

STAR TREK



EXPECTATIONS

by Sean O'Keefe

Star Trek: Expectations
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Credits:

This novella came out of a brainstorming session I had with my wife, Edelweiss, so full credit goes to her for helping me come up with the outline for the concept for the story and a couple of the lines therein. Never mind the constant stream of cups of tea and painkillers (we migraine sufferers keep the big pharma going on our own, methinks.)

Arrival

Tryna Sill was glad that there was one thing there was always plenty of on the *USS Enterprise-J*, space. The ship was enormous, and now that the ship had returned from its extended mission to the Andromeda galaxy, it was about to undergo one of its first major upgrades – the installation of a “Spore Drive”. Of all the ships in the Milky Way galaxy’s Starfleet, this ship needed one for its multi-galaxy tasking.

“Wow,” she said once more to herself. She was looking about the large cargo bay and wondered to herself if she was tripping. She might have *mostly* Cardassian blood, but she had been around enough humans to know what the word meant. And, given she was in the presence of some truly exotic mushrooms, perhaps she was. All the same, the fungi were, she had to admit it, beautiful.

“I said that the first time I saw them,” said an effervescent young woman with an enormous amount of curly red hair on her head. “They really are beautiful, that is, until they get into your body, and then they turn into a friend you knew as a child and then they suck you into the mycelial network and...”

Tryna had come to expect young Lieutenant Sylvia Tilly of the *Discovery* to run off at the mouth occasionally. As she looked down on her from her six-foot three frame,

she thought the girl was either frightened, or excited, or both. She sometimes reminded her of a brilliant little rabbit that talked in the hopes that someone didn't kill it.

"It's just funny to think that this stuff is going to be propelling us around the universe, that's all. We've been so used to using the power of our Omega core to push us around that it just seems weird that our ship is going to be flying on mushrooms." Tryna wrinkled her grey-skinned nose as she spoke. "That sounds weird just saying it."

Stepping up next to them, a human male with the most amazingly blonde hair—to Tryna's eyes—spoke. "Don't worry, I've heard it all. However, I am more than a bit concerned with the idea of pushing something with the bulk of the *Enterprise* through the mycelial network."

"I thought you said the journey was virtually instantaneous," Tryna observed.

Never one to miss a fight, Paul Stamets said: "Not with the distances you're considering on flying. You're planning on going to *Andromeda*. That's 2.537 million lightyears away. You're going to need a navigator with a great deal of skill for that sort of a journey."

"Never mind you're going to need a lot of barf bags." Tilly interjected offhandedly.

Commander Sill took her duties aboard Starfleet's biggest ship seriously. Both comments drew her attention and concern. The second particularly because her ship contained a very large contingent of civilians. Expecting

them to “hang on” every time they engaged the drive was more than a bit of an ask. She decided to address that issue first. “How nauseating *is* using the spore drive?” she asked, wondering if she would have to consider retasking the entire ship.

Tilly’s eyes went wide, and her hand went to her chest as if she had betrayed Stamets’ entire reason for being. “Ah, ah, it’s not as bad as you think, Commander,” she said a little fearfully. “I’m sure your people will get used to it fairly quickly and, as long as you give everyone some notice when you’re going to engage it, you’ll be fine.”

Stamets shrugged nonchalantly, as if he didn’t have a care in the universe. “Besides, the *Enterprise* is fitted with Quantum Slipstream and Transwarp drive, so you could do most of your flying around the galaxy using those and just save the Spore Drive for intergalactic and emergency use. I’ve been doing some reading on them and they’re fast enough for trans galactic purposes.”

Sill knew he was pretty right about that. The *J* was big, but she was also *fast*. “Agreed. I’ll be making that recommendation to the Captain. However, when we get this up and running, we’ll need to test it. I’ll want to take the Big E for a short hop within the Milky Way, and I know just where I want to take her.”

Stamets was curious, but not that curious. Tilly, on the other hand, wanted to know everything. However, by

the time she went to raise her hand to ask the question, Sill had already changed the subject.

“Now, Mister Stamets, out of your class of empaths, who do you think is the best candidate for the job?”

It took the man only a moment to come to an answer. While his Captain, Burnham, had a relationship with Book, his work with the Kwejian and his fellows had shown that he wasn't the strongest of their empaths. Those few who had volunteered to work with Starfleet to help them develop ships that could work with Spore drives that had come under Stamets' tutelage and quickly expanded their abilities to include accurately guiding their vessels to their desired destinations. Before he gave his answer, he noticed the look on Tilly's face and gave her a slight shake of the head, no. It wasn't going to be Book.

“Twila Candidata, would be my first choice,” he said with confidence. “However, you'll have to ask her first. I'm not certain that going to Andromeda was something she had in mind when she signed up for this.”

Sill tilted her head to the side and gave him a winning smile. “You let me worry about that. Where can I find her?”

Introductions

Tryna materialised in the corridor outside the quarters of Twila Candidata on the starbase, who was currently having some time off while waiting for her call to duty. She was surprised to be suddenly joined by the original *Voyager's* EMH, who materialised next to her before she could announce herself.

“Can I help you, Doctor?” she asked.

The EMH seemed embarrassed. “I have a request to make, if you don't mind. Since I returned, I've found myself to be a bit of a fifth wheel about here. While I've familiarised myself with 32nd Century medicine and techniques, the people around here tend to look on me as, well, outdated technology. It's a form of discrimination, if you ask me.”

Tryna had only met the Doctor once, but she recalled that he had spent some time in the Delta Quadrant with *Voyager*, hundreds of years with an alien race who had been ironing out their cultural and racial differences and made an epic journey home across the galaxy. That, in her mind, deserved some respect. “Doctor, may I ask, have you settled on a name? It seems a little odd to just call you ‘Doctor’.”

The EMH seemed even more embarrassed. “Er, not really. The Kyrians simply called me the “Surgeon

General” when they promoted me to head their medical divisions.”

Tryna was impressed. “You ran medicine for an *entire planet?*”

Modesty wasn’t the Doctor’s best suit. “Well, yes. It was my duty of care to the people of Kyria. However, once the situation that *Voyager* had helped create had finally settled down, I felt the need to make the journey home.”

Her evaluation of this artificial lifeform just kept improving. “So, they gave you a ship and you headed home on you own?”

“Yes.”

“Wow.” Before Tryna turned back to the door, she realised the Doctor had yet to ask something, even though she suspected what it was. “You had a question for me.”

The Doctor decided to go all in. “Well, as I said, I don’t exactly feel welcome around here. I’m a hologram eight hundred years out of time.”

Tryna knew where he was going. “However, the *Enterprise* is from the Twenty-Sixth, and that’s a little closer to home. Crew assignments are my purview on the *J*; however, I’ll have to clear it with the CMO, OK?”

The Doctor gave her a brief smile. “I don’t have to be crew, Commander. I don’t even mind opening up my own Doctor’s surgery on the *Enterprise* to help relieve the

burden on your own staff. I just want to be somewhere where I can be of some use.”

The implied “and that isn’t here” was clear. It saddened Tryna that such an extraordinary individual, even if he was made of photons, was sidelined on this station. “Consider yourself a resident of the *Enterprise*, Doctor. I’ll talk to Sarah, so she’ll let you have some space in the main computer core for your program. I gather they’ve fashioned some kind of mobile emitter for you? We don’t have holographic emitters everywhere on the *J*.”

The Doctor was pleased. “Yes, they have. I’ll have it transported over to the *Enterprise* as well. Who do I speak to about quarters?”

Tryna was a little taken aback by the request. Why would a hologram want quarters? Wouldn’t he just turn himself off when he wasn’t wanted? She suddenly realised she was exercising a bias that was unworthy of her. Here was a being that had more than exceeded his original programming and had literally performed miracles. Sure, he wasn’t perfect, but then again, who was? Even though he was photonic in nature, he deserved to be treated as an equal. “Speak to Sarah, she’s the *Enterprise*’s quartermaster. She’s always been the best at organising our resources. Hang on, I’ll take care of it now.” Tryna tapped her new, 32nd Century combadge with

its inbuilt transporter and tricorder capabilities and called Sarah.

Appearing like a modern version of Marilyn Munro, Sarah popped into miniature holographic being before her. "What can I do for you, Commander?" she asked amiably.

"Can you transfer the original *Voyager's EMH* to the *Enterprise* and can you find some quarters for him? He'll be joining our crew, either with Starfleet or as supercargo, we've yet to decide." She gave the Doctor a brief, apologetic, grin.

The ever-helpful computer interface gave her a quick smile. "Always happy to help, Tryna. You know me. I know just where to put him. We've had some vacancies open up since we arrived in the Milky. Not many, but a few."

Tryna's eyes opened a little at that but, truth be told, she wasn't overly surprised. A life of space travel wasn't for everybody. Having one's address: C/- USS Enterprise NCC-1701-J often made it hard to receive mail. Never mind it was challenging to raise sheep on a starship. "Thanks, Sarah. You're a gem." She glanced at the Doctor. "I'll see you on the *Enterprise*, Doctor."

The hologram gave her a warm, heartfelt smile. "Thank you, Commander. It will be good to be useful again." With that said, he winked out existence.

Tryna looked down at Sarah, who was still aglow before her. "Do you have him?"

Sarah's eyes seemed to be following something other than Sill. "Yes. He's looking around his new quarters. When you get back, you'll need to check in with Doctor Kintasandage. I'm not certain she'll want to be working with an EMH."

Sill nodded to herself. The Cait did have her biases – and her temper. However, her abilities as a medic were second to none.

"You're right about that. However, the Doctor did say that he would be willing to set up his own medical rooms on the *Enterprise* that would supplement sickbay if she didn't want him around."

Sarah tilted her head to the side, a decidedly human behaviour. She was surprised. "He is determined to serve others. Kudos to him. In that, I don't think Kintasandage would mind. I think she'd be happy to send all the hangnails to him."

Tryna laughed. Sarah had a wicked sense of humour. Bringing things back to a more serious note she added: "Actually, he'll be a great help to us. He knows a lot more about the last six hundred years of Milky Way medicine than we do. Yes, we've made our own breakthroughs and learned stuff in Andromeda, but I'm sure we can learn a lot from him."

Sarah nodded. "You're right. He'll be a great asset." She gave the Commander a grin. "Speaking of assets. Isn't it about time you rang that doorbell?"

Sill chuckled. "You're right. I'll catch you later. Sill out." She tapped her badge to cut the call and turned her attention to her first task.

Five minutes later, she was sitting down across a table from Twila Candidata, a fair-skinned, humanoid-looking female with long, braided mousy hair, dark brown eyes and a cool demeanour. Their greeting had been fairly standard. They had asked one another about their families, and Tryna didn't have a whole lot to tell. She was single and her family had been aboard the *Enterprise* for generations.

In contrast, Twila's world had only joined the galaxy a century before and had suffered at the hands of the Emerald Chain, an organisation Tryna had only just become aware of. She was appalled at the duplicity of Osyraa, an Orion woman who headed the organisation. She had offered the people of Kweja help in their hour of need, but then held it back as a form of blackmail to get what she wanted. She was clearly a cruel taskmaster and deaf to their cries of pain.

As she listened to the woman's story, what struck a nerve for Tryna was that she served with Orions and Andorians on the *Enterprise*, both centuries removed from the peoples of the 32nd Century post-Burn Milky Way. Had she done them a disservice bringing them home? Would

they suffer persecution here? Would they feel divided loyalties?

No, she thought to herself. Her people were strong enough to deal with the truth. Their identity was as members of the Federation first, their old cultural ties a distant second. She had to admit that included herself.

Twila clearly harboured a lot of resentment towards Andorians and Orions. That could create complications for her working with them on the *J*. “There’s one thing you’re going to have to be clear on. If you’re going to work with us on the *Enterprise*, you’re going to be working with some Andorians and Orions.”

As the woman literally flinched, Tryna carried on, undaunted.

“You need to remember that my people are not, and have never been, members of this ‘Emerald Chain’. In fact, they’ve never even heard of it. We’ve only been back in this galaxy for a few weeks, and we haven’t left this starbase. My people are loyal to the Federation first. I need you to remember that, when you see people with blue and green skin on the *Enterprise*, they aren’t members of the Chain. In fact, they won’t necessarily be Orions or Andorians either. Some of the people on board are chameloids.”

Twila’s eyes went wide. “Shapeshifters? How will I know which ones are which?”

Sill gave her a toothy grin. "You're the empath, I thought you'd know better than I. No, most of the Kelvans from Andromeda assume a humanoid form they like, and they keep it. That way they are recognisable to the rest of us. We only have a few tricksters on board who like to play games, but generally they don't make any trouble."

Twila snorted derisively, "What kind of a ship are you running? It doesn't sound like any Starfleet ship I've heard of." She sounded incredulous.

"I think you need to remember when the *Enterprise* was built," Sill said with a slight smile and shrug. "She was created in the 26th Century and is still one of the biggest ships the Federation ever built. She was created for *intergalactic* exploration. She is a flying city and has much more than a Starfleet crew aboard. She has schools and universities and bars and shops. She's a metal metropolis. She's so much more than a typical starship." She gave a slight chuckle. "If there's one thing you'll never be on the *Enterprise*, it's bored. I've just spent the last ten years travelling back here from Andromeda and I was never lacking for something to do. Now, with your help, we'll be back there in a flash."

Tryna noted from her body language that she was clearly used to getting her own way and she was not certain Twila was going to be a good fit in a team structure like the *Enterprise*.

At least her host had been kind enough to offer her a cup of coffee. Tryna preferred the brew over her people's traditional alcoholic beverage, kanar. The woman had tried the stuff once and had taken an instant disliking to it.

"So, you want me to operate the Spore drive on your ship and guide it to another *galaxy*? You must be joking." The younger woman rolled her eyes, mocking.

If there was one thing a Cardassian knew how to do, it was assuming a tough and annoyed veneer. The warmth in her voice disappeared and the temperature in the room dropped as she spoke. "I assure you, Miss Candidata, I have better things to do than waste your time and mine. The *Enterprise* just came home after spending six hundred years forging a branch of the Federation that spans a *galaxy*. Thanks to the Spore drive, we can get back there a whole lot sooner as we have pressing issues we have yet to resolve. Now, if you don't think you're up to the task there are other candidates I can speak to. I hear that one Cleveland Booker is available..."

To her surprise, Tryna touched a nerve in the Kwejian. The woman openly scowled at her. "That won't be necessary. I will join you on your ship. Your mission is a worthwhile one, and I must admit, being the first of my kind that travelled to another galaxy would be nice feather in my cap."

Nice to know she's doing it for purely humanitarian reasons, Tryna thought to herself sarcastically. She finished off the few remnants of her coffee, put down the mug and got to her feet. "Thank you for the beverage. The Spore drive should be fully installed by the end of the day, and we'll make the first test tomorrow morning. Please report to the *Enterprise* by seventeen hundred hours today, ship-time, and you'll be given your quarters, then report to Lieutenant Stamets, who'll give you your induction. All things being equal, we'll give the ship her first trip tomorrow morning. Just a short hop."

Trying to claw back some semblance of control, Twila asked: "Where are we going?"

"You'll find out in the morning, Miss Candidata. Until then." Tryna double-tapped her badge and transported away leaving Twila fuming and wondering what she had just signed on for.

It was a busy day for Tryna Sill. Being the Executive Officer of the *USS Enterprise-J* was a daunting task for many considering the awesome size of the vessel, but Starfleet had evolved by the 26th Century, and especially by the time the *J* had been created. While the duties of the XO hadn't changed much over the years, the notion that they had to be a "one man band" was long behind them. Tryna Sill had her own staff.

While crew rosters, evaluations and general morale were part of the XO's purview, her duties also included being the captain's link to the civilian sector of the ship. That was no mean task, considering the population of the ship at any one time was about ten thousand.

She didn't have a whole lot of time for them today as she needed to get to Sickbay to have a word with their CMO before the universe exploded. However, she was a courteous being, so she dropped by her office on deck ten and smiled at her secretary, Susan, an artificial lifeform who Tryna found endearing and had been working for her for years.

Susan appeared human, about twenty-five years old and had pleasant, blue eyes. She was quick-witted and was highly intelligent. She often knew the answer to a question before Tryna knew the question to ask. However, one of the things she liked about her was she never had an air of superiority about her. She just wanted to get along with everyone and be of service. Tryna respected that.

"Hi Susan. Any messages for me?"

It wasn't a stupid question. Most requests for an audience came through Susan as everyone on the *Enterprise* knew that the XO was usually doing something too important to interrupt. Only emergency calls went direct, and only once Sarah filtered them.

“Just one you need to look into right away. Doctor...”

This time Tryna was ahead of the game. “Sandage is on the warpath, I know. I’m headed over there now.”

Jokingly, Susan handed her a small hand phaser. “You may need this.”

Tryna looked at it mock seriously. “You may be right.” She pushed it back into Susan’s hand, gave her a smile, and turned on her heel and left, headed for Sickbay. As she stepped out of the door she suddenly realised: *Why am I still doing this the old-fashioned way?*

She tapped her communicator and said: “Sarah, transport me to Sickbay please.”

“With pleasure.”

In the twinkling of an eye Tryna appeared in the corner of a spacious room that was lined with diagnostic beds. At one end was an operating room where everything was done using imaging, focussed transporter tech and nanotechnology. It was still a wonder to her as medicine was all magic to her.

As soon as she beamed in a large, white Caitian stalked over to her wearing only a white medical gown that matched her brilliant white fur. Kintasandage was that rarest of rare amongst the Cait, a white, and it had gone to her head. Unlike her great to the nth power grandmother, Amantasandage, she had yet to humble herself. “What do

you mean by letting that antique come on board my ship?" Kin growled.

If there was one thing Tryna had learned with this female, it was not to allow the Doctor to get her riled up. "Your ship, Kin? I don't remember seeing your name on the plaque."

The Doctor was not to be out-smarmied. "Well?"

"Have you bothered to talk to him?" Tryna asked.

"Have you bothered to introduce it to me?"

Reflexively, one of Tryna's eyelids twitched. Voyager's EMH deserved a bit more respect than to be referred to as an *it*. "I was fully planning on bringing him by for a chat. I'm sure *he* has a lot to offer you and the entire department."

Kin's whiskers twitched dismissively. "Not likely. It's an EMH version 1.0, for God's sake! Doc Zimmerman's first version! Most of them wound up scrubbing shafts they were so annoying. Why in God's infinite universe would you bring such an abomination aboard this ship!"

Out of the corner of her eyes Tryna noticed that others had stopped and were watching. However, this wasn't just another one of Doc Sandage's tirades. This was a direct challenge to her decision-making paradigm, and it needed to be nipped in the bud. "Doctor Kintasandage! You are an officer in Starfleet and I expect you to show the proper respect, thank you very much! Don't forget where

you are! In intergalactic space you might get away with that kind of crap, but here I can have you reassigned in a heartbeat. *Do I make myself clear!*"

The Doctor's blue, feline eyes were wide in shock. The notion that she was no longer indispensable had never occurred to her.

Tryna went on. "Doctor, the *Enterprise* is probably the most valuable ship in Starfleet right now and I can guarantee that there are lots of officers out there who would give their eye teeth to take your place here. Now, we've all put up with a lot of bad behaviour from you over the years, but I'm putting you on notice, it ends here and now. Do we have an understanding?"

Kintasandage visibly gulped. She had a lot to lose, and the reminder of that fact was much needed. Never mind that her family's heritage was worth preserving, not being sullied by her bad behaviour. Many years before her family had saved her people, and now here she was making the Cait look bad. She felt ashamed.

For the first time that Tryna could remember, Kintasandage's whiskers drooped, and her body language showed – shame. She was remorseful. "My apologies, Commander. I have overstepped. While I do have reservations regarding the EMH, if you truly believe that he has something to offer I am willing to give him a go."

Tryna stepped forward and placed her hand on Kin's shoulder gently. "That's all I ever asked for." She

gave the Doctor a slight squeeze, then turned and exited the room.

Apparently, if there's one thing that you can't replicate, it's living mushrooms. Not one that'll run a starship, anyway. Apparently, that's Spore Drive 101.

Tryna Sill was making mental notes as she stood with her captain, Edan Dax, and new navigator of the mycelial network, Twila Candidata in their new Spore Drive room, which was attached to Main Engineering. They were sitting in on her induction with her instructors, Paul Stamets, Sylvia Tilly, and an unexpected guest, the handsome Kwejian known as "Book".

Tryna didn't have to be a keen student of body language to know that the Twila didn't like Book – not one little bit. If hate was radioactive then the man should have baked through ten minutes ago. She wondered how much of this the Kwejian was actually taking in while she was looking daggers at her fellow from home.

"So, you must make certain that the fungi be kept at a constant temperature. They are your life."

Stamets would have made a good university professor, Tryna thought to herself. He clearly thought he knew more than everyone else in the room. On this one subject, she had to concede the point.

Captain Dax raised a finger. "How do you manage the interface?" he asked, genuinely interested.

Stamets led their little group over to what appeared to be a glass booth, but Tryna knew it was probably made out of transparent aluminium. Tough stuff. He, alone, made his way into the small space and stepped between two thin, waist-high “posts” that appeared to contain a malleable substance that he was easily able to pierce with his fingers. “It’s that simple, Captain Dax,” he said amiably, yet with all the confidence in the world. “Once you have entered the co-ordinates into the computer, I... and our empathic friends here... become the missing link from the digital realm to the mycelial network. We then virtually instantaneously drop from where we are to, well, wherever we’re going.”

Tryna glanced at Twila once more to see that her new recruit was paying attention. She wasn’t so sure. What she did note was that she couldn’t have put more distance between herself and Book if she had tried. Book was at one side of the glass cube and Twila was on the other.

Book decided he needed to add something at this point. However, he spoke up just so he would be heard by his compatriot. “When I operated the Spore Drive on the *Discovery*, it wasn’t easy. Mind you, we were facing a core breach and about to explode. Michael doesn’t mind putting us under pressure.”

The comment drew wry grins from Stamets and Tilly, who knew their captain well enough that Burnham was capable of anything.

“Anyhow, I just began one of my favourite chants and, before I knew it, I’d connected with the network. When I opened my eyes, we were at the dilithium planet.” He tried to catch Twila’s eye, but she wasn’t interested in engaging him. All the same, he continued. “It was an exhilarating experience. You’ll never forget your first time.”

Tryna hoped that Twila was at the very least listening to the man. She sidled over to her and said quietly: “Did you hear what he’s been saying?”

Under her breath, Twila growled, “Yes, I have been listening to what ... that *traitor* has been saying.”

No wonder she hates his guts, Tryna thought to herself. Whatever Book has done in the past that’s offended her, it’s got to be a doozy.

At that point Lieutenant Stamets stepped out of the booth and graciously offered Twila the opportunity to try out the interface. Even given her misgivings with being anywhere near Book, she stepped into the chamber and examined the shiny waist-high stands with their almost gooey finger pads and gently inserted her fingers into them. She seemed almost disappointed that nothing happened.

Stamets continued his demonstration. “On the *Discovery*, when we’re about to use the Spore drive, we

call a “Black Alert”. At that point your staff here should be loading the drive with the spores while Miss Candidata will simply have to make sure she’s standing right there and prepared herself to connect to the network. It’s very straightforward.”

Tryna had earlier that afternoon finished hashing out which of the new recruits from their shipboard Academy they would be using for the Spore drive. Some of them were enthusiastic. One of them was as thrilled as someone being asked to clean up a dead rodent. She hoped they’d come around. After all, Starfleet was about duty, service and discipline. You didn’t always get a choice about *where* you were going to serve.

Twila caught Tryna’s eye, and for the first time there was a confidence in the younger woman’s visage where there was usually just cockiness. She actually seemed eager for the adventure ahead.

Captain Dax asked: “Is there any special software that needs to be installed in our navigation system? There may be compatibility issues with Sarah.”

As if on cue, Sarah’s holographic avatar popped into being in the middle of the room. “I take umbrage at that, Captain,” she said, sounding only slightly miffed. “There isn’t a software application in existence that I haven’t yet been able to crack.”

“You still haven’t mastered Galaga,” Tryna interjected with a wry grin.

Sarah shrugged. "I can run it; I just can't play it."

Captain Dax was chuckling to himself. "I should have known you were listening."

"Captain, you should know by now that I am always listening."

The comments drew curious looks from their guests from the starship *Discovery*.

"I should clarify," Sarah continued, seemingly embarrassed. "When it comes to ship's business, I'm always listening. People are entitled to their privacy you know. I'm not a perv."

Their guests, especially Book, did not seem sold. Captain Dax decided to smooth things out by gently raising his hands and saying: "Don't worry, she's harmless. Now, can I get an answer to my question?"

Tryna waited while Mister Stamets explained how the remainder of the interface worked with the rest of the *Enterprise's* systems. A lot of what he had to say seemed fairly basic, however whenever the conversation strayed into details regarding the mycelial network and their polymorphic connections the information went straight over her head. In the back of her mind she dropped the subject into the "Ask Sarah later" basket.

About half an hour later, once the formalities were completed, Dax, Sill and Candidata stood together and watched the *Discovery* team beam away to their ship. The

ever-busy Captain Dax still politely offered to shake Twila's hand in greeting.

"Welcome to the *Enterprise*, Miss Candidata," he said politely.

Tryna was always impressed by her captain's ability to make anyone feel at ease. His many years of diplomacy in two galaxies had made him a very quick judge of character. Tryna often joked that Edan could read a Horta's expressions. Perhaps now they were back in the Milky they could put that to the test.

"Thank you, Captain," Twila said, charmed. The usually slightly stand-offish woman seemed more at ease about Edan. It was a good beginning, Tryna thought.

"Please excuse me," Edan said. "A captain's job is never done." He gave both ladies a friendly smile, then turned and left the room.

Now that they were able to speak freely, Tryna asked: "Well, what do you think?"

Like Edan, Tryna was excellent at reading people. It was clear that Twila was not ready to confide in her what she truly believed.

"Look, this isn't a job interview where you have to worry whether you're fired if you don't pass inspection. The fact is, if you don't want to be here there are other people I can talk to and I'm sure one of them will be willing to put their hand up for it." She paused to let that sink in. "So, *what do you think?*"

Twila realised then and there that Tryna really did want an honest relationship with her co-workers. No BS. "Alright, then. I'll be honest with you. It's not that I don't know about you, or this ship, or even the Spore drive. The fact is, that my life these days seems to be a constant case of "catch up" and I always seem to be lagging behind. I never feel like I'm really in control of my own life."

A sigh came up from the depths of Tryna's soul. "I can see that. Your people and planet have been through a lot in the last hundred years. Now, with the fall of the Emerald Chain, and now our arrival, things have changed again and I'm asking you to take a giant leap of faith. It's a lot to ask for. I get it." She gently shook her head, tossing the long, single black braid of hair that reached all the way down to her hips. It reminded her of Twila's braids, and that the two of them had a lot in common. Both of their people had come out of adversity.

Her lessons had taught her that her own people had suffered long and hard to recover after the occupation under the Dominion, and the devastation of the bombardment of so many cities on the last day of the War! The planet had almost succumbed to a nuclear winter. Thankfully, with the help of the Federation, and surprisingly the Bajorans, Cardassia had begun the long road to recovery. By the time her family had joined

Starfleet, they had seen the possibility of a bright future, but the destination still seemed a long way off.

Twila had adopted a casual hand-on-hip stance while leaning on a panel. She didn't seem to mind opening up a little to her and she was glad for it. "Look, I can't make any long-term commitment, but I will give it a go for tomorrow at the very least. Let's take the *Enterprise* for her test run and then I'll give you my final word. OK?"

Tryna couldn't argue with that. After all, who knew what tomorrow held for them all? She stepped forward, her hand outstretched in a manner that she hoped the Kweja understood. Twila took the proffered hand warmly. "Welcome aboard, Miss Candidata."

Unexpected

The next day, it was decided that the *Enterprise* didn't need its XO on the Bridge for its first mycelial network jump. Commander Tryna Sill was an observer in the Spore drive room, watching Lieutenant Stamets guide the new recruits through their paces. He had been running them through drills all morning, and now it was time for the real thing. Standing nearby was his offsider, Sylvia Tilly, watching Tryna's Ensigns like a hawk and offering encouragement if they ever looked overwhelmed. Overall, they seemed to have things under control as they loaded the control panel with canisters of spores. Curiously, Book was nowhere to be seen.

Confidence among the crew was high. However, as a precaution, all non-Starfleet personnel, workers and *tenants*, were put off for the day at the starbase in temporary quarters that had been hastily set up for their use. Admiral Vance was mildly put out by the request, but he understood the necessity.

Sill's communicator chirped. It was the Captain. "How are things down there?"

Her eyes went to the glass booth. Twila stood in place, her hands hovering over the control surfaces. The Kwejian noticed her interest and she said: "Perhaps you could install a chair in here for me while I wait?"

Tryna pondered that question. She noted Paul Stamets' disapproving frown and she pictured him in a similar space aboard the *Discovery* while it was under fire. The fewer objects he could be thrown against, the better. However, the *Enterprise* was *not* the *Discovery*. It would take a hell of a lot to jolt this starship sufficiently to put Twila at risk.

All the same, the notion left Tryna with a nagging worry that she filed away for consideration later. Her mind cast back to times on the holodeck when her mother would take her mountaineering with her brother. The rule was simple. You never went climbing with just *one rope*.

"I'll think about it," Twila called back. She looked over to their expert. "Do we have a "Go" Mister Stamets?"

He gave the console a final check. "Tilly?"

"Go."

"Miss Candidata?"

"Twila will do."

Paul gave her an annoyed look. Tryna got the impression he hated working with civilians. "Are you ready?"

In answer, she plunged her hands into the control surfaces, closed her eyes and began to quietly chant.

While Tryna couldn't hear what Twila was saying, everyone in the room suddenly felt something soothing, a gentle, warm, calming sensation spread through the space like a loving fog.

Over the comms came the expected call. “Black alert.”

The lighting in the room changed to a darker blue and Tryna wondered what to expect. She noticed that Paul and Sylvia shared a grin, as if there was some secret joke they shared.

Then it happened. It was as if the universe suddenly vanished, and her along with it. Yet, Tryna was still sentient, still conscious, still being, but her sense of up, down, *any* sense of orientation was gone. For a split second, everything was simply ... *gone*. Then it was back again. It was ... not nauseating, but unsettling.

“Where are we?” Tilly asked Stamets. It was a pointless question. He was already consulting the star charts.

“Right where we were supposed to be,” he said with pride. “Twila has brought us to Cardassia’s front door.”

Tryna stepped over to the glasshouse, as she called it, and checked on Twila. “Are you OK?” she asked, genuinely concerned.

The woman just looked at her with a slightly odd expression. “That was the strangest feeling I’ve ever had, and yet... it was beautiful.”

The Commander’s concerns were put at rest when their navigator broke into a grin.

“That was awesome!” she said, exuberant. “I can’t wait until we do it again!”

Tryna was wondering if she was going to start clapping her hands together in glee. And then she did.

Over the comms she heard the Communication’s officer, Lieutenant Dana Troi, calling. “Commander Sill, Miss Candidata, Lieutenants Tilly and Stamets to the Bridge.”

Together, they tapped their combadges and transported themselves as requested. The *Enterprise* was too big for turbolifts.

The bridge of the *USS Enterprise NCC-1701-J* wasn’t much bigger than that of an old-fashioned Galaxy-class ship. However, all of its interfaces were holographic in nature, and any surfaces reconfigured to suit the user – literally. Instead of a viewscreen, in the centre of the bridge was a large, three-dimensional space that the Captain was standing next to. In the centre of it, large as life, was the planet Cardassia late in the Earth year 3189.

Captain’s Log, Stardate 866795.4

We’ve arrived in orbit of Cardassia Prime. So far, we’ve found no resistance, and all seems peaceful. The foliage on the surface, as seen from orbit, is a lot more lush than I remember from my last visit over six hundred years ago, but a lot can change in more than half a millennium. While we have

scanned cities, there doesn't seem to be a high population density, nor does there seem to be much in the way of industry. I wonder what's been going on here? We're about to open hailing frequencies.

Tryna gazed upon the world of her people's origins in awe and wonder. She had heard so many stories from her parents and grandparents, and she knew they'd heard it from theirs, and so-on, about what it had been like before they'd left for Andromeda. It had been harsh, the world virtually returning from the grave. She had never expected Eden.

While Troi had been advised of the few new innovations they had made in the Milky per changes to comms, she hadn't had to adapt all that much. Tryna could hear her making the call to open communications.

For a moment, there was silence. Both she and Dax turned and looked at Troi, as she sat at her post. The smaller, dark-eyed Betazoid woman looked up at them and shrugged. Then, she touched her earpiece and smiled. She touched a control, and the rest of the bridge crew could hear.

"...welcome to stay in orbit as long as you like, *Enterprise*. We are familiar with your organisation, even though it's been over a century since we've heard from you. Not since the Burn. The Emissary will join you shortly."

Troi blinked as the communication suddenly ended. "Huh. No beam down instructions. Nothing. I suppose their "emissary" will fill us in."

To Tryna's surprise, her captain suddenly slapped his head, startled.

"Oh, no! It couldn't be!"

Ever on the lookout for trouble, Tryna said without thinking: "Raise shields!"

Before their weapon's officer would even reach for a control Sarah, the ship's AI, reacted to the order and snapped on the ship's defence shielding. Looking back, the ship's computer's reaction time had saved the vessel on many occasions.

This time it had been unnecessary. Tryna was surprised to find her captain laughing. As was just about everyone else on the bridge.

When a sparkling green hourglass-shaped orb appeared in the air near the captain, many reached for their personal phasers.

"Weapons down!" Dax ordered. "It means us no harm!" Such was the level of confidence he radiated that all believed and lowered their arms.

The scientists among them gazed upon the swirling object in awe. Suddenly, the lights whirled and resolved themselves into a physical form, that of a human male, roughly forty-five years of age. He was dark skinned, bald,

wore a goatee beard and projected absolute confidence. Curiously, he wore a 24th century style Starfleet uniform.

“Benjamin!” cried Dax. “How?”

Benjamin Sisko, Emissary to the Prophets, smiled and hugged his oldest friend. “Hello, old man!”

Shortly after, Sisko was reclining in an armchair in the captain’s ready room with a raktagino in his hand. Dax was sitting in his chair on his side of the desk, with Sill sitting on her favourite chair, backwards and leaning forwards on it. She was twirling her braided hair between her fingers as she was want to do when she was considering a conundrum.

“What can I say?” Sisko said with a small smile and shrug of the shoulders. “My life is not linear. Ever since I joined the Prophets, nothing has ever been the same.”

“You can say that again,” Edan Dax said. “I last saw you was as Ezri before I became captain of the Aventine. Where have you been all this time?”

Sisko seemed like he was trying to come up with a coherent answer. “That’s not an easy question to answer. Time...”

Dax nodded. “For you is no longer linear. I get it.”

Sill cut to the chase. “So, what brings you to Cardassia?”

That appeared to be a question that he could answer. He seemed to have a long, hard look at Tryna’s

face. "It's been a long time since your family's been home, hasn't it?" he asked in his deep, basso voice.

Tryna couldn't help but wonder where this was going. "Well, yes. The *Enterprise* left for Andromeda in the 26th Century. We only just got back."

Sisko showed a lot of pearly teeth as he smiled. "Ah. Then, I have a lot to show you." He put down his mug, got to his feet and gestured for them both to join him.

Sill glanced at Dax for reassurance, but he gave her a nod and a look of total confidence. "Sisko is my old Captain, Tryna," he said, from the heart. "I trust him implicitly."

It was good enough for her. She stepped over to the handsome man from another time and took his offered hand. Dax took his other.

Suddenly, they were standing in sunshine.

"Where are we, Benjamin?" Dax asked.

"And when?" Sill asked.

"Fair question," Sisko asked, with a small, cheerful chuckle. "We haven't gone anywhere in time, just down to the planet. We're standing in what used to be Lokarian City. It's been rebuilt after the Dominion destroyed it and renamed Kira City after Nerys."

Dax's face softened and his eyes moistened a little. "That's appropriate after what she risked for them in the final days of the war."

Sisko nodded. "You're right about that," he said, his tone deadly serious. "I wish I'd never had to send her there, but it was war."

The three of them looked about them at the thriving, yet green city. The buildings were a blend of styles, and not anything that Sill expected. From her studies, they reminded her of Cardassian, Bajoran and even some human forms. It was a real mix. The people were making good use of nature's provision as solar panelling was visible everywhere, and Sill noted that channels, with paddle wheels and generators were prolific.

"It looks like the people are using whatever they can to generate power," Tryna remarked. "I gather the Burn destroyed their dilithium stocks?"

Sisko nodded. "It did. Cardassia has been getting by for the last hundred years the old-fashioned way. The Alliance has only a few remaining, working freighters and we keep the dilithium reserved for them."

"I suppose it's also been a problem dealing with the Emerald Chain," Dax observed. "I heard they were nasty."

Sisko gave an almost embarrassed grin. "Ah, no. I visited Osyraa one night and made sure her people would never visit a world in the Alliance – ever."

Dax and Sill shared a look. The Emissary must have put one hell of a scare into that lady to make that happen!

“Come with me,” Sisko said, cheerfully. “I want to show you something!” He strode off, forcing his guests to move quickly to follow.

Within minutes they arrived at a gleaming, golden metal statue. Dax looked up at the three-metre structure and this time he did shed a tear. It was a very faithful reproduction of one Kira Nerys, wearing her Bajoran Military uniform, standing proudly, looking off into the sunset, her earring still dangling from her ear.

Standing next to him, Sill quietly said: “You miss her, don’t you?”

The Captain sighed. “I miss all of my old friends, Tryna. One day, I’ll be missing you, too. It’s the price of longevity.”

The sound of children laughing caught Sill’s ears and she followed it to the shoreline nearby. Crunching through the pebbles, she found them playing in the warm afternoon sun in the clear waters. It was then that she noted just how clean everything looked. If there was one thing the stories she’d always heard noted, it was just how industrialised her homeworld was, and that even with modern technology working to clear the air and water, it never seemed to be able to keep up. Everything always just appeared *dirty*. This place was pristine.

However, the children were even more amazing to her. They were so different to anything she had imagined. For one thing, their skin tone was different to hers. Tryna

Sill was almost a full-blood Cardassian. These children clearly were not. Firstly, their skin was much lighter in tone than hers, and while their eye sockets and forehead had the typical markings of a Cardassian, it was much softer. To top it off, the children all had Bajoran earrings.

Upon seeing her fully, they stopped and ventured over to see her. They didn't appear frightened, only curious.

"Hello," one little girl said. "What's your name?"

"I'm Tryna Sill."

"Where are you from?" a boy challenged. It seemed clear to him that she was a stranger.

It was at that point that any fears they harboured were put to rest. The Emissary arrived and, in awe and reverence, they surged toward him and, not thinking that they were still wet in their bathers, wrapped themselves about him. Sisko didn't care. He had been a father. "This lady and her friend are from the sky," Sisko said. "They've been gone for a very long time, and they've only just come home, so we need to make them feel welcome."

Dax was grinning as he stepped up next to Sill. "Ben's always had a way with kids. He was a great father to Jake."

Sill's eyes widened a little. Then she realised it shouldn't have come to her as much of a surprise. "It was just such a long time ago."

Her captain sighed. "That's something he and I have in common. The people we've left behind. The difference is, he can always go back and visit them."

Tryna's eyes darted back to their host. "He's a *time traveller*?"

"Yes, and no. You make it sound glamorous. It's not like he's able to go anywhere and make changes. He and the Prophets are just ... guardians, you might say." In lieu of a better description, he could only shrug.

There were times when Sill found her captain annoying with his enigmatic air. He was older than sin and he knew it. Still, there were times when you wanted something a little deeper than a shallow description. Something better than: "I'll explain later."

Knowing she wasn't going to get much out of Dax, she decided to go right to the source. Rather than address him by his religious title, she decided to appeal to their commonality. "Captain Sisko, can you tell me why you really brought us here? It wasn't just to show us a statue and the children."

At heart, the man was still Starfleet, and Sill knew it.

"Commander," Sisko said, once more wearing his Captain's persona. "What you see is the product of many years of time, patience and reconciliation. As you know, Cardassia and Bajor have had a very tense relationship at times, the worst for Bajor being the Cardassian

occupation, the best for Cardassia being the Dominion War, when they realised at last that their best ally was, in fact, the Bajorans after all. Kira Nerys was that one who showed them the way.” He held up his hands and begged off the children. Reluctantly, they released their grip on his legs and stepped back. Sisko held out his hands in a familiar fashion and, once more, Edan and Tryna took them.

They found themselves standing outside the doors of the Cardassian HQ, with Demar, Garak, Kira Nerys and some of their followers huddled behind some crates having a laugh at something they currently found hysterical.

“Don’t let go of me,” whispered Sisko. “We’re just here to observe. They cannot see us.”

It wasn’t the war that Sill found interesting, it was the fact that Kira was sitting there, wearing a Starfleet uniform and having a laugh with a Cardassian – the enemy – during a war. The whole situation was nuts. Tryna was aware that Demar was leading a rebellion and Kira was helping him, but she never really believed it until she saw it with her own eyes.

Then the doors opened and Demar, Kira and Garak led the charge – and Demar died. With his last breath he kept encouraging their people to go forward. Sill was moved.

Dax had not been a witness to this, so he, too, was seeing it for the first time. “Nerys, you never ceased to amaze me,” he whispered.

The scene shifted again, and they found themselves standing in the ruined remains of what had been a Cardassian city, watching Sisko, an Admiral and a Klingon drinking what Sill could only guess to be bloodwine while they were surrounded by the corpses of so many different beings – so many of them Cardassians. She could only wonder how many Cardassians lay slain that day. How much blood had seeped into the soil? Was she standing in the ashes of one of her forbears? She felt the urge to check the bottom of her shoes. She sniffed the air. It smelled of smog and dust and blood. She wanted to hurl.

The Emissary muttered: “The Admiral and I couldn’t stomach drinking over the dead with Martok. Watch,” he added solemnly.

The Starfleet men poured their drinks out on the ground and walked off. Martok was not the sort to let good bloodwine waste, so he finished his cup. Then he joined his friends.

They then found themselves standing on a familiar shoreline.

“Lokarian City,” Sill said, recognising the landscape.

“Yes,” Sisko said. “It had been bombarded from space by the Jem’Hadar and levelled. There was nothing left, so the decision was made to simply bulldoze what remained. What bodies that could be found had been and respectfully buried up there on the hill, where everyone can see and remember.” He nodded off to the left where the stones that marked so many graves could be seen. It was a constant reminder to all that such a cataclysm should never be visited on the natives again.

“Come with me.” Sisko didn’t give them a choice as they were still clasping hands. They moved close enough to observe the works – and who was doing them.

Many machines were operating, Tryna could see, but it was the operators that caught her attention. They were clearly a mix of Federation citizens, a number of Bajorans, with Cardassians in the *minority*. “What is this, Captain?” she asked, addressing Sisko.

“After the war, the Dominion did such a good job of bombarding Cardassia that nearly half the population was wiped out. Afterward, disease took a toll as pride held back many who refused the help of outsiders, even though they were dying.” The sadness in Sisko’s voice was hard to miss. “The Federation offered the hand of friendship to rebuild in the hopes of helping build a better Cardassia afterward, but it was the Bajorans who led the way. With a little help from me, and Colonel Kira.”

Dax interjected. "I remember Garak was leading things for a while, and he was a voice of reason. The problem was, I could never learn to trust him."

Sisko gave a dark chuckle. "None of us did. He was brilliant, useful, daring, and did some good work during the war. He was even helpful afterward. It was just his reputation for duplicity that didn't help whenever you wanted to negotiate with him. You never really knew if you were getting a good deal or getting screwed over."

"Quark would have been proud of him," Dax observed with wry tone.

Sisko nodded. "Yes, but even Quark would have known better than do business with him."

Standing next to them, Sill was making a mental note to look up this Quark fellow later.

They were back on the beach, but years later. Standing nearby was a much older Kira Nerys, still wearing her military uniform, but with more elaborate markings on the collar. Perhaps another promotion?

Looking around them at the scene, they could see the buildings were a mix of designs, and the Cardassians didn't seem to mind. Indeed, nearby was a building that they recognised from their first visit but had missed the significance of. It was a Bajoran temple. Standing before it, with their back to them, was clearly the new Kai, blessing it. Next to them was ... Sisko!

Sill looked up at Ben just to make sure he was still there.

"It's OK. We're both here, and the funny thing is, both of us are aware of each other." He shrugged.

"Not linear," Dax muttered.

"Exactly," Sisko said.

Tryna Sill looked about her at the children. While there were many Cardassian children playing, there were also a smattering of Bajoran kids as well.

Sisko noticed the attention. "Yes, some Bajorans have come to live here. That's why they've built a temple here. That's why I'm here."

Once again on the same shore, but it was late in the day and the sun was setting with a gorgeous tangerine glow. The air was clear and Tryna sucked in a lungful of pristine, pure oxygen. It was refreshing. After the previous visits to devastated versions of this world, the atmosphere was a welcome change. It was as if life was returning to her and her homeworld.

She looked off into the distance and the once barren hills were now covered with trees. The cemetery was still visible, but largely cloaked. The streets were lined with foliage, and the architecture everywhere had changed yet again. It seemed as the people changed, so had the buildings.

“Come with me,” Sisko said. This time he did something unusual. He let go of their hands. “Don’t worry. Nobody’s going to give you a second glance here.”

While Dax and Sill shared a dubious look, they decided to follow Sisko down the street. What they found surprised them.

First thing, nobody *did* pay them any mind. That suited them down to the ground.

“Benjamin,” Dax asked quietly. “Why aren’t they paying any attention to *you*.”

“I never said anything about *me*, old man,” Sisko said with a cheeky smile.

“What year is this?” Sill asked, curious.

Sisko shrugged. “Somewhere in the middle of the 28th century.”

“Wow,” Sill said, amazed. “This is cool.”

As they walked down the neat, tidy and clean street, it was becoming clear that the Federation’s influence on Cardassian life was plain to see. However, the larger cultural change was Bajoran. Their spirituality was everywhere. Many Cardassians were wearing their earrings, and it was clear that mixed marriages were culturally acceptable, even promoted.

Noticing the flag flying in the distance, Sill mentioned: “I remember my parents telling me that Cardassia joined the Federation in the middle of Earth’s 25th Century, but only after the last of the war generation

had passed away. It seemed the memories of the war had to die before we were willing to finally make peace with our one-time enemies.”

Sisko looked over at Dax with a cheeky grin. “It’s a good thing, then, that not too many people ever made war with the Trill. They would never have been able to have been able to make a lasting peace with them.”

“Hardy, har, har,” Dax said in reply. “I’ll remember that, Benjamin.”

“I’m sure you will, Old Man,” Sisko said, with his fond smile, reserved for his oldest friend. “However, things here aren’t as perfect as they look.” He stepped over and once more took their hands.

Everything changed again and once more they shifted into the future, standing on the shoreline, the waves lapping at their feet. Looking at the city, Sill noticed that, while the buildings looked as pristine and modern as ever, it hadn’t really grown in size, and there was a greater reliance on natural energy. She pointed out her observations to Sisko.

“The problem is that dilithium is becoming scarce in the galaxy. In the 24th Century, we knew how to recrystallize dilithium, but you can only do it so many times before the structure loses integrity completely and all you wind up with is sand.” Sisko looked wistful, sad. “The Federation at this time had over three hundred member worlds and had not spent enough time exploring

alternatives to matter-antimatter/dilithium reactions for energy creation. A growing society has growing energy demands. With dwindling dilithium supplies, things began to become desperate. One-time friends began to turn on each other. Things were getting nasty.”

The image Sisko was creating in their minds was disturbing. When resources became desperate, civil wars sometimes erupted.

“In a way, we were saved an all-out civil war in two stages. One: Vulcan and Earth seceded, along with Andoria and Tellar Prime, which were huge wakeup calls to the rest of the Federation members when the founding fathers call it a day. And, of course, stage two, the Burn, when most of the remaining dilithium in the galaxy suddenly became inert.” Sisko’s voice cracked at that point. The former Starfleet Captain could only imagine how many of his fellows had died in an instant as every starship with an active warp core had suddenly exploded.

Dax grimaced. “It would have certainly slowed everything down. Too many societies wouldn’t have known how to get their ships moving without dilithium to funnel their matter/antimatter reactions. I seem to remember the original *Enterprise NX-01* was limited to Warp five because of power generation limitations without dilithium.”

His old captain nodded. “Since the Burn, it’s been a feeding frenzy.”

Sill and Dax shared a look. They had some good news for him.

“Well, Benjamin, we have some great news for you, then. A whole new source of dilithium has been found. We’ll have you all up and running in no time.” Dax was beaming.

Sisko wasn’t about to break out the champagne. “Until the next time it runs out.”

Sill understood. A man without time could see the bigger picture. “There is an alternative.”

Her captain scowled. Even Sisko wasn’t read in on Omega.

However, Sisko knew where she was going. “Omega, I know. You’ve already given it to me, I mean you will give it to us. I tend to get my tenses mixed up these days. That’s the trouble with not being linear, you see.” He spoke with the serenity of complete knowledge.

Dax was taken aback. “You know?”

Sisko let go of their hands. The others hadn’t noticed yet, but they were back in the 32nd Century present. He gestured upward. “I know the *Enterprise* is powered by it, and not antimatter. I also know that you’ve just had a spore drive added to your ship and you can literally travel pretty much anywhere in the universe you want to. You’re going to have fun with that.” He gave them a friendly wink.

The Emissary began walking once more and the two of them followed quickly. As soon as Sisko made an appearance, the townsfolk began to flock about him, yearning for a touch, a word. Dax and Sill had to remain close if they wanted to be heard at all.

As they walked down the main street, Sill could not help but feel out of place. The faces around here were a blend of traditional Cardassian, Bajoran, human and there were even touches of Klingon here and there. It seemed the galaxy had made its home here.

Sisko noticed her discomfort. "What were you expecting to find when you came home, Commander?"

Sill was embarrassed. "I supposed I was looking forward to seeing Cardassia of old. At least some Cardassian architecture..."

"And faces more like your own?"

Sisko's tone wasn't accusatory, it was gentle, but his words still cut to Sill's core. She felt like a dinosaur, like a woman stuck in time, something from the past that had refused to move.

"You know, you haven't done anything wrong," Sisko said gently. "Your parents and theirs simply chose a different path."

All the same, his words didn't make her feel a whole lot better. Yes, the *Enterprise* had spent the last six hundred years in Andromeda, which was far removed from the affairs of the Milky Way galaxy. There was no way that

they could remain connected with what was going on at home. No way that they could know that their distant cousins had embraced a different way of life. "Then who are the true Cardassians?" she asked, speaking from the heart.

"Is it so important to be a Cardassian? Why can't we all just be people?" Curiously, it wasn't Sisko who engaged her. It was a Vedek who had joined them from the nearby temple.

"But it's our world!" Sill said, the old nationalism boiling up within her.

The crowd stopped with the Emissary, and they listened respectfully as their Vedek spoke. "As it is ours. We're all children of Cardassia here as much as we are children of the Prophets. We love this world and consider ourselves guardians of it. Do you have a complaint about how we've cared for it?"

Tryna closed her mouth and recoiled slightly as she found herself unable to reply. She *had* been struck by how beautiful their world had become. "No, I don't. Cardassia is a paradise compared with the legends I've been told."

The elderly male Vedek gave her a genuine smile of compassion and love. He spoke from the heart. "Then what does it matter what we look like? We are at peace with ourselves, with nature and with those of other worlds. I would have thought that these were the values that you espouse as members of Starfleet and the Federation."

Standing just behind her, Dax couldn't help but mutter: "He's got you there."

Tryna Sill had to admit to herself that he was absolutely right. She had a blind side, a prejudice she was unaware of, and she realised she had some mediation and introspection to do. "I apologise if I've caused any offense, sir. I should have known better." As a commander in Starfleet, she was called to a higher standard, and right now she felt like she had fallen terribly short of it. She felt a tightness in her chest and a desire to rise above and do better.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Tryna," Dax said, in a conciliatory tone. "Some of us have remained more "genetically pure" for cultural reasons, but for some of us we don't have a whole lot of choice. The Trill are the only ones who can carry our symbiotes."

In his most enigmatic manner, Sisko shook his head. "No, Dax, you're wrong. You haven't met Adira Tal yet, have you?"

Eyes wide, Edan Dax just stared at Sisko. "Ben?"

"Just meet Adira and have a chat. All your questions will be answered." He gave a cheering smile of farewell to all. "I must be going everyone. I will see you again." To Dax, he said: "I will see you when you return with Vedek Turana."

"Where are we going with him?" Dax asked thin air. Sisko had vanished.

The elderly Vedek, resplendent in traditional Bajoran garb, his face a clear mixture of Bajoran nose ridges, Cardassian forehead and greyish skin tone, spoke for him. "You're taking me back with you to speak on Cardassia's behalf with the Federation council. You're going to give me the dilithium we need, and then the secret of Omega."

Dax shot Sill a look, whose wide-eyed look of shock and mad, shake of the head replied: *no, I didn't tell him anything.*

"Don't worry, Captain Dax," Turana said. "The Emissary told me you were coming yesterday. He told me to pack and prepared me for everything I needed to know beforehand."

Edan Dax rolled his eyes. "Of course, he did." Once again, his old captain was two steps ahead of him. He should have known better. His narrowed eyes betraying his annoyance, Dax asked: "Are you ready to go, sir?"

Turana held up his old carpet bag and gave it a jolly jiggle as if he was looking forward to the trip. "I am!"

Sill waved her hand about her. "People, please clear a space!" Obediently, understanding, the locals stepped back and gave them room.

Dax tapped his badge once. "Sarah, three to beam up, please."

In a flash, they were gone.

Just Desserts

It wasn't so bad the second time, and Tryna believed she would get used to it. All the same, it was an odd notion that something with the overall bulk of the *Enterprise* was somehow spinning through the mycelial network and dropping out once more into normal space. Their test flights had gone off without a hitch.

That was easy, Tryna thought. The hard part will be when we attempt the flight back to Andromeda.

There were friends she had left back there that she missed. She tried not to think about them, but at least she was able to keep in touch via the subspace bridge they had established there. She had received several video messages so far, and they had mostly been good.

Now she was home on the *Enterprise*, and she realised she really *did* think of the ship as her home, not Cardassia, she was doing her best to put aside her predilection for classifying people by their outside appearance first and just accept who they were as *people*. Her time on her ancestral homeworld had taught her a valuable lesson: it didn't matter what you looked like on the outside – what matters was what sort of individual you were on the inside and that was shown by your actions. It was a lesson she thought she had learned as a youth, but she had never truly taken it to heart until this day.

Now that the *Enterprise* was back in the confines of the Federation's "starbase" shields and had retrieved all of their people, things were relatively back to normal. At least she was able to sit in her favourite café in the ship's colourful restaurant sector and enjoy a coffee and chocolate croissant. As she considered her meal, she realised even then, that while she may have looked Cardassian on the outside, she certainly didn't act like one. Even her tastebuds didn't reflect her people's old attitudes. She even liked Bajoran hasperat. Maybe she didn't have that far to go after all.

"May I join you?" The voice was unexpected but not unwelcome.

Tryna looked up and had to shield her eyes from a poorly placed spotlight but managed to see the face of Twila Candidata. She gave her a welcoming grin. "Please," she said, offering her the chair opposite.

The operator of "Chocolate or Die", a young Kelvan female came by and gave Twila a friendly smile. "You're new here. What can I bring you?" she asked politely.

Twila just looked up at her curiously. She glanced at Tryna. "Is she...?" she asked.

The Commander just shook her head. "Does it matter?"

Looking up into the expectant eyes of the waitress, she simply answered: "No, I suppose it doesn't." She

checked the menu. "Since I don't know what chocolate is, I'll have some of that."

Both women were mortified.

"Call security!" Tryna said in jest. "Better yet, Crystal, you and I should throw her out the nearest airlock!"

Crystal was laughing so hard others were looking. She didn't care. "We'll just have to initiate her, then, to the *Enterprise Order of Chocolate*."

Twila was looking back and forward from one nutter to the other, wondering what in the universe she had gotten herself into.

"With what shall we induct her, oh High Priestess?" asked Tryna, bowing before her friend in mock obeisance.

"I was thinking Death by Chocolate, Knight of the Choc Realm," Crystal replied in a mock English accent.

"Excellent choice, my Queen! Let it be done!" Tryna grinned like a loon as Crystal vanished behind her console to prepare the dessert.

At this point, Twila was looking like she was considering using her personal transporter to escape the ship entirely.

Tryna put her hand on hers to settle her. "Don't worry about us, Twila. Sometimes we have to be a little nuts to let our hair down. It's been a very unusual day, hasn't it?"

At that, her guest had to admit she was right. It was definitely not a standard day. "It's not every day I jump a starship five hundred light years in a second."

"Exactly. And it's not every day I go time travelling with a man I thought was long dead and find out that everything I thought I knew about my homeworld was wrong. *And* that I had a lot to learn about my own prejudices."

At that point, Crystal returned with *two* tall, large glass servers filled with different ice creams, sauces and confections. To Tryna's eyes, it looked like her teeth would rot while she ate it. Each had a long teaspoon sticking out of the top, inviting them to pluck it out and sample a morsel of the confection.

"Enjoy!" their host said, before stepping back to watch.

Tryna wasn't going to wait. She eagerly showed the way and scooped out a helping of dark brown ambrosia, being careful not to let it drip, and let it melt on her tongue, a look of bliss spreading on her face.

Twila watched her, amazed and curious. Not willing to let anything get the better of her, she seized the glass in her left hand, took hold of the teaspoon in her right and sampled some of the ice-cream while the others watched. A look of delight came over her and shone in her eyes. She quickly came back for more.

Behind Tryna, another voice said: “Be careful you don’t give yourself a brain freeze! I warned Po, but she went ahead and gave herself one anyway.”

The commander didn’t have to turn to know the voice. Lieutenant Tilly had joined them. “What can I do for you, Carrot Top?” she teased, while offering the younger woman a chair.

Tilly wasn’t unwilling to give back an annoyed look, which Tryna credited her for. Perhaps she wasn’t a little bunny after all. “Thanks, Commander,” she said. She looked up at Crystal. “Can I have one of those, too?” As their host left to fill the order, Tilly went on to report. “You’ll be happy to know that the spore drive has completely checked out. All systems are operational. Although Lieutenant Stamets has requested copies of your logs for research purposes – especially when you make the journey to Andromeda.”

It didn’t take a genius to understand why. Sill just nodded her acceptance. “I’d be happy to. Thanks for all your hard work, Sylvia, you and Paul. I gather he’s already headed back to *Discovery*?”

Tilly looked embarrassed. “You can never take him away from his mushrooms for too long. He doesn’t trust anyone with their care for more than a day.”

Tryna wasn’t certain that was all, but she didn’t say anything. Gossip wasn’t her thing.

At that point, Crystal returned with Tilly's ice-cream, but before she decided to try it, she had one more question. "Can I ask you something, Commander?"

"Of course, Sylvia, and we're off duty. Call me Tryna."

Not entirely comfortable with it, but still willing to give it a go, Tilly said: "OK, Tryna, I noticed that the *Enterprise* hasn't had any changes since you returned from Andromeda. When we got here from the past, *Discovery* had a major upgrade, but *Enterprise* has had no changes. You haven't even detached your warp nacelles. Why?"

Tryna gave her a smile full of hidden knowledge. "Since *Enterprise* went to Andromeda, she went through a lot of changes, including the fact that our computer became a completely self-aware AI called Sarah. Everything on this ship is integrated – I mean *everything*. She's practically a living thing. You can't start messing with one thing without adversely affecting something else. That's why we have Sarah. As it is, *Enterprise* is darn near as perfect as she is, if you'll pardon the boast. Why mess with perfection?"

"What about the spore drive?" Twila said, interjecting. "Surely that must have upset the balance?"

"Not really," Twila said. "Sure, it's an extra drive system for the ship, but as it's pretty much self-contained,

it's not much more than adding fuzzy dice to the windshield."

Both women looked at her with puzzled expressions.

"Hmm," Tryna said, realising that one had gone straight over their heads. She'd liked that one. She had picked it up in an old earth movie. "How about adding pinstriping to the engineering section?"

Understanding showed in the eyes of both women.

"That I get," Tilly said. She took another scoop of the confection, delighting in the flavour. "Oh, god, this is too rich. Where do you think you're going next?"

At that, Tryna shrugged. "That's up to Admiral Vance. We understand that the issues here are grave and we're happy to help out, but I'd like to be back in Andromeda within the next couple of years. Things are getting pretty bad over there and we need to begin the evacuation as soon as we can."

Tilly almost choked on her spoonful of ice-cream. "You want to evacuate a *galaxy*?"

Tryna gave her a thin-lipped smile. "You thought you had it bad here. Just wait until we get back to Andromeda. You ain't seen nothing yet."