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## HOME

From behind Captain Janeway, Harry Kim called out, "Captain, long range sensors are picking up a vessel three parsecs off the port bow. Moving very slowly."

Janeway stood and moved to Kim's station. Chakotay followed.

"What sort of vessel?" she asked.

Kim shook his head. "Resolution is poor at this distance, but I don't recognize the configuration. And, well, the computer..."

"Yes, Mr. Kim?"

"The computer says it matches the configuration of a class of sub-light ships from 21st century Earth--a sleeper ship used during the first wave of extra-Solar colonization.

Janeway was astonished. "That's extraordinary, Mr. Kim." Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Could it be a trap? Are there any other ships in the area?"

Kim consulted his instruments again, double-checking himself. "Just us, Captain."

Chakotay looked at Janeway. "We should investigate, Captain. If it is an Earth ship out here, however unlikely that seems..."

Janeway nodded. "Agreed. Helm, lay in a course."

As Tom Paris was entering the Mess Hall, he ran into Tuvok, who was exiting. Tuvok held a small, greenish rock in his hand.

"What have you got there, Tuvok?"

"Ah, Mr. Paris. It's fortunate our paths have crossed. Please accompany me to Engineering."

"Can it wait, Tuvok? I'm really hungry. Neelix has a big plate of spaghetti waiting for me."

"I believe the Captain has given you Level A Security clearance, has she not, Mr. Paris?"

Paris nodded.

"Then, Mr. Paris: I just now confiscated this rock from Ensign Webber. He illegally obtained it several years ago while stationed on a planet called Gateway."

"Never heard of it."

"That is not surprising. The rock is a fragment of a larger artifact that has been kept from public knowledge because of its potential dangerousness, were it to be used improperly or by the wrong people."

Paris listened attentively, intrigued.

"The artifact, which calls itself the Guardian of Forever, is a gateway to any time period in history, or any place in the known universe." Tuvok turned the rock over in his hands, his brisk pace indicative his excitement.

"And that little rock is a piece of this Guardian? So what? It just looks like an ordinary little rock to me."

Tuvok raised his eyebrow. "This 'little rock' may mean that you will be having that spaghetti dinner you wanted, Mr. Paris. Tonight. On Earth."

Janeway stared intently at the forward viewscreen.

"Coming into range now, sir," Harry said.

A battered, blocky, ancient-looking space vessel lumbered slowly onto the viewscreen. Janeway and Chakotay leaned forward in their seats to study it.

"Straight out of the history books," Chakotay said. "What's it doing way out here?"

"Sensors confirm that it is a DY-100-class sleeper ship," Kim reported. "Hull-markings identify it as the S.S. Sheridan. There is nothing in the computer about this particular ship..."

"That's not surprising. Records from that time period are so fragmented. Life signs?"

"Faint, but there. Consistent with suspended animation."

Janeway stood. "Still no sign of other ships in the area? Kazon?"

Kim consulted his readouts. "None."

Janeway looked at Chakotay. "Commander, take an Away Team and find out what that piece of living history is doing in our part of the Galaxy. We'll discuss the revival of those people later."

Chakotay smiled eagerly. "On my way, Captain." He motioned to Kim and the two of them left the bridge.

In Engineering, Tuvok, Paris and Torres clustered around an analyzer in which was cradled the fragment of the Guardian. Energy from the warp drive was being fed into the fragment, causing it to glow a bright white.

"Well, Tuvok, that's very pretty. It holds the energy well," Paris said sarcastically. "But you still haven't told us what you're trying to accomplish with this."

Torres nodded and they looked to Tuvok for an answer.

"I had thought my intentions were obvious. Tests on the Guardian have shown that its powers can be stored in fragments of it. This rock is, to use a human expression, a 'chip off the old block.' It should possess the abilities of its parent, although to a lesser extent. I believe that if we feed enough power to this fragment, we will be able to access those abilities."

Sudden understanding lit Paris' face. "You mean instantaneous travel across the Galaxy. Take a single step and we're home."

Tuvok didn't take his attention from the fragment.

"Precisely, Mr. Paris."

The intercom chimed. "Janeway to Tuvok. We've encountered an old-style sleeper ship, and I've sent Commander Chakotay to investigate. I'd like you and Lt. Paris on the bridge as soon as possible."

Tuvok raised an eyebrow, and Paris and Torres exchanged curious looks. "Acknowledged. Tuvok out."

The three of them turned back to the rock-Guardian. "Cross your fingers, B'lanna," Paris said. "If this works, I'll treat you to the best plate of spaghetti you've ever had."

"What in the name of Kahless is spaghetti?"

Paris' eyes widened in disbelief, and he opened his mouth to respond, but Tuvok interrupted.

"Ms. Torres, increase power by .5 %."

Torres stepped back a few feet to a control console and touched a few buttons. There was a loud sound like a crack of thunder. Torres watched helplessly as a blinding flash of light expanded from the rock and engulfed Tuvok and Paris. They vanished and the light faded. No trace of the Guardian fragment remained.

Torres looked in horror at the empty space where Paris and Tuvok had been. She pulled herself together and touched her communicator. "Engineering to bridge. Captain, we've had...an accident down here..."

Chakotay and Kim walked down a darkened, narrow corridor lined on both sides with frosted, glass-covered berths in which lay people in suspended animation.

Kim swung his flashlight from side to side. "Johnson should have the lights on any minute now."

On cue, lights on the ceiling flared to life. Chakotay and Kim turned off their hand lights and strapped them to their belts.

Chakotay walked over to one of the berths and rubbed away the frost, looking in at the occupant. Kim did the same at another berth.

"Incredible, isn't it?" Chakotay asked. "For these people the 21st century was yesterday. But they've slept away 300 years."

Kim walked to the next berth and rubbed away the frost. His eyes widened when he saw the occupant. "Commander!"

Chakotay rushed over and looked questioningly at Kim, who directed his attention inside the berth. Chakotay peered inside.

The frozen form of Tuvok reclined within the berth. Frost covered his eyebrows and streaked his hair.

Chakotay and Kim exchanged astonished glances, then Chakotay moved to the next berth and rubbed at the frost, looking inside. Kim peered over his shoulder.

Inside the berth was Tom Paris, his exposed skin dusted with frost.

In a narrow, deserted alleyway, Paris and Tuvok were lying unconscious next to a garbage dumpster. Tuvok stirred first. He sat up and looked around. From the direction of the alley mouth he heard numerous voices and the steady hum of automobile traffic.

He put his fingers to the side of his head and closed his eyes, willing his headache to go away. That done, he leaned over and checked Paris' vital signs. Satisfied that Paris was merely unconscious, he walked to the head of the alley and cautiously peered onto the street beyond.

Sleek vehicles rushed by on the street. People hurried past on the sidewalk. Many of the people were dressed in various types of military uniforms and had guns strapped to their hips. Those soldiers not wearing identical uniforms watched each other warily.

Paris came groaning behind Tuvok. He shook his head back and forth and blinked his eyes several times. "My head feels like the morning after," he said. He looked onto the street. "Is it just my imagination, Tuvok, or are we on Earth? I remember a flash of light back in Engineering, and then..."

"We are indeed on Earth, Mr. Paris. It appears we were successful in tapping the abilities of the Guardian fragment. Although this uncontrolled and unplanned trip is not at all what I had intended."

Paris grinned up at the buildings, the city and the bustle of people around them. "What does that matter, Tuvok? We're here! I'm home, and Vulcan is just a short hop across the quadrant. Now let's get out there and find out where on Earth we are."

"Very well. But I must urge caution, Mr. Paris. With all those uniforms out there, we should not appear out of place, but...." Tuvok broke off, because as he'd been talking, Paris had left the alley, too excited at being home to listen to Tuvok.

Tuvok arched an eyebrow at Paris' retreating back. He touched his ears, then quickly looked around. A timeless 1950's style fedora hat lay discarded beside a dumpster. He reached down, picked it up and placed it on his head. It barely concealed his pointed ears. Somewhat satisfied, he left the alley in pursuit of Paris.

When he caught up, Paris did a double-take at the hat on Tuvok's head. "Very...stylish, Tuvok."

The two of them walked side by side, going with the flow of the pedestrians. Paris ogled the buildings and shops that lined the street, drinking in the sights of home.

The soldiers they passed watched them warily and

fingered their guns nervously, but otherwise ignored them.

"You know, something doesn't look quite right about this place," Paris said in puzzlement. "This looks a lot like New York City--I lived there for awhile, and some of these buildings look familiar, but...not quite right..."

"This is not the New York City you know, Mr. Paris. I had thought that was immediately obvious. You will recall that I said the Guardian of Forever was a doorway to any time period, as well as anywhere in space. I did not realize you would blindly assume we were still in the 24th century."

Paris stopped and turned to Tuvok, suddenly bewildered. They moved out of the flow of people, to stand in the sheltered entrance of a drugstore.

"So when are we, exactly?"

Tuvok looked at a news kiosk behind Paris. "Based on my observations so far, we are in the second quarter of the 21st century. Specifically, March 23rd, 2052." He folded his arms on his chest. "A particularly turbulent year in history."

"But why here, Tuvok? Of all the places in the universe, all the times, why did the rock send us to 21st century New York City?"

"I've always been fascinated by the particularly brutal history of your planet. On Voyager for the past several nights I had been refreshing my knowledge of this period. It is possible that at the time of our experiment with the fragment, thoughts of this period occupied my mind. Perhaps the fragment somehow sensed this and sent us here."

Paris shrugged. "Well, however we got here, we're here. I wish the others could have made it back with us, but....We can make a life here. 300 years in the past still beats being cramped into Voyager for the next eighty years." He suddenly noticed a restaurant across the street whose sign read, "Luigi's Fine Italian Eatery." Another sign in the window proclaimed "Spaghetti--All you can eat--10 cr." Paris looked at the place longingly.

"Do not make yourself at home too quickly, Mr. Paris. We cannot stay here. We must return to Voyager."

Paris waved his arms angrily. "Tuvok, don't start quoting me the Prime Directive, or lecturing me on the dangers of meddling with history. We're here, and I don't see that we have the slightest chance of getting back to Voyager. She's 300 years and half a galaxy away. Why even bother...."

Tuvok's voice was heavy with un-Vulcanly exasperation. "Do you not know the history of your own planet, Mr. Paris?"

"I must have been asleep when the teacher got to the mid-21st century," Paris said sarcastically. "Why



don't you fill me in?"

As though suddenly realizing passersby might be able to hear their conversation about the future, Tuvok led Paris into the vacant doorway of a boarded-up building across the street, so they could talk in private. "This year is a pivotal point in Earth's history, Mr. Paris. Though the Eugenics Wars are several decades in the past, two tyrannical supermen are still holding a small portion of the United States, and another is at large. An historic peace conference is to take place here in New York City later this year. Soldiers from various world factions are already converging here in anticipation of this. Several groups have already tried to seize control of the city. The situation here at the moment is extremely volatile."

Paris looked out at the soldiers milling in the streets. "So that explains them all, and why no one has given us a second glance."

"The situation in the rest of the world is just as tense. Two weeks from today, to prevent the peace negotiations, an unknown faction will detonate several neutron bombs here in New York City, and the city will be completely vaporized."

Paris felt sudden horror as he remembered his history. "World War III. World War III starts this year with the destruction of New York City."

"It appears you were not asleep during your history class after all."

Paris looked out on the street, at the people rushing by. With helpless pity on his face. "All these people are going to die..."

"If I recall correctly, 25 million people were killed in the 30 seconds that it took for New York City to be obliterated."

Just then, across the street, a group of soldiers stopped and began to study Tuvok and Paris very closely. The insignia on the breast of the soldiers was a fist clutching three lightning bolts.

"Perhaps we had best move on, and find a secluded spot where we can consider our next course of action in safety."

Paris nodded and they rejoined the flow of people on the sidewalk. Paris glanced back at the group of soldiers, but they were gone.

They soon entered a run-down neighborhood. Old and grimey buildings lined the trash-littered street. The people walking the streets were a mirror of their surroundings.

"There used to be a huge park a few blocks from here," Paris said. "I mean, 300 years from now there will be a park, which was supposedly built in the late 20th century--"

His eyes widened in horror and disgust as two grotesque people passed them. Weeping sores cover their bodies, and they walked with highly-pronounced limps.

Tuvok gave no sign that he'd noticed.

Paris, however, gave the infected couple a wide berth. He turned and stared after them for a moment, then caught up with Tuvok. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Tuvok, what--?"

"As I said, Mr. Paris, the Eugenics Wars are several decades past, but the world is still suffering from them. At least ten engineered viruses are circulating among the population. They are extremely virulent and deadly. In the remnants of the United States, large groups of infected people are quarantined. Other countries choose to dispose of their infected using less humanitarian means. By the time these viruses are finally brought under control a decade from now, 100 million people will have been killed by them."

Paris looked around, suddenly noticing more of the sore-covered people. "Uh, Tuvok, are we in any danger from being so close to these people?"

"I do not believe so. These people undoubtedly carry a blood-born virus. Otherwise this entire area would be sealed behind a wall and heavily guarded."

"This place is insane. Plagues, trigger-happy armies roaming the cities..."

"Then may I assume your first-hand experience of this time period, coupled with your knowledge of events to come, has sufficiently motivated your desire to return to Voyager?"

Paris nodded.

"Very good. At this point I should inform you that we are being followed."

Paris risked a glance backward. Three of the soldiers with the lightning-bolts-in-fist insignia were coming up the street toward Paris and Tuvok.

They continued walking non-challantly, as though ignorant of their followers.

"Are you ready to run?" Paris asked. "They have some formidable-looking weaponry, and we're unarmed."

Tuvok nodded, and the two of them began walking faster, preparing to run. They halted when four more of the lightning-bolt-insignia soldiers came around the corner ahead of them and moved to cut them off.

Tuvok pointed to a darkened alley nearby, and Paris nodded. They turned into the alleyway--only to discover that it dead-ended in a brick wall. Trash heaps littered the alleyway. The nearest windows were twenty feet above them and covered with metal bars.

The steady click of running boots could be heard on the street, growing louder.

Tuvok and Paris turned to face the alley mouth.

The seven soldiers stepped into view. Tuvok opened his mouth to speak. One of the soldiers raised a rifle. Two bursts of light spit forth, throwing Paris and Tuvok against the wall. They slumped to the ground.

At the end of the street, two men stood in the shade of a palm tree, watching the alleyway. Each was dressed in a sharp blue uniform with a strangely distorted American flag on the breast. They watched as the seven soldiers emerged from the alleyway carrying the unconscious Starfleet officers between them. When the seven soldiers reached the end of the street, the two men followed at a discreet distance.

An office furnished with a large desk, bookcase, two chairs and a sofa. A door opposite the desk. A large window behind the desk gave a view of a run-down neighborhood in New York City, possibly the same one where they'd been captured.

Tuvok was sprawled unconscious on the sofa. Paris, also unconscious, slumped in one of the chairs. Their communicator pins were missing.

Tuvok stirred. He sat up and touched his head, feeling for the hat. It was gone, and he arched an eyebrow. Whoever had kidnapped them would know he wasn't human. He explored the room, looking for a way out. The window wouldn't open and was unbreakable. The door was locked.

Tuvok turned as Paris groaned awake.

He put a hand to his forehead. "When this is all over with, I think the thing I'm going to remember the most about this time period is the headaches."

"The weapon they used on us was an extremely primitive precursor to our modern day phaser. The trauma it inflicts upon the body is several degrees higher than the perfected version. I found being stunned by one to be an...interesting experience."

"Now why doesn't that surprise me, Tuvok?"

They both jumped as the door banged open.

A large, heavily muscled man strode into the room. He wore a tight fitting black outfit. On the right breast was the fist-lightning bolt insignia, with four small golden stars beneath it. As he came into the room, he left the door open.

Through the open door Paris glimpsed two soldiers standing guard in the hallway beyond. He recognized both from the group in the alley.

"Ah, good," said the man. "You're awake. My name's

Darwin."

Tuvok wasted no time with formalities. "Why have you abducted us?"

Darwin pointedly ignored Tuvok. Instead, he stood in front of Paris with his arms folded on his chest. Darwin was a head taller than Paris. "Tell your friend I'll not speak to him. He's obviously not from this planet, so I find him doubly inferior. Now, what is your name?"

Paris and Darwin were very close together, almost touching. Paris looked up at Darwin defiantly. "I'm Tom Paris." He felt strangely emboldened due to an imagined invulnerability as a time traveler. "Got anything to feed us? I haven't eaten in a while, and I'm starving. I'd prefer spaghetti, if you've got it."

Darwin grinned at Paris, then moved to the window and stared outside, his back to them. "You are a mysterious pair. We know every uniform of every army on this planet. Yours don't belong to any of them. And those badges you had on your chests....There's some very complex microcircuits imbedded in the gold. I doubt anyone on Earth's capable of such fine work. And then there's the matter of your friend's ears..." Darwin turned around and looked at Paris, leaning against the windowsill. "So tell me who you are."

Paris opened his mouth but---

"And don't lie to me. I have a doctor friend who's very eager to examine your friend. If I don't get the truth--and I'll know if I don't, believe me--I'll let him cut your friend open to see what makes him tick." He pointed at Tuvok. "There are some mighty peculiar things going on in his chest. I'm very curious as well. And impatient. So start talking."

Paris looked at Tuvok, who stood by impassively, confident in Paris' ability to improvise. "Well, like you've guessed, we're not from this planet. We're...emissaries...from the planet...uh...Uhgrok."

"Uhuhgrok?"

"That's right." Growing more confident by the second, Paris sauntered over to the desk and leaned against it casually, folding his arms on his chest. Darwin watched expressionlessly. "And we've come here to offer you a deal that, frankly, you'd be stupid to refuse. Which is why you really don't want to kill my friend Tuvok here."

"He's sub-human and inferior because he's not from Earth. You've just admitted you're not either. Now I may have to kill you both."

Paris waved his arms hastily. "No, no, I never said I wasn't from Earth. I am, obviously. I mean, look at me. Tuvok and his friends....invited....me to leave Earth when I was younger. And now I'm back."

"Why? What's the deal I can't refuse?"

Paris looked to Tuvok for support, but Tuvok was watching with his eyebrow raised. Clearly no help there. "We, uh, we want to offer you membership in our, uh, our galactic community. And we're only offering it to you and your colleagues. We realize that you're the most superior group on Earth, the only ones worthy. Forget all those other--" He waved at the window. "--fools out there."

Darwin looked at Paris for several long, silent moments. Paris waited tensely. Darwin turned his attention to Tuvok, consideringly. Maybe thinking that perhaps Tuvok wasn't inferior after all. Then, to Paris: "I'm not sure I believe you. But then, considering everything about you two, maybe..." He shrugged. "I'll keep you alive a while longer, until I decide for certain. In the meantime, on the assumption that you are telling the truth, there's something I should show you..."

He motioned Tuvok and Paris to follow, and led them from the room.

They walked a short distance to a windowless room. Numerous crates were stacked around the walls. A safe sat in one corner. In a cleared area in the center of the room a large table on which sat three shiny silver cylinders, each about two feet high and half a foot in diameter. Flashing buttons and knobs lined the sides of the cylinders.

Darwin halted at the table and looked down at the devices. Paris and Tuvok stood at the opposite side of the table.

"Behold the harbingers of change," said Darwin.

"If I'm not mistaken, these are neutron bombs," Tuvok said.

"Very pretty, are they not? Nice, shiny...." Darwin caressed the bombs lovingly.

Tuvok and Paris exchanged glances. It was obvious by now that Darwin was not entirely sane.

Darwin muttered to himself, "Today, New York City. Tomorrow, the world...."

"You intend to destroy New York City with these?" Tuvok asked.

Paris was looking down at the bombs. He suddenly had the idea that perhaps he could somehow destroy these bombs and prevent the deaths of millions....But should he?

Darwin answered Tuvok. "Yes. I've got more of these, in other cities around the globe. First New York City goes, and then--"

"Why would you wish to murder millions of innocent people? You claim to be superior, but--"

"They are not innocent!" Darwin shouted. "No one is innocent!" He closed his eyes and breathed heavily, calming himself. Finally he opened them and gazed coolly at the

Vulcan, apparently haveing forgotten his pronouncement of Tuvok's inferiority. "Decades ago, we...my brothers and I--Khan Singh, Baradas, Mikaelmas--we offered the world a better way of life under our glorious rule. They rejected us. Now it's time to cleanse them from the Earth and make room for the new breed of man--my fellows, who share the vision. A glorious new order shall emerge from the ashes of the old."

One of Darwin's soldiers stepped into the room and loudly cleared his throat. "Sir, we've captured someone snooping around the perimeter of the building."

Darwin motioned for the prisoner to be brought in.

The soldier waved into the hall. Another soldier brought the prisoer into the room at gunpoint. The prisoner wore a blue uniform with a distorted American flag on the breast.

Darwin waved his men away. They exited the room, leaving the prisoner standing just inside the doorway. Darwin strode forward and glared at the prisoner. "Lt. Allen."

The prisoner looked around, ignoring Darwin's hawkeyed gaze. "So this is where you and your scum have been hiding out, eh, Darwin? After Detroit, we knew you'd come to New York City." He glanced at the bombs on the table. "We heard about your little plan. Been scouring the city to find you, but we've had the damndest time." He nodded at Paris and Tuvok. "But thanks to our mutual friends..."

Darwin drove his fist into Allen's gut. Allen doubled over, gagging. Darwin whirled on Paris and Tuvok, enraged.

Allen, taking advantage of the distraction, pressed a button concealed on the sleeve of his coat.

"You're working with the Feds?!" Darwin yelled. He advanced on Paris and Tuvok. Paris, thinking fast, opened his mouth to dissuade Darwin--

Gunfire sounded in the distance, echoing throughout the building. Darwin stopped and all three of them listened curiously.

Soldiers ran past the door, headed in the direction of the battle. Except for one, who breathlessly ran into the room and shouted at Darwin. "Feds, sir! Assaulting the main entrance!"

Darwin growled. He grabbed up the rifle lying on the crate near the table. He looked at the soldier and pointed furiously at the three prisoners, indicating that he should stay and guard them. As Darwin rushed out the door, he knocked Allen roughly against the wall.

The three prisoners were left alone with the soldier, who watched them silently. Gunfire reverberated loudly throughout the building. Seconds later the soldier, no longer able to resist the call of the gunfire, backed out

the door and shut it. It clicked noisily as locks slid into place.

Allen rushed to the table, looked at Tuvok and Paris. "We don't have much time! I don't know who the two of you are, but you're obviously not working with Darwin, and you've got every agent in the city wondering about you. What kind of uniforms are those?"

There was a sudden loud pounding on the brick wall opposite the door.

Allen backed toward the door. "You'll be safer over here."

Paris and Tuvok joined Allen by the door. Following Allen's lead, they crouched down and shielded their heads.

"Stick with me," Allen told them.

A loud explosion rocked them. Flying bricks and dust hurtled inward as the wall opposite the door exploded. When the dust settled, fading daylight shone into the room through a gaping hole. The safe, which had been in the corner near the destroyed wall, had blown open. Money and credit cards were scattered across the ground before it.

The bombs still sat safely on the table, covered with a layer of fine powder.

They stood and dusted themselves off. Allen rushed forward to the table and grabbed one of the neutron bombs. His arms sagged under the burden as he lifted it. Four soldiers, wearing the same uniform as Allen, darted into the room through the breached wall and nodded to Allen. A pair each grabbed the remaining two bombs and carried them from the room.

Allen motioned to Paris and Tuvok. "Come on! No telling how long that diversion will fool them!"

He hurried out of the room as quickly as his burden allowed.

Tuvok and Paris exchanged looks. Paris shrugged and they went after Allen. Before leaving, Paris bent over and picked up a handful of money from the destroyed safe.

Tuvok arches an eyebrow at him. "Theft, Mr. Paris?"

Paris tucked the money into his uniform. "It's not theft. This money's going to be destroyed along with New York City anyway, so...Besides, we need money if we're going to survive here until we can get back to Voyager."

Without waiting for a reply, he sprinted over the rubble and out the hole.

They emerged into an abandoned parking lot. A chain link fence, broken in several places, separated the lot from the street beyond. Gunfire and shouts echoed in the distance. Allen stood nearby, waiting impatiently for them. He beckoned them to hurry, then turned and followed the retreating forms of his four comrades. Beyond the fence he turned and ran to the left, disappearing around a corner.

Tuvok and Paris looked in the direction Allen had gone. In unspoken agreement they ran the opposite direction, away from Darwin, Allen, and the sound of gunfire.

After three steps Tuvok stops and picked up a discarded hat that lay on the ground, a duplicate of the one he had earlier. After dusting it off he plopped it on his head, then raced away to catch up with Paris.

Half an hour later, they walked down the same street where they'd first appeared. Neon signs lit up the night.

"Why have you returned us to this street, Mr. Paris? We now have the means to secure lodging for the night, and it would seem prudent to do so."

"We will, Tuvok, we will. But first..."

They came to Luigi's, the shop Paris had noted upon their arrival. Paris looked with joy at the "Spaghetti--all you can eat" sign in the window.

"...But first, we're going to eat. I know you Vulcans can go without food for days, but I can't. I'm half-starved."

He opened the door to Luigi's and politely stepped aside so Tuvok could enter first. Sounds of forks clinking against plates and a low buzz of conversation issued from the open door.

"After you."

Tuvok arched an eyebrow. "Very well, Mr. Paris." He stepped through the door.

"Oh, and Tuvok...We're not on Voyager right now, and Starfleet's 300 years away. Call me Tom."

Luigi's was crowded. Smoke drifted through the dim light, and the buzz of conversation was quite loud.

Following a scant meal, Tuvok sat reading a newspaper. The plate on the table before him had been neatly relieved of its contents. It was immaculately clean, as if it'd already been washed.

Across from Tuvok Paris cleaned his mouth with a napkin which he laid down beside an empty plate smeared with the remnants of spaghetti sauce. He sighed contentedly. "Ah, that really hit the spot."

Tuvok put the newspaper down on the table. The headline, in big bold letters, read "Feelies being shipped into space--sleeper ship to leave in three days."

"Are you quite through, Mr. Paris, or shall you attempt to finish a seventh serving?"

"Tom. And no, I don't think I'll order another plate."

The waiter's starting to get a little snotty with me."

"Which is not surprising. Each plate you consume reduces their profit by a considerable fraction. If they get many customers with an appetite equal to yours, the owner would be wise to--"



"Yeah, well, I doubt their average customer has been hurtled 300 years into the past, blasted with a primitive weapon that barely deserves to be called a phaser, been kidnapped, met the man who's going to commit genocide next week--all in one day. That makes for quite an appetite."

"I myself consumed only one plate of spag-etti."

"Vulcans are masters of deprivation. You're a race of Masochists."

Tuvok raised an eyebrow.

"Anyway. Have you figured out a way to get us back to Voyager?"

Tuvok glanced at the newspaper beneath his elbow. "I beleive so. However, returning to the 24th century is no longer our top priority."

"It's not?"

"Of course not. First we must attempt to straighten out the alteration we have caused, or our own timeline will not be there to return to."

Paris cocked his head. "What alteration?"

"We have caused the neutron bombs to be removed from Darwin's possession. For our time line to progress, we must see that they are returned to him."

"Wait a minute. How do we know Darwin is the one who detonates the bombs? You said history didn't know which faction destroyed New York City."

"By his own confession, Darwin plans to detroy New York, as well as various other cities. Lt. Allen and the other American soldiers we encountered took the bombs to prevent that."

"Yes, but they would have taken the bombs from Darwin anyway, whether we were here or not. Therefore someone else must detonate the bombs, therefore if we just leave matters as they are things will sort themselves out."

"That is not correct, Mr. Paris. We led Allen and his comrades to Darwin's hiding place. Allen himself indicated this. Contrary to my belief, our uniforms did not blend into the crowd. Both factions noticed us. Darwin risked himself by coming out in the open to abduct us, and in so doing revealed himself to Allen, who followed us to Darwin. Therefore we ARE indeed responsible for the ruin of Darwin's plans."

Paris thought it over for several moments. "Maybe. So what---you want us to somehow steal the neutron bombs back from Allen and return them to Darwin, thereby causing World War III and the deaths of 25 million people?"

"We MUST do so to restore our timeline. We have altered history by our presence here."

"Right now I don't give one whit about our timeline. These people have just had their death sentence lifted, and I'm not going to condemn them to it again. I won't be

responsible for genocide." He shook his head. "Besides, who's to say that Darwin won't get the bombs back himself? If he's so hell-bent crazy on destroying New York, he'll get them back. And he's got an army to help him. Don't you think it's a little arrogant to think that he couldn't get the bombs back without us?"

"It is unlikely that Darwin could get them back on his own. The American military bases of this time are known for their utter impregnability."

"So we couldn't do anything anyway. Case closed."

"Not quite, Mr. Paris. I happen to have the security codes that will allow access to any base in this country."

Paris sighed. "Of course. You would, wouldn't you?" He picked up the check, for the moment accepting defeat. "Why don't we go get a hotel room, and then you can tell me how the hell we're going to get back to Voyager when the time comes."

They walked along casually, looking for a hotel. Paris idly chewed a toothpick. "So tell me, Tuvok--why is it that you just happen to know the security codes to the military bases of mid-21st century Earth?"

"I'm a Starfleet Security specialist, Mr. Paris. It's my job to know. A good deal of my training at the Academy involved the study of the military installations of many worlds, over a span of many centuries. Such study included military codes."

"Yeah, but--how could you possibly remember such mundane trivialities like a security code from this particular era?"

"Because this particular era is hardly trivial, Mr. Paris. It is a pivotal--"

"I know, I know. World War III and all that. I was trying not to dwell on that, just for a moment. Just out of curiosity, what's the code?"

"The security codes differ for each city, each installation. But they are governed by a relatively simple algorithm which can be used to--"

Tuvok stops talking as a little girl, her dress dirty and torn, her face smeared with dirt, ran up and tugged on Paris' pantleg. Paris squatted down so that he was face to face with her. "What is it, honey?"

"Mommy's sick." She pointed into a nearby alley where a woman, half hidden by shadows, leaned weakly against the wall. "And I'm hungry."

A tear is ran down her cheek. Paris wiped it away with his thumb. With his other hand he reached into his belt and pulled out the money he took from Darwin. He presse it into the girl's palm. "Here, honey. You take this and get you and your mommy a nice hotel room and a nice hot meal. This

should last you until next--next week."

The girl gave Paris a quick hug and ran back toward her mother.

Paris stood up. They began walking again.

"I trust you are aware that you just gave away all our money, Mr. Paris?"

"That little girl will be dead next week, Tuvok. We don't deserve a good night's sleep."

"Perhaps the park we sought earlier will suffice to pass the night."

They came to an intersection. Paris noticed two of Darwin's soldiers across the street, heading their way. The soldiers pointed directly at them and picked up their pace.

Tuvok had seen them too. "This way, Mr. Paris."

Tuvok turned down a sidestreet. They both began running. They weaved between people. Paris leaped over a fire hydrant which blocked his path.

Two more of Darwin's soldiers roaming the street spotted the Starfleet officers and joined the chase.

"It would appear Mr. Darwin wishes to continue our discussion," Tuvok said, panting.

"We're pretty popular I guess. Let's hope we don't run into Allen's men as well. By the way, do you know where we're going?"

"Of course. Turn here."

Paris risked a quick glance over his shoulder. The soldiers were half a block behind. He and Tuvok swerved around a corner.

The street was eerily deserted. Litter blew around in the slight wind. A ten-foot high brick wall, obviously built many years after the surrounding buildings, blocked the far end of street, from one side to the other. Three very large fans were atop the wall, blowing to the other side of the wall. Two soldiers holding guns stood at the foot of the wall, looking bored.

Paris slowed as he sees the wall and the guards.

Tuvok continued running toward the wall.

"Tuvok, where--?"

"Over the wall, Mr. Paris." Tuvok reached the wall and leapt, catching the top of it and scrabbling to the top.

The guards at the wall ignored him completely.

Darwin's men came racing around the corner, and Paris lurched into motion again. By the time he'd reached the wall, Tuvok was standing atop it. Paris jumped, catching a hold on the top. Tuvok reached down to help him up.

Darwin's soldiers stopped a short distance from the wall. One of them raised his rifle to stun Paris and Tuvok. But the guards, ignoring everything until that moment, raised their weapons and pointed them at Darwin's men. The two soldiers reluctantly lowered their guns and watched

helplessly as Tuvok and Paris leaped down to the ground beyond the wall, out of sight.

Paris landed on the ground near Tuvok. "That was too easy. Why didn't those guards try to stop us from getting inside here?"

"They are not there to stop people from getting in. Their job is to keep people from getting out."

Paris looked around at the buildings, feeling unseen eyes upon him. "What is this place? A prison?"

"In a manner of speaking. It is a quarantined area, where the last of the 'Feelies' have been relocated for the public good."

"The Feelies?"

"Humans who are infected with a virus known as T-25, which causes a painful, slow death. It is transmitted through close contact with an infected individual--Feelies, as in 'touch.'"

"But why the wall?"

"The Feelies have been sequestered here and are unhappy with the situation. Several of them have escaped and gone on sprees, infecting innocent people. One hundred are held within the confines of these two city blocks--the last known people on the planet known to be infected with the virus. They are to be placed in suspended animation and sent into deep space three days from now."

"How do you know?"

"I read it in the paper while you were gorging yourself earlier this evening. This seemed an ideal place to escape Darwin's men--while at the same time providing us with the means to return to Voyager."

"The sleeper ship!" Paris said. "Just before we arrived here, the Captain mentioned that Voyager had run across a sleeper ship!"

"Yes, Mr. Paris. I believe it is the same DY-100 class vessel which will carry the Feelies into space in three days."

"And we're going to be on it. After a 300 year ride through space in suspended animation? Is that the plan?"

Tuvok nodded.

In the shadow of a doorway behind them there was a sudden movement, a subtle shifting of the shadows. Paris didn't notice. "But how? If the government is shipping the Feelies away, why would they allow us on board ship as well? Two strangers who aren't infected? And surely they'll recognize us and detain us before we can board. Allen must have described us--"

A loud cough sounded from the shadow in the doorway, and a man stepped forward.

"We will be allowed on board the sleeper ship, Mr. Paris. We have just been infected with the virus. We're

Feelies."

The man limped toward them, his skin milk-white and exhaustion in his eyes.

From other doorways, more Feelies limped into view, forming a circle around the Starfleet officers.

"You deliberately got us infected with a fatal disease!" Paris whispered fiercely.

"Relax, Mr. Paris. Once we get back to Voyager the Doctor will purge us and these people of the virus."

"You can't know for certain that we were on that sleeper ship Voyager finds in the future!"

"But I can, Mr. Paris. The sleeper ship would not be capable of reaching the Delta Quadrant in only 300 years. Therefore I must have reprogrammed its navigation system to take it through a wormhole that will open briefly near Vulcan approximately 100 years from now. That wormhole's terminus was in the Delta Quadrant."

Paris relaxed a bit. "You appear to have given this a great deal of thought."

"Trust me, Mr. Paris."

Paris nodded and turned to the circle of people surrounding them. "This is your lucky day," he said jovially.

Somehow, the Feelies got word out to Darwin, and within the hour he was on the visi-phone with Tuvok.

Tuvok laid out his proposition. "You need your neutron bombs, and we both know you will not be able to retrieve them from Lt. Allen. However, I can give you the code which will allow you to enter his base and get your bombs."

"Why would you want to help me?"

"That is not your concern. Suffice it to say that for now, our goals coincide."

"And what is your price for the code?" Darwin asked shrewdly.

"In three days, a DY-100 class sleeper ship will be launched. I want your men there, to see that Mr. Paris and I are passed aboard without question. And I have a list of supplies that you will have loaded aboard, as well."

"What you ask will be difficult."

"But within your capabilities, I am sure."

Darwin studied Tuvok a moment, then nodded. "But what makes you believe you can trust me?"

Paris leaned forward to hear Tuvok's reply.

"It is a known fact that you and your brethren value your word more than your lives. Do we have a bargain?"

"We do. You have my word. Give me the code."

Tuvok shook his head. "First, I will need to know the location of Allen's base, and the date of its inception. Then I will require ten minutes for calculations. After

that, you shall have the code in a form that won't be accessible by you until four days hence."

Darwin growled. "Done. Here is the information you require."

When Tuvok shut down the visi-phone, Paris sighed heavily. "We've just consigned 25 million people to their deaths, Tuvok. One of the greatest atrocities in human history, and I'm partly responsible."

"How so, Mr. Paris."

Tom Paris merely sighed and wandered off to be alone.

Two days later, Tuvok, Paris and 100 virus-ridden humans were frozen and loaded aboard a sleeper ship. The next day they were launched into the depths of space.

Three days after that, World War III began following the obliteration of New York City by an act of terrorism.

Over 300 years later, Tom Paris sat at the table in his quarters. The Feelies had been purged of the virus and would be dropped off on the next uninhabited Earth-like planet Voyager came across.

A plate of spaghetti, made from supplies brought from Earth on the sleeper ship, lay untouched on the table before Tom.

He was holding a PADD which displayed a photograph of the ruins of New York City, three days after the city's destruction. He stared at it for a long time.

Finally he set the PADD down beside his cold spaghetti and buried his head in his hands.

## WARP SPEED

### **Captain's Log, Stardate 5319.5**

For the past 11 days the Enterprise has been in drydock at Starbase 17, getting a complete overhaul. My crew has returned from shore leave and we are currently heading for deep space at Warp 4. We've been assigned a mapping mission that won't bring us back to Federation space for several months.

Mr. Scott strolled around Engineering, keeping a watchful eye on his juniors as they went over every inch of the ship's propulsion system, assessing the work done by the overhaul crew. He handed out praise where it was warranted, reprimands when he noticed something one of juniors had overlooked, and advice where needed.

As he was looking over the shoulder of Lieutenant Thompson, pointing out a discrepancy in a readout, the intercom whistled for his attention. "Mr. Scott, I think you'd better take a look at what I've found, sir."

Ensign Wu, checking Jeffrey's Tube 1.

"And please, sir, could you hurry?"

Scotty sighed in exasperation, gave a last bit of advice to Thompson, then acknowledged the intercom. "On my way, Mr. Wu." He exited Engineering, turned right and climbed up a ladder to a small access corridor. Jeffrey's Tube 1 was a large, well-lit hole in the wall, slanting upward.

As Scotty approached, Ensign Wu emerged from the Tube.

"What is it, laddie?" Scotty asked.

Wu pointed into the Tube. "Sorry to insist that you hurry here, sir, but....please tell me that's not what I think it is."

Scotty looked questioningly at Wu, then bent over and climbed up into the humid, narrow Tube. At the top, straddling the main intermix flow coupling, was a large box-shaped device. A small bubble of glass on top of the box was filled with a clear, viscous fluid he recognized immediately: gelatinite. Words were painted in red on the side of the box: WARNING-DO NOT TOUCH. "Oh boy," Scotty breathed. In the cloying air of the Tube, sweat beaded quickly on his forehead. He wiped it away as he surveyed the jury-rigged contraption. Cables snaked away from the box; one attached directly to the flow monitor, and several others had been spliced into various ship's systems.

He wiggled backwards out of the Tube. Ensign Wu was waiting expectantly.

Scotty put his hands on his hips and took a deep breath. "We're in a heap o' trouble, laddie."

On the bridge, Jim Kirk felt a subtle shift in the hum of the deckplates, the nearly-imperceptable vibration of his command chair. He hadn't given an order to accelerate, so he knew something was wrong.

At the same moment Kirk noticed the change, Sulu looked back at him. "Captain, we've accelerated to warp 6." His hands flew across the console. "Helm isn't responding."

Kirk stood and stepped forward, leaned over Sulu and looked at the readouts.

"We are changing course," Chekov reported.

"Heading?" Kirk asked.

"Plotting..." Chekov tapped at his console. "New heading: Marcos 12."

Kirk looked over at Spock. "What the hell is--"

That's when the turbolift doors swished open and Mr. Scott burst out. "Captain, we have a bomb on board," he shouted as he rushed over to the Engineering station and sat down.

Kirk went over and leaned on the railing beneath Engineering. "A bomb, Scotty?"

"Aye sir, attached to the main intermix flow conduit."

Kirk walked over to his chair, thumbed on the ship-wide intercom. "Red alert, all hands to emergency posts." The alert beacon began to silently pulse. He turned to Sulu. "All stop--"

"Captain, no!" Scotty shouted.

"Belay that, Mr. Sulu!" Kirk barked, unnecessarily: at Scotty's shout, Sulu's hand had frozen halfway to the controls.

"Mr. Scott?"

"I recommend we slow her down gradually, Captain," Scotty said. "The way the device is rigged, I have a feeling..."

Kirk looked at Sulu. "You heard him, Mr. Sulu. Nice and slow."

Sulu nodded and turned back to the helm.

Over the next several moments Kirk concentrated on the feel of his ship as it decelerated, a sense born of long years of intimacy. Sulu counted off the precise warp changes, but for Kirk they were unnecessary.

When Sulu called off Warp 5, Scotty waved his arms. "Hold it, Sulu!"

Kirk looked over at Scotty's monitor. He was no Engineer, but he knew what the flashing telltale lights meant: cascade failure, warp core breach imminent.

"Warp 7, Sulu, quickly!" Scotty shouted.

The Enterprise accelerated. The telltales winked out.



Kirk and Spock joined Mr. Scott at Engineering.

"It's just as I suspected," Scotty said. "If we drop below warp 5, that infernal device will trigger a warp core breach. Oh, ma poor, poor lass."

"Who wants to destroy my ship?" Kirk rubbed thoughtfully at his lip. "And why?"

"Logic suggests that a person or persons on the Starbase 17 overhaul crew planted the device," Spock said.

Kirk nodded. "Sulu, ETA to Marcos 12."

"At our current speed of warp 7, 3 hours."

"Scotty, how much can we slow down without triggering the device?" Kirk asked.

"Don't take her below warp 5.3."

Kirk looked at Sulu; Sulu nodded. "Aye, sir."

"New ETA?"

"5 hours, 33 minutes."

"That gives us a little more time. Anyone believe that we'll drop to impulse outside the system and assume a standard orbit of Marcos 12?" Kirk looked around at the faces of his crew. "Neither do I. So: we're hurtling out of control through space with no brakes, on a collision course with Marcos 12, population 5 billion. What will happen if we impact at that speed, Mr. Spock?"

Spock folded his hands behind his back. "Assuming our warp field doesn't collapse upon entering the gravity well of the Marcos system, thereby causing the Enterprise to explode, we will pass clean through Marcos 12 and emerge on the other side as a scattering of particles that will continue harmlessly on through space. Our passage will, of course, cause massive seismic trauma to Marcos 12. The resulting explosion will obliterate the planet."

Kirk clapped his hands. "Okay: Scotty. Get back down to Engineering and remove that device."

Scotty sighed, almost protested, then shifted into his miracle-worker frame of mind. He nodded and stood. "Aye, sir."

"Spock, call up the records of the team that did the overhaul. See if you can find a motive for this: why us, and why Marcos 12."

Spock nodded and turned away.

"And Uhura, get Starfleet Command on the line."

At the helm, Sulu looked at Chekov. "Once again we're being commandeered toward Marcos 12." He pounded at the air with his fist.

Chekov nodded. "That is one wery unlucky planet."

In Engineering, Scotty strapped on a belt bristling with tools, grabbed a tricorder, and climbed back into Jeffrey's Tube 1.

"All right, ye little beastie," he said as he came

level with the device. "You're about to learn a lesson: nobody messes with ma engines."

He spent a long time just lying there, studying the cables connecting the device to various ship's systems. Getting a feel for precisely what he was up against. He sweated a lot; there was no air circulation in this small cranny of the ship. He took readings with the tricorder. Finally, cautiously, he gently touched the surface of the main box with the tip of his finger. An ominous hum sounded from within the box and he jerked his finger back. His suspicion was confirmed: the casing was pressure sensitive. Probably heat sensitive as well.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the humming subsided a few seconds later. It'd just been a warning.

He began hunting for a way to circumvent the casing's sensors. If he couldn't get inside to the CPU without triggering the device, the ship was in trouble. Marcos 12 was in trouble.

An hour and a half later he was no closer to a solution. A small group of his juniors had gathered at the opening to the Tube, drawn by the elaborate, caustic Scottish curses. Most of them had never heard the centuries-old curses, let alone such foul language from their chief.

Finally Scotty relaxed onto his back and sighed, wiped the profuse sweat from his forehead. "Ah, mah poor bairns," he whispered.

A taunting voice suddenly issued from the box, harsh and grating, full of hate. "You're not giving up are you, Monty? Surely not you, the miracle worker, the legend, Starfleet's finest?"

Scotty sat up on his elbows. He knew that voice, though he hadn't heard it for nearly a year, and it had sounded a trifle more civil. "Jensen?" he said.

"You remember little old me? I'm touched. After all, I was merely one of your underlings, a nobody."

Scotty didn't bother responding. It could only be a personality analog. The person who'd rigged such a masterpiece would want to gloat, so Scotty should have expected the analog. But there was no point in responding. At least now he knew who was behind this.

He flipped open his communicator. "Scott to Bridge."

"Kirk here."

"Captain, I've just learned who planted this bloody thing. They left an analog chip. It's--"

"Ensign Mark Jensen," Kirk finished. "Spock just finished wading through the records of the overhaul team. I was about to call you. Apparently Jensen arrived on Starbase 17 shortly before us, under an assumed name and with forged ID's. So convincing they passed muster. One of

the overhaul team fell conveniently ill and Jensen was the replacement." Kirk paused momentarily, and Scotty heard Uhura say something in the background. "Scotty, I've got a call coming in from Starfleet. Any progress?"

"No progress." Scotty felt great shame as he uttered the words.

"Keep working. Kirk out."

Scotty turned back to the box with renewed vigor. "All right, Jensen. No upstart young Ensign can beat me."

Kirk sat in his command chair, watching as the large, bulky destroyer, the MacArthur, lumbered onto the viewscreen, matching speeds with the Enterprise. It's designers hadn't given any thought to aesthetics; utility had been their concern. The destroyer bristled with weapons, and Kirk found himself looking up the figurative barrel of a bank of torpedoe tubes. Since Marcos 12 was near the Romulan Neutral Zone, the MacArthur had been quick to arrive.

The MacArthur's captain appeared on the forward viewscreen.

Kirk nodded at the image. "Donald."

"Hello, Jim. It's good to see you again, though I wish the circumstances were different."

"Me too. But let's dispense with the pleasantries, Donald. How long do we have before you blow us out of the sky?"

Donald Stamp rubbed his chin. "We'll wait until the last possible second, of course, Jim. But Marcos has heavy in-system traffic, and then there are the 5 billion people on Marcos 12--"

"How long?"

"Two hours. We'll do it just before you enter the solar system. I'm sorry, Jim, but--"

Kirk waved his hands. "No, no, I'm not mad at you, Donald. I understand completely. There are lives at stake here."

Donald nodded. "Let's just hope it doesn't come to that. Has Mr. Scott made any progress?"

Kirk shook his head. "Did they find Jensen?"

Donald nodded. "They found him, all right. It took a bit of doing; his ID forgeries were flawless. I understand they're going to review the system, cover up the holes Jensen used to sneak in. He covered his trail very well, but they did find him, in a small, seedy hotel outside the capital."

"Has he talked yet?" Kirk prompted. "Is he going to help us?"

"He's dead," Donald said flatly. "Hanged himself right after he got off work. What's his connection to the

Enterprise anyway?"

"He was assigned to Engineering a year ago, fresh from the Academy," Kirk said. "Full of ideas, very pushy and arrogant. He thought Scotty was in his way, and was obviously very jealous of Scotty's reputation. They clashed constantly. Finally, a month after his arrival, there was...an incident....and I gave Ensign Jensen the choice between a voluntary transfer or an involuntary one. He grumbled a lot, but in the end he left voluntarily. I don't know what became of him after that."

Donald nodded. "We looked into his record. After leaving the Enterprise he was transferred twice more. His last assignment was an administrative position on Marcos 12, from which he received a dishonorable discharge. After that he dropped out of sight."

"Full circle, then."

"Full circle," Donald echoed. "Now, Jim, let's discuss evacuation. With transporters going constantly, we should be able to get most of your people to the MacArthur before we reach ground zero."

Kirk nodded and began issuing orders to his crew.

The taunts of the personality analog were growing more difficult for Scotty to ignore. He knew the thing was just a machine and he should ignore it, that its sole purpose was to distract him, to elicit just the response it was beginning to. But the barbs were becoming too personal, and as time dragged on and every approach he tried to remove the device led to a dead end, he started cursing at the analog as if it were really Jensen. The analog was useful for one thing, however: each time it urged Scotty to accept defeat and surrender, he grew that much more determined that he would never surrender.

He was so engrossed in his battle with the device that he barely listened when Kirk's voice issued from the communicator. "Scotty, we're going to start beaming people over to the MacArthur. Any news yet?"

Scotty grunted out a reply and continued working.

A few seconds later the captain's words finally registered. "No," he yelled.

He fumbled for the communicator. "Transporter room! Do not engage! Repeat: do not engage!"

The technician's voice came back: "I'm sorry, sir, it's too late...."

In the background, Scotty heard the familiar hum as the transporter energized.

The device next to Scotty clicked ominously, then began vibrating slightly. "Oh no," he said.

At the same time, the transporter technician's voice came from the communicator: "Oh my god."

Scotty reflexively closed his eyes and braced himself for an explosion that would rupture the intermix conduit and trigger a warp core explosion.

Instead, after a second, the device stopped humming. Jensen's cackling voice sounded muffled in the humid, close air of the Jeffrey's Tube. "That one was free, Monty. The next one'll be the real thing."

"Mr. Scott," the technician said. "I--I just beamed ten people out into space. The coordinates were for the MacArthur, but--but--" His voice began to break.

Scotty sighed. "It wasna your fault, lad." Scotty closed the channel and contacted the bridge. His voice was sounded heavy, weary. "Captain, no one can beam off the ship. And don't try using the shuttle craft either."

"That's not what I want to hear, Mr. Scott."

"I'm sorry, sir." Scotty sighed and let his head fall against the wall of the tube.

"Admit it, Monty," the analog whispered. "I've beaten you. I'm better than you."

Scotty sat up. "That'll be the day."

Kirk drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. Silence reigned on the bridge. They were playing a waiting game now, the air was thick with tension. On the forward viewscreen, the star of Marcos was still half an hour distant, but it stood out in stark, graphic relief from the surrounding stars. And it grew noticeably larger with each passing second.

"Any response from helm?" Kirk asked for perhaps the tenth time.

"No, sir," Sulu responded.

Kirk knew it was pointless to ask; Sulu would tell him the instant anything changed. But he was hoping against hope that this was all an elaborate hoax, that they'd slow down and control of the ship would be returned just before the MacArthur fired on them.

Mr. Scott's excited voice suddenly boomed out over the intercom. "Captain! I've found something!"

Kirk sat up; all faces turned expectantly toward him and the sound of Scotty's voice. "Yes, Mr. Scott?"

"I've found a crack in this thing's armor," Scotty said. His voice was filled with joy and pride. "It's wired into practically every vital system in the ship, but Jensen missed something. I knew he'd miss something, I knew it!"

"Get to the point, Scotty," Kirk said in exasperation; the tension was unbearable. "Before I send Bones down there to strangle you."

McCoy, slouching beside Spock's station, perked up.

"The emergency intermix shunt procedure," Scotty said.

Spock nodded in sudden understanding. "Of course."

"We go outside the ship," Scotty continued, "and string a line between both warp nacelles, patching either end into the plasma vents, Uhura. "Get Captain Stamp on the line."

Scotty quickly checked the seals on his spacesuit. Thompson did likewise, then the two of them picked up the heavy coil of hose, sharing the burden. They stepped into the airlock and cycled through to the outside of the ship, activating their mag boots when they passed beyond the internal gravity field.

They emerged at the base of the port warp nacelle. Its support pylon rose above them like an enormous metal tree.

Scotty pointed to the nacelle at the top of the pylon, several hundred feet above them. "Good luck, lad."

Thompson nodded, firmly gripped the coil of hose, released his magboots and activated his thrusters.

Scotty watched as Thompson rose toward the nacelle and the plasma vent. Once there, and once Scotty was in position, Thompson would connect one end of the hose to the plasma vent and shoot the other end across to Scotty.

When he was satisfied that the Lieutenant was on course, Scotty released his own mag boots, oriented himself toward the starboard nacelle, and activated his thrusters. With a lurch he jetted upward and outward.

As he crossed the wide empty space between the nacelles, he concentrated on the heavy rasping sound of his air recycler, keeping his mind off the view. Spacewalks during warp were disconcerting. From inside the ship, through the refracting and computer-enhanced windows, space appeared relatively normal, a rainbow of warp-smeared stars rushing by. But out here it was different. The Enterprise was motionless inside a starless void blacker than black. To his left, in front of the ship, was a reddish sphere. Marcos 12 was in there somewhere. Aft was a large blue sphere. Directly in front of him, beyond the approaching starboard nacelle, the ponderous bulk of the MacArthur hung motionlessly.

A sudden crackle of static sounded in Scotty's ear. Then Jensen's taunting voice: "Down to your last option, huh, Monty? You'd better hope it works."

Scotty's face went cold as the blood drained from it. It was over; the Enterprise was doomed. Jensen had been one step ahead of him the entire time.

"Scott to Enterprise," he said. There was no response. "Scott to Kirk." Still no response.

Scotty felt a rough jolt as the suit's thrusters changed direction. He tapped furiously at the control on his wrist, but it was no use. He swung away from the pylon and headed toward the void. But despite appearances, that

void was not infinite. In a very short time he would breach the Enterprise's warp bubble and emerge into normal space at relativistic velocity. Of course, his consciousness wouldn't have time to register the transition.

Thompson's voice sounded in Scotty's ear: "Mr. Scott, I've reached the plasma vents, but....sir, the one we need, the connector's been battered shut. I don't think I can get it open." He paused, waiting for a response. "Mr. Scott? Sir?"

Scotty craned his neck around, watched the Enterprise and the MacArthur recede behind him.

"You're a failure, Monty," the Jensen-analog said. "The great engineer has failed. And all your shipmates, all those billions on Marcos 12, are going to die because of your failure. All because of you."

The ever-present rasp of the air recycler cut out. The beating of Scotty's heart was overpowering in the sudden silence. Scotty sighed and looked at his wrist control. He had perhaps a minute of air left. He tried to calculate how far it was to the edge of the warp bubble: would he reach it within that minute, or would he suffocate first? Either way the result was the same.

Resigning himself to his failure and looming death, Scotty took a moment to think back over Jensen's handiwork. It was truly brilliant. Sneaking past all the security safeguards, closing off every option, orchestrating it all right under the noses of his fellows on the overhaul team....Jensen shouldn't have been able to do all that he had in the short time he'd been allotted.

"You're good, laddie," Scotty finally had to sigh appreciatively. "Ye've beaten me, and that's no easy task." He regretted his words almost immediately; perhaps the waning air supply was making him dizzy.

Two beats of his heart and then Jensen's voice: "You said the magic words, Monty. You'll die alone."

The suit computer's voice cut in, "Transmitting deactivation code."

But spots had begun dancing before Scotty's eyes. He asphyxiated without hearing the computer's final words.

He came to on a strange bed in a strange room. He hadn't expected to survive, so the abrupt transition from the suffocating clutches of his spacesuit to this room came as quite a shock. He sat bolt upright, disoriented.

A tall, muscular man with graying hair and a full mustache stood nearby. He stepped forward when he saw that Scotty was awake. "It's all right, Mr. Scott."

"Where am I?" Scotty asked.

"Sickbay, on the MacArthur. I'm Captain Donald Stamp." He extended a hand, which Scotty shook weakly. "We beamed

you aboard just before you breached the combined warp bubble of our ships. Dr. Akar managed to save you."

"But...the Enterprise." Scotty was almost afraid to ask, dreading the answer. "Did you....?"

Stamp smiled. "The Enterprise is safe, Mr. Scott. The device shut itself down and released the controls. She's at station keeping, dead in space, waiting for your return to begin removal of the device. Most of the crew's being evacuated to the MacArthur, as a precaution."

Scotty remembered then, his admission of defeat and praise of Jensen's skill. Apparently that's what Jensen had wanted all along, and he'd been willing to destroy an entire planet to get it. Scotty sighed.

Ten minutes later he materialized on the Enterprise. An eager young technician stood behind the console. Captain Kirk was nearby. Scotty nodded to the technician, turned toward Kirk--

--and stopped dead in his tracks.

"You're good, laddie. Ye've beaten me." A hiss of static. "You're good, laddie, ye've beaten me." His voice was coming from the intercom, over and over.

"What in God's name--?" He said loudly, indignantly, over the looped message.

Kirk stepped forward, fighting to keep his smile down. "Welcome back, Scotty."

"How long has that been going on?" Scotty asked.

"For the past hour, ever since the device shut down. We can't get it to stop. I guess Jensen wanted others to share in his victory."

"Of all the bloody rotten--"

Kirk patted Scotty's arm and turned them both toward the door. "Don't feel too bad, Scotty. Jensen's dead, after all. You're still the greatest living engineer in Starfleet."

As the door swished open, Scotty looked sidelong at Kirk, catching the ghost of a smile. He sighed. Kirk headed up the corridor toward the bridge. Scotty stood in the corridor a moment, listening to his voice echoing, "You're good, laddie..." He wanted to clamp his hands over his ears. Finally he turned right, toward Engineering, holding his head proudly erect as he passed several crew members.

As Scotty neared the turbolift, McCoy rushed up to him. "Oh, Mr. Scott! I want to talk to you a minute, about that personality analog Jensen used." He took Scotty's arm and ushered the two of them into the turbolift. "Think you could make one of me? That I could put in Spock's quarters? That way I could torment him even when I'm not around."

The turbolift door swished shut.



## INTREPID VOYAGERS

Harry Kim's laughter rang across the bridge, cutting like a knife through a silence born from the boredom of the past two weeks, which Voyager had spent crossing a remarkably unremarkable expanse of space.

Chakotay turned around, unable to prevent a smile from spreading across his face. Harry's laughter was infectious. "Would you mind sharing the joke, Mr. Kim?" Chakotay asked.

Kim looked up from the small monitor on his console. By now everyone on the bridge was looking at him. His laughter quickly withered beneath Tuvok's habitual disdainful scowl. Kim coughed nervously as he looked down at Janeway. "I'm sorry, Captain. I've been monitoring a transmission for the last five minutes, and it's very funny, though I don't think the humor's intentional. But--"

Janeway had stood. "A transmission, Ensign Kim? From where?"

"From a star system half a light year off to port, Captain. It's being broadcast on a local, narrow subspace band, very limited range, not more than a few parsecs, perhaps a light year--"

"Content, Ensign. What's the content of the transmission?" Janeway asked.

Harry looked down at his monitor and stifled a new wave of laughter. "You'll have to see it to believe it, sir. I'll put it on the main veiwscreen."

He touched a button. The stars on the forward viewscreen wavered and were replaced by an image of Chakotay and Janeway. They were sitting very close together on the sofa in Janeway's quarters. Chakotay was completely naked, though his nudity was carefully concealed from view. Janeway wore a red silk robe. Each held a glass of wine in their hands. Through the window above them the stars rushed by. In soft, tender voices, they were debating whether or not they should reveal their passion for each other to the rest of the crew. The debate quickly died out as Chakotay swept Janeway into his arms and gave her a passionate kiss.

Tom Paris's sudden laughter pealed across the bridge.

On the viewscreen the romantic interlude faded. An advertisement flashed quickly by, loudly extolling the virtues of purchasing a new Ghotan Twin Engine Sky Rover.

Janeway slowly shook her head as she turned to face Kim. "Ensign, what--what is that?"

Kim smirked. "It's us, sir. Before your big scene, Tom and I were in Engineering, trying to help Belanna restore power to the warp drive, which had earlier failed--I don't know why it failed; we seem to have come in halfway through the transmission."

"But how--"

"Captain," Tuvok interrupted. "Sensors show an object several thousand kilometers off the port bow, at the edge of the system where the transmission originated. Unmoving. Possibly a station of some kind."

Janeway faced forward again. "On screen. Drop to impulse, Mr. Paris."

Just as the commercials faded and Tom Paris's face appeared on the viewscreen, that image also blinked out and the starscape reappeared. A small spherical structure bristling with antennae swam toward them out of the blackness. It swelled until it filled half the screen.

"All stop," Janeway said, and the sphere ceased growing.

"One life sign, Captain," Tuvok reported.

"We're being hailed," Harry Kim said.

"On screen," Janeway stood and strode forward a step.

A man appeared on the forward viewscreen. The most remarkable thing about him, Janeway noted, was his ordinariness. He could have been a human from Earth. Unusual facial structures, like nose or forehead ridges and such, seemed to be the theme of the Delta Quadrant, and she'd come to expect it. But this relatively young man had nothing of the sort. She could see a large screen on the wall behind him, on which Tom Paris and Belanna Torres were in a heated discussion. Tom waved his hands emphatically at the flickering warp column behind them.

"I'm Captain Janeway of the Starship Voyager," she said.

"Hello, Captain!" The man smiled raptly, gazing around the bridge at each member of the crew. "And there's Tom, and Harry, and--my god, it's Tuvok!" He looked back at Janeway. "Captain, you have no idea what an honor this is! I've been a fan of Intrepid Voyagers since the first episode! What a coincidence that you should arrive right in the middle of the show!" He pointed at the screen behind him: Neelix in the mess hall, talking with Tuvok.

"It seems you have us at a disadvantage," Janeway said.

"Oh, excuse me, Captain. I'm very excited, not to mention extremely nervous. My name is Jenter Camal, Technician for Outpost 3."

Janeway pointed at the screen behind him. "And what is that?"

"The Intrepid Voyagers. It's the hottest show on subspace. I knew it was based on true events, but I never imagined I'd actually meet any of you! Uh, Captain Janeway?" He looked at her sheepishly. "I know it's asking a lot but--would you...beam...me over so I can get some autographs?"

The briefing room, eight hours later.

Janeway and Chakotay stood as the door hissed open. Tuvok entered, escorting a tall middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair and piercing, steel gray eyes. His open, friendly smile softened the intensity of those eyes. He strode confidently forward and firmly clasped Janeway's hand, vigorously pumped it. "Captain Janeway, what an honor to finally meet you! I came just as soon as I was informed of your approach--got me out of bed, as a matter of fact--it's the middle of the night in my city. But no matter. Let me be the first to welcome you to Doran. I'm Nephtaf Centravi, of Centravi Productions."

Janeway finally managing to free her hand from his vice-like grip. "I'd introduce Commander Chakotay, but I suspect that's unnecessary." She sat down and motioned for Centravi to do the same. When he was seated she asked: "Are you with the Doran government, Mr. Centravi? I'd assumed they would send a government official."

He shook his head. "No, I'm not with the government. But I might as well be. Centravi Productions owns most of the planet. As soon as the bureaucrats heard you were coming, they called me. You are the flagship of my network, after all."

"We are?" Chakotay asked.

"Well, not you personally, of course," Centravi said. "But Intrepid Voyagers is based on you, after all."

Janeway folded her hands on the table before her. "Tell us about Intrepid Voyagers," she said. "I'm sure you can understand our curiosity. We've never had contact with your people, and yet..." She pushed a button inset into the table and a monitor on the opposite wall came to life. Music played, words and disconnected images raced across the screen, and then Tom Paris and Belanna Torres stepped out of a turbolift, deep in conversation. Janeway muted the audio.

Centravi looked at the monitor, open astonishment on his face. "How--? Voyagers is only on once a week! How--"

"We recorded it," Chakotay said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the universe.

"Record? For later playback! What an ingenious idea!" Centravi reached inside his jacket and withdrew a small palm top computer, into which he quickly typed several notes. When he'd finished he looked up to find the three watching him. Tuvok raised an exasperated eyebrow. "My apologies."

"About Intrepid Voyagers..." Janeway prompted.

"Yes, yes. It's all computer-generated, of course. I created it a little over a year ago, fed in your personality profiles, personal histories, photographs, that sort of thing. I've got a dozen writers on staff that dream up new adventures every week. To tell you the truth, I'd never done this type of show before. All my others are live-

action. Voyagers is the crowning achievement of a very long, successful career. It's the hottest thing on subspace."

"So we've been told," Janeway said. "But how did you learn of us? Where did you get all your information? As I said, we've never encountered your people before."

"That's because we don't travel much. We're an extremely insular society, Captain. And very hedonistic. We prefer to sit in our homes plugged into various entertainments, rather than venture out into the universe. But I did some travelling a few years ago, searching for new ideas. Always looking for those. I went further from Doran than anyone had ever been before and hadn't found inspiration. Just as I was about to give up and return home, I stopped at a trading outpost on the far side of the Necrid Expanse."

"We were there approximately two years ago," Tuvok said.

Centravi nodded. "While there, one of your crewmen--Neelix--was involved in....Well, I guess I don't have to recount that for you, do I? Anyway, I watched you and your people from a distance. I knew I'd found my new show. So I gathered as much data about you as I could and returned home. Developed my ideas and began production. Intrepid Voyagers was an instant success."

"And since then," Chakotay said, "your people have been watching computer-generated simulacrums of us?"

"Yes. It's--"

"--the hottest thing on subspace," Chakotay finished for him.

Centravi smiled.

"I'm not sure whether or not I should feel violated," Janeway said.

"Oh, it's all fiction," Centravi assured her. "Most of it, anyway. I mean, we've tried to be true to your individual characters, your mission and all that, but the adventures my writers throw at you every week are all pure fabrication. The people love it."

"Did it ever occur to you," Tuvok asked, "to ask our permission while we were on the trading outpost?"

Centravi shrugged. "I didn't see any need. I never imagined that you would be coming through our system. Although the show is billed as "The True Adventures," and the people know that there really is a Voyager hurtling through space, they know it's all make-believe. You're no more real to them than...than..."

"Than the Tooth Fairy?" Chakotay said.

"Exactly. I think." Centravi smiled. "Until now, that is."

"Well, there's no harm done, I suppose," Janeway said.

Centravi beamed. "Well then, Captain, gentlemen, I'd like to invite you and your crew to--"

"Bridge to Captain," an excited voice blurted through the intercom.

"Go ahead, Mr. Paris."

"Captain," Tom said, "we're receiving a distress call from the outermost planet of this system. They're being attacked. Shall I lay in a course?"

"Stand by, Mr. Paris." She looked at Centravi questioningly.

"That would be Gahka," he said. "Doran has a large mining installation there. Captain Janeway, on behalf of Doran I formally request your assistance. Our ships are much slower than yours, and it would take precious time to mount an operation. Please?"

Janeway touched her comm badge. "Lay in a course, Tom. Red alert." She stood and headed for the door. "It's been a pleasure, Mr. Centravi. I'll see you when we return."

The door slid open. Ten men in attire that matched Centravi's were standing idly in the corridor beyond. Janeway turned back. "Who are all these people?"

Centravi stood and smiled ingratiatingly. "They're with me, Captain. If you don't mind, we'd like to tag along. Watch the action, explore the ship. Who knows? We might come up with an idea for an episode."

Janeway sighed. "Very well. Just don't get in the way." She looked sternly at Tuvok, silently berating him for not informing her of the presence of these other men. Then she headed for the bridge, Centravi hard on her heels.

Ten minutes later, Gahka loomed large on the forward viewscreen. A small planet, really little more than a moonlet, gray, barren and rocky.

"Sensors show an extensive network of tunnels lacing most of the planet, Captain," Tuvok reported. "Ruins scattered across the surface."

"Ruins?" Janeway asked. "From an attack?"

"No," Tuvok said. "Decay is apparently due to abandonment."

"The miners move around a lot," Centravi said. "Once a vein is mined out, they move to another."

"Faint life signs," Tuvok said. "Clustered in a tunnel network near the equator. The life signs are sporadic, fluctuating. I cannot get a conclusive reading."

"Possibly the galtric ore is affecting your instruments," Centravi told him.

"Any other vessels in orbit, Tuvok?" Janeway asked.

"Negative. However, there is an ion trail leading into deep space. Perhaps residual discharge from the attacker's propulsion."

"Hail the installation," Janeway told Kim.  
"I've been hailing them, Captain. No response."  
Chakotay stood. "I'll get the Doctor and take an Away Team down. See if there are any survivors."

Janeway nodded.

"Let's go, Mr. Paris."

As Tom and Chakotay headed for the turbolift, one of Centravi's cohorts fell into step with them.

"I hope you don't mind if Mr. Gert there accompanies you," Centravi called after them. "Just to observe and get some ideas, of course."

Chakotay's resigned sigh was indistinguishable from the turbolift door swishing closed on them.

Five people materialized in a dimly-lit tunnel: the Doctor also had one of Centravi's tag-alongs.

"Fan out," Chakotay ordered. He headed left. Mr. Gert followed close on his heels, intently watching Chakotay's every move.

The tunnel walls were jagged, blasted out of the bare, cold stone of the moonlet. Lights were strung along the ceiling, many of them shattered and dark. In places the walls were scorched black. "Signs of weapon discharges," Chakotay said on general-comm.

"Here too," Paris returned.

"I've found a body," the Doctor reported. "One of the Doran miners, and it's not a pretty sight. Dead. ...apparently."

"Apparently?" Chakotay asked.

"Tricorder readings are...garbled," the Doctor replied.

"Would the ore affect our tricorders even in such close proximity?" Chakotay asked Mr. Gert.

Gert grunted noncommittally, shrugged his shoulders. He continued staring unblinkingly at Chakotay.

"Thanks for your help," Chakotay said, fighting his irritation. He was rapidly tiring of being shadowed by Gert.

They came upon a section of wall smeared with a sticky yellow substance. Chakotay cautiously stuck the tip of his index finger in it, brought the finger to his nose and sniffed. He quickly jerked his finger away and wiped it on an uncoated wall section. "What is this?" he asked.

Gert shrugged, and they continued on.

The tunnel suddenly widened into a large room. Three tunnels opened in the wall directly opposite. Bunk beds lined the other walls. Storage chests sat at the bases of the beds. The mattresses on the beds had been shredded, the chests forced open. Blackened streaks marked great gouges on the walls.

Several bloodied bodies were piled haphazardly at the room's center. Their limbs jutting at unnatural angles.

"More bodies, doc," Chakotay said. "Follow my signal."

"On my way."

Chakotay stared around the ransacked room. "What the hell happened here?"

Again Gert shrugged.

Chakotay faced him, folding arms on chest. "You don't talk much, do you?" he asked in irritation.

Mr. Gert's mouth opened and Chakotay thought the man might finally utter a word--

--but Tom's urgent voice rang out from Chakotay's communicator. "Movement, Commander, all around us. Centered on your location."

"Who is it?" Chakotay asked. "Miners?"

"Can't say for certain," Paris said. "My tricorder can't get a positive lock. Whoever--whatever--they are, they're big, and there's a lot of them."

"Meet me here on the double, Mr. Paris," Chakotay ordered.

"You don't have to tell me twice." Tom's heavy breathing indicated that he was running. "They're moving like lightning....Can't see them but tricorder says they're almost on top of me....Oh my god..." Phaser fire rang out, and static hissed across the comm channel.

"Tom. Tom!" Chakotay shouted. He hit his comm badge again. "Doc, where are you? What's taking you so long to get here? Doctor?" He looked at Gert.

The pound slap of running feet and a rustling movement behind them. In one fluid movement Chakotay whirled and drew his phaser.

"It's good to see you too, Commander," said the Doctor, emerging from the mouth of the middle tunnel. Close behind him was the tag-along.

Chakotay lowered his phaser but didn't holster it. "Why didn't you answer me?"

"My comm badge emits only static," the Doctor replied.

"Tom's in trouble."

"Yes, I heard. I've also been unable to raise Voyager."

Chakotay hit his badge. "Chakotay to Janeway." Dead silence. "Chakotay to Voyager." Again, silence.

"We've lost contact with the Away Team," Ensign Kim reported.

Janeway looked to Tuvok.

"Sensors show that they are still alive," Tuvok responded to her unspoken question. "However, Mr. Paris's signs are fluctuating....something has intersected his

position, and others are closing on Chakotay, the Doctor and Centravi's two men."

Janeway and Centravi stepped forward as one to stand at the railing below Tuvok's station. Centravi's face was almost comical in its concern.

"Can you beam them out?" Janeway asked.

"Negative. Our beam is being scattered."

"Captain," Kim called out. "Ship approaching. Engine signature matches the ion trail we found on arrival."

Janeway faced forward. "On screen."

The approaching ship resembled a gigantic spear, bristling with weapons and other unknown structures. Voyager's shields were automatically raised upon detection of the ship.

"Do you know who they are? Recognize that ship?" Janeway asked Centravi.

Centravi shook his head. "No. The nearest inhabited star is Nestor, twelve light years away. We don't have much contact with the Nestorans, but we know they don't have any ships like this. Besides, they're friendly. And I can't imagine why anyone would attack us."

"Captain, we're being boarded," Tuvok called out. "Engineering and the cargo bay."

"How did they get through our shields?" Janeway demanded.

"Unknown." Tuvok looked down as his control panel bleeped. "Multiple plasma beam discharges in Engineering. Intruders advancing and spreading rapidly."

"Get down there now, Tuvok. And get them off my ship!"

Tuvok nodded and ran to the turbolift. The door slid open and Seven of Nine stepped out. Tuvok squeezed past her into the lift.

"Seven, go with Tuvok," Janeway told her.

Without a word Seven turned and reentered the turbolift.

As the lift doors swished shut, Centravi asked excitedly, "Captain, who was that woman?"

"Seven of Nine."

"Who? She's not in the records we have, but she looks like an interesting new character. Perhaps--"

"Not now," Janeway curtly waved him off. "Harry, erect a Level 3 containment field around the bridge. Reroute all engineering functions here. Lock them out."

Kim nodded.

"Tuvok to bridge. Intruders sighted. Engaging. They look--" He broke off as phaser fire erupted, someone, not Tuvok, screamed and the intercom went dead.

Janeway turned to Centravi with a worried frown. She felt impotent, having to stand idly by while her crew were



fighting for the ship, perhaps dying....

As Chakotay and the Doctor were advancing through the tunnels toward Tom Paris's last known position, they heard a soft chittering and shadows moved on the wall opposite an intersecting tunnel.

Chakotay threw himself to the floor and scooted close to the wall, aiming his phaser at the tunnel mouth. The Doctor did likewise. Mr. Gert and his companion remained standing, watching curiously and without concern.

"Get down!" Chakotay hissed at them.

Large bug-like creatures suddenly skittered from the tunnel mouth. They were all hard carapace, clacking mandibles and needle-sharp, stick-like limbs. Their multi-faceted eyes fastened unblinkingly on Chakotay and the Doctor.

Chakotay activated the universal translator function of his comm badge. "Halt!" he yelled from the floor. "Any further movement will be considered an attack."

The creatures made chittering sounds and rushed forward.

Chakotay nodded at the Doctor. They fired together. Phaser beams sliced through the air, deflected harmlessly off the hard shells of the advancing creatures.

"Higher setting," Chakotay called across to the Doctor. He ran his thumb across the intensity setting and fired again. The beam struck its target and ricocheted wildly.

Tom Paris's voice suddenly rang out, "All right guys, that's enough. Someone's going to get hurt by a stray beam, and it'll probably be me." Tom stepped out of the side tunnel, waving his hands. "Hold your fire, commander."

Chakotay relaxed his thumb on the trigger, but didn't lower his weapon.

The creature in the lead sighed. "You're probably right. I guess we've gotten enough footage, anyway." It raised a limb. With several rapid clicks and faster than the eye could follow, the bug shrank, folding in on itself and collapsing, revealing a man beneath. The others did likewise, until a group of men were standing in the tunnel, next to a grinning Tom Paris.

Chakotay slowly stood and put away his phaser. "Costumes?" he asked, dumbstruck at this unexpected turn of events. Adrenalin and fear still pumped through his body.

"Armor, actually," the lead man said.

Mr. Gert suddenly came forward and took Chakotay's hand, pumped it furiously. "Sorry for the deception, commander." He smiled widely at Chakotay. "But it's been a real pleasure working with you. I must say, you're my favorite character. I'm the one that's been developing the

Chakotay/Janeway romance on the show." He released Chakotay's hand. Reaching behind his ear, he removed a small box-shaped device. Chakotay recognized the unmistakable bump of a holorecorder node.

"So you can talk after all," Chakotay said. He turned on Tom Paris. "You went along with this?"

Paris waved his hands. "Hey, commander, I was scared witless when they first "attacked" me. But when they revealed themselves and explained things, I didn't want to spoil it for them right away. There's no harm done, and you have to admit, it is kind of funny."

But Chakotay wasn't laughing.

"Give it time," Tom said.

On Voyager, Janeway stood resolutely behind the tactical officer. "Lock phasers and torpedos," she told him. "Disable that ship, bring her just this side of complete destruction." She turned to Harry. "After we've fired, tell them we'll finish the job unless they get their boarding party off Voyager." She turned back to tactical. "Fire at will."

Phasers sliced through space, with a volley of photon torpedoes hard on their heels. All passed through the ship without inflicting any damage and receded into deep space. Janeway looked at the tactical officer in perplexity--

--as an insistent bleeping suddenly sounded somewhere on Centravi's person. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the palmtop computer and looked at the small readout. "Nice timing," he said. He touched a button, and the ship on the viewscreen vanished.

Janeway turned and looked at him askance.

"Transporters have a positive lock on the Away Team," Harry called out.

"Beam them up," Janeway said.

"Tuvok to bridge," Tuvok's voice rang out over the no-longer-dead intercomm. "We were in a running firefight, no one injured. The aliens have surrendered and are in actuality--"

"Put it in your report, Tuvok," Janeway said curtly. "I'm about to get some answers directly from the source. Janeway out." She looked sternly at Centravi. "Well?" she snapped.

"There's not much to explain, really, Captain," Centravi said. "When I heard you were in our space, I saw an irresistible opportunity and I took it. Think of it: the first live-action Voyagers episode, featuring the true-life characters reacting to a dire threat! No rehearsals, no computer-generated nonsense! We spared no expense to make this as realistic as possible, which wasn't an easy task on such short notice. This will be the most-watched

episode in the history of subspace."

Janeway sighed and rubbed her forehead. "But how did you do it? The planet, the other ship, boarding us even though the shields were raised?"

Centravi shrugged. "Trickery, sensor ghosts--technologically simple things. And my people all carried holo-recorders, right in the thick of the action. As for the planet, I own it--or rather Centravi Productions owns it. One of our studios. And it was a simple matter to phase my actors through your shields, using my computer as a focus." He tapped his palm top. "I'm sorry for any inconvenience, Captain, really. No one was ever in any danger. It was all in good fun--and good ratings, of course. Thank you." He extended his hand.

Janeway folded her arms on her chest. "Give me your recording devices."

"What for?" Centravi asked, taken aback by her reaction.

The turbolift door swished open. Chakotay and Tuvok came unobtrusively to stand beside Janeway.

"So they can be destroyed, of course," Janeway replied. "You had no right to holorecord us without our permission."

"And," Chakotay interjected, "you've wasted our valuable time and resources."

Tuvok: "Several decks are in a shambles from our mock battle. More time will be wasted in their repair."

"So I tell you again," Janeway said, "hand over all your recording devices."

Centravi shook his head. "I will not."

Without warning, Chakotay swiftly reached out and retrieved a small device, identical to Gert's, from behind Centravi's left ear. He smirked at Centravi, tightly squeezed the device in his fist. "That's one down, nine to go."

Centravi chuckled. "Do whatever you'd like with that, Chakotay. It's just a collector; the footage from all our devices has already been transmitted back to my main studio on Doran." Centravi turned to Janeway. "Really, Captain, there's no need for this unpleasantness. I should think you would be flattered, not outraged. No harm was intended, and you will be richly compensated back on--"

"Round up his people and throw them all in the brig," Janeway said.

Tuvok seized Centravi's arm.

Chakotay drew his phaser and motioned toward the turbolift. "Let's go," he smiled smugly.

Centravi shrugged out of Tuvok's grasp. "Captain, please, you can't do this! I'm an important man, a busy man! I've got to get back to Doran and--"

"Harry," Janeway called out. "Hail Doran. Get in touch with one of Mr. Centravi's media rivals and inform them of his incarceration."

Centravi's mouth fell open. "Captain!"

She smirked. "As you say, you're an important man. I'm sure all of Doran will want to know why we've detained you." She motioned to Tuvok. "The brig."

Chakotay waved his phaser at Centravi. "Please give me a reason to stun you."

Nearly a day later Janeway strode into the brig. She stopped in front of the forcefield. In the cell beyond, Centravi and his entourage sat idly, numb with boredom. Gert and a few others were sleeping. Centravi stepped forward, facing Janeway.

"We're in orbit of Doran," Janeway said. "Your local subspace channels are abuzz with news of your incarceration. They seem to think it's quite a scandal."

Centravi nodded. "Good. Believe it or not, Captain, I'm grateful you contacted them."

"What?" Janeway said, startled. "Why?"

"Like they say, the only bad press is no press. This "scandal" is an excellent promotion for Intrepid Voyagers. Even more people will watch our special episode because of it."

Janeway sighed. The sigh quickly turned to laughter. "Oh, Mr. Centravi, isn't there anything I can do to get to you?"

Centravi smiled. "You're finally beginning to see the humor in recent events."

Janeway went to the control panel behind her and deactivated the forcefield. "Get off my ship, Centravi."

As his sleeping men came groggily awake, Centravi stepped out of the cell. "We owe you a great deal, Captain. I'm sure your crew could use a shore leave."

"What are you getting at?"

"I told you we planned to compensate you for your troubles, Captain. There's a whole planet down there that thrills to watching your adventures on subspace every week. They'd be ecstatic to have you walking among them. Your crew's every whim will be catered to. We'll restock your ship. And perhaps some of your people would like to script a show for us, or even," he paused dramatically, "direct an episode of Voyagers. Just give the word and Doran is at your disposal." He stepped forward and extended his hand. "What do you say, Captain?"

"Mr. Centravi, I think my crew would mutiny if I refused." She smiled and shook his hand.

Two weeks later, Tom Paris and Harry Kim stepped off

the transporter platform. As the transporter reenergized, they turned around, curious. Belanna Torres and Seven of Nine materialized.

"Transporter Room to Bridge," the transporter technician said. "The last of them are aboard, sir."

"Thank you. Bridge out."

Tom Paris stepped forward and helped Torres down from the platform. "There you are. I was hoping to spend the last day on Doran with you, and instead you sneak off for two days without so much as a goodbye." He smiled to take the edge from his voice, and kissed her. "Where'd you go?"

She smiled and turned to Seven of Nine. "Should we tell them?" she asked conspiratorially.

"I see no reason to withhold the information. Lieutenant Torres and I spent the last two days posing for a publication tentatively titled The Women of Voyagers."

Harry Kim's mouth fell open.

"P-posing?" Tom asked. "Posing how?"

"In the nude, of course," Seven of Nine said. Without a further word she brushed past Kim and left the Transporter Room.

"She's kidding, right? You didn't," Tom asked Belanna.

She smirked at him, not saying a word.

"You did! Why would you do it?" Tom asked.

"For a thrill," she said. "I wouldn't have done it, but....we'll never be back this way again, so who will ever see it? And they paid us very well."

"Paid you?" Tom asked. "You don't need money, and you can synthesize anything you need. What could they possibly offer that would entice you to...."

She leaned close and whispered in his ear, "Meet me in about an hour and you'll find out." She grinned at him, nodded to Harry, and left.

Tom and Harry watched the door slide shut behind her.

"The Women of Voyager, huh?" Tom said.

Harry nodded. "Think you can convince the captain to stay in orbit long enough for us to hunt down an advance copy?" Harry asked.

"I doubt it. Think you can contact someone on Doran and have them send us a copy over subspace?"

Harry grinned. "I'm prepared to die trying."

"That's the spirit." Tom clapped him on the shoulder and they left the room.

## PHANTOMS OF THE MIND

Harry Kim crawled through the bowels of Voyager.

The Jeffries Tube clutched him like a fist. He pulled himself forward inch by inch. Sweat covered his body and soaked his uniform. The toolkit he pushed ahead of himself scraped harshly on the deckplates.

The voice of Belanna Torres suddenly filled the crawlspace. "You there yet, Harry?"

"Just about," Harry said pantingly. "I think the next thing we need to work on is getting some air conditioning in here."

He crawled up to the hatch he sought and paused to wipe his brow. Then he released the clamps and opened the hatch. "Okay, Belanna," he called out as he opened the tool kit. "I'm there."

In Engineering, Torres stood at the console, studying readouts. In front of her, the intermix column was quiescent--the warp drive had been shut off. "Good," she said to Harry. "Let's hope this works. That cracked conduit's been out of comission for too long."

Harry reached into the open hatch and ran a plaser over the conduit. Sealant jetted into the large crack. "Almost got it, Belanna."

He finished up. The beam cut off and he pulled the plaser from the hole, setting it on the deck. He squatted back against the tube wall, sweating profusely. "T h a t should do it." He reached back into the hole and stroked the newly-sealed crack, testing it. Pulled a tricorder from his belt and held it toward the conduit. "Ready whenever you are, Belanna."

Torres walked to another instrument panel and began pressing buttons. "Okay Harry. I'll start with a flow rate of 5%."

The intermix column began to slowly pulse.

Harry watched his tricorder. "Steady so far. Negligible stress on the conduit."

Torres looked up briefly at the intermix column, then looked back to her panel, pushing more buttons. "Increasing flow to 25%."

The intermix column pulsed more rapidly.

"Still green," said Harry.

"Great. 50%."

"Looking good."

"I'm taking it to 75%."

Suddenly the conduit ruptured. Neon green liquid spurted out and doused Harry. He lurched back against the wall and rolled to the middle of the tunnel, screaming and writhing in agony. Green liquid continued shooting from the conduit.

"Harry?" Kim's screams leapt from the intercom. "Harry!" As Kim's screams echoed in her ears, Torres feverishly punched buttons, shutting off the intermix flow. She looked away from the intermix column and hit her communicator, cutting off Kim's screams. "Sickbay! Medical emergency! Computer! Lock onto Ensign Kim and beam him directly to sickbay!" She slammed her hand angrily against the control panel.

She turned and ran toward sickbay.

Torres paced the floor nervously, near the door. Nearby, Harry lay on a diagnostic bed. The Doctor was working on him with a protoplaser.

Janeway entered, followed closely by Tom Paris. They stopped beside Torres and watched the Doctor's ministrations.

"How is he?" Janeway asked.

Torres opened her mouth to reply, but the Doctor interrupted her as he joined them. "Allow me to answer that, Captain. I'm afraid the prognosis is not good."

"Let's hear it."

"Ensign Kim suffered extensive plasma burns. However, I was able to adequately repair his skin."

"But?"

The Doctor looked back at Harry. "He absorbed a lethal dosage of radiation. Microcellular therapy was unsuccessful..."

Paris interrupted. "How long, Doc?"

"I'm afraid Ensign Kim has only three days to live, at the most."

They all turned and looked at Harry. He raised his head weakly, returning their stares. "Captain..."

Paris put on a lighthearted face and strolled over to Harry's bedside. His skin was pink and shiny. "Hey, Harry," Paris said gently, "if you wanted a vacation, there are easier ways to go about it."

Harry managed a weak smile.

Janeway put a comforting hand on Kim's shoulder.

"Captain, I'm...." His eyes closed and his head slowly relaxed back onto the bed.

The others looked to the Doctor, who scanned Harry with a tricorder. "Don't worry, he is merely unconscious. Sleeping."

"Doctor," Janeway said, "are you absolutely certain there's nothing you can do?"

"Captain, I assure you, I've--"

Janeway shook her head and waved him into silence. She rubbed the bridge of her nose and massaged her eyes for a moment, looking troubled. When she'd collected herself she turned to Torres. "How soon will you have the engines back

on line?"

"I've got a crew decontaminating the Jeffrey's tube now. When that's done...."

Janeway and Torres turned and left Sickbay, still discussing the matter.

Paris looked down at the sleeping Harry, looked briefly at the Doctor, then followed the other two. He walked a few feet down the corridor, then stopped and sank against the wall, his eyes wet.

A long, dimly lit hallway. Scorched walls, blackened, pocked with holes. Debris littering the hallway. People rushed by in a frenzy of activity.

Harry lay along the wall, eyes closed. Slowly his eyes fluttered open. He sat up and looked around, disoriented. Stood. Ran his hands over his body, checking his health. He quickly backed out of the way as the hurrying people jostled him as they passed. They paid him no attention.

A muffled explosion rocked the hallway, startling Harry. A fine powder rained down from the ceiling, settling in his hair and on his uniform. He coughed.

He looked in the direction the people were heading, then followed. He came to a bend in the hallway, and a woman hurtled from around the corner, colliding with him. They both staggered back.

"Whoa!" Harry grabbed at the woman's forearms to keep her and himself from falling.

"Sorry about that," she said. She pulled back and studied Kim's face, ran her eyes over his uniform. "Who are you? I've never seen you before."

"Ensign Harry Kim." He extended his hand in greeting.

She stared at him warily for several long moments before taking it. "I'm Shara," she smiled.

Harry shuffled his feet nervously; she was very attractive. "Uh, look, this is going to sound strange, but...Where am I? I have no idea where I am."

"You're in the Citadel. In Capital City."

They both swayed and fought to keep their feet as another explosion rocked the hallway.

"Captial of what?" Harry asked. "What planet is this?"

Shara's smile faded and she looked at him suspiciously.

"It's Galtran. What other planet is there?" Another explosion. "We'd better hurry up and get below with the otehrs. But first, I need your help. Follow me."

She took Harry's hand and pulled him back the way he had come.

She led him into a room that was little more than a closet. Shelves lined the walls. Various objects cluttered the shelves: large packs with shoulder straps, small packs, tools, and dozens of other items.



She began grabbing packs from the shelves, throwing the straps around her neck. "Grab everything you can carry."

Harry watched her rushing around, made no move to help. "Look, I need some answers. What am I doing here, and how did I get here? Last thing I remember is falling asleep in sickbay."

She held a pack out toward Harry and he reluctantly put the strap around his neck. She began piling more stuff into his arms as they talked.

"Where's sickbay?" she asked.

"Back on Voyager."

"Voyager? What's that?"

"My starship."

Shara smirked at him. "Starship?!" She forcefully pressed an item into his arms. "Listen: you look different, and you're dressed strangely, but I'm not convinced you didn't sneak in here past the guards. You're very cute, but no amount of charm or trickery will get you a place on the rocket, so why are you bothering to try? The crew is already selected." She placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm truly sorry." She hurried from the room.

Harry stood looking after her, his arms full. "Am I dreaming or...am I dead?"

He ran after her.

They walked as swiftly as their burdens would allow. Several far-off explosions once again rocked the hallway. They passed an jagged hole in the wall. Beyond was darkness, night. A field of tarmac stretched away toward distant lights--possibly a city. Stars speckled the sky. High in the sky hung a large white ball of light, with a tail of diffuse whiteness smeared across the sky behind it.

Harry stopped and looked out the hole, eyes fastened on the ball of light. "What's that? A meteor?"

"It's the third asteroid." She looked sideways at him. "You really don't know, do you?"

"I told you, I'm not from around here."

"Four day from now it's going to impact several thousand miles to the west. The first two hit three days ago, on the other side of the planet. Massive tidal waves, earthquakes, planet knocked off its axis--all that good stuff. In a few days we won't be able to see the sun anymore. Too much dust." She sighed. "Three more on the way. Galtran's doomed."

Bullets suddenly ricocheted off the wall near Harry. Both of them quickly ducked back inside the hallway.

"Someone out there's seen us," she said.

She started walking, and Harry ran to catch up with her, nearly dropping his burden.

"Who was shooting at us?" he asked. "And what's making all those explosions?"

"The people out there don't want us to leave. They're angry that we're abandoning them. But we can't all fit aboard the rocket. And anyway, we won the lottery fair and square."

Harry shook his head, perplexed. Opened his mouth the second man to Harry and Shara, "unless you want the same, I suggest you hand over your indenti-tickets."

Harry set down the packs he carried and held out his hands. "Look, you're making a mistake. We don't--"

The first man's finger tightened on the trigger. "No, you're the one making a mistake. Now hand over--"

The second man suddenly fired at Shara. A beam of green energy spat from the gun. Without thinking Harry leapt at her, knocked her out of the way. The beam grazed him, sending waves of agony through his body. He hit the ground and rolled to his feet, wishing he had a phaser.

A flash of light, and a phaser suddenly appeared in Harry's outstretched hand. He looked momentarily shocked, but fired before the men could react. The phaser beam was on wide-dispersal and hit both men simultaneously. They fell to the ground.

Shara looked at the phaser in Kim's hand. "Did you kill them?"

Awash in agony, he said, "They're just stunned."

She put her arm around him, to help support him. "Where did that weapon come from? And what is it? I've never seen its like."

"I- I don't know," Harry said in confusion. "I was just wishing I had a phaser, and suddenly there it was."

She looked at the fallen men. "If they made it through the guards at the gate, there could be others. Maybe they killed the guards. We'd better get back to the Vault. Can you make it?"

Harry suddenly moaned and put his arm against the wall for support. Pressed his other hand to forehead.

"What's wrong?" asked the woman. "The beam only grazed you; you shouldn't be in this much pain."

"Don't know...I suddenly don't feel so great. Dizzy..." His nerves felt aflame. He fell to the ground, and everything grew fuzzy...

Night shift in sickbay. The lights were dim. Harry lay on the diagnostic bed, asleep. Face sweaty, skin pale. His eyes suddenly flew open. He sat bolt upright. "Doctor!" he screamed, panic in his voice.

Tom Paris entered Sickbay and went over to Harry's bedside. "Good morning, sleepy head. Thought I'd stop in and see if you were awake yet."

Harry groaned as he struggled to raise himself onto his

elbows. He still looked pale, but not quite as pale as he had earlier.

"Is it my imagination or do you look better?"

"The doctor says I've improved slightly."

Paris was astonished. "Really? But he said...."

"I know. Same prognosis, though. I haven't improved that much. Tom! I had an incredible dream last night..."

Paris grinned. "Oh really? Did it involve anyone we know?"

"Not that kind of dream."

"But those are the best kind."

Harry ignored Paris' remark. "It was strange. I was on a planet called Galtran. Asteroids were bombarding the planet, and from what I could gather, a small group of people were preparing to leave in some kind of rocket. The rest of the people weren't too happy about that and were trying to break into the refuge. Anyway, it seemed so real, until the end when we were attacked. I wished for a phaser and -boom- I had one. That's when I started to think maybe I was dreaming, and...Except that I don't think it WAS a dream. I mean, it was too vivid. Like I was really there, in another place. Sound, touch, smell ...everything. It was like..." He searched for the right description.

"...like being in a holodeck fantasy. Except...."

"What are you saying, Harry? You think your dream was....what?"

"I don't know. Maybe I was somehow transported to a parallel universe. Except the doctor says I haven't left sickbay. I--"

They were interrupted by Paris' communicator.

Chakotay's voice said with slight sarcasm, "Mr. Paris, sorry to trouble you, but you're a minute late."

"Sorry, Commander. Be right there. Paris out." He looked to Harry. "Well, duty calls. Try not to have too much fun on your day off." He touched Kim's arm, turned and headed toward the door.

As he passed the doctor's desk, the doctor called out, "Mr. Paris, do you have a moment?"

Paris veered into the doctor's office. "Sure, doc. What is it?"

"I thought you would be pleased to know that Mr. Kim has improved slightly. The radiation in his body has lessened by 5%."

"Yeah, but he's still..." Paris swallowed. "He's still going to die, right?"

"Yes, but--"

"Has he told you about his dream, doc?"

The Doctor nodded.

"What do you make of that? Is it possible he wasn't dreaming?"

"If you are suggesting, as he did, that perhaps he was transported to somewhere else, then the answer is no. According to the computer and the medical monitors, he never left Voyager. The monitors do, however, show intense R E M activity during the time in question. In short, Mr. Paris, he had a very vivid dream."

Paris sighed. "Thanks, doc."

Paris turned and left sickbay.

Harry's eyes slowly opened. He lay in one corner of a dimly lit room crowded with people. There was a low, steady hum of a dozen conversations. A child somewhere in the room was crying. The air was hot and wet, and sweat coated his body. He was naked, wrapped in a blanket. He propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at himself. His skin was raw red, covered with burns. And they hurt. He gritted his teeth.

He slowly became aware of Shara sitting beside him, watching him with concern. "You've been unconscious for an entire day," she said softly. "Thanks for saving me."

"Where are we?"

"In the Vault." His eyes told her that meant nothing to him, so she continued, "Where we're staying until the ship is ready." She patted the concrete wall behind her. "Heavily reinforced. They managed to break through the perimeter, but they can't get to us in here. And they can't get at the ship either."

"They?"

"The rest of the population. Those who won't survive the bombardment. We can only save 1% of our people. The rest don't think that's fair, it should be all or none, and....it's anarchy out there." She pointed beyond the walls. "The other nine ships left last week. We'll launch the day after tomorrow and rendezvous with them." She looked over the people in the Vault. "We're the last group to leave. You really don't know any of this?"

"I told you I'm not from Galtran."

"That's impossible! But I'll bite. Where are you from, then?"

He laughed weakly. How could he tell her that as far as he knew, he was dreaming? "You wouldn't believe me."

"Try me."

He opened his mouth to reply, but sudden pain made him moan in agony. Every inch of his skin felt on fire. It passed as quickly as it had began. If this was a dream, it was the most vivid, detailed one he'd ever had. He panted heavily. "How bad is it?" he asked her.

She was leaning over him, rubbing some sort of oil on his skin. "The man in the hall shot you with a plasma beam. It only grazed you, but these burns are consistent with a

full-on blast. Doctor Ovolos doesn't know what to make of it. He says that--" Her voice choked. "I'm sorry. He says you're going to die"

"Don't worry about it," he told her. "He's not the first doctor to tell me that recently." He noticed a pendant hanging from her neck. He reached out and caught it in his hand. There was a picture of a man on it. "Who's this?"

She jerked the pendant out of his hand and sat back against the wall. "It's my husband. He--he looked a lot like you." She turned away from him, trembling, beginning to cry.

Harry closed his eyes, feeling so weak. Sleep dragged him down.

While he slept, he dreamed of voices and dim faces, half-glimpsed through the haze of exhaustion. Captain Janeway conversing with the Doctor. Tom Paris calling his name. Kes holding his hand, crying softly. And the Doctor, appearing several times to scan him with a tricorder.

Then he was awakened by soft whispering voices, and the sound of a child crying.

A leathery old man with wild, uncombed gray hair and sharp eyes sat nearby, watching him.

Shara was slumped against Harry, sleeping.

"Good, you're awake," the old man said. "I'm Ovolos. Feel like talking?"

"I hurt all over," Harry whispered. He looked down at his naked arms. The skin was flame red, puffy with blisters.

"That's because you're dying, son," the man said in a sardonic voice.

He looked down at Shara sleeping propped against his shoulder. Looked around the large darkened room filled with adults and children wrapped in blankets and hunkered on the floor and against the walls, likewise sleeping, or whispering to each other in the darkness. "Why am I in here?" Harry asked. "I thought only people who had been chosen to survive were in here."

"When Shara first brought you here, the guards tried to keep you out," Ovolos explained. "But for some reason Shara's taken a liking to you. She insisted. She can be quite stubborn, and after she told me your story I convinced those in charge that it would be in our own best interest to have you here."

He looked at Shara. "I didn't think she believed me."

Ovolos laughed. "She doesn't. She says you have kind eyes and you remind her of her dead husband."

"But you believe me?"

"I can't afford not to. Maybe I'm being foolish, grasping at straws, but... You say you're from a starship?"

Harry nodded. "Voyager."

"But how did you wind up on Galtran?"

"There was an accident," Harry said, swallowing as a wave of nausea swept over him. "I'm...I'm in sickbay right now, dreaming this."

Ovolos laughed. "You think you're dreaming this? Oh, if only this were a nightmare. But this starship of yours-- I assume it travels among the stars?"

Harry nodded.

"And how long does it take you to travel such distances?"

"Not long, five or so light-years in a week."

Ovolos reached into a sack beside him and pulled out a thick spiral notebook. "The work of my lifetime," he said. Flipping through the book, he showed Harry pages filled with equations and theories. "I'm on the verge of formulating a way to travel like your Voyager, but it eludes me. Please, can you help me? Help me to save my people!"

"What good would it do?" Harry asked. His breathing was labored. "It's too late. You're leaving in a day or two."

"But it's not too late!" Ovolos said. "Once, long ago, we ventured into space before politicians decided it wasn't worthwhile and turned away from it. There's an abandoned base on one of our moons. Our ships are to rendezvous there before heading across space to the Davlor system, where our telescopes have revealed a habitable planet. We're going to be in suspended animation for part of the 100-year journey. But if I can complete my theory, we will use the moonbase and the moon's minerals to modify our ships to travel faster than light. The journey to Davlor would take mere weeks, and we could return here to salvage what's left of Galtran and its people. Your presence here, and your knowledge, assuming you're telling the truth, gives us new options. Now, son: am I just a foolish old man grasping at straws, or can you help me?"

Harry reached out, wincing with pain as his blisters were stretched taut, and took Ovolos's notebook. He flipped through the page, giving Ovolos's ideas a cursory glance. "This is brilliant work," he said. "You did this on your own?"

Ovolos nodded. "You recognize it, then?"

"Some of it," Harry nodded. "Elementary warp theory, quantam mechanics.....every Federation child learns this stuff in grade school--ooh." He closed his eyes, struggling to stay conscious as a wave of pain swept over his body.

Ovolos shook him gently. Harry opened his eyes.

"Will you help me finish it?" Ovolos asked.

Harry shook his head. "The Prime Directive prohibits...." He closed his eyes again.

"You must help me!" Ovolos shouted.

But a searing white pain rose from Harry's core and washed him away into darkness.

Harry groggily opened his eyes to find the Doctor leaning over him, scanning him with a diagnostic tricorder.

"Doctor," Harry said through a sleep-dry, cottony mouth. "What's wrong with me? I feel so hot."

"You have an extremely high fever, Mr. Kim," the Doctor replied. "Oddly enough, however, your condition seems to be improving. The radiation saturating your body has reduced by another 20%. I have no explanation."

"I-I was there again, Doc," Harry said weakly.

"There, Mr. Kim? There where?"

"The dream. The dream that's too real to be a dream."

"Ah, yes. Your radiation-induced delusion. Mr. Kim, I can assure you you've been here the entire night. You--" The Doctor looked down as the tricorder beeped. "Hmm. Most peculiar."

"What is it?"

"Your neurotransmitter levels have risen a hundred fold during your sleep. That should not be."

"So what does it mean?"

"It means, Mr. Kim, that while you were sleeping you have accumulated several hours of waking memories."

Janeway stood in front of the Doctor's desk. "What's your explanation for his increased neurotransmitter levels?" she asked.

"I have none," the Doctor replied. "If you're asking me whether he is being transported elsewhere while he sleeps, the answer is no. Mr. Kim has not been absent from sickbay since the accident. The only unusual events have been intense levels of REM while he's unconscious."

Janeway creased her eyebrows. "If he's not physically leaving the ship, is it possible that during sleep he's mentally interacting with another universe?"

"That might explain the increased acetylcholine and serotonin levels, but there is no way to verify such a hypothesis."

"But the plasma radiation saturating his body could be shifting his consciousness to another reality," Janeway persisted.

The Doctor sighed. "If we're going to pursue this far-fetched notion, then we should also note Mr. Kim's present condition."

Janeway turned and looked through the office window toward Kim's bed. He was sitting up, intently reading something on a PADD. The blisters on his skin were healing, and the flame-red glossiness was fading to a soft pink.

"As you can see," the Doctor said, "he is showing remarkable improvement. When he was first brought in, I had anticipated that death would occur sometime last night."

Janeway turned back. "And now?"

"At his current RAD level, death will come more slowly--a week or so. However, he claims that in his dreams he was shot by a plasma weapon, and each time he dreams, his dream-self becomes more sick. There is a corresponding improvement in the real Mr. Kim. In short: his dreams are healing him. My prognosis is that if things continue as they are, he will fully recover."

"His dreams are healing him," Janeway repeated to herself. "But are they dreams--or something more?"

Janeway left the Doctor's office and went over to Harry Kim's bedside. He looked up as she approached. "Good morning, Harry. How are you feeling?"

"Much better, Captain," he replied. His face was pale, and he had the look of one about to vomit. "Just... constantly nauseas. Good news from the Doctor, though."

"I heard. You can't imagine how glad I am." She touched his arm.

"I'm not out of the woods yet, though..."

"You'll make it, Harry." She looked down at the PADD he'd been reading. "Elementary warp theory?"

"Just refreshing my memory."

"Harry, I talked to Mr. Paris before he went on duty. He told me about your dreams--especially last night's. Are you planning to give this scientist the knowledge to develop warp technology?"

"Their planet is dying, Captain. If you could see that asteroid looming in the night sky...it's eerie. With warp technology, they'll have a better chance of surviving. And there's a girl, Shara....I feel drawn to her, like she's my ideal woman." He chuckled weakly. "The woman of my dreams."

"But Harry, what about the Prime Directive?" Janeway asked. "As a Starfleet officer, you can't give these people knowledge they don't have."

"But Ovolos is on the verge of discovering it himself. He's just gotten a few concepts wrong. He'll eventually figure it out. And anyway, Captain, it's just a dream. Tom keeps telling me that, the Doctor keeps telling me that...."

"But it might not be a dream, Harry! Your radiation poisoning might have had an unusual side effect. The evidence is very circumstantial, but...."

"Captain, it's just a dream. The Doctor is absolutely certain of that, and the sensors show that I've never once left the ship."

"But do you believe it's a dream?" Janeway asked.

Harry shook his head. "No. I don't know how, or why,



but I'm convinced it's real. But all the evidence says it's just a dream, so I guess it is.... I don't know. It's confusing."

"So we're left with the question: if you're convinced it's real, but from an objective viewpoint it's just a dream, will you actually be violating the Prime Directive?"

Harry gripped the PADD tightly. "I can't let those people die, Captain. And you can't censor my thoughts."

Janeway sighed. "Well, the radiation poisoning has had one very obvious side effect."

"What's that?"

She smiled. "You never would have argued with me before."

Harry slowly opened his eyes. Shara loomed in his vision, golden and bright. "Good morning, sleepy head."

He screamed.

Shara pulled back. "What's wrong?"

"The pain," he gasped, as fire seared him to the bones. It rapidly faded, finally becoming a tolerable sensation thrumming in the background. "Worse than ever.... but I can handle it," he whispered through a parched throat.

Shara looked at him with concern and sorrow. "Poor Harry Kim. I'm so sorry for you. If only...." She sat back on her heels, watching him.

Harry returned her gaze unblinkingly. Her eyes drew him in and seemed to consume him. What he found made him more content with himself than he'd ever been before, or, he suspected, would ever be again. Finally, nervous and perhaps a little frightened, he broke contact and looked down at his blistered hands.

"Doctor Ovolos told me you think this is all a dream," she smirked. "Still think that?"

He looked back up at her. He nodded.

"Why?"

"Because women like you only exist in dreams. And they're certainly attracted to me only in dreams."

She laughed. "You think I'm attracted to you? Well aren't you the arrogant one."

He smiled weakly, half-heartedly. "If I'm not dreaming, how do you explain how that phaser suddenly appeared in my hands the other day? Right out of nowhere?"

"Hmmm. Good point."

"And," he said, "how do you explain this?" He held up his hand. A glass of ice water magically appeared in his hand. "I'm thirsty." He drank all the water and the glass vanished. Smugly, he said, "I rest my case."

"Your evidence is hard to deny. But I don't for a minute believe I'm just a figment of your sleeping mind."

I'm real."

"That's good, because it's more fun interacting with someone who believes she's real." He went into a coughing fit. When it had subsided he felt a wetness on his lips. He wiped them with his hands, which came away bloody.

"I'll get Ovolos," Sharra said. She hurriedly stood and wandered off into the crowded room.

Ovolos appeared several minutes later. He looked at the blood flecking Kim's lips, at the obvious pain on his pale face. Kneeling beside Harry, Ovolos said, "You certainly don't look any better. But I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do for you."

"Doesn't matter," Harry said weakly. "That's not what I wanted anyway. Get your notebook. I'm going to explain a few things to you."

"Oh? What of your mysterious Prime Directive?" Ovolos said acerbicly. "And we're all just a dream anyway. Why help us?"

Harry gave a wince of pain in reply.

"Sorry," Ovolos said, softening. "I'll take any help I can get. And by the looks of you we don't have much time." He reached behind him and retrieved the notebook from where he'd tucked it into his waistband.

Harry took it and began thumbing through it. "You're about to get a crash course in Basic Warp Theory and Technology 101. Now, where to begin...."

Harry's eyes slowly fluttered open.

The Doctor noticed, set down the protoplaser he'd been cleaning, and came to the bedside. "Mr. Kim, good morning. I--"

"Doc," Harry interrupted. "I feel incredibly good. I mean, compared to before." He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. He looked wonderingly at his arms and hands--the blisters were little more than dry patches of flaky skin.

"Yes, Mr. Kim. I'm happy to report that while you slept your body has miraculously thrown off most of the effects of the radiation. For the next few days you will grow fatigued very easily, but other than that I give you a 99% clean bill of health."

"Strange. In my dream, I went from very bad to just this side of the grave," Harry said.

"Then your dream-self has not yet perished?" asked the Doctor.

"Not quite." Harry shrugged. "If I'm in such good shape now, mind if I run to the mess hall? I'm starving."

"A healthy appetite is a good sign," the Doctor said. Then he shook his head. "But no. I have a few more tests to run, and the Captain has ordered you confined to sickbay

under my constant supervision until you perish. In your dreams, that is. We still aren't sure what we're dealing with here. Despite your apparent good health, it is possible that you could have a sudden relapse. I'm sure Mr. Neelix will be happy to bring the mess hall to you."

Harry sighed. "So I'm just supposed to lay around here in bed all day? I'll go insane with boredom."

"Fear not, Mr. Kim. I shall keep you properly stimulated. I would appreciate your input on the medical paper I'm writing."

"Mine? On what?"

"On you, of course. Your case is definitely one for the textbooks. Once we get back to the Federation, I intend to publish it in all the journals." The Doctor picked up a PADD. "Now, shall we begin?"

Harry sighed again.

Just as the Doctor had predicted, Harry quickly grew fatigued. Although Harry wasn't certain whether it was due to his recent ordeal or to the Doctor's incessant rambling in that monotonous nasal voice of his. Whichever it was, after several hours Harry Kim's eyes grew heavy and he drifted to sleep.

He opened his eyes to see Shara leaning over him, wiping his brow with a wet cloth. "Harry?" she was saying, shaking him gently. "Harry, we're going to move you. The ship is just about ready to launch, and Doctor Ovolos has used his influence to get you a place onboard."

Harry's heart was hammering, and sweat rolled down his face, stinging his eyes. "I don't think so," he rasped through a bone-dry throat. He clutched Shara's arm weakly. "I think...this is it."

She sat back on her heels, opened her mouth as if to protest. But she merely nodded instead. "You're right. I can see it." Her lips trembled and her eyes grew moist. "Oh Harry...."

He tried to smile. "Don't cry. I'm dying, but not really. I'm just...not going to dream of this place again. This is not the end for me, so don't be sad."

She sniffed, trying to be strong. "I wish I could believe that."

His sight began to grow dim. "What about the third asteroid? And Ovolos?"

"The asteroid's going to hit in a few hours, right after we launch. The other three will follow a few hours after that. And Ovolos....he's ecstatic over his....your...theories. All our scientists are drawing up plans for a warp engine. The fleet will rendezvous on the moon and build it. They say we'll be in the Davlor system and settled on the new world within two years. And it's all

because of you, Harry." Her shoulders trembled with repressed sobs. "If only you could come.... I need you."

"Now I'm absolutely certain I'm dreaming." He felt a sudden fierce wind against his face, and the roar of crashing waves. "You hear that?" he asked. His muscles went limp, his hand lost its grip on Shara's arm and fell to the floor. He could hear her crying now, drowning out the roar.

"Goodbye, Harry Kim. I'll remember you forever, Harry, in my dreams," she whispered.

Darkness rose up and consumed him.

Harry remained in sickbay for another day, until the Doctor was convinced that Harry wouldn't have a relapse. Upon his release he hurried to the mess hall and wolfed down a large lunch. After that he reported for duty. Captain Janeway, still concerned, reluctantly allowed him to finish that day's shift. To his chagrin, he learned that the cracked conduit that had caused his accident had already been repaired. He'd been hoping to pick up right where he'd left off.

A week passed, then two. The accident and his strange dream faded into memory. Life resumed.

One night, over a month later, a sense of unease roused him from a deep, dreamless sleep. He sat up, the silk bedsheets slid to his waist. He felt eyes watching him from the darkness, making his skin crawl.

"Computer, lights," he called out in a groggy panic.

The lights came on. A woman was sitting in the chair across the room. Watching him.

Shara.

"Hello, Harry." She smiled and stood. Walked over and stood beside the bed, looking down at him. "It's me, Harry. It's Shara. And I'm dreaming."

He looked up at her incredulously.

His door chime began beeping insistently. He looked into the other room. "Come," he called out.

He looked back to Shara--

--but she'd vanished.

Tuvok and three security men came rushing into his bedroom, phasers drawn. Tuvok looked around the room. "Are you all right, Mr. Kim? There was an Intruder Alert, your quarters."

Harry looked at the empty space where Shara had been standing. "I'm fine, Tuvok. But I wonder--"

He pinched himself.

## OUR MAN FLINT

Data watched impassively through the shuttle's forward window as the ruddy brown planet grew larger. For the 6,813<sup>th</sup> time he wondered why he'd been compelled to steal the shuttle and come to this planet. But the compulsion, like the previous one that Dr. Soong had left within him, offered no explanation. He'd been reduced to a prisoner in his own body, watching as it performed actions against his will.

Had he been human, he decided that the appropriate emotional response would be outrage. Mingled with fright and trepidation, perhaps.

His mutinous fingers stabbed at the controls, initiating a landing sequence. Maneuvering thrusters took over from the impulse engines. The shuttle swooped down through a light smattering of clouds, made several course adjustments, and the thrusters shut off. The shuttle coasted over a dry, cracked seabed, skimmed over craggy mountains, came in low over a dusty desert. Finally the braking thrusters fired and the shuttle gently settled to the ground beside a crumbling castle.

Still feeling like an outside observer, Data watched himself stand, exit the shuttle and pass through the heavy oak doors of the castle, which were ajar. The castle was empty. He walked through dusty halls that were a chilly 9.65 degrees Celsius. There was no illumination, so he adjusted his eyes accordingly. Purposefully he wended his way through a maze of passages until he came to a closed door. Beyond the door he found a musty bedroom, spartanly furnished. Adjoining the bedroom was a laboratory, the various scientific instruments neatly organized. Along the far wall stood a human-sized metallic arch, with an attached control panel.

Data crossed the laboratory and positioned himself at the center of the arch. His fingers danced over the control panel. A flash of light engulfed him, and he vanished.

### **Captain's log, Stardate 47553.7:**

*Starfleet Command has authorized us to exceed the new warp speed limits in order to search for Mr. Data, who has stolen a shuttlecraft and headed for an unknown destination. We suspect that he is once again under the influence of an overriding directive installed by his late creator, Dr. Noonian Soong.*

Jean-Luc Picard strode onto the bridge. As he headed

toward his command chair he glanced at the small star on the forward viewscreen. From this distance, on the very edge of the system, the star was barely larger than the sprinkling of background stars.

"This is his destination?" Picard asked, standing beside his chair, hands on hips.

Riker stood. "Yes, sir. The Omega system. Long-range sensors show that he's landed on Holberg 917G, the second of three planets. There's a Code Red quarantine beacon here, so we can't go in any closer. No explanation given by the beacon, but Code Red means there's a mortal threat in the system."

Picard crossed his arms on his chest and tapped thoughtfully at his lower lip. "What is Data doing here?" he whispered. "And how did he make it past the planetary defense system?"

Riker cocked his head. "Sir?"

Picard tugged at his uniform, then strode toward toward his Ready Room. "Join me, Commander," he called over his shoulder.

Riker followed and waited as Picard settled himself behind the desk.

"What I'm about to tell you cannot go beyond this room, Wil."

"Understood, sir."

"About 75 years ago, an earth man named Flint died on Holberg 917G after a very, very long life. He was nearly 6,000 years old when he died." He waited for the shock to fade from Riker's face. "During his long existence, he was known as Alexander the Great, Methuselah, Brahms, Da Vinci, and others we can only guess at. He was unarguably the greatest mind that ever lived."

Riker smiled. "I think Lt. Barclay might argue that point, sir."

"All jocularities aside, Wil, he had enormous creative powers. When James Kirk first met Flint, Flint actually pulled the Enterprise from orbit and shrank it. Kirk eventually set all to rights, as usual. He also learned that Flint was dying."

"Kirk, sir?" Riker had a fascination for the first captain of the Enterprise.

"Yes. At Kirk's request, Starfleet allowed Flint to live out the remainder of his life in privacy. At his death, he promised that the fruits of his mind would be made available to humanity. When we're ready for it. Starfleet knows there is a treasure trove of technology on Holberg 917G, but Flint

sequestered it behind an impenetrable defense system. Starfleet's playing the waiting game, wondering when and if Flint's technology will be made available to us. So they've classified this system as Top Secret, to discourage treasure hunters and prevent fatalities in attempting to penetrate the defense system."

"So what is Data doing here of all places?" Riker asked. "And how did he get past the defenses?"

Picard smiled. "My thoughts exactly."

Just then Worf's voice came over the intercom. "Captain, there is a temporal disturbance on Holberg 917G--"

James Kirk materialized outside the double gate of the castle. He and Leonard McCoy looked up at the high buttresses, the three tiers, each higher than the last, and the large central dome. The castle seemed unchanged after eighteen years.

And the scowling, grey-haired man who stepped through the doors to greet them seemed hardly to have aged a day. Kirk held out a hand, but the man ignored it. "Flint," Kirk nodded. "You look....remarkably well."

Another, younger man stepped through the door to stand at Flint's side.

"You expected a decrepit old man, hunched over and hobbling with a cane, I'm sure," Flint said gruffly. "But I assure you I am very near death. Doctor McCoy's diagnosis eighteen years ago was correct." He nodded to McCoy. "You may scan me, if you wish."

McCoy took out his medical scanner and ran it across Flint's chest. "Terminal atherosclerosis," he said, reading off the data. "Imminent renal failure, advanced colon cancer....." He shut off the scanner. "You're a walking textbook of gerontological disorders. How is it that your outward appearance is so healthy?"

Flint smiled. "You wish me to reveal my secrets? Despite our brief time together so many years ago, I think you know me better than that."

"But isn't that why you called us here?" Kirk asked. "To hand your knowledge over to the Federation before you die?"

"Perhaps," Flint said vaguely.

The young man standing at Flint's side coughed, drawing Kirk's attention. He couldn't have been more than twenty, with slicked-back jet black hair, a rather large nose, and deep inquisitive eyes. His mouth was little more than a line in his face, with a playful smile dancing at the corners.

"I fear my manners haven't improved with time," Flint said. "Kirk, this is Noonian Soong, a student of mine."

"Doctor Soong?" McCoy asked. "The cyberneticist?"

Soong nodded. "The same. Though I deny that I'm the shame-filled outcast the rumors would have you believe. "

"I knew you were young, but I had no idea....."

"He's come to me for.....obvious reasons," Flint said, studying Kirk.

Kirk tried to hold back the painful memory of a beautiful young....woman.....whose awakening emotions had destroyed her.

"I see you still carry the pain, Kirk. And the love. As do I." Flint pounded a fist to his chest. "In here."

Kirk was silent.

Flint motioned toward the door. "Gentlemen, shall we go inside?"

They walked through the castle's double-doored portal. "Tell me, Captain," Flint called over his shoulder. "Where is the illustrious Mr. Spock? I had hoped he would be with you."

"He's away playing ambassador to the Klingons. Helping to negotiate a treaty."

Flint led them down a hallway and into the same recreational room in which he....and Rayna....had entertained them eighteen years earlier. The ancient golden piano still occupied a corner of the room. But the pool table had been replaced with an enormous oak table, which had been laid out with the delicacies and sweet meats of ten different worlds. The four of them sat down and picked at the food as they exchanged polite conversation and the two Starfleet officers brought Flint up to speed on current events. During the meal Flint experienced a prolonged bout of coughing, during which his napkin came away with blood on it. He waved off McCoy's concern. Another time he stopped talking in the middle of a sentence and stared blankly into space for several long moments before resuming as though nothing had happened.

When everyone appeared to have had their fill, Flint stood. "Soong, if you'd be so kind as to regale the good Doctor with some of your delightful quatrains, Captain Kirk and I have some matters to discuss in private."

Soong nodded and turned a mischievous grin on McCoy. Kirk followed Flint down the hallway, through Flint's tidy bedroom and into a laboratory beyond.

"Kirk, a life as long as mine has been gives a lot of room for creativity, and over the years the mind builds up a huge impetus for invention. There are insights in here," he tapped his head, "that could revolutionize the Federation. New



sciences, corrections to the fallacies of existing sciences. And some of the devices I've built would amaze you."

Kirk looked around the room, searching among the neatly arranged scientific apparatus and the open textbooks.

"You won't find anything in here, Captain," Flint said. "My masterpieces are....elsewhere."

"Yet for all your vast intellect," Kirk couldn't keep the bitterness and sarcasm from his voice, "you couldn't keep her alive."

A look of rage, quickly suppressed, crossed Flint's face. "I can't deny that. But Soong is good, very good. With what he's learned from me, he will succeed where I failed." Flint touched a knob on an apparently blank wall and a door popped open. "I must insist, Kirk, that everything you see and hear from this moment on will be held in the strictest confidence."

Kirk agreed uncertainly.

Flint went into a small room and wheeled out a gurney, upon which lay a man who appeared to be unconscious.

Kirk cocked his head perplexedly as he studied the man. "Soong?" he asked. For the man looked like an older version, perhaps ten years older, of Soong, but with oddly pale skin. Kirk remembered that day, so many years ago, when he'd discovered a room filled with failed versions of Rayna Kopek.

"Soong is an android? Is this the only failure?" Then Kirk noticed the vaguely Starfleet-like uniform, and the insignia. His perplexity deepened.

"Soong is human, Kirk, flesh and blood. I didn't construct this one," Flint said. "Soong did, in his own image.

Or rather he will. This is an android from the future, Captain. Who, it might interest you to know, serves aboard the Enterprise. A month ago, he came to me unexpectedly through one of my devices. Soong doesn't know of his existence."

"Why?" Kirk asked.

"I wasn't sure at first, but then I realized, I arranged for him to come here, so near to my death. You see, I wasn't sure what I should do with the bulk of my knowledge when I died, because my wisdom tells me that humanity is not yet ready for it. So: should I pass it on, at the risk of humanity misusing it, or should I destroy it and hope they eventually discover it on their own? It was quite a puzzle for me. And then a month ago I found Data unconscious on the floor of my laboratory and I had my answer."

"You're not going to give Starfleet anything, are you?" Kirk said accusingly..

"On the contrary, I'm going to give the Federation

everything I know, just not all at once. You'll get some today. But when I die, a defense system will go up around this planet, so warn Starfleet not to come here."

"But what about the rest?"

Kirk watched as Flint tapped a place on the side of the android's head and a hatch flipped upward, exposing a network of circuits. "I'm going to give Soong a chip to implant in his creations, a chip that will bring them to me once the Federation reaches the first of a series of scientific crises that I know are coming, and to which I, of course, have the solution." Flint picked a circuit up from the table. He snapped it into place at a juncture in the android's neuropath.

"The circuit I've just implanted contains instructions, and conditions that must be met, so that this android may gradually reveal my knowledge to the Federation. He is virtually immortal, so my problem is solved."

"But what if Soong doesn't want to implant your circuit in his creations?" Kirk asked. "Or suppose it's years before his creations are realized, and he forgets?"

Flint put his arms behind his back and started pacing. "I sought Soong out several years ago, during a brief sojourn back to Earth. He was barely out of his teens then, a wunderkind, living in the shadow of his own failed potential. His colleagues regarded him with a mixture of pride and shame. He was a solitary man, like me. It didn't take much to convince him to come here, away from the watchful eyes of his critics, and continue his research with me as part colleague and teacher. We've made a lot of progress, yet even the combined might of our intellects have been unable to construct a positronic brain that won't decay after a few days or weeks."

"You've continued your experiments?" Kirk said, enraged. "Did the death of Rayna teach you nothing?"

Flint continued, ignoring Kirk's outburst. "But after studying Data, I know where we've gone wrong. And knowing the nature of our error, Soong's error, I'm not sure he will be able to construct a working positronic brain." He held up an information disk. "So I've put Data's schematics on here. I'll give it to Soong. He won't like himself for taking it; he'll think it's cheating. But he will take it. He'll tinker around on his own for awhile, and who knows--maybe he'll succeed on his own. But he'll use this as a last resort. Either way, a positronic brain will be constructed. And the price for this information will be that Soong implants the chip in Data's brain. Bringing him back to me so that I may pass on my knowledge to the Federation through him."

Kirk's mind was reeling. "You're talking about a closed temporal loop. The old question of the chicken or the egg."

Flint nodded. "However it happens, the positronic brain originates with Soong. And he will implant my chip, otherwise we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Kirk shook his head. "This is why I hate time travel. Damn paradoxes."

Flint went into a violent coughing fit. He doubled over and fell to the floor, clutching at his stomach. Kirk bent down and gripped Flint's shoulders with concern. He flipped open his communicator. "Dr. McCoy--

"No," Flint gasped, his coughing subsiding. "I'm all right." He got shakily to his feet.

"Yes, Jim?" McCoy's voice came through the communicator.

"Never mind, Bones." Kirk closed the communicator.

"Thank you, Kirk," Flint said, the color returning to his face. "Thank you for keeping my secret all these years, and letting me finish my life in peace."

Kirk looked at his feet, feeling shamed. "I didn't keep your secret, Flint. I had a duty to tell Starfleet. But I asked them to leave you alone, and they have, although they've kept an eye on this system, to prevent you from falling into the wrong hands. We're no longer the barbarians you seem to think we are."

"Well, then I at least thank you for the way you handled my case with your superiors."

Kirk nodded. He pointed at Data. "Does Soong know?"

"No, and he never will. And I trust you, Kirk, to at least keep this secret from your superiors. I believe your Prime Directive or some such other philosophy demands it. Telling Soong and others would have an influence on future history."

Kirk nodded slowly. "I'm inclined to agree." He studied Flint in silence for several long moments, as Flint closed the flap on the android's head. "Why did you ask me here, Flint? We didn't exactly part on the best of terms. You no longer need your privacy. You could have requested Starfleet to send someone else. Why me?"

"Because, Kirk, I know the pain you've lived with over the years. It never goes away. It's always lurking in the deepest corners of your mind, coming forth in the darkness of the night. I've felt such pain a thousand times over the course of my life. No man should have to live with it even once. And I know I'm partly responsible for your torment." Flint headed toward a door on the other side of the room. "I never buried

her. I kept her body in my laboratory, foolishly hoping that someday I could....repair her." Flint held up a cautionary finger. "She won't be staying. You understand that I must send her forward with Data, because I used his brain as a guide to restore hers."

Kirk's heart began hammering as he followed on Flint's heels. He knew what was coming, but he didn't dare hope.

Flint put his hand on the doorknob. "My gift to you, Captain: an easement for your soul. You'll know that she's still alive, somewhere, and hopefully in that knowledge you'll find peace."

Flint opened the door. A young woman stepped into the room, her eyes gleaming with life. She turned a radiant smile on Kirk, and his heart soared.

Flint passed away a day later, at sunset.

Picard and Riker hurried onto the bridge.

"A second temporal disturbance, Captain," Worf reported. "Exactly 20 seconds after the first, if that's of any significance."

Picard looked at the viewscreen. "Both centered on Holberg 917G?"

"Yes sir."

Picard and Riker sat down. The bridge sat in silence for several long moments. It seemed there was nothing to do but wait. When Worf's console began bleeping for attention, everyone turned toward him expectantly. "It's the missing shuttlecraft, sir. Departing the planet, on a rendezvous course with us." He paused for a moment. "Commander Data requesting permission to dock in 5 minutes."

"Permission granted." Picard stood and headed for the turbolift, motioning for Riker to follow. "Shall we, Commander?"

The shuttlecraft settled to the hangar floor. A few moments later the hatch swung open and Data stuck his head out. "Greetings," he said cheerfully to Picard and Riker, who stood nearby. He stepped onto the deck. "Captain, I must apologize for my recent behavior and the theft of the shuttlecraft. However, there are mitigating circumstances. My actions--"

"Were not your own, Commander. We suspected as much. Are you all right?"

"I am fine, sir," Data replied. "And....I have a message for you. Not for you specifically, but for the Captain of the

Enterprise."

Picard raised his eyebrows, curious. "From whom?"

"James T. Kirk, sir."

"James T. Kirk?!" Riker asked incredulously.

Data nodded. "The message is simply, 'Hello.'"

Picard smiled, nodding appreciatively.

"I also have a solution to our current warp speed problems, sir. Courtesy of Flint. High warp speeds can again be achieved without risk of damaging the space-time continuum."

"Indeed," Picard said. "It seems you have been busy, Commander. I look forward to your full report."

"I am afraid a full report will not be possible, Captain. My awareness of events ends shortly after I entered a castle on Holberg 917G and resume after I exited. Though my internal chronometer tells me 33 days have passed, I have no memory for that time period."

"33 days?" Riker said. "But you've only been gone four days, and--" He suddenly fell silent, gazing beyond Data at the shuttle hatch. A stunningly beautiful woman had appeared from within the shuttle, and stood silently gazing around the hanger.

Data turned and took her hand, helped her down onto the deck. "Captain, Commander," he said. "This is Rayna Kopek. She is.....a relative."

## THE HAUNTING OF ORGALA 512

Data, dressed all in black leather, paused in the corridor outside Ten Forward. Cupping his head in his hands, he gently twisted until the magnetic clamps disengaged. He pulled his head free from his shoulders, cradled it gently against his waist in the crook of his right arm, and stepped up to the doors. They swished open, and sounds of merriment spilled out into the corridor. He gripped his black cape in his free hand, gave it a grand flourish, and entered the lounge.

Ten Forward was crowded, and everyone wore a horror-themed costume. Near the door someone dressed as a Kitorian man-bat stood laughing with a gigantic Denebian slime worm and two wart-nosed, haggly witches, one with black hair, one with red. The man-bat was sucking synthohol in through its snout. When the doors swished open and Data made his grand entrance, the four stopped talking and turned their attention on him.

“Data!” the man-bat exclaimed, in Commander Riker’s astonished voice, staring down at the head held at Data’s waist. “Data, is that thing real, or...or is your head tucked under your shoulders?”

“My head is quite real,” Data replied. “There is no costumed deception involved, sir.”

The man-bat’s eyes widened, the only visible evidence that Riker was astonished to see Data’s detached head talking to him.

Data’s hands moved so that his head was clutched before him, in front of his stomach. His eyes looked up at the two witches. “Doctor, Counselor,” he said, “your costumes are very--”

“Appropriate,” Riker cut in, laughing.

The two women said nothing, merely stared at Data’s disembodied talking head with open-mouthed astonishment. Finally the dark-haired witch blinked and glanced away. “I can’t look anymore,” Counselor Troi said. She turned and hurried away, quickly fading into the crowd. The red-haired witch immediately followed.

Data’s head, now balanced at chest-height on his left hand, looked after them in confusion. “Counselor, Doctor?”

The bat-man and the slime worm moved closer to Data, closing the gap left by the hastily-departed women.

“Commander, Geordi, I am confused,” Data said, his eyes moving from one to the other. “Have I offended Counselor Troi and Doctor Crusher? If so, please explain the nature of the offense.”

The man-bat grinned and laid a hand on the slime-worm’s aural structure. “I’ll leave it to you, Geordi. I see an Orion slave girl I haven’t said hello to yet.” The man-

bat smiled and nodded at Data, then pushed his way through the crowd toward the other side of the lounge.

The slime worm's forelimbs pushed at its head. The headpiece swung backward, revealing Geordi LaForge's face. "You didn't offend them, Data. You just.... it's like..... Look, it's Halloween, and people are supposed to focus on the horrible and grotesque. But it's all make-believe. No one wants to see actual horror. People can't actually pull off their heads and walk around with them. You've got the right spirit, Data, but I think maybe your Headless Horseman costume is just a tad too realistic. I think that's what frightened the women off." He smiled. "You're like the guy in the stories who shows up at a Halloween party with a bloody hacked-off thumb in a display box. It's supposed to be a fake thumb, but it turns out the guy actually dismembered himself before the party."

"I believe I understand," Data said. "Although the distinction between reality and fakery is somewhat--"

"So how did you do it?" Geordi interrupted. "I didn't know your disconnected head could still maintain control over your body."

"For the past several months I've been developing wireless neural receptors for both ends of my spinal connector. My choice of costume was in part to publicly demonstrate the end product of my endeavors."

Geordi looked around. "Well, it's one hell of a demonstration, I'll give you that much. From the way everyone keeps glancing over here, or trying hard not to, I'd say everyone in the room has noticed."

"My intent was not to disturb my ship-mates with the realism of my costume," Data said in a regretful tone. "Perhaps a bit of levity will alleviate their discomfort." Data held out his head to Geordi. "Geordi, if you would please hold this."

Geordi hesitantly took Data's head in his hands. "What are you going to do?"

"Do not fear," Data's head said. "I know what I am doing. Please, turn my head around so that I may see the room rather than your abdomen. Thank you."

Data's right hand grabbed hold of his left, detached it and set it on the floor. The hand began dragging itself forward with its fingers, crawling across the floor toward the food-laden bar. "Behold," Data head said in a dramatic, tremulous voice that caught everyone's attention; his body gestured dramatically with the remaining hand, "the autonomous crawling hand. Who knows what evil lurks in its twisted mind? Beware!"

Geordi groaned shrugged his shoulders in resignation.

The entire room fell silent, watching with mixed emotions as Data's hand scabbled across the floor, steering its way between the feet of the party goers. At last it reached the bar and began dragging itself upward toward the generous spread of snack foods on the bar top.

Ten minutes later Data's hand had finished its antics among the snacks and crawled back to Data amidst a smattering of applause. Data's body bent over, retrieved the hand and reattached it.

Geordi gratefully pushed the head back into the android's hands. "Please, Data, put this back where it belongs, all right?"

"Very well." There was an audible click as Data's head settled back into place on his shoulders, after which he shook his head back and forth several times to fine-tune the alignment. As he did this he noticed someone at the other side of the lounge. "Geordi, do you recognize that crewman standing at the far exit, intently watching us? His face does not match any of the records in my Enterprise personnel database."

Geordi followed Data's gaze. "Which crewman? The sorcerer or the knight?"

"Neither. I am referring to the crewman in the late 23<sup>rd</sup> century Starfleet uniform."

Geordi shook his head. "I don't see anyone in an old uniform."

"Strange. He is no longer there. A small group walked in front of him. When they had passed, he was gone."

"I didn't see anyone, Data."

"I am certain I saw someone who does not belong here."

Geordi laughed. "It's Halloween, Data. I see a whole *room* full of weird someones who don't belong on the Enterprise." Geordi smiled and waved to one of his staff nearby. "I'll see you later, Data," he said as he started over to his subordinate.

After Geordi had left, Data scanned the room for several long moments, hoping to catch sight of the man in the old Starfleet uniform. But the man didn't reappear. Data, still puzzled, moved over to the forward window. He turned his back to the revelry, and looked out at the lush green planet spinning below the Enterprise. The ship was currently re-mapping Orgala 512, a star system that hadn't been visited since its initial survey over a hundred years earlier. The planet below was the fifth planet of that system. Data's own reflection stared back at him from the window. His black outfit and cape blended in perfectly with the blackness of space, so that it seemed his pale head, bodiless, was floating in the stars above the planet.

"Your costume is very effective," a deep voice boomed over Data's right shoulder. "Yours is the best portrayal of the Headless Horseman I've ever seen."

Data turned to find Worf standing next to him. The Klingon wore a frilly, polka-dotted clown outfit, complete with a garishly-painted face and a bulbous red nose. He clutched a tankard of Klingon blood wine in his white-gloved right hand.

"Greetings, Worf," Data said, looking from Worf's oversized clown shoes to his frazzled green hair. "Your costume is very effective as well, contrasting as it does the jovial buffoonery of the clown with your normally dour--"

"Thank you, Commander," Worf interrupted, impatient, as usual, with Data's



verbosity. “Halloween has always been my favorite human holiday.” So saying, Worf’s right hand suddenly jerked upward and back, splashing blood wine from the tankard all down the front of his costume. Worf growled, showing his teeth. “Again! That’s the fourth time I’ve spilled--- Ach!”

“Is everything all right, Lieutenant?” Data asked.

Worf suddenly staggered to the right, nearly falling before catching himself. He growled again. “I seem to be having trouble with my coordination this evening,” he said through gritted teeth. “Fortunately everyone seems to think it is a part of my ‘act.’”

“Perhaps you have had too much blood wine,” Data suggested.

Worf shook his head. “I haven’t been able to drink more than a few swallows. I’ve spilled every tankard.” He looked down at the now-empty tankard in his hand. “If you will excuse me, Commander, I’ll try a fifth.” Worf headed to the bar.

Data turned back to the window--

--and saw a reflection of the man in the old Starfleet uniform staring back at him, unblinking, looking over his left shoulder. A middle-aged man, with wavy blond hair and a full mustache, with a long scar over his right eye.

Data whirled around. But no one was there. Data scanned the crowd, but saw no sign of the man in the old uniform. He sought out Geordi, pulled his friend away from a group of Engineer’s mates. “Something is wrong,” Data told Geordi. “Twice now I have seen a man in an old Starfleet uniform, and twice he has vanished.”

“Maybe there’s a glitch in your positronic net.”

“My self-diagnostic routines indicate no malfunctions.”

“Then maybe--”

A commotion across the room caught the attention of both officers. Worf was staggering around, moving with jerky, abrupt motions, as though he were being pushed. He tripped, and when he had gotten back to his feet and taken a step, he tripped again. The crewmen around him were laughing uproariously at his clownish antics.

Geordi smiled. “Who would have thought Worf would be the life of the party?”

“But Geordi,” Data said, “he is not acting. Do you not see the two men in old Starfleet uniforms who are pushing and tripping him?”

Geordi stopped smiling and looked at Data. “No, I don’t. Data, are you saying you see two men attacking Worf?”

Data nodded. “Though ‘attacking’ is perhaps too harsh a word. I believe a more appropriate word would be ‘bullying.’ Two men, wearing Starfleet uniforms, circa late 23<sup>rd</sup> century. Neither of them is the man I saw earlier. They are translucent, and difficult to see. Perhaps if you were to look closer....” Worf suddenly stopped staggering and tripping. “They have vanished.”

“Wait a minute. Translucent? Old Starfleet uniforms. Data, it sounds like

you're describing ghosts."

Data nodded. "That had not occurred to me, but they did indeed appear ghostly."

Geordi signaled urgently to Riker, who quickly came over. "Commander, I think we may have a problem...." Geordi explained briefly, after which Data gave Riker a detailed account of what he'd seen.

"Data, this isn't some elaborate Halloween gag you planned with Worf, is it?" Riker asked.

"No sir, it is not."

"Then I'll inform the Captain," Riker said. "Did these beings you saw seem hostile in any way, Data?"

"Other than their apparent dislike of Lieutenant Worf, no. And they did not seem intent on doing him permanent physical damage."

"Then we won't call off the party and alarm anyone just yet. I'll alert Security, and have Deanna ask around, find out if anyone else saw Data's 'ghosts.' Data, I'd like you to go with Geordi to Engineering and let him perform a complete diagnostic on you."

"Yes, sir," Data said.

Data and Geordi left Ten Forward together, while Riker turned back to the party, in search of Worf and Troi.

Twenty minutes later, after stopping at their respective quarters to change out of their costumes and into their uniforms, Data and Geordi were in Engineering. Data was sitting on a bench beside the main console.. One of his head plates had been raised, exposing the interfaces to his positronic net. Several cables snaked from his head and plugged into the main console. Geordi stood above him, probing at the android's matrix.

Data held a PADD in his hands, and as Geordi worked, he was rapidly scrolling through the complete database of every person who had served in Starfleet since its inception. Names and photographs flashed across the screen at a hundred records a second.

Fifteen minutes passed, with neither officer saying a word. Geordi was so absorbed in examining Data that he nearly dropped his probe and jumped a three feet when Data abruptly said, "Freeze! Back two records."

Geordi took a deep breath to calm himself, then looked down at Data's PADD. "Find something?"

"Affirmative." Data held the PADD up to Geordi. On the small screen was a photograph of a smiling blonde-haired man with a long scar above his right eye, wearing an old-fashioned Starfleet uniform. "This is the first man I saw in Ten

Forward. I saw him twice.”

Geordi squinted as he read the personnel information next to the photograph. “Captain Walter Drake, U.S.S Vagabond. Stardate 4913.5. Eighty-three years ago. You think you saw this man in Ten Forward, Data?”

Data nodded, lowering the PADD back to his eye level. “Save record and resume.” Images flashed across the screen, but only for a few seconds this time. “Freeze!” Data said again. “Display records 20,153 and 20,254.” Photographs of two men appeared on the screen, a jovial-looking man with red hair and a dour older man with black hair. “These are the two men who were harassing Lieutenant Worf. As you can see, all three men were officers on the U.S.S. Vagabond, which was destroyed eighty years ago after colliding with a quantum filament, one hundred light-years from our present location. There were no survivors, and nothing remained of the ship to salvage.”

“Data, how can--”

The terminal on the main console began bleeping insistently. Geordi stepped over and examined the readout. “This is strange,” he said after a moment. “Data, have you made any adjustments to your visual processor recently?”

“I have not. Why do you ask?”

“Because your processor has been adjusted to detect energetic oscillations in a quaternary subspace manifold.”

“But my internal logs report no anomalies,” Data said in a puzzled tone.

“See for yourself,” Geordi said. He stepped aside as Data stood and examined the results of the Level One diagnostic.

“You are correct, Geordi. But who has tampered with my positronic net? And how was it done without my knowledge?”

“And why?” Geordi tapped at his lip thoughtfully, then stepped over to a wall console. “Data, the subspace manifold your visual processor has been attuned to is pretty deep in subspace, and the ship doesn’t routinely scan for it.”

“Perhaps we should conduct a scan now,” Data suggested.

“My thoughts exactly.” Geordi started tapping commands into the wall console.

“There’s an anomalous subspace manifold stretching from one end of this star system to the other,” Geordi told the assembled officers in the Briefing Room. He was standing in front of a schematic of Orgala 512 displayed on the wall screen. The manifold, a jagged bold red line, ran across the system like a crack. “This is a highly unusual folding of subspace at the quaternary level. It’s so rare that such a folding has only been encountered once before.”

“What’s causing it?” Captain Picard asked.

“Orgala’s fifth planet, which we’re currently orbiting, has an extremely powerful

magnetic field. It's somehow twisting this particular layer of subspace."

"It has long been theorized that an electromagnetic field might be able to exert an influence on subspace, but such an influence has never before been encountered in nature," Data interjected.

"Does this present any danger to us?" Riker asked. "Maybe we should move the Enterprise out of the system and do a long-range study."

Geordi shook his head. "Which brings up my other point. We're in no danger, but I don't think we can leave Orgala, Commander. Shortly after I conducted the initial scan that detected this anomaly, the manifold shifted, dragging space around the star with it and creating a closed loop, effectively cutting us off from the rest of the universe. Any direction we go, we'll just wind up right back where we started."

Picard's elbow rested on the table, his finger tapping at his lower lip. "Have you confirmed this, Geordi?"

"No, but Data and I prepared a probe just before calling this meeting. We can launch it right now if you'd like, sir."

Picard nodded. "Make it so."

Data tapped a sequence into the recessed keyboard on the table before him. "Probe is away."

On the display screen behind Geordi, a yellow blip appeared on the schematic of Orgala 512, and sped toward the edge of the system. When it reached the edge, a second yellow blip appeared on the screen, heading in toward the system, at the opposite edge from the first blip. After a moment, the outward-outward bound blip disappeared. The inward-bound blip streaked toward the Enterprise.

"It is the same probe," Data said, consulting the small readout on the table. He tapped a few keys and the blip on the screen came to a halt.

"A closed loop around the system," Geordi said. "We're trapped, Captain."

"And you say this spatial loop formed after you conducted your subspace scan?"

Geordi nodded.

"That can't be a coincidence," Picard said..

"It couldn't have happened on its own," Geordi said. "There's intelligence at work here."

"Data's ghosts?" Riker asked.

"We think so."

Data then summarized his discoveries in the Starfleet personnel database.

"So you think the ghosts of dead Starfleet officers, this Captain Drake and members of his crew, are here in the Orgala system?" Picard asked.

Geordi shrugged. "I wouldn't go that far, sir. But there are highly complex, localized energetic oscillations rippling across the subspace manifold. So complex they could be some form of intelligence. Data's visual processor has been adjusted,

possibly by these beings, to see and interpret these oscillations. And they're being interpreted by Data's processor as Starfleet officers. But whether they actually are the disembodied consciousnesses, the ghosts, of Captain Drake and his crew, we don't know. The only thing we can be certain of is that these beings do exist, and they've trapped us here."

"But why would these beings choose to masquerade as Captain Drake and his crew?" Picard asked almost rhetorically. "Why that particular crew, which died eighty years ago and a hundred light-years away?"

Geordi shook his head. "Unknown."

"You said you're seeing them intermittently," Riker asked Data. "Any idea why?"

"It is possible that these beings reside at a deeper level in subspace, where we are unable to detect them. It would take a great deal of energy to boost themselves up onto the quaternary manifold, and thus they are only able to sustain themselves at that level for brief periods. They are also able to exert a physical influence on our space, as they have demonstrated by the modification to my neural net and their harassment of Lieutenant Worf in Ten Forward. But such physical interaction would be an even greater drain."

Geordi came to stand behind Worf, laying a hand on the Klingon's shoulder. "For some reason, these beings must be very angry at Worf. They'd have to be, for them to waste so much of their energy just to trip him up and push him around. They may have wanted to do more, but that was all they could manage."

Worf gave a low growl at the memory.

"But what do they want?" Picard asked. "And why have they trapped us here?"

Data paused to stare at a point just over Picard's shoulder. He refocused his attention on Picard. "Perhaps we can find out now. The ghost of Captain Drake, or the being masquerading as Captain Drake, is standing right behind you, sir."

Worf jumped from his chair and drew his phaser, peering intently at the empty space behind Picard.

A chill raced down Picard's spine at Data's words. But he calmly swivelled his chair and looked up and down. "I see no one. Counselor, do you sense anything?"

Troi shook her head. "No, sir."

"A being is there, I assure you, sir," Data said. "He--it-- is now motioning at me with his hand, and heading toward the door. I believe he wishes me to follow."

Picard stood and motioned to the door. "Then let's see where....he....leads us, Data."

The door swished open. No one had been close enough to trigger its sensor. Picard and Riker exchanged uneasy glances.

They followed Data out into the corridor. As they walked along, Picard asked,

“Data, are these beings able to talk to us?”

Data shook his head. “It is doubtful, sir. While they are obviously able to interact with our environment, albeit weakly, producing the brute force necessary to trip Lieutenant Worf would be relatively easy. Producing something as complex as a sound vibration would be several magnitudes more difficult.”

“Is this being able to hear us?” Picard waved a hand at the corridor ahead, unsure exactly where the being was.

“Captain Drake!” Data called out. He stared at the corridor ahead for a moment, then shook his head. “He did not turn around. Apparently they cannot detect or interpret sound waves.”

“Then any meaningful communication will be difficult.”

“So it would seem, sir.”

After several long minutes of wending their way through the corridors, Data brought them to Transporter Room 3. The door swished open when the officers were still ten feet away. They followed Data into the Transporter Room. Data stepped behind the controls and peered at empty air beside the console. “Captain Drake is using his fingers to communicate a sequence of numbers,” Data told his fellow officers. “I assume it is a set of coordinates on the planet surface.” Data keyed in the coordinates and put the transporter on stand-by.

Geordi went to the secondary controls built into the wall and retrieved the coordinates from the main console, initiating a sensor sweep. Geordi studied the readout for a moment. “This is damn peculiar,” he said.

“Mr. LaForge?” Picard asked.

Geordi turned to the others, who were watching him expectantly. “There’s a cloaking field on the planet at those coordinates. Very hard to detect; a routine sensor scan would have missed it.. Visual sweep shows only a barren iceland for hundreds of miles around the given coordinates, but the part of the icecap coinciding with the cloaking field has all the characteristics of holo-matter.”

“The ice is a hologram?” Riker asked.

Geordi nodded. “Part of it, sir. I’d say something’s hidden down there. And whoever hid it wanted to make sure it stayed hidden, from a visual surveillance or a detailed sensor sweep.”

“Excuse me,” Data said, “but the Captain Drake being has vanished again. Just before he faded, he was motioning at the transporter platform. I believe he wants us to beam down to the surface and investigate.”

Riker looked to Picard, who nodded and said, “Number One....be careful.”

“Aye, sir. Data, Geordi, Worf: you’re with me.”

The four officers materialized on the planet’s surface ten minutes later. They

stood on a low rise overlooking a barren, frozen plain. The sun shone weakly in a cold, grey sky. A strong wind blew, and over the eons had shaped the ice flows into jagged crags. Long, uneven fissures broke the ice in many places, their depths cloaked in shadow.

A faint glow surrounded each of the officers: force-fields to protect them from the cold, generated by the arm bands they wore.

The shattered wreckage of a starship was scattered across the plain of ice, at the end of a miles-long black scar gouged deeply into the ice. The hull had been broken into dozens of smaller pieces, which gleamed dully beneath layers of ice that had formed. The remains were barely recognizable as a Constitution Class starship.

“What the hell happened here?” Riker asked, surveying the destruction.

Geordi pointed to a slender piece of machinery that stood at the bottom of the slope. “There’s the cloaking device, Commander.” Geordi and Riker walked down and examined it, while Data and Worf went to explore the wreckage.

Geordi ran his tricorder over the machine, examined it carefully with his visor.

“It’s standard Klingon technology, sir. Manufactured about eighty years ago on Klath, according to the markings.” He pointed to another machine behind the cloaking device. “A holo-generator. Federation issue, very primitive model. I’ve seen a few in museums. Manufactured during the infancy of holo-technology. From a mile away, all this would be invisible. And someone conducting a standard survey from orbit definitely wouldn’t see it.”

“Federation and Klingon technology from that era, side by side?” Riker asked, puzzled.

Data and Worf stepped up behind them. “These are the remains of the U.S.S. Vagabond, Commander,” Data reported. “The ship of Captain Drake.”

Riker cocked his head. “But according to the records the Vagabond struck a quantum filament, a hundred light years from here.”

“Apparently Starfleet records are in error, sir.”

Riker looked at the cloaking device and holo-generator. “Or deliberately inaccurate,” he said thoughtfully.

“Many of the hull fragments are scored with disruptor burns and torpedo residue,” Worf said. “The ship was attacked, sir. By Klingons.”

Riker absently scratched at his beard. “That looks like the bridge module over there. Let’s go see if we can salvage the logs.”

Layers of fine ice particles crunched beneath their boots as they trudged across the ice to a portion of the ship’s hull, several hundred meters long. Its side was torn open, a gaping wound edged with buckled girders and frazzled wiring. The four officers, carefully avoiding the jagged metal edges, climbed through the opening into the darkened corridor beyond. They turned on their wrist lights.

And encountered their first body, perfectly preserved by the sub-zero cold.

The human male had been stripped and pinned to the wall with metal spikes driven through his wrists and his thighs. His blood-smeared corpse had been mutilated. His face bore a look of extreme agony, his wide eyes staring at nothing. His skin was glossy with ice, his hair and forehead dusted with frost.

Geordi and Riker turned away from the sight, fighting not to retch. Data examined the body curiously, Worf with horror and growing rage.

“Ach!” Worf growled in disgust. “This is Klingon work. An ancient ritual execution, reserved for the most vile of Klingon criminals.” He shook his head with disbelief. “Surely no Klingon would be a part of this! There is no honor such slaughter!”

“Commander Riker,” Data said. “One of the subspace entities is watching us a short distance up the corridor. His face bears a strong resemblance to this man.” Data indicated the tragic mess on the wall. “Though the entity’s features appear a good deal more calm.”

Riker shined his light in the direction Data indicated. Only twisted metallic debris was revealed by the stabbing beam of light. But for a moment, in the interplay between his light and the cold shadows, he almost thought he saw something moving. Something ghostly.

Riker turned slowly in the opposite direction, his uneasiness growing. “The bridge is this way. Let’s go.” He started off down the corridor, carefully avoiding looking at the corpse as he passed.

Before they reached the bridge, they found ten more corpses pinned to the wall and brutalized just like the first. Worf growled in outrage over each one, mumbling indignantly about the lack of honor.

On the bridge they found seven more corpses, including that of Captain Drake, neatly dismembered and the pieces placed haphazardly in the command chair. Near each corpse they encountered, Data reported that one of the entities stood nearby, watching the officers with a brooding, dark expression.

The bridge controls had been smashed, the ship’s logs erased.

Riker looked around at the carnage and took a deep breath. “Let’s get the hell out of here,” he said finally, his voice quivering.

The Enterprise Briefing Room, thirty minutes later.

“I’ve never believed in ghosts,” Riker said, rubbing his beard, “but from the moment we entered that ship, I could swear someone was watching us.”

“Data,” Picard asked, “is it possible that....something....survived the slaughter down there?”

“I have had a subroutine analyzing that possibility, sir,” the android replied.



“While there has never been any verifiable, ncontestable evidence of the existence of the classical ghost, most sentient beings generate an electromagnetic field unique to each individual’s consciousness. It distinguishes each individual much like your own fingerprints. It is possible that, at the moment of their deaths, the signatures of the Vagabond crew were imprinted on this planet’s unusual electromagnetic-subspatial complex. In effect, their consciousnesses were preserved beyond death.”

“There is still the mystery of what the Vagabond is doing down there,” Geordi said. “Official records put it light-years from here at the moment of its destruction.”

“It’s no mystery at all,” Picard said. “Consider the evidence. We have a Federation starship shot down on the planet below, apparently by Klingons. Her crew slaughtered by Klingons. Which would explain their apparent dislike of you, Mr. Worf.” Picard nodded at the Klingon. “And we have evidence, in the form of the cloaking device and holo-generator, that the Klingons and the Federation, in cooperation, concealed the wreckage of the Vagabond. And altered official records to say that the Vagabond actually met her end a hundred light-years from here.”

“A cover-up,” Riker said, nodding. “Initiated by the highest levels of Starfleet Command.”

“But to what end?” Worf asked. “Those Klingons responsible for this dishonor should have been held accountable.”

“There was something greater at stake,” Picard said. “Look at the time period we’re dealing with here: the beginnings of the Klingon-Federation alliance. Not more than a month earlier, James T. Kirk had uncovered a conspiracy to assassinate the Federation President and put the blame on the Klingons. A conspiracy by a faction in the Federation which would rather have gone to war than make peace. Kirk thwarted the assassination, and the discussions at Kitomer continued. But surely there must have been a similar faction among the Klingons, just as eager to sabotage the peace process and spark a war.”

“The Vagabond,” Worf said in sudden understanding. “If word of this slaughter had been made public, billions would have been crying for retribution. There would be no peace.”

Picard nodded. “The public would be outraged. I’m not sure whether to approve of Starfleet’s actions....or condemn them. On the one hand, I understand the reasoning behind the cover-up. But....”

“But on the other hand,” Riker finished, “those men down there were Starfleet officers. Their families and friends deserved to know the truth about their deaths. History deserves to know. After eighty years, I think the Alliance could withstand the revelation.”

Picard nodded slowly. “I agree. Data, the next time you see--”

“Captain Drake, sir?” Data interrupted. “He appeared a few moments ago. I

was about to inform you. He is standing behind you, sir.”

“Very good. Data, if he were to speak, but without sound, would you be able to read his lips and interpret?”

Data nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Picard picked up a PADD lying on the table at his elbow. He tapped in a sentence, which was displayed on the small screen: CAPTAIN DRAKE, WHAT HAPPENED TO THE VAGABOND? Picard handed the PADD to Data. “Show this to him, Data, and indicate that you want him to respond as if he were speaking.”

Data nodded, stood and moved to stand beside Picard’s chair. As the other officers watched in silence, he held the PADD up to empty air. . He then pointed at his mouth, opening and closing it. “He understands,” Data said. Staring intently at a seemingly empty point in the air, he began interpreting. “We were ordered off our regular patrol route by Admiral Donner, and told to proceed to Orgala 512. No explanation was given; we were told orders would be forthcoming once we arrived. But we got no further orders. Four Klingon battlecruisers were waiting in ambush behind the fifth planet, and attacked us without provocation. The battle, if you could call it that, lasted less than a minute. We crashed on the planet. The Klingons followed us down and butchered the survivors. Only....we lived on. We found a....a new home. A few weeks later, another starship and a Klingon Bird-of-Prey came to the crash sight. They erased the Vagabond’s databanks, and put up devices to hide the wreckage.” Data looked away, refocusing on Picard. “Sir, Captain Drake is indicating that he is growing weaker. I believe he is about to disappear once again.”

“Quickly then, Data: ask him why he and the others have trapped us here. What they want from us.”

Data rapidly tapped out the message on the PADD and showed it to the air. After a pause, he began interpreting again. “We mean you no harm, Captain Picard. We may be....ghosts....but we are still Starfleet officers. We are still the men we were. You are the first ship that has visited this system in eighty years. We just wanted to detain you until long enough to guide you to the wreck of the Vagabond. As for what we want: we want Starfleet to uphold the first duty.”

Picard nodded, and stood. He faced the empty air, where Data was looking. “Captain Drake,” he said, enunciating clearly and speaking loudly, certain that Drake would understand, “I will do everything in my power to make sure the truth comes out. You have my word as a Starfleet officer.” He touched his fist to his chest. “I salute you and your crew, sir, for your service to the Federation.”

Worf stood and moved up beside Picard. He knelt down and bowed his head. “And I will make certain that the families of those Klingons who took part in the slaughter of your crew are held responsible, in accordance with Klingon law and tradition. I swear this on my honor as a warrior.”

Data's hands moved swiftly on the PADD, typing in what both Picard and Worf had said, in case Captain Drake hadn't understood. He showed the PADD to the air. A moment later he set it down on the table. "Captain Drake sent his thanks....and then vanished, sir."

A voice came over the intercom. "Engineering to LaForge."

"Laforge here," Geordi said.

"Commander, the spatial loop is unfolding."

"Understood. LaForge out." He looked at Picard. "We're free to leave, sir."

Picard nodded. "Number One, will you get us underway? And open up a channel to Earth and transfer it to my Ready Room. I need to have a long talk with Starfleet Command."

"Aye sir."

The officers stood and filed out of the Briefing Room.

#### Captain's Personal Log, Stardate 45612.9:

The Enterprise has left the Orgala 512 system. Data has had no further sightings of Vagabond crew members, and the quaternary subspace manifold which sustained them for these eighty years has begun to dissipate. I can only hope that the crew of the Vagabond has finally found peace, wherever they may now be.

After a lengthy discussion with Starfleet Command, an official inquiry committee has been convened to look into the Vagabond matter. It seems the original cover-up was done so well that no one currently serving in Starfleet has any knowledge that there ever was a cover-up. A detailed statement to the public is expected to be made when the committee finishes its investigation.

Lieutenant Worf's brother Kern, on the Klingon High Council, has begun his own investigation to find the names of those who took part in the slaughter of the Vagabond's crew. He vows that no family will be spared from paying for the crimes of their forebears. As distasteful as it may be to us, I'm sure there are those in the Federation who will take comfort in this harsh Klingon justice, and it will undoubtedly help to soften the public's response when the Vagabond's true story is finally disclosed.

Yet one final question remains unanswered: why were the remains of the Vagabond and her crew merely concealed, rather than vaporized to prevent discovery, which would have been the safest of the two choices? Though it is pure speculation, I believe that the concealment was a compromise that the Starfleet brass of the day reached with themselves: they knew they had a duty to preserve and promote peace, yet they also had a duty to the truth. And so they concealed the wreckage to preserve the peace, hoping that the wreckage would be discovered in a time when the blossoming peace with the Klingons wasn't so fragile.