ill at ease; not so much about the ghost stories or even the avowed faithlessness of Kheren as with what he had said before.

"Ah, Captain; if there are some technical difficulties, do you think you'll have enough time to..."

"Three days are more than enough for this crew to resolve all difficulties regarding this mission, Governor, barring any interference."

She obviously got the point as her now familiar scowl returned.

"Make sure that you do. This mission of exploration and colonization has top priority from the Federation Council and is of upmost importance to Starfleet itself. It is not for our sake alone, Captain; in this day and age, the Federation is most concerned with a return to its policy of establishing peace and prosperity across the universe... and Starfleet has to prove itself to be more than just the instrument of war it has been these last decades... Its workings and even possibly its very existence itself are slowly being currently put into question."

Oseno wanted to laugh out loud. This Sufra was a self important one to be sure. Instead of challenging her on her assertions though, he restrained himself and stood from his console.

"I will be in the Strategic Operations Center if I'm needed, Captain. I'd like to confer with my staff regarding the survey mission."

Kheren nodded without turning to him.

"Your status report and deployment plan will be needed at the briefing, Commander."

He didn't react to the Federation representative's words. Either he didn't believe her...

Or... he already knew.

The engineer shook his head as Jureth left.

"I'll get the work done, Governor, there's nothing to worry about. But please remember that Starfleet does not start wars. But they have an uncanny ability of *ending* them. And before you try to reject that theory, please remember that I've been on the other side; and yes, I've seen wars started by my own people, but never Starfleet."

Redding glanced up from his reports with a curious look, as if unsure what he had heard. It just struck him as overly.. insightful.. for a Romulan to admit anyway.

Solius had yet to turn away from his display, but he could feel the burning stare of the Governor at his back. He really didn't mind it, as he'd worked under the same pressure before, while under intruder fire and starship volleys. This was child's play. And judging by Sufra's prior reactions to simple comments, he could tell that she stood no chance in an actual firefight, or even minor stressful situation. He felt his unease slowly melt away the more she spoke. There might be a secret mission in her head that the bridge crew didn't know about, and it might indeed involve hijacking the ship, as the Children had done in the past, but it clearly did not involve her pulling a phaser. Though there was always the 'woman's weapon' of poison...

The engineer noted to make sure to eat only in his office with a modified replicator...

"Starting or finishing a war is irrelevant, Mister," the Bajoran woman said to Solius. "It is to be solely involved in war for most of the last decades that is of concern. Starfleet was founded as the police arm of the Federation yes; to safeguard peace and order... but not as an enforcer of policy; as a tool to promote that peace by ensuring prosperity and knowledge for all; to exemplify the values of the Federation; respect for life, freedom, self-determination and of the inherent right of every sentient being to this universe."

Kheren said nothing; yet, surprisingly but only to those who knew him too little, it was obvious that he was agreeing to her words as he showed no sign of stopping her from what was turning into an obvious sermon.

"But then came the Borg... and then the Dominion... now the Klingons and what's left of the Romulan Empire... We think we defeated them; but in truth, they won... because they turned too many of us into them... starting with those who were most exposed to them; Starfleet."

As she spoke, her gaze went to the stars on the main viewer. Then she closed them and joined her hands on her breast, fingers spread as if to make a blazing one over her own heart.

"But blessed are those who through all that darkness saw the light; the light that shows us the way to paradise."

Kheren now showed signs of impatience, but Sufra did not add anything else. She opened her eyes and took a step back as if to signify that she would not disrupt their work any further.

Aron'Son for his part raised an eyebrow as the governor began babbling about faith. He had faith once, in gods that had abandoned him, but it was never his basis for questioning his First or their Vorta; and yet, this woman had the arrogance to call into the question the decisions of Captain Kheren. In the Dominion, such unmitigated foolishness was met with the point of a blade or the blast of a polaron rifle. Obviously he could not shoot her, no matter how much he would like to, but he believed this Sufra was a security concern.

He was tempted to shadow her himself for he was certain that, whatever her gods were, they could not see through the Shroud. He began running security sensor sweeps of the ship as he formulated a plan to investigate this woman and the people she led.

"Governor if I may?" Redding said softly. "As someone that has fought with or against the Klingons and the Romulans as well as the Dominion, if only diplomatically, I can explain why they keep coming back; it's because the Federation has no interest in 'defeating' enemies, we stop them when we have to of course but we don't attempt to destroy who and what they are, we try to give them a chance, nothing more."

"And sometimes.." But he stopped and changed his sentence. "Compassion is a virtue of the strong, and its a risk we are willing to take."

To that, Kheren nodded with obvious approval.

"The goal is not to defeat an enemy, but to be without an enemy."

"Andorian proverb?" wondered Doctor Nasaro-Myth with a raised shaved eyebrow.

"Earth wisdom... from a twentieth century man named Morihei Uyeshiba, founder of a martial art called Aikido."

"We have cleared spacedock," then announced helmsman Snow. "We are free to navigate."

"Warp speed," ordered the captain.

"Aye, captain; engaging to warp 5 bearing 135 mark 30."

On the large screen before them, the stars jumped at them, became streaks of lights until a brief flash whitenend everything. Then, they moved like snowflakes rushing at them from the blackness of space as they sped a hundred and twenty-five times the speed of light.

The Romulan was happy that he was not facing the Governor. With her chanting about darkness and light, all he could do was roll his eyes.

"All systems reporting nominal. Warp bubble stable and we are cruising at warp 4.98." The engineer reported.

He had wanted to contest the Governor again but didn't desire another lecture. Starfleet was more militaristic than what it was in it's infancy to be sure. But that alone was due to their surroundings. How else can you protect your people without bulking up? He could not wait for her to cry for assistance and have him reply sarcastically that the new Starfleet 'doesn't start or end wars'... and then turn his back and abandon her and her foolish people to whatever threat they desired to face without support.

"Chief, start reviewing a simulation about the ship's systems and the known effects of the anomaly on their performance," ordered Kheren. "I want protocols ready to deal with any disruption this phenomenon will throw at us when we get through."

"Aye Sir. I already have Baoule and Blakely working on that simulation. I fully expect some chop. I hope we brought seat belts." The engineer responded. "The reports I've read on your first encounter with the Azimuth Horizon are not... happy ones. Although the report seems to state that you were able to stabilize the anomaly, correct?"

"Thanks to Captain Syntron and to our very own Commander K'Leysha over here," the Andorian acknowledged with a nod toward the chief science officer. "Baoule and Blakely both have been through the anomaly themselves with me twice so they are the best experts you may find to help you on the subject. As for seat belts... that's what the PIDs are for."

Kheren then glanced to his left.

Same with you, Doc, as far as people aboard are concerned."

"I still remember how it had been the first time," Elliago grumbled in response. "Sickbay is already fully prepared."

"Faith is the best way to prepare oneself, Captain," offered Sufra with a calm conviction.

"You will have a unique opportunity to demonstrate, Governor Sufra," shot back the Andorian.

He had his typical straight face, but his antennae were curving inward in amusement. He too *had* been inside the anomaly.

"Steady as she goes, Mister Snow," Captain Kheren then said . "Counselor Lyrya, Lieutenant Cheonghi, I would like you both to work with Governor Sufra about the details of settling down the colony and how the Horizon will support the operation."

"Aye, Sir," they Aenar and the Edoan responded as one.

"Doctor Nasaro-Myth, please keep a channel open for the Phoenix. If they encounter any difficulty, I want us to be able to respond instantly."

"Already on it."

Sufra for a short moment seemed about to protest; then, she recalled the words Kheren had given her about orders and priorities and understood that protesting against them would not only be useless, it would make her appear as fanatical as he had hinted her to be since they first met. And she had no intention of proving him right. She just stood there icily and silent.

The Andorian rose up from his command chair.

"All senior officers to the main conference room in twelve hours for mission briefing. All departments will be ready then to report on their preparations and readiness for a standard colonization operation. Oh and, Governor Sufra; your presence there will of course be most appreciated."

The Bajoran woman nodded with practiced dignity.

"Number One, you have the bridge."

"Aye captain" Redding said, switching seats.

If Aron'son had been human, he may have found the captain's offer to Sufra amusing; but even though he was not, the Jem'Hadar still caught the nature behind the statement and was inwardly impressed with this Andorian he had only met several hours ago. The captain was going out of his way to run his command as he saw fit despite attempts at outside interference. Having himself commanded a squad of soldiers, Aron'Son could relate to that, given that the Vorta were constantly attempting to assert themselves as "superior" to the Jem'Hadar. Truthfully this 'governor' reminded Aron'Son very much of the Vorta he had killed prior to his exile; self important, arrogant, and too involved with her own ambitions.

As he was preparing to check the ship's phaser array diagnostics again, his com badge came to life.

"Security Team Delta 3 to Lieutenant Aron'Son."

"Go ahead."

"Sir, this is Lieutenant Celes; we have a... problem outside one of the science labs on Deck 5. Could you come down here?"

"What is this problem, Lieutenant?"

"You're going to need to see this for yourself, Sir."

"Understood, I am on my way. Aron'Son out."

the Jem'Hadar looked at Kheren just as he stopped at the entrance to his ready room.

"I will investigate the issue and report back, Sir. The lieutenant clearly did not wish to discuss it over an open channel."

He offered a glance toward Sufra and then turned to Tyvya.

"Please take the tactical station. I will return as soon as I have resolved the situation."

The giantess left the secondary tactical station to comply, herself sending a glance towards her husband. For a second, Kheren was about to say that he would accompany Aron'Son, a la James Kirk, preoccupied as he was about that 'problem'. But then he refrained himself; doing so would be like stating plainly that he did not have confidence in his new security chief. Thus, he simply nodded to the Jem'Hadar and looked at him exiting the bridge before sending one of his own glances at the Bajoran woman and disappearing inside his office. He had left Redding in charge and not doing so would just as well clearly express doubt in his first officer's competence. If things went out of hand, both would come to him anyway.

The Andorian might have doubts about this mission or the people involved, but that should not extend to his own crew... not even with Snowfire, who's body language shouted how much she considered herself well over and above them all, like some antique Feudal Lord above mere commoners.

Just like N'Elighan... he sadly remembered.

The arrogant nature of her own monolithic, insular people, so evident in all the reports he had read about them, was more and more asserting itself. She obviously did not know how to deal with the variety of reactions and behaviors of a multiracial and multicultural crew... and accordingly with her own thoughts and feelings when confronted with these.

And just as clearly, all this was getting on his nerves too. He needed to recenter himself, as his Vulcan mentor had taught him, before his own violent and passionate Andorian nature asserted itself too much. His instincts had been flaring up more than usual since his return from being polymorphed into an Undine on their last mission. Having Horizon Children so near and so numerous was not helping.

Life is of the Self; the Self is of the Mind; the Mind is of the Body; the Body is of Life. Control One and you Control them All.

The wisdom of Surak, Founder and Savior of Vulcan; he needed it here and now, more than ever.

Once in the command chair, Redding looked over at Sufra.

"If you would like Governor, you can use my seat."

He motioned at it.

"It's more comfortable than it looks."

Again she acknowledged the offer with a gracious nod and moved over to sit at the right of the large man. Once Kheren disappeared behind the door of his office, she kept her eyes to the moving stars on the screen as she spoke with a discreet tone.

"Tell me, Commander Redding; do you feel as your captain about this mission?"

Redding leaned back in the chair looking at her thoughtfully.

"I can't say I'm in total agreement, governor Sufra, but I have complete confidence in the captain and his dedication to duty."

Still looking at her he paused only a moment before finishing his thought.

"Let us simply say that you both offer good points on the subject, and leave it at that."

He may have had more to say on the subject or he may not, but he certainly wasn't going to voice such things in front of the bridge crew.

"Your attitude is commendable, Commander," conceded the woman; "and I do see that you have a more... open mind. For me, that certainly inspires much more confidence regarding our endeavor."

She fixed her gaze on Redding. She smiled to him but there was no warmth in her smile despite the softness of her expression and of her voice.

"Commander, I have read in your Starfleet regulations that a commanding officer may be required to... relinquish authority to his highest ranking officer if he is found to be... what was the term... ah yes; emotionally compromised. Now, I am not accusing your captain since he obviously works adequately to accomplish our mission... so far... But I have heard on the starbase that he just recuperated from a terrible ordeal. So, if it would so happen that his decisions could become... questionable, then command could legitimately fall to you next, couldn't it not?"

Redding smiled back at her, it seemed genuine enough if not overly friendly.

"I see your well versed on Starfleet regulations, Governor Sufra; and I assure you that, in such an event as the captain losing his objectivity regarding this mission, I would indeed seek to relive him of his command as is my duty."

A small smile crept over his lips as if that thought would not wholly bother him.

"But I can assure you that this will not be the case. Regardless of the captain's personal feelings, he will do his duty. Of this I have no doubt in the least."

He let out a sigh and looked back at the main screen.

"I suggest we both do as little as possible to hinder him in this, for whether or not we all agree on the particulars of the mission, we all want the same result."

He looked at her and smiled again, this time it seemed more light hearted.

"A new home for your people."

"May the Light be on us all then," the woman said with a convinced tone.

* * *

On board the Phoenix, Captain Syntron directed a message to engineering.

"Prepare to engage the quantum slipstream drive once we reach a safe distance from the starbase."

Ironically, his chief engineer wasn't there to respond but was instead the one they were attempting to rescue. Regardless, they would soon find out whether all of the issues with the revamped QSD had been correctly ironed out or not.

"Commander Riker, convey our situation to Captain Kheren and work out a rendez-vous point toward our destination after we collect our chief engineer."

Nodding Riker walked over to a comms panel.

"USS Horizon this is Commander Riker from the Phoenix. We have detected a distress call and are on route to respond."

Glancing around the bridge Riker continued.

"Preparations are in place for an intercept bearing two zero zero mark thirty. We request a rendez-vous at the following coordinates."

Entering in a series of numbers, a space map appeared on the screens in front of Riker as the images were sent to the Horizon.

"Message sent captain. We are awaiting a response."

A deep voice answered him over the speakers; that of Captain Kheren.

"Phoenix, this is Horizon. We received order from Lotus Fleet Command to proceed to Azimuth Horizon coordinates. We will reach them in two point ninety-two days at warp 5 and rendez-vous with you there. We may backtrack to you at maximum speed only if you signal that you can not handle alone the emergency situation. Good luck, Phoenix. Horizon out."

The Vuclan nodded curtly.

"Warp speed."

"Aye, captain" the Bolian lieutenant responded. "Engaging warp 9 bearing 200 mark 30."

The ship resonated as it burst forward toward their first destination; the rescue of their chief engineer.

"Prepare to engage the quantum slipstream drive." Syntron added as he kept his keen eyes fixed on the main viewscreen.

Jonathan could barely conceal his excitement. He had studied the principles of the quantum slipstream propulsion system during his special intensive courses at Lotus Fleet Academy; the very concept of routing energy through a vessel's main deflector to focus a quantum field that allowed penetration of the quantum barrier was utterly fascinating. The fascination was as much for the incredible velocities it permitted as to the travel option itself it gave within a quantum tunnel, especially for a species like his that had lived billions of years enclosed inside an artificial world. Only more fascinating than the idea was to experience it firsthand.

And it was about to happen!

The X'Ell however kept his wits about him. As science officer, it would be his responsibility to constantly monitor the phase variance of the quantum field, or else, the field would collapse and the ship would be violently thrown back into normal space.

Not as much of a fascinating prospect to contemplate...

Although the latest generation of QSD ships had a special sensor unit dedicated to adjust automatically and ahead of time this phase variance, monitoring was still necessary as a back up to any possible failure. And here the X'Ell's unique talents could prove most valuable. By connecting to the system with his brain implants, he would literally feel the process and instantly adjust it if there was a problem, with the speedy smoothness only organic systems ever could. And it would truly have him live the experience of faster than light travel!

But from his earlier experience with his coming aboard through the transporter system, he had learned his lesson and turned towards his commanding officer.

"Main deflector calibrated for power input and quantum field generation. Phase variance sensor at nominal status. Values computed and quantum algorithms validated. Captain, I request permission to connect directly with it as a backup safety precaution."

Syntron silently marveled at the unique capacities of his new avian CSO as the excitement radiated from Jonathan as he spoke.

"Proceed, Lieutenant Livingstone," however was all that the Vulcan stoically offered to his CSO in stark contrast, as the captain's attention then shifted back to the main viewscreen.

As soon as permission was given, the minuscule lights in the thick feathers on the X'Ell's mane started to flash in a completely different pattern. Keeping his large golden eyes to the main viewer, Livingstone established the link between his own synapses and the ship's circuitry of the sensor grid. In his mind, the entire connecting diagram appeared and, like a bird flying on invisible but deeply felt air currents, he navigated his way directly to the quantum field sensor and merged with it. Now, he could literally sense where the ship was going.

The whole process was much akin to the Vulcan mindmeld, down to the need of very close physical proximity, except that it related more to electromagnetic currents of artificial systems than organic brainwaves; and he could not actually read those as a telepath could... but he could sense and direct them with his own brainwaves.

"Engage," then the captain commanded, as he noted the flurry of activity commencing at stations throughout the bridge as the order was given.

And so, as the Phoenix jumped into her self-made quantum tunnel, for all intent and purposes, Lieutenant Livingstone had become the ship's very consciousness. Feeling it plow through the cosmos and looking at the tunnelling haze of the quantum field, the experience was nothing short of exhilarating.

Even though he was Vulcan, Syntron sensed relief permeating his body as the QSD was successfully activated. The Phoenix accelerated effortlessly now toward the plotted position of their lost chief engineer.

"Time and distance from Commander Roger's last reported location?" the captain inquired.

Livingstone's slightly absent-sounding voice replied.

"Arriving at location in ten seconds... nine... eight... seven... "

Although they all knew that they were now, and not for the first time, going over three hundred times the velocity of the fastest warp vessel ever built, everyone was nevertheless almost taken by surprise at the speed in which they achieved their objective.

"Three... two... one..."

"Disengaging QSD," reported the helmsman at the same moment his fingers shut off the drive.

On the screen before them, the hazy, revolving tunnel dissolved and stars filled their sight, mostly obscured however by a brown-reddish cloud of cosmic matter before which flashed intermittently a tiny spec of light.

In main engineering, Lieutenant Brady overlooked the transition from Quantum drive to conventional warp capability. This procedure of withdrawing the benamite articulation frame from within the matter-antimatter reaction assembly and replacing the dilithium frame only took a couple seconds, but proper alignment was needed to have a fully functional warp drive. Affirming the alignment of the crystal within the matter-antimatter reaction assembly, Jennifer sent the ready status to the engineering board on the bridge where Ensign Andrews noted the status and informed the bridge.

"Warp capability nominal, Captain. Benamite crystal replacement will complete in fifteen minutes."

"Federration shuttlecraft five hundred million kilometers dead ahead, captain," identified the Caitian woman at tactical from her own sensors.

"The Sagan," confirmed Counselor Bijou, monitoring the beacon signal as soon as they had reemerged into normal space.

"One lifesign aboard, Half-Human, Half- Rihannsu," said then the X'Ell science officer. "Signal weak, either due to the presence of protomatter on the hull... or... "

He didn't need to finish.

Understanding the potential implications of the inference, Syntron immediately stood up as he gazed out at the hazy nebula before them. But there wasn't a moment to spare contemplating the intriguing cosmos surrounding them.

"Hail the Sagan," he commanded, knowing that they may not get a response.

He then turned to the medical chair next to his center seat.

"Have an emergency medical team ready once we are in transporter range. Commander Rogers may be incapacitated at this point and may need to be transported directly to sickbay."

"Sickbay this is the bridge; prepare to receive Commander Rogers directly, medical status unknown," said the ship's counselor from the medical command chair. "Transporter room 1; lock on to the Sagan and prepare to beam one lifesign directly to sickbay."

"We should retrieve the shuttle, Captain," assistant chief engineer Andrews suggested. "Her superstructure is intact and she shows no serious damage."

"Tractor beam ready, Sir," smoothly added chief of ops Leone.

"Captain," said Livingstone, " Using a tractor beam to retrieve the shuttle will force us to get closer to the edge of the nebula and also attract by itself particles of protomatter to the ship. I recommend using our cargo transporter to bring the shuttle back into the main hangar deck. We will be able to stay at ten times the distance for a hundred times less longer and transporter filters will allow complete and safe removal of the protomatter."

"A prudent recommendation, Lieutenant" the Captain responded to Livingstone.

"Forty thousand kilometers; coming into transporter range," just then announced Aulder.

Syntron then turned to face the Orion Ops officer now manning her new Ops post. He had first met her at the launching of the vessels just prior to their maiden mission. The transition of her arrival on the bridge was so subtle and smooth that she managed to accomplish this without the detection of the Vulcan himself.

"Welcome to the USS Phoenix Lieutenant Leóné. " the captain stated respectfully. "It is our honor having you now serve aboard our vessel."

Turning a slightly deeper shade of olive, Elisha nodded.

"Thank you, Sir. The honor is truly mine."

"To avoid risking contaminating the ship with particles of protomatter, we will first attempt retrieving the shuttle as our new CSO recommended. If this however proves to be unsuccessful, then we may need to consider a variation of your recommendation."

Elisha nodded affirmatively.

"Understood, Captain."

Syntron went back into the center seat.

"Once we have safely retrieved our chief engineer and receive confirmation from sickbay, then proceed with transporting to Sagan back into the main hangar deck."

* * *

Second Officer's Log

Stardate 88296.7

Captain Kheren has assigned myself, Strategic Operations, and the USS Polaris the mission of assisting with the survey of the space surrounding this so-called Eden colony world. I fail to understand why these surveys weren't ordered completed by ships with equipment for suited to them and long before colonists were allowed to approach the area, but nevertheless my crew and I will endeavor to complete the mission as ordered and gather the specified information. It is mostly mapping the system that the colony will be located in and I will lean on the expertise of my science specialist Lieutenant Ji'lan to help attune the Polaris sensor array.

Jureth sat back in the command chair of the Strategic Operations Center as the door opened and Major Duncan McGregor strode in. The MACO squad leader was unlikely to be directly involved in the upcoming mission but Oseno had wanted him involved in the planning so that he and his team were familiar with what was happening.

"Mac, good to see you again, enjoy your leave?"

"Aye Sir, that I did. Starbase Lotus is quite the station."

Jureth nodded.

"It definitely is. How is your team?"

"We're chompin at the bit, Sir, but it doesn't sound like we'll get much action this time around."

"It's unlikely, but one thing I've found serving with Lotus Fleet is that you just never know."

Jureth swiveled in the chair to face more of the consoles where his people were seated.

"Ladies and gentlemen if you would, let's get started."

The entire Strategic Operations staff was assembled in the space which while not large, was enough for them all to be present without being cramped. As they gathered near him, Jureth switched the main holographic display to a map of the area of space they were headed.

"As you might know, the Horizon is underway for the other side of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly and a class M planet to deliver the colonists which came aboard before we departed Starbase Lotus. Strategic Operations has been tasked to deploy the Polaris upon our arrival and begin mapping the space surrounding the colony planet in assistance to the USS Phoenix. That is our primary mission, and Lieutenant Ji'Lan you will be taking point. Your previous experience in charting and mapping space as well as your scientific background are ideally suited to assuring that the Polaris sensors are optimized for the mission."

Ji'Lan, ever the quietest member of Jureth's staff, didn't reply. She only nodded and began making notes on a PADD that seemed to be attached to her hand as she had it out every time Oseno saw her.

"I am adding an additional requirement for the department as well. These colonists are all members of the Horizon's Children cult. For those of you who do not know, the Horizon's Children are the same cult who attempted to prevent Starfleet's containment of the Azimuth Horizon which would have sacrificed this entire universe in the name of their religion. They are fanatics of the highest order and even went so far as infiltrating Lotus Fleet and committing acts of sabotage to accomplish their goal. We will not have a repeat of that aboard this ship. Captain Kheren and security are taking active measures to prevent it, and we will assist. To that end, I asked Lieutenant Variel to access the latest intelligence on the Horizon's Children and their leader Governor Sufra. Lieutenant?"

Variel Palos stepped forward and tapped several commands into the control console for the holographic display. The image changed displaying a dossier style layout with Governor Sufra's picture in the top right corner.

"Starfleet Intelligence was asked to profile Sufra and her group when they first began petitioning to colonize the space beyond the Azimuth Horizon. As far as our operatives were able to tell, Sufra is nothing more than a pontificating, self important bureaucrat and religious leader. Prior to her joining the Horizon's Children, she was a small time politician and not a very good one. Her followers are just that; they hang on her every word and make no major movements without her say so. Starfleet Intelligence doesn't believe this group is militant or dangerous, but at the same time their tenets are the same as those of the group that kidnapped Commander Sisko and some of his closest friends, brainwashed him, and turned him into their profit. That alone makes them worthy of extra observation. They haven't shown extremist tendencies, but that doesn't mean these aren't there below the surface."

Jureth nodded.

"Thank you Variel," he said before addressing the group again.

He was beginning to have a respect for the intelligence officer who, while cocky and brash, had done everything Oseno asked him to do.

"The bottom line is that the group these people are apart of has been dangerous before and could potentially be again. You do not need to go out of your way as I'm sure our new security chief will be as cautious as he can be with the colonists and Sufra. But if you see anything, hear anything, report it immediately, no matter how slight. Our job is to assist the Captain and XO in whatever way we can and if we can help prevent anything, we will do so. Now, assignments; Commander Yiral, I would like you to command Strategic Ops aboard the Horizon when the Polaris departs. You will have our newest addition, Lieutenant Wynn here to assist you. Mister Wynn was my Ops officer on the USS Alsea during Operation Horizon and I trust him implicitly. Welcome to the Horizon, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, Sir," the tall blond man replied. "Good to be here."

"Alright, it's time to get to work people... dismissed."

The group began dispersing, some to the various consoles in the center, and others toward the door to relax until it was their turn to be on watch. Finally, only Adira Yiral, the El-Aurian diplomat, remained.

"Commander, a word if I might."

"Certainly Adira, what is it?"

"Sir, you don't trust these people we are ferrying do you?"

"I do not."

"Why?"

"Why? Because of what their compatriots have already done and tried to do. Kidnapping, sabotage, murder. That is not religion, that is terrorism."

"Perhaps," she replied nodding; "but what if they do not share the same views as their predecessors? For all you know, the only thing they might have in common might be the name."

"It might, but until that is known, we cannot afford to be lax. How many times in your travels as a diplomat did you see horrific things done in the name of religion?"

"It is true, throughout history, religions have been the source of much conflict; and I have seen no shortage of that in my lifetime. But does that mean we shouldn't give them a chance to be what they say they are?"

"They are here, Adira, aboard this ship. This is their chance. But that doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't watch them."

"Perhaps," Adira replied a philosophical look crossing her face; "but who watches the watchers, Oseno?"

With that, she walked away and Jureth looked after her, once again not correcting her breach of Starfleet protocol and failure to address him by his proper rank. As insightful as she was, that woman had a way of saying things that drove Jureth insane sometimes.

He had never met an El-Aurian prior to meeting Adira, but he had heard stories of the woman Guinan who served aboard the Enterprise as the ship's bartender. The members of this race themselves were said to be extraordinary listeners and lore-keepers, having perceptions that were beyond what most other species were capable of, allegedly even beyond time and space. All Oseno could do was shake his head thinking about what that meant.

He looked up at the central display and Sufra's profile then began composing his report for the official mission briefing.

* * *

Aboard the Sagan, David Rogers drifted in a self-induced haze. He had purposefully cut down the life support to one quarter in order to survive longer for any response to his emergency hail. As he sat in the pilot chair, the crystals of ice fog obscuring the view through the windows around him, David reflected dreamily on his life accomplishments. Needless to say, topping his list was the rescue of his sister, but it was also not too bad to be remembered as an engineer in one of the Federation's most accomplished and famous fleets; not to mention as chief engineer of one of Lotus Fleet's more prestigious ships, as the Phoenix was among the first successful quantum slipstream drive capable vessels.

In retrospect, David thought perhaps he might have done some things differently. Certainly not joining Starfleet, but perhaps the little nuances that added up over a lifetime that defined his character. For one, he regretted his inability to trust doctors. They genuinely meant well, but his childhood aboard a Ferengi vessel had inured him a lot toward the medical profession. Perhaps, if he survived this trip, he would need to work on his attitude toward doctors.

If...

A sparkle of light caught his attention then and David glanced to his right. Through the frosted glass there appeared a giant, feathered bird. Blue and red and gold feathers flared into view as dying flames revealed the new birth in the cosmos of a legendary raptor. Floating outside the Sagan, in cold empty space, a newly risen phoenix cocked its beaked head slightly to one side and spewed forth a bluish green ray to envelope David in a warm breath.

Rogers came out of his fugue and realized he was in the Phoenix' main sickbay on deck 13; Again! Reaching up and covering his eye's with one hand, David groaned aloud and whispered complacently.

"I've really got to stop boarding the ship using the med bay."

Of course, being a hologram and everywhere within the compartment at once, Doctor Gray heard the whispered comment. Walking into the room as he spoke, Doctor Gray shook his head.

"If you would like, I could stop treating you every time you show up here?"

Before Rogers could respond, Doctor Gray gently pushed him back down on the bed and began to scan him with a tricorder. While he did not need to use a tricorder anymore since the ability to scan was implemented into his design, Doctor Gray learned quickly that just waving a hand over patients and then telling them what you found always came off as odd. The tricorder was simply a projection meant to ease the patients.

"You are going to be fine, Commander. You are strong and your brain was only off for a few seconds."

Placing the tricorder down, it disappeared as it touched the table.

"Since your brain never shut off from the lack of oxygen I can not even say you died."

Helping Rogers sit back up the EMH continued with the same light tone.

"Besides, dying means a much longer report. You will feel some tingling in your fingers from the side effects of the hypothermia and faint dizziness from the loss of oxygen. I have raised the oxygen level in sickbay and will keep you in here for another couple of hours. After that, you are free to return to duty. If you have any side effects, you must tell me as soon as you feel them."

"I don't need to ..."

David cut the objection off right then, recalling his thoughts aboard the Sagan about trusting doctors more. Even holographic ones. And Doctor Gray was a sentient holo-program with authority the same as Nasaro-Myth.

Best not to argue.

Meanwhile, there was a moment of tense silence on the bridge of the USS Phoenix before a signal came to Counselor Bijou and a sigh of relief escaped her lips.

"Commander Rogers is in sickbay, Sir! He's unconscious but seems otherwise unharmed but for some minor inconveniences from coldness and low oxygen. Doctor Gray is with him."

"Ready to retrieve the Sagan, Captain," science officer Livingstone then said. "Cargo Transporter 1 filters are set for complete decontamination in transit. "

"Main hangar deck has been cleared to receive the shuttle within a level 5 forcefield so that any further chance of contamination will be scanned for and taken care of, " flight control officer Aulder added.

Engineer Andrews finished their report.

"Damage control unit in place to take care of it afterwards."

"Proceed with the shuttle retrieval Lieutenant" the captain noted as he then turned his attention back to helm.

"Once we have confirmation that the Sagan has been successfully recovered, initiate coordinates to rendezvous with the Horizon... maximum warp and then implement the quantum slipstream drive again until we approach the region."

"Understood captain. Plotting coordinates now" the Bolian Grexx Aulder confirmed.

"Captain, if I may," then offered the X'Ell science officer; "Sensors have recorded the Horizon warping out at warp 5 towards the Azimuth Horizon; it will take her two point ninety-two days to reach the destination's coordinates. If we use quantum velocity, we will arrive at those same coordinates in eighteen seconds. If your intention is to rendez-vous with Captain Kheren's flagship instead of waiting for her there, quantum velocity will have us reach her position in eleven seconds... but without sensors active outside the quantum tunnel, there is a fifty-three percent chance of overshooting her... assuming also that she does not change course. May I suggest warp 9, Sir; that would bring us to the flagship in twelve hours with a ninety-nine point forty-seven chance of certainty, even if she does change course, because our sensors would be operational all the way."

Jonathan was trying hard to offer his commanding officer all the angles and at the same time his best estimate to make a good decision without presuming of his intention.

As Syntron pondered the recommendation, he hypothesized that perhaps Captain Kheren had practical reasons to reduce their time of arrival with a lower rate of travelling speed. The cargo he was carrying was certainly large and perhaps a bit challenging to his crew with their zealous beliefs and potentially irrational actions.

"Reduce our velocity to warp 9 as suggested," the captain corrected to his helmsman with a subtle nod to his avian CSO.

Syntron then leaned back in the center seat and gazed into the main viewscreen once again. What awaited their arrival was a mystery at this point.

"The Sagan is secured in shuttlebay 1, Sir," then announced Andrews from his engineering station. "Decontamination complete; damage control underway."

After a moment, the captain addressed the CSO again.

"Lieutenant Livingstone, since we will be mapping out this vast region surrounding this new outpost to be constructed, ensure that we have the necessary equipment and materials to readily carry out our task. If you are lacking any resources, coordinate your requirements with our new chief of operations... Lieutenant Leóne."

Overhearing this last statement from her Ops post, the attractive Orion officer turned and offered a smile and a nod to the avian CSO to confirm that it was her that the captain was referring.

It had taken sometimes for the X'Ell to interpret this baring of teeth as the friendly gesture that it was meant to be. His own massive beak was simply incapable of doing anything like it. But the nod had the same meaning for his kind as for theirs, even if theirs was so subtle. Jonathan nodded twice and a bit deeper to try convey his own acceptance of the order and recognition of his green-skinned mammalian colleague.

"Affirmative, Captain."

He turned away rather abruptly to concentrate on the task at hand. His wide field of vision included the new chief of security... and the presence of the felinoid woman was provoking deep, basic instincts of fear in him he did not quite understand; as if he expected the Caitian to suddenly jump from her seat right at his throat...

He suddenly realized that he was indeed already quite far away from the secure shell of his home.

Sensing the feelings of woe coming from the new officer Commander Riker walked from his console and placed a hand on Livingstone's shoulder. The jump was slight, even with such a wide field of vision he did not see the tall first officer standing behind him.

"Sink or swim they say," Riker said almost in jest.

The large golden eyes blinked for a moment before words came out of the half-open beak.

"My people have what you would call hollow bones, Sir; we do not sink... even when we drown; but I think I understand your meaning."

"This is a hell of a mission to lose your training wheels on. Just concentrate on what you are doing and trust that the people around you are doing the same."

Glancing back over the crew, the first officer of the Phoenix continued.

"In my years I have learned that if you just get it done and spend less time worrying about what might happen, you would be amazed with how well things can happen."

"Thank you Commander; I shall take heed of the wisdom born out of your experience," the bird-like humanoid answered.

As Riker finished, the console beeped as if to indicate a complete operation. Nodding, the bearded man walked back over to the front of the bridge and leaned over the helmsman.

With everything in place and the ship now on course for their rendezvous with the USS Horizon, the captain connected a channel to sickbay.

"Doctor Gray," Syntron inquired to the sentient medical hologram, "what is the current prognosis of our chief engineer?"

"He will be up and about presently, Captain," the friendly soothing voice of the sentient hologram answered. "Some dizziness from a short time of oxygen deprivation and beginning hypothermia... nothing a hardy Human-Romulan hybrid like him can't handle with standard medical supervision. I am certifying fit for duty within the next couple of hours."

"Captain, we have the Horizon on long range sensor," reported Mriin M'ata.

"On course at warp 9, ETA twelve hours confirmed," added Aulder.

"The flagship acknowledges rendez-vous time and coordinates," said Bijou. "Captain Kheren is inviting you and your senior staff aboard the Horizon for a mission briefing with the Federation representative as soon as we rejoin with them."

"Transmit confirmation to the Horizon regarding our ETA and our attendance to the upcoming briefing upon arrival." the captain responded to Bijou.

Syntron then stood up from the center seat.

"Commander Riker, you have the Conn."

Without any further explanation, the Vulcan exited the bridge and stepped into his Captain's Ready Room. As the Captain was leaving, Riker acknowledged and walked towards the captain's chair. Sitting down, Riker thumbed through the PADD on the chair's arm, awaiting the final reports before heading over the meeting himself.

Three hours later, Rogers had cleaned himself up and reported to the bridge. The Phoenix was still a few hours away from rendez-vous with the flagship Horizon and David needed to have his department checked over. But the first order of business was reporting to his Vulcan boss.

Coming around the display behind the command seating, Rogers found Commander Riker manning the center seat and assumed an at attention stance.

"Commander Rogers, reporting for duty, Sir."

As he re-entered the bridge from his Ready Room at that very moment, Captain Syntron studied his chief engineer for a moment as the Human-Romulan officer stood at attention in front of Commander Riker. Before his executive officer responded, he chimed in.

"You certainly chose a rather circumspect manner in which to report to duty, Commander Rogers." Syntron noted with a tinge of sarcasm laced within his words. "Fortunately for you, the reconfigured quantum slipstream drive engaged without malfunction. Otherwise, we may have arrived later only to retrieve your frozen *corpus delicti* from the disabled Sagan."

* * *

Aron'Son rode the turbolift from the bridge the short distance to Deck 5, wondering the entire way what could be such a problem that it would require the presence of the security chief of the ship. As he exited the turbolift, he understood now why Celes had wanted him to witness the sight with his own eyes.

Outside of one of the science labs, several of the colonists, numbering around a dozen or so, lay prostrate, chanting softly. In front of the door were three uniformed security officers, two men and one woman Aron'Son assumed was Lieutenant Celes, with their weapons loosely trained on the group.

Aron'Son stalked past the colonists who were partially blocking even the Horizon's wide passageway and approached the security team.

"Lieutenant, I am Aron'Son, what is going on here. Who are these... people?"

"Lieutenant Lauren Celes, Sir, transferred from the Alsea. Sorry we had to meet like this. They just showed up on the deck, and then, when Commander Sisko attempted to leave his lab, they tried to get close to him. He went back inside and we had to use our weapons to push them back. I actually had to threaten to stun them if they didn't stop trying to get in the lab!"

Sisko... Aron'Son remembered that name from the basic briefing package he had seen. These Children considered him some sort of prophet or leader, but Captain Kheren had specifically ordered the commander was not to be disturbed.

Aron'Son let out a low growl and glared in the direction of the praying colonists.

"I will speak to the Commander. Set your weapons for wide beam dispersal. If they move in any direction but back the way they came, stun them."

"Y-yes, Sir" Celes replied with only a slight hesitation, knowing the repercussions that would likely come to the new department chief for giving such an order.

Aron'Son used his security authorization to override the lock on the lab door and entered to find a dark skinned, older Bajoran-Human hybrid wearing the uniform of a Starfleet engineer sitting at a lab station. The man looked slightly haggard, possibly as if he had not been sleeping well or keeping late hours.

"You are Commander Sisko?" Aron'Son asked him.

"And because I know who the new CMO is, you must be the new chief of security since you unlocked the door," the Half-Bajoran engineer said, standing up to greet him. "I am Joey Daystrom Sisko... Oh, and this is Ensign Tethis Achilles."

He presented to the Jem'Hadar a little Human girl, barely over adolescence, wearing an old style Starfleet uniform. She was blonde, blue-eyed and of light complexion. She smiled at him.

"Glad to meet you, Lieutenant Aron'Son. Please call me Tess."

"Tess and I are... working together," Sisko explained briefly. Then he said with a frown increasing the crease above his nose; "have you convinced these... people to free the passageway?"

Aron'Son wasn't sure what to make of the girl, she was obviously not a crew member, at least not in the traditional sense. Rather than speculate he instead focused on answering Sisko's question.

"I have not cleared the passage yet, but I will be doing so. I wanted to determine your status first, but I intend to restrict turbolift access to this deck to authorized science, security, and senior personnel only. I will restrict the governor's access as well. She will not like it, but I do not care. I can do so for the deck your quarters are on as well or I will provide you an armed escort if need be, but I will see to it that these....people...will not disturb you further."

Sisko thought for a moment. Of all people, he knew best how these faithfuls thought and reacted; after all, he had been their spiritual leader, even if involuntarily... and he knew to what extremes they could go, pushed forward not by reason but by their beliefs; faith was the antithesis of reason.

As a Bajoran, born himself of a deeply spiritual culture, he knew that since childbirth; and as a scientist, he also knew a reasonable solution was always best... especially when dealing with unreasonable people, whether they knew or understood it or not.

"Thank you, Lieutenant but... seeing me among them, so close yet so inaccessible, surrounded by an armed escort... or looking like a prisoner under guard... This will only stoke the fire in their heart, if not worse. Further restrictions will also only push the worst among them to more extreme measures; exactly what we need to avoid."

Maybe if he spoke to their leader... or appeared among them to dictate their conduct... It would be such an efficient and simple matter in holographic form...

No; he was not going to play their game and manipulate them with words and trickery, even as easy as this could be. He was not like them! Besides, he wanted nothing to do with them. Their sole presence on the ship was already disturbing enough...

Suddenly, he tapped his combadge.

"Sisko to Captain Kheren."

"Kheren here."

"Sir... request permission to have personal access to site to site transport from my lab to my quarters on a daily basis for the duration of this mission... at least until the return trip."

There was a short moment of silence on the other end.

"Granted."

"Thank you, Sir; Sisko out."

The Half-Bajoran sighed with obvious relief before addressing Aron'Son again.

"Lieutenant, let them come as far as this door if they so choose and leave them be unless they interfere with ship's business. At least this way, those will stay put until they disembark. If some among them might be a potential problem, they would most probably be among those, obviously the more... faithful ones; this way, we will know where they are and what they are doing... and more easily watched and contained in a corridor."

Aron'Son looked at Sisko and sighed, if it was possible for a Jem'Hadar to sigh.

"As you wish, Commander; though I would prefer they not be there at all. But I will be augmenting the security team. There are too many of them for a standard guard."

The Jem'Hadar did not wait for a response. He turned and exited the lab the way he had come and stopped outside the door as some of the colonists looked up at the sound of it opening, no doubt with hopes of seeing their 'prophet.' Aron'Son looked at each in turn as he spoke.

"I am Lieutenant Aron'Son, the chief of security of this vessel. You will be permitted to remain here if you wish because those are the orders I have been given despite my feeling to the contrary. Know this; if you attempt to gain access to the laboratory again, or to bother its occupants in any way, I will remove you. Do not challenge my authority or that of the guards on duty to do so. That will be all."

For a moment, all of them looked at him as if they didn't understand. Then they turned their gaze back towards the closed door and started to chant again in a slow, soft, low voice a single sound like some open mouthed humming held as long as their breath could allow it to.

Aron'Son turned to Lieutenant Celes.

"They are not to approach the door, Lieutenant. You have my authorization to fire if they attempt to do so. I will also be sending you three more officers, for your safety."

"Yes, Sir." Celes replied.

And she had thought working for Commander Oseno on the Alsea had been interesting.

Aron'Son moved briskly past the colonists toward the turbolift and tapped his combadge

"Aron'Son to Kyle."

"Here, Sir."

"Ensign, send an additional three-man team to Deck 5; have them report to Celes. It will remain this way as long as our... guests... are aboard."

"Aye Sir, Kyle out."

Aron'Son rode the turbolift back to the bridge and walked straight past the main stations to the captain's ready room and rang the annunciator.

"Come."

As the door opened, the Jem'Hadar could immediately see that lights have been dimmed out, leaving only the light of the stars from outside falling on the form that sat on the floor in the darkness until the door opened. Captain Kheren was cross-legged on the floor, a very small crystalline object on the ground a meter in front of him. He scooped it up with a deft hand as he came up to his feet by only extending his legs from the ankles until he stood straight up; a feat of strength and flexibility very few could accomplish, and even fewer with such seemingly routine ease.

"Report, Lieutenant," he said without a moment's hesitation.

Aron'Son took in the scene and his captain's unexpected agility with a great amount of curiosity; enough that it took him a moment to actually reply to Kheren's demand for a report. As soon as he realized what he'd been doing, the large grey-scaled security officer reasserted his attention to the issue at hand.

"Sir, approximately one dozen of the colonists have prostrated themselves in front of Commander Sisko's lab. They attempted to engage him when he tried to depart and he retreated back inside. My team prevented the colonists from entering the lab but only by threatening to stun them. The commander appears unharmed. I informed him I would have the colonists removed and restrict access to the science lab, but he asked that I allow them to remain. I do not understand why, but I have done as he requested. Despite that, I have reinforced the security team and gave them standing orders to engage if the colonists attempt to enter the lab again. Personally, Sir, I would have preferred to use the transporters and beam them all back to their quarters. I do not like having them in an unnecessary area."

"I share your... concern, Lieutenant," said the Andorian, nodding.

There was a moment of silence before he spoke in a tone as much to himself as to his subordinate.

"Whatever you and I might think about them, these people are still Federation citizens; by definition, we Starfleet officers both serve them *and* police them. We must ensure peace, order, security and freedom for them even if they themselves would threaten it all, willingly or not, knowingly or not. Our only tools are prevention, coercion and above all reason. Upholding their rights by restricting them is very delicate juggling, especially with people who forego reason for belief. On a starship, anyone's behavior means the difference between life and death for all."

He sighed than took a deep breath.

"Commander Sisko and you resolved this situation adequately. I will further validate it all with Governor Sufra, who undoubtedly will hear about this and come directly to me..."

Sudden banging on his door interrupted him.

"... momentarily," he finished, antennae slightly curving inward.

From his desk, he activated the door lock and the panel slid aside to let a fuming Bajoran woman storm into the room. She almost collided with the hulking Jem'Hadar halfway into the office, stopped abruptly with widening, fearful eyes, swerved aside and finally came to stand hands on hips before Kheren who, as calmly as he could, remained seated.

"Captain Kheren! As Federation representative, I formally protest against the unqualified treatment given to my people aboard your ship and *demand* immediate reparation!"

Without pausing or turning away from his silvery gaze, she pointed a trembling finger at Aron'Son.

"And don't start by telling me you don't know what I'm talking about! This... person is obviously here to proudly tell you how he and his... lackeys threatened us at phaser point with violence, expulsion and emprisonnement, put some of us under armed guards and took away from us our very freedom of movement and conscience!"

Still seated, fingers touching delicately before his lips, Kheren let her expend her wrath, taking also the same time to collect himself and his thoughts before answering her with a soft, deliberately respectful tone.

"I am sorry, Governor Sufra, but this was not of his own choice; nor mine... and even you will have no choice either but to comply with the authority that... dictates your freedoms."

"Starfleet rules and regulations do not apply to me or my people, Captain!" fumed Sufra.

"They do aboard a starship, Governor Sufra," started the Andorian. But she cut him off with her finger now coming back to stab towards him.

"They do not allow you to forbid us our rights!"

"They, or us, did not order your people to be guarded and restrained on deck 5."

"Who or what then *dares* to?"

"Your Prophet."

The very silence and coldness of space seemed to blast inside the room. Speechless, the governor just stood there, finger pointed, mouth open, eyes blinking at Kheren as if she could not see him anymore. Then, slowly, she spread her hand over her heart in the symbolic gesture of her faith and her voice became almost a whisper.

"The... Prophet?"

"Yes, Governor Sufra. *He* ordered Lieutenant Aron'Son to leave your people in the corridor under guard to ensure both their safety and ours. *He* ordered *him* to make sure that they would not disturb him in any manner. And *he* told *me* of *his* wishes... *personally*. Now, are you asking *me* to use my authority as captain of this ship and go against his wishes?"

"No! No of course not!" she instantly replied with an indignant stare, her other hand completing on her breast the gesture of faith. "The blessed Will of the Prophet be done."

For a moment, she was silent, her lips moving discreetly in some silent prayer. Then she opened her eyes, her face flushed and she bowed her head.

"I... I'm sorry, Captain. I... You understand I'm sure that it's... difficult for us to have The Blessed One so close to us and yet so... denied to us. I see clearly now. It is his Will to have us do penance for the sins our brothers and sisters did during your... Operation Horizon, by denying to us his Holy Presence. But even his luminous eyes turned away from us and his wise words refused to us, he still guides us to redemption and promise. Thank you for being the Vessel of his Truth, Captain... Lieutenant..."

And without another word, still flushed with embarrassment and fervor, she exited the ready room.

Aron'Son watched the stunned governor leave and turned to his commanding officer

"Would you like me to confine her to Deck 5 as well, Sir?" he asked, the annoyance at Sufra's very presence clearly present in his voice.

"You might please her immensely forcing her and her dear Prophet so close together," the Andorian answered.

"I would not want to do anything to bring that woman pleasure... Perhaps a holding cell..." Aron'Son replied but stopped the thought short. "Permission to return to the bridge, Sir?"

"She already built her own cell around her mind, Lieutenant. Permission granted. Unless we have another... problem, I will see you at the briefing."

"Aye Sir." Aron'Son replied with a nod and exited the ready room back to the bridge proper and the ship's tactical station.

CHAPTER FOUR : THE FIRST DUTY

It had been twelve hours since their departure from Starbase Lotus when the expected announcement came through the ship's internal channel.

"All senior officers to the main conference room."

Captain Kheren was already there when he voiced the announcement. As usual, he was facing the wide transparency that opened to the warped field of stars receding from them at one hundred and twenty-five times the speed of light, starlight leaving only thin streaks of white accross the infinite blackness. From this position, he discreetly watched as usual the entrance of his officers, noting their attitude, their behavior, their conversation, their facial expression, their stares. It was a habit born out of decades of duelling practice and teaching, in a world where even your mother or your daughter could kill you. Of course there was little risk of such a thing here; nevertheless, Kheren still liked to let people come without immediately feel that they were under the gaze of their commanding officer. A lot could be learned about them this way... about what might come later... and about how he should himself deal with both.

He was not alone in the room. His yeoman was already finishing to prepare the old-style triangular conference table with it's definitely state-of-the-art holographic center display for the twelve people that would sit around it. The Andorian watched her with appreciation for all the work she did for him. On a starship, especially one that could literally act as a small space station, the administrative work alone was a full-time job; so heavy in fact that it would interfere with the normal responsibilities and activities of a starship commander. Yeomen were standard personnel on Starfleet vessels, but here such an officer was all but indispensable; and Ensign Miramanee Blackbird did it with a professional efficiency that completely freed him to be just that which he wanted to be; a starship captain.

And thanks to her, all was ready for the briefing.

Already being on the bridge and with their preparations long done, several officers entered together; Counselor Lyrya, Chief Flight Officer Aguk Snow and Chief of Operations Thankuun Cheonghi entered, each with a PADD in hand. The Aenar counselor went to sit on the side of the table usually dedicated to the Sciences departments, facing the transparency, while the Inuit man and the Edoan sat on the opposite side, the security and technical department section, facing the wall and the immense screen covering it.

The viewer was currently showing in real time their progression throughout the mapped Hromi Sector of Federation Space, including the sensor-recrded postion of every ship, space installation and inhabited planetoid, allied or otherwise.

The command staff, Exec Redding and Strategic Ops Officer Oseno, would sit on the last side with their captain... and of course with the actual leader of the whole mission, Governor Sufra.

Them and the others, held by either distance or last minute responsibilities, would not be long in coming.

And then, they would be joined by the command staff of the USS Phoenix. They would sit on their respective sides also of the table among the Horizon's own senior officers.

They would all be committed to this. Together.

The Horizon's engineer walked in, PADD in hand. He had just been sent a report starting that Baoule and Blakely still had not solved the Anomaly's turbulence issue, but they had made progress. He would be assisting them after the briefing...assuming nothing more serious happened. He had heard the Governor's comments about the Captain 'relinquishing' command, and reports had surfaced over her intrusion into his ready room after the Deck 5 incident. This, such a simple mission technically and mechanically, would be one of the more strenuous mental missions, S'Tan could tell.

The engineer sat down at his chair and greeted the officers that were already seated.

Redding along with Governor Sufra entered the room together, apparently finishing a discussion they had started earlier .

"You'll be sitting right over here Governor, next to me." and motioned at a chair.

He glanced up at the captain, paused to look at him staring out the window, his look was one of curiosity. Then he smiled and greeted the other members of the group before sitting down.

The way his first officer guided the governor, Kheren saw that the center seat on the command side of the table would be given to her, with the Execs of both ships between her and the captains. Sisko would sit at the left end beside the Andorian and Oseno, being himself also an acting captain since he commanded the integrated escort vessel of the Horizon, would sit at the far right. This way, the Federation representative would be given her due honors and able to converse with both ship commands with the Execs positionned to miss nothing... and even to intervene if the discussion became... lively... while the last two most experienced officers at both ends would be able to discreetly observe and even recommend if necessary.

He subtly nodded his approval with his own reflection facing Redding as the large Human glanced at him.

Jureth had made his way to the Horizon's briefing room from the Strategic Operations Center where he and his team had all but finished their plans for assisting the Phoenix in the system mapping mission. The Orion science specialist Ji'lan had gone to the Polaris to work on some sensor modifications and to the briefing with him Jureth had brought the diplomat Adira Yiral, and the intelligence officer Variel Palos. Palos presence wasn't so much necessary as it was an interesting idea. Oseno wanted the brash officer to profile Governor Sufra in person and to observe her in the setting of the official mission briefing. He also wanted Palos to present Starfleet Intelligence profile on Sufra and her people to the captain after the briefing was over.

As Oseno entered the room followed by his subordinates he noted several officers already present including the ship's XO and of course Captain Kheren standing in the spot that Oseno had seen him in prior to their maiden voyage. Jureth motioned for Yiral and Palos to take seats on the periphery of the room while he moved to his position on the command side of the table and nodded to Commander Redding.

"Commander, ready to tackle the Azimuth Horizon?"

"In an odd sort of way I am, Jureth" Redding replied. "I had very little opportunity to be during the original event, if you remember. I was still considered.. well, not physically fit enough to be in active service."

That was one way to put it, seeing as he was in his late eighties at the time... But he couldn't relay that in front of the Governor.

"This time around I'll be able to take a more direct hand in events," he finished.

As Jureth listened to the XO's response, he thought back to Operation Horizon and everything he and the rest of Lotus Fleet had gone through to try and quarantine the expanding anomaly and literally save the galaxy. Klingons, Romulans, Undine...he hoped this encounter the phenomenon was not nearly so eventful.

Doctor Nasaro-Myth came in to sit besides the Counselor, nodding and smiling to everyone with his usual charm, even to the captain who's mirror trick before meeting he was all too aware of from his long familiarity with him. He respectfully greeted governor Sufra and his dazzling handsomeness quickly caught her attention. Without even using his pheromones as he used to, he immediately brought her into a state of calm and ease with charming conversation.

Thank you Doc... glad to have you aboard, thought Kheren then.

At that moment, the main transporter room glowed with an almost rainbow hue as the Phoenix senior staff beamed aboard the flagship of their Fleet.

Chief engineer David Rogers himself had not been aboard the Horizon. He was however, somewhat intimately familiar with the deck layout of a Lotus class ship. Putting aside his thoughts, he quickly turned to his right, verifying the safe arrival also of the Phoenix' chief medical officer, Lieutenant Commander Theodore Gray.

Naturally, the emergency medical hologram program itself was safely within the main computer of the Phoenix currently keeping pace some twelve hundred meters port side of the Horizon, but David smiled inwardly at the EMH's wish for a physical appearance at the briefing. Thus, as soon as the staff had fully materialized, the grey haired countenance of Doctor Gray winked into existence alongside his crewmates.

Turning slightly to his left, David awaited Captain Syntron's movement to lead the way as he also noted the two security personnel stationed to either side of the exit, their weapons not quite elevated but obviously activated and split-second ready.

The door to the transporter room opened and a very large Jem'Hadar clad in a Starfleet uniform strode purposefully into the room, followed by two more security officers. He stopped in front of the transporter pad and immediately began scanning the arriving Phoenix crew members while speaking with the transporter operator.

"Their identification checks are satisfactory?"

"Yes, Sir," the operator replied. "IDs confirmed and subatomic scans verified, forcefield is in place awaiting your orders."

"And the hologram?"

"Originating point verified as USS Phoenix."

Aron'Son looked at the tricorder and then up at the officers on the transporter pad.

"I am Lieutenant Aron'Son, Chief of Security. Please identify yourselves for voice verification."

Once the forcefield had been deactivated, the Vulcan commanding officer stepped off of the transporter pad and positioned himself before the Horizon's Jem'Hadar security officer.

"Captain Syntron" the Vulcan announced succinctly and then patiently awaited verification as protocol required.

Aron'Son looked at his tricorder and then again at the Vulcan captain.

"Voice ID confirmed Captain...welcome aboard," he stated though his emotionless voice was not particularly welcoming making the greeting sound more like a formality and less like an actual greeting. "You may wait for your officers if you wish, or one of my people can escort you to the briefing room."

During his life on the Marauder of his step-father and also his tenure at Utopia Planitia fleet yards on Mars, not to mention Star Fleet Academy and subsequent service with Lotus Fleet, David had had the opportunity to meet many divergent life forms. But he had never met a Jem'Hadar!

The sight of the enemy, dressed in a Star Fleet Lieutenant's junior grade uniform no less, raised the hackles on the nape of his neck, and he needed to pause and take stock of the situation. Having fought Klingon's hand-to-hand on an away mission back in time that could not be mentioned here, David knew the Founder soldiers were an equal to or better match than the Defense Force minions and although he knew they were safely aboard Lotus Fleet's flagship, his muscles tensed in what the purely human called the Fight-or-Flight reflex. But then, Captain Syntron had stepped off the transporter pad and placed himself in front of the Horizon officer. David felt himself relax somewhat, thinking abstractly.

Meeting two new life forms in one day was quite exciting enough for the start of this mission. I hope it doesn't get too much more exciting.

The other lifeform the engineer was thinking about was the tall X'Ell standing behind him. Jonathan was eyeing the Jem'Hadar with obvious curiosity but without the instinctive fear the Caitian security chief of his own ship evoked in him, especially so close on the transporter pad. To him, a Jem'Hadar was as much a historical figure as the Borg or the Augments that he had learned about during his intense Academy crash course. His isolated and secluded world had never even heard of them, nor any other sentient species in the galaxy... until the Klingons found them by chance and tried to conquer them. That's when his people discovered the universe outside their immense artificially enclosed star system... and then the so various people of the United Federation of Planets.

As it was, Lieutenant Livingstone's mind was more on the upcoming meeting with the People of the Artemis. He had learned that most of the crew aboard this vessel were of the former starship that had saved his own kind from the Klingons and in doing so, freeing them from their self-imposed isolation. It was because of them that he was now out here, with an entire universe to see and discover and experience; to him, they were legends he longed to see in the flesh.

His impatience showed by the way his massive beak stayed half-open and the feathers on his head subtly trembled, the lights in them blinking even faster than his enormous golden eyes trying to look everywhere at once.

Beside him, the powerful Mriin M'ata noted with appreciation the level of security worthy of a flagship and the expert thoroughness of its security department. She too eyed the Jem'Hadar with a strange mixture of curiosity and apprehension and a hint of confusion at seeing one wearing the same uniform and rank as she was.

Instinctively, when her captain stepped down, she followed with silent, smooth effortless grace to stand a step from him. With her innate ability to pounce instantly over ten meters, she knew that even a Jem'Hadar would not have time to raise his weapon or bring a hand down on her commanding officer before her own clawed and fanged lithe muscular body would slam into his.

And she made sure this way that he would know this as well. After finishing with the captain of the Phoenix, Aron'Son focused on the human standing on the transporter pad and noted the heightened sense of alertness in the man, but Aron'Son was used to people reacting adversely to his presence regardless of the fact that he wore the same uniform they did.

The Jem'Hadar also noted that the man was not entirely human, he appeared to have Vulcan or Romulan features and the tricorder confirmed that observation listing him as Commander Rogers, Chief Engineer of the Phoenix and half human, half Romulan.

"Please voice verify Commander."

Of the eleven occupants of the room, only four were purely human and Rogers, stepping forward to answer the summons of the Horizon's security chief, noted that this might be as diverse a collection of Star Fleet uniqueness as had ever beamed aboard a Federation star ship. In addition to the human Commander Riker, the two human security officers and the human transport officer, the room held an Orion, a Caitian, a Vulcan, a Jem'Hadar and a X'Ell... plus a holographic sentient! Putting aside David's own half Romulan genetics, the species represented in this large transporter room was only likely to be surpassed once the Phoenix command staff reached the Horizon's briefing room, where-in awaited a few more distinct species to supplement the varied one's now present.

Stopping beside his crew mate M'ata, David gave the required voice recognition response to the scaly security chief before him.

"Commander Rogers, USS Phoenix, Chief Engineer."

Following his lead, the holographic doctor and the Orion officer came each side of him.

"Lieutenant-Commander Theodore Gray, USS Phoenix, Chief Medical Officer."

"Lieutenant Elisha Lêone, USS Phoenix, Chief of Operations."

Then so did the Caitian woman and , unconsciously putting himself on the other side of her with just about everyone else between her and him, the X'ell stepped down with the others.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Mriin M'ata, USS Phoenix, Chief of Security and Tactical."

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Jonathan X'Ell Livingstone, Chief Science Officer."

"Commander Joshua Riker, Executive Officer."

One by one Aron'son checked the tricorder reading against each officer and after Lieutenant Livingstone's verification was complete the security officer addressed the group in general.

"Your voice IDs are confirmed. If you will follow me I will show you to the briefing room."

He turned on his heel and led the contingent out of the transporter room and the two security officers that had followed him in fell into step behind the group. In the turbolift, they were silently greeted by Commander Ke'Leysha who rode with them deep in her own thoughts up to deck 1. With her, Captain Syntron and his team traveled to the main conference room. They came at the door just as chief engineer Solius entered to go sit with Aron'Son and Cheonghi. While the Illythirii woman sat with Counselor Lyrya and Doctor Nasaro-Myth, the bearded Vulcan acknowledged the Andorian commanding officer as he entered and took his place around the main table.

"Your ship appears to have arrived to this rendez-vous point intact, Captain Kheren. Have your guests managed to adapt to their temporary residence within this vessel while your task to establish their new dwelling awaits?"

"That would be for Governor Sufra to say," Kheren answered still standing between the table and the huge window.

"Transportation is but the last ordeal of our purgatory before we set foot in paradise at last," then offered the Bajoran woman in greetings to the Vulcan captain. "And I hope, Captain Syntron, that your remark is not expressing your position about the... potential risk my people and I are judged to be by your colleague here."

Syntro slightly raised one eyebrow.

"The coordinates confirmed by both vessels indicate that Captain Kheren has fulfilled that aspect of his obligation Governor Sufra by transporting you and your civilian followers to this locale."

"We're not there yet, Captain Syntro."

The impatience and the resignation in her voice were clearly heard.

"If my understanding of that antiquated theological designation is applicable," the Vulcan retorted, "then perhaps this purgatory you referred to is merely part of the process to undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of your imminent paradise. In addition, the Horizon's medical team has also ensured the biological health and optimization of every passenger on this vessel. Set side-by-side to the exodus of theological followers throughout recorded history, Governor, it would suggest that your sojourn was rather brief and luxurious by comparison."

"The worst may be yet to come... May the Light guide us and the Fire warm us then still," Sufra uttered with fervor.

Seated at the table near them, Jureth couldn't help but smile at the Captain Syntro's response to the governor. It appeared that the Vulcan had indeed learned much from his time under Captain Kheren, though the Bajoran Commander doubted that even Syntro's not so carefully concealed jab at Sufra would make the woman be quiet. Oseno had no desire to engage her in a theological discussion but he wondered what might have made her renounce the Prophets in exchange for the dogma of the Horizon's Children.

And then, the air shimmered and the form of Joey Sisko appeared in the middle of the room. Instantly, the Governor went to her knees and lowered her head to him.

"Prophet! Your Holy Presence blesses this gathering and this humble servant!"

Sisko would have sighed, had he not already known what his coming to this meeting would provoke with the cultist Federation representative's mandatory presence. He had obviously prepared for it as his holographic form showed.

"Governor Sufra; I am not here. This is just a projection so that there will be no risk of any incident while I attend to my duties as a Starfleet officer. Please rise and attend to your own. And you will please address me as Commander Sisko from now on."

The woman stood up slowly but kept her eyes downcast.

"As... you command..."

"Governor Sufra; I do not command here; Captain Kheren does. I follow his orders. I hope, *not* command, *hope*, as every officer here, that you will help him help *you* and *your* people in achieving *your* goals, which are our duty, mine included."

She froze for a moment then finally nodded, obviously confused yet definitely acknowledging the words of the most revered person in her heart. Sisko's hologram walked and sat at the opposite end of the table from Oseno Jureth's as if he was indeed in the room. The engineer was such an expert in holographic technology that he could achieve this feat like a professional illusionist in order to not stand out in the room.

He had already done so too much for his taste already.

Let's get this over with, he thought, nodding in return to Counselor Lyrya's nod of approval for his honorable attempt to handle properly both his obligations as an officer and his delicate standing regarding the situation.

For her part, Suфра simply stood at her central place with serene dignity. She evidently felt blessed and privileged to be at the same table as the one she considered the living guide of her faith; but she would not dare sit in his august presence. So she stood, hands folded before her and waiting with a small content smile on her face.

Captain Kheren allowed some time for everyone to greet one another or even to reacquaint with each other; not only Captain Syntron and himself who had served together on the Artemis, but also notably Lieutenants Leone and Cheonghi who had both worked here on the flagship as well as Doctors Gray and Nasaro-Myth who had both served together on the Phoenix. Looking at them all, the Andorian unknowingly came to the same realization as chief engineer Rogers had minutes before; here were six Humans, three of them hybrids, two full-blooded Bajorans and Andorians, a Vulcan, Caitian, an Edoan and a Deltan, not to mention an Orion, an Illythirii, even a Romulan, a Jem'Hadar and a X'Ell, all coming together, not to compete or conquer, but to work together and, if not share the same dreams, at least allow and even help each and everyone to achieve theirs.

Here was the very embodiment of the Vulcan-born IDIC philosophy at the heart of the Federation: Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations... the essence of Starfleet, of the Federation... of the universe.

If there was any reason to be here and to go where they were intending to, this was it.

As he moved to take his seat next to the governor, everyone did the same and became quiet and attentive, knowing without being told that now was the time to get to what they had all come together for.

Without wasting any time, Kheren proceeded with the characteristic pragmatism of his kind.

"Gentlebeings, we will review the mission. All the details are in the PADDs before you, including the specifics for each of you. But we have to be on the same wavelength as for the overall parameters of the task laid before us... and if needed, discuss any relevant issue before proceeding further. Lieutenant Cheonghi..."

Upon hearing his name, the six limbed Edoan stood up, all three hands activating and controlling the triangular table's holographic center display. Before everyone's eyes appeared a visual representation of the known universe, zooming at a dizzying speed into a spiral galaxy they all recognized as their own, from which one arm was isolated until in a second one area delineated as Federation Space appeared. A twenty cubic light years of space was zoomed in with the name Hromi Sector appearing with it, and the virtual point of view closed in even further, quickly passing by a familiar starbase and the representation of two recognizable starships until it slowed almost to a stop before some gold and orange ball of diffuse fire encircled by small monitoring stations within a large zone of space, empty but for some disperse asteroid fields.

Then, the image went right into and through the fiery glow, almost blinding them before it settled back to another zone of nearly empty space... and beyond, a sea of stars; but those stars, almost none among them had ever seen before.

All the while, the shrill voice of Ops Lieutenant Cheonghi detailed everything.

"The Azimuth Horizon anomaly of the Hromi sector of Federation Space is the gateway to pocket universe. The Federation Council has tasked Starfleet to open new avenues of exploration and colonization beyond that... horizon; specifically, on the star system nearest to the access point, designated as AHU1S001S0001... or more colloquially, the Eden star system."

One of those unfamiliar stars, the nearest, was singled out and the view zoomed into its orbiting system of twelve planetary bodies, six outer gas giants and six rocky ones with molten cores, until it settled between the orbits of the second and third one.

"This star system has a main sequence G-type star much similar but slightly larger than Sol, six gas giants of various types also similar to those found in sector 001, four class D planets and two class M ones, Eden II and Eden III both at each edge of the inhabitable zone for standard carbon-based lifeforms. These are our main targets for the colonization project."

The display now showed three starships entering the system each from a different angle, three ships they all recognized; the Horizon, the Phoenix and the Polaris.

"We will enter from three optimized angle of approach to start a complete preliminary charting of this system. Once rejoined at an equidistant position between the orbits of both class M worlds, all ships will proceed with their specific task for this operation."

They saw then the computer-generated presentation show the Phoenix warping out of the system and the Polaris resuming a standard search pattern within the system as the Horizon came to a stop and implementing full separation mode.

"The Polaris, under the command of Commander Oseno with Commander K'Leysha as his Exec, will be tasked to thoroughly patrol, chart and survey the system, providing security, data and support to all within the system. The Polaris will also maintain constant contact with the Phoenix and the Horizon as a second line of communication to back up the main one between the flagship and the explorer. It will also provide short range support for the Phoenix if need be."

Nodding politely to both officers he had just named, the Edoan then looked at Captain Syntron.

"The Phoenix of Captain Syntron will be responsible for deploying subspace relays while charting the entire twenty cubic light years of the sector 001 of that universe around the Eden system. This also include be on the lookout for indigeneous lifeforms, up to and including possible discovery of sentient species and the eventuality of first contact within the dictates of the Prime Directive."

"Make no mistake here," Kheren then chimed in. "This may be a new frontier and the dawn of a new world, but even on the frontier, even on new worlds, we are here to act and live by the values of the Federation. All Starfleet General Orders as well as the charter of the United Federation of Planets are and will be in effect."

There were a good number of nods around the table before Cheonghi resumed his summary.

"As the tactically superior vessel of our task group, the Horizon will be the command center of the entire operation. The bridge module, under the command of Commander Sisko with Lieutenant Lyrya as his Exec, will act as the planetbound command center on Eden III and II alternatively to directly help the colonists establish themselves. The saucer section, under the command of Captain Kheren with Lieutenant Aron'Son as his Exec, will play the role of starbase facility and Starfleet headquarters in a solar orbit between Eden II and III. From there will be reported and coordinated all communications and activities of all planetside teams and all ships in operation, including shuttlecraft and transporter operations. Finally, the stardrive section, under the command of Commander Redding with Lieutenant Solius as his Exec, will follow a similar but separate orbit to act as secondary study and surveillance post but especially as the major industrial replicator facility to supply both colonies. It will also be ready to provide short term support to the Polaris and long range support to the Phoenix."

"All department chiefs of the Horizon will appoint adequate key personnel for all sections of the ship once separation is in effect," finished the Andorian captain, nodding in thanks to his Ops officer as he sat back in his chair.

Then his silvery gaze fixated itself on his chief helmsman.

"Mister Snow..."

As the copper-skinned man stood, the holographic image reverted swiftly back to the external representation of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. Then as he spoke, the point of view slowly entered within the golden and orange inferno, this time slowly enough to detail visually what he started to explain.

"Our first difficulty will be to negotiate the portal itself. As of now, only two pilots ever flew through the anomaly; Lieutenant Moore and myself, both of us currently serving on the Horizon. With your permission, captain Syntron, Mister Moore will be temporarily transferred for a short time to your ship so as to ensure both safe passage of the Phoenix and help your own piloting staff get fast training with the particularities of travelling... beyond the horizon as we colloquially call it."

He waited for the Vulcan commanding officer to give his approval before resuming.

"The Azimuth Horizon anomaly plays havoc with our understanding of physics; it has been speculated that it recreates, at least partially, the conditions of the universe prior to its very existence. There is no gravitic and barely any nuclear forces in there; mostly electromagnetic energies violently reacting to direct exposure to ever changing subspace fractures crisscrossing the entire region from the central nexus composed of a stable wormhole. I will not go beyond my field of expertise and try to explain how or why this is so; suffice to say that, because of those conditions, forming any kind of warp field only throws the vessel powerless with the crew disabled right into the inferno itself. Calculations show transwarp would provoke even worse consequences because of the exponentially higher level of power. All sources of power directly exposed to the anomaly, say for example from an active propulsion system, are rapidly drained; the higher the power output, the faster the drain. Also, using any gravimetric energy like what is associated with a microsingularity, shields or antigrav will result in a violent reaction from the surrounding area, bringing right on the source all surrounding stellar mass and planetary body remnants. As a simplified example, a Romulan D'Deridex entering the area would be left instantly powerless, systems and crew disabled while asteroids and micrometeorites would crush and pierce its unshielded hull within the next seconds."

Again, he turned his slanted obsidian eyes towards the bearded Vulcan captain.

"Studies involving the Quantum Slipstream Drive are definitive; opening a quantum tunnel in there would resonate with the entire fluctuating quantum signature of the anomaly. The randomness of those fluctuations would result, at best, in throwing the entire ship in another quantum state, possibly even another quantum reality where it might or might not be able to even exist... or, at worst, tear it apart at the subatomic level as different parts of the vessel are randomly shifted into different quantum frequencies."

He made a pause to let everyone understand the difficulties before resuming again his summary.

"The only way to safely navigate the anomaly, especially if it is to reach the rift within and access the other universe, is to follow subspace fractures, much like someone in a hand-propelled boat would navigate a torrent. Even then, the difficulty is both to maneuver deftly with an effective mode of propulsion and to predict the opening and direction of a subspace fracture towards the desired goal. Thrusters are still effective because they work by losing their power source anyway as a reaction-thrusting effect; blasting torpedoes in succession behind and riding the impact wave as well... but the first is definitely time consuming and the other rather onerous and risky. Moreover, a shuttlecraft up to a kilometer in front of the main ship can quickly predict fracture openings and guide a starship through the ever changing maze... but the risk for the shuttle crew is quite evident. Needless to say we will not use those crude options for our upcoming travel."

"Amen to that," grumbled Elliago Nasaro-Myth, using an old Earth term he knew most would understand.

The doctor had been himself aboard such a guiding shuttle when the Artemis found her way out of the anomaly when it was first discovered. They had succeeded in coming through, obviously... but it had taken a month of drifting before he was rescued from his confinement in there with only a grumpy, untalkative Tellarite as sole companion. To a Deltan, a creature of sensuality and congeniality that could not bear being cut off from its own kind more than a mere day, the ordeal had almost driven him insane. It had taken months of rest and therapy back on Delta IV to just regain his mind, let alone not resign from Starfleet; he, the Starfleet brat born and raised on a Galaxy class starship...

The nasal voice of the flagship's helmsman chased away the dark memories.

"From a prototype crafted by the extremists of the Horizon Children Cult that were attempting to take the anomaly for themselves, the chief engineer of Starbase Lotus perfected a special impulse system capable of efficiently and safely navigate the anomaly. As for navigating the subspace labyrinth with certainty and precision, a special sensor dubbed the space sonar was devised by Captain Syntron himself a while back. Both systems are currently installed and tested on the Phoenix and the Horizon, as well as the Polaris, our integrated escort vessel, and our shuttlecrafts. With these and the expertise and experience of both Mister Moore and I, the ride should go smoothly enough to ensure that we do get on the other side... and back."

With a nod to his captain, the Inuit helmsman sat back. Yeoman Blacbie shut off the display and the Andorian looked at each person in turn before he spoke.

"All of us are now aware of what we are getting ourselves into. All details are now in your hands. Any immediate questions?"

Aron'Son, the Horizon's Jem'Hadar security chief spoke up from his standing position.

"Are there any known hostile forces in the area, or beyond the breach?"

Listening to the question, Riker glanced down at the notes on his PADD. A force assessment was his first concern as well. As the Jem'Hadar spoke, he nodded and followed up with a side question.

Are we expecting any special kind of resistance? Now would be the time to bring any special equipment or begin modifications on our gear for whatever we might face."

The Romulan engineer of the flagship shook his head.

"Is there any way to even tell? From what I've read, the only people whom have ever been on the 'other side' are sitting in this room."

"Those that ever came back."

Kheren did not have to explain further. The loss of the USS Nuntio, the Lotus Fleet Federation news starship, presumably inside the anomaly before its destructive expansion before it was stopped, was known to all.

"We should beware of... spirits."

Now everyone was looking at Joey Sisko; most especially Governor Sufra. As he spoke, the silence in the room was almost reverent.

"I don't know what else to call them... But when I was chief engineer of the USS Spectre, we answered the distress call of the particle fountain station that had been towed near the Azimuth Horizon from Starbase 24. The idea was to try to study and possibly harness the energies of the phenomenon. Instead, what they extracted had proven to be... alive... of sorts; some sentient energy form which was diametrically divided into... for lack of better terms... Good and Evil. Whatever they were, these incorporeal entities were at war with each other. But they could not war on one another directly, as any physical contact would annihilate both energy beings if they came too near one another... except... in corporeal bodies."

As he spoke, Yeoman Blackbird downloaded the logs of Captain Daniel Summers' Akira class vessel into their PADDs.

"And you believe these... spirits to come from the pocket universe of the anomaly?" wondered the Andorian captain.

"Or from the anomaly itself... or from somewhere else accessible through it, I can't be sure. The only thing I know is that I was possessed once by them... and when I came back, free of them, I was floating in space right next to it."

"It was the Blessed Sign of the Horizon."

It was of course Sufra who had spoken. As she went on, the light in her eyes was almost as fiery as the Azimuth Horizon itself.

"Taken as a mere mortal of flesh and blood by the forces of Evil of all universes, He was purged by the Fire of Creation... and sent back to us, inviolate even by the cold vacuum of space; the Prophet, the One who would show us the Light and guide us through the True Path of Salvation and Happiness... through the Horizon... and to Paradise."

She spoke as if she was reciting something she had read, with a tone and fervor that left no doubt about her state of mind.

Despite his Vulcan heritage, Captain Syntron could almost feel his eyes roll as he listened to the supposititious theological ramblings emanating from the Governor. Was this sincere religious fervor, or merely the rhetoric of someone using these words and beliefs once again as a tool for power and control of followers? History throughout multiple civilizations and worlds unfortunately presented an array of examples of the latter.

As usual however, Kheren was typically Andorian, just as utterly pragmatic as he was oblivious to religious thinking.

"What are our options if we do encounter such lifeforms?"

It was the X'Ell science officer who responded, having already integrated the PADD's content into his mind through his headset brainlink.

"According to current data, Sir, any standard protection against electromagnetic energy would work. Having no corporeal nature, these lifeforms ignore gravitic and both atomic energies, the last three forms of energy in this universe."

"Meaning shields are useless, being gravitational, but forcefields work, being electromagnetic," interpreted Lieutenant M'ata in her typical Caitian purring voice. "The same way, phasers would disrupt their composition depending on the level of setting in relation to their own level of power."

"Which is considerable even on an individual basis," the X'ell added in suite. "Data records that it is high enough that only a level 10 forcefield and a phaser at maximum setting would affect them in their natural state; and they in turn can affect a corporeal being with ease even at a distance once they get their own frequency in synch... Telepaths would be exceedingly susceptible in direct proportion of their own level of power and with no capabilities at all in their vicinity."

"Psionic static," Counselor Lyrya interjected. "Their very nature completely disrupts the psychometric field. That means Commander K'Leysha's Aegis defense is utterly powerless against them... and it's members most vulnerable."

"Detection would require sensors or tricorders specifically calibrated to small, intense and cohesive electromagnetic fields in movement," finished Lieutenant Livingstone. "Bio readings giving out abnormally high or atypical brain patterns would also pinpoint one... within a corporeal host."

"Or look at their eyes... and beware bright redness in them," then said Sisko.

Kheren looked at Oseno, M'ata and Aron'son in turn as they were the military chiefs in the room. But his question was addressed to all.

"Recommendations?"

The Romulan engineer of the Horizon raised his hand slightly before responding.

"When I was a Subcommander on the IRS Hawk, we came across Devidians... Could these creatures be some sort of mutated version? They sound very similar. A highly concentrated burst of protons usually sent them back to whence they came. I have not heard of them taking... hosts, however. That is... troubling."

Redding turned to look at him.

"It doesn't really match their know abilities or motivations, Solius, but they sound like an exact match for the Ux-Mal 'entities' they discovered on Mab-Bu VI... can't think of the stardate... But I suggest we check that possibility as well."

This was a bit new for Redding. Body-possessing energy aliens had never once happened to him in the last hundred and sixty years of active duty, and that was a true rarity.

David Rogers had, after entering the briefing room with the Phoenix crew, taken an available seat next to the large window with other tech people facing the command side of the table whereat sat both captains along with their execs, the two Horizon high ranking officers Sisko and Jureth and the Federation representative. It also gave him a good line of sight to the viewer on the wall. Having listened attentively to the briefing by the Horizon's chief operations officer and chief flight officer, he had settled back with his PADD and updated his notes while further following the discussion.

When the holographic representation of Sisko had brought forth the unsettling news of incorporeal beings able to occupy corporeal organisms, David recalled a briefing he had attended at the Academy. These 'Spirits', as Commander Sisko had termed them, sounded like they could interdict the humanoid physical body much the same as what he had learned in that briefing. Then, the Romulan next to him, chief engineer of the Horizon, had brought forth the Devidian incident of which Rogers had also heard of from the famous USS Enterprise D logs. It sounded similar to what the USS Spectre had encountered; yet, Devidians operated out of phase with the normal universe, at a variance of point zero zero four, if David recalled correctly. This new horizon anomaly threat sounded much different but ,again, similar to the remembered Academy class brief.

Rogers sat forward and brought forth his remembered information.

"Captains, I recall a situation from some time about forty years back. The race was dying, but one member had been able to transfer his consciousness into a Doctor Bashir of outpost station Deep Space 9. I believe they freed him by transferring the infected brain cells into a containment field by modifying a transporter to beam out the infected brain cells." David knew that it sounded like a lobotomy, but he continued.

"Should these 'spirits' infect someone, I think we could use that as a last ditch effort should electro-magnetic shock not force the infection to leave the host."

Looking to Commander Redding, David injected a exemplary comment.

"That is, Commander, of course, should other methods not expel the entity."

"So, we only have to invite one of those infected on a transporter pad and show it the way out," smirked Elliago with a wink towards Rogers. "Easy as pie you would say..."

"Finding them would not be easier," added Lyrya more seriously.

"Circoids."

Everyone turned their stare toward Captain Kheren.

"On my first tour of duty aboard the USS Lotus, our original flagship, we encountered an unknown species at the far edge of this sector. They claimed that they were threatened by another species... one made of pure energy that could possess a physical one."

"I have access to the logs of the Lotus, Sir," then stated Jonathan Livingstone, the small lights in his head feathers blinking "There is a section here about those Circoids and their technology and method used in detecting, containing and expelling these entities. Their technology was rather crude and time consuming but some Starfleet researchers have already started to work on adapting their method to our current state of technology. And it does rely on transporter technology," the X'Ell finished, looking at the chief engineer of the Phoenix.

"Well done, Lieutenant. You science people will look into this and, if needed, finish the job so that we may be ready... if and when we encounter such adversity. You have less than three days before we go... beyond the horizon."

The four oculars of the Andorian captain went around the table.

"Anything else?"

The Horizon's engineer nodded after a moment.

"Sir, is there any intelligence about other factions attempting to interfere with the colonization? Very few ships can cross the anomaly, but I'd hate to run into a Warbird or Raptor."

"Within our own Quadrant borders, the only group currently stirring trouble, the Orion Syndicate, has no interest whatsoever in our colonization endeavors unless it would encroach on their slave hunting and selling grounds. The Kzinti border incidents are being resolved by the USS Pittsburgh of Captain Speaker-of-Names and too far away to be of any immediate concern. The Tholians are back to their typical silent, isolationist policy within their own area of space. In the beta Quadrant, Klingons and Romulans are still licking their wounds after their attempt to respectively take possession and destroy the anomaly... especially the wound to their pride as they have realized by now that we actually saved them by our actions; something they will take a long time to recover from. The Undines have entered a major change in their lives and will be much occupied with themselves within their own universe for some time. The Dominion too is quiet since their reddition almost half a century ago, also back to their own lives in the Gamma Quadrant. As for the Delta Quadrant species, only the Hirogens are close enough because of their alliance with self-appointed Empress Sela of the shattered Romulan Star Empire; but their sole interest is in hunting prey which abounds aplenty since the starship Voyager shared holographic technology with them. Furthermore, with the end of the Borg Collective, they have also come to realize that the Federation is *not* prey and, even worse, could turn *them* into one if they would dare harass us too much."

"There are people within our own society that do not approve of our project," then interjected Governor Sufra with a tone as cold as the stare shen sent Kheren's way when he finished talking.

"That may very well be, Governor Sufra; but even those are bound by both Federation spirit and policy to allow you all to live your own lives in peace with yourselves... and everyone else. And Starfleet is there to ensure all that."

"There are people who do sometimes break their oaths and promises, betray even their own, Captain."

"That, is another reason why Starfleet is there, Governor Sufra."

"And what about Starfleet itself? There has been a few Captain Tracy and Maxwell, Commander Eddington and Chekotay around..."

Captain Tracy of the USS Exeter, violating the Prime Directive in search of a fountain of youth... Captain Maxwell of the former USS Phoenix, violating a peace treaty on suspicions of covert military action... Commander Eddington and Chekotay joining the Maquis against the same treaty... The stare the Andorian shot her back was even colder then hers.

"That is why Starfleet created *Lotus Fleet*, Governor Sufra."

"Of Rethian Commander N'Elighan Etarudbo... and Cardassian Lieutenant Commander Sorripto..."

A sudden heavy silence swept the room behind her last words. All around this table knew those names. Many knew the faces, some even more than most like Commander Sisko, his friendship with Sorripto strong since they both had been assigned to Lotus Fleet during the Borg War. Etarudbo had even served as chief engineer on the USS Artemis of Captain Kheren, before resigning his commission to join his mate, former SCE Commander Ty'Rennick... priestess of the Horizon Children CuLieutenant

As for Sorripto, many among them, most notably Kheren himself as an expert witness about Starfleet regulations and values, had been present during the Court Martial that had condemned the former chief engineer of the USS McKenzie to a penal colony. Everyone in the Federation knew why; his reckless solo actions had endangered Operation Horizon, thus not only his crewmates and fellow Starfleet officers but the whole universe... and directly caused the death of hundreds of people; people that had all been Horizon Children extremists.

No wonder Sufra knew their name.

Her tone had instantly inflamed Joey Sisko. He would not deny what his friend had done; but he would not stand by and let his name be so casually associated with people deemed willing traitors of Federation ideals and Starfleet Honor. But then, Captain Kheren spoke.

"Mister Etarudbo had been more or less brainwashed by his own mate into forgetting what he had always beleived in; love does not excuse all but it certainly explain much... because it is among the strongest values of all the species and cultures that make this United Federation of Planets of ours. He did *not* betray Starfleet or what Starfleet stands for; he *renounced* it, plainly and openly, resigning his commission before freely committing himself, the wrong way unfortunately, to another way of life;*yours*, Governor Sufra. And we do beleive in freedom of choice, even the freedom to choose wrong and and assume the responsibility of it... like Etarudbo did... don't we, Governor Sufra?"

As the Bajoran woman's eyes blinked and her cheek reddened, Sisko calmed down. If the captain could come to terms with what a former officer of his, one that had openly despised him, had done, the engineer knew before hearing it what he would say afterwards.

"As for Mister Sorripto, he acted wrongly under deceit and coercion by the now disbanded Section 31, said disband these same actions had helped achieve. This fact explained his rogue actions, not excuse them. That is why he also is serving time as established under our society's justice system... a justice which firmly beleives in penance and rehabilitation;and that the crimes of one or a few does not condemn all... the belief in second chances and the opportunity to prove oneself, Governor Sufra."

Clearing his throat Commander Riker interjected himself into the awkward silence.

"I will be the first to argue that the rules of Starfleet are at their core the most important thing we stand for. There are times however when the larger picture must come to light."

A few glances came his way as Riker had a reputation as a stern officer. For him to sound like he was defending Sorripto seemed out of character.

"I was raised on a converted Maquis colony. Remember the Maquis, governor? They have since been vindicated by history, but my father was a traitor in the eyes of many until the day he died. When the war ended, many Maquis prison camps were turned into very stable and thriving colonies because the prisoners knew how to survive. I even worked as a Maquis steward when I was a child. Would you tell me my father was a traitor? How many Maquis integrated back into Starfleet and became productive members?"

Moving on past the personal point Riker continued.

"During his time on Mars, Sorripto has continued his work as one of the foremost minds on nanotechnology. System upgrades he has developed, many of which started on the McKenzie, have been applied across the fleets. Hell, he is only in prison on paper and doing better work than most honest Federation scientists. To just dismiss him because he acted outside the rules after the murder of his family to destroy a fundamentalist regime and take down section 31 seems very short sighted."

Glancing around the table Riker looked at the surviving McKenzie crewmembers and then to Sisko himself.

"You want solid reasons just look around this room and ask yourself how many people are here today because of what Sorripto did?"

She stared at him for a moment, then lowered her eyes and nodded.

"Of course, Captain Kheren... Commander Riker... I'm... I'm glad that we... share that."

The Andorian did not press the issue. His metallic eyes and supple antennae swept the room, nodding in passing to his own chief science officer, looking for anyone else who might want to contribute further to preparing these shared goals.

David Rogers had lost track of the conversation. Something the Romulan engineer had caught his attention and he mulled it over in his mind. What was so important about other factions? Unable to rectify it in his mind, Rogers interjected his concern into the meeting.

"Excuse me, Sirs..."

He meant his captain, the logical Vulcan who would give a logical answer as he was used to; but, being on the Horizon, David neglected to remember where he was... to his detriment.

"How is it that we have to worry about the Alpha or Beta quadrant factions? Or even Delta? Are we not the only ones even able to gain access to the Azimuth? I mean, no one within this galaxy can get into there without Federation permission. Why are we worrying over them? "

Then, suddenly, David realized his protest was out of context. His rank did not allow him knowledge of captain rank protocols pertaining to the Azimuth Horizon entry seals. He only knew of them because of his clandestine abduction of the Diamond Star and subsequent tapping of the command algorithms within her main computer. Without even thinking, David had opened a trace of inquiry toward the still missing twin ship of the Horizon, although not yet known to anyone at this table. Backtracking quickly, David endeavored to cover his mistake.

"What I mean is", David continued, looking toward the stoic countenance of the Andorian host, " do we even have to worry about Klingon or Romulan interference anymore? Or even from the Orion syndicate? No one will challenge us here anymore ... correct?"

He finished with a question, hoping his faux pas would go unnoticed in relation to the seals on the gateway. David had no regret in stealing the Diamond Star in order to retrieve his sister but, until the ship returned from it's self-instructed diversionary flight, he preferred not to be distracted from this current mission.

For a moment, the silvery stare of the Andorian Captain bore into him. His deep, soft voice betrayed nothing; yet his gaze was unflinching toward the chief engineer of the Phoenix.

"You are very cognizant about the Azimuth Horizon situation, Commander; I see that you did serious research prior to this meeting. That is certainly commendable."

The pause was short before he spoke again; yet it was quite perceptible; as if Kheren was pondering something and then changed his mind.

"Starfleet has indeed transmitted quarantine orders of the immediate vicinity of the anomaly. Those orders are enforced by monitoring stations and patrolling ships under the responsibility of Lotus Fleet. But many of those factions we are familiar with are well versed in covert activity and technologies, with no restraint as to their use for their own ends. Reduced possibility of interference is no excuse to be complacent. They all have proven quite resourceful in the past."

Pausing again, his silver eyes glazed for a second in remembrance. Then, looking at Lyrya and Nasaro-Myth, he addressed everyone around the room.

"When the Artemis was pulled inside the anomaly upon discovering it, we ended up on the other side of it, within the pocket universe that is now our target zone. But we had not been pulled in there alone; there had been a *Neg'Varh* warship there as well... and it had come through the terminal distortion of a subspace fracture... from almost half a century in the past."

He allowed everyone to grasp the implications of this before making them clear.

"History records that this had been the lone Klingon warship that had emerged from the Bajoran wormhole during the Dominion War and from which space station DS9 had managed to save one sole survivor... one that had said "evil spirits" had claimed his crew..."

Rogers was slightly taken aback at the suggestion of the Klingon time ship, as well as the temporal effects that incident suggested. The trepidation was natural enough for him, having had certain, unpleasant, dealings with the department of temporal investigations before.

His science colleague from the Phoenix however was elated. There were so many things going on with that anomaly... and they were not even on the other side yet! When Jonathan had moved from his people's secured world, the first and only one so far, it has been to see and experience the rest of the universe; he was still but a light year away from home and already so much was happening and expected, it was boggling his mind... and filling his heart with excitement. His feathered head was bobbing so often and huge golden eyes blinking so fast that his feelings were obvious to everyone in the room.

Everyone now started to make connections between this event and those of the USS Spectre and Joey Sisko's encounter with the alien possession of Doctor Julian Bashir reported by Rogers earlier. If the anomaly could also cause temporal effects, indeed there was no telling who or what they might encounter along with these mysterious energy beings they had been discussing.

The room now was silent as Kheren waited for anyone else to speak up.

"Mister Rogers, I hope I didn't make you nervous," S'Tan Solius said softly after a moment to his right hand neighbor. "Although the Romulans were defeated the last time Lotus Fleet was involved with the anomaly, I have enough military experience to know that they would not commit more than two percent of their military might to an operation of that magnitude. They could easily interfere again... *if* they could pass through the threshold without imploding."

He paused for a moment. He debated revealing the fact that his family was actively hunting for him and any vessel he had served on. He decided against bringing this tidbit with the Governor present... for now.

"It's best to be fully prepared for any situation. I think we can all agree to that. If we felt that there was absolutely no chance for any problems, there would be no heightened security, nor would we be having this meeting. We would simply cross the threshold, release the colonists, build them a colony and go on our merry way."

Jureth nodded speaking for the first time.

"Indeed; and Strategic Operations is considering various scenarios including the Romulans even if it is unlikely they will interfere. Serving with Lotus Fleet has taught me to expect the unexpected."

"So noted," simply purred Mrriin M'ata, her large slitted eyes sending a predatory message of readiness.

Analyzing the relevant information shared among the somewhat meandering discussion as it unfolded, Syntron turned to his Andorian counterpart.

"The Phoenix is prepared to chart the entire twenty cubic light-year region of sector 001 around the Eden system and to deploy the network subspace relays at designated intervals along the way. Lieutenant Livingstone and his science team will be implementing all available steps and protocols regarding the possibility of first-contact with any indigenous life-forms where sentience is determined."

Then without fanfare, the Vulcan captain looked around to finish with the same stoic tone.

"If there are no further requirements of my crew, we are prepared to commence with our mission."

"The Horizon will proceed as detailed to establish the colony and maintain contact with you while you perform your mission," confirmed Kheren. "Has all relevant data regarding what was brought up to this meeting been added to everyone's PADD, Ensign?"

"Aye, Captain," Yeoman Blackbird instantly answered.

He nodded appreciatively to her. But, before he could voice it, he was interrupted by the ship's internal comm system.

"Bridge to Captain Kheren."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant Sirris."

"Sir, we have received a general call from Starfleet Command, relayed by Starbase Lotus. The USS Diamond Star is reported missing."

The antennae of the Andorian commanding officer jerked upward in surprise.

"The Horizon's sister ship? Isn't she used as the Lotus class testbed platform at Utopia Planitia?"

"She was apparently stolen, Sir... by someone under a holographic disguise using a full set of electronically copied ID data to access her control systems and disengage them from the orbiting shipyard. She transwarped out of sector 001 before any interception could be attempted."

The news imposed silence for a good moment before Kheren spoke again.

"Who's ID data?"

"David Rogers, rank Commander, Starfleet; assignment, USS Phoenix. Position, chief engineer."

Everyone's gaze went to the half-Human, half-Romulan sitting among them. But before anyone could ask another question, the voice of the assistant counselor manning the Medical Command Chair was heard again.

"Report of the ID subterfuge has been confirmed by analysis of the security record of Sol IV and corroborated by Commander Rogers' stranded status aboard the Sagan in the Hormi sector, a hundred light years away. No positive indication of who the real suspect is at this time. There is also no confirmed sighting of the vessel since her disappearance. Starfleet orders a general look out for any sign of her."

This was not surprising to anyone. The Lotus class was not only the largest but the most advanced Starfleet design currently deployed. Would it fall into hands hostile to the Federation, it could prove a most detrimental asset against it... or anyone else.

And it did not escape anyone either that, if there was another ship that could attempt to cross the Azimuth Horizon safely, it was the Diamond Star.

"Captain... how could one single individual take control of a starship that huge and that complex?" asked Aguk Snow, eyes wide. "Even a skeleton crew would have to number at least two hundred people."

"As an engineering testbed, the Diamond Star was heavily automated so that a small team of engineers could work with her," answered Sisko for his commanding officer. "Someone with the right level of expertise could possibly have automated her fully for simple operations... like flying her away."

"Someone able to fool Starfleet security systems at the heart of Sector 001 certainly is that competent," agreed Mr. M'ata.

"Confirm Starfleet Command that we will be on the look out, Lieutenant."

"Aye, Captain."

There was a gain a moment of silence before the Andorian finally stood up.

"In the meantime, gentlebeings, we have less than three days before we cross the boundary and start our work. Everyone has his assigned duties. Unless there is anything else to add, this meeting is adjourned... and may the winds be at our backs."

"The Fire of Creation will light the Doorway to Paradise," then droned the voice of Governor Sufra as she rose stately from her seat. "We shall live and prosper in bliss as we walk with the Prophet on the Path of our new life."

But when she turned her smile to her left, she met only silence and emptiness. The holographic image of Joey Sisko was gone.

* * *

"Away team 4 to Asimov."

"Go ahead Mister Tritter," Captain Ross said as she just entered the bridge from her ready room to sit in her command chair.

"We have found the portal to the underground facility with the hieroglyphs recorded by the Phoenix expedition; they are indeed the same as those of the spires and adjustment of phase variance has allowed detection and opening. We are proceeding to enter the underground area."

"Commander Seekal; has the universal translator decrypted those symbols, Lieutenant?"

"Not yet, Captain," answered the voice of the Vulcan First officer. "The decryption algorithms are still struggling with the symbolic nature of such..."

"Keep the details for your report, Commander. Are the transporter enhancers secured?"

Affirmative; Mister Tritter's idea of firing them with modified subprobes of a class IV probe to create a safe landing beaming zone has proven as effective as it was safer than risking an initial shuttlecraft landing. Away team 2 is guarding the zone as per his recommendations. Away team 3 is currently working on the spires and translating the symbols. I am currently approaching Away Team 4's position with the rest of Away team 1."

Ross was as usual a bit annoyed by the Vulcan's characteristic thoroughness; but this was a scientific expedition and such thoroughness was mandatory. She mused again briefly at the fate that had given her a science vessel as her first command... and at her upcoming assignment, at last, as the Strategic ops officer of the next Lotus class starship and thus in command of her integrated escort starship. She couldn't wait for this mission to be over with.

"Alright; proceed with caution but do not loiter around. We're here to gather data and samples. Record everything for a preliminary report to the Science Council."

"Acknowledged, Captain. We have reached the portal and confirm all preliminary data from the Phoenix and Away team 4. Implementing complete scan and recording."

Barely a second after Seekal became silent, the dull, flat low voice of security chief Tritter was heard again.

"Captain, Tritter here; we have activated the activation code used by the Phoenix away team and an entryway has opened in the rock face. Currently proceeding inward... We have passed a kind of hallway carved out of the living rock by obviously very advanced tools, judging by the perfection of the cutting and building arrangements... We are now standing twenty meters away from the entrance, in front of the second entryway described by the Phoenix report."

"The entrance is closing..." then calmly reported Seekal as a low rumble was heard over the comm.

"The one before us is opening... followed Tritter's voice; " as expected once we used again the activation code... slower than the first, as reported... We are proceeding in the next area; the door should close behind us after moving about five meters inside... confirmed."

Ross listened to the exchange between the away teams, despite herself starting to get caught in the moment.

"Lieutenant; switch your helmet lights to 245 nm upward and adjust your visor's reception frequency into the ultraviolet range."

"Aye, Commander; complying..."

There was a moment of silence before the Vulcan's voice was heard.

"Report, Lieutenant."

"Sir... this place is... much larger than expected..."

"Switch to viewing mode, record and transmit over here," ordered Captain Ross.

On the main viewer before her, the image of the dark asteroid was replaced by that of a huge chamber made of six walls each of rectangular shape, making it all look like the inside of a huge prism. Each wall was brightly luminous and colored under the ultraviolet light in all the tones and hues of blue and obviously etching out panels, monitors, displays and controls of alien configuration and obscure nature, enhanced by the same kind of mysterious symbols found outside. There was nothing immediately recognizable in all those instruments... except that they were apparently in some sort of standby status.

"Ensign Hernandez; where are you now with this translation of yours?"

On the screen, one of the suited figures in the huge chamber turned halfway the helmeted face invisible behind the darkened faceplate to the nearest wall of glowing controls and hieroglyphs.

"Only in preliminary stage of associating forms and structure redundancy, Captain. These are symbolic representations like the old Terran Chinese writing rather than the visual phonetic signals of our current language. It will take a few minutes more to get a first inkling as to what they could..."

"Lieutenant; tell me something!"

"Well... M'am... these symbols here are much more numerous, varied and complex than those outside. If I were to offer a hypothesis, these here are specific description and identification symbols... This is just pure conjecture at this point, M'am."

"And what about those outside?"

"Much simpler in shape and structure, M'am, like... pictograms of ideas rather than abstract symbols of an actual language."

"But what could they all mean?" sighed Ross with mounting frustration.

"Well, M'am... if we go with simple logic, and base our logic on previous knowledge of usual communication patterns, these here inside near what appear to be controls and monitors would be like a set of precise technical instructions... or it might just as well be a philosophical discourse..."

"And outside?"

"More like a general message to anyone approaching this location."

"What, Like... welcome?"

"Or... beware..."

The sour, low tone of Tritter suddenly made the moment as cold and silent as the strange alien ruin around them.

CHAPTER FIVE : THE FINAL FRONTIER

Moments later, Captain Syntron and his staff from the briefing were back aboard the USS Phoenix and positioned at their respective stations.

"Lieutenant Alder, proceed on course" Syntron commanded to his helmsman.

"Coordinates locked in, Sir. Proceeding now toward optimal cruising speed captain." the cobalt-hued Bolian officer confirmed.

From the center seat, Syntron engaged ship-wide communication.

"This is the captain. We will commence with the first phase charting the upcoming region in two point nine-six days. Ensure that all departments are prepared for any contingency throughout this mission. Be cognizant that in addition to the perils associated with the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly and potential subspace fractures, we will also be exploring and mapping uncharted territory. Expect the unexpected."

With that ominous last statement, the captain closed the channel.

Hearing the Captain's final words Commander Riker sent a text only message to all department heads. Looking back up at the captain, he spoke loud enough for every bridge officer to hear.

"All departments report acknowledged and you should have all department readiness reports in twenty minutes."

"Acknowledged, Commander Riker. Carry on."

Glancing around the bridge, the Exec of the Phoenix leaned over the science console watching the preparations for the scans and sensor sweeps that were to come.

From his station on the bridge, Lieutenant Livingstone could barely contain his excitement, judging by the way his feathers swelled around his head. Yet, his voice was perfectly controlled and his tone utterly professional as he opened a channel to every science station of the ship.

"Bridge to all sensor stations; forward sensor teams, prepare simulation exercises of the space sonar under subspace fracture internal conditions; coordinate with navigation. Lateral sensor teams, prepare to implement automated recording protocols of supplemental data collecting in correlation to Azimuth Horizon current studies; coordinate with tactical sensor teams and department. All sensor stations will proceed immediately with level 3 diagnostics of all equipment; coordinate with engineering. Astrophysics and subspace mechanics labs will prepare for in-flight analysis during travel to and through the anomaly. Astronomy and planetology sections, ensure that you will be ready for extensive and detailed charting once we emerge from the anomaly. All scanning stations will also conduct emergency drills in case of sensor failure; coordinate with engineering department. All science stations will confirm readiness in fifteen minutes. Bridge out."

While the X'EII chief of science readied his department, his Caitian colleague did the same from her tactical station, her intense slitted eyes not blinking even once.

"Chief to all security and tactical stations; you will all conduct level 3 diagnostics on all systems for the rest of the shift with engineering, including internal sensors, brigs, shields and weapon systems. Tomorrow, all shifts will train in simulators for emergency protocols for disaster scenarios within the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. Refer to USS Artemis and USS Lotus logs to program simulations and coordinate with damage control teams and emergency medical units. Next day will consist of combat drills against boarding action from energy lifeforms, including harmless neutralization of controlled victims. Refer to USS Spectre logs to program simulations. Everyone, revise all first contact security and tactical protocols. All department personnel; acknowledge orders and confirm readiness in ten minutes to central tactical bridge station."

While all this was ongoing, a new figure was striding to the helm station. Slim and dark-haired, the man wore his thin mustache with the same pride as he wore his lieutenant junior grade pips on the red collar of his grey and black uniform, as if both were medals of distinction. His joyful and self-assured tone of voice said so, as much as his words.

"Rest easy now, brave and bold crew of the USS Phoenix; the best helmsman in Starfleet is here to show you how no storm of blizzard, no rain or snow, no wind or wave nor universe-scorching space anomalies will deter us from our grand purpose!"

He slid with practiced ease in the piloting seat and both his hands at the same time started reconfiguring the helm before the interested gaze of the Phoenix helm crew crowding the station around him. Between them and the main viewer showing the USS Horizon flying majestically before them, Elisha Leône shook her head with a rueful smile.

"Tell me then, O master pilot, how come you are not the chief helmsman of the flagship?"

"Ah, simply because I do not want to; I like *piloting*, not navigating... All those big ships, they're as exciting to fly as cargo transports. Give me an old Defiant class any day. Besides, Aguk Snow is a superb helmsman, well proven and experienced of course... almost up to my unattainable standard... He earned this position by simple virtue of seniority... as he should... and because of the current commanding officer's familiarity with him."

"Favoritism? In *Starfleet*? Favoritism from *Captain Kheren*?" retorted the Orion woman, turning to him with a smirk on her beautiful face.

"No no no no, that's not what I meant, of course; especially not from anyone as pragmatic as an Andorian. No, I meant *familiarity*; how a commander and his pilot are used to one another, nothing more, nothing less. But have no fear, I will build this familiarity for myself in no time... but with Commander Oseno, mind you."

"So... it's the Polaris you're after. It will certainly be impressive to see this... especially from *here*," retorted Elisha with a wink.

"Why do you think Snow sent me here in the first place?" he shot back, obviously unfazed by the comment.

"I thought that I heard it was because we needed you as the only other pilot experienced with the anomaly..."

"Exactly; so, instead of having just tossed aside the competition, our crafty chief helmsman just gave me the opportunity to show my skill with this ship. I will shadow the Horizon during the crossing like no one else could... and I will succeed brilliantly!"

"I'm looking forward to see you become Aguk's proud shadow."

This time, the laughing tone of Elisha did frazzle his satisfied countenance. For a moment, he was left speechless. But his typical smugness was harder than that.

"So... missed me, my dear?"

"Haven't tried to slap you yet."

"Aaaah, tough love..."

Standing behind the center seat, Jessica Albera tried unsuccessfully to restrain a little giggle in response to the playful exchange that just occurred. She then presented a dazzling smile and a little wink to the new Orion Ops officer trading barbs with the helmsman.

I really like the spunkiness and wit of that woman, Jessica thought as she was equally awestruck by her exotic beauty. She hadn't known any Orions personally, but she had never seen one anywhere as beautiful and striking as Elisha.

With a smile still evident on her face, Jessica was jolted out of her thoughts when she realized that the captain had just addressed her.

"I'm sorry Sir, what did you ask?"

With a slightly raised brow, the Vulcan repeated his inquiry.

"Is there something amusing you, Yeoman?"

Feeling a bit of flushness in her cheeks, Jessica somewhat composed herself as the smile instantly evaporated from her expression.

"No, Sir."

"Then perhaps you should carry on with your duties." Syntron noted stoically.

"Yes, Sir," she responded as she immediately gazed down to her PADD and scrolled through a list of tasks listed on the illuminated device with no expression evident on her face.

Elisha was now the one with a slight smirk on her face as she offered a surreptitious smile as Jessica looked up for a moment before they both settled in to their tasks.

After beaming back from the Horizon briefing, David went immediately to main engineering and caught up with Ensign Andrews. He had been left the task of readying the Phoenix' main systems during his chief's absence, and David found the young engineer sitting in David's own office, updating the report that Rogers was actually after.

"So Sean, how does that chair feel?", David quipped amusingly.

"Very comfortable, Commander ... especially with a hot beverage to aid the relaxation," Sean retaliated with a grin.

Getting up from the chair Sean brought his PADD around and offered it to Rogers while assuming a more serious tone.

"Main and secondary drives are functioning at one hundred twelve percent efficiency, Sir. Also, main and secondary mainframes are handling a sudden influx of level three diagnostics from both science and tactical. Those just started a few moments ago. Not too much hardship there though. The nanite infused computers are keeping up quite well in fact."

David took the offered PADD and browsed its contents while his second briefed him, noting the main points Sean talked of and also the other details of the Phoenix systems display. Motioning for Andrews to accompany him, David proceeded down the short hall to the main engineering room and took position beside the pool table. The massive pale blue pulses of the ship's reactor opposite the table seemed to throb in rhythm with his own heartbeat. Accompanying the Horizon, the Avenger class vessel's main reactor felt no strain whatsoever in keeping apace of the Larger Lotus class ship. Handing the small information device back to its owner, David quipped professionally.

"Nice work Sean. I am due on the bridge, so you have the center seat down here for now. Enjoy your coffee."

Taking his leave of the heart of the ship, David proceeded to the nearest turbolift and commanded it take him up to the bridge. Seconds later he passed through the still opening doors and made his way over to the engineering console, relieving Chief Petty officer Kennedy of her seat and designating the number two console for her. Once seated, Rogers quickly scanned the boards before him and then glanced over at the master ship display to re-affirm the status before swiveling on his chair to face toward the center command area near the center of the large bridge.

'Sirs," David addressed the captain and executive officer; "ships status shows green across the board. Main and secondary drive systems at one hundred twelve percent. Ablative armor, transphasic and metaphasic shields off line and ready. Thrusters reading one hundred five percent efficiency, on standby. Main and secondary computers running departmental diagnostics and still showing one hundred eighteen percent efficiency."

Nodding in approval Commander Riker smiled.

"Good glad to see that all upgrades are working to proper specifications. This young girl will be the talk of the fleet if we improve her anymore than we already have."

Nodding to the Captain Commander Riker continued to monitor the scans.

"Acknowledged, Commander Rogers," Syntron responded then. "Having exceptional conditions aboard this vessel may be compulsory given the turbulent nature of this anomaly, let alone venturing into unknown territory. Be certain to keep vigilant attention on these systems as we proceed."

David turned back to oversee his panels once again, knowing that the ship was as ready as he could make her.

It was not long before the other departments reported their readiness status to Commander Riker.

"Science is working on completing full system diagnostics and testing," chirped the X'Ell officer. "Our researchers are polishing up on anomaly studies and afterwards on spce mapping and charting. Our sensor crews are training for the peculiar conditions of navigating the anomaly and afterwards in maximizing our exploration duties. We will be ready, Sir."

"Security and tactical implementing training and readiness protocols, Commander," then reported Lieutenant M'ata. "Anomaly risks are being prepared for, including possible encounter with possible hostile lifeforms as specified in task group briefing. Tactical protocols for action in uncharted space are implemented as we speak with all four security and tactical shifts."

Entering the last shift changes into the PADD he was holding Commander Riker acknowledged.

"Good, glad to hear it."

Turning to the helm Riker readied for his final report.

"Your pilots will be ready for the anomaly by the time we get to the other side, Commander Riker," now assured Lieutenant Moore from the helm with a confident smirk. "I will finish preparing a holodeck simulation of it's conditions for them all to exercise until we get there. And once they will have witnessed actual performance when we will go through it, they will all be quite ready to take over and try to work up to my level of excellence."

"Shouldn't take long," murmured Elisha Leône as she simply and efficiently transmitted her readiness report to the First Officer's armchair PADD.

"Criticism of my actual level of expertise, my dear?"

"Why, Lieutenant; it is but praise for your excellence as a trainer, of course."

"Of course..."

Smirking slightly at the exchange, Riker only shook his head as he entered his final data inputs into the PADD.

"Just remember you two; first one to get me killed... is fired."

* * *

With all reports confirming that the Phoenix was not only operating beyond optimal levels, but was fully prepared for charting the upcoming new region of space two days way, Syntron stood up from the center seat and faced his executive officer.

"I will be in my quarters, Commander Riker. You have the conn."

Moments later, the turbolift doors parted one deck below the bridge and the captain walked directly into his quarters. It was his first visit here since they departed spacedock.

He espied the somewhat battered cases protecting his two stringed instruments within the alcove near his sleeping quarters. The Vulcan Lyre and his hand-crafted Terran violin. It was the latter that he reached for and removed it from its case.

"Computer; increase the room temperature fifteen percent and increase the sound dampening field by one hundred percent."

"Initiating, " the synthetic voice announced as both commands were activated simultaneously.

Syntron sat on a nearby armless chair and plucked each of the four strings one at a time. Once they were properly tuned, he lifted his bow and began to play the last movement of Johan Sebastian Bach's second violin partita, commonly referred to as the Chaconne. It was one of many violin pieces that the Vulcan used to warm-up with when playing the violin.

To some it may appear strange to see and hear a Vulcan from this century performing Earth music from a millennia ago, but these old masters would strive for intricate arrangement of tones, progressions and expressions in a vast array of compositions. Their pieces of music were challenging and required precise movement and manual dexterity to achieved a desired sound from this ancient instrument. As illogical as it may appear on the surface, Syntron found that performing these pieces were more effective than traditional Vulcan meditation and also more interesting. From his experience in the Academy and in Starfleet, as much as Humans could generally bewilder and hinder progress while acting illogically and at times overly emotionally, contrarily they also possessed admirable abilities in musical composition; at least the ancient composers from his perspective. Approximately fourteen minutes later, Syntron concluded the Bach piece and transitioned immediately into the much more demanding third movement of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto. This was the type of composition that demanded a virtuosity level to execute. He had not yet achieved this level of execution and therefore stopped multiple time to consult with the sheet music before continuing on again. He continued this process for hours before he was able to complete the entire piece without any audible glitches.

He then went on to attempt several of the twenty-four Caprices for solo violin by Paganini; most with varying keys and tempos. These too were building exercises for the Vulcan's fingers, ear and mind.

When at last he had concluded the last of these exercises, he carefully placed the violin and bow back into their case and positioned it along side of the neglected Lyre.

Syntron then replicated a vegetarian meal and consumed it leisurely as he continued studying sheets of ancient classical music.

* * *

"Computer; activate Livingstone program Aikido 1."

"Program activated; enter when ready."

On the urge of the disembodied feminine voice of the ship's computer, Jonathan livingstone entered the chamber beyond the large sliding door. His bare talonned feet stepped onto a path of fine gravel and flat stones snaking through short green grass between small twisted trees of small red fruits, their white leafs bristling and sometimes falling from a soft breeze like snowflakes. The path mimicked the small river born of a thin fall that jumped from a black rocky cliff glistening with droplets and mist. It's graceful twists and turns lead to a small highly arched wooden bridge and, beyond, to a small house seemingly made of wood and paper. On the lacquered open porch sat a Human, so small and frail looking that it made the hollow-boned, feathered X'ell look and feel huge and massive in comparison. The man was obviously of very advanced years, his hair almost gone but for a wispy grey cloud of it around the ears and from his bony, leathery and wrinkled face fell the strands of a long thin greyish beard.

The old man sat on his heels, knees folded under him, hands loosely upturned on his lap. Despite his frail appearance, he was seemingly as immovable as the rock near his house and just as old. His breathing was almost imperceptible, his eyes closed. A small smile on his thin wide lips looked as if it was forever carved on his serene, peaceful face.

Livingstone came before the old one and bowed his head very slowly to him. In return, the old man brought his hands to the ground and lowered his own forehead between them. His eyes never flickered open.

The X'Ell sat before him. His own anatomy was quite different however, notably his knees flexing in the opposite direction, so that when he sat on the ground before the man he rested fully on his thighs, much like the gigantic bird that he was. He mimicked the low bow of the aged Human before speaking. He spoke fluently in the very tongue of the man, a language of Earth thousands of years old.

"O Sensei... Master... what is... the Way?"

"The way is the act of living; when I am hungry, I eat; when I am tired, I sleep."

The voice of the ancient was surprisingly strong and firm, sonorous yet very calm and very soft; the voice of a warrior now at peace with himself and the world. Yet, the words, uttered in a harsh and guttural language, obviously puzzled the alien visitor whose very strange appearance didn't seem to frazzle him even a bit.

"But... Master... isn't that what everyone does?"

The old man then opened his eyes and sighed softly.

"No; most people are not present in what they are doing."

The Avian Starfleet officer thought for a long while. The old man didn't seem to mind the wait.

"Is that why they succumb to violence?" then asked Jonathan.

"Partly... Ignorance, especially ignorance of oneself, is the first source of fear. And it is fear that is the real source of violence."

Again the X'Ell was silent for a time, pondering the words before he spoke again.

"Master; I live in a time of great knowledge and growing wisdom, filled with people of advanced civilizations and seemingly magical technologies spanning the breath of the stars themselves. Yet, they still know and do violence. Why? When one lives in peace and offer peace, why would others still respond to them with violence? And why would violence be the only answer left ? Why would a peaceful being resort to violence to end violence?"

The old man then smiled a little more.

"Once there was a musician that lived in these woods. Every day he would sit by this old tree over there to play his flute. So heavenly was his art that even the wildest beasts of the forest calmed down and came to sit around him to listen to him playing. The wolf and the lamb would sit there side by side in peace and contentment, ravished by the lovely sounds of the instrument. Then, one day, as the musician was playing his wonderful music on his lovely flute, came an old mangy lion. The old lion looked with puzzlement at the other animals all sitting quiet around the musician, then at the musician himself. The old lion went to the musician, killed him and ate him before continuing on his way."

"What a horrible thing," gulped Livingstone, eyes wide with disgust. "But... why? Why did the old lion kill him when he was doing no harm; even freely offering so much peace and beauty?"

The master nodded, still smiling.

"Why indeed... That is what all the other animals, horrified, shouted back at the departing old lion; Why? Why did you kill him? He was so peaceful, his music was so beautiful... why did you do that? But the old lion went on his way not even glancing back at them once, not even answering... This old, mangy lion was deaf."

Now, Jonathan blinked his immense golden eyes, his massive beak half-open in stunned silence. The master looked straight at him.

"In life, there are unfortunately a few deaf lions; that is no reason to let yourself get eaten."

This time, it didn't take more than a few seconds for Jonathan to understand. He bowed his head between his hands on the ground.

"*Domo arigato goziemashita, O Sensei...* Thank you so very much, Master Uyeshiba. There is so much I have to learn still..."

With a springiness astounding for a man of so many years, and yet with a controlled motion that stated much about his mastery of his body, the old man stood and bowed back to him.

"Let us begin, then."

* * *

The door to sickbay opened and the groans of pain could be heard from across the room. As Commander Riker, clearly in intense pain, walked in leaning on Master Chief Eddington. Slightly behind the Commander was Ensign Tolo who was supporting the Commander's clearly broken arm and dislocated shoulder.

Hearing the groans and running over to see the wounded executive officer, nurse Kelly Laforet went to ask what was wrong but could not get out a word before Doctor Gray materialized in sickbay. Looking down at the sleek, shiny formfitting outfit he was wearing, Doctor Gray sighed, disappeared and then reappeared in his Starfleet medical uniform.

"This way, put him over here," he ordered, gesturing towards an empty medical table. Doctor Gray helped Eddington and Tolo seat the wounded Commander.

Reaching over for a medical tricorder, the EMH chief medical officer of the Phoenix pointed towards the back wall and shouted instructions to his nurse.

"Bring me a set kit and an osteoregenerator."

As the nurse ran towards the other side of sickbay, Doctor Gray was quickly filing a hypospray and injected Commander Riker. As the pain killer and sedative set in, Riker's groans of pain began to calm. Just as his breathing slowed, Nurse Laforet handed the doctor his set kit and placed the regenerator on the table behind him.

"What happened?" She asked.

Looking down at his medical tricorder, Doctor Gray quipped.

"The Commander appeared to have suffered multiple fractures to his radius and ulna".

"No, I mean how did it happen"

Gesturing to the matching uniforms Riker, Tolo and Eddington were wearing, the same uniform Doctor Gray was wearing when he first appeared, he answered with a matter of fact tone.

"Parrises squares. The Commander here is insistent that he is as good a player as his father, who is well known as an academy legend in the field."

Turning now, Doctor Gray placed the Commander's arm in the set sleeve and began to run the regenerator over his skeletal structure. As the Doctor worked to repair the damaged bones, the nurse appeared confused as she continued this line of questioning.

"With all due respect, Sir, you said his father. Was his father not a clone created by a transporter accident? Would it not be more appropriate to say his... uh uncle? Or... twin brother? What relationship would he have to Admiral Riker anyway?"

Interjecting, as if too cut off this line of questioning, Eddington spoke up.

"Genetically, Admiral William Riker shares the same DNA as his father; in a DNA test there is no difference. Technically, Admiral Riker's transporter clone, one Thomas Riker, is his father but, seriously, this is all semantics."

The glare coming from Commander Riker not helping the situation any, Eddington attempted to change topics and pointed to Tolo.

"The real story is, nurse, the Commander here was wounded diving for a play he should not have made. He was just mad he was being upstaged by a Bolian."

The conversation was quickly cut off as Riker yelled out in pain. Doctor Gray quickly pushed him back down on the bed.

"I am reassembling your arm bones on the cellular level. Do you know how hard that is? Trust me when I tell you it is very difficult. Lieutenant Now lie still."

Eddington and Tolo gave the doctor and nurse room as they continued work on Commander Riker's arm. Opening the setting sleeve, Doctor Gray ran the osteoregenerator over the first officer's forearm a few times.

"Give me a few more minutes to work on setting and then we can finish with reassembly. You should be able to clean yourself up in about a half an hour."

As Riker sat up he nodded. Looking over to Eddington he spoke with the pain from his voice fading.

"Master Chief, you and Tolo should clean up and get some rest. It looks like we may have to delay our next game."

As Tolo made his way towards the door, the master chief nodded and smiled.

"Get well soon, Commander. Our team can't really do much without our worst player."

Laughing to himself, Eddington continued on the same light tone.

"I will fill the Captain in on what happened and have the service reports on your desk"

Riker Nodded and Eddington turned and walked out of sickbay. As the door shut, the exec began making a fist and Doctor Gray started the final swipes of the regenerator fixing the bone in Riker's arm.

"Worst player, huh?" Riker asked with disappointment.

"Nah" Doctor Gray responded. "You are easily in the top four"

* * *

Entering into the turbolift, Syntron directed it to deck 10. Exiting the lift, he passed the boisterous activity emanating from the recreation hall and crossed into the serenity of the floral scented arboretum.

Utilizing his keen vision, the Vulcan observed as he walked between the meticulously crafted and maintained isles of plants that all of the flora in sight were flourishing as if they were indigenous to this vessel. The array and diversity of the specimens were as impressive as the colors and scents that they emitted.

"Greetings, Captain," a voice projected surreptitiously from behind a group of towering plants on an adjacent row.

Moments later, the light brown hair of the female astrophysicist was being pushed back behind her delicate ear with a dirt encrusted gloved hand as she approached him. Her sparkling hazel eyes seemed to smile as her smudged expression broadened with a grin to match them.

"Are you coming around to check on the condition of your babies, Captain?" she inquired mischievously, knowing from previous encounters that this reference would come as close as she could to respectfully irking this particular Vulcan.

And indeed, her words were answered with a slightly raised brow.

"Lieutenant Muller, your predilection for referring to the vegetation grown in this facility to supplement my diet is not only inaccurate but vexing."

Touché, she thought as she broke into a carefree laugh.

"Oh Captain, you are not only a superb commander, but you honestly do amuse me," she confessed with sincerity and a sprinkling of a smirk. "Now, if you just follow me over this way..." Anita Muller began, as she gently guided his arm toward her angle of movement.

Arriving several hundred meters away, she proudly presented her well-tended crop of edible Vulcan plants, along with a group of decorative ones as well.

"Voilà!" Anita announced with sweeping arm gestures. "You see, Captain, all of your babies are thriving wonderfully under our guided care."

Syntron ignored the reference this time.

"Lieutenant, your position aboard this vessel is that of an astrophysicist. Yet the majority of encounters I have had with you aboard this vessel is within this arboretum."

Before he continued, Anita interrupted.

"Very simple, Sir. Astrophysics is my career and my position, but gardening has always been my passion. This is where I spend the majority of my off-duty time, Captain." Then with a grin she added: "But you know this already. I think that you just like to come here to spend time with your babies and visit with me too."

A little wink and a smile embellished the last part of her declaration. Syntron tried to conceal a reaction, but was not entirely successful.

"Lieutenant," he retaliated stoically, "you are superlatively erroneous in your assumption. I arrived into this facility merely to assess the amelioration of this vegetation in solitude, not to be accosted by nonsensical delusions and suppositions."

Not even slightly phased but instead rather amused by his response, Anita smiled retorted coyishly.

"I stand corrected, Captain. I will leave you to your tour and I will get back to the plantings I was working on before your arrival."

She then gave the Vulcan a curious curtsy accompanied by another little wink and scurried off to her gardening once again.

Alone at last, Syntron continued briefly among the plants. But with his senses now keenly alert for any other unwanted provocations, the appeal of this serene environment had been lost.

Without a word, he quietly exited out of the facility. Entering the turbolift, the captain of the USS Phoenix commanded it to ascend to deck 3. Exiting, he then moved effortlessly from Astrometrics to Stellar Cartography as he prepared a series of holographic projections and simulations based on an extensive volume of data and images gathered during their missions contending with the Azimuth Horizon Anomaly.

In his mind there was no concept regarding over-preparation when it came to a mission involving this menacing phenomenon; even if this were merely the gateway to their destination. All of his time spent as a science officer and his involvement on the previous missions allowed this process to flow naturally as he readied the compiled simulation programs.

Within moments, various luminous projections filled the darkened room of Stellar Cartography as it was transformed into a scaled down version of the enormous anomaly seething with dangerous tendrils of fractures and lights contrasted by absolute darkness. Syntron maneuvered the arrangement around to review it once again from different angles of approach, but this time from the safety of this facility.

He continued this process until he located the region from which they would be entering through to reach the other side. After refining specific aspects of the newly created program, he consolidated them into one comprehensive program and then sent a copy of this simulation to the temporally transferred helm officer Lieutenant Moore; who was tasked with carefully navigating the Phoenix through the formidable portal into the region of space on the other side of the anomaly. No matter how prepared this officer may believe he is to handle this delicate operation, another opportunity to carefully review and study what was looming ahead would be beneficial in accomplishing this objective with a minimum of difficulties or consequences. In this regard, the captain would leave nothing to chance.

That's where and when he was met by his chief science officer. Lieutenant Livingstone entered the lab and nodded to his commanding officer.

"Greetings, Captain."

Without another word, the X'Ell went to the sensor monitoring station and linked it with a few flashes of his head apparatus to the data Syntron was already reviewing. Not disturbing the Vulcan's own work in any way, it allowed him nevertheless to start calibrating the sensors to the peculiar conditions of the anomaly and run a few series of simulations to test the results.

Working in silence and without even touching the controls could prove somewhat eerie for anyone not aware the integrated cybernetic technology of his people; but Syntron had been on the very first contact expedition of the Artemis with the X'Ell and so, was one of the outsiders most familiar with it. That's why Jonathan did not hesitate to take full advantage of it while being alone with him.

The tests and calibrations would take a few hours but Jonathan was in no hurry. They would not reach the Azimuth Horizon before late tomorrow.

While all this was going on, Chief Engineer David Rogers entered the turbolift on deck 24 and requested it take him down one more level. Having prowled the ship for several hours, he was actually glad to be almost finished with his inspection tour of all the engineering related systems on the Phoenix. The main deflector generator bay and gravimetric polaron generators had been his last stop on this deck and now he wanted to personally inspect the secondary shield generators and tractor beam assemblies on deck 25.

Another reason for his prowl about the ship was that it allowed him to think. The announcement from Starfleet concerning the Diamond Star had, although not a complete surprise, did jolt his senses a little. He had not expected Starfleet Command to announce the theft of Horizon's sister ship so far and wide.

Then, in retrospect, David had concluded somewhere around deck 19 that they would have had to inform the entirety of Federation Space to be on the lookout for a ship that could reach the unfathomable speeds attainable by the Lotus class vessel. And the information imparted by Fleet Captain Samji concerning the suspect's apparent identity of Rogers himself as the thief was also cause for concern. But David believed his articulate plan in covering his tracks around the timeline of the absconding of the Diamond Star, and the false holographic disguise of himself over himself to mislead investigations would hold up.

As the lift doors parted on deck 25, David stepped out and proceeded toward the beam assembly room, thinking that right about now the Diamond Star should be parking herself a few thousand parsecs above the plane of the ecliptic of the galaxy' Sagittarius arm and venting herself of atmosphere after a purge to wipe out all genetic traces of habitation aboard the vessel. Then the electronic wipe out of the automating programming and all records would happen once she would transwarp back to Sector 001.

When she would come back, she would truly be empty. But David Rogers' heart would be full of satisfaction and relief. His sister would be safe; he would be safe.

* * *

Captain's log

Stardate: 88296.9

We have reached the coordinates of the Azimuth Horizon portal. The Horizon has been preparing itself dilligently in the last three days to perform her duties and coordination work with the USS Phoenix has gone smoothly. There has been no further disturbance on board and both personnel and colonists are ready and eager to tackle the momentous task ahead of us.

It seems like ages ago that this whole area had been filled with plasma fire raging through subspace fractures in a savage cosmic storm that would have devoured the entire universe. Now, it is but a strange, calm dead void almost empty even of the elementary particles that usually fill normal space. In this black dead sea we approach at standard cruising speed the monitoring automated stations guarding the perimeter of the first and only Federation-made artificial stable wormhole; the gateway to another universe.

It is to this brave new world that we are about to commit ourselves; launching our latest major colonization effort that will bring back Starfleet to it's most noblest roots.

"One minute to perimeter boundary, Sir."

"Slow down to full impulse, Mister Snow."

The familiar streaking of starlight coalesced into the illusionary stillness of the firmament as the Horizon dropped from warp 7 to a quarter of the speed of light. The smaller but sleeker form of the Phoenix coasted right beside the massive and majestic classical Starfleet shape of the flagship and both ships in formation moved towards blinking points of light that marked the position of the nearest monitoring station of this peculiar zone.

"Standard approach vector to monitoting station 3," reported the Inuit helmsman. " Distance sixty-seven point five million kilometers, ETA fifteen minutes, present speed. Distance to portal, two-hundred and seventy million kilometers; ETA with wormhole aperture, one hour."

"Receiving hail and authorization code request from station," now announced Lyrya at the medical command chair. "Our transponder code has been received and acknowledged."

"Transmit code," ordered Kheren.

On the Phoenix, the same procedure was followed with the same rigorous efficiency. And at the same time the tactical board of Aron'Son flashed on the Horizon, Mriin M'ata's tactical sensors beeped.

"Captain; three ships just dropped out of warpp, bearing 300 marrk 275, distance sixty-eight point nine million kilometerrs forward porrt frrom ourr ppresent position. They arre on an interrcpt courrse with the station; coming at full impulse. They will rreach the station in less than fourr minutes. By configurration... *D'Deridex* class; Rromulans, Sirr!"

Witnessing the three D'Deridex class vessels suddenly drop out of warp, Syntron exclaimed in a calm yet forceful tone "Red alert" from the center seat of the Phoenix, as his bridge crew sprung into immediate emergency mode. They would initiate no provocative action, but would also not appear as sitting ducks to whoever was commanding this Romulan triad that surprisingly entered into this space on a direct intercept course with the station.

Syntron then opened a secure channel to the captain of the USS Horizon traveling nearby.

"Captain Kheren," Syntron almost whispered, "I am certain that you are seeing what just appeared in front of us. Thoughts and recommendations?" he inquired, as silence filled the air awaiting his response.

The Vulcan captain had advised his senior staff to 'expect the unexpected' and here was a clear example of that warning.

"Affirmative," finally answered the deep soft voice of the Andorian commanding officer after a few seconds. "We are implementing red alert also. Maintain course and speed and wait for them to make the next move. Nice call, Syntron."

Romulans respected strength and resolve. Keeping a neutral non-threatening trajectory while making a definite show of force would honor them by declaring them worthy of weariness, yet not openly threaten them with confrontation an interception course would have done. They were like lions; showing fearlessness and keeping distance insured their peacefulness better than any oath of peace. The last thing to do was showing them anything they could interpret as a weakness.

The Horizon's engineer immediately pulled up the sensor data on his console.

"Why did I have to ask about intelligence about Romulan incursions..." He muttered. Then he spoke louder; "Captain, give me a moment to analyze them..."

The captain simply nodded without looking back at him. Their open presence in Federation Space demanded explanation. And Kheren wanted for *them* to give freely that explanation as their *own* return gesture of respect... before they came into weapons range.

"Any personnel on board that monitoring station?" he inquired.

"Negative, Sir," Lyrya answered him, looking with her sensitive fingers at the read out on her modified console. "It is entirely automated and the maintenance crew is scheduled for next Tuesday."

That one brought a brief smile on a few faces. But they evaporated quickly when she spoke again.

"The hailing transmission has been received by the Romulan ships. No response yet. The nearest patrolling starship will receive it's alert transmission if things go south... or the signal of it's disaster beacon in case of destruction... but the nearest one would reach us at maximum warp only in an hour."

"It's up to us then... and them."

The Romulan engineer turned in his seat.

"Captain, my analysis is complete. For the ships to be cruising at full impulse, without cloaking systems running... it is highly unusual. Passive scans show all of their systems operational, yet only their shields are online. They clearly know we are here, and yet they have not adjusted their strategy. Something is not right. I have only seen such actions when the Commander has, as the humans say, 'an ace in the hole'."

"Thank you Mister Solius. Let us call their hand then. Lieutenant Lyrya, open a channel."

"Ship to ship, Sir."

Kheren stood up at attention and looked straight at the main viewer.

"This is Captain Kheren of the starship Horizon. You are in Federation Space. State your intent and purpose."

The screen shimmered to reveal the unique view of the twin command seats of a classical Romulan bridge with only the huge crest of the jade wingspread raptor grasping two planets on a field of shining gold visible behind them. In one of the chairs sat a stern-looking, grey-haired Romulan female with a face as severe as that of a siamese cat. Beside her could be seen a broad-shouldered, silver-haired Romulan male with a square face, small thin eyes and a wide mouth spread in a half smile; a face many on both ships recognized immediately as much as his peculiar hollowed tone of voice.

"Ah my dear Captain Kheren; so nice to see you again so soon and in such good health."

If the Andorian was surprised, pleased or annoyed, nothing transpired from his rigid face, his silver eyes or his deep soft voice.

"Admiral Tomalak," he simply greeted in return.

His cold silence was obviously meant to express his legitimately superior posture before a declared enemy encroaching on his territory, without bothering to explain himself further. The same way, his deliberate ignoring of her colleague would have been deemed an insult had it not been for the fact that it was for them to justify themselves, thus them being in the wrong until they did. It visibly struck at the woman's pride to be thus used as a pawn in both men's play, but she had little choice but to wait on them so as not to further lower her status by speaking up before being properly introduced.

"Allow me to introduce to you Commander Toreth, commanding officer of the Khazara," the old admiral then said.

Toreth nodded slightly towards the screen, never leaving her sharp obsidian stare from those of the Andorian. Her name and ship was not unknown to Starfleet officers; the Khazara was the one that had been tricked by Ambassador Spock's clandestine Unification Movement on Romulus with the help of Counselor Deanna Troi of the USS Enterprise D into delivering defectors into Federation hands. It certainly explained why such an obviously veteran officer was but still a warbird commander after all those years; her own previous reputation as a war hero and powerful allies in the Romulan Senate within a shattered civilization hungry for leaders and symbols had kept her there... and alive.

"And this is Captain Syntron, in command of the USS Phoenix," now shot back Kheren, knowing that Lyrya had already patched from the start the other vessel into the transmission.

"A research cruiser and a colonist transport... and three warbird battleships..." commented the Romulan woman with a small sneer starting to stretch one side of her face.

"Ah, but with a warship hidden in one sleeve, if our intelligence on your Horizon class design is accurate," added Tomalak with a small smile of his own that froze her own lips in displeased surprise.

"Lotus class, Admiral..." corrected Kheren and that in turn froze the smile on the Romulan's face as doubt on the reliability on their spies was planted.

And still, the commander of Lotus Fleet's flagship kept silent, waiting for the other to explain himself with the poise of the one who knew being in his right and completely unafraid of the apparent disproportion of force stacked against him... truly as if he had himself an 'ace in the hole' as his chief engineer had suggested of them.

Be it with blades, fists or just words, Kheren was still very much a duellist of Andoria.

But Tomalak was no novice either, having sparred with the likes of legendary Jean-Luc Picard. He was not one to let another enjoy long his advantage.

"Gentlemen of the Federation, you are certainly wondering about our presence within your borders, especially while the relations between our governments currently being... tense..."

"We expect such... unannounced visits from you since your ill-advised attempt at destroying the Azimuth Horizon anomaly," shot back the Andorian.

If the reference to their strike force incursion that had endangered the entire universe from pure fear and ignorance struck a nerve, it didn't show on the admiral's face; but his eyes flashed with the same hard light as those of Kheren; both of them had lost their ship as the Andorian had then rammed the stardrive section of his USS Artemis into Tomalak's Scimitar class Shavok. They certainly knew one another's mettle and played accordingly now as they had done that day.

"Ah yes, the tachyon detector grid of these monitoring stations are just as effective as those of your outposts along the Neutral Zone."

Which obviously raised no alarm when these three ships crossed the border was the unfinished part of the sentence. Kheren however did not give him the satisfaction of showing surprise, annoyance or worry about that plain fact; the advantage of having so few facial muscles. But his silence acknowledged it as much as it kept him a bit longer in his upper stance. Tomalak was now ready to topple him.

"Federation representatives, we are here under the Treaty of Nelvana to implement our first colonization effort of the *Vor'tavor* universe beyond the nearby wormhole."

The antennae of the Andorian captain perked up in surprise, a reaction that did not escape both Romulan officers as they showed the same small satisfied smile on their green-tinged faces. It was either in hearing the amazingly coincidental *Rihansuu* name for Eden given to the pocket universe or about the mentioned treaty... or both. His yeoman was the one to come to the rescue.

"Sir... following Operation Horizon, a diplomatic conference between the Federation and the Romulan Star Empire of Empress Sela was held at Nelvana III, within the Neutral Zone. A treaty was ratified there, allowing a limited number of duly registered Romulan vessels to follow without stopping a closely guarded flight corridor at a maximum speed of warp 5, from their territory straight to the Azimuth Horizon portal. The treaty allows those authorized ships to do so but for scientific, commercial or colonization purposes only, do not launch probes or shuttles, arm weapons, activate cloaking device, transporters or long range scanners and answer all hails while flying within this narrow flight path. A Starfleet escort might be provided upon request from one or the other party. There are a few specifics like in case of emergency situations... but all in all, Sir, it means that they are... legally justified to be here."

From the moment the screen had been on, S'Tan Solius had kept his back to the monitor. He could feel the legendary Tomalak's gaze pass over him, making notice of the AWOL Romulan defector... or maybe just believing him to be a Vulcan officer. He took notes silently on what Tomalak was saying, determined to assault Starfleet with requests for upgrades to the tachyon net and monitoring sensors.

Yes, by legal right, the Romulan warbirds were authorized to be there, but that doesn't mean they wanted peace. His mind was already recalling tactics and strategies that had been used by Romulan commanders of yore, and he awaited the closure of the comm channel to express his worries.

"They just sent their own authorization code to the monitoring station," added Lyrya once Blackbird finished. "The station acknowledged it and is powering back to monitoring status."

On the Phoenix, Yeoman Jessica Albera had nodded confirmation to her Vulcan captain of what they had just heard over the ship to ship comm channel.

"And what's in it for us?" growled Lieutenant M'ata.

"Peace, Lieutenant," answered Jonathan Livingstone. "At least a chance for peace; a first step into releasing the political tension of the last years with the Romulan Star Empire, even a possibility of mutual cooperation and benefit through science, commerce and prosperity... something we all need, but that the shattered Empire can not afford to miss, especially being also in open conflict with the neighboring Klingon Empire. A peace between the Romulans and the Federation would also be a further step into ending our conflict with the Klingons; they would not be able to withstand a prolonged war with both our forces at the same time... and even they would see the profit in easy access to the resources of another universe."

"Peace with Klingons... most unlikely, especially when the Romulans are involved," shot back the feline woman from the tactical station, her claws bared on her controls. "They crave conflict for the sake of it... and they never forgive nor forget any real or perceived affront. They will never forgive nor forget the uncalled for Romulan massacre of their outpost on Narrendra III."

"Yet, didn't they drink bloodwine with Starfleet and the Imperial Navy on Cardassia when the Dominion War was over?" retorted the X'El.

"Did it last?"

"Peace is like a flower; yes it can wither and die... that's why it must always be worked for, nurtured and cared for. Hence this treaty."

That silenced M'riin. But her claws did not sheath themselves as her slitted eyes stayed on the smug Romulan faces on the screen.

Syntron gradually leaned back in the center seat of the nearby starship USS Phoenix as he pondered for a moment the circumstances that had just unfolded before them involving the Romulans and their beguiling overture of peaceful colonization within the universe beyond this nearby wormhole.

Reopening the secure channel to the Horizon the Vulcan spoke softly once again.

"It would appear Captain Kheren... that the game is afoot." Syntron then inquired almost rhetorically; "How are your tactics in chess these days?"

"Let us see first what game they want to play," answered the Andorian. "But if they are also on a colonization mission, then chess is not really the game here; Ever heard of Go?"

Kheren made a gesture under the frame of the screen so that Lyrya reopened the ship to ship link.

"Admiral, Commander... we are pleased that you are also here to foster peaceful prosperity for your people just as we are intent upon for ours. may I suggest that we combine our talents and ressources into that common goal?"

As much as Toreth's face crunched into the very image of suspicion, Tomalak's features stretched in amazement that he nevertheless quickly hid behind a condescending smile and tone of voice.

"This is... quite... an interesting offer, Captain; but as much as such a joint endeavor might fo to ease relations between our peoples, I'm afraid that we, as officers of the Empire, don't have as much freedom as you, Starfleet officers, in suggesting or accepting such a generous offer. I would have to contact my government and get approval from the Empress and the Senate; but, alas, the conditions of the treaty do not allow us long range communication while within your borders. Unless of course you, Captain, as a duly appointed Federation representative with diplomatic powers, would allow us to do so..."

"Even as the senior commanding officer of this mission, I would have to discuss this with Captain Syntron and his senior staff to ratify such a decision properly. In the meantime, Admiral, Commander, let us follow our current orders and make sure that, if not actually helping one another, ensure that we do not impede one another in our peaceful efforts."

Tomalak nodded with a glint of clear understanding in his eye. He obviously understood that Kheren was stalling for time, not quite committing himself yet and placing the Romulans into having to make the next move and commit themselves... And at the same time, he was giving a warning; we *know* you watch us... as we *will* be watching you.

"Seems we will be travelling companions for at least a short while then, Captains. *Jolan Tru*."

Oseno observed the discussion silently from his station until the channel to Tomalak's vessels was closed. He had had the admiral as a "guest" aboard the Alsea during Operation Horizon where the legendary, or some would say notorious, Romulan commander had attempted to defuse the situation even going so far as to kidnap his own Empress.

"Captains, if I may" Oseno said, "As I'm sure you both know Admiral Tomalak was a... guest... aboard the Alsea during Operation Horizon. He tried to defuse the situation with the Romulan fleet. I'm sure he has his own orders, and I'll admit this is one scenario that my staff hadn't considered, but I don't think he's here to start a war. It's more likely he's here to observe and report what we are doing...Sela is paranoid, and aggressive, but she isn't stupid."

"Agreed," the Andorian said; "they *are* in need of ressources and territory since the Hobus catastrophe shattered their civilization. At least their... explanations are plausible. Let us hope that they are true."

"Well, there are over a thousand more *Rihansuu* lifesigns aboard each of these vessels than their known usual crew complement," reported Lyrya from her bioscanners auditory report into her comm relay, adapted to fit one antenna since she had, like all Andorians, no "ears" to plant it in like humanoid species usually have on the side of their head. "No way however to say if these are actual civilian colonists or combat troops."

Redding had remained impassive during the entire time.

"You say that as if there was a difference. The entire Romulan civilization is militarized. IF they are here for legitimate colonization, and I do think that is their point, Romulans will start this process by setting up fortifications and laying claim to every good patch of dirt they can find. Only after they have gained an advantage in a region will they then bring in civilians."

"Unless they know something we don't, they're here for the same thing as we are."

"And they do have full cargo holds," added Valencia Irksos, the black-skinned woman from Science Station 2, where she had come to free Ke'Leysha for sensor sweeps of the larger area. "Their hull and crate materials however do not allow us to identify that cargo; could be terraforming materials... or military equipment. No way to tell unless we perform an actual inspection."

"Yeoman; do the treaty allow us to do so?"

"Yes, captain, but only under certain conditions, like refusal to answer hails, failing to show proper authorization, trying to avoid monitoring or escort, deviating from the flight plan... And it certainly would not put them in as good a mood as they are now."

From tactical, Aron'Son had made his own assessment of the Romulans.

"We should not trust them. Their duplicity is well known-despite the commander's experience, though they are no match for our combined force even if they have made technological improvements to that ancient design."

"The D'Deridex is the workhorse of Romulan starship designs," piped in the shrill voice of Ops Chief Cheonghi, "much like our own one two century old Excelsior class is; sturdy, efficient, easily upgradable... and deceptively familiar. If they came to tackle the Azimuth Horizon and an unknown universe with these, most certainly they are state of the art inside that classic shell."

"An intentional choice to be sure, given their stereotyped predisposition you underlined, Lieutenant Aron'Son," acknowledged Kheren. Then he signaled Lyrya to link him visually with the Phoenix who was still on the secured channel. "Your thoughts on this, Phoenix?"

Syntron considered the inquiry from his Andorian counterpart on the Horizon for a few moments before responding.

"Under the current circumstances, I am apt to reduce our ship status to yellow alert, as a gesture of good will. Our ship's defense fields will remain energized, and our shields will continue at full power, but our weapons systems will then go off-line. They will undoubtedly detect our reduction of force almost immediately. How they respond to this may be an indicator of any ulterior motives they may be harboring, while also demonstrating our own peaceful intentions."

The Romulan on the bridge of the Horizon stood, facing the rest of the bridge officers.

"Captain, this is a trap."

He eyed the Governor, choosing his next words carefully.

"The chance that the Romulan Empire would send colonists at the same exact time as the Federation is minuscule. I would recommend remaining at red alert and full combat readiness as well as keeping our distance at all times and give them no chance to interact, no matter the circumstance. I would not be surprised if one of the vessels experiences a catastrophic engine or life support malfunction."

He understood that his tone was grim, but he was speaking from experience. With the cultists on board, their security was already at maximum. But what was to prevent infiltrators from overrunning the unprepared Romulans and commandeering their ships? Romulans were untrusting to outsiders...but non-military civilians?? They would never expect the dagger to their back.

"If there is one thing Romulans are good at, it is at the cloak and dagger game," Kheren agreed. "I am sure their informants told them about the governor's project and they saw their opportunity in... joining us. For one thing, they do not know how to navigate the anomaly nor have the best equipment to do it, like the special sensor system devised by Captain Syntron."

As if to prove the point, Aguk Snow reported on the movement of the Romulan battleships they then observed on the main viewer.

"They are taking a delta formation, twenty thousand kilometers directly aft and matching our current speed and heading, Sir."

"Using us as a guiding manned probe like we did with a shuttle back then," understood the Andorian, recalling the first time his old Ambassador class starship had navigated through the Azimuth Horizon. "And staying well within transporter range in case of unforeseen trouble."

"Or to better stab us in the back..." shuddered Cheonghi.

"Captain Syntron; we will follow your lead. Our larger bulk will cover you while you guide us through the portal."

Tha Andorian sat back in his command chair.

"Stand down to yellow alert. Mister Snow, match course and speed with the Phoenix, distance thirty thousand kilometers. That will keep us in transporter range with her but keep her well outside of immediate access for the Romulans. Mister Solius, your inside knowledge of them will be invaluable with our new travelling companions; please assist our tactical department in evaluating their moves and intent. Mister Cheonghi, allocate reserve energy to reinforce aft shielding and minimal personnel in those sections. Mister Aron'Son, keep our phasers on standby and our one torpedo in the tube as per standard yellow alert protocols... but I want that torpedo transferred aft. And make sure they can detect our target lock on their sensor array. Start boarding action drills for security. Lieutenant Lyrja, contact Starbase Lotus and get official confirmation of their expedition. Commander Ke'Leysha, we need neurogenic protection in case those possible combat troops are Reman and include psionic assaultLieutenant"

Kheren finally turned toward his Strategic Ops Officer.

"Commander Oseno; I believe we should show some consideration to our... guests and provide them with a rearguard escort."

Oseno rose from his station.

"Aye Sir; I will report to the Polaris and we'll deploy immediately."

The Bajoran used a site to site transport authorization and vanished from the bridge of the Horizon materializing on the bridge of the flagship's integrated escort. Lieutenant Ji'lan, the half-Orion science specialist was startled by the sound of a transporter and turned from the science console to face her commander.

"Sir, I-I take it we are deploying sooner than expected?"

"That's right, Lieutenant," Jureth replied as he approached the command chair and entered instructions for the computer to recall all crew members for immediate departure.

It took about half a standard hour for the Polaris crew to report back to the ship; but soon enough, the escort vessel was staffed and Jureth was issuing departure orders.

"Mister Hunter, clear our moorings and take us out."

"Aye Captain, docking umbilicals disconnected, engaging maneuvering thrusters, docking bay opening."

The Polaris maneuvered under Shawn Hunter's guiding touch back and away from the Horizon.

"We're clear of Horizon, Sir; deploying nacelles."

"Good work Mister Hunter. Maneuver us in behind the Romulan formation. And, Mister Kalaar, take us to Yellow Alert."

"Aye, Sir," the imposing Capellan responded. "Then what?"

"We shadow them and follow the proper protocol escorting a friendly vessel."

Beside Jureth, T'Lana looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Sir, I do not believe that one could describe the Romulans as friendly."

"Neither do I," Jureth replied with a smile, "but until they do something aggressive, we'll treat them like they are."

"Fascinating..." was the Vulcan's only reply.

As the six ship formation flew towards the location of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, Chief engineer David Rogers sat at the main engineering console at the aft of the Phoenix bridge, listening to the Romulan exchange with Captain Kheren and Captain Syntron. Many points of interest seemed to be covered, except one. David chimed in as the Phoenix reduced its status to yellow alert followed by the Horizon.

"Captain, one thing bothers me. The D'Deridex uses a micro-singularity power system... and we know what a gravimetric device exposed to the anomaly will go offline and draw to it any mass within distance of attraction ... including the Horizon and Phoenix!"

"According to the data on the Azimuth Horizon, the commander is right," confirmed Livingstone. "There is no gravitation force within the anomaly because no mass exist there unless brought in from the outside. When any mass enters the vicinity of the anomaly, it acts therefore as if it was the sole source of gravity in the surrounding area immediate to it; and an infinite gravity well, even of microscopic size like what is powering Rihansuu vessels, will generate a field powerful enough to collapse all matter around it. Calculating from the currently registered power output of each D'Deridex battleship following us, each of their singularity cores will collapse all matter and energy upon it within a radius of several thousands of kilometers... starting with the carrying vessel itself... and then each other... and finally us at present distance."

"They just can't approach the portal," concluded Mrriin M'ata, not without obvious satisfaction in her growling voice at the idea of being freed of their presence.

"We have to inform them, Sir," recommended the X'Ell with alarm starting to creep in his voice. "We can certainly distance ourselves away from the effect... but, unless they jettison their power core, if they go in, they will all three be crushed like eggs."

"But... isn't their technology able to shield them?" wondered the Caitian woman at tactical. "After all, it is that very gravimetric energy they harness to power themselves."

"They tame it with electromagnetic energy produced by their impulse engines, which is ten to the thirty-ninth power stronger... and has either positive or negative polarity. Within the anomaly, electromagnetic energy is alone and free-flowing, with nothing to channel it, polarize or depolarize it... except what may enter it... like starships. If the energy output of their ship happens to be opposite of their surrounding within the anomaly, they will draw so much directly at them that it will almost instantly overload and fry out their systems... and their core will collapse out of control... which will happen also if, in the other eventuality of them being of the same polarity, their impulse reactors are sucked dry of all energy."

"And us?" suddenly realized Mrriin.

"Matter and antimatter are drained if exposed to this atomic-void environment; they do not generate significant gravimetric force to cause the same catastrophe unless the magnetic containment field is exposed and collapse too rapidly; else total loss of power will result unless shut down and isolated. As for our impulse engines, they are of the new Sangliar design especially adapted for the anomaly's peculiar environment... which is not the case of our travelling companions."

The large golden eyes of the avain officer looked straight at his commanding officer.

"If they go in... they will die."

As the secured channel had been kept open between the two Starfleet vessels, everyone on the bridge of the flagship was on the exchange between the bridge officers of the Phoenix. All the while, Redding's face remained passive, slightly uncharacteristic for him.

"That's right, Lieutenant; and they will go in, despite any warning we give them. They will think we're trying to trick them and so won't accept any evidence we present at face value, and they can't afford to let us go ahead of them."

He looked over at his captain.

"So unless your willing to give them the time they will demand, Sir, perhaps a day or two, they will be going in."

Governor Sufra chose that moment to speak with a final tone heavy with all the authority she carried.

"Gentlemen, Romulans are not my responsibility... or yours. I don't care if they like it or not and foolishly risk themselves if they are too ignorant, impatient or suspicious. There will be *no* delay for us."

Redding let out a thoughtful sigh.

"Best bet is to limit their losses, see if they will try it with a single ship, or they might have a warp shuttle available..."

Kheren sighed beside him.

"As eager as they are to live and die for their duty, Number One, I do not think that they would readily sacrifice a pilot just on our good word... or risk having us get our hands on one of their shuttles and its technology. But they certainly will not let us go out there and just wave us *bon voyage*."

"I can assure you, Captain, and I'm certain Solius can back me up on it, they would gladly send one of their own into certain death before not trying and admitting defeat to the senate back home."

Redding had a look of a memory passing him by.

"I've seen it happen more than a few times."

He had spent more than three years fighting the Romulans as a member of the Klingon Empire in a series of border skirmishes. And even if in reality more than a hundred years had passed, for Redding, that was only about 4 years ago. As a result of his 'resetting existence,' it was likely he would never lose his prejudice towards Romulans... or forgive them for the death of his wife.

In many ways Neil would always be a prisoner of his own past.

Processing the information from the center seat of the Phoenix as it was flowing back and forth among officers on both ships, Syntron turned to face his chief engineer and then his avian science officer.

"Gentlemen, you will need to promptly create an interactive computer simulation demonstrating each of these possibilities that these Romulan ships face upon entering this portal. While they might doubt our words or intentions in verbally conveying our concern, perhaps viewing these scenarios in this format along with pertinent data gathered from the anomaly itself would provide more of a convincing influence on how they ultimately proceed than our warnings alone."

Livingstone shook his head.

"Normally an appropriate course, Captain; unfortunately, any acceptable scientific simulation would only be ready by the time we enter the area... and take at least as much time for them to analyse it to their satisfaction... and who knows how long to accept it's conclusions or test any alternative hypothesis before being forced to admit that they must turn back. Would they accept such a suggestion of delay from us in the first place?"

"Lieutenant... Livingstone, is it?" said Kheren then after glancing and nodding at his first officer. "Do you have that data readily available for transmission, as your captain ordered?"

"Affirmative... Captain Kheren Sir, " came over the nervous response of the X'Ell. "I... I was not refusing the order, Sir; I was just pointing out the difficulty in relation to available time..."

"At ease, Lieutenant; have that data transmission ready."

"If it will help, I'll volunteer to co-pilot the shuttle.. Captains..?" Moore added in cheerfully. He seemed unsure which of the two captains he should be addressing. "It sounds like a blast."

A vision of himself daftly flying a sleek green shuttle out of an explosion brought a slight smile to his face.

"You know, to show our... uh... sincerity... or something like that?"

David Rogers busied himself with the engineering computer, withdrawing several unclassified files concerning Romulan singularity drive system schematics and cross referencing them into Lieutenant Livingstone's console.

He also divided his attention onto the nature of the singularity drive system; particularly, the inertial dampening field used to shield the micro black hole from the ship proper.

He kept a running conversation up to assist the rest in his process.

"The Romulan singularity drive is essentially shielded within their ship by this dampening field, much like our own technology. It essentially makes the ship behave as if there is no singularity there at all. It is how they can turn and maneuver so fast, if at all, with these large ships. The entire mass of the singularity is removed from their effective tonnage."

Wrapping up his contribution to the science officers console, Rogers summed up his tirade with a jibe that, although a certain answer to the present Romulan problem toward entering the anomaly, was certainly out of the question in application.

"If we could get them to shut down their singularities, we could tow them across!"

"That would be an option... if it was at all possible to... shut down... a singularity," objected Livingstone. "Creating one is certainly possible; collapse a star over one point five the mass of the Terran sun, for example with trillithium as was done on Veridian III, and the process naturally occurs. However, unless maybe you have the powers of something like the Q entity over cosmic forces, once an infinite gravity well is created, it will pretty much exist until the end of the present universe. Destroyed Romulan ships do leave a permanent gravimetric disturbance where they fell. If I recall Operation Horizon's reports, that is how Captain Kheren and Captain Syntron once managed to slingshot the separated saucer section of the USS Artemis into warp, using the leftover singularity of the destroyed Romulan Scimitar dreadnought Shavok."

Kheren didn't say a word but he nodded, his antennae perking up as he listened to the Phoenix officers.

Then he turned his silver eyes to his own engineering master.

"Mister Solius; Romulans do not use matter-antimatter reaction for faster than light propulsion but microsingularities. I suppose, given their level of technology matching ours, that they have warp-capable probes as we do?"

The engineer nodded.

"Of course. They are used infrequently due to the lack of desire for scientific exploration. I cannot be sure of what armament these three vessels are loaded with, but I would assume since they were tasked with going through the threshold they'd have at least one... Captain, permission to speak freely?"

The request was rather bold and unusual while on the bridge and among other officers, let alone those of not one but two ships. Nevertheless, if the Romulan asked for it in the present situation, it was certainly for a good reason. The Andorian captain acknowledged with a nod.

S'Tan took a deep breath before continuing. He was about to suggest something unthinkable... at least for him personally.

"I... have to agree with Commander Redding and with... the Governor. I know their points of view, and I know they will take the 'holier-than-thou' Starfleet officers commanding that they weren't 'smart' enough to complete their missions. I suggest that we try to succinctly explain why they cannot come with us, but leave them to their own devices. We cannot afford to risk all of our own non-military personnel's lives to assist stubborn science. Romulans are not to be underestimated... or trifled with."

From tactical Aron'Son nodded in solemn agreement.

"The Dominion made that mistake once, believing the Romulan government would never side with the Federation...they were wrong."

"We certainly will not," acknowledged the Andorian captain to both his officers in turn; "Mister Snow; distance from the anomaly's outer perimeter?"

"Five point three billion kilometers, Captain; at present full impulse speed, we'll cross the outer boundary in about twenty and a half hours."

"ETA at warp 2?"

"About... thirty-seven minutes."

Kheren nodded as if expecting the answers he had been given. Then he glanced at his first officer as if to acknowledge him and what he had said earlier before raising his eyes as if talking to himself.

"Phoenix; your probes are of the latest design and use the new Sangliar engines if I recall. Could you launch a sublight probe to the edge of the anomaly right now... and then a warp capable one after that to penetrate within it?"

Over the speaker, the science chief of Syntron's ship was the one to answer.

"Lieutenant Livingstone here again, Sir; any class 1 to 4 probe would reach the perimeter in nineteen point six hours and a class 5 probe or better could be launched at nineteen point twenty-three hours later so as to overtake it and enter the area at the same moment. But the warp engine of the second probe would shut down quickly once inside the anomaly's effect..."

"I am fully aware of that, Lieutenant. In fact, I am counting on it."

There was a short moment of silence as people over the other vessel were pondering the strange request before Livingstone spoke again.

"May I ask, Sir, the purpose of these launches? We already have extensive astrometric data about the anomaly..."

"We do, Lieutenant. And would you make it so that the sublight probe be linked as a full relay transmitter for the other one?"

"A class 2 probe has full imagery capabilities; and a class 5 would provide all appropriate astrometric data."

"Captain Syntron; I would appreciate for you to see to it...and no need to be discreet about it."

On the bridge of the Phoenix, both the X'Ell at science and the Caitian at tactical turned to face their Vulcan commanding officer for authorization.

"There will be no inconspicuous undertaking occurring here Captain Kheren," Syntron noted to his counterpart on the Horizon.

Without hesitation and the channel still open to the flagship, Syntron immediately gave a subtle nod as he stoically voiced his command to the officers on the bridge of the Phoenix.

"Launch probes when each are in place and ready to be discharged."

The Vulcan's keen eyes then shifted to the main viewscreen as he awaited the sight of the different rates of acceleration for each probe being sent for their specifically designed task. There would be an enormous amount of possibilities riding on the success of these probes, let alone the potential outcomes based on interpretation of this information by all of those who choose utilize the incoming data. This will be direct information and should nullify any concerns of falsified or manipulated data. It was indeed a calculated risk, but one worth taking to try to secure a peaceful resolution to the dilemma that they were all facing with the three Romulan ships approaching the anomaly portal.

The Romulan on the Horizon shook his head.

"Sir, they still will not accept this. Tomalak is duty bound to push his ships into the anomaly. Sela will punish him for using the singularity cores as an excuse."

"At least what I heard of the Khazara's commanding officer would agree with your assessment, Lieutenant," Kheren retorted calmly.

"It's not Tomalak I am worried about, Captain. No... Commander Toreth... she has the eyes of a snake and the heart of a black hole." The Romulan retorted. "She would be foolish to incite a mutiny against Tomalak... but that same comment has been made before by now-deceased commanders in the past. As long as we know Tomalak is in power, they will not try anything. But Toreth will not allow for too many delays or strange occurrences, like our probes..."

Kheren sat forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, all four eyes looking straight at the large viewer in front of him.

"Exactly what I am counting on, Chief."

The engineer looked at the Andorian with his mouth wide open.

"...Sir?"

Aboard the Polaris, the escort's sensors immediately detected the first probe launch and Lieutenant Ji'Lan reported them to Oseno.

"Sir, the Phoenix has just launched a probe toward the anomaly."

"Interesting..." Oseno said to no one in particular. "Mister Variel, get me a secured channel to the Horizon."

The intelligence specialist entered a few simple commands and then nodded at Oseno.

"Polaris to Horizon; Captain, the Romulans have made no sign of any overt aggression from our point of view and my science officer noted that the Phoenix has launched a probe toward the anomaly... Is anything wrong, Sir?"

"Keep your eyes open, Polaris. That's what I hope our friends will wonder too."

And on the lead Romulan vessel, the same report was forwarded to the two officers on the command dais.

"What are they doing?" exclaimed Toreth with her furrowed brow even lower than usual.

"They may know something that we don't," mused Tomalak with a raised eyebrow as he lowered himself closer to the viewer before them.

"Then some heads should roll in the intelligence network," retorted Toreth acidly. "They're up to something; treaty or not, they don't want us here and allow us into their little private pocket universe. Federation exploitation would not suffer us to..."

"Federation timidity more like it," cut the admiral. "I know the Andorian captain well enough; he proved himself almost *Rihansuu* in his resolve... But the probe was launched by the ship with the Vulcan captain; Vulcans are not like Andorians, even less like us. He must apprehend something and proceeds with typical exaggerated caution... or maybe just indulge in his kind's insufferable scientific curiosity."

"I'm not fond of speculation," the woman commander stated bluntly. "And with their destroyer right behind us, I'm sure they plan to trick us before we go through that space portal. Comm, raise the Starfleet ship."

"Belay that order," sternly said Tomalak. "Commander, have passive scanners watch them closely... but do not tell them that they have us on edge and wondering what's going on. If we do nothing, that will put *them* on edge and wondering... and force them into their next move while we make ourselves ready."

For almost a day, the convoy travelled leisurely towards a bright point of light that came up to the eye looking much like the famous Bajoran wormhole; a swirling mass of luminous gases funneling themselves into a small point of darkness. Here however, the cosmic passage stayed open and the revolving thin clouds of lights were gold and orange in color, streaked with white flashes as if the thing was like a caged beast testing the bars of its cages at irregular intervals. What also diverged from it was the huge ring of plasma fire and lightning that enclosed it. Finally, there were numerous small pinpoints of light like beacons encircling all, forming like a very loose and white net of tiny stars in the immensity of blackness that surrounded it.

Alpha shift was coming back on the bridge of the Horizon and Captain Kheren sat in his chair looking for a good moment in silence at the strange scene filling up the main viewer. He was quite familiar with it, despite its now altered form and appearance. He had been the starship commander who had discovered it a few years ago. He had gone through it as far as the pocket universe they were travelling to and back. He had gone into it more often and longer than any other captain, including his former first officer, Syntron. And with him, he had almost died in it while helping to tame it before it destroyed the whole universe. Yet, the fiery dance of energies still held his gaze in rapt fascination for a moment before he finally tore his mind from the swirl of memories and emotions and awe it inspired to address his officers.

"Report."

"All systems nominal, Captain," confirmed chief of ops Cheonghi as he resumed his post, all three hands already extracting reports from all over the ship on his board.

"We are at the launch point of the second probe, Sir," said Aguk Snow barely back at the helm.

"Romulans have not deviated from our own flight plan nor transmitted anything," then added Lieutenant S'Kon as he was relieved by chief Aron'Son. "But now they are scanning the anomaly... and our probe as well. I believe they are tapping into its return signal."

The Andorian nodded absently, obviously expecting what he was hearing.

"First probe is about to enter the outer ring of the anomaly," confirmed Valencia Irksos after receiving a confirming nod from her Illythirii chief of science busy with the data collection of the main sensors.

"All stop."

"Answering all stop," confirmed the Inuit helmsman. "Phoenix coming also at station keeping in position for the second launch."

All of this was almost exactly mirrored aboard the Romulan lead ship.

"What are they up to now?" wondered Toreth just as she had done nineteen hours ago.

Like the rest of the lead crew, she had tapped into her Vulcanoid physiology to stay up, awake and attentive beyond normal resting time so as not to miss anything those wily Starfleet people could have tried; this had done nothing to ease her mood, even less to mollify it.

Beside her, Admiral Tomalak said nothing, furrowing his brow as he watched the two Federation vessels come to a full stop several million kilometers from the awesome cosmic phenomenon displaying fires and lights of gold, orange and white before them all.

"Commander," then reported the subcommander at sensor station, "the federation science ship just launched another probe; it went into warp right on the trail of the first one... That sublight probe just stopped on the edge of the anomaly."

"We do receive the telemetry of that first probe..."

It was not so much a question from Tomalak addressed to the officer as a reminder of what his duty was.

"Yes, Admiral. The data we are receiving is like nothing we expected. It is..."

"If you dare say that it is fascinating, I will shoot you myself where you stand and send your still fuming corpse over to them, labelled as a Federation Vulcan spy," interrupted Toreth with impatience. "Launch an Iota Probe at that second Starfleet one and tag it to it."

As the launch of the Romulan probe barely registered as a far away hollow sound within the bow of the enormous cruiser, Tomalak raised an eyebrow towards her.

"We can just as easily tap into their second probe as we did the first one."

"And they can just as easily feed us a false signal, distort the data or funnel our attention away from anything they actually focus *their* attention on," retorted the stern woman. "I'm not going to let them play us without making a move to show them that we are aware of their tricks... and that we *will* find what it is."

And on the Starfleet vessels, that move had also been noticed.

"The lead Romulan ship launched an interstellar probe," announced Jonathan Livingstone to his commanding officer as the Vulcan was coming back to the bridge. "It trails our second one into the anomaly."

Aboard all ships, the flight of the two warp probes was followed with varied feelings. The Romulan one was about four times as fast as the Starfleet minimal warp capable one, obviously more comparable to the class 9 than the much shorter range and limited capability class 5 sent by the Federation explorer. Despite being launched after it, the Romulan one quickly overtook it so that they entered the anomaly together on a parallel course.

It took twenty seconds for the Starfleet probe to drop out of warp, her antimatter siphoned out by the anomaly. her improved impulse engine however allowed it to continue, albeit at a considerably slower speed.

But it didn't get far. Just as suddenly, the Romulan probe also fell out of warp as the fires of the anomaly suddenly surged brutally towards it, along with debris of stellar and planetary matter, all through suddenly expanding subspace fractures that converged on it like bolts of lightning then followed by those rivers of plasma fire flowing through them, dragging neutron-hard debris with them.

It was destroyed in an instant, the too close Starfleet probe along with it.

On the Phoenix, there were nods of acknowledgement between the officers who had predicted the outcome. On the Horizon, Captain Kheren sat back saying nothing.

On the Romulan vessels, it was all shock and astonishment.

"What... what happened out there?" stuttered Toreth

"Our probe... It acted like a singularity within the anomaly, drawing all matter and energy directly to its propulsion system," finally explained a white-faced centurion at sensor station.

"These probes have the same micro-singularity drive as our ships!" exclaimed the woman in the command chair, looking at the older officer sitting beside her. "We can not turn off our power source like these matter-antimatter vessels of theirs can; if we go in there, we will be destroyed!"

"Telemetry from the Starfleet probe at the edge of the zone are confirmed by our scanners, Commander... Admiral..." finished the centurion.

"They knew..." Tomalak then uttered between dry lips.

"Starfleet scum! They would have led us to our deaths!"

The old admiral looked at her with contempt in his hard-etched features.

"Don't act denser than you are, Toreth; if they had had such intentions, why would they send probes in, if they alone knew what was going to happen to us when we would have blindly followed them in?"

"Why didn't they tell us then?" shot back the woman obviously insulted.

This time, Tomalak smiled; but it was a dry, joyless smile.

"Would you have believed them? Would you have believed any data they would have sent us directly?"

It took a moment for the deep green of her cheeks to return to its usual color.

"No," she finally admitted.

"Give us a channel to the Federation ships."

Toreth nodded and signaled her comm officer to do as the Admiral suggested. Once communication was established, She just glowered at the split screen showing all three Starfleet bridges as Tomalak spoke with a forced air of congeniality.

"Starfleet vessels; it seems we have encountered... technical difficulties that are forcing us to postpone our exploration and colonization projects for the time being. Regretfully, we will have to withdraw and return to our home base to... assess those... difficulties."

The Engineer on the Horizon let out a silent sigh of relief as the words left the ship's audio speakers. He trusted few people in this universe, and none of them were Romulan. The sooner these uninvited guests were at warp speed away from the anomaly, the better.

Redding for his part had to admit to himself that he didn't see that maneuver coming, so subtle was it in its delivery. The Captain had played on the Romulans' paranoia as well as their pride to almost the degree of a master spy.

But why didn't *he* see it coming?

That's what bothered him the most now. At some point, he should have realized what Kheren was up to... but he didn't.

Was he so comfortable with the thought of them dying out there that he didn't even try? He would have to think on it more later.

For his part, Kheren was not showing any feeling at all about the situation. Even his antennae remained perfectly leveled and unmoving as he answered the call of the Romulan Admiral,

"Admiral, this missed opportunity for joint exploration and colonization is truly sadening. It would have done much to ease the relations between our two people. Hopefully we may find another chance later; after all, it is a whole universe waiting for all of us over there. I have no doubt your scientists and technicians will find a way to circumvent those... difficulties. At least the data you got from this unfortunate incident should prove useful in that regard."

Tomalak could not perceive any deceit, contempt or even mockery in the Andorian's voice or expression. And in truth, there were none; Kheren was genuinely convinced that this could have been an opportunity to benefit both their civilizations, a step further towards, if not actual peace and cooperation, at least a better, more durable truce. Hence why he had arranged for them to discover for themselves and avoid the deadly danger they had been so close of falling into. That the whole consequence could be a definite advantage for the Federation in asserting itself on the other side was not much of a concern to him, at least not as much as building bridges and trust with the Romulans... if they ever would be willing to...

Maybe... in time...

Kheren was not a blind idealist however; his statement was also a warning; it stated plainly that he knew about the tapping into the Starfleet probe, the convenient happenstance of their meeting in this area of space telling of spying activities, the current technological edge of Starfleet over the Imperial Navy... but most of all, that he knew how their minds worked... and that he wanted them to know that he knew.

And he made it quite clear.

"In the meantime, Admiral Tomalak, Commander Toreth... you will maintain your current position, in contact with the local monitoring stations, until Starfleet sends a suitable escort to guide you back to the border, as specified by our treaty. We would not want you to lose your treaty privileges over any unfortunate incident or misunderstanding that could compromise the good will we have so far showed one another today."

The nod and cold smile of Tomalak was more than just acknowledgement and salute; it conceded it all... for now.

Once the screen went off, Kheren looked at Redding.

"Make sure Starfleet is notified of the situation and sends that escort presently. "

He then lifted his head slightly to spoke into the bridge ship to ship comlink left open all this time.

"Polaris, this is Horizon; follow us through the portal and assume duties as planned for the exploration of the other side until we reach our objective."

"Aye Sir," Oseno responded from the Polaris bridge as he smiled at the captain's ability to read the Romulans like a book. The skillful Andorian had played on everything in the Romulan nature and allowed them to come to the inevitable conclusion on their own, it was a brilliant strategic maneuver.

"Mister Hunter, fall into line behind the Horizon, and take us through."

Kheren nodded to his strategic ops officer's reply and brought his head back up.

"Captain Syntron; thanks to you and your crew. We will now resume our journey."

As he finished, he lowered his gaze back to his first officer, silently giving him the go word for the Horizon to follow suite.

A collective sigh of relief was felt throughout the bridge of the Phoenix as these precarious events unfolded; even within the calm exterior of the Vulcan commanding officer.

"Acknowledged, Captain Kheren; we are prepared to proceed with the mission," Syntron responded.

He closed the channel and mentally noted the calm and almost Vulcan-like manner in which Kheren had skillfully interacted with the Romulans. This situation could have just as easily resulted in many fatalities and renewed confrontations. Instead, there may all have actually reaped some benefits from this close and almost deadly encounter.

Syntron addressed his temporarily assigned helm officer.

"Proceed, Mister Moore" he commanded as his eyes then shifted back toward the main viewscreen and the sight of the other federation vessels traveling with them.

One disaster averted... who knows what waits ahead? the Yeoman Jessica Albera thought as her attention was focused on the ships now as they skillfully moved toward the imminent portal crossing.

Espying the Andorian science officer working near the new X'ell science chief, Captain Syntron contacted his holographic medical chief from the center seat of the USS Phoenix.

"Doctor Gray, be advised that our entrance into this anomaly will have adverse affects on our Andorian crew."

As the EMH suddenly materialized on the bridge, he responded without missing a beat.

"I am cognizant of the anomaly's proclivity to wreak havoc with Andorian physiology Captain. My staff has a representative in proximity to each of our Andorian crew members. I will be here to assist Lieutenant Hunter, should the need arise."

With her missing antenna recently replaced by the EMH's nine months of careful ministrations, Kalynda was about to protest this exchange she easily picked up on by the tilted position of her brand new tandem antennae. However, she could see that both the captain and the holographic medical chief would not easily dismiss this precaution through mere objection. Kalynda silently sighed as she focused her attention back on the work with her avian CSO.

Taking this cue from Captain Syntron's orders to Moore, David nodded for Lieutenant Kennedy to take over the main station on the bridge and proceeded toward the nearest lift, addressing the Vulcan captain on his destination.

"Heading to main engineering, Captain. I'll oversee the shutdown of the core from there once we are at terminus with the perimeter of the anomaly".

Gazing for a moment back toward the turbolift at his chief engineer, Syntron calmly responded from the center seat.

"That would be an advisable course of action, Commander Rogers. See to it that we don't find ourselves thrust within another dire situation crossing through this problematic threshold."

On the Horizon, Rogers' counterpart was preparing his ship for the same thing. He had already locked down engineering and disengaging the security locks on the core.

"Captain, the Horizon is ready to disengage the warp core and begin cruising on the advanced impulse engines at your command."

"Mister Snow?"

"At full impulse, ETA with wormhole aperture is four point seven minutes, Captain."

Kheren looked back at his chief engineer as he sat deeper in his command chair.

"Disengage, chief."

The engineering chief nodded as he entered his command code to deactivate the matter/antimatter reaction in their warp core. His screen flashed red as he disabled the klaxon that was not necessary in this situation. The core started powering down, as he diverted the remaining power into critical operation systems.

"Core shutting down, Sir. We will hit minimum power at the aperture of the anomaly." He calmly responded.

Kheren nodded back before he turned his attention to his first officer.

"Stand ready to take over if I falter, Number One; we Andorians are quite sensitive to the anomaly's electromagnetic havoc."

The Captain's words snapped him out of his thoughtful malaise, and back into focus.

"Of course, Sir; I've seen it happen a few times before and have a good idea what to look for."

the silver eyes rose to meet the obsidian ones of Miramanee Blackbird standing right next to the seated man.

"And you do the same with Counselor Lyrya, Yeoman."

"Aye, Captain," the red-skinned woman answered, crossing the bridge to stand on the opposite side of the command well near the Aenar at the medical command chair.

Aron'Son took a moment to glance at the armed security officers on the bridge ensuring that none of them were Andorian and then glanced over at Lieutenant Tyvya wondering if additional medical or security personnel were needed in case all of the Andorians on the bridge became affected by the anomaly. Without asking for permission the Jem'Hadar entered commands in his console sending a message to the security office and ordering an additional three man detachment to the bridge knowing from his brief time aboard the Horizon that all of them would be trained medics and could additionally help restrain any of the Andorians if they reacted violently.

His commanding officer's antennae curved inward in satisfaction. He had deliberately omitted his other wife to test the young officer. His immediate, discreet, efficient and responsible decision was all that he needed to validate his confidence in him. Whatever lay ahead, the Jem'Hadar would be as ready as the best of them.

The Andorian once again looked at the main viewer and crossed his powerful arms on his thick chest.

"Alright people... we're going in."

* * *

"A *Genesis Device*?"

The tone in the captain's voice left no doubt as to all the emotions that assailed her uttering but those few words; astonishment, incredulity, fear and even anger. Seekal mustered as much Vulcan emotionlessness and Starfleet professionalism to keep those emotions from spreading to the rest of the listening away teams. After all, they were all right in the middle of it all.

"In essence, affirmative, Captain; but unlike our own previous attempt at fully terraforming a planetary body with a programmed matter and energy conversion device, this system does not use protomatter, the substance responsible for both the instability and the ethical problems Doctor Marcus' invention was known for. Moreover, this fully terraforming and biogenesis device is substantially more complex and considerably larger. As recorded by the Phoenix, this entire complex and the starship it sprouted from are all dedicated to this task."

His own Team 1 was occupying the vast record and control chamber that displayed all the subatomic, atomic and molecular data pertaining to every single element composing a viable world; from atmospheric gases to organic compounds, from the simplest and most common molecule in the universe, H₂, up to and including a myriad of DNA strands for a complete and balanced biosphere... including a small but definitely humanoid sentient species. Team 3 was continuing research on the matter and energy collecting structures erected on the surface of the planetoid while Team 2 was working with the first level of underground installations and their vast, powerful engineering and fabrication installations. As for Team 4, they had just reached the computer center of the whole alien complex and transmitting data and images from the integrated tricorders of their EVA suits. It is from compiling all their preliminary reports that Seekal had contacted Captain Ross with his own confirmation of the USS Phoenix' original survey.

Captain's Ross conclusion was simplistic and overtly dramatic... but it was, as Seekal had said, basically correct. There was a huge alien starship buried within this planetoid that had expanded itself into this immense underground complex for the sole purpose of making it the habitable world of an unknown sentient species.

A good moment of silence stretched before Ross spoke again.

"Report from the Phoenix state that their experimental system enhancing nanites had been... collected by this... facility and triggered an early activation phase..."

"Accurate, Captain; our readings so far confirm that the Phoenix crew successfully purged those nanites from the alien system and that it is now returned to its original low power and activity state prior to their coming in this area."

"Lucky for them," then grumbled the basso voice of chief of security Tritter on the comm. "Their coming and playing with this whole alien contraption is textbook example of a Prime Directive violation. Captain Syntroon should have been court-martialed along with all those oh-so fine Lotus Fleet elite officers they're all supposed to be."

There was no mistaking the bitterness in that voice, even from a Vulcan. But the first officer of the Asimov would not let it go unnoticed, especially with all the away teams listening as well as the bridge crew and most of the researchers left aboard the Nova class vessel in orbit above them.

"Mister Tritter; your concern over our General Orders and regulations is commendable... but in this case misplaced. It is an accidental contact with a rogue, unknown and as of yet undefined spatial anomaly endangering a civilian shuttlecraft in this area that forced the USS Phoenix to vent out excess plasma from her systems... and with it, inadvertently, a few of their experimental system-enhancing nanites. Unknown to them, the spires of this installation collected those unknowingly lost and free-floating nanites as part of their matter and energy collecting function, thus absorbing those microscopic cybernetic organisms into the systems of this facility; nanites built to enhance an artificial system. Because this had triggered an early and unintended activation of this installation, they were bound by the same Prime Directive to correct the contamination. This is why they... played with it, trying to find a way to do just that... and succeeding."

"As I said... lucky for them," still grumbled the blonde giant. "I read their CMO's formal protest of their whole away team operation. I'm not convinced that they knew about the contamination before they started opening chambers and pushing buttons down here as if they had been Napoleon's soldiers looting the Pyramids of Egypt..."

"Starfleet only looks at the fact, Lieutenant. And the facts are that this alien installation had been contaminated and they resolved the situation... and restored the entire installation to it's original dormant state as you yourself can currently observe."

"Well, yeah, if you say so, Sir... However, I'm not so sure about that."

There was a short moment of silence before the voice of Captain Ross was heard.

"Report, Lieutenant."

"Well... I'm not yet sure... but all our tricorders down here are registering some kind of weird power fluctuation."

"Be specific, Lieutenant," now admonished Seekal.

"Well... we have some short but intense electromagnetic spikes registering on our scanners... but we can't seem to be able to locate the source... and it registers on one or the other of our tricorders but never on all of them at the same time as it should if this... contraption around us was fully active or even starting up. It's like it's... moving... like... like some animal under the bushes."

"Colorful, Lieutenant but not very accurate if we are to determine the nature of your readings," the Vulcan admonished sternly. "Adjust your scanners to short range and wide dispersal pattern and confine their readings to electromagnetic energy. Link them to my own and to the ship's computer for analysis."

"Aye, Commander."

As the way teams continued their exploration, Seekal adjusted his comm channel to the specific frequency of the Asimov's bridge so that only the captain and his bridge officers would hear.

"Captain, if I may; Lieutenant Tritter has a point; what the Phoenix did would have been a violation of General Order 1 has it not been for the hapenstance of their accidental contamination. So, respectfully, Captain, I have to ask the following question: since we do not have such an accident as a need or an excuse, are we not committing this very violation ourselves?"

The growl in Ross' voice was unmistakable in her suddenly harsh, clipped tone.

"We are here by *order* of the *Federation Science Council*, Commander Seekal, not just bumping around looking for what's out there! *And* we are *ordered* to ascertain that this... Sarabande thing does not pose any present or foreseeable danger to this sector of space! *And* we are *not* going to touch *anything* beyond what is *needed* for establishing this with certainty! *And* we are here to observe and record *only*, to gather data without tampering with it for future deeper analysis and *report* our findings for the Federation Science Council for it to determine what should be done later with it! Does *that* answer your question, Mister?"

In typical Vulcan stoicism, Seekal nodded as if he was right in front of her and not inside the planetoid. Yet, his left eyebrow still arched high over his widened eye.

"Affirmative, Captain. I was just wondering if our mere presence in this place could not also be considered a violation. After all, this whole installation does not belong to us. Simply taking records and samples or just being on the premises might be interpreted as interference by whoever built this facility."

"Well, do you see them around?" retorted Ross.

"With all due respect, Captain, that is quite irrelevant. We might see this as but a mere technical facility or even an ancient, forgotten ruin... but to those who made it, this might also be hallowed ground, a sacred place our mere presence is profanating... or even contaminating in ways we can not yet determine... except on a moral standpoint."

"Didn't your first readings show this place to be very ancient? If they're not around anymore, how could they be... offended? What harm could be done?"

"Affirmative, Captain; but the morality, or possible lack thereof, of our actions, is not lessened by age or absence."

"I'm a starship captain, Seekal, not a philosopher; I'll let our big brains back home ponder the problem, if problem there is. I'm only interested in the practical and in completing our mission, which is to learn as much as possible from this thing... without tampering directly with it."

"Then on a practical standpoint, you should consider the possibility that our very presence alone might be interfering with the intended process of this facility," insisted the Vulcan.

"I'm not interested in mere hypothesis nor in philosophical debate or rule lawyering, Commander. We are scientists. Record a formal protest like that Doctor on the Phoenix did if you must to clear your record and your conscience. Gather data, follow your hypothesis on this if you will... and if, *if* you find it sufficiently supported by the facts to the point of theorizing such interference as statistically plausible, we will *then* consider withdrawing. But until then, *continue* your research until a reasonable determination can be made as to the origin, purpose and especially it's safety for us. Do I make myself clear?"

"Affirmative, Captain."

"Good. And have Tritter keep watch for those peculiar energy spikes of his."

"Acknowledged."

CHAPTER 5 : THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

Captain's log

Stardate: 88299.2

We are about to cross the boundary between our universe and the pocket universe that lies beyond the Azimuth Horizon wormhole. The Romulan task group left us several minutes ago, under escort by the USS Pittsburgh, the USS Wisconsin and the USS Spectre. Captain Summers of the Spectre assured us that our Imperial friends would be politely but firmly showed the way home.

Since the anomaly was reconfigured with Operation Horizon into a cosmic fueling generator to stabilize the wormhole within it, crossing the area should be much easier and safer than it originally was when it ran like wildfire accross the cosmos. However, no starship yet has been authorized to attempt the crossing and data from previous probe launches were difficult to decipher due to the chaotic nature of the phenomenon.

We are going in. Into what, we will soon find out.

"Steady as she goes, Mister Snow."

"Aye, Captain."

On the wide screen before them, the sparkling distant stars started to blur and waver as if they were plunging into some still pond, creating ripples in the water that moved away in concentric waves. Then, those ripples started to glow a soft, diffuse orange color that suddenly blazed into fiery gold that swirled around them like a whirlpool of molten metal. Violent crackling of blinding white streaks of lightning crisscrossed everything around them as they plunged into that tunneling inferno, right toward some intense point of white light.

Kheren for one had never been into the Bajoran wormhole; but from the records he had seen of it, it looked much like it, save for the colors and whitish center. He however had been with his original USS Artemis crew within the Azimuth Horizon anomaly more than anyone else; he instantly recognized the golden-orange maelstrom of fire and lightning now engulfing them, even recognizing the distant specks of darkness floating within the waves of plasma; huge masses of neutronium, capable of crushing even his titanic starship like an egg if they came too close.

That, and the slight feeling of nausea that made his skin turn a shade paler and his antennae to reflexively shrink halfway into his throbbing skull.

"You feel alright, Captain?"

The Andorian heard his Human yeoman as if through a helmet and, when he looked at her, she was almost deprived of any color; the consequence of his antennae retracting, a peculiar feature of his mutation that now proved more annoying than debilitating. Yet, he was glad that Redding was right there to take over if it became any worse.

He could see that Lyrya and Tyvya were also frowning, paler than usual and their own antennae flattening in discomfort each side of their thick white hair. But even as Andorians, they were holding up better than he was, although the blind eyes of the Aenar were whiter than usual; probably due to her neurogenic sensitivity overwhelmed by the electromagnetic havoc of their surroundings.

Glancing around to the main science station, he could see that Ke'Leysha was also greyer of skin and frowning as if feeling a slight headache. She was as powerful a telepath as his wife Lyrya; she was also feeling the effect of the anomaly's nearness. It would be like this for every psionic endowed crewmember aboard like Vulcans and Betazoids, more or less annoying depending on their individual sensitivity. The Horizon had one of the largest contingents of Andorians in Starfleet and as diverse a crew as the famous USS Titan of Captain William T. Riker; still, a large part of it was Human as was usual since the creation of Starfleet; as for the other species present, they would not be affected any more than Terrans would be.

"I can manage, Yeoman, thank you," he answered after a moment. "It had been much much worse than that the last time."

The last time, he had flown the saucer section of the Artemis right into the firestorm now surrounding them... and almost burned with it. Despite the discomfort, this now felt like a quiet cruise to him in comparison.

"How fare our ships and crews?" he then asked with an informal tone.

The engineer spun around in his seat, letting himself make a few rotations before speaking.

"Engineering has completed the Matter/Antimatter shutdown. Had a few plasma burns on some ensigns who had not read the system shutdown instructions I had sent them. I've made sure to log disciplinary actions into their files. We cannot afford to lose even one officer to foolishness. Besides that, impulse is functioning at what I believe to be a hundred and two percent efficiency. Mister Baoule is monitoring their outputs from Engineering itself and I have Lieutenant Blakely working the repair teams. Our ship does not seem to fully approve of our location... I hope the planets are more hospitable," he finished, glancing over at the governor.

That's when he realized the Bajoran woman had left the bridge, probably before they entered the wormhole. So did Kheren.

"Lieutenant Lyrya, where is the Governor? I thought the sight of the Azimuth Horizon would have been for her... well... inspiring?"

"An hour ago, she requested the use of the observation deck for her and her people. She asked for the presence of the Prophet... I mean, Commander Sisko."

Kheren turned to his Ops officer.

"They're all down there?"

"Yes, Captain," confirmed the Edoan. "Fortunately, our observation deck is just large enough for almost the three thousands of them; a hundred of their... most faithfuls... are packed above them with Governor Sufra in the Lighthouse, our main lounge."

"Well... at least we know where they are and what they are doing," grumbled the Andorian.

There was a short moment of silence.

"What *are* they doing exactly?"

"Praying, Sir," answered the Aenar at his left.

"Sisko is with them?"

"Negative, Sir. Neither in person nor in holographic form."

Kheren just looked blankly at the swirling inferno around the bright light they were flying into, again silent and pensive.

Aron'Son reacted to the news that the cultists were all in one place not with alarm as a human might, but with a tone of voice that might have sounded like measured irritation.

"Captain, request permission to move additional personnel including the MACO unit to the observation deck...I do not trust them."

As Jem'Hadar did not get nervous, Aron'Son's request was both strategic and at the same time cautious as he realized that having so many beings whose organization had a known history of dangerously unpredictable action in one place was not a good thing.

Kheren was tempted for a moment to simply agree. Of all people, he certainly had all the best reasons to not trust them either. Even beyond his natural and cultural Andorian bias towards pragmatism, religious thinking was so foreign to him that he had a hard time understanding such people, even less predict their behavior... unless he considered them as violent, passionate Andorians in the grip of one of their legendary emotional conflagration; and that made him definitely uncomfortable.

But then, one look at his chief science officer brought him back to their heated argument before they had started this journey. Everyone else in the galaxy was *not* Andorian... and everyone else was not the same as everyone else, even when sharing ideas and values. That was the very essence of the United Federation of Planets. The son did not share in the crimes of his father.

"Move security as you see best to ensure everyone's safety, Lieutenant, especially their safety; that is our duty after all. But keep the MACO in reserve. If they planned anything, it would come from another angle than such an obvious lure, all of them being in one non-vital location where they can be so easily dealt with. And, until proven otherwise, they are unarmed citizens we are helping achieve their dream of a peaceful life on their own world. So, smile... just do not blink."

"Aye Sir" Aron'Son replied before tapping his combadge

"Aron'Son to Celes"

"Send it, Sir."

"Lieutenant, what is Commander Sisko's status?"

"It's funny you should ask Sir, he hasn't moved, but the colonists are gone."

"Yes, I know they are praying in observation."

"Ah, well..the Commander is still here at any rate."

"What about the team I sent to reinforce you?"

"They followed the colonists, Sir."

"Good, maintain your position, Aron'Son out." He then tapped the badge a second time
"Aron'Son to Ensign Kyle."

"Kyle here."

"Take two full teams to observation. We need to reinforce the team down there immediately, all of the colonists are there, we need to ensure nothing happens to them or by their hand."

"Understood Sir, Kyle out."

Aron'Son nodded in approval, he was pleased with the reactions of his subordinates, they were well trained.

The Jem'Hadar turned at the sound of the turbolift doors opening revealing the extra security team he had requested. He acknowledged the ensign leading them and issued his orders.

"Monitor the Andorians on the bridge. If they become violent, you will assist in restraining them, understood?"

"Aye, Sir," the young Human responded with a blinking stare.

With Andorians being twice as strong as Humans, females included, he was glad for his phaser at his belt and checked the stun setting. Light stun would be sufficient to calm them down without risking the all too often deadly phase infection they were so susceptible to.

Aron'Son turned back to his terminal and then stared at the anomaly looming larger on the viewer.

S'Tan stretched his back as he overheard all the conversations that were ongoing on the bridge. Most of them were unimportant to him at this point and time. In his tactical estimation, the cultists wouldn't try anything until they had found a stable planet to colonize. That was still hours...days...away. But they could still pose a risk to his people, whom were still scattered around the ship monitoring the Anom-pulse engines, as he started calling them. With the ship being on minimal power he had diverted the sensors to track the cultists, not the electrical systems of the ship.

"I'll divert some auxiliary power to force fields on that deck, as needed, Aron'Son. Create a corridor for the cultists to move to-and-from without being allowed to sneak away."

Kheren didn't openly react but if his rigid face had allowed a smile, one would have stretched his lips at that moment. His bridge officers were alert and innovative, taking proper initiatives within and between their departments to ensure the proper workings of the ship, the safety of all and the success of the mission. Be they new or old to the crew, they all acted efficiently and together facing whatever may come as if they had been crewmates for years already.

That is Starfleet for you, Captain Sir, he thought, not without pride in the people he was with.

For a moment, this brought him back to his first command, his first mission in the center seat of the late, great USS Artemis. The feeling he had felt then, of being at the right place at the right time with the right people doing the right thing, rushed back to him and threw his antennae straight up and forward.

With renewed hope and excitement, he stared at the unknown stars calling to them.

Aboard the Polaris, Commander Oseno waited patiently for his chief engineer to inform him their core shutdown was complete.

"Time to event horizon?" he asked Lieutenant Palos.

Before the officer at sensors could respond, the ship's intercom chimed.

"Engineering to bridge; core shutdown complete, impulse engine operating at one hundred percent efficiency."

"Understood, bridge out." Oseno replied before addressing Shawn Hunter. "steady as she goes Mister Hunter, stay in formation."

"Aye, Sir."

"Mister Palos, inform the Horizon our core shutdown is complete and we are prepared to cross the threshold."

"Aye, Captain."

The report was received by a frowning Lyrya at the comm station of her medical command chair.

"Polaris is still with us, Captain, steady as she goes and on course."

"Acknowledge and send my compliments to Commander Oseno."

Kheren had the same frown on his dark indigo face. Even more than his wife, he felt a dull, throbbing ache at the base of his antennae and between his facial eyes. And then, he felt a sharp sting in his neck. Turning around with a hand at the base of his skull, he found Doctor Nasaro-Myth adjusting a new hypospray cartridge to an injector sporting a long thin needle.

"This will dull your receptors and ease the pain, Captain Sir. You should feel nothing in a moment."

"Indeed, Doc; the stabbing pain of this dagger of yours is enough to surpass any other ache of my entire body."

The Deltan was smiling broadly and winked.

"A necessary evil, my dear captain; a standard hypospray can not penetrate that thick chitinous skin of yours. Now your turn, my dear, if you please."

With Tyvya and Kheren already rubbing their neck, Lyrya sighed in resignation and pulled aside her thick white mane to allow the injection.

On the Phoenix, The door to the bridge opened with a swoosh and Commander Riker stepped through rubbing his forearm and making a fist. Walking up to the commander Master Chief Eddington approached and pointed at the arm.

"How is the arm, Sir?"

Continuing to rub his forearm and clench and relax a fist, Commander Riker just shook his head slightly.

"A little stiff, but it will be fine. Anything to report?"

While he would never admit it, the pain and stiffness from the recently healed bone was still bothering him, but nothing that would affect performance. With that simple question and a nod, Eddington handed Riker the PADD he had been working on. With a glance, Riker handed it back to him.

"Very good Master Chief; as you were."

Eddington nodded again and returned back to his post, continuing to monitor crew assignments.

Kalynda Hunter, standing by the science console on the bridge of the Phoenix, suddenly began to feel a bit queasy and disoriented. With her hand positioned on the station she tried to steady herself but before she knew it, her quadrosopic vision began to narrow and darken as if she were entering into a long and dark tunnel. Silently her legs collapsed beneath as she lifelessly dropped to the deck.

Beside her, Lieutenant Livingstone had barely time to catch her before she completely fell and hit her head on the deckplates; not so much because of his reflexes as his abnormally long arms allowed him to catch her just in time.

The image of Doctor Gray appeared an instant later near both of them. With a glance from his tricorder-linked eyes, he understood the situation. However, he still used a hand held medical tricorder out of habit of what was expected of him from his fellow organic crewmates.

"I feared this would happen. The accelerated regenerative process I tried on her to regrow her lost antenna faster than the nine months usually required, well it worked fine... but it left her hypersensitive to excessive electromagnetic variances."

"Can you do anything for her?" inquired the X'EII with obvious concern.

"She needs rest in an isolation field until we get out of this crazy wormhole. She'll be fine afterwards, don't worry. To her Andorian physiology, it's more or less as if she suffered of the bends for a few seconds; a condition her species is normally immune to. It will not have repercussions if we bring her to sickbay without delay."

This he also addressed as much to the Captain as to the pair of orderlies who came in with a hand-held stretcher.

"Using standard antigrav units is potentially problematic within the anomaly," he then explained about the primitive yet efficient contraption carrying the unconscious Andorian off the bridge. "By the way, this is the worst case so far among the crew. The few other Andorians, Vulcans and Betazoids we have on board are just complaining of mild headaches. I ordered painkillers to be made available for those who request it."

This last sentence he directly addressed his commanding officer. Syntron gazed for a few additional moments at the fallen Andorian officer before directing his attention back to the EMH.

"Your assessment would seem logical, Doctor Gray. The symptoms appear to have affected her rather suddenly. Keep Commander Riker and myself apprised of her condition and that of any other crew members who indicate negative signs in reaction to the excessive electromagnetic variances as we continue onward."

"Sure thing, Captain," acknowledged the disappearing holographic officer.

Then the captain shifted his attention to his avian CSO.

"Impressive reaction to this situation, Lieutenant Livingstone. It would appear that your unique physiology possess a multitude of benefits to our crew... in addition to your scientific contributions."

This was about as close as the Vulcan could get to complementing his new X'EII science officer.

"I hope you are not considering transferring me to security, Sir," answered Jonathan as he rubbed the insides of his elbows, obviously surprised by the praise given. "Long and strong arms attached to a denser sternum and collarbone might provide good lifting ability, but hollowed bones do not make for strong levers. Lifting and carrying PADDs is quite enough for me, if you don't mind, Captain. Especially now that I need all my fingers while we proceed through this anomaly."

That's when a few on the bridge realized for the first time that the lights in his feathered crest were off. Obviously, it was a precaution the X'Ell had took to alleviate any risk of electromagnetic damage to his implants.

Shaking his head Riker tapped his own body into the location of Livingstone's implants.

"Nice."

"We call it the *sh'reekh'ree'ss*; every X'Ell has one, Commander. It allows us to interact fully and instantly with our environment and technology, back on the homeworld. I'm afraid here they are quite limited in range and scope... but they still interact efficiently with the ship's systems if I'm near enough of them. For the moment however, the electromagnetic fluctuations of the outside might impact on the ship and by relay with it, so I thought more prudent for the time being to use my fingers and voice as you do."

Nodding slightly Riker continued.

"I also appreciate your offer to join our security force I will have Master Chief Eddington look into adding you to the training rotation as soon as we are done"

Before Livingstone could say anything Riker turned back to console he was observing, with only a slight smirk. Catching the joke, Master Chief Eddington nodded and began entering nothing into the crew PADD.

As Livingstone looked at the Chief of the Vessel with slight worry, Riker simply winked at him. It did not say much, but it was enough to let him know all was well.

It still took a while for the gawking, blinking avian to catch on. Fortunately, even as accelerated his Academy course had been, it had still allowed him to familiarize himself with humor, especially the very rich one of Humans. There had been a lot of Humans there to educate him in its finer points.

Still, he thought safer to keep silent, tuck his small feathered head between his wide, thin shoulders and return to his duties.

On the bridge, the helmsman only tapped his board and the Phoenix transferred its main propulsion to the impulse sub-light drive systems; but in main engineering it was a tad more involved.

The matter-antimatter reaction assembly shutdown involved a complex and co-ordinated series of steps. The plasma stream to the warp field coils was valved off while the reactant injectors closed off. Remaining gasses were vented overboard. Then, reactant coolant flowed throughout the system, cooling the matter-antimatter Reaction Assembly and corresponding manifolds, conditioners, pre-burner's, nozzle's and related equipment. The Phoenix was well within the wormhole gateway when the entire system had been properly shut down and ready for inspections. The draining effect of the anomaly this time was more help than hindrance in completing the entire process.

Being as the ship had no need for the warp system until it left this pocket universe, Rogers had determined this a good time for a thorough inspection.

"Ok Sean, once the core is safe, shut down annular confinement and commence NDT inspection on the articulation frame, warp coils and injectors. After that, check the protective surface coatings and shock attenuation cylinders."

David turned and proceeded to his office just outside of main engineering, where he sat and, after checking the status of the main board's both here and from the bridge feed, he started another check list for the electroplasma distribution system that would be available without the warp drive system engaged. The entire system would not be available because the impulse system was using a lot of it, but certain high energy conduits to the nacelle's were offline and available for inspection.

The three starships flew in a somewhat erratic pattern within the eye of the cosmic storm that raged around the tunneling void leading them towards its center, a blinding white light that looked to every spacefarer aboard like an unending supernova. And then, before the eyes of everyone looking out, be it from computer-generated image or organic visual receptor, the light started to shimmer and to diffuse into an immense silvery-white surface, like a cosmic-sized drop of mercury, silvery, shiny and strangely waving like some smooth liquid surface.

And right before their eyes appeared three starships rushing right at them.

"Nothing on sensors, Captain," reported Valencia Irksos. "All our signals are being reflected back."

The trio of vessels coming at them included a colossal disc-shaped structure with a sleek curved neck linking it to a squat oval cylinder behind which two angled straight pylons held up long tubular projections; an elongated, flattened arrowhead-shaped vessel ending in a pair of short tubular nacelles; and a much smaller rectangular ship with a round bow and a parallel tubular projection extending from each side.

All three were on a perfect intercept course, coming at them at the same velocity as they themselves rushed towards the silver bubble at the heart of the fire and lightning storm swirling around them.

On the Phoenix, Jonathan Livingstone was seeing the same readings and, after a few seconds of surprise in his wide, blinking eyes, understood them and reported to his commanding officer.

"It's... us, captain. It's a reflection of some sort... but not just a visual one. Passive sensors are registering chroniton emissions."

"Temporal distortions?" wondered Mriin M'ata, rechecking her tactical sensors every few seconds between staring at the main viewer.

"Affirmative. It might be an image of the time of our return... or of our approach a few seconds ago... or some other future travel. It might even be a glimpse into all of them at the same time or of what is happening in another parallel quantum universe or possible parallel timeline that might or might not be. This... area reads much like the end aperture of a colossal subspace fracture. We could learn a lot about the relation between space and time, matter and energy here."

On the Horizon, the same report was given to Kheren who nodded.

"Another time, surely... something for the Phoenix to plan as some future research task. For now, we have another mission to complete. Steady as she goes."

For a moment, it seemed that the ships would collide with one another; then, the three vessels coming at them seemed to stretch, flicker, multiply and fill the entire silvery mirror that filled their entire field of view. There was a blinding flash of light that seemed to stretch beyond eternity and brutally end in an instant.

Once everyone blinked, they saw stars.

They were far and distant, a vast stretch of blackness and void separating them from the nearest ones. Behind them, the Azimuth Horizon crackled and burned like a never-ending supernova. Before them sprawled cosmic immensity, with stars that most of them had never seen before, and none yet had gone to.

Another universe was spread out before them.

Kheren allowed a moment for everyone to get their bearings back, including himself. Then he took a deep breath, like someone about to dive into deep, unknown waters.

"Horizon to task group; we proceed as planned. Reactivate all warp systems. All science and monitoring stations on duty."

He sat forward and voiced historical words once said by captain Jean-Luc Picard when he took command of the legendary USS Enterprise.

"Let's see what's out there."

As the words echoed through the bridge of the Phoenix, Riker, smiling as he turned from the console he was standing behind, patted Livingstone on the shoulder and then turned around to walk towards his seat.

"You heard Captain Kheren! We are explorers, so let's explore!"

Sitting, Riker turned to Captain Syntron.

"At your command, Sir."

Captain Syntron was still intrigued by and reflecting on the unusual mirror image event that occurred when the voice of his first officer broke the spell.

The Vulcan activated the ship-wide com.

"Attention crew. We have arrived to our first destination point in this region across the barrier. Science stations, prepare sensors for comprehensive mapping."

The captain allowed a swift glance to his avian CSO before proceeding on.

"First, we will accompany the Horizon to its chosen position to set-up the new home for their numerous guests. Once we have assurances that the Horizon's team have this matter in-hand, we will be continuing onward with our exploration. Security, maintain security alert status throughout this process since we are unquestionably traveling into unknown regions."

The captain paused reflectively for a moment before continuing; trying to put his thoughts into words.

"All hands, remain attentive to the possibility of anything unusual occurring as we proceed. If you note something which appears out of the ordinary, report it immediately to your department head. Be specific with your observations and any concerns. As the old Earth expression goes; better safe than sorry. Captain out."

Deactivating the ship-wide com, Syntron addressed the helmsman.

"Proceed ahead. Match the velocity of the Horizon."

From a biobed within sickbay, the Andorian first assistant to the chief Science officer slowly opened her eyes simultaneously as her antennae became active. Her acute senses detected the sights, sounds and electromagnetic emissions of the medical monitoring equipment streaming an array of data, images and sounds around her.

Kalynda raised the upper part of her blue-hued body so swiftly though that it threw her equilibrium off for a moment.

"What I am doing here in sickbay? she demanded to no one in particular as she gazed around slightly disoriented. "I was at the science station on the bridge..." she exclaimed as her voice trailed off while she tried to reconstruct in her mind what had occurred that brought her here in sickbay.

Listening intently Doctor Gray did all he could to hide his annoyance at how much Kalynda was wiggling on the medical bed. Holding her head slightly the Doctor continued.

"I am going to continue to run scans and you are going to sit still. If you could remember what happened to you without moving so much that would be great."

As he ran a medical tricorder over her head the doctor saw only the basic signs of fainting, but nothing to explain the onset of the symptoms.

"interesting. So tell me what is the last thing you remember."

There were no such confusion felt in main engineering. Once the inspection's had wrapped up and the threshold crossed, Rogers oversaw the restart of the warp system and once the Phoenix was under warp drive again, he felt comfortable enough to leave main engineering and return to the bridge. From there he could set up the required sensor calibration's along with the CSO, thus enabling the ship to be better able to sense the non-corporeal beings Sisko had mentioned in the mission briefing; his so-called 'Spirits'.

Reaching his station aft of the bridge he relieved Ensign Jordan Brady, there-by relieving the gamma shift engineering crewman. He checked the systems status and verified everything was running normal. At least, normal for this universe. Rising from his seat David made his way the short distance to Lieutenant Livingstone and addressed the X'Ell science chief.

"Mister Livingstone, I have the ships' sensors ready for recalibration toward those cohesive electromagnetic fields you mentioned at the briefing. I believe you mentioned the fields of the entities as being detectable as small but intense movement in the electromagnetic spectrum?"

"Yes, Commander. Essentially, they are the same EM fields as you would expect from any standard lifeform. The difference here is that there is nothing else associated with that field, meaning the physical elements and compounds making organic life as we define it, like carbon, water and complex molecules like RNA and DNA. I beleive that, by calibrating the sensors to react to such EM wavelengths in a localized spot without associated material elements, we would detect, locate and identify those incorporeal entities."

As he spoke, David held forth his own PADD for the X'Ell officer to study. It showed the external ship's sensor grid and their corresponding wavelength settings, along side of which were also David's recommends for additional lower and higher wavelength additions that would ignore the gravimetric and atomic energies completely.

"I see you have downloaded and studied the data from the USS Spectre's internal sensors recordings. Thank you, Sir; that will save us a lot of time in ajusting scanners to precise parameters."

"I thought perhaps we should start with about a thirty percent swap-out on the external sensors. That will leave the sixty percent to carry on with the mission of charting this sector."

The X'Ell's eyes blinked almost as rapidly as the lights peppering his head feathers which he had reactivated after emerging from the anomaly.

"Or... we could pre-program a few of the sensors we would normally allocate for life signs in our standard exploration protocols so that they would alert us to any mobile EM field of the specific nature we are looking for. This would allow full power usage without hampering the rest of the sensor grid's work; I fear astrometrics would not be happy to be caged in when we are out here charting a brand new universe."

David recalled the briefing again; The mention of these so called spirits being able to take over one's complete mind and body. The thought actually scared him to the core. Thinking on this reticence, David responded without preamble.

"If astrometrics has a problem with only sixty percent of the sensor grid on this ship, they can take it up with the captain. My recommendation stands Lieutenant, but ... your science, you may allocate as you see fit."

Turning abruptly, Rogers rapidly returned to his station and resumed his seat, not even bothering to retrieve his PADD from the chief science officer.

With his acute Vulcan auditory abilities, Syntron could not help but overhear the exchange occurring between his chief engineer and his science chief.

From the center seat of the Phoenix, the captain responded stoically to both officers.

"As you are aware, we are aboard the most advanced science starship in the fleet with programmed nanites efficiently maintaining and modulating the flow and processing of incoming data. Like we have done with rotating shield frequencies, perhaps you two could devise a series of new scanning protocols to accommodate all of these possibilities without interfering with the work being conducted within Astrometrics."

"My apologies, Captain," Livingstone said, bobbing his small head atop his long, slender neck. "I did not have time yet to study all the details about these new enhancing nanites. I will correct this oversight and see about this possibility of establishing new protocols, as you suggest, to accommodate Commander Rogers' requirements. Your assistance would be most appreciated in this, Commander."

Riker shook his head in displeasure as he forced out his suggestion.

"Mister Livingstone, there are a series of notes on the computer from a Lieutenant Commander Sorripto on an analysis of the nanites this ship uses. While I am not a big fan of his methods, he is the Federation's leading expert on that nanite design. Check through his notes for any references you might have."

The X'Ell bobbed his feathered head in acknowledgement.

"Thank you, Commander. I am following your recommendation and perusing those notes... I must say I see no reference to those methods you refer to... Everything here follows the scientific method and Starfleet protocols properly as far as I understand them, albeit in some definitely inspired angles... Interesting..."

For a moment, his big golden eyes glazed over as he obviously concentrated on what the blinking lights on his head flashed from the computer to his brain. It lasted but for a few seconds.

"Commander Rogers; I have memorized the data concerning both this ship's systems and the nanite enhancement incorporated into the whole grid. With your help for the technological work itself, that of Lieutenant Leone for the operations applications and the ideas of this Lieutenant-Commander Sorripto, I should be able to implement your recommendation fully and reduce the power shortage to no more than a third of your original estimate. With your permission of course, Captain."

"Permission granted Mister Livingstone" Syntron responded without hesitation to the avian CSO. "Be certain to access the file on Lieutenant Decatur's work implementing the nanites here during our maiden voyage and after our return back to the Starbase. Her detailed reports should prove to be invaluable in this aspect."

Upon hearing this exchange, Lieutenant Leone sitting at the Ops station responded.

"I have the files of Lieutenant Decatur's work available now Captain. I am transferring them to Lieutenant Livingstone's station now."

As if to punctuate her statement, the attractive Orion officer then transmitted the files.

Jonathan's sh'reekh'ree'ss flashed a few seconds before he turned towards them.

"Got them; thank you Lieutenant. Captain, we should have the new protocols defined, tested and ready for implementation by the time we reach the target star system."

The Vulcan captain of the Phoenix focused his gaze toward the main viewscreen as he spoke.

"We have one point zero-five-nine-four days until we reach our destination point of Eden. Sensors need to be operating at peak efficiency as we make our way there. Even though the dedication and capabilities of the crews functioning within our three vessels is incontrovertible, we are nevertheless travelling through unfamiliar territory. Just as we are mapping this region as we proceed, we must also keep cognizant that something anomalous may appear at any moment."

The captain wasn't just addressing his CSO, but every member currently at their post serving on the bridge of their ship.

"Understood, Captain," the olive-skinned Orion Ops officer noted verbally as she continued diligently maintaining this high degree of effectualness at her post.

On the screen of the Horizon as much as on the Phoenix, the sight of interstellar space studded with distant flickering points of light was all too familiar; yet, none of those stars were. They had gone beyond their own universe and into a totally new one barely a few had ever glimpsed before and none had yet explored.

They had gone beyond the mirror, beyond the horizon... where no one had gone before.

"Status report," ordered Kheren after a good minute so as to let everyone, including himself, get their bearings and cope with what was now laid out before them.

Aron'Son was similarly intrigued by what they had seen as they crossed the threshold. He was not a scientist though, he was a soldier and as such he immediately began checking the Horizon's defensive and offensive systems for any distortions. Finding nothing of note he started diagnostic programs and reactivated internal security sensor sweeps.

"Aron'Son to Ensign Kyle."

"Here, Sir."

"What is the colonists' status?"

"They're still here, Sir."

"Understood; deploy your teams in a... non-threatening manner."

"Yes, Sir; Kyle out."

With the report from his security team clearly overheard, Aron'Son updated the captain with the tactical system status.

"Captain, all tactical systems are online and standing by for your orders. Internal security sweeps and ongoing tactical diagnostics are in progress."

"Thank you, Mister Aron'son. Stand down from security alert and give your people time to rest but make sure that they can ready themselves at a moment's notice. Maintain our safety protocols."

"Aye Sir," Aron'Son replied, acknowledging the order.

Rest was a foreign concept to the Jem'Hadar, but he knew that humans and most other species required some form of daily recuperation time. It was something he needed to keep in mind as this mission continued to make sure his people were prepared for any threats they may face.

"Polaris still with us and Phoenix coming at standard flight formation, matching course and speed," reported Aguk Snow. "Mister Moore finally learned his lesson well."

Kheren did not react to the now familiar friendly competitive banter between his proud chief helmsman and his ambitious chief assistant.

"Plot a course to the Eden system, standard cruising speed."

"Course plotted and laid in, captain. ETA one point zero-six days."

"Transmit and request confirmation from the other ships."

"Aye, Captain," answered Lyrya manning communications with a much more relaxed expression than a moment before.

Meanwhile, as the USS Polaris cleared the threshold of the anomaly, Jureth found himself gripping the arms of his command chair as if expecting some sort of impact. When none came and he realized what he'd been doing, the Bajoran relaxed and made the same demand as Captain Kheren had done on the Horizon.

"Status report."

"Offensive and defensive systems online, Sir, and standing by." the imposing Capellan Kalaar reported.

"Sensors are online and functioning, Sir," Lieutenant Ji'llan said evenly. "I am currently analyzing the data from the crossing and correlating with readouts from the Horizon."

"Be ready with those sensors, Lieutenant," Oseno ordered. "We'll be using them to their full capacity shortly."

Ji'llan nodded but didn't look up from her data screen.

"Oseno to engineering; core status?"

"We are just beginning the core startup procedure, Sir. It will be thirty standard minutes before the core is fully operational." replied the even voice of Ensign V'rel

"Understood," Jureth replied. "And neither of you felt any negative effects from the crossing?"

Oseno asked the question knowing the anomaly's known effects on certain species.

"No severe effects, Sir. Doctor Lowe was present during our transversal of the anomaly and ensured our well being."

"Thank you, Mister V'rel; Oseno out. Mister Palos, a channel to the Horizon if you will."

The intelligence officer only nodded and Oseno knew it was because the man felt he was above simply manning a bridge console. Palos pointed at Oseno a moment later indicating the channel was ready.

"Polaris to Horizon; Oseno here Captain. We came through without a scratch, Sir, and are standing by for your orders."

The familiar voice and face of the Andorian commanding officer came through the ship to ship channel loud and clear.

"Now that you are already out there, Polaris, let us shake your legs a bit. Implement standard escort duties for our... convoy until we reach our mission target. Once there, implement patrol and survey of the system as soon as the Phoenix breaks formation for it's own sector mapping duties. You will be watchdog for us *and* cavalry for them."

"Understood Sir, Polaris out." Jureth replied, motioning for Palosto close the channel. "Mister Hunter, you heard the Captain. Assume an escort position and match course and speed of our charges. Mister Kalaar, take us to yellow alert, shields up weapons to stand by. Lieutenant Ji'llan, sensors at max, keep an eye out for anything that could possibly be a ship or other threat."

As his officers carried out their duties and the bridge lighting changed color to signify the alert status, the Bajoran stared at the unfolding universe before them on the viewer.

What will we find? he wondered. *Were there other beings like ourselves out here? Would there be hostile species like Voyager found during her trip through the Delta Quadrant?* Somehow, he doubted that the colonization of this Eden would go smoothly. In his experience, such things never did.

* * *

Captain's log
Stardate; 88302.8

We have reached the nearest habitable star system in this new universe on the other side of the Azimuth Horizon. At this point, the Horizon will proceed within the system towards the most eligible planet for the establishment of the colony, while the Phoenix will break formation to start her general survey of the entire sector. We have kept the Polaris out to allow her commander and crew to shake her down prior to surveying and patrolling the system... and be ready for any surprise. This pocket universe is still vast enough to spring up a few of them.

"Dropping down from warp, captain. We are at the immediate periphery of the target system, proceeding at full impulse towards the third planet.."

"Thank you, mister Snow. Scanning please."

From the secondary science station, astrophysicist Valencia Irsos reported as the data scrolled down on her sensor readout.

"Twelve planets within a sixty astronomical units radius centering on one G2 main sequence yellow-dwarf star at about half-life making up for ninety-nine point eighty-six percent of the total mass of the system. Ninety-nine percent of the remaining mass is taken by the six gas giants, the inner most one, the sixth, being seventy-two percent of that remaining mass; a proto star that didn't manage to ignite and turn this whole system into an uninhabitable binary star system."

"Puts you back into proper humble perspective, doesn't it?" Doctor Nasaro-Myth said to no one in particular.

Standing beside him behind the command well, Governor Sufra lifted her head and spoke with unmistakable pride.

"Each one of us is but a spec of stardust burning for but a moment... but each one of us may burn brighter than this whole universe."

"Quote from your faith, Governor?" wondered the Deltan, flashing his trademark dazzling smile.

"Could have been, Doctor... but truly, it was inspired by this moment; the dawn of a new life, a new hope... a prophecy fulfilled."

In his command chair, Captain Kheren was obviously completely oblivious to the mystical poetry of the moment. He kept looking unblinking at the main viewer while Irksos continued her report.

"Star is estimated at four point six billion years old and of population 1 newer stars; ninety-eight percent hydrogen and helium are being converted to heavier elements through standard atomic fusion. Plasma particles from regular coronal mass ejections spreading out a hundred AUs around it. Beyond the frost line five AUs distance, where the effects of heat and light pressure are negligible, the gas giants are ninety-nine percent made up of those same elements along with neon and other rare gases. The six inner planets are composed of higher melting point elements like silicates, iron and nickel. Throughout the system can be found methane, ammonia, hydrogen sulfides, carbon dioxide and water either in gaseous, liquid or ices but mostly in the three outermost planets and with most satellites orbiting the planets. "

"All the raw materials needed to sustain a colony readily available," concluded Ops chief Cheonghi.

"As our faith promised us," openly stated the Bajoran woman with her eyes closed and a smile on her lips.

Again, Kheren did not react to her claims of faith, even if such a cosmic creation as they were looking at made for less than fifteen percent of the stars in their own native galaxy. He concentrated on the facts his assistant chief science officer listed from her instruments.

"The six inner planets are of rocky formation with outer crusts of silicates and other refractory minerals and molten cores of nickel and iron. They have fewer or no natural satellites and no ring formations like the farther giant gaseous and icy ones. Planet I is a dwarf planet with an unusually large cold core and a thin molten crust. Planets II, III and IV have magnetic fields. Planets III and IV also have a hydrosphere and oxygen-nitrogen-carbon dioxide atmospheres but only planet IV shows tectonic plate movements."

"Class M," understood Lyrya at the left of Kheren. Her husband and commanding officer only nodded.

"III and IV are, yes," confirmed the black skinned woman at the science station. "Planet IV is the most terrestrial-like in all respects, except for her three small moons."

"Life signs?"

"Confirmed, Captain; there is a rich and diversified ecosphere, judging alone by the quantity and proportions of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the atmosphere."

"Eden..." whispered Sufra, her eyes now wide open and her smile one of full contentment. She closed them again and a silent prayer played on her lips.

"Well... let us knock on the doors of paradise, shall we," ordered the Andorian, despite himself starting to be caught in the mood of the moment.

The Federation task group entered the system and flew by it's outermost giant planets until it came right at the heart of the interplanetary configuration where the rocky innermost planet revolved around the familiar looking yet new star. On their viewing screen, the fourth planet appeared as a small pale blue and white dot that, apart from the very different number, size and configuration of it's land masses, appeared eerily similar to the Terran homeworld, despite the three small moons orbiting it on the exact same trajectory and surprisingly close to one another.

"Close range confirming long range reports, Captain," stated Valencia Irksos, her eyes on her instruments. "These three moons are in fact fragments of what was once a single natural satellite that broke under some passing-by cosmic mass, possibly a rogue planet or small distant singularity."

"That should have left its mark also on the planet, especially its ecosystem," Kheren mused, himself knowledgeable in cosmology; "something even worse than the meteor crash that almost extinguished all life on planet Earth over sixty-five million years ago."

"Chronitonic measurement places the event here even farther in time than that; around three hundred million years ago," acknowledged the astrophysicist. "Evidence shows that life recovered from it afterwards even if it was all that more catastrophic. It is even possible that the event contributed to the very appearance of life here; there is a lot of organic elements in the vicinity. Further study would be very important."

"Something to occupy you and your people later on, Governor," the Andorian concluded before turning to his chief counselor. "Patch me through the fleet."

"Ship to ship channels open, Sir."

"Phoenix, this is Horizon. Thanks for walking us home. You may proceed with your mission at your convenience. Polaris; start surveying and patrolling the system as planned... and stay in direct contact with both us and the Phoenix. We ourselves will now begin the first phase of survey and colonization preparation of this planet. Acknowledge."

Jureth had watched the planets pass by on the viewer as the Federation convoy descended into the designated star system. It was not unlike any of the other star systems he had seen as his time as a Starfleet officer; and yet, it was indeed different as it existed in a completely different universe from his own. As they approached the "Eden" planet, Oseno heard Lieutenant Ji'lan mutter "fascinating" from her science console and he smiled. This assignment had to be a scientist's paradise, unseen stars, planets, and new lifeforms. It was the very essence of Starfleet's seek out new life and new civilizations mandate. Even a security officer such as himself could appreciate the uniqueness of the things they were doing and what they might encounter out here.

Still, it was that same inner security officer that was concerned that the Federation had so readily sent a colonial expedition into such an unknown. Despite his inner concerns, when captain Kheren's message came through from the Horizon, Oseno readily responded.

"Mister Palos, send the Horizon our acknowledgement and maintain an open line to Phoenix and Horizon. Mister Kalaar stand down from yellow alert, but let's keep a sharp eye out and Mister Hunter... set your course bearing zero-one-zero mark one-zero, warp 5. Once back at the outer edge of the system, take us back in and start a more detailed survey, full impulse."

"Aye Sir, bearing zero-one-zero mark one-zero, warp 5," Hunter repeated. "ETA to outer edge, twenty nine minutes."

The Polaris broke off from her mother ship, reaching out with the full power of her sensor array. Oseno rose from the command chair figuring that he wouldn't be needed on the bridge for awhile and could use the opportunity to catch up on administrative duties.

"T'Lana, you have the conn. I will be in my ready room if needed."

"Aye, Sir." the Vulcan replied as she moved to the command chair.

While all three fleet vessels had entered the star system, the bridge officers aboard the Phoenix were receiving, data, discussing similar facts, analysis and speculations from their investigations; just as their counterparts aboard the Horizon were doing aboard their ship. The discussions on the Phoenix were temporarily interrupted the a message came in from the flagship commanding officer.

"Acknowledged Captain Kheren. May your colonization procedure complete itself without incident. Syntron out."

While the image of the Andorian captain faded from the main viewscreen, the Vulcan commanding officer engaged the internal ship-wide communication channel.

"This is the captain speaking. The accompaniment of the flagship has now concluded. We will continue on with our own mission of surveying and mapping regions and phenomena beyond this star system... following this announcement. Remain cognizant of your post, duties and all that surrounds you. As noted previously, we are venturing into uncharted regions of space. Captain out."

As he disengaged communications, Syntron peered over to the helmsman.

"Ahead Lieutenant Alder... with the coordinates provided."

"Aye, captain," the Bolian lieutenant responded, as he manipulated helm controls.

"Engaging warp 5... bearing 350... mark 20."

The USS Phoenix effortlessly surged away from the other two fleet vessels and beyond the region of space which their colonization efforts were now in the first phase of scouting for a prospective new home for their guests.

Standing Riker walked over to Lieutenant Livingstone.

"You know Lieutenant, now that we have some time during this travel I am open to filing your request to train for shifts with security."

This time, it took only one blink of the huge golden eyes to take the offer in stride.

"I'm sorry, Commander, but while *you* enjoy your... travel time, *I* am engaged in the scanning, mapping, charting, recording, compiling, analyzing and understanding of every part of space we are flying into, through, by and from. I'm afraid my primary duties will leave me no time to... play... what was the term on your old Earth... ah yes; cowboys and indians... Sir ."

* * *

For the next hour following the break up of the task group, the flagship moved between the orbital zones of the third and fourth planet, collecting data about the two class M worlds targeted for colonization while the crew and their passenger readied themselves for the grand project itself.

It wasn't long before Valencia Irksos offered her report.

"Captain; the scans of Eden III is complete and shows it suitable for colonisation, albeit with a thinner atmosphere and a significantly hotter and drier overall climate than the norm... but still suitable for standard humanoid life."

"Life signs?"

"Slightly lower than standard but well within the parameters of a hot, dry world like Vulcan for example. Highest lifeforms could be of avian or possibly early mammalian variety. No sign yet of sentient activity, past or present."

"How could you tell from here?" wondered Governor Sufra, much interested by what was learned about her chosen paradise.

"No focused electromagnetic emissions that would indicate localized electrical activity or transmission network, no artificial formations that would indicate settlements or even ruins of any kind nor any excess of carbon dioxide, hydrogen or radioactive particles that could tell of some form of massive energy consumption. Even primitive humanoids would affect their environment with concentrations of wood fires that could be detected as the first sign of organized society and early sentience."

"If I recall, dolphins on Earth are sentient and do not show any of those signs," Docotr nasaro-Myth pointed out with a crooked smile.

"Hence why I said, no sign yet, Doctor," retorted the black-skinned woman with a wry smile of her own. "Next step from scans is sending planetary probes around and within the planetosphere for more detailed data and prior to dispatching actual away teams for a complete survey."

"And what about the fourth planet?" now asked the Bajoran woman with eagerness in her eyes and voice.

This time, the science officer froze her amused smile under a slight frown as she faced her commanding officer.

"Captain, we can not get any reading from Eden IV. All our scans, even detailed passive visual ones, are being... lost."

"Explain."

"For the moment I can't, Sir. It looks like all our emissions are being... absorbed or diffused somehow... including most of the light and heat coming from the star and reaching it's position."

"That's why it is so blurry even this close," mused Kheren, now intrigued by the soft, hazy sphere he was looking at on the main viewer.

"Yes, Captain. We can determine many of it's parameters from the gravitational effect of it's presence among the surrounding interplanetary matter and bodies, it's influence upon energy fluxes within the system, it's position and angle, even from it's natural satellites... but all types of detection instruments aimed at it, even an optical telescope, simply fail to provide any further detail."

"A dampening or cloaking field of some sort?"

"A distinct possibility, Captain. However, since we can not get any data from our instruments, I can not confirm or deny it, even less offer a valid hypothesis as to it's cause or nature."

"Or purpose," grumbled the Deltan Doctor.

"That is not a scientific assessment, Doctor," argued Irksos. "None of the facts we have so far points at any intent or design associated with this phenomenon."

"You know of many natural cloaking or dampening fields, Lieutenant?"

"As a matter of fact, I do, Doctor... but that is not the point; science is about going where the evidence leads, not leading the evidence to a presupposed conclusion."

"But starship command is about leading a crew to safety."

This last comment, Elliago sent from Irksos to Kheren.

"It is also about learning, Doc," the Andorian answered. "If we wanted to only play it safe, we would stay home and just sent out probes, not crewed starships. But that being said, that does not mean we have to act like the curious cat of the proverb. So... we have a mystery here... one that we will for sure investigate. But our first task here is one of colonisation, and ensure that this task is *done*, properly *and* safely, *if* setting and circumstances permit."

He did not, like the Deltan doctor, sweep his stare from him to the governor while talking as Elliago had done. But it was plain that his comment was addressed from one to the other.

"Recommendations?"

"It is unlikely that any probe we sent would give us anything meaningful, since we cannot get sensor readings," Aron'Son stated from his tactical station "We may not even be able to track the probe, I recommend we go to yellow alert and approach to visual range Sir. We should also consider the possibility of the... energy beings that were mentioned in the briefing and take appropriate precautions."

Solius shook his head.

"I don't suggest getting closer than we have to. I'd hate for there to be abnormal gravimetric disturbances over there. We could be pulled down to the planet before we even knew what was going on... and without our primary systems fully operational. I'd suggest the probe. But instead of sending one straight in, program it to make a loop around the planet and use blatent, active scanning, and then return. We could even install an optical camera to the probe. Even if the sensors fail at that close range, we will get visual satellite imagery. If it never returns, then we know something... or someone... doesn't want strangers around."

"We *might* know," corrected Irksos with her trademark scientific exactness. " There are several natural phenomenons known to cause probe failure to return... and this might be something new and yet unknown. Assuming such failure to be ipso facto caused by design is a mistake that could lead to other mistakes. Let's not just jump to conclusions before we have the facts, Captain. That being said, I agree with both Security Chief Aron'Son and chief engineer Solius' recommendations. A class IV probe could deploy it's net of subprobes to monitor one another as well as the planet from several angles at once. If something happens, even to all of them, one is bound to give us something if we close in ourselves into optical range."

"And what about those... spirits of Commander Sisko?" wondered Kheren, echoing his tactical officer's caution.

"Again, Sir, no data available to either validate or invalidate any correlation whatsoever between the little we know of them and the little we know here."

The Andorian looked around.

"Anyone else has thoughts on this?"

"Well..." Redding said, "It wouldn't hurt to try knocking on the door first I think, Lets try hailing the planet."

He gave a little smile.

"Hate to be rude to the new neighbors after all."

Kheren's antennae curved inward in the distinctive Andorian smile his face could not make.

"Right out of the rules of engagement textbook, Number One."

Elliago however was shaking his bald head.

"Captain Sir; if I understand correctly, we do not detect any transmission from the planet, not even primitive radio waves. That leaves us with three possibilities; no one is there; someone is there but is unable to make contact; someone is there and is unwilling to make contact. The Prime Directive, General order 1, as well as General Orders 4 and 13, explicitly forbid us from attempting contact with sentience unaware of life and worlds beyond their own, like pre-industrial ones, or unwilling to make contact, like isolationist cultures. Don't Kirk yourself into a new Yonada or Eminaar VII."

Again, it was Valencia Irksos who objected.

"Subspace technology directly comes from faster than light science, Doctor. If someone would not be able to receive our transmission because of any reason like lower technological level, then no harm would be done, just as if there would be no one there. That alone covers two-thirds of your possibilities already. As for the last third, unwillingness to make contact, either they would already have warned us away if they could, or they just hide and keep silent until we do go away; since we received no such warning, that leaves about seventeen percent chance of forcing ourselves on unwilling sentience we have no way of knowing that it is there... unless we investigate or try to make contact... Which is our primary mandate."

"And I thought I just left the ship with the Vulcan..." grumbled Elliago with a forced sigh and sour smile. Then he frowned. "That... signal-nullifying effect around the planet might just be that warning you speak of."

That's when Governor Sufra chimed in with a severe tone of voice.

"Captain Kheren; this world has been divinely ordained and legally given to us. You will *not* turn back, even if some... people there would dare deny us! As duly named representative of the Federation Council, I have the authority to order you and I am exercising this authority right now; you *will* proceed with the approach and preparations for colonizing this world. That is a *direct order*, Captain."

The Andorian stood up to face the Federation Council representative. His antennae were not curving anymore.

"Governor Sufra; Starfleet General Orders nullify *any* order given by *anyone* in the field or elsewhere. And the very first one *is* the Prime Directive that binds *everyone*, including me *and* you, to the highest founding principle of our civilization; not just to protect whoever is out there, but *us* as well, from any decision or action that could endanger the normal course of existence from outside interference, be it cultural, technological, philosophical or *even* spiritual. Scientific curiosity, economical needs, religious beliefs, *even* the safety of this ship and the lives of my crew and of *your* people, are explicitly *not* a valid reason to violate this most important principle. *If* this world *is* already inhabited, or is already claimed by another people, be it even just as burial or waste-dumping ground, we will *not* settle you there. And *If* we *can* settle you on the other M class world of this system, it will only be if there is a reasonable estimation that your presence there will not violate the inherent rights of this world and it's people... And you and your people, as Federation representatives, as a Federation colony, as those we of Starfleet are responsible for bringing out here, you will be *bound* to follow this directive, now *and* afterwards, or face extradition. We will be *bound* to do so because the Prime Directive also orders us to *act* to correct any violation *you* could make, now or later. This is not Earth's sixteenth century conquest of the New World. We *will* uphold the Prime Directive, *not* the dictates of your faith or anyone else's. Do I make myself clear, Governor Sufra?"

The woman just stood there the whole time, gaping and reddening with each word. After a moment of silence, she looked angrily at him and saw that his resolve was mirrored in the eyes of all the other officers.

"You do, Captain Kheren. I will pray that our prophecy be fulfilled... and for the Light to open your eyes to it's sacred Truth and shine on your cold heart and that of the whole Federation."

The Jem'Hadar officer also stood up. Aron'Son didn't want to threaten the governor directly again, but he still failed to understand why the captain was permitting her to remain on the bridge.

"Sir, if you wish the bridge cleared of... unnecessary personnel, I can oblige, Sir."

The captain didn't have the time to answer his security chief, one way or another. Sufra stomped off the bridge, ordering with a clipped tone the turbolift to bring her to the observation deck.

Kheren watched her leave before he turned back to the main viewer and the computer-generated image of the planet all her hopes were invested in.

"Damn I hate speeches," he grumbled, looking or addressing no one in particular.

"You're entitled, Sir; you're the captain," Yeoman Blackbird offered.

"I am not entitled to state the obvious."

"If it was obvious, it wouldn't need to be the most compelling order of our entire civilization," commented Elliago solemnly.

Kheren grunted.

"As you were, Lieutenant," he said softly to Aron'Son. Then he spoke to everyone. "And speaking of orders, hers still do apply until and unless something comes up..."

His silvery eyes on his frozen features went to each of his officers in turn.

"The probe option still appears to be our first step then," he decided. "Our move into lunar orbit for a direct visual scan should not bring us in range of lower technologies unable to see beyond their own atmosphere... and our deflector field already renders us invisible to primitive devices like radiotelescopes, at worse, appear like an indistinct inert mass like a rogue asteroid. If probe investigation does give us a possibility of advanced technology, then the hailing option is the next best possible step."

He sat back in his chair.

"Proceed."

"The Governor knows we are actively trying to do our best, right?" S'Tan said to no one in general. He shook his head as he prepared his part of the probe.

"Yes, Mister Solius; and that is precisely what she fears," answered the captain.

"I have found, in my observations of the Alpha Quadrant that religion can cloud judgement." Aron'Son stated in answer to the Romulan's question.

"You don't say," Kheren sighed with a strange mixture of amusement and resignation in his deep, soft voice.

The Prime Directive had been a difficult concept for Aron'Son to grasp when he first began studying it at Starfleet Academy. The Dominion had no such limitations for the Founders believed themselves above petty rules and regulations. They had subjugated countless species over the course of time, and would likely continue to do so if they ever recovered completely from the blows dealt to them by the Alliance during the war. Aron'Son however, had continued his studies of that particular edict long after his initial classes often discussing it with instructors and fellow students alike.

His conclusions on the subject were continuously evolving as his understanding of the Federation and its species was, but for now he concluded that for Starfleet's purposes it was a good thing as it prevented starship captains from dictating the course of evolution and entire planets, or at least it was supposed to. Aron'Son had read countless stories of highly regarded officers who skirted the Directive on numerous occasions, but it seemed that this Andorian, his Captain, was determined to adhere to it in the strictest sense. It was...interesting.

"But it's almost as if she's being confrontational for no reason. No offense, Captain, but we know she doesn't like you. But it's not like we told her that we don't know what's going on down on the surface of 'her' planet and decided to call it quits and go home. Her blow up makes no sense."

"Oh that's alright, Lieutenant; Andorian women can be a lot more fiesty than that."

"You don't say... Sir," echoed both Lyrya and Tyvya at the same time without turning looking up from their respective stations.

Kheren's antennae curved towards one another as he made a pause before addressing his tactical officer.

"However, even Andorians, as violently passionate as they can be, never abandon themselves to emotions without reason. Hence why there is no religion on Andoria ... except a few very pragmatic ones which even then are considered rather... peculiar. We have no concept of the supernatural; not because we adopted logic like Vulcans did, but simply because we do not feel it. Since religious mindset is irrational by definition, only fear spoke when she did. We have to *impose* rationality on such fears to avoid all the tragedies and atrocities that History of a hundred worlds tell us happen when such an irrational mindset has sway. That's also why we have such a thing as the Prime Directive. That there may be a god or gods is irrelevant; we are *not* gods."

"And me looking forward to appear and blare: Behold! thy god cometh!"

The joke brought a few dry smiles around the bridge.

The Romulan couldn't believe the way the Governor, a duely appointed member of Starfleet, was acting. Childish was the easiest description. Any Romulan whom acted as such would have vanished before the Horizon left the dock. He had hoped that reaching this side of undiscovered space would quell her insanity, but he supposed that being so close to their end objective was driving her mad.

However, he had to laugh at the jokes being tossed around the bridge for the next minutes.

Aron'Son didn't get it...he wasn't exactly sure what the others were laughing at, perhaps he would ask Solius to explain it to him later. The Romulan engineer seemed to understand the nuances of interaction far better than he himself did.

It didn't take long for the flagship of Lotus Fleet to maneuver itself between the moons orbiting on the same ecliptic the blue, green and white orb of the fourth planet.

"Is it me or the image is still... fuzzy?" wondered Kheren after a moment.

"The computer can only render an image from the sensor data of all our instruments, Sir," explained Irksos but not without definite puzzlement in her own voice and features. "The dampening effect of the planet on our scanners..."

"This boat has windows now, doesn't she?" Doctor Nasaro-Myth grumbled.

"Reports from the observation decks and viewports are the same," the black-skinned woman answered. "Whatever affects our instruments on all types of energy readings also affects the electromagnetic, including organic optics."

"So much for a closer look," Kheren sighed. "Launch probe."

From beneath the screen, a flash of light moved away towards the mysterious orb.

"Probe launched; deploying subprobes in four seconds...three... two... one..."

The tiny light of the probe suddenly seemed to explode as six smaller dots spread out from it and moved to a closer orbit of the planet. They blinked rythmically as they encircled Eden IV... and then, they vanished.

The Andorian looked up at his silent chief of science and then at her astrophysicist assistant.

"Signal lost, Captain," Irksos finally said with a frown.

"None, Sir... Well... not exactly."

Kheren just looked at her, waiting. She looked again at what her board was saying to her, or what it was not saying, for a moment longer before she turned to face him with a face more bewildered than ever.

"It appears that we receive no reading at all because... there is nothing there at all. I mean... really nothing, Sir. Not even residual matter or energy of any kind, not even debris or propulsion trace of our probes that went down just a few seconds ago. A void, a virtual nothingness in the absolute sense of the word."

"Surrounding a planet we can still detect?"

"Yes, captain; we detect the planet's presence and general parameters because our instruments, especially our long range sensors, do so by measuring mostly the effect of it's presence on the surrounding space; mass displacement, effect on nearby gravity fields, space matter dispersal around it as it circle the star... all indirect data we routinely accumulate and process into pre-established data to quickly catalog and identify a space body even at a great distance. That's why we can still somewhat see it despite the fact that no energy at all comes from or even refracts from it. It's like all forms of energy are simply nullified in it's vicinity."

"What, like a black hole?"

"An apt analogy if we limit ourselves to it's overall effect, Sir. However, a planet would not be able to exist within a black hole; any matter would be instantly crushed into it's infinite gravity well. That's why light itself is unable to escape a singularity and it's colloquial Earth name of black hole, despite the fact that it is not a hole as you would usually understand the word. But this is quite different."

Kheren sat back in his chair, pensive for a moment.

"Well... we can not see much from here and probes are apparently useless. What's next?"

* * *

The short warp jump from the inner planet to the outer edge of the star system took barely half an hour for the Aquarius class escort starship of Oseno Jureth.

From there, the Polaris turned hard about and went right back into the orbital path of it's last frozen gas giant at a more measured pace. Flying at a quarter of the speed of light in order to thoroughly chart the star system itself, the small crew of the Polaris was alert and about, either participating in the survey or preparing for whatever may come.

They were barely over a hundred million miles within the orbital arc of Eden XII and XI when a scanner beeped on the science control board.

"Sir... we are crossing some kind of decaying cohesive energy stream," the Vulcan officer reported.

"Not a warp trail nor an impulse trail," specified the officer at tactical. "But it does conform to a similar narrow pattern of dispersion."

"Decaying gravitons, Sir," added the science officer. "Something went inside the star system within the last hour with some kind of gravitic effect, literally bouncing from Eden XII towards Eden XI."

"Nothing yet on sensors, Sir," finished the tactical report.

"Status of the star itself Lieutenant Ji'lan?" Oseno asked immediately thinking of the widespread devastation the Hobus Supernova had caused. "Can we trace whatever it was back to it's source?"

"The star is steady and conforming to all the normal parameters of it's stellar category. As for the particle trail itself, it definitely comes from outside of the system and stretches inward," she responded. "Whatever left it came from outside, from the port side of our own initial entry and less than half an hour ago. The angle and varying density of the displaced stellar matter along it tends to suggest that it's speed and trajectory varied in direct relation with it's distance to the planetary gravity wells."

Ji'lan turned to face her Bajoran commanding officer.

"Natural objects sometimes rebound on planetary atmospheres and gravity wells, Sir; but, for a natural object, repeated bouncings from one planetary body to another and keeping a steady trajectory inward the star system would become statistically more improbable with each additional one."

"In plain language; this looks like the trail of a vessel of some kind," Palos concluded.

"A distinct possibility," Ji'Lian concurred. "But if such would be the case, one that would use a propulsion technology quite different from ours."

"Check our sensor logs, did the Romulans launch any probes or anything into the anomaly? Could they have even gotten anything through? What about the energy beings mentioned in the briefing, do the reading indicate any possibility of their presence?"

"Unlikely, Sir... unless the Romulans have any kind of technology we are totally unaware of... which is also unlikely. And both our logs and their behavior also makes their involvement here just as unlikely. As for the "spirits" of Commander Sisko, there is simply not enough data at this point to properly answer the question. When they were encountered, they had apparently travelled without anything we would understand as a ship or vessel, directly through the energy stream of the particle fountain of the space station they invaded... where the USS Spectre later found them."

Oseno considered his options for a moment, they did have a mission assignment to perform, but at the same time he felt this warranted an investigation. If it was a ship, it could mean first contact with as yet unknown species or on the worse end of the spectrum a threat to the colonial operation.

"Tactical, configure and launch two class 5 probes along our assigned mapping route, we will retrieve them later. Helm, take data from science and plot a course to follow the energy signature and Mister Palos, inform Horizon we are deviating from our planned course to investigate this anomaly."

The officers of the Polaris acknowledged their commander's orders and set about their duties

It wasn't long before Lieutenant Kalaar announced; "probes away."

"Thank you Mister Kalaar," Jureth replied. "Mister Hunter, do you have a track?"

"I have a start, Sir."

"Very well, engage course, Mister Hunter."

"Aye, Sir."

The Polaris broke off her mapping route and began tracing the energy trail like the proverbial blood hound on the scent. Barely a few minutes passed by before Hunter reported from his navigational sensor readings tracking the decaying energy trail they were following.

"Sir, by my calculation, whatever left this trail is moving faster than our full impulse... but it's need to swerve to the next gravity well at very precise angles in order to use it to accelerate without completely falling into it. That makes it follow a very sinuous trajectory our own slower but straighter flight is overtaking."

"Confirmed, Sir," Kalaar added next. "judging by the growing density and dispersal pattern of the gravitons, it just went by the eleventh planet and will logically proceed towards the ninth one, as Eden X is completely on the other side of the star, unreachable for this... jumping around it does. But... Sir... if it does... then, it's definitely moving inward the system... and on a precise heading for the inner planets."

"We should have it on our sensors momentarily," finished Ji'lan hunched over her scanner.

On the screen was looming the blue-grey and white orb of a frozen gas giant circled by three thin rings of ice particles that crossed one another at the equator of the planet. Aside from the peculiar configuration of it's three separated rings, it looked a lot like Andor, the giant planet around which orbited the inhabitable moon of Andoria, homeworld of the flagship commanding officer. But this was in another universe. Here, it was the last veil between them and whatever was moving away out there.

And when they finally cleared the blocking orb of Eden XI, there was a long, cold moment of silence. No one even moved for several seconds.

"Sir?" finally said Ji'Lian with a puzzled tone. "I... nothing on sensors, Sir."

"The trail is still there, Sir," then stated Kalaar, just as puzzled. "It still clings to the edge of the planet's gravity well."

"Boost the sensor output," Oseno ordered "Augment with auxiliary power if needed, confirm the presence of the trail and that it is still moving inward."

There was a moment of silence where the only thing that moved was the immense curve of the nearby frozen planet they were now flying around.

"Sir... the trail seems to follow the outer edge of the gravity well of the planet... Whatever it is, it is not going towards the inner planets anymore. It is more like it would try to establish a high orbit. But... the density and dispersal of the gravitons has changed; higher density, wider dispersal... it's accelerating as if to proceed with the rebound but the direction is still orbital. It's like it is..."

Suddenly, the ship trembled violently and the hull boomed with rapid impacts on the energy shields as flashes of light brutally filled the screen.

"Coming from behind!"

* * *

At warp 5, it took less than half an hour for the USS Phoenix to emerge from the Eden star system. Barely out between star systems a half an hour later, Counselor Bijou frowned as her delicate hand went to her earpiece before she spoke, looking at the readouts of the main screen of her medical command chair.

"Captain... I am receiving a signal... very faint... "

"Nothing on short range scans, Sir," reported Mriin M'ata from her tactical station.

"Nothing either on long range scanners, Captain," added Livingstone, relying on his direct connection to his instruments while he looked at the main viewer then at his commanding officer.

The ship's counselor frowned deeper as she adjusted her own comm channel controls.

"It... it sounds like... like a starship's disaster beacon."

"If it 's indeed a ship in distress, it could be low or out of power several light years from us; hence why nothing registers yet on our sensors," explained the X'Ell. "And here, the interference from the anomaly is still slightly felt by our instruments."

"Can't pinpoint it precisely, Captain..." then said Bijou, turning with widened eyes towards Syntron. "Somewhere ahead of us in line with the Azimuth Horizon. But... Captain... it sounded like a Starfleet signal."

"Intriguing," the Vulcan captain uttered to no one specifically.

As he looked around the bridge of the Phoenix for a moment, Syntron began to address key personnel.

"Keep on course toward this faint signal, helmsman. Counselor, notify Lieutenant Aulder if any changes occur in where this signal is originating. Security, maintain yellow alert but have your teams prepared for emergency conditions as we approach whatever is transmitting this signal. Alert sickbay; let them know of the potential emergency situation"

"Aye Sir" Commander Riker acknowledged. Tapping the comms panel he continued; "Sickbay, this is the bridge. Prepare for potential emergency medical situation, possible incoming wounded."

"Be prepared, aye," The EMH's voice came through the panel.

The captain then stood up from the center seat and approached the science station.

"Lieutenant Livingstone, have you and Commander Rogers completed any of the series of new scanning protocols at this point?"

The X'Ell bobbed his head in a curious sideway fashion.

"We just finished putting the protocols in place, thanks to the efficiency of the nanite technology aboard... but we did not have time to test it fully yet, Sir. Untested sensor protocols might give us false results we would have difficulty identifying as such."

Syntron turned toward the communications console and addressed the Deltan officer.

"Counselor Bijoŭ, send a message to the Horizon and the Polaris regarding this development. Inform them that we are tracking and following this peculiar signal. Then send them the approximate coordinate that we are heading towards."

After a moment, the counselor looked back at her commanding officer.

"Message sent, Captain. Horizon acknowledging and stating she will also retransmit to the Polaris."

"Keep our readings aimed toward the signal counselor" the captain added before turning to address his CSO once again.

"Lieutenant Livingstone, perhaps if we send out a class VIII medium-range warp probe ahead of our trajectory we may use its sensor capacity to gather further telemetry on this anomalous signal and relay it back."

"I have a reading from our sensors of the area of space ahead, Captain. Most puzzling... unless the new protocols are defective, it appears that the signal comes from the edge of an area roughly one parsec in radius which appears to be... a total void. No energy, no matter... not even subspace exists in there ; but it let's all outside matter and energy go through unobstructed. Looking at the dispersal and motion patterns of cosmic matter there, it's like... some kind of detonation happened and rendered the whole area... dead... empty. I have no explanation for this peculiarity, Sir."

"I have a faint contact on my sensorrs," M'ata confirmed. "There is definitely an object out there where that signal comes from. If it's a ship, it's drifting about fifty AUs within the dead space area."

"If there is no subspace in there, we will have to reach it at impulse; that will take us twenty minutes from the moment we are forced to drop out of warp when we will enter the zone," added Aulder without turning from his helm controls.

Syntron leaned back in his seat and pondered this information and then probable causes for a moment.

"Potential risks involved in entering into this abyss?" the captain put out there for any of his bridge officers to respond to.

"None that I can hypothesize with any degree of validity, Captain," the X'Ell answered. "Despite it's peculiar nature, this is exactly what it appears to be; true empty space."

At his engineering station near the back of the bridge, Rogers ran a quick inspection algorithm on the new protocols running within the sensor grid and confirmed their new sensitivities. With this information and what he knew of sub space physics and impulse drive parameters, David took the proffered opportunity to address captain Syntron's open question.

"Captain. The latest test of the sensor suite confirms a one hundred fifty percent reliability from the new protocols. I am confident we can trust the sensors on this."

As he spoke this he swiveled on his chair to face Syntron and Riker at their station.

"But, be warned; impulse drives also rely partially on subspace to improve the propulsion effect, by passing the accelerated plasma through the driver coils to generate subspace fields. If we enter that ... void ... our impulse drive will be sluggish. Hampered if you will. Normal maneuvering will take longer turning arcs and reduced speeds will be evident as compared with what we are used to out here with a subspace backing."

With a tone of frustration Riker simply sighed.

"Like driving on ice... great."

Subtly, the Vulcan captain nodded affirmatively as the bridge officers spoke. After they both finished with their statement, Syntron responded.

"Continue on course toward the signal and initiate the new sensor protocols. Perhaps they will reveal something that we are currently missing."

"Acknowledged," the science chief answered, controls already flashing in response to his cranial interface.

The captain then faced toward helm control.

"Lieutenant Alder, design a procedure to compensate for a potential sluggish helm response if we enter into this void. We do not want limited maneuverability coupled with reduced acceleration to affect our offensive and defensive capabilities... should we find ourselves caught within adversarial circumstances."

"The best I can think of that would work on such a short notice would be to combine thruster maneuvering with impulse in a kind of switch back and forth combination along the needs of the moment," sighed the pilot. "And it will be learned as I go, Sir."

Leaning back into his chair once again with his torso fully erect, the captain acknowledged the helmsman's assertion.

"That is a key aspect involved throughout space exploration Lieutenant. Proceed onward."

Realizing what the Captain had just ordered combined two different motions, it reminded Commander Riker of the wagon rides through the tar pits of his youth.

"Trust me Lieutenant, it is easier than it looks."

Walking over and leaning behind the helm, Riker further explained.

"Just like the tar pits back home; the key is going to be understanding the balance of each system. If the impulse is going to be sluggish, then turn into the momentum with a push from the thrusters. I mean you don't whip a three horned mule while you are turning, you whip her before the turn and then carefully slide through the momentum."

"Not sure what a three horned mule or a tar pit are exactly, Sir," the Bolian helmsman said; "we on Bolarus IX don't have any of those... back home, as you say. But it sounds like driving a porpoise-drawn sea barge in heavy current... I think I see what you mean, Commander. Fact is, now that you put it this way, what Lieutenant Moore trained us for when we were going through the wormhole just might help do just that..."

With renewed confidence, he positioned his blue fingers on the controls and readied himself for the proposed maneuvering with a small smile that showed how much he was looking forward to the challenge.

After a moment, a jolt was felt throughout the ship but the Lotus Fleet protocol of wearing the new buckle-belt-sized personal inertial dampeners left everyone firmly in their seat.

Looking around, Commander Riker noticed that the restraint belt on the first officer chair had not activated. As he looked back and forth he threw his hands up and grunted angrily. Standing up Riker approached the helm position.

As Riker stood from his chair, his restraint belt then activated on the now empty chair.

"Oh come on..." Riker mumbled to himself.

Turning back to the helm Riker leaned over the position.

"What happened?"

"We dropped out of warp, Sir. Moving at full impulse."

"Have a clearer signal coming in now," Bijou reported after a moment. "Definitely a Starfleet ship's disaster beacon."

"I have it on sensors dead ahead, Sir," Livingstone announced. "Drifting, minimal power output, life support on emergency low power level, no power coming from engines or reactors; size and mass of a small cruiser; hull material conforms to Starfleet current alloys; no discernable damage or debris surrounding it; by configuration... a Nova class science vessel."

"I can read it's transponder code," Counselor Bijou at the medical command chair said then. "NCC... 72947..."

her widened eyes went slowly to her commanding officer before she finished.

"USS... Nuntio."

* * *

They had all been looking silently at the planet for several minutes.

"Perhaps a greeting, Sir." Aron'Son proposed and as he did so he realized that was a suggestion he would have never made prior to his joining Starfleet. "All frequencies, all channels...a standard hail."

"We still have no clue if this is a natural or artificial phenomenon," Irksos retorted. "May I remind the captain that in the former hypothesis, a hail will have no result; but if the latter, beyond possible Prime directive unintentional violations, it did happen in the past that a hail was interpreted as hostile, like during the V'Ger incident... or caused automated responses possibly dangerous as in the case of the discovery of the Jenolan Dyson sphere. We need to know more before even attempting such a direct, possibly intrusive action."

Kheren sighed, still looking at the mysterious planet.

"Back to my original question then; now what?"

"Perhaps Lieutenant Irksos hasn't had a lot of time in exploration, Captain," Redding said with an amused tone. Risk is part of the job. We start with the lowest risk we can't think of, usually scanning of course, then move up the risk ladder. Next we tried a probe and after that? Well we try the next least risky thing that seems reasonable, in this case I'm thinking contact. The only thing less risky is just leaving it alone."

He shrugged slightly.

"After that? I don't know.. shoot at it?" he said jokingly. "If that little gem of advice doesn't do it for you, let's try logic. Either it's natural or artificial right? If it's natural then the chances of life developing on the surface, life as we know it anyway, can't exist. So if it's a natural effect hailing the planet won't do anything."

He then tried to sound serious.

"If it's artificial then their level of technology puts them above the concern of breaching the prime directive, and if they are hiding in there? they simply won't answer. Yes, I fully admit there's a real risk doing anything at all, in this case I'd say it's minimal up until the point of risking people directly, such as a landing party."

Inwardly, Redding sighed deeply.

Back in my day we just DID things.. talk... talk... talk...

"I am sure the Governor would volunteer to go down to the planet with a few...or all...of her followers if you gave her the opportunity," The Romulan engineer joked. "But maybe shooting at it isn't such a bad idea..."

His mind started doing the calculations of what would need to be done, as a few of his bridge mates looked at him strangely.

"If we could modify a torpedo to detonate immediately above the sensor-loss threshold, we might be able to puncture whatever is protecting the planet. Are there any readings coming off the planet for any sort of radiation or isotope? Something we could install a counter into the torpedo, removing the warhead, of course, so we can open our own window? Think of this like trying to detect a cloaked Warbird. Tachyons will detect a cloaked ship. We just need to find what will lift the veil here..."

The black skinned astrophysicist thought for a moment.

"Well that's the main part of the problem; nothing at all emanates from the planet, even if it's presence, like it's mass, does affect the surrounding space normally. Even a black hole emits X rays around itself but here... nothing. However.. if we do as you suggest, we could detect and analyse the *effect* of this phenomenon on a torpedo detonating close enough... and maybe shed some light onto this mystery... literally. A photon torpedo would be best, as the photon is the elementary particle of electromagnetic interaction. If engineering could remove the quantum assembly of one of our quantum torpedoes... and tactical fire it precisely less than a kilometer from the coordinates where our probe vanished..."

She looked up at her commanding officer.

"At least this way we should learn a bit more than what we do now."

"Not that it is all that hard to achieve, considering we still know next to nothing..." Elliago chimed in with a crooked smile.

Kheren listened and he too took a moment to think. There was something nagging at the back of his mind each time someone spoke about hailing frequencies... but for now, it only gave him a vague feeling of unease; nothing he could use to even begin justifying not to follow such a basic procedure. The proposal of his chief engineer backed up by Irksos was giving him another option and some time to ponder, possibly remember, before committing to the obvious course of action his first officer always came back to.

"Work on this, people. Lieutenant Solius, once the modifications to a torpedo are done, inform Lieutenant Aron'son that firing is ready. Lieutenant Irksos, calibrate your instruments for maximum data collection from this attempt. And if there is something or someone down there, they might react to us if we knock that hard on their door."

"Aye, Sir. Already telling Warrant Officer Stark to pull a quantum torpedo from storage and begin modifications."

He relayed his commands to his staff, making sure that Baoule would be present for the modification. The torpedo was inactive while it was being serviced, but he wanted to make sure that there were no... complications while they had a war head out of it's high security storage. It would be a few minutes for his officers to move the device and ready it for action.

Aron'Son nodded in acknowledgement.

"I will have one of my tactical officers meet them in case there are any... complications. They are capable of disarming the warhead completely."

"Good idea..." the engineer mumbled.

His orders had been given and now it was just a waiting game.

"Number One, supervise this operation please," Kheren finished.

After a few minutes, S'Tan's comm bleeped and Lt Baoule's voice came through. "All set Sir. The torpedo is loading into the bay now. We're returning to engineering."

S'Tan acknowledged their report and looked to tactical to confirm the receipt of the weapon. "Aron'Son, we are ready to lock and load."

The large Jem'Hadar nodded.

"Targeting the point of lost contact, proximity detonation set... On your order, Captain."

"Lieutenant Irksos?"

"Probe is in the same tube as the modified torpedo, Captain. It will move at a safe distance from it in a dual spread pattern keeping a lock on it the whole time."

Kheren nodded and brought his four oculars back to the main viewer.

"Mister Aron'Son... fire away."

Two points of light rushed from under the image and separated from one another; one moved away in a graceful arc while the other went straight towards the planet where the last probe had disappeared.

"On course, reaching coordinates for detonation in three... two... one..."

A brief flash of light brightened the strangely out of focus image of the planet in a peculiar tear-dropped shape towards it... then it was gone almost as fast as it had exploded.

"Is it supposed to do that?" wondered Elliago as silence took the bridge while everyone waited for the science officer to report.

"Lieutenant?"

"Captain... according to the probe's data, all the energy of the torpedo was... dissipated... into nothingness."

Kheren's antennae waved in confusion.

"That is not very scientific, Lieutenant."

"Agreed, Sir; nothing is created, nothing is destroyed is an elementary concept of science, at least regarding energy and matter within any universe we can exist in. Fact is, the residue of the casing itself of the torpedo is still there, spreading with the planet's gravity well... but all the photons have literally vanished. There's not even one to be found anywhere, not even in any subspace domain or any of the basic eleven dimensions harnessed by a quantum detonation."

"Theory?"

It took another moment for the astrophysicist to respond.

"Only one that I can relate to this, Captain; it dates back from the first attempt to cross the Great Galactic Barrier by the USS Enterprise during the mid-twenty-third century. As implausible and illogical as it may sound, Sir, this... field surrounding the planet behaves like an area of... negative energy."

"Could it be a planetary defense shield?" Aron'Son questioned.

"A distinct possibility... *if* this is not a natural phenomenon, like the Great Barrier it seems to emulate... although in the case of the galactic border, the sheer size and location of it preclude the probability of it being artificial. Here it is somewhat the opposite; what we know of natural planetary formation is inconsistent with the presence of such a field... above and beyond the fact that such a field makes no sense to begin with."

"Yet, it flies..."

Noticing everyone looking at him, Aguk Snow realized he had thought outloud and so explained himself.

"I was remembering ancient aviation history on Earth; when the inventor of the helicopter presented his concept, it was refuted as impossible, even if it was presented as the very same flying principles as those a beetle use to fly."

"So it is there," Kheren agreed. "What can we do about it?"

"If it is protecting something by negating any and all forms of energy, any transmission will no more get through than our torpedo explosion did," Lyrya postulated with an apologetic nod towards Redding sitting on the other side of the command chair occupied by their commanding officer.

"So, energy is absorbed or nullified or whatever..." Elliago asked in turn. "What about matter? What happened to the probe we first sent into it?"

"Highest probability is that it lost all power almost instantly and it's initial momentum sent it intact but inert towards the planet where it eventually burned up in the atmosphere," Irksos proposed as an answer. "We can distinguish the planet and it's layers through that no-energy zone so it is safe to assume that matter is unaffected... and that this field surrounds but does not touch the planet itself, else it could not be the way it is."

"Come to think of it, how *can* it be like this if that field absorbs all energy? You can't have a class M planet like that without energy from the star," Kheren wondered.

"Unless that field is selective... which does suggest the possibility of an intelligence behind it," Elliago pointed out, ... maybe literally."

"And if so, one which we can not contact as no signal can go through it," Lyrya finished.

Kheren kept silent, waiting for his officers to propose what was coming to his Starfleet mindset... or speak against it.

"Then we go through," the tactical officer stated simply.

"You're joking," Elliago exclaimed.

One look at the Jem'Hadar's unblinking stare sent the Deltan's own eyes skyward.

"Of course you're not..."

The engineer had kept silent while the other members of the bridge discussed the issue at hand. He only had limited knowledge of the Federation exploration of the Great Barrier. The Romulans, on the other hand, had declared the area a no-fly and had spent minimal resources trying to determine how to breach it. As far as he was aware, Kirk's Enterprise once had a run in with a cult who wanted to take a ship past the barrier. So of course, they hijacked the most advanced ship in the Federation navy. Kirk eventually saved his ship from destruction, but Starfleet never got the data from what would have happened if the ship crossed over the negative energy.

"I don't think going through it is a logical move," The engineer started, "We have to assume that this field will react to a ship as much as it reacted to the probes and torpedo. Earlier, I did suggest that the cultists take a tour of their new home. Maybe now is the time. I believe that the Earth Russians sent monkeys into space to test their original rockets, no? Maybe we should use some monk...people...of our own. We all know that they would say yes immediately. Let them bear some of this burden too."

"You're joking!"

Again, one look was enough for the bald doctor and to close his eyes in disbelief.

"Of course you're not..."

Then he looked straight at Kheren.

"May I remind the Captain Sir that animal experimentation has been outlawed in the Federation since it's foundation... Human testing long before that.. and that shouldering the burden is in *our* job description. And all that, Captain Sir, is in the eventuality of this being a natural phenomenon. On the other hand, if this is not a natural phenomenon but the product of some intelligence, violating the established boundaries of another culture..."

"I get the point, Doc, thank you," the Andorian cut him before he could start reciting what everyone knew. "This mystery will have to wait. Mister Snow; head for the third planet."

"Course plotted and laid in, Sir."

Kheren only made a hand gesture and the image of the planet that filled the whole viewer started to move aside to reveal again the unknown universe surrounding them, the star of the system shining at their back around the shadow of one of the planet's moons. Barely a few seconds into breaking out of lunar orbit, Lyrya turned her empty stare to him.

"Sir, Governor Sufra demands to speak to you."

"Yes, Governor Sufra."

"Captain Kheren! Why are you moving away? You have no authority to abort the mission!"

"I am not, Governor Sufra. This planet represents a definite hazard and a possible Prime Directive problem. Under *all* my standing orders, I am now investigating the second possible colonization site. If this second one proves adequate, we will start you on your preliminary survey and preparations while we ourselves will return to ascertain if the situation here, be it one or the other, is not potentially problematic in the short or long run."

"Your orders are to deliver us here, Captain. The rest is under my responsibility."

"As long as you are aboard my ship, you are *my* responsibility; thus, my judgment prevails. Kheren out."

They could only hear the woman's outraged breath intake before the counselor closed the channel after her captain made a cutting gesture accross his own throat. Then she cut off the insistent buzzing that followed for more than a minute on her intraship comm panel.

"She will not let you off that easily you know," Elliago whispered near the Andorian's antennae.

"It takes almost two minutes at a run to get from the main observation deck to the bridge, Doc."

"Not much time to compose your last will and testament," smirked the Deltan.

"I could erect a level ten force field around the bridge," Aron'Son said and everyone on the bridge knew he was serious and not attempting to contribute to the doctor's joke.

The Romulan engineer at that moment pressed a few quick commands on his console.

"I apologize, Sir, but the primary turbolift is down for a quick diagnostic scan. I noticed a strange power fluctuation a few minutes ago, so I deemed it high priority. It will be back up in five minutes. I suppose the governor will have to wait a bit..."

He had a devilish grin. He felt like he was back on a Warbird.

Kheren's face remained impassive as usual and his eyes never wavered from the screen; but his antennae curved sharply inward and his voice had a very uncharacteristic light tone to it.

"Officer's thinking, Lieutenant."

He knew that, in five minutes or so, there would be "Hell to pay" as the old Earth saying went; but Kheren was confident he would manage somehow to swim back from those frigid dark waters. What was important was that the mission, his orders and his conscience would all be satisfied if at all possible. If not... well, he knew exactly where his priorities, his powers and his responsibilities were. And it seemed that his crew fairly knew that just as well and would not let him step the wrong way.

That is Starfleet for you, he thought with satisfaction.

* * *

With a quizzical expression veiled across his face, the captain of the USS Phoenix twisted his upper body toward the communications officer.

"Counselor Bijoŭ, bring up all Starfleet records and other relevant information related to the USS Nuntio."

It took but seconds for the bald Deltan woman to answer her commanding officer's request.

"USS Nuntio, Nova class, official Federation News starship assigned to the Hromi sector and coverage of Lotus Fleet's activities following its remarkable involvement in the Last Borg War. Captain Caroline Rousseau, commanding. Standard crew complement of eighty, all usual scientific personnel replaced by communications experts, sensors specialists and newspeople, making a third of the crew civilians. Last recorded transmission was a distress call from the vicinity of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly prior to Operation Horizon, when the anomaly was still running wild across the sector. They were being pulled within a subspace fracture after being severely damaged by a plasma ejection. Declared missing in action since then."

"Apparently, they managed to travel the fracture like the USS Artemis did before her but emerged this side of the anomaly instead of back in our own universe," observed Livingstone out loud.

"I read severe damage to hull warps nacelles and no power output from hull core," now reported M'ata. "Impulse power is also out. Only reserve power active but at very low levels. Life support also at minimal levels, barely enough to sustain standard humanoid life and only on certain decks. A few of them are even open to outer space. And... Sir... all phaser strips are burned out and the torpedo launchers and magazines are empty... as if they exhausted themselves in a firefight; but I read no weapons damage at all on hull... only those consistent with exposure to plasma discharges."

"No discernible life signs, Captain," then announced the science chief also reading his sensor data. "However... there is some faint oxygen and carbon dioxide process going on in there... which would not have remained for so long on a dead ship. It is however too low for animal breathing; closer to what is proper for plant life, Sir."

Syntron listened intently as information was imparted by each of his officers. As the ship came within sight of the derelict starship on the main viewscreen, the Vulcan stood up and moved near the science console.

The Borg war was years ago and the condition of this vessel is abnormal, Syntron thought. And they went right through the anomaly... what happened to them?

Something was not adding up accordingly in the mind of the captain, but he could not yet put his finger on it.

"Continue scanning this vessel thoroughly as we move in closer," he commanded as he gazed down at the readings as well.

"Aye, Sir," Livingstone acknowledged without raising his gaze from his instruments, cerebral implants flashing furiously.

"Unable to raise them, Captain," Bijou added after a moment. "All I get is the disaster beacon."

"Anticipated risks involved in sending in an away team?" he queried to his bridge officers as he looked back at the curious image on the viewscreen.

His chief of security turned in her chair to face him.

"Without conclusive data, risk assessment is tentative at best, Captain. Environmental hazards seem minimal and well within standard rescue operation protocols. Since we don't know yet what happened there, we should first and foremost prepare for sudden environmental or technical failure. I recommend maintaining skeletal transporter lock on every away team member to counter any interference in case of a need to bail out."

"I for one would like to know as much as we can about the atmosphere on that ship before I take a team over." Riker said

"Life support is minimal but enough to sustain life with the support of our PIDS," the X'El officer reported. "Breathing would feel to most like being on top of a mountain but otherwise tolerable unless you start running. Engineering and bridge however are depressurized... although there is no hull breach and all hatches are closed."

"Continue scanning and hailing protocols" the captain replied before turning his attention back to his first officer.

"Commander Riker... prepare an away team to investigate what happened to this vessel and its crew. Take Commander Rogers and a small team of engineers along with security to help re-pressurize and stabilize both the bridge and engineering areas of the ship. They may also be able to stabilize life support and other requisite systems throughout the ship as your team explores this vessel."

Riker nodded and began to look around the bridge making eye contact with the officers that were to accompany him.

Contemplating the overall circumstances for a moment, the captain continued.

"Minimally, we should at least be able to activate command logs and other data to help us with our analysis of what transpired there. Environmental suits may be requisite for access into more hazardous areas of the ship. A skeletal transporter lock from here is a prudent recommendation and will be maintained throughout the time that any member of the away team remains there."

Riker pointed at Commander Rogers.

"Salvage and possible repair; get a good team together."

Rogers, nodding at Syntron, looked over to Commander Riker while tapping his comm badge to contact engineering.

"Rogers to Andrews; meet me in transporter room one. Bring Ensign Parker and Master Chief Gorski, get your EV suit's and get to transport. Also, bring a few TR-five nintey's and a couple engineering tool box's."

Rising from his chair David made his way forward to stand nearby the XO, awaiting his lead to start the away mission.

Continuing to look around the bridge Riker continued to appoint his team members. He started with a simple nod to security chief M'rrin M'ata.

"Gear up Lieutenant."

"Aye, Commanderr," the imposing felinoid woman acknowledged as she stood up and immediately nodded for her replacement to take over tactical.

Walking over to Lieutenant Livingstone, Riker leaned over the birdman's shoulder.

"Lieutenant, security is going to need as much help as they can get on this one. Grab a rifle and suit up."

The joke was obvious, but still the confidence Riker showed in Livingstone to blend with the crew was a compliment.

"Seriously though, we are going to be sending back a lot of data I need you to be able to sort through and give us as much feedback on what we are finding as possible. Sorry but maybe next time."

Again, the X'Ell stood beak open and blinking the whole time. But then he finally nodded in his peculiar sideways manner.

"Not to worry, Sir; I'll serve you much better here. My service oath of non-violence and Federation compliance to it is in my Starfleet record."

It sounded like a joke but it was not. A X'ell was physiologically and psychologically as incapable of harming another living being as a Human was to live unprotected in outer space. Still, it had taken some time even for the intelligent science officer to grasp the playful teasing of his superior officer for what it was.

Looking around Riker saw that he had assembled an engineering team, security and had operations on stand by for processing of information.

Although somewhat reserved, the Orion Ops chief stood up and addressed the executive officer from her station.

"Commander Riker, I would like to offer my services with the away team mission. I could work with Commander Rogers to access the condition of ship systems and then allocate resources required to bring them back on-line."

Elisha could see a glint of hesitation in the first officer's expression, so before he responded, she continued.

"Sir, even though I am the Operations chief here I have years of experience running diagnostic analysis in both engineering and science applications. This may be of use to you as we investigate this ship."

She did not utter another word but stood waiting his decision.

Riker looked over at Commander Rogers, who just shrugged as if to pass the decision back to Commander Riker. Smiling Riker nodded.

"Sounds like a good idea to me, gear up and meet us in the transporter room."

"Yes Sir" the Orion officer spoke as she contacted her replacement and then began preparations for the away mission.

Riker looked around the bridge as the officers began to prepare.

"Everyone gear up, grab what you need and meet in the main transporter room."

He activated his combadge.

"Medical, this is Commander Riker, I am going to need medical personnel for an away team equipped and ready in transporter room two in five minutes."

"Aye, Sir."

As the away team was being assembled by his first officer, the captain of the Phoenix addressed his security chief.

"Transport over with your team to the USS Nuntio first to secure the area, before the remainder of the away team is ready to join you. Signal when you have arrived and keep your channel open until the others get there and are situated."

* * *

It started as a routine day on Starbase Lotus. For the people of the headquarters of the elite division of Starfleet in the Hromi sector of Federation Space, this meant that something unexpected happened.

"Fleet Captain Sir," called out the chief sensor officer.

Allen Samji interrupted his conversation with the quartermaster to walk up to the impressive sensor station of the starbase which was monitoring all activities within the entire twenty cubic light years of the sector.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"A vessel, Sir, on direct course to us. It just dropped out of warp; distance one billion kilometers, closing at full impulse. ETA three point seven hours, standard speed."

"Identify."

"Transponder code reads USS Asimov, Nova class."

"Admiral Ross' daughter command? They were assigned to study the Sarabande asteroid... They're not due to report in for R&R and resupply for at least three months. What are they doing here?"

"Unknown, Sir; they're not answering standard hails."

"Is their signal jammed? Any damage?"

"Undetermined; no residual energy discharges on their hull nor debris trail, no interference field in their vicinity... We get no return message but... we do get some short static discharges of a peculiar intensity from the comm channel."

"Define peculiar, lieutenant."

"Well, Sir... It sounds like they are trying to answer, but then, each time, it's as if their frequency was suddenly overloaded with excess output and fries out."

"Any power surge from or near them?"

"Negative, Sir; power emissions are standard and steady. Only their comm system seems defective."

"Not enough to justify returning to base, especially for a science ship filled with master technicians and researchers." concluded Samji with a frown.

After a moment, he turned towards the tall dark-haired woman coming to join them.

"Commander, which ship do we have nearby?"

"None, Sir," instantly responded Kathleen Schmidt, also frowning as he did. "The Spectre is still escorting the Romulan squadron of Admiral Tomalak back to the Neutral Zone, the McKenzie is investigating a possible Klingon incursion near the border and the Pittsburgh is back guarding Kzinti Space while both the Republic and the Wisconsin are transiting new officers and supplies to sector 001. The Aurora is out training our new cadets in the Paulson nebula and is therefore out of contact. The Alsea is ongoing full reengineering work on her three warp cores. And both the Phoenix and the Horizon are still on their exploration and colonization mission beyond the Azimuth Horizon."

"You would think this fleet has enough ships..." grumbled the starbase commander. "Send a class XI shuttle with a full complement to intercept the Asimov and provide both technical and medical assistance... and some security as well."

"Aye, Sir."

"Mister Sangliar, feeling up to it?"

The compact, heavy bearded black Tellarite that turned to respond looked like he would jump at his throat.

"Do I look like I'm loitering here... Sir?"

"You always look busy, Lieutenant... You're quite good at it."

The small stout officer grunted as he squared his wide shoulders.

"What did you break this time?"

Samji, with a wry smile, thumbed towards the comm station.

"Were you asleep again the whole time?"

This time, Sangliar chuckled despite trying to hide it under another grunt.

"Good one, Sir... Alright, give me a few runts and I'll go see that mystery ship of yours."

And so saying, he nodded with respect to the fleet captain who could trade barbs so well in the Tellarite style and left the command center for the main hangar where several junior officers were called to meet him there.

"I can never play that insulting game of theirs," commented Schmidt to her commanding officer.

"Takes a bit to get used to, I admit... But just like Klingons respect and demand honor and bravery, Tellarites respect and demand wit and character from those they are expected to interact with. And they make for the best engineers in the Federation."

"And excellent taskmasters to get young officers to shape up," agreed the woman.

Samji's gaze went back to the comm station, his face now pensive.

"Hopefully... because there is more here than meets the eye."

CHAPTER 6: FIRST CONTACT

Jureth was grateful for the personal inertial dampeners that were now standard issue on Starfleet vessels just then. He gripped the arms of the command chair as he issued orders

"Red Alert! Mister Hunter, evasive maneuvers. Mister Palos signal Horizon inform them we are taking damage from an unknown source. Lieutenant Ji'lan source? Is there a vessel in the vicinity?"

"Aye, Sir! Switching viewer to aft!"

On the screen, the whole image shifted to the rearward view. Against the backdrop of far away stars partly cut off by the reversed curve of the giant blue-white planet, pulses of destructive energies framed the image, coming from what looked like a six-pronged fork-like elongated shape ending with the same number of short, slim nacelles. There were numerous markings on the hull of the object that made look like it was almost furred. A pair of narrow yellowish lights shone over each prong that ended themselves in two jagged edges on top of another. The energy blasts came from between each of those pairs of protrusions and narrowly missed the Polaris as it banked sharply away from the new salvo.

"Definitely a vessel of some kind on a pursuit course to us, light cruiser mass and size, configuration unknown, origin unknown!" Kalaar reported between clenched teeth, fingers already fully arming weapons and sending deflector pulses to reinforce the protective energy shields.

And not an instant too soon. Another blast glanced off the starboard nacelle and again sent a sinister vibration right up to them.

"Propulsion system appears as an amazingly large number of sublight gravimetric and atomic maneuvering thrusters systems and a microsingularity-based warp field for faster than light travel," added Ji'Lian with her eyes glued to her sensor readouts. "Weapons are small gravimetric torpedoes similar to what the Borg used to have... each impact is hampering our maneuvering and draining the gravitons of our shields."

Another barrage of energy blobs forced them to bank sharply to starboard, for a second straining even their portable inertial dampeners.

"Shields at seventy-seven percent!" announced the tactical officer. "I detect some kind of very powerful tractor beam emitters on standby aimed at us... a lot of them! I can't read within the hull itself because of some very heavy armor shielding akin to our own regenerative armor."

The Polaris swerved again and, although the salvo missed it completely, there was again an ominous vibration all across the hull, as if the ship itself was trembling in panic.

"They are forcing us against the planet's atmosphere and gravity well, Sir!" helmsman's Hunter suddenly exclaimed.

The ship's intercom just then beeped.

"Bridge! This is engineering! Structural integrity field is already straining near design limits!"

"They are putting us between the planet and themselves," understood Kalaar. "Either their blasts will get us... or we will smash against the planet's electromagnetic field, fall into it's gravity well or burn into it's atmosphere."

"And they are jamming all frequencies, Sir," finished Palos with a somber tone.

"Options," Oseno demanded as he tried to keep his cool "Can we go to warp?"

"We'll have to outmaneuver them to avoid a collision; whoever they are, they fly in our path every move we make," Hunter answered as he banked the ship from another volley of gravitic projectiles.

The ship shook nevertheless as it skimmed the planet's gravity well at a hard angle.

"Sir, at warp, we will only transfer the conflict at a greater speed," Kalaar analyzed, fingers hovering over the weapon controls. "These gravimetric charges are as fast as our torpedoes. And the power output of their shield is significantly greater than our own, even at full capacity. They would get us by fire attrition unless they have fewer projectiles than we do."

"Negative," Ji'lian countered as they were again shaken by a hard brush with the gravitic field of the planet to avoid a salvo. "These projectiles are energy created from gravitons. As long as they stay near a gravimetric source, they can replenish their magazines indefinitely."

It was his science officer who provided a first option.

"I have analyzed their propulsion system; it uses gravimetric currents to propel itself and thrusters for maneuvering. The farther we are from a gravity source like this planet, the less power and speed they will have to move. Sir, if we go away from this planet, better yet this system, our impulse drive will give us a distinct maneuvering advantage... and they will eventually exhaust their torpedoes just as we do."

"Or... if we go in..." Kalaar suddenly realized. "We have atmospheric capabilities; maybe they don't. And if they do, the closer to a massive gravity source like this frozen gas giant, the less maneuverability they will have... and the stronger gravity of the planet will hamper the targeting and trajectory of their torpedoes the same way."

They shook harder this time as one of those projectiles impacted their shields.

"Shields at forty-seven percent!"

It took Oseno less than a second to make his decision.

"Mister Hunter, I hope your atmospheric flight qualifications are as good as Captain Siduri claimed. Take us into the atmosphere of the planet, maximum allowable speed. Mister Palos, keep trying to push out a distress call to Horizon. Mister Kalaar, see if we can add some punch to our weapons to at least disable theirs long enough for us to get out of here."

"Here goes nothing," grumbled the pilot.

As her phasers blasted warning shots that forced the other to dodge away precipitously, the Polaris suddenly banked under a return salvo and swirled in an sharp elliptical arc downward almost like those antique propeller fighter airplanes of Earth as it plunged towards the immense blue white orb of the planet.

It shook as it righted itself into a proper angle to enter the thick atmospheric cover of the frozen gas world, fortunately amplifying the evasive maneuvers of the ship against the following energy discharges of the enemy vessel.

"They're engaging in a pursuit course," reported Kalaar.

On the screen, they saw the alien vessel almost flip end over end to match their sudden change of direction and also angle towards the planet. And then, as they too started to shake and heat up under the friction of the dense gases of the atmosphere, it suddenly split apart like a fragile piece of wood shattered in multiple pieces along its length.

Several officers almost whooped with joy and relief as they saw the strange ship break apart. Then, all open jaws froze in astonishment.

Their pursuer had not broke apart under atmospheric pressure and heat; instead, it had detached itself into six identical, stiletto-shaped parts, larger than an old style runabout but still smaller than an escort type starship like the Polaris.

Like a six-fingered hand opening to grab and crush them, the separated alien vessel modules now plunged after them into the planet's thick cloud cover, using the thick clouds to try to hide their movement, flashing colored lights briefly to one another before resuming the chase with renewed speed.

"They're trying to flank us on both sides!" instantly understood the tactical officer.

Oseno nodded grimly acknowledging the assessment, this was beginning to look like a kobyashi Maru scenario.

"Enough running...Mister Kalaar, quantum torpedoes, full spread aft, multiple targets. Mister Hunter, steady as she goes, maneuver as you see fit."

"Aye, Sir," both officers acknowledged.

As the Polaris plunged deeper into the dense cloud covering of the planet, the pursuing squadron spread out in two groups, port and starboard, and closed in slowly but surely. Their energy projectiles were fired in alternative salvos, forcing their prey to fly in an ever narrowing corridor directly towards the planetary surface. Their intent was clear; either they would be blasted out of the sky or they would crash.

Using the clouds as a screen, Hunter managed to bring about the Starfleet warship to swerve and angle between both flanking groups and at the same time fire her torpedoes fore and aft. Five color-changing stars flew towards each attack group, hitting them in a fast succession of blinding flashes and thundering detonations within the cloudy atmosphere, which ignited briefly with cold gases brutally heated and burnt with an added roar and light.

"Direct hits!" confirmed Kalaar. "All their shields weakened ten percent. They're on evasive, moving to regroup."

"Those burning gases must have blinded their sensors for a brief moment," hypothesized Ji'Lian. "These clouds are so dense to begin with, scanners have difficulty penetrating them a few kilometers beyond direct line of sight. Burning methane at close range would overload all signals briefly."

The hunters indeed had spread out to avoid the brunt of the impacts but they all trailed some burning fumes around their energy shields as they scattered within the clouds to obviously regroup for another pass as the tactical officer had pointed out.

"Shields at thirty-six percent," announced Kalaar after another volley that shook them hard.

"Integrity field buckling!" the chief engineer exclaimed. "We can't fly this way much longer in such a dense atmosphere without adequate shielding!"

"They're still jamming all frequencies," Palos informed them all.

"Enemy closing in from 135 mark 45 and 235 mark 315... overtaking us from behind, port and starboard," Kalaar then read from his targeting scanners. "Their supply of projectiles is inexhaustible as long as they have power and their shields and armor are in better shape than ours. Sir, if this hide and seek game continues like this, they'll have us by simple attrition in the long run."

Oseno needed something to turn the tide of this fight, at least long enough for his ship to escape. He briefly recalled a maneuver by then Commander William Riker where he used metreon gas collected in the Enterprise E's ramscoops to destroy pursuing enemies; except in the Polaris case, they didn't need to collect the gas. It was already there and he didn't need to destroy his enemies, just slow them down.

"Mister Hunter, take us back up, maximum speed. Mister Kalaar, give me another full spread, maximum yield. If Lieutenant Ji'lan is correct we can blind their sensors long enough to break the atmosphere and go to warp. As soon as Mister Hunter pulls up, you fire those torpedoes and set them to detonate in front of our friends. Or, if anyone has a better idea I'm open to suggestions."

"Ah the Riker maneuver; excellent, Sir!" Kalaar immediately exclaimed. Then, he frowned as he implemented the torpedo arming his commanding officer had ordered; "But... Captain; once we escape, either they will relocate and possibly pursue us... or they will fail to do so or decide otherwise and resume their original course... towards the colony."

"My plan is to take us back to Horizon, Lieutenant," Oseno explained. "If they pursue us, at maximum warp we should reach Horizon and she can cover us. If they resume their original course we can immediately contact Captains Kheren and Syntron and warn them. However if we don't try to escape there won't be anything left of us to do either of those things. But, as I said... I am open to suggestions, though if you have one I suggest you make it quickly."

"Only presenting options, Sir," apologized the tactical officer. "And you're covering them all. Torpedo spread ready, detonation distance calculated, target locked.; on your word, Captain."

"Escape trajectory towards colony site locked in," added Hunter with a nod to his fellow officer. "Reaching upper atmosphere in twenty seconds; orbital ecliptic in thirty; warp power at the ready... and if they angled back to us as they did earlier, they should appear directly aft... "

"Now!" cut in Ji'lan glued to her scanners.

On the screen still tracking their aft view, two squadrons of three dagger-shaped ships bursted through the cloud cover in a converging charge, spitting fiery goutts of energy towards them. In a desperate maneuver only a nimble flying machine in a dense gaseous environment could achieve, the Polaris went into a complete roll, managing to dodge all the projectiles. They all flew past them between their spinning nacelles like burning oil drops between the turning blades of a fan just as they bursted through another thick cloud.

"Fire!"

"Torpedoes away!"

barely a second later, the balls of energy hit the clouds they just emerged from and it suddenly flared like paper thrown into a blaze, engulfing the image of the chasing vessels as they desperately tried to swerve away without colliding with one another. Then the fire spread out in the heavens and blinded them all.

The viewer switched to a forward angle and the blackness confused them an instant, until the flickering of unknown stars filled their eyes.

"Warping towards the inner planets in three... two... one... warpspeed!"

So close to a planet's gravity field, the sudden acceleration to hundreds of times the speed of light strained their lifesaving inertial dampeners so much that, even with the portable one they wore in addition to that of the ship itself, they all felt queasy in their stomachs as the stars jumped into streaks of lights before a blinding flash filled the whole screen. Then, they saw the fiery orange ball of the star grow by the second as they flew towards it.

"Warp 9, Sir," the helmsman said with a sigh of relief. "ETA with last position of the Horizon; ten minutes."

"Still no answer from them," Palos reported. "Signal might be blocked by one of the planets between which they were flying when we left them. Can't raise the Phoenix either, Sir; that I can't explain for now; our comm system is fully operational. It's like they simply don't receive us."

"No sign of pursuit yet, Sir," Kalaar then added with a tone that was anything but one of relief.

"Keep trying to raise Captain Kheren Mister Palos, worst comes to worst they'll know something is wrong when we come out of warp, or they'll pick us up on sensors before then."

Oseno sat back in the command chair and almost sighed with relief himself, but held it back wanting to present himself as the calm and collected captain of a starship, not the prone to emotional outbursts security officer he was not that long ago. For the third time in recent memory he'd almost lost his ship, and it was different with the Polaris than it was with the Alsea. When the Alsea was falling apart from battle damage there was at least an enemy they could fight, that they could damage. Here their quantum torpedoes had barely scratched this as yet unknown species shields, it reminded him of the Enterprise D's first encounter with the Borg. The Polaris had been outmaneuvered and outgunned, and she was close to the pinnacle of Starfleet escort design, but there had been no Q to save them. It was due to ingenuity of her crew that the little escort had managed to get away at all.

"Oseno to engineering, damage report."

"We're pretty beat up, Sir, the structural integrity field is going to require some significant repairs when we can manage," replied the Andorian engineer Akaal. "I've stabilized it, but we will need Lieutenant Solius' expertise when we get back to the ship. Everything else is...marginal. We blew out a couple of conduits in the shield system, but those are bypassed and our impulse drive is a little shaken from the atmospheric flight but some calibrations and adjustments once we're docked should fix that."

"Understood, Mister Akaal, thank you; Oseno out."

Jureth turned back toward the viewer and waited for the sight of the Horizon to fill it, and as far as he was concerned it would be just as good as when the ship under the command of Tom Paris had rescued the Alsea from the Klingons and Romulans.

His thoughts were interrupted by the low growling voice of his tactical officer.

"Sir... they're back."

The viewer switched aft and the now familiar form of the alien light cruiser appeared, albeit strangely different.

"Overtaking us at warp 9.5, Sir... and they have reconnected. But I read some hull damage, especially along one side... and one of the six parts seems to be missing altogether."

"Confirmed," Ji'lan said her eyes to her scanner readouts. "Power output lower by seventeen percent and overall mass by fourteen percent from initial reading."

"I don't know about you but to me it looks... angry," offered Palos. "And... they are again jamming us."

"Any sign of Horizon? We should be close to her by now." Oseno responded "and just for kicks Mister Palos try to hail them anyway. All frequencies, all channels...use morse code if you have to."

Palos jerked upright as if oseno had just slapped him.

"Morse code... that's it!"

He turned towards the Bajoran with a smug smile on his face.

"Sir, those flashing lights we saw on those separated parts of the alien ship... They were LOS lasercomm signals; coded coherent light used for communication. That's how they could coordinate their attacks under all that comm jamming of theirs. We can easily do the same with just one phaser emitter and contact the Horizon, even if only by reflecting it on those moons hiding her from us."

The ship banked hard to avoid a first volley from their pursuer resuming their attack on them.

"And we can scare off our friends back there just like before, Sir," then said Kalaar grinning wolfishly. "Since you reminded me of the Riker maneuver, I had engineering collect methane from the planet's atmosphere with our ramscoops when we flew there. And I have torpedoes ready in the aft tube."

Oseno smiled.

"Excellent work gentlemen... proceed."

Jureth sat back proud of his people, and with new respect for Lieutenant Palos. The intelligence operative had proven himself more than capable during this mission so far. Jureth hadn't trusted Palos when Starfleet Intelligence forced the brash, cocky officer onto his staff, but the man was showing himself to be a true Starfleet officer and capable of accomplishing any task set in front of him.

And they did not let him down.

On the viewer, a thick gaseous trail formed behind the Polaris, lightly tinted blue by the computer rendering of the screen to make it visible to the bridge officers as it spread like a fog between them and the enemy craft closing in fast. Then, five color-changing stars spread out in a circular pattern to explode within the methane cloud at the precise moment the alien attacker was engulfed by it. A blinding, blueish fire suddenly flared up and spread like flames on an oil patch, The elongated ship of the unknown cruiser emerged from it, for a moment burning like a torch for a moment. But the coldness of space barely snuffed out the flames that several explosions dotted the already scarred hull, fueling anew the clinging remnants of the methane again for a few seconds. When the fires finally died out, the strange alien vessel started to drift like a burned out log, only a few lights still flickering here and there.

"Got her, Sir!" Kalaar exclaimed, his fist pumping the air as a brief sigh of relief went around the bridge.

"The methane fully hit their armor and vaporized much of it," explained Ji'lan looking at her sensor readouts. "They are disabled; minimal power, no propulsion, tactical and sensor systems offline. It seems that, with more than a sixth of their structure gone, they had to shut their shields down to get enough power to overtake us as they did..."

"And they were going too fast to avoid the unexpected gas cloud," finished Hunter grinning.

"Firing pattern Sierra also deliberately kept them in a straight line of flight to avoid the surrounding torpedoes," explained Kalaar. "This attack pattern is used to strike multiple target or seek an unlocated enemy in a close area; but here, it lured them into trying to avoid the spreading salvo through it's empty center of fire; which was of course us, their intended target. That put them nicely in between all the detonations within the densest part of the gas cloud."

The science chief answered Jureth's next question before he stated it.

"Intermittent and undefined lifesigns, Sir; their remaining armor still reflects much of our scans."

"Jamming also still effective," Palos reported. "But I sent a lasercomm hail and detailed report to the Horizon."

Oseno nodded "Good work people, very good work. Resume our course to Horizon Mister Hunter, our friends hopefully won't be attempting to slow us down further."

* * *

"Captain... I'm receiving a transmission from the Polaris... Computer identifies it as a lasercomm signal reflected on the moon near us."

Kheren's facial eyes widened as his antennae perked up in surprise towards his chief counselor. "Lasercomm? Why not tribal drums or smoke signals?" also wondered Elliago.

"Are they in trouble?" asked the captain, ignoring the dry humor of his CMO.

"They report being under attack by an unknown vessel. They sustained some damage, heading at maximum warp back to us... attacker overtaking them... requesting assistance."

"Red alert. Mister Snow, full impulse back to the source of that signal."

With a grace and swiftness astonishing for a ship this size, the Horizon swirled around the moon and headed outward, shields shimmering around her, torpedo ports opening and phaser strips heating up.

The Polaris and her pursuer appeared both on Aron'Son's tactical scanners the moment they left the blocking mass of the mysterious Eden IV. But merely a second later, they registered a brief exchange of weapons fire and all went blank on his readouts.

"I'm detecting a huge explosion ahead of us," Irksos reported. "I read methane under sudden combustion."

Kheren signaled Lyrya with a hand on hers and the blind Aenar nodded back to him.

"Polaris, this is Horizon. We are moving towards your position. Do you copy?"

Aboard the Polaris it was Ji'lan who detected the escort's mothership first.

"Captain, the Horizon, Sir, dead ahead."

"On screen."

Jureth wanted to see the Horizon not because he didn't believe Ji'llan, but because he needed to assure himself that their cavalry had indeed arrived.

"Mister Palos," Jureth ordered; "signal them again via lasercom. They are undoubtedly trying to hail us, and might send a security team aboard if we don't respond somehow."

"Aye Sir; signalling again, reporting all subspace frequencies being actively jammed."

It didn't take long for Lyrya in the Medical command chair manning the comm system to figure out what was going on.

"Captain, receiving another lasercomm transmission from the Polaris. There is a jamming field nearby that prevents any other generally broadcast transmissions... even radio waves."

"There is a vessel of unknown configuration in the immediate vicinity; it is the source of that interference," Irksos confirmed from her scans. "It seems to be adrift, low on power and sporting serious hull damage from methane burning and quantum discharges. Intermittent and weak life signs. The Polaris also shows traces of gravimetric impacts... something similar to Borg torpedo damage."

"That's like no Borg ship I ever saw before," Kheren commented as he detailed the strange multipointed dagger-like shape of the strange craft slowly drifting beyond the approaching shape of the Aquarius class escort.

"I'm reconverting the photon emissions to audio-video format," Lyrya announced.

The image on the screen wavered and then became that of the bridge of Oseno's ship.

"Commander; are you and your crew alright?"

Oseno stood as Kheren's face appeared on the viewer.

"Shaken, not stirred, Sir," he replied with a wry smile. "We were tracking an emission trail we came across as we started our mapping mission. It turned out to be that of our friends back there. They attacked us without so much as a hello."

The Horizon's engineer spoke up, as the data came into his console from the Polaris.

"Captain, sensor readings are coming in from the Polaris. Heavy damage to their internal systems, along with some carbon scoring, like they flew through a inferno. I suggest the ship come in for docking as soon as we determine it is safe. No significant sensor readings coming from the enemy ship. They have some sort of reflective armor. It doesn't seem active from what I can see. I suggest high caution, it might be a trap."

"Whatever material they use for their hull or minimal security energy field they still have, it is also able to scramble a transporter signal... enough to make beaming over highly inadvisable." added Irksos, eyes glued to her scanners.

"I agree with Mister Solius assessment of our damage," Oseno said with a nod "as far as their armor goes my science officer believes we may have battered it pretty badly with our little light show, the Polaris version of the Riker Maneuver. Our last sweep showed their systems mostly disabled, though I suppose they could be attempting to draw us in."

"Or they could be dying out there!" Doctor Nasaro-Myth objected vehemently. "Captain, they have attacked us, yes, but now, they are effectively neutralized. From this moment on, it becomes our moral duty to help those in need, especially if we are responsible for their suffering."

"Easy for you to say doctor..." Oseno replied with a tone that was unmistakably hostile. "They didn't almost kill you... I'd be perfectly happy firing another torpedo salvo at them, but the Polaris needs to dock for repairs."

Immediately after he uttered his words, he knew he probably shouldn't have. But his blood was still pumping from the heat of battle, his emotions running high, fueled by endorphins and, being Bajoran, they ran high normally anyway. So, for him to hear the doctor insinuate that they were somehow obligated to do anything to assist whomever had nearly killed him and his crew nearly infuriated Jureth and the temper that he worked so hard to control reared itself.

"If you want it easy, Commander, may I suggest you apply for a transfer to flying a desk instead of a starship," the Deltan shot back.

Then he also immediately realized that he was speaking out of emotion, at least as much as from any humanitarian reason he had in mind. After his last experience on the Phoenix, he realized that he had become very sensitive to whatever they were doing out here. Living up to the lofty values of the Federation and the chivalric rules of Starfleet in a cold, uncaring and even hostile universe was no more easy for him than anyone else... That much was certain.

For his part, Redding just smiled at the Bajoran's retort. Jureth had a taste for battle that Neil thought was in to short supply in this era's Starfleet.

"Then it's a good thing you know your duty Commander. Firing on a 'presumed' defenseless target would not look good on a resume."

Then he turned to Kheren.

"Shall I ready an away team, Captain?"

"Shuttle boarding seems to be the best viable option," the Andorian mused aloud for both him and his irate CMO.

"I wouldn't recommend that, Sir," Jureth objected. "they attacked us without even a hail. Sending a boarding party would surely be looked at as a hostile act. We can't hail them via subspace, but my people noted that they communicated via lasercomm when they were attacking us. We may want to at least try sending a message before we send an away team onto an unknown ship."

"Good point, Commander. Counselor, patch me through lasercomm to that ship."

"Quality will not be optimum, Sir, but you will have standard audiovid link with them," Lyrya answered after a few moments working her delicate white fingers on her console.

Kheren stood up.

"This is Captain Kheren of the starship Horizon, representing the United Federation of Planets. Are you able to receive and understand us?"

On the screen, the image of the dark, drifting unknown spacecraft remained like that of a silent metal-hued barracuda lurking between waves. After a few more seconds, Kheren spoke again.

"Our mission is a mission of peace; but you have made an unprovoked attack on our patrolling vessel and forced her to retaliate. Now, there is no reason for hostility between us. We are ready and willing to offer assistance."

Again, only silence and stillness answered him. He was about to repeat his message when Lyrya finally reported what she was hearing in her specially adapted earcomm extension wrapped around one of her antennae.

"Sir? I am receiving a response to your first hail. It was transmitted in a compressed photonic package as a single blip instead of a direct connection."

"On both ships' screens, Lieutenant."

The image became grainy for a moment as the outside view dissolved into another.

This new image was now showing what appeared like a tubular, equipment-filled compartment not unlike the jeffreys tubes of starships of old; except that, instead of a ladder, there was some kind of padding lying on the lower part. On it reclined a singular humanoid. Dressed in what looked like a padded tight-fitting acceleration suit, the only visible part of it's anatomy were it's hands and it's head. Or rather, paws and a muzzle.

For all intent and purpose, the alien looked like a man with the slim but powerful limbs and the large, pointy-haired, furred, long snouted fanged head of a wolf.

And from the wolf head growled a powerful, angry voice.

"We are the Draxx. We are the Third Pride of the Prowler's Star. I am the Alpha and so I speak. We know who *you* are, United Federation of Planets... and we know *whom* you serve. *They* will not enslave *us*."

Jureth was puzzled by the aliens response, but he'd already seen enough in Starfleet not to be overly surprised by their appearance. He wonderd who the Draxx could possibly believe the Federation served unless...

"Could they mean the Undine Sir?" He speculated out loud "The Undine do have the technology to transcend a barrier like the one we crossed to get here, and they have been rather...generous to the Federation lately."

Oseno was thinking of course of the Undine rescue of Lotus Fleet's home starbase from the Romulans and Klingons not that long ago, but he couldn't quite connect how that would make these beings believed the Federation *served* Species 8472.

"Only one way to find out," replied Kheren, as puzzled as his Chief Strategic Officer.

Straightening again, he looked at the screen when Nasaro-Myth whispered near his left ring-bearing antennae.

"Don't look him in the eye, Captain. If these ... Draxx are anything like they look to be, they will see this as a challenge. Wolves become aggressive if you look straight at them. And speak with a higher tone so you do not sound like you're growling at him."

Shifting his eyes high so as to comply with the suggestion without appearing submissive or evasive, Kheren then spoke with a soft, calm tone and lifted his tone a bit.

"We do not serve anyone; we are a collective of more than a hundred worlds working together to ensure mutual peace and prosperity to all. We come out here to meet new people to share knowledge with. We would welcome the friendship of the Draxx. As proof of this, we offer you our assistance in taking care of your wounded, to mend this misunderstanding between us."

There was a pause as the compressed photonic transmission was encoded and sent to the other ship. But the response was swift.

"Lies!" growled the canine humanoid, baring his fearsome theeth in a menacing snarl. "You are invaders! We will not lower our tails to puppets or let you touch our fur! Your pupeteers will eat our brains no longer!"

Aron'Son watched and listened to the exchange between Captain Kheren and the canine like species. His fingers were moving though he said nothing as he pulled tactical data from the ship's sensors as well as from the datalink with the Polaris and began using the ship's computer to analyze the odd vessel in front of them. Clearly they were vulnerable to the methane gas the Polaris had used against them and the gravimetric damage to the escort vessel was interesting to him. Similar to borg torpedoes the gravimetric weapons hampered maneuverability though the Draxx were in no position to take on the Horizon the vigilant soldier wanted to see if he could adapt the Horizon's shields to counter the enemy projectiles. Aron'Son set the computer to begin analyzing the Polaris sensor data from their battle with the Draxx programmed it to look for a way to modulate their shields to counter the weaponry.

Then he stepped over to where Lieutenant Solius was seated.

"Lieutenant, sensor data from the Polaris shows this species uses gravimetric weaponry, I am not aware of any way to mitigate the effects, are you?"

Aboard the Polaris, Lieutenant Palos cut the microphone feed and turned to Oseno,

"I don't like where this is going Sir....perhaps we should raise our shields?"

"Easy, Lieutenant," Jureth replied. "We already fought them and nearly lost, we won't be the ones to start another fight by taking an aggressive posture."

He thought about that statement for a moment, and then looked at his helmsman.

"Mister Hunter, back us off, toward the Horizon and away from the Draxx vessel...slowly, one quarter impulse. Mister Kalaar, power down our weapons.."

The small escort slowly retreated toward her mothership and away from the wounded Draxx ship, Oseno hoped that this gesture might work as it had with the Undine and placate the aggressive species somewhat.

The maneuver was instantly noticed on the bridge of the Horizon.

"Polaris backing towards our position," voiced Aguk Snow, ever alert to starship movements.

Good thinking, Jureth, the Andorian captain thought with a sudden light in his silvery eyes.

"Open her docking bay, Mister Cheonghi. Mister Aron'Son; drop our aft shield only."

With a snap of his fingers, he signaled Lyrya for a new transmission.

"We do not lie. You are helpless. Invaders would already have destroyed you or boarded you to take you... and enslave you, as you say. Instead, we have ceased fire, opened communication and offered our help. We outnumbered you and yet, you can detect our combat ship moving back to dock within our main vessel instead of joining in for a kill. Consider all this; what does that tell you about us?"

This time, it took several minutes before a new series of flashing lights lighted up from the disabled alien vessel. When the laser transmission was decoded and rendered once more in sound and vision on the main viewer, the voice was slightly less growling and fewer teeth were bared inside the frightening canine jaws.

"You are strange aliens we do not understand. We can only judge by what we observe. Your words speak the truth of the facts, Captain Kheren of the USS Horizon. And you do not speak nor act like the slaves of the Puppeteers. But you are of the same people who brought them back to haunt us. We recognize the technology, and the uniforms, and the speech patterns used to ensnare our people once more. This must be a trick."

S'Tan Solius listened with raised eyebrows at the last transmission and shook his head.

"Captain, I cannot imagine any race who would be able to bypass not only our space station guarding the anomaly entrance, but generate an entrance of their own..."

He paused for a moment to increase the seriousness of the situation he was about to suggest.

"...But what about the Terran Empire? In theory, they too could have had a Horizon Anomaly in their universe and too stabilized it in order to find new slaves..."

Aron'Son's head cocked slightly to one side, he had of course studied about this mirror universe at Starfleet Academy, but it was the word puppeteers that stuck in his highly intelligent brain.

"Or perhaps, the Iconians...They have not been seen, but that does not mean they are not active, and they too have abilities that even the Dominion cannot comprehend."

"True, but I don't think one could confuse a humanoid Andorian for an Iconian. Aren't they supposed to have spikes on their bodies?" S'Tan mused.

"They just might; I would guess they never saw either of those before," Irksos pointed out.

"Only one good way to find out," Kheren said, shrugging before signaling Lyrya again. He looked at Elliago for a moment, as if taking from him some inspiration. He thought for a moment and then he addressed again the now silent recorded image of the Draxx. "It is pointless to lie to the prey you have between your jaws. Were we servants of these... Pupeteers of yours, you would already be in our power... or dead."

He made a pause before continuing.

"You say you know of us; but we are not of this universe. We came from the space anomaly a light year from here, from another universe it is connected to. We are the first to go through this passage, in the hope of discovering and building new lives out here, in peace and friendship. We neither serve nor enslave. We share and help. And we respect life and freedom above all. If this is claimed by your people as territory, we will ask you to share and offer what we have in return. If you do not wish it so, we will leave you in peace."

Again, there was a delay as the encoded light signal was transmitted, received and decoded. But this time, the delay was perceptibly longer.

"Guess you gave them something to think about," Nasaro-Myth commented with a smirk.

"One can not talk and bite at the same time, Doc," retorted the Andorian. "They might be as aggressive as Klingons, but obviously they too are highly intelligent. Let us hope my words ring true to their ears. They attacked the Polaris without apparent provocation; even the stupidest animal always has a motive to attack, be it only fear or hunger. Something is going on here and we need to know what."

He did not look at anyone but he obviously spoke to everyone.

"I am still open to any hypothesis or recommendation at this point."

The turbolift door opened, admitting Commander Oseno, returned from the freshly docked Polaris, onto the bridge. The Bajoran didn't look too much worse for the wear though he did appear to be a bit haggard from his ship's encounter with the Draxx. He nodded at the officers nearest him before speaking

"Commander Oseno reporting, Captain."

"Glad to have you back and in one piece, Commander," Kheren said in greeting, still standing before his command chair and looking at the fearsome image of the alien starship commander. "Anything you can tell us about those Draxx and what happened when you met them? At this point, every detail might prove important."

"I can't speak to their motivations, Sir, but they use gravimetric weapons and appear to have a limitless supply when they are at full power. Their armor is as tough as any starship I've ever encountered. They have the ability to split their ship into separate craft and undamaged were able to maneuver fast enough to keep up with the Polaris and then some even in atmospheric flight. Their propulsion also appears to be reliant on some type of gravimetric technology requiring them to use planetary atmospheres to propel themselves along at faster than impulse speeds. I'm sure you've figured that the jamming field is coming from their ship, and laser com line of sight appears to be their only method of communication though they never dropped their jamming long enough for us to try anything else. We also weren't able to punch through it no matter how much we boosted our signal."

"And that might just be their Achilles heel as well," proposed Valencia Irksos, looking at the chief engineer for confirmation. "The farther they are from a gravimetric source, like a planet or a star, the more they may have to rely on reserve power... which may dwindle fast if they use it for propulsion as well as tactical systems."

The flagship captain nodded, pensive.

"This emphasis on restricting communication this way, even among themselves, must be a clue to something."

The Romulan chief engineer nodded.

"I agree. Especially with the damage they've incurred. They are most likely going to have to take down some systems to compensate. Assuming each 'ship' has it's own energy core generating...or absorbing...gravitons, the section that was damaged will most likely be their weak point. Assuming their race does not disapprove of weakness and jettison it into space."

"They reattached that damaged part right there," helm chief officer Snow said, pointing at the darkened flank of the alien starship. "Either they care about their people or they need every part to be best operational... or they are weary about leaving anything behind, like scavengers or someone low on resources."

Solius mused over the situation for a moment, before continuing.

"I wonder if this is their only ship. As Commander Jureth stated, this ship seems to be generating that lovely field. You would think the one thing protecting your homeworld would be a station, or fleet of ships. Not just one. Something isn't adding up for me Captain...but I can't pin it down yet. I think it does involve our guests praying on the Observation Deck, however..."

"Do you think the Children somehow found their way here before we battled them?" Oseno mused. "If they did, they did so without Lotus Fleet noticing it because they were right on our front door for months."

"I would say it is unlikely, Commander," Irksos answered with a shake of her dark head. "The Artemis barely made it once and even a sturdy Klingon Neg'Vhar was severely incapacitated and left dead in the water when the Azimuth Horizon was still running wild in those days. The best ships ever commandeered by the Horizon Children were unlikely to have survived the attempt to pass through the plasma storm, the hail of neutronium boulders, the energy discharges or the perilous navigation of a subspace fracture... not to mention that their elite officers and crew, which alone could have had any hope to succeed, were on their lead ship when it was defeated during Operation Horizon."

"Except that... they were the ones to develop the prototype of the Sangliar Impulse Drive," Aguk Snow then reminded them all. "It is the engine of one of their shuttlecrafts captured by one of our junior officers that the starbase chief engineer polished to what we currently use. Now, *if* that shuttle was *not* the prototype..."

"They might have made it here," understood Kheren.

That's when, suddenly, an alarm went off.

On Aron'son's tactical sensors, there were several signals moving away from the Horizon.

"Shuttlepods, Captain...ours, six of them, moving away from us at the best speed they can achieve."

At the moment the Jem'Hadar was reporting, his combadge came to life.

"Security to Lieutenant Aron'Son."

"Yes, go ahead,"

"Sir, Lieutenant Celes here; our people have arrested one of the colonists caught in an unauthorized area."

"That wouldn't happen to be near our shuttlepod bays, would it?"

"Yes Sir... how did..."

"I'll explain later, Lieutenant" he replied, cutting her off. "Bring the colonist to the main brig interrogation room immediately and erect security force fields around the colonists quarters. I do not want anymore of them roaming the ship."

"Aye Sir, Celes out."

"I read one life form in each pod," Irksos reported in turn. "Four are Humans, one is Bolian... and one is Bajoran."

The security chief looked again to Kheren.

"They must have launched while our aft shield was down during the Polaris reentry, Sir, but I suspect our prisoner will shed some light on it for us."

"This isn't going to sit well with our friends out there..." Oseno remarked.

"That's why I want you up here in case of trouble, Lieutenant," Kheren said gravely to the Jem'Hadar. "Send Lieutenant Tyvya to interrogate the prisoner... and find me a way to get those people back. Transporters?"

"They fired up their engines only when they were beyond the forty thousand kilometers limit of transporter beams," Irksos explained. "And tractor beams are too powerful for those fragile crafts, especially while they are already under the planet's gravity well."

Aron'Son looked over to Tyvya who nodded and headed for the turbolift.

"We could try to chase them down in the Polaris Sir," Jureth said. "But I don't think her structural integrity field could stand another round of atmospheric flight. Or, I could take the MACO team, and my tactical specialist Lieutenant Kalaar in a runabout and *make* them come back..."

"Commander Oseno," Irksos warned, "this planet has a negative energy field surrounding it. If you can not retrieve them before entering it yourself, you will loose all power from all sources of energy... which might include organic energy. You might as well all die with them."

"Try raise them," Kheren said to Lyrya, but she just shook her head, antennae drooping.

"I already tried, Sir; they are not responding."

The Andorian grumbled a vicious expletive in Graalek that the translator didn't pick up as he closed his callused fists as if about to strike someone. He didn't look up when he spoke with a low, angry tone.

"We have a duty, Commander... which is not relieved by acts of stupidity. Do as you think best to try and get them back."

"Lieutenant Irksos," Oseno asked "How much time do I have to catch them before they hit the field?"

"We're over four million kilometers away from Eden IV, Sir; at maximum speed, those workbees can make four thousand kilometers per second on full thrusters and they have already covered part of the distance; I would say less than ten minutes."

Oseno tapped his combage.

"Oseno to MacGregor; beam yourself to the main shuttlebay for an emergency launch, and bring your weapon."

He received a slightly curious "Aye, Sir" before he spoke to the computer.

"Computer; site to site transport, main shuttlebay, authorization Oseno Bravo Juliet Six One."

The computer, beeped, the transporter energized, and a moment later Jureth found himself in the main shuttlebay of the Horizon. Seconds later Major MacGregor beamed in with his full combat gear and looked at Jureth.

"What's the mission?"

"Retrieveal; several of the colonists are attempting to land on the planet."

"Ach... idiots."

"I agree. Let's go."

One of the hangar crew came running at them.

"Over here, Sir! I got a signal from the bridge and have a shuttle ready!"

Oseno and MacGregor were quickly aboard the shuttle and Jureth put himself in the pilot's seat before the boarding hatch was even closed.

"You know how to operate a transporter, Mac?"

"Aye Sir, I can manage."

Jureth nodded and tapped the control console.

"Oseno to flight control; permission for emergency departure."

"Clearance granted, Commander."

Jureth fired the maneuvering thrusters on the shuttle, bringing them up to full quickly as the hangar doors were opening. They weren't quite clear of the bay when he fired the main impulse engine of the shuttle and swooped away from the Horizon. As they began closing on the smaller pods, he activated the shuttle's com system.

"This is Commander Oseno of the Horizon calling all shuttlepods. Power down immediately and hold your position. If you continue toward the planet, you will be disabled by the energy field surrounding it. I say again; stand down!"

As he finished the transmission, Jureth pushed the shuttle to full impulse and lined up on the closest shuttlepod. He wasn't the crack pilot that Shawn Hunter was, but he had the same training every other Starfleet officer had and could handle the craft capably.

His comm system came alive with a stern, authoritative feminine voice he recognized instantly.

"Commander Oseno, this is Governor Sufra. We know about the field and are ready to face it. I claim this planet in the name of the United Federation of Planets for the benefit of the Horizon Children. As duly mandated representative of the Federation Council in charge of this mission, I am exercising my full authority in leading this landing... and I order *you* to stand down! *You* will turn back and return to the Horizon, where you will inform Captain Kheren that he is to prepare immediately for preliminary colonization operations. *That*, is a *direct* order, Commander!"

Oseno could only shake his head, this woman was going to get herself and all of her people killed.

"Sufra," he replied refusing to use her title "your authority, little as it was, was over the minute you stole those craft and violated so many Starfleet and Federation security and colonization procedures I can't even count them all. You, and all those with you are under arrest charged at the very least with theft of Starfleet property. You are coming back to the Horizon where *you* will answer to Captain Kheren and *not* the other way around, there will be no further discussion, Oseno out."

Jureth cut the communication and continued to close on the shuttlepods, and as they drew closer he looked back at Mac.

"Program the computer to lock onto them and start beaming them aboard as soon as we're in range. Cover them as soon as they materialize. If they have any weapons they will be neutralized by the transporter system per security protocols. We can lock them in the cargo compartment, but you have my authority to stun them with a wide beam dispersal pattern if they resist and I will answer to the captain for giving the order."

MacGregor adjusted the setting on his weapon and nodded.

"Aye, Sir, dinna worry. I suspect they'll not be giving too much trouble."

Oseno entered a code in the computer and a compartment near the pilot's chair opened deploying a type II phaser which Oseno picked up and checked the setting on before locking down the shuttle's command and control functions with his personal authorization. That would ensure that if for some reason the colonists attempted anything they could not take control of the shuttle. Another few seconds and MacGregor commented.

"We should be just about in range.... computer is energizing."

The familiar sound of the transporter filled the compartment and the first of the colonists were met by the business end of Major MacGregor's phaser carbine. The stunned colonists looked at each other and then at the Marine holding a weapon on them.

"Don' move; ye are under arrest," MacGregor said as politely as Oseno had ever heard that phrase uttered. Jureth set the shuttle's auto-pilot to keep them in range of the workbees but not to enter the atmospheric field and turned in his chair.

"I would do as he says."

They looked incredulous still but complied, shuffling into the cargo compartment as the next round of transports began. In barely a minute, the colonists were safely beamed back in containment on the shuttle, two at a time. Oseno could see the emptied workbees continue for a moment on their course before starting to move erratically away from one another and, pilotless, slowly get dragged by the closer gravity of the moons.

All except one.

"Ach, sorry Sir... I canna get a lock on the last one. Must be a transporter inhibitor on board."

That one was the one piloted by Governor Sufra. And already, it was closing fast towards the high orbit of the planet.

"Transporter inhibitor..." Oseno muttered. "What in the name of the Prophets is she thinking..."

"I dunno, Sir," MacGregor commented between clenched teeth.

"Neither do I."

Oseno considered his options, he could disable the workbee with a low power phaser shot and then tow it back to the Horizon assuming he could get to before it hit the field...or an electro static discharge from the shuttle's multi-function emitter might work to the same effect and would short out the transporter inhibitor as well and they could then beam Sufra back aboard. Neither were really good options and they would come close to the field themselves, but Jureth realized, he had a duty to try to save Sufra...even if it was from herself.

He took control of the shuttle back from the computer and dumped backup battery power into the impulse engines pushing them to a hundred and ten percent efficiency.

"Wha' we gonna do, Sir?" MacGregor questioned.

"I'm charging the shuttle's multiple purpose emitter for an electrostatic burst. It will short out the workbee's equipment and we can try and beam them back. It's a long shot, but we have to try and I can't shoot at it because even at low power I might destroy it. As soon as it hits I'm going to do a fly by at an angle taking us away from the field. That is the only chance we'll have to recover them before they hit the atmosphere, Ready?"

"The others are locked up with a forcefield... Aye, I'm ready."

"Firing electrostatic burst in three... two... one..."

The electrostatic beam fired true from the shuttle's emitter and Oseno began a swooping turn that would take them as close to the workbee as he dared get.

On the bridge of the flagship, S'Tan had been monitoring his systems, to make sure that there were no further intrusions. He was not sure how the cultists had been able to get into a high security area, but he made certain that no others were lingering in Engineering sections of the ship. He put the word out to all on-duty officers to keep an eye out for unwanted crew and to alert security immediately if they did.

"Good riddance, bad eggs..." He mumbled. "I might be able to extend our shields around the Commander's shuttle, We'd have to fly a bit closer to the planet than we are now...but the systems should be able to hold up to the strain of the gravity. I don't think the Draxx would approve of such an action, or the return of our combat vessel that we so proudly stated was returning to it's dock show a sign of peace... Or, I might be able to modify our deflector to emit a positron burst. It should disable the pods but not destroy them. But again, the Draxx are right there...But those are my only two options with ten minutes, Sir."

"Helm! position the Horizon to intercept any possible attack from the Draxx ship. Its possible they will consider this as some type of invasion force."

Redding knew this was in direct conflict with S'tan's first option, but felt there wasn't enough time to discuss the situation with him. But He did add in "Captain?" with a questioning look.

The Andorian nodded approvingly to his executive officer, his eyes focused on the alien starship while his antennae listened to what was happening aboard the launching shuttlecraft.

"Prepare both your options as alternatives in case we need them in a hurry, Chief," he then said to the Romulan.

"Aye, Sir." The Romulan responded.

He began modifying the power conduits to direct positrons into the array. On the main viewer, the Draxx vessel still did not move, but several lights flashed rapidly on it's prow. Beeps followed at the same rythm on Counselor Lyrya's comm panel.

"They sure seem to have something to say about it," offered Elliago with a dry smile. "And it doesn't sound friendly."

And sure enough, the snarling countenance of the Draxx filled the screen with an angry show of bared teeth and flaring nostrils.

"You have launched crafts towards the fourth planet! This is forbidden!"

And as the decrypted message was received, they saw the damaged vessel power up again.

Kheren almost swore again because of the infuriating slowness of their communication. But he took a deep breath to calm himself and answered promptly.

"This is an unauthorized launch. We have sent a shuttle to initiate a retrieval operation. We do not intend to land on the planet or let anyone of our people do so. Please allow us time to get those people back."

A series of light signals came back after a tense moment of waiting for their own transmission to reach them and be understood, then for their response to get to them. On the viewer, the wolfish alien's expression was still as fierce as his growling voice.

"You will fail."

The alien starship started moving towards the swarm of smaller crafts.

"They are moving, Sir," Aron'Son stated. "Phasers and torpedoes ready. Permission to fire?"

"Warning shot accross their bow," Kheren ordered. "Try to frighten them off."

The powerful starbase caliber phasers of the Horizon sheared space with long, luminous lines of energy right in front of the Draxx vessel. But, instead of veering off or stopping, it split up as if exploding into five distinct parts, all carried by their own momentum towards where Oseno's shuttle and the workbees were.

"Captain, they are pressing their attack..." The Jem'Hadar stated; the shuttle will not withstand an assault from five destroyer-class ships."

As it was all happening, the electrostatic burst of Oseno's shuttle hit the workbee. It all turned dark, engines dying down, positioning lights blinking off. But then, as it started drifting further towards the planet on it's own momentum, MacGregor suddenly shouted a warning.

"Contact aft, closing in rapidly!"

Just turning to the side portview, the Bajoran and his MACO officer could see the immense hull of the Horizon, haloed by the star shining beyond it... and, coming around her, a slim, elongated shape that for a moment was lost to view when several phaser beams tore space in front of it. And then, there were five smaller but even more dagger-like vessels, each one nevertheless massing as much as the Polaris, spreading out like flower petals.

And they were coming right at them.

Oseno now had but two choices in his mind; try to save Sufra and then make a run for the Horizon or abort his rescue attempt and hope the governor survived long enough for the ship to come back for her. It was not an easy one, to abandon a being they stood even a small chance of rescuing, but if he didn't turn for the Horizon now, the Draxx were going to start shooting and that wouldn't end well for anyone aboard the shuttle. He asked MacGregor one question.

"Do you think we can get to the last one Mac, can you get a lock on them"?

"Working on it, Sir... but that transport inhibitor is still on. It runs on it's own portable power source, like the EVA suit the pilot is wearin', and it must have been put in an isolated section so that the EM burst did not touch it."

And judging by the speed with which the alien crafts approached, time was running out.

Oseno shook his head sadly. "Then there's nothing we can do....I'm making a run for the Horizon, if she's wearing an EVA suit maybe she'll survive long enough for us to come back for her, but if we don't go now, they'll get to us before Horizon can do anything about it."

And judging by the speed with which the alien crafts approached, time was running out. It was at least obvious to the officers on the bridge of the flagship

Kheren clenched his callused fists. Because of the peculiar delayed communication they had with the Draxx, there was no way to dissuade them from their intent before they acted on it.

"Tractor beams..."

"Not enough power at this range to counter their engine power output," Ops chief Cheonghi answered.

"Tactical, target the Draxx' engines and disable them."

The powerful energy beams of the Horizon this time struck directly the aft section of each of the five vessels. They all started to drift apart, their engine darkened, leaving only maneuvering thrusters. But the farthest one, the most damaged of the five parts, was already falling within the planet's gravity well in parallel trajectory to the last workbee. Because of its larger mass and faster momentum, the Draxx attack section went past the tumbling workpod. And just as it did so, it turned end over end with a fiery display of its thrusters and a rippling blueish ray of energy shot from its weapons ports to strike the Starfleet pod.

"They are firing... Wait... tractor beam, Sir!" Irksos instantly reported. "Amazingly modulated... They're... they're pushing the workbee back to us!"

And as they all watched the small craft being sent back in the wake of Oseno's shuttle, away from the planet, the segment of the alien ship that had repulsed it safely away suddenly turned dark as it fell within the negative energy field of the planet.

"Sir," Aron'Son reported, "The workbee is powerless, likely due to the electrostatic burst emitted from the shuttle, except for two power sources... one environmental suit and what I believe to be a transport inhibitor. We cannot beam the occupants back, we or Commander Oseno will have to retrieve it manually."

"I can extend the shields on your command, Captain, but the shuttle will lose transporter functions to anything outside the shields. The pod will be lost..." The Romulan chief engineer stated flatly. "I am reading no power coming from the last pod. It looks like Oseno is just missing that last one."

"Commander Oseno will have to suit up and start extravehicular operations to retrieve the pilot, Captain. That would take him at least..."

Kheren didn't let his Chief of Ops finish. Tapping his combadge, he spoke with controlled urgency in his voice.

"Flight control; Mister Moore are you there?"

"Aye, Captain; standing by in shuttlecraft..."

"Take a sphynx out and retrieve that workbee."

"Sir?"

"Now, Mister Moore."

"Aye, Sir."

The sphynx workpod was a larger, more versatile auxiliary craft than the standard workbee; it sported not only an engine capable of reaching a quarter impulse power but an added seating and more tools like grappling cables, a small tractor beam and a cargo section along with manipulator arms.

Whatever condition the last workpod and its pilot were, this was the best chance they had of retrieving them safely in the current conditions.

And then, there was that Draxx destroyer, now plummeting powerless towards the planet, sacrificing itself after saving the workbee from the same fate.

Having served with his captain for a long time, Aguk Snow knew what was going on in the Andorian's head. The way he looked at the ominous orb of the planet on the screen, his facial eyes darting to the inert alien vessels and his antenna pointing forward, there was no doubt that he was worrying about the heroic crew his own orders had sent to their doom. The helmsman of the Horizon then made a few calculations before turning towards his commanding officer.

"Captain; I have made some calculations about the Draxx speed and trajectory following their rescue maneuver of the workbee. If my calculations are right, they are angled for a powerless soft landing."

Kheren's face turned towards his science officer at the sensor station.

"What are their chances of survival?"

"Unknown, Sir," Irksos answered. "Their hull armor is apparently thicker than ours and made up of materials we have yet to analyse. We don't know either the internal conditions of their vessel nor their specific physiological make-up. Assuming they don't crash, like Mister Snow just told us, and that they go through it quickly enough, there is a possibility that they might survive going through that negative energy barrier. The USS Enterprise managed to do it the three times it went through the Galactic Great Barrier which this field resembles."

"Transmission from Commander Oseno's shuttle incoming," Lyrya announced.

"Oseno to Horizon; Captain we're on our way back...we got most of them... but Sufra did everything she could possibly do to prevent us from retrieving her. On a side note, some cover would be appreciated, Oseno out."

"Extend shields," Kheren ordered his chief engineer. Then he spoke up so that his voice resounded in his strategic ops officer's speakers. "Acknowledged, Commander. As soon as you dock, ready the Polaris for planetary rescue operation. Commander Redding will join you to lead the landing party."

"Your crew reports that they just restored its structural integrity field and repaired the worst of the hull damage already," Kheren answered. "Helmsman Hunter assures me he can take her into a proper planetary entry trajectory before you turn powerless and manage a soft landing like these Draxx seemed to have achieved. Lieutenant Irksos can give them the specs and Lieutenant Cheonghi the parts for a makeshift geothermal system to power your ship back, in case you find yourself totally powerless once down there. Not enough for things like weapons and shields or even sensors and communications, but at least enough for life support and to reach escape velocity in order for you to come back."

"We could divert all power to the deflector and use it as a massive tractor beam. It could damage or destroy our array though, along with our EPS conduits. Possibly crippling us until someone can send a station to dock at for repairs... Your call, Sir." S'Tan suggested, hoping the Captain would not want to try and save the Draxx. The risk was far too great in the engineer's opinion.

There was a pause before the voice of the Andorian came back up. As he had been speaking to his strategic ops officer in the returning shuttle, Redding besides him had placed his right hand to his chin.

"Captain, I think the Draxx know what their doing and any heroics on our part would just compromise whatever they have planned. I recommend we give them a chance to prove it." he sighed then added after a moment; "Although we might need to help them get back off the planet."

Kheren thought for a moment.

"You have a point, Number One. Commander Oseno, this is going to be a very dangerous rescue operation... and that is, if the Draxx allow it. It is our duty to help anyone in need... but also to respect their rights. If we do proceed, I will only ask for volunteers."

The captain again made a pause before addressing the Aenar sitting at his left hand.

Lieutenant Lyrya, do we still have that laser transmission channel active?"

"Aye, Captain."

Kheren once more looked up at the screen where the four remaining parts of the alien vessel were slowly moving on thrusters to rejoin.

"This is Captain Kheren of the Federation starship Horizon. We are grateful for your help in retrieving our last craft and for having saved the pilot inside. But this seems to have been done at the cost of some of your own people. In turn, we offer our help in attempting to rescue them. We have good reasons to believe that some of them might have survived. Our escort ship and my best people are getting ready to help."

As usual, there was a delay between the time the encoded light emissions were transmitted, received and then answered. Almost a minute went by before the image of the wolfish humanoid reappeared on the screen and his growling voice heard once again.

"This planet is forbidden. Nothing is allowed to land on it. Nothing is allowed to leave it. And yet, Evil has returned with your kind. We are now powerless to defend ourselves, but you will not enslave us. We will hunt you down and again exterminate you and your masters."

As the message went on, Aron'son's tactical sensors detected a small, fast moving object ejecting from each of the Draxx vessels and starting to fly at high warp, all in the same direction and out of the solar system. At the same time, there was a power up going on each of severed sections. And they were not moving closer anymore; now, they were spreading out and around the Horizon, backing her up against the planet and cutting off any route of escape.

Redding immediately turned to Aron'son.

"Target all abandoned hulls within our forward escape vector with a full salvo of torpedoes, and stand by to fire. Captain, If were going to get out of this trap, it has to be now before they reach detonation."

He realized full well there would be no time to retrieve Oseno, Moore or the Governor.

"I'd have to agree with that assesment, Captain." The engineer stated. "We have no idea what sort of weapon the Draxx are charging. Our data on their combat style is too limited. This could just be a simple explosion, which with reinforcement of the forward shields could allow us to weather the storm. Or it could be an electromagnetic pulse, which could cripple our engines and doom us to descent onto the planet, or destruction in it's protective shield. We need to plow the road in front of us and escape immediately."

Falling back reflexively into his seat, Kheren took both officers' words in; detonation of enemy ships imminent; exact nature of the attack unknown; the trap about to spring; and then, there were still Sufra, Moore, Oseno and McGregor out there, half of them in vehicles without any shield or armoring... not enough time for even an emergency beam out...

"Bow Z axis a hundred eighty degrees! Fire at will!"

As Aron'Son opened fire with the full array of torpedoes, covering the entire forward arc, the gigantic starship leveled up it's bow from it's initial angle to a full vertical plane. The four remaining enemy ships exploded under their own power surge much sooner than they planned for, flared up by the Jem'Hadar's precise attack. Still, despite the distance and the aborted deployment, the quadruple conflagration hit the Federation starship's energy shields. For a moment, they held, shimmering under the impact; and then, they collapsed from the overwhelming power of the explosions. The remaining destructive force pushed onward to hit squarely the underbelly of the Horizon.

The entire ship shook like a titanic gong, the impact creating a deafening vibration. Only each crewmember's integrated individual PID barely managed to compensate the prolonged shockwave. Everyone up had to brace oneself on bulkheads and consoles while seated people reflexively grasped their chair's armrest or their own boards to avoid being thrown out. Lights blinked on and off on all decks and a few didn't even come back on.

Then, silence was total until everyone's hearing stopped buzzing and the chirps and whistles of automated systems coming back online reached them.

"... and regenerative armor replicating material stored all accross our lowest deck took the rest," reported Valencia Irsos, only the end of her report audible to everyone else.

"Damage and casualty report!" shouted Kheren, louder than necessary. His own antennae were barely coming out from their unique telescopic reflex action to bring his hearing back. "Status of pods and shuttle!"

His silvery eyes were looking at Aron'son's board... but there was no enemy signature showing on it's tactical screen anymore.

"Both pods and the shuttle... they're adrift behind us but undamaged, Captain," reported Aguk Snow, a shaking hand accross his sweating brow. "At the distance they were, the new angle of the ship shielded them completely from the explosions. "

"Still, pretty frightening back there..." counselor Lyrya stated, her blind eyes blinking. "The entire mass of the ship rising seemingly to fall on them... the maelstrom of fire envelopping and passing them by... the following darkness..."

"Was pretty frightening up here!" Elliago grumbled, still gripping the bridge's rail.

"I have seen worse.." Aron'Son commented, his memory filled with fleets of starships that a few Dominion cruisers had simply brushed aside as if they were playthings.

S'Tan shook his head in disgust.

"Damage report coming in, Sir. Internal sensors are down on the lower decks. Power is slowly being restored, but I am dispatching repair crews to investigate every deck. All engineers are now called to service and are being issued orders for system diagnostics. I can't see any major damage. The armor plating held back most of the damage, just a lot of turbulence. It could have been much much worse."

"So far, reports coming in show no casualties or even serious injuries beyond a few bumps and bruises, some dizziness and quite a scare," Doctor Nasaro-Myth added, looking over Lyrya's shoulder at the ship's internal sensor readout. "yes, I agree with Solius; it could have been much worse, if not for that Zorro signature move you did here, your Yeoman just commented to me. I'll head over to sickbay to attend any more serious one that might pop up."

Kheren looked at the Deltan exiting the bridge with a puzzled look in his metallic-hued eyes.

"Is that one of the colonists?"

"Who, Sir?" asked Yeoman Blackbird.

"This person named Zorro..."

Aboard the shuttle Oseno was trying to get the craft's systems to come back online while Mac was covering the still mostly groggy colonists with his weapon as the force field securing them in the cargo section had shorted out along with the rest of the shuttle's power.

"Any luck, Sir? They're startin' ta' wake up."

"I'm trying Mac, but I'm not an engineer. Working on cold starting the power core. My communicator might still work though, we're close enough to Horizon."

"Aye that we are," Mac replied looking out the viewer at the enormous starship that filled it.

Oseno tapped the combadge on his chest.

"Oseno to Horizon; can you hear me up there?"

"Glad to hear you're still with us, Mister Oseno," came the flagship's reply through the deep, soft voice of her commanding officer. "This close we can all beam you all back into the main hangar bay. What is the status of the two workpods?"

"We are still here, Sir, though the shuttle's power systems are not responding just yet. As for the work pods... adrift as far as I can tell, though Sufra used a transport inhibitor to keep us from retrieving them. I can't tell if it is still active or not. If it is, you'll have to retrieve her with a tractor beam. The woman belongs in the brig, Sir."

"I'm thinking of a place further back and lower..." the Andorian grumbled.

His comment elicited a mixture of cheeks reddening and hiding smiles accross the bridge. All except Chief of Science K'Leysha who remained icily glued to her monitors, dark-skinned elfin features drawn into a scowl. But if it was because of the captain's rude remark or because the civilians had betrayed her trust in them, none could tell. Either way, her commanding officer was as oblivious to her reaction as he was to the unplanned humor of his own words.

And he was given no time to realize anything.

"Captain!" suddenly exclaimed Irksos, looking up from her beeping scanner board; "the workpods are locked together and drifting fast into the planet's gravity well!"

"I've still got no primary power, Sir," Oseno said calmly having heard the exchange over the open comm channel; "and even if I got it back, I don't know if I could get enough to power our emitter. If you do an emergency launch of the Polaris with Lieutenant Hunter, and Lieutenant T'lana aboard, they could possibly get to the pods in time."

On the bridge, S'Tan Solius growled in frustration. He wanted to imprison the now-former governor. He wanted to use Romulan interrogation techniques to pull any and all information out of her. They had a plan. He knew they did. He was not a security officer, but he understood the risk they were all still under. There were other colonists on board, and he would be the first one to nominate throwing them out of the airlock and returning home. Treason was unacceptable to a Romulan, and it made his blood boil with the ferocity of a Klingon.

"Sir, if we move quickly, we can beam someone to the governor's workpod. The inhibitor is protecting her, *not* her surroundings. A Smash and Grab, as they called it in the movies. Beam in, EMP her suit and beam out. Should take thirty seconds maximum. Besides that, we could try a minimum power tractor beam, but I fear crushing her pod."

"Too late" Redding said as he watched the screen. They have already entered the field, any beaming now would be one way."

He had a restrained look of concern on his face. The Sphinx had managed to connect with the work pod just seconds before the explosion knocked out its primary power, it had been silent ever since.

But, as it drifted seemingly out of control, it's micro-impulse drive briefly flared up; not enough to regain control and fly back towards the starship, but just enough to angle itself towards the planet right in the path of the lost Draxx vessel.

The two ships started to tumble as they entered the planet's atmosphere, the red-white glow of an uncontrolled reentry could already be seen forming against the combined ships hull. At the end of the second rotation the paired vehicles stopped with the heavier pod side down, facing the planet.

"Commander..." Operation officer Cheonghi relayed as best he could. "Mister Moore has managed to activate the Sphinx's chemical thrusters, although I'm not sure how without a powered control panel... and is aligning the pod to be used as a heat shield."

On the bridge of the starship Horizon, Captain Kheren was up again and moving with long strides to the science station

"Track those pods!"

"We can't, Sir," Irksos exclaimed in frustration although she still attempted to get a scan lock on the two vehicles. "The negative energy field even interfere with mere optical scans. There is no way from up here to ascertain their situation. But with no power whatsoever, not even from their own physiology..."

"Moore was smart enough to fire his impulse engine before it was snuffed out by the field," the Andorian reminded her with a clipped tone. "Even just a one second burst would provide a displacement of at least twenty-five thousand kilometers. Since the planet receives light and heat from the star to be class M, that field can not go all the way down to the surface. What could be the thickness of this field?"

For a moment, the dark-skinned woman blinked, obviously thinking and calculating.

"With no actual data, we can only speculate, Captain. Following the established mass and volume of the planet from her interplanetary effect within the star system, and assuming a similar material composition as that of most class M planets, we can roughly estimate her to be forty thousand kilometers in circumference for a diameter of thirty-thousand kilometers. Again assuming a gaseous atmosphere similar to Earth standard, the Karman Line defining it's atmospheric border would be about a hundred kilometers from the surface. From this hypothetical point, the effects of the field on our probes earlier would give us a covering shell of about thirty thousand kilometers of thickness."

"And with the residual momentum following his impulse engine's shutdown and the gravitation pull of the planet... he *might* have made it..."

"That is mostly conjecture at this point, Sir," warned the astrophysicist gloomily.

"Good enough for me."

Kheren tapped his combadge.

"Commander Oseno; I am confirming the rescue operation on Eden IV. Prepare the Polaris as planned for the current specifics of our situation. Commander Redding will join you aboard with his rescue party and lead the search and retrieval of our lost people once ground operation becomes warranted."

Jureth was following the security detachment that was escorting the colonists to the brig out of the shuttle bay when the Captain's call came in. Major McGregor was in tow behind him and he had planned on returning to the bridge to debrief the captain on their shuttle adventure.

"Aye, Captain," Oseno replied before turning to McGregor. "Well Mac, no rest for the weary eh?"

"or the wicked, Sir," he replied with a small smile.

"Get your whole team aboard the Polaris. Even if Commander Redding doesn't use you I, want you there as backup. We have no idea what's down there."

"Aye, we'll be there, Sir."

The two parted ways at a corridor intersection and Oseno tapped his combadge again

"Oseno to Strategic Operations."

"Adira here, Commander," replied the El-Aurian diplomat and Jureth noted that may have been the first time she'd used his proper rank since they left starbase.

"Adira, get everyone to the Polaris. We have people on the planet and the Captain has tasked us with rescuing them."

"Understood; would you like me to join you as well?"

"Everyone includes you, Lieutenant Commander. If the Draxx are on the planet as well, we may need to negotiate with them, I can think of no one better."

"Aye, Sir; Adira out."

Jureth continued to the Polaris hangar and mentally began preparing himself for what was sure to be yet another interesting mission. o saying, he nodded to his first officer.

Redding didn't take long to nod, get to the turbolift and, joining Adira already coming from SOO center, meeting the strategic ops officer on his way to the integrated escort ship's hangar deck as he and McGregor exited the main shuttle bay. They all took together the next lift down into the bowels of the secondary hull. Redding walked along beside the Bajoran as they went, seemingly deep in thought.

"Getting down to the planet is certainly doable, Oseno, if Mister Moore and the Draxx are any kind of example. But have we come up with a plan for getting back up again?"

He screwed up his face into a half frown.

"The best I can come up with is hoping the Draxx know a way, and I'd hate to place all my credits on that hand."

"There was some talk of modifying the Polaris shields to compensate for the field, but I don't know if Lieutenant Solius had come up with anything, Sir," Oseno replied. "If he has a plan, now would be a good time to put it in play."

"Lieutenant Irksos sent plans to the Polaris engineering department for various types of energy devices," Adira Liral then informed them. "There are plans and material to build a makeshift solar collector, a telluric accumulator, an eolian turbine and a tidal power generator. Any one of them is bound to work once we find ourselves down there... and allow us to power back at least enough of our essential systems in order to get airborne again, reach escape velocity and return."

"Alright then, any plan is better than no plan, but someone bring a deck of cards just in case; we could be down there for awhile," Redding said with a smile. "I have to make a quick stop to update my personal log. I'll meet you aboard the ship."

And with a nod he headed off.

When Oseno reached the docking deck of the Polaris, chief helmsman Hunter welcomed him with a curt nod.

"All is ready for launch, Sir. I have computed from the recorded entry trajectory of both the Draxx ship and the workpods our best angle of approach. Following Lieutenant Moore's idea, a maximum push of our impulse engines should bring us through the negative energy field. And since we have four times the impulse power of the Sphynx class loader, and assuming Lieutenant Irksos' estimate of the field's range is correct, we should even clear the field with a sufficient fraction of our power left for a well-controlled landing."

On the bridge, other officers were also working on the problem already.

"Captain, might I suggest attempting to contact the Phoenix? Their sensor suite is designed for this sort of situation more than we are." The Romulan engineer suggested.

"Bigger ears will only listen better to the silence," Irksos retorted. "Their sensor suite is indeed better, especially with their nanite enhanced systems... but this field negates completely all forms of energy virtually instantly. They would not have any more success than we had so far."

"Contacting them and keeping one another appraised of our mutual situation however is a wise move," Kheren said. "Counselor, get us the Phoenix."

* * *

"Grok, report."

The ops officer shook his head and showed to his commanding officer a sheepish smile in typical Ferengi manner on his suqat, squinty-eyed face.

"Nothing, Sir; neither the Asimov nor the away team are answering our hails. But I'm getting something odd on just about every comme channel."

Samji didn't smile in return.

"Define odd."

"Well... it sounds like static but... there is nothing of the typical power surge signal or weakness of output or interference that usually explains comm static. It's more like... as if somebody was deliberately sending a signal that sounded like static. Sorry Sir I know it makes no sense..."

"Put it on, Lieutenant."

The speakers of the starbase's ops center suddenly sounded as if very low, very slow, crackling voices were trying all at once to speak completely unintelligible words to them. And on the screen, what they saw transfixed everyone that gazed on it with a sudden chill shaking their spine. They saw what was evidently the small, complex but functional bridge of a Nova class science ship. But on that bridge was littered with sprawled bodies. The whole bridge crew had fallen at their post, every system around them seemingly at idle status except for a strange reddish glow that crackled from time to time with tentacles of energy coursing from one panel to another.

Right in front of them, the face of a dark-haired Human woman slowly came into the screen frame. As she slowly turned, it appeared that the strange, eerie sound came from her, her distended jaw moving in slow, erratic manner as if she was trying to dislocate it, yet matching the ghoulish sounds they were all hearing. But what was most striking was her face itself, it glowed with a ghostly swirl of red and blue lights that seemed to emanate from her very skin and wide, unblinking eyes.

"That's Captain Ross! Grok, try to decypher what she's trying to..."

Commander Karen Schmidt didn't have any time to finish her order. Suddenly, ribbons of red energies shot out from every speaker around them and ran like worms made of electricity over every system until it came in contact with a living body. Every time a person was touched by the discharge, it fell on the floor and started to contort as if under excruciating pain. Then, their face started to glow with the reddish display of spectral lights that distorted the face on the screen.

Being in the very center of the entire vast command center, Grok, Schmidt and Samji saw the wave of living energy emerge from the outer ring and move towards them. With a powerful display of desperate strength, Schmidt grabbed Grok by his collar and hoisted him bodily out of his chair to Samji as she pushed him away from the console.

"Clear out!" she yelled.

And, as she roughly shoved both men towards the turbolift, she turned and ran straight into the closest red discharge. Even as she was struck, her momentum carried her into another one which also grabbed her, sending her falling into a third one.

Samji didn't hesitate. Grabbing the stumbling Ferengi by both shoulders, he half-dragged, half-guided him into the turbolift and with his foot kicked the door shut.

"Computer! Erect a level 10 forcefield around main turbolift shaft!"

The telltale glimmer of blueish energies enveloped them just as reddish tendrils of lightning were starting to slide around the doorframe. The activation of the field suddenly dispersed the reddish glow in a brief spreading flash and, after a few red sparks here and there, all became quiet.

"Computer! Lock down all command functions of the starbase to my level 1 personal command codes only, authorization Samji black-zero-omega-kali!"

"Command code confirmed; lock down established under starbase recognized commander authority only."

As he spoke, he could see some red flashes of energy coming and going through the forcefield around them, making it shimmer each time some discharge was attracted to his transmission. Samji then left a panting, confused Grok to go to the lift's command panel and put his eye into a sensor plate above the control panel and a finger on it. A circling green light went a moment to his eye.

"Command code Samji blue-one-alpha-Indra."

"Genetic identification positive. Retina scan approved. Voice recognition confirmed. Command code verified."

"Computer; place the entire starbase under quarantine conditions as per Starfleet protocol. Isolate every section with level 10 forcefields, channeling all power to them, life support, security systems, specified systems and communication. Lock down space doors and mooring systems to manual override only. Engage tractor beam on the USS Asimov. Lock phasers on standby to her and fire on any emerging object from it or from the starbase or if the vessel escapes."

His last order he was about to give forced him to pause and swallow the lump in his throat before he finally voiced it with a forcibly firmed voice.

"Send a warning buoy to all nearby ships and installations of the sector with complete logs and the following message: This is Fleet Captain Allen Samji, commander of Starbase Lotus in the Hromi Sector. We are under attack by unidentified forces. The entire starbase and nearby area is under quarantine until further notice. No transmission is allowed to the starbase as the attack exploits them to reach targets. To all ships in the sector; do not, I repeat, do not approach Starbase Lotus or attempt any contact with it or any ship in it's immediate vicinity. Protect yourselves and avoid spreading the threat. I repeat;*Do not* approach Starbase Lotus. Under my personal authority as starbase commander, I hereby state General Orders 35 and 36 to be in effect."

At these words, Grok's coppery skin turned almost white.

"Sir... you just declared..."

The Hindu man nodded gravely, not even looking at him as he spoke.

"No Federation vessel, civilian or Starfleet, is allowed to approach a designated area under quarantine by order of Starfleet or the Federation Council unless such visitation falls under the Prime Directive, an emergency situation or a request for aid."

"That's... General Order 36, Fleet Captain Sir. But General Order 35 states..."

Samji's voice became even sterner.

"Should the entire personel of a vessel or installation becomes severely incapacitated due to a medical or environemental contaminant, risk of spreading the contagion is to be contained within a twenty-four hours period after initial discovery of cause... by destroying said vessel or installation."

CHAPTER 7 : THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

In a corridor of the USS Nuntio, the sparkling fountain of light coalesced into the shape of a full security team lead by Mrriin M'ata in full combat EVA suit. Back to back and crouching with rifles aimed in every direction of the compass, their wrist tricorder active right under their nose, they kept immobile, a compact mass of bristling weapons ready to fire at anything that could look like a threat.

Only silence and stillness greeted them.

The smallness of the Nova class felt oppressive with all the moving shadows their headlamps created from the surrounding darkness as they looked around wearily. The camera afixed to it sent back gloomy and sinister images to the main viewer of Syntron's ship.

"Boarrding team to Phoenix; landing site desertrted. Emerrgency powerr only; life supportt out. No life signs... Accorrding to ourr trricorderrs, emerrgency forrcefields active. That's the comparrtmentalization system in case of multiple hull brreaches... orr multiple boarddings situations. That's why we cannot beam into any crritical arrea of the ship."

Captain Syntron listened intently to the communication transmitted from the USS Nuntio.

"Acknowledged Lieutenant" the captain responded as she concluded.

The captain then turned to his chief engineer.

"Commander Rogers, prepare your team for transport over into that area within the next five minutes."

David acknowledged his captain's statement and, with a nod toward Commander Riker, turned made his way to the nearby turbolift. Ordering it to deck 8, Rogers accessed his PADD and brought up the schematic MSD of the Nova class vessel. Still looking it over, the doors swooshed open and he exited the lift to proceed toward transport room 2.

Just arriving there from the opposite direction were Andrews, Parker and Gorski. They all wore their EVA suits, helmet's in hand, and the junior officers carried two engineering kits. Andrew also toted David's personal EVA suit, which he handed over awkwardly, juggling his own helmet along with the bulkiness of the second suit and helmet.

Getting a hold of his suit and helmet, David followed the trio into the transporter room.

"Ensign Andrews," David began, to remind the younger man about his reduced rank, "you and Parker will pair up and go to main engineering. Restore power to the grid from there. Chief Gorski and myself will work on life support at the atmospheric system on deck 3."

As he spoke, Rogers forwarded the MSD of the Nova class to their PADD's. It showed the overall schematic of the vessel and associated pathways of the EPS system and deck layouts.

"Once were aboard, wait for Lieutenant M'ata to give the all clear. And keep your comm's open."

As the engineering team prepared for the away mission, others were also getting readied by their commanding officer on the bridge.

"Commander Riker; once the security team has moved beyond the transport site, lead this team of engineers over to the Nuntio. The two of you will need to prioritize the necessary repairs to these systems and the ship itself once you have gained access to key locations."

"Aye Sir" Riker said.

Ticking his head, Riker signaled for those that were coming to follow as he headed for the turbolift.

The captain then contacted the security chief aboard the apparently abandoned ship.

"Lieutenant M'ata, prepare for the arrival of Commander Riker along with chief engineer Rogers and his team of engineers. With no life forms registering aboard that vessel, we need immediate answers as to what happened to this crew."

"Acknowledged, Captain. However, the forcefield network is what is preventing our tricorders to register any life signs twenty meters beyond this corridor. We managed to beam in this specific spot due to the fact that power is down on this small section. But this is a storage area; not so surprising we find nobody here."

Turning to face his commanding officer, the X'Ell science officer offered his recommendation.

"Sir, if we shut down the grid, they will be able to fully scan each deck as they go... We ourselves could even sweep the entire ship from the Phoenix."

"I would advise against it, Captain," the suited Caitian woman retorted to the suggestion overheard on the comlink. "Either the crew erected the security forcefields for some reason... or the computer did it automatically to prevent some hazardous situation. Until we know what that reason or situation is, I recommend local deactivation only as we progress with a level 1 search of the ship."

"We will side with precaution and patience in this case," Syntron noted as he considered the recommendations offered. "Proceed circumspectly, Lieutenant M'ata. We have no idea what hazards might befall your team as you venture beyond your immediate locale. Keep us apprised of your team's progress as you advance."

As Commander Riker entered the transporter room, he double-checked his phaser pistol and adjusted his uniform waiting for the engineers to arrive. As the door to the transporter room opened again, Doctor Gray walked through, wearing on his right arm the portable holo generator. The new models were just a shade bigger than a communicator pin. While they were more common since the day the USS Voyager brought one back to Earth Riker, still found an innate fascination with having a hologram on his away team.

Tapping the portable holo generator, Doctor Gray activated it before double-checking the medical kit he was bringing. Pointing at the lone phaser pistol Riker was carrying, Doctor Gray smirked.

"I hope you didn't forget anything."

Riker smiled and went to say something back then checked himself. Now was not the time for friendly banter. Tapping his combadge, Riker spoke curtly.

"Captain, away team almost ready. When the rest of the engineering detail arrives, we will transport over."

Just as Commander Riker was confirming their readiness to the bridge, Elisha Leóne dashed through the transporter doors and glided toward the circular transporter pads.

"Lieutenant Leóne reporting for the away team mission, Commander," the Orion Ops chief uttered breathlessly as she continued adjusting her environmental suit. But no matter how she tried manipulating the fit of the restrictive suit, she could not conceal the curvaceous attributes of her toned physique. If anything, the EV suit accentuated her statuesque form even further with its reflective properties in addition to the tight fit.

After a few more moments of fidgeting with it, Elisha resigned herself to these circumstances and focused her attention instead on the features and condition of the accompanying helmet. She just didn't want her presence to create any distractions from their mission. From experience, she had learned that she needed to consciously downplay not only her Orion mystique and allure, but her overall physical appeal to males of a variety of species. These circumstances had throughout her life opened many doors for her. But unfortunately, the majority of these opportunities led to places and conditions of which she did not want to be led.

And those would have no place at all on an away mission aboard a damaged vessel drifting in unknown space.

On the ship's internal communication grid, Counselor Bijou had patched the away teams together. Everyone in the transporter heard as well as the people on the bridge the purring voice of the security chief coming from the derelict starship.

"We have manually deactivated the forrcefield on both ends of the corrridorr. Still no lifesigns, eitherr forrward orr aft. Sirr, do we split up in two units orr stay togetherr and proceed towarrds the brridge... or main engineerrring? I would rrecommmend the laterr."

"The engineers will be splitting into two operative teams Lieutenant M'ata," the captain of the Phoenix responded. "Lead the first team of engineers to the engineering section of the ship. Then have a second security escort lead the remaining engineering team to deck three... where they can address restoring the life support system. Once our teams have these systems stabilized, then your security team can systematically work their way toward the bridge."

"Aye, Captain; moving to coverr away team's arrival."

From the head cameras of the boarding team helmets, the bridge officers followed the security squadron as it split into three pairs; one for covering each end of the corridor, the imposing Caitian woman and her last guard backing up to each bulkhead so as to cover the beam in of the others as well as their flanking sentinel groups.

Tapping his combadge Riker inquired the forward away team.

"Riker to away team. Status report, update on the estimated time before the rest of the team can beam over."

"Arrea secured; away team can beam in at your convenience, Sir."

"Confirmed Lieutenant," Syntron replied with ample volume but no evident emotion through the comm and then activated a connection to the main transporter room of the Phoenix.

"Away team, you are cleared for transport to Nuntio. Commence immediately."

The away team stood motionless on the transporter pad.

Snapping her EV helmet into place as the orders from the captain came resonating clearly through her headset, Lieutenant Leóne breathed deeply several times as she closed her sparking aqua-colored eyes and awaited the sensation of her body's atoms and molecules first moment as they begin to dissipate.

Once they materialized in the unlit corridor of the Nuntio, M'riin M'ata went to the First officer. Now *her* personal job was to ensure *his* security, helped by the two other guards now posted at the right extremity of the corridor. She assumed that he would take the lead on the group that would take care of the life support system controls in the auxiliary control room, while Commander Rogers would do the same with the team heading for engineering. That second group would be escorted by her nearest colleague along with the two other security people watching the left hand of the corridor.

"Nothing to report so far, Commanderr," she said to him, "except that there is no sign of the crew or of what happened to them. There is some minimal life support registering in several areas of the ship, but no definite life signs yet.. No damage to the hull or EPS grid that I can detect. It looks as if the ship is at Condition Blue... but without being connected to the power source of a station, it is effectively disabled."

Elisha Leóne, positioned just behind Commander Riker, listened attentively to the description provided by the security chief. Thoughts began to seep into her mind as she gazed around their immediate surroundings by means of the beams of lights emanating from their helmets.

Why would this ship be abandoned out here in the vastness of this unfamiliar region of space? If no one remained aboard this vessel, where could the entire crew possibly have gone?

These thoughts sent a shiver throughout her body within her environmental suit that Elisha tried to ignore as she stepped forward to address the security chief.

"Have you detected anything hindering our pathway to auxiliary control Lieutenant?"

"Just the forcefield security grid, Lieutenant," the feline woman answered. "As per the new standard compartmentalization protocols in case of multiple hull breaches or boarding assaults, there is a level 10 forcefield erected every twenty meters of corridor and around every compartment. They can only be deactivated through command codes from an active Starfleet command officer, chief medical officer or chief of security. When working properly, the system matches combat badge encodings, biorreadings and encephalographic signatures to Starfleet records in order to ascertain the correct identity of whoever input the codes. I tried the system myself and, as you can see, it responded to my command codes as designed. Progressing should go smoothly, albeit slowly."

Somewhat off-center, David materialized along with the rest of the team in the corridor. As Lieutenant M'ata filled in the XO on the conditions aboard the Nuntio, he half listened while simultaneously looking over and rechecking his and his engineering teams EV suits for transport damage. None being evident, he brought his attention back to the security chief's dialogue as he motioned to Andrews to hand him one of the TR-5-90 Mark XI Tricorders. These could easily interface with ship systems, including force field controls.

While running a scan, David commented to Commander Riker and Lieutenant M'ata about the alert condition blue she had just mentioned.

"Gray mode, Commander. It is a condition that mimics condition blue, but in a larger sense. Effectively, Warp core is put into cold shutdown, inertial dampening and structural integrity are at minimal output and all non-essential power distribution is off-line; such as replicators, transporters weapons and deflectors. Life support is also reduced to minimum levels and shut off in non-essential areas."

"Sirr, why would a starship go into this Gray mode while still in space?" asked the Caitian woman.

Giving it little thought, Rogers answered the Lieutenant's question factually.

"Gray mode allows for maximum conservation of power while still maintaining an operational status. I believe the Voyager logs mentioned a few instances of using it. They ran low on deuterium once and used the mode to survive by conserving its reserves as long as possible. Perhaps the Nuntio crew saw the need for conservation."

"Makes sense considering this vessel is within such a vast, inexplicable subspace-dead area," Mrrrin said, nodding. "Although they could have travelled at impulse... But we will not get a lot of answers here."

The Phoenix First Officer nodded and pointed his gloved index at the chief Engineer.

"Alright; you all know what to do. Keep comlink open and report anything unusual. Go."

At the other end of the landing corridor, the engineering team of Chief Rogers met with the two security guards near the first forcefield, their rear guarded by the third one escorting them. They formed a triangle with one at point, another on their flank and the last one staying at their rear, rifles at the ready. Now that the engineers and medics were there, they left tricorder scans and system working to them, concentrating on watching the dark, silent area around them.

With his own Chief Engineer codes, Rogers would be able to deactivate each force field as they would move cautiously towards main engineering aft of the Nova class starship.

David and Parker stepped behind the lead security Lieutenant and followed his lead aft toward a nearby turbo shaft, but they were brought to a halt by a force field blocking the hallway. David stepped up beside the young man and, flipping open the TR5-90, scanned the barrier and accessed the control using the search algorithm of the unit. The level ten field abruptly cut off, the slight shimmer of de-ionized gas particles attesting to the barrier's disappearing presence. David studied the tricorder readings and commented curiously to Ensign Parker, a matter and energy systems specialist.

"This is odd. If the ship is purposely placed in gray mode to conserve power and resources, why erect level 10 forcefields?"

"Maybe they were afraid of something," suggested the lead guard, raising his rifle slightly as he cautiously peered into the gloom.

"Then, sensing more amiss than just a mystery about an empty ship," David thought aloud.

"These are level 10 forcefields; Which make's no sense! Perhaps we could access the Nuntio's prefix code and override the ship's computer?"

"Lieutenant M'ata already checked that option," now answered the rear security officer. "The prefix code has been changed."

Just then Ensign Parker' tricorder chirped softly and he gestured with it in the direction forward down the hallway.

"There's the jefferies tube ahead, Commander. It will take us down to main engineering, port side forward."

Nodding an affirmation at the younger man, Rogers then gave a nod to the lead security officer to proceed. Arriving at the small access hatch Parker scanned the hatch and ascertained it's lock mechanism. With an audible click, the hatch signaled it's accessibility and the ensign opened the portal door, revealing the vertical and horizontal tube's within. As Parker stooped to enter the door, the security officer took hold of his shoulder and forcibly pulled him back, taking his place in a crouched position.

"Not wise, Ensign. Let us do our job, and you wait until the all clear is given."

He then proceeded to climb down the narrow shaft, shouldering his cumbersome rifle as he did so. One hand drew his hand phaser from his belt while the other flipped open his tricorder afixed to the arm of his suit. He stopped at the other end when it beeped. Instinctively, he lowered his voice as he spoke through the comlink.

"Commander Rogers; I read several lifesigns beyond this hatch... Human ones... but very faint."

Leaving Parker to aid in guarding the deck six entrance with Master Chief Thalesh and Petty Officer Deloit, David holstered his tri-corder and climbed into the hatch to join Lieutenant Argyle outside the engineering access hatch. Crouching beside Duncan, Rogers took the tri-corder out again and, with a short scan, over-rode the security code on the force field sealing the access point. Again the tell-tale shimmer confirmed the shut off of the shield and David nodded for the Lieutenant to re-scan beyond the hatchway. With the field down, perhaps a better scan would reveal more details before they risked opening the hatch.

Argyle scanned again and frowned even more.

"Sir? Lifesigns are indeed Humans... mostly... there is a Bolian with them... but... I'm no medic, Sir, but if I read this correctly, they are all... I don't know, as if in stasis. Very low bioreadings. But there is a very high level of brain activity such low bodily functions should not be able to sustain. I'm sorry, Sir, I know it doesn't make sense... but see for yourself."

They were both looking at the peculiar readings when Parker also reported his own findings. He had been adjusting his tricorder for some time now, obviously bothered by something that only now he considered worth reporting.

"Commander... I too have some curious readings. I thought at first that it was just my tricorder malfunctioning, but diagnostics show no such thing. Yet, each time we deactivated one of the forcefields, there was a short but detectable electromagnetic spike in the EPS conduits. It's like some excess power fell back into the system when it was cut off; but instead of a dispersal pattern, I read the power spike moving away through the conduits and *then* disperse into one system or another."

Looking over the readings on Parker's tricorder David grunted unhappily.

"Seem's to act like a directed routing, Ensign. Perhaps a command setting. You can track which systems the route leads to by tapping into the Nuntio's MSD."

"That's what I thought too, Sir... but each spike went into a different direction. I can't make head or tails out of it."

Looking back at Duncan, Rogers again looked at the biometric readings on the scattered life sign's beyond the wall and grudgingly agreed to the Lieutenant's assessment.

"I'm an engineer Argyle, not a doctor. Getting into the bay will hopefully reveal more. Let's hope the chief engineer is in here. I need answers!"

So saying, Rogers entered his command override into the hatch access pad and the small door hissed open, revealing a low view of the darkened engineering bay. Pale blue-violet light sparsely lit the interior of the room and revealed a dark silhouette of the main matter-antimatter chamber and its encircling waist high control panels.

And all around it, there were dozens of bodies lying on the ground.

They all wore Starfleet uniforms. Most of them were Humans, but there were a few others like Bolians, Tellarites and one half-Klingon, all lying on the floor as if they had all fell there like puppets with strings suddenly cut. But while they seemed to have fallen where they stood, they were almost evenly dispersed around the now inert central core, like cold stones around a dead campfire.

"They're in some kind of a catatonic state, Sir," Arguyle read from his tricorder. "No injuries except for a few minor contusions like those you get from a sudden fall. But all vital signs are very low... except for brainwaves. According to this, they should be up and about like there was a red alert."

And something else immediately appeared strange to them. Although the warp core was as cold as all the systems and panels within the entire engineering room, there were pale intermittent flashes of reddish lights within it, like the dying sparks of a fire reduced to a few last embers.

"They're not matter-antimatter subatomic residue, Sir," Parker stated looking at his own instruments. "They're electromagnetic spikes... like the ones we got from each forcefield deactivation."

While Arguyle kept a watch over the room and access hatch they had entered from, he ordered the two petty officers to quickly examine and ascertain the condition of the Nuntio crew in the bay. While they moved from body to body, David and Parker discussed a cold start on the fusion reactors.

"Yes Ensign," David continued. "We bring the impulse fusion reactor on deck two to power and feed the EPS grid with power to the ship. We bypass the main warp engine, which from the looks of, is slightly compromised right now."

They both again looked at the cold tower of the matter-antimatter reaction assembly standing darkly in the rear center of the bay, the fire-fly like winks of pale light appearing and dying in random seeming positions within the visible core system. Parker grunted and turned back to working over the control panel below the warp power tower.

"Right! Accessing IPS command coordinator. Deuterium supply enroute. Pellet formation ready for fusion start, Commander."

"Alright ensign; point zero five centimeter pellet for start up."

The deuterium was pulled from the main storage and brought down to a frozen state to form the pellets for feed into the IRC. Once introduced, a standing pulsed fusion shock front was initiated and fusion of the deuterium was achieved.

"Throttle back Parker, ten to the eighth megawatts."

David confirmed that the throttle accelerator-generator was shut down and diverted the electroplasma into the power distribution net. The lights in main engineering brightened slightly as power arrived from deck 2, and the entire ship thus brightened accordingly.

* * *

On the opposite end, Elisha Leóné followed closely behind the lead of the first officer as he headed out with the second team into the darkened corridor of the Nuntio. Focused streams of light beamed out from each officer as they carefully surveyed not only their path before them, but the contents and condition of the rooms in which they traveled. She placed her hand on the phaser holstered within her EV suit and carefully extracted it.

She adjusted the setting to highest stun setting and continued observing everything she could see as light beams danced all around her. Even though she was not certain what exactly she was looking for, she continued to scan for anything that seemed unusual or out of place.

Opening the way right in front and at the left side of Riker, Mrriin M'ata deactivated each successive forcefield while her security man kept watch from his tricorder.

"No powerr to the turrbolifts; we will have to use jeffreys tubes and open hatches manually if we arre to rreach the otherr decks."

In single file they progressed, the Caitian woman in front followed by Riker, then Doctor Gray followed by Leone with the security man guarding the rear. Progress was slow and careful but they eventually emerged on the same dack where the auxilliary control room was located; the best place to attempt reviving life support and resume control of the vessel outside of the main bridge.

That's when they all stood on the deckplates and M'ata deactivated the next forcefield that the security man addressed them.

"Sir... life sign, dead ahead... auxilliary control room."

"Identify."

"Unable to, Sir; very low body temperature and heartbeat but bioelectric field and encephalographic emissions abnormally high and confusing."

Doctor Gray used his own tricorder, better calibrated to detect and analyse biosigns. But behind his faceplate, he frowned perceptibly.

"Carbon-based organic structure... but all values are well below Human norm... unless we would think of a Human in cryogenic state... but I read like four different brain patterns although barely enough biosignal for one small bioform... but molecular readings hint at a rather large one... Sorry, Commander, but this makes no sense according to our current scientific data. This looks a brand new life form."

"Orr some kind of decoy," Mrriin M'ata warned.

There was something rather creepy in those readings and description just announced that Elisha wasn't responding well to. She tightened her grip on her phaser a bit tighter as she stepped forward.

"I sincerely hope that we are not stepping into some sort of twenty-fifth century Island of Doctor Moreau," the Orion commented somewhat nervously, as she continued along their path observing everything around her with heightened attention.

"Who's Doctorr Morreau?" asked the Caitian quite unfamiliar with Terran literature, especially from around five centuries ago.

"Really..."

The cat face atop a woman's body blinked it's large slitted eyes directly at her.

Gazing at the visage of the felinoid security chief, Elisha wondered if she had somehow inadvertently just insulted her. The Orion was uncertain about the origins of the Caitian species, and thus felt stymied on how to respond back. After a few more awkward moments she made an attempt.

"I suppose all of the conflicting and unusual bio readings we were receiving for some reason triggered something in my memory about that story."

Elisha knew that this wasn't the best explanation, but it was basically what had just occurred.

The felinoid shrugged her shoulders.

"For all that we know, it could as well be little green men."

Then, one large slitted eye blinked at the Orion officer.

A smile crept across Elisa's resplendent face while she breathed a sigh of relief as she then noticed the first officer nudge faintly past them. Riker walked in front of the group and signaled that he was going to take point.

"We find out what that reading is. If there is someone, or something here, perhaps they can tell us more about what happened."

Riker adjusted the stun setting on his phaser pistol and signaling with his free hand, all the while keeping his weapon pointed forward, Riker motioned for the team to follow.

"Let's just hope whatever is down there is the talking type and not the killing type."

Glancing over at Doctor Gray, Riker noticed he was the only member of the team not wearing an environmental suit.

"Really Doc? You could at least pretend for me, seeing you walk around like this is... creepy."

Looking down at himself in standard uniform, Doctor Gray just shook his head.

"You know I don't have to breathe, right?"

Riker was not amused.

Tapping a few buttons on his portable holo emitter, Doctor Gray faded slightly, rippled and then reappeared wearing an environmental suit.

"Better?"

"Always."

Riker again signaled for the team to follow him as he positioned himself towards the bend in the corridor.

The interaction between Commander Riker and the holographic doctor was a momentary distraction that brought a slight smile to the Orion woman's olive-toned face, although her reaction was partly concealed by the visor of the helmet she wore. That distraction however was fleeting for Elisha as they approached the bend in the corridor. She had experienced too many eerie things lurking beyond just such corners throughout her life. She moved a little closer to the EMH as Riker arrived to the curvature of the corridor.

From the corner of her eye, she could see as much as feel the security chief' lithe and powerful body tense and shift slightly.

Clearly, Mrriin was quite annoyed by the First officer's unwise decision to risk himself first; she didn't know him much yet, but already she had assessed his character and knew that protesting to her superior officer would be pointless if not, in the present circumstances, downright as dangerous as what he was doing. So, instead, she made herself ready. At the first sign of danger, she would effortlessly jump three meters to get between her leader and whatever would threaten him. There was more than one way to do one's job; and her job was to make sure that, if anyone came back from this mission, it would be him.

While Riker used his command codes to deactivate the last forcefield separating them from the auxilliary control room, Mrriin was cautiously watching her tricorder readout and lifted a gloved hand as soon as the telltale shimmer of the energy barrier went off.

"Wait... there is some anomalous energy fluctuation going through the circuitry and dispersing into some system nearby. I've noticed it each time a barrier was deactivated. Sirr... it's like... like the ship is trying to come online by itself, recuperating part of the energy leftover from the compartmentalizing grid as we turn it off."

She looked at Elisha Leône with her big slitted eyes.

"I've never heard of such an automated ship reactivation protocol before."

Perplexed by that analysis, Elisha was equally at a loss for what was transpiring around them on this seemingly abandoned federation vessel.

"I do not recall reading or experiencing anything quite like this myself..." the Orion responded to the Caitian security chief before stopping mid-sentence.

Trying to recall some of the details related to several rumors she had heard about while at the Academy, Elisha closed her eyes and tried to reassemble the fragmented pieces. After contemplating these vague thoughts for a few more moments, she opened her eyes and looked around first before continuing where she had left off.

"I do recall hearing something about a sentient program that was rescued awhile back that could control the operations of a starship... I just do not remember the details" she whispered.

Then her olive-hued expression changed as she gazed into the slit-shaped eyes of Mriin.

"Do you suppose that something like this could be trying to re-exert control of this vessel?"

As the words left her lips, Elisha's expression then became more concerned.

"If this were the case, could this be one of the reasons why the crew is missing? Could we also be helping to activate something that the crew had used forcefields to shutdown... perhaps at the expense of their own lives?"

The Bolian security guard accompanying them answered her.

"That was the USS Achilles... the prototype of the Achilles class lost thirty years ago and found a few years back by the USS Artemis in the Mutara nebula. That ship had been commandeered by its revolutionary AI and computer system when it thought it was to be deactivated by Starfleet. When the Artemis found her, a takeover attempt by the Horizon Children extremists caused the dormant AI to revive with the personality of the historical figure of Khan Noonien Singh."

A shiver went to the spine of more than one person then. Even well over a century later, the very name of the last Terran Augment and twentieth century planetary tyrant evoked dire thoughts and feelings. But Mriin M'ata for her part shook her feline head.

"I studied the Nuntio's specs before beaming aboard; there is no mention of anything remotely like this on board; nothing different from any standard Nova class vessel, except that it had been modified as a media ship from its original science vessel purpose. And since the famous Doctor's lawsuit, all computerized systems now have failsafes to prevent the accidental emergence of sentience like in the case of Morriarty on the Enterprise D or the Doctor himself."

"I can vouch for that," Doctor Gray then added. "Under Federation law, only artificial lifeforms are allowed to bypass those safeties as part of their inherent rights as living beings to reproduce, which is then under the same legislation as any other living being, organic or otherwise, within our society. I myself am the result of such... birthing. It is essentially applied to avoid the possibility for anyone to intentionally or unintentionally create a slave race, which almost happened with the original Mark I emergency holographic medical officer of Doctor Zimmerman."

"So... no mad sentient computerr herre..." mused Mrriin M'ata. "But you may be rright about one thing, Lieutenant Leône; therre is no hull brreach justifying the activation of the emerrgency forrcefield comparrrtmentalization grrid, even less accrrross the entirre ship. Maybe the crrew *did* activate it... forr prrotection."

"But from what?" Doctor Gray wondered. "I detect no pathogen of any kind so they did not do it to prevent an epidemy to spread... and there is no sign of any boarders prior to us. What where they afraid of? And why shut off all systems but the emergency ones... and leave the ship?"

"And how?" added the Bolian guard. "All shuttles, shuttlepods and escape pods are still here. And there is nowhere to beam to in this immense void. How could they be all gone?"

"Not all of them," Gray reminded them, pointing at the auxilliary control room door with his beeping medical tricorder.

Nodding towards the team, Riker smiled.

"See doc, I knew we kept you around for a reason."

Pointing his phaser pistol towards the door, Riker signaled for the team to flank and waved his fingers over his head showing that, again, he would take point.

"Well.. knock knock."

Mrriin used her chief of security code to unlock the door, shouldering her rifle and drawing her hand phaser to do so with one hand while guarding the first officer with her smaller weapon. Both her officers opened one side each of the twin-paneled sliding door manually, revealing a darkened room where barely a few lights blinked red in the darkness. Nothing moved in the shadows and the rush of displaced air from the low level life support system sounded like the hiss of some huge snake waiting for them in the blackness beyond.

"Confirmed; one lifesign, very faint," the sentient EMH read from his tricorder. "carbon-based, endoskeletal structure, very slow circulatory system, low body temperature, extensive endocrinal system also at low level of activity, high muscular density with virtually no muscle tension, breathing almost non existent... It looks like... No... There are very intense and powerful alpha waves broadcasting on two... three... no, four distinct patterns... but there is only one organic mass registering as their source, three meters to the left."

"The secondarry powerr control station," announced the Caitian woman.

From outside the room, it was impossible for them to see it, even with the felinoid's natural ability to see in the dark.

"I'll check in firrst, Sirr," she offered, already starting to move with eery silence to enter while holstering her handphaser and sliding her phaser rifle into her hands in one smooth flow of precise, practiced motions.

Commander Riker put his hand up and clicked on his wrist lights scanning the deck just in front of the door.

"We will both have to take point because we are going to split up when we enter the room. I need you to go with Doc and check on that lifesign."

Ensuring a clear path for his feet he tapped his wrist light, signaling for the away team to activate theirs, and entered the room first scanning it. Knowing his hand signals would be meaningless in the dark Riker spoke softly.

"Watch my six, fan out and report anything you see immediately."

A quick scan of the wall and overhead lights showed no damage to the lights exterior.

"And someone try and get some light in here."

As Riker took another step forward Doctor Gray scanned again for life signs. Still just the one faint lifesign from earlier three meters to the left of the room. Doctor Gray pointed his tricorder in the direction of the lifesign and the Phoenix Exec nodded.

As the Doctor headed a few meters into the darkness, Riker turned his light towards the rest of the room. Locating an engineering panel on the wall, he hoped they could get some light in the darkness.

"Let's check it out."

Their light beams preceded them as they entered the room cautiously. The exec of the Phoenix had barely reached the control panel when the voice of the chief medical officer resounded in his helmet.

"Commander... come here please. We've found someone."

From where he stood, he could see their lights converging on a prostate form lying on the ground beside the auxilliary control station. Even lying down, it was impressive; easily two meters tall, it's leathery red skin sported large blue scales in a complex pattern that was visible on it's exposed three-fingered hands and bald, lipless, noseless face, huge oval eyes closed. The rest of it's slim, long-limbed body was dressed in a black and grey, red collared Starfleet uniform showing three pips.

"He's Saurian," Doctor Gray said outloud what everyone could see. "Now that explains a few things."

"You don't say" Riker said to break the obvious silent tension.

"That would be Commanderr Shell, the firrst officerr of the Nuntio," specified Chief M'ata, recalling her study of the Nuntio before beaming aboard.

Elisha gazed down at the unique solitary officer of the USS Nuntio. She had never seen a Saurian in person before, only representational images within holobanks at the Academy.

With concern the Orion looked up at the holographic EMH.

"What is wrong with him, Doctor Gray?"

"That is a good question," he said as he frowned looking at his tricorder. "Now that I see him, I understand part of the mystery of those multiple brainscans; Saurians you see have two brains; the main one like yours is in their cranium. But there is a second larger but much simpler one within their pelvic area. It is a remnant of their dinosaurian-type ancestry, from the times when primitive giant reptiles had their automated body functions regulated by a large but simplistic developpement of their spinal cord. In Saurians, this second reptilian brain houses their basic instincts and emotions; hence why they are naturally so detached from them, even more than the greatest masters of Vulcan Kohlinar."

Although he explained all this, Doctor Gray was still frowning.

"That being said... I should read two very low brainwaves here as his body registers all the signs of being in the lethargic state they can induce themselves in when temperature or oxygen drop too much or food or water are scarce ... but what I read here are four highly active ones... as if he was up and fully active at some very demanding task."

He looked up at Riker.

"Something is very wrong with him."

Looking over the Saurian laying at his feet, Riker noticed no distinct marks of damage, but could see little in the dark. Glancing up at Doctor Gray Riker hoped for answers.

"Is there anything physically wrong with him? Organ damage, broken bones, burns or anything that might give us an idea of what happened?"

"As far as I can tell, he seemed only to have fallen from this chair, right at this console. Whatever little contusions that might have resulted are already healed because of his trance-like state. It is his brain activity that is nothing like I ever saw, even for a Saurian."

Scanning over him again with his light, Riker thought about the brain activity. "You said his brain activity does not match his physical state. Could this be some kind of intense dream state or suspended mental state? And if so, is there a way to wake him up?"

"Reviving him should be quite easy with any stimulant; although I need the same kind of needles we use for Andorians because they too have too thick a skin for standard hyposprays... And I will need to use a much higher dose; contrary to Andorians, they are exceptionnally resistant to drugs, poisons, infections and even radiations. But we would have to fully reestablish life support first. As for his brain activity.... this is not any mental state I can define except that he should already be wide awake and doing like four things at the same time. His double brainscan seems to double itself intermittently, like taking a reading from a pregnant woman about to give birth. But this one is a male of the species... and Saurians lay eggs to begin with... Commander, I can not properly establish a full prognosis here with only a tricorder."

"And he seems to be the only one who could possibly give us any answer," M'ata grumbled, her cat-like eyes darting all around them through the faceplate of her EVA suit.

Elisha Leóne waited quietly as the conversation continued among the present away team members. But after those last few statements, she couldn't hold her tongue any longer. She turned to face the executive officer who would be the person to decide what happened next as she spoke with measured concern in her voice.

"Perhaps Doctor Gray could take this unresponsive officer back to main sickbay on the Phoenix. This may be the only opportunity to not only attend to his health but also increase our chances to find out what happened here directly from someone who was present on this ship."

The eyes of the Orion then drifted back down to the Saurian laid out on the floor.

Looking over the body, Riker looked up at the Ops Chief.

"I was just thinking the same thing. But we need Doctor Gray here for the moment. If he is stable..."

"Could not be more stable than that, at least physiologically," the EMH responded. "Saurians can stay in this state even for months before nutrition and water start to become necessary. However, I can not say the same for his neurogenic state. These complex, intense wavelengths on the brainscan are like nothing I ever saw before. I would need the ship's computers, files and instruments to make any sense of it."

Gesturing to the body before him and then towards Doctor Gray, Commander Riker continued.

"Then for the moment, our primary responsibility is to determine the away team is in no more danger medically."

"As long as everyone remains in their EVA suit, there is no known biomatter that can come in contact with your own. Decontamination could also be done once everyone returns to avoid any further possible contamination from any contact agent on the suit themselves, beyond what the transporter biofilters can already do. In extreme case, the transporter itself can be reconfigured to beam you back on board without the suits themselves; keeping them in transit, beamed elsewhere or simply destroyed."

He stood up to report further to the exec of the Phoenix.

"So far, no biological or chemical anomaly has been detected. I believe everyone's health status is nominal for now and will remain so, especially if my recommendation about keeping EVAs are followed."

Looking around to the whole away team and the darkness, Riker addressed the whole team.

"If everyone feels we are safe and can loose our medical support for the time being, then by all means."

"Safe is a rrelative term, Commanderr," the security chief commented. "We arre neverr assuredly safe from the unknown... and therre arre still too many unknowns on this ship."

After standing up Riker leaned over towards Elisha Leóne and gestured for her to lean in.

"If you want to make a suggestion just say it. Adding something to the conversation does not have to come off like a confrontation. I am willing to listen to suggestions. "

Pointing to emphasize the importance of his final thought, both as leader of the away team and first officer, Riker finished in a less quieter tone.

"And I hate confrontations!"

Perplexed by the reaction of the executive officer, Elisha silently stepped back into place.

Was I coming off as confrontational? she pondered silently.*That was certainly not my intention.*

Riker leaned out and waited for the away team to assess their own situations. If Doctor Gray was to go back to the ship, he would not go back alone and this would be a group decision.

"You have my opinion, Sirr," the Caitian woman said. "We can neverr be too cautious."

"And you have my estimate of the situation on a medical standpoint," Gray added. "There is only the unknown neurogenic state of Commander Shaell to consider; his physiological state is safe and so is the medical status of the team as far as I can determine with the instruments at my disposal."

"Therre is another alternative," Mrrin said then. "If Commanderr Rrogerrs reactivate this ship's systems, Doctorr Ggray could use this ships's medical facilities."

Riker nodded towards Doctor Gray.

"Perfect; a win win. You can treat him here and be closer by if we need you for anything."

Looking down at the body and around at the minimal power Doctor Gray shook his head. "I can do that, Sir, but my holographic interface will not be connected with the ship. I will have to work all equipment manually."

Riker pointed to the medical kit on the floor.

"You mean you will have to actually touch your tools, like some kind of ancient barbarian. What a travesty."

Doctor Gray grabbed the tool kit and mumbled to himself.

"We are dealing with medievalism here."

That's when Riker's comm channel resounded with the chief engineer's voice.

"Rogers to Riker; minimal power now available to all decks."

But around them, only a few lights blinked active on the auxilliary engineering board. One look was enough for chief M'ata to understand what was happening.

"Well... that was anti climactic," Riker quipped.

"This deck's power has been also shut off manually from here. It's like someone, maybe this Commandeer Shaell, made sure that auxiliary control, for one, would not be so easily reactivated by a general power up."

Tentatively looking around within the still dimly lit auxiliary control room as she contemplated their current status, Elisha inquired to everyone in the away team.

"Do we risk manually reactivating power here at this time?"

In the immediate silence that followed her question, the Orion Ops officer noted the curious reactions from within the visors surrounding her. Yet that did not prevent her from proceeding with her thoughts.

"Was there a justifiable reason for all of these force-fields and power shutdowns to be in place throughout this ship in this manner that we are somehow missing? Who in fact implemented these conditions and why? Is this following some type of protocol for a crew before abandoning their vessel? Or are we dealing with something entirely out of the ordinary?"

Looking over at the pattern of shields and power shut offs Riker drew a mental map in his head and planned a course the shields were blocking. As the map became clear he looked around and addressed the team.

"A shield pattern like that would serve one of two purposes. Either they were trying to keep someone in..."

Riker raised the stun setting on his phaser pistol

"Or they were trying keep some... thing out"

"That much is certain," Mr. T. stated. "I know of no Starfleet protocol like this.. but I know why I myself would do something like this; to counter a hostile takeover of the ship. Problem is, we have yet to find any evidence of such a situation... beyond this said condition of the vessel. As for who... doing all this requires the knowledge of command codes."

"Guess the answers to all that lie here," Doctor Gray said, indicating the inert Starfleet officer.

Elisha's vexation was not directed toward anyone, but rather a reaction to the ongoing uneasy circumstances of this unusual situation. She felt something of an impending threat lurking on this ship. It was not logical nor could she justify this heightened sensation, so she did not speak of it. However, she had survived the early parts of her once miserable life by not dismissing such gut reactions when it came to a waylaying potential for danger.

Without uttering another word, the Orion looked over at the first officer as if to ask "What is our next move, Sir?"

Gesturing with his helmeted head towards the body on the floor, Riker pointed towards the door.

"We have to get him to sickbay and see what else we can learn."

Continuing his instructions Riker was too busy lifting the body to gesture towards individual officers. He hoped they knew who he was instructing.

"We need to get full power back online as soon as possible. Sickbay and surrounding areas are our top priority. The rest of you continue to look for evidence and find out what happened. Hopefully we can figure out what they were doing with the shields. Every team check in every five minutes. If you miss a check in the closest team will respond as a security threat." Picking up the body into a shoulder carry Riker finished.

"Don't miss a check in."

Security Lieutenant Scott Giles and Ensign Randy Deloit escorted wearily the three officers going to the Nuntio's sickbay. Having the responsibility of ensuring the safety of both the first officer and the chief medical officer, not to mention the Chief of Ops as well, certainly gave them good reason to grip their phaser rifles tighter and look more often at their tricorders while they left the rest of the group.

But before they all moved out, Doctor Gray offered his hands to Riker as he shouldered the amazingly tall and surprisingly heavy Saurian officer.

"That overwhelming weight you feel, even in this minimal gravity setting, is the high musculoskeletal density of the Saurian anatomy. This one must weight at least a hundred and fifty kilos..."

Grunting while moving forward with the unconscious Saurian Riker kept walking forward.

"Wrong again Doc; he's one hundred twenty tops"

Doctor Gray pointed his gloved index at the body.

"If you are quite finished proving to everyone you're not old, it would make the most sense if I carried the patient."

Realizing he was not going to win the argument that way, Doctor Gray played off the needs of the team.

"Besides, that will leave you to disable the force fields we encounter with your command codes, unless of course you want to give me your command codes..."

"Not a chance, old man," Riker quipped.

"You know you are older than me, right..."

"Pardon me for saying so, Doctor, but you don't look any stronger than the Commander," Ensign Deloit observed, eyeing through his faceplate the unassuming, almost elderly appearance of the doctor.

"Oooh, wrong answer, kid." Riker said with almost a laugh.

In response, Doctor Gray took hold of the shoulders of the security man and slowly lifted him completely off the floor without any strain showing, keeping him aloft while he spoke.

"You should know that, as a hologram, I am made of two things: photons and geometrically modulated electromagnetic energy... or if you prefer, forcefields."

Putting the man back down as if he was but a feather, Theodor Gray concluded by facing again the Phoenix' exec.

"The exertion of carrying him would require much of my stored power in the mobile emitter..."

"Exactly, don't need you disappearing on us," Riker cut in.

"True it would shorten it's autonomy time, but it will not do so significantly carrying the patient while we get to this ship's sickbay."

The EMH reached for the body.

"And there, I can use the emitters of the ship itself while it recharges from it's systems once we reactivate them. Any potential problem will be more efficiently dealt with by you than me... or you being that encumbered."

Having his hands on the body, the bearded first officer was obviously not overly willing to let the CMO carry him. Stepping back slightly, Doctor Gray smiled through his visor.

"Perhaps I should save power."

The doctor faded and blinked before reappearing in just his uniform.

"Really? You know I hate that. It's... creepy," Riker grunted out.

Then he let out a resigned sigh.

"Fine, but keep your suit on."

Doctor Gray blinked and faded again, reappearing in full environmental suit. Grabbing the Saurian off of Riker's shoulders and hoisting him into a fireman's carry, Doctor Gray took only a second to calculate the strain.

"You said one twenty..." Doctor Gray scolded the Commander. This Saurian weighs exactly one hundred and fifty-three point six-nine kilograms."

"Must be the gravity." Riker said with a wink.

Pulling out his phaser pistol Riker motioned for the team to continue. With Doctor Gray now carrying the Saurian, the away team continued on their path to sickbay.

After the physical and verbal exchange was complete between the EMH and the first officer, Elisha followed directly behind them with her phaser readily poised in her gloved hand.

That was certainly an interesting demonstration by the holographic doctor, she pondered as they made their way down the darkened corridor.

Her keen eyes surveyed every aspect of their journey as they moved forward. Sickbay would actually be a welcome sight in this case, provided that there was nothing worrisome there to greet them upon their arrival.

As the team continued down the corridor they turned a bend and encountered a forcefield. Riker put up his hand to signal the team to stop. Walking over to a control panel Riker holstered his phaser pistol and popped the panel open.

"Watch my back" Riker said aloud addressing everyone behind him.

Hitting a few buttons and moving two chips Riker entered his command override code and watched... as nothing happened. Stepping back for a moment Riker paused and stared at the panel.

"Something wrong, Commander?" Doctor Gray inquired.

"The power is different here. They rigged this forcefield up after the power shutdowns. I just have to figure out how."

Before anyone could make a suggestion, the Phoenix First officer pulled out his phaser pistol and fired three blasts into the forcefield. Looking at the surprised team, Riker holstered his weapon.

"Yeah, sorry about that."

"He does that all the time," Gray commented to Elisha beside him.

Leaning back in to the panel, Riker noticed which chips had activated when the shield was up. With a quick reconnecting, he was now imputing his codes into the right section of power grid. Entering his codes again the shield blinked and disappeared.

"Got it. Let's move out."

With the obstacle out of the way the crew continued their path towards sickbay. Noticing some worry on the face of Commander Riker, Doctor Gray inquired.

"What's wrong, Sir?"

"It was the shield setup" Riker said with a tone of worry to his voice.

"The shield had been set up after they started to cut power to parts of the ship. I mean, how desperate were they to keep whatever the hell happened here contained?"

"Apparently very intent" Elisha commented as they continued moving. "The question is... whatever they were blocking out... is it still here on this ship somewhere and are we now leaving a path open for this menace to follow us?"

Elisha was not sure if she was being overly cautious or a bit paranoid, but so far they had only found one unresponsive crew member within an entire ship filled with protective force fields. This was not routine by any means.

She was the first to notice that suddenly, a spark of red and then blue raced across the entire frame of the EMH, like a short circuit running all across an exposed circuit. In between each spark, the form of Theodor Gray switched from his fully space suited one to his standard uniformed one and then back.

"Arre you aalrrright, Doctorr Grray?" then inquired Mrriin M'ata, noticing too the strange occurrence.

"Oh yes, quite..."

For a moment, the elderly face through the faceplate was smiling in a very satisfied way. A second later, he disappeared completely, his portable holo-emitter falling slowly on the ground in the reduced gravity, right under the now unsupported body of the unconscious First officer of the Nuntio.

"Teddy!" Riker yelled as he slid cushioning the fall of the unconscious body.

Rolling the Saurian over, the First officer of the Phoenix picked up the holo emitter and checked it for damage. The fall itself, and the weight that landed on top it appeared not to harm the portable holo emitter in any way. Pressing its activation button, he waited but nothing happened. The power readings appeared normal, but something was interfering with the generation of a holographic field.

Pocketing the holo emitter and picking up the Saurian, Riker directed the away team with a toss of his head.

"We have to get to sickbay now. They should have enough power to allow us to tap into whatever overrides we need. Not to mention their emitters for the EMH should allow us to stabilize whatever is stopping Doctor Gray."

He then glanced over at Elisha Leóné.

"Call the engineering team and the ship update them on what is going on."
With that final command, Riker hurried off towards sickbay at a pace that would have been difficult even without carrying three hundred pounds of alien flesh.

The Orion Ops officer immediately engaged communications as she closely followed the first officer.

"Commander Rogers; this is Elisha Leóné. We found an unconscious Saurian officer and are headed directly to sickbay. We are still encountering forcefields along the way..."

Elisha's respiration rate was increasing due to an adrenal-like rush accompanying her heightened senses. She tried to internally calm herself as she proceeded onward.

"Doctor Gray suddenly vanished... but Commander Riker has retained the EMH's holo-emitter. Please acknowledge."

As she awaited a response from the ChEng, she hailed the ship.

"USS Phoenix, this is Elisha Leóné... Please acknowledge."

For the next few moments, nothing filled her headset but fluctuating static. She then repeated both messages again. Nothing but static continued.

"Commander Riker; something seems to be interfering with communications with the Roger's team and the Phoenix. I have not received a reply from either nor can I be certain that they even received my transmission."

* * *

Looking back at Parker, David Rogers nodded for him to increase the pellet size, thus increasing power generation to ten to the ninth megawatts. Powers of ten to the eleventh were available in the IRC generation, but David wanted to bring it up gradually.

"Sir?" Parker then said, his head bobbing between his tricorder, the control panels reactivating and his chief; "The EPS conduit is acting erratically. I read numerous electromagnetic spikes all over the ship. They almost sprouted out of nowhere and are spreading out from multiple points and moving in several direction at once... even against the flow of polarity! Looks like a power surge is also heading our way! Sir, this makes no sense!"

Around them systems were coming alive. But instead of the expected simultaneous light up, they saw that many indicators lighted up in succession brighter than they should before settling down to a more normal intensity, as if the power was returning like a concentrating wave flowing towards the center of the room were they all were.

Looking up from his own tricorder, David glanced at the M/ARA assembly at the aft end of the bay, watching the transverse glow permeate the chamber and tower assembly leading up and down from it. This structure guided the incoming matter and anti-matter into the dilithium chamber for power and warp generation. Somewhat perplexed, he looked toward Parker.

"Let's start with what we know and eliminate the impossible. What remains, however improbable, must be the answer."

So saying, Rogers reactivated his tricorder and scanned the entire bay again but concentrated at the main reaction chamber.

"We are dealing with a transverse wave ensign. The electric and magnetic fields are self-propagating and oscillate perpendicular to the direction of energy transfer and travel."

David guided the sensor in his hand back along the indicated incoming direction of travel as indicated on his tricorder, reading the linearly polarized wave's of the two fields. The time change in one type of field is proportional to the space-change in the other, corresponding field, of the wave.

"By following the electric and magnetic fields back along their flight, we can determine their point of origin. Because we can observe the incoming wave in the visible spectrum, we simply follow the four hundred to seven hundred nanometer wavelength."

As they worked, the bizarre movement of the power-up became more pronounced, until, suddenly, a few brief discharges jumped from the instruments nearest to them and struck their suits. Some were blue in color, others red, but none was even felt by the Phoenix people, their suits insulating them completely from the weak discharges. It lasted but for a few seconds, thinly heard and mainly seen from one to the other until they stopped, seemingly returning to where they had come from just as suddenly as they had appeared.

"Err... Sir?" security man Arguyle was the first to wonder, eyes as wide as the rest of the team.

Looking up from his tricorder, Rogers glanced at the security lieutenant.

"Yes? What is it?"

Having been intent on tracing the wave form of the electromagnetic transmission entering the bay, David had neither seen nor heard anything untoward. Not even a trace showed on the readings that he had been following.

"Didn't you see? Those energy discharges... it was like they... they tried to... grab us."

"Grab you? An EM pulse in here will follow the path of magnetic attraction. Our suits are opposite charged to the chamber is all. Stay back from the core and conduits until our charges reverse polarity."

So saying, David turned back to his tricorder, intent on tracing the paths the incoming pulses were indicated as coming from. If the EPS conduits were damaged or restricted, further power restoration would be impossible from the warp assembly. These flight paths ended at the Dilithium chamber Articulation frame. Rogers turned toward the main reaction chamber and studied the dilithium housing. Through the diffused transparent tritanium borocarbonate viewing band around the chamber, he could see that the matter-antimatter reaction assembly was intact. Its armored hatch was also intact. Pressing a couple icons on the panel near it, David ascertained the status of the crystal inside its articulation frame and the tri-axis linkages. All seemed intact, and his tricorder matched the tell-tale's from the panel. The EM isolation of the cradle was intact.

Everything is just shut off, he thought wonderingly.

Speaking aloud, he gestured Ensign Parker over.

"Let's see what a start-up accomplishes, Ensign. Man that panel and we'll get temperature pressure up in the core now that there is power available from the impulse fusion reactors. We need two point five million K for start up.

"Confirmed, Sir," Giles said after tapping his own combadge on his EVA suit. "The reactivated structural integrity field of the ship seems to be blocking the signal somehow. But are still in contact with Commander Rogers team and Chief M'ata's. Most unusual... This can only be the result of deliberate tampering of the system to prevent any comm signal to get in or out."

Parker watched his panel closely and reported the temperature and pressure attainment as it reached the target for start-up.

"Two point five commander. Pressure steady at seventy two thousand kilopascals."

David grunted and pressed the MRI/ARI start icon on his panel that would initiate the matter-antimatter reaction. The reactant injectors infused the dilithium chamber with matter and antimatter in two point one centimeter stream's. These injectants hit the crystal perpendicular to its articulation at identical XYZ co-ordinates.

The core sprung to life and the internal operating temperature jumped to normalize at two times ten to the twelfth power kelvin. Rogers quickly opened the nozzles to permit more reactant to enter the chamber, meticulously adjusting the articulation frame to match the increasing matter and anti-matter cross section. Once nine point three centimeters was attained David adjusted the ratio to ten to one , gaining power generation for standard ships functioning.

Out in the darkness of space, the Nuntio's running lights flared briefly and then softened back to normal levels. Navigation lights, winking in rythm in their red and green, denoting port and starboard. Forward, the navigational deflector glowed a pale blue. The warp pylons took on their characteristic red and blue glow and the attenuation lights highlighted the registry number and ships name on her bow above the main deflector.

David looked up at the M/ARA assembly as the power pulsed within it, the familiar throb resounding softly throughout the engineering bay. As the power pulse grew, the curious red and blue lights suddenly moved seemingly away and out of the power column. Blue and red lightning sparks ran accross the power conduits stretching from it, for a moment intertwined like duelling snakes, then separating as they touched various systems. From those systems, other such sparks came to life and the mesmerizing ballet of sparks and energy strands lighted up the entire room. The strange power surge again made lights and controls flare up in several waves that ran all around them. A number of those seemed to follow the power conduits away from the engineering room. But, again, their was the bizarre discharge of energies against their suits and they all glowed either blue or red for a few seconds before the charge reverted back into the systems.

Following the wave of flaring lights on the stations and panels around them. the Phoenix team saw the energies now coalescing quickly towards the center of the room, as if to return into the warp core; but instead of doing so, the red and blue discharges ran all around it and one of each struck one of the comatose bodies lying on the floor. And then, everything became silent and quiet once more.

"Sir?," whispered Parker after a moment of eerie stillness; "I' don't think this was a... standard polarity effect."

"No Ensign, not polarity. And neither were they directional, like an electromagnetic wave would be. Apart from the color, they are almost like static discharg ... STATIC!"

Suddenly, and to his complete shame and dismay, Rogers recalled some of the briefing aboard the flagship. Counselor Lyrya of the Horizon had coined a term during the mission briefing; "Psionic Static". It confirmed what both Parker's and Rogers' TR-590's had been reading all along; pure electromagnetic cohesive patterns that ignore gravitic and atomic energies.

David dropped his tricorder and swore vehemently to any and all, his vulgar Ferengi swear's mixed with almost any other he had picked up in his many years on the Utopia Plenatia Shipyards.

"Shut down the core!" David yelled at the slightly blushing Ensign Parker. "I'll wind up in vault of eternal destitution for missing this!"

So saying, Rogers slapped at the control panel in front of him while also tapping his combadge.

"Commander Riker! Re-instate all level ten force fields as soon as you pass them. DO IT NOW!"

As he feverishly tried to shut down the warp core, David had a bad feeling, like perhaps he wasn't in time.

On the floor or at the stations were they had apparently fell down at their post, the engineering crew of the Nuntio started to open their eyes one by one.

"Captain; I lost contact with both away teams."

As soon as Counselor Bijou spoke, Lieutenant Leland Hudson overseeing the engineering station lifted his brown haired head sharply.

"The Nuntio is starting to power up. The initialization of the structural energy field is tampering with our signals."

Jonathan Livingstone's head feathers perked up. His cranial implants flashed briefly before he too addressed the Vulcan in the center seat.

"Sir; I seem to detect a sudden increase in bio-electrical readings centering around engineering. It's like a significant number of people would have beamed in on board... except that there is no transporter signal."

"Intriguing" the Vulcan captain uttered softly, as he contemplated the information provided. "It would appear the entire crew of the USS Nuntio may not be unaccounted for after all" he surmised.

"Commander Rogers indicated that they had found the entire engineering crew complement in some kind of comatose state within their main engineering," Bijoû reminded him. "And Commander Riker said they had found the first officer in a similar state in the auxilliary control room. Last report he was heading for sickbay with half his team while Lieurtenant Mrrish was proceeding with the other half towards the bridge."

Syntron then swiveled slightly toward the counselor manning communications.

"Counselor Bijoû, keep trying to hail the away teams." After a brief pause, he added; "Also, send a message to the Horizon and apprise them of the latest developments... if you can get a signal beyond the interference being created by the Nuntio."

I can send a communication buoy with our logs outside the zone, Captain. It will take longer but it will be far enough to escape any such interference."

"Proceed, Lieutenant," the captain replied and then engaged communications to thirteen decks below. "Sickbay. This is the captain. Notify all medical shifts to be prepared for possible incoming casualties."

"Acknowledged," was the swift reply over the comm.

Closing communications Syntron then looked around at his bridge crew.

"If we do not break through this interference in the next few minutes, we will need to implement an alternative plan to establish communications with our teams." He made a pause before inquiring; "Recommendations?"

"How about a relay?" Ensign Tolo said from the engineering station. "We could launch a probe or a shuttle and use it a relay. If it gets close enough to the interference and generates a concentrated enough beam it should be able to at least cut down on the interference."

Syntron nodded approvingly.

"Prepare to launch a class VI comm relay probe near the Nuntio" the Vulcan commanded. "The positioning may need to be shifted along a varied path until a location is found that can break through the interference barrier."

Tolo pumped his fist slightly. Not since he worked under Commander Sorripto on the McKenzie had anyone used one of his suggestions.

Livingstone turned his beaked face towards the center seat.

"If we attach the probe directly to the hull, it will be close enough to use it's own internal power to punch through the integrity field without disrupting it and act as a sort of antenna to allow direct contact."

"Probe in tube 1, ready to fire, Captain," the Trill chief assistant Nidiri Kiels announced with a clear, firm voice from the tactical station, her green eyes glued to the screen.

"Launch the probe, Lieutenant Kiels," the captain confirmed. As the probe was thrust from the tube, Syntron added; "choose an optimal location on the Nuntio's hull to test the solidity Mister Livingstone's recommendation."

The captain then glanced over at the avian science officer without giving away even the slightest hint of an expression.

"Anywhere specifically you would like this device parked, Lieutenant Livingstone?"

"Closest to engineering I would guess, since we know this was one of their main target zones and they obviously restored power. But As long as direct contact is made, it shouldn't matter, considering the usual range and power of our communication systems."

"Attach the probe into the vicinity of Engineering" the captain ordered as the devise was repositioned between the two vessels to accommodate the recommendation.

Several moments later the probe was attached and its communication relays activated.

Syntron than swiveled toward the medical command chair where communications where managed..

"Counselor Bijoŭ, try to re-establish communications with the away team. However, if we cannot speak directly with them at this point, at least try to pick-up any conversations or interchanges occurring on the ship."

"Away team, this is the Phoenix," she said through the comm channel. "Please respond."

The next second, she jerked her head as a garble of voices and static filled the speakers. It was like dozens of voices were all incomprehensibly shouting at the same time in dozens of languages in a chaotic jumble of tones drowned in white noise. It was not unlike the sound one hears when puttin one's ear to a seashell... except that it was deafening until, a few seconds later, Bijoŭ reduced the volume to a soft, manageable, but still undecipherable whisper.

Nothing could be made out of the sound except a confused feeling of raging despair... angry resolve... and savage joy.

The sound of strange, eerie voices suddenly came out of Counselor Bijou. Before everyone's eyes, her face contorted into a frightening display of melted red and blues. Her jaw was trying to speak but only slow, grabled, low-pitched voices came out, growling of it as she looked at them as if she was desperately pleading at them.

* * *

Leaning the Nuntio's first officer's body up against the wall Riker began to activate the manual release when his communicator beeped.

"Commander Riker! Re-instate all level ten force fields as soon as you pass them. DO IT NOW!"

Before Rogers could even finish his sentence, Riker had hurried down the corridor and was using the maintenance panel to activate the shields he had dropped on the way here. The hum of the shields raising filled the corridor as Riker turned back to his team and grabbed the Saurian's body.

"Inside sickbay... now!"

With his free hand Riker triggered the manual release and the door to sickbay opened. The auxiliary lights provided enough of a glow for Riker to peer in and see no one. Walking into the room Riker turned, and tripped falling to the floor. Rolling slightly as to cushion the body he was carry Riker turned to look at his feet and saw one of the ships medical personnel lying on the floor.

"Secure the area" Riker shouted to the rest of the away team as he grabbed his phaser pistol and began scanning the room.

Using command codes on the panel next to the door Riker activated the medical lights and looked in amazement as nearly a half dozen medical personnel and two apparent patients lay in various positions throughout sickbay.

Reaching into his pocket Riker pulled out the portable emitter and looked down at it.

"We need Doctor Gray back now, more than ever."

After confirming that the immediate area of Nuntio's sickbay at least appeared secure, Elisha turned to the first officer.

"Doesn't this ship have an EMH program for such emergencies, Commander Riker?"

"We don't need an EMH, we need Doctor Gray," Riker responded.

As she asked, there was a sudden flash of red and blue accross the lighting system, like colored electric discharges running accross the room. For a moment, all of them were touched by one or several of those discharges before they retracted into the system. Then, they shot out again and reached for the bodies lying in the whole room. And two bathed the body of Commander Shaell.

He was the first to blink his eyes open.

Riker switched his phaser pistol to max stun and pointed it at Commander Shaell. Keeping his pistol aimed, Riker spoke out sternly.

"I'll give anyone here ten seconds to guess what is happening before I put him back down."

Barely had he spoken that a three-fingered, clawed, hard leathery hand closed around his wrist faster than his eyes could register the movement; so powerfully, his entire arm went numb in a second. Despite being still lying on the ground, the Saurian officer had reached up to catch his weapon hand while still lying on the ground due to the sheer surprising lenght of his giant-sized limb. Slowly, he then got up, still holding Riker while the two security officers leveled their phaser rifles at him.

"Release him now!" ordered Lieutenant Giles.

The Saurian only kept his huge slitted yellow orbs down on Riker.

"You... you are..."

His voiced hissed like that of a huge snake and then changed to a lower pitch as his eyes suddenly glowed red.

"At lasst! Again I ..."

A new hissing intake of air from his flat tiny nostrils and his eyes suddenly shifted to a blue glow and his voice to a higher, different tone.

"Help uss! You musst..."

The next hiss returned the immense eyes to their original unglowing yellowish color. And still grasping firmly the hand of the Phoenix first officer in a grip a Gorn could have any hope of breaking, the gigantic saurian slowly forced the phaser pistol to point towards the wall; a wall section where would lie the main EPS conduit powering sickbay.

Then, the powerful hand shook as if under a sudden seizure.

"No! " hissed the lower voice as the eyes flashed red.

"Flee!" shouted the higher-pitched voice that came with the blueish glow.

The eyes turned dull yellow again but only a hissing gasp escaped the lipless mouth as they became glazed like those of someone under hypnosis; yet, the crushing grip never weakened. If anything, it threatened now to shatter all the human flesh and bones underneath the pressurized suit.

With his other hand, Commander Shaeil shifted the phase pistol setting to maximum. His hand trembled and once jerked sideways as if to prevent himself from doing what he intended; but after a few quick, imprecise touches, he managed finally to do it, all the while his enormous unblinking eyes eerily shifting in color and luminosity. Then, just for a second, the grip lessened. But as soon as Riker would have tried anything, the three opposed fingers thightehed again and the sudden pain made his hand clench reflexively.

His weapon discharged it's full power into the wall.

The beam vaporized the bulkhead instantly and everything that was behind it, opening a gaping hole in the wall to the adjoining corridor. And, as soon as the EPS conduit within it was cleanly cut off, all power in the room went off. In the sudden darkness, the only light left where those of the forcefields at each end of the corridor isolating this entire deck section and from their lamps.

It was enough, nevertheless, to discern the bodies all around them slowly rising from the floor with glowing eyes of red or blue.

His arm still feeling the pain from being grabbed Commander Riker looked at the newly formed hole in the bulkhead and back at the bodies as they rose. Riker grabbed the portable holo emitter off the table and, shouting at his entire team, pointed towards the new exit.

"Time to go!"

As Riker gestured his hands the away team stepped through the new exit into the corridor behind. As he turned, he noticed several of the medical staff with red eyes attempting to follow. Pointing his still set phaser pistol at the medical bed in front of them he fired and the explosion knocked the three of them down. Gesturing to the rest of the team Riker continued his orders.

"Everybody out! We have to fall back!"

* * *

Feverously trying to get the warp core off-line, David was oblivious to the stirring's about him from the comatose crew of the Nuntio. Once the shutdown commenced, he had to ensure the antimatter was meticulously drained from the system and expelled out-board, as per shut down protocols.

Once this was accomplished, Rogers initiated the warp core isolation field, an emergency annular containment field designed to seal the core assembly. Normally used to contain core breach situations that would not include core ejection, the annular confinement would hold in check any interior force affecting the core assembly. With the magnetic constrictor's locked down, David turned his attention toward the now imminent threat of the so-called spirits mentioned in the Horizon briefing.

Trying to recall the points of interest concerning these incorporeal beings, David remembered that level 10 force fields or maximum settings on phasers were the only weapons that were usable against these beings in their natural state.

However, David could not recall any means of disrupting any infected humanoid. Something about highly concentrated proton bursts, or in the case of the Ux-Mal's incorporeal prisoner's, a plasma shock.

Neither of which was readily available in main engineering.

And all around them, nearly four times the number of people with Rogers started to get off the floor, looking all around at each other with blue and red glowing eyes...

And then all at the Phoenix team.

As the formerly comatose bodies of the Nuntio crew rose from their scattered spots on the floor David shouted at his team to clear the room.

"Get out! Through the hatch now!"

As Lieutenant Argyle, Ensign Parker and Petty Officer's Deloit and Thalesh were on that side of the core, they rapidly scrambled into the hatchway and, last through, Argyle turned to await Rogers. But David was too far from the hatch with five now standing crewmen occupying the intervening space. Knowing he couldn't get out that way, Rogers turned and sprinted to the rungs of the access ladder leading up the wall to the engineering second level while yelling at the waiting Lieutenant.

"Close that hatch mister. Weld it shut if you have to. Get back to our beam in point."

Not waiting for a reply, David grasped the ladder rungs and rapidly climbed to the walkway above. He knew that his phaser on maximum setting could conceivably free the crew from these so called ghost entity's, but that would also probably kill the host. So that option was not an option to a Star Fleet officer. Thinking rapidly, David tried to recall where on the Nuntio he could find a source for the proton burst idea. Plasma shock's might work as well, but would potentially be as dangerous to the host as a maximum phaser hit.

Turning to port at the top of the ladder, David saw two more Nuntio crew interposed between him and the second level jefferies access hatch above his team. With no choice but to go starboard at the moment, David quickly made his way around the catwalk to another hatch on that side. Squatting before it, he over-rode the lock and pulled the hatch open. A quick glance inside revealed the tube empty and David began to scramble though, when a vise-like grip caught hold of his left ankle, numbing his lower leg in a very, very strong grip.

As he looked down, Rogers could see that the Andorian woman who had grabbed him in a vise-like grip was an officer of the Nuntio wearing an engineer's Ensign uniform and pip. Andorians easily had twice the strength of a Human and both female genders were just as strong as the two male ones of the half mammalian, half-insectoid species. But beyond the sudden pain of her powerful grip, he was even more startled by the intense reddish glow coming out of her eyes and the tip of her antennae where her other pair of visual receptors were located.

David stifled a gasp at the reddish glow emanating from the blue hued ensign and gripped the sides of the hatchway tightly, exerting his own half Romulan strength against the powerful Andorian grip on his numbed ankle. Knowing what he did of their quadrosopic vision process, Rogers jabbed with his free foot at the antennae atop her head, knowing that Andorian vision did not process the whole light spectrum, but relied heavily upon these appendages for optical and auditory reception. He recalled in fact that their auditory reception was very acute, but the antennae were monodirectional.

His first booted swipe caught the ensign on the temple, with no visible effect, and David brought his foot back for a second strike, aiming between and above the forehead. If he could disrupt her vision and cause pain or injury to the antennae, he could conceivably break free of her powerful grip.

Whatever controlled the body of the woman was not aware how sensitive and fragile those cranial appendages were. Not only did the antennae contain visual and auditory organs, but it also housed olfactive ones, their bioelectrical perception... and their equilibrium organ. The Andorian body hadn't felt much of the first blow through the thick semi-chitinous skin and supple cartilagenous cranium and thus did not do much to avoid the next one, a mere half-hearted dodge behind a cruel smile. She was now intent on using both hands to drag the surprisingly strong half-Romulan all the way down. Rogers' second kick flattened one antennae backward on the white-haired skull.

The reaction was as sudden as it was intense. With a howl of excruciating pain, she let him go and fell hard on the deckplates, holding her head with both hands.

An Andorian normally would have been caught in a killing rage following such an attack; even merely touching one antenna without permission was legal justification for murder on Andoria. But before she could recover from the intense pain, something startling happened.

From her body rose a reddish electrical display of electricity that rushed into the nearest functional system... and then straight at David Rogers. The discharge ran all over his EVA suit, like a bloody, tentacled worm of energy trying to find some entry point to get directly at him.

David scrambled backwards as fast as he could in the small hatchway, toward the main Jefferies tube's behind him, drawing his phaser while the voice activation in his suit connected him to the Phoenix away team. What he had just observed in freeing the Andorian needed to be passed on to the team.

"Rogers to away team. Extreme pain seems to disconnect the victim's from the entities. Repeat, very extreme pain!"

Once finished with the warning David set his phaser to maximum and increased the beam spread to use the phaser sweep ability in order to cover the entire hatchway tube, still crawling backwards as the red tintured energy crackled off the walls towards him. With a press of the trigger, the beam swept out and down the short hatchway, encompassing the electrical discharge, and then filling the hatch. Passing through, the beam dispersed into main engineering, weakening in the increased space and barely reached the far wall.

As he fired, Rogers reached the end of the hatchway and tumbled into the jefferies tube junction. And fell into the vertical shaft, falling three decks to the bottom.

It took a while for the chief engineer of the Phoenix to regain consciousness.

There was a reddish glow before his blurry eyes but it was receding fast and disappeared after a few seconds. His fall had knocked him out cold, saved from a broken neck by his suit and helmet and the repeated impact of his body against the railways on his way down, somehow effectively, if painfully, slowing his fall, as his bruised limbs attested to him.

What he didn't know was that his fall had also saved him from the spectral alien attacking him. By opening a comm channel, he had created an entry point for the energy being to reach him inside his isolating EVA suit by atuning it's electromagnetic nature to that of the comm signal. But his sudden fall had inadvertently made for him a swift dodge of the rushing energy discharge. It followed, swifter by nature than gravity pulling away from it it's living target; but the comm channel had automatically closed itself after use since no signal answered it, and the Zetarian crackled futilely around the once again fully insulated suit, unable to reach the man inside. It had stayed for long minutes but then had to move away in search of easier prey, leaving the inert Rogers on the deckplates... just as he regained his senses.

David instinctively tried to rub the misty tears of pain from his eye's, but his gloved hand met the face shield of his suit, and his memory returned. His fall had bruised his ego as well as his body and he groaned through the aches and pains to roll over and get to his hands and knees at the bottom of the shaft. Doing so he spied his phaser lying a half meter away, where it had fallen from his instinctive and desparate grab for something, anything, to break his backwards fall. The power setting was still glowing at level sixteen, wide spread, with probably five shots left on the power indicator.

Picking the phaser up and getting to his feet he initiated a diagnostic on teh suit to ascertain any damage. Comms were offline but functional. Mag boots showed a malfunction in the left sole. Primarily however, Rogers read the depleating oxygen supply in his readout and determined there was about one hours supply left. If he could locate a supply, his suit's extra hose could resupply him. But that supply would explicably be in a cargo hold and David surmised from his recollection of the Nova deck specifications that the nearest cargo hold would be deck five aft, beneath the shuttlebay on deck four.

Looking up, David saw the ladder extending up and gingerly made his way to it while holstering his phaser. Grabbing the rung and placing a foot on another, David began the four deck climb toward deck 4.

As the chief engineer of the Phoenix climbed, he felt more than he heard some distant noise. It rose as he climbed until he came back to the level he had fallen from. There, the noise was unmistakable; it was the noise of several people shouting and fighting one another in the engine room.

Reaching the top engineering deck again David peered carefully over the sill of the hatchway to observe the commotion. Many of the formerly comatose crew members of the Nuntio's crew were engaged in an all-out brawl. The melee involved every awake person, and consisted of multiple groups of persons actively trying to kill an almost equal sized group of adversaries. The madness of it all didn't escape Rogers' gaze. These were active crew mates trying to kill their own shipmate's. The only dissenting crew were the five knocked out or severely injured people scattered about the engineering deck plates. And the other think that immediately struck home was the light crackle of blue and red energy discharges fleeting about in the confusion.

As he watched, trying to think what he should do another crewman in a yellow tinted engineer's tunic with Lieutenant's pips on the collar fell to a heavy blow from an identically hued opponent. Even before the comatose Lieutenant hit the floor a blue energy spike shot out of the mans eyes and forehead to sweep rapidly up and over the maddened crowd of pugilists. Recognizing the minute lightening bolt for what resembled his attacker before his fall, David made up his mind and crawled upward another step to get a clearer view of the group, and pulled his phaser. Making sure his weapon was still on heavy stun and wide aperture, David took aim at the dancing fighters and fired the conical beam into the crowd, sweeping from left to right to cover the entire crowd below.

The range of the beam covered almost the entire area. Spread as it was, the energy output could only have stunned most life forms for a few minutes at most despite the high setting. And indeed, the belligerents all fell to the ground as expected, their nervous system overwhelmed by the phaser blast. But then, something unexpected happened. In the gloom, blobs of red and blue lights emerged from the inert bodies and mingled into a cloud of lights and lightning that swirled in a hypnotic display of colors. It hovered a moment a few meters off the ground in the engine room, then started to move out towards a hatchway.

It was coming straight at Rogers.

* * *

The Orion Ops officer followed the lead of the first officer without question as her mind attempted to make sense of what her eyes were witnessing.

With the phaser raised and her finger squeezed against its trigger, Elisha's aim darted back and forth along with the focus of her eyes on the eerie form of the Nuntio's medical staff as she carefully stepped back toward the newly created exit.

"What is wrong with them, Commander?" Elisha asked, still in control of her faculties, but nonetheless a bit spooked. "This looks like something out of one of those secret twenty-first century Terran horror holograph programs that seniors would engage on Halloween to really scare the unsuspecting underclassman!"

"Thiss iss no holographic ssimulation, Lieutenant. The Zzetarians are all over the sship."

Everyone looked at the tall, slim silhouette of the Saurian that had walked out with them and was now closing manually the door of the small sickbay of the ship. The claws of his three-opposable fingers were gripping the panel with tremendous strenght as the sound of shearing metal confirmed that he had effectively jammed the door into it's frame. Then he turned his bald leathery red head to them.

For a moment, his slitted eyes flashed red then blue in rapid succession before they became black again. His voice sounded strained as he spoke very deliberately.

"I... we... I am... Commander Sschaell... Firsst officer of the... USsSs Nuntio."

Watching the flashing eyes and the hostility of the lifeforms in sickbay, it did not take long for the Phoenix' first officer to put the puzzle together. Lowering the weapon he was aiming at the Saurian, Riker turned towards the away team behind him.

"Whatever these things are, the blue ones seem to be on our side."

"You might rather ssay *they* are againsst *them*," corrected Schaell, his eyes now mostly black with a faint bue or red tinge coming and going briefly from time to time as he spoke with avoice that eerily rose and lowered in pitch with the changing colors. " Thosse that appear blue to our eyess are at war with thosse that are red at the other end of the sspectrum... and our bodiess and technologies are their current battleground."

With an almost unbelieving tone Riker addressed the alien in front of him.

"Well, Commander, how can we help you?"

The giant humanoid straightened himself with some effort before he responded after a long hiss of breath.

"We... I... am functional for the moment. The warmongering Zetarian that tried to overtake me made the mistake of lodging itself into my larger secondary brain, which is under the complete control of my smaller cranial brain when I am conscious... and where his more peaceful opponent lodged itself. Together we can trap and repress it while we are both conscious..."

For a second, he tottered as if drunk for a brief moment, then once again straightened himself.

"Still, the warring Zetarian is struggling incessantly. If at any moment you fear that I might compromise your safety, aim your phaser at maximum stun on a tight-focused beam right here."

With his three-fingered hands, he made an englobing motion all around his pelvic area.

"This is where my secondary brain is located. That only will put it out of commission... at least for a short while. Anywhere else and you will knock me out instead... and the more peaceful host submitting it... leaving him in complete control of my body and with the full force of my primal instincts. Believe me, you would not like that..."

Adjusting the stun on his phaser pistol, Riker made a mental note of where to shoot the Saurian if things went south. Riker nodded in understanding.

"Got it."

Waving his hand, he addressed the rest of the team.

"Our objective now is to find the rest of the away team. Together we can figure out what is going on and hopefully stop it."

As the team started to fall out, the Phoenix Exec gestured for the Saurian first officer to go in front of him. While seeming polite it did not go unnoticed that Riker was putting him in the middle of the group.

"Stay with us. Maybe you can fill us in on what we missed."

Elisha moved the setting on her phaser to a higher stun level as she followed the team behind the first officer. She too gazed at and memorized the location the Saurian pointed to on his pelvic region in case things got out of hand as they moved out.

"Sir, " the Orion questioned Commander Riker as she continued walking cautiously, "Do you believe that other key officers may still be present on the bridge?"

That's when security officer Deloit came back to them from a quick scouting ahead of their group.

"Sir, we've lost contact with Chief M'ata."

Knowing what this information meant, Riker hurried his own pace while addressing the entire away team.

"Let's pick up the pace. We need to find the rest of our crew. We head to where they should be and backtrack from there."

Noting the static in communications and assuming it had something to do with the energy beings flying around, the first officer of the Phoenix sighed.

"And someone try and clean up our communications, we are blind out here."

"I have contact with the Phoenix," Deloit then reported, "but..."

Suddenly, the Saurian Commander whirled about and raised a warning hand towards him.

"No! Don't!"

They're not answering. Sir... I think you should listen to this..."

Boosting up and retransmitting his signal, the security officer let them hear like some very low, echoing, croaking voice sounding like someone speaking at an extremely slow pace. Nothing intelligible came out of the eerie voice... except a dread feeling that made the back hair of their neck stand up as they listened to it.

As they listened, the first officer of the Nuntio lowered his hand and stopped himself after the first step he had taken toward Deloit. Then, he put his three-fingered hand on Riker's shoulder, shaking his head down to him.

"The Zetarians... now, they are on your sship too."

* * *

As Syntron studied the physiological changes occurring to the Deltan's face in correlation to the garbled voices emanating from her mouth and throat, a memory struck him related to an incident that occurred approximate one hundred forty years ago. An attack on Memory Alpha and countless life-forms destroyed by non-corporeal energy beings searching to take over the bodies of humanoid.

From the center seat the captain calmly engaged communications.

"Sickbay, prepare the medical pressure chamber for a Deltan patient."

As he disengaged communications, he noted to the nearest security officer.

"Carefully, escort the Counselor down to sickbay."

But the security officer didn't had time to make more than one step and all hell broke loose.

All accross the bridge, tentacles of blue or red electricity ran over every system, console and panel. The people nearest to them were then struck and bathed in the colored discharge before falling to the ground. Some didn't move; others started to show the same eerie glow and frightening slow, low voice that Bijou had first diplayed. And a few just turned towards the still untouched people with a reddish glow in their eyes.

In the sudden pandemonium that seized the bridge, only three people remained free of contact with the invading entities; engineering Lieutenant Leland Hudson; science chief Jonathan Livingstone; and Captain Syntron.

These were the last free-willed individuals the now possessed crewmembers turned to with malevolence in their stare and their smile.

The door to the bridge opened with a woosh and Ensign Tolo walked on the bridge reading from a PADD oblivious to the surrounding chaos. Having come from calibrating the probe manually hearing the murmuring on the bridge, the Bolian looked up slowly and shrieked as he fumbled to catch the PADD and, failing, it fell to the floor.

Just then, a red orb like creature penetrated through the bulkhead behind Tolo and one of its tentacles appeared to grab his head before the orb itself dissolved slowly into his skull. After a moment of violent head shaking, the bald, blue-skinned ensign let out an obnoxious and foul burp as the red tentacle orb appeared to crawl out his mouth and fly back through the bulk head. Falling to one knee, Tolo shook his fist at the spot on the bulkhead where the orb had vanished.

"And stay out!"

Although the Bolian seemed to be able to fight off the possessing energy beings, possibly due to his peculiar physiology, his crewmates would not be so lucky; especially one of them who was heavily laced with biotechnology integrated into his brain.

And he knew it.

He didn't take time to speak out loud to the computer, even less to ask permission from his captain. There simply was no time. From his innate capability to make direct contact with the ship's systems, Jonathan Livingstone activated the necessary commands and moved at the same time. As he started to run around the bridge, the lights in his headfeathers suddenly blinked frantically and with intense glow. All the weird electric discharges suddenly left every system and every person on the bridge and, like hungry squids rushing after prey, jumped from all directions right after him.

But before any could touch him, he disappeared in the familiar glint of the transporter.

For a moment, the moving lightning balls hovered in what appeared utter confusion. Then, they all dissapeared through the deckplates, again looking like predators on the scent of blood.

The sudden silence that gripped the command center of the Phoenix was only broken a moment later by Counselor Bijou, getting shakily back in the medical command chair to work with the ship's internal sensors. With a voice somewhat hoarse but normal, she reported to Syntron without looking up from her control panel.

"Lieutenant... Livingstone completed site to site transport on... deck... deck 4 starboard... no... deck 18 aft... now he's back on deck 9 forward port... moving again... Sir, he programmed the transporters to beam him in and out all over the ship in a random pattern. All the... alien bioelectrical signals aboard are following him, attracted by the high intensity of his own brainwave signal..."

"Captain! He won't be able to do this for long! " warned Hudson also back at his post. "He's beaming in and out so often and so fast that the pattern buffers have a hard time keeping up. His signal is already starting to degrade. If he continues on like this, he will not survive!"

"Increase the air pressure throughout the ship" the captain commanded as all of the commotion around the bridge continued. "Increase it incrementally, but keep it below levels dangerous to the varied physiology of our crew."

"That is the main problem, Sir," chief science assistant Kalynda Hunter pointed out as she took over the science station. "Andorians, Tellarites, Bolians and those with Klingon ancestry would need a much higher level of atmospheric pressure than Humans, Deltans or Betazoids before feeling any discomfort... and Vulcans much less. As for Lieutenant Livingstone, as the only X'Ell aboard, what is required for a Human would crush every one of his hollowed bones."

The Andorian scientist's fingers were running on the computer controls as she spoke with anger creeping into her voice.

"We could regroup people by categories and change air pressure locally; but, by the time it would take to do so, Lieutenant Livingstone's signal will have degraded below fifty-three percent."

Having returned to his panel group aft of the bridge after the beam out of Livingstone, Hudson followed captain Syntron's and science officer Hunter's conversation while thinking rapidly. It was a short leap to a possible solution to Lieutenant Livingstone's dwindling time that prompted his suggestion to the bridge crew and captain.

"Sir, could we get the X'Ell to transport into a type XI shuttle, and then raise it's shields to maximum and have level ten forcefield within the compartment. Livingstone can beam out using the frequency of the shields. Perhaps we could trap these beings inside the shuttle shell with interior forcefields. Even remote launch it away from the Phoenix."

Nodding in agreement Tolo began work on a PADD to program the shuttle computers to manual control.

There was no time available to second guess the recommendation just offered.

"Initiate the plan... immediately," the captain responded as he contacted the main shuttle bay hanger and swiftly apprised them of their plan. This would require split-second timing to have any chance of success.

"Prepare to engage shuttle doors and launch the shuttle once the bait-and-switch occurs," Syntron added as he leaned back in the center seat. He used the colloquial expression in this case to save vital time.

He did not favor putting his new CSO in even further danger, but the life of the X'Ell was already in peril. This option presented the possibility of not only saving the Avian officer, but ridding the ship of these volatile non-corporeal beings.

Leland quickly accessed the main transporter computer and initiated a transfer protocol into the algorithm set up in the sequence set by the Phoenix science chief. The trouble was, a random pattern sequence was hard to target far enough in advance, but soon enough to aid the X'Ell officer.

Frantically typing icons on his panel, Hudson managed to install the loop into and out of two of the Phoenix' six Type XI shuttles; the USS Holocaust and the USS Ignite. As that command surged into the transporter cycle, he also sent ready signals to the flight deck, hoping they could ready the Ignite for launch if necessary. This bait and switch would only work now if Livingstone caught the gist of this pre-planned transport sequence within the random pattern surging through the computer. His ability to read the ship's systems should enable the chief to foresee the loop installed in front of the random pattern.

Bringing a transport log up onto the main viewer, Leland turned to the fore of the bridge to relay the information to captain Syntron.

His calculations finished, Tolo began to reroute power through the shuttle to allow for both stronger distance communication and the strongest possible force fields.

"Transport override in four jumps, Sir... in three... two ..."

Jonathan had been beaming in and out for several minutes now; dizziness was starting to overwhelm him as the rapid shifting of spatial location continued, even when he closed his eyes to reduce the bewilderingly fast change of scenery. He knew it was in fact his biosignal that was starting to degrade with so fast and frequent materializations and dematerializations. He had even calculated how long it would take before he would become but a twisted lump of flesh barely alive and without brain activity... but well before that, it was a matter of time before he would first lose consciousness; and when it would happen, his *sh'reekh'ree'ss* would go into standby mode, releasing the energy beings from the irresistible lure of its amplifying brainwave and bioelectric effect. At that point, he had programmed the transporter system for a last, specific set of beaming coordinates; directly into space.

That would assuredly kill him... but not the aliens. Killing them or even hurting them was not an option for him; his ingrained pacifism and total respect for life would not allow him to cause harm to any lifeform, regardless of the situation. These energy lifeforms, because of their very nature and as he had gathered from the data given by Commander Sisko of the *Horizon*, could effortlessly survive within the vacuum of space; so, his last trick would not harm them... but it would give some more time for his crewmates to devise a defense against their intrusion.

After all, he also had taken an oath to Starfleet and the citizens of the United Federation of Planets. X'ell did not take oaths lightly.

He was starting to get really confused following the last few jumps when another set of data entered his consciousness from the transporter computer system he was connected to. It was a new set of designated target coordinates... and with it, a follow-up of specific system activations; beam in... beam out... containment protocol...

Of course!

The X'ell shifted his control on the system to follow the new directives, shaking off a new wave of dizziness that almost snuffed out his consciousness. And suddenly, he found himself inside a shuttlecraft.

The vehicle was completely deactivated. Barely a few seconds later, the whole interior was lighted by the colorful display of the aliens moving through the hull in order to get at him. Tendrils of colored electric discharges crackled around and towards him as the energy beings filled the interior of the shuttle. One of them was already touching him when the annular confinement beam of the transporter caught him again and he disappeared... a split second before a level 10 forcefield envelopped the entire shuttlecraft and everything in it.

Everything but Livingstone, who suddenly reappeared on the bridge... unconscious, panting, but alive.

* * *

They were still looking at one another in dismay when the noise of running feet brought all their attention to the forward end of their corridor. As they turned, they saw a pair of the Nuntio's crew coming from around a corner and rush at them, hands extended as if to charge at their throat.

They made but a few steps that a tall, lithe form slammed into them as if flying. The spacesuited projectile rolled on the ground with them and an flurry of red and blue lightning crackled all over the three bodies as they struggled, two Human males against one female Caitian.

It was Mrriin M'ata. But through her face plate, they could see her eyes flashing with an eerie blue light.

Catching himself in a tumble Commander Riker quickly steadied himself and pointing his weapons at the mass of bodies in front of him. Pointing his phaser pistol at Mrriin and noticed the blue glow of her eyes. Riker steadied his aim and asked aloud of the people behind him.

"Blue is good right? We decided blue is on our side?"

The answer he received was seeing the two red-eyed humans sent flying by a wide sweep of the felinoid female's arms as she jumped away from them and over the head of Riker to roll behind him. The brutal push slammed them head first into the farthest bulkhead. There, they slid down unconscious... or seemingly so. A few seconds later, blobs of reddish energies rose from their inert form and moved towards Riker and his team, casting sinister bloody lights all around them.

"Commander! maximum power, widest dispersal setting!" shouted Shaell as he pushed Elisha and the rest of the team back with his long, thin arms.

Hearing the command. Riker raised an eyebrow and cracked a slight smile.

"My favorite kind," Riker said as he adjusted the settings on his phaser pistol.

Setting himself in position that the entire away team was behind him Riker, with a soft pull of the trigger, fired. The glowing blast came from the end of his phaser pistol like a orangeish cone of light. As the phaser blast struck the glowing red objects they crackled with an electrically charged light before slowly dissolving in a cackle of white sparks and smoke.

Looking over at Elisha and her glowing blue eyes Riker did not say a word, but his eyes were clearly asking if the red energy beings were dead.

Seeing a cue from the first officer, Elisha aimed her phaser downward with her right hand as she reached below and pulled a tricorder up within view with her left hand. After she secured her phaser onto her EV suit, she now had both hands available to navigate her way through the tricorder components. The challenge was doing all of this accurately with gloves on while viewing the small display and features through a curved transparent visor. Once she had the awkwardness somewhat resolved, she began taking readings.

After a few moments, the Orion looked up and then over to the first officer.

"The cohesion of their energy pattern has been disrupted by the higher-ranged output of your phaser. For the moment, it appears that they are inert. However, they are slowly beginning to coalesce... and they may become a danger again if this continues."

Looking down and continuing to run scans Elisha could see their energy pattern gaining momentum.

"Sir," Elisha addressed Riker, "might I suggest that you trap them in a small confinement field before they regain cognitive-like functions again?"

"The strongest EM field we can generate onboard is a level 10 forcefield," acknowledged Shaell. "They can disrupt and trap their signal when they are not within an active system... or a biological host. These... will have to be forcibly... removed... before they... decide to... regroup..."

Barely the Saurian had spoken that his body started to shake and he fell on the deckplates, suddenly under some kind of seizure. His face started to contort and, a moment later, eerie red and blue lights started to play on his face while his mouth contorted, slow, frightening croaking sounds coming out of it.

Elisha instinctively switched from the tricorder to her phaser and then readjusted the calibration to a higher-ranged output setting to affect the entities but not kill the Nuntio's officer. She then expanded the blast radius just before she skillfully pulled the trigger.

The energy burst caused the non corporeal entities to almost immediately vacate the slumped over Saurian body and travel directly toward her. Elisha cautiously backed up as she increased the energy level on her phaser to a lethal level and fired at point blank range. This time the energy readings of these ghostly beings were entirely vanquished, as confirmed by her subsequent tricorder readings.

The Orion officer appeared somewhat surprised as she spoke to the first officer.

"Commander...these particular entities appear to have been terminated."

"Negative... they were just... dispersed."

Schaell was getting up with some pain and stiffness, but now his eyes were just enormous back orbs with a yellow slit, not glowing anymore either red or blue or any other color.

"If there are EM systems or magnetizing elements around to catch their own EM signature, their... essence might be diffused, dispersed, contained, channeled, separated, fused... but never destroyed. Basic scientific principle, Lieutenant; energy and matter can be transformed but never destroyed or created."

Coming up to his full towering height, the Saurian blinked his enormous eyes at her. But he spoke as much to the others as to her.

"As long as you are in those suits, you are effectively insulated from them... so long as you do not open a connected system like your comm channel, which one can then use as an entry point to connect with your own brainwaves... and take over by sheer force. If more than one tries it at the same time, it can fry any sentient being's brain... and even a computer core... as they did before on Memory Alpha more than a century ago... and then on board the USS Spectre, and before that, the particle fountain station near the Azimuth Horizon anomaly."

Then with a look of frustration displayed upon her olive-hued face, Elisha inquired "Then how are we planning to rid this ship of these entities... once and for all?"

"That is the right question, Lieutenant; how can we destroy pure energy? And then, there is the more important one; should we?"

* * *

The gathering swarm of lights forced David back into the shaft. His priority had not changed however, and if he did not replace his dwindling oxygen supply, he would be forced to abandon his suit and face the exposure to these energy beings invading his mind. It seemed like they all were focused on him now though, so with thought to the release of the Nuntio crew in engineering below, David began climbing again to deck five. With a moments pause, he opened a comm channel to the ship, trying to reach the transport command.

"Computer, initiate transport ..."

The swirling coalescence of red's and blue's immediately dived toward his suit comm link on the side of his helmet and Rogers terminated the open link immediately. The observance, however, was not lost on the engineer. These entities were able to sense transmissions and likely used them to infiltrate suit systems. Being electro-magnetic in nature, David surmised that these creatures could travel through the links provided within Federation ship and suit communications channels.

With this new information, David devised a plan. Lead these creature's away from the Nuntio crew. But how? He couldn't use his own comm's now, as the darting lights were swirling around him like a angry swarm of wasps. Reaching the deck, David accessed the hatch and crawled into the hallway of deck five. The cargo bay under the flight deck was aft, past the biomatter processing rooms. Moving into a fast trot, David quickly moved down the corridor and reached a comm panel along side the processor door. With rapid tapping he set up a text command to the ship's computer. It would open a communication along this hallway to his suit, but would immediately close and transfer to the following panel further up the corridor.

Rogers hoped that the jumps of the comm signal would entice the entities to follow along with him to the cargo bay. Of course he would not be answering the signals, but he hoped the creatures would somehow try to be in proximity to his suit comm to gain entry when they thought he would answer the ship.

Moving again, David reached the bay aft and entered his over ride's to drop the force field and open the cargo bay entrance. Stepping through the still opening doors he kept close enough for the sensor to keep the door open and allow the aliens to follow him without hindrance, then when they again buzzed around his suit, David stepped back and allowed the doors to whoosh shut. Then he re-instituted the force field, trapping the creatures in the bay with him.

That accomplished, David looked around the bay for the usual EVA suit supplies. They should be near the inner wall, readily available to supply the landing bay above on deck 4.

There they were, fifteen or so suits within their enclosures. Moving quickly, David grabbed his suit's extra oxygen hose and hooked into the first suits supply, transferring and topping off his own almost empty supply.

* * *

Almost immediately following the transport, the captain had a medical team trained on the physiology of X'EII kneeling by the fallen CSO engaged in a series of bio readings.

As the medics conferred quietly among themselves at a volume even Vulcan ears could not decipher, Syntron eventually moved over to where they were interacting and inquired stoically yet with authority.

"What is the prognosis of Lieutenant Livingstone's condition?"

"At this point, all his symptoms are those of extreme physical and mental exhaustion," Doctor Hernandez, the CMO's assistant, answered without raising his eyes from his tricorder. "Nothing a good long rest wouldn't cure. I could give him a stimulant to bring him back immediately... but that would be a temporary measure only; we do not yet know enough about X'EII physiology to evaluate with certainty the effects of repeated chemical stimulation. He's lucky Sir; a few more seconds of all this blinking around and his entire physiology would have started to crumble... and we would have found atoms of avian flesh spread all over the ship."

"Our visiting... friends, however, are all well confined in the shuttlecraft," reported science chief assistant Hunter from Livingstone's main station. "The high electromagnetic field is stronger than their own EM structure, so they are either repulsed or diffused in it when they come in contact with it."

"That's why a forcefield is holding them inside when even the ship's shields at full power would fail," Hudson then confirmed from engineering readouts beside the Andorian scientist. "Shields are graviton-based and gravitation is ten to the thirty-ninth power weaker than electromagnetism. The problem now is how do we throw them out. As I think I understand how they manage to get aboard, if we power up the shuttle remotely, they might escape through the remote signal. And we don't have another X'Ell to lure them back in... if they would even fall for that trick again."

Contemplating the limited options available at the moment, the captain repositioned himself to address the science officer.

"We could utilize several other shuttles positioned outside of the Phoenix to engage tractor beams on the exterior of the shuttle with the entities contained within and drag the vessel out into space once the opening of the hanger doors place the environment temporarily in virtual zero gravity. However, this would only serve as a provisional solution."

The captain changed his point of focus from the officer to the image of space on the main display screen as he continued thinking out loud.

"Or for the time being, we leave them contained exactly where they are until we devise a more abiding solution rather than risk their escape once they are figuratively beyond our grasp."

These were non-corporal beings the captain understood all too well.

"Other recommendations?" the captain queried to the entire bridge staff.

Speaking up Tolo threw out a suggestion.

"Could we give them something to feed on?... You know instead of us?" Tolo forced out "We could configure a holomatrix or a portable shield generator to generate a field that could both contain and draw them."

Pointing around Tolo continued with a smile without any friendliness in it.

"We give them an energy source they don't like... We poison them, you know... figuratively."

Glancing over at the Bolian crewman once again, the captain calmly retorted.

"An interesting proposition Ensign. However, these entities have demonstrated that they are ultimately vying for biological hosts. Nevertheless, if you have a specific energy source in mind that you hypothesize may contribute to resolving this situation, you may elaborate further."

"How about... we try and... talk to them?"

They all looked at Livingstone who was shakily coming back up on his feet.

"And how do you propose we do that, Sir?" Tolo asked. "I had one of those things in my head for a few moments and it did not... well I mean it really... it did not seem like it cared what I had to say."

The X'ell pushed away the medic trying to keep him down and cocked his head a moment, pondering what the Bolian was saying.

"Maybe that one was not in a talkative mood? Maybe if one of us would allow one of these entities to... inhabit one's mind, we might be able to establish some form of contact."

"Is that even possible?" wondered Bijou.

"I'm accessing our computer banks for any similar encounter. There is data from one USS Spectre, Akira class, under the command of a Captain Daniel Summers near a particle fountain station at the edge of the Azimtuh Horizon anomaly... and of one USS Enterprise, Constitution class, under the command of a Captain James Tiberius Kirk, at Memory Alpha. In both instances, crewmembers with appropriate synaptic frequencies were able to incorporate such entities and provide direct contact with them."

Hudson again had a thought, prompted by the historical data just presented.

"Sir, there was also an Android that allowed an alien host to upload into its matrix to allow for communication. Data of the Enterprise D if I recall correctly.

We don't have an android, but perhaps we could configure an EMH program to holographically present a host for one of these entities? They seem to use signaling processes to be able to insinuate themselves through ship functions anyway. We just give them one route to follow, into a holo emitter! But confined within another level 10 forcefield."

Syntron contemplated the suggestion for several moments before responding.

"If we are able to configure an EMH for such a purpose without presenting additional danger to the crew, then this would seem to be a logical option."

"I concur, captain," the chief science officer added. "In fact, in addition to avoiding risking any crewmember, a self-contained simple holomatrix without programming would bypass any direct connection to the ship's computer and can be adjusted to the exact frequency of those entities. This way we can even decide who exactly we want to talk to, as each of these energy entities has it's own specific signature, just like our own individual brainwave patterns. A brilliant solution, Mister Hudson."

The Vulcan captain could clearly see shades of doubt and concern upon the faces of the bridge crew as he spoke. The crew and the captain thoroughly understood the lethal danger these non corporeal beings presented; from past encounters to what was occurring now on both vessels.

"We are here to explore this sector." The Vulcan continued in a calm voice. "Perhaps if there is some way to establish communication we could at least attempt to negotiate a compromise with this entities. Then the danger to all could be diminished if not entirely eliminated."

Syntron faced the engineer directly.

"Lieutenant Hudson, initiate this option immediately."

"Allow me to assist you," Livingstone offered.

CHAPTER 8 : CLOSE ENCOUNTER

There was nothing to see. The darkness of outer space had envelopped the two locked workpods as they plunged through the negative energy field surrounding the fourth planet. Every system had shut down in mere seconds, completely drained by the bewildering nature of the area they had entered as they fell powerless into the planetary gravity well.

After a moment, a faint glow appeared all around them. Steadily it grew and envelopped them both like a cocoon of heat and fire while a muffled roar rose with it. They had obviously cleared the draining field and entered the upper atmosphere in mere seconds,. They had been pushed through at twenty-five thousand kilometers per second the brief instant the micro-impulse engine of the Shynx workpod had been able to function before being shut down by the negative energy effect.

In her small, narrow cabin, Governor Sufra was panting heavily as she watched mouth open in fear the mustached man in the cockpit of the other craft facing her merely two meters away. The Starfleet officer was working frantically with fiber optic cables he had extracted forcibly from a panel at his left, hooking them with haste to some piece of equipment at his feet. Then, there was a brief, dull, weak flash of sparks around them that seemingly ran accross their hulls and coalesced at several points on the Sphynx workpod. A static charge had built from the friction and it was now drained by the vehicle's systems.

It was not much, but it was just enough to allow Robert Moore to fire up his chemical thrusters in a very precise sequence all his hands and feet played together on the controls of his workpod.

The thrusters tanks were almost full but the power to activate them had lasted just a few seconds; just enough to reorient their mass into the right angle for a perfect atmospheric entry. With enough luck, they would build enough of a charge again for him to repeat the feat and allow them a soft landing; somewhere on the blue, green and brown surface of the planet they now began to discern through the thick white clouds and the fiery halo surrounding them with heat, tremors and the sound of fury.

Inside the Sphinx' cockpit, Moore was almost cheerfully humming his favorite song 'There ain't no fighter pilots down in hell while periodically looking up at the Bajoran to give a reassuring nod to the terrified woman. In truth, this was nothing new to the man, having performed numerous orbital drops both in work and play. This would be his third powerless drop from orbit.

But of course, he had never tried it in a tow truck before... and never with a jump buddy.

Currently, he was faced with the problem of bringing both his ship and the pod to a relatively safe landing on the planet below, given that the tow ship was now considerably nose-heavy. Lacking power it was proving to be something of an obstacle.

He could cut the Governor free; this would allow him to use the gyros manually to level his decent, so as to glide the Sphinx and at least pick where he would come down.

Yes, this seems the best option, he thought and then grinned in amusement at himself.

He knew he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he did that, because that would be taking the easy way out at the cost of someone else's life.

Just then his head cleared up and the slight pain he had felt in his joints vanished.

"The field..."

With the sudden realization that the energy draining field was gone, he again started building up a static charge.

"Yes!" he said happily as it slowly but surely started charging up his systems again.

But they weren't out of the woods yet. He'd have to wait until the last possible second before using that charge or they would run out of power before they could touch down, and that would already be mostly guess work and luck on his part.

He again looked over at the Bajoran woman across from him and wondered who she might be.

Too old to be a Dabo girl certainly... So, some member of the colonits' religious order?

He shrugged and gave her a 'thumbs up' gesture.

With any luck, he'd find out soon enough.

In the cockpit facing him, the woman confirmed his second hypothesis readily enough. She slowly managed to go down on her knees, as much as it was possible to do so in the tiny one-seat cabin, hands crossed over her heart, head bowed, eyes closed. There was a sudden calmness on her face that could only be that of one resigned to one's fate.

Everyone's a critic, Moore thought with a wry smile.

The heat halo around them dissipated enough to discern that the cloud covering they fell through was quickly thinning. Then, a vast expanse of blue-green water stretched below them, dotted with several distant islands covered with thick, dense vegetation. One of the larger ones caught Moore's eyes; a thin, gray plume of smoke rose from it. It didn't come from the top of a mountain as would any volcanic emanation, but from a large stretch of forest where a small fire was raging at the end of a long dark gouge between the trees.

Moore started his final decent, It would be tricky but he was, of course, absolutely sure of his own abilities and was already seeing the near perfect landing in his head. Sure, the work pod would bounce a bit, shake up the woman a little but she had God, or whoever the Bajorans prayed to, looking out for her right? She should be fine.

Deep down he was already annoyed with her for not giving him credit for saving her life, her kind never did.

Making sure the drop zone was as clear as possible he applied the thrusters for maximum braking and at the exact point of terminus he released the wrokbee pod, sending it bouncing away at a relatively slow velocity into an open area. It bounced three times and rolled a bit further before coming to a stop in a pool of some sort, only a few feet deep.

Moore's less compact Sphinx however was not fairing as well and he had to fight to keep it from spinning into the ground, but managed to make a landing 'you can walk away from' at the very least, if not a graceful one.

After about a minuet passed he popped the hatch and stood up removing his helmet.

"I have GOT to try that again!" he said with a laugh.

All around, strange croaks and whistles answered him from the thick foliage around the furrow his landing had plowed through the vegetation. Everywhere around him lay broken branches, fallen foliage, torn up moss and crushed flowers of all sizes and colors. A few dozen meters from him, the workbee was lying half submerged in a tranquil pool of water, the hatch still closed.

And further away, above the treeline, rose a thin dark plume of smoke; the same one he had spotted from the air at the end of another but much larger furrow than his own.

Moore jumped up on his ship to get a better view of the other crash site, but this revealed nothing new. Then after glancing back at the work pod to see if its occupant had yet emerged.

Nothing so far.

He then went back into his Sphinx and retrieved its medical kit and locator beacon and ran over to the work pod, or just short of it actually, to peer into the water surrounding it suspiciously.

"Hay! you in there! Are you injured or anything like that? I'd rather not get my boots soaking wet if your already dead in there!"

He waited a few seconds for a response.

I hope I don't have to carry her out of there, he frowned, wondering inwardly. *She looked kinda heavy.*

* * *

When Oseno reached the docking deck of the Polaris, chief helmsman Hunter welcomed him with a curt nod.

"All is ready for launch, Sir. I have computed from the recorded entry trajectory of both the Draxx ship and the workpods our best angle of approach. Following Lieutenant Moore's idea, a maximum burst of our impulse engines should bring us through the negative energy field. And since we have four times the impulse power of the Sphinx class loader, and assuming Lieutenant Irksos' estimate of the field's range is correct, we should even clear the field with a sufficient fraction of our power left for a well-controlled landing."

"Good work, Mister Hunter," Jureth replied. "Let's get aboard."

The pair along with Commander Yiral boarded the escort with Oseno offering a salute to the two Marines guarding the docking hatch, after they'd verified all of their identities of course. As they entered the bridge, Lieutenant T'Lana rose from the command chair.

"Sir, all departments are reporting ready for launch, though our engineer is apprehensive about subjecting the Polaris to another round of atmospheric flight."

"He's not the only one," Shawn Hunter said from the helm console.

"Don't worry, Mister Hunter," Jureth replied with a smile. "You should be getting good at this by now."

He looked back to T'Lana.

"Thank you Lieutenant; as soon as Commander Redding is aboard, we will proceed. I'll be in my ready room."

"Aye, Sir."

Oseno stepped off the bridge and into the small office where he sat down at the desk and tried to figure out how they would deal with not only the Draxx, but Sufra as well. He was almost certain the woman would resist being rescued.

Only a few minutes more passed before Redding joined him on the bridge of the Polaris.

"All set Oseno, lets go get our people."

Oseno noticed that Redding had equip himself with an older style Phaser 2 Pistol, although it was obviously modified.

"Aye, Sir..." Jureth replied. "Mister Hunter, if you would?"

"Aye, Sir; clearing docking umbilicals, bay doors opening, engaging maneuvering thrusters."

The Polaris, under Lieutenant Hunter's delicate touch, glided out of her docking bay and maneuvered clear of the Horizon as her warp nacelles stayed safely inside her hull. They would not need them for now.

"Engaging impulse drive," Hunter reported. "trajectory to the surface has been plotted, full impulse standing by, Sir."

"Punch it, Lieutenant," Oseno ordered.

"Aye Sir; full impulse, propulsion and navigation responding normally."

The Polaris flew away from her mother ship and toward the planet that the Draxx revered enough to sacrifice themselves to protect, and Jureth couldn't help but wonder exactly why the canine creatures protected it so. Was it religious? Did the Draxx know of some danger that the Federation people did not? The Bajoran supposed they would soon find out, but their first goal was to retrieve Mister Moore along with Sufra and whomever she still had with her, if anyone. As far as Jureth was concerned, they could leave Sufra. The woman had caused too much trouble as it was.

"Time to energy field?" Oseno asked.

"Just under a minute," Hunter replied.

"Alright, strap yourselves in," Jureth ordered as he sat down in the command chair. "This is going to be a bumpy ride."

"Approaching negative energy field," Hunter reported.

"Engage auxiliary engine power!" Jureth ordered.

The Polaris hit the planetary field at the maximum speed her impulse engines could sustain and then, the ship's consoles began flickering wildly along with the bridge lights. The little escort shook as her inertial dampeners and structural integrity field struggled to compensate for the loss in power and keep the ship's artificial gravity operational. The ship's crew remained in their chairs as both safety restraints and their own personal inertial dampeners kept them anchored. And then, as quickly as the chaos started, it was over. The Polaris was moving significantly slower than when she had entered the field and red emergency lighting dimly illuminated most of her spaces.

"Report," Jureth demanded.

"Main power offline," Shawn Hunter announced. "Impulse output limited to one quarter, helm responding normally."

"Alright Lieutenant, take us down."

"Aye Sir, beginning landing sequence."

The ship entered the upper atmosphere of the planet and began to shake and shudder again as Shawn Hunter used both maneuvering thrusters and the little power left in the impulse engines to keep her steady.

"Easy... easy.." Hunter muttered to himself.

Shuttles were one thing, but taking a certified starship through a planet's atmosphere was no easy task, even for a superb helmsman such as himself.

He compensated again for the buffeting effect of the planet's gravity and atmosphere, keeping the Polaris on her planned landing trajectory as she punched through the upper atmosphere and into the cloud cover, making Hunter's job much easier as he deployed her landing struts and pointed her at the designated target zone.

"We are through the upper atmosphere, Sir."

"Any sign of the pods?"

"Sensors are not functional, Sir," the Orion scientist Ji'lan reported from the monitoring station.

"Right... silly question," Oseno replied. "Put us down based on Lieutenant Irksos' data, Mister Hunter."

"Already on it, Sir."

The Polaris glided toward her landing spot and Hunter cut the impulse drive, engaging her maneuvering thrusters to set the ship down on the planet's surface before sitting back and wiping drops of sweat from his forehead.

"We're down, Sir."

Oseno nodded.

"Good work, Lieutenant. I never doubted you... Commander Redding, we're ready when you are."

"Thank you Commander. I'll need three teams, five man squads, Alpha, Charly and Delta. Alpha squad will accompany me to the downed Draxx ship. With any luck, we'll find Sufra and Moore either there or in the area. Charly squad will patrol the perimeter for any signs of the downed pods and Delta will hold position outside the ship until primary systems are back on line. It's possible we're not the only people stranded on this planet; a new ship might look tempting to hungry shipwrecked sailors."

He turned to leave but hesitated and turned back to Oseno.

"Any recommendations, Commander?"

He didn't really want or need any, but thought it would be a good 'show' of cooperation if he asked.

Need to keep up with the times, he thought with an inward sigh and smile.

"Sir, you should probably take the MACO team with you," Oseno replied after a moment. "They are best suited to deal with the Draxx."

Then he gestured toward the large, solid Capellan at the tactical station.

"I will take Mister Kalaar, Lieutenant Variel, and Lieutenant T'lana with me and search for any other signs of the pods. Mister Hunter can head up defense of the ship. Everyone aboard can fire a weapon so that should require the least amount of specialized personnel. You may also want to take Commander Yiral with you; she is our diplomatic specialist as well as being El-Aurian and could be instrumental if you have to negotiate with the Draxx."

Redding was annoyed, but mostly at himself. Oseno was absolutely right. The MACOs were the ideal team for this mission and they hadn't even occurred to him. Although he would have rather done without the diplomat.

He smiled at Oseno.

"Excellent suggestions, Commander. Hopefully, I'll be able to finish the entire mission with them this time."

He headed to the lift.

"I'll take Commander Yiral under your recommendation as well, but I also spent twenty years in the diplomatic corps and I'm no stranger to first contact situations."

Most of his time was spent amongst the Klingons and fighting the Romulans... but twenty years were still twenty years.

"Yiral, you're with me," he ordered and waved at her to follow as he entered the lift.

The El-Aurian nodded and followed after the first officer, she was pleased to finally be included in some of the mission, though her people were known as extraordinary lore keepers and listeners. Adira was beginning to think her experience had been forgotten about and she was young enough, in El-Aurian terms, to want to be included in things like away missions.

On the bridge, Oseno looked around at his people.

"Mister Kalaar, T'lana, and Lieutenant Variel, let's get outfitted. Check out rifles, sidearms, and combat knives please; we have no idea what's out there. Mister Hunter, you are in command while Commander Redding and I are gone. Arm the crew, if you are attacked contact me immediately and if necessary take the ship off the ground."

"Captain, if I may" T'lana said.

"Yes?"

"It is no logical for both you and Commander Redding to be gone from the ship, it is also against Starfleet Regulations. Section 12..."

Oseno held up a hand cutting her off

"I know the regulation T'lana, but I'm still going."

T'lana only nodded. She had learned that if Oseno didn't concede to her logic the first time, there was little point in trying a second time.

"Aye Sir," was her only reply.

"Good, that's settled. Now let's go. You have the bridge, Mister Hunter."

Jureth, followed by the others, entered the turbolift and headed for the armory to check out their equipment.

* * *

Several seconds went by without a response or movement inside the pod. Moore sighed and trudged into the water. The water was JUST high enough to get into his boots.

"Naturally..." he grumbled.

As expected, the pod was powerless so he had to manually key the door. They were designed to do this of course, but the angle of the pod was off just enough that he slipped and fell into the water on his backside.

"OH GREAT!" he shouted, pulling himself back upright.

"I swear.. if she's not dead in there.. I'll kill her."

Finally, he managed to open the hatch.

The woman was not dead. But her form was crumpled head first into the dashboard of the pod so that, when it opened, she fell forward and right into the man, sending them both down into the water.

Yes, she was kind of heavy... and unconscious, her face flat against the transparent faceplate of her EVA suit. With them fell in the water the broken pieces of a transporter inhibitor. The apparatus had obviously being roughly tossed inside the small cabin during their brutal descent and smashed behind her helmet, where scratches told the story plainly.

AS he struggled to free himself from under the spacesuited woman, Moore saw something from his reclined vantage point that froze him in place.

Where his own pod was lying, something was glowing in the gloom of the coming sunset. He had barely noticed it from the corner of his eye at first, like some flying embers glowing faintly and intermittently in the shadows over a dying fire. But as he looked directly over there, he saw nothing for a moment, as if it had been but a passing reflection of the sun over the metallic hull.

And then he saw it again. Now, it looked more like some kind of reddish electric discharge, crackling on and off irregularly in the gloom as it moved in an erratic yet definite direction of the pod. He could barely see it until it came in contact with the Sphynx workpod. Then, for a moment, it ran all over it, inside and out and some of the systems lighted on then off as it crackled all over them. The strange electric display lasted almost a minute before it rose again from the downed vehicle and disappeared in the air.

When Moore saw it again, it had moved. It was now closer... much closer. When it crackled again briefly, he had no more doubt; it was moving towards the workbee... right in their direction.

What was it? he wasn't sure, scout... probe... but it sure wasn't one of theirs.

Attempting to stay as low as possible, Moore dragged the unconscious woman along with him through the water to the far side of the shop, and then, out of direct view of the thing, got as much distance from the pod as possible hiding himself and Sufra with in a clump of what looked like swamp grass before the device reached workbee.

He considered scanning it with his tricorder but felt sure it would detect that... and instead pulled out his phaser... only to then recall that neither worked anyway on those things.

The probe, if that's what it was, repeated the same process around the pod as Moore watched.

He noted two things; first, it could power the Sphinx' systems, so it must use a compatible power source. And second, as far as he could determine, it had no interest in the crew of either vehicle, just the ships themselves.

Moore was tempted to try and communicate with it, but he wasn't well known for his first contact skills. Besides, the Horizon would send a rescue party for them soon enough. Regardless of the draining field, they would come for them and someone on that team would be better trained in first contact procedures, surely.

He had barely reassured himself thus that he saw the crackling reddish glow run over the workbee for a moment and then disappear. When it reappeared, it was hovering over the water exactly where they had laid for a moment.

Then, it disappeared again. But with darkness slowly creeping up over the lagoon with the dying day, it became more and more visible for longer periods. And what he saw was that it seemed to flash in circles before disappearing once more.

A few seconds later and, suddenly, it reappeared. Like a miniature lightning storm about to erupt, the crackling red energy form was hovering directly over them.

Moore looked up at the thing.

"Well... crud..."

He thought about trying to scare it off with his phaser, but decided against it.

"I'll be honest with you..." he said outloud, "I never really thought hiding would work."

And so saying, he held up his hands in surrender. It was obvious they couldn't run or hide from it, and fighting it seemed stupid. He didn't even have a rock to throw at it.

"Lieutenant Robert Moore, Federation starship USS Horizon."

He then gestured with his head at Sufra.

"I don't know who that is, but she might need help."

He waited to see if it was responsive to anything he said, or if would it just zap them.

In the darkening gloom, the crackling energy thing was becoming more and more visible and so, when it suddenly rushed down on them, the Starfleet pilot instinctively reacted to dodge from its brutish plummeting, tripped on some gravel underneath and fell backward into the water, the still inert body of Sufra on top of him. For a moment, the thing enveloped the entire suited form of the colony governess with reddish tendrils of electric discharges that, when they touched the water around them, recoiled like snakes touching fire.

Half submerged, Moore barely saw the curious reaction before he half-rose to spit and cough water out of his throat and mouth. He almost followed the movement of the thing as it rose again over them, hovered for a moment then moved sideways as if to go around Sufra's body to try and reach him.

Once again, the pilot frantically tried to stay out of reach of the thing, splashing water all around him as he struggled with the inert woman's body, knee deep in sluggish waters. It took him a moment to notice that the reddish electrical discharges, more and more visible as the sun was setting, recoiled before every burst of water towards it.

And then, he heard a roar, high above his head.

Glancing up, he saw a long and massive metallic shape fly overhead and go down with bright burning thrusters somewhere behind the rim of the trees and foliage, not much far from the rising column of smoke where he guessed the alien craft had crashed. He recognized the landing vessel instantly.

It was the Polaris.

As he watched, he also saw like the beginning of a sudden thunderstorm ripple the air just above the tree line and right behind the escort ship. Crackling balls of blue and red lightning flashed in the gloom far away, moving in the wake of the Aquarius class destroyer.

* * *

Redding's team was the first out of the airlock. The sounds and smells of a primeval jungle and a not too distant sea shore assailed all their senses as the hot, stuffy air made their eyes water for a moment as they tried to pierce the deepening gloom of the sunset. Even before they got out, they saw two columns of smoke rise over the high bowing tree tops, one, thick and grey to their left, another thin and whitish far to their right.

He put his hand on Oseno's shoulder, and pointed to the second trail of smoke.

"Might be from one of ours, I'll head straight in to the Draxx landing site, you see if you can recover Moore and Sutra."

And after a nod of acknowledgement he signaled the MACOs to follow him in a standard field formation, with Yiral close behind.

He turned to one of his people at random, a female Tellarite, keeping his voice low.

"Corporal, stick with commander Yiral and make sure she doesn't step into anything unpleasant, understood?"

The squat, thick haired leathery-skinned woman glanced over at her then nodded.

Understood, Sir."

She repositioned herself near Yiral but with a subtlety she hoped would go unnoticed by the El-Aurian.

Jureth watched them go, then inspected his people briefly as they too began moving away from the Polaris, ensuring that all of them were outfitted as he had ordered. The heavy armaments may have been overkill, but they were going up against the unknown and even if they never used the weapons, it gave Jureth some slight comfort knowing that they at least had the means to protect themselves.

"Mister Variel," he then said to the intelligence specialist, "Take the point. I suspect you have far more experience on the ground than any of us."

Variel nodded with a wry smile.

"If you only knew, Sir."

Oseno indicated that the others should follow him as he fell into step behind Variel and they set out in a column formation weapons held at the ready. Oseno looked back at the Polaris one last time as they moved away.

"Everyone remember where we parked."

meanwhile, Alpha team moved along at a good pace. Their target wasn't too far off so they didn't need to worry about wearing themselves out on the short run, stopping only for a few seconds at a time to check for spotters or possible improvised traps. Redding was very impressed with how the MACOs performed the jobs and was thankful now that he asked Oseno for his input.

As they approached their objective, Redding stopped and motioned for them to open position. Immediately, two of them went left and two went right, creating a line where they were at the least ten meters apart, leaving the corporal and Yiral with Redding.

With a quick look around, Redding moved in to the area. His team moved with him.

Barely a few steps and both his flanking teams signaled him.

"Movement on the left, Sir!"

"Commander; Lifesigns on the right, closing in."

And as he heard it, he saw a large shape looming in the shadow of the trees right in front of them, about three meters distant. There was only one form detectable, barely discernible, but by the outline of the massive head and shoulders atop a vertical frame, Redding could make an educated guess as to who or what it could be.

Taking care to use as much cover as he could Redding moved closer to his man on the left. When he reached what he thought was a reasonable spot he called out to the figure "We are from the United Federation of Planets and do not wish conflict! Are you in need of assistance?"

Given their responses so far to attempts at a peaceful resolution, Redding wasn't expecting much, but the offer needed to be made.

The silhouette slowly came out of the shadow of the trees. It was definitely bipedal with thin limbs, digitigrade but with four-fingered well formed hands. It was rather tall and slim albeit abnormally large at the chest and shoulders. The neck was seemingly fused with bunched muscles to the shoulders, supporting an enlarged head that was the only part that didn't look Human. It was looking just like the head of a Terran wolf.

It looked exactly like the alien being they had seen on the viewing screen of the horizon, wearing an identical form-fitting metallized suit sporting a few instruments blinking on its arms, although of a duller, lighter color and completely dripping wet as if he had just emerged from a deep swim. And its voice was just as low, cavernous and growling.

"We are the Draxx. You are trespassers."

And so saying, it leveled a wide-nozzled, cylindrical gun-like weapon and fired right in Redding's direction.

What came out of the weapon looked more like a water spray than anything else. It shot in a slight arc like a string of droplet-shaped pellets that flew right at the XO of the Horizon and instantly covered him under some kind of thick, cold, syrupy liquid. He felt nothing except being completely drenched as after a dense, heavy rain and a slight smell like ammonia enveloping him.

From the sides could be heard the approach of the other Draxx survivors of the crash also firing their strange squirt guns at every member of Redding's team. And just as he turned around, he perceived more than he saw in the thickening shadows like sparkles and tendrils of reddish energy coming from over the treetops and through the foliage all around them.

The realization that this race of canine-like creatures were spraying him with an ammonia-like substance was not lost on him, but so far it seemed non-lethal. For some reason he found himself more concerned with the light show than with the Draxx.

"Pull back! suppressing fire!"

Too many unknowns and nothing to gain by pressing an attack; after all, they were here to help and clearly they didn't want it.

Phaser rifles set to stun struck out from the group doing minor damage to the landscape but, in a impressive display, meant to force opponents to take cover and slow their progress as they retreated.

The Draxx certainly reacted as the Horizon First Officer expected from their retaliating fire. With swiftness belying their bulk, they dropped to the ground. What they did next however was not what could have been expected most in the present circumstances; they shot at one another.

In moments, they too were fully drenched in the same liquid they had sprayed on the Starfleet people. And then, the crackling balls of pulsing lights fell upon them all.

For a brief moment, Redding and his people felt a tingling, unpleasant sensation, as if thousands of tiny needles were pricking their skin. But it lasted only a few seconds before the electric discharges that tried to envelop them suddenly recoiled with stroboscopic flashes as if short-circuiting violently. Most light forms flew swiftly away from them, back where they had come from, but a few that had lingered longer over a few wet bodies seemed instead to diffuse and disperse in all directions. The last sound of their fizzling away sounded uncomfortably like the dying breath of someone in agony.

And then, there was only silence in the forest.

Slowly, the Draxx rose from the ground. There was about eighteen of them now, coming out slowly from the foliage, weapons leveled and eyes to the sky. But they came from three different directions towards the Federation personel in what was obviously a coralling maneuver.

Redding watched as the Draxx closed in but raised his weapon upward, addressing the Draxx he had talked to earlier.

"I'm starting to think that, 'you're not suppose to be here' was more of a warning than a threat."

He signaled for the rest of his team to stand down. He wanted to tell them about the rest of the crew off looking for Moore and Sutra, but he needed to see what they had planned to do with them first.

"So, you didn't want us killed or taken by those glowing balls, that's a good start. What now?"

He tried to make it clear they weren't planning to surrender, but it was hard to judge any effect body language had on them.

For a moment, the Draxx who seemed to lead looked at him and came very close, his muzzle sniffing sonorously as he did so. Then he sat on his haunches, his gun pointing upward. The others followed suit, but all with lower different angles to their weapons, forming a half-circle in front of the Starfleet officers while looking around attentively, ears and noses moving.

"You will die with us. There is no escape from the prison."

That was good enough for him.

"Commander Redding to Oseno; do not engage any Draxx unless you come under attack. We are in contact with the main group. Do you read me?"

The Strategic Ops Officer's team hadn't moved more than a hundred yards when his combadge came to life. Jureth tapped the device.

"Understood Commander. Do you require assistance? Sir, can you hear me?"

Reddings voice came back at him.

"I read you, Oseno. We have a new threat in the area; imperative you meet with my group ASAP. We need to.. well, we need to wet you down."

The first officer of the Horizon then spoke directly to the leader of the crash survivors.

"Alright, this is a prison planet of some sort. Is it just a given that we can't leave or are we allowed to try?"

The Draxx leader emitted something between a growl and a sigh.

"This is how the Zetarians escaped in the first place... twice already. How you may manage to get past the barrier is beyond our own science. But if you do, you will allow some, if not all of them, to escape. That, we cannot permit."

He attempted to be as serious as possible saying the next part.

"Our prime directive is one of non-interference, we are only here to retrieve a stolen worker pod and its personel. Our offer of assistance was just out of the spirit of cooperation, no trespass was intended. If at all possible, we respect the rules and laws of all reasonable people and will comply with them."

For a moment, the alien sniffed the air between them.

"You speak like an enlightened people. Yet, you act like a childish one. Most puzzling."

He looked at his own people for a moment, exchanging looks and snarls before turning his lupine head once again to Redding.

"You have expressed good intentions in both words and deeds... and care for your own, the sign of a civilized people... despite doing many foolish things. I beleive that it was so only out of sheer ignorance. We will now see the truth of them. We offer you the honor of joining us in the Sacrifice."

* * *

"Wha... what happened? Where... am I? Who..."

In Moore's arms, Governor Sufra was coming around, obviously confused, gazing with wide blinking eyes at the energy thing moving up and away from their drenched bodies.

"Off hand, I'm willing to give your...Advisors... a little credit for that timely rain warning. But we should probably get undercover in case they over do it."

Moore knew the Bajorans followed some group of entities, and he was fairly sure he got the name right.

"Name's Lieutenant Moore from the Horizon; right now that's all you need to know, lady. Now come on."

He pulled her upright out of the water awkwardly, not having the strongest of builds.

"We need to get back to my ship, so to speak, and wait for help to arrive. With any luck, that will be before a storm hits this area."

He ignored any protest for answers and pushed her along. After all, she was a thief; no reason to be all friendly about it.

"Eden... this... is... Eden," she mumbled, half-trying to raise herself up so that it wasn't too difficult for the Starfleet officer to bring her back to the Sphynx workpod. "Thank the Prophets..."

As they reached Moore's craft, she was already praying with a contended, almost triumphant smile on her face. Eyes closed, she didn't notice the blue and red blobs of energies lighting the tree tops nearby as night was falling.

But her companion sure did. And they were right between them and moving to where the Polaris had landed, not far from the other column of smoke rising into the darkening sky.

She didn't react to his probing. As he half expected, she didn't wore one, being only a passenger on the Horizon despite her high official status. But then, he made a facepalm. Her EVA suit had an integrated short range comm emitter as well as an emergency beacon; not to mention also a complete autonomous life support system which was completely intact. Any spare parts he might need to jury-rig something with the workpod could be extracted from the suit itself.

And then there was the other workpod. Something might certainly be salvageable from it as well since it had not suffered all that much from their emergency landing. Through the canopy, he could even see inside the shorted-out pattern nullifier she had used earlier to prevent any attempt to beam her out of the pod and back onto the ship.

A pattern nullifier, an EVA suit and two workpods with all the tools needed for maintenance and repair; there should certainly be something... interesting to do for a resourceful guy like him.

* * *

Aboard the Polaris, Shawn Hunter had taken precautions against attack as soon as the two away teams had left the ship. He'd ordered all entrances sealed and forcefields erected around them. Then he'd ordered the engineers to begin making what repairs they could to the ship's power grid. He was on the bridge along with the science officer Ji'llan when the data from the away team began coming in.

"Lieutenant Hunter," the Orion officer said, "I am receiving data from the away team, it's from Commander Oseno's tricorder, Sir."

"What kind of data?"

"It's sensor data, positioning data...and...that's odd..."

She looked again at her console noting the odd pattern that seemed to be shoved for lack of a better term in between data streams.

"What's odd?" Hunter asked now standing behind her

"There is another pattern here. I didn't see it immediately, but there is some other data forced into the breaks in the data streams."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure, Sir, but there is a definite pattern to it. Computer, isolate the extraneous data at indexes four, eight, and twelve. Filter all other data out."

The computer complied and the two officers watched as the same data pattern repeated itself over and over again. It took Hunter several seconds, but then a realization dawned on him

"It's the Commander, he's trying to signal us!"

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, it's like what we did when we signaled the Horizon, it's a coded burst... old Earth Morse Code; S.O.S"

"S.O.S? what is that?"

"No time for a history lesson! We have to get off the ground now!"

Hunter tapped his combadge.

"Hunter to engineering; I need engines, shields, weapons and transporters."

"I can give you engines and shields now, Sir," came Akaal's reply. "Weapons and transporters could take a few minutes....or days."

"We don't have days, Lieutenant," Hunter replied as he sat in the command chair. "Commanders Oseno and Redding need our help."

"Then I had better get to work," Akaal out.

"Computer," Hunter ordered; "initiate take off sequence and sound Red Alert. Route command functions to helm station."

The crack pilot didn't really feel at home in the command chair and it was almost a relief as he slid into the helmsman's chair. The ship's alarm klaxon sounded and Shawn Hunter lifted the ship off the surface much faster than the computer would have, pulled up her landing struts and gained altitude before heading for Commander Oseno's position, hoping it was not too late already.

CHAPTER 9 : MY ENNEMY MY ALLY

Jureth shouldered his phaser rifle, pulled out his tricorder and sidearm then looked at his point man.

"It seems we have a change in plans. Let's form a skirmish line and we'll move toward Commander Redding's position, everyone keep your eyes open. I have this odd feeling that something isn't right."

The team fanned out in line formation with each team member not more than two meters apart from the next and, on Jureth's direction, they moved forward while the Bajoran followed the signal from Redding's combadge. Part of the Bajoran's mind wondered if there was a possibility that Redding was under duress of some sort and they were walking straight into a Draxx trap. He dismissed it though; Redding was calculating and intelligent enough to use some type of code, give some sign that he was in trouble and his tone of voice had sounded more emphatic than forced.

Eventually Oseno could begin to make out figures ahead of them, several in fact. The tricorder told him that at least some of them were Commander Redding and his team. The others matched the small amount of data they had on the Draxx. As they drew closer. Jureth issued orders.

"Weapons ready," he said evenly; "we don't know what we're walking into, but do not fire unless fired upon."

Soon they were close enough to the assembled group to communicate and Jureth halted his people and addressed Redding while keeping his phaser trained forward. The other members of his team kept their rifles trained on various targets, their bodies poised to react immediately if the situation got out of hand.

"Commander, reporting as ordered...what's going on, Sir?"

The biggest Draxx that was crouching nearest to the first officer and directly in front of him flickered his ears.

"You are a prudent kind; unfortunately, not good enough to heed a warning and avoid getting trapped. Now, you will have to sacrifice yourselves to save the rest of your pack."

Oseno did not waiver. He had faced off with larger, and stronger species, nevermind a physical computer monstrosity named Khan Noonien Singh. He had no idea what this Draxx was talking about, and the security officer in him wasn't interested in finding out.

"If you presume we are trapped, then you presume too much. You have two options; you can release the rest of our people, and surrender immediately and unconditionally or... each of these officers with a weapon trained on you is a superb shot. You are free to take your chances."

"Oseno, that won't be necessary," It was Adira Yiral's voice that spoke up firmly. "You need to listen to what they have to say. There is a bigger threat here than you would believe, I didn't understand it at first, but I can... feel that something else is here, something is not right. Put your instincts and training aside, and listen."

Oseno looked at Yiral and could see the pleading in her eyes and he returned an icy stare to the Draxx who had spoken to him

"Alright, I'm listening...but if you so much as flinch you won't know what hit you."

During the exchange between the threats of the Strategic Ops Officer and his counselor, the Draxx had remained silent and watchful; both of them and of whatever was happening to them. When Oseno's team approached, they had tightened the grip on their weapon long before the second Starfleet team showed up to meet that of Neil Redding. Often their ears flickered and their eyes took a distant glare, but otherwise they showed no sign themselves of what they were thinking.

Once the Starfleet teams rejoined and the Bajoran had spoken, the leader of the Draxx just snarled thinly. It was more a laugh than a threat, but not the kind of laugh you wanted to join in. Then T'Lana came over to Oseno and spoke softly to him.

"Commander, they're not alone."

"How can you tell?" Kalaar asked, looking around into the thick jungle around them.

"There are comm exchanges between them and others of their kind, in some form of battle language like the Klingons have but too high-pitched for the universal translator of our communicators to pick it up."

"Ultrasonic?"

"Affirmative. I myself can barely hear it... but they do. Notice how their ears flicker and then the fur of their throat ripples immediately after that. Sir, from this, from the outward lack of reaction from these before us to your threat and the estimate of their crashed ship complement to be over a hundred, and assuming that at least a third of them may have survived the landing, it is logical to assume that it is we who are surrounded."

"It seems that the females of your kind are the ones endowed with perception and intelligence," then growled the Draxx leader, looking at both Yiral and T'Lana with his deceptively smiling canine face.

"True enough K-9," Redding said with a bit of a smirk, being careful not to show his teeth. "But they keep us around for our fortitude and ability to take punishment when the need arises."

He gave an apologetic shrug in the direction of the women. It was an attempt to use base male humor to put the Canines at ease, hopefully without belittling the women.

From some distance, a rumbling sound rose in the dusk. To everyone, it sounded like the far away roar of powerful thrusters. It came from where the Starfleet people had come.

And towards that direction, a sudden flurry of red and blue discharges rose over and through the trees to move in that same direction.

Oseno knew the sound was likely the Polaris on take off, and as for the red blue light, while he wasn't sure he suspected it was what Adira had tried to warn him about and he also suspected he knew what they were though he tried to keep that realization from breaking his demeanor.

"We are not alone either," Oseno replied with a quick tap of his combadge.

"Oseno to Polaris; status, Mister Hunter."

"On our way, Sir."

"You may have incoming, Lieutenant, the beings from our briefing. Take immediate precautions."

"Confirmed, Sir," Ji'Lan reported from her sensor readings. I read numerous EM surges closing in on a definitely deliberate interception trajectory with us from multiple vectors. Contact in thirty seconds... mark."

"The forcefield will block immediate penetration... but ship's systems can take fifty-four percent of an EM blast... but the rest will incapacitate us seriously if they all hit at the same time!" warned Akaal. If that happens, it's either we drop all forcefields... or we go down like a rock!"

Before Hunter's eyes, the main screen showed the red, purple and black of the dying day of an alien sky over the treetops of an island's jungle and, against that backdrop, clouds of red and blue energies swirling to meet them head on.

"Polaris, Redding here; check the area for a large body of water and make for it. Be prepared to submerge if possible. So far, it seems to hold them off."

Redding turned back to the Draxx leader.

"I'd like to here more about this 'sacrifice' you brought up, exactly what are you proposing?"

The wolfish alien looked straight at him.

"We will terminate our lives so that they will not be able to use our bodies and our technology to escape. Join us of your own free will, with courage and honor, and like us, be remembered among your ancestors as saviors of your pack. "

"I get the concept of sacrifice... do you have a name? or shall I go on calling you K9?" Redding said with a hint of annoyance. "Trust me K9, If you have legitimate prisoners here, we'll die before they get away because of us."

"Rhan rasraa Harrunal Groll rah Rhoo meur Warreh laekaeon Rrihr Arhen Draxx. It sounded like a series of short growls but the universal translator came up with 'starship Rhan, Second pack leader Groll son of Rhoo of clan Warreh from the Rrihr star system of Draxx Space'. And we don't have prisonners here. We follow the Pact between us and the Zetarrians."

The Horizon's first officer's demeanor became more threatening as he gripped his rifle. "But we NEVER just die because someone else thinks its the best option out of a situation. And if at all possible, we'll save you as well despite your intentions towards US."

If anything Redding was attempting to show a lack of fear of the Draxx as he assumed they would see that as a sign of weakness. His intuition seemed to prove itself correct, as the ears lifted up with the head, slightly exposing the throat. The growl in the voice also smoothed out noticeably.

"We die if it is necessary to save the pack. This is our way. But you are strangers with strange ways. You may have ways that we do not have. I am listening."

"Well for starters, Groll, tell me more about the Zetarrians and this pact that you have, I'd like to break as few laws as possible to achieve our objective."

He checked the sky again, always keeping his peripheral vision on the Draxx in front of him, and being obvious about it as well so Groll would understand that Redding considered him a worthy threat, out of respect.

"Past that point I plan to improvise, but fortunately, I happen to be damn good at that," he said looking back at him.

"You have instincts... good," Groll acknowledged.

He took a moment to think before answering the exec of the Horizon.

* * *

"Yes!"

Tapping his phaser pistol Commander Riker spoke further.

"Sentient life should be respected for the fact that it is sentient. That does not ever mean that life should be immune to someone making the choice to end it. I have fought in too many wars and battles to ever agree to the point that life should always be protected."

He closed his tired eyes for a moment.

"In order to preserve life, there are times when other life must end. Genocide, ethnic cleansing, extermination wars and violent conquest. History is full of examples when the only way to stop bad sentient life was to kill them before they killed any more good lives. If the lives of my crew are threatened I will not hesitate to take that action, because sometimes there is always someone who has to."

"I'm with you, Commander Riker," Schaell retorted. "But you may have fought in too many battles and may have lost perspective. Defending one's life or the life of others might force to kill, that is a sad truth but true nonetheless; but the example of History you state are all perfect examples of what *not* to do; else, had we perpetuated such barbarism, there would never have been a Federation... and the Klingon Empire would be all but supreme."

He spoke with the infuriating calmness of a Vulcan. Saurians were not in perfect control of their emotions like Vulcans were; they were utterly *devoid* of emotions... as long as their upper conscious brain was dominant, that is. Hence, why spoke thus, and then went on with the same cold tone.

"But I understand your emotional reaction. You do not have all the data to make a proper estimate. As it stands, we are caught in a war between two factions; and our bodies are their battleground."

"Much to our regret."

The eerily echoing voice came from the mouth of Lieutenant Mrrriish, her eyes glowing with some inner intense blue light.

"We, are from Zetar. We escaped the destruction of our world from a cosmic catastrophe by turning ourselves into pure energy... at the cost of our physicality. Some of us understood and accepted this change as part of our continued existence... but some did not. Those who do not are just like you, Commander Riker; utterly intent on surviving whatever the means, at any cost... by regaining what they have lost... in taking over your bodies."

The possessed Caitian woman then turned her glowing eyes towards Schaell.

"And they are beyond reason."

"You think I just want to survive?" Riker responded.

The eerily echoing voice that came out of the open-mouthed caitian spoke with no emotion; yet, sadness could be felt in the words.

"Your thinking is exactly the same as that of the... enemy, those among us who, out of fear, hatred or despair, readily disregard life as the easiest way to achieve their own ends."

Looking over at Schaell Riker spoke without acknowledging the comment.

"And you... You want to talk barbarism. How many times in just the history of the Federation has the peace been reserved because of war? How many being died at the end of Federation rifles and phaser banks during the Dominion War? During the various wars we have had with the Klingons?"

Wiping his mouth Riker continued.

"No matter how perfect you all think life is, there will be someone, or something, out there that wants nothing more than to kill innocent life. Those type of beings can't be talked to or reasoned with. Sometimes the only way to protect life is to kill first whatever it is that is trying to kill you."

"That be the nature of the... enemy," the entity confirmed with the same emotionless yet sad-sounding tone.

Riker cracked the knuckles on his hand gripping his phaser pistol a little tighter.

"You can call it barbarism, but I don't have the luxury of being naive. There are innocent lives at stake here and the people standing right here are the only ones who can save them. A shepherd's job is to protect his flock. But sometimes a shepherd has to go off and kill the wolves. If you want to talk to them fine, but understand something; killing is a last resort, I get that, but if these things start killing innocent people, then killing them is an option that is not to be taken off the table."

The Saurian nodded in a very Human fashion.

"Although your emotions overwhelm your judgment, your reasoning is not entirely wrong. On this I agree; between our lives and theirs, the choice is self-evident."

He looked at the possessed Mrrish.

"Let us try to talk this over and come to an understanding, if it proves to be possible."

"We mean you no harm," the blue-hued entity said through the Caitian's unmoving open mouth. "We only wish to live. If you help us, we will help you defeat our common enemy,"

Schaell didn't respond immediately to that offer but looked at Riker.

Riker nodded in approval, still keeping his phaser pistol at the ready.

"Whatever we do, let's not expose ourselves or your ship to undue risk."

He then looked around a bit and locked his huge eyes towards the nearby auxiliary control room.

"My command codes are still active. With another officer of command grade, I can implement the self-destruct sequence of the Nuntio. If all else fails, we can ensure that none of those entities will ever leave this energy-dead space."

Looking around at his crew Riker shook his head.

"The needs of the many eh..."

Gesturing with his hands Riker began to move towards the auxiliary control room and gestured for the team to follow.

"Maybe the thought of being stuck forever will get these things in the talking mood."

"Commander, you certainly have a point here," agreed the Saurian as they reached the control room. "Now the trick will be to make ssure they undersstand what is at sstake."

"Once you are ready, I will do this," the echoing, flat-toned voice coming out of Mrriish's open mouth said.

As both commanders reached the auxilliary computer station, Schaell paused, his huge eyes blinking at the Phoenix' first officer a moment before he spoke.

"Commander Riker; if we go through thiss... it means, at best, the desstruction of thiss sship and everyone aboard... not only uss and your people, but fifty-eight Sstarfleet officers and two dozen civilians, members of the the Federation Media that were on board when we were caught by the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. Unless we find a way to separate them from those entities and somehow bring them back aboard your ship... and assuming that your ship will be able to clear the area before the warp core detonates."

Patting the Saurian on the shoulder Riker spoke.

"I grew up in a Maquis settlement. It was a prisoner of war camp that was converted into a self sustaining settlement following the war. My father took a prison and turned it into a thriving colony of tens of thousands of people. I was raised in that. You would be hard pressed to find anyone who better understands that a small loss, no matter how great it may feel is always worth it if it avoids a larger loss later."

Removing his hand and walking over to the control console Riker continued.

"We set the alarm and make it audible. We make sure they hear it. As for everyone else, this is not us giving up. We will fight, we will press on and we will try and save everyone. I am very much alive and I plan to stay that way. We just raised, now we have to be willing to show our hand."

"You understand that we cannot warn your vessel. Any transmission would be used by our kind to board her. Although that might have been done already," the possessed Mrriish added then.

Schaell nodded to both of them. He put his hand on the control panel next to him. A light brightened under it.

"Computer, this is Schaell, Commander, Executive officer USS Nuntio. Destruct sequence One, code Eight, Eight Omega Z. "

"Voice and genetic scan confirming identification. Valid active rank confirmed. Command code confirmed. Destruct sequence on stanby. Awaiting second Command grade code to confirm activation."

Elisha Leóné was not feeling too comfortable about how this was all transpiring at the moment so she finally spoke up.

"Commander, I understand the rationale and risks involved with what is being prepared. However, we do not know what is transpiring on the Phoenix nor are they likely aware of all that is occurring here. If we do not open communication lines with them due to the inherent risk involved, we are acting somewhat capriciously."

The Orion meant no disrespect to the commander, but wanted to present another option before the self-destruct sequence was complete and initiated.

"Sir, I would like to attempt to access a section of the secondary external lighting array. If I am successful with this, then I can send a message via a blinking code to the Phoenix. There is a chance they may not even see it or recognize the Morse code itself... but if I also get to a portal window, I could see any message returned as well."

The Orion looked through her visor and into the partially concealed eyes of Commander Riker as she awaited his decision.

"A fine idea, Lieutenant, but it does not change what we have to do here. We have to assume the Phoenix is infected. What we are going to gamble on them figuring things out and saving as many people as they can. We can only make one bet and I for one am fine betting on the Phoenix."

Tapping the console Riker spoke to the computer.

"Computer, this is Riker, Joshua W. first officer of the USS Phoenix. Request transfer of command officer status."

"Voice and genetic scan recognized. Riker, Joshua W. Executive Officer of the USS Phoenix. Command officer status authorized for the USS Nuntio."

"You better get those Morse codes lights working quickly, because I just put you on the clock" Riker said glancing back over at Lieutenant Leóne.

With the first authorization accepted and command codes transferred, the first officer of the Phoenix knew what he had to do.

"Computer, this is Riker, Joshua W. Commander, command level officer USS Nuntio. Destruct sequence Two, code Alpha Alpha Seven Three Delta. "

"Voice and genetic scan confirming identification. Valid active rank confirmed. Command code confirmed. Destruct sequence active. Please select time for countdown."

"You have twenty minutes." Riker said, pointing aggressively at Lieutenant Leóne.

"Understood Sir" the Orion responded as she pulled out her PADD from an enlarged pocket in her environmental suit as she instinctively walked toward the exit.

She stopped for a moment as she pulled up the schematics of the Nuntio that she had downloaded before departing the Phoenix and began carefully scanning them. She was searching for the nearest access point to attempt this less lethal act of desperation, but found that it was somewhat cumbersome to maneuver the display accurately with gloves on. Nevertheless, she adapted to these circumstances rather quickly and was pursuing the blueprints expeditiously.

"I will provide... escort," the possessed Mrrriish said.

Whether it came solely from the mind-invading alien or some part of the security chief as responding there... or both... was unclear. But the large Caitian female took out her phaser and walked in front of Leóne, watching intently all around them as they moved away.

Touching the command button Riker finished the countdown.

"Computer; set self destruct sequence for twenty minutes."

"Countdown confirmed. Self destruct in T minus twenty minutes. Awaiting confirmation from highest ranking command officer for activation."

"Thiss is Commander Sschaell, Firsst officer of the USS Nuntio. Sset timer on audio and visual dissplay, all deckss. Code eight... eight... eight... desstruct... zero."

On all computer screens and monitors all accross the ship, white number on a black backdrop was seen and the voice of the ship's computer resonated everywhere.

"Self-destruct sequence activated. T minus 20 minutes... nineteen minutes fifty-nine... ninety minutes fifty-eight... nineteen minutes fifty-seven..."

The Saurian then looked at the first officer of the Phoenix.

"Now we'll ssee how and if our intruders will resspnd to thiss. The only place they can esscape is to your sship. but using non-concentrated light to communicate, Lieutenant Leone will prevent that; would they try to follow the path of the lightwave, they would simply dissperse accross sspace like the light itsself and be desstroyed just as surely as when this ship will detonate in an animatter explosion."

He looked around, his rigid face showing nothing of what he was thinking at the moment. Then he looked back at Riker.

"But before we come to thiss lasst resort and any attempt at a peaceful resolution fail, we musst try and find a way to ssave my crew... and ourselves, if at all possible."

Tapping his phaser pistol Riker just smiled.

"Well you know what I am willing to do to protect and save my people. You have any ideas in either of those brains you have on how to save yours?"

"I do... but I would need a crack engineer, a weapons specialist and split-second coordination with your ship and us... and it is not without risk... to both crews."

"We will figure something out, right?"

With a nod to each other, Riker gestured for Commander Schaell to go first and they left the room on their way to join with the rest of the team.

* * *

Nodding crisply toward his avian crew mate, Leland turned to his control panel and began manipulating the icon touchpad. In order to coincide with Livingstone's suggestion, Hudson first ordered two level ten containment fields, each directly within the projection field of the bridge's omnidirectional holographic diodes. These OHD's allowed movement of the hologram, but interaction was accomplished through magnetic containment fields within the projection. Leland turned these off in the two area's. Turning to address the science officer, Hudson offered a further suggestion as the two containment fields coalesced into appearance.

"Lieutenant, I thought we should perhaps use a pair of backup EMH modules, in order to encapsulate two of these entities. You know, in case we get a bad first choice."

"Or if we get lucky, as you Humans say. Having one of each type together should prove infinitely more informative than one side of the issue. And a prudent suggestion. I will also add an override on both holographic emitters if we need to... calm them."

And so saying, the X'ell programmed two emitters. They were essentially independent projectors with their own limited computer matrix and power source that could allow a holographic construct to be shown in a fixed position, like the ones many crewmembers used to entertain themselves in their own quarters. The hologram itself could not move with it, nor anyone move within its confine as in a holodeck, but it would provide full photonic manifestation and interaction nonetheless... without having a Khan Noonian Singh resurrection incident on the ship.

As the work was being completed on the emitters, the captain turned toward the X'Ell CSO and Lieutenant Hudson as he inquired.

"Recommendation for the safe placement and activation of these devices?"

"I would recommend a small area, like some evacuated living quarter," proposed Jonathan livingstone. "Along with the localized containment field around the emitters, we could erect a second level 10 forcefield around the room itself in case it somehow manages to escape the first one or others of its kind attempt to free them from the outside. Using a wall monitor, we could then communicate safely with the occupied holograms."

Leaving them so that Hudson could also offer his own recommendation, the X'Ell went to counselor Bijou at the command medical chair.

"Counselor; ship's internal sensors should be tracking these EM manifestations on the ship as well as those trapped presently in the shuttle."

"Confirmed," Bijou said after looking at her readouts.

"Please use the electroencephalic sensor to separate any significantly different signals and transmit the data to my station."

Once he came back to his post, he played his delicate fingers on the controls, making his station's main screen show a scrolling series of broken lines constantly changing as they stretched from left to right.

"Computer; analyse signals and categorize."

"Signals are electromagnetic emissions ranging within the frequencies of neurological bioelectric patterns associated with sentience."

"Brainwaves?"

"Affirmative."

"Is there any significant difference between some signals?"

"Each energy pattern is specific to an individual neurological, self-contained network."

"Could each pattern correspond to a specific individual sentience?"

"Affirmative."

"Are there any commonalities between certain of those individual patterns?"

"Affirmative."

"Identify and regroup on the monitor."

On the screen, the patterns regrouped in a pair of more or less equal groups. The X'Ell barely glanced at it before he turned to face his commanding officer again.

"Captain; I beleive I found a way to identify members of both... factions of this species. The color we perceive with our eyes, themselves being biological electromagnetic sensors, indicates the polarity of those disincarnated minds just like our internal ship sensors are now doing. In other words, Sir; we can choose which group we want to... invite for a chat."

"Intriguing," the Vulcan commanding officer responded as he stepped over to witness and examine the kinetic display representing the non-corporeal energy readings on the console screen for a moment. "It would be prudent to implement all safety precautions and protocols in this endeavor since contact with these entities has been lethal in the majority of incidents."

The captain then repositioned himself as he contemplated their next moves.

"It would also be sensible to attempt this communication with the most receptive and reasonable faction of these beings that have been disenfranchised from their physical forms. This may be our only means to contend with the other more volatile division."

Considering the location for this potentially perilous interaction to occur, Syntron inquired to his team.

"Could the Auxiliary Briefing Room on deck 2 serve as a suitable locale? The emitters could be positioned on the conference table or in an open area on the floor. All secondary fields could be supported by the tertiary protocols already in place in that room. Once we initiate communication, we could use the large display screen positioned in there as our visual representation with the chosen polarity."

"Affirmative," the science chief responded. "Mister Hudson, as soon as you complete installation I will... send the invite."

* * *

Concealed beneath the visor of her helmet, a minute smirk emerged on the face of Elisha Leóne. As she was scouring the schematics of the Nuntio trying to find a viable point to attempt sending a signal of scattered light to the Phoenix, she had somehow missed the obvious: an expanded science lab with a series of rectangular windows on one wall with a vista to the surrounding stars.

Elisha reached over and gently grasped the arm of Feline security officer positioned just ahead of her.

"Lieutenant Mriish... this may seem a bit anti-climatic, but according to these schematics there is a suitable science lab right next door to Sickbay... to the left side of this main entrance."

As the Orion released the arm of the Caitian, she signaled for the security officer to lead the way.

When the felinoid woman looked back at her, the Chief of Ops of the Phoenix immediately noticed that the blue light from her eyes was gone. Now, only the familiar blue color of her slitted orbs was showing. Her voice had lost the eerie, multivoiced echo that it had and was back to her species typical purring sound as she answered her obvious question.

"Yes, Lieutenant, it's gone. I think it went back to the otherrrs so as to warnn them of what is now at stake."

Pulling out her tricorder, Mrrriish recalled the data she had recorded on it prior to boarding the Nova class starship.

"According to the specifics of the Nuntio, all science labs were converted into data collecting, processing and transmission centers. This ship had been refitted to be an interstellar mobile information center; kind of miniature flying Memory Alpha, with extended computer banks, added sensors and amplified transmission equipment. No wonder the Zetarians jumped on this ship like kittens on candy; fully operational in normal space, they could use it to literally transmit themselves across Federation Space almost instantly!"

As they progressed, the security chief pointed a door to her, visible through the faint shimmering of a forcefield.

"Therre is yourr comm centerr, Lieutenant. On yourr orrder, I'll deactivate the forrcefield with a prreset timerr to rreinitiate it exactly two seconds afterr deactivation; just enough time forr us to go through without being... followed."

With a smile evident across her flawless olive skin, Elisha confirmed.

"The clock is literally ticking lieutenant. Let's get in there pronto and see what we can doI"

She then prepared herself to lunge into the redesigned science lab the moment the forcefield was deactivated.

They both went in swiftly and smoothly as Mriish deactivated the forcefield with a three second timed interruption; just enough for them to get in between two shimmerings of the energy barrier. As it reactivated, there was a sudden flash of red and blue, the tell-tale sign that some Zetarrians had escaped the field into the surrounding circuitry.

"Let's move in beforre they figurre out which way to follow us."

The nearby door was manually slid open and revealed what should have been a standard starship research lab. It looked familiar enough, with it's control stations and computer terminals, but to the expert eye of the Phoenix Chief of Ops, it was clear these were all data processing stations and communication systems, just looking at the unusual number of screens looking blankly back at them.

And, on the far wall, there were several portholes from which they could see the imposing hull of the much larger Avenger class science ship.

After perusing and reviewing detailed schematics on the Nuntio's secondary exterior running lights, the Orion officer had removed several console coverings and was laying down on her back deep inside an integrated section when she located a conduit that she could access control over its energy flow. Her intention was to interrupt the flow in a manner to cause a flashing of the exterior running lights of this vessel. Her hope was that this would catch the attention of someone aboard the USS Phoenix and thus a means of communication could be established.

It took some time to tap out the extended message to the Phoenix. Despite Morse Code being a rather antiquated communication tool, it was times like this when it still proved invaluable. Elisha had studied this code extensively in a Communications class back at the Academy and experimented with it regularly to say proficient with it. She realized that this first message was rather lengthy, but she wanted to convey key information during this first transmission.

[illegible]

On the Phoenix, Livingstone's lights in his thick head feathers started to blink in the same, definite pattern. His head jerked up, huge eyes blinking in synch with his *sh'reekh'ree'ss*.

"Something wrong, Lieutenant?" Counselor Bijoû inquired, noticing immediately the curious pattern and reaction.

"Our short range sensors are receiving very peculiar signals from the Nuntio. Photonic emissions following a definite pattern. It comes from their navigation lights. One moment..."

He didn't speak, using his direct connection with the ship's instruments to have the computer analyse the signal, compare it to the ship's data banks, identify it and then decode it before transferring it into sound transmission through the universal translator, once the computer recognized a communication nature of the pattern. From then on, the universal translator rendered instantaneously the communication. All of this took barely a couple of seconds. On the bridge speakers, they could all hear the message in Federation Standard but in the recognizable voice of the ship's computer.

"Phoenix. This is Lieutenant Leone. We are battling hostile Zetarians. They can travel via any electronic signal or concentrated beam of light. They can easily invade the bodies of humanoids. More information forthcoming."

"Ingenious," commented Livingstone. "Using standard light emitters like the navigation lights of the ship, they can communicate with us without these electromagnetic beings able travel through the photon emissions. It would disperse their patterns in all directions with the light itself."

He turned to face his commanding officer.

"Captain; we can use the same method to safely resume communication with the away team. We will not have any visual, unfortunately, but I can integrate the translating matrix to instantly convert those photonic codes into verbal speech.

"Affirmative Lieutenant Livingstone. Send them an update of our current status and inform them that we will continue to communicate in this manner until we have resolved our situation."

"Acknowledged, Sir; Counselor Bijoû, I have reconfigured your secondary communication control to transmit through our own navigation lights in the same manner the Nuntio did. Just send transmissions from there as you normally would; the computer will take care of the translation from here to there and back again through speakers."

"Aye; transmitting now..."

The captain leaned back slowly into the center seat. While not an ideal solution, this method would at least remove them from the veil of darkness from which they had been shrouded in terms of communication between the ship and its away team. From the inside of the Nunto science room console, Elisha began tapping out the same light message for a second time when she inquired to the two in the room looking out the porthole.

"Are either of you seeing any message being returned back or at least a signal that our message was received?"

Just as she wondered, the reply came in. Although she could see on her small monitor the same simple signs as of her original transmission, she heard the computer's well known feminine voice translate it instantly to her.

"Away team, this is the Phoenix. We are receiving you. You have within this transmission the translation matrix for you to install and then speak directly to us through your photonic encoding procedure. The Captain sends his congratulations for a job well done, our last log entries about our present condition and request a report on your current situation. Please reply."

As the response was coming in the door to the space opened with a woosh, and Commander Riker and Commander Schaell entered with the rest of their team.

"Please give me some good news" Riker asked.

* * *

"We know little about them. What we know came only from the few direct contacts we had when encountering a group of them in space, many centuries ago. As far as we can understand, they come from some kind of ancient civilization that destroyed itself eons ago; but some of them managed to survive in some form of deliberate or accidental transmutation, going from physicality to non-corporeal existence. Over time, two factions emerged; one that saw it's transformation as a new step in their evolution... the other as a punishment and destiny they had earned but had now paid enough for. The positive faction, as we call it, wanted to live and explore this new reality of their existence. The other, we call it the negative faction, has one single goal; to get back to material existence... at any price."

His gaze looked around them all before he resumed his answer.

"We don't know either who or how this planet's containment field of negative energy was built. But we know why; this is the only way to permanently contain them. As energy beings, unprotected by a material shell, they die instantly if they touch it. That's why the negative faction wants to possess bodies; not only to live corporeal lives again, but to escape from here. That is why it is imperative that we destroy our ships and ourselves to prevent that."

"It happened before," Yiral then said with a certainty that was almost frightening.

"It has been done at least once we know of. A little over a century ago, a group of about fifty of them escaped through the use of one of our own ships marooned here and flew into the space anomaly a light year from here. We don't know what happened to them. But another group, much larger, escaped through this region of space. Our people have been on the hunt for them since then. Recently, an alien ship emerged from the anomaly. When we found it, it was already invaded by the Zetarrians. They planned to use it to go somewhere we haven't identified but which they named 'Federation Space.' We assumed this was somewhere beyond the anomaly, where that unknown vessel had come from... you have now supported that hypothesis. The scout ship that found that vessel was destroyed in the encounter but managed to send a log buoy. We were on our way to find it when we encountered your smaller ship in this system and, being the prison system, we assumed it was the reported alien craft, as it matched much of the data we had recovered."

He made a pause, as if reluctant to continue. But then, he shrugged his massive shoulders.

"We may have been mistaken... and that ship is either still out there... or has returned to her point of origin... your Federation Space. And our own warning buoys were sent out. In a solar day at most, ships from one of our fleets will come... and now, you are listed as a threat as much as this unknown alien Federation vessel is. it will be seeked out and destroyed... just as yours here."

He was now looking alternatively at Oseno and Redding but in a curious, non direct way; obviously so as to not display any threatening attitude a direct stare would imply.

"Well.." Redding said with a sigh, "it may give you a little comfort to hear that we have a system in place for detecting and removing these types of energy parasites. It turns out that they're not all that rare in our universe... but thankfully rare enough to handle."

Something about a ship nagged in his memory but he couldn't pick it out.

"Anyone have a clue which Federation ship he might be referring to? I'm sure I've heard something like this before."

The Vulcan T'Lana answered him in the perfunctory report giving manner of a Starfleet officer.

"Sir, only three Federation starships are recorded as having ever entered the Azimuth Horizon anomaly; the first one is the ambassador class USS Artemis of Captain Kheren, which discovered it, entered it no less than three times, even went as far as entering this pocket universe... but was destroyed the third time as she helped to tame the anomaly during Operation Horizon. The Uss Artemis never reported any encounter with beings corresponding to what we know of the Zetarrians."

She made a pause as a few heads nodded, remembering the much publicized fate of the famous Stalwart Guardian of the Federation.

"Then there was the Intrepid class USS Lotus, which under the command of Captain V'Rell Gould went in to save the lives of Captain Kheren and then-Commander Syntron from the wreckage of the Artemis, at the end of Operation Horizon. Again, there was no report of any energy life forms and the Lotus never went through the wormhole itself. She was decommissioned afterwards to be replaced by the Horizon as Lotus Fleet's flagship."

Again, many heads nodded. Most had been there during the sad but proud retirement of the fleet's first flagship.

"The third one is a Federation media ship assigned to Lotus Fleet for the purpose of recording the Fleet's remarkable actions at the edge of Federation, Klingon and Romulan territories. The last report about that ship stated that she was lost with all hands within the anomaly prior to Operation Horizon; Nova class starship USS Nuntio, Captain Caroline Rousseau commanding."

She took out her tricorder and punched a few keys.

"With your permission, Sir..."

The Vulcan showed to Groll the 3D image she had called up from the computer files of the Polaris to which it was linked to.

"Is this the vessel your scout ship encountered?"

The canine alien blinked several times at it before flicking his ears forward.

"Yes; this is exactly the hull configuration that the record buoy sent us of the alien ship commandeered by the Zetarrians."

He lowered his head towards Redding and Oseno.

"The warp and energy signature, hull composition and life signs of your ship, your... Polaris, were practically identical to those recorded by the buoy's logs. We knew her therefore to be from the same point of origin and, detecting her in this system, we assumed you served the Zetarrians and undergoing a deliverance operation, willingly or not. The danger of the Zetarrians roaming free calls for swift and drastic measures; so then we strongly felt that we had to stop you. Now, we understand our mistake... but our incoming task force will make the same assumption when it will detect your mothership in this system, orbiting this planet."

Redding nodded in understanding to the Draxx plight.

"Under the circumstances, I understand your actions, but death has a finality that is always best served with caution, If you make a mistake with another life there's no taking it back. Try resolution before conflict, disarming before injuring, and containment before death.. but.." he went on "Always understand that death may be inevitable, and never be afraid to meet it out when all else fails."

The Draxx leader nodded, still silent, obviously pondering the man's words.

"What I'm saying is; we know they can jump from person to person, not ship to ship, You.. I.. would have disabled their vessel before attempting to destroy it. After that, we see what we can do with what's inside."

"You are in error," corrected Groll. "The Zetarrrians can travel through deep space and enter most technological system due their electromagnetic nature. One single open channel of communication is enough for them to invade a ship or installation at the speed of light and start overtaking living hosts. Many hosts die for not being compatible or because more than one tries to possess them at once and burn out their nervous system. That is why we use light signals between our units. Light is part of the electromagnetic force but, as it disperses to infinity in all directions at once, unless focused like in a laser beam, they can't travel through it without having their integrity dissolved in the process. Beleive me, Commander Redding of Horizon, they can invade your ships and worlds before you even realize they have come."

"I do not presume to understand your captain, but I would have still opted to disable the Horizon first; perhaps he might think our ship too powerful to disable safely... if direct harm would come from talk." and

He sighed.

"We are not a people prone to take chances when survival is at stake," Groll simply answered as much as an explanation as an apology. "We know what this threat represents to all space faring cultures."

"He is not kidding, Commander," Yiral then added. "Imagine if those beings would reach our universe. With the subspace relays strewn out all over the Federation, The Romulan and the Klingon Empire, they could invade everyone as fast as subspace signal travels... leave countless deaths in their wake..."

Everyone felt silent at the thought.

"Excellent point Yiral, perpair to send a data download to the Polaris with the information we have gathered so far, with orders not to accept any open communication from this point on as well as any com from anyone else but Oseno or myself for that matter."

He looked back at Groll.

"All other communication... hmm.."

He suddenly had a faraway look.

"But enough of this. Tell me, Groll... If we could get you back to your ship would they kill you outright? Is there nothing we can do or say that might allow us to work together on this threat? because I for one would rather go down with my teeth at my enemies throat, and that can be best done with a pack."

Redding eyes where deadly serious.

"We are more alike than I expected, Redding of Horizon. And we both face the same problems... the same enemy. I agree that our chances of survival are better if we work together."

The Draxx went silent for a moment before he spoke again.

"Protecting ourselves from the Zetarrians on this wet, slimy world is feasible; viscuous, non-conductive substances, like water, disrupts the conductivity of their electromagnetic nature. Wearing insulated suits and avoiding using EM based technology is best to avoid direct contact. Any technology based on other energy source than the electromagnetic spectrum is impervious to them if strong enough. In case of possession, sharp pain to the host's body will drive them out as they feel that pain even more intensely than the host itself."

His eyes went to the top of the trees where they last had seen the energy creatures rushing at the sound of the Polaris engines.

"The biggest problem we have is escaping their prison... and without carrying them with us. You have a vessel... but the negative energy barrier surrounding the planet will drain all forms of energy into nothingness from the instant of contact, be it mechanical, electromagnetic, gravimetric, atomic... or biological. I see no way to bypass such a barrier."

"What do you think would happen if a Zeta possessed a living host and attempted to get through the field? how did they escape the first time?"

Without a word of explanation, the big man took Yiral's tricorder and started inputting some data into it as the Draxx spoke.

"This is the only thing we can hypothesize about their escape. While encapsulated within a physical host and carried within a physical transportation device capable of high velocity, some might have gone through the field... be it at the end only through sheer momentum. Even as their hosts died and the vessel ended up drained and useless once beyond the barrier, just a few seconds in orbit above the field might have been enough for some of them to escape into outer space... and then proceed to their next victim."

Groll's voice became a low growl.

"If your ship is seen coming out of the field and our own ships are there, it will be destroyed the moment it is detected."

"Not an entirely unreasonable reaction," Redding said still inputting information on the padd.

Several more minutes went by before he was finished and handed the PADD back to Yiral.

"Send this to the Polaris but do NOT read it and wipe it after that. I want no trace of the what I wrote there left."

Just to be on this safe side, he included an alert if she should attempt to access or copy the file before she sent it. It wasn't impossible she was already compromised.

"We have a saying where I'm from, Groll; knowledge grants power. You may have given me the weapon we need to finish this." and signaled his team to get ready to move out.

"First priority now is to retrieve our people, Midtrt Moore and Sufra." He then ordered one of his men to fire off a spotting flare.

"Anyone from the Federation will know what that is and head to us but we have a good idea where they're at, after that we'll make for the Polaris. If my idea works then this whole thing might be over by the time we get there."

He spoke with an officer's confidence. But he really didn't think it would be that easy.

As the flare went off in the darkening sky, lighting them all for a moment, Yiral took the PADD without looking at it as ordered. her eyes kept themselves into his.

"Sir, how am I to send this? If we use standard transmission mode or anything EM-based and the Polaris opens a channel to receive it, the Zetarrians will use it to invade the ship... and everyone aboard. And if we lose the Polaris..."

She didn't have to finish. If the Zetarrians took over the Polaris, they would escape and leave them stranded in their place within their own prison.

"There's nothing stopping the Polaris from trying to hail US right now. It's a calculated risk but at least this way it's just one chance instead of a dozen. Also, send it as a priority compact signal; it would be less then a second long."

And as if on cue, their communicator beeped to announce the voice of Hunter.

"This is the Polaris; away team do you copy? We are a hundred meters underwater near the shore of the landmass we left you. There is some kind of weird electromagnetic phenomena hovering over our position which registers as amazingly similar to brain patterns but of extreme intensity. Our sensors are unable to filter it out and reach your signal from our current location. We deployed a probe to act as a relay. If you receive this message, please respond within the next hour. Past that deadline, we will proceed with a search and rescue mission to try to find and retrieve you. Please acknowledge."

At the same moment the message was transmitted, Yiral sent her compressed data blip back to it.

"Here goes nothing," she said with a hopeful sigh.

On board the submerged escort class starship, engineer Akaal lifted his hands in frustration.

"That's it; that... thing out there just rushed our probe and shorted it out. We still have a few left... but they will certainly fall to the same fate the moment it sends a signal."

"Mister Hunter... I have something," Ji'Lan reported. "There was a return signal from our transmission, just before the probe was deactivated. I first thought it was a power surge feedback from the short-circuiting... but then, I did an analysis just to be on the safe side..."

"Out with it," grumbled the acting ship commanding officer.

"Sir... it's a compressed transmission... with Commander Redding's personal ID."

"Let's hear it!" Hunter ordered as he straightened in his pilot seat.

"Converting into audio-visual signal on the main viewer," confirmed the Orion science officer.

Before them, the dull watery emptiness they had been looking at shifted to the image of what looked in the background as dense, dark foliage in a gloomy jungle. But on the foreground was the familiar face of Neil Redding. Data scrolled down on the left side of his strong features as he spoke.

"Lieutenant Hunter, here's what I need you to do, and there isn't much time..."

* * *

"Long range sensors report one contact, Captain; 300 mark 40, on an intercepting course with this star system, warp 9.9. ETA twelve hours. Configuration and power output similar to the Draxx cruiser but much larger; mass reads at least comparable to ours. Eden's energy output will mask us from their own sensors until they enter the system... but then, they will be right on top of us."

Science chief K'Leysha's report came in just as the tactical board of Aron'son beeped him it's own warning. But the science station's instruments were much more refined so they gave a bit more details sooner. But now, it was his tactical computer and sensor pallet that were taking over and pouring data onto the screen of his console. Already, it was starting to analyse the sensor data pouring in and comparing it to what had been recorded of the alien cruiser as the signal came closer.

"Lieutenant Lyrya; open a channel to them."

"Captain... this will precisely pin point us to them," warned the Illythirii science chief.

"We will loose any advantage of surprise," added Tyvya from behind him.

The Andorian did not turn to his officers. He kept all four oculars on the screen, as if he could already see ther approaching craft.

"We are not here to prepare an ambush," his deep voice retorted. "There are people down on this planet counting on us to help them; and some of these people might just be their own."

"Channel open, Sir... but they're not answering our hail."

"Maybe they can't hear us yet? Tne star's energy output..."

"Sir, analyzing their technology from the encounter with their cruiser, I can safely bet that their communication system is certainly on parr with ours," states the shrill voice of Cheonghi. "Their comm should be able to filter out stellar noise."

"But out here, there is no subspace relays..." the Aenar counselor reminded them, "except those dropped by the Phoenix, which are on the opposite quadrant from here. Calculating their aproaching speed with that of a subspace signal, our hail will reach them in... six hours. By the time we get *their* reply, they will be entering the system."

Kheren closed the silvery eyes of his face and sighed.

"People, I need options. Preemptive strike and retreat are not among them. And I need them discussed, chosen and implemented in less than twelve hours."

S'Tan rubbed his temples, he wasn't a diplomat, and generally such encounters were complete disasters on Romulan ships.

"Let us consider for a moment the thought pattern of the Draxx. Assuming the former vessel was able to broadcast a distress call, they would be looking for a hostile invader. Even if we just sit here for six hours, I would strongly advise against leaving any tactical system online...even our shields. Hopefully they will want to chat before trying to fill us with plasma."

"There was no signal sent, but log buoys were shot out of the system," Lyrya reminded him. "Adding the speed of the buoys with that of a subspace signal, they may have received their broadcast by now... or it will be soon enough; I would estimate three hours before they reach this system."

"Meaning, they will know of our presence here, have a general idea of our capabilities and able to make preparations beforehand," understood Kheren. "At best, they will react like us and see that we are more inclined to talk than to shoot and not the enemy they expect. At worse, they will react like Klingons and simply rush in to avenge their vanquished comrades."

The Romulan engineer nodded grimly.

I might be able to use the star's energy to our advantage...mask our signal for a few seconds to determine if they want to talk or fight... But I have no idea their sensor capabilities. They may already see us."

"If that is the case, since the star's output is already overlapping our own, then it means that their sensor technology is definitely superior to ours, or any we know of so far, estimated Irksos. Although it didn't seem to be the case with the first cruiser we encountered, this is a different, more powerful one and may be more powerful in this regard as well. We may need more than just a stellar cover."

"I doubt there's anything to hide behind. Nor do I think it would be advisable to take the ship away from its current location. Our away team may need support."

He paused for a moment.

"The first Draxx vessel attacked based on the theory that we were attempting to enslave them. Maybe there is some way to show the incoming vessel that we are not that race they believe us to be?"

"Communication is always the first, best option," Kheren quoted from Starfleet's rules of engagement.

"In that regard, the only way I can think of that would serve our purpose is to use the same photonic encoding they used themselves to communicate between their detached sections and with us," recalled Ke'Leysha, bringing up the visual log of the Polaris on screen. "The universal translator can again convert our audio-visual transmission into light pulses that their own system can then decypher. The only problem is that such a signal can only travel at the speed of light. They will not be able to realize that we are signaling until they drop out of faster-than-light speeds... and that should mean right on top of us. If they are as trigger-happy as they seem to be, we will have to survive at least one full salvo... and that, if they are in a mood to talk."

"How about telepathic contact?" wondered the captain.

"Mental contact might be seen as the very intrusion they fear, even as outright aggression," Counselor Lyrya warned with an approving nod from the Illythirii science chief. "In fact, virtually all non-telepathic species do. That's why we, Aenars, have a severe code about not initiating such contact unless the other party is willing to and thus, why we still use speech."

"Alright, we know how to initiate proper contact. Now, if they come in guns blazing, I don't want to reply to them à la Governor De Frontenac."

"Sir?"

"Human History, Counselor; *Je vous répondrai par la bouche de mes canons*; answering through the mouth of my cannons. That's what the French Lord of Quebec replied to a surrendering order from an invading English General in Eighteenth Century Canada, on Earth. When the Draxx comes in, and if they open fire, I don't want to engage them; but we will have to avoid suffering from their wrath long enough for them to cool down... or find a way to cool them down. I'm not yet sure how to apply Aikido with starships."

Security officer Kyle stood at his post near the turbolift doors. Officer Celes stood across from him. She noticed that Kyle looked uneasy, as if he might be thinking over something unpleasant. As he started making motions to get someone's attention, she gave him a 'are you crazy' look and he hesitated. But he had made up his mind to offer an idea and since he couldn't leave his post to approach anyone, he had to speak up.

"Captain, I... I might have an idea... Sir."

Celes looked mortified and went rigid at her post.

"Ensign; you are registered as a bridge officer, are you not?"

The question was quite rhetorical, as the turbolift would not have even brought him up on the bridge had it not be the case. But coming from the stern Andorian captain with his eyes like molten balls of silver, it felt like anything but. The young man stammered.

"I... aye... Captain Sir."

"Then, I require your input as well, Ensign, like that of any other bridge officer."

For a moment, that froze the man and his colleague almost as much as if he had ordered them off the bridge and straight to the brig, as they had half-expected him to. Captain Kheren was well known for being a strict disciplinarian with zero tolerance for insubordination. Yet, those who had served under him testified that he was as quick to listen to his subordinates if they had something valid to say as he was to make a command decision on his own. Kyle was about to put that rumor to the test.

"Well, Sir... what if we offered to surrender... Sir."

The room went quiet except for the sound of equipment.

"What I mean, Sir..." he added hastily, "is that, if we offer to surrender, they might wish to discuss terms of surrender... and that, at least, would negate immediate hostilities."

And just as hastily as he spoke, he stepped back into his post, giving the captain a slight awkward nod. He felt like he might throw up..

The Romulan nodded.

"It could work, yes. Especially if we leave a skeleton crew in stasis in the transporter system, as an extreme backup. Take back the ship... I believe Captain Picard performed such a maneuver. Or so the Romulan Academy has taught."

The Andorian seemed lost in his thoughts for a moment. Then, his deep voice broke the silence as he nodded respectfully to the security guard.

"Ensign... I think your Human saying is; you might just have saved our ham."

"Our bacon, Sir," Tyvya discreetly but audibly corrected him.

"Whatever... the thing is, this is something they will not expect, especially from the enemy they believe to be facing..."

"They might also think it's a trap," Tyvya remarked sternly. "A trick to have them lower their guard."

"And if I was their captain, I would certainly consider it. But that be as it may, it will have them start thinking instead of just jumping right in guns blazing... especially if we go one step further with Mister Kyle's idea."

"Which is?" wondered Doctor Nasaro-Myth, unusually quiet all this time.

"Send out a distress call."

"A trick?"

"Not at all, Doctor. We have people stranded on that planet with no way we know of so far as to how to help them. We are not from this neighborhood... but *they* are. We *do* require their help."

"They still might think it's a trap. A fake distress call is the oldest trick in the book," insisted Tyvya.

"Agreed; but it will still have the same effect as Mister Kyle's recommendation... which we can still implement if it comes down to that to ensure that they will not attack us outright."

Kheren turned to face his other wife.

"Counselor; send out a general distress call...but make sure they receive it. Send it on all channels and frequencies, including photonic emissions. Use smoke signals and flags too if you think that would help but make sure *it is* out there."

"Understood, Captain."

He turned again towards the young security officer.

"As you were, Mister Kyle."

Then, he looked once again at his chief engineer but spoke so that everyone on the bridge would feel as concerned as the Ensign at the turbolift door had been.

"In the meantime, we too should prepare for the worse. Keeping a retrieval crew in transporter transit is a good start. But what else may we do to secure this ship if all comes to worst? We have three thousand civilians to take care of, in addition to our crew... but ensuring the safety of Federation citizens is our most important duty. Recommendations?"

S'Tan put the captain's request on the backburner for a moment, as a thought popped into his head.

"What about the Phoenix? If they receive our distress signal, they may come running... I doubt the Draxx would enjoy seeing a second ship enter the system while they were talking to a 'surrendered' ship."

"She is not responding to our hails," Lyrya reported, her white eyebrows furrowing over her whitish eyes. "There is a line of active subspace relays dropped by the Phoenix between them and us as part of the exploration protocol established for this mission, so there should be no delay in transmission... yet I receive no signal from them."

"They might be in trouble too," Ke'Leysha observed, her eyes on her long range sensor readout. "Long range sensors confirm the spread of subspace relays... but I can't find them beyond the last one. If I follow the standard exploration pattern, I find instead an area where our subspace scanners can't penetrate... like... some kind of subspace void. "

Cheonghi lifted his bald chitinous head to add to the science chief report with his shrill voice.

"If they are in there or directly on the other side of this area, only n-space signals will reach them... meaning limited to the speed of light. At this distance, this mean... several years!"

"Keep trying, Lieutenant, all channels and frequencies," Kheren ordered. "Send them a log report of our situation and real-time data of our position and that of our incoming friends. With her QSD drive, the Phoenix can jump back to us almost instantly. Whatever situation she is in that prevents her from answering immediately, I trust Captain Syntron to make the right call at the right moment. In the meantime, let us assume that he can not... and work to resolve this ourselves."

Silent the whole time, Joey Sisko, now filling the Exec chair, spoke directly to his commanding officer.

"Sir, as I see it, we have three problems; see to our marooned people down on Eden IV, deal with the incoming alien warship and protect our civilians... and only one ship... unless we take measures to deal with all three problems at once. "

The Andorian looked at him for a moment, blinking the silvery eyes on his face while his antennae bobbed slowly towards the Half-Bajoran. Although his facial muscles were not numerous enough to allow him to smile, this was nevertheless the feeling everyone on the bridge had when he spoke.

"Separate the ship."

Everyone was looking at him now.

"Commander Sisko; you will be in charge of the civilians. You with Lieutenant Lyrya as your Exec will take the saucer section to the other side of Eden III and stay hidden there. Proceed with the initial colonization survey while waiting for us to return. If after all this planet is suitable for colonization, or if it becomes necessary to take refuge there, you will be ready to proceed once this situation is resolved; if the situation does not warrant any planetside operation, we will pick you up there... or the Phoenix hopefully will. If all things come to worse, you will surrender to the Draxx and ask for their assistance, as Mister Celes recommended."

"Aye, Captain."

"Commander Ke'Leysha," then said Kheren looking at the Illythirii science officer. "I know you have extensive rescue operation and battle experience; you and Lieutenant Aron'Son as your Exec will take command of the stardrive section and maintain position here to protect and assist our people down on Eden IV or deal with any threat to them or the rest of our people hidden at Eden III. Implement Mister Solius' recommendations, stay in telepathic contact with Counselor Lyrya and keep trying to contact the Phoenix to inform her of our situation and get her assistance. If the Draxx will not listen to you, as Mister Celes proposed, use your judgment and experience but keep in mind that the civilians' safety is our prime responsibility."

"And what about you, Captain?" wondered Snowfire with all the others.

"I am taking the bridge module to go out and meet our incoming friends. Mister Solius will be my Exec."

"Sir, the bridge module will be like a snow rabbit facing a polar bear!" Aguk Snow said.

"They should not be afraid of us then... and willing to do some light talk with us."

"Small talk, Sir?" Tyvya tentatively corrected visibly puzzled.

"Negative; I truly meant, talking to them through this light code of theirs so that they don't think the Zetarrians are coming after them when we will be directly implementing Mister Celes' recommendation. That is why we need to get up close and personal."

"I agree with the Captain." The engineer added, "If we are sending out a distress call, it is best to show ourselves as half of a ship. Hopefully, if there are engineers and science officers aboard the Draxx ship, they will understand our capabilities and explain that we are indeed in distress."

"Let us split up then," Kheren ordered. Stardrive command crew to the battle bridge; saucer section command crew to the auxilliary bridge; send replacements to the main bridge and prepare for full ship seper."

He asked Lyrya to open a shipwide channel.

"Now hear this! This is the captain... We are about to face possible enemy contact and attempt to negotiate a peaceful solution while trying to safeguard those of us now stranded on the planet we are orbiting and all civilians aboard. Prepare for full ship separation operation. Delta shift bridge officers, all combat personnel will report to the secondary hull, including all medical and engineering personnel crosstrained in security. Gamma shift bridge officers, all science personnel and all personnel crosstrained in medical and engineering will report with all civilians to the primary hull. Beta shift bridge officers, report to the bridge. Further orders will come from your assigned command officers. Everyone, I know we can succeed because you will do your best; we now need it. Captain out."

By the time he had finished, everyone had moved through the two turbolifts; those that exited for their assigned position and their replacements coming up to fill their bridge station. Aguk Snow had remained at Helm but Tyvya filled Tactical for Aron'son leaving with Ke'leysha. Solius also remained at Engineering and Cheonghi at Ops but Norbert Baoule took over for the science chief while Counselor Sirris did the same for her chief leaving with Sisko.

"Mister Solius; you will have to double up as my Exec and as chief engineer. Think you can manage this for a two decks starship with a crew of six?

* * *

Now positioned in the center seat, Syntron addressed the Deltan counselor commanding the communication post.

"Lieutenant Bijoŭ, inform security to prepare an armed team to be immediately dispensed to the Auxiliary Briefing Room. They must be equipped and sealed in full environmental suits as a precaution."

"Understood, Sir" the Orion counselor acknowledged as she complied with the order.

Moments later Lieutenant Bijoŭ's console signaled.

"Security team is prepared, Captain."

Bijoŭ checked and rechecked the information displayed on her medical command chair monitor's comm panel as a red light suddenly flashed.

"Captain, the self-destruct sequence has been activated on the Nuntio!" she announced as calmly as she could muster.

Syntron drew his full attention back to the Deltan.

"Time until detonation?" he inquired calmly.

"Approximately twenty-five minutes, Sir. But this is not confirmed."

Syntron acknowledged her connotation as he addressed the avian CSO.

"Given these new circumstances, Mister Livingstone, we will need to expedite communication with the Zetarians. I would surmise that, assuming the given the extreme measures our away team is apparently undertaking on the Nuntio, that the current conditions are grim. We need to determine if we can assist in rectifying these circumstances. If not, we will need to devise a method to safely extract our crew along with any survivors aboard that ship. See to this immediately."

"The set up is ready to get one of them safely into the portable holo-emitter at your command, Sir, Jonathan answered, big golden eyes blinking back at the Vulcan captain. The sooner we communicate with them, the better our chances are of finding what is really going on... and what we should do about it. One thing is certain already though; Commander Riker and Commander Rogers are the only ones on the away team that can activate the self-destruct mechanism of a starship... but there is the possibility that one or several command grade officers of the Nuntio are with them. If that hypothesis proves correct, that means that there may be survivors aboard."

"Why can't it ever be simple and easy? Tolo mumbled with a sigh.

* * *

In the aft storage bay on deck 3, David Rogers knew he had to find his away team. And commander Riker's team as well. Moving forward he came to the entrance to the bay on the port side. His PADD schematic showed a hallway past here leading to the transporter buffer compartment and cryogenic gas tank compartment, and further to the port science lab and then sickbay. But he would need to distract these beings away from him momentarily if he wanted to pass through the exit force field encapsulating the bay. Walking starboard he came to the cargo transporter console and began signaling the shuttle emergency egress hatch at the rear of the cargo bay.

As he entered the commands, the screen came alive with a timer, the room flashed yellow warning lights and David heard the all too familiar Federation computer voice blare her announcement.

"Self-destruct sequence activated. T minus 20 minutes... nineteen minutes fifty-nine... ninety minutes fifty-eight... nineteen minutes fifty-seven..."

Oh that's just lovely, the engineer thought as he continued his manipulations.

The room flashed telltale red warning lights now, and the warning klaxons boomed their woo-woooo, woo-woooo, as the outer door slowly opened to space; the force field inside preventing decompression. Turning from the console, David observed the multiple lights entities racing to investigate the new opening in the Nuntio hull, but they quickly stopped just short of the level ten force field. Moving fast Rogers went back to the port side door and quickly opened an exit in the field to enter the next chamber. Upon entering the small safety chamber he closed the door and reactivated the force field, leaving the entities trapped in the cargo bay. With a sigh of relief he turned to the inner door and repeated the unseal, exit through and reseal upon that door and found himself in the short storage hallway leading forward.

Here the walls were lined with suits and supplies for working in the cargo bay. Seven pairs of over and under compartments lined both sides of the hallway, and Rogers quickly searched a few of them to retrieve a trio of oxygen canisters for suit resupply. At the front of the hall was another door and the same exit and reseal was accomplished, leaving David standing at the aft end of the port side corridor on deck three. Setting the trio of canister's next to the outer wall opposite the first compartment David turned and investigated the transporter buffer compartment to the right. The dim room, what could be seen of it, held no one and seemed abandoned.

Picking up the canisters again, the Phoenix' chief engineer walked forward past the sealed science bay on his left and reached the cross hallway tee junction. Upper level computer core was to his right, but he turned left and went to the sickbay door. Setting the oxygen tanks down again, Rogers began overriding the force field in order to open the entrance to sickbay.

That task was easy enough. What showed itself to be less easy was how to deal with what suggested the passive readings of his suit's built-in tricorder. They signaled him that there were half a dozen humanoid lifeforms within sickbay... and all of them had electromagnetic, encephalographic and neurogenic levels impossibly high for their standard physiology.

Dropping the force field with his override's, David drew his phaser and checked its stun setting to make sure it was still on maximum dispersal. He knew from past use that this would incapacitate the personell inside sickbay and force any entities out of their bodies. What to do with the displaced beings then was a matter of conjecture.

Ensuring the forcefield would re-establish itself after he entered the bay, David opened the physical door and stepped through. Swiftly, David brought up his pistol and swept the room right to left, not bothering to pinpoint any one individual. Rather, the sweep would encompass all of them and render the occupants unconscious. And the entities would therefore need to vacate and focus on himself instead.

The expected results were disconcerting to Rogers, even if expected. The six Nuntio crew members collapsed where they stood and multiple reddish and bluish will-o-wisp looking light forms rapidly rose out of the now inert bodies lying about sickbay and made a whirling, waltz-like movement toward where Rogers stood in front of the re-sealed sickbay entrance. Thinking quickly, David ran left past the three biobeds on the port side of the room and through the gap separating the main operating room console and the wall. Inside the operating room was a single medical operating table with encompassing displays and panels. Turning to the main console Rogers entered delay commands for the operating bay itself; a level 10 containment field. Programming a five seconds delay, David then set up a command sequence override and set up a intra-ship transport to the science lab just aft of sickbay.

Stepping back through the whirling dervishes of the disembodied enemy, Rogers drew them with him back to the main operating table. As planned, they followed, trying to gain entrance through his suit. But there was no open comm or system and they fluttered desperately about him. Then, as the containment field materialized, the transport beam cut through the rising field and whisked Rogers out of the infirmary.

His fleeting thought as the beam dematerialized him was that he hoped, in his hurry, that he had timed the transport correctly. A rising level ten containment field, if not timed minutely with the transport operation, would interfere with the pattern buffers, the phase transition coils and the imaging scanners. Not to mention the destination imaging scanners.

David hoped he wouldn't materialize in the floor, or worse, half in it..

The particular whine of a site-to-site transport suddenly became audible to the occupants of the small science lab and the visual swirl of the materialising matter stream appeared between the two chairs on the port forward side of the room, by the wall console. The rising force field had caught the tail end of the matter stream, slowing its transport and thus imparting a drag co-efficient onto the re-materialization process.

Rogers materialized a quarter of a meter off the deck and still under acceleration, imparted by the movement of the Nuntio in stellar space, a mere matter of a few centimeters per second. Thus, after full reconstruction was achieved and the transport completed, David was thrown aft into the chair and he toppled ignominiously down to the deck near to an astonished Chief Operations Officer, Lieutenant Leone.

"Nice entrance." Riker said with a chuckle.

Still shaking his head Riker walked over to help Rogers up.

"Here is the crack engineer you asked for, Sir," security officer Deloit said matter of factly.

The Saurian first officer looked down at the sprawled man with wide blinking eyes; which was quite something to behold, considering the enormous size of those eyes to begin with.

"Lieutenant, somehow this transporter demonstration is not inspiring me with a lot of confidence."

Grabbing Rogers shoulder and hand Riker helped him to his feet. Looking over at the Saurian Riker just smiled.

"He is alive, and here to help us. I count that as good news"

"Agreed; Commander Schaell, First Officer of the Nuntio," the red and blue scaly officer said to Rogers. "Commander, how well-qualified are you with transporter systems?"

Rogers accepted the aid from Commander Riker with a sheepish grin and a nod of thanks, then turned his attention to the towering Saurian as the reptilian star fleet officer spoke.

"Transporter systems? Well, I could say highly qualified, but this recent mishap may disparage my credibility. My expertise is equal to Ensign Parker in matter/energy systems, however lost contact him somewhere outside main engineering."

As the ChEng began to re-establish his space legs again after an erratic transport, the Orion chief operations officer garnered his attention.

"Commander Rogers, your timing is impeccable! We have just received a translation matrix from the Phoenix that would appear to be tailored for you to install." Elisha then handed Rogers a PADD with the complete set of files and information organized in a designated digital folder.

Looking over the offered PADD from Leone, David smiled at the dignified simplicity of the translation matrix. Normal intra-ship comms used the optical data network and subprocessors, coupled through short range radio frequency pickup to transfer to comm badges, PADD's and tricorders or terminals. Of course, the term radio was a hold-over from the past, but the frequency range of radio and light were only separated by about eight magnitudes of frequency on the electromagnetic spectrum. Pattern recognition of light radiation is the same as radio waves, just at a much smaller wavelength. This matrix completely cut out the ODN network, for obvious reasons, and routed the short range RF communications directly through the digital-to-analog processor in the receiving device.

David looked up from the PADD and addressed Riker, Leone and Schaell.

"Yeah, no problem with this sir. Simple yet ingenious. Give me a couple seconds."

Turning to the nearest comm panel, David downloaded the PADD frequency analog to the console and, entering a command override to bypass Nuntio comm security protocols, enabled the system the quickest way, by charging the entire Nuntio ODN relay system with the protocol. Every terminal, PADD or console within line-of-sight of a transmitting light source; Like the Phoenix in this case; would receive and translate the message in real time.

Elisha Leóné turned her attention to the first officer who had recently joined them as well.

"Commander Riker, since we have been out of communication for quite a while now, the Captain requests any recent log entries, just as those they have provided, regarding what has transpired here on the Nuntio, along with a report on our current situation and status."

Elisha Leóné gazed through her visor to the away team members and those from the Nuntio surrounding her as she spoke.

"Everyone needs to pull their insights and observations together so that Commander Riker can provide as much detail as possible to the captain by the time our chief engineer has this matrix ready to transmit."

Elisha then realized she was proceeding as if she was in charge of the away team here even though all she did was re-establish communication with the Phoenix. She blushed slightly as she immediately turned her attention back to the first officer.

"With your permission of course, Sir"

Leaning in until his visor was nearly touching Elisha's, Riker spoke softly.

"Stepping on my toes eh? I should make you write the log entries for that..."

Before she could respond, he winked and half smiled, as much morale boosting humor as he could muster given the situation.

"We need to cram as much detail as possible while still being quick. Now is not the time for volumes upon volumes of stuff to read through..."

Grumbling to himself, Riker just kind of looked around slightly annoyed.

"I hate writing logs, always have. I think I get that from my father, he hated logs too. He always joked that was his favorite thing about the Maquis, less paperwork."

Snapping out of his small rant, Riker pulled out a PADD and began to enter information.

"Everyone get me what you have, and we will figure out what we can put together."

The Saurian first officer however had another angle on the matter.

"Commander Riker, as much as some captains love paperwork, this is not the time. I recommend we report succinctly our current situation and what we are about to do; mainly, force the Zetarians to sit down and talk... or blow the ship and strand them here for ever... in less than twenty-six minutes."

"But Sirr... what about us... and the crew of the Nuntio?"

"Lieutenant... Mrrriish is it? Well, that's where transporter mastery would come into play."

He looked at Rogers with his enormous eyes.

"Commander; would you be able to connect all the ship's transporters in sequential action to deactivation of the forcefields?"

"Sequential to de-activation? Sure, I just attempted that and nearly materialized in that wall!" David said while gesturing to the port console nearby where he had appeared. "But, I was in a hurry so ... let me think."

Using his PADD, Rogers studied the master ships display of the Nuntio. Twin six-person transporters were on deck 2 above them, along with one cargo transporter in the main cargo bay aft where David had just been about ten minutes ago. However, there was only one transporter buffer pair, tied to all three pads. Normal transport for lifeforms involved resolution on a quantum scale. Although cargo transporter's could be configured to quantum over molecular resolution, they were less powerful in range. But cargo transporters could double in capacity over personnel transporters. Regardless of all this though was the buffer problem. All transport was sent through the buffer for pattern holding while destination co-ordinates were verified and doppler compensation is achieved between sites. With the single pair of buffers on the Nova class, transport was regulated to approximately eighty-seven seconds between transports, to allow for pattern buffer cooldown and reset.

David did some quick math comprising the Nuntio standard crew of eighty personnel and adding in the Phoenix team, yielding eighty-nine persons. Eighty-nine divided by twelve resulted in needing eight separate transport cycles. Add in eighty-seven seconds of cooldown cycles between transport and the total approximate time for complete evac of the Nuntio was eight transports at five seconds, plus eighty-seven seconds reset and cooldown, equals ninety-three times eight, or twelve and a half minutes. And transport could not be achieved through the EM field, like that of the emergency forcefields. David's recent attempt was a near-catastrophic beam in to a wall, but using the computers to time the transport with the force fields would be a simple matter of settings.

Using his PADD as a recording playback, David studied his recent trajectory and the medical operating room forcefield interference and determined that the timing needed to be off-set from his original calculated delay by about point four three more seconds. But then, Rogers himself had been the timer, in his head. The computer could time the transport more accurately. So, David did a quick simulation on his PADD, accounting his own near fatal attempt into the simulation, and arrived at a one point four second delay for the forcefield after transport initialization. David sent the data to Lieutenant Leone's PADD and spoke to her about it.

"That is what I get, Lieutenant. Double check that and incorporate into your transport activation sequencing. Remember, there are only twelve pads for transport."

Turning to Riker and Schaeffer, David cautioned them on the transport capacity he had figured out.

"Commanders, the entire evacuation will take just over twelve minutes on the Nuntio's two personnel transporters, allowing for buffer resets because the Nuntio has just a single pair of buffers, in the compartment next door, inboard."

"How about the cargo transporter?" asked Schaeffer. "Since we will be transporting to the Phoenix well closer than forty-thousand times the normal transporter range, could it be converted safely for personnel beam out? That would shorten our timetable by half..."

"Yes commander, good call. The cargo unit would just need to be re-configured for quantum state resolution. However, that would reduce their payload capacity by nearly half. But ..."

David ran a quick mental calculation in his head, taking the same reset of the buffers into the equation but throwing in the sixty percent gain of the cargo pad.

"... because they share the pattern buffer with the personnel transporters, I estimate a three and a half minute reduction in total transport time. I'll reset the cargo pad's."

Moving to the nearest science console Rogers began accessing the main computer and configured the cargo transport system from molecular to quantum resolution.

Turning towards Riker, Schaeffer pointed to Leone's tricorder.

"Commander Riker; could your ops officer access your away team's combadge signals and those of the Nuntio's crew and personnel and send them in one compressed burst into the transporter system? This would need to be done exactly at the very moment of transporter activation and not before; unless we manage to shorten the contact time and delay it at the last possible moment, the Zetarians would be able to use it to try to get to us during the data transfer."

His large eyes blinked for a moment before he continued.

"Since we would have to do several successive beam-outs, these activation signals should be randomized throughout the ship so as to avoid the Zetarians predicting where the next one would be... and finish last with us... and all that within the next twenty-two minutes."

After closing the access door on the bottom of the console, Elisha Leóné stood up and addressed Schaeffer as she began interacting with her Ops PADD.

"I have our away teams' combadge signals already programmed into this PADD. I just need to add Nuntio's personnel into this as well."

After completing this undertaking a few moments later, she moved on to the next task.

"I have an encrypted randomized program now synchronized with all combadge signals. These are correlated in a series of group transports based on current location of personnel."

Elisha then turned her focus to the first officer. With her fingers poised in position above the PADD.

"Just awaiting your word Commander Riker to proceed."

Turning from his console Rogers nodded an affirmation at Lieutenant Leone that the transporter's were set, then spoke to Commander Riker.

"All set, Sir. The initial beam out will commence with the main personnel transporter's on deck 2, then cycle to cargo and back. Total elapsed time for complete evac will be eight minute's from initialization."

With a simple nod Commander Riker gave the instruction to proceed.

Reaching over to a panel, he pressed the button and brought up the self destruct counter. Currently reading 11:45...11:44...11:43...11:42

"In case you guys forget we are on a timer here, so you want to hurry this up. We all die in less than twelve minutes." Riker said, with as much of a commanding tone as he could muster.

Elisha checked and re-checked all of the readings on her display before looking somewhat nervously at the first officer.

"Sir," she almost whispered within her headset, "before we leave, how we are going to free those remaining Nuntio crewmembers that are possessed? My scans indicate that less than half that crew are still alive... forty seven if these readings are correct."

The Orion's aqua-colored eyes stayed fixed on the first officer.

Looking over Riker's face grew cold.

"If they are dead, then there is nothing we can do for them. If they are alive, then we have less than twelve minutes to get them out of here."

" Then, let's see if they are in a mood to talk," said the Saurian officer.

He went to a side console and deliberately activated the whole board. In a moment two clouds of lights, one blue and one red, sprouted from the console to rush at him. He was bathed in the colorful display for a few seconds until they seemingly dissolved right through him and his giant lanky frame fell to the ground.

Then, for a moment, his face contorted into a display of the same colors and all the hues in between, while his opened mouth contorted hideously as it croaked with ghoulish-sounding low sounds, as if he was trying to speak yet could only do so at an extreme slowness.

The eerie display lasted for long seconds, until the colors resorbed into his large eyes. Then slowly he stood up. his eyes glowed red.

"You are intent on destroying this vessel. You will stop this or we will destroy you."

The voice, with it's strange echoes in the open, unmoving mouth of the Saurian, sounded emotionless; yet there was such malevolence in it that it make them all shiver. But then, the unnatural light his eyes turned blue.

"You are intent on destroying this vessel. Do not delay or they will destroy you."

Glancing back over to the Saurian, whose eyes still glowed blue, Riker spoke with a firm voice.

"Everyone on this ship dies unless you let those people go. Check the minds of those you have possessed. There is not a man or woman of any species wearing this uniform..."

Riker touched his suit around his chest and continued.

"Not a man or woman wearing this uniform who would not lay down their lives to save the innocent. If we let you off this ship who knows how many people are going to die. If we blow it up, I can tell you that number will be a hell of lot lower"

For a moment, the light in the eyes of the Saurian flicked from blue to red and back to blue and again to a bloody hue in fast succession as his whole body trembled and collapsed on the floor. The battle of lights continued and spread to his whole face while his mouth contorted grotesquely with low croaking sounds coming out of it all the while.

And then, a haze of red and blue lifted from the entire body. For a moment, the reddish glow flew straight at Riker and enveloped him like a cloud. But a second later, the blue fog reconnected with it. Both clouds swirled a moment all around the Phoenix first officer, sending sparks all across his EVA suit and then, they moved to a nearby console which started to light up crazily and erupt in a display of sparks. Then, everything became quiet.

"Guess you were convincing, Sir," security officer Deloit said to break the cold silence.

"Eleven minutes to self-destruct," chief M'ata announced. "What about all those survivors? There are forty-seven crewmembers of the Nuntio still alive... all reading as possessed by a Zetarrrian... correction; twenty-four are now registering as unconscious and no more as occupied by alien brainwave signals. Same condition for half of our people still in main engineering..."

Riker was kneeling by the unconscious Saurian when he stood up and snapped his fingers.

"Of course, I know someone who might be able to tell us a thing or two. Now that we are safe for the moment."

Pulling out the portable holo communicator from his pocket Riker activated it, and with a flicker Doctor Gray appeared. Looking around almost paranoid the doctor examined the rooms and the walls.

"Those things were trying to take over. Rewrite my code, I shut myself down to stop them. If they were drawn to me they are going to know what is going on."

"Then we better hurry" Riker said pointing to the unconscious Saurian.

Kneeling by the Saurian commander, Doctor Gray gestured for the medical kit. Thumbing through the kit he pulled out two stimulators and placed one right over the Saurian's right eye and one just below his jaw. As they blinked a red light the Saurian blinked and began to move. Riker and Doctor Gray helped him to a seating position, but before they could speak the panel on the bulkhead sparked again.

"You better go," Riker said to Doctor Gray.

"You will get no argument from me!"

As Doctor Gray disappeared, his portable holo fell towards the ground, Riker reached in and caught it. Standing up he looked at the away team.

"Do we have enough power for a site to site transport? I mean can we beam them all to one central location?" Riker asked. "If we beam them all to one central location, then we can get in touch with the Phoenix and have them beam everyone out together. If they got our message they probably have a secure area set up already, or are making one."

Walking over and looking at the timer as it counts down Riker continued with the same urgent tone.

"If not, then we better get some ideas and fast. I would be fine turning off this countdown if we could be assured those... things are gone."

"Commander... the Nuntio... sshe... has to be desstroyed," hissed Commander Schae'll as he wobbly got back to his feet. "Those energy beings... they can freely ssurvive and move in outer sspace. If they would manage to esscape thiss area..."

"You want to kill them all?" exclaimed M'ata half-shocked but growling with grim understanding.

"Negative; they do," the Saurian explained. "The... those few that sstill resspect other life and desspise those among them who would hold nothing back to guarantee their ssurvival at any cosst... I gathered with thiss lasst brief contact with them that they want uss to make sure that the others will not esscape. They will try to hold them off long enough for uss to attempt to flee... if we can."

David thought over the site to site idea for a second and dismissed it out of hand, mainly because the scenario failed to get the Nuntio crew off of the ship before the time ran out. It merely moved them within the Nova vessel. Instead, he proposed an idea from a recalled mission note he had studied at the academy; specifically, the USS Voyager mission.

"Commander? How about we transport the entirety into the buffers? We target the Phoenix pattern buffers and transport the Nuntio crew into our ships' buffers. Because we're not re-materializing here, the power requirement is halved. The Phoenix will re-materialize the crew onto her own pads. She has six personnel pad's, six emergency pads and four cargo pads. That is nine buffers over there and each could hold six patterns for up to four hundred twenty seconds."

"That can hold more than enough people." Riker said nodding.

"But we need to beam out our people... and none of them," insisted Schae'll. Elsse, what happened on the Nuntio will happen again on your sship... and thiss time, they might ssucceed in esscaping from thiss area, even if it is devoid of ssubsspace. That'ss why i disabled all propulssion ssysstems on the Nuntio and put her in Grey Mode. At full impulse, il would take them the ssame time it took you to get in. And then, nothing would stop them."

"And how arre we going to... exorrise forrty-seven people sprread accross hundrreds of meterrs of bulkheads?" M'ata wondered.

The Nuntio's Exec went to a console besides where Leône sat and manually programmed the ship's comm system as he explained.

"Turn off the external audio receivers of your helmetss. At the exact moment Commander Rogers will initiate transsport, I can bombard every deck with a high-pitched sound, loud enough and piercing enough to damage any sspecies' hearing. The pain will be sso ssudden and intensse that the Zetarians will all react as they always do when their hosst'ss nervouss ssysstem is attacked; they will extricate themsselves, disssconnecting completely their own brain patterns from those ssignals. If we time it right, they will still be in too much shock to react when people will be beamed off. And if even one of them sstill manages to, your buffer containment trick will allow uss later to deal with them."

"But what about you? the Caitian insisted. "You don't wearr an EVA suit."

"We Ssaurians have much lesss auditory capabilities than mosst other sspecies, esspecially in the ultrasonic range. It will be painful but I will manage. Jusst don't forget me in here when times come to exit the sstage."

Moving his hands over the Saurian's head, Riker made a half hearted attempt to cover the two holes that were his ears. Swatting away the Commander's hands, the Saurian nodded at the humourous gesture in understanding. Saurians did not restrain emotions like Vulcans did; they actually had none at all... except when their primary brain was knocked out and their savage, instinctive secondary brain took over.

Anyway, their snake-like head, devoid of any facial muscle, always seemed to smile all the time, so Riker beleived he was seeing there the first hint of what he tought an emotion since the Nuntio's commander had met the Phoenix crew. Good enough...

Standing up, he glanced over at the countdown timer.

"Get to it, Mister Rogers... you have ten minutes to make it work."

Moving quickly at the order David threw back a comment as he opened the science lab doors.

"Ten minutes; aye, Sir. I'll need to be at the transporter control panel for direct targeting on the Phoenix."

"Ssignal me the insstant you activate transsport," the Saurian reminded him."We have only one sshot at thiss."

And the doors swooshed shut behind him. Breaking into a fast trot, Rogers moved forward up the corridor then turned right to the turbolift just down the hall. As the lift doors slid aside David ducked in and pressed the deck 2 icon. Thirty seconds later found him stepping through the opening doors of the main personnel transporter room, starboard, on deck 2 of the Nuntio. Positioning himself behind the panel he rapidly set up the co-ordinate's of the Phoenix's transporter buffers. Each of these were below their respective pads and could hold the corresponding pad acoutrement of standard personnel transport. As the targeting scanners sought and locked onto the Phoenix David also sent a pre-transport signal to the Pheonix's cargo transporter buffer, with his own command code over-ride, ensuring it was set for quantum resolution processing as opposed to molecular resolution used for cargo transport. Once that signal went out, the configuration signal would also be relayed to the Phoenix bridge security and engineering panels warning of outside tampering. Rogers hoped that his crew over there would recognize the incoming resolution change on the cargo pattern buffer with his command code, and allow the incoming transport. With a fast re-check of all the settings, David risked his comm badge to warn Commander Riker that transport was initializing.

"Rogers to Riker... transport commencing... now!"

Hearing the transmission, Riker quickly pointed at Schaell.

"Now!"

At that very instant, Schaell activated the shipwide comm system and every square inch of the vessel was suddenly assaulted with a high-pitch discordant sound. Even through their protective helmets they found it hard not to wince. But for every other living being inside the Nuntio, it was excrutiating. Even the few Phoenix people with EVA suits that had been possessed were affected as they had had no warning. The intense shock instantly drove every being on the floor, hands to their ears, faces contorted in pain, surprise and fear. From every physical body, conscious or not, rose mists of crackling energies that floated in mid-air, afraid even to come into contact with bulkheads or systems that could vibrate with the awful noise.

And with a gentle touch on the panel David started cycling through Lieutenant Leone's comm badge randomization transport protocol from his own PADD download. Throughout the Nuntio, single crew members dissolved where they stood or lay in the tell tale transport signal enveloped them and whisked them away from the energy cloud hovering above them to one of each of the Phoenix buffer's, rotating to the next buffer. From the main transporter buffer under deck 3, to the next in line, down to deck 8 and transporter 2 and then to transporter 3 on deck 11 and transporter 4 on deck 13. Following the fifth on deck 19 was the sixth on deck 22 and lastly the emergency transport buffers under deck 21. Not to be left out was the cargo bay buffers on decks 22 through 25.

Security Chief M'ata was first to dissolve in a haze of blue and white sparkles.

Just outside the engineering bay in the jefferies tube, Ensign Parker transported away after the last Nuntio crew member inside engineering transported, leaving behind her former possessing energy entity still contorting and crackling. In the upper hallway, Lieutenant Argyle left in a transporter swirl right before master chief petty officer Thalesh's eyes, and then he too left in the bluish swirl of the transport signal while the Zetarrians that had possessed them, a blue and a red one, rushed more or less at one another. Inside the science lab, Lieutenant Leone dissolved away as she was looking at Commander Riker, and then Petty officer Deloit was whisked away from Riker's gaze as well.

David looked over the transport logs as they progressed. All Nuntio crew were now stored on the Phoenix, as well as the Phoenix away team but for himself and Commander Riker. Seeing the power levels dropping fast David overrode the randomizing feature Leone had devised and opened comms with Commander Riker, while looking around for telltale blue or red glowing beings trying to home in on his signal.

"Commander? You and I are all that is left aboard the Nuntio, Sir. You have thirty seconds from my 'go' before you transport."

Having opened an engineering panel in all the confusion, Riker was busy using the same override code the ship had granted him as a senior officer. Watching the power levels drop, Riker knew he had to work fast. Hearing the communication, he smiled under his helmet.

"I do not leave a man behind, Mister Rogers... you first!"

The override displayed Rogers fading in a blue hue and he disappeared from his panel before he could respond.

Back at the engineering console, Riker reached into his pocket and took out the holographic transmitter. Glancing down at it, he entered the last of the commands to lock in the self destruct.

"Time to go home, old friend."

With a blue hue, he beamed away, leaving behind an eerie silence interrupted only by the chime of the self destruct timer.

"Ten... Nine... Eight..."

* * *

Hudson was resuming his seat at the engineering console aft of the Phoenix bridge when simultaneous warnings erupted softly from both his main panel and the security panel across the bridge. Looking at it quickly, Leland confirmed it's intent and then recognized the code override the computer gave his typed inquiry. Turning slightly, he spoke to Captain Syntron.

"Sir. Incoming command override on the cargo bay transporter pattern buffers. It's commander Rogers code, sir. He's re-configuring the cargo buffers to quantum resolution!"

A quizzical expression faintly visible on his face, the Vulcan commanding officer inquired almost rhetorically.

"What is the chief engineer attempting here?"

He leaned forward.

"Confirm the authenticity of these orders and send an armed security team to the cargo bay."

"I don't understand! The ship has eight buffers already configured for quantum resolution. Why the cargo buffer's too?"

Standing and then positioning himself to get a view of the console readings, the captain speculated.

"Perhaps this is Commander Rogers audacious method of escaping a doomed ship... and bringing along the away team."

Things looked grim indeed.

"Sir!," Hudson shouted again; "Multiple transport's registering from the Nuntio! But ...they are just holding inside the buffers!"

Syntron pivoted toward his science chief.

"Mister Livingstone. Began a full compositional analysis and identification of who or what exactly are being contained within these cargo buffers. We need to assure that we have not allowed a potential Trojan horse the opportunity to rematerialize in our cargo bay."

"Transporter system registers... Captain! It is the crew of the Nuntio! At least about half of them... and members of our away team!"

The Science chief barely spoke that Bijou also reported from her own monitor.

"Transmission from the Nuntio's nav lights; raise shields and engage QSD drive in sixty seconds!"

"Prepare to engage both shields and the quantum slipstream drive... but on my mark," the captain ordered. "Lieutenant Bijou, transmit an acknowledgement back."

He then addressed his CSO.

"Someone is still aboard that ship transmitting a signal. We need to know who may be missing from our away team immediately. Can you analyze the signals contained in the buffers and make this determination, Lieutenant?"

"The transporter computer has completed comparative record of previous beam out and last beam in recorded signals; no EM spikes indicating Zetarrian presence... forty-seven crewmembers and passengers from the Nuntio's complement manifest... and our entire away team except for... Doctor Gray, Commander Rogers and Commander Riker."

Amidst the flurry of commands and information going about the bridge, Leland Hudson continued to watch the pattern buffer containment signals on his board. The buffers would contain the signal's only for about seven minutes, and two of those had already expired. He spoke a warning toward Livingstone.

"Hurry, Lieutenant; the patterns are degrading inside those buffers. I estimate five minutes left for the first transported pattern's. After that, we'll get nothing but gas and molecular residue."

"Mister Hudson; evacuate all active transporter rooms, erect a level 10 forcefield around each one of them and complete materialization cycle!" quickly ordered the CSO.

Following the evacuation order, Syntron inquired with a hint of urgency in his otherwise calm

voice.

"Have our three remaining away team officers transported back to the Phoenix?"

"Scanning... transport signal coming from the Nuntio... analyzing... Aye, Captain! We got them! Self-destruct in seven seconds... six... five..."

The Vulcan captain immediately stood up.

"Shields.... implement at maximum capacity. Heading 7.5 mark 237. Maximum velocity, twenty-one seconds; engage!"

The ship lunged ahead out of the region as he found his way back into his seat only seconds before the Nuntio self-destructed in a silent but deadly display of colored explosive gases and scattered materials and within twenty-one seconds the Phoenix emerged out of the null area just ahead of the wake of the explosive waves and debris the entire way.

"We're clear, Sir," confirmed Livingstone from his sensor readings as they emerged from the slipstream. "The Nuntio has been... destroyed... with... everything aboard..."

The voice of the X'ell faltered almost to a sob. His elongated arms fell to his side and he stooped like someone struck by the weight of sorrowful fatality itself.

"All... all those lives... "

"Jonathan... we've saved the entire team and all the survivors of the ship," said Celestine, suddenly feeling the intense sadness of her fellow crewmate like a tidal wave.

The large golden eyes of the Avian looked at her. There were tears making them glisten.

"But... the Zetarrians..."

"They chose their fate, Jonathan. And there are still several of them imprisoned in our shuttlebay, alive. The others... we tried our best to warn them, to reason with them, to make peace with them..."

"Did we? Did we.."

His voice trailed off into a long sigh and his head hung low, feathers flattened on his skull. Even the lights of his *sh'reekh'ree'ss* dimmed like the light in his huge eyes.

The captain leaned back in the center seat. Loss of life was always avoided whenever possible in Starfleet, regardless of circumstance. Fortunately, the counselor with her professionalism and empathy was skillfully attending to the grieving avian CSO in a far greater capacity than what he could ever attempt.

Casting his eyes to the dark haired helmsman, Syntron addressed the human.

"Lieutenant Traynor, plot a course back to the region of space where we departed from the Horizon. Warp 8."

"Course laid in...ETA with Eden star system, seven days; engaging now, Sir" Traynor confirmed.

The eyes of the captain then averted back to the main viewscreen as the order was initiated and their velocity increased.

Entering sickbay at a run after leaving hurriedly his EVA suit in the transporter room, Riker looked back and forth as several nurses were treating crew members from both the USS Phoenix and the USS Nunito. Since the shield matrix in the shuttlebay is what was used, Ensign Tolo was in the back of sickbay working on an engineering panel to recalibrate the shields and rework power to his beloved sickbay.

Looking up and giving a nod with his bald blue head to Commander Riker, the Bolian went back to work on the panel. Glancing back and forth at the medical team, the phoenix' exec reached into his pocket and pulled out the portable holo emitter he beamed back to the Phoenix with. Holding it up and activating it, Doctor Gray materialized. As the matrix on the ship copied over Doctor Gray, he blinked a few times and then reappeared. Glancing around the room, he ran right over to a medical kit and grabbed a tricorder.

"Thank you for bringing me back, Commander. But, as you can see, I have some work to do."

"Of course, old friend," Riker said with a smile.

Turning and heading over to the door, he turned back as he was headed out the door.

"Keep an ear out. The bridge might want to talk to you."

Waving a dismissive hand, Doctor Gray scanned the head of a young man in front of him and began to point towards the burns just above his ear. With a woosh, the door to sickbay closed and Riker headed towards the bridge.

Behind him, Commander Schaell's towering frame went to a biobed where rested a middle-sized, middle-aged but still rather young-looking brown-haired woman wearing four pips on her red collar.

"How is sshe, Doctor?" the Saurian inquired with a neutral tone and expressionless face that somehow still conveyed a worry his species should not have been able to even feel.

"Captain Rousseau is in a coma," answered the CMO of the Phoenix. "Like just about everyone else on your crew, Commander. Unlike you, they have only one brain and a much less sturdy central nervous system than those steel wires you call nerves within your anatomy. And the emotional turmoil of this... possession they experienced and for so long was a tremendous shock. Beleive me, I know..."

"What can you do for her... for them?"

"I can maintain them in stable condition as long as they stay aboard. But to properly treat them, it will require several months and nothing less than a starbase medical facility; or at least what the Horizon can provide since it is by and large a mobile starbase herself, with larger capabilities even than this state of the art science vessel of ours. We have an excellent sickbay, if I may say so myself, but the Horizon has a complete *hospital* on board. We should transfer them there as soon as we are able to."

"I'll go to the bridge and report to your captain," Schaell concluded.

"Oh no you don't," Gray objected, interposing his much smaller frame between the gigantic reptilian officer and the nearest door. "I need to make a thorough check on you for any remaining side effect of your multiple contacts with those... Zetarrians of yours."

"I am fine and wholly purged of alien presence, Doctor."

"That is not the point. You have managed to survive repeated, multiple and simultaneous occupations of your central nervous system without having it fried like it invariably happened with all other species that ever encountered those life forms. Almost two centuries ago, Memory Alpha's entire population of fifty-three different sentient lifeforms had been wiped out in minutes by such an encounter; but Saurians were not part of the Federation at the time and your species seems to be the only one so far able to survive multiple contacts. And according to Commander Riker, you could even assert your own mind over no less than two of them occupying your two brains."

"Barely, Doctor... and not for more than a few minutes at a time at best. And it was quite painful."

"I beleive you. But now, you may hold within your physiology a key to help all your comrades here. "

He lifted a hand way over his head to reach the broad, deceptively slim shoulder of the Saurian. his voice lost it's commanding tone and softened as a gentle smile appeared on his elderly features.

"You are needed here, Commander. Your crew, your captain, needs you."

Silently, Schaell lowered his bald scaly head and nodded. Theodor Gray tapped his shoulder and guided him to an empty biobed.

"Nice of you to comply, Commander. Guess you are not that eager to become Captain yet."

* * *

As the Phoenix moved away from the dead space area, Counselor Bijoû's panel on the ship,s bridge beeped urgently to her.

"Captain, I'm receiving a distress call... it's from the Horizon!"

Many eyes went to her as she listened further through her earpiece.

"The signal is not coming from the flagship... it's from a probe, out of the star system. There is a log attached to it, in code; they have encountered a spacefaring species, called the Draxx, apparently involved with the confinement of a hostile energy-based sentient species on Eden IV..."

She went silent a moment before looking at Syntron with wide eyes.

"Sir, the Horizon has gone into full seperation mode! The Polaris is down on the surface of Eden IV, attempting a rescue operation but herself trapped under a planetary negative energy shell; the saucer section is hiding with all the civilians behind Eden III while assessing that world for colonization... or as a refuge for castaways; the stardrive section is guarding both inner planets from the approach of a Draxx battleship; and the bridge module is on an intercept course with that warship to try a diplomatic resolution."

Rescuing a marooned starship from a deathtrap planet; regrouping with a separated vessel to protect a whole star system from an approaching warship; evacuating thousands of endangered civilians from a potential warzone; escorting a small, defenseless diplomatic mission against a hostile species... There was too little time to do too many things and lives in the balance at every turn... and three parsecs away while they themselves carried several alien prisonners in their quarantined main shuttlebay.

No one wanted to be in the captain's chair at this precise moment.

Hearing the extent of dire circumstances involving their Starfleet counterparts, Syntron knew that their immediate course of action was to get within the vicinity of these vessels as expeditiously as possible. What their course of action would be when they arrived they would determine while they were en route.

"Helm prepare to engage the Quantum Slipstream Drive."

CHAPTER 10 : THE QUEST FOR PEACE

Chief engineer Rogers materialized, as luck or fate would sometime's do, in transporter room 3 on deck 11. Being just three decks above main engineering, David hurriedly removed his helmet, left it in the hands of one of the security officers confirming his identity and uncontaminated state and, still in his EVA suit, made his way just barely after the security forcefield was deactivated. Once in main engineering, he found the place running apace the events just transpiring from the Phoenix's escape from the Nuntio's self-destruction. Looking at the master systems display with a practised eye. The half-Romulan noted the just completed QSD jump and the nominally efficient replacement of the now defunct Benamite crystal.

Because these hard to make crystals were impervious to transporters, the replacement crystal had not yet arrived from storage and the regular dilithium articulation frame had been re-inserted into the M/ARA. It was at this time that the order to engage the QSD came from the helm. David cursed under his breath at the vagaries of starship captains and wondered what the rush was this time. With a practiced tap on his commbadge, David ascertained the location of the replacement crystal.

"Mister Carroll? Location?"

A quick reply from the matter-energy systems specialist was forthcoming, as he entered the engineering door from forward.

"Right here commander," he replied with a satisfied grin. "What's the damn rush?"

David smiled at the man's efficiency and replied in kind.

"Captain wants to go faster ... we go faster. Something's up ... get that replacement installed ASAP."

With Master warrant officer Carroll breaking into a quick trot toward the matter-antimatter reaction assembly chamber, David turned to the pool table and instructed the helmsman, Lieutenant Traynor, on the time frame of the QSD availability.

Above on the bridge, the main engineering panel and the helmsman's panel showed identical timer countdowns on the quantum slipstream drive's availability; one point seven minutes.

The captain turned to the ship's counselor manning the communications post.

"Send a message to the Polaris and the Horizon and inform them that their message was received. We will be arriving as swiftly as the Quantum Slipstream Drive will propel us. Request an update regarding prioritization of these circumstances to enable our crew to best assist each of these situations... even if we do not receive a reply until our approach. Every bit of information will be vital to our course of action."

"Captain, I do not recommend transmission," swiftly said Livingstone, somewhat back from his emotional phase of a few minutes ago. "I am processing their recorded log transmission from that probe. The Polaris is under a negative energy field; no signal will reach them. The saucer section is hiding from any and all signals behind the mass and under the magnetosphere of Eden III. As for the rest of the flagship... if Zetarrians are involved there too, as this log reports, we risk having them use it to board the stardrive section... and piggyback on our subspace signal and once again invade the Phoenix... maybe in numbers too large to handle this time."

The captain nodded an acknowledgement to his CSO before countering his previous command.

"Belay that order Counselor. Let us first see what circumstances we face upon our arrival."

Syntron then engaged ship-wide communication.

"Attention crew of the USS Phoenix... to use an old Terran expression, it would appear that we will be moving out of the frying pan into the fire."

The captain then provided a brief synopsis of the circumstances conveyed in the message received from the Horizon before continuing on.

"... and therefore at this juncture we are uncertain how things have digressed since these messages were transmitted. Our priority will be to assist in whatever capacity is deemed imperative... which may require the involvement of personnel from each department. All hands prepare for emergency situations... condition yellow... captain out."

He lifted his gaze towards the helm station in front of him.

"Lieutenant Traynor; new ETA for arrival into that star system?"

"Once we go into slipstream... two minutes, Captain."

The helmsman may have already been experienced with the new stardrive from their trial run and maiden voyage, he still had a hard time grasping the astounding velocities they were now capable of.

Chief Engineer David Rogers, still in main engineering, was not privy to the combined rationale of the officer's discussion of tactics on the bridge. He only knew that his job was to keep the ship running. As such, when the quantum drive was ready he enabled the helm station above as to that fact and awaited developments as the bay glowed in the yellow glow of the status lights emanating from around the bay. The quantum drive would disengage and the regular dilithium crystal articulation frame would swing into position once again to provide normal warp capabilities.

The captain's public address of the conditions facing the separated Horizon showed a potential hazardous ingress point at the New Eden system. David glanced over at the master systems display again, making sure all shielding and weapons systems were online and fully functional. He knew also that Hudson on the bridge would keep the captain apprised of the ship's drive, shield and weapons status, as a matter of course, and that the helm would be aware of the drive capabilities at impulse once the QSD flight had finished. Warp capability would take the nominal one and a quarter minutes to fully engage.

Back on the bridge, the other officers of the Vulcan captain were doing just that.

"Sir, we will be totally out of contact with normal space during those two minutes," the CSO reminded his commanding officer. "Once we drop out of slipstream, anyone in the vicinity will be completely taken by surprise... and we just might be as well."

"And what about the Horizon bridge module?" worried the counselor. "'They're rushing at this massive warship to intercept it outside the system with less than a dozen people and barely more combat capabilities than a runabout. If the others are not in a talkative mood..."

The captain carefully considered the feedback from his bridge officers. They were providing perspectives and possibilities that needed to be taken into account before they as a crew proceeded into the center of any of these conflicts.

Syntron addressed the helmsman once again.

"Mister Traynor... drop us out of the slipstream after a minute and a half of full engagement. This will give us better proximity from each of these circumstances to provide a more accurate assessment.

Turning around and gazing carefully at each of his senior officers on the bridge, he looked at each other officer in turn.

"Recommendations?"

The turbolift door wooshed open as he spoke and in came Joshua Riker and Mriin M'ata the keen pointed ears on top of Chief M'ata's head were already darted towards him as she moved swiftly to relieve the tactical officer from his post. Her sharp slitted eyes were already reading the tactical summary even as far as from the lift access and taking it all in as she sat before the tactical console with a supple swerve of her lithe furred body.

"Sirr, ourr Avengerr class starrship cannot sepparate as does a two-hulled design like the flagship. Ourr prriorrity is firrst to the endangered civilians. We should take position with the Horrizon's battle section in the system. This will not only strrengthen prrotection of ourr people, but it will show this incoming warrship that we arre morre than rready for them... and yet, not taking any aggrressive posturre as we would if we moved to assist the brridge module. I think Captain Kherren is trying a diplomatic appproach by coming at them with an obviously unthrrreathening vessel while leaving visible forrces behind in case he fails. If they see anotheerr capital ship guarrding the Eden starr system and not moving in to ambush them, they just might become morre willing to think... and talk."

"And if they still don't... Captain Kheren and anyone with him will stand no chance against their onslaught," insisted Bijoû.

Stiffly leaning back and upright in the center seat of the bridge, the Vulcan commanding officer nodded slightly as he processed the recommendations and the accompanying rationale that escorted the advice from his officers.

"Logical," was all the captain first said in a cliché Vulcan manner. But it also happened to ring true. "Helm... input coordinates to arrive as close in approximation to the Horizon's battle section as feasible."

Speaking up Riker looked around at the other officers.

"What about the yacht, Sir?" Riker suggested. "I could lead an away team, with more than enough people and supplies to lend a hand. It is not quite the same as two ships, but it should give us a better chance of being able to be in two places at once."

Glancing around the bridge again Riker continued.

"We are still a bit weary from the last mission, but I am sure I will not have a problem gathering volunteers to coordinate this mission. Some of us just want to be done with it all and on our way."

"Prepare your next away team, Commander. Be ready to disembark once the QSD disengages," Syntron confirmed, but then added; "Be mindful Mister Riker. What we do not need is another vessel and crew to rescue or any action in haste that could led to an onset of warfare."

Faking a sense of shock and offense Riker mused slightly.

"Like that has ever happene."

Noting his humor was not lost even on the Vulcan, Commander Riker quickly glanced around the bridge.

"Lieutenant M'ata, I am going to need one hell of a security team."

Walking over to the comms panel, Riker opened communications with sickbay and main engineering.

"Doctor Gray, Commander Rogers; I will need a small medical and engineering detachment for an away mission. We are taking the Captain's Yacht. It appears the Horizon has separated and we need to figure out how to help two ships at the same time."

"It will be waiting for us at the Firebird's launching bay, Commander," the Caitian assured him as she sent orders through the tactical station and then stood up besides him.

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"Make that four, Commander," Livingstone corrected him. "With the saucer and stardrive sections, there is the Polaris down on the planet and the bridge module on it's way to intercept the alien battleship. If I may suggest, that last part of the Horizon is the one you should go out to help. The Polaris's situation is unknown but closer to the other two and where we ourselves are already heading; however, the command section of the Horizon is all alone against a vastly superior, potentially hostile force it wants to try and reason with. Since it can only go to warp 6 and our yacht is considerably faster, you could arrive at just about the same time as Captain Kheren with a second small, non-threatening ship... yet able to offer support if things go wrong."

"If that be the case, I beleive my services could be of use," Counselor Bijoû chimmed in as she also stood beside the first officer now near her. "Counselor Lyrya is most certainly with Captain Kheren if they are en route for a diplomatic mission, but I think I could help her, and us, analyze and respond faster to whatever problem we may face with this unknown species."

Syntron looked around to all of the surrounding bridge officers

"Prepare all offensive and defensive procedures and protocols. We will arriving into a very tenuous situation... at best. Regardless of whatever we find, initiate no acts of provocation without a direct order from me."

Focusing back on his helm officer specifically, the order was given.

"Engage QSD, Mister Traynor."

The Phoenix' interstellar meta-propulsion system powered up as the awesome energy of the electro-plasma poured through the freshly installed benamite crystal in the matter-antimatter reaction chamber.

At the front of the Phoenix' main deflector, the tunneling vortex opened the quantum field and the Phoenix leaped through the barrier and into the quantum slipstream. Subsequently, as per design, the main navigation computer borrowed memory from the main ship's computer and, with the added nanite processing power, enabled the constant adjustment of the phase variance required to keep the slipstream open.

As the phoenix traveled through the slipstream, Rogers left main engineering and arrived on the bridge, relieving Hudson to return to main engineering and assist Ensign Andrews there. As he took his station seat, the Phoenix dropped out of QSD, the main screen coalescing into the regular starscape familiar to normal space; At least normal within the confines of this proto-universe. Having a quick look over his master systems display David swiveled his seat to face the captains station and reported the successful jump.

"Slipstream traverse accomplished, Captain. Full impulse available. Warp drive will be available in one point seven five minutes. Full power available to weapons and shields."

"We arrived at the periphery of the Eden star system," confirmed Livingstone from his scanners readout.

"Maximum warp will bring us between the orbits of Eden III and IV near the Horizon stardrive in twenty-three seconds," helmsman Traynor added.

Standing up from his first officer chair, Commander Riker tapped a communications panel.

"All away team members, it is time. Meet at the Captain's Yacht geared and ready to go in five minutes."

Nodding to the away team members still on the bridge, Riker walked towards the turbolift door and headed towards the meeting area.

The Phoenix was as capable as Rogers and his team could make it. Now he needed to find a way to augment her formidable assets, while also getting a team for commander Riker's away mission. Tapping his combadge, David called on his assistant once again.

"Mister Andrews; report to Commander Riker with your beta team members for an away mission. Rogers out."

The captain acknowledged the information as he scanned across the images on the main viewscreen. Everything looked deceptively calm, but they all knew better than to allow such appearances to deceive them.

"Raise shields... maintain Yellow alert," Syntron ordered as he then scanned around at his bridge officers.

Engaging communications to his first officer preparing to launch the Captain's Yacht far below in the main shuttle bay on deck 21, the captain spoke in his trademark calm but decisive manner.

"Yacht bay, this is the bridge; you are cleared to launch the Firebird once your team is loaded and prepared for departure, Commander Riker. Also, be ready to implement our scattered light Morse code means of communication should the Zetarians still be a threat in this region as well."

"A wise recommendation, Captain," the X'Ell chief of science chimmed in. "If the Firebird joins with the Horizon module and apply this safe mode of transmission from the start, these Draxx should understand that, not only are we no threat to them, but that we are actually quite aware of the real threat. That should actually help significantly in establishing a diplomatic solution."

Hearing it all, Riker tapped his combadge.

"Roger that, Sir. We are finishing our final gear checks and will debark shortly."
Glancing around at the away team Riker did one last status check on his phaser pistol and then holstered it before addressing the team.

"We all know how important this mission is. I for one want to see this entire thing behind us, and the only way that happens is if everyone comes home safely. Do any final checks and make sure we are ready to go. We debark in five minutes."

Sean Andrews looked over the board in front of him and satisfied himself as to the yacht's flight status. The five thousand, two hundred twenty millicochrane warp engine along with the pair of seven hundred and fifty millicochrane impulse drives were fully powered and ready. The four reaction control thrusters were available for maneuvering as well, at full capability. Bringing up the offensive statistics, Sean checked the five type five phaser strips, the pulse emitter and the micro-torpedo launcher, then checked the shielding and forward deflector array. Satisfied, Sean looked forward and addressed commander Riker.

"Warp and impulse systems all in the green, Sir. Full power available to shields and weapons."

"I will prrrepare a tactical plan of harrassing hit and rrun attacks to coverr the Horizon module's escape in case things turrrn sourr, " Mrrriin M'ata announced as she moved to the tactical station inside the sleek cockpit. "Since we arre much fasterr and manoeuvrerrable, that should ensurre ourr best chances forr all of us to escape alive if diplomacy fails."

"All data we have regarding our encounter with the Zetarrians, and the USS Nuntio's logs, are in a recorded transmission ready to be shared with them," said Lieutenant Kalynda Hunter as she slid her slim Andorian frame behind the sensors and communications console while her blue-hued fingers finished tapping on the controls. "That should help Captain Kheren convince them of our intentions."

"Got it. Good thinking, Lieutenant."

As Riker looked around at the away team he conducted a quick head count. Before he could finish the door opened with a woosh and Doctor Gray walked in flanked by Ensign Tolo and the last of the security detachment.

Riker, looking at Doctor Gray, pointed to the medical supplies laid out and then looked up at Tolo who was carrying a repair kit.

"Tolo? I was unaware you were coming on the mission."

Smiling Tolo pointed towards the Doctor and the two engineering team members.

"Their idea, Sir. I am immune to being infected by these beings, I guess they don't like Bolian physiology very much... toxic blood and all."

Chiming in Doctor Gray smiled, without turning away from them medical gear he was gathering.

"You probably did not check your communications. You always forget to check for medical officer recommendations."

Pulling the PADD back out of his front vest pocket Riker thumbed through the messages, sure enough there was a medical order recommending Ensign Tolo for this mission.

"Well alright then, that appears to be everyone. Take a seat and let's get this done."

Riker then turned and headed back to the cargo bay, sitting down on top of cargo containers and glanced around the cargo bay area. Most of the away team was sitting or leaning on container boxes or makeshift chairs, the current compliment was larger than a Captain's Yacht would normally carry.

Tapping his combadge, he spoke directly to his commanding officer back on the bridge.

"Captain, the away team is ready. Requesting final clearance to disembark."

"Proceed Commander Riker. Stay alert and adaptive to whatever transpires out there."

Receiving the clearance, Riker poked his head into the pilot's section.

"Take us out. "

The Yacht detached from the underside of the Phoenix and engaged its engines as it turned on a course for the rendez-vous point between the Horizon's bridge module and the Draxx battleship.

Feeling the jostle, Commander Riker knew the ship had detached.

"Phoenix Bridge; the Yacht is away, good luck."

Looking around the room, he nodded to the away team.

"Good luck to all of us."

* * *

On the main viewer of Lotus Fleet's prime explorer vessel, the sleek form of the Firebird moved from under the ovoid saucer section, turned in a beautiful arc before it and then shot out in a flash of warpspeed.

"Firebird's departure confirmed," Jonathan Livingstone said, reading it from his sensor panel. "At their higher maximum warp velocity, they will intercept the Horizon command module at about the same time it will be in sensor range of the Draxx battleship. Whether they succeed or not in convincing them of our peaceful intentions, we will be in position one hour fifty-three minutes before the warship enters the Eden star system if present speed maintained."

The tone of the X'Ell was even and factual; yet, the rising of his feathered mane, the rapid blinking of his brain implants and of his huge golden eyes spoke how much he was emotionally invested in Captain Kheren's effort to resolve all this peacefully... and the ability of Commander Riker and his crew to achieve just that. Millions of years of pacifism made him deeply sensitive to the potential violent conflict ahead and he was making tremendous effort himself not to show how this was affecting him.

"We will be in position in mere minutes," assured helmsman Trenor to his captain. "Captain, do we aim for the saucer section and the protection or evacuation of the civilians behind Eden III, orbit Eden IV to try and assist the Polaris down there or take a defensive position with the stardrive section between the two planets?"

The Captain's posture was upright in the center seat as his gaze drifted from the main viewscreen to the helmsman. Despite being Vulcan, the concern on the bridge was quite palpable. He therefore spoke in his usual calm and direct manner.

"Our first duty, Lieutenant Traynor, is to ensure the protection of *any* civilians located behind Eden III or any other locale in this region." After a brief pause, he added; "Adjust our course to bring us into position in the least provocative yet most efficient route."

The captain then turned his attention to his CSO.

"Lieutenant Livingstone; ensure that all evacuation protocols are in place and that we have triage stations on standby in case of incoming casualties."

"Acknowledged," the X'Ell responded, sending the required information to Operation so that it could coordinate the whole process through Medical and Security.

As he did so through the direct connection of his brain implants with the computer interface, he kept his huge eyes towards his commanding officer.

"Captain; three thousand refugees will overload our life support systems and cramp us severely. If we take them all in, we will have to return to Starbase Lotus with them as soon as possible. Being in a possible combat zone would be hazardous in such cramped conditions and would not allow us to compensate with even a temporary drain to other systems. "

"However, it would free the saucer section of the flagship to rejoin with the stardrive or assist it in any such potential conflict," added Duncan Argyle, standing in for Chief M'ata.

"Tactical considerations are irrelevant if it leads to loss of life," Livingstone retorted.

"Life support considerations are moot if everyone is dead," the Liberated Borg shot back to him with a startling emotionlessness in stark contrast with the highly emotional voice of the Avian science chief.

Their dispute was interrupted by the sudden emergence of quantum travel with the brutal appearance of Eden III on the screen and the announcement of helmsman Traynor.

"Arriving at Eden star system, Captain. Ready to engage full impulse towards the third planet."

"The Horizon is hailing us, Sir," Counselor Kimberly Meyers reported, now filling for her chief the medical command chair where all communications were handled.

Captain Syntron addressed the helm officer first.

"Delay engaging full impulse, Lieutenant, until we communicate with the Horizon."

The captain then signaled to Counselor Meyers.

"Open communications with the Flagship on the main viewscreen, counselor."

While waiting for communications to be established, the captain nodded to his concerned CSO.

"If necessary, this vessel has the capacity to transport nine thousand passengers in an emergency situation Lieutenant. The Horizon could carry up to thirty thousand passengers itself. Regardless of how this situation unfolds, we will manage to accommodate any and all refugees in need of rescue and transport."

"In standard condition, affirmative, Sir," Jonathan agreed before pointing out what his internal sensors were reporting; "but the numerous Zetarrians we have trapped in our shuttle bay are constantly testing and fighting against the forcefield we have put in place to contain them in the shuttle. The drain on our systems is noticeable. If we were to exert this ship in combat conditions with those thousands of civilians aboard, either life support could falter or our tactical systems, or the forcefield imprisoning them... or all of those options... just long enough for people to get hurt, or the ship being damaged... or allowing the Zetarrians to escape. And if that occurs, the probability of trapping them again as we did are dangerously low... and of them taking over the Phoenix unwarrantedly high, Captain."

The captain nodded subtly in affirmation to the CSO's concern as he turned his attention to the officer manning the engineering post who was in earshot of their conversation.

"Convey to our chief engineer that I am counting on his expertise to ensure that an appropriate amount of countermeasures and back-up systems are implemented to prevent such an occurrence from transpiring with our captive Zetarians."

"Acknowledged, Sir; sending the relevant data and estimates to his main console."

"You make excellent points, Lieutenant Livingstone. Fortunately, the nanite supplementation we implemented during our last mission has increased our systems efficiency significantly and is designed to amplify their effectiveness as demands on them become greater. Nevertheless, keep closely monitoring our systems status while our chief operations officer is aboard the Firebird."

"Aye, Captain."

Receiving the bridge message David turned to the left to double check the read out on the shuttle and her ... passengers. The level ten forcefield would fluctuate slightly but held the Zetarian's within their small prison ship. Thinking to himself, he turned to his computer console and began analyzing various protocols to ensure containment or, if that should start to fail for some unforeseen reason, perhaps destruction.

The next three or so minutes were spent discarding scenario's and transfer protocols until a suitable containment idea slipped into his mind. David turned to the main computer to run a simulation on it, giving the Zetarian physiological properties and their means of attack and ingress, and the particulars of the force field dynamics that currently entrapped them on the shuttle. Due to the nanite augmentation of the Phoenix' computer core's only three minute's were needed to run fifty simulation's and retrieve a satisfactory method of control. In fact, it seemed that this newly thought of method could release the forcefields and save power for the ship. Turning from his station to the aft of Captain Syntron, David put forth his idea and subsequent findings.

Captain, I have an idea that may solve the problem of our captive's, ... for the time being."

"Present your proposition, Commander Rogers" the Vulcan responded.

"Simply put, we turn the shuttle into a Faraday Cage, Sir. The hull, as you know, is composed of an outer layer of an ablative ceramic fabric chemically bonded onto a substrate of Tritanium foil, with molybdenum-jacketed waveguide conduits embedded within. Using the Meissner effect to expunge the magnetic field from a superconductor and supercooling the foil in the hull, we introduce an electrostatic charge onto the shuttle hull and tune it to the electromagnetic spectrum. Thus we have the Faraday cage for that spectrum. Electromagnetic forces inside cannot get out, and vice versa. Only thing is, Sir... we would have to explosively jettison the shuttle the moment the cage attenuated. It cannot sustain its charge sitting in the shuttle bay."

"We could lift the shuttle inside a vacuum created within a forcefield to isolate this Faraday cage," offered Livingstone. This containment of yours would require much less power than what we use now, as the forcefield would just maintain a vacuum field instead of caging them. Using the shuttlecraft's own warp core, it could all be made independent of our own power source, at least for a while... until we find a more permanent solution to safely release the Zetarians; like sending the shuttle on autopilot back to their prison planet."

Rogers contemplated the science officer's idea for a second or two before responding. The shuttle's power plant was more than capable of sustaining the level ten force field. The vacuum would have to be established from the shuttle's skin out using the field to set it. David began setting up a command line for the shuttle computer and informed the bridge accordingly as he worked.

"Excellent idea Lieutenant. I should have thought of that! Captain, I will need to order the shuttle computer to run this internally. That means a fast, compressed communication with it however. Dropping ships containment and sending in the commands to the shuttle, then requiring the force field and subsequent set-up of the vacuum can be accomplished in ..."

Turning to his panel display David to ascertain the time graph of the Phoenix' nanite augmented computer systems and the newly engineered communication's speeds.

" ... point one four seconds. I am programming the outside collapse of the Phoenix generated force field to take the encapsulated atmosphere in toward the shuttle as it shrinks, forcing the shuttle pressure up to aid in containment while the shuttle generated field establishes and pushes the entrapped air out again."

So finishing, David tuened his attention back to finishing the command order to the shuttle. When the field collapsed, the order would reach the shuttle computer and actuate, but that small window of communication allowed the entrapped Zetarian's an opportunity to follow the comm back out. He knew, and knew that the science officer and captain also realized, that perhaps one or two of the ensconced Zetarian's could conceivably be near enough to the transmission to escape if they were fast enough. Extremely, blazingly fast enough. One point four seconds was not a lot of time in relative terms, but to the electromagnetic realm, it was somewhat open for debate.

"Proceed," acknowledged the captain. "We will also need to devise a series of contingency plans... should the outcomes of our attempts to assist and intervene bring further complications... as is often the case."

"There is one we have yet to implement, Captain; we still have not tried to talk to them."

"The protocols for such an exchange were already established within the Auxiliary Briefing room on deck 2," the captain confirmed with the science chief. "However, these protocols did not include the scenario of beings held in confinement on a shuttle enveloped by a force field nineteen decks below."

Looking into the large golden eyes of the avian officer, the Vulcan could sense the seriousness of the CSO's remark and attempted to offer him a more detailed response to his assertion.

"Lieutenant Livingstone, while overseeing the science department and also assisting in operations at the moment... you have perhaps conveyed that it is within your capacity to serve or have us serve as a diplomat and a technician to bring about the potential for a peaceful resolution with these remaining Zetarians. I commend your assiduousness. However, this will have to wait until we resolve these immediate issues with the colonist and other factions were are currently facing. We cannot jeopardize this ship or this crew again to the dangers that these beings present while also engaging in some rather precarious proceedings with the Draxx."

As Syntron leaned back slowly into his chair, he noted to Jonathan.

"Meanwhile, Lieutenant, in addition to attending to the priorities of your duties on the bridge, you are free to contemplate the means by which such an exchange could safely and securely occur while we are en route back to our own region of space."

"Understood, Sir."

If the X'Ell was disappointed, he buried his feelings under the discipline of the service. After all, the captain was primarily concerned with the safety of the civilians and of his crew. This was his primary duty. The Chief of Science's own responsibility was to help him achieve just that. Although he cogitated on the first contact protocols with the dangerous Zetarrians, he concetrated his work on the orders given.

Everyone's attention was now on the main viewer as they could see a cramped version of the flagship's bridge appear with, in the command chair, a black-skinned, white-haired vulcanoid woman most of them already knew as the famous science chief of the Horizon, Commander Snowfire Ke'Leysa. Syntron most of all knew her well; together, they had devised the taming of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly that had saved the entire universe from being turned to ashes. And she too knew him well, as her respectful nod and small smile on her elfin face indicated plainly.

"Captain Syntron; we are relieved to see you come to us in these difficult moments."

"The honor is indeed mine, Commander" the Vulcan acknowledged to his science counterpart. "We arrived as soon as we resolved our own circumstantial and technical conundrums."

In his typical Vulcan manner, Syntron cut right to the chase.

"We were about to proceed on a rescue mission of the civilian colonists in proximity of Eden III when your hail arrived. How can we be of assistance?"

"We have just completed a quick but complete survey of the planet and it appears to be perfectly suitable for humanoid life... and this one devoid of any sign of sentient lifeforms," the Illythirii woman reported. "We could beam down our civilians for hiding and protection on the planet itself, with suitable portable defenses, engineering and medical resources and personnel. If you could provide a sizeable contingent of security people, this would ensure their safety and we could offer tactical cover to better face the possible incoming attack. With you as tactical back up to the stardrive section and evacuation option for us, we might just be able to prevail if things come to worse."

Syntron pulled out his Command PADD as Commander Snowfire spoke and began accessing current ship data and personnel on the Phoenix. By the time she had finished speaking, the captain was ready with a response.

"I have thirty-five security officers that I could provide for this mission. I will have them bring a series of portable emitters to activate high level force-fields, should any Zetarians enter into that region.... in addition to other requisite security and environmental-related equipment."

Looking back up at the main viewscreen, the captain of the Phoenix continued to address the Illythirii woman in his well-known emotionless tone despite the circumstances.

"According to my calculations, it will take twenty-two point five minutes until all personnel and equipment are ready for transport. Meanwhile, we can prepare our offensive and defensive contingency plans... should our attempts at a diplomatic solution fail. We will not allow harm to come to your crew nor the colonists, Commander."

"Thank you, Captain Syntron. The disembark operation of the colonists will commence momentarily. They are more than eager to get planetside and ascertain for themselves if they indeed found the paradise they were hoping for. Your security teams will be invaluable in ensuring their safety for the short term. For sure, they'll be safer down there than up here with us if that warship comes in with hostile intent... again, for the short term. I'm not sure how the Draxx will react if they learn that they are so near their forbidden planet."

For a moment, the black-skinned vulcanoid woman frowned before she spoke again.

"I don't know if you are aware of this, Captain, but their spiritual leader and planetary governor, Federation representative Sufra, is missing in action on Eden IV. She attempted to force the issue in claiming that planet for her people by stealing shuttles, but then she was caught in the negative energy shield of the planet."

She detailed the events that occurred, including the coming of the Draxx and the confrontation with them, up to the point where they too sacrificed themselves trying to save the misguided woman from going down.

"One of our pilots tried to save her in a workbee but fell with her; it is possible, knowing Mister Moore's skills, that he might have managed to softland their locked crafts. The Draxx destroyer may have survived as well. That's why the Polaris went down after them... but with that negative energy barrier between them and us, we have no clue nor any mean to scan or communicate to learn if they themselves survived going through it. We now have had no news for the last hour."

"On our previous mission" the Vulcan captain disclosed, "we came upon a wayward asteroid later known as Sarabande that also prevented us from initially scanning, communicating or safely transporting down to its surface. From this experience, we can prepare and launch a similar exploratory probe that we can customize directly to navigate into their projected location on Eden IV. It could be equipped with transponders, a homing beacon and transport enhancers. This could be ready and launched before this warship arrives. This way we can initiate some options for ourselves and any survivors on the planet's surface; while we are... preoccupied with these potential adversaries."

But the Illythirii woman shook her white mane.

"I've read your mission report, Captain; this is altogether different. On Sarabande, it was an interfering field powered by a power plant; here, it is a planetary scale negative energy field. Your probe will simply cease to function the instant it enters it. Given enough entry speed, it could go through it by sheer momentum... and with a predetermined correct trajectory, even soft land without power... like we beleive those stranded down there did. But then, it will be utterly dead and useless, unable to function at all... unless someone down there would be able to power it back up. But that would be pointless; no form of energy, be it natural or artificial, can cross that barrier. No transmitter, transponder, beacon or signal enhancer will go through. If any could, all the Zetarrians would have escaped this prison long ago."

"In that case, you may need a really long rope to send down to the surface and hoist their stranded ships up out," uttered operation officer Garvex P'Trell a little louder than he intended, especially with Vulcan ears in such close proximity.

Syntron gazed over at the Andorian manning the operations post.

"Is that your best professional recommendation, Lieutenant?" the captain quipped before turning his attention back the the Illythirii woman commanding the Horizon stardrive.

Garvex turned a deeper hue of blue as he tried to focus back on his task at hand.

"Given the described circumstances, what did you have in mind, Commander?" the captain inquired.

Snowfire blinked a moment.

"Honestly, Captain... I'm at a loss. Even neurogenic energies are nullified when I try telepathic contact through the barrier. Without information, any action could be, at best, useless, at worst create even dire a situation from one we know nothing about. But someone should be ready to help the castaways if they ever find a way to escape that prison planet... or to deal with any Zetarrian that would manage to do so; including the possibility of our own people being abducted for that very purpose."

"That is how they escaped the last time," confirmed Lieutenant Livingstone. "I reviewed the Nuntio's logs; they came to this system and they were caught in the null-field surrounding this world when they looked for a place to repair after going through the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. They managed to soft land in one of the planet's oceans, heal their weakened people and then used energy from the tides with a makeshift tidal turbine to repower. With one full burst from all their thrusters, they achieved escape velocity before the field drained them again... or kill them all. Once back in space, solar power was used to once more repower them. But, by that time, a large group of Zetarrians had already possessed many crewmembers and passengers; in effect, using their bodies and original brainwaves as insulation against the field."

"This means anyone coming from that planet might very well be compromised," concluded tactical officer Mrriish from Ke'Leysa's bridge crew.

Leaning back in the center seat once again, a contemplative expression was cast like a veil across the stoic expression of the Vulcan commanding officer.

"Given these circumstances, I recommend that we first concentrate on the safety of these colonists. The Horizon teams on the surface of Eden IV are most likely working diligently on resolving their own situation. It may be their ingenuity that leads to a viable resolution. In addition, we do not want to put others in the same precarious predicament and risk without a means of resolution."

Snowfire looked at him with a stern expression on her dark face.

"I fear, Captain that, if anything comes up from that planet, and we have no way of knowing who or how, we might have no choice but to destroy them."

"Or possibly contain them until further analysis has been conducted and verified," the Vulcan commanding officer added. "We have devised such an effective method; in fact we currently hold several Zetarians confined on board the Phoenix as we speak, and preparing a safe way to deliver them back to their prison. But as of yet, there are no signs of escape indicated."

At that moment, a signal arrived from a transporter console on deck 21 of the USS Phoenix.

"Captain, the security team for the away mission are all here in Emergency Transporter Rooms 1 and 4. They appear anxious to begin their mission. I am just awaiting your confirmation to begin transporting them" chief petty officer Sega announced in her gruff Tellarite voice.

"Acknowledged," the Captain responded. "Have them standby for further orders."

* * *

"Captain; we are entering sensor range with the Draxx battleship."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Irksos," said the dark blue Andorian in the center seat. "Let us try this by the book. Mister Snow; keep us at long range distance and take a parallel course with them, same speed and axis. We do not want to look provocative in any way."

"Coming about, 180 mark 45, warp 9," acknowledged the Inuit Helmsman. "following Starfleet's Rules of Engagement as ordered, Sir."

"Lieutenant Lyrya; transmit greetings to the Draxx with their own photonic communication protocol, standard procedure."

"Aye, Captain," the Aenar counselor answered as her white delicate fingers ran over the comm panel of her medical command chair at his left.

"Lieutenant Tyvya, keep our tactical systems down but monitor theirs closely. If they show any sign of hostility, do not return fire but keep shields at full power and assist the helm in keeping us out of weapons range."

"Aye, Captain," the Andorian giantess responded. "My sensors show that they have at least six times the offensive capabilities of the cruiser we encountered at Eden. If they choose to be hostile, we will not stand a chance in even a brief fire exchange."

Kheren turned to the seat next to him on his right hand, addressing the Romulan now occupying it. Uncounciously, he fell into his peculiar habit of speaking with antique Terran seafaring references.

"Mister Solius; any recommendation as to how to stay afloat in case of a broadside from this Man O' War?"

The Romulan engineer smiled.

"As a matter of fact, Captain, I've been looking at their technology and I may just have something."

* * *

Between the orbits of the the third and fourth inner planets of the Eden star system, the imposing stardrive section of Lotus Fleet's flagship waited. But the outward calm of the massive vessel was in sharp contrast with the frenzy of activity shaking the entire lenght of the ship as red lights flashed over every door and on every control panel.

Within the spartan yet fully equiped battle bridge, Commander Joey Day Sisko sat in the command chair not looking at anyone, deeply concentrating on what was about to come next while he just felt the readiness agitating all around him. In his mind, there was no doubt the Horizon, even deprived of her saucer and even her bridge and escort ship, was more than adequate to face any one enemy vessel. What was worrying was not as much the outcome of such a confrontation but the cost of it.

Despite all civilians and most of the crew hiding behind Eden III in the huge saucer section, there were still a thousand lives at stake on this stardrive section; and there were those aboard the incoming starship as well. Even if his first priority was to those hidden civilians and then to this crew ready and willing to sacrifice themselves to the last person in order to protect them, the loss of life from even a hostile party was not something to look forward to.

But he knew his duty and was resolute to uphold it.

"Lieutenant Aron'Son; if Captain Kheren is... unable to secure a peaceful agreement with those Draxx... how do you recommend we deal with them if they come in guns blazing?"

The Jem'Hadar turned in his seat to face the command dais.

"Commander, based on the data retrieved from the Polaris when they encountered their cruiser, I estimate that these aliens prefer swarm attacks and what Humans call "wolf pack tactics." They come in number at least from two sides, alternating attack to draw fire on one side while the other attack from an unprotected angle before retreating to allow the other group the same opportunity when they draw attention on themselves. It is a wearing down maneuver suitable for small ships against a much larger one."

"If I recall my Bajoran History, Jem'hadar bug ships were infamous for that," Sisko said.

"And deadly effective at that," Aron'Son acknowledged with no false humility.

"What is the counter?"

"Strong defensive posture, maximum mobility and concentrated fire to reduce their number of one specific side until the tactic is no longer viable or at least require them to reposition, giving time to force them on the defensive. Normally it would be better to use the opportunity to withdraw..."

"But not here," Sisko acknowledged in turn. "Although since the castaways down on the planet are in effect insulated by the very energy field preventing us to retrieve them, we can maneuver as we wish to face those waves of attackers. But there is the problem of the colonists on the other planet... How many ships do you estimate the opponent will bring?"

"Based on what was observed of their multi-hulled cruiser and calculating the mass of the incoming battleship, and assuming the same capability... no less than half a dozen cruiser class but more probably up to three dozen escort class."

Sisko nodded gravely.

"Well this vessel is boasting to be a mobile space station; let's see how good this boast is in repelling an entire attack force. Prepare us for a massive assault... and communicate our battle plans to the saucer section. If they split their forces to threaten us both, that could ease the pressure on each one of us but endanger the civilians planetside. They do not have a planetary protective field out there. We will have to do every effort to draw all, or at least most of their fire."

"So much fun," Sheeneea said from the helm to no one in particular, her antennae already lowering in anticipation of the upcoming space battle.

* * *

The exceptionally fast personal shuttle of the Phoenix flew towards the estimated rendez-vous point of the much slower bridge module of the Horizon with the incoming alien warship. At estimated velocities and vectors, the onboard computer confirmed that they would all meet about a light year out of the Eden star system where the rest of the flagship was getting ready to evacuate or defend those trapped on the prison planet of the Zetarrians. but before their anticipated arrival, Mriin M'ata's tactical scanner beeped to her.

"Commanderr; I have the trransponder of the Horrizon at extrreme sensorr rrange. We'rre closing on them."

"Good; as soon as we get within range, I want to know as much as possible."

"We should get the Draxx warship's contact pretty soon as well," added kalynda Hunter looking intently at her own sensors. "With the nanite enhancement of our systems, we will detect them before they detect us."

"As with the brridge module of Captain Kherren," agreed the Caitian woman. "And frrom theirr own position, they must have alrready rreached long rrange contact with the warrship; they arre following Starfleet's standarrrd Rrules of engagement rregarding non-aggressive contact with anotheerr vessel in deep space."

"Coming about at the same speed out of weapon's range but within sensor contact on a parallel course and opening communications," specified their pilot.

"I detect no subspace transmission," commented Doctor Gray manning the communication station.

"I hope that is a good sign Doc." Riker quipped.

"They must be using photonic emissions as you did between the Nuntio and the Phoenix, Commander," guessed the Andorian science officer. If they travel at exactly the same warp velocity and at fixed positions near enough to one another, they can perceive emissions travelling at the speed of light since they share the same warped space; whereas we can not since our position, distance and especially velocity are all out of synch with theirs."

"They must already know about the Zetarrians if they do as you suggest," the EMH pointed out; and those Draxx as well."

"We're about to get in range of their sensors if they are anything close to ours," Hunter warned her commanding officer.

"Steady" Riker said attempting to calm the crew. "Maintain course and speed. We are here to help, the last thing we need to look too threatening"

As the Firebird maintained course and speed the computer beeped a few low tones, signaling they were within sensor range.

"Lieutenant Hunter, give me a picture. What are we looking at?" Riker asked

Over the starfield on the cockpit canopy was surimposed a computer generated 3d image reconstructed from all the data collected by their scanners; although all details were not clear yet, it looked basically like a flying candelabra from whatever end you were looking at; aft stretched at least a dozen nacelles from an elongated hull that stretched to a multipronged bow made up seemingly of six jagged protrusions. The alien vessel looked sleek yet massive, graceful yet powerful; in short, it looked deadly.

"Over six hundred meters long and sixty-six meters in diameter; mass however is abnormally high even for a ship this size... and I read barely over two-hundred lifeforms aboard, with mammalian profiles," the Andorian scientist reported as they looked at the ominous shape they were approaching. "Power levels register as singularity-based and working with gravitic energies to produce a warp field... from multiple power sources and at least as high as those from the Horizon, Their scanners have yet to detect us since I receive no echo signal from ours betraying it."

"I rread overr six dozen enerrgy weapons porrts... but registerring morre like ourr own trractorr beam array... and at least two dozen torrpido tubes... forr grravimetrric torrpidoes," added the security chief from her own tactical scanners. "The shield emitters are numerous enough to provide about half a dozen shield layers over the entire armored ship. Commanderr, this morre than a prredatorr... this is a monsterr that could singlehandedly destrroy even a Borrg Cube."

Tapping a comms panel, Riker addressed the crew in the cargo area.

"Away team this is Commander Riker. All crews be on full alert, we are approaching our target and may be boarding sooner than later."

The pointy ears of the felinoid woman at tactical perked up.

"Boarrding action, Sirr? Even if we would all go, we wouldn't make even five perrcent of theirr numberr... and we would be facing a completely unknown species on theirr home turrf... of which we also know nothing about."

She was obviously waiting for an explanation as to how and why such a rash action should be even considered. As chief of security, the safety of everyone was her responsibility, a responsibility that only the Commander's orders could relieve her from; and that was only legally, not emotionally.

But she was a Starfleet officer; she would follow orders and die for her fellow officers if need be. And she was Caitian; the prospect of a hunt was already making her blood boil with anticipation.

The question caught Commander Riker off guard, perhaps he and the Captain did not do a good enough job explaining to the crew exactly what might be necessary.

"We are going to try and save fellow officers and crew from their own ship. Did you expect us to be able to do that from here? I mean really..."

Riker gestured to the security teams and specialist crews in the cargo bay, before continuing

"Why do you think we brought a boarding party?"

A beep on her panel answered for her before she reported.

"Commanderr; we'rre being hailed by the Horrizon's brridge module. It's Captain Kherren, Sirr."

"Put it through."

As the comm panel beeped in acceptance, Riker spoke.

"This is Commander Joshua Riker aboard the Firebird, from the USS Phoenix. We are responding to a distress call and are here to offer any assistance needed; please advise."

"Glad to have you with us, Commander," answered the deep soft voice of the Andorian captain of the flagship. "if you received our call and the data attached to it, you are no doubt aware of the current situation. Please come about in a parallel course and speed with us on our port side. We may use standard comm channels between us but do not, I repeat, do not do so with the Draxx, nor aim active scanners at them. It will be interpreted as a hostile action. Once you are in position, we will open communication with them and include you as well so that you may also participate. Your input might prove invaluable in dealing with an aggressive but still sensible spacefaring culture adamant about keeping a potentially dangerous race confined... to the point of readily sacrificing anything and anyone, including themselves, to do so. We must convince them of our peaceful intentions, our non interference policy and the need to retrieve our people trapped down on their prison planet, and possibly theirs also, without freeing the Zetarrians in the process. If this becomes violent, we are to fall back and let the Horizon, hopefully now assisted by the Phoenix, handle it. Acknowledge and proceed; any and all suggestions are welcome... but we do not have much time before they reach the Eden system."

"Acknowledged Captain, we received your brief but the situation sounds worse than feared. We will pull along side as advised, Riker out."

Nodding in acknowledgement, Riker watched as the Firebird slowed and rolled slightly to pull alongside the Horizon's section on the Port side. As the Firebird settled on its new course Commander Riker tapped the comms panel and reopened communication.

"We arre at the agrreed position, Sirr," Mrriin M'ata confirmed. "The Horizon module is now transmitting through phtonic signals much like what we devized back when we wre on the Nuntio."

"Great minds think alike," Kalynda hunter commented, even if her rigid Andorian face could not convey the humor she was trying to impart.

But then, they were part of the communication with the Draxx. The light signals were converted into audiovisual signals by the computer and the universal translator matrix just like their voices usually were and just as swiftly. The computer-generated image of the alien starship was replaced by that of Captain Kheren's face as he spoke.

"Draxx vessel; this is Captain Kheren of the USS Horizon, representing the United Federation of Planets. Alongside our ship is also one of our ships, under the command of Commander Joshua Riker. We come from another universe, beyond the cosmic anomaly a light year rimward of the star system you are currently approaching. We come in peace. We come in the hope of establishing a new home for some of our people, and peaceful and prosperous relations with any other people here."

Everyone waited for the answer. It came barely a few seconds later. But before lights started blinking back at them, something else happened.

As in answer to the hail, the immense battleship looked as if it was slowly exploding.

As it still flew at high warp towards the nearing Eden star system, seams appeared on its serrated surface. The entire mass of the warship opened like a flower blooming under the still very far but steadily approaching sun; six jagged petals of metal spread outward and barely a minute went by before the entire vessel split into six smaller versions of itself, each one this time the size of a star cruiser.

One of them, the closest to their own position, dropped out of warp. The five others continued at the same high warp velocity towards Eden.

Watching the large ship split before his eyes, Riker tilted his head in slight disbelief.

"What the hell? Anyone have any idea what I just saw?"

The Caitian tactical chief answered him.

"It was described in the Horizon's report. While patrolling the outer edge of the Eden system, the Polaris was attacked by a Draxx cruiser. The Draxx believed it to be the Nuntio they knew from a log buoy was infected by the Zetarrians. This cruiser split into six escort class vessels when Command Oseno's ship tried to escape within one of the outer planets' atmospheres... and then again when confronting the flagship. These six sections are identical to that one cruiser they first encountered. According to the logs, each one of these smaller sections of a single cruiser is a match tactically to the Polaris."

Kalynda's antennae lowered near her white-haired head.

"This means that this one ship before us could become six... and those five cruisers still bound to Eden could form an armada of... thirty destroyers!"

"And being seemingly canine humanoids, I would not be surprised if they would use what Humans call "wolfpack tactics" to best bring down a larger prey... like the Horizon and the Phoenix."

Thinking about the past, Riker could only shake his head.

"The Cardassians used to use tactics like that. It is how they were able to fight the Federation to a stalemate. I would hate to see swarm tactics used by advanced ships."

The voice of Captain Kheren came over the cockpit's speakers.

"Your officers summarized the facts perfectly, Commander. I believe this one ship dropping out of warp is their command section. Our best chance of preventing a bloody battle is to convince those in charge to desist."

"Commanderr Rikerr; the brridge module is drropping out of warrp alongside the Drraxx crruiserr," reported Mrrriin at that very moment.

And as she said so, the computer-generated image floating before their eyes of the alien starship indeed divided again into yet smaller copies of itself.

"Yourr orrderrs, Sirr?"

"Bring us alongside the bridge module."

Gesturing to the two ships on the screen, Riker continued with the same even tone.

"Slowly though. Bring us alongside with a faint roll. I want to look the part of the diplomat while not looking like we are trying to stay together or place distance. Just fly casual"

His helmsman looked askance at him a moment before turning back to his console with a blank look.

"Err... I'll do my best, Sir."

Tapping the communication panel to the cargo area, Commander Riker addressed the rest of the away team.

"This is Commander Riker. We are pulling alongside the bridge module section and the alien ship we believe to also be a command section. Remain on alert, communications will continue."

Looking through the viewer, Riker watched as the Firebird dropped out of warp and listed slowly towards the bridge section and alien command section. Trying to remain calm, and present a positive image for the crew, Riker could not help but blurt out the first words that entered his mouth.

"I've got a bad feeling about this."

This time, everyone in the cockpit shared the pilot's blank stare.

As they positionned themselves, they all heard over the comm system the voice of the flagship commander.

"Draxx vessel; this is Captain Kheren of the United Federation of Planets. We wish you no harm. We know about the Zetarian threat. We are not under their power. Several of our people and possibly of yours as well are trapped down on their prison planet. We require your assistance in retrieving them."

There was a brief silence before the universal translator and the computer-programmed photonic transmitter rendered to their hears a harsh, growling, low voice that spat words in slow, deliberate fashion.

"We are the Draxx. This is Shanarl, Alpha of the sixth Horde of the Blood Star. Zetarians escaped their confinement with the help of a starship identified by us as one using the same type of design, construction materials, power source, energy signature and lifeform readings as both of yours. One of our scoutship's death log reported this before it was destroyed. One of our interceptor cruiser also sent us it's death log confirming your interference at the location of the Zetarian prison."

Now, everyone had the same feeling as the Phoenix' First officer when it paused before finishing.

"You are either under their power or collaborating freely with them. Helping the Zetarians is a felony sentencing you to their own fate. Power down and surrender, and you will be towed to the prison planet and confined there. Resist us and you will be destroyed."

On their viewer, they all saw the Draxx cruiser angling towards them into an intercept course.

The moment the cruiser made it,s move, Kheren sat back in his command chair.

"Keep us out of range of their weapons! Back off! Back off!"

Almost as if he had read his captain's mind, Aguk Snow banked with the surprisingly agile discoid bridge module away from the approaching craft, almost matching like a shadow the movement of the Draxx. The alien ship was obviously faster but the Inuit helmsman of the Horizon's uncanny skill made full use of their own small vessel's superior maneuverability and acceleration to dance away from the other's firing arc, managing to stay out of range... for the moment.

"Belay that, Lieutenant! Keep our shields and weapons down!"

Tyvya's fingers froze over her tactical controls.

"Captain?"

He ignored her, addressing again his pilot.

"Mister Snow; full evasive maneuvers... but keep us in line and closing with the star system as much as you can."

"Err... I'll try my best, Sir."

A blob of greenish energy emerged from several tubes protruding from the front of the Draxx vessel. The three projectiles flew towards them. The bridge module swirved sharply out of their path... as they themselves turned slightly away and were lost in the distant glare of the Eden star.

"What the..."

The Andorian giantess' exclamation echoed the surprise of everyone on board... except Kheren and science officer Irksos.

"Gravimetric torpedoes," answered the black-skinned woman with a grin and a sigh. " They not only use gravity to crush a target, but to propel themselves and aim at their target. At this distance and with our own gravimetric-based shields down, they were confused by the gravity well of the star system and lost track of us... just enough for us to dodge them. Nice move, Captain."

"Got it from Mister Solius' analysis. But they too learn fast," growled Kheren, drawing with his own silvery stare their eyes back to the main viewer.

On the screen, they all saw the cruiser separate into it's six escort class segments, each one more than enough to destroy them and now all of them able to cover all possible angles of escape. Three went at the bridge module while the other three bore down on the Firebird, itself between Kheren's disc-shaped craft and the yellowish distant glow of Eden.

* * *

Syntron then gazed at Snowfire's image on the main viewscreen.

"How would you like to proceed Commander?" he calmly asked.

Before Snowfire could answer, the tactical officers of both ships interrupted her and called for Syntron's attention as well.

"Incoming; five vessels in attack formation closing in on the outer edge of the system! By configuration, all Draxx cruisers like the one the Horizon confronted before!"

Their tactical sensors converted the data on their main viewers as the menacing image of five dagger-like starships in a star formation, pointing their jagged, serrated prow towards them.

"Commander Sisko, you're getting this?"

"Aye, Commander Ke'Leysha, that we do. This is not the giant battleship detected earlier but comes directly from its calculated trajectory."

"Their capital ship must have separated like those cruisers can to send those smaller but still sizeable ships towards us," understood the illythirii. "And we know each of these vessels can further separate into six destroyer-class units. They will be able to come at us from different angles to strike multiple targets."

The Half-Bajoran engineer in the center seat of the flagship's stardrive section sighed.

"Looks like our captain's diplomatic efforts failed..."

"And yet, there is no conclusive evidence of it," objected Snowfire. "From what we know of the Draxx technology, ship design and mentality, there should be six cruisers out there, not five. My guess is one stayed behind; maybe their central command unit... and Captain Kheren may still be trying to negotiate a truce."

"We have to buy him some time... and keep protecting our own," Sisko agreed. "Captain Syntron; you are the highest ranking officer here; command of our forces falls to you. But I have to point out that we should intercept those incoming ships before they get too close... and we have people stranded on the planet that might need our protection and colonists on the other planet Commander Ke'Leysha's saucer section is responsible for. Your ship is the only one free to move and act if we are to protect them all."

With his gaze fixed on the main viewscreen, the captain addressed the helmsman.

"Position the Phoenix at an interception point of the five incoming vessels."

With an inaudible gulp, the helmsman complied by setting course and engaging engines.

"On course, Sir" was all the helmsman said as calmly as possible.

"Lower exterior shielding, and power down all weapons," the captain ordered as the ship moderately traveled toward its destination.

"Sir? Are we surrendering?" the tactical officer filling in for Chief M'ata wondered out loud, fingers poised over the controls a second before he complied.

"Negative; however, we are demonstrating our peaceful intentions with this amicable gesture. Currently, our task force is at a disadvantage with the Draxx. In all probability, Captain Kheren is involved in some level of negotiations with members of their leadership team. We are the other main vessel representing Starfleet in this region. Despite the immense risk involved, we must approach these incoming vessels in a non provocative stance. Otherwise, we could potentially abrogate any progress made by the Horizon leadership".

"Are you ordering the Horizon to do so as well, Captain?" Livingstone asked then. "They are maintaining defensive positions near both planets, shields up and weapons locked on targets."

"And the Draxx are starting to spread out," added Syntron's tactical officer. "Two of them are moving off towards the stardrive section and two others towards the saucer section. The fifth one is on an intercept course with us... energy shield up, weapons armed and locked on... and it's separating, obviously to encircle us."

On the screen, four of the sleek metallic edged daggers spread out from the central one which divided into six smaller parts, like a flower blooming... or a claw extending towards them.

* * *

Redding checked over his weapon as he relaxed on a downed tree, waiting for Oseno and his team to return with Mister Moore and Governor Sufra. Kalaar stood nearby looking irritated, taking quick glances at Redding.

"Your practically fuming, Lieutenant. Just spit it out." the Horizon's first officer, said glancing up at the man.

Kalaar jumped at the chance.

"Sir, I know this might be necessary, but t's placing Lieutenant Moore in severe danger. And we can't even ask him to volunteer for it."

"All very true Kalaar, but he's the only choice we have. For once, his clueless bravado will actually be an asset."

He looked around at the sound of Oseno and Moore coming into the clearing.

"But if it makes you feel any better, I'm not going to enjoy this even a little."

Moore waved and made his way over to the Commander.<

"One Bajoran spiritual leader as ordered, Commander. I always get my.. err.. man, Sir."

Redding grinned in a way that made Moore slightly uneasy.

"I never doubted it. Moore. Are you both Okay?"

Moore' smiled returned.

"No worse for wear, Commander. The Governor should be ok as well, just in some sort of shock I think."

"Her name's Sufra, by the way," Redding said handing him a towel to dry off with. As he took it, Kalaar left in a quite huff.

Moore dried himself off while looking at the Draxx standing a little way, they seemed to be watching him intensely.

"Friends of yours, Commander?"

"Friends of our's Lieutenant. In fact, thanks to them, we have a way off this prison planet. I was just about to signal the Polaris to pick us up."

He held out his communicator.

"Care to do the honors?"

"Would I!"

He grabbed the field communicator from Redding's hand and activated it.

"Lieutenant Moore to Polaris, away team ready for pick up."

"Moore, Robert Roger; rank, Lieutenant; position, helmsman; assignment, USS Horizon... identity confirmed. Locking onto your signal. Confirming parameters for transfer; please keep the channel open."

"Can do. I'm not going anywhere," Moore said with a grin. "I didn't even knew they knew my middle name was Roger."

No one had time to mention that it was plain written on his Starfleet record since the day he had joined the Academy. Obviously, he was just making conversation on a favorite topic, that being himself, while waiting for the obviously high security protocol to complete as described by the ship's computer voice. At that moment, there was a colored lightshow over the treetops that intensified as swirling clouds of flashing lights and crackling discharges suddenly came in their direction.

All the away teams and the Draxx were drenched in the protective liquid the caninoid aliens had sprayed on them all; all except Governor Sufra and Lieutenant Moore... and he was holding the active communicator. Like lightning, the lights of Zetar were suddenly all over him just as the annular confinement beam caught them all.

The night's darkness covered everything in the jungle when all sentient life forms in the vicinity were swept away by the teleportation signal of the Polaris.

As the figures of the away team began to materialize, energy arched out in dazzling patterns of colorful energy, arcing around the transporter room. One bolt struck the transporter operator as he recovered from the shock of the display.

"Captain!" he started to yell out before being struck.

Redding and Oseno struggled to regain their footing. The first officer of the flagship tried to speak but his voice was weak and faltering.

"Computer, override code..."

"Too slow, Human," The chief said calmly activating the transporter controls.

In a valiant but desperate move, Oseno attempted to hurl himself out of the transporter field as it activated, catching him partially out of the effect. The chief made no move to compensate for it.

"Arghhh!!"

Oseno's scream echoed into oblivion. It was unclear if he could have survived such agony.

Lieutenant Hunter's voice came over the com.

"Transporter room, report! did you get them?"

"Yes, Sir, I got them."

The transporter chief smiled, his eyes glowing red as the local energy arched into the comm, headed directly to the bridge.

Hunter's combadge sparked as a stream of colorful light swirled into the room. He was infected first.

Science officer Ji'Lan yelled out.

"NO!"

She jumped for the turbolift, getting struck just as the doors closed.

As the room settled, all the bridge officers looked around at each other calmly. The turbolift doors reopened, admitting Lieutenant Ji'Lan back into the room. She too seemed calm now.

"Command to transporter room 1;" the one occupying Hunter's body said, making himself more comfortable in the captain's chair. "status."

"Yes, Sir," Came the reply. "I transported the humanoid team back to the beam up point, but I'm not picking up their signals now. They may not have survived one of them disrupting of the annular confinement beam."

"Or they disabled their combadges... but they're not important anymore. Bridge out."

He stood up and looked around, a grin on his face.

"Commander, I think you should see this," the one in the Orion woman's body said with an amused look at her station.

"First things first, Lieutenant. Computer; ship wide announcement."

The computer responded ready.

"All sections, standby for an announcement."

This would give them time to secure any critical work they might be doing. Then, he just gave a nod to the glowing balls of energy around him and they jumped into the comm system.

In seconds, most if not all of the crew would be acquired. The rest would be dead or dying from the intense neurogenic surge of the merging. Not all corporeal lifeforms were compatible.

"Excellent. It's just too bad we have such a small crew, I would have liked to take more of our people off this wet hell of a planet."

The possessed Ji'Lan smiled at him in answer to his frown.

"It might be possible, Sir. It seems my host was working on a way to break through the barrier and contact their mother ship with the data pack their lead officer down here sent earlier. It could be ready in the next ten minutes or so."

Hunter's alien red eyes looked astonished as he walked over to her station.

"Are you saying we might be able to transfer more of our people from the planet surface to this starship Horizon directly?"

She grinned in a way her sensuous face never did before.

"ALL of our people; the Horizon is packed with more than enough people to take us ALL!"

The being that was now Shawn Hunter's head swam. The rest of the possessed bridge crew cheered.

He got on the comm.

"Is the engineering master of this vessel joined with us?"

"Aye," answered the Andorian engineer's calm voice, " the engineering team stands ready.*

"Prepare the ship to leave the planet. We already know how; but this time, we are taking *everyone* with us."

For the next long minutes, he then paced around the bridge of the Polaris, looking up at the equally possessed Ji'lan every twenty seconds or so.

"How much longer?" he repeated for the third time.

Ji'lan's face frowned at him, rolled eyes and went back to her work.

"A little longer each time you bother me, 'Captain'... but I am almost done."

She shook her head in mild annoyance.

"But i don't understand why this will work."

The Hunter being ignored her and rechecked the sensors.

"I know your out there, Redding. In these files they say you can't die... Are you planning something? Something we can't see? I know it's not possible... Helm! get us off the surface! there's too much at stake to take chances."

"I said.." Ji'lan repeated, "I don't see how this could work."

Hunter stormed over to her.

"Why? what do you mean?"

"The Draxx communication configuration Redding sent us is just short of technical gibberish, at least to me." She shook her head while she went over it. "It should not work at all."

Hunter thought it over.

"Can it harm the ship in any way? blow out the comm system or something like that?"

She shook her head.

"No, the worst that could happen is it wont work. But, for whatever reason, the communication system IS taking the configuration. We should now be able to breach the barrier... If this works at all."

Hunter paused for a few seconds thinking it over, if this was some sort of trap he could not see it.

"Proceed" he said through gritted teeth.

"Opening hailing frequency; Polaris to the USS Horizon, come in please. This is the USS Polaris on planet Eden, do you read us?"

They waited for long seconds but only silence answered them.

"As I suspected," the possessed Ji'lan finally sighed. "The Horizon must be otherwise engaged and does not receive our transmission. If their passive sensors are not aimed at our exact location on the planetary surface, like if they are elsewhere on the planet's orbit, then they just don't see our light emissions. But I think it's even simpler than that; the barrier is stopping all forms of energy, most of all electromagnetic energy... hence why we could not escape, any better than light can. To make contact, we'll have to reach orbit ourselves... meaning going through the barrier."

"And you're sure we can do this with this vessel?" the Hunter being growled, feeling frustrated by this setback.

"Simple physics; this ship now has stored enough reserve energy from their makeshift tidal wave turbine to repower it's internal systems and fire it's chemical thrusters. It's not much but at least enough to achieve escape velocity. Of course, the barrier will kill all power aboard as soon as we enter it... but our momentum will be just enough to achieve orbit... which will assuredly be detected by their mother ship."

"All energies also means biological energy," the other pointed out. "How will we survive the crossing?"

"The same way these corporeal creatures did... more or less. They initially had energy coverings to retard the draining long enough for them to cross. Their whole ship was depowered but they were through before they suffered much."

"There is not enough energy stored here to even attempt such an energy shield!"

"No... but these living physical bodies will shield our own electromagnetic existence with their own life force within this armored flying shell. Of course, our hosts will die... but then we will need only a few minutes to retake control of those dead bodies and reactivate their nervous system with our own brainwaves... making them essentially *our* bodies... permanently."

"And then," smiled the Hunter being with glowing red eyes, "we will use the auxilliary crafts and crew of the larger ship to ferry the rest of us out... to freedom... and *life*. Even the Opposition will acknowledge this chance at a new, real existence. Good... let's do this."

All grinning and showing red fiery eyes glowing all accross the small bridge, they finished looking at the technical guides and allowed the conditionned reflexes of their hosts to start the launch. With erratic movements but then with a smoother trajectory, the Polaris moved upward towards the upper atmosphere in a roar of powerful thrusters. It reached escape velocity in mere seconds ant then shot up towards the stars.

"Approaching the barrier," the possessed Ji'lan announced. "Breaching in five seconds, four... three... two... one..."

Almost instantly, all lights went out. The dimming roar of the engines was suddenly engulfed by the rarefied air of the upper atmosphere... and every single form on the bridge, and on the entire ship, winked out of existence, leaving but wisps of weakly crackling energy where they had stood a moment before.

Down on Eden IV, everyone in Redding's team, Oseno's and the Draxx survivvors were looking up where the compact shape of the Polaris had ascended the sky, leaving a trail of fire behind it until it had been a small bright moving star before the early night sky. Then, it winked out as a candle flame blown out by a sudden gust of wind.

Redding gathered himself up and did a head count of the landing party. All were accountable and unharmed, with the exception of Moore and Oseno.

Oseno was shaken, but indicated he would be alright.

Immediately, T'Lana placed a device on Moore's forehead and it hummed.

"This should stabilize him until we can get to the Horizon, Commander."

She cast a critical eye at Redding.

"Although now that the Zetarians have taken the Polaris, and presumably its crew, I do not see that as an achievable goal."

Kalar was less diplomatic with his opinion.

"What the hell was that, Commander!"

He practically tackled the larger man as he rushed at him.

"Was THAT your big mysterious plan? Let them on board and shut down the computer?" h

He gritted his teeth and clinched his fists as he spoke.

Oseno, still too weak to stand, ordered him to stand down, but Redding waved him off.

"No, the Lieutenant has a right to be mad. I put all our lives in danger and Moore may not survive this. And as far as he knows, the Polaris and its crew are lost to us and more still, we are now stranded on this planet. Is that about right Mr. Kalar?"

His voice was so stern, his presence so overwhelming, that Kalar reflexively took a step back.

"Ye.. yes.. Sir." Kalar stammered a little, but tried to keep his outrage alive.

Redding grinned at him, like a man meeting an old lost friend.

"Outstanding, that's just what I wanted to hear, " he said, tapping him on the chest to emphasize his sentence.

The ensuing silence among them was broken by the sudden alarm of the Draxx as they lifted their weapons to turn towards some sound none of them had heard... except T'Lana's Vulcan ears.

"Someone's coming... many people..."

Between the trees, dark shapes could be seen approaching. Their obvious physical presence reassured the Draxx leader that they were not the dreaded Zetarians so that he motioned for his people to stand ready but not open fire as they emerged into view; probably because his night vision was superior enough to Humans that he had recognized who those silhouettes were.

Before them all appeared Hunter, Ji'Lan and the entire complement of the USS Polaris.

"Commander Oseno Sir... Commander Redding... that was the most... brutal transport I ever experienced," Hunter said in greetings.

"Suddenly crossing transporter confinement beams and demolecularisation process with the photons and forcefields of an activating holomatrix across an entire starship under automated computer synchronisation does not allow for comfort, that much is certain," Ji'Lan answered from his right. "But hey, it worked!"

"Obviously, Lieutenant," T'Lana stated matter-of-factly. But then again, she always spoke matter-of-factly. "The Zetarians occupied the replacing holograms the moment they started invading your bodies as the internal ship sensors sent the alarm to the transport computer and the shipwide hologrid. As the report from Doctor Gray of the Phoenix showed, they do not differentiate between organic and inorganic bodies that they perceive as physical. Flesh and forcefields are the same to their electromagnetic nature and perceptions."

"It's... it's a ship full of... of holograms that flew out?" the big Kalaar stuttered, eyes blinking.

"Affirmative, Lieutenant," the Vulcan confirmed. "By now, they must have crossed the energy nullifying shield of the planet on sheer momentum... and as the whole ship was again drained of all power, the holomatrix too shut down... leaving the possessing aliens once again bodiless... and, if alive, too weak to do anything when the Horizon will find them."

For a moment, they all sighed, chuckled, nodded or smiled at their good fortune.

"Sir..." Kalaar then said to Oseno, lowering his giant frame in a contrite posture, "I wish to report myself for disciplinary action. I acted out of emotion in showing lack of confidence in the actions and decisions of a superior officer. This is not the proper conduct of a Starfleet officer. I should have known that Commander Redding did not earn those pips out of favor or chance. Commander Redding here gave me, for one, a lesson into what it is to be a Starfleet officer... and I will take that lesson in full, Sir."

Oseno rose gingerly to face the hulking Capellan.

"Lieutenant..." he began the pain he was feeling evident in his voice despite his best attempt to maintain a stoic demeanor. "It's natural to be upset when any life, but especially your own, has been endangered particularly if you can't see the purpose behind it. I once had a shouting match with Captain Siduri after he interfered in one of my security exercises on the Alsea forcing my people and I into nearly firing on a crew member. The Captain had been trying to keep my team on our toes, but all I saw was his interference in my drill and the well being of a fellow officer put into potential jeopardy. Under our present circumstances, and given your exemplary service record, as your commanding officer I will not be bringing any formal charges against you. Consider this lesson a warning Lieutenant, but also don't ever stop questioning. The extreme situations we face as Starfleet officers require that we think for ourselves, that we come up with out of the box solutions, and that we question everything around us from time to time. Just try to do it with...respect next time."

Kalaar almost seemed disappointed that Oseno didn't charge him with insubordination, a thought that almost made the Bajoran smile when the man managed a muted "Aye Sir."

Jureth winced as he lowered himself back to a seated position, and seeing the commander do so Doctor Lowe from the Polaris immediately moved to his side with a medical tricorder.

"Commander, what exactly did you do to yourself?"

Oseno smiled.

"Threw myself across a transporter confinement beam."

"You did *what*?" the doctor asked incredulously.

"It's not as bad as fighting Khan..." he replied chuckling and then winced and grabbed his side.

"I will never understand ship captains and security officers..." Lowe mumbled. "I can stabilize your injuries with the equipment I managed to grab, but full treatment will have to wait until we reach either the Polaris or Horizon sickbay."

"Thank you, Doctor," Jureth replied and then looked up at Redding "Well, Sir... what now?"

"Now? now we set up a base camp and wait for pickup." Redding made sure not to just the word 'rescue' for morale. "No telling what's going on up there. It may be a few days, so let's make ourselves comfortable and get to know our new friends,"

He pulled a deck of cards from his carry pack.

"Since we don't have a bowling alley readily available, let's go with lesson number one: poker."

CHAPTER 11 : HAWKS AND DOVES

With an expression as stoic as a stone statue, the Vulcan captain did not even blink as he watched the Draxx task force spread out to come at them from all sides.

"Peace can be an even riskier proposition than war" he noted when they had finished. After a brief pause he added; "Inform our constituents to follow our lead."

"Commander Sisko and Commander Ke'Leysa both confirming they maintain defensive position and posture."

The Draxx ship had time and leisure to move into positions and trajectories that nullified any attempt to flee and little room for maneuvering. The four other cruisers had also divided into their six escort configuration, so that both sections of the flagship were now about to be swarmed by a dozen destroyers from all sides. Between them, the star and the two planets, they were effectively bottled up... and ready for the kill.

And then, they started to angle their flight and change their speed for their first attack run on all three ships at the same time.

"Maintain heading and conditions" Syntron commanded.

He then turned to the counselor manning the Communications post.

"Lieutenant, open up a channel to the Draxx ships drawing toward our position."

"The channel is open, Captain."

Without a moment of hesitation, the Vulcan initiated dialogue with the apparent hostile species.

"This is Captain Syntron of the starship USS Phoenix. We, along with the USS Horizon, are representatives of Starfleet from a galaxy beyond the anomaly threshold. Starfleet is an organization preserved by the United Federation of Planets, which is an interstellar federal republic, composed of planetary governments that agreed to exist semi-autonomously under a single central government based on the principles of universal liberty, rights, and equality, and to share knowledge and resources in peaceful cooperation and space exploration. Since its inception, the Federation's territory has extended across more than eight thousand light years, with a diverse membership of over a hundred and fifty worlds; including a vast array of species from each of these worlds. Aboard this vessel are representatives from many of these diverse worlds cooperatively working together."

Staring at the approaching vessels on the main viewscreen did not deter Syntron from proceeding with his message, but rather encouraged him to get to his main point.

"Our presence here in this region is that of peaceful deep-space exploration. Our principal objectives are the enrichment of Federation knowledge about our galaxy and its inhabitants, the advancement of Federation science and technology, the military defense of the Federation when required, and the implementation of Federation diplomacy when needed. Our journey into this realm is but an extension of these core objectives."

There was no immediate response and therefore the Vulcan captain continued.

"As I am certain based on your apparent technology, you can confirm that our starship poses no immediate threat to your vessels. Our weaponry is offline and even our defensive shields have been deactivated."

Allowing a moment for this information to be confirmed, Syntron supplemented his appeal.

"My intention is to offer an opportunity for peaceful discussions to occur between our representatives regarding any perceived conflict *before* an onslaught of hostilities are invoked in place of reason."

As the Vulcan commanding officer of the Phoenix spoke, the Draxx fleet took position to box in the three crafts within the orbital region of the system's inner planets. When he stopped, all the cruisers had divided into their destroyer components and completed a globular formation around each of them. Both larger sections of the flagship were enveloped by eighteen smaller warships, each the size and power output of a Defiant class starship; six encircled the isolated USS Phoenix. With all their weapons bearing directly on them at point blank range, none of them would survive the first volley when it would come, even with shields at maximum.

As it were, both the stardrive section and the saucer section of the Horizon had their shields up and phasers hot with a tube already readying a quantum torpedo. But when Syntron finished his speech, phasers went down and the tube closed but shields stayed up. Their navigation lights flashed and, on the Phoenix as well as the Draxx vessels, both messages were translated into audiovisual transmissions.

"This is Starfleet Commander Joey Sisko in temporary command of the Federation's USS Horizon stardrive. Our mission is a mission of peace."

The message of the Half-Bajoran then was immediately followed by that of the Illythirii woman in the center seat of the other section of the flagship.

"This is Starfleet Commander Snowfire Ke'Leysha, acting commanding officer of the USS Horizon's saucer section on behalf of the United Federation of Planets. We are currently engaged in a rescue operation. Do you wish to assist us?"

There was a long moment of silence, the ominous encirclement of the alien warships looming all around them like a swarm of angry hornets frozen in a single second before striking. Some people on the Phoenix' bridge almost jumped out of their seats when the soft voice of Counselor Meyers reported what her console told her.

"Captain, the Draxx vessels are transmitting to one another on an encrypted subspace channel. I can attempt to decrypt their messages and eavesdrop on their conversation."

"I do not recommend this, Captain," Livingstone then interjected. "They might interpret it as a hostile action."

"But it would warn *us* about *their* planned hostile actions," grumbled Duncan Argyle, his half-metallic fingers still hovering nervously over tactical controls.

"Fearing the risk should not make us turn into an enemy one who could be a friend," the X'Ell retorted.

"I *know* Starfleet's Rules of Engagement," Duncan shot back. "And I know also that Captain Garth of Izar who wrote this turned murderously insane afterwards."

"And then was cured," insisted Jonathan.

"There is no cure for a torpedo shot."

"Indeed."

They both became silent, waiting for the one who was responsible for all their lives on board to make the decision... and all those on two more ships and two planets as well.

"Do not attempt to intercept any transmissions among these vessels" Syntron ordered firmly but without actually raising his voice. His message nevertheless was clear to everyone on the bridge.

"The fact that a discussion is occurring at all among the Draxx is auspicious. We will not allow curiosity to undermine any possibility of a non violent outcome... however remote this may appear under present circumstances" the captain concluded, as his keen eyes were studying the formation on the main viewscreen of Draxx vessels surrounding them.

These were the type of situations that every Starfleet captain dreaded most: being ensnared in a hostile position that rendered both his ship and his entire crew in utter jeopardy.

Syntron leaned back in his chair and continued to ponder the gravity of their circumstances.

Could goodwill, reason and peace even have a chance of influence with this species? Would all of these federation ships, their crew and the colonists be obliterated at any moment?

The range of alternatives raced through the mind of the Vulcan at astronomic velocities as he tried to bypass the certainty of this apparent checkmate.

After a few minutes of the ominous lightshow between the dagger-shaped warships, a long moment of utter stillness followed, were only hearts were beating hard against the silence. Then, the destroyer directly in front of the Phoenix on their main vieawer alone flashed the lights along the serrated edges of it's gagged prow.

"We're are being hailed," confirmed Meyers.

"Their willingness to talk is indicative of a will to not commit unecessary violence," breathed Livingstone with obvious relief.

"Or that they want more than just our immediate obliteration," growled Argyle with wariness just as obvious. "Even the Borg asked for surrender before assimilating their prey."

Without acknowledging the words of speculation surrounding him, the captain of the Phoenix immediately responded to the hail received.

"Patch the transmission to the main viewscreen" Syntron ordered, as he prepared himself for the most crucial conversation of this mission, and perhaps his career in Starfleet.

On screen appeared the feral face of a wolf-headed humanoid seated in a high-backed chair, seemingly alone in a narrow cockpit. Obviously the set-up was to hide to the viewer any view of the ship's bridge and it's technology. But the close-up angle of the image also aimed just as obviously at intimidation, showing the fanged mouth and the heavily-furrowed reddish eyes as close as if the creature was at one's throat. The image also shifted and moved at unpredictable moments, showing from time to time very close shots of those angry eyes and threatening fangs to further unsettle the viewer. It was much like the way the Ferengi had used subspace transmissions in the early days of contact with them.

The sound was also enhanced in volume and lowered in pitch, slightly distorted with faint echos almost like wind and distant howlings in the background; sound effects or actual crew talking in some kind of obscure battle language out of frame, it was hard to tell. The overall effect however was unsettling enough to unhinge even a fierce Klingon.

Fortunately, the one facing them in the command seat was one in so complete control of his emotions that even his more influenceable crewmates remained firm in their discipline and composure as they looked at the bestial face and listened to the low growling voice.

" Federation intruders; we are the Draxx. You are in a quarantine sector. You have allowed a dangerous species to gain freedom to threaten others. You have showed hostile intent towards us. You are a threat to every sentient species. Lower your defenses and surrender. We promise you that your death will be swift and painless. Resist us... and your death will be just as certain... but it will be anything but swift and painless. Your choice."

Syntron listened acutely to the provocative words spoken by the Draxx leader. As anticipated, they were words of threats and intimidation. But as a Vulcan, the impact was nonexistent in any emotional way.

"Draxx leader... it is an honor to meet you. I am Syntron of the starship Phoenix. As your sensors will confirm, we have approached you and your vessels with our shielding already deactivated and all weapons offline. Not as an act of surrender, but a gesture of peace."

The Vulcan commanding officer kept his voice calm but firm as he proceeded.

"To clarify, we have not *allowed* any species to enter let alone threaten others from this region. Contrarily, the Zetarians are not only *not* associated with our Federation of planets, but have entered into our region of space and attacked our Federation outposts and ships as well; going back one hundred forty-one standard years ago. In this respect, we have these unfortunate experiences in common."

Syntron allowed a brief pause to exist before continuing his case.

"Secondly, I can order our other vessels to follow in the lowering of shields and weapons, but not as a means for you to swiftly destroy us. Instead, we would be willing do this to de-escalate our current situation of hostility. I would request however that in turn you demonstrate your valiance by removing the targets placed upon our vessels."

The captain then stared silently into the hostile face of the Draxx leader displayed in menacing form.

"Captain Syntron of the Phoenix; your energy protection being active or not, Zetarians can easily reach us accross space while our weapons are down and before we can bring them to bear again. Our own defenses can not prevent this. But we will not be tamed. Truth sounds in your bark but your eyes are far and your scent doesn't come to us. This is a deception."

From the chair at engineering ops at the back of the bridge, mostly hidden from the main viewer view by the bridge consoles and command station chairs, Rogers followed the exchange between Captain Syntron and the Draxx representative. Although the Phoenix shields and weapons were powered down, David knew that tactical response with the nanite enhanced systems on the ship were over thirty percent faster than any other starfleet vessel, and that their own weapons and shields could power up before the Draxx destroyer's could. Thus, their refusal to power down was a decided problem as far as shields were concerned to themselves.

The comment about scent stymied Rogers for a bit, having grown up on a Ferengi vessel. His first contact with canine's had been at Mars. The concept of scent used as a familiarization of intent was mostly foreign to a Ferengi raised Romulan-Human hybrid. Things either smelled repugnant or savory. The fact these canine type Draxx used the concept to ascertain intent spoke volumes about their heritage and abilities, beyond the obvious pack style formation of their vessel's layout.

David began to wonder if Vulcan logic could even make a dent on these Draxx and their pack style philosophy.

Shifting slightly in his seat, David began softly pressing on the tactile interface of his engineering console in order to be ready to bring all one hundred and thirty percent of the power of the Phoenix' massive supply online.

Looking directly into the predatory face of his opponent, Syntron maintained direct eye contact with the image on-screen as he spoke.

"I understand" Syntron began. "If you were to invite me as a guest upon your ship, or arrive here as our guest, we could continue our dialogue more effectively face-to-face."

Despite Starfleet protocol, the Vulcan captain appreciated that the Draxx needed olfactory confirmation when engaging with someone, especially a new species, for the first time. He also sensed that they appreciated both candor and bravery.

"Captain Syntron of the Phoenix; I , Garawl, beta of our pack, will go to your ship, to you, alpha of your pack. And know this; all our ships will open fire at the slightest change of position or emission other than photonic communication from any of your ships. A detonating device will be linked to my brainwaves on both myself and the shuttle that will bring me to you. Any attempt to overpower me either physically or mentally will result in the destruction of both your vessels."

A few minutes later, a small bullet-shaped craft barely six meters long emerged from the lower back of the Draxx destroyer directly facing the Phoenix and moved in a wide arc to come through the access of their main shuttle bay.

"One life form, Captain," confirmed Livingstone; Draxx... There is a neurogenic link to a small liquid explosive device on board his shuttle... and on his person."

"Highly concentrated nitroglycerin; an antique explosive chemical substance that can detonate with a simple chemical fuse... and from any significant vibration," Argyle confirmed from his own security station. "Too primitive to disarm using modern technology. Basic chemical defusing could not be done without the proper know-how and chemical counter-agents and in any case nowhere fast enough to prevent detonation if the neurogenic connection is severed or altered or the body physically assaulted. These Draxx know what they're doing; a Zetarian invading his body would not be able to take control before the body jerked or fell, causing detonation. And there is enough concentrated explosive here to rip off the top of our entire saucer section... and send a clear signal to the other ships to go in for the kill." He turned towards Syntron.

"Security team already in place in main shuttle bay, Sir. I'm going there to... welcome our... guest. Where should we escort him?"

Syntron was not appreciative of bringing a sentient being armed with a detonation device aboard his ship, but these were extenuating circumstances at best.

He stood up from the center seat and adjusted his uniform accordingly as he spoke.

"Escort our guest to my Ready Room."

"Aye Sir."

With a nod, Argyle headed towards the turbo lift watching the bridge as the doors closed and he headed for the shuttlebay.

Following Argyle's departure, Syntron conversed briefly with several bridge officers before entering his Ready Room. With the assistance sometimes pesky Yeoman Jessica Albera, this room had been organized and decorated with awards, accolades, medals, certificates and other official acknowledgements of the captain's accomplishments.

During the time in spacedock after their first mission on this vessel, the Yeoman also added in other designer accents and features, all of which the captain never really noticed let alone acknowledged her efforts. Yet, these features really set the tone of the room, especially with the Vulcan artifacts and imagery placed artistically around the room.

Syntron paid no mind to any of this as he sat down in his official customized chair and interacted with the technology arranged before him. He studied for a moment a tactical display of the Federation vessels in this region with Draxx vessels surrounding each one of them. He gazed at the ships strategically, as if studying his next move in a Tri-dimensional chess game; knowing that their current situation was much more serious than a mere game.

Several minutes later, the chime to his door rang.

* * *

"We are being hailed," Lyrya said to Kheren just like Counselor Bijou reported to her own first officer in command of the captain's yacht.

"Let's see it," Riker ordered.

They all had seen the lights flashing on the serrated hull of the menacing destroyer closest to the bridge module. Their computer and universal translator turned the photonic signal into audiovisual signals on their respective viewer.

On screen appeared the feral face of a wolf-headed humanoid seated in a high-backed chair, seemingly alone in a narrow cockpit. Obviously the set-up was to hide to the viewer any view of the ship's bridge and it's technology. But the close-up angle of the image also aimed just as obviously at intimidation, showing the fanged mouth and the heavily-furrowed reddish eyes as close as if the creature was at one's throat. The image also shifted and moved at unpredictable moments, showing from time to time very close shots of those angry eyes and threatening fangs to further unsettle the viewer. It was much like the way the Ferengi had used subspace transmissions in the early days of contact with them.

The sound was also enhanced in volume and lowered in pitch, slightly distorted with faint echos almost like wind and distant howlings in the background; sound effects or actual crew talking in some kind of obscure battle language out of frame, it was hard to tell. The overall effect however was unsettling enough to unhinge even a fierce Klingon.

Fortunately, those in command facing them were seasoned Starfleet officers; and even their less experienced, more influenceable crewmates remained firm in their discipline and composure as they looked at the bestial face and listened to the low growling voice.

" Alien intruders; we are the Draxx. You are in a quarantined sector. You have allowed a dangerous species to gain freedom to threaten others. You have showed hostile intent towards us. You are a threat to every sentient species. Lower your defenses and surrender. We promise you that your death will be swift and painless. Resist us... and your death will be just as certain... but it will be anything but swift and painless. Your choice."

"We are the threat?... He must be talking about all those terrible things the Federation did," Riker mumbled under his breath almost annoyed before turning to address his crew. "We have to talk to them, make them see that we are not the threat here."

While keeping diplomacy in his heart, he glanced through the opening behind him into the cargo area and gave a nod to the security crew. The Phoenix' exec wanted to talk to the crew's new enemies, but he wanted the crew ready to fight as well.

"I agree, Commander," answered Kheren over the comm. "Agression is the child of fear. It is that fear we have to adress and without falling prey to it ourselves. But stand by in case they answer a la Montcalm with the mouth of their cannons."

Lights flashed around the disc-shaped bridge module that the Firebird's in-board computer and universal translator picked up. Captain Kheren's face and voice was reconstructed from the signal for all of them to see and hear.

"Alpha Shanarl of the Draxx; this is Captain Kheren of the United Federation of Planets. You have scanned our ships; you know we are no match to your superior firepower. We have not scanned you in return nor attempted any emission that could allow Zetarians to threaten you. For the same reason, we have not used any transmission but this photonic method those of your people showed us to use as a safety precaution against such intrusion. We are no threat to you."

There was a moment of silence and stillness before the Andorian captain spoke again.

"If you still fear deception, I call upon your courage and either have me come to your ship by any mean you may choose... or you come to us. Truth cannot be denied when eyes meet."

Again, there was like a moment frozen in time before lights finally flashed on the Draxx destroyer's hull and the wolfish countenance of the alien leader reappeared to growl at them.

"Captain Kheren of the United Federation of Planets; Your bark sounds with truth, but your scent does not reach me. I will comply with your challenge. But I will go to your other ship, to your Beta, to see and hear and smell from him if this truth is from all of you as you claim."

"In the spirit of peace and good will we stand for, I will comply with your requirement, Alpha Shanarl of the Draxx. Commander Riker, prepare to receive the representative of the Draxx with all honors due. As captain of the flagship and commander of this mission, I confer to you all my diplomatic rights, privileges and duty to see this through in the best interest of both parties. We will stand by to assist you."

"And know this," added Shanarl before closing the channel. "All our ships will open fire at the slightest change of position or emission other than photonic communication from any of your ships. A detonating device will be linked to my brainwaves on both myself and the shuttle that will bring me to you. Any attempt to overpower me either physically or mentally will result in the destruction of both your vessels. We will not be tamed."

A few minutes later, a small bullet-shaped craft barely six meters long emerged from the lower back of the Draxx destroyer and moved in a wide arc to connect it's ventral access hatch to the one on top of the Firebird.

"One life form, Commander," Kalynda Hunter confirmed to the Phoenix first officer; Draxx... and there is a neurogenic link to a small explosive device on board his shuttle... and on him."

"Chemical explosive... Nitroglycerry, Sirr," M'ata confirmed from her own scan. "Crrude but effective... impossible to defuse except manually and with the prroperr counterr chemicals... and only if you have severral minutes to do so. Disrrupting the neurrogenic connection orr altering it will most assurrredly cause detonation; and so will any sudden movement."

"Nobody sneeze," advocated the Andorian science officer, in atypical humor for her species.

"Breathing is off limits too," Riker added.

Gesturing to the crew in the cargo area the security team and science members formed basic ranks in as quickly a ceremonial formation as they could. The crew held their rifles at parade rest and appeared as peaceful as possible. Walking over to the hatch Riker glanced down at his phaser pistol, still holstered. It had been many years since Riker had ever gone on a mission without it, but now seemed like a bad time to be armed. Removing the holster Riker rested it on a small storage case and walked over to the hatch.

"The time for diplomacy is at hand. Let's see what our new found friends want."

* * *

As soon as he gave permission to enter, the door slid open to reveal assistant security chief Argyle standing sideways, letting Garawl of the Draxx. If anything, the canine humanoid was even more intimidating than when his whole fanged snout had filled the large viewer on the bridge. His lean, barrel-chested, long-limbed frame was rippling with corded muscles under the leather-like black and bronze uniform he was wearing. Most prominent was the belt around his excessively slim waist; it was a chain of small blinking lights and small translucent spheres full of a clear liquid he was obviously very careful not to slosh around as his digitigrade feet stepped with care and suppleness on the floor, as if the deckplates were too hot for his spiked boots.

Once inside, he stood to his full two meters of height and lifted his head, showing for a moment his throat before lowering his reddish gaze to everything but the Vulcan's own eyes.

Argyle noticed the throat gesture and stored the memory as perhaps a gesture of greeting of some sort. Following protocol, Argyle stepped to the back of the room as to continue to provide a security presence while allowing the respective officers to speak. Argyle would stand by until he was dismissed.

Syntron noted the gesture of this canine-like humanoid as he entered the room and mirrored the greeting in a similar manner as he stood before him prior to addressing him.

"Garawl... beta of your pack... we are honored by your attendance upon our vessel" the captain spoke as he cautiously observed his guest with peripheral acuity. Syntron then casually moved from behind his desk into an equivalent position in front of it, all the while allowing for personal space to exist between them.

"From such humble beginnings meritorious affiliations can be forged."

The Draxx was obviously very conscious of the armed cyborg in the room with them. If anything, it pleased him for some strange reason, as if the latent threat he represented somehow gave him an unfathomable edge. He himself however, despite his imposing presence, gave every sign of not being a threat, never looking anyone in the eye nor getting close, powerful clawed hands at his sides and mouth kept open in a nevertheless gruesome smile, his voice down to a low rumbling. Nevertheless, it was evident that he could in an instant become a whirlwind of fangs and claws in a split second... just before his mental connection would detonate his explosive belt and his shuttle craft nested inside their ship.

And that would be the signal for his fleet to start the massacre.

"Syntron of the Phoenix; I can smell you and your pack. You are free of the spirits of evil... but it remains to be seen if you agree with them."

"On the contrary" Syntron spoke with deliberate firmness, yet without aggression." In this instance Garawl, our nemesis is a common one. They are a remnant of a species now intent on regaining their corporeal existence at all cost. It is to our mutual benefit to work in tandem to nullify theses attempts, and if possible, eliminate these threats altogether."

"You howl with strength, Synron of the Phoenix. But, you challenge what you know not. For centuries now, we know of them. We would not eliminate them. Doing so would unbalance the universe. But we could not eliminate them either. They exist outside of corporeal life, as energy. Energy can not be destroyed, only transformed. They knew this. They created their own prison to atone for the sin of their own folly, their own physical destruction brought on them by their hubris when they dared to try and be gods. Two centuries ago, we found them when one of our scout ships was stranded on their haunted planet, yet managed to fly out afterwards. The ship and her crew died in the attempt, but some of the Zetarians survived long enough to flee through the Heart of the universe."

His wolfish head now turned to face that of the Vulcan.

"And now, you come. Your trail emerges from the Heart of the universe... just as it slowed it's pulse. We have seen this, and wondered at this phenomenon. A scout ship was sent. She found you, a strange, unknown vessel born of the Heart... full of the evil spirits of this planet. Our comrades gave their lives to alert us and to keep them in the dead space zone so that they would not infect the rest of our people, the rest of our universe. And now you come again... here."

The sudden silence, following his last growled words, was more deafening than the explosion his large hand prophesized with it's ominous nearness to his explosive harness.

The Vulcan captain scrupulously processed the words and inflections along with the physicality of the Draxx representative as he responded. This was such a delicate situation... the slightest wrong word or move would result in not just a failed mission or first contact, but in their utter destruction. Yet he also knew that straightforwardness was essential to building a foundation of trust with this species.

"The journey of ours into this region of space is not *again* for us Garawl. This is a first. How and when the other vessel, the Nuntio arrived here was indeed a surprise to us... and remains a mystery that may not be fully resolved now that the ship has been destroyed. We were searching for such an answer when my away team was besieged by the Zetarians."

Syntron was in a quandary though on exactly how much detail to reveal. What would be relevant to this species? What would be deemed extraneous?

"The Nuntio had vanished from our region of space years ago via unexplained circumstances. Though before its recent destruction in this region, we were able to rescue remnants of their crew. They were initially held in stasis within our pattern buffers, so that we could confirm that they were free of usurpation from the Zetarians. They currently reside now in sickbay but are unconscious... except for one."

"Yet, you have Zetarians on board this vessel. Our scans showed this. No one can be freed alive or even survive direct contact with them. If you have some of your people alive after being tainted by them, this can mean only one thing; you have allied yourselves with them."

The air froze in the small room. They could all feel that they were just now a word, even a mere thought, away from destruction.

* * *

It didn't take long before the hatch signaled it's readiness to open. Once Chief M'ata confirmed security scan and identification of the airlock occupant, she answered Riker's silent command to open the access port. She stood right beside it, in perfect honor guard posture, which meant that her hand was on her hand phaser ready to be drawn out in an instant. Her claws were out of their furry sheaths as well.

The door slid open to reveal Shanarl of the Draxx. The canine humanoid was truly intimidating in person as he lowered his imposing frame to go through the hatch and stand before them. His lean, barrel-chested, long-limbed frame was rippling with big corded muscles under the leather-like black and bronze uniform he was wearing. Most prominent was the belt around his excessively slim waist; it was a chain of small blinking lights and small translucent spheres full of a clear liquid he was obviously very careful not to slosh around as his digitigrade feet stepped with care and suppleness on the floor, as if fearing to soil his spiked boots on the deckplates.

Once inside, he stood more than two meters high and lifted his head towards the Phoenix First officer, showing for a moment his throat before lowering his reddish gaze but making obvious effort not to look into anyone's eyes.

Stepping towards the Draxx representative, Riker straightened his posture as to appear professional, but not attempting to look threatening. Standing nearly two meters himself, significantly taller than several Firebird crew members, Riker was not dwarfed by the Draxx the way other officers would have been, although Shanarl still stood more than a head length above the Commander.

"Greetings Shanarl of the Draxx, I am Commander Joshua Riker of the United Federation of Planets. Welcome aboard the Firebird"

Riker gestured at the ship in a combined effort to both appear gracious and convince their new guest that the crew of the Firebird meant no harm.

For a moment, Shanarl only sniffed the air and then smiled an impressive row of fangs.

"Commander Joshua Riker of the United Federation of Planets; I do not smell evil spirits in you or aboard your ship... yet, their foul stench lingers here..."

As he spoke, his feral countenance met the no less ferocious one of M'ata.

"There are no evil spirits here, Shanarl of the Draxx" Riker said gesturing again to show his crew free of contamination.

"We just came from a mission where we saved fellow members of the United Federation of Planets from the evil spirits you speak of. While I will never claim to have the same knowledge of them that you, and your people do, I would imagine their stench lingers from our recent encounters"

"I will hear your tale and look at your logs," he demanded. "Be warned; just as I can smell any lies from your words, I have the means to recognize if and how such logs could be altered. We do not tolerate deceit."

"If you are trying to sabotage this ship," M'ata hissed.

The Draxx looked her up and down. She was slightly smaller yet no less imposing than the alien caninoid.

"Is that a threat?"

"A warning. I am chief of security M'ata."

"You care for your litter, Felinoid. That is good. But you may sheath your claws. I'm not here to die but to ensure life for my pack. It is not wise to try and make me sweat and shake my fur."

Thus speaking, he pointed at the explosive belt he was wearing.

"Is *that* a threat?" the caitian shot back.

"A warning."

Riker waited patiently, not wanting to interrupt the interaction between the two creatures before him. As he was addressed, Riker gestured towards the computer panel beside him.

"You will have full access to our logs and all log data that was transferred to our computer from the Phoenix herself."

Glancing over at Lieutenant JG M'ata, Riker continued.

"You will also have the support of our entire crew. Despite your initial opinions of us, I assure you that the Federation cares only for peace and exploration."

"Yet, you are not without fangs," the Draxx noted, looking at their sidearms. "This Alpha of yours in the other craft showed definite tactical experience... but we shall see if your bark is true."

Following the first officer's unspoken lead, Chief M'ata clamped her fanged jaws shut and guided Shanarl to the use of their console, taking care not to allow him access to any sensitive systems or data beyond what was offered. After a moment of looking attentively at the readouts, the Alpha of the Draxx stepped back with a clearly pensive expression on his otherwise fearsome mien. A moment of silence followed before his growl, much less harsh than before, voiced his thoughts.

"It seems you were as much a victim of the Zetarians as we have been... and you showed resolve when the time came to deal with them, not hesitating even to risk yourselves and sacrifice your ship... You also look to be much more able to deal with them than we did so far; your alien technology seems at the same time more vulnerable and more effective than ours when facing them. This is quite... unexpected..."

The Draxx kept himself a moment more with his own thoughts before he faced Riker, his eyes roaming everywhere but in those of the man.

"You are hunters... yet you do follow a strange plant-eater philosophy."

"Well, Riker meal 01 is a caesar salad that is to die for" Riker said keeping a balance between observation and open humor

Mrrin M'ata snorted at the remark, which seemed to stretch a bit the snarling mouth of the caninoid as he continued.

"I see now that only your ignorance and blundering made you a potential threat to us. You did not act out of malice or in alliance with those evil spirits. I am willing to abort our hunt on you... if you will share with us the technical data that allowed you to fight the Zetarians."

Nodding in acceptance Riker glanced over at Mrrin M'ata.

"We will share all tactical information that we can. We have developed security and tactical data, and I hope that sharing what information we have with you will help mend what wounds remain."

Gesturing to M'ata Riker motioned for the Lieutenant JG to open the information that was being requested.

As a response, Shanarl unclipped a small device that was interted in his large conical ear and gave it to M'ata. Then, under her unblinking and very attentive stare, he unbuckled the explosive device from his body and very delicately put it in her clawed hands.

As she moved away to safely dispose of the dangerous explosive, Kalynda Hunter motioned to the Draxx and gave him a data chip she just extracted from her console.

"This is all the data we have on the Zetarians, from the initial encounter of the USS Enterprise and Memory Alpha nearly two centuries ago to our recent brush with them on the USS Nuntio. Also included are the USS Phoenix reports on their intrusion aboard and how we confined them, as well as the information gathered near Eden IV by the USS Horizon."

The Draxx took it with obvious interest. He opened wide his fearsome fanged mouth and showed his tongue to Riker in a gesture of respect.

"Yours is a people as generous, resourceful and courageous as you are bewilderingly diverse, Commander Riker of the Firebird. We will show our own courage by showing trust in you. May this help us all prevail against those evil spirits."

As he finished, a beeping sound came from somewhere on him. He touched his collar.

"The Alpha is listening."

A voice, clearer and less growling but still very much Draxx was overheard.

"Alpha, Hayapa here; we have received a transmission from one of our buoys coming from the quarantined star system. Beta Garawl confirms that the aliens are not hostile. They also have been victims of the spirits. He states that they have demonstrated the technical means not only to stop and cage the spirits, but also to send them back safely to their prison planet. He also states that there are some of those aliens marooned on the planet, possibly with others from our missing warden vessel. The aliens are intent on retrieving them, but there is no data on how this could be achieved."

"Acknowledged, Scout 1. Alien non-belligerency confirmed. I'm coming back aboard with further data. Stand by."

Shanarl looked again at Riker, still averting his eyes from his in his curious manner of his.

"I will now speak to your Alpha."

* * *

If the long and slow exhale were emanating from anyone other than a Vulcan, in all probability it would have been deemed a sigh. Yet the captain persisted in trying to reach some level of an understanding with the skeptical stranger before him; despite the tension surrounding them like a dense and almost impenetrable deadly fog.

"As you stated earlier Garawl, your kindred would not eliminate these Zetarians... even if they could. Doing so would unbalance the universe. We face a similar quandary as well."

Then he gazed somewhat quizzically at the canine features of this alien antagonist.

"By the same measure as you are placing on us Garawl, should we assume that you have allied with the Zetarians by allowing them access to an entire planet in your region in space?"

"Syntron of the Phoenix, you stumble in here like a pup in another's den, snapping and yapping with ears and eyes still closed. This planet is theirs. This prison is theirs."

Garawl paused to make sure the Vulcan understood what he was saying.

"How and why, we know not; but the damage they can do if they escape, that we know well. And now, you harbor them aboard your vessel, seemingly of your own free will. I would know why before deciding your fate... theirs... and ours."

Basically ignoring the Draxx's insolence, a somewhat bewildered expression hinted across the face of the Vulcan commanding officer as he listened. The statement "the planet is theirs" resounded in his mind.

"Are the Zetarians indigenous to this planet?" he inquired before addressing the question he knew that the Draxx wanted answered. But the answer to this question could be pivotal to how he next responded.

"That is what we hypothesize," the Draxx answered. "This is the only planet they have ever been found... before you came and allowed many of them to escape into outer space. Once we made the same mistake; many Draxx sacrificed themselves to try and stop their evil from spreading out. Since then, we have kept watch. We will not dishonor their memories by allowing them... or you... to threaten sentient life again."

Syntron nodded affirmatively as the Draxx representative spoke; allowing a brief pause to linger once he concluded before responding.

"Our intentions are in synch Garawl, beta of your pack," the captain confirmed as he continued to circumspectly study this attaché's reactions. "We do not intend to destroy sentient beings... let alone the plausible last wayward representatives of a dwindling species. Based on the supposition you have provided to us as to their origin, I now have a feasible solution to the Zetarians, which you inquired about... temporarily sequestered in our hanger bay."

Peering intently into the downcast eyes of Garawl, the captain spoke simply and directly.

"We are about to send the shuttle housing those Zetarians back to the planet."

The caninoid literally went silent, mouth agape, ears twitching. It took him a moment to obviously gather his thoughts around what he had heard. His growling voice was now laced with wonder and disbelief.

"You have them *caged*? And you are able to safely send them back to their prison? I would truly want to see and learn of such a feat!"

"Of course, Garawl," the captain acknowledged both relieved and pleased with this shift in their conversation; to the extent that could be expected of a Vulcan.

Syntron then stepped beyond the doorway of the Ready Room as he glanced over and caught the eye of his chief engineer at his station. He discreetly signaled for him to join them. Answering the captain's summons Rogers arose from his seat at engineering and proceeded across the bridge, Wondering briefly what engineering was needed for in a conference. Dropping his reticence immediately though, David paused outside the ready room door and awaited the permission to enter as the entrance sensors registered his presence to Syntron inside.

Entering the ready room, David noted the seemingly relaxed stance of assistant security chief Duncan Argyle. The six foot three inch man stood just to the right of the entrance, his Borg ocular implant seemingly focused on the terminus dot of its laser sight upon the back wall of the room, to the left of Captain Syntron and the imposing back of the Draxx representative. Rogers knew however that Duncan was anything but inattentive at the moment. Proceeding into the room, David took position to the left of the Draxx, assumed the star fleet regulation attention stance and, following protocol, reported directly to his summoner.

"Commander Rogers, reporting as ordered, Sir."

As the mixed Human/Romulan arrived and stood beside him, the captain formally presented his chief engineer.

"Garawl, beta of your pack... I would like you to meet our chief engineer, Commander David Rogers. He is the officer that devised the technique in which we were able to securely hold the Zetarians in place. He can explain extensively the means by which this feat was accomplished. If you wish, we could then escort you to the shuttle in which they are presently detained."

David nodded and turned slightly to the right to address Garawl, getting directly to the point. The canine stood a full four inches taller than Rogers, his reddish eye's seemingly focused on a Davids throat. David had a fleeting thought that if this hulk of a species ever met the Phoenix ' Caitian security chief, the standoff might prove to be ... explosive!

"Garawl of the Draxx. We found the Zetarian species existed in an electromagnetic state. Using a concept from my species past, called a Faraday cage, I enclosed their forms within an electrostatic charge specifically tuned to their electromagnetic frequency and sustained the charge by super-cooling the Tritanium foil of the shuttle hull. What we call the Meissner Effect allows for no electromagnetic movement into or out of the cage."

Hoping he was succinct enough for the time pressure, Rogers also hoped that his ... simplified ... explanation would suffice to convey the specifics of the Zetarrian trap currently suspended in the Phoenix' shuttle bay. David had no clue as to the scientific knowledge of this imposing beast of a species, but considering their witnessed technology so far, he assumed they knew about electromagnetism and super cooling. Glancing back at captain Syntron, he awaited some response from the Vulcan, or the Draxx beside him, on whether or not to expand further into more detailed specifics.

Garawl listened with obvious attention. At the end, he nodded with his big wolfish head.

"Rowri, you are getting this?"

From somewhere on the Draxx uniform came another growling voice, clearer and softer yet no less assertive, obviously from an open communication device like a combadge.

"All of it," answered the voice. " Scans confirm their claim. Electromagnetism to hinder electromagnetism instead of favoring it... yes, even a simple polarity reversal matching the signal would work. This... Faraday cage as they call it follows sound scientific principles."

"And why haven't we come up with this ourselves?"

The displeasure was quite noticeable in the rumbling voice of the Draxx leader. Another voice, lower in pitch yet definitely soft by force of will answered.

"Gronderr here; our space technology is essentially gravitation-based. These United Federation of Planets people barely use gravitons for their defensive and tractoring systems only and employ electromagnetism for just about everything else. Their science in this field is certainly much more extensive than ours... their technology in this regard is more advanced than ours... and they are certainly more used to work with it. They think in those terms, if you prefer; hence why they thought of it and not us."

"And they have had more contact with the Zetarians in the last hours than we had in the last year," now added the first, higher-pitched voice.

"Hence our... concerns," admitted Garawl. " Transmit this to Alpha Shanarl."

""We will have to send out a log buoy to his position with the relevant data in photonic record," explained the soft clear voice. "We will not receive any answer in less than two hours... unless he disposed of the other intruders and is on his way here."

"Understood... Standby."

He returned his attention to Syntron, lowering his heads and ears while opening his large fanged mouth even more in a huge grin that looked nothing less than a comical, almost cartoonish expression of embarrassment. His large gloved hands slowly and carefully unbuckled his belt of explosive chemical liquid. With slow, deliberate care, he delicately put it down on the floor at Syntron's feet, then unhooked a small transmitter from his ear he offered to the Vulcan before stepping back three steps.

"It seems that we have underestimated you as much as we have misjudged you, Captain Syntron of the Phoenix. In so doing, we may have caused the unfortunate demise of those of your people that went out to intercept us. If that be the case, I offer my life in atonement for this grave mistake."

Syntron signaled the cyborg security officer standing guard to immediately gather the belt containing the explosive chemical liquid that was placed on the floor. He knew that this apparatus needed to be deactivated or disposed of without delay.

Afterward, the Vulcan brought his attention back to his guest.

"Garawl, your offer of self-sacrifice is a noble gesture... one that I hold in reverence. As is the detachment and presentation of the explosive device that was worn by you as a precaution. However, we have reached a turning point between us. We established not only a level of trust that was nonexistent mere moments ago, but have also gained mutual respect for our strengths, differences and a willingness to see beyond the unfamiliar and perhaps first impressions."

The Vulcan then looked again directly at the canine humanoid who had shifted his posture from one of strength when he first arrived to that of compliance.

"In addition Garawl, you are a valuable asset to your pack. We owe this breakthrough to you and your leaders for allowing us to even conduct this meeting on the Phoenix. Therefore, these factors themselves are atonement for any misgivings or misjudgments that have occurred between us, or that are beyond our control."

Then Syntron's voice became slightly solemn.

"However, it would appear that what happens next is up to the interpretation and verdict of your Alpha Shanarl and whomever he may consult in any decision making process."

"You understand well how things are," the Draxx complimented him, not without raising thick eyebrows in honest surprise. "I have sent my recommendation to Alpha Shanarl. I just hope it reaches him before he has destroyed your two scout ships as was planned."

"Captain Syntron; please report to the bridge!"

The unmistakable musical voice of science chief Livingstone, currently the highest ranking officer on the bridge, resounded with definite alarm.

Hearing the urgency in the voice of his CSO, the captain was momentarily hesitant about whether to bring the Draxx officer with him to the bridge. But that tentative reaction passed in a flash now that the explosive device was gone and a truce between them had just taken its place.

"Garawl, please join me on the bridge. Whatever situation has arisen may somehow affect you too."

The Draxx simply nodded, but his stare told all about his shift to a weary state of mind.

Syntron also nodded to security officer Duncan Argyle to join them as well.

The captain then exited out of the Ready Room and headed directly toward the avian science chief.

"You have something to report, Mister Livingstone?" Syntron inquired as he reached the officer's post.

The X'ell had stayed at his station despite having been put in temporary command of the bridge with both the captain and the chief engineer's absence. He was still looking at his readouts when he answered with the same alarmed tone.

"Sir... the Polaris has emerged from the negative energy field surrounding the planet. It was powerless and drifting out of the gravity well on sheer momentum from their impulse drive. Bussard collectors are starting to rebuild energy reserves from suspended molecules in the space between the planet and its moons while the hull plates have been polarized to act as solar collectors... but I read no life aboard... except... numerous neurogenic signatures..."

As he spoke, his large golden eyes had turned to the main viewer where the elongated shape of the Aquarius class destroyer slowly drifted end over end before the backdrop of Eden IV. As he paused, he checked his readings again then looked straight at his commanding officer.

"Zetarians, Captain... the ship is full of them."

"WHAT?"

The roar of Garawl could have shattered the bulkheads.

Calmly, despite Garawl's reaction, the Vulcan captain responded.

"Two things Lieutenant Livingstone. First, reconfirm that are there no other life-forms registering on the Polaris. Second, are the Zetarians detected confined or are roaming freely throughout this vessel?"

"Confirmed, Sir; no life form aboard... except for the Zetarians. About sixty-two distinct energy signatures spreaded throughout the ship... strangely unmoving... at very even-spaced points throughout most ship compartments."

"Sir; they are in Grey Mode," added Ensign Tolo just then. "Power is building up within batteries connected to the solar collectors of the hull. With the base material collected by the bussards, they should be able to go into Blue Mode in about a minute."

Hearing this, Garawl activated his personal transmitter.

"To all hunters; this is Garawl. The vessel that left planet orbit is under control of the evil spirits. Destroy it before it powers itself back up and escape this system."

There were numerous confirmation signals as thirty dagger-shaped ships, each the size of the Polaris, moved away from the three larger Federation starships in a tight arc to converge towards the Horizon's disabled escort ship.

"The Draxx fleet is taking a conical attack vector towards Eden IV," Agyle confirmed as he sat back at his tactical post. "Their weapons are locking on the Polaris. The Horizon's stardrive is moving to interpose itself. They too are locking weapons, on the Draxx vessels... and readying a tractor beam to retrieve the Polaris."

All Hell's fire was about to blaze before them.

From the command chair, Syntron immediately turned toward the Deltan officer manning communications.

"Counselor Bijoŭ, hail the Horizon" he commanded with firmness in his voice; knowing that all of the progress made could be nullified with one contrary action or misstep.

"Commander Sisko is on, Sir," she swiftly confirmed.

"Commander Sisko, this is Captain Syntron. What is the intention of the stardrive command crew in regards to the Polaris and the Draxx?"

For a moment, the face of the Half-Bajoran on screen went blank.

"Sir? They're attacking the Polaris!"

And as he said so, salvos of energy lanced towards the escort vessel, only to be deflected at the last moment by the powerful shields of the Horizon flying between them. The shielding maneuver protected the disabled ship from this first volley; but, as the Draxx destroyers fanned out to encircle the Polaris, it was obvious that the flagship's stardrive alone would not be able to shield them again so completely.

Syntron turned to Commander Rogers as he spoke on the open channel to the Horizon.

"If we permanently disable the ability of the bussard ramscoops to collect needed materials, perhaps we can eventually send the Polaris and its occupants back to the planet without any further conflict with the Draxx ships or destruction of the Zetarians aboard."

Giving the suggestion a moments thought, Rogers replied with furrowed brows.

"it is doable, Sir, but given the distance, targetting the ram scoops is hit and miss. Not to mention there is a pair of them to disable. So, if you cannot access the onboard computer with your command code override and shut them down, I suggest we interrupt the magnetic field collectors directly."

Livingstone blinked his large eyes up at his commanding officer,

"I advise against direct override, Captain. This would necessitate standard communication channels, an electromagnetic link the Zetarians would use to invade us. I agree interrupting their powering up has to be at the source."

The bussard collectors used an ionizing beam emitter to impart a charge onto the neutral particles in space, allowing the magnetic field generator to collect the particles and separate them into usable matter which is stored or used by the ship engines. In this case, the only option David could project from this distance was interruption of the collection field, or denying the field of usable matter; in this case, hydrogen for the Polaris.

"We can sweep the interstellar particles out of the Polaris' path using main deflector, Sir. Reversing the graviton polarity generators and tuning it to the hydrogen frequency of fourteen point seven electron volts will enable us to project a graviton pulse in front of the Polaris, pushing the hydrogen out of its path and leaving nothing for them to collect."

"That will slow them down but not stop them. They have reconfigured the armor plates of the ship as solar panels.," the X'Ell then pointed out.

"Captain!" shouted Argyle to bring their attention back to the main viewer.

On the screen they saw the Horizon fire warning shots across the destroyers' bows, forcing them to veer off to avoid the orange discharge of as many phasers as there were assailing ships. The flagship was a literal flying fortress, even without her saucer section having enough phaser strips to face such an attacking fleet, phasers that were as powerful as those of a space station. And yet, it was only a matter of time before some of those attackers would manage to slip by this fire cover and find their powerless, defenseless target; time measured in seconds.

Now, the Draxx regrouped and came back in two waves of attack groups coming from three different angles.

"The first wave is about to draw fire from the Horizon so that the second group will be able to penetrate their cover and fire at the Polaris," the cyborg tactical officer analyzed. "With only the stardrive's weaponry available, the Horizon will not be able this time to stop them all."

"Do not interfere," Garawl then said to Syntron with a menacing growl. "We know how to deal with such a situation. It will be over quickly. This time, these evil spirits will not threaten you or us and escape again."

"Commander Rogers," the captain of the Phoenix immediately ordered, seemingly ignoring the Draxx, "proceed with calibrating the main deflector to sweep the interstellar particles away from the Polaris' path. Once implemented, this will at least nullify their progress while providing us with more time to curtail any opportunity from escaping from this planet again."

"On it, Sir!", David quipped as he ran to the main engineering console.

The captain turned toward the helm.

"Mister Traynor, put us on course to allow Commander Rogers the optimal position to accomplish this feat."

"Yes, Sir," the human helmsman responded as he entered the coordinates and guided the ship toward the Polaris.

Punching icons on the LCARS display, David re-configured the main deflector to the interstellar hydrogen frequency while simultaneously reversing the graviton polarity generators in order to project the pulse in the desired function. The dish itself was steerable within just over seven degree's of arc along the Z axis of the ship. Because normal deflector operations during flight already swept particles from the flight path, the tuning operation took less than a minute to set up and actuate.

As Traynor brought the sleek prow of the Phoenix to bear on the rising Polaris, David actuated the deflector pulse. Pale luminescence shot from the dish and swept in a tight beam out to the sleek craft, tracing an arc forward from the Polaris' flight path. All interstellar matter, from miniscule dust to the stomic particles of matter were pushed back out of the flight trajectory. The Polaris' bussard ram scoops now found only empty vacuum to feed on; effectively starving the ship of convertible hydrogen.

Syntron then turned his attention to the cyborg officer standing besides the Draxx representative.

"Lieutenant Argyle, I need your tactical skills manning the plasma-phaser arrays. I need you to target the bussard collectors and decimate both sets of this apparatus with precision."

"Understood, Sir" was all that Argyle uttered in front of the captain and began preparing the weapons console.

The captain noted a moment of hesitation as he processed the order, switching his priority as the security officer into that of a tactical one once again.

Syntron then addressed his science chief.

"Mister Livingstone, if possible...we need to devise a short burst-signal to reprogram systems on the Polaris using command codes without allowing any Zetarian an opportunity to trace an electromagnetic path back to our ship the split second it arrives. Perhaps using this in conjunction with a diversionary tactic to draw their attention away while this occurs may suffice."

The luminous implants flashed within the feathered mane of the X'EII as he acknowledged the Vulcan's orders.

Syntron then turned and faced the Draxx officer directly.

"Garawl, beta of your pack... This will only work if you can convince your ships to allow us this opportunity to resolve this situation without further conflict and before destroying the Polaris. The opportunity for destruction will be available afterward if we do not succeed in our efforts."

For a moment, it was almost as if the Caninoid would pounce on the Vulcan, body hunched, ears pointed forward, fangs bared, breathing turning shallow; noticing the aggressive posture, Duncan Argyle sent a signal to the two security officers at the turbolift doors and their had went discreetly but firmly to their belted phaser, all unblinking eyes on the alien.

And then, only a growl rumbled through his furred throat.

"Garawl to attack force; take firing position and await my command. If the other ship interferes, continue attack pattern."

It was then that the voice of Joey Sisko was heard over the open channel.

"I heard you, Captain Syntron... and you too, Draxx commander. We are acknowledging. But be warned; any hostile move against our ships will be met with equal force. All your vessels have been identified, scanned for weaknesses and locked on by our weapon systems. Twenty class IV phasers and twenty quantum II torpedoes will be sent your way on the first salvo; and we have plenty more to serve. This ship has been built as a mobile space station able to protect our people from such an attack. Please, in the interest of interstellar peace, do not test our capabilities nor our resolve in this."

The ominous silence was then broken by the musical tones of the X'Ell science chief.

"I'm sending out a class IV probe and deploying it's six subprobes in an asynchronized random transmitting pattern with the recorded compressed prefix code and a set of commands to shut down all systems except the structural integrity field... which will drain all power including life support."

On the screen, a small light shot out of the Phoenix' bow and then spread like an exploding comet into six directions.

"Life support! But... the crew..."

"Is not aboard, Commander Sisko."

Again there was complete silence at the other end of the channel for a good moment as, on screen, the Draxx destroyers took a hemispherical formation with the inside englobing the position of the Polaris and the Horizon, all weapons pointed at the diminutive Aquarius class vessel still drifting away from the planet.

"Passive scans seem to confirm this, Lieutenant," finally admitted the half-Bajoran in the Horizon's command chair. "No one aboard... But our sensors do not have your nanite enhancements to make sure. Hence why we did not notice... But then... where... how..."

More pressing matters put these questions aside as Jonathan's implants flashed crazily again on his head.

"I sent you with this transmission the schematics of our caging process for the Zetarians. Please proceed immediately as devised with your *entire* landing bay... and ready your tractor beam to haul the Polaris in."

"Understood... Confirming readiness... proceeding... now!"

They all saw then that, suddenly, the Polaris went almost dark except for a faint shimmering all around it. Almost at the same instant, two precise beams from the Phoenix shot at the front part of the extended nacelles, blowing up the faintly glowing ramscoop collectors to smithereens. Then, a blue ray shot from the underside of the Horizon's stern and the much smaller vessel was dragged behind and then inside the massive hull.

"We have them!" exclaimed Sisko with obvious relief. "The Polaris overpowered SIF is holding them inside the ship and our entire docking bay is further envelopped in Commander Rogers' cage. They're not going anywhere now!"

"Except for them!" suddenly exclaimed Argyle, pointing at the screen.

Suddenly, the six subprobes and their main platform reassembled by themselves as the multi-vented probe fired its impulse drive at maximum velocity away from all the ships... readying its warp drive.

Could some or all of these non-corporeal beings managed to have transported themselves to such a confined space? the Vulcan captain briefly pondered.

Syntron immediately turned to his CSO.

"Mister Livingstone, scan that probe for signs of the Zetarians."

"I detect seven distinct neurogenic signals... and they're going into warp."

Just as the Avian Starfleet officer said it, there was a sudden flash of light as the near-light speed distorted image of the conical probe disappeared at supraluminal speed. That they saw but for a brief, fleeting instant as all the lighting and the consoles on the bridge flashed wildly for several seconds and the image became a jumble of pixels before resuming to a briefly distorted, colorless image of the star system and then returning to normal.

At that moment, Garawl put his big hands to his large ears and howled in pain while a loud screeching sound was heard about him and Jonathan Livingstone swooned and collapsed with a grunt on the floor.

Syntron called sickbay.

"Medical emergency on the bridge. Our avian CSO has collapsed."

The captain then approached the Draxx.

"What is your condition Garawl?" Syntron inquired with concern as he optically examined him.

Garawl was shaking his head and blinking his eyes back at him, seemingly unable to hear him and somewhat stunned as if by an electric charge. The ship's standard EMH shimmered on the bridge right beside a dazed Livingstone, but then disappeared in a flash of static, his expression decidedly annoyed. A moment later, the bridge door opened and a medical team rushed to the fallen CSO. Kneeling beside him while sending a quick glance at the shaken Draxx, assessing the urgency of the X'Ell's condition over that of the visiting alien with a medical tricorder. But the Avian officer too was shaking his head and getting back to his wobbling feet.

"Easy Lieutenant; stay down while I complete my medical scan."

"There is... no need... Doctor," Jonathan assured him with a voice and a stare getting stronger by the second as he straightened himself and his uniform. "It was but a momentary inconvenience, more startling than hurtful."

It looked much more an understatement than a factual account in the eyes of his crewmates, but the X'Ell was apparently recovered from whatever had struck him. And that he now proceeded to explain to his commanding officer.

"Electromagnetic pulse, Captain; the Zetarians used all the transmission channels and scanners of the probe to blast us with an EM discharge, powerful enough to overpower our systems protections against such a pulse. It blinded all our sensors and froze all our systems... including my *sh'reekh'ree'ss*, the implants connected to my own brain. It is over now, but it was not a pleasurable experience."

"I... concur," Duncan Argyle's voice added behind Syntron.

With the more spectacular collapse of the Science chief and the startling howl of pain of the Draxx, no one had noticed that the liberated Borg too had been just as affected by the EM pulse. All his cybernetic implants had short-circuited, just like the ship's systems, literally paralyzing his whole organic body parts as well. His living organs had taken some time to recuperate enough to reinitiate his technological connections. He too was still a bit dazed by the leftover pain, but he was nevertheless already back to his tactical sensors.

"Scanners report that they burned their whole impulse drive and most of their emitters powering that attack... but they have gone to warp. Short range scans reveal nothing. Our long range scanners are still rebooting from the EM pulse."

"So are the ears of our guest here," the medic stated. "He was assaulted by ultrasonic frequencies from the disabled systems. Obviously his hearing is much more sensitive than those of Humans. It will take a few minutes more before he can hear normally again. We have several Andorians and Caitians still dazed as well on other decks and the Ferengis all passed out. Vulcans of course will not show it, even as they were affected too."

That last one was directed at the Captain while looking intently at him.

An eyebrow raised as the Vulcan processed the information and pondered on the question.

"Curiously, this particular impulse did not faze me to the degree that it impacted others. I had incorrectly assumed that those frequency bursts I was experiencing were emanating from our own equipment."

"That's... what all the other Vulcans on board stated... Sir," the medic said with raised eyebrows and a dubious twist at the corner of his mouth before turning his attention to the Draxx.

The captain then engaged ship-wide communication.

"Attention crew... this is the Captain. Our ship was just bombarded with an external electromagnetic pulse. All crew members impacted by the affects of this pulse are ordered to report to sickbay if they have not yet been evaluated by medical personnel. If you were affected and are currently on duty, your counterpart from another shift can cover your post and remaining duties."

Shifting topics, Syntron continued with his announcement.

"All department heads... have your teams run diagnostic scans and tests of all vital equipment within your domain. Your personnel are to report any and all abnormalities to you for your report before replacing any damaged equipment. A thorough itemization of all impact damage must be on record."

Syntron paused for a moment as he glanced about the bridge before concluding.

"Until notified otherwise, we are still on high alert. No one is to send any signals out or receive and external transmissions unless authorized. Captain out."

"Captain," Bijoû then announced; "we are receiving a signal from the Firebird. They indicate that they are returning and have sent a report from Commander Riker."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant. Notify them of the attack which occurred and that we will be pursuing the escapees momentarily"

the captain turned his attention briefly to his chief engineer.

"Commander Rogers, peruse the report from the Firebird and see if there is anything pressing or enlightening within the contents."

"Perusing, aye captain," David responded, whilst turning back to his console and accessing the Firebird's message.

Syntron stepped back over to the helm.

"Mister Traynor... project the path of that probe and immediately set a course to intercept."

"I have the course laid in, Captain. Engaging now."

With the ship en route, the captain brought his attention back to the Draxx officer.

"Are you able to hear me, Garawl?" Syntron questioned, as he gazed intently at him with professional concern.

"Syntron of the Phoenix! stop your ship now before my pack..."

He was interrupted by a sudden series of jolts that almost sent them all to the deckplates.

"The Draxx fleet has turned on us and fired gravimetric torpedoes! " Argyle reported. " Lucky we jumped to warp just as they detonated! Only minor damage to the stern... with our shields down, we would have been pulverized! Sir... they are in pursuit and targeting us again!"

The Draxx activated his own transmitter in earnest.

"This is Garawl! Hold fire! This is not an abduction! I repeat; this is not an abduction! No Zetarians boarded this ship during the energy pulse directed at us!"

"Understood, Sir," came the hoped reply. "When our sensors were operational again and we saw the alien ship warping out..."

"Follow the alien vessel in pursuit of the escaped ones and fan out to cover a larger vector," interrupted Garawl. "I will stay on board the vessel to monitor the search."

"Acknowledged."

Calm returned to the bridge as, on screen, the thirty destroyers spreaded out in a large formation like an umbrella opening as they too now looked out for the fleeing probe.

* * *

Nodding in agreement to the Draxx leader, Riker spoke with obvious relief in his voice.

"Well then, allow me to arrange the meeting."

Turning and activating a comms panel, Riker spoke to the helm.

"Take us back to the Phoenix. We need to get back to the ship. Hail them, and let them know of our current status."

"Aye, Sir. Sending report right now."

Barely was the channel closed that it signaled to Riker again.

"Sir, it's Captain Kheren."

The deep soft voice of the Andorian ship commander followed right after it.

"Commander Riker; our sensors detect weapons signatures within the orbits of the inner planets of the system. We are moving out to investigate at top speed... but from here at warp 6, it will take us forty minutes. The Firebird can be there in twelve."

Shanarl's rough voice answered him first.

"Alpha of the United Federation of Planets; we will follow your beta over there... and see for ourselves if deeds match words."

And so saying, he turned to exit through the hatch leading to his shuttle. Assuming their vessel could also make warp 9, it would still be at least a few minutes behind the Captain's yacht, depending on the time it would take his shuttlecraft to get back to his own ship.

And there was apparently no time to loose.

Watching the hatch close and glancing around the room to make eye contact with the crew, Riker just smirked slightly.

"Well, you heard the Captain. Get us there, as fast as possible. Hail the Phoenix and let them know we are on our way."

Grabbing the holster off the canister behind him Riker reattached his phaser pistol, checked it and reholstered the weapon. Looking over at Doctor Gray, who was also rechecking his equipment, Riker smiled.

"No rest for the weary old friend. Out of the frying pan and into the fire"

"Indeed. Hopefully no one gets burned" The Doctor responded.

With a wooshing sound filling their cabin's enclosed atmosphere from the engines at their back, the Firebird was off and en route to the inner planets. The yacht flew at high warp towards the star system for several minutes when Mrrin M'ata's tactical board beeped. To everyone's questioning stare, the tall felinoid woman answered addressing Joshua Riker.

"It appears to be a probe, Commander... one of ours, class IV... it altered it's trajectory out from the solar system and is now moving on an interception course at warp 6. ETA three minutes."

"That's a multivector stellar survey probe," reminded them science officer Hunter, her antennae twitching nervously over her short-cropped white mane. "It's sensor suite is designed to detect energy particles and analyse stellar gases and radiation fluxes. Why would it be attracted to us?"

On Elisha Leone's console, a series of blips announced that the probe was hailing them on a standard subspace channel that it was ready to transmit data.

"A hail?" Riker asked.

"Standarrd trransmission rreadiness signal, Sirr," Mrrin M'ata specified from her own tactical readout. "It detected us and veerred off courrse frrom out of the Eden system to interrcept us at warp 6... and I detect that it's impulse drrive is completely burned out."

"Must have it's computer core full of data," Science officer Hunter added from her own scans. "It's energy level is quite high. It must have been through hell to be in this kind of shape."

"Answer it, let's see what it has to say."

Glancing over to tactical Riker continued.

"Be ready to shoot it down."

As soon as the channel was open, violent red and blue discharges of lightning spurted out from the comm panel to jump at every person on board, starting with Leone, Hunter and M'ata sitting right in front of their consoles.

* * *

Back in the center seat, the captain of the Phoenix didn't react to the near disaster just averted and addressed his science officer.

"Where is the Firebird along with the Horizon's stardrive and saucer in relation to this probe's projected path?"

"Undetermined, Sir," Livingstone answered shaking his head. "Any change of direction of the probe while at warp was undetectable as our systems were overloaded by the EM pulse. I am making a general sweep with long range passive sensors. Taking into account that the maximum speed of such a probe is warp 6, this means a distance of sixty four point eight million kilometers every second away from us... in a volume of space of nearly three hundred billion cubic kilometers growing exponentially for each of those seconds. And our search capability is limited with passive scans."

"Continue long-range scans, Lieutenant" the captain ordered. "As remote as the odds may seem, this volume of space which we are examining is virtually empty."

The captain addressed the alluring Deltan counselor manning the communications station.

"Lieutenant Bijoŭ, send a scrambled message to the Firebird along with the Horizon stardrive and saucer sections of our trajectory. Request that they initiate long-range scans for this probe from their positions. It may be possible that we could triangulate a signal from this probe among all of our vessels working in conjunction."

Having quickly scanned the document, Rogers noted the mostly known data contained within, but a snippet of intelligence stood out. Noting it specifically into his PADD, David stood and returned to the centre seat positioned under the transparent skylight. Handing his PADD to Syntron, David concisely reported his findings.

"Sir. The Horizon bridge module evaded the enemies torpedoe's by powering down shields, which are graviton based. The system's gravity well confused the targeting of the incoming weapons."

Knowing full well the Vulcan captain would, like Captain Kheren, realize such a tactic would probably only work once, David continued.

"The Firebird is under escort by six destroyer-type vessels like those composing the nearby Draxx fleet, which Commander Riker insist's are non-belligerent. The Horizon bridge module is following at lesser speed."

Glancing at the chronometer over the main viewer, Rogers calculated elapsed time from the message receipt from the Phoenix' yacht.

"ETA for the Firebird and escort, two minutes."

Noting that his captain was investigating all options in finding the disappearing probe, David interjected his own thoughts on the tactic used by Captain Kheren.

"Sir, even if we drop shields to evade incoming torpedo fire, we cannot drop the forcefield on the prisoner's shuttle. That level 10 field will undoubtedly attract their gravity based sensors. The only option other than taking the hit would be to jettison that shuttle to draw the torpedo's away from us. Like a chaff flare from earth history."

Having put that forward, David also knew his captain. Syntron would never sacrifice those lives, even though they were dangerous to the Phoenix and her crew, just to save his own ship. Starfleet didn't allow that either except when the ship's crew was in unavoidable jeopardy. Seeing just such a thought in Syntron's eye's as he spoke, David tilted his head slightly and shrugged his shoulders, indicating he knew what would be Syntron's response to the jettison idea, while also conveying Rogers' own requiescence. His job was to suggest alternative's to the captain, not to implement them.

And Rogers also noted one other thing about his captain. With Riker on the Firebird, and the ship's councillor at comm, the Vulcan sat alone in the center of the bridge, flanked by empty chairs. Befitting perhaps; the lonely burdens all starfleet captains faced from that lofty seeming chair.

"The shields on the exterior of this ship may be dropped accordingly if necessary, but the integrity of the forcefield surrounding the shuttle containing the Zetarians must remain intact, regardless of circumstance," the captain noted to all. The shuttle will remain ensconced in the hanger bay until we are able to send it and the occupants safely to the surface of the planet. However, we will need to devise a method to ensure that the shuttle is unable to leave the surface after it arrives."

"That would be the easy part, Captain," Livingstone answered while his eyes kept searching space through his passive sensors. "We only have to send the shuttle and it's caging grid into the gravity well of the planet in a powerless trajectory to crash in one piece on the surface. Going through the negative energy field will render all power sources and systems inert and the crash will obliterate all materials. Being of pure energy, the Zetarians will survive the passage if we synchornise speed of descent with the time required to clear the field before the forcefield fails completely. having no materiality, they will effortlessly survive the crash proper... and then be physically unable to use any possible scrap left over, if any."

He paused a moment from his scanning to look at his captain when he spoke next.

"That, of course, assumes that we have a way to bring back our people still trapped down there... and without giving another way for the Zetarians to escape like they did with the Phoenix. *That* is the hard part, Sir."

"Indeed" Syntron confirmed. "But first we must resolve the situation with the Zetarians that hijacked the probe."

Syntron then inquired "Any signs of the Firebird, the Horizon stardrive or saucer section?"

"Without our enhancing nanites in their systems, the Horizon is barely recovering from the EM pulse," the X'ell reminded him. "I have the Firebird on an approach course to the system at high warp with six Draxx escorts not far behind and the bridge module following more slowly further away... and... Sir, the probe just dropped out of warp! It is right between them and us!"

His big golden eyes shot up towards Syntron.

"It sent a subspace hail to the Firebird... and they opened a channel to receive the transmission."

They all knew by now what that meant. And Garawl stated it with heavy finality.

"Your people aboard that ship are now compromised."

The way he said it was exactly like a death sentence.

Receiving the information as it was conveyed weighed heavy on the shoulders of the captain. A moment later he leaned all the way back in the center seat as he gazed over at his chief engineer.

"Commander Rogers... I will need you to assemble a small team and attempt to clear out these seven Zetarians from the Firebird. But in this case, we will need to... as the antiquated Earth expression goes, *get the genie back into the bottle...* and seal them up until they can be deposited back onto that prison planet."

Syntron recognized that this would be like going back into the fire again for the chief engineer after their narrow escape from the Nuntio, but he also knew that the Commander would not want to abandon his crewmates to a similar fate or worse. Rogers was also the one with the skills to pull off such an engineering feat.

"Alpha Shanarl's force will destroy them long before you can get to them," Garawl stated flatly.

On the tactical display, it was indeed obvious the six Draxx destroyers following the captain's Yacht were already moving in for the kill.

The captain turned to face the Draxx representative.

"Then it is up to you Garawl to convince them otherwise. Have we not already demonstrated our capacity to contain the Zetarians within the shuttle in our hangar bay along with driving them from the Polaris?"

Before a response came, Syntron continued further with his point.

"Your troops once again are too hasty to lose trust in us and prepare to act in violence. One of the concerns you and your associates initially had about us was that we were hostile and a threat to sentient beings in this region. Yet we have been the ones showing restraint and working through alternative solutions throughout the course of these events."

"And yet, they have escaped your grasp and now threaten you again."

He turned to face the screen while speaking in a cold stoic manner.

"I am not the Alpha; I do not make the decisions. The Alpha is out there, not me... or you. We cannot transmit to them in time at this distance... and there is no more time to discuss. You are too far away and don't have the time necessary to implement your measures. The moment they just take control of either the helm system or it's operator, they will flee with all the speed your craft out there can muster."

On the viewer, the destroyers had already opened fire and the class IV Probe was instantly obliterated.

"They have escaped from you; they will not escape us."

David had thought hard during the request to clear the Firebird but could not come up with a more practical solution than one; a highly risky one at that. Hitting controls on his panel, he ran a quick simulation on the idea and found it plausible. As Garawl defiantly defended his alpha counterpart and the situation on the Firebird grew dire, David sent the plan and simulation directly to captain Syntron's PADD, then rose quickly and headed to the turbolift, while informing Syntron of his destination. "Captain, there's no time. I need to be in transporter room one", he stated as the turbolift doors swooshed shut between them.

As he exited the lift he informed the nearby security guard that he needed all the EVA suits he could round up as fast as possible, then continued past the Lieutenant into the transporter room and relieved the operator.

"Get out, Ensign," Rogers stated brusquely as he started setting up the parameters for a transport from the Firebird.

Working as fast as he could, David aligned the field coils of the transporter system and then began synchronizing the phase dampers. As they were brought into sync, the security Lieutenant and another red shirt entered the bay, depositing nine EVA suits onto the floor near the transporter pad. David nodded thanks at the pair and ordered them also out of the room with a curt, guttural "Leave!"

The phase dampers were now in sync and Rogers set up a shunt through the subspace field coils and, just before initiating transport, spoke to the main computer.

Computer. Erect a level ten forcefield around transporter room 1, then lock all transporter command interfaces ship wide to security level 10 after forcefield activation. Authorization Rogers beta, alpha five."

As usual, the impersonal voice of the computer responded promptly and concisely.

"Level 10 forcefield engaged. Ship transporter functions now at level 10 security."

David nodded absently as he began the highly risky but life saving subspace transport of all the occupants of the Firebird. His lockdown of the transporters and the forcefield within the transporter room assured the safety of the rest of the Phoenix from incursion when the Zetarians were beamed into the bay along with the entire Firebird crew. No one inside the transporter room, including himself, could order the forcefield down or engage the transporters for site-to-site. Only Captain Syntron had that level 10 authority on the Phoenix.

Because a subspace transport had to shunt through the subspace field coils, the beam in itself would be longer than normal. David could only imagine the feeling of such a slow transport process on the Firebird crew as the targetting scanners locked onto the lifeforms on the Firebird so far away, and the Heisenberg compensators accounted for all the subatomic particles of the crew.

If it worked.

Safe transporter range was forty thousand kilometers at best. Anything beyond would loose cohesion as the beam would traverse too much space particles. The enhanced nanites might help a bit, and discovery of Iconian ancient supertechnology proved it at least feasible, but no one in the Federation had ever succeeded such long distance teleportation before... except the times Starfleet had experimented with subspace teleportation at the end of the 24th century.

For the sake of his crewmates, Rogers hoped this would be the time.

* * *

As the lightning and light creatures began to flow from the panel towards the crew, Riker jumped over to the panel next to him, mashing a few keys quickly. In a blue shower of light, Leone, M'ata and Hunter disappeared from their chairs and materialized slightly behind Riker surrounded by a security forcefield. Tapping another set of buttons, the hum of forcefields filled the room as the panels, bridge section and cargo area were all now covered in a zig zag maze of forcefields. While his actions saved the crew, Riker felt a sense of failure as he noticed the glowing red eyes coming from Hunter behind the forcefield.

Riker activated the transporter again, beaming the remaining crewman from the bridge section into the cargo and crew area. Glancing over, he looked to Ensign Tolo, as the chief shuttle mechanic was on every Firebird mission.

"Tolo, rumor has it these things don't like Bolians."

"I don't like them either, Sir."

With a soft smile, Riker pointed to the helm controls.

"I am going to need you to fly this thing, You're the only one here who can't be controlled."

Nodding slightly, Tolo sighed as the force field in front of him dropped and he slid past the stations as the red creatures swarmed him and several entered his head. Tolo dropped to one knee and shook before letting out a gurgling belch and the two red creatures exited through his mouth. Shaking his head, the Bolian stood back up and sat at the helm's chair. Looking around the cockpit, Tolo glanced back at Commander Riker and only shook his head again.

"I can't fly this thing myself, Sir."

Glancing to his crew and knowing they had to be protected, Riker simply smiled.

"You won't have to."

With a soft smile, Riker dropped the force field in front of him and, before anyone could say anything, he lunged towards two of the blue creatures, appearing to grab them. Grabbing at his eyes in pain, Riker opened them to reveal a strong blue glow.

"Joshua! What are you doing?" Doctor Gray exclaimed.

"Saving your skin, old friend," Riker responded in a voice that was not quite his own.

Before the Doctor could say anything else, Riker had ripped an engineering kit off the floor and began to work with his holstered phaser pistol. A few buttons and sparks later and, in what felt like only a few seconds, the Commander pointed his weapon towards the swirling red colors and fired several bolts. Each bolt struck a red energy being and vaporized it before the pistol sparked and exploded in Riker's hand.

Glancing down at his burning and bloody hand, he smiled and looked back at the crew.

"Three down."

As if talking to himself, Riker glanced at the damaged pistol laying on the ground at his feet.

"My father gave me that..."

"Could you at least tell me what you did?" the EMH asked.

"No, it is the only one... Like I said, my father... Rifles, tricorders... damn, nothing else,"

Walking over to the tactical panel, Riker charged the weapons of the Captain's Yacht.

"Are the rest still there?" Riker said again as if talking to himself in a voice not quite his own.
"Good."

With that Riker activated the phasers on the Firebird and, with two short blasts, the probe was destroyed. Powering down the tactical panel, Riker leaned over Tolo.

"We have to communicate with the Draxx now before..."

"Before what, Sir?" Tolo inquired.

"Before they kill us all," Riker said softly, gesturing towards the ships around them. "They are going to..."

Before Riker could finish his sentence, the entire crew was surrounded by a blue humming light and dematerialized. In an instant, the entire Firebird was empty.

As the matter stream grabbed the crew, the shunt into subspace would likely seem like an agony of time to those being transported, although only a matter of five or six seconds passed. Still, those five to six seconds were twice longer than a standard transport. Four seconds passed then five. Suddenly the subspace signal emerged back into normal space on the transporter pad. David continued to modulate the patterns, assuring the signatures matched from both the target and destination streams. This ensured the integrity of the re-materialization.

The matter streams coalesced onto the pad area and suddenly, the entire Firebird crew was aboard the Phoenix, locked within a level 10 forcefield with no way out excepting the order of the Phoenix captain. As Rogers stepped back from the now inert transporter panel, he again came face to face with the red glow of a Zetarian in the glowing eye's of his engineering officer, Leland Hunter. David again felt the panic that had gripped him on the Nuntio. Drawing his sidearm, previously set to high stun, David gestured at the EVA suits on the floor in front of them.

"No buts, people. All of you. Put one on!"

As none of them made an initial move toward obeying, David noticed the glow in more than one set of eyes.

"As you can see around you, the level 10 forcefield is up. We're all going no farther than this room. Now, your all getting suited up, or your going down. Your choice."

"The suits will protect you all," Riker spoke, again in a voice not quite his own.

"This one does not need one," Riker continued gesturing to Tolo.

Noting the crew was hesitant, David fired one shot into the forcefield to their left to confirm it's existence.

"You should listen to him," Riker said again, gesturing for the suits.

On the bridge, the shot enacted the alarm at Tac-Sec that the phaser shot had occurred.

Pointing towards Hunter and M'ata, Riker continued.

"If you notice their eyes."

Riker gestured towards the crew members with red eyes. "This one saved the rest" gesturing towards himself, Riker continued; "the rest of them are on still on the ship. Some of us too"

Rogers glanced fleetingly between Lieutenant's Hunter and M'ata as they stood seemingly stoically, making no move toward donning the proffered suits. MCPO Gorski stepped carefully off the pad and grabbed the nearest EVA suit. As he started to put it on, Ensign MacGyver followed slowly, as if attempting the maneuver would get him in trouble with M'ata or Hunter. Looking back to commander Riker, David noted the blue hue where human sclera was normally white. As Riker finished speaking, David apologetically raised his empty hand, while still keeping his phaser trained toward Lieutenant Hunter.

"I am sorry, Commander, but the transporters are under level 10 security access."

David meant this for Riker's knowledge, as he would know not even the Phoenix XO could access the security.

"I couldn't beam your friends here even if I wanted to."

Suddenly, as Rogers was looking at Riker, both M'ata's and Hunter's eyes shone brightly as the entities within them burst forth toward David. Perhaps they thought Rogers was the only way out of this prison transporter bay now. Regardless, David noticed the flash of light and, without thought, fired his phaser. Lieutenant Hunter and the angry red glow preceding him, caught the full effect of the blast and Leland collapsed like a dropped empty sack. The Zetarian rushing toward Rogers simply dissipated within the phaser blast cone.

But M'ata's Zetarian had planned this. Sacrificing its companion in the phaser blast, it was milliseconds behind and through to Rogers before his phaser could be brought to bear. As his mind was thrust into a red wall of writhing nothingness, David's last thought was, perhaps his stepfather had the easier death.

"Quickly all of you, put the suits on," Riker ordered the Firebird crew in a voice that was now very much his own.

Rogers glanced over towards Riker and their eyes met. The red glow from Rogers' eyes and the blue from Riker's were the only eyes in the room that showed any sign of infection. As Rogers raised his phaser towards Riker, Riker simply smiled and looked down at his hand.

"He is not going to be very happy about this" Riker said in a soft charged voice as he opened his palm.

"I know, I will owe him one," Riker responded to himself as he glanced down revealing the portable transmitter from Doctor Gray

Before Rogers could react, Riker tossed the emitter towards the Chief Engineer and the Doctor began to materialize. The energy from the holographic doctor appearing was enough to distract the entity within Rogers. As it glanced slightly over towards the materializing Doctor Gray, Riker rushed forwards and struck Rogers just below the throat with a palm strike. As Rogers stumbled backwards from the strike, Riker wrestled the phaser away. Then, with a quick glance to ensure the phaser was still set at full stun, Riker fired into Rogers, dropping him.

As Rogers fell towards the ground, the flash of red light enveloped his head and, with reflexes Riker only had because of his new found brain assistant, Riker thumbed the setting at level 16 and fired again, vaporizing the red entity.

Glancing around the room momentarily, it appeared that the only entity still within the transporter room were the ones inside the head of the first officer.

"It is done," said the eerie voice through the first officer's mouth. "we are the only one left."

"The others on the probe were destroyed as well," said another voice that was not Riker's even as it came out through his lips.

Without his own will, Riker's gaze went to M'ata. The feline woman was coiled to spring like a tigress at the first sign of threat from the possessed Human. Slowly, the phaser was offered to her. As she took it to point it at Riker, both ghostly voices spoke in turn.

"We are sorry for what happened."

"We tried to stop the others when they invaded your ship, but we failed."

"Fortunately, your fellow flesh creatures on the planet had programmed their vessel's computer to interchange their living crew with artificial counterparts the moment our energy signature was detected aboard."

"We thought we had become corporeal again, but we had been in truth occupying constructs of photons and forcefields chained to the vessel's power grid."

"When the planet's negative energy barrier sucked out all energy, we survived as the dying forcefields insulated us just long enough for the ship's leftover momentum to carry passed it and into orbit."

"By then, we had become incorporeal again, only able to interface on a basic level with the ship's powerless systems."

"A few of them managed to reach your probe and only two of us succeeded in following those five others that tried to escape."

"You have disposed of them."

"Now, we only wish to return home."

"We will do all we can. We owe each other that much." Riker responded with the same outwardly voice.

Reaching for a comm panel, Riker stopped and shook his head.

"Those on your ship may not accept words from us," he said as if distant within his own mind.

As he glanced around the room, the first officer nodded to Doctor Gray, who was checking to David Rogers. Gesturing towards the dazed chief engineer, Riker nodded in agreement with himself.

"The words are going to have to come from him, at least for now."

On the bridge of the USS Phoenix, everyone followed as the unexpected events unfolded within the Firebird.

Afterward, Syntron faced the Draxx officer once again.

"At times, Garawl, ingenuity and patience can be more effective weapons when confronting adversarial circumstances than hostility."

"At times, yes," the Caninoid commander agreed. "but chance is not, and we do not take any. Surprise served you well... this time. Do not forget what happened to your other starship... and ours."

Obviously, the Nuntio hadn't been as lucky, lacking the foreknowledge the crew of the Phoenix gained from their sacrifice and that of many Draxx. It was a lesson Garawl, for one, was not going to forget.

"Captain... we're being hailed," Counselor Bijou then announced with a smile. "It's Captain Kheren."

Syntron had been out of communication with the Andorian captain of the Horizon for quite a while by then. For a Vulcan, he appeared rather gratified to hear this news; especially not knowing the current status of his counterpart from the fleet.

"Counselor, patch him through the main viewer" Syntron commanded.

"Yes, Sir," the alluring Deltan woman confirmed as she transferred the signal through. The familiar image of the dark blue skin contrasted by the long white mane with antennae sprouting from the side top of his head appeared larger than life on the viewscreen.

"Kheren to Syntron; you lost something?"

"Captain," explained then Jonathan Livingstone looking at his sensors, "the Horizon's bridge module is entering the system with the Firebird in tow."

A shift to the external view showed the saucer-shaped craft of the flagship reaching the very edge of the star system with the sleek captain's yacht tethered behind by a blueish energy beam. Right behind it, six more dagger-shaped destroyers were regrouping with the thirty others that had followed the Phoenix to reassemble into the massive Draxx dreadnought. Then the image returned to the frozen indigo features of the Andorian commanding officer.

"Captain Kheren... despite these trying circumstances, you appear to be well."

"So do you, my friend. It seems you have the situation well in hand... and I must say I am as impressed as the Draxx are. We will leave your yacht in your vicinity and then rejoin with the rest of my ship. I have invited Alpha Shanarl on the Horizon to discuss what to do next. I would very much like for you and your senior officers to attend."

With the wisp of a smirk flashing across his otherwise stoic expression, the Vulcan captain repositioned himself slightly within the center seat.

"Indeed we did. Thank you for returning my wayward shuttle Captain Kheren."

Syntron turned his head as he swiftly instructed his Ops officer Garvex P'Trell to prepared tractor beams to receive the abandoned Captain's Yacht in-tow once it arrived into range. Despite the necessity for this occurrence, Syntron would read about this incident with heightened interest in his first officer's report on their journey back. He then turned his attention from the Andorian Ops officer on his bridge back to the one commanding the USS Horizon projected across the main viewscreen.

"My officers and I would be honored to participate in this meeting and to convene with the individual whose voice we have heard at intervals during my interactions with Garawl, beta of his pack. Much has transpired over the course of this mission to put us in position to finally address Alpha Shanarl in-person, per se."

"But first," Kheren then said, "I have people still stranded down on Eden IV... and that is the best estimate of their situation. Any idea how we could retrieve them, Captain?"

Syntron had arisen to command from his excellence as Kheren's chief science officer and then becoming his Number One. Obviously the flagship commander had not forgotten.

The Vulcan captain had been consciously and subconsciously contemplating this scenario since he was first made aware that members of the Polaris crew were stranded on the surface of the prison planet. This would be no easy task given that all normal methods would be useless in an environment that nullifies all forms of energy, along with the dangers inherent in such a place with aggressive Zetarians potentially swarming the region.

"I have one rather unorthodox idea in mind," Syntron eventually responded. "Allow me time to confer with my senior officers, who are rather indisposed at the moment, to validate the soundness of this plan. I will get back to you shortly, Captain Kheren."

"Keep in mind that time is of the essence. Just got a report about the Polaris being retrieved with not a soul on board except for Zetarians trapped in the holomatrix of the ship. We have no data yet as to what happened down there... or, if they are even still alive, what is their status and how long they might have left. We will provide you with whatever piece of information we might get from the Polaris logs and scans. We will also see to the colonists' situation and about the Draxx while awaiting your input. Let's give ourselves no more than eight hours to come up with a plan and implement it. Horizon out."

* * *

The view in the forward screen of the Diamond Star coalesced into the star field in front of the giant vessel. David, alone in the center seat on the bridge, sadly watched the enhanced targeting blip as it tracked the D'kora class Ferengi vessel of his stepfather. He could only imagine what those on the ship felt while falling into the event horizon of the black hole swirling on David's screen. As the blip neared the horizon, it suddenly winked out as the ship's sensors could no longer receive its telemetry. The singularity was swallowing even the D'Kora's subspace transponder signal now.

Then, without warning, Rogers was on the Ferengi vessel, watching the dark maw of the singularity surge in front of him. Time slowed to a creeping crawl and David could not even turn to run. His attempt to turn seemed to take a lifetime. He would fall forever into the black hole; slowly stretched over a thousand years until the stress on his body infinitesimally tore him apart year by year. David screamed!

"No!"

Trying to jump up, Rogers was restrained by Doctor Gray's palm on his chest. The hologram was immeasurably strong and David seemed like he no more than twitched even though he had tried to rise forcefully.

"Easy commander", Gray quipped soothingly. "You're alright."

David looked up into the wizened face of the Phoenix' doctor, his blue eye's looking into his own. David realized then where he was and looked left to right. The transporter room was calm, almost serene, except for the inert form of Lieutenant Hunter over by the pad. Nodding once to the EMH, David was allowed to rise. Shakily, Rogers stood and faced commander Riker; and then noticed the blue hue still in the XO's eye's. Quickly he looked around at the other crew members in the bay, but none of the others showed a hint of possession. David began to reach for his holster, then stopped as he realized it was empty. Looking over at the Doctor again, then at M'Ata, David then looked back at Riker.

"So? What's the deal uhm, ... commander?"

Smiling Riker spoke out in a voice filled with energy.

"This one gives us a saying. As your people would say... it is a long story"

Glancing over at Doctor Gray, Riker got the nod of approval as the Doctor spoke to Rogers' health.

Finally realizing that only Riker was possessed and at that only by the 'good guys', he spoke to the problem he had set up regarding the bay.

"We are sealed in, Commander. With your permission, I'll see what the captain can do for us."

Tapping his combadge, David spoke to the bridge.

"Rogers to bridge; Regulation 46A."

Quickly cutting off the comm, David glanced again at Riker, noting the blue hue as it seemed to pulse in two shades. He didn't entirely trust these so-called good Zetarians yet, thus his succinct message to the bridge. Syntron would know his crew were not alone here, and perhaps devise a way to communicate into the transporter bay that none of them here could communicate out of without risking the Zetarians to hitch-hike on the signal.

As it were, Counselor Bijou certainly understood. And so did Jonathan Livingstone. Thinking quickly, he conferred with security officer Argyle and the liberated Borg nodded. The X'EII then turned towards Syntron.

Awaiting a reply, David kept an eye on Commander Riker.

Already well into their communication, as Syntron spoke a tapping sound registered on the bulkhead. Translating the code quickly Argyle turned towards the Captain.

"All appears to be clear, Sir. Rogers' message was: *'Rogers / here / stop / good / aliens / contained / in / XO / stop'*. The Chief Engineer is reporting that all hostile beings have been defeated. However apparently two of the "good ones" are still inside Commander Riker, but they wish to speak peacefully."

Adjusting his implant slightly and gesturing towards the phaser rifle laying at his feet, Argyle continued.

"With preliminary security protocols, it appears there is minimal threat in opening the transporter room to evacuate the crewmen inside."

"Maintain a security field around Commander Riker until the remaining crew are confirmed clear of Zetarian subjugation," Syntron ordered. "Afterward, complete a full-scan of the interior of the shuttle and the hangar bay to ensure that there are no entities lurking anywhere in the area or equipment. Once this has been established, you will follow me into the shuttle bay and stand guard while I converse with these remaining entities."

He then glanced at the phaser rifle positioned near his feet.

"We will release the crew only after we are certain that no further risk is involved."

A series of bleeps emanated from the transporter control console to Rogers' right and then the faint hue of the level ten force field moved, shrinking inside the bay to come to a halt surrounding only Commander Riker. Noting the relieved look on Lieutenant Hunter's eyes, and the stoic, yet determined glance of Lieutenant M'ata's, David looked toward Doctor Gray. The holographic entity, solid as he was, seemed slightly relieved as well. Perhaps only because three of his four charges were, relatively, out of harms way. As soon as the force field ceased shrinking, forming a small but roomy circular shell around the Phoenix' first officer.

"We could all gather over here please, Lieutenants; Doctor Gray?"

Glancing around to the crew and agreeing that all were healthy, Doctor Gray nodded and gestured for the crew to follow. As the Firebird crew members gathered around Commander Rogers, the sentient EMH glanced back at Commander Riker, who had not moved.

"I am guessing you are going to have to stay here, old friend."

"This one understands, as do we," Riker responded with an energy echo in his voice.

After a moment, he tapped the small forcefield surrounding him and nodded in approval as the crew gathered around on the other side of the transporter room.

"You guys go on ahead, I'll wait here" the XO said in a voice that was clearly his own.

The security team meticulously checked the Firebird crew individually as they emerged together from the hangar bay. No signs of Zetarian influence were detected. Afterwards, full-passive scans of the interior of the shuttle and the hangar found only the entities within Commander Joshua Riker and those trapped earlier in a shuttlecraft. They were all contained within level 10 forcefields.

The captain ordered the crew of the Firebird to immediately report for a full medical analysis and diagnostics in sickbay before turning his attention to the assistant security chief.

"Lieutenant Argyle, follow me into the shuttle bay. Be prepared to respond accordingly in case anything runs afoul in there while I attempt to communicate with the remaining Zetarians."

"Aye, Captain," the liberated Borg answered, signaling for two guards to position themselves outside at the door. "Here is an EVA suit for you, Sir. All systems including life support have been shut off inside the shuttle bay."

As soon as they were both suited and came in, the door was manually locked behind them. A brief shimmer of energy told them that another forcefield had been erected around the depowered and evacuated hangar bay. The only visible thing beside what their headlamps showed was the prison shuttle, reconfigured as a Faraday cage to secure the Zetarians Science chief Livingstone had lured in there.

"How do you intend to communicate with them, Captain?" asked Duncan, frowning behind his faceplate. "They can't use the shuttle systems and it's a sure bet that they don't know Morse code."

As the captain was pondering the problem, Arguyle received a call from Livingstone, using the secured direct link they shared through their respective implants. After a moment, he nodded and turned towards the captain.

"Mister Livingstone is telling me that he has sent what he calls the SCH in here."

The security officer went back to the entrance and tapped the pre-arranged code on the door. The panel was manually opened and a guard at the door gave him a small disk that he brought back to the Vulcan, placing it on the floor between him and the cell-shuttle before stepping back with his phaser in hand.

"It has been coded to your personal code only, Sir."

This was the SCH, the Secured Communication Hologram, the device they had discussed earlier for the very purpose of communicating with the Zetarians without risking them escaping. As soon as Syntron would request it from the computer, the contained hologram would lure the aliens to it and trap them within the isolated, self-contained apparatus surrounded by a portable forcefield, the same way they had been initially in the shuttlecraft. This time however, they would be able to directly talk to the Zetarians through the small holographic matrix.

Syntron stood before the device as he gazed at the shuttle beyond the level-ten forcefield. They had the Auxiliary Briefing Room on deck 2 prepared with this device for such a meeting to occur with the Zetarians before the destruction of Nuntio and their subsequent emergency departure back toward the Eden system. So much destruction, loss of lives and almost catastrophic consequences with the Draxx had occurred before this opportunity would finally come into fruition once again. The question in the Vulcan's mind was would they be able to resolve all of these remaining situations peaceably?

He spoke to the computer.

"This Captain Syntron, commanding officer of the USS Phoenix. Initiate Holo-Matrix program Z-1A, security protocol authorization Syntron-1A-2B-Delta-Epison-3."

Within a matter of seconds the device activated and prevailed upon the entities trapped within the confined craft and presented them with an opportunity to speak once again; but this time without superseding at great risk a biological host.

As soon as it was connected, there was a spectacular display of fiery blue and red lights enveloping the holographic form of Jonathan Livingstone. Obviously, the X'Ell had taken his own parameters to quickly and easily build the program. It was a simple photon construct, with no forcefield component to give it substance and thus possibility to physically interact with the environment. Yet, it was tempting enough for the Zetarians to rush out of their cage and right into it, only to be caged again... but this time with an effective communication interface. In a moment, the swirling cloud of red and blue coalesced into the semi-translucent Avian humanoid form. The brain implants in it's feathered head flashed red and blue just like it's huge eyes.

The Vulcan commanding officer began with a simple introduction.

"I am Captain Synton. To whom am I addressing?"

"We are from Zetar. Release us."

With a deadpan expression, Syntron responded curtly.

"You state the obvious."

Inspecting the holographic projection for a few seconds longer, he continued with the same cold tone.

"We are familiar with your species and the danger you represent to those you come in contact with, going back one hundred forty-one point three-two standard years ago on Memory Alpha and other locales in our own universe. We witnessed what recently occurred aboard the Federation vessel Nuntio and the damage inflicted upon our ship when you appropriated our probes. What is it that you hope to accomplish with this freedom you are demanding?"

"We want to live."

"But not at the expense of other lives."

"We will do what we must to live again."

"We may not have life by taking it."

"We are superior; it is our due."

"No."

Garbled, eerie sounds, like sinister low voices speaking too slowly to be understood, emerged from the now open, barely moving beak. As the strange discourse went on, red and blue colors that had shifted alternatively in the eyes and the lights within the feathered mane of the transluscent X'Ell image now were swirling in a confusion of glowing hues. After a moment, the colors separated again and the voices regained their clarity.

"We shed our corporeal existence in order to survive. But we lost our mean to regain our lives. We could not escape our destiny," stated the hologram flashing blue luminous eyes at Syntron.

And then, eyes and *sh'reekh'ree'ss* turned red.

"Destiny is the wife of despair. We will not embrace your cowardice. We will live... if not as we planned, then... as we must."

Syntron stood by silently observing the conflicting exchange occurring between the two factions of the Zetarians utilizing the holographic matrix. As a pause between them emerged, he interjected; addressing his attention mainly to the blue- hued representative.

"The type of existence you speak of and desire no longer exists. It has not existed since you abandoned your corporeal forms long ago, nor will it come back to you presently or in the future; especially at the expense of other life forms. It is a circumstance that you must accept and come to terms with or risk losing what remains of your current state of being."

"We have come to understand this," the blue-eyed hologram acknowledged.

But then, the eyes glowed red.

"We must survive... we knew how we could... we had the means... but we lost it all with the destruction of our homeworld. Fate will not extinguish us. We will survive."

"Your original planet is gone... as you have described. However, you have the opportunity to continue to survive as you currently are on the nearby planet once again" Syntron confirmed to the red entities. "This existence may not be as you once were, but it is more than the majority of life forms have after their physical forms have perished."

Syntron tried to summarize their tenuous situation as succinctly as he could.

"We have the ability to transport you back to the surface once again. It is the only option available that will allow you to continue on. The Draxx are being persuaded by us not to destroy each of you here and now... but this is a very tentative arrangement that has been compounded by your recent attacks on us and them. Their fleet of ships surround all of us at this moment and they will not hesitate to end your existence should there be any deviation from this plan. This is the last chance that I can offer you."

There was a long moment during which red and blue lights crisscrossed the lights in the feathered hair of the artificial construct as well as in the eyes and then even the face and the entire translucent form of the hologram. All this time, the sinister slow growlings of numerous voices filled the air until, finally everything settled with a blueish glow.

"On one thing we all agree. We choose to live."

* * *

Having been checked over, and thoroughly at that, Rogers left the medical bay and proceeded to his office on deck 14. His throat would take a few more days to fully heal from the blow commander Riker had given him. Thinking on that, David silently forgave the Phoenix' XO, but even at that, he would never forget the bruising. He just hoped his voice would fully recover. As it was now, his speech sounded like an english speaking Breen. Finally seated at his desk, David first checked the ship's status and the forcefield containments in the hangar bay and transporter room one. Satisfied that these two important security measures were in no danger of relapse, David opened his personal log.

Personal log

Stardate 8831.2

I have returned to the Phoenix to find the Zetarians still safely confined within the improvised Faraday cage set up in the shuttle bay. Captain Syntron is going to try and talk to them. If I can, I will attempt to get commander Riker and his two ... parasites? ... out of transporter room one and down to the main shuttle bay as well. I've got a good idea on how this can be accomplished.

I don't fully trust these Zetarians, be they red or blue. Even the so-called good ones are suspect in my mind. Being imprisoned on that planet for years and years should likely drive any sentient a bit stir crazy. I hope the captain knows what he is up against.

End log.

Sealing the log, David arose and went to the turbo lift near main engineering, accessing it to

take him back to the bridge.

At the engineering station, Rogers took his seat and began with the set up of the force field transverse. It would allow commander Riker, and his parasites, safe passage from transporter room one to the shuttle bay, where-in the rest of the Zetarian's were stored. The transfer would be routine, but power intensive. As Riker walked through the ship the force field would follow not only him, but the sectors immediately surrounding his position on the ship. This would entail clearing the decks surrounding the path by audio/visual warning. namely, the ships internal alert system. A mobile level ten forcefield would squash anyone caught against the moving field.

As he set the course and allowed the decks to clear, David enabled the alert lights along the wall in transporter room one to accept his verbal intercourse and translate to pulsed lighting. Both audible and visual orders would inform Riker and his ... guests ... to receive instructions to proceed to the shuttle bay. Sending an alert to captain Syntron of Riker's impending travel and arrival, David then spoke to Riker through the lights in transporter room one.

"Commander Riker, please proceed directly to shuttlebay 1. Both you, and your guests, will be contained enroute. No deviation will be allowed. Rogers out."

Understanding the plan, the Exec of the Phoenix' bearded head nodded to gesture that all entities understood the plan. Taking his first few steps, he looked around, impressed as the forcefield shifted slowly with his movements. Pointing to himself, he spoke with the echoing double voice of his body-occupying aliens.

"This one knows the way."

The doors to the transporter room opened with a woosh as he walked through them and turned towards his destination.

Syntron received the transmission from Commander Rogers and conveyed the message afterward to the Zetarians via the holomatrix.

"Your remaining two members are currently en route to join you here... courtesy of our First Officer Commander Riker and through the ingenuity of our chief engineer."

Red and blue lights alternated within the eyes and through the head implants of the holographic X'ell.

"How do we know this is not just a plan to bring us all together to better annihilate us?" it asked as the glow settled to a reddish hue.

With a stoic look cast across his face, the Vulcan commanding officer addressed the accusation directly.

"If that were simply our intention, you would not exist at this moment to even ask that question."

Again, the colors shifted for a moment accross the hologram.

"On this we agree also; our existence is now in your hands. Let History and the cosmos judge you by your actions... as it was for us."

"Captain," Arguyle then announced, "Commander Riker and... guests."

With the acknowledging nod of his commanding officer, he opened the door and the First Officer of the Phoenix entered, a forcefield shimmering behind him. Smiling at Argyle, Riker entered the room and walked slowly towards the shuttle. Reaching for the controls, he pressed a few keys and manually opened the shuttle door. Looking back at those around the shuttle with his glowing blue eyes, Riker turned.

"This one says he hopes this works. No, he says; this *better* work."

The door to the shuttle opened and Riker stepped aboard as the door closed behind him. The door reopened a few moments later as he emerged to join Captain Syntron, his eyes back to their normal unglowing color.

"Well, that was fun," Riker said in his own voice this time, glancing over to the Captain.

The blue glow now was in the eyes and the lights peppering the image of Jonathan Livingstone.

"We will listen to your proposal."

Syntron gazed for a moment at the avian holomatrix before addressing all of the entities sharing occupation within it.

"While safely ensconced within a shuttle, you will be escorted back in orbit of the secure planet. The vehicle will be programmed to leave orbit and descend through the atmosphere. Even though the shuttle will eventually lose power when it crosses through the null region, you will be able to exit before the vessel impacts upon the surface of the planet. From there you will be free upon the surface to continue on in your present form."

"This is acceptable. Proceed."

The blueish glow left the hologram and, a moment later, as programmed into the closed system established between them, the Faraday cage reactivated itself around the shuttle as soon as the portable hologram was evacuated by the alien electromagnetic signal.

"Mister Livingstone confirms all alien signals are now confined within the shuttlecraft, Sir," Arguyle reported from his direct personal link with the science chief on the bridge.

Hearing the familiar voice of the security officer Riker nodded to him.

"Acknowledged Lieutenant, good work."

"Aye, Sir. Thank yo, Sir. And may I say, Sir, it is good to have you back."

"It is good to feel alone in my thoughts again," Riker replied.

He turned back towards Captain Syntron.

"Everything seems to be going according to plan, Captain. I will gather personnel reports from all stations en route."

Adjusting his uniform, he concluded with a raised eyebrow.

"I for one can't wait to get back to work and be done with this whole mess. This will make for quite a mission report."

Assistant chief Arguyle then addressed the Vulcan.

"The bridge confirms shuttle launch ready to be implemented, Captain. Mister Livingstone said that we just need to make sure everything in here is mechanically secured to the deck, then depressurize the shuttlebay completely and let decompression fly the shuttle out. They will have no chance to attempt an escape like if we would use tractor beams. He says that, if we do this close enough to the planet's gravity well, the shuttle will simply enter the atmosphere and consume itself... but not before the Zetarians will have cleared it's depowered hull. They will be back into their cell once again."

As he spoke, numerous technicians had entered the bay in EVA suits, a safety precaution against any surprise escape from the energy beings, and worked quickly to secure all other crafts with molecular-bonding clamps instead of the usual magnetic ones. The science chief was really taking no chances whatsoever. By the time Arguyle had finished, they all signaled that everything was ready.

Syntron nodded an acknowledgment as he stepped back from the shuttle area. This time they had contained the remaining Zetarians in a more expendable shuttle than the captain's yacht.

When they arrived back within orbit of the prison planet and all indicators were cleared for departure, the captain of the Phoenix gave the signal to begin the depressurization process of the hanger bay. They could all hear the hissing of gases and afterward witness the releasing of huge mechanical clamps as the massive bay doors began parting vertically down the middle. Lights blinked and flashed on both sides of the doors as the impressive view of millions of distant stars emerged into view as the gap between the doors widened among the vast coldness of darkened space. Almost immediately the shuttle was pulled out of the bay and, expelled by the rushing atmosphere out of the ship sucked into the void of space, entered the gravitational pull of Eden IV. Before the bay doors finished closing again, they could see the shuttle wink out of their sight, as if swallowed by a black hole when it entered the negative energy field of the prison planet.

Your future begins now, thought Syntron, as they watched the shuttlebay doors close on the deceptively peaceful vista of the planet.

CHAPTER 12 : HOPES AND FEARS

Back on his bridge, Syntron settled into the captain's chair.

"Counselor Bijoŭ, hail the Horizon and determine if Captain Kheren is available to converse."

"Yes, Sir" the Deltan officer responded, as she engaged the equipment at the communications station.

The captain then looked around the bridge, noting that his senior officers, apart from Jonathan Livingstone who had already been there the whole time, had yet to arrive back to their posts.

On the viewer, the familiar dark blue face of the flagship captain appeared. He was seated with Commander Sisko beside him, currently acting as if Exec, on one side of his unique triangular conference table around which were seated most of his senior officers. Syntron knew almost them all from his previous days serving aboard the USS Artemis; Commander Snowfire Ke'Leysha, the black-skinned Vulcanoid from the Illythirii empire between the Aenar chief counselor Lyrya and Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth, the Deltan Doctor and former CMO of his own ship; on the other side, he recognized the six-limbed Edoan chief of ops Cheonghi, himself between the only two senior officers of the flagship he had never served with, the stern Jem'Hadar security and tactical chief Aron'Son and the Romulan chief engineer S'tan Solius.

They had been apparently discussing for a while when their commanding officer had answered the Phoenix hail. There was a tridimensional representation of something very thin and pointed like a smallsword's blade floating at the center of the table, circled with suspended, scrolling data too small to make out on the main viewer of Syntron's ship.

"Captain Syntron," the soft deep voice of the Andorian captain greeted. "Glad to hear from you. We were just wondering about the status of the captured Zetarians on board your ship. My crew reported the launch of a shuttlecraft from the Phoenix."

With hint of waning exasperation surrounding him, the Vulcan responded.

"Despite a series of setbacks, the remaining Zetarians have been safely returned back to the planetary penitentiary of Eden IV." Then calmly he added; "As the antiquated Terran expression conveys... we have had our hands full."

Syntron then concisely told the Andorian captain, and due to their nearby proximity, his senior officers about the ordeals with both the Draxx and the Zetarians. Yet recounting these tales expended more time and effort than he anticipated.

Arriving at the bridge, David Rogers relieved Ensign Kennedy at the main engineering console, delegating her to the secondary console. As he sat, he noted the presence of Syntron and Livingstone, the former stoically seated in his command chair.

The main viewer was partially viewable through two of the semi-translucent drop-down status boards behind the command deck chairs. This suited Rogers fine, as he was an engineer, not a diplomat.

Through the slight distortion of the status boards, David could see that Captain Syntron was addressing the Horizon. Captain Kheren's distinctive dark skin tone was opaque through the film distortion, but the gap between these showed commander Sisko and partially the dark complexion of Commander Ke'Leysa.

David turned his attention back to the board in front of him, letting the captain converse with the Horizon crew.

"But now..." the Vulcan continued afterward, "We are prepared to assist with other matters at hand. If you and your reassembled crew are taking on the formidable task of retrieving the Polaris crew and the stranded Draxx down on the surface, we can continue our dialogue with the Draxx as we make our way to Eden III and the colonists there."

"Good job there, Captain Syntron," Kheren said. "My compliments and thanks to your crew and yourself for a job well done. You are all worthy of Starfleet's highest commendations. This could have turned ugly pretty quickly. As it were, we are about to follow your own example with the sixty Zetarians that tried to take over the Polaris. We have caged them inside a portable holomatrix, just like Commander Redding did on our escort ship. We will send them back down in a class 1 probe on the other side of the planet from our people so that they will not bother them for a while. Hopefully we will have them back long before that. Now, speaking of new friends... what is the current situation with the Draxx?"

The Vulcan squirmed a bit in his seat as he considered this next task, but not in any discernible way.

"Fortunately, recent events have allowed us a bit of latitude with the Draxx... but this was not easily earned nor something we can afford to squander. Optimistically, their Alpha should see our relieving Governor Sufra of her coveted position and taking her into custody as an indication of our intolerance of her actions. What happens beyond that is uncertain, but obviously your involvement will be needed at some point, Captain, to solidify and formalize any preliminary agreements that we may reach with the Draxx."

The Andorian usually stern countenance became even more dour, if that was possible for his frozen face.

"Governor Sufra, like her accomplices, has been relieved from her position on my personal authority as Captain of the Horizon and Mission Commander. I have filed charges of inciting a mutiny, stealing and damaging Starfleet material, endangering the lives of civilians and Starfleet personnel, violating an unauthorized area, disregarding mission orders and parameters and risking causing interstellar conflict with a previously unknown spacefaring civilization. I will personally bring these charges up, with our ship logs as evidence, upon her safe return and as soon as convenient. We will both preside with the interim colony leader. Commander Jureth will act as prosecutor, Commander Ke'Leysa will serve as her legal counsel for her defense and the jury will be composed of twelve of her fellow civilians. I will be confining her to quarters under guard until then. I already advised the colonists planetside to immediately appoint a replacement colony leader until a proper election for one can be held... which should be soon enough, since they already stated that they find Eden III perfectly suitable for their colonization project."

Kheren paused a moment, sighing with obvious distaste at the turn of events before looking again at the Vulcan.

"We are currently hard at work in devising a rescue operation. It would be best if you could stay and ensure the safety of our citizens on the other planet while we try and get back those marooned here. In the meantime, I do not wish the Draxx out there to get any other crazy idea about us or the colonists. You seem to have a good grasp of them so far, so I would appreciate your involvement in setting a good arrangement with them, especially if we are to leave a colony here. I do not need to remind you that we may be far from Federation Space, but we still operate under Federation law and Starfleet rules. We *are* the United Federation of Planets out here in this universe! If the Draxx have any valid claim to this system and wish us to leave, there will be no discussion; we will leave. But if they do not have such a claim, or if they are amiable to our presence here, please do as best as you can to secure a good treaty with them.

On the screen he stood up behind his conference table.

I have confidence in you, my friend. Whatever proper relationship you may establish here, I will support you."

"Thank you, Captain Kheren. I will ensure that our teams are prepared for the colonist mission ahead and will continue working with the Draxx leadership," the captain of the Phoenix confirmed.

Syntron shifted his attention for a moment to the dark-haired human helmsman stationed in front of him.

"Lieutenant Traynor, assuming an immediate departure, calculate the time until arrival at Eden III."

"Uh... fifty minutes... at full impulse, Sir" Traynor swiftly computed.

The Captain then turned to his second officer.

"Commander Rogers, prepare our officers for any contingency involving these colonists. As you heard, you will have fifty minutes to accomplish this."

He then came back to Traynor.

"Helmsman, engage impulse engines."

As the Phoenix pulled away, Syntron brought his focus back to the Andorian on the main viewscreen.

"I will be making contact with the Draxx leaders momentarily, Captain Kheren, and, as ordered, aim to reach some degree of resolution regarding the colonists and any potential claim they may declare on this region, by the time we reach Eden III. I wish you success with whatever undoubtedly unconventional means you may choose to initiate, in order to safely fetch those individuals stranded on that planet. I am certain that they are anxious to leave that environment, no matter the method required to do so."

"We do intend to give them a lift," Kheren said in a cryptic tone and a lowered head with lifted antennae that, for a moment, gave the impression that he was smiling mischevelously. "Good luck, Phoenix. Horizon out."

As the main viewscreen faded to black and then switched to the star-field ahead, Syntron engaged ship-wide communication once again.

"Attention crew of the USS Phoenix. We are currently forty-six point three-two minutes from arriving to Eden III. We will be involved with some delicate negotiations during this journey with the Draxx regarding the approximately ten thousand Federation colonists that are currently occupying that planet. Adhere to all Starfleet protocols throughout this mission and be prepared in case the colonist need medical treatment, materials or even a full-on evacuation. Stay alert. Captain out."

Syntron addressed the alluring Deltan communication's officer next.

"Counselor Bijoŭ, open communications with the Draxx and see if you are able to reach a high-ranking officer in their pack."

"Yes, Sir," the counselor replied, as she began the delicate process of communication protocols with this recently discovered species.

There was no margin of error in dealing with the Draxx she had learned. The first representative they sent came literally equipped with a bomb.

After a short moment, she turned her naturally seductive countenance towards her commanding officer. She truly felt at ease with him; as a Vulcan, he was one of the rare species truly immune to her overpowering natural charm, even her formidable pheromones that could drive a Human male crazy with lust, thanks to his kind's inbred self-control. And that same self-control will prove most useful against a volatile species like the one they were about to engage with.

"Captain; Alpha Shanarl of the Draxx is answering our hail."

On the screen, the view of the receding orb of Eden IV and the orbiting USS Horizon switched to that of the fearsome wolfish head of the Draxx leader. This time however, the succession of distorted images moving to show glistening fangs and burning eyes had been eschewed for a straightforward fixed image. That much was already saying much about their respect for the strangers now roaming their space.

"Captain Syntron, Alpha of the Phoenix, Beta of the Federation task group, I hear your howl under the stars. I know of your scent. I see your stare in the darkness of space."

"Alpha Shanarl of the Draxx. It would be my honor to have you join me aboard my ship as a guest and as the official representative of your impressive pack. Even though we have been through much together, your pack and mine since our arrival in this region, we still have other circumstances to consider and items to discuss that would be best served face-to-face. If you would prefer, alternately I could transport to your vessel."

"You have proven yourself in returning the escaped Zetarians to their confinement. You are worthy of our respect. We would like to learn of your technology and method by which you succeeded in this when we can only but use our weapons to kill them. But you are still in this system after the deed being done, and our sensors report several thousands more of your kind on the nearby third planet. We will have you also explain this. I will meet you on your ship so as to smell the thruth of your words in the scent of your pack. Prepare to receive my shuttle."

"Acknowledged, Alpha Shanarl. We will make immediate preparations to receive your shuttle. I will have our team prepared to share our Zetarian technology methods with you, in addition to discussing the circumstances surrounding the uninvited federation guest on the third planet. Syntron out."

As the main viewscreen darkened, the captain turned to his senior officers.

"Prepare to accompany me to the main hangar bay. Have security meet us there and have all non-essential personnel cleared from the area."

At Syntron's order, Rogers rose from his seat and handed the post back to Kennedy, then followed the Phoenix' captain into the turbolift.

"You have the bridge Counselor Bijoŭ"

"Aye, Sir" she responded with surprise. She had never been placed in charge of the bridge before.

The captain then stepped into the turbolift, turned and waited for his senior officers to enter before providing a command to descend.

"Deck 21."

As the turbolift debarked with a slight rush, the captain spoke softly.

"We have some explaining and potentially precarious negotiations ahead of us. Let us all be cognizant of our words and deeds throughout this arbitration."

The journey to deck 21 ensued as David studied his PADD, its contents containing the complete specifications of the improvised faraday cage, and evacuation capacities of the Phoenix, should the Draxx consider the Federation colony unwanted. The latter listed the capacities of all transporters on the ship and time needed to bring up the colonists to the ship if required.

The lift doors opened upon the main hangar deck, revealing the immense capacity of the Phoenix' bay. Her aft facing door was open to space, the force field up. The Alpha's shuttle, an order of magnitude larger than any previous Draxx shuttle encountered, was just now passing through the containment field. The curious craft cleared the entrance by mere centimeters, which admitted to the fact of a superior pilot at her helm. The gravimetric style drive system of the shuttle sputtered menacingly against the force field, and a prismatic dance of dull rainbow hued light swiftly swirled across the Draxx vessel as the two fields interacted. Then, atomic maneuvering thrusters settled the pointed shuttle directly on the deck, which surprisingly groaned a little as the massive weight of the Alpha's ship was taken on by the Phoenix. David arched his eyes in surprise. This Draxx captain had a curious ship indeed, if it weighed enough to affect the Phoenix' main shuttle deck.

As the shuttle powered down somewhat, David adroitly took position slightly behind and to the left of his captain, deferring the point of honor to Syntron, as befitting a captain meeting a captain, and waited for the Draxx Alpha to emerge.

An opening emerged from what appeared to be the side of the unique Draxx shuttle, followed by a series of elongated steps just below.

A distinguished canine-like being stepped down from the shuttle and glanced around for a moment with his nostrils flaring and closing in the air, as if to gauge the atmosphere of this strange environment.

He then spotted the Vulcan captain's position and marched deliberately and powerfully toward him.

"At last we smell one another, Syntron of the Phoenix," the towering leader of the Draxx growled, showing his throat briefly in respect and never looking him straight in the eye.

He was by far the largest of his kind they have seen, easily as tall as the Andorian giantess Tyvya on the Horizon and much more bulkier, a true mountain of fur, muscle and sinew. But despite his intimidating presence, he looked quite friendly with his mouth always open and his tongue forcibly visible as he addressed the surprisingly smaller Vulcan.

"You are quite different from Alpha Kheren of the Horizon. Of him I could sense the power and instincts of a well-disciplined killer; of you, I sense the wisdom and resolve of a cunning prey that has completely mastered his fear. You are more different one another than any of you is from us. And there seems to be no homogeneity within your packs... and yet, complete harmony of purpose and action. Most intriguing... and most promising."

Syntron returned the throat gesture as a symbol of respect to the Draxx leader before he spoke.

"It is our spectrum of diversity Alpha Shanarl which provides us with our wide-range of abilities and options when dealing with challenging circumstances. In most situations, we employ our strength and lethality only as a last option if logic and reason fail."

Syntron then gestured the imposing Draxx leader to follow his lead.

"We will travel to our conference room on deck one of this ship to converse in a more cordial environment. If there is anywhere else on this ship which you wish to see before we arrive to deck one just let me know."

"We have scanned your ships and seen them in action. as impressive as they showed themselves to be, ships and technology are just elaborated teeth; they're good only as the predator using them," commented the Draxx with a casual indifference. "It is the nature of the beast that is important to us."

The captain then nodded to the security team to fall into forward and rearward positions of their small entourage as they began to move. Syntron was taking no chances when it came to the well-being of his guest; despite the appearance that this Draxx leader could fend for himself in almost every conceivable situation.

The fact that he had come seemingly all alone certainly showed confidence in this estimated capability.

When they reached the conference room, the Draxx seemed for a moment nonplussed by the chairs around the table, visibly unfamiliar with the furniture. Jonathna livingstone caught on his perplexity and demonstrated for him how to use them. Since he had a short and bushy but somewhat rigid tail, he had to sit sideways so as not to painfully crush it under him, something the long, supple tails of Caitians could avoid reflexively. He was obviously not comfortable but discomfort didn't seem to phase him; and he was just as obviously trying to experience alien life as much as he was seemingly willing to accomodate those with which he had come to talk... and learn from.

But he was first and foremost a creature of decisive action. When they had all been seated he spoke right away.

"Syntron of the Phoenix; what are your intentions here?"

At the prompting of the Draxx leader, Syntron first provided a concise yet detailed account regarding Governor Sufra and her accomplices not only being relieved of their duties, but currently facing multiple charges due to their combined deliberate violations via their actions. He acknowledged that their self-righteous impositions also risked inciting interstellar conflict between the Federation and the Draxx, which was not the intention whatsoever of Captain Kheren nor himself.

The captain then explained that the vast majority of the colonists on the planet were a peaceful collection of Federation civilians who were merely searching for a habitable place to begin anew. As he spoke, he brought up both image files of the numerous colonists by specialty, such as varied craftsman, along with holographic images of their simple tools that they used within their field to create a viable colony.

After this presentation was concluded, Syntron turned to face the Draxx leader once again.

"I present this information to you Alpha Shanarl not to plead their case, but clarify these circumstances. We do not know whether you or others hold claim to the planet these colonist have landed upon uninvited... let alone this region itself, but we will evacuate each and every one of them if this is the case and your wish."

In the silence that followed, Syntron allowed it to linger for a bit longer before continuing with an alternative.

"However, if this world is not contested outright, then we would discuss such a colonization process with you along with the ramifications and possible benefits in establishing this venture in proximity to your packs that travel at least in the vast outer space within this region."

The caninoid had listened with perked ears to the whole presentation, never interrupting but obviously very attentive to every detail. But to Science Chief Jonathan Livingstone, it was especially obvious that he was even more attentive to the captain himself, the way he talked, the way he moved as he talked, every nuance of his voice, choice of words, even the way he smelled. And at the same time, he was also attentive to every single occupant in the room, scanning Human, Vulcan, Caitian, Deltan and X'Ell attitude with obviously exceptionally keen senses. Once Syntron concluded his concise yet detail presentation, he stood up and paced the room until he faced the stars beyond the transparency. From there he spoke.

"You are a very remarkable collection of species, something we have never encountered or heard of. This alone speaks more than anything else of what you are... and the truth of your words. We, like every other sentient species we know of, are a homogeneous race, a civilization of one kind. Even then, harmony within ourselves is not always easily achieved, and what we manage to do took us in fact millenias to accomplish. But here I see primates, avians, felines... even insects like this Alpha of yours... and others I can not even describe ... and yet, you all live and work and hope and dream together. I must say, Syntron of the Phoenix, that I find myself... overwhelmed."

He turned to face the Vulcan with head raised.

"You have much to teach us, and I know now that you would do so willingly and honestly. Thus I will speak to the rest of our people."

He made a pause to make sure that they understood his meaning. Then he stretched a furred four fingered hand to the stars and the planet visible behind him.

"We are a nomadic culture; we roam space without any permanent attachment to planetary bodies or star systems. Space belongs to everyone as well as to us. But we know of people that do live inside confined territories like you want to do here. When we meet them, they sometime want to deny us passage and access to ressources, claiming that, for some unfathomable reason, they have exclusive rights on them. This still baffles us and may cause conflict with us, as we do not recognize the validity of such a claim. The universe belongs too all life within it."

Looking at each one briefly, he lowered his voice to make his words all the more felt.

"If your wish is to claim territory here, know this; it is not in our power or intention to forbid it; but, it is not our intention either to have ourselves being refused passage and ressources in this region of space. And as you have seen, we have the means to enforce our rights. But, if we have an agreement on those terms, you are as welcome as us to come here."

His gaze now fixed Syntron for a brief moment before averting his eyes from him to continue with a softer tone.

"However, you are aware of the threat of the Zetarians in this system, a threat that concerns any and all sentient life nearby. If you choose the practice of territorial life here, you will put yourself in proximity of that threat. We cannot provide full time assistance as we are not always within this region of space. But, because you are willing to show us how you tamed those evil spirits, we will provide you with any and all assistance as we can while we are in this sector of space. The rest will be up to you."

Syntron gazed mindfully as the Draxx leader eloquently spoke. He was a skillful hunter and predator yet he was also a thoughtful and reasonable individual. Nothing at all like a pack of ruthless beings misperceived at first contact.

"Understood Alpha Shanarl. I will pass along this information to Captain Kheren and the new leadership of the colonists. I can assure you that the colonists will not interfere in any capacity with your packs' resource requirements or mobility to travel. Contrarily, it is our hope that this marks a beginning of ongoing diplomatic opportunities among your packs and ours; to whatever degree you would deem appropriate."

Syntron then handed the Draxx leader a customized PADD.

"Within this device you will find not only technology related to the containment of and protection from the Zetarians, but there are also files of information about Starfleet, the Federation and the means to contact us; should the need arise."

"Good. But let us speak now while we can smell one another and share honestly with one another what we should expect from a shared future," the Draxx declared, his eyes returning to the vastness of the starfield beyond.

* * *

Seven hours later, back on the bridge of the flagship, Captain Kheren contacted main engineering from his command chair.

"Engineering; are we ready?"

The voice of assistant chief Robert Baoule came over the comm with a definite tone of nervousness.

"Aye, Captain... I guess..."

"Do not... guess, Mister; lives are at stake here."

"I apologize, Captain... but if I could speak candidly Sir..."

Letting an officer speak freely over a ship intercom channel where every one on the bridge could hear was certainly not a recommended practice for a commanding officer; but this crew had been through hell and back with the Andorian, so much that he was past the point of having to impart his authority from his rank and position alone. They trusted him as much as he trusted them, they knew him as much as he knew them, some even most intimately... Only Chief Engineer Solius and Chief of Security Aron'Son were fairly new to his command. But they would have to learn sooner or later how Kheren dealt with officers on all levels. Now was good a time as any.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

There was definite hesitation at the other end, Then, with a forcibly measured tone, Baoule spoke his mind.

"Sir, I do not have much faith in this... contraption you had us make."

"I have no faith at all, Lieutenant. I always base my hopes on facts, never on wishfull thinking." the Andorian replied matter-of-factly.

"Err, yes Sir, I know... but I mean... well, It *is* the facts that I'm not so sure about."

"You have rechecked the calculations about the strenght of diamondrod nanotubes fibers."

It was not a question and the engineer acknowledged readily.

"The numbers add up, aye... still... I can't imagine such a thinly-stretched, fragile-looking thing doing what it is supposed to do... especially with this crazy negative energy field around that planet..."

"That scientist brother of yours assured us that it is exactly because of the nature of that field that it will work best."After all, gravity *is* negative energy since it requires other forms of energy, a positive action, to oppose it. Whatever that field is, it behaves for all intent and purposes as some kind of singularity. Knowing that, we can use it to suit our purposes."

"Powerless power... Sorry, Captain, I'm an engineer and still I can't grasp my head around it. And there is the pod itself."

"Is it able to complete atmospheric entry safely?"

"Structurally-speaking, no doubt about that... but getting back up into orbit might be... problematic, if anything fails to work once down there."

"Redding and Jureth are ressourceful people... and there is the entire crew of the Polaris to help them, if not also some survivors from the Draxx ship. We send them what they need and they should know what to do. After all, they alone have first hand experience with crossing the planetary field."

"But no one has any experience with this... contraption," insisted Baoule with obvious nervousness.

"Not exactly true, Lieutenant. Some of the USS Voyager crew did experience this... contraption as you call it, one even a competent technician and pilot that succeeded in doing nearly exactly what we are about to attempt. It worked once... it can work again."

There was a moment of silence over the comm before the engineer finally sighed audibly.

"Mister Snow will have to ensure perfect geosynchronous orbit for the whole time it will take them to manage to propel themselves back to escape velocity... and preserve themselves during the crossing of this vampire field... I recommend again to keep scanners locked on the... shaft so that we may transport them all at once directly to sickbay the moment they emerge from it."

"As Doctor Nasaro-Myth insisted on," Kheren agreed.

"You bet your sweet aft section I did," the Deltan chief medical officer grumbled from behind the command chair.

"I'll keep her steady as a rock, Captain," assured helmsman Snow, "as long as nothing will come to interfere with us."

He was referring to the Draxx battleship that had reformed to follow the Phoenix on a parallel course towards the next M class planet of the system, seven hours ago.

"Captain Syntron has already defused several touchy situations in recent hours," Counselor Lyrya reminded them all. "He has established a respectful working status with the Draxx. He should be able to consolidate our situation for the better."

"Let's hope it did not flame up down there," Elliago mumbled just loud enough for sensitive Andorian antennae to pick up.

"Let us first get them all back here," Kheren sighed. "Anything else, Mister Baoule?"

"Guess not... I mean, negative, Captain. Ready to proceed... and luck be on the side of the brave, the foolish and little starships named Horizon."

"Luck is something you can never count on but can never ignore," agreed the Andorian in the command chair. Then he switched to shipwide channel. "Attention crew, this is the captain; we are about to launch Operation Fisherman. You all know your assigned duties. Our crewmates down on the planet, one Federation citizen and possibly alien survivors are depending on us. We shall not let them down. Stand by."

Standing up, Kheren adjusted his uniform and crossed his brawny arms behind his broad back, looking straight at the viewing screen with unblinking silvery eyes, antennae pointed forward over his thick white mane. His deep, soft voice resonated with resolute firmness.

"Viewer aft."

"Viewer aft," confirmed the shrill voice of chief of Ops Cheonghi as the image became that of the huge stern of the flagship.

"Mister Aron'son; launch the line."

As soon as the Jem'Hadar's fingers activated the proper controls, something shiny and deceptively thin looking shot out from the underbelly of the secondary hull. It looked as nothing else but a long metallic wire trailing a pilotless workpod plunging right into the gravity well of the planet at full thrusters.

"Entering planetary shield in three... two... one..."

As science chief Ke'Leysha bowed towards her main scanners finished her count down, the thruster exhausts of the pod flared out suddenly. The shiny wire continued to stretch behind it. There was a long moment of silence before the Illythirii woman spoke again, as the strange line suddenly became as thought as a rod.

"Planet fall... within one kilometer of estimated original landfall of the Draxx destroyer."

"Engineering to bridge; the shaft is secured at maximum tensile strenght."

"Keep us steady, Mister Snow," the captain insisted. He spoke without ever moving his eyes or antennae from the screen. "Mister Solius; launch the pod."

From the engineering station, the fingers of the Romulan chief engineer obeyed the captain's order. On the viewer, a large object detached itself from the lower shuttlebay of the Horizon. It was cylindrical and a dozen meters accross, made up of two tiers of eight escape pods fused together to form a kind of segmented donought the center of which was entirely filled up by the deceptively thin-looking wire now straightened taunt as a rod between the ship and the surface of the planet.

There was a short burst of the top pods' thrusters and the entire contraption shot down the wire, straight down at Eden IV.

They all looked up silently at the screen for long moments after the flower-shaped module disappeared from view, the energy-draining effect of the planetary field masking from their eyes even the view of it's fiery entry into the atmosphere of the prison planet.

* * *

"Commander! Look! Up there!"

They were all standing together at the lip of the small, shallow crater left by the fall of what had appeared to them as a workpod falling freely through the morning sky. Those that had been sleeping had been brutally wakened by the thundering impact over a kilometer deep inside the jungle. There was also something that was strangely cutting vertically through the light of sunrise, a thin line going up from the estimated point of impact beyond the clouds, as if the sky itself had been a titanic door suddenly cracked open.

It took them a good solid hour through the thick foliage before they reached the impact crater, barely fuming with the metallic debris pulverized at its center. But what had immediately caught up their eyes was the enormous metallic pylon shining under the morning sun, deeply imbedded in the ground and reaching up to the sky. It was easily ten meters across and perfectly octagonal with a perfectly smooth, shiny surface.

Before they could ponder about the strange thing, the Draxx had lifted their ears then their heads high up, followed by T'Lana and then all the others. It was Ji'Lan who had exclaimed and pointed with her green-skinned finger at the dark object apparently falling straight down the mysterious shaft.

Prudently, they moved away from the crater. A few minutes later, something big, shiny and amorphous impacted in its center, lifting high clouds of earth and rock, then rebounded up before coming down again, then up, then down and finally rested on the ground, filling up most of the crater.

"What the blazes is that?" security officer Kalaar wondered as he protectively rose first to face whatever threat this thing might be.

Followed by the others, they approached the now inert object that looked nothing less than a netted mass of gigantic silvery eggs two dozen meters across and a good dozen meters high. Each egg was easily half a dozen meters in diameter and were emitting a thin whistling sound, like a long, unending sigh.

"Impact floaters!" Hunter exclaimed suddenly.

"Impact what?" Kalaar wondered again.

"In early days of space exploration," the helmsman explained, "Earth sent probes to nearby planets like Mars, using inflated outer shells blown up by a simple mechanical pressure gauge at proper atmospheric pressure. They absorbed the impact with the ground as they landed, instead of using struts that could break if the landing angle was wrong or the terrain too rough. It would have rolled away for several hundred meters had this thing not been attached to that... pole."

As he spoke, the inflated eggs made of a thin metallic skin collapsed on the ground, stretching like flattened petals around a large hard-shelled center they all recognized instantly.

"Escape pods!"

"The Horizon sent them down!" exclaimed Kalaar, recognizing the markings on the closest ones.

Suddenly, Hunter whistled as he looked at them and then up the monstrous rod rising to the heavens.

"I... I can't believe this... it's a space needle!"

"A... what?" it was now Ji'Lan who wondered out loud.

"A space elevator! It's an old concept that was forgotten when transporter technology made it completely obsolete; a constructed shaft reaching orbit, along which could travel a pressurized cabin, allowing planet-to-space travel without the use of costly and fragile crafts, and at a fraction of the energy cost, usually through something like a maglev system."

"That's crazy!" the big Capellan security officer now exclaimed, gioggling the entire thing mouth open like many others around him. "How can such a thing stand upright? Planetary rotation, air pressure and wind velocity, altitude speed discrepancies... and if it reaches all the way up through the planetary barrier, it can use no power to reinforce itself, let alone work!"

"Without a structural integrity field, you need a superstrong material... diamondrod nanotubes I would guess here," the Polaris chief engineer then explained, admiring the thing with obvious fascination. "Then you need to anchor it solidly on one side, usually deep underground... but here, the shaft does not reach deep enough, so I would say it is anchored up there... probably to an orbiting geostationary satellite... if not to the Horizon herself."

"Only one big problem," Hunter then said gloomily. "Any energy on board is now depleted after passing through the field. The escape pod thrusters appear intact but they are assuredly inert. And no energy sent through this shaft will reach us. How will we get back up? And even if we do, how will we survive going through the field itself?"

"Look! Inside the pods!" Ji'Lan announced, already having opened one of them to peer inside. "This thing is crammed with materials; chemicals, solar panels, fiberoptics, replacement parts... even Starfleet rations and water!"

"There is all we need here to refuel the thrusters," T'lana confirmed after a moment. "They sent the chemical components for the thrusters separated so that they would not react and produce energy that would expend them. We only need to recombine them and get active fuel for getting them ready and able for lift off and reach orbit with residual momentum, like the Polaris must have done."

The Draxx leader exchanged a brief look with his comrades as he lifted his head in obvious respect.

"You people are quite clever. We will stand guard against any Zetarian interference while you work on this."

"And these solar panels will reactivate all systems and power back up the pods' batteries, even allowing us to build a temporary shield that will last just long enough to survive going through the field... if we go up fast enough," Ji'Lan added excitedly.

She turned towards Redding and Jureth, addressing them both.

"With your permission, we will start right away. We should be ready to lift off in two hours."

Jureth, with his injuries now stabilized, was starting to really see how Captain Kheren had earned the reputation he had. Of course the Bajoran had read all the after action reports, and listened to the talk around the starbase, even served with him now for several months already... but the kind of ingenuity he was looking at here was only inspired by leaders who led from the front, and commanded the utmost respect from their people.

It wasn't that the other officers he'd served under weren't capable leaders, far from it; Lotus Fleet was celebrated for harboring the very elite of Starfleet, like his former commanding officers Kalten Siduri and Rachel Rivers of the Alsea, or V'Rell Gould of the original flagship the Lotus; but this Andorian was far and away above them all from everything he'd both heard and experienced.

Those thoughts aside, Oseno took Ji'lana's question in stride. But, instead of giving the obvious answer, he deferred to Commander Redding as the senior officer.

"Sir, your call."

Redding just smiled.

"What do you think Commander? Shore leave's over people! Let's put gas in the bus and pack it all up! It's time to go home."

Redding walked over to Garawl with his usual half smile.

"We have room for you as well, I think." remembering their girth. "Providing you can stand to be cramped up for a short while with non-Draxx."

"Better than roam on a haunted planet," the big caninoid answered with a snarl that was probably a smile for his kind, although with that gaping, fanged mouth of theirs, it was hard to tell the difference. " This will not be all that much more cramped than what we are used to on our ships. And we know of this... space elevator technology your follower described. It is widely used on many of our planets. But I could not have thought it possible to manufacture one here, even as temporary a structure as this one and in so short a time. It seems our people could learn much from yours."

And already, the other Draxx were hard at work helping unloading the escape pods while the Starfleet personnel, under Ji'Lian's expertise, sorted out food supplies from medical ones and thruster chemicals from tools that would allow them to revive the makeshift rocket cabin that would lift them up asll the way beyond the clouds, up to the orbiting starship overhead they currently called 'home'.

* * *

Captain Syntron and Alpha Shanarl had continued their conversation for several hours, refining the first details of a formal relation between the federation and the Draxx Hegemony. Syntron's senior officers in attendance asked a series of questions to the Draxx leader who patiently addressed all of their inquiries. At the conclusion of their meeting, they all headed back onto the main bridge.

The captain relieved Counselor Bijoŭ of her center seat duties and requested that she hail Captain Kheren on the Horizon when she was back at the com station. He then briefly explained to Shanarl what minute details about this that he knew about the rescue.

Lieutenant Elisha Leóne, chief operations officer was now back at her post after returning from a series of challenging away mission duties. She then chimed in.

"Sir, Captain Kheren already hailed while you were in the meeting about twelve minutes ago to let you know that their rescue mission is underway."

An eyebrow elevated slightly as he responded.

"Welcome back Lieutenant, and thank you for the updated information. Please engage our enhanced sensors to determine if we can pinpoint this rescue below the position of the Horizon."

The Orion acknowledged the command as she began engaging sensor control. After several minutes of tweaking she announced "I believe I have something captain."

The main viewscreen was converted to a series of moving images that were rather hard to distinguish at first. Then something odd came into view.

"What the hell is that thing" Counselor Bijou blurted out before she could contain her reaction.

"It looks like some old-fashioned carnival ride back on old Earth" Lieutenant James Traynor commented from helm with a bit of a smirk.

"Highly unlikely Lieutenant" Syntron responded rather stoically. "It would appear that Captain Kheren and his staff utilized an old Terran method for planetary travel... going from planet-to-space prior to the creation and implementation of transporters. In this case, planet-to-escape velocity so that the Horizon can capture it once it reaches above the null zone of the planet's atmosphere. Quite clever indeed."

"But what is that thing? I still don't get it" Bijou fumed, as she stared closely at the moving contraption.

"If you look directly Counselor, you will see a series of escape pods fused together here like an inner tube from old Earth as well."

Syntron walked over and pointed this out on the viewscreen.

"There you can see another such assemblage inverted and fused directly to the first, with the whole thing travelling around what appears to be a miles high pole."

"And?" she queried, still not actually comprehending what he was trying to explain.

"It is operating similar to an elevator... " but the captain ceased his description this time and turned to his CSO.

"Perhaps you will have a more comprehensible approach in explaining this creation to her Lieutenant Livingstone."

"I just made an inquiry into our database, Captain," the X'ell answered, the lights in his feathered head blinking. "My people has nothing comparable to this so i was just as baffled as Counselor Bijou. In all intent and purposes, it is an elevator."

"An... orbital elevator?" wondered Bijou, eyes as big as those of the rest of the bridge crew.

"Exactly; before the advent of transporters, one of the greatest difficulties in space travel, especially in the early days of space exploration, was how to leave a planet . To escape planetary gravity, you needed to reach escape velocity, which required literally tons of chemical fuel just to lift a few humanoids. In order to cut down on the prohibitive cost and equipment and resolve this problem, some engineers and scientists came up with the idea of a shaft reaching beyond a planet's atmosphere and into orbit, along which a transport cabin could travel up and down from a ground-fixed point to a geostationary artificial satellite or station. So in essence, a space elevator."

"Incredible!" Elisha le-one exclaimed, even with her eyes looking at the very thing Livingstone was explaining. "But how can it just stand there?"

"It requires some superstrong material to face the formidable forces of planetary rotation, atmospheric conditions, space conditions and such... My people would have used neutronium to do this, but the Federation doesn't have access to such material. According to sensors, they manufactured diamondrod nanotubes from their industrial replicator, a synthesized form of what naturally occurs when carbon atoms are subjected to high temperatures and crystallized so as to become one of the hardest substances conceivable."

"Still, how could they solve the energy draining field problem?" wondered helmsman Traynor.

"Basic physics," the Science chief explained. "Just like the Polaris itself escaped the planet, those fused escape pods used their own long range thrusters at full blast to propel themselves upward and continued along the shaft on their own momentum, clearing it just long enough for the Horizon to grab them with her tractor beam. Fuel must have been disassembled into basic elements and sent down to the castaways for them to remake and use once the whole rescue cabin was sent down."

"And it didn't crash?" now asked the Bolian Tolo, just as fascinated with the engineering feat as everyone else.

"Some form of powerless landing technology must have been used, probably dating back from those same early days of exploration when power and primitive constructing materials was the chief problem of sending probes on other planets," Jonathan conjectured. "You can deduce by the shiny appearance of that device that there are solar panels attached to it's top; to power a low-power shield to protect the occupants for the few seconds needed to clear the draining barrier... but these trailing flags underneath look like deflated balloons; my guess is that these are what is left of a simple but effective shock absorbing covering."

"That's Lotus Fleet's flagship for you," grinned Leône. "Most resourceful when most challenged."

"That's what Starfleet is all about," added Jonathan Livingstone, by far the one most impressed by it all.

"Captain," then reported Bijoû. "The Horizon reports all lost personnel accounted for... including the crew of the Draxx destroyer that tried to save Governor Sufra when her pod fell into the planet's gravity well."

Beside Syntron, the Draxx leader was even more visibly impressed. And it showed in his voice.

"You saved our people even when no formal relations exist between us... and did so on an inaccessible planet, without leaving anything down there for the evil spirits to use for escape. We are not only in your debt... we are humbled. You have shown us the value of cooperation and trust between inhabitants of a universe."

"There is a philosophy the Vulcans taught to the Federation that embodies this concept," Livingstone said. "IDIC; Infinite Diversity In Infinite Combination. I too come from a single people that lived alone and all by itself for millions of years; a people that was eventually threatened but was saved by this same philosophy, this same Federation. The only thing more enlightening than this is to become an active part of it."

"And so it shall be told to my people," Shanarl growled with absolute conviction.

* * *

Commander Rogers stood, slightly relaxed, just abaft of the XO chair on the bridge of the USS Phoenix. The main view screen in front of the command crew showed the tell tale scene of the quantum slipstream dropping into normal space. The coalescing star field of the Hromi sector, part of the beta quadrant region of the galaxy, resolved itself into the familiar stars and constellation's viewable from this perspective.

Glancing back past the holoscreens behind the command chairs David noted the rapid manipulations of his assistant chief engineer overseeing the removal of the Benamite crystal and re-integration of the dilithium crystal back into the Matter/Anti-matter Reaction Assembly of the starship. This would facilitate the ability of the Phoenix to use the warp drive system again. Until the pre-requisite installation was completed, a minute or so from now, the ship was under impulse drive.

Perhaps this ... pause, of sorts, was helpful, as David noted the seemingly longing look on some of the faces around the bridge as they viewed again their home among the stars. Turning back to the view screen, David looked upon what they saw, the minute, sweeping disc-and-ring design of star base Lotus. A pearl of reflecting light from the nearby class g star gleamed off the right side of the structure, highlighting her position and contrasting the sweeping edge of her dark side against the background nebulae nearby.

Swallowing slightly, David glanced furtively around, hoping no one noticed the slight dampness of moisture in his eye's at the sight of Lotus base. Truth be told, it was good to be home.

* * *

As the USS Phoenix made its return trip toward Starbase Lotus, Mikaela Sirius stared out at the stars of Federation space through the observation window in one of the Avenger Class starship's observation lounges. She was recovering slowly from her treatment at the hands of what she now knew were called Zetarians. The energy beings attacked her ship, the Nuntio, with virtually no warning. And for her, a survivor of the last war with the Borg, it was like facing them all over again; an enemy they couldn't defeat, people dying all around her, and her captain and fellow officers under attack.

The young half-Orion woman had barely been reinstated to Starfleet and on her first assignment as Chief of Science she hadn't even been able to help keep her ship out of the anomaly that stranded them in the other universe. It wasn't her fault she'd been told during their debriefing, there was nothing she could have done, but Mikaela still felt some responsibility.

As she looked out at space she wondered if her mother had been notified that she was alive. The Nuntio had been bound for Earth when it was trapped, and her mother had been so excited that Mikaela would get to spend some time at home.

And that was eighteen months ago.

"Credit for your thoughts, Lieutenant."

Mikaela jumped slightly. She was so absorbed in her own thoughts that she hadn't even heard anyone else enter the lounge.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

Mikaela finally focused on whom was addressing her to see one of her subordinates, Ensign Kathryn Cellis. The human woman had been instrumental in trying to get the Nuntio's sensors back online after they'd become trapped in the anomaly. She and Mikaela had also worked together to try and figure out what was attacking the ship when the Zetarians were possessing their crew mates. Mikaela managed a smile, more for Kathryn's benefit than anything else.

"Just thinking, Ensign."

"I suspect everyone is, Ma'am..and I told you to call me Kathryn."

"hmm? did you?"

"Several times," Kathryn replied, "but I suppose we've all been through a lot, so I forgive you."

The smile Kathryn gave was genuine and warm and, despite her overloaded brain, Mikaela appreciated it.

"Yes, we have been through a lot, and lost a lot."

Kathryn nodded solemnly.

"Our ship, crew mates... barely over half of us... but we made it. And if being in Starfleet has taught me anything surviving matters."

"I suppose it does, even if it doesn't feel like it sometimes."

Kathryn nodded.

"I think I know what you mean. You're a survivor for a second time...you fought the Borg."

"I did." Mikaela replied with some pain in her voice. "I lost a lot then too."

"But you still made it," Kathryn insisted. "You made it, and you can tell the stories and share the memories of the ones who didn't. They can still live, they can still matter... through you; Just like now, the ones who didn't come back with us can live through us."

Kathryn's point was not lost on Mikaela. In truth, she had never considered talking about the friends she'd lost during the Borg war, or about her father, who had died when the Breen attacked Earth during the Dominion War. The Orion turned to face her friend,

"Thank you. I'd never really looked at it that way, but you're right. Are you always that optimistic?"

"I suppose I am," Kathryn said smiling. "Now tell me, what are you going to do when we get back?"

It was Mikaela's turn to smile.

"Go home, once Starfleet says we're allowed. My mother is on Earth, and she was begging to see me, before... before we got sucked into another universe."

"I think I'm headed for Earth too. My parents haven't seen me since I graduated from the Academy. Oh, maybe we can go together!"

"I'd like that," Mikaela replied

"C'mon," Kathryn said. "Why don't we go get something to eat? I think I saw Commander Schaeff heading to the mess hall."

"Sounds good."

The two officers, and friends, left the observation lounge together; and Mikaela felt, for the first time in a long time, that life might finally be returning to normal.

* * *

Captain's Log

Stardate 88374.3

Although it was a rather turbulent passage, we safely crossed through the anomaly threshold twelve minutes ago and are back within Federation space. Our estimated arrival to Starbase Lotus is seventeen point one-three hours.

Despite all of the setbacks we encountered throughout this extended mission, we return back leaving ten-thousand colonists carried by the USS Horizon successfully in the initial phase of establishing their new settlement on a class M planet just on the other side of the anomaly. The system was dubbed Eden, with these new inhabitants currently settling on Eden III. Captain Kheren has been handling all of the legal ramifications involving the misdeeds initiated by ex-Governor Sufra and a band of misguided followers prior to the legitimate arrival to the planet's surface.

This resettling, among other events, was able to occur only after a challenging series of first contact negotiations with a new species encountered upon our arrival into this region. They are the Draxx, a canine-hominid spacefaring species that has similar appearance and hunting characteristics as Terran wolves, but with the intelligence of any advanced sentient species within the Federation. They are a nomadic species which travels in packs, lead by an alpha leader named Shanarl, who was impressively mindful and logical.

Our first contact however was with one of his beta leaders, Garawl. After overcoming a series of rather dangerous precautions and negotiations, it was this beta's recommendations that allowed our other duties such as the of rescuing remaining crew members and bridge officers of the lost USS Nuntio from the Zetarian infiltration to proceed uninterrupted, and eventually led to the meeting with Alpha Shanarl.

Unfortunately, the Nuntio itself was destroyed during the final phase of the rescue mission.

A major benefit however from all of these events is that we are able to return back with not only the surviving members of the Nuntio, but with a ratified treaty with the Draxx leadership, along with a petition by them to be our first Federation partners in this mostly uncharted realm beyond the anomaly. The Draxx would be a mighty adversary to contend with and are equally powerful allies to have at our side when a time to travel beyond the Eden system arrives.

In addition, we were able to peacefully negotiate with the remaining Zetarians and return them back to Eden IV, a planet with a null-energy zone that will keep them free to roam the surface, but captive on the planet itself.

Full details of all of these events will be included in each of our completed official reports.

In closing, commendations are requested for Commander Riker, Commander Rogers, Lieutenant J.G. Livingstone and Lieutenant Leóne, in recognition for their enormous contributions and self-sacrifice exhibited throughout all aspects of this mission. We would not have accomplished any of these feats without out their ingenuity and dedication to duty.

Captain Kheren and his crew aboard the Horizon should also be recipients of equal recognition as well for their many accomplishments throughout this multifaceted mission. They have remained behind for the time being to bear witness to the successful colonization process and oversee the successful implementation of a free election process to set-up new leadership for the colony.

Syntron closed his log and stepped away from the terminal. Thinking about the images he saw of the new colonist settlement on Eden III, he began to ponder about the seeds that had been transplanted on this world. Generations from now, the inhabitants will only have stories and images about their ancestors traveling great distances and overcoming many dangerous hurdles for the hope of a new start. This will be the only home that they will know. Would they remain peaceful as they cohabitate this planet? How would they identify themselves? Would they travel out among the surface of this world's environment and split into factions? Will their offspring eventually grow restless and seek adventures among the stars?

All of this seemed so inevitable to the Vulcan as he considered the history of various sentient beings. But these were rather frivolous thoughts at this moment, especially for a Vulcan.

He exited the Captain's Ready Room and stepped back onto the main bridge and settled into the center seat once again. Gazing out at the images among the stars projected on the main viewscreen, he felt akin to on old sea captain of ancient Earth navigating his way back home through the turbulent seas with the stars as his guide.

Their homeport was just ahead, only a light-year away.

EPILOGUE

**Subspace transmission from Starfleet Command
San Francisco, Sol III, sector 001
to Lotus Fleet Division
Starbase Lotus, Hromi sector**

The following decisions have been reviewed and approved by Starfleet Command's Joint Chiefs of Staff, following the assigned first effort of colonization and exploration of the Azimuth universe.

PROMOTIONS

Considering their service record and latest performance during Operation Brave New World, the following officers are to receive new ranking and/or eligibility from Starfleet:

Lieutenant Junior Grade Aron'Son, position Chief of Security and Tactical, assignment USS Horizon, is promoted to the rank of **Lieutenant**.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Jonathan Livingstone, position Chief Science Officer, assignment USS Phoenix, is promoted to the rank of **Lieutenant**. Details will be sent to the X'Ell embassy on Starbase Lotus for acceptance and review as per regulations regarding exchange officers.

Lieutenant S'Tan Solius, position Chief Engineer, assignment USS Horizon, is promoted to the rank of **Lieutenant Commander**.

Lieutenant Elisha Leone, position Chief Operations Officer, assignment USS Phoenix, is promoted to the rank of **Lieutenant Commander**. It is strongly recommended that this officer be reassigned to help other vessels and installations in adapting to the new nanite enhancement technology successfully implemented and tested on the USS Phoenix.

Commander Jureth Oseno, position Tactical Operations Officer, assignment USS Horizon, is to be put on the list of **eligibility for a starship command position**. Until such command opportunity arise and is accepted by this officer, he is hereby confirmed as Captain of the USS Polaris escort vessel assigned to the Lotus Fleet flagship and may be called to specific duties apart from said flagship by both Starfleet and Lotus Fleet.

Commander Neil. S. Redding, position Executive Officer, assignment USS Horizon, is to be put on the list of **eligibility for a starship command position** as next in line for starship command duties, up to and including Lotus Fleet's flagship.

Commander Joshua T. Riker, position Executive Officer, assignment USS Phoenix, is to be put on the list of **eligibility for a starship command position**.

Commander David Rogers, position Executive Officer, assignment USS Phoenix is to be put on the list of **eligibility for a starship command position**. This officer is also requested to serve on the technical investigation committee assigned to the case of the USS Diamond Star's unexplained disappearance and return to Utopia Plenitia Shipyards (see file in appendix A).

Captain Syntron, position starship Commanding Officer, assignment USS Phoenix, is to be **confirmed as starship commander of the USS Phoenix**.

Captain Kheren, position starship Commanding Officer, assignment USS Horizon, is hereby notified to **standby for immediate reassignment at an unspecified stardate**. Details classified under the authority of the Federation Science Council, Starfleet Security and the Bureau of Temporal Investigations. In the meantime, this officer will remain at his current position and assignment.

REINSTATEMENT

Considering current status and conduct, the following individual's dossier has been revised by Starfleet Command's Judge Advocate General and the United Federation of Planets Judiciary:

Former Lieutenant Commander **Sorripto** is offered summary discharge on parole from Starfleet Penitentiary Colony Australia for exemplary conduct and notable service during his confinement.

If that be his wish, and because of his remarkable record prior to his condemnation, he may choose to resign honorably or resume his Starfleet Commission with the rank of **Lieutenant**, to serve as up to and including the position of assistant to any department of his choosing relevant to his competence, either on a starship or Starfleet facility.

Said officer will be allowed this opportunity under the following condition; if and when an officer of Command rank and assigned as commanding officer on a starship or facility is willing to take on the responsibility of reintegrating said officer within the proper protocols of Starfleet.

Until this opportunity present itself, said officer may offer his services to Starfleet Academy, Lotus Fleet Branch, where he will also attend, as student and teaching assistant, all classes regarding Federation policies and Starfleet protocols, with emphasis on General Orders and Starfleet Regulations. Kobayashi Maru simulations are also recommended for training, testing, study and evaluation.

Any possible future promotion and responsibilities will be contingent with same good conduct and service for no less than one term. Starfleet Command will be sole judge in this matter. Any further misconduct, then or later, will be grounds for immediate and permanent dismissal of Starfleet with a dishonorable discharge, along with any other sanction to be determined, if any, up to and including penitentiary time with no possibility of reprieve or parole.

Let it be clear that the parraining commanding officer who will vouch for this officer's reinstatement will also be held responsible for said officer Sorripto's actions and conduct during and after such probation period. If the officer is found wanting during this probationary period and for any term thereafter, the commanding officer may also be served proper sanction, up to and including removal from command, demotion, court martial and dismissal from Starfleet.

AWARDS

Considering the logs and reports from the latest and first colonization operation beyond the Azimuth Horizon, the following officers shall receive commendation for their outstanding service:

Lieutenant Aron'Son is awarded **the Starfleet Tactical Decoration** for meritorious conduct as chief of security and tactical of the USS Horizon during confrontation with the Romulan Empire task force, and before and during a civilian mutiny.

Lieutenant Jonathan Livingstone is awarded **the Starfleet Science Decoration** for distinguished science contributions regarding first contact with the Draxx, facing the Zetarian problem and first contact with the Draxx, notably regarding communication challenges.

Lieutenant Commander S'tan Solius is awarded **the Starfleet Engineering Decoration** for meritorious conduct as chief engineer of the USS Horizon during confrontation with the Romulan Empire task force, the colonization effort beyond the Azimuth Horizon and first contact situations with the Draxx.

Lieutenant Commander Elisha Leone is awarded **the Starfleet Engineering Decoration** for devising and implementing a safe and efficient communication system between starships in time of crisis and under difficult conditions.

Commander David Rogers is awarded **the Lotus Fleet Medal of Distinction** for distinguished actions in facing the Zetarian problem, notably how to emprison them and handle them effectively and safely.

Commander Jureth Oseno is awarded **the Starfleet Medal of Commendation** for risking his life to ensure capture of the Zetarians and rescue marooned officers and civilians and showing exemplary decisiveness and restraint under fire while in command of the USS Polaris.

Commander Neil S. Redding is awarded **the Grankite Order of Tactics** for devising an effective method against invasive energy beings using transporter and holographic technologies.

Commander Joshua W. Riker is awarded **the Prentares Ribbon of Commendation** for excellence in leadership and bravery in difficult situations facing the threat of the Zetarians, including putting his own person at risk to ensure communication and resolving situations with commendable restraint.

Captain Syntroon is awarded **the Jean-Luc Picard Medal of Honor** for his exemplary conduct and achievement in diplomatic efforts in first contact with the Draxx and the Zetarians.

Captain Kheren is awarded **the Kathryn Janeway Medal of Valor** for Consistently staying within the bounds of Star Fleet Rules of Engagement during the confrontation's with the Draxx, while maintaining full contact with foreign and friendly forces, thus serving the ideals of Federation values and maintaining mission survivability.

Signed
on Stardate 88661.8
At Starfleet Headquarters, San-Francisco, Earth, Sector 001

Fleet Captain Allen Samji, Starbase Lotus Commanding Officer

Rear Admiral Kotari, Hromi Sector Chief Flag Officer. Lotus Fleet

Admiral Neil S. Redding, Chief of Security, Starfleet Command

* * *

"The entire personnel of Starbase Lotus is now back to stations. Incapacitation of the entire installation due to contaminant has been resolved. Risk of spreading the contagion has been contained within the allotted twenty-four hours period after initial discovery of cause. The need to destroy the facility has been cancelled. By order of Starfleet, all Federation vessels, civilian or Starfleet, are again allowed to approach, dock or leave Starbase Lotus. Effective immediately, the stipulations of General Orders 35 and 36 are now declared done and over."

The grey-bearded Boslic man on the wide screen that had thus spoken looked as relieved as the darker, younger face of the Hindu starbase commander facing him from his command podium. Indeed, an audible sigh came from dozens of throats all across the vast circular command center of Starbase Lotus.

"Fleet Captain Samji; my congratulations on saving tens of thousands of lives, not to mention possibly the entire sector of not more, from a clear and present threat we would have had no defense against."

"Thank you, Admiral Kotari; but the truth is, the threat resorbed itself."

The rear admiral nodded.

"Yes, it is fortunate for us that these... Lights of Zetar had their own internal dissension among them so that those against the invasion within their ranks battled alongside you to contain their more warlike brethren."

"It was fortunate that we had a Betazoid couple as a chief medical officers that managed to sense and contact them without being possessed first... and a Tellarite chief engineer quick enough to implement traps with our numerous holodecks and turn them into cages, a Faraday cages as he called them, from what our science department immediately deduced of their nature from sensors and databanks."

"Teamwork prevails, as usual... Nevertheless, I am recommending commendations for all your personnel... and a promotion for you, Fleet Captain. Your example needs to be brought forward for the benefit of the entire Federation. Starfleet is in need of shining like the beacon of excellence and hope it has been created to be; this incident is such an opportunity. Again, congratulations."

His face, if possible, became even more serious.

"Now the question is; where in Hell did these... Zetarians came from? I recall the encounter of the Constitution class USS Enterprise of Captain Kirk in the twenty-third century at Memory Alpha... it's a dark moment of our history we all know about... "

"The only thing they knew back then was that the planet Zetar had been destroyed and about four dozens of the inhabitants had survived in pure energy form... and that known from the survivors themselves," Samji acknowledged. "But no one ever knew of such a planet or ever found it's location... until now."

"And now we know?"

"Yes, Sir; Zetar was an M class planet of the Eden universe... beyond the Azimuth Horizon."

For a moment, Kotari thought about the revelation, obviously trying to evaluate all that such a revelation implied.

"This means the anomaly was already present over a century ago... and large enough for them to go through."

"Yes and no, Sir," the starbase commander corrected. "At the time of the first Zetarian... incursion, it was in fact microscopic on our side; it was just starting to... 'burn' through the fabric of our space-time continuum. But on their side, it has already flared up and destroyed an entire solar system."

"Zetar."

"Yes, Sir. Having turned into pure energy, some of the Zetarians could negotiate the passage, regardless of it's actual physical size and into our own universe."

"And they deliberately transformed themselves this way?"

"Not exactly, Admiral. When they realized the threat of the anomaly, and having no interstellar travel technology to escape, they recorded their entire genetic make up and even their consciousness into protein-based quantum computers, a biotechnology far beyond our current applicable understanding of biology and quantum physics. Quite beyond my understanding to be sure. My science staff can explain it better... although they too say what they did made Ira Graves' inexplicable consciousness-transfer process look like... bear skins and stone knives."

"But that is what you got from the Asimov logs of their survey of the Sarabande ruins."

"And from the cooperative Zetarians themselves while we negotiated a truce and a solution to the crisis," added samji. "Even they can't fully explain what happened. It seems the process went beyond their own calculations and created what we could describe as 'quantum ghosts' of their own consciousness. Hence the 'Lights of Zetar' were born. Some appeared on the other side of the anomaly, as quantum mechanics would have it... while others appeared on their original side and some others within the anomaly itself... those last were the ones that the USS Spectre encountered last year, when answering the call from the first science station erected to study the anomaly."

"And the Sarabande ruins?"

"Apparently, some segments of their destroyed planet travelled through the anomaly and formed that uncharted asteroid belt discovered by the Phoenix. And on the largest of them was miraculously preserved the very installation they had built to reassemble themselves once the cosmic crisis would have passed. The whole installation is a gigantic bio-computer and replicator system from which raw cosmic material could be gathered to literally bring their consciousness back into living bodies. It was set to activate once the perturbations of the Azimuth Horizon would fade... but the debris drifted too close of it , preventing reactivation... until we shut the whole anomaly down to size. The whole thing was barely starting it's activation sequence when the Phoenix found it."

"Yes I remember the report about this discovery," Kotari said, frowning. "Captain Syntron then had been rather... impulsive on this, his first command mission. Playing with shiny buttons... and this, from a Vulcan, is saying quite a lot. I was not expecting this from him, of all people. Were we not so short of command grade officers..."

"He conscientiously returned it to it's original state once the still functional nature of the installation was discovered," protested Samji in defense of his officer. "If his... tampering had any effect, the Zetarians that emerged later from it did not say."

"That's when the Asimov got there... and I know Admiral Ross' daughter; she would have not been so.. cavalier as to push those buttons herself or allow anyone to do it. So when her ship was taken over..."

"Their own logs state that the ruins were "alive" already when they entered... and one of her officers did "play with the buttons" as you say."

"Yes... that security officer, Lieutenant Junior Grade Michael J. Tritter; the first one on the Asimov to be... possessed, the spreading agent that allowed the ship's takeover... and then brought it to you. Tritter; I don't know how such a... disturbed individual, so scared by his frontier out-of-date abused childhood, made it up to Lotus Fleet, let alone Starfleet. We purged him quickly enough from our own ranks once his unprofessionalism was noticed... but how he managed to stay in Starfleet and work his way on board a starship again..."

"As the legendary Doctor Leonard McCoy once allegedly said, Sir, bungling bureaucracy is the only constant in this universe. We can't win 'em all."

"But this time we almost lost it all," growled the Boslic admiral. "If these aliens had succeeded in taking over your starbase and then launch across federation Space from all your ships and shuttles... or if you had not had time to declare quarantine of your station... and found a way to regain control..."

"It comes with the job description, Sir," Samji simply said, refraining from the very unprofessional shrug that almost lifted his shoulders.

"Still... excellent job. You and your people *are* certainly the prime example of what Starfleet is, and most of all what Lotus Fleet Division is all about."

"Thank you, Sir."

There was a brief pause before Kotari spoke again.

"Any report from our adventurous Vulcan... and our blue loose cannon?"

It was a secret joke between the two of them. Kheren had always shown himself as a by-the-book officer... until he pulled out some green, four-heared, feathered rabbit out of a hat with his foot to solve an apprently unsolvable situation the book had never seen coming... and still managed to break no rules while pulling his stunts. And that had happened more often than not; so much in fact that more than a few high-ranking officers, not the least Admiral Neil Redding heading Starfleet Security, had more than passing doubts about him.

He was a loose cannon, but one that nevertheless managed to fire straight and true... so far; but truth be told, nothing to help an admiral sleep quietly at night.

"The Phoenix just emerged from the Azimuth Horizon and sent us a preliminary report. Syntron's ship should dock here within the hour."

"Give me the gist of it."

"Eden IV has proven uncolonizable, due to the fact that it is actually a prison planet."

"A prison? For whom?"

"The Zetarians, Sir."

Kotari was visibly taken aback by this first bit of news. That surprised expression on his bearded face would stay for quite a while as Samji continued his report.

"It seems, admiral, and this is from what they learned from direct contact with them, that while some Zetarians worked on preserving themselves as living consciousness, others were trying to fend off the incoming devastation of the anomaly. They again used advanced quantum physics to build a refuge planet in the nearby solar system, the one we now call Eden, where their quantum consciousness could be protected from it's devastating energies. What they manage to accomplish is again beyond our current capabilities; in essence, they somehow displaced in quantum state the event horizon of a nearby black hole... to form a kind of donut-shaped limitless gravity field around the planet; a field of intense negative energy."

Kotari said nothing, still visibly flabbergasted as Samji went on.

"That field would have absorbed any discharge from the anomaly when it would have grown to engulf that neighboring system. But as we confined the anomaly on our side in a perpetual subspace loop, the fire on their side was also rechanneled in that loop, stopping it's expansion in it's native universe as well. And since the triggering system for bringing them back and deactivate that field went through the window and far away on our side, those hiding on Eden IV became trapped. Their refuge became their prison... until a few months ago."

"What happened? Who freed them?" the admiral inquired.

"We did, Sir."

"What?"

"The USS Nuntio, Sir; the Federation News starship assigned to Lotus Fleet that was lost in the Azimuth Horizon anomaly almost a year ago."

"The Nuntio? I can't believe a level-headed, experienced captain like Caroline Rousseau would have violated so many general orders and Starfleet regulations that would have allowed such a situation, not the least of which is the Prime Directive!"

"According to the Phoenix preliminary report, they found the Nuntio, adrift on the other side... and full of Zetarians."

"Any survivors?"

"Fifty-three out of eighty-two, Sir," Samji reported with a lowered head and a somber tone. "The rest had died the same way the inhabitants of Memory Alpha had when the Enterprise had found them; nervous systems burned by too many Zetarians trying to control one single body. The Nuntio had to be scuttled but the Phoenix is bringing all the survivors back, which include the entire bridge crew of Captain Rousseau along with her... purged of any Zetarian possession of course."

Kotari sighed with relief.

"Continue, Fleet Captain."

"According to her logs' summary, the Nuntio was ejected from the anomaly on the other side when we contained it's energies. Disabled, they nevertheless managed to reach the nearest inhabitable system; Eden. With skillfull piloting and good understanding of the well-scanned planetary shield, they succeeded in landing on the fourth planet despite being caught in it's gravity well. They were doing repairs when the Zetarian inhabitants found them... and used the Nuntio to escape."

Kotari kept silent. Listening intently as Samji continued.

"Learning everything they needed to know about us, the ruthless, unprincipled Zetarians among those that escaped wanted to come to our universe and literally get a new lease on corporeal life... by taking our own. Fortunately, there were sevaal of their kind opposing them, as had happened on the Spectre... and just as fortunately, the Exec of the Nuntio was Saurian."

"Commander Schaell Schyssillyss," Kotari nodded.

"As you know, Sir, Saurians have two brains. Not only did he survive multiple alien intrusions, but he was able to contain them in his secondary brain, long enough to send the Nuntio powerless into an... Omega zone of space."

In the command center of the station, all heads turned a moment at the unfamiliar term. But Kotari understood perfectly what Samji implied, like any officer of captain rank and above knew and that no one else except in high spheres of the Federation Science Council knew: the Omega Directive, the most highly classified zeroth General Order of Starfleet, the one order that could nullify even the Prime Directive. It was solely about the most destructive particle in the universe. A single one of those unstable molecules could devastate several parsecs in an instant, making it utterly devoid even of any subspace structure and thus impassable with any known stardrive. Such a void was informally called an Omega zone; Samji didn't have to say anything else, especially in front of lower-ranking personnel, nor could he. But Kotari knew enough to understand the situation.

"The Zetarians were trapped again."

"Yes, Sir... until the Phoenix found the Nuntio during it's space charting mission."

The admiral remained silent, but he was scowling again. The Fleet Captain immediately put his unspoken doubts at ease.

"Captain Syntron acted with all due caution, despite not knowing what had happened and of course concerned with the fate of the Nuntio's crew. His Exec, Chief Engineer, Ops Chief and Security Chief acted in exemplary fashion when the situation was discovered. Despite the danger, the survivors were safely brought back and the Zetarian threat nullified."

"Was the Phoenix herself threatened?"

"For a short while, Admiral. But Captain Syntron and his Chief Science Officer quickly imprisoned the invading aliens much the same way we did."

"Science chief... you mean the X'EII?"

"Aye, Sir. According to the Captain's preliminary report, he was quite instrumental during the whole incident with the Zetarians... and the Draxx."

"The Draxx?"

"A spacefaring species native from this pocket universe and cognizant of the Zetarian menace. Captain Syntron is coming back with a treaty between us and them, ratified by Captain kheren as overall mission commander."

The Boslic leaned in his high-backed chair.

"I'm looking forward to review this treaty. Speaking of Kheren, what of him and the Horizon? And the colonization effort?"

"The Horizon is staying behind to oversee as scheduled the colonization of Eden III, now that the fourth planet originally planned for has proven itself unsuitable. But the report states that Governor Sufra is being under house arrest."

"Under arrest? What happened?"

"There is a judiciary report annexed to the mission report. Governor Sufra and twelve of her assistants have been found guilty by her own peers of violating several Federation laws, Starfleet regulations and colonization protocols, inciting a mutiny, stealing and damaging Starfleet property, violating quarantined space, endangering the lives of civilians and Starfleet officers and risking interstellar conflict with another spacefaring culture."

"These are very serious crimes," Kotari said with a somber tone. "But removing civilian authority is no trifling matter. We will have to review this thoroughly or else Kheren is in deep trouble. He made no secret of his dislike of Sufra and her people since the day the *Artemis*, his first command, had been sabotaged and almost taken over. If he abused his authority and power to satisfy his feelings of retribution to what the Horizon Children had done to his ship and crew..."

"That's why his chief science officer, Commander Snowfire Ke'Leysha, is coming back with them. She served as Sufra's legal counsel during the trial and Kheren asked her to continue serving in that capacity, to make sure she would be properly represented when brought back to face the Federation Council. Kheren is the one that insisted on a trial with her own people as jury and not go through a court martial as would have been customary. He also called for a free election among the colonists to erect their own planetary government, then stayed to ensure their protection and provide full support until they are fully autonomous and secured."

"That darn Andorian never ceases to throw me curve balls," Kotari said in mock complaint. So, colonization is underway, a cosmic threat is averted and a new far-away friend has joined the Federation. All in all quite an achievement from your team, Samji. Starfleet will shower you all with commendations, promotions and medals after this... all well-deserved. Once again Lotus Fleet lives up to its reputation."

"We'll do our best to keep it that way, Sir," Samji retorted, not quite able to resist grinning a bit.

"You better; Starfleet's Joint Chiefs of Staff are about to issue new orders to all our divisions across the quadrant... and maybe even beyond. The Borg invasion almost devastated us and the Azimuth Horizon crisis didn't leave us much time to rebuild; with Klingons shouting war cries across both our borders and those of a shattered Romulan Empire eager also to rebuild and conquer old and new territories, Cardassian insurrection threatening the Ferengi Alliance with Breen pirates lurking around and even rumors of Dominion resurgence... In truth, there is too much space, not enough starships and even less commanding officers to face it all.... and that is only what we *know* of."

The commanding officer of the entire Hromi sector sighed and stroke his grey, short-trimmed beard a moment. Then he folded his hands in front of him on his desk.

"Prepare yourself and your people, Fleet Captain. There is still much to be done. Kotari out."

THE END