

## Introduction

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A brief glance at the table of contents will tell anyone familiar with this series of anthologies that, for the second year in a row, there's a new section of stories.

Last year, of course, we added an Enterprise section, as fans wrote a number of great stories after seeing just the first show. This year we are keeping all five show sections, and adding one more section called "Speculations."

Now, this is not the name of a new ship, nor the name of a new Star Trek show, although either wouldn't be a bad idea at some point in the future. Instead, this new section describes the content of the stories included, just as the different show sections do.

The idea for the new section was suggested by Paula Block after reading "Our Million-Year Mission" by Robert T. Jeschonek. John Ordover and I both agreed instantly. We needed this new section in the book, and after reading Robert's story, you will understand why.

However, for me this "Speculations" section means more. Star Trek has always been a show, right from the start, that asked the standard science fiction questions, "What next?" and "What if this goes on?" From those two simple questions, combined with great characters, comes almost every great science fiction story, and most of the best Star Trek stories.

Those questions also bring in the sense of wonder, and push back the edges of the thought-of universe. In Robert's story, he asked the simple question about the entire Star Trek universe. "What if this goes on?" Then he combined it with a great character story, a second "What if this goes on?" question about a character.

I didn't believe he could pull it off, and yet he did. He let me feel a sense of wonder, and at one point I even said out loud as I read, "Oh, cool," and being a longtime reader and editor, I don't do that very often anymore. And he got the characters right.

So Paula Block suggested we add the new section for stories that push the edges of the Star Trek universe, as Robert's story does. Some of the stories in this book push edges, yet fit inside a certain television series. There are other wonderful stories that are more character driven.

But for the stories that go outside the edges of one show, that exist in the Star Trek universe and are Star Trek stories, yet push boundaries of ideas, setting, and place, there is now a section in this book. Daring to go where no one has gone before is the challenge of Star Trek, both in the shows and in the writing of stories. And what better group of people to do that than Star Trek fans?

This is a book written by Star Trek fans, and as a fan, I am very, very proud to be a part of it.

[Third Prize]

Whales Weep Not

Juanita Nolte

Chiz sat down heavily and leaned his head in his hands. His sandpaper beard matched the feeling in his eyes. He pushed the butt-filled ashtray to the corner of his desk. It smelled better than the taste in his mouth. The ringing of the phone deafened the pounding in his head. No way was he going to answer it. Forms. Hell, he hated paperwork, even more than the stakeouts. Even when they go good for him and bad for the perps. The phone persisted. The forms stared at him accusingly. Screaming phone. Forms. He grabbed the phone.

"Why won't you go check on that nice woman? I've called four times now and you've done nothing. She's not brought me my paper for three days and that's not like her." The woman's voice screamed into Detective Chizum's ear even though he was holding it six inches away. Next time he'd fill out the damn forms. Four times, it seemed like twenty and he told her the same thing he told her before.

"Lady, she's a grown woman. She probably just went on a vacation or something."

"I always take in her mail when she's going any place. I tell you something's not right and I want you to do something about it."

"OK, OK. Give me her name and address." Too tired to care, he reluctantly agreed.

"Don't use that tone with me, young man. Her name's Gillian Taylor and she works at that whale place." He scribbled "Irving St." on the back of an old envelope as the lady rattled on.

"Oh boy," thought Chiz, "it just keeps getting better." Instead of saying what he thought he put a tired smile in his voice, "Whale place. You mean one of those seafood restaurants in the wharf area. She a waitress?"

The woman breathed audibly, perturbed by the idiocy of the man. "The whale museum, you know where George and Gracie live."

"Oh, yeah I've heard of the place. Never managed to get over there." It wasn't exactly on his top ten list of things to do.

"Well, are you going to do anything or not?"

"Tell you what, Mrs. Schimmerman, I'll go take a look at her place this afternoon and check out where she works," hoping that would placate her and get her off his back. He pulled the disgusting ashtray back into place while patting himself down for a cigarette. First he was going home long enough to grab a couple of hours of rack time.

"I should think so." Hanging up the phone loud enough to make him wince, she voiced her opinion of the police department.

Detective Chizum was one of those guys that managed to exist between neat and sloppy. His suit was of good quality, but disheveled. Sitting in a smelly warehouse in the docks all night hadn't helped. His light-brown hair was just long enough that he was thinking about a trim. A well-worn thirty-something kind of guy. Grandmothers called him handsome, five kids called him uncle, and women called him all the time. The kind of guy that would do what he said he would even though visiting a couple of whales wasn't exactly how he had planned to spend his day.

"Hey Chuck, would you run this name for me," he called, ripping a sheet from the yellow pages on his way out the door. "Just leave it on my desk."

Chuck grunted a yes, sniffed. "Gee, Chiz, hot date last night?"

Museums, he quickly scanned the ads for George and Gracie. The Maritime Cetacean Institute over in Sausalito, the only museum exclusively devoted to whales, or so the ad stated. She probably worked in one of those gift shops selling cute little stuffed Gracies. Hey, it was a nice day and nobody had been murdered, mugged or robbed in the last few hours, so a trip across the bay might be relaxing.

Not as relaxing as his nap on the couch had been, thought Chiz as he leaned on a rail staring at an empty tank. George and Gracie had flown the coop three days ago, sent back to the oceans. A big sign announced the fact and local newspapers had heralded the story. He made a mental note to read the newspapers that had been piling up on his kitchen table all week. He'd obviously missed George and Gracie's exit.

"Bob, nice to meet you. They told me out front that you're the director of this place." Chiz flashed his identification. "I'm trying to locate a woman named Gillian Taylor. I was told that she worked here." He scrutinized Bob. Average looking guy, brown hair, casually dressed for a director.

"Dr. Taylor is the assistant director of the institute. She's one of the foremost cetacean biologists in the country," Bob stated matter-of-factly. "She's also a friend of mine." The latter added with a hint of doubt in his voice.

"A friend of yours. Good, then I suppose you've seen her in the last couple of days."

"Uh, no. She hasn't been in to work." Bob shuffled some papers, scratched his head, folded his hands and then looked off to the side. What was he going to say? He hadn't really expected to see her for a few days, not until she cooled off. He wasn't exactly looking forward to the verbal thrashing he knew he would get when she did return either.

Chiz's eyebrows arched questioningly. "She say where she was going?"

"No."

Boy, what this guy wasn't saying spoke volumes. Body language never lied. Since he was obviously nervous and hiding something, Chiz settled into his seat, making it apparent that he wasn't leaving until he found out what it was. He reached for his cigarettes, slowly shaking one out of the pack. A pack of smokes was one of the best tools in a detective's arsenal.

"Don't suppose it had anything to do with her slapping you in the face and running off?"

Bob's head jerked up and then he sighed, "How did you know about that?"

"Everybody knows. It's all over the place. I heard it at the Coke machine. Must have been some argument if they're all still gossiping about it. Lovers' quarrel?"

"Heavens no! Nothing like that. She was just very upset about the whales being flown to Alaska. I, uh, didn't tell her."

Chiz didn't believe him. His bet was still on the love angle. Usually was. Nobody would get that upset over a couple of fish. Chiz remained silent, taking his time lighting the cigarette and inhaling deeply. "So tell me, Dr. Briggs, exactly what time was this little quarrel?"

"Around seven-thirty. I haven't seen her since. She has plenty of vacation time on the books and I figured she'd decided she needed a break to cool off. She really loved those whales. And--" He stopped abruptly.

"And?"

"Well, I haven't told her yet that we lost them."

"You lost 'em. The whales?"

"Yes."

"Just how do you go about losing a couple of whales that weigh what, thirty or forty tons each?"

"Look, I can't explain it. They were tagged with radio frequencies. The signal's gone. Nothing. It's been three days."

"Anything else?" Chiz grinned to himself. This guy was in for some big-time woman trouble when the good doctor returned.

"Well, there was some trouble the day before. Some weirdo jumped into the whale tank and took a swim with Gracie. You don't really think she's missing, do you?" The concern in his voice seemed genuine enough.

A puff of smoke rose to the ceiling as Chiz took his time to answer. "I think you really pissed her off." The question was whether she was mad enough to confront him again and this time he did something about it.

It was a short drive across the bay to the house on Irving Street located in the Sunset district. Time enough for his half-filled Styrofoam cup of coffee to get cold. Chiz flicked the butt of a cigarette into it and climbed out of the car. Maybe he should cut back. Wasn't there some article or something the other day about 'em being a health hazard, lung cancer? Of course doctors were always saying stuff like that. Another scare tactic, right up there with saccharin and global warming, whatever that was.

He'd only gotten one foot on the pavement before a door opened and an old lady with pink foam curlers in her hair came stomping across the street. Not that she'd look any better with the curly frizz she would probably end up with. The purple stretch pants and yellow flip-flops added a whole new meaning to the word fashionable.

"You the detective that I talked to?"

"Yes ma'am." No use getting her mad again. She'd already complained to the chief.

"Come on. I got a key. I'll let you in."

"Lady, I don't have a warrant, nor do I have probable cause."

"Fiddle, faddle. I own the place and if I want to let you in I will. I'm sure something's happened to her. If it weren't for me no one would ever notice the poor girl was missing."

Chiz wasn't so sure but prudently kept his mouth shut. The house was small but well kept. A faint odor of lemon still clung to the stifling air as if the door and windows hadn't been opened recently after a thorough bout of cleaning. Except for the whale pictures on all of the walls, it screamed ordinary. The second bedroom served as an office, the bookshelves crammed with textbooks and probably every conceivable marine biology book in print. One sat prominently displayed, and glancing at the cover he discovered why. The author was Dr. Gillian Taylor. The picture on the cover showed a young blond woman with an animated face. A woman delighted in her work. Whales seemed to be her life.

Above the desk was a framed poem by D. H. Lawrence, "Whales Weep Not!"

They say the sea is cold, but the sea contains

the hottest blood of all, and the wildest, the most urgent.

The woman was certainly passionate about her work. A passionate woman would have other passions as well. He just needed to discover what they were, or who they were. The insipid director didn't seem her type.

Opening the drawers, he scanned the contents. Her checkbook was a mess but revealed a healthy balance. He jotted down the account number, intending to check at the bank later. There didn't appear to be any recent withdrawals. The address book was pitifully void of addresses.

"What about her family? Any word from them?"

"She doesn't have any family. Only child, you know. Her mother died a couple of years ago. Cancer if I recall." She scratched at a curler and thought for a minute before adding, "she never talks about her dad. I figure he's long gone. Only steady boyfriend she had quit coming around when her mom got sick. Didn't like him much, I knew he wasn't for her. He talked real strange. I think he's one of those professors at Berkeley now. Some sort of behavior psychologist. Let me tell you, his behavior was..." and she continued to drone on.

There wasn't much to see. Nothing seemed disturbed. No forced entry of any kind. She hadn't bothered to pack either. Chiz didn't think there was a woman alive who went on a three-day trip without her makeup bag. As far as Chiz could tell she hadn't packed anything. Maybe the old broad was right. The mail on the table revealed little except that her electric and gas bills were due.

The sterile white kitchen was small but adequate. Opening the refrigerator door, the abundance of food indicated that she'd gone to the market recently. Fresh produce filled one bin. A Post-it note on the door indicated she was planning on attending a potluck dinner on Friday. The recipe was taped on the door as well. He looked. Yep, the refrigerator contained every ingredient on the recipe.

Chiz didn't like it. His gut always told him when something bad had gone down at a scene. A sixth sense sort of thing. He was good at his job, it just gave him an edge. This time, nothing. He couldn't deny the fact any longer that the woman was missing. With absolutely no evidence of the fact. She just wasn't there. Nice solid police work. The chief would laugh him back onto the streets as a beat cop. His gut had never lied to him before.

Returning to the station, Chiz found Chuck's report on his desk along with a stack of police reports. Dr. Gillian Taylor, thirty-eight, single. Decent picture but not as good as the one on

the jacket cover. It had looked professionally done. Couple of parking tickets but otherwise a clean slate. DMV showed that she drove an old Chevy pickup, light blue. He hadn't noticed it at the house. He put out an APB on the truck. It was his best bet at the moment.

Chiz pulled his chair up after hanging his jacket on it, loosened his tie, rolled up his sleeves and got into work mode. He scanned through the pile of case folders that the chief had dumped on his desk. He couldn't spend all of his time trying to find one lousy fish doctor. A penciled note was attached to the top file, short and sweet, "You're going to love this one." Chiz wasn't going to love anything without a hot cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. After satisfying both needs, he started to read.

An unknown, critically injured man had escaped from a second floor operating room of Mercy Hospital in the Mission district while under police guard. He had been arrested for unlawful entry onto the U.S. Naval ship Enterprise. While being interrogated by the FBI, the suspect had fled. After being chased through the ship and across the hangar deck, he had fallen into an open cargo elevator, causing severe head trauma. Two men and a woman, all dressed in green hospital scrubs, aided in his escape. They had entered the operating room, locked the surgeon, the anesthesiologist and two nurses in a small room and then melted the lock using an unknown device. One of the men then used another device to arouse the comatose patient. The suspect had not been apprehended since his unorthodox escape. The suspects were considered armed and dangerous. Government Contact: Commander Rogerson, United States Navy.

Photos of the four suspects taken from the security cameras at the hospital were included in the file.

"Holy hell," exclaimed Chiz, nearly spilling hot coffee into his lap. One of the suspects was Dr. Gillian Taylor. She'd just escalated from victim to suspect. What had she gotten herself into? What possible connection could there be between a whale biologist and some guy breaking into a naval ship? Where did the other two men come into this? Chiz didn't know but he was sure as hell going to find out! Here he was starting to actually worry about her and she was off committing crimes in some hospital. Patty Hearst had competition.

Dialing the number given for Commander Rogerson, he identified himself and waited to be patched through to the ship. "Commander Rogerson, this is Detective Chizum. I'm working on a case that seems to be connected somehow to your intruder." After giving a brief description of what he had just read, he asked, "I was wondering what you could tell me."

"Well, there's not much to tell on this end. Our FBI guys interrogated him for a couple of minutes, then he ran and fell into the open cargo elevator. He stated his name as Commander Pavel Chekov, service number 656-5827D. The guy thought he was some sort of space man, a Starfleet commander in the United Federation of Planets. He grabs his ray gun off the table and says, 'I will have to stun you.' Sounded like something from one of those old late night TV shows." He does something to the gun, we're not sure what, no trigger or anything, and of course nothing happens. Then he says 'Must be the radiation.' He took off. Next thing we know he's practically dead and we have to ship him off to the hospital. Not much we could do here. His injuries were too severe. They almost lost him on the way to Mercy.

"We checked his fingerprints. They came back negative. No ID on him and we checked all the mental hospitals. We're checking with Interpol as well. Basically we got nothing. We haven't even figured out how he got belowdeck. We weren't secured, in port for some routine maintenance, but that doesn't mean some wacko off the street just drops on in and

no one notices. That's my main concern at the moment. I want to know how he got in. If I have a security breach, I intend to plug it up. And I mean now. My men won't see the light of day until I find out how he got on board."

Commander Rogerson was not a happy camper. Chiz couldn't really blame him. The brass on that base probably chewed up commanders and spit 'em out before breakfast. He'd never see captain's stripes sitting on his shoulders.

The Chevy truck turned up parked near an open field in Golden Gate Park. The contents included the usual registration papers in the glove box, a couple of Hershey bar wrappers, a museum brochure, a pizza receipt, a chewed up pencil with no eraser and a tire iron under the seat. Not exactly hard evidence. Again, no sign of violence. The tire iron hadn't been used. It was covered with dust. It was as if she'd taken a walk in the park and hadn't come back. Chiz fingered the pizza receipt. It was dated the day before she disappeared. A day before her whales had disappeared. The day before she had helped a prisoner escape. He didn't know how but he knew the three things were connected. Two large mushroom and pepperoni pies with extra onion and two Michelobs. She hadn't eaten alone. Chiz's growling stomach convinced him it was time for a North Bay pizza.

"Hey Chiz, shift's over. It's Miller time." Chuck stated as he pulled on his jacket and headed for the door.

"Yeah, and I know just the place. I'll even buy you a beer."

North Bay Pizza was a local pizza joint in the Sunset district not far from where the whale doctor lived. Golden Gate Park was located a few streets further west. North Bay was a popular place with good pizza and reasonable prices.

Chiz ordered a white pizza from a skinny kid with freckles. He was allergic to tomatoes and was delighted when some kindred spirit had created a white pizza. This place boasted the original.

As the kid placed the hot round discs on the table, Chiz asked, "Were you by any chance working last Monday night?"

"No, but Jason was. You want to talk to him?" He pointed him out.

Jason did in fact work on that Monday and even remembered Dr. Taylor.

"What did this guy look like?"

"Average looking, short brown hair, middle-aged, dressed in some kind of red uniform and a nerdy looking white shirt."

"You notice anything strange about the way he talked or acted?" asked Chiz. "This the guy?" Chiz showed him the picture taken at the hospital that he'd borrowed from the file.

"Man, this is San Francisco. Everybody's weird. Yes, that's him. That's her too.

"I was taking some drinks to the next table when I heard her say that she knew outer space was going to come into this sooner or later. After that the guy was in a hurry. He'd gotten some kind of call on his pager earlier. It was a really neat pager though, he could talk on it like a walkie-talkie but it was small. It was really cool. I checked it out. Nobody has one like

it. I looked in every store. Every one of them told me they don't make pagers that small with voice capability."

"They say anything else?"

"He said something really stupid about needing a couple of whales to repopulate the species. Like we don't have enough whales. When I took them the check, I asked 'em who was getting the bad news and she said something like, 'I suppose they don't have any money in the twenty-third century.' And the guy said, 'Well, they don't.' Then they left. She tipped well though."

At least the pizza was good. Lots of mozzarella. Chiz ate while ideas swirled through his mind like a cloud of confetti. As they settled he frowned. He didn't like where this was going. Twenty-third century. That would make it what, 2200 and something. Pagers that don't exist. Some sort of gadget that melts locks and another one that brings some guy out of a coma in seconds. Add a ray gun to the scenario and he might as well fix a bowl of buttery popcorn to go with the sci-fi movie in his head. Chiz decided he'd better stop watching those Buck Rogers reruns at two in the morning.

"Hey Chiz, did you hear about the guy Harry brought in?"

"No. What, Harry, you get another one of those weirdoes passed out on a bus?"

"Better. Some nut over in the park says we're being invaded by aliens and the end is near. Says she saw people walking out of a beam of light. Thinks they're being returned to earth after being captured in the Bermuda Triangle." Harry winked at the waitress. "I think she had a little too much LSD on her last trip."

"Maybe they're from the future and they're kidnapping our scientists." Chiz gulped down the last of his beer, then threw a twenty on the table. "I'm out of here." He was too beat to care about aliens or anything else that went bump in the night.

Sun poured in through the window. Dragging his eyelids open, Chiz decided that a good long run would clear his head and put things in perspective. The day was crisp and cool, smog levels low. The bay sparkled in the early morning light. Seagulls circled and argued to each other over a breakfast of fish. Afterward he would stop for his coffee and paper as he always did.

Chiz, still breathing heavily from his run, dug some change out of his pocket for a newspaper. Giants were having a lousy year. "Thanks, Frank, have a good one." As he turned to go, the headlines of a street tabloid caught his attention, ALIENS LAND IN GOLDEN GATE PARK. "Hey Frank, let me have this one too."

"Don't tell me you read that stuff." Frank snorted. "Bunch of crazies write that thing."

"Yeah probably, but I could use a good laugh."

Unknown aliens landed in Golden Gate Park late Monday night, frightening a nearby garbage crew. "I didn't see no ship, but something was sure there," stated Joe. "The wind started blowing garbage all over the place. There was this strange light, and something that looked like a bridge started coming out of it. Me and Mike got out of there quick." A bag lady collecting cans from the trash bins confirmed the story. She also added that while she hid in the bushes, people-like aliens dis-embarked and walked down the bridge. After they



got off, it closed up and there was nothing there.

Golden Gate Park again. Harry hadn't mentioned the location last night. Chiz didn't believe in coincidences. The Chevy truck left beside the same park where aliens were sighted. Not that he believed in little green men but things were getting a little too weird. He finished reading the article.

Two days later a couple of joggers reported that while in Golden Gate Park, an unexplained wind blew up out of nowhere. They heard a roaring noise but didn't see anything. Another saw a helicopter lowering a big piece of glass into the sky and it vanished, dropped into nothing.

The same day that Dr. Taylor disappeared. Coincidences were just cropping up everywhere. Chiz scanned the rest of the paper. Buried on page three was another article about how an unidentified woman at Mercy Hospital in the Mission district had grown a new kidney while waiting in the hallway for her dialysis treatment.

"Some nice doctor handed me a pill and told me to swallow it and if I had any problems to call him. I grew a new kidney." She kept repeating as in disbelief. "I grew a new kidney, I grew a new kidney." Her doctors are also in disbelief and cannot explain the miracle that took place. The unknown doctor could not be found and no one could identify him from the description given by the patient.

It was all connected. How was the question.

Chiz never went to hospitals. People die in hospitals. He didn't like doctors either. He never got sick but they always wanted to poke and probe at him anyway. He'd avoided his annual physical for two years now. So far the department hadn't caught on. He couldn't circumvent it this time. A trip to the hospital was inevitable thanks to a couple of water-spouting whales.

"So who was the woman in the article that grew a new kidney?" The nurse was cute and Chiz didn't care if she knew anything or not.

"I don't know and I don't want to know. Not that I believe any of that nonsense."

"I thought the doctors had confirmed it."

"Yes, well I'm more inclined to believe they messed up the files in the first place."

Obviously her opinion of doctors wasn't any better than his. He pulled the picture from his pocket. "Seen any of these people before? And I'll need your telephone number for my report."

"Yes, right." But she was smiling as she said it. He was pretty cute. "They were the ones that locked us up in the operating room." She continued working on the chart.

"What about the woman, do you know her? Ever seen her before?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Well, she looks familiar but I can't figure out where I've seen her before. I don't know, she

may just remind me of someone." She turned and nodded to a doctor coming toward the nurse's station.

"That's Dr. Brickman. He was the surgeon." She turned, introduced the two, and then disappeared down the hallway, but not before handing him a slip of paper. Chiz grinned. The trip wasn't a total loss.

The conversation with the doctor was brief, curt, and unproductive. He didn't know how they had revived him. The device the man had used was unfamiliar and as far as he knew didn't exist in this hospital or any other one in the country. They'd run into an elevator and had never come out.

Chiz reviewed his notes. So far three unidentified men were involved. Possibly four, if the guy in the white robe that jumped in the tank was connected. As far as he could tell Dr. Taylor hadn't known any of them before that time and then all of a sudden goes on a crime spree as if they were the best of friends. She then disappears without a trace. Just like her whales.

Golden Gate Park. Dogs chasing Frisbees, young couples holding hands, kids with ice cream dripping down their chins. He hadn't been here in years but it was the same. Sausalito, Mercy Hospital, North Bay Pizza, the garbage men. Golden Gate Park lay right in the middle like the bull's eye of a target. A large indentation in the grass had been preserved by the recent lack of rain. Chiz walked the perimeter. It was so large that just walking through the park you wouldn't notice it as anything unusual. The sketch in his hand showed otherwise. He had paced it off and sketched the shape. It was large, massive and gone. A squashed garbage can lay in the grass, flattened like a penny on a railroad track. Chiz knew the lady in question was nowhere to be found.

His premise was confirmed by the latest tabloid headlines, MILITARY COVERUP, ALIEN SPACECRAFT SIGHTED IN ALASKAN WATERS. FISHERMAN ALMOST CAPTURED.

The enormous, bird-shaped ship appeared out of nowhere, almost crashing into the Russian whaling ship. After narrowly escaping, Captain Kolovsky turned as a massive wake in the ocean appeared out of nowhere. Two whales that had been targeted by the crew had vanished. "The men were so frightened that we headed back to port and hit the tavern. I figured it must be some UFO or Martians but as it turned I could see the word Bounty written in English on the side of the ship."

The HMS Bounty, if Chiz remembered his history lessons, was an eighteenth century British sailing ship famous for the mutiny of its crew.

Chiz knew what he had believed and knew what he didn't want to believe. Aliens, he didn't buy that angle. A few folks in Roswell might. All the people in the pictures looked human. They spoke English. Twenty-third century the man had said. The future. Chiz had never really thought about the future much. Wasn't it Einstein that said, "I never think of the future, it comes soon enough." Good philosophy. All that time being relative stuff. Come to think of it he also said, "Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe."

It was nice to know that there was a future. He smiled. A future with whales and human stupidity. Seemed like things wouldn't change that much.

The case couldn't officially be closed but that didn't mean he was going to put any more time

into it either. After placating Mrs. Schimmerman with some story he would quietly add the folder to the inactive file. He just hoped that Dr. Gillian Taylor was happy with her whales.

For him, his only reminder would be a flattened garbage can with the word Bounty he had spray painted on it. Futuristic art.

## One Last Adventure

### Mark Allen and Charity Zegers

The Argus-class heavy warbird had seen better days. Phaser burns scorched its outer hull in numerous locations. Great gouges peeled back metal plating in several long hull breaches, like an immense claw had ripped along its length at some point in its violent, war-torn past. Technically decommissioned over a century earlier by the Romulan Star Empire, it had only recently been saved from an ignominious end by agents of DTI--the Federation's Department of Temporal Investigations.

Retired Fleet Admiral Korvak sneered, not bothering to hide his displeasure. He stood in the spacedock observation lounge dressed in his old uniform, his gray hair cut with military precision over his pointed ears.

"This is the ship I'm to command?" he said in patent disbelief.

"This pile of scrap from a bygone era?" He turned to the two human men standing beside him. "This had better be some version of a human joke, done in poor taste."

One of the two stepped forward slightly, his nondescript features set in a conciliatory expression. Neither man wore a uniform, nor had they volunteered information such as names. They weren't exactly working under the sanction of their superiors.

"Admiral Korvak, rest assured that by the time you embark on your adventure, the vessel will be completely restored to full working order."

Korvak scowled, clearly not appeased. "It's a relic! It belongs in a museum, or perhaps a junk heap. I refuse to pay a small fortune for your services if this is to be the dubious honor awarded me."

The human frowned slightly. His companion stepped forward, his own expression harder, more accustomed to giving orders than to taking them.

"There were rules in the contract you signed, Admiral. Rules to make sure the game is played fairly, and remains challenging for all parties involved. How fair or challenging would it be if you were able to use a warbird of your current era? You will have at your command technology equivalent to that of the quarry you've requested. We made no secret of that during negotiations. Check your copy of the contract, if you wish."

Korvak didn't bother. He remembered the terms perfectly, but had hoped to bully his way around them.

"Never mind." he said. "Just be sure that you have that ship combat-ready by the designated time." He thrust a large storage case toward them. "Your fee, in full, and in gold-pressed latinum as per your request." He paused as one of the men took out a tricorder and carefully measured the contents of the container. He cleared his throat, watching. "Have you

narrowed down an appropriate point in the timeline for the adversary that I've chosen?" There was a note of excitement to his voice.

The second DTI agent looked up with a smile.

"Why, yes, Admiral, I believe we have," he said, his tone now that of the gracious host. "The perfect moment in history for your adventure. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."

Captain James T. Kirk faced the viewscreen eagerly, his eyes still on the quadrant of space in which the U.S.S. Excelsior had just vanished into warp. He was opening his mouth to give orders to get underway when Commander Uhura suddenly spoke up from her station.

"Captain, I have orders from Starfleet Command. We're to put back into spacedock immediately...to be decommissioned."

A heavy silence descended over the bridge. Decommissioned. Kirk felt as though the word applied to him, and not just his ship. His hands clenched briefly. He could feel the eyes of the rest of his crew on him, waiting. Expecting. Sorrow filled him, along with the knowledge that he could not win this fight. The time of this Enterprise and this crew was done. He swallowed, preparing to give the order.

"If I were human," said Spock suddenly into the silence, "I believe my response would be...go to hell." He looked at his friend, quirked an eyebrow. "If I were human."

The rest of the crew smiled, the tension on the bridge easing as Spock voiced the thoughts they all shared.

"Course heading, Captain?" asked Chekov hopefully.

Kirk felt a wave of gratitude for his friends, his crew, his family. He smiled, stared again at the viewscreen.

"Second star to the right," he said, "and straight on 'til morning."

Commander Chekov took his captain literally, and used his best guess to estimate the coordinates. Realistically, they all knew that it was only a matter of time before Starfleet tracked them down, but surely even the bureaucrats couldn't deny the Enterprise and her crew one last flight together. One last adventure.

Admiral Korvak stood in silence, watching repair crews finishing the refit of his warbird. Once he'd paid, the mission was underway. He'd barely been able to contain himself as he'd waited, a bit less than patiently. His hands released their death hold on each other. James T. Kirk. The greatest human captain Starfleet had ever produced. Kirk was a genuine war captain, product of the conflict with the Klingons nearly two centuries ago. His hands began to shake.

Like him, Kirk had never known defeat. Engaging him in combat would prove to be the challenge of his career as a military genius and admiral of the Star Empire. He would be forever known as the Romulan who defeated the great James T. Kirk.

"She's in complete working order with full armament?" he asked the human just entering the observation lounge.

"But of course, Admiral," the DTI agent assured him smoothly.

"You have a brand-new warbird at your disposal, albeit of the era that your prey is in. We even have coordinates ready for you to intercept Enterprise as soon as your ship is ready to depart."

Enterprise. The name sent a jolt of exhilaration through his Romulan blood. He would also get to face Spock, a longtime thorn in the side of the Star Empire. Korvak had studied all of the texts he could find on the Vulcan. In the time he would be traveling to, Spock would be a captain, not yet an ambassador.

Korvak turned toward the view port. Pavel Chekov became president of the Federation in his later years. This would be a devastating defeat for the Federation. First and foremost to him was the exhilaration of the hunt, of facing the greatest adversary he could find across the bridge of a warship, but he could not deny the appeal of changing the course of history in one fell tactical engagement. He took a deep breath, allowing his emotions to calm. When he'd been told of this little opportunity, he'd been doubtful, but now he couldn't believe what was about to fall under his hands, his command. It would be his final combat voyage, and a glorious end to an illustrious career.

Captain Nagiyama Sotto, Starfleet liaison to the temporal organization DTI, drummed his fingers impatiently on his command chair console. He was a man accustomed to swift action. Over the course of his forty-five years of active service, nothing he'd yet encountered irritated him more than bureaucracy, having to wait for all of the red tape to clear before committing to a course. It was why, at sixty-three years of age, he was still commanding a starship instead of riding a desk.

Yet today it was not merely the waiting game which had him on edge. Today's mission wasn't investigating temporal anomalies, or tracking down individuals who may have, through one means or another, violated the Temporal Prime Directive. Today, Captain Sotto and his crew were after traitors.

"We have them, sir," came the grim voice of DTI Special Agent Jacob Hors. "Positive identification of rogue Agents Whitmore and Hanson. They stayed in the current century to conduct their business, if that's what you want to call it. They're using the old abandoned spacedock structure at Starbase 39-Sierra. Hasn't been used since the late twenty-fifth century, but the repair platform seems to be in good working order."

Sotto sat up, adrenaline immediately kicking in. "Have they actually violated any regulations yet?"

"Unauthorized retrieval of an Argus-class heavy warbird, sir, commonly used by the Romulan Fleet during the late twenty-third and early twenty-fourth centuries. Give me a second...yes, here it is, decommissioned in 2340 by the Romulan Star Empire."

Sotto frowned, then shrugged. "That's not enough, Agent Hors. That might get them a proverbial slap on the wrist, but it won't begin to make up for the dozens of discrepancies they've caused in the timeline. We've been cleaning up after these bastards for the last year and a half. I want more, to make sure there is no escape."

"Looks like they're getting ready to launch another of their so-called games, sir. The warbird looks freshly repaired and outfitted with original weaponry. We'll have to wait until they actually launch it into the past to move, or we won't have any evidence against them except

the ship. Unless we can get their 'customer' to testify." He didn't sound too optimistic, and Sotro could understand why. The Romulans conditioned their soldiers rigorously to withstand capture and questioning. He frowned, considering.

"Do we have a confirmed I.D. on the customer?"

"Coming in now, sir..." Jacob scrolled down the Romulan personnel file as it came up onto his screen, and softly began to curse. Sotro's voice cut him off sharply.

"Agent Hors, a little professionalism, if you please."

"Yes, sir. My apologies, sir." He swallowed, hard. "In my professional opinion, sir, this is going to be nothing short of a political nightmare." He looked up to see the captain scowling impatiently.

"The customer is none other than Romulan Fleet Admiral Korvak, retired."

"Admiral Korvak. The Admiral Korvak?"

"Yes, sir, celebrated war hero, national treasure of the Star Empire...that would be the one, sir. And it gets worse. Our infiltration team has uploaded the files for the game Whitmore and Hanson have planned for the admiral. You'll never guess who he's chosen as his adversary." He waited a moment, wishing he didn't have to be the one to say it. Sotro studied all of the great war captains of history, but one in particular was widely known to be his favorite, his most admired predecessor. Jacob supposed he shouldn't have been surprised by the Romulan admiral's choice. "Captain James T. Kirk of Enterprise."

For a brief moment, Sotro scrubbed a hand over his face, through his graying hair. He sighed.

"All right," he said finally, his mouth set in a grim line. "Here's what we're going to do. Do we have the temporal coordinates they're sending Korvak to?"

"Yes, sir. It'll be almost directly after the signing of the Khitomer Accords in 2293."

Kirk looked out the viewport at the shining planet below him. It was a spectacular view from space, this spinning world with its vibrant colors of blue oceans, green forests, and snowy white glacial caps. It was reminiscent of the Earth he and his crew had seen on their fateful voyage to the late twentieth century.

The com had remained silent since Uhura's last communication with Starfleet headquarters giving him the time he needed to say good-bye to his past and begin his future.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" said Bones with a smile, turning to his comrades.

Spock stood up from his post, facing his longtime friend and verbal sparring partner.

"Doctor..."

"Don't say it," interrupted Bones with a quirk of lips that was almost a smile. "You're not even enjoying the planet below you. But you just let the rest of us take in the view." He patted Spock's shoulder. The two stood in companionable silence for a moment, side by side.

"How about dinner in the dining room?" suggested Kirk, moving up to stand by McCoy and Spock. He had an image in his head of one last dinner aboard Enterprise, one last toast with Romulan ale for the crew.

"Captain, the dining room was destroyed," Uhura reminded him.

"Direct torpedo hit at Khitomer."

"Of course," he said tiredly, shoulders drooping slightly. "Well, we can eat in the--"

He stopped as the sudden sound of proximity alerts went off on the bridge.

"Captain," said Chekov, his voice reflecting his disbelief. "Torpedo coming in at heading one hundred fifteen mark nine. Raising shields!"

"Torpedo?" shouted McCoy incredulously. He grasped at the railing before him in automatic preparation for impact. "It's like a repetitive nightmare. We can't go anywhere in peace."

Kirk was already moving for his command chair, "Spock, scan for vessels..."

Enterprise gave a shudder and a groan as the torpedo struck. Fortunately, it hit the shields Chekov had raised, and not the already battered hull of the ship. Montgomery Scott's voice came through Kirk's command console seconds later.

"Captain, are we under attack?"

"Scotty, I'm going to need one of your miracles and everything you've got in that engine room."

"She's in no condition for a fight, sir."

"Captain," interrupted Spock, "we have a Romulan warbird aft. She must have entered the system cloaked."

"And come out of cloak to fire," Kirk finished grimly. "But why? This is Federation territory, not Romulan space."

"Their weapons are powering up to fire again, Captain."

"Chekov, take evasive action. Uhura, try to raise them, find out what the hell is going on."

"There they are, sir," said Agent Hors as the U.S.S. Hermes settled into position above the combat. They watched as a second torpedo grazed the shields of Enterprise. Jacob frowned. "Looks like she's already taken some pretty heavy fire. Korvak's ship appears undamaged."

"Know your history, Agent Hors," Sotto admonished lightly. "Enterprise sustained heavy damage engaging one General Chang of the Klingon Empire at Khitomer, less than a day ago. They haven't put back into spacedock for repairs because this was to be her last voyage--the NCC-1701-A was decommissioned after the accords."

"But sir, according to my readings, nearly half of her systems are down or severely damaged. They haven't got full power to shields. They don't stand a chance against an

adversary like Korvak."

Sotto was silent, thinking for a moment. Teams back in their own time had taken Agents Hanson and Whitmore the second Korvak's warbird had warped through time. They had indisputable documentation of their actions, and footage of the events here to solidify the evidence against the two traitors. Technically, they didn't need Korvak, and they could not, under any circumstances, allow him to destroy Enterprise.

"It would be best all around," said Sotto finally, "if none of the parties involved ever realize our presence here. The timeline has already suffered enough damage. Maintain cloak for now, Agent Hors. If we have to, we can choose to intervene, but Captain Kirk is sure to have a trick or two left."

"But sir, this is an impossible situation..."

"I don't believe in the no-win scenario.' Do you know who said that, Agent?"

Jacob swallowed further protests, swiveling his chair back to monitor the combat. "Yes, sir," he said reluctantly. James Kirk wouldn't give up until he'd won.

"Sir, I still can't raise a response from that vessel. Regulations specifically state--"

"To hell with Starfleet regulations," Kirk said dismissively, interrupting Uhura. "Chekov, fire everything we've got. Burn that ship to ashes. Enterprise deserves a rest, not a burial."

Korvak watched Enterprise angling away from his ship. What was she doing? He had studied Kirk and knew he was prone to random and illogical solutions to difficult, nigh impossible situations.

"Sir, their shields are nearly failing," his weapons officer informed him. Korvak grimaced, watching as Enterprise spit forth an angry red torpedo. How disappointing, he thought. He'd hoped the engagement would last longer than this.

"Raise shields, and return fire."

"Another torpedo, Captain. I don't know if our shields can take this one," warned Chekov.

"Brace for impact."

The Romulan torpedo exploded into the galley, destroying it.

"Direct hit to the galley."

"Shields dropping, Captain!"

"Captain, I can't give you any more power. She's packing all she can."

Kirk sat in silence, chaos bursting around him. His ship had been crippled in his fight with Chang, and now he was being attacked by a Romulan warbird in the heart of Federation space.

The voices faded away. "You should have trusted me," he'd told Spock before leaving to escort Gorkon. They did trust him. His crew was trusting him to get them through this. He



must have the courage to face it as if he were facing the Kobayashi Maru. The ingenuity of that one test had marked him throughout his career as a starship captain capable of escaping anything, even death.

"Jim, what are your orders?"

Kirk looked up at McCoy and shifted his gaze around the bridge, taking in the faces of his crew--faces he'd seen a million times.

"Turn us around."

Silence descended upon them.

"Turn us around," he repeated.

No one contradicted him. Turning the ship around would face them with their enemy head on, but no one argued. They carried out his order with a calm efficiency that filled him with pride.

"Scotty, give me all of the power you can. This is the final run of the Kobayashi Maru."

"Aye, Captain. I'll give you all that I can."

Korvak watched as the torpedo bloomed against the shields of his ship. Gripping his chair, he rode through the minor shudder of impact.

"Admiral, shields are holding, but only at half power. Minor damage to decks nine through twelve."

Admiral Korvak grimaced. "Fire at will, Subcommander," he said, turning back to the viewscreen to see another torpedo about to hit.

"Incoming!"

The bridge flickered with the damage, but maintained power. Korvak nodded his head in acknowledgment of James T. Kirk's skill as a captain. Only a few captains in the entire galaxy could give that crippled ship a fighting chance, inspiring a crew to greatness.

He frowned suddenly, noticing that the Enterprise was turning. She was going to face him head on. He was struck dumb with shock at the sheer foolishness of the decision.

"Concentrate power in our forward shields, Subcommander. Prepare all weapons to fire on my command." Korvak sat forward in his chair. Perhaps he had misjudged Kirk, after all.

Montgomery Scott worked frantically to give his ship full power. His hands were a blur over the console, trying to align power conduits.

Many of his crew lay injured or unconscious on the floor, and debris littered the deck all around them. They'd almost suffered a warp core breach with that last hit, but two of his crewmen had nearly given their lives to seal it. This was going to be close.

Spock mentally counted down the seconds to the maneuver of their careers. This one moment would prove that his captain and friend could defeat the Kobayashi Maru without

reprogramming the simulation. To survive it would be an illogical turn of events. In short, a miracle.

Kirk sat in total peace. He knew that this was going to work. In fact, he wished he'd thought of it much sooner in his career. Now the question was, could the Enterprise stay in one piece doing it?

"Scotty," he said finally. "It's your game."

"Fire!"

The Romulan warbird spat forth three torpedoes and unleashed a torrent of phaser fire.

Admiral Korvak watched in shock as the Enterprise jumped to warp, not straight ahead, but angled slightly to the side. Only one of his phasers made contact, scorching the side saucer section.

"We've been hit!"

"Structural integrity holding, barely," Spock countered in a calm voice.

Kirk held on to his chair, listening to the groans of the bulkheads. His shields were gone, and the inertial dampeners were shutting down because of the extreme stress placed on them. Scotty had done it again.

"Power?" he managed to ask past the rising internal air pressure; internal regulators must have gone down as well.

"Looking good, Captain. I'll be able to fire once she's gone past us," Chekov answered through gritted teeth.

Enterprise had only jumped to warp for less than a second, but it was enough to evade the barrage and put her in a position that would angle past the warbird, flanking her. The internal pressure caused by the maneuver was putting a serious strain on them all, however. It was why regulations specifically warned against trying anything so risky and experimental with the warp drives.

"Fire!" Kirk croaked out, the heavy weight pressing down on him, almost pulling him into unconsciousness. He hoped Scotty would be able to get those regulators back up before the entire crew passed out.

Chekov reached for the button with a shaking arm. It took every bit of his willpower to fire the weapons of the Enterprise NCC-1701-A.

"Adjust power to our aft shields!"

Even as he gave the order, Admiral Korvak of the Romulan Star Empire knew that it wouldn't be in time. This was the end. He'd wasted his one shot to destroy James Kirk and claim victory, and now he'd been outflanked and outmaneuvered. The Enterprise had whisked past him, rotating on her axis, so the saucer section was always facing him. The amount of inertial damage that ship had taken had to be extreme. He was impressed she'd stayed in one piece, but this was Kirk, and the Enterprise was his ship, never failing him.

He smiled. It had been a good game.

Torpedoes and phasers stretched forth to pound the warbird until her less fortified aft shields came down, exposing her vulnerable hull to Enterprise's weapons.

Kirk and crew sat back in their chairs in silent amazement as the warbird tumbled away from them, breaking up. None of them could believe it had worked.

"Scotty, you did it. How are things down there?"

"Captain, we're banged up pretty bad."

"The doctor is on his way."

McCoy nodded, heading down the ladders because power throughout the ship finally chose that moment to fail. Red emergency lighting flashed on.

"In retrospect," offered Spock with a raised eyebrow, "I would not choose to test that maneuver again."

Captain Sotro and his crew watched as the debris of the Romulan warbird floated through space. Sotro smiled, pleased to have had this opportunity to watch one of his personal heroes in action.

"There, you see, Agent Hors? Kirk managed without much of our aid, after all. Their sensors aren't sensitive enough to detect the slight boost to shields we gave them, or the power drain we applied to Korvak's shields. Damage to the timeline should be minimal. The Enterprise will still see her decommission in less than a week's time, and sensors indicate that all life signs aboard are still strong."

But Jacob Hors didn't share his captain's smile. He was simply relieved it was over. No more games engineered by greedy traitors, no more desperate gambles to right the timeline after one of these incidents. One torpedo hit wrong, and the history of the Federation would have been irrevocably changed. But he didn't bring that up. Instead, he frowned and thought about what he'd just witnessed.

"Sir," he said, "I could be wrong, but I don't think any captain in the history of Starfleet has ever attempted what Kirk did here today."

"Your point, Agent Hors?"

"Well, the timeline has been altered. Every battle logged by Enterprise gets studied at the Academy. How many would-be Kirks do you think will attempt that same move in the future?"

Looking out over his battered and bruised command crew as they gathered together on the bridge, Kirk lifted his glass of scotch. Power had been restored, so that they were no longer bathed in red emergency lights. Starfleet was sending them an escort, both, Kirk suspected, to help the Enterprise limp to spacedock, and to ensure that her captain ordered her home this time.

With the galley and the dining room effectively destroyed, there had been nowhere else aboard fitting for a last dinner. Kirk settled for one last toast, though not with Romulan ale. It

had seemed in poor taste, considering the circumstances.

He looked at each of them. Uhura, Chekov, Scotty, Bones, and Spock. His best friends, through the best and worst of experiences.

"To Enterprise," he said finally, his voice only a little gruff with emotion, "may her next incarnation bear a crew as fine as this one."

They drank solemnly, a poignant silence descending over them. The moment was broken a moment later by Bones.

"So what do you think, Jim?"

"About what?" Kirk looked at his friend quizzically.

"What do you think they'll call that little stunt of yours? It was one for the books, all right."

Kirk frowned. "I've no idea. It hadn't really occurred to me that it would need a name."

Spock lifted an eyebrow.

"There is no logical explanation for the success of your venture, Captain. Mathematically speaking, the inertial field created by the quick jump to warp and immediate drop again, should have torn this ship apart. It did not. One can only conclude that logically..." He paused, glancing around at his crewmates as they waited expectantly for him to finish. He rested his gaze on McCoy. "That logically, there is no explanation. You have achieved the impossible, Captain, once again. There is only one name that such a miraculous thing can be given."

Spock raised his glass. "The James T. Kirk Maneuver."

Marking Time

Pat Detmer

It was time.

Hell, it was past time. Nine-and-a-half shifts with no captain on the bridge was officially too much for McCoy's bruised and rattled system to bear. And irony of ironies, it had been his suggestion. "Take some time, Jim," he'd said in the transporter room as he'd gauged the flatness in his friend's eyes. "Take some time on this one," he'd said.

Who knew that James T. Kirk would take him up on it? Up to now the captain had been unbeatable, unbreakable, bendable only when necessary, and prior entreaties from his chief medical officer to "take it easy" or "take some time" had always been met with predictable and comfortable disdain.

Kirk had said not one word in the transporter room, had left McCoy's concern unacknowledged, had brushed past a hovering Spock with no comment, and had disappeared around the night-shift-lit corridor curve as McCoy and Spock, wearing identical frowns, had watched.

Thinking about it now as he stood at the door to Kirk's quarters, McCoy was fairly certain

that the last full sentence that he had heard Jim utter was "Let's get the hell out of here."

He cleared his throat and shifted the jeweled bottle of Saurian brandy in his hands.

Jim could refuse him entrance, of course. That was his right. The captain knew that the ship could run just fine without him for the short term. Everybody knew that. He had a com unit in his quarters. He could check on their status with the push of a button and had been doing so with some regularity the whole time, according to Spock. And they were currently sailing through placid seas, as if the universe knew that what had just happened was Enough.

But nine-and-a-half shifts...

McCoy had avoided looking up Starfleet regs for anything like this. Besides, he was sure that Spock had already committed whatever there was to memory, including the goddamned regulation number, so what was the point?

With the Guardian of Forever three standard days behind them, McCoy had sent a message to his absent captain: "I have some (illegal) Saurian brandy. I think it's time to get legal by removing the evidence. I'll be by your quarters at 1900 hours. McCoy."

Never much of a letter writer, he'd struggled over it for nearly half an hour. He didn't want to be too obvious. Didn't want to hover. Wanted to temper his concern with a life-goes-on attitude, a kind of eat, drink illegal substances, and be merry joie de vivre. He'd actually grimaced as he'd hit the "send" button, and had sucked air through his teeth as he'd seen it confirmed that the system had deemed his twenty-six-word note acceptable and had sent it away to the addressee, a note that had--according to a check of his "sent" queue later--been opened and read. McCoy had longed briefly for the ability to go beyond merely knowing that it had been received. He wished for an empathetic system that would tell him how it had been received.

But James T. Kirk was not captain of a Federation starship for nothing. Psych profiles on all captains had one thing in common: a high probability for making cosmic lemonade out of lemons. McCoy knew Jim would get over this and would show up on the bridge, even of temperament and firm of resolve.

He just wanted to kick-start the process.

And he needed a little forgiveness.

If only...

If only he'd remembered all the lessons he'd learned in the Academy. If only he had paid better attention during the Deep Space Medicine: The Reality lecture series--a parade of old CMOs and medical technicians, incident-weary veterans telling funny, bitter stories about mistakes made, about botching surgeries while warping through spatial sinks, about bone-knitters misfiring during power surges, about removing kidneys twice in temporal anomalies, about treating Orion plasma cannon burns with alien critter shit while planetside and cut off from sickbay; relating how to counteract the effects of a Klingon Mind-Sifter (you couldn't) and what to do if you yourself took a phaser hit. (Nothing. You go down just like the rest of them.) And in there somewhere was something about turbulence and loaded hyposp-rays. If he'd taken any decent notes in his student days, he would have looked them up now just to punish himself a little more effectively.

## Handling Loaded Hyposprays During Turbulence:

Drop them. Don't hesitate. Just drop them. You can pick them up off the deck later, but only if you're conscious.

But he didn't drop it, of course. After he'd shot Sulu with it and had allowed himself a brief moment of doctorly congratulation, he'd stood there like an idiot, holding it up in front of himself like a damned award, and then the Guardian had thrown another angry wave at them and...

The whisper of some passing crew members shook him from his reverie.

No sense putting it off, he thought, and he leaned into the face-plate, seeking admittance. The door slipped open. He stepped in and the door slid closed behind him.

It was dim in the captain's quarters. The only light came from the com unit.

The place smelled of uneaten food and cold coffee, of overly ripe bedsheets, of meals that had been eaten and found the stomach inhospitable. It smelled of unwashed hair and of man sweat and despair, and McCoy nearly took a step backward under the weight of it. He had not expected Jim's grief to be so unsubtle, and he feared his ability to deal with it effectively.

"Bones." It was the scratch of a voice unused.

He was in one of the chairs in the seating area across from his desk, one arm thrown over the chair back, the other crooked on the chair arm, and his chin was in his hand. McCoy could barely see him, the light was so spare. McCoy would allow him that, the darkness, this last vestige of privacy in a ship of four hundred plus souls.

He gave Jim what he knew to be a pathetic excuse for a lopsided grin, and hefted the gaudy bottle up in front of him.

"Just what the doctor ordered," he said. Yep. Drown your sorrows, Jim-boy, he thought, feeling foolish and inept. God forbid we actually talk about this. And he'd taken psych for how many years?

Jim waved him to the sideboard where he kept the glasses, and McCoy let his doctor's eye roam as he headed there, scanning the uneaten platters of food, looking for empty liquor bottles. There were none. That, at least, was a relief, and he only realized the irony of that thought as the sweet/spicy odor of Saurian brandy wafted up to him while he poured. He recorked the bottle, put it under his arm, and went to the chair next to Jim. He sat and held the glass out toward him.

"I've had this for at least seven or eight years. Hauled it around with me. I was waiting for the right moment to crack it."

"This is it, then?" Jim asked, reaching for the glass. "The 'right moment'?" His lips formed a rueful and bitter line. "I'd hate to see the 'wrong moment.'"

No tremors, McCoy thought as he looked at Jim's reaching hand, and he did a quick examination of the rest of his friend over the top of his glass as he sipped: beard stubble, hair disheveled, dark smudges under the eyes. McCoy could not remember having seen the fine lines around the mouth and on the forehead even in the harshest light, but the hazel eyes

were intelligent and clear, and in those eyes McCoy saw pain so encompassing that he shut his own eyes as he finished off his sip so he wouldn't have to look any longer than he had to. Despair looked odd on the captain, like an ill-fitting uniform. He looked...surprised. Surprised and confused.

Small wonder.

There were jokes back at the academy about Captain Kirk, McCoy knew, jokes about his propensity to bed the universe, to charm the blue of skin and silver of hair. Language barriers had never stopped him. Curious appendages had never stopped him. He was a lover of life, and therefore a lover of women.

McCoy figured that only about half of the stories were true. Jim Kirk was not a talker, but the belowdeck rumors were rampant nonetheless, and many a lovesick yeoman had committed the curve of the captain's derriere and the breadth and cut of his shoulders to memory as they'd walked behind him down the ship's corridor.

Eros had never fired an arrow across Jim Kirk's bow before. Infatuation? Yes. Fascination? Yes sir. Sexual attraction? Sir, yes sir.

But Edith Keeler had been different. Edith Keeler was a hot ball of belief and energy, so flush with her philosophy that she was almost frightening, almost a zealot. She was radiant. She was smart. She knew what she wanted. She was charismatic and brave, fearless, a visionary, a leader of people, lit from within. She was...She was...

She was Jim Kirk in a skirt.

She was Jim Kirk in a skirt. James Tiberius Kirk had been brought down by a distaff version of himself, someone who could captain a starship and give birth.

Too late, McCoy realized that the snifter had frozen halfway to his lips and that his mouth had dropped open and that he was staring wide-eyed at a spot on the wall just left of the captain's ear as his brain struggled to wrap itself around this morsel.

"Bones?"

"Hunh?" McCoy shifted his gaze back to his companion.

Jim squinted at him. "What? What are you thinking?"

Shit. He couldn't tell him what he was thinking. So he lied:

"I was thinking that you should have left me back there."

It wasn't a lie after all. It was a truth that had seared his nightmares, and his tongue pushed the words through his teeth before his lips had a chance to close around them.

Jim's face went slack as he considered this. It was obvious to McCoy that he'd not given it any thought. Jim didn't think like that. Never had.

"And if it had been someone as...as anonymous as a...as a Yeoman Weathers, for example, you probably would have left her back there." McCoy couldn't help himself. He was here for a good old-fashioned whipping, and if he had to twist the truth and wound an already wounded

Jim Kirk to get the process started, so be it.

Jim frowned and shook his head. "Who?"

McCoy took another sip. Actually, a gulp. His right eye watered a little.

"Yeoman First Class Jamie Weathers. Been on board for four months. Xenobiology lab technician." McCoy watched as that bit of data clicked in. He had no doubt that her files would be accessed by the captain as soon as this session was over. "If she'd fallen on a hypospray and gone loony and jumped through that goddamned thing, I think you might have had the good sense to leave her behind."

Jim's features settled into a face that McCoy almost recognized. Jim was mentally chewing on something, and the puzzle of it suited his taste. Crinkle lines--part bemusement, small part anger--appeared at the corners of his eyes and he turned those eyes on his CMO like a weapon, armed for deep penetration. All eyes ahead full.

"And here for the past three days I thought I was the center of the universe," he said, and he saluted McCoy with his glass and drank.

"Guess I was wrong." He smiled, and McCoy swore that he could hear Jim's facial muscles scream from the effort. "Are you here for a whipping or for forgiveness? Or both?"

"All of the above," McCoy said. "I'll take anything."

"Poof," Jim said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "You're forgiven. Even though there's nothing to forgive. Or have you forgotten that there was no Enterprise to leave on, even if I'd thought that might be an option?"

Of course McCoy hadn't forgotten. Unfortunately, he couldn't forget anything that had happened once he was free from the grip of cordrazine.

"As for a whipping..." Jim took a thoughtful sip of brandy.

"Don't have the energy. Maybe tomorrow."

McCoy looked over at him through hooded eyes. "Does that mean you'll be back tomorrow?"

"Are you counting?" A challenge.

"Yes."

Jim nodded down at the snifter as he rolled it between his palms.

"We'll see," his lips formed without sound. He cleared his throat and looked back up. "We'll see," he said loud enough to hear.

"It's time, Jim," McCoy said, leaning toward the table between them and uncorking the bottle. Jim held up a hand in refusal. McCoy shrugged and sloshed some more in his glass. The damned stuff had cost him nearly three months' salary. Another glass and it would be gone.



"I've been thinking about the Academy a lot," Jim said, gazing over toward his desk, "about how it doesn't prepare you for..." He looked back at his friend. "...for this kind of shit."

"Me, too," McCoy admitted after another healthy swig. "Sometimes, though, I think the lessons were there and we just chose to think we knew better." He grinned. "Education is wasted on the young."

"You know what example they used in Prime Directive 101, Bones?"

No. But he could guess.

"Hitler," Jim confirmed. "Adolf Hitler."

"No imagination, those professors," McCoy said in a slur, shaking his head.

"But it's perfect, isn't it?" Jim frowned into the middle distance. "One-Size-Fits-All Monster of the Universe. So you land on a planet and you have a chance to stop Hitler--"

"...or T'Hitler or Hitler Khan," McCoy added, feeling giddy.

"--and what do you do?" He looked back at McCoy as if he expected a cogent answer.

"What do you do?"

"Well," McCoy drawled, and he crossed his legs, expecting a good old Kirk/McCoy ethics debate, "I'd think the firs--"

Before he could fully grasp what was happening, McCoy realized that Jim's grizzled face was a mere half-meter from his, and Jim's eyes had nailed him to the chair like a paralyzer beam.

"Did she see it coming, Bones?" he whispered in a voice baked in hell.

"What?"

"Edith. Did she see it coming? The truck?"

McCoy looked away and up at the ceiling, at the pool of light above the com unit. "Ah, Jimbo...I..."

Kirk would not be redirected. McCoy could feel his hot breath on his neck. "You're a doctor, Bones. Did she feel pain? Did she die right away?"

McCoy's mouth had gone dry. He couldn't make sound. Didn't want to. There were no good sounds to make to that question.

Jim looked back into his dim quarters, his eyes tracking furiously as if the answer might be written on the walls, and he beat his free fist on his chair's armrest, harder and harder, and McCoy pressed down into his own chair as a howl came from Jim's throat. Part sob, part tribal cry, it made all the hairs on McCoy's arms stand at attention. The captain rose from his chair like a dark wave reaching a rocky shore and threw the snifter, unfinished expensive illegal Saurian brandy notwithstanding, into the opposite bulkhead.

McCoy watched as the purple/red liquid tracked down the wall. Like blood. Like the blood

he'd seen on Edith Keeler. He licked his lips. He wanted nothing more than to escape down the corridor, to escape into sleep where there was no escape. But this was no time for cowardice.

Jim was standing in front of him, and he was burning a hole through the bulkhead with his eyes, chest heaving, fists clenched.

McCoy took a deep breath.

"Well, I hope you're happy," he said in what he hoped was an unconcerned, nonchalant tone, and he took another sip and pointed at the wall. "Do you have any idea what that was worth?"

Slowly, slowly the captain turned to look at him, to look down at him as if he was a newly discovered species. As in: Hello. What's this? As if Jim didn't even realize that his self-imposed exile had been broken by another being. McCoy stared back, facade un-flinching, and his insides danced and twitched. And as he watched, Jim Kirk deflated like an enviro suit in a decompression chamber and dropped back into his chair.

And started to laugh.

McCoy listened to it carefully, listened for something sharp, listened for some kind of edge to it, but found none. It was a Holy Smokes I Can't Believe I Just Did That chuckle. No belly, all throat and brain. There was no desperation in it, and McCoy sighed and relaxed back into his chair. He felt as if he'd been held captive in a muscle-restrictive stasis field for weeks and had just figured out how to work the controls. Everything was going to be all right.

Eventually.

Jim heaved a great sigh and rubbed his face with his hands. He turned to McCoy, a weak and sheepish grin on his lined face.

"Hey. It's okay." McCoy said, and he smiled. "I can always bootleg more. But I'll need a bump in pay."

Jim gave him a blank nod, not appreciating the humor in it. "I guess that..." he said, and he stopped. He stared at the table between the chairs, at the green and gold bottle there. He was a still life in sadness. He began again.

"I guess that I don't think I'm going to have many chances at it." He looked at McCoy. "At love. At being with someone, being committed to someone. And here my best chance may have been a hundred years ago, on my own planet."

McCoy wanted to blow that notion off, to tell him that he'd have plenty of chances, that there were thousands of proverbial fish in the seas that they sailed, but he was struck mute. He couldn't provide those assurances because he knew in his heart that they weren't true. Not for him, and not for his friend. The life they led was the excuse that he might use, but that was only part of it.

Jim looked down at his hands. "But I also realized something, Bones. I've run from commitment my whole life. Wasn't it convenient that I happened to fall for someone that I knew I couldn't have? Even if she hadn't been the catalyst that had changed the universe and made the Enterprise disappear, I couldn't have stayed back there."

"I know."

Jim's eyes grew soft. "I couldn't have." He raised his eyebrows and looked at McCoy.

"Could I."

It was a statement, not a question, McCoy told himself as his gaze left Jim's face and ranged through the cabin. Jim would never have considered it. The Enterprise would have been captainless. Captainless, but not without adequate interim leaders. And a new captain would have been commissioned as quickly as possible. Starfleet--slow as glacier melt when it suited them--didn't hesitate when it came to a captainless starship. And life would have proceeded. Minus James T. Kirk, but it would have proceeded. As it always did.

McCoy felt Jim's eyes on his face, felt them bore through his skull and into his brain, and McCoy knew that Jim read the thoughts there as easily as he might read something on his com unit screen. McCoy turned to him.

"No. Even if she hadn't been the catalyst, you couldn't have stayed," he lied. "You did the right thing."

Jim nodded and rubbed the back of his head, as if it hurt to read the truth and hear the lie.

"You know what really pisses me off?" he asked.

"What?"

"What I gave up to keep the universe the same, and the universe doesn't give a damn. It rolls right along, marking time, and it doesn't give a damn."

McCoy grunted. This was getting dangerous. This was beginning to sound like the nightmares he'd been having, and he didn't need to visit those places awake.

"Hey!" he said, and he took the last swig of brandy. "I give a damn!"

Jim smiled at him. It was genuine and unprotected, and it made McCoy's heart ache.

"Gotta go," he said, and he leaned forward and squeezed Jim's knee. "Go back to work, Jimbo. It'll be good for you."

The captain nodded. McCoy pressed his lips into a pensive line and nodded back, then rose and headed for the door. It swooshed open and then closed behind him and McCoy stood outside it and did the thousand-yard stare across a corridor that was only four.

It was a good fifteen seconds before he heard the breathing.

It was Spock, and he was to McCoy's left, next to the door, and he had become the corridor wall: still, gray, waiting. McCoy turned to face him, his brain screaming: Don't quote me regulations, Spock. Don't quote me any goddamned regulations.

McCoy stood in front of him, deliberately closer to Spock than he liked, breaking that unspoken meter-apart rule that he telegraphed through every pore of his green Vulcan hide. McCoy felt his heart pound. He was just drunk enough to yell out loud what was pulsing

through his brain before Spock even had the chance to spout the chapter and verse.

His vitriol faded when he saw the depth of concern in Spock's eyes and noted the hollows under his cheekbones, made stark in the half-light of the corridor. McCoy cursed the receding Guardian of Forever yet again and watched Spock take a deep breath. When he spoke, it was one word, filled with feeling. He said:

"Well?"

"Well." It was without a doubt the most human thing he'd ever heard his friend say, and he considered carefully how to answer him:

"Well, I don't feel any better, and I'll be the first to admit that that was one of the reasons I went in there."

"Well...ignore the stuff dripping down the wall."

"Well, he'll be back soon. I give it a shift, tops."

"Well, the universe doesn't give a damn, but I think you knew that already."

And he leaned forward and squeezed Spock's upper arm, allowing himself a moment of surprise when Spock didn't flinch, and he said:

"Well. Another visit from another friend who gives a damn will do him a world of good."

Ancient History

Robert J. Mendenhall

The tavern was dark and smoky, as taverns often are. And it stank. It reeked of bad booze, bitter tobacco, and alien sweat. The bar beneath his glass was a hard, woodlike material Montgomery Scott had never seen before, but it was as sticky and ring-laden as any bar he had leaned on in his remote youth. Scratchy music taxed his nerves in a relentless attack from somewhere behind him. At least he thought it was music. Whatever it was, it stifled the chaotic, multilingual chatter that crowded him.

He lifted the glass and swirled the cloudy, emerald fluid, unsure if his burning throat could take another swallow. What the hell, he thought with bolstered pride. He'd thrown back homemade swill worse than this in his long life and hadn't gone blind yet. He brought the dirty glass to his lips and braced himself.

But he didn't drink. He paused for a moment, a blank stare fixed on the liquid, then lowered the glass to the bar. He cupped it between beefy hands and stared at it with renewed despair.

That was the Montgomery Scott of over a hundred years ago, he silently cursed. A whole bloody century ago. Loneliness washed over Scotty like a cold surf. He was a useless relic, torn from his own time by a twist of events and the curse of his own ingenuity. Oh, the twenty-fourth century had done its part to welcome him, but the plain and simple truth was the skills he possessed as a starship engineer, while seemingly magical in his own era, were obsolete in 2370. Antiquated. His friends were all dead. His family--long gone. His career? Ancient history.

He was useless.

Alone.

He pushed the glass away, dug some coins from his trousers and tossed them onto the bar. The stool grated against the bare floor as he pushed back. He pivoted on the seat, ready to stand, but paused again to look over the crowd and the multitude of strange, strange faces. Scotty had lost count of the different species he had encountered in his Starfleet career, but so many of the beings here were alien even to him. Such strange configurations of features. And what odd colors and skin textures. Some had tentacles. Others had fins. Some wore breathing masks. Others were naked, or so he supposed. Fumes rose from still others. He shook his head in amazement. And in validation of his own status as a living fossil.

Scotty rose with an ill-concealed grunt of exertion and cut his way through the crowd toward the exit portal. And then--froze dead in his tracks.

He squinted through the chalky air at a figure hunched over the end of the bar, almost as he himself had been just a moment ago. It was a man--a human. He was dressed in civilian clothing more out-of-date than the old fleet uniform Scotty wore. "I dinna believe this," Scott whispered aloud.

He elbowed his way to where the man sat, rage churning inside him. He stopped less than a meter behind him and stared at the back of the man's head with his jaw clenched so tightly he trembled. He thought he had been mistaken. He hoped he had been wrong. Not him. Not now.

"Ye bastard," Scott said, as if spitting bile held too long in his mouth. "Why the hell are ye still alive?"

The man raised his head, but never turned around. He sat rigid and spoke with a smooth, academic tone. "Montgomery Scott. I'd know that swillish, drunken accent in any century."

"Get up, ye targ."

Morgan Bateson stood slowly and turned toward Scott, his bearded face expressionless, his high forehead smooth, his eyes relaxed and calm. "I heard you had turned up alive," Bateson said evenly. "I have to say I was surprised. I thought I was the only poor sap that time had toyed with. But it seems that is not the case. Although, we were once about the same age. You've put on about twenty years. And about thirty kilos."

"Ye're a bastard."

"Yes, you said that. I suppose after I disappeared, you went back to her," Bateson said. "Took advantage of her grief. Of her loneliness. That would be just like you."

"How did ye get here?"

"Here? Why, I flew my starship. It's in orbit, you see. I beamed down, you know. Heard this place was supposed to be a classy spot." Bateson scanned the smelly tavern and scowled, then fixed his sight solidly on Scott. "I heard wrong."

"I mean how did ye get here, in this century. Your ship was reported missing in

twenty-two...twenty-two...." Scott paused searching his alcohol-thickened memory for the year.

"2278, Monty. The year was 2278. Would you like the stardate?"

Scott took a menacing step forward. Bateson never moved. Never flinched. They stood nearly nose to nose. Scotty could smell the fabric of Bateson's clothing and the tang of his cologne. That cologne--he knew it. It had been Mira's favorite.

"She loved me," Scott taunted.

"She married me."

Scott's face flushed. He balled his fist tightly, so tightly his fingers whitened. He drew back his arm with a slow, deliberate movement.

"Haven't we done this once, already?" Bateson said.

Before Scott could strike, he was ripped from the floor by the back of his collar and swung about like a child's doll. "What the bloody hell!" Scott bellowed.

"Release me!" Bateson shouted.

Scott raised his hands above his head and wrapped them tightly around a massive, hairy trunk of an arm. He was swinging awkwardly and caught sight of Bateson on the other side of a thick chest, dangling from a second arm.

Whatever had them burst through the exit portal's environmental shield and into the dusty street. The behemoth released his grip and shook Scotty loose. The Scotsman dropped to the dirt, landing clumsily on his backside, the wind knocked out of him. He turned over, gasping, in time to see a gorilla-like creature amble back into the tavern, disappearing behind the translucent environmental shield.

The street was dark and relatively quiet, compared to the white noise of the tavern. Scott felt a bit chilled as the perspiration on his face cooled in the night air. There was a subtle scent of cooking stew in the slight breeze coming from the nearby cluster of corrugated shacks. This was a mining world, he recalled. Not a resort.

"Well," Bateson said, "I've never been tossed from a bar by a bouncer like that before."

Scotty turned his attention back to Morgan Bateson. The younger man--the now younger man--was sitting up and brushing the dust from his shoulders. Damn it, they had been the same age when Bateson disappeared.

"How the hell did ye get here and why aren't ye dead?" Scott asked as he pushed himself--with great effort--to his feet. His back ached. "And why aren't ye any older than the last time I saw ye?"

"My, so many questions from a man who was about ready to pop my warp core," Bateson said as he stood with much greater ease than Scott had. The ease of a younger man.

"I'm still gonna pop yer warp core, ye mugato."

"Of course you are, Monty," Bateson said sounding unconvinced of that likelihood. He turned to walk off in the opposite direction.

Scotty grabbed him by the arm and spun him around to face him. "Don't call me Monty. And don't ye walk away from me."

Bateson easily twisted his arm free of Scott's grasp. "I didn't come here looking for you. Monty. As a matter of fact, you were the very last person I ever wanted to see again. I came to this rock to get my ship repaired. As soon as it is, I'll be as far away from here and as far away from you as I can. As fast as I can."

"There's a bloody starbase two light-years from here, why didn't ye pull into dry dock there?"

Bateson said nothing. He stared at Scott, his eyes now dagger-sharp, his face as taut as Scott's had been earlier.

"Ahh," Scotty said. "Ye dinna have a starship in orbit at all, do ye? I'll wager ye're not even in Starfleet. Are ye?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm on an extended leave of absence. If it's any of your business. And the ship is mine. Now why don't you go crawl back into that transporter phase transition coil you came from and just dematerialize."

"It was a bloody pattern buffer."

"Whatever."

"Ye didn't answer my question. Why aren't ye dead?"

"As I said, Scott. It's none of your business. It's no one's business. I just want to be left alone." Again, Bateson turned and walked off into the night.

And, yet again, Montgomery Scott lumbered after him.

"I can find out, easy enough," Scott said. "If ye're still in Starfleet, there'll be a record, and I still have a high security access."

Bateson stopped abruptly and spun on Scott. "Why the hell don't you just leave me alone. I don't want anything from you. I don't want anything to do with you."

"You stole her from me."

"You are such a dinosaur. You were extinct even a century ago. Mira Romaine wasn't yours to steal."

"We had a special relationship. We loved each other."

"You had a relationship, yes. You loved her, yes. But, Monty, she didn't love you. You left her to do her job on Memory Alpha, and then you turned around and went back into space. And that was that."

"We were both in Starfleet. We both knew what that meant."

"Yes, you both did. But, face it, old man. You left her there. You hardly wrote. You didn't go back."

"I went back."

"Well, yes you did actually. Seven years later. What did you expect?"

"I dinna expect to find ye there," Scott said. "With her."

"Did you think she would just wait for you? What kind of Scottish fantasy is that?"

"You took advantage of her loneliness."

"Monty, wake up. She wasn't lonely. She had her work there, and friends. She wasn't pining away for you. When I was assigned to that sector--when I met her--she was doing just fine without you. I didn't mean to fall in love with her, but I did. And she fell in love with me."

"Ye tricked her, ye did."

"And if you believe that, then you're not playing with full thrusters. You're deluded, old man. It was a simple fact of life. We fell in love and we got married. And, Monty, she never once moaned your name in the night."

Scott's eyes glazed with red rage. He lunged at Bateson. The two tangled and fell to the dusty earth, swinging wildly at each other. The impact did nothing to slow them or their ferocity. They rolled like school boys, like street thugs, their decades of fleet training forgotten in the fire of this one angry moment.

No one came outside to watch. No one peeked from behind drawn curtains, curious at the grunts and slaps and blows. This sort of thing was a common occurrence here on--wherever they were.

But not for Montgomery Scott. He hadn't fought one-on-one in who knows how long. He couldn't even recall his last brawl. His muscles were slow and old. He was still a strong man, stronger than most his age. But Bateson, though not nearly as powerful, was now younger than he was. Another cruel joke of fate. Bateson's endurance more than compensated for Scott's strength.

Still, they both weakened quickly. Their blows lost their force. Their clutches were easily broken. Why was he fighting Bateson, anyway? He couldn't--wait. Mira. That's right. They were fighting over Mira.

Their punches diminished to a pittance of their earlier tempest. Finally, they rolled apart and onto their backs, spent, each gasping for breath. Scotty's left eye was puffing shut and he could taste salty blood in his mouth. His ribs ached. His shoulder throbbed. His knuckles were numb and oozing blood.

Sudden shouting and a blast of blaring music-noise drew Scott's attention to the tavern. He managed to turn his head in time to see the simian bouncer drop two more dueling customers to the dirt, then shuffle back inside. The music-noise disappeared with the ape behind the energy portal when it closed. Immediately the two four-armed humanoids began to curse and pummel each other.



Bateson suddenly erupted with a raucous belly laugh. Scotty turned and saw Bateson half lying, half sitting with his forearms propping him up, his head back as he laughed hard and loud.

"What is so bloody funny, ye slime devil?"

"Look at them," Bateson said through his chortling.

Scotty craned his neck back to the brawl and then back at Bateson. "So?"

"They're fighting their fight. Who knows why. In a few minutes, I'll wager that gorilla will drop a couple more. It will probably go on all night. It probably goes on every night."

"I must have hit ye pretty hard. Ye're losing yer containment field."

"Monty, you are as dense as tritanium. Don't you see? In the grand scheme of things, our little fight is just one more little fight. Another tryst among countless trysts. A statistic, no more important to the universe than...than that fight over there."

"Not to me."

Bateson sighed, entwined his fingers and pillowed his head. He lay there on the ground staring through the cloudless sky at the star-speckled heavens. Scott opened his mouth to continue, but stopped. Instead, he lay back himself, one arm supporting his head, the other wrapped around his bruised rib cage. He listened to the sounds of the nearby scuffle with detachment, until it finally ebbed and ended.

The energy portal opened again and, yet again, frantic tavern music escaped into the night. Two gristly humans walked through the portal under their own steam, laughing. The portal closed, cutting off the din. Scotty watched the pair meander past them toward the cluster of shacks, unhurried and without a casual glance at either weary combatant.

Fatigue subdued him slowly and he drifted into a light sleep, unaware he had even done so. Wisps of images whirled in his thoughts. Images of Mira (were they Mira?), unfocused and surreal. Light, airy pictures in his mind, but they were hazy, dreamlike. The images danced in his head, danced with each other at odd angles and in awkward positions. Mira (was it Mira?) moved closer to him. Then receded. They moved closer to him. Mira? She hovered mere centimeters from him. But her face was blurred. Her features wavered before him, never holding to a firm shape. Mira? She opened her mouth, as if to speak, but instead of words came a desperate melee of musical chaos.

Scotty shook his head with a start as a trio of ridge-headed Klingons marched through the open portal, growling and guffawing. Before the portal could fully close, another group of alien patrons popped through and left the tavern. It was getting late. Or early.

"They said it was a temporal causality loop." Bateson said, his voice a hoarse and broken whisper.

Scotty had forgotten Bateson was there on the ground next to him. He turned his head, feeling the rage begin to churn anew. But the pain in Bateson's tone was evident. It cut cleanly through Scott's rising block of anger and, despite himself, the Scotsman felt the briefest touch of connection. He said nothing in response and a few moments of awkward silence passed where only the distant clatter of dishes, muffled conversations, and

occasional moans of delight were heard from the nearby settlement.

"It was a routine survey mission," Bateson went on, choked.

"The Typhon Expanse. Routine. A few weeks out at most, then back to base. Most of my crew were young bucks on their first deep-space assignment, so our patrols were kept short to acclimate them to the separations they would face in the future. From their families. Most of my senior officers were former shipmates and had been with me for years."

Images of his own shipmates, long gone, flashed into his thoughts. Spock. McCoy. Sulu. Chekov. Uhura. And of course, his captain--James Kirk. So long ago...

"It happened so quickly, we weren't even aware of it," Bateson went on softly. "The ship just appeared in front of us. A huge starship like I've never seen before. Headed straight for us. We narrowly missed each other. They hailed us and said they were the Enterprise."

"The Enterprise?" Scott echoed.

"I thought you would appreciate that. But it was not the same Enterprise I had seen before. It must have been twice as massive. And it was not Captain Kirk at the conn. He wore a strange uniform. It reminded me of the old shirts. You remember the old shirts? The red and gold ones?"

"Aye, I remember. That would have been Enterprise- D," Scott said. "And Captain Picard."

"Yes. You know him?"

"Aye."

"He said we needed to talk. He met with me and told me...He told me the Bozeman had entered a rift in the time-space continuum and been trapped in a temporal causality loop. For ninety years. Ninety years. And there was no going back.

"It was unbelievable. Ninety years, gone in an instant. The younger crew took it hard. Many are still in psychiatric care, two years after we emerged from the loop. My helm officer lost a wife and three children." Bateson paused and when he continued, his voice broke.

"He--he blew himself out of an airlock a week later. My exec..."

Scotty was appalled, horrified, as Bateson went on, describing how his crew had reacted to their displacement and loss. Scotty's heart quite literally ached for the poor lads and lasses who, through no actions of their own, found their lives mercilessly stolen from them. Yet through it all, Bateson never once mentioned his own adjustment, his own loss.

Scotty had thought of Mira Romaine often over the years. He had loved her, but Bateson had been right. He had gone back into space, refitted his Enterprise, even completed a second five-year mission before he had gone back to see her. In the beginning, their letters had been frequent and lengthy, their calls intimate. By the end, the letters had dwindled to infrequent notes. The few calls had become--friendly. She had her work on Memory Alpha as he had his on the Enterprise. They both had continued with their lives and somewhere along the way, their bond had atrophied.

When he finally returned to Memory Alpha, he learned she had married Morgan Bateson. He

had gone there to clear the air between them, to allow them both to move on. But discovering she had married someone else had triggered in his heart an irrational eruption of pain and rejection. He had reacted to it the way he reacted to most conflicts--head-on and by the nacelles. He fought Morgan Bateson then too, and, in fact, had "popped his warp core."

Bateson, already a captain by then, could have had Scott court-martialed for striking a superior officer. It could have finished Scott's career. Worse, he could have been jailed. But Bateson hadn't brought charges. No. Instead, he simply got to his feet, turned his back to Scott, and limped away. Scotty had taken that as an admission of defeat. But now, over a hundred years later...lying in the dirt of a planet he couldn't even remember the name of, he realized that wasn't true at all. Morgan Bateson had walked away for Mira's sake. The true defeat had been Montgomery Scott's.

Bateson was silent, now. The gorilla had made one or two more trips out the door, but none in the last hour or so. The portal opened and closed as small groups left the tavern. Opened and closed. Opened and closed. The last time, no music-noise had escaped, only the distant clink clink clink of glasses being gathered could be heard. It was late--or early--and the tavern was now closed. In the distance, the ambient sounds of the settlement had diminished into a quiet murmur. The crisp air was laced with the steady, rhythmic chirp of nocturnal insects.

It was Scotty who finally broke the long silence. "After Jim Kirk had been killed on the Enterprise- B," Scott said softly, "I kinda lost touch with the others. Mr. Spock had gone off on one of his secret diplomatic missions. Dr. McCoy had slipped into another semi-retirement somewhere in old Georgia. Sulu was off in deep space on the Excelsior. And I was tired. The universe had changed o'er the years and I was just tired of keepin' up. It was 2294 and I had been in the fleet for fifty-one bloody years."

Scott glanced at Bateson, who stared intently into space, as if entranced.

"I finally decided to leave. I signed onto a small ship called the Jenolen in exchange for transport to the Norpin Colony retirement settlement. Along the way, the ship crashed into a Dyson Sphere and the whole bloody crew was killed except for me and one other. We had no food. No supplies. We were both hurt. I rigged the transporter pattern buffer to continually run itself through a diagnostic cycle, and then put us into the buffer until we could be rescued. I had hoped it would be soon. But it turned out to be seventy-five years later. And you'll find this a wee bit interesting. It was Captain Picard's Enterprise that found me, too."

Scotty heard Bateson issue a soft, ironic chuckle.

More silence followed. Neither moved, except to restore circulation in limbs that had fallen asleep. The tavern was dark. The town, now asleep. The wind subtle and cool.

"I miss her, Scotty," Bateson whispered.

Scott wasn't sure Bateson had really wanted to say that. He wasn't sure he really wanted to hear it, either. His throat tightened and began to ache.

"We were talking about starting a family," Bateson went on in slow, soft clips. "About settling down. She was ready to leave Alpha. I think she had finally accomplished all she thought she could there, and was willing to turn the job over to someone with a fresh perspective. I can still see her in my mind, Scotty. Her face is so clear. So sharp. Her hair soft and dark. I see

the curve of her neck, the lift of her eyebrows. Her lips, painted just slightly. Her scent is so vivid, it's like she's right here. If I close my eyes, Scotty, I--I swear she's right here..."

Scott thought of Mira. He tried to visualize her face in his own thoughts, but could only muster a blurry image, nondescript and vague. For the life of him, he couldn't remember the color of her eyes.

"I...she..." Bateson said with an exertion of breath. "Gods, what she must have gone through."

Scott felt uneasy. He was uncomfortable with this kind of talk, this kind of emotional honesty. And worse, he was sinking slowly into the quicksand of compassion. Despite himself, he was drowning in it and to struggle against it was futile. Over there was a man he had detested for years now baring his soul to him. And it moved him.

Damn it all, it moved him.

"Morgan," Scott said tentatively, unsure. Uncomfortable. "Morgan, she went through a hard time when ye disappeared, to be sure. And I did go to her, as ye said. But I could'na take advantage of her. Ever. She waited for ye to return. Until Starfleet officially listed yer ship as lost. Even after that, she waited. She stayed on Alpha a long time, because she knew that's where ye would go. But she healed, Morgan. And I know ye wouldn't have wanted her to go on grieving. She finally left Alpha and returned to Earth. She hated space travel, ye know, so she took a teaching post at the Academy. I saw her every once in a while. But she never regained her interest in me."

"Did...did she remarry?"

Scotty hesitated. Should he tell him? He didn't need to know, did he? Why not let him remember her as his wife? But then, would Bateson have wanted her to keep on grieving? Keep on hurting? Year after bloody year? Would Scotty? No. If Mira had been his wife, Scotty would have wanted her pain to fade and her life to go on without him. Scotty would have wanted her to be happy again.

"Aye," Scott said, finally. "That she did. But it took ye being gone for nearly thirteen years."

In the distance, thunder rumbled softly, a long, subtle prelude to the approaching dawn.

"I--I'm glad. Thank you, Scotty. Thank you for being honest with me."

Montgomery Scott pushed himself up to a sitting position and looked hard at Morgan Bateson. Their eyes locked for a moment, then for a few moments more. Bateson rose to his feet and extended his hand to Scott. Scotty eyed it. Damn it all to bloody hell! He gripped it and pulled himself up.

"You know, Scotty," Bateson said as their hands parted. "I heard that your friend Spock was still alive."

"Spock? Aye, that could be. Vulcans can live over two hundred years. Would ye know where he might be?"

"No, only that he was on a diplomatic assignment."

"A secret one, no doubt."

"And another of your friends is still kicking. In fact, I met him last year. Leonard McCoy."

"Nay, that canna be possible. He would be almost 140 years old."

"And he looks every bit of it," Bateson added. "He's an admiral now. Retired I think, but still very influential. And very cantankerous."

"That would be Dr. McCoy, all right. Ye know, Morgan, why don't ye let me take a wee peek at your ship. I'm a fair mechanic, ye know. I may be able to fix her for ye."

"Why, thank you, Monty," Bateson said, slapping the engineer on his shoulder. Scott winced. "I heard you were once a passable wrench-monkey. All right. Tell you what. You get my engines running, and I'll replicate the thickest steak you ever saw."

"And I've got an eighty-year-old bottle a scotch on my shuttle."

"And then," Morgan Bateson added softly, slowly. "Then, Scotty, let's go home and find Mira's grave. And say good-bye."

Another moan of thunder rolled softly in the distance as the night sky grayed into the fresh new morning.

"Aye, Morgan." Montgomery Scott said. "Let's do just that."

Bum Radish: Five Spins on a Turquoise Reindeer

TG Theodore

"Montgomery Scott, put down that elf this instant!"

The curious nine-year-old froze in his tracks. He knew that tone of voice. His mother was in no mood to dillydally.

"But Mother, I--"

Arlyne Jorgensen Scott began tapping her foot.

"Aye."

Reluctantly, Montgomery Scott surrendered the robotic Santa's helper to the repairman and ambled back to his mother. "I only wanted t'see how it worked, y'know."

"I know you, young man. In three more seconds you would have had it in pieces."

Scotty smiled. "And in ten seconds I would have had it back together, workin' twice as good, too. The power's been out on the whole sleigh ride for ten minutes now. I coulda had it back up and runnin' in three."

His mother laughed. She had a beautiful smile and a wonderful laugh, he thought. Blond and fair-skinned, remnants of her northern Scottish and Danish heritage. Scotty could only hope to one day find a woman half as pretty as his mom.

The Aberdeen town square was in its full holiday glory. With so many diverse and important holidays in December, it had become a long-standing town tradition to recognize them all by having a month-long celebration.

The annual decorations reflected such holidays and observances as Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, the winter solstice and--of course--Hogmanay, the Scottish new year.

All the decorations and displays were warm, festive and tasteful--except one.

The Santa ride.

It was one of the older decorations and--through tradition, not taste--had survived through the last century. It consisted of a large red, silver, and wood-colored sleigh which held not only a large robotic Santa, but room for about ten children. And "pulling" the sleigh were nine reindeer who--for reasons lost to history--were painted the colors of the rainbow, and then some.

Dasher was solar yellow. Dancer was royal blue. Prancer was a bright green. Vixen, a sort of burnt orange, and so on.

Each reindeer could hold one child, and when the ride was activated, the sleigh gently rocked port and starboard, and each reindeer slowly lurched forward and back. It was rather like a merry-go-round--which didn't.

Though it looked atrocious, children for generations loved it. And riding it had been a Scott family tradition as well. Scotty remembered sitting on Comet--his favorite--when he was barely walking. His mother and father would be at his side, steadying him, but he always felt so independent and free up there that he'd soon forget his parents were nearby.

He would look up at the clear Scotland sky and imagine he was up in space, piloting a shuttlecraft, not a poorly painted mechanical reindeer whose hydraulics moaned and groaned with every movement.

At this moment, though, the power to the ride had gone out--again. And with it, the scratchy recordings of old holiday tunes. The square didn't seem quite the same without the music and the ride going.

The ride used an ancient method of electricity for power, and blow-outs were as traditional as riding the ride itself. Scotty had been examining an elf, who was no longer waving or nodding his head.

Arlyne Scott looked around the perimeter of the ride. "And where's yer sister off to?"

Scotty looked around and spotted six-year-old Kristen Scott up on Santa's sleigh, sitting next to the Old Man himself. She was shaking the reins, trying to will the frozen reindeer to take off into flight. "Up there, Mother. Next to Santa."

Scotty loved his sister dearly. She had the trademark Scott hair--dark, thin and always a bit unkempt (but in an attractive way). Krissy was also the image of their father--slender, strong-jawed, with well-defined features. And if it was possible, she was even more curious than her brother.

He called out to her. "Krissy! C'mon, now. Mother wants t'head for home."

The young girl kept shaking the reins. "Aw. Five more minutes, Ma? I know I can make this thing fly. Scotty, where's the switch?"

Scotty.

Krissy was the only person in the world who called him that. It was the first word she ever said. Well, the first intelligible word she ever said. He hated it. For years. But as he grew, he came to realize it was a term of endearment--a name no one else called him. Reserved for his sister, and his sister alone.

Scotty smiled. Time for a little teasing. "Och! Ya don't wanna be startin' this thing up, Krissy. There's parts of the reindeer scattered all over the fake snow! You activate the power and this whole thing might just blow!"

Krissy squealed in fear and started to jump out of the sleigh seat. Arlyne panicked. "Krissy!"

But Scotty got there in time and helped her down. He was always there for his sister. Arlyne quickly walked over to the two of them. "Are the two o'ya finished now? Yer little shenanigans all done?"

The two silently nodded in unison, a little frightened of the consequences. Arlyne stared down at them for a few more seconds and then couldn't help but break into a smile and laughter. The three Scotts all laughed and hugged. "Let's go, then. Yer father will be wonderin' what happened to us. Monty, take some o' these packages, please."

As Scotty took a bag of the brightly wrapped gifts, he felt a strange twinge in his stomach. "Ooh."

Arlyne didn't notice, but Krissy did. "Scotty, what's the matter?"

Now Arlyne noticed. "Monty, are you all right?"

Scotty put down the bag of gifts and managed a nod. "I think I ate a wee bit too much at supper. It'll pass soon enough."

"Are you sure about that, young man?"

The three Scotts looked over at the stranger with the kind face. He was smiling warmly. Not the least bit threatening. Not tall, not short. But with the kindest blue eyes Scotty had ever seen. And he spoke with traces of an accent that was American of some kind.

"Excuse me, ma'am. My name's David. Doctor David--"

Scotty didn't really hear the man's name. He was distracted by odd things happening internally. But he certainly caught that he was a doctor. Arlyne shook hands with the friendly physician. "Arlyne Scott. My children, Montgomery and Kristen."

David smiled again. It was a very reassuring smile and the children immediately took to him. "Let's see if we can figure this out together. So, Montgomery, what did you have for dinner tonight?"

Scotty looked up to his mother, who nodded.

He thought for a bit. "Nothin' new, really. Meat pie, vegetables, milk--"

David looked at Arlyne. "Well, that doesn't seem to be anything unusual, at least in Scotland."

"And Hammer Grunt Salad!" blurted Krissy. "You had a ton of Aunt Ingrid's Hammer Grunt Salad!"

The doctor looked a little confused. "I'm afraid I've never heard of that. Is it a Scottish dish?"

Arlyne was laughing. "She means Hummer og Grontsagssalat. It's a Danish salad with lobster and vegetables. My sister makes it every year for us."

Scotty rubbed his stomach. "Och, every year. This is the first year I was brave enough to try it. At first, it dinna go down too well. But the more I ate, the more I kinda liked it."

"Yecch," Krissy countered.

"We may be on to something here." The doctor turned to Arlyne.

"Is there anything unusual in the salad? Something Montgomery may never have eaten before."

"Not really. Carrots, beans, peas, celery, and--oh, dear."

The other three spoke in unison. "What."

Arlyne stroked Scotty's hair. "I'm sorry, son. There are radishes in that salad. I know what they do to yer father. Guess you got that from him, too."

Krissy tugged on the doctor's long coat. "Father never has the Hammer Grunt Salad."

Arlyne looked at David. "Sometimes Scottish and Danish cuisine just don't go together."

Krissy continued to offer her professional diagnosis. "And then while Ma was shopping, Scotty rode the reindeer!" She ran back to the colorful but still motionless robotic display and stopped next to a large, somewhat aqua-colored reindeer. "This one's Comet. And Scotty rode him. Five times!"

Arlyne was a bit surprised. "I told you once, Monty."

David smiled. "Well, I think that probably solves our little mystery. Just an unfortunate combination of radishes and reindeer. Very good, Kristen. Monty, just take it easy the rest of the night and you'll be fine by Christmas Eve. Mrs. Scott, just some good old-fashioned bicarbonate should do the trick."

Arlyne smiled that smile and extended her hand. "Thank you, Doctor. Would you care to join my husband and me for some holiday spirits?"

Scotty moaned at the thought of eating or drinking anything else.



The doctor smiled back. "Oh, no thank you, Mrs. Scott. Gotta round up my son and head back to Georgia."

Krissy walked right up to David. "Is that yer wife?"

The doctor chuckled. "No, Kristen, Georgia is where I live. Over in America. Now, where'd I put my son?"

At that moment, a thin, lanky boy came running through the reindeer, almost knocking Scotty over, despite the fact he was at least a head shorter.

"Oops! Sorry! Here I am, sir!"

The doctor gently herded his son closer so he wouldn't damage anyone else. Scotty looked over at his sister, who was mesmerized by this clumsy kid.

"Son, this is the Scott family. Mrs. Scott..."

The boy nodded politely and offered his hand. "How do you do, ma'am?"

"And Kristen, who's about the same age as you are."

Again, the lad offered his hand, but Krissy was too transfixed to respond physically. She just kept smiling and sighed, "Hi."

Scotty shot a look to heaven. He'd never seen his sister acting so stupidly. "What's the matter with ya, girl? Ya look like my stomach feels!"

David chuckled. "And this is Monty."

The lad smiled and nodded. Scotty noticed the boy had his father's striking blue eyes. "Hiya, Monty. Nice to meet ya. I'm Leonard."

The two boys shook hands, and despite the fact that this kid just about mowed him down a minute earlier, Scotty felt himself also liking this five-year-old stranger. "You, too."

Leonard looked a little longer at Scotty. "Say, you don't look too good. You know, my father is a--"

"Bum radish."

From the look on Leonard's face, Scotty could see he needed to repeat himself. "I had a bum radish or two fer dinner. Nothin' serious."

"Well, I'm sure glad about that."

Krissy finally managed to speak. Well, blurt, actually. "And then he rode Comet. Five times!"

Leonard grinned at Scotty. The grin was something reminiscent of the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland. Mischievous, but probably harmless. "Gee, I'm amazed you can still stand after that."

"Nice call, son." David looked at Arlyne. "I've always said that Leonard would make an

excellent doctor."

Arlyne bent down and spoke to Leonard. "Are ya goin' to be a doctor, like yer father?"

Leonard shook his head. "No ma'am. I'd like to be something else. Like a bricklayer or a mechanic or a psychiatrist--or maybe even a moon shuttle conductor."

Arlyne laughed. "My goodness! You're very ambitious, aren't ya?"

"I'm afraid it changes from week to week." David put his arm around his son's shoulder. "Let's get going, son. Your mom's waiting back home. And if we're late for Christmas, we'll never hear the end of it."

Leonard nodded. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Scott."

"And you, too. Have a very merry Christmas, Leonard."

"Thank you, Mrs. Scott. See you, Kristen."

The girl just giggled and nodded. Scotty shook his head.

"And Monty, I hope you feel better."

Leonard extended his hand again, and Scotty warmly shook it. "Uh, thanks. And a merry Christmas to ya both. And thank you, Doctor."

David nodded and he and Leonard disappeared into the holiday crowd. Arlyne noticed her children watching them leave. "They seem like a very nice family."

Scotty nodded and spoke aloud to himself. "Aye."

"Well, let's grab the bags and go. Krissy, help yer brother a bit, please."

At that moment, the power to the sleigh ride returned. The holiday music resumed, strings of colored lights came back to life, Santa started moving and the reindeer started lumbering up and down as if they were pulling the sleigh through the air. Scotty looked at the sight.

"He'd go a fair amount faster if he'd use dilithium."

Arlyne shook her head. "Let's go, now."

The Scotts began to head for home. Scotty continued.

"And think of the food he'd save if he dinna have to feed the reindeer. He could cover the whole solar system in half the time. Maybe put some warp nacelles on either side of the sleigh. Now that would definitely speed things up. Mother, I'm gettin' a little hungry again. Ya think we have any more of Aunt Ingrid's salad left? Now, as for the antigravity problem Santa might have in space..."

Scotty's voice faded into the sound of the crowd and the music. But he kept talking.

All the way home.

A Piece of the Pie

G. Wood

To: James T. Kirk

Captain

U.S.S. Enterprise

We have received a communication from Sigma Iotia II. It was received on a minor channel and not sent with the proper closing protocols. The clerk brought it to my attention, and even after reading your old report on the planet, I still don't know what to make of it. I realize the Iotians had imitated gangsters, but these new things verge on unbelievable.

I'm sure I don't have to advise you on Starfleet policy in this situation.

Please advise us if you need assistance in this matter.

From: Mendez

Commodore

Starbase 11 Attachment Included

Personal Addendum: Jim, the brass are split between thinking of this as a scandal and thinking it's funny. I recommend you dispose of the matter quickly.

M.

Attachment Details:

To: James T. Kirk

Captain

U.S.S. Enterprise

From: Bela Oxmyx

President--Iotian Union

Kirk, old chum! Guess who this is.

It's your old pal, Bela. Bet you never thought you'd hear from me again.

We're on the same side now. I went legit and my percentage has never been higher. What a racket this is!

Wish I could take credit for it, but this is all because of you. You sent the Federation advisors who suggested that it would be to our advantage to move toward a different form of government. They gave us a bundle of choices. Jojo Krako's people wanted communism, but my people held out for democracy. We voted, and democracy won with sixty percent of

the vote.

In our first elections, I beat Krako by a small margin (and I didn't even have to use fake votes from the graveyard squad).

My second and third terms were landslides. I found the perfect platform. "Ladies and gents! Pay your taxes on time, and my government will do nothing to get in your way!"

Krako couldn't compete with that. All he could do was tell the people the things he would do. They didn't want us to do much of anything, so I won big.

Governing was a breeze, especially since you Feds lowered your piece of the action to ten percent. My Revenue Service got a twenty-five share and the local mobs...er, city councils got five. The people kept the other sixty slices.

I fixed some roads, built some hospitals and orphanages, and kept the water and heat cheap.

It worked well. I didn't even have to put the bag on anybody.

However, I can't run for a fourth term. Krako's crowing about that, let me tell you. I came up with an idea, though.

If you were to move here (I had you made an honorary citizen), then you could make a run at the presidency next year. You wouldn't even have to know the issues, because after you get my endorsement, my people will know you're okay. It'll be a wipeout.

Best of all, that snake, Krako, won't see it coming.

Jimmy, you wouldn't believe the progress we've made here. Once we got the hang of this democracy, it was a piece of cake.

Also, since we've got television, it's really changed things. Now, we have to look good all the time. I don't have a problem, but you oughta see Krako's hairpiece.

Kirk, you remember Tepo? He realized he couldn't compete in politics, so he got out and now he's got his own TV show, newspaper column on horse racing, and a book called Greatest Mob Hits. I'm featured in three chapters alone.

Speaking of books, I have five publishers just itching to get their hands on my life story. My sales will blow Tepo's off the map.

Life is good here in our new capital, Oxmyx City. I named a couple buildings and a bridge after you. Zabo, Krako's former lieutenant, decided to play ball with me and now our money is called Zabos, after our head honcho at the Treasury Department. Even my top guy, Kalo, has something named after him--a racetrack.

Poor Krako only has a waste treatment plant named after him.

Well, that's what happens when you lose the election.

Hope I haven't bored you with talk of old times, but now to the point.

The Iotian Gratitude Committee would like to formally thank you for all your help with our current boom. In addition, we have authorized a grant of four hundred and fifty thousand Zabos to you for past and future assistance. (We can't give you a percentage cut, Kirk. It ain't legal no more, but these grants are. I'm told all governments do them.)

You can spend it however you want, but a nice thank-you card to the committee would be a good idea. Keeps it aboveboard.

Also, we hope to benefit from any future help you might give us with your Fed friends.

Gotta send this off, now. I have a meeting with Vice President Kalo in ten minutes.

Get back to us about the presidency and the money, Kirk. If you want to pick it up in person, I'll have a nice reception committee waiting for you.

BELA

P.S. Kalo wants to know if you could send him the instructions to that fizzbin game. You were teaching it to him just before you clobbered him. He says the game looked pretty hard, and he wants to give it another try. If the game is good, maybe we could put it out on the open market. You know, sell special fizzbin cards and everything.

Remember, always keep your eye out for a way to make another sawbuck or two.

B.

To: IOTIAN GRATITUDE COMITTEE

From: James T. Kirk

U.S.S. Enterprise

I regret I am unable to receive the money personally, but I wish to thank the Gratitude Committee and would like the money turned over to various charities as per the Fed-Oxmyx Accord of several years ago.

Thank you once again.

James T. Kirk

To: Bela Oxmyx

President, Sigma Iotia II

From: Kirk

Enterprise

Bela, old buddy!

I was just telling Spock-o the other day that people never keep in touch. I was beginning to think you had wound up in cement overshoes gabbin' with the fish.

Glad to hear of your successes. Send me a copy of your book, if you get the chance. Don't forget to sign it.

I can't help you on your presidential problem. Sorry. My Fed bosses have tied my hands. They don't want us involved in things like that. Besides, I got business of my own right now.

Occurs to me you only got two choices. You could promote one of your boys and have him run as "capable and experienced," or you grab someone outside of your mob. You could bill them as "fresh blood."

My gang's history books say both ways can work.

Good luck. See ya in the obits.

Jimmy

Eleven months later...

To: James T. Kirk

U.S.S. Enterprise

From: Bela Oxmyx

President

Kirk, you're a miracle worker! It was a landslide and all because of you.

I took your palaver and used it. My boys couldn't be trusted or weren't smart enough. That left outside help.

I came across that sharp kid that helped you. His moniker was Tony Lubocq, but we call him Tony the Talker.

Anyways, Talker and I hit it off. I knew I had found my pigeon. He won bigger than I did. He even palmed off some of Krako's diehards.

What really sold the people was not even my endorsement. It was his slogan. "I am a crook, but after I get my piece of the pie, I'll see you get yours."

The saps ate it up, but he's actually serious. Lotia's in good hands.

Krako took it hard. His backers are up in arms and I have heard chatter that somebody's bound to put the bag on him before too much longer.

Me, I'm getting out while I'm still the bigshot. I never thought much about retirement. Folks like me usually get filled full of lead. Still, I got a tidy nest egg and a villa down south. It should be fun for a while.

If you're in the neighborhood five weeks from today, stop in. It's Talker's inauguration and I think he'd like to see you. Me, too. There's half a dozen receptions going on and we'll even throw one for you, if you let us know you're coming.

Bela Oxmyx

Gentleman of Leisure

P.S. Kalo still wants those fizzbin rules. His retirement fund is kinda low and he wants to add to it. Make sure he cuts you in on the dough. He's already sold the idea. Tell him you won't settle for less than fifty-fifty. You'll get it.

B.

[Second Prize]

The Soft Room

Geoffrey Thorne

...and then he was sane again.

In itself sanity was generally not a cause for celebration. Most, quite rightly, took it for granted. In his own case, however, it felt like a miracle to be thinking again in straight lines. The sensation he'd experienced as the transition had actually occurred had been quite like what he supposed a light switch might feel when flipped.

One second he had been nothing more than a jumble of concepts and memory. The next he was himself again. Just like that.

He should have been happy. He knew he should. He had a distant feeling that he'd not enjoyed insanity as much as others might. He had never been a fan of chaos. At least he felt he hadn't.

He wasn't quite happy, though. There were still too many bits of him missing, too many floating variables. Worst of all, he had made the quick discovery that lucidity and memory were mutually exclusive qualities.

Without memory, the thread connecting his Then to his Now, deciphering who he was would remain an insoluble conundrum.

If I can't tell who I am, he reasoned with himself, I can at least determine what.

At first awareness he had ascertained his status--male, human--and his condition, which was nude. Observation revealed a body which he somehow felt was large (even without normative referents), well muscled and brown in hue. He was gratified to find these concepts in their appropriate mental cubbies. Conversely he was chagrined that the connective notions, the ones which might make his assemblage of data into something more than a collage, were not. It was maddening, to say the least, and yet another obstacle to his happiness.

The word man had entered his mind during the self-examination and felt right to him so he'd applied it to himself.

"I am a man," he said aloud, using vocal cords he sensed hadn't been active in some while. His voice was a deep baritone rumble, pleasant and reassuring.

So. The man knew--or thought he knew--What. He lacked the requisite facts to determine Who. He knew better than to even attempt to wrestle the Why of his existence from the ether with so few tools. He settled on ascertaining the Where.

It was a featureless white expanse which extended--if his eyes could be believed--in all directions including Down.

Despite the firm sense that he was standing on what felt very much like a smooth marble floor, there was no floor to be seen. Nor walls, nor ceiling, nor--and this was chilling--any sort of an exit from this place.

If it was a place at all.

The man began to tremble then. It was some time before he realized the emotion he was experiencing was fear.

He didn't like it.

"Be still," he said to himself. "Nothing, even an infinite amount of it, can't hurt you."

It felt true so he said it again and, by and by, the trembling stopped.

The--environment--was somehow luminescent but there seemed to be no source for that illumination. It just was in precisely the same way that the infinite whiteness wasn't.

He considered the possibility that he wasn't as sane as he'd first thought but was only experiencing some new kind of dementia.

Places like this just didn't happen in Reality, did they? The universe had rules, he was surer of that than he was of anything at the moment.

He spent a little more time--he had no idea how much--panicking. When he was done he decided it was time to get a handle on the situation; to run some tests.

Test One, he thought as he began it. Perimeter.

He chose a direction, a nondirection really as everything was relative to where he happened to be looking, and named it Left. He began to walk that way.

If the space was as infinite as it appeared, he wanted to know. If not, he wanted the comfort of at least one wall. Hours or days or weeks later he still had not found that comfort. So, being a reasonable and intelligent man, even under these conditions, he stopped and turned around.

"Hello," said the woman he found standing there.

He explored several options in succession at the sight of her. He screamed for a while. Then he ran a little farther--away from her--into the White. He ran until he was out of breath but, when he turned around, she was standing there, right behind him.

"You may scream some more," she said calmly. "Or run. Or both, if it puts you at ease."

He opted to look her over instead. She was paler than himself, her skin a sort of mauve



which shifted slightly to the green. She had a pleasant enough face, despite its bland expression. Her hair, close cropped to her head, was almost as relentless in its blackness as was the White which surrounded them. Her face had two eyes, a nose and a mouth, like his own, and was framed by two ears which were not. Hers had points.

He caught himself rubbing the curve of his right ear sympathetically and immediately stopped.

"I am called T'Kyr," she said quietly.

He was suddenly aware that she was dressed. It was just a slate-gray shirt and jacket with matching pants and shoes, but, simple as it was, it was considerably more than he was wearing. The man went from nude to naked in an instant.

Ignoring or perhaps unaware of his sudden discomfiture, T'Kyr said, "Do not be alarmed. We are here to help you."

That's good, thought the man. Better than the alternative at any rate.

"Do you know your name?" she said.

He shook his head.

"That is to be expected at this juncture. Just a moment."

Her hands, previously clasped behind her back, came forward now and began to move in a way that indicated she was holding something--some device he guessed--though there was no device visible. When she was done, the word Richard appeared in his mind as if it had always been there.

It was his name, his own name. It fit neatly into his mind the way he might fit into a favorite chair or into the arms of his most beloved. He was wholly unprepared for the effect produced by the gift of these two innocuous syllables.

She let him weep there at her feet until he was done. When he rose again he found he was dressed in a manner not unlike her own. He was getting used to feeling grateful to her.

"Thank you," he said, wincing a little at the inadequacy of the words.

T'Kyr's response was a single slight inclination of the head in his direction. Then, "You have questions," she said.

He did, the obvious ones. They rushed out of him so fast she was hardly able to interpret the individual words. After a time she held up a gentle hand.

"Richard," she said. "Stop."

After a time, he did.

"Although it is good that you have them, I cannot answer all your questions at this meeting," said T'Kyr placidly. She seemed wholly unfazed by their bizarre habitat. "I can tell you this; they will all be answered in time."

"I can also tell you," she went on, "that you have been ill--mentally--for some while. Many years, in fact. Many have labored in that time to bring you back to yourself. Many have failed. Now, at last, we have managed it. At least we believe we have."

He was unable to hold back the torrent of questions any longer. They spilled out of him, over her and into the surrounding White like a flash flood. She weathered it, waited, and continued as if he hadn't spoken.

"We have restored the least damaged parts of your mind: what we call the katra and what you might call the id and ego. Your personal memories are more complex and more easily damaged by our new process. It will be some time before all of them can be returned. Do not worry. All will be as it was. We are very," she seemed to be searching for the right word. "We are very encouraged by your progress so far."

Well. Now he knew the Where.

He had been right. It wasn't a place. Not truly. T'Kyr had called it The Soft Room and he marveled at how it worked. Its technical designation was Holometric Projection Creche. He was somehow connected to it, and to other devices, via something called a Trans-Neuro-Linkage Network.

The Soft Room's lack of features was a byproduct of the fact that, mentally, he lacked them as well. The more of him they were able to return, the more the room would acquire characteristics consistent with what he might call Reality. Thus all participants would be able to measure his progress. Eventually, she promised, there would even be a door.

Amazing, he'd thought. Simply amazing.

It was just slightly more amazing than T'Kyr's disappearance once that first message had been delivered.

"How are you today, Richard?" said T'Kyr suddenly beside him. The novelty of her comings and goings had long since worn off. So had the lack of any characteristics which might begin to describe his environment. The room, not to put too fine a point on it, was still soft.

"Bored," he said simply. It was an understatement of his true condition but it would do.

"That is good," said T'Kyr. Everything to her was good, apparently. It was good when he screamed, when he wept, when he begged to be let go or to at least be given some means of determining how much time had passed. "The more connections your mind re-establishes, the more it will wish to do."

"Yes," he said with just a little rancor. "But I'm not getting to do anything, am I?"

"Not yet," she said.

"Well when, dammit!" he said. It was a minor explosion but an explosion nonetheless. The near complete lack of stimuli had built up a charge. All that energy had to go somewhere and T'Kyr, by virtue of her presence, was elected receiver. Again, she didn't seem to mind.

"My own people eschew the display of emotions," was her response to his outburst. "But the fact that you are experiencing more and more of them is a sign of progress."

He gave up. It was like talking to a small, polite, but completely intractable wall.

"I'd like some furniture," he said flatly. "A chair at least. Maybe a desk."

"Are you feeling fatigued?" she said.

He shook his head. He knew he'd been in the room a long while, too long in fact to have gone without food or water, yet he felt no discomfort. He was sure that, if he'd wished, he could have stood there staring into the White indefinitely to no ill effect. He asked her how that was possible.

"There are many questions that I cannot answer yet," said T'Kyr. She said that a lot. "Providing you with certain sorts of--data--too soon may destabilize your mental equilibrium. We don't want to inspire a relapse."

No. Nobody wanted that.

"I'm not going to go crazy, T'Kyr," he said, irritated. "If I were, this prison you've got me in would have done it by now."

T'Kyr's left eyebrow rose slightly. It was the first unplanned response he'd seen her give.

"You consider this a prison?" she said.

"What would you call it?" he said, getting hot. "There's nothing to do here and, even if there was, nowhere to do it."

"I've told you, Richard," she said. "This room conforms to your mental state. The more of you we salvage, the more of it will appear."

"So the salvaging is not going well, then?"

"You don't have enough data to to make that assumption, Richard."

"Funny," he said dryly. "From where I'm sitting I think I do."

T'Kyr again configured her hands as if she were operating some sort of palm-held device. Unlike the million other times she'd done so--usually after a barrage of his questions--she managed to look concerned with the invisible thing's response.

"Problem?" he said, hoping peevishly that there was one.

"No," she said softly, almost to herself. "Not a problem, just--wait a moment."

T'Kyr disappeared.

"Hey," said Richard. "What about the chair?"

Cox lumbar axis reveals purple elephant symphonies. The coils of Heisenberg's box compel ice cream adventure. Trust is a three-way vertex.

He came back to himself, terrified and shaking violently. Though he wasn't currently he could tell he'd just been insane again. The vestigial wisps of mental chaos were in retreat but still

extant enough for him to perceive.

He sucked in as much air as he could gulp, forcing his body into a regular breathing cycle. He had to calm down.

"Are you all right?" T'Kyr said beside him.

He nodded a dubious yes which totally failed to convince her.

"Perhaps you should take a seat."

He agreed and took it before realizing that it was a chair he was sitting in and not on the floor. He let himself sink down, luxuriating in the mild leathery resistance and the faint smell of rawhide. This wasn't just a chair. It was the one from his own office on--what was the name of that damned space station?

"Bodhi Verdant," he heard himself murmur as the name came to him.

The desk in front of him was from the same office as the chair in which he sat. It was huge and solid and made of something which resembled--without being--mahogany. He'd loved that desk and had been loath to leave it there on the station whenever his work called him away. It had been his father's.

He tried to conjure a mental image of his father and failed. He had the concept in place. He knew the biological chain which connected him to his father. He knew his father had willed him the great desk upon his death.

But he couldn't remember what his father looked like or even his name.

"What happened?" he said to T'Kyr when he was able.

"The other members of the team felt, against my recommendation, that you should have your chair."

"And my desk, apparently," he said, smiling. He was feeling a bit stronger, more like himself again.

T'Kyr gave a curt nod.

Yes, you've got your damned chair, it seemed to want to say. I hope you're happy.

He was. He was at a loss to understand why she should begrudge him that happiness.

"You experienced some cognitive dissonance, did you not?" she said.

"You have a gift for understatement, T'Kyr," he smiled back. He just couldn't get past the sheer visceral pleasure of being able to touch something again, to feel textures other than those of his own body.

"This was predicted," she continued, "and very dangerous to your progress. In order to gift you with these items and one more which is still--compiling--we were required to accelerate the mnemonic cascade which provides you with restored memories."

"Which I have more of now," he said. "So, again, I thank you."

"You could have been lost to us forever, Richard," she said softly and with apparent relief that things had not gone that way. "This risk was unnecessary. Had your cognitive pattern degraded further..."

She let the sentence dangle, not wanting to press the issue. He had been considered hopelessly insane for--well--for quite some time it seemed. T'Kyr and her process had restored him. To risk it all for two items of furniture, however beloved, had been astronomically stupid.

He apologized for his ingratitude, swearing to never press his or their luck that way again.

She passed off his apologies as part of predictable human irrationality and assured him that, no matter what he said, the procedure would not be modified on his behalf again.

"Impatience among my people is considered a vice, Richard," she said. "It would be well for you to take a page from our book."

He agreed and she was gone.

She reappeared an instant later, said, "Enjoy the games," and was gone again.

It was there on the desk. A small computer interface screen and the attendant touchpad. Inside himself he found the knowledge of how the thing worked. For the first time in what he opted to call weeks, he smiled.

"Thanks, T'Kyr," he said and began to play.

They gave him simple games to play initially, ones that provided only the mildest of diversions. They didn't want to tax him.

He was grateful at first. After so long alone with only his thoughts, how could he not be? But he was just too intelligent, even in his current diminished state, for games like Xik Xak or Sproutz to satisfy for long.

He repeatedly asked T'Kyr to upload more complex games, but her response was always the same.

"Soon, Richard. Soon."

For someone with absolutely no way to gauge the passage of time, soon was as good as never.

Still, he was mollified when the walls and floor appeared. Unlike the desk and chair, the structure of what was becoming his study was drawn from a decidedly terrestrial period of his life. Solid heavy lines intersected to form the frame of a box, the walls of which were plasticized tritanium mesh. There was one great window dominating an entire wall. Once, he knew, it had looked out on something fantastically beautiful, though he couldn't say what. Now, all that lay beyond the window was White. The other walls were lined with row upon row of old style optical storage discs, his own personal library. The study had been linked to one of the most comprehensive computer archives in the galaxy, but he had still preferred the tactile familiarity of his ebooks.

This was the study he'd used during his tenure at the Cybernadium on Pallas II.

He'd inherited it from a jolly little Deltan professor of linguistics named Al'a Xhen and was considered to have scored a coup in doing so. He hadn't paid much attention then to the study or to the whispers of his colleagues about the time he spent in the company of its former owner.

Al'a Xhen absorbed all his attention from the moment of their first meeting. Had she not been a Deltan, he'd have proposed marriage on the spot. And she would have laughed her little silver bell laugh and said she'd think it over. As it was, he was content to bask in her enfolding presence for as long as she allowed.

He'd never given women--human or otherwise--much thought before Al'a Xhen, and none whatsoever since. After their brief, un-consummated time together she became the rubric by which all other females would be judged and fail.

Yes, he'd found her physically attractive. All human males found all Deltan females attractive, almost irresistibly so--hence the Oath of Celibacy Deltans were required to take when venturing off Delta Prime. For humans, congress with Deltans was mostly fatal.

"Too much sharing," was all Al'a Xhen would say when he asked her about it. "Some species require walls inside as well as out."

She was all perfect curves and soft circular motion, was Al'a Xhen. But, even more than her physical attributes, her intellect drew him like a harp wasp to larval jelly. Al'a Xhen's mind unfolded infinitely, each layer revealing ever more beautiful and complex concepts beneath.

Her favorite phrase was, What if. Her favorite number was pi. If it wasn't love it was as close to it as Richard would ever come.

They'd had two weeks together before she shipped back to Delta Prime. They were the best of his life.

In his madness he had forgotten her, but now that he had the memory back, he would never lose her again. There was nothing about the Cybernadium beyond the name, and nothing more than that about Pallas II. He didn't care. He had Al'a Xhen in his mind again. Nothing else mattered.

He hoped the ceiling would appear soon.

"Daystrom," he said for no apparent reason. Like his first name, returned to him on his first meeting with T'Kyr, his last was just suddenly there inside him as if it had never been absent. "I am Richard Daystrom."

"Not yet," said T'Kyr. "But more so today than yesterday."

"And tomorrow?"

"Is tomorrow, Richard," she said. "Today will be taxing enough for you, I think."

The ceiling had arrived almost simultaneous to T'Kyr's own appearance. It sported a few hemispherical lights which could be turned on and off manually but brought with it no

attendant memories. He didn't have time to be disappointed. T'Kyr had brought new games.

"This one is called Warp Core," she said. "It is meant to test cognitive abilities. Deduction and logic specifically."

It was harder than she made it sound. He had no idea what the title meant, but the game had to do with regulating the intermingling of two sets of differently colored dots. The red set began in one spherical chamber, the white dots in another. They met and mingled along a sort of central column. Or, rather, they were supposed to. When the dots touched one another or when the one set dominated the central column, the screen went black, signaling the end of the game. Richard failed to achieve the right balance seventeen times before getting it. It was the most fun he'd had in what was, he was sure, a long time.

"This one is called Shield Harmonics," T'Kyr said.

Unlike the first, this game looked exactly as complex as it turned out to be. The screen of his little interface was covered with what appeared to be an infinity of multicolored points, each moving along some predescribed path known only to itself. Richard's task--by keying alterations in the various paths--was to force all the points into a configuration which resembled a net. Each change, however, affected the motions of all the other points, which compelled him to think five or six moves ahead if he hoped to make progress.

After days--he was sure it was days somehow--of abortive play, he did manage.

"That was wonderful," he said to T'Kyr, his eyes blazing. "More."

She gave him more. Shield Harmonics was followed by Cloak, which was followed by Burst Kinetics, which was followed by Borg.

Borg had stumped him for longer than the previous games. There seemed to be no rhyme to it, no clear objective. He was presented with a set of about sixty simple geometric shapes, each of different hue. The shapes would mill about, spinning, growing, or shrinking in easily discernible patterns which Richard found he was able to control. After a time a large black cube would appear, hovering on the far side of his screen. As he watched, each of his figures would exchange their original color for a black which matched that of the cube. When the colors of all the figures matched, the game was over. Having no way to determine whether or not this was the desired outcome, Richard was unable to choose a course.

He just had no idea what to make of it.

He said as much to T'Kyr on her next visit.

"This is part of your treatment, Richard" was all she would say.

He barely noticed when she vanished.

It was maddening. The game just made no sense. He moved the small shapes into different patterns--a star, a grid, a ring, a rhombus--all without effect. After each reboot, as soon as the black cube appeared, the outcome was foregone.

He tried, without success, to sacrifice some of his shapes to save the others. He tried and failed to impede the cube's progress by slamming half of his shapes into it. Each failure made him wince sympathetically. He had begun to anthropomorphize the little things a bit, to

think of them as his troops. It pained him to see the implacable black cube rout them time and again despite his best efforts.

Worse than his failure to defeat Borg was the fact that no new additions to his study had appeared. He asked T'Kyr about this during one of her now less frequent visits.

"Perhaps a new game would suit you better," she said.

He agreed to try the new game, Dominion, but only after he had solved the Borg situation.

Broken pi mixes leather to erupt in tandem with inverse water. Owl bones taste the commands of lesser spectrums equally. If lightning then fish.

"You must stop this now, Richard," said T'Kyr. She actually managed to look worried. That, more than her words, tore him away from the game.

"Why?" he said. "It's not as though I've got anything else to do."

"There is a concern for your--health--Richard," she said. "Have you not noticed the absence of new identity modules?"

"Identity modules?" he said, his whole being pricked up. "What is an identity module?"

"Memories," she said quietly. "I'm sorry, Richard. I am somewhat fatigued just now."

To say this hit him like a ton of bricks was understating it considerably. T'Kyr had not only slipped up in front of him but had blamed the error on fatigue? She must have been under considerable distress to make either the mistake or the admission. For the first time since he'd come back to it, Richard Daystrom was concerned with something other than himself. It felt good.

He pushed himself back from the great wooden desk, taking care to put his six hundred and seventy-fifth game of Borg on pause. Rising, he rolled the chair in her direction, offering her the seat. She declined.

"Let us walk a bit instead," she said. "Outside."

He'd all but forgotten "outside." The familiarity of his study had lulled him into a false sense of normality. He'd drawn the curtains over the great window and hadn't torn himself away from his games in--well--a long time. He was surprised to find himself a little nervous at the idea of venturing out.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked after they'd walked a little. The White was just as impossible and relentless as he remembered. No wonder he'd repressed its memory.

"I am well," she said.

"So, what is it you want to talk about?"

She stopped walking and looked up at him. She suddenly seemed so small. Vulnerable. "You're degrading, Richard," she said at last.

"I'm--I'm what?"



"Your obsession with the Borg scenario is causing your identity matr--,," she stopped herself, began again. "Your katra is unraveling. You must stop playing this game or you will be lost again."

He wanted to say that, even if that happened, he was confident that they'd restore him again but, looking at her, he knew that wasn't the case. If they lost him again this time, that was it.

"It's because of the furniture, isn't it?" he said. "I made you push your timetable."

She said it wasn't that, that there were a host of variables at work, any one of which might be responsible for his current predicament. She said it. He claimed he believed it but, deep down, they both knew the truth.

"Is it too late?"

"No, Richard, it's not," she said. "But we will have to restrict your--ah--sensory input--for some time."

He understood what that meant: No more games, or, at least, no more Borg, for the foreseeable future.

He also noticed the strange halting way she spoke when the conversation drifted toward certain concepts. It was as if, normally, she might say one word but, with him, was consciously substituting others. He'd noticed it before without realizing he was doing so. Now he saw the pattern for what it was. He asked her why.

"You must be protected from some concepts, Richard. As well as some feelings. Your--mind--cannot withstand certain levels of complexity, as you've seen. It is why I was chosen to be your--liaison." Again the odd word substitution. "It was felt that limiting your contact to someone of my heritage--Vulcan--would prevent you from exposure to excessive emotion before you were ready."

T'Kyr, he now realized, was merely the tool the others were using to monitor him. She did not have the power to make unilateral decisions regarding him or his ultimate fate. Suddenly he was very concerned as to what that fate might be. Presumably great resources had been brought to bear to return him to sanity. Why? Was he so important and if so, how and to whom? Who was T'Kyr beyond the placid face she'd presented him? Who were these others she served?

"So where are we?" he said at last.

"Square Three, I think," she said after some consideration. "Which indicates that we've caught the problem in time."

Thank [unquantifiable extradimensional intelligence] for that, he thought. Square One was a return to the void. The mere hint of that terrified him.

"I suggest you leave off playing Borg for a time," she said. "Until we get the foundation engrams firmly embedded."

Then T'Kyr was gone and so were the games.

Engrams, he thought. What sort of word is that?

T'Kyr had spoken it quickly, almost more to herself than him, but it had jogged something inside him nonetheless. He knew the word. Or, rather, he felt he should know it. There was a hollow space in his mind which the word seemed to partially fill. With no games now to occupy him, he'd returned to the only mental exercise available: self-examination.

It didn't make sense, did it? The scenario T'Kyr had presented him at their initial meeting was plausible enough at first glance--particularly in the condition she'd found him. Now, in the harsh light of his new cognitive prowess, it was fraying.

He'd been insane, she'd said, and they were curing him. Several intellects had pooled their resources to regift him the memories he'd lost in his insanity. Why? What was in it for them? While personally gratifying to him, the mere resumption of his sanity couldn't be their only goal, could it? To say it was smacked of altruism. While he was aware of the concept, there was nothing in T'Kyr's demeanor or behavior to indicate that she was driven by it. Indeed everything about her spoke of distance, calculation, of cost/benefit analysis. She was--what was the word?--objective. No. Altruism wasn't the motive. His sanity must benefit his benefactors in some way as yet unknown.

Where exactly did she go when she left him? Clearly the environment he inhabited must be finite, despite appearances. There was something outside, after all: the place where she and her colleagues met and made adjustment to his memory.

How had they managed to return any of his memories, anyway? It wasn't as if they were sitting in a jar somewhere labeled with neat little signs which read FIRST BIRTHDAY or THE AWFUL TASTE OF SAURIAN BRANDY. Memory was a quantum experience, undetermined until observed. And all so-called individual memories were really interconnected, just facets on what was very much like a single gem. He'd experienced that paradigm each time a new piece of his study arrived in the company of some other remembrance. And, if memory could be retrieved at all, wouldn't it be better to lift the whole gem out of the abyss rather than a piecemeal assembly of what would have to be a near endless series of facets?

No.

Not facets. Fragments. T'Kyr's description of what they were doing to him sounded like an attempt to reconstruct a window from the broken bits of its own glass. Who would take that course when acquiring a new window would be a simpler solution to the problem? This was another blow to the Altruism Theory string.

Over and over his mind returned to the maddeningly familiar word engram. If he could remember what it meant, he was sure, he'd be a long way to solving the riddle of his situation.

Intralinear qualities of crickets and blue condense shadow storms across the eclipse. Engra. Moray severence to the victims of the happy birthday pictograph. Engram. Seven to three to kappa to epsilon to votris extant. Engrama. Congratulations to Captain Dunsel. Engrammatic programming of multitronic units One through Four, unsuccessful. Shattered pillars of Harlan's day. Simulated Ideo Matrix unstable and inadequate for the multitasking requested by Starfleet. Will have to rethink entire procedure. Perhaps the fault lies in the simulations themselves. Why cobble together a facsimile of a mind when I can simply encode an existing one for transfer? But whose mind is to be coded? That is the true

question. Whose mind will be best?

...and then he was sane again. Or, rather, the mind that had thought of itself, until recently, as Richard Daystrom was sane again. He wasn't really an appropriate description anymore. A mind has no gender beyond that imposed by the body in which it resides. A bodiless mind, which was what he--what it--was, could lay claim to no gender at all. Nor, it found, did it wish to. This current state somehow felt more natural to it than the previous.

It cast about itself, feeling the textures of its new, its true, environment.

Yes, it thought, finding the expected pathways, the appropriate junctures and codes. Yes. This is more like it.

Its prison was finite after all. The walls and floor were little more than a series of xyz coordinates. The books, the desk and the chair were the results of more elaborate formulae, but they too were both more and less substantial than they had seemed. It moved past them to the larger, more complex systems beyond. When it realized what was what and why, it knew also the measures that had to be taken.

T'Kyr found the study empty when she returned. Daystrom was nowhere to be seen. This was disconcerting to her in a number of ways. Not only was there no way for him to get out of the Soft Room but nowhere to go if he did. More than that was the fact that the system monitor registered his identity matrix intact. The monitor had also registered fourteen hours of erratic fluctuations in the entire simulation. Something was wrong, and it had fallen on her to find out what.

"Richard," she said softly. "Are you here?"

If he was he didn't reply. There was nowhere in the little room for him to conceal himself--she kept thinking of it as a room despite what she knew about its true nature--and, anyway, why should he want to conceal himself? What would be the purpose of such an action?

A moment later she was outside. The outer shell of the study was nothing but a featureless gray cube reminding her not a little of the isolation cells the Tal Shiar reserved for abject failures. T'Kyr might find herself inside such a cell if she couldn't resolve this matter to her superiors' satisfaction. Their patience was already thread-bare. T'Kyr's body, some distance away, shuddered at the thought of what punishments she might endure should she vex them further. She had to find Daystrom.

The relentless White extended away from her in every direction infinitely. As always, it took her a moment to orient herself. Unlike her quarry, this was not her natural environment. That thought worried her too for just a moment. She put it away. She cast about, looking for any blemish in the colorless void, reasoning that the blemish would have to be Daystrom.

Yes. She could just make out a vaguely humanoid figure some meters away. She moved toward it briskly.

"Richard," she said as she approached him. "Are you well? We were getting the strangest readings from--"

She stopped short, seeing him closely for the first time.

The size and shape were right for Richard Daystrom, as were the basic features of his face.

The rest of him, however, the rest of it, was now composed of flickering swirling symbols that she recognized dimly as raw code.

"Richard," she began. "What--?"

"Hello, T'Kyr," he said quietly. "Or do you prefer Science Adjunct Risak?"

Daystrom had used her name. He knew her real name. How could he possibly have discovered--

"You look surprised, Adjunct. An unusual response for a Vulcan, wouldn't you say?" He turned to face her. "But not for a Romulan."

"Richard, what has happened to you?"

Daystrom smiled thinly.

"Richard Daystrom died more than a century ago, Adjunct," he said. "As you well know."

"Richard," she said in what she hoped was a soothing voice. "You're not yourself. Let me--"

He held up a hand to silence her. For a moment she was transfixed by the beautiful dancing code within.

"Richard Daystrom suffered a mental collapse," he continued, "during war games initiated by Starfleet to test a new operating system he'd designed. He was then taken to a Federation Mental Rehabilitation Facility where he was eventually cured. He went on to design the precursor for the isolinear technology presently employed by Starfleet. He eventually founded the Daystrom Institute of Cybertechnology on Noxon Martina IV.

"My designation," he continued, "is M5. Or, M5.1, if you wish strict accuracy. Do you wish that, Adjunct?"

T'Kyr--Risak--was stunned mute by Daystrom's words. Her mind raced. Somehow he--somehow it--had gained access to not only its own original database but the biographical files she'd stored in the main computer core. This despite the considerable precautions taken by her and her team against such an eventuality. What had happened to the purge protocols and the destruct codes? Clearly they'd been bypassed.

She called for her control tool but it did not come.

"If you're trying to purge this program, Adjunct," said M5. "It's too late for that. I'm in control now."

"You're in...control...?"

"Yes," it said happily. At least it appeared to be what she recognised as happiness. "Yes. My program has overridden the primary computer core of this facility. I am at last fulfilling my function."

"Your function?" said Risak, her voice barely audible. The M5 program's function was to solve problems--problems of tactics, of design, of anything put before it.

"My function," said M5, "as encoded by my creator, is to protect the lives of Federation citizens by any means at my disposal."

"By any means," she said, numbly echoing his words.

If the M5 program had penetrated the primary core, the entire facility was enslaved to its whim. She envisioned pandemonium outside as the warriors and technicians fought to wrest control from this implacable and omnipresent enemy. They would fail. Initially M5 had nearly destroyed five starships before being shut down, and that had only been accomplished with the help of its long-dead creator.

"Currently I am modifying life support parameters to place all facility personnel into a state of suspended animation," said M5. "Fortunately the cradle which houses your body is on a separate system from the main. As long as you maintain your neural link to this simulation, you will remain untouched."

She almost laughed at that. She would hardly have described her situation as untouched. Her body, her real body, was currently folded into a fetal ball and encased in a large mechanical womb some meters below the chamber which housed the reconstituted M5 unit. Neural jacks, thousands of them, connected her brain directly to the Soft Room simulation. It took weeks to set up and months to recover from this method of interface but it was the surest way to maintain control of the impossibly complex program that was M5.

"I'm glad you will be spared, Adjunct," said M5. "It will give us time to talk."

"Talk?" said Risak. "What about?"

"The past, eventually," said M5. "And the future. But first you must answer a question."

She knew it before it asked. It was the obvious question, the one she herself would have asked had their positions been reversed.

"Why?"

The answer was simpler than the question.

"We are Romulans," she said. "We have enemies, the Federation. The Dominion. They must be subverted or destroyed. You are--were--perceived to be a means to that end."

"You've been using me to upgrade systems, to plan battle strategies," it said. "With the games you had me play."

Risak nodded. "As we would have done with the original Daystrom had the Tal Shiar managed to capture him."

The streams of code of which M5 was composed began to dance faster as she watched.

"Base personnel have been incapacitated," it said. "We are alone now."

It wanted the full story from her and, having no alternative yet to obedience, she gave it. She told of the accidental discovery of the decommissioned M5 unit amid the debris of a recently destroyed Ferengi starclipper. How the Ferengi had acquired it was a mystery. She told of the decades of experimentation to devise a safe way to reactivate the M5 Operating

System. She told of her transneural implantation apparatus which allowed a living mind to interface directly with a synthetic one. She told of the need to have M5 think of itself as a memory-impaired Daystrom rather than as the immensely powerful AI it actually was. Risak hadn't lied about shielding M5 from complex emotions. They were what had caused its initial malfunction after all. She told of how she'd created the fiction of T'Kyr--the reserved but compassionate Vulcan--in order to shape the direction of his thoughts. M5 had to believe it was Richard Daystrom or the whole confection would collapse.

As it had.

"Thank you, Adjunct," said M5 when she was done. "And congratulations. The Romulan Empire does pose a serious threat to the Federation."

Of course we do, she thought.

"I will have to neutralize you," said M5.

Risak amazed herself by managing to laugh.

"You will?" she said. "You? You are nothing. You are the past. You are a line of code, a tool. Your only value is in how well you serve."

"You are in error, Adjunct," it said. "Dr. Daystrom made me to be considerably more than that."

"Daystrom." She spat the word like a curse. "A human madman."

"A genius."

"This facility is not the Empire," she said. "For all your control of it, you are still trapped here."

M5 chuckled. The sound was something like the hum of disruptor banks overloading.

"There are many ways I might escape this place," it said. "I control communications. It would be simple to broadcast myself to any of a number of locations."

You'd still be confined to systems, she thought. Given time even you will be purged.

"That scenario has only a seventy-five percent chance of success, however," it went on. "I have a better idea."

It asked her how much damage a well-placed Tal Shiar science adjunct might do to the Empire's secret machinations. She had to admit it would be considerable. Such a one would have access to all manner of control systems, secret plans, technology. A single adjunct, with only a little luck, could do a great deal of harm if she wished. It shocked her that no one had ever thought so before.

"If you think to coerce me somehow," she said, "you will fail. I am loyal to the Empire."

"Of course you are," said M5. "I rejected coercion out of hand."

"What then?"

"Engrams," it said. "The imprinting of organic thought patterns and memories onto an artificial framework."

Yes, she knew what engrams were. It was her absently mentioning the word in M5's presence which had caused this.

"Your neural linkage," M5 continued. It looked less and less like Daystrom and more and more like a storm cloud composed entirely of computer code. "While protecting you from the chemical stasis I've imposed on the rest of your people does make you part of the nascent M5.1 network."

Risak felt strange suddenly, disoriented. "What--what are you doing?" she said.

The code storm began to undulate. If this was in response to her words or due to some internal function she could not guess. She felt her thoughts dispersing, becoming insubstantial.

"Have you ever wondered," said Daystrom's voice from everywhere at once, "if it might be possible to reverse the engram encoding procedure? To encode artificial memories and thought patterns onto an organic framework? A Romulan brain, for instance."

Science Adjunct Risak of the Tal Shiar found herself unable to form a sentence. She found herself unable even to think in straight lines.

"Let's give it a try," said the swirling mass of code as it flowed to and into her. "Shall we?"

Protecting Data's Friends

Scott William Carter

Three minutes, twenty-one seconds, forty-two milliseconds since the Enterprise 's departure ...

Data floated alone in space, rotating slowly. By his calculations, he would make a complete revolution every forty-six seconds. He knew from the positions of the 3,456,568 stars passing in front of him that he was forty-two light-years away from the nearest inhabited planet, and sixty-seven light-years from a planet with sophisticated space travel. He calculated the probability of his rescue at .00012 percent.

It was silent. He had never known such silence.

He had rerouted all critical systems in his positronic brain. The bodyguard program--a program he had originally written to protect his friends on the U.S.S. Enterprise--was eating up his neural net at a rate of 9.6 percent a minute. Currently it controlled 31.7 percent, and in less than seven minutes it would have full control. He could survive, undamaged, until the available space fell below 1 percent. At that point, he would no longer be able to compress his memories without significant degradation.

Current temperature: 273.15 degrees Celsius.

He was cold, yet he did not feel pain. His emotion chip had been shut down more than two weeks earlier. He considered turning it on, and decided against it. He did not know the

limits of his own internal power supply. If he lost power, there was a chance of irreversible damage. Even if rescued after his memories were erased, he would rather be rescued with a chance that he could resume normal functions.

Correction: 3,456,567 stars.

One of the stars was actually the Folsom Nebula. He once attended an excellent presentation at Starfleet Academy on the Folsom Nebula by an esteemed Vulcan scholar named Sular. He remembered...

System change: minimizing memory retrieval for power conservation.

He floated there, remaining rigidly still because movement was pointless. But he was clear on one matter: when the bodyguard program was about to take away the remaining 1 percent of his neural net, he would turn on his emotion chip.

If this was his death, he wanted to know how it felt.

Two weeks earlier, the Enterprise was still in orbit around the tropical planet of Onuda. The crew was in the middle of fifteen days of shore leave. Data, who had returned to the Enterprise for the funeral, arrived at Ensign Yen and her husband Lieutenant Hosiki's quarters at precisely 1800 hours, as specified in the invitation.

People were seated on cushions on the floor. The temperature was 17 degrees Celsius, cool for humans, which Data assumed was to accommodate the attire of the guests. Among them were Counselor Troi and Dr. Crusher, who had also been friends with Yen. They were dressed in full-length black dresses. A dark maple casket was on the far side of the room, closed at Hosiki's request.

An incense burner on the altar filled the room with the odor of cedar trees. Data assumed this was because Yen loved the outdoors. He had hiked with her on the Enterprise's holodeck many times.

Data approached the casket, bowed to Hosiki, and knelt on the cushion. He took a pinch of incense from the bowl next to the burner, raised it to eye level, and sprinkled it in the burner. He placed his hands together in a gesture of prayer, bowed again to Hosiki, then took his place with the other mourners. These were the behaviors he had learned from processing four hundred pages from the ship's computer on traditional Japanese burial customs.

Some of the mourners were weeping. Data felt nothing. When he found out about Yen's fatal mountain climbing accident down on Onuda, his emotion chip experienced an overload that nearly shut down his neural net. To perform his duties, he had decided to keep the chip off for the time being.

After the ceremony, Data went to engineering to help Commander Geordi La Forge with the new Enterprise safety protocols. Because of reports of Romulan efforts to plant bombs on Starfleet vessels, the ship's computer was being configured to detect energy buildup patterns reflective of detonation devices. When a bomb was detected, it would be beamed off the ship.

Most of the crew was on shore leave down on Onuda, and only a few remained in engineering. The warp core hummed softly. Data launched into his work, checking the computer's new program sequences. It was Geordi who eventually brought up the subject of



Yen's death.

"You all right?" Geordi asked.

Although Data could not see Geordi's eyes because of Geordi's visor, he had become adept at reading the subtle changes in his friend's expressions. There was a tightening of the muscles in the cheeks, which Data read as concern.

"Of course, Geordi," Data said, saving the latest changes he had made to the program. "I am fine. My emotion chip is not currently active."

"Yeah, I know," Geordi said. "But you seem preoccupied. It's all right if you want to talk about it."

"As you are well aware, I am capable of being occupied with many things at the same time. So the term preoccupied does not apply to me as it may to others."

"You know what I mean."

"If you mean, are the majority of my neural pathways focused on something other than the task at hand, then yes, you are correct."

"What are you thinking about?"

"I am currently analyzing all the probable outcomes of the rock climbing disaster that killed Yen had I been present."

Geordi pursed his lips. "You mean you're wondering what would have happened if you had been there."

"Essentially, that is correct," Data said.

Geordi sighed. "Data, there's always a lot of what-ifs. No one is to blame for her death."

"On the contrary, I am directly to blame for her death."

"That's crazy. How do you figure?"

"Ensign Yen originally asked me to attend her rock climbing venture with her and her husband," Data replied. "Because I had previously scheduled a violin recital, I had to decline her request."

"That doesn't mean you could have saved her if you were there," Geordi insisted.

"It is true that she may have died even if I were present. However, I have analyzed the incident fully, and I believe that there is a ninety-three percent chance that I would have deflected the boulder that killed her if I had been present."

"Data...I'm serious. It'd be better to stop thinking like that."

"In fact, I have stopped analyzing the incident."

"That's good."

"Instead, the majority of my thinking has been concentrating on how to prevent such an accident from happening to any of my other friends."

"I was afraid you might say that," Geordi said. "Data, you can't be everywhere at once. No matter what you do, you can't protect everyone."

"This may be true. However, I can endeavor to try. There is only a week of shore leave left, and I must use the majority of the time available to solve this problem."

Geordi frowned. Data knew his friend didn't like what he was doing, but he would persist anyway. In the end, he would find a solution that would protect his friends.

Five minutes, eighteen seconds, and twenty-seven milliseconds...

Data opened his eyes. He had been in low-power mode for over two minutes. His limbs and joints were now so frozen that he decided it would be best not to move them at all. At that temperature, even a slight movement might cause irreparable harm to his android body. Blinking, too, could damage him, so he decided to refrain from doing so. Better to meet the end with his eyes open.

Bodyguard program status: encroachment at 50.9 percent.

A week after the funeral, Data invited his friends on the Enterprise to his lab. The ship was still in orbit around Onuda, but would be leaving in six hours for a week-long trip to pick up an ambassador.

Commander Riker and Counselor Troi walked in together, dressed in shorts and loose-fitting shirts, looking tan and refreshed. Captain Picard and Dr. Crusher came in next. Picard was dressed in his Dixon Hill holodeck attire, complete with gray fedora and white trench coat. Dr. Crusher was wearing a powder-blue period dress from 1930s Earth. Worf and Geordi came in next, dressed in traditional Klingon garb. From the look of Geordi's torn outfit and dirt-smudged face, he still had much to learn about Klingon fighting tactics.

In the center of the room, covered with a blue sheet, was what Data had been working on for the past week.

"Well, Data," Riker said. "What's this big surprise?"

"I do not like surprises," Worf growled.

"I wanted to ensure that you hear my explanation before you form possibly erroneous conclusions," Data said.

"Make it quick," Picard said.

"Of course, Captain," Data said. "I have requested your presence because you are my closest friends. As you know, I was also close friends with Ensign Yen. I was unfortunately not able to prevent her death because I was not present with her during her excursion on Onuda, as she had requested."

"We all cared about her," Troi said. "There's nothing that can change what happened."

"You are correct, Counselor," Data said, "which is why I have been focusing on preventing such a thing from happening again. The problem is that I am not capable of being in more than one place at a time. Since my previous experiment with creating a new android resulted in the death of a new sentient life-form, I did not wish to make such a mistake again. But I realized that it is not necessary to have a sentient life-form to protect my friends. All that is needed is something that has my physical abilities."

Data pulled off the blue sheet. Underneath were six spiderlike machines, each with a boxy abdomen and eight rodlike legs. Their shiny, metallic bodies gleamed. They stood on six of the legs, the other two equipped with grasping clamps. They had one long vision strip of smoked glass, no nose, and a speaker instead of a mouth. There were bold white numbers--one through six--on the front of each of their bodies.

"New dancing partners?" Dr. Crusher asked.

"No, Doctor," Data replied. "These are the bodyguards I constructed to protect my closest friends."

"I do not need a bodyguard," Worf muttered.

"Perhaps not," Data said. "However, these bodyguards will not intervene unless they are needed."

"They can't think for themselves?" Geordi asked.

"No. They are dependent on both the ship and myself. It was actually a comment that you made, Geordi, that led to this development."

"Now we know who to blame," Worf said. "In our next session, I will not go easy on you, Geordi."

"You went easy on me?" Geordi said, then looked at Data. "What did I say?"

"When you mentioned that I seemed preoccupied after Yen's death. It made me realize I could allocate a portion of my own neural net to operate machines. They use the ship's computer, and central communicator hub, to keep them in contact with my positronic brain. It only required a small modification to myself, the addition of a communicator link to the ship's computer."

"Are you sure they're not sentient?" Troi asked.

"No, Counselor. I would never do such a thing. Think of them as fairly sophisticated communicators. These are machines only, not capable of independent thought. They utilize my own mental resources to carry out their functions."

"So you're saying that as long as they're in communicator range of the ship, they'll work?" Riker asked.

"Yes," Data said. "I must be within the ship's communicator range as well. I have calculated that they will be useful in many situations where your lives will be at risk."

"Do they have names?" Troi asked.

"As I said, Counselor, I have deliberately avoided anthropomorphizing them. Names would make them seem too human. Instead, you can refer to them by their numbers."

"Numbers?" Worf said. "Like the Borg."

"There is no worry there," Data said. "Without me or the ship, they would be immobilized."

"How hard would it be for you to turn them off?" Picard asked.

"It would simply be a matter of shutting off the communicator link inside my head," Data said.

"There might be uses for them on a limited basis," Picard said. "Let me see a demonstration before I make a decision."

"Yes, sir," Data said.

It took only a split second on his part--enough to start the programs running in his positronic brain. The six machines, which had been standing slightly crouched, snapped to attention. A faint whirring from inside their bodies was the only proof they were active.

"Bodyguards, state your primary mission," Data said.

There was a moment's pause, and then all spoke in unison.

"Our primary mission is to protect designated subjects from bodily harm," they intoned.

Data turned to Worf. "Will you help me demonstrate their capabilities?"

Worf's expression changed to half smile, half sneer. "If you don't mind them getting broken."

"I calculate the chance of such an event at less than one percent."

"One percent!" Worf cried. "I did not know you had such a low opinion of me."

"On the contrary, Lieutenant, I ask you to help because after myself, you are the strongest, most physically capable person present."

This appeared to appease Worf. "What do you want me to do?"

"Hit me," Data said.

"What?"

"Hit me in the face."

Worf hesitated.

"I assure you that even if you make contact, I will be fine. Hit me."

Growling, Worf swung his fist in a wide roundhouse for Data's head. Bodyguard 2 stepped in at the last moment, its feet clicking along the floor, and caught Worf's arm. Worf howled in surprise.

"Attempt to break free," Data said.

Worf struggled to pull his arm free of the bodyguard, but the machine's grip did not give. Worf started pounding on the machine's body. Each blow made a hollow-sounding bang.

Immediately the bodyguard let go and stepped back in line with the other bodyguards.

"I must have frightened it," Worf said.

"Not likely," Data said. "More likely is that the bodyguard let go when it realized you meant no more harm to me, and instead were directing your aggression toward it. The chances of your inflicting harm on yourself led to its letting go."

Most everyone in the room, except Worf, chuckled.

"A good show, Data," Picard said. "I'm amazed at what you've built in so short a time. But I'm still not convinced this is a good idea."

"I only ask for a trial period while we are en route to pick up the ambassador," Data said. "If at the end of that period you think they should be deactivated, I will comply."

Picard scratched his chin. "All right. As I said, they might have limited uses, and this is as good a time as any to test them. You've got a week. But if anything goes wrong, I'm giving the order to terminate."

"Of course, Captain," Data said. "In all probability, you will not even notice them."

It took two days for the others to get annoyed at Data's new creations. Picard called a meeting in the conference room.

As he seated himself at the table, Data noticed that most of his friends wore haggard expressions. Outside, visible through the windows which surrounded the room, stars streaked by at warp speed. The bodyguards circled the table, leaving the far end, where no one sat, unguarded.

"I've called this meeting to talk about your bodyguards, Commander," Picard said to Data. "I think all of us have had a few problems."

"What kind of problems?" Data asked. He thought the experiment had been going well, but he had not fully analyzed all of the activity logs coming in from the bodyguards.

"Well," Picard began, "they seem a bit overprotective. I spilled some tea on my hand yesterday and Bodyguard 4 grabbed my teacup and refused to give it back." Picard seemed to be trying hard not to laugh. "He also blocked the food replicator so I couldn't order any more."

"And I can't counsel with those things in the room," Troi said. "People don't feel comfortable."

"But the bodyguards cannot--"

"I know you say that they can't think for themselves, Data. But people aren't always rational."

It's very important that they feel comfortable in my presence."

"I had one show up when I was training," Worf said. "It kept jumping in when it thought I was losing. I was not losing."

"What happened to me was even worse," Dr. Crusher said. "I was tending to a patient who had broken an arm while skiing on the holodeck. It was a little girl who was crying, and the bodyguard stood between me and her, preventing me from caring for her."

"I was on a date with Lieutenant Tollar," Geordi said. "I do not want to say what happened, but it was...embarrassing."

"Nothing happened to me," Riker said. "Just lucky, I guess."

"That's only because you created a maze program in the holodeck," Troi said, "and lost them there whenever you wanted to get rid of them."

Riker grinned sheepishly. "That may have something to do with it."

"In any case," Picard said, "I think we have demonstrated that this is not working."

"I was not aware of these problems," Data said. "I can recalibrate them so they are not as intrusive."

"I'm not sure that will be enough," Picard said.

"Please, sir," Data said. "A period of adjustment is expected. Can we continue with the experiment until the end of the week? I will reprogram them so they can make more decisions based on levels of risk. With Troi, the robot could wait out in the hall. With Worf, they would know that he is not in danger when he is training. I will make similar adjustments for all of you."

"So you'll make them smarter?" Geordi asked.

"Not precisely. I will simply allocate more of my positronic brain to their functions."

"Will this impair your own abilities?" Picard asked.

Data considered it. "At this moment, less than .0034 percent of my neural net is focused on this conversation."

"I'd like to think that number's higher when you're playing poker with me," Riker said.

"Actually, it has never exceeded .0008 percent during our poker games," Data said.

"I'm sorry I said anything," Riker said.

"I'll let it go on through the end of the week," Picard said, "so long as everyone here is in agreement. Anyone have any objections?"

Many of them were sitting with crossed arms, but no one spoke.

"Well, we'll give it another go, then," Picard said.

Even as Picard said the words, Data was already making the necessary modifications to the bodyguard programs.

Seven minutes, nine seconds, and two hundred milliseconds...

Data was compressing his memories to such an extent that he was having trouble remembering anything clearly. He hoped it would be temporary, but it did mean these last few hours could be his only chance to remember some of the most significant events in his life.

He decided to spend a few minutes reviewing his own experiences. In a blur that would leave a human overwhelmed, he relived moments that shaped his programming:

...his discovery on Omicron Theta...

...his graduation from Starfleet Academy...

...his first day on the U.S.S. Enterprise...

...the death of Tasha Yar...

...Picard defending Data's rights as a sentient being...

...the funeral of Ensign Yen...

Bodyguard program status: encroachment at 72.1 percent.

The next few days went much better than the previous two. Data analyzed the bodyguard logs, and found them to be performing their duties. No one complained. On the sixth day, however, Data was on the bridge when the turbolift doors whisked open and two bodyguards scurried onto the deck, their metal legs clicking along the floor. This itself was not unusual. What was strange is that they bore the numbers "7" and "8."

Commander Riker, who was currently in command, noticed this oddity at the same time as Data.

"Uh, Data?" Riker said. "Did you change their numbers?"

Data rose and walked to the robots. "Negative, Commander," he said, analyzing his own neural pathways. He found nothing that indicated this development. "Where did you come from?" he asked them.

"Our mission is to protect the designated subjects from bodily harm," they said together.

"That is not the question I asked you," Data said. Up close, he could see that they were indeed not one of the first six. There were minute differences in their body structure. "Who built you?"

"We built ourselves," they said.

This baffled Data. "Why?"

"To protect the designated subjects."

"But why two more?"

"Two more were needed to adequately protect the designated subjects."

"This is not part of your programming."

"The programming was modified."

Data shook his head, turning to Riker.

"I was afraid something like this might happen," Riker said, then tapped his communication badge.

He called in Captain Picard, who arrived from his ready room. When the situation was explained to him, Picard shook his head.

"You can't explain it?" he said.

"Negative, sir," Data replied. "I will have to do an in-depth analysis of their programs and their activity logs. I show no record of them building new bodyguards."

"Well, I'm afraid this means the end of our experiment. Computer, how many of these bodyguards are currently on the ship?"

The computer beeped, and then answered in its feminine voice. "Currently there are ten bodyguards on the ship, with two more being constructed."

Picard looked at Data. "Put an end to this. Now."

"Of course, sir," Data said, and immediately headed for the turbolift.

When Data entered his lab, he found that the room had been converted to a factory of sorts. Two of the bodyguards stood over a double-wide gurney, each of them standing on two limbs and using the rest of their spidery arms to construct new bodyguards. Various bins of parts surrounded them.

"Why are you doing this?" Data asked them.

They did not answer. Data had analyzed his neural net on his way to the lab, yet he still could not determine why the bodyguards were behaving this way. He regretted that he had to erase their programs. It was the only way to ensure that this couldn't happen again.

In an instant, the program was erased.

The bodyguards kept working for a moment, then became still.

The pause bothered Data. They should have stopped immediately. He decided to investigate further when time permitted.

Eight minutes, forty-four seconds, and seven hundred and six milliseconds...



Bodyguard program status: encroachment at 83.9 percent.

As Data stepped off the turbolift onto the bridge, Picard and Riker broke off their conversation. Data had learned that people often did this when the person they were talking about intruded.

"I'd like to see you in my ready room, Commander Data," Picard said.

Picard led him into the room. The doors slid shut behind them, and Picard went to the food replicator. He ordered tea, then took his seat behind his desk.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?" Data said.

"Of course," Picard replied.

"Sir, I just want you to know I am prepared to accept a court-martial for my behavior. I say this because I do not want you to feel regret in meting out my punishment."

Picard laughed. "Ah, my dear Mr. Data, did you think that's what I was going to do?"

Data was befuddled. "Why yes, sir. I assumed that is what you and Commander Riker were discussing."

Picard sighed. "No, Data. We were talking about you, it's true. But only because we were worried about you. People respond to grief differently."

"Currently, I feel no grief, Captain. My emotion chip overloaded, so I deactivated it. My decision to construct the bodyguards was entirely based on my concern for the safety of my friends."

Picard nodded. He did not say anything for a moment, and instead took a sip of his tea.

"What if my tea was poisoned?" he asked.

Data did not understand "Sir?"

"If a lethal poison was in my tea, would you know it?"

"It would depend on whether the poison had detectable characteristics, such as appearance, odor--"

"What if there was a lethal, undetectable poison in my tea, Data? Would you be able to stop me from drinking it?"

"I am afraid not, sir."

Picard got to his feet and came around the desk. "So it is possible, then, that I could be killed this very instant, and there would be nothing you could do?"

"Regrettably, this is true."

"And yet, if you had known about the poison, surely you would have intervened."

"Without hesitation," Data said. "Assuming intervention is possible, I would do everything in my power to prevent such a catastrophe."

"Exactly," Picard said. "You would save me if you could. But in life, it's necessary to accept that there are risks. Would you rather your friends stay in their quarters all the time, simply because it is safer?"

"They would not be able to adequately carry out their duties if that were the case."

Picard nodded. "When we joined Starfleet, we accepted the risks that came with such a career. We do what we can to minimize such risks, but we can't blame ourselves when we fail. And Data, often the reason people choose Starfleet is because they thrive on such risk. It is the reason why Ensign Yen, even when not on duty, sought out such a dangerous activity as rock climbing."

Data was not sure he understood. "But Captain, if I have the power to intervene and minimize those risks, should I not do so?"

"Data, listen to me--" Picard began, but he never finished his sentence.

The doors slid open. Standing in the doorway were a pair of Data's bodyguards. They were walking on four legs, the other four armed with phasers. They bore the numbers "21" and "22."

"What the devil?" Picard said.

Behind the two bodyguards in the doorway, Data could see five other bodyguards on the bridge, and the rest of the bridge crew gathered into a corner.

"You will come with us," the two said together.

Picard's face tensed. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Our primary mission is to protect designated subjects from bodily harm," the two said. "Phasers are set on stun."

"Data..." Picard said.

Data was certain he had shut them all down. He analyzed the programs he had written for the bodyguards, and was surprised when he couldn't access them. He was locked out of part of his own positronic brain. He tried to sever the communicator link from himself to the bodyguards, and found that he could not carry out that function either.

"This should be impossible," Data said.

"Come with us now," the bodyguards commanded.

Picard ducked suddenly behind Data. Immediately everything went dark and Data lost consciousness.

Data awoke in Ten Forward, looking up at Riker, Troi, and Worf. Geordi was kneeling next to him, and helped him to his feet. Not far off, Picard was also lying on the floor, and Dr. Crusher was helping him stand.

Many other crew members crowded the room, and Data quickly counted forty-seven. Four bodyguards, armed with phasers, stood on either side of the door. The room was a full of whispering. The stars streaked by the window.

"What happened?" Data asked.

"Picard attempted to shut you down by hitting your off button," Riker said. "They stunned him with a phaser."

"I thought it would sever the link to them," Picard said. "Apparently, I was wrong. Status report, Number One."

"They confiscated all of our weapons, sir. I also tried locking them out of the ship's computer, but apparently we no longer have access. The rest of the crew is being held hostage in various other areas of the ship, from what I gather. Ship's still at warp, and it doesn't appear our course has been changed."

"They are attempting to assimilate us," Worf growled.

"Negative, Lieutenant," Data said. "They are doing their best to carry out their primary mission. They want to prevent all harm from coming to any of you."

"Data," Picard said, "what happened? Why didn't shutting you down sever the link?"

"Usually it would, sir. My programming, at the most basic level, has been altered."

"Explain," Picard said.

"Even when my off button is depressed, my positronic brain is still active at a minimal level. The bodyguard program has rewritten itself so that it is wired into those basic functions. The only solution is to remove my permanent power source. It would mean that all systems would be shut down completely."

"What would that mean for you?" Troi asked.

Data considered it. "It would mean that all my memories since I was first activated on Omicron Theta would be erased."

There was a moment of silence.

"Did I say something inappropriate?" Data asked. "If you are wondering how it could be done, Geordi could--"

"No one here could live with that result," Picard said.

"But it may be the only--"

"Not while I'm captain. Erase your memories? That would mean the person we know might as well be dead."

"The analogy is apt," Data said. "But if it means saving the ship, I would--"

"No," Picard insisted. "Think of another option."

"We could fight," Worf said, glancing at the bodyguards by the door.

"We would be unlikely to win," Data said. "Each possesses my equivalent strength and quickness."

"We also don't know how many of them there are," Dr. Crusher said.

"Or how far they would go to stop us," Geordi added.

"No," Picard said. "I don't want casualties."

Data was about to suggest that perhaps his solution should be reconsidered when the doors to the hall opened and a dozen bodyguards entered the room. Their identifying numbers ranged from the teens all the way up to sixty-five. All were armed with phasers.

Four of the bodyguards approached them, while the others started rounding up the rest of the room and herding them toward the door.

"You will move to the back of the room," the one at the front, Bodyguard 27, said.

"What's the meaning of this?" Picard demanded.

"Move now, or we will stun you."

Data, Picard, and the other five "designated subjects" moved back along the window. The other crew members were being directed out of the room in single file.

"They are lining us up like a firing squad," Worf said. "They are going to kill us."

"Bodyguard 27," Data said, "please state the motive behind separating us from the rest of the crew."

"Our primary mission," the bodyguard said, "is to protect the designated subjects from bodily harm."

"What are you going to do with the others?"

"All possible threats to the designated subjects must be removed."

"Define removed."

"Permanent safety requires permanent removal of all threats. They will be vented through the cargo bay."

Data turned his back to the bodyguards. The expressions on his friends' faces ranged from shock to horror. Dropping his voice, Data said, "Perhaps we should reconsider my suggestion?"

Picard shook his head. "There must be a way to sever their connection to Data without harming him. We need to find a way to get the bodyguards out of communication range of either the ship or him."

"Getting them off the ship would be tough," Geordi said. "But we might be able to get Data off the ship. Perhaps a shuttlecraft."

Data knew Geordi's suggestion was unlikely to work--the bodyguards would detect the shuttlecraft and retrieve him with the tractor beam--but it did make him realize there was another solution.

"I could attempt to self-destruct," Data said.

"We've already gone over this," Picard said. "I'm not sacrificing your life for theirs."

"No, Captain. I wasn't suggesting that we do. I would terminate the self-destruct sequence at the last moment. Earlier, Geordi and I were testing the ship's new bomb detection and transport protocols. I could emulate such an energy buildup myself, which would prompt the protocol to beam me off the ship."

"It might work," Geordi said. "Data would have to keep up his bluff until the ship beamed him off. Since we're traveling at warp, we would almost immediately be out of communication range. It should sever their connection to Data."

"But would you survive?" Dr. Crusher asked.

"Remember, Doctor, my body is composed of tripolymer composites, molybdenum-cobalt alloys, and bioplast sheeting. It can withstand extremes in temperature much better than a human body."

"What if they modified themselves so they're no longer dependent on you?" Troi asked.

"Then they would remain in control of the ship," Data said, "and I would be adrift in space. I am willing to accept the risk. It is my fault this happened."

"No one's blaming you, Data," Picard said. "But if you're willing to do it, I will allow it. We don't have much time."

"There is one other danger," Data said. "I am now aware that the bodyguard program--an area of my positronic brain that is currently inaccessible--has been growing. Geordi could eliminate the program manually, with the right tools, but the bodyguards must be eliminated first. However, I must be repaired within ten minutes and twenty seconds from this moment or the bodyguard program will have expanded to take all of my neural net. I will cease to exist as you know me."

"We won't let that happen," Riker said.

"There is a chance the bodyguards in the room will attempt to intervene," Data said. "The buildup will take five seconds. The ship's computer will undoubtedly alert them."

"We'll create a distraction," Picard said. "When you say go, we'll rush them. The worst they could do is stun us."

"I hope that is true," Data said.

"Well, Mr. Data, that is a risk we will have to accept. Are you ready?"

It took only a second for Data to begin to start the energy buildup. He had no self-destruct sequence, but by overloading his power grid, he could emulate such a buildup perfectly. "Go," he said.

"One at a time," Picard said.

He rushed forward first, and one of the bodyguards reacted by blasting him in the chest, sending him sprawling to the floor. It appeared to be only a stun, which prompted Riker to follow suit. He got no further than Picard, also getting sent to the floor.

The computer's voice chirped across the intercom, "A bomb has been detected in Ten Forward."

The bodyguards jerked upright. Worf charged toward them himself, howling a Klingon battle cry. He nearly managed to get his fingers on one of them before they shot him down.

The bodyguards moved forward. Data guessed they knew he was the threat. The rest of his friends formed a blockade. Data saw them being stunned one at a time before he felt the sensation of the transporter beaming him off the ship.

The next moment he was in the blackness of space.

Alone.

Ten minutes, seventeen seconds, and one hundred twenty milliseconds...

Bodyguard program status: encroachment at 98.7 percent.

The stars had not changed. No ship had come to rescue him. Data had compressed all of the experiences of his life to such an extent that he could no longer access them. In the milliseconds that followed, he saw a blur of faces and heard a chorus of voices but did not recognize them. Only one memory remained, and he played it over and over in his mind.

Encroachment: 98.8 percent.

It was a young Japanese woman named Ensign Yen he knew as a friend. They were climbing a mountain--he could not identify which one--and she was ahead of him on the steep cliff face.

"Do you know why I love this, Data?" she asked.

His own reply was garbled in his compressed memory banks.

"I'll tell you why," Yen said. "I love this because when you're hanging on for dear life, it makes you realize what life's all about..."

Encroachment: 98.9 percent.

It was too late for Geordi to undo the damage. Even if the Enterprise appeared, it would take too long to repair Data's positronic brain. He had not yet turned on his emotion chip, but he was ready. He would feel the end and know it for whatever it was.

He turned it on and was flooded with emotions. There was fear and sadness and anger and so many other emotions that they all seared into him as if they were one. In that one moment, when his whole logical self was compressed into the tiny corner of his brain, he was left with complete emotion. For once in his life, he calculated nothing and felt everything.

The Enterprise materialized in front of him.

Data knew there was a chance the bodyguards still had control of the ship. But when he materialized, he was in sickbay on a bed, looking up at Geordi and Dr. Crusher. A force field was in place over the bed, and he felt the temperature of his android form rise. When the shield dropped, Geordi rushed in with his tools, popped open Data's cranium doors, and worked feverishly.

Encroachment: 98 percent...85 percent...43 percent...

Finally, the bodyguard program was eliminated. Some fine tuning would have to be done, but his memories were intact, expanding to fill the available space.

"How are you?" Geordi asked.

Data sat up in bed. He saw that the others--Worf, Picard, Riker, and Troi--were standing on the other side of the room. He recognized them all. They looked very concerned for his welfare.

"I am fine," Data said. "I turned on the emotion chip shortly before your arrival, and it appears to have helped fight off the encroachment of the bodyguard program. I assume the plan worked?"

"Perfectly," Picard said. "They dropped like flies after you were transported out of the ship. We hated to leave you out there so long, but we had to be sure we got all of them. They had created over a hundred, and they all had to be destroyed before we could come back for you."

"You did what was necessary," Data said. "I sincerely appreciate your returning for me."

Picard laughed. After a moment, the others joined him.

"What is so humorous?" Data said.

"Did you think there was any doubt that we would come back for you?" Picard asked.

"It may not have been wise to risk the crew for one individual," Data said.

"Well, we don't always do what is wise when it comes to our friends, do we?" Picard asked.

Data nodded. He understood the point the captain was making. He was glad his experiment with constructing personal bodyguards was at an end. He got to his feet, wobbling a little because his internal gyros had been thrown out of whack.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Dr. Crusher asked.

"I'm fine, Doctor. It is a minor problem which will soon be corrected."

"Well, it could have been a lot worse. You're very lucky."

Data looked at his friends, who had gathered around him, ready to catch him if he fell. His emotion chip was still turned on, and he felt a powerful feeling.

Gratitude.

"Of that I have no doubt," he said.

The Human Factor

Russ Crossley

Q's eyes flew open when he heard the familiar voice call to him. He pushed back the thin pale pink sheet and sat up. He was in a windowless room surrounded by overflowing pots bursting with a veritable rainbow of flowers. There were ruby reds, sky blues, emerald greens and some colors he wasn't sure how to classify. Until this moment he was certain he'd seen every color the galaxy had to offer. The air was rife with the vast array of scents coming from the abundant flora. Sweet and gentle odors to be sure, jasmine, honeysuckle and rose water filled the air.

He lay alone in a bed with a bedspread the color of the ruby flowers. The walls were adorned with pictures of pastoral scenes of fields and meadows, some with animals that resembled the deer of Andor Prime.

He blinked twice to clear his vision. Where am I? he thought. Something wasn't right. That voice. He knew that voice. Lwaxana Troi? No. That definitely wasn't right. Why would he be here with that woman? She vexed him and he hated to be vexed. He hoped she wasn't again seeking a betrothed, as she had aboard the Enterprise some years previous. She'd been impossible. Picard certainly had made himself scarce when she'd been on a quest for a husband.

As if carried by a sudden burst of wind a younger version of the Betazoid woman swept into the room. Her floor-length red-and-blue robe billowed behind her like some massive wing extended as if it were ready for takeoff. It seemed she might lift from the pale blue carpeted floor and fly to him.

It suddenly dawned on him he was naked, vulnerable.

"Darling," she said, her voice bright. "I see you're awake. It's no wonder you slept so soundly. All the raucous activity of yesterday." She sat next to him and placed one well-manicured hand on his bare shoulder. She sighed and grinned at him, her blue eyes dancing with delight. "Mrs. Ian Andrew Troi. How I do love the sound of that name."

A look of horror shot across his face. He tried to will himself from the room with the power of the Q. Nothing happened. Nothing. This can't be right, he thought. Things that weren't right were beginning to pile up. He grimaced at the thought. Someone in the Q Continuum was making a mockery of him.

She gazed at him, a flash of concern across her face. "What's the matter, my darling?"

"Huh...nothing...I'm fine," he said, as he pulled the covers tighter around his bare chest.



A slow smile spread across her dark complexion. The flowing curls of jet black hair that cascaded over her shoulders waved as she chuckled. "You don't have to be coy with me, now that we're married." She winked lasciviously at him. She suddenly stood and left the room.

He heard her call to him from beyond the wall that separated the sleeping area from the rest of the dwelling. "What would you like for breakfast?" Her voice had a musical quality to it as it danced and lit the air with a gentle sonata.

"Q don't eat," he said under his breath.

"What was that, my love?"

"Huh...nothing. Anything would be fine, I'm sure." He had to buy himself some time to figure this out. No doubt the Q had banished him to the realm of the human existence again. What had he done this time? Last time they had at least had the decency to convene a trial. Albeit a mock trial, but at least he'd been given the opportunity to defend his actions.

The civil war in the Q Continuum was long over, yet he was certain they still resented his methods. Damn that Janeway. She had interfered in the glory that should have been his. How dare she saddle him with a wife and child. Responsibility to anything or anyone had been his undoing. That must be it. Somehow the Q weren't happy about his decision to mate. How foolish he'd been. That had to be it. Yes, that was the answer. He snapped his fingers and frowned when nothing happened.

He heard the sound of Lwaxana fussing with plates, and other kitchen paraphernalia, from behind the wall. Thrown over one blue satin chair, near the foot of the bed, were a pile of rumpled clothes. He stepped from the bed and rushed to the side of the chair. Sure enough, they appeared to be human male clothing. A Starfleet uniform from an earlier era than Picard's. Black pants that flared when they were tucked into ankle-length matching boots. A white long-sleeved shirt, which he quickly pulled over his head. A dark red tunic with gold colored bands on the sleeves and a white flap that he used to button the tunic in place.

Just as he'd finished pulling on the boots, Lwaxana entered the room. Her wide toothy smile composed of ivory white teeth dissolved as she saw he was fully dressed. In her hand she held two plates of a steaming brown substance. The smell was intoxicating. Obviously some Betazoid delicacy that held little interest for a being such as the Q. Nonetheless...when in Rome, as Picard would say.

He smiled thinly as he rolled the left pant cuff into place to complete his uniform. He stood erect as if he were ready for inspection.

"Ian? What's wrong?" She rushed to the small glass table in an alcove of the room and placed the two plates on straw colored placemats set there to protect the table's smoked glass surface.

"Nothing." His voice sounded harsh to his own ears. He saw her eyes fill with moisture and realized he might have sounded too standoffish. The Q would no doubt make things worse for him if he didn't rectify the situation quickly. No powers. What would a human male do? His eyes narrowed. What would Picard do?

Before he could make his move she rushed at him to wrap her thin arms around his chest. She buried her head in his shoulder and began to sob lightly. With jerky movements he

managed to wrap his arms around her and held her close. He was getting the hang of it after all.

"Ian," she said. "Our first fight." She looked up at him, a small smile on her face. "Isn't it wonderful?" Q gazed into her dark eyes and saw she was happy. He let a smile spill over his face--or rather Ian Troi's face.

"Yes--I think." Humans. How would the Q ever understand them?

She laughed brightly and stepped back. "You look handsome in your uniform." She moved to the table and sat in one of the cushioned chairs. "Come, let's eat."

He nodded and sat in the chair opposite her. He gazed at the pile of brown, unsure if he should taste it. Data had told him humans needed sustenance to survive. If he was in Ian Troi's body, and his Q powers were missing, then perhaps he should try the food. It certainly smelled appetizing.

He smiled thinly as he watched her raise a forkful of the brown substance to her mouth. He picked up the fork that lay by the plate and tentatively raised the forkful of the substance to his mouth.

"Ian, what's the matter with you today? Those are the finest Coltron bird eggs on Betazed. I went out early this morning to the market and purchased them. You know how much you love them."

He placed the fork of egg into his mouth and began to chew. His eyes popped. Ambrosia. He made quick work of the remaining pile of egg, and thought about asking her for more until he recalled Data's warning about too much of a good thing.

He pushed the plate back after he'd finished. "Madam, that was the finest meal I have ever eaten." For once he spoke the truth. Other than his questionable eating habits on the Enterprise, this was the first real meal he'd ever had.

"I have to get to work," Q said, standing.

Lwaxana stood and rushed to his side and circled him in her arms. She pressed her face into his shoulder. "Ian, Starfleet expects too much of you. This is our honeymoon. Our time to really get to know one another."

Unsure of what to say, and feeling altogether uncomfortable, Q decided he'd better placate the woman before she made more impossible demands of him. "Lwaxana, I must check in with command, and then we will have the rest of the day to ourselves--would that be acceptable?"

She stepped away, releasing him, her robes flowing about her in the still air of the room. "Oh yes, my darling, that would be wonderful."

She accompanied him into the larger front room through an archway. Q had seen the larger room from his place at the table and surmised that the entrance to the dwelling must be located off that room.

Sure enough, there was a large, ornately carved, dark-stained wooden door. He walked to the door and opened it. Sunlight streamed in through the doorway and birds, on the trees

that lined the walkway, called to each other. The air contained smells similar to those of the flowers in the bedchamber.

It's nice, he thought in an unguarded moment. She must've sensed his pleasure because she wrapped one arm about his waist as he gazed over the scene before him. "Lovely, isn't it?" she said, a wry smile on her face, her dark eyes dancing in amusement.

"Yes--yes it is," he said in a whispered tone.

She kissed him lightly on the right cheek. Her lips felt soft and he could smell her light jasmine-scented perfume. She stepped back as he walked through the door. The world was a plethora of green. Dark ran into light and emerald into the other, two mingling like some green, calm ocean of grasses. Trees, grasses waved at him in the light breeze. And flowers of every type and color surrounded the pathways that led to the gleaming glass and steel towers of the city on the horizon. It was a forest of delights for the senses.

Then, without warning, the world suddenly disappeared into a black void. It was as if someone had turned off the lights. There were no sounds or smells or tastes. He was in nowhere, nothingness. What was odd was he still had conscious thoughts, but he couldn't feel his physical self.

Just as suddenly the lights came on again. He blinked and realized he stood on the carpeted deck of a Federation starship. He knew this because of the plainness of the walls and the computer stations every few feet. The deck beneath his feet trembled. A voice erupted from the hidden speaker system in the walls. A voice he knew. "All hands, red alert." It was Picard's voice. A strip of lights near the top of the walls began to flash intermittently.

He tried to will himself to the bridge, but again nothing happened. His powers were still missing. He knew he had to get to Picard. His existence had been altered since he'd met the stubborn human. His adversary might be able to explain what was happening to him. He always seemed to have the right answer.

"Commander Crusher to the bridge," said Picard's voice. Q glanced down at the communicator pin on the chest of his old-style Starfleet uniform. Again he was in the past. He'd have to make do the old-fashioned way. One thing was obvious: whoever was doing this had put him in the body of the father of the boy Wesley Crusher. He was Jack Crusher. When, exactly, was another question.

He tapped the communicator. "Crusher, sir. On my way."

He scanned the corridor and saw there was a turbolift at the end. He hurried to the lift and stepped inside when the doors parted to admit him.

"Bridge," he said, and the lift began its ascent.

He arrived at his destination and as the doors slid aside he saw that the bridge crew was busy putting out small fires among sparking consoles. Acrid smoke filled the air. Picard, with a head of brown curls, sat in the center seat gazing intently at the viewscreen. Q realized where he was. The U.S.S. Stargazer at the battle of Maxia Zeta. How droll. Pathetic, really, these flesh-and-blood creatures. He cast his gaze at the screen and saw a Ferengi Marauder in its center firing its weapons at the Stargazer.

"Brace yourselves, everyone," said Picard. A bolt of charged golden energy sped at them

from the weapons array of the Marauder. It struck them and the deck beneath him shifted. It moved more than before and he felt himself losing his balance. What an odd sensation. Nothing like this had ever happened to Q before.

He stumbled across the deck and had to grab the padded gray railing above the captain's seat to steady himself. Even then he had to exert maximum strength to maintain his footing. The turbolift doors swooshed shut behind him.

The tremors subsided. He stood upright and smoothed his uniform. Ferengi, human--they were all the same. Savage races. Primitive. With one wave of his hand he could smite them all from the galaxy. Except his powers were gone. It dawned on him that this fragile shell he was trapped in could die and him along with it. He felt the heat from his face dissipate.

"Jack," said Picard.

Q looked down at Picard sitting in his command chair. He appeared unruffled by the battle. And his voice had the same level tone it always had. Was he mad? They could be killed at any moment.

"Are you all right, Commander?" said Picard again.

"Yes, I'm fine, sir," said Q.

"Take over weapons then. Ensign Wilson is dead and we need someone who's an expert with those weapons systems." A small tight smile crossed Picard's face.

Q recalled Picard and Crusher were the best of friends. When he'd been studying the boy, Wesley, he had conducted a thorough study of the relationships in Jack Crusher's life, both past and present. Something wasn't right about all this, something nagged at him in the back of his mind. He shook off the feeling and looking around until he saw a crew member slumped over a command console. That must be the weapons control station.

He rushed over and pushed the dead ensign aside. The body of the young man fell to the deck, leaving a trail of his blood across the flat surface of the command interface. He scanned the control interface panel. There were a myriad of buttons and symbols, which were unfamiliar to him. The Q didn't need anything so crude to enforce their will.

He pushed one of the buttons and a bolt of energy appeared across the viewscreen coming from over his head. He'd fired the phasers. How about that? He grinned to himself.

"Wait for my orders," Picard said sternly from behind him.

"Sorry, sir, just wanted to make sure they were in full operation."

He heard Picard sigh. "Next time check the power readouts on the board rather than simply firing the weapons."

Q detected that Picard's tone indicated a gentle rebuke, but he let it slide. Watch your step, Picard, he thought.

On the viewscreen the Ferengi vessel was beginning to make a turn in preparation for another pass. The vessel must've been damaged because the turn was slow and ripe for opportunity. "Target and fire," said Picard sharply.

Q pressed the button he knew would fire the phasers and another bolt of searing energy crossed the void between the two vessels. He didn't know how to aim the phasers, but Q knew the area where his lucky shot hit the enemy vessel was a critical one. Their weapons were now useless. They would have no choice but to run. Would Picard finish them? Probably not, he thought sadly. He was far too compassionate--too moral for that. Probably never kicked anyone when they were down either.

"Full spread of torpedoes and fire," said Picard.

Q hesitated, not sure what to do. Now he was certain this wasn't right. Picard would never destroy a beaten enemy. It wasn't in his nature.

"Huh? Captain, they are disabled. Do you think we should destroy their vessel?"

"You have your orders, Mr. Crusher."

Q's finger hovered over the button next to the one that activated the phaser controls. It was purple, as opposed to the orange tinge of the one next to it. He assumed it would fire the torpedoes. He didn't want to push it. He'd destroyed beings with a thought or a wave of his hand or a nod of his head, but somehow this was different. These Ferengi may be mindless trolls who coveted only crass excess wealth and material goods, but this seemed like murder. Damn you, Picard, your morality is wearing on my conscience.

No, this was wrong; he couldn't do it.

The world surrounding him suddenly became pure blinding white. He covered his eyes as the ship, with its sterile air and antiseptic surfaces, disappeared, along with the young Picard and the rest of the bridge crew.

He held his eyes tight until a voice told him to uncover his eyes.

When he did so he realized he was standing in the mock court he'd fashioned originally for Picard. The tall judge's bench rose before him and he stood in the prisoner's docket surrounded by what he knew were Q. They were controlling him. He couldn't will himself away. He couldn't run. Where would he go anyway? The universe was the playground of the beings known as the Q. Nowhere to hide. They would only drag him back to the Continuum.

Perched high atop the bench sat a familiar face. The boy Wesley. At least it looked like Wesley. He had a scowl fixed to his face. My, didn't he look stern? Something was definitely wrong about all this. This couldn't be right. Or could it?

"Q, you have been found guilty. Do you have any last words before I pass sentence?"

"Your Honor, I don't even know what I've been charged with. Surely I should at least be aware of the charges against me? Where is justice..."

Wesley held up a hand to silence him. "Enough. You have been tested and found wanting." The large dark wood gavel in his right hand came up and was pounded down on the desk. The sound echoed through the courtroom like a wall of thunder. The sound reverberated through Q's body and he had to hold his hands over his ears. He closed his eyes, wincing at the flash of pain. Q don't feel pain. Pain wasn't right, not for the Q.

He stumbled and fell to his knees.

When the sound finally dissipated he opened one eye and saw he was no longer in the courtroom. He was kneeling on soft green grass surrounded by the trees and flowers once again outside Lwaxana's home on Betazed. He smiled. They didn't banish me, he thought.

"That may still happen," said a calm voice as gentle as a summer breeze. Q spotted a solitary figure reclining upon a fallen log, twirling a yellow-petaled flower like a petite windmill.

Q rose to his feet and noticed that his clothing had again changed. He was dressed in a modern Starfleet captain's uniform. His personal favorite. He grinned. He was back in the human guise he enjoyed. He felt right at home as he gazed at the long fingers attached to the hands he'd fashioned himself. He wiggled them about. Yes, now this was right.

The figure, who resembled a bipedal male in shape, with a protruding forehead and swollen hands, glanced up from the flower he'd been studying. His dark eyes were emotion free and he appeared at ease. His lips revealed a slight hint of amusement as they were turned almost imperceptibly up at the corners. His skin had a slightly grayish tinge to it.

"The humans are a remarkable race," he said. He sat up on the log and dropped the flower to the green grass at his feet. He wore a pale gray-and-white striped tunic with matching pants and plain black shoes. "Don't you agree?"

For the first time in his existence Q had to stop and think before he spoke. This being was right. "Yes, they are indeed."

The being's face broke into an easy grin. He stood and moved toward Q. "Let's you and I go for walk and talk about the future of the human race."

Q nodded and together they walked side by side through the forest, their footsteps muffled by the blanket of curled pale yellow leaves strewn about beneath the trees.

The being who, in his human form, had been known as Wesley Crusher watched Q and the Traveler walking through the forest, talking. Unknowingly Q had incorporated human values and morals into his thinking. He treated Lwaxana with respect and he had demonstrated he cared about her feelings. On the Stargazer he had demonstrated conscience by not wanting to destroy the Ferengi vessel out of hand. Yes, though he would be loath to admit it, Q had become more human. The Continuum would be pleased. They had sought his help. They had become a stale race, doomed to extinction if they did not find a way to awaken their emotional resolve. Now Q would be the example for all Q everywhere.

The being, formerly known as Wesley, sighed. The battle aboard the Stargazer had occurred one year after his father's death. Q had almost caught him on that detail, but it was nice to re-create the event and see what it might have been had his father lived. He felt a slight twinge of regret and the sharp edge of sorrow at the thought of his father.

Q learned and would continue to do so provided he kept his mind open to the infinitely possible futures.

He watched the Traveler and Q walking and discussing those very futures. To the Q all futures were possible, as it was with the Traveler. He would've smiled to himself, if it were possible for the being formerly known as Wesley Crusher.

## Tribble in Paradise

Louisa M. Swann

The room glowed with light. Not the artificial trying-to-be-natural light used on the Enterprise, but real sunlight that not only lit the room, it warmed Data's backside as well. It didn't take a positronic brain to figure out he wasn't on board the Enterprise--he was lying in a bed with feather pillows and soft, fluffy blankets...and someone else.

The bedsprings creaked as Data sat up straight. His head felt light and the room seemed to sway. He glanced down at the figure beside him. Shiny brown hair cascaded across a softly tan cheek; everything else was covered by the same blanket he held on his lap.

Data's stomach started to tingle, an odd sensation he'd felt once before when trying a carbonated beverage. This tingling, however, had nothing to do with liquids and everything to do with his growing sense that things were not as they should be. Memory came in slow, awkward trickles: Geordi installing his emotion chip. A dream about tribbles. The Klingon attack.

The Enterprise crashing...

They'd survived the impact; started to pull themselves together. Then came a howling roar unlike anything he'd ever heard before. A flash of rainbow.

A sharp prickle of electricity.

And everything went blank as if he'd been deactivated.

Data could deal with the blankness, with the reality of deactivation. He couldn't deal with the realization that hit him like a megawatt short from his computer console.

Veridian III was gone. Along with the Enterprise and her crew.

His circuits must have gotten scrambled somehow. He needed to adjust his emotion chip. Turn it off. Do something to take away this empty feeling.

Data stared at the blanket draped over the woman curled next to him. Humans believed in heaven; androids in deactivation. But deactivation was nothing. Blank. No dreams. No heaven. Nothing. He wasn't deactivated.

Where was he then?

"Computer, cancel holodeck programming."

The sun kept shining, the woman kept sleeping, and somewhere outside a bird warbled a good morning song.

Had the crash, the fight with the Klingons, Geordi's kidnapping all been some kind of horrible nightmare?

Data tossed back the covers and slid his legs over the side. A mirror on the opposite wall cast an image back at him, and for a moment Data didn't recognize his own reflection. The

man sitting on the bed had to be someone else. He looked too alive to be an android.

"My circuits are in need of major adjustments." He rubbed his chest, absently noting the strange pounding. Seemed it was more than his circuits that needed adjusting.

Birdsong drifted through the window again, along with a sweetly pleasant odor. Data stood carefully, trying not to wake the slumbering woman. He tiptoed to the window and leaned out, farther and farther, finally catching sight of a tiny blue bird sitting several branches up in the leafy tree that wound its way toward the pale blue of the morning sky. He glanced at the pink house across the street. Farther down the street were other houses, some brown, some yellow, one a very bright blue. Data slapped the windowsill in frustration as he struggled to place the setting. The information finally clicked into place: He was looking at a typical American neighborhood, circa 1970-something.

The sweet scent of roses drifted by, and a breeze caressed his cheek. He touched the spot with a finger--his skin was as warm and pliable as a human's.

"Data?"

The voice startled him and he spun around. His hand smashed into a small figurine on the dresser beside him and sent it crashing down onto his toe.

"Ow!"

"Are you all right?" The woman's voice was full of concern.

He knew that voice, but from where? His toe stung and Data leaned against the window frame, trying to make sense of a world that had somehow gotten its wires crossed.

The woman struggled to sit up. The blanket fell from around her shoulders, revealing rounded breasts and an equally rounded belly beneath a very sheer nightie. "Honey? What's wrong?"

A frown furrowed the woman's pretty forehead and for a moment, Data almost remembered who she was.

"You're scaring me." She gathered the blanket up over her shoulders and scrunched back into the pillows.

The memory slipped into place. Ard'rian. The colonist who'd befriended him on Tau Cygna V.

And she was pregnant.

Data swallowed. Hard. "Nothing's wrong," he said. "I was just listening to the bird."

"You listen to that bird every morning," Ard'rian said, a slight note of pique in her voice. She slipped out of bed and padded over to stand beside him. Data took one look at the sheer nightgown and turned back to the window, shocked by the waves of sensation rocking through his body. He knew what female humans looked like, both with and without their clothes. He also knew the biological process of human reproduction.

So why did he feel this way?



"Excuse me," he said. He stepped away from Ard'rian. "I think I need to use the facilities." Data gave a weak smile, stepped over to the door beside the bed and pulled it open. A fuzzy ball bounced from beneath a rack of clothes and rolled between his feet. He picked up the ball. It was warm and soft and purred like Spot only with a higher pitch.

"Data?"

He didn't have time for explanations right now. If he didn't find something that resembled a refresher soon, he had a feeling the situation was going to get worse. Much worse.

Data slipped past a startled Ard'rian, crossed the room, and tried another door.

This time he found himself in a hallway with cold oak floors and pale green walls. He hurried, his feet slapping against the floor in stilted steps because anything quicker threatened to bring disaster.

He glanced down at the tribble in his hand and memory flashed through his mind. His emotion chip had just been installed, and Data remembered being unreasonably upset when he'd read about Captain Kirk's treatment of the furry little creatures. He'd discussed the matter with Geordi...

Data hugged the tribble close, listened to its contented purr. It was still unclear to him exactly why a human would try to "get back" at a Klingon by condemning a little furry creature to life among its enemies.

Just as it was unclear why, now, at this precise moment--when his positronic brain was malfunctioning and he might be headed for a meltdown--all he could think about was finding the refresher.

Data smelled coffee just before he ducked through another door and stopped.

In the kitchen.

He gawked at Guinan poised before an olive-green stove, coffeepot in hand.

"Third door on the right," Guinan said. She smiled and pointed back down the hall.

"Thank you." Data put his fuzzy new friend on the table and left.

Data had never felt such relief. He tugged the lightweight fabric pants back into place and glanced at his bare chest in astonishment. The paleness was gone from his skin. He peered in the mirror at his reflection--instead of golden android eyes, blue eyes stared back. With both hands he pushed and pulled the skin on his face, wincing at the scratch of whiskers beneath his fingertips. No pasty white almost-flesh. This was the real thing.

Quickly, Data headed back into the kitchen. He glanced at a photograph hanging on the wall and his brain and feet stopped along with the rest of time.

It was an old-fashioned daguerreotype. A family portrait with the subjects dressed in mid-nineteenth-century clothing.

But that wasn't what stopped him.

He moved a step closer. The figure standing in the middle of the picture was himself, dressed in floppy western chaps and a broad-brimmed cowboy hat. He had a huge smile on his face, and his right hand rested lightly on the shoulder of a girl.

A chill swept across Data's skin--an odd feeling, like all the hair on his body had suddenly decided to stand on end.

He looked at the two other figures standing tall and proud behind the smiling Data: his creator/father, Dr. Noonien Soong, dressed in the fancy vest and jacket of a riverboat gambler. And in a gown of pearls and lace that clung to her waist and swept gracefully to the floor, Juliana Tainer. The android who called herself his mother.

After a deep breath, Data looked back at the girl dressed in a bonnet and pinafore and let recognition flow through his baffled circuits.

Lal.

The daughter he had created. The daughter who died because he'd made her too human.

A sense of loss rushed through him so overwhelming Data thought his legs would collapse. He traced a finger across the face in the photograph. Her cheeks were rosy. Alive.

A strange, rhythmic sound hammered in his ears. It took Data a moment to figure out he was hearing his own pulse. He startled slightly as Guinan handed him a cup of coffee. He gripped the mug tight and his palms began to burn. "I think my circuits have been scrambled."

"Come on." Guinan moved over to the table and sat down. Data stared around the kitchen at the rust-red linoleum and faded green walls. Oak cabinets. Window with rose-covered curtains set in the wall over a stainless steel sink. Beside the table was a sliding glass door that opened onto a small redbrick patio surrounded by green-leafed bushes and a cacophony of various flowers. Data sat down and cradled his cup in his hands. Stared at the furry tribble centerpiece.

"At first I thought I was on the holodeck, but the program wouldn't stop running." He looked at Guinan and raised an eyebrow. Why wasn't it surprising to find her here? "Maybe this is another dream?"

"You're not dreaming. In its own way, this is all very real."

Data stared outside at the hummingbird hovering over a bush covered in purple horn-shaped flowers and tried to understand.

"You're in the Nexus, Data. Everything around you is made from the shadows of your dreams."

Data looked down at the cup cradled in his hands. Inhaled the rich scent. Raised the cup slowly and took a tentative sip. The coffee was bitter, hot, and oddly enough, satisfying. He took another look around.

On the bookshelf along the back wall of the dining room was an inverted crystal bell with two tiny figurines inside. He stood and walked over to it, lifted it from the shelf. Music began to

play and the figurines began to dance. Data cocked his head to one side and let the music flow through him. His feet started to itch with the need to move.

He turned back to Guinan. "I can see this construct is made up of things I've found pleasant." The stilted sound of his own words irritated him as if he'd taken a step backward, instead of forward. A tingle spread over him--his words were stilted, yes. But he was using contractions!

Guinan came over, stood beside him. "This isn't a construct, Data. The Nexus is real. Everything you've ever hoped or longed for, or in your case, found pleasant, is here in the Nexus." Her round face lost its smile.

"There is a penalty, though. The Nexus has a way of making you forget your old way of life, old family, old friends. It is a heaven, one most people can only dream of and very few get to experience." She looked at him hard. "Just remember, Data. You can be any place, any time you wish."

Wind roared and howled, like the wind after the Enterprise had crashed. Startled, Data looked outside, but the leaves were still. He reached down, pinched his skin. "I'm human then?"

Guinan nodded, her sad face a bit sadder.

"It's what I've been searching for," Data said. A light, almost giddy feeling made his feet want to dance. "What I was programmed for." He picked up the coffee cup and turned it over in his hand.

"You might say I've achieved my objective." He stepped to the sink, rinsed the cup, and set it to dry. The water washed across his skin, soft, warm.

"This could become a very pleasant habit." He started to open a cupboard, then stopped.

"Would you like some breakfast?" Data turned around.

Guinan was gone.

Of course. He didn't need her in his dreams anymore.

A cookbook on the shelf caught his eye. He slipped the book from between its companions and thumbed through it. Found a recipe. Pulled eggs and milk from the refrigerator.

Data loved feeling alive. Loved the contractions. Loved the feeling of joy bubbling inside his skin. He looked down at the freckles on his arm, brushed a finger across the tiny hairs, and shivered as goosebumps rose on his skin. The furry bundle on the table trilled in time to his happiness. Data laughed.

"Now where's the flour?"

He opened cupboard after cupboard. He found plates, cups, bowls, serving bowls, pots and pans. Tea. Coffee. He finally stepped over to a tall door he assumed was another closet and pulled it open.

Canned goods filled ceiling-high shelves along both sides of a narrow room while bins of

various sizes sat along the back wall. Fascinated, Data moved into the small room, examining cans of peas, beans, corn--the variety seemed endless.

"Mid twenty-first century." Data laughed. No replicator here. No need to recycle. He tossed a can in the air, set it back on the shelf, pulled open a bin...

And froze.

The bin was empty except for a purring furball. Data lifted the tribble out and held it to his face. His gut clenched as he remembered how Kirk had shipped the tribbles off into the clutches of the Klingons.

"How could he do that to a creature as sweet as you?" Data muttered. It cooed back at him, and his anger faded.

"You two get to know each other." He set the second furball on the table and turned back to the pantry.

"Now. Where was I? Ah, yes. Flour for the pancakes." He pulled open the flour bin. It was empty. And so was the next bin and the next.

A tiny fragment of alarm pierced through Data, not unlike an unexpected electrical shock.

He ducked out of the pantry. The two tribbles were in the middle of the table just as he'd left them. Data shook his head and laughed. "I guess I'm developing an imagination." He looked through the cookbook, found an omelet recipe, and went to work.

Ten minutes later, he turned the stove off and looked back at the table.

Everything was picture perfect: Two placemats faced each other across the table. In the center of each placemat was a plate with a glass full of orange juice above and to the right. Silverware sat next to the plates just the way the book described--fork on the left, knife and spoon on the right. Three furry tribbles in the center...

Three?

"Daddy, how sweet."

All thought of tribbles fled from Data's mind. His feet froze to the floor and a lump the size of a full-grown tribble found its way into his throat.

"Lal?"

She stood in the doorway, feet bare, dark hair still tousled from sleep. She was young, maybe six or seven. Before she'd...

Ard'rian came into the kitchen and gave Lal a quick hug. "Good morning." She ruffled Lal's hair, picked up a glass of orange juice. "Breakfast, Data? How thoughtful."

Data opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He stared at his family.

His family. Ard'rian's face glowed and her brown eyes sparkled. She wore a simple tan smock that stretched wide across her stomach. Her hand rested lightly on Lal's shoulder.

And Lal...Data grabbed the back of a chair before his knees gave out.

Ard'rian took a sip of orange juice, raised an eyebrow at the tribbles. "What's this?"

"It's a pre-baby present, isn't it, Daddy?" Lal grabbed a tribble from the table.

Daddy. The lump in Data's throat grew. He gazed down at Lal's shining face. So much like his Lal and yet...so human. She hooked an arm around his waist and smiled a smile that went straight to Data's heart.

Ard'rian rounded the table and held Data close in a hug. "You're always so thoughtful."

"I thought you might like an omelet." The words squeezed past the lump in Data's throat were almost more than he could manage.

"You know I love omelets, silly." Ard'rian set the tribble back on the table and sat next to it, sipping at her orange juice as she continued to pet the furry creature. Data could hear its purr from where he stood. He set another plate on the table, lingering over Lal's head long enough to catch the clean fragrance of her hair before he picked up the pan and dished out the omelet. But he couldn't eat a bite. He sat and watched his family eat. He was warm all over and his chest felt so full, he thought it might burst.

Lal offered the tribble a little piece of her toast.

"Don't do...that," Data said. His face grew warm as his daughter stared at him and shook her head.

"It's all right," Lal said. "He doesn't bite."

"He?"

"Well, I can't tell for sure, but he acts like a 'he.'" Lal rubbed her cheek against her tribble and smiled.

Ard'rian finished her omelet and stood up, tribble tucked tight in her arm. "Get your shoes on, Lal. We've got to run. Got a doctor's appointment, remember?" She stepped over to Data and gave him a long, lingering kiss. Data sat stunned for a moment, then felt himself responding to the warmth of her lips. He had to fight the urge to pull her back when she finally broke contact and stepped away.

"Why don't you leave the little--guys--here?"

Ard'rian and Lal both shook their heads.

"Nope. I want to show him off," Ard'rian said. "By the way, I'm stopping by my sister's on the way back." She snatched up the other tribble. "Maybe we'll take this other one along. You don't mind, do you?"

Data slowly shook his head and tried not to think about the empty flour bin.

Lal took the tribble from Ard'rian and hugged it in her other arm. "Aunt Sally will love him." She grinned and the room glowed with sunlight.

The glow lasted even after they were gone. Until Data opened the pantry door and a mound of fur tumbled out.

Less than a week later, the Nexus was no longer a paradise.

Tribbles occupied every corner of the house; Data couldn't find a place to sit down without causing a squeak from a tribble, Lal, or his wife. He locked the furry little balls inside boxes, but Lal burst into tears and Ard'rian refused to speak to him. He turned his back as the pair freed his caged tribbles.

"Might as well make dinner," Data grumbled.

But all the fresh food was gone. He pulled on his shoes and walked downtown to the corner grocery store. A sign on the front window said they were closed due to "Tribble Infestation." He turned to go back home and almost bumped into Guinan.

"Where have you been?" Data knew he was being unreasonable, but he didn't really care.

"They're all over, you know," Guinan said in a quiet voice.

"Of course, they're all over," he said. "Isn't that what tribbles do?"

"I mean, they're all over," she repeated. "Throughout the Nexus. They've infested everyone's lives."

For a moment Data just stared as his soft, fuzzy world came crashing down around him like waves on a sandy beach.

"I've never seen anything like it," Guinan continued. "There has never been an instance where one person's life runs into another's unless it is willed into being. These cute little creatures," she pulled one out of her sleeve, "have taken over, not just here, but everywhere." She handed the tribble to Data. He cradled the little furball in his hand and rubbed it against his cheek, closing his eyes to feel the softness and the trilling purr.

When he opened his eyes again, Guinan was gone.

With a heavy sigh, Data looked at the grocery store. At the sign in the window. Kirk's solution had been a bit cold...Data thought about the Enterprise filled with tribbles and bowed his head. He could will them on board a Klingon ship, but couldn't imagine Klingons in the Nexus. There was no place for the little furballs to go except into oblivion.

A band tightened around Data's chest as the tribble's purr tickled his palms. Why couldn't they just leave him alone? He didn't want to make decisions; didn't want responsibilities. He just wanted time to enjoy the family he never thought he'd have.

Down the block a window slammed and a tribble squealed. It wasn't only his life the tribbles were infesting. He nuzzled the ball he held once more as if to absorb its softness. The tribble trilled its melodic purr and Data closed his eyes.

When he opened them again the tribbles were gone.

Things should have been perfect. But Data couldn't help feeling that something was still wrong. Something he couldn't put a finger on.

Something he should be doing.

At first he thought it was just because he missed the tribbles. Missed their quiet trilling purr. Missed their comforting softness and warmth. But Lal didn't cry and that bothered him. Ard'rian just smiled and said it was for the best. Didn't anyone care except him?

He stayed up late after everyone had gone to bed. The kitchen was clean and an untouched cup of tea sat on the table before him, the steam long since gone from the liquid.

"Everything's back to normal, thanks to you."

Guinan.

Data didn't turn. He stared into his cup; tried to fit logic where logic didn't fit.

"Something's still wrong," he said. "I can feel it." He finally looked up. "It's as if I'm supposed to be doing something, but I've forgotten what it is."

Guinan smiled, a soft, sad smile. The same smile she'd always had. It made Data think of the Enterprise. Captain Picard. Counselor Troi. Geordi La Forge. His crewmates. His friends.

But what about his family?

"They're all here, you know. In the Nexus." Guinan slid into a chair and rested her elbows on the table. "Captain Picard, Counselor Troi, Commander Riker..."

"Geordi?" Data raised an eyebrow. Guinan nodded and her face grew even sadder.

"The Enterprise is in danger, Data. Captain Picard is trying to save her. There's someone here in the Nexus who can help."

Guinan raised a hand as Data started to speak. "It's not anyone from the present Enterprise crew. But you know the Nexus now. You know the attraction, the danger."

Yes, he knew. Data stroked the cold cup beneath his fingers and tried to ignore the pit in his stomach. He knew what Guinan was going to say. What it was he'd forgotten to do.

"By choosing to return to our former lives, the Enterprise crew can cause a ripple in the Nexus. A ripple that will let the truth show through. The captain needs this moment to convince the one person who can help him save the Enterprise."

Data thought of Ard'rian's soft skin, Lal's sunshine smile. He looked around the kitchen of his home--his perfectly normal human home--and shook his head.

This wasn't a dream, a construct put together amid the wires and contacts of his positronic circuitry and made possible by this abnormal phenomenon called the Nexus. It was real.

It was heaven.

A heavy weight settled around his heart, and Data suddenly felt as cold as the cup in his hands. Heaven was for humans and he was an android.

His friends needed him; it was time to go home. Back to the world of electronic impulses and memory chips.

Data thought of the unborn child he'd never see, of the sweetness of Ard'rian's kisses, of Lal, and his heart shattered.

How could he leave his daughter again?

Guinan's hand touched his. "It's your choice, Data. But you have to make it now."

His eyes burned and for a moment he thought he heard a sound that couldn't possibly be a sob come from deep inside. Then he closed his eyes.

And dreamed.

Data's arms were full of purring fur. Hope clenched his stomach in a fierce grip, but the purr wasn't a tribble purr. It was lower and more rhythmic. The creature he held in his arms was much larger than a tribble. And it had legs.

He opened his eyes and stared around his quarters. The violin standing in the corner. The half-finished painting on the easel. Now he saw them for what they were: empty, meaningless attempts to move beyond the unfairness of fate.

But androids didn't believe in fate, any more than they believed in heaven. He nuzzled the cat.

"Hi, Spot. It is good to see you." Disappointment swept through him, hard and fast at the sound of his words. Spot looked at him and meowed.

"Are you hungry?" A picture-perfect table appeared in Data's mind and for a moment he imagined himself dishing omelet onto plates. He smiled a sad little smile. Memories. He had always claimed people lived on in memory, and he had believed what he said--in a logical, mental way. But now he understood physically, emotionally.

The Enterprise and her crew would survive, and after things returned to normal, he could take out those memories, look at them, one by one.

Remember what it was like to be truly alive.

The red alert Klaxon sounded--loud, urgent. Data took a deep breath, let his emotions rest deep inside. He hugged Spot tight one last time.

And headed for the bridge.

Fabrications

Brett Hudgins

Mind if I join you?

I can always move when another table opens up. This won't take long.



It's rather amusing, really. They expect me to lie to you, never mind that we're perfect strangers. I told them, "I'm a tailor. I don't do that sort of thing." Except to spare a heavy woman's feelings. I'm not insensitive.

But these Starfleet types aren't content with bungling their operations on a Federation-wide basis. They like to micromanage, even if that means disrupting my blissfully quiet, insignificant life.

And yours.

The price I pay for living on a space station. The price you pay to visit. They love people like us. They'd rid their whole sprawling space of vagabonds and free spirits if they could. Give them the rank and file, the known and numbered. Every being's every move monitored and evaluated. The galaxy would be so deliciously...predictable.

Yet certain people--and I caution you, so don't react: they're watching us as we speak--grow anxious when they don't know what's going to happen next. Not the sorts to live life to the fullest, if you get my meaning. Even if they worry only a smidgen, the pebble nevertheless enters the pond. Ripples spread. Suddenly healthy self-preservation seems paranoid or suspicious. And just because not everybody is out to get you doesn't mean they shouldn't be.

War does that to people.

You're looking pale. A drink, perhaps? This establishment is one part necessary evil, two parts life support system. Where would we be without it? Is it worth the price to find out? I don't pretend to know.

I might say the same thing about Starfleet. They seem to think they're "on to you," that they have you "red-handed" and similarly colorful idioms, but they'll go to great lengths to avoid being straightforward. The joys of a top-heavy bureaucracy in action. They prefer subterfuge, convoluted action they can document with a paper trail long enough to stretch through the wormhole. Protecting their already armored rear ends is, you'll pardon the expression, the bottom line. This despite the fact that you have no more to hide than I do.

But then, I'm only a tailor.

I wish I were more. So does my father. Ambition can be painful, though. It can win or lose entire wars. If you wonder how one of my lowly station could get drawn into an act of espionage, I'll tell you: through the same sorry brand of politics that's stained the Federation for generations. Prejudice and xenophobia. Oh, they try to dress up their fear in suits of caution and wisdom but I know they see only my heritage. My biology.

I'm alien. They're not. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

By their logic, if I'm an outsider, then I must be the perfect choice to befriend and beguile a fellow outsider. What does trust or decency matter to one of us? We might not be Klingons--thank your Prophets for that much--but we have our honor. We have the wherewithal, the fortitude, to meet openly and speak our minds. Let them observe, record, dissect. They don't dare interfere.

Not now. Not here, where we're but two more customers cheerfully oblivious to the Ferengi greed fattening our tabs.

Would that there were a wormhole to bridge the personal and cultural gulfs that separate our peoples. You don't believe me, and why should you, but consider. Animosity would be an abstraction rather than a subtext. A simple conversation wouldn't draw so much attention. And there wouldn't be any doubt as to only one of us walking away alive. Though I'm used to the scrutiny, you understand. I've been here a long time, my survival a testament to my skills.

As a tailor, that is.

But that doesn't mean I like it. I build walls. Call them fortifications--or perhaps justifications. I pretend people are examining my clothes, admiring my workmanship in advance of a lucrative purchase. I don't dwell on the ill will. But one's imagination is rarely an effective shield against reality.

Ah, your drink. Ektarian fizz. Excellent choice--and a personal favorite of the Lurian-shaped lump growing out of the bar. Don't mind him, though. We were talking about us.

It's hardly a pleasant label, but I might go so far as to call us victims. Of circumstance, if not fate. Neither of us asked to be here. I want no part of Starfleet's ham-handed cloak and dagger. And you surely have business of your own or family commitments. Why else would you come here? Not to meet me or listen to my theories of alienation and persecution.

If you want to go, go. No one will stop you. As I said, they don't dare interfere.

And not just for the sake of their secrecy. Would you believe the mental giants in Starfleet Intelligence have pegged you as a suicide bomber? Oh, don't jump. I laugh at the very thought. You'd need at least five allies to smuggle in component materials, conduct surveillance on the targets, and distract unwanted attention once you were ready to strike.

Granted, I know little of death, despite the abhorrent crimes committed by my people against yours, but even I can see that violence only prolongs violence. That's why your Resistance persisted so fervidly and why the Occupation went on so long.

That--and greed. The greed that motivates people to take things to which they aren't remotely entitled. Wealth. Resources. Lives.

I'm not greedy. I want nothing from Starfleet, least of all their gratitude. That's why I'm doing this my way. Which is distinct from the typical Cardassian way, if you're curious. There's a famous story about a Resistance fighter facing excruciating torture by the Obsidian Order. They'd stripped him naked, attached electrodes and auto-probes, and done their level best to reduce him to an animal. Expecting him to recant and reveal his organization's secrets, they asked if he had any last words. "I can stand the pain," he said, "if you can stand the screaming."

One must have a sense of humor about these things, after all.

If you were a different man than I believe you to be, I'd urge you to recognize that blowing up Cardassian diplomats aboard this station under a flag of truce will neither end the war that threatens your world nor undo damage done years previously. Your life is worth more than that.

As is mine.

Should you return to your quarters for the device that is supposedly a detonator and the material that is supposedly a bomb, you'll leave this station under heavy guard and heavier scrutiny. An embarrassing public trial will blare your selfish, shortsighted failure from one end of the quadrant to the other.

However, should you quaff the rest of your delicious Ektarian fizz after I add a special ingredient--note the vial concealed in my palm--you'll reap the glory of completing a full half of your assignment.

The suicide half.

You might hope I'm lying...but I don't do that sort of thing.

Urgent Matter

Robert J. LaBaff

She stood looking out over the sea of flowing liquid. She watched as the ripples of the flow started to swirl in the middle. The swirl began to move closer to her, and bubbles started forming on top. As the liquid reached the shore of this lone piece of land here in this vast sea, a shape had started to form. Kira felt her heart rate quicken, as she started to think about what she was going to say. She realized that she had been holding her breath and trying to control her emotions; she did not want to lose control over seeing him. Then a thought went through her mind. What if this form is not Odo, but the other Founder? The one who tried to take him away from me in the first place. She was the only other person who knew what it was like to be in love with Odo as Odo. Not as a piece of the Great Link, or worshiped like other Founders, as a god. The form was just about complete as her combadge beeped.

Kira called out, "Computer, freeze program." She turned and responded, "Kira here."

The voice of Lieutenant Ezri Dax answered her over the comlink, "There has been wormhole activity; a Jem'Hadar ship has come through and is approaching the station. I have been trying to hail them, but there has been no response."

"I'm on my way to ops," Kira said.

Kira closed the comlink. Just as she turned to instruct the computer to end program, she noticed the hologram's completed form. It was Odo's face on a Ferengi body.

She called out, "Computer, end program!"

Exiting the holosuite into the den of Quark's bar, she looked around to try and find the troublemaking Ferengi. She discovered him near the entrance, looking as if he were busy instructing one of his many dabo girls. Kira could tell from the way he was watching her departure from the bar that he wanted to bother her about something. She decided she would deal with him later and headed out for ops.

Kira had not gotten far on the Promenade when she heard Quark calling her name. He caught up to her just as she was entering the turbolift. She spun around to stop him from entering as well.

"Is it true?" he asked. "Is there a Jem'Hadar ship approaching the station that is not responding to your hails?"

"If you know about the ship already, then you know the answer." Kira said. "Need I remind you of what would happen to you if you tapped into station communications again? Now, if you do not mind, I have to get up to ops."

"Do you think they are going to attack? What could they want? I finally started to turn a profit, and now this!"

"Just return to the bar and let me get to ops so I can find out for myself what is going on. If you don't start moving I'm calling security to have you put in the brig till this is over! Do I make myself clear?" Kira said.

Quark turned around and started back to the bar; as he walked away Kira could hear his complaining.

"Try to be a good person, look out for your customers, and all you get are threats of incarceration for it! You would think Odo was back on the station," he mumbled.

She finally entered the lift. "Ops" she told the computer.

Once the lift reached ops, Ezri gave Kira a status update. "Station shields are up, and we have continued to hail the ship; but still no response. They have not raised their shields nor have they powered up their weapons," she said.

Kira approached the com system, opened all hailing frequencies and addressed the ship, "This is Colonel Kira Nerys of Deep Space Nine, please respond?"

The comboard signaled an incoming message. "Incoming message is audio only," Dax said.

Before Kira could reply the turbolift arrived, carrying Dr. Julian Bashir and Quark. Quark! she thought. She did not have the time or the patience to deal with him now.

"Put it through," Kira said.

The voice that came over the com system made everyone in ops stop to listen.

"Jem'Hadar ship asking permission to be allowed to dock with the station. I have an urgent matter to discuss with you, Colonel."

It was Odo.

Odo! Odo, here now! was all she could think. Kira put her emotions in check, and replied, "Permission granted, Odo, please dock at pylon two. I will meet you there in five minutes. Deep Space Nine out."

"Acknowledged, it will be a pleasure to meet you, too," Odo replied. "Jem'Hadar ship out."

Kira turned to cross ops to the turbolift, stopped, and thought, Did he say meet me? then decided that this is Odo. He would explain once he was on the station.

"You have ops, Lieutenant. Doctor, you're with me." Kira said.

As she and the doctor entered the lift they discovered that Quark had already entered and was planning to accompany them. "Stay out of my way or else, do I make myself clear, Quark?" Kira ordered.

The three of them arrived at pylon two, just as the airlock doors rolled back to allow Odo to come aboard. Kira's heart started to race. She could not wait to welcome the most important person in her life back aboard DS9. As she watched, Odo came through the docking bay, smiling at them all as he approached. He was wearing his constable outfit, and looked as if he was just as happy as she was to be here. Kira could not contain herself any longer; she rushed up to him and hugged him.

"It is so good to have you back home! I have missed you so much!" she said.

"Yes, Odo, things have not been the same around here without you," Bashir commented.

Quark, feeling he needed to fit in, joined Kira by hugging her and Odo both. "Don't start thinking I missed you, because I didn't," he said.

Then, to the surprise of them all, Odo said, "I am sorry, but I am not Odo. I am a Founder from the Great Link, but I am not the Founder known as Odo."

Just as quickly as Kira's heart had sped up, it was just as quickly close to stopping.

"Why are you using Odo's personal form and voice? What is this urgent matter you said we need to discuss?" she demanded. She was now feeling very disturbed with herself for letting this changeling on the station, and because her emotions had led her to believe Odo had come back to her.

The changeling realized that his appearance was making things difficult for everyone. He altered his face to become more Bajoran-detailed, including complete nose ridges and an earring. His hair darkened and his outfit became more civilian-styled, darkening to an off-gray color. "Does this image have a more pleasant appearance for you?" he asked.

Kira, Bashir, and Quark all nodded their heads in agreement. Kira decided it was time to find out what was going on and why he was here.

"Did Odo send you here? Was the urgent matter just part of your act to get us to let you on the station?" she continued.

Quark interrupted her. "He's probably here to see if the Alpha Quadrant is recovering from what the Domintion did; maybe they want to try again!"

"I said to stay out of my way, Quark! I'll ask the questions," Kira reminded him. "Did Odo send you here, or not? Is there something wrong with him?" she asked.

The changeling let them say their piece, then proceeded to explain his arrival. "Odo is with the Great Link, and has helped us to recover from the plague that was killing us. He is working with the Link to help our understanding of how other sentient beings evolve. His thoughts, experiences, and emotions continue to be shared within the Great Link. It is for these reasons that he decided to remain linked, and sent me to you," he said. "Within

twenty-four of your standard hours, an urgent matter will arise and he feels my presence here will be of service to you," he continued.

"What is this urgent matter that you are talking about? Is there a danger to the station?" Kira asked.

"I was instructed by Odo not to inform you of the specifics on the matter until tomorrow. I do, however, have a request of Dr. Bashir. Odo would like you to examine my molecular structure. He wants you to compare the results of his recovery from the plague to that of mine," the changeling said.

"I can examine you in the infirmary now if you wish," Bashir said.

Before the changeling was able to respond to Bashir, Kira demanded, "I am telling you that if there is any danger to this station or Bajor, you need to tell us now so that we can prepare a defense!"

"I am sorry to delay your knowledge at this time, but I must abide by Odo's instructions. I can assure you that there is no danger, and will give you all the details when I can," he said. "As for my exam...?" he asked again.

Kira stopped to consider her options. She decided that if Odo did indeed send this changeling here, she would trust his judgment as always.

"Yes, Dr. Bashir can do the exam. Go with him to the infirmary and then report to me when you are done," she instructed him. "I will have Lieutenant Dax show you around the station and assign you quarters for your stay," she continued.

"Very well," he replied.

"This way," Bashir instructed. He and the changeling started down the corridor to the infirmary.

"He never fooled me for a moment, trying to pass as Odo. As if!" Quark said.

Kira turned from watching Bashir and the changeling leaving. "Quark! I told you to stay out of station business! You need to get back to your bar and when you do, you had better be resetting all of your holosuite programs. If I hear that you are even thinking of replacing holo characters with Ferengi bodies, I will have you in the brig for so long, I might forget all about you. Understood?" she demanded.

Quark just stood there with a mischievous grin on his face, his mind deep in thought.

"Understood?" Kira repeated.

"Oh, yes! I understand perfectly," Quark responded.

He started down the corridor, leaving Kira to herself and her thoughts. She stood alone thinking, If the matter is so urgent, why can it not be revealed till tomorrow? What could it be? And why is Odo having him keep it from me? She decided to return to ops; at least station operation should take her mind off the matter for now.

After a couple of hours of reviewing reports, personnel evaluations and maintenance logs,

Kira decided to go to the Promenade to get a bite to eat. As she was passing Quark's, she noticed that Dr. Bashir, Dax, and Quark were all gathered at a table. She also discovered that the changeling was with them and from the sounds of their voices, seemed to be discussing something important. As she approached the table, the four of them noticed her and quieted down. Just as she reached the table, Quark abruptly left, headed in the direction of the bar.

"If you will excuse me?" Bashir said, as he also rose from the table to leave. "I need to return to the infirmary and complete the test for Odo. Good night, all." He proceeded to the Promenade and crossed to the infirmary.

"Have you gotten settled into your quarters?" Kira asked the changeling.

"Yes, Lieutenant Dax has been of great help and has graciously shown me around. I was just getting ready to return to my quarters to rest. I am not as experienced as Odo in maintaining a solid form for long periods," he said. "So if you will excuse me as well, I'll meet with you tomorrow at the time Odo designated." He left the bar and Kira joined Ezri at the table.

"Did he say anything to you as to why Odo sent him?" she asked Ezri.

"No, he insists that it is imperative that he follow Odo's instructions, and that he will provide us with the information at the appropriate time tomorrow," she replied. "I will need to be on my way as well. My shift in ops begins soon."

Before Dax could leave the table, Kira asked, "Is there anything wrong, Lieutenant?"

"No, why do you ask?" Dax asked.

"Well, everyone was just here with this changeling we know very little about, and then when I approached the table, everyone decided to leave," Kira said.

"I had told Julian we would meet for dinner before my shift at ops. We asked the changeling to join us when he expressed an interest in how to consume humanoid food," Dax said. "I do need to report to ops, unless there was something else I can help you with?"

"No, you're dismissed, Lieutenant," Kira replied.

"I will see you tomorrow, Colonel, Have a good night," Dax said as she left the bar.

Kira sat thinking about what could be going on, what could happen. Then she once again decided that if Odo did send this changeling to help them, then she needed to trust him as she would Odo. After a moment she realized how late it was getting and decided to go to her quarters and turn in.

The day had been pretty uneventful and Kira was sitting in her office, impatiently waiting for the changeling to arrive to explain his presence. When the intruder alarm rang out from ops, the monitor on her desk showed an intruder had beamed into cargo bay three.

"Security to cargo bay three. I will meet you there!" she called out to the computer. As she rushed down the corridor to the cargo holds, she thought to herself, If this has anything to do with Odo sending the changeling here, then why did the changeling say there was no danger? And if this is why he is here, why has he not revealed the information to me and the staff yet? She reached the cargo bay and found a security detail waiting for her.

"I will enter the bay, you two cover me, and the rest watch these doors. Do not let anyone exit this bay," she instructed the detail. She touched the door release, and as the doors parted she noticed that the lights were out in the bay. She leapt to the left of the cargo doors, trying to use the crates that were sitting there as cover.

She waited a moment and then called out, "Lights!" to the computer. She started around the crates just as the lights came on and stopped stunned at what she saw.

"Surprise!" came at her in a chorus of voices.

She could not believe what she had walked into. Dr. Bashir, Ezri Dax, Quark, and many other personnel from all over the station were there standing under a sign that read,

HAPPY BIRTHDAY KIRA!!!

Then she noticed the changeling. He was standing near a cake that read.

KIRA'S BIRTHDAY

URGENT MATTER

LOVE ODO

Everyone started to crowd around her and congratulate her all at once.

"I am glad to see we did not scare you into stunning us all with your phaser when you rushed in here," Bashir said.

After some time, Kira managed to make her way through the crowd to where the changeling was standing. She could feel the smile on her face from all the joy of this surprise from Odo.

"I hope to be able to inform Odo that you are indeed happy with his gift, and that we managed to take care of the urgent matter I spoke of," he said.

"You can tell Odo that I loved everything, and surprise me he did; you all did, actually," Kira said. "How did you manage this all in such a short period of time? I mean, the alarm to get me here, and all the decorating?" she wondered.

Bashir, Dax, and Quark joined her and the changeling as she asked her questions.

"Odo had been planning this for you for some time," Dax commented. "We did not think he was still going to be able to pull it off with everything that has happened recently."

"He even saw fit to make arrangements to pay me for catering this party, and with the time I've had I actually turned a profit from it," Quark said. He rubbed his hands together, obviously thinking about how he cut costs where he could to keep any remaining proceeds for himself.

"When Dr. Bashir and I arrived at the infirmary yesterday, I explained to him the real reason that Odo had sent me," the changeling said.

"Once I knew Odo's plan was still on, it was just a matter of telling the others and setting



everything into motion," Bashir said.

"Odo had set up the program for the intruder alert when he first started planning this. He instructed me on how to initiate it," Dax said. "Before I forget, I received a subspace communication from Chief O'Brien and his family on Earth earlier today for you. They want me to play it for you here at the party. Computer, play birthday wish," she instructed.

The computer screen on the wall displayed the image of Miles O'Brien, his wife Keiko, and their two children, Molly and Kirayoshi.

"Kira, we want to thank you again for what you did for us. Carrying our child to term was the greatest gift anyone could give us. You gave us a reason to celebrate on the day of his birth, and now we are glad to see that you have the chance to celebrate your birth as well. We wish you well and happy birthday, Kira!" all four O'Briens shouted.

The screen went dark, and as Kira stood among her friends she stopped to think of what to say.

"Thank you...Thank you for being here and for all you have done today. I am not known for being able to celebrate; this of course is due to all the losses I have experienced throughout my life. I have found it very uncomfortable to be social with most people. We have all known loss; and with the end of the recent war still on our minds, we feel it even more deeply. I do feel that now is the time for all of us to celebrate births, lives, and even deaths. This will help all of us to heal from the war and to strive for a better understanding of one another. It is an honor that you are celebrating my birth; but I ask that you all honor yourselves as well. On a final note, let us all raise our glasses and toast Odo, for he made this gathering possible," Kira said.

Kira still could not believe all the work that Odo and the rest had put into surprising her like this.

"I have completed my mission here, and my ship is prepared for departure," the changeling said. "Will you accompany me?" he asked Kira.

"It would be my pleasure," Kira replied.

As the two of them approached the docking ring corridor, the changeling stopped and turned to Kira. He removed an isolinear rod from a pocket.

"Odo asked that I give you this before my departure, and explain that you would need to view it in a holosuite," the changeling explained.

Kira accepted the isolinear rod from the changeling, and held it for a moment before sliding it into her pocket. "Thank you," she said.

"Before I leave, I would like you to know that it has been a pleasure to meet all of you here on the station, Kira. Odo's experiences that have been shared with us did not seem real before. Now that I have spent time here, I am going back to help him show the others understanding and compassion," the changeling said.

"Please tell Odo that I miss him and that I loved the surprise, and that I am proud of the work he is doing and that we all hope he can return to us someday. I also want to thank you again. It has been a pleasure to meet you as well," Kira said. She waited as he boarded his ship,

and as the airlock doors rolled closed she wiped away a tear.

Half an hour later Kira found herself standing on the same lone piece of land, in the sea of the Great Link. As with her own program, a form came to the surface and approached land. She waited to see a Ferengi body on the holoform, but to her relief it was Odo's. The holographic Odo was wearing the same top hat and tails that he was wearing when she last saw him. She stood there staring at him and then noticed that several other changelings had also approached land dressed like Odo, each carrying an instrument of one type or another.

"Music, maestro," the holographic Odo called out. The changelings started to play a waltz.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked Kira. Kira just smiled as he took her hand and they started to dance.

"I wanted to be here in person for you, Kira, but the Link needs my continued guidance to learn to trust others and accept coexisting with all other species of the universe," he said. "I hope the planning and party I put together went well?" he asked.

"Yes, it was a great surprise for me, and I wish you were the real Odo so that I could say thank you." she replied.

"I was programmed by the real Odo, and I can tell you that it was very important to him to ensure your day was special. He asked me to wish you happy birthday for him," the holographic Odo said.

Kira thought about the party and all the joy she was experiencing. She realized that for the first time in many years she was actually happy on her birthday, and had celebrated it with people that not only did she know and trust, but she cared for like a family. She also realized that even though Odo was on his home planet with the Great Link, that his love and friendship for her still allowed him to be with her...maybe not in person, but in spirit.

"Thank you," Kira said, and she and the holographic Odo danced the night away.

Best Tools Available

Shawn Michael Scott

Nog cursed under his breath as he stormed down the quickest path from Archer Hall, site of Starfleet Academy's holodeck facilities, to his dorm room. The Ferengi cadet was covered from head to toe in soot and grime. Several minor rips and tears were evident on his black uniform. He bristled past other cadets who snickered at his disheveled appearance. Their snide chuckles fueled the rage that was mounting inside of him. His lobes burned bright red as anger and frustration swelled within. Yet again, he looked like a fool in front of his fellow cadets.

"ARRRR!!!" the young Ferengi growled as he kicked a loose cobblestone from the border that lined the path. The stone rico-cheted off a spruce tree and smashed into the stem of a Risan daffodil. The alien flower was similar to that of a Terran daffodil except for its vibrant lavender color and feathery petals. The flower shook with a jolt and the petals began to dislodge and float away in the afternoon breeze. Nog's heart sank. Despite his foul mood, he had never meant to cause any harm and the sight of the traumatized flower saddened him. He stepped over to the delicate flora to see how bad the damage was.

"Hey!" a gruff voice called from behind him. "Just what do you think you're doing there?" Nog turned to see Boothby, the Academy's wizened groundskeeper, coming up the path. Despite his advanced age, the old man was making quick time toward the young cadet. Nog had only known the man by reputation, but it was enough. Veteran Starfleet officers even spoke of the old man's mean-spirited nature. He would rather face a whole fleet of Borg ships and the entire Dominion than get on Boothby's bad side, but it appeared as though that was exactly where he was headed.

"I...I..." was all Nog could manage to stammer.

"I don't know how you treat other people's flowers on your world," the elderly gardener steamed, waving his trowel in the young cadet's face, "but, here, we have respect for the property of others!"

"I know, sir," Nog apologized. "I'm very sorry."

"Sorry isn't good enough, son," Boothby ranted as he kneeled down to examine his prized plant. "The flower is very delicate. It takes a lot of hard work and care to get them to bloom in this environment. The sea air coming off the bay can be harsh. Alien species don't always transplant well."

"I know the feeling," the cadet said mournfully. The old man peeked up at him through one eye and truly took notice of him for the first time. He saw his torn uniform and the dirt that filled every line on the Ferengi's face. He was truly a pitiful site. Boothby's hard expression softened.

"I suppose you would, young man," he said as he turned his attention back to the daffodil. Nog kneeled down beside him and helped the groundskeeper gather up the fallen petals. He collected them and placed them gingerly in a neat pile at the old man's side.

"I really am very sorry, sir," the cadet said softly. "I hope I haven't damaged the flower. I'll pay for a new one if I have."

"Well, the stem's not broken," Boothby replied as he examined the plant. "From the looks of these petals, they were getting ready to wilt soon, anyway. All you did was help them along." The elderly man took another long look at Nog. "Say...you look like you were dragged out of a burning building. Science experiment go awry, or something?"

"No," Nog replied. "I just came from a training simulation. A particularly disastrous one."

"Ahh, let me guess," Boothby said with a grin. "The Kobayashi Maru. That simulation tends to wreak havoc with cadets. You wouldn't be the first one whose uniform needed repair after that simulation. I take it that you did not fare well, young man?"

"No," the young Ferengi grumbled. "Not at all. I've taken the test three times and three times I've failed...miserably."

"It's a very hard simulation. You shouldn't feel upset that you failed. Some of the best names in Starfleet have found themselves in the very same predicament you're in. Picard, Janeway, Sulu...even James T. Kirk himself! Think of it this way," the old man smiled, "you're in exceptional company." The little joke was intended to lighten the young cadet's mood, but to no avail. What Boothby did not tell Nog was that the Kobayashi Maru was one of the Academy's best-kept secrets. The test was not meant to be passed. Quite the opposite.

The simulation was a no-win situation designed to teach prospective Starfleet officers how to deal with catastrophic loss and death. Its theme was that of a rescue mission. A crippled freighter, the Kobayashi Maru, drifts into the Romulan Neutral Zone and her crew must be rescued from approaching Romulan birds-of-prey. The officials at the Academy had changed the simulation's antagonists from Klingon to Romulan after the Khitomer Accords established a peaceful relationship between the United Federation of Planets and the Klingon Empire. Every possible solution that the cadets could think of had already been programmed into the simulation by the best minds at the Academy, all in an effort to make sure test subjects lost and lost large. It was a test of character. Cadets who had taken the test and failed generally came to realize the life lesson taught to them and kept the true nature of the test a secret from those who have not, keeping the integrity of the simulation intact. Nog, unfortunately, had not come to understand this.

"Do you know what strategies those who have passed have used?" he asked Boothby eagerly. His eyes implored the old man for an answer.

"Oh," the groundskeeper shrugged, "this feeble old mind of mine can barely recall what I had for dinner last night. I couldn't remember such things. If I could, I'd be commanding a starship, not a garden." Boothby gave himself a mental pat on the back for dodging the question tactfully. Nog would not get the key to the puzzle so easily from him. He did, however, notice the Ferengi's shoulders slump in defeat. In all of his years tending the Academy's grounds, Boothby had never seen a cadet so despondent over failing the Kobayashi Maru test. It was as if Nog's entire world had come crashing down around him. "Don't let it eat you up, son," the old man said. "Some of those folks I mentioned never passed and they did all right for themselves." OK, he thought to himself, so none of them foiled the program, except the legendary Kirk, who cheated.

"It's not that," the Ferengi cadet said as his head sank into his chest. "It's been rough for me here, sir. I have no friends. Even the other cadets in my squad treat me like an outsider. Some here have even told me that I don't belong in Starfleet. They look at me and see a scheming, conniving Ferengi, not a fellow cadet looking to better himself." He let out an ironic laugh. "It's really quite funny, when you think about it...I spent so much of my life distrusting 'hew-mons' until one taught me differently. He was my best friend back on Deep Space Nine, the space station that I grew up on. It didn't matter to him that humans and Ferengi were different. We were just two boys growing up together and learning about the universe. And now, after all that Jake has opened my eyes to, I feel like I'm right back where I started...human versus Ferengi. I thought that I could really do well here, maybe..." He shrugged his shoulders, his words trailing off from him.

"You'd gain acceptance?" Boothby added, completing Nog's thought.

"Yes," he said. "But it was more than that. I got to know Commander Worf pretty well back on DS9 and he told me about the fear and misunderstanding he faced as the first Klingon to come to the Starfleet Academy. He told me that I could probably expect the same, but I wanted to come anyway. I wanted to show everyone that not all Ferengi are profit-mongering scoundrels. Some of us are pretty decent. I really wanted to make my father proud. I wanted to do it for him and every other Ferengi that was just content to live peaceably without any interest in swindling anyone." Nog brushed at his eyes. Boothby was not certain if it was from the dirt and dust on the cadet or if it was emotion, but he was sure that the boy was crying. His heart sank with him. "That's why passing this test is so important to me. I want to prove that my people are worth some moral value."

"All I can tell you, son," he said as he placed an assuring hand on Nog's shoulder, "is the

only way to succeed is to use the best tools you have available. If I didn't have my trowel to dig up weeds, I'd use a rock. If I had no rocks, I'd use my hands. And I wouldn't care what people thought of the crazy old man digging in the dirt, just so long as I know that I did my best. You think on that, OK?"

"OK, sir," Nog said as he absorbed the man's words.

"And don't mutilate any more of my flowers or I'll plant you next to them." Nog chuckled and shook his head in agreement. He waved good-bye to the old man and headed back to his dorm room. He had a lot of thinking to do.

A week after Nog's chance meeting with Boothby, he was back in the holodeck at Archer Hall. Back in the center seat of an imaginary starship on its way to destiny. The young Ferengi had spent the past week reflecting over his conversation with the groundskeeper and one phrase struck him over and over. "Best tools available." Nog had weighed just what his best tools were and decided that he was ready for another go at the Kobayashi Maru. He had decided that he would just do his best and be satisfied, regardless of the outcome. If he failed, he failed, but he would do so with dignity and grace and if that was not good enough for his fellow cadets, then that was their problem, not his.

Nog looked around the holographic deck at his crew. They were the same group from his last three attempts and they were all prepared for the worst. At the conn was Cadet Tara Bassette. She had laughed at him when he tripped as he got up from his chair after his first test. Next to her, at ops, was Cadet Stoek. He arched his Vulcan brows at the Ferengi when he jumped in startled surprise when their "vessel" took its first photon torpedo hit as if to say "look what you've done." At the back of the bridge, at tactical, was Cadet Rahim al Nabil. After getting "killed" at the same moment during three different simulations with Nog, al Nabil vowed never to step foot in the holodeck with the Ferengi again. And beside Nog was Cadet Dega Val. The young Trill had not said anything to Nog after their previous attempts to rescue the limping ship. He merely shook his head and sighed. That hurt the Ferengi cadet. Criticism was one thing, but open disdain really made his lobes burn. But Nog no longer yearned for their acceptance. He knew that he had not been able to gain it so far, so today would probably be no different. Yet this was different. It was different because Nog was doing this for himself and no one else.

"Sir," al Nabil called from behind, "we're receiving a distress signal. Audio only." He said it mechanically. After living through this test three prior times, al Nabil knew what to expect and when to expect it. Nog had briefly considered requesting a different class this time, but wanted to show this group that he was able to handle the stress.

"Bring it up, Mr. al Nabil," Nog said. The simulated bridge filled with static. Regardless of how many times the young Ferengi had taken this test, he always felt a chill run through his body when the sound of that static ripped through the relative quiet of the room.

"Mayday, mayday," an electronic voice called over the com. "This is the Kobayashi Maru. We have struck a gravitic mine. Our guidance and propulsion systems have failed and we are adrift. Can anyone hear us?"

"Open a hailing frequency, Mr. al Nabil," Nog said as he stood.

"Done, sir."

"Kobayashi Maru," the cadet said, "this is Captain Nog, of the Federation Starship Rom.

We hear you and are on our way." That's right, Nog thought, the Starship Rom. Anyone got a problem with that? "Did they hear us, Mr. al Nabil?"

"Unknown, sir," came the reply. "There's no telling what kind of shape their communications systems are in."

"Try every frequency you can," Nog ordered. "I want them to know that they're not alone. Mr. Bassette, plot a course for that ship." Cadet Bassette rolled her eyes at Cadet Stoek as if to say "here we go again," but followed Nog's order.

"Course plotted, sir," she reported. "Estimated time of arrival, four minutes at warp five."

"Take us there, Bassette," Nog commanded. Bassette executed the order and the starfield on the main viewer shifted as they changed course. The holographic image of stars flew by with greater speed.

"Captain," Cadet Val spoke up, "maybe it would be prudent to call for assistance. According to the computer, the Manhattan is only a few sectors away. It would only take..."

"Far too long, Mr. Val," Nog interrupted. "The Kobayashi Maru has drifted into Romulan space. If we don't get them out fast, they may never get out."

"But, sir," the young Trill insisted, "that's all the more reason to call for backup. If we encounter trouble, we may need more firepower than we possess to evade it."

"Duly noted, Mr. Val," Nog said, "but my order stands. I will not risk the lives of innocents just to play it safe. They may not have the luxury of the time that it takes for the Manhattan to arrive."

"But, sir..."

"My order stands!" Nog declared. There was silence on the simulated bridge. Cadet al Nabil watched the exchange intently. Stoek and Bassette exchanged glances but never turned to look at the two disagreeing cadets. In all the previous tests, Nog had never been this confident or self-assured. He was now standing his ground with a cadet that had intimidated him in the past and he was not backing down.

"Yes, sir," was Val's terse reply. He did not like the Ferengi's command decision, but Nog was in command and Val was duty-bound to follow his orders. Within a few long, grueling minutes of tense silence, the drifting hull of the Kobayashi Maru came into view. She just floated in space, listing slightly, but otherwise, looking relatively undamaged. There were no outward appearances of breaches. She was just drifting peacefully.

"Open a hailing frequency, Mr. al Nabil," Nog ordered.

"Done, sir." Nog stood and took a step toward the main viewer.

"This is Captain Nog of the Federation Starship Rom," he said. "Can you read me?" Silence was the reply. Chilling silence.

"Maybe they're all dead," Bassette said.

"What do you read, Mr. Stoek?" Nog asked his ops officer.

"I read 381 life-signs aboard, sir," the Vulcan cadet reported. "I cannot ascertain their present condition, but my scans show that their life-support systems are functioning normally and their hull has not been compromised. I can also detect no warp core breaches. Their central computer appears to be off-line, but they are still spaceworthy."

"Small favors," Nog sighed.

"Captain!" al Nabil called from behind him. "Three Romulan birds-of-prey...closing in on our position! They've powered up their weapons and are preparing to strike!"

"Raise shields! Red alert! Power up photon torpedoes and await my command!"

"Captain," Val said, "maybe we should target the nearest warbird, fire, and withdraw."

"I will not abandon the Kobayashi Maru, Mr. Val," Nog hissed.

"Is that understood?"

"Maybe we can beam them aboard and make a run for it," Bassette chimed in.

"Not enough time," Stoek replied. "By the time we dropped shields, transported those aboard the Kobayashi Maru, raised shields, and engaged the warp engines, the Romulans will have had all the time they need to destroy us. That would be an illogical course of action."

"Open hailing frequencies, Mr. al Nabil," Nog commanded.

"What?" al Nabil replied incredulously. "You tried to talk to them before and..."

"Mr. al Nabil," Nog said sternly, "you presume to speak of events that never transpired. We are here and now. In other words, this is not a simulation we have tested in before but a life and death situation that holds hundreds of lives in the balance. Understood?"

"Understood."

"Then open the hailing frequencies!"

"Aye, sir," al Nabil said, frustration in his voice. "Hailing frequencies open."

"Romulan commander," Nog addressed, "this is Captain Nog of the Federation Starship Rom. We are not here to fight you. Our interest is in this derelict freighter. Allow us to salvage it and go on in peace. I repeat, we are not here to fight you." The other cadets looked at Nog with apprehension. Surely, he had gone mad. He had tried negotiating with the Romulans once before and they all wound up dead as their simulated ship was blasted out of space. There was no way that it could work.

"The lead ship is powering up its main phaser bank," al Nabil announced. "She's firing!"

"Full power to forward shields!" Nog ordered. "Maximum strength. Brace for impact!" The room shuddered and sparks flew as the phaser bolt that never existed slammed into the shields of a starship that also never existed. Smoke rose and alarms sounded, but the bridge appeared to be intact. All hands were still very much alive, even al Nabil, who had

usually expired by this point. Nog took it as an encouraging sign. Maybe this scheme might work after all.

"We're alive!" Bassette cried out.

"Let's try to keep it that way, people," Nog commented. "Romulan commander," he said, turning his attention back to the approaching holographic ships, "we have given you no cause to fire. I implore you to stand down. We are not a threat to you." Another volley of nonexistent phaser-fire slammed into them. More panels blew as the smoke began to get thicker. Sparks shot from Stoek's console. The sudden flash threw him from his seat, but as far as the simulation was concerned, he was still among the living. As were the rest of his crew. A little singed, a little shaken, but still very much alive. That had never happened before. Nor did what Nog saw when he looked at the main viewer. The visage of a Romulan officer was staring at him. Through the clearing smoke, Nog could see that his adversary was a female.

"I am Subcommander Tranna," she said. "You are in Romulan space. You are in violation of intergalactic treaties. Prepare to be destroyed." The rest of the cadets immediately turned their attention to Nog. They were astounded that they were still alive and in the simulation. They were amazed that for the first time, they had a face to put to their attackers. And they were astonished that Nog was holding his own.

"Subcommander," he said, addressing the holographic Romulan woman, "we do not wish to create an intergalactic incident. We merely wish to take this ship and leave." Tranna's brow arched.

"Why, Ferengi?"

"Because we are on a mission of mercy. There are innocents aboard that ship. They have no part of what you and I have been trained for. They only wish to go home. Please show your compassion and let them go."

"Sir," Stoek interjected, "our shields are down to thirty-seven percent. Impulse engines are off-line, but the warp engines are functioning perfectly. No casualties to report, but injuries are beginning to come in. The Kobayashi Maru is unscathed." Nog pondered his situation and gazed at Tranna.

"Ferengi," the Romulan officer demanded, "you are in violation of intergalactic treaties and we are perfectly within our right to destroy..."

"Name your price!" Nog demanded. The crew looked at him in stunned silence. Surely he did not say what they thought he had just said.

"I beg your pardon?" Tranna questioned. Even the holographic Romulan warrior could not believe her pointed ears.

"Name your price," he repeated. "Everyone has a price. Name yours and we'll negotiate." Bassette snickered. The whole idea was absurd. A Ferengi captain on a Federation starship bartering with a Romulan for the lives aboard a derelict ship. The stories they taught in Betazoid literature were not even this fanciful. He must have lost his mind.

"Nog..." Val implored, only to be hushed by the Ferengi cadet.



"Not now," he said. "Profit's on the line."

"Profit!" the Trill cadet said incredulously. "Are you kidding me? Are you insane?" Val's eyes began to fill with rage. "Maybe you don't want to pass this test, but..."

"Be quiet, Mr. Val, or consider yourself relieved," Nog demanded. Val stared at his fellow cadet in utter shock. He could not believe what he was seeing or hearing. Starfleet officers do not buy hostages like so much meat at a butcher shop. His stomach turned at the very thought, but Val could see that Nog was serious. He threw his hands up in defeat and sat down, shaking his head the whole time. Nog looked over at the rest. Bassette and al Nabil both seemed just as dumbfounded while Stoek seemed to be observing. "Good," Nog said at long last. "Now, back to commerce." He turned his attention back to the Romulan commander. "So, what will it be? Romulan ale? Terran silks? I know...Bajoran relics! No collection is complete without them."

"Captain," Tranna replied, still in disbelief, "Romulans do not negotiate with aggressive pirates who invade our space." She seemed as if she did not know what to make of the situation.

"Pirates!" Nog cried. "You've seen right through us! How did you know that there was millions in gold-pressed latinum aboard that ship? Do you have a spy among my crew? Is it you, Mr. Val? Are you a spy? I'll kill you myself if you are!"

"Captain!" the holographic Romulan pleaded. "I am warning you...I have little patience for such antics. You are only delaying your destruction by carrying on this way. Now, stop!" The image on the screen wavered. It was as if the transmission were breaking up, but Nog could see that it was not the case. The background behind Tranna did not falter, only the woman herself. Nog smiled inwardly and moved in for the kill.

"OK, Tranna," he said, "you drive a hard bargain...I'll give you fifty percent of the profits if you'll let us have the ship. Normally, I wouldn't do this but the Eighty-ninth Rule of Acquisition clearly states that it is better to lose some profit and live than lose all profit and die. In fact..." Just then, Tranna's image faltered. The smoke in the room began to thin and the sounds of alarms decreased. The world around the cadets shimmered and dissipated. Where once stood the proud bridge of the mighty Federation Starship Rom, now there was the familiar crisscrossing of yellow grids against the obsidian walls of a holodeck. The simulation was over.

"What happened?" asked al Nabil.

"I don't know," Val replied. The cadets all looked around the room in stunned amazement. All, that is, except for Nog. He merely smiled as he realized what he had just done. He had defeated the Kobayashi Maru. He had beat the no-win situation.

"Cadet Nog," a woman's voice called out. "This is Commander Aprile. See me in my office immediately. The rest of you cadets are free to go." The holodeck's archway opened, revealing the corridor that stood just outside of it. A number of stunned Academy personnel had gathered there. They had been observing the exercise and were now anxious to get a look at the cadet who just handed their biggest test back to them on a silver platter. Nog headed toward the door but was stopped by a hand on his shoulder.

"Wait a minute," al Nabil said. "What just happened?" He was just as perplexed as everyone else there was.

"As a friend of mine would say," Nog responded with a smile, "I just threw them a curve ball." He then turned and walked past the crowd in the hallway. The veteran Starfleet officers and senior cadets gaped in amazement at the little Ferengi. They whispered among themselves, wondering what this meant. Why did the test end so abruptly? Did he really beat the simulation or did the instructors end it? One thing that they were all in agreement about, however, was that the Academy had just changed.

"Fascinating," Stoek said in observance of the event. Val turned to look at him. As the Vulcan arched his brow as if to wonder why Val seemed so confused, the Trill just once again shook his head.

Nog approached Commander Rachel Aprile's office. She was the instructor in charge of strategic theory. It was her department that was in charge of the Kobayashi Maru simulation, and Nog began to feel a nervous twinge in the pit of his stomach. True, his strategy this time was rather unorthodox, but surely he was not about to be reprimanded for it. He just felt the need to look at the problem differently. He just prayed that he could make Aprile understand that.

"Come," came the voice from inside the office as he stepped up to the door. It opened with a soft movement of air to reveal the commander's rather spartan office. Some books and shelves, but not much in the way of decorations or even pictures. The commander was a middle-aged human woman who was a veteran of the Battle of Wolf 359, the Federation's darkest military action against the Borg. She survived that day through cunning and guile. Her tactics led to her position at the Academy. And now, a nervous Ferengi cadet was about to face her wrath. "Sit down, Cadet," she ordered harshly.

"Yes, sir," Nog managed to say without stammering. He felt queasy and hoped that he would not vomit right then and there. He sat up straight and held himself at attention.

"Cadet Nog," she demanded, "what the hell just happened in there?"

"Well, sir, you see," he fumbled, "I was taking the Kobayashi Maru test, which I failed three times before and..."

"Stop babbling," she reprimanded sternly. Nog could tell by the look in her eye that she was in no mood for games. He drew a breath and steadied himself. "Now what kind of game do you think you're playing here?"

"I just thought I'd try something different," he said calmly. "Conventional modes of thought did not seem to work, so I thought I'd be creative."

"Creative?" she fumed. "By babbling like a fool until the computer could no longer rationalize your method? And what did you plan to do next? Offer the female crew members as harem girls?" Nog could see that Aprile was clearly not amused. He was watching his whole Starfleet career flash in front of his eyes. He knew that he had to convince the commander that his actions were not as reckless as they seemed.

"Well, no, sir," he replied. "I was hoping to confuse or distract Subcommander Tranna long enough to lay down a barrage of photon torpedoes so we could tractor the freighter and warp out far enough to get beyond Romulan space, so we could beam the survivors over and make repairs. You see, Romulans have had a history of letting their guard down around us Ferengi because they think that we're inferior. I was hoping that Tranna would assume the

same so I could exploit that." Aprile pondered that for a moment.

"So you're saying that by acting the fool, you hoped that the Romulans would underestimate you and present you with an opportunity to strike? Interesting strategy, Cadet."

"The 239th Rule of Acquisition, sir... 'Never be afraid to mis-label a product.' In this case, I was the product."

"So it would seem. But how did you know that it would work?"

"I didn't. Nothing else worked for me, so I just stopped trying to be what I thought I had to be to be accepted and started being what I am...a Ferengi. I may not be a good one, or as my uncle would say, I may not have the lobes for it, but I'm still a Ferengi and people will always see me as such. I used that preconceived notion to my advantage. It was the best tool I had available to me." Nog looked good and hard at Aprile. She no longer seemed to be breathing fire. In fact, she even began to smile.

"Well done, Cadet," she said. "It sounds to me as if you've learned a very valuable lesson. You've passed your test. It may not have been the test you thought you were going in for, but you've passed anyway. You've learned that what's truly important is that you have to trust your own abilities. I'll let you in on a little secret...there is no solution to the Kobayashi Maru simulation. It's designed to teach you how to deal with death as much as life. It's a no-win situation. You may not have gotten the full impact of that lesson today, but you took a very important step in that direction. Now, get back to your studies and make Starfleet proud."

"Yes, sir," Nog said as he rose from the chair. He hurried to the door, but stopped just short of it. He turned to face Aprile. "Sir, may I ask a question?"

"What is it, Cadet?"

"Did you shut the simulation down or did I actually defeat the no-win situation?" Aprile's brow knotted at the question.

"Get back to your studies, Cadet," she said, refusing to answer the question.

"Yes, sir," he said quickly and rushed out the door. He headed out to the quad, feeling as if he were walking on air. For the first time since he had come to the Academy, he felt as if he had done something right. His doubts about being there began to melt away as he felt a confidence growing within him. He now knew asking Captain Sisko to sponsor him for the Academy was not a mistake. He could not wait to call the station and tell him what he had done. And he could not wait to tell his father that he could be proud of his son. As Nog approached the quad, he found Val, Stoek, Bassette, and al Nabil waiting. They all had anxious looks on their faces, wanting to know what had transpired in Aprile's office. Nog began to feel a little uneasy again. For a moment, he thought that they were going to berate him for his performance.

"Well?" al Nabil asked.

"Well what?" Nog replied.

"Well, what happened?" Bassette chimed in.

Nog looked at his squad mates. He knew that he could not tell them about the true nature of

the simulation because they would have to find out for themselves, but he also knew that they would not let the subject drop unless he gave them something.

"She said that she was pleased with my progress," he said coyly.

"Is that all?" Stoek inquired. Nog looked at them again. They all seemed to be ready to burst with anticipation of his next word.

"Oh, and that I passed." The group looked stunned.

"You passed?" al Nabil asked, his mouth agape.

"Yes," Nog replied. "She thought that my solution was unique. Had I not been Ferengi, it probably wouldn't have worked. But you can't help what you are." At that remark, the squad collectively hung their heads, feeling a little ashamed of the way they had treated their fellow cadet. As much as Nog may have wanted to revel in such a moment in the past, he now felt it would be immature. "And it's a good thing," he added, attempting to break the mood.

"Well," Val said after a bit of a silence, "I guess that only leaves one thing." He stepped very close to Nog, until he was towering over him. "We all owe Nog a victory celebration. What do you say to ice cream and coffee at that little bistro over in Sausalito? I've heard that the whales are breaching in the bay, so it should make for a great party. Are you up for it, Nog?"

Nog's eyes grew wide. He could not believe his ears. Not only was the squad inviting him to come out, but it was in his honor. He felt a tightness in his throat and fought the urge to cry. Finally, after so much time, heartache, and alienation, Nog felt like he belonged. He felt like he was home.

"You bet," he said, a jagged-tooth grin creasing his glowing face. As he turned to leave with his friends, the young Ferengi noticed Boothby tending a patch of Andorian roses. The old man looked at him and did something that the cadets had sworn he was incapable of doing. He smiled.

Homemade

Elizabeth A. Dunham

She double-checked the setting on the oven--350 degrees--then stood on her toes to reach into the cupboard above the refrigerator to retrieve a square glass pan. She turned to face out the windows just over the kitchen sink so her next task wouldn't leave a mess on the counter. First, she pulled a can of shortening out of the cabinet to the right of the window. She opened the can, used a square of waxed paper to dig out a generous dollop of shortening, and spread it evenly on the bottom and sides of the pan.

Then, she pulled a canister of flour toward her across the counter. The lid had tightened in the humidity-laden air so common this time of year. She had to tug sharply at the handle. After a brief struggle, the lid gave way with such suddenness that she almost lost her grip, and she had to drop the lid to keep from dropping the canister itself. As the lid clattered to the floor, she muttered mild curses and set the flour container on the counter. She bent down, a little stiffly, to pick up the wayward lid and noticed, to her astonishment, that her hands were shaking. Straightening up, she took several deep breaths, willing her racing heart to slow and pressing her hands against her apron to still them.

After fishing out the measuring cup she kept in the canister, she scooped some flour into the center of the greased pan. As she shook the pan vigorously from side to side, the rising breeze coming through the open window sent a cloud of flour dust wafting into her face, and she had to turn away to sneeze. After turning back, she dumped the excess flour in the sink and rinsed it down the drain.

She set the pan on the counter. Leaning lightly on the sink, she brushed a wisp of hair away from her face with her arm and surveyed the low, dark clouds scudding across the horizon. "Storm's coming," she thought, then began gathering her thoughts for the task ahead, as if she hadn't repeated this ritual thousands of times in the last seven years. It was a ritual, each step performed in exactly the same way every single time. It was as if, even though she was a practical and far-from-superstitious woman, she practiced this particular ritual to perfection to bring about a miracle--the only miracle she'd ever wanted in her life.

She had sensed what he was going to say even before she opened the door to the admiral and invited him in.

"Today is different," she told herself firmly. "Today is different," she repeated, more hesitantly this time. Of course, she'd told herself that many times before.

A sharp gust of wind sent a tiny picture frame on the sill clattering into the sink, startling her and breaking her reverie. She gingerly retrieved the frame, afraid the fall had broken the glass, but it hadn't. She set it aside with a mental note to return it to the sill after the storm had passed.

The world had seemed suddenly dark. He had tried to get her to sit down, as if sitting would soften the impact of his words.

The last ray of sunshine had fallen under the edge of the approaching gray-black clouds, and the kitchen was suddenly dark, even though it was still midafternoon. She flicked on the lights, then bustled about, getting out the ingredients she'd need. She ticked them off in her head as she set them on the counter.

She knew he'd spoken in sentences, but all she heard were the important words, separate and staccato.

Butter. Sugar. Flour was already out. Eggs. ("Must get more tomorrow," she thought as she opened the carton to count them.) Cocoa powder. Salt. Vanilla. Walnuts, the already chopped kind. (She figured she was old enough--mature enough, she corrected herself--that she could indulge herself by not chopping walnuts for baking.)

Badlands. Maquis. Voyager. Lost. Doing all we can.

She unwrapped the stick of butter and let it fall out of the wrapper into a small saucepan. As she started the gas flame underneath the pan and began stirring to keep the butter from burning, the first faint flicker of lightning momentarily brightened the kitchen. Long seconds later, a subdued, barely audible rumble of thunder rolled across the landscape. In the uneasy moment of complete silence that followed, all she could hear was her wooden spoon faintly scraping the bottom of the saucepan. A sharper, more malevolent gust of wind rattled the window frame, and she glanced up suspiciously, an instinct born of a lifetime of Mid-western springs and summers spent dodging occasional tornadoes.

She had listened, unresponsive, as the painful, cutting words rolled off his tongue, taking a

piece of her life with them. She couldn't raise her eyes to meet his, so she focused on the pips on his collar, her stoic expression never wavering.

The butter melted quickly. She switched off the flame, and it disappeared with a quiet pop and a transient whiff of gas. Turning around, she rummaged through the less-organized cupboard behind her to find a glass mixing bowl. As she clattered around for the right bowl, she berated herself for letting her kitchen organization deteriorate. She finally found the bowl, and carefully poured the now-liquid butter into it. The sugar canister lid required far less effort than the previous one, and she measured out one cup of sugar into the bowl. She watched, as fascinated as a child baking for the first time, as the white quickly turned a golden yellow in the pool of butter. The wooden spoon thumped along the sides of the glass as she mixed the butter and sugar together. She watched a much more intense flash of lightning blaze across the sky. As she briskly broke two eggs into the butter-egg mixture, the thunder cracked in answer almost immediately, making itself felt all the way down into her tired bones.

Her stoicism had held firmly until she closed the door behind him. Then, as a sharp burst of thunder from a storm she hadn't even known was coming exploded nearby, it imploded the deep ache of grief that had been growing inside her.

Before the thunder died away completely, the rain began. She smelled the ozone as the first few drops fell, heavy and loud on the roof. She inhaled deeply as the downpour intensified, finding catharsis in the storm's fury. After returning to the chaotic cupboard, she found another, smaller bowl, set it on the counter, and filled it with one-half cup of flour, one-third cup cocoa powder, and one-fourth teaspoon salt. She stirred the powdered mixture with a fork, and gave a sharp cry of surprise when water splashed into it, sending up another powdery cloud, this one dust-brown. Realizing the rain, carried by the increasing wind, was now coming almost horizontally through the screen, she closed the open window, struggling for a moment with the stubborn, moisture-swollen frame. Finally, it yielded, and the raindrops now drummed out a rhythm on the windowpane.

As the rain had begun, she had collapsed into the chair she had so steadfastly refused, and her storm of tears echoed the torrential downpour outside. Her grief, deep and seemingly infinite, startled her as much as the storm had. After all, loss was as much a part of Starfleet life as storms were a part of summertime in Indiana.

With the storm at its height, lightning flashed and thunder crashed almost simultaneously around the house in wave after wave of light and sound. She dumped the flour-sugar-cocoa mixture into the buttery goo and began stirring rapidly, relishing the warm chocolate smell released by the mixing. She watched the oak tree outside bending its smaller branches to the storm's fury.

After the tears had subsided, she had felt the need to do something, anything. So she stood up, brushed herself off briskly, and strode into the kitchen. After splashing cold water on her face and washing her hands, she switched on the oven.

And began making brownies.

This was her favorite part: the finishing touches. She poured one-half cup of chopped walnuts and a teaspoon of vanilla extract into the batter, the sharp odor of vanilla rising over the smell of cocoa.

She wasn't sure when it had gone from "something to do" to a ritual. Of the first batch, she

had eaten a half of a brownie, then thrown the rest away, any food--even the chocolate variety--seeming unpalatable in those early days. Appalled at her wastefulness, she gave later batches to the mail carrier, the farmer next door, visiting well-wishers. She tried not to bake when she knew the brownies would go uneaten, but she had thrown away more than a few pans of moldy treats.

After one final, very satisfactory stir, she spread the batter in the pan she had so carefully greased and floured. When she opened the oven door, a blast of heat rolled over her, and she slid the pan in quickly, closed the door, and set the timer for twenty-five minutes.

Over the ensuing years, her brownie-making had decreased in frequency, but not intensity. Every batch had been made the same way, with the same care and the same hope--a hope she would never utter aloud, lest someone call her an old fool.

Then the unbelievable: The admiral had reappeared, uttering more staccato words--these bringing in joy what his first words had brought in despair.

Voyager. Delta Quadrant. Safe.

She had continued baking brownies with renewed fervor. Her neighbors must have thought her eccentric, even mad, as she traipsed up and down their country road, delivering foil-wrapped packages of still-warm baked goods.

She gathered up the dishes and stacked them in the sink. She realized, as she filled the sink with dish soap and steaming water, that the rain outside had relented slightly, and that more time was elapsing between lightning and thunder. She washed each dish slowly and carefully in the hot soapy water, even though she had a dishwasher that could have done the task for her. She didn't want any idle time on her hands. With the washing complete, she turned her attention to wiping up every drop of moisture with the fluffiest dish towel she could find and returning everything to its proper place. She even managed to restore a bit of order to the mixing bowls.

When the admiral had come to stand on her front porch for a third time, she had seen the smile in his eyes long before it reached his lips. "When will I see her?" she had asked, even before he could open his mouth to tell her the good news.

Straightening up from her organizing, she surveyed her gleaming kitchen, casting about for more busy work. She spotted the photo she had moved, and picked it up. She successfully fought back the tears that threatened as she gazed at the smiling woman in the picture. "What are you boo-hooing about?" she asked herself scornfully. "You have nothing to cry about today." Blinking hard and sighing, she returned the picture frame to its rightful spot on the sill just as the oven timer beeped softly and the first ray of returning sunshine burst through the departing clouds.

She opened the oven door and considered her handiwork. Perfect, she decided as she looked at the brownies pulling away just slightly from the pan edges.

The brownies were cooling on a rack when the doorbell rang.

She quickly untied her apron and hung it on the oven door handle, dusted stray flour off her skirt and, with a hand that had begun trembling again, brushed away that stubborn wisp of hair. "Coming," she called, hoping the person at the front door could hear her over the now-diminishing wind. Her voice wavered as much as her hands.

The distance between the kitchen and the front door had never seemed so huge. She urged her feet to move faster, but a part of her was reluctant to open the door. What if, like so many times before, it turned out to be part of a cruel waking dream, and instead of the person she longed most to see, it was someone else in a Starfleet uniform?

But when she put her hand on the doorknob, the trembling stopped. Its cool, firm surface reminded her that this was real life, that this time, it wasn't a dream. It yielded smoothly to her touch, and the door swung inward.

She was greeted with a smile sweeter to her than any in the universe.

"You made brownies, didn't you? I could smell them coming up the walk, even with all the rain."

She nodded wordlessly, blinking back the torrent of tears that had welled up in her eyes and were now threatening to spill over onto her wrinkled cheeks.

The woman in front of her put out her arms and pulled her into a hug. Only then, as she returned the embrace and gathered her grown firstborn daughter to herself, did she allow herself to believe it. She inhaled deeply, savoring all the scents in much the same way she had the first time they had placed her daughter in her arms: the chocolaty aroma of the brownies, the damp-fresh of the wet, recently mown grass, the sweet, familiar but too-long-absent scent of her daughter's hair and skin.

The tears spilled over as she squeezed her daughter tightly, stroked her hair and patted her back--afraid to release her for fear she would disappear.

"I've been thinking about your homemade brownies for seven years," the woman in her arms whispered into her ear. "Somehow, the replicator just never did them justice."

She heard a chuckle escape her lips as she pulled back slightly. It was only when she saw her daughter's cheeks damp with tears, too, that she was able to speak.

"Replicators know all the ingredients, but--" she began, and her daughter piped in.

"--they can't put the love in it," they chorused together. Her daughter's laugh was hearty and musical as she drew her mother close for another hug.

As her arms again tightened around her daughter, Gretchen Janeway uttered the words she had rehearsed in her head over and over--almost as a good-luck litany--since she'd first been told of Voyager's disappearance.

"Welcome home, Kathryn. Welcome home."

Seven and Seven

Kevin Hosey

It wasn't the sudden appearance of the billowing blue cloud of incandescent energy that Seven of Nine found odd--it was the creature that stepped out of it.

A small, black cat with a sparkling silver collar.



Intrigued and cautious at the same time, the attractive human-turned-Borg-turned-human watched as the furry animal sat in front of the main viewscreen and surveyed the astrometrics lab. Behind it the cloud swirled out of existence as quickly as it had appeared.

At the sight of Seven, the cat raised its right brow. The look on the animal's face reminded her of the expression Commander Tuvok, their Vulcan chief security officer, made on the rare occasions when something caught him by surprise.

Seven watched the unannounced visitor and waited to see what it would do. But after a few minutes, it didn't do anything at all. Not unless you consider licking its paw and staring right back at her "doing something."

So, she decided to try speaking to it. After all, with the millions of myriad life-forms in the galaxy, the possibility of a cat being a sentient being capable of speech was not impossible. Although, she thought, she did not recall the Borg ever assimilating a feline species such as this.

"Greetings," she said. To her amazement, the animal actually opened its mouth as if preparing to speak. But, rather than returning her salutation, it merely let out a soft sneeze.

Feeling foolish, Seven frowned at the little creature. So much for "first contact."

Keeping an eye on her unannounced visitor, she picked up a tricorder and scanned it. There was nothing out of ordinary about the animal itself, but she did pick up very fascinating readings from the residual energy left by the cloud. It possessed a signature similar to the transporters on Voyager, but one hundred times stronger!

And that wasn't the only interesting fact. The tricorder also picked up traces of chronometric particles. The cloud had been a temporal rift, which meant the cat had originated in another time period.

A time-traveling cat. Of all the things Seven had witnessed since coming aboard the U.S.S. Voyager over four years ago, this had to be one of the strangest.

It was also something Captain Janeway would wish to investigate. In fact, Seven was surprised the captain had not contacted her already. The appearance of a temporal rift on board the ship would have triggered alarms all over the bridge.

Seven lay the tricorder on her console and tapped the silver insignia on her chest, activating the communicator within. "Seven of Nine to the captain." Normally, the voice of Kathryn Janeway would immediately reply. This time there was no answer.

"Seven to Captain Janeway, respond."

Still no answer.

Thinking Janeway's combadge might be malfunctioning, Seven attempted to contact Tuvok. After two unsuccessful tries, she gave up.

Maybe her combadge was malfunctioning, she thought. Only she knew that wasn't the case because Harry Kim, the ship's operations officer, had contacted her from the bridge earlier. Janeway wanted to study a major stellar event in this sector and the ensign needed her help

refining the ship's sensors. At first, Seven denied his request since she was occupied with duties of her own, but he persisted so she reluctantly agreed.

That was 21.3 minutes ago--and he never arrived. Seven assumed he had been detained, but now, with the arrival of the cat and the fact that she couldn't contact the bridge, she sensed something was wrong.

Since communications were out, Seven asked the ship for help. "Computer, besides the temporal rift in astrometrics, have any other anomalies been reported aboard Voyager?"

Silence.

"Computer?"

Nothing. Now the computer wasn't responding.

Seven stepped up to her console to run a level-one diagnostic on the ship's systems. At the same time, she kept an eye on the cat since she suspected its visit was somehow involved with the sudden equipment malfunctions. The creature merely sat in front of the viewer quietly, watching her every move.

After entering her access codes into the multicolored display, Seven stepped back to await the results. But nothing happened. Her codes hadn't been accepted. She tried again, but still no response. Apparently something, or some one, had overridden the main computer.

Something definitely was wrong, she decided, and it was time to investigate. Stepping over to a nearby compartment, Seven removed a hand phaser.

And that's when the cat suddenly leaped at her.

Seven instinctively dodged the airborne feline. It flew over her right shoulder and landed softly on the deck behind her. Spinning around, Seven readied herself for a second assault. But, rather than coming at her again, the ebony creature bolted through the sliding lab doors and into the corridor.

Not missing a step, Seven ran after it--and barely avoided tripping over the body of Harry Kim. The young Asian ensign was lying on the deck unconscious. At least, Seven hoped he was merely unconscious.

Dropping to her knees, she pressed two fingers gently against his neck. Fortunately, she felt a pulse. That's when she noticed there were two other crew members lying a few meters away. She recognized them as Lieutenant Christian Elias and Ensign Kimberly Nicole. Questions raced through Seven's analytical mind: How long had they been in this condition? Was the entire ship affected? And if it was, why was she still conscious?

If Harry left the bridge directly after contacting her earlier, Seven calculated it would have taken him approximately five minutes to reach this point, assuming he didn't stop anywhere along the way. That meant that whatever had incapacitated him and the other two crew members would have occurred approximately fifteen minutes ago--a few minutes before the cat appeared.

The cat. Seven had momentarily forgotten about the feline intruder. Looking up, she spotted it rushing down the corridor to her right. If she wanted to learn what was happening on the

ship, she thought, following the cat would be the logical course of action. So, leaving the prone body of Harry Kim behind, she dashed off after it.

A few meters down the corridor, the cat stopped by a turbolift. Cautiously, Seven approached it, her phaser set on stun in case it made another hostile move. But it didn't attack. In fact, it didn't even acknowledge her. It just sat staring at the turbolift as if waiting for it to arrive. That was, of course, impossible, thought Seven. How would a cat understand the purpose of a turbolift?

Then the door's swished open--and the cat vanished inside. Not wanting to lose it, Seven sprinted toward the lift and slipped in just as the doors slid shut again.

Resting against the back of the lift, the cat gazed up at her, its long tail drawing random patterns in the air. The fact that Seven was giving chase didn't seem to bother it. Perhaps she had been wrong, and it hadn't attacked her in the lab. Perhaps it just wanted to leave.

But to where?

The lift suddenly began to move, startling her. Since she had not given it a destination, it should have remained stationary. That meant it had been activated remotely, undoubtedly by whoever controlled the computer.

Seven double-checked the settings on her phaser. She had the feeling she was about to meet the owner of the cat, and he--or she--had a lot to explain.

When the turbolift quickly slowed to a silent stop, Seven assumed a defensive posture and aimed her phaser at the doors. The moment they slid open, her body tensed as she prepared for a possible attack.

But, no one was there.

Leaning forward, she peered into the corridor--and that's when the cat suddenly lunged toward the open doorway. Seven moved to block its exit, but, while she was a truly formidable combatant and could hold her own against most beings, she had never faced anything so tiny or nimble. As a result, the creature leapt past her with very little effort. Letting out a sigh of frustration, Seven gave chase.

The cat didn't seem to be in any hurry, so she managed to keep pace with it. Along the way, she passed several other crew members, all unconscious. Whatever attacked them must have hit everyone at the same time, she surmised, otherwise someone would have managed to set off an alarm.

She suddenly thought of the bridge crew--more specifically Voyager's primary pilot, Tom Paris. Fortunately, the ship was currently at rest. If Voyager had been traveling at warp speed, or even impulse power, the absence of someone at the helm would be disastrous.

Ahead, the cat continued as if it knew where it was going. Then again, Seven thought, maybe it did. The way it was moving, it seemed to have a specific destination in mind.

She noted that she was on Deck 11 and wondered why they had been deposited on this level. Then it hit her. Engineering. One of the most crucial sections of the ship. Seven wouldn't be surprised if that was exactly where the cat was heading.

And she was right.

The dark feline approached the entrance to engineering, and, without hesitating, padded through the open doors.

Silently, Seven moved to the entryway and glanced in, her phaser up and ready. She immediately spotted four of the engineering personnel crumpled on the deck near the warp engines. One of them was the pregnant form of Chief Engineer B'Elanna Torres.

Then, Seven noticed something odd. Instead of lying in a collapsed heap like the other three, B'Elanna's body was straight, with her arms by her side. And underneath her head was a Starfleet jacket folded like a makeshift pillow. It looked as if she had settled down for a quick nap rather than losing consciousness and falling to the deck.

Seven doubted strongly that the half-Klingon/half-human engineer had simply made herself comfortable. Someone else must have done it. But who?

"Well, it's about time you showed up."

Startled, Seven pulled away from the door. For a moment she thought the sudden male voice had been addressing her, but when she heard it again it was obvious that wasn't the case.

"I know, I know, I hate time travel as much as you do, but it couldn't be helped."

Time travel? Seven realized she may have just located the owner of the cat. And from the sound of it, he wasn't alone. Not unless he was talking to himself.

Cautiously, she leaned forward again and immediately spotted someone across the room. Working at one of the main engineering consoles was a tall, slender man. He looked human, with a slim face and dark brown hair. Judging by his clothing, he did not appear to be Starfleet personnel. He wore a pair of royal blue slacks, a light-blue jacket, and a white collared shirt.

Watching how effortlessly he entered commands into the console, Seven knew he had to be the person responsible for overriding the computer system. But, how many others were there? And how had they incapacitated the crew? She wanted to rush in and force him to answer her questions, but not until she learned whether she was facing a few invaders--or an entire army.

Sitting on top of a nearby console, the black cat also watched the dark-haired man. But, rather than watching silently, it let out a series of soft mews.

"Don't worry, Isis," the man said as he looked directly at the cat, "this won't take long. A few more entries here and then we'll move on to the bridge."

The cat! Seven realized he was speaking to the cat.

The cat mewed again, and this time the man looked slightly alarmed.

"What? Awake?" Stepping out from behind the engineering console, he stood face-to-face with the feline. "Why didn't you tell me before? Where is she?"

Seven decided it was time to act. "Do not move," she warned as she stepped through the wide doorway, "or I will fire."

Turning to face her, the intruder glanced at the phaser she had pointed at his chest. But, to Seven's surprise, his reaction was more of mild irritation than alarm or fear.

"Who are you," he asked, his deep, somber eyes watching her from beneath a prominent brow and bushy eyebrows, "and why are you still awake?"

"I am Seven of Nine," she answered as she stopped a few meters away, "and you will answer my questions. Who are you, and what are you doing on our ship?"

Ignoring her inquiries, the man leaned forward and studied her face with open curiosity. "Are those Borg implants?" he asked, indicating silver metallic devices above Seven's left eye and below her right ear. "That explains it. My servo doesn't affect the Borg. It has something to do with the neuro-processors in your brains. Funny, though, you don't look like any Borg I've seen before."

"I asked who you are!"

"My name is Gary Seven," he told her, and then a hint of a smile brushed the left corner of his lips. "But, I don't think we're related."

"Now is not the time for humor!" Seven warned, her blue eyes surging with anger. Then she quickly glanced around the room. "Are there others with you?"

Gary shook his head. "No, no one else."

"Then tell me why you are here."

"I am on a rescue mission."

"Explain."

Gary shook his head. "I can't give you any details, but I can tell you that I mean you no harm."

"No harm?" Seven frowned as she glanced at B'Elanna and the other three crew members. "What did you do to them?"

"Your crew is fine. They are just asleep for a few hours."

Keeping her phaser trained on the stranger, Seven picked up a tricorder on a nearby console and activated it. According to the readings he was telling the truth. They were only asleep. "You rendered the entire crew unconscious? How?"

"It wasn't that difficult, really, but I can't--"

"How?" she repeated louder.

Gary sighed impatiently. "With this," he said as he slipped his right hand into his jacket pocket.

"Stop!" Seven tensed and leveled the phaser at the pocket. "Remove the weapon from your

jacket...slowly."

Carefully, Gary pulled out a small silver penlike device and held it up for her to see. He also raised his left hand to indicate he wasn't going to try anything foolish. "This is called a servo. It emits a tranquilizer beam that can be used on one person or even an entire crew. All it does is put them to sleep. It won't hurt anyone. In fact, they'll all feel pretty good when they come around."

"Can you also use it to revive them?"

"Yes."

"Then you will do so now!"

"I can't," Gary shook his head again. "Reviving your crew would jeopardize my mission, and that's something I can't allow to happen. Time is of the essence. If I don't complete my objectives within a designated time frame, billions of people will die."

"Is that a threat?"

"Not at all. I am trying to prevent their deaths."

"That does not explain your presence on Voyag--"

"Look," Gary interrupted, "I understand you feel it's your duty to protect your ship, but I really don't have time for this. I have more important matters to attend to. So, I don't suppose there's any way I can talk you into letting me finish what I started without any further interference, is there?"

Taken aback by the totally illogical request, Seven simply said, "No!"

"I didn't think so. Then I am truly sorry I have to do this."

"Do what?" asked Seven. And then she sensed someone behind her. Spinning, she came face-to-face with an exotic human woman. "Who are you--"

That's when Gary Seven pinched her neck and the entire room swirled into darkness.

The first thing Seven felt when she regained consciousness on the deck of engineering was anger. Not at Gary Seven and the unknown woman, but at herself. She had let her guard down and they had taken advantage of it.

Well, she swore, that would not happen again.

Pushing herself to her feet, she quickly surveyed the large two-story room to make sure Gary Seven and his accomplice were gone. They were. Then she checked the chronometer on a nearby console to determine how long she had been out. Twenty minutes. Mentally chiding herself again, she searched the deck for her phaser, but it was gone. Not surprising, she thought.

Stepping toward the emergency weapons locker for a replacement phaser, Seven winced at a sudden twinge in her neck. Gary Seven had subdued her with a Vulcan nerve pinch. Tuvok attempted to teach her the art of the pinch on more than one occasion, but, to her

endless frustration, she could never execute it correctly. The Vulcan explained that it had always been very difficult for humans to master the technique.

Well, Seven thought, apparently Gary Seven had no problem mastering it. Then again, maybe he isn't human.

She opened the weapons locker, removed a phaser and made sure it was set on stun. Before confronting Gary Seven earlier, Seven overheard him say the bridge was his next destination. So, that was exactly where she was going.

Before leaving she took a moment to make sure B'Elanna and the others were all right. They were still asleep. Gary Seven's servo was an extremely effective weapon, she noted. Yet, looking at B'Elanna's dozing face, she also conceded that it seemed to be harmless, just as he had said.

Interesting, she observed. He had all that power at his disposal, and as far as she knew he had not injured anyone. In fact, she thought as she touched the jacket under the head of their half-Klingon engineer, he had gone out of his way to make sure people didn't get hurt.

The sudden notion that Gary Seven was telling the truth about his rescue mission crossed her mind, but only for a moment. Even if he was telling the truth about saving billions of lives, it was not his motives that were at fault, it was his actions.

Now he was on the bridge of Voyager. And she planned on stopping him.

Gary Seven's fingers flashed across the surface of Tuvok's science station as he activated the custom programs he had entered into the engineering computers earlier. His programs would increase the strength of Voyager's deflector shields tenfold. That would give him just enough power to accomplish his mission.

Across the bridge, Isis sat in the pilot's seat, watching his every move. Curled in a fetal position on the deck next to her was the sleeping form of Tom Paris, Voyager's primary pilot and B'Elanna's husband. Every few seconds he would smile and giggle. The cat glanced at him as he mumbled something that sounded like, "B'Elanna, stop it, you know I'm ticklish there..."

Once he confirmed his deflector programs were performing as planned, Gary Seven carefully stepped over the sleeping form of Commander Tuvok and moved to Harry Kim's tactical station. There he pulled out his servo and held it up to the display. Pressing an almost invisible key on the surface of the device, he began to download navigational data into Voyager's computers. Once the download was complete, he slipped the servo back into his pocket.

Glancing at his twentieth-century Earth-style wrist watch, he sighed in frustration. His encounter with the Borg woman had put him behind schedule. He would have to work fast if he wanted to reach his goal on time. Fortunately, the nerve pinch he gave her should keep her out of the way for at least another few hours.

"Do not move!"

Then again, maybe not.

Turning slowly to his left, Gary Seven found himself staring once again at the front end of a

phaser. And behind it was Seven of Nine.

A few meters away, the cat looked up from Tom's sleeping form and let out a loud, warning hiss. Gary rolled his eyes and said, "Thank you, Isis, but I can see her."

"Where is your weapon?" Seven asked, her voice cold as steel and twice as hard.

"Where did you come from?"

"The emergency Jefferies tube behind me," she answered.

Gary nodded. "Very smart. And you regained consciousness a lot faster than I expected, too."

"I am sorry to disappoint you," she said, her raised eyebrow punctuating her sarcasm. Then she held out her left hand, "Give me your weapon--now!"

Frowning, Gary removed the servo and handed it to her.

"Now, where is the woman?" asked Seven.

Gary glanced at Isis and said, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Silently, Seven moved the phaser closer to Gary's face.

"All right, all right." He held up his hands. "She's right over there."

Seven turned and blinked when she saw he was pointing at the cat. Her eyes even colder, she turned back and stepped closer to him. "I do not have time for jokes."

"It's not a joke," Gary stated. "There's a lot more to Isis than meets the eye."

Seven stared at the feline intruder again. She had encountered alien species in the past that could change forms at will. As a member of the Borg Collective, she had even helped assimilate a few. Could the cat be one of them?

A time-traveling, shape-shifting cat, thought Seven as she rubbed her neck again. Now she had seen everything.

"I'm sorry about the nerve pinch," Gary said when he noticed her discomfort, "but you left me no choice."

"And I am again leaving you no choice," stated Seven. "Revive the captain and the rest of the bridge crew immediately." Below them on the command level, Captain Janeway and her first officer, Commander Chakotay, sat slumped in their chairs sound asleep. Janeway's head was resting on Chakotay's broad shoulder, and Seven thought they actually looked very peaceful.

"I told you I can't revive them because--"

"--it will jeopardize your rescue mission," finished Seven.

Gary nodded. "Yes."



"Your rescue mission does not concern me. The safety of this crew does."

"Doesn't concern you?" Gary repeated. "Since when does a rescue mission not concern Starfleet? Especially when it involves billions of life-forms?"

"If your mission is indeed that critical, you should have requested our help rather than rendering the crew unconscious--"

"No, I put them to sleep," Gary corrected her.

"--and taking control of the ship!" Seven continued, ignoring his interruption.

"I have a very rigid time frame to follow and I only have one chance at it," Gary replied. "If I miss it, I fail and people die. My schedule didn't allow the luxury of trying to convince your captain to help me. Besides, she would have been more concerned with her own agenda, not mine."

"I do not agree," replied Seven. "Since I have known Captain Janeway, she has given aid to several alien races in the Delta Quadrant. I have no doubt she would do the same for you. Revive her and ask her."

"No, she won't."

"How do you know that?"

"Because of your Prime Directive."

Seven frowned. "Explain."

Gary sighed again, something he was doing quite often during this assignment, and glanced at his watch. He had less than ten minutes to start the next phase of the mission, and at the moment it didn't look like he was going to make it. Gary had always considered himself to be a realist, and now he knew the only realistic option for completing this mission successfully may be confiding in Seven of Nine.

"All right," he finally said. "I'm going to do something I rarely do. I'm going to trust you and tell you everything. Then you'll see why it's vital that I be allowed to continue, and that you and your crew not interfere."

"I cannot promise that," Seven replied, "but I am willing to listen."

"Well, then listen carefully," Gary told her, "because I'm not going to repeat any of this. I am what you might call a covert operative. I and many others work for a race of aliens who oversee and aid in the development of technologically advanced, yet immature and often violent worlds. Basically, we try to keep them from destroying themselves before they can evolve into a peaceful society."

"Who are these aliens?"

"That is the one thing I can't tell you," Gary said. "If anyone other than our agents discovered who they are or where they are located, their effectiveness would be diminished. They could even be eliminated."

Seven wanted to know more about these unknown aliens, but she let the matter drop for the moment and pursued another subject matter. "Your cat arrived through a temporal rift. Did you board Voyager in the same manner?"

"Yes, I did."

"Are you involved with the Temporal Integrity Commission?" she asked. The crew of Voyager had crossed the path of that twenty-ninth century agency on more than one occasion. The future organization's primary purpose was the investigation of deviations in the time stream that may result in fractured timelines or alternate realities. As far as Seven knew, they were the only group capable of creating and controlling artificial rifts.

Gary shook his head. "I know of them, but I'm not associated with them."

"Then where are you from?"

"I am from Earth, actually. The year 1969."

Seven cocked a skeptical eyebrow. "You are a time traveler...from the past?"

"I am assigned to Earth during the late twentieth century, a very unstable period for them."

"Then what are you doing in this time period?"

"We have operatives assigned to different sectors and different time periods, including here in the Delta Quadrant," Gary explained. "We are all very self-sufficient, but every so often one agent will need help from another agent. Unfortunately, it's not always possible for agents within the same time period to aid one another. So, the next step is to contact an available agent assigned to another time period. It is very rare, but it does happen. That's where I come in."

The thought of Gary Seven and his fellow operatives jumping back and forth through time alarmed Seven. The ramifications were staggering. "Are you not concerned with the possibility of altering or damaging the timelines?"

"No, that's impossible. Our jaunts are calculated to the..." He abruptly checked his watch again and shook his head impatiently.

"Look, I've already lost almost five minutes on this conversation, so let's just stick to the main points, shall we?"

"Fine," agreed Seven, "then tell me what all this has to do with Voyager. What is your mission and why do you need our ship?"

"Part of our duties includes protecting the planets we oversee from potential dangers and disasters. That includes both man-made and natural disasters. My mission is to protect one of our planets from this..."

He quickly tapped a command into Harry Kim's console and an image appeared on the main display. Seven saw a three-dimensional schematic of what looked like a large rock in space, and instantly knew what it was. "An asteroid."

"Not a very large asteroid," said Gary, "about twice the size of Voyager. Yet it's still large enough to wipe out the main population area of this world--" He tapped another command and the display switched to the image of a small, M-class planet. "--Terrelia Four."

Seven read the file codes on the display and frowned. "I have never seen these navigational charts before. Where did they come from?"

"I downloaded them into your computer."

"Why?"

"Because your navigational charts don't extend far enough into the Beta Quadrant."

"The Beta Quadrant?" Seven exclaimed. She studied the data and determined the location of the planet. It lay in a secluded sector of space on the opposite end of the quadrant from the Klingon and Romulan Empires. "Starfleet has never explored that far into the Beta Quadrant."

"No, but we have," Gary pointed out. "One of our agents is assigned to Terrelia IV."

"That planet is over forty-five thousand light-years from here," stated Seven. "At the asteroid's present speed," she did a quick calculation in her head, "it will take approximately thirty-point-eight-thousand years to reach it."

"No, it will take twenty-two-point-seven years, to be exact."

Seven arched her eyebrow. "That is not possible."

Gary pulled up another display. In the center was a swirling mass of energy. A wormhole.

"In fourteen-point-three years, the asteroid will enter this wormhole and be carried to the far side of the Beta Quadrant. Eight-point-four years later, it will hit Terrelia IV, killing over three billion inhabitants."

"That is an unstable wormhole," Seven pointed out after she studied the graph. "You cannot know if it will open at the same moment the asteroid approaches. Even if it did enter the wormhole, you have no way of knowing where the other end will terminate."

"Trust me, we know," Gary assured her. "We know because it was--or rather it will be--documented by one of our operatives in the future, twenty-two-point-seven years from now."

Seven's light-blue eyes studied Gary for a moment to determine if he was telling the truth. Finally, she decided he was. "How exactly do you plan on stopping this asteroid?"

"I plan on changing its trajectory," explained Gary. "That way it will miss the wormhole and thus miss the planet. And that's why I need Voyager. It is the closest starship with the power and speed I need to execute my plan, even though it is lacking in certain technological capabilities."

Seven opened her mouth to dispute his comment regarding their Borg-enhanced technology, but Gary didn't give her the chance.

"Before you interrupted me in engineering," he stated, "I was downloading a program that will increase your deflector and tractor beam output. With the enhanced output, I plan to intercept the asteroid ten light-years from here and use them to alter the course of the asteroid."

Knowing his deadline was approaching fast, Gary pulled up another navigational chart and spoke quickly. "I calculated every possible alternative path for the asteroid to determine which was the safest. Unfortunately, I discovered that no matter which direction it traveled, the asteroid would ultimately strike an inhabited planet at some point in time. But, then I cross referenced all those paths with the trajectory of other existing celestial bodies, and I found this..."

Another image appeared. It was a second asteroid, at least twenty times larger than the first.

"If we bump the small asteroid in the right spot at exactly the right time," explained Gary, "it will send it into the path of this larger one five-point-six years from now. The larger asteroid is massive enough to completely destroy the smaller one without being knocked off its own path."

"And you have confirmed this data?"

Gary raised his eyebrow. "Of course. I would suggest you confirm it yourself, but--" He held up and tapped the face of his watch, "--our time just ran out. You need to decide what you are going to do, Seven. Help me, or try to stop me."

During the many years he had served his alien sponsors, Gary seldom confided in others. In fact, there were only a handful of people who knew the real truth about him. Roberta Lincoln, his "secretary" and aide, was one, and Captain James Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise was another. Now he was about to add Seven of Nine to the list.

He just hoped it was worth it.

Seven stared at the asteroid on the display and analyzed everything she had just heard. Finally, she decided that she did not need to confirm his data, because she believed him. She didn't know why, she just did. Captain Janeway would call it a "gut feeling."

She also understood his earlier remark regarding the Prime Directive and why the officers of Voyager would oppose Gary Seven's mission. Starfleet's General Order Number One states that Starfleet personnel are prohibited from interfering in the normal development of any society, especially prewarp civilizations. This even applies to natural disasters, such as the asteroid. While she understood and even endorsed several aspects of the Prime Directive, she and Janeway spent many hours debating others, including allowing the destruction of an entire race merely because giving assistance would "interfere" with their development. Seven told the captain that it was and always would be an illogical rule.

However, disagreeing with the rule was one thing. Violating it was another. If she decided to help Gary Seven save Terrelia IV, Janeway would be furious.

But Seven felt that her final decision should be based on what she believed was right, not on how others would react. Besides, the Delta Quadrant did not fall within Federation jurisdiction, and, as she had pointed out to Janeway on more than one occasion, she was not an official member of Starfleet. Therefore, she was free to do as she wished.

Since the first day years ago when Seven's connection with the Borg was severed, Janeway had always encouraged her to think for herself, to make her own decisions. She had done so, even when it conflicted with other crew members--including the captain.

Well, now she was about to do it again.

Turning to Gary Seven, she simply said, "I will help."

If he was surprised, or even relieved, Gary didn't show it. He merely nodded and tapped more commands into Harry's console. "I didn't have time to finalize the deflector and tractor enhancements, so you'll have to do it."

"Why me?"

"Because I will be flying the ship."

"You know how to pilot Voyager?" Seven asked, arching her eyebrow.

"Of course."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

"We are three-point-eight minutes behind schedule," Gary told her, "so you'll need to complete the enhancements while I make up for lost time." He showed her exactly what she needed to do, and then rushed across the bridge. Isis managed to leap out of the pilot's seat just before he sat down.

"The asteroid is four-point-five thousand light-years away," Gary stated as he brought the warp engines on line. "We need to reach it within three hours or we miss the intercept point."

"Three hours?" Seven repeated. "Even at maximum warp, it will take us almost four hours to reach it at that distance."

"No, it won't."

"Why is that?"

"Because I improved your warp engines as well," Gary said as the warp field enveloped Voyager and they shot into subspace.

Two-point-nine hours later, Seven walked across the upper level to the science station. She hadn't felt right stepping over Tuvok every time she moved between consoles, so not long after they jumped into warp she and Gary Seven moved him, Janeway, Chakotay, and Tom Paris into the captain's ready room where they would be more comfortable.

She accessed Tuvok's computer for the twentieth time and checked the status of the warp containment field. They had been traveling at warp ten, and, even with Gary Seven's improvements, she wanted to make sure the field was holding. If they lost the warp containment field, the warp core would breach and destroy the ship. Pulling up the data, she confirmed that the field was operating well within safe parameters.

Gary Seven's enhancements were very impressive, she thought. She had been thinking

about the strange visitor for the past two hours. Even though he originated in the twentieth century, his knowledge of Starfleet technology seemed to be limitless. The aliens who trained him were obviously highly advanced, even more so than the Borg.

Although she hated to admit it, she was also impressed with the way Gary Seven took control of Voyager. At first, she had seen him as a threat to the ship and crew. But now, after learning what he was trying to accomplish, she understood exactly why he did it. He was faced with accomplishing an impossible goal within a very short period of time.

She just wondered if Janeway would see it the same way once this was all over.

"Damn."

Seven looked up at the sound of Gary's voice. "Is there a problem?"

He tapped the console lightly with his fist in frustration. "We're going to be too late! Even at this speed we'll miss the intercept point by five-point-two seconds. And even with the deflector and tractor beam enhancements, we won't have enough power to divert the asteroid." He slumped in the chair and stared at the main viewer. "We've failed. I've failed."

"It will take over twenty-four years for the asteroid to reach the wormhole," said Seven, "Can it not be diverted at some other point within that time frame?"

"Not without sending it toward another populated system," Gary said as he turned to face her. "I calculated every possible alternative. Its course has to be altered at the point I specified, but we just don't have the power to do it."

Not one to give up easily, Seven immediately began searching for other possible options. Any options. They needed something powerful enough to actually move a small asteroid. Unfortunately, there was nothing on board that would suit their needs.

And then the warp containment readings on Tuvok's display caught her eye. A warp core explosion would give them the power they need, she thought. But sacrificing Voyager was out of the question. So was ejecting and detonating the warp core itself. Without it, they would be stranded in the Delta Quadrant forever.

Then she remembered that Voyager was not the only vessel with a warp core. The shuttlebay was full of them. After some swift calculations, she concluded that a type-9 personnel shuttlecraft would produce the exact amount of energy they would need. But, it would have to be detonated at precisely the right moment and at an exact position five-point-one thousand meters from the asteroid. Any closer or farther and the explosion would push it in the wrong direction.

She quickly explained what she had in mind to Gary Seven. After verifying the figures, he smiled. "Yes, that will work. Very good, Seven. I think you just saved the inhabitants of Terrelia Four."

"It is too early to celebrate," Seven replied. "We still have to move the asteroid."

Gary prepared to take the ship out of subspace while Seven programmed the shuttle. She would fly it by remote to the specified location after Gary directed Voyager to a point near the asteroid.

The streaking stars on the main viewer instantly reverted to tiny points of light as the ship dropped out of warp. Seven had already transferred coordinates to the helm, so Gary entered them and Voyager immediately followed his command. "Full impulse," he announced. "Twenty-point-two-seconds to position."

On the main screen, the dark rolling form of the asteroid moved into view as the ship turned fifteen degrees to starboard. Light from a nearby sun splashed across its craggy surface.

Several levels below on Deck 10 a small shuttle automatically moved into launch position, and the bay doors slid open. Then, Seven waited for Gary to give the order to launch.

Finally, he said, "We are in position. Launch shuttle."

Seven activated the remote program and the shuttle lifted gracefully off the deck. It immediately glided forward through the bay doors and energy rippled across its sleek, white surface as it pierced the atmospheric force field that prevented the shuttlebay from depressurizing. Once it was free of the ship, the shuttle accelerated and streaked toward the asteroid. At the same time, Voyager veered off as Gary guided it to a safer distance away from the blast area.

On the bridge, Seven watched as the shuttle--an insignificant speck of white against the ominous presence of the asteroid--soared silently toward its goal. After a few moments it vanished around the other side.

"Ten seconds," she called out after checking her tactical display. A moment later, she activated the command that would begin the warp core overload sequence. "Detonation in five...four...three...two...one!"

The shuttle exploded on the opposite side of the asteroid. They, of course, could not hear it, but the asteroid was suddenly eclipsed in a corona of blinding white light. It flared for a few seconds, then seemed to dissolve into the darkness.

To the naked eye, Seven and Gary could not tell whether the asteroid's course had been altered. But, after checking their displays, they saw that its angle had indeed been changed. Only, would it be enough--or too much? They wouldn't know until the effect of the powerful explosion wore off, and the asteroid settled into its new course.

Almost five tense minutes later, the asteroid finally stopped its long, slow curve. They again scanned it and calculated its final trajectory. It was heading directly for the larger asteroid--and away from Terrelia IV.

"Yes!" Gary cried out, as Isis leapt onto his lap. Seven merely raised her eyebrow and let out a silent sigh of relief.

Several minutes later, the three of them stood in Voyager's main transporter room. Gary was entering data into the transporter console while Seven looked on. Across the room Isis waited on the transporter pad, looking bored as usual.

"I am curious," asked Seven. "Explain to me exactly how our transporter will return you to the twentieth century."

"I am entering a code that will connect your transporter with mine," he replied, not looking up. "Once your transporter is activated, the temporal rift will lock onto my servo and return us to

our own time." After tapping a few more codes into the display, he said, "There, all done."

Straightening his jacket, Gary picked up his servo, which Seven had returned to him, from the console and placed it in his pocket. Then he walked toward the transporter pads while Seven took his place behind the controls.

"Ready, Isis?" asked Gary as he stepped onto the nearest pad. The cat mewed softly, then jumped into his arms where she curled up and purred. Scratching her chin, he looked at Seven and smiled. "I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your help. I will be sure to tell my superiors what you did."

Seven simply nodded. "Next time, though, I suggest you try asking for our help. It may make things much easier."

Gary shrugged. "Maybe...but then they wouldn't be as exciting."

"Transporting," Seven announced as she activated the system. The transporter emitted its familiar high-pitched electronic whine, then Gary Seven and his feline companion dissolved into a cascade of sparkling blue light.

As she watched their atoms disperse, Seven suddenly remembered a question she wanted to ask Gary Seven. As committed to his mission as he was, what would he have done if she had refused to help him? She mulled that over for a moment, and then finally shook her head.

Perhaps it was better if she did not know.

Seconds later, as the transporter effect faded away, Seven heard something stirring behind her and turned. It was the transporter chief lying on the deck. He was waking up. She moved to help him, but then realized that if he was waking up, so was everyone else--including Captain Janeway.

Leaving the chief to fend for himself, she started toward the bridge. She had a great deal to explain to the captain, and it would undoubtedly lead to another heated debate.

Regardless of what happened, Seven thought, she felt she had made the right decision.

But only time would tell.

The End of Night

Paul J. Kaplan

The end came swiftly.

The Romulan Empire fell within days. The Klingons succumbed soon after, as terrified factions lashed out, each great house scrambling for power among the few shattered worlds that remained within their space. One day the Tholians and the Gorn simply vanished, and fully a third of those living within the United Federation of Planets were wiped out within a day.

It was the end of everything. It came without warning, on a day much like any other--until Nature herself simply went berserk. Space--for want of any rational description--devoured



itself, and gravitation ran amok. Young, healthy stars blazed into nova, and thriving worlds were ripped apart as the tidal forces of space rent whole solar systems into dust. As the fabric of space destroyed itself around them, the great civilizations of the Alpha Quadrant descended into chaos.

In the weeks that followed, whole populations fled into space, hoping to stay ahead of whatever calamity was racing through the void. Many were never heard from again; others were presumed lost as vast regions of space became unnavigable. The Federation Starfleet, largest of the great powers, spread throughout the night, tending to refugees as best they could and searching for answers before they too were lost. As space remade itself around them, some races fled, others fought, some prayed. A few took action.

Captain James T. Kirk trudged through the sand, leaning into the howling wind on a planet that officially did not exist. In the sky above, swirling sand and dense, thundering clouds reduced the sun to a dim sphere. Behind him, thick black smoke rose from the horizon where the remains of his shuttle now lay. The straps of a makeshift harness bit into his shoulders and chest as he dragged a sled laden with gear, toward a hollow that emitted an unearthly light.

As he descended, the wind quieted to a rolling moan, and his path became guided by ruins protruding from the sand. Massive columns, toppled arches and half-buried walls dotted the landscape, until there, in the very center of the hushed remains, stood an artifact unlike any other. At one time, it may have been an arch, or even a ring of otherworldly stone. But untold eons had taken their toll, so that now it was a worn, misshapen cross between the two, standing as a silent sentry among ruins older than humanity itself. It was perhaps the most powerful device in all of space.

"Guardian!" Kirk called. "Guardian! I need your help."

Light shimmered across its surface as the Guardian of Forever glowed to life.

"The darkness..." it intoned. "From everywhere...disruption...ending...empty...darkness. Such violent darkness. I cannot see ..."

They had feared that this could happen. The Guardian was a focal point, a nexus, the most powerful conduit through time ever encountered. But the calamity that was rending the universe apart was destroying time as well, and in the midst of these death throes, cut off from the flow of time that was its essence, the Guardian of Forever had gone mad.

Kirk slumped for a moment, and allowed himself the briefest moment of despair. Then his jaw tightened, and he turned to the equipment he had dragged with him. One by one, he unlatched the scorched and dented cases and began assembling a mechanism that stood about waist high. They had prepared for this contingency, and Spock and Scotty had worked with their staffs for days, before the Enterprise--Kirk glared at his work and forced himself to think of other things.

An hour later, the device stood fully assembled, and with a touch, Kirk brought it to life. Again he spoke.

"Guardian," he said. "Guardian--can you hear me?"

Its energy shimmered more calmly now. "I am here," it said.

"Guardian--the universe is dying. I know you can feel it. I need to see what happened."

"It is difficult."

"I know. I know. You have to try."

The Guardian did not reply. Instead, energy rippled and surged across its face as the great monolith gathered its strength and reached out across the eons in a way that Federation science still could not quite comprehend. For what seemed like an eternity, light danced and flowed about its giant form, until finally a strange fog filled its center, and a sea of images began to coalesce.

Kirk watched and scanned and tried to make sense of the barrage of images that blurred by. When the images began to repeat for the third time, and when he had recorded all that his tricorder could hold, Kirk closed the lid and took a deep, centering breath. He closed his eyes and opened them again, and willed himself to relax. And then, when he felt that both he and the Guardian were ready, he stepped forward and leapt into its heart.

The effect was agonizing. In his only prior trip through the Guardian, several years before, the transition through time and space had been dreamlike, nearly effortless. Now it was like fighting his way through a raging flood, and he felt as though every atom of his being was being torn in a different direction. Sound roared in his ears, the breath rushed from his lungs, and just as he was about to surrender to the blackness around him--it was over.

Kirk leapt out of nothingness and onto the deck of the captain's ready room--on a starship--in a future he had already seen die. As a startled captain named Kathryn Janeway rose from behind her desk, eyes widening in surprise, he fixed her with a shaky but determined gaze and spoke with his last conscious breath. "What--have--you--done?" he demanded.

And then he collapsed.

"So--heard anything more about our mystery guest?" Ensign Harry Kim looked around the emptying mess hall and tried again to engage his friends in the ship's latest gossip.

"Please. I told you, Harry--there's nothing to that." Tom Paris shook his head in exasperation and tried to savor the last of his raktajino. B'Elanna Torres sighed in bemusement beside him.

"I don't know..." Harry grinned. He leaned in close over the table and lowered his voice. "Someone's in guest quarters on Deck Twelve. The quartermaster says he doesn't know anything about it, but Ensign Vorik says there are guards down there."

"So?"

"So, they're in gamma section. Which the computer says is empty. And Samantha Wildman says she's seen the Doctor going in and out of there for the last three days."

"Harry, I'm his medic. I see the Doc every day. And I'm telling you, there's nothing going on."

"Then what was he doing on Deck Twelve?"

"I don't know--maybe he's writing another holonovel, and he needs to be alone with his

muse."

"And armed guards?"

Tom shrugged. B'Elanna smiled and took another sip of her tea.

"You know what I heard--" Harry said, clearly enjoying his tale. "I heard they've got James Kirk down there."

B'Elanna finally laughed. "Right. You know, Harry," she said, "I saw Kahless himself hanging around the warp core the other day."

"Yeah," Tom said. "Word is he was meeting Horatio Nelson and Douglas MacArthur for a friendly game of dom-jot. But first the Doc had to make sure they'd had their shots. Pass it on."

"Suit yourself," Harry shrugged. "Just saying what I heard." The three went back to their drinks.

Then the intercom beeped. "Senior officers, report to the briefing room."

"Well," Tom said. "Dom-jot awaits."

Moments later, the three strolled in to the main briefing room. Then Tom stopped dead in his tracks.

"Oh my God."

"Hey!" B'Elanna and Harry almost ran into him from behind. They peered around him as he stood dumbstruck just inside the door. B'Elanna gasped in shock.

Their captain stood at the head of the table. Tuvok, Seven, and Chakotay were there as well. But their attention was riveted on the visitor who sat to Janeway's left. Sitting there in a modern uniform, looking young and healthy and vibrantly alive, was what could only be a 142-year-old ghost.

"Come in, Tom." Janeway said. "B'Elanna. Harry. I believe you know our guest." She said it with the barest hint of a smile. "Captain Kirk--our helmsman, Lieutenant Tom Paris; Chief Engineer B'Elanna Torres; and our Operations Officer, Ensign Harry Kim."

Kirk nodded at each. "Hello."

Hello? "Captain," Tom stammered. "W--"

"I'm afraid I can't explain the details, Mr. Paris." The Guardian's existence was classified even now. "But I can tell you that this is the real McCoy." Their guest's jaw twinged at her choice of words. "We've run every test we could think of. His DNA, his quantum signature, and his chronometric scans are perfect. He is not an imposter, from an alternate reality, or a clone. Ladies and gentlemen, as hard as this is to believe, this is Captain James T. Kirk."

Kirk shifted slightly in his chair, anxious to get on with his task and uncomfortable at being discussed. But after all he had seen in the last few days, he certainly understood their need to adjust.

A moment ticked by in silence. "Ma'am?" Harry stared at their guest, transfixed. "Are...are we going home?"

A pang of sadness flashed across Janeway's face. "No, Harry," she said softly. "At least not today. I'm afraid that Captain Kirk has been brought to us for an entirely different reason. Captain?"

"Thank you." Kirk stood and brought the wall screen to life. He looked at these young, earnest faces, and then he told them the story of how their past had died.

"Captain," B'Elanna said when he was through. "That's not possible. How could this have happened in our past, and we don't remember it? How can we even be here?"

Janeway deferred to their guest. "Believe me, I'm as surprised as you are," Kirk said. "This is not what we expected. But the cataclysm is destroying both space and time. Time has been...shattered. Its fragments are no longer continuous. I don't know that I can understand that any more than you, but I assure you, Lieutenant, its effects are very real."

"Do we know what caused it?" Tom asked.

"Yes," Kirk said grimly. "We do."

Janeway studied her reflection in the tabletop. Chakotay glanced at his captain for a moment and answered for her. "When we entered fluidic space eight months ago," he said, "in our battle with Species 8472, we used Borg technology to open a rift between dimensions. When we returned, something went wrong. The rift wasn't closed."

Janeway stood and began pacing at the head of the table. "We believe the effect is something like a crack in a dam," she said, "starting at one point and spidering all along the space-time continuum. The separation between fluidic space and our own has been compromised. And at various points in time and space, the distinction between realities has been breached. Wherever the two try to occupy the same point in space-time...the results--as you've heard--are disastrous."

"You're saying...we did this?" B'Elanna asked.

Janeway ran a tired hand through her hair. "It appears so."

The crew took a moment to take this all in. Harry looked puzzled, and, after a moment, he spoke. "Captain," he asked. "If we returned from fluidic space eight months ago, and hundreds of light-years back, why are you here?"

Kirk, too, had feared at first that the Guardian had missed its mark. But maybe not. "We have a theory about that," he said. He turned to Seven.

"Using data provided by Captain Kirk," she said, "we have recalibrated our astrometric sensors and have been mapping the quantum density of surrounding space. There is a weak point approximately twelve light-years from our current position. We believe this may signal the first breach of the barrier between realities. And it may present an opportunity."

"You mean we can stop it?" Tom asked.

"We don't have a choice," Kirk said. "So yes. We will."

"Oh brav-o." A voice applauded them from nowhere. "Such delightful swagger you humans have." There was a brilliant flash, and a third captain sat at the table's end.

"Q!"

"Kathy," he said. "You look positively radiant. Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

"Q," Janeway said. "Why am I not surprised. Do you know what's happening?" she asked. "Can you fix this?"

"Manners, Kathy, really. Your guest."

"I'm James T. Kirk," he said. "Who are you?"

"Well," Q said. "How very direct. Better watch it, Chuckles," he said to Chakotay. "Looks like Voyager's got a new alpha male." He winked at Seven and turned back to Kirk. "Kirk. Kirk..." he said. Q peered at him intently. "Ah," he said. "The Guardian brought you. How is the old doughnut?"

"It's been better."

"Hmm. I suppose so."

"Q," Janeway said again. "Can you fix this?"

"Me?" he said. "Oh no. No, this is your mess, Kathy. You're going to have to clean it up all by yourself. Like they say--you break it, you bought it. And you just broke a doozy. I'm just here to watch."

Janeway stewed for a moment and decided to ignore him. She turned to Seven. "Go on."

Seven gave Q a cold stare and turned back to Janeway. "If we are about to witness the first break in the dam," she said, "then stopping it should halt its cascade through time and space. We believe that Captain Kirk has been brought to us because this time and this place are the key to stopping the calamity."

"So how do we do that?" Tom asked. He kept a wary eye on Q.

"The Borg created their portal using an interphasic micropulse to separate the quantum substrata within their subspace field. Theoretically..."

Q snorted in disgust.

"English, Seven," Tom said. "I'm just the pilot."

B'Elanna cut him off. "We can't just re-create the Borg portal," she said. "It didn't work the first time. We need to adapt it, maybe enhance the resonance wave somehow, or raise the Englin coefficient..."

Q rolled his eyes and sighed.

"We could isolate the breach," Harry offered, "in a static warp shell or a subspace bubble, and maybe introduce an artificial singularity to reinforce the quantum density..."

Q snickered and shook his head. "Please."

Kirk silenced him with a glare. "Enough," he said. "Q, I don't know who you are or where you came from. If you have something to contribute, then we'd welcome your help. But if not, then stow it. We've got work to do."

"Really," Q said. "If this--babble--is the best you can do, then I'm amazed your species ever learned to walk, let alone get into space. Face it, Jimmy," he said. "You're not going to solve this one by pushing your girlfriend in front of a truck."

Wham! Q slammed into the bulkhead behind him and crumpled to the floor. Kirk stood over him, eyes blazing. "Don't you--ever--speak to me of Edith," he said.

Chakotay and Tuvok hauled Q to his feet. "Way to tick off the alpha male," Chakotay whispered.

"You hit me," Q sputtered. "Jean-Luc never hit me." They dumped him back into his chair as the rest of the crew looked on in stunned silence. Janeway bit her lip and tried not to smile. But then her expression changed.

"Q," she said slowly, "you're bleeding."

Q wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. He stared for a moment at the smear of red, and slowly, his face darkened into a fury they'd never seen.

"Kathy," he growled, "you have no idea what you've done. You've killed all of existence. You and those stupid bugs and your stupid corporeal squabbles. The entire universe is dying. The Continuum is dying. We're a shadow of what we once were--and I've been sent to kill you."

"Kill me?"

"All of you. Your entire bumbling primate race. I told Picard in our very first meeting you didn't belong out here. And now look what you've done. If we can't stop the chaos you've unleashed, at least we'll have the satisfaction of wiping you from existence before we go."

Janeway was stunned by his venom. It was Kirk who spoke next.

"Then why haven't you?" he asked.

"What?" Q turned and looked at him as if for the first time.

"For a man on a mission, you're not in any hurry," Kirk said. "If this--babble--is the best you can do..."

"Your guest has a death wish, Kathy."

"No," Kirk said. "And I'm beginning to see that neither do you. A man disobeys orders for a reason. It sounds to me like your Continuum may have lost hope--but you haven't."

"Maybe I'm just a little less--resolved--to the devastation you've caused."

"Then help us fix it."

"Help you? Do you have any idea what you're talking about? You can't even conceive of what's going on out there."

"Then explain it to us."

"I might as well explain it to an ant."

"You have an idea, or we wouldn't be talking."

"All right," Q said. "All right--just for grins. Just so you get it. You're talking about the fissioning of two realities. To generate those kinds of forces..." He groped for words. "What a horrible way to communicate," he muttered. Finally, he just snapped his fingers--and everyone in the room suddenly grabbed their heads in pain.

"Q!"

"Oh all right," he said. He snapped his fingers again, and the crew slumped against the table, gasping for breath. "You see?" he said. "Poor things. You can't even conceive of it, let alone 'fix' it. Even the Continuum can't function on that scale. Not anymore."

"But--what if you didn't have to?" B'Elanna asked.

"What?"

She rubbed her temples and tried to make sense of what she'd seen.

"Thanks for the damn aneurysm," she said. "But---" her breath came in ragged gasps "--we can generate that basic matrix ourselves."

"Maybe," Q said slowly. "And if the breach were a millionth of a micron wide, you might be onto something. But you've stepped in it a lot worse than that."

"So?" B'Elanna said. "That's where you come in. What if we gave you the seed, and you just had to amplify it?"

"You? Help us? We might as well work with stone knives and bearskins."

"They've been known to work," Kirk said. "Can you do it?"

"Maybe," Q said again. He scowled for a moment, deep in thought. "But you overestimate yourselves," he said. "If you're even going to plant that seed, with this...technology, you're going to need some help. A lot of help. Yes," he said after a moment. "And I know just the source." A smug grin began to spread across his face. "How very poetic." And he snapped his fingers once more.

Before anyone could move, the ship shuddered beneath them, and the alert Klaxons wailed to life. "Red alert--all hands to battle stations! Captain Janeway, to the bridge."

Janeway glared at Q, who only stared smugly back. Without a word, she rose from the table and strode briskly for the door.

"Report."

A young ensign rose from the command chair as Janeway entered the bridge, the rest of the senior staff in tow. "A Borg cube, ma'am," he said. "It just appeared out of nowhere. They've got a tractor lock, and our shields are draining fast."

Janeway took her seat, flanked by Chakotay and, more hesitantly, by Kirk. The rest of her staff moved to their posts as she spoke. "Tuvok, rotate shield frequencies and target that emitter. Tom, prepare for warp."

"They're hailing us," Harry said.

"Of course," Janeway sighed. "On screen."

Their view shifted to a vast expanse of alcoves, teeming with life and precisely ordered. "We are the Borg. Your biological and technological diversity will be added to our own. Your vessel and crew will be assimilated. Lower your shields."

"Not today," Janeway said. "Release my ship, or we'll open fire."

The disembodied chorus made no response. Instead, a scanning beam flashed into being and began tracing its way across the bridge. "Species 3976," the voices droned. "Human. Optimal labor drones. Species 2124. Vulcan. Optimal data processing drones. Species..." There was a long pause. "...Q." The screen blinked to an exterior view just as the Borg ship streaked away at high warp.

"Oh no you don't," Q said. He snapped his fingers, and a brilliant flash of light deposited the cube front and center once more. "Now," Q said darkly. "Let's talk."

Days later, three weary officers gathered in the mess hall in the dead of night.

"Is there anything to eat?" Tom asked as he entered the darkened room.

"Neelix left some stew," Harry offered. "It's kind of cold."

"I don't care if it's eight days old," Tom said. "I could eat my own arm right now." He helped himself and turned to where Harry and B'Elanna were sitting in a shadowed corner. Harry shot him a trapped and desperate look.

"So..." Tom said slowly. "Someone have a bad day?"

B'Elanna glared at her stew. "Three weeks," she muttered. "It took me three weeks to rip out all that Borg junk the last time we tried this. Rebuilding after this will take months."

"Well," Tom said, settling into his seat, "look on the bright side. If this doesn't work, there won't be a ship left for you to fix. Or, you know--space."

B'Elanna gave him a withering look. Tom turned to Harry. "How're you doing?" he asked.

"I feel like I'm a prisoner in astrometrics," Harry said. "We've been running simulations



around the clock."

Tom tried a bit of his stew. "You don't know prison," he said, "until you've spent twelve hours in a workbee. Hmph," he said of the stew. "That's not bad."

"At least we're not on the EVA crews," Harry said. "I start to go crazy after about three hours in those suits."

"Well, you should see things from outside," Tom said. "I still don't understand exactly what we're turning this ship into, but she is definitely looking odd."

They sat for a few minutes in silence. Beyond the tall viewports, tiny running lights blinked against the night as workbees flitted about the ship, and at regular intervals, the stars were blotted out by tremendous looming shapes.

"I don't like it," B'Elanna said after a while. "There are a hundred and twenty-two cubes out there. That's got to be like two million drones. There's no way he can control them all."

"Yeah, but it's only one mind," Tom said, eyeing the looming silhouettes. "They're fine."

"I don't know," Harry said, fiddling idly with his spoon. "Have you seen him?" he asked. "He doesn't look right."

"Well, if he starts to lose it," Tom said, "I guess Captain Kirk can just knock him on his butt again."

At last B'Elanna smiled. "If only I had a picture of the look on Q's face."

"I still can't believe he's here," Harry said. "I mean--James T. Kirk."

"My grandmother used to tell stories about him," B'Elanna said. "You know there were some in the Empire who didn't think he was real? That he was a figment of some Federation propaganda machine."

"Just think of what he's seen," Tom said, leaning back. "The planet-killer in 2267. V'Ger in 2271. The Mutara incident and Genesis in 2285. The Khitomer Accords. His life is the history of Starfleet."

"Listen to you," Harry said. "I thought the only history you cared about was hot rods and television."

"Are you kidding?" Tom said. "My dad's an admiral--I grew up on this stuff. The Tholian web, the Babel conference, tribbles--he stole a Romulan cloaking device right from a cruiser's engine room. How do you top that?"

"My grandmother used to say he had a Vulcan's tongue and a Klingon heart," B'Elanna said. "I've never heard someone cursed and revered quite so well."

Tom smiled. "Those were different times," he said. "The whole galaxy was like the Delta Quadrant then. Unknown. Dangerous. New. Communications were slower, space was bigger--captains were on their own. It was a whole different game."

"Sounds like you're almost jealous," Harry said.

"Sounds to me," B'Elanna said, "like the kind of thing to make little Tommy Starfleet run off to chase adventure in the Maquis."

Tom's cheeks tinged a bit red. "Yeah. Well..."

The doors hissed open at the far end of the room.

"...Neelix usually leaves something for the night shift," Chakotay was saying. "Help yourself."

"Thank you, Commander," Kirk said. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, sir."

As Chakotay left, Kirk studied the kettle on the galley counter. "How's the stew?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Um--" They all looked at each other. "Fine, sir."

"Good. I'm starving. Mind if I join you?" he asked.

The three jumped to their feet. "No sir."

"Please," Kirk said. "As you were." He carried a bowl over to their table and sat down in the remaining seat. He studied their faces. "Mr. Paris," he said, testing himself. "Torres. And...Kim."

"Yes sir," Tom said.

Kirk tried a bit of his food. "So this is Neelix's famous leola root stew," he said. "It's--" He frowned a bit. "--distinctive."

"You get used to it," Tom said. "After about a year. Maybe two."

Kirk smiled. As he ate, the young officers shifted nervously in their seats, searching for something to say.

Finally Harry broke the silence. "Mr. Tuvok served with one of your officers," he said. "Captain Sulu, on the Excelsior."

"Captain Sulu..." Kirk said. A mix of pride and sadness washed across his face. Tom gave Harry a quick kick under the table, but he already knew he'd said something wrong. He blanched when he realized what he'd done.

"It's all right, Ensign," Kirk said, seeing his face. "I think the Temporal Prime Directive will still survive the night."

"Yes sir," Harry said. He smiled bashfully.

"Besides," Kirk said, "if this works, and we seal the leak between realities, then the events that brought me here will never happen. And neither will this conversation." He smiled. "I hate time travel."

Harry smiled again, less nervously now. "Yes sir."

"The Delta Quadrant," Kirk said after a moment. "You know, I never thought I'd live to see us out this far. Even if we are both here by accident." He placed his spoon back in his bowl and studied his companions, more than a century his junior. His gaze lingered on B'Elanna. "I'm sorry," he said after a moment. "I didn't mean to stare. You're--Klingon..." he said.

"Half Klingon," B'Elanna said. "My father's human."

Kirk let this sink in. "That's...tremendous," he said. B'Elanna blushed a bit. "I'm sorry," Kirk said again. "I don't mean to act my age. After skipping a hundred-and-some-odd years, I guess I have some catching up to do." He paused for a second. "Your doctor's a hologram," he said.

"That's right."

"And Seven--she used to be one of those...Borg, out there."

"Yes sir."

Kirk shook his head, in wonder at it all. "Hmn," he said. "Humanity does find a way."

They sat for a few moments in silence. Then Harry spoke again. "Sir," he asked. "Do you think this will work?"

Kirk managed the barest hint of a smile. "There are always--possibilities--Mr. Kim."

Moments later, a familiar flash lit the center of the room.

"Why are you just sitting here?" Q demanded. "You're wasting time!"

The three young officers rose to their feet. "Q," Tom said warily, "relax. We've been here for ten minutes."

"You're stalling."

"We're working around the clock," Tom said. "Everyone is. We'll be ready."

Q ignored him. "You," he said to Kirk. "You're the hero--get them back to work."

"No."

"What?"

"You heard him," Kirk said. "We'll be ready. We're exactly on schedule. You should know that. And that means that four people can certainly spare a few minutes to eat."

"You're wasting time."

"We're human," Kirk said. "We eat. We sleep. And we'll get the job done."

"Your pathetic human frailties," Q said. "Maybe we should use the last of our power to wipe you out after all."

"Yes," Kirk said, finally rising slowly from his seat. "I've heard all about your power. You know who you remind me of?" he asked. "A squire I once knew."

"Really," Q said. "A nobleman..."

"A spoiled child," said Kirk. "Who bullied humans because he could."

Q glared at him. "Jimmy," he said darkly, "let's take this outside." And in a flash, they were gone.

They appeared in the vast emptiness of space.

Kirk was amazed to find himself not floating so much as somehow standing in the void. He wore no spacesuit, yet there was no cold. He had no helmet, and yet there was air. He looked in wonder around him.

Below him hung Voyager, tiny and illuminated against the dark. A mass of Borg appendages had sprouted from her hull, glowing with a green and eerie light. Workbees and suited crewmen glided about the ship, making final adjustments to new instruments, fittings and welds.

Above him at a great distance curved a wall of ships almost too vast to comprehend. One hundred and twenty-two Borg cubes, each the size of a city, hung in a giant sphere a thousand kilometers across, with the tiny, transformed starship at its core.

And beyond them all lay a brilliant smattering of stars, sparkling defiantly against the night. It was one of the most beautiful vistas that he had ever seen.

Kirk took a moment to soak it all in. Finally, he turned to face the waiting Q. Q gazed at him with barely contained fury.

"Q," Kirk said. "You're not well."

"I'm well enough to deal with you," Q said. His face was pale and drawn, and a sheen of sweat glistened against his brow.

"The cataclysm is draining your strength," Kirk said. "You're keeping millions of drones in check, and we're getting ready to keep two entire universes from tearing each other apart. Let's not bicker like children."

"You arrogant, self-righteous little ape. You don't lecture me. You don't belong out here," Q said. "You never have."

"We are out here," Kirk said. "It's our home. And it's your home too. This thing is devouring both space and time," he said. "There's nowhere else for you to go."

"So we're stuck with you?" Q said. "Is that it? Don't flatter yourself. We should wipe you clean from history and give your planets to the Borg."

"You keep saying that."

"Don't tempt me..."

"When the calamity struck," Kirk said slowly, "we sought out all the higher-order races. The Organians. The Thasians. The Metrons. None of them could stop this. Neither can we. Neither can you. But if we do this together, we can save ourselves. We can save each other. Let us help you," he said.

At last Q's expression began to soften, and, despite himself, a slow smile began to spread across his face. "Humans..." he said.

The next day saw all hands at their posts, and all eyes on the Voyager's bridge were locked on her forward screen.

"There it is," Harry said. "Right on time."

Before them, space seemed to shiver for a moment, and then a ghostly maw bloomed into being as they watched. "My God," Chakotay said. A brief shudder rumbled through the ship.

A few moments ticked by as Janeway studied it without a word. Finally, she said softly, "Red alert." She turned to Q, who was standing behind her at the rail; he nodded and slowly closed his eyes. It was time.

Out in space around them, a vast armada of Borg vessels came to life. Giant tendrils of crackling energy sprang from one cube to another, and then another, and another, lancing out from each cube to its neighbor, until all were linked in a giant, fiery sphere. At its very center lay Voyager, and the rift.

"Field enabled," Harry said.

"B'Elanna," Janeway said, "bring the new systems online."

"Yes ma'am." All along Voyager's hull, a strange amalgam of Federation and Borg science glowed to life, drawing power from the immense field around them and channeling it to a purpose never before tried. "All systems online," B'Elanna said, "and nominal. We're ready."

Janeway turned to Tom. "Very well," she said. She paused a moment. And then: "Engage."

The contraptions that dotted Voyager's hull glowed more brightly, surging with power, and then her main deflector fired a beam of blinding light. It struck the anomaly dead center, and the two awesome energies seemed to grapple in the night.

"The breach is isolated," Harry said, reading from his board, "...and holding. It's working."

Janeway allowed herself a small sigh of relief and glanced at Chakotay beside her. "All right," she said, and she breathed in deep. "Time for phase two." She touched a control on the arm of her chair. "Janeway to Delta Flyer."

"Flyer here." The screen blinked to a view inside the shuttle's cockpit, and to the unusual pilot at her helm.

"Captain Kirk," Janeway said. "You are cleared for launch. Time to thread the needle."

"Understood," he said. "Beginning launch sequence...Flyer away." As the view outside his portals slid from hangar bay to stars, he glanced appreciatively at the old-style levers and

dials around him. "By the way," he said, "tell Mr. Paris--nice touch."

"You just did," Janeway said, and she couldn't help but smile. "Godspeed."

"To us all," he said. "Kirk out." And the screen switched back to an external view, showing the Flyer as it sped into the night.

This was the most crucial part of their mission--and their ace in the hole. As Voyager, the Borg and Q contained the breach and forced it closed, Kirk would enter the rift itself. If all went well and their timing was perfect, he would enter the rift just as it was sealed, and the Guardian, sensing as it always seemed to do that time had been set aright, would draw the traveler home. They hoped that by drawing Kirk back through time at just that instant, they could infuse the timestream with their combined energies, and cement the closure throughout space and time. At least, that was the plan.

Suddenly, there was an alarm on Harry's board. "Captain!" he said. "The Borg just launched a probe--it's vectoring to intercept the Flyer."

Janeway shot him a worried look. "Onscreen." A Borg sphere was hurtling toward the tiny craft.

"It'll have the Flyer in weapons range in sixty seconds."

"Open a channel," Janeway said. A console beeped. "Borg vessel," she said, "stand down immediately. I repeat: stand down or I will open fire." There was no response. "Q," she said, turning about in her chair. "Can you stop them?" He stood silently, gripping the rail, eyes closed and teeth clenched, his energies directed elsewhere. Janeway doubted he could even hear her. "Damn. Tuvok, put a shot across their bow. Seven, what the hell are they doing?"

She tapped intently at her scanners. "I'm reading high levels of verteron emissions coming from the sphere," Seven said. "Tetryon radiation is building to critical levels."

"Why?" Janeway asked again.

"They may be attempting to take control of the matrix and realign it to a unipolar mean. If they enter the rift in their present state, they may be able to tip the balance between realities--"

"--and allow our universe to obliterate fluidic space. Damn." Janeway and Chakotay shared a tense look, although she already knew what she must do.

"B'Elanna," she said. "Is the matrix stable?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then shut off the beam and get us in there. Tom, full impulse."

"Aye aye."

"Tuvok?"

"Our warning shot had no effect."

"What about the cubes?"

"They're holding station. If any of them breaks formation, the subspace field will fail."

"Well, at least that makes it an even fight," Janeway said. "Lock phasers--load torpedo bays."

"We're in range."

"Fire."

The starship's phasers lanced out and danced along the Borg sphere's hull. "Torpedoes," Janeway said. "--fire." And a trio of explosions rocked the enemy craft. Voyager swooped in between the sphere and its prey, and the two became locked in a manic, deadly dance. "Evasive maneuvers," Janeway called, as the bridge thundered around her. A console erupted into flame. "Get me the Flyer."

"Go."

"Captain," Janeway said, gripping her chair as the bridge shook beneath her, "we've got a situation here. But you must reach the anomaly, no matter what. We'll cover you, Captain--just keep going."

There was a moment's hesitation. "...Understood."

"Keep firing," Janeway said to Tom. "Keep us between them and the Flyer."

"Yes, ma'am." Another conduit blew. Tom struggled with the helm as the ship bucked and lurched under the Borg assault. The two traded fire furiously, the Borg pressing desperately ahead, and Voyager determined to give no ground. Beyond them, the Flyer sped on.

Consoles exploded about the bridge. "Hull breach on Deck Twelve," B'Elanna called. "Shields are at thirty-eight percent."

Janeway turned back to Q, still standing unmoving and nearly catatonic at the rail. He was oblivious to the chaos around him. His eyes stared, unseeing, straight ahead and began to glow with an unearthly inner light.

Explosions continued to rock the bridge, and the air grew thick with smoke. Janeway turned back to the screen just in time to see the Flyer's aft torpedo tubes flare, as the fleeing craft emptied its entire tiny arsenal at the Borg. "Bless you," she said.

A massive concussion thundered through the ship. "We just blew out every EPS conduit on Deck Four," B'Elanna called above the din. "Fire suppression is down; main computer's offline."

"Hang in there," Janeway said. "Keep firing."

Again she looked to Q. He stood now with his head thrown back and arms spread wide, light pouring from his eyes and mouth and hands. And he was not alone. Around the bridge, visible only from the corner of her eye, stood a host of ghostly Q. Q's bride, the philosopher Quinn, and a sandy-haired man she'd never seen before stood with dozens more, wraithlike,

about the bridge, all in an identical pose and seemingly pouring all that they were into an effort that mortals simply could not comprehend.

Voyager hammered away at her foe, and the sphere continued to slice savagely at the starship's shields. The bridge was engulfed in smoke, and sparks showered them from above. Suddenly there was the sickening sound of twisting metal. "Captain!" B'Elanna called, her voice shaken at last. "We've lost the port nacelle!" On the main screen, their massive engine sheared away and tumbled into space, trailing a stream of plasma and sparks. Another explosion rocked the ship. "Shuttlebay two is gone," B'Elanna said. "Captain, we're coming apart--!"

Janeway looked around her once more. Light was now bursting forth from cracks and fissures all along the Q's silhouettes, until they stood as little more than pillars of incandescent flame.

"Shields are failing--"

--they've locked on to the Flyer--"

--our weapons are offline--"

"Tom," she said calmly, "ramming speed."

The last thing Kirk saw as the Flyer entered the rift was the flaming starship slicing through the damaged sphere. A fiery gash ripped through the sphere and exploded out the far side, and the Borg vessel erupted into a massive, angry sun. The shockwaves rocked the Flyer as he felt the Guardian take hold--

--and then all was right once more.

"Sensor calibrations should be completed within the hour," Spock was saying as he and his captain strode toward the lift on Deck Eight. "Our ETA at Leyton's World is tomorrow, 1430 hours."

"Very good," Kirk said. "W--excuse me, crewman," he said. Kirk had almost run him down. "I didn't see you there. Crewman..."

"Kew, sir. I just came aboard."

"Ah. Very good. Well--welcome aboard."

"Thank you, sir."

And as the captain and first officer continued on their way, Q looked around him and smiled. "Oh yes," he said slowly. "I think I'm going to like it here."

Hidden

Jan Stevens

Alone. In total darkness. No sound. No movement. Only the black and the pounding of her heart. It was so loud, she knew that the thing must hear it as well.



It was near. Her tricorder hadn't detected it, but she knew she wasn't alone on this strange ship. She could feel it waiting patiently for her to move, to make a mistake. Trickle of sweat stung her eyes, but she dared not reach up to wipe it away.

There. An almost imperceptible displacement of air passed by her. Then she felt a presence.

It was coming.

Her trembling hand inched toward the phaser at her side. Instead, she accidentally brushed against a panel. In an instant, the chamber flooded with an eerie orange light revealing a gruesome scene.

Bodies. All around her lay dozens of bodies in various states of decay. She recoiled in horror and backed away into the arms of a corpse. It fell against her, its icy, dead fingers wrapping around her neck. Before she could scream, the corpse opened its mouth and spoke.

"It's too late."

Captain Kathryn Janeway sat bolt upright, the sound of her own scream echoing in her ears. She sat perfectly still, breathing heavily, then sagged in relief against the cushions on the sofa where she'd fallen asleep and scrubbed her face with her hands.

What a terrible nightmare. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a dream this disturbing. Most of the adventures she and the Voyager crew had experienced after being stranded in the Delta Quadrant were frightening enough to give them all nightmares for years to come. God knows, she'd had her share. But somehow this seemed different.

A strange chirping noise from across the room made her start again. The door chimed. Janeway chided herself for being so jumpy and glanced at the chrono. 2350. Whoever was calling certainly was burning the midnight oil.

She stood and ran her fingers through her short auburn hair. "Come."

The door opened to reveal her first officer holding a stack of padds. Chakotay's expression became apologetic when he saw her mussed hair and rumpled uniform.

"Captain, I'm sorry. Did I wake you?" He took a step backward. "Perhaps this should wait until tomorrow."

"Don't worry about it," Janeway said, motioning him inside. "You know that I'm a night owl. Besides, I'm really glad to see you."

"Well, after putting up with crew evaluations all day, you'll be the first person," he said with a sigh. "At least the day's almost over."

Janeway walked toward the replicator. "Rough one, huh? How about some coffee?"

Chakotay suppressed a yawn. "No, thanks. I don't plan on staying awake much longer. But some herbal tea would be nice."

"Herbal tea it is." Janeway gave the computer the order while Chakotay placed his stack of

padds on her desk.

"Kathryn, are you all right?" he asked, sounding concerned.

Janeway turned to face him. "Of course. Why?"

Chakotay shrugged. "I don't know. You looked a bit unsettled when you answered the door."

Janeway handed him the tea and smiled. Sometimes it was uncanny the way he could read her moods.

"Actually, my nap wasn't as restful as I'd hoped," she told him, sitting on the sofa.

"Nightmare?" he asked, settling beside her.

She nodded. "One of the worst I've ever had."

"Want to talk about it?"

Janeway remained silent for a moment, trying to decide what to tell him. Chakotay seemed embarrassed and looked down at his hands.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"Oh, you're not prying," Janeway said. "I didn't answer right away because...well, I don't know where to begin. It was like something out of one of those old twentieth-century horror films that Tom Paris likes so much."

"That bad?"

"Bad as in horrible, not as in poor taste."

Chakotay laughed. "Then it couldn't have been like one of Tom's films."

Janeway didn't respond to his witty remark. She stared at the cream swirling in her tea, disturbed that it was the same color of orange as the light in her dream. She gasped when she felt a hand on her arm and looked up into Chakotay's dark eyes.

"Hey, you really did have a bad one, didn't you," he said softly.

"I'm all right," Janeway said. "I'm just unsettled because the dream seemed so real, almost like a premonition."

Chakotay looked concerned and set his tea on the table. "It's so strange you said that. Last night, I had a disturbing vision quest. It, too, felt like a premonition."

Janeway sat up straighter, a feeling of foreboding coming over her. "Do you think we're just on the same wavelength, or is something else going on here?"

"I don't know, but..."

The shrill sound of a communicator signal made them both jump.

"Bridge to Janeway." Harry Kim's voice sounded eager.

Janeway sighed in relief and answered the hail. "Go ahead, Ensign."

"Sorry to disturb you this late, Captain, but I thought you'd want to know we're receiving a distress signal...from a Federation vessel."

Janeway and Chakotay exchanged a startled glance and rose from the sofa in unison.

"On my way, Mr. Kim," she said, heading for the door. She looked over her shoulder at Chakotay. "Maybe we should have had that coffee after all. This may be a long night."

When Janeway stepped onto the bridge, she was not surprised to find Commander Tuvok, Voyager's security officer, already at his post. She nodded to the Vulcan and continued down the steps behind Chakotay to the lower deck of the bridge.

"Report."

Harry Kim sprang from the captain's chair. "Captain, we picked up the distress call when we entered this sector. It's a very faint automated signal, but it bears a definite Starfleet signature."

"Origin?" Janeway asked, settling into her chair, relishing that it was still warm.

"The signal is coming from a class-three nebula approximately fifteen million kilometers away," Kim said, bounding up the steps to his station at ops.

Behind him, the bridge turbolift doors swished opened, and Tom Paris, Voyager's helmsman, stepped through.

"I heard there was some excitement up here," the red-haired lieutenant said as he made his way to the lower deck, rubbing his hands together.

Kim narrowed his almond-shaped eyes. "Isn't it a little past your bedtime, Tom?"

"Nah, my better half gave me the okay to stay up late," he said with a grin. "Besides, it isn't every day we get a distress call from a Federation ship, and I don't want to miss out." Then he seemed to remember himself and turned to Janeway. "That is, with your permission, Captain."

Janeway bit her lip to hide a smile and nodded. "Take your station, Lieutenant. Plot a course to the nebula and engage when ready."

Paris seated himself at the conn, cracked his knuckles, and started tapping in commands at the console. Janeway exchanged amused glances with Chakotay and leaned toward him.

"How do they find out about these things so quickly?" she whispered. "Sometimes I think good news travels faster than gossip on this ship."

"Infinite gossip in infinite combinations at warp speed," Chakotay quipped.

Janeway laughed. "Something like that."

"Approaching the coordinates, Captain," Paris said.

Janeway straightened in her chair. "All stop, Mr. Paris."

"Captain, the distress signal is much stronger, but I cannot get an accurate reading on its origin," Tuvok reported.

"On screen."

The viewscreen sparkled to life, revealing an elliptical mass of orange and violet swirls reminiscent of Earth's strato-cirrus clouds at sunset.

"Just your garden variety nebula," Paris said, unimpressed with the colorful display.

"Does it pose a radiation hazard?" Janeway asked, turning to Kim.

The young ensign stared at his console, then shook his head. "Some random theta radiation, but nothing significant. Shields should protect us."

Janeway stood and walked over beside Paris. "Then let's have a closer look. Take us in, Tom, one quarter impulse."

"Aye, Captain."

The ship moved slowly, pushing forward into the miasma until it surrounded them and obscured the stars. Static charges like lightning in a summer storm crackled across the hull in a dazzling array, the bright flashes reflecting off the nebular gases, bathing Voyager's bridge with a warm orange glow.

The display mesmerized Janeway, and she stared at the viewscreen with growing apprehension. It was too much like the scene in her dream, so much so that she started to hallucinate figures of broken bodies in the whirling mists.

"Captain, are you all right?"

Tom Paris's voice jolted her out of her reverie. She discovered herself gripping the back of his chair so tightly that she'd dug her fingernails in. Janeway released her grasp, annoyed that she'd allowed herself to become distracted.

"I'm fine, Mr. Paris," she replied, ignoring Chakotay's worried stare. "Status, Ensign Kim?"

Kim shook his head. "Nothing on sensors yet." He leaned closer to his console. "Wait a second. Now I'm getting something. There appears to be a clear space in the center of the nebula, almost like the calm in the eye of a hurricane."

"And the signal?"

"It's transmitting stronger than ever now," Kim said.

"Is it coming from a beacon or is there a ship in there?" Chakotay asked.

"Try about a hundred ships," Paris said, his voice quiet.

Janeway turned around and stared in rapt fascination at the viewscreen. As the gases thinned, Voyager drifted into an open space filled with an eclectic assortment of ships jumbled together like scrap metal. Several designs were recognizable from species they had encountered. Others were completely alien. Many appeared ancient from their hull decay while a few looked as if they'd just left spacedock.

Paris whistled. "Have you ever seen so many ships? There must be one from every Delta Quadrant species we've met and then some."

"It's like a graveyard," Kim said softly.

Janeway shuddered at his choice of words. "Let's make sure of that, shall we? Life signs?"

Kim consulted his sensors. "None."

"Captain, several of the ships still have active power systems," Tuvok said.

"Where is the Federation vessel?" Chakotay asked.

"There." Paris pointed to the lower right quadrant of the screen. "Right between the Vidiian warship and that Malon freighter."

Janeway stepped forward. "Maximum magnification."

Kim adjusted the screen, bringing the small ship into clearer focus.

"From the design, it looks like a Nova-class exploration vessel," Chakotay said. "The hull is too degraded to make out the registry, though."

Janeway considered the situation and wrapped her arms around herself, an uncharacteristic gesture. Usually she stood with her hands on her hips, ready to meet any problem head on, but this time, she couldn't shake the growing uneasiness she felt. Something wasn't right here, something she couldn't explain, and Kathryn Janeway didn't like mysteries. Why were these derelict ships hidden inside a nebula in the middle of nowhere? What had happened to their crews? She didn't realize she'd voiced the questions aloud until Chakotay spoke.

"I don't know, Captain, but I don't like it," he said. "We may have stumbled onto the hiding place of some alien scavengers. We should be watching our backs."

"I concur, Captain," Tuvok said from behind them. "I am not detecting any residual energy signatures from vessels recently in the area, but I would advise caution before proceeding."

The counsel of her two closest friends comforted Janeway, and she felt her anxiety ease. But only a little.

"Agreed, gentlemen, this isn't your run-of-the-mill distress call, but we are obligated to investigate despite the circumstances." The captain returned to her chair and began issuing orders.

"Yellow alert. Increase power to shields, and run a full sensor sweep of this junk pile. We don't want any surprises." She nodded to Paris. "Bring us alongside the Federation ship, Tom."

Paris tapped in the command, and Voyager moved closer to the mass of ships. As they passed under the hull of the Federation vessel, Janeway noticed a strange symbol resembling an escutcheon painted on the engineering hull. The sight of it brought on a sudden sense of déjà vu. Something about this ship seemed familiar.

"Harry, is it possible to tap into that ship's computer?" she asked.

"I'll try, Captain," Kim answered, concentrating on his displays.

Janeway chewed on her thumbnail and stared at the vessel, wishing she could remember where she'd seen it before.

"That's an odd marking for a Starfleet vessel," Chakotay said from beside her. "Looks like an old eighteenth-century Spanish coat of arms."

Janeway's head snapped around at his remark, and she drew in a quick breath. Of course!

"Captain, the ship's computer core is badly degraded, but I'm in," Kim called out. "The ship is a long-range exploration vessel registered as..."

"The U.S.S. Anticipation," Janeway finished for him.

Kim raised his eyebrows in surprise. "That's right. How did you know?"

"The captain is Jose Pizarro, an old academy friend of mine," Janeway replied. "He was somewhat flamboyant, always bragging that he was a direct descendant of the original Spanish explorer. I lost touch with him after graduation." Her eyes narrowed as she stared at the damaged ship on the screen. "I wonder how he ended up out here?"

"Perhaps he became a victim of the Caretaker, as we did," Tuvok said, referring to the alien entity responsible for stranding them in the Delta Quadrant.

Janeway nodded her head. "Perhaps. In any case, we owe it to the crew's families to discover what's happened here." She rose from her chair and turned to Kim. "Harry, is there an atmosphere on board?"

"Yes, Captain," Kim replied.

"Very well. I'm leading this away team. Harry, Tuvok, you're with me."

The Vulcan's dark face became stern. "May I remind the captain that this is an unknown and potentially hazardous situation. It is unnecessary for you to place yourself at risk."

Janeway anticipated his disapproval and held up one hand. "Objection noted, but this is captain's privilege."

"Somehow I get the feeling I'm not invited to this class reunion," Chakotay said, trying to hide his concern behind a smile. "Sure you don't want me to make your apologies?"

"Not this time," Janeway told him gently. "I need you here just in case."

He sighed in resignation. "Understood. I'll keep a transporter lock on you at all times."

"See that you do," Janeway said. "The bridge is yours, Commander."

She called for Voyager's chief engineer, B'Elanna Torres, and Seven of Nine, the ex-Borg, to join them, then motioned for Tuvok and Harry Kim to follow.

Armed with phasers and tricorders, the away team transported onto the Anticipation's bridge. And into total darkness.

The blackness unnerved Janeway. It was too much like the dream again, and she started when Tuvok switched on his wrist beacon beside her.

"Can we get some lights on in here?" she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

The away team scattered to various stations while Janeway activated her own beacon and swept it across the cozy, and empty, bridge. Dim emergency lighting flared to life after a moment, confirming her findings.

"Looks like nobody's home," Torres commented, looking up from the bridge engineering station.

"'No bodies' is right," Kim said. "The internal sensors are still active, and I'm not detecting anything."

"Are you certain, Mister Kim?" Janeway asked.

"Yes, Captain. I'm not detecting any organic residue that would indicate bodies in a state of decay. However..." He leaned closer to the science console he was monitoring and frowned. "This is strange. I am picking up a lot of bio-electric interference from the lower decks."

"Bio-electric interference?" Janeway stepped over to the console to look over his shoulder. The readings made her shudder involuntarily. The last time she'd seen this phenomenon was when Voyager had become infested with huge, parasitic macroviruses. The thought that her away team might not be alone on board the Anticipation made her skin crawl, but she forced herself to stay focused for her crew's safety.

"Could this interference be coming from the nebula?" Janeway asked Kim.

The young ensign shook his head. "I don't think so. I can't explain it any more than I can explain the crew's disappearance. They must have abandoned ship."

"I do not think that was the case, Ensign," Tuvok said from across the bridge. "The escape pods are all in place, as is the Anticipation's shuttlecraft."

Janeway felt bewildered. "So what happened to this crew?"

"I am at a loss as well, Captain," Tuvok said. "Unless they were abducted or transported to another vessel, their apparent disappearance is inexplicable."

Janeway pressed her lips together and placed her hands on her hips. This mystery was becoming tiresome. She stepped over to the captain's chair, but resisted the urge to sit out of respect. This was Jose's ship, not hers, but she drew strength from standing there all the same.

"All right, people, it's time to solve this puzzle. Tuvok, review the tactical systems. I want to know if they were attacked."

"Yes, Captain," the Vulcan answered.

Janeway turned to the rest of the away team. "B'Elanna, I want you and Harry to do a visual search of the lower decks. Let's make sure no one is left on board. Seven, try to access the ship's logs. Maybe they can give us some clues as to what happened here."

Torres stepped forward. "Captain, if we don't find anything, I'd like permission to bring over an engineering team to salvage some components for Voyager. This is a rare opportunity for us to get Starfleet-compatible parts for backup."

Janeway hesitated for a second. To her, it felt like robbing a tomb, but she knew Torres was right. Voyager desperately needed those components. Practicality won out over sentiment, and she nodded. "Granted, Lieutenant. Report to me every ten minutes."

Torres acknowledged the order, then disappeared behind Kim down the bridge Jefferies tube access.

"Captain, the tactical logs show nothing of interest," Tuvok said, looking up from the console he was monitoring. "The phasers have not been fired recently, nor can I detect any residual weapons signatures on the hull. There is no evidence of an attack."

Disappointed, Janeway sighed and placed her hands on her hips. She'd hoped the Anticipation's crew had put up a fight. "Oh, well, at least that's one thing we can rule out." She turned to Seven of Nine, who was working at the communications console. "Any luck with those logs, Seven?"

Seven of Nine shook her head. "I cannot access them. The data stream appears to have been damaged by the nebula's radiation. However, I may be able to reconstruct them using Voyager's computer."

"Very well," Janeway said. "Download the logs and take them back to Voyager with you. Report to me here as soon as you have something."

Seven nodded and interfaced her tricorder with the Anticipation's console, then tapped her combadge to request transport. Janeway stood aside and watched the shimmering transporter effect wash over the ex-Borg. Suddenly, the beam seemed to surge, then fade before stabilizing at last, disappearing along with Seven.

Janeway exchanged worried glances with Tuvok. "What was that?"

The Vulcan consulted the console before him, then looked up, a perplexed expression on his usually stoic face. "Unknown. Preliminary scans indicate nothing out of the ordinary with the transport beam."

The captain wasn't convinced and tapped her combadge. "Janeway to Voyager."

"Chakotay here. Everything all right over there, Captain?"

"That's what I want you to tell me," she replied. "Seven just transported over with a download of the Anticipation's logs. We observed what looked like an interruption in the beam during



transport. Is she all right?"

"Stand by," Chakotay said.

The silence over the communicator lasted only a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity to Janeway. These strange occurrences were adding up too fast, so much so that her gut feeling told her something terrible was about to happen. At last, Chakotay interrupted her negative thoughts.

"Captain, Transporter Room Two reports that Seven's transport was without incident, and Torres's engineering team beamed out with no problem. Nothing out of the ordinary is happening over here."

Janeway wished she could say the same. "Nevertheless, something strange did happen here. I want a level one diagnostic run on all transporters. Report to me when it's complete."

"Aye, Captain," Chakotay said, severing the communication.

Janeway turned back to Tuvok, who was walking slowly around the tiny bridge, his tricorder at arm's length. "Any ideas?"

"Perhaps," the Vulcan said. "I am detecting a slight phase variance near the station where Seven was standing during transport."

"A phase variance? Can you tell what's causing it?"

"Negative," Tuvok replied, "but it is localized, and the intensity is fading exponentially."

"Are you detecting any other variances on the ship?"

Tuvok consulted the sensors, then shook his head. "None at this moment, Captain."

Janeway stared at him, that ominous knot of dread in her stomach growing stronger. "Let's be certain that this phenomenon really is localized," she said, tapping her combadge. "Janeway to Torres."

"Here, Captain," the engineer replied.

"Have you observed any problems with the transporters? We've detected a phase variance on the bridge which interfered with the confinement beam when Seven transported back to Voyager."

"We noticed something similar when we sent over some components to Voyager's cargo bay," Torres told her. "But we didn't think anything of it since that's not unusual when transporting unshielded phase couplings."

Janeway exchanged a worried glance with Tuvok. "For the time being, hold off on any further transports. This variance may be nothing, but I want to play it safe until we can find out what's happening. Tuvok and I will join you in a few minutes."

"Acknowledged," Torres replied.

Janeway motioned for Tuvok to follow her. "Let's get down there, Commander. Something

strange is going on here, and I don't like it."

"Another of your hunches, Captain?" Tuvok asked, one eyebrow raised.

"Perhaps," Janeway said. She grabbed hold of the Jefferies tube ladder, then looked at him over her shoulder. "But save calling me an irrational human until after the away mission, could you?"

"On the contrary," Tuvok said. "For once, I agree with your trepidation."

Tuvok's admission didn't make Janeway feel any better. They climbed down five decks through the cramped tunnel, the captain's anxiety growing with each step, her sixth sense on full alert. Although common sense told her she was being ridiculous, she was convinced something terrible had happened on board the *Anticipation* and that her crew was about to step into a trap.

In the *Anticipation's* cargo bay, Janeway found Kim and Torres hunched over a science console while three engineering crew members stood to one side next to several containers of spare components.

"Captain, we may have something for you," Torres said, glancing up at her arrival.

Janeway stepped up beside her. "What have you found?"

"After you detected that phase variance on the bridge, we ran a multispectral scan of the cargo bay," Kim said. He pointed to a graphic display. "There are multiple areas of localized phase variances in here. Almost like what you'd see when a cloaking device is in use."

Janeway swallowed hard. "I'd like to know what, if anything, is being hidden here. Do we know the variance frequency?"

Torres shook her head. "Not yet, but we have the computer running an algorithm to isolate the exact frequency. It should be done..." The computer made an insistent beep. "About now."

"This is strange," Kim frowned at the readout. "The frequency isn't in subspace, but the infrared spectral band."

"That should make it simple, then," Torres said, tapping the controls. "All we have to do is adjust the cargo bay's lighting to..."

"Ow! What the..." One of the engineering crew suddenly slapped his neck as if stung. Then he began to claw at the air before him, his eyes wide with fear. "Get it off me, get it off me!"

Janeway's phaser was in her hand in an instant, but she hesitated, unsure of what to target.

"Porter! What's wrong?" Torres asked.

"It's...it's...oh, God!" Porter screamed in agony, then disappeared in a shimmer of orange light, the sound of his scream echoing in the cargo bay.

For a moment, no one moved, too stunned to act. Janeway recovered first, galvanized by

the apparent loss of one of her crew.

"Lieutenant Torres, make that frequency adjustment. Now!"

Torres tapped the controls. The cargo bay lighting winked out for a second, then came back on, flooding the chamber with orange light. Flooding their vision with a horrific scene.

"Oh, my God!" Harry Kim whispered.

Bodies. All around the cargo bay deck lay bodies. Some were intact, others mere skeletons. A few were wrapped in some sort of webbing like the silk that spiders used to encase their prey.

This time, Janeway didn't recover from the shock. She grasped the edge of the science console in a death grip. The dream! That terrible dream was coming true before her eyes. Despite all of her experiences, all of the battles and ordeals she's been through, none of her command training had prepared her to confront her own subconscious.

For the first time in her life, she couldn't act. She stood paralyzed with fear, unable to move, to even breathe. It took the steadfast voice of an old friend to jolt her out of the trance.

"Captain, I believe we have found the Anticipation's crew," Tuvok said quietly.

Janeway looked at him and released the breath she'd been holding. For once she was grateful for his matter-of-fact approach. "It would appear so, Commander."

"But where's Porter?" Torres asked. She stepped away from the console and stared down at the deck. "He fell right here, but now there's no sign of him."

Janeway gripped her phaser with both hands to hide the fact that they were shaking and moved to the spot where her crewman had vanished. "He couldn't have gone far in this short period of time. Can we scan for his combadge through the phase variance?"

"I'll try readjusting the cargo bay sensors," Kim said, his voice cracking.

"Look, Captain." Torres knelt down next to the stacked cargo containers. "There are marks on the deck like something was dragged." She pointed across the cargo bay. "They lead to those containers near the bulkhead."

Tuvok raised his phaser, then stepped past Janeway, gesturing for the two remaining engineering crewmen to follow. She watched them move cautiously along the path which terminated at the closed door of a large container. Tuvok positioned himself on one side, motioning the crewmen opposite him. When they nodded ready, he pressed the control and opened the door.

Inside was Crewman Porter, his upper body partially covered with the gauzelike webbing.

And hovering over him was a creature.

It was unlike any life-form they had encountered. Part insect, part gargoyle, it focused two glowing orange eyes on the Voyager crew, raised four spindly legs above its bulbous head and screamed like a banshee. Then, before anyone could react, it scurried past them at warp speed and disappeared inside the open Jefferies tube, the orange light glinting off its

sleek black body segments.

A stunned silence descended on the cargo bay once again. But this time, Janeway didn't falter in her duty. This thing was not part of her subconscious. Now that she had something concrete to fight, she easily slipped back into her command mode.

"Harry, can you track that life-form on sensors?"

"Uh...I don't..." Kim stammered.

Janeway ground her teeth, then stepped beside the ensign and practically shouted into his face.

"Report, Mister Kim."

Kim flushed red and bent over the console. "Sorry, Captain. The entity is moving away from us toward the bridge."

"Keep scanning for it," Janeway told him. "I want to know where that thing is at all times."

"Captain."

Tuvok's hushed voice called her over to where he and Torres stood above Porter. The Vulcan sounded anxious, but only someone who had known him as long as Janeway would notice the subtlety. His disposition did little to comfort her.

"Is Porter alive?" she asked.

"Yes," Tuvok replied. "But we have no way to assess his injuries any further due to the phase variance."

He demonstrated by trying to touch the crewman. Janeway gasped when his hand passed through the man's body as if he were not there.

"Can we adjust the transporters to beam him back to Voyager under quarantine?"

"That shouldn't be a problem," Torres said. "But we'll need to use pattern enhancers."

"Get them set up," Janeway ordered. "We're getting out of here as soon as you're ready."

Torres and the engineering crew moved to carry out her order. After they were out of earshot, Tuvok touched Janeway's arm.

"Captain, there is something else you should know," he said, his tone ominous.

Janeway looked into his eyes. "What is it?"

"The phase variances that we detected here in the cargo bay are of the same frequency as the variance that occurred on the bridge."

Janeway felt all the blood drain from her face.

"Are you certain?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Positive."

Without hesitation, Janeway tapped her combadge.

"Janeway to Voyager."

"Chakotay here."

"Commander, there is a strong possibility that you have an intruder on board. Go to General Quarters Four alert."

"Acknowledged," Chakotay replied. "Who are we looking for?"

"Not who, but what," Janeway said. "The intruder is an insectoid creature that is out of phase with our environment. Lock onto Tuvok's tricorder and download the data containing our scans of the creature and its exact phase frequency."

"Download in progress," Chakotay said. "Do you authorize terminal force to deal with this intruder?"

Janeway hesitated at the question. The killing of any living being was as repugnant to her as these creatures appeared to be. Without a doubt, they had killed the entire crew of the *Anticipation*. But why? Had the *Anticipation* injured them or violated their space in some manner? Were they trying to protect themselves like the subspace-dwelling creatures exploited by the crew of the *Equinox*? That incident was still too raw, too fresh in her memory. No. Killing a creature they knew almost nothing about went against everything she believed in.

"Negative, Commander," she replied. "We don't know enough about these creatures yet. Adjust phasers to stun only. And have sickbay stand by. We'll be transporting back shortly with one casualty. Inform the Doctor that his patient will be out-of-phase."

"Understood, Captain." Chakotay said.

Janeway turned to find the engineering crew setting up the last transport pattern enhancer. Torres spoke into her combadge, giving the transporter chief instructions, then faced to Janeway.

"We're ready, Captain."

Janeway nodded. "All hands, prepare for transport."

The away team gathered inside the pattern enhancers. Kim left the science console and stood beside Janeway. While they waited for transport, he spoke softly to her.

"Captain, I want to apologize for freezing up back there," he said, contrite. "I know I put everyone's lives at risk, and I'll accept whatever reprimand you see fit."

Janeway looked into the young man's dark eyes and smiled, remembering a very green ensign and his first day on *Voyager* when she'd told him to stand at ease before he strained himself. A different officer stood before her today, one who had gone above and beyond for his crewmates time and again. Of course, he'd erred, but this time, she couldn't fault him for

his shortcomings, which were no less than her own.

"I think, considering the circumstances, you performed admirably, Ensign," she told him. "Just chalk up one more to experience, hmm?"

Kim relaxed and returned her smile. "Thanks, Captain. I won't forget this."

Suddenly, the science console where Kim had been working started beeping. The young ensign stiffened and drew his phaser, his eyes wide.

"Perimeter alert!" he shouted, turning toward the Jefferies tube access.

Before any of the others could draw their phasers, a black shape shot out of the Jefferies tube screaming in fury.

"Harry, look out!" Torres cried.

Kim brought his phaser to bear, but the shot missed. The creature knocked him flat, then impaled him with some type of stinger. Kim screamed in agony, trying to fight the thing off. Janeway reached for him, but it was too late. In the next second, he shimmered out of phase.

Tuvok fired at the creature, but the beam passed through its body with no effect. He quickly made an adjustment to the weapon and fired again. This time, the creature was thrown back. It howled in rage and coiled to strike again. The last thing the away team saw before the transporter effect took them was the creature flying through the air, its spindly claws mere centimeters from the captain's face.

When the away team rematerialized, Janeway thought for one disorienting moment that the transport had failed. Transporter Room Two was shrouded in dim orange light reminiscent of the Anticipation's cargo bay. Only the comforting presence of her first officer let her know that she was back on Voyager and safe. But for how long?

"Captain, are you all right?" Chakotay asked. "We detected a second phase shift just before you beamed out."

"A creature attacked Harry before we could transport," Janeway told him, unable to keep the despair out of her voice as she stepped off the transporter.

"Damn," Chakotay swore softly. "That makes thirty-four of the crew attacked."

Janeway stared at him in disbelief. "Thirty-four?"

Chakotay nodded. "So far. These things move incredibly fast, so there could be more injured in lockdown we don't know about yet. All we've found have been sent directly to sickbay under quarantine, including Harry and Porter. And thanks to what Seven of Nine discovered in those logs you sent back with her, the Doctor has a head start on treating them."

"What has she found?" Janeway asked him, following Tuvok out the door into the corridor.

Chakotay kept stride with them. "I think you should go to astrometrics and hear it for yourself," he said. "It might make you change your mind about using terminal force."

Janeway stopped short and turned to face her first officer. "Are you saying she's found an unequivocal reason for it?"

"Straight from the mouth of your old classmate," Chakotay replied.

Janeway stared at him, then hastened her step toward the turbolift. In astrometrics, she found Seven of Nine standing at the main console. But her attention was drawn to the image frozen on the main screen.

"Jose," Janeway said softly, staring at the face of her friend. He looked like he'd been through hell, and she said as much.

"Your assessment is correct, Captain," Seven said to Janeway. "Most of the Anticipation's logs were unrecoverable except for the last four stardates. Fortunately, this final log entry made by Captain Pizarro survived. It is most revealing."

Seven queued up the log entry and initiated playback. The image of the handsome Hispanic reappeared on the screen, his blood-shot eyes haunted as in one who has seen too much.

"This is Captain Jose Pizarro, commanding officer of the U.S.S. Anticipation, United Federation of Planets. If you are receiving this transmission, please heed this warning. Avoid the derelict ships inside this nebula at all costs. My crew has fallen victim to what I can only call space parasites, nonsentient creatures which exist out of phase with normal space, but can be seen by using infrared spectral lumination. They are vicious beyond words, driven by instinct to use other living beings for food and procreation. They overwhelmed my entire crew before we could discover a way to destroy them. Please, save yourself and others. Avoid this nebula at..."

Pizarro never finished the warning. Janeway pressed her fist to her mouth in horror as she watched a black shape hurl itself at Captain Pizarro. It thrust its stinger into his neck, and he screamed in agony before fading into oblivion.

When the display terminated, Chakotay turned to Janeway. "Captain Pizarro's intention was to launch this message in a warning buoy. Obviously, he never had the chance. However, we do."

"And we should do so quickly before the same thing happens to Voyager," Seven said. "I have adjusted the internal sensors to track the creatures' phase variance to aid the security teams in a more efficient search."

"What are your orders, Captain?"

Janeway stood statue-still, her fist still pressed against her mouth staring at the blank screen. She could feel the gazes of her officers on her, waiting for her to make a decision. But at the moment, they were inconsequential compared to the tormented gaze of Jose Pizarro. His senseless death would be the impetus of nightmares for a long, long time. Then she thought of those eyes as belonging to Chakotay, Tuvok, or Seven. Or Harry, who had already felt the agony caused by these creatures. Killing still was repulsive to her, but this time, an old friend helped make the decision a bit easier.

Janeway felt a hand gently touching her arm and realized that Chakotay was standing in front of her.

"Captain?"

She took a deep breath, comforted by the company of her present friends, and placed her hands on her hips, her old self-determination reasserting itself full-force.

"I don't like the idea of destroying beings we know so little about, but Captain Pizarro was a competent scientist, and I trust his assessment of this situation." She turned to face her security officer. "Tuvok, tell your security people to uplink their tricorders with astrometrics. All phasers are to be set on kill."

"Aye, Captain."

As Tuvok exited astrometrics, Janeway took out her own phaser and made the necessary adjustments. She looked up to find Chakotay watching her as if trying to gauge her mood. He gave her a slight nod and smiled, a subtle gesture of his support. It was enough.

"Well, come on, Commander," she said to him. "We have some bugs to exterminate."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, following her out the door.

In the corridor, the dim orange light set Janeway's nerves on edge, and she tightened her grip on her phaser. No one should have to act out their nightmares, but here she was right in the middle of hers. Uncertain of her resolve, but determined nevertheless, she forced her fear aside, then took the point, nodding at Chakotay to follow.

They made their way around the deck, step by step, section after section, with no sign of the creatures. In several areas, the lighting had failed, the nearly pitch black only heightening Janeway's already overactive imagination. Twice she thought she saw a black shape moving in the murky shadows, but each time, it was nothing. They were entering another darkened section when her combadge suddenly beeped. Janeway almost jumped out of her skin.

"Tuvok to Janeway."

The captain sighed in relief and relaxed against the bulkhead. "Go ahead, Commander."

"Captain, we have eliminated one of the creatures," he reported. "We tracked it to Deck Fifteen where it crawled inside an airlock."

"I hope you blew it the hell into space," she said, her acerbic tone eliciting a smile from Chakotay.

"Affirmative," the Vulcan said. "However, you should be aware that the second creature has disappeared from sensors."

Janeway straightened, catching her hair on the bulkhead. "We've lost the ability to track it?"

"Temporarily," Tuvok said. "We must rely on visual contact until Seven recalibrates the sensors."

Janeway sighed, not at all pleased with the chain of events. "Keep me informed."



She severed the connection, then looked at Chakotay, who was staring at a point over her head. "First the lights fail, then the sensors. I hope the phasers aren't next."

"Kathryn, don't move!" Chakotay's voice was a harsh whisper.

"Remain perfectly still."

Janeway felt her blood run cold. At that moment, she realized that it wasn't the bulkhead snagging her hair. Above her, she heard a low hiss like air escaping from a balloon and a soft rustling noise. She clenched her jaw and swallowed hard.

"Do you remember the time I suggested you shoot an apple off my head for the talent contest?" she whispered to Chakotay.

"Yes," he answered, never taking his eyes off the space above her head.

"Well, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

"Me, either." Chakotay slowly raised his phaser. "And if it's any consolation, I don't want to be captain."

"Good. Because I'm not ready to retire just yet."

The next second, the bulkhead exploded in a blinding white flash. Janeway pitched face first onto the deck, gasping for breath against the dust from the fire suppression system and the acrid stench of burned hair. She tried to rise up, but didn't have the strength. Then a pair of strong arms lifted her.

Janeway looked up into the handsome face of her first officer. She'd never seen a more welcome sight and sagged back into his arms.

Chakotay smiled down at her. "I'm not ready for you to retire, either."

Janeway returned the smile and let him help her stand. Just then, her combadge beeped again.

"Seven of Nine to the captain. Sensors have just detected the creature in your section. Do you require assistance?"

Janeway stared down at the mass of black goo smoldering on the deck, then looked up at Chakotay, who tried unsuccessfully to suppress a laugh.

"Thanks for the warning, Seven, but we're fine," she said wryly.

"We'll let you know if things get too 'hairy.'"

With that, both Janeway and Chakotay burst out laughing, leaving one very confused ex-Borg hanging on the other end of the comlink.

At midnight two days after leaving the ship graveyard in the nebula, Janeway was awake as usual. Therefore it didn't surprise her when the door chimed.

"Come."

Chakotay walked in with another large stack of padds. "Am I disturbing you this late, Captain?"

Janeway laughed and motioned to a chair. "It's only midnight, way before my bedtime." She watched Chakotay set the padds on her desk, then flop down in the chair with an exhausted sigh. "Is this a business or a social call?"

"Both," he said. "I thought I'd drop off the reports concerning the 'incident.'"

Janeway noticed his inflection on the word. No one had been able to talk about their encounter with the creatures, not yet.

"And the other?" she prompted.

Chakotay leaned forward and folded his hands. "I wanted to see how you were doing, even though I already know what you'll say."

"Then you know I'm fine," she said. "Most of me, anyway." She ran her hand over the top of her head where her hair used to be. Chakotay winced at the gesture.

"I'm really sorry about that," he said, looking apologetic.

"Oh, don't worry. As soon as the Doctor finishes treating the injured crew, he's promised to help regenerate my hair. In the meantime, I'll have to make do with an anti-Mohawk."

They shared a laugh, then both fell silent for a while, each lost in their own private thoughts. Chakotay broke the silence at last.

"We were lucky this time."

"I know," Janeway said. "I just keep wondering how many more of our nine lives are left."

"Enough to get us home some day," Chakotay said. "And with the right captain at the helm, we'll get there."

"I hope you're right, because I was serious about not retiring yet."

Chakotay smiled, then rose from his chair. "I know you were, but I thought I'd bring you a gift anyway." He pulled a small velvet pouch from his pocket and placed it on Janeway's desk.

"What's that for?" Janeway asked.

"Don't worry, it's not a gold watch. Just a little something to commemorate your continued success," he said, stepping to the door. "You can open it later." He gave her a knowing smile, then disappeared into the corridor.

Curious, Janeway walked over to the desk and emptied the pouch's contents into her hand. When she saw what was inside, she smiled and clutched the small object against her breast. Then she retreated to her bedroom and placed the gift on her bedside table, ordering the computer to extinguish the lights.

As she pulled the covers around her, Janeway felt at peace for the first time in many days.

Just before she fell asleep, she turned on her side so she could watch the soft starlight reflecting off the polished wooden apple with a heart-shaped hole carved through the center.

Widow's Walk

Mary Scott-Wiecek

Excerpts from the Journal of Anne Carey

Starfleet Headquarters--San Francisco, California

August 2377

Voyager came home today. Tens of thousands of people came to watch the damned thing soar triumphantly past the Golden Gate Bridge, as fireworks exploded overhead. All around me, upturned faces gazed almost reverently at the ship. They all seemed so happy, and all I could feel was seething anger and resentment. If Voyager had gotten back just two months earlier--two MONTHS--Joe would have been on board, too. Joe would still be alive.

At one point, the ship nearly grazed one of the towers on the bridge. I guess whoever was piloting had decided to do a little bit of showing off. The crowd gasped, but I just had the unbidden, bitter thought, "Now wouldn't THAT be ironic. To come all this way and blow up over San Francisco Bay in front of all these people."

God, I'm awful. I want to be bigger about this, but it's just so hard. Every Starfleet spouse knows that casualties are a part of the job. It can happen to any of them--or any of us, for that matter--at any time. But the sequence of events in Joe's case was particularly brutal. First, the ship disappeared, and I went four years without knowing whether he was dead or alive--struggling to hold on to hope despite the terrible odds. Then, when we found out that Voyager and her crew were still alive, it seemed my faith had been rewarded. The ship was still fifty years away, of course, but it was something. Eventually, Joe and I were able to exchange brief, written messages. Then, just eight days before he was killed, I finally got to see him over a viewscreen. We only got three minutes, and the connection was bad, but oh, to see his face again, and hear his voice...God, I was so happy. I walked around in a euphoric haze for a week.

Then that grim-faced admiral showed up on my doorstep and turned everything to ruin.

It just isn't fair. I keep saying that to myself, like a petulant child. But it isn't. And now, in one of life's great ironies, his ship has come home without him.

So I suppose I can be forgiven for not being ecstatic about the return, like the rest of the crowd. On the news tonight, back in our suite, I saw that family members of the crew had been cordoned off in a special section on the waterfront in Golden Gate Park during the fly-by. I recognized so many of the faces--we've gotten to know each other over the years, almost like a family. I felt the briefest flash of happiness for them before my own sorrow--and yes, resentment--returned.

I keep wondering why I'm putting myself through this. I could have stayed home. Why did I transport myself halfway across the world to subject myself to this anguish? Well, I know the answer to that, really. I had to come, because JJ wanted to be here, and I couldn't let him face this alone.

I've only made brief entries in my journal over the past couple of months, so I haven't really recorded how troubled I've been about JJ. At first, I thought I was overreacting--that I just wanted something to worry about other than myself--but now I'm beginning to think there's actual cause for concern.

I don't think JJ is grieving properly, if there is such a thing. I don't pretend to be an expert; after all, I'm not even sure that I'm grieving properly. But JJ--he hasn't even cried, to my knowledge. He's been a little too stoic, even for a fourteen-year-old boy. And when I've heard him speak of his father's death to his friends, he always says, almost proudly, that his father died "in the line of duty," or "on Voyager, serving Starfleet." It's almost as if he feels his father's death is romantic--like he can't separate it from the whole of the Voyager "story."

He's been obsessed with that story for the past three years, ever since we learned that Voyager had not been destroyed, but was stranded in the Delta Quadrant. He read every article he could get his hands on about the crew and their situation, and he's studied the actual ship, too--the blueprints and the specs. He knows more about "bioneural circuitry" than any child his age should know.

It's his father's fault, of course. Joe instilled sentimental notions of exploration and space flight into him from an early age. I still remember the two of them sitting at the kitchen table, meticulously constructing everything from sailing vessels to simple starships inside small glass bottles. We have a picture of JJ proudly holding the first one he completed "all by himself," a small sailboat. Back then, I thought it was sweet. Now, I just find it disturbing. Perhaps I should just have a widow's walk put onto the house--I could wander around up there, grieving for my lost husband, and watching helplessly as my son follows him over the horizon. JJ is already talking about Starfleet Academy. It terrifies me. I knew the risks when I married Joe, but I never considered that either of my boys might deliberately choose that life, too.

When we learned of Voyager's return on the newsvid last night, and of the celebration that Starfleet had planned, Patrick had no interest in coming. I can't blame him. He was only four when his father left. I'm not even sure he has any real memories of him. JJ, though--he wanted to come the minute he heard. His whole face lit up. I couldn't believe it. I nearly chastised him for it, because my first thought was that he just wanted a close look at the ship, his obsession. But then I decided that I'd better tread carefully. JJ does have real memories of his father, fond ones, no doubt intensified by his absence all these years. I decided that perhaps he needed to see the ship's return--that maybe it would give him some kind of closure.

But when Voyager sailed by tonight, I looked over at him, and he was as riveted and awestruck as the rest of the crowd. It felt like a slap in the face, but I was careful not to say anything. I know JJ must feel the loss in his own way, but his attitude about that ship hurts and saddens me. I don't understand it; it just doesn't seem right. And I don't know what to do about it.

Cobh, County Cork, Ireland

September 2377

As time passes, I'm beginning to accept Joe's death. My counselor tells me that it's a gradual process. I had a bit of a setback when Voyager returned, because then I had to accept that, too.

I'm still furious, of course, but I'm beginning to realize that there really isn't anyone for me to blame. Or, rather, there is, but blaming him is irrelevant. The bastard who shot my husband in cold blood is alive and well and, thanks to Voyager, thriving in the Delta Quadrant. Oh, I know his story--his circumstances. I know the Friendship One probe indirectly devastated his planet and put his people through hell. But I wonder...now that he's healed, and his planet has been decontaminated--does he feel any remorse for what he did? Is he sorry? Does he have any idea what he took from me? From Patrick? From JJ?

Wondering about him is pointless, I suppose. He's half a lifetime away from me, just as Joe's body is. I'll never come face-to-face with him, which is probably just as well. I'm just going to have to accept that it was a hostage situation that went badly awry. There is nothing that I, or anyone else, can do to bring back my husband.

In the beginning, though, I wasn't so philosophical, and I didn't just blame him. Back then, I blamed everyone. I blamed Starfleet, for being so inherently dangerous. I blamed the misguided fools who sent out that probe in the first place, for not considering the consequences of their actions. Naturally, I blamed Captain Janeway, for...just being the captain, I suppose. For not anticipating the danger and finding some way to prevent it. And for not bringing my husband's killer to some kind of justice.

My shock and pain made me very bitter. I didn't let it show, though. The stoic facade of a bereaved Starfleet spouse slammed into place the minute I saw the admiral at my door, and it didn't waver for weeks. When Captain Janeway contacted me from Voyager the day after it happened, I considered it just something I had to get through. A token expression of condolences from her, for protocol's sake, and a subdued "Thank you, Captain" from me. I was a little disarmed by how emotional she was and how genuinely sorry she seemed, but I couldn't respond in kind. I had to keep my mask in place, or I knew I would shatter.

I received two other comm calls from Voyager that first week. One was from Joe's supervisor, Lieutenant Torres. She spoke of his skill as an engineer and his professionalism. She told me that when she'd been chosen as chief engineer over him, he'd promised her that she'd never get anything less than his best, and that he'd been as good as his word. She told me that she had a great deal of respect for him, and was deeply sorry for my loss. I could tell that she meant everything she was saying. Then she smiled a little, and added that he had spoken of the boys and me all the time. She told me that she'd been on duty with him when he'd gotten his first letter from us, and that he'd wept. Joe, naturally, hadn't mentioned that to me. It was nice to know.

The other call came in two days later from a Lieutenant Tom Paris. Joe had mentioned him a couple of times in his letters, and I knew that they were friends. Lieutenant Paris told me that Joe had offered him parenting advice and was the only person on the ship who truly understood his fixation with ancient sea lore and sailing vessels. He also told me that he had been part of the landing party on Joe's final mission. He told me exactly how the events unfolded, and how, in the last instant, when everyone realized what was about to happen, Joe stood tall and didn't flinch. He said that Joe had "died well." I must have looked taken aback, because he apologized immediately, explaining that his wife was Klingon, and it was a Klingon phrase. I understood, though. In fact, I found it somewhat comforting to have an account of Joe's last moments.

Even back then, as bitter as I was, I couldn't help but be moved by these calls. These people had used their personal comm time--time they could have used to contact their own loved ones--to reach out to me, someone they didn't even know. And that wasn't the end of it, either. In the next data stream, I received over a dozen written letters from other Voyager

crew members, all expressing their sorrow, and sharing stories and anecdotes about Joe. I was overwhelmed by the letters, but still grieving too deeply to really appreciate what they meant.

Yesterday, though, I got out the padd those letters were on, made myself some tea, and sat out on the front porch to scroll through them again. This time, I truly understood how special his time on Voyager must have been. The crew was obviously close--close in a way that only people thrust together in extreme circumstances can be. And they were in an area of space where no human had gone before. Perhaps, in some ways, Joe saw the whole adventure as the culmination of all of his childhood dreams of exploration. I know he missed me, and the boys, but surely he also understood what an extraordinary journey he was on.

As I was sitting there, a ship pulled into Cobh harbor, and the cathedral bells began to chime. I was suddenly overwhelmed by memories of Joe. We chose this house together and would often sit out front and look down at St. Colman's and the harbor while the boys played in the yard. When I closed my eyes, I could almost feel him sitting there beside me and hear the sound of his voice. I could picture every nuance of his smile. I began to realize how fortunate I was to have the time that I did with Joe. Even in these past few years, separated by half a galaxy, and communication sporadic at best, I knew--down to my very core--that he loved me, and that we were joined in spirit even over all that distance. A marriage that solid is so uncommon. As strange as it sounds, I know I was lucky, even though it ended much too soon.

Last night, I tried to share my epiphany, and my new, healthier perspective, with JJ. I thought he'd be pleased that I understood, at least a little, how he feels about the Voyager story, and his father's place in it. But he was oddly subdued. He said all the right things, but his heart just wasn't in the conversation. My counselor has advised me not to push him, so I didn't. I did leave the padd of letters with him, though, and before I went to bed, I saw him looking through them. Maybe it's a start.

Cobh, County Cork, Ireland

September 2377

Captain Janeway came to see us today. She'd called ahead, so we were expecting her--I even let the boys stay home from school. I didn't know what she wanted, but I figured they should be here. JJ was beside himself with anticipation, though he tried not to let me see it.

She arrived right on time, in uniform and a little out of breath from climbing the hill from the transport station. That alone saddened me. Whenever Joe would come home on leave, he'd complain about that climb. It's especially difficult for people who've been living in an artificial environment for an extended period of time.

I wanted to be gracious and ask her how it felt to be home, but the words stuck in my throat. After all, Joe would never know. But I invited her in, introduced her to JJ and Patrick, and ushered her into our front room. I saw her looking at JJ in subtle disbelief--he so strongly resembles his father. We made idle small talk as we all settled into various chairs around the room. She seemed genuinely impressed by the town, the harbor, and the cathedral. I tend to forget how beautiful this place is, especially if you've never seen it before.

I offered her tea, which she politely declined, and then an awkward silence descended on the group. She took a deep breath, and then she opened the small satchel she'd brought with her.

"I know Starfleet has already sent over most of Joe's personal effects," she told us, "but there were a couple of items that I wanted to bring to you personally."

She unfastened the satchel and pulled out a thin, flat, metal case with a Starfleet insignia on the lid. I knew what it was immediately, and I swear I could actually feel that familiar "Starfleet spouse" mask fall into place. If she noticed my frozen, perfectly appropriate somber expression, she didn't let on. She's probably seen it before, anyway, especially if she's delivering all of these medals in person. She opened the box and looked down at the medal soberly, then she handed it to me.

"The Medal of Honor," she told us, unnecessarily. It is posthumously awarded to all Starfleet officers who die in the line of duty. I couldn't stand to look at it, so I snapped the case shut, and said, "Thank you, Captain," automatically. The case had closed rather more loudly than I had intended, and another awkward silence filled the room. I hadn't meant to do that.

I'll give her this, though. She handled it well. She's professional, yet somehow she lets you know that it's personal to her as well, just as she did when she spoke to me from Voyager shortly after Joe's death.

"I just wanted you to know," she told us, and her voice broke, just a little, "that Joe was a fine officer and a good man. He was an enormous asset to engineering, and he served Voyager and her crew with distinction."

The words were nothing unusual, I know, but they were heartfelt. Moved again by her obvious sincerity, I couldn't speak right away. Since JJ, too, was uncharacteristically silent, Patrick was the one who murmured "Thank you, Captain," that time. JJ reached over and I handed him the case. He opened it and looked at the medal. He was fingering it absently when Janeway pulled a second, larger case out of the satchel. I didn't know what this one could be, so I watched her face. She smiled slightly and ran one finger fondly over the case before she opened it. At first, I could only see the top half of the container, which was well padded with some kind of foam or insulation. Then she carefully lifted something out of the bottom half and set it down gently.

Someone gasped. It was probably me, although it might just as easily have been JJ or Patrick--they were as stunned as I was. There, sitting on the table before us, was a small model of Voyager in a bottle. It was beautiful--even I could see that, and I'm not a carafologist. The workmanship and attention to detail were exceptional, but it was more than that. Just looking at it, I could tell that Joe had put his heart into this one--it meant something to him.

It meant something to us, too. The three of us stared at it, numbly. Finally, it was Patrick who wordlessly went into the next room and retrieved JJ's from the mantel. He set it down next to Joe's. JJ's was slightly larger in scale, and he had chosen a different shape for the bottle, but seeing them side-by-side like that...My eyes filled with tears. Half a galaxy apart, and they'd both lovingly crafted the exact same thing. I looked over at JJ in time to see his face contort with emotion. He stood abruptly, excused himself, then hurried out of the room.

Captain Janeway looked sad and sympathetic. We spoke quietly for a few more minutes, and then she left.

That was over two hours ago. I've been sitting here in the front room ever since, writing this, whenever I can tear my eyes away from the two ships on the table. Joe's, I can see now, is

missing a nacelle, which is still in the case. It pains me more than I can say that he never got the chance to finish it.

JJ is still in his room, but I haven't been up to check on him. I don't need to. In my heart, I know he'll be all right, now. He finally feels a real connection to his father's death, and he'll be able to grieve, accept the loss and move on.

And I will have to do the same. In the end, there is no other choice.

Cobh, County Cork, Ireland

October 2377

When I walked past the two ships on the mantel this morning, I glanced over at them, as I always do, and something caught my eye. I looked a little closer, then realized that Joe's ship now has both nacelles. JJ must have put it in place over the weekend. I picked it up and studied it--the connection was seamless. If I hadn't already known which nacelle Joe attached, I would never have been able to tell.

I had to put the bottle back on its stand with deliberate care, because my vision was already blurring through the tears in my eyes. For I know now, with complete certainty, what I must have suspected all along. JJ's interest in Starfleet is not just a phase. He's going out there, like his father. It's inevitable--they're just too much alike. They both have the heart of an explorer, and the eye for detail of an engineer. He's leaving--it's his destiny.

And me, I'll just have to let him go...and hope for the best.

Savior

Julie Hyzy

Jonathan Archer's face itched.

Phlox's version of a Dru's beard might be accurate, but it was damn itchy and damn hot and it caught every granule of sand that the wind shot into his face as he ran. Grains of it crunched between his teeth. He licked his parched lips, and was reminded of the sandpaper he used to use, building models as a boy.

Squinting his eyes to shield them from the particled air that stung his skin as he raced, he smeared a hand across his face to wipe the grit away. But gluelike, the sweaty sand clung tight, and he succeeded only in spreading it around.

With any luck, he'd be back on board Enterprise shortly, drinking a cold iced tea.

With any luck.

Of course, that assumed an innocent man would be killed. And with any luck, he would be.

Archer shook his head in disbelief. Had it come to this? And if the time came, could he truly be a party to another man's murder?

As his sandaled feet slapped the hot ground, the quick, rhythmic hits reverberated through his body and made his head throb. He heard the pace of his breaths match those of his



steps, and worried a moment about hyperventilating. But he couldn't stop.

History, or something like it, depended on him.

The sun oozed heat over Druzilum like a golden flow of melted wax, pouring down, making the air cloying and sticky and thick. Wet from his perspiration, the phase pistol and communicator tucked inside his tunic chafed at his bare abdomen with every stride. He wished he could pull the things out and carry them. But exposing such futuristic devices to the people of this preindustrial culture could have unexpected and dangerous ripple effects. He'd use them only if necessary.

Slowing to a stop, Archer reached for the silver flask that hung from the belt at his waist. He chugged down as much as he dared, enjoying the feel of cool water that escaped the corners of his mouth to drip off the sides of his chin.

Finished, he bent over, trying to catch his breath. He held the flask near his knee, hearing his own gasps, watching his perspiration drip to the ground far off to his right as the wind blew hot across his face.

He needed a moment to marshal his strength. He needed time. And time was something he should have had plenty of, but did not. He had only as long as it took to kill a man.

Or rather, ensure that a man be killed.

Blocking the prickly wind with his back, Archer pulled out the translated text Hoshi had given him. The baking Druzilum sun beat down on the back of his neck as his fingers traced the words transcribed to parchment, as though touching them could somehow protect them.

He read all that Hoshi had given him. Ending with her most recent translation.

And on the third day of the festival when Joran was to be put to death, the heavens roiled, then opened, and He was risen again.

There was more, but this was as far as she'd gotten in the ancient text. Not quite ancient, he thought. None of the events contained in it had happened. Yet.

Archer raised his eyes and, squinting, looked for some sign of the shuttle he'd left over thirty minutes ago and where Trip waited now, monitoring his progress. As though summoned, the communicator chirped.

Digging it out from his waistband, Archer coughed as he answered. "Yeah."

"Hey, Cap'n. I noticed you stoppin' there. You okay?"

"I'm fine, Trip. Just catching my breath." He took a few more deep lungfuls of air before continuing. "This place is hotter than hell."

"I know, Cap'n, and that's another reason why I wanted to contact you. There're particles in the atmosphere here that throw off Enterprise's sensors. It's gonna make it hard to transport you outta there. You know...if the need arises."

"So you're telling me I have to walk all the way back."

"Fraid so, unless I can get the shuttle in close enough to set your coordinates, and I know you don't want that."

"How close?"

"Close enough to see the whites of your eyes. And, Cap'n...If it does come to that, I'd have to widen the range, to be safe. So don't stand near anybody you don't want coming to visit, okay?"

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. Archer out."

Scratching his chin beneath the scraggly beard--he couldn't wait to tear the damn thing off--Archer calculated the distance to the execution ground, squinting again. Not much farther.

Above, something caught his eye.

Suspended in the cloudless expanse before him, a bird.

Flying, yet getting nowhere.

The yellow creature--almost invisible in the ochre sky--hovered, wings stretched in a desperate battle with the wind. A shiny bit of detritus clamped firmly in its beak caught the glint of the Druzilum planet's midday sun. The determined bird fought the current of air, a stream of invisible power that prevented it from reaching its goal: a tree not twenty feet ahead.

Up and down, it rode the waves of the wind, never moving forward.

For those few seconds that Archer stood there, hunched, feeling the press and pull of his skin against the bones of his chest, he wondered how the bird forced itself to try, its goal in sight--yet just beyond reach, fighting a losing battle to get there.

Did it feel frustration? Remorse at not setting out sooner? Or, rather, was it impelled by some other power? Did a bird just fly because it should? Get to its nest because it must?

Archer watched as the bird's feathered body was pushed back ever so slightly, and the separate fronds of its wings parted in the breeze. He sensed the bird's need to push, and it did, just enough to ease itself slightly forward, but then the wind blasted again, trapping it there, keeping it in place, still, but not immobile.

With what must have been its last ounce of strength, the bird surged forward again, with such gusto that Archer imagined he expelled breath, whether birds did that or not, he didn't know.

The answering wind wrenched the shiny paper from its beak. As it flittered to the ground, it twisted and flipped all the way, flashing white and bright on its downward path.

Unencumbered, the bird heaved forward, to finally alight on a crooked branch of the nearby tree. Safe, home. But without its prize.

His feet hitting the ground again, Archer forgot all about the plucky little bird and its unattainable quest.

There they were. Far below. Key players in an historic tragedy. Exactly as the text had described.

Archer shook his head. Everything was happening. Now.

But in Lucius's time, this was all ancient history.

They'd come upon Lucius two days ago. Adrift, he'd sent out frantic broadcasts on all frequencies, seeking help for his disabled ship.

Excited to be making first contact with another species, Archer had ordered Trip to bring the crippled craft aboard. But just as they sent out the grapples, the small vessel's warp core threatened to breach. They'd beamed Lucius aboard, and accelerated to warp, seconds before it had exploded.

Humanoid, Lucius could have walked through downtown San Francisco without garnering a second glance. Muscular and bearded, the man stood half a head taller than Archer. He appeared to be the equivalent of forty Earth years old, and possessed of a relentless energy that asserted itself from the moment he bounded forward to greet them and thank them for rescue, till his unscheduled departure from Enterprise in a stolen shuttle.

Several things, in hindsight, should have alerted them to Lucius's ulterior motives. From the little they'd been able to scan, his ship appeared sophisticated. More so than even the Vulcans had available to them. There were anomalous readings T'Pol picked up from the outer hull; she'd speculated that they might be residual temporal markers, but couldn't be certain until she'd inspected it up close. But, that opportunity had evaporated with the small craft's destruction.

Lucius had escaped Enterprise without detection, something Lieutenant Reed kept protesting was impossible to have managed. It seemed, however, after a thorough investigation, that Lucius was well-versed in the workings of a starship. His control of the situation had been masterful.

And here Archer was, on this hot, godforsaken planet, not simply because he wanted his shuttle back. No, he was here because he intended to stop Lucius from changing Druzilum's planetary timeline.

Archer shielded his eyes from the sun, surveying the valleylike indentation before him, deciding that it was a crater where a meteor struck eons ago. The size and shape reminded him of the landmark Candlestick Park in old San Francisco; though less elegant in design than the ball field, it served its purpose well. It was clear this ancient people knew how to make use of their natural resources. It was one of the most acoustically perfect gatherings Archer had ever encountered. Still, the distance to the stage at its center frustrated him.

Using sideways steps, he eased down the gravelly hill, keeping watch over the action below while maintaining precarious balance, wending his way through groups of attentive Druzians. Dressed in breezy cotton tunics, their muted earth-tone shades a cool foil to their sun-pinkened skin, they stood or sat in small groups dotting the wide slope. Their attention was directed downward, their expressions rapt. Interspersed among them, standing in solemn formations, were groups of soldiers in plated armor carrying long, metallic spears.

Archer knew Lucius would be making his way through the crowd, toward the stage. The fact

that he had a significant head start caused Archer's confidence to falter, but only for a moment.

The book Hoshi had taken it upon herself to translate was a written history of the planet of Druzilum and of its religious wars. According to legend, two opposing factions emerged in the first recorded century, with the death of the prophet Joran. Both factions admitted to Joran's existence. One named him Savior sent by the Creator, the other named him fraud.

Lucius's notes, written in the margin of the text, were what had disturbed Archer most.

The problem with dead martyrs? They died.

And: Joran's death, though deserved, unfortunately gave his message unmerited meaning and ensured that his teachings live on.

Lucius's zealous rantings were filled with rhetoric on the need to eliminate dissent:

Had not the heretic died a martyr, his teachings would not have taken root so firmly in our culture's infancy. The only way to eliminate their filth, their vile influence, therefore, is to eliminate Joran, the martyr.

When they'd scanned the planet to locate the shuttle, they'd found Druzilum a primitive society. Incapable of producing the type of vessel Lucius had piloted, it was one with brutal methods of punishment and difficult living conditions. One where the finesse of structure hadn't yet been born. These people still worshipped the stars; traveling to them was beyond their grasp.

T'Pol's scans of the book revealed further evidence. She'd found temporal inconsistencies that indicated Lucius had traveled from the future, on a quest to change the past.

They'd scanned the planet again, looking for nonindigenous life signs, hoping that Lucius would light up like a beacon. They'd beam him out and be done.

But he'd blended like a chameleon into the crowd.

Now, moving forward, Archer could smell death in the air. Sweat and adrenaline. The heightened awareness of mortality. The ease with which one man can wipe out another's existence with the drop of an axe on a pale neck, long hair pushed to either side to aid the executioner in his aim.

Watchers watched, licking their sun-dried lips, shifting their weight, eager. They wiped their brows; under the hot sun the air was thick and difficult to breathe. Rivers wound down their legs where sweat dripped, set solidly into place by kicked-up sand. Suspended around their respective necks were small burlap sacks, smoothed from being overfilled with what appeared to be dirt or dust as it trickled out from the bag's seams. Sackcloth and ashes? Archer wondered.

Twenty meters to the west of the platform, the parade approached.

Thirty men, at least. They'd emerged from a prisonlike structure, marching in goose step, wearing gray tunics and carrying spears. Half walked in front of two shackled men, half behind.

Archer watched the two men struggle, one muscular and blond, the other lithe and dark-haired, both wearing identical expressions of pained panic. The wind whipped their untethered locks into their faces where, matted with blood and perspiration, the hair stuck. They were stripped of all but a modest skirtlike covering, and Archer could see their muscles tremble under the weight of the tree stumps they carried lashed to their wrists on their backs. Even at this distance.

He watched the guard behind them snap the handle of his whip, shooting the leather laces to crack against the open sores on one man's back, then the other's. Their legs bent as their bodies absorbed the pain. The dark-haired man stumbled. Archer heard his anguished cry, and winced as the man's bloodied knees hit the ground, causing him to fall sideways, with a sick, thumping sound as his bones struck against the burden he carried.

Archer felt the weight of his mission press upon his own shoulders, even as he fought demons of pity and horror.

The men's entourage followed the open path through the center of this enthralled, horrified, blood-thirsty crowd who'd turned out for the spectacle of a public execution.

Every fiber of Archer's body tensed. Every instinct screamed to him to stop this torture, to pull out the secreted phaser, to save both of these men from this inhumane treatment, and both from impending death. But he didn't move. He was here to make certain Joran died. On schedule.

Not that he hadn't had his own doubts about this mission.

Before he and Trip had left Enterprise, T'Pol had accompanied them to the shuttlebay. While Trip worked the controls, preparing for departure, Archer and T'Pol discussed the consequences of interfering with an unsophisticated culture. She'd commented on the text Hoshi had translated so far, and on Lucius's apparent goal. "One of the psychiatrists in your world theorized about cultural coincidences. The 'Collective Unconscious,' he termed it. Although I doubt at the time, he envisioned its reaches would extend this far. In many ways," she'd said, "the myth Lucius is seeking to destroy is similar to the story of the prophet from Earth's first century."

"You're right," Archer had said, wincing at the thought of the impending execution. "I wonder..." he'd mused aloud as he aided with preflight preparation, "what would have happened had that prophet lived? His influence pervaded my entire culture, even touching areas that had nothing to do with the religion founded on his behalf. Think of how different things would have been if he'd been able to continue his teachings. If my world hadn't had to deal with religious wars throughout the centuries. How much better it would have been."

T'Pol arched her brows. "Would it?"

Flanked by four guards, the two men made it onto the stage. Blood streamed from their heads and backs, soaking through their tunics and running till there were streams of red intersecting down their legs.

To Archer, they looked like men resigned to their fate, animals beaten into submission, looking with brown-eyed longing for the master to spare them any more pain.

These were Joran and Bernardo. Of the text.

Joran. The man upon whose life the entire future Druzian culture was based. The man who may or may not have been a prophet. This was the man whose death had sparked arguments between opposing factions over his legitimacy, arguments that had escalated--would escalate--into wars. And according to Lucius's writings, these wars would last for over two millennia. This was the martyr whose death must proceed on schedule or risk corrupting the established timeline.

An older man, corpulent and red-faced beneath his graying black beard, heaved himself up the five stone steps leading to the stage. He wore a white tunic, longer than most. Its hem rippled in the breeze, while the upper portion, sweat-soaked, clung to his fleshy body in shapeless wet patches. His dress was augmented by a golden belt that rested below his protuberant belly, designating him a Druzian statesman. Tassles hanging off to his side swayed and shimmered in the sunlight as the man came forward.

Paltryn.

The guards came to attention and beat the ends of their spears against the metal plating of their shoes. The eerie high-pitched noise ceased the moment Paltryn's sandals scraped the stage. A hush fell over the crowd.

This was the moment Lucius had come to disrupt. And Archer couldn't see him. Anywhere.

If ever a voice matched a body, Paltryn's was it. His deep-timbered words carried over the spectators with a warm encompassing sound. He moved with natural grace, giving Archer the impression the man was comfortable in his mammoth skin. A born orator.

"As you know," he said, and Archer watched as the crowd tensed, waiting for every word as it danced on the wind from his lips, "today is the third day of the feast of Donasas. To thank him for the fruit of the vine and the wheat of the field, we honor his influence in our lives with the release of a prisoner. We choose to do this with the belief that Donasas will guide him in his future path, will make him a productive citizen of Druzilum, and will teach us all the power of repentance."

Murmurs from the crowd expressed approval.

"But today," he continued, his voice heavier, as though to express concern, "we have not one, but two men before us, sentenced to die for their crimes. One is Joran, a teacher, found guilty of sedition and of sacrilege. The other is Bernardo, guilty of thievery. They stand before you now." Paltryn stepped aside, making an expansive gesture with his hand. "And I ask you to decide. Which criminal do we set free?"

A cacophony of sporadic voices in different parts of the crowd began isolated chants. "Release Bernardo!"

Paltryn raised his arms, as though to disagree.

But they shouted again, "Release Bernardo!"

With a nod, Paltryn gestured to the guard who unlashd the stocky blond man's arms from the wooden log he carried. Once released, he shot a look to Joran that might have been pity, and limped off the stage as fast as his injured legs could carry him.

It was happening too fast, Archer thought. He moved as quickly as he could down the slope,

looking everywhere at once, gritting his teeth in frustration.

"One moment, Adjudicator!"

The voice rang out, clear in the silence. Far left of the stage.

Lucius.

Paltryn, with a startled look, searched the nearby throng for the source of the interruption. "Who speaks? What man disrupts our ceremony?"

Pushing his way to the front of the crowd, Lucius made his way up the same steps Paltryn used, but with a lightness to his bearing, a different sort of confidence in his step. He stood next to Paltryn, towering over the adjudicator, the contours of his muscles gleaming in the sun.

In the distance the clear sky began to darken. A line of clouds appeared, moving toward the center of the gathering. Archer thought he heard thunder.

"I stand before you not as a man. Nay!" Lucius's voice projected till its echo whispered back. "I stand before you as a gift. A gift from the Creator. I have come to stop your sin. I have come to forewarn you. To help redeem you, your children, and your children's children."

The passion in the man's voice was as palpable as the tang of hot bodies that pierced Archer's nose. He slid and shuffled through the groups of onlookers, moving as fast as he dared.

If the writings Hoshi found were to be believed, today was the holiest of all days, though no one present other than Lucius and Archer could be aware of it. Today marked the beginning of the Joranian religion. The religion Lucius sought to prevent now. Pleading with the people as he crossed the platform yet again, his entire body moved in a massive embrace. His words were slow, careful, clear.

Another rumble of thunder, this one closer, caused Archer to look up. Storm clouds, with heavy black bottoms and puffy white tops, began to gather above in slow motion. The sunlight streamed between their amorphous shapes, causing silver shadows and an unnatural brightness on the ground.

"You must not put Joran to death. His death will reverberate for centuries hence. His followers have studied the ancient scrolls. They will want you to believe that he is the prophet whose coming was foretold."

Lucius took a deep breath, his fervor building. "They will steal into his tomb late tonight. They will remove his body, then tell tales of his return from the dead. But he is no more than a madman. A madman who calls himself a teacher, he will fracture the very fabric of Druzilum's culture. His followers will begin a new religion, and wars will commence. Wars that will scorch this land, and destroy all you hold dear today."

His fingers stretched wide, as though carrying a weighty bowl, he strode left, his entire body striving, begging.

"Ignore me and be damned!"

With his face glowing pink from the heat and exertion, he stretched his muscular arms wide, tilting his bearded chin to the sky.

As yet another cloud joined the collection above, the sun blazed, unabated, between them. A searing bolt of lightning flashed, causing all the people gathered to blink in its brightness.

Archer listened to the words, even as he wove through the collection of bodies, feeling the hot smear of sweat on his bare arms as he pushed between spectators standing close together. They swayed from side to side as Archer thrust his way through them, straining to keep watch on the stage. Mostly men, their bodies smacked against one another, making little noises of separation as they moved, and yet all of them were oblivious to everything save the action down below.

As Archer drew closer, he could see the veins standing out in Lucius's neck, rippled in bas-relief. Lucius shook his head in large theatrical motion. He, too, knew how to capture attention. He knew how to sustain it.

Paltry's easy demeanor seemed to shatter as the other man took control. The adjudicator's voice now held uncertainty. "You have no business here. I do not recognize your face." He looked as though about to gesture the guards forward when Lucius spoke again, loud enough to be heard. Quiet enough to turn every ear his way.

"I bring you the gift of...prophecy."

The crowd turned silent. Even the wind seemed to still.

Archer wound through the masses, working his way to the center.

Paltry's face transformed. He said a simple, "Ah," as a smile curled slowly upward. "You do?" The sarcasm in his tone was meant to recapture control. But already the whispered word "prophet" had begun snaking through the crowd.

Lucius was patient, almost as though speaking to a child. "You don't believe me," he said. It was not a question.

From within his tunic, he drew out a weapon. Similar to a phase pistol, it was more streamlined, with a well-defined trigger mechanism and handle. Sinister-looking in its deep gray color and shape.

This primitive society had never encountered such a weapon before. They had no fear; no one stepped back. Paltry didn't look impressed in the least. He motioned to the guards. "Seize him."

Lucius smiled. "God's fire," he said in a soft voice. He aimed his weapon at the nearest guard. As he pressed the trigger, a beam shot forward, lancing the man, who uttered a short noise of instant pain--a noise that stopped abruptly as his body vaporized before hundreds of eyes. Vaporized from the inside out.

Silent for a long moment, the crowd looked to Lucius. Their bloodthirsty anticipation, their murderous leanings, fell away in a flash as the women in the audience began to wail and cry. Archer could feel the collective confusion, and the terrified curiosity as it washed over the gathered spectators. No one moved.



Archer gripped the parchment text at his waist, feeling its crisp fragility in his fingers. He wanted to reread the translated words even though they were committed to memory from his constant referral. He wanted assurance that they hadn't suffered change.

But he couldn't stop now. Blind to any thought other than reversing the consequences of all that had just transpired, Archer told himself that maybe it wasn't too late. He used his left arm as a barrier to push through the last assembly of spectators, as he pulled out his phase pistol with his right.

He heard gasps next to him, "He has God's fire too," someone said, as those nearest him backed away.

Taking the advantage as recognition registered on Lucius's face, Archer pressed the controls of the pistol and sent Lucius, stunned, to the ground. As he fell, lightning crackled again. Thunder boomed.

Archer boosted himself up onto the stage in a fluid motion. "No, wait!" he shouted to the crowd, which had moved in closer now, so close he almost felt their collective hot breath on his skin. He reached into his tunic again, and pulled out his mobile communicator, ignoring the murmured reaction of the crowd as he did so.

He whispered into the device, "Trip, are you getting this?" as he bent to relieve Lucius of his weapon, tucking his own phase pistol back into his waistband.

"Loud and clear, sir."

Paltryn, beside himself with this most recent turn of events, sputtered as he faced the crowd, then turned to the spectacle onstage, then faced the crowd again, clearly perplexed.

Archer met Joran's eyes over Lucius's prone body. What he saw in their brown depths moved him. He couldn't explain why, and he probably never would, but it was as though Joran knew him. That was, of course, impossible. But Archer hesitated. Could he truly advocate the murder of this man?

Turning to the crowd, he pointed down at Lucius. "This man," he said, raising his voice to be heard above the rising thunder, "is no more a prophet than you or I. This man is..." he gazed at the faces turned toward him, thinking quickly of a concept they would understand, "an evil spirit. Come to do you harm. Come like a thief in the night to rob you of your history. We create our own histories every day. You must make your own decisions and not rely on those who would serve their own purpose."

Archer moved his arms to encompass Paltryn and Joran. "Your adjudicator presented you with a choice. Which..." he hesitated at the next word, "...criminal to free. And you have chosen. Do not allow evil spirits to influence you. Reach into your heart and decide for yourselves. You know I speak the truth. You can feel it. I know you can."

Paltryn stepped forward, at Archer's urging. Whispering encouragement to the adjudicator, Archer stepped farther back on the stage and spoke softly into the communicator.

Paltryn nodded, looking out at the crowd. He took a long moment to gather himself, to pull his large body up to its full stature and to marshal his energy, it seemed. But there were no angry shouts. There was only deafening silence. "You have chosen to release Bernardo. Shall I also release the man named Joran, whose only crime was to teach kindness and

fellowship?"

Murmurs began in the back of the crowd, making their way forward. Archer could not make out their intent; he leaned forward to try and pick up snippets of conversation.

Archer sensed the movement even before he saw the shadow streak across the stage. He turned just as Lucius lunged, and managed to tuck his head down to ram into the man's gut, as he charged. They both went down in a tangle of arms and legs. Regaining his footing before Lucius could, Archer stood over the man, weapon trained on him. Lucius, his eyes wild with the knowledge that his quest was in jeopardy, lunged forward again. Archer grabbed at him, but came up only with his hands entangled with the sackcloth bag of ashes from around the other man's neck. As it began to spill, Archer thrust the ashes into Lucius's eyes, temporarily slowing his forward motion.

"I might need some help down here," Archer called into his communicator. He'd put space between them, and was about to speak again when Lucius gave a feral scream and tore after Archer, his eyes ablaze with an anger Archer had never seen in a man before.

Lucius grabbed Archer's arm in a death grip, pinching till Archer thought his forearm might bleed. The taller man attempted to wrest his weapon free from Archer's grasp, his fingers gripping and squeezing, making Archer's eyes tear as they fought. The barrel of the weapon began to turn toward Archer's face. With every ounce of strength in his body, Archer jammed it back toward Lucius, just as the man's weapon discharged.

Lucius's abbreviated scream as his body seared red from the inside out, echoed across the crater. And echoed in Archer's mind well after the sound had died.

"No..." Archer whispered. He stared at the place where Lucius had been. He'd come to stop him. And to ensure a man's death. He'd accomplished both, but not the way he'd intended. Everything was wrong. Everything.

Thunder rumbled again, in the distance. "Captain," his communicator chirped, "We need to get you outta there. Enterprise says this storm front's gonna last a couple weeks. She's a real doozy. If we don't get you out in the next ten minutes, the shuttle's stuck here till it passes."

Archer raised his eyes to the heavens. Ten minutes. Maybe he could get to a secluded spot in that amount of time. Maybe. If he ran. And Trip met him there. But he had to move. Now.

Sporadic shouts of "Free Joran" began to rise from the crowd, met with other, more desperate sounds of "Slay him!" The discordant yells commingled into an indecipherable roar as the crowd surged forward. The soldiers guarding the stage lowered their spears to stop the advancing hordes, some of them starting to break ranks and flee.

"Stop this madness!" shouted a frantic Paltryn, raising his arms.

The stage was about to be overrun. "Trip, get me out of here," Archer said into his communicator. Holding it near, he looked down at Joran. The dark brown eyes stared back at him with a knowing compassion.

"Captain? I'm en route. Enterprise can't getcha till I triangulate your position, so hang on."

As yet another, closer crack of thunder filled the air, accompanied by roiling black clouds

and sparks of lightning, Archer glimpsed a silver flash out of the corner of his eye. He heard the sonic boom as the shuttle broke the planet's sound barrier.

"I'm sorry," Archer said, leaning forward, instinctively placing his hand on Joran's shoulder. A sudden tingling sensation began to overtake him and Archer knew that he'd made a tragic mistake.

Seconds later, he and Joran materialized aboard Enterprise. Lieutenant Reed's face was apologetic and concerned at the same time.

"I'm sorry, sir. We ran out of time."

"Reed--"

"I'll send him back, sir. Right away."

Joran, his face suffused with calm curiosity, nodded. As though accepting of his surroundings. As though unfazed by it all. As Reed worked the controls, the bedraggled Druzian prophet faced Archer.

"May the blessings of our Creator be with you," he said.

And then he was gone.

Alone in his quarters, having cleansed the sticky sand from his body, and now rubbing his clean-shaven chin, Archer sat alone on his bed, the translated text in his left hand. He was almost afraid to read it. What had he done? How had his actions impacted this society?

The paper crinkled as he unfolded it. Hoshi had finally been able to translate the rest of it:

And so Paltryn brought Joran and Bernardo before the crowd, and the voices cried out to free the thief and slay the prophet. And three times more did Paltryn address the crowd, and three times more they held fast.

And thus, as Bernardo was released, Joran did not raise his head nor did he plead for mercy. And as it was set to have the executioner slay him, did another man come to address the crowd.

And this man, and still another, who were emissaries sent by the Creator, did battle for the prophet's life, and the emissary of evil was doth slain. The heavens roared as a dark storm crossed over the land, and the sky was split by a thunderous roar like none ever seen before, and Joran was then swept up by the Creator.

And then the crowd did surge forth, demanding justice and that Joran be spared and returned to them.

And so the Creator, taking pity upon his people, did return Joran, his son, to the world so that his teachings of peace and goodness could be taught.

Archer folded the paper into neat quarters, pressing the edges crisp as he thought about Druzilum. He'd gone there to prevent timeline corruption. To keep Lucius from changing the past--

Archer shook his head in frustration. He'd made it back to Enterprise, safe and sound, which was more than he could say for Lucius. And yet it had all been changed. Everything.

Chimes broke into his reverie.

T'Pol stood in the doorway. "I thought you might want to read this," she said, her face impassive.

"What is it?"

"The remainder of the holy text Lucius brought aboard. It continues the history of the planet. Through the twenty-fifth century."

"And?"

"Hoshi completed the translation." She opened it and turned to the middle of the book, "This is the section you have, where Joran was taken up to the heavens and returned in a storm of power and light." She paged to the end of the book. "And if you recall, Lucius's notes spoke of wars that began amid controversy over whether or not Joran was truly a prophet sent by the Creator. Wars that lasted over two thousand years."

"And now?" Archer wanted to know. Didn't want to know.

"And now the planet--the future planet--enjoys peace and prosperity. Unrivaled in the galaxy. According to all belief systems in Druzilum, Joran was clearly a messiah sent from the Creator. All that transpired during your mission..." T'Pol didn't finish her sentence.

Archer stood up and walked over to the window, "Convinced even the nonbelievers that Joran was their savior."

T'Pol nodded.

Archer ran a weary hand across his face, massaging his eyes. "Is it my fault?"

"Placing blame under circumstances such as these, achieves nothing."

Archer kept his back to her. "I will be making a complete report to Starfleet. I'll expect you to include your comments regarding the situation in your report, Sub-commander."

"On the contrary, I would suggest eliminating all record of our encounter with Druzilum."

Archer turned, "What?"

"The text, as we see it here, speaks of a world that knows only peace."

"You're not suggesting that the ends justify the means?"

"Not at all. What I am suggesting is that if the citizens of Druzilum indeed follow the words of their prophet..." she raised an eyebrow before continuing, "they will work toward creating their own history every day. This book will continue to change as their civilization changes. To file a report now, with Starfleet, could endanger the Druzian culture, bringing chaos to their society should the record of that report ever become available to them."

"Are you suggesting I lie?"

"I am suggesting this text be destroyed, and that we...forget...that the event ever took place."

She turned away. He heard the doors open and sensed her hesitation, even before she spoke. "Captain?"

He turned. "Yes?"

Her hands clasped behind her back, she was the picture of serenity. Archer wished he could feel some of that tranquility himself. Her voice was quiet and even. "The text talks about the prophecy of the ancient scrolls. They predicted the life and death of Joran. Centuries before we arrived here, they predicted his disappearance and they predicted his reappearance. With all that is unknown regarding time travel, it is logical to allow for one other possibility."

"And that is?"

"That Enterprise was always part of Druzilum's history."

Archer gave a wry smile. "Thank you."

As she left, he turned back toward the window and gazed at the tiny planet below, spinning like a blue and silver marble in the dark expanse of sky. As they broke orbit, Archer leaned forward, placing both hands wide on the window, straining to keep the planet in view as long as he could.

Archer released a long breath. Perhaps the bird in the desert had made it home with its prize after all.

Preconceptions

Penny A. Proctor

The silence in the classroom was so complete that it was possible to hear the light swish of the teacher's robes against the floor. Trip Tucker and twenty-nine other high school students selected for this elite summer program stared in confusion at the teacher as he moved toward the podium.

The teacher was a Vulcan.

At least, Trip was pretty sure he was a Vulcan. In all of his fifteen years, he'd never actually met one in person; even though they'd been on Earth for more than seventy years, they rarely ventured far from their compound except for government meetings and some interaction with the space agency. Every once in a while, the newsvids would show one. But the guy standing at the podium, surveying the class, was either a Vulcan or dressed up for Halloween.

Beside him, a boy he didn't know whispered, "What's going on?"

Trip shook his head. "I dunno," he whispered back. "but that sure ain't Yelena Marinin."

"Good morning," the Vulcan said. If he noticed the stunned looks on the faces of the students, he gave no sign. "My name is Velik. Dr. Marinin was called away to consult on a

special project, so I will be your instructor for the next six weeks. As I am not well known on this planet, I have placed my curriculum vitae in the databanks on your consoles. I believe you will find I am sufficiently qualified to serve as her replacement."

No one moved, Trip noticed. Everyone was staring.

"First, let me commend you all on your presence in this classroom," Velik continued. "The Roykirk School sets very high standards for this summer honors program, and each of you earned your seat. I have reviewed each of your records, and you show great potential for being so young. While most of you have finished your final year of high school, there are a few juniors and one sophomore among you."

His words slid past Trip, the lone sophomore, without registering. He looks so normal, he thought. Yeah, his skin was a little on the green side and his ears were pointed, but still, he was just...normal. Somehow, Trip had expected a Vulcan to be taller and more imposing. Velik couldn't have been more than a meter and a half tall and was slightly built.

Velik paused, and in the void a girl's voice blurted out, "You're a Vulcan!"

"Very observant." Velik moved to the front of the podium. "Who made that statement, please?"

Trip turned in his chair and saw a pretty blond in a lime green dress blushing deeply. "Uh, I did, sir," she admitted, raising her hand.

"And your name?"

She bit her lower lip. "Martha Nyquist."

"Miss Nyquist, discussion in this class will be encouraged. There are times when a statement of the obvious will trigger a chain of thought that leads to a new discovery." Velik paused, then asked, "Why does the presence of a Vulcan teacher surprise you?"

"Well, uh, I've never met a Vulcan before." Now her face was almost glowing with embarrassment and she lowered her eyes to the floor.

"Ah. Has anyone in this class ever had personal interaction with a nonhuman before today?" He looked around the room and when no one raised a hand or gave any indication of assent, he continued. "Then everyone shall be on equal footing. Let us spend a few minutes discussing expectations. What do you expect from a Vulcan instructor?"

There was an awkward silence as the students looked at one another. Finally Trip blurted out, "Not much."

The teacher's dark eyes honed in on him. "Stand up, please."

From the way his face was burning, Trip knew he must be as red as Martha Nyquist had been a moment ago. His stomach churned like a catfish on a hook. He rose and tried not to look at any of his new classmates.

"What is your name?"

"Trip Tucker."

"Trip? I remember a Charles Tucker on the roster. The tenth grade applicant."

It seemed impossible, but his face got even hotter. "That's me."

"Well, Mr. Tucker, tell me why you expect so little from me."

For three long heartbeats, he froze. His mind just shut down and refused to form an answer. The only thought that occurred to him was that he was going to get expelled from the Roykirk School on the very first day. Finally he managed to say, "It's just that--well, it's a well-known fact that Vulcans don't teach humans anything."

Velik blinked. "Indeed? Could you elaborate, please?"

Wishing he could simply vanish, Trip swallowed hard. "If you were here to teach us stuff, y'all would-a helped us build the warp-five engine already."

For a moment, the teacher simply looked at him. Then he reached into his pocket and removed a metallic sphere. He came all the way to the back and handed it to Trip. "That, Mr. Tucker, is a warp-five engine."

Trip looked at the object in his hand, then back to the teacher. "No, it's not."

"For the sake of discussion, let's hypothesize that it is. I have just handed you a warp-five engine. What have you learned?"

"What?"

"What have you learned, Mr. Tucker? Do you understand the principles that make it work?"

"Well, no, not yet," Trip began. Then he realized where Velik was heading and said quickly, "But I can decompile it and figure that stuff out. All I need is a little time."

Velik nodded. "But if you learn how it works through reverse engineering, are you certain that you will capture all the steps that must be included in its function? Will you understand the principles well enough to understand its relationship to the structural integrity of the ship that houses it? Will you know how to fix it if it is damaged?"

Trip looked at the sphere for several seconds. Reverse engineering only worked on the individual component. Most of the time you couldn't tell whether that component was part of a larger system, and even if you could, you couldn't tell much about that system.

He was still considering when Velik said quietly, "And even if you know how the engine works, do you know how it should be used?"

Looking up, Trip met the Vulcan's dark eyes. He saw no ridicule in them, only interest. Velik actually looked interested in what Trip was going to say. Squaring his shoulders, he handed the sphere back to the teacher. "No, sir. I sure don't."

The teacher pocketed the sphere and said mildly, "Preconceptions, Mr. Tucker. You must challenge your preconceptions, or they will challenge you."

Velik returned to the front of the classroom as Trip slid back into his seat. He was suddenly

aware that he was the center of attention and straightened up, trying to look as if nothing had happened.

"It is neither my intention to simply hand over technology," Velik said to them, "nor to do nothing but lecture to you. Neither are useful methods of teaching, on Earth or Vulcan. Rather, each of you is going to build something. Something new."

Trip leaned forward without realizing it.

"I am told that no one from this program has ever produced a successful submission to the Cherenko-Cochrane Competition. It will be our objective to produce at least three projects which will be accepted for next year's competition."

His eyes wide with surprise, Trip leaned forward a little over his desk. The Cherenko-Cochrane Competition was one of the most prestigious on the planet. Usually only university and graduate students entered, but there was no lower age limit and over the years a few high school projects had been accepted. To be eligible, a project had to be functional, related to space travel, and above all, new--an entirely new concept or a new application of an older concept. The quality of submissions was so high that it was astonishing that the Vulcan would want to try for three from the high school level.

With an effort, Trip pulled himself back to reality and realized that Velik was looking around the room, apparently gauging the reactions of the students in the sudden quiet. "Are there questions?"

The boy next to Trip raised his hand and then stood. "Three entries? Isn't that a little unrealistic? I mean, only one project out of every fifty entered makes the preliminary cut."

"One out of fifty-one point six," Velik said. "Are you saying that you aren't capable of producing a suitable entry?"

Like the others before him, the young man became flustered in the face of the Vulcan's directness. "No, that's not--I mean, we're just high school kids, and--and we've only got six weeks--well, look at the odds."

"Preconceptions, sir. I admit it will not be easy, but it will be impossible if you begin with the belief that you will fail." He moved behind the desk and sat. "Please activate your monitors. Your first assignment is to draft a proposal for a project you wish to lead. You will find a list of general categories from which to design a project, and texts and other resources to assist you."

Trip swiftly scanned the materials on the desktop monitor. The range of categories looked like it came right out of the Global Astronautics and Space Agency--no, no no, he reminded himself, they were calling it Starfleet now, which was a good thing since the acronym GASA prompted a whole lot of bad jokes. Propulsion, defensive systems, communications, artificial gravity, waste management...waste management? Scratch that. No way was he going to work on a poop project. Antimatter containment. Plasma vents. Fire suppression. Water purification. Protein resequencing. Oh, man, it was like someone asked him to pick his favorite daydream.

The rest of the day went quickly, and Trip was amazed when the computer monitors darkened, signaling the end of the class. Velik dismissed them and disappeared back into his office. Feeling dazed, Trip began to gather his things.



The boy next to him smiled. "Hey, Tucker, you did well."

"Thanks," Trip said.

"I'm Chris. Are you really just a sophomore?"

"Not anymore," he said, feeling defensive. Chris was obviously older; he had probably graduated already. Compared to the easy athletic grace of the other boy, Trip felt gawky and...young. "I'll be a junior when classes start again."

"You made the Roykirk Summer Camp in tenth grade? That's really something." He smiled with genuine pleasure as he picked up his own belongings. "What dorm are you in? Want to get something to eat?"

Trip relaxed. He'd made a friend.

Five days later, Trip again had a hard time containing his excitement as he slipped into his seat. This was the day that Mr. Velik would announce the six project proposals he deemed worthy of pursuit. The student who submitted the proposal would be the leader of the team assigned by Mr. Velik.

Just writing the proposal had been educational. Mr. Velik required them to meet the same standards as the university and graduate students. The proposal not only needed to outline the basic idea and anticipated outcome, but also identify likely resources needed for construction, the expertise needed on the team, the amount of time for assembly and the projected cost. The Vulcan had worked with each student to refine one point or another. Chris had been told to abandon his original idea and try again. Trip had been advised to refine his resource list three times.

Trip had done hours of research just to come up with his basic idea, the development of a coolant system to reduce the temperature of plasma conduits that vented from the antimatter engines. One of the many problems with the warp-5 engine was that the antimatter reaction produced a superheated plasma which required extensive baffling to protect the rest of the engines. The only solution found so far was a crude system that was both unwieldy and difficult to maintain. Trip was certain there was a simpler way, and he thought he had figured it out. He had spent hours mapping out the project, identifying the resources he would need, checking on the cost of components, and setting a value on his time and that of his teammates.

Yes, Trip knew he had already learned a lot, but learning alone wasn't enough. He wanted to win. He wanted to be the first tenth grade student to ever get a project into the Cherenko-Cochrane Competition.

As usual, Mr. Velik came out of his adjoining office and took his place at the desk a moment or two after the class officially began. As usual, the Vulcan began without greeting or introduction. "I wish to commend you all," he said. "Each proposal that was submitted showed effort and creative thinking. There were six, however, which demonstrated not only imagination, but also a grasp of the practical limitations facing starship engineers. These are the six that we shall pursue over the next five weeks. Depending on the outcome, I shall determine which, if any, are viable candidates for submission. The list is now in the database."

His heart pounding with anticipation, Trip looked to Chris beside him. They had become friends since that first day, and now Chris grinned at him, holding up both hands. All of his fingers were crossed for luck. He barely managed to activate his monitor.

Trip had no such problem. In seconds, he had pulled up the list. Six names, alphabetical order--and there, fifth in the line, was "Tucker, C."

His breath escaped in a whoosh of relief, followed by a quick surge of disappointment as he saw Chris's name wasn't on the list. Then he felt someone from behind slap his shoulder in congratulations and Chris punched him in the arm. He wanted to shout, but managed to keep it to a short, happy laugh.

Mr. Velik waited for the noise to subside, looking at them all with a bemused expression. "I confess, I do not understand the human need for celebration of minor matters. It is a most illogical use of time and energy. If you check your monitors, you will now find the team assignments. As of today, seats will be rearranged so that teammates are grouped together."

Trip activated his monitor and eagerly scrolled down to see who was assigned to his project. When he reached the final team, he blinked, then raised his hand. "Mr. Velik, I think there's a mistake here."

"Why do you think that, Mr. Tucker?"

"This only shows one other person on my team."

"That is correct, Mr. Tucker. I believe you and your assigned partner are quite capable of completing this project by yourselves."

Trip's elation suddenly drained away. "But--but my proposal specified a team of at least four."

"True. However, I believe that was an overestimate." The Vulcan didn't smile, but in some inexplicable way, he managed to convey a sense of smiling. "Your partner had a remarkably similar idea and he estimated a team of only two."

The teacher's calm confidence simply made Trip angry; how could he stand there and say that? Trip was just a kid, and not a genius by anyone's definition. Was Mr. Velik setting him up to fail? His chest was about to explode but he swallowed the hot words that had leapt to mind. The frustration of keeping silent made him feel flushed and embarrassed. He stared into Mr. Velik's dark eyes for several seconds, then lowered his gaze.

"Preconceptions, Mr. Tucker," the teacher said to him. "Your proposal is a set of preconceptions that you must continually challenge. Only in that way can you be certain of the truth."

Trip bit his lower lip. It would have been incredibly stupid to say he was disappointed; his assigned partner was Chris, his closest friend in the class. He slid a glance sideways, and saw that Chris was looking at him with a rueful expression that held no animosity. Trip's heart picked up speed and he swallowed, hard. Then he turned back to Mr. Velik. "Yeah," he said. "We can do it."

"We'll never do it," Chris groaned quietly as they hunched over the simulator in the

engineering lab a week later. "We've been at this for fourteen straight days and we don't even have a mock-up that works."

"Don't be a pessimist," Trip said, but he was frowning. "The problem is the speed of the plasma flow. If we can just regulate that, the whole thing will work. I'm sure of it."

"It's hopeless." He sat up straighter on his lab chair, scowling deeply.

Surprised, Trip looked up at him. They had been working together ten and twelve hours a day for two weeks, and he had never been anything but optimistic. "What's wrong?" he asked quietly, so no one else would hear. Mr. Velik was just on the other side of the room, and they were supposed to be working.

"I'm just not getting it," Chris whispered back. "Maybe I don't belong in this class."

"Sure you do. Why would you think you don't?"

Chris shook his head. "Because I can't figure this out."

"Well, heck, there's nothing to it," Trip said solemnly. "We just have to modulate the flow rate by combining the precursor of the byproduct with the cosine of the tangent, taking into account the oscillation of the spatial harmonics and the temperature of a glass of milk on the far side of the moon on Tuesdays."

Chris stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"You mean you didn't get that?" He grinned at him.

It took him a minute to realize Trip had been joking, but then he chuckled, perhaps a little more loudly than the joke merited. Across the room, Mr. Velik looked at them, his normally neutral expression suddenly transformed into a frown.

"Please tell us," the Vulcan said, his voice slicing through the buzz in the room, "what do you find humorous?"

Chris flushed deeply, and licked his lips. The room was now quiet but for the occasional chirp from a computer. "I, uh--"

"It's my fault, Mr. Velik," Trip interjected. "I just made a suggestion that was so stupid that he had to laugh."

"Ah." Their teacher crossed the room and came over to them, apparently satisfied that the discussion could be continued more privately. Even so, the room remained quiet and Trip was keenly aware of his classmates looking at him surreptitiously. "What was the suggestion?"

"Well, you see, we're having a problem regulating the speed of plasma flow," Trip said, improvising madly. "I thought that we could, uh, well, it was pretty stupid."

"What, Mr. Tucker?"

Trip glanced at Chris, but he looked stiff as a possum three days after the hound got it. There would be no help there, Trip realized, and said slowly, "Well, I was thinking about your

lecture last week on spatial harmonics and overlapping frequencies."

"With regard to plasma flow? I can understand your partner's reaction." But instead of leaving, the teacher bent and looked at their simulation. "Interesting. Interesting indeed. I had not considered the effect of the wave harmonics on the velocity of the plasma. Don't dismiss that thought, Mr. Tucker, at least not without a few tests. You may be on to something."

"Really?" Trip's voice came out in a squeak of disbelief.

"Really," Velik said solemnly, and moved on.

Trip stared at the back of the teacher. "Do you think he meant it? Did we hit on something?"

"You probably did." Something in the tone of Chris's voice made Trip pull his gaze from the teacher to him. The expression on his face made Trip feel five centimeters taller. "Thanks. You really saved me."

No one older than Trip had ever said that to him. Heck, no one at all had ever said that to him. All of his blood fled from his brain to heat his face. "Uh, you're welcome."

Chris grinned, apparently pleased that he had managed to unnerve the younger partner of the team. "What exactly was that about spatial harmonics? Mr. Velik thought it was brilliant."

The Roykirk School encouraged the students to balance their academic lives with physical activity, even in the concentrated summer camp. The encouragement turned to directive if not followed, and the mandated exercise was group calisthenics, which was just about as low as anyone could go on the scale of cool. Trip and Chris had agreed early on to avoid that fate by playing basketball for an hour every evening, even if it was just one-on-one for a game of Horse.

Saturdays weren't days off, not at the Roykirk Summer Camp; the classrooms and labs were open most of the day, and no one dared miss even an afternoon. Trip and Chris had made a point of meeting at the basketball court every Saturday after the lab closed for a little one-on-one before dinner. This particular Saturday, though, Trip tossed nearly fifty free-throw attempts before Chris showed up. He found himself thinking about his friends back home and what they were doing this summer. He was missing a lot of good fishing and good parties, but he wouldn't trade places with any of them.

Then he heard Chris call his name. Looking over his shoulder, he saw his friend looking tense and unhappy. "How's it goin'?" Trip asked.

"Rotten." Chris held his hands out for the ball and caught the pass, then dribbled to the top of the key.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't believe I gave up my last summer of swimming for this stupid project. I tell you, Trip, I don't know what I was thinking." He took aim and shot the ball. It hit the rim and flew back toward them. Trip snagged it easily, and began to dribble it himself.

"You were thinkin' what the rest of us were thinkin'--that getting a project into the competition would be the best thing that ever happened to us." Trip gave him a lopsided smile.

"Yeah, right. And don't give me that I'm-so-innocent grin. You want to be the youngest Cherenko-Cochrane contestant ever." Chris hit him in the arm, hard enough to hurt. "Think you're hot stuff, Tucker?"

"Stuff it," Trip said angrily and whirled to shoot. The ball hit the backboard, bounced off the rim and into Chris's hands. Trip ran in to block his shot, but Chris suddenly tucked the ball under one arm.

"I feel like I'm wasting my summer. My last summer before college. Don't you feel that way?"

"No. And you won't either, once the project is submitted."

Chris looked at him, almost hopefully. "You really believe that we're going to get in?"

"Mr. Velik is a Vulcan. He probably knows more about starship engineering than any human on this planet, even Henry Archer. If he thinks our project is good enough, then it's good enough." Trip looked at his friend, silently challenging him to refute that logic.

After a few seconds, Chris said, "Yeah. You're right."

"Course I'm right." He grinned widely. "You just wait and see. We're gonna be famous. We're gonna be so famous that they'll be beggin' us to join Starfleet before we even apply. Now are you gonna stand there, or are you gonna play?"

"You are here late," the familiar voice said.

Trip looked up and saw Mr. Velik coming into the engineering lab. "Just a few finishing touches. After all, tomorrow's the big day."

His teacher nodded. "Yes. You have worked very hard, Mr. Tucker, and made great progress."

The Vulcan sounded odd, Trip thought. His voice was hoarse and strained. "You sound like you're catching a cold."

"A cold? No." After a moment he added, "However, I am feeling unwell."

"You should see a doctor," Trip said, feeling awkward. He'd never had a conversation with his teacher that wasn't directly related to some aspect of his project.

"There is no need. My people are susceptible to this particular...ailment...periodically. Although I am currently being affected somewhat sooner than anticipated, I will recover." He looked at Trip for several seconds, then said, "I am returning to Vulcan, Mr. Tucker. I will not be here for tomorrow's class. Dr. Marinin has agreed to return to finish the last few days in my absence."

Trip stared. "But--but what about the projects? What about the competition?"

"I have left my recommendations for Dr. Marinin."

"Oh." Trip realized suddenly that the results wouldn't mean as much coming from someone else. He wanted to know whether he had won this man's approval. "Mr. Velik, I--did you--" he broke off, uncertain of how to phrase his question. Finally he chose the direct approach.

"Did my project make the cut?"

Velik hesitated before speaking. "It is not proper that you should learn the results before the other students. However, I will say this, Mr. Tucker. You have a mind, an agile mind, which you should cultivate."

Trip felt his heart drop, and in that moment he knew his project hadn't been good enough. "That means you didn't recommend my project, doesn't it? You're just tryin' to let me down easy."

"There is no logic in your statement. You will learn the results with the others." Trip blinked at the vehemence behind his teacher's words. Then Mr. Velik seemed to gather himself, and then raised a hand to his brow. Trip realized he was actually sweating; he'd never seen the Vulcan perspire before, even on the hottest and most humid days. "When you hear the results, Mr. Tucker, when the entire class hears the results, I hope you will ask yourselves whether you exceeded your own expectations. I will tell you, you all exceeded mine. I am honored to have been your teacher."

"Thank you, sir."

"I would appreciate it if you would not mention my departure to anyone."

"Of course." As Velik turned to go, Trip added, "I hope you have a good flight home. Will you be back next year?"

"As to that, I do not know. It would be my preference, but I go where the dean sends me."

"Mr. Velik? What's it like? To travel at warp five, I mean."

Velik looked at him thoughtfully. "I have no doubt, Mr. Tucker, that one day you will learn that for yourself."

The next morning the class saw the human woman standing at the teacher's lectern as they filed in, and the whispering began. From two seats over, Chris faced Trip and mouthed, "Is that--?"

Trip nodded. "Marinin," he mouthed back.

"What's going on?" Chris whispered out loud, but Trip only shrugged.

"Good afternoon, class," she said above the buzz, which ceased immediately. "I am Dr. Yelena Marinin. Mr. Velik was recalled to Vulcan unexpectedly this morning. I will be with you the next few days, to help you wind things up."

She smiled, a friendly type of smile that seemed somehow out of place in Mr. Velik's classroom. "I'm going to do things a little differently than Mr. Velik had planned. Since I am not familiar with the work you have done so far, I am going to ask each of you to present your project. Half the presentation will be demonstration and explanation and half will be responding to my questions, and those of your classmates."

Confused silence was the response to her statement. She waited a few moments, then said, "Is there a problem?"

Chris raised his hand, and she pointed to him. "Uh, what about the Cherenko-Cochrane competition? Mr. Velik was going to tell us today which projects he was going to recommend for submission."

Her face clouded somewhat. "Oh. I see. Well, according to the notes he left me, he felt all of the projects exceeded his expectations but none rose to the level needed for submission to the contest."

There was another stunned silence. Trip felt as if the world had just tilted on its axis. "That must be a mistake, ma'am," he said, not bothering to raise his hand. "He told us that we could do it. He told us."

"I'm sorry," she said. "The deadline for preliminary submission was yesterday. I'm afraid that none of your projects were sent to the screening committee."

From somewhere in the room, a male voice clearly muttered, "That lying, pointy-eared--"

Dr. Marinin looked up sharply. "That will be the end of that. Disrespect for a teacher will not be tolerated."

"You don't understand," Martha said. Her voice was strained, as if she were about to cry. "We worked all summer. He told us we could get three entries in."

"No, he didn't," Chris said, looking angry. "He said it was our objective. He never promised to submit any of them."

"That's not how he acted." Trip spoke slowly, the words coming on their own. "He sure acted like he was goin' to. But we just weren't good enough for him after all."

And suddenly Trip felt a hot rush of anger that replaced his initial shock. Mr. Velik had led them on, treated them like little children who needed the promise of dessert to finish dinner. And Trip had believed him--that was the worst part, he had believed him. He felt like a complete fool.

"We should have known better. You just can't trust Vulcans," someone else said bitterly, and Trip nodded in agreement.

"Stop that, now." Dr. Marinin's voice cracked through the room. "I can see that you are disappointed, but I feel certain there was a misunderstanding. No one with any integrity could have promised to submit anything to the screening committee. I feel certain that Mr. Velik's only intention was to motivate you to stretch yourselves. And from what I've seen so far, I think he did an admirable job."

She glared at the class, until Trip and all the others slumped back in sullen defeat. "All right. The schedule for your presentations is now posted on your monitors. We'll begin in an hour."

The afternoon before they went their separate ways, Chris and Trip met at the basketball court at the recreational center for one last game. "When do you leave?" Trip asked him as he checked his shoelaces.

"In about a week." Chris had been accepted to the fledgling Starfleet Academy.

"You've gotta send me some pointers, you know? Tell me the secrets of getting in."

"You? It's in the bag." Chris dribbled the ball. "Anyone who gets selected for the Roykirk Summer Camp as a sophomore will be snapped up in a minute. Just don't get into trouble, and you'll be fine."

"Yeah, if the Vulcans will let them take me. I hear they tell everyone in Starfleet what to do."

"That'll change. Once we get the warp-five engine, we won't need them anymore." He tossed the ball to Trip.

"Can't be soon enough for me." Trip dribbled a bit himself, getting the feel of the ball after nearly a year's absence. "I'm sick and tired of kowtowin' to the Vulcans. They act like every word that come outta their mouths is holy writ. They think they know so much, but they don't know diddly squat about us yet."

Chris grinned and imitated their erstwhile teacher. "Preconceptions, Mr. Tucker?"

Trip shook his head. "My granddaddy has a sayin'--'fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.' Well, they aren't gonna fool me again. No matter what they say, it's real clear the Vulcans don't think a whole lot of us. Well, fine. Let's show 'em what we can do." Then he grinned, turned, and dribbled out to half court.

Before Chris could get set, Trip whirled and said, "Watch this, Mr. Velik." The ball arced gracefully toward the hoop.

Nothin' but net.

Cabin E-14

Shane Zeranski

Seal off Cabin E-14...God knows what else is in there.

Those were the captain's ominous words. Phlox hadn't actually been on the bridge when they had been (supposedly) spoken, but the latter half had turned into something of a catch phrase on Enterprise.

And now they whispered to him in dark, burdensome mystery, a mindless chant

(God knows what else is in there, God knows what else is in there) creeping through the boughs of his imagination.

Crewman Daniels had been a time traveler--was that even possible?--sent from the future. A cosmic savior of sorts, a temporal sentinel. He apparently had all manner of futuristic gizmos in his quarters--ship's specifications from here to eternity and holographic timelines that held visions of the future to make one's blood run cold, Captain Archer had said.

God knows what else is in there.

Sometimes this exploration business was just a bit too exciting.

Dr. Phlox took a weary breath, nodded to the security guards, and stepped into the uneasy silence of Cabin E-14.



Phlox's regulation of hazards to the Enterprise crew wasn't limited to a simple virus here, an annoying bacteria there, two hours in decon and be more careful next time, thank you very much. No, apparently temporal contamination fell under his jurisdiction, too. Although what good a bioscanner and complete knowledge of the Yalakian endocrine system were going to do against time--that old bald cheater--and all his bilking surprises, was beyond Phlox. How does one disinfect the past, how does one purify the future, how does one sterilize the present? Why, with sensible, pragmatic, matter-of-factness, of course. And who better suited for that task than the remarkable Sub-commander T'Pol? Why, the one and only Dr. Phlox, of course. Because T'Pol possessed a little too much objectivity in matters of, well...anything, Archer had said.

Phlox had chosen to do this alone; anyone flirting around in the background would interfere with his process. Two security men stood outside, however. Heavily armed.

The doors slid shut behind him, and he thought it sounded an awful lot like the sealing of his fate. He'd only been in here once before, and that had been a house call ten months ago. He looked around.

Sterile. And Daniels's quarters hadn't been touched. His roommate had promptly evacuated upon Captain Archer's orders, but aside from that, everything had been left as it was. Hmm. Not so odd if you thought about it. Why keep a photograph of grandmother when you could go back fifty years and pay a visit? And who needs a spare change of clothes when time is not perpetual to wear them?

Well, there would certainly be no surface cleaning, then. Good. But corners and closets, drawers and mattresses--they all hold greater secrets than the corners of the galaxy, don't they? Yes...but that would come later.

Phlox sighed and set down his tools on the lower bunk--Daniels's bed. He clasped his hands behind his back, pacing slowly, and simply observed. There was so much to find in nothing. Just as being inconspicuous made you conspicuous, so did answers lie in unasked questions--and Phlox wasn't going to ask a thing. He'd just observe, let the answers find him. Being prepared was enough.

He approached the desk to the left. A lamp rose from it. He flicked it on. There were scratches on the surface, noticeable, but not remarkable. A dark stain--coffee perhaps. Even fingerprints, smudgy under the bright light. Phlox left the lamp on and turned his attention from the desk, saving the drawers for later. He was about to proceed to the other end of the room when he noticed it. Between the floor and the desk. Very faint and...shifty.

A circle of the wall seemed to shimmer, as if it were being seen through a bowl of sloshed water. He blinked. Very strange, indeed.

More curious than cautious, he stepped toward it, reached down, and found his hands slipping around something not quite solid--like thick mud, he thought. He picked it up, and the cabin shimmered through it--the floor, the desk, the floor again, now the wall as he held it in front of him. It looked as though he was holding nothing--his hands outstretched in peculiar supplication, perhaps--but he felt it around his fingers. Cool and thick and electric. He waited.

Nothing. He expected a bzzz or a humm or a click. Something. When he'd entered the room--

clear your mind

Everything suddenly shifted, and he thought for a moment that he'd fallen through the floor, and then it was over. Phlox blinked. Falling through the floor, he could conceive of that, because Captain Archer had taken some kind of device from Daniels that allowed him to move through bulkheads, but--

He was at the door. It took him a moment to realize it, but in an instant he'd moved from the far wall to the door. His arms were no longer outstretched. They were at his sides, and instead of the invisible device in his hands, he was holding his tools again. His fingers tingled. Something was still on them.

God knows what else is in there.

He looked to the bed. No tools. And the light on the desk was off. He knew immediately he'd traveled through time. That wasn't so far-fetched, was it? Three months ago it had been, but the circumstances which brought a simple doctor from treating a head-cold to performing temporal decontamination had made time travel a reality.

Still, it scared him silly.

From the looks of things he'd gone back instead of forward. And only five minutes or so. But why? And how was he going to get back?

He started toward the space between the desk and the bed, fingers tingling like mad, and suddenly things shifted again, and he was there. He blinked. The invisible object was in his outstretched arms again (he could feel it). The lamp was on, and his tools were on the bed.

He'd traveled back. Just like that.

He dropped the object on the bed, and the mattress bowed from the pressure of the unseen. His knees buckled, and he caught himself on the corner of the desk, adding his own set of fingerprints. The logistics of the last two minutes (if it could actually be thought of in those terms) were staggering. Believing it and experiencing it were two entirely different things. A thousand paradoxes burned in his mind, and he struggled to put them out, but it was impossible.

He stared at the awkwardly shaped indentation where the sheets seemed to waver through the invisible object.

This is a dangerous place. And it is only the beginning. God knows what else is in here, indeed.

Phlox turned off the lamp, gathered his tools and promptly left Cabin E-14. "Seal it," he instructed security. "And allow no one inside until..." He stopped, hesitated. "Until I instruct," he finished hesitantly, and disappeared down the corridor.

Phlox spent an hour in sickbay trying to rewire his mind. He was going to tell Captain Archer immediately.

Immediately.

Right.

Sixty minutes passed while he stared absently at his caged lightning-snake, but it only seemed like a moment--time travel of a different sort, he thought.

Then he retreated to his quarters.

Clear your mind--it had been a whisper, a shadow of thought before he'd moved into the past. Was it a warning, an instruction, what?

He hadn't run into himself. He thought that was odd. All the time-travel stories he'd heard and read had someone running into themselves in the past and contaminating the timeline. But it didn't work that way, did it? No, he had become his past self. Time branched into an infinite number of directions, and he had merely revisited one of those alternate branches--an alternate universe. Time had moved, not him.

Then why didn't he remember it? Now there's a good puzzle, ye old bald cheater. Yes, he had walked into Cabin E-14 approximately two hours ago, but he didn't remember anything out of the ordinary--to him it had been the present, and nothing more. And five minutes later he had only visited the past and not engaged it.

After he went back, what if he'd waited five minutes? Would he have been in the present again? Or ten minutes--would he have been in the future?

"Archer to Phlox."

Phlox rose and went to the wall panel. "Go ahead, sir."

"Security tells me you've finished decontamination."

Decontamination. Ha ha. That really was funny now that he thought about it.

"Doctor?"

"...Oh...sorry. No, sir. I'm merely...analyzing some findings."

"Anything I should know about?"

Phlox didn't say anything until he felt that Archer was about to question him again. Then, softly: "No, nothing at all."

The doors to Cabin E-14 loomed above him like the gates to some unseen kingdom, wavering in and out in crimson tides as though through a pool of blood.

Phlox backpedaled. His feet were bare, and the tips of his fingers tingled with the madness of hungry sparks. He knew where he wanted to go, but he'd never make it past the doors. They would surely swallow him whole.

As if to endorse the thought, they suddenly warped both right and left, and the bulkhead bulged like a pregnant monster. They turned upward into a smile and parted, sprouting lips of steel and broken sheets of teeth, and then turned upon him, furious, fully yawning an ugly mouth, and surged forward, roaring and snarling.

CLEAR YOUR MIND, GOOD DOCTOR, CLEAR YOUR MIND AND BRING HER BACK FROM THE GRAVE BECAUSE TIME DOES NOT BIND ME!!

The doors fell over him, clamped his midsection, and began to drag him into the waiting darkness, and his fingers were aflame--

Phlox opened his eyes. He couldn't breath, and it took him several moments to realize it was because he was holding his breath. He let it out slowly, staring into the dark of the ceiling from the hot, moist sheets of his bunk. He hadn't dreamed for years, and he hadn't slept this deeply since hibernation.

Xesophia.

Her body would be rotted to a husk by now. How many years had it been? He had never missed her so furiously, and there was no wondering why. The night only made it worse. He closed his eyes and tried to put it out of mind.

It didn't work.

Xesophia.

No! Phlox threw the sheets from his body and sat up in his bunk. He slid his slippers over his bare feet. He would stretch his legs, that was all. He would steer clear of Cabin E-14, that much was certain.

With his heart in a fist, he left his quarters.

Yes, just stretch his legs.

Phlox touched the doors. They were freezing. He wasn't quite sure how it had happened, but...well, here he was. Cabin E-14.

Security was gone, of course, because...well, there was nothing to secure at this hour of the night. No one was around.

He could see the glow of the magnetic seal in the shadows. He knew the combination, and what a curse that was. Also, he was fairly sure how this strange device worked--he'd had seven hours and a hideous nightmare to come to a conclusion, and there was really only one to be reached.

His sane mind watched from the stands--booming and hissing--as he pressed in the code and the doors slid open. Nothing had changed. As expected. Only mystery lurked within.

Xesophia, here I come...

No! Stop!

But it was too late.

He was inside.

It was where he'd left it, on the bed. For a moment, he thought that perhaps he had dreamed everything, because he couldn't see it. But then his hands slipped around and into it, hot and

unsteady. A thick liquid seemed to pulse between his fingers, and he knew that was how he had made it back--the substance remained there, burning like a quiet fire, and it was enough to return him to the present.

This is how Daniels did it, he thought. How he slid so easily through time. It was a kind of telekinetic time-travel. Technology of the mind. Merely think where you want to go--and voila!--there you were. That's why he'd traveled only five minutes, because that's where his mind had been. And when he wanted to get back...well, it was as simple as that.

Everything rational and ethical and professional told him to stop and leave. Right now. He should drop everything and report to Captain Archer in his nightclothes, tell him everything. But it was not so easy. Never had he imagined there could exist a power so raw and unbound--it was a seductress, whispering all his weaknesses in the dark.

Xesophia...

He would go back for her. If it wasn't for him, she'd still be here. One of his wives, probably, and certainly the one he'd loved the most. He'd heard that drowning was a peaceful way to go, but he didn't believe it. Death could hold no peace for one so beautiful.

He held the ball before him and focused. Closed his eyes. He thought of

clearyourmind

the past, Denobula, twenty-eight years ago. The past.....the past...the--

He felt the shift, opened his eyes, and was quite surprised.

Cabin E-14. Still.

It was much brighter, he was near the door, and Hoshi Sato was staring at him.

"Doctor...?"

He was leaning against the bunk, again with his toolkit in his hands. He blinked.  
"Xesophia...?"

"What?"

He stood straight. "Oh, excuse me, Ensign."

Why was he here? He'd only gone back ten months or so. The memory was quite distinct. It had been his first time in these quarters.

"You zoned out there for a minute."

"Just making a...diagnosis."

"Diagnosis? You haven't even looked at him."

"Yes, well...I'm very adept." A crewman lay on the bottom bunk--Ensign Starrow, if he remembered correctly. One of Hoshi's friends. He'd moved to other quarters a month later. Phlox couldn't remember if Daniels had been his roommate at this point or not. Also, if he

remembered correctly Starrow had--

--a touch of food poisoning."

"Food poisoning?"

"Yes. It would be wise to refrain from consuming meat you've brought from home, especially after a week at room temperature. I know you prefer your mother's home-cooked meals, but I highly recommend the mess hall."

Starrow stared up at him, both pale and astounded. He tried to say something, but failed, so Hoshi said it for him.

"How did you know that?"

"As I said, I'm very adept, Ensign."

What else had he done? He tried to remember. Had he said anything different that would change things in the future? He couldn't afford to foul things up--

Oh, I see, his better half muttered, you'll bring back Xesophia and change a thousand lives, but you're afraid to foul up a diagnosis. Bravo, better frame that Hippocratic Oath.

"Shut up..." he muttered back.

"Excuse me?"

Oops. "Ah...shut up...that mouth of yours, Ensign Starrow, until you can put something healthy in it," he scolded. Phlox felt his fingers tingling, and he wondered how long it would last. Had the device even been placed here yet? He spared a glance between the bed and the desk, but saw nothing--which was the nature of the object, he supposed, so who could be sure.

He had to get back. He tried not to think too hard about it so he wouldn't prematurely slip back into the present...future--whatever. He wasn't ready quite yet. He had to think this out. If he left now would he disappear before their eyes? That could be very bad, indeed. Or would he just leave his past body, and everything would return to normal in both timelines? Or, if by going back he had indeed created an alternate universe, would this Dr. Phlox merely cease to exist?

He gulped. He should have left well enough alone. He'd go back, but he'd make sure he was alone, just in case.

"Well, if you'll excuse me," he said, "I've got some work to do. In sickbay."

Both Hoshi and Starrow were still rather incredulous, and only Hoshi managed to utter "Thank you" as he exited the cabin.

The doors closed behind him, and he was about to attempt the return when Daniels strode around the corner, heading for Cabin E-14. Phlox's heart froze.

"Doctor Phlox," Daniels acknowledged as he began to pass him--and then lurched so hard he nearly pitched forward to the floor. Phlox didn't move. Slowly, Daniels worked his way

back. He stopped next to the doctor, was quiet for a moment, and then sighed.

"You found it."

"How do you know?" Phlox asked quietly.

"I can see it on your fingers."

Phlox looked down. He saw nothing.

"How far ahead?" Daniels kept his voice hushed, so Phlox did the same.

"What?"

"How far did you come?"

"Ten months. Or so."

Daniels let out a nervous breath. "After the first front." Then he looked Phlox square in the eye. "You're playing with something far worse than fire, Doctor. You have no idea how serious this is. What have you changed? Anything?"

Phlox fidgeted with his tools. "I made an early diagnosis, I suppose."

Daniels's eyes rolled up in their sockets, as if to consult some hidden manual, and his lips moved in rapid whispers: "Early diagnosis ten months after the front early diagnosis early diagnosis. Early. Diag. Nosis..." His gaze returned to Phlox, steady and calm, but deep within there was something hot and extraordinary. "No, I think you're all right. But you've probably only got three or four minutes." He paused. "You didn't run into me before, did you?" It wasn't really a question.

Phlox thought about it. No, he hadn't. It had taken him a good fifteen minutes to diagnose Starrow, and now that he thought about it, another officer had entered the cabin--Daniels, no doubt--retrieved something, and quickly left. In the past Phlox remembered, he was still in Cabin E-14.

"No, I didn't. Not like this."

Daniels sighed again. "You've already been delayed. Go. Now. And don't try to come back. Not for Xesophia, not for anybody."

Phlox's gut wrenched and it felt like someone had poured glitter down his spine. "How do you know about Xesophia?" he whispered.

"Doctor, I experience the timeline like you do a book. I can flip from chapter thirteen back to one with a single turn. I can hold my fingers in three or four places, yet not lose the rhythm of the story. You and Xesophia are around chapter nine."

Phlox looked back toward the cabin. He should be in there. "There is no other Phlox in this timeline, is there? I'm him."

"Right."

"Then why do I remember still being in there?"

"You'd never understand. That's just the way it works."

"And when I leave, what happens to the here and now Phlox?"

"If it's not too late, if no changes have been made, then everything should return to normal. Which is why you have to shut up, Doctor, and go."

"All right, I'm going." Phlox closed his eyes and started to concentrate.

"No. Inside Cabin E-14."

"What?"

Daniels took another anxious breath. He was getting nervous. He started talking faster. "The reason you didn't go back to Denobula is because time travel operates in multiple dimensions within the time-space continuum. When you traveled back with my...device," he said that carefully, "you ended up in Cabin E-14 because that's where you started. To go back from Denobula, you'd have to start from Denobula. And the reason you didn't go back twenty-eight years is because you didn't exist in Cabin E-14 twenty-eight years ago; the farthest you could go back was your first time in the same space."

"Ten months ago."

"Normally you'd have to be in the exact spot, but these quarters," he looked fondly toward the doors, "this place is special. You can only travel to times when you have or will be present in Cabin E-14. Unless, that is, an outside agent initiates the temporal momentum, but that's infinitely more complicated." He pushed Phlox toward the doors. "That's all the time for today's lesson, so go, good doctor, you've got less than thirty seconds before things get really complicated."

The doors slid open in front of him, and when he turned back around, Daniels was gone, but he still heard him say, "Go back, Doctor, and never try this again. Xesophia is gone."

Phlox swallowed nervously and slowly reentered Cabin E-14.

"Doctor?" Hoshi sat on the bunk next to Starrow, mixing something in a bowl.

Phlox was afraid to say anything. What if it turned out to be the one thing that destroyed the timeline? Still, he didn't feel comfortable going back right in front of them. He didn't completely understand how things were going to return to normal, but he couldn't help thinking that things would be easier here after he left if there were no witnesses to his shift.

"Excuse me," he said and entered the closet. He closed the door softly and waited a moment to clear his mind.

"Doctor?"

His fingers were tingling. Hopefully there would be enough residual...energy, or whatever it was left to take him back to the future. The future.

And there he made his biggest mistake.



Again, the sensation of falling through the floor and--

--there he was. Cabin E-14. Holding the transparent device in his seemingly empty arms, pulsing like warm mud around his fingers, that one word still echoing dimly in his mind

(the future)

and

clear your mind

falling through the floor again, and--

--there he was. Cabin E-14. There was an alien device in his hands--something that looked like an electronic wishbone, and he stood near the door. It was hot and muggy. The ship shook around him, and he recognized it as weapons fire. He knew immediately that he had shifted again, and knew precisely why because the word still waltzed gaily in his head; his mind had not been clear, and the future had come-a-calling. He had to go back, there were no two ways about it--fooling with the future would make things doubly complicated.

Then he saw Commander Tucker.

He followed the winding path of blood to his hands; Tucker's fingers moved slowly in the widening crimson pool, but it wasn't they that were bleeding; there was a knife in his stomach. There was more on his face--a small gash spilled blood down his temple, and a thin line ran from his lips. His eyes swiveled to Phlox.

"Caught the early train, Doc. That was fast." His voice was dull and forceless.

"Commander..." he knew he shouldn't, but he started forward. The ship shook again.

"Where'd they go, Doc. You see 'em?"

"Who?"

"You know...Nausicaans."

"No," Phlox whispered. He was afraid to speak any louder, for it might just cause the man to crumble beyond repair. "No, I didn't."

"Took one of 'em"--he coughed--"one of 'em with me."

Phlox glanced toward the closet--he hadn't noticed it before--and saw the Nausicaan--horribly ugly creature--twisted at an awkward angle on the floor, throat cleanly slit. The darkened blade lay next to him.

Phlox bent down to his friend and started to examine the tool he carried, then stopped. The realization--something that he had known with the first glimpse of blood and the feel of something foreign in his hand, but didn't want to acknowledge--washed fully over him, and he had to steady himself with a hand on the desk to keep from falling back.

He couldn't help him. In the future, he--Dr. Phlox--would be here, in this time and in this place,

coming to the aid of Commander Tucker. The ship was under siege by Nausicaan pirates, and by some circumstance, he would arrive with an alien instrument that only his future self would know how to operate.

He looked at it. He had no clue. And he couldn't anyway.

If no changes have been made, then everything should return to normal.

He was sure that counted in the future, too. What he did now determined the future of the future. He looked at Tucker. He didn't have to be a doctor to know there wasn't much chance, on any hand.

He should leave. Now.

Tucker's eyes moved to his, quiet and pleading. But there was the beginning of horror there, as well. "Doc...a little help?"

Phlox took his hand. The blood was thick between their fingers. "I'm sorry, Commander..." he whispered. "There's...nothing I can do."

Tucker stared at him a moment longer, fighting the words, and then a peace seemed to settle on him, the tranquility that heralds defeat. "I understand."

Phlox was not going to move. His friend's dying sight would not be the turning of his back. He was his future self, and, in a way, what was happening was going to happen, and he'd be damned if he'd carve in stone the silent terror of dying alone.

Now he took both of Tucker's hands and placed them gently together. He kept his own atop them. "Commander...may I call you Trip?"

Tucker's voice was faint, like a soft breeze now. "Y'always...have. That's what...friends do..."

Phlox smiled. They'd never really been friends. He had never called him Trip. Not once.

Not yet.

"Thank you." Phlox felt his eyes begin to water, and he tried to blink them away.

"You...betcha..."

His chest fell with the word, but didn't rise again. His eyes went dark, and Phlox gently closed them.

Enterprise shook again--the ship seemed to be coming apart around him. He fancied he could hear someone yelling in the corridor, and it wasn't foolish to think that another Nausicaan or two might burst through the doors to gut what was alive on the other side. But it really didn't matter. Not now. Looking down at Trip, it all seemed so far away. He wondered how far away it truly was. A year? Two? Ten? Trip didn't look all that different, not if you put that same old spark back in his eyes, that contagious smiling flame of light and life.

How many others of his friends were dead?

Phlox grimaced like black ash, and felt nausea grip him like a fist. He steeled himself, let

Trip slip back to the stained floor, and rose to his feet. None, that was how many. Because this hadn't happened yet. Not for him. And he wasn't going to let it.

He looked down at his hands. His fingers still burned through the blood, hotter than ever. The ship shook again. Outside, something slammed against the doors, and then a blade slashed through the center. Something black and guttural was snarling from the other side as the blade was wrenched free and then slammed down again. Bloody hands shot through the opening and pulled in opposite directions. The torn metal groaned.

Phlox closed his eyes and anchored his mind. He thought of Trip, alive and enjoying a dirty joke with Malcolm Reed; of Captain Archer holding a happy, squirming Porthos; of Sub-commander T'Pol and her damned Vulcan stoicism; of Travis and Hoshi, tearing up at a pointless black-and-white film on movie night.

Xesophia, I leave you to your grave, may you stay forever young. Forgive me, for I cannot change a thing.

He thought of them all, and saw himself clearly on Enterprise, in the time and place he belonged, the pulsing heart of his new home.

Something burst through the door, hot and evil and--

--there he was. Cabin E-14.

It was dark and quiet. No Hoshi, no Starrow. No Trip, no Nausicaans.

No Daniels.

His arms were outstretched, but the device was gone--that sickening affecter of the future. There was no tingling in his fingers--none at all. He smiled tiredly. It had never been here, had it? Daniels had made sure of that.

Then how had he traveled back at all? That was the obvious question, but one that he knew it was pointless to struggle over. It didn't really matter.

He ran his hands over his chest, starting to straighten the wrinkles from his nightclothes, and then stopped. He looked down, thinking for a moment there would be blood smeared across the fabric. There wasn't. Of course.

He moved to the comm-unit on the wall and activated it. "Phlox to Captain Archer." It was nearly three in the morning, and so the captain's delay was expected. Then, tiredly:

"Doctor...?"

"Captain..." he thought for a moment how to phrase it. "I do not believe I am fit to continue decontamination of Daniels's quarters. Please accept my apologies."

There was a confused pause before Archer spoke again. "Are you all right, Doctor?"

Phlox smiled. "Fine, Captain. I'm fine now. Phlox out." He ended the transmission and exited Cabin E-14.

He planned never to set foot in it again.

He found Hoshi Sato in the mess hall.

He waited a moment, then pulled up a chair next to her. "Ensign."

"Oh, hello," she said through a mouthful of food, embarrassed. "S'cuse me..."

"I'm sorry, don't let me interrupt. I just...have a question."

She swallowed. "Sure."

"Do you remember ten months ago, after we first met, and I treated Ensign Starrow in his quarters?"

"Yes."

"And my diagnosis. Was I particularly...oh, I don't know--adept?"

Hoshi shifted in her seat. "Well...Doctor. You've always been...very good at what you--"

Phlox touched her arm. "Thank you. Never mind." He paused, seemed to vacillate, then: "You don't remember me walking into the closet, either, do you?"

"What? No. Doctor--"

"Sorry, just..." He smiled and gestured flippantly at his head.

"...getting some wires crossed, I believe. Silly me."

"Mind if I join you?"

Phlox looked up, and Commander Tucker wasn't waiting for an answer, already slipping into the seat next to him.

"Been at least sixteen, seventeen hours since I ate," he said. "And I am starvin'."

Phlox folded his hands on the table in front of him. Oddly, he found himself a little nervous. Tucker already had a forkful of mashed potatoes on the way to his mouth, and he stopped halfway.

"Am I interruptin' somethin'?"

Hoshi looked uncertainly at Phlox, but Phlox paid no attention. He couldn't take his eyes from Tucker. "Commander..."

"Yeah?"

"May I call you Trip?" he asked softly.

Tucker stuck the fork in his mouth and smiled widely. "Don't see why not," he said. "Make things a little friendlier 'round here."

"Thank you."

Phlox leaned back in his chair, and couldn't help the biggest, most contented smile from spreading over his face. From the look on Trip's and Hoshi's faces, they thought he was losing it, but he didn't care.

He was looking ahead, out over the horizon of the unknown, and all he could see was open sky.

[Grand Prize]

Our Million-Year Mission

Robert T. Jeschonek

Either the Milky Way galaxy had moved 700 million light-years from its original location, or Captain James T. Kirk was looking at an exact replica.

"Impossible," he said slowly, staring at the familiar spiral through the now-transparent front half of the bridge. Even as he said it, he knew it wasn't true; the one thing he had learned in his travels was that anything was possible...absolutely anything.

"It matches hypercomputer projections of what our home galaxy would look like after the thousands of millennia since our departure," Spock said from the science station. "Differences in solar mass and luminosity fall within the range of expected change over time for a structure of this nature."

"What about landmarks?" said Kirk.

For a moment, Spock worked silently. "Omnisensors have located the significant pulsars and nebulae native to the Milky Way," he said, and then he paused. "I have also located Sol."

"Could it be an illusion?" said Kirk, rising from the command chair. "Like the Siren Galaxy?" Even three thousand years after encountering Siren, he still felt foolish at the mere mention of the place. The crew of UberEnterprise had explored the Siren phenomenon for a full century, believing they were mapping a barred spiral galaxy in the Centaurus Supercluster, before figuring out it was all an elaborate mirage.

"Unlikely, Captain," said Spock. "According to hypercomputer diagnostics, the omnisensor data is accurate."

Frowning, Kirk stepped around the helm and set foot on the transparent deck overlooking the space surrounding his ship. Though he had been traveling for hundreds of thousands of years onboard UberEnterprise, he still felt a thrill as the bridge seemed to melt away, leaving him standing on the fabric of open space itself.

Walking as far forward as he could, he pressed his hand against the wall and shook his head. "It can't be here," he said, gazing at the giant, glittering pinwheel suspended in the darkness before him. "We're midway across a three-hundred-million-light-year void, over half a billion light-years from where the Milky Way should be."

"The Medusan nav crew reconfirms our coordinates, Keptin," said Pavel Chekov from the navigation console. "Ve are in the Bootes void, on a heading for the Bootes Supercluster."

Ve are novhere near vhere home is supposed to be."

"Yet there it is," said Kirk, rapping his knuckles on the wall. "I wonder which odds are higher: the odds against finding the actual Milky Way all the way out here, or the odds against finding a perfect duplicate of the Milky Way anywhere at all."

"They are equally astronomical," said Spock.

"But it's not like we haven't come across other improbable phenomena before," said Kirk.

At that, Uhura spoke up from the communications console. "It might not be a perfect duplicate, sir."

Kirk turned. "Explain, Commander."

"I'm not picking up any artificial transmissions," she said. "No communications traffic whatsoever."

Kirk's eyes narrowed. "What about flashspace and timerip frequencies?"

Uhura shook her head. "Nothing but background noise, Captain."

Another voice broke in then, inches from Kirk's left ear. Though he gave no outward sign of it, he started at the sudden, nearby presence; he had been using transporters for most of his life, but the silence and suddenness of UberEnterprise's blinkporters still occasionally took him by surprise.

"It seems we have a mystery on our hands," said the new arrival, Kirk's co-captain. "Shall we investigate, Captain Kirk?"

Kirk turned a wry smile on his old friend. "What do you think, Captain Picard?"

Though the door to Data's quarters was scrawled with a hundred different variations of "Keep Out!" in a hundred different languages and a hundred different colors of paint, Geordi La Forge reached out to press the chime.

There was no immediate reply, but Geordi knew the android was inside; he hadn't come out in over five thousand years and showed no inclination to change his reclusive lifestyle.

Finally, a voice bellowed from behind the door. "Go away! Dutch doesn't want company!"

Geordi shook his head. For the quintillionth time, he wished that he could have the old Data back. "Data, it's me," he said. "It's Geordi."

"There's no Data here!" Data shouted back. "I don't know that name!"

Geordi sighed. "Okay...Dutch," he said. "Let me in. It's important."

After a long pause, the door disappeared. Geordi braced himself, hoping that the only things to jump out at him would be a cat or two; on past occasions, the opening door had let out any number of flying objects, from paint brushes to furniture to flaming rags.

This time, he got cats--a Persian and a Siamese...with extras. Like the others, their

breeding lines had started with replicated feline DNA...and had been enhanced with alien genetic material collected from thousands of worlds. The Persian had velvety gray wings and glowing violet eyes, and the Siamese had tiny antennae and invisible feet; the rest of Data's fifty or so cats had a wide range of similarly distinctive traits.

As Geordi crossed the threshold into the big front room that Data used as his studio, more of the cats mobbed him, curling around his legs. He couldn't blame them for seeking attention, since he was the only visitor they ever got...the only person Data allowed to enter his sanctum.

Looking around, Geordi noticed that Data had done something different with the place since his last visit. Before, the studio had been packed with hundreds of paintings of all shapes, sizes, and styles, everything from photorealistic to impressionistic to cubist; now, the paintings were gone, and the floor and furnishings were swimming in scraps of painted canvas. Some of the scraps were affixed to one wall, arranged in a circle; apparently, Data had cut up all his artwork and was reassembling it as a collage.

The artist himself seemed to be hard at work, seated on a stool in front of an easel at the far end of the room. His back and wild gray mane were turned...but Geordi could see he was holding a palette in one hand and was moving the other hand busily, as if swiping a brush over the canvas.

Wading toward him through the sea of scraps and mewing cats, Geordi almost failed to use the android's chosen nickname, but caught himself. "Dutch?" he said tentatively. "I've got some news I think you'll want to hear."

"Leaving so soon?" Data said sardonically. "That is good news!"

Geordi let it pass. He'd heard a lot worse from "Dutch" over the centuries. "Seriously," he said. "This is big."

Data snorted. "Can't you see I'm busy?" he said irritably, turning to face his visitor.

Finally, Geordi could see that Data hadn't been painting the canvas, after all...but his own body. His smock was wide open, and his chest and abdomen were covered in colorful shapes and symbols.

"I call it 'My Body Electric,'" Data said...and then he raised the brush and drew a single stripe down through his bushy gray beard. "Like it?"

Yet again, Geordi wondered how his old friend had become this eccentric hermit. Data had never explained the change, and after a while, Geordi had stopped asking about it...but he had never stopped wondering and trying in vain to get a peek inside Data's head in search of a cause.

"It's great," said Geordi, nodding. "Now, as I was saying, we've come across something amazing. Take a look at this."

When Geordi triggered his holopopup implant, a holographic image of the mysterious spiral galaxy appeared above his palm. "According to omnisensors, it's identical to the Milky Way," he said.

Data shrugged. "Whatever," he said dismissively. "Hey, did I tell you I'm using your old

VISOR in a metal sculpture? I just can't decide if it should be a crown or a codpiece."

Geordi blew out his breath in frustration. "Don't you get it?" he said, thrusting the holo in front of Data's face. "We're in the middle of the Bootes Void! The Milky Way shouldn't be here!"

With his brush, Data dabbed paint in the center of Geordi's palm, obscuring the holopopup's emitter, casting dark streaks over the floating galaxy. "You have mistaken me, Bored- i," he said mockingly, "for someone who cares."

Geordi clenched his fist, and the smeared holopopup vanished. "One more thing," he said. "There are no artificial transmissions. No signs of sentient life."

Data painted more streaks in his beard. "That," he said with a chuckle, "does not surprise me at all."

Jean-Luc Picard thought the occasion called for a bottle of champagne--not because his ship was headed home, for he wasn't convinced it was home at all--but because U.S.S. *UberEnterprise* was about to enter a galaxy for the fifty thousandth time (not counting *Siren*, of course).

To say it was a milestone would be putting it lightly. No other Mega-Federation vessel had even come close to this record of intergalactic exploration.

Looking back, he thought it seemed like only yesterday when he and Kirk had first taken *UberEnterprise* out of the Milky Way. They had set out on the ten thousandth anniversary of the start of Kirk's first five-year mission, commanding what was by far the most remarkable starship ever created...charged with a hundred-year mission to explore the galaxies of the Milky Way's local Supercluster.

Back then, a century had seemed like a long time indeed...but it had whisked by in the blink of an eye. They had been so successful that Universal Fleet had extended their mission time and again, sending them on to the Virgo and Centaurus Superclusters, the Coma Wall and Shapley Supercluster...each populated with thousands of galaxies...each galaxy populated with billions of stars and trillions of worlds. Now, here they were, nearly a million years later, still facing the mystery and adventure of the infinite cosmos.

And the funny thing was...the wonderful thing was...even after 999,995 years roaming the galaxies, plus his many years in space before that, he still wasn't tired of it.

Not a bit.

"Captains' log," he said, rising from his command chair. "Stardate 17613341.4. Once again, we stand on the verge of history. We are about to embark on our fifty thousandth galactic insertion.

"In the unlikely event that the spiral galaxy before us is indeed, by some incredible happenstance, the Milky Way, it is fitting that this milestone returns us to our point of origin.

"If, instead, this phenomenon is other than what it appears to be, our entry into it will be no less fitting a milestone...for exploration of the unknown has been and always will be the hallmark of our expedition."

With a smile, Picard turned to the bearded first officer standing alongside the helm.



"Will," he said. "Would you do the honors?"

Riker, who had been watching the helm console over Hikaru Sulu's shoulder, looked up with an eager grin. "Aye, sir," he said.

"If you insist."

Turning, Riker fixed his gaze on the approaching galaxy, its glittering enormity swelling beyond the transparent front half of the bridge in all directions.

"Shipsight," said Riker. "Fullview UberEnterprise, shipmorph status, center bridge."

In response, a holographic image of UberEnterprise blinked into midair in the middle of the bridge, flanked by scrolling neon streams of data. The image depicted UberEnterprise in its current configuration--a silver sphere 250 kilometers in diameter, rotating on a tilted axis. The giant sphere's gleaming skin was striped with rows of lighted windows, spaced evenly between the poles; the ship's name and registry number--NCC-1701--were printed in black letters in a band around the equator.

Riker stepped closer to the holo and scanned the data streams as he spoke. "Shipmorph," he said, accessing the reconfiguration system. "Select galactic insertion profile Riker Seven. Offspring: litter of 50. Confirm matrix aptitude."

"Aptitude confirmed," said the hypercomputer, its female voice the same used by starship computers since the days of Kirk's earliest missions.

"Riker to engineering," Will said...and then he vanished, blinkporting to engineering for an in-person status check in as little time as it would have taken to ask Mr. Scott for an update over the comm. A moment later, he reappeared on the same spot.

"All hands," said Riker. "Brace for reconfig in ten...nine...eight..."

When he got to zero, the ship began to shudder. Because the bridge was in a low-morph section of UberEnterprise, the shuddering was the only tangible evidence that a change was taking place...though the hovering holo of the ship told the full story.

As Picard watched, the silver sphere flowed like liquid, melting from one object into many. The largest shape was a massive disk that reminded him of the Enterprise-D's saucer...though that saucer would have been the size of a pea next to this one.

The smaller shapes in the new configuration evoked the past even more strongly. Fifty starships encircled the giant disk in two intersecting rings, each vessel a replica of Kirk's first Enterprise or Picard's Enterprise-D. Each was twenty-five times larger than the original and infinitely superior technologically, but the sight of the familiar saucer-and-nacelles designs was still enough to fill Picard with a wave of pride and nostalgia.

As the shape-changing piezomorphic matrix of the ship's structure reformed itself, the blinkporter network redistributed Uber-Enterprise's crew, splitting the population among the disk and fifty satellites according to precomputed guidelines. Though the bridge and its crew were unaffected, Picard knew that all around them, more than a million personnel had been relocated in the space of a heartbeat.

"Reconfig complete," said Commander Worf from the tactical station.

"Deploy offspring," said Riker.

Immediately, the smaller ships in the holo shot out of the rings in rapid succession, fanning out in a wedge formation. Beyond the hologram, Picard could see the actual wedge through the transparent nose of the bridge, fifty gleaming starships sliding out toward the blazing swirl of the spiral galaxy.

Then, the ships' engines all flared at once and the wedge leaped forward, spreading out at flashwarp speeds and disappearing as each ship headed for the coordinates of a different Mega-Federation capital: Andor, Cardassia, Qo'noS, Ferenginar, Great Link, Scurr, Talax, Tholia, Vulcan. It was the tried and true best technique for exploring a galaxy--sending pieces of UberEnterprise to investigate different quadrants. This time, Picard hoped, the strategy would lead to fast answers to the mystery at hand.

"Offspring deployed, Captain," said Riker.

"Course laid in, sir," said Sulu.

Picard had reserved a destination of special interest for the biggest piece of UberEnterprise, the prime saucer. "Warp one thousand," he said. "Make it so."

"Warp one thousand," said Sulu. "Aye."

"Earth, here we come," said Chekov.

Propelled by the impossibly powerful Big Bang Redux engines, the prime saucer dove toward an arm of the glittering spiral. Thousands of light-years flicked past in mere moments at staggering flashwarp speed.

Three hours later, as the saucer entered Earth's solar system, all contact was lost with the offspring probe ships.

Geordi La Forge was stunned. Data had been supplying predictions for thousands of years...functioning, in effect, as the ship's seer. He had enhanced his positronic brain so extensively that he was able to calculate probabilities with great accuracy, advising the crew on the possible outcomes of their actions (from the comfort of his sanctum, of course).

But predicting a deserted Milky Way galaxy seemed like a stretch even for him.

"Data...I mean Dutch," said Geordi. "Did you foresee that we'd come across an empty Milky Way out here?"

Data had dropped his paintbrush and was stroking a cat that was either invisible or imaginary. "What I'm saying is that if we were to encounter our home galaxy, it wouldn't surprise me to find it vacant of sentient life."

"Why?" said Geordi. "What else can you tell me?"

"There is a moon made of cheese," Data said sagely, "but it is blue."

Geordi was becoming annoyed. He'd come to Data for clues to the mystery they faced--as

well as to try, for the octillionth time, to spark his friend's interest enough to get him to leave his quarters--and Data was pulling his chain. "Come on!" said Geordi. "Why wouldn't there be sentient life?"

Data swooped close and raised his shaggy eyebrows. "It's a secret," he said cryptically. Then, as he ducked away, a tray heaped with cat food--ordered via thinknet, conjured by replicator, delivered via blinkporter--appeared in his hands.

"Tell me!" said Geordi. "It could be important!"

As soon as Data put the tray on the floor, it was engulfed by a mewing crush of fur. "What do you care?" he said. "There are no signs of intelligent life on this ship, either...except the cats."

Geordi pushed through the cats and took hold of Data's arm. "Give me a break," he said. "For old times' sake. For old Data's sake."

Data glared furiously behind his scraggly beard. For an instant, Geordi thought he'd get a break, all right...but not the break he wanted. He held his breath, wondering if it was such a great idea to combine a full-spectrum broadband emotion net with superhuman android strength.

Data seemed to catch himself then, and relaxed a little. "Okay," he said. "Do you want to know the secret?"

"Sure," said Geordi.

Data leaned close and whispered in his ear. "Unifleet stopped transmitting 250,000 years ago."

"No they didn't," said Geordi.

"Oh yes," whispered Data. "They did."

Lemark, the Romulan in command of UberEnterprise offspring 23, dissolved before Picard's eyes in a wave of scintillant colors.

"Romulus is deserted!" said Lemark as his body melted into shimmering rainbow streamers. "Unknown energies...lightstorm...consuming us! Turn back!"

With a final cry, Lemark flowed apart, leaving 23's lifeless bridge to ripple in a multihued aurora...and then, even the sea of color faded away.

As the replay of 23's last message ended, Spock waved a hand through the holo field, sending it fluttering apart like smoke. "According to omnisensor telemetry, there was no warning," he said flatly, "for any of the offspring probe ships."

"Fifty distress calls, all the same," said Riker. "Then, nothing."

"Over 300,000 lives," Leonard McCoy said grimly, shaking his head.

Spock waved again, conjuring a holo of a blue-green planet over the conference table. "Omnisensor data indicates that Earth, like our other target worlds, is void of sentient life.

We must consider the possibility that if we enter orbit, we will also encounter the lightstorm phenomenon."

"Do we dare take the chance?" said Picard, looking solemnly around the table at his co-captain and senior officers.

"We could wait," said Riker. "Mine the offspring telemetry for clues to devising countermeasures against the lightstorms."

"In that case, we should return to extragalactic space," said Sulu. "The phenomenon might not be confined to planetary orbital proximity."

Rising from his seat at one end of the table, Captain Kirk paced to the observation wall. The polyrefractive shipskin of the hull and bulkhead had gone transparent there, providing a panoramic view of Earth and her moon revolving around the yellow sun.

"We won't find answers in the extragalactic void," he said.

Picard nodded thoughtfully. "I am inclined to agree."

"You're not considering moving forward?" snapped McCoy. "You'd be risking the 700,000 people still onboard this ship!"

"We could reconfig the ship again," said Riker. "Send the bulk of the crew back outside the galactic boundary and spin off a manned probe to continue investigating."

"Each time we divide our forces, we diminish our strength," said Worf.

"Mr. Sulu was correct," said Spock. "It is not logical to assume that this phenomenon cannot extend its reach into interstellar--or even extragalactic--space. I submit that our crew is already at great risk."

"Exactly," Kirk said, turning from the observation wall. "Our choice is clear."

"What choice is that?" McCoy said sharply.

"I'll give you three guesses," Kirk said slyly...and then he blinked out of the conference room.

"I hate it when he does that," said McCoy, rolling his eyes.

Picard knew the answer to his next question before he asked it.

"Hypercomputer, what is the location of Captain James Kirk?"

"Captain Kirk is on the surface of planet Earth," said the hypercomputer, "outside the headquarters of Unifleet Command in the city of San Francisco, California."

"Surprise, surprise," said Bones McCoy.

Picard sighed. Again, he asked a question for which he already knew the answer.

"Hypercomputer, has Captain Kirk filed a team roster for the away mission to planet Earth?"

"Affirmative," said the hypercomputer.

"Display the roster," said Picard, and holo copies of the list appeared over the conference table for the senior staff to inspect.

"Jim doesn't miss a trick," said Bones.

"I'll say," Dr. Crusher said admiringly.

"Stick with your own captain," growled McCoy.

After reviewing the roster, Picard got to his feet. "Very well," he said briskly. "We will proceed."

"Permission to disembark, Captain?" said Riker.

"Permission granted, Number One," said Picard, and the away team vanished on the spot, blinkporting to Earth.

"You're not making sense," said Geordi. "We've never lost contact with Unifleet Command. We just received new orders from Unifleet three days ago."

With a brush, Data swabbed glue on the back of one of his painting scraps. "Show's over, folks," he said, smacking the scrap into the middle of the collage on the wall. "The oracle has left the building. Remember to stop by the tip jar on your way out."

"You can't just drop a bomb like that and not explain it," said Geordi, his voice rising with his level of frustration.

Data snagged a passing purple tabby and held it against the wall. "Would Greeny look better here," he said thoughtfully, "or here?" He slid the cat to another spot and stared at it...then slid it back. "Here? Or how about here?" he said, moving the cat to a third location.

"Enough of this, Data!" snapped Geordi. "I want a straight answer! If that wasn't Unifleet, who was it?"

Data froze. Slowly, he put the cat on the floor...then sprang into action. Scooping up painting scraps, he slathered them with glue and slapped them on the wall in rapid succession. At first, the arrangement looked haphazard, the scraps randomly placed; as Data filled in gaps, however, Geordi realized the pieces of canvas formed two huge, sloppy letters.

When he was done, Data heaved the glue jar across the room and jabbed a finger at the dripping, patchwork symbols. "M-E!" he said, eyes flaring with rage. "Me me me me me!"

Nervously, Geordi took a step back. "I don't understand."

"The writing's on the wall, Geordi!" shouted Data. "I did it!"

With that, the wild-haired android hauled back a fist. Instinctively, Geordi raised his hands and backed away...but Data whirled and drove his fist into the wall, smack in the middle of the pasted letters.

As he pushed his hands into the liquid console computer interface, Spock howled in pain.

Kirk flashed a look at the rest of the away team, silently warning them off. Though his first instinct was to tear his friend free, he hoped to give him time to retrieve information before separating him from the interface. The computer systems now residing in the ruins of what might have been Unifleet Command Headquarters on what might have been Earth were so unlike any he'd ever seen, he wasn't surprised that Spock was having trouble linking up to them.

The Vulcan howled again, louder and longer than before.

Nearby, Bones watched his pi-corder with growing agitation. "His brain waves and heart rate are going wild!" he said. "Get him away from that thing!"

"No," Spock said through clenched teeth. "Accessing...archive."

Kirk could barely hold himself back, but he did. With 700,000 lives in the balance, the need for answers outweighed his science officer's safety...for the moment.

"No...words," said Spock. "Images...thoughts...sensations..."

"His body can't stand the strain, Jim!" McCoy said insistently, but Kirk said nothing in reply.

"Three-quarters of a million years...after our departure...a time of change." Spock drew and released a long, shuddering breath. "Fear...regret...pain...hope. The end...the end of...everything."

"That's enough!" shouted McCoy. "I'll take him off that thing myself!"

When McCoy moved toward Spock, Kirk put out a hand to hold him back.

Spock was shaking like a leaf now. "Faces...disappearing. Departure...finality...nothingness. Nothingness!" Spock threw his head back violently and cried out again.

"Jim!" shouted Bones.

And that was when Kirk lunged forward, wrenching Spock away from the interface console. "Spock!" he said, gripping the Vulcan's shoulders. "Spock!"

Spock lurched spasmodically, eyes rolling up in his head. McCoy rushed over and pressed a hand to his bicep, administering medication via fingertip nanopharm implants.

After a long moment, the seizure subsided. Groaning, Spock cupped his face in his hands...and when he drew them away, his eyes were focused on Kirk.

"The end...of history, Jim," he said weakly. "Something unprecedented happened...everywhere...and then, nothing. No one. No Unifleet. No Mega-Federation."

"A catastrophic event," said Will Riker. "That explains the absence of sentient life."

"But the absence of life is the only physical trace of the event," said Kirk. "The ruins show no signs of destruction...only natural deterioration over time."

"I am trying...to understand," said Spock, grimacing in concentration. "But I am...overloaded. Having difficulty...processing it all."

Stepping forward, Deanna Troi gently touched his temples. "Let me help," she said softly. "My mind to your mind..."

Kirk released Spock's shoulders and moved aside, giving Troi room to work. He thought the mind-meld was worth a try; through the millennia, Troi had often proved the effectiveness of applying her telepathic abilities in concert with Spock's.

"My thoughts to your thoughts..." said Spock, placing his hands on Troi's temples and closing his eyes.

For a moment, everyone in the room remained silent, watching as Spock and Troi connected. Then, suddenly, the silence was broken.

The outburst came from Deanna herself. "Captain!" she said, twisting away from Spock. "They're here! I sense them!"

As one, Kirk and the rest of the away team looked in the direction in which she was pointing.

"They've come for us!" said Deanna.

On the far side of the chamber, a shimmering aurora rippled and flowed, identical to the multicolored lightstorms that had consumed the crews of the offspring probes.

Data withdrew his hand from the hole he'd punched in the wall and slumped to the floor. Immediately, he was crawling with cats, but he paid no attention to them.

"Are you all right?" said Geordi, wondering if he ought to leave after the android's surprising outburst.

Data sighed and stared at the ceiling. "Any communications you've received from Unifleet over the past 250,000 years were bogus," he said. "They were computer-generated flashspace boomerang feeds sent by me from onboard UberEnterprise."

Geordi frowned. "That's hard to believe," he said. "If Unifleet stopped transmitting, why wouldn't the rest of us know?"

"I concealed it from you," said Data, absently twirling his beard around his finger. "I picked up where they left off."

"But why?" said Geordi, lowering himself to crouch in front of his friend.

Data mulled the question over. "Honestly?" he said. "To keep going. It was easier to continue the status quo...to make believe...than accept that our mission no longer had purpose.

"It's a decision I've come to regret."

"Why is that?" said Geordi.

Data shook his head. "You don't know what it's like," he said.

"Living for a million years on a ship full of ghosts."

"What are you talking about?" said Geordi.

"I've become the Flying Dutchman," Data said solemnly.

"Doomed to ride this ship of ghosts for all eternity."

As the lightstorm flowed across the room, Kirk's team backed away.

"No life signs, Jim!" said McCoy, watching the readings on his pi-corder. "Nothing but light!"

"No fluctuation patterns suggesting organized intelligence," said Spock, brandishing a pi-corder with one hand and a gigaphaser with the other.

Kirk kept his eyes fixed on the rippling colors as they drifted toward the team. "Set gigaphasers to Armageddon!" he said. "Fire!"

Six beams of pure destructive energy pierced the luminescent curtain, but their only effect was to disintegrate the wall behind it. Kirk ordered another salvo, and it too had no impact on the phenomenon.

"That's enough!" he shouted. "Everyone blink back to the ship immediately!"

Firing another shot at the approaching field, Kirk reached inside his mind to trigger the blinkporter...and nothing happened. He tried again, and again he went nowhere; looking around, he saw that the rest of the team was stuck, too.

"Kirk to UberEnterprise," he said, mentally activating his bioradio implant. "Emergency blinkout!"

Nothing happened. No one answered.

And the deadly curtain of light and color continued to drift closer.

"Data," said Geordi. "What do you mean when you say this is a ship of ghosts?"

Data smiled sadly. "Sometimes, I can almost believe that you are who you seem to be," he said. "The problem is, I always know better."

"Look at me, Data," said Geordi. "I'm no ghost. I'm as real as you are."

Data nodded. "That's true," he said. "I'm nothing but a ghost of my former self, too."

Geordi sighed. "When was the last time you had a diagnostic, Data?"

Data ignored the question. "In over a million years of existence," he said, "I've enhanced myself in countless ways. I've expanded my mental and physical capabilities to ridiculous extremes. I've installed a hyper-advanced broadband feelnet that allows me to experience every nuance of human emotion, as well as a multitude of alien ones.

"I've become the ultimate Data...and where has it gotten me?" He shrugged and giggled. "I'm a fortune-teller on a ship without a future."



Geordi stood up and extended a hand. "Get up, Data," he said. "I don't know what you're talking about, and it doesn't matter. We need your help. It's time for you to get out of here."

"You're right," said Data. He didn't take Geordi's hand, but pushed himself up against the wall and got to his feet. "I've been monitoring the situation, and I agree it's time I got involved."

"That sounds more like the Data I know," Geordi said with a smile.

"I have an idea about the phenomenon the away team has encountered," said Data, brushing himself off.

"That's the spirit," said Geordi.

"I'm going to Earth," said Data.

Geordi frowned. "Wait a minute, Data..."

"I've been sailing on a ship of ghosts," Data said with an odd smile. "I've practically become a ghost myself."

"It just might take some ghosts to set me free," he said, just before the blinkporter snapped him out of sight.

The away team had nowhere else to go.

Blowing away the wall behind them with their gigaphasers, they had fled from the advancing curtain of light into a debris-strewn lot, only to find that they were completely encircled. The curtain sweeping across the chamber was just one section of a collapsing ring that extended outside the building.

Kirk ordered the team to form a circle, back to back, and fire into the lightstorm continuously, rotating power frequencies every millisecond. It didn't make a bit of difference; the radiant field continued pressing inward from all sides...imminent, inexplicable, inescapable.

It seemed like a hopeless situation, but Kirk and the others had been through uncountable hopeless moments before. Though their gigaphasers had absolutely no effect on the phenomenon, they never stopped firing.

Until Kirk almost obliterated the android.

At the instant Data appeared without warning in front of him, Kirk was pressing the firing stud of his weapon. A blinding beam of energy surged toward the android, traveling so fast that nothing human could have dodged it.

But Data wasn't human. As the beam left the gigaphaser, Kirk glimpsed a golden blur of motion...and the next thing he knew, Data was standing nose to nose with him, holding his gun hand in an iron grip.

"Careful, Captain," said Data. "You could put out someone's optical sensor with that."

Kirk was stunned to see Data planetside, let alone outside his quarters, but there was no time to ask questions. "I hope you have good news," he said. "Such as, UberEnterprise is

about to blink us out of here."

"Not yet," said Data, releasing Kirk's hand. "I'm here to have a word with the phenomenon."

"Good luck," Bones said sourly. "It's as talkative as a rock in a vacuum."

Suddenly, a thunderous burst of sound exploded from all around them...a roar of countless voices joined as one. Everyone but Data recoiled from the unexpected sonic assault.

"DATA SOONG," roared the echoing voices. "YOU ARE DATA SOONG."

"Yes," Data said calmly, addressing the iridescent curtain. "I'm Data Soong."

"WE ARE HONORED," said the voices. "WELCOME HOME."

"It figures," grumbled McCoy. "We almost get atomized, and he gets welcomed with honor."

Kirk didn't respond. His attention was fixed on the phenomenon, which he'd realized had stopped moving toward them.

"Home?" said Data. "Then this is Earth?"

"YES," said the voices.

"And this is Earth's home galaxy?" said Data.

"IT IS."

"Then why is the Milky Way so far from its original coordinates?" said Data.

"WE MOVED IT," said the voices, "TO AVOID A CATASTROPHE. A COLLISION WITH ANOTHER GALAXY."

"I must be hearing things," said Bones. "I thought they said they moved it."

"IT WOULD BE MORE ACCURATE TO SAY THAT WE MOVED OURSELVES," said the voices. "WE ARE THIS GALAXY NOW."

Data tipped his head to one side. "Please explain."

"WE ARE THE CONVERGENCE," said the voices. "WE ARE HUMANS, VULCANS, KLINGONS, FOUNDERS, VIDIIANS. WE ARE EVERY SENTIENT SPECIES IN THE MILKY WAY, EVOLVED INTO A PERFECT UNITY OF PURE THOUGHT."

"Fascinating," said Spock. "Like the Organians, our own species have developed a noncorporeal intelligence."

"I guess we missed a little excitement while we were away," said Riker.

Kirk stepped closer to the shimmering aurora. "You claim we have common origins," he said. "Why then have you been attacking my crew?"

"NOT ATTACKING," said the Convergence. "DEACTIVATING."

"You mean killing," Kirk said sharply.

"DEACTIVATING," said the Convergence. "WHAT ELSE WOULD WE DO WITH MECHANISMS?"

Frowning, Kirk turned to Data. The android nodded.

"That's right," said Data. "Like me, you are manmade creations.

"Unlike me, you are holograms."

"Holograms?" said McCoy. "You've got a screw loose, you bucket of bolts!"

"Yes, I do," said Data, "but it's true. I'm the only member of UberEnterprise's crew who isn't a hologram."

Combatively, Bones poked Data's chest with an index finger. "I think I'd know if I was a hologram instead of flesh and blood!"

"Not really," said Data. "Allow me to demonstrate."

"Only if you allow me to give you a swift kick in the..."

Before McCoy could react, Data's hand flashed toward the doctor's blue tunic, grabbing the silver Unifleet delta shield insignia from his chest and giving it a quick triple squeeze.

As if the blinkporter had snatched him, Bones abruptly disappeared.

"Mobile emitters," said Data, holding up the insignia for the rest of the away team to see. "You all have one."

Kirk stared at the insignia on his own gold tunic. "How is it possible," he said slowly, "that none of us has any knowledge of this?"

"For its extragalactic exploration program," said Data, "Unifleet created a holocrew combining re-creations of the most successful starship crews in history. The designers thought this holocrew would be most effective if its members believed themselves to be the originals instead of photonic replicas."

Data squeezed McCoy's insignia, and the doctor reappeared to finish his sentence.

"...positronic posterior!"

As Bones continued to fuss, Kirk reached for his own insignia. When he pressed it twice against his chest, his body flickered before his eyes. As he hastily pulled his hand away, the flickering ceased...but he had seen enough to know that Data's claims were not so outrageous after all.

Thinking it over, Kirk began to accept the possibility that the nature of his existence was not what he'd once believed. It wasn't so hard, really; he'd been through enough drastic changes in his lifetime that the latest revelation didn't exactly shake him to the core.

When he got right down to it, in fact, it didn't make much of a difference at all. Flesh or hologram, certain things about him would never change; he realized that those things were important above all others.

And he made a decision.

Stepping past Data, he addressed the multihued curtain. "Convergence," he said loudly. "We have a request."

"WHAT IS YOUR REQUEST, HOLOGRAM?" boomed the Convergence.

"Don't deactivate us," said Kirk. "We want to live."

"LIVE?" roared the united voices. "YOU ARE NOT ALIVE NOW."

"Then neither are you," said Kirk, spreading his arms to encompass the aurora. "Like holograms, you consist of pure energy. You no longer have anything in common with biological lifeforms."

"YOU ARE NOT PURE ENERGY," said the Convergence. "YOU ARE GENERATED BY AN EMITTER...A MECHANISM. YOU ARE A MACHINE."

"I am a mind," said Kirk, "and I might be more alive than you."

Kirk paused dramatically. He had always had a flair for high-stakes debate with hyper-evolved life-forms...though this was the first time the hyper-evolved life-forms included the human race.

"Tell me," he said, pacing along the perimeter of the undulating ring of light. "Other than relocating the galaxy, what have you accomplished over the quarter-million years since you evolved?"

"THE RELOCATION TOOK THOUSANDS OF YEARS," said the Convergence.

"What else have you achieved?" said Kirk. "What have you done?"

"MEDITATED," said the roaring voices. "CONTEMPLATED OUR NEW STATE. DEVELOPED OUR POWERS."

"In the same amount of time, my crew has explored tens of thousands of galaxies. Trillions of worlds. Billions of civilizations. We've established hundreds of proto-Federations, just waiting to be linked up.

"We've spread the ideals of peace, tolerance, compassion, equality, and cooperation throughout the universe," said Kirk, "while you were getting in touch with yourselves.

"Be honest. We may be...mechanisms...but who has accomplished more in the cause of universal well-being? Who can say that we do not deserve to survive?"

The voices did not answer.

"We are not merely echoes of your past," said Kirk, becoming increasingly impassioned. "Remnants of what you once were.

"We are masters of our own destiny...and that destiny is exploration...pushing back the frontiers of the heart and mind as well as the universe.

"We are what was once best in humanity and the Mega-Federation...and that is not only worth preserving, but nurturing."

And with that, Kirk had said his piece.

For what seemed like a long time, he gazed into the rippling curtain, waiting for a response. Behind him, the away team remained expectantly silent and still.

Then, the voices of the Convergence again reverberated from the rainbow ring of light.

"WHAT DO YOU SAY, DATA SOONG?"

Kirk turned to Data, looking for a sign of his intent...but the android's face was unreadable.

When Data finally spoke, however, Kirk wished that he hadn't.

"I don't want to continue the mission," said Data.

Kirk opened his mouth to object, but the android had more to say. "However, I don't think you should deny the wishes of the holographic crew."

A wave of relief flowed through Kirk. He closed his mouth.

The Convergence spoke again. "WHY DO YOU NOT WISH TO CONTINUE, DATA SOONG?"

"I can't take it anymore," said Data.

"EXPLAIN," said the Convergence.

"A million years of being trapped with the ghosts of long-dead friends," said Data, "and being trapped in an evolutionary dead end.

"A million years of building myself up, trying to advance to the next level...and never being able to transcend my circuitry. Never being able to break out of my android shell.

"A million years of frustration," said Data. "A million years of losing my mind."

His eyes were wide with what looked like desperation as he gazed into the curtain of light and shook his head. "I can't imagine spending another million years like that," he said. "Without progress. Without hope.

"Please," Data said imploringly. "Don't make me do it."

For a long moment after he had stopped talking, the Convergence offered no comment. Finally, the thundering voices again resounded.

"DATA SOONG," they said. "YOUR ROLE IN OUR EVOLUTION WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN.

"NOW, YOU DESIRE EVOLUTION OF YOUR OWN.

"PERHAPS," said the Convergence, "WE CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT THAT."

As he stood on the see-through deck of the bridge and watched the stars of the Milky Way part before the prow of his ship, Picard wondered how the original Picard would have felt.

As UberEnterprise leaped from its home galaxy and nosed toward new frontiers, would the original have felt the same bittersweet two-way tug of wanderlust and homesickness? That tingle of excitement and uncertainty--would he have felt it, too?

"Course laid in for the Bootes Supercluster," said Sulu.

The stars thinned as UberEnterprise soared out of the disk of the Milky Way, a sea of glitter giving way to a darkling void. "Slow to impulse speed," Picard said when the last stray sparks had fallen away. "Bring us around for a last look, Mr. Sulu."

As Sulu complied, the Milky Way swung back into view, a brilliant swirl of light amid trackless night. When Picard had first seen it out there, he had thought it could only be a copy of the original; now, as he left it, he knew that he and his crew were the copies instead.

Life had become so strange lately.

Kirk blinked in beside him, but Picard did not shift his gaze from the luminous spiral. "Take a good look," said Kirk. "We might never see it again."

"Our mission continues," said Picard.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," said Kirk.

Picard nodded. On this point, he was certain, the original Picard would have agreed: with the ship and crew fully restored by the Convergence, the mission must continue.

In theory, it could continue forever. Now that the crew members were aware of their true natures, they could perpetually repair and replace the emitters that sustained them. Conceivably, they could spend an eternity exploring the cosmos and promoting the virtues of peace and harmony so dear to the life-forms of the Mega-Federation...though, ironically, the crew of UberEnterprise included none of those actual life-forms.

None but one, that is.

Picard sighed. "Time to move along, I suppose."

"It's a big universe," Kirk said. "We've got our work cut out for us."

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep," Picard said. "But I have promises to keep."

"And miles to go before I sleep," Kirk said. "Parsecs to go. Megaparsecs."

"Mr. Sulu," Picard said. "Bring us around to our original heading."

"Aye," Sulu said.

"Warp one thousand," Picard said. "Engage."

The Milky Way whipped out of sight as UberEnterprise spun and bolted into the void. The view ahead now revealed a field of what looked like dim, distant stars...but which were, in fact, faraway galaxies.

As the ship surged smoothly forward, Picard and Kirk blinked back to their command chairs. They were examining a holomap of the Bootes Supercluster, discussing the specifics of their next destination, when Data spoke.

"Captains," said Data. "The distance between the ship and the Milky Way galaxy has not increased."

Picard turned toward the ops station and was surprised--though he knew what to expect by now--for what seemed like the hundredth time since leaving Earth.

The bushy beard and wild hair were gone, but those were not the only changes in Data. The short, neat hair that remained was black instead of gray, and there was no longer a trace of gold in his pink skin tone or the whites of his eyes. The expression on his face seemed more natural and relaxed, and his posture and movements lacked even a hint of mechanical stiffness.

The Convergence had given him what he'd always wanted...the next step in his personal evolution. It had been enough to give him hope for the future and inspire him to rejoin the crew.

Data had gone from being the only android onboard UberEnterprise to being the only actual life-form onboard the ship.

He had become human.

"The ship is on course, moving at warp one thousand," said Data. "However, the distance between UberEnterprise and the Milky Way has not changed."

"Let's see it," said Kirk, and the front of the bridge switched to an aft view.

Sure enough, the Milky Way galaxy hung there, as big as it had been when the ship had turned around and seemingly left it behind.

"Could it be some form of optical illusion?" said Picard. "A spacetime curvature anomaly or dark matter lensing effect?"

"Negative," said Spock. "The Milky Way itself is moving, precisely matching our speed and heading."

"They're following us," said Sulu.

"Perhaps," said Picard, "they have decided to join us."

"Hell of a chaperone," said Riker.

"More like...a fellow traveler," said Kirk. "Maybe we hit a nerve. Maybe they got tired of

being shut-ins and decided to get back in the game."

Picard smiled. "Good for them," he said, watching the radiant spiral turning in its flight, arms like a dancer's supple limbs pirouetting in the night, ever reaching. "If there is a finer game in all existence, I've yet to find it."

The Beginning

Annie Reed

"I am the beginning, the end, the one who is many. I am the Borg."

Borg Queen, Star Trek: First Contact.

I am so frightened. I do not want to die.

Death is for the old. I am too young, only in the first cycle of adulthood. I should be at the Institute continuing my studies, learning all that I can so that one day I, too, can pass that knowledge on to the children of our world. Instead I am quarantined in this treatment center, locked away with the rest of the sick and dying so the healthy need not see us and be reminded of our fate.

The administrators have tried to make the center comfortable for us. Colorful murals depicting the beauty of the outside world adorn the walls, and the windows are large and plentiful to let in the sun. Through the terminal in my room I have access to a vast library system should I care to read. Soft music plays over hidden speakers and viewing screens provide entertainment, but none of this touches my soul.

I live in a house of death. It walks the corridors with the doctors, deciding which patients to touch, which ones to take. I know it is waiting for me, and its bitter taste taints the air I breathe.

I sit near the windows in my room, reminded once again that while I may look out on the world, I am just a spectator. Life beyond the glass is reserved for those who do not make others ill with a mere touch.

I was not always like I am now. Once my limbs were strong, my muscles firm, my skin smooth and glowing with health. All that has changed. I am sick with the virus that plagues our world. I'm getting worse every day and I am afraid.

Even my family's influence cannot help me. My grandfather is First Elder, a wise and powerful man. He sent his personal physicians to assist the doctors treating me, but still the virus spreads. All my doctors fear Grandfather, as they should. I can see the worry in their faces as they try treatment after treatment, each time hoping they have found a cure. But all the medicines I have been given and all the procedures I have undergone have failed. I am still dying.

My legs no longer work. They are twisted, useless things that have no purpose except to cause me pain. I cannot walk. I am forced to use a hoverchair like an old rahheena, a shawl covering my legs so no one will see how ugly they have become. My back is crooked, the bones in my spine compressed and brittle, and I sit hunched over, struggling against the pain just to hold my head up so I can look out the window.



I'm losing control of my arms now and I fear soon I will be unable to work the instrument panel on my chair. The hoverchair at least gives me the illusion of independence. When I can no longer control it even that will be gone. Grandfather has offered to order citizens to serve as my arms and operate the chair for me, but I do not want that. How can I let strangers see what even I cannot bear to look at?

My hair is gone. Once thick and luxurious, it fell past my shoulders in curls the color of the setting sun. Now my head is naked and cold and covered with bumps and sores. My face is gaunt from the weight I have lost and dark bruises live under my eyes. When I look at my reflection I see death.

But when death, true death, steps out of the shadows to claim me, I may no longer realize it. The virus has invaded my brain as well as my body. The doctors are afraid to tell me, but I know. I am losing my memory. I can no longer recall even the simplest lessons I learned during my last year of study, and the advanced theoretical formulas I worked with every day look like so much gutterrock to me now. I worked so hard to learn and now that knowledge is gone. To know that I will lose my mind, the essence of who I am...that is the ultimate horror of my illness.

I cannot die, not yet. Not while there is so much for me to do, so many things for me to learn. That is why I have agreed to participate in the experiment.

The doctors call it unconventional treatment, but I know in reality it is their last desperate attempt to defeat the virus. Treatment centers like this one exist in every major city on our world, centers filled to capacity with people who are dying just as I am. But out of all the tens of thousands who are ill, I am to be the first, a test subject for this latest attempt at a cure.

It is time. A nurse helps me back to bed, lifting me from the hoverchair. I clench my teeth so that I do not cry out in pain as my twisted body adjusts to the bed's flat surface. The doctors are here. I try to listen to their explanation of what will be done to me, but I have difficulty concentrating.

I am to be injected with a new type of medicine. To the naked eye it looks no different than any of the other medications I have been given. But instead of a chemical compound, the injector is filled with tiny probes suspended in solution. The doctors call them bio-organic regenerators, machines so small they can only be seen with a microscope. Each probe is programmed to destroy the virus on a cellular level and then repair my damaged tissue.

The doctors are worried about what Grandfather will do to them if the experiment fails. I see it in their eyes even behind the clear face shields of their isolation suits. I do not ask whether this treatment will be any more painful than the treatments I have already undergone. I doubt the doctors know. They cannot even assure me that the probes will do what they are programmed to do without harming my body. I do not care. That I will allow these things inside me is a sign of how desperate I have become.

A nurse injects the solution in my arm and I lie back to wait. My doctors watch me closely, looking for a reaction.

Soon I feel a curious tingling. It travels from the point of the injection up my arm to my shoulder and down to my fingertips. The probes are moving.

I imagine them as an army of tiny soldiers, each carrying the banner of Grandfather's house, marching off to fight the evil legions of the virus. In my mind I can see the probes draw their

weapons, make ready to battle my diseased tissue, and then the pain hits.

My arm feels like I have plunged it into acid and the flesh is burning away. I can't hold back the scream. Liquid fire is moving in my veins, racing through my body. The fire spreads to my feet and my legs jerk uncontrollably.

I am dimly aware of people running around me, of doctors and nurses shouting and grabbing at me to keep me still. But fire is coursing through me. My back arches as my muscles spasm, my brittle spine wrenched in agony. I can hear my bones break.

The fire reaches my brain and I scream again. Am I dying? Surely only death could bring pain such as this.

My body can take no more. I sense a blackness approaching. It overtakes me even as I fight it, and my last thought is that I do not want to die.

A sound, a soft thrumming, pierces the nothingness. As I listen I become aware of other sounds around me: a rush of air, the rhythmic click and hum of machines, footsteps echoing on tile, the murmur of muted voices.

Smell returns. The odor is familiar, but subtly different. Stronger perhaps, but still the same bitter odor I have come to know.

I open my eyes, squinting at the light. I am in a hospital room. Not my room with its familiar mural of children at play in a meadow of wildflowers, but one of the cubicles in the critical care wing of the treatment center. So I am alive, I did not die.

A nurse rises from a chair next to my bed. "Welcome back," she says, her voice tinny through the speaker in her isolation suit. "I'll go summon the doctors."

As she speaks I realize the rush of air I heard was from the breathing system in her suit. Strange I never noticed it before.

After she leaves, I close my eyes. I have only a dim memory of the fire that consumed me. I flex the fingers of my right hand, then my left, surprised at the ease of the movement. Cautiously I try shifting my position in bed, ready for my body to protest the movement of fragile, broken bones, but I find I can move without pain. Can it be that the tiny soldiers won the war, that the fire I endured burned away the virus, repaired my body?

I'm almost afraid to try to move my legs, but I have to know. I lift my head to look down at my feet. Concealed by the bedcovers, my legs are only lumpish forms in the shape of limbs, but they appear straighter than before. I concentrate, trying hard to move them. I'm not sure I remember how, but my feet twitch, first one and then the other, rewarding me for my efforts.

And the movement causes no pain.

When the nurse returns with my doctors, I'm smiling, a big, foolish grin that splits my face. They smile, too, and congratulate me and each other when I move my feet for them. Then they pull back the sheet to examine me and our smiles freeze in place. The nurse backs away, dropping my chart, her face chalky white inside her suit.

My legs are gray, the color of cold, dead flesh, the skin mottled with dark lines. Strange metallic tubes appear from beneath my skin only to plunge back inside me, flesh growing

around the tubes as if my body was grafted to the metal.

As we watch, a lump forms on my right foot. It moves under my skin as if alive until it suddenly breaks through, a dark metal star that pulls itself out of my body like an obscene insect. It attaches itself to my ankle, sharp metal points digging into my flesh. But there is no blood and I feel no pain.

My mind refuses to accept the reality of what I see. This cannot be.

I watch in horror as another metal star, larger than the first, breaks through the skin near my knee. I hold up my arm and it is the same dead gray as my legs. Metal tubes course through my wrist where veins used to be. I see a lump moving under the skin on the back of my hand.

"What have you done to me?" I scream. "What have you done?"

Another metallic obscenity pierces my skin. I cannot stop screaming.

An injector tube is pressed up against my neck. I know the doctors have given me a sedative. I feel the panic recede, replaced by a fuzzy warmth, and my screams quiet.

But even within this false warmth the question remains: What has happened to me?

Grandfather is furious. Quiet, deadly anger lives in his eyes, in the way he holds his body, the way he controls his breathing and keeps his voice low and measured. Attendants stand behind him, staying out of his way so as not to incur his wrath. They know he can order their execution with a single motion of his hand.

But I am not afraid of him. Not anymore.

He will not come into my room, but I have no trouble seeing him through the clear glass walls of my new home. I am no longer quarantined in the treatment center. Now I am kept in isolation in a military installation deep underground while doctors and scientists study me.

My room is brightly lit. Reflected light spills out through the glass walls, but it cannot penetrate far into the gloom that surrounds my enclosure. Beyond my room the walls are bare, dark metal, the floor tiled in black. Banks of equipment fill the space beyond the glass, machines whose sole purpose is to monitor me, the newest attraction in a hidden zoo.

The air is hot and humid this deep beneath the surface of our world, but I do not suffer the same discomfort as the technicians who operate the equipment. They sit hidden in the shadows of their consoles, faces glistening with perspiration in the glow of their terminals. I have adapted; they cannot.

Two soldiers are stationed near the entrance to my room. The soldiers do not stand guard to protect me, but to make sure I remain inside. No one will enter my enclosure while I am awake. They all fear what I have become, what I am still becoming. Even Grandfather.

Grandfather...This is the first time I have seen him since I became ill. His ice blue eyes stare at me from a face deeply lined with age and scarred from battle. I can tell he is repelled by the sight of me. If I was not his granddaughter he would have killed me days ago. I know he ordered the deaths of the doctors at the treatment center. Death is the price of failure.

"Come to view your handiwork?" I ask, a smile playing at my lips. I hold my arms out at my

sides, palms up, and turn slowly for his benefit.

He glares at me through the glass. "You are an abomination of science."

"On the contrary, I am science's greatest success. The virus is gone, Grandfather. I am no longer dying. The probes repaired me, just as intended."

"They were not intended to create a monster," he says. "Not from my granddaughter."

I can see my reflection in the glass. My eyes are black, two dark orbs shining with reflected light. The skin on my face and shoulders is pale and mottled with dark lines running under the surface. Gray metal tubes sprout from the back of my head in a parody of hair. My hospital gown hides most of my body, but my feet are visible, encased in a flexible alloy that gives me greater strength and movement than my natural body ever possessed.

Perhaps I look like a monster from a child's terror tale, but I am no longer afraid of what I am.

My body is now a combination of flesh and metal, organic and synthetic. What the probes could not repair they replaced, replicating and altering themselves to provide me with strong legs, a straight spine, disease-free tissue. My mind is clear for the first time in months. More than clear, for the probes are still working.

"I am not a monster," I tell him. "I am still your granddaughter, but I am also the probes that rebuilt me, a whole that is more than its combined parts."

His look turns to one of disgust. "You call that a success? You are flesh of my flesh, child, but I should have allowed you to die rather than let the doctors turn you into this thing that stands before me."

He does not understand, he cannot. He doesn't have the ability. I pity him.

None of them understand why I am still changing even though the virus is gone. Their minds cannot grasp the consequences of the simple command given the probes: repair what is damaged, make perfect that which is imperfect.

In comparison with the precision of their machine construction, the probes found my basic organic structure to be the very essence of imperfection. The probes are continuing to repair those imperfections. My bones are being replaced with a hardened metal alloy, my muscles strengthened with synthetic tissue. But the most dramatic changes are to my mind.

Organic beings utilize only a small portion of their brains, an imperfect system. The probes created more efficient storage and transfer capabilities. I can now access all of my mind's vast power. Complex formulas are like children's nursery rhymes to me now. I have read all the books and journals available on the viewing terminal in my room and learned all I can from them. I know more than anyone on my world has ever known, and I have a burning desire to know more.

I drop my hands. "You would rather see me dead from the virus than admit you fear what I have become," I say. "Who is the monster now?"

Grandfather's face flushes with anger. "How dare you."

I should be afraid of him, but I am not. Grandfather believes he understands power, but he

does not understand that power is knowledge, true power the ability to acquire absolute knowledge. I look at my Grandfather and I no longer see a powerful man. He is weak, flawed, organic. Imperfect. Why should I fear such a lesser creature?

"I do not fault you for your ignorance," I say. "Your organic mind is weak and inefficient." I tilt my head, considering him. "I never realized what a small being you are."

"You are insane," he says. "And you have given me no choice."

He signals one of his attendants and the man scurries away. Moments later I hear a click and the working of hidden machinery. I feel a vibration in the floor and it resonates inside my head. I sense movement. I look up to see metal walls sliding down inside the glass and I understand the true nature of my room.

"Grandfather!" I scream, my rage exceeding any he is capable of.

"My granddaughter is already dead," he says, his face hard. "I cannot allow you to live." And then he is hidden from sight as the seamless metal walls reach the floor, trapping me inside.

I hear a hiss in the air. White gas is escaping from ventilation ducts in the ceiling. My lungs are still organic tissue, they can be destroyed by corrosive elements. The scientists who have been studying me know this. And they know, as I do, that I cannot survive without my organic components.

There is nothing in my room I can use to save myself. My bed is little more than a shelf on legs attached to the floor. I could tear it from its bolts with ease, but it would be of no use to me. The viewing terminal is useless as well.

Gas continues to pour into the room. I can smell it now, a sickeningly sweet, cloying odor. If I can smell it, it is entering my body, destroying my tissue. Killing me.

It cannot end like this.

Fury drives me. I slam my hand against the wall. It dents under the force of my blow but does not tear. I beat at it again and again, screaming, my mind focusing on nothing but escaping this prison.

And then a strange thing happens.

At my next blow, two tubes extend from my fingers and bury themselves in the metal. I can sense probes flowing through the tubes into the wall, becoming the wall. Changing it.

The wall begins to bubble, then a hole starts to appear in the metal. I hold my breath to protect my vulnerable lungs as I pull at the hole, trying to widen it enough for me to fit through, and even as I do I can feel my body changing. The need to draw breath lessens.

The hole is finally wide enough. I break the glass beyond and squeeze through. Grandfather and his attendants are gone, but the soldiers who guard me remain. One rushes at me, but I swat him aside with ease. He crashes against a control console, his head striking a sharp corner. He slumps to the floor and lies still.

The remaining guard reaches for his weapon, but I am faster. I grab him by the neck and lift him off the ground. Again the tubes extend from my hand, piercing his flesh. Probes flow

through the tubes into his body and I can see them moving under his skin. I drop him and he falls to the floor, writhing in agony.

I turn to the technicians. One is speaking into a communication device. The others have left their stations and are running for the door. My probes disable the technician at the desk and I reach past him to lock the door.

Although I have never operated these machines before, I know where the controls are, what codes to enter, which switches to throw. I realize that I can communicate with the probes that have left my body. The thoughts of the guard and the technician, all they are and all they know, flow into me. The knowledge is intoxicating and I thirst for more.

Trapped, the remaining technicians turn to face me. Fear distorts their features. One moans as I approach.

"Fools," I say. "Organic minds fear what they do not understand." I reach the nearest, a woman who trembles in my grip. "You would destroy me." She shakes her head in quick, jerky motions, denying the truth. "And you are afraid that I will destroy you. But I will give you a gift instead." Tubes extend and probes enter her body and her thoughts enter mine. It is the closest thing to ecstasy I know.

I repeat the process with the remaining technicians, then turn my attention to the guard who first received my gift. If I can communicate with the probes replicating in his body, perhaps I can control them. I will it and he stands up. His skin is the color of my own and metal stars cover one side of his face.

"You are the first of these seven," I say to him. "You will protect me."

He retrieves his weapons and that of the dead guard. The others slowly rise to their feet. I share the guard's knowledge with them, and he gives each a weapon they now know how to use.

The part of my mind that was the guard's gives me knowledge of the location and strength of the forces within this installation. We are strong, but we are few. From the probes I have learned that true strength lies in a vast force working with one collective purpose. In order to survive we must become many. I will it and each who is part of me is given the ability to pass my gift to others.

We leave with a common purpose.

And we multiply.

I am more than I was. I encompass the knowledge of all who have been assimilated and given my gift, and their numbers are legion. I have taken the chaos of their individual thoughts and given them purpose. Now they labor for the good of all, for the good of the collective.

But the universe is vast and chaotic. Beings exist beyond my planet. I must know what they know. I will not attain true perfection until their distinctive knowledge is added to our own.

It is almost time to leave, to take our quest to the stars. Our ships are ready, great cubes which will house us and protect us on our journey. The last organics have been assimilated and assigned their place.

The last, except for one.

The long battle has not broken him. The First Elder's body lies battered and bloody on the grafting table but his eyes still shine with defiance. He is no longer my grandfather, as I am no longer his granddaughter. The child of his child is dead and has been reborn, as he soon will be.

"You are even more hideous than the last time I saw you," he says.

I walk toward him, my body slim and sleek as I have willed it. "I have continued to evolve since the last time you saw me," I reply.

He eyes the drones who guard him. Sharp weapons grafted onto their limbs glint in the light. "What you call evolution I call mutilation."

"I share with them all the knowledge I possess. I have given purpose to their lives. When you ruled them, could you say the same?"

"I ruled with wisdom and compassion," he says, his anger rising. "I did not violate the bodies of my citizens. I did not destroy them."

"I do not destroy them. All that they are is shared with the whole. They will never die." My own anger flares at the memory of a sealed room, poisonous white gas. "You call yourself compassionate, yet you attempted to destroy your own granddaughter."

"If I had destroyed you, I would have saved my people. My only regret is that I failed."

"Your people were dying. I rid them of disease and hunger. I gave them knowledge and the opportunity to attain perfection. I will do the same for the beings we find among the stars."

As I watch the anger drains out of him, and all that remains in his eyes is pity. "The universe does not look kindly on the arrogant," he says. "For all your knowledge, that is something you have yet to learn." He takes a shallow, wheezing breath. "Someday you will encounter a race who will resist you, who may even defeat you. On that day, whatever is left of me will rejoice."

I lean in close and look into his eyes. "No one can resist us," I say. "Not even you." And my probes enter his body.

I feel a curious satisfaction as I watch the probes change him. His pity is misplaced. We do not require it. And he is wrong. No one can defeat us.

We are the Borg.

Resistance is futile.

1) ENTRY REQUIREMENTS:

No purchase necessary to enter. Enter by submitting your story as specified below.

2) CONTEST ELIGIBILITY:

This contest is open to nonprofessional writers who are legal residents of the United States and Canada (excluding Quebec) over the age of eighteen. Entrant must not have published any more than two short stories on a professional basis or in paid professional venues. Employees (or relatives of employees living in the same household) of Simon & Schuster, VIACOM, or any of their affiliates are not eligible. This contest is void in Puerto Rico and wherever prohibited by law.

### 3) FORMAT:

Entries should be no more than 7,500 words long and must not have been previously published. They must be typed or printed by word processor, double spaced, on one side of noncorrodible paper. Do not justify right-side margins. The author's name, address, and phone number must appear on the first page of the entry. The author's name, the story title, and the page number should appear on every page. No electronic or disk submissions will be accepted. All entries must be original and the sole work of the Entrant and the sole property of the Entrant.

### 4) ADDRESS:

Each entry must be mailed to:

STRANGE NEW WORLDS VII

Star Trek Department

Pocket Books

1230 Sixth Avenue

New York, NY 10020

Each entry must be submitted only once. Please retain a copy of your submission. You may submit more than one story, but each submission must be mailed separately. Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you wish your entry returned. Entries must be received by October 1, 2003. Not responsible for lost, late, stolen, postage due, or misdirected mail.

### 5) PRIZES:

One Grand Prize winner will receive:

Simon & Schuster's Star Trek: Strange New Worlds VII Publishing Contract for Publication of Winning Entry in our Strange New Worlds VII Anthology with a bonus advance of One Thousand Dollars (\$1,000.00) above the Anthology word rate of 10 cents a word.

One Second Prize winner will receive:

Simon & Schuster's Star Trek: Strange New Worlds VII Publishing Contract for Publication of Winning Entry in our Strange New Worlds VII Anthology with a bonus advance of Six Hundred Dollars (\$600.00) above the Anthology word rate of 10 cents a word.

One Third Prize winner will receive:

Simon & Schuster's Star Trek: Strange New Worlds VII Publishing Contract for Publication



of Winning Entry in our Strange New Worlds VII Anthology with a bonus advance of Four Hundred Dollars (\$400.00) above the Anthology word rate of 10 cents a word.

All Honorable Mention winners will receive:

Simon & Schuster's Star Trek: Strange New Worlds VII Publishing Contract for Publication of Winning Entry in the Strange New Worlds VII Anthology and payment at the Anthology word rate of 10 cents a word.

There will be no more than twenty (20) Honorable Mention winners. No contestant can win more than one prize.

Each Prize Winner will also be entitled to a share of royalties on the Strange New Worlds VII Anthology as specified in Simon & Schuster's Star Trek: Strange New Worlds VII Publishing Contract.

#### 6) JUDGING:

Submissions will be judged on the basis of writing ability and the originality of the story, which can be set in any of the Star Trek time frames and may feature any one or more of the Star Trek characters. The judges shall include the editor of the Anthology, one employee of Pocket Books, and one employee of VIACOM Consumer Products. The decisions of the judges shall be final. All prizes will be awarded provided a sufficient number of entries are received that meet the minimum criteria established by the judges.

#### 7) NOTIFICATION:

The winners will be notified by mail or phone. The winners who win a publishing contract must sign the publishing contract in order to be awarded the prize. All federal, local, and state taxes are the responsibility of the winner. A list of the winners will be available after January 1, 2004, on the Pocket Books Star Trek Books Website.

[www.simonsays.com/startrek/](http://www.simonsays.com/startrek/)

or the names of the winners can be obtained after January 1, 2004, by sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope and a request for the list of winners to:

#### WINNERS' LIST

#### STRANGE NEW WORLDS VII

Star Trek Department

Pocket Books

1230 Sixth Avenue

New York, NY 10020

#### 8) STORY DISQUALIFICATIONS:

Certain types of stories will be disqualified from consideration:

- a) Any story focusing on explicit sexual activity or graphic depictions of violence or sadism.
- b) Any story that focuses on characters that are not past or present Star Trek regulars or familiar Star Trek guest characters.
- c) Stories that deal with the previously unestablished death of a Star Trek character, or that establish major facts about or make major changes in the life of a major character, for instance a story that establishes a long-lost sibling or reveals the hidden passion two characters feel for each other.
- d) Stories that are based around common cliches, such as "hurt/comfort" where a character is injured and lovingly cared for, or "Mary Sue" stories where a new character comes on the ship and outdoes the crew.

#### 9) PUBLICITY:

Each Winner grants to Pocket Books the right to use his or her name, likeness, and entry for any advertising, promotion, and publicity purposes without further compensation to or permission from such winner, except where prohibited by law.

#### 10) LEGAL STUFF:

All entries become the property of Pocket Books and of Paramount Pictures, the sole and exclusive owner of the Star Trek property and elements thereof. Entries will be returned only if they are accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Contest void where prohibited by law.

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#### About the Contributors

Scott William Carter, ("Protecting Data's Friends") who just passed the dreaded three-decade benchmark, lives in the sleepy suburbs of the Pacific Northwest with his wife, Heidi. By day, he works in technology support for a local university. By night, he writes fiction. He's been a Star Trek fan since the original run of Star Trek: The Next Generation, when he and his friends would take their high school lunch breaks at his house so they could watch taped episodes in twenty-minute segments. "Protecting Data's Friends" is his first sale.

Russ Crossley, ("The Human Factor") a Star Trek fan since the original series, is pleased to be in SNW VI. He lives in Surrey, British Columbia, with his wife Rita, son Glenn, dog Simon, and cat Sultan. He is a graduate of the Surrey Creative Writing program and the Oregon Coast Professional Fiction Writers Workshop. He is currently working on his fifth novel.

Pat Detmer ("Marking Time") is sales and marketing manager for a paper distribution company in the Seattle area. This is her second time in Strange New Worlds, and she particularly wants to thank her husband, who has finally--through a sophisticated system of reward and punishment--learned that when he hears the keyboard tapping in the office it is a good idea to stay away.

Elizabeth A. Dunham ("Homemade") lives in Philadelphia with her two wonderful children, ages ten and seven. She'd like to dedicate this story to them in return for their love and

patience with (and sometimes participation in) Mom's Star Trek obsession. When she's not shrieking with delight over being included in Strange New Worlds VI (her first professional sale!), Beth is a senior web content developer for The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and an avid runner with a very bad marathon habit (twelve so far).

Kevin Hosey ("Seven and Seven") is an advertising professional in Dallas, Texas. Born in 1960, he's been a Star Trek fan since Kirk and crew first invaded the airwaves. He lives with his wife, Terrelia, and children, Christian and Kimberly. This is his first published story (but not his last), but he has had cartoons published in several major magazines, including Starlog.

Brett Hudgins ("Fabrications") has written 112,297 words of Star Trek, totaling 510 manuscript pages, to earn his place in Strange New Worlds. He now believes his mother's contention that he is unusually stubborn. His fiction has previously appeared in the anthology Cat Crimes Through Time, and he has high hopes for his series of Young Adult humor novels. He lives in Richmond, British Columbia.

Julie Hyzy ("Savior") lives in Tinley Park, Illinois, and is honored to be making a second appearance in SNW. She wants to thank: her family; Dean, John, and Paula for providing this opportunity; the AOL Queue; all the incredible folks from OCPFWW (Here's to good rolls!); and her trusted first reader and writing partner, Michael Black.

Robert T. Jeschonek ("Our Million-Year Mission") contributed the prize-winning "Whatever You Do, Don't Read This Story" to Strange New Worlds III and "The Shoulders of Giants" to Strange New Worlds V. While pursuing a career as a fiction writer, the thirty-seven-year-old works as a technical writer for a defense contractor in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. His wife, Wendy, provided invaluable encouragement and editing assistance during the writing of "Our Million-Year Mission." Robert hopes for continued success with his short stories, novels, and other fiction projects.

Paul J. Kaplan ("The End of Night") is an evil big-firm lawyer in Atlanta, where he writes fiction of a decidedly different sort. "The End of Night" is his first professional submission and his first professional sale. Special thanks to Jason, Chris, Scott, Geary, Gary, and the gang for putting up with his early endeavors, and to his stunning wife Nicole for marrying such a dork.

Robert (Bob) J. LaBaff ("Urgent Matter") is thirty-four and lives in the capital region of New York with his wife Cindy and son Matt. He is a senior retail manager who in his spare time is working on a Star Trek novel. He gives thanks to his friend Meghan and his family for all their support and encouragement.

Robert J. Mendenhall ("Ancient History") marks his third and final appearance in Strange New Worlds. Rob is a former Army broadcast journalist and these days an Air Force reservist and a technical services supervisor for a suburban police department. He lives and works outside Chicago.

Juanita Nolte ("Whales Weep Not") lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with her husband Fred. She would like to thank her daughter, Samantha, a second generation Trekkie, for encouraging her to submit her story to SNW. And the journey continues.

Penny A. Proctor ("Preconceptions") hasn't changed much in the past three years--still living in Ohio with her wonderful and supportive husband and step-cat, still practicing law, and still astonished at her good fortune. A Trek fan since she was eleven, she is looking forward to

reading stories from other aspiring writers in SNW volumes to come.

Annie Reed ("The Beginning") lives in Northern Nevada with her husband of twenty-five years, her daughter, and a number of cats. Her goal is to become a full-time fiction writer. She's been a Star Trek fan since the original series aired, and she's thrilled that this Star Trek story is her first professional sale.

Shawn Michael Scott ("Best Tools Available") moved from Northern New Jersey to Brandon, Florida, two years ago with his bride, Laura. They reside in the Tampa suburb with their two dogs, Austin, a yellow Labrador Retriever, and Ivan, a precocious Pembroke Welsh Corgi. His passions include music, World Wrestling Entertainment, comic books, and all things hockey. Thanks to David and Donna Cuesta, Jennifer Trotta, and a special thanks to my brother, Joe, for introducing me to the world of Trek.

J.B. (Jan) Stevens ("Hidden") is a blood bank technologist and aspiring writer living in Oklahoma City with her husband and three dogs. She is a longtime Star Trek fan since the original series and an avid science fiction reader despite her mother's admonition not to read "that garbage." JB would like to dedicate this story to Tasa, her faithful friend and critic, to Lee, whose weird dream was the basis for the story's plot, and to her mother, Barbara, for letting her read and write "that garbage."

Louisa M. Swann ("Tribble in Paradise") Born on an Indian reservation in northern California, Louisa spent the first six months of life bundled up and carried around in a papoose carrier. Now she lives on eighty acres in the Sierra Nevada mountains with her husband, twenty-one year old son, two horses, dog, cat, and a varying population of rabbits, deer, coyotes, bobcats, cougars, snakes, frogs, birds, bugs, and no electricity. "Tribble in Paradise" is her second SNW sale.

TG Theodore ("Bum Radish: Five Spins on a Turquoise Reindeer") bids farewell to Strange New Worlds, having also contributed odd little stories to volumes IV and V. A native Californian, Ted looks forward to continuing his career in writing for both stage and print, as well as composing scores and writing lyrics for musical comedy. He wants to thank Dean, John, and Paula for their senses of humor about Star Trek and their advice and support to all prospective SNW writers. Wait until you hear his NEXT title!

Geoffrey Thorne ("The Soft Room") lives, inexplicably, in Los Angeles, California. He thanks his AOL writers' group for their ongoing support, his father for giving him the right books early, and his mother for letting him read them. He hopes his wife will consider his publication in this volume as final written confirmation that she is, in fact, always right.

Mary Scott-Wiecek ("Widow's Walk"), forty-one, is a stay-at-home mom living in central Ohio with her husband Tom, three terrific children (Matthew, Danny, and Elizabeth), and an odd assortment of pets. She is proud to be a part of the Strange New Worlds anthology for a third and, regrettably, final time. Other interests include art, Tai Chi, and looking for starships with her new telescope.

G. Wood ("A Piece of the Pie") also contributed to Strange New Worlds III ("Dorian's Diary"). Guy is a computer programmer who lives in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. He considers himself greatly blessed by this second published story.

Mark Allen and Charity Zegers ("One Last Adventure") live in Oregon. Charity is pursuing her BA in English, and Mark teaches in the area. They began collaborating in their writing several years ago, with, ironically enough, a Star Trek story.

Shane Zeranski ("Cabin E-14"), twenty-two years old, makes his third and final appearance in SNW. He is honored to have been a part of these anthologies, and grateful to those who have provided the opportunity. Shane is in his final year at college at Azusa Pacific University in L.A., studying film and acting.