

Ready Room Starship K'mpec Early 2378

As he retold the story, the battle replayed in Captain Kenji Tanaka's mind. "Responding to the distress call from the *Narcissus*, we encountered a Kothlis'Ka attack cruiser," he said, struggling not to be engulfed in memories of fire and blood.

"It-it looked like a flying bat'leth," he recalled, "All curves and sharp edges... and there was nothing we could do to stop it." He paused, unable to continue, the shriek of his deceased first officer ringing in his ears. Even though the other captains he was addressing hadn't been there, they each bore looks of knowing horror. They had all rushed to meet the *K'mpec* at its warp sled, where the ship had limped back to for repairs after nearly being atomized by the Kothlis'Ka warship.

"So, the *Narcissus* was destroyed," Commander Gilma Rhizzo, of the *Saber*-class *USS Ariane*, repeated, seemingly more to process in her own mind than to repeat what Tanaka had just told them. The Zakdorn woman eventually lowered her head, unable to accept the cold finality of the *Narcissus's* demise. "Captain Landau sponsored my entrance into the Academy...I can't believe that she's gone."

"She might not be," Captain Ottah offered, his voice steeped in hope and compassion. The Edoan somehow maintained an optimistic disposition even in the midst of oncoming doom. The master of the *Nebula*-class *Starship Shuttlesworth* craned his elongated neck in the direction of the weeping Rhizzo. "Your sensors did detect *Narcissus* escape pod energy signatures."

"Yes, but the infernal Kothlis'Ka prevented *K'mpec* from retrieving them," the dour Captain Thelius said. The Andorian's twin antenna writhed like serpents, as he added, "For all we know those pods were picked off by now, for sport." Thelius commanded the *Norway*-class *Baltimore*.

Captain Tan Erasia, of the *USS Empress*, frowned at the pessimistic Andorian. The trim Efrosian had now become the leader of what remained of Intercept Group Four, with the destruction of *Narcissus* and the likely death of Captain Gretchen Landau. *Empress* was a *Galaxy*-class starship, just like *Narcissus*. Captain Landau had had far more years in command of starships than Tan, ergo her being placed in charge of the taskforce.

"Captain Tanaka, how many escape pods did your ship's sensors detect?" Erasia asked, forgoing rejoining Thelius's negative comments.

"We picked up fifteen, but there could've been more. The warship's shields and weapons interfered with our sensors," Tanaka answered.

"My gods, only fifteen," Rhizzo shook her head.

"There could be more," Ottah pointed out.

"Or none left at all," Thelius just had to say.

"Well, we won't know until we find out for certain," Erasia said, "And that is why I am dispatching shuttles to retrieve any survivors."

"That's a good idea," the Zakdorn said, perking up slightly. "I think we should all send shuttles."

"I concur," Ottah nodded.

"Of course," Thelius didn't attempt to hide the doubt in his voice.

Tan nodded, and offered everyone a reassuring smile. Tanaka thought that the woman was adapting to her new role as taskforce leader very well. "I'll have my first officer coordinate with his counterparts." The woman winced when she noticed Tanaka doing so. "I'm sorry," she said to the man. "Commander Baird was an outstanding officer," she added. Tanaka nodded in acceptance of her apology. His memory of Davin's last, shuttered cry had robbed him of speech.

Erasia gave him a moment to collect himself. Then she said, "That was the easy part of this discussion," she began. "Now, comes the tough sell," the captain paused and gathered herself, "We're going after the Kothlis'Ka armada."

# Ready Room *USS Empress*

Erasia had barely signed off with her counterparts before her first officer was out of his seat. Leaning halfway over her desk, Commander Mark Sheppard asked, with his clipped English accent, "Are you serious?"

Tan sat back, and pondered his question for a moment. The dark-skinned human tensely waited her out, with his hands gripping the sides of her desk, and his brown eyes gazing into her pale blue ones with a forced attempt not to stare. "I wouldn't have proposed this course of action if I wasn't," she reasoned. Sheppard was relatively new to the ship. Though she had served with humans for years, she still found them sometimes hard to discern. Her last XO had been Vulcan and far easier to comprehend.

"It wasn't even the armada, just one ship destroyed *Narcissus* and nearly vaporized the *K'mpec*," Sheppard said, "and now you want us to go after their entire *armada*?" Now, the man's incredulity was quite clear.

Sheppard's sudden spate of trepidation was curious. Tan was well aware of his Dominion War record and his actions during the Talarian Incursion. Mark Sheppard wasn't a man who shied away from battle. In fact, it appeared that he to some extent thrived on it, allowing it to keep other demons at bay.

It was something he had never shared with her; Tan could read it sometimes on his face. It was the same look that often greeted her in the mirror. "Well, perhaps our combined strength might at least force the Kothlis'Ka to talk with us, and if that happens, perhaps we can avoid further bloodshed." One of the eeriest things about the Kothlis'Ka was their silence. Either they didn't understand Federation Standard, were mute, or simply saw no point in talking. The last possibility chilled Tan, and that was hard to do to an Efrosian. Both *Narcissus* and *K'mpec* had not been able to establish contact with the armada to convince them to change course.

Captain Landau had been forced to begin laying a quantum minefield to get them to do so. The Kothlis'Ka had interpreted that as an act of aggression and had mercilessly responded.

Sheppard shook his head. "I don't think these guys are big into talking." Erasia shuddered inwardly, spooked that the man's summation dovetailed so easily with her own thoughts.

"What would you propose we do then Commander?" Erasia asked.

"I think we should wait until Starfleet can send a larger force," Sheppard answered.

"It will be too late by then," the captain said. "At their current speed the armada will skirt Tholian Assembly space within weeks and if they encounter little to no resistance their path will lead them into Romulan space."

"The Hobus system," Sheppard nodded, "If I recall what Science Officer K'Baara said correctly."

Tan nodded, "You did. And from Hobus, Romulus would easily be within reach."

"And we should be concerned, why?" Sheppard asked, drawing a stern glare from the captain. The collapse of Romulan forces at Draken IV to the Jem'Hadar had resulted in massive casualties, including the loss of his pregnant wife, and hadn't left him too fond of their erstwhile wartime allies. "Perhaps they can do a better job defending their homes than mine."

"I am sympathetic to what you have endured," Erasia said, doing her best to hide her own chastened feelings.

Similar to the Romulan retreat at Draken IV, *Empress* had been part of Tango Fleet, which had failed to hold off Dominion forces from Betazed. She could sympathize with Sheppard and certainly empathize with many of the Romulans at Draken IV. Continuing, she said, "While I don't understand fully the depth of your loss, I advise you not to express any prejudicial view on the bridge or among subordinate officers. In here or with the ship's counselor is fine if you must, but out there, I want your mind clear and strictly on the job."

Sheppard shot up and stood at attention, the consternation on his face evaporating completely. "Aye sir," he said tightly.

"Oh at ease Commander," the captain waved. Sheppard relaxed, but only a bit. Erasia continued, "We have a duty, not just to the citizens of the Federation, but to

the galactic community to do our part to stop or impede that armada. Millions, maybe billions, of lives might be at stake."

"Something tells me that our sacrifice won't be remembered as gloriously by the Romulans as the Klingons revere Garrett's stand at Narendra III," the first officer rejoined.

"Perhaps so," Erasia conceded, "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to save lives if possible."

"Even at the expense of our own?" Sheppard asked, not completely convinced.

"Certainly at the expense of our own," Erasia concluded. With that, she dismissed the commander after he had no additional questions. Once she was alone, Tan sank into her comfortable leather seat.

Mentally she climbed down from her self-righteous peak. She couldn't help but wonder if the ghosts of Betazed were still haunting her, if her survivor's guilt over escaping that charnel house with her ship and life were compelling her to throw both of them away on the Kothlis'Ka.

"Only time will tell," she whispered to her ship. *Empress* didn't respond.

# Main Engineering USS Empress

Captain Tan Erasia felt the weight of history on her shoulders as she crossed the threshold. Before her dominated the towering warp core, which beat like a great heart. Serious-faced engineers scurried about, many of their noses or breathing organs pressed against personal display devices. Others were hunched over table-like master displays.

The normal cacophony of life had been replaced by the buzz of war. Tan had witnessed it in every department as she toured the ship. She felt both heartened and horrified at how easily her crew seemed to adapt to a wartime footing. Many had been baptized in blood courtesy of the Dominion War. Some lucky enough to escape that hecatomb had been blooded by the postwar occupation or the Talarian Incursion.

The Efrosian had hoped that the Vanguard mission would be getting Starfleet back to exploring and not making more war preparations. "I know that look," Chief Engineer Thav said, breaking free from the throng. The stout Andorian gave her a wry grin. "How about you come to my office?"

# Chief Engineer's Office USS Empress

Erasia's tension started to ease only after the second glass of sky blue Andorian ale. Thav always had the best Andorian spirits, even putting the recreation lounge to shame. Thav sat back in his chair after taking his own second bracing shot. "I'm no doctor, like yourself, but it seems like my liquid prescription is doing the trick."

Tan smiled as she also sat back. "Right as always Thav. You know me too well." Erasia had served with the hale Andorian for years aboard the *Gral*. The man had been pondering retirement, to return to his bond group on Andor before Tan had convinced him to join her aboard the *Empress*. The biggest enticement was that the *Galaxy*-class ship also carried families and Thav could bring his entire bond group with him.

A benefit to Tan was that she not only got a good friend serving alongside her, but a talented operations officer in Lt. Aarti, a member of his bond group who had already transferred back to Andor in anticipation of Thav's return. However he had convinced Aarti and the rest of the bond group to join him on *Empress*. The other two members of the group served in civilian posts aboard the ship.

"I guess I should let you get back to your inspection," Thav said after a few moments of pleasant silence. "It's not as if my team doesn't have enough stress," he half-joked.

Tan chuckled. "I know," she conceded, "but this is not a formal inspection. If anything, I'm just walking the ship one last time, right before a fateful battle. I heard that Picard did that...shortly before the first Borg invasion of Sector 001."

"Ah yes, I remember he was mimicking an Ancient Earth captain...Horatio Nelson, if I recall correctly," Thav gave a tight-lipped smile. The Andorian's love of ancient Andorian ice cutters expanded into old sailing vessels from many cultures. His personal quarters were filled with models of several such vessels. "The *HMS Victory* was his vessel," he said. "A ghastly tradition," he added.

"Excuse me?" Tan cocked an eyebrow.

"You know that Nelson didn't survive that battle, and Picard nearly didn't either," Thav answered. "You should've picked another tradition."

The Efrosian sighed. Thav was the one person aboard that she felt she could be the most honest with. They had saved each other and seen each other at their worsts more times than she could count. So she didn't hide her true thoughts like she would around another member of the crew, including her first officer.

Recalling the damage inflicted on the *K'mpec* and Tanaka's account of the attack cruiser that he had barely survived, Tan regarded her old friend with a sober expression, the ale's effects drained from her. "No, in light of what we are rushing towards, I think the tradition is most appropriate."

Observation Lounge *USS Empress* 

Captain Erasia had barely sat back down in her command seat before the Starfleet communique she had been waiting on had arrived. After reviewing it privately in her ready room and sending the message on to her taskforce counterparts, Tan thought a meeting with her senior officers was in order.

From the head of the long, polished black table, shaped like a Starfleet chevron, she watched the reactions of her crew to the images on the display behind her. They were a cross section of compassion, empathy, terror, and anger. They had mirrored the emotions roiling inside her when she first viewed the footage.

The images were of the planet Hestravar, a colony under the protection of the Nyberrite Alliance. The Alliance had sent the data on to Starfleet Command which had rushed it to the *Empress*.

The colony world, which reports had described as lush was a hollowed out shell of its former self. Deep, ugly gouges crisscrossed the planet like scar tissue. Buildings and other structures lined the ground like broken teeth.

The caliginous clouds ringing the planet, the result of a global nuclear winter, reminded her of the scenes of postwar Cardassia Prime. And images of the few wretched, disfigured, and broken survivors among the oceans of the dead would haunt her forever. The carnage was created by what the Nyberrites dubbed harvester drones, city-sized spheres that had roved the planet, plundering it for biomass, atmospheric gasses, and mineral deposits. Nyberrite scientists predicted that Hestravar had only two weeks of sustainability left.

That was the fate that awaited the Tholians, the Romulans, or anyone unfortunate enough to be in the way of the Kothlis'Ka. The captained trained her gaze on Commander Sheppard until the man noticed.

He returned her gaze, a stricken and contrite look on his face. "My God," he muttered, "I wouldn't want this to happen to anyone else, even our adversaries."

"I don't see how we have much of a choice," Dr. Segen pronounced, with palpable gloom. "The Kothlis'Ka armada destroyed at least nineteen Nyberrite capital ships that had tried to defend that colony." The Mazarite medic ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "We are severely outmatched."

"We've been outgunned before," Flight Control Officer L'Naar replied, her whiskers twitching in annoyance at the doctor's defeatism. "We'll find a way to turn the odds in our favor this time as well." The calico-furred Caitian glared at the doctor, running her teeth over her sharp incisors as if she was considering making him into a meal.

"From what we've seen of this footage, and from the account of Captain Tanaka, I don't see how that is possible," Segen said, stroking his goatee and girding for a fight. The man had left Starfleet because of his pro-Maquis leanings and only returned under order due to the need for skilled medical personnel during the Dominion War. "This isn't one of the Satie administration's carefully orchestrated public events, where every ill can be cured by a dose of good old Federation know-

how, our innate superiority, or manifest destiny. This is the real galaxy and there are threats out there that even we can't defeat; civilizations that are far more advanced than us; that view us as nothing more than insects."

"I don't think any of us need that lecture...again," Security Chief Moeller retorted, her blue eyes flinty. "You've aired your views quite exhaustively over the years, yet still you remain in the organization you constantly disparage." That sharp jab drew several nods of approval among the senior staff. Tan stopped herself from joining in.

Why Segen had stayed on after the war was anyone's guess. Tan suspected that he furtively liked serving in the Fleet, though the Mazarite was never shy about critiquing the military aspects of the organization.

"And I will continue to do so because it is my right as a citizen, as a sapient being," Segen replied. "And you all know I speak the truth. This is not just an impossible battle; it is one that we should not be undertaking."

Erasia's eyes shifted to her first officer. Feeling her gaze again, Sheppard stiffened in his seat. He had voiced similar sentiments only days ago in her office. Now, his expression was full of consternation. The captain wasn't sure if it was because he was now opposed to not interfering or merely because it was the doctor who shared his mindset.

"I'm not going to debate that with you Dr. Segen," Erasia replied, smoothly, but firmly. "We are going to do our best to prevent another Hestravar."

"Or a *Narcissus*," Sheppard added.

"Despite the bravado I just don't see that happening," Segen wouldn't back down. "The Nyberrite fleet was shredded by solid neutronium slugs. Our shields can't stand up to that."

"That's where you're wrong," Moeller's grin was feral.

"Excuse me?" Segen asked, incredulous at the security officer's boast.

"Enlighten the man Katrina," Sheppard said, beating the captain to the punch.

"Yes sir," Moeller nodded at both Sheppard and Erasia before she continued. "Thoron shielding."

"That's theoretical," the Mazarite scoffed.

"Not so," Science Officer K'Baara waded into the discussion. "My counterpart on the *Baltimore* has devised a thoron-based screen that should be stronger than traditional shielding, which has thus far proven ineffective against the Kothlis'Ka's neutronium weaponry."

"What's the drawback?" Segen pressed.

"The power drain will be significant," The bronze Chezkenite science officer replied without hesitation. "We will need to draw power from every source, including weapons, propulsion, structural integrity, and life support, if we want to enact a long-sustaining shield."

"How much will that affect our propulsion systems?" Lt. Commander Thav worriedly asked. Lt. K'Baara turned his enlarged head carefully on his thin neck to look at the Andorian engineer as he spoke to him.

"Warp power will be impossible and while full impulse is achievable, it's recommended that the ship travel only at half-impulse or lower while the thoron screen is activated," the science officer said.

"That will reduce our maneuverability a great deal," Thav replied, not pleased. But the Andorian said nothing more.

"So that will reduce the yields of our armaments?" Segen nearly threw back his head. "That reminds me of an old Earth saying about cutting off your nose to spite your face. That shield might buy us a few seconds but it robs the ship's ability to actually damage Kothlis'Ka vessels."

"While it might impede our phaser banks, our complement of photon and quantum torpedoes will remain unaltered," Moeller pointed out.

"And there are other options available to us," Sheppard added.

"The unmanned warp combat vehicles," Segen said, his voice becoming frosty. He was a vocal opponent of the increased usage of the UWCVs since the Talarian Incursion. The medic felt that the weapons detached leaders and citizens from the real consequences of military action and could lead to adventurism.

"Yes," the captain interjected, wishing to head off another futile bit of pique from the Mazarite. Though brilliant and often engaging, the captain wasn't in the mood for Segen's moralizing at the moment. "I also intend to use quantum mines to disrupt and alter the course of the armada."

"It would help if the Tholians could send some of their ships," Operations Officer Aarti said, "But so far, they have not responded to our long-range hails." The thin Andorian's expression conveyed her deep disappointment over the Tholians' silence.

"Nor have the Romulans," Sheppard added. "They might not know what's coming their way, but more than likely they just aren't replying. Perhaps they don't want to be seen as getting assistance from us." He shook his head, an expression of disgust contorting his features. "They would probably consider it a sign of weakness."

"We'll they're getting our help whether they want it or not," Erasia declared. "And I have every confidence in you all to have your departments ready to insure that this crew and ship performs at its peak." They all nodded at her assertion, even a still reluctant Segen, to the captain's challenge.

Erasia sat back and allowed herself a smile as she looked on at her senior staff as they talked among themselves, the din rising in the observation lounge. It was the best bunch of people she had ever served with, and she was honored that most accepted her decision to track down and impede the Kothlis'Ka armada. They trusted her with their lives and it was a solemn duty she had to respect to the utmost.

The weight of the responsibility turned her smile a bit sad. She cleared her throat and all of the side conversations came to a halt. Everyone shifted their attention back to her. Self-consciously Tan tugged down on her tunic and wet her throat.

"It is not my intention to dismiss the gravity of the task before us," She nodded in Segen's direction. He nodded back. "And Dr. Segen has made several valid arguments, and dissent is always welcome in my meetings, so for that I thank him." She paused, unsure how to say what was in her heart. Eventually, she just let it out, "This might be our last meeting together...and I thought it might be appropriate to bring this meeting to a close in the ways we sometimes did on the *Gral*."

Tan's smile turned mischievous as she looked at Thav. "On my mark Mr. Thav." The stocky Andorian sat up in his seat.

"I'm at the ready Captain," the grinned.

"Mark then," Erasia motioned.

Thav tapped his compin. "Energize." The familiar whine and harsh blue-white light of the transporter effect gave way to a tray containing several glasses surrounding a bottle filled with a rich purple liquid.

"Nelag," Tan said, impressed. Thav had promised that the beverage would be special, though the captain had thought he would pick something exotic, like a potion from the Gamma Quadrant or some other far-flung locale. Instead he had gone with her favorite Andorian spirit. The last time he had shared the libation with her was to celebrate the end of the Dominion War.

For a big man, Thav moved quickly, placing glasses in front of all of the senior officers. On the second round he poured quick dashes of the violet liquid into each glass. They all mimicked the captain as she held her glass aloft.

Tan knew that was as far as Moeller would go. Her Islamic faith forbade her from ingesting alcohol. "To the best crew in Starfleet," Erasia toasted.

"To the best captain," L'Naar said.

"Seriously L'Naar, you pick now of all times to buck for a promotion?" Aarti teased. The laughter afterwards almost felt as good to the captain as the drink.

### Ready Room *USS Ariane*

Commander Gilma Rhizzo had waited a few hours after concluding her meeting with her staff to call in the security chief. Lt. Zileena stalked into the office, as was the custom of her predacious Zaranite species.

The lithe woman stopped crisply in front of Rhizzo's desk and stood at attention. The Zakdorn could only imagine the true expression on her subordinate's face. Like most Zaranites in Class M environs, Zileena wore a breathing mask which

obscured her eyes, nose, and mouth. The apparatus provided the vital fluorine Zileena needed to survive.

Without allowing the woman to stand at ease, Rhizzo asked, "Is it ready?"

"Yes Captain," despite the breather, Zileena's voice was mellifluous. "But sir, need I remind you that if you proceed upon this course of action it will be in violation of the second Khitomer Accords."

"No, you don't," Rhizzo snapped.

"Sir, abrogation of the Accords and so near to Tholian and Romulan space could have serious repercussions," Zileena pressed.

"You know as well as I do Zil that our standard weaponry will not stop the Kothlis'Ka," Rhizzo reasoned.

"Permission to speak freely?" The other woman tightly asked. Gilma toyed with not granting it, but then relented.

"Speak," she brusquely ordered.

"Captain Erasia said that our mission was not to defeat the armada per se but to impede it, to impel upon it the unwanted costs of continuing on its present course," the Zaranite security officer said.

"And I don't see a better way to demonstrate that than to cleave through that armada," Rhizzo said, "Violence appears to be a language they are at least conversant in."

"Are you sure that you are doing this to send a message or to avenge the loss of Captain Landau?" Zileena asked, cutting right to the quick, in the best tradition of her hunter ancestors.

Rhizzo didn't hesitate. "Both. And now you're dismissed."

# Captain's Quarters *USS K'mpec*

The two glasses of Altair water sat on the coffee table untouched. The two occupants on the couch facing the table were too engaged in conflicts, external and internal.

"Sir, Command stocked each of our vessels with tricobalt devices," Lt. Commander Mehita pointed out. "I would think those would be sufficient."

Captain Tanaka, sitting opposite his new first officer, grimaced as he wrestled with his ethics. "We can't be certain of that, though we didn't even have time to use them before the Kothlis'Ka were on us." He finally said. Similar to Tanaka, Mehita was dressed in civilian clothes. He had called the woman to his domicile after his discussion with Commander Rhizzo. He needed the Ktarian's counsel.

"And even if we had used them we don't know if they would've been sufficient, especially if we had set them on a lower yield, which is what we are wont to do," the captain added. The seldom used weapons were extremely dangerous and were even

capable of creating subspace tears. However they weren't specifically created with that goal in mind which made them permissible under the second Khitomer Accords.

"But creating isolytic subspace weapons," Mehita shook her head, her voice clotting with disbelief. "That would make us no better than the Son'a." Tanaka's heart pinched a little as the Ktarian looked at him with baleful yellow eyes, and he saw her losing respect for him.

"To be honest, if the Son'a used those isolytic burst armaments more, they might be winning their war against the Alshain right now," Tanaka soberly replied.

Mehita's eyes widened in shock, "Sir I can't believe you said that."

"It's true," he sadly shook his head, "And you know that is so."

"Maybe," she conceded, dipping her head a moment. "But at what cost? Sometimes the price of victory is too high to pay."

"Well at least you'll still be alive to agonize over it," Tanaka rejoined. "The *Narcissus* crew is not, the same as millions on Hestravar." He paused, his voice turning colder, "Or Commander Baird and thirteen other crewmen, though I sometimes wonder if the Kothlis'Ka didn't spare *K'mpec* to send their own message. I think it's time we repaid them in kind."

He was pleased that Mehita took in his words but didn't back down. "Or we could be making a horrific situation even worse."

"I already raised the potential fallout with the Tholians and the Romulans to Commander Rhizzo," Tanaka answered. "She had already considered that."

"And?" Mehita prodded.

"The commander felt repelling the Kothlis'Ka with a decisive show of force was more important," the captain replied, "and that the Tholians and Romulans might grumble about our methods but no one would hold us to account if we were successful in stopping the incursion." He paused again and looked the woman squarely in the eyes, "And I agree with her."

"I don't think the other captains would," Mehita bluntly said, "especially Captain Erasia."

Tanaka's smile was wry. "That's why Rhizzo came to me first."

"Sir, whether I agree with this action or not, I don't think it's right to keep this from the other captains," Mehita was all business. The captain's small attempt at levity had sunk like a latinum balloon.

"If this does go badly, the less who know, the less who will have to pay the price for our actions," Tanaka reasoned.

"You really think the admirals are going to see it that way?" Mehita didn't hide her skepticism.

"It will be the truth," Tanaka shrugged, "And I can live with that."

Mehita shook her head again, "I wonder if you will be so sanguine once this is over."

Ready Room
USS Baltimore
Three Days Later...

"You can't be serious?" Captain Ottah asked, his semi-simian features scrunched in disbelief.

Captain Thelius frowned, not used to not being taken at his word. "I trust my Science Officer," he sharply replied. "She would not lie about what she heard from her counterpart aboard the *Ariane*." The intercept group had been traveling together, at a cruising speed of Warp 8, in an attempt to catch up with the fast moving Kothlis'Ka armada. The arrangement had allowed the ships to continue refining the experimental thoron shielding in addition to their battle plans.

Ottah shook his head, unable to digest the magnitude of what Thelius had revealed to him. "Subspace weapons?" The man eventually said, more to himself than the Andorian. "That would violate everything we stand for."

"It appears that Commander Rhizzo would rather deal with that at her court martial," Thelius said, unwilling to empathize with or soft pedal the woman's motivations. He leaned back in his chair and forced himself to be quiet and let the Edoan's mind process the truth. Though Ottah leaned forward, in Thelius's direction, his yellow eyes were lightyears away. Eventually the man's gaze refocused on Thelius and now Ottah's saturnine expression nearly matched the Andorian's.

"And Captain Tanaka is on board with this?" Ottah asked, his longish face falling.

"Yes," Thelius nodded, "It makes sense," the Andorian added.

"How so?" Ottah asked; still not ready to completely accept that which was plainly obvious.

"The Kothlis'Ka nearly destroyed *K'mpec*, murdering thirteen of their crew, including the first officer," Thelius replied. "I'm surprised that it wasn't Tanaka that brewed this idea."

"Are you certain that this isn't a mistake, that these weapons aren't being created as a last resort?" Ottah asked.

"I don't doubt the veracity of what my Science Officer reported to me," Thelius kept his temper in check. He hated repeating himself. "Plus we conducted our own surreptitious scans and detected elevated isolytic build up...concentrated in each ship's weapons banks."

The Andorian paused to savor Ottah's stunned expression at that hammer blow. He had been holding it back until he was certain he could trust the Edoan, and by the man's crestfallen countenance, Thelius knew that Ottah had no foreknowledge of this scheme to use banned weapons against the Kothlis'Ka armada.

"My gods," was all that Ottah could muster.

"Even if this was a doomsday scenario plan, it would still violate the Khitomer Accords," Thelius added.

"Yes, it would," Ottah said, stroking his pointed chin. "And that would only make things worse."

"My thoughts exactly," Thelius nodded in affirmation.

"Do you think that Captain Erasia is aware of this plot?" Ottah asked.

"It's true that Edoans are telepathic then?" Thelius asked, "Because you must have just read my mind." Ottah chuckled.

"I think you're getting us confused with the Triexians," the man said. "Don't worry, it happens all the time."

"I don't know if Captain Erasia has endorsed this disastrous idea or not," Thelius said, all levity drained from his voice. He stared portentously at Ottah, before adding, "But there's only one way to find out."

#### Main Bridge USS Empress

Captain Erasia's eyes watered slightly, a nervous tic. The woman's stomach tightened and her shoulders bunched. She cleared her throat softly before she gave the order.

Seconds later the main viewer split between images of the bridges of the *K'mpec* and the *Ariane*. Despite her anxiety, Tan's voice was strong. "Don't deny it. We have scanned both of your vessels."

Captain Tanaka looked mildly shocked, but Commander Rhizzo nodded in affirmation. "How could you do this?" Erasia asked, with a hint of the disbelief that she had displayed when Thelius and Ottah had brought this to her. "Constructing subspace weapons; and without authorization. If you had used those weapons in combat it could've had a disastrous effect...not only on the Kothlis'Ka, but on the taskforce. We don't even know what kind of propulsion propels that armada but we do know that isolytic-caused tears are drawn to warp cores."

She felt the charge run through the bridge crew at the revelation. Only Commander Sheppard had been privy to the information until this moment. Tan had felt it necessary to put this out in the open, for her crew and those aboard the *K'mpec* and *Ariane* who weren't aware, to see the dark corners the Kothlis'Ka had pushed her compatriots down. Perhaps it would add internal pressure on the two captains to abandon their course while serving as a warning to *Empress's* crew not to abandon the rules of war even in the face of impossible odds.

"I thought it was an acceptable risk," Commander Rhizzo stated, looking her squarely in the eye. "And I still do." Tanaka's gaze wasn't as unwavering, but he had a determined expression. He wasn't going to back down either.

"I understand how the loss of the *Narcissus*," Tan nodded in Rhizzo's direction, "And the near loss of the *K'mpec*," she acknowledged Tanaka, "affected you both. Dismantle those weapons immediately and we'll forget this happened."

"No," Rhizzo shook her head. The Zakdorn looked off to the side and muttered something unintelligible.

"Sir, *Ariane* is powering weapons," Lt. Moeller informed her, unable to hide the shock from her voice, "And has broken formation." The human shook her head in disbelief, "*Ariane* is now moving to engage us."

"Gilma, what are you doing?" Tanaka asked, beating Erasia to the punch.

"Our long-range sensors picked up that armada hours ago," Rhizzo replied. "And now we are only hours away from engaging them. I'm not going to be denied the opportunity to save this taskforce and the Tholians and Romulans as well, not by some fleet captain by default."

The jibe stung but Erasia took it in stride. She hadn't asked for the responsibility, and she knew she didn't have the experience or accomplishments that Captain Landau had, but Erasia intended to carry out her new assignment the best she could. "Lt. Moeller," she said, her voice devoid of emotion, "Charge our forward phasers and target the *Ariane*."

"Captain Erasia!" Tanaka shifted his gaze from Rhizzo to Tan. "What are you doing?"

"Something I don't want to do Captain Tanaka," Erasia answered honestly, "But it's not really up to me. This is Commander Rhizzo's decision. As we say on Efros, the Levithi nuts are on your tree."

### Main Bridge *USS Ariane*

Commander Gilma Rhizzo tried to ignore her first officer's plasma burning stare. It would not do for her to blink in front of Captain Erasia, the *Empress's* crew, or her own.

Typically, Lt. Commander Gerald Atwell would not be ignored. "This is futzing ridiculous," he said sotto voce while leaning over toward her. "What are you doing Gilma?"

"What I have to," she snapped, refusing to look at the lanky Australian. "Lt. Zileena, aim forward phasers at *Empress's* primary hull."

"Belay that order!" Atwell called out loudly. Incensed, Rhizzo whipped around to confront him.

"How dare you?" She bellowed. "Right now, they've got weapons trained on us!"

"Only because you made the first aggressive move," Atwell said, with smoldering but damnable reasonableness. "And that's not the only one you made.

Constructing subspace weapons without informing me," he shook his head. "What's gotten into you?"

"Are you angrier about me planning to utilize subspace weapons against the Kothlis'Ka or you not being in the loop?" She charged, hoping the dagger drew blood.

Atwell looked unfazed. "This ends now Commander," he said tightly.

"Zil, you heard me!" Rhizzo yelled, ignoring her first officer. "Get those weapons on the *Empress*."

"Don't make me relieve you of duty sir," Atwell warned, his voice clearly filled with regret.

"Relieve her," Erasia's voice issued over the still open channel. "That's an order."

After a few charged, indecisive seconds, Atwell's shoulders fell. "Sir, please get up from the command chair."

"No," the Zakdorn shook her head and dug in her heels. Atwell sighed. He stood up, consciously towering over her, but far enough away to lessen the threat of the gesture.

"Lt. Zileena, please remove the captain. Take her to her quarters and set up a security detail to contain her until we can straighten this mess out."

"I'm sorry sir," the Zaranite said. And it was the first time Rhizzo's stomach twisted. Among her senior officers, Zil was the closest to Gilma, and if she had lost the Zaranite's trust there was little hope in retaining anyone else's.

"I'm not leaving," Rhizzo declared. "You'll have to force me from this chair."

"So be it," Atwell's sigh was deeper this time, coming from the well of his soul. She hadn't heard the man sound so bone weary since the Talarian Incursion. "Lt. Zileena," he called again.

"I'm so sorry," Zileena repeated. Gilma closed her eyes and steeled herself for a fight. It wouldn't be the most dignified way to exit the bridge and possibly her command, but it would show the crew that she would fight for them until the end.

She jumped at the familiar sizzle of a phaser. Her eyelids flipped open just as she saw a sparkling beam punch into Commander Atwell and drove him to the deck.

Zileena stood on the upper deck, the phaser now shaking in her hand. Gilma threw herself out of her seat. She knelt down at the unconscious Atwell and checked his pulse. It was slow, but steady.

She looked up at Zileena and nodded grimly. Both women understood that they had just thrown away their careers. Then Rhizzo turned toward the stunned Erasia. "There's your answer," she bitterly stated.

Main Bridge USS Baltimore Captain Thelius was done with the drama playing out on his viewscreen. "Enough of this hand wringing," he declared. "Fire on the *Ariane*," he ordered, "Targeting her propulsion systems." He added, a bit too jauntily, "She's going to have to sit the big fight out."

"Aye sir," the Xenexian at the tactical console replied. Commander Erean shook her head as twin golden spears arced from *Baltimore* and slammed into *Ariane*.

The Andorian would commiserate with his Argelian first officer later. Right now he had a dust up to resolve before the real battle began.

#### Main Bridge USS Shuttlesworth

"Gods no," Captain Ottah shook his head. On the viewer, the *Baltimore* had engaged *Ariane*, lobbing a fusillade at the smaller, *Saber*-class vessel. Deceptively compact, *Sabers* were loaded with armaments and Rhizzo gave back in kind. The darkness of space exploded in a violent clash of colors between the two starships. Along with the *Shuttlesworth*, *K'mpec* and *Empress* floated idly, unsure what to do.

The Edoan looked to his first officer to get her take, quickly remembering that Janice Hsiao was leading the joint rescue mission to retrieve any *Narcissus* survivors.

He wondered what the rescue teams, culled from the various starships' personnel, would think if they returned to see their respective starships dueling or even worse, one or more of the taskforce ships destroyed by a fellow Starfleet vessel.

Lt. Commander M'Reah, the woman occupying Hsiao's seat, looked as perplexed as he must have. The dark gray furred Caitian flicked her golden eyes and shook her head in a gesture nearly mirroring Ottah's. "What do we do sir?" The woman asked, clearly not comfortable with being thrust into such a pressure cooker.

Normally the ship's Science Officer, M'Reah thought that every problem could be solved with the scientific method. But Ottah was as dumbfounded as she was to find a way to apply the venerable process to this situation.

"Move to engage the *Ariane*," he said eventually. The sooner Rhizzo was subdued, the sooner they could return to their mission. The deck plating trembled slightly as the flight control officer quickly changed the ship's course. The nimble fingered Nuvian ensign whipped the *Nebula*-class ship around like a shuttlepod.

"But sir," Lt. Zaiden spoke up. The Acamarian Security Officer was never at a loss for words. Normally Ottah encouraged it. Normally. Ottah swiveled his head around to glower at the man who stood at a freestanding aft terminal. Not sensing the change in the captain's mood, Zaiden continued, "Baltimore was the aggressor. They fired first. Shouldn't we move to intercept them instead?"

"Captain Thelius was only trying to prevent a greater aggression from Commander Rhizzo," Ottah calmly responded, reining in his frustration. "We can't

allow *Ariane* or *K'mpec* to use subspace weapons against the Kothlis'Ka. It would violate everything we stand for."

"The captain is correct," Lt. Commander M'Reah said, her voice hardening, "Now target our weapons on *Ariane* and prepare to fire at the captain's' order." Ottah turned back to the woman and gave her an encouraging half-smile.

The smile crumbled seconds later as the bridge shook violently. "What was that?" M'Reah asked, but Ottah already knew.

"We've just been fired upon," he answered before Zaiden or the Operations Officer could.

#### Main Bridge USS K'mpec

Captain Kenji Tanaka didn't know what shocked him more: the order he just gave or the fact that it was carried out. A line of phaser fire from the *Akira*-class heavy cruiser had stitched across the primary hull of the *Shuttlesworth*; not enough to damage the larger *Nebula*-class explorer, but enough to send a message.

Tanaka wasn't going to let *Baltimore* and *Shuttlesworth* gang up on *Ariane* and force Rhizzo to back down, especially since he thought she was the only one making sense. None of the other captains had stared down the gun ports of a Kothlis'Ka attack cruiser. And Erasia had proposed taking on an entire armada and with their hands tied to boot!

None of them truly could fathom what they were up against. And if they wanted to at least have skin in the game, they needed to use more powerful weapons, and subspace weapons were the most lethal in their arsenal.

"Send Captain Ottah a hail," Tanaka found his voice again. Though he cleared his throat before adding, "Next time the gloves come off." In response, the *Shuttlesworth* halted its advance on the *Ariane* and slowly turned to face the *K'mpec*.

Behind the triangular tactical pod on *Shuttlesworth's* superstructure, Tanaka could see *Baltimore* and *Ariane* trading shots, both ships unwilling to give ground. *Empress* had remained off to the side. Kenji imagined he could feel Erasia's indecision through the void. *Shuttlesworth* continued to advance on them, the large saucer of its primary hull was starting to blot out the raging battle.

"Sir, should we utilize evasive maneuvers?" Lt. Commander Mehita asked.

Tanaka shook his head, "No," he said. "We're holding our position. We'll make *Shuttlesworth* either ram us or blast through us." The captain was certain Ottah wouldn't do that. The Edoan was a decent fellow, and he hated putting him in this position. But if *Shuttlesworth* relented, it might force the more hardnosed Thelius to give up.

It didn't seem like Captain Erasia was going to be a factor in this dust up. And that might have been for the best. Perhaps the Efrosian was merely the only adult

still left in the room and was allowing the children to throw their tantrums. So far no one had gotten hurt.

Kenji had noticed that while a flurry of shots passed between *Ariane* and *Baltimore*, they were all low-yield. Even the volley he had ordered be fired at the *Shuttlesworth* had been depowered. Despite Tanaka's verbal threat, he wasn't sure if he could really carry it out if Ottah pushed the issue.

Kenji was hoping that the Edoan would back down instead of calling his bluff. As if reading his mind, the young Gnalish male at the operations console called out, "Shuttlesworth is still advancing."

"But they are not charging their weapons," Lt. Retha said from the tactical terminal. The Kamorian had also divined his thoughts it seemed.

"Damn peculiar," the chief engineer grumbled from an aft auxiliary engineering panel. Tanaka glanced back at the hulking, hirsute Gumato.

"No, it isn't really," the captain rejoined. "He doesn't want to hurt us anymore than we do him."

"He's hoping we back down first," Lt. Commander Mehita chimed in.

"So it's a game of chicken huh?" The ensign at flight control quipped before quickly reddening at her interruption. Tanaka merely smiled.

"Right you are Ensign Langdon," the captain said, grateful for the opportunity to smile, if briefly. Looking back at the main screen and the oncoming *Shuttlesworth*, he wasn't sure if he was going to get another chance to do so.

# Main Bridge USS Empress

"Tanerasia Ni-Inguyokaii," Chief Thav's voice thundered, shaking her loose from her complacency, "You've got to put a stop to this," the hefty Andorian added. He was halfway out of his seat at the auxiliary aft engineering console.

Despite the circumstances, Tan smiled. "No one has called me by my full name since I was a cadet." Tan had decided to shorten her name, breaking apart her first name because she thought it would be easier for others to pronounce. Her Academy instructors doubtlessly thanked her, Tan imagined.

"Perhaps that's because you haven't frinxed up something as badly since," Thay blistered.

The Efrosian winced. "You're right," she said, her tone and countenance sobering. She tugged down on her tunic and reappraised the scene before them.

*Ariane* and *Baltimore* continued their slow dance, while *Shuttlesworth* trudged toward an unmoving *K'mpec*. A riot of fear, desperation, and ego were all raging before her.

Things had broken down so quickly it had taken her by surprise and overwhelmed her. For too long, all Tan had been able to do was watch in sick wonder

as the intercept group turned their phasers on each other, a mini-civil war over the desire of Commander Rhizzo and Captain Tanaka to use banned weapons.

The captain imagined that Captain Landau would not have allowed things to devolve to this point. In fact, it's doubtful that Rhizzo would've ever bucked the venerable captain.

Landau had a respect that Tan had not earned. Perhaps it was time to change that situation. "Mr. Sheppard," she put on her best command voice. It was a tone that would brook no debate. Because Tan realized she had to win back her crew in addition to commanding the respect of the rest of the intercept group.

"Aye captain," Sheppard quickly replied. Tan glanced at the man. He was on the edge of his seat. He had been chomping at the proverbial bit to get involved. The Efrosian tried to ignore the doubt glinting in the human's eyes.

"Get me the prefix code overrides for all of those ships," she ordered. "It's time to put the children in their corners."

Ready Room
USS Empress
Five Hours Later...

"You have no right!" Commander Rhizzo thundered. Captain Tan Erasia leaned back in her seat, and took the woman's outburst in stride.

"You can't seriously have just said that right now," she replied. Then she leaned forward, propping her elbows on her empty, polished desktop. Her expression hardened. "You're self-righteousness rings a bit hollow since my away teams are removing all traces of illegal subspace weaponry from your armories." The other four ships in the intercept group hung idly in space, their weapons and shields deactivated.

Tan had locked out the ship's commanders from changing the prefix codes once *Empress* had taken control of them. And she would remain in control of the weapons and defense systems until Commander Sheppard confirmed that all subspace weaponry had been confiscated. Out of a sense of fairness, Erasia kept *Baltimore* and *Shuttlesworth* on the hook as well until the situations on both *Ariane* and *K'mpec* were secure. Captain Thelius had already made his displeasure well known, and Captain Ottah had been too gracious to do so, but Tan didn't care. It might have taken her a bit too long to respond to the fracas, but once she did so, she moved swiftly and decisively.

"Captain, I still think this is a mistake," Captain Tanaka said. At least the human, standing beside the still fuming Rhizzo, was contrite.

"Kenji you can think what you like," Erasia shrugged, "but you should be pleased that I am letting you both keep your tricobalt devices."

"This is outrageous!" Rhizzo threw up her arms. Her jowly, wrinkled cheeks, jiggled at the sudden, violent movement.

"And your instigation of this melee, that wasn't?!" Erasia stood up, planting her hands wide apart on her desk, her pale blue eyes shooting disruptor beams at Rhizzo. "Give me one good reason not to still install Commander Atwell in command of your vessel?!"

Tan was at least happy to note that the man hadn't received any serious injuries after he had been shot by Rhizzo's security officer while acting on Erasia's orders to replace the rebellious Rhizzo.

"Captain," Tanaka said quietly, yet firmly, a voice of reason. "Despite her temper and rashness, Commander Rhizzo is one of the best strategic minds we have. She was instrumental in stopping the Dominion from taking the Kabrel system, and she received a Star Cross for her actions during the Talarian Incursion."

"I know her service record," Erasia snapped, still miffed at Rhizzo's haughty attitude. For her part, the Zakdorn wasn't backing down. Rhizzo glared right back at Tan, with her arms crossed tightly across her chest.

"To be blunt, we need her for this fight," Tanaka said, "Whereas we might survive seconds against the Kothlis'Ka, Rhizzo could get us minutes, and that might help us change the tide of battle."

All three knew it was unlikely, but Tan nevertheless conceded the point. A few more minutes might impress upon the Romulans and Tholians how fierce the Starfleet crews fought to protect them. While that might matter little to the policy makers on Romulus and Tholia, it could endear them to the general populaces. And Tan realized that was better than nothing.

Not looking at Tanaka, Tan kept her focus on Rhizzo. "You better be glad I trust Captain Tanaka's judgment, despite all that has happened." She stood up, and the tension began to drain from her muscles. Still looking at the Zakdorn, Tan's gaze softened, and became searching, imploring. "Sometimes it's not winning the fight that counts; it's how we conduct ourselves while fighting it. And if we are going into an impossible situation, I would rather leave this galaxy knowing that we upheld the principles we swore to give our lives for in the first place."

"What good are those principles if they do nothing to stop that armada?" Rhizzo rejoined.

"Gilma, we don't know if that we don't have enough extant firepower to stop the Kothlis'Ka," Tanaka conceded, and Erasia nodded in agreement.

"Kenji is right," the Efrosian said, "We don't know if our weaponry is enough to stop them without resorting to illegal armaments." Pausing, she drew herself up to her full height and looked them both in the eye before adding, "But we're going to find out."

Ready Room
USS Shuttlesworth
Seven Hours Later...

"I wasn't expecting to talk to you so soon again Captain Ottah," Captain Erasia said with a slight smile as she crossed the threshold. The Edoan weakly smiled back. He stood up from his desk and awkwardly extended his torso appendage in her direction. The man's other two arms held personal display devices. Tan took the proffered hand, feeling a pang of jealousy that she wasn't born with a couple extra limbs.

After her exhausting half-discussion/half-chewing out of Captain Tanaka and Commander Rhizzo, Tan had brought both Captains Thelius and Ottah to her office. Most of her ire in this instance had been directed at Thelius. Though she appreciated the saturnine Andorian taking her side in the contretemps, he had acted without her approval, a disregard for the chain of command nearly as grievous as Rhizzo's rebellion.

Ottah's bunched shoulders and pinched expression told Tan that she was about to get some payback. She waited patiently while the Edoan searched her face as if divining clues or motives.

"When are you going to dispense the Alpha Weapons?" The man eventually asked.

"What are you talking about?" Erasia asked, "What are 'Alpha Weapons'?"

Her reply made Ottah stand up to his full height. His expression hardened, his yellow eyes burned like suns. "Captain Erasia, I hoped that we had established strong enough bonds of trust, despite the recent misfortunes, to move beyond such deceptions. Certainly you weren't planning to hoard all of the armaments yourself."

Tan shook her head and blinked rapidly several times as she tried to process exactly what the man was asking her. "Ottah I don't know what you're talking about."

"While checking with my first officer on the progress of the rescue mission, I informed her of recent events here," Ottah said, his gaze still brimming with skepticism. "Commander Hsiao said she was shocked that things would devolve to the point where Rhizzo and Tanaka felt the need to create subspace weapons since we had Alpha Weapons in our possession."

"I really don't know what these Alpha Weapons could be," Erasia answered honestly, her exasperation straining her voice.

"Janice said that select starships, among the overall taskforce, were given incredibly powerful weapons such as subspace fractal inversion fields, zero-point singularity initiators, and protomatter bombs," Ottah's look was damning. Tan was certain hers was horrified.

"Oh gods," she shook her head, "Don't tell me Starfleet has actually devised such weapons?"

After a few tense, silent moments Ottah said, "I know you are a skilled medic, but there's nothing in your service record that said you were an actress. I believe you knew nothing about these doomsday weapons."

"The question I have is how does your first officer know about them?" Erasia asked. The tension she felt at being accused by Ottah had shifted to anxiety about being left in the dark.

"She's an acquaintance of the chief strategic operations officer aboard the *Galaxy*," the Edoan explained. "He told her about these weapons and she trusts him."

"I don't get it," Tan admitted. "Why equip some ships but not all?"

"Or why equip any with weapons this destructive?" Ottah added.

"We can be certain that neither Tanaka nor Rhizzo have any of these weapons," Erasia reasoned. "If they did, neither would've been so sanguine about creative subspace weapons. Further, Ottah if you had these armaments, you wouldn't be questioning me about them."

"But what about Thelius?" Ottah asked, his expression becoming ominous. "Could he possess these arms and not tell us?"

"If so, maybe because he isn't authorized to do so," Erasia said, wanting to give the querulous man the benefit of the doubt. "Whoever could authorize these weapons doubtlessly has the power to order Thelius or any other ship commander to be silent about storing them aboard their ships." Ottah nodded in agreement.

"Should we ask him?" The Edoan ventured.

"I don't think he would tell us," Erasia admitted.

"We could scan *Baltimore*?" Ottah offered.

"I'm sure that precautions were already taken for that probability," Tan reasoned.

"Well there is another possibility," the Edoan's shoulders lifted slightly before slumping. "That the Alpha Weapons were aboard *Narcissus*."

"Possibly," Erasia thought, as she stroked her chin. "Though it begs the question why Captain Landau didn't use them against the Kothlis'Ka?"

"I have no clue," Ottah confessed. "Perhaps the armada attacked before they had the time to respond?"

"There is that," Tan conceded, "though there is another possibility we haven't considered," she said, her expression darkening. Ottah looked at her askance.

"None of our ships were given Alpha Weapons," Erasia answered.

"I hadn't considered that," Ottah said, shaking his head, "But why? Even though we are closest to the Alpha Quadrant, we could still face impossible threats," he gestured, not needing to spell out the present situation facing them.

"Maybe Starfleet Command had the same concerns I had, about using such weapons near the Tholians or the Romulans," Erasia offered, not quite satisfied with the answer. These weapons conceivably did not violate any accords and they could give them a fighting chance, though at a terrible cost.

Ottah shook his head and looked down at his desk. It was the most dejected Erasia had ever seen the man. "I fear that we might never know the answer."

Main Bridge USS Empress Six Days Later...

Captain Erasia shared her first officer's skepticism, but she plunged ahead anyway. "Kothlis'Ka armada," she said, her voice clear and strong, "In the furtherance of galactic peace we ask that you alter your course." She directed Commander Sheppard to transmit an alternate heading and waited calmly for a reply.

Per Commander Rhizzo's suggestion, the taskforce had formed into a diamond slot formation, which greatly increased the breadth of the thoron shield encapsulating them all. *Empress* was the lead ship and *Ariane* brought up with the rear, with the other three in the middle. Erasia could hear its steady thrumming overriding the normal buzz of the main bridge, but not eclipsing the pounding of her heart.

Long-range sensors brought the armada into full view and it felt too close for comfort. The alien armada was vast, with the 15-kilometer seedships dominating the center and protected by attack cruisers and destroyers, each bristling with what were assuredly weapons. However Tan noted that the Kothlis'Ka aesthetic seemed to favor sharp edges and the some of the ships might have looked more aggressive than was their function.

The intercept group was trailing the massive fleet, and was just within communications range. Tan hoped that they weren't in range of the neutronium ammunition. Flanking the taskforce was the full complement of unmanned warp combat vehicles each ship possessed. Slightly bigger than Type-7 shuttlecraft, each warp vehicle boasted two type-X phasers, 40 quantum torpedoes, and five tricobalt devices.

The warp vehicles filled out the taskforce immeasurably and made Tan feel a tad more confident. She was also mollified that the unmanned vehicles meant fewer casualties.

Heeding Tanaka's advice and against the knot of distrust in her gut, Tan had placed Commander Rhizzo in charge of operating the warp vehicles. Erasia conceded that the woman's skills in tactics were enviable.

In the event that *Ariane* was unable to direct the warp vehicles, *Empress* would take over command duties. If *Empress* was impaired, the vehicles' artificial intelligence fail safes would activate and the vessels would continue the fight without a guiding hand.

Still waiting, Erasia glanced at the Arkarian manning the tactical console. She nodded at the young man and his returning smile was confident. Despite herself, Tan wished that Katrina was at tactical; as did Lt. Moeller without a doubt. Katrina had not been pleased when the captain had broken the news to her that she would she would be joining the *Narcissus* rescue mission.

Each ship was supplying a senior officer and Commander Sheppard had balked, and Tan felt guilty about thinking of sparing Thav by sending him, and Segen would've given Commander Hsiao too many headaches, so she had selected Moeller. The rescue mission would need the best security officer among the taskforce and Tan was certain that that was Lt. Moeller.

The woman had put up a fight, at first, but reluctantly accepted the inevitable. She had hand-picked Lt. Quim to replace her. The man's demeanor and bearing thus far seemed to be another indication of Katrina's good judgment.

"No response to our hail," Commander Sheppard said after an interminable time. "Shall we try again?"

Tan's two stomachs roiled. She patted them both while smoothing the front of her uniform. "Yes, once more." She really wanted to resolve this peacefully. "Open a frequency."

"Frequency open," Lt. Aarti's voice was tight, and lacking its usual mirth. Erasia could imagine that the woman wasn't just thinking about her own life and that her colleagues, but that her entire bond group, including Thav, was aboard the *Empress*. The quartet had struggled to produce offspring and it was very likely that none of them would get the opportunity.

It would be a profound loss not just to Starfleet but to the Andorian people who were suffering a severe population decline. Each Andorian life was even more precious than before and many Andorians looked on procreation as a patriotic duty.

Tan had had her reservations about Thav and Aarti's plan to bring the other two members of their group aboard *Empress*. On some level, her dark imaginings had envisioned them running into something like the Kothlis'Ka. But neither Andorian had listened to her.

Both Eirwen and Neva had been welcome additions to the civilians working and living aboard *Empress*. The captain hated leading them to their deaths too.

"Kothlis'Ka fleet," Erasia reined in her flagging hopes and put as much strength into her voice as she could. "The new heading we provided you will help you avoid encroaching into sovereign territories and will decrease the chances of misunderstandings or hostilities."

"Like the misunderstanding of them blowing the *Narcissus* to hell," Sheppard murmured, just loud enough for the captain to hear. She frowned at him.

"Kothlis'Ka armada," Tan tried again, "While we might be able to accept that a miscommunication resulted in the destruction of our fellow ship the *Narcissus*. That you were perhaps acting out of self-defense, such comprehension will not be shared by the Tholian Assembly or the Romulan Star Empire." Her stomachs twisted at how

she described the loss of the *Narcissus*, but Tan was trying to be as diplomatic as possible and to project as much empathy into her voice as she could muster.

As she waited, likely in vain, for a reply, Tan took stock of her crew. All had determined looks on their faces, though she knew them well enough to know how fragile those masks were.

"Ariane is hailing," Aarti said. "Commander Rhizzo." Tan sighed.

"Put the commander onscreen," the captain ordered.

"Captain I think we've gotten our answer," the Zakdorn said. "I suggest we send our first wave of warp vehicles to hammer home our resolve."

Erasia glanced at Sheppard. The dark-skinned human nodded in agreement. The captain sighed again.

"All right," she relented and gave the fateful order. "Commander Rhizzo, prepare the first wave. I only want them to shoot off the bows of the rear Kothlis'Ka vessels; phasers at low-yield."

"Aye sir," Rhizzo's grin was smug. The Zakdorn was going to get the war she wanted; Gods help them all.

"Captain!" Quim nearly shouted, drawing everyone's attention, even Rhizzo's.

"What is it Lieutenant?" Tan asked, her stomachs knotting with fear of Kothlis'Ka incoming.

"Long-range sensors are detecting new vessels, lots of them," the Arkarian said, a mix of confusion and relief on his face, "and they are heading on an attack vector toward the Kothlis'Ka armada!"

## Main Bridge USS Shuttlesworth

"My gods," Captain Ottah muttered, his body trembling as ship's sensors brought the attacking ships into view. A flotilla of venomous green dagger-like ships cut through space toward the Kothlis'Ka.

"What is it Captain?" Lt. Commander M'Reah asked, perched on the edge of her seat. The perceptive Caitian next asked, "You know whose ships those are?"

"It's something that I could never forget," Ottah replied, more to himself than his first officer.

"Who are they?" M'Reah asked after a respectful few moments. The question finally pried the Edoan's eyes from the screen.

"The Chakuun," Ottah coldly answered. "The shock troops of the Tholian Assembly," he added.

"I thought they were a myth," Lt. Zaiden interjected.

"No, they are very real," Ottah shook his head and tsked. "What are they teaching at the Academy these days?"

Zaiden was at loss for words. M'Reah threw the man a preserver. "Captain Ottah saw action against the Tholians during their expansionist programs."

"That was over a century ago," the Acamarian security officer replied in wonderment.

"My climb up the ladder was a tad slow," Ottah gave a quick smile before his expression clouded. "I was a yeoman aboard the *Carpenter* at the time. We were one of the first ships to respond to the Tholian attack on the New Milan colony. We didn't get there in time," he paused, and lowered his head, the failure still stinging.

"We couldn't do much to protect the colony but my captain was determined to make the Tholians pay. She ordered our ship on a pursuit course."

"Like many aboard the ship, I was livid and wanted payback cloaked in the guise of justice as well," Ottah admitted. "We thundered after the Tholians, but what we found instead were the Chakuun...and their ghost ships." He pointed at the main viewer. "It looks like the design hasn't changed in over a hundred years."

"What happened sir, when you faced them?" The eager Junior Lieutenant Calder couldn't help but interject.

Ottah shook his head again and looked sadly at the bright-eyed redhead. "The *Carpenter* was lost, destroyed by the ghost ships and their fusion casters. Captain Lawton was one of the casualties." Shocked gasps and deepened, contemplative silence followed Ottah's revelation.

"My grasp on history might be a little shaky, but I do remember ships, and *Carpenter* was a *Constitution*," Zaiden said. "It would take quite a lot to destroy one of the Connies."

"You are correct Mr. Zaiden," Ottah said, "and the Chakuun armaments were more than adequate."

"I wonder how they will fare against the Kothlis'Ka?" M'Reah asked the question everyone had to be thinking.

"I have no doubt the Chakuun will soon put on a demonstration," Ottah stated.

### Battle Lattice Chakuun ghost ship *Deathstroke*

The Cohort General's mind stretched along the psionic network, linking with the rest of the minds and eyes of her immediate subordinates. It was a facsimile of natural Tholian telepathy and took years to master. Only the best among the Chakuun warrior-elite mastered the ability to process and transmit such astronomical levels of information.

With hundreds of eyes she saw both enemy fleets. The minor Starfleet contingent stood idly by, as was their wont, waiting for someone else to finish their battles for them.

If not for the threat posed by the Kothlis'Ka to Tholian borders, the Assembly would have been content to allow the aliens to continue their rampage on to Romulus and probably Earth.

The cohort general could only imagine that the discussion among the Ruling Conclave on Tholia gleeful at the prospect of an alien armada dispatching two nuisances at once. Such thoughts were distaste to a warrior of her ilk. The cohort general preferred to fire and sword to inaction and delegation.

The Chakuun was pleased that the news the Ruling Conclave had learned about the encroaching fleet had rattled them enough to send her out to meet them. The warriors hadn't unsheathed their blades in many cycles, the last Seltorian revolt being too long for the general's liking.

The arrival of the Kothlis'Ka were like a gift from on high, and the cohort general intended to honor the war goddess the only way she knew how.

"Attack," she said and projected mentally, trembling slightly as she watched the thought ripple in a hundred directions.

As one the Chakuun bore down on the Kothlis'Ka.

### Main Bridge USS Empress

"I played with one of those models when I was a kid," Commander Sheppard said in amazement, as he watched waves of Chakuun starships dive toward the heart of the Kothlis'Ka armada. Trailing them were several waves of Chakuun fighters, which had been belted out of the ghost ship holds.

Captain Erasia watched the green, silver-winged ghost ships in stunned silence. The gods had seemingly answered her prayers. The battle might not be hopeless after all; in fact the intercept group might not have to engage the Kothlis'Ka at all.

"Captain," Aarti pulled Tan out of her reverie, "Commander Rhizzo is hailing." "Audio," Erasia ordered, not wanting to miss the battle about to begin.

"Captain Erasia," Rhizzo's voice was unusually chipper. "I guess the cavalry has arrived." At that moment the starless void erupted in violent showers of light as the two navies engaged.

"You could say that Commander," Erasia nodded.

"What are your orders?" The Zakdorn asked.

"We are going to hold position," Tan said.

"You're making a joke right?" Rhizzo asked, her voice full of incredulity.

"No, jokes are not in my skill set," Tan shot back.

"Our odds of success have just multiplied exponentially," Rhizzo replied. "We have a real chance against the Kothlis' Ka now, thanks to the Chakuun."

"We don't know how well the Chakuun will fare against them," Erasia said.

"Well certainly with our help it will increase their chances," Rhizzo rejoined.

"And it is possible that the Chakuun can handle the Kothlis'Ka without our assistance," Tan said cold-bloodedly, "which will leave this taskforce intact and able to complete our mission of exploration and contact."

"I can't believe that you would rather have us sit on the sidelines and let the Chakuun fight our battle." Now derision peppered the disbelief.

"As mission commander my job is to safeguard this group to the best of my abilities," Erasia answered, "and sending us against the Kothlis'Ka needlessly is not the optimal way to do that."

"Even to secure justice for the *Narcissus*?" Rhizzo was now aghast, "What about that?"

"I don't think adding more casualties to the list is a preferable option," Erasia replied, "I will not throw away our lives."

"Perhaps being in Tango Fleet made you gun shy," the Zakdorn charged, and the accusation stung. Tan's eyes narrowed and her mouth turned into a slash and a scalding reply boiled on her tongue. But she held it in and pushed back the bile rising in her throat.

"This is our one chance to stop the Kothlis'Ka and I'm not wasting that!" Rhizzo declared.

"Commander!" Erasia snapped.

"Ariane has cut communications," Aarti said, looking at the captain with an alarmed expression.

"And she has broken formation," Lt. Quim added.

"On screen," the captain barked. The view quickly shifted to *Ariane* angling away from the diamond slot formation. The screen flickered and the lighting brightened minutely.

"Thoron shielding is down 20 percent," Aarti said next.

"Hail them Aarti," the captain ordered.

"Ariane is not answering our summons," the Andorian ops officer said.

Erasia pounded her armrests. "All right then, if she wants to play it rough," she muttered to herself. More loudly, the captain ordered, "Commander Sheppard, bring up the *Ariane's* prefix code." She would shut the ship down again until the obstreperous Zakdorn saw reason.

Sheppard tapped furiously at his console for several seconds. Eventually he conceded defeat. Looking up at the captain, his features stormy, Sheppard said, "Captain, it appears that *Ariane* has changed their prefix code."

"Damn you Rhizzo," Erasia softly cursed.

"Captain, *Ariane* has gone to warp!" Aarti announced. "And she's taking the warp vehicles with her!" The compact *Saber*-class light cruiser shot past *Empress*, surrounded by streaking unmanned warp vehicles. They headed toward the battle.

"After the *Ariane*!" Erasia bellowed. The captain hoped she could catch and disable the quick little cruiser before they got close enough to draw the attention of either the Kothlis'Ka or the Chakuun.

### Main Bridge USS Ariane

"Empress just attempted to override our prefix code," the Nasgulian Ops officer said with a smug grin. "Bet they're shocked." On the viewer screen, aft sensors were showing the larger starship charging after them.

"Damn right," Commander Rhizzo chuckled. "Captain Erasia wasn't going to pull that one on us again."

"Captain," Lt. Commander Atwell spoke him. His voice was tight and his eyes burned like coals.

Rhizzo tensed, prepared for the rebuke. "What is it Commander?"

"You know I disagree with your actions," he told her bluntly.

"File a formal complaint," she shrugged. "I don't have time for a tantrum."

"You're the one to talk," Atwell retorted, exasperated and disgusted.

"I can have you removed from the bridge," Rhizzo nodded in the direction of the eager Zileena.

"No," Atwell shook his head. He placed a hand over his head and shook his head again. Removing the hand, he looked at her squarely, "I don't like this. But this crew needs me; you need me right now, more than ever."

"You're right," the Zakdorn acknowledged. "Thank you for this."

Atwell's expression was stony. "Damn you for it," was his reply.

### Main Bridge USS K'mpec

"Didn't we just do this dance several days ago?" Captain Tanaka said aloud. "Hail the *Empress*. We've got to get her to pull back."

"Empress is not answering our hail," the Virtili communications officer snappily replied. Tanaka nodded at the avian woman before turning his attention to Lt. Commander Mehita.

He leaned close to her and lowered his voice. "Recommendations?"

"Sir, I think you should pursue the *Empress* and talk sense into Captain Erasia. It's too late to sit out this battle now. Even if the Chakuun somehow won it, there is no telling if they won't turn their fusion casters onto us in the aftermath. One way to lessen that is to give them a helping hand."

He nodded in agreement. Sitting back in his chair, Tanaka said more loudly, "Helm, lay in an intercept course for the *Empress*."

#### Main Bridge USS Baltimore

Commander Erean didn't hide her frustration. "What are your orders Captain?" Thelius didn't answer immediately.

Instead he pondered the battlefield with the Chakuun lobbing their fusion discharges at the eerily complacent Kothlis'Ka. Explosions illuminated the void. The din was so fierce Thelius couldn't make out how it was faring for either side. His antennae writhed as his attention switched to the incipient battle brewing between the *Empress* and the *Ariane*.

"Commander Rhizzo might be brilliant, but she is also impulsive, rash, and driven by grief," he surmised. "It's dampening her talent for strategy."

"Should we join the *Empress*?" Erean asked. Clearly it was what the Argelian wanted to do. But Thelius's antennae lowered in disapproval.

"I think Rhizzo is right in this instance," Thelius said. "We shouldn't dither, not in front of both the Chakuun and the Kothlis'Ka. It is likely that the Kothlis'Ka could be persuaded to leave our sector of space, but at worst they'll be the Romulans' problem. But now that the Tholians have thrown the Chakuun into the fray, any reports back of our inaction could have serious repercussions with the Tholians. It might embolden them to start another series of expansionist campaigns."

"I hadn't thought of that," Erean admitted.

"That's why I'm the captain," Thelius quipped. Turning slightly away from her, he barked, "Helm, best speed into the middle of the firefight."

#### Main Bridge USS Shuttlesworth

Captain Ottah threw up his three hands. He didn't know what to do. *Empress* and *Ariane* were heading toward a confrontation, with *K'mpec* in hot pursuit. The Edoan didn't know which side Captain Tanaka would choose. It appeared that *Baltimore* had abandoned them all to join in with the Chakuun.

"What do we do sir?" Lt. Commander M'Reah asked.

"I wish I was the one asking that question," Ottah honestly replied, "Instead of having to make the decision." His head swiveled to take in the debacle. His flesh recoiled at the idea of helping the Chakuun, but he realized that they might be the best chance the intercept group had at surviving the Kothlis'Ka armada.

However he recognized it was suicidal not to join forces with the Chakuun together; united. He had to talk sense into his colleagues.

Ottah directed the Suliban male at the helm to intercept the *Empress*. "Let's tackle the small imbroglio before we have to deal with the bigger one," he said with forced cheer.

#### Main Bridge USS Empress

As *Empress* bore down on *Ariane*, Captain Erasia hated what she had to say next. "Mr. Quim, target the *Ariane's* engines."

The Arkanian complied. "Fire," the captain ordered. Golden spears flew from Empress, impacting *Ariane's* shields. The tough, little *Saber-class* was jolted, but quickly resumed course.

"Fire again," Erasia said. She felt Sheppard's eyes on her, but she didn't turn to meet his gaze.

She wasn't sure what she would find there, and she didn't want to second-guess herself. Quim let loose on the *Ariane* again.

"Ariane's shields are down 10 percent," Sheppard said.

"She's still not stopping," Tan shook her head. "Hit them again, this time with photon torpedoes. Full spread."

"Captain," Sheppard's voice was quiet, but his tone was insistent.

"Not now Commander," she said, too sharply.

"Captain, *K'mpec* is heading our way, on an intercept course," Lt. Aarti informed her.

Erasia shook her head. "It seems that Captain Tanaka has cast his lot with Commander Rhizzo again. Do not alter course. We'll deal with him later. Fire photon torpedoes, full spread."

"Belay that order Mr. Quim," Sheppard said.

Half out of her seat, Erasia whipped around on her first officer. "What did you just do?"

"Captain, such an action could seriously damage the *Ariane*, and in the middle of a battle with two hostile forces," Sheppard projected a damnable reasonable tone.

"Don't you think I am aware of that?" She snapped.

"Of course sir," Sheppard looked mortified.

"Then don't countermand my orders again!" She barked. On some level she knew she was taking her frustrations out on Mark, but Erasia also knew that she couldn't be seen to look any weaker than she had already.

Settling back into her chair, Tan smoothed her ruffled tunic. "You heard me Mr. Quim."

#### Battle Lattice Chakuun ghost ship *Deathstroke*

The Cohort General demanded tactical reports. They streamed in along the psi-network, through diodes attached to the general's skull.

The pain was excruciating, and for one timeless moment unbearable. And then all the streams coalesced into manageable information that she could analyze and then formulate war plans.

The battle was proceeding apace. The ghost ships had swept in among the hulking, slow Kothlis'Ka fleet, blasting them with their fusion casters.

So far the alien vessels' impressive shielding held. It was superior to anything the Chakuun had encountered. But each strike was draining the Kothlis'Ka shielding and soon the vessels would be defenseless; ripe prey.

The general wasn't overly concerned about their lack of progress thus far. Granted no ships she had ever encountered, in nearly a century of defending the Assembly's borders, had withstood such a barrage, but so far the Kothlis'Ka had proven more recalcitrant than she had expected.

Perhaps they had heard about the dreaded Chakuun and knew that they would not be as easily defeated as the Nyberrite navy or Starfleet.

A frenzied bolt pulsed into her brain, blinding the general with its brilliance. Squinting against the pain, she regained control. Her heart thudded as she ran the information through her mind, more slowly, and luxuriated on the data.

They had penetrated the shields of one of the smaller Kothlis'Ka vessels. In her mind's eye she saw it. It was huge by humanoid standards, and dwarfed the ghost ship that had been pounding it. Unlike many of the other vessels it had a rounded hull and two large transparent bulbous windows on each side. Through them the general saw strange-colored, spiky flora but no other signs of life. The ship was powered by three engines in a pyramid configuration at the rear of the ship. So far scans hadn't revealed what powered the Kothlis'Ka vessels.

"Ships Beta-14, Beta-17, and Beta-30, concentrate your fire on the engines of the unshielded ship," the general commanded. "On my mark," she added.

Beta-17 had been the ship that brought down the shield. Now Beta-14 swung into position behind the hapless vessel. Beta-30 did likewise.

She paused, waiting for the Kothlis'Ka to respond. She was expecting them to ask for leniency for their benighted ship.

Her face twitched at a new spike of information. She processed it quickly. Another Kothlis'Ka vessel was lowering its shields and moving toward the alpha ship. *Her vessel!* The Kothlis'Ka ship was far larger than the vulnerable ship. It had a unique split shell hull design with long, thin struts connecting the upper and lower hulls. Tinier struts ran along the length of both hulls. It made the ship look like a gaping mouth full of sharp fangs.

How did the Kothlis'Ka know her ship was the lead vessel? It looked no different than the others and was similarly in the thick of the alien fleet.

The general's concern was somewhat mollified by the larger vessel lowering its shield. It was a classic gesture of supplication. The general grinned. It had been far too long before any species had bowed before her.

"Contact the oncoming vessel," she ordered. "Inform them to submit or we will destroy the other ship."

"Message transmitted," her communications officer said. The man's face was masked by his helmet visor. All of the other Chakuun were in full body armor. Only the cohort general went sans helmet, so she could better integrate with the battle lattice.

After a few quiet seconds, she ordered, "Tell them they have twenty seconds to comply." The only response the general got was that the approaching vessel stopped. Its thinner connecting struts retracted, revealing a circular orifice in the center of the structure connecting the hulls. Energy tendrils began to flicker from the orifice like tongues.

"Energy readings?" She demanded.

"Our sensors are detecting high electromagnetic radiation, emanating from the opening on that vessel," the science officer informed her.

"Is it a weapon, of some sort?" The general asked.

The other woman shook her head, "I cannot say Cohort General."

"Aim our weapons at that vessel, inform all nearby ships to do the same," the general said, "And contact them once more. Tell the Kothlis'Ka fleet to stand down and that ship in particular to desist or we will fire on them."

"No reply," the communication's officer snappily responded. He didn't hide the satisfaction in his voice. The foolish young man wanted Kothlis'Ka blood. But while he was sending his entreaty the general had taken stock of the battlefield. Despite all of the energy the Chakuun had expended, only one enemy vessel had lost their shielding.

The battle wasn't going as well as the communication's officer and many other Chakuun warriors thought. "Redirect your fire on the incoming vessel," she ordered her fleet, "fire on my mark."

The other Chakuun vessels swung into position, powering their fusion casters. The cohort general stared with hundreds of eyes at the fanged vessel bearing down on her, its orifice looking like a gullet preparing to swallow them.

"Electromagnetic readings are building within the Kothlis'Ka ship," the science officer informed her.

"Mark," the general didn't flinch.

## Main Bridge *USS K'mpec*

"What the hell did she just do?" Captain Tanaka asked, pounding his armrests. The *Empress* had just unloaded a full salvo against the *Ariane*. The beleaguered *Saber* took evasive maneuvers but the barrage was too strong. Eventually, *Ariane* stopped trying to avoid being hit and turned to face the larger *Galaxy*-class ship head on. The *Saber*-class cruiser opened up on the *Empress*, pelting it with phaser blasts. Fortunately Rhizzo had not turned the warp vehicles on the Empress. They floated idly in space, silent sentinels to the monumental egotism and stupidity on display.

The bigger fight between the Chakuun and the Kothlis'Ka was all but forgotten now. Even *Baltimore*, swallowed up among the titanic ships, and *Shuttlesworth*, galloping to catch the *K'mpec* had been pushed to the back of Kenji's mind. Tanaka's focus was solely on his battling compatriots.

"Hail the *Empress*," he ordered. Seconds later, the stern visage of Captain Erasia blinked into view.

"Captain Tanaka if you're not contacting me to inform me that you will help subdue the *Ariane*, then you're wasting your time."

Tanaka didn't care for the woman's imperious tone, but he held a retort in check. "I'm asking you Captain to stand down," he said, "If you do it, I know that Gilma will."

"Commander Rhizzo has shown me plenty about how reasonable she can be and how much she respects the chain of command," Erasia scoffed. She paused, looked off screen, and said something unintelligible. Looking back at him, her pale eyes glinted like ice cubes, "It's a wonder how she made it to command a starship. I'm guessing Captain Landau had amazing pull."

"That's unfair," Tanaka said. "You know her service record."

"And we also know how eager Starfleet has been to replenish its command ranks since the wars with the Klingons and Dominion, and now the Talarian flare up," Tan said. "It was doubtless that some bad Levithi nuts got through."

"Give her another chance," Tanaka pleaded.

"Perhaps you should be having this conversation with her," Erasia retorted.

"Captain I think she will follow your lead...this time," Tanaka added quickly. Erasia's laugh was mocking.

"Stay on the sidelines," she warned before ending the communication.

Tanaka was preparing to attempt to reestablish communications with the *Empress*, when Lt. Retha interrupted.

"Sir, the Shuttlesworth is hailing."

"On screen," Tanaka ordered, a tad bit reluctantly. He really wanted another crack at Tan. He had never seen the woman act so stubbornly before.

"Captain Tanaka," Captain Ottah greeted him.

"Captain," Kenji nodded tersely.

"I hope we aren't going to engage in hostilities," Ottah floated.

"No," Tanaka glowered, "I think we've all made our share of asinine decisions over the last several days. I don't want to go over my quota."

"So, what do we do about our colleagues?" Ottah asked. Tanaka thought about trying to state his case again to Erasia, but gave up on the idea. She wanted to teach Rhizzo a lesson and while that might not be a bad thing it wasn't the optimal time.

Kenji sighed. "Let them tussle. I say we join Thelius. I've lost track of him and he might need our help."

"More likely he'll need us to pull him out of a messy situation," the Edoan surmised.

Tanaka's smile was sour. "Sounds about right," he nodded, "but doing that is better than watching these two embarrass the Fleet."

#### Main Bridge USS Baltimore

"Great Uzaveh the Infinite," Captain Thelius gasped in astonishment as the intensity of the ghost ships' weapons' fire overwhelmed the main viewscreen. After a few seconds of furious blinking, and a minute of watching the hologrid behind the display, the Andorian had already asked for reports about the barrage.

"Had it worked? Had the Chakuun destroyed the Kothlis'Ka vessel? Had they at least penetrated its shields?" He hurled the questions at his crew.

As they struggled to answer him, the main viewer reactivated and he gasped again. The Kothlis'Ka vessel was listing, with massive perforations in its hull. A cheer went up among the crew, as if they had struck the blow.

"They can be hurt after all," Lt. F'lk'yn said with heartening confidence. The Xenexian's purple eyes had a savage gleam in them.

The Chakuun swooped around the vessel like redbats, toying with their food. The other Kothlis'Ka vessels had not responded. *Perhaps they are as stunned as I am*, Thelius wondered.

The listing vessel slowly righted itself. The Chakuun trained their weapons on it again.

"Arm a tricobalt device," Thelius ordered. He wanted in on the kill. "And inform the Chakuun that we are here to assist them."

"I don't think they need our help," Commander Erean noted.

"And they might resent us trying to procure some of the spoils," F'lk'yn added.

"Do it anyway," Thelius said. "I want the Kothlis'Ka to realize it isn't only the Chakuun they need to fear this day."

"No response to our hail," F'lk'yn said. Thelius frowned. He ordered the ship to move toward the Chakuun anyway. He would dare them to fire on them. Though he had little doubt that the Chakuun could defeat them, he calculated that their masters back on Tholia hadn't given them license to start a war with the Federation. The Andorian grunted with satisfaction as *Baltimore* fell in beside one of the Chakuun vessels that now held stationary orbit, encircling the struggling Kothlis'Ka ship.

Thelius didn't know whether to admire or be chilled by the lack of response from the other alien ships to the vulnerable position of one of their fellows. Perhaps the Kothlis'Ka lived by a survival of the fittest credo?

"Reading a spike in electromagnetic energy from the Kothlis'Ka ship," the Bijani operations officer said.

"They're attempting whatever they were attempting before," Erean reasoned. Thelius nodded in agreement.

"Let's not give them the chance," the captain said. "Prepare to fire the tricobalt device at my command."

"Aye sir," F'lk'yn was jaunty. He was enjoying this. Conflict was nothing new to his tactical officer. The Xenexians were warriors, like Thelius's people once had been.

Though he would never admit it, Thelius half expected that F'lk'yn had joined Starfleet to test himself during the war with the Tzenkethi ongoing at the time.

"Intense electromagnetic buildup, emanating from Kothlis'Ka ship," the operations officer's voice rose considerably.

"Increase magnification," Thelius said, wanting to get a closer look. The hull of the alien vessel was literally throbbing, its plating bucking and buckling.

"I think that vessel is undergoing a massive containment breach," the Bijani said. Erean looked troubled.

"Back us off," Thelius said, his gut agreeing with the operation's officer's guess.

"Chakuun ships are preparing to fire," F'lk'yn said.

"No," Thelius muttered. More loudly he said, "Warn them off. Tell them what we speculate."

"Too late," F'lk'yn replied. Thelius gasped for the third and last time as he watched the Kothlis'Ka ship rip apart from the inside, the dark energies ravishing it meeting and merging with the Chakuun fusillade, creating a massive shockwave that consumed everything in its path, including the *Baltimore*.

## Main Bridge USS Ariane

Commander Rhizzo grabbed her armrests as the compact ship dove underneath a volley from the *Empress*. What the *Saber* lacked in size and firepower, it made up for in speed and maneuverability.

"Pattern kappa 010," Rhizzo ordered. Zileena worked in conjunction with the helm to execute the attack maneuver. The Zaranite lobbed several quick punches into the *Galaxy's* secondary hull before rolling away from their returning fire.

"I can do this all day," Rhizzo muttered. She wished a communications line had been open so she could've made the boast to Captain Erasia.

"But we shouldn't," Lt. Commander Atwell had leaned forward and was speaking quietly to her. "It seems that Captain Erasia has become as insistent on throwing away her career as you have."

"I'm trying to prevent greater loss of life by showing the Kothlis'Ka we have resolve," Rhizzo shot back. "The last thing we need is another Dominion, testing our resolve and finding us lacking enough to initiate a larger war."

"And what kind of impression do you think breaking formation and getting into a tussle with the *Empress* is showing them?" Atwell wouldn't back down. "It's showing them that we are undisciplined, that we are irresolute."

"I'll do whatever it takes to defend the Federation!" The Zakdorn snarled.

"Then stop this insane battle," Atwell pleaded.

"Captain," Ops Officer Vidula interceded, "The *K'mpec* and *Shuttlesworth* have broken away and are headed toward the ongoing battle between the Chakuun and the Kothlis'Ka armada."

"Which is where we should be going," Atwell added.

"Maybe that's one way to get Captain Erasia to fight the real enemy," Rhizzo grinned. "If we have to drag her kicking and screaming into the maw of our adversaries that's just what we'll do."

# Main Bridge **USS Empress**

Captain Erasia had just sat upright, after the salvo from the *Ariane* had knocked her against one side of her command chair, when Commander Sheppard piped up.

"Ariane is disengaging," the Brit said, "And is now following Shuttlesworth and K'mpec."

"It appears that Commander Rhizzo is giving up the fight," a relieved Chief Thav said from the aft engineering console.

"No," Tan shook her head. "She's just trying to draw me into the bigger battle." The Efrosian's face contorted with disgust. "How insufferable she is, to think she can force my hand this way."

"Maybe she has a point," Commander Sheppard suggested. Tan's gaze was hotter than plasma.

"Elaborate," she ordered; her voice even frigid enough to make her shiver. The first officer paused, collecting his thoughts and doubtlessly carefully selecting his words.

"Sir," he began and then stopped. Another recalculation, "Perhaps we have... gotten confused about who the real enemy is here."

"What do you mean by that?" She snapped.

"Commander Rhizzo's actions had to be addressed," he conceded, "but I think you've sent the appropriate message. Now it appears that she is back to supporting the other taskforce members."

"How long is that going to last?" Tan demanded. "She's too much of a wildcard."

"I don't deny that," Sheppard said, "I mean, really no one can after her behavior these past several days. But maybe a wildcard is exactly what we need right now."

"I don't follow," Erasia replied.

"We are grossly outnumbered and we can't be sure yet if the Chakuun will be on our side or not," the first officer pointed out. "Being unpredictable, throwing out the rule book, might just be the thing that saves us."

"Commander Sheppard might be right," Thav said, "I mean, there's nothing in the rule book to address this situation."

Tan pushed up from her seat so that she could turn around and look her old friend in the eye. "Not you as well."

The thickset Andorian shrugged, "I don't see how dropping this hatchet will make things any worse."

"I think you mean burying," Sheppard piped up.

"Excuse me?" Thav asked and the captain looked askance.

"Never mind," the first officer said, "It's a human thing." Thav laughed.

"Humans," he muttered, shaking his head. The captain smiled sympathetically.

"Let's join the rest of our taskforce," Tan said, "We'll deal with Rhizzo later." The captain felt the tension ease on the bridge with her proclamation. Her crew would much rather be facing the Kothlis'Ka than each other.

Erasia sat back down, tugging her tunic as she did so. She had to admit that an albatross had been lifted from around her neck. One that had been placed on her neck by Commander Rhizzo and one removed from it...at least for now.

That didn't sit too well with her. While contemplating that sad state of affairs, Erasia ordered the helm to pursue the *Ariane*, but this time in the spirit of amity.

### Main Bridge USS K'mpec

Captain Tanaka held on for dear life. The structural integrity field holding the ship together strained in the grip of the shockwave. The powerful aftermath of the explosion battered the *K'mpec* around like one of the toy ships he used to play with as a boy.

But this was certainly no game he knew, as he pushed past his fear to bark commands. The helm rode the waves as best she could, in an attempt to break free of the vise. Kenji refused to look in the direction of his first officer's chair. He knew that Lt. Commander Mehita was crumpled at its feet, her neck bent at a horrendous angle.

Tanaka wasn't sure if Mehita was the first to fall, but he was certain she wouldn't be the last.

## Main Bridge USS Shuttlesworth

Captain Ottah had been mere minutes behind the *K'mpec* but that had been enough. He had quickly ordered the ship to turn hard about, just scraping against the wave that had carried Captain Tanaka's ship aloft.

Despite that unfortunate turn, at least *K'mpec* still had a fighting chance. Ottah would never forget the image of the *Baltimore* vaporized before him, caught in an explosion that wiped out a great swath of the Chakuun fleet. Now the survivors appeared as lost and directionless as he felt.

But he would have to worry about them later. "Commander M'Reah, prepare a tractor beam," he ordered, "We're going after *K'mpec* and plucking her from that maelstrom."

#### Battle Lattice Chakuun ghost ship *Eviscerator*

The Cohort-Major did his best to refashion the lattice, but so many minds had been lost. The lattice had been shattered beyond repair. The weight of the void was too much to bear. He damned himself for fleetingly thinking of retreating, of skulking back to Tholia to ask the Ruling Conclave for more vessels, including Tholian ones. It would be the greatest shame he could ever incur upon his bloodline and the reputation of his people.

However he saw no other way to defeat the invaders than with the full might of the Tholian Assembly. Yet he could not admit such weakness. So, only one other option was left to him.

He sent his command through the strands that he remained in contact with, using his grief to compel himself on the skeptical and to castigate the skittish. The battle might be lost but honor could be maintained. *Die with honor*, was his only command.

#### Main Bridge USS Shuttlesworth

Captain Ottah winced, symbiotically feeling the strain of his ship as its tractor beam tried to hold on to the bucking *K'mpec* as both ships were buffeted by the shockwave. The captain had ordered the helm to skim *Shuttlesworth* along the wave, bouncing along it and using its power to propel the vessel closer to the *K'mpec*.

"Now we've just got to get out of here," Ottah said, informing no one and everyone.

"I already got something in mind," the chief engineer said from her aft console.

"Let's hear it," Ottah glanced back at the Algolian.

"We can reconfigure the Bussard collectors to intake energy from the shockwave and then expel it, pushing *K'mpec* out of the shockwave." The engineer said, "But there's a catch."

"Of course," the captain said, "What is it?"

"It's going to require a lot of energy to reinforce the collectors, to keep them from exploding and we are going to have to draw it from all over the ship, including shields and structural integrity," she said.

"Well, it will only be for a few seconds," Ottah reasoned.

"Captain," the Dekendi tactical officer interjected, "I object to this course of action."

Ottah nodded at the woman. "Noted," he said, "But we'll proceed anyway."

"Sir, it will leave us vulnerable," the tactical officer pressed.

"And if we don't act it will leave the crew of the *K'mpec* dead, and I cannot allow that," the captain declared.

"It is possible that they will be able to successfully ride out the shock wave," the Dekendi refused to let it go.

"Not without our tractor beam and we are straining the tractor beam generator as it is," the chief engineer said. "If we want to save them, we need to act and we need to act now."

"But it will leave us vulnerable against the Kothlis'Ka and the Chakuun," the Dekendi pointed at the screen. Ottah followed her finger and shuddered at the scene before them. As if suddenly powerless Chakuun ships en masse were dropping onto and diving into Kothlis'Ka vessels.

"If one of those ships hit us with weakened shielding..." the tactical officer didn't finish her sentence.

"It will only be a few seconds," the chief engineer surmised. "And then we can put the shields back up, full strength."

"It's the best option we've got," Ottah said, "But admittedly it is not without risk. However I couldn't look into my reflection again if we did not make this attempt." Ottah quickly glanced at the other bridge officers to gauge their feedback. He got a lot of affirming nods, gestures, and vocalizations. The tactical officer still looked reluctant but she kept any further concerns to herself.

"Get to work on it Chief," Ottah ordered. The Edoan informed Captain Tanaka of their plan. The human was also in agreement. Once Tanaka signed off, Ottah watched as the tall, lithe woman hunched over her terminal, her long fingers moving like arachnid legs.

She looked up moments later and declared, "Sir, its ready."

"Proceed," Ottah ordered. The lighting on the bridge dimmed and the natural noises of machinery grew quieter as power was diverted to the collectors. The viewer shifted from the *K'mpec* to the space above the warp nacelles. He held his breath as the two pulsing red collectors, each on the tip of the warp nacelles, began to inhale the chaotic energy surrounding them.

"We are ready to expel the energy," the engineer said. Ottah exhaled.

"Do it," he ordered. The engineer unleashed the energy at the *K'mpec*. Crimson pulses blasted from the collectors, scooping the *K'mpec* up and pushing it out of the wave.

Cheers erupted from the bridge as the *Akira*-class ship broke free. It took Ottah a second to realize that he was the loudest noisemaker.

Feeling a bit self-conscious, his cheeks warming over with embarrassment, the captain cleared his throat. "Contact the *K'mpec*," he ordered. On the other end, Captain Tanaka's grin was as wide as Ottah's.

"Thank you and your crew," Tanaka said. "We wouldn't have made it without you."

"All in a day's work," Ottah dipped his head. "You would've done the same for me."

"Don't be so sure about that," the *K'mpec* captain joked. The two men shared a laugh. "So what's next?" Tanaka asked after the laughter died down.

"I think we need to be the referees between Captain Erasia and Commander Rhizzo," Ottah said, his smile evaporating.

"Time to blow the whistle again," Tanaka said, just as mirthlessly.

### Main Bridge USS Empress

The loudest shout came from Captain Erasia as she watched the miracle save of the *K'mpec*. "Let's get in there and help them," she told the helm. "Once we're close enough, we'll activate the thoron shield."

"Aye," Commander Sheppard said, not hiding the grin on his face.

"Inform *Ariane* and the others," Erasia said. *Empress* swept in beside the *Shuttlesworth* while *Ariane* gracefully sidled up to the *K'mpec*.

"Ready to activate thoron shield on your mark," a subdued Commander Rhizzo said after hailing *Empress*. Captains Ottah and Tanaka quickly replied in turn.

Captain Erasia breathed a sigh of relief once the shield enveloped the taskforce. Chasing the shockwave had taken them away from the major battle ground and now she could look on with growing horror as the Chakuun rammed their ships into the Kothlis'Ka fleet, creating violent, horrific explosions. The Kothlis'Ka was trying to fight back but Chakuun's suicidal drive was overwhelming them.

"That's one way to take the fight to the enemy," Rhizzo said, over the still open channel.

"It appears to be getting results," Ottah said quietly, and Erasia heard the sadness welling in his voice.

"But why?" Tanaka asked, the outrage building in his voice. "All of this loss, it's just so senseless."

Erasia shook her head, an inkling of the Chakuun mindset blossoming in her mind. "The Chakuun know they can't win, but they're sending a message," she said.

"Yes," Rhizzo concurred. The woman agreeing with her rankled, but Tan ignored the unpleasant sensation.

"This last ditch, scorched earth tactic will not stop the Kothlis'Ka, and they know it, but it has to be their hope that such madness will make the Kothlis'Ka survivors relinquish any plans they have to sojourn through Tholian space."

"That makes sense," Tanaka said, clearly mulling over Erasia's words.

"So what are we to do?" Ottah asked, "Just watch them slaughter each other?"

Erasia didn't answer the question immediately. She already knew her answer, but she didn't want to give voice to it, she didn't want to commit her ship and crew to it. But deep down, the petty part of herself simply didn't want to give Commander Rhizzo the satisfaction.

"I think now's the time to send our own message to the Kothlis'Ka," Erasia concluded, "We want them to leave this part of space completely, and perhaps that will not be accomplished without drawing their blood."

## Captain's Ready Room *USS Empress*

Captain Erasia had to tear herself away from the bridge, but she felt a private meeting was necessary. She didn't want to expose her crew or any of the other crews to more dissension among their ship commanders.

If Rhizzo was going to balk Tan preferred the woman did it privately. So far, surprisingly, the Zakdorn hadn't voiced any opposition to Erasia's battle plan. Now Erasia waited while her compatriots mulled her idea over.

"It's going to be tricky," Tanaka said, rubbing his chin. The other commanders floated above the floor, their holograms emitted by projectors hastily installed by Chief Thay.

"A lot of precision flying will be involved," Ottah nodded, "I mean precise."

"If you're jockeys aren't up to it Ottah, you can borrow one of my helmsmen," Rhizzo offered. The Edoan frowned at the woman's bravado.

"Captain Ottah is correct," Tan said, never denying herself an opportunity to splash cold water on Commander Rhizzo. "Our ships and the warp vehicles are going to have to fly between dropping Chakuun ships and Kothlis'Ka ships either attacking them or trying to avoid them."

"For once in this fight it pays to have the smallest vessels on the battlefield," Tanaka pointed out.

"Not to mention the speediest and most maneuverable," Ottah added.

"Do you think that taking out just one seed ship will call off the dogs?" Rhizzo asked, voicing her first skepticism.

"I think it's the best way to send a clear message that we will not tolerate their further incursion into our space," Erasia said. "And let's be honest, we don't know as of yet that we actually can destroy even one of their seed ships."

"One is a good place to start though," Tanaka piped up.

"And then we can demand they leave our space," Ottah said.

"I don't know, maybe we should just let them continue onto into Romulan space," Rhizzo said, "Perhaps they can destroy each other."

"Or they could become allies," Tan said.

"But more than likely they'll set their sights on Federation space after plundering the Star Empire," Tanaka replied. "We need to stop them now, while they are preoccupied with fending off the Chakuun."

"If we are going to do this, we need to do it now...and as one," Erasia said. Ottah and Tanaka shifted to look at Rhizzo.

"This is hopeless," the Zakdorn protested, "Insane even." The woman paused and looked at her colleagues, her gaze eventually finding Erasia's. She grinned crookedly. "Captain Erasia, I didn't think you had it in you."

## Main Bridge USS Empress

Captain Erasia regretted not having the thoron shield to protect them. But each ship needed maneuverability as it navigated through the battlefield. *Ariane*, no surprise, was in the lead. The remaining warp vehicles trailed behind her.

Tan had reluctantly given control of them back to Commander Rhizzo. She hoped that wasn't a decision that she would come to regret even more than ditching the thoron shielding.

The ship rocked to the left and her head snapped to the side, "What was that?"

"A shockwave from a fusion caster discharge," Commander Sheppard answered. "Minimal damage to the starboard shields."

"Keep her steady," Erasia barked at the helm.

"Aye sir," the flight control officer replied crisply.

"I know you're a bit on edge," Sheppard leaned over toward the captain, his voice low, "but Lt. Tobiaston is doing the best she can."

"I'm aware of that," Tan said tightly, her face darkening. "Now is not the time for screw ups. There will be no do overs."

"We're all aware of that...sir," her first officer icily replied.

"Listen Mark, I don't mean to be...so...disagreeable," Erasia conceded. "I just want us to survive this."

"I would wager that everyone on this boat and aboard the other ships feels the same way," he said.

"But with Rhizzo controlling the warp vehicles," she didn't finish her statement.

"I understand your trepidations captain, but we need her being that wild card," Sheppard reminded her.

"I know," she paused as she juked in her seat involuntarily. Lt. Tobiaston angled the ship quickly around a hurtling propulsion drive that had broken off from a Chakuun warship.

"We're so close," she said, eyeing the main viewer and the monolithic seed ship now within their sights. "All we have to do is strike it and warp away to a safe distance and make our demand. And I'm spooked because it's going well so far...too well."

"Give it time," Sheppard grimly replied. "Give it time."

### Main Bridge USS Shuttlesworth

"One of the Kothlis' Ka warships is in pursuit," the tactical officer said.

"On screen," Captain Ottah ordered. The image shifted from the seed ship before them to the attack cruiser gaining speed behind them.

"Kothlis'Ka vessel is charging weapons," the Dekendi officer added.

"Alter course to engage them," Ottah said.

"Sir, are you certain?" Lt. Commander M'Reah asked. "What about the plan to attack the seed ship en masse?"

"It appears we won't be part of that strike force," Ottah frowned, "And to protect Captain Erasia and the rest as best we can, we need to buy them as much time as possible." He paused, "Inform Captain Erasia of the situation."

"Aye sir," the Caitian replied briskly.

Ottah felt the slight give in the deck plating as the *Nebula*-class vessel turned to face the oncoming warship. "Full power to forward shields." After admiring its wicked looking curves, "Tanaka was right; it is like a flying bat'leth."

"Kothlis'Ka vessel is preparing to fire," the tactical officer said with surprising calm.

"Hit them first with quantum torpedoes, phasers, and the tricobalt device, full spread," Ottah ordered. He was pleased that Juriaan struck fire. The deck plating trembled and the captain dug into his armrests as a flurry of quantum torpedoes and shafts of light from the ship's phasers and tricobalt device slammed into the Kothlis'Ka vessel.

A cheer went up on the bridge as a powerful explosion engulfed the enemy ship. "Not so tough now," Lt. Zaiden, sitting at an auxiliary console, bragged.

Ottah was just coming back down to the Edos when Commander M'Reah snapped, "Evasive maneuvers!"

"What is it?" Ottah said, right before he caught sight of the main viewer. The Kothlis'Ka ship hadn't been destroyed. The barrage had damaged it, but not enough. The ship had resumed its pursuit.

"Kothlis'Ka vessel is firing!" Lt. Juriaan said. "Neutronium rounds."

"Evasive," was all Ottah was able to get out before the slugs tore the *Shuttlesworth* to shreds.

#### Main Bridge USS K'mpec

Captain Kenji Tanaka leapt from his seat. "No, oh God no," he said as he watched *Shuttlesworth's* destruction. "We've got to go back, see if there are survivors."

"Sir," Lt. Commander Mehita said gently, "You know there aren't. No one could've survived that."

"Kothlis'Ka vessel is now advancing on us," Lt. Retha said.

"They're going to pick us off, one by one," the Gnalish operations officer worriedly opined.

"Contact *Empress*," Tanaka ordered, "We're going to have to change our plan."

# Main Bridge USS Empress

Both of Captain Erasia's stomachs twisted into knots. The main viewer was split between Captain Tanaka and Commander Rhizzo. Both had tense looks on their faces.

"I'm breaking off from the seed ship and engaging the Kothlis'Ka warship," Tanaka declared.

"You'd stand a better chance with assistance," Erasia said, making up her mind. "We'll do it together."

"I think that's exactly what the Kothlis'Ka wants," Rhizzo balked. "Look at how they've moved the seed ships away from the main Chakuun attack. They have anticipated our gambit and are trying to distract us."

Tan sighed, "You don't know that Commander Rhizzo."

"What else could it be?" The Zakdorn shrugged. "It's imperative that we press on and take out one of their seed ships."

"And leave ourselves open to being attacked from behind?" Tanaka was skeptical.

"We have little defense against their neutronium ammunition as it is, it doesn't matter if we face them head on or not," Rhizzo countered. "What we might have though is a speed advantage, which we are rapidly dwindling as we dawdle."

"Commander I'm ordering you to engage the Kothlis'Ka warship," Tan's voice brooked no further debate.

"And I respectfully decline to follow that order," Rhizzo said, a sad look on her face. "You might not believe this but I wish that things had been different." She deactivated the link.

"Damn it Rhizzo," Erasia pounded her armrests. "Lt. Quim, prepare to lock on a tractor beam on my mark."

"Let her go Captain Erasia," Tanaka pleaded, "Let it go."

A war raged within her as she replayed her entire fraught relationship with Rhizzo. She should've thrown the woman into the brig days ago, but at this moment could Tan really say that the Zakdorn's suspicions were wrong? And maybe splitting their forces might give them the fighting chance that was all she had been asking for.

"Okay," Tan said quietly, resolving the idea in her mind, "We'll let *Ariane* continue on to the seed ship while we engage the warship."

"It's really the best option we have," Tanaka said, trying to be encouraging.

"It's the best option we have *now*," Erasia said, not hiding her bitterness. "I just wish Rhizzo Godspeed."

"Me too," Tanaka solemnly nodded. A rakish and inappropriate grin spread over the human's face. "And now Captain, care to dance?"

## Main Bridge USS Empress

The words came too easily to Captain Erasia. She had spoken them now across countless battlefields, against the Klingons, Dominion, and Talarians. Her crew knew them damnably well by now too.

"Attack pattern omega two," she called out and her crew complied. The *Empress* swung under the *K'mpec*, lobbing phaser fire at the oncoming Kothlis'Ka vessel. Above, the *Akira*-class starship did likewise. Symbiotically the two starships became whirling destruction.

"No damage to Kothlis'Ka shields," Commander Sheppard didn't hide his disappointment.

"Keep firing," she commanded. "Perhaps we can keep them off balance so they won't be able to fire their neutronium rounds."

Erasia reluctantly had to order *Empress* to hold fire as she broke from the *K'mpec* to avoid colliding with the Kothlis'Ka vessel. *Empress* went below it and did her best to soften its underbelly as it passed the ship. She was satisfied to see a few shots hit home, disrupting the shield encapsulating the enemy ship.

"Minimal damage to their shields," Sheppard reported.

"That's a start," she felt encouraged. Erasia ordered the ship to come about. *K'mpec* matched her.

"Care to do this again Captain Tanaka?" She asked. She had maintained audio communication with the *K'mpec*.

"Certainly," he replied. The Kothlis'Ka vessel was slowly turning to face them. Tan couldn't shake the feeling that the aliens were toying with them and that eventually their patience would end.

"How about we add quantum torpedoes to the mix this time?" She suggested, hiding her growing fears.

"You're reading my mind," Tanaka quipped.

### Main Bridge *USS Ariane*

When Commander Rhizzo saw the spheres eject from the seed ship she understood why the Kothlis'Ka warships had left the larger vessels unattended.

"We've got incoming," Lt. Commander Atwell stated the obvious.

"Evasive maneuvers," Rhizzo also stated the obvious. "And put the warp vehicles into play. Form a layer around us." The first officer carried out her orders and the warp vehicles fell into place around the *Saber*-class ship. The extra protection didn't make the Zakdorn feel any better.

"The spheres will be on us in twenty seconds, what do we do?" Atwell asked.

"Win this fight," she replied. "The only way I know how. I'm going to activate the isolytic burst."

"What?" Atwell didn't hide his shock. "I thought Captain Erasia confiscated our weapon."

Rhizzo chuckled. "You didn't think I just had only one constructed did you?"

## Main Bridge **USS Empress**

The quantum torpedoes had done some damage to the enemy ship, but not enough. Energy beams from the Kothlis'Ka vessel lashed into *Empress*, throwing Captain Erasia from her seat. She landed painfully on her knees, an agonizing jolt running from her wrists up her arms when she threw out her hands to break her fall.

Ignoring her pain, Erasia climbed back into her seat. She dabbed at the wetness from her eyes, brought on by the smoke rising from burning consoles. "Status report," she barked.

"Hull breaches, Decks Five through Twelve," Lt. Aarti called out. "Auxiliary shielding is in place over the breaches." The Kothlis'Ka had spared them the neutronium rounds and instead had decided to carve them up with energy beams. So far her crew hadn't figured out what powered the beams, but in the end, it didn't matter. All that did was that the Kothlis'Ka warship was starting to punch through the ship's weakened shields. They were starting to win.

"We can't take much more of this," Commander Sheppard said through gritted teeth. A nasty gash ran from the corner of the man's eye to under his chin. Blood poured through the wound and onto the deck plating. The man needed medical attention, but she needed him more on the bridge.

"I know," she said, "But we only have to distract this ship to give Rhizzo the time she needs."

"And how long will that take?" Sheppard voiced skepticism. She didn't have to be a Betazoid to tell that the man didn't trust the unpredictable Zakdorn.

"As much time as it takes," she snapped, feeling terrible for the emotional outburst and a bit defensive about letting Rhizzo go the final time.

She pondered if she would go to her grave wondering if she did the right thing.

#### Main Bridge USS K'mpec

The ship rocked so hard Captain Tanaka's teeth clattered.

"Sir, Engineering is reporting a warp core breach," Lt. Commander Mehita informed him.

"Damn it," Tanaka said. "Order everyone to evacuate the ship!"

"Sir, we can't send them out into that!" The Ktarian balked. She pointed at the cracked viewscreen, which was still displaying the hellish battle around them.

"What other choice do we have? A likely death or a certain one? Do as command," he said, his tone inviting no further debate.

"Yes sir," the woman said crisply.

"Hopefully the Kothlis'Ka will ignore the escape pods. They might not see them as a threat."

"We were spared once," Mehita said. "I don't think we can count on such luck again."

"You better hope so, because I want you on a pod."

"No sir."

"That's an order!"

"Which I'm refusing to follow."

"I could relieve you, bring you up on charges!"

"Sir, somehow I don't think I'm going to see the inside of a Starfleet courtroom or stockade."

"Heh, I think you're right. I guess you'll be staying with me." He looked around the shattered bridge. None of the officers had left their post. "I guess that goes for the lot of you huh?" They all nodded grimly. Tanaka couldn't help but smile.

"So, what's the plan sir?" Mehita asked.

"We ram this ship down their throats," Tanaka answered.

### Main Bridge *USS Ariane*

"Firing the tricobalt devices, for all warp vehicles," Commander Rhizzo informed her crew. Her fingers moved deftly over the inset arm controls and she raptly watched as the spears of energy punched through the onrushing spheres.

Thankfully they could not withstand the onslaught and were demolished. The bridge cheered, but Rhizzo kept her satisfaction to herself this time.

That was only the preview. "Training the warp vehicles on the seed ship," she said. Turning to Atwell, she ordered, "Prepare the isolytic burst. We'll fire them at the same time."

"Aye sir," her first officer had long given up arguing with her. She smiled at him, thankful for the surrender.

"It's ready," he said moments later.

Rhizzo leaned back in her seat, confident in her course of action. "Fire."

#### Main Bridge USS Empress

"The *K'mpec* has less than a minute before a full warp core breach," Chief Thav informed the captain. On the main viewer she saw the *Akira*-class ship driving toward the Kothlis'Ka attack cruiser, seemingly unfazed as the alien craft blasted chunks of its hull away.

"They've lost shields, and all major systems, including life support," Lt. Aarti said. "They've also started ejecting escape pods."

"Drop shields and beam anyone who is still on that vessel, off of it," Erasia said without hesitation.

### Main Bridge *USS Ariane*

"My God," Commander Atwell gasped as space opened up and devoured the seed ship. The combined might of the Ariane and the warp vehicles had opened a massive subspace tear that cleaved through the Kothlis'Ka fleet. The surviving ships scattered, trying to avoid oblivion. Commander Rhizzo pumped her fist and a larger shout erupted across the bridge.

"Take that," the Zakdorn crowed. Composing herself, she then said, "Open a channel and give offer them the chance to surrender." It wasn't enough to drive the Kothlis'Ka from their space; they also had to pay for murdering Captain Landau.

"Sir," Atwell protested.

"Not now," Rhizzo snapped, "Do as I command."

"It's not that sir," Atwell snapped back. "We're being drawn into the subspace tear."

"What?" Rhizzo glanced at the screen before looking at him. "Reverse engines, maximum warp."

"I wouldn't recommend that sir," Atwell pointed out; "The subspace tear is drawn to our warp core."

"Switch to impulse then!" Rhizzo barked. She felt the tug of the ship towards the gaping mouth. She could feel doubts clawing at her edifice of certainty.

"Impulse won't be strong enough," Atwell said, his eyes clouding for a moment. "Perhaps we could jettison the core, ignite it and neutralize it. It has been done once before, in the Briar Patch."

"I don't want to be this far out without a warp drive, but if that's the only thing that can save us," she paused, waiting to see if anyone else had any better ideas. There were no takers. "Then do it."

Klaxons went off as she felt a deep rumble from the heart of the ship. "Warp core has been ejected," Atwell informed her.

"Destroy it," she ordered. She could see the hole in space growing larger, the mouth widening as the ship drifted towards it.

The main viewer was overwhelmed and the ship was buffeted by shockwaves as Atwell carried out her order. Blinded momentarily by the intense flash, Rhizzo's vision returned in blotchy patches.

"Has the subspace tear been eliminated?" She asked, unable to see for herself.

"Not quite," Atwell answered, his tone somber.

"What does that mean?" Rhizzo rubbed her eyes, willing her sight to return.

"The tear was too large. Our actions merely created fractured it," the first officer replied.

"Damn," Rhizzo said. "What is our situation?"

"That's the bad part," Atwell began. Rhizzo never heard what else the man had to say.

# Main Bridge USS Empress

"How many did we get?" Captain Erasia asked. Sheppard shook his head, a sorrowful cast over his features.

"Only forty-seven," he said morosely. "They're in the auxiliary cargo bay."

"Helm, get us away from the fireworks! Maximum warp!" The captain ordered as the ship came hard about. Tan wanted to watch the conflagration from as safe a distance as possible. Thanks to the deft efforts of her flight control officer, Empress was able to do just that. The main viewer dampened the violent explosion as the *K'mpec* collided with the Kothlis'Ka attack cruiser, impaling the ship before both were vaporized.

"Sweep up all of the survivors in the escape pods," Tan ordered after a moment, unwilling to let her surging emotions engulf her.

"Aye captain," Sheppard replied, setting immediately to work.

"Aarti do a sweep for the *Ariane*, let's see if she's somewhere in this mess." The three way battle had littered the space around them with fragments and hulks of starships.

"Yes sir," the capable Andorian said.

"We've recovered another two hundred fifty survivors," Sheppard said after an interminable time.

"No sign of Ariane," Aarti said, right on the man's heels.

"Could it be interference from all this space junk?" Thav asked his bond-mate.

"It could be...but I don't think so...Captain, I've detected massive isolytic readings from multiple subspace tears off of our port bow."

"Gods no Rhizzo," Tan breathed. "She didn't. She wouldn't. How could she? Where did she?" The questions poured from her. And she didn't know what frustrated her more, never getting the answers or deep down knowing she should've asked these questions long ago. She trusted Rhizzo to give up all of her weapons, and trust was a condition the woman hadn't earned.

"A Kothlis' Ka warship is on an attack vector," Lt. Quim informed her.

"Prepare to meet them," Erasia ordered, though she didn't know how much damage her ship could take.

The oncoming ship stopped before it came within reach of *Empress's* weapons. "Captain, the Kothlis'Ka vessel is hailing us. Audio only," Lt. Aarti said, the shock clear in her voice.

"On speakers," Tan said, and immediately regretted her decision. A harsh screeching blared through the speakers, resolving into a guttural garble. It vaguely reminded her of the Breen speakers.

"Can you make that out?" She asked the operations officer. Aarti frowned.

"It's a melding of several Beta Quadrant languages," she said after a moment. "I think the rough translation is 'Fought. Well."

"Kothlis'Ka vessel," Tan spoke, but the ship began to turn away from her. It joined the remaining ships, far fewer in number, and the armada continued on its inexorable quest.

Erasia sat in her seat, stunned. "Sir do we pursue?" Commander Sheppard asked.

Tan looked at him with a jaundiced eye, "And do what exactly?"

"Well, I-um-I'm not sure sir," he admitted.

"No, we search for the *Ariane* and see if there are any survivors, and after that's done, I'm relinquishing command and giving the ship to you." Now it was Sheppard and her crew would wear the dumbstruck looks on their faces.

Captain's Ready Room USS Empress Two days later...

"Captain, we have not found any survivors or a trace of the *Ariane*," Commander Sheppard reported.

"Lost with all hands," Tan grimly shook her head. The two settled into an uneasy silence as they contemplated the loss of the Ariane. Eventually, Erasia placed her hands on her desk and pushed up from her chair. "That's that then," she said. "This office is yours."

"I'm sorry sir, but I can't accept this promotion," Sheppard shook his head. "I won't accept it sir. The *Empress* has a perfectly good captain as it is."

"If I'm so perfect why did I let Rhizzo countermand my orders and use outlawed weapons?" She charged, her anger coming to the fore. "Why was my only plan one that signed the death warrants of hundreds of my fellow crewmen?"

"Sir, the Kothlis'Ka presented us with a no win scenario," Sheppard said. "There was little to be done that was different than what you did. I'm sure that Captain Tanaka told you the same."

Erasia laughed bitterly. She had indeed gotten a similar talking to from Captain Tanaka. *Empress* had been able to beam out the *K'mpec's* bridge crew. It had been one of the few wins from the battle.

"Don't worry I'm not going to hunker away. I think I can still be of some use. With Dr. Segen's loss, you are in need of a chief medical officer." Unfortunately the Mazarite had been sucked into space through one of the hull breaches perforating *Empress's* hull.

"You'll be of more use to us in the center seat," Commander Sheppard declared.

"I've already informed you of my decision," Tan stood ramrod straight. "If you can't handle the big chair, say so now and I'll promote Lt. Moeller or hand off the reins to Captain Tanaka."

"I think Captain Tanaka feels the same way I do," Sheppard ventured. "He won't accept them."

"I guess its Katrina's ship then. As soon as she returns," Erasia said. Hours ago, Aarti had informed her that the shuttles sent out to retrieve any *Narcissus* survivors were on their way to the battlefield, and thankfully with some survivors.

"Permission to speak freely Captain?" The human's jaw was tight. Tan waved her allowance. "I can't believe that a woman who just faced impossible odds and came out on top of them is a coward."

"What did you just say?" Erasia's hackles rose at the accusation. But Sheppard held his ground.

"Perhaps the big chair is just a little too big for *you* right now," the first officer charged. "We've lost a lot, but we've also survived, and we've sent a message to the Kothlis'Ka that even got a response from them. Despite Rhizzo's controversial methods, it's arguable that they played a role in the Kothlis'Ka leaving us in peace, not as a symbol of their dominance but as an equal foe, someone that had earned their respect. I don't know what that could mean in the long term, but it was your plan that brought that about, albeit with some tweaking from Commander Rhizzo.

None of us expected to be alive after that battle, but here we are, arguing now. It's a miracle. So suck it up and treasure it."

"After you finished?" She asked.

"There's more I could say," he admitted, "but I don't want to have to clean any more nacelles with a toothbrush."

Erasia eased, "It's just, the responsibility, the weight of this...it's just very immense, and I can't help but second guess myself, wondering if this whole thing could've been averted. I'm also worried about the response from the Tholians and especially the Romulans." Aarti had projected that the remnants of the Kothlis'Ka armada remained headed toward the Hobus system in Romulan space.

"Let Starfleet and the Federation Council worry about that," Sheppard offered. "We did our duty and that's all that matters."

"Maybe you're right," Erasia said, a weight lifting off her shoulders. "About that captaincy...can I have it back?"

"Actually," Sheppard grinned, "The big chair is awfully comfortable." The two shared a welcome laugh.

"Thank you Mark," Tan said, holding out her hand. The first officer clasped it.

"The least I could do," he smiled. "We all need a good swift kick every now and then."

"Excuse me?" She raised a reproachful eyebrow.

"Proverbially speaking of course," he quickly added.

"I guess I better get out there and inform the crew that I'm sticking around," she smiled.

"I think that is for the best, I'm sure that they will be glad, though I'm going to be a little sad about having to cancel my party in the lounge."

"So you were preparing a party to celebrate your promotion?"

"Well, ah, it was all for boosting the ship's morale."

"Yeah, right."

"Seriously. Honestly Captain." Sheppard said, starting to get perturbed.

"Just joshing Mark," the captain said. The man exhaled in relief.

"That's good to hear," he replied.

"As was your talking to. It helped put things back into perspective. No more pity parties, I promise."

"Aye, aye sir."

"And don't cancel your party. I think we all need to celebrate, we need to treasure our victory."

"That's a very good idea sir," Sheppard said.

"Don't push it," Captain Erasia good-naturedly chided as side-by-side they stepped onto the bridge.

#### THE END