

STAR TREK S.C.E

HARD CRASH

By Christie Golden

Our communication system appears to be damaged. I am receiving no response from you. Jaldark, please come in. You need to effect repairs so that we can communicate.

Jaldark, please come in.

Jaldark, respond.

Please.

Tlaimon Kassant sipped a cup of hot jiksn. He had the late shift, the solitary shift, and he liked it that way. His people were known for their close-knit bonds and love of socialization, but Tlaimon was considered unusual in that he preferred his own company for a few hours every day. He considered his "oddity" a boon as he was paid twice for being willing to go the entire night by himself. Most Intarians liked to work in huddled groups.

All alone for the night. What a pleasant thing. Easy job, too; watching the monitor for things that seldom happened. Most ships communicated their arrival long before they showed up on the monitor. They were always eager to get to Intar. It wasn't as well known in the quadrant as Risa, admittedly, but then, what planet was?

Tlaimon stretched the retractable tentacles that served the Intarians for arms and lazily brought his multifaceted-eyed gaze toward the screen.

The cup of jiksn fell to the padded floor unheeded and bounced twice. Its contents formed a pool of sticky lavender fluid. Tlaimon swore a deep oath under his breath while his two hearts raced with fear at what the screen revealed.

Something large was approaching the city from space. It was several million kilometers away, but it was closing fast. Too fast for comfort. He adjusted the controls swiftly, his tentacles more deft than any humanoid's clumsy digits.

Tlaimon could see the outline now. A ship of some kind, though the computer kept flashing that most frustrating of words, "Unknown", on the screen. It was long and spiky and promised destruction if it continued on its trajectory.

Tlaimon quickly hit the button that would translate his message in every language known to the Federation.

"Attention alien vessel," he said in a voice that trembled. "You are on a collision course with a major population center of our planet. Adjust your course to bearing one-four-seven mark eight and you will avoid impact."

The ship didn't change its position one millimeter. Either it was unaware of the impending disaster--for surely it would be destroyed upon striking the planet if it continued at its present speed--or else its crew didn't care.

Unpleasant scenarios crowded Tlaimon mind. Was this a suicide run? A dreadful first strike that would mean war?

Who would possibly want to make war on us? Tlaimon thought wildly.

There was nothing else for it. Trembling, Tlaimon extended a tentacle and tapped the white button that would alert the government that a disaster was descending upon the capital city of Verutak with all the inevitability of dusk at the end of the day.

Jaldark, what is going on? I have heard nothing from you. Everything appears to be intact, and yet we

remain unable to communicate. Please respond. Please attend to the communication damage.
Are you still receiving this? Jaldark?

Bartholomew Faulwell smiled to himself as he took the items from the replicator. What he was doing had become, over time, a ritual of sorts. He took the crisp, off-white paper, enjoying the feel of it in his hand; picked up the smooth pen filled with just the right shade of black-blue ink. Sometimes, if he weren't careful, the ink would stain the tip of the third finger on the right hand. It brought him an uncommon rush of pleasure whenever he chanced to look upon that smudge before it wore off, because it reminded him of the ritual, and the ritual brought him closer to Anthony Mark.

Of course, there was no convenient way of getting the actual letters to Anthony. Once Faulwell had composed them, had gotten the words exactly right, he'd read them aloud into a subspace message and poof, off it would go. It was impersonal, but it was the only way. On the rare opportunities they had to meet, Faulwell would give Anthony the letters in a box as a special gift. But the simple physical act of writing the letters--all of which he opened with the words "Just a brief note" regardless of how many pages the letter would then go on to become--made Bart feel akin to the myriads of wanderers who had gone before the sailors of ancient Earth, the early spacefarers, all those who knew distance from those they loved and tried to bridge that distance with the written word.

Words, written or spoken, were almost as dear to Faulwell as Anthony.

He took a breath and settled down in a chair in the quarters he shared with Stevens. He instructed the computer to provide soft instrumental music as a pleasant background, and began to write.

Just a brief note to let you know that our last assignment was completed successfully. It was not without its tense moments, however! Some days, this mission becomes just a trifle too exciting for a boring old linguist like me to handle. It is always such a pleasure to have a calm moment now and then to write down my thoughts and feelings to you, my dear, and know that as you read these words you will, in some small way, share in my adventures. How are you getting along with your new colleague, the one you called in your last letter the "Pompous Windbag?" Has PW come around to your way of thinking yet? I cannot imagine you would be unable to win him over once

A klaxon sounded. Yellow alert. The slight linguist sagged in his chair and groaned. Time for another adventure.

"Will the following crewmembers please report to the briefing room." Bart listened, but his hopes of peacefully continuing with his correspondence were dashed when he heard his name among those listed. Carefully he capped the pen and left the letter on the table.

He wasn't usually summoned to briefings unless he was an actual participant in whatever mission they were about to embark upon. Still, he remained optimistic. With any luck he'd return to his letter in a few moments. After all, not every "adventure" on which the da Vinci embarked required a linguist.

"And we'll need a linguist," Captain David Gold was saying to Geordi la Forge as Faulwell entered the room. "Ah, from my mouth to God's ears," Gold added with a lift of his bushy eyebrows as he caught sight of Faulwell. The rest of the crew who had been asked to report was filling the small briefing room, gently pushing past Faulwell to take their seats.

Faulwell smiled weakly. His brief note would have to wait.

Something brushed past his leg; P8Blue scurrying toward her specially designed seat. She was muttering underneath her breath. Bart wondered what this mission was about that got the normally calm Pattie so agitated.

He sat between Commander Sonya Gomez and Carol Abramowitz. Carol leaned over and whispered, "Culture specialist and linguist huh? Wonder if it's a first contact situation."

Her dark eyes glowed with excitement. Abramowitz loved first contact situations, but they always made the academic Faulwell nervous as hell. He more than anyone knew just how important choosing the right word in delicate negotiations could be. Sometimes, it was literally a matter of life or death. He figured each of the first contact situations in which he'd participated had aged him at least a year. No wonder his hair was thinning and turning gray.

110, as always, was the last one to enter. Sometimes, he was quite late in reporting to the briefings, but Gold had not reprimanded him. Everyone was sympathetic to 110's situation. Bart had begun to worry about him after their conversation. The little Bynar edged into the room as if fearing an attack, his eyes, so small in his round, pale face, darting about. Bart remembered how the unified pair used to move, each step in synch, quickly but with grace. Now 110 moved jerkily, awkwardly, as if he was uncertain where to put hand or foot. There was no rhythm in his movements anymore. In many ways, he reminded Bart of nothing so much as a broken toy. He did not take a seat, but chose to stand next to the door.

As if to make a quick exit, Faulwell thought. He grieved for the solitary being. He couldn't imagine losing Anthony, and they spent most of each year light-years away from one another. To be as intimately bonded as the Bynars were, and then to lose that other half--inconceivable. Simply inconceivable, what 110 must be going through.

Gold's sharp eyes scanned his crew. He nodded, as if satisfied.

"We got the notification from Scotty about fifteen minutes ago. We're going to have to move quickly, gentlemen, ladies and others. We've got a delicate situation on our hands. Commander, if you will?"

La Forge touched a button. Bart felt a sinking in the pit of his stomach as he stared at the image that appeared. A large ship lay like a beached whale in the center of tons of debris. The pile of rubble had once been, if the graceful curves and arcs of the surviving buildings were any indication, a highly civilized city. The vessel was oval in shape, with four peculiar extensions jutting out of its fore and aft sections that looked like spikes. It seemed as if the impact had severely damaged the vessel, but the unfortunate city had gotten the worst of the deal.

Faulwell's mind raced. High population area, doubtless.

"Casualties?" asked Gomez, alert and focused.

"None that we know of, fortunately," said Gold. "It's the capital city of Intar."

"Not Intar!" gasped Abramowitz, her eyes wide with shock. "The Intarians are famous for their friendliness. I can't imagine anyone attacking them."

"They also have an extremely advanced warning system," said Gold. "It was designed so that they could address approaching ships and send them a nice hello. The other, secondary, purpose was to identify drifting space debris that might do some damage. They were able to evacuate the entire city before impact."

Bart felt the tension in his chest ease a little.

"However," Geordi continued, "according to reports on approach of the ship, everything points to the vessel deliberately crashing into the planet. The Intarians tried to contact it, and when contact failed, they open fire. Intar doesn't have much of a defense system and what little they did have seemed to have absolutely no impact on this thing. And while it's temporarily dormant, it's still emitting signals." He tapped the screen with his knuckle. "The beast is wounded all right, but it's still alive."

"Any vessel we're familiar with would have been broken to pieces on impact," said Pattie, blinking her multifaceted eyes solemnly. "This is damaged all right, but preliminary reports indicate it's made out of something we've never seen before. It's got a structure as impervious to damage as--"

"Yours," joked Duffy.

Pattie looked pleased. "That's not a bad comparison, actually. The difference in that ship's structure and a normal vessel is, indeed, roughly comparable to the difference between my chitin and your thin human skin." She extended a limb and delicately patted Duffy's hand.

"The first volley in a war?" theorized Lieutenant Commander Domenica Corsi. The Chief of Security was always looking for the martial explanation, and sadly, she was often right.

"As I said, I can't imagine a more unlikely target for such an attack than the Intarians," said Abramowitz, frowning a little. "They don't have a lot of resources other than a pleasant climate and a pleasant people. Nor do they have an extensive weapons array. On Intar, it's pretty much come when you like, stay as long as you like, and don't forget to write."

"Nonetheless, we ought to be prepared." Corsi stuck out her chin a little. "I recommend we proceed with Tactical Code Level--"

Gold held up a hand. "No life signs, Corsi. No one to fight. No one on the long range sensors hovering

about watching like vultures, either."

"Captain, there's always the chance the ship was crewed by a kind of life form we haven't yet encountered. Our scans wouldn't necessarily detect them," Corsi pointed out. "Or, it could be a trap." She sat up a little straighter in her chair, utilizing her always intimidating height to its best advantage even when seated. "The entire ship could be a threat. A bomb of some kind. It could explode at any moment. I repeat, I recommend--"

"Duly noted, Commander," said Gold, his voice slightly harder than before. "But let's do a little investigating before we declare this planet a war zone, okay?"

Her eyes flashed, but Corsi settled back in her chair. She pressed her lips together tightly. Faulwell suspected that Gold was going to pay for that one next time he veered from the regs one iota. Gomez gave the security chief a reassuring smile, but Corsi would not relax.

"Lieutenant Commander Corsi does have a point." It was Dr. Elizabeth Lense speaking. "The vessel could be automated. It could have been programmed to crash, especially if it's as tough as Pattie's theorizing. Is there any indication that there was a crew aboard?"

"No way to tell without investigating it with our own eyes," said Geordi. "But that impact was pretty rough. Despite its thick hide, that ship's banged up quite a bit. Unless they were secured and protected somehow, humanoid bodies probably couldn't have survived that kind of crash even if the vessel itself did."

"Non-humanoid bodies could," said Faulwell, speaking up. His mind was already racing with the possibilities. He needed to narrow it down as much as he could in order to determine which branch of linguistics would be most effective to research. Armed with at least a rough idea of what to look for, he'd have a better chance translating the data they would retrieve from the ship's computer banks. As far as he was concerned, other than the concern a caring person must always feel at loss of life, he was relieved that there were no living beings aboard that ship to try to talk to.

He noticed that Carol, however, looked keenly disappointed. They'd called her in for her knowledge about the Intarians, not to speculate about the crew of the ship. There would be no First Contact this time.

"Early indications are that the environment inside the ship is a nitrogen-oxygen mix, similar to Earth's. But that's no guarantee that the crew was humanoid," said Geordi. He smiled a little. "We'll find out soon enough."

"So, here's the situation." Gold leaned forward and laced his fingers together on the table. "The ship has deliberately plowed into the heart of downtown. It's far less damaged than it ought to be for the impact it took. It is inactive at the moment, but we're still getting signals. No signs of life, but as Corsi astutely pointed out, that doesn't mean that something's not still alive in there. Now, sensors indicate there's only one central command area in the thing. Pattie, you get to examine the outside."

"Certainly, Captain." She wriggled several of her legs. "I could use a little exercise."

Gold continued. "If we can get a transporter lock inside, You five--Commander La Forge, Gomez, Duffy, Faulwell, and 110--will be transporting into a ship about which we know absolutely nothing. Anything can happen, or nothing."

"In short," said Duffy, grinning, "an assignment much like any other."

But Faulwell wasn't laughing. Out of the corner of his eye, Bart had noticed that the Bynar had physically shuddered at the news that he--it?--was being assigned to the team. It was, as a Vulcan would say, the only logical choice. 110 was their computer specialist, until Starfleet sent them another one. 110 had been very brave up until now, expressing a willingness to continue with his work despite what had to be--had to be--extreme personal grief. But it was clearly taking a toll on the little fellow. He'd already delayed going home once. Now this had come up.

Even as Bart regarded the Bynar with sympathy, 110 straightened, pulled his tiny shoulders back, and resolutely lifted his large, hairless head. Faulwell was filled with admiration.

Jaldark? If you are conducting a test of some sort, you may cease. I am starting to worry. Please, please come in.

The worried face of the Intari Makestru, the leader of his people, appeared on the viewscreen. "Captain Gold," he said anxiously. "You are a welcome sight. We have done nothing, as per orders from Starfleet, but I must say, it's been alarming having this ship just sitting there in our capital city."

"I'm certain it is, as it has," soothed Gold. "We're preparing to transport our people over to the ship. We'll contact you once we have the situation well in hand."

"We are grateful." The image blinked out. On the screen now was the strange, seemingly dead ship. Gold took a breath, said a quick prayer, and instructed the away team to report to the transporter room.

As they gathered in the transporter room, Sonya Gomez was still a bit on edge from the confrontation she'd had with Domenica Corsi. Normally, she got along with "Core Breach" Corsi better than anyone else aboard the da Vinci. But Corsi was still stinging from the rebuff she'd gotten from Gold during the briefing. While Gomez was heading for the transporter room, Corsi had fallen in step beside her and insisted that she be allowed to accompany the away team.

"There's no indication that that will be necessary, Dom," Gomez had said as sympathetically as she could. "There's no indication that it won't," Corsi had retorted.

"Look," Gomez had finally said, exasperated, "the captain wants you on the bridge. And I think he's right. Suppose something does go wrong? We'll need you up here in case that ship proves to be a danger to the Intarians."

When even that logic failed to placate the chief security officer, Gomez had added, "That's an order, Lieutenant Commander."

She disliked pulling rank, especially here, with this crew, where at times it seemed so unnecessary. They had worked together long enough that everyone knew what to do and usually didn't need to be told. She especially disliked having to do it with Corsi, who was generally the one keeping all the rest of them on their toes with regards to regulations, protocol, and proper rank deportment. Corsi had stiffened, drawn herself up to her full and imposing height, fixed Gomez with an icy stare, replied, "Yes, Commander" in a cold voice, and stalked off.

Gomez wasn't superstitious, but this was a bad way to start a mission. Her boots rang loudly as she stepped onto the transporter pad.

"Core Breach got you?" asked Kieran Duffy.

"Kaboom," she replied softly. He grinned a little, then looked away quickly. Too quickly. It would take more time than this to get used to each other again.

Geordi, too, was smiling. She felt a trace of annoyance. She didn't want La Forge to see any division in the ranks, any hint that she couldn't take care of subordinates. She wished Gold hadn't ordered him to accompany the away team. This ought to have been her mission.

It was only now that she realized that 110 was missing. Her dark brows drew together in a frown.

"Where is--"

The door hissed open. 110 stood there for a moment, looking around as if lost. Gomez's vexation with Geordi evaporated. Damn it, 110 seemed so very tiny, so very fragile in his envirosuit. So...alone. There was something very strange to her about seeing a single Bynar, something wrong about it. Like watching a Vulcan laugh at a joke. That wasn't the way this culture was meant to be.

Were they pushing him too hard? Was 110 really ready for another assignment without a chance to properly mourn and reconnect with his people?

Hesitantly at first, then with more determination, 110 moved into the room. He clambered onto the transporter pad and craned his neck to look up at first La Forge and then Gomez with unreadable dark eyes.

"We--I--apologize for being late, Commander."

"Don't worry about it, 110," said Gomez with more warmth than she had intended to show.

She looked up at Wong, who was awaiting their order to transport.

"Energize," said Gomez.

....Jaldark...?

They materialized in Hell.

The command center looked like a torture chamber to a horrified Duffy. It was a huge domed area, but there was no skylight letting in the softening light of the stars. The area was completely enclosed. There appeared to be no exits. All was metal, heavy and cumbersome looking. Everything seemed the same--the arching ceiling, the consoles, the walls. What little light there was was red and eerie, casting a pulsing, bloody hue over the alien equipment and the macabre centerpiece of the disturbing scene. For in the center of the room, its decaying limbs splayed at an odd angle, a corpse was strapped into a chair.

"So it did have a crew," said La Forge softly, sadly.

"Or at least a pilot," said Gomez. Duffy admired the calmness of her voice. Sometimes it was hard to believe this was the same big-eyed girl who'd spilled hot chocolate all over Captain Picard just a few short years ago. But of course, she wasn't really the same. She had changed, just as he had, in the intervening decade or so. Gomez stepped forward and shone her wristlight over the humanoid body. La Forge and Duffy stepped beside her. Duffy began to take tricorder readings.

"As Lieutenant La Forge reported earlier, the atmosphere in here is perfectly breathable," he said to whoever was listening. "It never shut down after the pilot's death. That's why the body's rotting."

"Let's not take our suits off just yet, shall we?" said La Forge. Faulwell and 110, less interested in the dead body than in the computer that might be coaxed to yield information, stepped over to the consoles and began to analyze them. They spoke together in low voices, Faulwell occasionally bending over to hear 110 better. They seemed to be having a hard time figuring out where to begin. For the first time in a while, Duffy heard the oddly musical sound of the Bynar language as 110 adjusted the blinking buffer he always kept at his side. Duffy wondered why 110 was talking in his native tongue. Could he simply have forgotten there was no one here who could understand him?

La Forge tapped his comm badge. "La Forge to da Vinci."

"Go ahead, La Forge," came Gold's voice.

"It appears there was a crew on this vessel, Captain," La Forge continued. Duffy examined his tricorder as he spoke. Out of the corner of his eye, Duffy saw something on the floor and directed his tricorder at it.

"A single pilot," said La Forge. "Humanoid. It appears to be female."

"Injured in the crash?"

"Negative. It looks as though she was strapped into the seat. Hard to say how long she's been dead. Long enough for decay to set in." La Forge stepped closer to the corpse, his face almost touching that of the dead pilot. "No obvious trauma."

Duffy knelt and regarded the piece of equipment on the floor. According to his readings, it was the alien equivalent of a tricorder. Gingerly, he reached to pick it up. It was about the size of an old-style tricorder and weighed about as much. They could take this back to the ship and analyze it while Faulwell and 110 continued to work on the computer here.

He glanced over at the linguist and the Bynar, and frowned to himself. 110 seemed to be having a hard time cracking the ship's computer, and Faulwell was looking a tad impatient. I'm sure it would be much faster if 111 was still with us, Duffy thought. Although even a single Bynar is usually several times faster than any human in accessing a computer.

"No, wait," said Gomez. She was squatting on the other side of the humanoid in the chair, examining the fastenings. "Look at this, Commander."

Both Duffy and La Forge moved to shine their wristlights where Gomez had indicated. La Forge inhaled swiftly, but otherwise gave no indication of how startled he must be. Duffy gaped, seasoned Starfleet officer though he was.

"Correction, Captain Gold," Geordi said. "The pilot appears to be impaled upon the chair."

That got Bart's attention. His head whipped around and he gazed, frowning, at the corpse in the chair. Leaving the Bynar alone for the moment with the conundrum of the computer that would not yield its information, he strode quickly over to the rest of the team.

"Geez, will you look at that. You're right," he said, distaste in his voice. As rigor mortis had set in, the arms had pulled back from the metal of the chair. Three spikes extended from the chair deep into the pilot's arms. "Do you think this was some kind of torture device?"

Gomez shook her dark head, recovering her composure quickly. "I don't know. And we shouldn't make assumptions without all the data," she said. "Captain, I think we should transport this pilot to sickbay and have Dr. Lense perform a complete examination." Her eyes flickered to 110. "And 110 seems to be having a tough time figuring out this computer."

"What?" Gold's voice was incredulous. "And Earth is having a tough time spinning."

"He's doing the best he can," said Bart, almost as if in defense. "It's hard for him by himself."

"I'll send over Pattie and Ina to lend him a hand. Or leg, as the case may be. The rest of you, keep examining that ship. I'll have the pilot beamed over and I'll let you know when Lense learns anything."

"Aye, sir." La Forge Gomez, Duffy and Abramowitz stepped back from the chair. The figure shimmered, then dematerialized.

A terrible sound rent the air, a high-pitched scream of agony mixed with an ear-splitting mechanical hum. As one, they whirled to behold little 110, his tiny body arched in agony, screaming as his body shuddered and writhed. Blue Light crackled around his small frame, enveloping the Bynar and the console on which his delicate fingers were placed. He was caught, writhing, unable to break free. Unable to do anything but cry out.

His crewmembers rushed forward. Before they could get to him, a final burst of energy lifted 110 up into the air and hurled him across the room. He slammed into a bulkhead, and Duffy heard an audible crack as the Bynar tumbled, limp, to the deck. The buffer lay beside him, blinking wildly.

Faulwell was the first to reach him, but by then Gomez was already saying, "Medical emergency! Lock onto 110 and get him to sickbay now!"

Even as 110 shimmered and vanished, Duffy felt the ship shudder. The light changed from murky red to bright yellow.

"It's powering up!" Duffy cried, yelling to be heard above the sudden rumbling that filled the control room.

Gomez raced back to the chair and began searching for a control panel. "There's nothing here!" she yelled.

The ship lurched violently. All of them lost their balance and fell heavily to the metal deck. The vessel heaved and bucked, then appeared to move forward.

There was no screen, no way to see what was happening outside this womb-like single room. How had the pilot been able to navigate?

"Gold to away team. I'm getting you and Pattie the hell out of there."

"What's happening?" demanded La Forge.

"That ship just woke up and is trampling all over downtown. Prepare to beam aboard."

They all appeared on the bridge. Duffy materialized directly in front of a furious Corsi. She towered over him, her face red with anger, and hissed, "I told you I should have come with you! Look!"

She pointed angrily at the screen. Duffy stared. His captain hadn't exaggerated. The ship filled the screen. Earlier, they had wondered what function the four protrusions on the otherwise sleek ship might have performed. Now, they saw those strange spikes, seemingly so awkward, in action. They served the vessel for legs, moving clumsily but effectively across the wreckage that had once been a thriving, peaceful city. Thank God there had been time for an evacuation, or by now thousands would probably be dead.

"It looks like it's...walking," said Bart with faint disgust.

"It is," said Gold grimly. "And I think there's an Intarian ordinance against unleashed ships walking around downtown. Try to make contact one more time Mr. Wong, then McAllan, it's your turn."

Wong shook his head. "No response, sir. I don't think it even heard us."

Gold sighed. "I hate having to do this. God knows what we lose. Lieutenant McAllan, target weapons systems and fire at will."

"Sir, I'm unable to detect any weapons systems, at all," replied McAllan in his deep, rich voice, taut now

with tension.

"Let me see that," snapped Corsi, shoving McAllan out of the way. Her fingers flew over the console, her body tense and focused on the task at hand. Nobody could concentrate like "Core Breach." Finally she looked up, confusion and irritation on her face.

"McAllan's right. It's impossible to distinguish weapons from propulsion from anything else."

"Maybe it's unarmed," suggested Abramowitz. "Maybe the people who built it are non-violent. It could have crashed accidentally."

"You saw what they did to that pilot," said Faulwell with unusual vehemence. "That sure wasn't non-violent."

Duffy quickly took his seat. Gold leaned forward, resting his head on one hand. He rubbed a finger along his chin as he considered the options. "Let's find out. Corsi, fire a warning shot."

On the screen, their phaser blast appeared angry and red. The ship stopped dead in its tracks. Looking unsettlingly like a dog sitting and begging, its stern section dropped suddenly and it lifted its upper two "arms." Blue-black balls of energy exploded forth and screamed out of the atmosphere striking the da Vinci. The ship shuddered with the impact.

"Shields down thirty-three percent," said Wong.

"It's got weapons," La Forge commented.

"And it's not very non-violent," said Gold. "We've got to disable it. Corsi, it's all yours."

Corsi's lips thinned. Inwardly, Duffy cringed. He liked to avoid Corsi whenever possible, because it seemed to him that whatever he said or did was exactly the wrong thing. She was utterly intent upon the task at hand and her blue eyes were like ice now. He was very glad he was not the object of such intense concentration.

Corsi fired. And fired again. And again. Red phaser energy shot through space. Despite her poorly concealed rage and passion, she knew what her captain wanted. For some reason they had been unable to locate the weapons systems--indeed, any specific system--on the vessel. Now that it had fired on them, however, their targets were clear the two major appendages. Corsi concentrated her fire on those. To everyone's astonishment, the heavy attack seemed to have little to no effect. The ship merely resumed its bizarre squatting position, targeted the da Vinci with deadly accuracy, and returned fire. The Federation vessel rocked violently. The impact knocked Duffy out of his chair and he fell heavily for the second time that day. He was bruised and bloody, and something felt wrong in his hand. Once this was over, he'd have to go see Emmett. He found that the hologram was even nicer to deal with than the flesh and blood doctor--quite a switch from the earlier programs.

"Ineffective, sir," said Corsi in a low, angry voice, stating the obvious. She continued to fire on the ship's appendages.

"Evasive maneuvers. Transfer all power to the forward shields. Let's take its hits here. Try different parts of the hull before we back off," said Gold. "Nothing's completely invulnerable." But he didn't sound too certain.

Now Corsi directed the da Vinci's phasers randomly. She attacked the rear appendages, the bow, the stern. At one point, when the ship raised itself again to fire, she got a clear volley in at its underside. It stumbled. One spiky leg waved frantically.

"That's the spot, Corsi!" cried Gold.

Heartened, Duffy leaned forward as Corsi fired again. The ship collapsed. It clambered to its "feet," but Corsi knew where to aim now and was merciless. After five more rounds, the ship teetered for a moment, fell heavily, and lay still.

Silence on the bridge. But the ship was motionless. They had disabled it. Duffy let out his breath. He wasn't aware he'd been holding it. All at once, he became aware again of the alien piece of equipment he'd been clutching in a death grip.

"Captain," he said, "I recovered this from the vessel. I think it's a tricorder of some kind. We may not have been able to access the main computer, but this might have something on it worth knowing."

Gold's eyes lit up. He and Geordi exchanged looks, and La Forge grinned.

"Duff Man found a key," said La Forge with a trace of pride. After all, Duffy had been under his

command at one time. Duffy grinned back.

"La Forge, you and Faulwell start trying to figure out how to use this key. Nice work, Duffy."

"Thank you, Captain." It made the terrible pain in his hand worth it.

"Permission to go to sickbay to check on 110," said Gomez.

"Granted," said Gold. "You two," he said to Faulwell and La Forge, "get on this tricorder immediately.

Now," he continued, rising and walking down to the screen, "little ship, are you really disabled or do you still have a trick or two up your sleeve?"

Duffy held his injured hand and watched Gomez leave. He knew why she was going, and he understood. It wouldn't kill him to wait until she'd finished with 110 to get his injury treated.

Dr. Elizabeth Lense hated this part of the mission. She'd much rather be attending her other "patient." The dead one, lying on a biobed awaiting examination with the patience of, well, the dead. But 110 needed her attention now.

The Bynar was spasming on the bed, his eyes rolling back and forth underneath tightly shut lids. He wasn't breathing. Lense went into automatic pilot, making the right judgment calls and movements without even thinking about them. Get him breathing. Stabilize the erratic heartbeat. Monitor brain wave activity. Her hands flew over the small, prostrate figure, attaching monitors, sensors, hypospraying concentrates of this and that.

At that moment the ship rocked violently. It would appear as if the hitherto dormant ship had been awakened. Lense swore softly under her breath. Sickbay lost power momentarily and the emergency backup mechanisms kicked in.

She had a brief flashback to a similar scene aboard the Lexington in the middle of a battle. Voices were crying out her name, shrieking in agony, begging for help. There literally had been blood almost everywhere in sickbay. Patients with injuries from fractured skulls to decapitated limbs to sucking chest wounds filled sickbay, overflowed into the corridor. There hadn't even been the chance to set up the shuttle bays to handle the sheer volume of wounded. The stench of so much blood had been almost unbearable.

Eighteen of the dead and injured had been her own staff. She and the EMH, an efficient but cold and sarcastic image, had been the only ones able to treat the wounded.

She remembered Jenson, dying in her arms even as she buried her hands almost to the wrist in his wound, trying to hold closed a slippery, severed artery with her fingers because she couldn't reach her tools. And Galloway, who kept refusing treatment in order to bring in others more gravely than she, breathing her last quietly in a corner when she couldn't bring in any more.

Lense had been able to save about a quarter of them. One lousy quarter of the screaming, bloody people who had begged her for help, pleaded with her to ease their torment.

Damn it. Damn it all to hell.

"Stay with me, 110," she whispered, although she knew the Bynar could not hear her. She couldn't treat him when the ship was this chaotic. The best she could do was make sure he didn't fall off the bed, and that the pieces of medical equipment strapped to his little body stayed put.

For what seemed like an eternity, the ship shuddered under attack. Finally, it appeared that the worst was over. The power surged back on.

Lense turned her full attention to 110. The cortical stimulator was doing its job and the spasming slowed, then stopped. A quick glance at her tricorder told her that the immediate danger had passed, though only a complete examination would reveal what, if any, permanent damage the Bynar had incurred.

She took a breath. She could use an extra pair of hands. "Computer, activate the EMH," she ordered. At once, the slim, somewhat elegant figure of Emmett appeared.

"Good morning, Doctor--oh, dear," said Emmett. "What happened?"

Lense noticed that his dark eyes had quickly taken in everything she had done before he asked his question. Good. She had never had so apt a pupil.

As he spoke, the door to sickbay hissed open. Lense turned her head quickly and saw that it was Sonya Gomez.

"Can you fill us in, Sonya?" she asked.

Gomez stepped closer, looking down at the Bynar with her arms folded tightly across her chest. "No one's really sure," she said. "He was attempting to interface with the computer aboard the alien ship when it appeared to send a massive shock throughout his system. He was caught in it for a few seconds, and then it shot him across the room. We had him beamed up the instant he was released."

Lense extended a hand for Gomez's tricorder, which had captured the whole event. She reviewed it in silence, Em peering over her shoulder.

"Who was working with him, or was he by himself?" asked Lense, handing the tricorder back to Gomez. "Bart was with him at first, but he came over to look at the pilot's remains after we noticed the--the holes."

Lense glanced up sharply at the hesitation in the other woman's voice. As a previous victim of burnout herself, she was always keenly alert to the manifestation of the symptoms in others. But Gomez appeared to be all right.

"Holes?" Lense demanded.

"Of course. You were so busy keeping 110 stable you haven't had a chance to look at the body," said Gomez. "There were holes in each of the arms. It was impaled on the chair."

Lense glanced quickly over at the pilot's body. Sure enough, there were three holes in the lower arms. Gomez was clearly a little rattled, and who wouldn't be, upon discovering a body that had seemingly been impaled on sharp spikes in the command center of an alien vessel which had just gone on a city-wide rampage? Gomez wouldn't be human if that hadn't unnerved her, at least a little.

"The pilot's not going anywhere," she said with a touch of black humor. "Right now I'm more interested in 110. Did he do anything, touch any specific button? He had to have triggered something, or else the computer would have exploded the minute he tried to interface with it."

"You'd think so," said Gomez, moving hesitantly to stand beside the Bynar. "And he probably did, but no one was watching."

"What about his own tricorder?"

"He hadn't activated it. He never does." She looked miserable. "Captain Gold's reprimanded him about it before. It's just not in the Bynar nature. Between their evolved brains and the buffer they carry with them at all times, they seem to have everything they need."

"Perhaps when they're on Bynar, but not when they're all the way out here," snapped Elizabeth. It was too bad that they couldn't translate the information stored on 110's omnipresent buffer. But only the Bynars could figure out that gibberish. "If he'd recorded what happened in a way we could understand, we'd be a lot closer to knowing how to help him."

"The pilot," said Em slowly.

Lense and Gomez turned as one to regard him. "What about the pilot?" demanded Gomez.

Em seemed a little uncomfortable at suddenly being the center of attention. "Well," he began, "according to your tricorder, Commander, the incident occurred as the pilot's body was being transported out. We've seen that it was attached in some fashion--you used the word 'impaled'--directly to the ship. Perhaps there were sensors that were triggered when the body was removed from the chair. The ship has to be operating on automatic commands. Maybe the removal of the pilot activated it."

"Very good, Emmett!" said Elizabeth. She was proud of the EMH's deductive reasoning, but a little embarrassed that she hadn't had figured it out herself. A quick glance at Gomez confirmed that the other woman shared her discomfiture.

Lense turned back to the supine figure of the Bynar. "There are first degree burns on his hands and face," she said. "Whatever had happened to him had been bad enough to burn right through his protective gear."

"Em, can you take care of those for me, please?"

"Certainly, Doctor," Em replied, and began to run the dermal regenerator over the injured flesh while Lense continued.

"There appears to be no permanent damage to the brain. If he'd been human, there might have been, but Bynar brains are set up to be able to handle bursts of computer-generated information. Their limbic system can take an awful lot, more than almost any other humanoid species could. Whatever the ship's

computer did to him seems to have done no lasting damage. You may tell Captain Gold I expect a full recovery. One more piece of the puzzle."

"Can you awaken him? The captain will have a lot of questions."

Lense hesitated. "Let's give him some time. I want him more stable before I force him into consciousness. While we're waiting, I can begin the examination of the pilot." She nodded her curly dark head in the pilot's direction. "She should have a great deal to tell me about her race, if not necessarily her ship." Gomez lingered, looking anxiously at the still Bynar. "Sonya," said Lense, gently, "I'll let you know the minute we learn anything."

Gomez nodded her head, knowing a cue when she heard one. "Thanks, Doctor." She turned and exited, running sMcAllan into Duffy.

"Sorry!" Gomez said.

"No, it's my fault. Wasn't watching where I was going." Lense looked at the two of them. It wasn't a secret they had once been involved. And judging by their awkwardness around each other when they weren't in the midst of a mission, they hadn't figured out what to do about that past involvement.

Duffy was wincing and clutching his hand. "Oh, no, did I hurt you?" said Gomez.

"No, no," Duffy protested through clenched teeth. "I was heading down here to get this fixed."

"I'm sure I didn't help it any," said Gomez. "Sorry, Kieran." She hastened out.

Lense smiled. "Let me take care of that for you." The injury wasn't serious, just a bad sprain. When she was done, Duffy flexed his hand and gave her a grateful look.

"Thanks, Doctor. See you, Emmett."

"See you, Lieutenant Commander Duffy," said Emmett, with perfect correctness if too much formality. Lense would have to work on that with him.

Lense turned back to the task at hand. Her gaze traveled up and down the small, slight frame on the bed. Space had not done its usual fine job of preserving the body in this case. According to what the away team had reported, the ship had continued to maintain atmosphere, and the body had decayed normally. At the moment, it was safely encased by a force field; Starfleet S.O.P for the da Vinci in bringing any non-living organic matter aboard.

Lense glanced at the readings. Nothing dangerous detected. She could safely eliminate the forcefield, but she would keep the body in stasis. Otherwise, the smell would be unbearable, and she wanted to prevent the body from decaying any further. She touched a button, then stepped beside the body.

A thought occurred to her. "Emmett," she said, "have you ever performed an autopsy?"

"I am perfectly capable of performing an autopsy." He looked offended. "It's a standard part of my programming."

She held up a placating hand. "Of course, you know how to do one, but have you ever actually done so? On an alien about whom we know nothing?"

He looked a little excited. "No, I haven't."

"You'll find this fascinating," she assured him. "I've been doing some comparative research on how this used to be performed in the old days, and how it's done in other cultures. A few hundred years ago, they had no holographic technology. IF you wanted to find out how someone had died, you had to literally cut them open."

The sensitive hologram stared, mouth slightly open. "That's...barbaric," he stammered.

"Well, naturally, we think so, but that's only because we have other methods to gain information," she replied. "And there's something about actually seeing inside a body, touching it, weighing the organs. It makes you respect death a little more, I think."

"I prefer to respect life," Em replied primly.

"Of course you respect life. Every doctor does. But on this mission, you and I are dealing mainly with the dead. You'll need to cultivate respect for them too."

Em's face furrowed. "But, Doctor, surely dealing with a holographic representation shows more respect to the body than cutting it open."

"Yes--after a fashion. But let's begin. You'll see what I mean eventually."

Despite everything that had happened, Lense couldn't help laughing at the expression on Emmett's dark

face. "Don't worry. We won't be dissecting the body, I promise!"

Em looked very relieved. Still chuckling, Lense gave instructions to the computer. "Computer, prepare to construct accurate holographic replication of the body on the biobed. All weights and textures must be exact."

The biobed closed over the body and a lavender beam washed through the form.

"Prepared and awaiting data," replied the computer in its cool female voice.

"Project the alien's skeletal structure," Lense ordered. "Keep it in the same position as it would normally be if held into place by tissue."

Immediately, the skeleton appeared on the empty bed. It could easily have been mistaken for that of a human, save for the narrower jaw, extreme indentations of the skull at the temple point, longer finger bones and a rib cage that extended almost to the hip.

"What conclusions do you draw from this?" she asked Em. He carefully examined the skeleton, leaning in to peer at it, his hands clasped behind his back.

"No, no," said Lense. "A good doctor uses more than just his eyes. Touch it."

Em was hesitant. "We are not programmed--"

"You'll need to learn to exceed your programming here, Emmett. Go ahead. Touch it. Like this.

Computer, adjust image to permit removal of individual bones without disturbing the construction." Lense stepped forward and picked up the skull. She ran her fingers over it, feeling the smooth, slightly oily texture.

"This is unusual," she said, caressing the indentations in the skull. She handed it to Emmett. "What do you make of it?"

"Perfectly circular," he said, emulating her and running his fingers around the holographic skull. "It's unlikely that this is a natural development."

"Part of the torture that we think may have been performed?" It was a leading question, but she wanted to push him.

"No," he replied with certainty. "The indentations are too old, too well integrated into the skull structure to have been inflicted upon an adult. These modifications were begun when the patient--" His face fell a little, realizing that there was no "patient" to treat, only a body to examine. "When the, ah, subject was in infancy and the skull was more malleable."

"Good," approved Lense. "What else?"

Em was starting to get as excited as she was about this old-fashioned method of examination. "There are similar stresses in the radius and ulna. They've been manipulated over a long time to draw away from one another. Again, I would say this was begun in infancy. Perhaps for decorative or ritualistic purposes."

"Good. And the ribcage? What does that indicate?"

"The extended ribcage indicates the strong likelihood of a multiorgan cardiovascular system and perhaps other extra organs humans do not possess. And the lengthy fingers indicate that this race is probably quite dexterous."

"You catch on quickly," said Lense. "Computer, add internal organs except for the brain."

Blue light traveled down the skeleton, leaving in its wake an intriguing jumble of soft tissue. Lense nodded to herself. Emmett's theory of two hearts had been dead on. There were a few extra organs that they did not recognize. She went through them one by one, removing them and handing them to Em for his comments. The functions of most of them were immediately recognizable despite the unusual shapes, textures and colors. All humanoids had hearts, lungs, and organs that formed the function of kidneys and livers. They might have different shapes and colors and be located in different parts of the body, but they were always there. She frowned when they examined the digestive system.

"It's unusually atrophied for a humanoid of this size," she said. "What could be the reason for that?"

Em frowned. "Perhaps this alien has evolved to the point where it does not require fibrous foodstuffs in order to obtain its nutrients."

It was a fascinating development, and one Lense had never before encountered, but it had no direct bearing on their real purpose. They could save that for later. Time to look at the brain.

"Computer," she instructed, "replicate the alien's brain."

It appeared on the table beside the skull. Lense was shocked. It looked, on first examination, no more complex than that of an average human. She had begun to wonder if this species was more highly developed, but apparently not.

Em, too, seemed a little disappointed. "It looks a great deal like a simple human brain," he said.

"Let's look a little closer. Computer, separate the brain along the two hemispheres." The computer complied and Lense picked up one in each hand, scrutinizing them carefully. "The corpus callosum is severely degraded," she said, confused. That slab of white nerve fibers was what transferred important information from one hemisphere to another. Thus degraded, it made it highly unlikely that the pilot could function.

"It doesn't look damaged," said Em. "Perhaps the brain transferred information by some other method."

Lense nodded, though she had her doubts. There were a few things common to all humanoids and the corpus callosum was one of them. This body was becoming more intriguing to her by the minute.

Further examination of the brain only whet her appetite. Other parts of the brain were degraded. Some seemed to be completely missing. Other areas were so developed as to be completely unrecognizable.

"This is absolutely fascinating. We'll have to come back to this later, but I want to complete the procedure so you're familiar with it. Computer, add musculature."

Again, the pilot's muscles were not as well developed as she would have expected. She glanced over at the actual body. It seemed fit and strong. Why, then, were the muscles so atrophied? This was not a result of decay, for the computer was programmed to extrapolate on how the musculature was in life.

She thought about the brain with its missing corpus callosum. Something strange was going on here. She asked Emmett what he thought.

"The muscles could be artificially stimulated," he suggested.

She smiled a little. She'd caught him in an error. "But then the muscles themselves would show us that stimulation, wouldn't they?"

He nodded, confused. "Then I have no theory," he said, apologetically.

"Neither do I, not yet. Let's see if the skin tells us anything. Computer, apply the epidermal layers."

And this was when it always started to get to her. Once you had skin, you had a face, and once you had a face, you suddenly had a person. This face was a sweet one.

"It is a shame she died so young," said Emmett, softly. Lense shared his regret. The girl on the table, eyes closed softly as if in sleep, was only an adolescent. In human years, Lense put her age at about fifteen. Just a girl, a child. She must have been attractive in life. Large eyes, with greenish freckles on skin that was almost human-colored but a bit chalkier. Long brown hair with green highlights pooled around her head.

But there was something not right. Something was missing.

"Wait just a minute," said Lense. She glanced back from the actual body to the holographic replication.

"Look at the temples."

Emmett followed her gaze. "They're not sunken on the actual body," he said.

"Exactly. Why do you suppose that is?" Without waiting for an answer, she went to the body and gently touched the temples. Her questing fingers found something hard and spherical.

Lense's heart began to race. Firmly, she told herself not to jump to conclusions. "Something has been embedded here," she said. "The computer didn't replicate it because we didn't ask it to. The good old sense of touch comes through again. Computer, scan the body. What is the source of the spherical nodes on the cranium?"

"Cybernetic implants," replied the computer, utterly unperturbed by the direness of the words.

Lense swallowed. "Purpose?"

"Unknown."

"Display on holographic replica. Remove skin layer."

She caught her breath as the computer complied. The pilot lay before them, devoid of the skin that softened the emotional impact. Two silver spheres were nestled in the carefully cultivated nodules in its skull. The eyes, while organic, had also been augmented with implants. A thin silver wire ran like a shiny nerve along the pilot's body. This, then, was the reason the muscles had atrophied. Artificial constructs

had assisted them in doing their job. The missing corpus callosum was present and accounted for. It, and other parts of the brain, was utterly artificial.

She could see now the three cones which had been inserted between the bones of the lower arms. That was why the radius and ulna had separated so much; these metal cones had been implanted and forced them to grow apart.

Lense recalled the chair upon which the away team had found the pilot sitting. When the pilot sat in an erect position with her hands on the arms, these holes lined up perfectly. It was almost as if she was plugged directly into the ship....

Sweat broke out beneath her arms and she started to tremble as realization struck her. It all fell into place now and made terrible sense. Even the atrophied digestive system now seemed logical.

"Oh my God, Emmett," Lense said softly, lifting her blue eyes to meet Em's puzzled gaze. "I think we've found a Borg."

Beneath closed lids, 110 saw. Dreamed. Downloaded information.

111010000100100100100000111101101110.....

"Coffee?" asked La Forge, standing next to the replicator in Engineering.

"Thanks. Cream and sugar," replied Faulwell. La Forge returned carrying two mugs. Bart reached up to accept the one Geordi extended to him. "We're not supposed to have these here, you know."

Geordi smiled. "Last person who I let have a beverage in Engineering was Sonya. Picard, as you may have heard--"

"--ended up wearing it," Bart finished, sipping the hot beverage. "Wish I could have been a fly on the wall that day."

Geordi winced. "No, you don't. I'd rather have faced a phaser blast than Captain Picard's glare. Poor Sonya just about died."

"But look how far she's come. She's soared through the ranks."

"Hmm," said Geordi with mock seriousness. "Perhaps the secret to advancing in rank is to spill hot chocolate on one's commanding officer."

"If that's the case, I'll stay where I am," said Bart, trying to envision Captain Gold's reaction to such an incident.

"You know," said Geordi, "you are starting to have quite the reputation yourself."

Bart was startled. "Me? Oh, no."

"Yes, you. I've an ear for languages myself, so I pay attention to developments in the field. And I've heard your name come up more than a few times. There's nothing that says you can't go through the Academy and get yourself on a starship somewhere. They could use you."

"Oh, no. That's not for me." Bart concentrated on his drink. "I'm quite happy here."

Geordi regarded him for a long moment with those odd, artificial eyes. "If you ever change your mind, let me know."

"Yes, sir."

"Download complete," came the computer's voice.

"Damn. And just when my coffee was exactly the right temperature," said Geordi in a mock-mournful tone. "Come on, Bart. Time to see what's on this thing."

At that moment, Geordi's comm badge chirped. "Lieutenant La Forge, Faulwell, get to the briefing room at once."

They exchanged glances. "Captain Gold," said La Forge, "we've just finished downloading the information from the tricorder. We're about to try to decipher it."

"And I want you to, but not right now. It'll have to wait. On the double, gentlemen."

Faulwell had always thought that the expression of one's heart leaping into one's mouth was always a bit over the top. But when he looked at what a tight-lipped, pale Dr. Lense had to show them, he realized that the old cliché was actually quite true.

Borg.

Hard to believe that one word, comprised of four letters, could produce such violent emotions. But then, Bart had always respected the power of words. Now, as he gazed at the replicated body on the viewscreen, with its lengths of cables and artificial implants, all he could think of was a giant cube sweeping down to assimilate them all.

"What do you think, Geordi?" Gold asked, his calm voice breaking the horrified silence that filled the briefing room. "You've had some experience with Borg technology."

Geordi licked his lips. "I don't know, Captain. This technology is different from any Borg technology I've encountered before. Take a look at the delicacy of that cable, the seamless way the artificial has been integrated with the organic in the brain. Borg technology was always...." He searched for the right word. "Crude, but efficient. It got the job done, but not much more. This is almost elegant. Then again, if there's one thing you can count on with the Borg, it's that they're always improving. Upgrading."

"Assimilating," said Duffy, managing the complicated trick of putting a sneer of disgust and respect into the single word.

"Exactly," said La Forge.

"But it was my understanding that the Borg travel in groups--in a collective, or subdivisions, in a unimatrix. Never just alone like this," put in Gomez.

"Again," said Abramowitz, "that's always been true...so far. But don't forget the Borg queen. She is quite definitely an individual."

La Forge nodded agreement. "And there was an adolescent male Borg who came aboard the Enterprise several years ago who was able to understand the concept of the individual. We even named him. Called him Hugh. Got kinda fond of the guy, actually."

"I remember reading about that," said Abramowitz. "Because of his interaction with the Enterprise crew, he was unable to fully reintegrate into Borg society. He joined with others who split off from the Collective, right? What became of him?"

"We don't know," said Geordi. "I like to think that he's all right out there somewhere, but who knows with the Borg? They could have reassimilated him and studied this thing called individuality. They could have found a way to utilize it. When you think about it, the Borg are already a blending of organic being and machine. It's not that big a step to link an individual with a vessel to form a new collective of one unified mind--instead of a humanoid simply being implanted with cybernetics and linked together, link that mind directly with a personal, mobile machine. With a ship."

Carol sank back in her chair. "It does sound exactly like something the Borg would do."

"The ship's ability to withstand the crash also points to Borg technology," said P8 Blue. "It powered up well enough when it wanted to. Self-repair, just like a Borg cube."

"Let's think like the Borg for a moment," said Gold. "Not that it's a pleasant task. What would be the advantage to the Borg of forming such a collective? Tying only one mind to one machine? What's the point in that?"

"Easier maintenance," said Gomez at once. "One person, one ship. Elizabeth, it looked as though that pilot was able to disengage from the ship. Is that right?"

Lense nodded. "They could join, and I'd imagine they could separate. There was no indication that the pilot required any sustenance while joined. The entire digestive system had shrunk. I suspect the pilot didn't even eat as we understand the term, but got her nourishment somehow through her connection to the ship."

"Again, exactly like the Borg," said Gold, frowning. His bushy black eyebrows stuck out over his eyes like alarmed caterpillars. "She would regenerate. As long as the ship had power, she could live."

Lense nodded confirmation. "And yet, she died and the ship continued on. There was no trace of injury or illness, so there must have been some kind of malfunction which was localized and didn't spread to the ship."

"So," continued Gold. "Easier maintenance might be a reason. What else?"

"A single-person vessel could travel places that a more standard Borg ship couldn't," said Abramowitz, clearly warming to the subject. "It could scout out races for assimilation, then alert the more aggressive

cube."

Bart felt cold. All this made terrible sense.

"There's your explanation as to why someone would attack Intar," said Corsi. "The Borg are hardly tourists. You know their mantra. 'We are the Borg. Resistance is futile. Prepare to be-'"

"Stop it," said Bart. He hadn't intended to speak but the words came out of his mouth. Everyone turned to stare at him. He felt his face grow hot.

"Faulwell is right, Corsi," said Gold gently to his chief of security. "This isn't a laughing matter. Very well. I'd say that while we can't be absolutely certain that this isn't the latest version of the new, improved Borg, it's a highly likely possibility. I'll alert Starfleet Command, see what they want us to do about it. Gomez, I remember right before we beamed you out, you said something like, 'there's nothing there.' What did you mean by that?"

"There were no control panels," said Gomez.

"That's right," said Bart. "No buttons, no lights, nothing to indicate how the pilot controlled the ship. I guess we know now. There's no need for control panels when you can maneuver a vessel with your thoughts."

Gomez frowned and her brow furrowed as she tried to recall exactly what there had been. "At least," she amended, "no control panels as we understand them. Now that I think of it, there might have been some ports where the pilot could have linked other than the chair." She looked a little embarrassed. "We were so distracted by the pilot, and then we were transported out. We didn't have time to conduct a more thorough investigation. I'm sorry, sir."

Gold waved off her apology.

"That's why I couldn't locate where the tactical and propulsion systems were," said Corsi. "With most ships, there are separate sections where the various pieces of equipment are installed. Here, it's all spread throughout the ship, controlled by the pilot's mind."

"Oy vey," said Gold, with feeling. He rubbed at his eyes with his hand. "No chance of learning anything without a whole Starfleet team of Borg experts swarming over that ship, then. La Forge and Faulwell, you two are now the indispensable crewmen. The information on that tricorder is so far the only information we've got. Translate whatever is on there. I want concrete data, not theories, when some admiral starts trying to pull rank and questions our actions and conclusions. Understand?"

"Yes sir," said both Bart and Geordi at once.

"You're pretty quiet," La Forge observed as he and Bart stood in the turbolift.

Bart shrugged. For some strange reason, all he could think about was the unfinished letter to Anthony sitting in his quarters. If this thing was indeed a Borg ship, as was looking more and more likely, who knew what would happen. He wondered if he'd even have a chance to finish the note, let alone see Anthony again.

"Finding a completely new type of Borg threat isn't something that happens every day. Not even in this job," Bart added in a weak stab at humor.

"Listen, I've survived a lot of up close and personal encounters with the Borg," La Forge said, "and while they're definitely to be taken seriously, they're not totally indestructible. Besides, the captain must think there's at least a chance that it's not a Borg ship, or else he wouldn't assign you to this."

Bart brightened at that. "True," he said. If Gold expected the tricorder information to be recorded in standard Borg, the computer would already know how to translate it. The sometimes-archaic skills of a linguist wouldn't be required.

When they began their work in earnest, Bart was heartened by the fact that the language recorded was not Borg. After working with the computer, he narrowed it down to a branch of the Taklathi language with some of the grammatical structure of the Nemar and Olisu thrown into the mix. By cross-referencing with languages as varied as Xlatitigu and Pe, he was able to establish a root structure from which the universal translator could extrapolate. He loved these moments. They were positively exhilarating, and it was a refreshing change to work with someone who, like him, respected and enjoyed language.

Finally, the tricorder was adjusted and linked with their system. After a burst of static and snow, which

gave Bart a bad moment when he thought they'd shorted the whole thing out, it began to transmit information on the screen. Their eyes widened in shock at the first image, and the shock did not diminish as they watched. Engrossed, they listened to the entire recording with a growing sense of horror. At last, it was done. Geordi turned to regard Bart, who felt exhausted and emotionally drained after viewing the information.

"The captain needs to see this. Heck, I think everyone needs to see this." Geordi's voice was heavy and somber.

Bart blinked rapidly and swallowed hard. "It's pretty awful. How much of it do you want to show them?" "All of it."

Lense regarded the still form of the solitary Bynar. She didn't want to do this, but Gold had insisted. 110 had had the most direct contact with the computer system of that ship. He had information that had been downloaded into that buffer of his. He knew things the rest of them didn't, things that Gold needed to know.

She sighed. "Em, bring him around."

Emmett pressed a hypospray to the Bynar's neck. It hissed gently, and 110 opened his eyes. Lense squeezed his newly healed hand gently and smiled down at him.

"Welcome back, 110," she said softly. "How do you feel?"

He blinked, slowly. "As well as can be expected."

With the tenderness Lense had come to expect from the surprisingly sensitive hologram, Em leaned forward and eased the Bynar up into a sitting position. 110 blinked, seeming a little dizzy, but otherwise he appeared to be fully recovered.

"We--I must speak to Captain Gold," he told Gomez.

"And he wants to speak to you. Let me run a few tests first, to make sure that--"

"You do not understand," insisted 110. He turned his dark eyes to her. "The vessel is alive. It is in pain. And it is very, very angry."

110's shocking announcement stunned everyone except Bart and Geordi, who exchanged glances.

"Before we act on the information 110 has given us," said La Forge, "I highly recommend we watch this first."

"Time is speeding by, Lieutenant," said Gold. "I've got the Enterprise and the Lexington on their way here even as I'm having this pleasant conversation with you."

"I understand the situation, sir," Geordi continued, speaking urgently, "but trust me, you all need to see this first. And I mean see it, not just have me brief you on it."

Gold's brown eyes narrowed and he regarded La Forge intently. Geordi didn't flinch from that scrutiny. Duffy wondered what the hell was on that recording that would make La Forge buck Gold so openly on this.

Finally Gold nodded, cursorily. "You waste my time, La Forge, and I'll let Picard know about it."

"Understood, sir, but I'm certain you won't consider your time wasted."

"Well, then, start the thing going. I feel my hair turning gray."

Geordi pressed the control button, and took a seat.

With such a dramatic lead-in, everyone assembled leaned forward, expecting to see something staggering. The static and snow stabilized, formed itself into the face of a young woman. While Duffy intellectually knew it was the face of the greatly decayed corpse now being held in stasis in sickbay--their possible Borg--this lively, animated visage bore little resemblance to the still death mask of the decaying body they had found in the chair.

By human standards, guessed her to be between sixteen and nineteen, if she was even that old. She was grinning. The recording device, which she held in her hands, was not steady and she occasionally moved out of the center, but this inefficiency, which Duffy would have thought not tolerated by a Borg, seemed not to trouble her one bit.

"I'm recording these on a portable device because I don't want Friend to know about them," she said.

Her eyes were a beautiful shade of leafy green, her teeth white and straight. But what broke Duffy's heart more than anything was the smattering of greenish freckles on her small nose. Judging by Abramowitz's expression, Carol, too, was mourning the loss of such a vibrant young woman.

"Don't get me wrong--I love sharing things with Friend," the girl hastened to add. "I love it when we link up and I've got the whole ship's sensors at my hands."

She looked a little smug. "I don't need a primitive viewing screen to see, or a console to program, not when I'm joined with the computer. To be able to experience so many things that, as an organic being, I'd never otherwise know is indescribable. And he--yeah, I know it's not alive and it's got no gender, but I think of the ship as a he--is so close to me when we're joined. I've never known anything like it, not even in a relationship with another Omearan. But there are things I want to say so I can look back at them later, and I can't be entirely honest when Friend is so completely joined with me. So, I guess these are secret journals."

She giggled. To his surprise, Duffy felt tears sting his eyes. He had thought they'd be looking at boring but informative impersonal logs, stuff that would reveal the horrors and atrocities committed by this ship and this pilot, not the most intimate confessions of a young girl's private thoughts. He felt like a peeping Tom. But there was nothing for it. This was, so far, the only information they had on the ship and its pilot, and they needed to keep watching, hard as it was.

One thing was becoming rapidly apparent. Their assumption about the pilot had been all wrong.

Whatever she was, this giggling, endearing child on the viewscreen was no Borg.

The girl rambled on about how hard it had been for her to say goodbye to her family. "I didn't want to tell Friend about it because it'd upset him. He's really sensitive to my happiness. It's nice to have things like that matter to someone else so much." She smiled, her green eyes soft with affection, and continued.

"We wouldn't normally get tapped for so deep a mission, but after the war, we're really short of pilots," she explained. "So here Friend and I are, alone together in space, searching for an uninhabited but fertile planet so we can get off that toxic rock. Start new lives. I tried to explain to Friend about how great it feels to walk on soft grass in your bare feet, but he didn't quite get it, I think."

Another journal entry described a severe bout of homesickness. A third had the girl, who finally identified herself as Jaldark, describing how she and Friend had navigated a treacherous asteroid belt unscathed.

"It's the most amazing sensation, to be linked with him while we did that!" Jaldark enthused, practically bouncing up and down in her chair. "I just love Friend so much. He's the most wonderful ship. I'm so glad I'm bonded with him for the rest of my life. He seems to be so much easier to get along with temperamentally than the trainer ships, but maybe that's because they are constantly bonding and breaking bond with new pilots. Maybe they never get to settle into being themselves. Poor things."

The grin, the wonderful, wide, endearing grin crossed her face again. "I guess I'm just the luckiest girl in the universe."

But you weren't, Jaldark, Duffy thought, feeling slightly sick. And sure enough, on the next tape, the trouble had already begun. Jaldark looked thinner and paler. There were deep circles under the green eyes, and she wasn't smiling.

"Something's wrong," she told her recorded journal without preamble. "Friend can sense it but I'm not telling him any more than I have to in order to maintain function. He knows we're turning around and heading back toward Omearan space at our top speed, but I don't know that we'll make it in time. I hate lying to him like this."

She swallowed hard, licked dry lips, and continued. "I think it's the implants. I've passed the rejection window, so it can't be that. They'd never have let me go on a deep space recon mission if there was a possibility that they'd be rejected. But they're failing somehow. I can't get sustenance from Friend anymore."

Jaldark pressed long, thin fingers to her unusually deep temples. Twin implants pulsed beneath the skin at her touch.

"I have these terrible headaches. And the arm sheathes--they ache whenever we join." She looked dreadfully unhappy. "That means that whenever we join I'm in a lot of pain. So of course I come up with excuses not to join as often. Friend hasn't said anything much, but I know his feelings are hurt. He's the

last person--well, thing--I'd ever want to hurt, and I just hate it that this is happening!"

Tears welled in her eyes, trickled down her freckled cheeks. She wiped at them angrily. The gesture afforded Duffy a good look at what Jaldark called the "arm sheathes." They were three conical tubes that had been implanted on both lower arms. The spikes on the chair that Duffy and the others had first assumed were torture devices and later thought were evidence of Borg technology were links with the ship's computer. They created a way for a lively young woman to be close to a machine that had transcended its hardware and become a friend; a way to attain the sustenance that would keep Jaldark alive.

There was nothing sinister about the spikes any more. There was nothing sinister about anything now--only sorrow.

Still crying, Jaldark reached and turned off the recording device. But there was one more entry. Kieran didn't want to see it, but, along with the others, he couldn't look away. Jaldark looked awful. She had lost a lot of weight and was obviously very ill. She was silent at first, but in the background they could all clearly hear "Friend's" voice slightly metallic, but filled with concern.

"Jaldark?" Friend called. "Please respond. Are you angry with me? Is there something wrong? I am an Omearan Starsearcher, a top of the line vessel with extensive and flexible programming. I am certain there is something I can do to help you. Please respond, Jaldark. Please respond."

"Do we have to watch the rest of this, Captain?" Surprised, Duffy tore his gaze from the haggard girl on the screen to look at the speaker. It was Corsi, the last person aboard the da Vinci he would have expected to have a problem watching this recording. She seemed to have a skin thicker than Patti's shell. And she was doing her best to look annoyed, not pained; irritated at time wasted, not about to cry. She hid it well, but he could see it, and he suspected everyone else could.

It seemed like Core Breach Corsi had a heart after all.

"I think we owe it to Jaldark and Friend, yes," said Gold. "It's a little bit like sitting shiva." He stabbed a forefinger at the screen, where Jaldark was burying her face in her hands and sobbing openly as Friend's queries became more plaintive and frantic.

"This is a brave little girl here, who never had the chance to grow up into the brave woman she ought to have been. We may be the only ones who see what she went through, how courageously she handled it. We have to bear witness." Gold's brown eyes were serious. "We crawl over corpses in alien vessels all the time, take their dead ships, examine their bodies. I hope we never forget that they were once people. She's reminding us. Friend is reminding us."

Corsi said nothing, only leaned back in her seat and fixed her gaze on the table.

Jaldark lifted her head and stared into the viewscreen. She was shaking. Her hair, once long and lustrous, was dull and stringy. The implants in her temple, which had once pulsed to a steady, slow rhythm beneath the skin, were flashing erratically.

"I don't think I have much longer," she said in a voice thick with tears. In the background, Friend continued to call for her. "The pain is so bad I can hardly stand it." She bit her lip and closed her eyes as, Duffy guessed, another wave of pain racked her skeletal frame. "I think I'm going to die. But I can handle that. It's Friend I'm worried about. He's supposed to autodestruct if anything happens to me. They said Starsearchers aren't designed to function on their own. They told us the ships need an Omearan mind to link with in order to make ethical decisions. They warned us that could be dangerous without a pilot. But I don't believe that. I don't think Friend would hurt anybody unless they hurt him first."

She took a long, shuddering breath and leaned into the recorder. "I can't kill Friend, I just can't. That would be the most selfish act I think I could possibly perform. I know I'm supposed to, but I won't do it. I won't. I've deactivated the autodestruct mechanism. Friend won't be able to reengage it on his own. He's going to live, even if...even if I don't."

She smiled a little, a taut, pained smile. "That's what friends do, isn't it? They help each other. If anybody finds this, please take care of Friend. Send him home. The coordinates are in the computer. Help him find a new pilot. He's going to be so lost without...me to take care...."

Jaldark whimpered. More than a scream, that tiny sound rent Duffy's heart. Watching this was torturous. Jaldark's chest hitched. Her free hand went up to press tightly at a flashing implant. When she was able to

speak again, it was through tightly gritted teeth.

"Tell him I'm sorry. Tell him I love him. Tell him it will be all right. He's just got to be brave."

She began to gasp, as if her body could no longer absorb oxygen. Her brilliant eyes rolled back in her head and the recording device slipped from a suddenly limp hand to bounce on the floor. There it lay, recording only the base of the chair until it ran out of bytes, while out of sight Jaldark quietly gasped until she made no more sounds and the plaintive voice of Friend kept demanding, "Jaldark, please respond!" La Forge reached over and wordlessly turned off the screen. For a long moment, despite the urgency of the situation, no one spoke.

"Rest in peace," said Gold solemnly.

"Do you see?" said 110, softly. "The ship--Friend--has lost its only companion. Jaldark told us that the ships are supposed to autodestruct if anything happens to the pilot, but Friend does not have that option. It was not designed to be alone. It does not know what to do. Like its pilot it is a young vessel, with little experience, and it is terrified. We must not destroy it. We must help it. And I volunteer to be linked with it as Jaldark was."

Gold looked at him sharply. "110, forgive me if I step on your toes here, but--you've been deliberately avoiding such an intimate link with anyone. That's why you're putting off going back to Bynar. Assuming I will even let you, which is not an assumption you ought to be making, why do you want to do this? You barely survived your last encounter with that ship's computer. We've got trained specialists on the way right now. They'll figure something out."

110 looked solemn. "Because, Captain Gold, I am already partially linked. When I attempted to access the computer when we first boarded, I engaged some sort of circuit with it. It has downloaded a link to my brain, but a very inefficient one. Bynar brains are already constructed to link smoothly with computers and contain a great deal of information. I am the only one capable of establishing communication that could convince it that we are no threat. It is up to me to stop the ship."

"We've already stopped the ship."

Slowly, 110 shook his large head. "No, sir, we have not."

At that moment, Gold's comm badge chirped. "McAllan to Captain Gold. The alien ship is powering up. It's left the planet surface and is heading right for us."

Repairs are complete. All systems fully operational. Jaldark is not on board. Accessing search parameters. Searching planet surface...Jaldark is not present on the planet surface. Alien vessel in orbit about planet. Unable to penetrate shields for search.

Conclusion Jaldark has been taken by the alien vessel. Action required Jaldark must be recovered immediately.

Jaldark, I am coming. I am coming, my Friend. I will not let them harm you.

Gold was still in a solemn mood from the tragic recording he had just seen as the turbolift doors hissed open. But once he stepped on the bridge and saw the expressions on the bridge crew, he put his pity aside.

It was tragic that Jaldark had died alone, in pain. And he sympathized with the ship's loss, if it was, as 110 kept insisting, sentient and capable of emotion. But that didn't mean he was willing to make the ship feel better by letting it blast the da Vinci to bits.

"Shields up. Red alert," he snapped. He took his seat and gazed at the image on the viewscreen.

It seemed impossible, but there it was. That ship had been badly damaged when it crashed into the planet, and they'd believed that they had completely knocked out its weapons systems. And yet it looked like they hadn't even scratched the thing. It was, as McAllan had said, heading straight for them, and if Gold imagined that the ship was seething with deadly intent and aching for revenge, he knew he wasn't guilty of anthropomorphizing.

"Status report," he demanded.

"One minute the vessel was dead, the next, it's completely repaired and heading right for us," said Wong.

"We can't tell for certain, of course, but I would guess its weapons systems are intact."

At that moment, a green bolt of energy narrowly missed them.

"I'd say you're right," said Gold. "But that was obviously a warning shot. If that ship wanted to hit us, it would hit us. Open a hailing frequency. Attention alien vessel. This is Captain David Gold of the U.S.S. da Vinci. We mean you no harm. Let's open a dialogue."

At once, a metallic voice echoed throughout the bridge. "Omearan Starsearcher 7445 to the da Vinci. You have my pilot. Return her at once, unharmed. Then we will open a dialogue."

Dear God, thought Gold, he doesn't know she's dead.

"Captain," said Gomez, softly, "I don't think Friend will respond too happily if we beam that body over."

"Agreed," said Gold. "Wong, mute. Suggestions?"

"Let me attempt to link with it," said 110 at once.

"110," said Gold wearily, "that ship might just as soon crisp you as talk to you."

110 lifted his head and regarded Gold evenly. "As we--as I have told you, Captain Gold, I am still already with it, though it is not a two-way communication. Its pain is my pain. The only way I will lose that pain is if I can speak with it. And that is the only way Friend will ever accept what has happened to Jaldark. The news must be given to him gently, in a way he can understand. Otherwise he will attack in anger. When he crashed into the planet--it was not an accident, Captain. He was in despair and could not engage his self-destruct mechanism."

He winced a little. "Please. This is the only way."

"110," Geordi said gently, "there's no guarantee that you will be able to form a proper link with the computer."

The little Bynar smiled at that. "There is, as you humans like to say, only one way to find out."

Geordi and Gold exchanged glances. Gold reached a decision. "Gold to Dr. Lense. Would it be possible to adjust 110's brain and body in order to render him able to link with the ship?"

"I think so. If you'd wanted to do this with a human, the answer would be no, but the Bynar brains are much better candidates for such a link. And judging by his brain wave patterns, I'd say that there seems to be some kind connection established between them already. It would take some surgery, but I--"

"110, get to sickbay right now," ordered Gold. At once, 110 scampered to obey. "Wong, reestablish link. Attention Omearan Starsearcher 7445. We would like to send an ambassador to your command center to speak with you."

"Return my pilot. Then she and I will speak with your ambassador."

Gold took a deep breath. Time for a little white lie. "Your pilot is unwell." It was true. Dead was about as unwell as one could get. "She is currently in our sickbay." Also true. "We have boarded you previously."

"I remember." The metallic voice was angry now. "When you kidnapped Jaldark."

"We brought her to our ship, yes. But while we were aboard you, while you were inactive, you established a link with one of my crew."

Silence. "Yes," said the ship, haltingly. "I remember."

"We think we can further adjust him so that he may link with you. We can explain everything to you most efficiently in that fashion."

A long silence. Gold felt sweat gather on his brow. He let this ship take its time.

"I will permit such a contact," said the ship after what felt like an eternity. Gold briefly closed his eyes in relief. "You should be aware that your crewmember will be vulnerable. If I do not like what I hear, I will not hesitate to kill him."

Was it a bluff, or the truth? Either way, it seemed as though this was something 110 was intent on doing. And much as Gold hated to admit it, it seemed as if it was their only hope. The Enterprise herself would have a hard time fighting an opponent that was virtually indestructible. And the little da Vinci was certainly not equipped to handle it.

"We are explorers, not warriors," said Gold. "We have no intention of harming you. You will realize that once you link with my crewmember."

"There is no deception possible in the link," agreed the ship. "All your plans will be revealed."

"We have nothing to hide," Gold declared.

"Then you have nothing to fear." Abruptly, the ship terminated the transmission.

Gold sank back in his chair, debating. He thought about contacting Starfleet and telling them to cancel the arrival of the Enterprise and the Lexington. Gold now knew the vessel wasn't a Borg ship, and there was a chance that it wouldn't even prove hostile. What was it Jaldark had said? That she was certain Friend wouldn't hurt anyone unless someone hurt him first.

But if 110 couldn't convince the ship--Friend--that Jaldark had already been dead for weeks before the da Vinci found her, then Gold imagined the vessel would consider itself grievously hurt. They'd need the Enterprise and the Lexington then. Hell, they might need every vessel in the fleet if the repaired ship went on a rampage again. It had done enough damage while still repairing itself. At full strength-- Gold chuckled a little. His father always had a wise saying that he would trot out when David would start fretting about things that might happen. "Don't go borrowing trouble," he would say. And Gold realized that's exactly what he was doing.

They had the tricorder recordings Jaldark herself had made. They had the body, which was in advanced stages of decay. And they had 110. If this weren't enough to convince the ship, then they'd just have to deal with the consequences.

"Lense to Gold."

"Go ahead."

"110 is tolerating the implants for the moment, but I don't know how effective they'll be. I also don't know how long it will be before his body starts rejecting them. I'm sorry, sir, but it's the best I can do."

"Then, as always, Elizabeth, your best is good enough for me. 110, how do you feel?"

"The implants are...uncomfortable, Captain. But it is a necessary pain. Faulwell has given me Jaldark's tricorder. I hope to be able to interface with both it and Friend's central computer system."

"Good luck, 110."

"Thank you, Captain Gold. It has been an honor to serve you."

Gold didn't like the way that sounded. He didn't like it at all. But there was not a single thing he could do. It was all up to the Bynar now.

He only hoped the little guy was not planning to go out in a blaze of glory.

When 110 materialized in the command center of Friend, part of him felt like he was coming home. Odd, since the last time he had been present aboard the vessel it had attacked and nearly killed him. He stood for a moment in the command center of the sentient ship, looking around. There was no dull blood hue. Instead, Friend had given him lighting that was quite comfortable to his eyes and enabled him to see perfectly. The entire scene was much less sinister than it had been when the away team had beamed over earlier.

Various panels here and there had indentations or spikes. He knew that these were ways to join with the ship if he needed to fire the weapons, or enhance propulsion, or effect repairs. Over there, where he had foolishly begun trying to tap into the ship's computers, he had triggered Friend's angry arousal.

But for everyday operations, for companionship, for nourishment, the chair was the center joining point. Jaldark had died in that chair--and lived in it. 110 wondered if the fluttering in his insides was nervousness or anticipation. Probably a little of both. He had never joined with a computer the way he was about to join with Friend, and was uncertain as to what to expect.

"Please sit in the command chair," came Friend's metallic voice. "It is the most efficient way for us to link."

Slowly, one hand reaching to touch the buffer at his side for reassurance, 110 climbed into the chair.

Even though Jaldark was an adolescent of her species, she had been much bigger than the little Bynar.

He had to hold his body in an awkward position for the hole Lense had made in his arms to line up with the spikes on the arms of the chair.

For an instant, 110 knew terrible fear. Then, resolutely, he maneuvered so that the spikes inserted into the arm sheathes.

Information flooded his brain at a speed that even 110 found difficult to process. Frantically, he thought, Slow down, slow down! To his surprise, the ship obliged. It wanted to tell him everything at once, but it tried to curb its urgency.

The information came at a rate that would have killed a human, but with effort, 110 was able to comprehend it.

The ship's designation was Starsearcher 7445, but Jaldark Keniria had taken to calling it Friend. Their people, the Omearans, had just emerged from a bitter and devastating war that had nearly decimated their planet. Their foe, the Sarimun, were advanced technologically, but lacked the advanced traits of mercy and a desire for peace. The attack had been rebuffed, but the Omearan world had paid a dreadful price.

The strongest advantage the Omearans had had been the Conjoined, the term used to refer to the linking of Omearans with the Starsearcher vessels. It was a position of tremendous honor among their people. Only one in ten thousand was born who was able to withstand the pairing. Rejections of the cybernetic grafts were the norm. Once a child had been identified as a good candidate, the process began in infancy. The still-forming skulls were carefully manipulated to eventually house the spherical implants. One by one, strands of cables replaced nerves and muscles. The child was weaned to eat food only occasionally, and to take most of its sustenance from the same fuel that propelled the Starsearchers. It was a union of the most intimate sort. Once a child pilot entered adolescence, it was bonded with the ship that it would have for the rest of his life. Such pilots considered themselves blessed, and the ships, which had also been carefully programmed with emotions and their own intelligence, adored their pilots.

Originally designed for peaceful purposes, the Starsearchers and their pilots had been altered for war. Thousands were lost in the war, and the pilots grew younger and younger, less and less experienced. By the end of the war, only a few pilots were left. They were sent off to various parts of the quadrant, to search for a planet they could safely colonize.

Thus it was that Jaldark, all of fifteen in human years, had found herself alone with her malfunctioning implants in the darkness of space. All alone, except for Friend.

Humans could not possibly understand this, thought 110 in wonder. They were so very separate. Even in their marriages, which he understood brought physical union, they remained two separate entities, with their own personalities and uniqueness. The humanoid races which had developed telepathy might have moved closer to comprehension, but even they could not share information so profoundly. Bynars could, and clearly, the union of ship and pilot was closer to that union experienced by the Bynars than anything the crew of the da Vinci could conceive.

But...you do? Friend's "voice," in his mind, quivering along the implants that served for nerves, tingling where 110 was physically impaled upon the ship's spikes.

110 let his memories be the answer. It was his turn to flood Friend's chips with images. Friend was silent as it absorbed the information. 110 thought of Bynaus, of his joining with 111, of the grace and speed and efficiency with which they worked together. He let Friend in on the intimacy of computer linkage with another living being, something he knew Friend understood only too well. Organic being, computer bytes, joined in two beings who were not really two, but one.

I understand, came the response, but not even in words, not any more. The Bynar and the sentient ship had surpassed such clumsy methods of communication now that they trusted one another. Steeling himself for the fresh wave of pain, 110 relived 111's death. The emptiness, the aching, the repeated, increasingly frantic queries to a mind that was already gone. Oh, yes, he knew loss such as Friend had experienced.

Friend's agony washed through 110, and the Bynar experienced it as if it were his own. He swam upward, drowning in the linkage, long enough to press the button on the tricorder. He forced his eyes open. He would have to watch Jaldark's logs for the second time. Through the link they had established, Friend would also then see them. He would see, and believe.

So much information coursing through his brain, along his artificial nerves! Jaldark's childish face appeared on the screen, saying words that pierced both vessel and Bynar.

I love sharing things with Friend...I love it when we link up and I've got the whole ship's sensors at my hands...To be able to experience so many things that, as an organic being, I'd never otherwise know is indescribable. And he is so close to me when we're joined. I've never known anything like it...He's really sensitive to my happiness. It's nice to have things like that matter to someone else so much...I tried to

explain to Friend about how great it feels to walk on soft grass in your bare feet, but he didn't quite get it, I think....

She was wrong, came Friend's thoughts. Through her, I knew. I knew everything....

It's the most amazing sensation, to be linked with him...I just love Friend so much. He's the most wonderful ship. I'm so glad I'm bonded with him for the rest of my life...I guess I'm just the luckiest girl in the universe...Something's wrong...Friend can sense it but I'm not telling him any more than I have to in order to maintain function. I don't know that we'll make it in time. I hate lying to him like this.

110 had thought the ship's pain difficult to deal with, but the raw rage almost stopped his heart.

Why did she not tell me? There were things I could have done, systems I could have shut down, that would have made us make more efficient!

She did not wish to burden you with her fears and pain, 110 "replied."

We were joined! I was supposed to share her fears and pain!

But Jaldark had been a humanoid, and augmented and technologically enhanced as she was, she remained a humanoid. She didn't understand that Friend would have been more comforted had she confided in him. Perhaps she would have learned this, as she grew older. But perhaps that wisdom might also have made her less compassionate, and she would not have disabled the ship so that it could not self-destruct.

I think it's the implants. They're failing somehow. I can't get sustenance from Friend anymore...I have these terrible headaches. And the arm sheathes...whenever we join I'm in a lot of pain. So of course I come up with excuses not to join as often. Friend hasn't said anything much, but I know his feelings are hurt. He's the last person--well, thing--I'd ever want to hurt, and I just hate it that this is happening!

The ship could not form coherent thoughts anymore, but 110 did not need it to. For the first time since 111's death, he let his own grief surface. In the bonding, they were more than two. Now that she was dead, 110 felt as though he was less than one. She had taken so much of him with her when she died.

I don't think I have much longer...The pain is so bad I can hardly stand it...I think I'm going to die. But I can handle that. It's Friend I'm worried about. He's supposed to autodestruct if anything happens to me. The ships aren't designed to function on their own. They told us that the ships need an Omearan mind to link with to make ethical decisions. They could be dangerous without a pilot. But you know, I don't believe that. I don't think Friend would hurt anybody unless they hurt him first.

Friend had been lost in his own pain, but now 110 felt the Starsearcher's attention focus fully on the dying Jaldark's words. 110 wanted to linger in his own bittersweet misery, but was pulled along with Friend.

He, too, really began to listen.

I can't kill Friend, I just can't. That would be the most selfish act I think I could possibly perform. I know I'm supposed to, but I won't do it. I won't. I've deactivated the autodestruct mechanism. Friend won't be able to reengage it on his own. He's going to live, even if...even if I don't. That's what friends do, isn't it?

They help each other. If anybody finds this, please take care of Friend. Send him home. The coordinates are in the computer. Help him find a new pilot. He's going to be so lost without...me to take care...Tell him I'm sorry. Tell him I love him. Tell him it will be all right. He's just got to be brave.

Friend's shock now felt as strong as his suffering. That is against all the rules. Jaldark was the reason I was unable to self-destruct? She did it deliberately? Why, why? We were supposed to die together!

110's narrow chest hitched. So were Bynars. Linked unto death, it was not at all uncommon, nor frowned upon, for a remaining Bynar to die upon losing a partner. Sometimes, more often than not, such a death was chosen, self-inflicted. It was the only way in 110's culture to avoid being forced to take another mate. It was the only way to remain Bynar.

But 110 did not want to take another mate. For a while, he thought, as Friend had, that he wanted to die. For what was life without 111, without the friend and mate and ultimate companion, who lived in his affections and mind and soul? But there had been no chance for suicide, and to 110's own astonishment, his body refused to simply quit on its own. There had been the computer to help, and the Pevvni to fight, and then Friend's plight to attend to.

While 110 was sorting through this, Jaldark quietly died on the screen. He expected the ship to lose control utterly, and braced himself for the throes that would surely come.

Instead, Friend remained strangely still. 110 realized that the ship was focusing on him and his thoughts. You did not die.

No, 110 "replied." I kept living. I kept working.

For what reason? Your loss was as great as mine. Why did you live?

For a long moment, 110 could not form an answer for that because he truly did not know. Finally, the answer came, and with it a sudden easing of the pain that had been his constant companion since that terrible moment.

Because 111 wished me to continue.

As Jaldark wished me to continue, thought Friend. 110 felt the ship's own pain subsiding ever so slightly. But why? Starsearchers cannot function on their own. We need a pilot. We could be dangerous. I was dangerous. I destroyed buildings and fired upon your ship. I could have killed you. I was not constructed to attack, only to defend.

Physical pain began to penetrate 110's consciousness, distracting him from the thoughts he was only now beginning to process. The implants. Dr. Lense had warned him about this. Because he was a Bynar, a member of a race which already had a great deal of integration with computers, he could tolerate the implants to a certain degree. A normal human could not. But he was not Omearan, and the implants had not been part of his body since infancy, and it was starting to reject them. Once the pain began to increase, Lense had said, he only had a matter of moments before he would go into shock.

Faced with dying like the unfortunate Jaldark, in the same position, 110 realized that he very much wanted to live.

I can help you sent Friend with a sudden sense of urgency. I can enable you to make the transition. You could help me by becoming my new pilot. You understand. And...I could help you, too, because I understand.

The pain in his head increased. 110 wondered if all Starsearchers were this compassionate. He understood now why destroying Friend had been anathema to Jaldark. And oh, it was appealing, wasn't it? It was the perfect solution. He would not be alone, and yet he would not dishonor the memory of all he had shared with 111 by so quickly selecting another mate. And poor Friend desperately needed him. He was right. They could help one another. Heal one another.

It was ideal. And it was too easy.

Friend sensed his rejection before 110 even had a chance to phrase it. He hurried to explain his reasoning.

Jaldark said you had to be brave. She said everyone thought that the Starsearchers couldn't function without a pilot. But you proved them wrong. Look at you right now, interfacing with a completely alien species. You're making ethical judgements. You can be an individual. As...as I can be. If we are both brave enough.

But, what is a ship without a pilot? I serve no useful purpose.

The pain was increasing. Morbidly, he wondered if the same white-hot agony that was racking his body was what Jaldark had undergone. He had to transport out and have the implants removed before they caused permanent damage. But he didn't want to leave, not yet. 110 willed himself to hang on for just a little while longer.

That is a false conclusion arrived at by incorrectly analyzing the data. You could help to complete the mission upon when you and Jaldark had embarked. If you will let the Federation help you, they can assist your people in searching for an undeveloped world to colonize.

In reply, 110 received such a violent jolt of fear and loathing that 110 almost passed out from the force of it. Other races hate us! They tried to kill us!

But I don't hate you, 110 thought. The Omearans have encountered only a few other alien races. There are thousands in this quadrant alone, and every race is different. Many of them have joined the United Federation of Planets for their mutual benefit. I know my captain wants to assist you, and once he knows what it is you are seeking, help the Omearans as well. You must be able to sense my sincerity.

Yes, and the ship's reply was slow, halting. 110 supposed he couldn't blame Friend for his suspicions.

But the pain was worsening. He needed a decision now.

Friend, the implants are hurting me. I must leave you.

No, please, please stay, just a while longer....

I cannot. While it is right and appropriate for us to mourn our lost bondmates, we must continue. Alone. We have tasks to perform, things that only we can do. Things that our bondmates would want us to do. I...I understand. I will do what Jaldark wanted me to. I will be brave.

Right before the darkness claimed him, 110 knew in his heart that both 111 and Jaldark would be proud of their decisions.

"Welcome back," came the kind voice of Emmett.

110 blinked. "You beamed me out in time," he said. It was a statement, not a question.

"And only just," came Captain Gold's booming voice. His face moved into 110's vision. "What were you thinking? You were supposed to come back the minute the implants started to hurt. You could have died down there!"

110 smiled, softly. No. Friend would not have let him. None of his friends would have let him die.

Another time, another place, yes, one day he would die.

But it would not be today.

"So," said Gold, his anger diminishing, "what happened with the little Bynar and the great big ship?"

"What is Friend doing now?" countered 110.

"Sitting quietly in space. It wants to make sure you're all right."

"He will be," said Lense. "I would recommend you take it easy for a while, though, 110. No more joining with strange ships. In fact, you should leave the computers alone for at least a day."

"The Enterprise has arrived," Gold said. "They came even though I called off the alert. They figured they were this close, they might as well pick up Geordi and you and take you back to Starbase 505."

"No." The firmness of 110's reply surprised everyone. "I will not go to Starbase 505. I will not rejoin."

"What?" Gold appeared stunned. "But--you have to. You're a Bynar."

"I am," agreed 110, "but I am also myself. An individual. Captain, my bond with 111 was profoundly deep. The severance of that bond was dreadful. I know what my customs demand, but I do not wish to obey them. I do not want to bond with anyone, at least not yet. That is why I did not bond with the ship."

"What?" Gold said again. 110 felt a faint flush of humor. He was certainly startling his captain with these revelations. "The ship tried to force you to bond with it? Be its new pilot?"

"Force? No. Friend would not force anything on anyone. He and the people who built him are very peaceful people, Captain. But the offer was made, and I almost accepted." He felt a sudden pang of wistfulness. It would have been sweet, to have bonded again, to feel the comforting presence of that Other who was yet oneself. But this solitary state had lessons to teach, lessons 110 knew he was ready to embrace, hard though they might be.

"I will remain here on the da Vinci, if you will have me. If not, I am certain that Bynaas would be happy to provide you with another joined pair. They would certainly be more efficient than a solitary Bynar."

"Your contribution is unique, solo man," said Gold warmly. "As are you."

110 cocked his huge, round head. "Soloman? Is that an Earth term for one who is unmated?"

Gold chuckled. "Not an official term, no."

110 considered for a moment. If he refused to rebond, he would not be permitted to use his designation of 110 any more. He needed a new designation--a name, as the humans called it.

"Soloman," 110 said softly, liking how the awkward words sounded on his tongue. "May I then take the name Soloman? I will need one, now that I am unbonded."

"Soloman it is," said Gold. "Now, what's up with Friend?"

As best he could, utilizing the clumsy and inefficient method of the spoken word, the newly dubbed Soloman tried to convey what had transpired. He was frustrated at his lack of ability to convey the nuances, the intimacy of the joining with the ship, but Gold was a wise human. He seemed to understand what could not be spoken, only sensed. He listened intently, his dark eyes intense under his bushy brows.

"Do you think Friend trusts us?" he asked.

"He has bonded with me, and I trust you. Therefore, he must trust you also."

Gold nodded. He rose, and patted Soloman's leg. "Let me see what I can do."

"Hello, Jean-Luc, you old son of a gun. Late as usual. You missed all the excitement."

The normally formal visage of Captain Jean-Luc Picard broke into a smile. Gomez didn't think she'd ever seen that before and for a moment was mildly startled to hear Gold speaking to Picard in such a fashion. But Picard seemed unoffended; in fact, he appeared pleased.

"Seems like the last time, you were called late on the scene, David," he replied.

Gold laughed, a short, quick bark. "Starfleet called us in to clean up after the Enterprise. Run any marathons recently, Jean-Luc? You're looking a little soft around the middle."

"Not for some time," Picard answered, "but I could still beat you, old man." His dark gaze flickered to Gomez. "Commander Gomez, Lieutenant Commander Duffy. A pleasure to see you both again. So, David, I understand you called the Enterprise and the Lexington all the way out here on a wild goose chase."

"And we caught the goose," Gold said. "Wong, please transmit the information we learned about Friend to the Enterprise."

"Friend?" echoed Picard. "An odd name for a ship, especially one that did so much damage to an innocent planet."

"It's a long story, Captain," said La Forge, "but one with a happy ending, I hope. This isn't a Borg vessel, but the ship was designed to uniquely bond with its pilot. It's sentient. It--sort of panicked when its pilot died. Went a little crazy. They were searching for a new homeland for her people. They seem like a benevolent, peaceful race, and I'm hopeful that the Federation might be able to lend them a hand in that quest."

Picard had been listening intently, and now he nodded. "We'll do what we can. If this species is indeed as peaceful as you say they are, then I'm certain we'll be able to assist them. I understand that your last few missions have not been without cost, David. I'm sorry for the loss of 111."

"Thank you, Jean-Luc. I'll pass that on to Soloman."

Now Gomez almost giggled at the expression on Picard's patrician mien. "I beg your pardon?" asked the captain of the Enterprise.

"110 won't be coming back with me, Captain," explained Geordi, stifling a smile of his own. "He's decided to stay on with the da Vinci--unpaired. Captain Gold has nicknamed him Soloman."

Picard frowned. "You run a bit of a lax ship, Gold."

Gold appeared unruffled. "You know what we do, Jean-Luc. What we deal with every day. My team's sharp enough when it counts, and that's what matters to me."

Picard relaxed. "As it should. I've worked with some of your crew, and you know I think they're among the finest in Starfleet."

Gomez felt a blush suffuse her cheeks.

"Mr. La Forge, I'm certain you'll be reluctant to rejoin our boring old vessel after serving with this crew. But we need you back here."

"Aye, sir. I'll be there right away."

"Picard out." The screen was filled with the image of the Enterprise, awaiting Geordi's transport.

"Geordi La Forge," said Gold expansively, "the door is always open. We could use someone like you more than occasionally, you know."

La Forge smiled. "Thank you, sir. It's been quite the experience." He looked over at Gomez.

"Commander Gomez, it was good to see you again."

Sonya smiled, a warm, genuine smile. She'd worried about clashing with La Forge, about him stepping on her territory. But he was a good man, and had been a good friend. She was glad she had been granted the opportunity to work things out with him, and found herself realizing she was going to miss him.

"It was wonderful to see you, Lieutenant," she said, and the words could not have been more sincere.

"Give my best to everyone over in Engineering, will you?"

"You got it. Picard looks like he's itching for me to get back, so do me a favor. Say goodbye to Bart and Soloman for me, will you?"

She nodded, and followed him with her eyes as he stepped into the turbolift. He almost bumped into Soloman.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Geordi. "Shouldn't you still be in sickbay?"

"I must say goodbye to Friend. And I am glad to have the chance to say goodbye to you, Geordi."

"Take care of yourself, Soloman," said Geordi, as the turbolift doors closed.

"Captain...may I?" asked Soloman.

Gold nodded. "Wong, contact the ship. Go ahead, Soloman."

Gomez watched intently, her gaze flickering from the screen, on which Friend appeared, back to Soloman. "How are you feeling, Friend?" the Bynar asked.

"I am a little afraid," the ship admitted in a halting voice. "And we thought that thing was a killer on a rampage. Thought it was Borg. How wrong can you be?"

"So am I," said Soloman. "But I think we have chosen the right path, you and I." He hesitated. "If you would like, we could transport Jaldark back to you, so you may deliver her body to her people. Or else we can send her to the stars, as is the custom with Federation ships."

Gomez couldn't believe it, but her eyes prickled with tears again. It had been a long, long time since any mission had moved her this deeply. Perhaps it was because one of their own had been so profoundly affected. Or maybe it was because they had seen the young, lively Jaldark before her death. Regardless, the whole thing was stirring up deep emotions inside her.

"I...I think I would like to have her with me. I would like to take her home, one final time."

Soloman turned to Gold, who nodded. "We will transport the body in a sealed coffin, Friend. We will handle her with all respect and honor," said the captain.

"I am sorry for my attack on your ship, Captain Gold" apologized Friend. "You are kind to forgive me."

Gold cleared his throat. Gomez shot him a quick glance. His face revealed nothing, but that one sound told her that even her grizzled captain was moved.

"It wasn't the ideal first contact situation. But the second contact worked out pretty well," Gold replied.

"I am being hailed by the Enterprise. They are ready to depart."

"Soloman," said Gold, very softly. "If you want to change your mind, either about Friend or about returning to your homeworld, now's the time."

"No," said Soloman firmly. "I know what I want, what I need. I can do this, and so can you, Friend," insisted Soloman. "Farewell."

"Farewell," echoed the ship. The Enterprise powered up, and Friend obediently moved into position alongside it. Both ships jumped into warp, and were gone.

Captain's personal log, supplemental We started with a dead ship, then a live ship, then a dead pilot, then a Borg. We ended up with a formal first contact that could save an entire species if it's handled right, and saw two individuals display strength and courage as they chose to stand alone. You know, Picard and the others can have their Galaxy class behemoths. I'll stick with this little vessel and its crew any day. Look what we get to do.

Gomez was surprised to see someone else awake at this hour when she entered the mess. The lighting was dim; after all, it was well past midnight. But even in this faint light, she could tell it was Duffy. He seemed as surprised, and as uncomfortable, as she. They exchanged awkward smiles.

She stood in front of the replicator for a long moment. Gomez almost didn't make the order she'd intended to make. She'd rarely requested this over the last ten years as it was. But she wanted it badly tonight.

"Cocoa, hot," she finally instructed the replicator. "With whipped cream," she added quickly, and took the steaming mug the replicator offered.

"Whipped cream, huh?" commented Duffy. "You must be having a rough night."

Gomez smiled, feeling suddenly, absurdly shy. She had wanted to be alone, to think about things, but now she was glad Duffy was here. She had always been able to talk to him before. She wondered if that, too, had changed.

"May I join you?" she asked.

"Certainly," he replied. She took the seat opposite him, and then suddenly laughed as she saw what he had ordered.

"Macaroni and cheese?"

"The ultimate comfort food. Like hot chocolate," he said, forking up another mouthful. "Just like my mother used to make, if mother had been a replicator. Good for what ails you."

Sonya took a sip, enjoying the chocolately, sugary hit of the smooth beverage on her tongue. It had been too long. Ever since "the incident," as her spilling encounter with Picard had been dubbed by some wag, she had refrained from ordering the infamous beverage in front of others.

But Duffy was more than just someone she supervised. He'd been her friend, just like Geordi had, and then, he had become something more. He was someone she could trust, someone she could drink cocoa in front of when she really needed it without fear of being teased.

What he had just said suddenly registered. "Comfort food? Why do you need comfort food?"

Now it was his turn to look away shyly. "You know."

Sonya supposed he did. It was time they talked about it, at least a little. She was tired of this unresolved business getting in the way.

"What happened with 110--I mean, Soloman, and Friend," she said softly. "Watching poor young Jaldark dying alone, in pain, while her ship kept crying for her. And Soloman teaching it how to be by itself."

He nodded, still not meeting her eyes. "It kind of brought home...."

"That we're here, but we're not together any more," Sonya finished. "I know." She gestured toward her mug. "Why do you think I'm drinking this?"

"It was one thing when you got promoted and left," said Duffy, leaning forward and talking quickly. "I mean, we said our good-byes, and we moved on."

"Yes," Sonya said. It had been hard--harder, she supposed, on Duffy than on her. She had a promotion to look forward to and provide distraction, a new ship, a new mission. He had remained on the Enterprise. Until they had both ended up here, on a ship far too small for them to avoid each other. "And then, here we are again."

He nodded. "And this time, you're my boss."

"Another wrinkle in an already very wrinkled relationship."

"Very wrinkled."

"I missed you."

He looked up quickly at her. She held his gaze. Her heart began to beat faster. "I never got involved with anyone else," Sonya continued.

"You were probably just too busy," said Duffy, but his voice shook, just a little.

"I'd have made time for you," Sonya replied.

"You could now."

"Can I? Can I really? Oh, Kieran," she sighed, and she reached across the table to grasp his hand. "I'm tired. I don't want to think about this right now. I just want to be with you, eat our various comfort foods, and enjoy each other's company."

He smiled, and as she remembered, he looked just like a little boy when he grinned that grin. "Sounds good to me," he said.

Gomez felt warm inside. They'd broken the ice, and she had learned something that was very important to her. Kieran Duffy was still her friend, despite the time and distance that had developed between them. There would be an opportunity to explore this further, if it was what they both wanted. For now, she laughed, and clinked her cup of cocoa against his bowl of macaroni and cheese.

Alone in his quarters, Bart reread the letter he'd just finished writing to Anthony. It was long, eight pages' worth of small, neat script. He had told his partner everything. About their fear of the Borg, about finding Jaldark's log, about Soloman and his new name, about the sorrow and joy both sentient ship and unpaired Bynar were discovering in their newfound solitary lives. He frowned, crumpled up the heavy,

cream colored paper, and tossed it over his shoulder. It was all wrong. It was full of details, of description. Those were the things he'd tell Anthony later, over a delicious candlelit dinner in Anthony's quarters on Starbase 92.

Right now, he needed to say the important things. 111's untimely death and Jaldark's heartbreaking story had taught him that. There was no need for a long letter.

He selected another sheet of stationary, and began again.

My dearest Anthony, just a brief note to tell you how much I love you. Goodnight.