

NEW SHIPS, NEW CREWS AND NEW CHALLENGES EVEN BEYOND THE STARS

STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

NEW HORIZON

THE FOURTH DEPLOYEMENT OF LOTUS FLEET



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Forum roleplaying session
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Novelization by Kheren

Cover by Kheren

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Jureth as Captain Jureth Oseno and Lieutenant Commander Aron'Son

Caltern as Captain Speaker-Of-Names and Lieutenant Junior Grade Trea

Kheren as Captain Kheren, Commander Schaell Scyshyllyss, Lieutenant Jonathan Livingstone
and Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth

Redding as Captain Neil S Redding, Lieutenant Junior Grade Robert R Moore
and Acting Ensign Nathan Cross

Sorripto as Lieutenant Commander Sorripto

AlexSomers as 2nd Lieutenant Alexandria L. Somers

BLZBUB as Commander David Rogers, Lieutenant Junior Grade Sean Andrews
and Acting Ensign Shelley Rogers

CHAPTER ONE: MILLENIUM

"Well Mister Baoule?"

The two men watching the engineer sweat over his holographic controls seemed to be pressed by time; and they had no compulsion sharing this pressure with the tall, lean black-skinned bald man with the one and a half pips on the golden collar of his grey and black uniform. They themselves wore non-descript dark green suits with no insignia or decoration whatsoever.

The smallest of the two, a sandy-haired middle aged man, had a dour expression as if he had never smiled in his entire life. He was the one who had voiced the question with a toneless voice.

"The chronitons emissions are within expected parameters and the quantum matrix is nominal. The link between them is stable and control systems are online. After we have completed all levels of diagnostics, everything registers as per expectations."

"Then, what went wrong?"

That question came from the taller one, dark haired, heavy set, somewhat younger yet with the same dull expression as if even the answer to his own question was unimportant to him. But his intense black eyes said otherwise.

"As I feared, gentlemen; the computation."

The shorter man sighed.

"Mister Baoule; this ship has the single most powerful computer ever conceived by any advanced civilization... "

"As of now," added the other.

Unphased, his colleague continued on the same clipped tone as before.

"... and the coordinates had already been proof-tested and calculated long ago."

The engineer shook his head.

"They had been computed for an entirely different structure with completely different systems, power source, configuration, structural components... even mass and volume if not taken precisely into account will throw off all these calculations. And this is what happened. Moreover, they were crude and imprecise; not at all the kind of efficiency we are expecting from this project."

"In other words; it doesn't work."

Baoule shook his head.

"No Sir; the theory is sound, the technology proven and the design ready. When we attempted the first launch right in the middle of a crisis, we just didn't have the computer power to ensure it's reliability."

"But now we do."

The three of them turned to an elderly man wearing a tunic as white as his short cropped hair crowning his wrinkled dark brown face. A Starfleet security guard was at his side. Behind him was another dark skinned man, head shaven and bearded, with small creases on the bridge of his nose marking him as half-Bajoran and half-Human. The three pips on his golden collar showed him to be a full fledged Starfleet commander.

The short green clad man seized them up without even the hint of a welcoming smile.

"Commander?"

"Sisko; Joey D. Sisko, from the USS Horizon," completed the man not smiling either.

"Lotus Fleet... Kheren's ship," his tall companion added as if to remind the other who nodded, then addressed the elderly man.

"Doctor Daystrom. It seems that your computing wonder is not up to expectations."

"Not yet," the old man admitted. "As of now, the entire assembly is functioning perfectly and surpassing all other quantum computers even in experimental labs anywhere because of it's unique architecture. But since you did not allow it to mature..."

"Doctor Daystrom," interrupted the sandy-haired man, "you're talking to the most knowledgeable people in this galaxy about history; we are well aware of the potential and the risks involved in this... maturation process you so colorfully refer to. Your design was accepted only because it was allegedly powerful enough to meet our requirements and could be implemented without such risks."

"The twenty-fifth century doesn't need it's own Achilles incident or any such M5 catastrophe," added the other.

"That's where Commander Sisko comes in," Daystrom answered just as curtly.

As they all focused on the half-Bajoran, he simply cleared his voice before elaborating.

"Well, yes I suppose... You see, gentlemen, from the twenty-third century up to the present day, the main complain about computer systems was that they could not think and react like sentient beings. The intuitive leaps, the insights, going beyond logic, the feel of things, the instinct, the gut feeling... call it what you will... it was beyond even the most sophisticated machines, even beyond the positronic revolution of Doctor Noonian Soong and his still unparalleled androids. The inorganic nature of their being that gave them so many advantages was also their limitation... until Doctor Daystrom's breakthrough here."

"And such... feel for things and events is required to fully adjust this propulsion system of yours," explained the elderly man with the hint of a triumphant smile.

But the two green-clad men were not smiling.

"Doctor Daystrom; you are still serving a sentence in a Federation penal colony for the results of your... breakthrough," the shorter one said. "A powerful warship lost, responsible for depredations in the Mutara nebula for thirty years, culminating in the recreation of a long dead dictator's spirit now imbued with the terrible destructive power of that starship and the instantaneous relays of a supercomputer."

"Which has been neutralized," Sisko pointed out.

The short green-suted one snorted.

"Yes, we read Captain Kheren's report from the maiden voyage of the Horizon. That they danger might have possibly been averted, at least for the foreseeable future..."

"If there is such a thing," interjected the other.

"But it does not preclude it from ever happening again."

"Unless, gentlemen, we have a fully matured system fully committed to the three Asimovian laws, the Articles of the Federation and Starfleet's general orders and regulations," Daystrom offered with an even wider smile.

"I am afraid you are a couple of centuries too early for that, Doctor," Robert Baoule sighed.

"Commander?"

Sisko answered the smiling invitation of the older man by showing a PADD in one hand and an unusually large quantum computing storing device he was holding behind his back all this time, unnoticed because of the familiar Starfleet posture. He gave the PADD to the taller man who scanned it and then, with wide eyes, passed it to his colleague. As he too read on with a widening stare, Sisko summarized the PADD's content outloud.

"This is the official authorization from the Federation Council, the Federation Science Council, Starfleet Security, Starfleet Corps of Engineers and even your own Bureau... and the acceptance form signed by all concerned individuals."

It took a moment for both men to recheck all of it three times and grip with what it meant before the tall dark haired man finally spoke.

"Are you sure of this?"

Sisko and Daystrom exchanged a glance, like two proud parents before the schoolboard of their child.

"Yes, we are."

There was another pause before the shorter one spoke also.

"And this... interface?"

"Two years in the making, gentlemen... and that was the easy part since the technology for the frame, which was all that was needed here, had been known and studied for half a century and field tested extensively on the Enterprise D and E... as you are well aware of."

"But, Mister Sisko, no one, not even you or Doctor Daystrom here, has yet managed to fully recreate Dr Soong's positronic technology."

"To this date," chimed in his taller companion.

"Ah but gentlemen, that's the beauty of it," beamed the old Daystrom. "Thanks to this design of yours and my new approach, we don't need to... at least as far as your needs are concerned."

The man was obviously happy, proud even; but he was also just as eager, nervous, almost... frantic about it all.

Both suited men exchanged a look, then with engineer Baoule who nodded, obviously fascinated by it all. Then the sandy-haired man sighed.

"Proceed, Commander Sisklo."

"Doctor Daystrom; the honors should be yours."

With trembling hands, the old man took the storage device from the Starfleet officer as if it was the most fragile thing in the universe. Slowly he went to the console Baoule had been using and delicately connected the device to it. There were a few chirps and whistles, a display of light and then everything went dark.

"Doctor.."

Before anyone could start worrying as the dark haired suited man did, all lights and sounds came back slowly, as if all systems around them were awakening from sleep.

Daystrom was crying as he went back to almost fall into Sisko's arms.

"Thank you... thank you... thank you..."

Behind them, at the end of the corridor, the doors of the turbolift opened.

Out came a Starfleet Ensign, a young platinum haired, golden eyed woman of striking beauty with the same half-Bajoran nasal ridges as the Commander. Her skirted grey and black boots and uniform showed one golden pip on her red collar.

As she came up to Sisko and Daystrom, she had a shy smile for them. She was rather tall and perfectly proportioned and barely looked out of her teens. But she stood before them in a perfunctory Starfleet posture of attention as Sisko presented her.

Gentlemen, may I present to you Ensign Thetis Daystrom Jureth, class of 2370 with highest honors, yeoman of the starship USS Millennium.

"Sirs," she said in a soft musical voice, "please call me Tess."

CHAPTER TWO: AN OLD HAND, A NEW JOB

Sean grumbled aloud as the comm chirped loudly, waking him from a deep slumber. Rolling over in the low bed he growled an answer to the room.

"Yeah, I'm up! I'm up! What is it?"

The answer came as the voice piping from adolescence, or so it seemed to Andrew's groggy mind.

"Ensign Andrews, Starbase Lotus calling ... er, I mean this is ensign Maldor from Lotus base communications. I was told you could clear up a glitch we're having here at the moment?"

Sean sighed inwardly and sat up on the bed, cursing his misfortune once again. He should have took shore leave and went to Earth last week. But no, he wanted to get more work done on the Phoenix while Rogers was away. Swinging his legs over and onto the deck, he replied tersely.

"This better be good, Ensign. What's the problem?"

"Sir, we've got an incoming transmission we can't clear up. My supe says its internal melding within the subspace transceiver, but our techs say its external. I was told you had a lot of experience with our systems. Could you come clear this out for us, Sir? From what gibberish we can make out, it seems like a distress call, but we cannot nail that down for certain and I don't want to alert the entire base if it isn't one. Can you get over here please?"

Sean stood up and began reaching for his uniform from the chair nearby, noting the chronometer on the wall as he did so.

"Ok, Ensign, I'll beam right over. Which site are you at?"

"Administration section B, Communications room 5."

Pulling his tunic over his head Andrew gave a short reply.

"On my way Ensign."

Six minutes later found a still slightly dishevelled Andrews walking through the door of room five on starbase Lotus. A jog to the turbolift, ride to the nearest transporter; Transport to the base and jog to a turbolift. Ride and jog again to communications room 5.

"Ok ensign Malkior, what's the problem?", Sean barked as he approached the three personnel standing around a comms panel.

A short, rotund ensign wearing the science blue uniform spoke as he turned at Andrew's gruff entrance.

"Maldor, Sir. Have a look at these readings! They make no sense!"

Sean, his curiosity obviously piqued now, strode to the array and studied the displays for a moment, reached across and changed a few settings on the LCARS padd and studied it again.

"There's your problem, Ensign. That's an outside jamming source, not internal. See those spikes hiding almost behind your signal pitch? Matching it exactly? Something, or someone, is jamming your incoming signal!"

The young human boy, for boy he seemed to Sean, gave a surprised grunt at the screen and looked back at Andrews again.

"So what do I do? Force an override?"

"Not without knowing the exact direction you can't", Sean replied matter-of-factly.

Tapping his own commbadge, Sean contacted Lotus base's main flight control.

Lieutenant, er, Ensign Andrews to traffic control. What have you got on traffic flight?"

A second later the deep voice of traffic control came back.

"Nothing out here but stardust, Andrews. No traffic expected for about eight hours. Why d'ya ask?"

Sean answered immediately.

"Please check long range sensors for any traffic out there. I seem to have a jamming signal blocking an incoming transmission. Send me what you find please."

"We're on it, Ensign. Giv 'er a couple seconds."

Moving back to the display, Andrews switched to the traffic pattern feed to await the results. A mere ten seconds brought a glimmer from the screen and the results from long range scans, plus a comment from flight control.

"There ya are, Andrews. Good call. That is the shuttle we're expecting and she's just shy of twenty light years away, running hot at about warp 8.24. Delta class shuttle. The jamming source is right on her tail at about twenty-five hundred kilometres, closing slowly."

"What is it, Davidson?"

The auburn-haired woman at flight control turned to face the tall, stately blonde woman that came up to his station.

"Commander, we seem to have an inbound shuttlecraft with new personnel entering the sector at high warp, inbound to our location from bearing 202 mark 45. There is a moving jamming source overtaking it."

It didn't take long for an experienced Lotus Fleet officer like Karen Schmidt to figure out what was going on. After all, Starbase Lotus, headquarters of the most elite division of Starfleet, was located in the hottest spot in the entire quadrant, near both the Romulan Neutral Zone and the Organian Peace Treaty Zone between Federation Space and the Klingon Empire; and between them, the doorway to the infamous Delta Quadrant.

"Lieutenant Davidson; find out any available ship nearest to this shuttle's location and have one ready to intercept."

"On it, Commander."

The Exec of Starbase Lotus then tapped her commbadge.

"ComScan station, this is Schmidt; Lieutenant Shar, we need maximum gain on the communication array and the sensor grid, bearing 202 mark 45. Something is happening out there and I want to know what."

"Commander," then said Davidson turning to her, "We have only one ship capable of reaching so far in time to intervene... and she just cleared dock for a shakedown cruise of her newly refurbished impulse engines; the Horizon."

"Patch me through."

After a moment, the comm screen was filled with a view of the expansive bridge of the flagship in the background and the unmistakably recognizable dark blue, white-haired, silver-eyed countenance of her commanding officer.

"Horizon, this is Starbase Lotus; captain Kheren, we have an emergency. An incoming shuttle is being pursued by an unknown bogey jamming her and yours is the only ship capable of intercepting."

"Coordinates please, Commander Schmidt," was the familiar to the point reply of the Andorian.

"They have been sent to your nav station, captain."

"Confirmed, Sir," said the Inuit helmsman in front of him. "Interception trajectory plotted and laid in. Transwarp at your command, T4 ETA two minutes."

"On our way, Starbase Lotus," Kheren finished curtly. " Horizon out."

A moment later, the immense hull of the Horizon class starship jumped into a swirling funnel of energy and winked out.

* * *

On Stardate 88582.68, after just over a two-year advanced course at the Academy Second Lieutenant Alexandria Somers boards the Delta Flyer class shuttle Taff at the flight pan outside Starfleet HQ San Francisco. She looks back from just inside the doorway at her father and mother, they had come to see her off. Her father was the picture of stoicism he would have done a Vulcan proud. Her mother was more emotional and she was crying as Alex boarded the shuttle, she dropped her bags inside the ship and rushed back down and flew into her mother's arms for one final hug.

"Awww Geez mum, you going to get me crying," Alex said hugging her mother.

"It is a sad time for us, it has been a good time with you around, now you are returning to the front lines" her mother Jennifer Somers said.

"I know it is going to be hard getting used to the confines of the USS Horizon after the plush surroundings of our family mansion," Alex said with humorous Sarcasm and a smile.

Her mother gave her one of her trademark looks that said do not be a smart Alec. After breaking away from her mother she gave her father a final hug, he returned it and his reserve broke down "Bye Daddy," Alex said into his year and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

With that, she returned to the shuttle without looking back and closed the ramp when sealed in she slotted herself into the pilot's seat of the Delta Flyer Class shuttle. And looked out of the window to her right and saw her parents waving at her, she gave them a jaunty salute as she transferred offensive and defensive controls to her station.

The Shuttle Taff was set up in the same style as Tom Paris had it set up, the shuttle may have had the latest weapons and defence systems, but it was otherwise a replica set up of the Delta flyer class shuttle that Tom Paris flew when he was on the USS Voyager. Getting the clearances from flight control, she effortlessly lifted the shuttle up off the flight pan and zoomed into the sky. It was not long before the light blue sky became darker than black as she left the atmosphere of the planet when a good distance away from the planet she located the current location of the USS Horizon and set a course at the shuttle's maximum cruise was higher since the shuttle was created thanks to the improvements. Still, it would take her four months at warp 7 from sector 001 to the Hromi sector, the inner edge of Federation Space where Starbase Lotus was located.

Settling in for the long trip Alex took the shuttle to low warp until she cleared the Sol system then went to full warp. Now she was at warp she went back and pulled out a couple of books and returned to the pilot's seat, made sure the autopilot was on and sat back to read.

All was quiet on the flight out, the moment the shuttle got to the sticks of Federation space the Orion Pirates came out of nowhere and began firing on the shuttle. Alex was engrossed in her book when she was practically thrown from her seat and then in fluent Welsh she used ancient curse words as the modern ones were not easy to put into Gaelic, but the words she used had the same meaning.

"Dammit, frakking Orion's" she activated the shields and defensive and offensive systems and flew the shuttle as if it were a fighter, it was not as agile as one but the moment it broke inertia it was a slippery little sucker.

Now she brought the shuttle around and saw a flight of Orion Interceptors "okay, you guys I can take on" she said and fired with her upgraded weapons, destroying one Orion fighter and damaging the other one. Now she was in a furball if any other shuttle pilot encountered such an event, they would most likely fret, but Alex felt at home in combat and she had seen none while on her advanced training, so this was a welcome break. With a few scorch marks and slightly depleted shields, the interceptors were taken care of, just as she began to relax the carrier for the fighters arrived, it did not take them long to realise they had lost all their fighters and opened fire on the Shuttle Taff.

Alex's reflexes were still on alert and she just dodged the fire, "okay I am crazy and good, but I ain't that crazy and good!" she said and made a run for it. She put all power from the weapons into shields and engines and her speed picked up a little, eventually, she went to warp, making sure the Horizon was her next stop.

But then, the signal she was getting from the Lotus Fleet flagship simply winked out. A quick check of her instruments confirmed that it was not a malfunction. The Horizon simply had disappeared.

For exactly two minutes, she was left with no clue as to what had happened.

Then, her sensors picked up an unusual disturbance right behind her shuttle and, before she could even get alarmed by it, the colossal hull of the largest Starfleet starship she had ever seen appeared out of a swirling funnel of energy that flashed open and close so fast she would have missed it had she blinked at that moment. The vessel 's huge mass acted as a wall against the volley sent by the Orion warship, absorbing it with barely a flicker of it's huge deflector screens when it would have pulverized the Delta Flyer.

The starship was shaped in the time honored and proven design of saucer with secondary hull and nacelles christened by the legendary Constitution class, but was more reminiscent of the Ambassador class forward, Galaxy class midway and Excelsior class in her nacelles shape; except that this starship was almost a kilometer and a half long, larger even than the newest Odyssey class.

Somers' IFF circuit read the ship's transponder instantly:

**NCC-102176
U.S.S. Horizon.**

On her comm channel, a strong, clear signal was received.

"Orion vessel; this is Captain Kheren of the USS Horizon; you are trespassing into Federation Space with hostile intent. Desist and move out of this sector immediately."

There was no reply. On her sensors, she saw the Orion ship trying to circumvent the titanic starship.

So here, it was an enhanced delta flyer shuttle going at max warp and being chased by an Orion carrier, on her sensors she picked up the USS Horizon and opened a hailing channel.

"Shuttle Taff to Horizon flight control, this is Lieutenant Alexandria Somers, Marine Commanding Officer requesting landing clearance, I am being chased by an Orion carrier ship, I will need fire support, standby prepare for close fire support, I will be dropping deep into your defence perimeter with hostile ship on my six."

"Taff, this is Horizon," came a different voice, male, less deep than that of the captain but no less poised; " activate IFF beacon and prepare to dock on main shuttle bay, saucer section top aft."

With that, she activated her IFF beacon and dropped from warp and as warned she dropped right in on top of the Horizon and. This told her that the Orion ship was that close on her tail. She was too busy dodging fire from both sides

"Dammit why do I have to be this lucky!" she said with sarcasm.

She had to quickly pull up and duck and weave as the mobile Starbase fired a split second after she dodged.

"Nice shooting Tex," she said as she saw the Phaser beams lash out at her pursuer.

The shot had been of four class X heavy phasers boxing the whole Orion vessel within four orange beams of searing light and fire. The shots had been near enough to singe her shields. Another call was then heard, again from the deep voice of her commanding officer.

"Orion vessel; we now have your shield modulation and locked ten phaser strips and two burst five swivel torpedo tubes fully loaded with transphasic torpedoes on your engines. Desist or prepare to be boarded. This is your final warning."

The Orion suddenly came about and shot out at emergency warp away towards the nearest border of the sector. From the aft section of the Horizon's lower hull, an Aquarius class escort starship launched and went to high warp in pursuit of the fleeing Orion, making sure to give it best incentive to exit Federation Space.

Her sensors read that the Orion ship fled the area. Now she brought her ship to level flight and took up a holding pattern.

"Shuttle Taff to Horizon tactical, nice shooting there, flight control sending IFF code and requesting permission to dock.

"Horizon to Taff; permission granted. Nice bit of flying out there. Proceed to designated flight deck."

The Delta Flyer soon found ample room to dock in a shuttle bay larger than on any starship ever built, shying only from one found on actual starbases. There were eight of the latest class XI shuttles parked there, four class X shuttles, four class 18 shuttlepods, two M1 Sphynx workpods and a pair of workbees and one Delta Flyer sporting the name Dawn on it's hull. There was even a pair of refitted Peregrine class fighter shuttles and the obvious access hatch for what could only be the captain's yacht, fully integrated to the hull. And yet, with all this, there was enough room for Somers's craft to maneuver with ease.

The low intensity forcefield keeping life support in and the frigid airlessness of space out let Somers' flyer enter and land with barely a flicker of light as it passed through. On the deck was waiting the chief of security to greet her.

The woman was Andorian, not the well known Bishi light skinned, frontal antennae type but of the much less common Thalassan type; long knobby antennae protruding from the top side of her long, thick, white-haired mane cascading around her deep blue feline face. What was even less common of her was her astounding size; she was two point twenty-five meters tall, dwarfing even Hirogens and with a powerfully athletic built unusual for her species. Andorian females were known to be usually taller and as strong as their male counterparts, more than twice that of a Human being, almost as strong as Vulcans... and much more aggressive. This one looked like she could wrestle a Vulcan... and win.

Yet, despite her rigid expression, Andorians having too few facial muscles to smile, her voice was surprisingly soft and feminine despite the professional firmness of it as she nodded in greeting to Somers.

"Welcome aboard, Lieutenant Somers. I am Lieutenant Tyvya, chief of security and tactical aboard the Lotus Fleet flagship Horizon."

Alex looked at the Andorian and nodded in greeting.

"Hello Lieutenant, happy to be here, I was posted to this ship last time around and after things went south, well for me anyway I returned to Earth for further training, now I am back again" Alex said as she stepped down onto the flight deck properly and looked around. Alex noted that there was something different about this Andorian, but she noted some extra accessories like the ring on her left Antennae, for the moment her usual curiosity was not there, now that she was safely on the Horizon and her Adrenalin had returned to its normal levels and now she was a little too distracted to concern herself with species mating rituals.

With shaky hands Alex checked that she had her hidden retractable quarterstaff in its customary place, she had a boot combat knife in her left boot and in one of her two kit bags she had her bladed weapons her twin wakizashi blades, a Bat'Leth and a Dak'Tagh knife, but she tended these days to favour the wakizashi blades and two versions of twin desert eagle pistols. One version was your basic disruptor bolt effect energy based packed into a desert eagle shell, these pair of pistols were custom made, the others were vintage style and fully operational currently she had limited ammo for those guns, so she tended to rely on the disruptor based versions.

As she walked along with Tyvya she noted that the Lieutenant was not exactly packing standard Starfleet weapons if the boot knife and other weapons were anything to go by, they were small enough so as not to be noticed. But like the ring on Tyvya's antennae Alex did not think on the matter beyond noting the differences, and if she remembered correctly, this was not your usual Starfleet ship.

"So El-tee, where are my quarters? I need to dump my stuff first."

She paused as she looked back to the rest of her stuff being unloaded turning to face front again.

"And unless Captain Kheren or the First Officer wishes to speak to me, I need to know does this ship still serve real alcohol as I need something to calm my nerves?" Alex asked.

"There is no urgency now that the incident with these Orions and you is over," the giantess assured her as she guided her further inside the colossal vessel. "We are returning at standard warp travel to Starbase Lotus, so you have a good shift's length to settle in. Report to the Captain as soon as you feel ready to. First Officer Redding is out in the Polaris chasing off those Orions, and the captain anyway prefers to meet every new crew member personally."

They went to the nearest turbo lift and despite the large crew filling the corridors, they were both alone when Tyvya called for deck 2.

"As our MACO unit department chief and senior security and tactical officer, you are assigned to our senior officers quarters. As for your last request; the Crow's Nest on deck 10 has a store of every alcoholic beverage known in this galaxy; but real alcohol is available only with the Captain, the First officer or the Quartermaster's permission... or if the Chief Medical Officer prescribes it. Are you in need of medical attention?"

Smiling "No, but I need something to steady my nerves, I may be the best shuttle pilot, but even I get shaken by close calls like the one I just escaped from, look at this" she said holding up a shaking hand "that is how badly I am shaken and my nerves well I need a strong drink to steady them. Could you possibly show me to my quarters, please? I had different ones last time I was here" alex asked.

"We are on our way to officers quarters, Deck 2. Please follow me," the Andorian woman said as the doors of the turbolift whooshed open.

Once they stopped at the door, Tyvya activated the opening.

"You may imprint your DNA on the door pad and any encoding you like on your quarters access and configure the rooms conditions to your liking. Only the captain, the first officer, the chief medical officer and myself will have emergency access from then on. Of course, the EMH is also able to materialise inside as everywhere else on the ship in case of medical emergencies, either called for or if the biomonitor in your commbadge or the internal ship biosensors send an alert signal."

Looking at the Andorian "That is logical" Alex said as she inputted her DNA by pressing her thumb to the door pad, then in an old welsh dialect put in a password and looked at Tyvya "Well that is done" she noted that her other items had not yet arrived so she dumped her stuff in her new quarters.

The room was spacious and consisted of a reception and living room area, a small work area and a bedroom with a private adjoining personal facility with both sonic and water showers. Everything was neat but bare, awaiting the personal touch of its next occupant.

"so what to do now!" Alex said to no one in particular.

"Despite my cross-training in medical, I am not qualified to prescribe drugs to... alleviate your current condition," she then said, looking at her shaking hand. "But inside is a food replicator that can provide you with synthehol giving all the relaxing effects of any kind of alcohol you wish but without the debilitating aftereffects. And mind you, Lieutenant, these are state of the art replicators, not the old crude ones of yesteryear; what comes out of it is virtually identical to the real thing because it *is* the real thing; down to the molecular level exactly like the actual model used to program it, up to and including Grandma's Eggnog. We Andorians have smell and taste far beyond those of every other species in the Federation, and even us can't tell the difference now. So feel free to use it to... steady yourself."

Alex looked at her strangely, and wondered did Tyvya make a joke as it was known that Andorians did not understand Human humour; it certainly didn't appear so with this one, despite her frozen features.

"Well that is good to know, but even with enhanced replicators, it will never be as good as the real thing" Alex commented and entered her room as she looked back Tyvya. "Well Lieutenant, I think I know all I need to know at present. I think my old team is still loitering around somewhere, perhaps I will go seek them out before I go see the Captain it will be good to get reacquainted with them again" Alex added as the rest of her items arrived. "Ah at last, now I can start unpacking *looks at the tall Andorian* so El-tee apart from my wee unit, how is the marine situation on this tub?" Alex asked.

The Andorian did not comment on the unexplainable attitude of so many humans to see replicated matter as "not the real thing" when there was absolutely no difference with what they stubbornly referred to as "the real thing." A molecule of water was still a molecule of water, regardless of it being condensed within a planet's gravity well or into a condenser. Same with ethanol or anything else. You could even put impurities in there if you wanted "flavour." Not that human senses were that acute, to begin with; they never complained about the air they were breathing or the water they drank on a starship as "not the real thing" when it had always been all replicated in the first place for centuries. Even mere holo-technology completely fooled them, having no antennae to perceive subtle odours, the EM spectrum, ultrasonics, ultraviolets and infrareds or the biofield lacking in holo-constructs. But when it was things like alcohol, they always insisted it was not the same. Human minds worked in very strange ways...

Andorian minds, however, were unerringly pragmatic. So, she only bothered with the pragmatic part of the conversation.

"We are currently without the required MACO division aboard. Our MACOs all transferred with Commander Jureth when he was promoted to Captain of the USS Alsea; something about a sensitive mission within the Romulan Star Empire... or what's left of it. I believe Captain Kheren's first responsibility for you will be to have you bring your department up and ready before we receive our next orders. He will find your recommendations most welcome."

Alex looked at her then to her Padd.

"It is nice to see that my old marine crew remained on this ship." Alex was referring to the marines that were with her first time around. "it will be good to see them again, I bet they are fed up of playing security officers?" she asked the lieutenant.

"Well, let's see; they went to the edge of the galaxy to fight against a marooned squadron of Jem'Hadar serving the holographic recreation of Khan Noonien Singh commanding a lost super warship; they went to fluidic space to tackle the Undine in a complex diplomatic situation and retrieve our captain when he had been transmuted into one; they went to a pocket universe to confront a race of space wolves and another of pure energy while helping to establish and defend a new colony; they were there to help save a supply ship from Klingon marauders of the past and secure the access to a sentient time portal... yeah I guess you could say they might be fed up with real hard work and want plain MACO duty now."

This time, the giantess spoke with deliberate seriousness. After living through all these events herself with her fellow security officers, and a lot more before that when they had all served on the legendary USS Lotus and USS Artemis, going through a cosmic anomaly, a haunted nebula, a Dyson shell, the destruction of her former starship and through time itself, she was clearly telling that she certainly was not impressed at all with typical MACO posturing depreciating Starfleet security.

Looking at the Lieutenant and holding up her hand in a reflex reaction.

"whoa there, tiger; I have nothing against Starfleet Security; just because I am a marine, does not mean I look down on Fleet security. I have the utmost respect for any Security Officer who would strap on a phaser and go into battle for the Federation. I know my squad they get restless with too much combat, unlike myself I get restless when there is too much downtime. You should have seen how many hours I spent in the holodecks on Earth running combat simulations.

Then she looked up straight in her icy blue eyes.

"Despite my young age, I am a combat vet and I was given a field commission, so I will say this only one El-tee; kindly do not take such a tone with me, or I will put you flat on your back regardless of your size."

Then with some humour she added:

"Probably hurt myself in the process. all I am saying is, do not judge too quickly" Alex said. I

It was true the large Andorian did not frighten her; few things did and those that did she tried to avoid.

The Antennae of Tyvya's head curved sharply inward in amusement for several long seconds while she laughed uproariously.

"The arrogance of Humans is so funny, it cracks me up every time. Please apply your own words to yourself. You obviously have no clue whatsoever about Andorians... and even less about me. But if you need to try to prove yourself, please do not hesitate. There is an excellent combat area on board... and I would love a good warm-up with a real fighter."

Then, her antennae pointed forward, darting her four eyes straight down at her.

"We are of the same rank you and I and are respectively chiefs of our own department; so regarding my tone; deal with it."

It had been a long time since Tyvya had had any challenge except from her husband; and even he, the most renowned duelling master of Andoria, had to be careful with her. Andorians thrilled with challenge and revelled in violence, to a level that would be considered downright psychopathic to a Human. This one clearly had no idea what she was doing... while she, as was her duty as chief of security, had read thoroughly the personal file of their incoming MACO chief. Oh yes, she could put her flat on her back... and then, the real fun would begin.

The next assignment indeed now promised to be a lot of fun.

With that, the tall Andorian nodded her farewells and left Alex to her own devices, the moment the doors closed Alex began unpacking her stuff that had not long arrived, as she unpacked some personal belongings she pulled out an old style picture of her and her partner and smiled whistfully.

Her desk terminal was active and showed that the Horizon was returning at standard warp towards Starbase Lotus; ETA seventeen point one hours current cruising speed warp 8. And so, she had plenty of time to report to her commanding officer and then reunite with her team.

CHAPTER THREE: DISCOVERY

In orbit around Sol IV, Utopia Planitia had been the home of Starfleet's major construction yard for centuries. The personnel that are assigned there take pride in the ships they construct, and the ship being assembled in Drydock Number 10 was no different. On this morning, workbees flitted around the outside of her hull making final inspections, correcting minor issues, and making sure everything was perfect for her upcoming launch.

She was the first of a new breed of Vesta Class vessels. Her lines were similar to others of her class, sleek and organic; oval saucer forward on a short angled neck to a flattened, profiled secondary hull at the aft of which stretched up and behind long, thin nacelles. But she was built with the most modern materials and outfitted with the best systems Starfleet had to offer.

Callum Roark took more pride in this ship than others because she was his. As lead engineer, he had overseen every aspect of the ship's construction from the laying of her keel to the stem bolts that went into every last hull plate. It had taken nearly five years to construct her and now, as launch date drew closer, Callum was crossing the T's and dotting the I's on her final inspection. He stood on the bridge of the fine vessel alone this day and was surprised to see the doors open and a Starfleet officer walk out of the turbolift, especially this particular officer.

"Good morning Callum."

"Cap'n Kim, I dinna expect to see you today." The Irishman responded.

Harry Kim smiled.

"You might not be happy about it after you see what I've brought."

The rather famous captain handed over a PADD and Callum looked at it for a moment and then looked at Kim with an incredulous look on his face.

"Ya have to be kiddin'."

"I'm afraid not."

"Do ya have any idea how long these modifications will take?"

"You have sixty days; Starfleet is going to be sending you extra engineers."

"I hope they be sendin' an army of `em! Where are they sendin this ship, into the fires of hell?"

Kim smiled again.

"Something like that, yes."

* * *

For sixty days, it was indeed an army of engineers that swarmed over the ship. One by one, they made every modification on the list Captain Kim had given to lead engineer Roark. They installed, calibrated, and tested every last system until at last she was ready for launch. Manned by a skeleton crew, and with Captain Kim in the command chair, she was ready to begin transit to her new home within the fleet.

"Utopia Planitia control, this is Captain Kim aboard USS Discovery requesting departure clearance."

"Discovery, you have priority clearance, you may depart immediately."

"Helm; take us out."

The USS Discovery seemed to glide out of Drydock 10, her maneuvering thrusters pushing her clear of the framework and into open space.

"Clear of drydock, Captain," The pilot reported.

"Very good; set a course for Starbase Lotus and prepare to engage quantum slipstream drive."

"Course laid in, Captain."

"Let's show this lady to her new home. Engage quantum slipstream drive."

"Aye Sir, QSD engaging in 3... 2... 1..."

The Discovery's new quantum slipstream drive responded with a deep hum only audible in her engineering bay where Callum Roark was monitoring every signal and piece of data coming from the monitors inside the core bay. He would continue to do so until she reached her destination and could be handed over to the Starfleet engineering team that would take her on her maiden voyage.

Outside, a swirling funnel of pale blueish energy opened and swallowed the ship.

For eighteen minutes, the Discovery was propelled within this tunnel of swirling misty energies at speeds that were virtually unheard of even twenty years prior. Even now, the technology was only deployed on the most recent ships serving in very specific fronts; and where she was headed now was one of the most volatile areas of space.

"Captain, if we continue on present speed, we will reach Starbase Lotus in four minutes." Reported the pilot

"Okay, let's dial it back to warp 7 and we'll take the last few hours at normal warp."

"Aye Sir decelerating."

Discovery emerged from her quantum tunnel in a flash of swirling particles that collapsed behind her stern as she slowed to normal warp travel. Thanks to personal inertial dampeners and the ship's own up to date technology, the small crew aboard didn't feel a thing. Discovery continued under traditional warp until dropping to impulse speeds on the outskirts of the Hromi sector before proceeding to Starbase Lotus.

"Approaching starbase Lotus, Captain Kim," the helmsman confirmed eighteen hours later.

"Very good; open a channel."

"Open, Sir."

"Starbase Lotus ,this is USS Discovery . Captain Kim requesting docking clearance."

"Discovery, this is Starbase Lotus traffic control; your arrival was expected. Please proceed to space dock under standard docking procedures."

"Understood Starbase Lotus; Kim out."

As Discovery approached the starbase, Harry Kim noted several older vessels at station keeping, and now he understood why this new ship was needed here in this sector. There was of course the majestic Lotus class flagship Horizon, looking like a futuristic giant version of the legendary Galaxy class; the new Avenger design of the USS Phoenix; and another new design, this one from the well-proven Luna class registering as the USS Hoshea.

But there were also much older designs still proudly serving in this frontier sector of Federation Space but now starting to find the work arduous against the new threats and mysteries of this region of space; the Akira class USS Spectre and her unique DYCEP camouflage; the refitted Defiant class USS McKenzie; the USS Lotus, former flagship of Lotus Fleet ; and the versatile Prometheus class USS Alsea. And there was the Nebula class USS Wisconsin and Aurora, the venerable Excelsior class Republic and the Pittsburg, New Orleans class.

All were good ships, legends of the Borg War and of Operation Horizon. But the veterans were now stepping aside as duty and new challenges called for new vessels like the Horizon, the Phoenix and the Hoshea... and now, the USS Discovery.

"Welcome home, Discovery," Kim said softly. "welcome home."

CHAPTER FOUR: THE OLD AND THE NEW

The immense amphitheater of Starbase Lotus main officers conference room was familiar to most officers called there; the officers of all the vessels serving in this most elite division of Starfleet. Yet, it was always impressive to find oneself in a room filled with hundreds and hundreds of uniformed Starfleet officers, all seated in superposed rows each identified to their current command assignment.

The center part was occupied by the most numerous group, the hundreds of officers serving with Captain Kheren aboard the immense flagship USS Horizon. The holoimage of their imposing Lotus class design, classic shaped Starfleet vessel with saucer with lower hull and twin upward nacelles, floated over their head for all to admire.

On their right was the much smaller crew of a dozen officers, including the mesmerizing Deltan Doctor and Commander Elliago-Nasaro-Myth, his bald head only enhancing his masculine charm to even completely genetically incompatible females around him like the Andorians. He sat there as his last assignment had been under the command of Captain Felez aboard the former flagship, the USS Lotus, the legendary Intrepid class design, monohulled ovoid saucer extending the flattened hull ending in a pair of short flattened nacelles also floating over them for all to see. On the left of the Horizon crew sat those serving aboard the USS Aurora of Commodore Brigham, Lotus fleet's Academy vessel, the oval saucer with underneath aft flat nacelles and large triangular pod on top image of a well-proven nebula class hovering above.

On that side of the vast circular chamber followed the officers of the USS Steamrunner of Captain Ramabai, name bearer of it's class of boxy, flattened catamaran escort vessel ; near them, those of the USS Wisconsin of Captain Onias, also a Nebula class starship; then those of the USS Republic of captain Wyatt, her Excelsior class venerable design an obvious precursor of the state of the art Horizon; and finally the crew of Captain Speaker-Of-Names of the USS Pittsburg, like a much smaller and older version of the flagship with added engines on the top aft of her saucer.

The Kzinti Captain, whose auburn fur was oddly illuminated by the holographic projection, was flicking his rat-like tail back and forth behind him while speaking with the woman beside him, Commander Alani Bankoli, a woman whose ancestry could easily be traced back to Earth's ancient country of India. She was pulling back her black hair over her shoulder as Speaker spoke to her.

"You've sat in on our diplomatic sessions, but you will find that when you are in the fore-front," and here he clearly pronounced the hyphen, "things will be different. I feel like I am apologizing for relatives - and I suppose it is not an inaccurate thing to say. But. You must be aware they will not respect you. Always keep in mind that our females are little more than pets, and that colors our view. You were on Team-Rhetti. You, Captain-Rachele-Rivers, Lieutenant-Hattori-Airiekko, and Commander-Evelyn-Ryan were constant reminders for me that things outside Kzinhome are not the same as on the Homeworld. None of my people were likewise-blessed."

The Commander, and the security officer behind the Felinoid both nodded at this.

On the other side, beyond the people of the Lotus could be recognized Captain Jureth and the officers of the USS Alsea, Prometheus class, with her unique triangular upper hull and flat Intrepid-like secondary hull ending with two pairs of close-fitting nacelles; beside them, the towering, stoic red and blue scaled Saurian commander Schaell Scyshlyllyss with the people of the reknowned Defiant class USS McKenzie serving with Captain Riker, the flat monohulled disc-shaped vessel so much smaller and different from any other Starfleet design; and beyond, the officers of the USS Spectre of Captain Summers, the saucer with lower nacelles and upper torpedo pod unmistakably one of the Akira class design. Finally came the latest crew of Lotus Fleet, that of Captain Syntron of the USS Phoenix, the image of the science-converted Avenger class starship looking almost like a giant version of the elongated monohulled Intrepid but with event proportionately smaller and fixed nacelles.

That's where sat science officer Jonathan X Livingstone; the X, as for anyone of his bird-like species standing for X'Ell, the ancient, reclusive inhabitants of the nearby Dyson shell in this Hromi sector. In his feathered mane blinked the brain implants that allowed him direct control over any electrical device nearby; but at the moment, it was blinking with his excitement and satisfaction at being in the presence of so many diverse sentient species all working in harmony towards spreading peace and gaining knowledge throughout the universe. That was what he was here for.

They were all facing the center stage forming a vast oval platform below them all. There, a slowly turning crescent-shaped table was waiting for the flag officers of Lotus Fleet to enter and commence the fleet briefing. Over the table, a vast tridimensional map of the milky way galaxy floated as if all the holoships were poised to enter it. Ever changing real-time data scrolled accross the sides of the luminous display, colors coded to specific data sets flashing among the stars as some were discovered, studied, patrolled, colonized or defended by Starfleet and the United Federation of Planets.

Seated near the center right of the massive conference hall, David looked around the immense gathering of Lotus fleet personnel. He sat within the Lotus group where he was currently assigned, chief engineer and XO, with Captain Felez Connera'tu to his left. Further left was the very large crew of the USS Horizon, with the imposing figures of captain Kheren, tactical/security officer Tyvya and Doctor Lyrya dominating the center of the group with their taller physique's and antennae.

Looking to his right Rogers caught sight of his previous shipmate and friend, Lieutenant J.G. Sean Andrews as he sat almost unobtrusively among the USS Spectre crew. Andrews was an engineer of note aboard the Spectre, and David was glad the young man was still looking after his beloved Akira for captain Summers.

Looking further, David caught sight, towards the rear of the hall, the striking personage that looked almost like his twin: his sister Shelly. Being of equal lineage of Human and Romulan parents, the two of them sometimes drew curious glances on the few times they had been strolling about the base together. He hoped that she had applied to the fleet for something to do. Their last talk had brought up the apparent discrimination she was feeling being a former Syndicate assassin and bearing the same romulan features he had. He had explained to her then that, during his academy tenure, he had faced the same perceptions and had overcome them when he had finally realized that Star Fleet held all peoples as unique. Their common ancestry was not a barrier, just an opportunity.

The shimmer of a transport beam caught the corner of his eye and Rogers turned back to give his attention to the dias.

They had been assembled there for the past hour, refreshments served by on-duty yeomen when finally shimmered the familiar lights and colors of transporter beams. At the center table, the flag officers had arrived.

"Officers of Lotus Fleet; the C-in-C."

At the center stood a grey-haired, short-bearded Boslic man in a Rear Admiral's uniform. Everyone stood in the presence of Rear Admiral Kotari, Commandant of the Hromi sector and executive leader of Lotus Fleet. At his right stood a brown-skinned, dark-haired close-cropped bearded Hindu man wearing the pips of a Fleet captain; Allen Samji, executive officer of Lotus Fleet and commander of Starbase Lotus. At his left and a step behind stood the woman who had spoken at their arrival, a tall stately blonde human woman also sporting a red collar on her grey and black uniform, same as everyone else in the vast room, but with the three pips of a Commander. Starbase Exec Karen Schmidt would act as command staff aide for the duration of the meeting.

Not one much on ceremony, Kotari spoke in a clear, curt voice that was easily picked up and reverberated to the farthest corner of the titanic room.

"As you were."

They all sat back. The meeting was about to proceed.

Sitting with his Alsea crew, including the uncharacteristically silent and subdued black Tellarite chief engineer and XO Marksus Sangliar, Jureth couldn't help but wonder what crisis was coming this time. It seemed to him that when it came to Lotus Fleet the galaxy always seemed to be falling apart. He couldn't deny though that this group of captains and their ships were the finest in the fleet and since the first time he'd sat in this room as a green lieutenant he'd come to find himself at home with these people. Seated next to him, his security chief, Catherine Steele, must have read his mind somehow.

"What fire do you think we'll be putting out this time?" she whispered.

"I don't know...I haven't seen any reports about any major events."

"You know as well as I do that doesn't mean anything, I don't care what clearance you have now...Captain."

Steele nudged him with her elbow as she said the last bit. The two had been friends since their academy days and Jureth had always told her that he never wanted command of a starship. Now that he had one Cat teased him every chance she got.

"Nice combadge by the way," Steele said referring to the Bajoran emblem Oseno was wearing "I don't think that's regulation."

"It was a gift from the Kai, I couldn't very well refuse."

"Somehow I don't think anyone will write you up for it, but it looks like they're getting ready to tell us what race against time we have this week so we'd better shut up and listen."

Oseno nodded and both turned their attention back to the flag officers at the table waiting for what Jureth was sure was yet another dire mission for the men and women of Lotus Fleet. Back behind the Alsea crew, in fact back behind everyone sat a hulking figure in a Starfleet security uniform. He would have been out of place just about anywhere in charted space except perhaps in his former home of the Gamma Quadrant. Perhaps one of the oldest living Jem'Hadar ever, and the only one serving in Starfleet, Aron'Son sat merely observing everything that was happening in the room. This was his first time attending a Starfleet mission briefing of this scale and he wanted to watch and observe how these people of such diverse backgrounds interacted with each other. He currently had no assignment since returning from his detachment aboard the USS Spectre and did not feel it practical to join his former crew of the Horizon so he had opted to simply sit in the back of the room.

Aron'Son still did not understand how the species of the Federation managed to coexist for as long as they had without an iron handed ruler such as The Founders. They were as varied as the stars all with different cultures, religious beliefs, and dispositions.

Yet somehow they worked together, solved complex problems, won battles, and continued to exist without tearing themselves apart. They relied and inter-dependended on each other in a way he would not have thought possible. Still here they were, and he wanted to learn more about how they did it.

No one had spoken to him since he'd arrived and he didn't really expect them to, nor did he care whether they did or not. His purpose was to follow orders, and to keep to his honor. The Dominion had abandoned him, he was dead, and they would say that his only redemption could be death in battle. Here though, he was finding that death in battle was not the only way. These beings had given him another way to reclaim his life as a soldier, and for that he would serve them as steadfastly as the most honorable Klingon.

The heavy and overly clumsy sounds of foot steps approached from of his left side, Aron'Son realized almost instantly that the clumsy steps were for his benefit, so he would know someone was coming out of his view.

"Your welcome at our table Aron'Son, always a place for you on the Horizon if you want it." Comander Neil Redding said with a smile, the double meaning obvious.

With a shrug, the big exec of the Horizon continued on his way to the main table, to his commanding officer and crew.

Seated behind and to the right of Aron'Son was another security officer, whose orange eyes followed Redding with mild interest until he had seated himself with the Horizon crew. She was tall, very tall, and moved with an odd, barely perceptible rhythmic fashion. The officers in the conference room who were Lotus Fleet veterans would quickly note her as a recent transfer from another division of Starfleet. She was Lieutenant junior grade Trea of the planet Relivar, a member of the Praxiar, a people the Federation had only come into contact with in recent years, notable for a number of reasons, but most memorably for being a species with only one surviving gender. This particular example of her species was being quiet, but clearly out of respect for the goings on about her. The small smile that ghosted across her lips as Redding spoke to the Jem'Hadar betrayed a sort of playful, upbeat nature.

"Finally, they're getting real women in Starfleet," Tyvya commented to both her captain and husband and her wife chief counselor Lyrya as she nodded in greeting to the Praxiar.

The newcomer was even slightly taller than the Andorian giantess herself, also built like a powerful fighter and wearing the same pips and golden collar as her.

"You are not an easy one to replace," Kheren offered back.

"Why, you want to replace me?" she said in mock anger.

" You know what I mean," he shot back still serious and that sobered her.

Indeed she knew... like every other officer and crewmen of the Horizon that had previously served on the late, great starship USS Artemis. And she also knew, more than anyone else among them as she was a Starfleet security officer, that this conversation had to end then and there.

And at that moment, everyone got quiet. The Rear Admiral was addressing them all.

"Officers of Lotus Fleet; you are the prime example of what Starfleet has to offer, itself the shining light to promote and preserve the dream of universal peace and brotherhood that is the United Federation of Planets. There are some among you who, not so long ago, would have been called strangers; even a few who would have been called ennemy. Now, you stand with us to boldly go where we must go to share and live that ideal."

He paused to look at the many hundreds assembled there and the image of the ships that they served on. His hand pointed at them as he resumed.

When this division of Starfleet was commissioned, to engage the elite of our peoples in facing the challenges of the stars, we started with but two vessels; the USS Aurora as our own branch of Starfleet Academy, and the USS Lotus as our flagship. There is no need to remind anyone here of the unparalleled example they provided in their respective duties. Then came the USS McKenzie, our first defender, with the USS Umqua, our first science vessel. They served with distinction, spearheading the ships that would follow under our proud banner. Some like the McKenzie, the USS Wisconsin, the USS Republic, the USS Pittsburg, the USS Alsea and the USS Spectre still serve in this most sensitive and strategic sector. Others however did not enjoy the peaceful retirement of the Umqua."

A heavy silence was felt like a cold wind by more than a few, as many officers present had been witness to the dramatic fate of the ships Kotari now was bringing back to their memory, the computer imagery giving them for a moment a new life.

"The USS Tempest, Akira class, under the command of Captain Michael Rock... lost to the Borg on the eve of their final invasion; the USS Nuntio, Nova class, under the command of Captain Caroline Rousseau... lost to the Azimuth Horizon anomaly; and the USS Artemis, Ambassador class, the stalwart guardian of the Federation under the command of Captain Kheren, sacrificed to stop a Romulan Scimitar class dreadnought from destroying this starbase and then to ensure the success of Operation Horizon."

Again he paused, to let everyone reflect on these events... or mourn their losses.

"To quote legendary Captain James T Kirk; risk is our business. We risk ourselves so that others may gain and keep peace, knowledge, prosperity and freedom. You have all given much already; and I know you are all willing to give even more. That is why you are here. So let us face the next challenges together."

There was heartily felt yet disciplined applause as he sat back down in his chair. When everyone quieted again, Fleet Captain Samji rose to speak.

"Officers of Lotus Fleet, new challenges requires new plans, better protocols and more resources. Therefore, here are the next assignments for our ships and crews."

He looked at each crew in turn as he spoke.

"The USS Aurora, under the command of Commodore Brigham and Captain Vincent, will resume her duties as our Academy ship. The Steamrunner under the command of Captain Ramabai will stay as our starbase assigned starship ready to offer assistance when needed. The USS Wisconsin under the command of Captain Onias will resume her ferrying duties of personnel and supply for the Hromi sector. The USS Republic under the command of Captain Wyatt will resume her patrol duties of the Hromi sector. The McKenzie under the command of Captain Riker will return to her patrol duties along the Neutral Zone. The Spectre, now returned to standard configuration after saving this reality from the Kelvin temporal distortion, will return under the command of Captain Summers to her patrolling duties of the Organian Peace Treaty Zone. The USS Phoenix under the command of Captain Syntron will return to the Eden universe and beyond the Azimuth Horizon and resume her star charting and exploration there."

This business as usual confirmation told everyone in the room that what would follow would be unprecedented. The pause Samji made before continuing told them as much.

"The USS Alsea is to be reassigned as our Command School vessel under the command of Captain Rachel Rivers."

He now looked at the Bajoran commanding officer and his people.

"Captain Jureth Oseno; you and your crew will report to your new command; the USS Discovery. "

The name was well known, almost as much as the name Enterprise, dating back even to early Terran space exploration; but the ship they now saw replacing the Alsea was no old design; sleek and elegant, her oval saucer was almost level to her elongated secondary hull, her neck sharply angles as the pylons that supported her long pair of nacelles behind in a profiled silhouette of the classic Starfleet design.

" NCC-82602, Vesta class, DeSilvo refit; twenty-three decks, seven hundred and forty-five crew, quantum slipstream drive and the most advanced tactical systems, labs and sensors available. As the Phoenix is our explorer in another universe, she will fill this role in ours."

They were all still in awe of the splendid heavy cruiser when Samji addressed specific officers in the room.

"Commander Marksus Sangliar; you will be transferred back to the starbase to resume your duties as captain of engineering for the fleet. Commander Scyshyllyss; you will report to the Discovery as her first officer. Mister Sorripto; you are hereby promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Commander and will report to the Discovery as her chief engineer. Lieutenant Junior Grade Robert Moore; you will report to the Discovery as chief flight officer."

The towering Schaell Scyshyllyss simply nodded his bald, earless red and blue scaled head, his huge black slitted eyes unblinking. As a Saurian, all of his emotions were confined to his dormant secondary brain down in his lower abdomen. Only his utterly emotionless upper primary brain registered the meaning of what his weak hearing had nevertheless caught; he was to join a new ship, a new crew, a new challenge where no one has gone before. He had no feeling about it; still, the prospect of this new assignment was intriguing, especially considering that he was to serve a Bajoran captain, one from a deeply spiritual people where he himself came from a species totally devoid of any such concepts since millions of years. Starfleet was fond of pairing commanding officers with execs to check and balance them; this was proving to be a prime example of that philosophy it seemed.

Marksus Sangliar for his part just snorted with his big black snout, crossed his arms under his long thick beard and grumbled something unintelligible in his native Tellar tongue. Anyone would have thought that he was frustrated; but it was just a show to entice some green officer to fall prey to his customary argumentative sport. In truth, he was glad to get back to pure engineering research instead of flying around the galaxy on new ships so well designed they practically ran themselves and barely required routine maintenance. Too boring for him; and confronting combat or diplomatic situations, exploring unknown worlds and phenomena, was not his idea of fun, even less of *real* work.

Samji paused as there were a few congratulations flying around. But they quickly quieted as it was obvious the starbase commander and executive fleet officer was just beginning.

"The USS Pittsburg, after all those years serving with honor on the Federation Kzin border, is to be decommissioned."

He then looked at the towering felinoid officer.

"Captain Speaker-Of-Names; you and your crew will report to your new command; the USS Hoshea."

Over the head of the Kzinti's crew, the old New Orleans frigate was replaced by the image of a brand new ship, looking like a smaller version of a cross between an Akira class and a Nebula class with her lowered nacelles attached to a saucer with a diminutive secondary hull, but with a massive sensor pod on top.

"NCC-98729, Luna class, Copernicus refit; seventeen decks, crew of three hundred and fifty nine, state of the art diplomatic accommodations, extended science implements and the latest in starship weaponry. She will be the new voice for peace and knowledge on the Kzinti front. Recent events are calling for those capabilities and a crew experienced in facing not only the particulars of this region of space, but the unknown as well."

He then turned towards the section of the room where sat the crew of the Phoenix.

"Mister Jonathan Livingstone; you are hereby promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Commander and transferred to the Hoshea as chief science officer. Lieutenant Junior Grade Sean Andrews; you will report to the Hoshea as her chief engineer."

The bird-like X'ell looked at the impressive felinoid commander and his feathered crest rose with his *sheereess* blinking in elation. A diplomatic ship crewed by fascinating new species; as a pacifist eager to discover the universe, he could not have hoped for a better opportunity.

Captain Speaker-of-Names turned to each name as they were read in turn, eyes narrowing slightly then nodding slightly and sharply. It would appear they were briefly assessed then approved for that moment. As his eyes met Mister Livingstone's, one of his bat wing-like ears flicked. Then he gestured for the X'ell to join the former command crew of the Pittsburg and himself.

Livingstone turned towards Captain Syntron and nodded his head to him.

"Thank you for your guidance and example, Sir. As my first commander, you will be the reference I will recall to as to what it means to be a Starfleet officer. May your flight bring you to beautiful horizons."

And with that, he gave a last nod and then moved towards the Hoshea captain. he could not refrain an instinctive shiver looking at the Kzinti colossus; some atavistic remnant of his avian ancestry towards feline kind he thought, just like Humans had toward reptiles. But he was quickly put at ease by the welcome and the Federation ambiance of the meeting. The same courtesy was extended to Lieutenant Junior Grade Andrews. The woman at his side took it a step further and moved to congratulate the two, shaking their hands when she'd intercepted them.

"I'm Commander Bankoli, good to have you aboard our new ship." She gestured to another human woman, younger and with white hair cropped short. "This is our Chief of Security, Commander Evelyn Ryan."

The security chief nodded to each of them as well in acknowledgement. She was business even as she said, "Congratulations. Welcome aboard."

Livingstone had adapted quickly enough to the peculiar Human form of greeting prevalent in Starfleet; as usual, he wondered what they felt when they came in contact with his warm, feather-covered hand, so different from everyone else. And with the astounding variety of sentient beings assembled here, that was saying much.

Shawn had stood stoically through the meeting, letting Fleet Captain Samji have his say. There was much pomp and ceremony as the various captains were assigned to new ships and these same ships were assigned officers. Stoically that is until his name was called and he brought full attention to the front dais where the fleet captain stood.

Chief!, thought Andrew's incredulously. *On the Hoshea?*

He immediately glanced across the crowd to see the newly appointed captain of the Hoshea invite him over to join the new crew. Sean moved slowly, then stopped and looked at captain Syntron to say farewell.

"It was an honor serving with you captain," he spoke softly.

Taking as direct a route as possible, Sean arrived to the side of his new crew and stopped for a moment. Captain Speaker-Of-names was a meter taller than his one point seven meter Australian frame, and probably held a couple hundred kilos over his own eighty. Never the less, Sean took the last step toward his new captain and started to nod a greeting when his path was interrupted.

"It is a pleasure to meet you both," Sean replied, looking first at Commander Bankoli then at Commander Ryan.

Again, Allen Samji let congratulations be exchanged before continuing. What he had to announce next would need all their attention. And it would certainly grab it.

"The Lotus is now assigned under the command of Captain Connora'tu Felez as our special mission vessel. Be it the testing of new technologies, resolving delicate situations or offering support to any of our other ships, the Lotus will remain on ready status within the starbase until such needs arise. Her crew assignments will also be on a need by need basis."

He then addressed directly the two highest ranking officers seated with the Efrogian commanding officer.

"Doctor Elliago Nasaro-Myth; you are hereby transferred to the flagship Horizon to serve as Chief Medical Officer and Acting Executive Officer until a first officer is assigned to the flagship."

The Deltan simply smiled his well known charming smile and acknowledged the order with a nod of his bald-shaven head. His purple eyes however were shrouded with confusion as he looked at the familiar ship and crew. He had served with them barely months before, and then had been assigned to the investigation of the disappearance of the Diamond Star, sister ship of the Horizon. Although he did have actual command experience, he expected to return as her chief medical officer, but certainly not doubling up as her executive officer.

If people were surprised, many looking at Redding as he was well known as the current first officer of the Horizon, until now, they had no time to ponder this unexpected announcement as the starbase commander was only starting.

"Commander Rogers; you are hereby relieved of duty as chief engineer of the Lotus. You will report tomorrow at seven hundred hours to docking bay 1 for immediate transfer."

Even commanding officers who knew things about David Rogers that the rest of the fleet didn't were nevertheless startled. Rogers had served with distinction, most notably on the latest time saving mission of the Spectre. People were so in shock that no one spoke as Samji now turned to those under the projection of the flagship Horizon.

"Commander Neil Redding; you are hereby promoted to the rank of Captain and assigned as commanding officer of the USS Horizon."

The shock of this new announcement was now felt like a tremor of deafening silence while Samji spoke.

Jureth wanted to stand up and shout...the Alsea was his ship. He had gotten her through Operation Horizon, and he had gotten her through a diplomatic dogfight with three separate groups of Romulans. Then there was the news that Captain Kheren was being removed from command of the Horizon. Why? to What end?

Oseno respected the Andorian as one of the finest Starfleet officers he'd ever met and Rear Admiral Kotari didn't seem to be forthcoming with any details. It didn't make any sense to the Bajoran, but he also realized that he couldn't very well cause a scene then and there. He was a command officer and was expected to take whatever his assignment came to him regardless of his personal feelings. Still, he felt he was being robbed of a chance to establish a true rapport with his staff of the Alsea.

He closed his eyes and went over his rarely used religious tenets to calm himself down while doing his best not to show his disappointment outright where junior officers could read it.

"As you were!" ordered Kotari with a hard tone.

Once the officers in the room quieted down, he nodded to Samji to continue.

"Along with Doctor Nasaro-Myth as your acting XO, 2nd Lieutenant Alexandria Somers assigned as MACO leader on board the Horizon will double up as acting Strategic Operations officer under your command. Civilian manager Nathan Cross is to be replaced by a new manager, Miss Shelley Rogers. Lieutenant Junior Grade Trea; you will assume duties as chief of security and tactical on the flagship. Commander Aron'Son; you are hereby relieved of duty. You will report tomorrow at seven hundred hours at docking bay 1 for immediate transfer."

The agitation of the crowd earned a small tilt of the head from Trea; a reaction that was the beginning of something more... until the orange-eyed security officer heard what her first commission with Lotus Fleet would be. Then those eyes got very wide and an unrestrained grin spread across her face.

Immediately, she hopped up from her chair and made way to Commander Aron'Son. As she passed in front the Jem'Hadar, she smiled and turned to bow her head towards him, closing her eyes briefly and bringing one fist to her chest. "I'll be taking your seat. I hope your next one's still more to your liking."

And with that, the two and a quarter meters tall young woman turned and walked gracefully and with a perceptible cadence towards the section the now Captain Redding had invited Aron'Son to earlier.

All the while, Fleet Captain Samji now looked straight at the dark-hued Andorian sitting strangely quiet ; so was a sizeable portion of his crew; those who had served with him on the lost USS Artemis. Not many noticed however that Samji himself looked as distraught as the rest of them, despite making the announcement himself; even less noticed that Kotari also was looking as much confused as they were... even angry.

"Captain Kheren; you have received the list of officers and crew members to be relieved of duty and ordered to docking bay 1 tomorrow at seven hundred hours for transfer."

The Andorian stood before answering.

"Aye, Sir, I have."

The silence in the vast room could be felt now like lead on everyone's mind. The words of Samji, spoken softly but with authority, echoed like thunder to many an ear.

"Captain Kheren; report to docking bay 1 tomorrow, seven hundred hours. You are hereby relieved of your command."

An eternity went by within the few seconds it took for the Andorian to speak.

"Aye, Sir. I stand relieved."

He then turned to face his former first officer as he next spoke outloud.

"Computer; patch me to the USS Horizon's main computer."

"Confirmed," answered the familiar disembodied voice known throughout Starfleet.

"Computer; recognize Kheren, Captain, commanding officer, serial number AO290558-ACH."

"Confirmed."

"Transfer all command codes to Captain Neil S. Redding, authorization ...-...-... "

No one heard the ultrasonic syllables of graalek uttered by Kheren, his own native language; no one except a few like Vulcans, Caitians and Andorians... and the computer.

"Confirmed; all command codes of the USS Horizon NCC-102176 now under the authority of Captain Neil S. Redding."

The Andorian looked at the big Human with his unflinching silvery eyes, antennae straight up from his thick white mane, his voice obviously purposefully devoid of any emotion.

"Captain Redding; the ship is yours."

"I'll try to take your... example to heart, Captain, and it was good working with you."

The two large officers shook hands. That human greeting was one thing that the former first officer had managed through his frank sincerity to make his Andorian captain comfortable with. On Andoria, you only touched someone you were mated with... or someone you were fighting against; sometimes, both were even the one and the same.

For his part, Redding was as much surprised by this announcement as anyone. Of course he had been asked if he had an interest in taking the Horizon's center seat, but he never actually thought they'd give it to him. But Kheren was speaking again.

"The honor was mine. No one is better deserving; Such was my recommendation. And when I say the ship is yours, I mean it. A quarter of the crew is to be transferred; just about every senior officers. You will have quite a job of building her back up again. That is why I also recommended my good friend Doctor Nasaro-Myth to join you and requested the best MACO officer, Lieutenant Somers, to return to the flagship. The Horizon will be a new ship; *your* ship."

Right behind them among the people of the flagship, Alex was sitting there listening, she was surprised to hear about the removal of Captain Kheren, but was even more surprised at her being assigned as a temporary Strategic Operations Officer, as well as MACO leader.

She had never done strategic operations before. She made a mental note to seek out Captain Reading on her new duties.

Leaning casually against the rear wall of the conference hall, Shelly Rogers studiously took in the mumblings around her as Fleet Captain Samji made his announcements. The various intakes of breath, Ooh's and Aah's seemed to be like a fan club for contestants at a Dabo table. But when her brother's name was spoken, and he was relieved of duty, even her own stoic countenance was shaken a little.

Why was David singled out like that? Her mind raced back over the past months, her kidnapping by David, and the subsequent chase by his very fleet mates after he had stolen a ship to free her from the Orion Syndicate. Was Starfleet going to change their secrecy regarding herself and David? Were they needing to be prepared again for a fight-or-flight situation? During the past few weeks, during his free time, she and David had talked a lot about their future, now that they were family again. Her understanding was that David had accepted the false accolades heaped upon him for the so-called Diamond Star security test, and was accepting his never being able to captain a ship in Starfleet.

They had discussed her own future as well, with the thought that she might be able to aid the Federation more now alongside her brother. She had even talked with the fleet councillors and captain Samji, about doing more for star fleet now; other than the intelligence she had passed along to SFI. Now ... they were sending David away? Without warning. Samji's mentioning of her name brought her out of her racing thoughts. Civilian Manager on the Horizon? She had thought perhaps a minor training roll, somewhere on the base here. They wanted her out in space!

She looked quickly down the vast expanse of heads, to see David looking back at her, a wink in his eye and a grin on his face.

"She is quite pretty you know," Elliago Nasaro-Myth commented in hushed tones to Rogers, flashing another of his inexhaustible supplies of charming smiles. "And she is quite preoccupied with your current situation... whatever that is."

David looked over at the Deltan medical officer and smiled briefly back in return.

"Yes, Doc, she is. But I think because she got the best of our mother, of whom I recall very little. But I do remember she was beautiful for a Romulan."

"You don't seem to be much concerned yourself, Doctor," interjected then Marksus Sangliar from the neighboring Alsea group of officers. His grumble was barely audible but it reached them nevertheless. "Neither is our true blue friend over there despite being removed from command of the flagship."

They both looked at Kheren who sat quietly as if nothing had happened. Just as strangely, his two wives were also quiet; and so was over a hundred various officers and crew members they noted for the first time had all sat together as if forming another crew of their own among that of the Horizon.

Whatever that was, they had obviously already known about it before the meeting had even begun.

"If I would hazard a guess, I would say he and a good portion of his crew have been reassigned," the Deltan said.

"Reassigned? Where?" wondered the Tellarite munching his thick bushy black beard in confusion.

"Remember during our last mission back in time. The Bureau of Temporal Investigations told us that Captain Kheren and some of his crew were sent on another... option... to save the timeline... We managed to do just that on the Spectre but we heard nothing about this... other option. Maybe this... reassignment has something to do with it."

"With what?" asked again the engineer with growing annoyance.

"It seems to be so secret that they aren't willing to discuss it even with our own elite officers."

He glanced at David beside him to see if their conversation would entice him in saying something. Thus, he subtly poked further without addressing him directly.

"And that would explain why they have singled out Captain Kheren, Commander Rogers, Commander Aron'Son and those crewmembers up there."

"They have not discussed anything with me either Commander, nor would I expect them to", Rogers replied while also looking toward the trio of tall Andorians.

Sangliar squinted his small beady black eyes over his dark snout and then his face lighted up.

"I know them; they were all from the Artemis! They were there on the ship's new maiden voyage when I served aboard myself; and they all transferred with him to the Horizon after the ship was lost and he got command of the flagship."

"Yes; all were on the Artemis with us in those days... all except Aron'Son and Rogers."

"And this means?"

"This means that I have no clue what's going on."

the Tellarite flashed an angry, frustrated smile at the Deltan doctor before crossing his short thick arms over his barreled chest.

"Hmff, well... whatever that is, if they selected Rogers, it's because they needed the very best engineer in Starfleet for it. And yes I said it and don't you dare repeat it!"

Elliago smiled and nodded his bald-shaven head in acknowledgement.

With a barely cut off bark of a laugh at the Tellarite's statement, David tried to assume a straight face again and formally bowed his head in Sangliar's direction.

"I'll take it to my grave, Sir."

"See that you do... or *that* assignment might be coming," Marksus grumbled in typical Tellarite mock threat.

"Same about Aron'Son," added Elliago; Kheren's wife Tyvya is a topnotch security officer, able to outmatch even the best Maco officers in known space... and yet, they singled out the first and only Jem'Hadar serving in Starfleet for this... transfer."

"Which means?"

"That I really have no clue what this is all about."

The Tellarite growled again almost as if he was in pain. Elliago again just smiled, his mesmerizing purple eyes lost in thought.

"I guess time will tell."

David groaned aloud at the Deltan's comment and whispered in the doctors direction.

"Please, don't mention 'Time' anymore .. I've had my fill of TI agents this year."

Aron'Son heard all they said, his genetically modified senses allowed him to take in more than most of the species in the room. But off all of them, he was the one who understood their reactions the least. He was being reassigned, but with no emotional attachment to ship or crew driving him as it did the others, Aron'Son had no reaction. He would go where he was ordered to go and serve as directed.

He did stand up however. The table was not designed for someone of his stature and so, he moved toward the door and found a suitable position along the back wall where he could still observe the remainder of the briefing.

"It's confusing isn't it, Commander? so many people, races and customs all jammed together like this.."

The voice appeared out of nowhere; of a man dressed almost completely in black leaning casually near him. His garb was civilian and Aron'Son thought he remembered seeing him aboard the Horizon.

How did he get so close? was he there already and he didn't notice him? both should have been impossible.

"Hard to know where to stand," he said in a voice that seemed extremely pleasant and... perfect.. It somehow reminded him of his old Gods.

"Confusing only that they manage to somehow continue to exist without destroying each other." The Jem'Hadar responded. "The Dominion exists because the Founders rule through the Vorta and the Jem'Hadar. Their rule is unquestioned, and instructions followed to the exact detail. More important to me though is who *you* are, how I did not sense you approaching and what your authorization is to be here."

Aron'Son straightened himself up as he challenged the newcomer, prepared to respond if he sensed even the slightest hostile action.

He showed not the slightest sign of concern for the shift in Aron'Son's stature, or perhaps he didn't understand it's aggressive intent.

He smiled.

To almost anyone else this might have put them at ease, even against their better judgement. But the Jem'Hadar didn't understand things like being calm or tranquil.

But when he spoke again a wave of... of submission seemed to fill him, as if he should do what he was told; it wasn't like it was something he HAD to do, but simply that he should.

"You're probably the only person on the Horizon not to know my name, Commander. I was only the bartender after all, something you had no use for of course; Nathan, Nathan Cross," he said without any sign of offering a hand shake or even so much a nod of acknowledgement, both things that Aron'Son would not care about.

He obviously had no intention on explaining himself to the Jem'Hadar past that.

"Perhaps I'll get another try in the near future, I actually do serve something that you might enjoy, other Jem'Hadar do."

Something seemed to get his attention across the room, but he didn't move.

Aron'Son glared at the man.

"Jem'Hadars do not enjoy anything. Relaxation, and recreation are weaknesses. If you are in fact a bartender, I would question again your authorization to be in this room."

The Jem'Hadar's attitude shifted then from mere preparedness to a much more threatening posture.

"Bartender or not, you will either confirm your clearance or I will remove you."

There was no mistaking the tone of Aron'Son's voice. Cross paid him no mind continuing as if his last sentence hadn't been said.

"Yes of course, and Klingons never laugh." he smiled mostly to himself.

He still wasn't looking at Aron'Son or even glancing at him as he spoke, his eye's wondering across the room at something else.

His level of indifference to Aron'Son was nothing short of unnerving, anyone when faced with a hostile hulking form of a Jem'Hadar would become defensive, even on an involuntary level. Eyes narrow, muscles tighten, the heart speeds up and other subtle sighs. All of which should be happening to Cross right now no matter how disciplined he was, but there was nothing.

"Well, I really must be off Commander, I promised now Captain Redding and a few others I'd be there for the after party, I may not see some of them again for quite awhile."

And with a nod in his general direction he casually walked away turning his back to him, his body language showed no sign of concern of the Jem'Hadar's actions.

Aron'Son watched as the man walked away, and every instinct he had as a soldier, as a Jem'Hadar, told him to apprehend the stranger if for no other reason than for defying him, a ranking security officer. Yet something stopped Aron'Son when he very easily could have caught the man and immobilized him. Still, Aron'Son was disturbed, if Jem'Hadar felt such a thing by the interaction. So as Cross walked away, Aron'Son moved like him toward where the Horizon officers were standing and approached the newly promoted Captain Redding.

"Captain, a word if I may, Sir?"

"Aron'Son; I was planning to stop and see you again anyway. Seems I must resend my offer for you to join us."

He slapped Cross on the shoulder as he passed by, who in turn grinned back at him and moved away. Then Redding faced the Jem'Hadar.

"You have my ear, Commander."

"Sir, who is this Nathan Cross? He approached me, yet I didn't hear him coming. That should not be possible. We spoke, yet despite my repeated challenges to his presence he ignored my requests for his clearance. I very easily could have and by instinct should have apprehended him; yet, here I am talking to you...I do not like it."

"Well, He's our former bartender on the flagship, an El-Aurian... I think. I don't know that much about him really... except that he's very good at his job. I don't think there's a drink he doesn't know or what snack food goes with which race."

He got a quizzical look on his face at the idea. Then he shrugged.

"A bartender is a specialized social field, they read people, listen to our problems and supply us with libations to help relax us. "

He frowned a little.

"But he didn't identify himself? that's odd... How do you find out his name?"

"He told me his name, but when I questioned the clearance of a bartender to be present in a mission briefing I was ignored."

"He has been commissioned as an acting Ensign and Mission Advisor by Starfleet Command," then said Captain Kheren sitting right next to Redding. "I know because he is coming with us both, Mister Aron'Son."

Aron'Son turned to the Andorian.

"Perhaps then, Sir, he should learn to respond to an order from a security officer, especially a higher ranking one...Were he Jem'Hadar, he would be shot for not answering to his superior."

"I agree," answered Kheren. "and I will make sure that he does as well; I mean the proper protocol between officers, not the shooting part.."

His four oculars went to the image of the flagship as he spoke almost for himself.

"There will be no passengers where we are going."

"Well, Captain Kheren, as both personnel in question are to go with you, I'll leave it to you then. But it sounded to me like Mister Cross did identify himself as a member of the crew and last I checked, this isn't a closed event anyway."

"As a matter of fact, it is," the Andorian corrected him. "Only Starfleet personnel serving aboard our ships are allowed in here. Had Mister Cross still been a civilian, even as a crew member his presence would not have been allowed. Commander Aron'Son was right in questioning him. "

Redding half smiled.

"From the sound of it, the Commander is more concerned with a perceived personal slight."

He spoke earnestly to Aron'Son.

"I don't know if he managed to sneak up on you or you simply missed him, but the hall is busy and noisy. It's quite possible you just didn't see him; no one is perfect."

He didn't want Aron'Son to think he was underestimating him. He didn't want to make that mistake again.

"But I'll leave it to you two to sort it out. Good luck to you both. I have a ship and crew of my own to worry about."

And with that he excused himself.

Redding wondered to himself what Kheren's mission entailed that he'd need a bartender.

The Andorian turned to face the Jem'Hadar.

"It is this very unfailing thoroughness and unquestionable devotion to duty and service you just showed here that has singled you out to join me in my... transfer. You just proved that estimate to be accurate; and I guess this is exactly the reason why this... incident occurred. Mister Cross has been granted field promotion and assignment by the same authority that selected us both and all of my former crew of the Artemis... and, Commander Rogers."

Aron'Son inclined his head slightly.

"It is mine only to serve, Captain."

* * *

From across the room Cross watched the conversation seemingly without interest, but taking it all in despite the room's activity.

Mission summary, my attempt to provoke Commander Aron'Son into a seemingly unprovoked overreaction failed despite the projected ninety-seven point seventy-two percent chance of success. I believe his interactions with subject Redding have altered his base personal response index, It should no longer be necessary to monitor Aron'Son's progress.

To only Cross' perceptions, movement in the room slowed down to a crawl and finally froze all together.

However, subject Kheren's following interaction is projected to destabilize my efforts, so I will attempt reintegration into this timeline at negative thirty seconds and attempt to intercept Captain Kheren before he can interrupt Captain Redding and Aron'Son's conversation.

Slowly time reversed and Cross walked calmly retracing his steps catching up to his prior self. *Initiating reintegration, chance of success eighty-nine point thirty-four percent, transferring all data at this time.*

And with that he calmly stepped into himself, knowing full well that there was a better than ten percent possibility that he would be utterly obliterated.

Time started again fluidly as Cross moved to intercept Captain Kheren, allowing him to first overhear the conversation.

"Captain Kheren, if you would hold off your intent for a moment?" he said with a smile as he glanced in the direction of the two talking officers.

The Andorian froze as he was about to join his former exec and his chief of security to clarify the issue. He turned away from his two former officers and looked at the man with obvious surprise as his antennae swished from side to side.

"My... intent? Are you telling me that you are a mind reader, Mister Cross?"

"My dear Captain, I'm a space faring adventure bartender most recently aboard the Federation flagship, of COURSE I can read intent."

Kheren bowed his head in acknowledgement.

"I stand corrected, Mister Cross. I should have come to that understanding myself; Andorians and duellists are by far not the only ones able to discern body language, looks and facial expressions. You are my teacher today. Still, I did not think I was that easy to read." Nathan's smile was flawless and his voice pitch perfect. To any other person, even another Andorian, his voice would have been soothing... calming... but Kheren was not a normal Andorian. Something seemed odd to him.

"I've seen your intent too many times to count; the rapid movements, the defensive posture as well as the focused attention. If this were a holo-novel and we were in a bar, I'd say you were going to defend a lady's honor."

His eyebrows went up questioningly as he sipped on his drink. But he held a hand up defensively.

"Not that I'm suggesting attraction of course; only that you might have a subconscious need to protect Commander Aron'Son. You are, in many ways, kindred souls."

He seemed quite sincere. Kheren thought for a moment then nodded.

"I am not sure how much this is true, but your argument is sound, Ensign. Although I am left with this question; why would you come to me and request that I should not act to resolve a misunderstanding between two of my officers?"

"That's a complicated answer better said in private. But for now, I will admit my own intent to incite Aron'Son, and ask for your patience until then. In the mean time..."

He motioned at the two talking men.

The Andorian was not one to let things simply go by with a smile, especially when something seemingly so trivial had suddenly raised unexpected questions earning him only so few and vague answers; but he was a patient man. And he knew *whom* specifically had assigned Nathan Cross to his command... and could already start to guess what this might be about. So, as suggested, he followed the man's lead... for the moment.

"But he didn't identify himself? that's odd... How do you find out his name?"

"He told me his name, but when I questioned the clearance of a bartender to be present in a mission briefing, I was ignored."

"Well, he was not in uniform but he nevertheless was commissioned as an Ensign, so he did have the clearance to be here."

"Perhaps then, Sir, he should learn to respond to an order from a security officer, especially a higher ranking one...Were he Jem'Hadar, he would have been shot for not answering to his superior."

"A little extreme, but I agree with the point, Commander. I don't know if he managed to sneak up on you or you simply missed him, but the hall is busy and noisy. It's quite possible you just didn't see him; no one is perfect. But I think we should take it up with Captain Kheren since you'll be under his command, and Cross is leaving the Horizon."

He half smiled at at him.

"I trust your instinct, Commander. You should follow it."

Aron'Son inclined his head slightly.

"It is mine only to serve, Captain."

Looking around, they spotted Kheren and Cross together and moved over to them. Redding, looking annoyed, spoke first.

"Captain Kheren, Mr. Cross." He said cordially.

Cross immediately looked apologetic.

"Captain Kheren and I were just discussing my transgression with Commander Aron'Son, Commander... OH, I mean Captain Redding, don't I?"

He brightened up a little as he said it, as if the news of Redding's promotion affected him personally. Redding seemed slightly confused as to which way to take the conversation.

"Uh.. yes, thank you, Nathan."

"But I digress. I owe you an apology, Commander. So focused on another matter, I failed to realize that you were being serious. I really don't get a chance to mingle with that many Jem'Hadars and I just assumed my answer was sufficient."

He seemed perfectly sincere. There was no doubt however about Aron'Son,s own conviction as he spoke. Aron'Son leveled his gaze at the "bartender" though the security officer suspected there was something more to the man. He just couldn't quite discern what. He resolved to find out when the opportunity presented itself.

"Mister Cross, I am always serious. I am a security officer and a Jem'Hadar soldier. My oath to serve and Starfleet regulations demand that I give my full attention to anyone, or anything, who may be out of place and you... were out of place. Captain Redding has informed me that you have the required clearance, but it is in your best interest to not ignore future requests of that nature."

He then turned to the senior officers.

"Captain Kheren, with your permission, Sir, I will go prepare for our assignment, whatever it may be."

"See you tomorrow morning, Commander. And Mister Cross," said the Andorian turning to the man, "once we are confirmed in our... assignment and before we implement it, you will report to my ready room and we will properly finish our discussion. And this time, Ensign, please present yourself in a proper uniform."

* * *

At the appropriate time, Alex Somers walked up to Redding.

"Excuse me Captain, might I have a word with you?"

She intended to find out what the exact duties a Strategic Operations Officer actually did as she was new to the post. She knew how to do the MCO MACO duty but her new added assignment was bridge duty. She rarely had ever done bridge duty.

"First off, Lieutenant, it's probably not the best way to introduce yourself to you're new Captain; pardon me, Sir, but do you have any idea how I do my job? I have NO clue... if you see what I mean."

The tone was one of slight amusement, the look was not.

"It's rather like being chief of security only more important, you'll be coordinating different ships in the sector as they fall under my command in the event of a task force and if necessary take command of one of those ships and lead a group. But in the mean time, it's mostly oversight aboard ship; and with the Horizon, that's a great deal of oversight. Past that point, I would perhaps read up on it; rather quickly I might add, since I'll be drilling you on it tomorrow."

He waited for her response with a stern look.

Looking at Redding with a neutral expression, her father being a diplomat, she had learned to keep her own counsel when a senior officer was speaking. She detected the humour in his tone, but his face spoke different. Either way he did not frighten her. She had trained with Klingons and verbally with Romulan diplomats and thus was use to such.

"I see, Sir, thank you, Sir. I approached you as I did, as I can either speak in the tone and form of a diplomat, or I can speak plainly, as I am no accomplished diplomat. I find speaking straight gets things done quicker, but my approach was not meant to be rude, but its effect was desired."

She paused.

"Thank you again, Captain."

She looked at the other officer. "Nice to meet you, Commander Aron'Son. I shall leave you both as I came; in peace."

She thought dark thoughts and what she really wanted to say, but that would not be a good way to start a new task under a new CO.

Redding watched her leave and a very slight smile crossed his lips.

She nodded and left to find the nearest replicator.

"She'll make a fine officer once she settles in, I do love a..." He paused, glancing at Aron'Son and decided better of it. "... a strong willed officer."

As Somers passed near her, Tyvya signaled Alex to wait. The Andorian's keen senses could read like a book the emotional distress the woman's first encounter with her new commanding officer had left her in.

She recognized it because she had felt it herself not so long ago, in very similar circumstances.

"Lieutenant Somers; a word with you if you please."

Feeling a hand on her arm she stopped and looked up to see the Andorian who had shown her to her quarters, Tyvya was her name Alex recalled.

"You may have a word with me, Lieutenant," Alex said, looking at her as she was gently guided to a more quiet corner of the room, where the giantess talked.

"My husband and I are sorry that we will not have the chance to serve with you on the flagship. We are not always called to duty the way we expect; in fact, this is rather the norm in Lotus Fleet. But I can at least leave you with my own experience about Captain Redding. The man's laid back demeanor is a facade; he is in fact quite stern and proactive; he constantly tests those under his command, push them emotionally as well as professionally to their limits, especially *off* duty... because, if any failure occurs while *on* duty, he wants it and the responsibility to be entirely his, leaving no blame possible to lay on those under his command. Remember it next time he challenges you like this."

"It is appreciated, thank you, your advice is heeded, but if something like this happens again, I will be in the brig and he will most likely be in medical being treated for concussion

She looked back at Redding,absently speaking.

"still I do like a challenge. I wonder how quickly I will get on his bad side?"

She then looked back at Tyvya.

"Apologies thinking out loud. You never heard that. Still the advice is greatly appreciated and I will make sure to remember it."

"Another piece of advice for you then, if I may," the Andorian giantess then offered. " I'm not familiar with MACO traditions, but if you keep that attitude in Lotus Fleet, you will not last long. We are not called the elite division of Starfleet for our smart uniforms you know. Our expertise is but part of what we are; what put us apart is our discipline, our cohesion and our reliability. With the challenges we face, if you can't deal with the mere dressing down of your commanding officer, you will be utterly worthless aboard our ships."

There was a long pause.

"Pushing me emotionally... If I can duel with Klingons in mental and physical training, then dealing with what the captain throws my way will not be much of a problem."

"Glad to hear it," Tyvya said with genuine warmth. "Because here in Lotus Fleet, compared to what we face, dealing with Klingons is child's play. And by the way, Captain Redding *lived* among Klingons for several years and he has apparently adopted a few of their ways... as you have just experienced a moment ago."

Somers looked back at Redding and tilted her head.

"Still, if it were not for the fraternization rule inhibiting stuff, I would make a move on him. He is kinda cute."

She looked back at Tyvya's expressionless, rigid face.

"Relax, I do not intend to go through with it. I am crazy not suicidal, even if I do like playing with matches" Alex said smiling, all thoughts of Redding now gone from her mind.

"Well, you know, those rules have many amendments." Tyvya retorted, glancing at Kheren and the Aenar woman next to him, then offering Alex a wink, one of the very few facial expressions her Andorian face was capable of.

"I was surprised that Captain Kheren had been reassigned off the Horizon. Did he ask for it... no wait, I saw his reaction. Hmm so, who did he upset to get reassigned I wonder?" Alex asked.

The giantess took a moment before answering.

"That's what I meant by our challenges in Lotus Fleet. I can't tell you much because what is relevant here is classified to the highest level. But I can tell you this; Captain Kheren is currently the most decorated officer in Lotus Fleet and it's third most experienced commanding officer; and this experience is, shall we say, unique. He, and very specific officers under his command, including Lyrya our wife and myself, were chosen among all known Starfleet officers, active or retired, for an assignment no one has ever been given before, even here in Lotus Fleet. "

There was no pride in her statement. She was obviously only stating facts so that Somers would understand the full portent of her previous advice.

"He didn't upset anyone; on the contrary, he and all of us selected with him impressed people at the highest level of the Federation, not only with our unique experience but more importantly with our discipline, our steadfastness, our reliability even under the most dire, difficult and complex situations. We've been tried and tested under fire that would burn your Human Hell to a crisp. I don't mean just mere war and combat; these are easy to deal with. What is most difficult is to stand fast to uphold Starfleet rules and Federation ideals when they, and you, are directly challenged... things where even legendary officers like Janeway and Sisko utterly failed... and Kirk and Picard were sorely tested."

She winked again because the too few muscles of her face couldn't make a smile like her curving antennae could.

"That is what Captain Redding is preparing you for."

"I was under the impression that Captain Kheren liked commanding the Horizon?"

"The truth is, not really," Tyvya confided. "My husband has proven himself able to lead the Fleet as is the first duty of the commanding officer of the flagship. But although he is Andorian, he's not a military man. After decades of being the duelling master of Andoria and serving in the Andorian Guard, he has grown a deep hatred of violence. Oh yes, he can even wrestle a Gorn to the ground, but he always looks first to the least violent solution even to the most violent problem. That's why he chose to serve in Starfleet. He is an unflinching believer of Starfleet's rules of engagement; to destroy or kill is the very last resort and only shows that, even if you win, you have failed. That above all, and his ability to make those under his command follow this same philosophy, is what selected him for our next assignment."

Tyvya winked again, antennae curved inward.

"But Captain Redding, although an exemplary Starfleet officer, does not harbor so much... inhibitions. Actually, you and him should end up getting along just fine... if you learn quickly enough how to live with his command style."

"If he has lived with Klingons for some time... Yes, I thought his method was a bit too Klingon."

She sighed.

"I should be able to reach a common ground with the good Captain, having lived among Klingons is a good icebreaker, a common thread!" Alex said with a wistful smile. "I wonder if he likes Bloodwine?"

Alex looked at the rather tall Andorian.

"I wonder what vintage he likes best?"

She then looked away in thought for a moment.

"Thank you for that El-tee, the info is quite useful," Alex said, looking back again at Tyvya with a mischievous smile.

"As the Vulcans are fond of saying; we come to serve," the giantess retorted, her antennae curving inward in the peculiar Andorian smile. "Good luck... El-Tee Two."

And with that, she went to rejoin her husband and wife with the selected crew of transferred officers.

As the agitation subsided among the various groups of officers, Allen Samji called again for silence and their full attention.

"Captain Redding; you will go back with the Phoenix to Eden space. Since the initial contact with the USS Horizon, the Federation is eager to establish relations with the Draxx, the first spacefaring civilization found in that pocket universe beyond the Azimuth Horizon. But like all first contact missions with an unknown species in uncharted space, this is one is as perilous as it is promising. We need the best ship and best crew out there and a commanding officer familiar already with them... and to them. That's you, Captain."

"Thank you Fleet Captain... Admiral; I intend to fulfill your expectation, Sir."

And with a nod he took a step back. The starbase commander nodded back to Redding and then looked at the colossal felinoid under the new Luna class starship projection.

"Captain Speaker-Of-Names; there has been reports of renewed undefined activity in Patriarchy space. You will take the USS Hoshea to investigate. As our best contact with your Kzinti people and the relationships you have built for the Federation with them over the last years, you are our best asset to do so without provoking them from the get go. But after what had happened with the Undine and way back with the Romulans, we have to be vigilant. Details of your orders will await you on board."

Speaker merely grunted in response, ears flicking quickly with the sound.

"Understood. We will begin preparations."

He looked around at his crew.

"New-undefined-activity is not welcome news. We will begin undergoing preparations at once. Once this meeting is concluded, I suggest we all familiarize ourselves with the new-ship quickly."

There was a pause, where the old Pittsburgh crew made their various assents, and during that time, the Kzinti looked towards Captain Kheren. Concern was reflected in the Hoshea Captain's eyes for just a moment. He then turned to Commander Bankole.

"Commander, coordinate our efforts. I will need to attend to something when this is over."

Turning about David Rogers proceeded toward the rear of the hall in the direction of where Shelly was standing. The large crowd of personnel were mingling and moving about, slightly impeding his progress. Even after getting numerous looks from curious crew and staff, no doubt to do with his dismissal of duties, David reached the rear wall and countered the flow that ebbed toward the exits. Only moments more passed and he reached his sister. She smiled toward him, a partial expression of bewilderment showing in her blue eyes.

"Shell. I hope your posting has not dampened your willingness to assist the fleet?", David insinuated smoothly.

Shelly, her equal height matching David's as she leaned back onto the wall, looked around at the flowing crowd briefly, then back into his own hazel eyes.

"I must admit brother ... I was quite surprised at the ship. I expected something on the station, but the Horizon? She is a very populous ship is she not?"

David followed her gaze up to the holoimage of the Horizon in the center of the expansive hall. It rotated slowly, showing the lotus class to her majestic beauty and size. The other images floating near her were almost dwarfed by her projection. David turned back to Shelly and replied honestly.

"Yes, she is. Around twenty-seven hundred, including officers and crew. Civilian complement is only about ... five or six hundred though," David thought thoughtfully. He wasn't sure on the exact civilian complement of the Lotus class, but he was sure he was close.

Shelly, looking down to him finally, barked out a laugh.

"Only five or six hundred," she exclaimed incredulously. "may as well be five or six thousand then! I'm their manager? What have you done to me, Commander!"

David reached out and, with a hand on her trembling shoulder, tried to calm her.

"Relax! They don't all need coddling at the same time you know. Mostly they're taking care of themselves anyway."

With a gentle tug on her shoulder, David guided her away from the wall.

"Come along sister. I think I should introduce you to your new boss," he said with a mischievous grin. "You will want to make a first impression worthy of the Rogers name, won't you?"

As she allowed herself to be led toward the middle of the hall she glanced menacingly back at her brother, replying in kind to his barbed statement.

"Yeah, I would. I just have to decide WHICH Roger's name I want to impress upon them!"

The few minutes travel time through the thinning crowds brought them eventually to the group under the Horizon projection, consisting of Captain Kheren, Commander's Aron'Son, and Redding and the black garbed man that David didn't know. Just as the group was preparing to break up, David interjected with his introduction.

"Captain Kheren; Sirs, if I may introduce my sister, Miss Shelly Rogers."

David guided Shelly slightly in front of himself, gesturing first to the tall Andorian.

"Shelly, may I introduce Captain Kheren. He doesn't bite, but his bark is enough."

"Ensign Rogers," Kheren said to her, his typical Andorian awkwardness with human social pleasantries obvious. "I am sorry we will not have the opportunity to know one another as well as we could have. Seems Command has decide otherwise. But the loss is mine alone as you will be serving under a most fine officer. Your brother however, is the one who will be stuck with Commander Aron'Son, Ensign Cross here and me with our... reassignment. He will be the one to regret to know me."

Next David introduced her to the imposing JemHadar security officer.

"Commander Aron'Son, Miss Rogers", David pronounced formally, then gestured toward the barely smaller man beside the tall Jem'Hadar.

Command ... er, sorry. Captain Redding, may I present your new civilian manager, my sister, miss Shelly Rogers."

David didn't purposefully neglect the man, this Ensign Cross as Captain Kheren had named him but, as he didn't know him, he thought it prudent that that man should present himself to them instead. So with a curious and somewhat suspicious glance toward Nathan Cross, David merely nodded at the black clad man and faced Captain Redding again as Shelly politely nodded toward each in turn, and lastly at Captain Redding, her new boss.

Two very tall figures then approached from either side of Redding and Kheren's gathering. One was the barrel-chested feline captain of the Hoshea. The other was Redding's new Security Chief, the Praxiar known as Trea.

The Kzinti immediately made his way to Kheren.

"Captain-Kheren; it is good to see you again. I..." He paused, then looked at Redding briefly. He frowned in puzzlement, then shook his head and continued. "I am saddened to hear of your removal from the Flag-Ship. I have tried to keep up with your endeavors while on the Patriarchy border...you are a Hero."There was a sort of hissing chuckle even as he added; "even if you are not OF the Heroes."

There was a joke there, certainly, but not an easily recognized one. Not even able to grasp Human humor better than any Andorian could, except for his wife Tyvya, it went at warp speed past Kheren; but not the sincerity of the Kzinti.

"Captain Speaker-Of-Names; the feeling is mutual. But you know at least as well as I do that, in Starfleet, we serve wherever... and whenever...we are called to."

He suddenly paused as if he was afraid to say more and changed tack just as swiftly.

"With what we are called for in Lotus Fleet in particular, we are *all* heroes. And I too have been following your excellent work with the Kzinti-Federation relations with much interest. I am gratified that they are now giving you and your crew a ship worthy of you and of the important work you do. This USS Hoshea will be a shining star even among our remarkable complement."

He glanced up with his antennae at the holimage of his former command.

"As for the Horizon; she has gained a commanding officer much more capable of assuming the overall command duties of a flagship than a pacifist Andorian like me, as mismatched these two terms may seem. And do not be concerned with me; I am convinced that there is a most worthy challenge set before me and I am looking forward to it."

For her part, the newly minted Praxiar Security Chief of the Horizon stayed out of the conversation between those two; out of the conversation of everyone there, in fact. She just stood smiling to herself as she focused her pale orange eyes upon her new Captain, and then onwards to those she had apparently recognized as her new crewmates. To those who knew how Security operated, this was clearly a silent evaluation. To those who didn't, it seemed Lotus Fleet's first Praxiar officer was a bit of a wallflower.

Kheren of course noticed the woman and her familiar behavior, at least to people like him or Tyvya and Aron'Son; she was as tall as his own giant wife and clearly a born fighter trained in more than the nevertheless excellent standard Starfleet security curriculum. She felt almost Andorian to him despite her very striking alieness. Kheren sent a smile and a wink at Redding; he might be loosing the Jem'Hadar and Tyvya but the Horizon was apparently getting good strong and fresh blood at security and tactical.

Samji now brought everyone's attention to the only Bajoran captain in the room.

" Captain Jureth; you also have a new ship to shakedown. I recommend that you do so in a safe zone within Federation Space. But since yours is our best explorer vessel along with the Phoenix, it would be useful for you to do so in the vicinity of both the Neutral Zone and the Organian Peace Treaty Zone. Romulans ships will not cross the Neutral Zone to start a war and no violence is possible between the Klingons and us on this side of our common border. And no other hostile will dare go too near the borders of these two major powers. At the same time, you will be in a good position to do surveillance on both and, doing so openly with a new explorer ship under the command of an accomplished diplomat like you, one well known to the both of them, this should send a clear message; we are watching you, we are ready for you but we are out there to discover, not spy or attack. A task tailor-made for you, Captain."

"Aye, Sir."

The fleet captain was obviously done. But before he could dismiss everyone, the deep voice of Captain Kheren was heard.

"Sir; may I ask about my orders?"

Both Kotari and Samji looked at him with an undefinable expression; or maybe it was contained frustration because it took then a few seconds before Samji answered, obviously in order to keep his emotions in check.

"No, Captain Kheren, you may not. Report tomorrow with your designated officers as scheduled."

Before the Andorian could even try to insist, Kotari stood and addressed everyone in a clipped tone.

"You will all receive your specific orders once you report to your assigned vessels. Meeting ajourned."

And with that, he walked out of the vast room with Samji and Schmidt in tow, not looking or answering anyone.

EPILOGUE

"The Republic, the McKenzie and the Spectre are back on their patrol areas, the Phoenix has already departed for the Azimuth Horizon portal and the Wisconsin is on it's way to sector 001 for our regular ferrying of personnel and supplies."

The rear admiral nodded absently.

"Is the decommissioning of the Pittsburg on schedule?"

Samji punched on his PADD to check before answering.

"Yes, Sir; some of her systems will help in recommissioning the Umqua as our sector research vessel. The rest will be recycled for starbase consumption. The Pittsburg had served well and the honor ceremony for her last salute will be held at the end of the week."

"Make sure Captain Speaker-of-Names and his crew are notified. Their years of service aboard her deserve to be recognize along with her; and they deserve to say that last goodbye. I want to make sure that they understand that this is not the end but the beginning of something worthy of their dedication, talent and valor."

"Consider it done, Admiral."

"What about or other old girls?"

"The Lotus is being stationed and maintained here in readiness for any unexpected need and the Steamrunner patrols in the base's vicinity for routine work and surveillance."

"Yes, we certainly don't want another captive starbase incident like we had when we inaugurated this posting nine years ago. Captain Jureth did a great job with the recent Unroth unrest but the Romulans are still too much on edge to be complacent with them again... not to mention the Klingons spoiling for a fight since Operation Horizon..."

Kotari wasn't looking at Samji. Hands at his back, his gaze wandered through the wide transparency of his office at the vast inner expanse of the starbase and the vessels docked in there, his corruscated brow even more furrowed than usual.

"Is the Alsea being prepped up for her new duties?"

"Yes, Admiral; with her multivector mode allowing for joint command between her three warp capable independent hulls, she will be the best command school ship in the fleet, no doubt. Our command officers will have actual space experience under their belt instead of simulations when they will get assigned."

"Captain Kheren's recommendation if I recall."

"Indeed, Sir; I don't know if you are aware of this, but he is the only Starfleet captain since Captain Spock who invented it that never took the Kobayashi Maru test."

The Boslic man turned halfway with a raised eyebrow.

"Really? Now that you mention it, I do recall from his record that he had no evaluation report of performance from it but that he received a commendation about it for... ah yes... critical thinking?"

"He went to the Academy Commandant himself and apparently convinced him that the test was utterly futile because, since it was a test, it was too easy for him to act all heroic and proper knowing even his failure or sacrifice would in reality cost absolutely nothing but school grades. Fake death never equates real death in the mind or the heart, he concluded in his research dissertation ordered by the Commandant to justify his claim. He had made Starfleet Academy ponder and work hard on the problem since then."

"that was bold coming from a cadet."

"He's Andorian, Sir."

Kotari half-smiled for a second before returning his worried expression to the view of the docked ships.

"Captain Rivers will make an excellent teacher. The Alsea joining the Aurora in our Lotus Fleet Academy, this division will most assuredly offer the very best Starfleet officers ever. And we will need them."

There was a moment of silence before the Fleet Captain resumed his fleet deployment report.

"The Horizon is falling behind schedule for her preparations to move out to the pocket universe."

Kotari's face darkened and a heavy sigh forced its way through his clenched jaws.

"She was gutted out of a fifth of her crew, all of her senior staff and her captain! Redding is a remarkable officer but he is not a miracle worker! Make sure the flagship has priority in supplies and personnel as she deserves."

"She also lost all her best helmsmen with Lieutenant Moore transferred to the Discovery... but we managed to get her this Praxiar woman as her new chief of security and tactical and even a new bartender and diplomatic advisor with acting ensign Shelley Rogers."

"David Rogers' sister? he one that got involved with him with the theft of the Horizon's sister ship, the Diamond Star?"

"The same, Sir; Starfleet Command believes her... unique experience will be useful with the upcoming mission of the Horizon."

Kotari said nothing for a moment. Samji went on to break the darkening mood in the room.

"We did manage however to get the very best MACO commander in Starfleet; Lieutenant Somers is competent enough to even double up as the flagship' Strategic Ops Officer, despite her lack of experience."

"Knowing Redding as I do, he will shape her up in no time. Who is to be his exec?"

"We have no qualified officer available for that position at the moment, Sir... except... her Chief Medical Officer, Doctor Nasaro-Myth."

Kotari looked back at the Hindu man.

"The Deltan? He has command experience?"

"He commanded an away team during his tour of duty on the Spectre, a shuttle to help the Artemis escape the Azimuth Horizon anomaly and then the Artemis bridge module helping Captain Jureth settle conflict and rescue the interfering Undines during Operation Horizon. He was also part of the commando team of Redding when they tackled the Klingons on the rogue planet of the pocket universe."

The admiral nodded.

"Well, Redding could have been stuck alone. Guess this will be a good thing to have a doctor compensate for the man's rather... old style of command."

"As in... cowboy diplomacy, Sir?"

They exchanged a small grin before Samji returned to his report.

"The Hoshea and the Discovery are prepping up for their assignment on schedule. We only have a junior officer to serve as chief engineer of the Hoshea, Lieutenant Sean Andrews, but he has worked for years under Commander Rogers so he is ready to make the big step."

"Hope he got the technical experience, not the compulsions of Mister Rogers," growled the Boslic admiral. "Who else again has been added to Speaker's senior staff?"

"Lieutenant Commander Jonathan X Livingstone will serve as her chief of science."

"Ah yes, the X'Ell; we better not miss the mark with this one, Allen; our whole relationship with his people depends on him."

Samji nodded then glanced again at his PADD.

"The Discovery is even ahead now with most of her senior officers already on board and on duty under the supervision of her exec, Commander Schaeff Scyshylyss... yes, the Saurian, Admiral; certainly the best balance to a Bajoran captain."

Again, Kotari briefly smiled.

"Captain Jureth has always been a dynamic officer. Having such a remarkable tactical officer commanding an explorer ship will certainly send a message; to our friends, that we are once again explorers... and to our foes, that now we are ready for anything."

"Anything, Sir?"

There was an uneasy silence between them before Kotari growled.

"What can be so damn sensitive that Starfleet Command wouldn't even tell me?"

"Sir... even Starfleet Command is being shackled by the Federation Council no less, from the office of the president himself... and..."

Kotari swung around angry, interrupting his starbase commander abruptly.

"I know who's responsible for it, damn it! Kheren is my most decorated officer, my third most experienced and my flagship commander and they take him and his best people from me without so much as an explanation! And Commander Rogers; how does he of all people get involved in this? And Aron'Son the Jem'Hadar, our most reliable security and tactical officer... and an acting commission to Nathan Cross? A *bartender*? What is going on here?"

Samji hared his heavy sigh and somber eyes.

" I agree, Sir; this whole set up is damn peculiar; thirteen class XI shuttles sent to us to transfer them all the stars know where, on a preprogrammed encrypted course launched at irregular intervals and different trajectories at maximum warp to avoid all space traffic and confuse detection... We're even under strict orders, all bases and stations in the sector, not to monitor their flight. And if they are intercepted, all available ships are to drop any and all orders and assignments and sent to clear the way for them. I don't know, Admiral, but this smells like... like..."

Kotari took a few seconds himself before voicing their fear.

"Like Section 31."

"But... Sir, Section 31 is no more; we even had one of our finest officers pay dearly to make sure this aberration, this cancer, would be excised from us."

"And to all prupose and intent, so it has been," Kotari said with conviction. "Sorripto is finally back at his old rank and again chief engineer, now on the Discovery. He did not sacrifice himself, his reputation and his career in vain! If need be, we will make sure of that!"

Silence again froze them both before the Boslic man spoke again in a far away tone, again looking at his fleet parked within his starbase.

"It does stink like Section 31... but in truth, we both can guess who is really behind it all."

Samji nodded to his back, he too looking far away.

"Only time will tell, Admiral."

"Yes... in time."

THE END