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THE FUTURE BEGINS (*What's Past Book 2*)

Steve Mollman & Michael Schuster



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Dedicated to the memory of James
Montgomery Doohan.

Acknowledgments

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Prologue

Stardate 53509.4

May 2376, Old Earth Time

Geordi La Forge materialized right in front of the Tucker Memorial Building, the beam having been ably targeted by Enterprise’s Vulcan transporter chief. The Tucker Building, adjacent to Starfleet Medical Headquarters, housed the Earth-based facilities of the Corps of Engineers. Those consisted of several offices, of course, and numerous labs where Starfleet’s best engineers analyzed alien technologies, developed new ones of their own, and fixed anything that came their way.

Basically, it was a building full of very skilled tinkerers.

La Forge quickly stepped up the flight of stairs leading to the building’s front doors, which automatically swished open to admit him. The lobby of the building was dominated by a massive replica of Zefram Cochrane’s Phoenix, which La Forge had not only seen in real life, but actually sat in only a few years ago. Around the circumference of the room were holoframes depicting many other great engineers who had served in Starfleet over the centuries, from the one that gave the building its name to George William Jefferies to Mahmud al-Khaled.

One of the holoframes was switched off, presumably out of a sense of modesty, as its subject was alive and well and presently berating another engineer by the lobby’s main desk. “What do you mean, you don’t have the report on the time corridor generator! You told me you would have it ready in a week!”

The engineer, a Vissian woman by the look of it, attempted to mount a defense. “Sir, that generator was buried on Mars for over two centuries, and is in horrible shape. A week was our minimum estimate—”

Captain Montgomery Scott, head of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, shook his head mournfully. “Lassie, do they not teach you anything? Always multiply your estimates—your maximum estimates—by a factor of four.”

La Forge cut in as he drew closer to the arguing pair. “He’s right, Ensign. That way you look like a miracle worker.”

Abruptly, Scotty turned to see the new arrival. “Geordi lad! ’Tis good to see you.” He grabbed La

Forge's hand and shook it most vigorously, then turned back to face the Vissian. "When I first met this lad, he was as bad as you. But I taught him how areal engineer works, so there's hope for you, too."

La Forge managed a weak smile at the Vissian. He admired and respected Scotty, and considered him a good friend, but the man's philosophy on reporting to one's superiors left something to be desired, in his mind.

"Now go on, and get back to work." The Vissian ran off for parts unknown.

Scotty turned to face La Forge once more. "What are you doin' here, lad? Not that I'm unhappy to see you."

"It's good to see you too, Scotty." It had been a few years since they had last encountered one another, aside from the occasional subspace communication. "TheEnterprise is here for some repairs after that whole gateways mess, but I decided I needed some time off."

Scotty sighed. "I wishI could get some time off." He set off for one of the lifts at the far end of the lobby, indicating La Forge should follow him. "I thought the reconstruction work had us spread thin enough, but the gateways crisis has made everythin' twice as bad. Every one of my teams is tied up somewhere, and I've got a dozen admirals askin' me to move each of them to two other places, at the very least."

They entered the lift, which Scotty ordered to the appropriate destination. "How are things with you, lad?"

"Not much better," said La Forge. "It's been one crisis after another ever since the war ended, from Gemworld on."

"Captain Gold said you spent some time on the da Vinci ."

La Forge nodded. "I joined them for a few missions. It was certainly different from what I usually do, and I enjoyed it, but I was happy to return to theEnterprise . Sure, both ships were just as hectic, but at least on theEnterprise I'm not hornin' in on someone else's turf."

"Gold and Gomez both said you were a wonderful addition to the team," said Scotty as the lift doors opened, depositing them in a nondescript corridor. Scotty led the way down it.

"I suppose so," said La Forge. "But anyway, working with an S.C.E. team made me think of you, so I decided to drop in next time I was in the area."

"It's good that you did, lad," said Scotty. "I could use a break."

The two reached a door markedCOMMAND LIAISON which opened as they approached to reveal a small office. "Good mornin', Deg," Scotty said to the Blood Many male sitting at the desk.

"Good morning, Captain Scott," replied the aide. "Good to see you in the office today."

"Ah, be quiet, lad, I have a guest." Scotty gestured unnecessarily at La Forge. "Do I have any appointments today?"

"Only your interview with Dr. Ven this afternoon," Deg replied immediately.

Scotty frowned. "What's that about, again?"

"He's looking for a medical position on an—"

Scotty waved off the rest of the sentence. "Tell him I'm sorry, but I'm out for the day, and I'll have to reschedule." Deg nodded, and began typing into his computer console. "Oh, and hold all my calls." Deg nodded again, and Scotty gestured at the bright red door at the back of the room. "After you, laddie," he said to La Forge.

La Forge stepped up to the door, somewhat out of place with its drab surroundings, and it slid open automatically. What it revealed was no ordinary office.

Scotty's office had been thoroughly redecorated in the style of a twenty-third-century Constitution-class vessel. There were bright primary colors everywhere, including the red grate dividing the portion of the room with the desk from that with some antique chairs. The desk itself was topped with a period-authentic three-sided computer monitor, and next to it sat a pile of old-fashioned duotronic computer cartridges.

"Scotty...this is amazing," La Forge said, finally stepping out of the doorway. As Scotty crossed into the office as well, and the doors closed behind him, La Forge noticed they had done so with the pneumatic swish characteristic, once again, of the time period.

"Thank you, lad," said Scotty. He stepped past La Forge to the "lounge" half of the room, where he sat himself down. The other engineer picked a seat across from him. "When I finally decided to take the job as head of the S.C.E. back in March, I determined the first thing I would do is make myself an office I would be comfortable in."

Scotty reached for a squat table next to him, grabbing a bottle and a couple of glasses. As he poured the drink—Scotch, La Forge presumed—into the glasses, Scotty continued. "Everythin's fully functional, even the computer disks. They're really isolinear chips with a casing around them so they work in my 'antique' adapted reader." He shook his head. "You don't know how many antique dealers tried to peddle off bad merchandise. One tried to tell me his twenty-second-century desktop monitor was from my time. Sure, it was three-sided, but that doesn't mean it was what I wanted."

La Forge grimaced as Scotty handed him the drink; it was Scotch, all right, and despite the other engineer's repeated efforts, he had yet to develop a taste for it. "You seem to be enjoying yourself, Scotty."

"Oh, that I am, lad, that I am," said Scotty, quickly downing his own cup of the drink. "I definitely made the right move when I accepted Ross's offer."

La Forge took a tentative sip of his cup. "Actually, I've been meaning to ask you about that. Since the last time I saw you, you've left the Sovereign, become head of the S.C.E., quit the job and Starfleet from what I hear, and returned in the same capacity. What is up with that?"

Scotty chuckled. "It's quite a tale, Geordi." He drank some more Scotch. "I'd like to tell it to you, but it's a wee bit classified in parts." Scotty paused for a moment. "Ah, hell, what's that between friends?"

La Forge shrugged. "Your secrets will be safe with me."

"Of that, I have no doubt, lad." Scotty finished off his glass, and began pouring another. "In the final

months of the Dominion War, I was tapped by Admiral Ross to take over the Corps of Engineers from John. A couple months after takin' my new position, I found myself called away from Earth by a very young laddie and his shuttlecraft, to be taken to the U.S.S. Gorkon. Her commandin' officer required me to help her humor some new alien friends..."

Situational Engineering

Stardate 52612.6

August 2375, Old Earth Time

Once the delegation materialized on the surface of Kropasar, inside a very nice-looking gathering hall, Scotty immediately lost sight of the others who'd transported down with him—except for Admiral Nechayev. Before he had quite acquired his bearings in the massive room, she was pulling him face-to-face with his first Kropaslin.

The Kropaslin were not normal humanoids by any stretch of the imagination. To Scotty's eyes, they resembled tall, bipedal lizards with feathers and a high forehead. They had four short arms which they usually kept close by their bodies, almost as if to protect themselves. Their most peculiar attribute was the complete lack of any visual organs. In any case, Scotty didn't spot any, even though he did look hard. In fact, the only sensory organ he could make out was their nose, which sported huge nostrils where other beings had their eyes, and they opened and closed in quick intervals.

They possessed feathers, or at least something that looked like feathers. Most of them grew on their head, around the nostrils, although the Kropaslin's arms also sported a few. This particular one did not even come up to Scotty's shoulders, though looking around he noticed there were several taller ones about. All of them were clothed, which was a blessing.

"Captain Scott, this is Bendalion Iamor, a thane in the Kropaslin Witenagemot," said Nechayev. "Thane Iamor, this is Captain Montgomery Scott, head of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers." She looked around the room and, noticing a Kropaslin trying to catch her attention, set off. "If you'll excuse me, I see High Cyning Forecic over there."

Scotty reached out and shook one of Iamor's four hands. "Good to meet you, Thane."

"Likewise, Captain Scott," Iamor replied. The Kropaslin's speech was heavily accented and very screechy; apparently he was speaking Standard directly, without the benefit of a universal translator. His voice box seemed to be unsuited for it.

"Thane, eh? Do you all think you're Ancient Scots or somethin'?" asked Scotty amusedly.

"Ah," said Iamor, "you refer to our political terminology: 'Witenagemot' for the legislature, 'thane' for its members, and 'high cyning' for its head. No, these terms were selected by a Federation translation team. They were considered most indicative of the fact that we possess a thoroughly democratic government that utilizes the trappings of an ancient feudal one."

Scotty simply nodded. As the conversation trickled on to a small pause, he finally took a good look at the hall they were in. It was certainly not a room designed for such receptions, that much was clear. However, quite for what purpose it had been designed was a question he did not have a ready answer to. The ceiling was a good five meters above the tallest Kropaslin's head, and in the center of it was a

transparent dome that let in the murky light from outside. It seemed to be a cloudy day here in the planetary capital whose name he didn't recall at the moment.

The gathering hall sported a stone floor that must have been designed with a passion for art, because intricate patterns like these didn't come natural to those who did not enjoy their work. Abstract shapes wound their way across the shining marble floor, like cubist snakes jointly sculpted by Salvador Dalí and Yeros of Vulcan.

"Why did Nechayev so wish me to speak to you?" Iamor asked, changing the subject.

"Damned if I know," replied Scott, quickly adding a respectful "sir." It wouldn't do to cause an incident in the first ten minutes of the event. "You don't happen to work in biotechnological engineerin', do you?"

"Alas, no," Iamor said. "I am the head of the Agreement Party."

"Agreement Party?" Scott asked, a bit confused.

"Did you not read the briefings we provided your delegation?" asked Iamor. "I was told information on our political structure was included in your briefing packet."

It was very possible that that information had been on the padd that Commander Piñero had given him, but if that were true, it hardly mattered, as Scotty hadn't even looked at it. He'd had too many technical journals to read. "Ah, I skimmed it."

"Well," said Iamor, "our government is dominated by two political parties, known as Agreement and Consensus. Presently, the Consensus Party holds a majority in the Witenagemot, but three years ago—"

"Sorry, Thane," Scotty said, interrupting Iamor's obvious enthusiasm for this topic, "but I'm an engineer. Politics is a wee bit over my head. I just know to show up on Election Day."

Iamor made a facial expression that Scotty was not sure how to interpret. "Very well then, Captain Scott."

"I don't mean to be offensive, Thane, but if you want to talk politics, I'm sure Ambassador Morrow over there would be very keen to hear it." Scotty gestured toward where the young diplomat he'd first met in the Gorkon's transporter room was talking animatedly with a small group of seemingly very interested Kropaslin. "Now if you don't mind, I'm going to check out the bar."

* * *

Upon arriving on the Gorkon, one of the first questions Scotty had asked Fleet Admiral Alynna Nechayev—the first, actually—had been "Why am I here?" There were others more suited for this sort of thing, people with, well, a real diplomatic background. Admirals, members of the Diplomatic Corps...even Nechayev herself.

Her reaction had been dry and serious. "This is not a formal negotiation, Captain," she'd said. "It is more of a way of reminding the Kropaslin of what we have to offer—and the other way around of course—in preparation for the actual negotiations. One of the things they have to offer us is their expertise in biotechnology."

Biotechnology—the one thing the Kropaslin could offer the Federation where they could be sure that the

Federation would pay every price to obtain it. Despite extensive research in that field, Federation scientists still lagged behind species such as the Breen and the Azziz. They managed to incorporate elements of it in their technology, certainly—the bioneural gel packs used on some of the newer ship classes were evidence of that—but that was a far cry from having entirely biological vessels at one's disposal, ships that you could basically grow in your own backyard while enjoying a quiet drink on your veranda, so to speak.

Scotty had become somewhat familiar with the technology while working on the construction of the newest Enterprise, and that was when he had first come across a reference to Kropasar. Nechayev must have known about his interest in those people's biotechnological accomplishments when she had picked him for this little "ice-breaker," an informal get-together of Kropaslin and Federation luminaries to ease tensions, now that membership negotiations were once again in full swing. Before the war, Kropasar had applied to become a member of the Federation, but then the revival of Klingon hostilities and the subsequent Dominion War had changed the Federation's goals. Since Kropasar was located a couple dozen light-years rimward of Omicron Ceti, far from the conflict zone, its admittance had fallen to the wayside, given the Diplomatic Corps had much more pressing matters to deal with.

But now, the president had decided the time was right to get things back on track, which was why Scotty was here on the fourth planet of a star system with no name, just a number, searching for a drink.

* * *

The bar, as Scotty had guessed, did not serve Scotch. However, one of the ambassadors, an El-Aurian, had recommended the Andorian ale, and Scotty soon held a glassful of that in his hands. Fortunately, it was a delightful vintage, possessed of a strong blue hue. Wandering over to the buffet, there was also an unsurprising lack of any good food. It seemed as though the Kropaslin had a big liking for foods imported from the Vega system, which was very unfortunate, as one of the many things he had disliked about Vega IX had been the food.

What he really wanted was some haggis, but he hadn't had a good plate of that for almost three years, since his time on the Enterprise -E; helping build a ship from almost the ground up meant you could hardwire the replicators just the way you liked. In the end, he reluctantly settled on a kebab of vegetables from Xaraka XII.

No sooner had he began to munch on the kebab than he was approached by another Kropaslin. This one was taller than Iamor, rising to about two meters. "I hope you don't want to talk politics, laddie," said Scotty. "You are a laddie, right?" He frowned, realizing he had no idea how the Kropaslin genders were differentiated.

"A what?" asked the Kropaslin.

From the way the translator rendered the person's voice, Scotty was willing to gamble that it was a she. Perhaps the taller ones were the females? "A laddie is a boy," he said, "but you seem to be a girl."

"I am a bit older than a girl," said the Kropaslin wryly. "Dr. Delasat Vantimor."

"Captain Montgomery Scott," said Scotty. "I'd shake your hand, lassie, but..." He held up his hands, each of which was presently occupied holding something, and shrugged. "Not enough limbs."

"Oh, I know who you are," Vantimor said. "I worked on the team that designed the special bioneural gel that was used on the Enterprise and the other Sovereign -class ships. Your reports and complaints made

for...interesting reading.”

“Lassie, let me tell you, interfacin’ alien gel with isolinear computer systems is a tricky job.” Scotty hadn’t and still didn’t recognize her name, but that was to be expected, as he had worked with far more people than he could recall on theEnterprise computer systems, most of them via subspace.

“Indeed it is,” said a new voice. Scotty turned to see an older-looking human male had approached from his right without his noticing. “Sorry,” the man said, “but I couldn’t help but hear your conversation.” Scotty recognized him as yet another member of the group from theGorkon that had assembled in the transporter room that morning, though he hadn’t been introduced to him. The man stuck out his hand. “Professor Andrews of the Timsonian Institute.”

Scotty sighed inwardly and quickly transferred his kebab to the left hand, which was also holding his ale, and shook Andrews’s hand. “I imagine you lot will have your hands full catalogin’ all this new stuff, won’t you, lad?” Located in Cluster Telpha-Z, the Timsonian Institute was a counterpart to the more famous Daystrom Institute, focusing less on development of new technologies and more on classifying and labeling ones acquired through trade, alliance, and the like.

“Indeed we will,” said Andrews, moving over to the food bar, where he grabbed a spider tramezzino from Alpha Arietis. “I would appreciate it, Captain Scott, if you did not refer to me as ‘lad.’”

“Ach, you may be older than me physically,” Scotty admitted, “but I was realignin’ dilithium crystals when you were in diapers.”

“Oh, I remember hearing about this,” Vantimor said excitedly. “You fell through a temporal rift in the Typhon Expanse, didn’t you? Came from the twenty-third century to the present?”

“No, lassie, that was my good friend Morgan Bateson. My story is a wee bit different. I was on my way to a retirement colony on Norpin V, when the ship I was on, theJenolen, encountered a Dyson sphere.”

“A Dyson sphere?” asked Vantimor. “Is that a spatial anomaly of some sort?”

“No,” said Andrews, “it is a massive artificial habitat constructed around a star to absorb all of its energy.” He munched on his half-sandwich with a forlorn expression. “Unfortunately, before the Institute could mount an expedition to take a look at the one theJenolen discovered, it up and vanished. Most perplexing and distressing.”

Scotty had taken advantage of the interruption to take another swig of the Andorian ale. “Exactly,” he said. “TheJenolen crash-landed on the sphere, killin’ everyone aboard but me and an ensign. Knowin’ rescue might be a long while in comin’, I managed to put the two of us into transporter stasis, by loopin’ our patterns through the buffer over and over.”

“Really?” came a voice from his left. Scotty realized they had been joined by another Kropaslin. “That is extraordinary.”

“Well, don’t praise me all too quickly,” Scotty said to the newcomer. “We were in transporter stasis for seventy-five years, until we were rescued by theEnterprise -D. But poor Franklin’s pattern degraded too far for him to be rematerialized.”

“That’s sad. However, it’s still an amazing piece of work,” affirmed the Kropaslin. “A miracle of engineering.”

Scotty shrugged. “Aye, you might say that.”

Vantimor had what Scotty thought might be a puzzled expression, though quite honestly he wasn't qualified to judge Kropaslin faces. No wonder —they have no sodding eyes! “I thought you were on your way to a retirement colony. Why are you in Starfleet now?”

“Well, lassie,” said Scotty, taking another sip of his ale, “that is another story.”

“Tell it then,” she said.

Scotty smiled. One of the advantages of being an old relic was almost always having a willing audience for a story—and having more than enough stories to tell. “After I helped save the Enterprise -D from a wee bit of a scrape they landed in, Captain Picard rewarded me with my own shuttlecraft. Instead of headin' to the retirement colony, I decided to roam the galaxy for some time.” He fell silent.

“What happened?” asked someone Scotty didn't recognize, a Deirr. It seemed he was attracting a crowd.

“Well, warpin' around in your own shuttle sounds thrillin', but it soon gets lonely. Oh, I had my fair share of...excitement, but before long I'd entered into a sort of funk. Bein' seventy-five years out of time can do that to you. Fortunately, thanks to an odd dream about Captain Kirk and some advice from a Hermat lass on Argelius—”

“Hermatlass ?” asked Andrews quizzically.

“Well, she was a lad, too, I suppose,” Scotty acknowledged. “I try not to dwell on that. Anyway, she told me I needed to get back to doin' what I was good at, and her words hit home. So I signed up at Starfleet Academy for some courses to get me up to speed with all the new technology, and soon enough, Morgan took me on as chief construction engineer of the Honorius, one of two Sovereign -class starships being built at Starbase 12.”

“That was the original designation of the new Enterprise, wasn't it?” asked Vantimor.

“Aye, lassie,” said Scotty. “The Enterprise -D crashed on Veridian a few months after I joined the project, and so Starfleet redesignated the Honorius in her honor. I served as her chief engineer on her maiden voyage, and after helpin' Morgan with her sister ship, the new Bozeman, I signed on to the Sovereign as chief engineer for a couple of years, where I worked on testin' new technologies for implementation on other Sovereign s. Once that was up, Bill Ross asked me to take over the Engineerin' Corps, and so here I am.”

Aye, and it's not really where you want to be at all, is it?

He drowned that thought with another swig of Andorian ale.

Tried to, more like. He didn't succeed. Involuntarily, he thought back to the conversation Nechayev and he had had in the admiral's ready room. At the start of it, she'd been pleasant and friendly, but her demeanor had changed quickly, giving Scotty the impression that it might have been just an act.

“Captain Scott,” Nechayev had begun, “you know as well as I do that you have not stepped foot in your office at Headquarters for the last three months.”

“I’ve been busy,” Scotty had said defensively. He had been wracking his brains for what he knew of Nechayev. Not much. She was way up there in Starfleet Command—almost as high as you could be, really—but he had only met her once before, during the Amargosa crisis, and that had only been for a brief time. He was woefully uninformed beyond the fact that she was the one who had been at the forefront of the Cardassian negotiations and the mess in the Demilitarized Zone that had followed. “When your man Dramar caught up with me, I was just on my way to my office. I’d been helping the repair teams in San Francisco.”

“Which is very admirable and fully understandable,” Nechayev had acknowledged. “But before that you and Admiral McCoy were on the Hudson conducting a monthlong inspection tour, I believe?”

“It needed to be done,” Scotty had said, still defensive. He had not expected to have his job performance evaluated on the Gorkon .

“Certainly,” Nechayev had said. “But almost anyone in the S.C.E. would have been qualified to carry out the task. It didn’t exactly require superb engineering prowess to look at a couple of facilities.”

Actually, it had ended up requiring quite a bit of skill on Scotty’s part when the Hudson had been forced to make an emergency landing on Bakrii, but he didn’t think the admiral would appreciate him pointing that out. “Well, it doesn’t require ‘superb engineerin’ prowess’ to manage the S.C.E. either. Commander Leland T. Lynch is perfectly capable of doin’ the job.”

“It’s not his job, though, is it?” Nechayev had said. “When Admiral Ross asked you to take over for Harriman, I think he expected you to do the work. Not your assistant .”

Truth be told, Scotty hadn’t really wanted to assume the position of liaison between Command and the Corps of Engineers. But when his tour on the U.S.S. Sovereign had come to an end, Scotty hadn’t had anything lined up. He’d been thinking of retiring again. While he had enjoyed the time he’d spent constructing the Enterprise -E with people who understood his plight, his subsequent time on the Sovereign had made him feel like a relic once more. The crew of the ship, from Captain Sanders down to Chaplain Blackwell, had treated him like a curiosity. A revered and respected curiosity, granted, but still a curiosity.

But before Scott could bring himself to actually do the deed, Admiral William Ross had come to him with the offer of heading the S.C.E. Scotty had leapt at the chance to do something useful but, not keen on becoming an administrator, insisted it only be on a temporary basis, until someone who actually wanted the job could be found. His first month had not endeared him to his new duties: it had been signing off on orders, approving requests, dictating reports, and more of the same. When a chance had come to get out of the office and do some work on a communications array at Tsugh Kaidnn, he had taken the opportunity without a thought. And the next opportunity to get out of the office, and the one after that.

The only thing that kept him in the job were the words Harriman had spoken to him a few years back, when Harriman had been contemplating retirement himself and offered his job to Scotty: They only gave it to me to keep an old admiral busy. But an engineer like yourself, you could really do something with it. But every time Scotty called Commander Lynch back at the office and learned how much more paperwork had built up, he doubted Harriman’s words more and more.

Returning to Earth after the inspection tour on the Hudson, he had thrown himself into helping with the reconstruction efforts repairing the damage caused by the Breen attack on San Francisco. But having

wrapped up what he could at the moment, he had been dreading returning to his office. Fortunately, Ensign Dramar had happened along. At the time, he had thought that even a meeting with the notorious Admiral Nechayev would be better than confronting his paperwork.

He'd been wrong there.

"What was it like on the Sovereign?" asked Professor Andrews, diverting Scotty from his momentary bit of introspection.

Scotty, not letting his doubts about his choices show, said, "It was pretty tricky workin' new technology like that, but I adapted quickly. When you've been an engineer as long as I have, you start to learn that some things never change."

"How long have you been an engineer?" asked Vantimor, her interest obvious despite her alienness.

"Over one hundred fifty years if I cheat and count my time in the transporter," said Scotty with a grin. "All my life, really. I think I've served on over a dozen starships. Three Enterprises, of course, plus Sovereign, Excelsior, Starstalker, Kumari, Gagarin . . ." He continued to recite his impressive pedigree, enjoying himself for the first time in a long while.

That evening, Scotty returned to his quarters, quite pleased with himself. He had spent the rest of the day swapping stories with Vantimor, Andrews, and the other engineers, and he could think of few things more pleasing than that, except maybe reading technical journals.

Speaking of which, he was still behind in his reading of the Kropasar Journal for Applied Biotechnology, not to mention the several hundred papers published by Federation journals on the issue. Tomorrow, he was scheduled to tour a gel production plant with Dr. Vantimor and some of her colleagues; he needed to be well informed if he didn't want to look like a relic from another time.

After cleaning himself up and changing into some Starfleet-issue pajamas, Scotty had the computer download his reading material onto two isolinear chips, loaded one of the chips into his padd, and settled down on his bed to read until he fell asleep. He hadn't done anything like this since cramming for his last history final at the Academy. He was rather enjoying himself.

Just as he was getting to the exciting part of the second paper—a discussion of realigning the nanotech processors to more efficiently process the neural-based output of gel packs without a loss in data density—he was interrupted by a beeping from the computer terminal on the room's desk.

Sighing, he heaved himself up out of bed, and crossed the room. "Scott here," he said, pressing the appropriate button on the terminal.

Commander Esperanza Piñero, the Gorkon's first officer, appeared on-screen. "Captain Scott, Admiral Nechayev has taken ill." She seemed to be in sickbay.

Scotty was puzzled. "I'm sorry to hear that, lassie. What's wrong?"

"It appears something she ate on Kropasar disagreed with her," said Piñero.

Scotty nodded. "Probably those meatballs from Vega. I always thought Vegan food was disgustin'."

Piñero shrugged. “Dr. Ezeafulukwe isn’t sure exactly what did it yet.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, lassie, but I don’t know what this has to do with me. I can’t do much more than offer my sympathy. I’m an engineer, not a doctor.”

“Admiral Nechayev was scheduled to meet with some members of the Witenagemot tonight,” said Piñero. “She has selected you to take her place.”

“Me?” Scotty asked, astonished. “Surely one of the diplomats would be more suited for the task?” He couldn’t imagine why anyone would want him to talk to a group of politicians. “Send that nice Morrow lad.”

“Captain Scott, the admiral explicitly instructed that you go in her stead. The meeting’s at 2100 hours. I’m sending the location of the meeting to you now. Send me your padd’s network address; sealed orders will be encoded into it that you will be able to access at the appropriate time.”

Scotty sighed. “Aye, aye. Tell the admiral I’ll be there.” He keyed his padd’s address into the terminal.

Piñero smiled. “Thank you, Captain Scott. I’m sure the admiral will be most grateful.” Her image blinked away, and Scotty checked the chronometer to realize he had a couple hours before he was due back on Kropasar.

“What’s she playin’ at?” he asked himself. Well, he’d know soon enough. In the meantime, he had better replicate himself a nice, strong Mythran coffee. It wouldn’t do to doze off while he listened to some politician natter on.

* * *

Scotty materialized in an empty corridor in the Kropaslin Curia. The lights flicked on in response to his presence. Checking his padd, he determined the room he was headed for was a little bit down the hall.

Damn and blast, why am I doing this? He’d been thinking for almost two hours, and had yet to come up with a reason why he would be the best replacement for Admiral Nechayev at a meeting with some alien politicians.

He reached the door, and he tapped the control on the wall next to it, causing it to slide open. Inside the room were seven Kropaslin gathered around a large round table. The table was mostly featureless gray metal, except for some computer terminals on the edges and a white ring in the center. As he stepped across the threshold, the door slid shut behind him with a link he recognized as the activation of an electronic lock.

“Take a seat, Captain Scott,” said one of the Kropaslin. Scotty recognized him as Thane Bendalion Iamor, the small fellow Nechayev had forced him to speak to briefly that morning.

The chair closest to the door was empty; Scotty sat himself down in it. There was a small computer terminal embedded in the table in front of him; it appeared to be one of the most recent models to come out of the design facilities here on Kropasar. “Why am I here, lad? Why am I meetin’ with your government?”

“We are not the government,” replied Iamor. “Not anymore, that is. As I mentioned to you this morning,

I am the leader of the Agreement Party. High Cyning Forecic is a member of the Consensus Party; they currently lead Kropasar.”

“I don’t understand what all your political wheelings and dealings have to do with me.” Scotty shifted in his chair; it had been designed for the unusual Kropaslin anatomy, and thus was rather uncomfortable to him.

Another Kropaslin, this one a woman, spoke up. “Patience, Captain Scott. We will explain.” Scotty vaguely recognized her as someone he had been introduced to during the day.

Iamor continued. “It was my political party that held power when we applied for Federation membership four years ago. In the intervening time, however, there was an election, and we lost our majority in the Witenagemot, though only just barely.”

“The Consensus Party,” the woman went on, “is somewhat less...tolerant than us. They place stricter qualifications on freedom of speech, open less of their policies to public review, and tend to favor members of certain ethnic groups. It is just on the edge of what the Federation considers acceptable in a member government, and in all honesty, our application could end up with a rejection now that negotiations are on again.”

“Why is President Zife pursuing your membership now, then?” asked Scotty.

“There is a very good reason for that,” said another of the Kropaslin. “Allow me to introduce myself: Thane Dreson Miculamor.” This new fellow tapped a button on his terminal. The white ring embedded in the center of the table suddenly lit up, revealing itself to be a holoprojector. An image of a strange, asymmetrical spaceship came into being in midair.

Scotty recognized the ship immediately. It was a Breen frigate. “The Breen?” he asked. “What do they have to do with your politics?”

“I see you recognize the ship, then, Captain Scott,” said Miculamor.

“Of course I do!” Scotty snapped. “Three of them attacked Earth. We haven’t stopped fightin’ them since.”

“Indeed,” said Miculamor. “Several months ago, a Haradin trading vessel came across one on the outskirts of the Helaspon Nebula. All the escape pods had been jettisoned, but the ship was largely intact, with only some minor damage. We still have no idea why it was abandoned. I am sure you know Breen ships are biological in nature, and their level of expertise is rumored to exceed even ours. The traders could not make use of it themselves, but they sold it to our government—for a hefty sum.”

“You have a Breen frigate!” Scotty exclaimed. “Starfleet would die to have one of those. The specs on that blasted energy-dampenin’ weapon alone could change the course of the war!”

“Regrettably,” Miculamor said, “this ship does not appear to be equipped with one. In every other way, however, it seems to be identical to those Starfleet has faced in battle.”

“Still worth a king’s ransom, then,” said Scotty. “If we knew everything about those ships, we would have a major tactical advantage.”

“Yes,” said Iamor. “However, High Cyning Forecic and the Consensus Party believe the existence of

the Breen ship should be kept as secret as possible, to maximize the economic and business advantages access to the superior biotechnology will bring our planet.”

“I’ll bet Starfleet Intelligence still found out, though,” said Scotty. “No wonder the president suddenly made Kropasar’s admittance a priority.”

“That is most likely,” said the female Kropaslin.

“You may now access your sealed orders from Admiral Nechayev, Captain,” said Iamor. “The password is R0-XX4-HT33-L.”

Scotty typed the code into his padd, causing a file to suddenly appear and open. He quickly read through it. “You want me towhat ?”

“Captain Scott, your superiors want that ship, and we want them to have it,” said Iamor. “If they are going to...acquire it, they will need the coordinates of the spacedock where it is being analyzed.”

“But why do youwant Starfleet to steal from you?” Scotty shook his head. “These orders have only made everythin’ makeless sense.”

“The Federation does not honestly want Kropasar as a member,” said the female. Scotty suddenly remembered her name was Gilvatac. Or maybe Gilvatas. Not that it mattered much. “There are not only the democratic problems the Consensus Party presents, but a planet that will not disclose the existence of a ship that could change the tide of the war is obviously not the ideal member. The reason membership is being pursued now is the Breen ship.”

“And we don’t want to become a member,” Iamor said. Before Scotty could state his confusion once more, he continued. “Federation acceptance at this time would provide an enormous validation to the Consensus Party in the eyes of the public. As the leader of the opposition, I cannot let that happen if we ever want to control the Witenagemot again.”

“But whyme ?” Scotty asked, his voice almost a whisper. “Surely one of your people could provide the coordinates.”

“No,” said Miculamor sharply. “They are known only to the handful of pilots that make the run between the spacedock and here. There is not a single member of the government, in either party, who knows them. They are, however, stored in our government’s most secure computer core. As your orders should indicate, that computer core is multitronic in nature, for security reasons.”

That made sense, Scotty reflected. Multitronics was an evolution of the old duotronic technology that had been used in the twenty-third century. The Federation had abandoned the development of multitronic technology like most of the peoples of the galaxy and eventually moved in a totally different direction, to isolinear technology. Though multitronics had its advantages, isolinear computers had come to dominate because it was immensely difficult to create a stable operating system for a multitronic system.

Scotty had seen the results of that problem himself. Dr. Richard Daystrom had used his own memory engrams as a model for the M-5 multitronic unit, which had resulted in the computer going mad and damaging several Federation starships before Captain Kirk had managed to shut it down.

But according to the orders provided by Nechayev on his padd, the Kropaslin had managed to create a stable multitronic computer core. This made their data storage virtually invulnerable, as no one outside of

the few Kropaslin who had designed it had the necessary knowledge to tap into it remotely. Every other computer on the planet was isolinear/bioneural in nature, and interfacing one of them with a multitronic system was something no one knew how to do.

Except Scotty, of course. He had been there when Daystrom had installed the M-5 on the Enterprise, and he still knew exactly how it had interfaced with the standard Starfleet systems. "I'm the only person who can do it, aye," Scotty said quietly. "Daystrom's dead; the M-5 and its predecessors long disassembled. Everyone who worked with him is gone, too—except for me."

"Exactly," said Iamor. He tapped a few buttons on his computer panel, and suddenly the one in front of Scotty lit up with blocks of code. "This is as far as our own programmers have been able to get; none of them have been able to make sense of the data."

"Everyone who worked on the multitronic computer is kept with it, well away from outside contact," Miculamor explained. "We are a secretive people where our technology is concerned." He made a gesture with his upper arms that Scotty interpreted as a shrug. "This is a necessity in today's competitive market."

"You may begin now," said Iamor.

He, and with him every other Kropaslin in the room, looked expectantly at Scotty.

Though outwardly he may have looked calm, inwardly Scotty was furious. He had been set up! Manipulated by Nechayev, by Piñero, by Iamor and the other opposition politicians. This whole diplomatic function was nothing more than a ploy to get him into this room so that he could steal from the Kropaslin government just so the Federation Council could avoid taking on an undesirable member, just so these politicians' precious bid for power wouldn't be jeopardized.

It was sickening. He could feel the vegetables from his kebab churning in his stomach, along with the ale and the coffee he'd consumed. He desperately wanted to visit waste extraction.

Yet here he was. The door was locked, and he had his orders from the almighty Fleet Admiral Alynna Nechayev right in front of him, clearly signed and dated. Oh-so-conveniently, she wasn't here. He couldn't argue with her. And he had no doubt that the door would not be unlocked until he had extracted those blasted coordinates from the multitronic computer.

There was no way out. He sighed, and cracked his knuckles before leaning down to take a good look at the screen on his terminal. "Well, I'll have to give it my best shot, laddies and lassies, haven't I?"

At least it would be an interesting challenge.

He could take some small comfort in that.

* * *

When the beam released Scotty into the Gorkon's transporter room, the first thing he noticed was Admiral Nechayev standing before him; Commander Piñero was operating the console. "Glad to see you're better, Admiral," he said as he stepped off the transporter dais.

Nechayev held her hand out. "Your padd please, Captain Scott."

Scotty slipped his hands behind his back, the padd still clutched in them. “I don’t think this is right. We can’t just steal from another planet.”

“Captain Scott,” said Nechayev with a sigh, “I had hoped this would not happen. You know as well as I do that if the Federation wants to stop losing this war, we need that ship.”

“Admiral, I don’t deny that! I just don’t think we should be stealin’ from potential member planets—or any other planets—just because it’s more convenient for us!”

Nechayev shook her head. “Captain Scott, it’s not as though you don’t know Starfleet can be a little...underhanded at times. I seem to recall you once joined a commando squad on a mission into Romulan space to steal a prototype vessel?”

“That’s not the same—” began Scotty.

Nechayev cut him off. “And of course, you had no problem with stealing from the Federation itself when you conspired with Captain Kirk to sabotage the original Excelsior and steal the Enterprise out of spacedock.” She motioned to Piñero, who stepped forward to right in front of Scotty, her hand extended. “Captain Scott, hand over that padd. That’s an order.”

Just as when he had read the sealed orders earlier that night, Scotty couldn’t refuse a direct order like that. He brought his hand from behind his back, and dropped the padd into Piñero’s hand. Piñero flipped it on and skimmed through the data. “It’s all here, Admiral,” she said. “The coordinates, the layout of the facility, everything.”

“Get to the bridge and break orbit,” ordered Nechayev. “The Catherine Mary is waiting at Delphi Ardu for that information.”

“Yes, Admiral.” Nechayev held out her hand, and Piñero gave her the padd. Nechayev gave some further orders about sending an apology to the high cyning for the abrupt departure, and then Piñero left.

“You don’t have to be rude to them as well, Admiral!” exclaimed Scotty. “At least do them the courtesy of finishin’ out your commitment here.”

“I can’t afford to waste any time here, Captain Scott. Captain Wrightwell needs that information as soon as possible if his strike team is going to capture that Breen frigate, and we can’t risk transmitting it, even in code.” She skimmed through the data on the padd herself. “Good work, Captain Scott. I think you’ll understand if I can’t put you up for commendation, though.” She began to head for the door.

“Now wait just a second, Admiral,” called Scotty, halting her in midstride. “I want to tell you somethin’.”

Nechayev turned, a look of curiosity evident on her face. “And what’s that, Captain Scott?”

Scotty paused for a moment, not sure if he really wanted to go through with this, not sure if he really wanted to say the words or not. Then he thought, The hell with this. “Admiral, I quit.”

For the first time he had ever seen, Nechayev looked like she was at a loss for words. “You what?”

“I quit,” he repeated. “I resign.”

“Captain Scott,” began Nechayev, “surely—”

“This has nothing to do with the stealin’,” said Scotty. “Well, it does, but that’s not the reason. The reason is that you manipulated me, Admiral. You deliberately engineered the entire situation so I would have to obey those orders.” Scotty wasn’t the type to disobey orders.

That’s not true, Scotty thought. How many times did you disobey orders under Captain Kirk? But there was a difference. Under Kirk, Scotty had never been the one initiating the disobeying. He had always been following orders, really; it was just that they had been the captain’s orders and not Starfleet’s. And now the captain was dead...

“What about your job with the S.C.E.?” asked Nechayev. It was clear that she still couldn’t quite believe that Scotty would end his Fleet career for such a reason.

“Admiral, you yourself told me I’ve not been doing that at all,” said Scotty. “There’s nothing to tie me to Starfleet anymore.” In truth, there hadn’t been since he finished his work on the Enterprise -E, if even then. “This century’s Starfleet isn’t for me if this is the way it treats its officers.”

He reached up to his chest, removed his communicator badge, and put it on the transporter console with a thump.

* * *

“Where to, sir?”

“Laddie, don’t call me ‘sir’ anymore. I resigned.”

Ensign Dramar nodded absently as he ran through the shuttlecraft Irenic’s preflight checklist. “Sorry. But where do you want me to take you?”

Scotty shrugged. “Earth, I suppose.” At the very least he would now need to clear his belongings out of his Starfleet-issued apartment in San Francisco.

The ensign nodded and as he continued doing the checklist with one hand, began plotting the course with the other. “What are you going to do now that you’re retired?”

“I don’t know, lad. This’ll be my second time, but I didn’t really know then, either.” The retirement colony on Norpin V was definitely out. The last thing he needed was to be with a bunch of old-timers all reminiscing over bygone days. He had enough history of his own to wallow in. “I’d return to wanderin’, if I could.”

Unfortunately, when he had reenlisted with Starfleet, Scotty had donated his old shuttlecraft, the Romaine, to the Starfleet Museum as a form of recompense for stealing a starship from them. Brennad Odymo, the museum head, would surely never part with it now, since the former shuttlecraft Goddard was the only sizable intact remain of the wrecked Enterprise -D.

“I didn’t particularly like wandering much, really.” Though there had been some interesting encounters on the way—renewing his friendship with Morgan, rescuing the Narisian refugees, tangling with Koloth one last time, rescuing Spock from Romulan captivity—most of the time he had just felt aimless. Much like he did now, much like he had since transferring to the Sovereign.

But the engine room was no longer a home to him. Starfleet was no longer a home for him.

Right now, aimless wandering is all I have.

Interlude

Stardate 53509.5

May 2376, Old Earth Time

Geordi La Forge set down his glass, his first drink still unfinished. “Well, that’s Nechayev for you,” he said. “The things I’ve heard about her, from the captain and elsewhere...”

“Oh, I know that now, laddie,” said Scotty. He reached for his bottle, but evidently reconsidered yet another glass of Scotch, as he withdrew his hand only partway there. “If only I’d known earlier.”

“So you resigned?” La Forge asked. “I thought I’d heard you went on inactive duty.”

“I wanted to resign,” Scotty said, “and I certainly filed my resignation. But Command—specifically Admiral Ross—wouldn’t take it, and he managed to talk me into goin’ on ‘inactive duty.’ I was maintained in an ‘advisory capacity’ to the S.C.E. or some similar nonsense, and Commander Leland T. Lynch took over as temporary head until a suitable replacement could be found.”

La Forge nodded. He knew Lynch, and had never been impressed by the man’s engineering prowess, but from what he heard, he made a capable administrator.

Scotty stood up. “I don’t know about you, lad, but I fancy goin’ somewhere else than this office, as nice as it is.” He nodded at La Forge’s glass. “I suspect you would like to do the same, so you can have a drink more to your taste.”

Geordi smiled. “That would be nice. I haven’t been to Worlds in a while.”

“Laddie, I don’t think I’ve been there since I retired the first time, and I’d certainly like to see how the place has been doing in the past eighty-odd years.” La Forge stood and followed Scotty out of his office, back into Deg’s.

“I’m goin’ to be takin’ the afternoon off, Deg lad,” said Scotty. “Anythin’ I need to hear before I leave?”

“Admiral Koike would like to send the *Vinci* to Maeglin to deal with a situation there once they’ve completed their mission to Tellar Prime,” replied the Blood.

“Gateways related?” asked Geordi.

Deg nodded. “There are few other types of crises these past few days.”

“Those Petraw fearties are about to give me an ever-lastin’ headache, I’m tellin’ you! Thank goodness for your Captain Picard,” said Scotty. “Otherwise we would be facing even worse. Tell Koike he’s free to send the *Vinci* wherever he wishes,” he said to Deg.

“Yes, sir,” said Deg, beginning to tap into his computer once more. “That should be it for the day.”

Scotty led the way out of the office, as Geordi followed. “It won’t be, of course. It never is.”

* * *

Strange New Worlds, the full name of the bar commonly called “Worlds,” was an ancient Starfleet institution, supposedly older than the Academy itself. According to myth, it was here that Admiral Jonathan Archer had been offered the position of Chief of Staff of the fledgling Federation Starfleet.

La Forge had never quite bought that one. The bar was old, but it wasn’t that old. Regardless, it had been popular with Starfleet personnel for over a century now, and that showed little sign of changing. La Forge had been coming here on and off since he was an Academy cadet, and had always liked it. The bar was filled with Starfleet memorabilia, from dedication plaques to model starships to used self-sealing stem bolts.

Once they were settled in at a nice corner booth—Scotty with an Aldebaran whiskey, and La Forge with a nice Saurian brandy—the younger engineer prompted Scotty to continue his tale. “Did you return to wandering, or what?”

“I suppose so, laddie,” said Scotty, “but wanderin’ of a more limited sort. I returned to Scotland, revisiting my old homeland for the first time since I left on the *Jenolen* back in ’94. But soon I found myself called away to a far more...pleasurable destination.”

Damage Control

Stardate 53194.6

March 2376, Old Earth Time

As he made his way to the lift of the observation tower, Montgomery Scott managed not to bump into a single tourist, which in itself was a small miracle. Usually, they didn’t care whether they were in his way, only to later complain quite loudly about his obvious inability to walk without distracting others from observing the scantily-clad natives.

Even if the visitors were forgettable, Risa itself always was a lovely spot to spend your downtime, and it hadn’t changed a bit in the years he’d been...offstage, so to speak. There were still those large wooden horgahn s everywhere, almost forcing you to get yourself some jamaharon while there was still some left.

Scotty was glad that he had found this job. He just wasn’t the kind of man to sit around lazily all day long, reading books, and solving 3-D crossword puzzles. He wished he had figured that out just a few years earlier (relatively speaking, of course), because then he wouldn’t have been on the *Jenolen*, on course to that bloody retirement colony, which had resulted in him skipping seventy-five years cleverly ensconced in a transporter buffer.

It had had its upsides, however—not only had he escaped a depressing number of wars and armed conflicts, but also some unnecessary revivals of outrageous fashion styles. Yet what had survival brought him? Nothing, except the knowledge that the galaxy hadn’t improved. People were still as stupid as they had been in the twenty-third century.

Case in point—suddenly, someone big and heavy bumped into him, mumbled an excuse and continued down the corridor. Scotty looked at the quickly moving back of the person—who seemed to be a

Megarite, judging from his drysuit—and thought about thanking him for his consideration, but somehow he got the impression that sarcasm was wasted on the peculiar aliens who used song to communicate their ideas and opinions.

Finally, Scotty made it to the lift; it made the one hundred twelve-story journey in less than thirty seconds. He stepped out of the turbocar and onto the observation deck of the Tolari Tower, the tallest structure on this continent. Even from up here, the main building of the nearby El Dorado Resort resembled a fake Aztec pyramid consisting of real Risian basalt, and it looked authentic, from what Scotty could tell. But then again, he didn't know all that much about ancient Aztec architecture.

He went to the railing and took a deep breath. The view was outstanding as always. He had heard that Risa's peculiar geological history was responsible for the abundance of beaches and lagoons, but he suspected that the Risian government had helped nature along. For more than two hundred years, the planet had been one of the Federation's most popular holiday destinations, together with Wrigley's Pleasure Planet, Casperia Prime, and Phloston Paradise, but if the Risians hadn't begun to interfere with their natural environment centuries ago, the planet would have rivaled Ferenginar in humidity.

However, some people didn't like the way the visitors to Risa behaved. They claimed that the Risian lifestyle was the cause of complacency, vanity, and extreme hedonism. In response, they had founded the New Essentialists Movement and tried to show people the error of their ways. Nobody would have complained if they had done it by holding rallies and handing out pamphlets, but no, they had had to switch off the entire weather control grid and the tectonic stress regulators. Who in their right mind believed that was more likely to convince people to change their lifestyle?

Anyway, that was long past. The Risian Ministry for Planetary Affairs had realized that they needed a better weather grid, one that couldn't easily be controlled by a small handheld device, so they had installed a new one and hoped it would solve all their problems.

It had not. In fact, it had created more of them. Some satellites stopped working for hours or even days at a time, and their memory cores had to be completely wiped before they could be reactivated. Visitors to Risa had to cope with incredibly localized gales and thunderstorms—if they stayed. Most of them left when they discovered that the planet no longer was the paradise they'd been promised.

As it so happened, a Starfleet admiral was spending his vacation in the Temtibi Lagoon Resort. He had contacted the local facilitator and told her that he knew just the person to solve all their tech-related problems. A number of calls later, Montgomery Scott was packing for his journey to the oldest pleasure planet in the Federation, ready to prove once more that he was the original miracle worker.

Admiral William J. Ross had been right. He had known that Scotty would enjoy his time there, even after he'd repaired the weather grid. The government had even offered to make him honorary citizen of the Risian Hedony, but he'd declined politely, telling them—and himself—that he'd be content if they let him stay on the planet just a little bit longer.

Luckily, a reason to stay had cropped up—there were other problems that needed his attention. The management of the El Dorado Holiday Resort contacted him about some computer trouble they had and asked him, since he was on Risa already, if he could help them out.

He hadn't said no. After all, the resort had a very nice bar.

Another deep breath, another look across the lagoon, taking in all the sights that Hanotis Harbor offered. He made a point of coming up here every now and then; seeing fantastic sights like this was part of the

reason he'd gone into space in the first place, and he wouldn't let retirement stop him from doing it.

Even from here, he could still see the bighorga'hn s that symbolized the attitude toward sexuality held by the planet's three billion Risians (not to mention more than a billion visitors that came every year). The majority of them had a rather...open approach to intimate pleasures. Not that he minded, of course. Not at all.

Ah...Belunis.He was sorry that she'd left so soon after he met her. She was a lovely woman, and he wouldn't have minded spending more time with her. Being a living Starfleet legend could get pretty lonely after a few years, not to mention boring. So it had come as a pleasant surprise that there was at least one woman who didn't know who he was or what he'd done. She liked him nonetheless. He had believed that she even loved him, but he would never find out now, would he?

A sigh escaped his lips before he could stop himself. Melancholy and self-pity wouldn't help him. That Hermat he'd met on Argelius II had told him as much, and it was still true.

Right. Abruptly, he turned around and headed back for the lift.

* * *

Scotty's shift began at eight in the evening and lasted four hours. Now it was past six, and he was feeling quite a bit peckish indeed. Once he left the Tolari Tower, he began heading back toward the grounds of the El Dorado, where his bungalow was situated.

After a number of failed attempts, he'd tuned the replicator in his apartment the way he needed it to be to produce an acceptable Forfar Bridie. Now, however, he wanted something simple and sweet, like a piece of Dundee cake or a Caledonian cream.

It was remarkable. The older he got, the more he longed for traditional dishes, the ones he'd grown up with. His mother, despite her Danish ancestry (or perhapsbecause of it), had been the best cook in Aberdeen—and indeed in Scotland.

And then he joined the Fleet and discovered all the splendid cooking that was done on other planets. The unimaginable, the impossible happened: he liked it better!

Perhaps it had something to do with changes of ingredients and different preparation methods. Perhaps it was the fascination of the unknown. Possible...but perhaps it was simply the joy of finally getting away from all the history and tradition and cultural background that threatened to crush him like a bug whenever he was in Aberdeen.

At least, that was how he'd felt as a teenager, when he hadn't known that there really was no place like home.

Now, however, he was on Risa, on the paved road leading to his fake Aztec bungalow. When he arrived at the front door, he keyed in his security code, and the door swished open.

He flicked on the lights, replicated himself a double-sized piece of Dundee cake, and sat down at his computer terminal. He was greeted by the blinking words: You have twenty-three new messages.

A sigh was followed by acceptance of the unavoidable.

He quickly scanned the message titles and their senders, and eliminated seventeen of them by way of being unknown and/or clearly identifiable as tribble-coms. That left six messages that got a second chance.

A couple were business-related—one from Theodore Quincy, Scotty's manager, about a meeting and another from the head waiter about a contingent of Withiki visiting tonight—and these he quickly read and digested. Three others he eliminated mere moments after opening them, realizing they were tribblecoms more cleverly disguised than most.

The sixth message was the one he'd expected, but not in a positive sense. Still, he had to listen to what it said.

The visage of Admiral Ross, formerly of Starbase 375, Kalandra Sector, now attached to Starfleet Headquarters, Earth, filled the terminal screen. He seemed calm and relaxed, and yet his messages always had a touch of desperation to them.

"Good day, Captain Scott." He still called him "Captain," despite the fact that Scotty was supposedly out of the Fleet. Scott guessed it had something to do with respect, or maybe Ross just didn't know better. He didn't really care either way.

"I know it's quite likely you haven't changed your mind in the last nine days, but nevertheless I want to ask you to reconsider. Starfleet needs you, now more than ever. The Corps needs you. I need you.

"Commander Lynch has now officially submitted his resignation as Corps liaison; his position will be vacant a month from now. Last week, all I could tell you was speculation and rumors, but now it is official. We need a replacement, and I can't think of anybody better suited for this task than you—considering that you worked closely with him until recently."

While it was surprising that Lynch had now actually resigned, the rest of the message wasn't all that different from what Ross had said in last week's message, or in the one from the week before, or the one before that. Are there no other engineers who could sit behind a desk at HQ instead of me? Starfleet must really be desperate if they can't think of anybody else. Me, a retired, slightly overweight, gray-haired man with a bad case of nostalgia! What bloody times are we living in?

Unaware of Scotty's thoughts, the recorded Admiral Ross continued. "On behalf of Captains Xentalir and Gold, I have to thank you for your recommendations you sent last time. Apparently, the candidates you picked fit their needs perfectly."

Hmph. Not much of an accomplishment. Even the thickest admiral would have seen that Lieutenant Borosh and Commander Gomez were the best of the best. It didn't take a genius to realize that. Okay, so Borosh had a bit of a popularity handicap there with his transparent skull, but he certainly made up for it with his engineering talent. And Sonya Gomez was simply brilliant. Her Academy paper about subspace accelerators had impressed Scotty very much—still did—which was the reason why he'd recommended her for the post of S.C.E. team leader on the... what was the ship's name again? He only knew the former leader had been a Vulcan. Killed in the war, in a Cardassian attack.

"There are four other senior posts to fill. I'll send you the files of the people we think would be ideal for their respective jobs."

Remind me again why I let myself be talked into this? It still feels like I'm part of the Fleet, even though my brain tells me I am not. But there he was, helping Ross and the soon-to-be-replaced (though not by

him) Lynch, choosing candidates for leading S.C.E. positions. This went far beyond gratitude to Ross for steering him to Risa—that debt was long since paid. How stupid am I? Didn't I promise myself never to work for these people again?

But some part of him had never really left Starfleet, not even after last year's incident. Some part believed that the organization he'd been a member of for more than half a century was still the same, always looking for something to explore, not exploit. Back when his parents had convinced him to undergo command training even though he had always known he wanted to be an engineer, he'd thought that Starfleet was interested only in acquiring as much knowledge as possible, be it technological, social, medical, or something else. As it turned out, he'd been wrong.

Oh, how wrong he had been.

"I ask you to consider this latest offer. Maybe next time we can talk face-to-face without me having to leave a message for you. That way, you'd get to voice your concerns, and I can provide you with answers to any questions you might have. Good-bye, Captain Scott."

Next time, Ross had said. Yes, it did feel as if he were still serving in the Fleet. He'd originally thought that agreeing to help find some S.C.E. candidates would satisfy the top brass on Earth. Once again, he immediately got the proof that he knew better how to deal with machines than people.

The screen changed, and Ross's visage disappeared. The list of received messages returned, reminding Scotty of the calls the admiral had made in the weeks past. It had all started on a Tarnday about two months ago. Scotty had just finished his work on the El Dorado computer system when the computer announced that Starfleet Headquarters was asking him to call Ross back at his convenience.

Scotty had assumed it had been to see how he was enjoying Risa after he recommended him for the job of fixing the weather system.

As it turned out, there was an ulterior motive: Ross wanted him back in the Fleet.

That was never going to happen. But kindhearted man that he was, Scotty offered to help Ross out by finding fresh blood for the S.C.E., the one Starfleet institution that he still trusted implicitly. Ever since his first close contact with it—then a ragtag group of dirty engineers on a decommissioned starship—he'd felt sympathetic to its cause: solving technology-related problems, wherever they might occur.

Now, however, he was content with his work at the El Dorado. His job consisted of standing at the entrance of the Engineering Room and waiting for prospective patrons. If they decided to enter the establishment, he was to approach them, shake hands and do some small-talk. Pretty straightforward, really—and just what he wanted to do at this stage in his life. Certainly there was better work available for an ex-Starfleet officer, especially one of Scotty's status, but he wasn't doing it for the money; that had been understood both by Scotty and Quincy at the beginning of their employer-employee relationship.

No, what he did it for was the chance to meet people. Despite his being more comfortable with machines around him, Scotty still enjoyed the company of others, and he relished the chance of seeing new faces every day. It was too bad that he rarely had time for longer conversations. Usually, he just approached the newcomers and spoke the magic words—"On behalf of the management of the El Dorado Hotel and Vacation Resort, I welcome you to the Engineering Room," or a variation of that. Only sometimes did he manage to actually involve somebody in a talk that lasted longer than a simple handshake.

Deep down, Montgomery Scott knew he didn't need to resort to fiddling with machines and engines in order to live a fulfilled life. No, he could just as well do that by interacting with his friends and acquaintances. However, he preferred to keep this part of him a secret. It took a very special person to get past that wall that he'd built for himself, early in his childhood.

His sister, bless her, had been that kind of person, but Clara was long dead. She'd eventually moved to Neu-Stuttgart after the death of Hamish, her first husband, having married a Dr. Hoffmann. Perhaps one day he'd find the time and spirit to travel to Neu-Stuttgart and visit her grave.

Mira Romaine had been another, and she, too, was no longer among the living. Her fate had been one of the first he'd checked up on, after his long-overdue rescue from the pattern buffer.

Belunis had also belonged to this select group of people, who all happened to be female. She had been Scotty's first friend on Risa, and soon became much more than that. He'd worked closely with her when the situation with the weather control satellites had arisen, and the day after he'd finished the repairs of the control grid, he'd asked her out, in that special way of his. She hadn't said no.

Then followed five wonderful weeks of love, happiness and...yes, of pleasure. While many people who'd reached his age—in actual years he was long past his prime, even though a bit of transporter trickery was involved—preferred to live a quieter life in certain respects, Montgomery Scott had never been one to shy away from anything that gave him pleasure. It didn't matter if it was food, drink, music, the love of a wonderful woman; when he opened his heart to something, it was opened wide.

Eating the last bits of Dundee cake, he switched off the computer terminal. Then he walked back to the replicator to recycle both plate and fork. A quick glance at the antique Canopian timepiece on the wall opposite his desk told him that it was still over half an hour until his shift started, but he decided to be there early. He walked over to the sofa, grabbed the maroon uniform that was lying on it, and put it on.

The uniform was replicated, but it was in all possible ways identical to the one he'd worn for over twenty years. True, most of the time he'd just put on the white turtleneck and his favorite engineer's jacket, but on special occasions he had slipped into his standard uniform.

After dressing he left his bungalow, sealed the entrance by voice command, and began walking toward the imposing pyramid of the El Dorado Hotel and Vacation Resort.

* * *

The Engineering Room itself looked just like its real equivalent on an average starship—to the uninitiated eye, at least. A much-decorated chief engineer like Scotty, however, noticed a great number of mistakes and inaccuracies ranging from the placement of the power transfer conduits to the lack of any security measures that would have been standard on any ship of the Fleet. Sure, there was the obligatory railing around the main reactor chamber, but that was about it. Besides, it appeared to only be there for show, not for safety.

There was no need for force fields, as the swirling colors inside the vertical pressure vessel toroid—looking for all the world like a poor man's version of the warp core he'd used on the refit of the original Enterprise—were not a result of a constant mixing of both matter and antimatter but different kinds of alcohol, fruit juices, and other ingredients. The PTCs leading away from the reactor chamber supplied a number of taps from which the bartenders drew their drinks hurriedly. The bar was bustling with people already, even though it was not even night yet.

Technically, “night” was something that Risa in its natural state rarely experienced. The cause for this was the existence of a second sun that had an entirely different revolutionary rhythm. To avoid almost eternal daylight, the Risians had installed gigantic screens in orbit that would blot out any unwanted rays from the larger, reddish star on the “nightside” hemisphere. Of course, they didn’t want a large, starless field in their sky, so they also installed simulated stars that mimicked their real counterparts. This was but one example of the trouble the Risians went to to satisfy their visitors as well as themselves.

Now he was standing outside the hotel, watching the steady throng of people coming down the boulevard. Many of them were obviously attracted by the music and the kaleidoscope colors that were pouring outside through the open hotel doors. Many of them were humans, or at least humanoid, but there were a few aliens that had almost nothing in common with those. Scotty saw a few Escherites, those horizontally-oriented creatures that he’d first met on the refitEnterprise, and they were still extraordinarily strange to look at, even though he had served another three decades in an ever-expanding Federation. Scott also spotted the occasional Mizarthu, and if he wasn’t mistaken, there was a Horta slowly disappearing behind a group of Gnalish.

Presently, Montgomery Scott found himself staring at two shapes that moved along the promenade with the other tourists, and when he realized which species they belonged to, he was quickly thrown out of his nostalgic reverie, only to land on the hard floor of reality.

Two Kropaslin were among the various aliens attracted by the sounds of laughter and joy that came out the hotel’s open doors. The couple, a male and a female, was actually taking a left turn, walking slowly and magnificently down the paved road that led to the El Dorado’s main entrance.

Scotty was using all the power at his disposal not to utter a particularly profane Gaelic curse. There was so much time in the universe, so why did these two have to show upright now? Who they were or why they were here didn’t matter; what mattered was what they were, and that they reminded him of something that he still hated himself for.

It had happened only about half a year ago, and the memory was still fresh. He’d tried to drown it in many a glass of Scotch, Saurian brandy, and genuine Romulankalifal, but it hadn’t worked. No matter how much alcohol he imbibed, Nechayev’s order was still as present in his mind as if everything had happened yesterday.

Of course, he was intellectually aware that he was, as a member of an originally military organization, expected to follow the orders of his superiors, no matter what those orders might be. That wasn’t the problem.

The problem was that he was also morally aware that some of those orders were just stupid—or worse, they were totally and utterly wrong. Nechayev’s order had struck him as one of the latter sort, no matter how often she told him it was for the good of the Federation. She was a much-decorated Starfleet admiral, that was true—but, as Tarbolde had once said, “even the gods have erred,” and Nechayev clearly was not a god.

The good of the Federation. What a bloody excuse to throw away your ideals and integrity.

Great. Now he was angry and nostalgic at the same time. Not the best of moods to be in while working. He needed a distraction, and he needed it quickly.

There seemed to be only one way out of this dilemma. He had to engage the Kropaslin in a conversation.

“Good evening to you both. On behalf of the management of the El Dorado Hotel and Vacation Resort, I welcome you and invite you to the Engineerin’ Room. I’m sure you’re going to have a nice evenin’.”

* * *

Later that night, he came close to forgetting the Kropaslin and what they reminded him of as they left the ER soon after they’d entered. Apparently, it was not their kind of bar, and they endeavored to look elsewhere for adequate entertainment.

While the bar was open until six in the morning, Scotty’s shift ended earlier. Usually he left the ER at twelve; sometimes he stayed on for another couple of hours. Occasionally, he even placed himself on a stool at the bar, watching the bartenders draw their drinks. That Guinan woman he’d met on the Enterprise—theEnterprise s, plural, to be exact—would fit right in here.

Tonight, he got home at about one, tired and a bit dizzy from all the welcome drinks he’d organized for new guests (of course he’d had to drink some himself; it simply wouldn’t do to let the guests down them alone). When he unlocked the front door by voice command, he experienced a short memory flash, as if something in his mind had been activated by an unknown stimulus.

Not only did he suddenly remember the two Kropaslin, but also every bit about the mission to Kropasar last year, the repercussions of said mission, his decision to wander once more, and the call for help from the Risian officials.

It seemed there was no escaping the past, no matter how hard he tried. A Takaran spiced ale seemed to be in order, as it would enable him to accept the inevitable onslaught of regret, anger, and general helplessness.

Belunis had not been very fond of his drinking habit at all. She was of the opinion that he was an alcoholic, but she was mistaken. If anything, he appreciated the taste of alcoholic drinks, but he did not imbibe them for the single reason that they contained alcohol.

The most important thing was the taste. The alcohol was just a nice side effect. That blasted synthehol those greedy little cheaters had introduced a few years before his return to a physical existence just wasn’t good enough, and he’d told a great number of people what he thought about that Ferengi swill.

“Light.”

The computer obeyed and illuminated the interior of the bungalow Montgomery Scott had occupied for the past two months. It was not as spacious as the one he had lived in after he moved out of his parents’ house, but it was more than just acceptable. Most important, there were enough shelves for all the engineering textbooks, technical manuals, starship guides, and engineering briefs that he’d collected over the years. It was a quite impressive collection, and it moved with him whenever he changed residences. Those books had been in Aberdeen—albeit in not so great a number—first in his room on the second floor of his family’s house, then in his flat; they had been in his room on the San Francisco campus, and they also had been in his quarters on all theEnterprise s. He’d even taken them with him when he’d moved into his sister’s house just some months before he boarded theJenolen . Thank goodness he’d left them there when he left for the retirement colony, otherwise they’d be so much debris on the side of a Dyson sphere right now.

There was a small hallway that led from the entrance to the back of the building, with two rooms on

either side of it. It contained a row of coat hangers as well as a clothing replicator integrated into the wall also containing a com panel and computer access. The first room on the left was his office/bedroom; opposite it was the bungalow's kitchen, whose reduced size was due to the big living room adjacent to it. The final, fourth room was the bathroom, which contained a sonic shower and a real bathtub, a toilet and an Antedean soaking spot.

The bungalow was small, especially if one compared it to some of the others Scotty had been offered by Quincy, but it was perfectly suited to his needs. A single man did not need as much space as two people did. Belunis had never mentioned moving in with him, nor suggested he move in with her. Scotty had the feeling it wasn't only because their relationship had not lasted long enough to give her a chance to think about this major step, it was also because Belunis wasn't the type for such relationships. She was passionate and caring, but deep down she wanted to be free of commitments. She was what was now called a "free bird," flying wherever she wanted and settling down only when needed.

Scotty, however, was all too happy to settle down permanently. He was ready for retirement, had been ever since before Khitomer. There were some in Starfleet who thought it a good idea to get him back into action, but they simply had not found out yet that they were wrong.

Granted, working until they dropped dead might be all right for some, but it wasn't for him. He was no Leonard McCoy—still an active Starfleet admiral at nearly 150, occasionally commanding a starship on a mission, visiting starbases and cruising around the Federation in a small runabout.

That inspection tour he'd joined McCoy on had been a lot of fun, even when they had almost met their fate on Bakrii at the hands of a Breen warship. It was better than paperwork, at any rate. Afterward, though, they had seen the damage wrought by the Breen on Earth, and learned how fragile some things really were.

The Breen. Of course.

His mind was going in circles, never straying too far from the subject that was at the heart of the matter. It all came down to the orders Nechayev had given him, the ones that had forced him to betray the trust of a planet full of innocent beings, simply because she thought it a good idea.

Blast the Breen.

Blast Nechayev.

Abruptly, Scotty moved over to the desk upon which the computer terminal sat.

"Computer, patch me through to Admiral Leonard McCoy's office."

"Working."

Seconds passed, and even though he hated the cliché, they seemed much longer—though not quite like hours.

Then, finally: "Unable to comply. Admiral McCoy's office is closed."

"Why?"

"Admiral McCoy is not in his office," the computer said, almost mockingly.

What? Where would Leonard be at this time of year? And why would he close his office? The last time they'd spoken face-to-face—which had happened shortly after their return to Earth, in the aftermath of the Breen attack on San Francisco—McCoy had intimated that he'd refrain from ever leaving his home planet again, “unless it turns out to be absolutely necessary and impossible to avoid.”

“Locate Admiral McCoy. Authorization: Scott-Psi-Three-Phi-Tango.”

“Authorization accepted. Locating.” A few more moments passed. “Admiral Leonard H. McCoy is currently on Arcturus.”

“Patch me through to Arcturus, then. And better make it quick, y'hear?”

“Working,” the computer's male voice said, ignoring the angry undertone in Scott's voice.

While the computer contacted the planet via various subspace relays, Scott took another sip of the Takaran ale. It was a bitter brew, and even for him it had required some getting used to.

“Comlink to Arcturus established. Contacting Admiral McCoy.”

“Finally. Next time I'll do it myself. Wouldn't be any slower than you, I'm tellin' you,” Scotty grumbled.

Another sip, and he closed his eyes as the liquid made its way down his throat. Because of that, he was completely unprepared for what happened next.

“I'd sure like to know who has such a unique talent of calling at the worst possible moment!”

It was all Scotty could do keep from sputtering his ale across the computer screen. He'd been successful!

“Hello, Admiral,” Scotty said, using the formal address that Len so despised.

“Scotty! I should have known it was you. I'm doing something very important, and I don't want to be disturbed. Why do you think I closed down my office?”

“And a good day to you, too, Len.”

“Oh, don't pretend to be so awfully polite. Doesn't get you anywhere, y'know?” McCoy said, looking distracted. Scotty couldn't quite make out where his friend was, except that it was a room with a giant emblem of Starfleet Medical on the wall. A medical conference? But they usually took place on holiday planets, didn't they?

“I'll try to remember it for the future. So, what is it you're doing, and why did you close your office in Krung Thep for it?”

“Because this is the presentation of this year's Carrington Award winner, and I've been chosen to announce the winner. Having won the award twice before, I must've seemed like the logical choice,” McCoy said with a glint in his eye. Something amused him, though Scotty did not know what.

“And the office?” he asked.

“Is closed until further notice. Rank hath its privileges, you should know that by now. It’s not like I’m actually responsible for running the place—Yerbi does that, even if everything would fall apart without me. And after all I’ve done for him, he can’t deny an old fart like me a little pleasure. Look at me, I’m older’n Sarek was when I met him for the first time. Every day I am surprised that I’m still alive. I take it you know the feeling?”

Scotty only nodded.

“The Krung Thep office, which you tried to contact without success, is closed because I took my staff with me. They’re hard workers, and they deserve to have some fun now and then.”

“But—”

“But me no buts, Scotty. I’m an admiral; I can damned well do as I please.”

Admiral. The rank that Jim Kirk had never wanted to have—because it brought power with it, both political and military, and, as everybody knew, power corrupted. Even McCoy wasn’t immune to its effects.

“So, hurry up, old-timer. What is it that you want from me?”

Scotty pretended not to have heard the bit about the “old-timer.” “I just wanted to have a nice, quiet conversation with an old friend of mine, but I realize this is a bad moment...”

“That’s right. I’ve only got a few more minutes before they drag me onto the stage. I really have no time to talk now. Later, maybe, but not now.”

“I understand, Len. Have a nice day.”

“I’ll make sure that I do. Good-bye, Scotty, and behave yourself. That’s an order.”

“Aye, Admiral.” As the line was cut, Scotty leaned back in his chair and sighed. McCoy was much too busy for his own good. A man his age—and McCoy had aged the old-fashioned way, without tricking Time—should slow down a bit. Relax. Enjoy life. Not necessarily sit on his bum all day long, but at the same time not ask more of himself than his body was willing to give.

It hurt Scotty to look at his fragile friend, his extremities supported by a duritanium and plasteel framework, not dissimilar to those worn by members of species native to low-grav planets. The seventy-five years that had been taken from the engineer had not been overly kind to McCoy, even though the doctor had made use of any and all medical innovations and advantages that had become available to him.

McCoy was probably the best friend Scotty had left—certainly the one he’d spent the most time with since he’d been revived on the Jenolen. Sure, some of his other old shipmates were still around, but most of them kept busy. Uhura still had her Intelligence job, but that meant that she had a lot on her plate, with little time for old shipmates. She was working with others at shaping the fate of the known galaxy, although she herself would most likely never have put it quite so dramatically. Some years ago, he’d even got a call from Chekov, who’d wanted to say hello. Now a desk-jockey admiral, the former security officer had an enormous amount of work, but he’d made some time.

Scotty would contact any of them if he was sure enough that they’d be able to spare an hour for him.

Unfortunately, he wasn't. Not at all.

Grumbling, he switched off the computer terminal and stood up. The truth was, McCoy's lack of time for him, regardless of his reasons for it, hurt the former engineer. He'd awaited—expected—a jovial talk about the past, some friendly advice, maybe even the promise of an inquiry into the legality of the Kropasar mission. Yet he had received none of this.

So perhaps it's time I bloody well took matters into my own hands. Why rely on the possibility of McCoy looking into things—or asking Uhura or Chekov to—when he could do it his own self? He needed to know what he'd done, what he'd caused to come to be, and there was no reason why he couldn't have a look into the Federation's xenosociological and xenohistorical databases himself.

Standing there, staring at the display, he was clueless as to why it had taken him over half a year to do this. He should have done so immediately after the Kropasar mission. He should have performed weekly checks to find out what had happened to the planet after he had left. The truth was that he had been afraid of what he might discover.

Blast it. It was no use thinking about what he should have done; only people afraid to actually try to undo the damage they caused did that, often while downing one drink after another.

And I'm no alcoholic, so I won't do that.

With newfound enthusiasm, Scotty searched the databases for any bits of information about Kropasar. It took several hours to compile it all, but after a time, he had collected enough data to form a picture in his mind.

It was not a pleasant picture.

Apparently the government had lost credibility with the public following the rejection of the planet's bid for Federation membership—a rejection that almost immediately followed the Breen cruiser's being purloined. After all, there was no need to be nice to the aliens if the Federation had what it wanted out of them. The Consensus Party had lost its majority in the Witenagemot; High Cyning Foreic lost her position as its head.

But Thane Iamor and his Agreement Party had been unable to rise into the gap. According to the public record, a dispute over some action of Iamor's—Scotty had a good idea what action that was—had split the party asunder, meaning no one was able to achieve the majority in the Witenagemot necessary to create a functioning government. Unfortunately, one of the planet's many provincial cynings had taken advantage of the lull in authority to revive a longstanding grudge with another cyning, weapons had been fired, and any chance of a unified Kropasar reemerging had died in the ensuing chaos.

He couldn't have imagined it if he had tried. He had known betraying the Kropaslin by stealing their cruiser and rejecting their bid for Federation membership would have had to have some effect on them, but this? According to reports, the multitronic computer so important to the continued functioning of several government services had been one of the first fatalities of the provincial cynings' squabbling. With that computer gone, vital government secrets relating to the production of bioneural circuitry had been lost, and without that vital export, the entire planet's economy was plunged into ruin.

Things only got worse from there.

This was bad. This was really bad. And it was partially his own fault—though not his alone. Fleet

Admiral Alynna Nechayev shared the responsibility for these developments.

Which was why the next thing he did was contact her.

“Admiral Nechayev is currently not in her office.”

Blast and double-blast! Was nobody willing to go to work today? First McCoy, now Nechayev. He’d thought that a call by a living Starfleet “legend” like himself would cause Starfleet Command to immediately establish a connection. Instead, he was given the usual evasive gibberish about Nechayev being incredibly busy and thus unavailable.

“Well. That’s too bad,” Scotty said, restraining himself from telling the admiral’s Andorian secretary what he really felt. “Can I leave her a message? It’s rather urgent, I’m afraid, and I’d like to hear her take on it.”

“Of course you can leave her a message, Mr. Scott. I’ll make sure that she sees it,” the secretary said, her antennae probing the air as she spoke.

“Thank you. I’d like to record and encrypt it, so if you don’t mind, I’ll get back to you in a few moments.”

“Of course, Mr. Scott. The admiral will contact you later. Have a nice day.”

With that, the connection was cut, and Scotty found himself staring at an empty computer screen, barely containing his anger. Was Nechayev really not in her office? He knew from experience that she was not above lying when it suited her needs. After all, she’d claimed to be sick once already, at a time when it would have been uncomfortable for her to suddenly have him calling her, complaining about the orders she’d given him. Instead, she’d claimed to be ill, a ruse that should have been as transparent to him then as it was now.

Silly him. He’d really expected her to be honest with him, when her day’s work consisted of making up stuff as she went along? Nechayev belonged to the upper echelons of Starfleet Intelligence, which was just like any other secret security agency. There certainly wasn’t much of a difference from the Tal Shiar or Imperial Intelligence.

He was certain that you had to give up your soul when you got recruited by any of them. Even Uhura, whom he still thought of as a friend, had changed in the decades since he’d last seen her in the twenty-third century. She’d become more serious, more distant, more...secretive, than the woman he’d once fancied.

He quickly recorded a short message to Nechayev, ambiguous enough to confuse any listener not familiar with what really had transpired on Kropasar last year, but at the same time detailed enough to let the admiral know what he wanted. Then he encrypted it, using a particularly clever technique; Scotty had found out years ago that many Starfleet codes were based on engineering protocols and warp-field physics. Using this knowledge, he chose a particularly difficult code to give Nechayev’s grunts an interesting time—after all, he was certain that she wouldn’t attempt to decrypt the message herself. She knew how to delegate.

Oh yes, she did.

He sent the message without establishing a direct comlink to Nechayev’s office on Starbase 395,

because he didn't want to talk to Zha Obnoxious again. Even though he wouldn't have admitted it to anybody, he felt a certain smugness when he hit the SEND button.

Having accomplished what he'd set out to do, he went on to clean up his office. There were unrecycled glasses everywhere, a painful reminder of last week's drinking excesses, even more so because he'd told himself that he had stopped drinking alone. Stretching his arms, he grabbed as many of the replicated crystal tumblers as he could, all the while telling himself that he wasn't an alcoholic. After all, he'd know if he was one, right?

The glasses weren't the only thing he had to clear off his desk. There were a number of pads lying there as well: detailed analyses of the computer system the El Dorado used, some technical manuals, a number of data files he'd found lacking and started to amend to fit his own needs.

He was barely done with it when the computer beeped.

"You are receiving a real-time communication."

"Well, on the soddin' screen with it! What are you waitin' for?"

A face appeared on the display screen. However, it was not the stern, angular face of Fleet Admiral Alynna Nechayev. Instead, it was that of Theodore Quincy, who—for reasons unknown—asked the people he considered his friends to call him "Thomas."

"Good evening, Mr. Quincy."

"Scotty, I don't know how often I've asked you to—"

"—call you Thomas. I don't know, either."

"Ah, so you do remember. But what about this morning? Have you forgotten about that?" asked Quincy, clearly agitated about something.

"What? When—" he interrupted himself. "Computer, what's the time?"

"Eight hours, twenty-six minutes and eleven seconds."

"Thank you. You were sayin', Mr. Qui... Thomas?"

"This is exactly why I'm calling. It's already past eight o'clock! Today's a Varasday, in case you aren't aware."

"Oh." Bloody sodding hell. Varasday was Risa's equivalent of a Sunday, the last day of the weekend, and thus something special. It had been Quincy's—Thomas's—idea to have the Engineering Room open on a Varasday morning and serve breakfast as usual, but with a twist.

The twist consisted of a simulated warp core breach, which was achieved by flashing lights within the M/ARA and colorful smoke being released from the ceiling. To top it all off, Scotty was supposed to pretend to do his best to stop the core breach. However, he was not supposed to be entirely successful. The breach was the special weekly event that drew in an additional two hundred or so visitors that put the money into Quincy's pockets, or so the manager had told Scotty at the beginning of their relationship.

“Don’t worry, Thomas,” he said, “that only means the breach’ll happen a wee bit later than usual. It’s not as if those usually happen at a specific time, anyway.”

“This is the financial future of the El Dorado we’re talking about! If there’s no core breach today, our customers will immediately flock to some other hotel on the other side of the harbor. This is important, Scotty! I do hope you’ll be here in a matter of minutes, otherwise I don’t know what we should do!”

“Have you considered doin’ it yourself? Really, all I do is run around and play prevent-the-core-breach. You could do the same, I’m sure.”

“I have better things to do than pretending to be a headless chicken!” Quincy shouted. “I’m the manager of this establishment. I hired you to attract more customers, in case you forgot. At the moment, I can’t say you’re doing your job.”

“Okay, okay, don’t get your knickers in a twist just yet. I’ll be there before you can say ‘asymmetrical peristaltic field manipulation.’”

“I’ll be waiting for you,” Quincy said and ended their conversation.

Bugger. Was it really past eight already? He hadn’t noticed the time slipping away like this.

Scotty found that he didn’t really care either way. While angering Quincy was something he didn’t mind all that much, he also could do without it. It made working for him much easier.

So it happened that, roughly ten minutes later, he was on the paved road again, walking through the carefully kept jungle toward the gold-covered walls of the El Dorado Hotel and Vacation Resort, mentally preparing himself once more for the unspeakable terror that was the Varasday morning warp core breach.

* * *

At ten o’clock, the smoke had long since cleared, most of the patrons had left the ER, and Scotty was on his way back to the bungalow. Quincy’s mood had immediately improved the second he’d seen Scotty in his ancient uniform. From then on, everything had progressed as it always did. He’d pretended to be not quite the miracle worker people told him he was, running around like a headless chicken indeed, and he’d even shocked quite a number of patrons by having some of the “warp plasma” blown in his face.

When he unlocked the door, he was greeted by the computer’s voice that told him he was receiving a real-time communication.

Hurrying toward the office, he shouted, “Well, put it on, you glaikit heap of isolinear rods!”

Just as Scotty reached the room at the far end of the corridor, the computer obligingly activated the screen on the wall near his office desk, displaying the Starfleet emblem for a short moment before changing to the countenance of the one member of the Fleet he most seriously wished never to have met.

Admiral Alyna Nechayev stared at him with the same serious look on her face that he had expected to see. Not even once in all the time he’d had the dubious pleasure of working for her had he seen her crack a genuine smile.

Which was probably for the best. For all he knew, her face would split apart, and the top of her head would fall off.

“Mr. Scott,” she said in lieu of a greeting, “I hope I didn’t contact you at an inopportune moment.”

“Oh, you most certainly did not, Admiral. Ever since leavin’ the Fleet I’ve had more time on my hands than is good for me.”

“I see. I do have to admit that I am surprised to see you wearing this.”

“What? Oh,” he said, realizing that he was still wearing his old engineer’s radiation suit, a replicated one whose design dated back to the same era as his standard duty uniform that he usually wore when playing the greeter at the ER’s entrance. “What can I say? Those were better times. You can’t fault an old man for doin’ a little reminiscin’, can you, lass?”

“Mr. Scott, I remember telling you on numerous occasions that I resent being called a ‘lass.’ Surely your memory is still as remarkable as it was?”

“Ach, would that it were. There’s things that I can’t seem to remember even if my life depended on it, and yet there’s things that I will quite possibly never ever forget,” Scotty said, deliberately choosing an ominous way of phrasing his reply. Why shouldn’t he remind Nechayev of what he knew? Maybe one day he’d tell everybody how she’d maneuvered him into betraying his oath and everything he believed in. The Federation newsnets would eat it up like Kaferian apple pie. After all, they liked stories about Starfleet scandals. He remembered the fuss the media had made about Jim Kirk’s death on the Enterprise -B. Poor John Harriman had had to bear the devastating reports that put all the blame on him, and not on an unpredictable ribbon of flashing energy, not to mention a headstrong, stubborn guest of honor.

“Splendid. Now, in your message to me—whose encryption, I have to admit, was quite a puzzle to my specialists, at least at the beginning—you mentioned something about Kropasar? I believe you even said you were concerned about its people.”

“Indeed I am, Admiral,” he replied, using her rank like an insult. “You see, I spent some time last night gatherin’ information about Kropasar. You are aware of the situation on the planet, I trust?” Not giving her any time to reply, he continued, “Never mind. I’ll tell you. Kropasar’s fallen to pieces. The government’s collapsed, the economy’s on the way out, disasters are ragin’ unchecked. And all of that happened because you and your pals decided to flout the basic principles not only of the Federation, but also of decency itself.”

Nechayev’s face was made of stone, her lips a thin line. Then, finally, she opened them to answer. “So you’ve done your homework, Mr. Scott. Bravo. But let me show you that I’ve done mine as well. Going over your file, I didn’t notice any filed complaints of yours when your revered Captain Kirk and Commander Spock went over to that Romulan battle cruiser and acquired its cloaking device. Neither did you protest in the least when the Enterprise fired on that colony of Axanar insurgents. You did not have any objections to Kirk’s rather unconventional solution to the Pelosians’ extinction problem that violated the spirit, if not exactly the letter, of three of Starfleet’s General Orders. What’s more, you even participated in that Starstalker project whose goal was to create the ultimate fighting cruiser.

“Are you going to tell me that these instances are in no way comparable to what happened on Kropasar? Because I get the feeling that Kirk never did anything wrong, or you would have said something.”

Losh, that woman certainly knew how to push a man's buttons, didn't she? "It may surprise you, but Captain Kirk did make the occasional mistake. Still, he certainly was no thief. He did what he was ordered to—"

A laugh—or was it a snort?—from Nechayev interrupted him, but he regained his composure quickly enough.

"He sometimes interpreted the rules a tad too generously, that is true, but what he did was always in the best interest of Starfleet and the entire Federation. And as for the events you cited, let me tell you that the Romulans were our enemies back then. I seem to remember that the Kropaslin were supposed to be our tradin' partners and a potential member! We're not supposed to steal from our allies !

"Those Axanar rebels, they deserved nothin' better, and if you've read my file, you know. As for the Pelosians, let me just say that history vindicated our actions, just as it did with regards to the Talin incident. Nobody was found guilty of violatin' a single General Order."

"Have I touched upon a sensitive subject? If so, let me apologize, Mr. Scott. However, you have not explained your involvement with the Starstalker project."

"And I shan't. The S.C.E. asked me to help them out, which I did, mainly because I was asked politely."

Nechayev surprised him by smiling, even though it was not a kind smile. It reminded him of the expression usually found on the face of a Gorbostasi palm-snake before it dislocated its left and right jaws to devour its victim.

"A pity you chose to be an engineer, Mr. Scott. You would have made a decent intelligence operative. Your evasive reasoning is on par with that of my best agents."

Now he became really angry—even though he didn't know what about, to be honest. "What is that supposed to mean, Admiral?"

"Mistakes are always the others' fault, aren't they? If you or your friends break the rules, there's always a good enough reason to pacify your conscience. Somebody else does the same, it's an outrage. How dare they treat the principles of the Federation like that, et cetera."

"Now that is simply not true, and you know it! Frankly, I'm appalled that an officer like you would resort to makin' petty remarks like these. Stealing anythin' from the Kropaslin is an extraordinarily serious crime, and I hate myself for havin' been moved into participatin'."

"I remember you telling me as much just after the mission ended. Why did you choose to contact me at this exact point in time?" asked Nechayev, her face deadly serious.

"I... I simply had to. The disgust is eatin' me up inside, and I just can't bear it any longer. Eventually, though, I will be able to speak with others about all this, not just with you. The truth will out, Admiral, there's no denyin' it."

Nechayev leaned forward, so close to the optical sensor in her com terminal that her face filled the entire display. "Are you threatening me?"

Scotty shook his head. "No. I'm not willin' to incur your eternal wrath by leakin' Starfleet secrets to the

press. However,” he began and took a sip of the now stale kalifal he’d replicated earlier today, “be assured that I know of no secret that remained exactly that. Somethin’ always goes wrong, somebody always blurts somethin’ to his ‘friends,’ and pretty soon there’s no stoppin’ it. I’m a patient man, Admiral, I can wait. But when the Kropasar mission becomes public knowledge, I certainly won’t be helpin’ you to save your precious hide.”

“Mr. Scott, far worse than you has threatened me during my Starfleet career. You can do whatever you like, but I would advise you to remember your manners when you speak to your superiors, even if you are on... ‘inactive duty.’”

“Manners, my arse. You had better start preparin’ a plausible explanation for your actions, because people will ask questions. Lots of them. Good-bye, Admiral. Rest assured you won’t be hearin’ from me in a very long time. Scott out.”

Before Nechayev had a chance to reply, the connection was cut, and the El Dorado logo replaced her thin face.

“Computer, do not establish a two-way connection to Admiral Alynna Nechayev’s office until further notice, no matter how urgent she makes it out to be, you hear me?”

“Acknowledged.”

“Good. Now switch off and let me take a nap.”

* * *

The following day lacked any unforeseen events, thus being the first “normal” working day for months. Not even Ross decided to call, which was... interesting, to say the least. In fact, the day’s uneventfulness was suspicious, but Scotty couldn’t well complain about experiencing a boring day every now and then, could he?

Despite his misgivings about the lack of unexpected happenings, the day progressed and ended without a surprise of the bad sort. He went to work, drank a few drinks with new and returning patrons of the Engineering Room, and spent some time talking to Beltz, one of the regulars, about the romantic prospects of a middle-aged, balding Klingon on a Federation pleasure planet.

Over the past few weeks there had been almost regular communications with HQ, mostly because of Ross’s repeated calls. However, the next days did not bring any news from that corner of the galaxy. No pleading calls to change his mind, no requests for more officer recommendations, nothing. Not even Commander Lynch tried to contact him, which was a miracle in itself. If ever there was a person most certainly not suited for the job of S.C.E. liaison to the admiralty, it was Leland T. Lynch. Of course, this made his calls much more frequent than they would have been if Lynch had actually been competent. Despite what he’d told Nechayev and Ross before, Lynch was about as perfect for the job as a Klingon was for writing juicy romance novels.

By the end of the second week, Scotty had almost gotten used to the lack of attempts to contact him. At the very least, he didn’t constantly expect to receive a call from Ross or somebody else at HQ any longer. Yet just as he was making small talk with all four members of an Andorian quad, one of the bartenders ran toward him.

“Sorry for the interruption, Scotty,” said the bartender, whose name was Geren’zrix, “but there’s a

message for you. Somebody from Starfleet, apparently. He said it was urgent.”

“It’s always urgent, Zrix. It always is.” Scotty sighed. “Please excuse me, zhutanii,” he said to the quad.

There was a com terminal near the faux warp core, to be used by the ER staff whenever they needed it. When Scotty arrived there, it was active, displaying the bulldog face of William J. Ross. What was the old gadgie up to now?

“I apologize for disturbing you at work, Captain Scott, but there’s something I have to tell you, and it can’t wait. If this wasn’t urgent, I wouldn’t have called you, trust me.”

Scotty felt that a sigh was in order right now, and he did not try to hide it. “I do have to say you didn’t pick an ideal time, Admiral. But I’m here, listenin’ to you, and so we had better continue this. What is it that you want?”

“I have made inquiries,” said Ross, leaving Scotty to wonder what on Earth he was talking about. “Somebody told me that you are not very fond of a certain member of the admiralty. Is that true?”

True to the old Fleet proverb, rumors did travel at warp ten, it seemed. “Who told you that?”

“Never mind. I have people who tell me things I need to hear. Mind you, I also have people who tell me things I want to hear, but those are not as welcome as the others.” Ross allowed himself a quick smile before his face returned to its usual state of stony seriousness. “In any case, I know of your, let’s say, ‘discussion’ with a certain female admiral, and I believe I have a good idea of what this is about.”

A short, deprecating laugh escaped Scotty’s mouth before he could stop himself. “I’m sorry, Admiral, but I don’t believe you do. And even if you know somethin’, you most likely don’t know everythin’.”

“Then why don’t you tell me? I’ll be in-system in a couple of days. I suggest we meet on Epsilon Ceti Outpost.”

“I don’t know. If this is just another trick of yours to get me back into action, then forget it. All due respect, Admiral, but I’m not a toy to be played with as you see fit.”

“I am quite aware of that, Captain Scott. Let me assure you that I’m not trying to trick you into returning to the Fleet. While I make no secret of my interest in getting you ‘back into action,’ as you phrase it, I consider myself honest enough not to resort to scheming and plotting like a power-hungry madman.”

“And I never accused you of bein’ one.”

“I know. Now, what say you to a meeting, Scotty?”

“Well, I don’t think it can hurt,” the former engineer said carefully, not wanting to sound too eager. The fact of the matter was that he welcomed the idea of meeting with Ross face-to-face, but for completely different reasons. Some things just didn’t have a big enough impact when said on a subspace channel. “Let me know when you’re here.”

“I will. Scotty, I’m really looking forward to this meeting,” the admiral said, apparently satisfied. “Ross out.”

When he returned to his place near the ER’s entrance, Scotty began to realize that a visit from Ross, no

matter what the reason, could only mean trouble.

Crivens, what have I got myself into now?he asked himself. Ever since Ross had got wind of his resignation, he'd tried everything in his power—short of bribery and blackmail—to make him change his mind.

Was it Scotty's fault if Ross didn't realize he didn't have a chance?

* * *

True to his word, Ross called him a mere two days later, asking him to be on Epsilon Ceti Outpost at noon, Central Risian Time. The U.S.S. Cerberus, Ross's flagship, had arrived in the system, ready to beam the admiral onto the outpost. After telling Quincy that he really needed to do this, Scotty was allowed to borrow his private impulse flitter, which he piloted across the binary system toward the Starfleet outpost orbiting the smaller star of the pair at a distance of roughly four hundred sixty million kilometers.

The outpost had been established toward the end of the twenty-second century, shortly after the Risian government had agreed to ally itself with the fledgling Federation of Planets that had been founded only a few decades before. The Risians had hoped for an increased influx of visitors to their planet, and they had not been disappointed.

Of course, the structure now orbiting Epsilon Ceti B was not the same one that had been built almost two centuries ago. The station had been overhauled, repaired and upgraded many times, so much so, in fact, that it no longer resembled a dark gray cylinder but a disc with a slightly blue tinge.

EC Outpost, as it was commonly named, featured a breathtaking observation center. Five levels tall, it served as a general recreation area, complete with trees, ponds, lakes, hills, even a river and a waterfall. Ross had asked him to wait at the Littlejohn Monument, a statue of the famous Earth president that had been erected near the central lake. On three sides of the monument, a number of comfortable benches invited passersby to sit down and enjoy the view—and perhaps think about the time of the founding of the Federation, back when Lydia Littlejohn had been Earth's president.

Those had been bad times, almost as bad as these last few years, Scotty was sure. The Romulans had been the twenty-second century's Dominion, provoking Earth into a war by means of their minefields and crudely disguised ships. Earth's wounds from the Xindi attack had just begun to heal when a new threat had made itself known. However, although they were trying to destabilize relations among Earth, Andor, and Tellar, the pointy-eared xenophobes managed to strengthen them instead, which directly led to the foundation of the Federation only a few years later.

The sound of approaching steps on the graveled path behind him disrupted his train of thought, and he turned around to look at the newcomer. It was Ross.

“Good day, Captain Scott,” the much-decorated war veteran said. “Thank you for coming.”

“A good day to you, too, Admiral. Why don't you take a seat?”

“Oh, I will, don't worry. I have a lot to talk about with you, and I'd much rather do that with a nice hardwood bench beneath me.”

“A lot, you say? I thought there's only one thing we need to discuss,” Scotty said, confused. What had

Ross planned for this meeting? He mentally prepared himself for the worst and expected dozens of S.C.E. captains looking for new crew members, letters of recommendation to be written, speeches to be given, and all the other tasks that so far had been dutifully fulfilled by Leland T. Lynch.

“One major thing, that is correct,” Ross said, his face once again serious as usual, the welcoming smile of seconds before gone without a trace. “But before we start, let me just show you this.”

Ross held up a small metallic-looking ball between his thumb and forefinger and showed it to Scotty. It was an electronic device, that much was certain, but its function was not as clear. However, Ross had chosen a particularly public spot that, while currently being remarkably devoid of other visitors, still was not as suited for discussions of a very secret subject as both of them would have liked it to be. Most likely, this device’s purpose was to change that. Indeed, it did have some similarity with a com scrambler that Nyota had shown him once, about a century ago, if he wasn’t mistaken.

Ross seemed to read his thoughts. “This here is a little gadget to ensure the privacy of our conversation. Nobody will be able to listen in, so you may talk as freely as you like.”

“That depends,” Scotty said and leaned back, crossing his arms across his chest.

“On what?”

“Will you do the same?” he asked and looked Ross in the eyes. Scotty’s level of candidness depended heavily on Ross’s reaction, so he observed intently.

The answer came at once. “Of course I will. I have no reason to lie to you.”

“That’s very good to hear. So, let’s cut to the chase, lad. Why are we both here?”

“I thought that was obvious. I know of your connection to Alynna Nechayev, and of your journey to Kropasar last year.”

So his fears had not been unfounded. Had he been a cynic like McCoy, he’d have been happy about that, at least. Still, there was no reason to immediately spill all the beans. “What are you talkin’ about?”

“Oh, don’t play the innocent here, Scotty,” Ross said impatiently. “I know what the Gorkon’s mission was said to be. I also know what her mission really was, and I know that Alynna doesn’t think as highly of you as she did before you set foot on her ship half a year ago.”

“Oh, she doesn’t? That’s a pity.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t suit you, you know that?”

“I happen to think otherwise, but let’s stop the small-talkin’. You know what she ordered—forced me to do. All right. Still, what is it to you? Are you goin’ to expose her for what she really is: a threat to the Federation?”

“Honestly, no. I can’t do that.”

Scotty harrumphed. “I should have known.”

“Probably, yes. But tell me, if her orders went against everything you believed in, why didn’t you simply

disobey them? Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't Kirk do the same repeatedly, not caring about what happened to him and his career, because he did what he thought was right?"

"Don't lecture me on what Jim Kirk did, Admiral, I know that better than you. Better than most of today's SFHQ, even. I was serving in Starfleet before their grandfathers were born, so—"

"Don't give me that speech again, Scotty! I've heard that so often now that I've lost count. You're older than I, that's right. You're even older than Admirals Akaar and Mondolen. So what? Does that give you the right to be obnoxious and stubborn?"

"It bloody well should," Scotty grumbled, angry at Ross for preventing him from complaining about the inadequacies of today's Starfleet top brass.

"Let me tell you something. People were making mistakes even in your time. Does the name Cartwright ring a bell?"

Scotty nodded silently.

"How about th'Zhalin? T'Vreen? Usbek-Wran? Almodóvar? Ortolappin?"

"I know a few of them."

"Good. Suffice it to say that Alynna Nechayev is only one in a long line of people doing seemingly 'bad' things for the good of the Federation, and I—"

Scotty's disgusted snort caused Ross to interrupt himself.

"What's the matter? Don't you think that she gave you the order because she wanted the Federation to survive this war?"

"Is our survival a good enough reason to sacrifice our principles? Where would we be if those in charge did what they thought was necessary, disregardin' everythin' from common sense to general standards of morality and everythin' in between? This is wrong, Admiral, and I will not accept it."

Ross observed his outburst in silence and then said, "You still haven't answered my question, Scotty."

"Hm? What question?"

"If you found those orders so appalling and downright wrong, why didn't you disobey them? Surely the result of such a decision could not have been worse than what you actually did shortly afterward. In both cases, the result would have been the loss of your Starfleet commission."

"So I have to defend myself against you now, is that what you're aimin' at?"

"No, it isn't, and you know it. Granted, I'm no psychologist, but I believe that you did what you were told to—instead of telling Alynna where to put her orders in a not very polite manner—because deep down you felt it was necessary, even though you tried to convince yourself of something else. Maybe now your bad conscience is trying to punish you for not listening to it then?"

"Oh, that's a load of dreik, Admiral, and you know it!"

“Do you have a better explanation?”

“Of course I do, but I don’t see why I should tell you.”

Ross sighed. Scotty was close to doing the same, but he held himself back.

“Captain Scott,” Ross began, using the formal address as if to underline the importance of what he was going to say, “let me tell you a story.”

“I hope it’s a short one,” Scotty said in a low voice.

“I’ll certainly try to make it as short as possible. So. There once was an idealistic Starfleet officer rising through the ranks, on his way to being an admiral, just as in those dreams he’d had as a child.”

“This is goin’ to be about you, isn’t it?” Scotty asked mischievously.

“Maybe. Just be quiet for a moment and listen, okay? So, there was this man, and in the fifties he was assigned as second officer to the *Leonov*. It did not take long for the troubles with the Tzenkethi to intensify. One day, the ship was caught between two Tzenkethi troop transports that fired on it. The enemy fire caused the warp core to breach. There was barely enough time for the *Leonov*’s crew to get to their life-pods and leave the ship before the core exploded, taking the ship with it. The fight had been initiated by the transports near an L-class planet, so the crew’s only chance was to land on that planet and fight for their survival. Unfortunately, the Tzenkethi fired on the slowest pods, killing roughly half of the remaining crew. The ones that managed to make it to the planet’s surface fought the enemy for over two weeks before reinforcements finally came.

“A few months later, the officer found out that the location of the *Leonov* had been leaked to the Tzenkethi by somebody in the Federation. Not somebody from Starfleet, but somebody who was working for an autonomous agency. The officer was enraged, of course, because that somebody was directly responsible for the destruction of the *Leonov* and for the deaths of three hundred sixty-four able men and women. He swore that he’d hunt down the person responsible and bring him to justice.

“So he spent month after month on the search, using all his contacts both inside and outside the Fleet to find clues as to the person’s whereabouts. Eventually, he was successful and caught him on a remote moon in the Arias sector.”

Unable to avoid being interested in how the story ended, Scotty asked, “And then what happened?”

“They talked. They talked for a long time, and during the conversation the officer realized that, while the deaths of the crew were a very high price to pay, everything the other man had done had been in the best interests of the Federation.”

And to think it had actually been interesting until now! “You’ve just lost me here. He’s the one that could just as well have killed your crew himself, and you’re defendin’ him?”

“That officer was angry, I will admit as much, but he did not let his anger cloud his mind. He listened to what the other man had to say, examined the proof, eventually spoke to some other people involved, and in the end he saw that there would have been many more deaths if the *Leonov* had not been attacked.”

“Why? What makes you say that? What sick, twisted mind can listen to all that hogwash and still be able to keep down his lunch?”

“The Leonov would have received orders to destroy a presumed industrial complex on Gauran Ja-Tem, a Tzenkethi border world, about two days later, had the attack not taken place. Many innocent people, mostly civilians and scientists, would have been killed. The repercussions of this assault would have been enormous, and the autonomous agency the man worked for had judged them to be grave enough to try everything in their might to avoid them.”

“And you’re actually believin’ that? You’re dafter than I thought, pardon my Tellarite.”

“Oh, I’ve had my doubts, rest assured. Still have them, as a matter of fact. But whenever I feel like I’m not doing the right thing, I walk over to the nearest mirror and look myself in the face. Never have I had cause to turn away. And not once have I regretted my decision not to report the man to the Fleet authorities.”

Ross apparently hadn’t noticed slipping from the third into the first person. Scotty wondered if that was significant.

“Is that all? Did you come here to tell me this story? I’m sorry, but you haven’t made me change my mind. If anythin’, you’ve strengthened my resolve not to have anythin’ to do with the likes of Nechayev and yourself for the rest of my life. Expect my final resignation to grace your desk when you get home,” he said and made as if to get up.

“Wait,” Ross said, placing a hand on the ex-engineer’s shoulder. “There’s more I have to tell you.”

“I’m not in a mood to listen, Admiral. I don’t think there’s anything you can tell me now that would make me change my mind about you.”

“Then it won’t hurt you if you listen to me, right? Last year, I was given a similar task to the one that Nechayev gave you, except that in my case it wasn’t an order, it was more of a friendly request.”

“That ‘autonomous agency’ you were tellin’ me about before, I suppose.”

“Indeed, yes. They needed somebody higher up in the Starfleet hierarchy to help place a mole in the Continuing Committee on Romulus. Because of my previous association with them, they thought of me. Just as I did that other time, I asked them to present me with all the documentation I needed to make up my mind. Scotty, I’m not one of those mindless fools with their finger constantly on the trigger who blindly follow orders, no matter how wrong those orders may be. However, if I can do something to save the Federation I love, then I’ll do it, and damn the bad conscience.”

Despite himself, Scotty was actually interested once more. Ross had... well, charisma, and besides, he’d heard rumors about that bilateral conference on Romulus last year that coincided with the ascension of Tal Shiar chairman Koval to the Committee.

“I have a relationship with Alynna that enables me to get her to tell me things she wouldn’t tell any other admiral, mostly because of the similarities of our professional lives. We met for lunch a few days ago, and she told me that you were a, and I quote, ‘real pain in my back end.’ Apparently, we both made use of the same tactic—pretending to have fallen ill quite suddenly.”

“An old trick, that was, and I really should have known better,” Scotty admitted, his logical self insisting that having a mole in the Continuing Committee was a tactical advantage, while his emotional self was jumping up and down, shouting that the ends did not justify the means, no matter how good one’s

intentions were.

“Ah well, don’t chastise yourself because of it. The person I was forced to play that trick on also fell for it,” Ross said, “and he was not happy about it, not at all.

“If this was an ideal world, I would never have agreed to work with these people. You should know me well enough by now to believe me when I say this. I was idealistic once, when I was a raw cadet, but I soon realized that I had no reason to be that ‘daft,’ as you put it. The world was a bad—and a mad—place, and it still is. Yet the Dominion War is over now, the threats to the Federation reduced to a minimum, which is their only goal, you know. Keep the Federation safe, regardless of the cost.”

“And that is exactly the problem I’m havin’ with their actions. And Nechayev’s, for that matter.” As he spoke the words, something in Scotty’s mind clicked. “Wait a minute...is she working for them?”

“Even if I knew, I wouldn’t tell you. There’s a reason why keeping the organization a secret is of the utmost importance. If they knew about me telling you this, they’d be rather angry, to put it mildly.”

Scotty had a wee bit of trouble digesting all the information Ross had heaped on him, and while the image of the war veteran was changing into something of a somewhat unpredictable top-level operative sometimes working on the wrong side of the law, he also had to admit that it made Ross somewhat more...well, truth be told, more of a person. Before, Ross had been flat, unremarkable, the perfect soldier, with an altogether incomprehensible affection toward Scotty. Now, however, he had faults, he had dubious motives, just like every other human in the galaxy.

Come to think of it, that affection toward him was still as incomprehensible as ever. What better time to ask Ross about it than now?

“I can’t say you’ve won me over, Admiral, but at the very least, you’ve given me somethin’ to think about.”

“I should hope so. Now, let me ask the obvious question: is there really a chance of you returning to active duty?”

Okay, that had not come all that unexpectedly. “I really can’t say. Give me time to think about it, about everythin’. But please tell me: why me? Why not some other, younger genius of an engineer who’s currently workin’ on the U.S.S. Lollipop?”

“I’ll tell you why, Scotty. Because you’re different. You’re old-school, you know what a ship is made up of. You know how to work engines. However, you also know how to work people. That’s even more important for the job as S.C.E. liaison. You have to interact with people, you have to make them work with each other.”

“I’d be the one handin’ out assignments, just like Blackjack did, right?”

“Right. I believe Commander Lynch was assigned this duty by yourself when the two of you took over from Harriman, is that correct?”

“’Tis, indeed.”

“Care to tell me why?” Ross wanted to know, concern still etched into his face.

“It just didn’t feel like the kind of job best suited for me. I’ve always felt more confident with machines and computers than with people,” Scotty admitted, secretly amazed at how his mood had changed ever since Ross had more or less confessed to having been part of an organization that had no compunctions about working outside the law. “Don’t get me wrong, I like people. It’s just that... I don’t know... it is easier to find out what makes a warp engine tick, if you know what I mean, than doin’ the same for a person. People are a Daluvian puzzle to me, most of the time.”

“Ah, I don’t believe that. You’re working as a greeter on Risa, for goodness’ sake! If you don’t get along with people, you should have moved elsewhere. Friends tell me there’s a lump of rock orbiting 36 Ursae Majoris that offers its visitors spectacular views of the entire star system.”

“Now you’re just makin’ fun of me. I can’t say I’m in the mood for that right now.”

“I’m sorry, Scotty,” Ross said and stood up from the bench. He straightened his uniform, turned and asked, “When can I contact you again?”

“There’s no need to. I won’t change my mind,” Scotty replied, certain now that Ross was only wasting his time. But that was his problem, and not Scotty’s. An important admiral from Starfleet’s upper echelon wanted to spend hours, even days, trying to make him reconsider, so what? Let him. It certainly wasn’t Scotty’s responsibility to make Ross happy. Ross was a grown man who should have learned how to deal with disappointments.

Yet, deep down inside of him, Scotty also knew that Ross was a man who was eager to give more to the service than he expected to get back. The people of Starfleet were more important to William Johannes Ross than his own life and career. By his own admission, protecting the Federation from coming to any harm was his top priority, and he would do almost anything to achieve that.

There weren’t that many differences between Ross and himself, Scotty realized. They both had the same approach to their work, and they really cared about the people they worked so hard at protecting. It was only a matter of where one drew the line. Admiral Ross had found out for himself that he could draw it quite a bit further off than the retired Captain Scott.

Still standing on the same spot as before, Ross said, “I realize that you are still mad at Alynna, and you even have a good reason for it, unlike many other people. You didn’t want to hurt the Kropaslin, but by following her orders, you had no choice but to harm them and their civilization.” Stated like that, so matter-of-factly, it seemed extremely neutral and distant, rather like coming from an android than a human person.

“As I said, I had a conversation with Alynna a few days ago, and she told me that, while she understands the reasons for your ‘emotional outburst,’ as she called it, she does not in any way understand how you can hold her responsible for changes in Kropaslin society that the Kropaslin themselves are to blame for.”

Now that was too much, indeed. “What? How dare she! The carnaptious hag! If she hadn’t come to steal that cruiser, Kropaslin society would not have fallen apart!” “Calm yourself down, Scotty! Do you want to get yourself sued by calling a Fleet admiral names?”

“Maybe not. Maybe, however, it would still have done so, only at a later date. Who knows? The truth is, Scotty,” Ross said, playing with the com scrambler in his right hand, “the past is just that: the past. We can’t do anything about it, as Regulation 157 tells us. However, we can do something about the future. And that is where you come in.”

“Me?” Scotty had no idea what Ross was talking about.

“Yes, you. If you agree to become the full-time head of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, leaving Commander Lynch free to retire, then you will have enough power and resources at your disposal to assist the Kropaslin with rebuilding their societal structures.”

“You’re havin’ me on, Admiral!” he said, unbelieving. “Aren’t you?”

“Oh, you’d know if I was. This, however, is serious. Just about as serious as I can make it.”

“That...that is...temptin’, to say the least. Still, I do need to think about it all. You said you’d give me some time for cogitatin’?” Scotty asked, realizing too late that he sounded vaguely optimistic. Ross didn’t deserve that much, certainly not.

“Yes, I did say that. Contact me when you have reached a decision, say, within the next month or so?”

“That’s acceptable. It might take the whole month, though.”

“I understand. Thank you for listening to me, Captain Scott. I appreciate that,” Ross said, and he sounded serious. He might have been an idealistic man once, but he had let himself be pulled over to the dark side by the evil forces that were at work within the Federation.

That sounds much too dramatic for an old tinker like me. I really must do something about that.

Scotty remained seated on the bench and watched Ross walk down the path that, some thirty meters from the Littlejohn Monument, was lined with tall trees on both sides. They had slightly orange leaves that prevented any light from reaching the ground. As he observed Ross disappearing in the shadows, he thought that this was an apt depiction of the admiral’s dilemma.

But Ross had made his decision long before. From the look of it, that had happened roughly two decades ago, during the Tzenkethi situation. Now he had to live with it.

Scotty didn’t know if he could do the same.

There was only one way to find out.

* * *

The following days were agonizingly long, which was mainly due to the fact that Scotty didn’t make it easy on himself. He still worked in the Engineering Room, and every time he walked by the artificial waterfall in the middle of the hotel lobby, directly underneath the artificial sun at the top of the lobby’s magnificent dome, he thought that it was not the worst kind of work he was doing here. Sure, there were almost no machines involved, and certainly no warp drive—unless you counted the ER’s cleverly disguised drink dispenser column—but that was not a major issue for him anymore. The truth of it was, he was content with his current job, and there would have been no reason at all for him to ask for a change if things had been normal.

Except that things were not normal. They actually never were, so that was not much of a surprise.

Ross, despite his flaws and questionable connections, had made him an offer that was very, very

tempting. To take over the S.C.E. full-time, throw out Lynch, and take an active hand in organizing things was a huge task. He'd realized that when Harriman had talked to him about it in '71, and today it wasn't different.

As S.C.E. liaison to the admiralty he'd be the one handing out the assignments to the various ships and their crews, all the while making sure that the best of the best were working for the Corps. He'd be a sort of talent scout, constantly on the lookout for new engineers that seemed perfectly suited for Corps work. Most important, however, he'd be in the position to actively influence the Fleet's technological development, as he'd have a say in their ship design policies.

Ah, the agony of making life-changing decisions! He could almost hear his sister scold him: Face it, Scotty, this is a prestigious job, and you'd be a real dobber if you said no. Clara, in addition to being the only one back then to call him by his future nickname instead of his proper name, had been the one to always tell him the truth outright and without embellishment.

Ah, the hell with it. He could think about it all later today, when his job was done. Indeed, today was a busy day at the Engineering Room. He'd shaken many hands and tentacles already, downed many drinks—in company, of course.

From the corner of his eye he saw the main doors open and two humanoid females enter. Promising the Hekaran in front of him to drop by later for a short talk, he started to walk toward the pair. They looked remarkably like mother and daughter, but he'd learned early enough that appearances were deceiving. They could just as easily be two lovers, or two friends. And besides, what looked like a female person didn't always have to be a female person.

And the older of them looked rather familiar. He approached them swiftly, all the while concentrating on the face of the woman, trying to remember the person she reminded him of.

“Welcome to the Engineerin' Room, on behalf of the management of the El Dorado. I'm—” he began, but had to stop himself because now he realized who the woman was.

It couldn't be.

It simply couldn't be.

She looked just like Christine Chapel, except that she didn't. Her hair was different, and she was a bit younger than Christine had been the last time he'd seen her—the last picture of her in her Starfleet file, to be exact. It had to be a remarkable coincidence, finding somebody who looked so much like her, even if that was just as unlikely as having her really be here.

The younger of the pair, a thin lass with a round face and dark-brown hair, watched him closely, he noticed.

Get hold of yourself, Scotty!

“You are...?” she asked, offering him an encouraging smile.

“Scott. Montgomery Scott.” It was impossible for him not to study the face of the woman who was and was not her. “Christine?” he whispered before he could stop himself. The moment the word left his lips he felt the blood rush to his cheeks, caused by shame about the foolishness of actually thinking that this woman here was the real Christine Chapel, late of the Enterprise. Losh, his face must look like a port

formation light! He suddenly felt as stupid as he had when he'd just been liberated from transporter stasis and he'd asked his rescuers if Kirk himself had managed to devise a means of saving him.

The young'un looked from him to the other one and back to him. "Who?" she asked, obviously not comprehending. Not that he could blame her.

"You have me confused with someone else, I'm afraid," the older woman said kindly. "My name is Morgan, Morgan Primus. This is my daughter, Robin. She's with Starfleet."

Of course. Yet another young soul to be corrupted by the machinations of the Powers That Be. "So was I," Scotty admitted, letting his tone slightly indicate just how happy he was he'd left.

Despite her name, this Morgan looked and even sounded so much like Christine, it was uncanny. Ignoring the still increasing redness of his face, he admitted as much. "The hair is different, but...you could be her twin."

Morgan stared at him. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

Just like that, she brought him down onto the hard, cold floor of reality. For a moment there he'd thought there was a chance, unlikely though it had been, to catch up on old times, asking her how her life had been after she'd left the Enterprise .

It was not to be. She might have looked like her, but she was an entirely different person.

Realizing he was being a little rude, Scotty did his best to explain his mistake and then introduce himself again. Robin was a little skeptical of his claim to be the Montgomery Scott, given his "well-preserved" state, and suggested he was a clone.

"No, no...the original item," he said, smiling at her while attempting a quick bow. "Perhaps you ladies would allow me to buy you a drink." Social drinking, that was the key. After all, who knew? Perhaps there was a way to make him forget not only Nechayev, but Ross as well. He certainly wouldn't regret it one single second if he never heard of Starfleet ever again.

Besides, this Morgan woman seemed rather...interested in him, so to speak. It was best to strike the iron while it was hot, as they said, so he couldn't let this chance pass without trying to make use of it. "I wouldn't have it any other way," she said, waiting for him to lead the way to the bar, where he ordered her a screwdriver.

The young'un called Robin joined them, mumbling something incomprehensible that surely was of no importance to Scotty. He decided to enjoy this evening.

Perhaps there was even a reason to enjoy the night.

* * *

As it turned out, the relationship Morgan was interested in was of a friendly nature, but not as intimate as Scotty would have liked. Perhaps it was his own fault, talking mostly about machines and computers and not about things that interested her. In hindsight, he'd pretty much killed any chance of getting anywhere with Morgan Primus on their very first date—if "date" was the correct word for it.

However, the following days turned out to be the best since Belunis had decided to look elsewhere for

the adventures that were absent in her life. Scotty and Morgan had fun getting to know each other more closely, talking about a broad variety of subjects that ranged from starship propulsion (as it turned out, Morgan had served on a Starfleet ship herself) to native Risian cuisine.

They had long since left the greeter-guest relationship behind for something better when a new player entered the game: some no-good shaan gadgie who reeked of money. His name was Rafe Viola, and he proclaimed himself an entrepreneur. When Scotty discovered that Viola was making advances toward Morgan, his alarms went up. The man was not good enough for Morgan in any case, and then there was the fact that Scotty had a bad feeling about him.

He said as much to Morgan, but she accused him of being jealous when all he wanted was to prevent her from being hurt.

Women. “Can’t live with ’em, can’t live without ’em,” indeed.

In the end, when Viola turned out not only to be what he’d suspected but also a cold-blooded killer, Scotty had felt no satisfaction over having been right in the first place. A mere two weeks after his first meeting with Morgan Primus and her daughter Robin, Scotty’s life had been turned upside down, the quietness of the past few months gone as if it had never existed.

At least I’m still alive, he thought. Poor Mr. Quincy was not. Viola’s son Nik had killed him—although “son” wasn’t the correct word. “Clone,” however, was. Later, after everything had calmed down, Morgan had told Scotty everything he’d missed. He’d missed a lot, apparently.

But his temporary absence was understandable. After all, you don’t get thrown into a shaft inside a multiple-level computer core only to miraculously appear mere seconds later. He had to thank the Great Bird of the Galaxy that he’d had the common sense to put on antigrav boots before he went to inspect the core together with Mr. Quincy.

Mr. Quincy—Thomas—wasn’t the only victim of this madman’s killing spree. Part of the resort—mostly trees and other plants—had been destroyed by a computer virus that caused the wave generator at the beach to malfunction. Out of control, it threatened to flood the entire hotel complex and drown every adult and child in the vicinity. Working together with Morgan, he’d managed to undo the damage, and within one hour the water had begun to be pulled back into the lagoon, where it couldn’t hurt anybody any longer.

The resort’s owners had contacted Scotty soon afterward, offering him the post of manager of the El Dorado. Unlike so many other corporate creatures, they knew what a loss the death of a manager like Theodore Quincy was to them. They were genuinely sorry, which was a point in their favor. However, they also saw the need to go on, and in order to offer the visitors a perfect holiday, they needed to repair the damage to their computer system, their wave generator, and—most important—their public image. A Starfleet legend such as himself would be a brightly colored feather in their cap, they reasoned, and they even offered him everything he ever dreamed of, including his own boat.

The owners of the El Dorado Hotel and Vacation Resort were not the only ones to advance an offer. Others from all over the planet did the same, some even going so far as to say that he could have his own private island if he agreed to work for them.

He politely declined every offer.

The truth was, he did not feel he needed to remain on Risa a single day longer. Ever since Viola’s

sabotage had been repaired, he'd felt restless, as if something was calling to him, telling him to move on.

One evening, a twelvenight after Quincy's funeral, he sat in the wicker chair on his small veranda, holding a glass of Scotch in his right hand. He watched the fireworks on the horizon, a colorful display of happiness that marked the end of the Lohlunat Festival over in Suraya Bay. Melancholy was washing over him like waves at high tide, and it was not a pleasant feeling.

When he lifted the glass to his lips, he was surprised to discover that it was empty. He didn't remember finishing his drink, nor did he remember drinking it, for that matter. He supposed he should be worried about that, but at the moment he just didn't give a damn.

Another plume of fireworks, then nothing. After a while, the muffled sound of the explosion reached Hanotis Harbor, but the sky was dark once again, only illuminated by the constellations of the stars and the two moons.

In a weird, morbid way, the fireworks reminded him of exploding ships in planets' atmospheres, and this, in turn, reminded him of the story that Ross had told him. A person's mind was a strange thing. So utterly abstract, yet there was no denying its existence. And the worst thing was, it operated in mysterious ways. Nobody could tell what dreadful memory of the past it dredged up next.

Ross and his offer, though, were not all that unexpected. Scotty had thought about them on an on-and-off basis during the last two weeks, and he grudgingly admitted to himself that it was indeed rather tempting. Yet he didn't know if he shouldn't just make a clean break now, leave Starfleet forever and buy himself a house on Caldos Colony, far away from SFHQ.

Absentmindedly, he took another sip of his Scotch only to notice again that the glass was empty. Something was wrong with him—had to be—because he normally never failed to consciously enjoy a drink.

Oh, sod it.

He abruptly rose from his wicker chair and entered his bungalow. Once inside, he went into his office and activated the com terminal there.

"Computer, do me a favor, will you?"

"Please state your request."

"Get me Admiral Ross's office. And better make it quick, before I change my mind."

"Working."

"You're a good lad."

Epilogue

Stardate 53509.7

May 2376, Old Earth Time

“Iknew the planet Kropasar rang a bell,” Geordi La Forge said, setting down his glass. He was on his third drink—yet still, the taste of Scotty’s Scotch lingered. “I remember some of the da Vinci crew talking about the S.C.E.’s relief efforts there.”

“Aye, laddie,” Scotty said. “We’re only just beginnin’, an—”

He was cut off by a chirp from his comm badge. “I hate these bloody things,” he grumbled. “No damn off-switch.” Despite his complaints, he tapped it. “Go ahead.”

“Sir, this is Deg,” came the voice of his aide.

“What is it, lad? I thought I told you I was out.”

“There’s a bit of a crisis in lab seventeen that...needs your touch.”

Scotty shook his head. “Fine, beam both of us over.”

“Aye, sir.” Scotty stood up, and Geordi followed suit just before both of them were swallowed by the blue sparkles of the transporter beam.

* * *

When they rematerialized, they were in what seemed to be the cockpit of a Starfleet runabout. It resembled the Danube-class La Forge was used to, but seemed more advanced. Alarms were blaring, and red lights were flashing.

There were two engineers already in the cockpit, though La Forge didn’t recognize them. “What have you done, lads?” Scotty shouted. Both engineers were furiously tapping buttons on the runabout’s control panels.

One of the engineers, a human man, looked up from his work to reply. “I’m not sure, sir!” he shouted above the din of the alarms. “We just switched the reactor on to see if we’d fixed the dilithium fracture, and now the power won’t stop building!”

“Did you try an emergency shutdown?” La Forge asked, joining the man at his console and looking over the readouts.

“Of course!” he shouted back. “First thing!” The other engineer, a Guidon, looked up from its panel just long enough to let off some agitated squeaks in the typical manner of its species.

Scotty shook his head. “Lasca, what have I told you, over and over? Get your hands dirty!” He moved to the rear of the runabout. “Give me a hand, Geordi!”

La Forge helped Scotty remove an access panel from the wall next to the transporters. Immediately, Scotty plunged his hands inside and began yanking out and rearranging bits of circuitry.

“Power is still building!” called Lasca, watching his screen. “It’s at one hundred forty-seven percent and rising! In another thirty seconds, the warp core will explode!”

La Forge briefly considered telling Scotty to hurry up, but years of unnecessarily being told that by his own commanding officers meant that he knew better.

“I cannot do it!” Scotty was frantically pulling bits out of the wall now, with no apparent regard for what he was doing. “I need more time!”

La Forge joined Lasca once more. “It’s no good,” he said. “The tetryon flow is continuing to multiply.”

“Slow it down, lad!” Scotty ordered.

“I cannot change the laws of physics!” La Forge shouted back—doing his best Scottish brogue. The Guidon engineer looked up from his console to stare in amazement. La Forge supposed not many of the people here would dare to mock the “living legend” that way.

Lasca was still watching the clock. “Fifteen seconds!”

Scotty grinned. “No, you can’t do that! But I can!” With that he jerked his left hand out of the mechanics compartment, and reached across the runabout to the opposite wall, where a finger stabbed down on a single button.

As La Forge watched, the power overload suddenly disappeared, the meters dropping down to zero.

“You did it!” shouted Lasca. “If that had overloaded, it would have taken out the entire Tucker Building!”

“At the very least, laddie,” said Scotty. “I knew let-tin’ you lot run tests on the surface was a bad idea. I shouldn’t have let you start up the whole tetryon plasma experiment again in the first place.”

“But aside from that, the Yellowstone is flawless,” protested Lasca.

“Aside from that, the Yellowstone is like any other runabout,” said Scotty, “so it would be, wouldn’t it? Well, except for your precious retractable sensor pod, but that ’s bloody useless.”

The Guidon engineer waved his hand for Lasca to join him at his panel. The two conferred over the readouts briefly in hushed tones, and then Lasca looked up. “I don’t understand, Captain Scott. How’d you do it?”

Scotty shrugged. “Sure, I could tell, you, laddie. But who would want to hear me spout off a load of technobabble?”

* * *

“Are you sure you have to go, laddie?”

La Forge and Scotty were in the lobby of the Tucker Building once more, in front of the holoframe depicting the eponymous engineer. “Captain Picard has called me,” the younger man said, “and so I must go. Sorry I won’t get to hear the rest of your story.”

Scotty waved his hand dismissively. “There wasn’t much left, just a wee bit.”

La Forge looked around at the massive room, engineers and other Starfleet personnel streaming in and out. “You’ve done well for yourself here,” he said. “You’re enjoying yourself.”

Scotty shook his head. "It's only been two months," he said. "Give me time to be unhappy again, lad; it'll come."

"I don't know..." said La Forge. He noticed the Vissian woman Scotty had berated this morning rush past, her head ducked to avoid attention. "I think you're enjoying passing your knowledge on to the next generation."

"I suppose so, lad," Scotty admitted with a smile. "Someone's got to whip them into shape—their professors certainly don't."

"You're being challenged. That's good for you." La Forge tapped his combadge. "La Forge to Enterprise . One to beam up."

"Acknowledged. Thirteen seconds, Commander," replied the clipped voice of the transporter chief.

"Good-bye, laddie—Geordi. Hopefully, I see you again soon. It's been too long between visits."

"Sure has," La Forge said. "Good-bye, Scotty." He continued to speak even as he felt the beginnings of the transport sequence. "Maybe someday you'll get a chance to finish telling me that story...."

Future Construction

Stardate 53426.4

April 2376, Old Earth Time

The visitor on the starship's bridge silently observed the goings-on that characterized every single vessel of the Federation's exploration/defense fleet, amusing himself with comparisons of single crew members to friends of times long gone.

In the center seat of the bridge sat a lean Bolian man, his collar pips clearly identifying him as the ship's captain even though his posture alone did a very good job at doing the same. His name was Bor Loxx, and he commanded the ship that Scotty himself had picked as the vessel to extend a hand of friendship toward the people on Kropasar who had been so deviously relieved of their prized possession of Breen origin.

The ship's name was Akarana, and it belonged to the class of transport vessels named for the city of Istanbul on Earth. Usually when Scotty needed a ship to send somewhere, he just tapped one of the four Saber -class ships that carried around the S.C.E.'s mobile teams, but this time all he needed was a ship capable of transporting a group of people from one place to another. The mobile response teams were better deployed elsewhere, considering all the postwar reconstruction going on, and so Scotty had called on the crew of the Akarana .

"Entering Akiganel sector," the Vulcan at navigation announced.

"Thank you, Mr. Lorin," Loxx said.

Scotty sat on an empty chair at one of the science stations aft of the captain, next to the starboard turbo-lift. From there, he could survey the entire bridge, watching everybody there doing their jobs, accompanied by the sounds the computer made reacting to command inputs.

Their mission here was simple: help the Kropaslin rebuild their society by lending what technological help they could.

Of course, this was not simply a Starfleet mission—it couldn't be. This was a matter of immediate concern to the entire Federation, which was why Scotty had had to address the entire Council in the Palais de la Concorde, and not just once, but twice in as many weeks. Despite his recently increased influence as the head of the S.C.E., he was sure it would not have worked if President Zife had not supported his petition.

Yet why exactly the Bolian had done so was beyond him—just as it had been beyond him when Nechayev had told him about Zife's decision to reopen negotiations with the Kropaslin. Then, the numpty had had an ulterior motive: technology. It was highly likely that there was such a motive now as well.

But Scotty didn't care. As long as they let him help the people on Kropasar pick up the pieces of their society and start anew, he didn't give a tinker's cuss about what the president thought he'd get from it.

In the time between the petition and now, Scotty had feared he'd strangle himself with red tape as there was a googolplex of forms and documents to fill out and sign, a myriad of people to talk to and practically beg on his knees for their support.

But all that was now a thing of the past. Now Scotty was on his way, aboard the U.S.S. Akarana, to deliver goods, technology, and a shipload of engineers and ambassadors to Kropasar so that the people there had a fair chance of survival, despite all the pain and sorrow Starfleet had caused them without their knowledge.

“Captain Scott?”

“Hm? What is it, lad?” he asked the Bolian captain.

“Now that we're almost on their doorstep, I believe we should contact the Witenagemot. Maybe you want to do that yourself?”

“That I do, lad, that I do. Thanks for indulging an old man.”

“Oh, it's no problem, Captain Scott. It's your project, so it's only fair that you get to do the talking,” Loxx said, grinning.

“I beg your pardon?” said Scotty, not quite understanding what he was going on about.

“The fact of the matter is that I'm not all that comfortable with talking to heads of state. You, on the other hand, seem to have a bit of experience with that.”

“Not as much as you'd think, Captain, but yes, you're right.”

“The captain is always right,” Loxx said, laughing. He turned to the Tiburonian standing at the tactical console. “Open a channel, Lieutenant Ramajif.”

The large man nodded. “Shouldn't take too long, sir. It's not as easy as shooting things, but it's not that hard.”

Loxx waved Scotty over to where he was sitting in the center of the bridge. “Ignore Ramajif,” he said as Scotty stood up and crossed the bridge. “He’s been moaning ever since the Fleet decided to make the tactical officer responsible for communications.”

“I have managed to open a channel to the high cyning of the Witenagemot,” Ramajif reported just as Scotty reached the area in the center of the bridge.

Loxx stood up and gestured graciously to his now empty seat. “It’s all yours.”

Scotty sat down. Nice, he thought. It seemed that after centuries of spaceflight, Starfleet had finally developed a comfortable captain’s chair. Loxx nodded to Ramajif, and the distinctive face of a Kropaslin appeared on the main viewscreen. “This is Captain Montgomery Scott of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers,” he said.

The Kropaslin answered back, the sound of her voice revealing her to be a female. “I am Sunanios Gilvatac, high cyning of the Kropaslin Witenagemot. I take it you are here to begin the promised relief efforts?”

Scotty realized he recognized her; she had been one of the members of the Agreement Party there on that fateful night. “Aye, ma’am.” He knew enough diplomacy not to call a head of state “lassie,” at any rate. “We’re here to provide whatever technological help we can, startin’ with the weather modification net.” Maintenance of the net had been one of the casualties of the collapse of the Kropaslin government, and now drought was raging across several continents.

“Thank you, Captain Scott. All of Kropasar will be in your debt—this government has only been up and running for a few weeks now, and just the news that the Federation was sending aid went a long way in establishing our credibility with the public.”

“It’s only fair,” said Scotty, “given what the Federation’s rejection of your membership did before.”

“None of us could have foreseen that chain of events,” said Gilvatac sadly. “No one.”

Scotty quickly glanced at a readout below the main screen. “The Akarana should be entering orbit in thirty minutes,” he said.

“I look forward to seeing you again,” said Gilvatac. “Witenagemot out.”

Her image was replaced by the stars streaking by, their light split up in rainbow colors, as the Akarana sped toward her destination. Scotty was eager to repair the damage caused by the previous visit of a Starfleet ship and almost couldn’t wait to set foot on Kropaslin soil.

There was just so much to do.

Monty Scott in the 24th-and-a-half Century!

A Timeline of Scotty’s post-“Relics” Journey

In writing *The Future Begins*, we found it necessary to weave together the bits and pieces various novels,

eBooks, comics, and short stories had given us about Scotty's life in the twenty-fourth century into one continuous narrative. Previously, we had only received snapshots of his journey; our goal was to combine these into a coherent whole, and *The Future Begins* would serve as the culmination of this whole.

The following timeline lays out what we know of Scotty's twenty-fourth-century (and beyond) odyssey. Not everything is here: we tried to fit what would work together, and not every story can. Indeed, it is possible that not everything that is here works together without contradiction, but we tried our best.

Thanks to Geoff "Wersgor" Hamell for his assistance in compiling this timeline.

Bracketed abbreviations: TOS = original *Star Trek*. TNG = *The Next Generation*. NF = *New Frontier*. SCE = *Starfleet Corps of Engineers*. SNW# = *Strange New Worlds* anthologies. TDW = *Tales of the Dominion War* anthology. NL = *New Frontier: No Limits* anthology.

2369

Starfleet Captain Montgomery Scott (ret.) is rescued from the wreck of the U.S.S. *Jenolen*, where he has been existing in a transporter loop since 2294, by the crew of the U.S.S. *Enterprise -D*. Captain Picard gives Scotty extended loan of the Shuttlecraft *Goddard*, and he sets out to wander rather than retire to *Norpin V*. ("Relics" [TNG])

2370

Blaming himself for the "death" of Captain Kirk on the *Enterprise -B*, Scotty travels back in time on a derelict Klingon bird-of-prey in an effort to prevent it, accidentally changing history so that the Borg dominate most of known space in the twenty-third century. History is eventually restored, and no one remembers the alteration. (*Engines of Destiny* by Gene DeWeese)

Scotty meets an old acquaintance, Captain Morgan Bateson of the *Bozeman*, who was also displaced almost a century in time. They fight over the memory of Mira Romaine but put their differences behind them when they realize that they are still friends. ("Ancient History" by Robert J. Mendenhall [SNW6])

Koloth engages Scotty in battle to settle a final score before heading to Deep Space 9 to track down the Albino. ("Old Debts" by Kevin Ryan [TNG Special #3])

Scotty renames the *Goddard* the *Romaine* in honor of his former love. (Crossover by Michael Jan Friedman [TNG])

2371

Scotty steals the old *Constitution -class* U.S.S. *Yorktown* in order to help rescue Spock from Romulan captivity. (Crossover by Michael Jan Friedman [TNG])

Inspired by an encounter with Burgoyne 172 on Argelius II, Scotty reenlists in Starfleet, donating the Romaine to the Fleet Museum as recompense. After taking some refresher courses to get up to speed with the new technology, Scotty joins Bateson at Starbase 12 to assist in the construction of the Sovereign -class U.S.S. Honorius . (The Two-Front War by Peter David [NF]; “Through the Looking-Glass” by Susan Wright [NL]; The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster [SCE]; Ship of the Line by Diane Carey [TNG])

On leave at Earth to join Admiral John Harriman and his wife at their sixtieth anniversary dinner, Scotty learns of the crash of the Enterprise -D and the reappearance and death of Captain Kirk. Harriman, who is considering retiring from command of the Corps of Engineers, tries to persuade Scotty to replace him. (“Full Circle” by Scott Pearson [SNW7])

The Honorius is redesignated the Enterprise -E in honor of the fallen ship, meaning that this is the third vessel of that name Scotty has served on. (Ship of the Line by Diane Carey [TNG])

2372

Scotty serves as chief engineer of the Enterprise -E on its maiden voyage under Captain Morgan Bateson. Afterward, the ship is turned over to Captain Jean-Luc Picard and the former command crew of the Enterprise -D. (Ship of the Line by Diane Carey [TNG])

Scotty assists Bateson in completing construction on the Bozeman -A, another Sovereign -class vessel being assembled at Starbase 12. Once it is completed, he begins a tour on the U.S.S. Sovereign herself as chief engineer under Captain Sanders. (Ship of the Line by Diane Carey [TNG]; Spectre by William Shatner with Judith & Garfield Reeves-Stevens [TOS]; The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster [SCE])

2374

While the Sovereign visits Earth, Scotty helps Ensign Dorian Collins come to terms with the loss of her shipmates from the Valiant . (“Dorian’s Diary” by G. Wood [SNW3])

2375

His tour on the Sovereign completed, Scotty is contemplating retiring when he is invited by Admiral William Ross to take over for Harriman as the head of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers. (Interphase by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore [SCE]; The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster [SCE])

Scotty temporarily assigns his duties to his assistant, Commander Leland T. Lynch, so he can take part in projects outside the office, including joining his old shipmate Admiral Leonard McCoy in making an

inspection tour on the runabout U.S.S. Hudson . (“Safe Harbors” by Howard Weinstein [TDW]; The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster [SCE])

The Hudson returns to Earth just after the devastating Breen raid on the planet. Scotty throws himself into assisting with the reconstruction efforts, continuing to neglect his duties with the S.C.E. (“Safe Harbors” by Howard Weinstein [TDW]; The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster [SCE])

Scotty is summoned to the U.S.S. Gorkon by Fleet Admiral Alynna Nechayev to take part in a diplomatic mission to Kropasar. Afterward, he resigns from Starfleet. Leland T. Lynch takes over as the head of the S.C.E. (The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster [SCE])

Scotty returns to Scotland briefly, until he is hired by the Risian government to rebuild their weather control network. After finishing the job, he sticks around, and eventually ends up employed as a greeter by the El Dorado Hotel. (Renaissance by Peter David [NF]; The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster [SCE])

2376

Scotty sees two Kropaslin at the El Dorado, inspiring a confrontation with Nechayev. Following this, Admiral William Ross meets with Scotty to discuss the Kropasar mission in one more attempt to get him to return to the Fleet. (The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster [SCE])

Scotty is assisted by Morgan Primus and Robin Lefler in stopping the plot of Rafe Viola to sabotage the El Dorado computers. Afterward, he finally formally returns to Starfleet. In his capacity as head of the S.C.E., he begins pushing resources toward the reconstruction of Kropasar. (Renaissance and Restoration by Peter David [NF]; The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster [SCE])

Scotty, in his capacity as head of the S.C.E., is heavily involved in coordinating Starfleet’s response to the crisis precipitated by the mass activation of Iconian gateways across the galaxy. Even once the gateways are deactivated, the S.C.E. must engage in various cleanup operations. (Doors Into Chaos by Robert Greenberger [TNG]; Here There Be Monsters by Keith R.A. DeCandido [SCE])

During the gateways cleanup, the Enterprise -E returns to Earth, and Lt. Commander Geordi La Forge is able to see Scotty for the first time since Scotty’s resignation and reinstatement. Scotty tells La Forge the whole sordid tale. (The Future Begins by Steve Mollmann & Michael Schuster [SCE])

Scotty assists the da Vinci crew in responding to the appearance of Shial spheres in the middle of San Francisco. (Aftermath by Christopher L. Bennett [SCE])

2377

Scotty is part of a covert mission to the Watraii home-world aboard the U.S.S. Alliance. (Vulcan's Soul Book 2: Exiles by Josepha Sherman & Susan Shwartz)

2379

Scotty is part of an inspection team assigned to the Enterprise -E. (A Time for War, A Time for Peace by Keith R.A. DeCandido [TNG])

2422

The Montgomery Scott Engineering Sciences Complex of Starfleet Academy is dedicated. Scotty is present to officially cut the ribbon. (Engines of Destiny by Gene DeWeese)

About the Authors

STEVE MOLLMANN lives in Colerain Township, which is a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio best known for possessing a large garbage dump, but he loves it all the same. He has been a Star Trek fan since before he can remember, for which he blames his mother. Maybe if someone lets him write another book or ten, he can make up for all the money he has spent on the franchise over the years. He is currently studying education at Miami University of Oxford, Ohio, and hopes to one day teach English at the high school level. He has never met Michael Schuster.

MICHAEL SCHUSTER lives in Austria on the other side of the pond and believes himself to be only the second nonnative speaker of English to write a Star Trek story after Jesco von Puttkamer. Michael has been studying English as a secondary language ever since his third year in school, and he likes to think that it shows. His love for science fiction in general and Star Trek in particular began somewhere around his twelfth birthday. While he always wanted to be one of the authors of such adventures, he never really believed he would eventually become one. The fact that this did indeed happen is generally attributed to his collaboration with Steve that started years before they worked together on The Future Begins and is unlikely to end anytime soon. Being the older of the writer pair, he of course takes all the credit for everything except the mistakes, which is as it should be.

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BY RICHARD C. WHITE

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