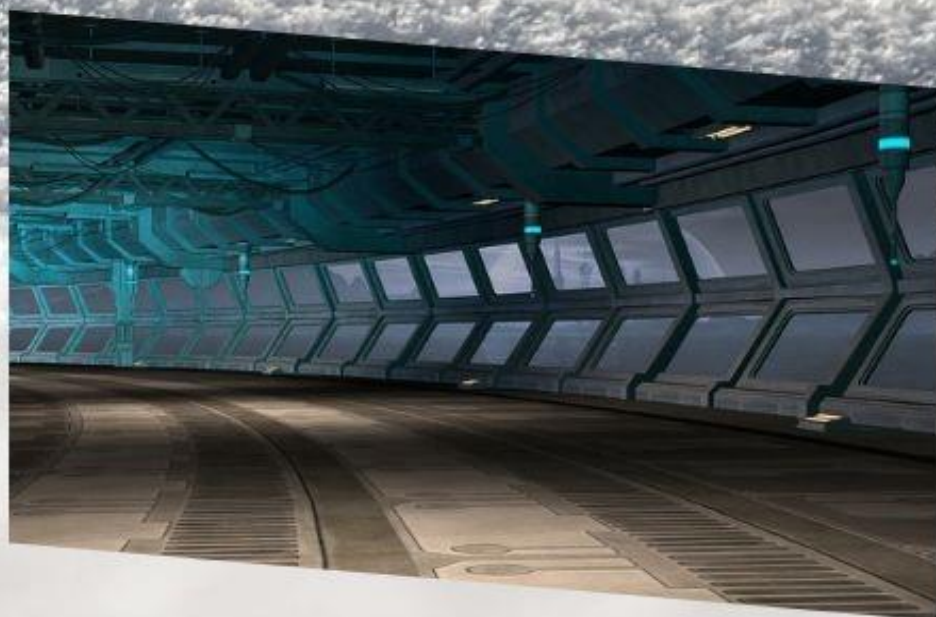


Dirge for A Winter's Solstice

A NOVELLA OF STAR TREK FAN FICTION



An Original Story By:

**GLENN G G
MAITLAND**

DIRGE FOR A WINTER'S SOLSTICE

A Work of Star Trek Fan Fiction

BY: GLENN G G MAITLAND

DIRGE FOR A WINTER'S SOLSTICE

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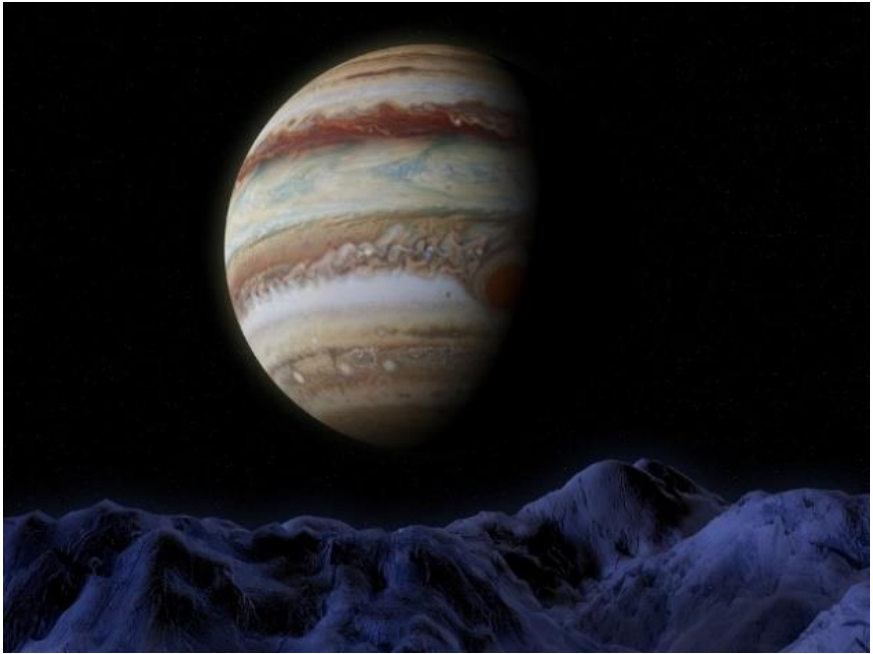
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EARTH ORBIT. ¹

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JUPITER GANYMEDE ²

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“Are you Section 31, Admiral?”³



CHAMPS-ELYSEE.⁴

³ From page 429 [Convergence: A Work of Star Trek Fan Fiction](#)

⁴ Published 28 Apr. 2016 Pixabay Licence Free

Steve One:

Marlatti is Dead.

Dr. Marlatti is dead. In many ways, Marlatti's influence, and death are critical to the arc Dannar Teague's life has taken up to this point. A fact that must be clearly understood if the events I am about to relay are to make any sense to you whatsoever.

As you know, my objective is to bring Dannar Teague into the fold. While many have proposed a simple "snatch and grab" operation, the need to have a committed Dannar, a Dannar invested in and completely loyal to our cause, make these proposals preposterous. I realize many don't hold with my approach, and that you're here to judge for yourself the value of my recent command decisions, but consider...

Having an asset to use occasionally for information gathering purposes is one thing; such assets can be bought, or manipulated through personal convictions, intimidated, or even blackmailed. That won't do for Dannar. For Dannar, we require genuine heartfelt dedication.

The coincidental anniversary of Jakkob Marlatti's death seven years ago, is key to my plan to persuade Dannar to serve our ends willingly and my investments in 74 are the means to achieve this goal.

First though, you need to understand that Dr. Jakkob Marlatti, engineer of note from Daystrom's Design Dynamics Lab and long-time Design Co-Lead for the Newport News Engineering and Design Consortium, died seven years ago in a sort of transporter accident...that bemused look you had just now, is understandable. We have been known to make creative use of transporters with regards to troublesome actors and various loose ends; however, in this case I can assure you we are completely innocent. Jakkob Marlatti got caught in an errant confinement stream generated by an overpowered and unlicensed secondary transport buffer of his own design.

Take a moment if you'd like and have a look at his last official Starfleet Identification image. That picture is more than twenty years old.

It's astonishing, isn't it? That glossy black hair. Those deep-set black eyes. Even the angular hook of the nose...Dr. Marlatti could pass for our own Mr. Moddax's brother. That wasn't the only reason I sent Moddax of course, but I'd be lying if I said it didn't significantly factor into my thinking.

The good doctor left his position with the NNEC shortly after the Transwarp Development Program was shuttered. If you can't place Dr. Marlatti among the luminaries more commonly associated with the Excelsior

project, don't worry. The man was never interested in fame. The work was what mattered to him. The goal of being the first to achieve Transwarp is what drove both Marlatti and our dear Dannar Teague.

When that project was cancelled, Jakkob was ready to resign. Teague managed to talk him into staying with NNEC, until Starfleet rejected the Virgo proposal shortly thereafter at least. Then, in a fit of protest he deleted all the research he could access on Transwarp and sent a scathing diatribe to the Chair of the Federation Science Council, Commander in Chief, even the Federation's President...and of course he provided copies to the media as well. Marlatti tried to convince Teague to join him in seeking backers for "their" work outside of Starfleet. The two did not part well.

Starfleet, Daystrom, the President, all publicly rebuked Marlatti's claims of short-sightedness and incompetence – though by the time their responses had been transmitted, Jakkob was long gone. Dannar, obviously, remained on as Chief Executive Operating Officer, Lead Designer, and majority stakeholder in NNEC. As you know, Teague's mother, grandfather, and great grandfather had all held that same position before Dannar. Teague couldn't walk away from his family legacy...at least not then.

At the time of his death, Marlatti was working for a private engineering firm (which we know was funded by the Tal Shiar) on one of the lesser moons of Dessica Two. He'd spent a few years wandering from job to job along the Neutral Zone before he was offered funding to continue his efforts towards perfecting a Transwarp engine by a Tygarian engineer known to be an asset for Romulan Intelligence. Five years later he had recreated most of his and Dannar's work and was preparing to test a prototype coil assembly when he tragically fell victim to a faulty pattern buffer.

When word of Marlatti's death reached Dannar at his offices at the San Francisco Fleet Yards on a crisp December evening seven years ago, Teague was said to accept his friend and partner's death with an odd stoicism. We arranged a memorial service in San Francisco. We were curious who might attend. Sadly, perhaps predictably, Teague and his assistant were the only two people to show up. Jakkob Marlatti was dead, and nobody cared, or noticed. Nobody except Dannar Teague.

It's taken seven years, but Dannar has been pushed to the brink of following in Marlatti's footsteps. We know he's been approached by the same cell that took-in Marlatti. Now that the Upgrade is done, NNEC is no longer top of the mountain. So, with some creative effort and Mr. Moddax's usual focus, we set out to guide Mr. Teague along our preferred path and build something of consequence using the ghost of Marlatti to light his way.

He kept his hair cropped short at the sides and back and long on the top; many men his age were envious of his head of thick natural hair.

The Winter Solstice.

A steady trilling from the room's flush-mounted computer interface filled the darkness with sound. He grunted and stirred beneath the light blue, silky sheets. The alarm had been carefully set the night before. The panel illuminated with soft blue indicator lights and increased the volume of the alarm half a decibel. Dannar sat up in the middle of his king-sized bed and let the light sheets fall around him.

"I'm up, computer...stop that noise."

A single chirp from the interface acknowledged the voice command and the trilling stopped. The full display illuminated. The photo-reactive blinds retracted from the three rectangular windows across the room from the foot of the bed. As Dannar swung his legs over the side of his mattress, the room brightened. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and blinked several times to get accustomed to the light. Outside the windows, far below, he could make out Australia and New Zealand just slipping into the darkness of a summer evening. The sun was blazing just beyond the curved horizon of the planet. In San Francisco it would be mid-morning on a winter's day.

Danner yawned again. He'd not kept to a regular routine since shuttering the Consortium's offices aboard Space Dock seven weeks earlier and he found getting up before 1100 hours SDST (Space Dock Standard Time) to be somewhat of a challenge. Still, he had an important meeting scheduled, work to be done and decisions to be made. He walked across his room's plush carpet in his bare feet and wordlessly consulted the weather forecast for San Francisco, before making his way to the head to attend to his morning business and have a sonic shower.

Once he was showered, shaved, and groomed, he returned to his bedroom to dress. He didn't notice that the crumpled sheets and scattered pillows he'd left piled about his bed had been reprocessed and fresh bedding along with crisp, perfectly shaped pillows had been made-up in their place. Automation was a luxury Danner Teague had long taken for granted.

Ten minutes later Dannar was inspecting himself in a floor to ceiling mirror projected by a hidden emitter built into his room's ceiling. At fifty-eight years old, Dannar took great pride in his appearance. He kept his hair cropped short at the sides and back and long on the top; many men his age were envious of his head of thick natural hair. He was meticulous in his grooming. He pulled his long hair back over his scalp in a smooth salt and pepper wave.

For today's meeting he'd selected a black one-piece suit with grey shoulder and sleeve embellishments. With keen emerald green eyes, he inspected himself from top to bottom in the mirror. Not a stitch out of place.

Not a flake of dandruff, or spec of dust marred the luxurious material. His two-meter tall, lean, yet muscular frame was perfectly accentuated. He looked exactly the way he felt – confident, fit, strong.

Terminating the mirror projection, Danner strode confidently out of his bed chamber into the private lounge beyond. He carefully drank a warm cup of replicated nutrient supplement before retrieving the grey briefcase he had packed the night before. He had two pads loaded with schematics and the proposal he'd specifically written for Henry, stowed within.

Dannar stepped out of his quarters into the common passageway ringing the exclusive Executive Habitat Level of Space Dock, supremely confident he would get his way. Space Dock was always bustling with people day and night. While the executive levels were less crowded than the office, R&D and laboratory levels, the corridors were still heavily travelled. On his way to the transporter room dedicated for V.I.P. use, Dannar collided with a black clad shorter man who rounded a blind corner just a bit too fast.

“Ooof! Ah, sorry. Are you alright?” The impact had almost caused Dannar to lose hold of his case. As startled as he was, he didn't notice the strange man take hold of his upper left arm for just an instant as they both regained their balance.

“No, please don't apologize. Completely my fault, I should learn to watch where I'm going. You're not hurt, I hope?”

“Ah...no, I'm fine...”

The short, muscular man smiled, apologized again and then got on his way down the corridor. Dannar rubbed his chest absently where the man's shoulder had struck him. There was no time for this, he thought to himself as he began walking towards the transporter room again. Still...there was something odd about the non-descript man.

Played Out.

The reality faced by our Section, just six months out from what can only be described as a triumphant rebirth, is stark and cold...

We're off-world for the first time in our existence. As a result, our control and subsequent use of Fleet assets is now tenuous at best.

K3 was acquired and hidden in plain sight as the new epicentre for Division operations. Our three-surviving *antique Hou-Yi* vessels and that one stricken *Nimrod* Cruiser are safely cloistered among the hulks and ghost ships K3 is intended to keep secure and these antiques are all we can rely upon now...

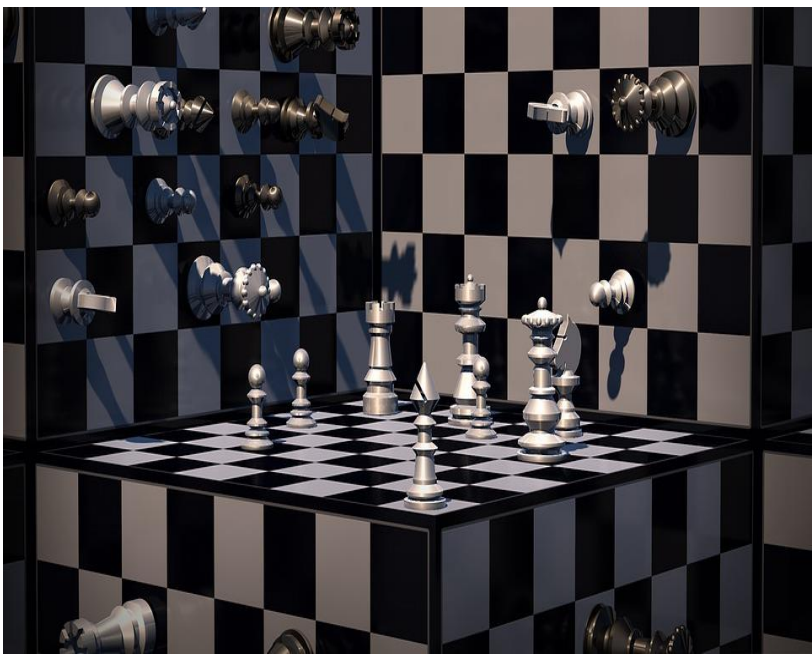
Only 37 and 93 are fully mission capable – 74 has been stripped of her armaments to free her powerplant to drive the experimental technology which Mr. Moddax has just used on this endeavour. Technology which up until a few days ago, had never been tested live before. That was my call. I realize Section Command considers my *modifications* of 74 to be unsound, but hear me out...

The Romulans are busy with matters relevant to the entire quadrant far away in the Kea System, as you know. What's left of our resources are being applied to manipulate the greater political situation to ensure their continued efforts remain hidden away and protected at the far end of the quadrant. The Upgrade had provided us time and opportunity to seek out corroborating intelligence on their activities, while the Fleet's defensive capabilities swelled. Now though, our Klingon neighbours need to be kept in check to give the Romulans time and space to work.

You've taken control of the Imperial Guard and the Cardassian threat is finally being monitored in a serious manner, but we're spread too thin. We've got no more resources to draw from should another front, or even a large operation necessitate Section involvement.

So, we've moved all the pieces we can on the board, to ensure the Federation's security and the need for a practical, independent *black fleet* persists. Three small ships do not a fleet make. Nobody we've got can make heads or tails of the mess our only heavy cruiser is in, and without the *Nimrod* we've got no punch. Then along comes Dannar Teague who shuts down NNEC and coincidence collides with fate. We didn't dare recruit him while he was actively working with Starfleet, but now a door is open.

This all may be just a small acquisition to your mind, but the potential for a large and productive payoff is my aim...and it all came together because Jakkob Marlatti is dead, and Dannar Teague is dissatisfied.



Played out.⁵

⁵ Published 30 Jan. 2017 Pixabay Licence Free

There was little activity around Command and down at the Academy, which Dannar thought was odd until he remembered that in addition to being the eve of the Winter Solstice, it was also just days away from the Winter Holiday.

Starfleet Command.

“Good morning, Mr. Teague.”

Dannar smiled at the young Lieutenant who greeted him as he walked into the reception room for Starfleet’s Commander in Chief’s office. He’d resigned himself to the fact that his long-standing relationship with Starfleet was likely over, but he had one last pitch to make. Jakkob had been mostly right all those years ago, and Dannar ruefully wished he’d listened to his friend as he cut ties with Starfleet on his own terms.

For the first time that morning it struck Dannar that today was the anniversary of Jakkob’s death. If he believed in omens, he wondered if this would be considered a bad one? Teague quickly pushed the nonsense from his mind.

Henry Wallace was a friend and as Commander in Chief, perhaps there was hope of salvaging things. After all, hadn’t he prepared for this meeting in the hopes of at least reimagining his standing with Starfleet?

“Good morning, Lieutenant. Is the Admiral ready for me?”

“He’s attending a briefing with Admiral Knot, sir. You’re twenty minutes early, but Admiral Wallace has left instructions to allow you to wait in his office.” The Lieutenant smiled politely and deftly selected the actuator for the office door.

Dannar strolled into the office without a word and waited for the doors to *hush* closed behind him before casually inspecting the room. The computer terminals were all locked, of course. Wallace’s desk was clear of any pads or reports – a framed picture of Henry’s granddaughter and a small silver bar with three red hashmarks etched into it resting on a polished display post were the only items of note there. Dannar moved towards the huge windows overlooking San Francisco Bay and took a seat in one of the chairs surrounding a small conference table. It was a bright, crisp morning outside.

The view wasn’t dissimilar to that of his old office at the now decommissioned San Francisco NNEC yards further along the Bay. There was little activity around Command and down at the Academy, which Dannar thought was odd until he remembered that in addition to being the eve of the Winter Solstice, it was also just days away from the Winter Holiday.

“Christmas...” Dannar whispered.

He shook his head slightly as if to shake away the images of decorated trees, huge meals, honorary aunts and uncles, grand parents, family friends and hangers-on, all invading the family estate every December 25th to eat and play, laugh and argue...Jakkob was in the jumble too. Angry, passionate Jakkob.

There was a half dozen pads littered around the conference table; Dannar noticed. He'd been so taken with the view and his own daydreams that he'd missed them. All but two were powered off. He pulled the closest illuminated pad towards him and began reading... *"It is with a heavy heart and no small measure of awe in the sacrifice made by..."* Dannar put the pad down. It was clearly a letter Henry was working on.

He leaned forward in his seat and stretched his lanky frame across the table to retrieve the second active pad. Instantly he recognized the standard layout for ship schematics. The pad was unlocked. Dannar thumbed the command key to call-up the blueprints and specifications for a re-fit Saladin Class Destroyer, *USS Sheaffe NCC 0564*.

"Find anything interesting, Teague?"

Dannar smiled at the sound of Henry's voice. "Admiral Wallace, I was getting worried you'd stood me up." He put the pad down and rose to face the Starfleet Commander in Chief.

Listening.

As this meeting was getting underway in Admiral Wallace's office at Starfleet Command, Mr. Moddax had joined me here in my own office on K3.

"Take a seat Mr. Moddax. I want you to listen to something with me."

I waited for the operative to settle himself into one of the retro plastic bucket seats fronting my desk, before activating my desktop terminal.

"Computer, tie-in link 0997, confirm."

WORKING, WORKING, TIE-IN 0997 CONFIRMED. RECEIVING.

From a hidden speaker in the top of the computer terminal came the sounds of rustling fabric, breathing, a clatter of plastic against metal.

Moddax narrowed his black eyes and leaned forward attempting to understand what he was hearing.

More breathing, a soft chirp from a computer or a pad, breathing...the quiet hush of a door opening...

Find anything interesting, Teague?

Moddax let his mouth drop open. He recognized the voice. No matter how distant and slightly marred by static it may have been; he knew the voice of the Starfleet Commander in Chief.

"What is this?"

"Ssshhh, Moddax. For now, just listen."



Sydney Relay.⁶

"I think a lunch out will be fine, assuming of course we'll be joined by your entourage. What are you up to now? Four, or five Commandos?"

A Talk Before Lunch.

"Do you really think I'd do that to the great Dannar Teague?" Henry smiled and extended his right hand towards Dannar.

Teague returned the smile and moved to embrace his old friend. "It's really good to see you, Henry. You're well?"

Wallace invited Dannar to take a seat in one of the plush chairs facing his desk. "As well as can be expected. I should be asking you that question though, Dannar. I understand you closed your office and dismissed Trudy and the others."

Dannar dismissed the question with a wave of his hand. "It's not like we were doing anything anyway, Henry. Trudy's better off somewhere else... but that's not why I asked for this meeting."

Admiral Wallace casually consulted his chronometer and noted it was almost noon. Dannar had asked for a meeting almost eight months ago, but with the Upgrade in full swing, the revelations surrounding the ill-fated *Sheaffe*, and the matter of Contemporaneous Affairs... there'd just been no time for it.

"I've got us reservations at the Repulse Room across the Presidio. Of course, if there's anything of a classified nature you want to discuss, I could have Lt. Beers arrange for a luncheon here."

Dannar smiled and looked around Henry's office as if sizing the room up. "I think a lunch out will be fine, assuming of course we'll be joined by your entourage. What are you up to now? Four, or five Commandos?"

Henry allowed himself a chuckle. He had a compliment of three Commanders who regularly travelled with him for security purposes. Star Fleet Security had already swept the Repulse Room in preparation for the day's meeting. Two of Henry's Commanders were awaiting his arrival in the private club on the restaurant's second floor and Evengii was waiting just outside to escort the Admiral and Mr. Teague to the transporter.

"All right then, let's head out. I should tell you, my granddaughter is expecting me to take her to the Christmas Market in Toronto for their Solstice Celebration tonight, so come Hell or highwater, I'm out no later than 1400 hours."

"Why Toronto?" Dannar rose, gripping his briefcase.

"She's seven and wants snow for Christmas. That's all the reason I need."

Briefing.

...all the reason I need.

Moddax listened as the two men shuffled their way out of range of whatever listening device had captured their conversation. He said nothing, not even daring to breathe too heavily until he distinctly heard the door hush open and closed as they left.

"Computer, end reception tie-in link 0997."

The static heavy hiss abruptly ended.

"How did you get a listening device into Henry Wallace's office?" Moddax couldn't hide the look of envious admiration on his usually sullen face.

"Six months ago, I gifted him my service bar." I said this casually, knowing it would gall him that I had accomplished such a feat.

Moddax had come close to being removed from his position for his treacherous dealings behind my back when I was first positioned as Director of CAD. Still, he's redeemed himself in the last six months and for reasons already mentioned, he was the operative I needed to make my plan work.

"You mean in Paris? You gave him a section pin and he has just kept it?"

"I had suggested he put it on in fact."

Moddax inhaled sharply at the comment but held his tongue.

"I knew he wouldn't get rid of it at least. Henry loves holding onto grudges, and we gave him one Hell of a grudge to cling to. He's kept it in his office ever since.

"The decoration is equipped with our prototype next generation communications system. It's too small and underpowered to receive anything without a dedicated base repeater, but it can still transmit over an impressive range. We have an asset at Sydney's Fleet Communications Centre, where those transmissions from San Francisco are captured and rebroadcast on a secure channel here."

I called-up the file picture of Dr. Jakkob Marlatti for Mr. Moddax.

"Who is that? This Teague person?" Moddax studied the face on the monitor without further comment.

"No, this was Jakkob Marlatti. This, is Danner Teague."

I called-up the current profile on Teague. Moddax took a moment to study the headshot and sized the man up to be between fifty and sixty years old, mostly grey hair, but fit and possessed of remarkably bright green eyes.

"I think I've seen this man before."

"Chief Executive Operating Officer, Newport News Engineering Consortium. As was his mother, her father, and his father before him..."

Teague's great grandfather pioneered the warp dynamics improvements on the first generation of *Daedalus*-class cruisers. He went on to gain control of NNEC and was key to the pioneering developments which opened the door to the first designs for what would become the *Constitution*-class Heavy Cruisers.

Teague's grandfather oversaw the construction of the first twelve Connies. His career flamed out shortly after though, as he was held responsible for the *Atlas*-class debacle..."

I then displayed a picture of Dr. Richard Teague – posed heroically behind a 1:100 ratio model of a *Daedalus* starship. Moddax noted the man had the same brilliant eyes as the great grandson. Next came a picture of Ramnan Teague, looking pathetic and shamed in front of a board of inquiry.

"Ramnan Teague was forced out of NNEC and sent to a rehabilitation colony for eight years...but not before he had a chance to get his daughter, Lurna Teague, a seat on the Consortium's Board, as a teenager."

The next picture was of a beautiful young woman posing happily beside Dr. Richard Daystrom himself. She had long black hair, high cheek bones and again, piercing emerald-green eyes.

"Lurna was a legitimate prodigy. She earned her first degree in engineering at fourteen. She developed a relationship with Dr. Daystrom early on. Nothing inappropriate in case you were wondering. She always described him as a father figure in her life.

She assisted him with his early work on the M4 A.I. system before taking a lead role in the development of the vertical warp core program. She designed the purpose-built refit dock and supervised the modernization of the *Constitution* fleet."

I showed Moddax an image of the *USS Enterprise* mid-way through her refit, safely nestled inside what would later become called Space Dock 17.

"Years earlier, while the *Atlas* project was underway, Ramnan Teague and his daughter were quietly commissioned to design and construct our *black fleet*. Ramnan designed the *Nimrod*-class and her unique engines, while Lurna innovated the *Hou-Yi*-class. The resources and ancillary costs of this project were wrapped into the figures associated with the *Atlas* builds. As a result, Ramnan went to jail, as I've mentioned.

Lurna stayed on and designed the refit dock, for the Connies obviously, but also for the rebuild and repair of our fleet after the incident near Xahea... the three *Hou-Yi*'s we presently rely on were salvaged by Lurna. The *Nimrod* never made it into Space Dock before oversight caught-up with the project.

Lurna was more cautious than her father. The additional repair expenditures were more effectively hidden amongst the NNEC costs associated with the refit project. The overruns were blamed on the CEO of

NNEC at the time, who was dismissed. After a vote, Lurna found herself in control of the Consortium.”

“Her son?”

“Dannar Teague. To this day no one knows who Dannar’s father was. Like his mother, Dannar was gifted from the start. He went to work in the yards before he even reached high school. In his late teens he met and paired with Jakkob Marlatti and the two of them eventually began to lay the groundwork for Transwarp. Dannar was the driving force behind the *Excelsior* project. Transwarp never happened, but Dannar spent decades of his life chasing that dream.”

“Alright, what is it you want me to do, Admiral?”

“While he was entwined with Starfleet, we couldn’t recruit Teague. Now, the last of his grandfather’s *Nimrods* is floating out there, resting in his mother’s refit dock; a ship we desperately need. There’s no way to replace that ship’s engine and nobody is able to breathe life back into it. A year ago, another Tygarian approached Teague and offered to fund his research, should he ever want a change. The Upgrade is done and NNEC has little to do creatively. Teague is ready for a change.”

“So, I’ll collect Mr. Teague, bring him back here and...”

“You’ll not just grab him and run. He must *want* to join us. The information you’ll need has all been uploaded to 74.”

So, Mr. Moddax was given command of *Hou-Yi 74*, with its modified cargo bay and transport system and sent on his way to pick-up Commander Xillion to engage Dannar Teague. On Earth, just forty-three minutes from Jupiter at Warp One, Teague and Admiral Wallace were stepping into a transporter together to beam almost instantaneously from Starfleet Command to the private dining room in the Repulse Room.



Mr. Moddax.⁷

⁷ Published 29 Sept. 2016 Pixabay Licence Free

Dannar set his empty glass down and looked into the younger man's dark eyes. The resemblance to Jakkob was unsettling.

Belly-up to the Bar.

Teague slowly made his way down the wide staircase from the second level of the Repulse Room. Henry and his Commanders had transported back to Starfleet Command from the secure pad located at the rear of the private dining room. Things had not gone well for Dannar. By the time Henry was ordering his digestif any hope Teague had of renegotiating his professional relationship with Starfleet had been snuffed out.

Henry had sat patiently and listened to Dannar's concerns regarding the direction Starfleet was taking. He sipped a scotch and soda as he listened to Teague list the reallocation of assets from the San Francisco Fleet Yards and NNEC to offworld yards and other firms. He even feigned interest in Teague's proposal to try and develop the Virgo engine designs proposed years ago after the Transwarp Program was terminated, all while making his way through a pint of lager. In the end though, the Starfleet Commander in Chief was not going to acquiesce to Dannar's proposals or intervene in any of the decisions made concerning NNEC's Fleet contracts.

"Dannar...I understand how you must feel, but what you're asking just isn't possible. Not now."

"Damn it, Henry, if you won't back Virgo Two, then at least give me back 17, so I can continue my work."

"Dannar, Space Dock 17 was scrapped months ago. You know that."

"My mother designed that facility, Henry. You had no right to just scrap it."

"Dannar, that dock belonged to Starfleet. I don't want this to get personal, but neither you, nor the Consortium had any claim on 17..."

The lunch had started friendly enough, but by the time Admiral Wallace's alarm chimed at 1400 hours, an air of hostility and resentment had developed. Henry rose without a word and smoothed-out his red tunic before asking Teague if he wished to transport back to HQ. Dannar remained seated and coldly thanked his friend for the offer, but said he preferred to remain and finish his coffee.

He sat alone in the private dining room for ten minutes before willing himself to rise and find the staircase that would lead him to the public dining room and bar on the ground floor. Henry had swilled a scotch and two pints of beer over the course of their *meeting*, Dannar hadn't had more than half a glass of water.

The ground floor of the Repulse Room was bustling with the last of the late lunch crowd and the extra staff the restaurant had called in to help prepare for San Francisco Bay's Winter Solstice Celebrations later that evening.

Dannar didn't know where he would go as he stepped from the stairs to the polished flag stone floors of the restaurant's ground level, but he did know he didn't want to return to Space Dock. He was about to step out onto the street to find a planetary transport terminal when a sharp cough from the bar room to his left caused him to turn.

For a second, Teague was frozen in place. Sitting at the bar, nursing a short glass of what looked to be whiskey, was Jakkob Marlatti.

Seven years.

Dannar blinked his eyes and focused on the muscular man sitting alone at the bar. It wasn't Jakkob, of course. Still, the resemblance was eerie.

A young woman carrying a case of glasses passed Dannar with a puzzled look on her face. Teague realized he was standing in the throughfare and cleared his throat in an embarrassing way. He wasn't going back to Space Dock and couldn't see any reason to return to Starfleet Command, why not have a drink or two? Stiffly, Dannar walked to the bar and took a seat two stools down from the ghost of the younger Jakkob Marlatti.

After two pints of Elysian Ale, Dannar noticed the hauntingly familiar young ghost was standing beside him with an odd smile on his face.

"Mind if I join you? I was waiting for some friends, but I think I've been stood up."

Dannar set his empty glass down and looked into the younger man's dark eyes. The resemblance was still unsettling. The hair, the complexion, the nose, and shape of the man's jaw – all of them so reminiscent of Jakkob decades ago...

"Here, let me get you another. Barkeep!" Moddax smoothly slipped onto the stool beside Teague and signaled for another round of drinks.

"I...I'm sorry, I don't think..." Dannar was unsure what was happening. As the bartender removed his empty glass and placed a fresh Ale and another whiskey on the bar in front the man who looked so much like Jakkob Marlatti, Teague didn't notice the tiny translucent chip the young stranger let fall into the ale as he moved the glass over.

"You are Dannar Teague, Newport Consortium, aren't you?"

"Ah...yes, I am. Sorry, do I know you?" Dannar lifted the ale to his lips and took a drink.

Moddax smiled. "Loban Hommix, Dixon Mogue Dynamics."

Dannar took another pull off his ale and set his glass down. "I'm afraid I don't..."

"Oh, it's a small outfit. We primarily work with shuttle components. I just thought the chance to have a drink with the owner of the biggest outfitter on the planet was too good to pass up."

Dannar took a breath and cleared his throat. "I don't *own* NNEC. It's run by a Board..."

"Sorry, I'd heard that you'd closed the whole operation down a few weeks ago, so I just assumed that you..."

"No, I..." *cough* "...I suspended operations while the uh, board..." *cough* "...investigates restructuring. I'm, well, I'm considering retirement to be honest." Dannar took another long draw on his ale. Suddenly he felt very dry.

"Oh, well...good for you, I guess. Still, it's an honour meeting you."

... *cough* ... Dannar shook his head and then drained the rest of his ale before flagging the bartender back to ask for some water. "I don't know about *honour*, Mr. Hommix, I'm sorry I couldn't be of more use to you."

"Why are you retiring, if you don't mind my asking?" Moddax sipped at his whiskey, leaned back, and watched Teague guzzle some water. The viridium patch Xillion had applied to Teague's suit while aboard Space Dock was just visible in the dim light of the bar. It'd been placed on Dannar's left triceps and had been key in knowing where to intercept the man following his luncheon. Shortly it would be all 74 needed to transport a drugged Dannar Teague to the cargo bay for the next phase of the operation.

"...oh..." *yawn* "...just, I don't know, something I should maybe have done years ago.... just, just time to move on..." *yawn* "...sometimes you give so much...expecting something, I guess..."

"Sounds like you're ready to make a change."

"Yes...a change."



Teague's Room?⁸

⁸ Published 25 Jan. 2018 Pixabay Licence Free

Stave Two:

Morning Again.

A persistent warbling hummed from the wall's flush-mounted computer interface filling the dark room with sound. He grunted and stirred beneath the light grey, downy sheets. Had he set the alarm the night before? The panel illuminated with soft amber indicator lights and increased the volume of the alarm half a decibel. Dannar slowly sat up in the middle of a queen-sized bed and let the sheets fall around him.

"Stop that noise...wh...what time is it?"

A single chirp from the interface acknowledged the voice command and the humming stopped. The full display illuminated.

THE TIME IS 1030 HOURS SPACE DOCK STANDARD TIME, came the computer's audio response to the inquiry.

Photo-reactive shutters retracted from four rectangular windows in the bulkhead beside the bed. Dannar swung his legs over the side of the mattress and was blinded by the blast of full sunlight flooding the room. He squinted hard at the windows and lifted his hand to his brow to block some of the direct light.

"Computer, blinds!"

From the interface mounted in the wall came an odd error note, and nothing happened.

"Computer, close the blinds!" Dannar turned away from the light and blinked hard. He was having a tough time making out anything beyond his own nose.

The odd-sounding error tone again emitted from the interface. Dannar was about to scream the command for a third time when, despite the blinding light, his eyes went wide at the sound of another voice in the room.

"Computer, shutters, seventy-five percent."

A familiar chirp from the computer acknowledged the new command and the blinding light faded rapidly.

Dannar stood completely still for a second, eyes wide, trying to force himself to breathe. The voice had come from... Teague turned towards the bulkhead where the door to his private lounge should have been; there was no door! A dark intruder, the shape of a stalky, muscular man, stood in front a grey wall of fog.

The intruder said nothing.

Dannar blinked away the tears and let his eyes adjust to the more forgiving light in the room. The voice had been somewhat familiar... he thought he recognized the intruder... the intruder's shape.

"You're... you're the man who ran into me this morning in the corridor. What the Hell are you doing in my room?"

The man-shaped shadow remained still but tilted his head slightly to the side. Dannar blinked again, but he couldn't bring the man, or anything else, into sharper focus.

"This morning? Mr. Teague, you haven't even started your day. How could you have met anyone in the corridor yet?"

The voice was that of the strange man. Dannar couldn't see any of the man's features, but his ears worked just fine. The voice was young and strong and oddly soothing...

"Come forward where I can see you," Dannar demanded.

The man cocked his head again as if not understanding the command. Teague took a cautious step towards the figure, then another. He could still not make out anything other than the man's general shape against the grey hazy background of the room's bulkheads. He abruptly stopped after his third step. His bare feet were no longer cushioned by the thick carpeting of his bedroom. He found himself standing on smooth, cold, unforgiving stone, or metal. He drew in a sharp breath and quickly looked back, thinking he'd call for a security alert... but he could just barely make out the form of the grey bed he'd woken up in and the bulkhead with the computer interface was gone.

"What is this?" Teague asked in a shaky voice.

"This, Dannar Teague, is an opportunity," said the short intruder standing in the nothingness just a few feet away.

Dannar turned away from his bed and looked back at the intruder, remembering how solid and strong the man had seemed when they'd collided earlier... He tried to remember what the man looked like, or even what he'd been wearing, but he hadn't paid attention, he'd been in a hurry for his meeting.

Dannar took another two steps to draw closer to the black figure, then stopped. It wasn't that the intruder's features were hard to see – there were no features. There was nothing. Just a field of the deepest black Dannar had ever seen in the shape of a stalky muscular man.

Teague took two more unsteady steps forward. The intruder hadn't moved, but neither did he appear to draw any closer. Teague looked down at his bare feet. He could feel the cold floor beneath them but couldn't see it. His white feet just seemed to float on a solid... nothingness. He felt the soft, warm material of the night clothes he was wearing and realized there was nothing familiar about the sensation of the fabric between his fingers. These pajamas were grey. His pajamas were green and woven from silk.

“Is this a... a dream?”

“Does it feel like a dream, Mr. Teague?”

Woefully, Dannar had to admit that it did not. Still, something was off.

Aside from not being able to see clearly more than a few inches in front of himself, he'd become aware of a subtle woozy sort of din in the back of his mind. It wasn't like being drunk or...

“...the bar... I was at the bar, after lunch. Some engineer had started talking to me and...”

“It's ten thirty in the morning, Mr. Teague. You haven't even had a shower yet.”

The cold radiating up from the floor set Dannar to shivering. He turned away from the intruder and shuffled back the few feet to where the bed and the carpet should have been. All he found was the murky amber glow of the computer terminal. There was no sign of the bed, which... wasn't quite his bed to begin with.

“Today you're finally going to make a change, aren't you Mr. Teague?”

“I had... I have a lunch meeting with Henry... maybe, if things work out...”

“Let's take a step back, shall we? Allow me to illuminate some of what has brought you to this point. Computer, shutters.”

With a cheerful chirp, the murky amber glow hanging in the grey swirling nothingness flickered and then the sun shone through the four impossibly tall windows with an intensity Dannar could never have imagined. For an instant the room, the carpet, the computer, windows and even the dark intruder were perfectly lit, just for an instant. Then everything was enveloped in an intense all-surrounding explosion of hoary white fire and Dannar felt a deep thrumming vibration deep in his chest.

Shades.

Everything was about to be swallowed-up and purged by the all-encompassing sibilance as Dannar found himself blind and wrapped in a shuddering silence unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Then, all at once, particle-by-particle, atom-by-atom, the white everything dulled piece-by-piece, greyed, and dropped away until Teague found himself standing in the middle of a grey and misty room.

"I... I know this place." Dannar whispered.

"Yes."

Dannar turned around and realized the intruder was still with him.

"Drafting Room #3, San Francisco Shipyards. You worked here, didn't you?"

Dannar turned back to face the scene. Drafting tables, actuary charts, computer consoles all drifted into focus. He sensed, more than saw, the panoramic window that looked out onto the Bay. It looked like a dream but felt cold and real.

"No... not really. This was my mother's office...I would come here instead of going to school and..."

"Work?"

"Learn." Dannar inhaled quickly as another figure suddenly appeared in the room from the grey misty corner where he remembered the door being.

A tall and lean youth walked into the scene and promptly took a seat at one of the drafting terminals. Dannar moved closer, but no matter how many steps he took, he couldn't close the distance between himself and the young man sitting at the table.

"You're here to watch only, Mr. Teague."

"I think that's..."

"You. You remember this day, don't you?"

The young man activated the computer embedded in the drafting table and the schematics for a standard field coil arrangement appeared.

"Yes...this, this was the day..."

"Dannar, you're here. Good!"

A young woman suddenly appeared. She wore a green jumpsuit and had her long, brown hair piled high atop her head. Teague let a whimper escape his throat as the woman ran towards him and the dark intruder. She didn't slow down as she approached them. Dannar tried to move out of the way, but there was no time and just as he braced himself against the coming collision, the woman ran right through him.

She joined the young man at the drafting desk.

Teague watched her as she began talking to the shade of his younger self seated at the table studying warp coils, as the spray of disturbed grey misty particles the girl had displaced by running through him slowly pulled themselves back into place and reformed the bulk of his own torso.

“What in the world?”

“We’re shades here, Mr. Teague. They’re shades as well. They can neither see, nor hear us.”

“This is a dream. It has to be a dream.”

“Does it feel like a dream, Mr. Teague?”

“I don’t know what it feels like...”

“Let’s watch, shall we?” The black form raised its right arm and motioned towards the scene playing out just a few meters away.

“...*he’s brilliant Dannar, he really is.*”

“*Trudy, I only have a few hours before the shuttle pod gets here to take me to the orbital office complex, can’t this wait?*”

“Trudy?”

Teague looked from the two figures at the drafting table towards the black figure. “Trudy, my assistant...rather, one of my mother’s interns here, I guess...”

“Ah, the same assistant you let go recently. Seems you knew each other for a long, long time.”

“She was applying for a spot at Daystrom’s Engineering School, then...” Dannar patted his chest gently with both hands and wasn’t sure if the fact that he seemed solid again was a good sign, or not. “...my mother took her on as an intern for a year and she just never left.”

“Attractive young woman. She’s five years older than you?”

“Four.”

“*Dannar, you’ve got hours. Wait...Jakkob! Jakkob, come on in and meet the boy wonder!*”

Another figure appeared. A solid, strong, dark haired young man. Jakkob Marlatti. The shade of Marlatti looked just as Dannar remembered – handsome, strong, young, everything a nineteen-year-old should be. Teague watched as the three figures began conversing. He knew he was looking at his fourteen-year-old self and a young Trudy...though he couldn’t really make out the details of their faces, or the exact colour or style of their clothing. Trudy was wearing the green jumpsuit that was the uniform for everyone who worked at the yards; but did he really see that the shade’s uniform was green, or was he remembering that it should be green?

Marlatti though... his shade was different. He was more defined than the others somehow. Dannar took a shuffling step towards the trio. Like the black figure who’d brought him to this place, the shades remained a few

meters away, out of reach, no matter how many steps Teague took towards them.

“This is when you first met Jakkob Marlatti.”

“Yes. He was in his first year at Daystrom, Trudy had met him during a tour. She thought we’d get along. We spent two hours talking that first...this first day. We reconfigured the design matrix on the standard field coil arrangement in less than forty-five minutes.”

The scene began to blur subtly. The greys grew deeper and slowly Dannar could barely make out the trio through a growing haze of thick monotone mist.

“Trudy was an attractive young woman.”

Dannar turned to face the black figure and nodded. He wasn’t tired, precisely, but the queer thrumming vibration was back and the growing grey nothing rose up and swallowed them both.

Graduation.

“Where’s your mother!? Dannar, tell me where she is!”

Teague opened and closed his eyes twice. The opaque grey atmosphere was everywhere and though he could hear what sounded like Jakkob’s voice, he couldn’t see anything. It was like being submerged in a giant container of flat grey industrial primer.

“Jakkob? What are you talking about!?”

Teague turned around in place, blinking his eyes hard, still seeing nothing at all. The sound of his own voice was unnerving. People often didn’t like listening to their own voices, or at least they found the experience off-putting as the voice they heard in their own minds, often sounded nothing like what the rest of the world heard. For Teague though, the experience was even more unsettling. He knew he was listening to his own voice, but he also knew it was as his voice had sounded in his youth.

“I just came from my lab at Daystrom. Your mother and her, her...goons, have wiped my personal data files and stolen all my variable alignment computations!”

“Variable... you mean that nacelle alignment project you were working on?”

“As if you didn’t know. Where is she Dannar?”

Suddenly the black form of the intruder stepped into existence right in front of him. It was the closest Dannar had yet come to the black form – less than half a meter away. The intruder’s form appeared as something darker and deeper than a silhouette against the light grey nothingness all around them. Teague peered into the blackness where the intruder’s eyes should have been and saw nothing. Without a word, the intruder swept his left hand in front of Dannar’s face. For a second the grey of the universe was obscured by the intruder’s black hand and once it had cleared Teague’s field of vision, Dannar found himself in his mother’s office aboard the Orbital Office Complex.

“She’s off world, as far as I know. Some project she’s supervising needed her attention. I’m sure you’re wrong about...”

Jakkob, who appeared to be in his mid-twenties now, tossed a pad towards Teague’s own shade. Dannar watched as the pad sailed through the misty atmosphere and past his younger self.

He remembered this day. This was the day Jakkob came to work for the NNEC. Breathlessly, Dannar watched as Jakkob closed in on the Teague shade, still sitting at his mother’s desk. The pad had crashed onto the desktop, Dannar recalled. It had sent a picture of Dr. Daystrom tumbling to the floor to smash...but the pad was gone. There was no crash, or smashed picture.

“Settle down Jakkob!”

“Sorry, Dannar, sorry. It’s your mother I’m angry with...”

“What is it Dr. Marlatti thinks your mother’s taken?”

The intruder was now standing beside Teague as the two shades continued to gesture and speak in raised tones, but without being clearly understood.

“Jakkob had been working on a theory that variable warp-field configurations as achieved by differential nacelle alignments with relation to a vessel’s central mass would...” The black form appeared wholly focused on the arguing shades.

“Go on, Mr. Teague.”

“The uh, the data he’d been collecting had to do with design specifications for a servo system that might allow for specialized nacelle pylons to freely adapt to the demands of a changing warp-field while a vessel was in transit through subspace.”

“I’m telling you; she took it all and wiped clean every data bank.”

“Jakkob that can’t be true. She’s off world. Besides, she wouldn’t even need to...”

“What?!” The Marlatti shade, still more vibrant and *real* than the shades it was interacting with, was alerted by the younger man’s choice of words.

Dannar shifted uneasily and hoped the intruder didn’t notice.

“Nothing. Forget I said...”

“No Dannar, no. Now, I’ve known for years your mother has been holding back on something and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t think you were at least partially in on it. So, spill it, or I’m lodging a formal complaint with Daystrom’s Academic Ethics Board and the liaison with Starfleet Design and Development.”

“I... I can’t get into it, Jakkob. I don’t really know specifics... but, your project isn’t something my mother would have any interest in.”

“Why not?”

As Teague looked on, he remembered bits and pieces of this exchange. Jakkob was outraged his work was gone, but he was unsure now if it had been stolen and truly hurt by the notion that Lurna Teague wouldn’t have been interested in it anyway.

“Did your mother steal young Jakkob’s work?”

“I don’t know.” The two shades continued to interact, but the room became unfocused. It was like watching a transmission on a low-resolution screen, through a bank of fog.

“Why did you say your mother would have no interest in this servo data?”

“My mother and grandfather had worked out a far more efficient system years before this conversation ever took place... the schematics were kept on a personal server...” Teague caught himself short and stopped talking.

The two shades continued their conversation even as the office melted around them. Dannar’s young counterpart was ill-defined and barely holding together. Jakkob remained more... stable. Through the atoms and swirling mists, Dannar could make out the features on Jakkob’s face – his dark black hair, his equally dark eyes and strong nose. Teague was about attempt a step closer to the desk to try and hear what was being said when a familiar figure walked into the office.

“Trudy is still with you, I see.”

“Yes. She deferred her admittance to Daystrom twice by this point. She... she’s going to tell Jakkob and I that Daystrom had just bestowed a full doctorate upon Jakkob for his outstanding work in warp field dynamics...”

“A happy day then?”

“Jakkob wasn’t happy... He just... accepted it and said his stolen work had paid for his professional credentials.”

“So, he dropped the matter with your mother?”

“He came to believe Starfleet had been behind it. Told me anything we’d get from Starfleet would cost us a piece of our souls from that moment... this moment on.”

“We?”

Epiphany.

“So, Jakkob Marlatti came to believe that his early commencement and doctorate from Daystrom were a payoff for his missing work?”

Teague felt the steady thrumming vibrations again and the shades gathered around the desk in his mother’s office aboard the Orbital Office Complex drizzled away into a churning grey mass of particles and atoms. The intruder was very close. Dannar could feel him standing right beside him in the swirling, inky mists. He wasn’t tired, but he felt *slow* in his thinking. His head was growing heavy. The churning mists and odd sounds of the world around him blended into a solid grey reality once again.

“...yes, Jakkob was sure the only reason Daystrom had bestowed full credentials upon him a year before he was supposed to graduate was a kind of payoff to keep him quiet.”

Once again, Teague found himself standing in the center of an opaque universe.

“That’s not all that happened that day though, is it? Your mother contacted Trudy with detailed instructions for Dr. Marlatti, didn’t she?”

The disembodied voice sounded as if the intruder was whispering directly into his ear, but when Dannar turned to face the black form... there was nothing but grey.

“She offered him a position with the Consortium, an office and...”

“You.”

Dannar let his eyes close. The voice was still right in his ear – almost inside his head, but there was nothing. He existed in a grey void. Only the curious sensation in his chest offered any sensation of physical existence.

“I... yes, I was to be partnered with Jakkob... I never went to Daystrom, or anywhere else. Everything I knew, I’d learned in the shipyards at my mother’s side...”

“You never saw her again.”

“Not in person. Only over subspace... She was... was...” Again, Teague stopped himself from revealing too much to the dark intruder.

“*Wait, wait, wait... Can this actually work?*”

“*That’s what I’m telling you, Jakkob. I think I’ve cracked it.*”

Then it was like an unfelt wind blew across the solid grey universe and Dannar found himself standing in the main observation gallery aboard Space Dock 17. The room was crammed full of workstations, virtual drafting tables, and independent comms panels. He could see himself standing beside a holographic wireframe of what would come to be the basis for the Transwarp Drive System. As before, Dannar could not make out the specific features on

his shade's face, but Jakkob was there too, and as before, Jakkob seemed more defined and somehow more *real* than the shades surrounding him.

"Hull 1879."

Dannar looked from Jakkob and his younger self to where the intruder was now standing in front of the enormous panel of transparent aluminum. Floating just beyond the gallery's viewport was the mostly complete saucer section and impulse plant of a *Miranda*-class starship still under construction.

"Yes... second-gen *Miranda*. The *Constitution* line was winding down. We were contracted for another four builds and then there'd be no more Connies." Dannar looked at the hull floating within the massive dock.

Teague had played a huge part in redesigning and repurposing the *Mirandas*. With Newport News's premiere design (the *Constitution*) coming to the end of its production run, the Consortium's place as premiere contractor to Starfleet was in peril. A newer outfit, Theoretical Propulsion Dynamics, was lobbying hard to provide the Fleet's next line of Capital Ships. Teague reworked the *Miranda* into a tough, multi-role, less costly successor to the Connies and managed to keep Starfleet on-side.

"Do you think we could come up with a practical testbed?"

Jakkob's shade had stepped in front of the wireframe hologram and appeared to be studying it closely. *"I think... if your theory is correct... we could house the assemblies required in something like a standard nacelle."*

"The coil arrangements would be vastly different from the standard NNEC Mark III's of course, but with reinforced pylons that shouldn't be a problem."

"We couldn't fit this to anything we have in production right now. Just looking at your power draws; it's clear we'd need a massive plant to draw from. You know, we could take this to market and get private backing..."

Dannar blinked slowly and again, the shades of things subtly changed. Hull 1879 was gone. The gallery was largely empty except for two massive workstations and a bank of independent servers. The intruder was now standing in the far corner of the room by the airlock to the service docking port. Dannar was rooted in front of the room's massive viewport, gazing out into nothing.

"Dr. Marlatti?" The shade of Trudy swept into existence like before and passed through Teague as if he was some sort of ghost.

"Jakkob, Trudy. Please, call me Jakkob. We've known each other for years now."

Both figures appeared older now. Marlatti was still far more real than any of his surroundings, including Trudy. Teague watched as she approached Jakkob at his workstation. He didn't recall any of this...

"Sorry, Dr. Marlatti, it's not that I don't want to... be more familiar with you. It's just that you're his only real friend and... I..."

"Trudy, he doesn't think of you that way. After all this time it has to be obvious that he's... he's just not interested."

"I know, of course. Dannar loves the work and only the work... but still..."

"Your devotion to him is admirable, in a way. Though, you must know how I feel about you Trudy, surely?"

"I know... I, I just can't risk hurting him. You're his best friend."

"I think maybe, you're his best friend Trudy – not that he'd ever know it."

The intruder instantaneously blinked from the far end of the room to Dannar's side without the slightest motion or sound. "Where were you when this was happening, Mr. Teague?"

Dannar watched as Trudy took a step back from Jakkob's place at the workstation and solemnly handed over a communique. Jakkob took the pad in hand and, as he read, the scene grew a little dimmer.

"This must have been the day I was in San Francisco with the Board. I was presenting our proposal for funding to construct a testbed for our theoretical Transwarp Drive. Jakkob wouldn't come. He wanted to get independent backing for our work and refused to ever deal with Starfleet directly again."

"What was on the pad?"

No sooner had the intruder asked the question than the shade of Trudy and most of the observation gallery melted away in a silent dissolve. All that was left in the swirling grey mist was Jakkob, sitting at his workstation, morose.

"Word that my mother had died. Natural causes we were told. As per her wishes, no funeral or services were to be held. Her remains were dematerialized and spread out across space from the Orbital Office."

Suddenly the odd thrumming vibration Teague had felt in his chest earlier returned, only this time it felt as if it were manifesting directly beneath his feet. The grey atmosphere seemed to rush and roll over the shade of Jakkob at his workstation and crash into Dannar and the black intruder like an unworldly wave. The next thing Dannar saw was the brilliant silver/blue hull of *Excelsior*, at rest just outside of the NNEC office windows aboard Space Dock.

"It's not a failure! It just isn't!"

"Jakkob, they tried four times to engage the drive, and nothing happened."

"Nothing happened because they let a madman loose in the engine room and he sabotaged the whole system!"

"He removed the secondary processors from the primary pattern drive regulator, that's all."

"He sabotaged our Drive!"

“He apologized... hell, they’re giving him and the others Yorktown as some kind of prize.”

“They’re good at giving away our work! My God!”

“Damn it Jakkob, don’t you think I’m just as disappointed?!”

“Disappointed? I’m not disappointed Dannar, I’m mad as hell. Can’t you see what’s going on here?”

“What? What’s going on, Jakkob?”

“After more than a decade of having their engineers and people rooting through every one of our systems, they’re stealing it from us.”

“Whose stealing it? Starfleet?”

“Yes!”

Dannar watched as a much older Jakkob ranted and raved about Starfleet’s hidden agenda to steal proprietary technology out from under their noses. His own shade... also visibly older in ways Dannar himself couldn’t quite define, just stood by, shaking his head.

“Dr. Marlatti didn’t trust Starfleet from the time his data was stolen from the Daystrom Institute all those years ago, did he?”

“Went missing.” Teague corrected.

The intruder moved around to face Dannar head-on and blocked his view of the shades arguing over what was going to happen to their Transwarp Drive and *Excelsior* herself. “Missing?”

“There was never any proof that anything was taken from Daystrom. Jakkob was sure my mother and Starfleet had something to do with it, but there was never any evidence. All the years he worked for NNEC; he carried a chip on his shoulder the size of an asteroid where Starfleet was concerned.”

“That seems a little hypocritical, given NNEC’s reliance on Starfleet to begin with.” The intruder, still as wholly black and imperceivable as ever, stepped to the side to reveal the scene had changed.

Teague was still looking at *Excelsior* in Space Dock, but now she was being fitted out with a new NNEC Mark 4.5 standard matter/antimatter reaction Drive.

“What became of your Transwarp Drive, Mr. Teague?”

Dannar shifted uncomfortably in place. There were no other shades in the office. He and the intruder were alone, watching the worker bees ferry parts to and from *Excelsior*.

“The modified coils and conduits, along with the enlarged emitter and pattern buffer were all removed and taken... somewhere.”

Jakkob had quietly resigned when he learned that Starfleet would not reveal where the specialized Drive components were being kept. Dannar had

just assumed the materials would be reprocessed... though Starfleet would neither confirm nor deny that possible end.

The theory had been painfully simple in Teague's mind. Modify a standard drive system with a dedicated emitter and an oversized pattern buffer to duplicate the warp fields generated by the nacelles, then project that duplicated field ahead of the subspace envelope to achieve Transwarp. Jakkob had been far more pragmatic in applying functional mathematics to the "simple" theory Dannar had come up with. The powerplant and sheer scale of the vessel housing the drive had to be massive. The two of them worked to design and ultimately build the NX-2000.

Inspiration for their NX-2000 was drawn from NNECs best loved and most successful product, the *Constitution*-class ship. Jakkob worked on the practical, while Dannar worked on selling the concept to Starfleet to secure backing. Early in the process several critics labelled NNECs newest endeavour as being a rehash of the disastrous *Atlas* fiasco from Teague's grandfather's time.

"So, in the end your Drive never came to be, but your ship succeeded brilliantly?"

"*Excelsior* was designed around the needs of Transwarp. A bigger, stronger space frame, meant to cope with the theoretical strain Transwarp speeds would have on her... I don't know if Starfleet agreed to back us because they wanted Transwarp, or because they wanted something bigger and sleeker than the Romulans were coming up with at the time."

"I didn't see Trudy this time..."

Dannar turned away from *Excelsior* and faced the intruder once again. The man-shaped black silhouette was unnerving. It occurred to Teague just then that the intruder was like a sentient black hole in the shape of a short, stalky man who'd maybe bumped into him in a corridor in another life.

"She has... had, she had an office on the lower level at this time. Most of our construction occurred in orbit by now, either here, or over at Space Dock 17."

"So, you never pursued her then? No children?"

"I could never give her the attention she wanted... the life she maybe wanted..."

"Pity."

The intruder blinked into nothingness in front of Dannar and not a half second later, everything went grey.

Resignation.

Dannar's head throbbed. The grey wall spun around him in a chaotic swirl. He staggered slightly and put his arms out for balance. He wasn't nauseous *per se*, but the odd, heavy feeling that had been building in his head was worse. It was as if someone had wrapped thick towels around his skull.

He was back in the observation gallery aboard Space Dock 17. The room no longer housed NNEC offices or workstations. It had been redressed with plush carpeting and dim lighting. A bar had been set up along the rear bulkhead and a polished black podium stood in front of the massive viewing port. Dannar blinked slowly and realized he was surrounded by Starfleet officers, black uniformed porters, FNN reporters and Federation VIPs.

There was no sign of the intruder.

The entire gallery was lit by the reflected light bouncing off the hull of what Dannar knew to be the *USS Proxima*. Her silver/blue skin was dazzling under the harsh white work lights. The entire orbital dock had been turned to face away from the Earth, in order to provide a black star-studded backdrop to the awesome new hull of *Proxima*, the second *Excelsior*-class ship to be commissioned into service.

Dannar remembered being in the room to witness the Starfleet Commander-in-Chief swear-in *Proxima's* captain and welcome her into the fleet. He also remembered Jakkob being...

As if on cue, a shade passed through Teague as if he was nothing more than mist. He'd almost gotten used to the sight of his body being dispersed into a billion tiny particles as one of these shades walked through him. This time it wasn't Trudy walking through him, though. Trudy, at this time as Dannar recalled, was on Earth, visiting her sick mother. This time it had been his own shade marching through the ether.

"You got word today then?"

"Just an hour ago, Jakkob."

"...and?"

"Let's wait until after the ceremony, please."

Dannar watched as his shade and that of a visibly upset Jakkob Marlatti bickered quietly near the back of the room. The scene played out just as Teague remembered it had all those years ago. When the short ceremony was over and the captain and bridge crew of *Proxima* had boarded their ship, the assembled dignitaries watched in feigned awe as the great vessel got underway and headed into space.

"They want Virgo, don't they?"

"They... were intrigued by the notion."

“*Intrigued? What the hell does that mean?*”

The shade of Dannar turned as if to look directly at Teague, who stood only two meters behind he and Jakkob.

“*We can’t talk here, Jakkob. Let’s get a pod over to the Orbital Office, please?*”

Dannar watched as the two made their way through the crowd towards an airlock and boarded a small shuttle pod bound for the old Orbital Office Complex NNEC still used as a redundant data storage archive.

Teague remembered how he’d noticed an FNN camera technician taking wide-angle shots of the ceremony just behind he and Jakkob. At the time, Teague had been desperate to keep his news from his partner in such a public setting. He’d been grateful to notice the camera tech filming just over their shoulders – it gave him the perfect excuse to get them both out of the spotlight.

“They didn’t go for Virgo, did they?”

No wind. No thrumming vibrations. Just a sudden universe of grey. Dannar was alone. The voice of the intruder was clear, but there was no sign of his all-engorging black form anywhere. Just soft, opaque grey.

“No... they awarded the contract to Theoretical Propulsion Dynamics. Jakkob was furious.”

“Why? The *Constitution* line was dead, but there was no end in sight for the *Miranda* Project and NNEC had full backing to produce *Excelsior*-class Capital Cruisers. Surely that was a triumph?”

“There was no challenge in *Miranda* Variants for Jakkob. The *Excelsior* line was just a big flashy collection of ships... a reminder that we’d failed.”

“He quit then?”

Dannar sighed heavily. He ran his fingers through his hair and briefly raked his scalp to try to shake off the heavy cotton-like feeling which was weighing him down. There was nothing around him, just grey.

“He... He quit. He erased terabytes of data concerning Transwarp and he quit.”

“He did more than that.”

Dannar sank to his knees. He was tired. He was labouring to breathe and suddenly wanted nothing more than to sleep.

“He’d been approached by a Tygarian Engineering firm... around the time *Excelsior* was being fitted out for her first Transwarp trials. They’d sent someone to solicit him to come work for their firm independent of Starfleet, but he’d put them off...”

“Until Starfleet cancelled Transwarp?”

Dannar fell forward but caught himself from tumbling into the grey with his right arm. “Uh... no, no. I convinced him to stay. There was a chance they might let us try again with *Proxima*... then...”

“Then, when Starfleet insisted the *Excelsior* line be conventionally powered, you came up with Virgo and Jakkob Marlatti stayed for that alone.”

“Yes... Virgo would have worked. Jakkob knew it would... Starfleet though...”

“They needed a long-range, independent, tried-and-true design. Something that could be built faster and more affordably than the *Excelsiors*, but that could satisfy a multitude of roles moving into the next century?”

“Virgo was too cutting-edge for them... they... they went with TPD’s design.”

“And Dr. Marlatti?”

“Told me he was done being a Starfleet lacky. Called me a Starfleet lacky, too. He destroyed his portion of the Transwarp files and offered to take me with him... said the Tygarians would fund us completely and we’d be our own masters...”

Dannar couldn’t resist the urge to lay down any longer. He lowered himself to the cold grey nothingness.

“Seven years later?”

“Jakkob was dead...”



Evening.⁹

⁹ Published 17 Sept. 2017 Pixabay Licence Free

"Mr. Teague, are you coming out, or do you expect me to wait here all night?"

Stave Three:

Present Tense.

A throbbing series of deep tones pulsed from the flush-mounted computer interface in the wall and filled the dark room with sound. Dannar grunted and stirred atop the thick, heavy white comforter. Who the hell could be at his door at this hour? The computer panel illuminated with its soft red indicator lights and increased the volume of the door chime half a decibel. Dannar slowly sat up in the twin-sized bed and forced his eyes open.

“Coming! I’m coming, just a minute... Computer, what time is it?”

The door alarm stopped. A single chirp from the interface acknowledged the inquiry and the full display illuminated.

THE TIME IS 2107 HOURS, SPACE DOCK STANDARD TIME.

Dannar blinked a half dozen times before pulling himself up from the bed. He was in his quarters aboard Space Dock – he had no doubt about that; but somehow, he wasn’t. The grey metal floor of his bedchamber was painfully cold. Dannar took three steps towards the interface and comms panel flush-mounted into the bulkhead beside his soft, inviting bed.

“Visual.”

A single chirp erupted in an oddly off-key tone and the terminal’s display lit up. Dannar studied the screen. He could see the view from his quarters out into the hallway beyond. The hallway was empty. A shiver ran up his spine.

“Display off.”

Again, the computer answered with a pained chirp, and the image collapsed to blackness. Teague eyed the terminal’s deep red lighting and glossy black face with suspicion. Of course, it was his terminal, and this was his room... but at the same time...

Teague confirmed the time display, then turned to have a look out the massive view port. There, far below his room was the Earth. She was blanketed in darkness and looked calm and peaceful.

“Mr. Teague, are you coming out, or do you expect me to wait here all night?”

Dannar froze. Another shiver ran through him at the sound of the oddly familiar voice from the other room. Dannar looked up from his view of the Earth and caught sight of his own reflection in the massive panel of transparent aluminum... so much like the viewing port on the observation gallery aboard Space Dock 17. He noticed he was dressed in a two-piece

suit. A wrinkled black top with grey sleeves and a pair of equally wrinkled grey pants. He must have fallen asleep in his clothes after his meeting.

“Well, Teague? I’m waiting.”

“On my... on my way.” Dannar turned away from the view of the sleeping planet below and ran his hands over his chest and thighs as he walked towards the door to his private lounge.

He was sure he’d recognized the voice calling to him. For the life of him, he couldn’t understand why he was so concerned about looking presentable. As he approached the door, nothing happened. The mechanism didn’t trigger the servo units to part the metal panels in time for Dannar to step through the bulkhead. He didn’t slow though, he just stepped through... the wall melted and disintegrated into a million tiny particulated grains of nothingness as Dannar passed through from his bedroom into what should have been his quarters’ private lounge.

The bar of the Repulse Room stood along the wall where Dannar would have expected the door to the common hallway to be. There was no barman. No wait staff. Nobody at all on the ground floor of the exclusive Restaurant/Club. Teague turned slowly to look back at the Earth through the observation gallery’s window which somehow had come to exist in his bedroom, but all he saw was the vestibule and staircase leading up to the Private Club.

“Come have a seat, Mr. Teague.”

Dannar spun around to face the empty bar once again. He’d missed the dark figure sitting in the corner booth. Without thinking, he shuffled towards the figure and felt a third shiver run through his body as the man’s features slowly emerged from the din of the abandoned barroom.

“Jakkob?” Dannar whispered.

“No. I told you my name is Loban Hommix, Dixon Mogue Dynamics.”

Dannar slid onto the bench opposite the man who looked eerily like Jakkob Marlatti and forced himself to smile. “Oh, yes...of course.”

Options.

“Your meeting today with Henry Wallace didn’t go very well, did it?”

Dannar tried to study the other man’s face. He looked so much like Jakkob...decades younger of course, but still.

“Mr. Teague?”

Dannar shook his head gently. He still felt... muffled, but he was sure this wasn’t a dream. What had this man asked?

“Pardon me?”

“Your lunch with Wallace. You were going to present him with a proposal. It didn’t go over well.”

“No, it didn’t...”

“So, what are your options then, Mr. Teague?”

Dannar shifted in his seat and looked around for some sign of life. The bar was dark. There didn’t seem to be anyone around. Beyond the staircase, on the other side of the building, the large dinning room was deserted.

“I’m sorry, I... I can’t discuss matters related to NNEC business...”

“Oh? Haven’t you shut NNEC down? None of what you took to Wallace had anything to do with Starfleet proper, did it?”

“How do you know that? Who are you?”

“You can call me Loban. I will call you Dannar. Right now, here, in the present, we’ll have a conversation.”

As much as the man reminded him of Jakkob, Dannar could see there were some definite physical differences between this man and his long-dead partner. The stranger was easily forty-five centimeters taller than Jakkob had ever been and kilos heavier with bulging biceps and a thick neck Marlatti could never have hoped to develop.

“I don’t know what you think you know, Loban, but I’m not prepared to discuss...”

“Virgo Two?”

Dannar held his breath for a moment. The dark-haired stranger with the black eyes smiled and leaned back in his seat.

Loban knew about the resurrected plans for Virgo’s Transwarp System. He knew how Teague had recruited a young Trill light-pod racer named Riadir Preed to serve as a test pilot for a proposed re-hash of the Transwarp Project of 2369. He detailed how Dannar planned to conscript Space Dock 17 back into service and seek Admiral Wallace’s personal approval to set up in the secure proving grounds beyond the asteroid belt. Loban also shared how the Admiral dismissed all those requests out-of-hand.

“It sounds like you already know everything, Loban. What more could I possibly tell you?” Dannar felt weary. In his mind he guessed that it must be past 2200 hours SDST.

“As I’ve said, Dannar, I want to know what you feel your options are now?”

It was true. Henry Wallace had listened politely to Dannar’s proposal to revisit Transwarp, but he had no real interest in what Teague was selling. Starfleet had invested more than two decades into the development, testing and ultimate failure of the NX-2000; the fact that the supremely well thought-out and superbly built spaceframe ended up being a marvelous platform for the Fleet’s new line of Capital ships was a happy by-product of that failure.

Nearly fifteen years earlier, when Starfleet had tendered a new RFP (Request for Proposals) for a long-haul deep space vessel capable of independent operations over years-long sorties, both NNEC and Theoretical Propulsion Dynamics answered the call. Jakkob and Dannar were still trying to salvage *Excelsior* at the time. With the last of the *Constitutions* nearing completion, the Consortium’s Board pressured Teague to come up with a workhorse even while “the great experiment” floundered in Space Dock and monopolized most of NNEC’s resources.

TPD utilized reliable, existing tech in their design – a four nacelled massive saucer replete with enormous hollow receiving bays for modular customization and plug-in points for a series of planned future add-on science and command modules. The design was practical. Many felt the design was bulky, if not ugly. TPD engineers relied on the practical and not the aesthetic to catch Starfleet’s eye. The proposed *Constellation*-class deep space frigate was to offer reliability and versatility in a single uncomplicated package.

NNEC was late to submit a design of their own. The NX-2000 was floundering. Jakkob had become apoplectic with the process and felt that Starfleet had intended on sabotaging his engine all along. Dannar sympathized with his partner, and tried to consul Dr. Marlatti, who was seriously contemplating other employment options at the time. It was only a matter of time before the Transwarp Project was ended. Jakkob had no interest in applying himself to another project.

Under pressure from the Board and left distraught by Jakkob’s looming departure, Dannar had an epiphany. *Excelsior* was huge, not so much by design, but by necessity. It’d been Jakkob who’d postulated years earlier that in order to get the power needed to achieve Transwarp, they’d obviously need a bigger ship. One night, alone in the NNEC offices overlooking NX-2000, Dannar took the core of Jakkob’s original premise and flipped it somewhat on its head.

Instead of having a giant power-plant to energize a single massive emitter and dedicated oversized pattern buffer all while driving a standard

warp core – why not downsize the apparatus and have two independent systems working in tandem? Build them into each nacelle and share the load while reducing the power draw.

Dannar designed Virgo, in one night. A class of starship built around two enormously fat inboard nacelles. She was to be five decks tall, including her bridge, and would have no secondary hull at all. Her nacelles would be mounted fore and aft to pivots and those points would be fully articulated, making each oblong nacelle capable of variable geometry operation. The nacelles were not designed to be as tall as they were wide, and when the ship operated at sub-light speeds, her nacelles would be completely recessed within their “pockets” cut out of the immense saucer itself. At warp speeds the nacelles could pivot up to two hundred and seventy degrees and protrude slightly over the dorsal and ventral edges of the saucer when generating their warp fields.

Taking inspiration from the original design of the *Constitution*-class Cruisers, Dannar reimagined a horizontal warp core that would rest between the two nacelles and provide power to both. The arrangement allowed for main engineering to be just one deck below and aft of the main bridge. He intended to shield the populated portions of the ship from the nacelles using re-enforced duranium bulkheads all-round. Each nacelle would have its own independent emitter and overpowered buffer to achieve a more sustainable and thus more reliable subspace projection to ensure Transwarp speeds.

He saved his work on Virgo to a personal server as he didn't want to risk Jakkob discovering the files and deleting them in a fit of rage. After a few hours sleep, Teague set about drafting a rough wireframe schematic of the Virgo for Starfleet's consideration. It was only after he'd presented NNEC's proposal at the deadline, that he shared his concept with his partner.

“Dr. Marlatti was angry with you, then?”

Dannar fell silent. He'd maybe revealed too much.

“Dannar, answer me.” Loban's voice was low and measured. He remained recessed in the murky shadows where Dannar couldn't quite make-out his face.

“No, Jakkob wasn't angry. He was appalled that he'd not thought to install independent emitters and buffers in each nacelle to begin with. He'd only remained with NNEC after *Excelsior* because he thought we might be given one more chance with the *Proxima*...”

“And the geometric variable nacelle feature... Dr. Marlatti was good with that?” It was a question, but it didn't quite come across as such.

“If you mean to ask if Jakkob thought I'd stolen his pylon servo ideas from all those years ago, no. The variable geometry system I incorporated into Virgo was...”

“Yes? It was what?”

Dannar slowly shook his head side-to-side and cracked a smile. He'd almost let it slip, but he'd caught himself once again.

“Well, we'll come back to that one. I asked you about your options now, not about the almost successes of your past.”

TPD's presentation was fulsome and traditional. The *Constellation* would meet all the benchmarks Starfleet had set and provide a work-a-day spaceframe that might conceivably last sixty or seventy years.

NNEC's presentation, which was delivered by Dannar alone, was more theoretical. The design of Virgo was unconventional; the massive nacelles little more than hypothetical contrivances. Where the *Constellation* proposal relied upon existing duotronics; Virgo would process all of her command and engineering functions through Teague's own experimental isolinear disc arrangements. Where the *Constellation* relied upon on TPD's patented underpowered and fickle aidyn engines, Virgo would have four independent cutting-edge versions of NNEC's impulse power plants with dedicated energizers.

In the end, Virgo was another too-good-to-be-true experiment waiting to fizzle. Starfleet needed reliability. They had the *Excelsior* line moving slowly towards modernizing the fleet and a slew of *Mirandas* to hold the line while the older ships and designs were hauled-in for mothballs. The *Constellation* checked all the boxes and while it wouldn't break any speed records, it could be put into production almost immediately. Virgo was dead and buried while it was still just a sketch on a pad.

“Yes, yes... very sad. Though that isn't what I asked you, Dannar.” The dark man produced a pad from somewhere under the table and handed it across to Teague.

Dannar took hold of the pad in a slightly shaking hand. He half expected it to disintegrate and crumble into nothing... but it didn't. It was solid, and heavy, and real in the palm of his hand. Teague drew it across to his side of the table and thumbed the actuator. A familiar chirp filled the silence. There, on the pad this stranger who may or may not have been real had just produced, was the full proposal Teague had walked into Starfleet Command with years ago. Everything was there. Virgo.

“Where did you get this?” Dannar looked up towards the stranger but could only see one of the man's arms laying on the table. The staircase and restaurant beyond the bar were gone now. Behind the deep blackness enveloping the man who said his name was Loban, existed the same grey misty nothingness Dannar remembered from earlier.

“Can we just finally agree, Dannar, that I know everything you've tried so hard to hide throughout this conversation?”

Dannar lay the pad down on the table and rubbed his temples. “If you know everything then why you are asking...”

“I’m asking you what you feel your options are, Dannar. Only you can answer that question.”

The man leaned forward and in an instant his face hung in the black nothingness like some ghoulish apparition. Dannar marvelled at the nose, the too white skin, and the deep-set black eyes, so like Jakkob’s, yet so totally different. He tried to order his thoughts, which had suddenly become very muddled. He became sublimely aware of a thrumming vibration coursing through his body like a familiar seizure...

The Market.

A jolt of cold shot through Dannar from feet to head. The grey swell of misty particles came and went in an instant – replaced by a grainy white flurry of flecks and golden light.

He found himself standing beneath strands of golden pearls suspended high above a wide thoroughfare. The sky was dark and clear. Hundreds of stars shone in the cold winter's sky. Teague began shivering uncontrollably. He looked around as the world reformed itself all around him. Loban was standing just in front of him wearing a long black coat and looking somewhat impatient.

"Where are we?" Teague whispered. He marvelled at the sight of his own breath rising in the cold crisp air as he spoke.

"Toronto... Kensington Market, I believe."

Dannar shivered some more and instinctively wrapped his arms around himself and looked around the deserted scene. There were several stalls and temporary kiosks lining the wide cobblestone street in front of an immense red brick building which resembled something between a warehouse and a barn. There was nobody around and everything was closed or shuttered. The wind blew and cut through Dannar's suit like a blade.

"It's cold..." The wind died as quickly as it had risen, and Teague suddenly heard the clear sound of a choir singing some old carol in the distance.

"It's the third week in December, by the lake, in Toronto at just past one o'clock in the morning, Dannar. Of course, it's cold. Shall we?" Loban shucked his shoulders forward beneath the heavy black coat he was wearing, then pulled up the black hood which had been hanging down behind his back.

The sound of the choir was haunting. As Teague shuffled along under the lights in the swirling snow, he tried to recall what the ancient tune was called but couldn't quite manage to remember. Walking helped with the cold, but Dannar wished he had a coat. How Loban had managed to arrive early in the morning on the other side of the continent properly dressed was a mystery Dannar wasn't up to contemplating.

They walked through the empty streets for what seemed like forever. The further they got from the Market, the fewer festive lights they encountered. The sounds of the choir eventually faded away. In the distance Teague could see the spire of the city's iconic tower. Erected on the site of the original landmark, which was destroyed in the last global nuclear war, the *new* tower was a free-standing pillar of transparent aluminum and tritanium which served

as a subspace communications relay. To mark the Winter's Solstice the tower was illuminated a bright blue and gold.

"In here, Dannar."

Teague looked from the glowing pillar of light in the distance over to where Loban had led them. The wind had all but ceased and though he was still quite cold, Dannar took a minute to scrutinize where he was being shepherded. Loban stood on the other side of a back laneway he'd guided them along next to a loading bay door of some enormous nondescript building. The snow was falling at a slow, gentle rate and collecting in grainy piles along the sides of the buildings and blanketing the pavement.

Dannar held out his hand to try and catch some flakes. None landed on him. He'd spent most of his life in orbit, but when he was on Earth he was almost always in San Francisco. Snow as a lived experience was a rarity for Dannar. All the same, something wasn't right. Toronto was situated on one of the largest bodies of fresh water on the planet – surely the snow should be wet and heavy. As he watched the odd shaped flakes flutter down around a distant streetlight, Dannar realized that all the snow was dry and light. It piled up like granulated plastic.

"Hey! As much as I'd love to watch the snow fall on this cold night, we have things to attend to. Let's go."

Teague shivered again. He crossed the lane and headed towards Loban. Dannar had noticed that neither he, nor his strange guide had left any footprints in the undisturbed snow-covered streets they'd navigated.

"Where are we?"

"Just in time for cocktails, Dannar. Go on, get in and warm up."

Perfidy.

Teague stepped past Loban towards the grey metal loading bay door expecting to simply pass through it like some spirit, or spectre. As he approached the barrier, he was seized by the familiar thrumming vibration deep within his core. Then a bright flash of yellow flame and a blast of heat washed over him, and Teague found himself standing in the middle of a restaurant.

A tall Bolian in a towering red chef's hat stood over a sizzling grill chopping and tossing bits of meat and mushroom with a flourish for the enjoyment of eight well-dressed diners. There were five other communal hibachi tables occupying the dimly lit room, but they were cold and dark. Dannar watched as the Bolian expertly flipped a pink shrimp off a long knife and into an ornate bowl resting in front of a perplexed looking Vulcan. The other diners roared with laughter as their Vulcan companion protested that he was a vegetarian.

Teague let the warmth wash over him and was grateful to be indoors. He stomped his feet and looked down at the rich, red carpet with its intricate golden pattern. He had a pair of unremarkable grey shoes on, which seemed to blend perfectly with the grey pants...shoes he couldn't remember ever having seen before. As he stomped the chill from his feet, he also noticed that both shoes seemed completely dry and free of snow.

"Dannar, this way." Loban still wore the black coat with the hood pulled up over his head. He stood at the far end of the dining room, waiting for Teague.

The group of diners continued to chide and laugh at one and other as their Bolian chef chopped and flung morsels at them from over the hibachi. Dannar moved past the party like an unfelt wind. As he passed, it occurred to him that he couldn't smell the sizzling beef, onions, shrimp, or rice. He passed through a chair when a young woman who appeared to be somewhat intoxicated, pushed herself away from the table to awkwardly to head to the restroom. The others continued to laugh and carry on as Teague's lower extremities erupted into hundreds of thousands of grey particles and blew back and then around the chair to collect and reform below Dannar's waist.

Dannar continued to draw closer to Loban. He looked down to watch as his legs rematerialized beneath him. He was moving without walking. The realization should have been more jarring, but as his feet began to reform from the swirling grey granules, he found himself getting lost in the misty, churning red and gold carpet below him. When he looked up, he was with Loban in the bar area.

“...ah, but you must come by the house Christmas Eve, Henry. Susanne would love to see you...”

“What’s this?” Dannar moved awkwardly towards the two men sitting at the bar.

“That’s very kind of you, Hibiki, but I’ve promised Dani I’d spend the Holiday with her and her mother...”

Loban stood back to allow Teague to shuffle past. “This is the Hibachi Room in the Royal York Hotel, such as it is at one thirty in the morning.”

“That’s Hibiki Masaru, he’s the founder of Theoretical Propulsion Dynamics.”

“Yes. Who’s that sharing a nice quiet drink with him?”

Teague moved through the solid dark wood bar and turned to study both men head-on. From his chest down he was nothing but a swirling mass of grey and black particles, but he was too preoccupied with the pair of men enjoying a quiet drink in front of him to notice. “Henry Wallace...what the hell is this about?”

“Nonsense, Henry. Bring Dani and your daughter along too. Sakura would love to have another girl her own age to spend the night with.”

“Admiral Wallace told you he was coming to Toronto following your luncheon, didn’t he?”

Wallace raised his glass to his lips and thoughtfully drained the last of his scotch. He swallowed, then smiled. *“Well, Mandy would probably get a kick out of spending the night with all those archaeologists...”*

Dannar leaned in close to Henry and tentatively waved his hand before the man’s face. “These are just... *shades*... they’re not real?”

“We’re the shades here, Dannar. This is happening, this is now.”

Teague stood up straight and studied the two men seated in front of him with a skeptical eye. “Henry said he was taking his granddaughter to a Christmas market, what the hell is Hibiki Masaru doing here?”

“Mr. Masaru is visiting his daughter and her family for the week. Susanne Masaru-Owaru is the assistant curator at the city’s Museum of Physical Anthropology. She and her husband are devout Christians and still observe the high holidays.” Loban remained planted in place at the threshold to the dining room where the group of late-night diners were still raising a din.

“You know, Henry, there’s no reason why we can’t come to some understanding about allowing us to partner more directly with the Mars Tactical Institute. Cut through some of the red tape around designing the defensive module upgrades our Constellations are waiting on.”

“Hibiki, does everything have to be about business with you?”

“Ha! You were the one who wanted to meet, Henry.”

Dannar staggered back half a pace. “What?”

"You closed your offices, Dannar. What did you think Starfleet would do? Stand by and ring their hands hoping you'd have a change of heart?"

"I shut the office temporarily! NNEC still has the contract with the MTI to develop defensive technology for our production lines..."

"You know we've got commitments with NNEC to utilize the Tactical Institute's facilities to outfit the Excelsior line, Hibiki..."

"There! There, see? Henry won't go for Masaru's underhanded dealing. The man's my friend and that still means something."

"I know you're fond of Mr. Teague, Henry. I'm sensitive to that. The fact is though, you've got the Excelsiors, and the Miranda line takes care of itself at this point. You wanted to know if Theoretical Propulsion Dynamics could pick up the slack if Newport News faltered and I'm telling you emphatically, yes."

Hibiki swallowed the last mouthful of liquid in his own glass before continuing...

"The facilities we've assembled at Utopia Planitia are already producing modules and components for our ships at an unprecedented rate. Victory just got outfitted with a cutting-edge graviton sensor array that didn't even exist three months ago. Now she's off to the Neutral Zone to..."

Wallace gently put his empty glass down on the bar and waved to silence Hibiki. "Sssh...we don't discuss fleet deployments, please."

"Oh, yes...sorry. My point is TPD is operating with one hand tied behind our back. The NNEC exclusivities must end. If we're to ensure the fleet is properly fitted out, we need full access to the complete infrastructure."

Dannar watched as Henry Wallace, the Starfleet C-in-C, his long-time personal friend, straightened up on his stool and turned to face Hibiki Masaru. Masaru, the scheming, corner-cutting upstart journeyman who for years had tried to compete with NNEC only to fail time and time again. Teague wasn't a violent man, but through the hazy fog that had begun to settle in his brain a glowing ember of rage was beginning to burn.

"Henry will shut this little man down right now, you watch!" Teague spat this into the air. Loban remained in his place, hooded, and watching.

"I know I called for this meeting, Hibiki. I'd hoped that after speaking with Dannar today we'd be talking about at least arranging a partnership between your two design firms..."

"Tsk... Henry, I personally extended that olive branch a year ago. Teague wasn't interested then, what makes you think he'd be interested now?"

"That's the thing... after meeting with him today, I know he's not interested. Not in working with you and your people, and certainly not working with Starfleet any longer."

Dannar's mouth hung open.

"So, he really did shut NNEC down?" Hibiki nearly fell off his stool.

"I've been in contact with the Consortium's Board and while Dannar is the majority stakeholder, the rest of NNEC don't support him in this... whatever the hell this is."

"What are you saying?"

"I'd really hoped Dannar was going to tell me he'd come to his senses today. I really did, but he's fixated on his Transwarp nonsense. Went on about how he needed Space Dock 17 back and free range to build some jumped up shuttle pod... My God, Hibiki, he, he even said he'd gone and wrangled some Trill light-pod racer to be a test-pilot!"

Masaru sat quietly for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. Dannar was trembling with rage behind the bar.

"Bottom line this for me then, Henry."

"Outside of the Service, Hibiki, you're my best friend. I can't afford to entertain Dannar Teague's delusions any longer. The NNEC Board will not support Teague. The Consortium will likely be broken up and that will leave you and TPD at the top of the mountain. Do you really think you can handle that?"

Hibiki smiled and shook his head as if he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. *"We're ready to meet our commitments."*

"We'll need you to do more than that."

"I got the feeling you assembled Utopia Planitia for more than just 'Upgrade' purposes, but until now, I would never have dared say that out loud."

"Your yards will begin construction on the remaining NNEC Excelsior commitments by the New Year. Retro-fitting the Mirandas and testing the new type-2 arrays will be farmed out to a shell organization several members of the Consortium's Board have already taken steps to establish."

"Then, will I have full access to Teague's formerly exclusive..."

"Through that third party organization, Hibiki. This can't look like a total collapse and there are oversights we have to maintain..."

Dannar balled his hands into fists and opened his mouth to scream his rage, but no sound escaped his throat. He rushed forward towards the two men without thinking. Hibiki Masaru, his greatest professional rival and Henry Wallace, the man Dannar had always believed to be his friend. Wallace had been on the first review panel Teague had ever addressed. In fact, Henry had been present one way or the other for every one of Teague's Starfleet proposals, projects, triumphs, and very occasional failures; always encouraging and supportive.

Gravity grabbed Teague by the head as he lunged forward. He intended to slam his fists down on the bar and shriek at the two men conspiring to betray everything he'd spent his life building. Before his wide eyes, Dannar

watched as both of his fists exploded into clouds of white and grey atoms. Unable to stop his momentum, he watched in fascinated horror as his forearms deteriorated against the unmoving bar, then his elbows... The swirling mass of particles mixed and fell away like sand against the bar top. White atoms, grey and black. It took just half a second for Teague to realize he was going head-first towards oblivion and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Trudy.

Dannar inhaled sharply and let his eyelids fly open. The familiar, yet unnerving thrumming sensation had come on fast and strong as he saw himself disintegrating against the hotel bar. It had dissipated just as violently. He was on his face looking across a cold blue floor.

“Well, I have to say Ms. Ullman, your résumé is impressive.”

“Thank you. Please, though, call me Trudy.”

Teague slowly pushed himself up on all fours. He watched his hands as he willed himself up. The pale skin on the backs of his palms swirled and vacillated in quivering waves. His arms, clad in the grey material of the suit which somehow wasn't his suit, didn't seem to have any cohesion whatsoever. He managed nonetheless to support himself on two black misty tendrils.

“Did you ever have any formal training, Trudy?”

“Pardon?”

“I... well, you were with Newport News for nearly forty years. I don't see any formal accreditations.”

“I was hired, originally by Laurina Teague after spending a year as an intern. After that I just sort of... went to work.”

Dannar pulled himself to his feet and found that he was in a sterile office with white bulkheads and a dark blue polished metal floor. Black and grey atoms swirled around his midsection. He marvelled at the sight of his own body pulling itself back together.

“You were Dannar Teague's personal assistant nearly your whole time at NNEC?” a man in a purple suit asked Trudy from behind a large white desk.

“Yes, I largely assisted Mr. Teague with organizing various funding proposals and helped polish various Board reports...”

Trudy had her greying hair tied up in a fashionable bun. She was wearing a white suit of her own. She had the silver attaché case Dannar had given her for her sixtieth birthday with her. Teague felt sluggish. He realized he was breathing heavily as he watched Trudy and this strange man interacting across the office from where he stood.

“I think you're underselling yourself, Trudy. Except for the last formal RFP NNEC competed in, the bid our Constellation won...” The man in the purple suit flashed Trudy a cheesy grin. *“You, uh... well, you were the person behind every major bid, presentation, and pitch to Starfleet for the last thirty years.”*

“Well, I learned to put a polish on things, but the work really spoke for itself.” Trudy squirmed slightly in her seat.

As Dannar watched the interaction, he realized that this was very possibly the first job interview Trudy had ever really been subjected to. He looked around the white room for any sign of Loban, or for some indication of where he wa... A giant blue and silver logo hung on the wall behind him just above a closed door. *Theoretical Propulsion Dynamics Utopia Planitia.*

“Well, we here at TPD could certainly use someone to help us put a polish on things. Do you mind if I ask why, after all this time...”

“Oh, they’re reworking things at NNEC. You’ve probably heard that the offices aboard Space Dock have been closed while things get worked out?”

“Yes, of course we’ve heard about the office. Surely though, as Mr. Teague’s...”

“Mr. Teague and I have... concluded our relationship.”

Dannar felt his heart sink.

“Oh, I’m... I’m sorry to hear that. That aside though, your qualifications are outstanding. If you’re sure you really want to continue working, TPD could certainly make use of your expertise.”

“Dannar, after all the years you worked together you never once thought to pursue Trudy, really? It was obvious to everyone how she felt about you.”

Teague turned back towards the door and wasn’t surprised to see Loban, still wearing the black coat with the hood up.

“What the hell is this!?” He spat the words at the black figure and was shocked at how angry he was.

“After more than forty years you closed your doors and sent poor Trudy reeling like a top into the unknown. The woman who’d been quietly in love and perpetually devoted to you from the time you were both children.”

“I never led her on! I never told her to pine away for me... I... I...”

Prospects.

Loban raised a hand to silence Dannar and then swept his arm across the space between them. The sickening thrumming returned. The white walls, blue floor, and silver sign all skewed and melted away. A nausea rose up from Teague's stomach and he doubled over in pain. It was like standing in the eye of a tornado. As the swirling cyclone of white, blue, and silver particles raced around him, Dannar shut his eyes to try and regain control of his innards. The vibrating thrumming grew stronger and stronger.

"Now, Dannar Teague... I asked you a question and I would like an answer."

Teague drew a long breath and nearly vomited. He threw both his arms out to keep his balance and remained perfectly still for a few seconds, crouched low, eyes shut and arms hanging out at his sides like some interpretive dancer. The horrible vibration from deep within his chest was gone again, but he ached all over. Cautiously he drew himself up to a natural stance and tentatively opened his eyes.

Dannar's stomach calmed itself. He ached in his joints and in his bones, but at least he didn't feel like he was going to vomit. Teague breathed heavily through his mouth and looked around to find Loban by shifting his eyes rather than turning his head. He was surrounded by the opaque grey universe of swirling mists once again. Loban stood several meters away on his right.

"Wh... what was that?"

"I told you. That is what's going on right now, Dannar. So, what are your options?" Loban was still wearing the black hood low over his eyes to hide his face.

"I... maybe I can change..."

"Dannar, what's past is past. What's now, is now. There's no changing anything. Before I go, before I can let you go... your options?"

Teague stood surrounded by the grey nothingness for what seemed like a long time, not speaking, trying to make sense of all he'd seen and heard. Jakkob had said for years that Starfleet simply wanted to take advantage of their work regardless of how that might affect them as people... Henry had always been so supportive professionally, but he'd conspired with the Board and Masaru to cannibalize everything Teague had spent his life building... Trudy had always loved him, even though he couldn't, or wouldn't reciprocate, but she...

"Trudy, I mean... she..."

“She’s been offered a position with Theoretical Propulsion Dynamics as a special liaison to the Martian Tactical Institute. Seems Mr. Masaru’s team are keen to get access to all of NNEC’s developmental projects and partners.”

Dannar belched and was suddenly nauseous all over again. He looked at Loban and noticed that the man who reminded him so much of a young Jakkob, was beginning to dissolve into the misty grey nothingness all around. Teague lowered himself to his haunches and breathed heavily.

“Imagine, Dannar... if Trudy lets slip some of the more sensitive details of NNECs inner workings? What could Masaru do with access to your Tellar files for example?”

Teague crumpled to his ass and let a weak moan escape. Loban was little more than a floating black smudge in the grey universe, but his voice was still clear and strong.

“Dannar, you never told anyone where your mother had gone after she left the Consortium, or what she was doing the last few years of her life... as far as your Virgo designs...”

“What do you know about that?” Teague tried to get back to his feet but failed.

“That’s my point, I know all about that. I know all about TL 9139. All about the secret server loaded with your mother and your grandfather’s *black* designs. The question, now that she’s been driven to TPD is, does Trudy know?”

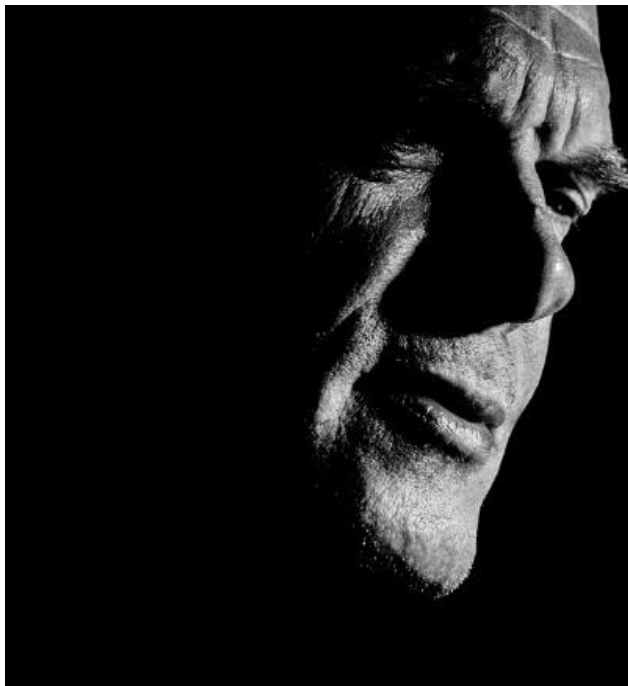
“Ohhh...” Dannar gasped. There was a chance Trudy knew all about the server interface. Would she know or even understand what any of it meant was another question, but still...

“Your options, Mr. Teague. What are they now?”

“I... I... don’t know... if I don’t just die here and now...”

“Go back to Wallace, cap-in-hand, cheerfully go to work for TPD? Hmmm? Or take up your Tygarian friend on his offer?”

“Yes, that’s it... Private capital. The Tygarian said they’d fund...” Dannar lay back and let his eyes close. Loban’s smudge had completely vanished and all that was left was a grey universe of regret.



Dannar Teague.¹⁰

¹⁰ Published 27 Mar. 2016 Pixabay Licence Free

Naked, alone, laden with agony...supine and facing an eternity of blackness, Dannar screamed his silence again and again into the dark.

Stave Four:

Reverberations.

Dannar was on the flat of his back in the darkness. His head pounded. All his joints were stiff and sore. When he moved more than a few inches in any direction a thousand points of agony exploded up and down his frame. The smooth nothingness of the grey universe he'd lain down in had changed subtly in the moments between the fading words of the hooded shade and this latest waking.

He existed in a black world. Laying reposed in a universe of the deepest stygian sable any mind could ever dare envision; Dannar Teague breathed in shallow, gentle huffs, trying to endure the exquisite agony racking his body. He moved his eyes back and forth in their sockets, searching for anything in the blackness.

There was nothing.

Teague strained and lifted his right arm from the cool granulated cushion of nothing he found himself lying in. His shoulder sang out its agony along with every muscle and tendon required to achieve the feat. Dannar endured the pain and turned his white hand and arm over and over again in front of his face. He was naked. The old skin on the back of his hand looked puckered and dark, but his forearm and palm glowed an eerie white.

Dannar lifted his eyes to search again for some light source, but there was nothing. The blackness was absolute all around him, yet he could see his own appendage clearly, he could look around himself and distinguish space.

His arm fell back to the unseen hassock of soft granules cradling his naked form. The pain persisted. Teague listened for the sound of his arm splashing back to his side... but there was nothing. His arm was resting in place once again, but there'd been no sound, only the sensation of some soft resistance supporting the limb suddenly.

Dannar worked his jaw painfully open and closed three or four times before drawing a breath and trying to call out. He felt the air fill his lungs pitifully as tears streamed down his face. Then a wave of agony roiled through him as his diaphragm compressed the air to force it over his vocal cords and out of his mouth... to a black universe where there was no sound to be heard.

Naked, alone, laden with misery... supine and facing an eternity of blackness, Dannar screamed his silence again and again into the dark.

Blue Orb.

Teague lay still in the center of the velvety black universe he'd come to find himself in. The tears on his face had dried. The agony in his muscles and joints had dulled with inaction. His head still throbbed, but he'd managed to compose himself mentally. The soundless, formless existence around him was oppressive. With nothing to focus on other than his own naked form, Dannar grew contemplative.

Where he was and how he might hope to somehow escape was not what Teague found himself rolling over in his mind. The unseen bed which cushioned him had soundlessly shifted and sunk; Dannar was now held in a semi-reclined position. He couldn't stand. The pain would be unbearable if he attempted to get up.

Go back to Wallace, cap-in-hand...

The words echoed in Dannar's mind. He blinked slowly and kept his eyes down-cast...lost in remembrances of Trudy, his mother, Jakkob... Wallace and Virgo...

Go back to Wallace, cap-in-hand...

The words echoed again in his mind. Still, he hung his head, thinking now that the wrinkles which had appeared on his face over the last decade must appear dark and ponderous here at the bottom of this black universe...

Go back to Wallace, cap-in-hand...

Teague blinked his eyes slowly and lifted his head. Hanging in the blackness only a few meters from where Dannar's naked, lanky form sat reclined; an eerily glowing mass of cool flesh, hair, and humanity, was a shimmering blue orb. At first, Dannar didn't want to believe the floating sphere was real. Like the words Loban had spoken in another reality, the blue ball of shimmering muted light must surely be a figment of...

Go back to Wallace, cap-in-hand...

The orb suddenly swelled to twice its size. Dannar inhaled sharply realizing that the orb was in fact, real. Then a dull swell of pale blue light spilled out of the orb and Dannar found himself looking at a collection of Starfleet VIPs gathered on the main observation deck aboard Space Dock.

Teague flinched at the sudden colour and light filling his black void but managed to keep his eyes open. The uniforms the officers wore didn't seem quite right. He looked past the churning group of well-heeled attendees to try and determine what was going on. He scanned the interior berths of the dock beyond the transparent aluminum bulkhead. Shapes hung in a blue/grey mist. Ill-defined hulls drifted too far away to be made out clearly. The crowd began to organize and come to attention. Teague shifted his focus from the berths

where any number of starships should have been tethered... to the raised platform situated at the head of the gathering.

A band began to play. A Vulcan quintet intensely focused on a short, fat Tellarite in an ill-fitting purple suit. As the lead ka'athyaist lilted into an uplifting series of notes, a young woman stepped to a clear plastic podium standing in the middle of the platform. She was followed by two Starfleet cadets carrying the Federation's banner and the Starfleet standard. The woman wore a dress uniform, and the cadets were dressed in formal Academy attire.

"Honoured guests, attention please."

Almost in unison the VIPs, most of them wearing dress uniforms, snapped to attention and the din of conversation died. On the platform, behind the young woman, the two cadets planted their flags in waiting chrome bases.

Dannar became aware that he was still reclined and nude as the scene played out in front and all around him.

Once the cadets had marched off the platform the quintet stopped playing. The young woman arranged some unseen item at the podium. In the instant it took her to look down and shift through whatever it was that required her attention, Dannar made out the insignia at her collar. She was a Commander...

"...the Commander-in-Chief."

Teague blinked twice. The world around him seemed to skew ever so slightly. His head was pounding with a migraine unlike any he could ever recall suffering. Dannar wondered if he was going to have a stroke.

A flinty looking old man stepped up to the podium and dismissed the young Commander. His hair was white and thin. He looked to be in his eighties. Dannar found him only vaguely familiar.

"Thank you, Commander Black. Thank you all. Today is a great day. A great day for Starfleet and a great day for the entire Federation. Unlike my predecessor, I'm not one for long-winded speeches..."

Several of the VIPs openly chuckled at this remark. Dannar could only see their backs and had no way of guessing at who all these people might be.

"However, before I invite the man of the hour up here, I would like you all to join me in a moment of silent remembrance for Admiral Henry Wallace. Without Henry's vision and dedication, none of this would have been possible."

The room fell silent. Dannar wondered what had happened to Henry. He was furious that the man had betrayed him, but he certainly didn't want Wallace, or anyone else for that matter, dead.

"Thank you. Without further delay, please welcome the mastermind behind today's triumph, Theoretical Propulsion Dynamics' founder and Starfleet's greatest

ally, three-time recipient of the Cochrane Medal, Nobel Prize recipient, and this year's winner of the Dannon Prize, my friend, Dr. Hibiki Masaru..."

The Vulcans struck up an uplifting march as the crowd applauded politely. Teague grunted.

Slowly, a bent, aged shade of Masaru made its way to the podium where the Starfleet Commander-in-Chief stood waiting. Masaru looked to have lost several kilos since Teague had last seen him having drinks with Henry in Toronto. His black hair had turned an iron grey. Dannar tried to sit forward, but his head felt like it was going to split apart, and his muscles would not obey...

"Thank you, Thomas..."

Masaru sounded weak and small. Teague squinted and tried to focus on the little man standing a few meters in front of him. A heavy-set bald man and a tall Deltan woman partially obscured the view Dannar had of the podium. Several people chuckled. Masaru smiled and looked sheepishly over at the C-in-C.

"Sorry, Admiral Knot. Forgive an old man some informalities, I've come to see you all as friends and too often forget your ranks and titles..."

More chuckling and a spattering of applause.

"A lifetime of work. Twenty years of passion and dedication...and now I humbly present TPD's greatest achievement and the vessel that will carry Starfleet, and the Federation... into the next century..."

The fat Tellarite fanned his arms wide and dramatically brought his hands together in a smooth sweeping motion as the Vulcans began playing a triumphant piece of music that filled the room. From the lower regions of the enormous docking bay beyond the viewport a silver/grey hull dramatically rose before the assembled VIPs.

"My friends, the USS Zodiac NX-3000."

Rage exploded within Dannar as the vessel climbed slowly into full view of the audience. The Vulcans played with passion. All eyes were on the sleek saucer hanging in weightlessness on just the other side of the transparent aluminum viewport.

"She has no secondary hull, utilizes an in-line warp core and variable geometry nacelles which recess seamlessly within shielded pockets in the saucer itself..." Masaru took a breath. *"Zodiac, I am proud to say is also the first vessel ever produced, capable of Transwarp speeds."*

The room filled with gasps and excited applause. Teague shrieked his outrage, but no sound escaped him and none of the shades gathered around his puckered, naked form paid him any attention.

Admiral Knot moved to congratulate Masaru and the young Commander assisted the bent, old man off the platform to thunderous applause.

“Thanks to Dr. Masaru’s incredible genius, we now have the greatest vessel ever conceived of across the known universe.”

The applause continued. Masaru and the Commander exited the observation deck and *Zodiac* slowly made her way to an empty berth. The Vulcans continued to play as the sleek, wide saucer gracefully drifted away.

“The NX-3000 will be undergoing the usual trials here for the next year; however, owing to the supreme confidence we have in her design and capabilities, I am pleased to report that the keels for NX-3001 and NX-3002 have already been laid and construction of the Zodiac-class is now underway at Utopia Planitia.”

More applause and cheers rang out. Dannar felt his left eye begin to twitch as his migraine somehow grew incrementally worse...

Green Orb.

A chill ran through him.

Dannar shifted his weight slightly to the left and his muscles screamed out in pain. The flavour of copper filled his mouth. He opened his eyes... blinked... slowly lolled his head to the side and blinked again. Blackness was all around once again. The nightmare was over. Teague tried to sit forward, but as before, he didn't have the strength and his body still cried out in pain.

Dannar brought his hand up in front of his eyes once again. He was still naked and reposed, but this time his shoulder moved freely, and the pain wasn't nearly as intense as he'd remembered. The headache was still roaring, but it was just a headache now, no longer a migraine.

He marvelled at the sight of his hand hanging in the unreal black atmosphere before him. There was still no discernible light source, but somehow his naked flesh radiated a cool white glow...

She'd been beautiful. Teague thought to himself as the memory of the *Zodiac* came to mind. *Virgo damn it! It was my design, my Virgo...*

The eerie pallor of his hand and forearm suddenly took on an odd greenish tinge. All thoughts of Masaru and his conniving schemes to steal away the legacy of Virgo fell away.

Take up your Tygarian friend on his offer...

A pale, green orb sailed over Teague's head, momentarily bathing him in an unnatural light. He forced himself to sit up from the soft cushion of unseen particles which had been cradling him since the world where Trudy left him dissolved. His spine felt like it was made of glass and his hips popped and cracked. The green orb travelled further along than the blue one had, but it quickly came to a stop in the blackness and hung silent and still.

Take up your Tygarian friend on his offer...

Dannar strained to remain upright. He breathed heavily, then fell back expecting to crash into the black, only to find that his cradle had adjusted to support him in his new position. As he exhaled and tried to get his pain under control, the orb flashed twice. Then he was somewhere else...

...another dark place.

Teague breathed a little easier. Sitting properly upright, as painful as it was, relieved some pressure on his lungs. His head still hurt...

"H ta'hwswai faehor?"

Dannar focussed his attention on the voice. He realized he was no longer in the black universe.

"Hvedroalh hsouh." A second voice said.

Teague watched as a dark cavern with rock walls materialized. He recognized the language easily enough... Romulan.

"Sub Commander Olmuth would like to see the engine now, Dannar."

Teague watched as Ekut Nocib, the Tygarian financier who'd offered him a prominent position with the Dessica Design Bureau along with generous funding only a year ago...

Or was it just a year ago? Did it really happen at all?

"Fine, fine. Tell the Sub-Commander it's ready and tested."

Teague watched three murky figures come together and shuffle deeper into the rocky caverns. The Tygarian appeared as he'd remembered and the tall dark Romulan man was non-descript... the third man, for just a few seconds as the murky vapor that seemed to make up the scene cleared, was a mirror image of Teague himself.

His headache was almost gone. In its place a sort of fog had started to settle. Dannar wanted to get up and go after the three shades as they retreated further into their cave, but he was tired. His muscles didn't ache as they had, but he felt the pull of unconsciousness threatening and he had precious little energy.

Then, as if by sheer force of will, the scene playing out meters ahead of him rushed over him and as exhausted, naked, and helpless, as he was – Dannar found himself sitting amongst the Romulan, the Tygarian and himself. They were gathered round a four-meter-long fuselage mounted to a narrow, blade-like nacelle.

"Kjumnaihssou 'hh ehdhihss Transwarp ceald?"

"Sub Commander Olmuth asks if this is the Transwarp engine he's come all this way to see." Ekut's brow ridges flushed a deep green as he stood beside the silver uniformed Romulan.

"You can tell the Sub-Commander that Riadir has broken the Transwarp barrier twice now in Virgo 2. I've run the numbers. The design works perfectly."

Dannar watched himself with a curiosity that unnerved him. Here he was, seemingly doing business with a Romulan. Of course, he'd chosen to leave Starfleet behind... Jakkob had been right all along. Still, Ekut had never mentioned Romulans...

"The Sub-Commander is impressed, Dannar. He wants to know if you thought to keep a record of the power consumption logs during Mr. Preed's test flights?" Ekut drew his long arms in towards his chest and brought his green scaled fingers together to form a kind of triangle with his hands.

The Romulan had removed the access panel at the rear of the small light pod to get a look at the small warp core. It was quietly rumoured that the Romulans had made advancements in artificial singularity drive technology, but few had seen a Warbird up close since the last war.

Teague's shade looked pained. Dannar watched himself step away from the tall reptilian looking Tygarian and start rubbing at his left temple the way he did when he was stressed.

"Of course, I... yes. Tell the Sub-Commander that I have recorded all developmental data on Virgo 2. Is he interested in completing this transaction now?"

Dannar let his head loll back gently into the unseen particles. He was tired. He was having a hard time making out the details of the green-tinged world around him, but he knew the shade of himself was anxious.

The Romulan removed the nacelle access plate as Ekut conversed with him. The narrow, irregularly angled coil assembly was exposed, as was the micro-emitter and custom-built pattern buffer.

"Vikra 'hh ehdhihss shanaku?"

"Where is the data?" Ekut parroted the Sub-Commander to Dannar, who'd moved away from the light pod and was standing in front of another dark cave.

The shade of Dannar Teague ran his hand over his well-wrinkled face and sighed. He said nothing for a few seconds as the Romulan continued to examine the coils and pattern buffer, then drew a long breath.

"It's all in the backup server in the maintenance tunnel."

Ekut translated Teague's response and the dark haired, mean looking Romulan smiled.

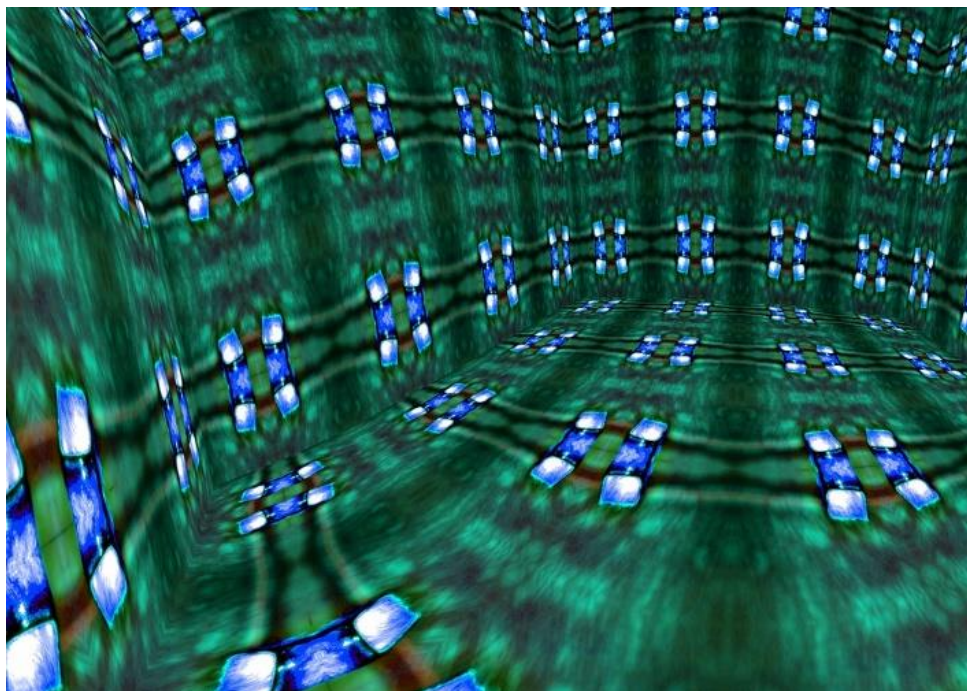
Teague felt a little better every passing minute. His joints were stiff, but they no longer burned with pain. The muscles in his torso and limbs were numb and weak, but they no longer ached. He was very tired though, and badly wanted to sleep. He forced himself to stay awake as the scene rotated. To his right stood the Romulan, to his left was the shade of Dannar Teague, standing fitfully in front of another black passageway.

"Ehsiu, mnek. Idh mnek. Hveolhaonn aelhe t'hea're hveiyaeihdh iudaiht here hrrau'khir." The Romulan positively glowed with satisfaction as he raised his left hand above his head and snapped his fingers.

Without a sound. Without warning. Dannar Teague's shade was seized by two grey-skinned demons who emerged from the dark passage. Ekut shrieked in a very un-Tygarian way from somewhere unseen and the sound of Teague's last breath being jerked from his body as he flew backwards into the blackness, echoed oddly around the chamber.

Dannar sat forward violently and the scene around him collapsed into ashy grey granules. The world dissolved completely into the unnatural blackness. The image of the two grey luminescent faces rushing out of the dark to claim the shade of Teague was the only thing he could think of. They were monstrous. Needle-like teeth protruding from savage mouths, grey skin

dewy and taunt... and the milky translucent eyes... their eyes were the most terrifying sight Dannar Teague had ever seen in his fifty-eight years of life.



Cargo Bay.¹¹

¹¹ Published 2 Sept. 2016 Pixabay Licence Free

From the time Jakkob Marlatti turned his back on Starfleet and left Newport News, Dannar Teague hasn't come up with a single new design of any significance.

...and that's where it ended with Dannar Teague.

You look confused, General. True, it's not quite the crescendo I'd hoped for, but given the unforeseen toll this operation had on 74's systems; Xillion and Mr. Moddax had to wrap things up the best they could.

Personally, I think the choice of Reman warriors was inspired. To my knowledge no civilian Federation citizen has ever seen a Reman and lived to talk about it. Teague certainly was shocked by the sight of two Remans attacking him from the dark – his bio-readings went off the chart. That too was part of the reason things had to end as abruptly as they did.

Dannar's physiological state was far more adversely affected than we'd anticipated. Using 74's multi-phasic transport buffer to transition Teague through these scenarios (and of course to beam him out of the heart of San Francisco undetected) was essential in maintaining the illusion. Unfortunately, the cellular degradation was cumulative and just got worse the more we put Teague through that buffer. Doctor Ploum says that just one more multi-phasic transport and Teague's DNA would have unravelled like overcooked pasta.

Still, I think the seventeen burnt-out photoemitters and ten hours spent putting Teague through his paces was well worth it. Don't you agree, General U' Chtuklli?

I realize you're used to seeing tangible results but consider this: if nothing else we just ran a successful real-world test of our new multi-phasic transporter and the photoemitter grid. With the data we collected over those ten hours we can start working towards developing fully interactive holographic environments and characters to conduct interrogations and who-knows-what-else in the future. You've heard how completely taken-in Teague was just using basic holograms programed with historical footage and documented photoplays of events recorded Teague's biography a few years back.

Relying on our friend in Sydney to upload live updates on-the-fly for 74's AI was a little stressful, but all-in-all, it went well. Removing 74's weapons and shields was the right call – the power draw for the cargo bay's grid was at the top end of our estimates. I'm having the cargo bay stripped and instead of a grid of a hundred photoemitters, I've authorized the expenditure to install three hundred of the prototype holo-emitter units and tie the entire bay directly to the ship's reactor.

We started losing significant resolution with just five photoemitters off-line. By the time we hit seven; we were all glad we'd taken the precaution to

dose Dannar with a healthy hit of trianoline-alkysol suspended in sodium pentathol. His mind bridged the gaps in reality that started showing up in this rudimentary holodeck.

Xillion was a superb intercessor between Teague and the holographic world, but Marlatti really was the key. You see that now? Mr. Moddax looked enough like Teague's old partner that with a little wizardry we could insert him into the illusion and have him bring a realism to the whole experience. I realize you feel we should have just grabbed the man and not given him a choice but to work for us, but consider this...

From the time Jakkob Marlatti turned his back on Starfleet and left Newport News, Dannar Teague hasn't come up with a single new design of any significance. The man's been on autopilot for seven years. The biggest contribution he's made in all that time was to pull an old design out of NNEC's files to "retro fit" the first gen *Excelsiors'* deflector control access systems. Hardly genius level engineering. It follows that if we simply grabbed him and expected him to just get to work for us, he'd tinker away however few remaining useful years he has left leaving us nowhere at all.

Now, we've shown him a truth in Marlatti's distrust that reconciles his own suspicions and dissatisfaction with Starfleet, as well as a terrifying glimpse down the road of private backing. What's left for poor Dannar Teague then? I have offered him a third option.

True, it's been four days, but Teague was only returned a few hours ago. The cellular damage from the transports had to be corrected. Doctor Ploum stabilized him aboard 74 once they got him out of the cargo bay. He spent a few days in stasis while the damage was repaired. We even implanted a biogel transponder behind his left ear. It's undetectable, far more reliable than the viridian patch and no matter what, it will completely dissolve in twenty months.

We weren't able to offer Teague that third option in the context of his experience. Mr. Moddax took a more practical approach. If Teague wants to voluntarily reach out, he has the means... If not, the implant is in place. We can snatch him anytime and try things the hard way, if you feel we must.

Trudy Ullman? Just some emotional filler to round out the whole experience. Whether it was relevant or not, Teague let that door close a long time ago and there was no harm in knocking on it...

>Beep beep, beep. Beep beep, beep <

Excuse me, I need to answer that.



Interface.¹²

¹² Published 19 Jul. 2019 Pixabay Licence Free

Dannar stood perfectly still. His belly ached for food. He tried a dozen more times to call up the purple interface, or the message, but there was no trace to be found. He asked the computer again for the date, both the Earth standard date and the stardate... He'd lost days.

Steve Five:

What Day is This?

A steady trilling from the room's flush-mounted computer interface filled the darkness with sound. He grunted and stirred beneath the light blue, silky sheets. The panel illuminated with soft blue indicator lights and increased the volume of the alarm half a decibel. Dannar sat up in the middle of his king-sized bed and let the light sheets fall around him.

"I'm... Computer, where am I?"

A single chirp from the interface acknowledged the inquiry and the trilling stopped.

MODULE 22B-0116, EXECUTIVE HABITAT LEVEL 3A, SUITE 2087, SPACE DOCK.

Dannar rubbed his eyes and yawned. He felt like he'd been asleep for days and winced as his stomach roared and cramped for food. The photo-reactive blinds retracted from the three rectangular windows across the room from the foot of the bed. Dannar swung his legs over the side of his mattress as the room brightened. Outside the windows, far below, he could see the North American continent. The sun was blazing on the horizon of the west coast. Morning.

He gently patted his chest and felt the tops of his thighs through the light blue sheets. The Earth was a beautiful bright blue. It took Dannar nearly three minutes to pull his attention from the planet outside his window and look around his bedroom. Everything seemed as it should be. Once Dannar had assured himself of this fact, he rose and walked across the plush carpet to the computer terminal.

As he approached the glossy black comms panel and display board, he caught sight of his reflection in the glass. He looked dishevelled, his hair was wild and the silk green pajamas he wore were bunched and gathered around his left knee. Dannar shook his leg and the silk dropped to hang perfectly to the top of his bare foot.

"Computer, what time is it?"

A cheery chirp signalled the computer's acknowledgement and then the pleasant female tone of the system's voice interface responded: THE TIME IS 0735 HOURS SPACEDOCK STANDARD TIME.

Dannar looked back towards the windows. "Computer, are we synced with the Pacific Standard Time Zone?"

A sweet chirp, then: SPACE DOCK STANDARD TIME IS SYCRONIZED WITH THE CHRONOMETER AT STARFLEET COMMAND, SAN FRANCISCO.

Teague's stomach rumbled again. It was time for breakfast. He cleared his throat and half-turned away from the interface to head into his lounge when a subtly blinking light caught his eye. He'd never seen the purple icon before. Breathlessly, he reached out towards the benign interface with a trembling right hand and activated the command prompt.

The panel flashed blue and then went black.

For a long couple of seconds Dannar thought he'd shorted the entire unit and was beginning to think he'd have to summon a repair crew to check his quarters' EPS feeds. Just as he was about to leave, the terminal flashed back to life. The soft blue indicator lights and standard layouts were gone. A strange, black and purple screen populated the entire panel. Teague took a step back.

LOCATION ADMIRAL WALLACE RESIDENCE OF D. OWARU and DR. S. MASARU-OWARU 8900 ROSEGARDENBLVD, TORONTO.

LOCATION EKUT NOCIB DESSICA DESIGN BUREAU DESSICA TWO, DESSICA DESIGN BUREAU CONFIRMED ASSET, TAL SHAR

IF YOU WANT A THRD OPTION, CONTACT 997-3-DT-00A QZD

The computer voice was still female, but it had lost the familiar soothing tone and was edged with a flinty confidence that came across as almost menacing. On the screen the text hung against the blackness in a sharp purple hue... then... the sound of the system rebooting itself and the same old layout and pleasing blue lights were back.

Teague stared at the screen with his mouth hanging open. It'd been too real to be a dream. He was awake. He thumbed the interface again and again, but the purple icon was gone, and the odd screens didn't reappear. He breathed hard and flashes of... it had to have been a dream...

"Computer..."

The familiar cheery chirp.

"What day is this?"

IT IS DECEMBER 25, 0744 HOURS EARTH PACIFIC STANDARD TIME. STARDAT...

"Stop."

An almost comical "fzzt" tone erupted from the terminal as Teague's voice command stopped the AI in mid-sentence.

Dannar stood perfectly still. His belly ached for food. He tried a dozen more times to call up the purple interface, or the message, but there was no trace to be found. He asked the computer again for the date, both the Earth standard date and the stardate... he'd lost days.

Finally, he had to relent to his hunger. His stomach felt like it was twisting itself into knots. Dannar stepped out of his bedroom and into his quarters' private lounge to get something from the replicator. He was still wearing his pajamas. There was a standard Starfleet engineering kit stowed in the front room's main compartment. Teague would have a glass of nutrient supplement, maybe two... then perform a diagnostic on the computer himself. He approached the replicator panel and felt his stomach knot again.

Instead of a supplement maybe he'd just have a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon with coffee... He stopped.

The only sound in his quarters was the rumbling and gurgling of his own innards. There was a strange pad waiting on his table. He shuffled away from the replicator. He suddenly felt numb. Dannar picked up the basic pad and found that it had no encryption blocks. With a simple press of his thumb the pad flickered to life.

997-3-DT-00AQZD

Dannar ate two servings of scrambled eggs and was on his third cup of coffee before he headed back to his bedroom to dress. The pad had remained active almost for as long as it took Teague to finish his bacon. Long enough for him to commit the subspace communication transfer code to memory.

Through the poisoned clouds swirling in the high atmosphere above the storm, flashes of yellow and purple lightning flickered like ephemeral specters angrily haunting dark recesses of the atmosphere.



K3 Jupiter.¹³

U' Chtuklli Bless Us, Everyone.

The view from her office aboard K3 was a terrifying look down into the swirling red maelstrom of Jupiter's signature red storm. From the station's close orbit of the gas giant, safely shielded from Jupiter's deadly radiation, the eye of the planet's iconic storm nearly filled her entire viewport.

Maureen sat in silence watching the storm. It was going on 1900 hours station time, and she'd been at her desk for hours without speaking to anyone since General U' Chtuklli had departed with Commander Demby. She'd started the morning's debriefing expecting to have to guide her Andorian mentor to the less obvious benefits of her mad little plan to recruit Dannar Teague. Section Command already had misgivings about the liberties she'd taken outfitting 74 with experimental tech. Selling the General on the value of her actions was key. He'd be taking his place in Command soon, now that the Andorian fleet had been properly deployed along the Cardassian border.

Through the poisoned clouds swirling in the high atmosphere above the storm, flashes of yellow and purple lightning flickered like ephemeral specters angrily haunting dark recesses of the atmosphere. The fortuitous timing of the communique from Sydney had been the saving grace. As impressive as the holodeck prototype had proven itself to be, and no matter

¹³ Published 27 Nov. 2019 Pixabay Licence Free.

the performance of the unorthodox transporter system aboard 74, had it not been for the signal right then that Teague had reached out... Bautlin was sure U' Chtuklli was about to remove her as Division Commander.

Demby ferried the General to Ganymede to await his transport, then she proceeded to Earth to discretely collect Teague from Space Dock. NNEC as it had operated over four generations of Dannar's family, was no more. As Maureen watched the storm below, Dannar was being settled into his new quarters aboard Space Dock 17 and getting acquainted with the revolutionary starship his grandfather had designed and built a generation earlier.

Before congratulating her on an "unconventional" operation and taking his leave, the old, one-eyed Andorian wished Maureen Bautlin a *Merry Christmas*... in keeping with the season, as he said. Maureen hadn't known how to respond.

General U' Chtuklli would report that Dannar Teague was onboard, and Section Command would have its fleet after all. Bautlin would remain in command at K3; her tactics having proved themselves sufficient.

"A Merry Christmas, indeed." Maureen whispered as another flash of lightning rippled through the churning hell of Jupiter.



Baubles.¹⁴

*Season's Greetings to
All Lifeforms Everywhere
and
All the Best for the Coming New Year.*

¹⁴ Published 29 Nov. 2016 Pixabay Licence Free.

The End...