STAR TREK

THE NEXT GENERATION

The Queen of Begemot

"Your orders are to accompany and accommodate the Begemote ambassador to the Federation. Our intelligence has picked up some social unrest on Begemot, including chatter that the Begemote ambassador is slated for some kind of assassination or blackmail plot. Should an ambassador from Begemote describe the caste system in open proceedings, and declare the unwillingness of the Begemote people to ever change, the Federation would be put in a very difficult situation. The worlds of the Federation have all compromised to become members. For them to find out one member is not asked to change could cause massive unrest across the entire Federation."

"Babysitting!" Picard scoffed, unable to contain his disgust.

"Preserving the security of the Federation, Captain. If Begemot does not join the Federation, we lose the capacity to surveil 25% of Tholian space, and the ability to create an effective defensive perimeter against an attack."

Also available from this author:

Star Trek TNG: kanu t' sybok
4d6f6279 4469636b or, "The Dhale"
Golem

Coming soon:

Kronstadt!
Terra Cognita
Apocalypse Cow!

Amazon author page

www.kimaaron.ca
still is the written word Publishing

Star Trek: The Next Generation
The *Queen of Begemot*

by
Kim Aaron

"As a matter of cosmic history, it has always been easier to destroy than to create."
-- Commander Spock, *The Wrath of Khan*

"It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."
-- Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

"Starbase 180, this is shuttle NCC-1701, *Sakharov*, enroute to your location. Estimated arrival time 40 minutes. Requesting permission to disembark my passengers via transporter on arrival." The young ensign sat back in her command chair and took a moment to monitor the shuttle's instruments. Despite being a recent Academy graduate, she was both self-confident and more than capable of piloting a shuttle to a starbase; however, given the passengers sitting not three meters from her position in the command chair, some degree of nervousness seemed appropriate. Being assigned to the *Enterprise* so early after graduating was an honor, but now she carried Captain Picard, Commander Troi, and that mysterious Vulcan lieutenant who'd been rushed aboard the *Enterprise* via high-speed transport only seven hours ago.

Her orders were terse but simple: "Shuttle passengers to Starbase 180 at maximum sustained warp, disembark them via transporter when within

range of the starbase. Return to *Enterprise* at new coordinates (attached), maximum sustained warp.”

While she was reviewing, a reply from the starbase came in on the shuttle's comms: “Shuttle *Sakharov*, your orders are confirmed. Maintain present course and speed. Prepare for hands-off approach at 15,000, then stand by and wait for transport coordinates.”

“Acknowledged, 180, hands off at 15,000 kilometers, stand by for transport coordinates. *Sakharov* out.”

She looked out at the stars streaming with the warp field. Her passengers had shut the door to the command section, so she had no idea what they were doing or saying. Probably something secret, and way above her security clearance.

#

“Once again, Captain, I apologize for the speed with which you have been ordered away from your ship,” Lieutenant T'Rya reiterated as they settled in the rear of the shuttle. The first thing she had done once the pilot was in the command chair was shut the door between the two sections and order the computer to mute outgoing audio. Now she sat across from Captain Picard and Commander Troi as they traveled from the *Enterprise* towards Starbase 180.

"I do like to be on board when my ship is being overhauled," Picard said, "but by the level of security involved I understand whatever is going on is extremely sensitive."

"Yes, Captain, extremely sensitive, and also time sensitive. I am here on behalf of Starfleet Intelligence Special Operations. The three of us are travelling to Starbase 180 in order to intercept a commercial luxury liner, the *Queen of Begemot*. Do either of you know the status of Begemot?"

"The planet is in the final stages of applying for entrance into the Federation," Commander Troi responded, looking with some confusion at Picard and then back at T'Rya, "but I hardly see how this involves sensitive security issues. The Federation's vetting for entrance is public knowledge. I understand at the level of negotiations there is always push and pull from both sides, but the requirements for admission are very clear."

"Yes," Captain Picard picked up, "and from what I've heard it appears Begemot's admission is all but decided. They should be part of the Federation within the year."

"That is the chatter coming out of the negotiations, Captain," T'Rya confirmed, "but in fact the Begemotes refuse to meet the minimum criteria for admission to the Federation. Despite having access to technology on par with most Federation civilizations, their economic system has failed to incorporate this technology into their society. Instead, they have maintained

a mercantile caste system. Most of the population essentially toils to extract planetary resources and manufacture products for consumption. Artificial intelligence and complex robotic systems are limited to those that can afford them. Beneath this small caste of wealthy owners are various lower castes engaging in more and more onerous and undesirable labor, with the least desirable labor retaining the least in economic credits. In fact, the lower castes sometimes do not generate enough credit to maintain lodging and sufficient nutrition."

"But how is this possible?" Troi interrupted. "Fusion reactors and food replicators could feed the entire planet. The Federation would provide them at no cost."

"Yes, they would, but the Begemot government has no interest in that. These castes have complex Begemot names, but we just call them one, two, three, and so on. The two wealthiest castes, one and two, essentially control the government and economy. There is a form of democracy, but getting elected is an expensive process, one only the higher castes can afford, although it appears the first caste has no real interest in politics beyond supporting those second-caste candidates they feel will support their particular interests."

"That sounds to me like the worst form of slavery," Troi complained. "The slave owners aren't even responsible to feed or house their laborers!"

"If I may, Lieutenant," Captain Picard interrupted, "while this is all intriguing and certainly important to the Federation, I fail to see what a starship captain and ship's counselor can do about any of it."

T'Rya's countenance changed. Vulcans did not tend to display emotion, so the fact they could see the effect the captain's question had on her was disturbing.

"None of what I've told you so far is important in terms of security. You should not go discussing it with others, of course, but what I am about to tell you is highly restricted information. The Federation is asking that you never speak of it. Ever."

Captain Picard and Commander Troi shared a glance, then turned back to T'Rya and nodded.

"Begemot will be inducted into the Federation, no matter what happens during this final round of negotiations. The Federation has determined they are too much of a strategic asset to lose hold of, given the current situation."

"What current situation are you referring to?" asked Picard.

T'Rya picked her PADD up from the table and opened a file, then handed it over to the confused pair to examine. It was a shot of space, very blurry, and clearly taken at extreme distance. In the image were at least 10 spider-like ships or stations. They appeared like spiders due to all the arms

coming off a central hub, perhaps 10 or 12 per object. Something like feet or toes could be seen at the end of each "leg".

"You are looking at an extreme long-range telescope image from Starbase 180, a passive view inside Tholian Assembly territory. This construction hub is one of dozens we have been able to image, and given we are able to penetrate about 5% of Tholian space with telescopes, if this pattern continues we are talking about hundreds, perhaps thousands of these hubs."

"Has Starfleet determined the purpose of these 'construction hubs'?" Picard asked.

"Those hubs you see here are constructing Recluse class battleship-carriers. We anticipate other areas will be building Tarantula class dreadnaughts, while most of the rest of their resources are likely centered on frigates and fighters to arm the carriers."

"But construction on that scale can only be for some kind of huge military operation," Troi mused.

"War," Picard agreed, then looked at T'Rya. "The Klingons?"

"Starfleet Intelligence has reached out to the High Council through back channels, but as far as we can tell the Klingons have no conflict with the Tholians. They even thanked us for the intelligence. It appears they had

no idea. They also promised to share any intelligence they collect with us, although we're not counting on it."

"But that does not rule out a possible conflict," Picard suggested, putting the PADD down on the shuttle's table, "when it comes to matters of the Empire's security the Klingons often hold things close to the chest."

"In all honesty, Captain," T'Rya admitted, "we are very much in the dark. But what we do know is we are not in a position to defend against such a massive force in this sector. Not so soon after Wolf 359, and with a credible threat developing with the Dominion.

"We've run simulations, including a Tholian invasion of the Sheliak or Breen. If one of these is the target, we could be outside observers. But if the Klingons are invaded, due to the terms of the treaty the Federation would be obligated to defend them."

"So Begemot is a strategic location on the Tholian border," Troi said as if she'd suddenly realized, "and that's why they will be admitted to the Federation."

"Exactly," T'Rya replied. "It is a strategic pearl we simply cannot throw away, and one we'll pay any price to hold. Starbase 180 is not a military resource. As a staging ground in an actual war it will only be useful for communications and perhaps as a medical facility. Plans to retrofit starship repair bays and shift engineering personnel are currently moving

through the Federation bureaucracy, but even with the best upgrades 180 will never be as useful as a planet."

"Forgive me, Lieutenant," Picard said quickly, leaning back on the couch and raising his hand to his cheek, "but I still cannot see what this has to do with the commander or myself. Begemot will be admitted to the federation, the Tholians are building a massive fleet which may or may not be for attacking the Federation, and the two of us will be taking a luxury cruise?"

T'Rya let out a sigh: "You and the counselor…"

"Commander," Troy corrected.

"Yes, please excuse me, you and the commander are hereby ordered to disembark at Starbase 180, and to embark on the *Queen of Begemot* in two days' time as it swings past the starbase."

"The Begemot is a massive luxury liner on one of several test cruises. While it can accommodate tens of thousands of guests, this cruise will only include delegates from Begemot and the Federation, to hammer out the final details for the inclusion of Begemot into the Federation. Of course, the Begemotes do not know they will be approved no matter what, so the Federation delegates plan to play as much hardball as they can, to wring as many concessions out of the Begemotes as possible, in particular regarding their social caste system."

"Your orders are to accompany and accommodate the Begemote ambassador to the Federation. Our intelligence has picked up some social unrest on Begemot, including chatter that the Begemote ambassador is slated for some kind of assassination or blackmail plot. Should an ambassador from Begemote describe the caste system in open proceedings, and declare the unwillingness of the Begemote people to ever change, the Federation would be put in a very difficult situation. The worlds of the Federation have all compromised to become members. For them to find out one member is not asked to change could cause massive unrest across the entire Federation."

"Babysitting!" Picard scoffed, unable to contain his disgust.

"Preserving the security of the Federation, Captain. If Begemot does not join the Federation, we lose the capacity to surveil 25% of Tholian space, and the ability to create an effective defensive perimeter against an attack."

"Yes, but why us?" Picard objected.

"Your credentials precede you, Captain, and the *Enterprise* is currently en route to drydock for maintenance. Commander Troi's achievements also speak for themselves. An empath could prove invaluable to your mission. As for myself, I am fully briefed on the mission's technical details."

"Then you are coming with us?" Troi asked.

"Yes, Commander. I will be your operational lead and liaison to the Federation's position during the operation."

"The babysitter's babysitter," Picard chuckled.

"As you wish, Captain. My duty is to assure the Federation's goals are achieved."

Just then, the ensign in the command section came over the shuttle intercom: "Sorry to interrupt, but we will be in transporter range in five minutes."

"Acknowledged," T'Rya replied, and picked up her PADD. She stood up, as did Picard and Troi, "I know this does not seem a desirable mission, but the Federation is in a desperate situation. If that war armada is meant for us, we need all the early warning and defense we can muster. Surely *you* understand, Captain?"

Picard remained stoic, but his mind vacillated between lashing out and dropping his head in shame. Starfleet was in its weakened position because he had led the Borg at Wolf 359. He had not been in control of himself, but still the battle played itself out inside him, as it did every day, but he refused to let it break him.

"We will do the best we can," Picard replied, "right, Commander?"

"Aye, sir," Troi agreed, although she could feel the conflict going on inside him. It was a battle that might destroy a lesser mind.

"I have authorized you to receive the mission details. Please review them at your convenience. We have 43 hours until the *Queen of Begemot* comes into shuttle range of Starbase 180. The Federation representatives for the talks are already on the base. We will shuttle out together."

"No transporters?" Troi asked.

"Excuse me, Captain, but we have arrived at Starbase 180 and will be in transporter range in three minutes," came their pilot's voice over the ship's intercom.

"Acknowledged," Picard replied, "let us know when you have the transport coordinates from starbase. Computer!" There was a trill as the computer acknowledged him. "Mute intercom until the ensign contacts us again."

"As to your question, Commander, no, the Begemotes do not use or accept transporter technology, as it is too similar to replicators. In fact, they have altered their society to identify replicated items. I'm afraid we'll be setting off all sorts of sensors on board the *Queen of Begemot* until we can acquire some local clothing."

"But they are a warp-capable society?" Troi asked, perplexed.

"Very much so," T'Rya replied, "and when you get a look at the *Queen of Begemot*, you'll see another reason the Federation wants to bring them into the fold. Their capacity for ship design and engineering appears to be highly advanced."

"Captain, I've received transport coordinates from Starbase."

"Very good, Ensign. Prepare for transport."

The three stepped back into the small transporter at the back of the shuttle.

"Well then," Picard said ironically, "let us get on with the babysitting. Ensign!"

"Sir?"

"Three ready for transport."

"Aye, sir, transporting now."

And with a swirling of lights the three disappeared off the transport pad.

Up front, the young pilot sighed, then spoke: "Computer." A trill response. "Plot a course to these coordinates and engage at maximum sustained warp when ready." She studied her orders and then typed the coordinates into the navigation panel.

"Coordinates received. Plotting course. Stand by for warp."

"Oh, and computer," a trill, "let's have some music. I feel like some Brahms."

As the command section of the shuttle began to fill with strings, the warp engines engaged and it disappeared from view. Behind where it had been, the massive bulk of Starbase 180 hung motionless in the dark.

Chapter 2

"Spacedock 135, this is NCC-1701 *Enterprise*. We are currently 150,000 kilometers from your location, please acknowledge." Lieutenant Commander Data keyed off communications and waited for a reply. As he did, the lights in the bridge became brighter.

The computer came over the ship's intercom. "Zero eight hundred. Day shift begins."

To Data's left stood his replacement, eager to take over ops. All over the bridge, the replacement crew began to take over the stations from the off-duty night shift. Data did not relinquish his seat, but instead held up his hand with one finger raised in a "just a moment" pose.

"*Enterprise*, this is Spacedock 135. We are monitoring your approach. Please set to hands-off at your convenience and advise."

"Confirmed, Spacedock," Data replied, "the ship is now set to hands-off, you have the ball."

"Confirmed, *Enterprise*, we have the ball."

Data then stood and addressed his replacement: "Spacedock 135 is currently in control of the ship's navigation. Monitor for anomalies. Otherwise, it should be a simple flight."

"Yes, Commander!" the ensign replied, and took the seat Data had vacated.

Data made his way to the bridge turbolift and met Commander Riker just stepping onto the bridge for his shift.

"Good morning, Commander," Data said plainly.

"Morning, Data. Are you on shift with La Forge this morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"I was looking over the specs last night, and it looks like they're planning to upgrade several bits of firmware, including the protected memory archive and all our hand phasers?"

"Yes sir. The memory archive upgrade should be quite simple, but time consuming. At least 25 hours. All hand phasers are currently being connected to remotely and will take less than an hour to upgrade. Unless there are issues with damaged phasers, at which point they will have to be sought out individually and repaired."

"I thought hand unit upgrades like this were done on the fly via subspace."

"Yes sir. It is just a fortunate coincidence that we will be able to push the updates through the *Enterprise* computer. It will also allow for a detailed diagnostic on each device so we can repair or replace any faulty units at spacedock."

"Thank you, Data."

"Sir." Data nodded, then proceeded into the turbolift. Once the door shut he said "Engineering," and as the turbolift began to take him to his destination Data began to whistle "Pop Goes the Weasel."

#

On the bridge, Commander Riker took his seat and watched as the spacedock uneventfully navigated the *Enterprise* into its belly.

The dock was an asymmetrical-looking thing. On the port side sat the bulk of the crew quarters, the visitor promenade, and the labs and machine shops required to repair massive ships like the *Enterprise*. The spacedock's starboard side looked like the legs of some giant spider which, when fed a ship, curled its limbs around to hold its prey tight, and, of course, provide easy access to the ship for the spacedock repair crews.

"Check all moorings are set," Riker said automatically, "and confirm hard seal on the gangway."

"Positive pressure on gangway, and moorings are confirmed," Worf replied from behind Riker at the Tactical panel.

"Thank you, Mr. Worf." He tapped some of the icons on the command chair's pad, "Engineering."

"La Forge here, sir."

"We are nestled in for our long winter's sleep, Geordi. Data estimated 25 hours. Can I start the clock?"

La Forge chuckled, "We'll need to lock down thrusters, impulse engines, and the warp core, and shut down all ship communications. Then I have to set the computer to passive signal reception so spacedock can push the firmware updates. Give me 2 hours to get everything locked down, then we can start the clock."

"Understood."

"And Commander, I'm recommending everyone disembark onto the dock. Internal systems like turbolifts and doors will still function, but that's about it. No computer and only emergency lighting."

"I hear you. I think I might take the opportunity to catch up on some sleep. I'll take a light with me."

"Yes, sir. Engineering out."

#

In Engineering, Data noticed La Forge waving to him from the lower level, so he quickly got on the lift to ride down. Once at the bottom, he walked over to the chief engineer. "Yes, Geordi?"

"I think I might be a victim of my own success. I've identified three hand phasers with programming issues, and one that is not responding to remote connections at all."

"How can I be of assistance?"

"Well, just about everyone is off the ship enjoying themselves on spacedock, and I'm in the weeds here shutting down the warp core. Think you could go and collect these phasers for me?"

"Inquiry: 'in the weeds'?"

"It means I'm really busy," La Forge explained, pretending to be exasperated, "now, how about you round up those phasers?"

"Of course."

"Okay, great. Here are the locations of each phaser," he pointed to a list on his engineering panel. "I'd send it to your comms badge but all internal communications are down already."

"I have the list. Based on their locations, I should be back within 30 minutes." Data turned and walked over to a storage locker, where he retrieved a small case.

"Then you'd better take a light with you. I'll probably have main power cut off by then, and it'll get dark."

"Understood," Data replied. He fetched a wrist light from an equipment locker, put it on his arm, and with his case left engineering.

Commander Riker woke suddenly in the darkness, the edges of a distressing dream still caressing his mind. "Computer, lights!" he ordered. No trill, and no lights. It took a few moments for the dream to finally leave his thoughts, and what was happening came back to him. Geordi must have shut down the ship's main power by now in order to update the computer. He reached carefully to his side table and retrieved the wrist light he'd left there earlier.

With some light he made his way to the small WC in his cabin, splashed some water on his face, then got dressed in his uniform. Without the thrum of the warp drive the *Enterprise* felt like a vast, empty cave. The only signs of life were barely visible if he looked out his viewport just the right way. A couple of workers in maintenance suits were doing something on the hull.

The cold water had woken him up, and now he realized how right Geordi had been. He couldn't get anything done with the ship in this condition. He decided to get to the gangway and take a tour of the spacedock.

As he approached the door to his quarters a tiny premonition in the back of his mind slowed him just before he reached it. He stood in front of the closed door, his nose not 10 centimeters away.

"I thought you said the doors and turbolifts would be working," he mumbled to himself, noticing how odd his voice sounded against the utter stillness of the ship. He turned his light on the access panel and moved over to open it. Just as he did, the door suddenly slid open. The low emergency lighting barely illuminated the hallway. Riker walked out of his quarters and turned to watch the door slide quietly shut.

In the back of his mind this door not opening, but then opening, triggered a distant memory. Had this happened to him before? Shaking his head and attributing the whole event to the upgrades on the computer, he started walking. In a few moments he was in front of a turbolift, waiting for it to arrive. Without even thinking about it he'd changed his destination from the spacedock promenade to engineering. That memory in the back of his head was still nagging at him, so he decided to make his way down to Geordi and Data and see if either of them could figure out if something was wrong.

#

When Data returned to engineering with the four problematic hand phasers shut snugly in his case, La Forge had just begun to cut main power. This was a multistage procedure and was sensitive to error. You didn't just turn off the lights on a thousand-meter starship by pushing an off button. The ship shut down in stages, much like a city loses power, in defined grids.

The shutdown took place from the periphery of the *Enterprise* and migrated towards Engineering, so when the power finally cut out here, La Forge knew the entire ship was shut down.

He keyed an icon on his control panel: "Spacedock, I have shut down all propulsion and idled the warp core. The ship's power is down and I have just released the safety interlocks on the computer's core memory. We have four hand phasers here that are misbehaving, but we'll patch them up if we can and you should be able to update them up as we go."

"Confirmed, *Enterprise*. I see your computer is accepting our handshake and we are able to access the archive. Let's run the clock now. Twenty-five hours. Let's see if we can't finish in 16!"

"Affirmative, spacedock, I say we set some speed records."

A laugh came over the intercom, then "Affirmative, *Enterprise*, spacedock out."

La Forge turned to look at Data standing behind him, still holding the case with the damaged hand phasers.

"Well, Data, we have a day or so, want to go hang out on the spacedock?"

"I have been to this spacedock three times previously," Data explained. "The only new service offered on the promenade is a skin treatment spa. I do not think they could help me."

La Forge laughed. "No, I guess not."

"I believe I will stay in Engineering and see about repairing these hand phasers. If they cannot be repaired and updated, we will have to requisition new ones."

"Fair enough. Spacedock isn't really my kind of thing either. Hand me one of those phasers and let's see what we can do."

Data set his case on the ground and opened it. Inside, protected by the case's foam interior, were four identical hand phasers. He picked one out and handed it over.

La Forge took a quick look at the phaser's exterior with the full spectrum of his VISOR. "I can't see any obvious physical signs of damage. Here, take this one and start running a diagnostic. I'll give the rest of these a look-see."

"Yes, Geordi," Data replied. He took the phaser La Forge was holding out to him, then made his way through the dim emergency-lit room to an alcove opposite the warp core. Retrieving a cable from a storage locker, he plugged it into a port underneath the station's engineering panel, then plugged the other end into a small port on the phaser. After that, even in the dim light, Data's fingers began to fly over the panel, directing the low-level computer functions to perform a diagnostic on the ailing weapon.

As the computer performed its diagnostic, Data sat motionless at his station. If engineering had been busy, he would make sure to move an arm, shift in his chair, blink, and otherwise look alive. He had found if he remained motionless for too long, even when he had no reason to move, people would become nervous around him. But since he was with Geordi, he felt comfortable enough not to run that subroutine.

Suddenly his panel blinked. The diagnostic was complete. As he unplugged the phaser from the computer, he said, "This phaser has a faulty memory chip."

"All right, well, that's what, a 15-minute fix?" La Forge said, walking over to Data with two more phasers.

"Two minutes 18 seconds."

"Yeah, well, some of us are only human. Here's two more that look visually fine. I'll patch in the last one at the other diagnostic station."

"Very well," Data agreed, taking the two phasers. He placed one on his workstation and connected the other to his communication cord. La Forge was doing the same on the opposite side of the alcove.

In a few moments both panels signaled a completed diagnostic.

"Well, I've got a corrupted microcore here. That's a tougher fix, but we can repair that too," La Forge announced.

"This third phaser has a damaged connection to its power source. Another simple fix."

"Well, great. I'll get started on these repairs, and you run that last diagnostic." La Forge had already used an instrument to crack open the case of his phaser.

"Very well," Data said as he plugged the last phaser into his diagnostic cable. In a few unexciting minutes, the panel confirmed the test was complete.

"So, what seems to be the last one's problem?"

Data regarded his panel for a moment, then tilted his head slightly to the side. "Curious," he said, "Geordi, my diagnostic reports this phaser has no internal errors or failing components. The diagnostic reports operating at 100%."

La Forge put down the phaser he was repairing. "Which one is that, Data?"

Data turned the phaser over and examined its serial number. He knew their locations from the list Geordi had given him. "This phaser is the one that originally did not reply to the wireless handshake."

"But the diagnostic says the wireless is working now?" La Forge asked, getting up from his station and walking over to Data. "That *is* interesting. Can you get it to connect to the spacedock now?"

Data took the phaser out of diagnostic mode and set it to receive maintenance updates. Its display showed it was accepting its firmware upgrade.

"So, what, we chalk this one up to voodoo?" La Forge asked.

"Hand phasers are not subject to magic, but I am at a loss to explain its original failure. Perhaps there was some form of interference through which it could not reply to the wireless handshake?"

"That's my Data. Always coming up with a reasonable theory. So, let's do two things. Identify exactly what was around this phaser, and identify the signal direction from Engineering. Maybe we'll find something between here and there that blocked the signal."

"Very well. I will begin an analysis now. Would you like me to help you with fixing the other phasers?"

"Sure, pal. I'm almost done with the first one, but somehow I suspect you'll have the other two done before I am."

"That is likely," Data agreed, and La Forge's laughter lit up Engineering.

#

The turbolift never came. A couple times, he heard one rush past his location, but they did not stop for him. And once, very faintly, he thought he could hear some kind of crashing coming from behind the turbolift door.

Now, starting to become really concerned, he closed his eyes and tried to visualize the quickest way to Engineering using only access tubes. It was going to take a while.

He ran down the corridor to an access hatch and pulled it open. This allowed him to drop down one deck, but the next access hatch was on the other side of the saucer section. He ran to it and jumped down one more deck.

Now he needed to move aft so he could get access to maintenance tubes that reached down from the saucer. From that point things would move a little more quickly, but he was probably still 20 minutes away.

Then, suddenly, as he came around a corner, a turbolift door opened beside him. It was a risk, but something was wrong, his instincts were screaming at him not to, but he stepped into the lift anyway and ordered: "Engineering." Then the door closed shut.

#

"Well, that's it," La Forge said with satisfaction, as he set the last phaser to maintenance mode and watched as it was upgraded over wireless by the spacedock. He took a look at the chronometer on his station's panel. "Still 19 hours to go."

"Perhaps a game of poker to pass the time?" Data suggested.

"Sure, but not for 19 hours," La Forge replied. "I can't afford to lose to you for that long."

There was a banging at the door that led out of Engineering. La Forge and Data shared a glance.

"Is that what I think it is?" La Forge asked.

"Yes, it sounds as if someone, or something, is attempting to get into engineering." Data got up and picked up two phasers. He handed one to La Forge and then proceeded to the door.

"I will walk up and open the door, while you watch from the flank," Data said quietly.

"Okay," La Forge agreed, "but be ready to jump for cover."

"Affirmative," agreed Data, then he proceeded to walk towards the door as if he was leaving engineering. His positronic brain registered the moment when the door sensor should detect him. Then it began a chronometer count down to the estimated time for the door to start opening. This amount included a plus or minus of .35 seconds, as there were many possible variations to the mechanism's function. The chronometer ran down to zero and yet the door had not moved. Data began to analyze the possible causes of such an event, as well as to search his memory for similar events on the ship. He identified 14 such incidents recorded in the logs on board the *Enterprise* since the D version had finished construction eight years

ago. Ten of these incidents had occurred while the ship was in its shakedown period six months before being commissioned. Two of the incidents had been due to failed motors that maintenance had not managed to repair before someone walked into them. This left two incidents that…

Data bounced off the closed door and fell onto his back.

"Data!" La Forge ran over to the fallen android. On the other side of the door, the banging got louder. La Forge thought he could hear shouting as well.

"Data, are you okay?"

Data snapped up to a sitting position. "I am fine, but I must confess, the fact the door did not open got me to thinking about why, and I did not have enough time to analyze all the possibilities before walking into it. Did I look… funny?"

The banging got even louder. Now it was clear someone was yelling from the other side.

"Let's save the comedy breakdown for later. You hear someone yelling?"

"Yes, it is Commander Riker."

"Uh oh." La Forge quickly opened the access panel to the door and pulled the manual release. The doors eased open a crack, and as hands

reached in the opening to pull the doors apart, Data and La Forge each took a side to help. The doors complained but opened.

They were confronted with a very red-faced First Officer, but also a troubled one.

"Something's wrong," Riker said as he made his way into engineering.

"Yes," La Forge agreed, "looks like the sensor or motor on this door has failed. I'll put in a memo to maintenance."

"No Geordi, something is really wrong. This happened on the door to my quarters, and I'm certain I heard turbolifts colliding in the saucer section."

"Intriguing," Data said quietly.

"What is?" Riker demanded.

"Just before we opened the door for you, I was speculating on all the incidents when doors did not open correctly on the *Enterprise* since her construction. There have been 14 such incidents since the initial shakedown cruise after her construction at the Utopia Planitia Shipyards. Ten were during the shakedown, two were subsequent failed motors, one was a prank by Alexander Rozhenko when he sabotaged Lieutenant Worf's door as part of an April Fool's…"

"Data!" La Forge interrupted, "do you have anything relevant?"

"Possibly," Data said, "the final incident almost did not make it into the log, until its importance as a warning sign of major systems failures on the *Enterprise* became apparent. It occurred to the Captain, and subsequently many others, when we intercepted the *USS* Yamato log on stardate 42609.1."

"Data, are you talking about…"

"The Iconians, yes, sir," Data interrupted, "or rather, their software attempting to rewrite ours."

"But we purged their software from the *Enterprise*. You purged it from your system. You even reported Worf destroyed the tricorder on the planet," La Forge argued.

At that moment, the lights in Engineering came up, and stirring in the warp core began as it started to power up. In the corridor beyond the broken door to Engineering, the corridor lights came on.

"Yes, Geordi. I must admit I do not understand how it seems to have reappeared, or why now, six years later."

"Look," Riker cut in, "we don't really know anything yet. Geordi, can you figure out if the virus is back?"

"Actually, Commander," Data interjected, "the Iconian software was not a virus, it was only an incompatibility with our systems that…" Data's

voice trailed off. Even an android understood the daggers coming from Riker's eyes.

"Let me take a look," La Forge said quickly, then ran over to the central engineering station. "Data," he said quickly as Data came to stand beside him, "can you call up the logs from the Iconia mission. We don't have a copy of the software, but I provided as many detailed notes as I could regarding how it operated inside your positronic net, and I believe the chief engineer did the same regarding the *Enterprise*. Let's see if we can find a similar pattern."

"Yes, Geordi," and Data set to work on the station beside him.

There was a loud *whump* as the warp core came back online, filling Engineering with its familiar thrumming. A hail came over Riker's com badge: "*Enterprise*, this is spacedock. We read your warp engines back online. What's going on?"

Riker touched his badge: "Riker to spacedock, we are having a software problem. Recommend you go to Yellow Alert and engage your shields and deflectors."

The thrum of the impulse engines began to grow through the hull, rising and rising.

"What the hell, *Enterprise*! You haven't cleared your moorings! Stop what you're doing or you'll tear them apart!"

"Geordi, can you stop the engines?" Riker called out.

"We're locked out from here, sir. Maybe from the bridge."

Riker ran over to a display screen and passed the communication off to it. The command center of the spacedock appeared, with a very nervous officer looking back at him.

"*Enterprise*, you're tearing the dock apart!"

"Can you blow all the moorings!"

"Yes, but…"

"Then do it. We can't shut down the engines right now."

Suddenly the lights in the Spacedock Command Center went down, then came back up again almost immediately.

"Red Alert," the computer announced as Operations shifted to red. "Yellow Alert," the computer corrected, and the lighting came back up once more.

"*Enterprise*, we seem to be having some difficulty controlling our systems." The lights went down again. "I am unable to release the moorings." The officer turned to his left off screen and shouted, "What the hell is going on!"

In Engineering, they felt more than heard the moorings give way. The *Enterprise* lurched out of the spacedock, dragging mooring lines and parts of the dock itself. The impulse engines blasted at full power for several

seconds, then suddenly cut out. The *Enterprise*, no longer under any attitude control, began to roll on all three axes. The mooring lines attached to her swung around, straightening out like a spinning ballerina's outstretched arms.

Chapter 3

"Personal log, stardate 48053.3, Jean-Luc Picard, Captain, *USS Enterprise*, currently on detached assignment, starbase 180:

"I've had two days to explore Starbase 180 and go over the details of my assignment. The starbase is a medium-sized station orbiting Pollock 7e, an anomalous polar orbiting moon of Pollock 7, a colorful gas giant. The station's orbit provides an unobstructed direct view of Tholian space for almost every hour of Pollock 7's year. Starbase 180 was constructed after Starfleet's first contacts with the Tholian Assembly, after the Tholians rebuffed several attempts at normalizing relations.

"Because of Pollock's proximity to the edge of space claimed by the Tholian Assembly, it does not house any starship repair or refit capabilities. Obviously a starbase with such capacity so close to their territory would be seen by the Tholians as provocative. That they have never complained about or even mentioned 180 suggests they are not troubled by surveillance.

"Begemot is in a star system half the distance between 180 and Tholian space. It would indeed be a major strategic asset, and the Tholians could not object to starship construction, repair, and refit as that has been going on for decades already.

"Starbase 180 will certainly be useful for forward command and communications, medical services, supplies and provisions, and troop deployment, but is not big enough or armored enough to be involved in prolonged battle. However, I did see during my wandering around many weapons being constructed internally, phaser emitters and photon torpedo launchers, as well as shield emitters, that could be rapidly deployed to the surface of the station should they be required. This obfuscation is clearly to keep the Tholians from thinking we are aware of their warship construction, and if it proves untrue that the Tholians are arming for war against the Federation, these weapons, stored internally, will not cause the Tholian Assembly to feel the Federation is gearing up for war against them."

Picard's door chime went off.

"Come," he called, keying off his log in the panel at his station.

The door to his quarters opened and T'Rya and Troi walked in together.

"Just in time for our last briefing," Picard announced, getting up and motioning his visitors to sit on the other side of the room. He took a chair

opposite them.

"Yes sir," T'Rya agreed, setting her PADD down on the small table between them. "We need to go over Starfleet intelligence regarding the people of Begemot, and in particular C'Lei'Edtra, the Begemote ambassador to the Federation."

Troi said, "You mentioned on the shuttle that her life may be in danger."

"Well, the fact is we know very little about her or her caste. She claims to be third, but we have no way to confirm this. The third caste on Begemot live relatively luxurious lives in return for often demanding but fulfilling work -- doctors, lawyers, that sort of thing. It is not unusual for individuals from this caste to be given minor political roles like ambassadors. A ticket on the *Queen of Begemot* would be quite a difficulty for a third caste to afford. She would likely have to go into debt in order to pay for it."

"Are you saying ambassadors have to pay for their own travel, even when on government business?" asked Troi, bewildered.

"Well, as I said, our intelligence on Begemot society is limited, but it would appear that paying your way for things like that is both a reflection of their mercantile ideology, and proof positive that you are of the rank you say you are. A fourth caste, for example, would never be able to acquire

enough credit to purchase such an expensive ticket. And, should one of them fall into trouble financially, which happens more often the lower the caste, it would soon become apparent they could no longer afford their position."

"So, they'd be removed from a position in which they have demonstrated competence based solely on the fact they no longer have a sufficient accumulation of currency?" asked Picard, perplexed.

"It would appear that is the case, yes, sir."

"And this ambassador… "

"C'Lei'Edtra, Captain, yes; I imagine it is difficult for humans to pronounce."

"This ambassador, this third caste, may be in danger?"

"Starfleet intelligence has picked up a lot of chatter from lower-caste terrorist groups that include her name. We've broken their encryption but they also use a cipher. Given how little we know about their culture, it is extremely difficult to isolate. Sometimes her name has been used out in the clear. By comparing the same message translated more than once, one with her name ciphered and one without, we have made some progress in decrypting their communications, but so far very little."

"Could she be from one of these groups?" Troi asked.

"That doesn't seem possible. They are mostly made up of the lowest castes, with a few careful allies from higher up. We haven't seen any support for them from any third caste; however, that does not mean it is impossible. Again, our intelligence is poor."

"I think I'm beginning to understand the logic in assigning Captain Picard and myself to this duty," Troi admitted, "A Starfleet officer with extensive diplomatic experience and a Betazoid will likely fit right in with the Federation negotiators."

"Exactly, Commander. We are hoping the Begemotes see it as an eleventh-hour attempt by Starfleet to toughen its negotiating stance. A decorated starship captain with an extensive history of successful diplomacy favorable to the Federation, and an empath."

"Will I be required to be involved in these negotiations? I've had no briefing on them of any kind."

T'Rya smiled. "No, Captain. You can think of yourself as an attack dog meant to intimidate. You just have to sit there and look dissatisfied with whatever the Begemote negotiators say. As for you, Commander, it is possible the negotiators will ask for your insight at some point; however, your primary mission is the safety of the ambassador."

"Looking dissatisfied will be simple enough," Picard admitted, "I've never liked diplomacy or babysitting."

Troi and T'Rya both chuckled.

The quarter's intercom trilled: "Command for Captain Picard."

"Go for Picard."

"Commander Heywood requests your presence for a game of chess, sir, in his quarters. Your party is also welcome."

Picard turned to his fellow officers and raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"Is that *the* Commander Heywood?" Troi asked. Picard nodded. "Then no thank you, Captain. I think we will find something else to do."

"Very well," Picard responded, then addressed the intercom. "Tell Commander Heywood I would be delighted to beat him at chess. I should arrive at his quarters in about 15 minutes." He stood up. "Commander, Lieutenant, I will see you at the shuttlebay in just over three hours."

"Yes, sir," they replied in unison. Then Picard walked out of his quarters.

T'Rya stood up and found a glass to fill with water. As she was taking a sip, Troi came up behind her and spoke: "May I ask you a question?"

T'Rya turned and nodded, adding, "Of course, Commander."

"Captain Picard does not seem to notice—perhaps his mind is preoccupied—but on more than one occasion I have seen you smile. And just now you chuckled at the Captain's joke."

T'Rya met and kept Troi's gaze, but otherwise she did not respond.

"I have known many Vulcans during my career in Starfleet. You are the first I have ever seen smile, let alone laugh…"

Again, T'Rya merely stared back at her with a blank expression. She took another sip of water.

Troi was becoming embarrassed. "Of course, it's really none of my business. I find Vulcans extremely hard to read emotionally, and I am not judging you for having or displaying emotions. I mean, I understand it is frowned upon in general Vulcan society, but that doesn't mean…"

"Gotcha." T'Rya said, cutting Troi off.

"You… gotcha?" Troi stammered.

T'Rya smiled, then her face became emotionless. Then, suddenly, she burst out laughing, then stopped just as quickly. "I'm sorry, Commander, let's sit down and I'll explain."

They sat opposite each other on the other side of the Captain's quarters.

"Did you know I joined the Vulcan Science Academy?"

"Yes, it's in your record."

"But you know how unusual it is for a Vulcan to join the Academy and then leave it, particularly for Starfleet?"

"Yes, it's unheard of."

"I mastered everything they set me to learn. In the end, there was nothing left for me to do. I did not want to teach, which is often where Vulcans end up, nor did I want to be an ambassador for Vulcan. I detest politics. So I began to teach myself the most difficult thing I had ever encountered, mastering human emotions, word play, humor, and practical jokes.

"Now, as you might guess, doing that on Vulcan was next to impossible. Sure, there were diplomats and such, but they avoided displaying emotion as much as possible in order to be respectful of Vulcan culture.

"Then one evening, I short-sheeted the bed of the Federation ambassador to Vulcan. From outside her room I watched her attempt to get into bed for 5 minutes, her face getting redder and redder, until I began to worry for her health. Finally she yelled for her assistant, and with a voice I can only describe as self-strangulation, she blandly reported her bed was 'defective'."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," Troi blurted out, trying to hide her laughter behind her hand.

"Yes. It was quite a thing to hear someone attempt to yell logically. However, I do not feel these emotions, Commander. I can emulate a smile or a belly laugh, or come up with a prank or a joke, but only through

concentration and effort. Still, I feel my capacity to read and respond appropriately to human emotion, to understand and even create new humor, has plateaued. I have completed what I set out to accomplish."

"T'Rya, you have mastered human emotion and humor. Even your description of the ambassador's reaction was excellent comedy."

"I feel quite comfortable speaking with you, Commander. Around most humans I have to work hard to match their emotional state, yet not betray myself too much. With you, I feel like nothing is expected of me. It is relaxing."

"Well, this session is free. Next time won't be."

T'Rya paused, but only for a moment. It was barely perceptible: "Ah. An excellent joke, Commander. Very subtle. And delivered so nonchalantly I almost missed it."

"Don't worry, lots of humans miss jokes like that. Your mastery is incredible."

"And so," T'Rya said wistfully, getting up from her chair, "I am left needing another mountain to climb. Starfleet Intelligence has been… exciting… but sneaking around and lying to people is not something I want to continue doing.

"Some might call me overly ambitious. Vulcans would call me disorganized of mind and impetuous. But I've learned all their card tricks,

better than most of them. My mind is not disorganized, and I do not feel ambitious. So why do I want to climb that next mountain?”

“For the only reason that counts,” Troi replied. T’Rya turned to look at her. “Because it’s there.”

#

Captain Picard stood in one of the shuttlebays of Starbase 180. They would be leaving for the *Queen of Begemot* in less than twenty minutes, yet he hesitated to contact Commander Troi. She was one of his most competent and trusted officers. He could count on her. And yet, she was late.

As he considered what to do, the door to the shuttlebay opened, and Troi and T’Rya walked in, arm in arm, laughing loudly. Picard had noticed T’Rya’s subtle displays of emotion, but he had assumed this was a side effect of being around so many humans. Laughing was something new. He’d never seen a Vulcan laughing.

When the two got closer, he could smell alcohol. “Commander Troi,” he barked, perhaps louder than he meant to, “have you been drinking?”

“Just a bit, Captain,” Troi replied, “we’ve been testing T’Rya’s alcohol tolerance.”

“Alcohol? You mean synthehol.”

"No, sir, they have the real deal here on the starbase, if you know how to ask for it."

Captain Picard looked from Troi to T'Rya and back again. Since her walk from the shuttle bay door up to him, T'Rya's face had gone completely blank. Properly Vulcan, one might say. There were no signs of intoxication or mirth about her at all.

"I don't understand," Picard objected.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Troi replied, now also apparently completely sober and collected. We had one drink each almost an hour ago. With T'Rya's permission, I will explain."

"Of course," T'Rya agreed.

"Attention! Attention! Shuttle for the *Queen of Begemot* is now boarding in shuttlebay three. All passengers enroute to the *Queen of Begemot*, please board Supershuttle *Shadow of Begemot* in shuttlebay three."

"We have a two-hour shuttle trip ahead of us," Picard said dryly. "You can bring me up to speed once we board." He looked for a moment at T'Rya, whose Vulcan countenance had not wavered. "I imagine it is quite the tale."

Chapter 4

"Geordi, report!" Riker ordered, feeling the ship's artificial gravity and inertial dampers struggling with the out-of-control ship's wild gyrations.

"We've torn out of spacedock, sir," La Forge replied, holding on to his engineering panel and trying to call up more information.

"And spacedock, are they okay?"

"Their shields and deflectors were up when we pulled away. The dock itself is damaged, but the crew compartments appear to be unaffected."

"Get me in communication with them. Data!"

"Sir?"

"I need to know what's going on. Is it the Iconian virus? Is it something else? I think spacedock is affected as well. What's the status of the *Enterprise*?"

"I am examining the intrusion of our computers and systems, Commander. I should have an answer in approximately 90 seconds. As for

the *Enterprise*, she is in an uncontrolled spin on all three axes, with no attitude control of any kind."

"Can you use our thrusters to control the spin?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Then do it, before the inertial dampers fail and we all become yogurt."

Suddenly, the ship's klaxons blared red alert. Then yellow alert. Then back to red.

"I have spacedock, Commander," called La Forge. "They are having multiple system failures and are looking for any assistance we can give."

"Data, I need to know *now*!"

"Yes, Commander. From what I can see here, we are indeed infected with the Iconian program. It is trying to rewrite our software. It would seem a safe assumption to conclude the spacedock computers are suffering a similar situation."

"Okay, Geordi, what do we do about this, and what can they do about it? Let them know what to do, then get to solving our problems."

"Aye, sir," La Forge confirmed. "Spacedock, this is *Enterprise*. Your systems are being compromised by an alien software program. To mitigate, shut down your computers, wipe all affected memory, and then replace from your protected archive."

"Received, *Enterprise*, doing that now. We'll be in comms blackout for at least ten minutes. What is your status?"

"We're in an uncontrolled three-axis roll. Attempting to use our thrusters to compensate and halt our forward momentum."

"Data," Riker asked, exhausted from holding himself upright against the g-forces of their rolling, "those thrusters?"

"Yes, Commander, I have managed to connect to them. I am counteracting our roll now. Twenty seconds to static."

"And our velocity?"

"I will do what I can, Commander, but the *Enterprise* fired an eight-second full impulse forward thrust. Our inertia will take some time to compensate for."

"Very well," Riker said, already feeling the positive effects of Data's reduction of the wild rolling of the *Enterprise*, "do what you can. And shut off that red alert!"

"Yes sir." The red alert klaxons ceased and the lighting returned to Engineering.

Suddenly the hull of the *Enterprise* shuddered around them, and the ship's automated red alert came to life again.

"Geordi?"

"It's the pieces of the dock we tore out when we pulled out of the station, Commander. As we decrease our rolling they're coming around and hitting the ship. One heavy blow to the saucer section, and one to the starboard nacelle so far."

The artificial gravity in Engineering turned off.

"Will one of you please fix this!"

"Yes, sir," La Forge replied, "I'm shutting down the main computer."

"But Geordi," Data complained.

"What?" La Forge barked, annoyed.

"Geordi, the protected archive is open for the firmware update. We must assume it has been compromised as well."

The artificial gravity in Engineering turned back on.

"All pitch, roll, and yaw has been compensated for, Commander," Data said, "I am continuing to compensate for our forward momentum."

"Geordi, what does it mean if our protected core is compromised?" Riker demanded.

La Forge sat at his station, shoulders slumped. "It means we can turn off the main computer to stop the virus, but until someone gets here with a new Galaxy class starship computer core, the *Enterprise* is dead in space."

"Data, forward momentum?"

"Almost compensated for, Commander."

"Geordi, when Data has brought us to zero relative momentum from spacedock, I want you to shut down the computer core."

"Aye, Commander, but that will mean all ship systems will go down. Including life support."

"How long will we have?"

"We can get environmental suits and run off stored oxygen for days, but the heat of the ship is going to bleed off into space. Suit batteries will only last a few hours. We can keep replacing, so perhaps two days until we've depleted all the batteries."

"Any word from spacedock? Did they get their computers up and running?"

"They're still down. Should only be a couple more minutes."

"Forward momentum at zero relative to spacedock, Commander," said Data.

Riker looked around.

"Sir," La Forge warned, "the longer we sit here the more chance the virus will do something we can't fix."

"All right, shut down the computer. Put the *Enterprise* to sleep. Data, how did this happen?"

"There is insufficient evidence to draw a conclusion, Commander. Any possibility I may produce would be mere speculation."

"Then speculate. If we can't figure out what happened here, the *Enterprise* might be scrap."

"Processing," was Data's reply.

The throb of the warp core slowed and stopped. The sounds of air circulators ceased. Finally, all of the lights turned off, leaving them in utter blackness.

"All right," Riker announced. "We'll make our way up to the shuttlebay and take a shuttle back to spacedock. Can I assume any shuttle not in operation is safe from the virus?"

"Yes, sir," La Forge confirmed. "The *Enterprise* was in passive communication mode, only receiving. It couldn't have connected with the shuttles wirelessly."

By this time all three had turned on wrists and forehead lights. Riker walked over to the ladder leading to the upper deck of Engineering. He stopped at the station Data had been working on the phasers. "What's with all the hand phasers, Data?"

"We found four phaser units malfunctioning. I retrieved them, and Geordi and I were repairing them while we waited for the upgrade to take place."

"Could any of them be responsible somehow? They communicate with the ship wirelessly, don't they?"

"Yes they do, Commander," La Forge replied, walking up to the station, "which means if one of them had somehow been infected, the *Enterprise* would have been infected years ago."

"Damn," Riker sighed, "what the hell went on here?" He and La Forge began to move toward the ladder leading to the upper deck of Engineering.

"Commander," Data said, his head cocked slightly to one side.

"Yes?"

"What Commander La Forge said is not entirely accurate. Three of these phasers were allowing wireless access. This is how we knew they were damaged, through their self-diagnostic function; however, one phaser was not responding to wireless at all. I had to find it by using ship's records."

"And what does that mean?"

"Data's right," La Forge burst in, excited, "and we put all four through a direct connection diagnostic. We physically patched them directly into the computer. And once we did, the phaser that wouldn't receive wireless signals suddenly checked out as 100% functional."

"I still don't see how this explains how the Iconian virus got on our ship."

"Again, Commander, this is only speculation," Data explained, "but I am beginning to formulate a theory. We should take all these phasers with us for further study."

"Good idea, but let's turn off all their communications abilities first," La Forge added.

"Okay, I like that we have something," Riker said, his spirits raised, "Data, you carry the phasers and keep thinking while we make our way to shuttlebay two."

#

Travel laterally from Engineering to the neck of the ship was relatively quick. As the heat bled away from the *Enterprise*, the outer and inner hulls began to creak and groan like forlorn spirits lost in the ether. As they began to move up towards the saucer section they caught a lucky break. What was left in the ship's batteries finally failed, and the artificial gravity turned off. Trained as they all were in zero-gravity environments, their progress up the neck to the hanger bay was quick indeed.

They arrived winded but in good spirits at the outer door to the shuttlebay. La Forge opened the access panel for the door and prepared to pull the manual release. "What do we do if the outer bay door is damaged?" he asked.

"Run," Riker quipped.

"Commander," Data interjected, "even at top speed, and considering the size of the shuttle bay, it is unlikely you two will be able to escape the atmospheric decompression before being overcome."

"It's a joke, Data," explained La Forge. "If the bay door is compromised we're screwed."

"Ah."

"Ready?" La Forge asked. Riker and Data nodded. La Forge pulled the manual release. There was a clack as the door's seal let loose, but other than that, nothing.

"Okay. I know El-Baz is in there ready for flight," Riker said to the others, "so let's grab three environment suits, extra oxygen and batteries, and load up. Once we're ready, we get in our suits and figure out some way to manually open the outer door. Then it should be as simple as getting in the shuttle and making our way back to the spacedock."

The trio got to work, and in only a few minutes the shuttle was stocked and they had all donned environment suits. While Data went to re-seal the internal door using the access panel, La Forge and Riker retrieved some cables and hooked them into El-Baz's power connections. They ran these leads to the door operations panel as well as the door's motor assembly.

"Everyone ready for decompression!" La Forge called out. He gave everyone a count of five to brace themselves, then used the operations panel to order the shuttlebay's outer door to open.

For a moment it appeared it was not going to work, but with a groan the door began to move. The entire shuttlebay suddenly filled with fog as the air pressure dropped. The officers held on while the air of the bay attempted to blow them out into space, but by the time the bay door was fully open, the air had bled out and there was no more danger.

After some enthusiastic thumbs-up signaling, they detached the power leads from the El-Baz and got inside the shuttle. When the door was shut, La Forge began to bleed air into the cabin while Data moved forward and removed his environment suit.

When there was sufficient atmosphere, Riker and La Forge removed their environment suits and came forward. Riker took the con, Data ops, and La Forge sat at the engineering console.

"Data, I want you to do a few passes over the *Enterprise* so I can get a look at the damage. Record everything you can. We'll want as much information as we can get to prep for refit and repairs."

"Aye, sir. Geordi, would you please engage all sensors and train them on the *Enterprise*. I will make a coil loop around the ship with thrusters."

"Got it," La Forge replied, "making the necessary preparations.

Data maneuvered El-Baz around the *Enterprise* in the shape of a spring. Using the thrusters, he kept the shuttle's bow and sensor equipment facing the derelict ship. One of the mooring lines that had sheared off part of the spacedock was impaled in the starboard nacelle. Looking far worse was a larger piece of the dock attached to a second mooring line that had swung around and pierced the saucer section, driving itself in through six decks, venting their atmosphere to space.

"That is about all I'm going to get, Commander," said La Forge, "we've mapped every bump and scrape."

"Very good. Commander Data, get us to the spacedock."

"Affirmative, sir."

"I feel like I'm leaving my girlfriend," La Forge said wistfully.

"Her and everything else, Geordi," Riker agreed, "her and everything else."

Chapter 5

With Captain Picard brought up to speed on T'Rya's remarkable story, the trio found themselves standing at the edges of the main section of the large supershuttle taking them to the *Queen of Begemot*. The Federation party consisted of 18 delegates, who were now talking and drinking as if they did not have a concern in the world. Captain Picard both admired and detested them.

"May I have your attention," came a voice over the shuttle's intercom. "I would like to thank you for travelling with us on the *Shadow of Begemot*. As your captain, it has been my honor to bring you to the *Queen of Begemot*, and if you will indulge my hubris, I invite you to look out any port window of the shuttle."

The excited crowd did as they were told.

"We are coming up behind the Begemot's aft section," the captain continued. "I understand some of you are familiar with large starships, but I would like to say you've not seen anything this grand. Note the *Queen's*

nacelles located vertically on the top and bottom. This design was a requirement to engineer the six interlocking saucer sections you can see as we make our way over the top of the ship."

Through the port windows, the passengers of the shuttle could see the six saucers, two rows of three, their edges interlocking along the center of the ship. The saucers were angled down slightly from the top of the ship, resulting in a slight upside-down V formation.

"Each saucer section can house ten thousand guests. The *Queen* is just over 3500 meters in length, making her the largest luxury ship ever built, if not the largest ship in the galaxy."

The Federation delegates oohed and aahed at the sheer size of it. Picard had to admit, as he looked out the window, the *Queen of Begemot* was an absolutely massive ship. More than three times the length of the *Enterprise*, and not one meter of it dedicated to shields or weapons.

In addition to the massive top and bottom warp nacelles, Picard could see impulse and standard thrusters located on each of the six saucer sections. They looked like they were mounted on pylons that could be rotated. Even as the seasoned captain of a galaxy class starship, he did not envy the captain of this monster when it was time to dock at any port.

"No phasers nor disruptors, no photon torpedoes nor phase cannons, and without any form of shielding or deflector save for navigation, The

Queen of Begemot relies upon a special form of radioactive hull that, when energized, simply repulses any kinetic, electromagnetic, or antimatter attack before it may strike."

Now Picard stopped listening. He had heard of phased radioactive elements in technical briefings from Starfleet weapons research. Although initially promising, and incredibly inexpensive to construct, it was unable to withstand the weapons currently deployed on today's modern starships, Federation or otherwise. But he supposed it would sound impressive to people who did not know better.

"And now we will be docking in the aft hanger bay. The rear saucers are the most luxurious, and currently only the aft starboard saucer is completely finished. The *Queen* is so large we are able to accommodate ten thousand happy visitors in the finest luxury, while only a sixth of the ship is fully furnished."

The shuttle came around the aft of the *Queen* and entered a massive shuttlebay. Several tractor beams ensured the large shuttle came down to the hull without even a bump.

"No discomfort of any kind for their wealthy guests," Picard mused to himself.

The shuttle doors opened and the Federation representatives began to disembark. Immediately a warning klaxon began to sound, and polite but

armed stewards began to herd the representatives toward dressing chambers. Eventually one steward made her way to the trio.

"Apologies for the alarm. As you know, the people of Begemot reject all transporter and replicator technology. It is a cultural difference we hope you can accept in time. This warning will go off in the presence of any replicated material. They are present in the hangar bays and other random sections of the ship. Please make your way into one of our luxurious cabins here and pick from the array of clothing we've set out for you. There are lockers where you may store your possessions, which you can retrieve when you disembark." She motioned towards a closed cabin door. "And do not worry, while you are our guests you will want for nothing. The *Queen of Begemot* is dedicated to making every guest feel like an Emperor!"

Inside the cabin was a vast closet of clothing and wraps, gloves and footwear. Such an assortment it would seem capable of matching anyone's tastes.

"Since we are supposedly part of the Federation party, I believe we should choose plain colors, the same for the three of us, with something garish so we can pick each other out from a distance," Picard said, picking up a plain light-grey one-piece wrap.

Troi clucked her tongue, clearly disappointed by all that lost possibility, and began to look for something of the same color. T'Rya had

already found a similar wrap to Picard's, and picked up a bright purple sash.

"How about this Captain, tied around the left arm?" She demonstrated. The color clash was immediate and appalling.

"Perfect!" Picard announced.

Troi rolled her eyes.

They placed their clothing and Starfleet badges into lockers, digitally locked them via retinal scan, then proceeded out the door labeled "Exit", into another large room where the delegates were assembling into lines.

"Welcome ladies and gentlemen and all others! We will now fit you with your arm bands. Each one of these exclusive bands cost one bar of gold-pressed latinum, provided to you for free as a courtesy from the Government of Begemot."

At the end of the line there was a device set at elbow height. Each person set their wrist in a concave shape, and a second concave arm was levered down on the wrist. With a light *thunk* sound a bracelet, possibly five centimeters wide and paper thin, was attached to their wrist. The bracelet was snug but not uncomfortable.

"Feel free to wash, shower, eat and anything else with your bracelet on. It is nearly indestructible, and will be removed when you disembark. The bracelet is your means of access to your rooms, to meals, and to entertainment. Since there is only a small group of you, you have been

given Latinum access, meaning every joy and pleasure of the Begemot is yours to experience!"

If they looked closely, they could indeed see a tiny tube of liquid silver at the center of the bracelet.

"Ship's time has been adjusted to Earth standard for your convenience. If any of you require your quarters to be different, please speak to one of the many stewards. The section of the rear starboard saucer you will be staying in is the most luxurious, deck one, section alpha. You may consult any wall panel for directions at any time. The first talks will take place in deck one's conference facilities, and will begin at 8 a.m. Earth Standard. Until then, enjoy your *Queen*!"

The *Queen of Begemot* had a turbolift system similar to the *Enterprise*, so there was no reason to ask the wall consoles for directions until they found the alpha section of deck one.

Once off the turbolift, they and many other guests made their way to a wall console.

"Directions to my quarters, please," Troi asked the console. Nothing happened.

"Deanna," Picard called. She looked at him. He raised his bracelet arm up. Troi nodded and did the same. Once her bracelet was within 30 cm of the panel it lit up. "Directions to my quarters, please," she repeated.

"Yes, Commander Troi," a deep yet feminine voice replied, "you are in berth 11135A. Please follow this color to your suite." Troi's bracelet suddenly glowed a pale blue, and a pale blue line appeared in the wall of the hallway. As she walked down the hall, the line followed her, jutting out perhaps two meters forward of her. The others followed, interested to see the process.

The saucer section was constructed like the saucer section of many starships. There were quarters to the left, which would have windows facing into space, and quarters to the right, which would not have such windows, but as they were in the top deck, they might have skylights. The interior of the ring was no doubt dedicated to dining, entertainment, offices, and conference rooms.

When they reached Troi's suite, the pale light began to trace the door's perimeter.

"Welcome," the door said, and slid open as she presented her bracelet.

Inside was enormous. Easily five times the size of the most luxurious suite on the *Enterprise*. The entire outer wall consisted of a sloping window to space, with panels of shutters that could open and close independently. To the right was a door that opened up to an enormous bedroom and en suite. To the left, a small kitchen and dining area.

"The size of this ship is truly breathtaking," Troi said, sitting down on one of the large couches.

"Indeed," said Picard, "certainly the largest ship in the quadrant."

"So, we are free until 0800 tomorrow, for the first round of the negotiations. I understand the Begemot delegation is quartered in section beta on deck one, which is adjacent to ours. I think it may appear inappropriate to introduce ourselves to the Begemot ambassador before the first meeting tomorrow morning. Unless you have any objection, Captain, I recommend we all find our quarters and relax for the evening."

"No food synthesizers," Troi commented.

"True, but you do have a communication panel in your suite, and with your bracelet level you can either order what you like, or we can go down to the dining hall when dinner is announced."

"We'll stick to room service for this evening," Picard ordered. "We don't want to end up in a conversation with a Begemot delegate that we can't talk our way out of. And I agree with your assessment, Lieutenant— let's not bother the ambassador until tomorrow. We're sure to be formally introduced and will have an opportunity to speak with her then.

"Which brings me to my second point," Picard continued. "We are tasked with protecting this ambassador from assassination, but we have no way to communicate amongst ourselves or protect her. Forty guests, who

knows how many crew. I don't imagine a stowaway is likely, but with the size of this ship you could hide a small army until it was needed."

T'Rya smiled, still a bizarre sight to see on a Vulcan face, and reached into her robes. She pulled out three necklaces and three mini hand phasers.

"How did you get those through the sensors?" Troi asked, bemused.

"Captain, Commander," T'Rya said as she handed one of each to the others, "you are in possession of the only three communicators and phasers entirely made by hand. Not one replicated component, and they have never been transported. From the Federation Advanced Weaponry Lab on Earth, to you." She paused and let the others put on their necklaces and slip their phasers into pockets in their robes. "These necklaces are made with gold, platinum, and latinum decoration, an ostentatious display of wealth we assume the Begemotes will appreciate and accept. Many of the Federation delegates are adorned with similar items, although they are not communicators. To use, simply tap and speak, just like Starfleet devices. But we should only use them in an emergency. The ship's crew will likely pick up the communication and come looking. Same for the phasers. We can't be sure the energy discharge will not be detected."

"Excellent work, Lieutenant!" said Picard. "And now, I believe we should find our suites for the evening. We can reconvene here at the

commander's suite at 0700 tomorrow, in anticipation of the conference."

"Yes, sir," Troi and T'Rya agreed in unison, and Picard and T'Rya headed out the door to find their suites.

Troi sat for a while on the couch, eyes closed, just absorbing everything that had gone on since their arrival at Starbase 180. She reached out and could sense the other Federation delegates, then reached farther out to see if she could sense the minds of the Begemot. And they were there, but very different. She would have to see if she could read more tomorrow when closer.

Suddenly there was a knock at her door. Surprised, she made her way over to it, her hand slipping into her robe and clasping the phaser inside.

"Yes?" she called out.

"It's Picard, may I come in?"

"Of course," she replied, and waved her bracelet to open the door.

"I'm sorry to barge in on you, Commander," Picard said as he came in and took the seat Troi offered to him.

"Not at all, Captain, what's wrong?"

"It's T'Rya. Something doesn't feel right. Have you been able to sense anything?"

"T'Rya is a Vulcan, Captain. Their minds are all but closed to me," Troi said, sitting down opposite him.

Picard nodded. "I understand. Then what do you make of her desire to master human emotions?"

"Not master exactly, more like… imitate and comprehend. When she is laughing or making a joke, I sense no emotion, only concentration. It is hard work for her to understand or imitate human emotions."

"However you care to describe it," Picard continued, "don't you find it odd? Have you ever known a Vulcan to do such a thing?"

"No, I've never heard or encountered anything like this. There have been heretical Vulcans who have embraced emotion, but that is clearly not what is going on with her."

"Give me your gut instinct commander. Do you trust her?"

"It is hard not to. An unblemished, almost perfect record with the Vulcan Science Directorate, graduated head of her class from Starfleet in three years instead of four, and now a lieutenant in Intelligence Special Operations. Given the importance and sensitivity of the positions she has held over the years, there doesn't appear to be anything more important about this particular mission." Troi looked thoughtful for a minute. "Unless you are suggesting she is somehow working for the Tholians. But if that were so, merely passing on her knowledge would be far more damaging than disrupting the talks with Begemot. As we've been told, Begemot is all but guaranteed a place in the Federation."

"No, I'm not suggesting anything like that. To be honest I quite admire her, and I don't fear she isn't committed to her mission. There is just something about her that I cannot sort out. I sometimes feel she isn't looking at me, but rather into the distance, towards some unknown mountain."

Picard did not notice Troi's look of surprise, and she did not speak as she covered it up. As a Betazoid, people often felt safe discussing things with her they would not with others, and she considered this a part of her professional duties as a counsellor. T'Rya's personal ambitions to find something other than her current career was no one's business, so long as they did not present a threat to the current mission. Troi was convinced they did not.

"I'm sorry, Commander," Picard said, getting up, "I'm not really sure what I'm trying to say, but I'm thankful for an ear to bend."

"Not at all, Captain," Troi agreed, walking Picard to the door. "Like I said, I have no concerns for this mission, but I will endeavor to mark her behavior and anything else I can read from now on." She swiped the door open.

"Thank you, Deanna," Picard said, then he left the room.

Troi sighed and then seated herself on the couch. Once again she closed her eyes, reaching out into the ship, looking for any advantage for

them to ensure a successful mission.

Chapter 6

Despite the recent damage and assault on its main computer, the spacedock was in extraordinarily good shape. As Riker walked across the shuttlebay on his way to Operations, he noted even minor damage being repaired, while on their approach with the shuttle a veritable ant's nest of engineers were repairing the spacedock's arms.

The corridors of the station were no different, lots of repairs ongoing. He was approached several times by crewmembers of the *Enterprise*, but didn't have time to talk. He gave them all the same quick soundbite: *Enterprise* crew briefing in main auditorium at 1400 hours.

At Operations he found the same energetic busyness. The station's commander was involved in a heated debate with an engineer.

"I don't care about Starfleet specifications at this point, Ensign," she barked, "what I care about at this moment is there is a crippled Galaxy class starship that requires our expertise. Now patch it up the way I told you and put it on the maintenance roster to be rebuilt when we get the time!"

"Commander?" Riker called from behind her. She spun quickly to face him, but softened when she recognized a member of the *Enterprise*. "Commander Riker, I'm Commander Strand, welcome aboard."

"I'm sure you and your senior staff have many questions, Commander," Riker said quickly, "but I'm afraid the crisis isn't over yet."

"The *Enterprise*?"

"The *Enterprise* is… fine for now. But the threat that caused all this damage is not. My chief engineer needs access to one of your labs, the more advanced the better, and one where you can shield all incoming or outgoing signals."

"Consider it done. I'll contact you when it's ready. When can I expect that briefing?"

Riker checked the current station time. "I'll be back here at 1300 to answer all your questions, hopefully with an explanation of what went on here."

"Very good, Commander."

Riker turned to leave Operations, tapping his com badge. "Riker to La Forge."

"La Forge here, sir."

"I'm on my way to engineering. Commander Strand has promised us a Faraday Lab so we can try and sort out what happened."

"We're on our way commander."

<center>#</center>

La Forge and Data, along with a few other engineers from the *Enterprise*, were busy working over the four hand phasers recovered from the *Enterprise*.

"I don't understand it," La Forge said, frustrated, "all four check out fine. And how could a hand phaser carry the Iconian software for five years without us knowing?" He turned the suspect phaser over and over in his hand. He looked up at Data, who had his head cocked to one side as he sometimes did when thinking.

"Data, you have an idea, don't you?"

"Anything I have would be mere speculation."

"Let's have it," La Forge barked, "we have to figure this out, and soon."

"You must understand I have no recollection of these events, as I had to purge them from my memory. But I did read Captain Picard's and Commander Worf's detailed log entries. At one point, Captain Picard ordered Commander Worf to destroy my tricorder, which I had used to collect data on the Iconian control console."

"I remember, that sounds right," La Forge agreed.

"Every hand phaser is set to record a log entry each time it is used. Settings, user, length of fire, and other details. And once a phaser has been used, it maintains itself in log report mode until such time as it can add its information to the ship's log..."

"And it reports its status by sending out a Wi-Fi handshake!" La Forge finished Data's thought.

"Precisely."

"And the Iconian software decrypted and replied to the handshake, and then loaded itself into the phaser."

"Yes, Commander, that would be my supposition."

"But that doesn't work, Data. If the program was on the phaser, it would have simply jumped to the *Enterprise* computers. We would have detected, shut down, and reloaded from our protected archive again."

"But if you recall, Geordi, this phaser was not answering to wireless handshakes. I had to physically find it using the ship's database."

"All right, so its wireless was down. But why? It was working for the program to jump into it?"

"Unless the phaser's memory was insufficient to store the program. It could have bled into other parts of its memory."

"Like the wireless software and other minor autonomous systems!" La Forge said quickly, excited. "That would explain why it wouldn't

respond to wireless calls."

"And when I plugged it directly into the ship's computer, it evacuated the phaser completely, leaving it perfectly operational."

"Data, plug the phaser's serial number into the computer and check against the *Enterprise's* archive stored here on the station. It should be able to give us a record of the last time it was checked out."

"Affirmative." Data quickly typed in the phaser's serial number and queried it against the *Enterprise's* archive. In a few seconds a response came back: "I am seeing this phaser checked out to Lieutenant Worf on stardate 42609.1, the day we encountered the Iconian outpost."

"Bingo!" La Forge yelled. "That's got to be it!"

"I must reiterate that what we have so far surmised is only that, a supposition. We have no hard evidence proving our speculation."

"It's a start," La Forge replied, then touched his com badge. "Commander Riker, this is La Forge."

"Go for Riker."

"We have a preliminary explanation, Commander."

"Good work, Geordi. I'll be right there. The spacedock staff and the crew of the *Enterprise* are all waiting to find out what happened."

"Understood, sir, we'll fill you in when you get here."

"Riker out."

La Forge then went for a short walk around their lab, deep in thought. "Data," he said.

"Yes, Geordi?"

"How could we prove our hypothesis? We can't present the Iconian program, and we can't use the *Enterprise* memory on the ship because it's been compromised."

Data looked thoughtful for a moment, then answered, "I believe there is one way. Use a phaser in the presence of the program when it has wireless access, but nowhere else to go. Then, hard patch it into a larger computer core to which it could migrate."

"Trapping a copy of it. Data, that is genius. Except, the only place to do this would be on the *Enterprise*, and that means turning on the main computer."

"The protected archive is also compromised. The ship's computer is tied into every system, and nearly impossible to isolate, but the protected archive has only the main bus to the central computer. If we isolate that, then activate wireless connectivity, and power only the archive…"

"That could work," La Forge agreed, "but it would also mean physically destroying the archive. Right now we could wipe it and replace it with the backup the spacedock created, but *that* would mean we'd have to wait for a physical Galaxy class archive to be shipped out to us."

"I am confident I could isolate the archive without doing irreparable physical damage; however, we must also consider the ethical implications."

"The Iconian culture has been gone for millennia. This bit of software is abandonware. There's nothing left for it to run on."

"This is true, but is also a potent weapon. By merely presenting it over any ship-to-ship communication, we could potentially destroy any vessel in the galaxy. No one will ever be able to develop an effective defense, because the affected ship will inevitably destroy itself, leaving no trace but a series of cascading system errors. The likelihood of a repeat of our experience with the Iconians is vanishingly small."

La Forge sighed. "But we're the good guys, right, Data?" His voice was thick with doubt.

"Good and evil are moral concepts I have a difficult time understanding, but as a matter of history, power is a temptation many beings are nearly incapable of refusing, including humans. And as a matter of cosmic history, it has always been easier to destroy than to create. This software will destroy not only starships, but space stations, colonies, in fact anything with open communications and computers of sufficient technology. With such a weapon, Starfleet's posture could become very different than it is currently. As you know, it is the victors who write the history."

"Oh, Data," La Forge lamented, "how is it an android has to be the one to point out the moral ambiguity?"

Data did not reply, only cocked his head to one side.

#

"If I understand, Commander," Strand said slowly, "this virus hid on board the *Enterprise* for five years before being accidentally unleashed?"

"Exactly," Riker confirmed. "It's capture in our phaser and subsequent release were both one-time events that will never be repeated. If we purge the *Enterprise* memory and computer and start from scratch, that should be the end of the story."

"I like the cut of your jib, Riker. We have the *Enterprise* computer core backup here. As far as I can see, and let an engineer correct me if I'm wrong, if we tow the *Enterprise* back to the dock, purge her computer and archive cores, and upload our copy, she should be good to go."

"Yes, Commander," Riker agreed. "As long as we take less than seven days, at which point the warp core's independent power fails and the magnetic seals collapse."

"We're almost operational now. Give me 24 hours to get the station to minimum operations, eight hours more to tow the *Enterprise* back to the dock, and another four to get to your engineering section."

"Thank you, Commander. On behalf of my crew, and the *Enterprise*."

"That's what we do, Commander, keep you heroes up and running so you can save the galaxy!"

Riker smiled, shook the commander's hand, and left her office. He had a crew briefing in fifteen minutes, then would be on his way to Engineering to see what La Forge and Data had come up with.

<center>#</center>

When Riker entered the lab where La Forge and Data had been working, he could almost feel a weight settle on him. Data sat quietly at a station, not doing anything. That alone was enough to get Riker concerned, but even worse, La Forge was off in a corner, staring out a porthole at the stars beyond.

"Oh boy," Riker said as the lab door shut behind him.

"Commander." Data acknowledged him, but did not say anything else.

La Forge continued staring out the portal. "I didn't join Starfleet for this, Commander," he said finally.

Riker looked from La Forge to Data, and back to La Forge. "All right, gentlemen, self-indulgence is now over. I want to know what is going on here, and I want to know now."

Data opened his mouth to speak.

"Data, don't," La Forge pleaded.

Data closed his mouth.

Riker shot La Forge a look of daggers. "Data, as your commanding officer I order you to tell me what is going on."

Data looked pained, if it was possible for a machine without emotions to look pained, and he gave La Forge a furtive look before speaking: "During our speculation regarding where the Iconian software came from, we have discovered a possible way to capture the program again, without endangering the *Enterprise* or the spacedock."

"Well that's excellent news, Data, an opportunity to study it. Why does this have the two of you so down?"

"Our plan to capture the Iconian program presents certain ethical difficulties we are concerned cannot be overcome, even given Starfleet's mission statement."

"I don't follow."

"Oh, come on, Data, tell him the truth!" La Forge suddenly blurted out.

Data continued: "Capturing the Iconian program will provide Starfleet with an unstoppable weapon, Commander. As soon as a ship or space station or colony opens communications with us, we can simply send this program over their comms frequency and into their computer. From that moment, they are doomed. It is only a matter of time. We would be

presenting the Federation with a weapon not even the Borg could defend against."

Riker sat down hard on the chair next to him. "Oh, no," he said, mostly to himself.

"So you know we can't do that, right, Commander?"

Riker looked at La Forge. "If it was only that simple," he said, "if it was only so simple."

"We can't unleash a weapon like that."

"Geordi," Riker said quietly, "even if I agree with you, what makes you think Starfleet hasn't already considered this possibility?"

"At this point, it is all speculation," Data added. "We have no proof that any of our assumptions are correct."

"So what likelihood would you give our assumptions, Data?" Riker asked. "Give me a percentage."

"I would estimate the likelihood of our being correct at… 93%," Data replied.

Riker rubbed his forehead with his hand. "Picard," he said under his breath, "where are you when I need you?"

"What are we going to do?" La Forge asked. "If we've figured this out, Starfleet intelligence will too. Everything that has happened here has

already been transmitted to Starfleet Command. We have to figure out a way to stop them."

"Time is on our side," Data interrupted. "While Starfleet intelligence would likely want to be the ones to capture the Iconian program, given the volatility in nearby sectors, it is not strategically viable to leave a Galaxy class starship out of operation in this sector for the time required to get operatives here to do the work. The task will likely fall to us, given our technical knowledge of the *Enterprise*."

"And we just screw it up?" Riker asked. "Can it be that simple?"

"No, Commander," Data replied, and he tapped his head. "My memory has already compromised any attempt to do so. If ordered by a superior officer, I will have to tell the truth. I expect Starfleet Intelligence will find it hard to believe we made such an error."

"So now what?" said Riker, exasperated, "Do we just throw away our careers? I'll do it if I have to, but can't we think of some other way?"

La Forge got up from his chair and began to wander around the lab. "I think I have a plan, Commander, but Data needs to leave the room."

Chapter 7

At 0700, Picard and T'Rya met in front of Troi's suite. They nodded to each other, and Picard pressed the call button. The door opened and Troi came out. Together, they made their way to conference room alpha on deck one.

When they arrived they saw the 18 Federation negotiators sitting opposite the 23 or so Begemote negotiators. The conference room was both enormous and beautiful. The attendees sat opposite each other at a massive table that looked like it was made of black marble. To one side was a stage with a microphone, which allowed total acoustical coverage of the space, thanks to the carefully constructed walls and roof. A Begemote speaker on the stage was talking about the structure of the talks, timelines and breaks, open questions, and so on.

"That is the Begemote Ambassador," T'Rya said quietly as they sat in their seats, "and I see you have perfected your 'don't want to be here' scowl, sir."

Troi couldn't help but laugh behind her hand. She'd never met someone so willing to irritate superior officers. And try as she might, she could detect no humor in T'Rya at all, just that sense of concentration as she attempted to mimic emotions.

Even Picard seemed impressed. "T'Rya," he replied quietly, "you really are a singular Vulcan; however, it will be difficult even for me to maintain this scowl with you cracking jokes."

The trio then focused their attention on the Begemote Ambassador, who seemed both poised and approachable. She heaped praise both on the Federation and Begemote delegations for their willingness to compromise, while still standing for their ideals. It was a lukewarm, say-nothing speech appropriate to the opening of any negotiation.

The Begemote were humanoid, with only three digits on each hand, a thumb and two fingers, all of which could "bend" in any direction. The "whites" of their eyes were red, with a simple pupil and an iris devoid of color. The effect was of a burgundy sphere with a black point in the center, which would react to changes in light. They had no discernible noses. Instead, openings in their upper cheeks allowed them to breathe. Their ears were very tiny, and only the females appeared to grow hair—long, straight, almost spongy hair, as red as their eyes. Their skin was very dark, almost blackened, as if it had been burned, but it was not hard or fragile, flexing

and stretching quite gracefully as they spoke and moved about. Their mouths were lipless and toothless, appearing to be simple holes with no structures within, not even tongues. They spoke by opening their mouths and somehow projecting words without the benefit of lips or a tongue. Even so, the ambassador spoke very good Standard, making the need for a universal translator unnecessary.

Once C'Lei'Edtra had finished her opening speech, a Federation delegate took the stage. "To all present, thank you, and welcome to the final round of talks between the representatives of Begemot and the United Federation of Planets, concerning the Begemot appeal to join the Federation.

"For this morning's conference, we will be discussing and sorting out some already-agreed-upon details, to make sure the language is clear and equally understood by both parties. That being the case, all senior members of the negotiating teams may take the morning off. We will reconvene in full after lunch. Let's say, 2 p.m."

About half of the Begemote and Federation delegates began to get up out of their seats. Troi and T'Rya did as well, but Picard sat a moment longer, arms crossed, scowling at the remaining Begemote delegation. They clearly understood who he was, and his look was making them agitated.

"Captain?" Trio asked, preparing to sit down again.

"That should be sufficient," Picard said quietly, getting up and casting one last look back at the Begemotes remaining at the table. "They appear to think I'm some sort of bogeyman, so I just wanted them to be aware of who's holding the handle when we hammer out the details."

As they walked out of the conference room Picard asked, "Commander, can you get any sense of their minds?"

"They definitely have a rich emotional life, Captain," Troi described, "but very, very different from yours or mine. For now I'm just guessing, but as we interact more I should be able to get a sense of what their emotions mean."

"I have requested a meeting with the Begemote Ambassador to the Federation, Captain," T'Rya explained, "and she agreed to meet us during the morning break."

"On to business, then," Picard agreed, holding his bracelet up to a pad in the hall. "Directions to..."

"Actually," T'Rya interrupted, "she said she would be in the alpha section lounge, and to please meet her there."

"Very well then," Picard agreed. "Please direct me to the alpha section lounge."

"Yes, Captain Picard," the panel said, then obliged with a brown line, and with ten minutes of walking they found themselves at the nearly empty

section alpha lounge. A few Federation delegates were seated along the walls, enjoying a drink or an appetizer. Off in one alcove, by herself, they saw the Begemote Ambassador, and made their way over to her.

"Ambassador C'Lei'Edtra," Lieutenant T'Rya introduced as they approached her, bowing slightly.

The ambassador stood and addressed them: "I understand my name is a bit difficult for Terran vocal cords. Therefore, please call me Lee, which is I understand a human name, as well as simple to pronounce."

"You grace us, Ambassador," Picard said slowly, "and may I add, your grasp of Standard is most impressive."

"I was warned about you in particular, Captain Picard," the ambassador replied, as she motioned for the trio to sit opposite her, "that your sweet tongue was your most formidable weapon. Not having a tongue myself I can only speculate, but your words do seem to drip with nectar!"

"We are only here at your service, Ambassador," Troi rejoined.

"At my service?" Lee questioned. "A seasoned starship captain who is also an experienced diplomat, with multiple negotiated victories for the Federation? A Federation officer-cum-Betazoid with the power to read my mind? And a dark lieutenant from the nefarious Starfleet Intelligence Special Operations? You must forgive me if I find it difficult to believe you are here at *my* service."

Three Starfleet officers stared back at the her in shock.

The Begemote ambassador made a huffing sound, which sounded a bit like a human hyperventilating, but which was the Begemot equivalent of laughter. "You are a curious group, sitting with your mouths hanging open. Do all Starfleet officers do the same?"

"No, Ambassador," Picard finally replied, "but we must admit you have caught us quite flat-footed."

The ambassador raised the flesh above her eyes.

"Sorry, you have caught us by surprise," Picard corrected. "May I ask how you came to your conclusions?"

"Begemote Intelligence is much more capable than the Federation assumes, Captain," the ambassador replied. "In fact, we know we have been given entrance into the Federation, no matter how these talks turn out."

"Impossible," T'Rya asserted. "That is a closely-guarded secret."

"Why are you here, Captain?" the ambassador asked.

Just then, a server came to their table, a young Begemote female offering electronic menus. Lee waved the offer away, but the other three accepted.

"When you are ready to order, simply tap the items you prefer on the menu, and they will be delivered," said the server, then left to wait on a new table that had just filled.

"Well, clearly our cover is blown," T'Rya admitted while eying the menu. "We are here because Starfleet Intelligence has picked up chatter from your planet that may be a threat to your safety."

The ambassador made that same huffing sound, but she turned to Picard. "Captain, as a gracious Starfleet officer, would you be so kind but to order me something? I regret waving away a menu."

"I can recall the server," Picard said, getting up.

"Not at all, Captain. Please just order me a water and a Flu'Ctari'Dee stew. As we are all Latinum members," she held up her wristband, "they will deny us nothing."

"Then it would be my honor," Picard announced, and ordered the items requested, along with a light salad and ginger ale for himself.

"Now, while we wait for our food," the ambassador said, "perhaps you would like to explain why you feel I am in danger."

"We have decrypted your planetary communications, Ambassador," T'Rya said quietly, "and many, many lower caste messages, frankly revolutionary messages, are mentioning your name. Why else would you be of interest, if not as a target?"

"How could it possibly matter?" the ambassador asked. The server arrived with their selections. She spent some time eating her stew, and then drank half her glass of water, "Kill me, don't kill me, the Federation accepts

Begemot into the United Federation of Planets, and we become somehow useful. How does any of that change if I am dead? Or alive?"

"An astute position, Ambassador," Picard agreed, glancing at T'Rya. "It would almost appear Starfleet is making a fool of itself wasting resources on protecting an ambassador that is not in any danger."

"Captain," T'Rya began.

"Not now, *Lieutenant*," Picard said calmly, but clearly making it an order. He turned to the ambassador. "I sincerely apologize for taking up your time, Ambassador. Please enjoy the rest of the conference."

"Thank you, Captain," she said, standing to pay respect to the rising Starfleet members, "I hope you will be here for my closing speech in three days."

Picard ordered silence until they had reached his suite. It was as large and luxurious as Troi's, but even once they were safely inside, it did not feel comfortable to anyone.

"What is going on, Lieutenant?" Picard demanded, taking a chair and motioning the others to sit on the sofa opposite him.

"I don't understand, sir" T'Rya replied.

"Were you or were you not in the same lounge with me, sitting at the same table with me, listening to the same ambassador as me?" Picard barked.

"We were there, Captain," Troi interjected.

"And do you find any flaws in the ambassador's logic, Counselor? Dead or alive, what does the Federation care? The Begemotes will be accepted into the Federation, plus or minus one ambassador. And here we are, with secret weapons and communicators from Starfleet Intelligence, all to protect someone whose life or death means nothing to the Federation."

Troi had no answer.

"Captain," T'Rya offered.

"Enough!" Picard ordered. "You have one chance to come clean with me, Lieutenant. If you do not, I will contact Starfleet Command myself. What the devil is going on?"

T'Rya signed, then finally spoke. "The chatter we picked up from the lower castes is real, Captain, and it does deal with the ambassador. But this chatter is from a resistance movement that sees the Federation's involvement with Begemote as the perfect opportunity to let the outside world hear of their plight. Assassination as part of a larger plan? Some kind of recruitment? Some kind of protest during her speech? All we know is they are planning something that involves the ambassador, and it is up to us to prevent it from happening. I'm sorry I don't have a nice, neat package for you to unwrap. We had minimal time for planning on this operation, and minimal intelligence."

"Perhaps if we go over everything we know and suspect, Captain," Troi added. "We have a crucial Federation application in its final stage. We have the possibility of Tholian aggression in less than a year…"

"Six months," T'Rya corrected.

"Six months, then. Aggression that could be stalled or even prevented with the entrance of Begemot into the Federation. We have captured intelligence that involves the Begemote ambassador to the Federation as a possible assassination target, a protest target, or for all we know, a tool recruited to sabotage the talks. All of which, or any of which, has to happen in the next three and a half days, before the Federation delegation leaves the *Queen of Begemot*. So how do we make the best use of what we do know?" Troi finished.

"One of us needs to follow the Begemote ambassador," T'Rya said quickly. "Either to stop her or stop her attackers." She turned to Picard. "I think you should take up this task, Captain. She clearly took a liking to you in the lounge, and you did technically buy her lunch."

Picard nodded but said nothing.

"For my part, I will mingle with the Federation and Begemote delegates. I know the most about the current state of negotiations so I should be able to fit in. That leaves you, Commander. Have you acquired an understanding of the Begemote mind yet?"

"They are difficult to read, but I am getting better at sorting out basic emotions."

"Very well. That will have to do. Why don't you mingle with the ship's service crew? If there is some kind of plot, it seems likely it would involve some of them, as they will all be from lower castes."

"I still feel as if something is wrong, as if we're *missing* something," Picard complained, "but you've outlined the best approach as far as I can tell, Lieutenant. I have been invited to the bridge by the *Queen's* captain, so I will be missing the afternoon talks anyway. Perhaps I can invite the ambassador along."

"That sounds perfect. While this is a civilian ship, there are no civilian flight crews on Begemot. All space crews are part of the military or the military auxiliary. The ambassador should be quite safe with you and a crew from the Begemot space corps."

T'Rya walked to the door to leave, then turned back. "I understand how difficult this is," she said consolingly, "having to make the most of the least. I often forget others do not have the same training or experience I have had. Figuring out the scope of a mission while engaged in it is something SO operatives simply learn to do."

"Don't count us out quite yet," Picard quipped. "You may find we plain old Starfleet officers carry around our own small bags of surprises."

Chapter 8

With Data sent on an errand, Riker and La Forge sat down in a corner of the lab and talked quietly.

"So what's this plan of yours?" Riker asked.

"Well, we need to destroy the Iconian program, but make it seem like an accident."

"Agreed."

"So, we do as we planned, isolate the central archive on the *Enterprise*, power it up, and put a phaser in 'log report' mode. The program should be transferred to the phaser and get stuck there. We purge the *Enterprise* computer and the protected archive. Then we ask Data to interface with the phaser over a wired connection."

"Now hold on a minute," Riker objected.

"We'll get his consent first. If he doesn't, then the plan fails and we just destroy the phaser ourselves. But if he does, his system has already

been under assault from the Iconian program. It will shut him down, wipe all affected memory, and reboot him."

"But his memory will record our plans?"

"Not necessarily, Commander! His self-correcting mechanism wipes his memory back from the original assault. When we originally encountered the program, it wiped Data's entire experience of the program's attack, including several minutes before. So long as he consents quickly, it should wipe that too."

"But this won't solve the issue, Geordi," Riker objected.

"As long as Data wipes our request for him to be infected, there will be no log anywhere of what we did."

"Except."

"Ah, except for us," La Forge finally realized. "We will have to lie and falsify logs. If we're caught, there goes our careers."

"And that's not the hard part, Geordi. The hard part will be looking people in the eye, people we respect, and lying to them. That will include Captain Picard and Data. You okay with that?"

"Do we have a choice, Commander?"

Riker held his gaze, but didn't answer.

#

"Spacedock, this is Hermes."

"This is Spacedock Operations, go ahead, Hermes."

"We are in position and prepared to tow the *Enterprise* into the dock."

"Stand by, Hermes."

On board the tug's bridge, the captain signaled for communications to mute the channel. "Now watch," she said, "every time I get a Starfleet contract they pull an Andorian."

"Spacedock is replying."

"Bring them up."

"Hermes, this is Spacedock."

"Go for Hermes."

"Looks like we won't need that tug after all. We'll be leaving the *Enterprise* where she is for now."

"Affirmative, spacedock," the Captain said dryly, flipping both middle fingers at the blank viewscreen.

"Some good news though, looks like Starfleet Intelligence is hosting this party, so they'll be paying your bill. How about that! Something for nothing, Hermes."

The Captain patted her middle fingers down while the crew chuckled.

"Affirmative again, Spacedock. Much appreciated. Please keep us in mind for the next time you need nothing done."

"Spacedock out."

"What do you mean, I can't go back to my own ship? I'm her acting Captain!" Riker was standing in Operations, confronting Commander Strand.

"Not my call, Commander," she explained. "Like I said, this order comes directly from Starfleet Intelligence. The *Enterprise* is to be quarantined until further notice."

Riker rubbed his forehead.

"You're not the only one with a problem," Strand added. "I have to find some way to accommodate a thousand people indefinitely. My crew complement is 462."

"I'm sorry, Commander," Riker replied, sighing. "I shouldn't be taking this out on you. I'm going to contact Starfleet Command and see if there's anything they can do."

"Good luck with that."

Riker nodded and turned to leave.

"Commander Riker," Strand called as he began to walk away, "my station's not in any danger from this virus anymore, is it? I thought you said it had been contained."

"No, no danger to the dock. We did contain the virus, but we didn't purge it. That's the problem."

"Communication received."

<p style="text-align:center">#</p>

Riker sat in the temporary office Commander Strand had provided for him. On his desk the popup PADD displayed a call reaching out through subspace to Starfleet Command. After a few moments, a face appeared on the screen.

"William Riker. Well, as I live and breathe!" It was a woman, older but still striking, bearing the insignia of a Starfleet admiral. "You haven't called in ages." She narrowed her eyes at him and her voice became sarcastic. "What do you want?"

"Admiral Chang," Riker complained, "why do I have to want something just to check up on an old friend?"

"Old *and* friend. Plus 'Admiral'. Goodness, this isn't going well for you at all!"

"What would you say if I told you I think about that night every day of my life?" Riker asked.

"I'd say you were lying, but handsome enough to get away with it. It's good to see you, Will. How are you doing?"

"Not good, I'm afraid."

"I hear through the sour grapevine that the *Enterprise* is in a bit of a pickle."

"Yes, of the worst kind. I'm reaching out to you because I need someone I can trust."

"Is this a secure line?" Admiral Chang demanded.

"No, my temporary office doesn't have the ability to generate secure comms."

"Let me see," the Admiral said as she considered some possibilities, "Do you have a shuttle there?"

"Yes."

"Good. Get to it and initiate a secure channel back to me. I'll wait for you."

"I'll call you right back, Lanna."

"And Will," Chang said dryly as Riker got up to leave, "don't leave me waiting like last time." Then she closed the connection.

Riker made his way quickly to a turbolift, and then on to the hangar where the El-Baz was stored. The hangar crew had moved the shuttle off to one side, but he could tell they had run a maintenance check over it, so it was ready to fly. Riker thought to himself again how efficiently Strand ran her station.

On the El-Baz Riker shut and sealed the door, then sat down in the rear section out of view of anyone looking in from the front, and reestablished communications with Admiral Chang.

"Ah, there you are," Chang said as soon as the secure communication was established, "I suppose it depends on which lady is waiting on you whether you'll show up."

Riker did not let his guilt flare up. He knew he'd treated this woman badly, but it was decades ago, and he'd been young. And she was right. A really important lady needed him.

"I'm sorry, Lanna."

"You've said so before, and I accepted then; however, I maintain the right to poke you in the guilt at will until the day I die."

Riker smiled at the joke. "Fair enough."

"So what is going on?"

Riker explained about the Iconian software's outbreak on the ship and the spacedock computers. How they'd dealt with the problem, then discovered how the software had managed to store itself inside a phaser. He outlined their plan, vaguely so as not to implicate the admiral, and this latest issue he had with Starfleet Intelligence quarantining the ship.

Admiral Chang looked thoughtful for a moment. "I tell you what, Commander, you're in luck. Due to certain… complications in your sector, we quite literally cannot have a Galaxy class starship floating around useless. Are you certain you can purge the program from the computer and archive?"

"Yes, Admiral."

"And then re-install the protected archive from the dump created by the spacedock before the infection?"

"Yes again."

"And the odds of some form of re-infection, which appears to be Security's cause for a major hissy fit?"

"Practically zero, Admiral. All we have to do is purge the computer, then isolate and purge the archive. At that point, the Iconian software will be gone."

"I can see here that Starfleet Security won't arrive for at least five days. How much time do you need to get the *Enterprise* up and running?"

"Twenty-four hours to get the computers purged, reloaded, and the ship's power up. I'd have to check with the spacedock commander, but I'm guessing a week or two for repairs. But that will be the same no matter who gets the *Enterprise's* computer up again."

"I even see the Hermes is conveniently docked with the spacedock."

"Yes Admiral, it seems Intelligence already paid them for towing the *Enterprise*, then told them not to bother."

"There's a joke there somewhere. Oh, Will, getting to stick it to intelligence twice with one order. I think I may love you again."

"Years ago I would have said something smug, I think. But now I'll just say 'thank you.' Sincerely."

"Think nothing of it. You can have the *Enterprise* up a week faster than Intelligence. Given the tactical situation, your plan's better. Don't be a stranger, Will. Chang out."

Riker clenched a fist in triumph, then sat back and waited for the order to come through.

#

"Spacedock, this is NCC-1701 *Enterprise*, El-Baz, requesting clearance to exit hangar bay," Data said.

"Roger, El-Baz, you are cleared direct to *Enterprise*. Flight level 200, make your course 340 mark 015."

"Roger, spacedock, flight level 200, heading 340 mark 015."

"Stand by, El-Baz. Release your systems to clear the hangar bay. We have the ball."

"Roger, spacedock. All navigation disengaged and set to remote. You have the ball."

The shuttle lifted itself gently from where it was stored and lined up with a debarkation line. Lights began flashing from the shuttle and down the line to the exit, while a warning klaxon and voice notified shuttlebay staff of the departure. After a brief countdown, the hangar bay door slid

open and the shuttle burst through the force field keeping the atmosphere in the hangar. It began arcing to port.

"El-Baz, this is spacedock. Your navigation has been input to your computer. Please confirm you have the ball."

"Roger, spacedock, I have the ball," Data confirmed, shutting off the link between the shuttle navigation systems and the spacedock.

It only took a minute to travel to the *Enterprise*, looking like a wounded bird caught in amber, hanging in space only a few thousand kilometers from the spacedock.

"Dock at the starboard airlock, Data, we'll make our way from there down to engineering."

"Aye, sir," Data replied, entering commands into the navigation panel.

Riker moved into the back of the shuttle. "Now!" he mouthed at La Forge, who merely shook his head.

There was a soft bump as the shuttle backed up into the port airlock on deck 25.

"We have a hard seal sir," Data called from the forward compartment.

"All right, everyone get an environment suit and oxygen, plus a headlamp and wrist light. Geordi, you bring the equipment, and Data, you take the lead. Use your understanding of the *Enterprise* interior to get us to engineering as quickly as possible."

"Yes, sir," Data agreed, then turned and opened the airlock.

#

Data brought them swiftly to Engineering. Along the way, they made sure to shut every door and hatch behind them, in case of a loss of internal atmospheric pressure. The lack of gravity made travel very quick, particularly with Data leading the way.

Once inside they worked quickly. Data isolated all connections between the protected archive and the outside world, except for one wireless channel. Meanwhile, La Forge installed a portable power unit to the main computer and aligned it with a power transmission beam from the El-Baz. Using this power, he brought up the main computer to maintenance mode, and ordered the system to purge itself completely.

"Commander," La Forge said, "the portable power unit is now powering the main computer. I have initiated a purge routine. I estimate the main computer will be completely purged in 13 minutes."

"How's it coming, Data?"

"I have isolated the archive from any external connection but one wireless channel, and I have connected a lead from the portable power unit. As soon as the core is purged and shut down, I will purge the archive."

Data continued to monitor the archive and said, "Geordi, may I ask why we are giving the archive a means of external communication? This

would appear to be an unnecessary risk."

"That was my idea," Riker cut in. "Starfleet Intelligence has requested we attempt to isolate the Iconian software for further study. I thought the best way to do that was to feed it into the same phaser that it occupied before."

"A cogent analysis and supposition, Commander. May I assume you received these orders while I was outside the lab on the spacedock?"

"Yes Data," Riker agreed, sharing a look with La Forge. "I should have filled you in. I suppose I forgot. I've got a lot on my mind."

"Understood, sir. The computer core is now purged. I am removing its power lead." Data removed the power coupling from the main computer. "We may now purge the protected archive."

"Now we're here," Riker said flatly, "I'm not even sure how to make this work. Geordi?"

"If I may?" Data interrupted. La Forge nodded. "If the program finds itself trapped in the protected archive with no way to escape, then simply providing the phaser as an option should lead it to spread out into it. At this point, we could simply purge the protected archive using low-level root commands, then remove the power when the purge is completed."

"Make it so," Riker ordered.

"Attaching power to the archive," La Forge announced.

Data retrieved the phaser from the equipment case. He keyed in the lowest setting, and then aimed at an empty chair a few meters away.

"The protected archive is now powered. I'm detecting incompatible software activity."

"Firing phaser to set it into log mode," Data announced, then fired the phaser at the chair.

"Phaser wireless mode set," he said, examining the phaser in his hand.

"I am reading wireless activity from the archive," La Forge announced, watching the temporary panel attached to the it.

"The phaser is receiving data," Data added, "and the wireless signal has now failed."

"That's it. Data, purge the archive."

"Purging the protected archive," Data reported.

In a minute they were done. All power to the *Enterprise* was severed, and the hand phaser appeared to have the Iconian software trapped inside of it. Both the *Enterprise* main computer's memory and the protected archive had been purged. They were now just useless collections of sophisticated hardware.

"Mission accomplished," Data announced, holding up the phaser, "shall we proceed to the shuttle and alert spacedock?"

"Not just yet, Mr. Data," Riker said, gliding over to the android.

La Forge floated over and flanked Data, putting his arm on his friend's shoulder. "We need to talk."

Chapter 9

T'Rya went back for the afternoon session, planning on taking dinner with the Begemote delegates. She hoped that explaining she was a trusted assistant to Captain Picard would get her access, because they would not want to upset the legend.

The session itself was nothing extraordinary. T'Rya used her capacity to concentrate to focus on every word, every objection, and every agreement. Before long she came to the conclusion that, despite what Ambassador Lee had said, the Begemot delegates did not know they had already won and would be admitted into the Federation. She supposed it might be the case they did know, and were merely acting in order to give validity to the proceedings. T'Rya's experience with the Begemot was limited, as was her understanding the nuances of their body language and verbal communication. Still, after assessing them repeatedly, she became convinced they were in earnest. If the Begemote authorities did know they

were guaranteed entry into the Federation, these delegates did not appear to have been informed.

When the afternoon session was over, and dinner was offered to everyone in the main dining hall, T'Rya accompanied the Federation delegates, ignoring the curious looks and gently rebuffing any attempts to question her. She told everyone she was Captain Picard's assistant, and that the captain was here to monitor the talks only, on behalf of Starfleet.

In the dining hall, T'Rya made a point of appearing interested in the Begemot dishes, which all appeared and smelled foul. She was offered tastes of this or that, and kept her bile down by force of will when she realized she was eating actual animal and insect flesh.

But her ploy worked, and soon she was sitting amongst the delegates. They were suspicious at first, but when she explained her position as Captain Picard's assistant, and that he was only here to observe, they opened up. The extremely expensive necklace she wore also made the Begemotes warm up to her. It was not replicated, and clearly hand made. It would be worth a small fortune on Begemot. She kept the conversation away from politics, asking about their planet, domestic life, what their flora and fauna were like. Once again, T'Rya came to the same conclusion she had at the negotiations. There was no duplicity or guile here. The Begemote

representatives had every intention of winning these negotiations, but that was to be expected.

As the evening wore on and members began to filter out, T'Rya excused herself and headed back to her suite. She was disappointed that she did not find out more, but in a way this lack of information was also useful. It helped identify where they did not have to look further.

As she was about to raise her bracelet to open the door to her quarters, she felt a distinct shudder in the hull beneath her feet. Then, ominously, the power browned out in the hallway, only to come back up immediately. Finally, a klaxon began to sound and blue light started flashing all along the hallway ceiling. She reached up to her communicator, but then dropped her hand. Until she knew what exactly was happening it was better to keep their secrets hidden.

Her bracelet still opened the door, so she quickly entered her suite and went to a console. It too was blinking, that same blue light, and the text in the panel explained what that meant: "Collision Alert! Stand by for a message from the bridge."

<center>#</center>

Commander Troi began her day by eating breakfast in the lounge. From there, she watched the waitstaff come in and out of the kitchen. She

made friends with her Begemote server, and managed to glean some information about the staff on the ship.

The flight crew of the Begemot was military, while the various services on board were outsourced. Thus, the cleaning, the cooking and serving staff, the laundry, and so on, were all contracted out to different guilds on Begemot.

Using one of the information stations around the ship, Troi was able to identify the various contractors tasked with keeping the *Queen of Begemot* in space:

➢ General Cleaning

➢ Laundry Services

➢ Food Services

➢ RCS Thruster Services

➢ Warp Drive Maintenance

➢ Impulse Drive Technicians

➢ General Maintenance

➢ Electrical Engineering

➢ Structural Engineering

➢ Exterior Maintenance

➢ Forcefield Generators and Emitters

➢ ...

The list went on and on. Troi gave up trying to read them all. It would seem the "crew" of the Begemot, those military officers tasked with flying the ship, were literally the bridge crew and nothing else.

It took her some time, but she managed to find her way into the bowels of the *Queen*. Beyond the passenger sections was a noisy, stinking, damp, and unpleasant space in which the service crew of the ship had to live, emerging into the passenger areas only when required.

Not only was their space unsavory to inhabit, but the gravity plating and inertial dampers were less than reliable. As Troi walked she could feel her weight fluctuate nauseatingly. She saw mothers nursing their young in the bitter cold of the ship's crew decks. Here there were no amenities or comforts. No environmental controls or even comfortable beds.

Troi may have not understood Begemote emotions this morning, but walking through the deprivation and misery of those tasked with almost all aspects of running the ship, she came to know Begemote anger, to know their discontent and suffering, to understand their love of their young, and their misery at being unable to care for them properly.

Eventually she had to sit in a corridor, unable to stop her tears, and the Begemotes responded to her. Even without a common language, they

brought her a pillow to sit on, and a warm tea that lifted her spirits. She thanked them profusely, and they seemed to understand her appreciation.

When she managed to recover herself, she rose to make her way back into the guest area of the ship, but before she could do so, she felt a vibration in the deck plating. A moment later the gravity seemed to fail and she floated up to the ceiling. The lights blinked out and emergency lighting came on. Then, as suddenly as it had turned off, the gravity came back. She fell down to the metal deck plating and smashed her face against it, giving herself a bloody lip. Behind she could hear cries of pain as hundreds of others came down too.

No warnings or sirens came on. Troi made her way back to the guest area of the saucer, and finally back to her suite, where she saw the announcement that a collision had occurred, and instructions to wait for notification from the captain.

#

Captain Picard spent the better part of an hour attempting to find the Begemote ambassador. He used his bracelet to find her berth, but there was no answer. He made his way to the afternoon conference, but she was not there.

Finally, almost in desperation, he went back to the lounge where they had first met. And there she was, at the same table, once again with nothing

to eat or drink in front of her.

"Ambassador," Picard said as he came up to her table, "you are a difficult person to find."

"Not at all, Captain," Lee replied, motioning for him to sit, "you only need to visit my favorite table."

"Is this where you hold informal court?"

Ambassador Lee huffed in the way Picard had come to understand as laughter. A server came by with menus and once again Lee waved it off. Picard, testing a theory, accepted his menu, although he was not hungry.

"What can I do for you, Captain?"

"Well, Ambassador," Picard began, pretending to peruse the menu, "I have an offer from the captain to view the bridge of the *Queen*, and I thought you might like to accompany me. I understand that, since the flight crew is military, no one is permitted on the bridge, even negotiators and ambassadors."

"That is true. A trip to the bridge is coveted. Little things like that, ones that cannot be purchased, are often worth a great deal in our culture. I would indeed enjoy accompanying you."

Picard went back to examining his menu.

"Will you be eating, Captain?"

"Perhaps just a drink. What do you recommend?"

"Qa't'a tea is lovely. I have overheard that several of your human delegates enjoy it."

"Ka-ta tea it is then," Picard agreed, trying not to mangle the Begemote word too badly.

"Could I trouble you to order one for me as well captain?"

"Of course," Picard marked the menu for two Qa't'a tea. "Anything else?"

The ambassador appeared to consider for a moment, then said "I suppose something light, since I do not know how long we will be away on our adventure. Please add a Sta'lit'Tr salad. Do you see it there, with the purple flowers?"

"Ah, yes," Picard said, tapping the picture, "one salad ordered." He leaned in closer to the menu. "Ambassador, are those flowers blooming from the backs of animals?"

"Yes, from R'L'eTs, something very similar to a beetle I've been told. The animal has caused some issues with your botanists, as our planet is the first to be found with sexual pairing between what are commonly called flora and fauna."

"Fascinating. I will try not to stare at your lunch."

Their tea arrived and they both took a sip.

"Very earthy," Picard said thoughtfully, "with a note of sweetness like honey. Yes, very good."

"Of course we have to be careful what we feed you from our planet," the ambassador cautioned. "But the menu will never let you order anything that can harm you."

"This is truly delightful," Picard went on, taking another drink of his tea. "I'll have to get this analyzed so I can replicate it on the *Enterprise*."

This was a slip indeed, a terrible gaffe. T'Rya had been quite specific about the Begemote antipathy toward replication and transporter technology. And yet as he watched her over his tea, Ambassador Lee did not appear upset at all.

"Ah yes, your infamous food replication. I've been told that with technology and fusion reactors, we could feed, clothe, and house our entire population. It is out of context, but is that not 'a consummation devoutly to be wished'?"

"Shakespeare?" Picard blurted out, stunned.

"I've known for months about this posting, Captain, so I took advantage of my position to indulge in your culture. Very few of my people will ever get the opportunity. At first I read some strange story about two people who could not mate, but I never managed to understand why anyone would oppose it. Then they killed themselves. Strange. But then I stumbled

upon Hamlet. 'To be or not to be,' Captain, this is a question so many of my people must ask themselves every day."

The ambassador's food arrived, and she began to eat with concentration. Picard was reeling from what he'd heard. Lee had essentially confessed to him that she was, if not working for, at least in sympathy with the lower castes on her planet. So the threat was likely not aimed at her, but was in fact the ambassador herself. Then again, her sympathies did not guarantee there wasn't some plot against her. And this was why he hated politics and diplomacy so much: not knowing who was friend or foe; the duplicity; the deception and lies.

"That was delicious," the ambassador said, drinking the last of her tea.

"Yes," Picard agreed, finishing his own. "Would you care to make our way to the bridge?"

"Yes, Captain, I am excited to see it."

#

They found a turbolift, labelled "People Mover" on a digital display at the top near the ceiling, and waited for it to arrive. After some time, when nothing came, Picard noticed a similar bracelet panel on the side of the door, in front of the ambassador.

"Perhaps we need to use our bracelets to call the mover," Picard suggested, pointing toward the panel in front of the ambassador.

"Yes, yes, of course," Ambassador Lee agreed, and stepped back to allow Picard access to the panel. He reached over and held up his bracelet, and the panel flashed an acknowledgement.

It took only a few moments for the door to open, but in that time Captain Picard ran through many thoughts in his head. The Begemot ambassador knew how their technology worked, understood the principle behind the bracelet, and should have seen the panel and activated it. Absent minded perhaps? But then, why stand out of the way rather than activate the people mover herself? Perhaps something cultural to do with male and female roles? Or was he overthinking things?

The people mover door opened and allowed him to shut down his thoughts.

"Destination?" The mover asked in Standard.

"Bridge, please," Picard requested.

"Access to the bridge is restricted."

"Yes, I have an invitation from the captain to visit the bridge. This is Jean-Luc Picard, Captain of the *USS Enterprise*."

"Please stand by," the mover said, then, a moment later, "access to the aft bridge granted." The mover began to move them.

It was a quick trip. Picard had spent some time reviewing the schematics of the *Queen*, so he knew the ship had two bridges, one forward and one aft. Instead of trying to turn a more-than-three-kilometer ship around, control was simply given to whichever bridge was most suited.

The mover stopped and the door opened. Just outside the door stood two Begemote sailors at attention, weapons conspicuous on their hips. They saluted, and Picard chose to simply nod at them as he and the ambassador stepped out of the mover.

"Ah, Captain Picard," said another Begemote sailor as he came over to shake hands. This was clearly the captain, as he had the most rank insignia on his left pant leg. He was wearing a universal translator around his neck, which was why his Standard sounded so good. "I am Captain [untranslatable], but please call me Gee. Welcome to my bridge."

Picard took a moment to look around. The bridge was cavernous, with dozens of stations, all crewed. The forward half of the bridge looked somehow off, but he couldn't make out why that was.

"Captain Gee, thank you for the invitation." Picard turned to the ambassador. "I took advantage and offered the Begemot ambassador the option to come with me. This is Ambassador… Lee, is the name I've been given."

The ambassador shook the captain's hand and told him her proper Begemot name.

"Wonderful! Now I have two victims to show off to," Captain Gee said, then made that huffing sound. The ambassador joined him, and Picard smiled.

"I must say, Captain, this is one big ship. And your bridge, very impressive."

"Thank you, Captain," Gee replied, soaking up the compliments.

"But may I ask," Picard continued, "why does the forward half of your bridge look slightly different?"

"Does it?" Gee asked, looking forward. "Well, it does not to us, I don't think. Ambassador, do you see anything off about the forward part of the bridge?"

The ambassador shook her head. "No, not at all."

"Well, then, it must be your human eyes," Captain Gee speculated, "because you are correct, the forward half of the bridge is not here, but is in fact at the bow of the ship. What you are seeing is a projection of that bridge, just as the bow bridge sees a projection of this one." Gee motioned around them. "This allows us to see and talk to each other in real time, and allows me to act as captain no matter which bridge I happen to be on."

"This is remarkable," Picard mused as he walked up to the edge of where the bow bridge was displayed.

"Communications!" Captain Gee ordered.

"Sir?"

"Turn off our view of the bow bridge."

"Aye, aye!"

In a moment, the forward bridge projection disappeared, and Picard found himself standing before a massive transparent wall. Before him, he could see the upper nacelle of the warp drive. He could look down on all six saucers. On the aft two, he could make out the pods that contained the thrusters and impulse engines. The thruster pods looked capable of swiveling 360 degrees, meaning the *Queen* could likely make very precise, if slow, maneuvers.

Then the forward bridge came back up. "Remarkable," Picard repeated, "just remarkable." Picard turned and walked back to Captain Gee. "Sir, you have a remarkable ship."

"Why, thank you. Of course, she is nothing like the *Enterprise*, but we are very proud of her."

Suddenly one of the sailors at a console interrupted and said something to the Captain. He did not have a translator, and so Picard did not know what was said.

"Bow bridge audio!" Captain Gee barked.

Picard took the ambassador's elbow and backed them into an out-of-the-way corner of the bridge.

"Captain?" she asked.

"It seems they're having a bit of an emergency," Picard explained, as the audio from the bow bridge poured into the aft bridge. "It's best if we stay out of their way."

Captain Gee glanced over at them once, seeming to appreciate Captain Picard's retreat into an out-of-the-way location.

"Ambassador," Picard continued, "I can understand the captain's orders, but can you tell me what the warning klaxon is saying?"

"It is repeating—the closest I can translate is, 'Warning: something hits us!'"

"A collision alert?"

"Yes, yes, that would be accurate too."

At that moment the warning klaxon with its voice ceased repeating. While both bridges appeared to be in some form of red alert, the tension in the sailors dropped significantly. After issuing a few more orders, Captain Gee came over to Picard and the ambassador.

"I am sorry, Captain. It appears our starboard bow saucer suffered a collision with several micrometeors. Nothing to worry about. Only the one

saucer section is inhabited, yours in starboard aft."

"I thought you had phased radioactive elements for shielding?"

"Well, the ship is still in shakedown, and only the two aft saucers have active shielding. We planned for this kind of event. The starboard forward saucer is venting atmosphere, but each saucer is protected by an independent bulkhead that ensures the ship's integrity. This is not even a reason to shorten our cruise. I'll send a repair team out and we'll patch the holes. Problem solved!"

The bow bridge projection suddenly disappeared.

"What's this?" Captain Gee asked as he walked back into the center of the aft bridge. "Get me the bow bridge back."

A few of the sailors replied back to the Captain.

"What do you mean there is no more signal?"

Picard walked along the starboard wall of the bridge until he was at the transparent wall where the bow bridge project used to be. In the distance, he could see massive amounts of debris shrouding the starboard side of the bow.

Then the shockwave came, making the ship shudder beneath their feet. The power in the bridge failed for a moment, then emergency lighting came up. Multiple alarms started to go off.

"Captain," Picard shouted over the din, "what is happening? Can I be of assistance?"

Captain Gee wheeled on Picard, "There is nothing you can do, human! Get off my bridge!"

Chapter 10

"Let me see if I understand what you are saying, Geordi," Data said, as the trio stood in the dark and freezing engineering section of the *Enterprise*. "In order to prevent Starfleet from gaining access to the Iconian program, which you assume will be misused, you are asking me to allow myself to be infected by it via this phaser, which would clear the program from the phaser by allowing the software to jump into my positronic network, where, you continue to assume, it will be defeated once again by my self-correcting mechanism. Further, you assume the affected memory purge will wipe my memory of these last few events."

"That's about it, Data," La Forge admitted.

"I am curious. Are you certain the Iconian software will be used incorrectly by Starfleet?"

"We're not certain of anything, Data," Riker admitted, "we just feel something this powerful can't fall into anyone's hands."

"It could even backfire and get out. What would happen if it infected Earth's computers, or piggybacked along subspace transmissions to all starships and starbases? It could wipe out Starfleet," La Forge added.

"All conjecture, and each such conjecture comes with a very low probability," Data mused, "but then, the cost of such a low-possibility event could be enormous." Data regarded the two of them. "I will infect myself."

"Okay!" La Forge said, and floated over to an equipment locker to fetch a patch cord. He came back over to Data and asked, "Where do I patch you in?"

Data reached up and opened a port on his neck. Within was a standard communication port for hard-wired connections. La Forge plugged the cable in.

"Maybe you should sit down, Data," Riker warned.

"Indeed, Commander," Data agreed, and sat on a nearby chair. La Forge used a strap to keep him from floating away, then handed Data the cable and phaser, and Data plugged the cord into the phaser.

The effect was instantaneous. Data jerked, then seemed to be frozen in place for a few seconds. Finally, he started to float away, but La Forge and Riker kept him on the chair. The phaser floated away, and Riker secured it to the deck by stomping on the cord with his boot. The force popped it out of the connection in Data's neck.

"Data," La Forge asked, "are you okay?"

Data sat up straight in the chair, the straps around his legs keeping him from floating away. "As before, I appear to be under attack by the Iconian program. I am once again… blind; however, my self-correcting mechanism appears to recognize the attack and…"

Then Data stopped talking or moving. La Forge looked at Riker. "He appears to be dead."

"Just like last time?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get rid of that cord, Geordi," Riker said, pointing at the patch cord still sticking out of the phaser, "and close that port on his neck."

La Forge quickly closed the access panel on Data's neck, then floated over to the equipment lockers and stored the patch cord in its proper location. As he was floating back, Data appeared to come back to life.

"Data?" Riker asked. "Can you hear me?"

"Accessing," Data replied. His head twitching slightly from side to side. Then it stopped. "I am in engineering. We were purging the Iconian code. Were we successful?"

La Forge and Riker shared a glance.

"Something went wrong, Data," La Forge lied. "We purged the computer core and the archive, but instead of infecting the phaser the

Iconian program somehow jumped from it into you again."

"Ah, I see," Data replied, "and I appeared to have purged the code as well. How is the *Enterprise*?"

"She's ready to go," Riker replied, "and we have a lot of work to do. How are you feeling?"

"I feel fine, Commander. Although I must admit a gap in one's memory is disconcerting. Should we inform Starfleet Intelligence of our failure?"

"In good time, Mr. Data. For now, let's get this old lady back on her feet."

"Yes, commander. How shall we proceed?"

La Forge said, "I need you to repair the bus on the protected archive. Get it back in communication with the main computer. Then I'll use the portable power unit to power it up, and we'll get the spacedock to send over the protected archive wirelessly via the shuttle."

"Very well."

"While you do that, I'm going to see about restarting the warp core. Commander Riker, could you get a power lead and connect it from the portable to the warp core computer?"

"On it," Riker said, then floated over to the equipment cabinet to retrieve a power connector.

When power came up, La Forge began a low-level diagnostic on the warp core using the protected firmware.

"I have restored the protected archive and left open one wireless channel," Data announced, "I will make a secure connection with the shuttle and then request the archive be dumped via the El-Baz."

"Roger that, Data. The diagnostic is looking good. I should have the warp core restarting in a few minutes."

Data tapped his com badge: "Spacedock Operations, this is Lieutenant Commander Data on board the *Enterprise*."

"Go for Operations."

"Please begin a data dump of the *Enterprise* protected archive over a secure channel to the shuttle El-Baz."

"Stand by, *Enterprise*."

The low frequency thrum of the warp core began to reverberate through the deck plating of Engineering. It would be negated when the artificial gravity was engaged.

"Warp core startup initiated," La Forge announced.

"Good. I for one could use a little gravity," Riker said, clinging upside down to a support strut.

"Everyone orient yourselves to the floor," La Forge announced, "the core is running in low-power mode and I am engaging the artificial gravity

in engineering.

Suddenly gravity came back. The trio gained their footing, and various loose objects around Engineering rained down for a few seconds.

"Great, Geordi," Riker commended, "now how about a little heat?"

"Engineering life support is coming online, sir."

"Excellent work."

"*Enterprise* Operations."

"Go for *Enterprise*," Data replied.

"Ready to begin transfer."

"Please proceed."

"Transfer initiated. Will the *Enterprise* make it back on its own power?"

"This is Lieutenant Commander La Forge. I have the warp core back up and I'm running some diagnostics. If navigation checks out and the damage isn't too severe, we should be able to make it back to spacedock on our own power."

"Understood, *Enterprise*. Spacedock out."

"Data, you can disconnect the ship's systems from the remote power unit and turn off the power stream on the shuttle. In fact, everything is checking out here. Why not go back to the shuttle and bring it into the shuttlebay?"

"Yes, Geordi," Data replied. He decoupled the power unit from the ship, and then turned it off. When finished, he walked out of Engineering, back toward the shuttle.

Riker came over and stood behind La Forge.

"I didn't know it would be like this, Commander, lying to Data."

"We are defined by our choices, Geordi. And we pay the price for them every day of our lives."

"Is this the kind of cognitive dissonance being in command brings?"

"Putting people in harm's way. Keeping information from them. Carrying the burden of responsibility for what happens because of our choices. Yes, those are some of the darker prices of command."

La Forge turned back to the warp core console.

"*Enterprise*, this is Operations."

Riker tapped his com badge, "This is Commander Riker, go for *Enterprise*."

"Archive dump complete. We're severing our link to the shuttle. Anything else we can do?"

"Get my lady back up and running as fast as you can. It looks like we'll be able to use thrusters to get her over to you."

"Affirmative, *Enterprise*, we'll do our best. Spacedock out."

"I'm loading the archive into the computer core. Main computer coming online. Computer!"

The main computer trilled its acknowledgement.

"Run level one diagnostic and report."

There were more trills, and then: "Level one diagnostic complete. All system functions nominal."

"Computer, restore power to the rest of the *Enterprise*."

A trill.

"Looks like we're good to go, Commander," Geordi announced, "main computer is up, power is being restored, and I see Data has just brought the shuttle into the shuttlebay."

"Good," Riker said quickly, removing his environment suit. Engineering was already warming up. "I'll be on the bridge."

"Commander Riker," Data came over the intercom.

"Go ahead, Data."

"I have arrived at the shuttlebay."

"Good work, Commander. Meet me on the bridge." Riker nodded to La Forge and left engineering.

#

The bridge felt empty, like a home where all the children had moved off to college. And not only quiet, but cold to the bone. It would take a

while to heat up 1100 meters of starship. Commander Riker sat in the captain's chair, while Data maintained the con. He tapped his communications panel. "Spacedock 135 this is *Enterprise*."

"Go for Spacedock."

"We are now 5000 meters out and ready for docking procedures."

"Affirmative, *Enterprise*. Set your navigation to automatic. We have the ball."

"Acknowledged, pacedock, navigation set to automatic. You have the ball."

With a gentle lurch the *Enterprise* changed course according to the spacedock's commands. In only a few minutes they were docking within it.

"Geordi," Riker called out.

"Yes sir?"

"We're going to be in spacedock in minutes. As soon as you can, start running a full damage report and relay to Operations. I want repairs to start the second our relative velocity hits zero."

"Aye, Commander."

"Data, with the gangway hatch exposed to space we'll have to transport people over until it is repaired. I want you to get to transporter room three. I will order transporter engineers beamed over first. You assign them to the other transporter rooms. Then we'll bring over the bridge crew,

and finally engineers to put the *Enterprise* back together. For now, families and non-essential personnel will remain on the spacedock."

"Aye sir," Data replied, and stood to walk to the turbolift. But he paused and turned back to Riker. "Commander?"

"Yes Data?"

"About the events in engineering. There are a few issues I am curious about."

"Of course, Commander, we'll all sit down and disc*USS* it. But first, let's get the *Enterprise* ready to fly."

"Aye, sir," Data replied, and left the bridge.

Riker rubbed his beard with his hand and let out a heavy sigh.

#

The bridge was alive again. People moved about doing their duty. Outside the hull, some 300 spacedock engineers, supplemented with several hundred of the *Enterprise* crew, worked to repair the damage to the ship.

The first up for repair was the gangway, so new crew and equipment could flow unimpeded. The damage to the saucer section, although it looked the worst, was a simple fix. But the starboard nacelle, Riker sighed as he thought about it. All starboard warp plasma lost to space, three all-but-destroyed warp coils, and the nacelle's pylon partially buckled. Spacedock engineers reported an estimate of at least ten days for repair.

"*Enterprise*, this is Spacedock Operations, priority communication for the captain."

"Open a channel," Riker ordered.

A face appeared on the main viewer. "Channel open," Worf announced from behind him.

"Spacedock Operations, this is Commander Riker. Go ahead please."

"Commander Riker, stand by for Commander Strand."

"Standing by."

The image switched to Strand. She looked simultaneously angry and apologetic: "Starfleet Intelligence has sent new orders." She read from a PADD: "Starfleet Intelligence to spacedock 135, as of stardate 48062.2, you are hereby ordered to quarantine *USS Enterprise* until such time as duly authorized Starfleet Intelligence officers arrive at your location. Repeat, you are to quarantine *USS Enterprise* NCC 1701-D."

"Commander Strand," Riker objected.

"Let's do what they say for now," Strand added conspiratorially. "They said only to quarantine the *Enterprise*. That sounds to me like no one on, and no one off. Since we sealed off and patched the outer hull of the saucer section, you could pull your crew back in the next hour, before I have to implement this order. Also, this doesn't mean I can't keep repairs

ongoing. Doesn't mean your crew can't work inside the hull. Not as far as I can tell."

"Thank you, Commander."

"Oh, that's not everything. We found two suitable warp coils in stores, mislabeled as 'portable animal pens,' if you can believe that. And the third coil we can have repaired in 24 hours."

"I don't know how to thank you for all this."

"This is what we do, Commander, keep you boys and girls in the fight."

"I'll get back in touch with Starfleet Command, see if I can't pull in another favor."

"Wind at your back, Commander Riker, spacedock out."

"Mr. Worf, I'll be in the ready room."

"Aye, sir."

As Riker got up and began walking across the bridge, an incoming message notice trilled at Worf's panel.

"Commander!" Worf interrupted.

"Yes?"

"I am receiving an open distress call from the *Queen of Begemot*. They have suffered an implosion and are requesting immediate assistance."

"We're 24 hours from even a test run, Worf. Is there another starship available?"

"The *USS Rutledge* is the closest starship. They have responded to the distress call, but they are six days away."

"Get me Spacedock Operations, Worf," Riker ordered as he made his way back to the command chair.

"They are hailing us, Commander."

"On screen. Commander Strand, I was just about to call you."

"We received the distress call as well. I've just been haranguing my chief engineer, and we'll have you out of the dock in twelve hours."

"Commander Strand, I will put you in for a commendation. If I don't end up in the stockade."

"Help that ship, Commander Riker, that's all the thanks we need."

Chapter 11

Captain Picard turned toward the bridge exit, but the ambassador stopped him by grabbing his arm.

"Captain [untranslatable]," she said, "not only is Captain Picard the commander of a Federation starship, he is also a member of the Federation delegation sent to negotiate the terms of Begemot's entry into the Federation. And I am the Begemote Ambassador to the Federation. You will not order us about like common eight-castes. Now inform us what is going on!"

Captain Gee seemed to lose some of his bluster with this, and spoke quickly to the pair. "We have suffered an implosion in the starboard forward saucer section. The shockwave disrupted communications with the forward bridge. I have dispatched engineering crews to reestablish communication."

"How did that happen?" Picard asked.

"It seems the dust penetrated almost to the center of the saucer in deck five, the release of atmosphere created a pressure imbalance between

the upper and lower decks which eventually caused the structural failure of deck six, causing a catastrophic implosion.

"But there is no need for alarm. The ship, and each saucer section, is protected by static baffles that automatically deploy in an emergency. Again, Captain, it is unfortunate, but nothing we cannot handle. We have sent out a distress call as a precaution. The *USS Rutledge* has responded and will be here in six days. It is not a good idea for us to attempt warp again in the ship's current condition, but we have more than enough resources to wait six days. I will of course make an announcement and apologize to our Begemote and Federation guests."

"Thank you, Captain," Picard said, sincerely, "and now we will get out of your way."

A sailor called out something to Captain Gee. "Bring it up, then," he ordered.

With a series of flashes and distortions, the bow bridge projection re-appeared. Picard and the ambassador walked up the starboard side of the bride to get a closer look.

"Give me a close-up of the saucer section," Gee ordered.

The projection suddenly jumped closer to the saucer section. It looked a bit like a flattened pancake, with atmosphere venting from cracks and crevices all over the surface. A cloud of debris had spread out from the

surface, no doubt blown out during the decompression. There was lots of furniture and other bits from the interior of the ship, but as Picard looked closer he could see… bodies.

"Captain Gee, are those bodies?"

"Eh," the Captain replied, then took another look. "I suppose it could be. The ship is currently having the interior finished, as I mentioned before. Would only be sixth or seventh caste, though. Don't worry, we can replace them easily."

The gall rose in Picard's throat, but he controlled himself. The strategic weight of Begemot to Federation security was more important than his indignation. Yet at what cost did such compromises come? Starfleet was an imperfect, but ethical institution. How far could it stray from its ideals before it became something else?

"Thank you for your time, Captain," Picard managed, "we will get out of your way now." He gently grasped the ambassador by the arm and led her back to the people mover. Captain Gee was too busy to notice them leaving.

Once in the mover Picard began to speak, but the ambassador shook her head and pointed above their heads. Picard looked up to see what looked like simple air circulation vents, but got the point that the ambassador was suggesting some sort of surveillance.

"That was quite an impressive bridge," Picard said instead. "I wonder if something like that couldn't be incorporated into larger Starfleet vessels?"

"I'm sure after the talks the Begemot government would be happy to work on design possibilities with the Federation, whether we are admitted or not," the ambassador replied. Then she added, "Do you feel the ship will be okay?"

Picard thought for a moment. "The captain assured me that static baffles are put in place the moment there is any decompression on board. If I understand that, it means airtight bulkheads now separate all the saucers from each other, and from the other areas of the ship.

"Aft starboard saucer, deck one, section alpha," the people mover announced as it came to rest and the doors opened.

As they walked towards Picard's suite, the deck shuddered beneath their feet. Once again a blue light pulsed in the ceiling and a mild warning klaxon began to go off.

"Oh no," Ambassador Lee said, "does that mean?"

"Another saucer collapse? It's possible. It could also have been secondary implosions of the original saucer."

There was no one in the captain's suite, so they hurried down the corridor to Troi's. When the door opened they found both T'Rya and Troi

were inside.

"Captain, have you seen the announcement?" Troi asked as they came in.

"We were just on the bridge, Commander. The forward starboard saucer section suffered micrometeor damage, and the subsequent decompression caused an implosion."

Troi and T'Rya exchanged a look.

"Captain," T'Rya added, "both port and starboard forward saucers have imploded."

"That second shockwave," Picard mused, "just a few minutes ago."

"But Captain!" the ambassador half-shouted, "what of the static baffles?"

"Did he mention anything about danger to the rest of the ship?"

"Just a general assurance that the rest of the ship was airtight and safe."

Picard turned to Lee. "Ambassador, perhaps you would be more comfortable in your own quarters. I need to have a disc*USS*ion with my people and see to the other Federation delegates. I hope you understand."

"Of course, Captain. But I will be in the lounge."

"I'm sure your quarters are much safer, Ambassador."

"Quite possibly, but I will be in the lounge. I enjoy my privacy. I hope you understand Captain. My quarters are too… busy with ears and voices."

Picard's expression changed to one of understanding, but he kept his voice slightly annoyed. "Of course, Ambassador, we can only advise. If it is permissible, we would like to visit you in the lounge in a few minutes."

"Of course, Captain, I would welcome the company." With this, the ambassador left the suite.

T'Rya and Troi began talking simultaneously. "Captain…"

Picard cut them off. "I understand we have a lot to catch up on; however, we still have a job to do. T'Rya, you have been speaking with the Begemote delegation. I would like your report on what our chances are for tomorrow. After that, Commander Troi will fill us in on her survey of the support staff of the ship, and tell us if she found any wedges we can use in the negotiations tomorrow."

Troi and T'Rya stared at him in shock and confusion.

Picard pointed to his ear, and then around the suite. "Now please," he said, "I have a busy afternoon."

Getting the message, they began their briefings.

#

Soon afterward, the trio walked to the section alpha lounge, not speaking as they did. Once there, they spotted the ambassador at her

favorite table, and made their way over.

"Ambassador," Picard said formally, "so good to see you again. We were just coming in for a late lunch. May we sit with you?"

"Of course," the ambassador replied, then reached behind her and pulled back the cushion. A small device sat on the board beneath the cushion. "We are all free here in the lounge."

"Some kind of jamming?" Picard asked, taking a seat.

"Yes. It jams any audio recording, and will cause interference in any video. They will see us sitting here but it will be very poor quality."

"Counselor?"

"I'm not sensing deception, but I do feel a great deal of stress being relieved."

"So, Ambassador, time to come clean?"

"Captain, you cannot allow Begemote into the Federation. With that kind of political clout behind the first and second castes we will never achieve freedom."

"I'm not sure what you have heard, Ambassador, but…"

"In the case of a social revolution," T'Rya interrupted, "what would be the new government's stand regarding the Federation?"

"We would welcome them to help us design a new society, a fair society. We would most adamantly wish to be part of the United Federation

of Planets."

"Lieutenant, a word please," Picard ordered.

"In a minute, Captain," T'Rya replied. Picard sat stunned. He was not used to his orders being countermanded by subordinate officers.

"With the political and economic clout of the Federation behind the higher castes, our struggle could be set back 100 years. I don't understand why you would admit us anyway. We clearly are in breach of your minimum requirements. Is the Federation always so hypocritical?"

"There are forces at work—forces I cannot divulge—that may put the Federation's hypocrisy in perspective," T'Rya replied.

"I suppose it doesn't matter anyway now," the ambassador went on. "With these accidents and the ship needing rescue, the talks will be adjourned and take place elsewhere, and I'll be found out." She sat up suddenly, looking like someone that has said too much.

"Ambassador," Picard began.

"Lee, please," she requested.

"Of course. Lee, the Federation could be in serious danger in this sector. Your planet could diminish that threat."

"Then work with us, Captain, help us save ourselves."

"I am afraid that is not possible," T'Rya interjected. "The time frames involved will not permit a social revolution and recovery."

"What did you mean, you will be found out?" Troi asked.

The ambassador looked at her, then raised her arm. "This," she said, pointing at her wrist. "Boarding the *Queen* I had diplomatic immunity, meaning I was not scanned, and so my bracelet was not detected as a forgery. But now, either on our way to the evacuation shuttles or back on Begemote or at the new negotiations, I'll be found out. We do not have the resources to maintain my facade for long."

"Who is 'we,' Ambassador?" T'Rya asked.

"We are… a resistance I suppose. The situation on Begemote is terrible. The eleventh caste is essentially gone, starved out of existence. Now the ninth and tenth castes are expected to take up their labor, but with almost no more pay. Many of the tenth class live on the streets or in shanty towns, where they are attacked and beaten by the police for being vagrants. Even some ninth castes are losing their homes, which is unheard of. Our government and the Mercantilists require constant economic growth, and there is nothing left to grow. It is just a slow squeezing of our people, but there is no more water coming out, only sap, or, how would you say, blood."

"What was your mission?" Picard asked.

"I was to disrupt the negotiation during the last day by announcing Begemot would never alter its caste system, no matter what the Federation

would say," the ambassador hung her head, "and now I find even that sacrifice, probably my life, would have meant nothing." She seemed to slump in her seat.

"What's wrong," Troi asked, standing. "Can we help you?"

"I'm sorry," the ambassador said, regaining herself, "but the only food I have had on this ship has been what the Captain has been kind enough to order for me. My bracelet does not let me eat, or drink, or even enter my own suite."

"And you have been here, in this lounge, the entire time?" asked Troi.

"Oh, I've taken walks, but yes, this has been my cabin."

Troi motioned for a waiter and asked for a menu. She handed it to the ambassador. "Order anything you like. We will use our bracelets."

The ambassador looked at them one by one, then remarked, "My dealings with Federation humans has been pleasant, and I find them to be exemplarily moral beings. So why are you doing this to my planet?"

"Right now," T'Rya said, "we cannot tell you. I will see about getting permission to explain it to you, but for the moment, please trust us when we say the alternative means there could be no more Federation."

"All because of Begemot?"

T'Rya nodded." "All because of Begemot."

The ambassador made her selections and Troi added something for herself. After T'Rya declined and Picard ordered a Qa't'a tea, Troi used her bracelet to order the items.

As the ambassador ate her first stew with gusto, she managed, "I do thank you. And I believe you. I can't imagine you are bad people."

"Lieutenant, while the ambassador eats, I would like a word with you. And… Lee, how far does your audio disrupter extend?"

The ambassador motioned to the table across the walkway. "You should be protected there. Just do not raise your voices."

Picard got up, crossed to the other side of the walkway and sat down. T'Rya joined him.

"Lieutenant, what the devil is going on?"

"Captain?"

"Don't play coy with me. Our mission is to make sure these talks go on without a hitch, not abuse the hopes of the Begemote masses!"

"It is true our mission is to ensure Begemot is part of the Federation, but that does not mean we abandon the people of this planet. You heard the ambassador, Captain, they are literally starving to death, and the situation will only escalate."

"The Federation does not interfere with the internal political or economic situations of its member planets without a legitimate request from

that Planet's leaders. You know this as well as I do!"

"But, Captain," T'Rya argued, we are ignoring the requirements to allow Begemot into the Federation. It seems to me any ethical high ground has been abandoned."

"So what are you proposing, Lieutenant?"

"Not much. We find a way to keep the ambassador in her position, and then use her as a liaison to the resistance on the planet. The moment any threat from the Tholians is over, we use that connection to help bring about the Begemote revolution."

"You're talking about two wrongs making a right?"

"What do you want from me, Captain?" T'Rya demanded. "Politics is ugly and morally ambiguous and all sorts of other nasty things. While you sail about in your ethically superior starship the ugly reality of politics still grinds on. Begemot will be inducted into the Federation, which is our failure. The very least I can do is offer its people some hope of redress while we betray our own principles to use them to our advantage."

Picard looked at T'Rya for a moment, his expression blank. "I cannot argue with your analysis, nor can I claim that your plans to help the people of Begemot are wrong. I am just not used to being in positions like these, and this is why I am content to remain the captain of a starship."

"Give me a few minutes to contact Starfleet Intelligence and get their approval to have the ambassador as our contact on Begemot."

"Very well, Lieutenant, and I'm not going to ask you how you can do that," Picard said ruefully, and he went back to the ambassador's table.

"I must apologize to you both," the ambassador said as they came to sit with her. She had finished two meals and was well into a third.

"No need to apologize," Troi said. "You've hardly eaten for days. But from now on that particular discomfort is over."

The ambassador bowed her head in thanks, and then continued eating.

Picard looked over at T'Rya, who nodded her head.

"Ambassador Lee," Picard began, "there is no way for us to prevent Begemot being inducted into the Federation, as we've mentioned, but how would you feel about being our liaison to the resistance on your planet?"

The ambassador looked up for a moment, her head cocked to one side. "But in a few hours, I will be found out, taken back to Begemot, and executed. I do not see how I could be of any help then."

Picard held up his hand. "For the moment, just assume we can help you avoid being caught, and after that we can funnel you resources so you can maintain your ambassadorship without issue. Would you be our conduit to the resistance?"

"I could not be more honored or willing, Captain. I live and breathe for the freedom of my people."

T'Rya returned to their table. "I have been advised by Starfleet Intelligence to offer you a position as our liaison to the resistance, and to provide you with whatever material assistance you require to maintain your position as Ambassador to the Federation."

"Captain Picard has mentioned the possibility, and I gratefully accept. I would do anything to end the suffering of my people."

"Very well," T'Rya replied, "the captain and the commander will return to their suites, while I remain to sort out the few details Starfleet Intelligence has asked me to disc*USS* with you." She turned to the captain. "I'm sorry, but this is classified, need to know at this point, so I'll need to be alone with the ambassador. I will join you in your suite, Captain, and we'll make our plans. Then we can return here and get organized."

"Very well," Picard agreed, and he and Troi left.

#

"I hope you have some sort of plan to avoid the ambassador being caught with a phony bracelet," Picard barked the moment T'Rya returned to his suite.

"It is really very simple, Captain," T'Rya explained, "one of us will switch bracelets with her."

"That doesn't seem possible," Troi objected, looking at her bracelet, "not without damaging it."

"Actually, it is quite simple. The bracelet will slide off if you dislocate your thumb."

"But even so, whoever switches with the ambassador will be caught, and executed," Troi complained.

"That is most unlikely," T'Rya went on, "The Begemot government is not going to execute a Federation Officer on the eve of joining the Federation. All the officer will have to do is admit to the crime and apologize, and will likely be deported to Earth with a warning never to return to the planet."

"It does seem unlikely their government would execute a foreigner for breaking their law in open space," Troi agreed. "The only question is, who will take her place?"

"I will," Picard announced. "As the senior officer I will only subject myself to the risk, and as a member of the Federation delegation and a Starfleet captain, they will think twice about executing me. I expect the faster they can get rid of me and back to Earth, the happier they'll be."

"Captain," T'Rya objected, "I am the one with the most experience with Begemote society and customs. It should be me."

"Our mission has changed, Lieutenant," Picard explained, "and as the senior officer I will not allow anyone else to face this threat but myself. If Starfleet Intelligence wants to court martial me after I get out of a Begemote prison, it can feel free. Am I clear?"

"Crystal, sir."

"Good," Picard said, standing up, "now let's get back to the ambassador and disc*USS* how to exchange our bracelets."

The trio stood and walked to the suite's door. As it opened, it stuck halfway. They felt a terrible shudder through the ship's hull. A few seconds later came a terrific *whump* sound, and dust began to sprinkle down from the ceiling. The blue light started blinking again, and an even louder klaxon began to sound.

Chapter 12

"Spacedock 135 for *Enterprise*."

"Go for *Enterprise*," Worf replied.

"Commander Strand for Commander Riker."

"Stand by, Spacedock," Worf answered, then keyed communication to the captain's ready room: "Commander Riker, communication from spacedock."

"Pipe it through to me here," Riker responded.

In the ready room, Riker stopped flicking playing cards at the opposite wall and sat up to face the display on the desk.

Commander Strand's face appeared: "Commander Riker, I have good news."

"Oh, please go ahead with that!" Riker said.

"The saucer section has been patched, so no more need for external force fields. Your crew can repair the internal damage as they have time. All three warp coils are replaced or repaired, and operating as expected, and

your starboard plasma reserves are at 100%. Mooring lines on the *Enterprise* are still not repaired, but you won't need those. The airlock is still exposed, but that will have to wait. In other words, *Enterprise*, it is time for you to fly the coop."

"I'm not going to forget this commander. Assuming I don't end up in a penal colony, they will hear me sing your praises all the way to Starfleet Command."

"As I said before, Commander Riker, our job is to make you ready to fly again. So fly, *Enterprise*, before you-know-who shows up."

"Affirmative, Spacedock, we are on our way, Riker out."

Riker jumped up from his chair and left the ready room. As he walked through the door to the bridge he barked, "Clear all temporary mooring lines. Stand by for hands-on spacedock exit."

"Hands-on?" Data enquired from ops.

"Yes Mr. Data, the second the mooring lines are free, give me one quarter impulse power out of spacedock."

Data turned as if to question these orders, but took one look at Riker and kept quiet. "Mooring lines free. One quarter impulse power."

The *Enterprise* jumped out of spacedock like a shocked rabbit. The massive structure quickly became a tiny metal jewel reflecting sunlight in the distance.

On the far side of the spacedock, another ship jumped in from warp.

"Set a course for the *Queen's* last known position."

"Course laid in, sir."

"Commander," Worf interrupted from his security station, "we are receiving an urgent hail from the ship that just jumped in."

"No time Mr. Worf. Helm, warp six. Engage."

And the *Enterprise* disappeared in a flash of light.

#

Commander Riker sat on the couch in the captain's ready room. He stared at the empty chair. "Well Captain, looks like I just got myself a court martial. I think I did things the way you would, and I'm glad I'll be going down for this and not you." He sighed and stood. "Do you think…"

"Commander," Worf interrupted over the intercom.

"Go ahead."

"We are receiving a subspace message from Starfleet Intelligence. We are ordered to return to Spacedock 135."

"No response."

"Yes, sir."

Riker looked one more time at the empty chair. "Well?" Then he turned and entered the bridge.

Data stood up from the captain's chair.

"You like it, Data? Might not be mine for long."

"Sir?"

"Helm, time to the *Queen's* last known coordinates?"

"Fifteen hours, five minutes present speed.

"Data, how much faster at warp nine?"

"I should remind you, Commander, that we have not performed any simulations or field tests on the warp engines. Running beyond warp six is not recommended until such tests are completed."

"I understand that, Mr. Data, but what kind of time difference could we make?"

Before Data could answer, Worf's station registered an incoming message. "New message coming in sir. It's an automated message call from the *Queen of Begemot*. She is now declaring an emergency."

"How much time can we save, Data?"

"At warp nine, twelve hours, eighteen minutes."

"Helm, increase speed to warp nine."

"Aye, sir."

"The *Queen* is listing its crew complement. Fifty-seven officers, 23 Begemote delegates, 21 Federation delegates, and… 2,900 construction workers and support staff. And, Commander, Captain Picard and Commander Troi are listed as two of the Federation delegates."

"What? Hail the ship."

Worf used his console to send a hail. After a few moments of waiting, he looked up. "No reply sir."

Riker got up. "I'll be in the ready room."

Data stood up from ops. "Commander Riker."

"Yes."

"As we have several hours before we arrive, may I ask if now is a good time to disc*USS* my concerns?"

"Not now, Data. Contact Commander La Forge and Dr. Crusher, and have them meet me and yourself in the observation room in ten minutes. We're going to need an action plan to evacuate almost 3,000 people to the *Enterprise*."

"Yes sir," Data agreed, and returned to ops. He keyed his panel. "Commander La Forge, Dr. Crusher, please report to the observation room in ten minutes."

Riker left the bridge for the ready room.

#

"Here is what we know. In just under three hours the *Enterprise* will intercept the *Queen's* last known position. We don't know if she's still there, or what condition she's in, so we will assume she's right where we're headed and in a desperate situation. I need an evacuation plan to get up to

three thousand people off a three-and-a-half-kilometer-long starship and on board the *Enterprise*.

"Not a problem Commander," La Forge explained, "using transporters, it should take all of 30 minutes."

"Assuming no one is critically injured," Dr. Crusher interjected. "Those too unstable for transport will need to be evacuated by shuttle. That could take anywhere from thirty minutes to several hours, depending on their distance from a shuttlebay or docking port."

"All right, let's get into details," Riker began.

"Commander," Data interrupted, "if I may. The people of Begemot have a strict taboo against replicator and transporter technology. We may transport the Federation delegates out, but not anyone from Begemot without their explicit permission."

"Can we contact their government, get an okay?"

"From the details I have uncovered, there is no official government position on replicators or transporters. The people are left to their own conscience on the matter. However, given the severe social consequences people who use such technology face—social isolation, eviction, even loss of livelihood—we could not in good conscience transport someone from the ship without their express personal permission."

Riker sat back and stroked his beard, then sighed. "Well," he said, "our sprint has just turned into a marathon. Suggestions?"

"What about attaching the *Enterprise* to a docking port via the gangway?" Dr. Crusher suggested.

"The gangway was destroyed when we tore out of spacedock," La Forge explained, "and we didn't make it a repair priority, so the airlock is exposed to space and we'd have no gangway to deploy even if it wasn't."

"But could we manufacture something?" Riker asked

"In two hours? I'm good commander, but not that good. And we can't repair the airlock while we're at warp."

"If we have to use shuttles to get everyone off the ship, then we'll be there a lot longer than two hours. Make preparations to repair the airlock and manufacture whatever you can now to replace the gangway. Even if it doesn't work out, we can use the airlock for shuttles to disembark. That will give us five locations to get passengers onto the *Enterprise*, instead of just the three shuttlebays."

"How many shuttles does the *Queen* have?" Crusher asked.

Data consulted the PADD before him on the table. "Twenty supershuttles with 100-person capacity, and 25 lifeboats capable of holding 3,000."

"Well then our problem's solved. We get everyone into one of those lifeboats and have them detach from the ship," said Commander Riker, smacking his hand on the conference table.

"Not quite, Commander," Data interrupted, "these are the specifications for the completed ship. Currently she is involved in shakedown runs. While the lifeboats are all in place, they lack any propulsion, navigation, or life support systems."

"And the supershuttles?"

"Currently only three on board."

Riker sighed again. "Well, that's 300 people per trip we didn't have before. Geordi, how many shuttles can we get running in two hours?"

"I can get the eleven on-call ready in about two hours. We'll skip over everything but propulsion and life support checks. I'll have three more cargo shuttles and two more personal shuttles in four hours. Plus we have six shuttlepods that can be up in two or three hours. And the Captain's Yacht should be flightworthy. Give me a couple hours on that."

"Okay. Data, I need you to coordinate with Geordi on how many shuttles we can get in the air, what capacity we can handle, and these are short flights so overload them all you like, keeping in mind we don't know how many airlocks or shuttlebays are available on the *Queen*, and that we only have four means of docking with the *Enterprise*. When you have the

numbers, get together with Dr. Crusher and start working out a detailed plan to use that capacity to its maximum. Just in case, do one scenario with the supershuttles from the Begemot and one without. We don't know what kind of state they're in either."

La Forge, Crusher, and Data said "Yes, sir" simultaneously, and the meeting broke up.

<p style="text-align:center">#</p>

"Coming up on the *Queen of Begemot's* last known position," Data called from ops.

"Long range scanners?"

"The ship appears to be where we expected her to be," Data replied, "however, EM emissions from her are barely detectable. Warp drive is offline. There appears to be a great deal of debris around the ship."

"Life signs?"

"We are still too far out, Commander."

"Time to intercept?"

"Three minutes, 18 seconds."

"All right. Shields up. Mr. Worf."

"Sir."

"Ready all weapons. We're going in blind. I'm not expecting a fight, but let's be ready for anything. And Worf, if we do get into a fight, try to

keep that black eye on the saucer section out of trouble."

"Aye, sir," Worf replied, a note of satisfaction in his voice. He tapped on his panel. "Phasers armed. Torpedoes loaded."

"Coming up on the *Queen*, sir," the Ensign at con announced.

"Drop from warp, one half impulse power."

"One half impulse, aye, sir."

"Let's see the *Begemot*," Riker ordered.

"On screen," Data replied, setting the viewer to display the stricken ship. It appeared to be a silver tube, but fuzzy at the edges.

"Magnify."

"Times ten magnification."

Now the tube was much longer, and it was possible to see six silver half circles appearing to jut out of a long, central back.

"Again, Mr. Data."

"Times one hundred magnification."

Now the *Queen of Begemot* was large enough to see surface details. The earlier fuzziness was due to the vast amount of debris floating around her. Four of the six saucer projections looked collapsed and were venting atmosphere.

"Give me a damage report, Mr. Data."

"The *Queen of Begemot* appears to have undergone multiple implosions. Due to the expansion of the debris fields around each saucer section, the order of destruction appears to have been forward starboard, then port, center port, then starboard. The aft port saucer is also starting to lose its structural integrity. I estimate ten minutes before it collapses."

"Life signs?"

"I detect approximately 500 life signs in the aft port saucer, and approximately 160 in the aft starboard saucer."

"Hail them, Mr. Worf."

"Aye, sir." A pause. "It is the same as before, an automated distress call, but no response."

"Commander," Data interrupted, "the central spine of the ship is decompressing as well. The forward area is about to collapse."

As they watched on the main viewer, several hundred meters of the central spine of the Begemot crushed in on itself. The forward section of the ship began to twist, as if it was trying to scratch its back with one of the saucer sections. The upper nacelle broke away from the hull and began to buckle at the next pylon holding it in place.

"All right, we have to get in there now," Riker announced. "Order the shuttles to begin evacuation. Focus on the aft port saucer."

"Commander, it appears a shuttle is emerging from the rear shuttlebay."

As they watched, a very large shuttle flew out of the shuttlebay at the aft of the ship and headed towards the *Enterprise*. Two more shuttles suddenly detached from the aft starboard saucer and angled to meet the first. Then, two of the shuttles veered off from the *Enterprise* and jumped to warp. The other one continued to close the distance with the *Enterprise*.

"Hail that shuttle."

"They are responding. Audio only."

"Let's hear it."

"This is Captain Picard. Are you receiving?"

"Captain, this is Commander Riker. What the hell is going on?"

"No time, Number One. Transport us off this death trap and prepare for rescue operations on the aft port saucer section of the *Queen*."

"Yes sir. Data, inform the transporter room to get everyone off that shuttle."

"Aye. sir."

Riker keyed the panel on his chair's right arm: "Geordi, it's time to go. Concentrate rescue operations on the aft port saucer. There should be 500 survivors."

"Aye, sir," La Forge replied.

"Ops, get that shuttle in a tractor beam as soon as everyone is removed. I'll be in the transporter room. Mr. Data, you have the bridge." Then Riker jumped out of his chair and headed for the turbolift.

"Commander!" Data said urgently, "the aft port saucer has lost its structural integrity. It is imploding."

As the bridge crew watched, the saucer section seemed to vibrate for a moment, then collapsed on itself like a failed cake in an oven. Debris flew out of all the new rips and tears in the hull.

"Five hundred people," Riker said quietly. "Life signs on the *Queen*?"

Data tapped the ops pad. "None, Commander."

"Inform Commander La Forge and Dr. Crusher that we have switched to a salvage operation from rescue. Keep an eye on her warp core. No unnecessary risks."

"Aye sir."

"You have the bridge, Mr. Data," Riker added, then he stepped into the turbolift. Once the door closed he called, "Transporter room three," and leaned against the turbolift wall, shoulders slumped.

Outside the transporter room milled a couple dozen federation delegates. Security was taking them away by ones and twos to their quarters. Riker made his way through the door.

"That's all but two, Commander," the transporter technician explained. Riker held up his hand in a "hold on" gesture, and proceeded to usher the last of the delegates out the door.

"Okay, bring them over."

"Aye, sir," said the technician, and in few seconds Picard and Troi were materializing on the transporter pad.

Chapter 13

"Another implosion?" Troi asked over the din.

"Yes, that makes four," Picard agreed, "we could be next."

"Alert, alert," a voice came over the ship's intercom, then it continued in Begemote, seeming to repeat the Standard: "Evacuate, evacuate. This is by order of the captain. All delegates proceed to the docking port on deck five of their sections to the waiting shuttles. Bridge crew to the shuttle bay. All support and construction personnel, report to the lifeboats situated on the lower deck of the spine, beneath the keel nacelle." The message kept repeating, Standard then Begemot.

"We have to get to the ambassador!" Picard ordered. "You two head to the shuttle on deck five. I'll switch bracelets with the ambassador and meet you there.

Picard found the ambassador in the lounge at her table. Some of the ceiling panels had given away, and conduits and other material hung down, swinging gently.

"Ambassador," Picard said as he came up to her table, "did you hear the evacuation order?"

"Yes captain, I did. I was just sitting here for a moment collecting my thoughts."

"We must switch our bracelets before you get to your shuttle." Picard pointed at the ambassador's bracelet. Her hand was wrapped in some kind of bandage. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"It's nothing, Captain. Please sit down."

"We have very little time. Our saucer could be next."

"Please sit down, Captain, we need to talk."

Picard, realizing something was very wrong, sat down opposite her.

"I have changed my mind."

"I don't understand."

"I am not going to switch bracelets with anyone. I am going to be caught."

"But they will execute you."

"Perhaps. But I will threaten them with a show trial that will upset carts of apples all the way to the Federation Council. They will not want that. Instead, I will broker a prison sentence. They have no interest in creating martyrs."

"But all you have worked for…"

"Is being destroyed by your Federation accepting Begemot!" the ambassador barked. "You have set us back decades, and now you care about our struggle? The battle will still be there when I get out of prison, a old broken woman. Now go. Back to your world with its secrets and compromise. I know you have a good heart, Captain, but that is not enough to sustain my people."

"Ambassador. Lee."

"Goodbye, Captain. What is that saying? May the wind be at your back."

Picard sighed. "Goodbye, Ambassador. I hope we may meet again."

"Perhaps, Captain. Of all things, possibility is the only certainty."

#

Picard made his way down to deck five section alpha, only to see Troi arguing with some armed Begemote guards. One of them had lieutenant T'Rya in restraints. Clearly they had been rough. Her bracelet hand was black and blue from the thumb to the wrist.

"What is going on here?"

"Captain, they are saying T'Rya's bracelet is a forgery."

"I am Captain Picard and a member of the Federation delegation. You will let my lieutenant free!"

"We gave you a priceless bracelet and what do you do? Replace it with a forgery? We've been looking at your food purchases, with you and this one," the guard pointed at Troi," you have made multiple purchases. Selling our priceless bracelet and then using the others to feed your greedy mouths. Get on your shuttle before I arrest the lot of you!"

"Go, Captain," T'Rya begged, "before the rest of this ship collapses!"

"Where are you taking her?"

"She will be on our shuttle, with the bridge crew. I expect you can watch her execution on Begemote vid-broadcast in the coming weeks."

With this, the Begemote guard dragged T'Rya with them towards a people mover.

"We have to stop them," Picard shouted at Troi.

"No Captain, we must…"

Just then a massive shockwave came through the ship.

"That could be the last saucer before ours. Captain, we have to go!" Troi yelled over the groaning of the ship's structure.

Picard looked down the hallway where the Begemot guards had disappeared with Lieutenant T'Rya, then gritted his teeth and followed Troi through the airlock into the shuttle.

Inside was pandemonium. The Federation delegates were all talking at once. Picard and Troi made their way to the command section, but no

pilot had been provided.

"We're on our own, apparently," Picard said, taking the left command chair.

"We need to close the airlock and get away from the ship," Troi replied, as she sat beside the captain. They could feel the shuttle vibrating with the Begemot's death throes.

Without warning, the airlock on the shuttle shut and locked on its own. Looking out the viewscreen, they could see the section Beta shuttle ahead of them. Their shuttle suddenly separated from the airlock, and in their forward view the other shuttle separated at the same time.

"The shuttles are being remotely operated," Picard said, still trying to make sense of the Begemote control panel.

As they watched, helpless, the two shuttles maneuvered in tandem onto the same heading.

"Look, Captain, a starship," Troi announced, pointing out the forward view. Off in the distance they could make out the distinct forward profile of a Galaxy class starship.

The other shuttle suddenly peeled away and began to fly in formation with a third shuttle emerging from the Begemot's shuttlebay. As the two shuttles jumped into warp, the engines of their shuttle shut down.

"Find a way to open a channel to that ship commander." They both carefully scrutinized their panels.

"Captain, I think that might be reporting an incoming hail," Troi pointed to a new light blinking in her panel. She touched it. Two separated lights linked together.

Picard spoke out loud: "This is Captain Picard. Are you receiving?"

"Captain, this is Commander Riker. What the hell is going on?"

"No time, Number One. Transport us off this death trap and prepare for rescue operations on the aft port saucer section of the Begemot."

"Yes sir."

"Let's get everyone ready, Commander." They moved back into the rear of the shuttle.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Picard called out, "if I could have your attention. The *USS Enterprise* is here and will be transporting us over in a moment. Please stand up and prepare for transport."

The transporters began to take bites of the shuttle's occupants, until only Picard and Troi were left.

Before they were finally transported, Troi heard Picard mutter under his breath, "Starfleet Intelligence."

#

"Number One, how is the rescue situation?" Picard asked as he stepped off the transporter.

"The fifth saucer has imploded, and the backbone and sixth saucer will be failing soon. Rescue operations have ceased. We're in recovery mode now."

"There were almost three thousand people on that ship, Commander. I heard the captain order the workers to evacuate via the lifeboats attached to the keel of the ship."

They left the transporter room and headed towards the bridge.

"The technical specifications of the *Queen of Begemot* says that while the lifeboats are attached to the ship, none of them has any propulsion, navigation, or life support," Riker explained.

"Bridge to Commander Riker," came over Riker's com badge.

Riker tapped his badge. "Go ahead."

"A starship has just warped in. It is a Federation starship, but of unknown class. It has no visible name or designation. We are being hailed."

"Understood, Bridge," Picard interrupted. "Let them eat static until I arrive."

As they entered the turbolift Picard asked Riker, "do you know anything about this, Number One?"

"Probably, sir. I'm guessing it's Starfleet Intelligence, here for my career. Bridge!"

"Belay that," Picard interrupted. "I want to get out of this," he said, pulling at his grey wrap. "Deck eight." He turned to Riker conspiratorially and said "A little more static won't hurt."

Riker smiled. They got off on deck eight and the captain retrieved a uniform from his from his quarters. Once back on the turbolift and on the way to the bridge, he said, "You've been busy, have you, Commander? It's equally likely that ship is here for my pips." Picard tapped his com badge. "Security!"

"Lieutenant Commander Worf, here sir."

"Worf, get someone down to the delegates and find Rear-Admiral Ta'Ping. Ask him to report to the bridge as soon as possible."

"Aye, sir."

"And Mr. Worf, inform him he's needed to disappoint Starfleet Intelligence."

"Yes, sir."

The turbolift doors opened and the three walked onto the bridge, taking their customary seats.

"All right, Mr. Worf, open a channel to the other ship."

"It is audio only."

"Very well."

Worf keyed the channel open.

"*USS Enterprise*, by order of Starfleet Command, heave-to and prepare to be boarded. This is your last warning. Reply."

Picard swiped his hand under his chin.

"Mute," Worf announced.

"I can't imagine someone is about to start a civil war, but what kind of armaments do they have, Mr. Worf?"

"Three phaser arrays and 15 torpedo launchers. There is also a forward-mounted launch bay with 8 armed shuttles of a configuration I've never seen, all powering up."

"So, powerful, but hardly a match for the *Enterprise*. Unmute."

"Go ahead, Captain."

"Unidentified Starfleet vessel, this is Captain Picard on board the *USS Enterprise*, requesting visual communications."

"Captain Picard, visual communications denied due to security protocols. Are Commander Riker, Lieutenant Commander Data, and Lieutenant Commander La Forge on board?"

"They are."

"*Enterprise*, you will heave-to and prepare to be boarded. Have these three individuals arrested and clear out your Engineering section for our

sweep team.”

“Unknown vessel, I will do no such thing. I do not bow to a nameless, faceless authority that claims it is acting for Starfleet.”

Picard sat back down in his chair. “Cut communication. Raise the shields.”

“Aye, sir,” Worf said and worked quickly, “communications closed and shields up.”

The other starship suddenly launched its odd shuttles, which looked more like small fighting ships. Once they were all clear of the forward launch bay Worf said, “The other ship has launched its fighter-shuttles and raised shields.”

“Tactical assessment of these smaller vehicles, Mr. Worf.”

“I find nothing in the Starfleet registry, but my scans show a crew of eight, high-capacity field generators, fully-functional warp core, six phaser arrays, and two photon torpedo launchers.”

“Well, now, those fighter craft swing the odds more to even,” Picard said, mostly to himself.

The turbolift doors opened and Admiral Ta’Ping walked through, followed by an *Enterprise* security officer.

“Admiral on the Bridge,” Picard announced, as he, Riker, and Troi all stood.

"As you were, everyone," Ta'Ping said, waving his hand. "Oh my," he said, looking at the other starship and its swarm of fighter bees buzzing about it, "looks like Starfleet Intelligence has put on their navy blues, Captain. If I am not mistaken, that is the newest addition to the fleet, though it won't be announced active for several months. A cruiser/carrier, Akira class. Given our location, I'm guessing it is the *USS Specter*, commanded by Captain Goodall."

"They appear to be spoiling for a fight, Admiral, demanding I heave-to and hand over three of my officers."

"Charges?"

"Their say-so."

"Open a channel, please, full audio and video."

Picard nodded at Worf, who worked his panel and then looked up. "Channel open."

"Captain," Data reported from ops, "the sixth saucer is about to collapse, along with the rest of the central areas of the *Queen*."

"Very good, Mr. Data, keep monitoring and let us know if anything changes."

"Aye sir."

"*USS Specter*, this is Rear-Admiral Ta'Ping. Captain Goodall, you are interfering in search and rescue operations, and impeding the Federation's

delegation to the Begemot petition to join the United Federation of Planets. Are you threatening to blow us up?"

Before any response, the eight mini ships and the *Specter* all dropped shields, and one by one the smaller ships began to line up and land in the rear shuttle bay.

Suddenly the bridge of the *Specter* appeared. Captain Goodall looked like someone who'd just been called to his superior's office and so had to control himself. Which was the case.

"Admiral Ta'Ping, I had no idea. We are under orders and are not at liberty to share them. Commander Riker has stolen the *Enterprise* with some very sensitive technology on board."

"Stolen!" Ta'Ping said, sounding surprised. "Is this true, Captain Picard? Has your first officer stolen your ship from you?"

"Not at all, Admiral," Picard replied, clearly enjoying himself. "As a matter of fact he just brought the *Enterprise* back to me, responding to our distress call from the *Queen of Begemot*. As you can see, that ship is in its final death throes."

"Commander Strand at Spacedock 135 received our orders to quarantine the *Enterprise* before you departed."

"Commander Riker, is this the case?" the Admiral asked, turning towards him.

Riker stood. "It's possible, Admiral. We were all in a frenzy to get the *Enterprise* space worthy, as we were the only Federation ship within range to help the *Begemot*. I can't blame Commander Strand if she was too busy to sit down for some light reading. We all were, sir."

"I know Commander Strand," said Admiral Ta'Ping. "In fact, I used some of my sway to get her command of that spacedock. She gets ships fixed up and back in the fight faster and with more efficiency and safety than any other spacedock in the sector. If she, and a decorated officer such as Commander Riker, accidentally missed your orders in a desperate hurry to save lives, we can hardly blame them. And since the *Enterprise* is Captain Picard's command, we can hardly say Commander Riker bringing his ship to him is theft."

Captain Goodall looked like someone playing checkers who's made a stupid move and just lost half his pieces in a one-jump massacre.

"Nevertheless, Admiral, the *Enterprise* carries some very sensitive technology that must be turned over to Starfleet Intelligence."

"Commander Riker, please explain," the admiral requested.

"The *Enterprise* computer was infected with a piece of foreign software, but we were able to shut down the ship and purge it just as we did five years ago. It will all be in my official log, sir."

"And so this technology was lost?"

"Yes, sir. We just did what we did the last time in order to save the ship. I will reference our previous logs in mine for background."

"But, Admiral, I have orders…"

"Another ship is dropping out of warp, Captain," Worf interrupted.

"On screen."

The viewscreen showed a Federation starship moving towards them. Both of her nacelles were smoking violently.

"It is the *USS Rutledge*, sir."

"They should still be three days away. Looks like they burned themselves up getting here," Riker said.

"Hail them, Mr. Worf."

"Aye, sir. Channel open."

"*USS Rutledge*, this is the *Enterprise*."

"This is Captain Khatri. Looks like we're late to the party."

"Not at all, Captain," Admiral Ta'Ping announced. "Please put up both ships in conference mode."

Picard nodded to Worf.

"Conference mode."

On the forward viewer, the screen was split between the captains of both ships.

"Captain Khatri, this is Captain Goodall of Starfleet Intelligence, in command of the *USS Specter*. Captain Goodall, this is Captain Khatri of the *USS Rutledge*."

"Admiral!" Captain Goodall objected. "You are threatening Starfleet security!"

"Am I?" asked Admiral Ta'Ping, feigning ignorance. "As far as I can tell, I'm not the one chasing a non-stolen starship with a nonexistent piece of secret alien technology, and conversing with not one but two Starfleet captains about internal details of Starfleet Intelligence."

"This is not over, Admiral," Goodall growled.

"Oh yes it is, Captain, unless you'd like to wait around for a third ship to conference with."

The connection with the *Specter* suddenly cut out. In half the main viewer, they watched the starship make a tight 180 degree turn and jump into warp.

"Well, Admiral, Captain," said Captain Khatri, "I don't know what any of that was about, but I'm going to forget it ever happened."

"You look like you might be burning," Picard replied. "Do you need any assistance?"

"Thanks, but no, Captain," Khatri replied. "We just overheated on the way here. We'll need an hour or two to let our warp coils cool down. The

smoke is us venting them.”

“Good sailing then, Captain Khatri, we must be off.”

“Good to see you, Captain Picard, Admiral.”

The communication cut out and the view screen filled out to show the *Rutledge* slowly drifting, the smoke from her nacelles already diminishing.

“I don't envy making his log entry tonight,” Picard said to the Admiral, “and I'm not comfortable with Captain Goodall threatening you.”

“There is only one thing he wants Captain, for this all to never have happened. I recommend the three of us leave it out of our logs in the interest of Starfleet security, and when he breaks into them illegally and reads them, the fact he and his ship are never mentioned will calm him down. Now, I'd like to get back to my quarters and have a rest. It has been a trying few days.”

“No doubt, Admiral. Thank you for all your help.” Picard looked to the security officer who had brought the admiral to the bridge. “See the admiral gets to his quarters.”

“Sir!”

“Well, Number One, I thought I'd come on board with a more exciting tale to tell than you for once. But it looks like you may have beaten me again. Did you really steal my ship?”

“Let's say I borrowed it without permission,” Riker replied, smiling.

"We'll talk later. In the meantime, I need some rest. Will you see to the delegates, get them wherever Starfleet wants them, and then repair my ship?"

"Yes sir, I know just the place to get her fixed up."

"You have the bridge, Number One."

Chapter 14

Troi stood quietly before the massive iron door. The Begemote guard stood, glaring at her. A speaker above the door clicked on.

"Cell?"

"Eight six one five six," the guard barked.

There was a buzz and the steel door unlatched. The guard swung it open. Troi stepped back to avoid being hit. The guard did not apologize.

"Through this door. Look for cell eight six one five six," the guard explained. "You have twenty of your minutes."

Troi grabbed the universal translator on a string around her neck and shivered. Beyond the door was a dark, claustrophobic corridor with steel doors at set intervals on each side.

"Now!" the guard barked.

Troi jumped, then proceeded in. She was barely through the door frame when the door slammed shut with a terrific bang, followed by the sound of the electronic latch snapping shut.

As she walked along, she could see nothing in any of the cells. The walls appeared to be glass, but they were blackened to opaque. On each door was a number, so she kept walking, looking for 86156.

And there it was, although she didn't need to look at the number—the glass had been turned transparent. As she walked over to the cell, a harsh light turned on inside, exposing every nook and cranny. There was a metal bucket attached to the wall with a tap just above it, dripping slightly. A tiny, filthy mattress lay on the floor. There were no sheets or blankets. Not even a pillow. In the middle of the room in what Troi guessed was a form of Vulcan meditation style, T'Rya sat on the hard stone floor, legs crossed, eyes closed. She still wore the same Begemote wrap Troi had seen her in almost three weeks ago. The purple scarf was gone.

T'Rya's face was covered in bruises. Her upper lip was badly smashed, bruised and bloated. On her right side what looked like blood had apparently seeped into her clothing and dried.

"T'Rya?" Troi called.

At the sound of Troi's voice, T'Rya opened her eyes. Troi inhaled in shock. T'Rya's eyes were sunken and hollow, her face a skeletal mask. But she smiled, despite the ruined lip.

"Ah, Counselor Troi, what a pleasant surprise!"

Troi, usually a stickler to have her rank used rather than her profession, ignored this, instead saying, "T'Rya, what has happened to you?"

"I've been three weeks in a Begemote jail awaiting trial."

"Are they starving you?"

"On Begemot, prisoners in jail awaiting trial are considered innocent until proven guilty. As such, they are expected to purchase their own food and drink. I unfortunately do not have any currency on this planet, nor anyone to load my prison account."

"So the poor just starve to death."

"No, there are labor camps where we can be put to work in order to earn food, but my hands are too alien to work the machines they employ. However, when a person is convicted, they become a ward of the State, and are guaranteed shelter, food, and water."

"I will go and speak to someone right now," Troi said quickly.

"That would not be wise, Troi… do you mind if I call you Troi?"

"Call me Deanna. Why is it not wise?"

"The Begemote are quite a xenophobic culture. I have more than once been the subject of verbal and physical abuse by the guards. Also, as there are only lower castes in this prison, I am seen as a kind of hex—one who has put their social movements for justice behind by decades, by giving the

Begemote government legitimacy and access to Federation resources. Given the opportunity, my fellow prisoners tend to attack me as well. I have had to harm many of them in self-defense."

"And your side?"

"A lucky slash with a homemade knife in the showers. It has already healed over."

"Well, the least I can do is arrange for some credits in your account. I will have that for you by the end of the day."

"I would appreciate that. Even meditating all the time I can, I am beginning to succumb to starvation. Much longer and I will no longer be able to defend myself successfully."

"Your trial is next week."

"So soon?"

"Yes, and I've been talking with your counsel."

"You have? Strange. They will not let me meet with him."

"Well, it's all been arranged. You will plead guilty, the court will berate you, and you will be deported to the nearest Starfleet location, with a warning never to return to Begemot. So only a week more."

"I am not pleading guilty."

"What? If you don't, they will sentence you to life. Or even death."

"They will not sentence me to death. Not while they still wait for word on their application for entrance to the Federation. Even then, as such a new member in a Federation that does not permit the death penalty, they are unlikely to execute me."

"I don't understand. You could be home in a week."

"I've never really had a home. I have only found a series of higher and higher mountains that I thought climbing would give life meaning. But here, in the most miserable place I have ever been, among a people who hate outsiders, mixed in with revolutionaries who blame me for destroying their future, I have found my greatest mountain.

"This place, this planet, is an abomination. What the Federation has done by endorsing it cannot be ignored."

"I don't understand."

"I am going to dedicate my life to fighting the injustice on this planet. Starfleet Intelligence is already in touch with Ambassador Lee, and they will ensure she maintains the material facade she needs to remain as an ambassador. Perhaps she may even be elected into the government.

"Once I am convicted, she and I will work together. Through her, Starfleet Intelligence will keep tabs on me, and through them the ambassador and I will agitate for social change."

"But you can't do this as an officer in Starfleet."

"No, which is why the moment I am convicted I will resign from Starfleet and surrender my Vulcan citizenship. I hope by doing this to convince the people here that I am sincere about bringing change to Begemot. I'll have burned all my bridges, you see." T'Rya managed a wan smile. On her starved face it looked ghastly.

Despite her best effort, a tear escaped and ran down Troi's cheek. At that moment there was a loud buzz. The harsh light turned off, and the glass between them became completely opaque.

From out of the darkness came a voice: "Goodbye, Deanna. Live long and prosper."

Chapter 15

It was quiet in Ten Forward. A few single people reading, a few couples talking. In the forward starboard corner, pressed up against the windows, Data, La Forge, and Riker sat together at a table.

"Thank you both for speaking with me," Data said.

"Of course, Data," La Forge replied.

"The situation with the Iconian program in Engineering appears to have some inconsistencies, no doubt because I was unconscious and lost part of my memory. I was hoping you could both help me to piece together the events of those moments."

"Well, Data," Riker began, "we did make our personal logs of the incident. Have you read them?"

"Yes sir, I have. But they do not clear up the inconsistencies. In some ways, they make more."

"How's that?" Riker asked.

"Well, in both your logs you suggest, without knowing for certain, that the Iconian program jumped from the phaser and into me using the wireless log-submission protocol."

"That was our best guess, right," La Forge agreed.

"There are two problems with this theory. One, I do not receive wireless traffic automatically. It is one of my built-in security features. And while I am capable of doing so, I have to actively engage with a wireless signal on a per-connection basis. I would not have allowed the phaser access to my network, knowing it was compromised by the Iconian software. Also, I do not have the protocols to handshake with a ship's phaser, even if I did open a port to communicate with it. Finally, when we first encountered the Iconian program in that phaser, so much of the phaser's resources were used to contain the program that none of its systems could operate, including the wireless. This is how we discovered the problem in the first place."

"Those do appear to be inconsistencies," La Forge agreed, looking at Riker, "but you know, it all happened so fast. Maybe the Iconian program figured out how to use the phaser's wireless the second time around. It's really hard to say."

"Indeed, there are many possible scenarios. However, I later discovered that the interface access on my neck had been opened, and the

wired communications port used. At some point the cable must have been jerked, because it damaged the plug, which needed minor repair. No such damage was evident on my self-diagnostic three days earlier."

"Well, Data," La Forge began.

"No, that's enough Geordi," Riker interrupted. "Data, do you believe Geordi and I are your friends?"

Data did not hesitate. "Yes, sir, I do."

"Do you believe we would do anything to hurt you, or to sneak around behind your back and use you without your permission?"

"I cannot imagine such a situation, Commander Riker."

"Then let me put it this way. What we did, we did to protect ourselves, you, and the Federation. What that means is the two of us," he pointed to La Forge and himself, "will have to carry something with us that we are not proud of until the day we die. But we did manage to avoid you having to do the same thing."

"Ah, I believe I understand. I was a willing participant in, among other things, the erasure of my own willingness to participate. Very clever, Commander."

"Just as long as you and I are all right Data," Geordi said, reaching over and squeezing Data's shoulder.

"Of course, Geordi. I have already forgotten that I forgot about it."

Riker and La Forge both laughed.

Data looked perplexed as the stars began to blur and flash. The *Enterprise* had jumped to warp.

Chapter 16

Captain Picard was in his quarters, holding a book in each hand. His gaze travelled from one spine to the other, until finally settling on one and putting the other back on the bookshelf. He then walked over to the food replicator and demanded: "Tea, Earl Grey, hot."

He picked up his tea, set it down on the coffee table, then sat down on his couch with a sigh. He opened the book and began to read.

The doorbell to his quarters trilled. With a sigh he closed his book. "Come!"

The door opened and Troi came in.

"Ah, Commander," Picard said, getting up and gesturing to the chair in front of him, "please take a seat. I was just having some tea. Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you," Troi said as she sat down. She looked uncomfortable and pensive.

"Just back from your visit to Begemot?"

"Yes sir."

"And how is Lieutenant T'Rya?"

"She hasn't been fed since she arrived. Prisoners awaiting trial are expected to pay for their own food and water. She's been drinking from a leaky tap and meditating to ward off starvation."

"That is outrageous!" Picard stormed. "I will contact the Federation Council and we'll put a stop to this."

"There's no need, Captain. Before I left Begemot I put some credits in her account, and her trial is in four days."

"Savages."

"She's been regularly beaten by the guards, and attacked by the other prisoners, Captain. Including a knife attack in the showers."

"Well, it'll be over in four days, at least."

"She's not pleading guilty."

"What the devil?"

"She intends to fight the charges. When she's convicted she will resign from Starfleet and surrender her Vulcan citizenship. She plans to fight with the Begemotes for their freedom."

"Back on the *Queen of Begemot*, as I stood on the bridge and saw those bodies flying out of the decompressed saucer, and I think of all the help staff who served us food and cleaned the ship, all of them sacrificed by

the Captain to make sure they did not try for the only working shuttles."

Picard sighed. "Someone needs to help them. Clearly the Federation will not."

"Was it worth it?"

"We have our buffer against the Tholians. The Federation will continue to exist for another day."

"Is that enough?"

"No, no, I don't suppose it is. And yet, here we are."

THE END

SAI (Space Accident Investigations) Report

~~Eyes Only~~

From: Starfleet Intelligence

Summary:

On stardate 48061.5, The *Queen of Begemot* sustained micro-meteor damage to its starboard forward saucer, number two. The damage was due to a failure of the phased radioactive armor system. The saucer was occupied by 495 workers, who were completing that section of the ship. The meteor damage was minimal, but did penetrate into the secondary hull of the saucer section, which began to vent atmosphere. Workers evacuated the affected decks (five and six), but the pressure differential between the decks with atmosphere and those without eventually caused a catastrophic failure of the entire structure, leading to a complete implosion of the affected decks and the destruction and venting of the remaining eight decks into space. There were no survivors.

The designers and engineers who built The *Queen of Begemot* are on record as claiming the invulnerability of the ship even in the face of such catastrophic damage. Airtight bulkheads are automatically deployed in this situation, separating each saucer section from the others, and the bridge and crew compartments from the saucers and each other.

Due to early trials, and in order to cause less inconvenience, the engineers decided to double the automated people movers by running a second line above the original. Each of these doubled lines traversed the area where the bulkheads were to close. The original people mover tubes had been controlled for by making a cutout in the doors and having them close over the tubes, making airtight seals. Adding the additional tubes so late in development meant the safety and integrity checks were already complete. In short, the second tubes were added, but no modifications of the bulkhead doors were made to accommodate them. When the emergency began with the original decompression, the doors attempted to shut, but were prevented from making an airtight seal by the second tube.

As they were improperly sealed, the bulkhead doors allowed a slow decompression of the inner decks of each saucer section, one by one. Because of the bulkheads, none of the other workers, approximately 500 in saucers 1-5, were able to escape before their saucer imploded.

Finally, the service personnel in saucer 6, aft starboard, were ordered to evacuate using the *Queen's* lifeboats. Unfortunately, the lifeboats were not complete, lacking navigation, propulsion, and life-support systems. They were either crushed during implosions of the main spine of the ship or asphyxiated when the atmosphere bled away. All told, 2,895 people were lost during the accident.

--

Approved for release, stardate 48038.2, by Commander F. U. Nagileeb, Starfleet Intelligence, SAI.

Stardates

Iconian incident: 42609.1

Captain Picard arrives Starbase 180: 48049.6

Enterprise arrives at Spacedock 135: 48053.9

Distress call received from Begemot: 48062.1

Starfleet Intelligence orders *Enterprise* quarantine: 48062.2

Enterprise arrives Begemot rescue: 48065.1

Commander Troi visits T'Rya: 48084.3

Cast of Characters

(in order of appearance)

- Unnamed, ensign and shuttle pilot, *USS Enterprise*

- T'Rya (Vulcan: *t'sai ri'a'gra*, "resolute lady"), Lieutenant Starfleet Intelligence Special Operations

- Jean Luc Picard, Captain, *USS Enterprise*

- Dianna Troi, Commander, Ship's Counselor, *USS Enterprise*

- Data, Lieutenant Commander, Science Officer, *USS Enterprise*

- William Riker, Commander, First Officer, *USS Enterprise*

- Geordi La Forge, Lieutenant Commander, Chief Engineer, *USS Enterprise*

- Very nervous spacedock officer, Operations, Spacedock 135

- *The* Commander Heywood, chess player, First Officer, Starbase 180

- C'Lei'Edtra (Lee), Begemote ambassador to the Federation

- Strand, Commander, Operations, Spacedock 135

- Unnamed, Captain of the Hermes, a privately-operated tug

- Lanna Chang, Admiral, Starfleet Command

- [untranslatable] (Gee), Captain, The *Queen of Begemot*

- Beverly Crusher, M.D., Commander, Chief Medical Officer, *USS Enterprise*

- Ta'Ping, Rear-Admiral, Special Envoy, United Federation of Planets

- Goodall, Starfleet Intelligence, Captain, *USS Specter*

- Khatri, Captain, *USS Rutledge*

- Unnamed, Begemote guard, Begemote prison.

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 kanu t' sybok, the sequel to The Queen of Begemot.