

The first duty of a Starfleet officer is to the Truth

STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

THE SHADOW WITHIN THE LIGHT

The ninth voyage of the starship Lotus



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The Ninth Voyage of the Starship Lotus

Forum roleplaying session

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Redding as Captain Felez Connora'tu

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BLZBUB as Commander David Rogers

PROLOGUE

"Rogers HoD, pa'vetlhDaq maH."

Spinning slightly left in the command chair, the slim, athletic woman deftly threw one of her Kut'luch knives. The deadly assassin blade thunked solidly into the head rest beside the navigation officer's head.

"Qo' De' lagh chonayta' vISov Hinob."

Re-facing forward, she barked a command to the officer seated at the station immediately below her podium and to the right.

"Tactical!"

With a almost inaudible crackle of emerging power, the bridge viewer came online. The dull red hue of a triangular grid depicted the immediate space around the vessel with a distance marker displayed prominently along the bottom centre of the screen; fifty thousand kellicams.

"Target primary warp coils and fire."

Against the orange hued backdrop of the desolate Donia system, an orb of red pulsing light appeared from the emptiness of space, resolving into a speeding torpedo. Trailing a warp tail, the deadly projectile raced across the backdrop of the system's debris field, arcing into the complacent D'kora class vessel transiting against the backdrop of the dead planets silhouette. Impacting on the starboard warp generators, the Ferengi vessel fell out of warp as its field collapsed. Pallid green smoke trailed the now drifting horseshoe-shaped vessel as it spun around her x and z axis. Immediately, the failing field of a dropping cloak shimmered aft of the stricken ship, and the IKS Ya'Vang settled into a vector match behind the tumbling starship.

On the Ferengi ship, amid the acrid smoke rising from a few critically damaged consoles, DaiMon Ishil heard the telltale bleep of an incoming hail from the comm panel. Quickly touching an opening icon, she immediately started a berating barrage of insults and incriminations.

"What gives you the right to fire on a peaceful vessel, you klingon *QI'yaH!*"

On the screen, the athletic woman's shoulder length light red hair came into focus, framing her blue eyes which reflected the reddish hue of the battle lighting prevalent on the Ya'Vang's

bridge. Speaking tersely, she arrived straight to the point.

"DaiMon, a few months back you sold a Klingon cloaking device. I want the name of that customer. In payment, the Syndicate will ... allow you ... to stay clear of the vault of eternal destitution."

Swallowing a temporary lump which had suddenly formed in her throat, Ishil responded with incredulity.

"You? Are Orion Syndicate? How did you get a Klingon battle cruiser? What ... never mind."

Backtracking rapidly, Ishil returned to the immediate threat to her and her ship and crew.

"Cloaking device? Very well. In the interests of profit and loss, I guess I must tell you. I sold it to a Starfleet officer. Under the table, as the *hoomons* say."

Shelly crossed her arms akimbo, staring menacingly at the Ferengi woman on her screen.

"Get to the name, DaiMon. That idiot kidnapped me from the syndicate... and, as you well know, no one ever leaves the syndicate."

DaiMon Ishil well knew the legendary status of the Orion Syndicate's practices. One never left their employ, except through death. And even then, it was rumored, one simply continued on in it's employment registry.

"Rogers. Commander David Rogers. And you didn't get that from me, Captain."

Without so much as a passing glance, the red-haired woman's image dissolved off the Marauder's screen and DaiMon Ishil watched the Klingon heavy cruiser turn away, rapidly cloaking as it jumped into warp and became just an after image on her retinas.

CHAPTER ONE : THE DIAMOND STAR INCIDENT

Commander David Rogers stepped off the transport pad and paused while the security team rescanned him for proper identification again. Security procedures for starbase Lotus had been beefed up since the captain of the USS Horizon's security protocols had been adopted throughout the entire facility; including all her attendant ships. Getting the nod from the senior lieutenant, David turned and exited the transporter room on deck three, turned toward the turbo shaft and awaited its arrival.

Pulling his personal PADD from its holster, David opened his orders and read them again for the fifth time:

Stardate 88662.4

To: Commander David Rogers, Lotus Fleet. Current posting Chief Engineer, USS Phoenix.

Per orders from Commander in chief, Hromi Sector and Star Fleet Security chief, Sol III, you are hereby ordered to report for duty as Executive Officer and Chief Engineer aboard USS Lotus, star base Lotus, Hromi Sector. Report directly to Captain Connora'tu Felez.

Signed:

Fleet Captain Allen Samji,
CO Star Base Lotus,
Hromi Sector.

In and of itself, the orders were standard issue for transfer. But David had an uneasy feeling when he again read the orders origin. Star Fleet Security? Having had no real dealing with fleet security, David none the less got a somewhat foreboding feeling when seeing that. The turbolift doors chimed and then opened to admit him and Rogers stepped aboard the small elevator and directed it to the bridge, two decks up. A short five seconds ride opened the doors to reveal the Lotus bridge, from the perspective of the left aft turbo lift position.

A young Bajoran with ensign pips glanced up and practically skipped over to him.

"Commander Rogers?" but he didn't wait for the reply. "Welcome aboard the Fleet's oldest and most respected vessel, Commander. I'm afraid Captain Felez was... detained... and will be meeting with you later. In the meantime, I'm to assist you in settling in to your station."

David looked the young Bajoran security officer over whimsically, recalling his own tenure as an ensign. But, as protocols required business before pleasure, he got right to the point.

"Very well, thank you Ensign. I have had my belongings sent to my quarters already, so I will just get down to main engineering and see how the Lotus held up in dry dock. You can inform me when the captain arrives."

So saying, David about faced and re-entered the turbolift. As the doors swished shut behind him, he ordered it to deck 11. Once there, he immediately called the maintenance team still doing last checks on the recommissioned ship and ordered them to perform a level 2 diagnostics on the ships sensor systems while David initiated himself the same painstaking, hours long procedure on the computers which required all checks short of disassembling the entire thing as a level 1 diagnostic would have required. Weapons and shields diagnostics had already been completed and the main and secondary computer systems were all that was left.

He had left them for last because of their newly integrated Decatur Nanite Enhancement. The supplementary one hundred percent efficiency granted by the DNE was surpassed only by those of the USS Phoenix systems, the original testbed for the nanotech half-klingson officer's enhancement.

As the diagnostic began, David summarized the ship wide diagnostics into a concise report and placed it into his personal PADD. It would be available for the captain's approval once he boarded the ship.

* * *

"Are we there yet?"

The transporter chief should have felt annoyed by the repeated child-like inquiry of the the blue-collared commander waiting with obvious impatience on the forcefield-enclosed transporter pad. Yet, she could only smile each time she looked into the dazzling purple eyes, the soft kind face and the sparkling smile of the slim bald man with the soft, mesmerizing voice. Even with his pheromones consciously off, the Deltan's alluring appearance, despite the bland grey and black of a Starfleet uniform, and especially his seductive voice and friendly expression, were more than enough to make her almost swoon over. But she was a professional and she did her duty fully and correctly, keeping her emotions in check; barely.

Even the male security officer guarding the door, phaser at the ready, could not help himself but feel uncomfortable with the whole, tedious but mandatory new security protocols, as if the man confined on the transporter pad was an old, dear friend he was forced to inconvenience so unduly.

And the annoyance of the commander was as obvious as his friendly mien.

Finally, the transporter chief gave him a warm smile of her own.

"Voice and retina scan identification confirming biomolecular and medical file checks; welcome aboard, Doctor Nasaro-Myth. Your own medical team is waiting for you in our secondary sickbay."

"What are you taking about, dear? *My* medical team is still on the Horizon, in another universe," frowned the Deltan, as he walked right into the forcefield and was unceremoniously stopped dead in his track by the shimmering energy wall. "And this is an Intrepid class vessel, not a capital ship or a starbase; there is only one sickbay."

She smiled as her cheeks reddened under her lowered eyes.

"Last security check, Doctor. Sorry about that. Your belongings have also been checked in transit and beamed to your cabin on deck 2."

The restraining forcefield winked out with a last shimmer and with one hand cautiously extended, Elliago Nasaro-Myth stepped down, still smiling.

"Don't feel sorry, dear; I personally know the damn Andorian who's twisted mind conceived all these rules... and why. Keep up the good work, chief."

She smiled almost as if he had asked her hand in marriage. Leaving her a last warm smile. Elliago went to the door.

"I will call for an escort to guide you, Doctor," the security man offered, his hand already going to his combadge. But the Deltan's own hand and smile stopped him.

"No need, my good man. I know my way around starships. I was born and raised on one. I will go directly to sickbay to see at it's current state oversee it's readiness."

"Wouldn't you like to report first to the captain?" inquired the guard.

"No need; I'm the chief medical officer of this ship as of now. As per regulation, all personel must report to *me* for medical examination before we leave base. He will come to me."

With a parting nod and a friendly pat on the shoulder of the security officer, Elliago left the transporter room towards his assigned post.

* * *

The sickbay aboard the Lotus was a key point located on deck 5 of the ship. Unlike many Starfleet vessels the Intrepid class only had the one.

Captain Felez lay uncomfortably in the bio-bed. He recalled seeing this area less than half a dozen times during his last captaincy aboard the Lotus, but he knew that was about to change.

In most cases such exams lasted only a few minutes, but the Captain was a special case. During his last mission for starfleet he and then lieutenant Oseno fell into the vengeful hands of Romulan interrogators. He had been exposed to lethal doses of radiation over an extended period of time, causing critical organ failure and permanent skin damage.

But now it was a problem for his new ship chief medical officer, Nasaro-Myth.

The Deltan had welcomed him with a smile and a warm hand before guiding him to the biobed. There he had let the machines do their work, then cross-checked their results with direct body contact, using his acute perceptions to gauge his health through his pulse, his breathing, his skin moisture and temperature, his body odors and coloring. All the while, he had not said a word, obviously concentrating on the process of tuning his senses to his patient. That didn't take any longer than the actual medical scan from the sickbay systems and he seemed to be satisfied if not a bit puzzled by the concurring results.

"Well, captain, Xenomedecine is my specialty, but it is the first time I actually encounter someone of your species. I'm sorry if it took a bit of time but I had to familiarize myself with Efrogian physiology in general and the specifics of your medical record."

His smile was both friendly and professional, at the same time sympathetic and authoritative, a subtle mixture not many healers could achieve.

Efrogians, although a very passionate race, were able to read 'conversational empathy' in each other to an exact degree; and as such they lost the ability to use facial expressions. But they could perceive the feelings of others well enough and he knew the doctor was sincere and truly caring as he spoke.

"The radiation poisoning you've been exposed to was calibrated for Human physiology. It would have played havoc after months on a Human but on someone of your kind, it did worse and faster. It looks like the damages and consequences are irreversible, most notably to your immune system... but don't mind if I try my best to find out a way to reverse that sentence. A good diet rich in iron, regular moderate exercise, enough rest and maybe some meditation will do you wonders. In the meantime, I would advise you to avoid away missions as much as possible. And if you have no choice to do so and observe any discoloration of your skin, it will be a sign that something is affecting your system. In such a case, return to the ship at once. Exposing yourself to alien environments might prove detrimental too often and eventually leave you unfit to perform your duties. And that would be a shame; I read your Starfleet record and I've heard so many tall tales about you from my former commanding officer, the Federation would suffer a great loss if you were forced to retire due to ill health."

"Yes, it is a point of indignation for my people that we were once considered invaluable on a starship as navigators, so much so that now joining Starfleet carries a level social stigma for people like me."

Elliago's charming smile widened and a spark shone in his purple eyes.

"Fortunately, we live in a century where captains have XO's to do the dirty work. With a good one you have full confidence in, you will still have as long and fruitful a career in the big chair as anybody else. And your friendly doctor is here to make it so."

He stepped back with a crooked smile at the corner of his mouth so that Felez would know his ordeal was over.

"That's very kind of you, Doctor." Then as if an afterthought, Felez forced his face into a smile in return. "Thank you"

Getting up and putting his jacket back on, Felez felt more at ease.

"As soon as you're done with the rest of the senior officers, have them report to the briefing room, you as well of course."

"So it shall be done, Captain," Elliago acknowledged with a slight nod of his perfectly shaved head.

"I'm looking forward to working together, Commander."

There was a strange detachment in the way he did, as if he had said it out of reflex. He gave a nod and moved to leave sickbay. But his CMO's soft, rich voice followed him.

"Doctor, if you don't mind my good Captain. I hold a rank because the powers-that-be want me to, not because I want it or need it... and regulation allows me to have it ignored. I experienced command and if I'm ready to assume the responsibility, I do not look forward to it. I want to be, and be recognized as, a healer of body, mind and soul, Captain; nothing more but nothing less."

Felez stopped short as if not understanding what he had said at first.

"You're right of course. I'm just a bit distracted."

"Quite understandable, with this new command so suddenly entrusted upon you. And I'm sure mission orders are anything but routine stuff, if they recalled this lady back into play," Elliago noted, his eyes roving all around to encompass the ship. " But you're in command, Captain. It is now you who will call the dance, when and how you choose; remember that."

He gave him a nod.

"See you at the meeting, Doctor."

"Count on it," the Deltan acknowledged with a smile, although his eyes lingered on the Efrogian with obvious if undefined concern.

As he walked to the turbolift, Felez pulled up his latest assignment notes on his PaDD, The implication of someone taking a ship like the Diamond Star right out of spacedock beneath the very noses of Starfleet security was troubling at the least.

The list of suspects wasn't encouraging either.

A little later, he entered the Briefing room and took his seat, sighed and put down his PaDD. He was already feeling tiered from just the exertion of the exam and the walk back to the bridge, it wasn't a feeling he was ready to admit to himself.

He looked at the chronometer and wondered what was keeping them, perhaps the Doctor was keeping them busy.

* * *

Rising from his office chair in main engineering David pocketed his PADD and, with a shrugging stretch, eased the tension in his shoulders. After the take over of his body and mind on the Pheonix mission to the other universe, he had found that the damage inflicted during that encounter ... although treated and cured ... still had a tendency to knot his shoulders after prolonged sitting times. Exiting the office, David made his way out of the bay to the turbo lift, entered it when it sensed him and opened, then ordered it to deck 5. He knew, and dreaded, the upcoming summons that was inevitably ... the comm badge on his chest chirped.

"Commander Rogers, please report to medical immediately."

David groaned at the universe granting his worst nightmare with its usual cosmic joke.

Great, David thought grudgingly. I take it upon myself to do the proverbial end-run around that saw bones and report for that damn physical before he can berate me for not coming, and he and the great cosmos take the fun out of it.

Tapping his badge to respond, Rogers answered the order.

"On my way, Doctor."

The turbo lift surged slightly to a stop and David stepped through the opening doors. Walking casually; At least attempting to, David strolled into the medical bay and saw Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth standing near a biobed. Knowing their past interactions, David felt it necessary to continue his tirade regarding the usefulness of medical updates on every posting.

"So Doc? You have seen the transporter records of my beaming aboard the Lotus? Anything changed in the last few hours?"

"The machine didn't tell me, So let me check..."

Elliago served him his dazzling smile. He had served before with the engineer on the USS Phoenix' maiden voyage and new his typical Starfleet officer annoyance with medical examinations; an annoyance that grew proportionately with rank. He also knew such nonsense was affectation for almost every one of them. They wanted to appear indestructible to lower ranks and so went by as if they were immune to pain, illness, fatigue, stress and all the little ailments of life, including age. Sensible and straightforward officers like Captain Felez were the exception.

The Deltan knew all this; yet, he didn't mind playing the game with the likes of David Rogers... although this time, he could feel something was truly amiss. There was a subtle stiffness in his neck and shoulders that resonated into his forced casual tone of voice. He knew him; this was not his usual affected annoyance. Something was really bothering him.

As the Half-Romulan sat on the biobed, the built-in sensors quickly read his biometrics and compared them to both Starfleet records and transporter scans. At the same time, he placed the tip of his sensitive fingers on his cervical vertebrae and up the base of the skull, probing with a natural sensitivity that could match any instrument.

"Well Rogers, I would suggest you have yourself a good drink, a good book and some sleep before we depart. You are as fit as usual but you seem overtly stressed. I guess this upcoming investigation assignment is puzzling you as much as it puzzles me."

David, with a quizzical glance over his shoulder at the doctor about his last statement, answered with curiosity.

"Investigation?," David started, as his heart rate picked up a couple beats per second."What could I possibly be of value for in a security investigation?"

"My guess would be your technical expertise," Elliago answered.

David thought quickly. Verbally, he continued on the same puzzled tone.

" Doc, my orders were to report to the Lotus, by order of Starfleet security and the CIC. I haven't seen the captain yet, so I know nothing about any investigation, or even our mission orders."

"I myself was just told I was summoned for my xenoforensics specialty; and since it was from Starfleet Security, it could only be for an investigation... and quite the serious one at that, to drag me from the Horizon and all the way from the Azimuth universe."

Sliding off of the biobed, David started to turn away from the Deltan and his probing fingertips.

"I had better get to the captain now."

Elliago let him go. His medical check was done anyway; but he had sensed the sudden mounting tension in the Half-Romulan's body as they spoke. He had felt the pull away coming but did not insist. Not only would it have been rude, unjustified and unethical, but he understood his state of mind; or at least he thought so. Being half-Romulan and being unexpectedly and unexplainably called out by Starfleet Security alone easily explained such a reaction. Elliago himself, even being from a well known and respected member species of the Federation, nevertheless didn't feel as confident and relaxed as he was making it appear to be. Anything involving Starfleet Security was bound to be something to worry about.

He smiled at Rogers.

"Well, you were the last one I had to check so, I will also answer the summon of our glorious leader as well and go with you, if you don't mind."

The turbo lift doors swished open to allow Rogers access of the bridge of the Lotus. Turning right David made the few steps across the rear of the bridge and entered the small access hallway leading to the main conference room. The door opened as he walked to it showing Captain Felez already present.

Silently, Doctor Nasaro-Myth was following him like a shadow, freely offering his charming smile to everyone around. His bright purple eyes however shone with a definite seriousness in anticipation of what would be discussed beyond the swishing door.

"Good evening gentlemen, please take a seat, well be starting shortly." and motioned at the replicator, hinting that the meeting might be a long one.

"Don't mind if I do," the Deltan said jovially as he walked to the machine. "MacKintosh apple juice, chilled."

Once the glass of amber-colored liquid materialized, he went to the other end of the table opposing the captain's seat and sat with a contented smile on his face as he took a swallow of the sugary fruit juice. It was his habit to sit this way, as doctors often had to be the voice of conscience for many a commanding officer on board starships... and offer the feeling of full crew support when acknowledging a command decision across the whole table. Having been born and raised on a galaxy class starship, Elliago was in a starship environment just at ease as a fish in water.

And from this vantage point, he could also observe the whole command staff and the captain; he knew how that could also be helpful to a captain and to a mission.

Elliago didn't knew their assignment yet, nor this new ship and crew and captain... but he knew his duties and responsibilities quite well.

Once the doctor had selected his drink from the replicator and moved away David ordered a coffee and, taking the steaming beverage from the unit, turned to take the seat beside doctor Nasaro-Myth, facing captain Felez and the windows behind him. With a cautious sip, he set the coffee down on the table in front of him and, looking from the Deltan to the Efrosian, decided it was best to formally report aboard, pleasantries notwithstanding. Standing up, he took his orders PADD from his pocket, offered it to Captain Felez, and formally introduced himself.

"Commander David Rogers, Sir. My orders."

Remaining at attention, Rogers awaited confirmation for boarding the Lotus.

"Of course, Commander, my apologies. Working as a station administer for the last two years seems to have made me protocol deficient."

As he started reviewing the PaDD, he noticed that Rogers was still standing.

"Please sit, Commander. As I understand it 'coffee' loses something when its cold."

He had tried this coffee stuff after his old commanding officer, Captain Redding, suggested it once; revolting.. even cold.

"I assume, Doctor, that every one coming aboard has been given a clean bill of health? we may be going into a few 'out of the way' places soon, I would hate to have to detour for space mumps or the like."

He forced a light smile to show he was attempting humor.

"Rest easy, Captain; everyone aboard is fit and ready to serve," the Deltan answered with a smile that came easily to his sensuous lips. "And this ship is well equipped with state of the art medical facilities. And with the PIDs we now all wear as belt buckles, I will know about you getting mumps before you even felt it."

The humor was acknowledged, but behind it was the statement that he would be reliable as expected from the CMO of a flagship... even if the Lotus didn't had that glorious title anymore; but she was still worthy of having once being just that.

"Good to know Doctor." Felez said with a nod.

He folded his hands together. "Let us begin shall we."

He looked at both of them in turn as he spoke, with that strange blind-like stare his species were so well known for.

"Although it has not been made common knowledge, most of us know about the disappearance of the Horizon's sister ship, the USS Diamond Star from its dock at Utopia Plenitia a little over a month ago."

He looked around the room at their expressions. While not true empathis, Efrogians were capable of picking up and accurately reading bio-impules in living organisms. The only limitation was they had to be within two meters of their subject. But it was no surprise to Felez that the assembled personnel already knew this news, seeing as a sector wide hunt followed directly after the ships disappearance.

"Lesser known is the fact that two days ago the Diamond Star inexplicably reappeared over Utopia Planatia in almost exactly the same condition it had left in with the exception that its primary and secondary memory cores were wiped of the entire event."

He again looked over the reaction of his officers to this news, his eyes stopping momentarily on Rogers, his face and eyes remained without hint of emotion.

"Were you already aware of this, Mister Rogers?"

David shifted slightly in his seat and set his half empty cup of coffee onto the table in front of him. Looking back up into his captains eyes he responded.

"yes, Sir. As you may well know, skuttle-butt is faster than transwarp. An old acquaintance of mine at Mars informed us yesterday."

Glancing slightly at the doctor nearby, David returned his gaze back to Captain Felez. "By us, I mean Lotus base engineering,Sir. Standard gossip, although by today, I suspect the entire base is whispering theories across whatever beverages they're consuming."

"Ships don't usually go on a stroll by themselves..." Elliago stated with a frown on his handsome countenance. " At least not since the lifeform emergence from the computer core of the USS Enterprise D and the running away of the AI-controlled USS Nemesis. So... does Starfleet has any clue who did it , how and why?"

Rogers got up and returned to the replicator for a second cup of coffee while the Deltan spoke. Once it had materialized David returned to his seat and sat himself and the cup down. Glancing once at the doctor, David added to his facts.

"Yes, Doc; and there was also the old M-5 multitronic unit, back some one hundred forty years ago. It became self-aware and destroyed a federation ship. But the Horizon class uses Bioneural systems, just like most every other star fleet vessel now."

Picking up his coffee for a sip of the still steaming beverage, David continued to address Nasaro-Myth's last statement.

"We should be able to figure out the 'How' at Utopia Planitia. As to the 'Who' and 'Why', well ... That may have to wait until the 'How' is determined."

"The ship yard is our first stop." Felez added in. "The Diamond Star has been placed in a secure dock and is currently undergoing a rather sever sensor sweep. But so far, it seems we can rule out any idea of a rogue AI as a motivation. No, this one is the oddest case I've ever heard of."

He took a drink of his fish juice.

"To say it was an inside job is to state the obvious, but the situation is baffling. At best guess a small team of infiltrators or possibly even traitors within the Federation stole the newest, largest Federation Lotus class vessel in operation out of the most secure shipyard in the Federation, and all without setting off a single alarm I might add."

He gestured with his off hand as he went on.

"And the only apparent point to the greatest theft in Federation history? a joy ride, perhaps to prove it can be done."

The Deltan doctor smiled as he spoke, but there was no amusement in his eyes and much seriousness in his tone.

"Even Undines or changelings would have had a hard time doing it with the quality of biosensors and the experience with such beings we now have. Equally, sentient holograms would not be able to operate unchallenged for long on a starship, especially on such a new and state of the art design in it's birthing facility and at the very heart of Federation space no less. Moreover, the Diamond Star if I recall is the testbed of the Lotus class; those starship testbed platforms are the only ships already mostly automated so as to allow even a small team of technicians and engineers to make it operational for such testing, isn't that so, David?"

Elliago resumed his thoughts after a moment.

"So, full knowledge of Starfleet engineering protocols, security measures and starship operations of Utopia Plenitia in particular and Sector 001 both. Also, fully automating such a large vessel, especially without raising any suspicion or alarm and leaving no trace in computer banks, sensor records or security systems inside and outside of the ship speaks of extraordinary technical knowledge, experience and expertise. And after all this, the perpetrators allowed such an invaluable prize to return undamaged to Starfleet; a very peculiar act from a mere thief or spy. Thus, an inside job is not only the highest probable assumption, it is the only one that makes sense, short of genuine magic. This should considerably narrow down the list of suspects."

He gazed at Rogers and Felez in turn before finishing his deduction.

"Even before the who, the how should be the simplest one to find out, especially with an engineer of David's caliber and an experienced starship commander like you, Captain. And my scientific expertise with life forms may help identify any new threat we might not have yet encountered that could have unforeseen capabilities to accomplish such a feat. As for the why... Someone needed a powerful starship capable of speed and range beyond standard starship capabilities; it is certainly no coincidence that the only fully operational transwarp vessel was selected, especially considering that it was certainly the most well-guarded and the only one of such vessels available for full automation. Someone wanted to go quite far very fast and complete his objective before Starfleet could marshal enough resources to find them and stop them. Whatever that objective was, it had to be done quickly and without incriminating the perpetrators beyond what was strictly necessary, as the return of the ship seems to point to."

Now amusement crept into his dazzling purple eyes.

"If I didn't know better, I would conclude this has all the marks of Captain James T. Kirk assisted by Captain Data and a couple of Bynars."

"Interesting points, Doc," David interjected casually. "And I might add to your list! Captain La Forge for one. Last I heard though, he was commanding the Challenger. Data's brother Lore, although I have not heard of his ... regaining? ... full awareness. Not to mention, any highly competent engineering officer in Starfleet, the Klingon Defense Force. Romulan Tal Shiar also springs to mind."

David thought a bit more on the suspect list. Adding to the list would prolong the investigation. Not that he himself was above suspicion. And certainly not because he didn't want to be found as the guilty party. But the more time elapsed before his revelation as the thief and his sister's full recovery at Risa would be better. So? Throw more suspects into the investigation?

"How about my old familiars? The Ferengi Captain Nog is certainly capable. And Torres, late of the Voyager would be even more capable! Leah Brahms? O'Brien?"

"As I said, external forces like the Tal Shiar and KDF or special individuals like Lore are most unlikely," Elliago retorted. "Those would never have left such a prize as the Diamond Star out of their grasp... and if any of those would have been able to do such a feat, they would have been able to do far worse and a far more profitable job than this... and for what gain?"

He shifted his gaze from the engineer to the captain.

"It is the return of the Diamond Star that is much more telling than the theft itself. It's the mindset of a thief that doesn't want to be a thief or admit that he is a thief... or the mark of a high-risk prankster. Or, this is the act of someone needing to do something wrong to achieve something seemingly right in one's own mind; like Kirk did when he stole the Enterprise in mid 23rd century to retrieve Captain Spock on the Genesis planet, acting against all orders and regulations to the contrary, but according to his own conscience and sense of personal duty."

He took a sip of his apple juice and savored it for a few seconds before adding a few thoughts.

"All those Starfleet officers you named may possibly have managed such a feat, Commander; but none of them, not even the famous hot-tempered B'ellana Torres, have ever been known to display such behavior. LaForge and Nog are by-the-book exemplary officers; Brahms and O'Brien are by far not enough of the adventurous types; and Torres, a former Maquis, would simply quit Starfleet again to do things unrestricted if she needed to. And I'm sure Starfleet Security has already checked all of their whereabouts at the time of the ship's disappearance, and anyone else possibly as capable as them. So, whoever did this acted completely under the sensors; it must be someone otherwise relatively unnoticeable among his peers, with no previous history of insubordination, disobedience or cavalier attitude, able to provide himself with a solid alibi... someone invisible... but with a need, probably a very personal need, to risk everything in order to achieve it. A ghost, by any other name."

Felez regarded them both.

"It seems to be a popular opinion to the both of you that this was a one man operation. I was, at the very least, considering a small team with the backing of an inside man."

Both nodded slowly.

"But I see you are most likely correct, the near impossibility of several people working together and returning ship? No, with the possible aforementioned high risk pranksters that would be beyond belief, and a prankster would have some mark, some way of proving he had done it."

Elliago frowned a moment.

"I agree. So, if it was unlikely to be a prankster nor an outsider, that leaves little else but someone within Starfleet or at least very cognizant of Starfleet operations, more specifically with shipyards and starships. An efficient team would have a better chance of pulling it off than a lone operator but would also present a higher risk of leaving clues and make mistakes... and present a higher risk of slipping or betrayal just as well."

He sighed.

"Guess that's the farthest we can speculate about so far... and it's not much. We don't have enough data to go all Mycroft Holmes on this one. We'll have to do it the hard way of his less talented brother, Sherlock; actual reconstruction of the crime, interview of any relevant people and examination of the hard evidence.

Rogers looked between the captain and the doctor once, then changed direction. This was a briefing anyway.

"I should report, Captain, that the Lotus is ready, as per the PADD I gave you. Warp and transwarp capabilities are fully available. Shielding and armor are fully operational. Phaser array's are checked and fully functional, as are the four torpedo launchers. Sensors suites are fully checked and optimal. So is the Syntron sonar and Pel early warning programming."

Pausing for a breath, David thought of what else needed mentioning. Being an XO was new to him. Coupled with double-duty as chief engineer would keep him quite busy.

"Both computers have passed level 1 diagnostics. The Decatur nanite enhancement has them, and of course most ship systems, running in the one hundred thirty percentile. The ship is good to go at your command, Captain."

"Well I got sickbay ready," Nasaro-Myth simply repeated. "Although in view of our current assignment, I will be dedicating a good portion of it to forensics I guess."

"Very well. On completion of this meeting, we'll set a course for Utopia Plenitia shipyards, warp factor 6. I want you all to assemble teams and work on how this was done, coordinate with station security and come up with a few possible scenarios. I'll fact check your work as I get it. Doctor, I'm assigning you to comb the personnel files and see if you can figure out who did this and if possible, why?"

He motioned at Rogers.

"It's unlikely that more than three people had the ability to perform such a 'prank' within the time frame given, but we can't leave out the possibility that any of them might be part of it, willingly or not. So, I will be conducting interviews of all persons of interest either in person, or by ship to ship communication, as needed."

He put his hands together on the table.

"Any questions?"

Elliago cleared his throat.

"Well, Sir, since it will be well over three months before we get to the shipyards of Sol IV, I suggest we use the holodeck and all the data Starfleet has on the ship, the facilities, security protocols and everything relevant to that case, including holograms of possible suspects, to try and recreate the circumstances of the theft. We could try to have different officers act as perpetrators or perpetrator teams trying to recreate a way or ways to steal the ship and return it without any trace of themselves, methods and motives. If anything else, this will help us rule out false clues and hypothesis by the time we get to the actual location."

He gulped the last of his apple juice.

"That will also allow me to test in simulation what I might find in the files with the help of a few talented holographic technicians."

Felez forgot to show it, but he was smiling.

"You have an incredible gift for sarcasm doctor, allow me to correct myself."

He took a breath.

"Set a course for Utopia Planitia, best possible speed."

Why he had originally decided on warp 6, their cruising speed, was uncertain. He couldn't even remember the last time it was used.

Rogers stood up from his chair and returned his cup to the replicator. As the vessel disintegrated back into the system, David replied to Captain Felez' order.

"Aye, Captain; transwarp 3 to Mars."

"Great; now instead of three months I only have barely two days; typical Starfleet captain attitude," the Deltan grumbled with a false air of annoyance.

Born and raised on a starship, he was just as well versed in FTL calculations as in the want-it-all-want-it-now attitude of most starship commanders. And having just being transferred from the new flagship USS Horizon, he was one of the very few officers in Starfleet now familiar with transwarp travel. But he could not fault Felez about it. Getting there as soon as possible meant looking as soon as possible at hard evidence and the actual setting of the crime. There, his actual xenobiomedical expertise would be much more useful and effective than him scanning mere files and playing out simulations.

"Guess I should start right away, then. Unless you need me personally in that medical command chair of your bridge, I'll be in sickbay, reading... by your leave, Captain Sir."

And so saying, he brought his empty glass back to the replicator for recycling and headed out of the meeting room with a last smile to his commander and fellow officers.

As the exit doors of the conference room swished open at his presence, David Rogers paused and turned back to address his captain again.

"Will you be taking us out of dock, Captain?"

Felez had already turned his attention back to his PADD. One of the biggest problems of being an Efrozian in modern Starfleet was that constant study was necessary, although the race excelled at single skill sets, multitasking was nearly always problematic due to their highly focused mind. But like anything else, practice made perfect; enough to get by at least. Nevertheless, why try to deny one's nature, talents and limits?

"Thank You, Rogers, but I believe I shall leave this honor to you."

He gave him a slight nod. For some curious reason, it occurred to him that Rogers may never get another chance like this.

So let him have his moment.

David glanced back through the open doorway at the bridge, then back at Captain Felez, a small lump in his throat. He had never taken a capitol class vessel out of space dock before, just shuttles and such. Although the posting of executive officer required the necessity of launch, David had assumed this first launch of the Lotus would be under the captain's capable hands. Now, it was thrust into his own. With a nod, David acknowledged the captain's order.

"Aye, Sir."

Walking through the portal Rogers traversed the few meters to the step and down to the right. There, flanking a central small command console, where were the two original bridge command chairs, now with the added medical command chair as was now mandatory on all ships of Lotus Fleet. This new seat however was on the right side of the captain's seat instead of the opposite as on other, more recent designs. Passing the first one, David stopped in front of the captain's chair to its right and turned to face forward. He noted the helmsman below him, roughly five meters away toward the main viewer. Looking left and then right he noted the manned positions at tactical, engineering, ops and science. The crew were somewhat idle, as all preparations had been cleared just under an hour ago. They were merely crossing the t's and dotting the i's, as the Terran saying went. With a slight feeling of trepidation, David looked down and back at the seat behind him, then, almost gingerly, sat down in the command seat.

This was fairly new to him, but he had seen it performed dozen's of times on the Phoenix and the Spectre. Thus, with a low, quiet cough to clear his throat, David pressed the intercom switch on the console to his lower left and addressed the entire ship and her crew.

"Now hear this. We are getting underway. Mission flight time to Utopia Planitia is approximately forty six hours. Engineering? Standby for transwarp drive after launch. Commander Rogers out."

Reaching down and cancelling the intercom, David directed his attention to the comm.

"Contact starbase Lotus and clear us for launch."

"Aye, Commander," replied the dark haired comms Lieutenant. "Lotus base, this is the USS Lotus requesting launch clearance."

Almost immediately, the fair voice of Lotus base docking control came over the speakers.

"This is starbase Lotus flight control; clearance for departure through spacedoors two confirmed. Fair winds and good tides, Lotus."

"Disengage docking clamps, clear all umbilicals," David ordered with alacrity. "Forward view."

Helm engaged the large viewer at the front of the bridge and then reported dutifully back once the faint clangs of the clamps releasing and hisses of the umbilicals disconnecting had subsided.

"Ship is clear and at station keeping, Sir."

"Aft thrusters, helm. Port and starboard at station keeping."

"Aye, thursters on full. Port and starboard at station keeping," repeated the helmsman.

The seven hundred thousand metric tons of the USS Lotus began to move forward. An interior view of the capital class star base showed the massive number two space doors flash its red warning lights and then, as they turned to pulsing white strobe's, the doors split down the middle and drew apart. At just over fifty-five meters in width, the Lotus glided through the yawning aperture with plenty of room to spare, her one hundred and forty four meters height cleared the upper and lower sills with ease.

At five hundred meters per second, the Lotus' three hundred and forty two and a half meters slipped out of star base Lotus in barely over ten seconds, leaving her port, and relative safety, behind her. Rogers asked for the aft view before he gave the order to get properly underway.

"Aft view Mr. Goddard. Set course for sector zero zero one."

As he input the coordinates, Goddard repeated the instructions as per routine.

"Aft view aye. Coordinates set."

With a quick glance around the bridge to ascertain that all the crew were safely at their various stations, David gave the order to move out.

"Hit it!"

"Activating transwarp drive in five... four... three... two... one... mark!"

This crew had been briefed about transwarp travel and knew the transwarp technology aboard the Lotus had been experimental, a final stepping stone to the production of actual transwarp ships like the new Lotus class. It was functional but still a risky procedure aboard this much older and smaller starship design; yet, the only one sturdy enough for those early tests. Of course, since transwarp 1 was exactly the same as warp 1 and transwarp 2 merely equivalent to transwarp 8, it was starting at transwarp 3, equal to warp 27, that problems could really surface and the whole warp assembly burn out from the pressure of an added subspace layer over the original subspace field needed for standard warp travel. Warping already warped space-time was no easy achievement, even with the best technology available.

There was thus a definite tenseness as there was, on the screen, a stretching of starlight much brighter and denser than usual. The blinding flash that betrayed the breaking of Einsteinian space limitations was also brighter and longer than usual. And instead of the familiar warpspeed show of moving points of lights, there was a deep dark center from which those far away points became blue to red streaks of lights at the edge of the screen.

"Holding steady and on course at transwarp 3," confirmed the helmsman.

His sigh of relief and smile of satisfaction was echoed and reflected from every other officer on the bridge.

* * *

Having achieved full stealth parking within the outer fringes of the Hromi cluster, Shelly ordered the passive scan of the area. As it was being performed by one of the two remaining bridge crew, she reviewed again the display hanging to her right; A shielded screen only the captain's seat on the raised dais could see. The Klingon Intelligence file was short, but concise enough for her purposes at the moment.

From: Gelera, Klingon Intelligence;
To: All KDF captains

Subject: Commander David Rogers, Star Fleet, UFP.

D.o.B.: February 16, 2386 (approximately)
P.o.B.: Romulus Orbital Detention Facility

Physical:
Height: 6'1";
Weight: 99.7 Kg;
Pilosity: Black, shoulder length hair
Eye Color: Hazel
(See attachment 2 for Federation Starfleet file photo.)
Known History:

Nothing was known about Commander Rogers until his appearance in Starfleet files at registration with Starfleet Academy. The following parameters then became apparent:

Engineering crew, Utopia Planitia, Mars. (Federation year) 2402-2406
Star Fleet Academy, 2406-2409
Lotus Fleet, 2409 - present

Last known assignment. USS Spectre, Federation Akira class Heavy Cruiser.

Unsubstantiated reports place Commander Rogers on the Ferengi maurader of DaiMon Mok prior to the Utopia Planitia reports. Current assesement, based on known history and Starfleet Academy files, place a rating of 8.5(out of 10) on Commander Rogers. This rating is based on engineering and warp field dynamics studies at San Fransisco, Earth, as well as on specific reported actions between the USS Spectre and Klingon Defense Force units during the past two years.

Psychosociological profile:

Threat Assesement: High.

Turn Assesement: None. CommanderRogers half Romulan ancestry precludes possible Klingon Intelligence profiling for turning.

Recommendation: Kill on Sight.

End transmission.

Shelly turned the screen off once again and swiveled back and forth in her chair, lost in thought for a moment. She herself had been found to be half-Romulan. So, if this Rogers guy had indeed taken her from the Syndicate, then perhaps it was because he felt as a kindred spirit. But no matter; she couldn't leave their employ, even had she wanted to. As she mulled this thought over, the tactical officer to her right grunted for her attention. Facing him, Shelly gave him a nod to proceed.

"Passive scans complete, Captain. No nearby vessels of any type. The base is readable, but through the clutter of the Hromi cluster, and given this distance, we cannot obtain life form individuality. This human base Captain ... it is Capitol class! The second largest type ever built by the Federation!"

"Yes Lieutenant. The Famous Lotus Fleet's home base. Never mind that, what about their fleet. Where are their ships?"

Scanning his screen again, the Klingon officer replied factually.

"Internal scans reveal six vessels of different configurations. Power scale readings suggest one each of the Defiant class, the Intrepid class, the Prometheus class, the Akira class, the Avenger class and the Nebula class of Starfleet vessels. We cannot ascertain if any vessels are docked on the back side of the station."

"Very good, Lieutenant. Tag the Akira as Alpha One, mark the rest. If the Akira moves, let me know immediately."

Turning cautiously in his chair at communications, the sturdy Klingon lieutenant addressed his captain.

"HoD. De' ngeH ra'lw' korak."

Shelly motioned from the command dais to have the transmission sent to her personal screen. As it sluiced down from overhead, she unconsciously brushed her hair away from her forehead. Commander Korak was Klingon intelligence, so this was likely an intelligence update for ship's captains. According to her contacts within the syndicate, the intelligence officer was simply an intermediary, passing along information for high command. The screen stopped in front of her view and she touched the power up icon on its lower left frame. An intelligence intercept scrolled downward. Gathered, no doubt, by surveillance operatives between Earth and the Lotus Fleet starbase. Subspace transmissions were covertly listened to, if they were not encrypted.

The intercept concerned recent decisions forwarded from Starfleet Command to the Lotus Fleet, and Korak was simply updating KDF ship's captains. As she read the scrolling file, Commander Rogers' name sluiced up the screen and Shelly rapidly stopped the read out to focus on her nemesis' name.

""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 comitee assigned to the case of the USS Diamond Star's unexplained disappearance and return to Utopia Plenitia Shipyards (see file in appendix A)."

Of course, appendix file A wasn't attached. But the information stated clearly that Commander Rogers was on this Phoenix.

Shelly closed the file and opened the intelligence registry. The Phoenix was of the newer Avenger class assigned to this base last year. According to the file, it had been extensively converted into a pure science vessel; her cruiser would be but slightly overmatched head-to-head; not counting this ship's ability to fire while cloaked. Regardless of that, she had no intention of fighting the Federation at this time, although she would defend herself if push came to shove. All that mattered was the fact that Rogers was not on the Akira vessel but on this other one. She was about to change files again to look it up when navigation interrupted her thoughts.

"HoD vergh DIvI' Duj mej logh. Defiant Segh!"

Nodding affirmation, Shelly gave orders to keep track of the small ship but take no other action at this time.

"Ghoch neH. mIn mu'tlhegh'e' ja'chuqtaHvIS 'oH."

Turning back to her screen, Shelly brought up what information Klingon intelligence had on this USS Phoenix vessel.

CHAPTER 2 : THE GAME'S AFOOT

Felez didn't quite make it to the head before losing his guts.

The shock of Transwarp vertigo waved though him in an instant. His already weakened system didn't cope with it at all. After cleaning himself off, he took a dose from his Felicium inhaler, sat down, and sighed.

"Computer, I need a clean uniform." he said slightly out of breath. "And thank the gods for me for deciding to allow Rogers to launch the ship."

"Unable to comply; request does not relate to established parameters," the disembodied feminine voice stated.

Computers did not pray; which in truth would seem odd, considering that all computers, being causal by virtue of their mathematical nature, could not but accept as a basic axiom the principle of the First Cause: the divine in so many organic minds. The process must simply have been ignored in programming as irrelevant to actual functionality...

"Still no sense of humor I see; cancel request."

The commanding officer of the Lotus rolled up his uniform top to place in the replicator to be recycled.

He leaned back on his bed, allowing the queasiness to slowly pass.

Was this to be his life now? treatments, physical therapy and medications? bad enough he had to leave the rehab station..

He shook his head.

No, this wasn't his wife's fault.

She needed time and he was just a burden to her recovery from the Borg collective.

Not for the first time, his mind turned dark as he thought about Admiral Redding, if this was anyone fault.

He sighed again. He knew that it was pointless to rehash that point, the Admiral was dead now, and whatever was left in the new Redding didn't know anything about what the Admiral did to him... to HER, that much he was sure of.

Did Starfleet erase those memories? he wondered, or just decide not to download them into the new model?

He had no doubt that if he asked they would have simply said 'Classified' and gave him an apologetic look.

Felez slowly got up and got dressed. He ordered iced water and drank it down quickly, then did it again. Feeling better, he moved out to the bridge.

"Status report, Mister Rogers?"

Noting the captain's presence on the bridge with a nod, Rogers vacated the center seat and moved right past the console to stop at the leftmost chair. Glancing once at the chronometer David answered Felez' request.

"All systems nominal. Captain. No sign of stress from transwarp drive. ETA to Mars, thirty hours."

With a pause to await the captain to take his chair if he so chose to, David glanced at his PADD still in hand and filled Felez in on his investigation so far.

"With a subspace link to Lotus base, I have been collaberating with station security. The Emergency Security Holoprogram concurs that a single person may have been able to commandeer the Diamond Star; Estimating a probability, under ideal conditions, of eighty-six percent success."

David scrolled through his notes some more before continuing.

"Station Tac-Sec chief, Lieutenant-Commander Ssta'elia, confirms that estimate, Sir, but with a caveat. She says 'Ideal Conditions' would mean an absolute minimum of Utopia Plenitia security personnel at the time of the theft, and also minimal traffic within the Sol system entirely."

Glancing about the bridge at the various Beta crew at the stations, David thought briefly back to his borrowing the Diamond Star. It had been near the end of a weekend at Mars, and as he had known, staff were at a minimum during his foray.

But now was not the time to appear nonchalant.

"I have the Utopia Plenitia logs downloaded to the main computer from the time frame of twenty four hours on either side of the ship leaving McKinley Station."

Reaching down, David activated the console screen between the CO and XO seats. The McKinley security logs showed that the Diamond Star had suddenly powered up, disengaged all umbilicals, then remotely beamed out all thirty seven Delta shift night crew. Then, under impulse, she had swept straight out of the station and went to warp 3 minutes later. David continued with the description confirmed by Utopia Plenitia and Lotus security.

"Last estimated direction of the ship was bearing one hundred ten, mark twelve. Stellar cartography has mapped a twenty degree arc on that heading. Estimates of possible destination's are listed on the report."

David glanced down at his PADD, which he switched over to mirror the console graphic displayed. The arc swept out toward both Klingon and Romulan space. Listed on the chart, in a probability of destination based on population density provided by the Lotus Base Security holoprogram were, in order outward, Wolf 359; P Eridani; Taugus; Alpha Caeli... the list dwindled out as the cone approached the neutral zones. Numerous systems were listed in descending probability.

David interjected a humorous thought about the list.

"I think the security holoprogram was designed by a Vulcan, Sir. The list is almost endless."

"That seems likely... so lets start narrowing it down."

He looked over the list.

"Remove all locations outside standard warp drive range in the time allotted. It would have been impossible to use Transwarp without setting off any number of long range sensors even under cloak. The transwarp field 'bubble' would have shredded any cloaking field. But just to be on the safe side, put out a standard request to receive all Federation ship's sensor data in range at the time of the Diamond Star's theft. We might still get lucky."

He mused outloud.

"Also, remove heavily patrolled systems or systems in heavy occupied space. Placing an emphasis on areas that would make good hiding places, like dead systems, nebulas or heavy radation sectors. Anything that might blind or hamper ships looking for it."

He handed a PaDD to Rogers.

"Oh, here are the dilithium chamber specs from the Diamond Star. The decay rate should provide you with a reasonable range she traveled at standard warp."

Then, held up another PaDD.

"And this ones for me. The Starfleet Corps of Engineers found residual radiation in the Diamond Star's bussard collectors. Apparently it spent some time in a gaseous area, perhaps a nebula. I'm going to see if I can match it to anything in the data base, if you can get back to me on a possible range, it would make my search easier."

* * *

"Ghoch neH. mIn mu'tlhegh'e' ja'chuqtaHvIS 'oH."

The Ya'Vang had hung motionless along the edge of the Hromi cluster for two days, gathering intelligence on the remote Capitol class starbase. Even with the scattering effect of the nearby cluster's numerous young stars and proto stars, passive scans revealed the goings of ships by their drive signatures resonating within subspace. These electromagnetic traces were slow to detect using passive scans, but eventually revealed approximate mass and velocity of the target. Thus, the ships that left the Lotus base were eventually traced and their approximate direction of travel deduced from their wake traces.

Shelly had been studying the traces on her board, deducing from the information the destinations of the four ships that had left the capitol class base over the previous three days. The small defiant type signature had gone toward the Romulan-Federation Neutral Zone and was of no concern. A larger trace, most likely the Prometheus class by it's spectrum signature, had left and gone toward the general direction of the Azure nebula and Klingon space. Shelly also ignored that one too as, like the other one, it was obviously bound to some border patrol duty. She had thus studied another trace.

Suggested by its signature as the Intrepid class detected within the starbase, it had just left it hours ago and had travelled past the Ya'Vang at about fifteen light years starboard. Because the of the passive sensors limited results from within the cluster and the distance involved, only now was this information available. Cursing lightly, Shelly recalled the intelligence report of the previous day. Utopia Planitia was Starfleet's main shipyard facility, orbiting Mars, near Earth, deep in Federation space. If this Rogers character was purportedly to be investigating something there about a prototype starship, this Diamond Star, then the probability of his being on this Intrepid class ship was high.

She couldn't afford to miss the chance.

"Degh! He HIjmeH qaSpu'DI' Duj 'e'!"

The Ya'Vang laboriously swung about to exit the star cluster's vicinity and jumped to maximum warp. And then, it lost her prey in the next second. It had jumped at an impossible speed of... warp 27!

* * *

Twenty nine hours later, David sat on the bridge again. His engineering department heads had been consulted, the ship reports signed off and readiness to enter Sol space confirmed. As XO, he had numerous responsibilities aboard the Lotus, and handling the crew was a chore that, although paramount to safe ship operation, took considerable more tact than he had previously realised.

Also, the suggested parameters of captain Felez had been collated and a concise report ready for the captain, who would return to the bridge shortly, as they had entered sector 001 only moments before. Nearing Sol would require security checks and confirmations, not only from the automated platforms surrounding the system but also from manned security stations scattered throughout. With a glance at the tactical screen currently displayed on the forward viewer, David glanced toward the helmsman and ordered the ship to slow.

"Helm, bring us out of transwarp. Engage warp 1 until Saturn periphery then drop to full impulse."

Glancing back to his chair console, he then addressed comms.

"Comm, when we engage impulse, send standard recognition ping to the Jupiter outpost and request inner system clearance, as per standard approach protocols. Once cleared, inform helm to head to Mars."

Having set approach orders, David returned his attention to the PADD clamped to the chair arm. It contained the revised report on the Diamons Star investigation so far. With a tentative touch on the PADD's rim, David recalled the findings so far, in order to verbalise the report to Captain Felez, as well as to re-affirm it in his own mind.

The intelligence logs from Utopia Planitia held relative bearing of the Lotus class vessel when it went off scans there. With the maximum warp of 9,987 plotted on that course, and assuming an unmanned, straight line flight due to no manual steerage; And accounting for stellar object collision avoidance programmed into navigation as standard, David had plotted the possible destinations within twenty four hours of the Diamond Star leaving Mars.

First would be Wolf 359, the unpopulated memorial graveyard of the infamous battle with the Borg in 2367. It was seven point five light years from Sol, and arrival there would be in point one four days. Next out for uninhabited systems along the flight line was P. Eridani at twelve point three light years, reachable in about point two three days. Many inhabited systems were listed further out until reaching the last possible two before encroaching on the Romulan and Klingon neutral zones. Chi Leonis was too close to the Romulan neutral zone outposts, and Rho Pupis was at the Paulson Nebula, so David had actually struck it from the list of destinations. It was merely there for a placeholder to depict the flight line from Mars outward. Besides, there were no reports at starbase Lotus of activity during the time line near the nebula, from neither of starbase 23, 157 or 343. Then, with the dilithium decay rate factored in to these surmises, Rogers had eliminated the farther destinations, leaving the Wolf and P. Eridani ones.

And of course, he already knew which one was the right one.

Glancing up around the bridge David noted the comings and goings of routine ship functions and grunted satisfaction. The ship was now approaching Jupiter and the subdued flight clearances were also routinely being handled. David noted the tactical view showed course laid in for Utopia Planitia at standard full impulse; the required speed in system. He returned his attention to the report.

The sensor data information suggested by Felez from all Federation logs during the time frame had come up with a few ... suspect? ... findings. Suspect at least to be mentioned by the ships' captains when they had submitted their reports at the request. One had crossed a strange impulse trail at Verex III. That place was always in traffic though, as the suspected holdings of the Orion Syndicate were always under Starfleet Security observance. This captain had noted the trail because it had come in, and left, by highly oblique angles to the system.

Another captain, the Starbase 12 commander no less, mentioned an unidentified ship had shown up suddenly on sensors at Epsilon Ceti B II, or Risa. The ship had then left sensors before identification could be established. They suspected cloaking technology and thus attributed the unknown to either Romulan or Klingon factions.

The only other significant trace was the return of the Diamond Star some four weeks after it's theft. The Utopia and Mars scan logs showed it's incoming vector as from above the plane of the galactic ecliptic and from the opposite direction of her initial flight vector. Mars security surmised that, given the timeline and the fact the Lotus Class was Transwarp capable, up to Transwarp 5 for about twelve hours, the Diamond Star could have gone almost anywhere in the fifteen day half-time frame. Even the Andromeda galaxy was within the reach in that approximate time frame.

David shook his head at these musings from the intelligence reports. Although some of them were bang on, and he had to include them for the report, David knew that some of the facts were misleading and some were accurate. But as the thief, he also wouldn't elaborate on these facts unless pressed. One thing to be found out and charged; He had no qualms in that regard. The time his sister needed to recover and get out of Risa was what he was solely pushing for. Granted, her mysterious beam in to the hospital on Risa would naturally arouse curiosity there, but the pleasure planet was used to unusual guests. The woman could have transported from anywhere on the planet, for all they knew. Hospitals had no need for active intelligence gathering, especially on Risa.

Looking up again, David noted the final approach was being vectored toward the Utopia Planitia fleet yards orbiting Mars. Flight control there ordered them to the dock next to the Diamond Star, as they were expected; and only a minute behind schedule. Noting this, Rogers stood and, with a tap on his commbadge, summoned Felez to the bridge.

"Bridge to Captain; Sir, on final approach to Utopia Planitia."

A second or two passed without a reply and Felez entered the bridge from his ready room.

"Thank you, Number One; you may resume your post."

He still did not sit in the captain chair, as Rogers had noted earlier.

"Do to the added security around the Diamond Star, no transporters are allowed, You, the good Doctor and myself will shuttle over to the Star."

He headed over to the lift.

"Get what ever you need and meet me at the shuttlebay. We will exchange notes on the trip there. Helm, take us into mooring position but have the ship ready to cast off as soon as we return, no one is to leave the ship."

He waited for any questions or objections before entering the lift.

"Captain to sickbay; Doctor Nasaro-Myth, we are debarking by shuttle, I would like for you to join us as soon as possible."

"Horse and buggy... so great to live in the twenty-fifth century," came the grumbling reply of the Deltan. "I'll wait for you in the main barn, Sir."

If anyone overhearing the exchange didn't know of the good doctor's aversion to shuttles, that ignorance was now a thing of the past.

* * *

"...Well, that would be Lieutenant Mitchell, Captain." the deck commander said, looking over his PaDD. "But, Sir, he's off rotation now and..."

"I understand, but nonetheless, get him up here to be our pilot ASAP, unless you think he is incapable of performing his duties at this time?"

There wasn't even a hint of emotion in his language.

"No that I know of, Sir. Aye, Captain, I'll put in the call."

He gave a nod and headed off.

Elliago listened to the exchange and waited for the officer to move away before addressing him with a soft tone of voice.

"May I inquire why you are so insistent on this particular pilot? Not that I complain if you bring us the best, of course... But then again, this is a mere ship to ship travel we could even do in a thruster suit... Are we expecting something... difficult?"

Despite the casualness he affected, the tension at the end of the Deltan's sentence was most perceptible to one as sensitive to nuances as an Efrogian.

"Lieutenant Mitchell has the least reason to be joining us on this trip. As we will be discussing sensitive information in his presence, I thought it best to use him to as our pilot."

He allowed his eyes to look questioning.

"Or do I seem to be taking the conspiracy possibility to seriously?"

"At this point, even I could be a suspect," the Deltan answered with a smile. "I must say you are quite thorough in this endeavor, Captain. Now I understand why you were chosen for this investigation. If anyone can find the answer to this mystery, I believe it will be you."

His sparkling purple eyes looked askance at the shuttle and he sighed.

"I just wish we could do this the easy way."

Walking back from main engineering Rogers passed through the doorway leading to the main shuttlebay, went along the short hallway and through the next doorway to emerge in the bay. Looking left then right he noted the ready lights blinking on a type 6 personnel shuttle and made his way there, pocketing his PADD into its holster. His hand brushed the other holster as he did so and David realized he had taken his disruptor with him. The unconscious maneuver hadn't even registered with him. On the Phoenix, he had always worn it, and it was his go-to weapon of choice when leaving the ship. But this was the Lotus, with a new captain. He hadn't even thought to check on Felez' preferences of his ship parameters concerning personal weapons choices.

Reaching up the lowered rear ramp, David took a seat on the bench, right behind the co-pilot's seat. He noted the Lieutenant sitting at the pilots station was finishing up a pre-flight checklist, so David let him continue. Taking his PADD from its holster, he activated it and began checking the contents to make sure he had gotten all the relevant data from the Lotus and Lotus base investigation so far. The intelligence team at the Diamond Star would no doubt have additional information that they may not have shared so far outside of themselves. It was normal practice to withhold pertinent bits of information during an investigation. It allowed for cross-checking of witness statements or other data checks.

Looking up at Commander Nasaro-Myth then, David noted the apparent unease of the Deltan sitting across from him. Knowing from the Phoenix of the doctor's aversion to shuttle travel, David tried unsuccessfully to repress a grin. If he himself had to undergo multiple fitness exams every time he reported to a new ship, then the good Deltan could damn well learn to trust a proven shuttle design for the short hop over to the Star. However, David could not pass up the opportunity the doctor presented to him just now.

"Can I get you a stimulant, Doc?"

Elliago looked at him with a sigh.

"Would you like me to check the engines first?" he shot back.

Felez made himself smile slightly before noticing Rogers sidearm.

"Lieutenant Rogers, one does not enter a secure Starfleet facility armed, especially with a non-regulation weapon."

Not being a weapon buff or a security officer, he couldn't place the weapon at a glance as it was still in its holster.

"What is that anyway?"

David deftly smiled at the retort from his Deltan friend and, perhaps wisely, cut off a possible banter concerning their respective fields of expertise. This two-way sparring duel had started when Rogers had first reported to Lotus Fleet and had been required; No, eventually ordered, to report for physicals. Ever since joining Star Fleet, David had been poked, prodded, scanned and even pinched. It was tedious and, in his Ferengi raised mind, non-essential after the first one. Instead, he directed his attention to captain Felez' inquiry.

"Ah ... yes, about that captain. Sorry. It is my personal sidearm. A Romulan disruptor, modified with a forced plasma beam like the Ferengi sidearms. As such, the plasma beam is traceable with standard tricorders. A ... restriction star fleet wanted, I must add."

Drawing the weapon from his holster, David reversed it and offered it to Felez.

"I prefer the pistol grip style weapon over the star fleet issue thumbs-up style weapons. It fits my hand better, draws faster, and only has two settings; Stun and kill. I should have cleared it with you first. I guess I forgot. She's been with me since I left the academy."

With only a second's hesitation, he received the weapon and looked it over before handing it back, mostly looking it over just to be polite.

"I'm sure it's an impressive weapon and I will grant you it's use for away missions or personal use. But for any function of official nature, I will require you to carry a standard sidearm."

Felez personally disliked firearms and so far has never used one in the field, but understood that men like Rogers placed great importance on personal weapons and this was proven to increase their effectiveness.

"One of my prior Captains, Neil Redding, also carried a slightly modified assault phaser on his hip, and they were taken out of circulation more than eighty years ago.. terribly inefficient."

Felez started walking to the shuttle.

"It will take a few more minutes for our pilot to join us, seeing as I likely woke him up, but we should get started."

"Oh, joy," Elliago grumbled.

He waited until the pilot arrived to board the shuttlecraft, as if wanting to be sure Felez would not change his mind... or to allow him the opportunity to do so. Or maybe it was just to diminish as much as possible the time he would spend in what he viewed as nothing less than a flying coffin. Nevertheless, he took the seat inside... nearest to the main hatch.

Following captain Felez, David took a seat nearest the front of the shuttle on the port side. Mindful of Felez' admonishment, David opened the locker under the panel between his position and the pilots seat and placed his disruptor inside, then resealed the compartment. With a quick glance at Lieutenant Mitchell seating himself into the left seat up front, David then looked aft and watched the rear ramp door swing up and close with a soft hiss of the cabin pressure equalizing. He politely ignored doctor Nasaro-Myth's seeming uneasiness as the hatch sealed them in.

With an efficient and practiced calm, Mitchell cleared the shuttle for launch and cut in the hover field antigravs, lifting the six meter vehicle off the deck. Microfusion thrusters pivoted the craft on its horizontal axis and the shuttle seemingly drifted toward the launch bay door. At that moment, the warning lights began to pulse and a level 1 forcefield dropped in front of the doors. Then, with a reverberation felt slightly even inside the shuttle, the large aft bay door delatched and withdrew rapidly upward, revealing the open landing threshold behind the shuttle bay. Mitchell received final clearance from the ship and brought the microfusion thrusters to one half, and the shuttle penetrated the weakened forcefield and entered open space for the short flight to the Plenitia shipyards.

In synchronous orbit over sixteen thousand kilometers above the surface of Mars were the Utopia Planitia Fleet Yards, comprised of over a dozen drydocks, three G class stations, and two type three drydocks, more commonly called McKinley type's. The lowest of these latter pair was the shuttles destination. The seven hundred meter drydock could not adequately encompass the new, massive dimension's of the Diamond Star and thus the four spider-like arms of the station were not clasped around the saucer section like it could on the Galaxy class starship's. Neither were the four spindly legs of the aft structure wrapped snugly around the nacelles of the large ship, but extended straight out horizontally . As Mitchell approached the structure the comms chirped and a somewhat stern and authoritative voice intruded upon the four of them.

"Approaching shuttle, heave to and remain at station keeping for security scans. Comply or you will be fired upon."

"Touchy now, ain't they?" Elliago commented. "If this is standard procedure, here is one clue for us; Whoever did this either came in with all the official authorizations needed and in plain sight, or managed to slip by completely undetected. Let's begin by assuming the former; they must have here records of all the comings and goings the days before the Diamond Star decided to take a stroll."

"I agree, if only because the second option leaves no room for investigation." Felez said with a nod. "We shall begin with Rogers and myself checking both logs and equipment for irregularities, doctor you begin setting up an interview list of all involved personnel and see if any of them are flagged for special attention. I suspect most of our work has already been done by the on-site investigation team so we should be able to meet up for the interviews in say.. two hours?"

"I'll be as charming as I can be, Captain," the handsome Deltan acknowledged with a sparkling smile and a wink.

David gave a curt nod at captain Felez' order and then glanced once out the front view port. Mitchell held the shuttle stationary as the scans swept the craft, then there was a soft chime as the security chief on the dry dock gave them the all clear.

"Lotus shuttle, you are cleared to dock. Proceed directly to shuttlebay one. Power down and Flight ops will bring you aboard."

With a slightly raised eyebrow, Mitchell turned his head to look back at Felez in his seat.

"Unusually strange, Captain. They're not letting us fly aboard under our own power?"

"Much less unusual and strange than a runaway starship with allegedly no one aboard," Elliago shot back. "What would be strange and unusual would be for them to go business as usual after such a still unexplained happenstance."

David glanced between Felez and Nasaro-Myth once, shrugging his shoulders non-committalingly, and put forward an observation.

Captain, shuttlebay one is on deck 4. I believe computer control is on deck 13. That would be the destination if you want me to check the logs."

Pausing to pull his PADD from its holster, he tapped on a few buttons and brought up the Lotus Class deck layout before continuing.

"If you would rather I go over equipment, then the maintenace rooms would be the logical place to start. Those are on deck 15 and 16."

As he finished speaking, the shuttle came to a stop outside the shuttlebay and a moment later the gentle tug of the flight ops tractor beam could be felt grasping the small ship. Within moments, the shuttle was within the large bay and set down upon the deck. Locking clamps were felt engaging and Mitchell shut down the engines. Engaging the rear ramp to open he then stood up and turned to face the rear of the shuttle. A look of surprise broke out across his features as the lowering ramp revealed the interior of the Diamond Star's bay ... and the half dozen fully armed marines arrayed in a line at the rear of their shuttle.

Nasaro-Myth was so eager to get out of the confines of the shuttle that he almost bumped right into them. Quickly regaining his composure, he smiled at their lead officer and bowed.

"My, an honor guard? You shouldn't have..."

"This would seem to be a bit much..." Felez said to the Marine officer he assumed to be in command. "Or has there been any new developments in this situation?"

His eyes glanced over his companions.

The marine officer Captain Felez addressed, a Colonel no less, stepped forward a half step and gave a curt reply to his inquiry.

" Colonel Greene of the Starfleet Marines Corps; No developments, Captain. This facility is on lock-down and no one enter's or leave's without full security scans. No transportation of any kind without authorization. However, our scans detected a Romulan dna signature, and given the nature of the, uh ... situation here, a further response was deemed ... prudent."

At the last word the colonel looked directly at commander Rogers.

"Commander, you WILL accompany us."

The emphasis on the adjective left no doubt as to the determination of the marine's order. David looked once at each of his companion's, then stepped forward and aside from his crew mates, voicing his concern.

"Now just a minute there, Major! You have my credentials. I'm Commander Rogers of ..."

The Colonel brought his pulse phaser rifle around to point directly at Rogers and cut him off in mid sentence. The five marines in line slightly behind him all snapped into a battle stance, their rifle's all whining as their power levels were toggled to maximim. The Colonel gruffly barked an order.

"You may also be a Romulan spy Commander. Comply ... or die. Makes no difference to us."

At that instant, Elliago boldly stepped in their line of fire.

"Gentlemen," he said with his most soothing tone of voice and the calmest expression his handsome face could muster; "Are we on Talos IV to have the only death sentence in the Federation already passed over this man? Since when is someone in Starfleet to be instantly threatened with deadly force... and solely based on his gender, race or belief ? "

He sensed that the colonel was not in a mood to discuss the matter. Although his demeanor remained friendly and unprovocative, Elliago shifted to the best officer's voice of command one could have heard.

"I remind you, Sir, that General Orders supercedes at all times any order in the field from any authority whatsoever. You, Sir, by using unnecessary force against a Federation citizen, are in violation of General Order 2; by not giving proper treatment to a non-threatening prisoner according to his rank and station even in situations of extreme emergency, you are in violation of General Order 25; and by not taking proper care to avoid the loss of sentient life, you are in violation of General Order 33... and all this in the presence of a Starfleet starship captain and his chief medical officer... which you are now *also* threatening with unjustified deadly force."

He smiled again, his Deltan charm as much in display as his Starfleet Commander status. And he was obviously not going to move out of their line of fire.

"Unless you wish to find yourself dishonorably discharged for multiple general orders violations and in a penal colony as a convicted murderer, Sir, I humbly suggest you reset those phasers to stun.. and clear out the situation with his commanding officer... properly, this time."

What he did not say was however most obvious to all those present; as a Starfleet medical officer, he had the authority to relieve even an admiral from duty if, in his professional judgment, said officer displayed signs of irrational behavior. And it certainly looked as such with the overreaction displayed by these touchy Starfleet marines and their colonel.

That's why Elliago observed very closely these men, using his enhanced Deltan sensibilities, while sending out soothing pheromones to diffuse the tension. Their behavior was rather odd for Starfleet officers, even for trigger-happy Marines. Briefly, he also glanced to where security cameras were located, to see if their recording lights were active.

Rogers, taken aback considerably by the show of force from the marine officer, had subtly shifted his weight forward. A fight or flight reflex garnered from his human ancestry. But Nasaro-Myth had then moved between himself and the colonel. His esteem for the doctor rose a few points when his ship mate, with calm determination, laid down the law on the marine detachment. Looking at the back of his fellow commander, he was genuinely glad at that moment that the good doctor was on his side.

As Nasaro-Myth wound up his speech, David, perhaps wisely not retorting in kind, looked instead to his captain, in deference to his authority.

"Colonel..." finally said Felez with his utterly even voice, " You heard the good Doctor; while I understand your caution in this situation, your rather overbearing exclamation of 'comply or die' in this situation is unwarranted."

He simply looked annoyed at the whole event.

"If you'll check my orders, you will see I have been given carte blanche to recruit whoever I wish for this investigation as long as they have the proper clearance; he does. Now, I suggest you stop impeding our investigation before I have you and your men removed and charged. And I will be submitting a formal complaint for actions unbecoming of an officer for your little tantrum."

His hands still behind his back, he took a step at the colonel.

"Stand aside... now."

Colonel Greene powered off his weapon and with a hand signal to his troops, the detachment fell out to assume an on-guard formation, three to a side. The resulting lane left the four Lotus officer's an open path to the shuttle bay exit. Rogers fell into step beside Mitchell and they followed captain Felez and doctor Nasaro-Myth to the awaiting doors. David glanced once at the Colonel and the somewhat abashed officer's demeanour had the look of patient determination. As their eyes locked David felt the impression of 'I'll be watching you' coming from the stare. Regardless, he continued out the exit and the four were in the hallway and making for the nearby turbo lift.

"Now that was interesting..." offered Elliago to Rogers.

David followed the trio into the lift and as the doors swished shut responded to the Doctor's observation.

"I admit, a little over the top. Really, it is just a ship after all. What was that old earth saying? 'No harm, No Foul?'"

"No harm?"

The sudden quick movement of Felez turning on him made Rogers jump a little on reflex.

"Someone or group broke into the most secure shipyard in starfleet and without setting a single alarm stole a *starship*, Mister Rogers. As we speak, there are dozens of personnel whose lives are being placed under a subatomic scanner. People will have their careers ruined, agents are being dispatched in every region of space trying to find any lead as to who could have done this and why and some of those will never come back."

His face never changed it's calm demeanor but his voice was angry.

"No doubt that spies have reported this theft back to Romulans, Klingons and every other race that holds a grudge against the Federation, and they will display this incident as vary proof of our ineptitude and weakness."

He turned to face the lift door again.

"This 'Harmless joy ride' will ruin or kill a dozen or more people and weaken the security of the entire fleet, it will be years before we recover, if complete recovery is even possible."

Felez's passion had gotten the better of him, but Rogers remark underlined the situation clearly. Rogers didn't think about the consequences to others for his action, and he wanted David to know what this stunt would cost.

The lift deposited them on deck 1. Apparently, their reputation had preceeded them as the pair of guards at the doorway merely snapped to attention and let them pass. David recalled that this deck allowed for access to the bridge, observation lounge and captain's ready room. David's requirement was either computer control on deck 13 or maintenance of deck 15. Tapping Mitchell on his shoulder to accompany him, David announced his intentions to Captain Felez.

"Sir, we'll check the logs on deck 15 before going to maintenance and looking over the equipment, if that is agreeable?"

"I can go over the sensor and scanning records to see if I can find any clue," Elliago then suggested. "I have an idea that might help us trace back this magical mystery tour."

"Very well, do it." Felez said looking at him with curiosity. "I am quite interested in what you might have come up with." Felez stood ready to follow him.

The Deltan spoke as he walked to the science station and started activating controls.

"Well, basically I'm going to do what a Terran dog does; you know how such animal can sniff you and retrace all the places you've been by the odors you collected along the way? Well I'm doing the same with the ship's external sensors to collect and analyse samples accumulated on the hull; space dust and debris, radiation decay and contamination, spectral variations in the hull material due to exposure to different stars, stellar regions, planetary bodies, micrometeorites... We all know that empty space is far from being empty; the matter floating in it is just very dispersed, but not so much that our sensors can't pick them up, especially the state of the art sensor suite of this newest class of capital ships."

As he spoke, the console lighted up and reported a continuous stream of sensor data.

"There we go; it will take several minutes before a complete sweep of the ship is over and we have all the data. Then, by sending it all through the astrometric lab's computer and cross-referencing it with all cosmological data we have on all known region of space, narrowing the search to the known or most probable locations the Diamond Star may have been through... and the maintenance log of the impulse, warp and transwarp uses... we should have a fairly accurate travel path reconstructed within an hour. Knowing where she went and how long she stayed in each location might shed some light to why it was... borrowed; a most important clue to determine who might have done it."

* * *

"HoD! rI' maH!" Captain! We are being hailed!

About time, Shelly thought with exasperation. She had sent the message over six days ago.

"oH jang."

To answer it as ordered, the forward viewer sprang to life to reveal a backdrop of scattered debris and a bright beacon pulsing through the clutter. The wreckage, remnants of the Federation fleet that battled the Borg at Wolf 359, effectively hid the large Klingon cruiser's cloaked signature; Especially because the Ya'Vang was motionless along the periphery of the vast expanse of dismembered ship hulls.

Directly in front of the Ya'Vang, a ship appeared, dropping out of warp and coming to a full stop a few thousand meters in front of the Ya'Vangs position. Almost simultaneously the comms officer enabled the transmission from the now visible Keldon class cruiser. The screen coalesced to reveal a Cardassian woman, the very person Shelly had messaged six days ago. Without preamble, Dejar spoke, while glancing amusingly about the revealed Klingon bridge within which Shelly sat perched upon the raised command dias.

"Well well Shell, you look comfortable!"

Shelly smiled back at her cohort, a fellow assassin of the order. Her illustrious past as a Cardassian Obsidian Order operative had been cut short with the destruction of the order's fleet in 2371, at the battle of the Omarion nebula. That she hadn't been present there was only due to the fact that prior to that doomed raid, Dejar had been on the one crippled ship the Obsidian order had built at the Orias system in Cardassian territory. It had been severely damaged during an intercept battle with a Federation Defiant class ship. The ensuing repairs caused her and her ship to not be available to engage the Dominion homeworld. Three decades later, Dejar had ultimately joined the Syndicate, in order to find a use for her Obsidian Order training. As a spy she had few equals, and her talent for finding things, information, people, even technology, was invaluable. Thus, Shelly had asked her syndicate colleague to find Commander Rogers. So, with equal amusement, Shelly replied in kind to Dejar.

"Glad to see you too, Dejar. You came as needed, and you have my thanks. But why not cloaked? We are well within Federation space."

Dejar smiled back while looking around her own bridge slightly.

"Why bother. I'm just a friendly Cardassian passing through."

Dejar shifted slightly in her chair and her demeanour took on a more serious tone.

"But, you didn't ask for my health Shell. I have the data for you, as requested. Why the interest in this star fleet commander? You should be concerned with the boss! They want you back and are ... actively, searching for you."

Shelly glanced around her bridge uncomfortably, knowing full well no one ever left the syndicate, but having her own curiosity toward this commander Rogers to fulfill. She noted as much then back to her, relatively lone, friend.

"Dejar old friend, I must see this through. Why did he kidnap me? Why drop me at a relatively non-descript hospital on Risa? What was his reasoning in all this? I must know before I consider returning!"

Dejar studied her assassin friend carefully, but detected genuine distress from her counterpart. The two had worked together on numerous missions for the Syndicate, and Dejar considered the diminutive half human a trusted ally and formidable killer. As a former Obsidian Order operative, she full well knew the demands placed upon agents, but also sympathized with her fellow female's anguish.

"Very well then Shelly. You know I'll help with what I can. Please, come aboard. My ship is faster, and I must tell you the Syndicate is aware you've commandeered this Klingon battle scow anyway. Time for you to jump I'm afraid."

Shelly thought it over for a few seconds. It was obvious that the heavily modified Keldon class ship Dejar commanded was superior to this one. And equally obvious was the distrust she held for this Klingon crew. She could, and already had, handled the Klingons individually and in very small groups, but their fear would eventually be overcome by their honor. Yes, it was time to go.

"As you wish Dejar."

The transport beam initiated immediately, as Dejar had known Shelly would accept her invitation as practical. Materialising on the bridge beside Dejar, Shelly had the fleeting glimpse of the Ya'Vang staring menacingly at her through the view screen before the Orias cloaked and swung away, leaving the Wolf graveyard behind in a quick jump to warp.

CHAPTER THREE : THE FACE OF THE ENEMY

As Rogers and Mitchell stepped through the opening lift doors on deck fifteen they ran headlong into Jason Shoud, the senior civilian engineer at Utopia Planitia, and David's old friend.

"Jase!, you scoundrel, what are you doing here?", David spoke.

"Buck! Your a sight for sore eyes. We've been combing the Star for clues, as you well know, seeing as your here again so soon."

As Rogers guided his old work mate back to the main computer room, Shroud filled the two Lotus crew in on his findings from his memory core search. Mitchell listened attentively and even downloaded Jason's findings for Captain Felez. David had hoped to prolong the search, but the situation had escalated as of late, so he allowed the Lieutenant to proceed. Once the scan was complete and sent, David contacted Felez.

"Rogers to Felez. Sir, ship's logs have been scanned and downloaded to your PADD. The flight logs were erased, but MISTER Shoud has been working with the suplemental systems and found traces of instruction's left in some sub-systems."

Upon hearing it, Elliago's hand asked for Felez' PADD.

"With this, we will have the exact route within seconds.

Looking over the trace information beside Jason, David was compelled to pass along the pertinent information revealed from the senior engineer's search.

"The battle bridge overrode the main computer and launched the ship at zero-four thirty hours. Transporter logs indicate that prior to launch, command from that same location located and beamed off all personnel from the ship and severed umbilicals."

As Shoud scrolled further through his notes David kept a running dialogue of the findings. Scant as they were, they did encompass the transport, impulse and warp control computer systems, among a few others.

"Impulse drive records a three mnute burst before the warp drive engaged. That system recorded approximately point eight hours flight. that would give an approximate distance radius of seven and a half light years."

Reading still from the log of the warp core, Rogers continued.

"After about forty eight hours the warp drive cut in again, attaining transwarp 3, for a time of approximately forty-six hours. That gives a radius of about one hundred and five to ten light years, Sir."

David knew that Verix 3 was just over one hundred and seven light years from Wolf three five nine, so the time and distances equated by Jason was fairly accurate, even for an engineer not versed in stellar cartography. Regardless, David continued reporting.

"That radius gives distances out to the Klingon border, or half way into Romulan space, or most of the way through Cardassian Union territory or even out to the old First Federation area and past Ferenginaar space."

While talking David had taken both Mithell and Shoud in tow and headed to the bridge to meet with captain Felez and the Doctor. Once the lift deposited them on deck one, the trio entered the bridge to find Nasaro-Myth and Felez at the science station. Cancelling the comm badge transmission, David continued summarizing Shoud's findings as they approached the Lotus ship pair at science station 1.

"Search result coming in," the Deltan doctor said with a satisfied smile. "Converting into a star chart standard flight path. Good work, David."

He did not look at Rogers and listened with a distracted ear to his voice as he continued detailing the data found that was now being converted into an actual navigational display on the science station monitor.

"The Star then engaged again and travelled some thirty-eight hours before stopping again for about six hours. Then the drive cut in and she went to transwarp 5. That propulsion lasted approximately ..."

As the three of them stopped beside Felez and Nasaro-Myth, a transport beam enveloped the three Lotus officers and they de-materialized in front of Shoud's and Mitchell's astonished protestations, while warning sirens engulfed the Diamond Star's bridge.

Cardassian Dreadnought Orias:

Dejar smiled briefly at Shelly and gestured toward the nearest seat as she retook her own command chair. Pointing at a control panel, she told Shelly what she had for a surprise.

"A little something I picked up on a recent job, Shell."

Shelly looked over at the console with a slightly puzzled look and turned back to Dejar with an observation.

"Transporter?"

"Subspace kind. If you want, I can grab your guy from a few light years distance! My sources put your party on a new Federation starship at Mars. We'll be at maximum range in five minutes."

Rising from her command chair, Dejar walked to the panel and began inputting command parameters.

"Of course, at that distance, I cannot get a positive lock on this Rogers, but seeing as he isn't fully human, I can grab anyone that isn't full human, so ... what'll it be Shell? You want him now or later?"

Knowing her status with the syndicate rode on the outcome of her abduction, and a voluntary return with proof of innocence in the act, Shelly took what appeared to be the only course of action.

"Grab them, we'll sort out the chaff after."

As the Orias neared four light years from Mars, Dejar engaged the subspace transporter and searched the obvious locations on a Federation starship .. its bridge first, There, she enhanced five humanoids on the scanners, locking onto three that showed as not fully human bio signatures, then activated the unit. If these three were not the one's, they could be disposed of and another search would be undertaken. Sensors couldn't trace a subspace transport, so they would have time to try again. Once transport was underway, Dejar turned to face the large space between the command dias and the viewscreen. After about three seconds of energization, Commanders Rogers, Nasaro-Myth and Captain Felez materialized in front of the women, facing to their right. Dejar, recognizing the race of the doctor and captain, stepped slightly forward and drew her sidearm, addressed the trio but looking at Rogers.

"Welcome aboard gentlemen. Would the real commander Rogers step forward please!"

Elliago immediately stepped forward to draw everyone's attention on him with his Deltan charm and presence, soothing pheromones filling the air as he filled the silence with his mesmerizing voice, plunging his sparkling purple eyes into the woman's eyes with his dazzling smile seemingly all for her.

"You will have to be more precise, my dear; This is Commander David Rogers of Utopia Plenitia and this is Commander Dave Rogers, acting captain of the USS Lotus. I am Commander Davis Rogers of the USS Diamond Star."

Only four-genders Andorians and sexless species were immune to a Deltan's alluring presence, especially when the opposite sex was involved. Elliago was using this power at full effect to at least diffuse the aggressiveness he was perceiving from these women, especially the half-Romulan one glaring at them behind the Cardassian woman. Hopefully though, stepping forward to block her field of fire, fill their vision and draw in their attention, his overpowering natural seductiveness and his confusing words would give time for Felez and Rogers to do something.

Felez's empathic abilities noted the swift change in the women's emotional spectrum. Their pulse quickened and skin flushed, some even wavered a bit. His treatments gave him a modest immunity to pheromones and even he could feel it affecting him. The Doctor was really pouring on the charm, literally.

He also noted, for whatever reason, the half-Romulan woman seemed to be the most resistant to the charm.

Mustering up more than two decades of training his face to show expressions, he put on the most convincing look of fear and concern he could as he yelled out.

"Don't shoot him!"

Flustered at her sudden desire for the doctor and confused by Felez's accusation she might shoot him, she immediately jerked her pistol up and away as if it might just go off by itself.

"I wasn't.. I.."

She sounded embarrassed and defensive, but she never got the chance to finish her thought.

Felez bounded into her, driving his incredibly dense elbow into her rib cage, the sound of cracking ribs could be heard easily, and had most likely punctured a lung. Felez pushed on. both he and Dejar crashed into Shelly, all three falling haphazardly to the ground.

The initial shock of the long range transport let go of David at about the same time he recognized Shelly standing behind the Cardassian female. Then, as Doctor Nasaro-Myth stepped forward and his pheromones permeated the immediate area, his senses clouded again.

A blurry coalescence enveloped his vision and the movement of Captain Felez seemed to happen at half speed. Connera'tu's charge bowled over the startled woman and the pair collided into Shelly in a sprawling heap of limbs, while the Cardassian's sidearm was knocked loose and went tumbling onto the deck. Instinctively, David stooped and pawed at the weapon as it skidded past him. His surprise at actually grabbing hold of the disruptor was as abrupt as his astonishment of finding Shelly here. This confusion of action and circumstance addled his already pheremone fogged mind.

"What? How? Why are you here?" he said, almost at a whisper.

But the commotion carried on around him and he had to save Shelly from this attack.

"Don't hurt her!" he yelled at everyone, and no one.

Captain Felez' charge came to a tangled heap with him holding Dejar pinned sideways on the deck against the central command chair. Shelly, her legs partially trapped under the pair, pulled herself free and began to rise. Her darting eye's sought a target as she grasped at the Kligat weapon stored at her belt, assuming a Ryadam defensive stance.

Thinking of his sister, David fumbled the gun into position and, with a yell, fired into the light panel above the group. His shout was heard above the explosive shattering of the power conduit's within the lighting fixture.

"Stop!"

Felez maintained his grip on the stunned Cardassian but made no move on Shelly, his eyes watched her throwing blade in case she went for him.

Rogers was still shaking off the transporter effect, but Felez had felt this sensation too many times to be more than slightly annoyed with the feeling.

Such was life with Admiral Redding that the uncommon tended to be common.

It was now time to watch the drama unfold as David had the only readied firearm and was back with his sister. Would he now turn on his fellow crewmates?

But something he hadn't expected was happening as well, her feelings towards him were not friendly, not at all.

It was all most as if... as if she had no idea he was her brother..

Elliago slowly raised his hands towards both half-Romulans, noting only for the first time how similar they looked, especially both poised for a fight like that.

"Calm down, Commander; you have the upper hand here," he told David while eyeing the pistol in his hand. "And you lady, however fast you may be with this bladed star of yours, I assure you I can so easily read your body language that, from here, I can throw myself between you and either of my two friends. You will take me down but then they will take you down in the very same second and you will fail at getting to your intended target. So I suggest you calm down as well and explain the meaning of this abduction before everyone loose here."

His smile was charming and his voice mesmerizing, as only a Deltan's could be. But his words were cutting the silence like serrated blades.

Shelly tightened her stance and slightly lowered the Kligat, but the weapon was still usable from this stance. looking at the Deltan Commander, then to the prone but alert Efrogian with Captain's pips, she returned her gaze to Rogers.

"You are the Commander Rogers I seek. You kidnapped me from Verex 3."

David likewise lowered the disruptor slightly, a mimic to Shelly's action. The weapon also was quickly available for use if needed, but David had no intention of using it really. He had meant only to stop the fight before Shelly was hurt. When she addressed him directly, he replied with the obvious.

"Yes, I am Commander Rogers. And you are..."

David hesitated, glancing first at his medical colleague, then at his captain. He decided that, as the humans often said at the Academy, the proverbial cat was out of the bag; hiding the Diamond Star's theft any more was at best a moot point now. Not that he cared either way, but that Shelly survived. And so, looking back at his sister. he finished.

"You are Shelly Rogers, my sister. I ... removed you ... from servitude!"

Shelly was slightly taken aback by the statement. The obvious similarity David showed was a sort of corroboration of his claim of familial tie's, but the reasoning of servitude was lost on her.

"Servitude?", she shot back. "I haven't been a slave in over a dozen years commander. Your argument is invalid."

David could tell Shelly wasn't relaxing any. He saw it in the same tightness he felt in his own muscles; the readiness to spring; the fight or flight reflex. He couldn't let Shelly do either right now. Elliagio still stood ready to pounce. And Felez was a coiled spring, seemingly. But likely not actually, as the Cardassian woman in his grip was no threat to him with her physical injuries sapping her stamina right now. So? How to defuse this stand-off? David guessed it would have to start with himself.

"You are a slave nevertheless, Shelly. Everyone knows how your syndicate operates."

As he spoke, David, carefully and slowly, powered off the disruptor, its low whine sinking down into oblivion in the silent bridge. Once the greenish power light winked out, he slowly removed the power cell from the handle. Claspng the two together, David extended the weapon and cell toward Elliagio, indicating for the doctor to take it. Without a weapon to use toward her, Rogers hoped Shelly would relax her wariness and the situation could become more ... safe. He continued talking though.

"When I learned of your existence, I knew that the Federation could not, or would not, so anything to get you out of the syndicate. Even Starfleet, for all its directives and regulations, could not ... or would not ... interfere with the syndicate."

As he condemned the Federation in this instance David looked from Shelly to Felez, then to Nasaro-Myth. Not that he wanted their acquiescence to his statement, but just their understanding. The Federation had, in all their decades of existence, done nothing to eradicate the piratical organization.

Elliagio was about to correct Rogers with no less than two General Orders, then clamped his mouth shut. He could sense that the chief engineer's words were having their effect on this woman he had confirmed to his own senses as his sister. He listened to him but watched her intently, both the disruptor pistol and the power cell ready to be thrown across the woman's path as a distraction if she made any threatening move. His own mind however was distracted by the injured Cardassian a few steps from him. He could feel her pain and it tore at his heart to have to ignore it still for the sake of preventing even more suffering if this Shelly Rogers turned violent.

Looking back to his sister again, David continued.

"My esteemed captain down there will probably disagree, but in my opinion, I had to rescue you on my own terms. I commandeered a ship and took you. You are my sister ... my only family left. I could not. No ... I would not, let anything or any vaunted regulations and directives jeopardize your safety."

Taking a slight step forward, David brought both his hands forward, palms up.

"When I transported you down to Risa, into that hospital, I thought never to see you again, Shelly. But you would be out of that disturbing place, and able to start anew. Why did you come for me?"

Shelly took a step back as David neared. She also wanted space between them all. It was conducive to her style of fighting. But in this instance it was more confusion than fight. The pheromones still permeated the bridge. She glanced down at Captain Felez while, slowly, returning the Kligat to its holder on her belt.

"I think you can let my friend go now, Captain."

She side-stepped a pair of strides while looking from Felez to the doctor, to keep a safer distance from the large Efrogian.

"And you, Commander, from the looks of that uniform, are a medical officer? You could maybe see to Dejar's injury?"

Elliago offered her his best smile.

"That would be very kind of you to allow me to do so, my dear... thank you."

He affixed the weapon and the power charge to his belt where his own phaser and recharge would have been according to regulation, then knelt towards Dejar to probe her with his hands, the only instruments he currently had with him. But for a Deltan, they were as accurate as any medical tricorder. He spoke out loud for her benefit, so that her obvious friend's condition would not fuel her anger anymore.

"Third rib fractured, intercostal muscles swollen from contusion as a result of the impact, hematomias on the left side of the upper ribcage and the acromial point of the right shoulder, right hip joint and a slight sell of the right ankle, all due to the resulting fall and impact against the chair. Cardassian skin and bone structure are slightly denser than that of humans, so her lung was not punctured. But it is still quite painful."

Having no medical kit, he simply used his soothing pheromones anew and the extensive nerve manipulation techniques of his people to induce euphoria in her system, counteracting the pain with her own pleasure hormones. It took him a moment to find the correct spots to stimulate, as he had never done it on a Cardassian before; but xen anatomy was his specialty. In the next seconds, Dejar smiled and sighed with relief.

"She still needs proper medical attention; but that will do for now if you don't try to move to suddenly," he said to her with a genuine smile.

Again Shelly looked back at David. But this time her disbelief was less evident.

"If all you say is true, Commander, then you should know that the Syndicate is looking for me all over the galaxy. Dejar here warned me of that a couple days ago. Even if I wanted to, I seriously doubt I could pull a good enough disappearing act to get away from them."

David looked back at her, letting that sink in a little. But his response wasn't even remotely on the subject. More of a peace offering if anything.

"Call me David."

CHAPTER FOUR : JUSTICE BE SERVED

The impass situation on the Orias bridge seemed to hover for hours but, as with many tense confrontations, only minutes had passed. The telltale feeling of a starship slowing became evident as the cruiser dropped out of warp outside the Centauri triple star system. Dejar, now propped in a sitting position against the forward bridge chair, knew immediately the destination, as she had set the coordinates herself. She informed the gathered antagonist's of the fact.

"We are now in orbit of a Federation triple system, a little over a parsec from Sol."

She glanced at the other's cautiously. A former Cardassian espionage agent, she knew the furtive glances and steely jawed determination affixed on the Star fleet Captain's features just a few feet away from her. Also evident was the calm, but equally determined mannerisms of the Deltan doctor beside her. Shel was nearly out of her sight, profiled behind the main bridge console and Commander Rogers, turned sideways to her, had the affixed gaze of one who would brook no interference toward his sister. She noted the resemblances mirrored in their stances, their two profiles almost identical in the bridge lighting. The family resemblance was uncanny. If she had ever had any doubt before, it was gone now. But now was a time for diplomacy, before the situation re-ignited into chaos. She tried to calm the captain.

"Captain, we are too far out to beam you back to Mars. Could I, perhaps, offer you and your esteemed physician here a shuttle?"

Felez regarded the woman silently for a few seconds.

"We should cover the basics first Commander."

He glanced at Rogers as he spoke.

"It is my evaluation that you and your vessel are not complicit in the theft of a Federation starship and was in fact the work of a lone renegade starfleet officer following a personal agenda."

"However, I cannot overlook the fact that you kidnapped three starfleet officers from a secure facility as well as the use of banned technology within Federation space."

His face was completely void of emotion, his tone even.

"Officially, I must place you under arrest and impound your ship."

Struggling slightly, Dejar got herself up to a standing position, using the console as an aid. Once erect she faced Captain Felez and, with a quizzical smile, responded to the man's accusation's.

"My dear Captain, you are a guest on my ship! As your host I must adhere to certain personal protocols; Namely? Not beaming company into space when they're rude and mis-informed."

With a sideways glance at the Rogers' siblings, who seemed to be following the developments near the bridge console, the Cardassian woman resumed her corrective of Felez' legal banter.

"However you may wish to put a spin on it Captain, for my part you and your friendly, ... shall I say ... scentsy?... Deltan compatriot there are trespassers on my ship! Your presence was not warranted, yet you callously hitched a ride on the transport of my friends brother."

Turning slightly, Dejar changed the weight off of her left foot and over to her right, taking some time and wincing at the pain in her ribs. She leaned on the console with her other hand now, and then resumed.

"It would appear to me, and my ship's log's I might add, that yourself and the Doctor here employed a covert ops attack on my ship. I think the Federation Grand jury would find, given my evidence, that you two had no authorization to board my ship and find you are both agents provocateur!

Dejar swept her hand over and down onto the console, activating one of the contacts on the board. Instantly, two vertical force fields sprang up , dividing the bridge into three separate zones. Near the front of the bridge, Felez and Nasaro-Myth were contained and separated by the orange hued floor to ceiling barrier. David found himself cut off from Shelly by the next barrier, which enclosed him and Dejar in their own separate zone, leaving Shelly within the third zone nearer the rear of the bridge. As the low hum settled into a constant drone just near hearing, Dejar turned to look first at the Captain and doctor, then over at David.

"Mister Rogers. I would like you to know that, as Shel is my only and dearest friend, I will aid her in keeping out of the Syndicates clutches. But that would entail a long and lengthy trip. If I allow your captain here to impound my vessel, that won't happen. If I may ask ... what are your intentions now?"

David looked back at his sister then turned slightly to look back through the force field at his ship mates. Looking again at Dejar he posed a question.

"What do you plan to do with my friends?"

Dejar glanced once at the two men beyond the orange glow and, with a slight wince, moved around to the front of the console she had been leaning on and replied with sincerity.

"Oh, they can return back from whence they came. Make's no never-mind to me. I find your captain's sincerity in upholding your vaunted Star Fleet regulations amusing, but fruitless out here. Really! Kidnapping? Banned technology? What universe do they think we live in?"

"The real one, my dear," answered Elliago with a soft smile but eyes of steel. " not the shady, shifty, expedient one of despicable groups as your own former Obsidian Order; a universe where the Federation actually lives by it's values, even to the point of respecting the sovereignty of non member worlds like Orion when such a world still practice primitive and barbarous institutions like slavery. But even if we do not impose them on others in their own recognized self-governing space, we still have laws within *our* space; and you, my dear, broke them in *our* space. I would like very much to actually see you try your childish sophistry of a moment ago before an actual court."

David winced slightly at the regulations jibe, knowing full well he was as bound by them as was Felez and Nasaro-Myth. But also, Dejar had her point made. Within the galaxy, many things were conveniently over-looked by the Federation when ideals were second place to larger problems. David had said it earlier. The syndicate was still allowed, after all these years, to operate within the alpha and beta quadrants with seeming impunity to Federation laws and regulations.

That's what he had thought. But now, the Deltan had explained it all in unequivocal terms he had never considered before; Orion was not part of the Federation because of their practice of slavery; therefore, being a recognized self-governing state, the Federation had no authority to stop their slavery except when actually done outside of Orion space; which Starfleet was effectively called to do, with General Order 20 making it mandatory for all Starfleet officers to prevent and oppose any captivity, transportation or commerce of sentient beings within Federation space. But beyond that, it was up to Orion itself to freely choose to abandon it, even within their territory, if they one day hoped to join the community of free worlds; not for the Federation to dictate it's own policies on their non-member world. Or else, the Federation would be no better than they were.

The values of the Federation were high and hard to live by; but if it did not live up to them, then they meant nothing.

With that thought however came his own realization of culpability. He couldn't evade the outcome any longer. His sister was safe, that was the only important thing to him now. Rule 162 was for Shelly now. So it came down to trust this Cardassian, or further prolong the duel here. Rogers looked once at Shelly again and responded to Dejar.

"If you can promise to keep her out of the syndicates hands, send us back to Mars."

Dejar turned once again to the panels before her and started keying the controls, speaking meanwhile to Shelly.

"And your thoughts my dear? Have you decided on your brother? And your possible destination?"

Shelly, alone behind the aft force field, looked once between David and Dejar, then at the two beyond the third force field. Looking back at her Cardassian friend Shelly spoke.

"I guess I am on the run old friend. If you'll take me. As for Commander Rogers? I would like ... more information."

Glancing back at Felez and Nasaro-Myth again, Shelly continued.

"I think we are in depth here beyond even your capable wrangling's old friend. They should leave don't you think?"

Dejar laughed. A short bark that sounded out of place within the confines of the divided bridge.

"We always did think alike, Shel."

With that final sentence Dejar activated the transporters again. Before David could protest both Captain Felez and Commander Nasaro-Myth dematerialized from the bridge.

"what! Where ... ?", David shouted, way too late.

"Relax, Rogers, I said we were in the vicinity of a trinary. Proxima Centauri. The Federation has maintenance yards there. They're in the command center. The starfleet underlings down there will be quite surprised about now I think."

Turning off the force fields, she began entering more commands into the console before her, while continuing her dialogue.

"I really like this sub-space transport tech. They say it is untracable you know."

The ship surged forward as Dejar engaged the ship's drives, and the Alpha Centauri trinary system was left behind when the warp engines cut in. David walked over to ward Dejar, voicing a question.

"Where are you taking me ... us?"

Glancing up from the console, Dejar answered quizzically.

"Ever heard of the Typhon Expanse?"

Back on Alpha Centauri C, within the commander's office of the maintenance yards, the doctor and captain materialized before the desk in the large, cluttered room.

"Well, that wasn't very considerate," Elliago grumbled, looking around rather disoriented.

But then, he quickly recognized the place from his own childhood aboard the starship of his mother. Born and raised all his life on starship and starbases, the Deltan Doctor could almost recognize any major one in the federation just by the paint job on the walls.

"Alpha Centauri shipyards, captain," he told Felez. "And this is Fleetyards Administrator Lheah Bhrams I presume?"

The middle-aged brown-haired woman had stood up the moment they had appeared in front of her desk. Her finger had moved to her comm panel but then froze as she took in the dazzling smile of the Deltan wearing a Starfleet uniform. Her throaty voice had a hard edge to it.

"This is a rather cavalier entrance, Commander... Captain. May I inquire the meaning of this... unannounced visit?"

"You may ask," Felez said matter of factly. "Secure ship to ship communications to the USS Lotus, priority 1."

The woman hesitated but for an instant. Although she was not a Starfleet officer, she had worked for decades with Starfleet and knew quite well how to act around Starfleet officers, especially captains obviously caught in a serious situation. She hesitated but for a few seconds before securing contact with her communication bay. A few level 10 codes later, Felez was in contact with his ship and the entire Starfleet Security network in the quadrant, thanks to the efficiency of subspace relays.

"Aye, Captain, we have them. Six different relay stations and about a dozen standby vessels are triangulating their position as we speak."

"I want it on record that Lieutenant Rogers did not go willingly." Felez said calmly.

"Thanks to Doctor Nasaro-Myth, the implant in Rogers worked as expected. The moment they breached security at the shipyard we had his position in less than ten minutes," confirmed a rather happy sounding Tellarite starship commanding officer.

"A good thing it is now standard medical procedure to inoculate protein-based transponders into every Lotus Fleet officer during routine medical exams," Elliago said with a sigh and a wry smile, "and that only captains and above are aware of it... with the exception of ship's CMOs of course. Even if they interrogate Commander Rogers, he will not be able to tell them what he himself doesn't know. And if a full medical examination by a trained medical officer is performed, they might find them... if you know what you're looking... and that, only if they do an internal sensor scan for a low-powered, narrow subspace transmission to begin with, just to be aware of what is going on. Even if they beat the odds against all those "ifs" stacked against them, extraction is impossible; the system is diffused throughout the cell structure of the host. Their very bones and the metas and minerals they are made of serve as the antenna."

"Indeed Captain Felez, we have them. Implants or not, no cloaking device will save them now," a rather stern-looking Vulcan agreed.

"The ship yes, but it seems we have an added problem; they have a sub-space transporter." Felez reported.

The Vulcan on the communication screen showed no reaction and his voice stayed even.

"Already accounted for, Captain. That won't help them either, as long as they don't beam off before we intercept them that is. Their current heading is towards the Typhon expanse. We have four ships blocking their path."

Felez nodded in agreement.

"The Lotus will be picking us up in less than an hour and should beat them to the expanse by a good twenty minutes with the transwarp drive."

"They certainly are going to be in for a shock when they see us right in front of them, " the Deltan said with a wink.

Felez's race wasn't good at open expressions of emotion, but if one could be seen, it would be... dismay.

* * *

David and Shelly spent much of the time enroute with the elder sibling giving the younger woman a complete historical run down on her familial background. Her parents, Donald Rogers and Kalenna s'Hheinia, her birth above Romulus, the destruction of the SS Brilliant and her 'death'. The story of David's step-father, DaiMon Mok and the subsequent selling of Shelly into Orion slavery David had particular difficulty with. Not so much because the history was sketchy but that the anger still within him at Mok' betrayal toward his family. Much of the history now complete, David walked the corridor of the Orias heading back toward the bridge, temporarily lost in thought, when the lighting dimmed and a warning siren started a shrill pulse. He immediately broke into a run toward the Keldon's bridge.

"What is it?" David shouted as he got within sight of Dejar.

With an exasperated glance at her captive, Dejar swung back away from David at the aft of the bridge and resumed her scrutiny of the tactical situation that David could now perceive as he approached the side of the raised dais where the Orias' captain now sat. As she pointed out the display to Rogers, she summed up the situation.

"It would seem your vaunted Starfleet are here before us, Commander. From long range scans, we can identify three Federation heavy cruiser signatures." As she spoke, the man at the tactical station off to her right interrupted.

"Another ship has appeared; Federation Intrepid class. She appeared out of nowhere!"

Running a quick calculation over in his mind David surmised the distance from Mars to their current position some twelve light years from the expanse, near Epsilon Gruls, and concluded correctly the Transwarp flight time of the Lotus. With a slight sigh, David informed Dejar.

"That would be Captain Felez and the Lotus."

Comms then broke the ensuing silence with an announcement.

"Incoming hail."

Glancing once at Rogers, Dejar stood and faced the view screen.

"Open channel."

* * *

Minutes before in his ready room, Felez was talking to Rear Admiral Kotari.

"I think it's our best option, Rear Admiral, although I would rather not use it if there was any other way."

"You realize that if this doesn't work, your career in Starfleet will be ruined of course... and Commander Rogers as well." Kotari said sternly.

"No less than Rogers would deserve for his crimes, and my own downfall would be well worth the risk," Felez said, showing no emotion at all.

"Very well, Captain Felez. Go ahead with your plan and I wish you the best of luck."

Kotari ended the transmission.

Five minutes later, the Efrozian sat in his command chair on the main bridge. Ensign Tahndi gave Captain Felez his security report.

"Now arriving at task force rendez-vous point, Captain. Target ship has not deviated from either course or speed."

Felez looked intently at the main viewscreen. He whispered under his breath.

"Don't be stupid."

"Rogers is a sensible man," Doctor Nasaro-Myth assured him, having heard him as he stood right behind him, hands resting on the causeway ramp. "I could feel before we were unceremoniously booted out of their ship that both women had lost their hostility towards him. Let's hope he can reason them if they plan anything... unwise. But this Cardassian woman seems sensible as well. She surely knows that no one ship in the galaxy, short of a Borg cube, can stand against an entire task force."

Seconds later, Tahndi reported that the Cardassian ship dropped to impulse and was holding position.

Felez smiled inwardly and thought, Good girl.

"Open a secured hailing frequency."

Tahndi did so and reported that they were receiving the hail.

"This is Captain Felez of the Federation Starship Lotus. You are ordered to stand down and I invite Commander Dejar and the Rogers siblings to join me in the Lotus's conference room. You have five minutes to comply."

Barely two minutes passed before the Cardassian ship Orias responded.

"Commander Dejar here. I have decided to accept your gracious invitation, Captain. Expect our transporter signal shortly."

Moments later, in transporter room 1, the image of three humanoids could be seen materializing slowly on the transporter pad. The chief transporter operator gave Felez an approving nod.

"All clear, Captain. No weapons or biological surprises detected, Sir."

"Very well. Complete the transfer."

With that, the figures of Commander Dejar as well as David and Shelly Rogers materialized.

"Welcome aboard the Lotus, Commander. Please hold all comments until we arrive at the conference room. If you will please follow me..."

At that, Felez left the transporter room, leaving four security officers to escort their guests. Several minutes later, they all arrived in the conference room. Felez ordered security to remain outside leaving Felez and Dr. Nasaro-Myth and their guests alone.

Elliago went to the side of the captain, standing up behind him and keeping all his sensitive senses focused on their three guests. he refrained from using his soothing pheromones. Influencing their reactions would make Felez efforts useless. But he would be watching them intently for any sign of acceptance, refusal... or hostility. It would take but one word from him to activate security forcefield to encase them. But for the nonce, he remained silent, letting his commanding officer lead the meeting.

"Now, Commander, as I was saying before you quite rudely interrupted me, I was about to officially place you under arrest..." and he let that sit for a few seconds before continuing; "but as it turns out, that may have been for the best."

He sat down and motioned for the rest to do the same.

"So we're all on the same page, let's recap shall we? A short while ago, a Federation prototype starship was stolen from a secure shipyard within Federation space." Felez was careful not to say any names. "Most of Lotus fleet command as well as Star Fleet intelligence came to the conclusion that an inside operative working with a foreign element had to be responsible for its theft, and in a short time decided that Mister Rogers was the only reasonable and qualified suspect."

He looked at Rogers.

"Before it could be decided to apprehend him, the ship, on its own, returned to Federation space. It was then that I was assigned with the task of finding out the particulars of the situation, seeing as there were far too many unanswered questions. This was partially because of my familiarity with Rogers as well as my record for ferreting out saboteurs and spies. But, as I mentioned earlier, I have come to the conclusion that Mister Rogers was indeed acting on his own and attained the vessel using a dazzling array of tact and innovation."

With this, he took a deep breath and sat back in his chair.

"My original plan was to encourage Commander Rogers to attempt to escape or, at the very least, try to contact his allies for help, giving us an opportunity to track them down and catch them. To that end, Starfleet Command granted me command of this task force and what have I ended up with?"

He waved his right hand over the three of them.

"A discredited Cardassian smuggler trespassing in Federation space using illegal equipment; a victim of Ferengi exploitation and Orion slavery managing to commandeer a Klingon renegade ship for a personal quest of vengeance against the very person having freed her; and a decorated Federation officer with no faith in humanity and compassion of the organization he swore to serve, willing to place his personal problems of family over the security of Starfleet."

This last part seemed to bother him the most.

"I've tried to make you understand the severity of what you have done, Rogers, but I just don't think you can accept it."

He looked back at Dejar.

"Commander Dejar, Your ship will be impounded and crew arrested, tried and held, most likely, for most of the remainder of their natural lives due to the complicit nature of your involvement with this event. Unless you expect the Cardassian Union to intervene on your behalf, as I do not."

He turned to David Rogers.

"Rogers will, undoubtedly, suffer a similar fate, even if not convicted of it will be considered a traitor to the Federation, a probable thirty year incarceration followed by isolation because of his familiarity with Starfleet security protocols and obvious talent of bypassing them."

He shook his head sadly and turned towards Shelly Rogers.

"You Miss Rogers, will be a bit more complicated. Officially you're a civilian registered with the unaffiliated and independent Orion star system and, unless directly implicated by David or Dejar, will be turned over to the Orion government for processing in a few months."

His eyes stayed with her.

"I imagine, every facet of your life will be reviewed in detail and, if you're very lucky, they will attempt to use you as political leverage against the Federation, as you were of course an Orion citizen that was forcibly removed, drugged and abandoned after having your memory wiped, by a ranking, decorated, Federation officer."

He shot a quick glance back at Rogers.

"I'm sure you can imagine how THAT might play out."

Elliago didn't need to imagine it anymore than Rogers. Yet, the Deltan's sensitivity told him that all was not yet said or done. There was a tension in Felez, as if the Efrogian was about to fight or jump over a cliff. It was an odd feeling coming out of him, as by all facts and intents, he had completed successfully his difficult mission in finding out and apprehending whoever had been responsible for the theft of the Diamond Star. He had even discovered why. And yet, instead of a feeling of justified and righteous satisfaction at having done his duty well, there was still apprehension, uncertainty... and... hope?

It seemed that the game was not yet over.

The doctor looked at him but stayed quiet. Felez was not just a fellow Starfleet officer after all. He was the captain.

The Efrogian closed his eyes and took a deep breath, preparing himself for what he had to do.

"By all rights, this should be what happens next... but it can't."

He addressed Dejar.

"If we can all come to an accord, this is what is being purposed. The Federation greatly appreciates your assistance during this... exercise. You have helped Lotus fleet refine it's security response to the probability of a cloaked infiltration of a secure installation. Showing the swift and completely successful tracking and recovery of a cloaked vessel in Federation space, this should give most of our primary opponents concern. You will be compensated for your time AFTER we recover the illegal transporter tech we allowed for this exercise."

His pale gaze never wavered from her dark eyes.

"I hope we understand each other, Dejar; and I apologize for any discomfort this might draw from your peers."

The expression he gave her indicated he was not, indeed, concerned.

"David Rogers," Felez paused looking at him for several seconds. "You are to be commended for the skill and professionalism in putting together a plan, with the help of a few key personnel, necessary for this exercise."

"It will be made VERY clear that the focus was not in actually taking the ship, because such a feat would be impossible for any lone individual to do, but in the response and efficiency of Starfleet Security in it's quick recovery and the apprehension of hijackers. You will receive an award, I'm sure. And the people of the Federation will sleep better knowing that Starfleet doesn't have people like you threatening it's very existence for a matter of personal gain."

His face went blank again. He turned towards the half-Romulan woman standing next to her brother.

"Shelly Rogers, as a personal liaison between Dejar and Rogers, you are of course free to go with either of them as you wish. And I have arranged asylum for you if you so desire it."

He didn't look at Rogers but the next comment was aimed at him.

"Because the Federation looks after its people, and their families."

He looked around the room sternly. When his strange whitish eyes fell on the purple ones of his chief medical officer, he could read in them surprise, then disbelief, a flicker of doubt... and finally approval, even genuine admiration.

Elliago was a Starfleet officer, born and raised on starships, a firm believer of it's rules of conduct. But he was also Deltan, instinctively empathic and sensitive to other beings; and he was most of all a doctor, sworn to do no harm and to heal all suffering, even when enemies were concerned... let alone colleagues... and friends.

Felez brough his gaze back to Rogers. There was no more apprehension in his mind or in his voice.

"My terms are non-negotiable. If you need a moment to discuss this, we will exit the room."

While Captain Felez spoke, David stood quietly, knowing full well his culpability was without question, but also knowing that Shelly must be protected. Her return to Orion space was unthinkable to him and he tensed visibly at Felez' mention of her being returned into the syndicate's clutches.

Then the captain's next words; an accord. It gave a beacon of hope toward his sister and her fate.

The proposal unfolded like a dream. Continued freedom for Shelly, with an offer of asylum within the Federation. A non-negotiable offer, but also an unlooked-for alternative to his prior plan before beaming over to the Lotus. He, for his own sake, didn't need the offer. It was never his intention to gain anything except Shelly's freedom from the syndicate. With a warning glance toward the Cardassian, David answered for them, before Dejar could self-inflict to herself the pain all aboard the Orias were expecting from their defeat and capture.

"Sir, Captain Dejar herself would be happy to accept. I am also confident that Shelly would be, shall I say, accommodating, in persuing asylum."

The last, as he looked directly at his sister, was slightly enforced by a lower tone of voice indicating his desire that she herself voice the desire of asylum within the Federation. Neither he, nor anyone else, could voice it for her. Finally, looking back at Commander Nasaro-Myth first, then down to Captain Felez.

"I, ... ask for nothing for myself, Sir."

"Unfortunately Rogers, neither you or I will be awarded the luxury of anonymity. For the next few months, we will be smiling, accepting awards and lying with a straight face about how safe and secure Starfleet is, with guest appearances and security briefings. Some of those smiling back at us will know the truth and will be angry at both of us for the cover up. But in reality, you will be a prisoner and I your keeper, at the very least for the rest of your career. Security clearance will be just enough for your to continue your duties aboard the Lotus, minus the ability to take command even if the only officer left to do so. And a special attachment to your personal file make it extremely unlikely you will ever be allowed a command position."

A cover up; Elliago was quite ill at ease with the idea. Truth was at the very heart of being a Starfleet officer. He almost thought about making a formal protest.

It took a moment for him to realize that, in fact, truth *would be* honored; only those not already in the know and not needing to be in the know would be exempt from it. Any captain and above would be aware of what had happened and would act accordingly as Felez had done; for the good of the service. Everyone could understand why Rogers had acted this way, many would empathize with him; but even if an officer of Rogers' caliber was essential for the current depleted state of the fleet. discipline could not be jeopardized.... security even less. Officially punishing him would expose all the vulnerabilities of Starfleet before they could all be verified, tested and corrected. This smokescreen of a security test would prevent the same thing to happen to an active duty starship instead of a mere engineering platform sitting in a yard. No one in Starfleet had yet forgotten the theft of the prototype USS Prometheus by Romulans several decades ago.

And Rogers would nevertheless be punished; he would be obliged to remain working in Starfleet where his career was, for all intent and purposes, all but finished. It amounted to nothing else than the same sentence as lifetime in a penal colony. His moving around in a stahship would just cover it up for security's sake.

Hopefully, his love of his work would make him accept it just as James Kirk had graciously lived with his historically famous demotion. The Deltan sincerely wished it, for Rogers' sake. His actions were inexcusable; his feelings were still quite understandable.

Felez was acting to save both the Service and the man. The doctor could now feel nothing else but admiration for him and what he was trying to do... and for Starfleet for going, not outside but beyond the rules to do the same.

His mind was brought back to the present by the soft voice of the Efrogian captain.

"Dejar, I don't doubt Rogers is correct. However, I really must insist you agree to my terms personally."

As everyone else left the room, Felez asked Rogers to remain a minute longer. He seemed calmer than before, and spoke softer. He looked out one of the windows.

"On some level I.. admire what you did here David. Just before I joined the crew of this ship, my wife had been taken by the Borg. I was lost in my grief and oh so angry at Starfleet..."

He took a breath and stood there for a few seconds in silence, choosing his words.

"I know it's hard to tell, but Efrogians are a passionate people, easy to offend and known to hold a grudge for generations. What would I have done if I had been in command of the Lotus at that time? likely the same thing as you; broke my oath and go looking for her against orders... risking the lives of my crew on the slim hope of finding her before the trail got to cold."

He sat back down wearily.

"I found out later that my commanding officer, my friend... had located her not long after I took command of the Lotus, but chose not to tell me. I hated him for that... still do. But I now know, thanks to you, that he did the right thing."

He stood up and straightening his jacket then walked to the door.

"Thank you, Commander Rogers; you're dismissed."

And so saying, he left the room.

Right outside the room, Elliago was waiting for him. He fell in step with him.

"Well, Captain Sir... you certainly did it. I hope Starfleet Command will see things as clearly as you do and not have their rulebook so high up before their faces that they will not see what's best for everyone... most of all Starfleet itself."

Once Captain Felez had exited the conference room David walked silently around the vacated chair and stood looking out at the expanse of the surrounding space through the viewport. The Typhon expanse was a dim glow off in the distance, a mere couple hours away. He wondered for a minute; Would the outcome have been much different had the Orias made it to the expanse? Would he be standing just like this somewhere, Shelly safe? Dejar, somewhat unhappily, back on her merry way to do the bidding of her masters in the syndicate? He really doubted such an outcome would have happened had the Lotus' task force not intercepted the Orias here.

Stepping back a little David sat on the corner of the table, still looking at the stars, and gave thought to the future. Returning now to Lotus base, as surely must happen now, David surmised that Shelly may be asked to provide some intelligence on her contact with the Syndicate. He still fumed at the continued existence of that vile organization. And, upon retroflection to the doctor's conversation on the Orias, before Dejar had beamed them to the Proxima colony, he could see that the Federation's hands were effectively tied when it came to the Syndicate's operations within Orion space. But the fact still wrangled him.

Even the Free Traders, a supposedly legitimate Orion group, was known to the Ferengii as opportunists. Even though they have an established relationship with Vulcan society, his adopted people knew also that the Free Trader's operated under the guise of 'free' applied as loosely as interstellar law could be applied.

David grunted and stood again, pacing the room broodily. There was much that he could regret, but ... would Shelly be returned to him now, had he done things differently? There were too many variables to consider here. With a heavy sigh, David rose from the table and again approached the viewport.

One thought appeared to him, courtesy of his commandeering the Diamond Star. While effectively in command of the Horizon's sister ship, he had been made privy to the Omega Directive through the main computer. This Directive gave precedence to the destruction of any Omega particle detected by Star Fleet captain's. It even allowed the complete disregard for the prime Directive in carrying out said directive, including the destruction of an inhabited planet to achieve the directive. Could an officer accept mere bending of regulations to rescue his sister, knowing that any ship he was serving on could be sacrificed just to destroy a molecule? Now that was a sobering thought that gave rise to too many what-ifs.

David shook it off and turned to the exit then. He must return to engineering and look after the Lotus. At least for now, he was still chief engineer and XO. Although the latter might change at any moment. The doors swished shut as David exited the conference room.

As the lights darkened the now empty room, a stray comet tail became visible off in the distance, previously hidden by the glare of the room lights. It's complacent journey uninterrupted by the puny comings and goings of sentient lifeforms; Its only prime directive ... get to wherever it was going.

THE END

