



Epsilon Indi Calling
A Novella for Bravo Fleet by CrimsonTactic

Dramatis Personae

// USS *Arcturus*, Main Engineering

// Docked at Epsilon Indi Station

// Early January, 2399

The sharp footfalls of Akintoye Okusanya's boots on the deck plating cut through the hum of activity in Main Engineering. She was being trailed by a gaggle of lieutenants with their holographic PADDs open, taking copious notes on her orders as she swept through the compartment. It generated a chorus of "Yes, Captain Okusanya" in her wake, which had long since lost its novelty. After four years of supervising construction, she had become accustomed to being addressed by her rank alone, but a commissioned starship had only one person aboard who could be addressed in that matter, and, as Captain of Engineering, she had to step aside for the *Arcturus*'s new master.

"Computer, status report," Okusanya ordered, as she stepped up to the master control station on the railing ringing the ship's primary warp core. It was a dilithium swirl chamber running from floor to ceiling in the cavernous three-story reactor compartment of main engineering. The core itself spanned twenty decks, making up the beating heart of the *Arcturus*. Nearly three times the diameter of the original class-nine warp core found aboard the *Intrepid*-class, even as a woman of science found she found herself occasionally awed by the sheer power that would be contained behind six inches of transparent duranium and a magnetic containment field. Indeed, the mood in the room was ebullient as the crew prepared to finally bring the ship many of them had helped build to life for the first time.

"All monitored systems are operating within acceptable parameters. Pre-start checklist complete," the computer reported, crisply. Launching a new starship was not an easy or quick task by design; as one of the largest and most complex vehicles ever produced by Starfleet, every last relay and conduit needed to be monitored as the reactor came to full power. After a short shakedown cruise, the *Arcturus* was destined to test her full potential as a long-range command platform with a trip to the Delta Quadrant, so everything had to be perfect before they crossed through the Barzan Wormhole.

Okusanya tapped the intercom control on the panel, sounding a bosun's whistle across the ship. "This is Engineering. Be advised: warp core startup is beginning. All departments should prepare to switch to internal power in twelve hours," she said.

Once the all-call had ended, the captain of engineering took a deep breath and keyed in the command sequence to begin the slow start of the ship she had spent the last four years of her life designing and building. The first step was injecting plasma from the EPS grid into the reaction vessel to raise its temperature gradually to avoid the damage that would be caused by simply dumping deuterium and antideuterium directly into the cold chamber.

“Engine core temperature raising along expected curve,” one of the lieutenants reported from another panel. “Estimating two hours to antimatter injection.”

“Good. Lieutenant T'se, schedule level-one diagnostics for all systems connected to the primary EPS grid on a staggered schedule to coincide the power-up sequence. We're leaving nothing to chance,” Okusanya ordered, turning to the young Vulcan who was at the forefront of her coterie, who gave her the same rote response as the others. “I am going to report to the captain. Inform me if anything changes,” she said to the group, before turning on her heel and leaving the reactor room.

Passing by the primary workspaces aft of the warp core in the merely-double story area main engineering, she took the starboard door to a transporter pad, which was mirrored by ones on the main bridge, battle bridge main sickbays, and saucer engineering deck. “Bridge,” she ordered, before feeling the subtle tingle of the transporter beam energizing. Moments later, she was on the aft end of the ship's enormous main bridge, where the crew was hard at work performing their own system checks.

She managed to pass by unnoticed to the door leading towards the captain's extensive deck one suite. A lobby with stairs down to deck two and three turbolift alcoves also contained a desk for the captain's chief yeoman. The *Arcturus's* commanding officer had a more elaborate office than many flag officers did. Okusanya's eyes were drawn up to the skylight briefly when a workbee passed overhead before she stopped in front of the older Zakdorn woman's desk. She wore a gold uniform that matched the senior officer's, though with a small patch indicating her enlisted status rather than Okusanya's four silver pips.

“Is she free?”

“The captain is with the doctor right now, but you can go right in,” the yeoman replied, with a smile. A master chief petty officer, she'd spent decades in the service of

paperwork and bureaucracy, but generally seemed to lack the officiousness of most members of her species, at least so far in Okusanya's interactions with her.

Okusanya nodded, and then passed through the doors. The light strains of jazz were coming from the hidden speakers around the room and there was a pleasant scent of orchids, roses, and peonies from planters under the viewports and glass hydroponic vessels on the shelves behind the desk. Before her career as a diplomat and starship captain, the ship's new captain had an equally-impressive twenty-year career as a botanist. The room was larger than most ready rooms, with doors leading off on either side to the captain's "space cabin" and a small briefing room, though it also contained a small table and chairs of its own, as well as a sunken conversation area with impressive views of the starboard side of the ship.

"Come in, Akintoye," Fleet Captain Hayden said, standing up from her seat by the viewports. She wore the informal bomber jacket available to command-level officers, with a silver bar under her four pips signifying her status as one of the most senior captains in the fleet, just a half-step below flag rank. "Have you met our new CMO, yet?" she asked, gesturing to a Bajoran man wearing a white uniform with a blue yoke on the couch in front of her. He turned around and offered a smile.

"I haven't. It's nice to meet you, Doctor Alenis," Okusanya said, as she cleared the space between them.

"Alenis is my first name, but you're welcome to it. I get that all the time, because I prefer a more standard arrangement of my names," Alenis said, not breaking his smile as he stood up and extended a hand. Okusanya took it with a slight blush; she didn't like being on the back foot. He, too, bore the rank of captain, meaning the combined years of experience between the three officers in that room was probably close to a century. With a crew of 2,500 and an extended mission in front of them, Starfleet had made sure that there would be enough command experience on the senior staff to handle any obstacle they would face in the future—not to mention contingency command scenarios that would need to be implemented in the less-than-unlikely event of one of their deaths during their travels in the Delta Quadrant.

"What can I do for you?" Hayden asked her chief engineer, as she and the doctor sat back down.

“Just to say, Captain, that I have begun the MARA start sequence and we’re on schedule for leaving port on time and at full capabilities,” Okusanya replied, sitting next to Anjar. “I just wanted to make sure that there weren’t any last-minute changes to my instructions.”

Hayden nodded. “I didn’t have any doubts. This ship has been your baby for the last four years, after all,” she replied, with a genial smile. While the two of them hadn’t addressed it directly, Hayden had been gracious about the formal transition to her command in place of Okusanya’s, going out of her way to show deference to her expertise on the ship’s systems, which had generally mollified her ego. Still, she had held out *some* hope that the oversized ready room suite could have been hers. “We’re going to continue on the schedule I’ve already outlined. Starfleet hasn’t thrown me any curveballs, yet.”

“I’d hope not, given how long this mission has been on the books,” the doctor interjected. Okusanya glanced at him and couldn’t help but notice that he lacked the earring typical of Bajorans, and, combined with the name, she wondered what else he did differently from his people.

“I’m just grateful that Starfleet *hasn’t* repurposed this ship in the four years I’ve been building her. Exploratory missions have been scrapped to send ships to our borders for far too long, and her systems would be wasted within our borders,” she replied. The *Arcturus* had been specifically designed beyond the normal *Odyssey*-class specs to be a long-range exploratory flagship, not to head up task forces relatively close to home like her sister ships. She was proof-of-concept for the second block of the class, and the result of a desire to finally start sending larger groups of ships back out into the unknown, rather than the more independent *Century* and *Vesta*-class ships which had managed to avoid the cuts and reassignments that other classes had seen since Mars.

“I couldn’t agree more, Akintoye. The *Lafayette* was a good assignment, but I’m eager to put some distance between myself and showing the flag at flashpoints along the border,” Hayden replied, referring to the *Sovereign*-class ship that she had famously commanded through a number of important diplomatic missions in the last decade or so.

They’d be making a lot of second contact missions with races that hadn’t seen any Federation ships since *Voyager* passed through nearly thirty years prior, as well as first contact with races that *Voyager* didn’t have the time or fortune to encounter, so it made

sense that a diplomat like Hayden would be leading this mission. Though Okusanya had not spent much time with her new commanding officer, her reputation as being tough-as-nails and whip-smart had preceded her. There was a reason that she was one of the few fleet captains active in the fleet; she had the gravitas and experience to be at least a vice admiral based on her time in service, but she would be wasted behind a desk and not at the tip of the spear.

“If I remember correctly, our erstwhile First Officer served under you there?” Okusanya asked. He was to be one of the final crewmembers to arrive, and had otherwise been managing the composition of the ship’s company remotely from Earth.

Hayden nodded. “You read his file?”

“I like to know who I’m working with,” Okusanya replied, with a tight-lipped smile, meaning that she liked to know who had superseded her in the role. ‘Read’ was probably not the right word so much as scoured, including all of the addenda she had access to; Lancaster was nothing if not impressive. She probably would have had the same reaction, though, had someone else been brought in to oversee the engine room and she’d been made Hayden’s number one instead.

“Fair enough. The three of you are going to be working closely together in the coming months. Computer-aided psychological profiling suggests you’ll be compatible,” Hayden replied, with a chuckle. Had virtual intelligences become sophisticated enough to predict compatibility between sentients? “He’s one of the most effective first officers I’ve ever had.”

“His husband will be one of my assistant chiefs in sickbay, too. Extremely high marks in medical school and a decade of nursing experience to boot,” Anjar chimed in. “I didn’t know him very well, but he was on my staff when I was on Starbase 39-Sierra.”

“He’s married?” Okusanya blurted.

“Very happily, from what I know... Why?” Hayden replied, eying her.

Okusanya paused. “Well, he doesn’t really seem the type, from what I’ve heard about him.”

Hayden chuckled. “I hope you mean his reputation for being a bulldog when it comes to the regulations,” she said.

“Well, that, and a meteoric rise through the ranks to captain a full ten to fifteen years before any of us sitting here now. Officers like that just aren’t usually the family type.”

“Luca is the reason he left the *Lafayette*, actually. So they could be together on Earth while Luca finished his residency at Starfleet Medical. I tried my very best to keep him aboard ship, but that was the non-negotiable line for him. It’s how Michael ended up with the task of planning our mission, and that’s why I wanted him back: he’s young, ambitious, and, frankly, authoritarian, but he’s got a soul and doesn’t slave himself *completely* to the logic of advancing his own career,” Hayden explained, looking between the two of them. Ah, there it was: the weakness that couldn’t be sussed out from a service jacket.

“It’s admirable. Plus, he lets you be the popular face of the ship, while he makes ensigns cry for having their commbadges askew, with all due respect, ma’am,” Anjar interjected, with a grin.

“No comment,” Hayden said, smirking at him.

//Waverider *Ella Fitzgerald* (NCC-84000-2)

//Deep Space, En Route to Epsilon Indi

It was the middle of the night, but Captain Lancaster was still hard at work at a fold out desk in the crew cabin of the brand-new Waverider shuttle *Ella Fitzgerald*. He’d donned a pair of glasses his husband had replicated for him that made staring into his holographic display a little more comfortable thanks to an extremely precisely calculated set of lenses and prisms within the frames to disperse light in just the right way to avoid eye strain; even knowing the science it felt like an affectation, but the alternative was drops every half-hour to keep his vision from going blurry. Reviewing rosters and technical specifications for upwards of sixteen hours a day had been his life for the past four years, and joining the *Arcturus* meant more of the same.

He glanced over at Sheppard, who was sleeping on one of the lower bunks and smiled to himself. After several years of shore duty, both of them were eager to be back on duty aboard a front-line starship, but Lancaster would have stayed on Earth permanently if it meant staying with him. Sheppard’s strong back muscles were dappled with blue-green

light from Lancaster's preferred holographic UI; the young doctor was long-accustomed to sleeping through his partner's need to work into the wee hours, though he often chastised him for it the morning after.

The upsides of being married to someone as caring and affectionate as Sheppard outweighed the minor downsides of being married to a doctor, which meant far too much attention paid to his eating habits (not enough), weight (also not enough), and general disposition (grumpy and overworked), but beyond that Sheppard was someone that he always felt safe, protected, and listened to around, though that was something he was only willing to admit to Sheppard himself. Sheppard was his counterweight, keeping him grounded when he was liable to forget to eat, exercise, or even blink, and spend the entire day on paperwork.

Years of work had gone into planning the *Arcturus's* mission, based on logs from *Voyager's* early years in the Delta Quadrant and extreme long-range scans provided by the Federation's deep space telescopes. Other than a few key appointments that Captain Hayden had made herself, he'd meticulously selected each of the 2,500 officers and crew that would be making the initial three month cruise into the Delta Quadrant, and then, pending a positive evaluation, a ten-year survey of the Nacene Reach with a handful of other starships in tow.

Even still, with 95% of the ship's crew already onboard and waiting for them to arrive, he was making sure he hadn't missed a single detail on the roster. Once they were through the wormhole, getting replacement personnel would turn into at least a two-month ordeal with the long period of the Barzan Wormhole, so everything needed to be set and done, now.

"Time."

"The time is 0330 hours."

Lancaster sighed, taking his glasses off and setting them on the table, as he brushed aside the hologram to turn it off. He glanced at 'his' bunk opposite of Sheppard's, but instead took off his commbadge and set it next to his glasses, before crawling in behind him and wrapping his arms around him. Sheppard murmured and then rolled around in his sleep, holding him close like he always did when Lancaster crept into bed in the wee hours in what was their ritual when they were both on space duty together, one that

they'd fallen out of the practice of living on Earth, where both of them could easily be in bed before 2200 hours on most nights.

The first night they'd spent on the shuttle, he'd felt a little silly cramming both of their tall frames into one tiny bunk, so he'd slept on the other side of the compartment instead, but it didn't last more than twenty minutes before his insomnia demanded co-sleeping. Such a physiological need for comfort was uncomfortable for Lancaster, as he'd built a career on being a hard-ass, but he really struggled when the two of them were physically separated. It wasn't especially becoming of a Starfleet captain to need a cuddle buddy just to go to sleep, when he should theoretically be able to sleep in an E.V. suit or in a muddy foxhole. That was an area where Sheppard seemed to have a little less co-dependence, though, because he'd gotten used to being the first one in bed.

Still, when he was alone with his thoughts, he wasn't ashamed to admit that he liked the way that Sheppard's warm skin and firm muscles felt against him as he started to slip out of consciousness. His scent reminded him of home. With his uniform still on, he was warm enough that they didn't need a blanket, especially with the crew cabin tucked up under one of the craft's integrated warp nacelles, where the superheated plasma fought with the small vessel's environmental controls, even with thirty-five centimeters of solid duranium plating and radiation baffle between the warp coils and the bunk. Lancaster was just about to finally fall asleep to his partner's rhythmic breathing when the comm chimed.

"Incoming distress call: USS *Janice Rand*, Priority One," the computer chirped, which shook Lancaster right back to consciousness, feeling suddenly so much tired for his attempt to sleep than if he hadn't lain down. He could practically hear his own heart pounding as that jolt of adrenaline hit his sleep-deprived nervous system.

"Of course," Lancaster muttered, rolling back out of the bunk to sit on the edge as he started to collect himself, shaking off the cobwebs and moving fully into emergency mode. "Are we the closest vessel, computer?"

"Affirmative."

"Alter course and engage at maximum warp. Send a communiqué ahead to the *Arcturus* to inform them we may be delayed," Lancaster said, as Sheppard stirred, putting an arm

around his shoulder as he sat up next to him. The contact didn't help him want to actually get out of the bunk.

"Confirmed. Twelve minutes to intercept."

"Wassup?" Sheppard mumbled, blearily nuzzling against Lancaster's neck. A days worth of unshaven stubble tickled and made the young captain again want to just let someone else handle this problem.

"Distress call," Lancaster said, rubbing his face into Sheppard's hair, briefly. He smelled like almonds and grass, which Lancaster had to shake off and sit up straight.

"Computer, summarize mission and complement of the *Janice Rand*, as well as the nature of their distress call," he ordered.

"*Raven*-class courier on circuit between Earth Spacedock and Epsilon Indi Station. Crew complement of Four. Ten passengers and assorted cargo. Distress call indicates general systems failure and multiple medical emergencies," the computer reported, as Lancaster grabbed his commbadge and put it back on. Little starships like the *Raven*-class were common plying the lanes between Federation planets, carrying things and people not important enough to need space on a larger or faster starship. They had a reputation for extreme reliability, so Lancaster was surprised to hear that one of them might need their help.

Sheppard perked up at the mention of a medical emergency. "A ship like that should have at least an EMH. The damage must be bad if that system was knocked offline," he said, pulling his shirt on and then grabbing his jacket.

Lancaster tapped his badge. "This is Captain Lancaster. I need everyone up front, now," he said, leading the way out of the cabin and through the central lounge area of the *Waverider*, which had a large, round table flanked by two couches as the craft narrowed towards a point where the cockpit was located.

The young captain slid into the helm to review their remaining travel time, while Sheppard took one of the science stations. Shortly after that, Lieutenant Evandrión sat down at the co-pilot's station. A Deltan, he had an exceptionally-high aptitude for personal combat and small-unit tactics that flied in the face of stereotypes of his race's purported pacifism which made him a perfect choice to lead the *Arcturus*'s security department, though Lancaster thought that this was probably something cultivated on

purpose in response to that stereotype. He was the sort of officer that could be trusted to analyze security situations methodically and pragmatically.

“What’s going on, Captain Lancaster?” a somewhat-nasal voice asked, as the doors to the cockpit opened again. Lieutenant Ohala was the ship’s new Chief Communications Officer, and Lancaster had immediately regretted selecting him when the Bolian had first opened his mouth. Trained in both linguistics and the technical aspects, the only reason that Lancaster hadn’t left him behind on Earth is because he was probably the most qualified communications officer in Starfleet for a mission of their type. “Anything I can help with.”

“I was just about to explain that, Lieutenant,” Lancaster said, tersely. “We have picked up a distress---,” he started.

“Ah, I see it now. Priority one--,” Ohala interrupted.

“Lieutenant,” Lancaster warned, even more sharply, turning to glare at the chatty junior officer. “A priority one distress call from the starship *Janice Rand*. She’s a packet liner with seventeen passengers and five crew reporting general systems failures and medical emergencies. We’re the closest vessel,” he explained.

“Any signs of combat, sir?” Evandrion asked.

“Nothing on long-range sensors. We’re less than a day from Epsilon Indi, so I can’t imagine any threats being this deep within Federation space,” Lancaster replied. “When we arrive, Evandrion, Sheppard, and myself will transport over to render aid. Mr. Ohala will remain behind.”

“With all due respect, Captain Lancaster, I think that I’d be useful over there. I’m an engineer, you know,” Ohala said. “And, really, who knows what kind of--”

“Mr. Ohala, if I want your opinion, I will ask for it. And if we do by some happenstance require your unique set of experiences, I will send for you. Otherwise, I’m not leaving this shuttle unmanned in the midst of an emergency when we may need its systems. Is that understood?” Lancaster said, briefly feeling a moment of tunnel vision as the Bolian seemed to have no idea how irritating he was being.

“Understood, of course--,” he said, sounding like he was going to add a ‘but,’ but Sheppard turned around and warned him off by shaking his head.

"I've pulled the manifest, Captain Lancaster. There are several Tarl onboard, whose unique metabolisms require special pharmacological solutions. I'm going to head aft and replicate them, just in case," Sheppard said.

"Proceed, Doctor," Lancaster replied, feeling a moment of cognitive dissonance as he flashed back to having his face smashed against Sheppard's pecs just half a minute prior. "Evandriion, is there anything of note on the ship's specs?"

"No, sir. No weapons, minimal shields, and a top speed of warp five-point-nothing. The armory only consists of five hand phasers and they're locked permanently on the stun setting," the security officer reported.

"Nevertheless, we're going over armed," Lancaster said, looking at him. Evandriion nodded without Lancaster needing to explain that decision based on protocol, which made Evandriion seem leaps and bounds more tolerable to be around than the Bolian, though Lancaster always wondered how much Deltans' natural empathy (and possibly the lack of one-hundred percent efficacy of their pheromone blockers) made them *seem* more tolerable than they were.

Evandriion nodded and went aft to prepare their utility kits. Ohala moved forward cautiously to the co-pilot's station, seeming to finally realize that 0330 in the morning was not the time to be so ebullient in front of Lancaster.

"We're in communications range, sir," Ohala reported.

"Open a channel."

"Done." The open channel tone sounded.

"This is Captain Michael Lancaster of the Federation Starship *Arcturus* to the *Janice Rand*. We are answering your distress call. Please respond," Lancaster said.

After a few seconds, Ohala chimed in. "No response, sir. They might not be able to answer. The distress call could be automated."

"That would be the logical conclusion. Set my hail to repeat as we get closer. Their signal range could also be attenuated somehow. Computer, yellow alert. Shields up," Lancaster said, prompting the lights to darken and the alert lights to shift to yellow.

"Is that really necessary?"

“Is that really necessary, *sir*,” Lancaster insisted, with a sigh. “General Order Twelve: “On the approach of any vessel, when communications have not been established, a defensive posture must be taken,”” he quoted.

“Aren’t we the ones approaching them, *sir*?”

“Lieutenant, this is going to be an extremely short working relationship when you find yourself transferred to a dilithium mining facility because you can’t stop questioning my orders,” Lancaster threatened.

“I--, understood, *sir*,” Ohala said, meekly. “It’s just--.”

“Unless you get a response from the *Rand*, no more talking,” Lancaster said, closing his eyes for a moment and wondering if he could reasonably apply any of the regulations to justify shoving the Bolian in an escape pod. Or better yet, an EV suit.

The hatch to the rear section opened after a few moments, and Lancaster glanced back to see Evandrion with his utility belt strapped to his waist and another in his hands for him, while Sheppard had two medical kits, presumably one for the Tarl and the other for more standard carbon-based humanoids.

“Coming out of warp, now,” Lancaster said, looking back at his controls. They dropped out of warp several thousand kilometers from the *Janice Rand*, but at that range it was clear that the small starship was leaking drive plasma. Only four decks tall, the ship had an angular design with enough crew and cargo space to handle missions that were far too large for runabouts, while sharing their overall form factor. You were likely to see one at any given starbase any day of the week. He ran a quick sensor sweep as they got closer. “I can’t scan inside the hull, but there are no obvious breaches. The hull is ionized, so we’ll have to dock. Evandrion, look for a suitable port.”

“One hatch along the starboard side. We’ll have to use a cofferdam to cross over, though, as it’s not a standard circular port,” the Deltan replied, highlighting the approach vector on Lancaster’s screen.

Careful to avoid the streaming trails of plasma behind the *Janice Rand* that continued to be drawn away from the ship thanks to its forward momentum, Lancaster pulled alongside and locked the ship into relative position so that the computer could assemble and extend the air-tight gangway that would allow them to walk directly over to the other ship.

“Sir, may I?” Ohala said, looking as though it was giving him an aneurysm not to just speak his mind.

“Go ahead, Lieutenant.”

“The ionization of the ship’s hull may interfere with communications as well. I’d recommend taking a set of pattern enhancers with you, which could help cut through it as well as provide a way of beaming back, should that become necessary,” he suggested. Not a bad suggestion.

“Very well. Lieutenant Evandrión, please go get a set from the hold,” Lancaster said, standing up. “Mr. Ohala, stand by to relay transmissions back to Starfleet, should we need further help here.”

Lancaster waited with Sheppard at the hatch, attaching his belt and briefly checking his phaser to make sure it was set on high stun. He caught a disapproving glance from his husband at the weapon, but he wasn’t going to take any chances with an emergency of unknown origin, especially one that he was taking his husband into.

“I don’t think I have to tell you that if there’s trouble, you’re under my direct orders to return to the shuttle, Shep,” Lancaster said, quietly. “No arguing. And not just because you’re my husband. You’re a doctor and you’re unarmed.”

Sheppard frowned, brow furrowing as he appeared to contemplate insubordination. “Understood, *sir*,” he said, managing to emit both displeasure and amusement with his half-smile. Lancaster was lucky in the sense that he *could* give that order, but he knew that either of them would take on a thousand courts-martial if it meant saving the other. It was one reason he was glad that Sheppard wouldn’t be his direct subordinate on the *Arcturus*.

Once Evandrión returned. Lancaster ensured that the passage was free from the ionization that was arcing across the rest of the hull and checked the seal on the cofferdam and then opened the hatch. The tunnel was about ten meters long, connecting the two vessels, and Lancaster always felt a sense of unease when he walked through such constructions; they folded out from lightweight components installed next to the hatchways and weren’t intended to be used for more than short, temporary dockings. It would be extremely unfortunate if either ship were to move in

relative position during their crossing, as the tunnel would be ripped apart almost instantly.

The hatch on the *Janice Rand* opened automatically for them, the handshake protocols between the two ships apparently still operational. The corridor's white lighting was still fully operational, though there was an occasional flash of red through the alert indicators. It didn't exactly *look* like a starship that was leaking drive plasma. Lancaster was just getting his bearings when a blast of golden energy lanced past his head.

He found himself pulled back towards the entrance by Evandrión.

"Hold your fire! We're Starfleet! Captain Michael Lancaster of the *Arcturus*," Lancaster shouted.

"Sorry! We couldn't identify your ship," someone replied.

Lancaster poked his head around the corner to see a Lieutenant in a red uniform standing next to an ensign in a gold one, who looked terrified. They both set their phasers down on the deck in front of them, looking at their would-be rescuers with trepidation. Behind them was the tiny command bridge of the vessel.

"Are you in command, Lieutenant?"

"Yessir. Lieutenant Corey Pressman, Captain of the *Janice Rand*. This is Ensign Martell, my security officer," he replied.

"We're here to help, Captain," Lancaster replied; even on a ship as small as this one, the commanding officer of a starship was entitled to be addressed as Captain regardless of rank. "My Chief of Security, Lieutenant Evandrión, and medical officer, Doctor Sheppard. What happened?"

Pressman shook his head. "We honestly have no idea, sir. We were cruising along at warp and then we suffered a critical plasma containment failure. The two people in the engine room were killed and the hull ionized as we were pulled out of warp."

"How many wounded?" Sheppard asked.

"Ten. We have seven passengers unaccounted for, though, because internal sensors are offline. The ones we could locate have been moved to the port lounge, just around

the corner,” Pressman replied, pointing past the away team and down the corridor. “I’d be... grateful for suggestions, Captain.”

Lancaster nodded. “Doctor, take Lieutenant Evandrión and Ensign Martell to see what you can do for the wounded. Captain. Kent, you and I are going to get the ship’s systems back online,” he added, before leading the way further aft. The three officers followed his orders wordlessly, their sense of seriousness heightened by the emergency. Lancaster found a panel adjacent to the doors to Main Engineering, which indicated that there was still a plasma fire raging inside. He quickly activated an emergency shunt to direct *all* of the ship’s plasma supply out through the warp nacelles. The procedure went exactly according to protocol, which was a minor miracle.

“This was my first cruise. The return leg of it, anyway,” Pressman volunteered. Lancaster glanced at him and nodded, but then turned his attention back to the task at hand. The young man couldn’t have been more than a few years beyond the academy; an assignment like this one wasn’t uncommon for junior command track officers destined for executive officer positions on smaller starships after a few tours of duty shuttling back and forth between sedate core worlds on placid star lanes.

“Remember your training,” Lancaster said. “Emergency shunt complete. Venting the compartment,” he said, following protocol to render the compartment safe enough to enter.

Pressman nodded. “The primary power control computer circuits are in main engineering. We’ll have to bypass them to enable auxiliary power to take over for essential systems. It’s meant to make maintenance easy, because no one ever anticipated this level of damage on a ship like this,” he added.

“Redundancy on any meaningful scale is difficult on such a small vessel,” Lancaster replied. The computer showed that the compartment had been fully depressurized and was now cycling atmosphere again. As soon as the lights turned green, Lancaster opened the hatch and stepped through, pulling out his tricorder as he did so. There was no obvious sign of damage at all, though. No scorch marks. The computer consoles were all fully operational. There had definitely *not* been a plasma fire in engineering.

By the time he put his hand on his weapon, he didn’t hear the whine of a phaser this time making its mark, before he collapsed into blackness.

// USS *Arcturus*, Main Bridge

Hayden was pacing in front of the main viewscreen. It had been almost four hours since Captain Lancaster had last checked in and she was starting to get antsy. When she had gone to bed, it had sounded routine: aid a packet liner with an emergency until a larger ship could arrive, but waking up to no contact was unusual. Whether it was merely a distress call that was holding his full attention or something else, she couldn't shake the unease at the silence.

"Operations, prepare to cast off. We're going after him," Hayden decided, turning and moving towards the command throne. Commander Larus Aleser was an Ardanan with a skin tone between bronze and mocha, as well as the haughty smirk of someone who thought very highly of himself.

"Incoming transmission from the *Ella Fitzgerald*, Captain," he reported. Hayden's heart rose.

"Belay my last and put it on screen," Hayden said, sighing as she sat down into her seat. She furrowed her brow when an unfamiliar face appeared on the screen, a dark-skinned Lieutenant that she didn't remember from the roster. "This is Fleet Captain Elizabeth Hayden of the *Arcturus*. With whom am I speaking?"

"This is Lieutenant Corey Pressman, sir. I am, or *was*, the captain of the *Janice Rand*. Your shuttle docked with us after we experienced severe systems failures," he explained.

"Where is Captain Lancaster?"

"He and the rest of the shuttle's crew were rendered unconscious when another power surge ionized the cofferdam as they attempted to board, ma'am. My medic is monitoring them, but they're going to be down for the count for several hours," Pressman said, almost robotically; it was clear that he was in shock. "I'm transmitting their lifesign readings now. Maybe your doctor can come up with some better treatment for them?"

"I see..." Hayden replied, looking at the biometric data on the console in the armrest of her chair once it came through. "Your ship was damaged beyond repair?"

“Yes, sir. I have several survivors aboard, but our life support was failing by the time your shuttle arrived. I thought the only course of action was to resume your crew’s original course,” Pressman replied.

“Of course. How far out are you?”

“Approximately eight hours.”

“Commander, can we get out of dock and rendezvous any more quickly than that?” Hayden asked, turning back to Alesser.

“No, ma’am.”

“Lieutenant, I want updates on their condition every half-hour. We’ll have medical teams standing by when you arrive. Understood?” Hayden said, standing as she addressed the shell-shocked lieutenant on the screen.

“Yes, s-sir. We’ll make sure they get here in one piece.”

“Good. *Arcturus* out,” Hayden said, before glancing behind herself to Alesser, who cut the channel. “Thoughts?” she asked.

“Such an ionization event could be caused by a catastrophic warp engine failure, though it would be very unusual for such an event not to result in the outright destruction of a starship,” Alesser replied, crossing his arms. “It’s also standard protocol to apply a dispersion field around any points of contact between the cofferdam and a vessel with unusual energetic properties in the hull. It’s possible that’s what left the crew with only a loss of consciousness, but any surge powerful enough to push through the field should also have vaporized our shuttle. It’s suspicious.”

“One of the away team members may have touched the hatch itself,” Hayden thought aloud. “I agree that it’s unusual,” she tapped her badge. “Hayden to Anjar. I’m sending you biometric readings from our four crewmembers on the *Waverider*. I want you to analyze them to reverse engineer a cause and develop a treatment for their lack of consciousness.”

“Understood, Captain,” came a quick response.

// USS *Janice Rand* - Wardroom

When Lancaster came to, he was groggy and felt the immediate need to vomit: as sure a sign as any that he'd been struck by a phaser blast. His wrists and ankles were bound, and all he could see was light when he opened his eyes. As things started to come into focus, he realized that he was still on the *Janice Rand*, as evidenced by the pale beige wall panels and purple carpet which were certainly relics of 2360s design philosophy. Aesthetic death by a thousand cuts of muted pastels. His thoughts swum and he couldn't help but laugh at the realization that it was *that* was the first thing that came to his mind after being shot.

"Michael?" he heard Sheppard's voice ask. "Can you hear me?"

"Are we in Hell? Or just on this godawful little tiny ship?" Lancaster asked.

"We're still on the ship. It was Lieutenant Pressman and the Tarl passengers."

"Shoot you, too?" Lancaster asked, groaning as he rolled over to find the source of the voice. Sheppard was also tied up, but sitting up against the bulkhead. Thankfully, he looked unharmed. Evandrion, on the other hand, had several nasty bruises on his face. Ohala was gagged as well as bound; an irony, for sure. The room was otherwise empty. There were no windows, so it must have been an internal compartment on the lower decks.

"Just you, sir," Evandrion replied. "I'm sorry. I tried to stop them, but they literally were playing dead," he said, with a groan; it looked like it was painful for him to speak, and not just because he didn't like what he was saying.

"Not your fault. I'm the one who fell into this trap," Lancaster grunted. "I would very much like to puke my guts out and then break Mister Pressman in half."

"They took our shuttle. Slapped us all with lifesign monitors slaved to the distress beacon so they could spoof our lifesigns. He said he'd trigger the powercell to overload remotely if there was any sign we'd tried to get out, but medical tech like that can't produce a fatal overload" Sheppard said.

Ohala nodded emphatically. He must have been removed from the shuttle by the hijackers.

Lancaster's heart sank. Not only were they trapped on ship that was likely disabled, their shuttle was headed straight for the *Arcturus's* hanger with a group that was at the least pirates and at the worst terrorists onboard, and they wouldn't be able to catch up even if they did manage to get the engines back online.

"We've got to get in contact with the *Arcturus*. And get out of these restraints. Maybe not in that order," Lancaster groaned. "I would murder someone for an aspirin," added. "Can you two reach each other's?"

"Yes, but we can't see what we're doing," Sheppard said.

Lancaster slowly inch-wormed along the ground towards Sheppard and Evandrión, using his core strength and legs to close the few meters between them. "I'll try to guide you," he said. When the two turned back-to-back, Lancaster could see that they weren't standard Starfleet restraints, which would make things harder. He wasn't a security specialist, after all.

"What do you see, sir?"

"Duranium cuffs. Joined in the center by a cylinder of approximately three centimeters in diameter. There's an unusual raised triangle on the cylinder," Lancaster said, squinting.

"Sounds like a standard Tellarite design. There's a triangle on the other side as well that needs to be twisted in the opposite direction as the one on the top to release the cuffs," Evandrión explained.

That was one problem solved. Now, between the three of them they still had to find a way to actually manipulate those pieces of metal. Given that they hadn't been able to feel that detail, Lancaster was hoping that didn't mean that the two of them couldn't at least reach that point on the other's cuffs. It took Sheppard several tedious minutes to feel around and find the triangle under Evandrión's cuffs with Lancaster's guidance. Lancaster hauled himself upright and scooted back to them, feeling around for the triangle on the top, but his fingertips could barely reach it, with the way his own cuffs pushed against Sheppard's and Evandrión's, keeping him just out of reach.

"If you tell anyone about this, bad things will happen," Lancaster noted, darkly, before flipping back over onto his stomach gripping the upper triangle with his teeth. "Count of three," he said, before going his best to grip the metal and *barely* managing to twist it. There was a pop and the cuffs sprang free from Evandrión's hands, which also

caught Lancaster's lip in the process, leaving it bloody and bruised. He felt momentarily woozy from being so close to the Deltan, or possibly just from having recently been stunned and having to bend up and down so many times while still recovering.

"Very resourceful, sir," Evandrion said, respectfully, before unlocking his two shipmates as well, and then his own ankle restraints. "I do not believe that they bothered tying us up more securely because they knew that this ship would be incapable of catching them," he added.

"Lucky us," Lancaster quipped. He whimpered in a way that he found uncaptainly when Sheppard touched his bleeding lip, as Evandrion freed Ohala.

"I've never known you to try so hard to get *out* of restraints," Sheppard quipped.

"Really?" Lancaster scolded, even though his husband's voice had been very low.

Mercifully, the two medical kits that Sheppard had brought were still sitting on one of the tables. Smirking, the doctor went over to retrieve a hypo and loaded it with a vial, while also grabbing a dermal regenerator. He pressed the hypo into Lancaster's neck without asking, and then steadied his face with his hand to start regenerating.

"What was--"

"--No talking, unless you want your face to be lopsided. Electrolytes and saline. It will help with your phaser hangover. I could give you something stronger, but I'm betting we're going to need your brain at 100% to stand a chance of getting any parts of this ship back online," Sheppard said, smiling at his husband as he worked. After a few dutiful minutes, he set the regenerator down, and then frowned. He pulled the collar of Lancaster's uniform to the side and furrowed his brow.

"Evandrion. Need you over here," Sheppard said, grabbing a tricorder from his medkit. That was *not* a statement that inspired confidence or calm in Lancaster.

"What *is* that around the edge?" Evandrion asked.

"You two are not helping my stress levels," Lancaster interjected, as the two of them prodded at his neck. As they did, he was suddenly aware of *something* attached to him.

"It's a standard biomonitor, but it's grafting itself to his skin" Sheppard said, looking at his tricorder.

Lancaster looked under Sheppard's collar and found a silver disk with flashing green, yellow, and red lights moving around in a circle. It looked like it was somehow adhered directly to the skin, nearly embedded. A device like that should normally sit right on the surface of the skin with nanoadhering fibers.

"Yours is like that, too."

"All of us ours," Evandrión confirmed.

"Can you remove them?" Lancaster asked Sheppard.

"Not without a lot of scarring. They wouldn't want them to fall off and make it look like one of us were dead, I guess. Probably also why the restraints weren't particularly hardcore," Sheppard replied, softly. "Plus, we might not want them to know we found them. He might *not* have been lying about some sort of self-destruct mechanism."

Lancaster nodded. "I really don't like this, but whatever you think is best," he said, running his finger around the circumference of the circle he now couldn't help but feel like was burrowing more deeply into his neck.

"Why didn't he just take our commbadges?" Sheppard asked.

"The new model commbadge is too sophisticated to trick with spoofed lifesigns; they'd give it away that we weren't really on the shuttle if he was scanned," Ohala explained.

"Captain Lancaster, with your permission, I will search the rest of the ship," Evandrión said.

"Granted. Take Ohala and do a full accounting of the ship and any damage. Meet us on the bridge when you're done," Lancaster said, starting to feel the effects of the hypo.

"Assuming anything there still works" he murmured. He took the medical tricorder out of the second kit, and worked on switching it to standard functionality as he left the room with Sheppard.

"This is not how this day was supposed to go," Lancaster said, weakly, as the two of them looked for the vertical access shaft.

Sheppard pulled him in for a hug that was definitely not standard procedure for an away team. "I am so glad you are OK. Seeing you on the floor like that was awful." The two of them had never actually been together on a mission, for obvious reasons, and the way

this one was going was validation for that strategy. Of course, Lancaster was also very rarely incapacitated while on duty, so at least it was unlikely to happen again.

“I shouldn’t have turned my back on that twerp,” Lancaster said, squeezing him back, and then disentangling himself. They found the access point and it took both of them to pry open the door leading to the ladder, where the signage told them that they were on Deck Three. It wasn’t locked, just unpowered.

“You had no way of knowing. He was one of us.”

“This is obviously a sophisticated plot to get our shuttle and get aboard the *Lancelot*,” Lancaster said, as he put his foot on the first rung of the ladder so that they could climb up.

“You mean the *Arcturus*.”

“Huh. What did I say?”

“The *Lancelot*.”

Lancaster chuckled. “Guess I must be having flash-backs to the last time I ended up tied up on an away mission,” he noted, as they moved up a deck. As a lieutenant commander while leading a team to recon a facility suspected of being operated by the Tal Shiar, he’d ended up briefly captured. The experience, suffice it to say, had not been pleasant.

“Well, just as long as you’re not *actually* having flashbacks,” Sheppard said, sounding a little worried, as they worked to pry open the upper deck doors.

“No. Just some sort of warped nostalgia for the days where we seemed to be in combat every other week I suppose. The *Lafayette* was comparatively sedate,” Lancaster clarified. The corridors were completely deserted as they made their way to the bridge, and when they got there, none of the consoles were working.

Lancaster slumped down within the horseshoe-shaped helm console as he tried to think of a plan that would allow them to either get the ship moving or to let Starfleet know what had happened, but the lack of sleep had caught up to him. However much time he had spent stunned wasn’t a substitute for actual REM sleep.

“Why did I want to go back to space, again?”

“Because you’re one of the best bridge officers in Starfleet and neither of us were meant to fly a desk,” Sheppard replied, sitting down next to him. “We’ll think of something. Well, *you* will think of something,” he added, taking his hand.

“Yeah. Just need to think a little bit,” Lancaster replied, leaning his head back against the console and running through what he remembered of the ship’s schematics in his head. The audio and physical commands were both not working. It’s like the computer wasn’t even there.

About twenty minutes later, Evandrión and Ohala entered the bridge and Lancaster was no closer to coming up with a solution to their problem.

“Sir, all escape pods and the ship’s only shuttlecraft have been jettisoned. We’re the only ones aboard,” the Deltan reported, crossing his arms. “There are forcefields around main engineering and the computer core, but they’re not tied to the ship’s systems; they set up portable generators within the fields. The emergency transponder has had most of its components removed to limit it to repeating the distress call with our lifesigns.”

“Probably one of ours, since theirs were locked to stun,” Lancaster replied. “So, we have no way of contacting our ship, as well as no escape pods. It will take several hours to disrupt either of those forcefields without phasers, and by that point the shuttle will be out of range to catch. Thoughts?” he asked the group.

Ohala was clearly hesitating.

“Speak up, Lieutenant. I can’t believe I have to tell you of all beings that,” Lancaster said, fixing him with a stare, frowning in a way that made him wince from the wound he’d taken to the lip.

“Well, sir, there *is* a message getting out, and even though we can’t change it directly, we *can* manipulate it,” Ohala said. He pointed to the biomonitor on his neck. “You can’t spoof biosigns with a recording. Starfleet analytics are too sophisticated for that.”

“So, if we got these off or disabled them, the *Arcturus* would know that we’re not on that shuttle,” Lancaster mused.

“Potentially, sir. But we could manipulate our lifesigns to send a message, instead. Not our actual lifesigns, but the same sensors on a medical tricorder that detect lifesigns

can be altered to broadcast them, given a few tweaks. They didn't take our tricorders," Ohala added.

The idea was sound, Lancaster had to begrudgingly admit.

"It does seem preferable to find some way to send a message rather than letting silence be the message," Evandrion suggested.

"The question is: what's the message?" Sheppard asked.

Meanwhile on the *Ella Fitzgerald*, Lieutenant Pressman was sitting in the pilot's seat in the cockpit. The shuttle hadn't been secured by command codes, so his normal Starfleet authority was enough for him to commandeer it. So far, so good. Captain Hayden seemed concerned but she hadn't caught on to them, yet. On schedule, he reached over to the communications panel to tap out a fake update to the *Arcturus*: the life signs accompanied by a holographic depiction of the four officers in one of the bunk rooms. All he had to do was get inside the hanger bay of the shocking monstrosity that was the *Arcturus*. How dare Starfleet put a shipbuilding facility over yet another defenseless world after what had happened to Mars?

Pressman had spent the entirety of his post-Academy career in the Epsilon Indi system, much of it on shuttle runs between the Tarl homeworld and the station itself. He'd come to empathize with its people, though he was absolutely shocked that popular opinion was in favor of expanding the station because of the increased trade and cultural connections it brought to the Tarl.

His own family hadn't been so lucky on Mars, and he wasn't going to allow a repeat of that disaster, even if it meant breaking every oath he'd ever taken.

// USS *Arcturus* - Sickbay

In sickbay, Dr. Anjar was hard at work analyzing the lifesigns that were being sent intermittently and he was frustrated. These particular lifesigns didn't show anything that was hugely concerning—just four beings who were in various states of conscious or semi-consciousness, which could have been caused by thousands of different things, ionization being just one of them.

He was pacing in front of a floating display in his office as new results came in. Four people who were still unconscious, although three of them now looked almost identical in one metric: the EKG. Up seven, down five, and two beats of baseline. It was not a pattern he'd seen before in either Humans or Deltans, especially considering a Human heart was not capable of creating such a pattern.

"Seven, five, zero, zero," Anjar thought aloud. "Computer, search the medical database for any relevant data on Humans, Bolians, *and* Deltans that would lead to the numbers seven, five, zero, and zero appearing in lifesign readings of any type."

"Working," the computer stated. "No match found."

"Okay, run the same search on the medical equipment database. Is this some sort of error code that's being relayed to us?"

"Working. No match found."

"Computer, expand search to include all Starfleet equipment and civilian communications equipment."

"Working. Match found: Ancient Earth aeronautical code 7500 was used from the late-twentieth to early twenty-second centuries to signify a hijacking in progress," the computer replied, matter-of-factly.

A wave of cold passed through Anjar's body. "Cross-reference with full sensor data of the space around this ship and our shuttle, and the full Federation database," he added, leaning back against his desk.

"Working," the computer replied. It took longer, this time. "Confirmed."

"How is that possible?"

"Insufficient data to answer query."

“Speculate.”

“Based on provided search parameters and factoring in biological differences between the three species, the only available way for these four numbers to appear in sequence would be manipulation of life-signs at the source.”

“Could that be accomplished with the equipment found aboard our shuttlecraft?”

“Affirmative.”

Anjar tapped his badge. “Anjar to---,” he started.

“Incoming data,” the computer announced, as the screen in front of him changed.

“Captain Lancaster appears to be suffering arrhythmia,” it reported, though Anjar didn’t need the machine to tell him that. He also knew it was wrong. It was far too regular and none of the other lifesigns were fluctuating, as would be expected for that sort of medical emergency.

“Computer, run Lancaster’s EKG through the universal translator, assuming that the signal properties coincide to communication.”

“1000 KG Ultritium.”

// USS *Janice Rand* - Bridge

“You’re positive?”

“Yes, sir. Visual inspection of the cargo hold confirms that a thousand kilos of ultritium were removed from the hold. Likely using the transporter enhancers we brought with us,” Evandrion replied, gravely. Lancaster cast a withering look at the Bolian next to him, even though he was sure they would have found a way to transport it regardless.

After they’d worked on their hijacking alert (a Hail Mary code from something Ohala remembered from the academy, knowing that Pressman might know all of their official hijacking codes or that they were complex enough for the computer to detect on its own), Lancaster had Evandrion search the ship again for anything useful.

“Best estimates on the yield of such a charge?” Lancaster asked, trying to stay calm as he did the math in his own head, but he wanted to hear it from the security expert. The powerful forcefields within the shuttlebay would automatically engage to protect the *Arcturus* should a warp core breach on one of the shuttles be detected, if the shuttle couldn’t be expelled by simply depressurizing the bay, but ultritium was extremely powerful and undetectable by standard scans.

“Enough to destroy the majority of the *Arcturus*’s primary hull, sir,” Evandrion said.

“We have to change the message. They have to know,” Lancaster said.

“We don’t know if they got the first message, though,” Ohala said.

“Leave yours the same and change mine. No time for some sort of number code. Send it in English through my implant,” Lancaster said.

“That would look like an extreme cardiac event. There’s no way Pressman wouldn’t notice that. If these devices *can* hurt us, we’ve got to find another way,” Sheppard interrupted. “What’s that regulation about no uncoded transmissions?”

“Our shuttle has the ability to decipher any code we might send. We’ve just got to hope he’s so distracted with his plan to commit treason that he doesn’t notice. Do it, Ohala,” Lancaster ordered.

“Transmit a full report to Starfleet Security and Starfleet Intelligence,” Hayden ordered, locking eyes with Commander Alesser over Doctor Anjar’s shoulder. She was seething. The ship hadn’t even left port and they were faced with both a hostage situation involving her first officer and three other senior staff and a potential terrorist bombing with an unknown target. “I want this entire *star system* to go to red alert.”

“Captain, I’m not sure that’s wise,” Anjar said, softly. Her first response was pique, but she bit her tongue as the Bajoran continued. “The one advantage we have right now is that the perpetrators don’t know that we’re aware of their intentions. Doing anything to tip that hand could be very dangerous for our crewmen, or cause whoever did this to go to ground.”

Hayden exhaled through her nose and leaned back in the chair. Anjar was a doctor, an exceptionally talented one at that, and he’d captained a medical ship, but her instinct was to charge after her people.

“Orders, sir?” Alesser asked.

“Send the reports and put all crew to action stations, but don’t energize shields or weapons,” Hayden confirmed. “I do *not* like waiting to react to this situation, Doctor, but if there’s a chance we can get through this with our people alive, we’re going to take it.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Anjar replied. “Commander, what’s their ETA?”

“We have them on long-range sensors. They’re about 45 minutes outside the star system itself. Current course has them directly on target for us, but that could change,” Alesser replied.

“Is there any way of neutralizing the threat remotely?” Anjar asked.

“The prefix codes could be used to seize control of the shuttle and divert it away from the ship, but they would need to be within 10 million kilometers to be close enough for us to actually operate their systems without latency,” the operations chief reported. “At that range, we could still have a comfortable targeting margin to destroy them with our own weapons.”

Hayden nodded. Her instinct was to state that she wasn’t going to risk killing her people, but she knew it was the only sensible tactical decision, should all else fails. “What about the homing function on the shuttle?”

“As far as we know, the shuttle is intact and no one aboard other than Captain Lancaster would have the ability to disable that functionality., Captain. That function can only be used to summon the shuttle directly towards us; we couldn't give it another destination without rewriting the operating system.”

“If we activate the homing function, the cockpit controls will automatically lock, unless someone has the authority to override, yes?” Hayden said.

“If the controls are locked, no one onboard would notice if we briefly peaked into the sensor logs to see what's actually happening aboard,” Anjar realized, which made Hayden smile.

“Exactly.”

Hayden looked back to Alesser again. “Using the homing function to cover our intrusion into the shuttle's sensors and logs to determine who and what exactly are aboard would allow us a margin of error,” the commander agreed. “We could cancel the homing beacon, as well.”

Hayden shook her head. “No, we're going to bring them right to our doorstep. I don't want to take a chance and have them picking another target in this system or heading back out into open space,” she replied. “Hail the shuttle and prepare the remote overrides.”

// USS *Janice Rand* - Captain's Quarters

Lancaster had been moody and distant after they sent the message through his biomonitor, so Sheppard had done his best to give him some space, but he'd been alone for nearly twenty minutes until he found him in the captain's quarters--Lieutenant Pressman's quarters, that was. Lancaster was pouring over a PADD while sitting on the bed in the tiny room. The bed was made in regulation Starfleet fashion, and nothing else about the space made Sheppard think it belonged to an extremist.

"Anything interesting?"

"A manifesto against Federation shipbuilding, citing the Synth revolt. It's pretty poorly written," Lancaster said, before tossing the PADD aside and resting his head in his hands. Sheppard knew something was up when his husband didn't bother to even look up at him.

"No Marx, huh?" he asked, putting an arm around him as he sat down. Lancaster didn't flinch, but he didn't relax, either. That was normally a surefire sign that he was having trouble shutting his mind down. "Look at me."

Lancaster complied, sullenly. "This is a major fuck-up. I should have done a better job of determining the nature of the accident before we boarded," he said.

"The hull was ionized, they were leaking drive plasma, and there could have been fires onboard. You acted with the information you had. Whoever came up with *these* clearly had this all planned out," Sheppard replied, pointing to his own biomonitor.

"That's just the thing. Pressman did this with just his two Tarl accomplices, or that's at least what his confession says. As a freighter 'captain' he had access to the flight plans for every ship on the Epsilon Indi route including ours, so he knew he'd be able to get a ride directly to the *Arcturus*. He slapped biomolecular adhesive on standard biomonitors and linked them to the distress beacon. He goes to great pains to explain how easy this whole plot was, even," Lancaster replied. "I shouldn't take a tactical beating from a lieutenant so wet behind the ears he's practically underwater."

"I think Evandrión is the one who took the beating, actually, and he's a pretty tough customer. You and Ohala got a message out. Someone is going to see it."

Lancaster sighed. “We don’t know that anyone was monitoring those signals other than Pressman himself, really,” he added, flinging himself back on the bed. “It’s logical that he’d be relaying our info to the *Arcturus* to keep up whatever ruse he’s got going on to keep half of Starfleet from jumping in to blow him out of the sky, but he’s also unhinged, deranged...”

“You’ve got to breathe, babe,” Sheppard insisted.

Lancaster exhaled through his nose, causing his chest to fall until he was completely still for a few moments, before he took a breath in. Sheppard had never seen him looking so miserable.

“We’re alive right now. We’re not tied up. We might have got a message through, and as far as we know, the idea that some psychopath with a red button can fry us remotely was a lie.”

“This is not what we signed up for. We’re not even to the ship, yet, and we’re already in a crisis. I hoped leaving the Romulan border behind would mean *something* like a normal exploratory mission,” the captain said.

“Well, we’re Starfleet, so unexpected is part of the job.”

Lancaster shot up. “Unexpected shouldn’t mean having to put *my husband* into harm’s way.”

The he said that turned Sheppard’s stomach in knots; he felt like some sort of ancillary character in the grand epic that was the life of Captain Michael Lancaster. A footnote. He scoffed and shook his head. “Is that how you think of me? Just as your husband?”

“That was not meant to emasculate you or imply ownership, Luca,” Lancaster replied, crossing his arms. “You know what I meant.”

“Yeah, that you’re the hero captain and I’m some damsel in distress. I’m a Starfleet officer, too, you know. I’m not just your love interest or sidekick or whatever other secondary thing you want to imagine in your life, Michael. Don’t say that we didn’t sign up for this, because it’s exactly what we signed up for,” Sheppard said, not raising his voice but speaking with uncharacteristic directness. “I love you, and I know you love me, too, but I refuse to let you wallow in self-pity because you had to see me in danger. Not

until we're out of this, anyway. And I refuse to let you think of anything other than what I am: a Starfleet medical officer."

Lancaster blanched, the color draining from his face as he listened to Sheppard speak. It would be uncharacteristic of him to simply admit a verbal misstep, but Sheppard could see the wheels behind his husband's eyes turning as he tried to think of an adequate response.

"I never want you to feel secondary. I'm sorry," he managed, modulation in his voice suggesting that he was working very hard to keep an even tone. "This is going to be tough. Assuming we get out of this, anyway."

Sheppard nodded. "Well, you don't. Not usually. You've sacrificed a lot to be with me, and I know that. But... as much as I want us to be the first thing we think about..." he said, gesturing between the two of them. "... the game changes when we're on duty. It has to. You can't let this scare you from letting me do my job. Or *ordering* me to do my job."

The two of them reached for each other's hands at the same time. "You're right, of course. I'm going to say this now, though, and nothing you can say can stop me: if it ever comes down to it, I'm choosing you over me," Lancaster said with a sincerity that knocked Sheppard off balance.

Both of them had danced around saying that for as long as they'd been together, but neither of them had ever fully said it out loud. Sheppard had the more outwardly protective personality, so he was caught off-guard not to be the first one to make that combination of a promise and threat, but Lancaster's blue eyes shone with an intensity that left him momentarily stunned. He'd alluded to it earlier about coming after him, but that sounded like peanuts compared to what he'd just said.

"You shouldn't say things like that, Michael."

"You are my Achilles' Heel, Shep. Plain and simple."

"You mean your Patroklos," Sheppard teased, not able to resist a mythology-based zing at his entirely-too-erudite husband's expense. "Off me, and you lose your mind and burn the whole world down in rage."

Lancaster nodded, smiling slightly at him. "Except add to that that I'm not going to be sulking in my tent while I let something happen to you. I'm going to do everything I can to keep you safe, because you can't tell me that for one goddamn minute you wouldn't do exactly the same thing if our positions were reversed. If it were Captain Sheppard and Doctor Lancaster? I dare you to say otherwise, Shep," he insisted, growing more confident as he kept speaking.

"Gosh, you're pretty when you're mad," Sheppard said, watching the way Lancaster's nostrils flared in response to that statement. That usually meant one of two things. His partner lunged for him, but Sheppard's greater height and muscle mass allowed him to easily pin him down on the bed they were sitting on, arms both above his head. "I'd kill for you. Do awful things if it meant keeping you safe, especially if all I had to do is walk in front of a phaser for you. Any day of the week."

"Does that make us strong or weak?"

"I think it means we're two of the few people in the universe who've truly found our mates. It's like something out of Plato," Sheppard said, letting him up. "A little counseling to work through this might not be out of the question, either. But considering that neither of us are willing to take an assignment without the other, I guess we're stuck with that minor tragic flaw."

"Probably best not to go on away missions together, anyway," Lancaster noted, just before the ship rumbled under them. There was the clear feeling of the ship's engines powering up and then the stars outside the viewport stretched and then started streaming past. "We just went to warp."

//Waverider *Ella Fitzgerald* (NCC-84000-2)

As the *Ella Fitzgerald* crossed the heliopause into the Epsilon Indi system, the cockpit controls locked out, simply displaying the words 'Autopilot Engaged' on every control surface within the cabin. This wasn't unexpected; Pressman knew that his opponent would be suspicious, even with the biological data he was able to provide. The comm signal intoned and then Fleet Captain Hayden popped up on the screen.

"Lieutenant Pressman, as you're close enough for remote control, we've activated the homing function, so that you can focus on treating my personnel. My ship's doctor is somewhat alarmed that they're not making faster progress," Hayden said, blue eyes searching him through the transmission.

"Of-of course, sir. Happy to. As you can see in these latest sensor scans, my medic injected the four of them with a sedative, as she was concerned that without additional medical support, waking them up now would be possibly dangerous," Pressman lied, as he sent over additional data, which had been modified to fudge the brain waves just enough to suggest sleep.

"Can you get her on the channel?"

Pressman shook his head. "She's busy seeing to some of the passengers we managed to rescue, but I'll have her call you when she is free... if that's ok?"

Hayden nodded. "We will see you in one hour," she said, before cutting the channel. About forty-five minutes later, the shuttle dropped out of warp, still several hundred thousand kilometers from Epsilon Indi station.

Pressman smirked and grabbed his PADD off of the helm and sent a transmission back through the channel he'd set up for the life signs diversion to set the next part of the plan into motion. Starfleet was nothing if not predictable.

"Well, gentleman, it looks as if our plot has been foiled," he said, turning to the two Tarl that he'd convinced to help him in this little project. It had cost him all of the resource credits he'd saved up during his short Starfleet career to buy their allegiance, on the condition that they'd get off easy when they were inevitably caught. Since he'd organized it all on his own them and used them merely as muscle, it seemed likely they'd get a few years in a cushy rehabilitation colony, while he'd probably spend the rest of his life in one.

“Incoming transmission from the *Arcturus*,” the computer reported. It didn’t give him a choice before it pulled up the stern visage of Fleet Captain Hayden; if she had any intent of playing dumb about what she’d undoubtedly just learned, it wasn’t obvious from the fire in her eyes.

“Lieutenant Pressman, as you can see, I have pulled you out of warp early. Further analysis of the life signs you have provided to us shows signal attenuation that could only be attributed to increasing distance between the sensor and the transmitter. My crew aren’t aboard with you. I won’t waste my time figuring out why you’ve done this—,” she started.

“Of course you won’t, *sir*,” Pressman sneered. “Starfleet never seems to care. You’re sitting on a bridge built over a world that should never have been dragged into Starfleet’s messes like Mars was.”

On the sensors, he could see two *Danube*-class runabouts on an intercept course. That wouldn’t do.

Hayden shook her head. “I’m happy to have a very long conversation with you once you’re safely locked in my brig, Lieutenant,” she replied with acid in her voice. Typical posturing from someone who was used to getting exactly her own way all the time, i.e. a Starfleet Captain.

“Not gonna happen, I’m afraid. Sorry, guys, it looks like it’s Plan B,” Pressman said, looking back to his Tarl accomplices.

“What’s plan B?” one of them asked.

“Martyrdom,” Pressman said, moments before he depressed the triggering device that he had rigged up to the ultritium in the cargo hold. A metric ton of the stuff was enough to vaporize the shuttle, and trigger a warp core breach. The shockwave stripped the shields off of the approaching runabouts, leaving them burning in space with nothing to show for it.

// USS *Arcturus* - Main Bridge

Hayden stood from her chair when she saw the burst of energy from the *Ella Fitzgerald* collide with the shields of the runabouts that Epsilon Indi Station had sent out after Pressman. His plot thwarted, he'd killed himself and two Tarl, just after transmitting his 'manifesto' on a wide-band channel. Her heart sunk, but she was pleased at least that there hadn't been any casualties among her own crew.

"Status on the runabouts?" she asked, turning to the operations officer.

"They've been damaged, but they're not reporting any casualties. The station is sending out another pair to tow them back to dock, Captain," Alesser reported. "Quick analysis of the blast shows that if the shuttle had landed, it would have been enough to cripple the *Arcturus* in the most optimistic simulations," he added.

"Transmit the message he sent to us to Starfleet. Something about this doesn't scream 'lone wolf' to me," the captain said, before sitting back down in the command seat. "Now we have to turn to finding our own people."

"Aye, Captain," Alesser replied; his console chirping behind her. "The *Hokule'a* will be ready for departure in two hours. Starfleet is also deploying ships on a search pattern for the *Janice Rand*, but their distress beacon terminated when the *Ella Fitzgerald* was destroyed. Starfleet reports that the *Rand's* escape pods were picked up a few lightyears outside of this system. It would appear that our crew are alone aboard the ship."

// USS *Janice Rand*, Bridge

Sheppard was seated at the bridge's tiny science station. They had sensors back online, but there was nothing of interest out there in the blackness. The helm console had been locked on a fixed course: directly to Epsilon Indi station at a rate of speed that was far above the ship's safety thresholds. At warp 9, they would be in the system in less than twenty minutes.

"Maybe he's summoning us because the captain is negotiating with him," Sheppard wondered.

"I don't think she's very likely to negotiate with terrorists, Doctor," Ohala remind him. He was under the communications panel with half of its isolinear chips arrayed on the deck around him. Communications were completely offline and between the Bolian and Lancaster, they hadn't been able to determine how to restore them.

A few moments later, Lancaster and Evandrion entered the bridge with grim looks on their face. "The rest of the ultritium in the cargo hold has been rigged to detonate. It's on a timer," Lancaster said, crossing his arms. A wave of fear washed over Sheppard in a way that he hadn't felt in his entire career.

"Can you disarm it, Evandrion?"

The Deltan shook his head. "Not with the equipment we have here. A medical tricorder's not going cut it," he said.

"Is there any way of stopping the ship, at least?"

"Not in the time we have. The ship is practically flying itself apart to maintain these speeds, but even with the power transfer conduits stressed to their breaking point, Pressman took our phasers and we don't have anything else that could cut through them to sever flow to the nacelles or to break through the forcefield into Engineering," Lancaster replied.

It was probably useless suggesting options to him, as of the four of them, he was absolutely the expert in starship operations.

"Can we get it off of the ship?"

“Transporters are offline.”

“Well... there has to be an external hatch in the hold, right? Can't we just open it?” Sheppard wondered.

That question made Lancaster pause on his way to the helm console. “The hatch is sealed, but it's standard Federation practice to build in break-away panels into cargo vessels to jettison dangerous cargo,” he noted, pulling up the ship's schematics. After a moment, the display rotated to the underside of the ship to show four explosive bolts situated in the corners of the cargo hold. If activated, they would detach the floor of the bay and expel the cargo into space.

“How would we activate them, though? Internal systems control is still restricted,” Ohala pointed out. This time when Lancaster cast him a glance, it wasn't sharp, it was resigned.

“Bolts like that have a hard link to a manual control lever. It can't be disabled, for situations exactly like this one,” Lancaster replied.

“Let's go pull it, then!” Sheppard enthused, hopping up.

“It's *inside* the cargo bay. There's not a containment field generator on that side of the bay, either.”

Sheppard's heart dropped. That meant that one of them would need to be inside depressurizing cargo bay while at warp, which was one of the most dangerous environments an organic body could find themselves in. He also knew exactly which one of them would be the one to pull the lever.

“Lieutenant Evandrión, you're in command. I need a pressure suit,” Lancaster said, turning on his heel and walking off of the bridge. Sheppard raced after him, Evandrión's response lost in the blur of his realization that Lancaster really was going to do this himself. There was always the danger that either one of them could be ordered into a situation where they could die in the line of duty, but Sheppard wasn't ready for that, not with the conversation they had just had still raw in his mind, and certainly not if there were literally any other choice to be made.

“Michael, there has to be another way,” he pleaded.

Lancaster ignored him, as he opened an emergency locker by the main airlock and broke the safety seal on an emergency pressure suit. Lightweight and one-size fits all, it barely looked sturdier than a hazmat suit, or even a *bee-keeping* suit, for that matter. It was meant to protect a Humanoid lifeform on the surface of a low-pressure environment planet or one where the atmosphere wasn't entirely breathable. They could also be used for minor pressure loss within the ship, but the packaged, disposable suits were no substitute for an EV suit. They were just from getting you out of a damaged compartment and into a safe one.

"You know those aren't meant for EVAs," Sheppard said.

"There's a strap and a duranium hook. It'll keep me inside the ship," Lancaster replied, heading to the vertical access shaft.

"Assuming the strap doesn't break from the force, you'll only have twenty minutes *at most* in a hard vacuum before all kinds of nasty things will start happening to your body, Michael." Sheppard's heart was racing as he followed Lancaster down the shaft to the lowest deck of the ship. The cargo bay doors opened, and Lancaster stopped to survey the room.

"There's no alternative, Shep. Even if one of the other two were up for this, I am the most qualified engineer on the ship. I can't risk the safety of an entire starbase, not if I have the chance to stop this bomb," Lancaster said. He grabbed both of Sheppard's hands. "We talked about this. I... I have to do my job, even if it's hard for you."

"I could knock you out right now. Take the suit. Do it myself. Fuck the court-martial," Sheppard said, adrenaline fueling a level of false bravado. He did know that he was the only person in the fleet who could get away with talking to Michael Lancaster like that, though he knew that it didn't stand much of a chance of actually stopping him, now that his mind had been made up.

Lancaster shook his head. "I'm pretty sure you *could* knock me out if you wanted to, but you don't know how to prime explosive bolts or locate the release," he said, with a soft smile; ignoring the aggressive tone Sheppard had taken. "I love you."

Sheppard nodded. "I love you, too," he said, before kissing him. He wanted to linger, but time was of the essence. He reluctantly stepped back and looked Lancaster up and down. "Keep an open comm link. I'm going to be right on the other side of the door," he

said, as the other man slipped the lightweight suit over his uniform; it looked impossibly thin, even for being made of some Federation miracle material.

Lancaster nodded, and then tapped his badge to sync channels with Sheppard's badge, thanks to the small mercy of that being one of the only things Pressman had left them with. Sheppard stepped outside the door and slid down to the floor.

A few minutes passed. "Lancaster here. I've primed the four explosive bolts manually and am ready to release the hull plates. I'm strapped in as well as I can be. The ship should initiate an emergency deceleration once the bolts release, but there's no telling if that protocol has been tampered with." The message went to all three of the *Arcturus* crew aboard. He switched back to the private channel. "I'm going to be fine."

"When the bolts blow, exhale completely. A pressure suit like that won't be able to adjust quickly for explosive decompression, so you need to meet it half way," Sheppard insisted.

"Got it. Initiating sequence in three, two, one," Lancaster replied. At first there was nothing, and then the synchronized "pop" of four charges going off simultaneously, followed by the roar of atmosphere rushing out of the cargo hold and then alert klaxons as the ship's computer noticed the pressure loss. He felt a sudden deceleration, one that the ship's basic inertial dampeners had trouble mitigating entirely, which meant that Lancaster's hunch about the emergency protocols had been right.

Lancaster grunted on the other end of the comm channel. "Explosives ejected."

"Stay with me, Michael. That yank on your safety line probably broke a few ribs."

"Def... definitely," Lancaster managed, in obvious pain. "It's cold."

"Just focus on the sound of my voice. Starfleet's looking for us and we have to be close enough for them to see us now. Just hold on," Sheppard pleaded.

"If they don't make it—," Lancaster started.

"If you finish that sentence, I'm divorcing you."

Lancaster chuckled and then groaned. "Don't make me laugh... Ribs..."

Sheppard put his hand up against the cargo bay door, which was now ice cold, which made his heart race. They didn't have much time. "How close do you think we are to Epsilon Indi?" he asked. Math was always a good distraction for Lancaster.

"Based on rate of travel, we should be right outside the system."

"They'll be here soon, then."

"What I was about to say earlier, Shep..."

"I really don't want to hear it, Michael."

"I was just going to say thank you. For *us*," Lancaster said, before Sheppard could interrupt him.

At that point, Sheppard couldn't hold back the tears. As he tried to think of a response, Evandrión slid down the ladder, wearing a pressure suit of his own. "Full computer control restored. Must have rebooted during the emergency. Please get behind the compartment divider, doctor," he said, clipped and focused. He tossed a medical kit to Sheppard and then stepped past him.

Sheppard scrambled to his feet and moved to frames towards the interior of the ship. "Just a few seconds longer, Michael."

"Do it, Ohala," Evandrión said, prompting a forcefield to pop up between Evandrión and Sheppard, before the computer pulled all of the air out of the section of corridor between Evandrión and the cargo hatch. Sheppard watched as the Deltan made sure the pressure on both sides of the hatch was exactly equal, before opening it. He clipped his cable to the waist-high railing on the corridor bulkhead that Sheppard finally understood the purpose of, even after likely having been informed about it in some safety briefing before. Once he was secure, the security officer dove out into the cargo bay, using his momentum to swing along to where Lancaster was, out of Sheppard's line of sight.

"What's happening?" Lancaster asked.

"Evandrión's coming for you. We got forcefield control back. Just hold on."

"Got him," Evandrión said, patching himself into the call. The seconds drug on until Evandrión emerged back into the corridor. The door slid closed behind him and he

unclipped from the bulkhead. Sheppard could see blood at the corners of Lancaster's mouth and he was clearly dazed. It was interminable waiting for the air to be restored to the compartment and for the forcefield to drop.

Sheppard pulled the tricorder out of the medical kit and scanned his partner. As predicted, oxygen levels, body temperature, and half a dozen other metrics were all low. He had four broken ribs and his lungs were both verging on collapsing, but he was alive.

"Get that suit off of him," Sheppard ordered, loading a hypo with tri-ox. As soon as the suit was ripped open, he pressed the hypo to Lancaster's neck, who tried to surge upright as he gasped, but Evandrion held him down. "Pain?"

"Lots," Lancaster managed, also shivering.

Sheppard loaded another compound to help raise body temperature and injected it as well.

"Can't give you anything for the pain, yet. We can't risk you going unconscious until I can get you into a biobed," Sheppard muttered. Evandrion looked at both of them.

"May I? I understand how... reserved Humans are about physical touch, but I can stop your pain, Captain," the Deltan said. Sheppard didn't know much about empathic abilities, so he looked on with skepticism when Lancaster nodded; he didn't particularly like it when Evandrion put his hand on his partner's abdomen, but the relief was visible after only a few seconds of contact.

"Wow," Lancaster managed. "Can you sense my thoughts when you do this?"

Evandrion chuckled. "No. Not without your consent. It would be quite dangerous for you to experience the full range of my telepathic abilities without extensive mental conditioning, so we are quite practiced at doing only what is necessary to relieve pain," he explained. He was so taciturn most of the time he'd been on the journey with them that Sheppard hadn't had the opportunity to hear quite how sonorous his voice was. Unusually calming, for a security officer.

"Well, if you ever want a change in career... you're definitely more effective than a shot of anesthizine," Sheppard joked, still scanning him.

"Many of my kind have found great satisfaction in the medical field, yes. I decided that I would rather be in a career that is dedicated to preventing injuries in the first

place, though. Besides, no one expects a Deltan to be a threat, which has often proven to be advantageous, Doctor,” Evandrion replied, with a grin.

Moments later, Lancaster’s commbadge chirped. “This is the Federation starship *Atascadero*. Captain Lancaster, do you read?”

“I’m here,” Lancaster managed.

“This is Dr. Luca Sheppard. Requesting emergency transport to your sickbay, *Atascadero*.”

Moments later, the three of them disappeared off of the Janice Rand for good in a swirl of energy.

Captain's Log, Supplemental.

Thanks to the swift thinking of Captain Lancaster and the intervention of the Atascadero, all four of my officers are now safely onboard the *Arcturus*. While Dr. Sheppard and Lieutenant Ohala have already been cleared for duty, Lieutenant Evandrion and Captain Lancaster are both recovering in sickbay, where I am told that they will make a full recovery in time for our departure in two days' time.

Starfleet has launched an investigation into the actions of Lieutenant Pressman, but so far Starfleet Intelligence believes that he acted without the support of a larger anti-Starfleet network. Based on the usage of his resource credits, the two Tarl that he killed alongside himself had been persuaded to aid him in exchange for agricultural equipment that the Federation would have been more than happy to provide, which leads me to believe that he misled them about the Federation's intentions for his world, a planet that has been a member of the Federation for over two-hundred years.

While I had hoped for a more auspicious start to my command of the *Arcturus*, I take comfort in the performance of Captain Lancaster, Doctor Sheppard, and Lieutenants Ohala and Evandrion in a crisis situation. All four of them demonstrated the excellence and resourcefulness reflective of the reasons that they were selected for this mission. I have entered commendations in all of their service jackets.

End Log.

After Hayden completed the log, she sat back in her chair for a moment, just dwelling on the fact that she came very close to having to write an entirely different log entry, should one or more of them had perished. And that was only assuming that the ship and station themselves weren't also destroyed. There would be ramifications for security across the star system, if not the whole Federation, in the short term. Shipyards were large, messy operations, and so Mr. Pressman may very well have achieved his goal of hampering the shipbuilding process by forcing Starfleet security to spend extra time vetting and approving the hundreds of thousands of workers it took to keep Starfleet vessels rolling off of the assembly line.

She stood and crossed out of the ready room and past her yeoman to the transporter platform at the rear of the bridge. "Sickbay," she ordered, before her

molecules were dematerialized and then sent through a reinforced conduit directly to the pad a dozen decks down adjacent to sickbay. It was quicker than a transport necessitating being actually transmitted off of the ship, but not instantaneous, which took some getting used to. She passed through the doors of the large sickbay complex, where the receptionist sitting at a desk in the circular foyer stood up out of respect.

“Captain Lancaster?” she asked.

“We’ve reserved exam room one for his recovery, sir. Second door on the right,” the young woman said, indicating the archway to her right. A human of Indian descent, she had to be no more than 19 or 20, and once she’d given the captain the directions her eyes got big. “I can show you, if you like, Captain,” she added. “Err... *Fleet* Captain.”

Hayden gave her a kind smile. “Captain is just fine, and I’m sure I can find it. Thank you, yeoman,” she said, before leaving the stammering young woman to her own devices. She chimed at the door marked “Exam Room One,” which was indeed easy to find.

“Come,” came a voice from within that she recognized to be Doctor Sheppard’s.

When she entered the room, Lancaster was sitting up in patient scrubs with the head of the biobed raised. The meal in front of him on a tray looked relatively untouched, and he still made a move to stand when Hayden entered, despite what she understood to be four still-healing ribs. Sheppard did rise from his seat, though.

“At ease,” she said, smiling at both of them. “Not quite the reunion any of us were expecting, I don’t think,” she offered, moving to lean on the end of Lancaster’s biobed.

Sheppard chuckled. “No. Definitely not.” She had met Sheppard a few times, when Lancaster had first taken the first officer’s position on the *Lafayette* and then again on her visits to Earth in the lead-up to the mission. Besides being good at his job, Hayden knew that he also kept his husband sane, which were both positive qualities in her book. The appeal was also immediately apparent, as Sheppard was tall, muscular, and likely to be attractive to almost anyone of any gender or species who happened to like Human males.

“I should have anticipated Pressman’s intentions, Captain,” Lancaster said, looking particularly surly, and then wincing slightly when his anger caused something in his

torso to turn just the wrong way to aggravate his injury. Sheppard shot him a glance that clearly read “calm down.”

“I didn’t come down here for you to find some way of blaming yourself for this. All of what we’ve been able to learn so far suggests he’d been planning this for months, ever since your flight plan was filed,” Hayden said. “What I did come down here to say was that I’m glad you’re still in one piece. It was touch and go several times, there. You as well, Doctor.”

“Thank you,” they said, in unison.

“May I speak freely, Captain?”

“Always, Michael. That’s what I brought you aboard for.”

Lancaster nodded, and there was a flicker of a smile from him. “I feel, well, we feel, that we’re obligated to tell you how closely both of us came to being emotionally compromised while on the *Rand*,” he said, seeming nervous as he finished that statement.

“It was a hostage situation, so that’s not surprising.”

“We both found ourselves in situations where our attachment to one another clouded our professional judgment,” Lancaster elaborated. Hayden studied him for a moment, attempting to see where he was going with that; it was absolutely not surprising that someone would react emotionally when a member of their family was threatened.

“Ma’am, I almost stopped him from saving the ship,” Sheppard blurted.

Hayden nodded. “But you didn’t.”

“Ma’am?”

“You wanted to, but you didn’t. Just like whatever thoughts he had about you didn’t keep him from doing his job, either,” Hayden said with a wave of her hands. Honesty was both expected and appropriate from her first officer, but this struck her as more being related to the two men’s collective anxiety over the appearance of impropriety. “I appreciate your forthrightness here, but it’s not necessary.”

Lancaster cleared his throat, looking a little taken aback by Sheppard’s casual tone, which Hayden found to be almost comical. “What we’re saying is that we’re concerned

we won't be able to serve you well if we're together, especially when one of us in danger," Lancaster admitted.

That did make Hayden laugh, which caused the two men to exchange a look. "You're not the first married couple in Starfleet. You're definitely also not the first married couple to be in disparate positions of authority, either. I don't think this is going to be an issue, especially since you two are both clearly pained by the thought of putting a toe out of line," she said. "You get your yearly psych clearances like everyone else and your relationship is well-documented. If Starfleet didn't think you could handle it—if I didn't think you could handle it, you wouldn't be here. Clear?"

"Yes... Yes, Captain," Lancaster said, looking a little relieved.

"Clear," Sheppard agreed, beaming.

The door behind Hayden opened and she turned to see Doctor Anjar enter. The Bajoran exuded an air of competence and calm which seemed to lower the temperature of the conversation significantly. Until he spoke, that was.

"How's our patient doing?"

"Your patient is conscious and capable of speaking for himself, Doctor," Lancaster quipped. "I'm feeling quite ready to get out of here," he added.

Anjar chuckled. "Sounds that way. But you're also still recovering from several broken bones, near respiratory collapse, and exposure. I'll release you to your quarters, but you're off duty for another twenty-four hours on bed rest," the doctor replied, glancing over at the biomonitor readings scrolling past on the screen behind Lancaster's head.

Lancaster looked directly at Hayden, who stood up and shrugged.

"Don't look at me. He out-ranks me, in this regard. In fact, I think your husband is the perfect person to enforce such a house arrest," Hayden said, looking at Anjar.

"Agreed. I don't want to see either of you for twenty-four hours. You'll still have a full day to get ready for the launch after that," Anjar noted. "Captain Okusanya could probably do with a few more hours of feeling like the queen of the roost, anyway."

The captain chuckled. “Probably, yes. I’ll see you tomorrow, Michael. Luca,” she said nodding to the two of them and then leaving the room before she had to hear any sort of negotiation attempts from her stubborn first officer—not that his sentence of house arrest being enhanced with having to share it with his loving and attentive husband should give him much to complain about.

// USS *Arcturus*, Captain Lancaster and Doctor Sheppard's Quarters

The senior-most officers had impressive quarters located in the superstructure under the bridge hull, which, unusually for a starship, each spanned two decks. Fleet Captain Hayden's quarters took up the forward end of decks three and four, with Captains Lancaster, Anjar, and Okusanya each having suites on either the port or starboard sides of the same deck. Given the burdens that each of them had in leading the *Arcturus*'s long mission, the idea was that larger quarters might feel more like life on a planet. The rest of the crew could get that same feeling through the multi-story promenade that took up a portion of the forward quarter of the primary hull, as well as a large arboretum, and several expansive recreation decks, all of which put crew morale and wellbeing over space concerns, something that was only possible on such a large ship.

"Still grumpy?" Sheppard asked, as he came up the stairs from the living area below to their new sleeping loft, carrying two glasses of red wine, which he placed on the nightstand as he sat down next to Lancaster. Beyond him was the expansive viewport which had views out over the entire starboard saucer. Another smaller viewport was above their bed looking straight at the shipyard frame—though in space it would just be stars. Thankfully, they were both also polarized on the outside, as workbees continued to scoot along by with trains of cargo modules in tow, seeming so close that one could just reach out and grab one.

"I'm always a little grumpy, Shep," Lancaster quipped. "Aren't these mine?" he asked, snapping the waistband of the sweatpants Sheppard was wearing that he was absolutely positive were his from the academy, as they were noticeably too tight on someone who was twelve centimeters taller and quite a bit more muscular as well.

"Communal property, Husband," Sheppard replied, with a grin, before handing said husband one of the glasses. "It's just synthehol, but the sooner we get to you feeling like you're fully functional, the better."

Lancaster chuckled in response. "Well, the reason I'm grumpy is because I *am* fully functional and I want to get to work," he replied. He took a sip; it was a very good simulation of a light, bright, and cheerful beaujolais, though it lacked the slight bite that real wine would have had. He grabbed Sheppard's hand. "I don't mind getting to spend time with you, though."

Sheppard chuckled. "You don't mind it, huh? Ringing endorsement."

"Fine. I *like* it, Shep," Lancaster replied, shaking his head. He winced slightly when Sheppard's finger tips brushed against his bare torso; though his bones had been neatly knit back together with an osteoregenerator, the flesh around them was still sensitive. Sheppard gave him an apologetic look and pecked him on the forehead before moving around the king sized bed to sit next to him, rather than risk kneeling him in his bruised torso.

"Can we talk about something?" Sheppard asked, putting around his husband's shoulders, which so far had been the only position they'd tried that hadn't left Lancaster doubled over in pain.

"That sounds ominous," Lancaster quipped, taking an exaggeratedly deep drink from his glass.

"Evandrion. Was that... weird?" Sheppard asked, sounding sheepish.

"What do you mean 'weird?' It was definitely an unusual sensation."

Sheppard let out the sort of half-chuckle he made when he was nervous about something. "This is not at all an enlightened medical professional's opinion, but... he touched you and made you feel pleasant, which... seems odd," he said. "Since I couldn't, in that moment, comfort you."

Lancaster stared incredulously at him. "Is that jealousy or insecurity speaking, if not 'enlightened medical professionalism,'" he asked, after a beat.

"I suppose there's not much difference between those two things," Sheppard said, his olive-toned features now bright red. "Forget it. I shouldn't have said anything. I'm making something out of nothing."

"Oh, I quite like this uncontained anxiety coming from someone other than myself," Lancaster replied, with a laugh that made him wince again. "You're jealous that Lieutenant Evandrion touched me."

"I get that it wasn't sexual or anything like that. But it's still *really* intimate. He could access your emotions and your thoughts if he wanted to. I know that he *didn't*, but he had the ability to," Sheppard explained.

“We have been *far* closer and far more ‘intimate’ than that, Shep,” Lancaster reminded him.

“But we’ve never sensed each other’s thoughts. I wish we could do that,” Sheppard admitted.

“Sure we have. Maybe not literally, but we’re almost always in sync. Exhibit A: I didn’t even have to ask for wine,” Lancaster said, keeping himself from laughing at his husband’s line of thinking both to spare his feelings but also to avoid irritating his ribs. “So, maybe, it was ‘weird’ but I think our collective neuroses regarding our relationship show that we have a connection that’s a lot deeper than that, even without telepathy.”

Sheppard offered him a sheepish smile. “Collective neuroses is a good way of putting it. I’m glad Captain Hayden was understanding, back in sickbay.”

Lancaster nodded. “It did make feel rather foolish, though. I felt like we had to bring it up to let her make a decision, but the answer was so obvious it made me wonder if we’re a little... self-centered?”

“How so?”

“We’re both so focused on each other and *us* that we hadn’t even conceived that our exact situation is replicated hundreds or thousands of other places all around the fleet—people serving together while also in love. It’s not like we invented shacking up with shipmates,” Lancaster explained.

“Maybe our lack of self-awareness is due to how absolutely amazing we are together,” Sheppard suggested, before kissing him.

“Add collective arrogance to our collective neuroses, I guess.”

“About before. On the ship. Thank you, too. For *us*. There’s no one I’d rather be on this ride with, Michael.”

// USS *Arcturus* - Main Bridge

// Two Days Later

The final checks to get the *Arcturus* ready for launch had gone flawlessly. Every system from the warp engines straight down to the holographic waiters in the ship's lounges were ready and waiting for the ship's trial cruise to Barzan II, and beyond there to the waiting Delta Quadrant. Fleet Captain Hayden was flanked by Doctor Anjar and Captain Lancaster, each of which were using holographic consoles to monitor the crew and ship's systems respectively.

"All decks and departments reporting in, Captain. We are ready to begin final launch preparations," Lancaster reported, as blue lights illuminated around the bridge to signify the ship's preparedness to depart. All of the status icons on his board were green, and there was nothing left to do but give the order.

"Computer, give me ship wide," Hayden ordered. A bosun's whistle sounded. "Attention all hands, this is the captain speaking. Your hard work is about to pay off, as our ship is now ready to leave port. Some of you have been aboard for years as she went from a collection of hull plates and stem bolts to the magnificent vessel she is now. Some of you have just joined us, but together, *we* are the *Arcturus* as much as her bulkheads and computers are. We have a long journey ahead of us, so for now, I will just say: congratulations," she said.

Lancaster glanced around the bridge and noted the sheer enthusiasm he could see in those eyes he caught. Hayden was the type of leader that he aspired to be: someone who brought out the best in their subordinates and inspired them.

"Operations, clear all moorings and umbilicals," Hayden ordered. "Helm, bring all thrusters to station-keeping."

"Gangways retracting. Mooring beams disabled," Commander Alesser reported, standing behind Anjar at his own holographic station.

"Thrusters to station-keeping, aye," Lieutenant Tellora, the ship's Klingon helmswoman replied. Everyone on the bridge could sense the young woman's

eagerness to get underway. What she lacked in experience, she made up for in raw talent behind the controls of a ship of any size.

Hayden brought up the communications system herself from the armrest of her chair. "Epsilon Indi Station, this is the *Arcturus*. Requesting departure clearance," she said.

"Permission granted, *Arcturus*. We look forward to having you home again one day," the commanding officer of the station replied.

"As do we, Epsilon Indi. *Arcturus*, out," Hayden said, before turning to Lancaster. "Take us out, Number One," she ordered.

"Helm, release forward thrusters and set aft thrusters to twenty meters per second," Lancaster said, watching his instruments carefully as Tellora engaged the thrusters. The large ship began to move free of the docking frame for the first time, its gantries sweeping past them as it pushed out into open space.

"Departure successful, Captain. We are now free and clear to maneuver," Lancaster reported, counting down the twenty-five seconds it took the tips of the kilometer-long starship's nacelles to clear the dry-dock.

"I think it's high time that we get on our way, then. Let's put her through her paces." Hayden said, beaming as she placed both of her hands on the armrests of the command throne. "Ahead, warp one. Engage!" And with that, the stars rushed at the viewscreen and then there was a flash of light as the *Arcturus* jumped away from Epsilon Indi, en route to her destiny.