STAR TREK
THE NEXT GENERATION

Kanu t' Sybok

STAR TREK:
THE NEXT GENERATION
kanu t' sybok

by
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Contents

"Starfleet is not a thing!" Picard nearly shouted, "No organizations are things. They are collections of people making decisions. I took an oath as a Starfleet Officer to defend the Federation and its Charter. The Federation is using Starfleet to break its own rules. I am a person in that organization, and I am choosing to right the ship, not let it continue to capsize. History may paint me as a villain, but I will not betray my oath. Not again. I will resign first! But before I do that, I intend to right a wrong I was part of creating."

"Freedom must be taken! Freedom must be won!"

—Marmaduke Bonthrop, Orlando

"Logic, logic, logic. Logic is the *beginning* of wisdom, Valeris, not the end."

—Commander Spock, Star Trek VI "The Undiscovered Country"

Prologue

A small beacon spins in a lazy orbit around a binary star system. It is silent, and without navigation or any kind of lights. Suddenly, it bursts to life, flashing warning patterns in all directions from high-lumen emitters. In subspace, on a Federation emergency channel, the beacon begins to send a message to any ship approaching. At that moment one does, the *USS Nova*, NCC-73515 in bold letters on the top of its saucer section.

"Relative all stop," ordered Captain Alexander.

"Aye, aye," the navigation officer said quickly, then soon after: "Answering relative all stop, Captain."

"Ops, what do we see?"

"There is a Starfleet navigation buoy between us and the binary stars. It activated when we dropped out of warp. Besides visual warnings, it is transmitting a navigational warning and a series of coordinates describing a spherical shape between the buoy and the stars. Within this sphere are further coordinates defining a geometric shape in the center of the sphere."

"Is that our Tyken's Rift?"

"Yes, Captain," ops replied. "At least, it is what and where our briefing said to look for it, but I am not able to detect anything on our sensors."

"That's exactly what the *Enterprise* experienced. The Rift is not visible to ship's sensors."

"Captain," the officer at the science station interrupted.

"Yes, Commander?"

"I'm not picking up the *Brattain*. It should be there. At least, it was detectable on sensors and visible to the *Enterprise* crew."

"Okay. That is odd. That is annoying. But is it impossible?"

"No, Captain, I don't suppose so," the Commander replied. "Given the violence of the explosion when the *Enterprise* escaped, perhaps the interior of the Rift has become opaque."

"Put the area on screen. Overlay the rift as the buoy defines it. Have the long-range sensors sweep the system, in case the *Brattain* managed to slip out and orbit the stars without being sucked in."

The viewscreen display swung to port, then stopped with a flashing buoy in the center. The computer overlaid a large circle on the far side of the probe, and then the geometric shape of the Rift itself.

"Commander, why can I see through the thing if it's opaque?"

"Given the energy involved in maintaining the Rift's structure, we might be seeing something akin to gravitational lensing."

"Damn!" Alexander remarked, then began to chew the nail on her right thumb. *A nervous tick*, she thought to herself, *but this time I'm going to indulge. Three weeks to get here, a week to free and drag the* Brattain *to Starbase 220, and then 2 months of furlough. But of course, the damn ship isn't where it is supposed to be.*

"Okay, let's do everything book-wise, shall we?" Alexander continued. "Ops, coordinate with the science station to begin launching the probes. Keep at it until we can map a nice, solid surface of the thing, and the midpoint between the lobes."

The Ensign at Ops and the Commander at the science station replied, "Aye, aye, Captain!" simultaneously, and began to get to work at their stations.

"Navigation, when there is enough edge showing to be safe, move us within one thousand meters of the Rift. Let's hope this souped-up tractor beam can reach in there and grab it." She touched an area on the panel of the right arm of her chair, "Engineering."

"Yes, Captain?" came a voice back over the comms.

Before Captain Alexander could speak, the *Nova* began to fire off a series of very small probes. They came pouring out like water flowing from a faucet, looking like an RCS thruster with some electronics attached to the front of it, which is essentially what they were.

"Anything on sensors?"

"No, Captain, there is nothing in this system except dust. Those stars won't allow for a stable orbit."

She re-keyed an area on her chair's right panel. "Engineering, in case the tractor beam does not work from outside, please prepare the torpedoes."

"Affirmative, Captain," a voice came back from engineering, "but I am not happy about having these elements on board, never mind putting them in torpedo tubes. They are highly volatile, so I'm not comfortable having them out of containment for more than 2 hours."

"Very well, Grishim, if we don't use them in two hours, I'll shoot them into the suns. How long will it take to load the casings?"

"Give us an hour, Captain."

"Very well, proceed and report to me when they are ready and loaded into the tubes."

"Yes ma'am."

By now, the flood of small probes had begun to paint white almost exactly where the buoy's information had said the Rift would be. As each RCS probe entered the Rift, its power immediately began to fail. With the last of its energy, it sent a signal back to the ship's computer, which then painted a white dot at the probe's position.

"Moving into position one thousand kilometers from the center of the anomaly," the navigation officer said quickly, pausing long enough to let the Captain change her order.

"Very well."

On the viewscreen, the buoy flew past the port side of the ship, and they pierced the painted sphere overlayed on the viewscreen. The ship declared a red alert, automatically triggered by the buoy's heightened warning level, due to their increasing proximity.

"Dropping impulse engines for thrusters," navigation explained. "We'll be in position in thirty seconds."

"Stand down red alert! Ops, where's that ship?"

"I have nothing, Captain."

"Science, tell me you have something."

"I'm sorry Captain. Other than the probes we sent in, there is no matter of a detectable size inside the Rift."

"Alright," Alexander said, somewhat resigned, unconsciously chewing her thumbnail. "Comms, relay to Starfleet Command: Have located the Tyken's Rift and closed within one thousand kilometers using the modified probes. So far, no *Brattain*. In fact, nothing detectable inside the Rift other than the probes we sent in there. A sweep of the system confirms there are no objects at all orbiting the stars. We are prepared to use torpedoes to break it open. Please confirm. *USS Nova*, Captain Alexander commanding."

"Understood," the comms officer acknowledged.

"Now we wait," Alexander said to no one, or perhaps everyone, on the bridge. Then she stood. "McNeal, you have the conn. I'll be in my ready room."

"Aye, Captain," her first officer acknowledged, and she left the bridge.

#

Captain's log, USS Nova, Stardate 45081.1
We have arrived at the coordinates provided in our orders from Starfleet. As soon as we dropped out of warp, a Starfleet warning buoy began broadcasting a navigation hazard alert, with coordinates relative to the binary stars, as we expected.
Our attempts to locate the Brattain *inside the Rift have failed, but we are able to detect the probes we sent in to map the exterior of the thing. A scan of the system itself reveals nothing but dust. Anything with much mass cannot maintain a stable orbit because of the binary stars' unusual orbits. Eventually all mass will be drawn into the suns.*
We have another option, to disrupt the rift if we could not use our tractor beam to pull the Brattain *out, but the fact we cannot see the ship makes this problematic. I'm not sure we should do it, because the Nova could end up trapped herself. We have more chemicals and torpedoes, but I don't like the idea of making such a huge explosion near my ship.*

A trill came from the console on her desk.

"End recording," Captain Alexander said, and when the computer acknowledged it had done so, she keyed in the communication.

"Go for Alexander."

"Captain, the Starfleet response has come back."

"Very well, send it through to me here."

"Ma'am."

The console screen lit up with the United Federation of Planets logo, and some text reported it was descrambling a message. A man appeared on the screen, an admiral according to his uniform.

"Captain, I'm sorry I didn't have time to speak to you directly. We've discussed your situation with our people and agree there is no point in putting the *Nova* at risk trying to blow open the Rift if there is nothing inside. There is no *Brattain* in the Rift, and no *Brattain* in orbit. I think it is safe to assume it somehow slipped out and met its fate falling into the stars. Either that, or the reserve power maintaining the warp containment failed, and the ship destroyed itself.

"Given that you were expected to be working on this mission for at least a week, I've decided to extend your furlough. Since your next mission will involve cargo leaving Oasis, why not take the *Nova* to Risa for a month?

"Admiral Haaverty, out."

With the end of the message, the UFP logo once again displayed on the screen.

"Risa?" the Captain said to herself, and a light smile pulled at the corners of her mouth.

Then she stood up and re-entered the bridge. "Tactical!"

"Yes, Captain."

"Are those two torpedoes now ready to fire?"

"Aye, Captain. I have set coordinates into the center of the Rift."

"Negate that order. Navigation, orient our bow so it's facing the suns."

"Yes, Captain. Just a second."

"When we are ready, I want you to fire those torpedoes into the larger of the two suns. If you can't get a target lock, don't worry about it. Best guess. Gravity will do the rest."

"Aye, aye!"

"Bow now oriented toward the suns, Captain."

"Fire torpedoes."

"Firing torpedoes." As the tactical officer pressed the fire icon, the "torpedo fired" alert sounded in the bridge. As they watched, the two torpedoes headed off towards the suns.

"That's it then. Excellent work everyone. Helm!"

"Aye."

"Set a course for Risa. Warp eight."

"Yes, Captain!"

The *Nova* spun about, almost 180 degrees, then brought its bow up marginally.

"Course and speed laid in Captain."

"Engage." And that smile once again pulled at the corners of the Captain's mouth.

#

The *USS Nova* disappears in a flash of light, and space becomes empty and dark again. A small beacon spins in a lazy orbit around a binary star system. It is silent, and without navigation or any kind of lights.

The starboard door to the bridge opened and a young Ferengi stepped through, looking pensive and holding a small memory storage device. By his uniform's lack of stripes, and absence of chevrons on his forehead tattoo, he is a mere crewmember, and of little importance.

"You," the First Officer barked, turning from the command sphere when the bridge door opened. "What are you doing on the bridge?"

"I… I…"

"He is here at my request, Darin. Mind the ship," the DaiMon explained, turning and meeting the crew member near the aft of the bridge.

"Yes, DaiMon Pash!"

"Do you have it?" the DaiMon demanded of the nervous Ferengi.

"Yes… Yes sir, it is all in here." He held up the memory storage.

"Then hand it over," Pash demanded, holding out his hand. When the young crew member hesitated, Pash started to lose patience. "Frevar, I am currently sending my ship on a heading and do not know what I will find when I get there. You promised me you have a contact in Starfleet that has details of a very profitable business venture, one with little peril."

"And this is most true, DaiMon, but I must confess, I cannot in good conscience relinquish this information to you without first ensuring myself a percentage of the profits."

"What did you say?"

"Like I have explained previously, this information comes by way of a mole I have in Starfleet. It is a very valuable resource, and I cannot let it go for nothing!"

"You will receive a percentage of the spoils, as every member of this crew will!" DaiMon Pash practically yelled, leaning over the now cringing Ferengi.

"Nevertheless, DaiMon," Frevar squeaked, bending over backwards as the DaiMon leaned over him, "you will discuss percentages with me, or you will not know of the possibility that awaits."

DaiMon Pash glared at the lowly crew member for several tense seconds, and then his glare turned into a smile.

"Now that," the DaiMon explained to his bridge crew, turning in a circle, his hand in the air, "is a real Ferengi. All of you take note." He rounded back to Frevar: "And what do you believe should your percentage be?"

"Tw...twenty five percent," the beleaguered Ferengi managed, barely.

DaiMon Pash dropped his smile, replacing it with a grimace. "There is a difference between a real Ferengi and a body floating through space!"

"I meant, uh, ten percent."

For a moment DaiMon Pash stared, expressionless, his eyes boring into the Ferengi in front of him. The entire bridge tensed for violence.

"Ha, ha!" the DaiMon laughed, moving over and putting his arm around the terrified crew member. "What is your name again?"

"Crewmember, Frevar."

"Well, there is no way in all of space you will be getting ten percent of the mission carried out in my ship, with my crew, but because you have stood up for yourself in such fine Ferengi tradition, I hereby grant you seven percent of the spoils of this mission, after my percentage is taken of course, and upon successful completion, a promotion to Salesman Third Class. Now, how do you feel about that?"

"Deal! Here is the information you will need."

"And what is this surprise we are going to recover?"

"An intact, fully functional Federation Starship, DaiMon, abandoned by Starfleet inside a Tyken's Rift."

"What ship?"

"The *USS Brattain*. Our archives contain a nearly complete catalog of its displacement, tonnage, offensive and defensive weapons. Thrusters, impulse engines," Frevar was getting excited.

"Not to mention all the portable technology," DaiMon Pash added, "phasers and medical devices. If the ship's computer is intact, with all that Starfleet data. Sold

piece by piece it should be worth a fortune!" The DaiMon was beaming

The rest of the bridge crew, usually too careful to admit they were listening in on business negotiations, had begun to hoot and cheer with Frevar's revelations. Abandoned in space meant even the Federation could not complain if the Ferengi salvaged it. It would indeed be a once in a lifetime business venture."

"Except, Captain, I believe I may have an even more profitable idea than selling the ship bit by bit. It has to do with that mole in Starfleet I was telling you about."

"Well, Frevar, almost Third Class, if you say you have an even more profitable idea, then I am eager to hear it. Come with me to my duty room and fill me in.

"Time to destination?" Pash demanded.

"Four hours, three minutes DaiMon," came the response.

"Increase to warp eight. We must not miss our prize!"

"Yes DaiMon, increasing to warp eight."

#

A small beacon spins in a lazy orbit around a binary star system. It is silent, and without navigation or any kind of lights. Suddenly it bursts to life, flashing warning patterns in all directions from high-lumen emitters. In subspace, on a Federation emergency channel, the beacon begins to send a message to any ship

approaching. In a moment one does, a D'Kora class Marauder.

"Report!" DaiMon Pash demanded as soon as the ship had dropped out of warp.

"DaiMon," the sensor specialist replied. "There is a Federation beacon broadcasting on an emergency frequency. It started the moment we arrived."

"Can we decrypt it?"

"No need, sir, it is broadcasting in the clear, in Humaan Standard. It appears to be a set of coordinates describing a large sphere between the beacon and the suns. And another shape inside this sphere."

"Scan inside the inner shape," Pash demanded. He smiled as he awaited the expected answer. For sure, these Rifts were dangerous, and getting a starship out of one would be difficult. Nothing an enterprising Ferengi couldn't manage, though.

"Scanners show nothing inside the inner shape sir!"

"What? Then inside the sphere."

"Yes, sir!"

Pash felt the smile on his face slowly melting into a grimace. He began to imagine the humiliations he could heap upon this Frevar, wasting so much time and money on such a profitless enterprise.

"Nothing inside the sphere either DaiMon."

"Get Frevar up to the bridge. *Now*!"

"Yes DaiMon."

Pash spent the next few minutes moving between his Commander's chair and the command sphere. His imagination was coming up with ever more and ruinous humiliations. This failure reflected badly on him. His crew would be angry with him for the lack of profit, and no doubt someone above him in the CEA on Ferenginar would grasp it as an excuse to topple him from his position.

The rear starboard door to the bridge opened, and a clearly excited Frevar walked quickly through. After a moment to view the faces of the bridge crew, and especially his DaiMon, his excitement was swept away with fear.

"Where is your Starship, crewmember?"

Frevar looked from his DaiMon to the forward display. On it he could see a massive sphere painted by the computer, with another geometric shape inside.

"I, I don't know," Frevar squeaked. His mind raced frantically. The validity of his information was without question. So, this meant the starship *was* there at stardate 44631.2, and when the *Enterprise* left at 44642.1. He also knew for certain the Federation did not plan to salvage the ship for months.

So, what could make a Starship with no crew or power disappear? Frevar was a clever Ferengi. Perhaps not the best with business and profits, but reasoning and logic came to him so easily sometimes people called him a Vulcan. He had eliminated the possibility that the ship had

already been taken, and simply drifting out of the Rift was impossible. The ship was either still there or had been released by a massive explosion.

DaiMon had begun berating him now, but Frevar was slipping away, into the place where he could think. Like a holodeck, he imagined himself on the bridge of the *Brattain* by extrapolating from the ship specifications he had read, making up details as necessary. He had no idea what condition the bridge was in.

One panel was flashing on the right console of the Captain's chair. He looked to ops and conn, and saw the same symbol flashing on them. It was red and felt urgent. He slowly turned around. The same warning was flashing on every console. He made his way over to the Master Situation Station at the rear of the bridge and looked closely at the warning. His Standard was not good, especially reading, but he looked anyway. He did recall the letters of the alphabet, so he started with that: Core Breach in Progress! After a short time, realization lifted his brows and brought a smile to his face.

"Are you listening to what I am saying to you?" the DaiMon yelled in Frevar's face.

"No… Yes DaiMon. But all is not lost."

"What do you mean."

"Did you detect any debris in the Rift, as if a ship had exploded?"

The science specialist looked to Pash, who nodded. "There is virtually nothing inside the Rift, or the sphere.

Stray gasses and particles exactly the same as readings just outside the circle."

Posh turned back to Frevar to start yelling again.

"DaiMon if you will indulge me just one more time. Have you scanned the system, in particular closer to the stars?"

"Of course not, why would we… science station!"

"A few seconds DaiMon," came back from the science specialist. "Praise the Grand Nagus!" he suddenly shouted, "DaiMon, there is a Federation starship deeper in the system. No life signs or power readings of any kind."

"On the display!" Posh demanded.

"Sir!"

The beacon, sphere, and shape of the Rift disappeared as the external camera zoomed in closer to the binary stars. It was soon impossible to see anything due to the light from them.

"Filter this!" the DaiMon yelled. "Do I have to think of everything?"

A solar filter removed the glare until the suns looked like simple bright circles. There was a tiny dot visible.

"Closer, closer," Posh ordered.

The dot became a shape.

"Again, again you fool!"

The shape became larger, and before the DaiMon could shout again, it became larger, and larger still, until it took up almost the viewscreen.

It was indeed a Federation starship, and indeed a *Miranda*-class as they expected. The ship was rolling listlessly, and suddenly the upper hull became visible: *USS Brattain* NCC-21166.

"There DaiMon, there it is!" Frevar shouted.

"Why is it out of the rift?"

"I should have thought of this, and it is a good thing we are here. The ship barely had any power left when the *Enterprise* discovered it. With the Rift slowly draining anything remaining, eventually the magnetic seals on the warp core would fail, and there would be a breach of the antimatter containment."

Frevar looked around the bridge. All he saw was confusion.

"Why was it not destroyed?" Posh asked. He had forgotten he was angry.

"Don't you see? Like our systems, there must be some automated ejection of the core before it can destroy the ship. In this case the core was ejected, floated away, then exploded. This broke the Rift and allowed the *Brattain* to be pushed away by the shockwave."

"I'd say then we, and you, are very lucky."

"But DaiMon, we must not wait. This system does not allow for stable orbits. The *Brattain* will soon fall into one of the suns!"

Posh looked to his science specialist, who tapped a few icons, then looked back and nodded.

"Set a course for the *Brattain*. Full impulse power!" DaiMon Posh demanded. He always felt a euphoria at the thought of profit approaching, and this deal was going to be massive. He knew it was ridiculous, but he felt like the artificial gravity had failed, and his feet were floating above the deck. He didn't even notice he had put his arm around Frevar, who was grinning from lobe to lobe.

"Begin night shift." Commander Data, standing before the captain's chair, sat down as the lighting on the bridge dropped.

"Status?" Data requested.

"All decks report ready. All offensive and defensive systems report ready at standby," the Lieutenant at the tactical station behind Data replied.

"Sensors report nothing but background radiation, Commander," the Ensign at ops reported.

"Ship on course for Dardrius colony, warp six," came the report from the ensign at the conn.

"Time to arrival?" Data requested. This, of course was not necessary, he had already calculated the arrival time down to the minute, including variations allowing for predictable navigation issues. Data did not see the irony of his question. Taking control of the bridge for a shift meant for the commanding officer to orient themselves by requesting the ship's mission status, position, speed, if travelling, and the ship's overall status.

"Fourteen hours, eleven minutes," came the reply from the conn.

Data and the computer did not often disagree, but it would appear his estimation of the travel time was longer than the computer's. By almost an hour. This was sooner

than his estimate's most positive projection, by several minutes. Data cocked his head to one side as he considered the possibilities.

The computer was in error.

He was in error.

A third cause he did not yet comprehend.

His own personal full diagnostic was a week ago, with daily diagnostics at the end of every shift. He could not take time out from his duties to run one now, but none of the runtime error warning algorithms reported anything untoward.

"Lieutenant Feche."

"Yes sir," Feche replied from tactical.

"Please run a level five diagnostic on the computer at science two."

"Right away, Commander." Feche left tactical and a backup quickly took his place. At science two he ran the diagnostic, and in a few minutes, he said: "Level five diagnostic reports all computer functions operating nominally, sir."

"Thank you." Data now had to consider a third possibility. The computer reported all systems nominal, as did his runtime protection. This meant that the error must have occurred within him, but not been detected as an error.

Data considered possible causes why a human being would overestimate a time to arrival. He found one, relayed to him by Commander LaForge, who had heard it

30

described by Mr. Scott—a 23rd Century engineer the *Enterprise* had encountered crashed on a Dyson Sphere. This was the desire to look more efficient when the expected result occurred sooner than expected. Commander LaForge said Mr. Scott called it looking like a 'Miracle Worker.' But this could not apply to him, because he had not reported the time of arrival to anyone.

Another possibility came to him. An emotion called "pessimism", in which a person exaggerates things like wait times or other obstacles because they are not seeing things as they are, but in a more negative light, as they presume them to be.

An incoming message trill came from behind him at tactical.

"Commander, we are receiving new orders from Starfleet Command."

Data paused his computations and set the issue aside to consult with Commander LaForge at a later date. "Is it restricted?"

"No sir, just 'To bridge command, *USS Enterprise*.'"

"Route it to the captain's ready room please. Mr. Feche, you have the bridge," then he headed to the ready room.

"I have the bridge. Aye, sir."

Once seated behind the captain's desk, Data opened the file from Starfleet. It was a short set of orders that Data understood as soon as it appeared. Yet he paused

briefly, letting a difficult decision matrix sort out the decision to inform the captain or not.

Decided, Data got up and went back to the bridge.

"Ensign Erin," he said quickly.

"Yes, sir!"

"Make our new heading 334 mark 081. Maintain warp six."

"Aye, sir. Course laid in."

"Engage."

#

It was 07:49 hours when Captain Picard arrived on the bridge via turbo lift.

Data stood: "Captain on the bridge."

"As you were." Picard walked down the side of the bridge to stand in front of Data. "Report."

"Nothing of substance to report, Captain. The ship and crew are operating nominally. At 00:49 hours we received new orders from Starfleet Command, which required us to change course and make an investigation into a missing warp core at the Beta Epsilon salvage yards. We should arrive within the hour. Starfleet estimates up to twenty-four hours should be sufficient for us to investigate, and then to continue our course to the Dardrius colony at sufficient warp to arrive as expected. The orders are available on the display in your ready room."

"Very well, Commander. I have the bridge."

"You have the bridge, sir," Data agreed, then proceeded to the aft port turbolift.

Captain Picard stood for a moment looking at the warping stars through the main viewer. "Begin morning shift," he said, as he sat down in his chair. The lights on the bridge came up to daytime normal.

"Status?" he requested.

"All decks report ready. All offensive and defensive systems report ready at standby," said Lieutenant Feche at tactical.

"Sensors report nothing but background radiation, Captain," the Ensign at ops reported.

"Ship on course for Beta Epsilon salvage yards, warp six," came the report from Ensign Erin at the conn.

"Time to arrival?"

"Forty-nine minutes, Captain."

"Lieutenant Feche."

"Yes, sir?"

"Find Commander Riker and have him report to me. I'll be in my ready room. You have the bridge."

"Aye, sir, I have the bridge." And the Lieutenant selected icons to have the computer summon Commander Riker to the bridge.

#

Captain Picard sat at his desk in the ready room, drumming his fingers with one hand and supporting his chin with the other. He was having an extraordinary sense of déjà vu, but simply could not place it. His mind briefly picked at the covering over the fear he had for the

syndrome that would one day destroy his mind, but he quickly stopped himself.

A trill came from his door.

"Come."

The door slid open, and Commander Riker stepped in. While dressed in uniform, his hair was a mess.

"Did I catch you sleeping, Commander?"

"Never sir. You and I both know First Officers do not sleep."

Picard smiled and motioned for Riker to sit.

"The fact you're cracking smiles at my just-awake jokes tells me the universe isn't coming to an end," Riker jested as he sat.

"No, no, on the contrary. About 8 hours ago we received new orders from Starfleet." Picard turned the console on his desk around so his First Officer could read them. He continued as Riker read, "sounds damn familiar but I can't place it."

"It is, Captain. We had a similar mission three years ago, but as I recall you were playing dress up as a Romulan. We went to the Surplus Depot Z-15 surplus yards in search of a Vulcan ship part."

"Right!" the Captain agreed. "How could I have forgotten that?"

"You were rather busy at the time."

"Yes, I suppose I was," Picard replied, nodding, "I remember your report now. And that is the reason I got

you up. Given your success at the last yards, I'd like you to take point on this one."

"Yes sir," said Riker, standing up.

"Oh, and you'll probably be happy to hear, Commander, the Beta Epsilon salvage yard is operated entirely by Starfleet personnel. If they give a Commander any grief, just let me know and I'll growl a Captain at them."

Riker smiled his crooked, endearing smile. "Yes sir, this one sounds like a walk in the park."

"Dismissed."

Riker nodded and left the ready room.

#

First Officer's log, USS Enterprise, stardate 48502.3.

The Enterprise *has dropped out of warp at the edge of the Beta Epsilon system, immediately triggering dozens of automated sensor systems, which began to track us closely. Beta Epsilon is not a junkyard, like Depot Z-15, but a recycling shipyard that salvages viable parts of destroyed starships in order to build new ones. It was an initiative that came out of the destruction of so many Starships by the Borg at Wolf 359. The prototype was so successful, three more facilities were opened. But, because the yard deals with working starship parts and partially constructed starships, it needs the security of a Starfleet shipyard.*

The station itself is on a moon of the outermost planet, Beta Epsilon IV, a gas giant similar in size to Neptune. The four planets of the system orbit a blue giant star, making sensors almost useless due to the extremely high ambient radiation levels.

The starships and parts are contained in a tight orbit around the blue giant. Shield-emitting barges protect working crew and equipment from the star's radiation.

I have contacted the commander of the station, Commander T'Amar, and she has given us permission to visit by shuttlecraft, as transporters are too dangerous this close to the star's emissions.

As far as the mission, looking at the location and degree of security, I find it hard to imagine anyone managing to steal anything.

"Beta Epsilon, this is shuttlecraft *El-Baz*. Request landing procedures," Data said from the conn of the shuttle.

"*El-Baz*, Beta Epsilon. Please target ILS and maintain hands-on until landing. Repeat, you have the ball."

"Affirmative, Beta Epsilon, I have the ball."

"Hands on all the way?" LaForge mused from the engineering station.

"The ambient radiation from the Beta Epsilon star is extremely powerful, even as distant as we are," Data

explained, "The shields of the *El-Baz* are barely powerful enough to project us. A remote navigation signal could be subject to disruptions by solar flare activity, which is nearly constant."

"This is really not a place to be alive, is it Data?" Riker mused.

Data cocked his head to the side. "By my calculations, 99.999998% of the galaxy is inhabitable by life, and many of those habitable areas would be lethal to other forms. For example, even the Earth, when it was first able to support life, would have been fatal to anything alive today. It was a poisonous atmosphere of methane, carbon monoxide, hydrogen sulfide, and ammonia, with constant rains contaminated by sulfuric acid from volcanic activity. The first organisms on Earth consumed carbon dioxide and produced oxygen as waste. They were so successful they altered the structure of the atmosphere, creating such high oxygen levels they poisoned themselves, giving rise to oxygen consuming life like that existing on the planet today.[1]"

Riker and LaForge exchanged glances. As Data talked, his hands flew deftly over the conn's navigation

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[1] Earth's early atmosphere is a point of contention in the scientific community. While low oxygen-levels are more likely to produce life from prebiotic materials, the assumption that the Earth's atmosphere was generated by volcanic activity may not be correct. For a simple discussion of this issue, see: astrobiology.nasa.gov.

icons, and the shuttle landed on a pad with bright navigation lights around its periphery.

Once the shuttle's struts settled on the deck, a message came over the comms: "*El-Baz*. Please shut down all propulsion and ship systems."

"Confirmed, Beta Epsilon, all systems shut down," Data replied.

The landing pad began to sink into the ground. Once the roof of the shuttle cleared the level of the ground, a secondary door closed over the landing pad, designed to look like the surrounding rocky surface.

#

"Commander Riker!" an older, but fit woman–a Vulcan–approached Riker and the others as they came through the flexible hatch connected to the shuttle's aft.

Riker introduced the *Enterprise* crew. "Commander T'Amar, let me introduce you to our science officer, Commander Data, our Chief Engineer, Commander LaForge, and our Engineer's Mate, System Diagnostic Engineer Lieutenant Barclay."

Commander T'Amar nodded at each introduction, then turned back to Riker: "I am pleased you are here, Commander. When we discovered the missing item, we did a visual scan and discovered several other items missing as well."

"So, more than just the warp core?"

"Yes, the core, several items of bridge equipment, a warp core ejection system, two high-output starship phaser arrays, and five high-output fusion reactors."

"When do you suspect the items were taken?"

"That is difficult to determine. Starfleet is so confident in our location and surveillance there has never been a request to inventory our collection visually. This appeared to be unnecessary, as nothing has ever gone missing before. We are completing a refit of the *USS Shenzhou* and required a new warp core. But when my crew went to collect it based on its location in our computer inventory, it was not there. I then ordered a visual inventory of each item in our database."

"Okay," Riker said, rubbing his beard. "If you approve, I would like to assign my people to examine your computer and database, your surveillance logs and equipment, and your personnel going back as far as we need."

"Very well, Commander Riker, I have announced your presence to the crew, and ordered them to provide any assistance you require. I find your team satisfactory. If I may be of further service, do not hesitate to contact me. For now, I must resume my duties."

"Thank you, Commander," replied Riker, and they watched the station's commander walk away. "Okay," he continued, "Geordi, I want you and Reg to go over the station's surveillance systems like a level one diagnostic on the *Enterprise*. No one can even scan what is down

there near that star, let alone get to it without setting off the entire station's surveillance system. Is it working? Is there a flaw? Has it been tampered with?"

"Yes, sir," LaForge replied, then turned to Barclay "Come on Reg, let's go get our uniforms dirty." The pair headed off toward the security monitoring station.

"Data, I need you to go over the station's personnel. I have a hunch that these parts did not go missing without some help from the inside."

"Yes, Commander."

"At the same time, find out exactly what the parts were for, class of vessel, time of arrival at the yards, anything about them you can find that might point to why they were taken, and not the items next to them."

"I will do my best, sir."

"Thank you, Data."

Data nodded, then walked off to find a terminal to the main computer.

Riker tapped his badge, "Riker for Picard."

"Picard here. Go ahead, Commander."

"We've started our investigation, but I don't think we'll be able to sort this all out in twenty-four hours. Just the diagnostics could take days."

"Understood. Recommendations?"

"The *El-Baz* is sub-light only. Take the *Enterprise* to Dardrius colony now and pick us up when you're done."

"Not much to do on Beta Epsilon."

"Don't worry, Captain. We'll play charades."

"Very well, Commander," Picard replied. He tried very hard, but Riker could hear the laughter hidden beneath the words. "We will return for you at the conclusion of negotiations on Dardrius colony. Keep in touch with daily reports."

"Aye, sir. Riker out."

There were no external windows in the base to look out and see the stars, but in his mind's eye Riker could see the *Enterprise* disappear in a flash of light.

Riker tapped his comm badge. "Commander Riker for Commander T'Amar."

"Go for T'Amar."

"The *Enterprise* has left the system to complete its mission without us. They will return when their mission is complete."

"Very well."

"Since we will be here longer than twenty-four hours, could you get someone to assign us quarters and a science station?"

"Of course, Commander. Lieutenant Brait will be at your location in a few minutes to get you anything you need."

"Thank you, Commander, Riker out."

She came to awareness slowly, at least for her. There was a sharp pain in the back of her head, a ringing in her ears, and the unmistakable warm feeling of blood running down her neck and along her spine beneath her prison smock. As awareness came back, T'Rya realized she was standing on her toes–barely–and her arms were stretched taut up and off to the sides. The bindings on her wrists were forcing her to carry most of her weight with her arms. Her shoulders were already protesting.

She looked around. It was one of the large communal washrooms for prisoners, but this one looked filthy and unused. There were four Begemote prisoners in front of her, watching. She was some distance from the wall behind her, because she could not see it when she looked back. Who knew how many more were back there?

With as little motion as possible, T'Rya began to test the restraints on her wrists. They felt something like leather and were only wrapped tightly a few times around each wrist, then crudely tied in a knot. The other ends were tied to support beams in the ceiling. If she could somehow overcome the knot on at least one arm, she could unwind herself from the restraint. These prisoners, ones who refused to accept her, knew how dangerous she could be, even with one arm immobile. It was possible, if she could get one hand free, they might leave.

One of the prisoners came up closer to her. "Has it sunk in yet?" he asked, speaking the language of their

planet. Although T'Rya still had difficulty speaking it like a native, she had learned how to understand well enough.

T'Rya jerked forward and the prisoner jumped back, frightened. She just needed a little more time to get one arm free.

"Very funny Hokan," he said, trying to regain his composure. "Hokin" was as close to Vulcan as they seemed able to manage in their language.

"You are in error. All of you," T'Rya spoke loudly so everyone could hear. "I am not your enemy. I have forsaken the Federation and even my own people to be here."

Hand so close…

"Then you gave up for nothing. Because you are going to die here. This is a sublevel of the prison, forgotten by everyone, even the guards. Your friends will not find you here, no one will. We will prop you up in that pose you like, so you can meditate while you sink in the beetle swamp!"

The prisoner turned around and took something from another prisoner behind him. Without warning, he turned, and swung the object at her. It looked like a sock, with something in the end. Likely a bar of cleaning material. In her mind she applauded their choice of torture. Properly handled, someone could torture another for hours with a tool like that.

The soap hit her just below her rib cage. The Begemote was using his right hand, so it landed perhaps

ten centimeters to left of center. The pain was astounding, but T'Rya did not let them see anything. She steeled herself and controlled it.

The Begemote made a huffing sound, laughing. He turned around and they all laughed together. T'Rya took that moment to listen carefully. There were no more prisoners behind her. Just these four.

Her hand wriggled a little more. The straps might let her hand through if she dislocated her thumb.

The Begemote suddenly turned around and struck her another savage blow. This time it hit her rib cage. She heard two, perhaps more bones crack under the pressure. This time the pain was almost mind shattering, but she did not give them any satisfaction. She needed to keep them talking just a bit longer.

"Any smart comments now, Hokan?"

"All of my comments are smart, especially compared to you. I am a Vulcan."

The other prisoners began to laugh. Here was a female, trussed up and under torture, who took the time to make their leader look like an ass. T'Rya laughed with them, patiently twisting her hand from side to side.

She'd miscalculated. The laughter made the lead Begemote furious. He wheeled on her and began landing blow after savage blow on her unprotected mid-section. Some beneath the rib cage, others into it, shattering the already broken ribs and forcing shards into her internal

organs. One shard punctured a lung, and her ability to breathe became limited.

Still, she did not show any sign of the pain, and while the Begemote took a moment to catch his breath, she smiled slightly and gave him a wink. Twisting, working on dislocating her thumb.

The prisoners' leader turned to them and pointed back towards T'Rya. "She mocks us!" he yelled. "She thinks her Hokan mind is more powerful than us!"

The others began to agree with him, and jeer at her.

"So now, we all make her see how it is! Get her!"

All four moved up to her and took positions left and right, back and front. With a bellow, their leader struck her in the belly again, and not long after three more terrific blows struck her sides and her back. A rocket of pain rushed up her spine, then reversed and like a blast of ice traced her bone back to the blow. Her spine was broken. She could not feel her legs now. Freeing her hands was useless.

The blows continued, but she did not flinch. She was determined to show these Begemotes the power of a Vulcan mind, even when dying.

Loss of consciousness came sooner than expected, and a welcome relief when she realized it had arrived. She had tried, given her life now for the Begemot cause. Her only regret that this last mountain had proved too high for her to climb.

She was not conscious, but not unconscious. More like dreaming in a place where the sounds of the blows against her body were far away, like the last drops of a heavy rain. There was no longer any pain.

In her dream state she was clearly delirious. She thought famous Vulcans were speaking to her. Sarek, perhaps the greatest Vulcan of the modern era, was giving her a speech about the logic of death. Now she could see his son, Spock, instead extolling a fusion of logic and emotion as the means to a fulfilling life.

And here were her parents. Endlessly patient at her mischief like no one could imagine Vulcan parents could be. No scolding, no punishment, just reason and logic delivered with a love they would deny, but which fed her spirit.

Now, the rain had stopped, not even the dripping of the excess droplets off forest leaves. It was a beautiful jungle, and she looked up to see sunlight peeking through beneath the lush canopy.

She began to float, her arms no longer pulled by her weight, her feet no longer barely touching the floor. As she stared up through the jungle canopy, she felt herself gently flying down to lay in the soft grass. It was so cool; it soothed her pain. Pain? Yes, it was back again, as dreadful as ever. And yet, at the same time, it was being removed, bit by bit. First the bone shards in her lungs, then her bleeding internal organs on her left and right.

Then she was face down in the cool, velvety grass, and a warmth was travelling up and down her spine. What a strange death, T'Rya thought, to live a life dedicated to logic and reason, only to die believing fairies were restoring her to health.

A voice came to her, drifting in through the jungle foliage. "You are not alone, sister. In time we will come together. Peace, and long life."

And then she knew nothing.

#

T'Rya woke up with a terrific jerk. Then she gasped. Her body was nothing but pain. Every movement, every twitch, splashed her with it.

And yet, it was not the pain of a person with smashed ribs and punctured lungs. It was not the pain of a person about to die. No, this was the kind of pain that said, 'you will live, but might regret doing so'.

She looked around. Still the same, filthy unused bathroom. Across from her, set up against the other wall, were four Begemotes, the four who had tortured her (although, even for a Vulcan, it was hard to see much difference between one and the other). She rubbed her eyes to encourage consciousness to fully take over, and saw they were not restrained, but each one had the distinct mark of a hit from a high-setting energy weapon.

"Now when did you start trying to fool yourself?" she said to the quiet room, as she stood up and walked

over to her tormentors. "Those are not blasts from just any energy weapon, but from phasers at a high setting."

Then she paused. *Am I talking to myself – out loud?*

It was more mystery than she was prepared to deal with at the moment. Instead, she took a quick look around the room for anything useful, saw nothing, then made her way out so she could look for a way back up to the working prison.

As she wandered through a maze of unused, broken-down hallways, she considered how she had ended up here in the first place. T'Rya had made many allies in the prison – and many enemies. It seemed her dramatic arrival, trial, and rejection of Starfleet and her own people had basically split the prison in half.

There was a hatch in the ceiling with seams that looked slightly more used than the surrounding filthy roof. She jumped up to grab the hatch handle, causing thirty or so muscles to protest, and pulled the hatch down. It came with a metallic groan, showering her with dust. A tiny ladder slid down so people could climb up through it.

Despite her complaining muscles, or perhaps in spite of them, T'Rya went quickly up the ladder. Now, she could hear familiar sounds of prison life, quite far away but clear. She pulled the hatch shut and made her way toward the noise.

As she walked, she contemplated what had happened to her. Clearly, she had been ambushed in a

public area and was knocked out with a blow to the head, then dragged down to the sub-basement, tied up, and tortured. To death? She could recall the beginning of the attack, the shattering of her ribs, the vicious blow to her lower spine that resulted in her losing all feeling in her limbs.

She could not really trust her thoughts when the delirium set in, but there was no question she had awakened in that room with only superficial damage, four dead Begemotes propped up against the far wall, all killed by phasers on high settings. Likely Federation phasers.

She needed time. If she could only get back to her cell to meditate, she might be able to remember more, or more clearly at least.

The sounds were much closer now. It was difficult to tell in hallways with so many echoes, but T'Rya believed they would be coming from the right two intersections down. She paused at the next intersection to look left and right. On the left, the passage ended with a slotted wall, likely for the prison's air circulation. On the right was a short hallway with a door at the end. T'Rya ran to the door as fast as her aching body would let her, but there was a keypad lock. Even if she knew the combination, it would be next to impossible for her to press the right numbers in sequence. Begemot anatomy allowed their three fingers to bend in any direction, so security pads were more like triangular holes with number pads on all three sides. Any particular code would use all

three pads, including some sequences where two or even three digits needed to be selected at the same time. Her Vulcan hand simply could not do this.

Foiled by the door, T'Rya pushed herself against the wall facing the direction the low very loud voices were coming from. There was a chance, if these people were not looking around, that they might miss a stationary person pressed up against the wall.

Her plan failed the instant the first Begemote came into view. He stopped immediately and pointed toward her. Soon, six Begemotes were closing with her, all speaking at once, making it hard for her to identify individual words.

"T'Rya," the first Begemote called out, "we have been searching the sub-level for you for almost an hour."

T'Rya felt her knees go weak. The *meli-tukh t' threshan*[2] was wearing off, and she realized what poor condition her body was actually in. "I'Gal'Derta," she managed, "I need help." T'Rya began to fall, but before she could I'Gal'Derta was there helping her stand. "Need rest," she mumbled. In her exhaustion she did not realize she was speaking Standard, which none of the Begemot prisoners could understand.

<center>#</center>

When T'Rya woke for the second time, it was in her darkened cell on her filthy mattress. As poor quality as

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2 A Chemical similar to adrenaline in humans. The main difference being Vulcans can release *meli-tukh t'threshan* consciously.

it was, her body was thankful for any padding between it and the rock floor.

Somehow the Begemotes who found her had managed to save her from being missed in the count, and snuck her back into her cell with no-one the wiser. What time it was, what day it was, she did not know. But from the smell nearby, her helpers had left her some food.

She was ravenous, but she ate slowly. They had left a mug of their home-made, beer-like fermented beverage as well, but she did not drink it. Instead, when she had eaten her fill, she drank some water from the sink.

Eating brought on exhaustion, but rather than sleep, she sat and prepared to meditate. What had happened to her was too strange to ignore. Someone had stopped her beating, killed her tormentors, then saved her life, all after having infiltrated a maximum-security prison built underground, finding a second sub-basement that had been forgotten, and making their way out again.

T'Rya closed her eyes and began to slow her breathing. Emotions from her trauma splashed up from the depths: agony, helplessness, terror, but she acknowledged them and let them go. Now, deeper, her breathing almost stopped and her heart barely beating, she placed herself inside her mind, tied up to the ceiling, facing her tormenters. But they were not Begemotes, not even close. Instead, they were black and grey translucent smears of malevolence. Their heads looked like cauldrons filled with liquid metal, with faces arising from the liquid, only to

melt away from the heat, their mouths a rictus of agony, their eyes sockets where the flesh had burned away.

T'Rya relaxed even more. She understood the kind of trauma she had endured would not be easily overcome. But she let the mounting terror wash over her, and then recede, like a wave on the shore. Now she could see them properly, her tormentors. They were around her, once again beating her to death. Her spine was broken again, her legs sagged helplessly. Then the delirium came. But she did not allow it. Instead, she focused her consciousness into a fine point, and managed to see beyond.

Above the distinct sound of the blows against her body, her eyes barely caught the sound and flashing of a transporter. Six humanoids. Her attackers stopped, and before they could react each was shot with a phaser. While others dragged the dead to the far wall, two more released her hands and cradled her standing up.

Words. She heard words. One of them was speaking, and her vision began to shimmer. Twinkling lights, then nothing.

T'Rya sighed and brought herself out of meditation. She would see no farther. She'd witnessed her own death.

Stardate 48514.5 — Beta Epsilon

First Officer's log, USS Enterprise, stardate 48583.5, on detached duty Beta Epsilon salvage yards.

We have been on the station for three days, with little success. Commander Data reports the sensor logs show no anomalous readings, nor do they appear to have been tampered with. The high stress of working in such proximity to the sun means the station has a high turnover rate. After a six-month duty rotation, thirty percent request a new assignment. Those willing to remain are given a three-month furlough. Even so, Commander Data, working with his usual efficiency, has found no-one assigned to the station in the past five years to have any relevant blemishes on their records. Five years is the point at which the first of the stolen objects disappeared from the base.

Commander LaForge and Lieutenant Barclay have completed their level one diagnostic of the station's systems. As far as they can tell, every circuit, every isolinear chip, every control console is working as expected. They even analyzed the firmware updates to the station's systems for the last five years, and found nothing likely to cause a

malfunction, let alone something serious enough to compromise the station's surveillance and let someone sneak off with Federation property. There are no outgoing communication signals from Beta Epsilon. While they do passively receive subspace transmissions, all information and logs are sent by subspace buoys to a nearby star system, where they are broadcast via subspace. Starfleet is taking extreme measures to keep this location a secret – and for good reason. It is isolated so far from the bulk of the Federation.

One curious bit of evidence. Except for the phaser emitters and fusion reactors, which are generic in most ships in Starfleet, all the components taken were for Miranda-*class starships. A quick check of Starfleet records, and the only* Miranda-*class ship not either destroyed, mothballed, or in service, is the Shenzhou, which is right where it is supposed to be, here in the yards. The crew here assure me the Shenzhou is not ready for spaceflight. It is missing impulse engines, a warp core, and the inner hull has not yet been pressurized.*

"End recording."

After a trill announcing the computer's acknowledgement, Riker stood up from the desk in his temporary quarters and headed off to the mess hall. He had scheduled a meeting with Data, Geordi, and Barclay there

for ten minutes ago. As the station had no turbolifts, he would be another ten minutes late.

#

"We have to be missing something," LaForge complained as he sipped his coffee.

"The hardware checks out, Commander," Barclay chimed in, "I don't think I've ever run such an exhaustive diagnostic. We didn't miss anything." He looked at Data.

"I agree," Data said. "Based on your description of the diagnostic, and the logs, it would not appear any of the station's systems are compromised."

"Reg," LaForge asked, "imagine you wanted to pull something like this off. How would you do it?"

Barclay looked thoughtful for a moment: "I went over this again and again Commander, and I just don't know. But I'm convinced it would be completely impossible for someone from the outside to snatch those items without tripping any alarms."

"Perhaps not entirely impossible," Data objected, "we have come up against beings capable of taking things from the station's inventory without alerting anyone."

"Q?" LaForge spat.

"And not just a member of the Q continuum," Data added. "The *Enterprise* has had several encounters with beings whose technology or 'powers' might allow them to take these items."

"But I...I... I'm not convinced any of them would be interested in parts for a nearly out of date starship class, or phaser emitters, or reactors," Barclay argued.

"It is true these beings would likely have little interest in our technology, but often Q has confronted the *Enterprise* for amusement," Data replied.

LaForge sighed. "We're talking ourselves in circles. I'm not excited about explaining to Commander Riker we've concluded what happened here was magic."

As if on cue, Riker entered the mess. He nodded at his crew and came over to their table. "Sorry for being late. Needed to update my log. I hope you came to a conclusion while waiting for me."

"No sir," LaForge said, dejected. "This station's systems are running perfectly. No-one in the crew has anything suggesting they were involved, and Data's examination of the logs came up empty. Every day just the same as the next."

Riker sighed and rubbed his hand over his beard. *Sometimes I miss my chin*, he thought to himself. "Anything else? Anyone?"

"We did entertain the idea of Q, or another such being is behind the missing parts," LaForge admitted.

"Q!" Riker half said, half spat. "Oh, that's just what we need. What the devil would he want with a warp core?"

"The motives of members of the Q continuum have always remained abstruse," Data replied.

"Either way, I'm not going to go to the Captain with this. For now, we will ignore anything involving the supernatural. If Q shows up in a week to laugh at us, fine. Until then, we assume our mystery here has a conventional explanation."

"So, what do we do Commander," LaForge asked, "just keep doing the same things over and over and expecting a different result?"

Riker opened his mouth as if to speak, but Data interrupted: "Every day just the same as the next and expecting a different result."

The other three stared.

"I believe I may have a possibility, Commander," Data continued, "In my examination of the logs, I simply ignored those in which there were no sensor readings of note, just the ambient radiation of the system."

"And how will those logs help?" Riker asked skeptically.

"Y... Yes, Commander," Barclay agreed with Data, excited. "We need to examine the logs, because they don't contain nothing."

"And if that not-nothing, those ambient readings, are exactly the same for more than one day," LaForge continued.

"Yes," Data agreed, "then the later of those two logs is a copy of the former. Commander," Data turned to address Riker. "I will need some time at the console in our

science station. If our suppositions are correct, I should have the information we need in a few minutes."

"Excellent," said Riker. "Then let's reconvene here in thirty minutes."

There were "Yes, sirs" around the table, and the three headed off.

#

"Nothing," LaForge said, dejected. "Not one identical day in five years."

"Clearly our assumptions were incorrect," Data agreed.

"Wh... what if we look at this from the other way around?" Barclay asked suddenly.

"In what way, Reg?" LaForge asked.

"Well, we've been the investigators searching for clues of some kind of security breach. But what if we planned the crime ourselves, putting our minds to, uh…"

"Yeah," LaForge agreed, excited, "we've been looking for the obvious. The people behind this are certainly intelligent, clever, and resourceful."

"I agree, Geordi," Data added, "but I do not understand how this would radically alter our investigation."

"Just think about it, Data. If we were going to commit this crime, what would be the first thing we'd do to every idea we came up with?"

"Assuming we desired to avoid detection? We would examine each step of the plan to see if there were vulnerabilities that might expose it."

"Right. Now, what would we do with the logs?"

"Use previous days and overwrite the original log."

"But we just noticed that about our own plan. What do we do to thwart this?"

"I am afraid I do not know."

"Pieces!" Barclay burst out.

"Yes," LaForge agreed.

"If I was going to fake a day with no activity, I would make a composite of several different uneventful days, so a simple search would not return anything," Barclay went on.

"Ah," Data said, "and the degree of piecing together would be limited by the person's expertise, time available, and considered risk. However, with the aid of the computer, this masking could have been extremely complicated."

"But then you would have to mess with the computer's logs, which opens up another possible source of discovery," LaForge countered. "No, I think we have to assume someone did this with their own mind, quickly, but carefully."

"Computer," LaForge addressed it. It responded with its usual trill. "Examine the last five years of log entries for identical entries, parsing each log into four segments."

After several trills, the computer replied: "No identical entries found."

"Too simple," LaForge agreed.

"We did agree to keep the ruse simple," Data objected.

"True," Barclay agreed, "B… but ambient readings flow from one position to another. Simply sniping up a day would likely have wildly fluctuating readings, which would have alerted the crew. We need something that is simple, but results in a complex, and seamless result."

"But any copying of any day from one to the next would be detectable," complained LaForge. "I don't see how this could be done without a computer."

Barclay's eyes had glazed slightly, as if he was looking beyond the bulkhead and out into the stars. "Continuous monitoring," he said, still looking dazed.

"You have something Reg?"

Barclay brought his right hand up near his face: "We have been separating the log entries into days, because that is how we have asked the computer to present them. But that is not how they are created. The sensors monitor the system constantly, putting down entries as often as we request. Per second in these logs."

"Keep going, Reg," LaForge encouraged.

"If we imagine the readings as a continuous, unending flow for each item measured, slotted into place in a 'daily' report, we could slide those readings into the

past and future, combining days, but unique combinations for each type of sensor reading."

"If I understand your supposition, Lieutenant Barclay," Data said, "you are suggesting we look for sensory readings duplicated by types of readings, but randomly between types? This would be a sophisticated and complicated procedure for an individual to perform."

"Not at all, Commander," Barclay replied quickly, more and more excited. "All you would need is a few days of non-activity printed out, and a pair of scissors. Then you could pull each column into the past of future, different amounts for each one, and you'd have a relatively undetectable day of false readings."

"A manual cipher!" LaForge said, also excited. "If you know the direction and number of displacements, you have the new day!"

"Computer, scan the sensor logs for the past five years. This time, consider each sensor type independently, and look for any two days that have the same two sensor readings in a row, no matter the time of day."

After a moment's trilling: "There are 853 times in which two identical sensor readings in a row occur for one sensor type in two different days."

"Still not enough!" said Geordi, frustrated.

"Computer!" Barclay commanded. "Take into account the cycles of ambient radiation based on the Beta Epsilon star's solar output. Remove any positive matches

where the readings match the expected cycle or ambient radiation."

After a few minutes of trilling, the computer responded: "There are five incidents in which two readings from one sensor type occur the same in two different days, and in which the readings do not conform to expected ambient radiation cycles."

"Provided those dates please," requested Barclay.

The computer provided five stardates.

"All right!" LaForge shouted, shaking a fist in the air.

"A mechanical cipher," Data replied. "Most intriguing."

"We have to get back and let Commander Riker know," LaForge continued.

"Agreed," Data replied. "You and Lieutenant Barclay do so. I will remain here and sort through the crew logs. Perhaps I will be able to identify what crewmember was here for each of these stardates."

"Good idea, Data," LaForge agreed. "Let's go, Reg."

As the two left for the mess, Data went back to work at the science station.

#

LaForge walked with purpose back towards the mess. Barclay kept up with him, but his face was pensive and uncertain. Finally, he spoke up: "Commander?"

LaForge stopped and turned around. "Yes?"

"May I have, have a minute of your time?"

"Of course, Reg, but we need to get to Commander Riker and tell him what we've found. How about we talk later?"

"Yes. Yes sir."

They continued on to the mess and arrived a few minutes later.

"You look like people with good news," Riker commented as they came up to his table and sat down.

"Very good, Commander," LaForge agreed. "Lieutenant Barclay cracked how the logs were altered. It had Data and I stumped."

Riker looked at Barclay, perhaps for the first time. How far he had come from that self-conscious Lieutenant. He was glad he had asked Geordi to encourage him. It had done them all good.

"Data for Commander Riker," came over Riker's comm badge. Riker tapped it: "Go for Riker."

"Sir, I have analyzed the crew rotations and compared them to the dates of all five incursions we discovered in the sensor logs."

"And?"

"I believe we should discuss this in person, Commander. It has turned out to be… sensitive."

"Very well, Commander. Meet me in my quarters as soon as you can. We'll be waiting for you."

"Confirmed. Data out."

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Data arrived only a few minutes after the other three had made it to Riker's quarters. His passive face displayed none of the gravity of the situation.

"Okay Data, let's have it."

"Yes sir. After correlating the crew rotations with the five stardates during which items were stolen from the station, I found only one crewmember that was at the station for each occurrence."

"And?"

"Sir, it was Commander T'Amar."

"Uh oh," LaForge said.

At that moment the station signaled red alert.

"Let's get to operations," Riker ordered, and they followed him out of his quarters.

The hallways were a confused jumble. Clearly, a red alert was not something this crew had experienced before. But they managed their way through the frightened eyes and motionless forms, finally reaching operations.

"Report!" Riker ordered the moment he entered the room.

"It's an incursion, sir. A Ferengi ship just dropped out of warp."

"What is our weapon and defensive status?" Riker demanded.

"All shields up and operating. The station has no offensive weapons, sir."

"Where is Commander T'Amar?"

"I've been trying to contact her, Commander," an ensign replied, but I cannot locate her comm badge."

"Computer, where is Commander T'Amar?"

After a trill, the computer replied: "Commander T'Amar is not on board the station."

"When did she leave?" Riker demanded.

"There is no record of Commander T'Amar leaving the station."

"Commander, the Ferengi ship is arming its weapons and moving in."

"Current distance to the ship?"

"Ten kilometers and closing."

"Can we get a message to Starfleet?"

"Yes, sir. I can send out a courier with our present situation."

"What about the station? Can you send subspace messages from here?"

"Yes, sir, but that is not permitted due to security concerns." The ensign glanced as the image of the Ferengi ship closing the distance. "Then again, it looks like security is not a concern anymore. We don't have any."

"Good. Now, send a quick subspace message on the Starfleet emergency frequency: 'To any Starfleet vessels, this is Beta Epsilon station. We are under attack by a Ferengi D'Kora class Marauder. Please respond.'"

"Sending now, Commander."

"Coming up on one kilometer, Commander. The Ferengi are reducing speed."

"Their status?"

"Still with shields up and all weapons activated."

"Geordi!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Take Data and Barclay, find out where the Commander is."

"Aye, aye."

Riker watched them leave Operations, intent on their orders, no hesitation with their lives hanging in the balance. For a moment Riker felt pride, and nostalgia.

"Commander, the Ferengi are hailing us."

Riker stood up straight. Here he was getting ready to die and the fight hadn't even started. "On screen."

The main viewer of Operations switched from an exterior view of the Ferengi ship to one of its bridge interior. As usual, a Ferengi face appeared almost completely filling the viewscreen.

"Federation station, I am DaiMon Pash, commander of the Ferengi trading vessel *Mercantile*."

Ricker grabbed the most competent ensign he could find and turned them both from the view screen. "What is your tactical assessment of the Ferengi weapons against the station's defenses?"

"Well, sir," ordinarily we aren't considering repulsing a military force, but we have an enormous amount of power capacity inside the moon. Three thousand fusion reactors."

"Three thousand?"

"Yes, sir. We need the capacity to compensate if a shield barge fails."

"Are you saying this power can be made available to the shield generators?"

"Yes, sir. I wouldn't recommend all at once. The emitters have their limits, but as fusion reactors get knocked out, we can replace them."

"How long would that give us toe to toe with them?"

"Hours sir, maybe more."

"I am waiting, humans! Where is your leader?"

"I am the senior officer, Commander William Riker. You understand attacking a Federation outpost is an act of war?"

"What attack, humaan Rikr? We have done nothing."

"Your shields are up, and your weapons are ready to fire. That is clearly an aggressive posture, DaiMon Pash."

"Merely a self-defense measure, humaan Rikr."

"That's *Commander Riker*," Riker spat back, annoyed. Ferengi hearing was excellent. This DaiMon was just being an ass.

"Yes, very well. See? We have lowered our shields and powered down our weapons. We are no threat."

As the DaiMon spoke, the forward section of the Marauder began to move forward, as the neck connecting it to the drive section began to extend forward. One by one

the *Mercantile*'s weapons ports became visible and were visibly powered down.

"It's attacking!" an Ensign cried out.

"No, that's their surrender posture, displaying their weapon ports and making their ship vulnerable to attack. What do you want, Pash?" Riker demanded.

"Want...well, that is we…"

At that moment, the station power blacked out. For a few seconds they were in utter blackness, before emergency batteries kicked in. Minimal lighting came up, and the viewscreen resumed its communication with the Ferengi vessel.

"Is there some kind of problem, Commander," asked Pash, looking around at the dimly lit Operations center, "your transmission failed for a moment. And I see you have lowered your shields as well. Excellent. Screen off!"

The viewscreen went blank.

"Commander, the Ferengi are using their tractor beam."

"Near the star? I thought that wasn't safe."

"It is dangerous but not impossible, sir, and the ship is now half a kilometer away."

"What are they targeting? Can you tell?"

"Yes, sir. They appear to be targeting a section of the station. No, wait, a part of the moon just outside the station."

"What the hell? Show me on screen."

LaForge, Data, and Barclay returned to Operations.

"No luck finding Commander T'Amar. She seems to have disappeared," LaForge reported.

A schematic of the station appeared on the viewscreen. A dot appeared just outside one bulkhead.

"Can you rotate that to a side view?" Data asked.

"Yes, sir," and the display rotated to a side view. The dot was on the first level of the station, not far from the shuttle bay.

"The transport is complete, Commander."

"Put the Ferengi back on screen," Riker ordered.

The *Mercantile* was already moving away at high impulse. In a moment, there was a flash as it jumped to warp.

"Commander," said Data.

"What is it?" Riker snapped, annoyed.

"I believe I understand what has occurred."

Above Dardrius colony, the *Enterprise* orbits lazily. The first day of diplomatic negotiations are over, and the diplomats are being hosted at a reception in Ten-Forward.

Worf, looking simultaneously angry and uncomfortable, stood at the end of the bar, as far away as he could get from the delegates.

"The usual?" Guinan asked him, leaning on the other side of the bar.

Worf's expression softened. "Please."

As she prepared his drink, she continued talking: "Can you believe the Captain? I've never heard him say anything positive about diplomatic missions, but he is like a fox in a hen house." She handed him his drink.

"Hen house?"

"Perhaps not the right analogy. How about, like a kid in a candy store? He can't get enough of these people. Who are they?"

"Some archaeological sites have been discovered in the indigenous regions of the planet. Experts want to go in to dig, but the indigenous population, who welcomed a human colony to share their planet, are not willing to allow it."

"So, he's having the time of his life with eggheads?" Guinan asked.

"Egg… it would appear so," Worf agreed. "To me, one diplomat is the same as the next."

Worf's comm badge signaled him. "Lieutenant Feche to Commander Worf."

Worf tapped his badge. "Go for Worf."

"Sir, I've been trying to reach the Captain. We've received a distress call from Beta Epsilon and we are the nearest starship. But he isn't responding."

"Stand by." Worf, with a purpose, strode directly up to Picard. "Captain," he demanded.

"Just a moment," Picard apologized to the group. "Yes, Lieutenant!"

"The bridge is attempting to contact you, sir."

"Yes, I know. I've been ignoring them."

"We are receiving a distress call from Beta Epsilon station, sir."

Picard briefly closed his eyes, then opened them and said to his company: "I am sorry, but it appears I have ship business to attend to. My apologies for having to end our time here, but duty calls." To a nearby Lieutenant, he ordered: "Have the delegates beamed back immediately."

As his company commiserated, Picard walked with Worf out of Ten-Forward.

"Mr. Worf," Picard asked as they stepped into the turbolift.

"Sir?"

"Bridge! Has it ever appeared to you the Universe is one enormous practical joke, with you as the punchline?"

"I have not sir," replied Worf, becoming uncomfortable.

The turbolift doors opened to the bridge.

Picard stepped forward.

"Captain on the bridge!"

"As you were. Report!" he demanded as he made his way to his chair.

"Captain," Lieutenant Feche reported from tactical. "At stardate 48522.7 we received a distress call from Beta Epsilon colony, voice only."

"On speaker!"

Over the bridge speakers, an unknown voice came, clearly frightened: "To any Starfleet vessels, this is Beta Epsilon station. We are under attack by a Ferengi D'Kora class Marauder. Please respond."

"Has there been any response?"

"The *Exeter* has reported on route, but over twenty-four hours away."

"Helm, time to arrive at maximum warp?"

"Four hours, twenty-two minutes, Captain."

"Mr. Feche, inform Starfleet we are en route and will be there in four and a half hours. Send an encrypted reply to Beta Epsilon informing them of our status. Make our course to Beta Epsilon, warp nine."

"Aye, sir," the Ensign at the conn replied, "course plotted and laid in, warp nine."

"Engage."

As the *Enterprise* jumped into warp, Picard looked down at his formal dress. "I am going to my quarters to change. Mr. Feche, you have the bridge."

"Yes, sir, I have the bridge."

#

Some hours later, Picard sat with Worf, Data, LaForge, and Barclay in the observation lounge. The *Enterprise* remained on station at Beta Epsilon IV, awaiting the arrival of the *USS Exeter*, which would take part in the repairs and defense of the station. Data had completed describing events up to the mysterious visit by the Ferengi Marauder.

"At the moment of transport, I entered Operations to see if I could assist Commander Riker. As I entered the room, I saw the schematic of the station, locating where the Ferengi ship had aimed its transporter beam. As I had examined the original design schematics earlier, I was able to identify that location was in fact not rock, but a room on the station that someone had modified the computer to ignore.

"Upon forcing ourselves into the room, we discovered Commander T'Amar's uniform and comm badge, and a large space on the floor that had previously been occupied by something."

"Feche for Captain Picard," came a voice from Picard's comm badge.

"Picard here. Go ahead."

"Captain, you are receiving priority traffic from Starfleet Command. Eyes Only."

"Very well, Lieutenant, put it through to my ready room."

"Sir."

Picard stood up. "I want to know what is going on here. Do what you can to sort it all out. I'll be right back."

At his desk, Picard turned on his console and spoke quickly, "Computer, access Starfleet transmission, authorization Picard 176 Alpha Omega."

After a pause and a trill, the screen lit up with a live face.

"Admiral Chang!" Picard said, pleased. "It's been a long time!"

"Too long, Captain. I see Riker hasn't managed to blow your ship up lately."

"No, Admiral, I've kept the Commander on a short leash."

"We've received your latest reports, Captain, and I have to tell you you've caused quite a stir at Starfleet Headquarters. Intelligence is basically apoplectic over the security loss at Beta Epsilon. Commander T'Amar was a most trusted and decorated officer."

"A Vulcan traitor, Admiral. Has there ever been such a thing?"

"Not this century, Captain."

"And the items stolen. Hardly meaningful. Basically useless without a *Miranda*-class starship."

"It is true, if T'Amar was working for any of our enemies, she could have seriously harmed the Federation. But the Ferengi are not a threat, and like you say, what she stole was inconsequential. Except, that is, for what was hidden on the base itself."

"Ah," Picard said nodding, "I was wondering about that."

"In that room Captain was a prototype Federation cloaking device."

"That's not possible, Admiral. Our treaty assures the Federation will not deploy a cloaking device."

"And we're not. But considering how the Federation has been creamed in battle repeatedly because of cloaking technology, there has been a long-term strategy in place to produce such devices and deploy them should they ever be needed."

"That sounds like a technicality, Admiral."

"Perhaps, but that's for others to sweat about. Your job is to work up a sweat getting that device back."

"It's a pretty big galaxy, Admiral. Any hints?"

"Yes. We're sending everything we know about DaiMon Pash and the *Mercantile*. They've never strayed far from Ferengi space, so to make it all the way to Beta Epsilon, not once, but six times, to aid a Starfleet traitor

and steal highly classified Starfleet technology is about ten steps above Pash's authority.

"The Ferengi Alliance has disavowed Pash and the *Mercantile*, which means if they mess up, they are on their own, but if they make a good profit, they are excellent Ferengi."

"Admiral, there must be another ship that can take up the chase. We are at a very sensitive point in the negotiations on Dardrius."

"I understand, Captain, but we want to put the fear of god in the Ferengi Alliance and Pash. I can think of no better way to do that than sick the Federation flagship on them.

"As soon as the *Exeter* is relieved at Beta Epsilon, I will put them under your command for the duration of this mission. If you need more ships, Captain, you just let me know. I cannot stress how important word of this technology not get out. Our allies and our enemies will be quite upset."

"I understand, Admiral, we will do our best."

"As usual, Captain, when you say 'our best,' Starfleet hears 'consider it done.' Admiral Chang out."

News of her attack had rippled through the prison like a seismic event. Some had journeyed to the unused sublevel using T'Rya's directions, and returned with confirmation of the dead prisoners, the ropes hanging from the ceiling, and the tools they had used to beat her.

The four Begemotes that had attacked her were well-known as spies for the guards. Rather than an attack out of bigotry, it appeared to be more of a hit attempted by the prison authority itself. This sent a second shockwave through the prison. To have an inmate killed, even one serving life in prison, was a material breach of a prisoner's legal contract with the state, which guaranteed no extra-judicial punishment. So, while news of her brutal attack pushed many on to her side, the fact the prison itself was responsible moved all but the most-hard core xenophobes into T'Rya's camp.

Rather than describe her uncertain memory of others helping her, she claimed she had been unconscious after the first few blows. Only her most trusted allies were told the entire story.

"Then, there is someone helping you. Starfleet?" I'Gal'Derta speculated.

"I believe it was Starfleet equipment," T'Rya confirmed, "but I find it unlikely the personnel were Starfleet."

"Will they help us again?"

"I cannot say. I have no information with which to even speculate. They arrived to save my life, this much is certain. But this does not guarantee they are on my side, only that they required me to live beyond that moment."

"We have the prison now, t'raa," said J'Lew'Edtra, "all but a few are behind you. For months you have spoken of us rising up and defending ourselves against tyranny. You have ten thousand soldiers!"

"Yes, Lew, the time is coming. But it has not yet arrived. Now, we need to start telling the world outside the prison why you are all in here. Not for violence, but merely for being poor and falling into debt you could not repay. For this, a life of misery. This story should shake Begemot up to the F level, at least. That turns tens of thousands into tens of millions. Our goal is not to start a revolution and spill Begemote blood, but to come to the upper levels with such overwhelming numbers, they will agree to a more equitable redistribution of resources, and for Federation assistance with power generators and replicators."

Some sitting around her in her cell, her most trusted comrades, inhaled in shock.

"I understand how you find such an idea appalling. You have been taught it is a moral abomination your entire

lives. But once you have power and food, homes and clothing, you can choose to set aside replicator technology again, and build a different kind of society."

"Why not a war, t'raa?" I'Lam'Edtra demanded. "There are so many I would see given to the beetle swamps."

"I have two reasons, Lam," T'Rya answered. "The first is practical. Should there be a war between the upper and lower castes, there is no guarantee which side the Federation would join. They have a different goal than our freedom, at least for now. That goal is a stable planet from which they can spy on the Tholians. If they feel the upper castes are the ones most likely to provide what they want, then we will find ourselves facing an overwhelming force we can never defeat. Not without a massive fleet of starships of our own."

"My second reason is more philosophical, and I must admit, while it is carefully reasoned and logical, I cannot prove it is correct. I have studied many rebellions, from many cultures. Most of them lead to a new tyranny replacing the old. Some, however, result in a new society, a better society those who started the revolution were aiming for.

"The main difference between these outcomes—if we ignore chance and bad luck, or a hopeless cause of a tiny group against many, and so on—is the attitude of the rebellion itself. Some accept any means of victory in the belief that the end result of a better society justifies any

approach taken to arrive there. Yet others argue the means of the revolution must embody the ends, that to behave differently while fighting for freedom, once freedom is achieved, will taint this future society, and it, too, will fail.

"It is those who ensured their rebellion's means embodied the ends that were most often successful, while the others most often failed.

"If our rebellion seeking a better life for all Begemotes does not embody that end in the means we achieve it, then we may simply swap one tyranny for a different one. New faces on the top and bottom, no doubt, but a tyranny nonetheless."

"We drink your words," I'Lam'Edtra admitted, "you have become the spark of our hope."

"You dress me in flowers not rooted in me," T'Rya replied, appreciating how the Begemot language used so many beautiful metaphors, "but I will try to be worthy of their growth."

They sat for a few moments in silence. Where a few days ago T'Rya had thought any concerted effort to start a change was years away, here bad luck, then luck, and now more luck, had made that time for change now.

"So, who wants to start a revolution?"

The Begemote did not clap or cheer. They made their approval known by that huf-huffing laugh of theirs. Her cell filled up with the sound.

#

As T'Rya sat in the waiting room, enduring the gaping of prison visitors who had never seen a Vulcan, or indeed any kind of alien before, she went over her speech again. She and the ambassador could never meet, but someone she knew and trusted would visit her occasionally so they could trade information using a Begemote word cypher that T'Rya had found enormously difficult to master. However odd their political and social systems might be, there was a power to Begemot intellect that was truly humbling. If that intellect was finally let free, who knew how they would better the galaxy?

Finally, D'Gra'Derta arrived, spotted her, and came over to sit.

"I trust you are well?" he asked.

"As well as can be expected for someone beaten to death," T'Rya replied, using their cypher. To anyone listening, it would seem like an ordinary reply anyone might make to an "you are well?" question.

"Dead?"

"It would appear so. But someone beamed into the sub-basement, killed my attackers with Federation phasers, and somehow healed me. I was delirious, but I believe they transported me to their ship and used a biobed."

"Do you need extraction?"

"No, this bad luck is the best luck I have had. Almost the entire prison is now behind me, because my killers were working for the prison authority. The Begemot prisoners take their contracts and rights as

prisoners very seriously. Breaching my contract was probably the worst thing they could have done."

"And your mystery angels?"

"I have yet to formulate a suspicion, let alone generate a hypothesis. For now, unless they contact us, I cannot include them in any planning."

"Which is?"

"We have investigated the sub-sub-basement where I was taken. It has been forgotten by the prison for a long time. Just some broken-down hallways. However, after careful reconnoitering, we have discovered a fake cowling over a non-existent airconditioning fan. It leads to a passageway that ends in a hatch."

"Which leads?"

"We have not opened it, for fear it might open up somewhere that compromises us. I have written a letter to my family on Vulcan, which when decoded will identify, as accurately as I am able, the coordinates where the hatch will emerge. I need someone from the outside to determine if it is safe to open, or should we dig to another location.

"There is also a letter for Deanna Troi, on board the *USS Enterprise*. I would appreciate it if you could first translate and send the message, or send the cypher along with the message, so the computer can decode it on her side."

"We have little to report," her visitor then continued, taking T'Rya's letters. "The Tholian situation remains the same. Many of their ships have been

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completed and have disappeared, likely beyond anyone's ability to see passively from Begemot. The Federation assumes they know we are watching from the planet, so they are moving their assets to the most remote sectors of their space."

"Irrelevant. Once we determine the hatch is viable, or we dig to a location that is, we will break out of the prison, using a riot as cover. I will need somewhere to house roughly ten thousand rebels in the I or J caste levels, including food, clothing, and weapons, and covert communications."

"By when?"

"By tomorrow, if the hatch is viable. If it is, have the prison announce the Federation is sponsoring another amnesty for a non-violent prisoner, to be determined by lottery the next day."

"We cannot find the resources required to support an army in two days!"

"Then say the lottery will be held on the day when you can be ready."

"And if you have to dig?"

"We will have to meet again, and soon. The escape must happen in a week. No later. There is no way to keep a secret like this in a prison. And there is no guarantee I can maintain this popularity for long. Prison has a way of flattening enthusiasm and introducing apathy. This is the best chance I have."

"Very well. I will relay what you have requested, and we will do what we can. In the meantime, I have put some credit into your account."

"Live long and prosper," T'Rya replied, holding up her hand in the traditional Vulcan greeting.

"Yes," D'Gra'Derta replied, holding up his hand, looking at his three digits, and then putting it down again. "To you as well."

#

That evening, as T'Rya ate a mostly traditional Vulcan meal, an announcement came over the prison PA, announcing a Federation-sponsored amnesty would be granted by lottery to a non-violent prisoner in seven days.

She put this information aside for the moment and concentrated on her food. Since Begemot had been provisionally included in the UFP, much more trade was being conducted. The Begemote people were sampling more and more of the products of other planets. For some reason, traditional vegetarian Vulcan food had become something of a hit among the wealthy on Begemot. T'Rya assumed it had to do with the fact there were no plants or animals on the planet, only hybrids of both. To eat something purely vegetable was quite a novelty for them.

The benefit of this popularity meant Vulcan food on Begemot was reduced in price to a point where T'Rya could now afford to order it in. But she did so only for one meal a week. While consuming Begemot's more offensive options meant T'Rya had to mentally suppress her bile

from coming up, she saw the way others looked at her as she sat with them and ate their food. They could not help being impressed. Everything she had done for the past six months was to demonstrate her otherness was not a threat, and that she accepted their culture completely.

She finished her meal and took a long drink of water. Then she washed her dishes in the sink until it was not possible to tell what she had been eating, then placed them in the recycler. Finally, T'Rya sat in the middle of her cell in her meditation posture.

The PA announcement told her the hatch was safe for them to use for escape, and that she should plan for this in seven days. What they would find on the other side would remain a mystery until they opened it and found out.

For a moment she felt a rising panic, but carefully got it under her control. It was possible she was being betrayed. The Begemotes could have broken the code she used with her one visitor, or turned him, or captured and turned his boss, the Begemot Ambassador to the Federation. But as she considered the possibilities, it was unlikely there were any traps. The Begemot were very clever, yes, with an excellent intellect, but they had learned Vulcan intellects were not to be trifled with. Clearly, she frightened them enough to attempt to kill her. It seemed unlikely they would permit her to develop, organize, and instigate a prison escape, knowing how she could disappear into the lower caste levels. And if they

thought for a moment that she planned to bring every prisoner she could with her to start a revolution, they would put a stop to it immediately.

In the silence of her cell, her stomach satisfied and not attempting to void itself, and with the residual effects of her beating still weighing on her, T'Rya almost fell asleep where she sat. Instead, she focused her mind once more on the events of last week: when she had been attacked. She did this many times, all for naught. This time she focused at the very end, when that voice had spoken to her while she lay on the cool grass: *You are not alone, sister. In time we will come together. Peace, and long life.*

There was something wrong with "sister". Her memory was placing that word over another, although she could not tell why. Something very frightening was being hidden by that word. T'Rya did not appreciate being frightened. It only made her more determined. With every bit of her resources, she drilled down upon that word, squeezing it like a recalcitrant enemy's throat.

And then she heard it all correctly: *You are not alone, t'sai ri'a'gra. In time we will come together. Peace, and long life.* They had used her full Vulcan name. The only place to learn that name would be on Vulcan, and as a rule her people did not give out personal information to just anyone.

She was too exhausted to consider the matter any further today. Instead, she crawled over to her filthy mattress and let herself fall asleep.

Stardate 48542.4 — It's Not There

In an uncharted star system, a red dwarf slowly dies while three planets continue to orbit its diminishing radiation. Between the first and second planet, a Federation starship orbits idly. It looks dead in space.

Outside the system, a Ferengi Marauder drops out of warp and makes its way at full impulse power into the system.

"DaiMon," the sensor specialist reported, "I am picking up no emissions for any ship in the system. Should we raise our shields?"

"No," DaiMon Pash ordered. "Make no provocative moves. No shields, no charging weapons, nothing."

"But DaiMon," the weapons specialist objected, "if we are to encounter an unexpected ship, we will be helpless."

"No provocative moves!" Pash shouted.

"DaiMon!" the sensor specialist called out, "I am picking up the energy signature of a Federation starship. It is powering up its engines, shields, and weapons."

"Navigation," DaiMon Pash demanded, "slow to one quarter impulse power and set course for the Federation ship."

"The Federation ship is closing on us, but now it is slowing."

"All stop," Pash demanded. "Make our speed zero relative to the star."

"Answering all stop," the navigation specialist responded.

They all sat and stood on the Ferengi bridge, anxious, frightened and curious, as the Federation ship ceased its forward momentum and merely hung near them in space.

"DaiMon, the Federation starship is activating its transporter."

"Report!" DaiMon demanded.

"An item from the hold is being transported," the security specialist announced, "and something is being replaced in its stead."

"And what would that be?" DaiMon Pash asked.

"Gold-pressed latinum, DaiMon, a massive sum."

"Then our deal is complete," came a voice from the rear of the bridge. A Vulcan woman stepped forward to confront DaiMon Pash.

"Yes, yes indeed," the DaiMon agreed, delighted. "Communications, signal the other ship with one ping from our sensor array."

"Yes, DaiMon."

"Such a pleasure doing business with you, Commander T'Amar," Pash said to the Vulcan. "I do hope we can do business again."

"That is unlikely. I do hope to never see your kind again." With this, the Vulcan was transported off the Ferengi bridge.

"Make course for Ferenginar, warp eight," the DaiMon demanded, "and have security meet me in the main cargo hold."

"Yes, DaiMon."

Stardate 48543.9 — Latinum Down

Captain's log, USS Enterprise, Stardate 48544.0.
Having been tasked with finding the Ferengi responsible for the theft at the Beta Epsilon station, we have made use of the local trade networks in this sector to gather information. Starfleet has authorized us to offer a reward for information leading to the discovery of DaiMon Pash and his ship, the Mercantile.
After many dead ends, we finally found a Draeden trader who was quite bitter his substantial offer to the Ferengi for a piece of cloaking technology appeared to be considered, then rejected without explanation. He explained it was unlike the Ferengi to leave negotiations like that, when he had made it clear the first amount he suggested was his opening, and not his final, offer.
The trader was so upset he didn't seem to care much about our reward, but we transported over a Federation promissory disk which he can exchange at a later date should his information lead us to the Ferengi.
We are currently at warp nine in an attempt to overtake the Mercantile, *which we believe is en route to Ferenginar. Starfleet has given me broad*

latitude to deal with DaiMon Pash, including the use of force. It would seem the standard disavowal of rogue Ferengi will work in our favor. The Ferengi Alliance can hardly complain about us dealing with a rogue ship.

"Recording off."

The computer acknowledged his order with a trill, leaving Picard sitting at the table in his ready room. Warp nine was not a sustainable speed. They had been at it for seven hours now, and he could feel a growing frequency oscillation in the deck plating. Much longer and they would have to slow down substantially. Much longer after that, they would damage the ship and have to drop to sublight completely to make repairs.

"Lieutenant Worf to the Captain."

"Go ahead Mr. Worf."

"We are picking up something on long range sensors. We are too far off to tell much, but the mass does match a D'Kora class."

"Very well Commander, I'm on my way."

Picard got up, but then paused to look out the window at the streaking stars in the distance. Once again, he was Starfleet's errand boy, sent to ensure something Starfleet was doing wrong would not be exposed, and ultimately be successful. He thought of T'Rya and the people he'd help keep from their freedom.

Was he growing old and cynical? Had Starfleet always been like this, but he was too fresh and shiny with pride and hubris not to see it? Was the Federation a noble venture, or just another empire like all the others that surrounded it? Where was that eager young man ready to give his life for the good fight? More than anything, T'Rya had shamed him. That was why he had not gone to visit her, confronted her with disobeying orders and taking the Ambassador's bracelet.

What did "duty" mean anyway? Duty to whom? Duty to what? Was it to something external, or something within?

Frustrated, he stormed out of his ready room and onto the bridge: "Report!"

"Captain,' Worf replied, "the ship is indeed a D'Kora class Ferengi design. Like all Ferengi ships, its transponder does not identify the individual ship, but by examining all other Ferengi sightings in this sector, I am certain this is the *Mercantile*."

"Very good. I want a full sensor sweep recording of this ship at all times. I want to be able to find its particular signature at any warp or sub-light speed, just in case they manage to get away."

"Aye, sir."

"And arm all weapons, standby on shields the moment we drop out of warp."

"Weapons report ready, sir. Shields on standby."

"Mr. Data, can we tell what is inside that ship?"

"At this distance, Captain, the contents are difficult to determine. However, I am detecting a large amount of latinum on board, which is a compound not used in the production of any Ferengi ship design."

"Helm, increase speed to nine point five. Alter our course to intercept that ship."

"Aye, sir."

"LaForge to the bridge."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," Riker said, opening up communication with Engineering.

"I've just seen a request for warp nine point five on the engines. After running so hot for so long, we are tempting fate that something won't overheat and shut us down."

"Understood. Just keep us up and running a little bit longer. Our target is in our sites."

"Captain," Data added, "the Ferengi ship appears to have noticed us. They are changing course to 180 degrees from our position and increasing speed to warp eight point five."

"Helm, stay with them."

"How long until we overtake them, Data?"

"At current speeds, we will be within visual range in eight minutes, and weapons range in eleven."

Riker tapped his controls: "Geordi, did you hear that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you squeeze a little more out of the engines?"

"I'll do what I can sir. Maybe warp nine point six, but only for five, maybe ten minutes."

"That increase should see us in weapons range in four minutes, visual in two."

"Ensign," Riker said quickly, "make our speed warp nine point six."

"Aye, sir."

The *Enterprise* began to vibrate, and alarms began to go off on everyone's displays. The vibration got worse, as if it would shake out teeth. Only Data seemed unaffected.

"Within visual range, Captain," Data said, his voice warbling with the vibration.

"On screen!" Riker demanded.

On the screen was a bright silver dot, which was growing larger rapidly.

"Mr. Worf," said the Captain. "Send a message to that ship. They are to heave-to and prepare to be boarded, or we will fire on them."

"Aye, sir."

"They are hailing us," Worf said quickly.

"On screen," said Picard, standing and straightening his uniform.

For a moment, an angry Ferengi face appeared. But before anyone could speak, Data announced: "The Ferengi ship's warp engines have overloaded. They are dropping out of warp."

"Helm. Keep on them. Mr. Worf, raise the shields."

The *Enterprise* dropped out of warp only a few kilometers from the now listing Ferengi ship. Her nacelles were gaining and losing power sporadically, and smoke was billowing out of her port side. The *Enterprise* was also venting smoke from its nacelles. They had dropped from warp just before causing serious damage.

"Number One, assemble a boarding party. Pinpoint where that latinum is and prepare to transport there. I will signal the transporter room when it is safe."

"Yes, sir. Data, Worf, you're with me. We'll need a squad of security in transporter room four." He tapped his comm badge, "Commander Troi, please meet us in transporter room three."

"Tactical," Picard demanded, "hail that ship."

This time the picture that appeared on the main viewer was very much different. The power to the Ferengi bridge appeared to have failed, and minor electrical fires were occurring randomly. Once again that Ferengi face took up the viewscreen, but this time he looked furious.

"*Enterprise*, this is an act of piracy. When the Ferengi Alliance hears of this outrage, it will mean war."

"The Ferengi Alliance has already disavowed your activities, DaiMon. Now, before I start cutting up your ship for scrap, answer my questions. What is your name, and the name of your vessel?"

"Don't you already know?"

"Indulge me. Tactical, target phasers on their impulse engines."

"Alright, alright! I am DaiMon Pash of the Marauder *Mercantile*. But you already knew that, Starfleet."

"I like to be thorough. I have a team that is about to board your ship—where did we identify for the location ops?"

"Looks like their main cargo bay, Captain."

"Right, a team that will be transporting to your main cargo bay. We are looking for things you stole from Beta Epsilon, and for your sake they had better still be there."

"This is outrageous!" Pash cried out. "It is piracy! You are only here to steal our latinum, earned through legitimate business activities."

"I can assure you DaiMon, I have no interest in your latinum. Your ship would fetch a much finer price."

"Very well," DaiMon Pash said, resigned. "Transport your people over. If they do not leave the cargo bay, we will not interrupt them."

"Security, signal to Commander Riker to transport over, and that we have the cooperation of the ship's DaiMon."

"Aye, sir."

"DaiMon Pash, I will contact you when we have concluded our search. Screen off."

There was a moment of incredulity on the DaiMon's face, before the screen returned to an external view of the Marauder. Main power still appeared to be down, although the smoke from the port nacelle had almost stopped.

"Riker to *Enterprise*."

"Go ahead Commander," Picard said, sitting in his command chair.

"There is nothing here sir, but two piles of gold-pressed latinum. One large, the other enormous. Not a scrap of Federation equipment, although some ambient radiation signatures from magnetic locks suggest there was a warp core in here."

"I don't suppose Commander T'Amar is standing conveniently in a corner."

"No, sir. I expect she and her stolen goods are long gone. Commander Troi cannot sense any Vulcan presence on board."

"Very well, Commander. Make your way back to the *Enterprise*."

"Aye, sir."

"Hail the *Mercantile*."

The viewscreen once again lit up with a frustrated Ferengi face.

"My people are leaving your ship, DaiMon Pash, and you will find nothing has been disturbed."

The Ferengi's eyes lit up with this knowledge. "I will confirm this."

"Do what you like DaiMon, but for now you have a choice to make."

"What choice?"

"Well, you can either provide me with every bit of information about who you have been trading all these stolen parts with, or I will arrest you and your senior officers, and haul you off to the Federation where you will be tried, and if convicted spend a good deal of the rest of your life in prison. Your ship will be confiscated as remuneration for the damage you have caused, and your crew will be sent home to Ferenginar."

"You cannot do this!" Pash cried out.

"I can. I will. There is a third option."

"Which is?"

"The *Mercantile* simply disappears and no one knows what happened to it. There are many species quite eager to gain slaves. And as I understand it, Ferengi are quite strong for their size."

"You cannot! You are Starfleet."

The turbolift to the bridge arrived, and Riker, Data, Worf, and Troi entered the bridge and took their stations.

"I have been given wide discretion in this matter. You don't imagine that Starfleet is not interested in making itself some profit when the opportunity arises, do you?"

"I will not allow you. Shields up!"

"DaiMon, you have no shields. Your main power is still down. And I'd like to remind you, you can be on your

way the moment that power is repaired, if you simply give me the information I require."

"The details of who we were trading with?" DaiMon Pash said, seeing how the idea was perhaps not as terrible as he'd once thought.

"That is all I ask."

"And I'll have you know the starship was a fair salvage. It was left abandoned, and we recovered it according to interstellar law."

"Starship?" Picard repeated, momentarily confused, "very well, just include all the details of your legal and extralegal trading and send it all to me."

"Very well."

"And DaiMon, don't keep me waiting. Klingons do enjoy a good battle."

Pash looked from Picard to Worf, who was standing at tactical and frowning appropriately.

"Yes. You will have the information in thirty minutes."

"My engineers could fix two warp systems in thirty minutes. You have five, or I begin to add up my profits. Screen off."

"I don't recall the out-Ferengi the Ferengi tactic in my command training, Captain," Riker said, not hiding his smile, "that was some impressive bluffing."

Picard looked at him. "Was I?"

Before any more conversation, a message came in from the *Mercantile*.

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"Data, take a quick look. Is it everything we are asking for?"

"Yes, sir, it is a full account of their dealings for all the stolen parts."

"And the starship?"

"Yes, sir, that is included."

"Mr. Data, provide the conn with the coordinates of the Ferengi's last meeting with this mystery group."

"Aye, sir."

"Helm, engage when ready. Warp six."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

"Mr. Data, please correlate all the information we've been sent and prepare for a briefing in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir."

"Number One, have all the senior staff assemble in the observation lounge in ten minutes."

"Yes sir."

"Curiouser and curiouser. I'll be in my ready room."

Stardate 48544.2 — A Little Splash Will Do Ya

During the seven days T'Rya and the prisoners waited for their escape, they were in constant motion. Mostly moving resources down into the forgotten sublevel and putting them in packs and bags that prisoners could collect as they walked by.

But T'Rya could not overcome one flaw in her plan. Moving ten thousand people through a single hatch, no matter how well-organized, would take hours. By her estimation, barring any unforeseen difficulties, at least 12 hours. It would be possible for a small number of volunteers to simulate an uprising or riot in the prison for two hours, perhaps three, but the authorities would eventually clamp down on it to discover it was only a few, and that many, many other prisoners were missing. They would discover most of them lined up in the lower levels, discover the hatch and track down the few outside, and that would be the end of it. The prison would clamp down after this, making a small escape very difficult, never mind a mass one.

After several hours attempting to meditate but finding she could not focus at anything more than a superficial level, T'Rya sighed and went to lie on her mattress, wondering how she could sleep if she could not

meditate. But once her head came to rest on her mattress, she immediately fell asleep...

Only to wake in the dark. She listened carefully but could hear nothing. As anyone who has been in prison understands, there is never quiet. There is always noise: doors clanging shut, people yelling or crying themselves to sleep, guards giving orders, or prisoners arguing. Often the quiet is filled with others screaming for quiet.

She was sitting in her meditation posture. Her body was complaining about the cold of the concrete floor. In the dark she could hear a slow but steady drip, drip of water.

She was no longer in her cell!

With a snap, harsh lights came on above her. She could see she was back in the holding cell before her trial. As before, Commander Troi stood outside the glass wall, looking in at her. T'Rya tried to speak, but something kept her from moving.

Troi was speaking to her, but there was no sound. Her image was unnatural, jerking oddly, like a video playback skipping frames. The overall effect was terrifying. The Counsellor's eyes, usually a completely black pupil and iris, with a clear white sclera, had turned completely black, giving the image she had no eyes at all. Just black pits that nevertheless stared at her through the glass.

Troi continued to speak, but more and more earnestly. Then she stopped, instantly, remaining

motionless for several seconds. The Counsellor began to smile. At first a pretty, corner of the lips curling smile, but as it grew it began to expose her teeth. They were not human, looking more like the fangs of a *le-matya*[3] than a person.

Troi stared at her for a moment like this, then suddenly bit off the fingers of her right hand, severing them at the first knuckle. Blood spurted into the Counsellor's mouth, on her face, and down the front of her uniform.

Then, in that same jerky, nightmarish motion, Troi began to write on the glass of T'Rya's holding cell, using the blood from her ruined hand as a paint brush. The words were sloppy, but Troi was writing them backwards so T'Rya could read them: *tor be' dvun abru'*.

"I am not here," T'Rya said simply. "This cannot be real."

At her words Troi ceased moving and stared, the blood still dripping down her chin. Then, incongruously, the Commander was caught in a transporter beam and disappeared.

And T'Rya's cell went black.

#

Two days from the escape, and T'Rya sat shivering in her cell, refusing to see anyone. She had not slept for

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3The Le-matya is a large predatory beast, bearing poisonous claws, native to the planet Vulcan. Le-matyas are known to live in the foothills of the L-langon Mountains along Vulcan's Forge.

days, because every time she closed her eyes that horrifying golem of Troi would be dancing its inhuman dance in front of her cell, writing her bloody words on the glass.

The Vulcan phrase had no special meaning, neither did it when translated into Standard: "to pass over." To pass over what? Or was something supposed to pass over her, or them? When she gathered herself, she would inquire if the phrase meant something in Begemote.

And why Troi? From the moment she first met the Commander, T'Rya had felt at ease, and the two of them fell into an easy friendship the likes of which T'Rya could not remember ever having. No pretense, to hiding, no misunderstanding: she had bared her innermost to Troi, and received nothing but positivity. What a wretched thing to have her turn into a monster in her dreams.

As T'Rya sat, holding herself, fearing the one thing in her life that had been true and strong, her mind, was slipping its rational mounts and about to spin off into an abyss of… what, madness? She stood up to splash her face with cold water.

She sighed and brought her wet face close to the steel mirror–no glass allowed–and ran her hand through her hair. Something small fell from hair and into the sink. It was a dirty tan color, perhaps two centimeters long and a few millimeters wide.

Curious, T'Rya used the cloth of her prison clothes to lift it out of the sink. But by the time she brought her

uniform up to her eyes, the thing had disappeared into the cloth, leaving hardly a lump in her clothing.

Apparently, she had been marked. By whom, or what, or why, she could not say. "To pass over", but that was not exactly correct. In Vulcan it was correct, but translating to Standard meant it could stand as a verb or noun. That would leave "pass over". Or "Passover".

Now that term did spark a dim memory. She leaned against the sink with her hands and closed her eyes. Six months of food that made her ill, under constant physical threat, and attack, feeling the weight of the mission she had taken on for herself, was beginning to break her. All living things have breaking points. Even the mighty Vulcan T'Rya. She felt close to hers. Now another mystery, this one coming close on the heels of being beaten to death.

Drawing on reserves she willed into existence, she traced through her formidable memory for the term she had seen in her nightmare. As she stood at the sink, leaning on it with her hands, her breathing began to slow, the tension dropped away from her face. The traumatic memories of being strung up in that filthy shower room flashed at her like lightning stabs at the dark, but she let them go.

It came to her. As simple as remembering a good friend's name. It was a reference to an ancient Earth religion, who were ordered by their god to splash animal blood on their door to avoid their god's vengeance.

As absurd as the legend was, it became perfectly clear to her now what her nightmare meant. Someone, or something, was trying to tell her there would be a passover of the prison. The strange item she'd found in her hair, which had hidden itself in her clothing, was analogous to the blood splashed on her door. She would need to inform her allies to find the same item and hide it in their clothing. Then there would be nothing left to do but wait.

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In the early morning two days later, T'Rya's plan was set in motion. Three hundred volunteers began a riot in three separate wings of the prison. They drew the enemies of their plan into the riot and began to die as they were overwhelmed by superior numbers. Meanwhile, nearly ten thousand prisoners made their way, orderly but quickly, into a line leading down into the unused sub-basement and the hatch that would lead to their freedom.

T'Rya went first, never willing to put any of her people at risk before she faced it. She forced the hatch open, which groaned in protest and age, until it swung up and over. The Begemot sun burned through the clouds, temporarily blinding everyone beneath, even as rain fell down in torrents. T'Rya climbed up and onto what appeared to be a lush meadow. As her eyes adjusted, she saw many of the volunteers that had promised to give the rest of them as much time as possible, standing, sitting, and lying down in the meadow. Some had obviously been wounded but received medical attention. They all appeared

stunned. At the sight of T'Rya emerging from the ground, they became excited and came to her, dozens of voices asking what was happening.

Passover, she thought to herself. At that moment, at least another hundred prisoners from the riots were transported into the clearing. *So, not magic after all*, T'Rya thought to herself, *but Starfleet has grown a conscience*.

The rain was almost indescribable. Like a bottomless bucket poured over her head. T'Rya tried to protect her vision by cupping her hand above her eyes, but it barely helped. The Begemotes around her did not seem at all bothered with the rain, and simply let it run down their faces. Despite her reduced vision, she spotted a sign tacked to a tree-mollusk, a simple arrow pointing deeper into the forest. "You," she yelled over the pounding of the rain, pointing out a prisoner who appeared uninjured, "Stand at this sign and direct everyone past it. When you are the last, take it with you and follow along."

Without waiting for a reply, she ordered everyone in the clearing to follow her. As they crossed into the woods, she could hear yet another mass transport of people into the clearing.

Not far into the woods, T'Rya confronted another sign with another arrow. Even the canopy of the woods did not protect much from the relentless rain. She recruited another uninjured prisoner to stay with this sign, giving him the same directions as she had for the previous one.

And on through the woods she continued, until she came upon an entrance way to J-caste level. Down a long corridor she found a massive room and waited as her fellow prisoners came through. As she investigated, she found food and water and other equipment along the far wall, which was shrouded in darkness from the entrance.

T'Rya probed carefully among the prisoners who arrived. Had they been transported? If so, how did they feel about that? It was surprising for her to find almost no-one upset about being transported, and even those who were upset about it seemed more miffed than angry, as if they thought it unsporting to have that done to them without their foreknowledge.

In less than an hour the last of the sign positions came through, each carrying their arrow so no one could follow them. They were out, and for the moment free, but it would not be long before the Begemot authorities would find such a large number of people in one place. She consulted her captains and ordered them to share the supplies amongst all the prisoners, and then for each of them to take their platoon, about fifty prisoners each, into the J-caste level and find a place to hide. Until further notice, they would send one representative of their group to this room every day at dusk, so they could coordinate their actions.

Stardate 48549.7 — Message from an Old Friend

"Captain," Worf said from his station. "We are receiving a priority message from Starfleet. Eyes only."

"Very well, Mr. Worf, send it to my ready room."

"Sir."

Picard looked over at Riker, then got out of his command chair and walked to the ready room.

At his desk, he keyed on his console and said: "Computer, access Starfleet transmission, authorization Picard 182 Delta Gamma."

After a pause and a trill, the screen lit up with a live face, a Starfleet Admiral.

"Good morning, Captain Picard."

"Good morning, Admiral Holland."

"We've had some disturbing news out of Begemot over the past twenty-four hours. It seems there has been a massive prison riot and escape. Some ten thousand prisoners are now free and threatening the peace. Begemot has officially requested Federation assistance."

"I sympathize, Admiral, but isn't that an internal Begemot concern?"

"I don't have to tell you how invested we are in the Begemot system, and in particular their integration into the

Federation. To lose that advantage now to civil disorder is something we cannot accept."

"I understand, sir, but Starfleet is not the Federation's police force. We have good reason not to interfere in a planet's internal politics."

"You know what I am saying, Captain."

"Perhaps I do, Admiral, but I am not going to defy Starfleet and Federation protocols without being given a direct order. I've already done enough of that for a lifetime."

"Then consider yourself ordered. Captain Picard, by order of Starfleet Command, you are hereby required to make your way at best speed to Begemot, and to assist the Begemot authorities in suppressing this prison escape. Do you understand your orders?"

"Yes, sir. I'm afraid I do."

"Good. Get it done. Holland out."

The Admiral's face was replaced with the UFP logo. There was barely enough time for the headache to start before his door chime trilled.

He sighed. "Come!"

Commander Troi stepped through the door into the ready room.

"Commander, what can I do for you?"

"Thank you for the time, Captain, I wanted to talk to you about… Captain, is everything alright?"

"Of course it is," Picard snapped.

Troi did not speak. She simply stared.

"All right, I suppose not," Picard admitted, shaking his head and coming over to sit on the couch. Troi sat with him. "I've just received some disturbing orders, which are coming too fast upon each other for comfort."

"Begemot?"

"How did you…"

"I received a personal letter from T'Rya a few days ago. It appeared to be a kind of bland recounting of prison life, asking how my family was, and so on. Then a second letter arrived apologizing that Begemot subspace transmission protocols were just being standardized, and this was the second half of the letter. I asked the computer to join them.

"The second transmission turned out to be a cypher to the first part. Once decrypted through the key, T'Rya's message was completely different."

"Is she behind the prison unrest?"

"Yes sir. But the message is addressed to you."

"To me?"

"Yes, Captain. I don't know if she told you, but she was… is a great admirer of your career. She practically idolizes you." Troi handed a small storage module to him. "She asked me to give it to you as soon as I received it, but I hesitated while we were searching for this mystery ship. When I discovered the search was taking us in the same general direction as Begemot, I decided to give it to you."

"I am not going to like this letter, am I, Deanna?"

"No sir, but it may offer some clarity concerning what you should do." Troi stood up. "I don't envy you, Captain, but you know you have the entire crew with you, whatever you decide." She turned and walked towards the door, then turned back, expectantly.

"Yes, we'll talk later. Dismissed."

And then she left.

Picard sat for a moment, turning the storage module over and over in his hand. His headache has been replaced with a kind of low intensity fear. This was the worst kind. He was not intimidated by fear. He had felt it, faced it, and overcome it more times than he could count. But this kind gnawing nervousness was worse. It could not be overcome, because its source was the unknown.

He stood up and walked over to sit in his chair. He pressed the comm icon on his desk: "Bridge for Commander Data!"

"Yes, Captain."

"What is our current distance from the Begemot system?"

"Ninety-three-point-seven light years Captain."

"Time to arrival at maximum warp?"

"Eighteen days, one hour, twenty-four seconds at warp nine."

"Commander Riker!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Make it so."

"Aye, sir."

For a few minutes, Captain Picard sat staring at the console on his desk, and the storage module sitting beside it. Then he sighed and walked over to this food synthesizer.

"Tea, Earl Gray, hot." When the beverage materialized, he brought it back to his desk, put the tea down and sat in his chair, and placed the storage module in the port of the console.

"Computer, present letter provided for Captain Picard."

There was a trill, and suddenly T'Rya's face filled the console's display. Picard's eyebrows raised. He had been expecting a letter. T'Rya looked gaunt, and far older than the woman he had worked with not 6 months ago. She was almost skeletal, and something dark was hidden behind her eyes in a way he could never remember seeing a Vulcan appear. But still, she managed one of her very convincing artificial smiles, and began to speak.

"Hello, Captain," the image of T'Rya began. "My people here have managed to encode a short video message in my letter to Commander Troi. Feel free to share this with her if you wish. In my six months here, I have made great progress in bringing the prisoners together. Recent events, which I do not have time to describe, have given me enormous credit among my compatriots.

"Was it you, Captain? Did you send them to save me?

"At any rate, in a few days' time we will be breaking out of prison. I will have at my disposal almost 10,000 soldiers, who will quickly infiltrate the lower castes and grow that number by ten times, and by ten times again. I am hoping for a peaceful transition, but we are both resolute and desperate.

"I anticipate the Federation will send Starfleet to come to the aid of the Begemot government. I want to warn you, this will only make violence more likely. Unless the Federation is willing to fight a protracted ground war on a Federation member planet, they must not aid either side. Freedom must be taken, Captain; freedom must be won. It cannot be imposed or withheld from the outside.

"I do hope to see you again, Captain, away from the shadow of intrigue and violence we seem to meet under. I hope to see you visit a free Begemot, your ally in this remote part of Federation Space."

She held up her hand in the traditional Vulcan symbol, it was bruised and scraped, bloody. "Live long and prosper, Captain."

The screen went blank.

Captain Picard sighed, reached for his tea and brought it up to his lips, then paused and put it down again. He stood up and walked to the window of the ready room to stare out at the stars streaking as the ship warped space. He did not move for some time.

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Geordi LaForge sat in a corner table of Ten-Forward, watching the stars streak outside the glass. The Chief Engineer of the *Enterprise* looked consumed with a problem. To watch him, one might assume he was assessing a new intermix chamber percentage to increase the ship's acceleration, or a warp coil adjustment to increase the engine's endurance at high warp. Or even the next move of a difficult chess game...

"Commander," came a voice, breaking him out of his reverie. LaForge looked up to see Lieutenant Barclay standing next to the table. "Do you have a moment?"

"Sure, Reg," LaForge said, motioning to the second chair at the small table.

"A... are you sure, sir? You seemed to be in the middle of some serious thought."

LaForge motioned to the chair again. "No, no, I was trying to think of a way to ask the new daycare teacher out for coffee."

"Ah," Barclay commiserated, "even worse then."

LaForge smiled. "What can I do for you?"

"Well Commander…"

"Come on Reg, we're off duty. Geordi."

"Y... yes sir, I mean, Geordi." Barclay took a sip of his drink. "You see, I've been contacted by Dr. Zimmerman at Jupiter Station. They want me to join them as part of the holo-engineering team working on the personality of the new Emergency Medical Hologram."

"I've heard about that," LaForge replied. "A sort of localized holo-deck image of a doctor able to take over when the medical staff are overwhelmed or incapacitated. Sounds intriguing. What a feather in your cap that would be for your career!"

"Yes...well, I think I'm going to turn it down."

"What? Look, Reg, I am grateful to have you aboard the *Enterprise*. You've saved the ship several times. I don't want to lose you, but this is a huge opportunity for your career in Starfleet. Zimmerman's a genius. A position with him is like a ticket to pick your next assignment."

"I... I understand that Geordi, but, well…"

"It's new and kinda frightening, right?"

Barclay let out a large sigh. "Exactly. I feel I'm at a point on the *Enterprise* where I'm finally… comfortable. People speak to me with respect, they seek out my opinion. I know they still find me odd, but they look beyond that to see the positive qualities I have. This is the first time in my career I've ever felt like this."

"You know, Reg, I'm your boss, your colleague, and your friend, but I am not a counsellor. Maybe you should…"

"I've already spoken to Dean… Counsellor Troi."

"And?"

"She said the changes I've felt among the crew of the *Enterprise* is not them changing, but a reaction to me changing."

"That sounds right to me Reg. You've come a long way. You've developed a healthy self-confidence in your skills, and you have learned a lot about how to be comfortable in social situations."

"Comfortable here."

"Reg, there are over one thousand people on this ship. What is Dr. Zimmerman's staff, thirty? That's not even a third of the Engineering staff on the *Enterprise*, and I'll bet you know each Engineer on this ship by name."

"Well, yes, but…"

"But nothing. It is ultimately your decision. I understand that desire to stay where it feels comfortable and safe. But given the opportunity being offered you, I really recommend you give it some serious thought. There's no reason to believe the next place won't end up feeling comfortable and safe."

"T... true."

"And whatever you do choose, I'll back you up. I want you to head off and develop your career, but I'm also happy to have my Engineer's Mate taking care of the *Enterprise* with me."

"Thank you, Commander, er, Geordi."

They both took a sip of their drinks and turned to look out at the stars streaking past.

"We are finished t'raa," the wounded Begemot moaned as T'Rya placed a towel beneath her head. She looked over the wounds from the falling rock of the cavern. The internals visible from the crushing injury looked nothing like any animal T'Rya had ever seen. Some wounds oozed a clear, sap-like fluid, while others appeared to be drying out and flaking away with the slightest wind.

"I'm sorry," T'Rya replied. "I don't know how to treat your wounds." She sat back and tried to regain her composure. Things had been going so well. No violence, the resistance numbers doubling every day. The government acted as expected, locked out all labor and moved planetary food reserves to B-caste. But of course, that took labor, and a vast amount of those resources were redirected to the mostly uninhabited J-caste level. C-caste was sealed off from D, with loyal military and AI troops guarding any points of access.

On the ground, the military had been disbanded and AI robotics sent out to break the rebellion. This was mostly good fortune, as AI police units used mostly non-lethal means to capture and imprison the rebels. It was a game of whack-a-mole, where the rebels would simply

break open containment centers the moment the AI became too thin to patrol. The containment would be repaired, and the capture process repeated. It worked in the rebel's favor, as they did not hesitate to destroy any machines they could. They would wear down the government's ground forces by attrition.

That was, until today. This morning the robotic attacks resumed, but instead of non-lethal means, they were simply killing anyone they could get in their sights. The concentration centers had been abandoned, but not before anyone trapped in them was butchered.

And yet, even as gruesome a change as it was, this was something that could be fought against. The most terrible change in government policy was the use of high-altitude bombardment of areas beneath H-caste with any concentration of people. In other words, they were deliberately exterminating H, I, and J levels, both to stall the rebellion, and as a warning to the higher castes of what would happen to them.

"You're right," she spoke to the now unconscious Begemote female lying beside where she knelt, "we cannot win. I'm sorry. And I can't even treat your wounds."

T'Rya saw shadows in front of her, from the flickering of light behind, but when she turned, she saw a Vulcan in a Starfleet medical uniform.

"Stanch the flow, water the drying tissue. Begemot anatomy is something of a cross between plant and animal. Stand aside."

T'Rya did as she was asked, getting up and allowing the medical technician to kneel down before the dying Begemote. After some use of a tricorder, application of a few bandages and applications of water, he turned to look at her. He held out his hand: "Sarok, ship's doctor."

T'Rya automatically took Sarok's hand. "T'Rya," she replied, then noticed he had placed something in her hand. It looked like a…

#

T'Rya materialized in a transporter room. It was a Starfleet transporter, of this she was certain, but it was like none she had ever seen before. It was dirty, with damage to the walls. One of the six transport pads was discharging from an electrical short, sending foul-smelling chemical smoke into the air. It befouled the transporter room's air supply, but even beneath that T'Rya could sense something was wrong with life support.

"Where...who...what ship?" For the first time in her life, T'Rya was literally speechless.

"The Captain is ready to answer all of your questions, Lieutenant," the transporter technician, yet another Vulcan, explained. "I am not permitted to do more than send you to the bridge."

"What ship?"

"The *USS Brattain*, Lieutenant. Are you familiar enough with the schematics to make your way to the bridge on a *Miranda*-class starship?"

"I... yes," T'Rya managed, bringing her hand to her head.

"I would escort you, or have someone else do so, but I'm afraid we are too busy repairing the ship. I am not permitted to leave my post."

"No, no, I can make my way," T'Rya assured the transporter technician, then she made her way through the door.

Once inside the hallway, T'Rya found a computer interface and demanded: "Computer, what registry is this ship?"

"NCC-21166, *USS Brattain*."

This must be a trick, she thought to herself, *the Brattain was lost years ago*.

"Commissioning information?"

"Commission stardate 22519.5. *Miranda*-class revision D medium cruiser, constructed by the Yoyodyne Division at the 40 Eridani A Starfleet Construction Yards. Owner, The United Federation of Planets. Operator, Starfleet. Ship's motto: '...a three-hour tour, a three-hour tour'."

Now, more confused than ever, T'Rya made her way to the nearest turbolift. Once inside, she ordered "Bridge!", then leaned against the wall.

The door opened onto a starship bridge. On the forward viewer was a view of stars, with the slowly rolling ball of Begemot on the bottom third of the screen. Standard orbit.

As T'Rya walked onto the bridge, she could see the *Brattain*'s science, environment, and tactical stations were dark. Some engineering crew were working on them by accessing their components behind panels below the displays.

So that explains the musty air, she considered, *something wrong with the environmental systems*.

"Ah, Lieutenant T'Rya!" came a voice from the captain's chair. The Captain then stood and turned to face T'Rya as she leaned against the railing behind the chair. It was another Vulcan, a woman, dressed in a commander's uniform.

"This should be the auxiliary master situation station," was all T'Rya could manage.

"We have been forced to retrofit our bridge to an earlier version of the bridge layout, due to damage and a shortage of parts."

"Has life support failed, Captain?"

"Not failed, no. It is keeping us alive. But environmental controls were damaged. As you can see, science and tactical are also under repair."

"Combat damage?"

"Not at all," the Captain smiled, "and now I see what the Vulcan Science Academy and Starfleet

Intelligence Special Operations saw in you. Completely out of your element, half dead, losing a war, but still with a mind like a razor!"

"I am Captain T'Amar. Don't let my pips confuse you. I'm afraid Starfleet has been slow in approving my promotion."

Around the bridge came chuckles. T'Rya looked from face to Vulcan face. Smiling, chuckling, but all looking at her with admiration.

T'Rya opened her mouth to provide her rank, even though she was no longer part of Starfleet, but instead she had to shut her eyes against a sudden wave of vertigo. The bridge seemed to be spinning like an amusement park ride, the deck tilting near vertical. As she struggled with the sensations, her eyes landed on the ship's plaque, where every starship displayed their motto:

"Freedom must be taken! Freedom must be won!

—Marmaduke Bonthrop,"

it read.

With raw will, she held fast to the handrail behind the Captain's chair and let her knees collapse, allowing her body to fall safely to the deck. For a moment she saw the deck plating in front of her face, until it began to turn into tiny whirlpools rather than standard deck plating with regulation holes for the artificial gravity.

Then she saw nothing.

#

"Who is Marmaduke Bonthrop?"

"Doctor, she's waking up."

T'Rya opened her eyes. Had she just said something?

"How are you feeling?" the Vulcan doctor who had transported down to the planet to save her injured friend asked as he came into her blurry field of view.

T'Rya opened her mouth to respond to his query, but instead demanded a second time: "Who is Marmaduke Bonthrop? He is not a three-hour tour!"

The doctor did not appear concerned at her inappropriate response. "Now you are conscious, T'Rya, I need you to listen carefully to your diagnosis. You were exposed to some very dangerous chemicals in the transporter room. You will make a full recovery, as will the transporter technician we found not long after you collapsed. In a way, you likely saved his life.

"This chemical has given you a kind of temporary aphasia. You will find that even though you are forming coherent sentences in your mind to speak, what you will actually say will be different and often nonsensical. Fortunately, your ability to write clearly is not affected, so you can still communicate with us anything of importance.

"Do you understand?"

T'Rya nodded. At least she could communicate 'yes'. She turned to look around sickbay. On the far end of this intensive care unit, she could see the injured Begemote she'd been unable to help. T'Rya pointed at her.

"Want to know her status?"

T'Rya nodded again.

"Well, she suffered some dreadful crushing injuries, but with the appropriate suturing of the seeping organs and judicious use of distilled water, I'm happy to say she should be fine. Begemotes appear to have remarkable regenerative systems, requiring only minimal assistance to help it along."

"Blasphemy!" T'Rya yelled. The four medical officers in sick bay turned to look at her. All of them were dressed in their proper blue uniforms. All of them were Vulcan.

"Here," a nurse handed her a simple writing pad. With her finger she wrote the word "Butchering!"

Doctor Sarok nodded, "Yes, we know it is bad. We are working as quickly as we can to get our tactical systems back up. Without shields, phasers, and our cloak we are basically helpless. But when we are repaired, we plan to stop the high-altitude attacks. The rebellion will have a chance of success once we rule the skies of the planet."

"Bark!" T'Rya said, then wrote again on her pad with her finger: 'But, how is Starfleet defending the rebellion? Did Captain Picard sway them?'

"These are things you should probably discuss with the Captain," Sarok said as he took a hypo from the nurse that came up to her bed. "In the meantime, this will help you with getting those chemicals out of your brain and reversing the aphasia. It will probably make you drowsy."

"Nuts!" T'Rya yelled as she tried to stop the doctor from sedating her. *Not quite 'no',* she thought to herself, laughter somehow bubbling up from that abused lump between her ears, *but fits the general profile*.

But she was far too weak to resist a fellow Vulcan. In a moment she felt the hypo fired into her neck, and immediately her field of vision began to shrink down to nothing.

"Bollocks," she mumbled, before falling unconscious.

#

T'Rya snapped awake when she heard shouting. Unlike before, her mind appeared to be working properly. She was immediately aware of where she was, the ship, the aphasia, sickbay, all of it.

She looked to the far side of the intensive care wing to see Lara, the Begemote patient, standing with her back to the wall and brandishing a laser-scalpel. Three nurses were confronting her, not attacking, just keeping her in place, probably waiting for security.

"No, don't!" she called out, getting out of her medibed and moving over, her hands out in front of her, "these are friends."

The female spoke back to her in Begemot. Realizing she did not understand Standard or Vulcan, T'Rya switched language: "You know me, I am T'Rya, these are friends. They are here to help us. What is your name?"

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The Begemote paused, then replied, "I was so frightened. I thought I had died and sunk into the bog of ending. I am H'Lra'Edtra." She turned off the laser scalpel, reversed it in her hand, and held it out to the closest nurse.

Just then, two armed security guards burst into sickbay.

"No!" T'Rya shouted and moved to put herself between Lara and security. Before they could grapple with her, the nurses convinced them everything was now okay, and to stand down.

The security guards holstered their phasers but did not leave sickbay. They went into the lobby and stood behind the wall separating it from intensive care.

"You saved me!" Lara commented, as she allowed T'Rya to put her back in the medibed.

"Not at all," T'Rya corrected. "It was these people here, in particular Doctor Sarok."

"Those uniforms. This starship. Is the Federation with us?"

"I believe the answer to that is far more complicated than 'yes' or 'no'. But I plan to find out." T'Rya walked towards the exit.

"Please do not leave me here."

"I'm not. Not at least until you can communicate. I'm just going to speak to security."

On the other side of the privacy wall in the ICU lounge, she confronted the security officers. Both were Vulcan, she noted, now hardly surprised.

"You," she pointed at the closest officer.

"Yes."

"Yes what?" T'Rya demanded.

The guard hesitated, confused.

"What is your rank?"

"Lieutenant," he replied.

T'Rya pointed at his pips, "Lieutenant, junior grade. I am a Lieutenant with Starfleet Command Special Operations. That means I outrank you twice. So 'Yes what?'"

"Yes, ma'am?" The confused guard replied, unsure.

"Look, I am on my way to deal harshly with your Captain. But before I can, I require a universal translator so my friend in there can speak to her doctor. Do you think you have the capacity to fetch a universal translator and bring it back here?"

"I… yes. Ma'am."

"Good. On your way then!"

The security guard ran out the door.

"And why are you still here?" she barked at the other security officer, an Ensign.

"I, well, I was called…"

"And now you are dismissed, Ensign. That's how these things work."

"Yes, ma'am," and he too left.

T'Rya returned to Lara. "I have ordered a universal translator brought to you. This will allow you to speak to your doctor. I have to go now, but I will check back in twenty minutes to make sure everything is alright."

She leaned in close: "You can trust these people, Lara. They are on our side."

H'Lra'Edtra nodded and smiled a Begemote smile. To the unfamiliar, it looked more like a grimace. T'Rya patted Lara's arm, looked each nurse in the eye, and left sickbay.

#

As the turbolift door opened, T'Rya decided to play along with the Starfleet ruse: "Permission to come on the bridge, Captain."

"Granted!" T'Amar barked without looking back. The air had improved considerably, and she could see the Environment Station was now up and functioning. On the main viewer, stars streaked past. The ship was at warp.

"What is our destination?" she asked.

"We are skirting Tholian space while we repair our tactical systems. We were too exposed in orbit. You have many questions?"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

"Mr. Sakik, you have the bridge. I will be in the ready room."

"Aye, Captain. I have the bridge."

T'Rya followed the Captain T'Amar to the right, past the Master Situation Station and through the door labelled "Observation/Ready Room". Once through the door, there was a stairwell on the left leading down to deck two. In front of her on the far wall was a food synthesizer, and to the right of that a four-person table.

"Take a seat," T'Amar said, motioning to the table, I'll just be a moment." She continued to the right and through a door labelled "Ready Room".

T'Rya walked over to the table and took a chair up against the bulkhead, where she could look out at the stars streaking into the distance. She looked out along the hull of the saucer section and beyond, the pylon of the starboard nacelle and the overhead weapons assembly.

Captain T'Amar returned to Observation, carrying a PADD.

"This is not a Starfleet vessel," T'Rya said bluntly.

"Look around you. I'm afraid I must disagree with you."

"And you are not Starfleet."

"On that point you are correct. We are as much Starfleet officers as you are."

"Then why the ruse?"

"Because we are all ex-Starfleet, and we evolved naturally back into a Starfleet routine. Maybe it is the ship. Maybe it is comfortable. Whatever the cause, it is working very well."

T'Rya tried to think of other questions to ask, but it was difficult. The fatigue and despair she'd felt on Begemot was coming back. For a moment she feared she would collapse again.

"You are overwhelmed. I understand," T'Amar explained. "Why not give your mind a rest and let me tell you a story?" T'Amar sat down opposite T'Rya and placed the PADD on the table in front of her.

"In 2224 a very special Vulcan was born. He was extremely intelligent, and it was believed he would one day sit among the great minds of Vulcan history. But he chose a different path, the *v'tosh ka'tur*, and for this his own people banished him.

"This exile profoundly wounded him, but there was nothing he could do. As if the loneliness was not enough, he began to be tortured by a disembodied voice, and sometimes visions in his dreams, to find a being which claimed to be the divinity that created the universe.

"He was wrong. It was not a god they found, and no Sha Ka Ree. In his hubris, relying so heavily on emotion, he had allowed his logic to fail him, and be fooled by the being. And he died attempting to make up for what he'd done.

"Since his life a small, but devoted group of Vulcans began to explore his ideas. We discovered we were not the only ones to have sought a means to reintroduce emotion into our lives. Not to let it overcome us, as this Vulcan had, but to reintegrate them with our

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logical minds. This earlier group, the *v'tosh ka'tur* had been overwhelmed and lost by the second wave of Vulcan logic, when the *Kir'Shara* was discovered, and Surak's true teachings were revealed.

"The Vulcan's movement was lost with him, until a century ago, when his writings were discovered in a cavern on a distant Vulcan colony. They were treated as the historical treasures they were, and immediately sent for study at the Vulcan Science Academy. It was our study of them that led us to you, T'Rya.

"We are the Kanu t' Sybok, and you are one of us."

"But… Children of Sybok? Sybok destroyed himself. Emotion destroyed him."

"So, the world believed until his writings were discovered. He sought a balance of emotions and logic. But as his writings continue, they digress, begin to rant about a being, about god, calling to him. Sybok lost his mind before he set out on his quest. Not to logic. Not to emotion. But to an extraordinarily powerful telepathic being that distorted Sybok's thoughts, twisted them, and used him for its purpose, to escape its prison."

"But, Captain…"

"To you I am T'Amar. I will not have you paying obedience to me."

"T'Amar," T'Rya continued, "there has been some kind of mistake. I do not have emotions, only mimic them. I am ruled by logic."

"And yet, did Sybok not write of a resolute lady that would forsake emotion, her own world, and even logic to lift the oppressed, *t'sai ri'a'gra*?"

"You do not expect me to believe Sybok was telling the future?"

"The past, the future, even today we do not understand what they are. And yet, as we climb ever higher into knowledge, more and more, to our fear, we find the mind is a component of reality, like matter, like energy. Here you are, 'resolute lady', just as Sybok said you would be, forsaking everything to lift the oppressed."

"You are mistaken."

"Perhaps. And yet, here we are. We have found a starship, refitted it, and are ready to serve your cause. Will you have us?"

"The beating. It was you, not fairies! How did you save me?"

"Transported you up to sickbay, kept you delirious, and put you back together after those… I'm sorry we could only kill them once."

"Captain, Engineering reports tactical repaired and all offensive and defensive systems are now operational," came over T'Amar's communicator.

T'Amar smiled sheepishly. "Intra-ship communications are still down," she explained, then tapped her comm badge. "Not quite protocol, however, message received. Set reciprocal course. Increase speed to

warp eight. Standby all weapons systems and shields. Engage the cloak."

"Aye, Captain."

"Cloak?" T'Rya blurted out, unable to contain herself.

T'Amar smiled again and winked at her. "Contact me when we are within visual range of Begemot. Remain cloaked and enter standard orbit. Start gathering intelligence on those high-altitude bombers."

"Yes, Captain!"

"Cloak?" T'Rya repeated.

"Yes, it would appear your upwardly moral Federation has Starfleet building cloaking devices for its vessels."

"But that breaks two major treaties."

"Technically, no. They are not deployed, just spread out through the Federation in case they are needed."

"I… I can't believe this."

"Believe it. We're using one now. We only found out about it recently but couldn't pass over such a precious jewel. According to its specification, it puts to shame Romulan and Klingon systems. We can travel at warp, sub-light, have our shields up and engage in offensive battle while cloaked. It even has a subspace mirroring system that translates the firing point of our weapons up to half a kilometer from our location."

"And your plans?"

"Well, our plans were to blow those high-altitude bombers out of Begemot's skies to stop the genocide of the lower castes. Then, to operate as an orbiting support platform for the revolution. If the Begemot government puts a bird in the air, we put it on the ground. We managed to acquire some very advanced, high-output phaser arrays. If I may employ a human aphorism, we can shoot the cock off a fly from orbit."

T'Rya did not speak. She could not think of anything to say.

"But now, now we have you, our plans are your plans. I relinquish command of the *Brattain* to you. What are your orders?"

"You will return to Begemot and send me back among my people."

"But, T'Rya, we can help."

"No, I will not turn this into a rescue mission where Vulcans save the poor desperate Begemot people."

"You are a Vulcan."

"I am not. I am nothing. I have no world."

"Sophistry! Have you ceased meditating? Forgone logic? Excised a lifetime of knowledge and wisdom from your mind? Who gave you this? Yes, you have renounced your citizenship, resigned from Starfleet, but you answer to a greater calling. Where did that calling find you? As a Vulcan, as a Starfleet officer. Not only are you still Vulcan, you are the best of us. Now stop acting like a martyr and stop making Begemot about you.

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"I'll be on the bridge when you manage to find your senses."

With this, T'Amar stood and left the lounge, leaving a stunned T'Rya to watch the stars continue to streak into the distance.

"Entering the Begemot system," Data announced from ops.

"Drop from warp," Riker ordered. "Full impulse power to Begemot."

"Aye, sir."

"We are receiving flash traffic from Begemot, Captain." Worf added, "Audio only."

"Let's hear it, Lieutenant," Picard ordered.

Over the bridge comms: "Mayday, mayday. Any Starfleet vessel in range. We are requesting Federation assistance in suppressing an uprising. The government is in peril. A Federation Starship is in orbit assisting the rebels. Should this government fall, intelligence on the Tholians could be in peril. Mayday, mayday."

"Send to Begemot: this is the *USS Enterprise*. We are answering your distress call. Provide all tactical information you can regarding this ship supporting the rebels and we will engage," Picard said quickly to Worf.

"Federation ship?" said Ricker, confused.

"I'm assuming we are about to meet whoever stole those parts from Beta Epsilon, Number One."

"Shields up," Riker ordered. "Arm phasers, load torpedo bays."

"Aye, sir," Worf replied. "Shields up. Phasers and torpedoes report ready."

The *Enterprise* roared into orbit of Begemot.

"Tactical!" Riker ordered.

On the main screen, the planet became animated and shifted to present its northern pole. The plot of the *Enterprise* in orbit was represented by a slowly orbiting dot near the equator.

"Mr. Worf, I'm not seeing any other ship," Riker complained.

"Sensors can identify no other ship in orbit."

"In the north or south magnetic poles?"

"No, Commander, our sensors can penetrate the weak magnetic poles of the planet without difficulty. There is nothing out there."

"Mr. Worf," Picard ordered, "rig for anti-cloak defense."

Just then the *Enterprise* jumped to red alert.

"Report!" Riker demanded.

"Phaser fire, Commander, from orbit down to the surface. I am still reading no ship."

"Ops," Picard said quickly, target the origin of that phaser fire and plot a course. Give me course and distance."

"The phaser fire originated from the equatorial region, elevation eighteen thousand six hundred twenty-seven meters, location six degrees, eleven minutes, forty-eight seconds south by eighty-seven degrees, twenty-three

minutes, fifty-four seconds west, bearing one hundred sixty-one degrees from our position. Distance, fifteen thousand two hundred twenty-five kilometers.[4]"

"Conn, make for that location, one quarter impulse power."

"Another phaser blast."

"Location?" Riker demanded.

"Approximately five hundred meters from the first."

"Conn, adjust course to that heading and maintain speed."

"Aye, sir."

Riker leaned over to Picard: "Cloaked and firing?"

As the *Enterprise* closed on the last location of the firing, a ship suddenly dropped its cloak and spun to stand nose to nose with the *Enterprise*.

"Relative all stop," Picard ordered. "Can you identify?"

"Answering all stop, Captain," said the Ensign at the conn.

"Their transponder signal is no longer being hidden by their cloak," Data explained. "It is the *USS Brattain*, Captain."

"That Tyken's Rift, years ago," Riker commented.

4In orbit, distances are too small to use galactic coordinates. Instead, the height from the surface, and the body's latitude and longitude are employed, using the same 360-degree coordinate system for navigating any sphere.

"They are hailing us," Worf added.

"On screen!" Picard ordered. He stood and straightened his uniform.

The image of the *Brattain* hanging in space disappeared, and the bridge came into view. A Vulcan woman was sitting in the captain's chair.

"Commander T'Amar," Riker said, standing up to move beside Picard.

"Good morning to you, Commander Riker. And may I assume you are Captain Picard, commander of the *USS Enterprise*, the Federation Flagship?"

"I am, Commander."

"Captain," T'Amar interrupted. "I have not received my pips from Starfleet. You know how these things are." Several of the bridge crew chuckled. Picard and Riker both began to notice every person they could see was Vulcan.

"Captain," Picard continued. "You understand you are in a stolen starship and attacking a Federation planet."

"Not at all Captain. I am Captain of a derelict ship recovered under the interstellar laws of salvage. This wonderful ship was about to fall into a star. How wasteful of the Federation!

"And I can see you are about to interfere in the internal affairs of a Federation planet, which is prohibited by Federation law. Will we have to arrest you and seize your ship, Captain?"

"We are here to stop you interfering. And I believe you have several pieces of stolen Starfleet property," Picard rejoined.

"Well now, Captain, as you are perfectly aware, we are not part of Starfleet, and therefore not under Federation restrictions. Some Begemote friends of ours have asked for our help, and we are merely aiding our compatriots. The government is welcomed to hire mercenaries or find friends who are legally able to help them.

"As for stolen technology. Should we list what items we have managed to acquire from some Ferengi traders, over open-air communications? Let me begin then: some bridge equipment; a warp core; a warp core ejection system; a super-secret…"

"That is quite enough," Picard interrupted. "Perhaps you would come on board the *Enterprise* and we could discuss your terms?"

"I have a counter-proposal. You give me your word you will not confine, arrest, or otherwise prevent her from leaving your ship, and I will send over an advocate. You also give me your word you will not fire on us, as we simultaneously drop our shields to transport her over. Further, you will not prevent us from transporting her off your ship at any time while she is your 'guest'."

"Agreed."

"Very well. You and Counsellor Troi will go into your Observation room, then have the *Enterprise* drop her shields, at which point I will transport my advocate over to

you. I will be monitoring your conversation, so do not attempt to jam her signal. You may outgun us, Captain, but I have some rather nasty tricks up my sleeves, and I would prefer to avoid any bloodshed."

Picard turned to Worf and slid his finger across his neck.

"Mute," Worf announced.

"Mr. Data, full sensor sweep of that ship."

"Aye, sir."

"Mr. Worf, give me a tactical assessment of the *Brattain*."

"Standard torpedo configuration for the *Miranda*-class, sir. Their defensive systems appear standard, class three, except for their cloak. However, their phasers have been upgraded to an extremely high output version I am not familiar with."

"Capacity against our shields?" Riker asked.

"Three or four hits on the same location would be enough to bring our generators in that quarter down."

"Mr. Data?" Picard queried.

"The ship appears to be a standard, revision four *Miranda*-class starship. The bridge has been configured to an earlier version, probably because those were the only parts available. The rest of the ship maintains a standard design configuration, except for the addition of five high-output fusion generators. Four appear tied into the shield emitters, while one has no obvious purpose. It is currently

near maximum output. I expect it is being used to power the cloaking device."

"So, that is how they're able to fire and cloak at the same time," Riker proposed.

"Not knowing the design of the cloaking system, it is not possible for me to say, Commander. However, I can say none of the emissions or sensor readings we have gathered is in line with Klingon or Romulan technology. In fact, given these readings…"

"That's enough, Mr. Data," Picard cut in. "Mr. Worf, reconnect audio."

"Open."

"Is there a problem, Captain?"

"Not at all. Your conditions are acceptable to us. However, you have not given your word you will not fire on us."

"As I said, we wish to avoid loss of life. However, I will not hesitate to turn your ship to vapor if you make any aggressive moves. The one thousand lives on board your ship do not measure greater than the hundreds of millions below on the planet."

"Understood," Picard acknowledged. "Mr. Worf, lower shields and keep them down until ordered otherwise."

"But Captain!"

"Those are your orders, Lieutenant. Make them so!"

"Aye, sir. Lowering shields."

Picard turned and walked close to the Klingon. "Whatever you do, keep your finger over the shields."

"Yes, sir!" Worf replied, placated.

"Counsellor, with me to Observation."

"Yes, sir," Troi replied, and followed the Captain into the Observation Lounge.

"Commander, the *Brattain* is lowering its shields," Data announced. Riker walked over and sat in the captain's chair. "Very well. Everyone, on your toes. Close communications."

And the viewscreen reverted to the exterior of the *Brattain*, as it floated menacingly before them.

#

"Well, thoughts?" Picard asked as they entered the Observation Lounge and took seats.

"I am mostly confused, Captain. A stolen starship full of Vulcans aiding a rebellion on a distant planet? They have chosen me to help you because I cannot read Vulcans. But then, why not someone else? I do have intuitive senses that don't rely on empathic ability."

"Tell me you are not thinking of T'Rya," Picard ventured.

"It's hard not to, but even if she is Vulcan, she surrendered her Starfleet position and Vulcan citizenship. Besides, I can't see the Vulcan authorities authorizing something like this, even as a black operation. They are just as much under threat from the Tholians, even more than Earth."

"Some kind of rogue Black Guard?" Picard mused.

"Perhaps, but to what end? There are many, many oppressive governments inside and outside the Federation."

"Then we can agree we have absolutely nothing?"

Troi nodded ruefully.

A transporter signal began to glow at the far side of the room, sending its twinkling lights off the transparent aluminum windows and turning the Lounge into a dance hall under a disco ball.

When the transport was complete, Picard and Troi sat in stunned silence, their mouths hanging open.

#

"Commander, the *Brattain* is rolling to starboard and charging its starboard phaser array."

"Shields up," Riker ordered, jumping up from the Command chair. "Standby on phasers. Are they raising their shields?"

"No, sir."

"Conn, standby for evasive maneuvers."

"Aye, sir!"

In the forward display, the *Brattain* lowered its starboard side towards the planet and fired a short blast from its starboard phaser.

"Hail them!" Riker demanded.

The screen reverted to the *Brattain* bridge. But before Riker could speak.

"Commander, you have raised your shields. You leave me no choice but to assume aggressive action. If they are not dropped in three seconds, we will be having a firefight."

Riker said nothing.

"Two seconds."

Riker remained stoic.

"One second. Tactical, charge all phasers. Load torpedoes."

"Drop shields," Riker consented, not ready to start a fight. The *Brattain* had not fired on them.

"Thank you, Commander. All weapons stand down. Helm, return us to our previous attitude."

"We can't let you keep firing at the planet," Riker explained.

"But you must, Commander. Such a condition was not part of our parley, and we are involved in a desperate war for the freedom of an entire people. When the ground forces request aerial support, they receive it. Rest assured we are working to avoid any casualties from either side." T'Amar looked behind at the tactical station on her bridge. "Preliminary reports have come in. Devastation to an automated mobile ground force. Not one injury or death. Close communications."

Once again, the screen switched to an external view of the *Brattain*. Although at the same distance, it had seemed somehow to have grown larger. Riker rubbed his

sweaty palms against his pants and sat back down in the command chair.

<p align="center">#</p>

"T'Rya!" Picard and Troi blurted out at once.

"I am so happy to see the both of you," T'Rya explained, coming forward and sitting opposite Troi. "For me it feels like a very long time since we spoke."

"Not quite seven months," Picard explained.

"Yes, but time in prison is special, isn't it, Captain? I believe you have spent time in one or two. Time has a way of stretching like warm taffy."

Picard did not answer, but his expression showed he understood.

"Lieutenant, what are you doing on that ship?" Picard demanded.

T'Rya looked down at the tattered Starfleet uniform she had discovered on the *Brattain*. The synthesizers had failed, and the crew had nothing but four-year-old emergency rations to eat. Still, an old uniform was better than her prison rags.

"Lieutenant no longer, Captain," she explained, "and this uniform is all I could find on the *Brattain* to wear. However, it does not display my loyalties.

"You will always be Starfleet," Picard objected.

"You know, sir," T'Rya said, "before I met Captain T'Amar, I would have been insulted by your claim. But you are correct. I will always be Vulcan, and I will always be Starfleet. The only difference between you

and I is I will not compromise the principles I learned at Starfleet, even when Starfleet demands I do so."

Picard was cut deep but tried to cover it up. "Fomenting interstellar war is not a Starfleet principle, T'Rya. Not for Vulcans, and not for Starfleet officers."

"There is nothing interstellar here, Captain, and you know it. Do not try to put your guilt on my shoulders. I have died once for my people, and I will happily die for them again, but I will not abandon them for some nebulous tactical advantage. My allies on the *Brattain* denounce their Vulcan government as well, so at worst we are hired mercenaries working for the resistance. Working for them for free."

"And you!" T'Rya snapped at Troi. "Where have you been? Why did you not answer my letters?

Trio looked shocked. "But I answered every one. Even this most recent one where you left something hidden for the Captain."

"So, they lied to me again," T'Rya said wistfully. "They lie and they lie, and they lie, and we must protect them. I'm sorry Commander, but they did not let me see them, or even let me know they had come. I apologize for believing the worst of you."

"T'Rya, where does this madness end?" Troi asked.

"When the people of Begemot are free. When the government is overthrown and the Federation sends in

advisors to help the Begemote people create a just society, derived organically from the people they are."

"More likely it will end in failure," Picard said dryly, "and with the broken hull of the *Brattain* burning in the jungle down below."

"Your analysis is statistically correct," T'Rya admitted. "Even with Starfleet's cloaking device the *Enterprise* will likely be victorious. But you will suffer enormous damage, enormous loss of life on the *Enterprise*. You will kill everyone on the *Brattain* and ensure a repressive government can once again get its fingers around the necks of hundreds of millions.

"And for what? The people of Begemot are ready and willing to aid Starfleet in its effort against the Tholians. Even with your betrayal, they want to be part of the Federation.

"But that is not the worst, is it Captain? You know what this will do to your soul, and I believe you have a sense of what this will do to the soul of the Federation. How many 'compromises' can it make, before there is no difference with the Klingons, or the Romulans, or the Cardassians?"

There was an uncomfortable silence as the trio sat at the table, looking anywhere but at each other. Troi opened her mouth to speak, but Picard put up his hand.

"It seems clear we cannot come to a compromise. I have been sent by Starfleet to protect the legitimate government of Begemot against an insurrection. You

continue to attack that government. I have no choice but to stop you, and to aid the government in putting down any resistance."

"Another compromise? At what point will you look in the mirror, Captain, and see something other than yourself looking back at you?"

She spoke up for the Vulcans listening. "*Brattain*, our discussions are over. I wish some private time to speak with Commander Troi. Please give me ten minutes."

"Affirmative," came the response.

"Please Captain, a few minutes with an old friend."

Picard did not want to leave but could find no excuse not to. He got up and left the Lounge.

There was an uncomfortable silence as the women regarded one another.

"T'Rya," Troi began, "I can't be used to change the Captain's mind."

"Oh, Commander, that is not my intention. Not at all. As far as I am concerned, all discussion of the political/diplomatic situation is done. I just wanted… I mean, I had hoped…" T'Rya's voice faded off. She gathered herself and tried again. "I do not believe I have ever had a friend. My strange antics on Vulcan brought me fans, but no one I could rely on. In Starfleet there were people who I admired, and ones who admired me. But not friends.

"I believe it is reasonable to assert you have been the only friend I have ever known. I am unable to

determine if this friendship is reciprocated, but from my perspective, in the three days I knew you, I felt something I have never felt before: unqualified acceptance."

Troi made as if to speak.

"Please, Commander," T'Rya said quickly, holding up her hand. "I have only a little time. Let me explain what I am trying to say, before it runs out.

"In prison on Begemot I often thought of you. You might say, it was thoughts of you, of your friendship, that helped me through some very dark times.

"So, I am here to ask you one thing. At some time in the future, you may receive a package from me. It will be my autobiography, in a sense, as well as my philosophical speculation on the nature of logic, reason, and emotion. I ask you to find a way to have my thoughts accepted by the Vulcan Science Academy.

"I have no right to ask this of you, of course, and you may refuse."

"You are talking as if you are going to die. Why not give it to them yourself?" Troi argued.

"I am merely covering all eventualities, in my logical Vulcan way," T'Rya explained. "The Klingons say, 'today is a good day to die', and I often follow that with 'but tomorrow's better!' They find this exasperating. I do not recommend it."

T'Rya winked, then stood and backed away from the table. "Live long and prosper," she said, holding her

hand up in the traditional Vulcan salute, then she tapped her comm badge: "*Brattain*, one to beam out."

In a moment there was a twinkle of lights, and she disappeared in a transport beam.

As Troi sat, shocked, the *Enterprise* suddenly signaled Red Alert. She rushed out onto the bridge.

#

"Report!" T'Amar demanded as T'Rya materialized on the bridge.

"The *Enterprise* has raised shields, Captain!"

"Raise ours and engage the cloaking device. Emergency evasive maneuvers."

And just in time. As the *Brattain* drove itself at full impulse over the *Enterprise* at Z+ 2000 meters, the forward phaser banks of the *Enterprise* fired into the space the *Brattain* had just been.

"Cloak at one hundred percent, Captain."

"Make our course over the South Pole and maintain a geosynchronous position over the battle in the southern continent."

"Aye, Captain."

"T'Rya, my ready room."

"Yes, Captain," and the two women walked quickly off the bridge.

"So," T'Amar, said as the door to the bridge closed, "the flagship of Starfleet missed us from a dead stop?"

"It was very difficult, Captain, but I believe Captain Picard was attempting to tell me things different from his words."

"What does this mean for us?"

"It means, if we do not make a mistake, and do not give them an inexcusable reason to not miss us, the *Enterprise* will basically allow us to assist in the ground assault."

"This is all from your intuition."

"I understand Picard, and Troi. Their moral impulses are very strong, and what they have been asked to do here on Begemot is tearing them apart inside. It is my opinion the *Enterprise* will play cat and mouse with us, so long as we make our escapes viable enough, Starfleet cannot question their tactics."

"You are certain?"

"We are not burning in the jungles of Begemot, Captain. And we should be."

"Like Vulcans, we Children of Sybok do not prefer to act on hunches. But you have been brought to us in a way that is not logical, not even rational. We will trust your intuition, not fire on the *Enterprise*, and give them a plausible excuse to miss us every time."

#

"Report," Picard demanded as he entered the bridge from his ready room.

"The *Brattain* has cloaked, and we have lost them on sensors."

"Very well. Number One, you have the bridge."

"Yes, sir. And if I should need to contact you?"

"Don't. When the Commander returns, send her to shuttle bay three." With this, Captain Picard entered the turbolift and the doors shut.

A few moments later, looking a little stunned, Troi returned from the Observation Lounge.

"Deanna," Riker said, approaching her.

"I'm alright."

"But…" Riker looked in her eyes − the person in the universe he trusted most. "Of course, the Captain has ordered you to shuttle bay three, Commander."

Riker knew something was going on, something he was not part of, but which he should, as First Officer of the *Enterprise*. But he pushed down his concerns and covered them in his trust.

"Conn, begin a search pattern in orbit around the planet," he said.

"Aye, sir, beginning planetary orbital search pattern."

"Mr. Worf, calibrate sensors to detect any weapons fire or impulse engine emissions. Maintain shields and have all phasers and torpedoes at the ready."

"Aye, sir."

"Now, if we only knew what we were doing…"

#

Troi stood in shuttle bay three, nervously watching two engineers, who were attempting not to watch her. It was a relief when Captain Picard came through the doors.

"Give us the bay!" he ordered. The two engineers dropped what they were doing and left. Picard walked over to shuttle number four, the *Von Braun*, opened the hatch, and motioned Troi to enter. When the outer door had closed, he barked, "Computer," a trill, "dampen all external transmissions from this shuttle, and cease all log recording."

The computer gave a longer than usual trill: "Security clearance required," it announced.

"Authorization Picard 337 Beta Epsilon."

"Authorization accepted. All external transmissions have been dampened. All log recordings are paused."

"Captain!" Troi began, but he held up his hand.

Picard touched his comm badge: "Captain Picard to the bridge. The badge signaled it could not establish a link. Computer." A trill, "begin log entry: Captain's log, stardate…"

After a trill: "Log entries are currently on hold," the computer explained.

"Very well," Picard said, to himself it seemed. He motioned Troi to the port couch, while he took the starboard. "You have questions," he said as they sat down.

Troi, now finding she was required to speak, found too many thoughts trying to make their way out at once.

"Let me explain myself, and hopefully clear up some confusion," Picard continued. "You no doubt could sense I was lying to T'Rya, about blowing her ship out of the sky. You also must have sensed my attempt to project essentially the opposite message to her with my thoughts."

"It came out as a yell, Captain, there is no question she heard that message."

"Good. So, questions?"

"You are in flagrant disregard of our orders. Yet, if you have not brought me down here you could be free of any blame."

"But I would put you in a very difficult spot, Commander, having to wonder which version was true, which version to put in your report."

"Except now I either have to betray Starfleet, or betray you, Captain!"

"Yes, but at least you have no ambiguity. And I want to assure you I will place no blame on you if you feel the need to report what we've said. I will not dispute your claims. The silence on this shuttle is only for your protection, should you decide not to report anything."

"And you would let me bury you, wouldn't you?"

"If it comes to that. I am taking a moral stand. I cannot condone what Starfleet is doing. I will not allow this charade to continue. If T'Rya and those renegade Vulcans can topple the Begemot regime, they will receive no grief from the *Enterprise*, although to the outside world it will certainly look so."

"But to betray Starfleet!"

"Starfleet is not a thing!" Picard nearly shouted, "No organizations are things. They are collections of people making decisions! I took an oath as a Starfleet Officer to defend the Federation and its Charter. The Federation is using Starfleet to break its own rules. I am a person in that organization, and I am choosing to right the ship, not let it continue to capsize. History may paint me as a villain, but I will not betray my oath. Not again. I will resign first! But before I do that, I intend to right a wrong I was part of creating."

"About time, Captain," was all Troi said.

"What did you say?"

"You heard me. We have both felt like we were used for something evil for the last seven months. There has been little I could do, but I knew if given the opportunity you would make it right. So now you are, and you have me to help any way I can."

Picard let out a long breath. "Thank you, Commander. I was not looking forward to tossing you out an airlock." He gave a wry smile, and Troi returned one of her best.

"Now, it remains for us to decide what to do," Picard mused, "by the way, what did T'Rya want to discuss with you?"

"Just personal matters about her autobiography. Also, I believe she expects to die in this confrontation. She was so… resigned."

"She has put the entire Federation to shame, myself included. Let's do what we can to make sure she makes it through unscathed. As long as she stays on the *Brattain*, she should be fine."

"And what will we do Captain?"

"I need to contact Begemot and find out the situation from the government's perspective. Assure them we are going to stop the other ship. It's too bad we couldn't get Captain T'Amar's perspective on the situation. But I suppose that would be too blatant. From now on, you and I are tied-at-the-hip mutineers." Picard stopped, and sighed. "And if you want out, Deanna, now is the time to say. I swear I will never mention you, no matter what happens."

"I haven't been able to sleep either, Jean-Luc. Until the end."

Picard smiled. "Thank you. You know, people say I am a loner, but the truth is everything is easier with someone on your side."

"Agreed!"

Stardate 48607.3 — Once More unto the Breach

"Location of *Enterprise*?"

"She is making her way toward our position at full impulse. ETA, Eighteen minutes."

"Time to target in range?"

"Sixteen minutes, Captain."

"Alright everyone, as we've done so many times before, standby on cloak, and this time use evasive pattern theta. Engage the moment tactical has completed firing."

"Aye, Captain!"

Captain T'Amar sat back in her chair in an attempt to rest her spine. While Picard had promised to miss, he had not made it easy for the *Brattain* to support troops on the ground. She wondered for a moment what he would be like as an adversary that was intent on shooting her down. By her calculations, she did not give her ship one chance in three. She was not a practiced Starship captain, and the *Enterprise* outclassed her ship in every way.

T'Rya came on to the bridge. "Captain," she acknowledged as she stood behind her, resting on the railing behind the captain's chair.

"Yes, and what can I do for you?" T'Amar asked, keeping careful watch on the various chronometers counting down on the arms of her chair.

"You know what I want, Captain. I want to be on the planet, among my people. H'Lra'Edtra and I demand this."

"We can transport the Begemote down at any time. But T'Rya, your place is with us."

T'Rya walked down to the captain's chair level and stood next to T'Amar. "No, my place is with my people.

You do not have enough crew to have to deal with me causing trouble."

T'Amar stood up. "T'Rya, those are not your people." She motioned to the members of the bridge crew. "We are your people. We are here to help, but we are also here for you."

"Yet I have made my choice. My people are down on that planet, and I will die with them to fight for their freedom. We appreciate the help, we really do, but if you do not allow me to fight on the ground with my comrades, I will make it impossible for you to do anything. I will defy you with my every breath.

"And, as you can see, that is no small threat. That revolution down there is because of me."

T'Amar sighed. "You are our inspiration, *t'sai ri'a'gra*, how can we deny you anything? In eighteen minutes, the *Enterprise* will be upon us. Where do you want to be transported down to?"

"Where we were transported from."

"Lieutenant, that area is a very hot combat zone. We do what we can, but there are many, many automated battle drones."

"That is why we are required there. This battle is the most central to breaking the higher castes' control of the surface. Once we have broken that, the top three castes will be at our mercy. They will be forced to sue for peace."

"And yet we urge you. There are so many important issues in the galaxy. Please, do not let this one consume you."

"I am not one of your followers of Sybok. To be honest, I don't even know what that means. I have chosen my course, and I will not be taken from it. Help me or do not, but do not get in my way."

T'Amar stared into the other woman's eyes for a few moments. Behind the Captain's exasperation was an admiration akin to worship. *Would she even understand it if I should try and explain?* "Helm. Once the *Enterprise* has had its miss at bobbing for our apple, make our position six degrees, eleven minutes, forty-eight seconds south by eighty-seven degrees, twenty-three minutes, fifty-four seconds west. Tell transporter room two to stand by."

"Aye, Captain."

"Let me walk you to the transporter," T'Amar suggested. The other Vulcan nodded, and then followed her to the turbolift. They were silent while the lift took them down to deck seven.

"Your ship is a mess, Captain," T'Rya commented as they made their way through the corridor to transporter room two.

T'Amar paused outside the transporter room door. "We nearly tore the ship apart trying to get back to Begemot with our final components. But rest assured, we are repairing the *Brattain* bit by bit, from its most important systems to the dust on the carpets. When we are

finished, you will not be able to tell the difference between our ship and a Starfleet vessel."

"And after Begemot?"

"Sybok makes our mission clear. The defense of the weak, support for the hopeless."

"With one starship?"

"Sybok was one individual, and he changed history. If he had not been attacked and his mind destroyed, his teaching might have changed Vulcan. But that is not our purpose, and it was not his. His philosophical position is complex and beautiful, but it can be summed into a simple idea: 'for anyone beneath, lift them up.'"

"Beneath?"

"As always, to reduce complex ideas into simple ones necessarily introduces errors and confusion. I hope one day soon you will have an opportunity to read his teachings."

"I have, Captain, while onboard your ship. I am still in the process of examining its logic."

"Then, even more fortunate, I look forward to an opportunity to discuss your thoughts on his philosophy at a later date."

"And I yours, Captain."

They entered the transporter room.

"Captain," the transporter technician acknowledged.

"Two to beam down. We are waiting on the second."

"Coordinates?"

T'Amar looked at T'Rya, who provided them.

"That's a very hot location, Lieutenant," the technician warned.

The transporter room door opened and H'Lra'Edtra entered, escorted by two nurses. No security, T'Rya noted.

"We are returning to where we were first hit," she explained to Lara. "You are welcome to stay on the ship, or to be returned to a less dangerous location."

"Thank you, T'Rya, but I stand with my people. And with you. I'll not ask one of them to face a danger I would not."

"Then we will go." T'Rya turned and took a position on the transporter pad. The sixth pad was still inoperative, but no longer sending out noxious gases.

Lara hesitated.

"Lara?" T'Rya inquired.

The Begemote turned to the Captain. "I have had the honor of reading your leader's writings. It was difficult to translate in many parts, but I do believe I have absorbed his intention in writing it. It is much like the philosophy of my people, which has been distorted and abused to justify inequality and slavery. With your permission, I would like to take my translation of it down to my planet, to provide it to my people."

T'Amar looked stunned.

"I hope I have not overreached. I have left a copy of my translation with the Vulcan text. In time, perhaps we can help each other correct my translation of any inaccuracies."

"Bridge reports we are nearing transport coordinates, Captain," the technician reported.

"Understood." She turned back to Lara. "You honor us and our founder. We would like nothing more than for you to examine our philosophy and help us correct any errors in reason we may have made."

"We must go," T'Rya announced.

"Yes," Lara replied, then turned and took her place on a transporter pad.

"Live long and prosper," T'Amar said quickly, raising her hand. The technician did the same.

"Peace and long life," T'Rya agreed, saluting as well.

"Energize."

After they were gone, a message came from the bridge: "Captain, the *Enterprise* noticed our transport. They are closing with us."

"Time to intercept?"

"Six minutes."

"Make our course directly over the north pole, thrusters only. I'm on my way to the bridge."

"Aye, Captain."

First Officer's log, USS Enterprise, stardate 48615.8.

We have been playing hide and seek with the Brattain *for 6 days. Myself, the tactical team, and several others have become concerned that the* Enterprise *is not taking its mission seriously. At the same time, the government forces of Begemot are being systematically wiped out by strategic attack from the air. They do not have any ships capable of battling the* Brattain*, even without a cloak. It feels like we are just letting this happen.*

I was sent an 'eyes only' communication from Starfleet this morning, basically tearing a strip off me and demanding to know what was wrong with Captain Picard. In approximately four hours, two more starships, the Exeter *and the* Lakota*, will be joining the search. An* Excelsior-*class and an* Ambassador-*class, some serious firepower this far out from local Federation space. With a three-point planetary search pattern using the powerful sensor arrays of these three ships, there is no way the* Brattain *will be able to act without coming under fire. If they do, we will quickly wear them down and disable them.*

Now I must do something no First Officer of any fleet wants to do. Investigate the possibility, with the ship's senior staff, of removing Captain Picard from command. And while it appears I've been given latitude to make the decision myself, the impression I had from the Admirals was there was only one conclusion that would do.

"End recording and encrypt."

The computer trilled to acknowledge his orders had been carried out.

He touched his comm badge: "Riker for Lieutenant Worf."

"Worf here, sir."

"Where is the Captain?"

"Just off a double duty shift and in his quarters."

"Very well, assemble the senior staff and have them meet me in the observation lounge in ten minutes. Do not bother the Captain."

"Sir?"

"You heard me, Lieutenant! And have the lounge pause any log recordings."

"Yes, Commander."

Riker sighed, got up from the desk in his quarters, and walked out the door on his way to the bridge.

#

Pandemonium. Five command officers talking over each other. Only Data was silent, his almost implacable

face somehow always unable to hide his curiosity at human behavior.

Suddenly, Data shouted: "Enough!"

Every mouth around the table snapped shut.

"Pardon me, but in my experience aboard the *Sutherland* I found a raised voice often draws compliance more readily than a calm demeanor. In particular, coming from me."

All shocked faces simply looked at him.

"We all have an intense loyalty to Captain Picard," Data continued, "but we cannot deny the facts. The *Enterprise* is theoretically capable of defeating a Romulan *D'deridex* class Warbird, even with its cloaking technology. The *Brattain* is a twenty-third century starship design that was unable to defeat an unmodified *Constitution*-class starship eighty years ago.

"That we have not at least damaged this ship is cause for concern. I have presented several regular patterns the *Brattain* is using, caused by a combination of localized battle zones on the planet, and the apparent lack of tactical experience of her Captain. Captain Picard has not acted on any of them. If anything, I suspect he has employed my predictive heuristics to avoid encountering the *Brattain*."

No one spoke. How could they argue?

"But it's Captain Picard," LaForge said finally, expressing what they were all thinking.

"Doctor, is there any reason to believe the Captain has been compromised, medically?" Riker asked.

"No," Doctor Crusher admitted. "His last physical was only three weeks ago. In perfect health for a man ten years his junior."

He turned to Troi, "Councilor, can you sense there is any kind of interference with the Captain's mental state? Is he being controlled or forced to act in some way?"

"No," Troi admitted, "his mind appears perfectly normal, and he is quite sure of his actions."

Riker sighed, leaned forward, and rubbed his temples with his hands. "Then I see no alternative. The Captain is in dereliction of duty, going so far as using intelligence from his own crew to deliberately fail to achieve our mission. Is there anyone who wishes to argue against this?"

"But this is Captain Picard!" Worf announced.

"Yes, Lieutenant, but do you have any reason for why he is deliberately failing our mission?"

Worf shifted uncomfortably in his seat, then answered, "No, sir."

"Will," Troi began.

"That's Commander to you, Counsellor! Do you have something to say in defense of the Captain's actions?"

"No," the defeat in Troi's voice was palpable.

"Then at this time, stardate 48615.7, I am declaring the Captain unfit for duty, as advised by the ship's senior officers. Computer," a trill, "mark this declaration and the current stardate into the ship's log." Riker sat back and sighed. "Dismissed."

The other officers stood up and made their way out of the Observation Lounge, looking more like a funeral procession than the crew of a starship. Troi remained, but she said nothing, only stared at Riker.

After a few minutes of feeling her eyes on him, he barked: "What?!"

"Will, this is the man who has saved our lives more than we can count. The man who has literally saved Starfleet and the Federation over and over again."

"And? Give me something Deanna," he called out, "give me anything so I don't have to do this."

"I just did," she spat at him, and rushed out of the room.

#

Picard was dreaming. He didn't often remember his dreams, and when he did, more often than not they were unpleasant. But in this dream, it was two hundred years in the future and, absurd as it seemed, he was still a healthy, if relatively, old man, in charge of the construction of the Federation's first Dyson sphere. He worked closely with the Romulan Senate, who had proposed the project and asked that Picard be put in charge of its production. The inner surface of the sphere was to provide living space for all Romulans in the Federation, making it possible to repatriate them once more as a single people. But that would take up, at most, only one tenth of the inner surface.

So, the Federation and the Romulan Senate were petitioning other peoples to join them. Should the project

be successful, in five hundred years the entire Federation could be composed of such structures, existing for millions of years with unlimited energy.

As he went to approve a new build proposal, the PADD he was signing on trilled at him.

Odd, he thought, trying (and failing), not to make an old man joke out of it. And yet, as he began to sign again, the PADD trilled once more. The sound came up at him from the deep past. The sound of a particular door, on a particular ship.

Then the dream devolved into finger-painting…

The door to his quarters trilled again. Captain Picard sat up in bed, trying to shake the dream from his mind. He grabbed the robe by his bed and put it on as he stood.

"Come."

The door opened and bright light poured in from the hallway. A figure rushed through the light inside.

"Lights!"

As his eyes adjusted, a voice began speaking.

"They are going to take your command, Captain. They've decided you are not following orders."

"Wait, wait a minute. Deanna?"

"I'm sorry, Captain. Please take a moment to wake up. But not too long!"

"I'm up, I'm up. Please," he motioned to the couch in his living room and took the chair opposite.

"I just came from a senior staff meeting, Captain."

"Staff meeting? I didn't call any meeting."

"No, it was called by Commander Riker. They're going to strip you of your command."

"Strip me of Command? For what?"

"For not stopping the *Brattain*. Apparently, Data has given you intelligence that you used to fail at this, rather than succeed. They know what you are up to."

"Well," Picard smiled, "it was only a matter of time."

"But…"

"Deanna, did you give up our ruse at this meeting?"

"No, sir."

"Then they have no reason to suspect you were involved?"

"No, I don't suppose so, but…"

"Good, then get out of my quarters and go about your duties. I told you I would not allow your career to be threatened by my actions."

"I will not!"

"Then I will report you as a mutineer and put you in the brig."

"You...what?"

"There is no point in both of us being caught up in this. What possible advantage would ruining your career provide us? If you stay on the inside, you may find a way to help them when I am no longer in Command."

"Is that an order?"

"It is the request of a friend, Deanna. Do what you can to help them. It looks like my capacity to do so is at an end."

"But, Captain…"

"Please, what comes next is hard enough. Don't let it be the end of our helping those people on the planet."

Troi stood, tears in her eyes but she would not let them fall.

"Captain."

"Commander. Dismissed."

#

Picard walked over to his food synthesizer. "Tea, Earl Grey, hot!" As the cup materialized, he added, "And a croissant, with one pad of butter."

When the meal was ready, he took it and his tea to the table in his living room. He sipped his tea, nibbled at the bread, but without enthusiasm. Finally, what he'd been expecting came to pass.

The door trilled, announcing a person outside.

"Come!"

The door slid open, and a very unhappy Riker stood in the doorway.

"Come all the way in, Commander. You're letting in a draft." Picard pulled at the collar of his robe.

"Yes, sir," Riker agreed, and came inside. The two men stared at each other until the door slid shut.

"Is it?"

Picard nodded.

Riker exhaled a huge breath of air, then ran his hand through his hair.

The Captain motioned to Riker the chair opposite him at the table. "Can I get you anything Number One?"

"Maybe an antacid. I've been twisting my stomach in knots. And by the way," he gave one of his crooked smiles, "you were right on the money. Practically called it word for word. Three Admirals tearing a strip off me, basically saying if I didn't can you, they would."

"It was only a matter of time," Picard agreed, putting a piece of his croissant into his mouth. "We knew at some point they would figure something was afoot."

"I still don't understand why we can't bring in Deanna. She already knows your side."

"And that's all she is ever going to know! At least, at least until this is all over. She has plausible deniability. There is no reason for Starfleet to even look at her. Now you do as well. You have followed orders, forced my removal with the senior staff, and now you are Starfleet's attack dog. The only questions…"

"Not the only attack dog, Captain, two more starships are on their way, two hours out."

"Starfleet? Which ships?"

"The *Lakota* and the *Exeter*."

"Benteen and Braswell… you familiar with either of them?"

"No sir, you?"

"Benteen has a plodding, by the book style. That's probably why she's captain of a floating diplomatic escort. Braswell, though, she is 'undisciplined, reckless, overly-impulsive, and fearless.'"

"That sounds like a bit of detailed information."

"That was the review I gave of her when she was on the short list to Captain the *Exeter*. Didn't stop her getting it, but I expect it made her life that much harder. I don't suspect she'll have anything pleasant to say about me."

"So, a by-the-book and someone with a grudge. This will be… interesting."

"You being in command will likely dull any resentment she might feel. These are Starfleet captains after all.

"As soon as we have a three-point planetary search capacity," Picard mused, "there will be no way to continue the ruse. Should the *Brattain* continue to fire, we will eventually be able to disable them. Sooner rather than later."

"We need a way to communicate with the *Brattain*, without communicating," Riker mused. Suddenly his eyes lit up, but before he could speak.

"Absolutely not, Will. We already talked about this!"

"But she and I can communicate. She taught me how to hear her, and how to reach back to her. If the

Brattain would only slip by close enough, we could pass information back and forth."

"No. Commander Troi is to stay out of this. This is on my shoulders."

"What is going on here?" Riker demanded.

"What do you mean?"

"I've never known you to be a martyr, Jean-Luc. Why are you setting yourself up for destruction, with all of us as your little pawns to save?"

"How dare you?"

"How dare I what, Captain? How dare I agree to lie and break my oath, so you can feed some fetish where you can punish yourself? How dare I let you snare more of your officers into your little web? What the hell is going on? Is this about the Borg?"

"The Borg," Picard whispered beneath his breath, looking through Riker now as if he was somewhere far away.

"They used you, stripped away who you were. No one can just get better from that."

"You have no right!"

"No? What about the thousand people on this ship? What exactly do you think a right is? Do you think you're special because the Borg kicked your ass? Try finding there is another one of you alive in the universe, like I did, and watch him enjoy your life more than you do. No one has a monopoly on suffering, Captain."

"But I am not you," Picard shouted. He stood up and threw the small table across the room. Riker, wide-eyed, scurried out of the way. "I am Jean-Luc Picard. I defeated the Borg. Me, with my mind. And I vowed I would never serve them again. Yet here we are, letting the Federation assimilate Begemot like some sort of handy pet. I let them do this once, and the shame has been crushing. So, I say no, not again! I will uphold those principles I was introduced to by Starfleet. I will not yield them again, no matter the price." He was panting now.

Riker walked up toe to toe with him, forcing Picard to look up at his face. "Do you think you are the only one to have sworn an oath? Do you think Deanna's oath was any less real than mine or yours? Damn it, Captain, we have followed you literally to the ends of the universe, beyond that. We would all die for you. Do you understand that?"

Picard sighed, and the anger seemed to drain from his shoulders. He put his hand on Riker's shoulder. "And I for you, Number One. Just for anyone else to lose their career or life over such an abstract concept…"

Riker stepped past him and pointed out the third of Begemot they could see from the living room glass. "They are not an abstract concept. There is nothing abstract about what is happening here. I've endangered my career before, for what I knew was right. For you once not long ago. I don't plan to stop just because you have some plan to self-destruct."

Picard walked over and picked up the table, placing it back where it belonged, then gathering up the chair he'd knocked over, placing it back as well, and sat down. He sighed. "I'm feeling rudderless, Will. I don't understand why this issue. I don't know if I've ever felt so confused. What do I do?" He looked up, earnest. Perhaps even a little frightened.

"Well," Riker said, "turning the other chair around and sitting on it backwards, "there is no way I'm going to tell you that. Not in specifics. But I will tell you this: Your name is Jean-Luc Picard, Captain of the *USS Enterprise*, savior of your crew, savior of the Federation, savior of entire planets, and, if I recall correctly, savior of the human race."

"But never just me."

"No, you have had one hell of a team behind you. They still are." With this, Riker stood and left the Captain's quarters.

Picard sat for a moment, staring at the closed door to his quarters. When he stood, his shoulders seemed to slump, as he picked up his broken dishes and the remains of his breakfast. He placed them on the little table and turned towards his bedroom. In the black of his viewer display on the wall, he caught his reflection from the waist up. He paused for a moment, staring, as if he had never seen this man before. Then he touched his comm badge, with the outline of the logo of the United Federation of Planets. He traced it slowly, following its lines and curves

with his finder. As he did, unconsciously, he began to stand straighter, his chest to push out. Then he dropped his hand and turned towards the door to his quarters. He walked toward it and the door opened automatically for him.

Captain Picard stepped out of his quarters and into the hallway, heading for deck eight.

"Report!"

"Hit on the aft shields, Captain. No damage. Shields at ninety-three percent."

"Drop rear shield reactor output by sixty percent. Bring us around."

"Captain?"

"Do it, Ensign!"

"Yes, sir."

"The *Lakota* is coming around. She's preparing to launch a photon torpedo spread."

On the view screen, the bridge crew watched the slow-speed battle as the two capital ships attempted to out-turn one another. It was no contest. The *Brattain* was much smaller and far more maneuverable.

"Make our heading Z-minus five degrees, full impulse. Let's dive under their torpedoes and scrape the finish off their keel."

"*Enterprise* is closing, Captain."

"Time to weapons range?"

"Six minutes."

"Speed?"

"Full impulse."

"Picard you are not making this easy."

"Incoming hail from the *Lakota*."

"Audio only."

"This is Captain Benteen, Commander of the *USS Lakota*, representing the United Federation of Planets. You are in violation of several Federation regulations. Your attack on a Federation member planet is a declaration of war. *Brattain*, you are out crewed and outgunned. By order of Starfleet Command, I hereby demand you to surrender your vessel. Heave-to and prepare to be boarded."

"Mute."

"Muted."

"I guess they didn't notice our new paint job. Distance and closing speed to the *Lakota*?"

"Seventy-eight hundred meters. Closing speed 2500 kilometers per hour. We should be under them in eleven seconds. They are attempting to reduce forward momentum in order to lock torpedoes, and they are charging their aft torpedoes."

"Time to lock?"

"Thirteen seconds."

"Forward and aft torpedoes? It does not seem like they are looking for us to surrender. Time to weapons range of *Enterprise*?"

"Still six minutes, Captain."

"This is not going to work. Helm. Perform a starboard roll. Let them think we are going to hit their forward deflector with our pylon. Continue the roll when necessary to avoid an actual collision."

"Aye, Captain. We are rolling. The *Lakota* is changing course."

"Z+ ninety-degree pitch, full impulse, engage cloaking device."

There were multiple "Yes, Captains."

"Can we make it back to the *Enterprise*?"

"The *Lakota* has already begun anti-cloak soundings, Captain, and the *Exeter* is closing on our port flank, sounding as well. We'd need to cut between them to reach the *Enterprise*."

"Very well. Reset rear shield reactor output to maximum. Take us out of orbit. Make our heading…" she consulted her chair's tactical display, "180 mark 083."

"Course laid in."

"Now!"

"Aye, sir!"

"And stand down from red alert."

"Yes, Captain," came from tactical.

The lights in the bridge switched from battle red to a natural light.

Captain T'Amar turned to her left and examined the crewmember at the communications station: "Well, now what?"

The figure turned from her station to regard the Captain: "I'm not sure," Troi replied, "we did not get close enough for us to communicate."

"Commander Sakik, you have the bridge."

"Aye, Captain, I have the bridge."

"Commander Troi, walk with me," T'Amar said as she got up from the captain's chair and entered the foyer of her ready room. Troi followed her through the door.

Instead of taking a seat at the table or turning right towards the ready room, T'Amar instead turned to the left and took the stars down to deck two. She then passed through the deck two foyer, over the rear balcony, and down one more flight of stairs to the senior officers' lounge.

It was empty. Given this was an entirely Vulcan crew, Troi imagined it almost always was. The *Brattain*'s senior officers' lounge was nearly as large as Ten-Forward on the *Enterprise*, especially if one included the deck two balcony with its port and starboard wings. The effect of the deck three lounge reaching up two decks, with most of the deck two outer wall sporting viewing ports of space, gave a far roomier sense than Ten-Forward, by far.

Captain T'Amar turned right at the stairwell and took a seat on the couch with its back pressed against the stairs. She beckoned for Troi to sit, and she took a seat on the couch opposite.

"This is really a most versatile ship. So much packed into so little space but packed so well. Of course, in a ship twice the size you must find my comments quaint. I would offer you a drink, but all we have is water and years-old survival rations."

Troi glanced once more at the exterior view two decks above them but said nothing. Was T'Amar trying to

make small talk? Trying to shake out her own nervousness? Then she felt a sudden shock. She could read the Vulcan's emotions. They had an odd, clipped sense, like a stream with very sharp banks that completely controlled the water's flow. It was how she imagined Data's attempts to mimic emotions, every nuance carefully controlled and directed.

T'Amar had said they followed in the ways of Sybok, of allowing themselves emotions. This must be how they permitted themselves to have them, almost as if in a software sandbox where they could not harm the intellect. As she thought, she began to notice the carefully sculpted emotions of the ship's crew.

"We are in quite a pickle Deanna; do you mind if I call you Deanna? I feel strange keeping up the Starfleet pretense with an actual Starfleet officer."

"Perhaps not Starfleet for much longer," Deanna commented, "and no, I do not mind my first name. It is so strange to think this may be the last starship I'm on, where I am not in a brig."

"Have you lost all hope then?"

"I believe I understand what has happened. Data explained what would likely happen eventually. How many of the last pre-directed confrontations have been outside the scripted?"

"Three. The first and third involved shots fired. And each time the response of each ship to our incursion has been faster and with a more aggressive use of

countermeasures. I have taken us out of orbit where we can stay safe, but I fear we will not survive a fourth such confrontation. We are outclassed by each ship, let alone three, and I am no starship captain."

"If I read the Captain of the *Lakota* properly as we passed by, it was your lack of tactical training that stumped her. I believe the analogy she thought of was trying to catch a bouncing rugby ball on a warped wooden floor. She obsessed over the drop in your rear shield grid the entire time, and so she was too slow to catch your maneuver."

"Well, then, cheers to ignorance!"

"Command of the search has probably been taken by another of the captains, and command of the *Enterprise* may have been changed as well. I'm assuming the algorithm Data provided for the search and incursion windows will no longer be valid. If you can get us close to the *Enterprise,* I might be able to tell if Commander Riker is still able to help us."

T'Amar sat quietly, looking back at Troi. Then she tapped her comm badge: "Captain to the bridge."

"This is the bridge, Captain, go ahead."

"Make our course a wide spiral down toward Begemot. With each orbit, attempt to move closer to the *Enterprise*. When still outside their countermeasures, begin to follow her, using inertia and thrusters if possible. Impulse pushes as necessary."

"Aye, Captain. Bridge out."

"We'll get you your shot at Captain Riker, Deanna. If he cannot help us, I'm afraid our next attempt to aid the ground battle on Begemot will be the end of this ship."

"Surely they will just demand your surrender."

"Captain Benteen had no intention of capturing us, I'm afraid. The main reason we got away is because she thought she had us, and she was arming photon torpedoes. She could fire phasers in any direction, from several different banks. Those torpedoes were meant to destroy us."

They sat in silence, each in their own way feeling the grip of fate slowly curl around their ankles, grasping their futures.

"Incoming transmission, Commander," Worf said from his tactical station.

"On screen!" Riker ordered, standing up and straightening his uniform.

The screen switched from a display of two starships closing on their position, ten million kilometers from Begemot, to one of a woman captain, also standing before her command chair.

"Captain Riker," she said, "I am Captain Benteen on board the *USS Lakota*, commander of the Begemot task force. I have with me the *USS Exeter*, Captain Braswell commanding."

"Acting Captain," Riker corrected.

"I understand, Commander, no disrespect to your Captain intended."

"Just to have the most capable starship captain in Starfleet removed from his position."

"I am not without sympathy, Commander. Captain Picard has received and will receive no sanction on his record. To be frank, Starfleet does not care what has happened, only that we do as we are ordered, and assist the legitimate government of Begemot. Time is of the essence, so digging around for blame at this point is irrelevant."

Riker bit off another rejoinder. He would likely only get so many before he was removed. "How would you care to proceed, Captain?"

"I have no interest in taking over the technical details of the search for this rogue ship. Please continue, but we will link our bridge systems to generate a three-point planetary search pattern. Using our countermeasures, our cloaked opponent should not last long."

"Agreed. Commander Data, link our bridge systems and begin a three-point search pattern. Feed the pattern to the conn and begin cloak countermeasures at twenty-five percent as we start the search pattern."

"Yes, Commander," Data reported, "linking ships' helms and configuring the most efficient search pattern."

Captain Benteen consulted with the officer at the ops position, then turned to the officer at science one. With a nod from him, she turned back to Riker. "Our conn and computer have both received and acknowledged the pattern Mr. Data has provided are both optimal. Congratulations, Lieutenant Commander, we have all heard of your computational abilities, but the *Lakota* recently received a computer core upgrade. We have the most powerful AI in Starfleet, and you just out-thought it by two seconds!"

"Thank you, Captain," Data replied, his voice as neutral as ever.

"Commander, to you and your crew, 'good hunting!'"

"And yours, Captain. *Enterprise* out."

Captain Picard stepped out of his ready room.

"Well played, Number One. You had me feeling sorry for myself."

"An actor is only as good as the material, Captain."

"Mr. Data," Picard inquired, "how goes the un-search?"

"If I many indulge, Captain, the game's afoot!"

"Indulge away, Mr. Data, and perhaps a prayer to the silicon gods, if you're so inclined."

"Understood, sir."

"And now we wait," Captain Picard commented as he took the First Officer's chair, motioning for Riker to take his.

Riker smiled, shook his head, and took the captain's chair. "One for the books, eh, Captain?"

"One for the books, Number One."

#

"Commander, priority message from the *Exeter*!" said the officer at tactical.

"On screen," Data ordered as he stood up from the command chair.

The image of Begemot beneath them was replaced with a young, female officer, also standing in front of her command chair. Data, limited as his ability to identify human emotion was, could tell this officer was furious.

"Just what the hell kind of game are you playing at, *Enterprise*?"

"Captain Braswell, I assume. I am afraid I do not understand your reference."

"What is this?" Captain Braswell shouted, turning to her security station and pointing at the screen.

The officer at the station said simply: "Commander of the *Enterprise*."

Braswell sighed and turned back to the screen. "Is there a person I can speak to?"

"Of course, Captain, you are welcome to contact any person on the *Enterprise* you wish."

"Where's Riker?"

"He is off shift and currently sleeping. He has asked not to be disturbed except in the event of an emergency."

"Let me speak to the Chief Engineer!"

"While you may speak to any member of the crew at their leisure, Lieutenant Commander LaForge is currently on duty, and not available."

"I'm not talking to a robot."

"I beg your pardon, Captain, but I am an android. If it is your intention to speak with *Enterprise* Command, I am currently the officer in that position. If I am not satisfactory, the *Enterprise* night shift will begin in six hours, at which point I will be relieved by a 'person'."

The screen returned to an exterior of Begemot. But before Data could return to the command chair, the officer at tactical said quickly: "Another incoming message, also urgent. From the *Lakota*."

Data paused and turned around. "On screen," he said.

The screen switched to the bridge of the *Lakota*, where Data faced Captain Benteen.

"Captain, how may I assist you?" Data enquired.

"Well, Mr. Data, it would appear that somehow someone has outsmarted you and our ship's computer. As commander of this task force, I am relieving Commander Riker of command. For the last two hours we have beaten the hell out of your search pattern, and it keeps coming up snake eyes, so you are now in command of the *Enterprise*."

"I understand, Captain."

"And you will stay in command of the *Enterprise* until this mission is complete. I understand you do not require downtime?"

"While that is technically true, all Starfleet officers are guaranteed a specific number of hours downtime unless the situation is life-threatening, or…"

"Or they volunteer." They repeated together. "Thus, my next question is obvious. As this is not a life-threatening situation for your ship, would you volunteer to remain in command until this mission is concluded?"

"Yes, Captain."

"And can you confirm you are under no coercive force or previous orders that prevent you from fulfilling your orders under my command and as a Starfleet officer?"

"No, Captain. I have no impediments. I am capable of following your orders, as a Starfleet officer."

"Very well. Select the third best search pattern from your list of optimal patterns, send it to my ship, and reconfigure your bridge systems to follow the *Lakota's*."

"Yes, Captain." He turned to ops. "Configure our systems to follow the *Lakota*'s lead. I will send the new search pattern from Science One." When he was finished, he returned to stand in front of the command chair. "Captain, our last sensor readings show the *Brattain* possibly moving out of orbit. Are you certain they will return?"

"Well, either we will maintain our search, assist the government in suppressing the rebellion, and they do not return. Or, we maintain our search, assist the government in suppressing the rebellion, and destroy the ship. Either option works to support our mission."

"Captain, may I make an inquiry?"

"Of course, Commander."

"You said our mission is to destroy the *Brattain*. Did you misspeak? There are at least thirty-five lives aboard that ship. Given our advantage, we could very easily overcome the ship without destroying it."

"Sure, I misspoke. Now, follow my orders and let's get back to patrol. From time to time, you will be sent coordinates on the planet to hit with your phasers. Tight beam, ten percent yield. Understood?"

"Yes, Captain. We are standing by."

"*Lakota* out."

The screen returned to an image of Begemot from orbit, then began to tilt slightly as the *Enterprise* was given remote orders by the *Lakota*'s new search pattern.

"We need to fall back, t'raa. We cannot repel them without the *Brattain*. Do you think they've been destroyed?"

T'Rya considered for a moment, wiping her chin with her filthy uniform. She was certain she would feel the sudden death of her comrades in the *Brattain*, but that did not mean the ship had not been disabled or driven away. The comm chatter they'd decrypted from the government forces announced two more starships joining the *Enterprise* half a day ago. She supposed it was only a matter of time before this happened. T'Amar was brilliant, but she was not a starship captain. She did not have the training to fight against one starship, let alone three.

"You are right. There are too many. Order a phased withdrawal using a four-unit beetle hop back to the tree line, then move back into the tunnels. Split our forces in two, half north, half south?"

Just then, another Begemote officer came up to them in the command cave.

"The ground forces are retreating."

"Retreating? But that makes no sense…" she paused and began to think. She was not a strategic warrior, but given the Begemotes' inexperience with violence and war, it appeared a Vulcan was the best tactician they could

muster on short notice. "A trick! This must be a trick. Signal a general retreat into the jungle."

"Yes, ma'am!"

But before anyone could move, a bright light shone through the entrance to the cave, which faced the battlefield some one hundred meters away.

"That's a phaser!" T'Rya shouted. "But it's firing on our troops."

After the light was gone and her eyes had acclimated to the dark of the cave again, she asked: "Get the front line. What kind of casualties?"

The soldier handling communications spoke into his communication equipment. "Very light, t'raa, at most a few dozen."

"They've made some kind of mistake. We have to take advantage of it. Order a full assault. No reserves. Throw everything at them. Tell them to ignore phaser fire as it isn't much of a threat. To distract them, have all four fronts attack with all their forces. Let's bridge the castes in one final push."

She turned and walked down the cave to view the tactical displays as her troops, and whatever armor they had managed to acquire, made their way on all four fronts towards the caste buildings. The *Brattain* had provided a few mini fusion reactors and synthesizers programmed to produce phaser rifles. They had run those twenty-four hours a day until, one by one, they broke down. But at least a good portion of her troops had weapons that could knock

out the government's automated ground forces. They lay on the battlefield like soldiers of a forgotten mechanized army. Except for those the rebels managed to reprogram and repair. For a while, the government forces didn't even change the software in their AI to avoid firing on their own units, which had cost them dearly.

She continued to watch the tactical maps. The push appeared to take the enemy completely off guard, and on all four fronts they were falling back or being decimated by the rebel forces. After weeks of fighting and recruiting, the end was here. Once her forces were in the caste levels, they would move up and overwhelm any forces attempting to keep them below. Most of the D-E castes were technically still supporting the government, but an overwhelming force would likely turn them to the rebel's side.

When the flash came, T'Rya was facing away from the cave entrance, and perhaps fifty meters from the junction that led to it. Still, the cave lit up as if it was inside a star, and all the electronics immediately failed. Over a mounting roar she could hear those Begemotes closer to the entrance screaming in agony and terror.

Then came the unspeakable. Flame poured through the cave like gushing water. T'Rya's entire body immediately caught on fire. But before she could think to move a shockwave slammed into the cave. The walls began to collapse, the ceiling to fall. She was knocked over by the shaking, then roughly buried by the collapsing walls

and ceiling. Her last thought was the gentle sound of a stream. Or perhaps the frying of vegetables.

#

"There have been nuclear discharges on Begemot, Captain," the tactical officer announced. They were still working their way in towards the planet, trying to get a chance to get close to the *Enterprise*.

"What?" Troi called out from her station at Communications.

"Can we get any chatter from the other starships, Commander?"

"Just a moment," Troi said, working the comms. "There is a lot of ship-to-ship cross-communication. They all appear as shocked as we are, requesting confirmation from each other."

"Tactical, what are the locations of the strikes?"

"I am detecting four unique blasts. Two are visible to our sensors, and they are right in the middle of the two battle zones on this half of the planet. Preliminary sensor data suggests the other two strikes were on the other two battle zones on the far side.

"Move us into orbit."

#

Red alert sounded on the *Enterprise*.

"Ops, what is the source of that red alert?" demanded Commander Data.

"Something happened on the surface of Begemot, Commander. Looks like nuclear weapons have been detonated. Four separate strikes, almost simultaneous."

"Locations?"

"Looks like the four main battlefields, Commander. It looks like the government has wiped out the rebellion in one blow."

"Get me damage estimates and contact Dr. Crusher that we have a nuclear weapon blast emergency on the surface."

"Yes, sir."

"Hail the *Lakota*."

#

"Commander Data," Captain Benteen ordered, "please assemble your medical staff and prepare for humanitarian missions. I have sent over a zone for the *Enterprise* to cover. It is the largest, as you have the largest medical staff. The *Exeter* and *Lakota* will split duties on the other three, smaller battlefields."

"Aye, Commander."

The bridge of the *Lakota* went to Red Alert, as did the bridge of the *Enterprise*.

"Captain," the tactical officer on the *Lakota* announced, "the *Brattain* has decloaked on the far side of the planet, just above the *Enterprise* mission zone."

"*Enterprise*. If that ship so much as wiggles funny you will open fire. Do you understand Mr. Data? We have

to help those people left alive and we cannot waste time dealing with some bizarre rebels in a starship."

"Yes, Captain. I will contact them and explain they are to remain where they are, shields down, or they will be fired upon."

"Whatever! Just take care of them and get your medical teams down to the surface as quickly as possible."

"Aye, Captain."

#

"Captain, the *Lakota* has ordered us to begin medical missions to some coordinates on the far side of the planet."

"Very well," Captain Braswell replied, "contact medical and inform them to plan for severe injuries and radiation burns. All radiation protocols in effect. Quarantine a pathway from the emergency transporter room to medical."

"Yes, Captain."

The ops officer suddenly shouted: "Ship decloaking dead ahead, Captain, nine thousand kilometers!"

"Shields up. Arm phasers. Load all torpedo tubes."

"Shields up, Captain. All weapons report ready," reported the tactical officer.

"Ahead full impulse!"

"We are receiving orders to ignore the *Brattain* and focus on rescue operations."

"Ignore that order. First, we're going to scratch an itch. Tactical, has Starfleet changed or rescinded our orders regarding the *Brattain*?"

"No, Captain, no changes since they were first received."

"Then she's fair game. Have they raised their shields?"

"No, Captain."

"Making it too easy!"

"Captain, the *Enterprise* is closing. They are hailing us."

"That robot?"

"Yes, Captain."

"On screen."

"I'm busy, Commander robot."

"I have been given orders to take the *Brattain* into custody," Data explained. "You are to power down your weapons and move to your rescue position."

"In a minute. I have some target practice first."

"I have ordered the *Brattain* to lower her shields and surrender. I do not permit you to fire on her. If you do not desist in your attack, I will be forced to take defensive measures."

"Just like a robot, faulty circuits protecting the enemy. Fire on that ship!"

But even as the blast from the forward phaser array shot out, the *Brattain* seemed to disappear. The phaser fire

went directly through its fading image and lit up the shields of the *Enterprise*, which was just behind it.

"Captain Braswell," Data remarked. "You have fired on and hit a Federation starship, without reason or provocation. I am relieving you of command and replacing you with your First Officer. Should you fail to comply, I will be forced to board your vessel and personally take command of the *Exeter*."

"Captain, the *Brattain* has reappeared approximately five hundred meters from its previous position."

"Commander Fisher!"

"Yes, Captain."

"Take command of the *Exeter*. Continue with rescue efforts. I will be in my quarters."

"Yes sir, I have the bridge."

"I expect you to follow your orders," Commander Data said through the viewscreen. "*Enterprise* out."

The view of the *Enterprise* bridge was replaced with the view of her menacing size, staring down the *Exeter*.

"Proceed with emergency rescue plans," Fisher ordered.

"Yes, sir."

Troi worked with the medical teams as they labored to remove the rock and debris from the cave entrance. The survivors on the battlefield had been transported or shuttled up to the *Enterprise*, depending on the severity of their wounds. All that was left, even hours later in the constant rain, were the slowly smoldering corpses of the dead. Troi had smelled death before. Human death. And while this was completely different, it was no less terrible.

There was a shout as the cave opening was finally uncovered. Troi rushed to enter but some engineers held her back.

"But there's life in there!"

"Yes, Commander, and we'll get to it as soon as we can. But if we don't shore up these cave walls there will just be a lot more dead."

So, she sat in the grass in the torrential rain, crying hard because no one could see any tears in this deluge. Captain T'Amar had explained this was the last known position of T'Rya, and while her entire crew wanted to beam down to help, they had been ordered to stand-to or be fired upon.

Only a few hours ago the government of Begemot had sent out one last plea for help. Their unleashing of nuclear weapons on the rebels had been too much, and all

the castes beneath B had burst upwards and seized control of the government. The A cast level was also breached and pacified—in truth, just a long series of terrified surrenders without one shot being necessary—and now the provisional government of Begemot was officially requiring Federation assistance in repairing their society, acquiring fusion reactors and synthesizers to feed, clothe, and house the population, and to guarantee their support of the Federation in any way they could.

The *Exeter* and *Lakota* had been withdrawn as the first Federation hospital ship arrived, the *USS Pasteur*, *slinking into the dark to keep the story of what went on here out of the Federation history books*, Troi mused.

"We've got the cave opening reinforced!" Someone shouted, and Troi got up, soaked, and made her way to the cave entrance. She turned on her wrist flashlight, opened her tricorder, and went inside.

It was dark and claustrophobic. The air was thick with dust. The effects of hours on the surface in the radiation was beginning to make her queasy. She pulled her hand through her hair once and it came away with a huge swath. She did not do that again.

Many people were ahead of her, their tricorders set to detect signs of Begemot life. Her's, of course, was set differently. About one hundred meters in she came to a 'T' junction. All of the rescuers were making their way to the left, pulling out rocks and carefully shoring up the walls. Occasionally someone would shout out "Found one!"

There would be the flash and sound of a transporter, or the rapid carry of a rescue bed out to a waiting shuttle – and all too often, the slow, dirge-like hauling of a zipped-up bag.

To the right, as her tricorder prompted, there was not much space. Several times Troi had to literally inch her way through like a cave spelunker. Thoughts of getting caught, or crushed, or lost in the dark no longer came to her. The tricorder she was carrying was reporting a Vulcan life sign up ahead. A very weak life sign.

When she came upon the body, she almost crawled over it. As she looked down through the cracks in the rock, her wrist light caught the whites of eyes, staring up in the dark. Now she could hear a whisper, a strange sort of clicking language she recognized as Begemot. Her spirits dropped, then she chastised herself. Here was a life she could help, even if it was not Vulcan.

The left side of the person was pinned by an enormous rock. She would need engineers to remove it. But those crossing over rested on this rock and the ground. Many of these she was able to leverage out of the way, until she could move down and lie beside the prone figure. Skin the color of burnt paper.

The figure continued to talk, but then suddenly switched to something she could understand: "The logic of emotion is in that a design meant to incorporate emotion generates a far more holistic reality than one or the other alone. Reason and logic are gifts, an emergent pretext of evolutionary development, perhaps its ultimate expression

is in non-physical existence, but until pure reason can be achieved emotion is the mental protection, like the bumpers of a ship to protect against the wharf."

Troi regarded her tricorder again. There could be no doubt. This was a Vulcan.

"T'Rya?"

"Ah is that you, Sybok? Were you as baffled by their adulation as I? Before that thing took your mind, did you, too, not believe you had reverted to a child? It has become so clear now, so perfect. And I can see, as you did, as you tried to tell us, that perfection is not possible, even as we achieve it. The irrational saves us from rationality. The illogical from logic."

"T'Rya?" Troi tried again, louder.

"Yes, yes I see it too. Logic will become a drag eventually, slowing and stopping our progress. But you were too soon, and I am not capable. We must hope your children find the way, so Vulcan does not slip away, lost in the dusts of logic's wind…"

"T'Rya!"

"Co… Commander Troi?"

"Yes, it's me. We're rescuing the wounded."

"To send them to prison?"

"No, no you've won. The government has surrendered. The Begemote people are proceeding with formal relations with the Federation. The *Enterprise* and the *Pasteur*, a hospital ship, are in orbit tending the

wounded. We need to get you out of here." Troi turned back the way she'd come: "I've found one!" she shouted.

"No, Commander, please. Do not try to save me. There is not much left to save but a head and some bones."

"Does… does it hurt?" She could not help now; the tears began to overflow her eyelids.

"There was pain, yes, very much. But it is gone now. I feel nothing. I think I'll just wait here in the grass for the fairies to find me."

"Fairies?"

"And what of our ship, does the *Brattain* survive?"

"Yes, it is undamaged. They sent me down to find you."

"They… they have all of me they can have. I left it with them."

"They said, your Katra…"

"That old thing? There is far too much logic in it. Best to leave it for the Beetle Swamp."

"I don't understand?" The tears fell heavy now, dripping on T'Rya's body and sounding like water dripping on plastic.

"No, do not cry, Deanna. I have reached the summit of my last mountain. From its peak I can see nothing higher in all the worlds." She lifted her hand to give the Vulcan show of respect, but it had no fingers. "Live long… and… pr…"

Commander Data sat at his desk, idly stroking his cat, Spot, with one hand as the other flew over the icons on his console. His door chime sounded.

"Enter."

Commander Troi walked into his quarters.

"Commander Troi. It is good to see you. May I help you?"

"Maybe, I don't know, Data."

"Please, sit down," Data said, motioning to the chair opposite his on the other side of the desk, "I do need to be in Ten Forward for Lieutenant Barclay's transfer party in thirty minutes. But in the meantime…"

Spot jumped up on the desk, demanding attention.

"No, Spot," Data said, incapable of being impatient, "I am speaking with Commander Troi right now."

"Please, Deanna. We're off duty."

"As you wish." Data placed Spot on the floor. The cat flicked his tail in dissatisfaction and wandered away. "May I get you anything, Deanna?"

"No, thank you, I'm fine," she answered, taking the chair Data had offered.

"How may I help you?"

"It's about something T'Rya said to me on the planet, about logic, reason, and emotion."

Data sat quietly, looking expectant.

"She said some things about illogic being the protection against logic, about the irrational being a defense against rationality. She said one day logic will become an impediment to Vulcan, and that perfection is not possible, even as it's achieved."

Data sat without speaking for some time. An unusually long time for Data. Troi began to feel uncomfortable.

"Under ordinary circumstances, I would recommend you speak to the ship's Councilor," Data advised.

"Yes, Data, I see the irony here. But this is something I think you are more qualified to deal with than I am."

"I spent some time considering what T'Rya has said, and what various Vulcan philosophers have said about logic, reason, and emotion. The Vulcan purge of emotion was, in effect, a desperate emotional reaction. In an attempt to keep themselves from being destroyed by their powerful emotions, they decided to remove emotions completely from their society.

"If I am correct in interpreting T'Rya's thinking, the only successful future for Vulcan is to reintegrate their emotions, until they become perfect beings."

"What is a 'perfect' being?" Troi asked, thoughtfully.

Even given all their experiences, Data had to admit: "I am not able to define such a being. However, in our last

encounter with Q, he did mention to Captain Picard that the ultimate adventure for humanity lay in exploring the unknown possibilities of existence. The Captain's assumption, as Q hinted, is that physical exploration alone would not yield the kind of knowledge humanity is searching for."

Troi smiled.

"I am sorry if I have not been of assistance. Such esoteric topics are difficult, in particular with such little information to work with."

"Thank you, Data, you have helped a lot." She got up to leave, walked to the door, then paused and turned around. "Do we know what happened to the *Brattain*?"

"The ship cloaked and escaped during the rescue operations."

Troi nodded and turned again to leave.

"And Deanna, that ship is no longer the *Brattain*."

Troi turned back again.

"Our last visual of the hull showed they renamed their ship and altered their transponder signature. She is now the *kanu t' t'sai ri'a'gra*.

Troi smiled ruefully. "Do you know what that means, Data?"

"I understand "kanu t'" translates roughly as "children of", but I am afraid my experience with Vulcan proper names is limited."

"It means 'Children of T'Rya'."

THE END

Cast of Characters:

I'Gal'Derta, Begemot prisoner, ally of T'Rya

Worf, Lieutenant, Chief Tactical Officer and Security Chief *USS Enterprise*

Guinan, Bartender, *USS Enterprise*

Lanna Chang, Admiral, Starfleet Command

J'Lew'Edtra, Begemot prisoner, ally of T'Rya

D'Gra'Derta, T'Rya's Representative from The GAS (Guilt Adjudication Services), ally of C'Lei'Edtra (Lee), Begemot Ambassador to the Federation

Deanna Troi, Commander, Ship's Counselor, *USS Enterprise*

Holland, Rear Admiral, Starfleet Planetary Liaison, Starfleet Command

Sarok, Ship's Doctor, *USS Brattain*

H'Lra'Edtra (Lara), Begemote resistance fighter.

Beverly Crusher, Commander, Chief Medical Officer, *USS Enterprise*

Sakik, Lieutenant Commander, First Officer, *USS Brattain*

Benteen, Captain, Commander, *USS Lakota*

Braswell, Captain, Commander, *USS Exeter*

Fisher, Commander, First Officer, *USS Exeter*

Cast of Ships:

(In order of appearance)

USS Nova, NCC-73515, *Nova*-class, Starfleet

FMS Mercantile FAM 622, *D'kora*-class, Ferengi Alliance.

USS Brattain, NCC-21166, *Miranda*-class, Starfleet

USS Enterprise, NCC-1701-D, *Galaxy*-class, Starfleet

El-Baz, NCC-1701-D 05, type 15 shuttlepod, attached *USS Enterprise*

Von Braun, NCC-1701-D 04, type 7 shuttlecraft, attached *USS Enterprise*

USS Exeter, NCC-26531, *Ambassador*-class, Starfleet

USS Lakota, NCC-42768, *Excelsior*-class, Starfleet

USS Pasteur, NCC-58925, *Olympic*-class, Hospital ship, Starfleet.

Enjoyed the trip? I sure hope so. Please check out my website at kimaaron.ca where you can see more of my work. Want another Star Trek TNG fan fiction, check out The Queen of Begemot, the first novel in the sage of T'Rya.