

No time to make the wrong decision

STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

PRIORITIES

The Third voyage of the Starship Horizon



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The Third Voyage of the Starship Horizon

Forum roleplaying session

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From the story "Priorities" by BLZBUB

Novelization by Kheren

Cover by Kheren

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Kheren as Captain Kheren

Redding as Commander Neil S. Redding

Jureth as Lieutenant Aron'Son

CHAPTER ONE : A CRY IN THE NIGHT

Captain's log

Stardate : 88664.0

It has been three months now since the implementation of the colony on the third planet of the Eden star system, nearest to the Azimuth Horizon portal. As the sector 001 of the United Federation of Planets in this new universe, it will be the launching point of every mission and operation of this new frontier.

There has been changes aboard the Horizon, most notably Commander Jureth Oseno called away as ship's representative and Starfleet official witness for the trial of former Governor Sufra. I expect Starfleet will try their best to keep him, offer him a command of his own. He has already proven himself many times in that capacity. Loosing my Strategic Officer will be a great loss for my ship, but not having Oseno in the big chair would be an even greater loss for Starfleet. In the meantime, Chief of Security and Tactical Aron'Son will double as acting Strategic Operations Officer and First Officer Redding will take command of the Polaris.

Along with him, Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth has been recalled for some difficult investigation about the disappearance of the USS Diamond Star, sister ship and engineering platform of the Horizon. Commander Snowfire Ke'Leysha has concluded her officer exchange program between Starfleet and her native Illythirii Defense Force and will accompany them back to Starbase Lotus on board the returning USS Phoenix. Captain Syntron's explorer should soon be back to resume the charting mission of this sector.

The ten thousand colonists on the planet have already achieved full autonomy and already expanding towards the rocky and gaseous worlds within this system for raw materials, avoiding scarring their own pristine habitat. A fleet of shuttlecrafts provided from our own complement ensure their spacefaring needs while a series of satellites and subspace relays provides for all their needs of communication and defense. More supplies are expected from Starfleet and other colonists are expected to join them in their bold endeavor. The example of their success here will undoubtedly stimulate quite a new rush to the stars back home.

After all, with the nullified threat of the incorporeal Zetarians, confined by the planetary negative energy field of Eden IV, and the alliance achieved with the spacefaring nomadic civilization of the Draxx by assuming the custodianship of the prison-planet, this space is much more peaceful than our own original Federation Space.

"Bridge to Captain!"

The urgency in the voice of Lyrya was unmistakable for her husband. His antennae perked up over his thick white mane, then pointed forward as he heard it.

"Yes, Counselor."

"Sir, we are receiving a distress call."

"Coming."

Closing his desk PADD, he moved from behind his big translucent desk with a swiftness that belied his bulk. As an Andorian, he was massively built, even if he only looked athletic to Human eyes. In a few long strides, he was through his office's door and on the vast bridge of his ship, standing beside the Medical Command Chair on the command dais where sat his white-skinned wife manning communications.

He didn't have to ask and the Aenar had no need to probe his mind with her telepathic powers; which she was unable to do anyway since his experience with the Undine transformation serum that had left him subtly altered. She had served long enough with him, and more, to know what he wanted to know.

"Starfleet emergency distress call, Captain; USS Champlain."

"The Champlain?" wondered aloud Meeramanee Blackbird, his yeoman. "It must be the supply ship we were expecting. That's one of the new Ptolemy II class of Starfleet freighters, Sir."

"Like the Jeanne Mance," Aguk Snow reminded them from the helm.

Kheren simply nodded. He would not soon forget the freighter that had literally thrown him into the captain's chair of the late USS Artemis... and into the then untamed Azimuth Horizon anomaly... with a distress call, just like now.

Kheren nodded in appreciation for his Exec's own readiness.

"Location of the distress call's source?"

"A light year from here... on the other side of the Azimuth Horizon's portal," acting chief of science Valencia Irksos answered with a frown.

"Talk about nav error," wondered helmsman Snow aloud.

"Details about their situation?"

"None, Sir," Lyrya answered. "Only the standard distress signal; no subspace communication."

The blue-skinned commanding officer of the Horizon nodded pensively. Then he motioned the ship's counselor behind him to open the shipwide channel.

"All hands, prepare for saucer separation. Main damage control and medical teams report to the saucer section for deep space rescue operation. Mister Solius; report to the bridge at once. Mister Sisko, take command of the battle bridge with bridge crew Delta for planetary defense."

"Should I go secure the Polaris, Sir?"

while he was sure of the answer, Redding knew all orders came from his commanding officer.

The Andorian stood between his chair and the jointed tactical and helm stations, looking at the vista of space across the huge viewing screen as he spoke.

"Please do, Commander. I will command the saucer section to those coordinates. But at warp 9, it will take us twelve hours to get there. You will get there faster, so you will assess the situation, apprising us while we follow you and provide any urgent help if needed."

"Shouldn't we use transwarp, Sir?" the Inuit helmsman offered. "We would be there in mere minutes."

"We must not leave the colony defenseless, Lieutenant. A distress call is the oldest trick in the world... and we still know next to nothing about this new space. We will leave the stardrive here with Commander Sisko in command; and we cannot transwarp when the ship is in seper mode."

"The old fashion way, then, aye, Captain," Snow said with a smirk, his fingers already inputing the coordinates into helm controls.

"Yellow alert," Kheren then ordered, still standing.

"Aye Sir, sounding Yellow Alert," Aron'Son replied.

Even though the captain had issued orders, the Jem'Hadar continued to analyze the situation. There was a small probability that the distress call was a trap, he was aware of several species that employed such tactics, but it was more likely a genuine emergency situation as the Champlain had not been reported missing and a trap would have required either an enemy agent among the crew or for the ship to be waylaid in transit. It made more tactical sense from the security chief's prospective to dispatch the Polaris to investigate the distress call and leave the flagship to defend the colony, while he understood Starfleet's chain of command etiquette, he knew that department heads were expected to present solutions to their commander so he continued after acknowledging the Yellow Alert order.

"Captain, from a tactical perspective, the Polaris with a full complement is capable of investigating the distress call, Sir, leaving the Horizon free to protect the colony."

"That is why we leave the more powerful stardrive behind, Lieutenant," agreed Kheren. "The Polaris can certainly scout ahead and assess the situation and deal with many problems, but if an evacuation is in order, she will be unable to rescue even the whole one hundred and five crew complement of a Ptolemy class freighter. And in all probability, there might be several thousands colonists aboard that freighter. The saucer section alone can accomodate almost twenty thousand refugees if need be; that is why we have to go there. General Order 6 is cristal clear; an emergency call from Federation citizens nullifies all other tasks or field orders and demands immediate attention and response. And so we shall."

"Fortunately for them, this Lotus class saucer section comes with it's own warp drive," Aguk Snow reminded them all. "Course plotted and laid in, Captain."

"All personel at their assigned posts," confirmed Lyrya. "Chief Solius is on his way."

The Andorian tapped his combadge.

"Commander Sisko, I leave the safety of Eden in your hands."

"Acknowledged, Captain," came back the soft voice of the half-Bajoran cyberneticist.. "With your permission, Sir, I will have Ensign Tethys Achilles as yeoman on the battle bridge."

Kheren's antennae shot up and curved in the unique Andorian smile.

"Are you up for it, Ensign?"

A presence then materialized right in front of them, between the helm and tactical console and the main viewer. The girl looked barely out of her teens, with long blond hair and startling blue eyes, slender yet athletic, wearing the grey and black, red collared uniform and pip of a Starfleet yeoman.

"My program is active and functional, Captain," said the young slender woman with a richly modulated voice, "although even the massive computer core of your ship is not powerful enough to support my full capabilities yet. But then again, even a Starbase computer would barely suffice. For the moment, I can function as well and in the same manner as your EMH."

"This is not the artificial neurogel brain of the USS Achilles for sure, but we should gain more available computing power once we complete the nanite enhancement of the Phoenix to our own systems," Sisko chimed in then from the ship's comm channel. "It will at least help me complete my project of giving her a fully autonomous active interface."

Not for the first time, Redding remembered fondly the days before 'holodecks' and 'nanite enhancement' were every day words, although it did make him feel old.

"Glad to hear it," the Andorian said with a nod. "Carry on, Ensign. Commander, stay in touch with us."

"Aye, Sir," they both replied as the sentient program dissolved from the bridge and back to the secondary control center of the flagship.

"With your leave Captain" Redding gave a nod and headed off to the Polaris.

His antennae did not allow him to hear the turbolift doors behind him open to admit his Romulan chief engineer as his exec left, but they felt the air displacement of his entrance so that he knew they were all ready and at their post without looking away from the vista of space before him on the wide screen.

"Engage separation."

There was a distant, low sound like that of a huge door opening. They barely felt the slightest of tremors as the immense disc-shaped hull of the huge starship detached itself slowly and majestically from the flattened, elongated tubular lower hull keeping the broad inclined neck and the two long warp nacelles.

"Separation complete," Chief of Ops Cheonghi's shrill Edoan voice confirmed, his three hands moving over his console right between the screen and the double station of Snow and Aron'Son.

"We are free to navigate," added the helmsman.

"Warspeed."

On the viewer, the pinpoints of lights that were the stars stretched into luminous lines and a brilliant flash followed a swirling dance of shiny fireflies as the Horizon's primary hull went into high warp.

"Warp 9, Sir; confirming ETA eleven hours thirty-two minutes. We will arrive three point seven hours behind the Polaris."

"Lieutenant Commander Solius, you are now acting Exec," Kheren declared. "All senior officers, prepare us for a deep space rescue operation. Then, Beta shift will take over from Alpha shift which will take a rest until we are thirty minutes away from the theatre of operations. I will be on the poopdeck."

And so saying, he went back to his office.

Aron'Son was perturbed that he hadn't taken in to consideration the lack of capacity of the small escort ship, and resolved that he would rectify the situation by spending the "rest" period examining Starfleet ship schematics. Rest was a foreign concept to the genetically engineered soldier and expanding his knowledge was a far more efficient use of any off duty time; though he did not ever consider himself to be off duty. To his frustration, the Andorian woman who served as his second in command would not allow him to remain on the bridge for a full ship's cycle and, given that she was one of the captain's mates, he chose not to press the issue, though he had the authority to do so. It was her he turned to now as he prepared to obey the captain's order to "rest."

"Lieutenant Tyvya, all security personnel have reported ready. Select the best for a boarding and inspection team should the need arise. Also, ensure that all personnel are prepared to enforce crowd control and quarantine procedures in the event we have to take on....guests. I will not stand for a repeat of the incident involving Governor Sufra as long as I am aboard this ship."

He left the bridge without waiting for a response, knowing that his orders would be carried out. Aron'Son had learned that Tyvya was professional and followed orders to the letter, so he did not need to check up on her as he did some of the junior officers.

Tyvya sent an "aye, Sir" his way anyway, with a telling look offered to her captain and husband as she slipped her towering two pont twenty-five meters frame behind the tactical console. Like her, Kheren was well aware of the Jem'Hadar's difficulties in adapting to the peculiarities of humanoids like the need for food and rest or even to sit instead of staying upright to perform one's duties; but just as it has been for him when he had joined Starfleet, it was all part of learning, understanding and adapting to life within the vast community of the stars they were sworn to serve. It might be tedious at times, but it was necessary.

"Captain, the Polaris is signaling readiness to depart."

"Commander Redding," then said the Andorian, "best possible speed to the Champlain. Keep in mind that we will have your back only four hours after you arrive there, so the safety of those people out there is most of all in your hands."

"Acknowledged , Captain, Redding out."

And with that, the Polaris unhooked from its mother ship and sped on its way.

Although the Horizon's primary hull was already on it's way at over even hundred times the speed of light, the computer-generated image of it's wide screen showed the sleek, diminutive form of the Aquarius class escort zoom past them at almost a thousand times lightspeed. Everyone knew that what they saw was but a rendering scaled down digitally to human perceptions of course, but it was still an impressive sight, the long, curved warp nacelles extended each sides of the oblong craft giving it the startling silhouette of a diving hawk as it flew away and disappeared ahead, beyond the point where the stars streaked by.

"I will be on the poopdeck. Chief of the Boat Hollet, you have the bridge."

And so saying, Captain Kheren went back to his office.

Aron'Son also made his way from the bridge and down to the Horizon's security office. He gruffly dismissed the young petty officer on duty there and opened the terminal in his office.

"Computer, display ship schematics for Ptolemy II Class Feighter Champlain to include any modifications from standard design. Correlate with current Starfleet security procedures for securing a hostile vessel and display most efficient beam in points for boarding parties along with potential choke points."

The computer beeped and displayed the information he requested. As he began to examine it, he also examined his interactions with the species of the Federation thus far.

Humans were by far the most complex often making decisions based no empirical data whatsoever. They called it trusting their "gut." This was about as foreign a concept as any the Jem'Hadar had encountered in his time among them. His people had no comparable trait. They followed orders, either from their First, the Vorta, or the Founders themselves. If conditions changed the soldiers were expected to adapt and carry on the mission ultimately either dying or achieving their goal.

The Andorians, many of which he now served both under and with, were by far the closest to his own people. They were efficient, showed intensely focused emotion that could match the stoicism of his own kind and were revered in the Federation as warriors.

And then, there were so many others, so very diverse, it boggled his mind.

Continuing to analyze the Champlain's diagrams, Aron'Son made note of the prefix code for the freighter's computer and sent it to his tactical station.

This concept of "rest" that he was currently being forced to deal with frustrated him. Why should he have to take himself away from the bridge when it was not necessary? He did not get "tired" as the humans or other humanoid species did. He had no requirement for nourishment and his brain did not require any break as he'd heard some of his classmates refer to when he was at Starfleet Academy. Aron'Son resolved that if he could not find another way, he may have to approach Captain Kheren directly. For now, he finished with the Champlain's schematic file and moved on to another vessel.

"Computer, display schematics for USS Polaris to include any modification from standard design."

* * *

"I'm picking up a subspace transmission, very faint... audio only."

"Put it on" Redding said, clasping his hands in front of his chin.

The cool, austere voice of dark-haired, darke-eyed Vulcan ops officer S'Tron was followed by a finger dance on his console that brought a static garbled audio message to their ears.

"Mayday! Mayday! This... *hiss*... the U... *hiss*... Champlain. *Hiss*... have an Invidium leak... *hiss*... cargo cont... *hiss*... three. All... *hiss*... systems ... *hiss*... shutting down. Warp and impulse... *hiss*... offline, transporters and life support... *hiss*... mayday! mayday!"

"Ptolemy II class of freighter alright," strategic ops officer Nathaniel Gray stated, his tall gaunt frame a step behind the command chair. "One hundred and ninety-eight officers and crewmembers."

"An invidium leak will also affect our own propulsion systems if we get in contact with it," warned the Andorian Sheenea with blue skinned fingers, grey eyes and slim forehead antennae glued to her helm controls. "That's why they can't evacuate with their own shuttlecrafts either. Even lifepods will emerge powerless and adrift. And that, if their ejection mechanism works in the first place."

"Bad containment protocols and plain negligence must have caused this. But why would they carry such foul stuff in the first place?" growled the frighteningly muscular security Lieutenant Carmillia Julian behind the weapons station. "No one has been using it anymore for over a hundred years."

"No one in the Federation," the smooth, mesmerizing Deltan voice of bald Doctor Sheelya Osaro-Lyth explained. "But out here, the colonists of Eden III need it for their medical stasis fields until they can finish building a proper hospital with modern technologies... also on board this cargo vessel."

"Sir, I have the Champlain on sensors." Science Lieutenant Valencia Irsos reported.

On the small viewer before them all on the compacted bridge, a saucer flanked by a pair of nacelles tugged three long cylindrical sections linked like the segments of a caterpillar to what no other starships was the neck section under it. Some orange-tinted gas seemed to be seeping from the last container and partly obscured the whole view of the vessel. It was slowly drifting with lights flickering all over the hull.

The woman at the science station turned her chocolate-hued face towards the large man sitting in the spartan command chair, barely two meters on her right side.

"Sorry for the delay, Commander, but there are some intermittent anomalous distortions in the area."

From the technical station, the six-limbed Edoan engineer Taegae Jeonghun turned his bald, ovoid chitinous head around so that his gravelous, thin voice could better be heard.

"In its natural, gaseous state, invidium disrupts molecular bondings. It becomes inert liquid at minus two-hundred and twenty degrees Celsius. Although space's average temperature is minus two-hundred thirty-three Celsius, here it is at least as high as minus one hundred ninety because of the proximity of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. That's why we can see it still and clinging like this to the hull of the even hotter vessel."

He visibly swallowed before finishing his analysis.

"With all this invidium floating around it, a transporter beam would be disrupted. Whatever or whoever we would try to beam through that might, just *might* end up in one piece... or alive... but not for long."

Nathaniel Gray stepped closer to Redding.

"We cannot get too close, we cannot use transporters and we cannot send shuttlecrafts. We don't have the capacity to evacuate so many people... and it is dubious that they will survive four more hours for the Horizon to arrive in time."

"Invidium poisoning, slow asphyxiation and acute hypothermia, brutal decompression... On some worlds, such painful, inevitable death sentence would call for a mercy killing," mused Doctor Osaro-Lyth, clearly not agreeing at all with the idea.

The conclusion was grim, but they all felt it was essential to state it as factually as possible. Only then could their commanding officer properly assess the situation and make a proper decision.

Redding sighed in thought, several seconds ticking by as he pondered the situation.

"Okay... how about if we fine tune some low yield torpedoes and scatter heavier concentrations of gases away from the ship, and then grab it with a tractor beam and drag it along until we can pull out the crew. It hasn't taken any structural damage it seems."

"Their structural integrity field has collapsed but their hull is still intact," confirmed Jheonghun.

"What do you think Gray, better odds than an easy death?"

There was no sign of sarcasm in his voice. The strategic operations officer for his part just shrugged his shoulders.

"Death is death, Sir; nothing ever easy about it. But firing torpedoes this close without damaging the ship will be tricky. Even at low yield, quantum torpedoes still detonate powerfully. But if Lieutenant Julian is good enough, they will be quite shaken in there but unhurt and the quantum resonance will displace enough of the gases for us to try and lock on it with a tractor beam. If then we drag it far enough where standard space temperature is low enough, we will avert the immediate crisis."

"I recommend a fixed steady position abeam, Sir," The tactical woman said in her throaty voice.

"No problem," assured the Andorian at the helm; "we're far enough from the anomaly to not be heavily affected by its presence. I can keep her steady as rock for you."

"Alright people, let's get to it. S'Tron.." He swiveled the chair in his direction; "Apprise the Horizon of our situation as well as our solution."

"Acknowledged."

Then he swiveled around towards Irksos.

"While there setting up for that, get me a sensor sweep of the area. Even if this wasn't a planned ambush, it could still be an opportunity for someone."

"Aye, Sir; scanning," the dark-skinned woman answered, her eyes and fingers already busy at her instruments.

After a few minutes, Carmillia Julian was first to report readiness.

"Weapons team confirm a volley of torpedoes reconfigured to low yield and widest dispersal pattern of detonation in the forward tube. Full firing arc spread programmed into the firing sequence. Target lock confirmed. Proximity detonation calculated to safest distance to the vessel. Ready to fire on your order, Sir."

"Confirming tractor beam sensor lock," S'Tron added. "Activation upon clearing out of the gaseous field."

"Ready to move away once tractor lock confirmed, full impulse," the Andorian pilot followed right after the Vulcan chief of ops. "Heading 090 mark 45 to also get away from the vicinity of the anomaly."

"That will further help cooling the gases that will still leak from their cargo," Jeonghun commented.

"Medical team ready. I'll go join them," Doctor Osaro-Lyth said as she moved to leave the small, spartan bridge.

Redding's left arm was on the chair arm, his hand on his chin.

"You may fire when ready, Lieutenant Julian. All stations, stand at the ready."

At that very moment, a red light blazed on Irksos, Sheeneea and Julian's panels simultaneously.

"Sir! Shields just snapped on!" blared the powerfully built woman at tactical.

"We're going into evasive!" the Andorian zhen at the helm reported as the main viewer's image canted sharply to the right without her even having time to touch the controls.

"Three ships decloaking, equidistant twenty thousand kilometers, port, starboard and aft!" Irksos read out loud from her scanners.

The tactical chief was confirming from her own tactical sensors.

"Klingons Birds of Prey, Sir! Boxing us in and arming torpedoes!"

"Target any incoming torpedoes and move us into a position to better cover of the freighter, extend our shield around it if possible."

The phasers of the Polaris fired in all three directions but only Sheeneea's deft maneuvering allowed them to evade full impact. Nevertheless, the entire vessel shook from the close proximity detonations, activating their personal dampening fields just in time to keep them in their seats as they were grazed by the salvos.

"Minor damage to outer hull plating port and aft ventral, starboard dorsal!" declared Jeonghun, his voice shriller than ever. "Shields holding at ninety-four percent. "

"Mark XXV photon torpedoes, Sir!" Julian reported between clenched teeth. "They go to warp 9 with five seconds shielding and a yield of at least twenty-five isotons. Impossible to intercept!"

"They've cloaked again; standard Klingon multiple angle, hit and run tactic," analysed Gray. "They'll use random timing to confuse us."

Disabled freighter, impossible to rescue crew and an ambush, am I stuck in a Kobayashi Maru test? He thought bitterly.

It was almost impossible for Redding to take the situation seriously, but he really had no choice.

"Open a Channel," he ordered and waited for the acknowledgement before he continued. " This is commander Redding of the USS Polaris to klingon vessels; we request clarification of your intentions."

His voice was confident and firm, without even a hint of excitement or distress.

"They're jamming all frequencies," S'Tron replied in his imperturbable voice. But the tension of the moment shone in his eyes. "We can extend our shields to cover the freighter or the cargo but not both... and this will put us dangerously close to the invidium cloud."

"Which will also make us a sitting duck," warned the strategic ops officer. "And if that gas touches us, we'll be a lacquered duck."

On the screen, one of the raptor-shaped destroyer shimmered into view. But this time, Carmillia and Sheeneea were ready. The Polaris shifted angle so abruptly that they even felt the jolt through their PIDs. Phaser cannons blasted directly at it and the Klingon attacker recloaked. Because of the time it had took to orient the heavier weaponry of the Polaris, it's shields had reformed just in time to avoid complete destruction.

"Damage to their bow plating, but their torpedo launcher is disabled," reported the tactical officer, now smiling savagely. "At least this one will not spit anymore at us for a while!"

The hull around them vibrated and the image on the screen swirled dizzily as the Polaris moved into wild evasive maneuvers. Blinding flashes of light obscured the view at the same moment.

"But it can still be an effective lure," Nathaniel then reminded his commanding officer.

"Shields down to seventy-six percent!" the Edoan engineer announced. Ventral hull plating weakening!"

"They're ignoring the Champlain completely; they must want it and it's cargo," the strategic officer suggested then.

They knew it was a matter of seconds before a new attack would strike. Their survival was counted in seconds as well. But no one suggested a retreat. They were all Starfleet officers, ready to lay down their lives to protect Federation citizens and rights. But they would not just lay down and die. They were all poised to follow Redding's next orders.

Redding still couldn't convince himself that he wasn't suffering from temporal reversion, but those torpedo impacts felt real enough.

"Move us away from the Champlain, best possible speed." he said without a hint of hesitation.

"Abandoning the Champlain, Sir?" wondered Lieutenant Gray, eyes wide.

"A little tactic I call the spoilsport maneuver, so far it's worked every time on pirates." Redding gave a slight grin. "Arm one of our modified torpedos and target the freighter, fire at maximum optimum range, make sure the Klingons have enough time to target and shoot it."

Whether or not they were actually Klingons, the three birds of prey wouldn't have time to decide which one of them should target the torpedo, making it most likely all of them would. He had no doubt that his apt crew would take full advantage of their obvious greed.

If this really was the product of a layered memory, those three ships would be captained by theiving Ferengis. Given their predictable level of greed, he hoped for once that this was the case.

"Quantum torpedoes are just as fast and shielded as their latest photon types," the tactical woman stated. "The only way to do that is by launching the torpedo as a mine,". Ready, Sir."

"If we use it as a mine to provoke harsh action, we have to drop it as close as possible to the freighter," the strategic officer noted. "Helm; plot our trajectory to fly by the Champlain at maximum impulse, then maximum warp away from here."

He turned to Redding.

"At your command, Sir. Heading?"

"I..."

Redding paused.

"No, they'd never... fall for a mine attack against..."

What was going on? he knew that quantum torpedoes moved too fast for that maneuver... didn't he?

Then, with a look of painful frustration on his face he stood up.

"Gray... take the conn."

Never in his life did he want to give that order. It was harder than he imagined.

"Sir?"

"Just do it!" he said with a bitter snarl and stood off to the right of the captain's chair.

His pride churned against the walls of his stomach but he ignored it. This was what had to be done.

Puzzled and definitely nervous, the lieutenant stood before the command chair but did not sit in it. His hand went to his sweating brow.

He... helm..." he stuttered as he swallowed hard. " full impulse... bearing... err bearing 020 mark 15, standby warp drive. Science, Full... full sensor scan to get those Klingons as soon as they decloak. Tactical... drop mine as we cross the Champlain's path."

His nervousness contaminated everyone on the bridge but they all answered "Aye, Sir" and the image of the freighter suddenly loomed very large before them.

"Klingons decloaking!" shouted Valencia Irsos, louder than usual. "Same attack formation!"

On the screen, the round bow of the freighter went past them on the starboard side.

"Drop mine!"

"Torpedo away!" Carmillia Julian confirmed through clenched teeth.

"Warp speed!" yelled Gray.

Instantly, the stars stretched all around the screen then a flash shifted the blurry luminous lines into swiftly moving points of light. The jump was so sudden that it took their PIDs for them to stay in place.

"Maximum warp," said Sheenea, the only one apparently calm and composed among all of them junior officers. But that was only because Andorians were physiologically hardwired to get calmer and more focused in a crisis. but that also made her quite dangerous; a wrong word or move and she could lash out like a savage predator.

The only one truly in control was Vulcan ops chief S'tron. His deep, calm tone did much to counter Nathaniel's infectious nervousness.

"We have cleared the jamming zone."

"One of the Klingon ships is near the freighter, apparently disabled. It's the one we shot earlier," Irsos reported with a forced grin. "Apparently, detonating it themselves sent the invadium gas cloud straight to it's face and contaminated their systems before their shields could be fully raised."

The strategic lieutenant let a sigh of relief blow from between his dry lips, then turned his blinking eyes to Redding standing beside him.

"And I... I thought the Kobayashi Maru was just a... a useless simulation... N-nice tactic there... Sir..."

"And it's not over yet," Carmillia growled. "The other two Birds of Prey are in pursuit. We are distancing them... but not by much."

"They can't match our emergency speed," engineer Jeonghun informed them, finally able to regain a fraction of his thin voice. "And just to try to keep up, they will need all of their reserve power; which means no cloak and minimal shields."

"And as long as we stay at warp, they can only use torpedoes as well," the tactical woman reminded them all to try and calm down everyone.

Then the ship's comm beeped.

"Sickbay to bridge; what's going on out there? Are we helping out that freighter or not? Any casualties?"

Silence weighted heavily on all of them. No one looked at Redding but they were all waiting.

Suddenly Reddings mind cleared, he was sure where, WHEN he was again.

He answered the Comm.

"Stand by, Doctor, it's not over yet."

He then placed his hand on Nathan's shoulder.

"Good work, Gray; return to your post."

He would have liked to play it off as though he was just testing the young man, but it might happen again, so until he checked it out, he had to err on the side of caution.

As such he would now do what he almost never did; ask advice.

"Tactical; can we take the two remaining birds with a reasonable chance of success?"

"With a ship like the Polaris, aye," Carmillia answered. "We have superior firepower and speed... but they match our armor and maneuverability. They have cloaking which is basically a tactical advantage but which can prove detrimental if they rely too heavily on it, since it drains much of their power, unshielding them in transit. And with only about a dozen officers and men aboard, they cannot sustain casualties as well as we do with our own crew five times theirs."

She turned in her seat to face him.

"It all comes down to their commander and their tactics compared to ours, Sir. Two against one, they can afford a few mistakes. We might very well go down at the first one we will do."

She knew her analysis sounded like criticism; but she was a straightforward, non-nonsense woman. If she had been shy about ruffling feathers when speaking her mind, she would have chose diplomacy or counselling as a career.

And she knew enough of the flagship's first officer to know that he could take it... and then give some back. And that's the way she liked it... and him.

"So..." Redding said thoughtfully. "What you're saying is that we have them badly outclassed?"

He grinned.

"I like those odds."

"One on one, aye, " the muscular woman confirmed." But they have numerical advantage. In tactical terms, that means that, as a pair, they have four times our effective power."

Now calmer, Nathaniel Gray stepped closer to Redding's right.

"Klingons revel with the idea of dying in battle. I estimate one would maneuver to sacrifice itself to allow the other a killing shot at us. As Cyrano De Bergerac said; an officer does not abdicate the honor of being the target. The question is, wich one of those two ships will get that honor?"

"These are Klingon raiders, Mister Gray, if they're Klingons at all." He shrugged slightly. "I served four years on a Klingon ship doing boarder patrols. I assure you, they don't subscribe to that kind of honor."

He did his best to say it without criticism, Gray didn't deserve that.

"But to answer you question, neither do I ."

He stood up to better address the room.

"Drop us out of warp and bring us about. As soon as they go to impulse, I'm expecting them to activate cloaks. If that happens, take us immediately back to the freighter."

He then turned to the Vulcan.

"S'tron, we need to jam any signals they try to send back to their third ship. I want to catch them in the act, if you understand my meaning."

"Sir, if we also drop a jamming probe targeted to one of them, it will not only do the job but force them to destroy it."

Carmillia Julian grinned towards the ops officer.

"Diverting their firepower and attention, providing at least a few seconds to surprise them with our maneuver; quite devious for a Vulcan..."

"Guile would be a more proper term, Lieutenant," S'tron retorted impassively.

Redding sat back down.

"If we engage and they fight, fine. But I think their trying to keep us away from the prize."

Indeed, if they did fight, it might mean there was more going on than a simple heist.

Gray stepped closer to the big man in the captain's chair to speak more privately.

"If I may, Sir; why do you think these are raiders? There's easier, richer and tactically better suited targets on the other side of the anomaly, along their own borders where they can haul it back to base, or take refuge, even get reinforcements... And how could they have known there was a disabled freighter on this side in the first place? And how could simple raiders reach it so quickly and despite the satellite surveillance net and patrolling ships guarding the anomaly?"

Then, something else that the flagship's first officer had said struck him suddenly. He leaned closer.

"And, Sir... what makes you think they might not even be Klingons?"

"All valid and well thought out reasons, Gray, but think about what you just said. If the Klingons are out here in a military action, that means that they have slipped past our net guarding the Azimuth portal and managed to stay out of site until now. So they can steal cargo from a freighter or ambush the Polaris? I don't think so."

He shook his head slightly.

"And I think they are Klingons, but something's off with them. Their ships are well equipped and their tactics very efficient, but there's no... joy... in their actions. Klingons take all forms of combat very personally, and I'm just not feeling it."

The young officer blinked at this.

"Now that you say it, Sir... indeed, they *are* a bit odd; no boasting, no challenge... even this three against one assault is rather... cowardly, especially for Klingons. Something is amiss here."

He looked at the big man in the command chair.

"We are ready to invite them to the dance, Sir. Just give the word."

* * *

"Captain; the Polaris is hailing. Audio only."

A nod from the Andorian as he stepped out of his office brought the bridge's speakers alive with the drab voice of ops officer S'Tron slightly deformed by some interference.

"USS Polaris to USS Horizon; USS Champlain disabled by invidium cargo leak. Upon proceeding with rescue, we were ambushed by three Klingon Birds of Prey, *B'Rel* class. One disabled near the freighter; two in pursuit of us. We are closing in on your position at maximum warp, ETA fifty-three minutes."

"Evening the odds," Tyvya commented as she moved her giant frame out of the tactical console seat to allow chief Aron'Son to take her place. "With only two disruptor cannons and one torpedo launcher, they will be no match for our combined firepower."

"An Aquarius class is much faster than these old birds, even the latest ones," helmsman Snow stated. "We will have about forty minutes to prepare a welcome worthy of them."

"Lieutenant Lyrya..." Kheren started to say but stopped as he saw the Aenar at his left shake her head.

"Contact lost, Sir; jamming at the source."

The flagship commanding officer sighed.

"This can only means that Redding turned to fight instead of running and he's dancing with them again."

"Why would he do such a thing?" wondered ops chief Cheonghi, his third central hand to his chitinous chin as his two others worked his console. "They could not catch up..."

"Commander Redding is old school Starfleet," explained the counselor. "He is more of a soldier than an explorer; and with lives at stake on the Champlain alone with a Klingon warship, he is not going to just flee and abandon them."

This time, Kheren's sigh sounded more like a growl.

"The Polaris may keep her own against even three *B'rels*... but it will be bloody and messy. We have to get to them and fast."

"We're already at warp 9.1, Captain," reported Aguk Snow with obvious frustration. "That's the best we can do without the main stardrive."

From the main science station, science chief Robert Baoule turned his dark-skinned face from his sensor display to the command dais.

"If they come around and back to the freighter, ETA will be two point forty-one hours."

This time. it was definitely a growl that was heard from between the captain's clenched jaws.

"What in all the deep waters of Hell are *Klingons* doing out here?"

No one could answer him.

"From what I know of Klingons, Sir," Aron'Son stated "which is a considerable amount as they are one of the species the Dominion has a vast amount of information on, your question is valid. They live for their honor and there is no honor in ambushing a freighter, of all vessels. If they wanted something on the freighter, they would have disabled it, taken what they were seeking, and left the vessel adrift. It also is not likely they are trying to bait us. If they wished to attack the Federation's assets here, they would have done so in force and attempted to destroy the Horizon before attacking the colony. But they were badly defeated during the Azimuth Horizon incident and do not have the resources to mount such an attack even if they wished to do so. The only conclusion I can offer, Captain, is that either these Klingons are renegades, or they are not Klingons at all. They could be pirates or some other group that have captured Klingon vessels."

Kheren listened to his acting strategic operations officer, thought for a moment then nodded.

"A valid assessment, considering what little we do know of the present situation. I will keep that in mind when we get there... hopefully not too late."

His sigh still sounded a bit like a growl.

"I hope Commander Redding figured it out as well."

* * *

"Take us in Sheeneea; and try to make us look determined to fight," Redding ordered.

"Dropping out of warp," she answered as the streaks of lights coalesced into flickering bright points spread all accross the screen before them. "Coming about, full impulse."

The Raiders might be expecting a dosey doe but Redding was planning on doing more of a rope a dope maneuver.

The Andorian at the helm and the woman at the tactical station didn't look at one another; yet they were ready to work together.

"Launching probes," Julian announced.

On the viewer and on their sensors, the low-winged alien destroyers appeared one on top of the other. As soon as they came out of warp, they opened fire with their disruptor cannons. But the sudden, unexpected turn of the Polaris sent their four streaks of reddish fire tear empty space. Before they could cloak, two probes, one from each end of the Starfleet warship, shot out and arced straight at them. As they were built on the same casing as torpedoes, the enemy ships used their best defense against what they taught were attacking warheads; they cloaked.

"Jamming active," S'tron confirmed.

"Warp speed," Sheeneea said as the stars turned again into lightstreaks.

Completely taken by surprise and for a moment more concerned with the incoming pseudo-torpedoes with no way to communicate and sensors momentarily muffled, the Klingon ships took several seconds before they realized what happened.

Only after those several seconds did they reappear to sensors as they jumped to emergency warp, again trying to keep up with the much faster Aquarius class vessel. The two long range class VIII probes for a while would keep up with them.

"One good roll of the dice for us," Gray sighed with relief. "If they want to destroy the probes, they will have to turn around to shoot them down with torpedoes from their lone forward tube or drop out of warp to blast them with disruptors... and in doing either, risk losing us. They'll be jammed all the way back to the freighter and will not be able to warn their accomplice back there."

Redding stood up and grinned.

"Excellent work everyone. If I was still an Admiral, I'd be handing out a few commendations right now, so instead I'll just recommend them. Now, get us back to that freighter and push it a bit if you can, the more time we have before those two..." he jacked his thumb back words in the main view screen, "catch up, the better chance we have to figure out what their up to and secure the freighter."

"Aye, Sir," Shheneea and Carmilla Julian answered in unison.

"We can easily maintain emergency speed back to the Champlain," Jheonghun assured him. "Estimating they will go to emergency warp as well, that will give us nine minutes over them." He walked up to Gray.

"Have a security detail standing by for transport. They might have already boarded the ship, and it's crew likely won't be able to put up a decent fight. Life support belts of course in case the gas didn't properly vent."

"Carmilla, you better lead the assault. I'll take over tactical."

"Suits me just fine," the muscular woman said as she left the chair for Gray and headed for the turbolift. "Klingons give good exercise."

Redding too then went to tactical.

"I want that Bird of Prey disabled ASAP if it's not already, priority is getting a full sensor sweep of it's crew, systems and cargo."

"Understood, Sir," the strategic ops officer responded as he keyed the tactical console to his own command code.

"S'Tron, do you know what a 'wild weasel' is? and if so, does it still work in this day and age?"

The Vulcan eyebrow's went up.

"Indeed I do, Sir. An old tactic rarely used nowadays... From what we know of standard Bird of Prey technology and the proper use of our own equipment for this option, I estimate a ninety four point seven percent chance that it will work as expected."

"Better than I hoped for, get on it then."

Redding then turned to address the bridge.

"Okay everyone, we all know what we need to do and how to do it. There's a freighter with a scared crew out there that only has us to pin hope on, so let's not let them down."

With a reassuring nod to each station, he returned to his seat.

Their flight was as swift and silent as when they had retreated to drag the Klingons away from the endangered freighter. When they dropped out of warp, they immediately saw on their viewer that the third Bird of Prey was in a stationary orbit around the Champlain, albeit at the respectable distance from the gaseous haze still clinging to part of it's cargo pods behind it.

"The Klingon ship is trying to raise shields," Gray reported, "but the power levels are fluctuating on and off."

"They've been affected by the invidium that our torpedo blew into their faces," Irksos understood. "They probably have no clue what is happening to them since Klingons never used the stuff.. Even when such an accident had happened on the Enterprise D, it had taken quite some time before they figured it out. And Bird of Prey crews do not usually carry that many scientists and top notch technicians to begin with."

"But they do carry intimidating warriors," the strategic ops officer shot back. "I read half a dozen of them on the Champlain's bridge. No weapons fire detected yet. The ship is locking weapons on us."

"eight minutes, thirteen seconds before the other two arrives," reminded Sheeneea.

"Curious... " Irksos stated as her eyes where glued to her sensor readout. "Sir... the lifesigns of the Klingons on their ship are difficult to detect because of their shield's interference; but those on the Champlain... they do not seem to conform exactly to what we have in the database."

This knowledge made Redding pause. Although he had already expected new like it, now that it was confirmed...

"Update the security detail on this and have them stand by for transport," Redding said a bit uncomfortably.

"Lieutenant Julian is acknowledging. She has a full security team with her in the transporter room, her and two of her men already on the pads."

He really, REALLY wanted to go himself; and not long ago, from his perspective, it would have been the normal way of doing things. But with the two other Birds of Prey on approach, it would be improper to leave the ship.

"Disable that ship, whatever it takes, we don't have the luxury of being polite." he said firmly.

"They did draw first blood," Gray answered stiffly. " Phaser cannons and phaser strips locked on target, quantum torpedoes in both tubes, wild weasel ready to launch from shuttlebay..."

He blinked before turning an alarmed expression towards his commanding officer.

"Sir they... they are maneuvering behind the Champlain... using it as a shield between us and them!"

He didn't have to say more. Even with their ship disabled, warriors of the Empire would still welcome the fight; all the more glory if they died battling with such a tactical disadvantage against a state-of-the-art Federation warship, giving time for their comrades to come and finish the enemy as they sacrificed themselves. But this, such a cowardly maneuver, hiding behind civilians, it was definitely *unklingon*.

Redding's eyes narrowed.

They want to play peek-a-boo; fine. They left their people wide open.

"Redding to transporter room; lock on to three of the Klingons aboard the freighter and perform a concurrent transport, they just gave us a clear shot at them. If you can't get a solid lock on them, proceed to transport our team over anyway; but if you do get the Klingons, disarm and contain them."

If nothing else, he wanted at least one of these people to talk too when the immediate threat was over.

"Aye, Sir," came back the throaty voice of Carmillia Julian over the intercom.

The soft whine of the transporter was heard before the com closed. Since the freighter's shields were inoperative, they could obviously board her just as easily as the Klingons had done. "Mr. Gray, I still want that ship, but don't rush in. They might be trying to draw us into a surprise," he said and gave him a stiff nod.

"Aye, Sir. Sheeneea, try to maneuver so that we change places with them in the next... fifty-three seconds."

Under the apt fingers of the Andorian Helmswoman, the Polaris circled the Starfleet freighter at an oblique angle, leaving the crippled Bird of Prey only three choices; go again through the disabling invidium cloud, confront the Starfleet warship head on, or follow a circuitous route of his own under and around the immobilized USS Champlain.

"They're trying weapons lock but their targeting system seems to be malfunctioning," the SOO Lieutenant grinned, his eyes on his firing controls.

Both ships danced around the crippled transport for a few tense seconds until the other two Klingon destroyers dropped out of warp, right behind it.

Gray's fingers were poised over the torpedo controls, his board tracing their path over the Champlain so as to force the Klingon ships to take a lower angle to evade them and avoid a collision with their crippled accomplice... right where the Polaris cannons were already poised. Near him, S'tron's own index was ready to launch their wild weasel from the shuttlebay.

"Gentlemen.. unleash hell." was Reddings only remark.

Not knowing if the Klingon boarders had what they wanted or how they would react to the news that they also had people on it, the risk that they would simply destroy the freighter now was too great to allow them the opportunity to do so.

"Fire the Wild Weasel at your discretion, Mister S'Tron." He would hold off on the Weasel until the right time, and he was sure S'Tron would know when that would be.

"Torpedoes away!" announced Gray.

There was a sudden vibration and some distant booming from somewhere under their feet. On the viewer, what appeared at first as a big blob of blueish light split into five distinct stars that flew faster than any ship towards the incoming Klingon ships, right over the saucer section of the Ptolemy class freighter. And then, the Birds of prey did a very peculiar and unexpected dance; as the foremost, crippled one dragged itself backward to regroup with the other two, those moved swiftly in line right behind it.

"What the..."

The Strategic Ops officer understood just as he wondered about the maneuver; but still he couldn't believe it. At so short a distance and so close for such fast moving projectiles, the ships movements confused their tracking sensors and, before they could compensate and correct their course, they all impacted the first warship.

One standard quantum torpedo was more than enough to level a city; on a ship with minimal shields, five of them left only a thin cloud of sparkling dust, glowing vapors and remnants of antimatter radiation. When the blinding detonation subsided, there was no other trace left of the crippled Klingon destroyer.

And none at all of any of the other two.

"That was.. inspiring." Redding said in amazement.

But there wasn't time to be awestruck.

"Mister S'Tron; dim the lights and launch the weasel, weapons stand by to acquire new targets."

He was fairly sure they had re-cloaked.

"Manual targeting on standby, all weapons hot," Lieutenant Gray spoke in a hushed tone.

"Can we get a status update on Carmilla's team? are there still Klingons on board?" Redding asked. For they knew if the Klingons had what they wanted, then they were sneaking off under cloak.

"Wild weasel launching," the Vulcan confirmed first. "Transporter room reports boarding is underway."

He spoke in a whisper as lights dimmed and all systems but the most essential were put offline. With the modified shuttle emitting the equivalent of a starship's power signature, reducing theirs as much as possible would ensure the lure would be convincing enough. That was also the reason why Gray targeted without active instruments; a target lock would be detected and betray their true location.

And for several long, tense seconds, all was deadly quiet.

Then, on their viewer, two raptor-shaped vessels appeared in a converging pattern and fired torpedoes at the instant they became fully visible. But the two torpedoes were not aimed at the Polaris but several hundreds of thousands of kilometers in front of it.

"Ready to fire!" Gray managed to murmur despite his excitement at the fleeting opportunity they had created the moment the two destroyers appeared.

What detonated was the wild weasel they had launched for just this purpose. Both barely decloaked Birds of Prey were now still raising shields, torpedo tubes not yet reloaded and offering both their flanks to them.

"Fire all batteries!"

Redding's lips were drawn back in a tight smile, he lived for these moments, outwitting his opponents and turning it to an advantage.

During his command of the Klingon scout ship IKS Terren Koth, he often refused to engage his cloaking device in combat unless directly ordered to do so, declaring it a handicap that only poor commanders needed to rely upon, routinely quoting the old saying that 'striking from the dark is the way of an assassin, not a warrior.' While this made a powerful impression on his crew, the other commanders in his battle group complained and challenged him on it constantly.

But not on this ship.

"Port target suffered heavy damage to starboard weapons array shield emitters and wing armor plating," reported Irksos from the sensors following the powerful phaser beams and pulses the Polaris weapons poured out on both Birds of Prey. "Starboard target port hull is breached, plating gone and impulse engines slightly damaged. They are recloaking."

"Coming around the Champlain so as to draw their fire away from it," the Andorian helmswoman added as the form of the freighter was swept away to offer an unobstructed view of the wounded Klingon ships turning away and fading.

"They're running away!" engineer Jeonghun wondered aloud.

"Target locked!" now exclaimed Gray without any further restraint as they had fully revealed themselves. He knew the lock would be lost in the next second.

"Continue firing until disabled or destroyed, preferably the former." he said with slightly less enthusiasm in his voice, he disliked shooting at a wounded fleeing target but regardless of how wounded they were as long as they had an active cloak they would remain a threat.

"Issue a surrender signal, not that I think it will matter regardless if they're Klingon or not.." he would in fact be disappointed if they accepted.

"They're still jamming all frequencies, Sir," S'tron reported as the Polaris phasers struck again.

They had barely cloaked and the targeting computer helped Gray make a perfect evaluation of their possible speed, direction and orientation. Seemingly firing at empty space, the orange streaks of lights from the phaser strips and drops of fiery energy of the cannons illuminated starkly the silhouette of the two Klingon destroyers. They both reappeared as one exploded from receiving direct fire to it's warp core; the other warped away, leaving duranium, deuterium and plasma behind like a wounded beast limping away, broken and defeated.

"Jamming has stopped," the Vulcan ops officer announced. "All decks report no damage or casualties. USS Champlain's condition now stabilized and secured for the moment but their invidium leak and damage still need to be addressed."

"Second enemy ship destroyed, third one moving away again under cloak," Irksos confirmed from her science station. "Last bearing was..."

She stopped then, frowning, her soft, dark features frozen in obvious perplexity.

"Sir... in the direction this Bird of Prey seemingly took, long range sensors are picking up... disturbance in the local area. Too far to make a clear identification as the nearby emissions of the Azimuth Horizon are causing much interference but... but it seems to be local cyclic distorsions of space-time."

"Like what we find in the anomaly itself?" wondered engineer Jeonghun.

"Not exactly; this one seems cyclic like the emissions of a pulsar... and it is not a sensor echo from the anomaly," Irksos said, anticipating the Edoan's train of thought. "There is no space anomaly in this area of space... but there is... something... there are gravitational waves consistent with the presence of a planetary-sized body... but there is no star system located there and still, this is where those distorsions come from."

"And where our friendly Klingons flew away to," mused Gray.

They were all interrupted by the ship's com and the voice of Doctor Osaro-Lyth.

"Sickbay to bridge; Commander Redding, if you are through dancing with your friends out there, I strongly suggest you come here."

* * *

Long tense minutes went by as the flew through space with the oppressive feeling of powerlessness as their comrades on the Polaris were fighting for their lives and those of the Champlain against uneven odds. An hour of heavy silence had passed when counselor Lyrja finally broke the tension with her soft, cristalline voice.

"Captain; jamming from the source has stopped."

"The space sonar is punching through the anomaly's interference," science chief Norbert baoule then reported. "There two fields of debris and traces of weapons fire right ahead of us."

Kheren's eyes stayed on the screen, as hard and tense as his voice.

"The Polaris? The Champlain?"

"Negative, Sir; I have both ships on sensors. The Polaris is in a parking orbit around the freighter; but there is some gaseous accumulation around it... invidium gas."

The dark-skinned science chief turned his soft brown eyes to his commanding officer.

"Gaseous invidium will disturb all of a ship's systems. A leak is the probable cause of their initial distress call... before the Klingons showed up."

"So, the two field of debris are the Birds of prey?"

"Two of them at least, Sir. The third one might still be lurking nearby under cloak. An Aquarius class would outmatch a Bird of Prey but with a good ship commander, it is not all that a certainty."

The Andorian nevertheless permitted himself a small sigh of relief.

"Fortunately, the Polaris does have a good commander herself. ETA with her?"

"Seventy-four point six minutes present speed, Captain," helmsman Snow answered.

"Hail the Polaris, Counselor; inform them of our time of arrival. Tell them to hold fast and secure the situation as best as possible until we arrive."

"Aye, Captain; transmitting."

"Now that we can communicate again, if anyone has a bright idea that could help them from this far away, please don't be shy," Kheren stated openly to his bridge crew.

At that moment, on the bridge of the escort ship, the executive officer of the flagship was answering his medical officer's hail.

"Suggestion noted, Doctor. I'll be there as soon as I can."

He closed the channel but made no immediate move to leave his chair.

"Hail the Horizon," he said to S'tron also serving as the communications officer.

"Sir," answered the Vulcan, "the Horizon is already hailing us."

On the viewer appeared the stern countenance of Captain Kheren sitting in his command chair. The image was slightly distorted by the proximity of the Azimuth Horizon. It looked as if he was in a tank of syrupy water.

"Commander Redding here, Sir; two Klingon ships destroyed and another heavily damaged and heading towards what could be a temporal anomaly. With verification that we can leave the freighter safely, requesting permission to pursue remaining ship."

The Andorian's deep soft voice had a faint echo as he spoke.

"Horizon to Polaris; Good job Commander. Take care of the freighter as best you can and stay on alert. That fleeing Klingon might come back with reinforcements. We will reach you in less than an hour. We will assess the situation then. Horizon out."

"Sir; the Bird of Prey is a weak vessel design," Aron'Son then stated as the call ended. "Even with the Klingons attempting to improve them through time, the Polaris has superior armaments. Additionally, despite a cloaking device engaged, the Polaris sensors should be able to detect elevated neutrino particles from the ship if it remains nearby. Klingons have made no attempts to improve their cloaking technology in that regard. They may also attempt a tachyon sweep of the area if they remain able to do so with their deflector."

"A good idea we can have them improve upon," Norbert Baoule said. "There are just about enough probes aboard the Polaris for them to establish a tachyon grid around the immediate area by modifying them for that purpose. It would give them an early warning system if that escaped ship comes back with reinforcements."

Kheren nodded. For those who knew him, it meant that he was pleased even if his Andorian face had not enough muscles to show it. But he spoke plainly his satisfaction.

"Good work, Mister Aron'Son, Mister Baoule; have the specifications of such a probe-made security grid laid out to be transmitted to the Polaris... and also to the stardrive and colony back at Eden."

"Aye, Captain," engineer Robert Baoule acknowledged from the engineering station. "Their industrial replicators will be able to built satellites and implement the same security field as a permanent measure to protect the colony."

It took barely minutes for the officers to come up with all the data.

"Counselor, transmit the data to both ships," Kheren ordered, sitting back in his chair with a more relaxed posture.

They were less than forty-seven minutes to their rendez-vous with their escort ship and the disabled freighter. Yet, all was not over yet. There was a mystery out there that was now compelling them to further investigation... and perils, undoubtedly. And so, despite his relaxed stance, the Andorian captain was silent and unmoving, intensely concentrated on what lay ahead.

CHAPTER 2 : THE FACE OF THE ENEMY

On board the Polaris, everything had returned to a more quiet albeit still slightly tense atmosphere following the Klingon defeat. All aboard the small warship, the whole crew was busy with the situation in all its complexities.

"Damage control and medical teams are ready to transport aboard the Champlain, Sir," ops officer S'tron announced. "Preliminary estimates is eight people lightly wounded by the Klingon boarding action and minor damage to the forward cargo container, the one leaking invidium. However, most systems are offline or on low operational level due to the contamination."

"We are ready to tractor the freighter away into deeper space," Jeonghun then confirmed after conferring with his technicians. "The invidium will return to a solid inert state once we are far enough from the irradiation of the anomaly and surrounding space has lowered to its normal temperature. We should be ready to safely help them in sixteen minutes once in proper position."

"Coordinates of safe area plotted and laid in," Sheeneea added from helm. "ETA eight minutes at full impulse."

Redding sat back in his chair.

"Proceed with the operation Sheeneea."

"Aye, Sir."

Redding still frowned, thinking of the Horizon's last communication.

"Reinforcements?" he mumbled with disdain.

In his opinion, letting the ship go had not increased the likelihood of reinforcements, as there was nothing keeping them from calling them anyway. But ultimately, the captain was right; protecting the freighter had to come first and the Horizon was far more capable of dealing with the anomaly than they were.

"Commander, the Horizon is again transmitting; data regarding a... tachyon security grid," Nathaniel Gray said then. "According to this, we could modify all our remaining probes to establish a short range alarm system around both ships that would warn us of any cloaked ship approaching within firing distance. Sir, if we stay on yellow alert, we will have just about enough time to respond to such an intrusion once detected."

"Data confirmed," Valencia Irksos stated as she looked at it from her science readouts. " With our probes left, the largest tachyon net we can erect would be just about a hundred thousand kilometers out of maximum weapons range. If a cloaked ship comes through at full impulse, we will have barely over a second before being into long range engagement zone."

Redding smirked.

"I doubt that will be necessary but it can't hurt, we'll set it up when we reach the safe area."

In truth he found it over cautious, as the odds of reinforcement were slight in his point of view.

That's when the ship's comm chirped to get Redding's attention, followed by the voice of security chief Carmilla Julian.

"Transporter room to bridge; security report ready for you, Sir. We have secured the Champlain. We managed to reactivate a firing console to manually assist you against the enemy ships but the circuits now are fried. Six boarders found and captured under heavy stun, four in confinement, two in sickbay suffering light wounds. Two of our officers also wounded and in sickbay as well receiving treatment. Our two other security teams are on the freighter to ensure readiness against any such boarding action."

There was a pause before the security woman spoke again, this time with a perceptibly less firm tone.

"Sir, you were right; those... attackers are not... what we expected."

"As soon as we secure the safe zone I'll join you on the freighter chief, maintain station and prepare for some help, we'll beam over who ever we can spare."

He stood up and moved to the doors.

"You have the bridge, Gray. I should go find out whats going on in sickbay."

And with that, he left the bridge. When he arrived at the small infirmary labelled sickbay even on this diminutive starship, Redding was in for a shock.

The Deltan woman acting as his chief medical officer looked up to him as he entered but stayed on the other side of the two biobeds occupied out of the three available, so as to let him take in fully the sight of her two patients. On each was stretched the unconscious form of a tall, well-built humanoid wearing black boots and pants with a tunic of silvery mesh crossed by a large red bandolier ornamented with a pointed triangular tri-colored insignia. The face of each had rough features and a tan skin sharply delineated by a short, pointed beard and crowned by coarse, close-cropped hair over a smooth, high forehead over bushy eyebrows.

"You will not beleive this, Commander," Doctor Osaro-Lyth said then, " but these are our Klingon prisonners. And beleive me, I checked their physiological structure, all of their biometrics and down to their DNA; these *are* Klingons."

She pointed the biomonitor showing blinking lights and moving luminous lines over each inert body.

"Their DNA is the most fascinating part; what it shows is no less than a full percent of compatibility with Human DNA. Normally, there is but less than zero point one percent genetic similarity between those two species; hence why Klingon-Human hybrids are possible only with the help of genetic manipulation, as with any cross-breeding of species coming from different planetary environements. Even then, some are essentially impossible to manage, like for example with Andorians who's DNA is less than zero point zero zero zero one percent compatible even with other cobalt-based species like Bolians. But the thing that is most fascinating here is that, despite the genetic markers which are strangely yet not exactly similar to what we may find on Humans, these two are *not* hybrids. Look at the organ redundancy, the cobalt-iron blood composition, heartbeat, respiratory cycle, body temperature... they are still fully Klingons... yet, not quite..."

She looked at him with a frown on her incredible beautiful face.

"If I didn't know better, I would say that we are seeing here members of an evolutionary step of the klingon species; prior or following the Klingons we are familiar with, I could not say at this time. But even such minute changes should take at least hundreds of thousands of years... unless... artificially induced."

"Or perhaps we're looking at something very old. Are you familiar with the Klingon augment virus, Doctor?"

Redding looked over the Klingon closely.

"In my father's time, Klingons looked much like this, in the early twenty-third century."

Osaro-Lyth's eyes widened as she nodded, looking back at her monitor readouts with a new expression on her beautiful face.

"Now *that* would explain everything quite nicely! The attempt by the Klingon Empire in those days to make a genetic retrovirus from the DNA of 20th century augments did exactly what we are seeing here; Klingons with softened features, heightened aggression and, unfortunately for them, Human caution and fear with loss of standard Klingon muscle and bone mass instead of the superhuman capabilities they were trying to impart to their kind."

She shook her head sadly.

"This is why the Federation is so adamant about severely controlling genetic engineering since the historical tragedy of the so-called supermen of late 20th century Earth; you can never foretell the consequences of such fast and extreme alteration when only ambition and power are the motivation. If I recall my xenohistory correctly, the Klingon Empire were risking extinction when that retrovirus backfired into a killing epidemic... and they were only saved when it was rendered inert to prevent mass executions of these "lesser " Klingons."

Redding turned back to the doctor.

"Is it possible we have stumbled upon a rogue group that never cured the virus?" he said thoughtfully.

She nodded just as thoughtfully.

"Coelacanths of the Beta Quadrant..."

His questioning stare prompted her to explain.

"Back on your homeworld, fishermen of the early twentieth century brought back from the depths of the ocean a species of fish, the coelacanth, that had been believed extinct for well over three hundred million years. Such anachronistic findings are not all that rare; evolution does not demand extinction. Less successful lifeforms may still continue to live even when displaced by better adapted ones, albeit in small, isolated habitats where that competition is lighter or absent... or where the new conditions are not present to hamper their continuation... or when the evolving members are the ones moving to another unoccupied ecological niche. Space being so huge, your idea appears quite sound, Commander."

Her sparkling eyes returned to their two unconscious captives.

"Guess *they* have the answer to that question."

"The question that concerns me most is their current affiliation with the Klingon Empire."

Redding looked at the one closest to him long and hard.

"Their existence would be considered an embarrassing insult if discovered to the Klingons as we know them... But here, we have encountered them with new ships and state-of-the-art weapon systems, and that just doesn't add up."

He considered his options. Clearly, he should wait for the captain to arrive for a proper channel interrogation... But Redding decided he wanted first crack at them.

"Can one of them be revived safely? I need to know if we can expect any company."

While a reasonable excuse, it was still just an excuse.

"Well, they were just stunned by phasers and they are as sturdy as the Klingons we do know. I was keeping them under sedation until you decided what to do with them. I can revive them if you wish and the safety forcefield will keep them on the biobed."

"Let me get in some extra security, if they're at all connected to the eugenics project we shouldn't take too many chances."

In truth, Redding always wanted to match one of these eugenics Supermen. In his prime, he had defeated the Vulcan wrestling champion, which in turn endeared him to the Klingons. Once, he even defeated a Gorn hand to hand.. Although you couldn't really say he did it fairly.

But! a eugenics warrior? That's something else entirely different.

His call brought in his chief of security Carmillia Julian and two of her men. The men posted themselves outside at the doorway while the muscular woman came in to join Redding in the small and now crowded infirmary. They all had phasers II, so that they would not be cramped in the close quarters of the ship as they would have been with cumbersome rifles. And like all security officers under Captain Kheren's command, they were sporting also a combat knife in one boot which they had high level proficiency training in. Any one of them could match a Klingon one on one in any form of personal combat. And Julian herself, with heavyworlder genes inherited from her mother, could lift a full grown man with just one hand.

Those two prisoners, even if they somehow managed to free themselves from the energy restraints of their bed, would not go beyond the door.

Doctor Osaro-Lyth was now standing besides one of them with a hypospray, ready for Redding to order his reanimation. As he nodded, she injected him between two brief flashes of the forcefield. Seconds later, the strangely human-looking Klingon's eyes fluttered open. When he saw them, he visibly tried to move away; the forcefield only allowed him a slight tremor in his dark beard, pursed lips and beady eyes. Realizing his condition, He stopped struggling and turned his frightened and angry face towards the only male in the room. Although he seemed a bit confused by their appearance, he hid it behind a rough, coarse tone.

"Do your worst, Earther; I've been trained against your vaunted torture techniques and warned about your death camps. You will not break me."

"Earther?" Carmillia Julian repeated, visibly puzzled by the word and the rest.

But then she kept silent; Redding was in charge here.

Redding leaned over the man and spoke in a harsh and guttural manner.

"*Ra'wl'* Redding, *Maglin tuq yajmoHmo'*. *Sovlu'chugh toH qul SoH Duj 'ej Hoch chaq nuch yu' jIH.*" Roughly translated; 'I am Commander Redding, Steward of the house of Maglin. I demand to know why you fired on my ship, and in the way of a coward.'

It always baffled Redding how these new universal translators worked. How did it know he wanted to speak in Klingon? and more still that everyone else in the room would also hear Klingon? It had been explained to him once but his primitive mind just couldn't follow it.

He had hoped that the shock of being addressed in this manner and a challenge to his honor might get him talking.

The prisoner at least had enough sense not to try to spit in the man's face as was clearly written on his dark bearded face his wish to do; the forcefield would have sent it right back into his own. But he did spit every word he said in response, which he did in Federation Standard; this was always done on purpose by Klingons as a demeaning gesture, as it stated "you are not worthy of the power of Klingonee, the language of warriors" and in a simpler way, "I am superior because I can understand you but you can't understand me". The last point was of course rendered moot with Redding's perfect fluency; hence why the Klingon felt angered by his linguistic display; it forced him to consider the Human more or less as an equal, something that twisted his mouth with an expression as sour as his tone of voice.

"*PetaQ!* Your lies are as childish as this new uniform of yours! A Human, steward of a *Thlin'ghan* House? Even our Romulans allies do not deserve such lofty honor! One of our despicable enemies? Bah! You think me for the fool *you* are, Earther!

Redding switched off the bed's forcefield and grabbed the Klingon throwing him bodily to the floor.

"*Commander!*" shouted Doctor Osaro-Lyth, shocked by the unexpected violence.

Redding ignored her and she was still too shocked to do or say anything more as he loomed over the fallen prisoner.

"You attack and board an unarmed freighter and then attack my ship without challenge or reason... and you call ME a fool!"

His anger seemed genuine enough. He pointed up and away.

"TWO of your ships are now dust and their *HoD jach neH ghe;*" their captains scream in hell now, knowing that they too were fools."

He crouched menacingly over the burly yet smaller Klingon.

"We allowed the last of them to crawl back to your base within the gate."

The Klingons'eyes went suddenly wide precisely as he said the last word. But Redding was not finished.

Romulans? Redding thought. *That might explain a few things.*

But that line about new uniforms was intriguing, and combined with the anomaly...

"Your so called 'allies' supplied you with inferior out of date cloaking devices. When *our HoD* arrives, we shall use the flight path of that vessel to find your base... and deal with it."

That's when Sheelya finally regained all of her wits about her. She interposed herself between the standing man and the prone Klingon and helped him return to the bed, to which he complied under the intimidating muzzle of Carmillia's phaser and the threatening presence of the big man. As she reactivated the restraining field, this time he did not show any sign of struggle; obviously feeling more secure behind it's energy barrier. The Deltan Doctor offered a stern look and tone of voice to the Polaris commanding officer, putting all her overriding authority as CMO behind every word.

"Commander Redding, this is my sickbay and this individual is still under my care. I will not tolerate such behavior again!"

Redding looked as if he might strike at her, but backed off with a respectful nod.

"Of course Doctor, I apologize for my outburst. It is.. difficult.. to put up with such dishonor."

He turned to Julian with a look of dismay.

"How do the Romulans keep tricking these Klingon fools into using their 'advanced technology'?"

"Probably the same way they trick them with second hand and obsolete Klingon starship designs," the powerful woman mused, not at all ruffled by her commanding officer's forceful display.

Now the prisoner was silent and looking with as much fear as hate at Redding. Something the large Human had said was visibly troubling him but he certainly didn't want to talk anymore.

"Enough of this." Redding said wearily. "The Doctor will see to your... comfort, until our captain gets here at least," he added with a threatening smile.

With a jerk of his head, he signaled the rest of them to follow him and left the room in a huff. Once outside and a little ways away, he took a breath and leaned up against the wall.

"Well, that was fun. Think he bought it?"

"Have him transferred to the brig and I can give him your... sales pitch again, Sir," Carmillia answered, rolling her massive shoulders with a frightening smile. "Our good Doctor certainly did... But judging by his surprisingly soft features, soft for a Klingon I mean, he was much more worried, frightened even, than angry; which is also odd for a Klingon... if he really is Klingon. Did you notice, Sir, how indifferent he was to your reference about dishonor ? And also how alarmed he became when you spoke of his base?"

* * *

Captain's log

Stardate: 88666.7

We have reached the location where the Polaris is currently helping the USS Champlain to recover from both invidium leak and Klingon attack. Our more extensive damage control and medical teams will be taking over from the much smaller complement of the Polaris. Chief engineer Solius estimates the freighter will be able to resume it's journey towards the Eden colony in an hour.

Along with reports from these incidents, our sensors confirm those of our escort ship; space-time distortions are apparently coming from about a light year away, in the direction the last surviving aggressor flew to. It is a seemingly empty area of space and there is no known natural phenomena that can explain these readings. Consequently, investigation is in order.

Finishing his log, Captain Kheren stood up as he spoke to his officers.

"Mister Snow, keep us in guarding formation with the Polaris. Baoule, you have the bridge. Lyrya, signal Commander Redding, Doctor Osaro-Lyth and Lieutenant Irksos that their presence is required in our conference room as soon as feasible. Aron'Son, Solius, you're with me."

And so saying, he exited the bridge for the main conference room adjoining it. Once there, he took his favorite Captain's Brew from the replicator, which was in fact Cardassian fish juice at room temperature with flecks of bacon mixed in, then went to his seat on the red side of the triangular table in the center of the large room. As on the Artemis, his first command, Kheren had specifically ordered the traditional banana-shaped table to be replaced by this twenty-third century style meeting furniture. To his way of thinking, it was less hierarchical and confrontational and at the same time more conducive to involvement and cooperation; everyone seated close either side by side or at an angle with everyone else, it brought everyone physically closer together and never face to face or too far away from anyone else, especially the command officers. This way, everyone felt he had and should have something to contribute and would be heard. The department color-coding of each side of the table, red for command, gold for technical departments and blue for science including medical, also made discussions clearer.

Kheren, like all Andorians, was a team player; anything bringing the team together was most important to him, down to the furniture.

In this instance, Redding would come to sit with him on one side while Irksos and Osaro-Lyth would sit together on the blue side of the table while Solius and Aron'son would occupy the gold side. Command, science, medical, engineering and tactical would thus pool their resources, knowledge and expertise together to consider the situation and what to do next.

While waiting for his first officer, his chief medical officer and chief of science to join them, he addressed his Jem'Hadar acting Strategic Ops Officer and chief of security and tactical.

"Lieutenant; what is your appraisal of the current situation?"

Aron'Son contemplated the captain's question for a moment, but only long enough to organize the information in his head.

"Sir, as I stated previously, the tactics these enemies are showing are not standard for Klingons. Everything they do is tied to their honor and there is no honor in attacking a target that lacks the ability to fight back. No Klingon captain would follow such an order let alone three of them. Additionally, one Bird of Prey would be sufficient to disable a lone freighter.. We also did not encounter nor detect any additional ships in the vicinity which means it is unlikely they are being supported by a larger fleet, or they are on the other side of the portal and we simply can't see them. But a large Klingon force, even cloaked, would have been detected by Starfleet. Based on the information I have seen, it is also unlikely as the Klingons lost the majority of the ships they committed to attacking Starbase Lotus during the Azimuth Horizon operation. They do not have the forces to mount a major offensive at this time. Either the Klingons flying those ships are a part of some sort of renegade house, or they are not Klingons at all. Commander Redding and his people will be able to tell us positively which it is."

"I came to the same conclusions," agreed Kheren. "Klingons or not, these attackers act more like cowardly pirates than proud warriors. Had the Empire found a way to get here without Starfleet being able to notice it or stop them, they would have kept their advantage hidden until they would have been ready to exploit it to the fullest; not show their hand for the sake of one simple freighter with no cargo of importance to them. There is no tactical or strategic gain in attacking a lone vessel, especially here..."

It was obvious as he spoke that the Andorian was thinking by the way his antennae moved slowly this way and that over his long, thick white mane. His next words proved it.

"Unless... either they were in desperate needs of standard supplies like those aboard the Champlain's cargo containers...or... they have something to hide... and the Champlain came too close for their comfort."

He lifted his head and spoke with a more commanding voice.

"Computer; display sensor data regarding the local anomalous readings, excluding the Azimuth Horizon."

Over the triangular table appeared the translucent image of a star chart. It was rather simple. as the USS Phoenix had barely made a first quick survey of the surrounding sector. But it became much more detailed as the image zoomed to the point nearest the Azimuth Horizon anomaly, since there was added data from three more ships; the USS Nuntio as it drifted out of the anomaly where it had been lost for over a year; the USS Horizon on it's way to colonize the Eden star system three months back; and the USS Artemis, the first starship to ever go through the anomaly and find this new universe, several years ago, also under the command of Captain Kheren. The display then dulled the data and imaging of the anomaly and focused on an empty point in space beyond it, equidistant but from the other side of where Eden was located. A pulsing burst of energy from there seemed to turn the image into that of the surface of a pond rythmically disturbed by a stone dropped in. The data scrolling alongside the image spoke of massive distorsions in space-time.

"Lieutenant; can you name me any weapon made or theorized, especially of Klingon design, that could disturb the very fabric of reality like this?"

The Jem'Hadar furrowed his brow in thought.

"Subspace weapons could do such damage. The weapons built by the Son'a as reported by Captain Picard during the Bak'u incident would be capable if used on a large scale....There was also an incident reported by Captain Kathryn Janeway of a Krenim temporal weapon that could possibly have that effect, but that weapon reportedly erased itself. The only other known weapons that could possibly cause damage in space time are chroniton weaponry and possibly tricobalt weaponry as well."

"None of which are known to the Klingons," observed Kheren with a sigh. "And that would not explain there presence in this universe. if they were testing a new kind of weaponry, especially one of such nature and magnitude, they could have wanted to hide it... and of course, another universe is certainly a good place to hide. But the risk of being intercepted trying to get past the heavy surveillance of the Azimuth Passage would make that choice too hazardous, when they could simply do such secret testings deep and far into their own territory."

He sighed but the look of his silvery eyes turned towards the Jem'Hadar was anything but confused.

"I think that we may have stumbled upon something much more serious than a mere Klingon incursion. Hopefully, Commander Redding has some clues, if not answers for us."

Redding entered the with a nod to his fellow officers and a "Sir" to his captain.

"This is turning out to be way more interesting than it first appeared, captain." and took his seat. "Just off the cuff... We have a group of two-hundred year old Human-fusion Klingons allied with current age Romulans keeping a base of operations inside a temporal anomaly." He let it sink in before going on and smiled.

"And I for one think that's interesting."

"Oh, so there are Romulans around here too? This is gettting better by the minute," Kheren grumbled. "Interesting is quite the understatement, Number One. And somebody at the gate on the other side of the Azimuth portal is clearly not doing his job."

"Romulans, and time travel" Aron'Son said, the words dripping with disdain; "two equally contemptible things. But the fact that the two are connected is most likely worse than it

sounds. It is possible the Romulans managed to send a covert team through the portal while the bulk of their fleet was battling during Operation Horizon. It seem unlikely, but yet they are here."

"Has any been detected?" Asked the Andorian.

"Negative, Sir," Irksos answered. "The only reference to them was from one of our prisoners calling them allies. Of course, cloaked Romulan ships could have been lurking without our knowing."

"And not take advantage of you alone engaging three Klingon destroyers? Letting the Klingons do all the work, reap all the profit from the disabled freighter... and the Klingons okay with them not shedding blood by their side? I find it really pretty hard to beleive," Kheren shot back. "Especially in this day and age when the Romulans are supposed to be still the sworn enemies of the Klingon Empire. The Klingons never forgive or forget their treacherous attck of their civilian outpost on Narendra III a century ago. fact is, it was the turning point that sealed our former alliance with them..."

His antennae shot up as his primary eyes on his face widened. It was about the only expression his rigid Andorian face could convene and to show up like this said much about how he felt.

"Now wait a minute... You said the only reference to the Romulans was your prisoner stating they were their... *allies*? But... that was in the twenty-*third* century!"

"And it so happens, Captain, that these Klingons, at least the three we caught, are of an artificially created genotype that had only been encountered between mid twenty-second and mid-twenty-third century," Doctor Osaro-Lyth's mesmerizing voice added.

"Any analysis of the debris of their ships?" asked a deeply frowning Kheren after a moment of thick silence.

"Inconclusive," Solius stated. "Typical Bird of Prey, a small attack scout and destroyer class we are quite familiar with... In fact, these type of vessels have been in use in the Klingon Empire since the mid twenty-third century with barely a few modifications to propulsion and cloaking technologies."

Irksos spoke again.

"Captain; we know the Azimuth Horizon is as much a temporal anomaly as it is a spatial anomaly. On our first trip into it aboard the USS Artemis, before it was tamed by Operation Horizon, we encountered a Klingon *Vor'Cha* attack cruiser that had been caught in it during the Dominion War... and vanished into a temporal distorsion when it tried to destroy us. It is possible that those three Birds of Prey may have been similarly affected two centuries ago... and emerged here."

"Any data to support that hypothesis?"

"Nothing specific, Sir, except that property of the then untamed anomaly and the fact that they are here... as peculiar as they are in make-up, speech pattern and behavior. But there is that other anomaly we detected; might be a clue to this mystery."

"I seem to recall that the Klingons attempted a temporal incursion a few years back that the USS Spectre stopped on twenty-first century Earth."

"Klingons with time travel technology? As improbable as it is frightening to consider," chief engineer Solius commented. "Might have stolen it from the same Romulans that your former Artemis thwarted last year in their attempt to change galactic history."

In the following hour, the report from the officers of the *Polaris* regarding the Klingon attack, the freighter's predicament and the newly discovered space anomaly brought up more questions than answers. Especially, the identity of those "old-fashioned" Klingons, throwbacks from two centuries ago when they were known as treacherous, devious and cowardly conquerors and not the fierce, bold, honor-bound warriors they were all accustomed to, raised all eyebrows. The fact that still existed any of those genetically altered Klingons and that they were flying Birds of Prey fielded decades after they have been allegedly eradicated from the Empire only thickened the mystery.

Interrogation of the prisoners only yielded scant information, despite the best efforts of Betazoid and Vulcan interrogators, but it was telling; they themselves had recently established a base on a small uninhabited M class planet... right where the ship sensors detected the very center of the spatio-temporal distorsion.

Since there was no star or star system less than several light years near those coordinates that could allow for any planet to be there, most of all any habitable world, this was either an outright lie, a confused mistake... or something beyond their current knowledge. Kheren had no fear of the unknown; but the unknown could always be dangerous. And the unknown was always compelling; that was why they were all out there in the first place.

The captain took it all in, as well as the recommendations of his people, before coming to a decision.

"Until we get further data, we will confine ourselves to what we truly know; Klingons of the twenty-third century augment variety are here and there is a cosmic distorsion where the last of them went to. Let us work from that. First, once the *Champlain's* repairs will be completed, she will resume her journey to the colony. But with Klingon raiders in the sector, we dare not let her fly alone. The *Horizon* will escort her all the way to Eden."

His intense silver eyes and knobby indigo antennae darted straight at the first officer of the flagship.

"Commander Redding, you will take the *Polaris* to investigate this space anomaly... ascertain if indeed there is a Klingon base in the area... and any possible correlation between the two. You will keep your current crew roster; Irksos is our top astrophysicist and experienced with such anomalies from the days of the *Artemis*; Julian is well acquainted with Klingons, having been raised by them as a child before they sold her to Orion slavers she later managed to free herself from and join Starfleet security; S'Tron and Jeonghun knows how to adapt quickly to unexpected technical problems and Doctor Osaro-Lyth has extensive training and experience with field medicine and Klingon physiology; Gray is well versed in Klingon tactics and strategies and Sheeneea is our best pilot after Snow. Moore is more skillfull and daring than her, but she is more experienced in navigating near space anomalies, especially with starships of the escort class against raiding and pirate ships. "

His impassive face then turned towards Aron'Son.

"Lieutenant, you will accompany him as his Exec. I am counting on you to keep my first officer safe and as well counselled as he does himself with me."

Aron'Son frowned at the order to depart with Redding. The *Jem'Hadar* knew that he was bound to follow it, by his genetic coding as much as his sworn oath, but that did not mean he had to like it. And he did not. The idea of leaving the *Horizon* without both its second in command and its chief tactical officer was akin to decapitating an enemy with the blade of a *kar'takin*. It was messy, and should not be done unless necessary.

Kheren nodded to both the large Human and the even larger *Jem'Hadar*.

"As soon as the Horizon can be freed, we will join with you in the vicinity of this new cosmic anomaly and fully deal with the situation from your preliminary findings. Try to avoid confronting the Klingons or whatever else may be out there unless it appears imperative for the safety of our colony or your own. We might not like it for them to be here, but they have as much right to be here as we do... as long as their intent is exploration or colonization. If their intent is war and conquest, which is unfortunately what we should expect from them, we must address this problem as soon as possible, before it becomes too large to handle."

He sighed a moment before finishing.

"As for the anomaly, gather as much data as you can until we can join you with all these research resources of ours. Again, do not take any unwarranted risk, but we must determine what it is... and especially what are Klingons doing in it's vicinity. Although they are much more inquisitive and intelligent than many would like to think, they are not all that well known for their scientific curiosity... unless they think that they can weaponize whatever they discover. Again, if this anomaly is a threat or could be turned into a threat, we need to know before it actually hits us."

He stood up once his officers had acknowledged his orders, ending the meeting.

"We are Starfleet; Let us do this right the right way, people."

"Aye, Captain." Redding said, turning and walking out with Aron'son.

Irksos and Osaro-Lyth followed two steps behind, exchanging data between themselves in low voices.

"It will be good to work with a Jem'Hadar again," the big man said to Aron'son. " Despite his age, a 'First one' is a formidable opponent, and a most worthy ally."

Aron'Son glowered at the human executive officer.

"Again? Do you mean to say you have... worked with my people previously? That seems unlikely. The Dominion would not have tolerated the presence of one such as yourself."

"Ha!" Redding said.

He followed by a chuckle and a grin.

"There's no doubt about that! I was personally banned by the Vorta Yolieh from the talks after I put her Jem'Hadar guards in sickbay. We had a... slight... misunderstanding regarding... protocol."

There was a certain smugness in his voice. He left out the part of his broken ribs and dislocated elbow as well as having spent nearly a week in recovery himself.

"Shame too; for a Vorta, I thought she was rather pleasant looking," he said dismissively.

They reached the turbo lift and got in, Redding requested the nearest transporter room.

"To be honest, I was glad for the opportunity. At the time, I was deemed unfit for active duty and might never have got the chance to test your people in combat otherwise."

Redding knew what he was doing; he wanted to see how far he could push the pride of the warrior now trapped in this small space with him.

Aron'Son processed Redding's words and tone of voice. Rhe instantly realized the man was attempting to goad him. The Jem'Hadar drew himself up to his full height, which would have intimidated most species, especially in such a small space.

"First," he replied, his voice even and cold, almost vulcan in tone, "I find it hard to believe you successfully engaged multiple Jem'Hadars in hand to hand combat, as their superior strength and number would have either resulted in your death or their execution for failure if you somehow did manage to defeat them. Second, you are attempting to insult my sense of self, my "pride" I believe the human word is? You are wasting your time...Sir. I am not a Klingon; I do not have their inflated sense of... honor. The Dominion abandoned me as I have them, but their programming remains within me. I do not care about my own accomplishments; I seek only to serve and have sworn my oath to do so up to and including my own death. My honor rests in serving my commanding officer, not in the enemies I have defeated or will defeat."

Redding regarded Aron'son with a slightly amused expression.

"I'm sorry to say that they were executed despite my official apology to Lolieh. And you need not take my word for it; it's a matter of public record. Feel free to look for your self."

The amused expression was at the younger mans' attempt to intimidate him with his size. The Jem'Hadar was clearly used to humans with a lesser stature than he, but here they were the same height.

"I've 'successfully engaged' creatures with 'superior strength and numbers' for more than ten of your lifetimes, primarily Klingons, Romulans and even a Gorn or two."

The Gorns were a bit of an exaggeration, but true.

"But your right, I was treating you like a Klingon. You are far more self aware than I would have thought coming from an oppressed society as that of the Jem'Hadar. I do you a discredit by assuming as much."

He looked at Aron'Son with a look of calm seriousness.

"You are a Starfleet officer; if nothing else, that means you are worthy of my respect... until proven otherwise, of course."

The disclaimer was not aimed at Aron'son himself, but at a few other officers that popped into his mind as he said it.

As the door of the lift opened to let them set foot on deck 6 where were located the first four transporter rooms of the flagship, they met a tall willowy woman with long flowing red hair and sparkling blue eyes wearing a red collared grey and black uniform just like the one Redding was wearing except for the skirt and glossy heeled boots molding her shapely legs. The four pips on her collar left no doubt as to her identity; Lorena Swift, Captain of the USS Champlain.

For a moment, she was visibly startled when her almond-shaped eyes widened at the sight of the imposing Jem'Hadar beside the first officer of the Horizon. She made an involuntary step back and her left hand reflexively went to the small of her back where her phaser would have been. Then, the silent calmness between them allowed her to recompose herself.

"Commander Redding..." she greeted them, making every effort to ignore the massive grey-skinned alien, "I'm on my way to report to Captain Kheren. I'm glad to meet you again and thank you once more for helping us with our repairs and especially for saving us from those pirates. Without you, who knows what they would have done to us... whatever they were. Thanks to you and your crew, the eden colony will have her much needed supplies... and my crew and I will see home again."

She couldn't help herself and glanced briefly at Aron'Son as she took their place in the turbolift. Her nervousness was obviously more than the result of frayed nerves after the Klingon attack.

"I was glad enough to do the work, Captain Swift; gladder still that we were able to keep casualties to a minimum, on our side at least."

He smiled warmly at her.

"When your finished meeting with captain Kheren, perhaps we could go over a few details? I know a very good bartender aboard, if you would prefer a more relaxed setting."

He flashed his well known half smile in his most charming pose.

"Even with the help of the Horizon people, we still need at least good hour for my crew to get us fully ready to get underway. Of what I've heard about the typical Andorian expeditiousness of your Captain, my meeting with him should be over soon enough. It will be a good thing to... complete the work in a more... relaxing manner, Commander."

The smile on her face that disappeared behind the closing liftdoors was the perfect reflection of his own.

"She was afraid," Aron'Son said to Redding after the doors closed behind the Champlain's CO. "perhaps not of me specifically, but her reflexes were telling her to run away."

Redding looked at him with a hint of admiration.

"You caught that as well did you? but I do think it was in response to seeing you, or at least a Jem'Hadar.. that's why I asked her out, to see what else I might find."

But he cocked his head to one side and looked at the door.

"Well.. ONE of the reasons anyway."

Redding shook his head and addressed Aron'son more formally.

"It should take a little more than an hour to adjust the sensors for the anomaly, I want you aboard to make sure everything moves smoothly but don't push it. I need to follow this lead. Something tells me the good Captain Swift knows more about this than she would like to admit."

He started straightening his hair reflexively, saw Aron'son watching him and quickly put his hand back down.

"Keep me apprised of any changes."

After passing on orders, Redding sent an invite to Swift to meet him in the forward lounge and contacted his favorite bartender Cross to have his table ready and have something special for his date.

One of Crosses best skills was the ability to know what everyone seemed to like to drink. It was uncanny really, often with no better information than a loose description.

In the meantime, he stopped off to clean up and put on a fresh uniform at his quarters, fully intending to show up after Swift, either way, to heighten the anticipation.

He found her waiting for him in the Crow's nest. The immense lounge, located on Deck 10, at the forward most part of the ship, was as spacious as one found on a starbase. It had a very relaxed and congenial air about it. Named after the highest observation point of antique sailships, it was the only place on the ship where rank meant nothing; "sir" needed not be uttered when a person of lower rank addressed an officer, and everyone there was on an equal footing. Opinions could be voiced in complete safety. This lounge was indeed the social center of the ship.

The Nest, as some simply called it, had a battery of recreational games; 3-D chess and Vulcan Kalto, damjat and pool tables, poker and dabo tables complete with holographic dealer and chips, immense windows that looked out into space, heavily cushioned seats and tables. There was also a bar, serviced by an on-duty bartender with servers, all junior crewmembers or officers on disciplinary duty for minor offenses.

It stored not only the mandatory synthehol but as tradition would have it various potent alcoholic beverages as well; these were accessible only under the authority of the captain, the First officer or the Chief Quartermaster and included such as Chech'tluth, Bloodwine, Aldebaran whiskey, Saurian brandy, Tzartak aperitif, Tamarian Frost, C&E Warp Lager, Warnog, Antarean brandy, Andorian Ale and countless others. The numerous replicators were also able to produce other food and beverages for the crew to enjoy in this relaxed social setting. There was even an authentic galley for special occasions or for the benefit of the Captain's table.

It took him no time to notice her in the crowd of off-duty officers, as she was the only one with four pips on her red collar to be seen; no one ever remembered ever seeing Captain Kheren in here, which made her stand out all the more... especially to one as dynamic and enterprising as flight Lieutenant Robert Roger Moore.

The man was putting on his most suave performance for the distinguished guest of the USS Champlain, his back turned to the entrance while he entertained her with his latest and famous exploit; soft-landing a powerless workpod on a planet surrounded by an energy negating field to save a civilian saboteur unconscious in another pod he had grabbed with his own's pincers.

It had indeed been quite a feat; and the way he was telling it, as Redding heard as he approached, made no doubt about it.

"...I'm telling you, there's nothing like a low orbital drop into an atmosphere to remind you that your alive." he smiled dashingly and went on. "If you like, I have this holodeck program that's just perfect for two.." he paused as the sound of Redding's heavy foot steps came up behind him.

Between the flash of a red uniform in his wine glass and the angle of Captain Swift's neck as she looked up behind him and smiled, he knew it could have been no one else but Redding.

With barely a stutter he went on "two.. tomorrows.. time slot, I can let you use it if you want, " he said, looking very innocent all of a sudden.

No one could say Moore wasn't fast on his feet.

His eyes followed hers deliberately to find Redding.

"Ah, there you are Commander! I was just keeping the good Captain entertained while she was waiting." w

With a flourish, he stood up and offered his chair. Redding smiled and placed his hand on the smaller mans shoulder, The weight of it almost threw him off balance.

"Thank you, Mister Moore, that was very nice of you, but I think I can take it from here," he said, sitting down casually.

"Not at all, Sir, the pleasure was all mine."

Then with a smile to both, he made his way off.

"Your crew is quite... lively, Commander," the woman commented with a small grin. "And I thought you space explorers and galactic policemen were all business and protocol. Even your captain is rather bewildering... and saying this of an Andorian is saying much; these guys are so alien to begin with, they even make it look like Vulcans come from New Jersey."

She inclined her head slightly as if to look at him better with her right eye.

"And you yourself, Commander... I thought Neil S. Redding was an Admiral of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, not the exec of one starship... even one as impressive as the Horizon is."

He raised an eyelid in surprise.

"I'm flattered, you did some research on me?"

He smiled and reached out a hand to take a drink from the serving tray held out by one of the bartenders. Cross was a thin and vary pale man with short black hair and a face so perfect it might have been carved out of marble.

"Your usual commander, whisky, straight up." he said with the kind of voice so finely tuned that could only have been polished from years of serving others, or selling used hopsers.

Cross's oddly stern face smiled as he addressed Swift.

"Let me know if you need anything more, Captain." And returned to his station.

Redding neither looked up or acknowledged Cross, they were clearly well acquainted with each other.

"I'm going to disappoint you, Commander," Swift said with a small smile. " I only heard about Admiral Redding because of his involvement in Lotus Fleet's actions during the Borg war... like about everyone else in the Federation. It's the similitude of names between you and him that struck me and the fact that you do resemble him a lot. You look like a much younger version of holoimages of him I saw... which are not that numerous. This Admiral Redding is very... discreet. Shouldn't be surprising since he is allegedly assigned to Starfleet's most secret projects."

"I, on the other hand, don't know anything about you. I like to form an unbiased first impression, and if you look deep enough into anyone's past, your bound to find something you don't like." and took a sip of his whisky.

"If you don't accept someone's past, you can't beleive in any future with that person," she retorted with a curiously serious smile. "If you look back at Humanity, there is quite a lot we are right to be ashamed of; but acknowleging yesterday's mistake is how we can avoid repeating it and strive to do and be better tomorrow."

She took a sip of her drink before shaking her head.

"My personal history is rather bland; happy childhood, passing grades at the Academy, easy, untroubled career, offered command of a freighter I requested because I like peace and quiet. Well, I wasn't so lucky today now, was I? Apart from you guys happening to be around at the right moment."

Her smile was genuinely warm as she took another sip. Then, her combage piped.

"Swift here,"

"Transmission from the Champlain, Captain," announced the voice of Lyrya.

"Please put me through."

The soft voice of the Aenar was replaced by the lower, harsher tones of a man.

"Stauffenberg here, Captain; we are completing repairs but we need you for some authorizations to activate key systems."

"On my way, Exec; Swift out."

She took a last sip of her dring and smiled apologetically to Redding.

"Sorry, Commander; duty calls. You've noticed by now that the higher in rank we get, the heavier the paperwork is. Well, it was a pleasant talk, Commander. I'm glad to have met you. Maybe we will have time to resume it later when you get back to the colony? We will be there for several weeks before we return to Federation Space with whatever Eden III will want to send back."

And with a last smile, she exited the Crow's Nest, asking the onboard computer directions to the nearest transporter room.

* * *

On the bridge of the Horizon, Chief Engineer Solius rose from the command chair as his captain stepped onto the bridge.

"We are ready to escort the Champlain to Eden III, Captain. No sign of Klingons or any other ship in the vicinity. The Polaris is also signaling readiness to proceed with her mission."

"How long before we can rejoin them?"

Aguk Snow was the one to answer the ship's commanding officer's query.

"Although her engines are back to full efficiency, the Champlain has a maximum speed of warp 8. This means reaching the colony in seventeen point one hours if nothing interferes with our flight. Back to the coordinates of the anomaly at warp 9 will then take twenty-four hours if we do not rejoin with the stardrive and use transwarp instead. At transwarp 3, we would get back to them in fifty-three point four minutes."

The Andorian listened to his chief helmsman while signing a department readiness report handed to him by yeoman Blackbird and then looked at the Inuit shaking his head.

"Leaving the colony defenseless when we know that potential enemies are in the sector is not an option, Lieutenant. What is the emergency speed of the freighter?"

"Warp 9, Captain; she would be able to maintain it barely long enough to reach the colony in twelve hours."

"Assuming no serious breakdown, the colony would be able to help her refit her engines during the time the supplies would be delivered," added Cheonghi from the ops station.

Kheren thought for a moment, looking on the viewer at the saucer-shaped transport with her two warp nacelles jutting under and aft of it between which started the train of enormous containers magnetically aligned behind her. There was no sign of her previous battle damage nor of the invidium leak that had stranded her in space.

"Captain Swift assured me her ship was ready and eager to complete her mission. Let us see how well she deserves her name. Lieutenant Lyrya; signal the Champlain that we are about to engage and escort them to the colony, warp 9."

"Aye, Captain; transmitting," the Aenar answered with her blind eyes straight ahead as her fingers danced on the communication panel of the command medical chair.

"You fear another attack, Sir?" his other wife, Tyvva, asked from the tactical station.

"Here or at the colony," he admitted. "And the interference from the Azimuth Horizon here makes us deaf and blind for a good part of the way to whatever may happen over there... and them regarding us. It will be the same with the Polaris as she will near the other spatial anomaly. She is a tough little ship and Redding is a most apt commander, especially if Klingons are involved... and having Aron'son with him will certainly give them an edge... but I would be surprised if there were only three Birds of Prey involved. Not to mention that this unknown phenomena disturbing the very fabric of our universe might be beyond even the excellence of his ship and crew. The sooner we get back to them, the better."

"Captain Swift replies ready to proceed as ordered, Captain," Lyrya then confirmed.

Aguk Snow turned back to his console and activated a few controls.

"Course plotted and laid in, Sir."

Kheren sat in his chair, eyes to the screen.

"Patch me to the Polaris."

"Channel open, Sir."

"Polaris, this the Horizon. We are heading back to Eden at maximum warp. We will rendez-vous back to you at the anomaly in thirty-six hours. Do you copy, Polaris?"

"Redding here, Captain; ship and crew are reporting at the ready, Sir. Acknowledging thirty six hours; we'll see you then, Horizon. Polaris out."

Once her escort ship had confirmed her own readiness to depart, the chief counselor of the Horizon switched channels to bring them in communication with the transport vessel.

"Champlain, this is the Horizon. We will now get underway."

"Acknowledged, Horizon," came back the clear voice and soft features of Captain Swift on the viewer, showing her on her scarred but fully functional bridge. "Glad to have you watching over us."

Behind her, the turbolift doors were guarded by a MACO officer of the flagship. A full complement had been beamed aboard to supply added security during the trip to the colony. This time, any boarding action would be met with sharp response.

"Stay in standard escort formation, Captain," Kheren added. "I remind you that we have deployed a squadron of class X probes to create a guarding perimeter of scouts and, like us, will also be in constant contact with you. Go to red alert and maintain course and speed towards the colony the moment they notify a problem or if you loose contact. Remember; whatever we do or happens to us, you will not deviate from our planned flight plan. As discussed, a log buoy has been sent to our stardrive guarding the Eden star system; she will be expecting you and establish contact with you as soon as we escape the anomaly's interference."

"Understood," the woman said before her image faded out, leaving that of her ship silhouetted before the swirling colors of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. Her warp nacelles flared up.

"Mister Snow; warpspeed."

Looking almost as a gigantic twin of the Ptolemy class freighter, the saucer section jumped with it through the blinding flash of warp velocity towards the closest star.

CHAPTER THREE : AT THE EDGE OF FOREVER

The Polaris shook again. For the past twelve hours of flight, as each time it happened, they all had the disturbing feeling that, for a fraction of a second, both heart and mind stopped as something like a cold wave was barely felt, more like a remembrance than an actual feeling. The impact followed the feeling which was only truly felt after it was over and it struck them with a clockwork regularity since they had gone to warp, leaving the Azimuth Horizon anomaly behind.

"No other vessel detected in the area," announced Carmillia Julian without moving her eyes from her tactical scanner. "But the warp trail of the last damaged Bird of Prey does lead here. But it's gone now. They must have dropped to impulse to better hide."

"Engines and power reserves unaffected," engineer Jheonghun said then.

"All systems remain functional, " ops Lieutenant S'tron reported. "Ship's chronometer is being disrupted but returns to normal once the effect has passed."

"Same with our organic functions," Doctor Osaro-Lyth added. "Our biological clock is being reset each time. In plain words, Sir, since we've closed in on this area, no one has aged even for a second."

Then she frowned as she looked more closely at her medical scanner while she turned towards Redding.

"Except... for you, Commander..."

"Confirmed, Sir," Valencia Irksos finally said as another vibration struck them. "We are being hit by ripples in time."

"Your telomere degradation in your genome is registering our last twelve hours of flight into this area... while ours does not. I've checked my tricorder, remade the measurements several times and even use ship internal sensors to get another reading, just to be sure; but the discrepancy is there... and I can't explain it."

"While I can't say I understand why that's happening... *Or even what the hell you just said*, he thought at the same time. "It's not exactly surprising either."

He put his left hand to his chin.

"My own temporal quantum signature is... unique... in that it also resets itself after a trigger event. I guess that it's 'protecting' me from the effect."

He could feel the hair on his neck rise at the thought of it.

"I am aware of your... temporal instability from your record," the Deltan woman admitted with a smile. "Not that I understand it... beyond the medical effects that is. Seems here it prevents you from being directly affected by the side effect of these... ripples in time. So you continue to age normally, while we do not."

"Only time will tell if that's a good thing or not, quite literally."

He mused at his own pun.

"In the meantime, let's be ready in case I wink out of existence... or worse, all of you do."

He frowned at the thought of finding himself floating in space if the ship should vanish around him.

"Do we have anyway of off putting this effect? Are there any other notable effects beside immortality for the crew if we never leave... this..."

He stopped as a thought occurred to him. He gave S'Tron a curious look.

"What if the Klingons aren't time jumpers? maybe they've been right here the whole time, until the Romulans found them."

As he spoke he retrieved an environmental field belt from the supply closet putting it on and setting it to activate automatically if a hostile atmosphere should appear.

"There is as yet any evidence of Romulan presence or activity to be found, Commander," the Vulcan pointed out. "Since our own systems appear fully functional despite the periodical resetting of the clock, and with the Klingons appearance a light year from here and then coming back here when damaged and threatened, it is logical to assume that nothing interferes with normal navigation even at the proximity of the phenomenon."

A new shockwave made their entire deck tremble like under a sudden gale.

"That's what you say," Sheeneea grumbled. "Helm is still responding but, the closer we get to the source, the more sluggish controls become."

"And what is the source of those... ripples?" asked engineer Jeonghun with two hands on his tri-poded hips and a third scratching his bald chitinous head.

"That," Irsos answered. pointing at the main viewer. "Computer; enhance image with spectrographic scan and project on main viewer."

They had all noticed the blotch of darkness that blotted some of the stars at the center of their viewing screen. The computer-generated image now made all wavelengths of light visible to the human eye as vivid discernable colors, most notably deep blue and bright red. A slightly flattened sphere with a rough surface partially covered with gaseous formations appeared before their eyes.

"That... that is a planet!" Carmillia Julian voiced for everyone on the bridge. "A planet... alone without a solar system?"

"Rogue planets are not such a rarity in our universe, and apparently not here either," the astrophysicist at the scanning station commented. "Numerous cosmic conditions and occurrences can tear a planetary body out of it's orbit around a star and throw it wildly accross the void, from supernova to passing giant comet; however, this is the first time such a planet exhibits all the signs of being M class."

"An M class planet without a star to support it? That is most improbable," flatly stated S'Tron; "at least, under natural conditions."

Irksos nodded to him and turned towards Redding.

"Quite right, Sir. And sensors indicate that there are definite traces of artificial constructs on this planet... all in an advanced state of decay... and a massive power source on this side. That power source is the point of emanation of those temporal waves hitting us. It seems to come from a structure about three kilometers in size."

She frowned as she worked with her console before sighing loudly.

"There is highly decayed but definite evidence of what looks like the remnants of a technological civilization around the point of emanation. No life signs beyond primitive vegetation and animal life; molds, fungus and lichens on land, algae, krill and planktons in the seas. Sorry but I can't give you anything more specific from here. There is heavy interference from the aftereffect of these dense and abrupt chroniton waves that even the space sonar is unable to penetrate. And any computer image constructed from our sensors' limited data is being deconstructed before it can be transmitted to our viewer."

Another jolt struck them, making them sway in their seats. But the PIDs they were all wearing had activated automatically after the first serious vibration felt through the hull and ensured that they stayed there.

"These emanations distort space as well," S'Tron understood from this effect. ". If we are to use transporters to get down there and investigate, It would have to be very precisely timed between two of them, or the annular confinement beam will be disrupted and the signal lost."

"A shuttlecraft might make it," Sheeneea offered as an alternative. "It would be very rough flying and required expert flight skill, but it could be done with careful planning and timing."

At that point, Nathaniel Gray came up between Redding and Aron'Son.

"Sir, I have to remind you of the Prime Directive; if we do go down there, we will have to be very careful not to disturb anything. If these emanations do come from that giant structure and indicate it is something active, this might mean that someone or something is either using it or at the very least has claim to it... which we do not."

hearing it right beside her, tactical officer Julian felt the need to offer a counter-argument.

"However, Sir, *if* Klingons have been around here as we most suspect and if it is made evident that they have tampered in any way with what's down there, the same Prime Directive compels us to intervene in order to correct *their* violation. Therefore, we have to make that assessment."

"What if they did not commit a violation?" Aron'Son speculated. "Could the structures on the planet be the remains of a Klingon colony? What if they were drawn into the anomaly as the Nuntio was?"

"If this is Klingon in origin, then, we would be trespassing," Gray answered. "And they have as much rights to be here as we do."

"And if they were victims of the anomaly like the Nuntio was, that could explain their attack on a supply ship," Julian acknowledged. "It would explain it but not justify it. In this scenario, we would be apprehending criminals, which is in our rights according to intergalactic law... to which the Klingons officially abide by, especially when it's convenient for them to do so; like during the historical Admiral Kirk trial of the last century."

"As for this being a colony," Irksos then added; "this is most improbable; radiometric measurements estimate some of the oldest of these ruins to be several millions of years old; the Klingon species itself was not even evolved yet by the time this civilization collapsed."

"I do not entirely understand this," S'tron put in. "You say some of the oldest; are you detecting differences in radiometric datings?"

The black-skinned woman nodded to her commanding officer as she acknowledged her Vulcan colleague.

"Another mystery to add to our collection about this place; according to our sensor readings, as sketchy as they are, there seems to be numerous variances in isotope decay around this giant structure; as much as between a hundred years old and millions of years... and these ruins seem to be as much different in composition and structure as in age; some are of natural, worked stone while others are made of alloys known and unknown and even substances we can't identify in our database. It's like thousands of civilizations sprouted and fell around this thing. There may even be Klingon artifacts down there... but not a colony. And there is no lifesigns either."

"And we haven't found the last Bird of Prey there," the security and tactical chief stated. "However, tactical scans are picking up a faint impulse trail around this planet, leading to the far side of it."

Throughout the the entire conversation Redding had attempted to interject at three times, but gave up on the idea and he started feeling groggy by the end of it.

"Right then; chroniton waves, rogue planet, missing BOP..."

He realized he had started slouching and sat back up.

"First things first; let's see if there's anyone home. Hail the planet and see if we're stepping on anyone's toes."

"Sending standard hails on all frequencies," Doctor Osaro-Lyth answered.

Although there was no medical command chair on the diminutive bridge of the *Polaris*, just like there were no exec seat, the Deltan woman nevertheless doubled up as communications officer while the infirmary was inactive. After a moment, she shook her smooth shaven head.

"No answer to our hails, Commander... but... Sir, the message was received. Something down there echoed our signal, meaning that there is some sort of communication system active or at least in standby mode. But it is not acknowledging our signal, just receiving it."

"Our priority is still the Klingons, then we can turn our attention to the planet, if necessary."

He made a gliding motion with his left hand.

Helm, plot a course around to the other side of the planet going over its southern pole, keep us at one quarter impulse and slide us in quietly."

They all acknowledged their orders and the *Polaris* smoothly followed the axial curvature of the rogue planet, skimming its thin atmosphere. With clockwork regularity, shockwaves hit them even when they were past the perigee and starting to orbit it from the other side. They had barely started to fly over the hidden face of the lone planet when Carmillia Julian translated for them the lights that suddenly flashed on her tactical sensors board.

"Found them, Commander! The Bird of Prey is down on the surface, near what appear duranium shelters at the foot of an eroded mountain range."

"It's a standard Klingon military camp," Irksos reported from her own sensor readings. "They seem to have settled down there for some time... and they have not scanned us yet."

"But there might be others cloaked in orbit," warned the muscular woman at the tactical station.

"Cloaking technology requires too much energy expenditure to implement it as a basic routine stationary measure," countered engineer Jheongun.

"But they might be on alert, expecting pursuit after our clash with them," Carmillia reminded them all.

"But what could possibly interest them here?" wondered Doctor Osaro-Lyth. "If they wanted to establish a foothold, they could have just easily found the Eden system and settle there, where conditions are much more hospitable."

"My guess is, whatever is causing those space-time distortions and allowing the impossible yet definite inhabitable state of this lost planet," Gray offered.

"Perhaps the Romulans have some interest in the planet and the Klingons are merely their pawns," the large Jem'Hadar officer offered. "Romulans manipulate others as if it is a sport and for the right reasons Klingons can be manipulated, or perhaps the Klingons are aware of the temporal nature of the area and are using it somehow. Klingon science is not like that of the Federation, but they do have scientists."

S'tron lifted an eyebrow.

"Romulans, Sir? We have no evidence that they are involved. The only reference to them was from one of our prisoners in passing, naming them allies."

"isn't that enough?" asked Carmillia Julian.

The Vulcan officer explained in more detail his point.

"Making a thorough analysis of the facts we do have, their presence here is not evidenced; we know both empires have been bitter and deadly enemies since the Narendra III incident of the last century, and only in the century before that had they been doing limited technological exchanges; but no military collaboration was ever recorded. Only the last Klingon civil war showed a limited collaboration between Romulans and one House of Durass attempting to seize power, itself responsible for the same Narendra III incident as a prelude to its usurpation attempt. Keeping this in mind, we have found Klingons typical of this very specific earlier time period and now confirmed a temporal anomaly to which they obviously know about. The logical conclusion is that these Klingons may indeed come from the 23rd century... either voluntarily or involuntarily. As for Romulan involvement, we have yet to find any real evidence at all."

"Romulans are masters at dissimulation and backstage intrigue," Julian insisted. "They could be involved but staying in the shadows, using Klingons as their attack dogs."

"Agreed; but the twenty-third century cloaking technology of the Romulans is powerless against our state of the art sensors and we would have found them easily by now. As for modern Romulans, they would not waste their time with obsolete Klingons, as they can match us in every aspect by themselves... and with no need for such duplicity, as we are not barring them from coming into this universe in the first place. You will recall that we met an exploration and colonization task force on our way here three months ago; they would also have come here and right alongside us, has it not been for the dangerous incapacity of their singularity-based drive to go through the anomaly. Assuming they would now succeed and choose to do it covertly with these relics of the past is quite illogical, even for them. And again, we have no evidence whatsoever."

"Afraid we might be chasing ghosts, S'Tron?" Valencia Irksos shot with a half-smile.

The Vulcan simply raised an eyebrow in response.

"I don't think I've even suggested we were looking for Romulans, S'Tron. As I said, Klingons." Redding took a breath and looked at his first officer. "Of course I want to keep an eye out, but I'm not expecting any to be here personally."

He pointed a finger at him.

"In fact, it may just be that collaboration our Klingon was referring to is because he was from the same time period after all. In any event, it looks like we have to go down and find out anything more. So lets get to it."

He stood up.

"Find us a safe landing spot near the Bird of Prey and take us in easy and obviously,.There's no point in being mysterious anymore."

As the ship entered the atmosphere, Redding sent a message to the Klingon ship.

"Klingon vessel, This is the United Federation ship Polaris; Stand down and prepare to be boarded. Any attempt to lift off or activate your cloak will be considered a hostile action and you will be fired upon. This is your ONLY warning."

Then he faced his tactical officer.

"Julian, stand by to fire if they do anything I just said; disable if it's possible to do so, but they can't be allowed to leave under cloak again."

"Aye, Sir," the muscular woman said with a grin that told how much she wanted the Klingons to do just that.

"Commander Redding; we are being hailed from the surface," Doctor Osaro-Lyth announced then.

On their screen appeared the dark-skinned, bearded face of a smooth-browed Klingon wearing a sivery mesh uniform barred by a wide red sash. Despite his peculiar human-like appearance, his scowl and tone of voice were very klingonee.

"Federation warship! This planet has been claimed by the Klingon Empire! Leave immediately or be destroyed!"

"Damn it; they were here first; if it's uninhabited, they do have the right to claim it," Gray grumbled in a low voice as if only for himself, but just loud enough for Redding to hear it.

"If they are from another century, they have no claim here whatsoever," Aron'Son stated. "I say let them come. If they are foolish enough to attack a vessel with superior weaponry they deserve their fate."

While the Jem'Hadar knew that comment probably sounded bloodthirsty to the humans, Aron'Son genuinely believed his statement. As a soldier, he knew it was suicide to charge an enemy with superior numbers or weapons. But he also knew the Klingons were likely to do just that, no matter which century they were from.

"Their temporal legal status might be up for debate, but their position is not. They can call 'dibs' on the planet all they want, that's not my problem."

He contacted the Klingon Bird of Prey once more.

"Your claim to the planet is not my concern,. You have thirty seconds to comply with my order or we WILL open fire; Polaris OUT."

He looked back around.

"Target their weapon systems and stand by to fire on my order, or if they try anything."

He swung back at the viewer with his trademark smile at the corner of his mouth.

"Or if you think it's just the right thing to do, as you will."

He settled back. But he didn't have to wait long. The smooth-faced, bearded Klingon reappeared, a definite reddish hue on his glowering countenance.

"We established this outpost according to interstellar law of precedence! You have no right to threaten us here! Attacking us is not only a crime according to Law your Federation itself drafted and signed with us but an act of war against the Klingon Empire!"

"Twenty seconds," Carmillia Julian said, loud enough for even the flustered Klingon on the screen to hear.

"Sir, they are in their right to legally refuse us," Nathaniel Gray stated, looking only at Redding as he did so, talking as if the Klingon wasn't even there, listening. "However, we have traced back the trail of a pirate vessel all the way here, as our sensor logs would be evidence for. Interstellar Law compels us to investigate and Starfleet mandate orders us to ensure the safety of all settlements within our patrol territory, regardless of allegiance. Of course, the planetary governor's consent and collaboration is required... but if there is suspicion of such authority to be under duress or threat by criminals, a rescue operation might be called for."

On the screen, the face of the Klingon went by so many mood changes that it was difficult to assess his final reaction to what he was hearing. But his voice had lost a lot of the bluster it had before.

"We are not under threat from anyone... except by you!"

Redding looked over at Gray.

"I'm sensing a lot of potential duress here."

"Ten seconds," the tactical chief announced.

"This is outrageous! You wouldn't dare... "

"Five seconds... four... three... two... one... Target locked; firing forward pulse..."

"WAIT!"

"Hold fire." Redding said calmly.

The woman's finger was almost touching the firing button. For a moment, all was still except for the sweat trickling down the smooth brow of the Klingon. A growl came out of his clenched teeth before he finally spoke with a strained tone.

"In the interest of Interstellar detente, we will... allow... your... inspection to proceed."

"The Federation appreciates your cooperation on this matter, and assuming you have nothing to hide of course, we should not take up too much of your time Captain..."

He hung on that word as the ship started its final approach. The Klingon on the screen straightened his posture to better show the red sash crossing his mesh-covered shirt.

"Commander Wruk, son of Keltrik of the House of Khell, squadron leader under the command of Dahar Master Koloth! Remember this well, Earther, because I will remember you! Land your ship in front of ours. I will meet you there personally."

As the communication went off, Valencia irksos came to Redding's seat.

"Commander... I checked our data banks; there is no Wruk, son of Keltrik of the House of Khell in the known Klingon roster of officers."

"A poser?" wondered Nathaniel Gray.

"Negative; when he mentionned Dahar Master Koloth, I checked it too. Dahar Master Koloth, or D'Akturak, the "Ice Man" is synonymous with shrewdness and hardness in negotiations and tactics within the whole Klingon empire. He died during a vendetta in the second half of the last century. He was himself a survivor of the Augment plague and was restored eventually to his original DNA about one hundred and thirty years ago."

She made a pause to let it sink in before concluding.

"I was then able to find about our friend here; according to Klingon historical database, Commander Wrug was the squadron commander who first tested the then newly designed Bird of Prey attack vessel in mid twenty-third century. According to the files, he disappeared with his entire squadron except for one Commander Kruge later to be involved in the Genesis Incident. They were all field-testing the first prototypes on stardate 8101... a hundred and twenty-five years ago, somewhere within Federation space."

"We are on landing approach to the coordinates, Sir," Sheneea reported. "Touch down in fifty-three seconds."

The ship shook under a new spatial ripple and again for a moment, all systems went dark. Almost at the same moment, there was a much more violent impact that almost overpowered even their PIDs. Sparks flew all around them and the entire bridge tilted dangerously to the left while the rumble of the engines became silent.

"That was no spatial shock... that was disruptor fire!" Julian shouted as she worked hard to revive her weapons systems. "All tactical systems inoperative! No weapons, no shields!"

"It was timed exactly with the incoming distorsion effect," Gray understood immediately. "Just as our sensors were blinded and our shields fluctuating. Had it not been for our armor plating..."

"Warp core and Impulse engines offline!" announced Jeonghun, his voice as shrill as ever adding to the general nervousness. "Thrusters only!"

"Damage to our aft and port section; port nacelle strut system jammed. Other systems coming back online," S'tron's calm voice making counterpoint to that of the engineer as some lights started to flare again on their consoles. "four point seven minutes before nominal status."

"We are in free fall; impact with planet in thirteen seconds!" the Andorian helmswoman said then.

"Computer! emergency mass transport to..." He glanced at the tactical screen losing 2 seconds. "Grid gamma 42! execute!"

He couldn't be sure this was still possible but there wasn't enough time to check. Immediately after doing this, he pulled off his combadge, tossing it away and jumped for the helm controls, maybe he could still bring it down in one piece.

The Polaris only has two 4-men transporter pads and one cargo transporter that needed reconfiguration from molecular to quantum resolution to allow lifeform transport of twelve more. It should have been impossible to beam out more than a handful of crewmembers before the crash; but the Polaris, like the Horizon, had benefited from the brand new nanite enhancement the scientists of the Phoenix had tested a few months ago... and Captain Kheren had insisted that all cargo transporters on both ships be pre-programmed for instant autoreconfiguration upon receiving an emergency evacuation order. Thus, twenty people were beamed out the second Redding ordered it. Twenty more followed four point five seconds later. As per regulations, the bridge crew were last to go less than five seconds after that, leaving Redding alone to man the ship for the last remaining seconds.

Fortunately, Sheeneea had time to activate the thrusters at full power before she was beamed out. The Polaris was shaking with the vibration of the powerful reactors struggling to slow down her descent.

It was a tempting idea to crash into Commander Wurk's ship, but the shot could not have come from that ship; and it just... felt wrong.

A glance at the tactical sensor answered his question; there was a concealed disruptor cannon mounted as an anti-aircraft battery on the main colony building, now detectable because it was locking target, again, on his ship.

"So much for that..."

Redding gritted his teeth and cut power to all but the lateral port thrusters. The ship dropped like a rock but stayed level and slid starboard at an alarming rate, alarm claxons blared. He sat down and activated his chair's restraints and braced for impact.

If he had timed it right, the ship would crash on the far side of a natural formation, unable to be targeted by the cannon.

If he had timed it wrong the ship would flip and tear itself apart.

He smiled.

"I hope I get to remember this one..."

* * *

"He's coming around."

The only thing Redding remembered was the jarring shock and the awful roar that came before the blackness, because, as he emerged from it, there was still an echo of both in his head.

"Commander Redding?"

A soft, soothing warmth slowly eased his aching head and body. It took him a moment to feel the delicate fingers touching his temple and to smell the faint sweet odor that came from the sensuous body close to his prostrated form. Then the hazy pain went away and he blinked to see the beautiful smile of Doctor Osaro-Lyth so close to him that he felt himself blush involuntarily. Deltan sensuality was difficult to contain when so close to one of them.

But she had had no choice if she were to apply her nerve-manipulating techniques and natural soothing powers to ease his pain and bring him back to consciousness. After all, she didn't have a medkit with her because of their abrupt transport from the crashing ship.

When she released him and stepped back to let him regain his full awareness and free him from her too sensuous presence, the first officer of the *Horizon* could see that he was lying on some soft moss covering most of the grey porous rocks surrounding him and the five dozen members of his crew, many assuming guard duty at the edge of the rocks, others taking care of a makeshift camp in best Starfleet Academy survival style. The sky was dark but starry, with some distant light undulating at the edge of the jagged rocks around them, like an aurora borealis playing against the night sky. There was also an eerie sound playing around him that he had thought at first to be some remaining ringing in his head but now showed itself to be coming from somewhere in the distance.

Nathaniel Gray stepped in front of him, helping him to get to his feet.

"Are you okay, Commander?"

"Better than I expected to be, Gray, thanks," he said shaking off the soreness.

"Why don't you ask your friendly doctor?" Sheelya said with a mock smirk. "The emergency landing program Sheeneea activated slowed the ship just enough to land it roughly but smoothly enough for the commander's PID to protect him from a deadly impact. His hardy constitution did the rest... and my ministrations of course."

Redding smiled at her as he worked a muscle on his right arm.

"Looks like I'll live another day."

"Speaking of the ship," engineer Jeonghun reported then, "I'm afraid it is salvageable but not with the resources we have. It will not leave ground again until the Horizon comes to pick us up."

"That will be in about ten hours, if nothing holds them back," Sheeneea the Andorian woman added.

"We can salvage enough rations and material to survive easily until then," S'tron assured them.

"Forget it," then said Carmillia Julian as she appeared from around a large mossy rock, the strange skylights playing on her stern face. "It's crawling with Klingons over there. Lieutenant Aron'Son is still watching them just at the horizon's limit with his enhanced tricorder. Doesn't seem like they found our tracks... and these strange lights are certainly interfering with their obsolete instruments. But they're not dumb; when they will find no bodies inside the wreck, they will immediately realize that we transported out, somewhere on the planet."

"I suggest we move out," Gray said, looking at his commanding officer.

"But where?" the muscular chief of security asked with a frown.

"How about... this way?" Valencia Irksos said, her eyes on her tricorder while her hand pointed in the direction of the bizarre lightshow in the sky.

"Why over there?" wondered the Edoan engineer a bit nervously.

"For one, it is the farthest direction from the Klingons," the black-skinned astrophysicist answered. "Second, it is the source of those atmospheric radiations that are disrupting their detection devices... and third, it is the point of origin of the disrupting waves we encountered in space. And my tricorder identify an immense area of confusing ruins around it. Whatever this is, it is possibly linked to the presence of those strange 'Klingon colonists' back there; because I can make no more sense of those ruins than I can make sense of them."

"How far?" Gray wondered, a hand shielding his eyes as he looked at the strange luminescent display beyond the rocks.

"Five point three kilometers of very rough but manageable terrain."

They now all waited for Aron'Son to return and for Redding to give them his orders.

Aron'Son walked back over to the group of officers to make a report with the same stoic look that normally appeared on his face leaving them wondering if his news was good or bad until he spoke.

"They are still searching the wreck. They will probably try stripping whatever technology they can from it which may delay them from searching for us for the moment. It is what I would do in their position. Much of it including the weapons in the armory requires biometric verification, but they do not know that yet so they will try. We, on the other hand, need to find a much more defensive position. Am I the only one who made it out with a weapon?"

The last query was made with his hand resting on the phaser strapped to his right hip that continually rested there whether he was on duty or not as was his prerogative as the Horizon's security chief.

"We have our hand phasers as per standard regulation, Sir," the twelve security officers of the Polaris reported to their chief, "along with the combat knife Captain Kheren has made mandatory for all security personnel aboard his vessel."

"And us, Sir," the twelve men of the Marines detachment assigned to the Polaris said. "We have twelve phaser rifles, as many hand phasers, three photon grenades each, two photon grenade launchers and one reserve ammunition pack for each type of weapon... and the captain's mandatory combat knife as well, of course."

But they were the only ones. The beam out had been unannounced and so sudden, no one else had time to grab anything. They others had taken mostly survival kits and field rations while they had extracted Redding from the bridge were he had remained.

"This is most worrisome," Gray then said to Redding. "If these Klingons crack open the Polaris, they will get the very latest advancements in Federation technology. That could cause a major shift in the balance of power back home. And if they are modern remnants of the twenty-third century Klingon Empire, we might be looking at the same dire situation Earth faced with the worldwide terrorist threat of the twenty-first century; bloodthirsty, fanatic barbarians with modern warfare resources."

Redding looked at Aron'son seriously.

"What are their numbers? I'd rather take the Polaris back and hold it until the Horizon gets here than let them get their hands on it."

"There seems to be only that last Bird of Prey left," Carmillia Julian reminded them. "That kind of scoutship usually carries a complement of about a dozen officers and men and that's about what we saw going over the wreckage."

Then she grinned.

"We certainly have the numerical advantage... and of firepower too; the only thing I saw on them were antiquated disruptor weapons and *D'Ktaghs*. These... New Klingons of old were probably not allowed to have their honored bath'leths."

"Is there a possibility we could take their ship while most of them are stripping ours? that way, we could contain them while we check this place out."

He checked his own weapon, a modified assault phaser, for any damage from the crash.

"It wont matter what they get from the Polaris if they can't keep it."

His strategic ops officer answered him.

"Judging by the number of them scrounging over the Polaris and standard Klingon protocols, they should have left at least one guard on the ship, maybe one more outside... and one officer in their base. If I recall my military history correctly, that officer would be their commander. Twenty-third century Klingons were much less eager to lead from the front than those we are familiar with today. They were still relatively new at their promotion through assassination system back then..."

"With our weaponry we could very well take both vessels," Aron'Son stated. "The Klingons scavenging the Polaris are not expecting an assault, and they have no idea how many people were aboard the ship. We could down them all with a coordinated assault before they know what is happening."

"I'm sure that's true." Redding nodded. "But the BoP is of more concern. As soon as we hit their salvage team, whatever's left over there will not be happy about it."

He thought it over quickly, but the plan was already in place in his head before he finished the sentence. This would make the seventh time he attempted this exact same thing, and all were a success.

"Well split into three teams. I'll take a fire team and secure the BoP, I have the most familiarity with Klingon ships around that time period, Hell.. I used to captain one." he said with a shrug. "Gray, you hold for my signal then make your attack run and re-secure the ship, then see what you can do to get it running again."

He pointed upward.

"It's still possible reinforcements might show up. Lets see if we can not be sitting ducks if that happens."

Then looked at Aron'Son.

"You take two people and hit their base, fast and hard. Taking out the big gun is a priority but we need their commander alive. The Polaris might not be targetable at the moment but the Bird of Prey is, and they might just shoot it out of spite so we don't get it. I know I would,"

"You know those old-fashion Klingons well, Commander," acknowledged Nathaniel Gray.

"Valencia.." Redding started to say and noticed the woman was a bit nervous. He smiled; "Don't worry, Lieutenant, I've done this sort of thing several times; we'll be fine. But right now, I need to know if we can jam their short range communications with what we have, It only has to be for a few minuets if that helps."

She smiled back and took a deep breath.

"Well, Sir, you ousted us so fast from the ship, we didn't have time to take anything; and when we went to get you, we had to move out quick before those scavengers get to us. However, this planet's peculiar energy waves from those ruins is strong enough to interfere with any communicators not powered by a major energy source like a starship core. We've tested our combadges and they are not powerful enough to get through the interference... and they are way more powerful and hardened against static discharges than these antiquated handheld communicators they have at their belt. As it stands now, Sir, they already can't communicate beyond earshot... and same with us."

"Any questions or thoughts? be quick about it." And passed Aron'Son his grenades.

"Commander; Doctor Osaro-Lyth and Lieutenant Irksos should accompany the main assault force with our security forces to retake the ship as you order," Gray said. "Since Lieutenant Julian must escort you and Chief Jeonghun best suited to understand their ship's tech, I recommend the marines go with you. I beleive it is Ensign S'Tron and I that should accompany Lieutenant Aron'Son. I speak fluent Klingon and know more about them than anyone here but maybe for you, Sir... and S'tron's Vulcan death grip will supplement nicely our phasers."

"There is no such thing as a Vulcan death grip," S'tron retorted.

"But do those Klingons know that?" shot back the man with a devious smile.

"There's no such thing as a Vulcan death grip? I thought Vulcan's didn't lie." Redding looked completely sincere. "Okay, we'll go with Gray's set up. Without communications this will be trickier. How about the tricorders? If I set off a static pulse a few kilometers away would you be able to read it?."

He held up his phaser tapping at the 'Heavy Stun' setting so everyone got the point.

"Basically, it's like sending up a flare you can only see with the right equipment."

"We only have one tricorder, Sir," Jeonghun reminded him as he showed . " And it's an engineering one with a limited dataset. One of my junior technicians was checking it for maintenance when he was beamed out. And the interference in the area will prevent any signal to reach it beyond a few meters. However, if I jury-rig it to receive only one specific kind of signal, it should boost it's range significantly, especially if it is electromagnetic as you suggest. It will be faint but if we are actively watch for it, we should not miss it."

"Our combadges could be so modified to receive the same signal," S'Tron suggested in turn, "but such tampering will render them useless as communications devices after that."

"And there is the basic method of synchronizing ourselves by counting in our heads from a common starting point," Julian offered. "And we have one Vulcan with a counscious biological clock and Lieutenant Irksos who I beleive has a natural affinity with mathematical precision as well; our living chronometers as it were."

"Okay, great." Redding nodded along. "Modify two combadges, one for each team, We'll take the tricorder with us. At our signal we will start our attack run on the Bop and that will be your cue to engage. Aron'son, I'm giving you full leeway our your mission. If you can't wait for the signal don't."

He simply stopped there. It was seldom necessary to go into great detail with a warrior such as a Jem'Hadar, or show any kind of sentiment such as saying 'be careful' or 'good luck'.

"Move out as soon as you get your badge and good luck everyone."

* * *

The low rocky plateau looked like a rock formation so eroded by time and elements that it shined like a polished stone between the intermittent curtains of dust moved by the eerily howling breeze around them. On the far side, behind the prefab plasteel encampment erected loomed the upward-winged silhouette of the Klingon assault vessel, like a monstrous bird perched on a cliff ready to plunge on an unsuspecting prey.

The diminutive one hundred meters starship was apparently on idle status, the engines softly humming and a few low red lights visible from the rare viewpoerts seen on the forward boom section. like all Klingon ships, it was made of a blocky main hull with spreaded out triangular wind ending in disruptors cannon while an elongated neck held forward the command centers over a photon torpedo tube.

Because of its small size however, its warp engines were within and underneath the main hull instead of at wing's end and the boom section traditionally made as a choke point against mutinies was barely a few tens of meters in length. This was obviously one of the early models as it didn't add the phasers seen on more modern versions produced during the later times of the Federation-Klingon alliance.

"I see one guard at the access ramp and some movement inside; at least one other, most probably one or two technicians working on repairs," Carmillia Julian reported from their vantage point in a rocky outcropping below the plateau's rim. "I expect possibly another guard on the bridge using sensors and looking out the viewports forward. The ship's disruptors seem operational but the torpedo tube has barely been cleared out of debris; the tube itself is still too out of shape to be usable."

"The ship appears spaceworthy but they haven't replaced the armor plating underneath," Jeonghun pointed out. "By the sound of their engine and these plasma clouds coming from it, I would say they are working on their EPS conduits. Their sensors are at best working on very short range at about twenty percent max in this electrostatic-heavy atmosphere."

"All the more reason why they posted themselves up here to have a better view," the muscular woman added. "They flattened the whole plateau with disruptor fire; see the dark scoring marks all over the place. We have a hundred meters of flat, featureless open terrain between us and the Bird of Prey. Won't be easy to get the jump on them. Best angle would be the port rear, away from the portholes and the access ramp."

Redding pointed out two fairly good positions for cover fire.

"We'll leave two shooters in position to provide cover fire in case this goes badly. The rest of us will make a careful run for their blind spot and try to hold the boarding entrance. If anyone comes out and you even think they see us, shoot them. It's let likely that anyone inside the ship will hear the long range phaser blasts over a yell of alarm. When we make it to the ship, or you have to shoot anyone, send the signal to the other teams to begin, then hold position here. It might take some time to make it to the bridge and I don't want you spotted until we do."

When the two security officers were in place, Redding headed out with the remaining four including Julian and Jeonghun.

"Remember to set your phaser to heavy stun," the security chief said while adjusting her own. "It will knock them out fifteen minutes, not an hour, and minimal stun will have no effect on them. And I recommend we move downwind; Klingons have a keener sense of smell than Humans."

The muscular Woman and the six-limbed Edoan flanked their Commander so as to protect him against any surprise flank attack while he lead their assault. They were coming behind and to the right of the dark-skinned, short-bearded sentinel in his metallic mesh silver and black uniform of ages past, he was pacing before the ramp, disruptor rifle at the ready, a disruptor pistol at his hip, a *d'ktagh* protruding from his belt at his back and an old-fashioned communicator blinking on his left wrist.

A rough voice shouted something to him from inside the ship and he answered curtly before resuming his watch.

"Jeonghun, set up for a shot here. Julian and I will get as close to the ramp as possible before being spotted and rush the bay, if the guard see's us and he will, take him out."

Without another word, he headed out with Julian and the remaining security officer following close behind him. Redding's stealthy but quick steps sounded heavy in his own ears and seemed to crash into the ground as he went. Julian's were barely audible to his ears.

They had almost made it to the ramp when the guard looked at what he might have heard or seen before a stun beam from both Jeonghun and one of the snipers slammed into him.

Redding and Julian tore into the bay, the security officer vaulting up the side of the ramp. Much to his dismay this left him to unsteady for quick action. He found his first target holding a tool as he turned to face the ramp, the look of confusion replaced instantly with rage as he hurled himself at the human.

Realizing his officer's overeagerness, Redding held his position and fired his assault blaster at the flying Klingon sailing down at the back peddling man. The blast from the heavy pistol stopped the Klingon in mid flight knocking him back a few feet and down on the ramp, sliding down the the security officer's feet.

Meanwhile, Julian rushed up the ramp, scanning for a target and finding one drawing down on him with a quickly drawn disruptor pistol. The two exchanged shots, missing each other.

Redding looked at the officer.

"Back up, Lieutenant."

And so saying, he made a reckless dash through the bay, heading to the bridge as the Klingon and Julian exchanged fire. He couldn't allow the ship to be put into lock down by the ships commander. A Klingon 'Lock down' was very different from a Federation one.

And so were their security protocols, especially during the years of the Klingon split into two genetically different subspecies. In those days, the altered variety had all the weariness and distrustfulness of Human thugs; and being despized by the "pure blooded" original members of their society, they were often reduced to use alien mercenaries on their vessels that were not so prone to honor and duty for the Empire as readily as the average Klingon. Consequently, the danger of mutiny was very real and led to the distinctive design of Klingon starships, with their command points at the forward end separated by the rest of the ship by a long choke point neck-like structure. Even the smallish Bird of Prey, designed when the altered Klingons were almost extinct, retained this feature.

And of course, access to that part of the ship was severely restricted to klingon officers. Not surprisingly, the heavily reinforced access hatch to the ramp leading tto the forward hull was locked down with a genetic and encoded lock supplemented by a force field.

This meant two things; one, that no officer was on board; and two, if the other teams failed in their own assaults, they would be trapped in an unusable ship... of which the commander would have a remote self-destruct activation sequence prepared in case of mutiny and any attempt to steal his ship.

Upon seeing the secured hatch, Redding understood that taking the bridge would not be an option at this time.

There was a hard choice to be made. He could either clear and secure the Bird of Prey, relying on Aron'son's team to reach the Klingon Commander before he had a chance to remote detonate the ship's self destruct, or clear the bird and pull back in the event the Jem'Hadar failed.

Julian and the security officer managed to take down the last Klingon by forcing him into a cross fire position.

"Good work. Pull the Klingons away from the ship. I'm going to see if can remember how to disconnect the self destruct from engineering."

Jeonghun had just started up the ramp when he heard this.

"Shall I assist you, Commander? he asked with some small alarm at his commanding officer going off by himself.

Redding changed out the charge clip in his weapon and re-holstered it.

"Three Klingons need three people to carry them, and can you even read native Klingon?"

"Well.. no, Sir, I can't."

"Don't worry about it. I've disconnected the self destruct on this kind of ship three times already, Klingons are bloody bad sports about losing their ships. I need you to secure the perimeter and make sure no one takes the ship back while I'm doing it."

He gave him a smile.

"Not that we'll need to; Aron'Son wont give them a chance to activate it anyway. Now, get moving."

And with that, he hurried towards the rear of the ship. When he got there, his trademark smirked returned to his face. This was the original Klingon engine design he was most familiar with. And Klingons, even the Augment variety, were anything but efficient and consistent; and that meant they weren't much imaginative; they would not try to outguess a potential boarder or saboteur like Romulans would. The self-destruct on this vessel would be as standard as the rest of the ship itself.

He just had to defuse it in time.

* * *

"They chopped off the top of that low, eroded hill with the ship's disruptors to make their base overlook the entire region," understood S'Tron as they climbed the easy incline of the rocky formation they were escalating. "This suggests that their sensors are too much affected by local disturbances to be reliable. They will therefore resort to more simple ways of securing themselves; but judging by the number of them presently at the Polaris wreckage and the accounted for vessels, that would leave barely a few technicians for the ship's repairs and a few guards for both ship and encampement."

The encampement they were nearing on top of the hill rested at the center of a four hundred meters featureless plateau. It was a blocky, squared compound of three rectangular plasteel constructions with a ship container surrounded by a wall of stone slabs extracted vertically around it to also create a moat about three meters deep, the thickness of the makeshift three meters high fence around it. There was no door blocking access to the compound itself but one guard stood at the entrance and another walked around on top of the thick walls.

"At best, there should be one other inside to serve their commander," Doctor Osaro-Lyth suggested. "They probably have all this surveillance because of our presence here, otherwise they should have felt pretty safe on this seemingly deserted planet lost in space. If we can go in quietly, their commander inside will probably not be on his guard."

"There is only one outside entrance I can see," S'tron added, "at a right angle from the compound entrance to deter direct assault. "These three constructions must be only connected from the inside, somewhat much like the architecture of their ship; command section at the end, weapons depot in the middle with officers berthings and crew living quarters and supply at the front. Since we haven't seen him with the scavengers, the commander is either there or on the ship; fifty-three percent chances for the former I would estimate with current available data."

"And one hundred meters all around of flat terrain between us and that stone wall," said the Deltan doctor. "Guess we should start by moving from the opposite of the guarded door while the patrolling sentry has moved to that same side."

"A logical approach," the Vulcan acknowledged.

But they knew the only real soldier among them was Aron'Son.

"Clearly you have never assaulted a position with Jem'Hadar." Aron'Son stated. "Do any of you believe that you can hit the top guard from this distance? If so I will shroud myself and eliminate the door guard. When he goes down the shooter can then eliminate the top guard. Otherwise I will take both myself...they will not see me or hear me until it is too late."

"Well, don't look at me," the Deltan woman said with a smile, although her nervousness was plain to see. "I'm a doctor; I'm sworn to never cause harm."

"With a phaser rifle and at least four point seven seconds time to aim, I can stun the unmoving door sentinel with a ninety-five point three percent probability," S'tron assured him. "Then Doctor Osaro-Lyth can reach him to administer a sedative that will knock him out for as long as needed. But there is a fifty-three percent chance that the phaser shot will be heard within the compound and forty percent chance from the Bird of Prey beyond it as well."

Aron'Son shook his head.

"Unacceptable. I will take the shortest distance to the door sentinel and incapacitate him. The rest of you will have to wait until the patrolling guard is on the opposite side of his route to move. The other option is that I alone enter the compound shrouded and incapacitate all resistance. Even Klingons are no match for a shrouded Jem'Hadar, and if there are as few as we believe they will not be able to stop me."

"I will provide assistance," S'tron then proposed. "As a Vulcan, I have strength and senses that easily matches yours and techniques to render an opponent unconscious without any noisy struggle. But there is one thing I can attempt on the guard atop the wall; I can distract him with a hypnotic suggestion. Since he is in physical contact with the wall, I can reach his mind if I myself can make contact with the same wall."

"I can always shoot in the air to provide cover and distraction if all else fails and you need to retreat," the Deltan doctor then said. "I will not shoot at anyone, but these are more cautious Klingons than the norm; the noise of the rifle should deter them long enough to allow you to escape if things go sour. And I can stand watch outside in case others come near and risk discovering you."

"It is not an ideal plan..." Aron'Son mused clearly not the least bit pleased with his options. "but it will have to do. In order to support Commander Redding, we must accomplish our mission."

His old squad would have taken these Klingons without so much as a sound if they had wished; but he was not there, he was here on this planet with these people.

The hulking Jem'Hadar then turned to S'tron.

"I am ready when you are."

"You lead, Sir."

"Here's the signal! Redding's team is attacking!" Osaro-Lyth confirmed as her combadge buzzed.

"Then we must move quickly."

And with that, Aron'Son vanished from their sight.

It had taken Aron'Son some time to adjust his shroud to the trappings of Starfleet's uniforms, but he worked on the technique throughout his time at the Academy and with help from Doctor Bashir he was able to reliably conceal himself in the middle of the Academy courtyard for hours without being detected. So quickly crossing the distance between the Starfleet officers' concealed position and the guard took little effort. Aron'Son slowed as he approached the ancient Klingon and stalked his quarry carefully and then, without warning, he dropped his shroud and landed a vicious overhand blow to the back of the Klingon's head and the guard crumpled in front of him. He nodded in approval over the man's fallen form and then waited for the Vulcan to catch up to him.

When S'tron came up to him, he did not glance at the fallen guard but went immediately straight to the wall encircling the camp. He joined his hands together a moment, two fingers extended before his closed eyes. Then, with slow, deliberate movements, barely touching the rough texture of the barricade, he moved with imperceptible steps along its vertical surface, eyes unblinking.

On top of the fence, steps could be heard approaching. then they stopped. A moment later, the same footsteps receded away with slightly more haste.

"He thinks he heard a disturbance at the opposite side of the compound. He's going to check it out, " the Vulcan explained to Aron'Son. "Once he will be sure it was nothing, he will restart his normal pacing from the other end as before. I estimate we have four point seven minutes before he discovers that his colleague is missing from his post."

The empty courtyard was the only thing now between them and the entrance to the windowless, elongated Klingon camp where, at the other end in the last jointed structure, would be the office of the commander.

"Then we should proceed, we must be through the courtyard before he realizes there is nothing there. I recommend we move at a rapid pace"

Aron'Son knew that the Vulcan could keep up with him. He had studied the species of the Federation extensively and was well aware that S'tron's people were capable of speed, strength, and when needed stealth. So without bothering to check to see that S'Tron was with him Aron'Son moved quickly but also softly, if Jem'Hadar were capable of such a thing, into the courtyard. He used light steps to deaden the impact of his boots on the ground, stealth was a primary method of attack for Jem'Hadar soldiers especially when they were in small units. In all honesty Aron'Son would have given just about anything to have his old unit with him now. This assault was a perfect environment for the Dominion's shock troops, an unsuspecting enemy and a setting that would test their skill.

As they approached the door to the commander's office Aron'Son slowed and turned to S'Tron.

"It is likely there are two of them inside. It may be necessary and efficient to simply stun them both."

S'tron agreed with a nod.

"Klingons are efficient but not very imaginative. One will be on the left side of this entrance so as to better draw his sidearm from the right at an enemy's blind side. The other will be in the same position at the entrance at the other end but facing this access so that they can both catch a rushing enemy in a crossfire... or run away to seal the hatch and warn the others beyond, as those old-type Klingons are prone to do."

"We cannot have one of them escaping. I should shroud myself again and take the far guard, the only other option is to fire quickly and hope we do not miss."

"If we fire, we will alert whoever might be further inside," S'tron pointed out. " There is a good probability that there might be an escape hatch further back. However, I can take care of the near guard quietly if you can do the same with the farthest one. Our odds would be better this way, Sir."

"Agreed," the Jem'Hadar replied "Give me one standard minute to get into position."

With that Aron'Son's form seemed distort in waves, almost as if he was moving the air around him, and then he was gone. He moved into the building passing softly, silently, by the lone Klingon to his left. The Vulcan had been right, the Klingons were deployed exactly as S'tron had specified. The space between them was open, and Aron'Son could not see any other security measures in place. He closed the distance between himself and the far guard as quickly as he silently could. Once near the Klingon he studied his enemy, clearly these were not the Klingons of the present time. They lacked the physical presence, and distinguishing facial characteristics of the current Klingons. Aron'Son knew this was from some sort of genetic experimentation the species had done in the past, but he could not comprehend why anyone would undertake such a rash procedure. It was unfortunate for this Klingon as he would never have a change against his much stronger enemy. Aron'Son positioned himself behind the guard and waited for S'tron to make his move.

The Vulcan's approach could not have been more different from that of his superior officer. He simply strode boldly into the room, looking straight at the far away guard just as the one beside him jerked suddenly at his appearance. As he drew all their attention on him, the Jem'Hadar suddenly appeared as if by transporter besides the other guard; it reflexively drew towards him the surprised eyes and unholstered old fashioned disruptor pistol of the one nearest to the ops officer. S'Tron's arm sneaked past his shoulders to his neck nerve bundle and squeezed with typical Vulcan strength while his mind shot a telepathic burst through his own fingertip endnerves.

The first guard collapsed like an unstrung puppet.

The other reacted swiftly and pointed his weapon at the Vulcan. then he fell to the floor under the strong hand of Aron'Son.

With a holding hand, S'Tron asked his superior officer to wait for him and went beside him to listen beyond the door.

"I hear onr person breathing on the other side and some scratching" he whispered; "I estimate that it is a stylus on a pad, like those used in the twenty-third century before the advent of the PADD."

They both had the same thought at the same time. Only one Klingon would bother with paperwork; the commander.

"I do not believe we require stealth any longer. He is the only Klingon left conscious in the facility. We will enter, weapons drawn, and he will surrender or,more likely given that he is Klingon, he will try to fight and we will stun him. Either way the facility will be ours."

Aron'Son was confident in his assessment of the situation and drew his phaser from the holster on his hip preparing to burst through the door as soon as S'Tron was ready.

The Vulcan took out his phaser and set it on level 3, as Klingons were well known for their sturdiness. The one hour stun would only last fifteen minutes with one, while the fifteen minutes level 2 would barely last five and level one would have no effect at all. He nodded to Aron'Son and readied to open the door for him. Since he was Jem'Hadar, he was the better soldier and it was only logical to let him lead the charge.

They bursted into the office, weapon drawn. Behind a makeshift desk, the heavysset bearded human-looking Klingon wore a broad golden sash studded with emblems. At their appearance, he rose and brought his hand to his holstered disruptor pistol then froze.

With two muzzles pointed at him, he instantly knew he would never have time to draw it.

A modern Klingon would have done it anyway, choosing to die in glorious combat. But these genetically human-based Klingons were less instinctual killers and more thought-out ones; more assassins than soldiers, more bullies than warriors. They knew fear and treachery, both as weaknesses... and as tools.

His coarse voice rumbled with outrage.

"What is the meaning of this?"

If Aron'Son had been human he may have attempted to speak to the Klingon, or hesitated to fire without explanation but Aron'Son was not human. He was Jem'Hadar, and a soldier and so he did not hesitate, he fired. The heavy stun beam from his phaser struck the Klingon squarely in the chest and despite his size he crumpled to the floor.

"We do not have much time, we need to contact Commander Redding, and either find a way to restrain him or be gone before he wakes up. Otherwise we may have to kill him."

"With all due respect, Sir, you are not thinking logically," the Vulcan stated. "Starfleet regulations and general orders specifically prohibit the mistreatment, torturing or killing of prisoners, even in times of war; beyond these binding restrictions to our honor and service, such simplistic expediency is counter productive; a dead prisoner gives no valuable information. Information is what we need most here, not tactical victory."

Before the Jem'Hadar could wonder about it, S'tron went to the comatose Klingon and brought his fingertips to his head. His eyes glazed over and for a moment, his breathing was in perfect synch with that of the fallen commander. After a few minutes, his eyes focused again, his breathing became deeper and he broke contact.

"We can use these power cables to restrain him to his chair, Sir. But you are right, we must contact Commander Redding as soon as possible. What we have here is much more than a simple hidden Klingon outpost."

Before he could speak any further, the door bursted open and Doctor Osaro-Lyth bursted into the room.

"Damn combadges not working on this blasted lump of rock... We must hurry out; the rest of their forces are running back this way from the wreckage of the Polaris; about two dozen strong, all heavily armed. there was some fire exchange back there; I guess the rest of the crew managed to chase them off. But they'll be back here in less than a few minutes."

Aron'Son stared hard at the doctor for a moment his mind going over his tactical options. Once again if he had a well trained squad he would say let the Klingons come, but he did not and there was nothing he could do about it. While the Vulcan was more than capable the doctor would not fire a shot which meant setting up an ambush was not a possibility.

"Very well," he conceded; "we will retreat, we cannot take on an armed Klingon crew...even if they are ancient."

Aron'Son started back for the door motioning for the other two to follow with his weapon directed in front of him, retreat was not something in his nature, but he had done many other things not in his nature since joining Starfleet.

"I recommend we fall back to the Bird of Prey, Sir," S'tron said as they exited the small compound. "Regrouping with our other team with the only spacecraft still available would give us the best options."

Aron'Son nodded.

"A wise suggestion. We will do exactly that. I will take point. Doctor behind me, and Ensign S'Tron you will act as our rear guard. Doctor please use your tricorder to tell me which direction I need to go to both avoid our enemy and take us toward the ship"

"I'll do my best , Commander, but with all the interference on this planet, it's not that easy to distinguish an approaching Klingon lifesign with that of a bush flying at the speed of sound," the Deltan woman grumbled. "Good thing is, the Klingons will not be able to spot us any better than we can spot them."

"Lower the resolution to filter out chronitons, Doctor," the Vulcan then suggested as they moved out of the compound.

"Chronitons? You mean..."

They were moving at a fast pace towards the silhouette of the landed Bird of Prey, already recognizing the chief of security guarding the boarding ramp, when S'Tron voiced her thought.

"Affirmative; like a stone thrown into a shallow pond, this planet is bathed in ripples of time."

"I do not know much about time travel or chronitons but I know this is not good.." Aron'Son stated "we need to locate Commander Redding."

He continued to lead the small group toward the Bird of Prey his head swiveling and the honed eyes of an experienced soldier watching for anything that looked remotely like a Klingon warrior from any century.

* * *

When he got into the engine room, Redding found the usual cramped, low-beamed ceiling and curved pillared metal walls containing the heavy fumes of the heated warp core. It was bigger than one found on a Defiant class destroyer because of it's horizontal arrangement, reminiscent of the much larger one found in vessels of two centuries earlier like the legendary USS Enterprise. This one however glowed red instead of blue because of the different reactants and operative parameters of a small ship solely dedicated to aggressive military operations. All that, Redding was quite familiar with; and it was standard Klingon procedure to use it as a detonating device to destroy the aft section in case of mutiny, with the boom section with it,s fleeing officers separated... or to eliminate thieves fleeing with the ship... or bring down with them an invading force.

The first officer of the Horizon read Klingon easily enough; but he couldn't play much with the engineering computer program until he found and deciphered the right sequence to deactivate the self-destruct mechanism. So instead he went for the simpler solution.

Going to the manual release, he exerted all his strength to open the lower hatch and remove the clamps holding the central assembly.

With a sound of ripping cables and connections, the dying whine of cooling reactants under an emergency automated hissing cloud of coolant gases, the entire vessel resounded with a powerful clang and rumble as the warp core was ejected and dumped inert under the belly of the Bird of Prey like a lifeless egg.

With a satisfied grin but an audible sigh of relief he could not contain, Redding sealed the hatch and returned to the access ramp to meet with Julian and Jheongun.

"The ship is ours, Sir," the woman confirmed as she was effortlessly dragging a stunned, bound and gagged Klingon in each hand out in the open like so many sacks of grain... "And I see Mister Aron'Son and his team coming this way."

The six of them met at the base of the access ramp and S'tron was the first to report.

"Commander Redding, we should use this vessel to both avoid and keep at bay the incoming rest of the Klingons, deprive them of any transportation and means to pursue or escape, and reach the source of the spatio-temporal disturbances emanating from this planet."

"The source?" wondered the Edoan chief engineer of the Polaris. "I thought the Klingons were, some kind of technology of theirs..."

"Negative; it is neither technological nor biological... and maybe both at the same time. But the only way to understand it and deal with it is to go directly there," the Vulcan stated, looking directly at Redding as if he alone could already understand what he was talking about.

And indeed he did; even more than the Vulcan actually knew, for his ambiguous description had echoed precisely another one he had heard reading the famous USS Enterprise logs and reports of his own original century.

With a thumb jerk, he brought everyone aboard with him. Jheonghun went to the aft engineering section while the others jogged the short narrow corridor leading to the bridge aft. Taking their respective stations after a short glance to recognize them aboard this alien craft, they managed to decipher at least the basic activation controls, many of which were in standby already. Klingons liked to be ready in an instant to fly into battle; and Redding's intimate knowledge of Klingon ways and technologies, especially from this very era, brought them to speed in minutes. And not a moment too soon.

On the viewer, a group of Klingons were already entering the compound and discovering the remnants of Aron'Son's team attack, to the utter dismay of the one sentinel still standing at his post. Then, a voice barked in the comm system in angry Klingon.

"That would be our cue to exit the stage," commented the Deltan Doctor at the sensors.

Under Redding's experienced guidance, the Bird of Prey's thrusters roared to life and the entire vessel lifted off the ground, her swift departure saluted by numerous disruptor bolts that bounced harmlessly on her armored hull plating. And with what looked like disdain more hurting to Klingons than if she had fired upon them, the vessel turned around and flew away in the dark iridescent sky of the rogue planet.

CHAPTER FOUR : THE BEGINNING AND THE ENDING

Because of the difficulty of finding a landing space large enough to accomodate the Bird of Prey, they had walked almost a kilometer among ruins so diverse, so ancient and so numerous that they took a moment to even register what was before them as they reached their destination.

"There it is, Commander; the source of the disturbance."

S'Tron's hand holding his screeching tricorder rose to encompass the entire shape that was looming above and in front of them. It was a good hundred meters away and yet it felt as if it was right next to them, so enormous it was. And as they slowly walked nearer, it,s colossal proportions almost crushed them as much as what it was.

The thing looked like a massive rock formation, donught-shaped with athird of it buried underground and yet looking as if it had literally sprouted and grown out of the very rock. It was smooth with sharp edges all along it's irregularly curved lenght, easily a kilometer high and twice as wide, with a varying thickness of several dozen meters. It shined like metal yet was the color of eroded stone and pulsed with a dull inner light like a jellyfish. Some kind of distant, eerie moaning seemed to come from it through the hot, humid wind that passed through it, something between the exhaust fumes ofd an antique combustion engine and the breath of some monstrous, invisible living thing.

They were a few meter from it when Carmillia Julian, phaser in hand, pointed to it with a frown.

"What is it?"

"I AM THE GUARDIAN OF FOREVER."

The deep, resonant, echoing voice boomed from the massive object, the lights within it brightening with every syllable as it spoke.

" It's a machine!" exclaimed Jheonghun awestruck.

"No, it's alive!! Doctor Osaro-Lyth protested.

"I AM BOTH... AND NEITHER. I AM MY OWN BEGINNING AND MY OWN ENDING.

"Commander Redding, S'tron said then; "this object is similar to the one found on Gateway in Federation Space by the USS Enterprise of Captain James T. Kirk, during the twenty-third century. According to our data, it differs only in one aspect; this one is large enough to even let a starship as large as the Horizon go through."

As if it was listening to them, the huge circular formation lighted up again as it spoke.

"SINCE BEFORE YOUR SUN STARTED TO BURN, I STOOD HERE, WITNESSING ALL EVENTS WITHIN TIME AND SPACE. THROUGH ME, ALL JOURNEYS ARE POSSIBLE. LET ME BE YOUR GATEWAY."

Redding gave out a low whistle "Chatty thing, isn't it?"

He took a few steps closer to it, looking it over.

"You say Kirk found something like this? Did he figure out how it works? It could explain both the Klingons and the temporal ripples."

It was clear Redding knew nothing about the device.

At that moment, a fog lifted, confined inside the immense opening under the living stone arch. Through the haze, everyone could discern images, like snatches from multiple holorecords, showing in precise chronological order the events of history, starting with the Big Bang, then the formation of matter and energy, stars and planets. It then seemed to focus on several different worlds in succession, most unrecognizable at first. The passage of time was incredibly fast so that they only perceived snips of moments of History as it unfolded.

"This... Guardian of Forever is a space-time portal, Commander. By stepping through it at the precise moment it displays a specific segment of time in a particular spatial frame, you can transport yourself instantly to that place and that period in time. Captain Kirk experienced it with his first officer Spock to retrieve his chief medical officer when, temporarily rendered insane by an accidental overdose of cordrazine, he had stepped through and changed the course of Earth's history. Kirk corrected the timeline and brought him back. It was after this incident that the Gateway system was declared a quarantine area and the knowledge of the portal's existence was classified, restricted to Starfleet officers only. It brought about the very first draft of the Temporal Prime Directive."

While S'tron answered, Redding set his men out in a defensive perimeter. The Vulcan shook his head while looking at the immense display of history unfolding before his eyes.

"It is unfortunate the interference does not allow any recordings; we could gather invaluable information about the history of any world in this universe, even the universe itself. The scientific benefits alone are incalculable."

"And so is the potential danger," Chief Julian added, shaking her head. "Those 23rd century Klingons must have come out of it with their three ships. Who knows what else could emerge at any moment."

"Possible, Lieutenant," S'tron objected. As far as we know, only what came through from this side can come out from it; there is no receiving two-way portal we know of from our data regarding the original Guardian. The portal must usually provide temporal adjustment to atoms of a given subject to track and retrieve it at the point of entry, preventing accidental spilling out of temporal anomalies back here. I recall reading something about a device called an atavachron that had been built on a planet doomed by a supernova, which the population used to find refuge in the past; voyagers had to be prepared on the subatomic level for them to remain alive in that past. This must do something similar... usually. But look around us; there are debris of innumerable cultures from innumerable worlds and time periods around us. Evidence seems to indicate that elements from the past do emerge here from time to time."

"Then," chief engineer Jheonghun understood, "this device is somehow defective?"

"A logical assumption," S'tron answered. "In view of the size of this portal, we could eventually have something much more worrisome than a few Klingons; something truly catastrophic could connect from some other time frame to the here and now... like the Hobus supernova... a Borg vessel.... or even a flare of the former wild Azimuth Horizon anomaly..."

"Of which the current one is presently no more than a light year away from here," estimated Sheeneea their pilot. "If such a wild flare would connect to the one we have here..."

"It could re-ignite it... and not only resume the cosmic devastation through this time and universe, but through all time and universes."

The silence that followed the Vulcan's conclusions was deafening.

"So.. I'm hearing blow it up?"

S'tron lifted an eyebrow.

"Surely not, Commander; not only would this be a crime against science, and murder of an obviously sentient being, but this object's outer shell has all the properties of solid neutronium. It would take the power of a supernova to even hope to affect it. Moreover, we do not know the consequences of trying to cause damage to something linked to the full breath of time and space itself."

"And I'm sure the Klingons thought about it if not tried it already," commented Doctor Osaro-Lyth with a smirk.

"Maybe we can try and use it?" proposed Jheonghun in typical engineering interest.

"Before that, how about we ask it what's wrong? S'tron, it seems to like you, ask it to do a self-diagnostic or something."

S'Tron lifted an eyebrow again at Redding's remark but said nothing.

Redding glanced at the doctor.

"Or how it feels, does it need some chicken soup? Whatever it wants."

"That is a most logical option," agreed the ops chief, moving nearer to the immense arch.

"Since it states to be more or less alive, I sure can try my wits and charms, the Deltan chief medical officer added, moving in step behind the Vulcan.

S'Tron stood before the base of the nearest pillar of the arch, looking up at it,s immense curve disappearing hundreds of meters away. he spoke loudly and slowly.

"Guardian; is there anything wrong with you or or your workings?"

"THERE IS MUCH TURMOIL IN THE FLOW OF TIME. THERE WAS A DISTURBANCE OF SPACE THAT CAUSED IT TO SWIRL, EBB AND FLOW ERRATICALLY. I WAS... INOPERATIVE AND NOW I AM ADJUSTING. TIME IS STRUGGLING TO RETURN TO IT'S NORMAL FLOW SINCE THE DISTURBANCE WAS CONTAINED WITHIN ITSELF."

"I don't understand why it has to speak in riddles," grumbles the doctor.

"I GIVE THE BEST ANSWER THAT CAN BE UNDERSTOOD BY YOUR LIMITED INTELLIGENCE."

Both the Deltan woman and the Vulcan exchanged an almost hurt look.

Something was odd to Redding. How was it no one else seemed unaware of this 'Guardian's existence? Was it just him? He was sure he knew every time related case in the Federation data base, restricted or otherwise.

The thought also occurred to him that this thing might not have existed before they came to this planet, but was part of a fracturing of reality that he alone might be immune to.

Redding stopped to look around at the various debris, he seemed to be running a thought through his head.

"What if Julian is right? The BoPs did come from the gate. What IF this IS an exit point? Fractures in time and space that had nowhere else to go after the time line had been reestablished? That might explain why I don't remember any thing about it.

"A valid hypothesis, considering the proximity of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly which is known to disrupt the normal flow of time," S'tron acknowledged. "The Guardian we know of could only send and retrieve, not act as a point of exit. We need further study to understand this."

"The Dominion's knowledge of this...Guardian is limited to what was gained from the Federation database while Deep Space Nine was occupied." Aron'Son stated "I cannot offer any additional information, however in the past the Guardian has facilitated corrections to errors in time as it did with Kirk."

"TIME HAS BEEN ALTERED. IT CAN ONLY BE RESTORED THROUGH DIRECT INTERVENTION," boomed the archway in echo of the Jem'Hadar's words.

"How was it altered?" asked S'Tron then.

"BY DIRECT INTERVENTION."

"Meaning?" Osaro-Lyth insisted.

"THE FLOW OF TIME WAS DEVIATED. BEFORE THE DEVIATION COULD DRAIN TIME COMPLETELY INTO IT'S OWN FLOW, THE DISTURBANCE IN SPACE FURTHER DISTURBED TIME AND THE NEW FLOW WAS STEMMED. NOW THAT THE DISTURBANCE IS SELF-CONTAINED, TIME IS RETURNING TO IT'S PREVIOUS STATE BUT FOLLOWING THE NEWLY OPENED DEVIATION. THE ALTERATION OF TIME WILL REACH THIS POINT IN TIME AND EVERYTHING WILL BE FOREVER CHANGED."

"Can't you do something about it?" asked Jheonghun with alarm.

"I AM THE GUARDIAN OF FOREVER. . I CANNOT CHANGE TIME NOR THE MANNER IN WHICH IT FLOWS. MY PURPOSE IS TO BE THE WATCHER AND THE GATEWAY."

Redding glanced at his officers and frowned.

"Alright, Gateway; if you're looking for volunteers to fix the deviation, were here to help. What would you have us do?"

"I AM THE GATEWAY. THROUGH ME YOU MAY RETURN EVERYTHING AS IT ONCE WAS. ONCE THIS IS ACCOMPLISHED, YOU WILL BE BROUGHT BACK HERE AND THINGS WILL RESUME AS IF THE FLOW OF TIME HAD NEVER CHANGED."

Within the immense archway, images were continuing to flash at a dizzying speed, showing moments of history from innumerable worlds. And then, it focused on certain events in a certain point of space as time continued to flow.

"BEHOLD WHAT NEVER WAS AND NOW IS."

For a moment, they saw what appeared to be an old Starfleet vessel, then a wormhole where something distressingly Borg-looking emerged, followed by a planet collapsing onto itself.

"Guardian; the data flow is too fast for us to perceive adequately," S'tron said. "Can you show this again at a slower pace?"

"I WAS MADE TO DISPLAY TIME IN THIS MANNER. I CANNOT CHANGE."

The Vulcan nodded as if he had expected the answer then turned to face his superior officer.

"Commander, despite it's high speed of delivery, I have recorded the entire event on my tricorder. But I will need a ship's computer to make it intelligible for us. Unfortunately, the one aboard the Bird of Prey is too primitive, too crude and focused on military data to be of any use... and we lost those of the Polaris. I recommend we take the Klingon ship and return to rendez-vous with the Horizon. She should be well on her way to come here by now. Once there we will be able to decipher this data properly."

"We won't be going far without a warpcore," chief engineer Jheonghun remarked drily. "It would take us decades at impulse just to get back to the Eden system."

"Don't you ever read reports?" the Andorian pilot Sheeneea said with a smile.

"I have enough reading with technical journals, thank you," the Edoan shot back. "But what are you suggesting?"

"Slingshot ourselves into warp."

The six-limbed alien almost did a double take.

"That's crazy!"

"I was aboard the Artemis when we did just that with the saucer section during Operation Horizon," Sheeneea assured him. "It's not a pleasant ride, I can assure you, especially when you are sensitive to EM variances like us Andorians... but this Klingon ship is quite small but very sturdy and already quite uncomfortable. We should be able to achieve the same result with a well controlled trajectory."

"But... even if you manage to fly in the perfect trajectory, close enough but not so much as too fall into it, you would need something utterly massive for the gravitational forces to pull us hard enough to create a subspace field... like a black hole or at least a star..."

"Or this planet."

They both looked at S'tron as the Vulcan explained.

"I just made some quick calculations based on the formula first established by Ambassador Spock when he was serving as first officer of the Enterprise. Since we are not aiming at creating an unstable timewarp with a standard-mass starship, I believe that the altered gravity well of this planet, isolated and under the effects of the Guardian, could provide us just enough momentum at emergency impulse to achieve warp 1. Not much but enough to rendez-vous with the Horizon. The main problem will be navigation; because of the erratic fluctuations of the field of this planet caused by the Guardian, piloting will be a hazardous undertaking. I estimate a forty-seven percent chance of success."

"Well it's rather that... or we wait for the Klingons to run right over us," Carmilla Julian reminded them. "And I estimate that a hundred percent certainty."

Redding looked at him skeptically.

"Are you saying that we could break warp 1 without a warp drive? I'm no engineer but I was fairly sure that was impossible."

"It was... until the Artemis did just that," Sheeneea answered with antennae curved in the Andorian equivalent of a grin her rigid face could not do.

"They had a collapsed microsingularity from a destroyed Scimitar class Romulan dreadnought to help," reminded S'Tron. "But then, even just the saucer section of an Ambassador class starship is considerably more massive than this klingon scout vessel... and they were aiming for warp 9. The abnormally increased gravity field of this planet will suffice for this small craft at 95% of the speed of light to slingshot, not enough to create a timewarp, but just enough to break the warp barrier... if we can fly her around at the correct trajectory without crashing on the surface while erratic tides of gravitons try to do just that."

"Let's hope your calculations will be correct," Sheeneea said.

"They are; the real question is can we succeed in implementing them; in other words, your flying skills, Lieutenant Aron'Son's sensors expertise, Chief Jheonghun's ability to keep this ship running under gravitational stress and Commander Redding's instinct to break away at the right moment while we will be under time-dilation effect when approaching the speed of light."

Redding shrugged.

"I'm not one to argue science with a Vulcan, so we'll do it your way, even if I don't agree with your odds on defeating the Klingons, Lieutenant Julian... seventy-five, eighty percent tops."

He looked slightly insulted by the woman's estimation of his tactical abilities. She smiled at him.

"I was not factoring our chances of fighting them off, Sir; just the odds of them charging and howling all the way here."

"Is there any chance to we could set up a few of the BoPs torpedoes to dissuade the remaining Klingons from attempting to use the gateway? seeing as the gateway itself is beyond our ability to harm."

"That would be for our stalwart Aron'son to answer," suggested Osaro-Lyth with a dazzling smile towards the Jem'Hadar.

Aron'Son's expression did not change as he answered.

"While I do not support the idea of reducing our weapon complement, the older design of these torpedoes will make that work a simple matter. The detonators could be linked together and then attached to a single activation source either proximity or what humans call a "trip-wire". With your permission, Commander, I will begin the work at once. I will need some assistance moving the torpedoes into place."

S'tron the Vulcan and Sheeneea the Andorian, being both the strongest among them, stepped forward to assist him.

"Damn it," Redding held a hand to his head; "can we do it in a way that won't set them off the moment something exits the gate? and we have to be able to remotely shut them down later."

The picture of a shuttlecraft flying happily through the gate blowing up as it came out flashed in his head.

"A wise precaution, Commander," S'Tron agreed. "I can link the triggering system with this tricorder and set it with a command code and a continual Friend or Foe recognition program."

Redding smiled.

"Okay, lets get going. I need three teams again, Torpedo team is set, get moving." And he signaled for the team to move out. "Most of you will set up a skirmish line to slow down the advancing Klingons, form defensive positions, buying time for torpedo team to do its thing."

He pointed at Jeonghun and Julian.

"We three are back on BoP duty getting the ship prepared for takeoff, as much as I would rather be on the skirmish line, I'm the only one here who's ever actually prepped and piloted a bird of prey before so it looks like I'm stuck with the duty."

"I share the feeling, Sir," the muscular woman said, but I understand where our priorities lie. "

"Gray, you take command of the skirmish team. Remember, we just have to slow them down so don't take any chances. With any luck, we'll be gone before they get here anyway."

"May your luck hold one more time, Sir," the strategic ops officer said before assembling the Polaris security personnel for the needed task.

"Any questions? No, good. Everyone get to their job."

With that, he took off for the bird of prey. Julian and Jeonghun with his engineering team filed up behind him.

"Mind if I tag along?" the mesmerizing Deltan doctor asked Redding, joining him in the lead.

* * *

The small, spartan Bird of Prey was packed full with the entire crew of the Polaris. There was a double roster of officers occupying the small bridge, twice the needed technicians in the cramped engine room and just as much at every active station throughout the ship. The rest of the five dozen crewmembers were packed in the narrow corridors and the bare rooms. Fortunately, Klingons had the habit of carrying livestock as food supplies. Freeing all those targs out of the holds left enough room to embark four times the usual capacity of the scout ship. They would also provide a nice distraction to those Klingons who would reach the sector of the Guardian. All those long, numerous kilometers of walk through rough terrain would leave them quite hungry.

Having completed the set up of their boobytrap, Aron'Son was the last one to come aboard, with Sheeneea and S'tron behind him. The Andorian woman went straight to the helm and the Vulcan sat beside her at the ship controls station while a Security ensign vacated for the Jem'Hadar the station where was lowered the targeting periscope, just as the low screeching signal of the ship's comm struck their ears.

"Engine room to bridge," shrilled the voice of the Edoan chief engineer with metallic echoes, as if he was shouting all the way from the stern of the ship. "You have full impulse at your discretion, Sir. Sorry for not having time to remove the stench but reading Klingon is a bit hard. At least, I can confirm to you that we will not explode in mid-flight."

"If Mister S'Tron's calculations are correct," said Sheeneea with antennae curving inward.

"If Lieutenant's Sheeneea follows the correct trajectory at the proper speed and distance," shot back the Vulcan as if discussing the weather.

He was not smiling, but the banter between them was quite familiar to the bridge crew.

"Would you have preferred Mister Moore?" offered Valencia Irksos from the sensor station.

Doctor Osaro-Lyth, standing at the left of the high backed, raised center chair, rolled her mesmerizing golden-freckled eyes upward.

"Please; he would have attempted a barrel roll."

"At the breaking point," added Nathaniel Gray standing at Redding's right hand.

The mood-lightening exchange made it clear enough to Redding that they were all ready and eager to be on their way.

Reeding sat with a measure of smugness into the Klingon captains chair.

"Alright every one, operation 'Acme Rocket pack' is a go, lets kick the Coyote." He had earlier informed the crew of the ships new name 'The Coyote' but wouldn't say why.

The small scoutship rose with a roar of it's impulse engine and shook under the intermittent assault of the gravimetric distorsions emanating from the planet as it reached high orbit. despite her deftness at the helm, Sheeneea had much trouble keeping the vessel in the precise trajectory her navcom had been programmed to display. The graphically enhanced tunnel of light stretching over the equatorial line of the planet kept distorting with each passing wave of deformed space-time.

"This is not going to be fun," she grumbled, hunched over her controls, her antennae pointed sharply forward as if she was about to fight.

"I will manually adjust the flight parameters as best as possible," S'Tron said beside her. "But the unpredictable nature of those energy waves make all calculations approximate at best and perpetually obsolete from one to the next. As illogical as it sounds, your instinct might very well be needed to implement the correct flight path."

"Alright then... there goes nothing."

The engines going beyond full impulse roared as they flew around the planet. It's constantly shifting gravitational field turned it into a nauseating roller-coaster ride that threatened to send them all plunging into unconsciousness with each passing second.

"Passing a quarter of the speed of light... going to emergency impulse," reported the Andorian helmswoman.

The faster they went, the harder and frequent the space-time distorsions hit them, likes waves into which they were crashing head on. Already, several officers on the bridge had collapsed and most of them were struggling to stay conscious.

"Zero point five c... accelerating towards zero point six... seven... eight... nine..."

As they neared the speed of light, sights and sounds stretched out from on another and away from their sense of touch and of their own self. Ghostly images and sounds and feelings assailed their senses. For those who had experienced such a slingshot maneuver before aboard the Artemis, the sensation was familiar. But then, the intermittent shock of distorted space-time brought about pain and confusion until, suddenly, they were all thrown off their seat by a final wave and plunged into darkness and silence.

* * *

"We have failed."

S'Tron's assessment came out as no surprise to everyone now being revived by the soothing hands and pheromones of Doctor Osaro-Lyth. As they picked themselves up, lights started to return on the darkened bridge as systems automatically came back online. Science officer Irksos nodded with a heavy expression on her dark-hued face.

"The irregular space-time distortions and gravimetric variances of the planet's gravity well made all adjustments of trajectory impossible. The factors were too random even for the best computers available, let alone those primitive Klingon ones. Any renewed attempt will have no better chances of success. That is, if we can even try again."

"We are still in orbit, Sir," Sheeneea reported. "drifting into a lower orbit. Impulse is not responding. Activating thrusters to maintain altitude."

"All systems are returning to minimal operational status," The Vulcan ops officer said then. "Implementing level 2 diagnostics."

"No casualties, if you're wondering," the Deltan doctor then reported to her commanding officer. "We have however a large collection of various bruises and stomach spills all over the ship. I do not recommend using the drugs in what passes for an infirmary aboard, unless you want to start another round of retching."

"Engineering to bridge," then resounded the shrill voice of Jheonghun over the comm. "Impulse reserves down to barely five point three percent! We are on auxiliary reactor power and batteries. And we are starting to detect microfractures across the entire hull."

"We're certainly not going anywhere far and fast now," mused Nathaniel Gray. "And the Horizon is due only in eight hours."

The ship trembled slightly around them.

"We're still hit by the emanations of the Guardian down on the planet," confirmed Valencia Irksos from her readout. "We only have short range sensors. Nothing detected except for those distortions."

Another wave hit them and they could almost hear the ship groan in pain around them.

This ship is sturdy but I doubt she will hold together eight hours under such repeated impacts, Commander," Gray observed gloomily. "We can still land... but I bet the Klingons will be waiting for us down there."

"Well... if we start now, we could reach the Horizon on thrusters in about, oh... a few centuries," Osaro-Lyth said in a small effort to lighten the mood.

"Time is certainly not on our side," acknowledged Gray.

"You're starting to make me rethink my position on questioning Vulcans S'Tron," Redding said with a hint of a smile. "Drop a message buoy for the Horizon to find as updated as possible, and prepare to take the Coyote in for a landing."

Redding stewed for a moment longer while the preparations were being made.

"And could somebody check the ship's stores and see if they have any tibious claw left? I could go for a bite."

"Sir... we may have another option," Irksos then said. "The Guardian."

"The Guardian?" Osaro-Lyth wondered.

"You know what the Guardian is, Doctor. And you have seen it."

"Of course I know what it is. It shouted it loud enough! He's a gateway through..."

The Deltan woman stopped abruptly. Her beautiful eyes widened, her sensual mouth opened then her graceful finger rose in dire warning.

"Now just wait a minute!"

But the dark-skinned woman was now looking straight at Redding.

"This Guardian of Forever is large enough for a starship to fly through. Considering the diminutive size of this Bird of Prey, Sheeneea will have no trouble flying through it's kilometer wide aperture, even under the assault of the ripples in time emanating from it. S'tron's tricorder has the data flow it was emitting and we know from the time of Captain Kirk that it transmits it in a continuous cycle. If we synchronize our approach to this data flow and our planned stardate, we could move out to the current location of the Horizon. In effect, we would be right there instantaneously."

"Why not before?" suggested Gray. "We could avoid the Polaris crash and..."

"And change History," S'tron cut in. "Lieutenant Irksos is right; by returning to the Horizon where it is presently on her course towards here, we effectively rendez-vous with her and minimize the chances of altering the timeline... as required by our duty as Starfleet officers and the Temporal Prime Directive."

"But... using this time portal... won't it change the future and alter the timeline just as well?"

"Negative, Doctor," Irksos said. "From this point in time where we are, everything that came before is fixed so as to lead to this point; you change anything before, you jeopardize all that came afterwards that had happened in the timeline, up to this point and beyond. That is why we have our Temporal Prime Directive that not only forbids us to do so, but compels us even to correct any such alteration. However, from this point forward, the infinity of possibilities are open to our free will... like choosing to go back through a few seconds in time to return to the flagship. We cannot alter time before it unfolds because our current actions and decisions are part of that ongoing flow just as it does unfold."

The CMO and the strategic ops officer both nodded together in understanding. Then, like all the others, they looked at Redding to see how he was receiving the science chief's idea.

From the tactical station the Jem'Hadar security officer glowered

"This is NOT a good idea. Time travel even briefly is dangerous enough the Dominion avoids any mention of it. Meanwhile Starfleet seems to throw it around as if it is an every day event."

"Quick to judge, slow to change; that might say something about why the vastly superior Dominion was defeated," Gray offered with a crooked smile.

Redding sat there for a few minutes thinking it over. Any action involving time travel was problematic.

"I'm not sure I completely agree with your assessment. While it's true both the past and present time line should be secure the mere fact that were using the gate could still alter the future and is, in fact, what we would be attempting to do."

He shook his head no.

"Our situation just isn't dire enough to warrant an incursion through time. And if I remember your briefing from earlier, won't we still be drawn back through the Guardian when it's over to restore the timeline? How about a compromise; when we get back to the Guardian, I'll send an away team back to the Horizon to brief the captain of the situation, and then you can jump back with any reply."

Redding was really hoping S'Tron could talk him into taking the entire ship into the archway, but his personal desires had to be put in check.

It was Irksos who provided the answer.

"Sir, you are referring to an instance where there is an alteration in the past and sending someone to correct it. This is not the case here. We will not be affecting any event of the timeline before us; we are actually jumping to the *present* time but through a time portal that will in essence nullify the time required to cover the distance between us and the present position of the Horizon. "

S'Tron then added his own estimate about the situation.

"As for altering the future, Sir... the future is *not* set, like the past that brought us to *this* current present time. From our present time onward, *all* futures are valid *and* possible; the one that will become our present once getting there is what we will *decide* to do *now*... which *includes* choosing to travel through time as the correct event of the timeline, as this option is now *part* of our *present* from which this future *will* come out. Our time travel option was not the result of a previous time alteration from someone coming from our future and into his own past, our present. Therefore, using it will not change any future decided by our current decisions."

"In simple terms, Sir," Irksos concluded, "we will *not* be travelling into the past *nor* the future; we will just remove time from our travelling equation and move the ship instantly from here to there."

"Now I know why I should have taken that temporal mechanics course at the Academy," complained Carmillia Julian, shaking her head.

"That course isn't making this any easier for me to follow this, Carmillia." Redding smiled. "Alright then, let's do it." Tie in the helm to what passes for S'Tron's science station and prepare to take us in."

The Coyote flew down through the atmosphere of the impossible planet in a long, curved trajectory, not only to account for reentry friction as was usual, but also to ride the intermittent time ripples that were playing havoc with space itself, twisting the gravity and electromagnetic fields in unpredictable ways that could at any moment hurl the small ship out into space or crashing onto the surface. But Sheeneea was among the top pilots in Starfleet; despite the chaotic conditions, she kept the Bird of Prey in one piece with the help of Irksos' clever sensor forewarnings, S'Tron's deft power management and Jheonghun's expert shifting of impulse output, integrity field configuration and shield distribution.

"I wonder how the Klingons managed that bucket of bolts here," Doctor Osaro-Lyth grumbled as she gripped a pylon when another time ripple struck them.

"Badly," Nathaniel Gray answered from the opposite pylon on the other side of the command chair. "Jheonghun's report tells of damaged armor plating and hull microfractures everywhere. I doubt they could have flown that ship more than once or twice here before turning it into twelve million bolts flying in loose formation."

"Guardian of Forever dead ahead, Sir," Irksos then said to Redding. "Distance ten kilometers. We are in synch with the targeted timestream data."

"Steady on full thrusters at five hundred kph," added the Andorian woman at the helm. "Crossing the threshold in one point two minute... mark."

A light then flashed on Carmillia Julian's tactical board.

"Sir... we're being fired upon."

"I didn't feel a thing," the Deltan doctor stated.

"Disruptor pistols and rifles, Sir," the security chief added. "Shields holding."

"The remaining Klingons down there certainly do not appreciate us borrowing their ride," Gray commented with a grin. Then he suddenly turned serious. "Sir, leaving them near the Guardian might be a problem! If they managed to bypass our boobytraps... or even if just one of them survives and use the gateway..."

"One minute to treshold," Sheeneea reminded them all.

A cold thought suddenly struck Redding as he realized he had doomed the Klingons left on the planet, and his stomach felt queasy. As their failing, overstrained life support attested, there was no room left on this ship even for one more.

"Target the area, widest possible angle, fire all weapons as available." His voice was strained and without it's normal mirth.

"But, Commander! " Gray started to protest.

"The orders been given, execute them." He had meant his orders, but it applied to the Klingons as well.

As they targeted the men standing up to them with courage and defiance Redding explained.

"We left them the means to stop us, there's nothing stopping them from setting off the torpedoes on our approach." He didn't feel like explaining any more, there just wasn't time.

"Target locked, weapons armed," Julian responded with as cold voice. "They will thank you for it in Sto-Vo-Kor, Commander."

This last comment she addressed to Redding but it was for Gray's benefit. The man finally nodded in understanding. To a Klingon, dying in battle, especially standing up without fear to a superior force, was the best he could hope for in life... and afterwards. Short of dying in bed of old age, to be abandoned on a lost planet to die of thirst and starvation was the most ignominious, dishonorable fate he could dread. Of course, Starfleet officers were not bound by this view, especially considering that it went against almost all that they stood for; almost, because respecting members of another culture's right of self-determination, of choosing their fate as they saw fit, was among the values they had all sworn to uphold. But there was more to it in the present case; Redding had outlined how their own lives were in jeopardy if the Klingons were left there... and there was no telling what these altered, devious Klingons could do if they managed to use the time portal again. Redding's duty as commanding officer was first and foremost to ensure the safety of his crew and that of the Federation. And, unfortunately, Klingon disruptors had no stun settings.

"Firing all batteries," Julian said as her finger touched the console before her.

On the screen, the triangular grid of the tactical display showed a dozen red dots dispersed accross schematically delineated rough terrain. They all heard the disruptor cannons' discharge. The red dots blinked, then were gone.

"Candles in the wind," whispered Sheelya Osaro-Lyth.

"Reaching treshold in twenty seconds," Sheeneea announced.

In silence, they looked at the Klingon chronometer near her. Although very few of them could read it, they could all guess the countdown displayed.

"crossing treshold in five... four... three... two... one..."

And then, nothing happened.

"Are we through?" Osaro-Lyth asked a few moments later.

"If I read this correctly," Irksos said from her monitoring instruments, "we are one light year rimward of the Azimuth Horizon anomaly... on a direct heading toward the Eden Star system."

"Sir, I have a vessel on sensors," Julian reported.

* * *

"Klingon Bird of Prey, Sir! It didn't decloak, captain; it just popped out of nowhere!"

Kheren sat forward on his chair, elbows on his knees, antennae pointing forward over those of Tyvya, just as surprised as she was at the sudden apparition of a small winged craft bristling with disruptors and a huge torpedo port in front of the bulbous prow at the end of a short thick neck.

"Yellow alert!" Joey Sisko ordered from the Exec chair at the right of his commanding officer. "Baoule; tachyon scans. Search for others cloaked nearby. This one might be a lure... possibly a holographic projection."

"Open hailing frequencies," the Andorian then said over the alert klaxon.

"Channel open, Sir," Lyrya confirmed immediately at his left side.

"This is Captain Kheren of the Federation starship Horizon. You are approaching a Federation colony under our protection. Identify yourself and state your intentions."

The image of Redding seated in the command chair came on the main viewscreen.

"This is Commander Redding and the crew of the USS Polaris aboard the commandeered Vessel Coyote, requesting permission to come aboard, Sir, where I 'intend' to take a shower at first opportunity, Sir." It was a weary smile, but a smile none the less.

There was a moment of silence before the Andorian, Antennae straight up in surprise, curved them in a smile.

"Permission granted, Number One. You and your crew may even use real water if you wish. I am eager to have your report. There is assuredly a tall tale to be heard. I'll be waiting for you on the poopdeck."

"Err... Coyote, you are directed to use shuttlebay 2," announced Cheonghi with a shrill, hesitant voice, even for an Edoan. "Please standby for the shuttlebay to be cleared before proceeding with docking maneuvers."

The Horizon was so huge its secondary shuttlebay was large enough to accommodate a scoutclass-sized starship like the Bird of Prey who could fold its wings to fit properly inside. Still, all the shuttles normally docked in there would have to be temporarily moved to the other shuttlebays to accommodate it.

"All stop. "

"Answering all stop," chief helmsman Snow responded. "Confirming station keeping outside the Oort cloud of the Eden star system."

"Prepare shuttlebay 2 for docking," Sisko said, taking over the proceedings as was currently his responsibility as acting XO.

You have the conn, Commander," Kheren said to him as he rose his tall, muscular frame from the center seat to go to his ready room and await his first officer. Ensign Blackbird, get me the report of every crewmember of the Polaris and process the data for me to be ready for study by twenty hundred hours.

"Aye, Captain," the Amerind yeoman acknowledged before heading herself for the nearest turbolift.

There was indeed quite a tale to be told.

CHAPTER FIVE : TIME TO THINK

The captain's ready room, like everything else aboard the flagship, was larger than what could be found on any other vessel. Affectionally called the "poopdeck" by the commanding officer fond of old Earth naval terms, it was the size of a standard bridge officer conference room. And with only Kheren, Redding and Aron'son seated at the wide translucent desk, it looked even larger. The huge transparencies on one wall extended over their heads the awesome vista of stars outside and partly the view of the dark, lone planet below. On the other wall facing the windows, the enormous screen displayed the face of Commander Sisko in the center seat of the main bridge.

"Salvage of the *Polaris* is on schedule and proceeding without incident, Captain," the half-Bajoran reported. "Two Klingon survivors were found at their base camp, left there because apparently they were still unconscious when the rest followed their commander in chasing the *Polaris* crew back to the *Guardian*."

Kheren thought for a moment than sighed.

"Have them confined in guest quarters under heavy guard with no technological devices except those we can replicate from their 23rd century. The guards and anyone interacting with them will be clothed and equipped as per 23rd Starfleet standard issue as well. Interaction will be restricted and authorized only by either myself or Commander Redding. No members of a species unknown in Starfleet during their time period, like Bolians or Ferengis, are authorized in that area. Same restriction with equipment and data."

"We could keep them sedated," Sisko suggested.

"That would be in violation of general order 25 regarding the treatment of prisoners. And they're not criminals or enemies; they are just the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, general order 1a compels us to make sure nothing of the future should be revealed to them until we can correct the temporal anomaly they represent, either by integrating them in modern times or... somehow... returning them to their own time."

"Do I instruct Doctor Osaro-Lyth to prepare for short-term memory wipe?" asked Sisko.

"Affirmative. But we will wait for our report to come back from Temporal Investigations and their decisions regarding that problem."

"Understood; we could use holoprojections as well to keep them fooled."

"A most excellent recommendation, Commander. Please see to it."

"Aye, Captain."

The huge screen reverted to its real-time projection of Federation Space, except that it was currently a recording of what had last been known before the Horizon went into the pocket universe. The Andorian's silvery eyes followed his antennae towards his two senior officers.

"Alright, gentlemen; now what do you make out of all that occurred in this adventure of yours?"

For a good solid hour, Kheren listened in turn to Redding and Aron'Son's report about all that had transpired since the saucer section had left the Polaris, not even interrupting once. When silence finally stretched afterwards between them, he took a good minute to process all the information in his mind before speaking again.

"Another space-time gateway... and one large enough to accommodate a whole starship... this is extremely vital news that has the potential to affect the very fabric of reality. It is fortunate that the Klingons did not fully understand what they had stumbled across. I regret that you were forced to eliminate them, Commander, but you had not that much of a choice in the circumstances you described and which the ship's logs and sensor logs will vindicate. However, forced I am to say that this tragic turn of event might have prevented unforeseeable problems... at least for the moment. If Klingons were allowed to spread their aggressiveness not only across space but time as well..."

He stood up and went to the large window behind him, callused hands clasped behind him.

"I just received a preliminary report from the science and engineering teams going over your... Coyote. According to preliminary data of residual radiation and molecular readings of the outer hull, this Bird of Prey had gone through the Azimuth Horizon anomaly. It is safe to assume that these twenty-third century Klingons had been time-displaced by travelling through it somewhere in the past, when it was still undetected and untamed, just like the *Vor'Cha* from the time of the Dominion War the Artemis had encountered in there on her first voyage. "

He looked down at the dark sphere of the lone planet below. He could see the shuttles and workpods swarming around the wreckage of the Polaris as it was stabilized in orbit, getting ready to make it fit into its hangar.

"The astrophysics people hypothesize the rogue planet might just have undergone the same displacement, hence why it exists as an M class planet outside a planetary system," the Andorian added after a moment. "We know the Azimuth Horizon has swallowed and destroyed several star systems, like the one which once harbored the planet Neural that the Lotus evacuated before Operation Horizon. This planet may have come from this side or our side of the anomaly, the sole survivor of the catastrophe because of its spacetime shielding provided by the presence of this huge alien construct. Planetologists say that it maintains its M class status without the help of a star because, somehow, the Guardian is drawing in the light, heat and radiation of its former star through some temporal effect we have yet to understand."

The entire ship suddenly trembled. They were now all familiar with the effect that could even shake the immense starship. Kheren lifted his head, his antennae wobbling in apparent indecision.

"No one as of yet can explain those ripples in time emanating from the planet. They are quite different from those recorded by the Enterprise when it discovered the first Guardian in mid twenty-third century. They have no regularity and they are growing in intensity. It looks like time itself is being disrupted more and more as it goes by."

He turned to face them both, his antennae now pointing forward.

"Once we will have gathered sufficient data, we will proceed back to starbase Lotus. Starfleet and the Federation Science Council must be alerted to what is going on here."

He went back to sit behind his large transparent desk, crossing his hands on top of it as he darted both four oculars at them in turn.

"Number One, prepare the ship for departure back to Starbase Lotus. With the Champlain now assigned to Eden and our Draxx friends prowling around this sector, the colony is now secure enough for the time being. This information is too sensitive to delay any further... and to be honest, it makes me... uneasy. I am getting a red alert, right here,"

He tapped the back of his skull with a finger as he said so.

"Lieutenant Aron'Son, as you are due for a promotion to higher command responsibilities, I am assigning you the task of making sure this planet and especially the Guardian on it are secured from any further tampering. You have until the Polaris is back into her hangar and us ready to warp out to make it so. Not much time, I agree; consider it a command fitness test. All departments, facilities, personnel and resources not affected to salvaging the Polaris or for readying our departure are available to you."

Both officers stood up, nodded and left to implement their commanding officer's orders.

Left alone in the immense ready room, Kheren rose again from his chair to return to the wide window overlooking the immense vista of another universe, the closest star where a first colony was barely burgeoning, the closer fiery brilliance of a cosmic anomaly and finally down to the darkened mystery planet lost in the void around which floated the wreckage of a starship. His thoughts fixated on the immense alien construct he couldn't see but knew was down there, on the lost planetoid.

"Whatever this all means, let us hope we still have time," he whispered to himself.

As if to answer him, an ominous vibration shook his entire universe around him like a shudder... or a spasm of agony.

THE END