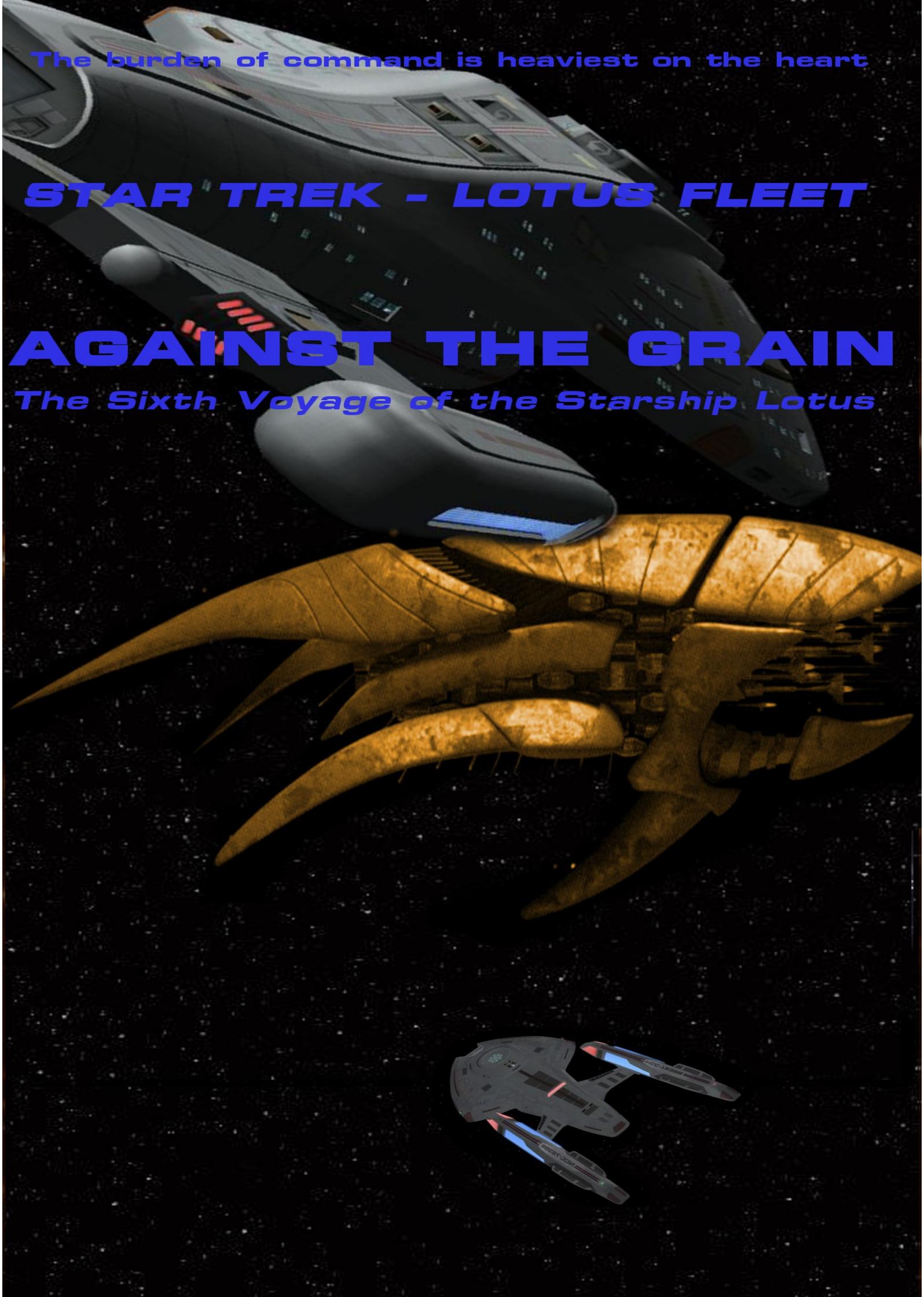


The burden of command is heaviest on the heart

**STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET**

**AGAINST THE GRAIN**

*The Sixth Voyage of the Starship Lotus*



**STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET**

# **AGAINST THE GRAIN**

**The Sixth Voyage of the Starship Lotus**

Forum roleplaying session

from August 7th 2009 to November 22nd 2009

Story by Redding

Novelization by Kheren

Cover by Kheren

## **DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

Redding as Acting Captain Connora'tu Felez

Robertson as Lieutenant Commander Mark Robertson

Ben Smith as Lieutenant Benjamin Smith

Driam as Doctor Shayanna Driam

Kheren as Ensign Kheren

## PROLOGUE

**USS Lotus, NCC - 74910.  
Lt. Commander Felez commanding.  
Acting Captain's log  
Stardate: 86766.1**

**We are only sixteen hours away from our rendez-vous with the USS Savoy and Captain Hargrove. The crew has spent much of the last two days preparing the ship, making sure everything's perfect for what their sure is to be a class A inspection, and they might be right.**

**According to her service record, she's an accomplished diplomat, and likes to run a tight ship. Her record of dealing with the Gorns and the Orions is impressive, settling seven conflicts without a single shot being fired. And still she had time for a family. I hope I can prove to be that versatile with my career.**

**No doubt she will be an asset in solving our problems with both the Romulans and the Klingon's in this sector.**

**On a related note: Lieutenant Smith can find no reason to suspect sabotage is responsible for our random system problems, but Corvers last action aboard ship may have triggered it.**

**Seems the Lotus is starting to feel her age..**

Felez exited the turbolift to deck 8 and made his way down to the science labs. It had been less than a week sense he had been there as Chief Science officer but it felt like months already. He had forgotten all about cleaning out his desk until he started looking for one of his data PADDs on transwarp flow charts and decided now was as good a time as any to pick them all up.

*Besides he thought I might finially get to see Lieutenant Klein and his celebrated team in action.*

After finding the Lab empty, Felez returned to the bridge where in just a few short hours he would go back to being the First officer, although he supposed that wouldn't be accurate seeing as he was acting as the Lotus Captain first.

He noticed that the blue-skinned, bald Bolian ensign Surta was at the helm instead of Robertson. But before he could inquire about it, Lieutenant Lortoria at Oops spoke up.

"Commander Felez, If you have a moment, Sir?"

Felez turned towards the science station his milky eyes, as white as his long flowing hair and fu-manchu goatee contrasting so sharply with his orange skin, and took a few steps in that direction.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

Lortoria, a black haired and eyed half Vulcan, half Bajoran female, had been on the Lotus about as long as Felez had, and they had worked together on more than a few projects.

"I attempted to contact the USS Savoy with a position update but, due to some kind of local interference on there end, was unable too."

Felez moved around the panel beside her.

"What sort of interference?"

"There last heading would have taken them along this class 3 nebula.. here.." she traced her finger along along the screen."Communication problems are not uncommon with that area."

Felez nodded.

"How long until they clear the problem area?"

"One hour and forty-three minutes present course and speed."

Felez touched a hand to his forehead.

"Very well, Lieutenant; if they haven't contacted us in two hours, try again. Inform me of the contact."

Then, he walked down to Helm.

"Mister Surta, increase warp speed to factor 8."

Surta looked up.

"Sir?" he said with a questioned look.

"Its the control panel near your right hand, Ensign." he said pointing at it.

The Bolian blinked twice his large blue eyes and then turned to his task.

"Aye, Sir, warp 8 will make our ETA almost two hours sooner, Sir."

Felez sat down in the captain's chair.

"I know Ensign, but better too soon than too late. If they were delayed by the Nebula, then we will have lost no time because if it. I'd rather be punctual, even if I'm not the one who's falling behind."

## CHAPTER ONE : MINDING THE STORE

The squad that came out of the holodeck and assembled in the security department briefing room in a perfect row before the Chief of security showed a wide variety of bruises and facial expressions:

"Good exercise." said Chief of security Kheren Kalel Th'Shelleryll, rubbing a callused blue-skinned hand over his bruised neck. "We will do this drill once a week to enhance team cohesion and sign language proficiency, but feel free to train individually with the program... especially in coordinating tactical movement with the shifting inner force field program. Each of us must become able to navigate every inch of this ship, even drunk with eyes closed... all of them. "

A weak laugh jumped from one security crewman to the other but the short smiles were slightly painful to more than a few.

"Opinions?"

"Ah, well, rather a question, Chief. " answered Lieutenant Tomah, rubbing his ribs. " Why did you suddenly attack us in the end? It surprised and frightened the hell out of us."

The Andorian turned his whole head towards him:

" So, next time I, or any one of us, is taken over by an alien mind, or revealed to be a changeling, you won't be. "

"Preparedness to the unexpected indeed explains why you divided us racially between all four security shifts." Ensign S'ton concluded with the usual cold logic of a Half-Vulcan.

Kheren nodded:

"Andorian antennae detect shrouded Jem'hadars; Caitian senses detect changelings; Vulcan logic decypher enemy tactics; a Bolian's tongue neutralize poisons; a Benzite is hard to disarm because of two-thumbed hands; Betazoid read minds; Deltans can neutralize pain; The Denobulan immune system can resist Borg nanoprobes; three-limbed Edoans can hold more weapons; a Saurian's four hearts make it hardier than Klingons... and Humans can survive and improvise almost anything..."

As he spoke, he was looking at each one of them:

"We are the United Federation of Planets : our strength comes in the unity of our differences. We will use that to the fullest."

As they nodded in understanding approval, he continued:

"We are Lotus Fleet: our competence is to be the best Starfleet can offer."

Hearing these words, they forgot their pain and fatigue as he concluded:

"And this is the USS Lotus, the flagship of the fleet; she deserves, she demands the best of the best...even more: the best of us. And we are Security: we protect her, and what she does; the heart and soul of the Federation. Are you up to it?"

"Aye, Sir!" they all answered in one strong voice.

Kheren now consciously gave them a typically Andorian smile, curving his antennae inward.

"Well, it's up to each of you... because Delta shift is next... and I've heard they prepared hard to beat Alpha shift's score... wich, like Beta shift, you just equated. Oh, the shooting deck is still open by the way. Dismissed."

As the room emptied, the Andorian waited for them to be out before allowing himself to sit on his desk and close his eyes to breathe slowly. His hands were slightly trembling for a moment before he rubbed his face with them.

*I'll need more than my 3 hours of sleep after that... and our good Doctor's liniment. Humans especially are so competitive, the're driving all the others to outdo themselves just to keep up... even me. But if we can all keep it up, we'll all put even Starfleet marines to shame...*

On a sudden impulse, he turned toward him his computer console and activated it:

"Computer; link to holodeck 2; open anti-boarding program Kheren One; modify USS Lotus ship layout simulation to incorporate random system malfunctions as reported by Chief Engineer Smith."

"Program modification complete" answered the synthesized female voice.

*Delta shift has learned too much already from the messhall gossip of the other shifts... and their new individual training regimen. Surprise is the hardest thing to train for...*

The auditory perceptors in his antennae were already picking up the footsteps of Alpha shift reporting for duty... and the last group of security members aboard the Lotus approaching the briefing room for their scheduled group training.

*I'm eager to hear Chief Petty Officer Gralthri after this exercise... Tellarites are very good at stating their opinion...*

He glanced at the clock before returning his desk computer console to facing his chair.  
*More than enough time to prepare the Honor Guard to receive our new Captain. If she does indeed like things ship shape, we will not disappoint her.*

Then he stood up and straightened his uniform before the members of Delta shift came into the room to be briefed for their own training session.

\* \* \*

"The technology has been improved over the course of several centuries, and you reject it because you do not think it is *safe*?" Chayana asked and pressed the buttons on the biobed, bringing up some data on its occupant.

"Look, if I had to go down to the surface of an unknown world, I'd feel better doing it in a shuttle than being teleported there one molecule at a time." Said Kerrigan defensively.

"But there have not been any transporter-related accidents for decades! The chance of being killed in a shuttle crash is infinitely higher than getting caught up in a transporter accident."

"Say whatever you want, doctor, but if given a choice between the two I'll take the sky any day." Kerrigan said as she walked over to the dispenser to get a hypospray for her patient.

"Humans..." Chayana muttered to herself.

Though somewhat annoyed by the naïvete of her second-in-command, she liked having someone to talk to besides patients and the counselor.

"Speaking as someone routinely broken down and reassembled, I suppose I could understand the rooted phobia behind the transporters," then said the ship's emergency medical hologram. "But the doctor is correct in regards to there safety. But don't feel left out, There are a number of people that refuse to be transported going back to the early days of space exploration quoting personal pilsopical and even religious reasons for not doing so. If you like I can supply you with there support information."

Kerrigan made a face and rolled her eyes.

"I'm good, thanks." and walked to another part of the bay.

The EMH shook its head.

"Humph... Humans; by far the worst for this phobia."

With her shift having ended just a few minutes ago, Driam had already left them and was on her way to her quarters.

"Computer, lights." She said after entering and letting herself fall backwards onto the bed.

Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a needle filled with the clear liquid that would soon allow her to forget the terror she had ben forced to experience ever since the incident aboard the Sapentia. After removing her uniform and pulling up the undershirt she took a deep breath as she gently inserted the needle until she hit her target and injected the merfadon.

*Pray this cruise come without pain and nightmares, she wished fevently. For all of us.*

\* \* \*

Chief Smith sat quietly reviewing the multitudes of level 2 and 3 diagnostics that his engineers

had run on the various systems during the voyage to the USS Savoy. He continued to find simple and explainable errors for each and every anomaly.

*This ship has really been through a lot in such a short time, he pondered. This bit of rest has really proven very valuable.*

Ben tapped a few buttons on the monitor at his desk and grabbed his cup of Bolian tea. He winced as he took a sip.

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger .....right."

Smith tapped his commbadge and asked Ensign Taggart to join him. A brief moment passed and the ensign entered the Chief's office. As the Ensign that Ben trusted so well approached, Ben began to talk.

"Well, Chris that do you think? Just a bit of rust on the ship?" He queried.

"Chief, for the first time. I really feel at home with the systems now. The constant change of staff and skirmishes had taken their toll. This time to refit has really benefited us."

Taggart stopped then presented his PADD to Smith.

"I have worked out the new team schedule, I have tried to mix new arrivals with the veterans."

Ben looked briefly at the list.

"This looks good, Taggart. You are a good officer and friend. I am glad you were kept on board. While I do not know what is waiting for us out there I am glad you are with us."

As they spoke, the warp engine started to resonate louder as the ship's engines moved to warp 8. The two humans looked at each other in a puzzled manner.

"Thank you, Ensign. Dismissed."

Taggart exited the room. Ben tapped his commbadge.

"Bridge. This is Engineering. I thought we were cruising to the Savoy? Has there been a change in plans?"

"Ensign Surta here, Sir; seems there was communication difficulty with the Savoy and Commander Felez ordered the increase as a precaution... I guess. I think he just doesn't want to be late, Sir."

Lortoria cut in.

"There's no problem we know of at this time, Chief. This interruption was predicted. The Captain is just being efficient."

Her tone almost sounded as if she might be defending his actions, but she tended to keep her demeanor professional most of the time.

\* \* \*

Setting the PADD in his hand to the steadily-growing pile on one side of his desk, Lieutenant Commander Mark Robertson, acting executive officer of the flagship of Lotus Fleet, rubbed his eyes with his hands, weary of reading reports all morning. Instead of manning the helm during his shift, he'd delegated Ensign Surta, a Bajoran, to the task, deciding to kill two birds with one stone.

Surta was the newest of the Lotus's three Flight Control Ensigns, and Mark thought he should get some experience on Day Watch while he got caught up with status reports and personnel files that needed attending to.

He pushed away from his desk, almost immediately banging the chair and the back of his head into the wall, still quite unused to his new office. He rubbed the back of his head as he walked out into the small space between his office and his Assistant's that opened into the Flight Control Center, deciding to give his eyes a break for a few minutes, when the Lotus suddenly increased its speed, forcing him to brace a hand against the wall plating.

He frowned and listened intently for a moment to the whine of the Intrepid-class vessel's engines before continuing into the FCC where a couple of his enlisted personnel, Petty Officers Cooper and Etzi were monitoring Flight Operations.

"No Red Alert...what'd we just speed up to, Mister Cooper?"

Cooper turned as Mark walked up behind them.

"Warp 8, Sir."

"Hmmm... Carry on," Mark replied as he nodded and turned on his heel, leaving the paperwork for later while he made his way to the turbolift, deciding if there was an emergency, he'd better get to the Conn.

Upon reaching the Bridge, he relieved Surta with a grin,

"How's she flying, Ensign?"

"Like a dream, Sir. Would you prefer I stayed as a relief, or report to Lieutenant Aramaki?"

Mark heard the question, but thought for a moment as he saw a possible reason for the speed increase; a Class 3 nebula that could muddle communications with the Savoy.

"Stick around, Ensign. Inform Lieutenant Ajzi you're relieving him for this shift. I'm sure he won't mind the day off."

As the young officer promptly carried out his orders, Mark estimated the time to the rendezvous point, figuring it in as about an hour and fifteen minutes, just under two hours earlier than the original meetup was projected.

Lieutenant Lortoria sent the comm signal again and gave a little frown.

"Bridge to engineering."

"Taggart here; what can we do for you, bridge?"

"I wish to increase resolution strength to the long range sensors. Is that possible?"

There was a slight pause before Taggart answered.

"No Problem, M'am, just let me clear it with the chief first; take a couple of minutes."

"Acknowledged, bridge out."

She then tried for the third time to hail the Savoy without success.

She reached for her combadge again but hesitated. Lowering her hand, she looked at the ready room door. The door opened at that moment and Commander Felez walked out and looked right at her. It gave her a little shock.

*Did he know she was thinking of him?* She wondered, looking at the strange milky white eyes of the Efrozian.

They were known for their strong empathy. He may have...

"Report on the Savoy, Lieutenant?" he said with that constantly blank look of an Efrozian.

"Still no response to our hails, Captain, and they should have circumnavigated the Nebula as of twelve minutes ago. I have requested additional power to boost the long range sensors."

Felez paused to think for several seconds before responding.

"Very well, continue with your efforts, Lieutenant. Helm, increase speed to Warp 8 and plot a patrol course following along the USS Savoy's projected flight path. When we reach the first check point, bring us back down to warp 6. I wouldn't want to miss anything. Tactical, The Savoy was patrolling this sector for possible raiders; three ships disappear in the last six months, although nothing as big as the Savoy. But make us situation-ready all the same, until we know better."

He sat back in the command chair.

"Bring us to Yellow alert."

## CHAPTER TWO: DARK IS SPACE

Yellow alert! Yellow alert!

"Computer: end program."

The interior corridors of the USS Lotus vanished, along with the Borg squad coming up from the aft section of the ship, to be replaced by a large square room with all sides, from floor to ceiling, covered by a large yellow grid on a black surface. The 14 security officers and enlisted dispersed within the now large, empty chamber rose from their previously entrenched position, weapons still in hand. Reflexively, their thumbs were already resetting them from light pulse to medium stun use while Kheren turned towards them:

" Rejoin Alpha shift at your stations. "

And as he already moved at a brisk pace towards the door of the holodeck, he tapped his combadge.

" This is Kheren; Gamma shift and Beta shift at readiness. Mr Tomah, join me at security station on the bridge. I'm on my way; Kheren out. "

As all the security personnel on board moved or prepared under yellow alert conditions, the Andorian belted his phaser and reached the nearest turbolift.

" Bridge".

The cabin shot forward then upward for a few decks before the doors opened to deposit him on the circular control center on deck 1. His voice came out right after him:

" Security reporting ready, Sir. "

In a few long strides, he reached the tactical station and activated it through his security codes as Ensign De Paul manned the security console behind him while awaiting the arrival of Lieutenant Tomah. He also activated the little speaker he had made installed besides it so that he could bypass his natural rear deafness and hear the officer assisting behind him.

It took him but a glance and a few fingertaps to bring shields to full operational status, implement ship's phasers pre-heating operation and the arming of one of the two forward torpedo tubes.

As Lieutenant Tomah came to the bridge to relieve De Paul, Kheren made a quick level 5 diagnostic on the 12 tactical sensors now online.

Then, keeping his white-haired head slightly inclined towards his board, he looked fully with eyes and antennae at his commanding officer:

" Security alert confirmed on all decks, Sir. tactical systems online. Nothing yet on sensors. "

He could see on his own console what was displayed on the nav station while a stream of data from the science station poured in to be added to the computer's constant tactical analysis.

*Good... although it would blind almost any other ship, our class-issued special sensors should be able to penetrate such a particle flux nebula... but let's not our minds now be clouded by it.*

In engineering, Ensign Taggart had already informed Chief Smith regarding the bridge's request for long range sensor enhancement. They had shifted power from some non-essential auxiliary systems to boost the range of the sensors. But just as they finished that enhancement, the ship suddenly was pushed up to warp 8.

Smith broke the huddle he was currently in the middle of.

"Let's move people! This is not a drill!" He shouted.

Main engineering was always a loud and hectic place. However, the noise and intensity was raised a level as crewman sprung to life performing preassigned tasks related to the Yellow Alert.

Ben spoke quickly to one of the new arrivals a Vulcan Ensign T'Krel.

"I heading over to my office to check with the bridge."

She nodded understandingly as the Chief moved away. As he entered the office Smith thought.

*What could cause this Alert? Let's see, enhanced sensors and increased speed... Something must be up with the Savoy rendez-vous.*

He walked over to his desk and accessed his terminal and started reviewing pertinent data. He immediately noticed that the shields were up and weapons were charging.

*Impressive, He thought. This Andorian of a new Security Chief might just be an Ensign but he appears to be top notch.*

Smith continue checking critical systems....satisfied he tapped his combadge.

"Bridge, Engineering stands ready."

" Security alert confirmed on all decks, Sir. tactical systems online. Nothing yet on tactical sensors, " Kheren's deep resonant voice said right after the nasal one of the chief engineer over the ship's comm.

"Coming up on first check point, Captain, Robertson reported. " Reducing speed to warp 6, Sir."

"Science station ready Captain," added Lortoria. "Shall I begin sensor sweeps, Sir?"

The Lotus glided along the edge of the nebula gracefully, seemingly an endless spray of reddish swirls drifting lazily with an occasional flash of color as the as volatile gasses collided. It looked for all the universe like a giant smear of streaking red paint spilled over a pile of spinning flash bulbs.

Felez hesitated for the briefest of seconds, looking around and the bridge crew with a sort of glazed fascination.

*So this is what it feels like To be the captain, he found himself thinking, to have everyone looking to you for direction. For answers that may mean the end of their careers or even their very lives.*

It wasn't supposed to be his time yet, to carry this kind of weight, the weight of command. But then, he glanced at Kheren; he was younger and less experienced than he was, barely promoted to Ensign... and did he have even the slightest doubt of his own worth? Not that his Efrozian sense could detect.

*No... if I had doubts, if I thought for even a moment...*

"Proceed, Lieutenant, concentrate your efforts within a two light-year radius of the Savoy's projected path. Look for anything out of the ordinary, anything at all."

"Aye, Sir"

Lortoria nodded her head and started scanning for the Savoy. It was only a few minutes before she picked up something.

"Sir, I'm reading a vessel... I think it's the Savoy, but I can't be sure. There's too much local interference."

Felez didn't even think it over. He then glanced back at the athletic Andorian behind the tactical console at his right shoulder.

"Better safe than sorry, Mister Kheren; bring us to red alert, just because we only see one ship..."

RED ALERT! RED ALERT! ALL HANDS TO BATTLE STATIONS! THIS IS NO DRILL! THIS IS NO DRILL!

The voice of the Chief of Security rang from one end of the ship to the other with the alarm. It made it almost vibrate like a living thing with all the souls now coming alive with intense dedication and resolve within its profiled shell: they were alert; they were ready; they were the crew of the USS Lotus.

*Not a drill...* repeated in his mind the Andorian at the tactical station. His fingers flew over his board, his eyes on the data scrolling beside the colored tactical screen his antennae were focusing on, while his auditory receptors inside them listened to the speaker from which came the confirmations of Lieutenant Tomah at the security station behind him.

*This is the real thing...* he thought with contained trepidation; *this is where I always wanted to be, where I prepared myself to be... This is where I will have to be a real Starfleet officer.*

He looked up at the Efrozian sitting in the command chair: *a true Starfleet officer...*

"Shields up, armor ready for deployment at your command, Sir. All phasers and torpedo launchers at your disposal. Tactical sensors at optimal level." he announced. When the Caitian Ensign Mrrish posted herself beside the turbolift entrance she exited from, while Ensign De Paul stood near turbolift 2, both covering each other and the bridge, he added: "Internal forcefield emitters and a security quad are at the ready on every deck."

Kheren concentrated on his board, confident his teams were as ready as the rest of the crew. Everything on his console already showed green lights and full power.

*The ops and engineering officers are indeed worthy of no less than the flagship of the fleet, He thought appreciatively. But the worst mistake to make besides underestimating a situation is*

*overestimating oneself. The ship is ready; you're counting on them... and they're counting on you. Now be ready, Kheren Kalel Th'Shelleryll.*

He continually jogged his tactical screen from one tactical sensor to the other, overlapping the dozen of them with one another and with the science sensors' data.

The moment they would detect anything, anywhere around them, his tactical computer would select the best pre-established maneuvers accordingly, ready to implement any one of them at one touch of his right hand as soon as acting Captain Felez would utter it.

But his left hand was hovering over manual override, ready to improvise with his commander in the face of the unknown.

And the unknown was taking the diffused form of an unidentified ship within a nebula.

*Like a hare hiding in a bush... or a wolf about to pounce... and the commander is right; if there be one wolf...*

Still in her quarters, Chayanna's heart skipped a beat hearing the klaxon and the dramatic resounding voice of the Andorian tactical chief and she quickly ripped the needle out and examined it, only to confirm that it was too late. Though the horrific memories she'd wanted to escape started to fade away, they were quickly replaced by a sense of panic. Routine medical examinations she could handle on her own, but for more serious cases she needed the symbiont with her.

Taking a deep breath, she stood back up started walking back to sickbay.

"No rest for the wicked, eh, doctor?" Said Kerrigan when Driam stepped through the doors.

For a moment she thought she was going to throw up.

"Captain!" She yelled after tapping her combadge, doing little to hide the panic in her voice. "What's happening? Should I expect casualties?"

Although his expression didn't change Felez' left arm jumped a little at the sudden and desperate sound of Driam's voice over the comm. So much in fact that he paused before answering.

"Doctor Driam?" He said hesitantly.

It was her voice to be sure but, at the same time, it wasn't.

"No confirmed enemy contact, Doctor, But the Savoy is stationary and may have injured aboard. Have sickbay standing by."

She sounded so... so... inexperienced, so different from the hard cynical demeanor she usually projected since transferred from her last ship. When this was over, he would have to look into this.

*I can't have my Chief Medical officer going into such a state every time the ship go's into red alert!*

He shook concerns for the chief medical officer out of his mind. That would be concern for the new captain anyway. And her, they had to find first.

"Helm, plot a course for that ship but take us in easy, I wouldn't want to blunder into anything."

Mark nodded as he laid in the course,

"Aye, Sir, plotting a course and moving to target at Warp 2. I'll disengage Warp well away from them so we get a good look before we get close."

With that, the Intrepid class vessel hurtled towards the unknown ship.

The other vessel had only been a few billion kilometers away, so it was only a matter of minutes before Mark powered the engines down and brought them to sublight speed.

"Target vessel now forty thousand kilometers off the port bow, Captain. Holding position."

Mark frowned as he waited to hear what Ops had to say about the target, finally getting the chance to wonder at Doctor Driam's desperation earlier at the call for Red Alert.

*I guess she hasn't quite gotten over the incident with the virus after all..*

He shook his head off that train of thought and refocused on the task at hand: finding the Savoy. With every minute that passed, it was more and more likely that the ship carrying their new Captain had been lost or disabled.

If luck was on their side, the target vessel they were now sitting near was their wayward comrades; if not, then perhaps this ship had seen them, or had a hand in their delay...

"It is the Savoy Captain."

Even as Lortoria said this, the main viewer displayed The USS Savoy, A smaller science scout vessel of the new Nova class, looking like a stunted, hard-angled, miniature version of a majestic Sovereign capital ship, although carrying less than ten percent of the larger ship's complement as it, s full crew. Nothing about its appearance seemed out of sorts.

"There primary power is off line but I'm not detecting any damage to the ship."

Felez stood up and walked a few steps closer towards the science station but stopped.

"Life signs?"

Lortoria quickly checked her readings before replying.

"I'm picking up twenty-two life forms, mostly human. Several seem to be injured, Sir."

"Captain, Ensign kheren then said, " a Nova class starship carries a standard crew of eighty."

*What happened here?*

Even without main power, they could have activated the distress beacon. And If it was some kind of medical problem, such as a virus, the ship itself would have sent out a warning by now.

"I want constant and full scans of the ship and surrounding space. Mister Kheren, prepare an away team. I want a look inside before we start doing anything. But make it a quick look; lives are in the balance."

" Aye, Sir. "

Signaling Lieutenant Tomah to take his place at tactical while Ensign de Paul moved to Security station behind him, the Andorian gave a nod to the Caitan security officer near the turbolift to follow him:

" Deck 4 " he said as the doors wooshed close. Then he tapped his combadge.

" Sickbay: Doctor Driam, please send a medical officer to transporter room 1. Engineering: Lieutenant Smith: please send a technician to transporter room 1 for system restoration. "

Smith tapped his combadge.

"Roger that Chief."

He motioned toward Ensign T'Krel whom had heard the order.

"Take what ever you need and move quick, Ensign."

She nodded in agreement.

"Yes, Sir."

With that, the Vulcan woman exited main engineering hastily. Ben recalled reading reports regarding Ensign T'Krel when she arrived. He felt very confident in her ability to aid the away team. This was the first away mission for the Lotus since he had taken over engineering a couple of months ago. He hoped that he had made the right decision.

Immediately ruling herself and Kerrigan out, Shayanna upon hearing the request, looked around the room at her new staff, who had gathered in a circle around her awaiting orders.

"You," Driam said and pointed T'kua, a Vulcan ensign who she figured would be the best choice given how little she knew about her people. "Get a kit and join Kheren in transporter room 1. The rest of you, prepare to receive casualties. I will be in my office, *do not* disturb me unless it's absolutely necessary."

The initial shock of what was transpiring had begun to die down, and her panic was fading away, leaving a sense of determination in its place.

"Computer," She said after sitting down inside the office.

"Bring up all available information on merfadon and highlight anything that might be related to counteracting its effects."

Ensign T'kua, though somewhat puzzled by Driam's decision to send her rather than herself, grabbed a medkit and concluded that her reasons, whatever they might have been, were irrelevant. Like most vulcans she was dedicated, intelligent and always focused on the task at hand. Although she considered himself to be superior to Driam and a better fit for the role as chief medical officer, she realized the inherent value of giving the position to someone who would be able to directly pass the experience on to other, even after death.

As he exited the lift and walked at a brisk pace to reach the transporter room, Kheren signalled the Betazoid male guarding the entrance to follow him while security crewman Bronson stayed at the transporter controls. As the two designated security officers Beren and Mriish stepped on the transporter pad, the Andorian announced:

" We will do standard search and rescue operation aboard the Savoy. Keep channel open and report continuously to me and to the bridge."

While he waited for the team to be assembled, he went to the computer panel to study diagrams of the Savoy's layout while asking to his man at the controls;

" Confirm power and life support conditions aboard that ship, Mister Bronson... and encode coordinates to beam us directly to their bridge. Keep a lock on us and request transporter room 2 to get a medical team and to be ready to beam survivors and injured aboard. "

Only when the team would be complete and ready to go would he tap his communicator badge again, saying: " Bridge, Kheren here. Away team ready to go, Sir. in view of the uncertain situation in the sector, we will be under transporter lock on and keep a channel open. "

" Bridge, Kheren here. Away team ready to go, Sir. in view of the uncertain situation in the sector, we will be under transporter lock on and keep a channel open. "

"Very good, transport when ready and good luck."

Kheren gave the transporter operator the nod and they slowly faded from room.

The bridge of the Savoy started to come into focus but something was wrong and they could all feel it. The transporter chief frantically worked the controls.

"What the hell..."

Images of the away team flickered in and out on the padds. The two techs worked the controls like mad men, like they where in a race with each other.

"Increase power to the matter stream!"

"Doing it! but its like.. Bridge! where losing the away teams patterns, its like something reach out and grabbed them, Sir!"

From the Tactical station, Lieutenant Tomah spoke with mounting alarm in his voice:

" Sir! I can't pinpoint the source of this interference... There is no ship in sensor range... but there is something... something attached to the outer hull of the Savoy... some object the sensors can't identify yet. It is definitely not anything Starfleet-issued, nor standard to a Nova class starship. I'm transferring data to ops and main sensors."

Tension rose on the bridge of the Lotus.

From the speakers, the voice of crewman Bronson came with renewed urgency:

" Bridge! Their patterns are about to dissolve... unless we get a serious power increase *now*... or cut off our own beam and let them go! "

*Go? Go... where?* thought anxiously Lieutenant Tomah as he focused to record the strange intercepting emission's signature and desperately find it's point of origin.

Felez went quickly to the science station and checked the readings and sure enough, it seemed as if a second transporter was intercepting the signal.

"Bridge to Engineering! Mister Smith, we need to increase emitter strength to transporter 1, now!"

"Roger that, Sir!"

Ben started pressing the touch pad to increase the strength of the emitter beam.

"I am diverting all auxiliary power simultaneously to transporter room 1. In addition, all the emergency transporters are devoted to this situation as well."

He continued to type, as few engineers started to gather behind him offering suggestions. The ambient lighting flickered in engineering as power consumption was being diverted to transporter 1's emitters. Smith tapped his commbadge again.

"Transporter room 1....status please?" He waited for a response silently. Had he given them enough power....

They all knew that, if they didn't overpower that intruding signal, the away team would be torn apart.

## CHAPTER THREE: FACING THE UNKNOWN

The two transporter operators worked furiously at their controls.

"They've engaged emergency power; increase the matter stream containment strength!"

The second tech complied without a word, a look of stern concentration on his face.

"OK, the patterns are stable, or as stable there going to get!"

The images on the platform completely faded out, leaving only silence.

"Bridge, we had no choice but to complete the transfer to the Savoy. I'm sorry Captain."

Felez was still reviewing data when he heard this.

"Status on the away team?"

"There was some degradation in their patterns... and we lost their signal completely."

"Understood; run a full diagnostic on your system for any possible problems on your end, Captain out. Lieutenant Tomah Hail the away team."

To no one's surprise there wasn't a reply.

"Sir, it looks like a counterband signal is coming from the Savoy... or somewhere on it. It started at the same time as the transporter problem. We're being actively jammed, Sir."

Felez sat in his chair, holding a hand to his head.

"Prepare two shuttles for a boarding attempt on the Savoy, Mister Robertson," he said, looking up at his acting XO and helm operator, your service record says you are an excellent shuttle pilot. I'll need you to lead the effort."

Mark nodded and stood, allowing Ensign Surta to take the helm.

"Aye Sir, I'll have the shuttles prepped and ready to fly inside of five minutes."

He reached for his combadge as the Captain continued.

"Coordinate with Lieutenant Tomah on the teams, get started as soon as possible."

Nodding again, Mark tapped his badge.

"Robertson to Aramaki."

A moment later, the Chief of Shuttle Operations responded.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Prep two of the Type-9s for immediate launch, I'll be piloting one, and have our most experienced pilot in the other."

"Aye Sir, they'll be ready and waiting. Aramaki out."

Lieutenant Tomah then spoke up.

"Ah, Sir, something you should know."

Felez walked to his station.

"Ah, well, according to these readings, the transporter problem was not just a jammer or designed to redirect the signal. Sir. See the fractal patterns?"

Felez nodded as he looked over the readout. Mark needed to understand what he and his men might be walking into and joined Tomah and Captain Felez at the Tac/Sec console. What they saw made Mark's heart sink for the crew of the Savoy as the Captain mused:

"I see, it would have redirected it in random series of reformation."

Lieutenant Tomah gave a shiver at the thought.

"Ah, it was a trap, Sir. This was deliberately designed to destroy anyone or anything attempting to board through a transporter signal, The interruption signal didn't appear until after they started beaming on to the Savoy."

Mark growled and looked up at the vessel in the viewscreen while Felez spoke in a grim tone.

"And I'll assume beaming anyone off will have the same effect as we just encountered?"

At this, Tomah frowned.

"Ah, well, no, Sir; in the other direction, there would be no chance to stop it."

A thought came to Mark's mind as he leaned on the console.

"Sir, it's safe to assume if they rigged the transporters, they'll be watching the shuttlebays. Recommend a full tactical team to accompany the first shuttle into the bays to clear a path for a medical team on the second. Our people, if still alive, may be as bad off as the Savoy's crew, if those twenty-two lifesigns even were any of them. They might be boarders still intent on salvaging the ship after attacking it and disposing of the crew. If so, with a little luck, we might be able to retake the Savoy."

Felez nodded smartly in agreement.

"From this point on the Savoy is to be considered a hostile ship and its crew captured until we know otherwise. Mister Robertson, I want you to be careful over there, but not so careful as to become part of the problem. All members of the Savoy's crew are to be considered compromised, so be on your guard."

Robertson gave a nod.

"Aye, Sir. Lieutenant Tomah, please have the Security team meet me in the Main Shuttlebay."

He turned and walked to the turbolift. As the doors opened, Captain Felez added one last thing.

"And that includes the away team as well."

Robertson gave him a quick look.

"Aye, Sir" he said quietly and left the bridge.

The doors closed, shutting him off from the bridge as he commanded the lift to Deck 3, and the car sped downward while his mind raced as well.

*Not Ferengi. Too sophisticated for them.. Orions, Naussicaans equally likely, the trap's designed to bring another ship in eventually...*

He walked quickly to his quarters to retrieve his phaser and tricorder, and returned to the turbolift, ordering it to Deck 10. He paced around the turbolift while it rocketed through the Lotus, carrying him to the Main Shuttlebay when the thought occurred that they would be needing the med team for the wounded as well as analysis of any effects of the transporter disruption. His hand went to his combadge.

"Robertson to Driam. Doctor, we're going to need a medical away team in the Main Shuttlebay to go over to the Savoy. Casualties are currently unknown, but there are at least thirty potentials."

"...Understood." The doctor responded.

After a few moments of deliberation, she stood up and went back out to the others.

"Kerrigan, get in here." She said in a stern voice and stepped back inside the office, followed by her second-in-command. "I want you to assemble a team and meet up with Mark in the main shuttle bay, you're going over to the Savoy and they estimate there to be as many as thirty casualties."

"With all due respect, Doctor, wouldn't it be more appropriate for the CMO..."

"Look, I'd go myself, but..." Shayanna said and paused, choosing her words. "There... are more important things that I have to take care of."

"Doctor, please. Can't you just tell me what's going on? If there is something you..."

"No! I will not tell you what is '*going on*'." Driam shouted, cutting off Kerrigan. "I am telling you, *ordering* you, to assemble a team and head to the shuttlebay. You think you could do that for me, Victoria?"

"...Yes, ma'am." Said Kerrigan and with a lance glance, she walked out.

She was shocked, to say the least. She had served as Driam's second-in-command for years, and during that time she had never screamed at her and not once had she seen her use sarcasm.

Something *was* wrong.

After picking three medics and briefing them on the situation, the team set off for the main shuttle bay.

"Lieutenant Robertson?" She said as the team entered the shuttle deck. "Doctor Victoria Kerrigan reporting"

At least she got to go by shuttle and didn't have to be beamed over. She'd have to keep a close eye on Mark, though. Last time they'd crossed paths, she'd had to dig out plastic shrapnel from his skull.

Mark was surprised to see Doctor Kerrigan, rather than Chayana. Nevertheless, he smiled and nodded.

"Good to see you too, Doctor. I assume you've been briefed on the situation; you and your team will be flying in the second shuttle with Lieutenant Tobor."

The medical team began boarding the shuttle he pointed out, but he stopped Dr. Kerrigan.

"A word, if you don't mind Doctor..."

He walked her a few paces from the shuttles, his arms still over his chest.

"I was wondering if you'd noticed anything...concerning, from Doctor Driam in Sickbay.."

"I don't know what's gotten into her," Kerrigan confessed in a low voice. "At first she seemed fine, I though she had really recovered from what happened on the Sapentia... but today..."

She paused and toned her voice down further.

"Today, she left sickbay at the end of her shift and when she came back... she seemed... anxious. It was like she was a different person. And then, when she called me into her office to tell me to come here, she just snapped and screamed at me when I asked why she didn't want to go herself."

Mark frowned as Kerrigan told him about Chayana's very strange behavior.

*Hmmm, does she need more time to handle what happened? 'Course, who could handle feeding on your fellow crewmen...*

As he thought so and listened to Kerrigan, he noticed the Security detail marching into the Bay and unfolded his arms. He turned back to Doctor Kerrigan and smiled somberly, squeezing her shoulder to show her he was concerned as well.

"It sounds like we might have to have Doctor Driam relieved until she can sort this stuff from the last mission out. But, we'll leave that to the Captain. We'll need to be sharp, walking into this trap on the Savoy... I'm sure the Captain noticed her overreaction on the comm. I'll leave it to him to decide if she's unfit for duty. As for us, first thing's first..."

Lieutenant Aramaki came to stand at attention before him.

"Both shuttles are prepped and warming up now, Sir. I've pulled Lieutenant Tobor to pilot the other shuttle with Ensign Kent, and you'll have Petty Officer Etzi as your co-pilot. I figured you could make use of her Betazoid telepathy if there were any surprises over there."

Mark chuckled and grinned.

"Good thinking."

The Shuttlebay was bustling with techs as the Lotus's two Type-9 shuttlecraft hummed slowly to life. Their flight crews conversed between them while waiting on the rest of the away team, and Robertson, Kerrigan and Aramaki joined them.

" Ensign S'kon, Sir. Reporting as ordered with full tactical team under my overall command. "

Mark looked behind the Vulcan at the diverse group of security officers. They were all armed with Type IIIC compression phaser rifles, the most powerful hand weapon available on board.

" Ensign Brock will second me in leading team Beta " he explained, pointing in turn at the squat, muscular Man behind him. " Crewmen Kimm, Syla, Vyrio and Grrhaalhaa complete the team. "

Without any further word, the massive Human led the woman, the Bajoran, the Deltan and the Caitian of his team to the first shuttle. Ensign S'kon waited for further orders from Robertson.

Mark nodded once more as the diverse team began loading into the shuttle.

"Very well, Ensign. This will be a two-part entry, we'll be flying the first shuttle in and will secure the Savoy's Main Shuttlebay before the second shuttle arrives five minutes later with the medics. We are to ascertain the situation aboard the Savoy, and preferably retake her. Unfortunately, since we don't know what's happened, we must consider all Starfleet personnel we meet compromised."

The Vulcan Ensign displayed zero reaction, sensible for a race who kept their emotions under strict check.

"Essentially, we will disarm or stun any personnel we find and bring them back to the Shuttlebay. We will have to hold the Bay at all costs, or retreat, that's our beachhead. Once it's secure, we'll move from there. If there's nothing else, load up."

Ensign S'kon said in his cold, soft voice;

" With all due respect, Sir, I have studied the USS Savoy's schematics. our new Chief insisted upon this as standard procedure before boarding."

He waited until he had the Lieutenant's full attention before explaining:

" Sir, a Nova class starship has two shuttlebays located on deck 4, aft of the secondary hull section. They are one on top of each other but both very small; there will be barely enough room in the main one for one shuttle to get in as the Savoy shuttles still occupies most of the main hangar. The other is full with workbees and shuttlepods. This will give us good cover on arrival but poor visibility and mobility. And the opposition will benefit from the same covering as well... and time to prepare as the shuttles settles in. "

He took a pause so that the acting XO could digest the information. Then he added:

" Chief Kheren prepared a different approach for the second team: using thruster suits to reach the Savoy. Therefore, since it was already prepared, we could be ready in six point twenty-three minutes, then enter through the hatches directly into any one of the two shuttlebays. The team would thus get in discreetly before the shuttles and secure each area in turn, manually opening the bay doors if needed, before they come in."

Not wanting to give any impression of insubordination, and being thorough as Vulcans always are, he concluded:

" But if we do go in as ordered, Sir, we will have to move out shuttle 1 or one of the Savoy's shuttle for our second shuttle to also enter the hangar. "

Mark listened intently as Ensign S'kon explained the details of the boarding procedure worked out by the new Security Chief, and waited politely until the Vulcan had finished.

"I can see the reasoning for a quiet entry, Ensign, but the potential enemy aboard the Savoy already knows we're coming, so the longer we delay to be cautious, the longer they have to hunt them down, as well as our own people."

He then spoke to everyone in the hangar.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this will be a rescue and recovery mission. The USS Savoy is presumed having been captured by an unknown hostile force. Twenty-two lifesigns were identified onboard. We cannot assume that any of them are Starfleet personnel. Petty Officer Etzi and I will be the first inside with the Security team, Lieutenant Tobor and Ensign Kent, you will be flying the medics in five minutes later."

At this, Tobor, a Bajoran female, spoke up.

"Sir, what if you're unable to secure the bay in five minutes?"

Mark grinned wryly while he folded his arms over his chest.

"Well then we'll be needing those medics and support all the more quickly, won't we?"

This elicited a chuckle from the group, though Mark could tell, some were more nervous than others about the plan.

"Our first objective will, obviously, be to secure the shuttlebay and our escape route. After that will be determined by what we find over there. Now, I doubt the enemy will be stupid enough to simply let us ferry personnel back and forth, so this'll be our only shot. Let's make it count."

In engineering, Chief Smith received a quick brief of the situation from Captain Felez. He stood pondering the fate of the away team.

*What would I do if I had made it to the Savoy?* He wondered silently.

A myriad of thought raced through his mind most of them not of an appealing sort. He started to pace near the entrance to his office.

"Twenty-two life signs and yet they could not be hailed either," he mused for himself.

He wondered then about the curious transporter stream.

"Whomever or whatever it was, that sabotage might just had been focusing on life signs."

Ben tapped his commbadge.

"Bridge, Chief Smith here."

Felez responded.

"Go ahead Chief."

"I have been thinking, Captain. I know we have no proof that the away party made a successful transport. However, the life signs aboard were unable to communicate with us upon our arrival."

Ben walked over to his desk and picked up a PADD on his desk, then continued.

"What if they are simply unable to use the Savoy's systems due to a dampening field or some other issue? I have been studying the transporter stream issue. I believe whatever happened was directed at the biosigns we were sending."

"Chief, what are you suggesting?"

"What if we modulate a few PADDs to act as sort of listening devices? If we set the modulation to a shortwave radio band, we will circumvent any subspace interference and might bypass the communication problem. If anyone is alive over there and just can't respond, this might give them the life line they need. I realize the problem with transporting. I suggest we initiate a transport from room 1 using modified bulk protein probe."

"The standard issue biomass transporter test device," understood the Efrogian.

"Exactly; we would send the PADDs via emergency transport at a three seconds delay. I believe the malvolent stream will scan the protein and lock onto quickly while the PADDs are moved to the Savoy. If I were over there and able to move but not communicate, I would be heading to the shuttlebays or escape pods. If you agree, I suggest we ship the PADDs to those areas as well as the bridge and sickbay. We can have this done in a few minutes."

Felez weighed the matter quickly in his head.

"Very well, Lieutenant, see what you can do. It's possible the transporter jammer was keyed onto there bio-signs. In any case, it can't hurt to try."

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **COME TO MY PARLOR SAID THE SPIDER TO THE FLY**

The swirling lights of the transporter beam flickered and twisted for long seconds before finally materializing the away team in the center of the Savoy's bridge. They all fell down between the command chair and the nav console.

The Caitian security officer was first to get back on her arched feet. A side roll brought her up before the port turbolift door and she backed in as the door wooshed open, phaser drawn, covering the entire circular command center from her covered position with a snarl of pain on her feline muzzle.

On the opposite side, the Vulcan engineer rose slowly on her feet, eyes glazed but reflexively unbuckling her tricorder to scan the empty room.

Then Kheren was on his knees at the foot of the steps leading down to the nav console, antennae wobbling wildly in and out of his skull. Using the chair in front of him for balance, he stood up, swaying slightly and almost fell again, his back on the pilot's panel as the chair swiveled under his weight, turning him halfway around and towards the rest of his team.

On the floor before the command post, security Petty Officer 2nd class Beren and medical Ensign T'kua were lying very still.

The entire bridge was otherwise deserted.

" Ensign Mriish... see to them. " ordered the Andorian pointing from the Caitan to the Betazoid and the Vulcan on the floor. " Ensign T'Krel... ship's status please. "

Finally straightening up and clearing his head, the Andorian tapped his combadge.

" Away team to Lotus. "

No response. Checking that his communicator was functioning properly, he tried again: still no response. Kheren turned around, did a level 5 diagnostic of the comm system of the ship through the pilot's console and tried one more time: silence.

The Vulcan engineer now standing at the master system display behind the command chair waited for him to turn around so that he could hear her.

" Chief Kheren; the Savoy is on emergency status: all non-essential systems powered down, leaving only life support, gravity, replicators, sensors and communication operating at low levels, on batteries only. All systems locked down with command codes. "

" Lifesigns ? "

" Twenty-two confirmed, faint and flickering, unmoving but dispersed throughout the nine decks of the ship, Sir. "

The Andorian walked upstairs to the remaining security officer. She was using the medical officer's own medkit and followed the activated medical tricorder's data besides her to administer 10 milligrams of cordrazine to the Betazoid and the rest, five times more, to the Vulcan, using his own hypospray.

Mrrriish didn't look up as she purred.

" that is the best I can do with this and our firrrst aid trrraining,Sirrr. They arrre stabilized but considerrring the serrrious interrrnal injurrries they arrre sufferrring, we must quickly get them to full medical supporrrt. "

" Chief, if I may... said T'Krel; Vulcans go into a healing trance when severely injured. Since officer Beren is Betazoid, I might be able to induce it though a telepathic transfer with a mind meld. That would help stabilize him like T'kua and buy more time. "

" Proceed, " simply said the Andorian. While the Vulcan joined them to further assist the wounded, Kheren tried again to raise the Lotus, but to no avail.

Crouching besides them, Kheren waited for T'Krel to finish and nod.

" Help me take them. There are four escape pods on this deck."

They helped him take each unconscious officers on one shoulder each. As he rose with both bodies each side of his silver-haired head, he faced the engineer:

" You both go to deck 4 and prepare each shuttle of both shuttlebays. we will need both to evacuate everyone. We may have to open doors manually. I'll join you after I have sent those two back to the Lotus."

T'Krel nodded again.

"In view of unexplained hazardous beaming conditions, a logical choice. We are on our way."

They exited through the turbolift as he took the starboard door leading to the rest of the upper deck, carrying both wounded men to the nearest hatch... but with a measured step; having the strength to carry them was one thing; but if he hurried too much, his high metabolism would exhaust him much too quickly.

He could in fact already feel the insufficient rest of the last training days and the after effects of the transporter malfunction weigh on him much more than the two inert bodies... not to mention the loss of contact with the Lotus.

*What in the rings is going on here?*

Kheren carried the two members of his wounded team to the adjoining section where the escape pods were waiting patiently to be put to good use. His head was starting to swim from the effort of carrying both of them, not to mention the after effects of the transporter problem. What seemed like long minutes passed before he was standing before where the pods were birthed and he carefully laid Ensign T'kua in front of it; but as he started to do the same with Petty Officer Beren, he turned to face a sound, like stone on metal.

Some four meters away stood a creature he couldn't identify, but it was humanoid in composition but slightly insectoid as well. It stood nearly two meters in height and seemed to be armored from head to toe in some type of carapace with large empty eyes.

Any thought of it being unintelligent went out with the large rifle like weapon in its hands, a weapon that was pointed at Kheren.

Several things flashed through the Andorian's mind in that second.

If he dropped Beren to dodge, the impact would likely kill him.

If he did not, he would not be able to move quickly enough out of the way before being shot.

He would never be able to draw his phaser in time to get a shot off himself, unless.. unless he used Petty Officer Beren as a shield.

*The only thing to do in a hopeless situation is to act hopelessly...*

Kheren didn't stop his crouching motion as he saw the gigantic alien pointing his unrecognizable weapon at him. Quite the contrary: his crouching became a quick drop on his haunches, releasing the body and keeping his arms extended.

He would use a shield... but he would never use a friend as one. His personal ethics and Starfleet training were too deeply imbedded in him to give such a thought more than a passing glance.

And he did not tire himself in practicing boarding operations with all his staff all the past week for nothing...

As the body slid from him, his already outstretched hands heavily struck the panel at the lower part of the bulkhead; the reaction force from the impact on the clamps threw it right back in his hands, exposing the EPS conduits behind.

*If it hits those with a shot...*

In one swift motion as fast as this stray thought was, the bulkhead covering was between him and the Alien's weapon muzzle just as the insectoid colossus pulled his trigger.

" INTRUDER... "

That is all the Andorian managed to shout through his open comlink. A luminous wave of energy flashed from the Alien's weapon, filling the whole corridor like a tidal wave. It passed over everything like sparkling water and struck him with a powerful discharge that sent him flying back with his makeshift shield over his fallen comrades and skull first into one of the curved walls behind.

Dazed, out of breath and feeling numb all over, Kheren could barely stay conscious.

*Stun setting...* he thought, looking through blurry black and white the exposed EPS conduits still perfectly intact... and the lumbering insectoid moving forward.

The creature moved almost casually at the downed team. Ignoring Kheren's slight movements, it approached Petty Officer Beren, and carefully, almost gently arranged him to lie on his back, face up. It then removed a device off his own leg and held it against Beren's chest. It made a squealing noise as the seconds passed.

Kheren was slowly regaining his senses but still couldn't move. He could only watch the scene unfold mere meters from him.

The device made a shrieking sound and the creature pulled back quickly almost as if worried that Beren would suddenly jump up at him. Then, with a quick well practiced motion, it jabbed its weapon against Beren's chest and fired.

Beren's chest collapsed as his internal organs were pulverised by the wave and blood spurted from his mouth, and from around his eyes. Death was instantaneous.

It then made an odd gesture over the body and turned to T'Kua.

Unleashing what little strength he had regained, Kheren tried to stop it, but all he could manage was a violent twitching motion and gurgle something incoherent. But it was enough to get its attention. It turned to face him. It moved toward him and then again held out the device from its leg and gently pressed it against the inert Starfleet officer's chest and waited.

This close, Kheren could see it easier now. It wasn't insect... at least not on the outside. It was wearing some kind of suit.

Just then, the device gave off the same shrieking sound it had with Beren and the creature jumped away, as if suddenly thinking Kheren was more dangerous than the second before. Quickly it lifted its weapon over Kheren's chest.

A phaser blast struck it from behind and it staggered forward, but still managed to turn around in time to be struck by a second blast and again by a third.

Kheren could make out a Starfleet crewman he did not recognize holding a phaser rifle, coming from the end of the hall, advancing slowly. His rifle was set on kill, and he seemed to be enjoying himself. On the third hit, parts of the alien's carapace blew off, spraying Kheren with sticky gelatinous blood. The alien fell to the floor heavily, never at anytime muttering a single word.

The man raced over and kicked the creature away from Kheren then tried to help the Andorian up.

"Can't you move?!" He said as loud as he could without yelling. "Get up! I can't carry you both!"

With his help, Kheren managed to stand and get moving, but just barely.

"We don't have much time, more are sure to..."

His eyes locked on Kheren's combadge and he reached out and tore it away from him, throwing it hard against the bulkhead.

"Why are you still wearing that?! How did you last this long with..."

Then, shook his head. He handed the rifle to Kheren and picked up Ensign Kuamu.

"No time; come on!"

And with haste, he headed back down the corridor.

Colors and depth were returning to Kheren's vision as his peculiar antennae stretched out again from his throbbing skull. Still a bit unsteady on his feet, he nevertheless went to Beren. There was no doubt the Betazoid security crewman was dead from massive internal damage. But medical officer T'kua was still deep in her healing trance.

"Come on, we must not stay here!" urged the Savoy crewman as he already started to carry the Vulcan's body away.

"In here. "

Stopping with a visible effort of will, the crewman looked this way and that and opened his mouth as if to protest. But the calm and resolute tone of Kheren's voice prompted him to obey. He then hastily proceeded to help the Andorian get both bodies inside the escape pod.

" We don't have time for this." the Human muttered coming out of the pod, again looking from one end of the corridor to the other.

" The alien too. " then ordered Kheren. As dumbfounded as he was nervous, the crewman nevertheless hurriedly helped him slide the huge body on the floor of the 4-men lifeboat then seal it close again. Kheren immediately struck the control panel and a blasting, whooshing sound confirmed the ejection of the pod.

" OK! OK! let's go now, quickly! The others will notice what we did and come by at any moment now. " said the Human already starting again towards the way Kheren had come from.

" I hope so... then said the Andorian following; it will distract them from us. "

He threw him back his phaser rifle, and on the way bent to retrieve the alien's strange weapon, the unidentified apparatus it had earlier placed on his chest and a piece of the armor smeared with some of the remains. With a nod of his head, he drew out with his free hand his own phaser and, setting it all the way to level 16, quickened his pace to follow his savior. Warily, he glanced more than once at the rear end of the corridor from where the alien had initially come from.

No word was exchanged as they quickly reached the command center. Checking that it was still empty, they ran to the turbolift his own remaining away team had disappeared into; it was the only other access to this deck besides the Jeffrey's tubes ladder the Human had used.

Both Starfleet officers posted themselves each side of the doorway before opening it manually, covering each other and the lift itself with their weapons.

It was empty.

" Deck 7 " ordered the Savoy crewman to the voice-activated lift once they were safely inside.

" By the way, thanks for saving our lives back there, " said Kheren panting a bit as the lift started to move down.

His companion rubbed the back of his hand across his sweating brow then turned to the Andorian.

" Luckily I saw it climbing that ladder while I was sent to check an attempt to unlock bridge controls. I'm sorry but I don't recall you nor any Andorian as I think of it. When did you come aboard? "

" About fifteen minutes ago. " answered Kheren. That obviously startled the human who looked him over anew with rounded eyes. So he added; " Ensign Kheren, Chief of security, USS Lotus. "

" You... the Lotus? We didn't expect you for at least... an hour... if not two. And you came with those two we jettisoned? "

" Affirmative; and two others: a Vulcan engineer and a Caitian security officer. They went to shuttlebay 1. "

" Then, they are dead " flatly stated the crewman, not without visibly fighting down a cold shiver down his spine. " These invaders lock on our combadges somehow, even if they are deactivated. "

" They can do that if they link to your ship's computer monitoring system. " guessed Kheren, his dark blue face even somber than usual. " How many are there onboard? " he then asked, rechecking his hand phaser's maximum setting.

" We haven't seen more than half a dozen since they pulled back from their initial assault twenty minutes ago."answered the Savoy crewman. "But there were at least two dozens of them showing up after we suddenly came out of warp and power dropped.It's been hell ever since "

The doors swished open to an empty, dimly lit corridor and a faint, far away echo of some throbbing sound. For a moment, Kheren thought it was his own heart beating so hard in his chest that it echoed throughout the ship as loud as it did in his head. Moving with senses and phasers stretched in front of them, both walked briskly side by side as his Human companion said: " I'm Ensign Simon. This is the only part of the ship we managed to secure... for the moment at least. I'm bringing you to engineering where the remaining members of our crew are holding position. "

" How many did you loose? "

" I'm not sure... but Captain Fiston and the whole bridge crew were first to fall."

As they came to the doors of the engineering section of the ship, they were greeted by two sentinels also armed with phaser rifles and bearing tricorders on passive mode. Kheren noticed the two others in the side corridors... and portable dampening emitters active at regular intervals. As access to engineering was manually opened by one of the guards, he saw two more guards inside, right next to it. " Who's in command now? " wondered outloud the Andorian as he stepped inside.

" That would be me, " answered from the main engineering console a tall woman in red with piercing eyes and a deep, controlled voice.

Despite her disheveled appearance, soiled uniform and a small cut on the side of her forehead, there was still around her an aura of resolute calmness.Kheren knew in an instant who this woman was.

" Captain Hargrove."

He went to face her commanding presence with head slightly bowed as was his usual posture of full attention.

" Ensign Kheren Kalel Th'Shelleryll, Chief of security, USS Lotus, M'am. "

" Welcome aboard, Ensign Kheren. " half-smiled Captain Hargrove, using without a thought the proper way to address Andorians. The way she took in the early presence of the Lotus told much about the quickness of her mind. " I see that you bring gifts. "

The Andorian put down both pieces of alien weaponry and the smeared armor piece on the engineering console.

" Since this is a science vessel, I figured that there would be people on board able to study this and come up with some clues; about who or what we are facing... and if not why they are here, at least how we may deal with them. "

" Starfleet thinking, Ensign " she observed as her hand went to several other examples of the alien weaponry lying on a portable worktable behind her.

" Captain, there are two members of my away team left. They were heading for shuttlebay 1. May I have permission to go and retrieve them? "

Captain Hargrove shook her head.

"We already have a team in that area, If they made it that far there as safe as any of us, and if they didn't reach it by now.. then its already to late."

## CHAPTER FIVE: BALANCE OF TERROR

Ensign Taggart tapped his commbadge.

"Chief Smith, package ready here."

Ben stood next in a small hallway near one of the emergency transporters.

"Roger that! On my mark, five... four... three... two... one... energize!"

As he spoke, the bulk protein probe shimmered and began to disappear. As anticipated the PADDs followed suit five seconds later.

Taggart studied the display and tapped his badge.

"Chief! We have another lock on the stream."

"Apply resistance as we planned."

Smith watched as the PADDs disappeared.

*We have given them a chance, he thought.*

He studied the display and began to have an eerie feeling inside.

"The life signs....why aren't they moving?"

Ben grabbed the PADD he synchronized attempted to hail the away team.

All of a sudden, he realized the obvious and tapped his commbadge.

"Captain Felez, we have succeeded with the PADD objective." Ben continued to study the sensor data. "Captain, I can not explain why the life signs have not moved. I realize the signs are faint but it is quite apparent that they are remaining in the same alignment. I would expect this from sick bay. However, these readings are disburst throughout the ship."

Ben continued as he viewed data from the PADD's.

"Captain, I have accessed the shortwave FM band from the shuttlebay, it is sketchy but there is differently some sort of conflict there."

Even as he was listening he nodded at Lortoria to double check the life sign readings.

"Excellent work, Chief Smith; bridge out."

"Felez to Robertson; there seems to be activity in the Savoy's main shuttlebay, It could be Chief Kheren trying to secure the bay. I suggest you move quickly on it."

Lt. Lortoria looked up from her readings.

"Captain, Mister Smith's findings are confirmed. None of the twenty-two life signs have changed position since our arrival and the readings themselves are odd as well. It's as if they're all from the same person."

Felez forced a frown.

"Decoys," he said almost as an afterthought. "It seems the entire ship is in one way or another a trap. Inform Lieutenant Robertson of this, Mister Tomah, and let's keep our eyes open for any more surprises."

Mark tapped his commbadge to reply to the news as soon as he heard it.

"Aye, Sir, we're finishing launch preparations for the first shuttle now."

He moved past the seated and strapped-in Security team to plop into the pilot's seat and run the final preflight checks Petty Officer Etzi had begun a few minutes before. Moments later, the shuttlebay was clear of personnel around the two shuttles and the bay doors yawned open smoothly while Aramaki's voice came over the comm.

"Shuttle 1, you're cleared for launch."

Mark turned to address the crew behind him.

"Everyone strapped in?"

A chorus of affirmatives rang out from the Security officers and he grinned, turning back to the starfield before them.

With a flick of his fingers, the shuttle shot out of the Lotus at half-impulse and quickly rolled, so as to not stay on the same flight path. But no phaser fire emanated from the derelict Nova-class, and all readings from her remained dormant.

Mark hmped and took the shuttle in a wide arc to come in behind the drifting ship and hailed the Lotus once again.

"Robertson to Lotus; keep a bead on our signal as we get closer. See if you can't pinpoint the enemy interference that way."

A moment later, Lieutenant Lortoria responded.

"Acknowledged, Shuttle 1. We're locked onto you for now. Good luck.."

Glancing beside him, he arched a brow as he addressed Petty Officer Etzi.

"Sense anything?"

The Betazoid woman shook her head.

"No sir, not yet. It's possible the enemy is somehow masking the whole ship. I can't even sense the Starfleet personnel..."

Mark set his gaze on the darkened vessel before them and nodded.

"Yeah, let's go with that. See if you can remotely open the Main Shuttlebay."

The enlisted officer nodded and set to work and was rewarded a moment later with a positive chirp from the computer as the bay door on the dorsal aft of the engineering section slowly slid open. Mark gunned the engines, not wanting to give the enemy a chance to shut it if they were fighting someone there. Within seconds, the shuttle approached the bay much faster than it was meant to, and the nimble craft zipped under the yawning door through the magnetic containment field, curving sharply to a stop before contacting the wall of the bay.

Hovering over the cleared launch area, Mark craned his neck, trying to get a better look at whatever the bridge had picked up.

\* \* \*

Captain Hargrove pondered the presence of the Andorian before her then shared her thoughts with him.

"Your presence here explains why the aliens pulled back from harrassing us here. They detected the Lotus' arrival. Did you encounter much resistance getting here?"

Ensign Simon spoke up.

"No, captain; only one near the bridge; it was clear the rest of the way back to here. It's like they just disappeared into the bulkheads."

"I don't like it. They're up to something." Hargrove stated, mostly to herself.

A familiar whine filled the room and many of the already on edge people jumped at the sound.

On the desk in the center of the room a PADD appeared.

One of the men walked cautiously up to it, then picked it up.

"It's a Lotus data pad, Captain. From the readings, it's transmitting a low ban signal. They should be able to hear us.. if it works."

"Let me see it."

Just then, two men came running into the room.

"Captain Hargrove! main shuttlebay was taken without difficulty, But after they started setting up, about a dozen of those things showed up! I don't know how long they can hold out!"

Hargrove rallied her men, sounding very in control of herself.

"I want every able-bodied people! The Lotus will need that bay if there going to get us reinforcements! It's now our priority!"

As she grabbed her gear, she spoke clearly into the PADD.

"Lotus, if you can hear me, this is captain Hargrove. We're moving to secure shuttlebay 1. Any boarding entry should be attempted at that point."

Then she looked at Kheren.

"Give this officer a rifle. I'm sure he'll know what to do with it."

As Kheren was gearing up, one of the two men come up to Hargrove behind the Andorian. The two exchanged quick words in low tones his antennae could not pick from this angle and Hargrove paused as if thinking something over, then dismissed him with a nod.

"Commander Ferrol, take the lead and good luck."

Ferrol, a rather small Caitian, gave her a quick nod then lead the way. The team from the Savoy was already moving out when Kheren faced Captain Hargrove.

" May I remind the Captain, general order 15... "

" I will not stay in a hazardous area without proper armed escort, Chief. " she cut in with a dry smile. " Mister Simon will stay here and some of those wounded can still fire a phaser if need be. "

The Andorian's antennae were moving slowly as he glanced at the half-dozen crewmembers of the Savoy lying down, half of them armed and watching the upper catwalks and jeffries tubes entrances. Then he focused again on the tall woman:

" You are aware, Captain, that the shuttlebay assault might just be a diversion for the purpose of taking the second most important area of this ship; mainly here, engineering. "

" That is why I am staying here... and you should be going, Mister. " She retorted curtly. " Since you have such a solid grasp of strategies and tactics, you should assist our rescue team...*now*. "

Coming to attention, Kheren turned on his heels and moved at a brisk pace to rejoin the rest of the assault team heading towards the turbolift.

The eight of them could barely fit in the cabin as it shut up to the upper deck where access to the main shuttlebay was located. When the door opened, Kheren at the front dropped flat on the ground, rifle extended forward. The others came out pointing nervously their weapons in all directions in a hurried fanning formation. The Caitian Commander stepped over the prone Andorian to look forward, but not without a frown and a snort at the Lotus Ensign at his feet.

The corridor leading to the shuttlebay doors was well lighted... quiet... and empty.

But the Andorian's antennae were picking off some faraway sound... and so did the flickering ears of the Caitian commander. With a head jerk, he prompted the rescue team forward.

As they fanned in a diamond formation to move towards the other end, Kheren said to him:

" Commander Ferrol, Sir, if I may... using the jeffries tubes to access the hangar's catwalk would give us high ground and access to... "

" No time forrr that" growled the large felinoid leading them towards the door. " I can hearr weapon's firre beyond that doorrr. "

" So do I... But, with all due respect, Sir, the access to the tubes is right here besides the door. It would be wise to... "

But as they flattened themselves each side of the hangar's access, the Caitian growled even more fiercely.

" I am not interrested in discussing tactics with you, *Ensign*. We have had enough of "Lotus people" telling us what to do on *ourrr* ship! My Captain was shot by those invaderrrs, and I will make surrre they rrreret it! Now, on my marrrk, you will open that doorrr and we will charrge in and get those uglies feel what a comprression rrrifle can do! "

Back against one side of the door with three men aligned besides him in the side corridor, three others facing him on the other side and Commander Ferrol jumping right in front of the opening: " Ready... Mark! "

The Andorian's antennae curled inward. But, as ordered, he side-punched the door's control panel.

The access to shuttlebay 1 wooshed open. In one, prodigious leap, the Caitian shot about twenty feet right inside the hangar, phaser rifle spouting fire and light.

But before any of the men could follow him, a loud, low sound vibrated from deckplate to upper bulkhead; a wave of light pushed like a soap bubble exploding through the doorframe... and the body of their leader was thrown right back out, flying backwards a good twenty feet away to slide inert along the rest of the corridor, to stop almost at the foot of the turboshaft door.

Turning around, the Andorian saw at a glance one of the invaders slowly walking toward the door; others firing at a small group of Starfleet officers pinned down behind an inert shuttle; one, a Vulcan female he recognized as engineer T'Krel was shot down by the pulsing energy wave of an alien rifle; another was unmistakably his Caitian security officer Mrrriish returning ineffectual phaser fire on insectoid armor.

And behind them, beyond the two closely parked shuttles in the small elongated hangar, a third type IX shuttlecraft squeezed itself in, space doors slowly closing behind it.

Kheren punched close the hangar door.

He turned and rested his back against the locked panel, then looked down at the distant, unconscious form of the Caitian commander, when he simply spoke with an even tone.

" Well now... how about plan B? "

\* \* \*

On the bridge of the Lotus Fleet flagship, Lieutenant Tomah immediately targeted a signal as it moved away from the Savoy.

"Sir, I'm tracking a life pod leaving the Savoy; one life sign aboard."

"lock a tractor beam on it." Felez said quickly. "But don't bring it in yet. Readings Lortoria? any reason to think its a trap?"

"One Vulcan female, life signs critical and... and two bodies, Sir." she said with a slight crack in her voice. "One is Human... the other I do not recognize."

"It was launched from the same area the away team was sent to, Sir," Tomah added.

Felez sat down. This was a risky problem. He didn't dare try another beam out but the pod could be trapped as well, and once in the bay it, could do considerable damage if rigged as a bomb.

"Bring it in, Mister Tomah. Erect a Level 10 forcefield around it and do a full scan of it, inside and out. Sent a hazard team for possible biohazard contamination or bomb defusing situation. Have sickbay stand by to receive a critical care patient."

Tomah understood the risk as well, but said nothing as he worked the controls.

"The pod's aboard, and secured, Sir. All scans negative."

The Efrogian in the center chair gave a sigh of relief.

"They're reporting they have Ensign Kuamu and moving her to sickbay. One of the bodies is petty officer Berens, but the other... they're not sure what it is, Captain."

"Very well, continue your scans Mister Tomah. Have Doctor Driam take a good look at this... unknown guest and report as soon as possible."

He was dying to get a look at it, but he couldn't leave his post and his medical staff was getting too thin to assign anyone for an autopsy. So for now, he'd have to let it go.

In sickbay, everyone was hurrying to the call of medical emergency.

"Doctor!" Said one of the medics, opening the office door. "We need you out here! It's T'kua! She's back from the Savoy. She's unconscious and in critical condition!"

"I'll be right out." Said Chayana, seemingly unimpressed by the situation.

"Doctor, we..."

"I'll be *right out*." she said through her teeth, prompting the medic to leave.

Mere seconds later, the doctor finally found the potential antidote she was looking for. It left her with one remaining hurdle, however; she had to administer it without anyone noticing. Given the circumstances, she saw only one solution. She stepped outside. Most of them were gathered around the central biobed, caring for T'kua who was still unconscious.

"Everyone, out. I'll call you back in shortly. There is something I need to do before I can start treating the ensign."

There was a brief moment of silence.

"*All of you! OUT!*" She yelled and pointed at the door, prompting them to do as they were told.

Once she was sure she was alone, she got out her syringe and approached the replicator.

"Five milligrams ground makara leaves in warm water." She said, picked up the mixture and poured it into the syringe.

She took a deep breath and slowly inserted the needle, grinding her teeth in pain before injecting the mixture and pulling it back out. A single tear rolled down her cheek as the memories and experiences became vivid again. She tapped her badge.

"Get back in here." She said and wiped the tear away, then pulled out a tricorder and started scanning the Vulcan ensign.

As much as she had grown to hate the monster inside of her, she'd started to realize that there would always be situations such as this, situations in which she needed it to be there.

\* \* \*

Looking down over the console, Mark barely had time to register the ten or so alien creatures spread over the middle of the hangar and the concentrated phaser fire that mowed down at least one that he saw before the shuttle's shields were slammed hard by the weapons fire from a few of the creatures in succession. He quickly whirled the shuttle's body around and down, swiping the aft end at the decking while he felt more hits on their ventral side, nearly bucking them out of their seats.

A sharp yell turned his attention to his side, where Etzi gripped one side of her head.

"Sense them now, do ya?"

The female Betazoid shook her head, sending her ponytail flailing in either direction.

"I-I feel like my head's been stuck in a crowded room where everyone's shouting at once right in my ear, Sir!"

Mark cursed under his breath as he dropped the nose of the nimble Type-9 shuttle and juked it along the wall of the bay, nearly scraping the top of one of the Savoy's twin Type-9 as it lay dormant across from its sister in the middle of the bay.

"Oh! Well kindly remove your head from the miniature version of the shuttlebay and try and contact the Savoy personnel over there, would you please?"

He continued skirting the walls of the bay, dropping down to dodge another of the odd-looking blast waves of luminous energy from the aliens as he heard a slightly-rattled Etzi hail the officers he saw running into the middle of the bay to retrieve another officer, a Vulcan, with some device on his chest.

"Shuttle 1 to Starfleet officers, come in!!"

Mark felt an arm wrap around the back of his seat and turned to find Ensign Brock trying his best to stay standing with the severe dance Mark was putting the shuttle through.

"Sir, the phasers! We could take the aliens out much quicker than this!"

Mark thrust the shuttle into the group of aliens, watching as they were shoved out of the way a few feet from the shuttle's hull.

"Oh sure! Let's start blowing holes in the ship and watch our people get sucked through one! I'm working on it Ensign, sit back down!"

Mark barely had time to quip at the squat man before Etzi's hail was answered.

"Shuttle 1, this is Ensign Mrrriish frrom the Lotus team; glad to see you!!"

Knowing the clock was ticking, Mark quickly yelled.

"Ensign, get everyone to cover in one of the Savoy's shuttles! Shuttle 2 is coming in with med support in a few minutes, I'll cover you!"

Mark whirled the shuttle across the bay and neatly skimmed the floor between the aliens and the Starfleet personnel, using the shuttle as a shield while he hurled it sideways at them, moving forward and back to try and absorb all the damage he could. The shuttle bucked up once, twice, and Mark curled his lips at the thought of having just squashed a couple of the aliens under the shuttle's shields.

Suddenly, Etzi cried out.

"Sir! The doors!"

All he needed was a glance towards the shrinking starfield they'd come from... The aliens were closing the bay doors.

"Keep those doors open. Shuttle 2 is going to be here in three minutes!" he yelled back as the shuttle was hammered by the odd blast waves.

"They've locked us out, Sir!"

Cursing vehemently under his breath, Mark had the flash of a thought to simply blow the doors with the shuttle's phasers, which would suck out everything in the bay as well, including the intruders.. The only issue was getting the emergency forcefield to not come up the moment the bay was ruptured.

He glanced over his shoulder.

"S'kon, you think you could use the emergency transporter to beam one of your team to the control room?!"

His co-pilot's head whipped around to stare at him as the Vulcan responded.

"It would be highly dangerous, Sir. I don't believe it would work with the ship in such erratic motion... Also, we do not know if the aliens' transporter trap is out of effect here."

Mark cursed again and quickly took the shuttle up and dropped it towards the four hustling officers, swinging the craft down and towards the weapons fire from the aliens again while his mind raced to try and think of a better alternative while trying to bowl for the insectoids.

\* \* \*

A mere nine decks high, the Nova Class starship was so small that Kheren emerged from the jeffries tube to the bay's catwalk just in time to see the Lotus' shuttle flying around the small hangar, scratching the top of one of the Savoy shuttles in a shower of sparks and bowling over aliens grouped between those and the access door.

He also saw Ensign Mriish jumping and rolling on top and over one of the parked shuttles, T'krel unconscious in her arms, while two of the Savoy's crew came around it's nose to join them at the small craft's side hatch, shooting at the insect-like armored invaders as they were retreating from the flying shuttle's shield. He even heard her acknowledge some order from her combadge.

But because of the rigidity of his antennae, he never saw the lone intruder emerging from the control room to point it's strange weapon at his back... nor even heard his comrade drop behind him just as it fired.

The wave of energy struck the Human fully. Although he took all of the discharge, the blast threw him hard into the Andorian's back, and both flew a few meters to slam hard on the handrail, almost flipping over.

The man was unconscious and Kheren was dazed despite his natural chitinous armor, his breath cut off by the impact of his stomach against the rail. He could barely turn on his back in time to see the looming alien coming closer, pointing his rifle straight at him.

Suddenly, the giant alien flared like a warp core, struck square in the chest from behind and above the Andorian by two bright, screeching beams. It barely started to lift it's armored head as it was struck again by the twin bolts of energy. Hard shards and gouts of slime spilled from its fuming torso and it tottered a moment before toppling completely, falling face first into the catwalk's metal floor.

Kheren's senses came back into focus. This time he saw, and heard, two other Savoy crewmembers, a Human woman and a Bolian female, jump down right next to him from a higher catwalk: the one leading to the much smaller auxiliary hangar deck just above the main one.

" Are you alright? " Asked the Bolian with evident concern. Her companion guarded their rear and the stairwell leading to the main deck of the larger room. Engine noise and weapon fire almost drowned her words, but the Andorian was already using the handrail to get back up from under his stunned comrade, waving with his weapon the Bolian's concerns aside.

The Human woman fired her own phaser down at the invaders.

" Don't shoot." he shouted, taking the whole hangar in; " Don't signal our presence! "

Too late.

Like her, he was now looking down at the moving shuttlecraft bowling over half a dozen insectoid forms and pushing back the others, herding them towards the inner door... suddenly opening so that the rest of his team started pinning them with heavy fire. As he had instructed them quickly before moving off with one of them as back up, two on each side were using the doorframe as cover, one kneeling, one standing over; the last pair was lying on the floor behind their own rifles, making themselves as flat as possible. All were firing at will at the half-dozen aliens barely a few meters from them and forcing the others farther inside to stay down.

One invader was firing with his strange rifle at the shuttle's shield as it pushed down three of his companions; two others fell under the crossfire of many phaser beams; but another shot at the door and his wave of energy blowed away the crewmen lying prone on the floor, the four others barely managing to hide behind the doorframe. And half a dozen more of the giant intruders were lumbering towards them from each side. But then, seeing the beam coming from above, one of them turned around and headed for the stairs leading to the catwalk they were standing on, leveling his weird rifle.

" Quick, into the control room! " ordered the Andorian.

A wave of light struck the wall right behind them, the edge of the blast pushing them hard towards the cabin's door. It wooshed open to let their bodies fall inside.

Behind them, the tall armored intruder was climbing the stairs with heavy footsteps.

The two women hurriedly dragged their inert comrade inside. Kheren followed them and locked the door behind him.

The alien was reaching the top of the stairs.

As the women started tending to the unconscious man, he swiftly moved to the controls. As expected, they were identical to what he got used to when he had been assigned as a hangar security crewman at Starbase 10.

He flipped open the comm switch.

" Lotus Shuttle, this is Chief of security Kheren. I'm in the control booth. We do not have much time so listen to me. "

From his upper vantage point, he saw Mriish and her two companions use the distraction provided by the flying craft and the shooting rescue team to disappear with the unconscious engineer inside one of the Savoy's shuttle.

*Even better!* he thought, almost smiling human fashion while looking again at the hovering shuttlecraft.

He didn't give time for any retort.

" We have only one chance to get them all quickly: Turn around;... I will deactivate the emergency forcefield... on my mark, blast away the space doors. "

Mark couldn't help but grin at the apparent mindlink, while Officer Etzi replied in a tense, almost shrill voice.

" Blast the doors? But without the forcefield... "

"Exactly! "

As he had ordered, the rescue squad in the corridor had waited thirty seconds before opening the door and start firing; and as soon as one of them saw him enter the control room above, they pulled back and closed the door again... Mriish and her team were already safely inside one of the shuttlecrafts fixed to the deck, quicker than expected and without any need to tell them to, thanks to the shuttle's commander.

As hoped, that left only the aliens regrouping inside the hangar.

All but one, who's heavy footsteps were approaching the door.

Kheren now was definitely smiling when he saw that the Lotus shuttlecraft had already turned to bring it's weaponry to bear towards the way it had come. *Great minds think alike* he quoted to himself from some Human book he had read.

" Mark! "

One word from the Andorian... a single shot from it's two type VI phaser emitters... and the Lotus craft fully blasted out the hangar's doors. Explosive decompression made the escaping air roar even up to the occupants of the sealed control room; the flying craft was buffeted a moment but the pilot was prepared and well trained. His craft stayed exactly in place, taking on the sudden effect of the opened void on internal atmospheric pressure as easily as the inert ones fixed to the deckplates.

But like bits of stray in a tornado, all the rifle-clutching aliens, standing or not, from main deck to the catwalk, were brutally blown out into space.

They were but a dozen gold specks vanishing against the colored starfield of the nearby nebula when the amber glow of the emergency forcefield was revived under Kheren's fingers. Life support immediately kicked in to reestablish temperature and atmospheric pressure within the now silent and deserted hangar, empty save for the hovering shuttlecraft.

"Glad you can at least hit a barn door, pilot." sent the Andorian, while the women behind him were cheering the rescue ship.

*Human humor... so hard...* thought Kheren when total silence fell within the entire hangar as the shuttle finally landed.

The shuttle whipped around from the juke it was in the middle of, and took aim at the bay doors, obliterating them with a press of a button from Mark. Everything not bolted down sufficiently, with the exception of the Savoy's shuttlecraft, was sucked out into the void, including the rest of the alien intruders.

Mark slumped back in the seat a bit and breathed a sigh of relief, one he heard echoed from behind him before he heard a haggard female voice.

"Can we please get out now?"

Chuckling, Mark slowly began to set the shuttle down while the control room continued their signal. Etzi spoke up.

"Sir, we're being hailed by both Lotus and Shuttle 2."

As the shuttlecraft came to a rest on the hangar floor, Mark glanced over at Etzi.

"First patch me into the Savoy's shuttle that our people made it into."

The Betazoid woman looked confused for a moment, then did as she was ordered, and a moment later, the small side viewscreen showed a female Caitian face.

This is Ensign Mrrriish... We arrre all still brrreathing."

Mark smiled.

"Good to hear, Ensign. I need you all to stay put until I give the go-ahead. The medics will be coming in momentarily to check on the wounded."

The Caitian security officer nodded curtly.

"Aye, Sirrr. We will put ourrr feet up and rrelax... Mrrriish out."

Etzi closed the channel. Mark opened the aft door for the security team and looked to S'kon.

"Ensign, please relieve Ensign Kheren and his team of their weapons. If he asks, explain the Captain's orders."

The Vulcan team leader nodded an acknowledgement, and proceeded to troop out of the shuttle with his team while Mark turned back to Etzi.

"Alright, now Shuttle 2, if you please."

"Tobor here; what's your status, Sir? we saw the bay doors blown out and were... a little worried..."

Mark grinned wryly.

"All part of the plan, Lieutenant. Come on in, the doors are permanently open and the bay's secure."

The Bajoran's eyebrow arched questioningly, but she acknowledged him anyway.

"Aye Sir, ETA: One minute. Tobor out."

## CHAPTER SIX: NEVER RAINS BUT IT POURS

From the elevated control booth of shuttlebay 1, Kheren saw some of his own security officers emerge from the the Lotus shuttle. Ensign S'kon was leading them, all armed with compression phaser rifles.

" Sir... they are certainly wearing..." started the Bolian female coming up to him, but the Andorian nodded and activated the cabin's comlink:

" Chief Kheren to Lotus shuttle: before you start doing all the wrong moves and endanger everyone, you should wait for a tactical report. First: all personnel must remove their combadges and send them through the disposal chutes. There are an estimated dozen aliens still on board and they can already track you and target you all through the ship's monitoring system. "

He saw that S'kon was sending Brock to the Savoy shuttle where Mrrriish and her companions had taken refuge. He then went on with his report.

" Second: the intruders are wearing energy-deflecting armor; keep armed personnel grouped at least by pairs and each pair should concentrate at minimum level 8 phaser fire on the same target in pulse mode. "

He could see that S'kon was intent on getting to the stairs leading to the control room. He motioned to the Human woman to unlock the door while he gave his report.

" Third: the intruders' weaponry is a stun wave. Only once the target is stunned do they add a targeting device on a paralysed body to shoot the wave within and rupture internal organs, causing death. There is no cover possible at point blank range. Medical team should prepare hyposprays to revive stunned personnel. "

The security team from the Lotus was coming to rejoin them at the control room when he finished.

" Finally, engineering is secured but bridge is abandonned, all main systems locked down by the previous Captain's command codes. Captain Hargrove is on board... and in command now. "

Ensign S'kon and officers Sylva, Vyryo and Grrhaalhaa were right besides him when he finished. He turned to greet them. Stoic and cold as usual, Ensign S'kon nevertheless visibly hesitated before saying in a voice he consciously kept even.

" Chief, please you and your team must give us your weapons. Lieutenant Robertson said those are the Captain's orders. "

The antennae of the Andorian started to bend subtly this way and that, while his silvery eyes darted towards the shuttle down below.

*What was it this old Human Faith book said? Ah yes... Lord, you gave them eyes but they cannot see...*

" Like hell! " flared the Human woman coming up besides him, clutching her weapon fiercely.

But the Andorian lifted a calming hand to stop her. Slowly, he gave his rifle, then both *ushaan-tors* he always carried on his belt on hazardous missions.

" These are not members of my team, Ensign" he then told the Vulcan. " They answer to Captain Hargrove. And they have orders to secure this area."

" And, with all due respect, I too have my orders, Chief. "

" With what just happened here, you are aware of course of how illogical these orders are now... "

" Indeed, Chief... but Lieutenant Robertson still transmitted the order... " began S'Kon.

Again Kheren lifted a hand to interrupt:

" And he ought to do it again." he said. Then, turning towards the console, he reopened channels and spoke: " Lotus shuttle, Chief Kheren here: Lieutenant Robertson, may I ask of you, Sir, to patch me through to the Lotus... "

\* \* \*

"The Lotus is still demanding an update, Sir."

Mark got up and stretched a moment before leaning over his seat and waving his hand.

"Put them on, please, Etzi."

The viewscreen illuminated once more with a view of the Intrepid-class bridge as he leaned in to be seen by the Captain.

"Robertson here, Sir. We've secured the Main Shuttlebay and taken out roughly a dozen of the enemy. They seem to be insectoid and I'd venture a guess that they're telepathically linked. Petty Officer Etzi here sensed a 'conversation' of sorts once we made our initial entry into the Bay."

Captain Felez was about to reply to Mark's hail, when Etzi spoke up again.

"Sir, Ensign Kheren is transmitting a tactical update from the control room, I think the captain ought to hear this.."

Mark nodded and waved his hand to indicate a connection to the Captain onscreen.

"Patch him in to our feed to the Lotus, let's hear it."

Then, they all listened to the Andorian's report. Mark stroked his chin as he listened to the report and watched Kheren on the monitor. Certainly, the Andorian seemed like himself, and he hoped the Captain noticed this as well while Kheren spoke. When he announced Captain Hargrove was on board, alive and well, he sighed in relief.

*Well that's a bit of welcome news..at least we didn't come all this way to have our new Captain killed by raiders,* Mark thought, though his attention was pulled back to the screen as Ensign S'kon made it to the control room, and carried out his order.

The Savoy's crew, who'd been fighting for their lives the last few hours, didn't take it so well, but Kheren calmed her down and relinquished his own weapons. Mark flicked his gaze to the Captain listening aboard the Lotus as Kheren asked for a direct link to the flagship.

"Yes Chief, you've been patched into the Lotus for the last few minutes. I think any question of your being compromised will have been answered nicely by this point, wouldn't you say, Captain?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Officer Etzi leaning up and looking out the other side of the viewport, which caused him to turn his head and look to see Shuttle 2 making its approach and landing smoothly while Captain Felez responded.

"I see no evidence to suggest it at this point, Mister Robertson. You are to continue to assist the Savoy in..."

Tomah's voice cut in from the background.

"Ah, Sir! I have a vessel dropping out of warp off our Starboard aft, It just... appeared from nowhere."

"Bring us about helm! Lt. Lortoria, hail..."

Suddenly, the comm link went dead with a high-pitched whine proceeding it for several seconds.

At that same moment, Etzi suddenly let out a yelp and staggered against a nearby wall.

"N... uuu..." she gritted her teeth. "So... loud..."

\* \* \*

"Close." Said Chayana and backed away from the operating table.

She was fortunate that there was a wall right behind her, or she might have fallen over from the shock of what happened. There was a sudden, sharp ringing in her ears and the lights were flickering.

"What *is* that?!"

She cried and looked over at the others, confirming that they were also hearing it. She tapped her badge.

"Sickbay to engineering. There is some sort of loud buzzing noise up here, what is going on?"

She was almost hoping to be told that it was a technical issue. There was something familiar about the noise that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

\* \* \*

The whine of the wind died out between the branches of the big pines shadowing the place.

Snow was starting to fall, like soft white sparks of remembrance that kept floating in Edward Tomah's mind, as small, as fragile, as flickering as each crystalline flake falling and covering everything.

*I should not be here...I don't even know what this is...*

His eyes followed dully the falling snow down to the dark, shiny casket lying deep into the ground. He could hear the soft sound of people moving away, but they were only shadows slowly dispersing around him, letting the whiteness of the ground and the air fill up his mind.

But there was still one shadow left in there, and it had the same dark tone as the coffin before him.

*I'm sorry... so sorry I let you down...No! No I am not weak! That's not me! that's... the other...*

His eyes fell further down, to his own crossed hands before his dark cloak. Between his gloved fingers, he held a single flower; a rose, bright and red as blood.

He took a step, and his hand let go of the rose, letting it fall with the snow on top of the dark polished wood.

*It should have been a lotus...*

*A lotus...*

\* \* \*

Felez was back home.

The door opened after the shuttle touched down on Efroze to a typical Efrozian day. It was blissfully cold, and the nearly constant wind swept over the young man as he stepped foot on his home world for the first time in over three years and he breathed in deeply. Earth was a pretty planet he had to admit, but it wasn't home.

*And never would be*, he thought .

"Back from school, are ye kid?" said an old man from the shuttle depot as he lead Felez to his luggage.

"Yes... In a sense..."

There was a certain lack of enthusiasm in his voice. The old man saw the Star fleet academy tag on his duffel and paused at it.

"Its none of my business of course, what you do... Just wondering."

Like all Efrozians, he never showed facial expressions, at least not without effort, never having developed the muscles for it. But Felez could feel it, there in the back ground...

Fear.

Felez just nodded to the man and retrieved his duffel and went out of the facility. His father's very old hovercar could be seen waiting for him in the lot. Felez knew his father must be in it since his mother had long ago stopped acknowledging his existence.

His father wasn't much better.

He tossed his duffel into a storage compartment and climbed in. His father only gave him a nod as they sped off towards home.

"Hello, father" he said rather automatically.

His father looked at him quickly then looked back at the road.

"So.." he said finally "Didn't work out did it? Your mother and I told you this was a waste of time..."

He did a quick head twist that was almost a habit when he talked about something unpleasant. Felez said nothing, not that he had to. For three years he trained for Starfleet only to finally give up at the end.

"You where right.." he choked out.

"Ever since they added the officer initiative program, its become almost impossible for us to keep up, but I tried anyway.."

His father didn't respond but Felez could feel his emotions. But it was odd. All he could feel from his father was... fear.

Felez laid out on his old bed looking up at the ceiling and sighed. After glancing around the room he noticed that all of his things were gone, boxed up and in storage most likly.

*At least they didn't rent out the room*, he thought glumly.

The family pet Skeeat jumped up on the bed and on to his chest. A small cat like creature that was once considered a rather vicious scavenger in the old days was now a favored pet among Efozians.

He rubbed it between the serrated horns and it purred contently. But, for some reason, it didn't seem to help him feel better. Generally, a contented Skeeat had a calming effect on empaths but this time he couldn't feel it.

He sat up, suddenly feeling disoriented

*How did I get to my room?*

The last thing he remembered was driving with his father back from the shuttle port.

"There you are Comor. Feeling any better?"

A young Efrogian girl was standing in the door way and took a moment for him to place her.

"Natra? you look.. good."

In fact, she looked very good. Those three years did wonders for her figure. Natra sat at the foot of his bed, fingers tracing the line of his right boot.

"You haven't sent me any messages for a while. I thought maybe you forgot my name by now."

He stood up, looking uncomfortable.

"Yes, well.. I had a very heavy workload. They expect candidates to learn several different fields and..."

*What am I doing?* he found himself thinking.

She seemed to have changed more than her appearance, had she missed him that much?

But that wasn't it, no there was something else, something deeper. No matter what she looked like, or how inviting the smile, he couldn't feel any passion from her, and she was one of the most passionate people he ever knew.

"You've changed. The picture I keep aboard the Lotus hardly does you justice any..."

He suddenly went blank

*The Lotus...*

What was the Lotus? he knew that name.

*The... USS Lotus...*

He could almost see it.

\* \* \*

Mark's head whipped around and stared, dumbfounded for a split second at the screen showing the Federation's emblem and a TRANSMISSION LOST notification when Petty Officer Etzi staggered against the shuttle's bulkhead, whimpering, turning Mark's attention back towards her.

He quickly got his arm around her to try and steady her.

"Etzi, Etzi! IZUNA!" he walked her to the last seat to the aft of the shuttle and sat her down before tapping his combadge.

"Robertson to Kheren; get down here..."

He nearly bowled Doctor Kerrigan over as he started for Shuttle 2 and caught her by the elbow to keep her from falling back. He pointed to Shuttle 1.

"Officer Etzi experienced some...kind of psychic trauma just now. Check her out please, Doctor."

She started for the shuttle before he pulled her back by her arm again as he remembered.

"There's a wounded crewman in that shuttle as well; took one of the aliens' stun waves before we arrived. Have one of your people see to him."

He finally released her and jogged to the back of Shuttle 2.

"Tobor, have you started powering the shuttle down yet?"

The Bajoran woman turned her seat and shook her head.

"No, Sir; I didn't know how hot it would be in here.."

Mark grinned.

"Good, leave it powered up and get out here, I'm gonna take it out and look around.. Kent, stay put, you're coming with me."

He turned back and nodded to Chief Kheren, walking over to meet him.

"No hard feelings about the weapons, Chief. We weren't sure what happened with the transporter trap. I'm going to take Shuttle 2 out for a visual on the Lotus, leave an appropriate number of officers here to hold the bay, I want them to keep their combadges."

To almost all Federation races, Andorians were notorious for being aloof, unexpressive and uncommunicative; And so was Kheren even to Andorians themselves.

*Comes with "the curse"* he always told himself.

So he kept silent and still while listening to the somewhat contradictory orders of the Lieutenant. Obviously he lacked some experience in tactical protocols and, like most humanoids, the situation was stressing him more and more by the minute, clogging his thinking and reflexes until all that was left was what was most ingrained in the core of his being.

Obvious to Kheren, Robertson was, first and last, a pilot... a man to take action into his own hands and direct his own destiny. That's why he rushed to pilot the reconnaissance shuttle himself, instead of assuming overall command of the operation as the senior officer present.

Kheren understood... and didn't mind, since the Lieutenant gave him exactly what he needed when he finally pointed to the middle of the bunker of parked shuttles.

"Have most of them leave their badges here, with one up in the control room. Guard the bay any way you see fit, just so long as you can get the drop on anything non-Starfleet. In the meantime, either go yourself, or send one of your people to Captain Hargrove and appraise her of our new... situation."

He pointed to the decking again to emphasize his point.

"We need control of this ship. If we've lost the Lotus, we're out almost all of our options. Retake the Savoy, or we evac on all the shuttles and make a run for it to the nearest Starbase, scuttling her. I'll come right back after I know what's going on out there, send someone back with an update in thirty minutes, shouldn't take me longer than two to see if the Lotus is reduced to so much debris..."

In other words: you're in charge until Captain Hargrove assume command. Which suited Kheren fine. Now he could do *his* job.

Robertson took a breath after giving the orders, glancing over to see the Vulcan security officer being helped out of the shuttle while the other officers piled out.

*At least we've brought some med support...a dozen of those bugs isn't so bad, as long as we can clear each deck. Here's hoping whatever messed with the Lotus is busy enough not to send reinforcements...*

" You, the Andorian ordered, pointing at the pilot Robertson replaced, you will be in command here; prepare the Lieutenant's shuttle for evacuation of the wounded. Viryo, Syla, you will each do the same with both of the Savoy Shuttles for the rest of the crew here. "

Everyone was grouped in a semi-circle before him right behind the open shuttles. He had already started collecting quickly all combadges as he said:

" You and you, he said to the Bolian female and the woman who came down with him bearing their unconscious comrade; get back to the control room. You know the tactic by now. Both Savoy shuttles will get you back with their emergency transporter when and if you are forced to evacuate. *That will be your decision until and if* Lieutenant Robertson returns " he added to Tobor.

All three immediately ran to their designed post as he continued.

" S'Kon, Grhaalhaa and Mriish, you're with me. The rest of you will guard this hangar, 3 near each shuttle hatch facing that door. "

Followed by his three security officers, the Andorian dropped all combadges in a wide semi-circle before the door opening to the ship's interior.

" The aliens will be zeroing on these if they try to retake this part of the ship. Remember: phaser at level 8 on pulse, two of you on each target starting from left to right. Your first salvo will drop down three of them right at the start and at least three others before they react. Now load the wounded and take position. Go! "

They were already hurrying to embark the last unconscious people from the corridor, including Commander Ferrol, as his own team ran to the turbolift in diamond formation, him leading and S'Kon closing with each Caitan guarding their flanks. They had practiced shipboard actions for over a week now and, even on a different vessel like this Nova class, they were ready.

As the lift rushed down, Ensign S'kon asked:

" Chief... are we going to try and retake the ship? "

Kheren simply nodded.

" But... command functions have been locked down by the forrrmer Captain. " recalled Mriish from their arrival on the bridge.

" All locks have keys. " simply answered Kheren.

Before any further words could be exchanged, the door wooshed open 3 decks below. Kheren shot out flat on the ground, antennae darting behind his rifle, while Grhaalha and Mriish knelt on each side ears and muzzle twitching each side of him, as S'kon standing behind walked above the prone form of the Andorian, checking all angles.

All empty, save for the pulsing of the alarms near engineering.

Again in formation, they moved swiftly to the door and Kheren pounded on it with the butt of his weapon.

" Captain Hargrove, Chief Kheren here. "

The panel moved aside to show the muzzle of a phaser rifle right in his face. Then Ensign Simon lowered his weapon and ushered them in, looking behind them before locking the door shut once more.

" Where is Captain Hargrove? " asked Kheren seconds after sweeping the area with his quadrispotic vision.

" She went to the bridge with the Chief engineer and Chief medical officer. " answered Simon, pointing at the two remaining armed men among the injured ones.

The Andorian swiftly turned around.

" Mr Grhaalhaa, stay here with Mr Simon. The rest of us will go assist her. Quick now! "

At a brisk pace, Kheren led his two officers back to the turbolift. Mriish was starting to growl, ears and nose twitching; his own antennae were flickering each side of his head; S'kon slightly cocked his pointed ears on one side, than the other. They exchanged one brief look and through it one single thought.

*If they plan to assault main engineering, we should walk right into them just about...*

In front of them, the turbolift door wooshed open, bringing a huge armored figure right into the Andorian's face.

And on each side, another giant silhouette was lumbering closer from the lateral corridors. They were already leveling their strange rifles towards the three Starfleet officers.

" Back! " yelled Kheren... as he charged forward, rifle barring the way in front of him.

His charge made him slam the giant across his broad armored chest. With his prodigious strength, he could probably push back the huge intruder into the lift.

But that was not his plan.

On cue, both his companions had jumped back into the main corridor, out of view of the other two aliens approaching; Kheren had to make sure they did not refrain from shooting... so he stayed in plain view, a brief moment, as if he was about to start a shoving match against the third giant...

And suddenly, using the very mass of his opponent and his effort to repulse him, he let himself be pushed back, and pushed himself back swiftly, hard and far back into the central corridor, just as his sensitive hearing detected the creaking of heavy armor moving now to aim at him from both sides. His entire vision, filled with his nearest opponent stumbling forward one step, was now overwhelmed by two pulsing wave of lights colliding...

He flew several meters back, farther than expected because he was caught by the edge of the energy wave.

Despite the suddenness of the blast, he rolled on his left shoulder in a classic *Hlesvalath* breakfall, ending up on one knee, pointing his rifle, a good meter behind Mrrish and S'kon also in position along each wall. In front of them, the insectoid giant was totering in front of the lift, struck simultaneously from both sides by his own comrades.

And as both of them swung into view, they all fired.

On the left, Mrrish shot two quick bursts of her type 111c phaser rifle on one, along the edge of the wall; on the right, S'kon did the same on the other armored colossus, his aim also enhanced by the wall on his side; and Kheren shot a burst on each one in turn.

Pieces of armor and flesh followed their fall.

The last one in the middle, still standing in front of the turbolift, had only enough time to regain his footing and try to level his own weapon... before three double pulses of light struck him squarely in the chest. He almost exploded in a shower of hard shards and organic liquid before slowly falling to his knees, then flat on his face, in a growing pool of his own vitals mingled with those of his two associates.

For a moment, the three Starfleet officers stood still, each focusing his own unique perceptions to find any sign, sound or smell of other aliens nearby. Finding only calm, silence and emptiness, they hurriedly went again to the turbolift, keeping their triangular formation even when entering the circular cabin.

" Worrked just like in yesterrrrday's Borrrg simulation. " commented the Caitan female, snarling.

" Negative, corrected the Vulcan; in the simulation, the third Borg adapted it's shield and blasted the Chief. "

" Aren't I glad this is not a simulation. " commented the Andorian.

As usual, no one knew if he was joking or not.

Seven decks above, the door slided to let them enter the command center of the USS Savoy. First to come out, Kheren immediately spotted Captain Hargrove and the two senior officers with her.

But not the crewman guarding the door.

It took only one quick burst of the guard's phaser rifle to bring him down.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: ENEMY MINE

Mark's face was set as he took the shuttle up from the now-bustling deck and eased her out of the blown-open bay. He trusted Chief Kheren to get his job done. This however, was going to take a little more finesse.

*Tobor's as crazy as I am behind the stick, couldn't have trusted her to not rush in headlong if the enemy is still out here...*

his gaze flicked to the young human woman sitting next to him.

*Kent's fresh out of the Academy, no way she could make that sort of a judgment call this soon.*

He took a deep breath, and put it out of his mind for now as he effortlessly slipped the shuttle under the Nova-class Savoy, and powered down the warp drive and lowered the impulse engines to a cold standby, minimizing their energy signature. He made use of the attitude thrusters to coast along on inertia under the Savoy's port nacelle; tilting them so that both he and Ensign Kent were peering out of the starboard side of the viewport as far as they could crane their necks, looking for the Lotus.

"Holy...", was all Mark could say to describe the sight before them.

The Lotus was caught in some sort of tractor beam...connected to an organic-looking ship about three times as big.

"Okay..." muttered Kent, "Now that's something you don't see alot..."

Mark shook his head.

"No...no it isn't...but it's not as bad as it could be.. Computer, begin cross-referencing all known ship archetypes against the alien craft.."

The female computer voiced droned.

"Accessing...please wait."

\* \* \*

"This is *not* what I signed up for..." Doctor Kerrigan muttered to herself just before Mark ran into her, nearly knocking her over.

Kerrigan nevertheless nodded to him and turned as he went to shuttle 2.

"Okay, um..." the doctor began addressing her comrades after sending one of them into the shuttle to care for those inside. "We'll gather the wounded in and near the shuttle and patch them up enough get them ready for evacuation."

Just as she walked by the corridor doors, Kerrigan heard what sounded like a scream.

"Did you hear that?" She asked one of the officers guarding the door.

"No, ma'am."

"Hello?" She yelled into the corridor.

There was another scream, this time she was sure she'd heard it. Her heart racing, she ran back to the shuttle still in the bay and grabbed a flashlight and a phaser, then back to the corridor.

"You," she said to the guard. "There's someone down the corridor, come with me."

"Doctor, I've been ordered to stay here and guard the area, and with all due respect, you should stay here and do what you were sent to do... ma'am."

With a dissatisfied grunt, the doctor walked out into the corridor and opened up her tricorder, determining that there was indeed a humanoid lifesign in the direction where she promptly set sail next. It didn't take long before she started having second thoughts.

"Hello?" she said nervously.

"Help me..." someone whispered.

She froze. The corridor was completely empty and she'd started to realize what was going on. There was no one near her that could have made that sound. The life sign was gone.

"*The badge.*"

She quickly tore it off and threw it, turning around to run back to the bay, only to stand frozen in fear at the sight of the alien grunt standing behind her.

She let out a loud scream and turned around to bolt in the other direction, but was knocked to the ground. Seeing the human desperately trying to crawl away, the alien stomped down on her leg, prompting another scream as he held a device to her chest.

Petrified, Kerrigan could only watch the events unfold. After a few seconds a high, clear sound emanated from the device.

She bit down to cope with the pain when the grunt started dragging her away into the corridor. She would have screamed, but she'd already lost one leg and had no wish to have the other broken as well.

As the alien started pulling her away, her muffled cries of pain attracted its attention and it looked down at her. Suddenly, it set its rifle against the wall and carefully picked her up to place over its shoulder.

Just as he did so two security officer's entered the corridor.

"Doctor, we heard..."

Both men leveled their rifles at it but didn't fire. Kerrigan was in the way, even a near hit could severely injure her.

"Damn! It's using her as a shield!"

The two security officers glanced at each other nervously, knowing that if it reached for its weapon they would have to fire.

But it didn't, instead it did something absurd. It quickly put Kerrigan back on the ground and stood over her, almost blocking her from sight of the two officers. She couldn't help but get the feeling that it was being... gallant. It seemed to be shielding her...

From the security team.

The two men seeing an opening fired, striking the creature and staggering it, but it held its place, refusing to move from in front of Doctor Kerrigan, even to reach for its weapon.

They fired again dropping it to its knees, swaying slightly.

The two men moved in closer for the kill.

Slowly but surely, Kerrigan felt her consciousness slip away. She looked up and saw the alien standing in front of her, valiantly withstanding the security officers' phaser blasts.

Why it would do such a thing rather than picking up his weapon and returning fire puzzled her. In the end however, it didn't matter. The alien dropped to its knees and the security officers moved in closer.

With her last bit of strength, the doctor looked directly at the officers and screamed.

"KILL IT!"

One of the men fired on it instantly, the shot nearly burned a hole through its chest and it went down hard. The other man stood there almost transfixed.

The one that fired walked over and gave the thing a kick, knocking it to the side.

"Are you alright, Doctor?" he said with a slight drawl.

The second Security officer slowly lowered his weapon, still looking at the body.

"It... it was unarmed... helpless..."

"The second one looked around at him.

"What was that?"

He looked somewhat bewildered.

"Since when do we... shoot to kill, Sydney? Without provocation? It was down!"

Sydney gave him a stern look.

"We're fight'n for our lives here. Freeman! It's just implied!"

Then he walked up to him, speaking lower so the doctor wouldn't hear him.

"Next time a superior officer says kill it. you'd best get to shoot'n! Or maybe you'd prefer work'n in maintenance?"

Sydney helped the Doctor up and moved her back out to the main bay leaving Freeman there alone.

He looked down at the still body one more time.

"It's just wrong," he mumbled before finally following them back.

\* \* \*

Ensign Kheren's first thought after walking in was forgotten instantly in a blaze of pain and light, and for a second he lost all sense of himself. He could hear voices in the background, but it was like they were miles away, and there was no sense of time.

Was he moving? floating? walking? he wasn't sure.

Minutes crawled by before the world started coming into focus.

"...Secure... capple... argoic..." he managed to murmur, but it didn't make any sense.

"Captain Hargrove; he's coming around." S'kon's voice said out of nowhere.

His eyes seemed to refuse to focus on anything.

"Already?" came Mrrish's voice from somewhere else. "Impresssive.."

Another voice he didn't know spoke up.

"Impressive? what was he thinking barging in like that! If i hadn't pulled my shot at the sight of his uniform..."

"That's enough," said a firm female voice and the room went silent.

"Computer, recognise authorization for Captain, Hargrove, Marianna"

"scanning... Identification confirmed."

"Requesting command override of ship's functions, authorization Hargrove,99F72A."

"Command code recognized; awaiting confirmation"

She pulled up Lieutenant Smith's converted data PADD.

"Go ahead, Doctor."

"This is Doctor Ferrol, Chief surgeon, override confirmed."

"Your turn chief, " hargrove said in her combadge.

"Lieutenant Mutain, Chief engineer, yez, override confirmed," answered a shaky voice over the comm.

"Command override authorized," the computer answered.

After making sure all sections were ready she then brought the ship back on line.

"Make defenses a priority. We need those security barriers in place immediately."

"Lotus... attacked..." Kheren managed to get out

S'kon jumped in.

"Captain, prior to arrival, we were informed that the Lotus encountered a ship. Communication was then lost."

She gave them a look before replying.

"Get on sensor's then; let's see what's going on out there."

No sooner than S'Kon got the sensors up and running than the Comm panel indicated a signal.

"Captain, incoming signal."

She didn't wait for Hargrove's reply. The signal ID was from the Lotus.

"USS Savoy, this is Shuttle 2, please respond! USS Savoy, come in!"

Captain Hargrove responded without hesitation.

"This is Captain Hargrove on the Savoy. What's your situation?"

"Ensign Kent here, Captain; you have three inbound pods from a hostile ship currently holding the Lotus in a tractor beam..."

he was interrupted by the whine of phasers firing in the background.

"Make that two pods inbound... and another six are moving near the Lotus!"

S'Kon brought up the Lotus on visual. A rather large vessel loomed over it and a powerful beam latched them together. Hargrove spoke with a firm tone.

"Shuttle 2, continue targeting the pods on the Savoy. Avoid the main vessel at this time. Contact us if there's any changes but I repeat, do not engage main vessel."

She then switched to engineering.

"Bridge to Mutain; we need main power back. How much longer?"

"Main power can only be available in thirty minutes capt'n; we're set for it as soon as possible. But I can give you impulse power in a few but reactors and batteries are at your disposal. "

"Understood; Bridge out."

She sat down in the captain's chair, watching the pods close in on the Lotus.

"There's nothing we can do but wait."

Shuttle 2 was floating under the Savoy's Port Warp Nacelle. After a few moments, the computer gave it's report.

"No matches found in Starfleet database."

Mark simply clicked his tongue,

"Saw that coming."

He was about to turn them back towards the shuttlebay, when the sensors began beeping insistently. Kent's face lit up as she checked it out,

"Sir, the Savoy's systems are coming back up! Reactors are coming online, estimate nine minutes to partial systems' restoration. It will take thirty minutes for the warp core to fully activate."

Mark had to fight the urge to grind his teeth, settling for simply gritting them and growling as he pointed to the pods going for both Federation starships.

"Life signs?"

Kent tapped a few commands into the sensor array, then shook her head.

"None, Sir, but we didn't detect the aliens on the Savoy either, so..."

*Savoy won't have shields until main power is restored, and even then, they'll be weak, Robertson thought quickly. Same for phasers, and those pods...*

He glanced to the viewscreen showing a detailed view of the incoming enemy craft as being just bigger than the Type-9 shuttlecraft...

*They won't have a chance of targeting them in time anyway. We could make a beeline for the ones going after Lotus, or even take a few out on the way, but there's no chance of getting all of them.*

He closed his eyes and took a deep, sighing breath before working the RCS thrusters to maneuver the shuttle under the Savoy and forward, away from the warp nacelle.

"Ensign. Give me a targeting reticle, passive scan only, manual control."

Kent frowned for a split second, then did as ordered. In a moment, the LCARS screen directly above Mark's controls became a view of space the shuttle was facing.

He swung the shuttle up, perpendicular to the Savoy, and slowly inched over the edge of the curved hull, aiming for one of the oncoming pods.

"Kent, here's what we're going to do. I'll worry about the pods and not getting swatted by that big ship. You wait until I tell you, and then hail the Savoy to give Captain Hargrove an update. She needs shields and phasers at the ready asap."

Kent looked over, not questioning, but worried.

"And..the Lotus, Sir?"

Mark closed his eyes, then reopened them.

"We've got a better chance of securing the Savoy to take on the big ship. We wouldn't be able to get all of the pods before they could dock. Until the Lotus is scuttled, or we're fresh out of options, we're not leaving them."

Mark tried breathing calmly to make the knot in his stomach unclench, but the thought of their situation just wouldn't allow it. He sighed once again as the pods hurtled towards them.

"Whatever happens... happens."

He began firing the shuttlecraft's phasers and lancing the small pod he had targeted, turning it into a briefly-fiery ball of debris as the other three scattered at the implosion of their comrade. Mark quickly fired up the shuttle's engines and pushed them to redline, taking some power from the shields.

Mark quickly had another of the pods in sight, and fired the phasers again, but this time the aliens had figured out not to fly in a straight line towards their target; the pod nimbly zipped to the right, missing the orange energy beams. Wheeling the shuttle to follow his prey, Mark throttled down for turning ability, giving him enough pitch while still firing the lancing beams to rake the small pod, slicing it into a similar fireball.

He glanced at the viewscreen and noted that while he'd taken out two pods, the other two were trying for a much wider vector to either side of him. The ones headed towards the Lotus buzzed around for a moment in confusion, then resumed their flight towards the Intrepid-class vessel.

*No good, huh? Alright, fine.*

He killed the throttle, and while inertia kept hurtling them in one direction, he used the RCS thrusters to orient them towards the pod trying to make it to the Savoy's triangular main hull before powering the engines up, barely giving the inertial dampeners time to compensate.

The pod he was trying to target was managing a fairly erratic path, and was flying as fast as it could to get over the hull, giving it some cover. Mark swooped in and turned the shuttle in its descent, making the Savoy's hull 'down' as he hurried to intercept the enemy. As the pod whizzed back and forth in his reticle, he thought he saw a pattern to the movement, and fired the phasers on a hunch, which paid off in clipping the pod, forcing it further down to be flattened against the edge of the primary section, splattering the alien craft along the hull in a fiery mess that charred the silver hull, probably causing some hull breaches.

A glance at the viewscreen told him that the other pod was snaking down along the ventral axis of the hull, trying to keep the large ship between them as it searched for a place to dock. Mark continued the swooping run on the Savoy's primary hull, and zoomed in front of the drifting ship, turning upside-down and under the Nova-class, yawing wide to clear the deflector dish...only to see three pods attached to the hull already..

*The original raiders; that's what those are!*

Sure enough, a look at the viewscreen showed the fourth enemy craft trying to align with the Savoy's hull near the strut attaching the starboard nacelle to the Engineering section. Taking all the power he could from the shields, Mark barreled towards the docking craft, unable to change its direction now that it was trying to dock, and handily vaporized it, aiming from the hull out, in case they decided to break off.

\* \* \*

His father walked up to him.

"Are you feeling OK, Comor? you look a bit light-headed."

"Father... have I ever mentioned the Lotus?" Felez said shakily.

"The Lotus.. you mean Lotus? your Skeeat? oh... well, I'm sorry for that, but accidents happen."

He looked away a bit glumly.

"What do you mean, accidents... she's right..."

But the Skeeat was gone.

"No... She was right... I know she was right here! and that's not her name dad, you never..."

He stopped and looked at his father.

There it was again. It's all he felt since he got off the shuttle.

Fear.

He saw it when he looked at his father, when he looked at Natra; nothing but fear.

*But that's not possible, he thought; why would they fear me?*

"The Lotus" he said quietly.

"USS Lotus, NCC-74910!" he said with defiant resolve.

"Son, what are you...?" his father started to say.

Felez ignored him, going on.

"Intrepid class vessel, under the command of... of..."

His eyes went wide.

"ME!"

He was surprised at his own words.

His father stood back.

"It's not working on this one."

Natra stood beside him.

"He is empathic. These others are telepathic... This was unexpected."

Felez looked at them both, suddenly realising that he was wrong. He wasn't sensing fear from them, he was sensing it from everything.

"Who are you? why are you doing this? what have you done with my ship?"

Then he remembered.

"You attacked my ship? Why..."

*No.. no! Not attacked.. attacking!*

"Your just keeping me busy, aren't you! Is this what happened on the Savoy? Is this how you took their bridge?"

His anger was rising but he fought it down. It couldn't help him or his ship now. His worst fear was losing control of his ship.

"Not like the other one. He would shut down ship's controls even while under our influence. This would be a great setback for us. First approach would fail," Natra said calmly.

"So this time it was decided to try a different approach, by stimulating memories of failure, it was thought..."

But Felez stopped listening. They were still doing it; they were still distracting him while they took over the ship.

That had to mean there was still time. Or else they would have dropped it by now.

*Wait... he thought; I'm still on the Lotus, still on the bridge.*

He pushed through the fear, the feeling of failure. They couldn't take out the bridge by just affecting him.

There... he felt it; sorrow... grief of something lost... and confusion... denial...

He concentrated on it. Slowly, the world blurred and a figure could be seen standing silently, head down. Felez watched as the person held his hand out as if to drop something. He could see him now.

It was Lieutenant Edward Thomah.

Felez looked slowly around. It was like he was in a dream. Everyone on the bridge was talking to themselves or crying slightly, lost in their own misery.

He looked down at his right hand, it looked surreal but it was working. It was pushing buttons on his arm rest. It was using the override to...

As the pods began to slow, preparing to land, suddenly the regenerative hull plating activated. Quickly, the exterior of the Lotus became covered with segmented armor plates, turning it into a gigantic replica of those armored fish of prehistoric seas, causing the tractor beam to lose its hold on the ship.

The pods still landed but found themselves unable to penetrate the armor.

With the tractor beam down, the ship's power and their thoughts stabilized as if the two were somehow linked.

The sudden change in the situation between the ships didn't escape the small shuttle flying between them.

"Any word from Hargrove?" asked Robertson, finally letting his breath go from his constricted chest.

Ensign Kent looked over with a curious look on her face before answering.

"Yes Sir; I just reached her a moment ago, didn't you hear me talking to her?"

"No, I was too focused on getting those pods.. Did she give us any orders?"

"Yes Sir, she does not want us to engage the main vessel."

Mark turned the shuttle to face the Lotus, and sure enough, she was drifting down from the enemy ship, the pods that had been on course to board her flitting about around it.

*They can't get through the armor!"*

Try to raise them, Kent."

"Aye Sir." she replied before opening a channel. "Shuttle 2 calling USS Lotus, please respond."

As she tried to hail their ship, Mark kept an eye on the pods the sensors could pick up, including the ones still attached to the Savoy.

*Better stick to running interference for the Savoy for now. Lotus will be alright with armor up.*

On the viewscreen of the Savoy, Hargrove and her people also watched as the pods reached the trapped Lotus and suddenly its armor sprang to life, quickly coating her hull. S'kon at the Opps station read off the sensor readings.

"The Lotus's armor has caused the the enemy's tractor beam to fail; not surprising as it is effective at doing so even against Borg technology."

"Captain, reports from the anti-boarding parties confirm enemy is withdrawing back to deck 4. They're not even returning fire as this point, Captain."

Hargrove didn't even blink at either of the reports, and replied as if giving no thought to them.

"Continue pushing them off the Savoy but take prisoners if possible. Mister S'kon.." she turned to look at him. "They took some of our people with them.. find them."

She didn't wait for a reply and turned away even as he started to explain the unlikelihood of her order. So instead he just said "Aye Captain" and went about it.

Mrrish spoke up in the break of the conversation.

"Captain Hargrove, if the bridge is secure.. may we transfer the Chief to sickbay?"

She looked over at him quickly. It was as though she had forgotten about him.

"Very well"

She pointed to the officer that had shot Kheren.

"Go with them."

The officer looked a little pale but nodded. It was clear he was slightly concerned about the muscular black-furred Caitian woman's feelings toward him at that moment.

"Main shuttlebay" Mrrish ordered the lift once the doors were shut.

"Hay, sick bay is on..." but Mrrish snapped at him.

"He goes back to the Lotus."

She finished up with a warning growl.

The turbolift deposited them on the shuttlebay level. Looking around for any sign of threat, they proceeded cautiously towards the other end of the corridor and soon met the group still standing there over the fallen body of a giant armored alien, with a Human woman in science blue applying a hypospray on herself.

As soon as they appeared, the two security guards leveled their phaser rifles towards them; but they quickly recognized the color of the uniforms.

So did Doctor Kerrigan; despite her crushed leg, she had barely injected herself with cordrazine to kill the pain and reduce the seriousness of her own injury that she was now unbelted her medical tricorder upon seeing the inert form of Kheren on the stretcher between the Caitian and the Human.

" Bring him here. " she ordered with a sigh of relief as the medication took immediate effect.

She cleaned her sweating brow with a swab from her medikit then focused on the wounded Andorian lowered beside her.

" Phaserrr shot, Doctorrr. " Simply said the Caitian woman as the Human scanned the carried Andorian. Everyone could see how pale his usually deep blue skin was, the large burnt mark across his chest a vivid metallic cobalt hue.

The medical officer was a moment startled to see that his cranial appendages were almost completely hidden within his white-haired skull.

*Retracting antennae? What in the...*

But what she voiced instead was much more chilling than any observation about some never heard-of anatomical peculiarity.

" Quick! we must bring him to sickbay if we are to have any chance to save him! "

"On the Lotus," specified Mrrish with a low growl.

" The Lotus? Why the Lotus? " asked Kerrigan. " There is a sickbay on this ship... "

" And all of these... things! " almost shouted the felinoid officer. " And his condition is becoming too crrritical to rrrisk being interrupted durring trrrreatment! "

" But... it was just a grazing shot... " started to protest the Savoy crewman.

Kerrigan extracted another capsule for her hypospray and added to it a long needle. Mrrish got suddenly alarmed and caught her wrist with a lightning reflex action.

" What is this? What arrre you doing? "

" Andorians have a partially chitinous skin and an osmotic circulatory system. " explained Kerrigan with definite annoyance in her voice. " Standard hyposprays are useless on them. Intramuscular injections are necessary." And as she did so, once released by the Caitian officer, she added: " This should stabilize him long enough to bring him to proper care... if we hurry! This thick hard skin of his may have helped him survive the initial shot... but if we don't hurry, he *will* die! "

" Die?" said both the Savoy officer and the Caitian female.

Doctor Kerrigan looked at them with a somber look when she pointed at his large wound.

" On a Human, this would have been a third degree burn. As serious as it would be already, on a much higher metabolic Andorian, it becomes much worse... "

All the others were still looking at her, and him, quizzically. And so she completed in a gloomy tone.

" Phase pulse infection."

"Hurry then!" urged Mrrish. "Help me carry him!"

As soon as the group from the corridor entered the shuttlebay, Mriish signalled the Savoy Crewman helping her to turn with her and the unconscious Kheren towards the stairs leading to the upper level.

" Where are you going? " asked Kerrigan immediately noticing them moving off. " The shuttles are over there. "

" And they will stay there, answered the Caitian woman, "unless Captain Harrgrove orders an evacuation. She's in command now... and she will certainly not risk sending out needlessly the shuttles full of people during a battle with another ship... shuttles she would need if an evacuation would be required. "

" Then, where do you think you are going? " asked again the wounded woman held up between her two rescuers.

"Our orders are to bring the Chief to medical bay. You officially stated his life is in danger; you confirmed to us that there is no safe and adequate medical help on this ship: thus, I will bring him back to the Lotus. "

" But... how? " still asked Kerrigan.

They were all confused... except for the Savoy crewman.

" Above this main bay is a secondary shuttlebay with all our auxiliary vehicles. The Ensign is thinking of using a shuttlepod. "

" But... a shuttlepod... in the middle of a skirmish between... but you said it yourself, that's too risky! " almost shouted the doctor.

The intense blue of Mriish's slitted eyes bore into her and her voice turned from a purr to a growl.

" Risky, yes... But staying here means Chief Kherrren will die. "

The feline female started climbing the stairs with the inert Andorian, helped the crewman as she said so. Herself propped up between two security men.

" I could order you to stay here... " the doctor began.

" And I could disobey... " retorted Mriish not stopping and showing a glitter of fangs in her dark-furred face, her ears almost flat on her dense mane of dark-blueish hair. " My duty is to save lives; what is yours, Doctor ? "

Speechless, Dr Kerrigan looked at them reaching the walkway above and moving on over the entrance, to a small open lift that brought them up half a deck, to a wide double door. It had been kept open since two guards dropped to save Kheren and his comrade during the alien assault of the hangar. With a last glint of her burning stare, Mriish disappeared with her companion and her inert superior into the secondary hangar.

*Well, it sure as hell doesn't include leaving injured crew members behind, or taking off in a repair pod when there's a far superior shuttle right in front of you, ya dumb cat,*

Kerrigan kept her thoughts to herself. Angered by what she perceived as a serious and irrational betrayal. A moment later, the Savoy crewman came out, lowered the lift platform to get back to the catwalk and signalled to the pair of officers occupying the control booth.

Then, just over their heads, a repair shuttlepod flew out to hover before the blasted open hangar doors, just long enough to let the closing forcefields shift behind it, then zoomed out of sight along the hull of the Savoy

## CHAPTER EIGHT: OF LIFE AND DEATH

Captain Hargrove moved anxiously around the bridge, periodically looking over at S'kon manning ops for some sign he was having success finding the Savoy crewmen taken.

"Open hailing frequencies to all ships," she said to the tactical officer.

"Ready, Captain."

"All Federation ships, you are ordered to immobilize the main alien vessel, cripple it if you must but it cannot be allowed to leave this area with Federation personal aboard. This is a priority 1 order."

"Lieutenant Mutain to bridge," then was heard from ship's inner comm channel; "all systems restored, Captain."

She didn't bother to respond.

"Bring phasers on line and get me a target on that ship," she said while sitting back down in the Captain's chair. "We'll cut off its warp engines if we have to but I'm not letting it leave."

On the Lotus, Felez made his way to the comm and replied even though he himself was still unsteady.

"Lotus here; acknowledged."

Most of the bridge crew was starting to shake it off. To his relief, Lieutenant Tomah was one of the first.

"Lieutenant, are you with me?"

His feelings were still confusing but sharpening quickly.

Tomah just nodded after first looking down at the floor, as if expecting to see something.

"I need a tactical analysis of the alien vessel. We need to disable it. Do you understand?"

Tomah gave a very subdued "Ah, Aye sir" and went to work. Felez then opened a channel for a ship wide announcement.

"This is the Captain..." he paused for just a moment remembering that shortly Hargrove would be taking that title. "All sections heads, report status to the bridge; Felez out."

On board the shuttle between the two Starfleet ships, Mark Robertson zoomed in on the scans they'd taken thus far of the alien mothership, looking for wherever the great behemoth might be keeping her engines. The only other viable targets were the tractor beam that had captured Lotus earlier, or the hangar egress those boarding pods had come from. The latter was rather unattractive, since Captain Hargrove intimated that some of the Savoy's crew had been taken hostage.

Beside him, Ensign Kent suddenly spoke up.

"Sir, a new launch from Savoy; it's one of the shuttlepods from the auxiliary bay. Hailing..." After a moment, he added; "they're responding, Sir. It's Ensign Mrrish."

"Onscreen." The Caitian Ensign appeared on the shuttle's small monitors.

"What are you doing out in that pod, Ensign?"

"Sirrr, Chief Kherrren was crrritically wounded. We could not rrrrisk the Savoy's medical bay, so we arre taking him back to the Lotus."

Mark nodded.

*Make sense; no time to find out about any surprises left in Sickbay."*

Ensign, we'll cover you. Get the Chief to safety."

He revved up the Type-9's engines and looped around to follow the shuttlepod, keeping it under a watchful eye while matching its velocity, heading for home, which was making its way slowly out from under the massive organic ship.

As the ops officer on the Lotus Fleet flagship's bridge started sorting out all the return calls from all departement heads from one end of the ship to the other, Lieutenant Tomah was completing a diagnostic of his on console when he suddenly frowned.

" Sir; two signals on a direct intercept course with us: one Type IX shuttlecraft... one of ours, Sir.. and it's following a shuttlepod... registered to the Savoy. "

" Confirmed, Sir. " then said the ops officer. " Lieutenant Robertson is escorting the shuttle pod. Security Ensign Mrrish is aboard, requesting emergency docking and a ready medical team..."

She then lifted her head to add: " She's bringing Chief Kheren... out cold with Phase Pulse infection."

Felez nodded but said nothing. Kheren must be bad off if they where evacuating him back to the Lotus.

"Hail Commander Robertson, ship to ship only," he said with a stern look at Lortoria.

"Go ahead, Sir." she said.

"Robertson, you will continue your escort of the shuttle pod and then take position in case the enemy vessel launches more pods. I do not want you to attempt to engage the larger ship; Lotus out."

He cut off before Robertson could reply, keeping him out of the line of fire if Hargrove later asked why he went against her orders, which he probably did in this unexpected situation.

*This is still my ship and they're still my crew, he thought defiantly. I'm not sending a shuttle against that monster.*

All this time, Felez was still more concerned with his people than anything else.

"Have sickbay standing by and explain Kheren's situation to the Doctor. Pulse phase infection is a deadly condition to Andorians. Time is of the essence."

"Sickbay is online, captain, came the instant reply from ops, followed by the voice of the chief medical officer.

"There was a strange loud noise sounding in sickbay, but it has since died down." Ensign T'Kua's condition is stable. She will most likely make a full recovery."

"Doctor," Lortoria then told Driam, "Chief Kheren has suffered a phase pulse infection to the chest and is unconscious. They're bringing him over from the Savoy as we speak, his condition is critical."

"Understood." Driam responded and began the preparation necessary to deal with the situation.

As soon as the shuttlepod locked itself to the airlock of the Lotus, Mrrriish powered off the craft and reached the aft hatch in one powerful leap. She quickly unlocked the safeties then let the crewmen on the other side open the access while she bounded back to the inert form of Chief Kheren lying on the floor in the minuscule spacecraft. She had hastily secured his tall frame with magnetic clamps usually used to fix equipment on a ship's exterior hull. They were just big enough to cover his limbs without crushing them on the deckplates. She deactivated them then turned around to see two members of the medical team slide in on each side of the unmoving body on an antigrav stretcher pad. Once activated, they created a supporting energy field underneath the unconscious Andorian, allowing him to be effortlessly moved without any risk of causing internal damage.

A medical tricorder was already scanning him as he was carried away. The Caitian woman kept her slitted blue eyes on his form as they extracted it carefully from the pod. There was a distinctive fruity scent permeating the diminutive craft: the peculiar and rarely perceived odor of Andorian sweat.

With forceful gestures, she secured the airlock then activated the release mechanism. The shuttlepod would drift away from the starship, so as not to hamper it while she was still facing a hostile vessel. She kept her felinoid features hidden between her and the wall, slowing her breathing. But her mind was still frantic with the same thought: two things could really make an Andorian sweat: heat... and serious sickness.

But it was out of her hands now, she sighed as she followed the medics carrying her chief.

Aboard his shuttlecraft, Mark didn't get the chance to protest the order he had received. He gritted his teeth, his mind racing as he watched the signals from the alien pods getting closer to docking with the mothership. Beside him, Ensign Kent asked the question.

"What's...what's that leave for us, Sir?"

"He said don't engage. I didn't hear squat about reconnaissance..."

A quick glance told him Mrrriish had made it close enough to Lotus, and he gunned the engines and arced up towards the alien vessel. It was all he could do not to at least take a potshot at the great hulk as they zipped up towards the dorsal surface and aft towards the engines that looked like they could push two Galaxy-class starships at full capacity.

"Scan it. Every last millimeter of that hull, Ensign."

"Sir, the Lotus and Savoy are powering up weapons, Lotus's ablative armor is dropping."

She didn't have to finish the sentence when he jerked the controls upward and diverted every last ounce of energy from phasers and shields to the engines that meant life for the both of them.

"They're firing!" Kent kept him informed as they shot up and away, then looped back down for visual confirmation as the pair of Starfleet vessels blasted away with their phasers, cutting into the larger ship.

On the Lotus bridge, Tomah spoke with just a touch of excitement in his voice.

"Ah, Captain, the last of the Alien pods has docked with the vessel."

Felez nodded.

"We're out of time; fire at will."

He didn't know if dropping the armor and making them vulnerable to their tractor beam again was a good idea, but they couldn't use phasers while armored up and two-hundred-isoton torpedoes were a poor choice of weapon for disabling a ship. The Lotus's main phaser bank lashed out striking the larger ship and at the same time USS Savoy open fire as well, both ships targeting the aft section of the larger craft, the effect was obvious. The larger ships shields seemed woefully not up to the task as the beams sliced through them with apparent ease, cutting long furrows into the enormous ship.

But it wasn't enough.

"Sir," Lortra then reported, frowning, "I'm reading a build up in there warp engines, something odd."

With a flash the vessel was gone, leaving part of its damaged hull behind.

Felez seemed and sounded calm.

"Track them, set up a pursuit course."

But he knew what to expect.

Lortoria worked her control furiously and then sighed.

"I'm sorry, Sir, we lost them as soon as they went to warp."

"Very well; plot a course following their last heading. Speculate where they might be going." He stood up and looked around the room.

"I want everyone to have every bit of information we have analyzed. There will be a tactical briefing in thirty minutes on everything that just happened. I want a definite answer as to what we're up against."

He then strode off to the ready room. As the doors closed behind him Lortoria glanced at Tomah.

"Is it my imagination, or is he really ticked off?"

On the Savoy, the sudden departure of the alien craft brought the same disappointment mixed with relief but shrouded in confusion. S'kon looked up from his console.

"I'm sorry, Captain Hargrove; they are no longer on our scanners."

Hargrove looked stunned, her face expressionless for several seconds. With a hollow sound to her voice she then instructed the Vulcan to prepare the boarding party's return to the Lotus.

"Captain, the Savoy will need more time and people to get fully operational. It would be unwise to.." S'Kon started to say but was cut off.

Hargrove seemed to explode.

"I gave you an order, Mister! Did I say I wanted your logical assessment on anything? Did I?"

Her face was red, her breathing fast but she calmed down with an effort of will. S'Kon was at a lost for words, not knowing how to respond to such emotional outbursts.

"I'm transferring command of the Savoy to Lieutenant Mutain. We will all return to the Lotus and decide what our next course of action will be. Do I make myself clear?"

Her words were now measured and even. S'Kon replied, unfazed by anything that had happened.

"Affirmative, Captain."

In shuttle 2, Robertson's heart sank in his chest after the organic vessel had shot into warp, knowing that some of their fellow officers were onboard.

He growled in irritation and brought the impulse engines back down from redline as he set a course for the Lotus, deciding regrouping would be the best option.

"Kent, take all data collected and send it to Lortoria on the bridge. Inform her we're coming in."

The female Ensign nodded and did so, receiving a reply within a moment.

"Lieutenant Lortoria says that Captain Felez has ordered a tactical debriefing in thirty minutes."

Mark sighed and slumped back into the seat as they made their way back to the Lotus,

*Tactical assessment? It could've been better and worse...*

"Sir?" Kent spoke up again, causing him to look over to her, "The shuttle pod..." He arched a brow and looked towards the aft starboard, where, drifting away from the E/V Access Airlock, was the Savoy's shuttlepod.

*Figures...* He thought ruefully as he cued up the comm system and hailed the Lotus's bridge.

"Lotus, Shuttle 2; I'm going to dock with the Savoy's shuttlepod and have Ensign Kent pilot it back to berth."

"Understood, Shuttle 2. Lotus out."

He grinned wryly and shook his head.

"Well, at least this way, we won't be cooling our heels for thirty whole minutes.."

Tractoring in and docking with the smaller shuttlepod took five minutes, but Mark didn't want to take chances, and escorted the slower vessel back to the Savoy. Once there, he ordered Tobor to report to Captain Hargrove to offer herself as a helmsman, though whomever was flying Savoy at the moment wasn't doing too badly. Another ten minutes, and Mark was setting

down in the Lotus's shuttlebay, vaulting over the extending landing ramp and jogging to the turbolift. Lieutenant Aramaki tried asking him what happened, but he waved him off.

"I'll explain later; just prep a Type-6 and make sure that Type-9 is still ready to fly!"

A few moments later, he was breathing heavily as he made it in time for the briefing, hoping for some good news from the data collected so far.

\* \* \*

"An autopsy?" said Driam.

Upon arriving, Captain Hargrove had come straight to sickbay. As soon as she got to Driam, she received confirmation about the alien body Chief Kheren had sent to the Lotus via an escape pod. And then came the unexpected order.

"That's right, doctor. And I want *you* to perform it personally. Make it your top priority."

"I realize that the need for information is great, but with all due respect, my attention is needed elsewhere. Ensign Kheren..."

"Yes, yes, and I'm sure your subordinates will take good care of him. Contact me when you have the autopsy report, understood?"

"... Yes, ma'am," acknowledged the doctor with a perfunctory tone.

As soon as the authoritative woman left, the Trill doctor made a face at the door closing behind her.

. "Computer, activate the emergency medical hologram."

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency."

"I need you to transfer to the morgue and perform an autopsy and full medical report on the alien insectoid we brought here from the Savoy, is this possible?" Asked Driam.

"It certainly is." Said the EMH with a smile and disappeared, just as the doors to sickbay slid open and security chief Kheren was carried through them.

"Put him down here," the Trill CMO ordered, pointing to the biobed that had been prepared for Kheren. "What happened?"

"He was shot, doctorrr." Responded a female Caitian security officer. "Yourrr underrrling diagnosed it as a phase pulse infection."

"Kerrigan? Where is she?" Asked Driam, suddenly realizing that she'd forgotten all about her.

"Still aboarrd the Savoy." answered Mrrish. "Herrr leg was severrrrely damaged durring an

attack and because of the lack of transportation, it was decided to leave her there."

"You did *what?!*" yelled Driam, struggling to contain her anger. "You *left her there?*"  
"Unlike the chief's, her condition was not critical. Bringing her along was not possible due to the restricted space inside a workpod..."

"OUT!" yelled the doctor, pointing at the door. "Unless you are wearing blue or in desperate need of medical attention, you will leave this room *now!*"

There were a lot of angry stares aimed at her direction, but in the end they did as they'd been told and the security personnel left sickbay. Though still angry over what she'd just been told, Shayanna shrugged it off and focused on the task at hand; Kheren.

"Strip his torso." she ordered after a thorough scanning of the patient. There was indeed a nasty infected wound where he'd been hit.

"Antibiotics."

She received a container of antibiotic gel which she carefully applied around the wound while one of her aides handled the dermal regenerator and another monitored the chief's condition. It took them a moment to recalibrate it; not only was he Andorian, among the most complex humanoid lifeforms ever encountered with their weird mix of mammalian and insectoid traits, but his file revealed that he was a genetic mutant, artificially conceived despite Federation and Andorian laws against genetic manipulation, to be both of the male genders of his four gender species. His DNA's complexity was second only to that of an Undine. It was at the same time fascinating and bewildering.

Despite this, he was no Frankenstein's monster. He was definitely a handsome man, but he was a product of his extremely harsh arctic planetary environment and of his violent, almost savage species and culture. Years of combat had certainly left their marks; there were scars all over his torso. Most of them were simple cuts but a few of them seemed like they hadn't come cheap. His brow was also slightly caved in as if from a tremendous blow and two angry scars crossed it under his thick white hair.

If there was one constant trait that seemed to span across all cultures, it was the irrational obsession amongst the warriors of the galaxy to view their scars as if they were some sort of trophies, worthy of decorating their bodies instead of being removed by people like Chayana. But according to Kheren's psychoprofile, he had kept them as a reminder of his mistakes and atonement for the lives he had taken in Andorian duels. A noble sentiment, maybe, but judging by their number, he was a slow learner.

The treatment progressed without complications, but even after all that could have been done had been done, the chief was still unconscious and had to be kept under observation.

"Call me if his condition changes. I will be in the other room." said Driam as she headed for the morgue to check up on the EMH.

"Report." the Trill ordered and frowned when she saw the insectoid splayed open with the EMH cheerfully cutting and making notes.

"Well, I checked the medical database, and after a lot of digging I stumbled upon the name Cyrroid. They're a race that was thought to be extinct for the last one hundred and fifty years. This young fellow seems to be a drone; I've been unable to find anything that looks like a reproductive organ and, based on what little information there was in the database, that seems like a plausible assessment."

"Good work, hologram. Keep working."

"Will do."

An hour passed. After several attempts, Driam managed to contact Kerrigan to confirm that she was out of danger. She was on her way to check up on the EMH when she got a call.

"Doctor, you might wanna get in here. Chief Kheren is waking up."

Relieved, she went over to the bed where Kheren has been resting and opened up her tricorder, confirming that what she had been told was true.

"Ensign?" She said in a low voice and leaned in over him. "Can you hear me, Ensign?"

The silvery eyes of the Andorian were looking straight at her, blinking. Then, slowly, his knobby antennae emerged from the thick mane of white hair covering his head, pointing at Driam.

" I do now, Doctor. "

Although she had read his medical file and the notes about his abnormality, she still looked startled by the peculiar movement his cranial appendages were capable of, quite unheard-of for Andorians. He lifted his torso upright, his eyes darting as much as his antennae all around him. Only his natural lack of facial muscles and decades of discipline allowed him to hide the flash of pain he felt from his body to his head and back with the motion... at least to the casual observer, not an experienced medical officer like Doctor Driam, that much was plainly evident in her own eyes.

" This is sickbay... on the Lotus, " he said.

It would normally have taken at least a Vulcan's hearing to perceive the slight straining of his deep, calm voice... But again, the chief medical officer of the flagship was well versed in xenobiology... and the high susceptibility to shock of Andorians.

He finally rested his eyes, all four of them, on the Trill woman:

" As expected, Doctor, your good ministrations saved the day... and this junior officer. Thank you. Now please excuse me but I have to report to the Captain. "

"I am afraid you will not be going anywhere, Ensign." Driam said in a gentle but stern tone.

She stood in his way to keep him from standing up. She was certainly powerless physically to do so, but her authority as chief medical officer alone was more than enough to freeze him there more effectively than a phaser on heavy stun.

"If you want to speak with the captain, he will have to come down here. You need to rest."

The Andorian had a most atypical reaction: he lifted one eyebrow up.

" Doctor... far from me to dispute your medical competence... but... if I can sit and talk in a biobed, can't I do it in a briefing room's chair? You could always strap a portable medical scanner to me if you need to monitor my vital signs. And I'll be only three decks above. "

He couldn't help but find it amusing that the Trill woman thought to position herself to prevent him from leaving. She would have to be strong as a Gorn to restrain him... or have the reflexes of a Caitian to prevent him from just flipping back to the other side of the bed... But the very thought of such simple acrobatics already made his antennae curl back... and for a split second, he wondered if he could have even pushed her frail form if he tried...

She was only concerned with his welfare, doing her job; beyond the simple fact that she saved his life, he could only but respect that.

But he also had a job to do.

" Doctor; thanks to you, I am one of the survivors of a close-hand encounter with those aliens.

I know their tactics, their weaponry and how to effectively oppose them in close quarters. I must report to the Captain. You did a great job saving me. Please allow me to do mine... not just for you and me but for the sake of our whole crew. "

He lowered his head to better look at her, knowing that this apparent gesture of humility would not be lost on her.

" Doctor... the better I do my work, the less work you will have. "

Just then, Felez entered sickbay, spotting Kheren and the Doctor and walked over to them.

"Your looking a bit worse for the wear, Ensign. How is he, Doctor Driam?"

"Aside from an irrational lack of concern for his own well-being, he will be fine." said Driam in response to Felez' question. "He took a phaser blast to the torso and a resulting infection, but I am confident that the situation is under control. He was just about to storm out to go see you, but now that you are here, I might be able to convince him to stay without physically restraining him."

She gave the ensign a dark glare that told she was not bluffing.

Felez gave a good natured smile... What he hoped was one anyway.

"I suspected you might be bedbound for awhile so I came to get your take of what happened aboard the Savoy before the briefing started."

Kheren wanted to stand up, but both officers rose a hand to restrain him. With obvious reluctance, he complied. It also allowed his head to stop spinning between his waving antennae.

Sitting as straight as he could, out of respect and to control his dizziness, he reported: " Sir, I encountered one of the aliens and was hit by it's weaponry. It is a particle wave weapon with kinetic effects similar to a heavy stun setting. A complementary contact device is then centered on the victim's body so that a second discharge can penetrate skin and cause damage similar to a disruptor discharge to internal organs, causing death. I noticed the alien jumping back in fear before discharging his own weapon on the device, as if he feared being caught in it's effect. The radius of the disruption must extend outward from the target to up to a meter, judging by it's actions."

He paused a moment to gather wits and senses before continuing: " the aliens looked insectoid, all identical, over two meters tall with limited mobility. I believe they are wearing an armor designed to withstand their own weaponry. But it is highly resistant to phaser fire. Stun is ineffective and at least a setting of 8 needed to penetrate it, and still often two discharges are required. "

He curled his antennae toward his superior officer before finishing.

" I sent one body into an escape pod, hoping the Lotus would recover it... along with the body of Beren... and... Ensign T'Kua! Did you recover it, Sir? Is she alright? "

For the first time, emotion was perceptible in his voice. his concern was flaring up higher than his own residual pain to the Efrozian's empathic sensibilities.

"She is out of danger now, Ensign. " told Doctor Driam. " You did well. "

Commander Felez cut in.

" anything else to report, Chief? "

" They never attempted to communicate or responded to any sign or word. They didn't board with any craft or thruster suit, so I assume they use some kind of transporter technology. They

sometime seemed to appear from just around a corner... but they used jeffreys tubes and turbolifts to move around. I suspect there must be a ship nearby, possibly cloaked. "

"There was, Chief... and they warped out with some of our people aboard."

Kheren looked caught between sadness and anger with a short burst that fused with a brief flaring of pain. The Efrogian perceived it all at once.

"Sir, they did not act like an assault unit. They had not even the simplest tactics to oppose our own when we started fighting them. They just stood and fired, moving slowly, barely using cover, no definite maneuvering; more like gatherers and scavengers than hunters or predators.... Sir. "

Felez thought for a moment.

" Thank you, Ensign. Very thorough, as usual. Now I leave you in the hands of our good Doctor. Get well. "

" With all due respect, Sir, started to protest the Andorian, rising, I can... "

" You can lie down and rest now, Chief. " interrupted Doctor Driam, forcing him gently but firmly to lie back on the bed. " A nurse will come shortly and give you a sedative. You can report to your station when it wears off. Not a moment sooner, understood? "

Not looking at her, it took a long moment for Kheren to answer.

" Yes, Doctor. "

Leaving behind a smile and a stern look, the chief medical officer turned around and headed for the autopsy room.

Kheren was not looking at her. Since her last words, he was looking intently at the nurse coming from the other end of the room with a standard hypospray ready in her hand.

Again, he had a most atypical reaction, one that was most difficult for his rare facial muscles.

He smiled.

## CHAPTER NINE: THE FACE OF THE ENEMY

The meeting in the flagship's briefing room was half a hour in as Ops officer Lortoria concluded.

" ... and despite their unknown configuration, their warp signature is very close to that of Klingon ships, Captain. "

At the head of the table, Captain Hargrove sat deeply in her chair, arms crossed frowning. Her voice was hard.

" A new Klingon design then... "

" Unlikely, Captain. " answered Lieutenant Tomah not without unease turning to the formidable woman on his right. " For one thing, their shielding frequency was not properly set against our phasers; like... well, civilian ships... or decommissioned starships... "

" Or a culture unfamiliar with our weaponry. " suggested Lortoria." Klingons would not hide themselves with disguises anyway... or send other species to do their battles for them; they are way too proud for that. "

Captain Hargrove turned an acid look at the ops officer. She obviously did not like her personal assessments to be challenged or dismissed so readily.

It was at least very obvious to the sensitive Efrogian First officer sitting at her right.

He hadn't said a word during the whole meeting, except to present the senior officers to her when she arrived from the Savoy, immediately deferring authority to her. He was use to letting senior officers and experts report and debate issues between themselves, guiding them if needed, until solutions came up from which he could base a decision supported by their expertise. His scientific mind always asked for data before making any hypothesis to guide his actions. It didn't take that long... and avoided many mistakes born out of rashness and limited points of view... But most of all, he had confidence in his junior officers.

Hargrove was not like him at all. She was the "take charge" kind of person, fully confident in herself... and not that much in her subordinates. That's the impression he got from his Efrogian sensitivity.

But Felez's job was First officer now; *his* job was to make Captain and ship run smoothly together. So now he spoke.

" Captain; Lieutenant Lortoria's preliminary lab results pointed out that fragments from the alien ship's hull collected appear to be of a specific organic-crystalline alloy of unidentified

origin."

" Unidentified... and how is that going to help us find them? " retorted the Captain curtly.  
" Bread crumbs. "

All heads in the room turned towards the door. The entrance was filled with the tall form of Chief of security Kheren.

" Isn't it the right term, M'am? From your Terran mythology... "

Doctor Driam turned sharply in her chair towards him as she interrupted him.

" Ensign, what are you doing up? " said the chief medical officer. " You are supposed to be in sickbay, resting. "

" Until the sedative wore off, Doctor." answered the Andorian. " Those were your orders. Obviously, it has worn off, so I am now reporting to the briefing room, also as ordered. "

" No, your orders were to report to your *station* once the sedative wore off, " said Driam, irritated by the suicidal tendencies of her patient over what she perceived to be an irrational attempt to look good in the eyes of his fellow officers. " And judging from the fact that you are already awake I... "

" Enough!" shouted Hargrove, slamming her hand flat on the table, startling everyone.

Everyone but Felez. He had felt her anger mounting though his empathic perceptions like a tidal wave coming. In the heavy silence that followed, the woman's voice thundered.

" Doctor, sit down and be quiet. And since you're so smart, Ensign, tell us what you mean. And better make it good, Mister! "

As the chief medical officer kept a concerned eye on her patient, the Andorian stood at attention. Shayana Driam knew the pain he was hiding just to stand up there; Felez felt it. But he felt also that Captain Hargrove wouldn't care if she knew, at least at the moment. And Driam was starting to see it too.

For his part, Kheren stoically spoke as ordered.

" Captain... this substance mentioned by Commander Felez is apparently very specific. Going to warp with them left in their wake, those particles must now be dispersed light years across behind it... like droplets of blood from a wounded running beast. "

" That would certainly work but..." Lieutenant Lortoria said thoughtfully,"even with the state of the art sensors aboard the Lotus, the particles are sensor resistant. We would have to drop out of warp several times to recalibrate our course; it could take days or perhaps even weeks to follow the ship to its final destination."

" A bit like tracking a gazelle with a magnifying glass." Edward Tomah added hesitantly. " But maybe we could get a projected destination... calculating the warp speed from the particles' rate of dispersal... "

"Which I'm willing to bet isn't very high." Mark Robertson leaned forward, elbows on the table as he finally addressed the Captain. "If I may Ma'am, we're talking about something roughly the size of a Romulan D'deridex-class using a roughly-Klingon warp signature. Now unless they're using some superior biotech system, I'm willing to bet they can't maintain Warp 9 all that long."

"Have a seat Ensign," Felez gestured at a chair near him. "As long as you are here..."

Chief Kheren hesitated for a noticeable fraction of a second, looking at the Captain. But she

gave no sign one way or another, so he complied.

Captain Hargrove stood up.

"Let's put the pieces together shall we? The autopsy report said they're Cyrcoids, a race that, according to the Starfleet database, was lost in the Navori system when it's star became magnetically destabilized more than one hundred and fifty years ago. Their defenses were inadequate and their tactics poor; its safe to say they had very little 'real world' experience, which shows the hallmarks of the Cyrcoid isolationist culture."

She looked around the room

"Conclusions?"

Mark frowned at the mention of the Navori system, and looked to the science officer.

"Lortoria, you at least projected their last known course when they warped out, right?"

The woman down the table looked over the PADD in her hand and nodded. Her eyes got a little bigger as she looked at the data.

"...Oh I see! Going out twenty light-years, there were three star systems along their last known trajectory, but they're all uninhabited for various reasons."

She sat forward a bit, leaning on the table as if to share a secret with the staff.

"One of which is due to magnetic instability within the system's star."

Felez nodded.

"Sounds like too much of a coincidence, Captain. I believe where looking at an isolationist culture that went into hiding during the war."

He got a concentrated look on his face.

"The question now is why have they come out to attack Federation shipping? We need..."

"Their motivation doesn't concern me, Commander," Hargrove said curtly. "Mister Robertson, set a course for the Navori system, maximum warp."

Felez hesitated for a second.

"The Savoy will not be service ready for another two hours Captain. Until then..."

Hargrove stood up talking sideways at him.

"They'll make do, Commander. The direct threat has been removed. You have your orders."

She then walked out of the room without another word.

As everyone else got up, Felez held his hand up to get their attention.

"Robertson, Driam I'd like you both to meet me in my ready... back here in ten minutes. I have something I wish to discuss with both of you. Kheren, now that you've had a chance to 'stretch your legs,' you should return to sickbay until properly released. Are we clear on that, Ensign?"

Then without waiting on a reply he nodded to all of them.

"Dismissed."

" Aye, Sir. " answered the Andorian, wanting to leave no doubt that he would obey. Standing at attention helped to tighten himself against the waves of weakness each heartbeat sent from his scarred chest to his head.

He saw that Commander Felez was well aware of how he felt... and Dr Driam was not one to be fooled by his stoicism, since she was the one who had treated him personally from the near fatal infection he had suffered. Most Andorians died from it, even if treated properly... That said a lot about her level of competence... and about him too.

But between the last intensive days of training, being blasted by both enemy and friendly fire and surviving from a deadly infection and a near fatally disrupted transport, he was definitely taxing himself way past even his limits.

*That is not the way to properly do one's duty. Not in Starfleet,* he thought while letting the senior officers get out first from the room; wich meant he was the last one to exit.

*I should have used the ship's comm* he chastised himself as he went to the turbolift with measured steps. *Just as I should have done on the Savoy to first report to the Captain...*

Mark had listened quietly as Captain Hargrove had given out their marching orders. He found it difficult to be welcoming to the harsh woman, her style of command left little room for subordinates or error, and reminded him a bit of what he'd heard of Captain Jellico's way of doing things. Nevertheless, she was now the ranking officer on the deck, and he gave Commander Felez a nod as the Efrozian asked him and Doctor Driam to report back in ten minutes.

Returning to the bridge of the Lotus, he found Ensign Surta still at the Helm and relieved him, plotting the course to the Navori system and ramping the engines right up to Maximum Warp. According to the computer's readout, the trip would take about two hours, so he had only but to wait and look over the after-action reports from the shuttlebay before rising and abdicating to Surta again to return to the briefing room.

A few decks below, Ensign Kheren carefully walked the short distance to reach sickbay, musing.

*I may not need that much sleep... but I won't be able to do my duty if I discharge myself like an overused phaser.*

As soon as he entered, the nurse that had given him the sedative ordered by Dr Driam saw him and rushed to take his arm and guide him to the recuperating ward, whispering and blushing:

" There you are! How come you are up? I gave you a full dose of sedative!"

" With a hypospray. " he answered, managing to smile Human fashion.

" Of course! Chitinous skin, diffuse osmotic circulatory system... you Andorians are so... strange!" she exclaimed.

" Thank you, I like you too. "

\* \* \*

Having gotten up and left the meeting room, Driam stopped just outside. After debating the options with herself she entered one of the turbolifts.

"Deck 4."

The ship was out of danger for at least two hours and other than the meeting with Felez and Mark she had nowhere she needed to be during that time.

The elevator stopped and she went through the corridor to reach her quarters.

"Computer, lock the door." She said once inside and picked up the needle she had used earlier.

After filling it back up she sat on the bed and took a deep breath before quickly pushing it in and injecting the liquid. The hesitation and anxiety that had characterized the previous times that she had performed the procedure were almost gone completely.

She put down the needle and closed her eyes, breathing slowly and feeling the spasmic twitching in her belly as it lost its hold on her mind and the memories faded.

As soon as the twitching stopped she pulled the needle out, cleaned it off and put it back beside her bed. She left her room and went back to the turbolifts.

"Deck 1."

She entered the briefing room, nodded at Mark and sat down beside him.

Felez returned slightly late. They had the impression he had been having words with the Captain and the discussion ran long.

"I'm sorry for rushing this, but time is not a luxury right now. Two things; first, Doctor, I wish you to put aside your personal concerns. Your behavior has been erratic since you arrived and has had some small effect on your performance. I need you at peak efficiency right now. Otherwise I would not insist on this."

He didn't wait for an answer.

"Second; Captain Hargrove, according to her file, is an accomplished diplomat, well noted for her patience when dealing with unknown lifeforms. I do not think her recent behavior matches this profile."

He looked at them seriously.

"I thought perhaps you might have an insight that I myself might have missed, since in this case she was personally involved in the confrontation."

He was now addressing both of them.

"I would value your opinion on these matters."

Mark shifted uncomfortably, and couldn't help but steal a glance towards the door, as if to ensure they weren't overheard.

"Well Sir, going off of that data, we can either assume that she's under duress from the boarding, which my gut tells me is incorrect."

He wanted to be as delicate as possible talking about their new commanding officer, since she had only been aboard the ship a matter of minutes. But things did not make it easy.

"Or, she and therefore some of the Savoy crewmembers we encountered are either working

with or are, somehow, Cyrcoids. The former is somewhat unlikely considering their isolationist stance, though.."

As he leaned on the table, he looked to Driam, appraising her.

"You saw the report on them, Shayana. Is it possible they could be somehow surgically altered?"

Felez' order regarding her condition caught the doctor off guard; so she was relieved to see Mark steer the conversation towards the issue with Hargrove.

"I guess it would be technically possible, but with the sheer amount of subtractions and additions that would have to be made, it would be an extremely difficult, not to mention dangerous procedure." said Driam. "I... guess I could order Hargrove to have me examine her but my guess is that any problem that our new captain might have would be psychological, not a case of her actually being a... *disguised bug*. And as for..."

She paused. Part of her wanted to tell them everything. Part of her wanted to lash out at them and tell them it was none of their business. But in the end she had the courage to do neither.

"My personal concerns are... well, personal." She finally began. "I assure you, I'm working through them."

Felez looked at her silently for a few seconds before replying.

"Very well, Doctor; privacy is your right but I will not hesitate to relive you of duty if I think your condition threatens your responsibilities to this crew."

Mark couldn't help but grin ruefully as she reinforced the fact that the Crycoids were insectoids. As she started to speak about her behavior though, he sobered quickly, and watched her face, looking carefully for a lie through the brush-off. He still wasn't convinced, but that had to be set aside for the time being.

"Still," he offered, "Hargrove's problem being psychological doesn't help much. I would tend to discount battle trauma. If she's an experienced diplomat and a woman of extreme patience, she would be fairly well-adjusted to the demands out here."

He glanced back to Commander Felez.

"However, it's not everyday your ship is boarded, and most of your crew killed like that. Fighting that desperately for her life could certainly have rattled her enough to lock her into the mindset that she absolutely knows what's best and that's that."

"Her condition is very perplexing to me, the Efrogian confessed. "She seems short-tempered, verging on angry, with a terrible sense of anxiousness. But at the same time, my senses tell me she's afraid."

He gave a sigh.

"I learned long ago I could not rely on my senses to fully understand other races, but this one is particularly difficult."

He shook his head and stood up.

"Thank you for your opinions on this. I will take everything into consideration. Return to your stations and be ready. There may yet be more fighting to come."

As they started to leave he added one last suggestion.

"If anything else comes to mind, let me know. But do not make inquiries to the crew on this subject."

\* \* \*

The door in the security office of deck 14 barely had time to open before being battered down by the towering form coming through the entrance.

" Lieutenant! We heard about the Chief! is... is he... "

" Ah, well, he's still his unsmiling good self as usual, Tyvya... now resting in sickbay." answered Lieutenant Tomah to the seven foot tall Andorian woman towering above all the rest of the security sub-department heads called to the meeting.

She was one of the three Andorians besides Chief Kheren assigned to security aboard the Lotus; their concern was deeply etched on their otherwise frozen faces, more so than the rest of the security people of the flagship. They were acutely aware of the deadliness of phase pulse infection to their species... and naturally already attached to their intensely driven leader.

*Even beyond any concern for his personal safety... or his career,* thought Edward Tomah. *An Ensign... barely out of the Academy...*

" Sirrr, said Ensign Mriish in her purring felinoid voice, did you meet him since his rrecovery? Did he tell you anything? "

" Ah, mostly this, answered Tomah: remember Sun Tzu. "

*"Know thy enemy as you know thyself..."* quoted Ensign De Paul in his usual smooth voice.

" Ah, Exactly. The Chief managed to send here one alien body with his armor and weaponry. Doctor Driam's autopsy report reveals we are facing Cyrcoids. You will familiarize yourself and your shifts with the data about them now recorded on your PADD. included also are the data regarding Chief Engineer's Smith analysis of their weapon and armor. "

" What's the plan, Sir? " now asked the muscular half-klington, half-human woman next to him.

" Ah, well, the plan, Ensign Krina, is this: all security personel will travel in pair. Each member of each pair will be issued the following: Type IIIc phaser rifle set at level 10; a hypospray of cordrazine prepared by the medical staff to counter the stun effect of their particle-wave weapon on their comrade; and each one of us will be wearing light combat armor to diminish it's impact, especially if an enemy manages to strap a targeting device on you while stunned. "

" Not the one with the helmet!" started to argue Armory officer Gralthri; but one stare from Tomah cooled down even the fiesty Tellarite.

"Ah, well, one will always target the chinks in the armor identified by the study; the other will aim at the weapon so that the residual kinetic effect of your compression beam will disrupt it's aim. Even just making it hit a wall point blank might turn their own blast in their faces. Both defenders will lie down to shoot as to minimize target and radius of their energy wave. If one is hit, the other carries him out to safety and revive him to make a second line farther. Questions?"

There were none.

" Ah, alright then. Ensign S'Kon of Engineering has reprogrammed the Chief's anti-boarding training scenario with all the information we have on the Circoids and their *modus operandi*.

We have two hours to prepare. Gather your teams and meet me at holodeck 2. Dismissed. "

The Savoy had been taken by surprise by an unknown enemy.

The Lotus would not.

## CHAPTER 10: THE HUNT

### **First Officers log**

**Stardate : 86769.2**

**After retaking the USS Savoy, the Lotus is in pursuit of the attacking ship now identified as belonging to the Cyrcoids, a race that was thought to have died out when their star lost its magnetic field more than a hundred and fifty years ago.**

**We are currently en route to their last known home world in the Navori system which corresponds with the ship's last heading and location of that star.**

**Personal note: Captain Hargrove's actions regarding this situation seem out of character to her profile and, in my opinion, bordering on recklessness. She seems almost obsessed with the recovery of the personnel taken from the Savoy to possibly a dangerous degree.**

Captain Hargrove had not returned to the bridge since the briefing, deciding instead to remain in her ready room.

"Commander," Lieutenant Lortoria said, looked up from the science station.

Felez quickly walked over to her.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Commander, the magnetic field around Navori is quite low, Sir, as we already know. But I've been going over the last survey data of that system, about thirty-five years ago, and applied it to our new sensor systems."

She brought it up on the display, a large bluish oval highlighted in spots.

The present data however shows concentrated magnetic emissions peaking in six evenly spaced locations around its perimeter... but..."

"But..." Felez went on, "that's very unlikely unless artificial in origin."

"That was my thought as well, Sir."

"So... if we're thinking what I think we're thinking, then..."

"Then the system is actually a... a Dyson shell? A ring or series of rings of artificial satellites harnessing the star's output?"

Felez just looked at the data again.

"Yes, it might well be."

"Built in barely over a hundred years?" asked chief engineer Smith with a disbelieving stare. "Even the federation could not do such a monumental task! The engineering skills alone to even conceive such a thing..."

"Well now I can think of a reason for those abductions and all those disappearing ships reported in this sector of space," Tomah offered; "slave labor... as with the ancient pyramids of Egypt."

There was utter silence on the bridge as the Lotus dropped out of warp just outside the system. but if it hadn't been for the two outer planets still orbiting there parent star it could have easily been mistaken for a small plasma cloud. Swirling electric blue clouds seemed to have enveloped the inner system and brilliant streaks of silver ran through them, arcing like massive lightning bolts. The effect was quite dazzling.

"Incredible! Smith said in genuine awe. " They used swarms of micro-satellites orbiting the star like the electronic cloud of an atom to create a... a reflecting cocoon, just dense enough in the resulting magnetic field of their mass and movement to do the actual job of capturing and reflecting inward the star's output... without the need of an actual hard-built construction and with far less cost in time, material and energy to implement. Whoever did this is brilliant!"

"Captain on the bridge," Felez directed as Hargrove came back into the room.

She seemed to have no interest in ceremony.

"Report."

Lortoria spoke up first.

"The system is surrounded by a type of Dyson construct never seen before. It is however devoid of any signs of habitation. There are no broadcast transmissions detected."

Hargrove made a face that looked annoyed.

"The Ship; I'm only interested in the vessel that we're looking for, Lieutenant."

Felez cut in.

"Mister Tomah is still scanning the area, Captain. With all the local interference made by this... swarm, it may take some time."

Hargrove took a deep breath and settled back into her chair.

"Very well."

Clearing his throat, Lieutenant Tomah stood at attention at the security station to report.

" Ah, Captain; all tactical systems are nominal. Security also reports ready. Four officers on each deck act in pairs, wearing light armor, one armed with a Type111c phaser rifle and the other with conventional rifle, both with proximity alert tricorders and cordrazine hypos. Internal security forcefields are programmed in coordination with trained anti-boarding action and any team can be deployed for boarding assault from transporters or shuttles at your command. "

Hargrove turned in her chair to look at the helmeted security officers Mriish and Brock each guarding a door to the bridge, and De Paul at security station behind Tomah, finally resting her eyes on him. For the first time, she was showing a slight smile.

" Very good, Lieutenant. Those measures are efficient, thorough and well thought out. You are showing how a truly competent officer at a command post can benefit a starship. Well done. "

All the while, she glanced slightly at Commander Felez sitting near her between her command chair and the security station. Her smile started to look like a smirk when she looked even so briefly at the former acting Captain of the Lotus.

The Efrozian didn't look at her. he didn't have too.

Tomah however blinked, then lifted his eyes above her head and cleared his voice again.

" Ah, well... Thank you, Captain... but I just, ah, followed Chief Kheren's orders. He has been, ah, preparing our department like so... since we left Starbase 10. "

Edward Tomah had no Andorian antennae, no Efrozian empathy, no Betazoid telepathy nor Caitian hypersenses; he was not as logical as a Vulcan nor social-skilled as a Denobulan... But he was nevertheless experienced enough to quickly categorize his superiors in order to better deal with them. It was an instinctive defense mechanism from his old Academy days. And even more, he became immediately aware of one thing; His honesty and loyalty were the only thing now protecting him from his new commanding officer's anger as she was being told, although not in so many words, how prejudiced and hasty her judgment was...

The smile was only a memory on her pressed lips.

He lowered his eyes to his console, occupying himself most deliberately with a new attempt at scanning the nearby star system. Not just to fulfill his duty, but also because he feared she could see in his eyes what he was thinking.

Some people like to categorize people with animals they resemble in looks or behavior. Tomah did the same but with famous officers of History and myth.

And the name that popped up right now in his mind, thinking of Captain Hargrove, was one from an ancient 20th century war novel.

Captain Queeg.

An uneasy silence filled the bridge as minutes stretched into hours and still no sign of the Crycid vessel could be found. Captain Hargrove's mood did not improve with the time spent in waiting.

She had started moving from one station to another, as if looking for something they might have missed. At first she would ask if there was anything new to report every few minutes but stopped as it drew stares from her crew after doing this several times.

After the first hour, she went into the habit of wringing her hands impatiently as she walked and stopping periodically to adjust her hair.

Lieutenant Lortoria gave a bit of a frown while looking at her console.

"Captain, I can find no evidence of any other ship entering this system within the last six hours at least, nor any other activity as well outside of the satellite swarm... obviously automated as indicated by the intense electromagnetic signals between them, creating these artificial pockets of magnetic fields all over the system."

As the minutes ticked on, Mark Robertson was acutely aware of Captain Hargrove's movements around the Bridge and glanced over his shoulder now and again, noting the extremely uncharacteristic nervousness and worry for a Starfleet Captain. As she wrung her hands and adjusted her hair, he had the strangest feeling of *deja vu*.

Frowning, he turned forward in his seat, tapping his helm console idly while the Lotus and her crew anxiously awaited any sign of the Cyncroid ship.

*Why does she seem familiar?* Mark wondered silently, having nothing else to occupy his time with nothing around the ship but the apparent Dyson construct envelopping the former Cyncroid world and star far in front of them.

He discreetly accessed the Starfleet records on Captain Hargrove, text-only, to one side of his console, and began reading intently, if only to pass the time.

*Hmm, accomplished diplomat, history with the Gorn, Orions.. Married? Hmmmm...*

He stopped at the section concerning the Captain's family and suddenly had a mental flash of his mother, pacing at the door when his sister was taking her Starfleet Academy Entrance Exams, wringing her hands nervously and playing with her hair. He had to fight hard not to whip his head around to look at Hargrove again, seeing the very picture of a nervous mother. His blue eyes flicked back to the console, and with a deft flick of his fingers, he highlighted the entry on Hargrove's son, his last known location.

Hargrove, Trevor, Starfleet officer; rank, Ensign; position; science officer; assignment: USS Savoy.

*Oh, dammit to hell.*

Mark thought bitterly. He could sympathize with Hargrove's predicament and knew he would doubtless feel the same if his siblings or parents were in a situation like this, or even later on when he would have kids of his own. Unfortunately, duty came first out here. Duty to ship and crew kept everyone safe and brought them all home again.

"Captain Hargrove, Commander Felez," he said, turning in his chair to address his superiors, keeping a straight face for now; "I may have an... unorthodox tactic to try if the enemy shows up. I'd like to run it by you both in the Captain's Ready Room."

Hargrove's response was what he would expect any Captain to do.

"Unorthodox seems to be standard protocol aboard this ship... something we have to correct at the earliest opportunity... But for now, surely you can offer this bit of wisdom in front of your peers, Lieutenant."

"Ordinarily, yes Ma'am. However, it involves our captured crewmen aboard the Cyncroid ship and might be somewhat... sensitive here on the bridge."

He held her eyes, stressing 'sensitive', hoping Felez felt his feelings of sympathy and family concerning Hargrove's attitude. Hargrove seemed quite annoyed as she walked towards her ready room.

"Very well, gentlemen."

Mark allowed himself to breathe for a moment as he stood and followed the Captain and Commander Felez into her office. Hargrove plopped into the chair behind the desk, arms folded in front of her.

"Speak, Lieutenant."

Mark knew he would only frustrate her further if he asked to speak freely, and simply did so, "Respectfully Ma'am, you've got the whole crew on edge, as worried or more about incurring your wrath rather than doing their jobs. Ordinarily, I'd chalk it up to battle stress, or simply your style of command... Then I took a look at your record."

As expected, she tensed like a coiled spring.

"Your son is aboard the Cyrcoid ship, isn't he, Captain?"

Mark tried to be gentle yet resolute in his tone, an odd balancing act as he put his career on the line.

"He was onboard the Savoy when she was attacked. But I'm willing to bet he wasn't among the dead. I have an older sister and two younger brothers Ma'am, so I've seen a mother concerned for her child more than a few times."

He paused a moment, wondering if she was going to interrupt him at any point, or perhaps the empathic Felez standing near him would take over, but both remained silent.

"Now, I believe that concern is putting him and the people aboard that ship, as well as the people here on the Lotus, in unnecessary danger. A Starfleet Officer's first duty is to the Truth, but that of a commanding officers is also to the safety of their ship and crew. Be honest with yourself, Captain. If your son was not aboard that ship, would you be doing things this way, pushing the crew this hard to track them down, bristling at any news you don't want to hear?"

Captain Hargrove's expression was cold, as if her face had been carved from stone.

"Mister Robertson; if your implying that I'm letting any personal problems interfere with my command decisions, let me put your mind at ease right now."

She sat up smartly in her chair.

"Yes.. my son is missing. I assume he is aboard the Cyrcoid ship, but that might not be the case. And even if he IS... my goal is the return of all the missing personal, not just Trevor."

She turned to Felez.

"Commander, have I taken any action that you deem to be inappropriate to my position as Captain of the Lotus? or would you say I've acted irrationally in my pursuit of the missing personel?"

Felez thought for several seconds before replying.

"While I do not agree with all your decisions Captain, such as leaving the Savoy in a barely operational state, No... I have seen nothing that shows a lack of competency in your command authority, Ma'am. However," he added quickly, "it just now occurs to me that your question is in error itself. We have yet to..."

Just then, Tomah's voice filled the room.

"Red alert, all hands, red alert! Captain to the bridge!"

As the command staff of the flagship emerged from the ready room, Lieutenant Tomah announced:

" Ah, Captain! Shields just snapped on!"

Captain Hargrove paused in front of her command chair.

" *Snapped on?* Explain, Lieutenant. "

" It's, ah, a half-forgotten security procedure, Captain. It dates back to the twenty-third century, when starships didn't have lateral sensors like we do now. It ties up the shield emitters to the scanners, activating them automatically when an object is detected on an intercept course, thus defined as potentially hostile by Starfleet rules of engagement. "

" Let me guess: another of your Chief's unorthodox ideas, right? " commented Hargrove dryly. But there was just the hint of a smile on the corners of her mouth.

Tomah couldn't tell if that was more unsettling than her usual dour attitude.

" It does, ah, allow faster response time in a threatening area, M'am."

She just nodded absently and sat in her chair looking at the main viewer.

" Report. "

" Ah, a ship is approaching the Dyson shell we detected, Captain " now answered the tactical officer. " Cyrcoid by configuration, bearing 262 mark 4 at full impulse. "

" On screen. "

Obeing her command, the main viewer shifted to show a small moving dot approaching the nebulous spherical constructed cloud they were facing.

" Magnify. "

Again, the image shifted, and the ominous silhouette of the alien ship appeared.

" Have they detected us? "

" Ah, undetermined, Captain. " answered Edward Tomah.

" How so? " The hard edge was back in Hargrove's voice. Lieutenant Lortoria then answered from ops.

" Ah, well, if they use passive scans, like simple optical devices, there is no way to detect it. As for active scans, the electromagnetic distortions nearby are affecting sensor input, Captain. Passive scanning is limited and active scans have to be boosted to be reliable. We didn't detect them until they moved at impulse in the immediate area, and they didn't visibly reacted to our emissions. However, we have no record of them ever performing any kind of sensor activity during the encounter with both the Savoy and the Lotus. "

" So, either they do not use any scanning device...wich would be most improbable for a spacefaring civilization... or they use a scanning method unknown to us... and undetectable by our own instruments. " thought the Captain outloud.

" Psionic. "

All heads turned to the Lieutenant at the tactical station. He himself was musing over and hadn't been aware of his own thoughts being worded in response to hers. Now that her eyes were obviously demanding an explanation, he cleared his throat.

" Ah, the report of the Savoy operation mentioned that one of our shuttle pilots, a Betazoid, was psychically assaulted when the Cirroid ship appeared. The effect was confirmed by the psi-sensitive members of the security staff here aboard, like Vulcans. Even Andorians, who are not really psionic nevertheless felt a slight tingling in their antennae. Could it be possible that they are somehow using some form of extrasensory abilities instead of technical ones to do their scanning? "

No one had time to discuss the theory. From the operations station, Lieutenant Lortoria's voice rose again.

" Captain; the Cirroid ship has activated a tractor beam. "

" At us? " asked Hargrove half-skeptical, since no anchoring bump reverberated throughout the ship's hull.

" Negative, Captain. It's aimed at the swarm of satellites up ahead. "

The large Cyrroid vessel lumbered at the edge of the field with its main weapon seemingly boring a hole into the cloud, it immediately started moving in to the hole.

"Ah, they're pushing aside the micro-satellites to make themselves an opening without disrupting the overall EM field."

Hargrove started yelling orders even as she listened to Tomah's report.

"Target their main drive! I want that ship disabled now! Helm, pursuit course!"

Lortoria and Felez looked at each other quickly and she checked her console before looking back up at him.

She nodded no softly.

" Ah, shields at maximum, armor ready for deployment. Phasers locked on target's engines, all torpedo tubes loaded. " answered Tomah, his fingers hovering over his console.

" All sensors adjusted to compensate for the magnetic disturbance, Captain. " added Lortoria. " Even if the swarm closes up, we will keep track of their ion trail through it's depolarization from the field's effect. "

" Engagement protocol Kheren 4... " came the next announcement from tactical. " Ah... switching targeting to main sensors, triggering to nav computer's optimum range calculations, amplifying phaser power directly from warp engines. " Now even blinded, we will still be able to, ah, well, shoot them down to a halt, M'am. "

Hargrove didn't acknowledge anyone... but her eyes blinked once hearing the last announcement. Her eyes were locked on the alien ship on screen. Even enhanced sensors couldn't match the intensity of her stare. The whole power of the warp core faded behind the tension in her jaw and in her fists straightened along her sides.

Captain Hargrove did not hesitate for a second.

"Phasers, fire!"

The phasers lashed out at the larger ships engines but struck amidship, ripping into the hull. The Captain jumped up in alarm and wheeled at the security station.

"I said to disable their engines!"

Tomah checked his figures again.

"Ah, but we *are* targeting their engines, Captain; but the distortion from the intense EM field between the micro-satellites is altering the phasers trajectory, bending it. It's difficult for the computer to calculate an exact area lock because of the constant erratic shifting of that field."

Her hands were shaking so she held them together.

"Alright then! Take us in, keep us on her tail, Robertson!"

Felez looked at her intently. He knew what he should say about this but to do so would surely invoke harsh rebuttal from the now desperate woman. Nevertheless, the safety of ship and crew were now at stake.

"Captain, The Lotus could not survive inside the distortion for more than a few moments." he said this as matter of factly as he could. "Our own tractor beams are not configured to imitate properly their procedure to open it."

Hargrove glanced at him at first then looked back, the stern look on his face seemed to catch her off guard.

"We'll stay in her wake. It will take off the edge. Ops, adjust shields to compensate."

"I can adjust the shields harmonics, Captain," Lortoria acknowledged tensely, " but it will take some time to properly do so with a reasonable safety margin; at least an hour... and that will not completely compensate for..."

"Just do your best! And do it *now!*" Hargrove snapped.

The look of frustration was easy to see now. She was losing her composure.

"Captain.." Felez went on. "We have to break off."

"Mister Felez! your recommendation has been noted! now either follow my orders or get off my bridge!"

She was nearly hysterical. She then spun on Robertson. Mark had angled the ship to follow alongside the Cyrcoïd vessel, well out of danger...for now.

"What are you waiting for? Engage pursuit course, Mister!"

He turned his seat again, looking her in the eye to show he was serious.

*Funny...we could sure use a diplomat's thinking about now,* he thought but said:

"Pursuit course laid in that will take us in alongside the ship, but out of their distortion field. We need a way to get their attention. force isn't gonna cut it, Captain."

He stressed the last word even though he was pretty sure she wasn't going to listen to him.

*The weapon is not the real danger; the hand wielding it is.*

The admonition of Chief Kheren during his newly implemented combat knife training sessions he had made mandatory upon taking his responsibilities as chief of security on board jumped right up in the mind of Edward Tomah as he watched Captain Hargrove losing all composure.

This was getting pretty ugly... and so near a potential threat in a dangerous zone, it could prove fatal. Mark Robertson watched as Hargrove's desperation and concern for her son's life overrode every rule in the book.

As the tension mounted on the bridge, Tomah quickly opened a file on his console.

*General Order 39*

*An officer or crewmember may be removed from active duty status if they are judged to be incapable of fulfilling their obligations as a member of Starfleet, whether for medical or psychological reasons, by either the Chief Medical Officer or by two ranking command staff officers.*

Then, a light on the computer made him look at a previous notation:

*General Order 28*

*No officer of command rank shall be removed from command status unless such action has the complete and unqualified agreement of at least three senior officers present. Whenever possible, such officers shall include the ship's First Officer, Chief Medical Officer or Counselor, and one junior officer of command station.*

Edward Tomah was acting Chief of security aboard the Lotus now. He knew Chief Kheren wouldn't hesitate if he feared the ship might be put into danger, even at the risk of his career or his own life. That's why he was in sickbay... and why he, Lieutenant Edward Tomah, was up here now.

For the first time in a long time, Tomah didn't hesitate anymore. He nodded imperceptibly to Ensign Mrrriish near the door. Without apparently looking at him, she resetted her phaser rifle on stun.

*Bless Caitan peripheral vision*, thought the Lieutenant.

As much as he could, he tried to project a feeling of concern through his attitude and his stare.

*Always take into account the racial traits of allies and foes...*Kheren had said.

Tomah hoped his Efrogian Commander would feel something.

He tapped his console's controls again. With a signal for medical emergencies, the whole bridge scene's recording of the last two minutes and the present events were now transmitted directly to Doctor Driam's office.

Captain Hargrove at this very moment was shaking with anger, her self-restraint failing. She looked around, first at Felez and then past him to Tomah.

"Lieutenant, relieve Mister Robertson and confine him to quarters for insubordination!"

She then turned back to Robertson, her eyes again pausing on Felez as she looked around, almost as if daring him to say anything.

"Your dismissed, Robertson! Now get out of that chair!"

It was obvious Felez wasn't going to allow this but for the moment he held his tongue. Perhaps he wanted to see how his bridge officers would react to this situation, or maybe he just wanted to see who was on his side.

As long as the ship wasn't going into the shell, he could wait a minute or two more.

*Mutiny... on a Federation starship? Unthinkable!*

Lieutenant Edward Tomah was thinking furiously, his mind working at warp speed. Disobeying a direct order would be just that: mutiny... unless the First officer and at least another bridge officer joined him in relieving the Captain on grounds of endangering the ship and crew.

But that was for the First officer to decide; and Felez, although obviously disapproving, wasn't doing anything. He was not even giving her a warning about her behavior and the consequences under Starfleet regulations.

It was as obvious that the Captain was not thinking straight; *she* was becoming more a danger to the ship right now than Robertson and his alleged insubordination.

But that was for the Chief medical officer of the ship to decide... and Dr Driam was not responding to his data feed.

In a blink, while thinking, he could see in everyone's eyes that they were all shocked and disapproving of their commanding officer's attitude. Yet, no one dared stand openly by oneself against the Captain of the ship. To do so without proper justification and orders would have dramatic consequences on her, on them all, on this ship, on the fleet... even on the whole of Starfleet.

Everyone seemed shocked, indecisive. And, at that precise moment, it was up to him. Alone.

*Time... we need time*

The Captain was just dismissing the flight control officer when the acting chief of security spoke.

" Ah, Ensign De Paul: contact the security office; have them send a brig guard to the bridge at once. "

Hargrove spun again toward the tactical station, eyes blazing, pointing a trembling finger at him:

" Lieutenant! I told *you* to relieve Robertson! "

Tomah was now speaking slowly; and it was not just to be more convincing and calming to his raging commanding officer.

"Ah, with all due respect, Captain; as acting chief of security, it is *my* responsibility to, ah, evaluate, all risks as of how to follow your orders, and, ah, comply in the safest possible manner... unless you *explicitely* order me to proceed *personally* and in those *specific* terms, M'am? "

She was about to interrupt him; but his finger pointed directly at the viewscreen, smartly diverting her attention towards the image of the Circoid vessel... the one holding her own son hostage. It made her pause long enough for him to continue.

" We are, ah, on red alert, engaging a hostile in a hazardous area: my duty is to man tactical systems and ship security; both possible only from the bridge. Leaving my station could, ah, put the ship in danger and be defined as dereliction of duty."

She looked at him again. Despite her anger, the words sunk in and she was starting to realize, at least for a moment, that if *her* orders would put the ship in danger..

The moment was just long enough for Lieutenant Tomah to explain further.

" Ah, Mister Robertson is no immediate threat. The bridge, the *most* vital area of the ship, must be fully guarded during red alert and tactical manned by the highest security officer available. Another security officer from the *least* vital area of the ship is on his way to relieve him, under *my* given authority, and escort him to his quarters... *as ordered*, M'am. "

Felez was now looking at him also. He was blinking at Tomah's strange mix of this new, uncharacteristic decisiveness in thought and his old, familiar hesitancy in his speech. But then, the Efrozian was starting to understand it all when he recalled the order to De Paul: calling a guard from what Tomah had designated as the least vital area of the Lotus...

The brig... aft section of the secondary hull... fourteen decks below. He was creating the opportunity for her to back off... or commit herself... and he was all giving them... time.

## CHAPTER 11: THE BURDEN OF HEART AND MIND

Not being able to counter the logic she looked back up at the view screen at the rapidly disappearing Vessel and grief gripped her.

"Your all going to stand by and let him.. THEM be taken? This is mutiny! I'll see to it personally none of you ever serve aboard a starship again! Cowards! When I'm done..."

"That's enough Captain Hargrove."

Felez's voice was hard and cut through the bridge like a knife.

"There will be no mutiny, not aboard my ship."

She looked confused by the remark.

"What do you mean..."

"Computer, List the commanding officer of this ship," Felez said still looking at her.

"Acting Captain Connora'tu Felez."

The words struck Hargrove like a stone.

"As I attempted to explain in the briefing room Captain, in our zeal to pursue the Cyrcoïd ship we never did perform the official transfer of command. You were never, and are not now, in command of the Lotus."

Hargrove stammered.

"There's.. that's.. that's just a technicality! as senior officer, I'm taking command of the Lotus!"

Felez looked unfazed.

"I'm sorry Captain, Order denied. I will not relinquish command of the Lotus to you at this time. It's your right of course to Levy charges."

Hargrove threw herself at him prompting the security officer to spring to action, but it wasn't needed. She grabbed his uniform.

"Please! don't do this! don't let them take my son!"

She started sobbing. Her emotions were overwhelming and Felez felt his own eyes brimming with tears.

"I'm... sorry... I..." and then, he stopped talking.

Robertson made a little nodding jerk then shook his head. Amazingly he realized he had almost fallen asleep! With a shock he noticed that the rest of the bridge crew looked dazed with exception of Lortoria who also seemed to be shaking it off.

Others then also started to come around. Only the Captain, Commander Felez and Lieutenant Tomah seemed to be still affected.

The circumstances left Robertson effectively in charge.

Mark gripped the arms of his chair as he really woke up, his heart and mind racing at the sudden near of consciousness. He whirled to determine their position, and that of the Cyrcoïd ship, which had evidently vanished into the electromagnetic field of the Dyson sphere, while the Lotus herself had come to a stop fifty kilometers from the field.

With the situation outside in mind, he looked back to the bridge, where the crew was in a general state of confusion. Commander Felez and Captain Hargrove were frozen in place, Hargrove clutching at Felez's uniform, pleading with the Efrosian to save her son. Lieutenant Lortoria seemed to be shaking off the effects of the....whatever it was...better than the rest of the crew, most probably thanks to her half-Vulcan heritage.

"Lortoria! status report!"

"Sensors... sensors read... we were out for almost no noticeable amount of time. It looks like it was something like when they tried tractoring in the Lotus earlier, just much much less powerful."

He glanced over and noticed Lieutenant Tomah was also not moving. He stood and walked over to Felez and Hargrove, reaching a hand between them to snap his fingers a couple of times before sighing at their lack of reaction.

"Hmmm."

He tapped his combadge.

"Medical Emergency! Doctor Driam to the Bridge!"

Looking over to Ensigns De Paul and Mrrriish, he gestured to Tomah.

"Move him over carefully. Mrrriish, you take his place. Surta, take the Conn. Any giant-sized ships around us, Lortoria?"

She shook her head in response,

"No Sir, no ships of any kind in the area. Sensors read the Cyrcoïd vessel went into the Dyson sphere approximately thirty seconds ago."

Mark sighed and folded his arms, closing his eyes to think a moment.

*What in Hell...*

Opening his eyes again, he looked up to Lortoria.

"Scan for any transmissions emanating from the field. Our 'friends' obviously want our attention. Hopefully they'll try and make contact."

As he spoke, he walked up to the Ops station and leaned one arm on the backside of the console, careful not to obstruct Lortoria.

"Keep working on remodulating the shields to get close to their ship. I know it won't be perfect, but just give us enough to board them."

He looked over to the now-Acting Chief of Security.

"Ensign Mrrriish, analyze our readings on that weapon of theirs. We might need to match it to go in after them."

A thought occurred to him, based on the attempted takeover earlier.

"...And bring up the ablative armor, let's see if that shakes off..." he gestured to Hargrove and Felez, "...Whatever that is."

He tried very hard to remain calm, grinding his teeth against one another as he took deep breaths and walked towards the center of the bridge, glancing to Commander Felez and Captain Hargrove, hoping Dr. Driam could help them and Tomah.

Suddenly the EMH appeared near the turbo lift.

"What seems to be the problem?" He said as he walked over to a wall panel and retrieved his medical pack near a frowning Robertson.

"I called for Doctor Driam."

The EMH didn't even look up.

"She's busy and I was faster... Sir." he said as an after thought.

Lt. Lortoria motioned to Felez and the Captain.

"The Commander, Captain Hargrove and Mister Tomah seem to be under the effect of the Cyrcoid vessel. Can you free them from it safely?"

He took out his medical tricorder and scanned them each in turn, talking as he went.

"Heart rate and respiration are elevated but within normal levels and I'm not detecting any chemical changes in there systems that would indicate trauma." Then looked up at Robertson. ""For all practical purposes, they're dreaming. As for waking them, it should be possible but wether or not that's a good idea? your guess is as good as mine."

Mark listened intently to the EMH as he explained the dream-like state that had captured Captain Hargrove, Commander Felez and Lieutenant Tomah, finally sighing as the hologram basically said he had no idea what was wrong either.

"Alright, monitor their vitals closely and keep me informed."

"The ablative arrrrmorr is now active, Lieutenant", Ensign Mrrriish rumbled from Tactical, "No casualties have been rreported as a rresult of the attack."

Nodding, Mark couldn't help but look back up at the viewscreen, which only displayed the swirling electromagnetic Dyson sphere encasing the Cyrcoid homeworld and the Navori star. He frowned as a thought crossed his mind, and he turned to Ops once again.

"Lortoria, transmit our status and data to the Savoy. Ask them to rendez-vous with us as soon as they can get underway. They wouldn't be able to get here for at least a couple of hours, but maybe a new perspective will help. It's something to do, at any rate, since it seems we can only wait it out."

He looked back to their trapped comrades and sighed.

"Here's hoping you're having better luck..."

" ETA... one hour... mark. "

No one spoke when Lieutenant Lortoria announced how much closer the USS Savoy was now to the Lotus. But they all glanced at the still unmoving forms of Captain Hargrove, acting Captain Felez and Lieutenant Tomah. For them, it was as if as time itself had stopped.

For the rest of the bridge crew, it was like time was literally running out.

" Lieutenant Rrroberrrtson, then growled Ensign Mrrriish, I fearrr Commanderrr Ferrrol sworrre a Hunting Oath. "

The humans were now all looking at the black-furred Caitan woman. So she explained.

" He will not rrelent in his chase unless a Biggerrr Mane... a superrrior officerrr... frrrees him frrrom his oath... orrr until he has tasted the blood of his quarry on his tongue."

They all understood: unless either Hargrove or Felez regained their senses in time... the Savoy would pursue the Cirroid ship... and do everything to destroy it.

" Fortunately, observed Lortoria from ops, his... quarry... is safe inside the Dyson shell. "

But Mrrriish shook her head, eyes on her tactical console.

"They just sent an update on theirrr status. Theirrr advanced sensorrr suite has alrrready detected the field, and theirrr state of the arrrt science computerrrs and perrrsonel analysed it... By the time they will rrrreach us, theirrr shields will have been rrrreconfigurrred to withstand it's effects and theirrrractorrr beams adjusted to open a passage forrr them. "

Her slitted sapphire eyes now went to each one in turn.

" He will not rrelent. "

Again, silence swept over the entire command center. Again, all eyes went to the two command grade officers still locked together in an eternal embrace, with the same sad painful expression on both their faces.

Maybe it was because of the tense situation, a trick of their minds... but the eyes of Hargrove and Felez seemed even more than ever on the verge of tears.

\* \* \*

The shift was subtle, almost gentle. There no sense of confusion about who or where he was... well, almost. Felez found himself standing in a cold barren area, standing next to a row of low hanging trees. It was snowing slightly and at his feet was a dark, shiny casket lying deep into the ground. He could hear the soft sound of people moving away, all but five.

"Commander..." Tomah said softly. "This scenery is from my... vision... when they attacked the bridge earlier. But.. look at the headstone, Sir."

In clear freshly chiseled words was the name Marianna Hargrove, Beloved Mother.

Opposite the grave, Felez could see he was joined by his father, Natra and a small boy. On his side he stood with Captain Hargrove and Lieutenant Tomah.

Hargrove gave out a shout and started moving around the casket.

"Trevor!"

Felez resisted the impulse to stop her and fixed his eyes on his father. The boy, Trevor it seemed, ran to his mother and she hugged him hard.

Natra spoke as they did so.

"The boy was beside himself with fear. It was decided that he must be given the chance to say goodbye to his... mother"

She said this last word as if it were distasteful in some manner.

Felez took a step forward.

"By what right do you take him from his mother? I demand the return of all Federation personel that you have captured from the Savoy or any other ship in Federation space."

Natra gave a confused look.

"We have no other survivors from your people, Commander. This one is the first we have found. All the others were found to be empty, and so were disposed of."

Felez face remained passive but his fists were clenched at his sides.

"Empty? Disposed of! you mean, you killed them, don't you?"

The man looked offended at the accusation.

"Of course not! We are the *Chee-nakoy*... the guardians of life. We seek to save your kind from the hidden among you, the empty ones, pretending to live but slowly destroying you. No one has died at our hands, Commander. We destroy only that witch is already dead."

Felez looked again at the gravestone.

"Why are we here? why this place?"

"Although we don't have the ability to read your memories," the image of his father said, " we can share the visions we induce with those we test. This place seems aproprate to the loss of a loved one for the child's people, so we use it."

Natra walked over to the mother and son.

"Trevor's mother died a long time ago. This *thing* is just a copy of her and he must come to understand this. And so he will, in time."

Again, Felez had to fight the urge to physically strike out at them and take the child back, but none of this was real... at least, the setting. The danger was very real.

"You keep saying that we're empty, copies; what do you mean by that?"

"Long ago, when your civilization you call the Federation was still young, we tried to warn you that your technology was killing you quietly. You ignored our warnings. In doing so, billions died, leaving way for the spirits of *hel-tic* invade your people and control your government."

" Transporters. "

Tomah had come up right beside Felez, wary of any danger that the aliens in disguise might pose to his superior officer. He had followed the exchange up to this point, where he spontaneously blurted out the word.

" I think he's talking about transporters, Commander. I remember being at a lecture at Starfleet Academy about the moral and philosophical implications of technology throughout History. Their was a part quoting a recorded conversation between Dr Leonard McCoy and Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott aboard the Constitution class USS Enterprise back in the 23rd century... you know, ah, Captain Kirk's ship."

Felez was now looking at him through a sparkling swirl of snow, listening to his tactical officer's explanation.

" Doctor Leonard H. McCoy, chief medical officer of the Enterprise, well known today for his mild transporter psychosis, asked Commander and chief Engineer Montgomery Scott how the transporter really worked. Scott explained that the transporter recorded the pattern of matter on a subatomic level, disassembled it and reconstructed this same pattern at the other end of a beam carrying that recorded data. *"So, said McCoy, I am, in essence, disintegrated here, and the machine exactly reconstruct my corporeal form over there, atom by atom, right?"* To which Mr Scott admitted: *grossly put, aye, Doctor.* Then Mc Coy asked: *" But then, am I really exactly the same Leonard McCoy that went into that first transporter and got disintegrated the first time? Did I effectively ceased to exist and only a copy of me made at the other end? Tell me Scotty: what about my soul? "*

Felez and Tomah were now looking at one another, silent.

Little snowflakes, barely formed out of the air by the cold, fell on their faces, only to disappear like the wisps of a dream.

Felez was surprised that he didn't catch the connection sooner as he responded with a nod to Tomah. It made perfect sense. The Cyrroid's had done there best to not harm anyone until they were sure they were 'empty' but the transporter traps were deadly, because they knew for a fact those people were 'dead'.

His father looked up with interest.

"So this is still discussed among your people, Commander? If so, then not all of you are lost. That is gratifying to hear."

Felez decided to switch tactics.

"You say these *Hel-tic* invade the bodies of our dead and take over? Does that mean everyone copied is a *Hel-tic*?"

"No Commander" Natra smiled. "There are only two thousand, two-hundred and twenty *Hel-tic*'s according to are studies. But it is impossible to determine where one of them will hide and they can move from body to body by a simple touch. In times long ago, they could only do this

on the recently dead, but science has given them another way. Now the dead walk openly and so they go where they will, shaping the cultures of those they infect."

His father than took over.

"We were surprised, Commander, to find the Federation still in existence. It was thought that when we emerged that the Klingon empire would have won the war and spread the teachings of the *Hel-tic* throughout the quadrant. But clearly, you won and destroyed the Klingons and so now you carry their sin and must seek to infect and control as they did."

Felez wasn't sure what to do with this. Telling them the truth would not change their perception of the situation. Telling them they were allied with the Klingons would surely make them think they were just part of these *Hel-tics* that according to them ran the Klingons.

And right now the child was what mattered.

"You can't tell that I or anyone else isn't one of these *Hel-tics* and, despite the... deaths... you caused, I believe you when you say you want to help us. Do we have souls? well, with or without a transporter... we can't prove that, can we?"

"But there might be a way that I can prove to you that Captain Hargrove is not a *Hel-tic*. If I can, will you return the boy?"

The two Cyrcoide's looked at each other and talked quickly.

Captain Hargrove looked at him desperately, her eyes red-rimmed and tear-filled.

*Gods let this work..he thought, or I'll never sleep soundly again.*

Captain Hargrove sat watching Felez talk to the Cyrcoide's for what seemed like hours, her mind racing. What could she do? the boy in her arms wasn't really even here, he was out there... a young adult today, not a child anymore... with *them*...

The one impersonating the Efrogian's father finally spoke up.

"It has been decided that you shall take the place of the boy and in exchange you will show us how to locate the *Hel-tic*."

Felez nodded solemnly in agreement.

Hargrove rose up looking shocked, holding her son behind her.

"Felez.. what are you doing? I.."

Felez walked over to her and forced a smile.

"It's the only way, Captain. This way, I can start building trust between our cultures again."

He looked back at them and they nodded. The image of natra raised her left hand.

"Time to begin"

\* \* \*

" Sir! The Savoy is hailing us! "

Robertson just nodded and Ensign Mrrish linked subspace communications to the main viewer. On screen appeared the image of the circular bridge of a now familiar Nova class science vessel, where the center seat was occupied by a squat Caitian:

" USS Lotus, this is Commander Ferrrol in temporary command of the USS Savoy. We have reactivated most of our main systems. We have been proceeding towards your position since then. We are acknowledging your call. ETA... 2 hours 12 minutes at maximum warp. "

Again, the Lieutenant nodded but before he could say anything, the felinoid Commander was speaking again; and his voice was definitely growling.

" Our weapons systems are soon to be operational too. As soon as we reach your coordinates, we will be ready to join you in making these invaders pay for all the death and suffering they have caused! Hang on Lotus! Savoy out! "

Silence fell heavily on the whole bridge of the Lotus as the view of the Dyson shell returned on the main viewer.

" What the... " coughed up Lortoria from ops.

From her tactical station, Ensign Mrrish looked at her superior officer with a blank expression on her black-furred triangular face, her slitted blue eyes wide and blinking.

Robertson jumped up out of the captain's chair as he saw Felez, Hargrove and Tomah come around.

"Commander?"

Felez looked calm and helped the Captain sit down.

"Bring us down to yellow alert, Robertson, shields only."

Robertson's eyes narrowed with suspicion and he stood there a few seconds longer. Felez looked him in the eyes.

"It's alright Lieutenant; they're releasing the captain's son. Just keep an eye out for anything underhanded, just in case."

"Aye, Sir." he acknowledged as he sat at the controls. "On that note, the Savoy is on her way... all teeth bared."

"Tomah, send them a hail to stand down and await orders. If whoever is in her center seat objects, remind that person that the Lotus is the superior tactical vessel in the area and therefore is in overall command."

"Ah, acknowledged, Sir."

The Cyrroid vessel again appeared out of the cloud of micro-satellites, moving slowly at them, the recent damage still showing heavily on its hull. Felez sighed, looking at the screen.

"Tomah, they agreed that their tractor beam would be unpowered... right?"

Tomah checked quickly.

"Yes Captain; status confirmed."

"Very well then; Tomah you have the bridge. The captain and I will meet with them by shuttle. I want you too..."

"Ah, Commander! Ship entering the area; the Savoy, Sir! She's targeting the Cyrcoid vessel!"

Felez jumped at the screen, almost as if he could stop the Savoy physically.

"Hail them again! Call them off!"

But it was too late. They could see the photon torpedoes firing from the Savoy streaking towards the larger ship, striking it with blinding fury and the ship seemed to shatter.

Hargrove let out a wailing cry that came from the depth of her being and fell to the ground, all but lifeless.

Off in the distance, she could hear talking, but it seemed so far away...

"Captain..."

It was Felez's voice, but it sounded so small...

"Captain Hargrove! its over! look at me!" the voice implored.

She opened her eyes and saw him but then realised something was wrong.. they weren't on the Lotus anymore. They were still in the graveyard.

The return to the bridge, the attack, the destruction of... None of it had been real.

She saw her Trevor standing next to Tomah, a grown man this time, wearing a blue Starfleet uniform and an Ensign's pip. She scrambled to him.

Felez looked over at the Cyrcoids also standing before them, this time in their true form.

"Satisfied? Could any soulless being hurt that much?"

The Cyrcoid's talked quietly for several seconds and Felez was struck with the thought that they were *talking* to each other. Could they not talk through telepathy while in this dream? It seemed they were limited by the reality created as much as they were.

The larger one that had impersonated his father turned his chitinous head and addressed Felez.

"Interesting; you allowed us to 'feel' her despair by living in the dream you created for her through us. It is very compelling evidence that she is indeed not a *Hel-tic*."

Felez felt the tension go out of his shoulders.

"So you will return the boy to his mother?"

The smaller Cyrcoid looked at him blankly for a second with those bulbous fixed eyes.

"Of course not. We believe she is not a *Hel-tic*, but she is still empty and the boy's life. if we were to return him to you, would be lost, as are yours."

Felez knew this of course, but had hoped it would have some impact on their decision. He had been wrong.

"The Federation will not allow this to go unchallenged. You have murdered our people and are now holding one ours against his will. How would you expect us to react? If we where to leave him, you would say it proves we have no souls because we don't care. If we destroyed you to get him back you would say that the *Hel-tic* sent us against you. Am I right?"

They didn't seem to know how to answer this. Felez went on.

"Tell me, what would you do if we killed your people and took some of them away and told them it was for there own good? would you believe us?"

the smaller one with the voice of Natra walked up to him, slowly.

"I'm not sure how to answer these questions, Commander. But I.. I have decided to speak for you in this matter."

The other alien looked outraged.

"What?! How can you say this? Retract this decision at once!"

the other turned sharply at him.

"NO! I have decided and so it is done! You know the law! I must now stand to my vow, even though it may well mean my death before it is done!"

His head twisted in anger but he gave a sharp nod.

"And so it is done."

And then, he faded away.

The remaining Circoïd turned back to Felez. The eyes seemed somewhat softer now.

"I cannot return the child. It is not for me to say.. but I will now return and speak on your behalf. I believe that, perhaps, we have lived too long in the dark, seeing only what we expected to see."

Felez had to resist the urge to hold her as if she truly where Natra.

"Why are you doing this for us?"

The alien drew closer. Felez did not pull away.

"I do this for you.. and for her, your Natra. When you shared your feelings with me, I felt through you as you thought she must, and you are so sure she loved you.. and so now do I."

His logical mind understood now, She felt like Natra because she now *was* Natra, in every way possible; even in appearance, as the Circoïd took again her appearance. But the passion for his race didn't care about logic or even truth. With a violent motion, he grabbed her and kissed her deeply, and she in return did the same, as any Efozian might.

When they finally pulled way, he was shaking with desire but stood straight and fixed his uniform reflexively.

"Thank you..." his words where unsteady. "Any help you can give would be appreciated... greatly."

Natra walked over to Trevor. Captain Hargrove blinked the tears out of her eyes and talked to her son.

"We.. we have to be apart for a while, Trevor, just for a little while."

Using all her willpower she managed a smile.

"You mind your manners while your there, you have a big responsibility."

She put her hand on his chin.

"I want you to show them what a good Federation citizen is like. This is your mission now. Can you do that, Ensign?"

Her smile trembled slightly, but she kept it all the same.

Nathan nodded and wiped a tear away

"Ok, mom.., Captain... I'll do my best. I'm a Starfleet officer and a scientist. Risk is our business... and knowledge and understanding is our goal. I will make you proud, captain... Mom..."

Natra smiled and held out a hand, Hargrove looked at it.

"She'll be your contact. She will...take care of you... Isn't that right... Natra?"

It was more of a plea than a question.

"He has less to fear than I when we go back. Do not worry Captain-mother Marianna hargrove of the Federation; no harm will come to him. And if I can, I will bring him back to you."

Natra took Trevor's hand and started to walk away but spared a backward glance at Felez, and smiled.

Then.. they where gone.

## EPILOGUE

### **Captains Log, Supplemental.**

**For now, negotiations with the Cyrcoids have stalled. We find ourselves with no recourse but to wait for them to contact us again. Starfleet is dispatching a unique team of civilian first contact specialists to conduct further talks, none of whom I'm told have ever traveled via transporter; quite a rarity in our spacefaring culture safely using this technology for over two centuries... But there are still a few planets within Federation Space like the Trill world where such technology had not been implemented, for multiple cultural or practical reasons. The richness of Federation diversity shows it's blessings once again.**

**The arrival of the Savoy made matters tense until Captain Hargrove stepped in and re-took command of the vessel, forcing Commander Ferrol to stand down his plans for retribution. It has been decided that they will remain here to await the first contact team to properly debrief them and provide them with scientific data in order to best proceed.**

**The Lotus is returning to starbase 10.**

Captain Hargrove stood before the Transporter pads of transporter room 2, having picked up the last of her personal items from her cabin on board the Savoy. Commander Felez was seeing her off.

Hargrove gave him a smile.

"I want to thank you again, Commander, for your part in this. As much as I hate to admit it, I wasn't thinking too clearly back there. I.. I let my personal feelings get in the way of my judgment."

Felez's face remained blank.

"Captain, it was your emotional outburst that gave us this chance to make peace with the Cyrcoid people. If not for that, there would be a very high likelihood that violence and destruction would have ensued and that you would never have seen your son again. All in all, it was the best way to Handle this situation."

She gave a small laugh.

"Well, just the same, I think I'll try to limit my emotional outbursts in the future. Now that I will be the Starfleet officer responsible for this area and the relations between them and us, I will have to do things right... and I will be near him. Who knows, I might even have the chance to see him again, from time to time. Isn't hope for the future one of our founding values?"

Felez forced a smile and nodded in agreement.

She climbed on to the platform, turned and faced the Efrogian.

"One other question, Commander; if I may ask, this girl... Natra... who was she? You must love her very much to have such an effect on that Cyrcoid female impersonating her from your own mind."

Felez was silent for several seconds, then glanced over his shoulder once at the transporter operator.

"Your dismissed crewman. I'll perform the transfer."

The Bolian gave a quick nod of his bald blue head and left the room as Felez took the controls. He spoke again after the woosh of the closing door.

"Yes Captain; she was very special to me. It was because of her that ultimately I joined Starfleet against my father's wishes."

She couldn't see it in his face but in his voice, there was a sense of loss.

She smiled again and decided not to pursue the issue.

"Permission to depart, Captain Felez?"

"Permission granted Captain Hargrove. Energizing."

And she faded off the pad like a dream.

\* \* \*

Felez Invited Robertson into his ready-room to discuss their last mission, and where they would go from there. He sat behind his desk reviewing the logs with the helmsman sitting on the opposite side listening to him evaluating their last performance.

"..and I hear you made quite a reputation for yourself taking out those boarding pods. I wish I could have seen it."

Robertson arched an eyebrow with a wry grin, curious.

"Why is that, Sir?"

Felez gave a stern look.

"So I'd know if it was an exaggeration or not."

Mark chuckled.

"I'll see about Lieutenant Aramaki getting you those shuttle logs, then..."

Felez went on.

"You know, Kheren sent me a report. He believes he can prove, as he puts it, that 'the Cyrcoids are dead wrong'... citing the cases of Surak and Jonathan Archer as well as Doctor Leonard McCoy and Captain Spock, wherein the Vulcan '*Katra*' was transferred from one person to another and transporters having no consequences on it, or them, at all. But frankly, I'm doubtful that even such evidence will change the Circoids' minds."

Robertson nodded slightly.

"Especially after a hundred years of isolation. We already saw they were utterly convinced they were right. Changing that is probably going to take a few years."

Felez gave a little sigh.

"In any case, it seems Starfleet has decided to call off the search for a new Captain for the Lotus and offered it to me. Naturally, I accepted."

Robertson arched both eyebrows in surprise and grinned.

"Congratulations Commander... I mean, Captain."

Felez sat back and forced a frown.

"Yes, thank you, but that leaves me with another problem.. now I have to find a new first officer and frankly, we have enough new people on the bridge. Who would we have that would be up to such a responsibility, Lieutenant?"

Mark took a deep breath, folding his arms over his chest as he closed his eyes, going over the Senior Officers.

"Well, Kheren's out of the running due to inexperience and rank, though he's definitely got potential, if he can loosen up a bit."

He glossed over Chief Engineer and Chief Medical Officer as both of those positions were being transferred.

"Lieutenant Lortoria was invaluable at Ops, but she could potentially be moved up to First Officer and replaced. Much as I hate to say it, I'm still in the running as well; Lieutenant Sybel could retake command of Flight Control, unless Starfleet has other plans..."

He grinned wryly, looking down at the Efrogian.

"But you already thought this over, didn't you, Sir? Hence why you wanted to talk to me.."

Felez cocked his head slightly.

"Well seeing as you recently inquired about command positions, I assumed you might have an interest. Is this the case?"

Robertson gave a little laugh.

"My old man used to tell me; *always keep an eye on your bosses out there, no better way to learn how to be one.* Yes, Sir, it looks like I am."

Forcing another smile the Efrogian stood up.

"That's good to know, because I already put your name in for the job."

Felez held out his hand.

"First Officer Robertson, welcome aboard."

\* \* \*

After his meeting with his captain, the freshly minted first officer of the Lotus Fleet flagship stared up at the ceiling of his quarters, lying prone on his bed while the events of the last day burned in his mind; particularly the audacious proposition of the Cyrcoids that anyone who'd been through a transporter was, essentially, a walking corpse.

His mind flashed back to the earliest memory he had of using a transporter, on a school trip up to a dock at the San Francisco Shipyards around Earth. He could follow the journey all the way through, recalling that one of the girls was particularly afraid, and he had held her hand when they stepped onto the pad and were dematerialized. He was sure he had felt her hand in his throughout the seconds they were energy, and as they re-emerged on the opposite side.

The memory brought up a twinge of loneliness. But, nevertheless, as far as he was concerned, he was still the same person after having used the technology countless times his whole life. Chief Kheren might indeed be right...

He stretched, and rolled off the bed, scratching his hair as he thought of Captain Hargrove and her son, making a mental note to send his parents a message while he sat at his desk and brought up the reports on the shuttlecraft. Both of the Type-9s were under normal maintenance at present, having done an outstanding job in the hurried circumstances.

His mind wasn't on the after-action report, though. Indeed, he turned his chair to look out into the black, the warp effect sending stars streaking by the viewport while his mind wandered, dwelling heavily on family. The Lotus was en route back to Starbase 10, and word had come down the grapevine that Gemini Fleet was to be re-formed.

Part of him wanted to return, possibly even to his post on the Sapentia again, but more of him wanted a bit of stability. His first year out of the Academy had been hectic to say the least, and staying with Lotus Fleet seemed the best way to get his bearings.

He sighed and turned back to his small viewscreen.

"Computer, begin recording message to send to Joseph and Mary Robertson..."

\* \* \*

Shayana was sitting at her desk in her quarters. She had been sitting there for hours with the door locked, the lights dimmed and the shutters closed. Both Kheren and Mark had made attempts to contact her, but she had ignored them both. The screen in front of her displayed a long document with medical data regarding the Driam symbiont, detailing how regular injections of merfadon it had been getting were beginning to cause serious damage to it.

In her hand Chayana held what was thus a last desperate measure that would end it once and for all.

History would suggest that the mouth or the temple would be the suitable places to apply such a treatment but she held it pointed against the abdomen.

For almost half her life she had been cursed with an affliction that she been taught to covet, an affliction that had robbed her of who she was and twisted her into a mockery of the young girl she used to be. She had been given no choice but to live with that affliction, until a few weeks ago when she discovered what she thought was a cure. A cure for the horrific memories, a cure for the demons that had invaded her mind, but a cure that the document in front of her now revealed to be just another way of doing what she was about to do when she pressed the button on the object whose muzzle was held against her abdomen.

Emotions were rushing through her head. Sorrow, hatred and fear. It was that fear that for the past few hours had kept her from pressing the button. The fear of what might lie beyond, of how her actions would affect the people around her, of the pain she would experience as she exit the stage.

Now, the fear was beginning to subside and her grip around the handle tightened.

*"One button press."* She thought. *"Just one, and it'll be over. Just one, and you'll be free."*

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She was ready.

Just as her thumb began to apply pressure on the button, she was interrupted.

"Incoming transmission." Said the cold computer voice.

Shayana opened her eyes.

"From whom?" She asked.

"Nilani Yautja, transmitting from Leran Manev, Trill."

"Put her through."

She put the phaser down and felt her eyes fill with tears as her mother appeared on the screen in front of her.

"Hi, honey."

They talked for what seemed like hours.

Once the conversation was over and the screen had reverted back to showing the medical file, the negative feelings started to return. But something was different.

She got up, walked over to the bed and lay down, staring at the ceiling.

The anger, sorrow and fear were still there, but they were now joined by something else. Something primal and strong, perhaps even strong enough to overpower the others. Her mother had shown deep concern about her... *her!* And pride about her job, her career, that she was so concerned and caring about others.

Caring for others... as she cared for her.

It felt like hope.

\* \* \*

" How are you feeling Ensign? "

Kheren raised his silver pupils from the monitor he had extirpated from a recess in the wall, trying an awkward Human smile at Doctor Driam:

" As if I was back from what you Humans call a vacation. "

" That good eh? " frowned the medical officer while looking attentively at the readings of the biobed monitor above and behind him.

Kheren sat up straighter in his bed:

" Your nurse gave me a full dose of sedative... enough to put a Human to sleep for eight hours. Since Andorians sleep about three hours of a thirty-two-hour day period, it's like I have been sleeping uninterrupted for three *days*. "

Shayanna was smiling; again on the same day... but her eyes were anything but casual.

" And a good thing too; remember, you almost *died* through a transporter disruption, you could have died again from an alien weapon blasts, then an alien life-sucking gadget, then from a phaser blast... and yet again you should have, under that phase pulse infection... and all this in much less than three hours. Somebody really loves you up there... "

Now the chief of security managed a genuine sarcastic smile on his rigid face:

" Or hates me so much as to do everything to keep me down here."

That made her laugh.

*At last! I'm getting that Terran humor right!* he thought with a genuine sense of accomplishment. *And using their old weird superstitions too!*

" Anyway, he then added, according to the Circoids, I *am* already dead."

He showed her the report of the last events he was reading on the screen of the bed's side monitor.

" Who knows? They may be right after all. " mused the Trill. After all, my own people for the most part still refuses this technology. We fear for our symbionts implanted in our bodies."

" They're wrong. "

She looked at him with a startled expression that turned sarcastic the way her eyebrows lifted up.

" You seem pretty sure of yourself. Did you make any revealing trip to the afterlife while you were taken out so many times? "

" Not me. "

Kheren, swinging his legs sideways of the bed, ignored her puzzled look.

"I must report to the Captain. Do I have permission to resume my duties, Doctor?"

" Return to your station, Chief. "

The Andorian jumped down the bed, adjusted his uniform then turned his antennae again toward Driam, this time with his usual blank expression.

" With all due respect, Doctor, do not make the same mistake again; as a medical officer, you have the authority to relieve, and send back on health and psychological grounds any crewmember to his duty, including the Captain... but, you have no authority as to what that duty is. It is not for you to say if I have to return to my station or to my quarters or else; it is for my direct superior officer... in my case, the Captain. "

For a moment, the woman obviously bristled at the rebuttal. But then, she became as deadpan and professional as he was.

" You're quite the quickdraw gunslinger with regulations, aren't you, Chief? "

For a moment, he looked genuinely startled, like someone reminded of something he had forgotten.

*Gunslinger... That's how they nicknamed me back at the Academy, because I was such a good shot... and used two phasers at the same time...So easy for us Andorians, being most of us ambidextrous and having four eyes...*

Then, Kheren managed to move the rare muscles of his dark blue face into a small smirk; walking away from the bed toward the door, he didn't turn his head as he answered in a matter-of-fact tone, using another of those weird, fascinating Terran references.

" I *am* the sherriff in this town. "

**THE END**